

CHOOSING TO BRIDGE: REVISITING THE PHENOMENON OF CULTURAL MEDIATION

In the immediate as well as the symbolic sense,
in the physical as well as the intellectual sense,
we are at any moment those who separate the connected
or connect the separate.

Georg Simmel, "Bridge and Door"

In his 1909 essay "Brücke und Tür", Georg Simmel observed that the building of paths between two places – or, more precisely, the wearing away of the surface of the earth through the action of purposeful walking – constituted one of humanity's greatest achievements. The will to connect, as he put it, brought with it the possibility of shaping the natural environment to meet human desire.¹ More impressive still was the construction of bridges, through which the connecting impulse overcame not only the problem of spatial separation but also the active resistance of natural barriers, that is, of special configurations of that space. Bridges in fact performed dual functions: they succeeded in connecting that which was separated in nature, and they made this connection – this unity – visible to the eye. As aesthetic constructions, they not only represented an idealized image of the natural environment, but they both existed in and transformed nature. Of course, every act of connection presumes a condition of separation. But, Simmel argued, in the correlation of "separateness" and "unity," the bridge always emphasized the latter. Its overall effect was to overcome the separation of its anchor points.

Doors, in contrast, perform a rather different architectural and environmental function. They represent, in Simmel's words, "in a more decisive manner how separating and connecting are only two sides of precisely the same act." The human being who first erected a hut demonstrated the ability to cut through the continuity and infinity of space in order to create "a particular unity in accordance with a single meaning. [...] A piece of space," he writes, "was thereby brought together and separated from the whole remaining world."² But the door, by virtue of the fact that it can be opened, also transcends the separation that it both symbolizes and performs. Precisely because a door can be opened, special significance is attached to the act of closing it and of thereby purposefully shutting off contact with a particular stimulus at a particular moment in time. Doors, consequently, seem to be more powerful symbols than walls. The latter, Simmel observes, are mute, "but the door speaks."

¹ Simmel, Georg: Brücke und Tür. In: Der Tag. Moderne Illustrierte Zeitung, September 15, 1909, 1-3. – English citations are from Simmel: Bridge and Door. Trans. by Mark Ritter. In: Theory, Culture & Society 11 (1994) 5-10.

² *Ibid.* 7.

“It is absolutely essential for humanity that it set itself a boundary, but with freedom, that is, in such a way that it can also remove this boundary again, that it can place itself outside it.”³

The contrasting images of bridges and doors, with their emphases on the transformative power of the imagination and on the unavoidable connectedness of opening and closing, might well be applied to the question of cultural mediation in the Bohemian lands and to the role of Jews in this phenomenon. Indeed, the image of the Jew – particularly the Prague Jew of the early twentieth century – as bridge builder, as impresario of some of the last great performances of German and Czech cultural mediation, has great appeal. At the Bard College music festival of 2003, for example, dedicated to the music of Leoš Janáček, the week’s events were punctuated with the names of individuals who in their lives had labored considerably to bring the creative genius of Czech composers, artists, and writers to the attention of the larger European audience. Leon Botstein, the director of the festival (and recently named the director of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra), wrote stirringly on the subject for the volume “Janáček and His World”, in which he examined the unique collaboration between Max Brod (1884-1968) and Janáček, Brod’s dedication to translating the Czech composer’s librettos into German, and his determination to secure for Janáček international recognition as a master of 20th century opera.⁴

Janáček was not the only Czech artist whose work Brod rendered into German; he also translated operatic works by Jaromír Weinberger and Vítězslav Novák, as well as the novel that was to establish Jaroslav Hašek’s international reputation, “The Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk” (*Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války*).⁵ There are, moreover, numerous names that one could add to that of Brod – individuals who devoted the better part of their adult professional lives to acting as self-appointed mediators (*Vermittler*) between the proximate, yet distant, cultural spheres bounded by the Czech and the German languages. Otto Pick (1887-1940) and Rudolf Fuchs (1890-1942) are two who come readily to mind. Both individuals were poets in their own right, but each is best known for translations of 20th century Czech masters: Fuchs for his translation of Petr Bezruč’s “Silesian Songs” (*Schlesische Lieder/Slezské písně*); Pick for rendering into German the poetry of Otakar Březina and the fiction and drama of Karel and Josef Čapek and František Langer. To the larger enterprise of lifting Czech letters from the relative obscurity that is the fate of “small nations” to a more universal appreciation, one might also mention the names of Franz Werfel, Egon Erwin Kisch, Willy Haas, Hans Janowitz, and others.⁶

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Botstein, Leon: The Cultural Politics of Language and Music: Max Brod and Leoš Janáček.* In: *Beckerman, Michael* (ed.): *Janáček and His World.* Princeton, 2003, 13-54.

