

Introduction

The Silk Road of Modern Jewish Creativity

In January 1907, a young and handsome Jewish man took the train from his small hometown of Buczacz to the city of Lemberg. The nineteen-year-old was an aspiring Yiddish and Hebrew writer by the name of Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes, better known to us as S. Y. Agnon, the winner of the 1966 Nobel Prize for literature. The trip to Lemberg—the provincial capital of Galicia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire—took him only a few hours, but it changed his life. Shmuel Yosef was traveling in order to become an assistant to Gershom Bader, an older journalist and writer of fiction who wrote in Hebrew, Yiddish, German, and Polish. Bader had established a Hebrew daily newspaper with the name *‘Et* (Time) and invited Shmuel Yosef to assist him. This was an opportunity he could not refuse.¹ In Lemberg—also known as Lvov in Russian, L’viv in Ukrainian, and Lwów in Polish—the budding writer encountered many institutions that he had never before seen: boulevards, parks, theaters, museums, and an opera house. One urban institution made a particular impression: the café.²

Lemberg in the early twentieth century was renowned for its coffee-houses. Bader and other Jewish writers frequently socialized in cafés; sometimes they would also write or edit there, using the café table as their working desk.³ In spite of the energy and optimism of Bader, the Hebrew daily paper quickly faltered, and he was soon forced to close it down. Shmuel Yosef lost his source of income and returned home. But during the months in which he lived in Lemberg, he visited several cafés and met many Jewish writers, politicians, and intellectuals, as well as people from many other walks of life, Jews and non-Jews, young and old, rich and poor.⁴ The polyglot enthusiasm of Lemberg’s café, an institution held together seemingly by little more than the desire for coffee and conversation, made a strong impact on him.

A little more than a year later, in April 1908, Shmuel Yosef traveled to Lemberg once again. This time, he had decided to leave his parents' home and migrate to Palestine in the Ottoman Empire. On his way there, he stopped in a few European cities. First, he arrived at Lemberg's railway station and went directly to the café to bid farewell to his old friends and to meet new ones. After his visit in Lemberg, Shmuel Yosef traveled to Kraków and then to the capital city Vienna, where he met other Jewish intellectuals in still more *Kaffeehäuser*. At the end of this trip, he arrived at the Arab port of Jaffa on the Mediterranean coast. He lived in Jaffa for a few years, frequenting Arab-, German-, and Jewish-owned cafés, and became part of a small Jewish intellectual and literary community. He made a name for himself as a Hebrew writer and changed his last name from Czaczkes to Agnon. Then in 1912, he journeyed back to Europe, this time to Berlin, where he joined a thriving Jewish cultural community that again met frequently in cafés. He spent the tumultuous years of World War I in Berlin before leaving Germany in 1924, traveling to Mandatory Palestine and eventually settling down in Jerusalem. In the 1930s, many Jewish migrants arrived there after fleeing Nazi Germany and Austria. As they found their way beyond the trauma that had forced them out of their homes, many of the refugees opened cafés, becoming part of the growing local intellectual and literary community, which had so inspired Agnon.

Agnon's journey took him to many cities and to many cafés. He traversed much of the route that we will follow in this book. But Agnon's café-laden path also tells us something about Jewish modernity writ large. These coffeehouses, way stations for Jewish intellectuals on the move across Europe and beyond, were central to modern Jewish creativity. In order to begin to contemplate the role of cafés in the development of Jewish modernity, we can turn to Agnon's fiction, to texts such as the novel *Tmol shilshom (Only Yesterday)*, which he wrote in Jerusalem when he was a middle-aged man. In the novel, Agnon used episodes from his own biography to depict the life of Yitzhak Kumer, a young and naïve protagonist. In one of the early chapters of the novel, Kumer travels to Lemberg, and upon arrival at the train station, he hurries to one of the local cafés. Why the coffeehouse? What, after all, is so important about a local café that Kumer feels that he must go there as soon as he arrives in the city? Agnon's narrator explains:

A big city is not like a small town. In a small town, a person goes out of his house and immediately finds his friend; in a big city days and weeks and months may go by until they see one another, and so they set a special place in the coffeehouse where they drop in at appointed times. Yitzhak had pictured that coffeehouse . . . as the most exquisite place, and he envied those students who could go there any time, any hour. Now that he had arrived in Lemberg, he himself went to see them.

