Bohemia's Jews and Their Nineteenth Century

Texts, Contexts, Reassessments

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Credits

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Foreword

My project started as what I mainly considered a reading enterprise based on literary sources such as those assembled in Oskar Donath's two-volume anthology about Jews and Jewishness in Czech literature (Donath 1923/30) or in Wilma Iggers's historical reader about the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia (Iggers 1986). I also admit inspiration from Otto Muneles's bibliography of Jewish Prague (Muneles 1952). Donath impressed me with his enthusiasm and detailed knowledge of sources, while Iggers was an engaged pioneer amassing a broad variety of Bohemian Jewish texts between the Enlightenment and the twentieth century, and as for the hundreds and hundreds of entries in Muneles—whenever I open this bibliography, I am humbled to see that I have missed an important title. In brief, trying to rescue forgotten texts from obscurity and looking for their contexts was a pleasure.[1]

My initial point of departure was based on the impression that our knowledge of nineteenth-century Bohemian Jewish culture is uneven. While the two prominent ends of the "very long Jewish century"—the era of enlightened reforms of the 1780s on the one hand, and the late decades of the Habsburg Monarchy on the other hand—have each received extensive attention in scholarship, the "quiet decades" in between, except for the revolutionary year 1848, seemed to me not to have been a very popular subject. Although I still believe that this judgment was not completely off the mark, I gradually realized that the idea of quiet decades was no more than rough conjecture. Besides older historiography, some already from the 1920s and 1930s, distinct progress in researching

1 This stage of my research resulted in a few short studies published in various journals and collections. Some of them have been revised as chapters in the present book, while chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, and 12 appear here for the first time.

this period has been in fact made in recent decades. Although no longer able to work fully, Ruth Kestenberg-Gladstein succeeded in presenting portraits of major Bohemian Jewish authors of the 1830s–1840s (Kestenberg-Gladstein 2002); Hillel Kieval provided analyses of the nineteenth-century Bohemian Jewish community, including its ideological and social context (Kieval 1988, 1992, 2000); Věra Leininger provided a high-resolution analysis of the legal and social status of nineteenth-century Bohemian Jews, with special reference to the ghetto of Prague (Leininger 2006); and Martina Niedhammer used understudied material in asking questions about Jewish Prague of the 1820s–1840s, highlighting family, gender, and class (Niedhammer 2013). In addition, Gary Cohen's analyses of Jewish and German Prague in the late Habsburg Monarchy have proven to have significant implications for my "quiet decades" too (Cohen 2006); the same holds for Michal Frankl's work on late nineteenth-century antisemitism (Frankl 2007). These are all signposts that helped define a map on which I believe my book is eventually situated.[2]

Throughout, I have highlighted printed, i.e., public, literary, and journalistic sources, where journalism is understood as a set of genres that includes essay, feuilleton, opinion statements, literary commentaries, and the like. Although reliance on such material would seem to have its limits, print media are obviously privileged entities in that they are well recognizable in the public space, tracking issues and conflicts in detail, often while they are unfolding. Many points remain murky in the dynamic space of print media, including the interaction of literary fiction, opinion statements and commentaries, and of course, the coverage of the so-called bare facts. Most importantly, however, mixed as they are, print media not only shed light on how public space is "happening," but they also inform it by way of their expressive capacity and verbal strategies, their rhetorical force, style of argumentation, specific topoi and motifs, as well as access to the public space.[3] Obviously, all texts, including those about Bohemian Jews, originate for specific reasons and with different aims. In some

2 As much of the present monograph was already completed in 2020, I was unable to take into consideration some recent publications, including the encompassing tome *Zwischen Prag und Nicholsburg: Jüdisches Leben in den böhmischen Ländern*, ed. by Kateřina Čapková and Hillel J. Kieval (Čapková and Kieval 2020). I can only recommend it as an invaluable complement to the present book.

3 Some of these factors relate to concepts discussed in the wake of Benedict Anderson's idea of print capitalism (Anderson 1991).

cases, they try to be realistic, in other cases they represent agenda-setting calls, in other cases, they create affective communities, and yet in another case they simply try to entertain. Handling this rhizomatic package should be part of the analysis.

