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ESSAY-The Extraordinary Lives of Lorenzo Da Ponte & Nathaniel
Wallich :
Religious Identity in the Age of Enlightenment

by Judith M. Taylor, Jules Janick



Lorenzo Da Ponte



Nathaniel Wallich

Being Jewish in a Christian world has always been fraught with difficulties. The oppression of the Jews in Europe for most of the last two millennia was sanctioned by law and without redress. Valued less than cattle, herded into small enclosed districts, restricted from owning land or entering any profession, and subject to random violence and expulsion at any time, the majority of Jews lived a harsh life.¹ The Nazis used this ancient technique of de-humanization and humiliation before they hit on the idea of expunging the Jews altogether.

The temptation to escape from this misery was extreme. Throwing off the surface symbols of an outcast race by changing one's identity was analogous to adopting protective coloration in the natural world. It opened up opportunities which had been denied.

The most common way for Jews to change their identity was either to convert to Christianity or cease being Jewish by attrition. Continuing to be Jewish but beyond the reach of the contempt and discrimination was possible if the individual became wealthy enough or in extraordinary situations,

achieved great recognition for one's accomplishments.

The lives and work of two extremely talented and complex Jewish men from opposite ends of Europe stimulated us to explore what it meant to be a Jew as the Enlightenment waned. Both men succeeded in the greater world by ceasing to be Jewish. Did the Enlightenment make any difference to their lives? Could they have achieved the same result if they had continued to be known as Jews? Were the accomplishments worth the price of denying their heritage?

Lorenzo Da Ponte, 1749 - 1838, and Nathaniel Wallich, 1786 - 1854, were vastly different from each other but the common denominator which connects them was the fact that they were Jewish. Each achieved high distinction in completely unrelated fields, but the same historical forces shaped their activities and responses. They faced the same dilemmas, Da Ponte in Catholic Italy and Wallich in Lutheran Denmark.

While the phenomenon of the Enlightenment heralded new possibilities for Jews, Da Ponte and Wallich effectively ceased to be Jews, one formally and the other by attrition. Da Ponte in full public view by conversion and baptism, Wallich by emigration and simply shrugging off his Jewishness.

Da Ponte lived by his wits, being variously a priest, poet, greengrocer, and the first professor of Italian at Columbia University. He became famous for writing the libretti for Mozart's operas *Don Giovanni*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and *Così fan Tutte*.

Wallich was a Jewish surgeon and botanist born and educated in Denmark. He went to work in a Danish colony in India and by a series of coincidences became the director of the Royal Botanic Garden in Calcutta. He ended up as a respectable Englishman, in spite of never having lived in England until the end of his life. Many of the beautiful plants such as rhododendrons discovered by Wallich in the Himalayas still enrich our gardens.

Although Da Ponte was almost forty years old when Wallich was born in 1749, the second half of their lives overlapped. The Enlightenment had been going on for fifty years, yet much of its full power had yet to emerge.

Da Ponte's father made his fateful decision to convert his whole family to Catholicism in 1763 for entirely personal reasons and probably was unaware of the political and philosophical turmoil in other

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parts of Europe. By the time Wallich was starting his education early in the nineteenth century the Enlightenment had peaked but some of its benefits were beginning to be felt.



Napoleon Bonaparte

The Enlightenment and Jewish Emancipation

The Enlightenment, lasting most of the 18th century, was a powerful force which indirectly influenced the fate of many Jews.² Starting at the very end of the 17th century, philosophers and scientists in England, Scotland and several European countries were responsible for the change from supernaturalism to secularism, from theology to science. Discoveries in natural science gave scholars in England and on the Continent of Europe ammunition to separate science from religion and liberate the intellect. Questioning religious authority was soon followed by questioning temporal authority.