A few hours later, Kumer finds himself

standing in a splendid temple with gilded chandeliers suspended from the ceiling and lamps shining from every single wall, and electric lights turned on in the daytime, and marble tables gleaming, and people of stately mien wearing distinguished clothes sitting on plush chairs, reading newspapers. And above them, waiters dressed like dignitaries . . . holding silver pitchers and porcelain cups that smelled of coffee and all kinds of pastry.⁵

This explanation of the significance of the café in the big city is simple yet quite accurate. In contrast to the intimate and thoroughly familiar small town from which Kumer—and Agnon—came, the urban environment is inseparable from, and often thrives on, a sense of anonymity and alienation. And yet city dwellers also need a place to meet people and establish a sense of community. Thus, cities have always included some sort of gathering places. For the past three hundred years, one relentlessly popular and profoundly influential place has been the café, offering the city's inhabitants—locals, migrants, and even visitors—an easy place to buy coffee and pastries in comfortable surroundings.

Of course, the items for sale are often the entry for something more profound. The urban café is not just a site of consumption but also an institution of sociability and exchange, where people can meet, converse, read newspapers, or discuss and debate the news of the day or other matters. In Agnon's novel, the Jewish students in Lemberg can do all of this for the price of a cup of coffee, if they can afford it. Kumer's experience as a wide-eyed young migrant who envisions the café as "a most exquisite place" and a "splendid temple" is telling. The café is seen here as a substitute for what has been lost in modern life and at the same time



Figure I.1. Photograph of the interior of Café Central, Lemberg, 1904 (Courtesy of the Urban Media Archive of The Center for Urban History of East Central Europe / Collection of Oleksandr Korobov)

a place that is completely novel and exotic, a place that can open doors to unfamiliar worlds. Thus, cafés embody the search for a space that can be both comforting and exhilarating, both familiar and strange. For Jews in the modern world, whether in Europe, America, or the Middle East, that search took on an even greater urgency.

Agnon and his literary protagonist Kumer were far from alone in moving from a small town to large cities and in gravitating to their cafés. This movement across cities and cafés was very common and was an essential aspect of Jewish modernity. From antiquity through the eighteenth century, traditional Jewish culture was quintessentially collective: to be a Jew meant to belong to the community. Thus, the culture that traditional Jews created was distinct from the surrounding society. Yet what may be “the most defining characteristic” of modern Jewish culture is precisely “the question of how to define it.”⁶ From around the time of the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, modernity created new possibilities and challenges, which went hand in hand with

processes of secularization, emancipation, and urbanization.⁷ As Jews left close-knit Jewish communities and migrated to large cities, cafés emerged as significant sites for the modern Jewish experience and for the production of modern Jewish culture, a culture that became difficult to define or to pinpoint as “Jewish” in traditional terms.

Amid the enormous historical, cultural, and economic upheavals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jews migrated to large cities and found their cafés. Indeed, Jews were often owners of cafés. Jewish writers have written in cafés, and they have written about cafés. Jewish intellectuals have used the café to create a place to argue with each other. Jewish merchants have made the café into a negotiating table. The café, in other words, has been an essential facet of the modern Jewish experience and has been critical to its complex mixture of history and fiction, reality and imagination, longing and belonging, consumption and sociability, idleness and productivity.

