

Czechs, Germans, Jews? National identities of Bohemian Jews, 1867-1938

Katerina Capková, *Charles University*

The topic of my paper is the national identities of Bohemian Jews from 1867, when they were fully emancipated, until World War II. The question of national identity played a crucial role in the Modern Jewish history of Central Europe. Throughout the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century the discussion whether Jews constitute an ethnic, religious or national community was very much alive. Different answers divided Jews into distinct groups, which were often hostile to each other. The competing Czech and German nationalities added a further dimension to the debate on Jewish identity in the Czech lands.

The debate about the character of Jewish identity started only after the integration of Jews into the surrounding society began. The process of integration did not proceed everywhere in Europe in the same way. In the majority of Eastern Jewish communities, Jews kept their Jewish ethnicity; they spoke Yiddish and preserved the Orthodox way of life until the Second World War. The Jewish community in Bohemia, which will be the subject of this talk, was a typically Western community.

Influenced by the Haskalah, Bohemian Jews very quickly refused Yiddish as a jargon and gradually embraced the religious reforms. The vast majority of Bohemian Jews belonged to the middle class. The Western character of the Jewish community in Bohemia became more marked in the absence of Eastern Jewish immigrants. The Eastern Jewish refugees who left their homes because of pogroms and the desperate economic situation, changed radically the character of the communities in Vienna, Berlin, Paris and London. They strengthened the Orthodox camp and some of them became strong supporters of the local Jewish national or socialist organizations. Not so in Bohemia, which did not attract Eastern Jews till the First World War, and after that, during the interwar period, only in limited numbers.

One more thing was typical of Bohemian Jews. At the turn of the 20th century the Bohemian Jewish community became one of the most secular in Europe. This is a paradox for Prague was one of the most important centres of Jewish scholarship until the end of the 18th century. The absence of the Eastern Jews was again one of the reasons for such a quick process of secularization. Moreover, thanks to integration, Jews were also influenced by the Czech Gentile society which was extremely secular. Last but not least, the Jewish religious

traditions were neglected due to the dramatic process of urbanization, which began after the restriction of migration was abolished in 1848.¹

Therefore, we can say that the situation of Bohemian Jews was conducive to their integration into the surrounding society and their adoption of the surrounding language and culture.

I.

Initially, they adopted the German language and culture. This was, to a very large extent, a result of the reforms of Joseph II in 1780s. In particular, the newly established German Jewish schools led to a natural process of germanization of the Jewish population. This did not mean that the Jewish population in Czech villages ceased to speak Czech with their neighbours, but the language of their education and business was German, as was that of sermons in the reform congregations. The intelligentsia of the Bohemian Jewry embraced German language and culture also due to the impact of the Berlin Haskalah. German was also in contrast to Czech the communication language of Central Europe.

The research of the German Jews in Bohemia is complicated by the fact that no German-Jewish integrationist movement was established. By contrast, there were the so-called Czech-Jewish and Jewish national movements, whose ideas we can analyse thanks to their specific journals and archive records of their associations. The integration of Jews into German middle class society was very smooth in Bohemia and, unlike in Germany, did not stop at the end of the 19th century. This is particularly true of Prague where a third of the German speaking Bohemian Jews settled. The German Jews in Prague were so well integrated into the infrastructure of the local German community that they did not need to establish their own journals or organizations. They published their announcements about weddings or deaths mostly in the *Prager Tagblatt*, the most widely read German newspaper in Bohemia, whose journalists were mostly Jewish.

One of the reasons for this unique situation was that German Jews constituted about half of the German minority in Prague at the turn of the 20th century. Thus, to defend the German interests in the capital city, German Gentiles needed to cooperate with German Jews. As the research of Garry Cohen shows, the Christian Germans therefore accepted the religious identity of Jewish Germans without difficulties. About half of the members of the *German Casino*, the most elitist German organization in Prague, were Jewish. Some of these Jews were at the same time active in the representation of the Jewish religious community. This state of affairs is in sharp contrast with the situation in Vienna or Hungary,

¹Wilma Iggers, *Zeiten der Gottesferne und der Mattheit. Die Religion im Bewußtsein der böhmischen Juden in der ersten tschechoslowakischen Republik*. Leipzig 1997. Ruth Kestenbergl-Gladstein, *The Internal Migration of Jews in 19th Century Bohemia*, in: *The Field of Yiddish* 1969, s. 305-309.

where the social upward mobility usually required abandonment of all Jewish identity.²

The pragmatic tolerant attitude of ethnic Germans towards the religious identity of the German Jews in Prague and in the liberal circles in *Sudetenland*, explains, I think, why the Bohemian German Jews were much more willing to embrace or at least to support financially the newly established Zionist organizations. For example: while in the 1920's and 1930's Zionists in Germany were excluded from the *B'nai B'rith Order*, in Bohemia leading personalities of the Zionist organization and the Jewish party became active in this Order.³

II.

