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A Concise Jewish History

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From Czernowitz to Cernăuți: Political Crisis and Cultural Heyday Between the Wars

From a multiethnic state to a nation-state

Rose Ausländer went to school in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, published her first poems in Romania, ended up in a ghetto set up under German control, and was in the Soviet Union when the war ended. In doing all that, she never left her hometown; it was the city itself that had changed hands. In 1919 it changed from Czernowitz to Cernăuți (Romanian), in 1940 to Chernovtsy (Russian), in 1941 back to Cernăuți, in 1944 it was again Chernovtsy, and since 1991 it has been part of Ukraine and is called Chernivtsi. The period between the two world wars, when almost half the residents of Czernowitz were Jews, was a time of uncertainty and flux. Lemberg became Lvóv (Polish, and later Ukrainian Lviv), Posen became Poznań, and Pozsony (Hungarian) became Pressburg and is now Bratislava. Old kingdoms fell and new states emerged. This was true for Rose Ausländer too, who had left her homeland for a time, emigrated to the United States, and returned only a few years later to the Bukovina, where—in the words of the most famous Czernowitzer Paul Celan—"people and books lived."

The years of the First World War had decisively altered the entire Jewish world in three ways. First, the great hopes that many Jews had placed on completing the process of integration had been disappointed in the course of the war. Second, the war promoted an unprecedented magnitude of physical brutality and racist thinking. Third, the decline and rise of states had considerable impact on the political future of the Jews. Most of them had lived at the start of the war in the multiethnic state of the Romanovs, Habsburgs, and Ottomans, and now they found themselves in new nation-states. Also, the British had gained control of Palestine and, in 1917, signed the Balfour Declaration granting Jews the right to a "national home in Palestine."

In those European countries in which Jews had not felt totally integrated by the start of the First World War, the trenches were now to provide them with something that laws had not been able to achieve. Shared experience at the front would them overcome the last remaining differences. About 85,000 German Jews went to war for the Emperor and the fatherland; 12,000 of them never returned. The situation was similar elsewhere. Smaller Jewish communities in France and Algeria mobilized 46,000 soldiers, of which 6,400 fell, and more than 2,000 of the 40,000 British-Jewish soldiers lost their lives. In the czarist army, which did not always treat the Jews very favorably, 600,000 Jews are said to have fought as soldiers. Just as Catholics shot at Catholics, Jews also stood opposite their coreligionists.

During the war they nevertheless soon also became the target of anti-Semitic attacks, even in the trenches, no matter how patriotic they showed themselves to be. In France and England the Jewish communities were comprised largely of Eastern European immigrants. How could they fight on the side of Russia, people in the Entente countries had asked, when they themselves had flown the czarist regime? The complaint that they were cosmopolitans could be heard on all sides. Their patriotic zeal did not seem credible, even though Hermann Cohen, the most significant German-Jewish philosopher, had propagated the symbiosis of "Germanness and Judaism"; Ernst Lissauer's "hymn of hate" against England represented the epitome of nationalism; and even dedicated Zionists entered the war for their respective countries. At the war's end, most Jews were denied social recognition. The anti-Semitism they experienced in the trenches weighed heavily in their memories.

Caption:
Lovis Corinth: "Portrait of Makabäus–Hermann Struck" (1915). Hermann Struck was an Orthodox Jew and committed Zionist. Still, he marched into Russia as a patriotic German wearing a Prussian uniform. There he had direct contact with Lithuanian Jews, which inspired his drawings for the book *Das ostjüdische Antlitz* (1920), in which writer Arnold Zweig wrote the text, idealizing the world of Eastern European Jewry (English: *The Face of East European Jewry*, 2004).

Paradoxically, the war experience promoted the Jewish feeling of community beyond borders. Especially the encounter that many German-Jewish soldiers from assimilated families had with apparently authentic Jews of Eastern Europe led them to reflect on their own background. This encounter had a concrete effect in the formation of some relief committees for destitute Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. Yet spiritually as well, it left a deep impression among individual German Jews. Their environment was no longer familiar with Jewish craftsmen or Talmud scholars, and the Yiddish language had largely disappeared in Germany, where it was unusual for Jewishness to be lived openly.