Jewish Urbanization, the Public Sphere, and the “Thirdspace” of the Café

Urban cafés, as we shall see, acted as points in a silk road of modern Jewish culture in the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. The “Silk Road” is a modern concept, coined in Berlin by the geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877, to describe a vast premodern Afro-Eurasian trade network between Byzantium and Beijing, Samarkand and Timbuktu. This nineteenth-century European invention of the silk road—a concept that became widespread only in the twentieth century—was more about the interconnection of modernity through railroads, commerce, and cultural exchange than about describing an ancient reality.⁸ I invoke the silk road here as a spatial metaphor to describe a network of mobility, of interconnected urban cafés that were central to modern Jewish creativity and exchange in a time of migration and urbanization. Significant numbers of Jews migrated to cities across Europe and to the U.S. and to Palestine/Israel during this time period, often frequenting cafés and finding them to be places ripe with possibilities for fostering creativity and debate and for negotiating their roles in an uncertain world. The migration of café habitués and their role in moving ideas through global networks had important ramifications for

the modern Jewish experience, which reached far beyond the confines of the café itself.⁹

Unlike the synagogue, the house of study, the community center, or even the American Jewish deli, the café is rarely considered a Jewish space.¹⁰ Rather, it is mostly associated with the development of modern urban culture more generally. That broad link—with modernity, with urbanity, and with culture, rather than any specific association with Jewishness—is key to café culture. Although the café is understood as a chiefly European institution, it originated—like coffee itself—in the Islamic Near East. Along with coffee, a new and exotic commodity, the coffeehouse was imported to Europe from the vast Ottoman Empire during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹¹ Initially flourishing in London and Oxford, coffeehouses were established, and became popular, throughout European cities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹² Jews have been attracted to, and associated with, the coffee trade and the institution of the coffeehouse from its arrival in Christian Europe. Oxford was the location of one of the first western European coffeehouses: the Angel was launched in the 1650s by someone we know only as Jacob, a Jewish entrepreneur of Sephardi origin, possibly from Lebanon.¹³

The historian Elliot Horowitz has shown that coffee and coffeehouses already played a role in Jewish life in the early modern period in such places as Egypt, Palestine, and Italy. Coffee was important for pietists and kabbalists, who used the beverage to enhance nocturnal religious rituals such as the midnight Tikun Hatzot. Jews in Venice, Livorno, and Prague were attracted to cafés as hubs of sociability, as places to gather outside the confines of the synagogue or the house of study, to talk, argue, and commune with each other and with their non-Jewish neighbors.¹⁴ In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Germany, Jews harnessed the new drink of coffee to enrich their personal, religious, social, and economic lives. Robert Liberles has analyzed Jewish consumption of coffee and has shown its commercial importance, as well as how coffeehouses served as sites of integration of Jews from various social strata into Christian society.¹⁵ As we shall see, Moses Mendelssohn, “the father of the Haskalah” (Jewish Enlightenment), made his first significant entry into intellectual circles at the Gelehrtes Kaffeehaus (Scholars coffeehouse) in 1750s Berlin, and those connections launched his publishing career in both German and Hebrew.

The link between Jews and cafés, however, becomes more pronounced starting in the nineteenth century. As modernity, the café, and urban life all flourished, so too did secular Jewish culture. Whether called *café*, *Kaffeehaus*, *kawiarnia*, *kafé-hoyz*, *beit-kafé*, or any other name, the institution was especially dominant in urban, literary, and artistic life in this period; across many countries, people gathered, wrote, discussed, and debated issues within the café's walls.¹⁶ These urban cafés were especially attractive for Jews in Europe and beyond because Jews did not always find a warm welcome in more exclusive meeting places such as clubs. This was also true in taverns, in which many Jews did not feel comfortable, in spite of the fact that many taverns were also owned by Jews.¹⁷ The relatively new institution of the café—often called a “tavern without wine”—emerged as an appealing alternative. It was usually, but not always, inexpensive, felt exclusive without feeling restrictive, and offered a certain degree of freedom from the increasingly prying eyes of the government.¹⁸

Cafés, in spite of taking deep roots in various cities and becoming an essential vehicle of culture for numerous countries, always retained an air of “otherness”; both the institution and the drinks that were consumed there did not originate in the local soil.¹⁹ This “otherness,” and the mix of the national and transnational characteristics of the coffeehouse, might have something to do with the fact that many cafés were owned by Jews; even more Jews were consumers who frequented these cafés and became their most devoted habitués, or *Stammgäste*.²⁰ The link between Jews and cafés was evident not only in fin-de-siècle Vienna or Berlin but also in the new Russian city of Odessa and in the emerging metropolis of Warsaw, as well as in New York City—the new center of Jewish migration in America—and the “first Hebrew city” of Tel Aviv in Mandatory Palestine. From the mid-nineteenth until the mid-twentieth century, cafés in many cities were deeply, though never exclusively, identified with Jews and with Jewish culture.

