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CZECHS, GERMANS, JEWS – WHERE IS THE DIFFERENCE?

The Complexity of National Identities of Bohemian Jews, 1918-1938

In my article I would like to argue that what made the problem of national identity of the Bohemian Jews so complex was the fact that there were only minor differences between the choices. I am claiming this despite the fact that the leading Czech and German historians still tend to base their arguments on the conflict between the Czech and the German nations, on the political struggle of – as they assume – the two historically and culturally so different ethnic groups.[1] And I am claiming this despite the fact that on the political level the burning issue of Bohemian Jewish society in the interwar period was the conflict between the Zionists and the so-called Czech-Jews.

One example is Karel Fleischmann, doctor, poet, writer, artist, born in České Budějovice/Budweis. He was a member of the association Budivoj, an association of south Bohemian academics, which was heavily patriotic and oriented against the "expansion" of the German culture in the Czech regions.[2] He had very close contacts with Czech poets and writers. At the same time, he was a member of Makkabi, the Zionists sports organization, and of the association of the Czech Zionist academics Theodor Herzl. According to the journal of Bar Kochba, which was published in Israel, Fleischmann was among the most active members of the Theodor Herzl association.[3] He however never thought of aliya and was deported to Terezin in 1941, where he became the head of the hospital for old people and made drawings of the ghetto; Fleischmann died in Auschwitz in 1944. He was Czech and Jewish; it was no problem for him to synthesize the two identities and nobody can judge which was more important for him.

There are many other examples of multiple national identities of Bohemian Jews. It was mostly only because of the census or elections that they had to think about

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[1] In contrast to this assumption, some American historians put emphasis on the similarities of the nationalist movements and on the non-ethnic factors in the choice of the national identity (e.g. social position, loyalty to the state, local patriotism). See *King*, Jeremy: Budweisers into Czechs and Germans. A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948. Princeton, Oxford 2002. – *Judson*, Pieter: Inventing Germans: Class, Nationality, and Colonial Fantasy at the Margins of the Hapsburg Monarchy. In: Social Analysis 33 (1993) 47-67. – See also http://www.cas.umn.edu/wp932.htm (7.3.2004) for the text of Judson's article. – *Spector*, Scott: Prague Territories. National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka's Fin de Siècle. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2000.

[2] *Housková*, Hana: Českí času. Život a dílo Karla Fleischmanna [What Time Left Behind. Life and Work of Karel Fleischmann]. Praha 1998, 31.

[3] Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, Bar Kochba collection, A 137/5, "Mein Lied wird gehört werden." 1972.

their preferred one. How was it possible that many of the Bohemian Jews hesitated about which nationality they were? Or how was it possible that some of the Bohemian Jews changed their preference of nationality during their lives – sometimes more than once?

There are, I think, three important reasons why the choice of nationality was more complex and to some degree unique in Bohemia in contrast to other European countries.

The first argument refers to the demographic situation of the Jewish population – to the history of Jewish settlement. The Jews were settled in Bohemia nearly continuously from early medieval times. In contrast to France, England, Germany and other European countries, Jews were not expelled from Bohemia for more than a few years in the middle of the 16th and the middle of the 18th centuries. In the latter case, the expulsion of the Jews from Prague ordered by Maria Theresia even accelerated the integration process of the Jews into the local population. Many Prague Jews decided to wait for the nullification of the expulsion decree in the villages and small cities in central Bohemia and some of them decided to stay in their new homes even after 1748.[4]

The nearly continuous settlement of the Jews in Bohemia naturally had an impact on their close relationship to the Bohemian land. To illustrate this, I would like to quote from Richard Feder's history of the community in Kolín/Kolin:

> In the 1870s somebody from the Kolín town hall called Jews foreigners. Natan Šidlov, a member of the city council, stood up and said: "Sir, come with me to our Jewish cemetery, I will show you the grave of my father, grandfather, great-grandfather and the grave of the father, grandfather and great-grandfather of that great-grandfather, and if you want I will show you the graves of the majority of the Jews from Kolín. And he who does not have his ancestors buried here, they are buried in Kovanice by Mladá Boleslav or in Prague, as they married into the local community. What foreigners are we? But, gentlemen, who of you will show me the graves of your ancestors at the Kolín cemetery?" Nobody from the present members of the city council replied and Natan Šidlov triumphed in his heart.[5]

This expressive story was written by a leading Czech-Jewish rabbi and relates to the old Jewish communities in the Czech regions of Bohemia. The situation of the mostly German regions in the border area was slightly different. The majority of the local interwar Jewish population lived there only from the second half of the 19th

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[4] *Kieval,* Hillel J.: Czech Landscape, Habsburg Crown: The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia to 1918. In: *Idem.:* Languages of Community. The Jewish Experience in the Czech Lands. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2000, 10-36.

