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ANCESTORS

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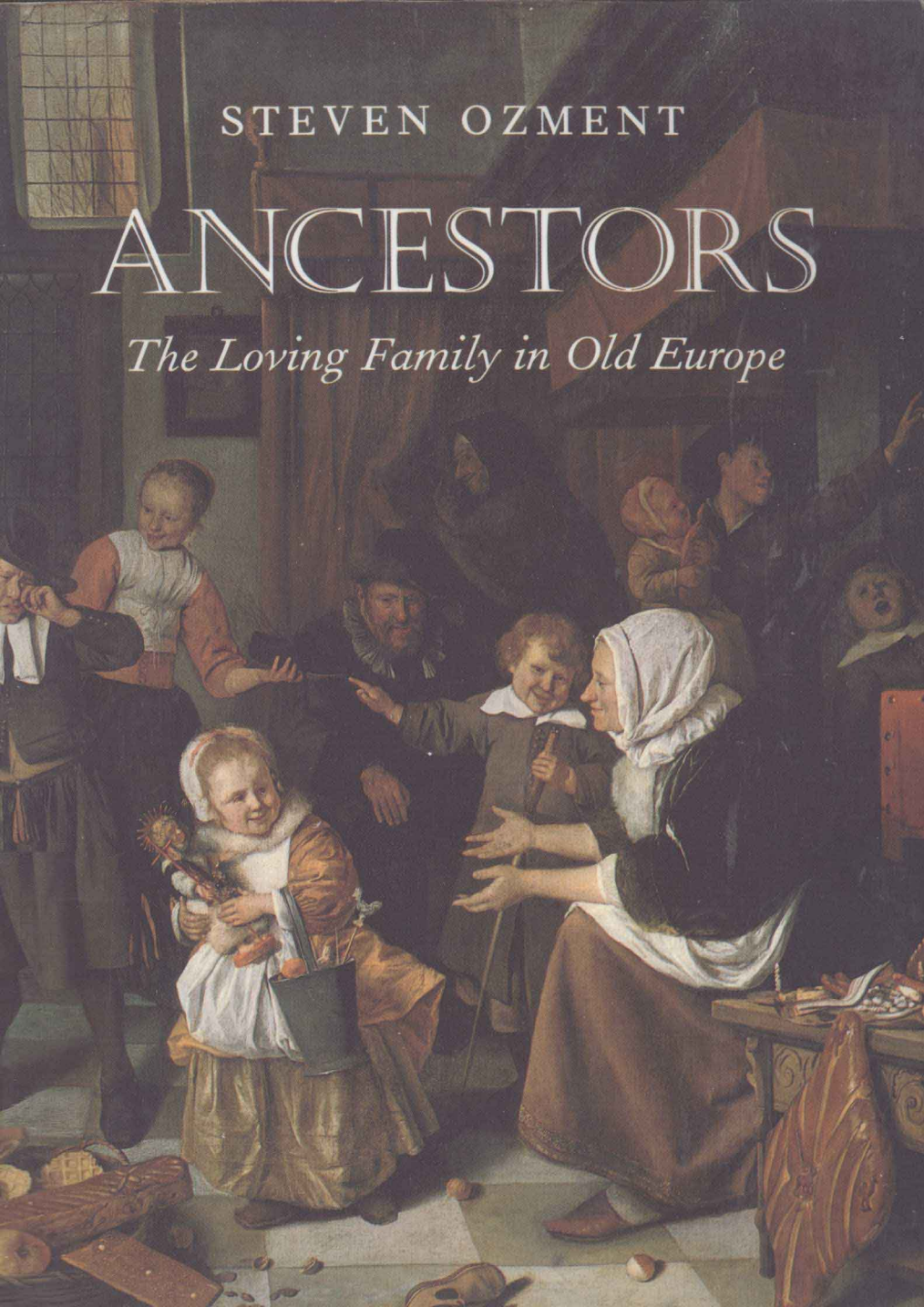

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The Loving Family in Old Europe

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To Carolyn for her constancy
and Kerry for the cake

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

As every good historian will tell you, the past is a distant place. Today, as perhaps never before, the otherness of the past is stressed in historical study, and not only because it presents us with a strange and different world. Many also believe that world still to be a dangerous and threatening one for people living today. Those who venture too close to it risk being pulled back into a past of fixed essences and hierarchies over which all-knowing political and religious elites rule—a combination deadly to modern liberty and equality. From this perspective, the past becomes a world we are fortunate to have lost and properly continue to flee.[1]

Every good historian will also tell you that the past is inescapable, forgotten by a present generation at the latter's peril. If today is the first day of the rest of one's life, it is even more the last day to date of the history of human civilization. The centuries that lie behind us are a deep, clinical record of human behavior, while the lessons still to be learned about ourselves from centuries to come exist only in our imaginations. From this perspective, the greater temptation for every generation is not slippage back into the past, but belief that past, present, and future constitute absolutely different periods of time and fundamentally distinct types of humanity. *Ancestors* presupposes that human life is continuous, integrated from century to century and from generation to generation, and that knowledge of a land or a people's historical evolution, no matter how near or far back it goes, always helps that land or people make sense of the present-day world.