As Agnon's life and novel reveal, these urban cafés—in particular those known as “literary cafés”—were especially alluring spaces for Jewish writers and members of the intelligentsia who were migrants, exiles, or refugees. Many of them were struggling to make ends meet and eager to find company in a new city; the café was often for them a substitute for a home and a community. However, cafés were not only a home away

from home or an escape from a rented, cold room; they were also spaces in which complex and often tense social and cultural negotiations took place. The urban café was one of the few places where Jews could become part of non-Jewish social circles and spheres of activity. Thus, it was essential to modern Jewish acculturation. Though the processes of integration and acculturation—the acquisition of the cultural and social habits of the majority group—are both hallmarks of Jewish modernity, repeated again and again in different facets of life, there is still much we do not know about the way these processes played out. As we will see, urban cafés—and their intimate relation to the press, literature, theater, art, and politics—played a key role in the creation of modern Jewish culture and an emerging Jewish public sphere.²¹

The more we look, the more we discover the café's astounding influence. However, we must not be tempted to idealize the café. Jürgen Habermas, writing in the 1960s, declared the coffeehouse as a key example of “the public sphere of bourgeois culture.” For Habermas, the coffeehouse—as it arose in early modern, increasingly capitalist Europe—was a space in which private individuals come together as a “public” distinct from the state. He claimed that such a public sphere emerged as a realm of communication that gave birth to both rational and critical debate.²² London's coffeehouses in their golden age, between 1680 and 1730, provided the individual with access to a wider strata of the middle class than was ever before possible and thus enabled more people to communicate with each other informally, with fewer of the restrictions of class hierarchy that had long dominated British life. Habermas's public sphere is built, thus, on its accessibility to individuals, who come together without hierarchy, through their discussions of literature, news, and politics, a broadened notion of participation that helped to form a new civic and liberal society.²³

This vision of the coffeehouse as an emblem of the public sphere has been essential and influential, but it is built on an ideal. In Habermas's eagerness to see the roots of a liberal, civic society, he neglected much of the messy historical reality. His assumption that everybody had the same unfettered access to the social and cultural institution of the café is too simplistic.²⁴ Moreover, the applicability of Habermas's framework to this study is evident but also limited. For him, the coffeehouse as a space of the public sphere reached its heyday in London of the eighteenth

century and fell into a state of decline through the nineteenth century, when it was “invaded by private interests.”²⁵ However, the period between 1848 and 1939 was the golden age of café culture across Europe and beyond and thus constitutes the chronological backbone of this book. In fact, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw not so much a decline but a further transformation of the public sphere.²⁶

Such transformation of the public sphere, and of the role of café as a cultural institution, was contemplated by the Jewish thinker Walter Benjamin. In his essay *Berliner Chronik* (*Berlin Chronicle*, 1932), he uses various Berlin cafés as a chief “guide” around which he arranges his “lived experience” in the city as the “space of his life . . . on a map.”²⁷ Benjamin attempts to divide Berlin cafés of the 1910s and 1920s into “professional” and “recreational” establishments, but he quickly notes that his classification is superficial inasmuch as the two categories coincide with and collapse upon each other. Benjamin thus demonstrates an enduring truth about the “lived experience” of the café, defined by a subversion of distinctions between private and public, professional and recreational, bourgeois and bohemian, and literary and consumer culture.