Obviously, texts do not exist in a vacuum. In the present case, elements characteristic of verbal media exert their functions against a grand historical context defined by factors that accompanied the overall demise of *anciens régimes*. As has been said many times, they range from the philosophies of the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution, urbanization, secularization, and nationalism. It is mainly for the sake of brevity that I will assume that the interplay of all these factors has created a modern space, henceforth the New Space, which is primarily understood here as an environment that invites us to expect a breadth of heterotopic configurations, a space that may house a broad variety of projects, conflicts, and solutions often existing side by side. Keeping Bohemian Jewish history in mind, the task is to see which of them the print culture reveals as intertwined, or just stray and episodic, and significantly, which show persistence and eventually aspire to *longue durée*. Overall, the New Space is understood in minimalistic terms here, mainly as a frame that does not prevent certain types of projects and conflicts from arising and leaving marks in the public space. Stressing the presence of projects—successful or not, completed or abandoned, advocated by individuals or by groups—is significant, as they represent a salient characteristic of Bohemia's Jewish history.

Although not following any particular social or cultural theory, the analyses presented below inevitably touch on issues with strong social and cultural components. Episodes unfolding in the New Space expose issues that need to be kept in mind, including those of identity, loyalty, and in the Jewish context, the so-called assimilation. As for the last one, I largely follow Todd Endelman, who has argued that the concept of assimilation lacks critical rigor in that it blurs at least four distinct factors: "Acculturation (the acquisition of the cultural and social habits of the dominant non-Jewish group),[4] integration (the entry of Jews into non-Jewish social circles and spheres of activity), emancipation (the acquisition of rights and privileges enjoyed by non-Jewish

4 They include the adoption of new social and cultural values and new modes of deportment, dress, and speech; cf. Endelman (2015: 50).

citizens/subjects of similar socioeconomic rank), and secularization (the rejection of religious beliefs and the obligations and practices that flow from these beliefs)" (Endelman 2008; 2015: 50).

These four factors would certainly each deserve a detailed discussion, as each is complex in its own right and may cover a range of situations. In the case of acculturation, much depends on whether it is understood as a multilateral process resulting in changes affecting all parties involved. When such mutuality is absent, unilateral relations need to be recognized. In other words, unilateral acculturation may still deserve the term *assimilation* as descriptively adequate in some cases. In the case of integration, one of the significant aspects is the rise of non-utilitarian contacts between Jews and Gentiles—i.e., an intercourse in which "Jews and Gentiles began to meet each other in situations not governed by the immediate purpose of business" (Katz 1973: 42). Although contact with the non-Jewish world has always been essential in the history of Jews,[5] the Enlightenment negated the basic premodern situation in which "there was no 'neutral' or 'semi-neutral' society, no common ground, or civil society, in which individuals from both groups interacted voluntarily" (Endelman 2015: 49). A hard binary at first blush, this generalization remains useful both as a grand framing device and as a challenge that invites a search for "wedges" that split social and cultural borders before and after the Enlightenment. Entertainment is one of them.

Although not projected as a significant contribution to theories of identity and loyalty, the present book turns to these concepts time and again. However, both are a focus of interest mainly where they allow for an understanding of social roles as they function in moments of conflict and change—i.e., as they are negotiated and renegotiated, enforced and policed.[6] As our texts show, dynamic aspects of identity, including multiple identities, are among the phenomena of Jewish history to pay attention to. Similarly, the concept of loyalty, which in recent years has complemented the interest in identity, is welcome whenever it can be applied along the same dynamic, or processual, lines. It is attractive as an analytic tool, and it may be preferable to iden-

5 Cf. Jacob Katz's sketch of the mechanisms of the contacts that Jews entertained with the surrounding society (Katz 1993: 10–30).

6 See Brubaker and Cooper (2000), a more than two decades old analysis that critically discusses the ways the identity concept has been applied—and abused.

tity analyses whenever it allows for nuances such as negotiation of loyalty, multiple loyalty, or whenever it can be understood in transactional terms of giving and receiving.[7] All these aspects are ultimately revealed in situations in which choices—often forced—can be meaningfully pursued, which is a salient feature of our domain of inquiry. If there were no choices—religious, political, economic, cultural, linguistic—neither projects nor conflicts would exist, and questions of identity and loyalty would be rendered uninteresting, if not meaningless.

