

GERMANS-JEWS-CZECHS: THE CASE OF THE CZECH LANDS, 1880-1938

In the days of December 10-12, 2003, historians convened at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich to revisit the ethnic triangle of Germans, Jews, and Czechs and address questions of anti-Semitism and Jewish identities in the Czech Lands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In his opening remarks, Michael Brenner introduced the collaboration between three academic institutions engaged in the research project entitled "History in a Multiethnic Network: The German-Czech-Jewish Triangle". Three studies are underway from researchers at the University of Haifa, Munich and Erfurt made possible by the German-Israeli Foundation for Scientific Research and Development, which also sponsored this conference. The triangular structure, Brenner continued, is also the lens through which historians have studied questions of identity and interethnic relations in the Czech Lands from the late nineteenth century onwards, and one which he hoped the assembled forum would provide new perspectives on.

The conference's first session was devoted to anti-Semitism, and was opened by Martin Schulze Wessel from the University of Munich. In his paper, "Anti-Semitism in the Czech Lands and the Foundation of the National Czechoslovak Church", Schulze Wessel looked at the absence of anti-Semitic discourse within the National Czechoslovak Church. Considering that lower Catholic clergy, a group considered to be a stronghold of anti-Semitism before WWI, was prominent in the national church, the absence of anti-Semitism suggests that it had lost its political and cultural function in the postwar period. Anti-Semitism had, Schulze Wessel proposed, become an anti-symbol of the new national ethos as defined by the dominant cultural and political elite. This new ethos embodied values such as tolerance, humanism, anti-clericalism, and civility, and consequently, in the new republic, anti-Semitism was discarded as a political instrument along with other elements of the Habsburg heritage.

The next speaker, Michal Frankl from Charles University in Prague, challenged the notion predominant in the historiography that Czech anti-Semitism was mainly a product of the national conflict between Czechs and Germans. In "'Sonderweg' of Czech Anti-Semitism?", Frankl problematized the perception of Czech anti-Semitism as a temporary, non-racial phenomenon, which disappeared once the national conflict was resolved. Historians, he argued, have taken the perception of the conflict's actors at face value focusing more on the "facts" about Jews' Germanizing influence produced by the anti-Jewish discourse than on the function of the anti-Jewish discourse itself. In contrast, Frankl argued that anti-Semitism was an

integral part of Czech nationalist discourse which helped define the image of the Czech nation and forge national unity at a time when national cohesion was challenged by social and political divisions. Furthermore, in the late 1800s, Frankl contended, as ethnic markers such as language, occupation, and areas of residence diminished, Czech anti-Semitism became an increasingly racialized discourse which served to identify internal enemies by erecting racial boundaries between Jews and non-Jews. Thus, anti-Semitism was not primarily a by-product of the Czech-German conflict, but played an integral role in the construction of a Czech nation.

In his response to the two presenters, Robert Luft from Collegium Carolinum in Munich stressed the need for a comparative study of Czech and German anti-Semitism as an ideology, of the ways in which anti-Semitism was disseminated, and the extent to which people acted on anti-Jewish discourses. The subsequent discussion centred on the relation between anti-Semitism and the national conflict as well as the role of race within the anti-Jewish discourse in the Czech Lands.

The next panel focusing on Jewish nationalism was introduced by Petr Brod (Munich, Prague). In her paper, "Czechs, Germans, Jews – Where is the difference?", Kateřina Čapková (Prague) compared the national identities of Jewish nationalists and Czech-oriented Jews in the interwar period. She contended that despite their apparent differences, the homogeneity of these Jews' socio-cultural background produced identities which were difficult to distinguish from each other. Figures such as Egon Hostovský and Viktor Fischl were deeply immersed in Czech culture, and shared both local patriotism, loyalty to Czechoslovakia embodied in an admiration for T. G. Masaryk, and a profoundly secular interest in their Jewish cultural heritage. While the similarities were shaped by the historical experience of Jews in the Czech Lands, the different conclusions Hostovský and Fischl drew from it, Čapková argued, was a matter of personal conviction and depended to some degree on the different social circles to which they belonged. National identities were, in other words, more a matter of choice than prescription. This fluidity of national boundaries among Jews is exactly, Čapková concluded, what makes studying Jewish identities in this region so complex.

In "Translation – Conversion – Projection: Central European Ethno-nationalism and the Zionist Version of Jewish Nationalism", Yfaat Weiss from the University of Haifa problematized the origins of Brit Shalom's support for a bi-national solution to the conflict between Arabs and Jews in the late 1920s. Weiss challenged the claimed correlation between the Central European origins of the majority of the organization's members and its endorsement of bi-nationalism. Rather, Weiss suggested, the Central European Jewish experience was not monolithic and did indeed produce diametrically opposite views of how to best resolve nationality conflicts. Weiss illustrated this by comparing the views of Hans Kohn, a supporter of bi-nationalism, with those of Arthur Ruppin, who wanted to create an autonomous Jewish space in Palestine. In his response, Hillel J. Kieval was especially interested in the extent to which the Jewish experience in the Czech Lands was unique, and suggested that a comparative perspective might add in significant ways to the discussion of Jewish identities in the region. Kieval pointed out that despite their differences both Hans Kohn and Arthur Ruppin used their experience with nationalism in Central Europe

as a negative model in relation to the developments in Palestine. The following discussion focused on the need to break down the perception of a clearly defined triangle of ethnicities and to de-essentialize national identities.