Peter Gay defined the Enlightenment as "a loose, informal, wholly unorganized coalition of cultural critics, religious skeptics and political reformers from Edinburgh to Naples, Paris to Berlin, Boston to Philadelphia" He noted it was "A program of secularism, humanity, cosmopolitanism and freedom above all, freedom in its many forms."³

Tyrannical power and despotism were slowly eroded as these tenets infiltrated society. It led to the concept that in a just society individual human beings had rights. The American Revolution in 1776, and the French Revolution in 1789, with all their complexity, reflected the influence of the Enlightenment. Even Jews, who in many places were not considered to be fully human, benefited from this idea. The new philosophy suggested that they too were entitled to rights.⁴

The Enlightenment led to but was not synonymous with the emancipation of the Jews. That came when Napoleon Bonaparte issued his Civil Code in 1806 liberating the Jews from the ghettos and granting them full citizenship.⁵ Napoleon's proclamations were based on the rights of man, but economic self-interest was part of it. He reasoned that if France welcomed the Jews they would flock there by the thousands, an additional source of taxes and revenue, and another economic engine for society. When his influence waned in the mid-19th century, this freedom was severely abrogated.

Growing up in Corsica, young Bonaparte never saw Jews. It is unclear how they seemed such

promising material, but clearly he knew some of them could be very rich. His first exposure to the Jews was in Italy in 1797, when he entered Ancona with his army. The Jews of Ancona were confined to the ghetto, an enclosed prison-like quarter. Most of its inhabitants were condemned to menial livelihoods or even begging. Napoleon immediately insisted the ghetto be unlocked and that the inhabitants cease wearing discriminatory clothing.

Jewish life in some European countries started to improve as Napoleon took over parts of the former Austrian empire. The most extraordinary transformation was in Germany. Jewish Disabilities Acts were lifted and laws allowing Jews to participate in national life of one sort or another were slowly passed, but it was still a struggle.⁶

There was very little correlation between the size of the Jewish population and reform. Central and Eastern European countries outside Napoleon's orbit, with the largest Jewish populations, made no effort to reform at all. Britain, with some of the smallest concentrations of Jews, also made little if any effort. Vested interest, persistent prejudice and the resultant inertia effectively blocked change. It would be interesting to speculate what might have happened if Napoleon's invasion of Russia had succeeded.

The Jewish Response

The Jews of Europe did not benefit immediately from the momentous changes brought about by the Jewish emancipation. There were two reasons, one external and the other internal. From the outside, their appearance and religious practices made them anathema even without organized persecution. On the inside, tight cohesion in the communities necessary to survival, controlled rigidly by rabbis, ensured that such electrifying ideas never penetrated their world.⁷ The Jewish response was circumscribed and narrow.

Inertia and Pride

The most powerful force of all was inertia. However difficult life may have been, most Jews simply stayed in their villages or ghettos, struggling to make a living and feed their children. Even if they had known of the Enlightenment it would not have touched their lives. It took strong motivation to move out of the community, physically or emotionally. Not making a decision to take special action was in fact a decision.

Ethnic and religious pride augmented the natural inertia. Jews had persisted as a religious and ethnic group for centuries, long before these other upstart religions and come what may, they were not going to change. Rabbinical teaching and leadership reinforced this attitude. Jewish religious leaders were violently opposed to the new ideas which emerged from the Enlightenment and prevented their congregations from learning about them.

Escape by Wealth

Money lending was a business relegated to the Jews, since usury was forbidden by the Church. Through money lending, a Jew could become very rich but the sense of insecurity and uncertainty often persisted. What the Gentile prince could confer, he could take away.

In the German-speaking provinces "Court Jews" were a noted phenomenon in the 18th century.⁸ Insolvent margraves and landgraves employed these money-lenders and bankers for their financial skill and international connections. Such Jews were envied, yet resented both by their employers and the Jewish community. The life and death of Joseph Suss-Oppenheimer epitomized these responses. After his meteoric rise, the prince for whom he worked had him executed.⁹

It was different for an independently wealthy Jew. A very large fortune confers great power on the owner. It made him more or less immune to the usual slights and humiliations, and he was not

obliged to obey the Draconian rules governing Jewish life. On these terms, continuing to be Jewish was less of a problem.