[5] *Feder,* Richard: Kolínští židé (historická skizza) [Jews from Kolin (a historical study)]. In: Kalendář česko-židovský 47 (1927-1928) 61, 197-207. The original text of quotation: "V sedmdesátých letech minulého století zavadil někdo na kolínské radnici o židy, nazvav je cizinci. Tu povstal přítomný člen obecního zastupitelstva Natan Šidlov a pravil: 'Pane, pojďte se mnou na náš židovský hřbitov, ukáži Vám tam hrob svého otce, děda a praděda a hrob tohoto otce, děda a praděda a chcete-li hroby předků většiny kolínských židů, a kdo z nich nemá své předky pohřbeny zde, má je v Kovanicích u Ml. Boleslavi nebo v Praze; přiženil se sem. Jací jsme to cizinci? Ale, pánové, kdo z vás mi ukáže hroby svých předků na kolínském hřbitově?' Z přítomných členů obecního zastupitelstva neodpověděl nikdo a Natan Šidlov jásal v srdci svém."

century. After 1848, when it was finally possible for the Bohemian Jews to freely choose their place of residence, many Jews from the central Bohemian villages and small cities decided to move into the industrially most developed German-speaking border regions.[6] A similar process can be observed among Czech workers. The difference between the growing Jewish communities in Northern and Western Bohemia and the communities in central and Eastern Bohemia began to be more evident during the last third of the 19th century. Whereas in the border regions the Jews often accepted or reinforced their German cultural identity and established close contacts with the local German bourgeoisie, the Jews in the central and Eastern Bohemian villages and small cities, underwent a rather quick process of adopting Czech language and culture – thanks to the growing political influence of the Czechs in these regions and also thanks to the late but rapid development of the Czech educational system in the 1880s and the 1890s. The difference between the border regions, which were later called the *Sudetenland*, and central and Eastern Bohemia was, however, not limited to the question of language. The Jews from the mostly German cities like Teplitz/Teplice, Reichenberg/Liberec and Karlsbad/Karlovy Vary belonged, along with the Prague Jews, to the economic elite of the Jewish community in Bohemia.[7]

Still, their migration within Bohemia and their integration into the German middle and upper middle classes did not effect their close relationship to the Bohemian land. Wilma Iggers, who grew up in a German-speaking family in Mirschikau near Domažlice/Taus, remembers that in her Canadian exile after 1938 the Jews from Bohemia had a separate community from other Jewish immigrants. They especially differed from the Jews from Poland, Russia and Lithuania in their relationship to their home country. Whereas the Polish and Russian Jews mostly cut off contact with their homes in Eastern Europe, Wilma Iggers wrote that she would be nothing without the notion of having her home in Bohemia.[8] Interestingly, also the Bohemian Zionists were effected by their rootedness in Bohemia. They mostly did not think of leaving their homes and the vast majority of those who made aliya did so in the last moments before the occupation of the Czech lands.

My next argument, which should explain the closeness of the choices between the national identities in Bohemia, is the secularization of the Jewish community in Bohemia.[9] Secularization is often viewed as a part of the general process of integration of the Western type European Jewish communities into the surrounding society. But thanks to the extent of secularization of Czech society, which makes it also

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[6] *Kestenberg-Gladstein,* Ruth: The Internal Migration of Jews in 19th Century Bohemia. In: *Goldberg,* David (ed.): The Field of Yiddish. Studies in Language, Folklore and Literature. Fifth collection. New York 1993, 305-309.

[7] *Čapková,* Kateřina: Jewish Elites in the 19th and 20th Centuries. The B'nai B'rith Order in Central Europe. In: Judaica Bohemiae 36 (2000) 119-142. – For Prague, see *Cohen,* Gary: The Politics of Ethnic Survival. Germans in Prague, 1861-1914. Princeton 1981.

[8] *Iggers,* Wilma and Georg: Zwei Seiten der Geschichte. Lebensbericht aus unruhigen Zeiten. Göttingen 2002, 41.

[9] For secularization of Bohemian Jews during the intewar period see *Iggers,* Wilma: Zeiten der Gottesferne und der Mattheit. Die Religion im Bewußtsein der böhmischen Juden in der ersten tschechoslowakischen Republik. Leipzig 1997.

today the most secularized region in Europe, one has to emphasize this phenomenon as a separate one.

