

**KARL MARX IN THE ROSENBERGER LIBRARY OF JUDAICA**  
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Introduction

Karl Marx in the Ludwig Rosenberger  
Library of Judaica

“The tradition of all past generations weighs like a mountain on the minds of the living.”  
—Karl Marx

Karl Marx is one of the most important and influential figures in modern history and one of the most controversial, even enigmatic. His feelings toward Jews and Judaism in particular remain the subject of debate. The son of Jewish parents, Marx was baptized at the age of six. While he had no Jewish education and embraced atheism, he continues to be identified as a Jew, and his Jewish ancestry influenced his thinking. Marx’s writings about Jews and Judaism, which identify Judaism with capitalism, are nearly all hostile. He has defenders and detractors: some argue that Marx’s anti-Semitism must be understood in the context of the times; others insist that he should be judged solely by his own words.

It is also not clear if Marx believed the negative qualities he saw in Jews were inherent traits or rather the result of historical circumstance that forced them into specific roles and activities. Whether or not he was himself anti-Semitic, his Jewish origins and his writings have been used by anti-Semites in linking Communism to a Jewish conspiracy; and his remarks about Jews continue to influence the reception of his other writings. Yet Marx’s thought relies on four major tenants of Judaism, namely equality based on right and not grace, justice as a matter of principle, reason based on learning, and this-worldliness demanding the struggle for perfection on earth. “Karl Marx in the Ludwig Rosenberger Library of Judaica” presents these issues by exploring the context and effect of Marx’s writings about Jews and Judaism.

Panel 1

Karl Marx was born in Trier, Germany on May 5, 1818, one of four sons and five daughters of Heinrich (Heschel) Marx, and Henriette Pressburg. Marx’s father, born in 1782, the third son of the Rabbi Meier Halevi Marx, was a practicing lawyer in Trier. At the age of 35 Marx’s father was baptized as a Protestant; at the time Jews were not allowed to hold public office, and in 1816 the definition of public office was extended to include the practice of law. In 1824, Heinrich baptized all of his children; his wife Henriette waited until 1825, the year her father died. Heinrich’s brother Paulus, a watchmaker, had himself and his family baptized in Aachen in 1831. The Marx family’s conversion was by no means unusual: almost 4,000 Jews in Prussia converted from 1812 to 1846. Heinrich surely thought that baptizing his children would give them better financial opportunities and improved social status.

## Panel 2

From 1835 to 1841, Marx went to university in Bonn and Berlin, where he studied history, philosophy, and law. In 1836, he was betrothed to Jenny von Westphalen, who was four years his elder. While he was in Berlin, Marx became attached to a group of students and faculty called the „Young Hegelians.“ After receiving his doctorate in 1841, he became the editor of a liberal newspaper *Die Rheinische Zeitung*. When government censors suppressed the newspaper because of its radical views, Marx resigned.

Marx's close friend Arnold Ruge urged him to move to Paris, where the laws were more liberal, and co-found a journal, the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*. In the first (and only) issue of the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, Marx published a critique of his former university professor Bruno Bauer's essay on the Jewish question that is his first statement on Jews.

Marx and his wife lived with the Ruges in Paris, but after six months they had a falling out. Marx remained in Paris, where he met Friedrich Engels. In 1845, Marx was expelled from Paris at the request of the Prussian government over two anti-Prussian articles he had written. Since prosecution for high treason awaited him in Prussia, Marx moved to Brussels with his wife and young daughter, Jenny. Marx's first collaboration with Engels resulted in their book, *Die heilige Familie*, published in 1845. In Brussels, Marx and Engels later wrote the famous *Communist Manifesto*, which was published in February of 1848.

## Panel 3

Revolution erupted in the early months of 1848 in France, Italy and Austria. Just one month after the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx was expelled from Belgium. A new provisional government in France reversed the previous expulsion order and invited Marx back to Paris, where he stayed less than two months before moving safely to Cologne in May of 1848. In Cologne, Marx and Engels founded a new newspaper, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, with Marx as the editor. Eventually the European revolutions of 1848 failed and the old regimes were reinstated. In 1849 Marx was expelled from Cologne as a stateless person. He moved back to Paris but was expelled again by the counter-revolutionary government. In August 1849, he finally moved to London, which became his permanent home.

In London Marx struggled from illness, family problems, and financial difficulties. He relied heavily on Engels and others for financial support. His only source of regular income was working as a journalist from 1851 to 1862. It was a job that he hated; it bored him and distracted him from the “pure scientific work” of his books. In 1864 Marx became the leading figure of the *International Workingmen's Association*, which later became the *First International*. The group grew quickly, and by 1869 it had perhaps 800,000 members. Marx's association with the *International* brought him into the political arena and his name started to become well-known throughout the world.

#### Panel 4

Marx is just one example in a long list of Socialists, including Jewish Socialists, for whom attacks on capitalism and on Jews go hand-in-hand. This form of anti-Semitism completely distorts fundamental principles of Socialism, which advocates freedom, justice, equality and progress.

As historian Julius Carlebach writes: “Whatever the ultimate significance of Marx’s contribution to human thought may be, he contributed little of importance and relevance on the Jewish question; the harm he has done and may yet do through his [writings] might perhaps have been avoided had he consulted his immediate relatives on the Talmud he despised so much, but which was ahead of him in the counsel of Avtalyon when he taught: ‘Scholars, be careful with your words’, for, as it is said in Proverbs (18:21): ‘Death and life are in the power of the tongue.’”

#### Panel 5

Marx’s political participation reached a critical point over his support for the 1871 Paris Commune. In France, at the end of the Franco-Prussian War, Parisians opposed the national government and revolted. They elected a municipal council called the Paris Commune. The Communards’ aims included economic reforms and were influenced by the ideals of Marx and the International. After only two months the insurrection was put down, and about 20,000 Communards were killed. Though the International played only a minor role in the Paris Commune, Marx saw it as a proletariat revolution.

After the Commune was crushed, Marx, as leader of the International, became known throughout Europe as a fiery revolutionary. Marx’s leadership of the International was in jeopardy. In the aftermath of the Commune, infighting among factions in the International threatened to bring about its demise. The most serious threat came from the Russian Anarchist leader Mikhail Bakunin. Marx and Bakunin had very different conceptions of the role of the State. Whereas Marx’s Communism advocated the centralization of property in the hands of the State, Bakunin’s Anarchism desired the total abolition of the State. Bakunin also resented Marx’s support of the centralized structure of the International. Marx was worried that with the left-wing Anarchists against him and without a supporting right wing, he would lose control of the International. Nevertheless, Marx prevailed during a congress of the First International in 1872 at the Hague, when he managed to have Bakunin and his followers expelled. After this event Marx wanted to withdraw from international politics and return to his work on *Das Kapital*. The International languished and was finally disbanded in 1876.

Marx spent the last decade of his life in depression and declining health. Though he still had a strong influence on Socialist leaders, he did not participate in any political movements. In 1881 his wife died, and his eldest daughter Jenny died on January 11, 1883. Bereft, Marx died on March 14, 1883.