Benjamin’s failed attempt to clearly define various types of cafés leads to a more complex understanding of the café as an institution and in terms of a place and space.²⁸ It becomes clear that the café has been (and perhaps still is) a place of commerce that revolved around consumption, leisure, and the spectacle of commodity—in other words, the epitome of bourgeois culture. At the same time, it was a place of the bohemian and the avant-garde that aspired to undermine the values of that bourgeois consumer culture. The café has been a space in which the enunciation of identity, the celebration of lived experience, and the grappling with contested meanings took place. Thus, it is more productive to study the café as a “thirdspace,” a concept that emerged from the work of cultural geographers on the “production of space” and “lived environment.” Challenging notions of space as an abstract arena and passive container, cultural geographers posited unified physical, social, and mental conceptions of space by emphasizing its continual production and reproduction.²⁹

“Thirdspace,” as we will use it as a critical tool to study the café, emphasizes the interplay between subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined. Thirdspace is crucial to our

exploration of the urban café in general and of its role in modern Jewish culture and literature in particular. It functions as a geographical concept that enables us to understand the café in the way it is located at and mediates between the real and the imaginary, the public and the private, elitist culture and mass consumption. In the context of modern Jewish culture, the thirdspace of the café sits on the threshold between Jew and gentile, migrant and “native,” idleness and productivity, and masculine and feminine.

As a result, this book pays much attention to the ways in which Jewishness has been contested, enacted, experienced, and represented in the space of cafés. The café as an imaginary and real thirdspace and its perceived “Jewishness” are fluid, constantly changing expressions of Jewish modernity. The thirdspace of the café also is very much related to differences of social class, political ideology, choice of languages, and gender, which we will follow carefully. As we shall see, in the context of modern Jewish culture, the masculinity of the café was very pronounced. Numerous texts point to the fact that cafés served as a modern substitute for the traditional male *beys medrash* (house of study). This common comparison also highlights the fact that the space of the café was gendered in a specifically Jewish way, one that is marked by homosociality, a form of “intense male fellowship.”³⁰ Very few women were part of Jewish literary café culture.³¹ At the same time, when individual women such as Else Lasker-Schüler, Leah Goldberg, Anna Margolin, and Veza Canetti became important figures in Jewish café culture, they consciously pointed out the masculine nature of the modern Jewish café and simultaneously disrupted it.

Mapping Urban Cafés, Migration, and Modern Jewish Culture

Mapping these urban cafés and their interconnections, spreading from eastern and central Europe both to North America and to the Middle East, helps us to chart the spatial history of modern Jewish culture and literature in a new way. Using the coffeehouse as our lens reveals Jewishness in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a network of transnational migration.³² Thus, examining the confluence of the thirdspace of the café, the urban environment, and the diversity of multilingual Jewish culture enables us to better understand crucial aspects of Jewish modernity. Previous attempts to explain how Jews became

modern often resort to concepts such as Jacob Katz’s “neutral” (or “semi-neutral”) society of modernity, a public sphere in which one’s religious or ethnic identity may be left at the door.³³ As in the case of Habermas’s public sphere, the assumption of religious neutrality is problematic and does not describe well the reality of Jews in different places and within variable political and cultural contexts. Likewise, the terms “emancipation” and “assimilation” have been the tools of analysis for scholars of modern Jewish history for generations. But these are contested terms with many different and conflicting meanings. The ideologically fraught term “assimilation” presupposes the existence of static majority and minority groups. Even the more precise one, “acculturation,” hardly captures the subtle variations of the various dominant groups to which a given group of Jews acculturates.³⁴ Ultimately, these terms are often too rigid to illuminate the actual development of modern Jewish culture, which, as we will see throughout this book, is fundamentally diasporic and transnational, no matter where it is provisionally located.³⁵

The subtle variations of Jewish acculturation are intimately related to Jewish migration, because it is this fundamental fact—that Jews have been on the move—that became a hallmark of Jewish modernity. Of course, we have long studied and written about Jewish migration. But we have focused almost exclusively on immigration, framing it from the point of view of arrival to a new country or city, rather than on the itineraries of people and institutions as they move and the networks they have created. As Rebecca Kobrin has pointed out, we know a lot about Jewish immigrants in various cities around the world but not about the transnational character of the movements that brought them from one place to the next or about the links forged between those places.³⁶ As the example of Agnon’s life and work in and about the café hints, by exploring the café, we are inevitably exploring how Jews got to that café and where they went after they left. In other words, studying this one very specific place illuminates the transnational cultural entanglements of Jewish migrants. Thus, while each chapter of this book focuses on a particular city in its unique geography, politics, and culture, the interconnected cafés allow us to explore and analyze the migration networks of diasporic Jewish culture created at their tables.³⁷