⁵ On Max Brod’s promotion of Czech music and letters, see: *Brod, Max: Streitbares Leben. Autobiographie.* Frankfurt/M. 1979, 259-278. – *Idem:* *Prager Sternenhimmel. Musik- und Theatererlebnisse der zwanziger Jahre.* Wien 1966. – Botstein points out that Brod not only reviewed “The Good Soldier Švejk” but turned it into a successful play in 1928, which was later made into a film. *Botstein: Cultural Politics* 14 (cf. fn. 4).

⁶ On the practices of cultural mediation among Jews in the Czech lands, see *Spector, Scott:*

Most of these figures – though by no means all – were the sons of middle class, German speaking Prague Jews, occupiers of a complicated (some might say, untenable) linguistic and cultural territory, to borrow the term used very deftly by Scott Spector in his recent work, “Prague Territories”.⁷ They were ascribed with the attributes of Jewishness, German language, Austrian supranational loyalty, and pretension to high culture – not altogether comfortable associations in the context of the ethnically divided, highly contentious atmosphere of the Czech lands at the turn of the century. In carving out for themselves a kind of “middle ground” of mediation, Spector argues – a space that perhaps only they could occupy – these individuals

[...] constituted a strange sort of ‘nation’ between the hostile Czech and German fronts; they produced a body of work that became the national literature of that people, and that inscribed a territory for them apart but not isolated from German and Czech Bohemia.⁸

Spector’s take on cultural mediation, as practiced by Jews living in the Czech lands, comprises three critical readings. First, he discounts (or at least keeps at arm’s length) the heroic account of this type of activity, according to which the Jewish commitment to mediation between conflicting cultures represented a selfless gesture, a kind of sacrifice of the ego on the altar of ethnic reconciliation. It would be more instructive, he suggests, to view the Jewish *Vermittlers* as engaged in a project of collective self promotion. Their gestures ought not to be seen as acts of selfless identification with “others,” but as a kind of working out of their own spatial and social position in this part of Central Europe: in other words, as expressions of self-centeredness.⁹ Second, Spector argues that even in their expressions of apparent self-identification with Central and East European “Others” – be they Czech-speaking Slavs in Bohemia and Moravia or Yiddish-speaking Jews in Galicia or Russian Poland – the Jews of Prague (in particular) never managed to free themselves of the assumptions of cultural superiority and paternalism, which they had acquired from the liberal German culture of their parents. According to this reading, Kafka and his fellow Jewish writers of German may have rejected their parents’ naïve confidence in the power and privilege of Austrian German liberalism, but they nevertheless had internalized many of the attitudes and assumptions on which this belief rested, including the tendency to “feminize” the Slavic other and condescend toward East European Jews.¹⁰ Last – deriving also from the theme of simultaneous resistance and

Prague Territories. National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka’s Fin de Siècle. Berkeley 2000. – *Godé, Maurice/Le Rider, Jacques/Mayer, Françoise* (eds.): Allemands, Juifs et Tchèques à Prague de 1890 à 1924. Montpellier 1996.

⁷ *Spector: Prague Territories* (cf. fn. 6).

⁸ *Ibid.* 195-196.

⁹ The following quotation is instructive in this regard: “Individual translators were literally denounced as traitors by Germans of Bohemia and Prague, but their allegiances were not to the Czechs but rather to this ‘middle ground’ of mediation inhabitable only by themselves. Together they constituted a strange sort of ‘nation’ between the hostile Czech and German fronts; they produced a body of work that became the national literature of that people, and that inscribed a territory for them apart but not isolated from German and Czech Bohemia.” *Ibid.* 195-196.

¹⁰ Thus the aside: “In ways strikingly parallel to their attitudes toward the Czechs, the

acquiescence – the mediating activity of Prague Jews, the willingness to break political and cultural taboos in the name of authenticity or reconciliation, the relentless appropriation of others in the quest for self-understanding, constitutes for Spector yet one more act of “territorialization.” Whether one is talking about the romantic identification with Yiddish language and culture or the appropriation of Czech literature to the pantheon of Jewish Prague, the claim is that Jewish writers and intellectuals, far from rejecting assumptions of ethnic exclusivity and territoriality, were carrying these notions to their logical conclusion; they were, in effect, “territorializing” Jewishness in Central Europe.¹¹

At the same time, the achievements of these individuals in challenging the liberal consensus, in breaking down social and political barriers, and in integrating Czech modernism into the general European canon of contemporary taste, were nothing short of being extraordinary. This group of Prague Jews was deeply implicated – after all – in acts of cultural transgression, for which they frequently paid the price in the form of public denunciation. Spector himself acknowledges that cultural and linguistic boundaries did break down and that the role of Prague Jews in this partial demolition was impressive. He writes:

Not only in the fields of poetry and prose, but in the visual arts and especially in music, a handful of German-speaking Jews from Prague introduced this vital culture to “the world.” To measure the importance of this gesture to the individual artists, one has only to consider the limitations of the bourgeois Czech-speaking culture market, situated primarily in Prague, as against the massive audiences of a network of cultural centers across two Central European empires, providing entry into Western Europe.¹²