The story of the Rothschild family illuminates this matter very well. Even the most rabid Jew-baiter could not touch them. Mayer Amschel and Gutele Rothschild's five sons used the capital their father had amassed by trading in old coins and built a financial empire.¹⁰ The family originated in the Frankfurt ghetto, a squalid and cramped street intended for a few hundred people in the 17th century but never enlarged as families grew. The sons moved to other cities and countries.

Mayer Amschel and his wife had managed to buy a slightly better house within the ghetto and never left it. It was form of pride. They had the means to make a free choice and chose to stay there, practicing their religion.



Moses Mendelssohn

Escape by Accomplishment

Moses Mendelssohn, 1729 - 1786 was so outstanding an intellectual that being Jewish became irrelevant in some ways, yet in spite of his extraordinary prestige he had to work in a humble occupation most of his life. Born in Dessau Moses spoke only Judendeutsch until he was fourteen. It was clear he had extraordinary intellectual gifts. By special dispensation he was allowed to live in Berlin after he followed Rabbi David Frankel in 1743. In the seminary he learned Talmud but he studied Latin and Greek secretly.¹¹ He was completely self-taught in secular knowledge. The Enlightenment had a profound influence on him and his ideas.

Mendelssohn corresponded with many of the great scholars in Europe but most frequently with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the German playwright and philosopher who championed Mendelssohn and promoted his ideas. Their themes were language and philosophy. Lessing's play *Nathan the Wise* was based on Mendelssohn.¹²

He insisted on opening up Judaism to new ideas and thoughts, erasing centuries of superstition and magical thinking. He precipitated the movement known as Haskalah, believing that religious truths

could be reached through logic. This process had been started by Spinoza.¹³ It is a curious irony that at about the same time pietistic Chassidism was emerging and flourishing in Eastern Europe, the polar opposite of what he proposed. Its ecstatic quality may have been a response to seemingly permanent persecution, a way of denying the awful reality.

Mendelssohn was also convinced that with the new ideas, good will and adherence to the rights of all men would erase religious divisions. He reasoned that if the Jews practiced their religion in a similar fashion to the Christians, tension would be reduced.

Being a Jew should be as good as being a Protestant or Catholic. Haskalah led eventually to the emergence of Reform Judaism in Berlin in the mid 1860s. The logic was that making Jewish liturgy and religious style closer to the mainstream would smooth relations with the majority population.¹⁴ Mendelssohn remained a pious Jew all his life but accepted, if reluctantly, his children's conversion.

Eight decades after the death of Moses Mendelssohn, Reform Judaism developed in Berlin, altering Jewish liturgy to make it resemble in outward appearance the religion of the majority. This was a late outgrowth of emancipation. The services were held in German, not exclusively in Hebrew, and prayer shawls were banished. Top hats replaced kipahs. The rabbis preached sermons, a new departure.

The fragile period of tolerance soon started to close. One omen was the election of blatant anti-Semite Karl Lueger in 1899 as Mayor of Vienna. Virulent anti-Semitism flourished in magazines and newspapers. Municipal restrictions and sanctions against Jews were enacted.¹⁵

Despite all the adjustments and accommodations, nothing helped when the end came. Orthodox Jews and "lapsed" Jews were all victims. German Jewish society had flourished brilliantly beyond anyone's expectations but it was short lived. From the ghetto to the gas chamber took only 150 years.

Escape by Conversion and Attrition

Ceasing to be a Jew by converting to Christianity had always been an option but changing one's identity was easier said than done. The outside world lay ready to hurl the imposters back into their proper place. Felix Mendelssohn, the grandson of Moses, was born a Jew, but baptized into Christianity to become a practicing Lutheran. In spite of that he reported that when he was a child, rough youths pursued him in the streets and taunted him with being a Jew.¹⁶

Mendelssohn's musical genius took him to the very top of society. Queen Victoria was very fond of him. He gave her singing lessons and she took him to see her children in the nursery, an immense privilege offered only to very few, yet in her diary she recorded that he was dark and dirty looking, "just like a Jew."¹⁷

Open conversion to the dominant religion caused problems with both the Christian and the Jewish communities. Attrition, often assisted by intermarriage or moving to a new town, worked more smoothly.

