

CZECH ANTI-SEMITISM IN THE CONTEXT
OF TENSIONS BETWEEN NATIONAL
AND CONFESSIONAL PROGRAMS,
AND THE FOUNDATION OF THE
CZECHOSLOVAK NATIONAL CHURCH

One might assume that the founding of the Czechoslovak National Church in 1920, which followed the founding of a Czechoslovak national state, was a prominent landmark in the history of Czech anti-Semitism. To state this unequivocally right away – this is not the case: The Czechoslovak National Church, which originated in a schism of the Catholic church, was by no means a stronghold of anti-Semitism. One can rather state that its rise to the position of second largest confession in Czechoslovakia (the Catholics still being the largest denomination) was closely linked to the decline in anti-Semitism within the population of Czechoslovakia.¹

What needs to be explained, then, is not a rise of anti-Semitism, but rather the opposite: The Czechoslovak Church was founded by a social group that was among the most anti-Semitic in Bohemia: the lower Catholic clergy. And they mainly appealed to the Czech urban middle class, which had proven to be especially prone to anti-Semitism around the end of the 19th century. Nonetheless, after 1920 the leading representatives of the church cannot be accused of programmatic anti-Semitic statements, or even of the anti-Semitic stereotypes current at that time.²

¹ Frankl, Michal: Český antisemitismus 1879-1900 v mezinárodním kontextu [Czech Anti-Semitism 1879-1900 in an International Framework]. Praha 2006 (manuscript). – Čapková, Kateřina: Češi, Němci, Židé? Národní identita Židů v Čechách 1918-1938 [Czechs, Germans, or Jews? The National Identity of Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1918-1938]. Praha 2005. – Kieval, Hillel: The Making of Czech Jewry. National Conflicts and Jewish Society in Bohemia, 1870-1918. New York, Oxford 1988. – Soukupová, Blanka: Česká identita po vzniku Československé republiky. Antisemitismus jako faktor upevnění jsočnosti? 1918-1920 [Czech Identity Following the Setting up of the Czechoslovak Republic. Anti-Semitism, a Factor in its Consolidation? 1918-20] In: *Idem/Zabradníková, Marie* (eds.): Židovská menšina v Československu ve dvacátých letech [The Jewish Minority in Czechoslovakia in the 1920s] Praha 2003, 21-35. – *Idem*: Český antisemitismus ve dvacátých letech 20. století. Antisemitismus jako složka české identity? [Czech anti-Semitism in the 1920s. Anti-Semitism, an Integral Part of the Czech Identity?] In: *Ibid.* 36-50. – Stölzl, Christoph: Die "Burg" und die Juden. T. G. Masaryk und sein Kreis im Spannungsfeld der jüdischen Frage: Assimilation, Antisemitismus und Zionismus. In: *Bosl, Karl* (ed.): Die "Burg." Einflußreiche politische Kräfte um Masaryk und Beneš. Vol. 2. München, Wien 1974, 79-110. – *Idem*: Zur Geschichte der böhmischen Juden in der Epoche des modernen Nationalismus. In: *Bohemia* 14 (1973) 179-221 and 15 (1974) 129-157.

² Schulze Wessel, Martin: Revolution und religiöser Dissens. Der römisch-katholische und russisch-orthodoxe Klerus als Träger religiösen Wandels in den böhmischen Ländern und der Habsburgermonarchie bzw. in Russland 1848-1922. Professorial dissertation, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg 2001.

We may find an explanation in comments made by contemporaries of the late 19th and early 20th century. In their opinion, anti-Semitism in Bohemia was possible or even real, but at the same time something foreign, something imported from other countries. Thus, in 1882, the Austrian writer Berta von Suttner considered anti-Semitism as a danger that threatened the Habsburg monarchy from the outside, as an influence from Prussia, whereas Tomáš G. Masaryk located the source of anti-Semitism in Vienna and described Czech anti-Semitism as a mere imitation of the hostility towards Jews of Vienna's clergy.³ Both authors viewed anti-Semitism in the Bohemian lands as an alien phenomenon. That would suggest interpreting the decline of anti-Semitism as a foreign influence which came to an end because an independent Czechoslovak state had been founded. But, as a matter of fact, the history of modern Czech anti-Semitism goes back at least to the revolution of 1848, and thence it developed independently of foreign influences.

Quite a current explanation for the rise and decline of anti-Semitism is connected to the history of Czech social structures. Some authors argue that the comparatively underdeveloped Czech trade gave rise to a kind of anti-Semitism motivated by trade rivalry, and that this anti-Semitism spread to the Germans in northern and western Bohemia during the economic crisis of the 1880s.⁴ In this model, the decline of Czech anti-Semitism after the turn of the century and then later on in the 1920s is explained by the fact that a Czech upper middle class emerged through the development of Czech industry.