The secularization of the Jews in Bohemia was, due to the old settlement and the special demographic situation, very much a result of co-existence with surrounding Czech society. There is, however, another reason for such non-religious behavior of Jewish society in Bohemia. In contrast to other capital cities in Central and Western Europe, Prague and other large cities in Bohemia did not experience the immigration of the Eastern Jews from the 1880s until World War I. The fact that the image of the Eastern Jew in caftan was unknown in Prague is very well documented by the experience of Jiří Langer, who became a follower of Belzer rebbe and who caused consternation among Prague Jews.[10] In addition, the visit of Yiddish actors from Lemberg/Lvov to Prague and their financial failure shows that there were few if any Eastern European Jews to visit their performances.[11] The success of the Yiddish theater companies in Berlin or Vienna was possible mainly because of the Eastern European Jewish audience. It was only during World War I that a significant number of Galician Jews reached Bohemia. The vast majority of them, however, left the country before the end of the war and the rest (with only some exceptions) had to leave in the first months of the new Czechoslovak state.[12] Also the immigration of some Subcarpathian Jews to Bohemia during the interwar period did not significantly change the character of Prague and Bohemian Jewish society. In contrast to Austria, Germany, France, England and some other Western European countries, where the Eastern Jews strengthened the Orthodox and conservative forms of Judaism, in Bohemia the lack of the Eastern Jewish immigrants fixed the secular character of that region. When, for example, Rabbi Gustav Sicher, a conservative rabbi in Náchod/Nachod and the Prague neighborhood Vinohrady/Weinberge (and the Chief Rabbi in the Czech lands after World War II) needed advice on religious issues (how to found a new Jewish cemetery, whether a child of an apostate is a Jew etc.), he always wrote to his colleagues in Poland or in Eretz Israel, as he had doubts about the extent of the Bohemian rabbis' knowledge of Jewish law.[13]

The outcome of the secularization of the Bohemian Jews was that not only the Czech-Jews but also the Bohemian Zionists did not view religion as a substantial part of their Jewish identity. In a Zionist brochure from 1912, the Zionist committee for Bohemia asserts:

> So who are the Jews? Religion seems today to be the exterior form of Judaism. This, however, cannot be the core of Judaism, as that would mean that everybody who gave up his belief ceased to be a Jew, which would not be conceivable.[14]

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[10] *Langer,* František: Můj bratr Jiří [My brother George]. In: *Idem:* Byli a bylo [They were and there was]. Praha 1992, 148-164.

[11] *Čapková,* Kateřina: Kafka a otázka židovské identity v dobovém kontextu [Kafka and the Question of Jewish Identity in the Historical Context]. In: Kuděj 3 (2001) 2, 42-52.

[12] *Kuděla,* Jiří: Galician and East European Refugees in the Historic Lands: 1914-16. In: Review of the Society for the History of Czechoslovak Jews 4 (1991-1992) 15-32.

[13] Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem, Collection Dr. Gustav Sicher, Sign. P209.

[14] Židovská otázka a její řešení. Vydal Sionistický obvodní výbor pro Čechy [Jewish Question

The impact of secularism on the organized Czech-Jewish movement was even more remarkable. Their distance from religion was strengthened by the "away from Rome" movement in Czech society after the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic, which even intensified the anti-clerical mood in Czech society. After World War I, all Czech-Jewish organizations cancelled the paragraph of their statutes which stipulated that only Jews could become members of their organizations. And there was a very strong tendency among the organized Czech-Jews to leave Judaism absolutely, i. e. to assimilate.

The attitude of the Czech-Jews towards religion was in clear contrast to other so-called integrationist movements in Germany or Austria, who based their Jewishness mostly on their religious identity and called themselves Israelites. So Austrian integrationists frequently criticized the Zionists for not being good Jews, they for example criticized the Hakoach club for playing a football match on Saturday. This would not have annoyed the Czech-Jews at all. While the Zionists in the German or Austrian case were often accused by the integrationists of being secular nationalists, in Bohemia the situation was the opposite. The Zionists were more interested in Jewish religion than the Czech-Jews, as they viewed religion at least as a source of Jewish national tradition and folklore. That is why the Orthodox minority in Bohemia supported the Zionists rather than the Czech-Jews.

The consequence of the secularization of the entire Czech society was that the Czechs not only did not require conversion from the Czech Jews, but during the First Czechoslovak Republic it was fashionable, especially among intellectuals, to be non-confessional.