Related to the above "serious" concepts are metaphoric terms, such as that of the boundary—be it cultural, social, or economical; imagined, conventional, or contingent; soft or strict; ignored or enforced. Although metaphoric, as many concepts in cultural studies are, the notion of the boundary is in our cases still useful in that it almost always implies the perspective of a conflict encoded in line-crossing or—to use another metaphor—the desire to seek "wedges" with which boundaries would be subverted. Such terms are open to spatial imagery, always an important factor in relations between ethnic minorities and majorities and their dynamics.

Let us then see, with due caution, whether (parts of) Bohemian Jewish cultural history—which also includes parts of Czech and German cultural history—can be written, or rewritten, by way of connecting specific projects to conflicts that our sources document in the New Space. Let us see whether one can fathom the dynamics of the century by way of turning the pages of old newspapers and obscure pamphlets. Or, to invoke Isaiah Berlin, let's take the liberty of moving as a fox while paying due regard to the hedgehog.

7 See Schulze Wessel (2004) and Osterkamp/Schulze Wessel (2017) for concepts of horizontal and vertical loyalty and attention to the role of emotionality. The horizontal mode of loyalty dovetails with Anderson's hints at fraternalism that he lists among the defining characteristics of the nation: "The nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 1991: 7).

1 Bohemia's Configurations

It is a set custom of Bohemian Jewish studies that a "trial" map of Bohemia be presented as an opener. This is a delicate move, since the basic terms—Czech, German, Jewish—have over time changed in content and function; moreover, the tendency to use our contemporary definitions often impedes the analysis. This chapter, therefore, amounts to no more than a reminder that in the nineteenth century, the Bohemian (or Czech) Lands were part of the Habsburg Monarchy, a multinational colossus centered in Vienna, and that they represented an ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous territory with three ethnicities (Czechs, Germans, and Jews) and two major languages (Czech and German). The first part of the chapter provides a conventional introduction to this situation. The second part opens a less compartmentalized perspective in stressing dynamic aspects of Bohemia's ethnic "trialism." This part should remind us that each of the groups under consideration pursued its own specific interests and thus functioned in its own way. To simplify, the Czechs were pursuing a program of nationalism; the Germans were gradually reacting to this program, transforming themselves from "Bohemians into Bohemian Germans" (G. Cohen); and the Jews were for an extensive part of the century struggling for elementary civic rights, while repeatedly conceptualizing their relation to the remaining parties. Goals and results were not always compatible, and conflicts were coming about.

1.1 The Three-Box Game

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Bohemia[1] and Moravia were populated by roughly more than four million inhabitants, nearly 60 percent of whom were Czechs and close to 40 percent Germans, or more accurately, speakers of Czech and speakers of German. Far behind these two major groups was a strong, not quite 2 percent Jewish minority.[2] All of these groups already coexisted side by side well before the nineteenth century. The present section provides a brief map of these three ethnicities.[3]

1.1.1 REVIVAL: THE CZECHS

Starting from roughly the 1770s, some 250 years after the Bohemian Lands were incorporated into the Habsburg Monarchy, the Czech intellectual elite, largely bilingual, began to cultivate the idea of *obrození*. The term has been variously translated as Czech "renaissance," "awakening," or "revival" into English, each case invoking the metaphor of waking up after a long period of sleep. And indeed, the Czech Revival—the term I will use throughout—specifically represents a nation formation that did not start from scratch but justified its narrative by reference to historical continuity. Under this perspective, Czech nationhood was a disrupted one.

1 The English term *Bohemia*, or German *Böhmen*, is primarily a territorial notion rooted in the historical concept of Bohemia, a territory that is now approximately the western part of today's Czech Republic. As this territory was populated by two major ethnicities—one Czech and one German-speaking—it would be logical to call the inhabitants Czech Bohemians and German Bohemians. However, such usage does not exist. Instead, we typically see the term *Bohemian* (or German *Böhme*), the meaning of which may vary. Throughout, I will use glosses to provide the "right" meaning where needed. For a detailed survey of Bohemian ethnic terminology, see Dickins (2011) and the literature quoted therein.

2 See Cohen (2006: 66–68) for a detailed discussion. Kořalka (1996: 140) gives the following figures for Bohemia for the year 1846: Czechs 2,598,774 (59.77%), Germans 1,679,151 (38.62%), Jews 70,037 (1.61%)—grand total 4,347,962.

3 For a concise English-language survey of Bohemia's Habsburg years, see Sayer (1998), among others. See also Judson (2016) for the broad imperial frame.

