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From Bilingualism to Binationalism: Czecho-German Jewry, the Prague Zionists, and the Origins of the Binational Idea in Zionism, 1900-1930

The present work, a study of the socio-cultural background of Prague Zionism in the twilight years of the Habsburg Monarchy, explores the ideological path pursued by its prominent activists – Hugo Bergmann (1883-1975), Hans Kohn (1891-1971), Robert Weltsch (1891-1982) and Max Brod (1884-1968) – from the emergence of the idea of Jewish nationalism in Bohemia to the laying of the foundations for the idea of a binational Arab-Jewish state in Palestine. Chronologically speaking, the period in question begins in 1899-1900, with the founding of the Bar-Kokhba student association, which served as the focal point for Zionist activities in Prague through 1918, and ends in the latter half of the 1920s, when a number of former Bar-Kokhba leaders were prominent among the members of a »radical« faction of Brith Shalom in Jerusalem.

This study questions the conclusions reached by many historical studies the Bar-Kokhba/Brith Shalom circle. The standard historiographic approach to the ideological development of the members of the circle involves a group of idealistic intellectuals who produced a sort of universalist Weltanschauung on the basis of their outspoken opposition to the rigid socio-cultural reality of their native Bohemia. More specifically, in

the case of Bergmann and his contemporaries, the pre-World War I rise in Zionist awareness was, as it were, part of a process devoid of any substantive socio-cultural context, amounting to an attempt on the part of intellectuals to escape the rigid social, cultural and political world around them in favor of a world of pure intellectualism, mysticism and utopian thinking. According to the initial assumption on which such an »idealist« interpretation is predicated, Jewish society in Bohemia and Prague was split between two polarized linguistic-cultural entities, »German-Jewish« and »Czech-Jewish,« thus constituting a kind of mirror image of the general national polarization between Czechs and Germans. Bar-Kokhba Zionism is thus perceived as the outcome of an experience divided between »Germans« and »Czechs« and between »German Jews« and »Czech Jews«; a kind of »escape« from the polarized surroundings to an area of utopian thinking. As such, the historiographic representation of the Bar-Kokhba figures as a group divorced from reality was chiefly reinforced by their widespread image as »German Jews« encapsulated in a kind of German cultural enclave in a city with a Czech majority.

However, the categories of »German Jews« and »Czech Jews« are terms that were primarily used in early twentieth-century Czech and German ethno-national discourses, and which nationalist demographers and politicians – German and Czech alike – applied in their efforts to map the Jewish population of Bohemia and Prague in accordance with their political needs. The uncritical reapplication of these terms in historical research, as well as acceptance of the dichotomy of »German Jews« versus »Czech Jews« as a faithful description of Prague Jewish society, produce an overly simplistic picture of the actual socio-cultural situation. In fact, while Prague's Jews did include individuals and groups that saw themselves exclusively as »German Jews« or »Czech Jews,« there were undeniably also those Jews whose day-to-day experiences were comprised of a combination of both German and Czech linguistic and socio-cultural affiliation. It turns out that such key Bar-Kokhba figures as Bergmann, Brod, Kohn and Robert Weltsch belonged to that population of Jews with ambivalent affinities, who can be best described as »Czecho-German Jews.« Certainly, such Jews had been educated in German, as had the overwhelming majority of the Jews of Prague and Bohemia, and the German language functioned as their primary intellectual language. However, in their everyday lives, they were exposed to the language and culture of their Czech surroundings. They grew up in mixed developments, inhabited by Czechs, Germans and Jews alike. This was in contrast to the typical housing patterns of Prague's Jews, who generally preferred to reside alongside other Jewish families. Unlike most of their schoolmates at German secondary schools, they studied the Czech language as an elective subject. Finally, and most importantly, they did not go along with the tendency, so endemic to Prague's German society, to ignore Czech culture.