Lorenzo Da Ponte: Conversion

Much of what we know about Lorenzo Da Ponte comes from his celebrated Memoirs, now considered a minor classic. Published from 1823 to 1830, the early part is in the style of Casanova's memoirs, filled with racy exploits.¹⁸ A careful reading allows much psychological insight into a man straddling the ancient regime and the emergence of the American experience. Da Ponte lived an extraordinary life and was the "Zelig"¹⁹ of his times who counted among his acquaintances Emperor Joseph II, Mozart, Casanova, and Clement Clarke Moore.

Da Ponte was born Emanuel Conegliano in 1749 in the ghetto of Ceneda, a small town near Venice. The town was renamed Vittorio Veneto in 1918 to celebrate the victory of Italy over Austria. Emanuel was the eldest of three brothers. His father, Geremia, was a leather dealer, prosperous enough to have a library. He also had a strong personality. The family name, Conegliano, was derived from another town in the Veneto. In 1778, according to a passage from the Memoirs, he defied Napoleon personally, preventing the latter from billeting troops in his house during the invasion of Italy, to protect the innocence of his daughters.

The children's mother Rachele "Ghella" Pincherle died when Emanuel was only five, a sadly commonplace tragedy at the time. Their world was the local ghetto. The boys probably had some Hebrew education and the eldest at least would later refer to a Hebrew text.²⁰ Ten years after his wife's death Geremia decided to marry a Christian woman, but the quid pro quo was clearly conversion to Christianity.

In 1763 the father and his three sons, Emanuel, Baruch and Anania, were baptized in Ceneda's cathedral by Bishop Lorenzo Da Ponte. This profound event colored the rest of Emanuel's life. Twelve days later, Geremia married Orsola Pasqua Paietta, aged sixteen. They eventually had ten children.

The conversion even led to the family changing their given names. Geremia became Gasparo, the bishop gave his name to Rachele's eldest son and the two brothers became Girolamo and Luigi. From the age of 14, Lorenzo, né Emanuel, was absorbed into the Catholic Church. The conversion of a whole family of Jews must have been a triumph for the bishop, even though it came very easily without any soul-affirming titanic struggle.

Bishop Da Ponte sponsored Lorenzo at the Ceneda seminary. The boy soaked up the Classical education, rapidly catching up with his classmates, learning Latin and writing poetry. The speed and extent of his transformation were startling.

Geremia was nothing if not thorough. Lorenzo was to become a priest, a decision Lorenzo seemed to regret. He would write: My father, being deceived in the choice of my career, and allowing himself to be guided rather by his circumstances than by his parental duty was thinking of turning me to the Altar; though that was utterly contrary to my vocation and my character.

To all intents and purposes Lorenzo was no longer a Jew but many years later he knew that his enemies still regarded him as one and in 1788 he repeats their invective: Let us throw him back into the ghetto whence came his despicable ancestors.²¹

This is the only direct reference of Da Ponte to his Jewish origin. The half-brothers also took on the name Da Ponte and they all appeared to bury their Jewish roots.

Protective coloration of this magnitude should have done its work but events showed it did not do that in da Ponte's lifetime. Origins usually get forgotten in succeeding generations but Jewish heritage is difficult to erase; historians still remind us that many of the prominent families in Spain derive from conversos.

Lorenzo Da Ponte was a very clever lad. In a few years, he rose to be Vice-Rector of the Portogruaro seminary but life as a priestly academic did not suit him. He loved women and poetry. A visit to Venice clinched his liberation. He worked as a tutor, but instead of mathematics and physics, he devoted himself to "voluptuousness and amusement."²² Giacomo Casanova was a close friend.