Of course, the history of anti-Semitism is not independent of developments in the economy and in social history, but it is still a false conclusion to depict anti-Semitism as a sort of rational answer to certain facts in social history. A closer look reveals that there is no such immediate connection between social factors and anti-Semitism.

Beneath, I shall discuss the history of Czech anti-Semitism in the field of relations between state, nations and confessions. The change that took place in this field between the 1860s and the 1920s can be described as follows: The Habsburg monarchy was a multi-national and mono-confessional, namely Catholic state – at least for the period of the concordat being in force (1855-1868), while the Czechoslovak state was a multi-confessional national state, the state of the Czechoslovaks. The Czechoslovak Church's claim to representing a congruence of a nation-state and a state confession was not maintained for long, even by the church's leaders. The

³ Hamann, Brigitte: Bertha von Suttner. Ein Leben für den Frieden. München 1986, 196. Quoted from Krejčová, Helena/Mišková, Alena: Anmerkungen zur Frage des Antisemitismus in den Böhmisches Ländern Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts In: Hoensch, Jörg/Biman, Stanislav/Lipták, Lubomír (eds.): Judenemanzipation – Antisemitismus – Verfolgung in Deutschland, Österreich-Ungarn, den Böhmisches Ländern und in der Slowakei. Essen 1999, 55-84, here 55 (Veröffentlichungen der Deutsch-Tschechischen und Deutsch-Slowakischen Historikerkommission 6) – Masaryk quoted from Stölzl: Die "Burg" und die Juden 93 (cf. fn 1).

⁴ Goldstücker, Eduard: K dějinám českého antisemitismu [A History of Czech anti-Semitism]. In: Pojar, Miloš (ed.): Hilsnerova aféra a česká společnost, 1899-1999. Sborník přednášek z konference na Univerzitě Karlově v Praze ve dnech 24.-26. listopadu 1999 [The Hilsner Affair and Czech Society 1899-1999. Contributions of a Conference Held at Charles University, Prague, Nov. 24.-26., 1999]. Praha 1999, 147-151.

Czechoslovak Church rather saw itself as one confession amongst many equal denominations.

The virulence of anti-Semitism in the second half of the 19th century and especially around the turn of the century must be seen in connection with the political claims that were at that time asserted in a field of tension between state, nation and confession. Thus, anti-Semitism in the Bohemian lands was also an instrument to initiate political alliances or enforce hostilities.

My first argument is that at times a mutual agreement between competing nationalisms within the Habsburg monarchy was sought on the basis of a common anti-Semitism. This political program was not officially supported by any particular party, but on several occasions in the 1880s and 1890s corresponding attempts can be detected. The initiative appears to have come from German-Austrian politicians and publicists. In 1883, for the first time German, Czech and Magyar party politicians entered negotiations about a "reconciliation of the peoples [Völker] on the basis of anti-Semitism".⁵ Nine years later this program was once more taken up by the German-Austrian member of the Reichsrat, Ernst Schneider, a leading exponent of anti-Semitism in Austria, during his visit to one of the most famous and influential Czech anti-Semites, the politician of the Young Czech party (Mladočeši), Václav Březnovský, in Prague. Schneider intended to forge a political alliance that was supposed to be joined by August Rohling, a German-Bohemian Professor at Prague University and author of the infamous book "Der Talmudjude" (The Talmud Jew).⁶ At that time, the idea of pan-nationalism on the basis of anti-Semitism must have already appeared quite unrealistic because of widespread national antagonisms within the Habsburg monarchy. Still, the contacts between leading anti-Semites in Vienna and Prague were maintained.

Taking the argument a step further, we may see that in the elections to the Reichstag in 1891, the modern national Czech Party, the so called Young Czechs, became the leading political force in the Bohemian lands. Why anti-Semitism played a considerable, but not decisive role in the political program of the Young Czechs, can be explained by the fact that the party developed the way it perceived itself in opposition to the predominance of the Catholic Church. Historical background for this was the liberal fight against the concordat of 1855, which had strongly influenced the political program of the German-Bohemian Liberals in the 1860s. This was directed against the Austrian confessional state, against the Catholic Church's pretension to control decisions concerning marriage laws, science and education. During this conflict, from the 1860s to the 1880s, political antagonisms arose – first among German-Bohemians, later among the Czechs – between the Catholic Church on one side and the laicists on the other. In a certain sense, their strict anti-clericalism made the latter something of a second "confessional party." The conflict between the clericalism of the predominant state confession and the laicism of the Young Czechs was, as one of their party leaders put it, "the key to all our internal

⁵ Quoted from *Stölzl*: Die "Burg" und die Juden 83 (cf. fn 1).