The acculturation of the Bohemian Jews to the Czech language and culture started in a large scale in the 1850s in the Czech regions, where the Czech secondary schools were established. In 1876 a group of Jewish students from the South Bohemian gymnasiums who came to study in Prague founded the first organization of the Czech- Jewish movement .

The Czech-Jewish movement was different from other European integrationists movements. For the Czech-Jews it was a “secondary acculturation”.⁴ The primary goal of the German *Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens* or Austrian *Österreichisch-Israelitische Union* was to defend the German national identity of the Jews against the antisemites and Zionists.⁵ The first Czech-Jewish organizations were founded in the 1870's, a period of dominant liberal politics when the Zionists were not yet on the scene. The primary task of the Czech-Jews was not to defend Czech national identity, but for the first time to evoke the interest of the Bohemian Jews in Czech culture and language.

The cultural and political upheaval of the Czech nation in the last third of the 19th century furthered the acceptance of Czech culture amongst Jews. The Czech-Jewish movement grew very quickly. The first crisis came in the late 1890s with the wave of antisemitism around the parliamentary elections of 1897 and the Hilsner affair in 1899. The vision of the Czech-Jewish collaboration was shaken. The disillusionment after the antisemitic riots turned some of the former Czech-

²Garry Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861-1914*. Princeton 1981, p. 178.

³Katerina Capková, *Jewish Elites in the 19th and 20th Centuries. The B'nai B'rith Order in Central Europe*, *Judaica Bohemiae* XXXVI/2000, p. 135-136.

⁴Hillel J. Kieval, *The Making of Czech Jewry. National Conflict and Jewish Society in Bohemia, 1870-1918*. New York – Oxford 1988.

⁵Steven M. Lowenstein, *Die Gemeinde*, in: *Deutsch-jüdische Geschichte in der Neuzeit*, Band III, *Umstrittene Integration 1871-1918*. München 1997, p. 138; Mosche Zimmermann, *Die deutschen Juden 1914 -1945*. München 1997, pp. 30-31.

Jews into enthusiastic Zionists. The experience of the 1890s led also to political reorientation of the majority of the Czech-Jews. The Realist Party of Masaryk and the Social Democratic Party were preferred to the Young Czech Party. A further consequence of the antisemitism of the 1890s was that the organized Czech-Jewish movement split into two: a main stream nationalist part, which fought against the German Jews and Zionists and tried to show their Czechdom in sometimes chauvinist ways, and a progressive part, organized in the *Union of Czech progressive Jews*, led by Viktor Vohryzek. The work of Vohryzek and other personalities from *Union of Czech progressive Jews* constitutes the best theoretical texts about the Czech-Jewish symbiosis.

Interestingly, and this embodies the major paradox of the history of Czech Jews in the interwar period, the Czech-Jewish movement experienced its deepest crisis during the First Republic. The paradox rests in the fact that Czech-Jews from the Czech-Jewish organizations were the only Jews in Bohemia who wanted and supported the establishment of Czechoslovakia. They hoped to gain government support for their activities in the new state, and that the government would appreciate their merits from the period of the “Austrian yoke”. They further hoped to be taken as the most important representatives of the Jewish community in Czechoslovakia.

The reality, however, was very different. The foundation of the Czechoslovak republic was accompanied by a wave of anti-Jewish revolts and the Czech press expressed its mistrust of Jews. What was more important is that the Zionists were the privileged group in the negotiations with the government, not the Czech-Jews.

Notwithstanding, there were also internal reasons for the low interest of the Bohemian Jewish population in the activities of the Czech-Jewish movement. The major task of the *Union of the Czech-Jews*, the largest Czech-Jewish organization with political ambitions, was the complete assimilation of Jews into the Czech nation. Many of the leaders left the Jewish religious community and claimed that the Czech-Jewish movement is only a step towards the total loss of Jewish identity.

In the early 1930s, a group of young Czech-Jewish students from the association *Kapper* tried to give a new meaning to the Czech-Jewish movement. For them, the Czech-Jewish movement was a symbiosis of the Czech and Jewish culture and traditions. They were deeply rooted in the Czech culture, but they did not know much about their Jewishness. So the members of the association *Kapper* started to study Jewish traditions. They published, for example, the famous *Nine Gates* from the Hassid Jirí Langer. The students from *Kapper* began also to collaborate with the members of the former *Union of Czech Progressive Jews*.

Unfortunately, this new generation did not manage to stop the ideological decline of the Czech-Jewish movement in the late 1930s. In 1938 the xenophobic

leadership of the *Union of the Czech-Jews* went so far as to refuse officially the immigration of Jews from Romania and after the Munich agreement from *Sudetenland* as well. They advised the Czechoslovak government to evacuate the *Sudeten* Jews from the territory of Czechoslovakia so as to preserve the Czech character of the Czech lands.