To be sure, bilingualism and multiethnic intermingling were also characteristic of considerable portions of fin-de-siècle Bohemian society. One should keep in mind, however, that in light of the special circumstances of the history of Bohemia's Jews in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a history included the Germanization of education and the community establishment on the one hand, and permanent extradition to the Czech countryside on the other, around the mid-nineteenth century Bohemian Jews were indeed unique by virtue of their outstanding bilingualism as compared to the non-Jewish population. Most significantly, Czech-German bilingualism was perceived by both German and Czech nationalists as a Jewish attribute par excellence. In light of the tendency of Czech-German ethno-national discourse to unequivocally relate linguistic patterns and national affinities, Jewish bilingualism was regarded as an evidence of the Jews' national duplicity. Because of their unwillingness to adopt a clear linguistic-cultural stance, Czecho-German Jews found themselves caught in the line of fire between both sides, German and Czech, as can be inferred from the debate among Czech-German demographers, in the German and Czech press, and in anti-Semitic pamphlets distributed by both sides.

It was in this atmosphere, in which the Jews' bilingual way of life was undermined by the demand that they demonstrate complete loyalty to one of the two national languages in Bohemia, that Prague Zionism gradually took shape. Motivating those Czech-German Jews like Bergmann and his circle, who shaped Jewish nationalism in the Bohemian capital on the eve of World War I, was the desire to provide an institutional, cognitive and intellectual foundation for the multiplicity of socio-cultural affinities with the neighboring bicultural surroundings. Thus, far from being a kind of idealistic escape from the rigid socio-cultural reality of its surroundings, Bar-Kokhba Zionism would rather seek to faithfully reflect its cultural diversity. This link between the emergence of the Zionist movement in Prague and the multiculturalism of Prague Jewry was of great significance vis-à-vis the substantive aspects of Prague Zionism, on two levels –self-identity, and national ideology.

On the level of self-identity, it can be said that the heads of Prague Zionism internalized the image of the cultural inconsistency with which Bohemian Jews were labeled in Czech and German propaganda, publicly declaring that the tendency to adapt German and Czech cultural influences was indeed one of the essential characteristics of the Jewish collective in Prague and Bohemia. The acceptance of this tricultural mosaic as a fundamental component of Jewish identity in Prague was accompanied by a value-based interpretation which was the antithesis of that advanced in this context by the German and Czech opponents of Jewish bilingualism: while the Czech and German nationalists saw the multicultural nature of Prague Jewry as evidence of national

duplicity and thus moral corruption, Prague Zionists perceived this as a sign of the national mission of the Jews of Bohemia, whose historic role was to establish bridges between the Bohemia and Czech and German neighbors.

On the level of national ideology, this view of identity led to an outlook concerning the nature of Jewish nationalism which reached beyond its Bohemian context. According to this outlook, expressed mainly by Bergmann, Brod, Hans Kohn and Robert Weltsch, what is primarily responsible for the national uniqueness of Jewish existence is its very ability to integrate a number of cultural tendencies within it. Hence, in order to maintain an authentic Jewish experience, Jewish openness regarding the neighboring cultures must be emphasized and expanded, be it in Bohemia, Palestine, or anywhere else where a Jewish community exists.

From the political point of view, holding an intercultural negotiation between Jews and their surroundings required the establishment of a multinational political arrangement in whose framework political recognition would be given to the difference between particularist national entities on the one hand, and the institutionalization of bridge-building mechanisms between the nationalisms would be promoted, on the other. During the last decade prior to the outbreak of World War I, the chances of establishing a political system of this kind in the Habsburg state – and in particular in its Austrian part - did not seem at all unrealistic. Despite the gravity of the political conflicts between diverse national movements throughout the monarchy, and notwithstanding the Austrian Germans and Hungarians' refusal to abandon their adherence to the German-Magyar dual hegemony, on the multinational peripheries of Cisleithania there were unmistakable signs of significant political tendencies to settle local national conflicts in the multinational political frameworks. From Moravia in 1905, via Bukovina in 1909/10, to Galicia and the Tyrol in 1914, in the Austrian part of the dual monarchy there became established a system of multinational provincial compromises, based precisely on the principle of the dual institutionalization of collective political rights of the neighbor nations on the one hand, and of parliamentary bridge-building frameworks that in practice highlighted the neighbor nations' common affinity to the territory in which they resided, on the other. Encouraged in particular by the successful application of the compromise between Czechs and Germans in neighboring Moravia, and disappointed by the exclusion of Moravia's Jews in the arrangement as a third nation, the Bar-Kochbaens expressed enthusiastic support for the idea of applying the principles of the Moravian formula in Bohemia in its amended trinational form, as a common political framework for coexistence between three autonomous national entities: Czech, German, and Jewish. On the basis of the notion highlighting the continuity of the historical existence of Jewish settlement in Bohemia and the Jews' integral place in the cultural-historical

landscape of this country, the Bar-Kokhbaens were convinced that Bohemian Jewry's rights to political national autonomy were no less than those of the Czechs and the Germans.

