

INTRODUCTION

While most research on the history of Jewish societies has emphasized separation and distance between a majority and a minority population, this volume focuses on exchange and interaction in a multi-ethnic environment. Presenting the research of outstanding scholars, this issue of the journal "Bohemia" seeks to investigate the encounter between Central European Jews and the populations among which they lived through an innovative thematic perspective. The situation of the Jews in the Czech lands is taken as a case study that will allow an analysis of political, social, cultural and religious affiliations and networks in the context of a multi-ethnic state. The volume not only adds to our knowledge about the central aspects of anti-semitism and national affiliation, it also challenges ethnic definitions by focusing on their changing and interactive character as they were negotiated between the political and social camps in the ethnic triangle of Jews, Germans and Czechs.

The research on European Jewish history in modern times in general – and central European Jewish history in particular – has long been caught between the paradigms of nationhood and assimilation. On this ground, otherwise opposing historiographical approaches agree on the existence of clear-cut positions of majority versus minority. This notion established a common understanding about the integration and the rejection of the Jewish population by the broader society. Antisemitism as a rejection by society was therefore interpreted as the increase of distance, while Jewish contributions to general society were perceived as reconciliation. This influential binary approach fails to describe the intensive interaction between Jews and their often diverse environments. The conceptual changes in Jewish historiography since the 1980s allow us to reconsider the relation between both sides and help us to describe the multitude of historical processes as well as the self-defined character of Jewish life even under the growing pressure toward assimilation. Bypassing concepts of multi-ethnicity that negate existing differences, this volume emphasizes the essential cultural characteristics of the various ethnic groups as products of social and cultural practices as well as of interactive processes. Acknowledging hybridity and retracing complex ambivalent processes, the individual essays investigate well-established cultural norms and social distinctions that define Jewishness.

The situation of Jews in the Czech lands between 1880 and 1938 allows the paradigmatic analysis of political, social, cultural and religious affiliations and networks in the context of a multi-ethnic state. Although the Jews of the so-called Historic Lands – Bohemia, Moravia and Czech Silesia – had been confronted with the national tensions between Czechs and Germans since 1848, one can hardly find any serious influence of this conflict on Jewish life prior to 1880s. Actually, until the last quarter of the 19th century the Czech national movement was relatively weak, in contrast to the already dominant German-liberal trend in Bohemia. Hence it is hardly surprising that from the 1850s onwards Jewish individuals in the Czech lands became more and more integrated into the German component of local society and

thus continued a process that was already initiated by the imperial Patent of Toleration in 1781. However, in the last two decades of the 19th century Czechs began to translate their numerical predominance in Bohemia and Moravia into concrete political power. In 1879 both the Young Czech Party and their more conservative rivals, the Old Czechs, joined the conservative government of Count Eduard Taaffe, while the German liberals were for the first time excluded from the coalition. In 1880 the Austrian Language Law proclaimed that any Czech individual within the "lands of the Czech Crown" could use Czech as an official language, and by 1882 the Czechs gained a majority in the Bohemian Diet. In 1881 the government agreed to the division of Prague's Karl Ferdinand University into separate Czech and German branches.

In addition to the political developments, far-reaching demographic changes occurred during the latter part of the 19th century. The severe economic crisis that put an end to the Czech agricultural prosperity resulted in the extensive migration of the Czech population to the industrial centres of northern and western Bohemia – formerly entirely German regions. These demographic movements also affected the structure of Prague's population, strengthening the Czech majority in the city. In 1880, the inhabitants of the Czech capital who proclaimed German as their daily language constituted 14 percent of the total population, while by 1910 the percentage had been more than halved. Coupled with the above-mentioned political setbacks of the German liberals, this demographic threat provided the immediate background of the bitter and sometimes violent struggle between two peoples over every school and every street name, and, more seriously, for every job.