Spector’s critique of the mediating functions of Prague Jewish culture is compelling in a number of respects – at least one of which I will want to elaborate upon later in this essay. At the same time, the picture that it paints is not fully contextualized; in its incompleteness, it is also misleading. Leaving aside for the moment the question of the Prague Zionists’ appropriation of East European Jewish culture, one notices in the cultural project that I have sketched thus far a curious (and basically inaccurate) one-dimensionality. For the linked projects of appropriation, translation, and transmission were not directed at Czech, but also at German culture, and the mediators themselves were at times Czech-speaking Jews. Thus Otokar Fischer, professor of German literature at Prague’s Czech University, brought the works of Heine, Kleist, Schiller, Hofmannsthal, and André Spire (a French Jewish writer) to the wider Czech audience; similarly, the Czech Jewish playwright František Langer played a key role in translating the writings of Kafka, Werfel, and others.¹³ More-

German-Jewish Praguers’ fascination with Yiddish and its speakers was a strange amalgam of romantic glorification, envy, and condescension.” *Ibid.* 85.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 85-86, where Spector speaks of the “re-territorialization” of Central European Jewish identity. See also p. 236, where he concludes that, rather than rejecting the dominant discourse of Czech and German cultural nationalism, the Jewish writers of Prague carried “its terms to the limits of their logical consequences,” creating in the process a kind of “radicalized rootlessness.”

¹² *Ibid.* 196.

¹³ See the discussion of this phenomenon in Čermák, Josef: *La culture pragoise entre les natio-*

over, one of the central figures in the mediation between Czech literature and the German reading public, Rudolf Fuchs, – a native of Poděbrady – by all accounts grew up as a Czech speaker who did not begin the task of mastering German until he moved to Prague to attend a German “Realschule” at the age of eleven. Eight years later, in 1909 – when Fuchs got up the nerve to send his first literary efforts to the Prague German writer Hugo Salus for a critique – he was advised to work a bit on his German style and linguistic skills.¹⁴ In fact, Rudolf Fuchs found the time to work on his German, not in Prague as a German-speaking Jewish writer, but in Berlin, where he worked from 1909 to 1916 as a representative of the Škoda machine works. Thus, in Fuchs’s case at least, the *Vermittler* was not a somewhat bilingual, German-speaking Jew attempting to overcome his or her cultural isolation as both German and Jew through the act of translation, but rather a provincial, Czech-speaking Jew undergoing rapid acculturation to the rarified atmosphere of “German” Prague. It was as an incompletely acculturated German speaker and writer that he embarked on the course of translating and disseminating the literature of his *native* Czech language.¹⁵

Our picture is also incomplete and misleading because it suggests that Jews began to act as mediators between competing cultures only in the 20th century. In fact the strange career of Jewish cultural mediation first gained expression in the 1840s among the first generation of secularly-educated intellectuals – individuals such as David Kuh, Mortiz Hartmann, Siegfried Kapper, and Leopold Kompert. These Bohemian Jews belonged to a generation whose quest for social advancement and integration took place at a time when nationalism was seen as a by-product of liberalism, rather than its opposite, and in an atmosphere in which promoting the interests of the nationalities within the Habsburg monarchy appeared to be perfectly compatible with both the larger cause of democratic reform and the particular struggle for Jewish emancipation. They contributed essays to Rudolf Glaser’s journal “Ost und West” (1837-1848), which was openly committed to political and cultural aesthetics that promoted both original lyrical creations and the “folk” literature of the peoples of East Central Europe. They translated the “national poetry” of the Czechs, Slovaks, and Moravians (whose literature occupied a separate category in

nalismes. Le rôle des médiateurs. In: *Godé/Le Rider/Mayer* (eds.): *Allemands, Juifs et Tchèques à Prague* 397-404 (cf. fn. 6).

¹⁴ *Seehase*, Ilse: *Daten zum Leben und Schaffen von Rudolf Fuchs*. In: *Fuchs, Rudolf: Die Prager Aposteluhr. Gedichte, Prosa, Briefe*. Halle, Leipzig 1985, 421-437. – *Seehase*, Ilse: *Nachwort*. In: *Ibid.* 438-468.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* – Scott Spector brings a more critical perspective to bear on Fuchs when he writes: “Coming from a Czech country town most certainly did not qualify Fuchs as an insider in any sense; his correspondence with Bezruč and other Czech writers was in German, as was the case for the other translators. It is not enough to heroize Fuchs for his efforts in spite of Bezruč’s ‘open antisemitism and chauvinism;’ such a judgment overlooks the fact of frank identification, and not mere sympathy, with the project that put Fuchs’s career and person at greatest risk. Fuchs saw his activity as expressly political; the ‘knowing soldier’ was fighting, however, for an army that did not understand how he belonged.” *Spector: Prague Territories* 208 (cf. fn. 6).