Of all European Jews, the events of the war hit those from Eastern Europe the hardest. In addition to hunger and disease, they also fell victim to administrative despotism. In April 1915 most Lithuanian Jews were evacuated by the Russian military administration. Many Galician Jews had already suffered a similar fate after the invasion by the czarist army. The Yiddish language and their fascination with the German culture made Eastern European Jews appear to be potential allies of German and Austrian troops. Not until the czar was deposed in

February 1917 did a short reprieve ensue, before the chaos of the revolution and civil war then took its toll.

European Jewishness?

As never before in European history, the revolutionary events of 1917 to 1920 catapulted individual Jews into the center of political affairs. Anti-Semites were indifferent to the fact that Rosa Luxemburg had long since cut all ties to the Jewish community. They also didn't care that the Jewish communities in Munich and Budapest had vehemently dissociated themselves from revolutionary leaders in their cities, such as Eugen Levine and Bela Kun; or that Lev Davidovich Bronstein, alias Trotsky, felt no sense of belonging to the Jewish community. The Jews knew all too well: even if it was the Trotskys who turned the world upside down, it was the Bronsteins who paid the price. In those days and years people experienced the fact that for the first time Jews appeared as decisive political actors. On that November 8 when Kurt Eisner, a Berlin Jew, had been Minister President of Bavaria for all of one day, Thomas Mann wrote in his diary about "Jew boys" who led a "Jewish regiment."

The Jewish masses, too, were once again in the thick of the action, namely, the postwar chaos in East Central Europe, especially Ukraine. In the civil war raging there, the Jews again found themselves caught between the fronts. Anti-Jewish violence during the Petlura government in 1919–1920 claimed tens of thousands of Jewish lives. In the Ukrainian town of Proskurov, 1,500 Jews were murdered by the Cossacks on a Sabbath afternoon in February 1919. In Poland there were 106 pogroms in 1919 alone. It was therefore all the more understandable that the Red Army was welcomed as a liberator even by anti-Communist Jews, though it did not necessarily turn out to be a friend of the Jews. Russian-Jewish poet Isaak Babel noted in his diary on July 11, 1920, that "it's the same old song, the Jews … had awaited the Soviets as liberators and then all of a sudden shouting, lashes, Jew swine."

There were no comparable mass murders in Western Europe. But the right-wing extremists experienced unparalleled success in a Germany that was marked by a humbling defeat and its consequences. In France, the anti-Semitic tract *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* made the rounds and in Britain, where most Jews were immigrants, xenophobic tones became increasingly audible. More so than any inner values, it was now anti-Semitism that served as a cohesive bond between the Jews of Europe. Even the most assimilated Jews could no longer avoid it. Some responded to the hatred of Jews by returning to Judaism, such as Austrian composer Arnold Schönberg, who had converted to Protestantism in 1898. His

journey back to the religion of his birth began when he was turned away from an Austrian summer resort because of his Jewish-sounding name and it ended when he formally rejoined the Jewish community in a Paris synagogue in 1933. The interim was an intense period of rapprochement, the creative epitome of which was his Zionist drama and the opera *Moses and Aaron*.

There was little else that held the Jews of Europe together besides anti-Semitism. The transformation of the political geography of Europe was generally unfavorable for them, as they were then splintered into numerous smaller countries. In the three multinational empires, where in the beginning of the century eight of the eleven million Jews had resided, they were one among many different nations, religions, and cultures. In nation-states such as Poland and Lithuania, but also in the greatly enlarged Romania, the status of the Jews was less clearly outlined than it had been before the war. They did not belong to the dominant nationality, but in contrast to the German, Hungarian, or Russian minorities they also lacked a country that would protect their interests. In the newly developed artificial configurations such as Czechoslovakia or Yugoslavia, the Jews were often viewed as the only true representatives of these new polities, whereas everyone else was a Czech or a Slovak and a Serb, Croatian, or Bosnian.