To summarise this part of my presentation, we can observe an interesting paradox of Czech Jewish history. The acculturation of the Bohemian Jews to the Czech language and culture started in the 1850s and continued uninterrupted until the WWII. The statistics of the school attendance of Israelites in Czech schools at primary and secondary level clearly prove that this was the case.⁶ Still, although the percentage of Czech speaking Jews in Bohemia grew rapidly, the organized Czech-Jewish movement, which had hoped to play a crucial political role in the questions of the Jewish community, gradually lost its influence and ended as a chauvinist xenophobic movement with only a very limited number of members.⁷

III.

Zionism was the only real national movement of the Jews. While the Czech-Jews could use the natural process of acculturation for their propaganda, Jewish nationalists had to appeal to the Jewish national feeling in spite of the natural inclination of Jews towards German or Czech culture.

The organized Zionist movement started in Bohemia in the critical years of 1890s as a reaction to antisemitism. In Bohemia and Moravia Jewish nationalism had a better position than in, say, Germany or France. The background of the Czech-German national struggle made the Jewish decision for their own nationality much more understandable. Leading Czech personalities (as e.g. Masaryk, Emanuel Rádl or František Krejčí) supported the Jewish national movement as a regenerative movement similar to the national revival of the Czechs.

But another problem arose for the Bohemian Zionists. They had a hard time defining their Jewishness. All were totally acculturated into Czech or German culture and, because of the high level of secularization, their membership of the Jewish community was only a formality. It is therefore unique, I think, that the famous German and Czech writers, whose work is taught in German and Czech literature classes, were at the same time Jewish

⁶František Friedmann, *Židé v Cechách*, in: *Die Juden und Judengemeinden Böhmens in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*. Ed. by Hugo Gold, Vol. I, Brünn-Prague 1934, pp. 733-734, see also Friedmann, *Mravnost ci oportunita?* Prague 1927.

⁷In April 1938 *Union of the Czech-Jews* had 2023 members in the whole Czechoslovakia. There were 20 848 Shekel-paiers in Czechoslovakia in 1937.

nationalists. E.g. all members of the so called Prague Circle, except for Franz Kafka, were active Zionists.

Jewish national movement in Bohemia before WWI was an issue for only a few tens of Jews, mostly students. This situation changed during the war. Not only because of the Balfour declaration. Also important was the Wilson declaration of January 1918. The tenth point of the declaration was about the right of nations to self-determination. This point, which played such a crucial role for the Czechs, was used by the Jewish nationalists for their own purposes as well. Before the end of the war, Jewish national councils were established in European countries. The aims of the councils were to defend and fight for the rights of the Jewish national minority. The Jewish national council in Bohemia was founded on 22 October 1918, six days before the foundation of Czechoslovakia. The members of the Jewish councils were also present at the Peace conference in Paris as part of the Jewish delegation.

But not only for this reason did the Zionists and not the Czech-Jews become the most important partners of the Czechoslovak governments in questions connected with the Jewish population. More than 65% of the Israelites in Czechoslovakia lived in Slovakia or Subcarpathian Russia. For these Jews the concept of Czech-Jewish acculturation or even assimilation was not suitable at all. In addition, the Czech-Jews did not have many adherents in Moravia either.

By contrast, Jewish nationalists could use the low level of acculturation in the eastern parts of Czechoslovakia for their propaganda. In the census of 1921, 15% of the Israelites in Bohemia, half of those in Moravia and Slovakia, and nearly 90% of the Subcarpathian Israelites claimed to be Jewish by nationality. Though the vast majority of the Jews in Slovakia and Subcarpathian Russia did not support Zionism, the members of the Jewish national council and later on of the Jewish party could claim to be their representatives.

The number of those who sympathized with Jewish nationalism grew during the interwar period. This is reflected not only in the growing number of the shekel payers (so real Zionists), but also in the census results in 1921 and 1930. In 1930 a fifth of the Bohemian Jews claimed Jewish nationality, whereas the percentage of Israelites who claimed Czechoslovak nationality dropped from 50 to 46%. This process continued and became more acute during the 1930s.

The wave of Jewish refugees from Germany and later from Austria set the Zionists a new task. With the help of some Jewish charitable organizations, Zionists tried to diminish their tragic living conditions of refugees. They also managed to help many of them to emigrate into the West or to Palestine. After the Munich agreement the Zionists did their best to find new jobs and emigration opportunities for the *Sudeten* Jews.

The extreme political situation of the late 1930s sharpened the conflict between the Czech integrationists and Zionists. Thanks to the effort to help the German, Austrian and *Sudeten* Jews to emigrate and to the ideology of *aliya*, the Zionists

had good contacts with all the emigration offices of the different countries and were at the head of the Palestinian emigration office. When the Czech-Jews asked the Czech society after the Munich agreement to distinguish between the Czech and other (German and Zionist) Jews, *Židovské zprávy*, the only Zionist journal at the time, published an article in which it was claimed, that the leaders of the Czech-Jewish movement could be sure that they would not get a certificate to escape to Palestine.