the journal). And they openly advocated the political and cultural aspirations of their Czech counterparts.¹⁶

In 1843, David Kuh and Siegfried Kapper formed a friendship with the Czech poet Václav Bolemír Nebeský in Vienna; the following year they embarked on a project that appeared – fleetingly – to align the programs of political liberalism, incipient Czech nationalism, and Jewish emancipation. Kuh authored a series of articles in the Jewish newspapers “Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums” and “Der Orient” calling upon his readers to have the courage to take sides on behalf of their Slavic neighbors, even at the expense of incurring the displeasure of the imperial rulers. “The position of the Jews in a country in which the nationality struggle is taking place, and with it the language struggle, is a difficult one,” he readily admitted. Nevertheless, neutrality was not an option. Kuh urged active engagement over discretion, exhorting the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia to identify with what he called “the fatherland” rather than with the state. This was, you may recall, at a time when the target of Jewish acculturation was precisely the high culture of the Habsburg state, but before that state had actually taken the step of including the Jews within the category of “citizen.” “The Jews,” he wrote, “should help to set in motion the machinery of nationality-language; attach themselves to those people who are occupied with scientific research into the Czech language in order to appear as Czech to their (unfortunately one cannot as yet say fellow-[...] citizens.”¹⁷ Nebeský responded with an appeal of his own, “Něco o poměru Slovanů a Židů” (Concerning the relations between Slavs and Jews), in the pages of the Czech-language newspaper “Květy”. It was an overture more cautious than warm, in which the poet urged the Jews to step outside of their “tragic isolation” in order to take part in the strivings of the Czechs.¹⁸

The *Vermittler* par excellence of the 1840s and 1850s was the physician, poet, ethnologist, and translator, Siegfried Kapper (1821-1879). Kapper published translations of Czech and Slovak poetry; original fiction in German; first-hand accounts of his travels among the southern Slavs; translations of Serbian folksongs (in both German and Czech); and, unique in its time, original poetry in Czech.¹⁹ The critical edition of Antonín Dvořák’s “Čtyři písně” (Four Songs: To the Words of Serbian Folk Poems), published in Prague in 1971, still lists Siegfried Kapper as the translator. In 1846 he became the first Jew (in any event, the first modern Jew) to publish his own poetry in Czech. His collection, “České listy” (Czech leaves) explored

¹⁶ On Czech Jewish intellectuals in the 1840s, see *Kieval*, Hillel J.: Languages of Community. The Jewish Experience in the Czech Lands. Berkeley, Los Angeles 2000, 65-94.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 76-82; the quotations are from 77 and 78.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 79, 82.

¹⁹ On Siegfried Kapper’s life and work, see: *Donath*, Oskar: Siegfried Kapper. In: Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft für Geschichte der Juden in der Čechoslovakischen Republik 6 (1934) 323-442. – *Idem*: Siegfried Kappers Leben und Wirken. Berlin 1909 (Special offprint from Archiv für slavische Philologie 30). – *Demetz*, Peter: Tschechen und Juden. Der Fall Siegfried Kapper (1821-1879). In: *Godé/Le Rider/Mayer* (eds.): Allemands, Juifs et Tchèques à Prague 19-27 (cf. fn. 6).

themes of Jewish longing and hope and imaginatively identified the Czech and Jewish nations, each the bearer of historical tragedy, each offering a vision of hope.²⁰

Unfortunately for this small cast of characters, indeed for Czechs and Jews as a whole, neither the Kapper-Kuh-Nebeský initiative to create a Jewish-Czech political alliance nor the entry of a Jewish writer into the field of Czech letters amounted to anything like a sustained endeavor. The political enterprise foundered quickly on the shoals of urban riots against Jewish business and property owners in 1844 and again in 1848. And any hope that Kapper may have had for a positive reception of "České listy" by the educated Czech public was quickly dashed by the leading Czech journalist of the day, Karel Havlíček-Borovský, who savaged Kapper in his newspaper "Česká včela" not so much for his poetry as for the notion that Jews could regard themselves as Czechs. "The Jews who live in Bohemia frequently count themselves among our nation," Havlíček wrote, "they frequently call themselves Czech. This is a completely false point of view [...] How can Israelites (Israelité) belong to the Czech nation when they are of Semitic origin?"²¹