The third argument is connected with the First Czechoslovak Republic only. It was typical for all Bohemian (as for Moravian, and the majority of Slovakian and Subcarpathian) Jews that they were totally loyal to the Czechoslovak state and to its first president T. G. Masaryk. The only exception were Communists of Jewish origin. The loyalty towards the Czechoslovak state was self-evident for the Czech-Jews, and it very much influenced the moderate political program of the Jewish nationalists as well as their distaste for making aliya.[15] It also exerted great impact on the German Jews, who supported Czechoslovak policy and who formed the core of the German activist movement in the 1930s. And though there were many prejudices against the national character of the Jews, the political authorities of the Czechoslovak Republic mostly recognized the loyalty of the Jews towards the state. That is why there were many Jews among the journalists and officers who worked for Czechoslovakian propaganda abroad – in press or as officers of different embassies or cultural institutions.

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and its Solution. Edited by Zionist regional commission for Bohemia]. Praha 1912, 5-6. The original text of quotation: "Co jsou tedy Židé? Zevnější forma židovství jeví se dnes jako náboženství. To však nemůže být podstatou židovství, neboť by každý, kdo přestal věřiti, přestal tím býti Židem, což je nemyslitelno."

15 Even the most radical Zionist branch – the Revisionists or Neo-Zionists were loyal to Masaryk and Czechoslovakia, see *Čapková,* Kateřina: Piłsudski or Masaryk? Zionist Revisionism in Czechoslovakia 1925-1940. In: Judaica Bohemiae 35 (2000) 210-239.

The loyalty to the Czechoslovak state and the possible service for the benefits of that state was of much greater importance for Bohemian Jews than their linguistic and cultural preferences. For example, in 1919, after long preparation, the Czech-Jews began to publish the Czech newspaper "Tribuna", the first daily in Czech in Bohemia with extensive news about Jewish issues from the Czech-Jewish point of view. The chief editor was Bedřich Hlaváč; one of the other editors was Arne Laurin. The Czech-Jews hoped with this newspaper to replace the German press for Jewish families. They even had the ambition to replace "Prager Tagblatt" in Jewish households. Only a few years later, both Hlaváč and Laurin took part in the competition for the position of the chief editor of "Prager Presse", a newly established newspaper financed by the state and designated especially for the readership abroad. Laurin won and the disappointed Hlaváč asked to be the chief editor of "Tribuna" again. He had to endure fierce criticism from conservative Czech-Jews. They were reluctant to accept somebody who had wanted to work for a German newspaper. Still, after some disputes, Hlaváč once more became the head of the Czech-Jewish newspaper. And what about Laurin? Did the fact that he became the chief editor of a German newspaper affect his national identity? Was his change of the job a turning point for his national feelings? I do not think so. The job in state service was a high prestige position and the change from the Czech to the German newspaper was of secondary importance for him.

It was also the loyalty to the Czechoslovak state which made – along with other factors – the results of the census questionable. Though the question of nationality was politicized in the entire society, Jews were especially aware of the benefits of their individual choice for the national politics of the new state. So it is very likely that many German-speaking Jews (or linguistic utraquists) chose Jewish or Czechoslovak nationality during the census rather than German.[16]

Here I could conclude with the argument that the three phenomena I have mentioned contributed largely to common attributes of the Czech, German and Jewish national groups in Jewish society in Bohemia. Common to all was their Bohemian patriotism, thanks to their tie with the Czech lands which had lasted for centuries; nearly all of the Bohemian Jews did not base their Jewishness on an active religious life; all of them were deeply involved in Czech and/or German culture and during the First Czechoslovak Republic all the Bohemian Jews (except of Communists) were politically loyal to the new state and to Masaryk.

But here the next step in our query about national identities starts. If the national groups had so much in common, what was the difference between Czech, German and Jewish national identities in Bohemia? Was it language or a different political program?

To illustrate the decisive differences, I would like to compare two academic associations – the Czech-Jewish Kapper and the Zionist Theodor Herzl. I consciously chose two groups of people who on the one hand belonged to opposite movements,

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[16] *Idem:* Uznání židovské národnosti v Československu 1918-1938 [Recognition of the Jewish Nationality in Czechoslovakia, 1918-1938]. In: Český časopis historický 102 (2004) 1, 77-103.

but who on the other were very close to each other. The members of both associations grew up in Czech-speaking families and were integrated into the Czech cultural and social environment. The Czech-Jewish as well as the Zionist students studied their Jewish roots because they had only limited knowledge of their Jewishness. But those from the Kapper association studied the Jewish traditions and philosophy because they wanted as Czechs of Jewish descent to enrich Czech culture; and the members of Theodor Herzl because they wanted to find out more about their Jewish national identity. So what was the difference? What was the difference between Viktor Fischl and Egon Hostovský, the chairmen of the two associations in the 1930s? Both were conscious of their Jewishness and both were deeply rooted in Czech culture. The works of both belong to the treasures of Czech literature. One was a leader of the Jewish national movement, the other a convinced Czech-Jew.