⁶ *Riff*, Michael A.: Czech Antisemitism and the Jewish Response before 1914. In: *Wiener Library Bulletin* 29 (1976) vol. 39-40, 8-20, esp. 9.

quarrels.”⁷ In the 1870s and 1880s, the fight against the dominating position of the Catholic Church, against its influence on other parties, such as the so called Old Czechs (Staročesi), became a source of agitation for the Young Czechs, who, from their point of view, were fighting an important battle for the sake of identity of the Czech nation. In his open letter to the leader of the so-called Old Czechs, the Young Czech leader, Eduard Grégr, maintained that the Young Czechs saw the “reason for their existence” in the fight against the “very effectively organized efforts of the ultramontane Catholics.”⁸ In another programmatic writing, he stated that the Czechs were “in their core” liberal-minded and anti-Catholic. There could be no greater difference, no greater opposition than between the liberal and the clerical parties: “The one wants enlightenment and education for everybody, the other wants to keep people in ignorance and superstition.”⁹ Jan Hus who, as a religious reformer, offered the opportunity for actualizing political topics, similar to Martin Luther in Germany, became the symbol of this battle against the clergy: Hus, just like Luther, was an important integrative figure for the anti-Roman, educated middle classes, who in the Bohemian lands were united not in a single protestant confession, but in a community of like-minded laicists. In the Bohemian lands, countless Hus celebrations mobilized around one million people in the 1870s for patriotic and liberal goals and became the most important symbol of an anti-clerical, united modern nation.¹⁰ To Jews, this vision of a nation had a strong appeal as well, at least there was a surge of new members joining the Czech-Jewish Society after the triumphant victory of the Young Czechs in the elections of 1891. Amongst Jews, the majority of whom lived in a Czech-speaking environment but (mainly) used German as colloquial language, there was a definite trend towards a shift of language from German to Czech.

My next point is that the Young Czechs’ modern laicistic concept of a nation corresponded with a Catholic concept that was decidedly anti-modern and anti-Semitic. The particular virulence of Catholic anti-Semitism within the Habsburg monarchy resulted from the fact that Catholicism perceived modernity not only as an attack on religious convictions, but also as a loss of the confessional Catholic monarchy. The dismantling of the concordat during the 1860s meant a traumatic farewell from a state that had been theirs. In 1870, the year the concordat was officially repealed, the first Catholic party was founded in Bohemia. Exactly because the adversaries of the Catholics were not united in a single denomination – like Protestantism in Germany – but remained rather indistinct, the political Catholicism of the Christian-Socials in the Habsburg monarchy was much more anti-Semitic than in other countries. This anti-Semitism was disguised as a criticism of capitalism, but a closer look quickly reveals that it ultimately had its roots in racism. In the Bohemian lands, this anti-

⁷ Grégr, Eduard: K objasnění našich domácích sporů [Explaining our Internal Controversies]. Praha 1874, 41.

⁸ *Idem*: Otevřený list panu dr. Fr. L. Riegerovi [An Open Letter to Dr. Fr. L. Rieger] Praha 1876, 23–24.

⁹ *Idem*: K objasnění našich domácích sporů 6 (cf. fn. 7).

¹⁰ Schulze Wessel, Martin: Das 19. Jahrhundert als “Zweites Konfessionelles Zeitalter?” Thesen zur Religionsgeschichte der böhmischen Länder in europäischer Hinsicht. In: Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung 50 (2001) No. 2, 514–529.

Semitism was supported by parts of the church's hierarchy – for example by one of the first Czech national bishops, the bishop Brynych of Hradec Králové/Königrätz. But it was the lower clergy who was particularly active, especially the organized movement of the Czech Clergy which would later lead to the Czechoslovak National Church being founded. (A personal continuity between the Christian-Social movement of the clergy and the Czechoslovak National Church can be detected in the curate and author Emil Dlouhý-Pokorný, among others.) Characteristic of the anti-Semitic sentiment within the lower clergy was under which circumstances they prevailed against the first non-aristocratic and national Czech archbishop of Olomouc/Olmütz, Theodor Kohn (1845-1915), to gain the latter's abdication. The fact that Kohn's parents were Jewish converts formed the background of this unprecedented case.¹¹