Within a short time Da Ponte's seditious poems and reckless behavior led to his being banished from Venice. In his own mind, he was a roaring success: "I was loved by women, esteemed by men and full of great hope." He re-surfaced in Vienna in 1779. Using what is now called "networking" he persuaded Antonio Salieri, 1750 - 1825, to find him a post at the Emperor Josef II's new Italian theatre, writing libretti.



The Marriage of Figaro

By another fortunate coincidence, he met Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, 1756 - 1791, at Baron Raimund Wetzler von Plankenstern's house. The Baron was a wealthy converted Jew who is remembered as Mozart's landlord, and who stood godfather to the Mozart's eldest son.

Da Ponte wrote some libretti for Salieri which were successful and some which were less so. Only one of the works from that phase of his career is still in the repertory, *Una Cosa Rara*, with music by Martini but the Mozart libretti are constantly celebrated.

Mozart had met Da Ponte in 1783, soon after he married Costanza. Mozart was wary of the "Abate" as a smooth Italian but seemed to be unaware of his Jewish background. Had he known about it he almost certainly would have relayed this information to his father. What he wrote to his father was that Da Ponte had promised to provide him with a libretto once he finished some work for Salieri, "but who knows whether he will be able to keep his word. I should dearly love to show what I can do in an Italian opera."

In 1785, Mozart approached Da Ponte with the idea of turning Beaumarchais' play *The Marriage of Figaro* into an opera. Baron Wetzler offered to underwrite it but Da Ponte got the Emperor to support it. The production was wildly successful, in spite of the seditious theme: a servant triumphing over his master.

The success of *The Marriage of Figaro* resulted in three more commissions for Da Ponte: libretti for Martini, Salieri, and Mozart which he worked on simultaneously. According to his autobiography, he fortified himself with copious drafts of Tokay and the tender ministrations of his landlady's sixteen year old daughter while he wrote *Don Giovanni* for Mozart.

He was later to write *Così fan tutte*, the last of his three libretti for Mozart. *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* were adaptations, but Da Ponte came up with *Così fan tutte* as a completely original idea. It still remains a perfect libretto. Some modern producers of the opera have based their idiosyncratic productions on the theory that Mozart wrote *Così* in despair because he loved one sister, but had to marry the other one. They support their arguments with reference to his letters.

These producers conveniently forget that da Ponte was the author of the libretto, not Mozart. Da Ponte probably had some equivalent experiences with a Dorabella and a Fiordiligi between Venice and Vienna. Da Ponte displayed cynicism and worldliness to perfection. Mozart considered him to be the ideal librettist.

In 1790, things changed very fast, with the death of the Emperor Josef II. Da Ponte would have liked to do more operas with Mozart but Mozart moved on to *The Magic Flute* and *La Clemenza di Tito* and died at thirty-five. Da Ponte tried to survive the transition from Josef II to Leopold, but overreached himself and had to leave Vienna.

He landed in Trieste where he met and married a young woman, Ann Celestine (Nancy) Grahl. The Grahls were a Jewish family from Germany. They had lived in England for many years, but then migrated to Trieste for business reasons. It was a surreal event in a surreal life: a Catholic priest as the *chosen* - the bridegroom - in a Jewish wedding.

The marriage of Lorenzo/Emanuel to a Jewish woman in a Jewish ceremony was an atavistic echo, possibly a metaphor for da Ponte's inner life. Lorenzo and Nancy moved first to Paris and then to London, but in spite of some *succes d'estime*, he could not make a living in the English theatre world. He was forced to let Nancy take their children to America in 1804, to join her parents and brother. He followed in April 1805.

New York was still a small provincial place, with no opera house. Without his usual way of making a living Da Ponte tried being a greengrocer in the city and later in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, but that did not succeed. The family returned to New York in 1807. By now he had five children.

Da Ponte gave Latin and Italian lessons. While he was in Riley's bookstore on Broadway one day, he met Clement Clarke Moore, a noted theological scholar and linguist, especially interested in Hebrew, Moore is known today as the author of *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*.²³ Moore was fascinated by Da Ponte and helped him to set up a school and generally promoted his interests.