By the end of the 1840s it appeared that the combination of popular violence and liberal disinclination had conspired to remove the possibility of any genuine mediation between Czechs and Germans on the part of Jews. Implicitly the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia conducted their lives along the lines that Havlíček himself appeared to have advised: to complete the process of acculturation to German that had been in motion for half a century. With an elaborate network of German-Jewish primary schools in place, secondary and higher education squarely within the German linguistic orbit, and a state apparatus that offered clear advantages to German speakers, there was little to hold Jews back from a complete embrace of German language and culture. Nor, in the face of antagonism from Czech quarters, did there appear to be a compelling alternative. The deepening commitment to Austrian German liberalism occurred at the same time that another door was closing. A bitter Moritz Hartmann acknowledged as much in a letter written in 1844, shortly after the completion of his own book of poems, "Kelch und Schwert" (Chalice and Sword) – parts of which had glorified the democratic and social ideals of the Hussites: "When one hears about revolution, like the one your fellow Praguers had, the best thing for a person to do is to become a loyal citizen and make his volume of poetry smaller by half."²²

Indeed throughout much of the nineteenth century, Jews living in the Czech lands pursued cultural and linguistic linkages that appeared to move in one direction only: toward German high culture. They carried among themselves only "half a volume" of poetry. But this identification of Jewish and German cultural interests was always

²⁰ *Donath*: Siegfried Kapper 338-441 (cf. fn. 19). – Also *Kisch*, Guido: In Search of Freedom. A History of American Jews from Czechoslovakia. London 1949, 34-36, 202-212.

²¹ Note Havlíček's use of the adverb "frequently," as opposed to "sometimes." Partial texts of the review are printed in *Kisch*: In Search of Freedom 213-214 (in Czech, with an English translation on pp. 36-38; cf. fn. 20), and in *Donath*: Siegfried Kapper Leben und Wirken 434 (in German). My translation is based on both sources (cf. fn. 19).

²² Moritz Hartmann to Alfred Meissner, summer 1844. In: *Wittner*, Otto (ed.): Briefe aus dem Vormärz. Eine Sammlung aus dem Nachlass Moritz Hartmanns. Prag 1911, 255-256.

incompletely achieved. Jews from small towns and villages in the countryside continued to speak both the language of their neighbors and that of the state; and, as tens of thousands of these Jews migrated to the larger cities of Bohemia and Moravia during the last third of the century (in particular, to Prague), their tastes and practices began to alter the face of Jewish cultural life in the city. Institutions emerged in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s whose purpose it was to support Czech-speaking Jewish students, to conduct religious services in Czech, to produce a Jewish literature in Czech, and to promote Czech nationalist candidates and positions.²³ To be sure, a fair proportion of the newly arrived Jewish men and women chose to place their sons and daughters in German schools, hoping thereby to increase their chances for mobility and success. This was the strategy chosen by Franz Kafka's parents, for example – his father, Herrmann (Heřman), hailed from the Czech village of Osek in southwestern Bohemia and had made his way to Prague after the completion of his military service. But in many instances, it was precisely the children of these assimilating parents who went on to assume the role of mediators between German and Czech culture in the years leading up to the First World War. For these sons and daughters of the new Jewish middle class, the impulse to bridge the linguistic divide represented not so much a turning of their backs on their contemporary cultural sponsors – the institutions of Austrian German liberalism – as it did the turning towards an unspoken, yet somehow intuited, family past.

In those cases where the allure of “at-homeness” in Czech language and the arts failed to provide a sufficient pull for would-be mediators, the growing radicalization of German politics in the Habsburg monarchy could act as a significant push. Pan-German nationalists began to make inroads into German associational life in Bohemia in the late 1870s and 1880s, even in such formerly welcoming enclaves as the German university in Prague. One German student association, Teutonia, insisted in 1879 that German identity be defined along *völkisch* rather than cultural lines, and voted to bar Jews from membership. Other fraternities followed suit a decade later.²⁴ Such racial closing of the ranks was one factor that moved Jewish students and intellectuals in Prague to advocate a “third way” for Jews in response to national strife: a cultural Zionism that emphasized the need for Jews in this part of Europe not only to imagine themselves as members of a broadly defined nation, but also (indeed, more importantly) to engage in the production of a modern, secular, vibrant, and inventive Jewish culture for the twentieth century.²⁵

²³ On the origins and development of the Czech Jewish assimilatory movement, see *Kieval*, Hillel J.: *The Making of Czech Jewry: National Conflict and Jewish Society in Bohemia, 1870-1918*. New York, Oxford 1988.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 76. – See also *Cohen*, Gary B.: *The Politics of Ethnic Survival. Germans in Prague, 1861-1914*. Princeton, 1981, 210-212. – *Borman*, Stuart: *The Prague Student Zionist Movement, 1896-1914*. Ph.D. Diss., Univ. of Chicago 1972, 7-8.