Analytical categories and their utility remained a key theme in the following session entitled "Cultural Hybridity". In his paper, "Mittel-Europa: Some Afterthoughts on Prague Jews and Translation", Scott Spector from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, discussed his understanding of Prague Jews' position as a "middle nation" by looking at the work of Prague Jewish translators Rudolf Fuchs and Otto Pick. Prague Jews of the generation born in the 1880's, Spector claimed, occupied a position of mediation between Czech and German culture. While belonging within the German ruling elite, they were also conscious of the challenges to their position coming from both Czech and German nationalism. The simultaneous challenge to German hegemony and to Jews' belonging within German culture, Spector suggested, shaped Prague Jews' identities as both inside and outside of structures of power, and formed the basis for their position as a "middle nation", an alternative space in between German and Czech culture. Spector pointed out that he found the term "cultural hybridity" problematic for the study of Prague Jewry. In particular, he questioned if the implied notion of the hybrid as culturally marginal was an accurate way of describing Prague Jews who composed more than half of the German ruling minority in Prague and who saw themselves as part of the dominant German Kultur. Rather, Spector suggested, Prague Jews' cultural position was as one of cultural mediation. The experience of Prague Jews was also the topic of Dimitri Shumsky's (University of Haifa) paper "Unintentional Subversives: Jews and Multi-ethnic Neighbourhoods in the Czech-German-Jewish Lands 1900-1930". In his presentation, Shumsky focused on the multi-ethnic socio-cultural experience of fin-de-siècle Prague Jews. While the self-image of Prague's Jews prevalent in the memoirs by some prominent intellectuals is one of a minority living isolated in a society deeply polarized between a Czech and a German camp, a close study of the neighbourhoods in which Jews lived suggest that the city's ethnic groups indeed did interact as neighbours, servants, teachers and students. Taking as his example Max Brod, who in his memoirs depicted Prague as a polarized city in which the different ethnic groups lived in isolation from each other, Shumsky contrasted Brod's retrospective representation both with his actual life-experience in a multi-ethnic social setting, and with his contemporary writings, namely "Ein tschechisches Dienstmädchen" (1909), revealing a dimension of fluidity and cultural ambivalence in the day-to-day existence of Prague's inhabitants. Indeed, Brod's retrospective "misrepresentation" demonstrates the power of the discourse of nationalist conflict in framing and shaping Prague Jews' memory. However, at the same time the multi-ethnic "facts" imply that there were limits to the national conflict. Nationalists' efforts to construct rigid national boundaries were, Shumsky contended, subverted by the reality of the continued coexistence of Czech, Jews, and Germans side by side in the city's neighbourhoods.

In his response, Andreas Gotzmann from the University of Erfurt discussed the utility of post-Colonial studies for the understanding of the Jewish experience in the Czech Lands, a theme which remained central in the following discussion of the

contrast between “reality” and its representation, and the meaning of these discrepancies.

The fourth and concluding panel was entitled “Jewish Spaces and Private Spheres”. Mirjam Triendl’s (University of Munich) paper, “L’schonnoh habbo! Nach dem schönen Marienbad ...’: Secular Jewish Pilgrimage and its Strategies of De/Territorialization”, explored the west Bohemian spas of Karlsbad/Karlovy Vary, Marienbad/Mariánské Lázně, and Franzensbad/Františkový Lázně as Jewish spaces. Jews’ travel to this triangle of resorts on the border between East and West Europe, which became the meeting ground for Eastern and Western Jews in the summer time, had, Triendl suggested, profound cultural meaning. The spas embodied utopian longings of Western Jews in particular, Triendl argued, in that they offered a cure for the physical and spiritual changes of modernity, and fulfilled a nostalgic longing for an imagined Jewish *Heimat* embodied by the presence of a vivid Eastern European folk culture, e.g. the colorful Hasidic rebbes and their courts who also frequented the waters. Moreover, the spas became realms, where political and national utopias were played out in the form of Zionist Congresses and other Jewish political gatherings. While visits to the spas were part of Central European middle class culture, middle class Jews, Triendl proposed, invested them with significant meaning about the Jewish self.

In her paper, “Religion Nebensache: Inter marriage between Biological Integration and (Self-) Destruction”, Gaby Zürn from the University of Erfurt discussed the changing perception of inter marriage in the Czech Lands from the mid 1800s through the 1920s. Before racial discourses became dominant, Zürn argued, inter marriage and conversion were seen as acts of social and biological integration. Over time, however, racial discourse tied ethnic boundaries into the physicality of the body, and thereby denied individuals any physical autonomy, as their bodies were to ensure the reproduction and survival of the nation. Hence within this framework both inter marriage and conversion were perceived as acts of self-destruction and biological contamination. Zürn traced this shift in the changes to state marriage regulations in the Habsburg Empire and later in Czechoslovak legislation which increasingly subverted religious legal codes, both Jewish and Christian, reflecting the increasing importance of race over religion in defining boundaries between self and Other.

In his response, Michael Brenner discussed the cosmopolitan character of the spas, and how the perception of the resorts as Jewish spaces might have shifted over time as Bohemia was transferred from a multinational empire to a nation-state. Brenner and the audience were interested in the question to what degree intermarried partners and converts were accepted among Jews in light of the racialization of identities in the 20th Century. This session concluded the many explorations of the Jewish experience in the Czech Lands. The presentations stimulated useful discussions on the complexity of Jewish identities contributing in different ways to the rethinking of the relations between Czechs, Jews, and Germans, and to the understanding of the place of the region’s Jews within the Central European Jewish experience as a whole.