His life blossomed in old age. When he was 70, he became active at Columbia College. *Don Giovanni* was performed at the newly built Italian Opera House in New York in November 1825 for the first time, with Da Ponte in the audience. Da Ponte had mortgaged everything to get the opera house built but it burned down a few years later.

Moore engineered a chair in Italian for Da Ponte at the college. One of the main difficulties Da Ponte had in teaching Italian was the lack of books. The college had only one rather dog-eared text. Da Ponte spent his own money in importing books from Italy. Building the opera house had been so important to him he even sold the books to raise money.

He wrote his memoirs in four volumes, providing great detail about the period. He died in 1838 at the age of eighty nine, still publishing to the last.

In America, Da Ponte's Jewish origins were not completely forgotten and although his rivals in the Italian émigré community referred to him as both a renegade Jew and a renegade priest he was such an exotic figure that most American society accepted him without cavil. For much of his time in New York, he was ignored and had to struggle for recognition. Not surprisingly, this made him rather bitter.

His marriage to Nancy was a success and he loved her unreservedly. Perhaps being born Jewish was a minor matter and not a cause for deep reflection or guilt but he was not allowed to be unaware of his heritage nor is this fact ever ignored in the hundreds of opera playbills issued each year. When he died a priest administered the last rites of the Catholic Church. There is an entry for Lorenzo da Ponte in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1972) but no longer one in the 18 volume *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967).²⁴

Nathaniel Wallich: Attrition

The improbability of Lorenzo da Ponte's life is matched only by that of Nathaniel Wallich. The latter's life took a different turn. Wallich was not such a free spirit as Da Ponte but a serious scholar with strong academic skill and credentials. Much of what happened to him was the direct result of war and politics, yet looked at from this distance, his life had many of the same surreal qualities as Da Ponte.

The path of his career was more clearly shaped by prejudice than da Ponte's, but the initial opportunities in his native land were driven by the Enlightenment. He solved some of his problems by dropping Judaism.

In the modern world, Denmark is almost synonymous with tolerance but it was not always so. A few Jews were invited to live there in the 1620s. King Christian IV needed large loans and craved luxury items and knew that Jews would be source of both. By the end of the 17th century, more Jews were allowed in to promote the tobacco business but were not permitted to build synagogues or carry on any Jewish communal activities.²⁵

The next wave of Jewish settlers in Denmark came from Altona near Hamburg late in the 18th century. Nathaniel Wallich's father Wulff ben Wallich (or Wolff Wallich) was a merchant who became fairly prosperous. Nathaniel was born Nathan ben Wulff. He adopted the more conventional name Nathan Wallich, later Nathaniel, as an adult.

As a byproduct of the Enlightenment, children of these Jews could attend schools and universities but then could go no further in academic life. By 1788 Jewish merchants had been permitted to join guilds and in 1798, their children could go to the university.

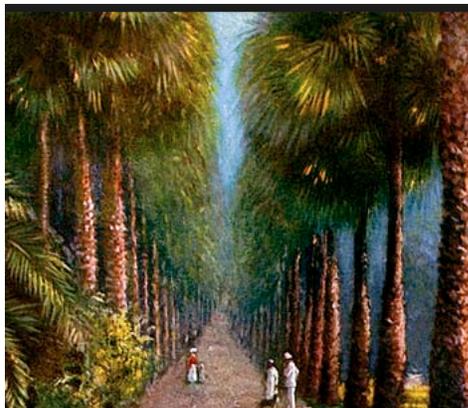
Wallich was a gifted student who preferred botany to surgery. The professor of botany, Martin Vahl, was internationally known. Unfortunately an academic post in either discipline was an impossibility. The university had very scarce funds and gave preference to Lutherans.

Wallich was graduated from the Royal Academy of Surgery in 1806 and managed to get a post as military surgeon in the Danish colony of Serampore (Frederischnagor) in India. Even this had depended on the goodwill of King Frederick VI. The king reminded his staff that Jews were supposed

to have full rights. In 1807 Wallich arrived in Bengal to take up his duties.