The centuries between 1400 and 1800 have long been the battleground for defining the emergence of the "modern" European family in terms of its structure, organization, and private life. These are centuries in which historians discern a new family type emerging and displacing the family as it had existed since antiquity. For most, it is over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the new family becomes pervasive, and during the twentieth it is said to have been set irreversibly in

place. Its defining conditions and features are fourfold: the separation of home and workplace (parents begin to work in factories or offices, allowing the home to become a special place); the departure of servants and workers from the household and a new prominence of the nuclear family, or parent-child unit; that family's withdrawal from public life ("cocooning"); and a growing recognition of spousal equality and sharing of authority within a family-centered rather than a work-centered environment.[2] Only as these four conditions were met, it is argued, could the history of the family become a progressive one, and the family as we know it today a reality.

Juxtaposed to this triumphant modern family is a premodern, or preindustrial, counterpart most people today will thank their lucky stars they did not grow up in. Exceedingly vulnerable to the tyranny of man and nature, the family of old adopted a rigid internal organization for its own protection—one that is said to have been hostile to democracy, the emancipation of women, and the gratification of children. Forced to concentrate its energies on feeding and protecting itself, this challenged family logically evolved into an impersonal household, ruled over by an imperious patriarch to whom all members were subordinate and subject, and in which relatives and kin were as much family as the parent-child unit, and often more so. The psychic and moral costs of this domestic arrange-

ment are said to have been exceedingly high for subsequent history: an inability of household members to establish bonds of deep affection or relationships of true equality, regardless of degree of kinship or familiarity among the inmates.

This portrayal of the premodern family is largely the creation of an influential group of scholars writing in the 1960s and 1970s. Their counterparts in the 1980s and 1990s have since drawn very different conclusions about the premodern family. *Ancestors* attempts to highlight the differences between the two sides and make clear the possibilities this confrontation has opened, both for future scholarly research and for a modern society that finds itself in the throes of a family crisis.

I

STRUCTURE AND SENTIMENT

Following the lead of the social sciences, the modern study of the family has focused on group organization and behavior within a presumably integrated social and cultural world. This is especially true of the "household economics" approach to family history, which attempts to explain human behavior and relationships through larger structures and constraints that often go unrecognized by the multitudes they silently influence.[1] The challenge here is to typify or model a larger society and culture before addressing finite subjects within it—this in the reasonable belief that what surrounds a subject may also best explain it. As demographers have demonstrated, a great deal can be written about the size and composition of households

without walking through the door of a single house or delving into the private life of any one family. And not a few generalizations about the inner life of families have been extrapolated from sparse or controversial quantitative data.[2]

The study of the family through its structures and numbers has increased the excitement of family history and given it a quasi-scientific appearance. Preoccupation with the family's surface similarities and patterns, however, has made it more difficult for historians to see the faces and hear the voices of the subjects themselves, who easily become lost in the semantic greenery of an ever enlarging theoretical forest.[3]

Further complicating the family historian's task is a powerful argument that a family is more an ongoing moral experiment than any fixed, predictable institution,[4] and as such a poor mirror of society at large. Historians wishing to avoid societal blurring of family life and unfounded generalization about it find it prudent to anchor their studies in family archives, whose sources provide deeper access to the subjects themselves and the actual worlds they inhabit. Even though the data collected in these archives are limited to a particular family, they are neither irrelevant to the study of an age nor without application to a larger society. Houses have windows and doors, and the burgher households of the past were even busier crossroads of contemporary society than are their present-day counterparts.

Still, there probably can never be enough studies of individual families to justify confident generalizations about "the family" across society and over time in any one age. As a rule of thumb, the more detailed the study of a particular family, the more difficult it becomes to generalize from it, while the less penetrating the study of actual families across a society, the more fecund an overarching theory. That may explain in part why "deep interpretation," which is theory driven, triumphed so completely over "deep sourcing," which relies on many layers of reasonable fact, in the work of the historians we will meet in the first part of this book.

