



Suddenly Jewish: Jews Raised as Gentiles Discover Their Jewish Roots (Brandeis Series in American Jewish History, Culture, and Life)

By Barbara Kessel

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One woman learned on the eve of her Roman Catholic wedding. One man as he was studying for the priesthood. Madeleine Albright famously learned from the Washington Post when she was named Secretary of State.

"What is it like to find out you are not who you thought you were?" asks Barbara Kessel in this compelling volume, based on interviews with over 160 people who were raised as non-Jews only to learn at some point in their lives that they are of Jewish descent. With humor, candor, and deep emotion, Kessel's subjects discuss the emotional upheaval of refashioning their self-image and, for many, coming to terms with deliberate deception on the part of parents and family. Responses to the discovery of a Jewish heritage ranged from outright rejection to wholehearted embrace.

For many, Kessel reports, the discovery of Jewish roots confirmed long-held suspicions or even, more mysteriously, conformed to a long-felt attraction toward Judaism. For some crypto-Jews in the southwest United States (descendants of Jews who fled the Spanish Inquisition), the only clues to their heritage are certain practices and traditions handed down through the generations, whose significance may be long since lost. In Poland and other parts of eastern Europe, many Jews who were adopted as infants to save them from the Holocaust are now learning of their heritage through the deathbed confessions of their adoptive parents.

The varied responses of these disparate people to a similar experience, presented in their own words, offer compelling insights into the nature of self-knowledge. Whether they had always suspected or were taken by surprise, Kessel's respondents report that confirmation of their Jewish heritage affected their sense of self and of their place in the world in profound ways. Fascinating, poignant, and often very funny, *Suddenly Jewish* speaks to crucial issues of identity, selfhood, and spiritual community.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Stimulated by Madeline Albright's well-publicized 1997 discovery that her parents were Jewish, Kessel, a freelance writer, decided to explore the question of "hidden roots." She placed an inquiry in the New York Times Book Review and on the Internet "seeking people raised as non-Jews who discovered they are of Jewish descent." She received 178 responses. This book is based on her interviews by mail, by telephone or in person with 166 individuals. Kessel classifies her respondents into four groups: crypto-Jews ("descendants of the Jewish victims of the Spanish Inquisition"), "hidden children" (those placed with non-Jewish families to save them from the Nazis), children of Holocaust survivors and adoptees. Her book consists of statements from representatives of each group, accompanied by psychologically oriented analyses. The interviewees' wide range of reactions to the belated discovery of their Jewish ancestry make for fascinating and occasionally humorous reading. An Oxford student, on learning that he was Jewish, ran to a synagogue and shouted, "I think I'm a Jew and I don't know what to do about it!" He is now a New York rabbi. Some interviewees were "shocked or moved or thrilled or distressed"; some were "blas?" while others were "dumbstruck." According to Kessel, they are all bound together by a basic human need for determining their identity. (June)

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From Library Journal

Kessel, the director of the administration of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, interviewed over 160 people who were raised as non-Jews and later learned that they were of Jewish descent. These included Crypto-Jews (descendants of the 15th-century Jews of Spain and Portugal who were forced to convert to Catholicism or be killed), "hidden children" (primarily children of the Holocaust who had been placed in non-Jewish foster homes during World War II), children of Holocaust survivors whose survivor-parents understandably denied their own Jewish heritage, and Jews adopted by non-Jewish parents. While their reactions ranged from shock to disinterest to an enthusiastic embrace of Jewish culture and religion, each gained a fuller sense of self from the discovery. Readers of the diverse first-person narrative accounts in this unique volume will not only come to a deeper understanding of a little-recognized situation that is more common than we may have thought but will themselves breathe a sigh of recognition and relief. A valuable addition to public and academic library collections. DMarcia Welsh, Guilford Free Lib., CT

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From [Booklist](#)

Kessel interviewed 166 people who were raised as non-Jews and later discovered that they were of Jewish descent. She placed an author's query in the *New York Times Book Review* and postings on the Internet. The largest number of responses came from descendants of the two million Jews who immigrated to the U.S. between 1881 and 1920. Although most of these immigrants maintained, at least for a generation, their religious and cultural ties to Judaism, their children were often more interested in assimilating into American society than in maintaining their Jewishness. The author divides the book into four chapters: crypto-Jews (descendants of the Jewish victims of the Spanish Inquisition); hidden children of the Holocaust; children of Holocaust survivors; and adoptees. Some of Kessel's subjects said that the news only confirmed a long-held suspicion; others were taken by surprise to discover the truth. This book, the latest in Brandeis University's erudite American Jewish History, Culture, and Life series, is candid and reflective--and sometimes even humorous. *George Cohen*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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