Parallel issues arise as we try to understand modern Jewish literature. Dan Miron’s recent attempt to describe what he calls “the modern Jewish

literary complex”—in terms of “contiguity” rather than “continuity”—is crucial to apprehend the true reality of Jewish literature, a “vast, disorderly, and somewhat diffuse” body written in many languages and places.³⁸ The challenge with the concept of contiguity is its abstract nature; in order to be useful, it needs to become concrete. Using the café as a lens both elucidates and makes concrete the spatial history of modern diasporic Jewish literature, in Jewish and non-Jewish languages alike, and illuminates the many manifestations of Jewish culture, as they have been created in the café and clashed in the café and carried forth from the café.

It is clear that café culture and modernism, which flourished in the period covered here, were inextricably linked, in that “literary cafés, journals and publishing houses encouraged the development of new styles of writing to meet new realities and needs.”³⁹ Indeed, “literary cafés”—places such as Café Griensteidl and Café Central in Vienna, the Café des Westens and the Romanisches Café in Berlin, and the cafés of the Left Bank and Montparnasse in Paris—were indispensable for the creation of European modernism.⁴⁰ What is often overlooked is the fact that these places, essential for the development of modernism, were not only attractive spaces for many Jews; they were sometimes identified, for better or worse, as “Jewish spaces.” Scott Spector has warned that “Jewish modernism” is “a complex field of self-contradictory tensions and inversions,” and therefore “its story cannot simply be narrated, but can perhaps best be captured by representing a constellation of moments in its elastic life.”⁴¹ By using the café, and writings about the café, as the focal point of such constellations of moments and spaces, we see how Jewish culture and modernism emerged side by side, each shaping and being shaped by the other.

This book offers a wide-ranging exploration of Jewish café culture in Odessa, Warsaw, Vienna, Berlin, New York City, and Tel Aviv. The reasons to focus on these cities are manifold. First, it is true that these six cities are far from the only places in which Jewish café culture was manifest; Lemberg, Budapest, Prague, Paris, Buenos Aires, and Jerusalem surely come to mind.⁴² While this book deals almost exclusively with Ashkenazi Jews, there was also robust café culture in urban centers of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jewry: Baghdad, Cairo, and Tangier.⁴³ However, the six cities that this book explores provide a good illustration of

the principal crossroads of Ashkenazi Jewish migration in eastern and central Europe, North America, and the Middle East, and thus of the Jewish modernity that was created there. Second, these cities were at one point or another—and, in some cases, continue to be today—centers of modern Jewish culture in multiple languages: Yiddish, Hebrew, German, Russian, and Polish. In the space of the cafés of these cities, intense exchange between Jews and non-Jews, and between Jews of different political and cultural orientations, took place. Looking at the cities and their cafés helps us to see how Jewish modernity was created along networks of migration, as Jews were pushed out or chose to leave some areas to migrate to others, bringing the cultures they had created within one city's cafés with them to another.

As will become evident, this exploration of the role of urban cafés in modern Jewish culture follows not only a geographic-spatial axis but a chronological-historical one as well. As we journey across continents alongside the Jewish migrants, we will also journey through time to explore the unfolding histories of modern culture, of Jewish culture, and of café culture. In some cases, these histories overlap, and in others, they diverge. Thus, in eastern and central European cities, we will focus mainly on the period between the mid-nineteenth century—following the revolutions that swept Europe around 1848—and the 1930s, when the rise of the Nazis, World War II, and Sovietization eradicated much of café culture and the modern Jewish culture that flourished there. As our narrative spreads beyond Europe, so too does our chronology. In New York City, the development of both multilingual modern Jewish culture and café culture begins toward the end of the nineteenth century with the migration of Jews from European countries and ends in the post-World War II years. In Tel Aviv, these same processes occur between the first decade of the twentieth century and the 1960s.