²⁵ *Kieval*: *Making of Czech Jewry* 93-153 (cf. fn. 23). – Leo Herrmann (1888-1951), who assumed the leadership of the student Zionist group Bar Kochba, was a native of Landskron/Lanškroun in northern Bohemia's German-speaking region. Landskron's deputy in the Austrian “Reichsrat” was the radical German nationalist and follower of Georg von Schönerer, Karl Hermann Wolf. Wolf had been one of those who, in 1879, had established the first

It is to this new Jewish culture-in-the-making that I should now like to turn, focusing on the Prague student Zionists, who congregated in the “Bar Kochba” and “Barissia” fraternities, and who published the influential newspaper “Selbstwehr”. They came mainly from the ranks of the region’s German speakers, but they included a significant minority of Czech-speaking Jews, including former activists in the Czech-Jewish student movement, as well as a sprinkling of individuals from the Russian empire. Characteristically, the Prague Zionists understood their “abstention” from the Czech-German nationality struggle not as a withdrawal from the politics of language and culture – a retreat from contested territory and into the self – but rather as a different kind of marking of physical and cultural space: theirs was to be a reappropriation of place that included an overture to all of the cultural ingredients that made up and defined their proximate setting. Choosing to be a bridge among cultures was to many of these Zionist intellectuals a moral obligation that went hand in hand with the choice of self affirmation. Max Brod makes this point in his contribution to “Das jüdische Prag”, an anthology of writings published in 1917 – still at the height of the First World War – to mark the tenth anniversary of the publication of “Selbstwehr”. While referring specifically to the Zionist project in Prague, Brod’s words allude to larger questions of isolation and belonging as well:

Between the zero of loneliness and the infinity of friendship lies that community, which we long for as the core of our Zionism – conceived of as loving; forgiving all mistakes while demanding all preference; honorable but never hurtful; in which one’s fellow man is both a foreign complex and yet a being all too deeply tied to me.²⁶

“Das jüdische Prag” was put together by the newspaper’s skeletal wartime staff under the editorship of Siegmund Kaznelson (it was republished in 1978 with a new introduction by Robert Weltsch).²⁷ The title of the volume seems deceptively simple and straightforward, suggesting that the purpose of the enterprise was to capture the “essence” of – or at least to evoke – that island in the Bohemian capital that could be called “Jewish.” (One wrote of “golden Prague” – of Czech and of German Prague; in what lines of poetry, artistic visions, or historical experiences was one to locate “Jewish Prague?”) I think, however, that “Selbstwehr’s” project involved a good deal more than simple mapping – than the delineation of Jewish ethnic space in this most contentious of *milieux*. In fact, the editors appear to have been moved by a very different kind of question. Not: where is my space, my territory, in all of this? But rather: how do I need to reimagine and reconstruct my city in order for me to be able to name it “Jewish Prague?” What would such a project entail?

German student association in Prague to bar Jews from membership. In his memoirs, Herrmann relates that he tried during his gymnasium years to make a special point, not only to show his face at Wolf’s local rallies (where he frequently denounced the Jews), but of standing in the front row. In: Central Zionist Archive, Jerusalem, A145/97, 2. *Herrmann*, Leo: Recollections of a Sudeten-German Zionist.

²⁶ Brod, Max: Zum Problem der Gemeinschaft. In: *Das jüdische Prag. Eine Sammelschrift. Prag 1917*, 10.

²⁷ *Das jüdische Prag. Eine Sammelschrift mit Texten von Max Brod, Martin Buber, Albert Ehrenstein, Theodor Herzl, Franz Kafka, Paul Kornfeld, Else Lasker-Schüler, Isidor Pollak, Robert Weltsch, Franz Werfel, Oskar Wiener u.a. Mit einer Einführung von Robert Weltsch. Kronberg/Ts. 1978.*

One answer to these questions is revealed in the very organization of the anthology and in the types of works its editors chose to display. Divided into seven topical rubrics, the bulk of "Das jüdische Prag" seeks to wed the creative arts and political – or ethical – theory. Thus an early chapter on "ethics and community" – consisting of original contributions on issues of community, politics, ethics, and engagement from such people as Max Brod, Felix Weltsch, Robert Weltsch, and Herbert von Fuchs – is followed by anthologies of poetry and short fiction from both Czech and German writers, and concludes with portraits of contemporary Prague artists. We also find that the collections of poetry and prose alone make up a third of the anthology's fifty-five pages. These literary selections come either from Jewish artists writing in German – Franz Werfel, Friedrich Thieberger, Else Lasker-Schüler, Hugo Salus, Oskar Baum, and Franz Kafka, for example – or from non-Jews (poets exclusively) who wrote in Czech: Otakar Březina, J. S. Machar, Jaroslav Vrchlický, Jan Neruda, Julius Zeyer, and K. H. Mácha. The by now familiar *Vermittlers*, Rudolf Fuchs and Otto Pick, contributed both original poems of their own in the German language and translations of Czech poets.²⁸