What happened next might have come from a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. Denmark had sided with France in the Napoleonic wars. With the victory of England, Denmark had to cede all its foreign possessions to the English. Serampore passed into the hands of the English army and Wallich was thrown into jail.²⁶

In the informal ways of the time, the prisoner and the jailer probably sat together at sundown and drank punch. Whatever the means, it was somehow borne in on the commandant that Mr Wallich was a scholar and botanist, not a dangerous warrior. He decided to free Wallich but to cover himself he placed him under the supervision of the director of the Royal Botanic Garden in Calcutta, Dr William Roxburgh (1751 - 1815). Within a short time, the East India Company, which owned the botanical garden, took Wallich on and employed him as a surgeon.



The Royal Botanic Garden at Calcutta, India

Wallich became fluent in English, writing it idiomatically and never again reverting to Danish or German. He now had an opportunity of studying botany first hand, guided by an expert. At the same time, Wallich paid a lot of attention to Indian art and history. He was the first director of the Oriental Museum of the Asiatic Society. It still exists today as the Indian Museum.²⁷

He was very unusual in expecting the Indian artists to label their work with their name. This had not been done and many beautiful paintings of flowers remain anonymous. Even indirect ways of identifying the artists failed. Household accounts only listed "Native painter 2 rupees," for example.²⁸

The climate affected Wallich badly and he travelled to Mauritius to convalesce in 1811. He probably had malaria or another protozoan infestation. Either way, the effects were extremely debilitating. Roxburgh was also in poor health and had to give up his position. In 1817, the East India Company appointed Wallich to be the superintendent of the Royal Botanic Garden at Calcutta.

Roxburgh had started a *Flora Indica* but died before it could be completed.²⁹ Wallich augmented it and published volume one in 1820, but Roxburgh's son and one of the family's friends were outraged by his "meddling." They stripped the text of all his emendations and re-issued it in a "pure" form. Volume two came out in 1824.

Wallich had a way of annoying people which has been attributed to being a foreign Jew in a hidebound British service. The Danish scholar Michael Sterll humorously refers to "paranoia wallichia."³⁰ When Wallich was not threatened, he was sweetness itself. He was helpful to John Gibson, one of the Duke of Devonshire's gardeners sent to collect rare orchids for the duke's hothouse.³¹ Wallich was very aware of social distinctions, making lifelong friends with Lord and Lady Amherst, Sir Stamford Raffles, and other English aristocrats.

Wallich travelled to Nepal in 1821, one of the very first Englishmen to go there, and returned with a wealth of new plants. He collected assiduously in other parts of India and found new rhododendrons, while *Amherstia nobile* and *Hedychia gardnerianum* (Khalili ginger) were some of his star finds. His articles about the plants for the English botanical press made him well known to the world of horticulture.

Wallich understood that English gardeners wanted new and exotic plants which would survive. Plants from the north of India were suitable because they grew in colder zones. He wrote two books, *Tentamen Flora Nepalensis Illustratae*, 1824-1826 and *Plantae Asiaticae Rariores*, 1829-1832.³²

In 1845, Wallich resigned from his post. He was tired, chronically ill and somewhat disillusioned. The East India Company had provided him with a house in London during an earlier leave which had lasted four years. There he had worked on his collections, visited by all the important English and European botanists of the day. Now he took his own house but only lived for another few months. He died in 1846 and is buried in London.

His son George became a well known zoologist. For most of Wallich's life, being Jewish played no overt role. While he never formally converted he lived a completely secular life. He married twice

while in India, both times to Christian women in Christian ceremonies.

Ceasing to be Jewish

Jewish life remained uncertain and at the mercy of external forces for millennia; it was only possible to escape from the ghetto by becoming very rich, very well known, or ceasing to be Jewish. In the century of the Enlightenment, social and political forces started changing, leading to the emancipation of the Jews and their acceptance as full citizens.