The Revival process was multilayered and proceeded at a different pace in different social groups. There is a consensus, mostly among literary historians, that it had at least three stages[4] between the last third of the eighteenth century and the year of revolutions, 1848. The process is usually described as beginning with an era of learned philologists and historians who were guide mainly by the ideals of critical philology that came with the Enlightenment. It continued with a second phase, the "Jungmann phase,"[5] marked by an active cultivation of Czech as a standard language and dominated by romantic historiography, now increasingly functioning as a tool of nation formation. J. G. Herder's ideas about national literature were influential, but Jungmann also referred to their vulgarized versions, as represented by the German F. L. Jahn, aka "Turnvater Jahn." The third phase, occasionally called the "Palacký phase,"[6] is usually dated between 1830 and 1848, which basically coincides with the Vormärz era in Habsburg historiography. But whichever dates we work with, there is a clear sense that well before 1848, Czech had a standardized format and functioned as a language of literature, although not of higher education. In other words, the emphasis on language was a significant feature of the Revival, eventually representing the cornerstone of a successful project in terms of not only general literacy but also politics. The bond of language and nation was an essential part of Czech nationalism.

The defeat of the revolutions of 1848 affected Czech society initially in slowing down its development toward a modern political entity; however, much had been resumed in the 1860s, an era during which the Monarchy moved to a liberal political system defined by a constitution and parliamentarianism. In many ways, the 1860s and 1870s represent a successful transformation characterized by premodern political parties and a concentrated effort to create a homogeneous national society in which the Czechs would be the leading force. When exactly this era came to an end is a matter of what criteria we chose. Pieter Judson has suggested that the entire Monarchy began to change politically and structurally in the 1880s (Judson 2017). Close to this

4 I take it that these stages were inspirational in Miroslav Hroch's theory of stages that structure nation formation.

5 Josef Jungmann (1773–1847), a Czech philologist and literary historian, significantly shaped the second phase of the Revival.

6 František Palacký (1798–1876), a historian often called the Father of the Nation, shaped the third phase of the Revival also politically.

are the Czech 1880s and 1890s, which are marked not only by the proliferation of Czech political parties but also by the emergence of currents that opened Czech culture to international modernism. The present study stops approximately at this point—the decision in the 1880s to raze the Prague ghetto marks the end of our survey on perhaps a symbolic point.

1.1.2 EMANCIPATION: THE JEWS

Given a relatively short list of candidates for minority status in the region, Jews come close to a paradigmatic Central European minority.[7] Their position was strengthened by their own clear sense of identity, steadily reinforced by long-term segregation and programmatic exclusion. For centuries, however, Jewish communities were legally on unstable grounds. When reporting on the Prague ghetto in the late sixteenth century, the English traveler Fynes Moryson (1566–1630) made a simple yet fundamental observation about the central premise of their status: "At Prague [Jews] haue the priuilieges of Cittizens, but they buye it and continue it with great payments of money" (from Hughes 1903: 490). In our period, however, Jews could claim limited toleration in the sense that they no longer faced extreme situations such as systematic expulsions[8] or pogroms of the Eastern European kind.[9] At the same time, Jews did not have equal rights and were far from being integrated. Segregated as second-class residents, they did not achieve the status of full citizens until 1867.[10]

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7 In rare cases, Romas are mentioned as a minority side by side with Jews; see Dohm's influential *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden* (Dohm 1781/83).

8 The Habsburg empress Maria Theresa decreed the last large-scale expulsion of Jews from Prague in 1844. While the decree was soon withdrawn, the idea of expulsion did not disappear entirely. In 1848, a petition with three hundred signatures by local merchants circulated in Prague, demanding the expulsion of the Jews. The city hall placed it *ad acta*. This tool was not always limited to Jews, cf. banishment of Protestants from Salzburg in 1731.

9 This is not to say that violence was absent. Anti-Jewish riots occurred repeatedly throughout the nineteenth century, continuing in the first years of the Czechoslovak Republic and even after World War II.