These political and demographic developments had a significant impact on Jewish integration into the surrounding society. The escalating national conflict exposed the Jewish population to growing criticism from Czech nationalist circles, which considered the Jews to be the main supporters of the German national cause. This criticism strengthened the position of a small but vocal Czech-oriented Jewish minority. Its members exerted sustained political pressure to alter the cultural patterns of the Jewish communities, and by the beginning of the 20th century the efforts of Czech-Jewish activists had indeed resulted in the weakening of German acculturation. Moreover, the significant changes in the political character of German Bohemian society caused by the growing power of Czech nationalism also affected the place of those Jews integrated into that society. Following the political and demographic decline of the German Bohemians vis-à-vis the Czechs, the German liberal leadership was challenged by Georg von Schoenerer's Pan-German movement, which – inspired by a racist antisemitic ideology – advocated the dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy and the association of Bohemia with the German Empire. Failing to capture leadership positions in Prague, these radical nationalists gained numerous adherents in northern Bohemia. They argued that Prague, the heart of German liberalism, had ceased to be the centre of German political and cultural life, and that the city's German liberal institutions had become predominantly Jewish. This argument played on the fact that between 1897 and 1914 German-Jewish liberals had taken over institutions and policies that ethnic Germans had abandoned, leaving the latter more and more isolated.

Nonetheless, at least until the establishment of the first Czechoslovak Republic after the First World War one can still trace the development of a German orientation among numerous Jews in the Czech lands. Perhaps more importantly, Jews could exist as culturally assimilated Germans without identifying with German nationalism, whereas Czech assimilation would have entailed a wholehearted commitment to the aims and ideals of the Czech national movement. Also, in many regions – including the purely Czech areas – the German language was not only considered more prestigious, but was also the official language of the modernized religious services of the Jewish communities.

Thus, even after 1918, when Jewish children in the Czech regions were transferred to Czech schools, there was no such transfer in the mixed Czech-German areas. Moreover, in the northern part of Bohemia, the so-called Sudetenland, there were still many Jews in 1938 who did not speak Czech. Such parts of the Jewish population as were disheartened by Pan-German antisemitism preferred either the Zionist option or other forms of Jewish nationalism, while the Zionist organizations used almost exclusively the German language and adopted German organizational patterns and symbols associated with German student life. Of those Jews who chose to declare themselves of Jewish nationality, furthermore – a choice presented by the First Republic – many had German as their mother tongue. Yet however deeply rooted German culture was among the Jews of the Czech Lands, a clear switch of the Jews from German to Czech nationality can be seen after 1918. This process was initially accelerated by Masaryk's personality and politics, and in the 1930s by the rise and threat of National Socialism. In contrast to German-speaking Jewry, the Czech Jews had build up several well-organized associations, whose leaders raised the issue of assimilation to a higher philosophical level. Still, even the avowed assimilationists among them did not perceive assimilation as total fusion, wishing instead to preserve Jewish individuality. It is hardly surprising therefore that there were also Czech-speaking Jews who proclaimed their adherence to the Jewish nationality, though to a lesser degree than their German co-religionists.

Starting from the central aspects that constitute difference as antisemitism and the differing strands of nationalism, the volume concentrates on aspects of close interaction between Jews and their environment in which interrelated structures merged into each other, creating a dynamic hybrid space in which the differing concepts of Jewish identity were defined. These aspects include the re-evaluation of religious concepts challenged by new ethnic definitions, the creation of Jewish spaces in "foreign" surroundings, and the forms of closeness and distance that existed within the multi-ethnic neighbourhoods. The idea for this volume began with a joint research project undertaken by the Chair for Jewish Studies at the University of Erfurt, the Bucerius Institute for Research of Contemporary German History and Society at the University of Haifa and the Chair for Jewish History and Culture at the University of Munich. The interdisciplinary research program included perspectives of religious, cultural and social history; it also introduced a new perspective to the study of Jewish history – one that, instead of relying on fixed modes of perception defined by difference, emphasizes the multi-layered and complex levels of interaction among Jews themselves as well as among between Jews and Christians.

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