That being said, it is neither the bias of historians nor the human predilection to treat people in distant ages or cultures as basically the same that poses the greatest obstacle to making sound historical generalizations about the family. The main problem lies in the nature of families themselves. A family is not a standard product of some universal social mix, but an organization of discrete individuals interacting with one another in a sui generis familial world created by and large by that interaction. Yet, although families have been freely opening and closing doors to the larger outside world since the beginning of human civilization, many today view them as thoroughly integrated social units and hence reliable reflections of a larger surrounding world. Herein lies the origin of the treat-

ment of the family as a mirror of the body politic, a microcosm of mass culture, even a true image and docile servant of the state. Yet the evidence remains overwhelming that local, territorial, and state governments from antiquity to the present have remained very limited in their ability to mold domestic behavior and control society at its grass roots, where unruliness has proven to be the rule. When people in medieval and early modern Europe thought about the continuity of society, they thought less about a centralized "state," which was then still evolving, than they did about the succession and success of individual members within their own household and among their own kin.[5]

At the same time, individual families have understandably been taken to represent some distant ages simply because of the limited sources available for the study of those ages. Existing records for the family in periods of antiquity and the Middle Ages rarely allow historians to delve much deeper than a royal or a noble family's formal political alliances and public ceremonies. Under such circumstances, family history necessarily becomes a study of caste, clan, and lineage in family formation around the patriline, or an ambitious effort to discern the genuine domestic and social residues in clerically composed saints' lives.[6] Here, what cannot be deeply known must unfortunately remain the whole story.

Not until the fifteenth century did the requisite education and tools needed to write and preserve detailed family histories become widely available to the urban lay public, resulting in the creation of family archives of such quantity and quality that truly penetrating studies of the inner life of the premodern family became possible.[7] For the first time on a large scale, and at heretofore unreachable levels, the inner circle of the family and the private lives of individuals within a household became visible beneath their external structure and organization.

The House that Philippe Ariès Built

The person who has done the most to shape our present-day view of the family, past and present, is French scholar Philippe Ariès (1914–1984). In a famous study published in 1960,[8] Ariès presented a paradoxical argument, both sides of which portrayed the children of the past as victims of parents and society. On the one hand, children were said to have been treated as "little adults," while on the other, the adult world's progressive discovery of childhood as a special stage of life begat an unholy desire in parents and society to mold their children into perfect adults, thereby making those children's lives actually worse than before.

Ariès closely associated the rise of the modern family with the demise of service and apprenticeship as society's way of ed-

ucating its young. The "essential event" was the progressive shift of vocational training from faraway homes and shops to nearby schools over the course of the seventeenth century. That, Ariès believed, gave parents longer contact and deeper involvement with their children, who were henceforth no longer to be "abandoned [to others] at the tender age of seven."

> The sentimental climate was [now] entirely different and closer to our [own], as if the modern family originated at the same time as the school, [which] satisfied both the desire for a theoretical education to replace the old practical forms of apprenticeship, and the desire of parents to keep their children near home for as long as possible. This phenomenon . . . bears witness to a major transformation of the family: it fell back upon the child, and its life became identified with the increasingly sentimental relationship between parents and children.[9]

Although the breakthrough came in the seventeenth century, Ariès recognized signs of a dawning "new sensibility" as early as the thirteenth,[10] evidence of which he found in realistic child portraiture, children's apparel, games, and pastimes, parental efforts to segregate children from adult society, and, by the sixteenth century, the reproval of parents for coddling their children.[11] Such signs, however, were only straws in a fickle wind; the family's emotional detachment from its children

could not be overcome until three controlling circumstances changed: high child mortality,[12] the integration of home and workplace, and the near total absence of privacy within households. Taken together, these conditions encouraged parents to look on their children as latent adults and to treat them as such "as soon as a child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny, or cradle-rocker."[13]

Ariès emphatically denied that parents in the past consciously "neglected, forsook, or despised" their children. It was not love that went missing in the premodern household, but parental and societal "awareness of the particular nature of childhood" and with it care for and involvement in a child's life.[14] Parents in the past simply did not recognize their children as such; the premodern family was only a "moral and social unit," not yet a sentimental one.[15]

The retention of the child in the home for a longer period of time proved also to have a dark side: the family now began to withdraw from society and turn inward upon itself. Before this point was reached in the seventeenth century, Ariès believed the family had been a remarkably gregarious and charitable institution, readily deferring to and embracing the world around it.[16] That very communal allegiance had been the major impediment to the development of a vital private life. Thus, in Ariès's scheme, nothing signaled the arrival of the modern family

more than the triumph of privacy over sociability.[17] However, what children now gained in attention and care, they progressively lost in freedom and tranquility. The new family and the new schools saved them from a premature adulthood only to deprive them of the leisure and informality they had enjoyed as little adults. "The birch and the prison cell" replaced parental indifference, and the old society's tolerance and diversity diminished under heightened preoccupation with discipline and conformity.[18] Reared in homes and schools more intent than ever on "cultivating" them, children would now grow up to be less joyous adults.

Despite such argument, Ariès could still describe his strongest empirical evidence (the placement of children at tender ages in apprenticeship, school, and service) as an act of self-sacrificial love in the minds of the parents themselves. Nor were children as a rule put out to new masters casually and without protective covenants. As contemporary letters might also have reminded Ariès, an absent child's bonds with parents and siblings could also deepen with the greater maturity such separations occasioned.[19] If Ariès could find modern sentimentality dawning in sixteenth-century criticism of primogeniture, he should logically also have acknowledged its shining as early as the twelfth century in medieval law codes mandating equitable distribution of family wealth to all offspring.[20] There is also an