10 In 1867, civic equality was finally encoded in the so-called "December Constitution" [*Dezemberverfassung*], a package of laws that included the Basic Law about

Historians mostly agree that the reforms that the Habsburg emperor Joseph II declared in the 1780s were a turning point in Habsburg Jewish history. They initiated a beginning of a new social, economic, and cultural space for Habsburg—and Bohemian—Jews. Specifically, besides a decree of religious tolerance of non-Catholic Christian churches, Joseph II released a cluster of edicts between 1781 and 1789 that changed the status of Jews. Each of them was tailored to a specific region of the Monarchy, starting with the Bohemian decree, signed on October 19, 1781 (Verordnung 1781). The decrees were part of an extensive social and political program that was gradually implemented under the influence of philosophical trends characteristic of the Enlightenment. While revealing the mindset and specific interests of an absolute monarch, they represented a social contract *sui generis*, perhaps incomplete and imperfect, but in some sense expressive of both parties' interests.[11]

Although Joseph II's decrees had specific effects on local Jewish communities, for instance, by destroying the practice of Jewish self-governance, they all derived from the same template that stressed questions of language, education, and entrepreneurial activities. The program of weakening the status of Jewish languages is clearly visible, for instance, in the prohibition of their

the Common Rights of Citizens [*Staatsgrundgesetz vom 21. Dezember 1867 über die allgemeinen Rechte der Staatsbürger für die im Reichsrate vertretenen Königreiche und Länder*]. For Jews, the important parts included: Section 2 (*Vor dem Gesetze sind alle Staatsbürger gleich* / Before the law all citizens are equal), Section 14 (*Die volle Glaubens- und Gewissensfreiheit ist jedermann gewährleistet* / Freedom of belief and conscience is guaranteed to everyone), and Section 19 (*Alle Volksstämme des Staates sind gleichberechtigt, und jeder Volksstamm hat ein unverletzliches Recht auf Wahrung und Pflege seiner Nationalität und Sprache* / All nationalities [*Volksstämme*] of the state are equal, and each nationality has an inviolable right to exercise and maintain its nationality and language); cf. www.verfassungen.de/at/Oesterreich-Ungarn/index.htm (accessed Aug. 2017).

An often-overlooked set of relaxations that preceded the liberal constitution of 1867 was the 1859 *Gewerbegesetz*, which eliminated a few occupational restrictions for Jews (Gary Cohen, p. c.).

11 For a discussion of Joseph II's Jewish policies, see Karniel (1986), who also reprints some of the relevant decrees.

use in legal documents,[12] but also in granting Jews access to education with the understanding that it would be conducted in German. Thus in Bohemia, concomitant ordinances simply ordered Jewish parents to send their children to German language schools.[13] The decrees further opened entrepreneurial activities for Jews—after all, the Monarchy was in a dire need of modernization, so it would be competitive, among others with its northern neighbor Prussia. However, numerous discriminatory laws remained, including residency regulations, Jewish head-tax (*Judensteuer*), and mainly, the Family Head Law (*Familiantengesetz*), which set limits on the number of Jewish families in Bohemia and Moravia, with the intent to prevent an increase in the Jewish population. In effect, discrimination against Jews continued throughout the pre-1848 era in one way or another.[14]

Another line of change came from within the Jewish community itself. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Bohemian Jewish communities were responding to new religious and cultural developments such as the Haskalah and Reform Judaism, both of which originated in German Jewish communities. Bohemian Jewish response generated an important intellectual elite, although its representatives remained locked in for a long time in the dominant Jewish languages of the period.[15]

Newer research supports the conclusion that, at least in nineteenth-century Prague, Jews represented a "regular" (i.e., layered) social group that interacted with their Czech and German counterparts not only economically but also socially and culturally (Niedhammer 2013). In several cases, members of the Jewish elite also achieved aristocratic ranks while leading families, espe-

12 This restriction was not so new; see the papal encyclic *Cum nimis absurdum* of 1555, an antisemitic classic of the early modern era (*Cum…* 1555).

13 See a 1784 ordinance for Bohemia that states, among other things: "Jewish parents are urged to send their children to German schools unless they want to expose themselves to the applicable fine" (*Die Juden sollen…*, in Cramer 1792: 168).

14 For a detailed account of pre-1848 legislation regarding property, domicile, and marriage praxis, see Leininger (2006).

15 A monographic description of Jewish enlightenment in Bohemia and Moravia between 1780 and 1830 is Kestenberg-Gladstein (1969), who in general stresses local specifics of Bohemian Jewry. See also studies such as Hecht's (2008a) monograph on the enlightened Jewish philosopher and pedagogue Peter Beer. On Prague's Jewish profile, see Pařík (2008), among others.