This book does not present a linear cultural history with clear points of beginning and ending for modern Jewish culture and café culture. Instead, it charts a spatial history and cultural geography of Jewish modernity through the lens of the café, through the embrace of both national and transnational contexts, and through partly overlapping geographies and chronologies. Moreover, while the book is organized around specific cities and the particular geography of each city, much of the exploration highlights the fundamentally transnational network of migration and

Jewish diasporic culture that find their nexus in urban cafés. This migration is core to the story of modern Jewish culture that emerges here. In other words, Agnon was in good company.

Almost all of the men and women who appear in this book migrated from one city to another, or to many others, sometimes for a few weeks or months, sometimes for years. Without fail, they find a café, or more than one, in each of these cities, compare them, take something from one café to another, and create the ebb and flow of the interactions and negotiations that occurred in them. Though they are Jews on the move, between cities and between cafés, they remain Jews, even as they pick up new languages, passports, identities, politics, and sometimes even a new religious identity. The result, it becomes clear, is that urban cafés are at the heart of Jewish modernity, and a better understanding of their crucial position reshapes our understanding of modern Jewish culture.

In order to bring readers into the world of Jewish café culture, this book makes use of newspaper articles, memoirs, letters, and archival documents, as well as photographs, caricatures, and artwork. However, the material that has survived the passage of time is partial. The cafés themselves and the activities that took place in them belong to the ephemeral realm of everyday life. We have no immediate, physical access to these cafés, which is particularly disappointing, since the reason why they were generative was precisely their palpable reality. Alas, most of these places do not exist today, and the one or two that do resemble a museum more than a living institution. As with all history, we must make do with what is available; we must resort to the written descriptions of these places, fictional and factual alike, and to photographs, drawings, and paintings. Like all evidence, these are subjective and yet highly instructive. Each of our sources refracts the reality of cafés in different ways, distorting some aspects, illuminating others. The gaps and imperfections of our sources can be frustrating, and yet they are in some way fitting, reminding us of the fundamental ambiguity and constructed quality of the café—its thirdspace—and its ephemeral qualities.

Literary works—stories, novels, poems—that take place in cafés and that were written by Jews in Hebrew, Yiddish, German, English, Russian, and Polish are a particularly crucial source. Texts such as Agnon's *Tmol shilshom*, which are rife with descriptions of cafés, are important sources because their writers, who were habitués of cafés, constantly

employed the coffeehouse as a thirdspace. These literary texts are not to be taken simply as historical documents, but they give us a better understanding of how Jews—locals and migrants, poor and rich, bohemian and bourgeois, as well as the writers themselves—experienced the space of the café as a contested locus of urban Jewish modernity. Throughout this book, we will give special attention to the *feuilleton*: the hybrid literary-journalistic form of the sketch that mixed cultural criticism with storytelling. The *feuilleton* originated in Paris's newspapers in 1800 but became popular all over Europe in the period covered in this book. The *feuilleton* also became central in modern Jewish culture all over Europe and beyond, in German, Russian, Hebrew, Yiddish, and Polish languages. As we shall see, the *feuilleton* was also linked to Jewishness and café culture from the time Heinrich Heine wrote his *Briefe aus Berlin* (Letters from Berlin) in 1822.⁴⁴

The literary texts considered in this book were written by a broad expanse of Jewish authors, including Heinrich Heine, Sholem Aleichem, S. Y. Agnon, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Joseph Roth, Isaac Babel, Theodor Herzl, Else Lasker-Schüler, Sholem Asch, Julian Tuwim, Leah Goldberg, Aharon Appelfeld, and many writers who are not as well known today. In one way or another, these writers made the café a dominant aspect of their fiction, poetry, essays, and memoirs, using this thirdspace as a microcosm of urban, modern Jewish experience on multiple continents. Transnational Jewish modernity was thus born in the café, nourished there, and sent out into the world of print, politics, literature, visual arts, and theater. In this way, what was experienced and created in the space of the coffeehouse influenced thousands who read, saw, and imbibed a modern Jewish culture that redefined what it means to be a Jew in the world.