The failure of the Czech national policy concerning the language question, i. e. the repeal of the Badeni language decree of 1898, marks a distinct turning point in the history of Czech anti-Semitism. Especially in the political camp of the Young Czechs, anti-Semitism became much more intensive than before and underwent a change of meaning. While up to 1898 the concept of Czech and German nationalists joining forces on the basis of a common anti-Semitism was still discussed, afterwards for the Young Czechs anti-Germanism and anti-Semitism became essentially interwoven. This meant that political Catholicism had the opportunity for a partial reconciliation with the Young Czechs, despite their anti-clerical attitude. Until 1898, both groups had aimed devastating rhetoric against each other, often borrowed from the vocabulary of anti-Semitism. The national Hus celebrations gave the Young Czechs the opportunity to accuse the Catholics that it had been them who condemned Hus to be burned at the stake, while the Catholics talked of their enemies as the "jungtschechischen und freidenkerischen Ratten" (Young Czech and liberal-minded rats), who would get their skulls bashed if they attacked Saint Peter's rock. After 1898, an end was put to the battle between clericalism and anti-clericalism in favor of a national truce based on anti-Semitic and anti-German sentiments. The debates of the Prague council of elders are characteristic for this. It was decided that there should be two monuments on the Old Town Square, a statue of the Virgin Mary and a new monument of Jan Hus. In their speeches the leaders of the Young Czechs, otherwise ardent laicists, not only talked of Hus, the apostle of a progressive nation, but also of Hus, the devout venerator of the Virgin Mary. As the German newspaper in Prague, "Bohemia", aptly stated, anti-Catholic sentiments were not to be detected during the debate, it had not been a conflict between laicism and clericalism, but a declaration of war against Germans (and Jews).¹² Only the fact that Czech national language policies failed, and resulting from this the careful rapprochement of Young Czechs and political Catholicism, reinforced by a common opposition to social democracy, explains how an atmosphere came about in which stories about

¹¹ Marek, Pavel: Prof. ThDr. Theodor Kohn. Život a dílo olomouckého arcibiskupa [Life and Work of an Archbishop of Olomouc]. Kroměříž 1994.

¹² Schulze Wessel, Martin: Die Konfessionalisierung der tschechischen Nation. In: Haupt, Heinz-Gerhard/Langewiesche, Dieter (eds.): Nation und Religion in Europa. Mehrkonfessionelle Gesellschaften im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Frankfurt/M., New York 2004, 135-150.

ritual murders not only found many followers, but were also widely accepted and even supported by politicians. Tomáš G. Masaryk was a solitary exception. Only the victory of the Social democrats in 1907 led to a drastic decline in anti-Semitism in the politics of the Bohemian lands.

The final point to be examined refers to the period after the first World War. Immediately after the Czechoslovak nation state had been founded, there were numerous acts of anti-Semitic violence. Still, after a while a remarkable decline in Czech anti-Semitism was to be observed. No phenomenon shows this more clearly than the attitude of the Czechoslovak Church, founded in 1920 by the most important representatives of the old clerical anti-Semitism, the patriotic lower Czech clergy. However, the members of the new Church came mainly from the urban Czech middle classes, the traditional voters of the Young Czechs. Within the Czechoslovak Church, the old opposition between clericalism and laicism was symbolically resolved, because it chose Jan Hus as its central symbol. In the tradition of the Young Czechs, Hus had hitherto embodied the laicistic nation, and now he became the symbol of a reformatory Church. The fact that now, unlike in 1898, reconciliation did not take place on the basis of anti-Semitism had several reasons:

For one thing, it can be explained by a certain loss of purpose that anti-Semitism underwent: The trauma of the Czech nationalists, the fact that their efforts towards the Habsburg language laws had failed, was finally eradicated by the founding of the nation-state. Moreover, the Habsburg confessional state of the concordat was no longer an option for the Czech Catholics after the founding of the ČSR. And even if part of the Catholics' reaction to measures taken against the church by the new state – like nationalization of church property – was anti-Semitic, the Catholics nonetheless accepted the existence of a state that made the separation of state and church part of its program (a promise never completely redeemed). The fact that the de-confessionalization of the state was an irrevocable objective of the new state's policy is especially due to its founding president, Tomáš G. Masaryk, who even in exile during the war seized every opportunity to establish a link between the setting up of a Czech nation-state and the objective of separating state and church. His name is also particularly connected with the successful policy of consequently banning anti-Semitism in Czechoslovakia – it is for this reason, for example, that the president did not accept any honorary citizenship from towns and cities where acts of anti-Semitic violence had been committed after 1918. Even if Masaryk had no part in the founding of the Czechoslovak state church (for certain reasons he was rather critical towards it), the new church nonetheless reflected the spirit in which the ČSR was set up. Without dogmatically committing itself to the belief in a personal God, the First Czechoslovak Republic saw itself, at least during the period of its foundation, as a representative of a Czech civil religion, central elements of which were freedom of conscience and tolerance. These principles were symbolized by Jan Hus, who thus for the first time had become an effective religious and national idol: Before 1918, he had been a heretic according to the Catholics' point of view and a national and anti-clerical pioneer according to the Young Czechs, and with the Czechoslovak National Church having been established he was ethicized: as the symbol of a tolerant, civil religion.