The actual political developments that took place in Eastern and Central Europe in the wake of the »Great War« – the disintegration of the Habsburg state and the establishment of sovereign nation-states in its stead – dumbfounded the leaders of the Bar-Kokhba circle. It was then that the idea of a binational Arab-Jewish state in Palestine began to take shape in the Bar-Kokhba group's triumvirate of Bergmann-Kohn-Weltsch. Politically, the three continued their efforts to foster autonomist multinational models from the era of provincial compromises, whose full implementation in the Habsburg state had not proven possible, so they believed, as the result of the natural course of development of this area being disturbed. On the basis of the autonomist interpretation of the term »national home« in the Balfour Declaration, they placed Palestinian Zionism in the context of autonomist Arab nationalist tendencies dating from the end of the Ottoman period, and hoped to establish a common political framework for the two autonomous national entities in Palestine, Jewish and Arab, which would in turn be part of a broader federation in the Middle East.

Ideologically, in the eyes of the Bar-Kokhbaen binationalists, the binational Arab-Jewish state was designed to provide a framework for implementing the vision of dialogical, intercultural Zionism, which they no longer considered attainable in the conditions of the Czechoslovakian nation-state. While the Bar-Kochbaen binationalists continued to believe that the dynamic cultural development of a Jewish national experience in Bohemia depended on the fostering of interactions between Jewish culture and the Czech and German cultures, they feared that in the event of an institutionalized national-political hierarchization between »Czechness« and »Germanness,« there would be not the slightest chance of building any structure of intercultural affinities between Jews and their surroundings. On the other hand, while they accepted the local failure to realize a national form of Judaism by way of negotiations with the surrounding non-Jewish cultures in Bohemia, they did not abandon their principled worldview, according to which what was mainly responsible for the unique nature of Jewish national existence was the very Jewish ability to integrate a number of cultural tendencies. When they looked at the land with which Zionist national hopes were bound up, they identified clearly the possibilities for realizing Zionism in accordance with the principles of intercultural dialogue, insofar as the vagueness of Palestine's political character at the start of the Mandatory period left intact their hope that a nation-state regime, which, in their view, would spell an end to dialogue between cultures and nationalisms, would not be implemented on its territory. Thus the idea of openness to the Czech and

German cultures as the very essence of the Jewish national experience in Bohemia was transformed into the idea of a renewed attempt at direct negotiations with Arab culture as the routeto Zionist existence in Palestine.

Thus, the argument viewing the Zionist outlook of the Bar-Kokhba/Brith Shalom figures as divorced from the reality of their everyday lives and socio-cultural surroundings is completely unfounded. Like the adherents of any national movement in the full sense of the word, they wished to give concrete political expression to their particularist nationalism in order to meet the socio-cultural needs of the members of their national collective. They identified the aggregate of these needs with the framing and institutionalization of the experience of the socio-cultural encounter between Jews and their non-Jewish surroundings, exposure to which was perceived as bringing into sharper focus the foundations of Jewish national identity, enriching the cultural content, and setting in motion a process by which it was constantly renewed. Like in Central Europe, so too in Palestine this was only the political framework of a Nationalitätenstaat, a framework that would institutionalize all of the local national cultures, containing within it responses to all the national needs of Bar-Kokhba Zionism. As used by its adherents, it was this that was intended on a practical-political level by the term »Zionismus,« thereby differing radically from the practical-political meaning of the concept of Zionism as understood by the existing research literature. Through the retrospective lens of the establishment of the State of Israel, the writing of the political history of Zionism tends to converge on a deterministic axis leading up to the founding of a Jewish nation state in Palestine. As a result, for the pre-State period as well, political Zionism was viewed as a movement that above all favored the principle of national self-determination in the general sense, and in particular the idea of the unlimited political sovereignty of the Jewish people in its land. Yet in the eyes of the Bar-Kokhbaens, a nation-state based on one national culture alone would be detrimental to the very foundations of the (multi)national structure of Zionist existence. This was precisely reason why opposition to the establishment of a regime of this kind – be it in Bohemia or in Palestine – was at the center of the political dimension of their Zionism.