Two Jewish men who started life under very difficult circumstances, one in an actual ghetto, the other in a restrictive society, both succeeded beyond their expectations, but not as Jews. Emanuel Conegliano, later Lorenzo Da Ponte, hardly seemed to plan his career at all but simply moved with events. He clearly had a very robust constitution, a brilliant creative mind and a lot of charm and was able to take advantage of anything that came his way. At an age when most men were vegetating, he kept shifting gears and entering new professions. Being a secular priest helped him in narrow societies like Vienna but it is clear he was never religious in any sense of the term, and there is no trace of religiosity in his libretti.

Nathan ben Wolff, later Nathaniel Wallich, was able to invest a great deal more in his career as a young man. His subsequent success was less of a surprise to him. Being Jewish was a source of frustration which he shed by emigrating.

In face of the crushing discrimination and constant humiliation of being a Jew in the 18th century, neither Da Ponte or Wallich can or should be blamed. The Jewish community is proud to claim both men today. The collaboration with Mozart conferred immortality on Da Ponte, but even today, Da Ponte's role is downplayed. If Wolfgang Amadeus had lived a little longer, they would doubtless have collaborated on more libretti surely creating more masterpieces. Wallich is not a household name like Da Ponte but everyone who gardens owes him a debt.

There is no way to know if either regretted his separation from Judaism since they both remained silent on the matter. As Jews we can regret that they were forced to make these choices and appreciate the fact that in the United States, we do not have to do so.

Were the accomplishments worth the price of deracination?

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1. Elon, Amos 2002 *The Pity Of It All: a history of the Jews in Germany 1743 - 1933* New York Henry Holt and Company. ↪

2. Gay, Peter 1966 (re-issued 1995) *The Enlightenment, an interpretation: the rise of modern paganism* New York London Norton. ↪

3. As an example, Moses Mendelssohn induced C. W. Dohm to publish *On the Civil Amelioration of the Condition of the Jews in 1781* ↪
4. The Declaration of the Rights of Man in the French Revolution started the process. In 1806, Napoleon passed a number of laws which improved the condition of Jews in the French territories. ↪
5. In England the first act to repeal some of the Jewish Disability Laws came in 1845. The next one was in 1858. Lionel Rothschild was finally able to take his seat in Parliament and not have to swear on a New Testament. ↪
6. Elon, Amos 2002 *The Pity Of It All: a history of the Jews in Germany 1743 - 1933* New York Henry Holt and Company ↪
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17. Da Ponte, Lorenzo 1929 *Memoirs of Lorenzo da Ponte*, Arthur Levington ed, translated by Elizabeth Abbott Philadelphia J B Lippincott ↪
18. "Zelig" the character invented by Woody Allen in the film of the same name, resembled Virginia Woolf's "Orlando" in being completely fluid and changeable, re-appearing under a new guise in different centuries. ↪
19. "I learned, as a scholarly rabbi once said, from my pupils: *Unitalmidai rabàdi miculàm.*" (Memoirs) The phrase is attributed to Rabbi Akiva. ↪
20. The invective of his enemies is written in stanzas to Pietri Zaguri. Russo, Joseph Louis. 1922. *Lorenzo da Ponte, Poet and Adventurer*. Columbia University Press, New York. ↪
21. Da Ponte, Lorenzo 1929 *Memoirs of Lorenzo da Ponte*, Arthur Levington ed, translated by Elizabeth Abbott Philadelphia J B Lippincott ↪
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Jules Janick's website: <https://www2.ag.purdue.edu/hla/Pages/Profile.aspx?strAlias=ianick&intDirDeptID=16>

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*****1 JUDITH M TAYLOR



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Judith M. Taylor is a retired English born, Oxford educated physician who now practices history without a license. Since moving to the Bay area of California in 1994, she has been so inspired by the plants and landscape that she has written four books about horticultural history: "The Olive in California: history of an immigrant tree; (2000), "Tangible Memories: Californians and their gardens: 1800-1950; (2003), "The Global Migrations of Ornamental Plants: how the world got into your garden (2009) and "Visions of Loveliness: the work of forgotten flower breeders" (2010, in press).

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