They differed in their preference of national identity, but the difference was not the language, not the history or religious background, not the will to stay or to leave the country. The difference had rather the character of a conviction. It is to some extent comic to read the arguments of the Czech-Jews and Zionists regarding their choice of nationality. The basic arguments are the same; what differs is the interpretation. Nobody denied that the Jews formed a specific *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*, that religion played an important role for Jewish identity in the past and that this had changed in modern times; nobody denied that the Jews became integrated into German and Czech societies in Bohemia during the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries and that the Jews had a long history of co-existence with the German and Czech population on the territory of the Czech lands. Still, one side concluded that they were Czechs by nationality, while the other thought they were Jewish. What made the Jews choose the one or the other interpretation?

I would like to argue that social contacts were decisive: family, friendships, work, and also the way in which a Jew was accepted in the broader non-Jewish environment. That differed in time and place.

In the Czech countryside and small Czech cities, the integration of the Jews into the Czech national community developed quite smoothly. Though there were antisemitic riots in the months following the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic and though there were some prejudices against the Jews, the vast majority of the local Jews accepted Czech language and culture as a decisive part of their national identity. In a report of the Central Zionist Federation for Czechoslovakia from 1926, the leadership complained that one can observe a conflict of generations in the Czech regions of Bohemia and Moravia – while the older, often utraquist, generation supported mostly Zionism,

> [...] their children were taken by an unstoppable stream of cultural assimilation, from which they can be torn out for the Jewish nation and Jewish culture only with the help of well-prepared and organized cultural educational work.[17]

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[17] Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, sign. Z 4/2338, letter of the Central Zionist Federation of Czechoslovakia for the local Zionist groups and for the confidents from the Zionist committee for the Czech regions, December 20, 1926. The original text of quotation: "jejich děti se nachází v nezadržitelném proudu kulturní asimilace, z něhož mohou býti vyrvány pro

But no propaganda managed to tear the young Czech Jews away from the stream of acculturation, and it was only during the Second Republic that Czech Jews from central and Eastern Bohemia became involved in Zionism in large numbers.[18] It was antisemitism that in many places destroyed the existing social contacts and friendships of Jews and non-Jews, including the exclusion of Jews from social meeting points, such as the association Sokol.

In the German border regions, the situation was different in the interwar period. Here, there was also a generation conflict. But whereas the older Jews still had many contacts among the German middle class, the youth often faced antisemitism in the German youth associations. No wonder, then, that the German-speaking Jews from the border regions formed the core of the most popular Zionist youth organization Techeleth Lavan.

The phenomenon of multiple national identities was common especially in the Czech cities with a significant German minority – such as Prague, Budweis/České Budějovice or Pilsen/Plzeň. There were many linguistic utraquists (not only among Jews) and it was also more understandable for Jews and non-Jews in such multinational environments that some Jews would promote Jewish nationalism. The involvement in Jewish national associations did not hinder the Jews from being active in Czech or German cultural and patriotic organizations, as the case of Karel Fleischmann shows.

These were the general trends in the different parts of Bohemia, but the reality of daily life was much more complex. As complex as the social contacts of an individual can be. In the case of Viktor Fischl and Egon Hostovský, both adopted their national persuasion from their parents. In other Jewish families national identity differed from member to member. Often the school years, job opportunity, university life or just an accident brought an individual into an environment with one national orientation or the other.

All in all, I would like to claim that the question of national identity of Bohemian Jews was unique, insofar as there were only minor differences between the various choices. Thanks to the similarities – such as Bohemian patriotism, secularism and loyalty to Czechoslovakia and his president T. G. Masaryk – it was possible to modify the national priority without any far-reaching consequences, and it was also possible to have more than one national identity at the same time. Neither language nor political program were crucial in the decision regarding the preferred nationality. Decisive, rather, were social contacts with Jews as well as with non-Jews.

židovský národ a židovskou kulturu pouze pomocí dobře připravené a organisované kulturní výchovné práce."

[18] Only in 1938, the first Zionist non-academic youth organization El-Al was founded, a counterpart of German Zionist Techelet Lavan, which was the most numerous Zionist youth organization during the interwar period. See *Sinai,* Amos (ed.): Rhapsody to Tchelet Lavan in Czechoslovakia. Hatzor (Israel) 1996.