Siegmund Kaznelson's foreword to the volume directly addresses the overarching question of the selection of material and, in so doing, provides a window onto the editors' conception of just what constituted "Jewish Prague." The various contributions, he explains, were attached to the theme of the volume either directly (unmittelbar) or indirectly (mittelbar) – directly, when they spoke to the essence or flavor of Jewish Prague in literary or historical terms; indirectly, when "Jewish Prague" spoke through them.²⁹ The first category consisted to a large extent of invited contributions from distinguished outsiders, luminaries of the Austrian literary establishment such as Martin Buber, Engelbert Pernerstorfer, Albert Ehrenstein, and Hermann Bahr, whose essays bore titles such as "To My Prague Friends", "The Prague Jews", and "The Eternal City". These authors were awarded a certain pride of place, as their contributions appeared at the start of the volume. But Kaznelson undercuts their importance to the project as a whole when he refers to them somewhat dismissively as "mainly [...] non-Jews and non-Praguers" (zumeist [...] Nichtjuden und Nichtprager). Equally telling is his suggestion that the "Jewish" dimension of the city was not something that could be addressed directly. Rather, it would emerge "naturally" from the cultural production of its native sons and daughters.³⁰

²⁸ "Das jüdische Prag" comprised seven chapters, a foreword, and an appendix describing the activities of Prague's synagogues and Jewish cultural institutions. The chapter headings were as follows: 1. Das Problem des jüdischen Prag; 2. Ethik und Gemeinschaft; 3. Lyrische Anthologie; 4. Epische Kunst; 5. Über Prager Künstler; 6. Aus der Geschichte des jüdischen Prag; 7. Die Ostjuden in Prag. Interspersed throughout the volume were photographs and illustrations, including expressionist caricatures by Max Horb and expressionist paintings by Max Oppenheimer (cf. fn. 27).

²⁹ Vorrede. In: *Ibid.* 1.

³⁰ "Das jüdische Prag" included four contributions by women, though only one in the privileged category of poetry: "Der alte Tempel in Prag" by Else Lasker-Schüler.

In the end, it was this indirect approach to the theme of Jewishness that the editorial board of "Selbstwehr" chose to pursue. And its selection of authors whose work was said to give implicit expression to what was alive and creative in the universe of Jewish Prague suggests that the young Zionists' conception of place was highly nuanced, somewhat catholic, and ultimately restrictive with regard to German language production. The writers who were chosen fell into two groups, each one designed to play off against and complement the other: Jews from Prague ("from whose work one can perhaps learn a good deal about Jewish culture in Prague, even if it has no Jewish content"), and Czech poets who composed works on Jewish themes ("written originally in the language, which the majority of the Prague population speaks, Czech"). Perhaps, Kaznelson writes, one can determine in these works a natural, uninhibited reflection of Jewish being (*jüdisches Wesen*), helping thereby to locate the "Jewish physiognomy" of Jewish Prague.³¹ This explicit preference for a merging of Czech poetry and German prose (written by Jews) demonstrates the extent to which the opening to Czech culture was accompanied by a simultaneous closing to certain bodies of German writing. It also contrasts boldly with Pernerstorfer's romantic nostalgia for the German-Jewish embrace of the previous century and with his presumption of a Jewish opposition to Slavic dominance in the city:

When I think about Prague, what hovers before my eyes above all is the fate of German culture (*Deutschtum*) in this city. How much German blood has been swallowed up in Prague by the Slavs (*Slaventum*)! And our Czechs sneer at us today that German culture in Prague only exists now among the German Jews. The fact is that, of the few ten thousand Germans of Prague, a large proportion are Jews. German Jews! Jews, who certainly have not ceased to be Jews, but who – thoroughly saturated with German culture – continue to hold on to it and express their thankfulness by collaboration in this culture.³²

While no limitations seem to have been placed on the subject matter of contributions by Prague Jewish writers, the Czech poems that make their way into the volume all deal in one way or another with Judaism or Jewish history: Březina's epic poem "The Builders of the Temple"; J. S. Machar's "A Jew Walks among the Ruins of the Roman Forum"; Vrchlický's "Motifs from Yehuda Halevi"; and K. H. Mácha's "Eternal Wandering" provide obvious engagements with Jewish themes. But so, in fact, do Neruda's "Czech Verses," which compare the Czech people to both Jews and Gypsies, and Zeyer's more elusive "Justice," whose subject is based on a rabbinic midrash concerning the drowning of the Egyptians at the Red Sea.³³

Doubtless the editors of "Selbstwehr" incorporated only a fraction of the Czech literary output of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in their conception of "Jewish Prague". At the same time, it was not difficult for them to locate Jewish

³¹ Vorrede 1. In: *Ibid.* (cf. fn. 29).

