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Medicine – History

1938. **Medicine and the German Jews: A History**, by John M. Efron. New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2001. 343p., illus., bibliog., index. [ISBN 0-300-08377-7](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0300083777). \$35.00. LC Call no.: R694.E376 2001.

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It is a generally held perception borne out in the disproportionate number of physicians in Jewish populations, that many doctors are Jewish and that Jews make good doctors. Admittedly this is a politically incorrect statement, since lumping any group into broad characteristics is ripe for challenge. But having said that, this fascinating work traces the centrality of medicine in the life and culture of European Jews, both as a profession and in the formation of the modern secularized Jewish identity from Medieval times to the rise of the Third Reich. Efron concentrates on German Jews, since evidence of the impact of Jewish physicians in Germany is less prevalent than it is in other parts of Europe, and indeed many of the anti-Semitic tropes of medieval times through the modern era centered around medical

discourse of a pathological Jewish body, argued by if not originating from German medical texts.

Among several thought provoking narratives there are two themes which surface throughout the book. One being the paradoxical relationship Jewish physicians had with their gentile patients, and the other being an argument to document evidence of a corpus of Jewish medicinal tradition distinct from Western medicine. Medieval Jewish physicians were highly coveted by high-ranking gentiles in Germany despite edicts from the Catholic Church leaders to shun Jewish physicians as deleterious to Christian health and even aggressively murderous. But many Jewish doctors held other qualities that may have been perceived as positive despite these official bans. Jews, for their mysterious and ancient traditions were thought to possess supernatural powers benefiting their ability to heal. Efron seeks to provide a body of evidence of German Jewish medical texts through the collection of disparate sources and the Hebrew texts from which these originate, or borrow from.

Efron describes the social setting of German Jewish physicians so that the reader has an understanding of professional and economic interactions defined at a basic level by the Jewishness of the parties involved. But simply tracing and documenting the prevalence of the Jewish physician is not Efron's goal. Rather, throughout his book, he points out a perennial theme of Jewish medical discourse as a project of establishing, encouraging, and promoting the idea of a vital Jewish health related to religious practice. Such a project, Efron argues has been central to the formation of the modern Jewish identity, both religious and secular.

The Nazi war of Extermination on the Jews broke a link between German Jews and medicine that had stretched from the Middle Ages to the Second World War. Efron's book, illustrates that history in accessible language, which is copiously end-noted. While the index is actually quite limited, the book is not extremely long and the thematic organization, which is also roughly chronological, allows a reader to browse easily for any specific mention. The book is recommended for University collections or Jewish studies collections. It is primarily for use by historians but is not inaccessible to a general reader.

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