³² Pernerstorfer, Engelbert: Die Prager Juden. In: *Ibid.*

³³ Březina, Otakar: Die Erbauer des Tempels. Trans. by Otto Pick. – Machar, J. S.: Ein Jude wandelt zwischen den Trümmern des Forum Romanum. Trans. by Paul Eisner. – Vrchlický, Jaroslav: Motive aus Jehuda Halevi. Trans. by Rudolf Fuchs. – Neruda, Jan: Böhmisches Verse. Trans. by Rudolf Fuchs. – Zeyer, Julius: Gerechtigkeit. Trans. by M. W. – Mácha, K. H.: Ewige Wanderung. Trans. by Oskar Rosenfeld.

themes in this oeuvre. Voices of one of Europe's "small nations," Czech poets and writers had turned frequently for inspiration to the historical experiences and religious literature of the world's small nation *par excellence*. The Jewish experience with historical calamity, with the loss of political independence and the destruction of its national and spiritual center, coupled with the ability of Jews to maintain a collective identity in the lands of their dispersion – indeed to have produced a national literature in the absence of national sovereignty – provided a wealth of material for Czech "awakeners" whose immediate concerns lay squarely in Central Europe. In J. S. Machar's poem, the speaker is a Jew who mourns for the loss of Jerusalem and questions God's inability to know either forgiveness or forgetting. Yet, as he walks through the Roman forum, he becomes keenly aware that this site, too, is just one more of the ruins that history has left behind. Power and hegemony are fleeting conditions; God – the poet assures us – will once again remember (in the Bohemian pronunciation) *Jeruscholayim*.³⁴

The answer, then, to the implied question, "How are we to imagine our city so that it can in fact be called *Das jüdische Prag*?" involved a delicate balance of sympathetic identification, appropriation, and limitation. The Prague Zionists enlarged their direct circle of experience in order to incorporate the pantheon of modern Czech poets in their vision of place – a move designed, certainly, to reinscribe Prague as a city of two languages, but one made all the more easy by the virtue of an apparently preexisting identity of interests and themes. Not to be ignored in this process, however, is the degree to which it involved self-consciously limiting actions. It is noteworthy that, among the works of fiction and poetry, the editors failed to include a single selection composed by a non-Jewish writer of German – as if to say that the German language, per se, was of no interest except as a vehicle of Jewish self-expression. Among the pieces collected from Czech literature, as we have seen, the editors imposed the criterion of a broadly conceived thematic relevance to the Jewish experience. Here the message seems to have been: the expressive field of Czech is not "foreign" to me, but my home is where Czech lyricism intersects with Jewish thematics.

In both instances – the opening to Czech language and culture and the closure with regard to German – the operation is relative only, hardly absolute. Moreover, the movement in both cases appears to be as much inner directed as bridge-like; self-centered; one might even say egotistical. Here I am drawn to Scott Spector's observation that mediation, too, can constitute a kind of "territorialization," that it is more than just an act of sacrifice and generosity. In the case of Prague Jewish writers at the turn of the century, it amounted to a reclamation of a piece of the diaspora (and

³⁴ *Machar*: Ein Jude Wandelt 27-28 (cf. fn. 33). – The Czech original „Žid procházející troskami Fora Romana“ [A Jew Walks among the Ruins of the Roman Forum]. appeared in his collection *Barbaři* [The Barbarians]. Prague 1911. See: *Mikulášek*, Alexej (ed.): *Literatura s hvězdou Davidovou: Slovníková příručka k dějinám česko-židovských vztahů 19. a 20. století* [Literature with the Davidic Star. A Handbook on Czech-Jewish Relations in the 19th and 20th Centuries]. Vol. 1. Praha 1998, 243-247. – and *Donath*, Oskar: *Židé a židovství v české literatuře 19. a 20. století*. Vol. 2. Od Jaroslava Vrchlického do doby přítomné [From Jaroslav Vrchlický to the Present]. Brno 1930, 11-31.

of a moment of time in the experience of diaspora) as specifically "Jewish" space. Was this an act of arrogance? Of unredeemed self-centeredness? Perhaps. It reminds us, at the very least, that one will find a fair amount of self-aggrandizement in the most generous of cultural projects; there is certainly no need to regard the "Prague circle" as somehow unique.

In the final analysis, however, to view cultural mediation exclusively as an exercise in narcissism is unfair. The Jews of Central Europe had learned to deploy the universalizing potential of language as a vehicle of assimilation and integration since at least the eighteenth century. The Jews of the Czech lands well understood the power and attractiveness of German in this regard. They also were well aware of the new, nationalist and exclusivist uses to which language was being put in their own day. Yet they chose deliberately to "transgress," to violate the rules of liberal German hegemony. And there was an element of bravery in this. The reading of Czech poetry, the cultivation and promotion of Czech artists, the identification with Czech historical memories, constituted serious choices and genuine elective affinities. They also represented clear voices of dissent to the more typical uses to which language was put in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when language served much more as a marker of difference and separation, a line of battle, a point of no return. To be sure, it may have been in the interests of the Jews themselves to attempt to diffuse the Czech-German controversy. But to have chosen inclusion and linguistic pluralism on the eve of Europe's capitulation to fascism must nevertheless rank as a courageous, if lost, cause.