In the Balkans, Jews already experienced the new ethnic order of the European map in the years leading up to the First World War. In the aftermath of the First Balkan War, hundreds of thousands of Turks fled eastwards, while entire Greek communities resettled in Greece after being expelled from western Anatolia. Saloniki, one of the largest Jewish communities in Europe, came under Greek control when the Turks left. The Jews living there had to decide whether to stay in the city that had harbored them for centuries or to remain loyal to the Ottoman rulers who had taken them in and protected them after their expulsion from the Iberian peninsula. In a certain sense the Balkan War and its aftermath constituted a prelude to the situation Jews faced after the First World War. What were the Jews and how could they adapt to the new configuration of states? The Greeks of Saloniki were orthodox Christians; the Turks were Muslims; and the Jews were, well, Jews. The situation in Poland was similar, where the Poles were Catholics, most Germans were Protestants, and the Ukrainians were Ukrainian Orthodox or Greek Catholic. But in both religious and ethnic terms the Jews in Eastern and Southeastern Europe were simply Jews. Their minority status was therefore different in many ways from that of other minorities. This became very evident during the Paris peace talks of 1919, when the Eastern European Jews spoke out for their rights as a national minority, whereas the Jews of Western Europe rejected such minority

status. In the countries in which emancipation had been granted, Jews viewed themselves as members of a Jewish religious community. In the other countries, however, they were considered a national minority and most of them still spoke a language different from that of the region, such as Yiddish or Ladino (Judeo-Spanish). They were also often recognizable through their clothing and practiced occupations typical for Jews. These characteristics slowly began to break down in the period between the wars, but were still recognizable.

The rift that divided Jewish identity in Europe can be identified most clearly with respect to Czechoslovakia. While Bohemian Jews had followed the western model of acculturation and most of them spoke German or Czech, Jews in the easternmost part belonged culturally to the Eastern European orthodox Jews and they largely spoke Yiddish. In the census of 1921, only 15 percent of the Bohemian Jews who were part of the Jewish religious community also considered themselves members of a Jewish nation (almost all of them saw themselves as Germans or Czechs). On the other hand, eighty-seven percent of the Jews in eastern Czechoslovakia did so. In the intermediate regions encompassing Moravia and Slovakia, about half of all Jews considered their nationality to be Jewish. Considerable differences could also be made out among Jews in the greatly enlarged Romania. Older communities in the Romanian Old Kingdom had already become largely acculturated to their surroundings, but the Jews in the newly ceded provinces of Moldavia, Bessarabia, Bukowina, and Transylvania belonged to much more traditional Jewish communities.

The Polish Jewish community, the largest in Europe in the interwar period, was also extremely heterogeneous. When Poland reemerged as a political entity after the First World War, it was ceded territories that for more than a century had belonged to three different countries, in which the fate of the Jews had each taken a separate course. The Galician Hassidim had more in common with Hassidic Jews in Romanian Bessarabia than with the Mitnagdim of Vilnius, which was also part of Poland. And the German-speaking Jews of Posen (now Poznań) shared more with Berlin Jews than with their coreligionists in Białystok. The only Polish-language Jewish daily was published in Krakow, whereas the two Jewish dailies in Yiddish were published in Warsaw. In some major Polish cities there were modern "temples" visited by the acculturated elite, while the *shtibl,* small traditional prayer rooms, dominated in the smaller towns.

The Jews of Europe were divided in many ways. Where did they see their future? In Europe, America, or Palestine? What language should they speak? That of their surroundings? Yiddish or Hebrew? Did their political sympathies reflect the views of liberalism, socialism, communism, Zionism, or even the nationalism of their respective country? Did they practice

their religion in a traditional, modern-orthodox, or liberal style? Or not at all? And what besides the struggle against all their enemies gave them cohesion?

City and countryside

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Jewish population continued to be concentrated in Europe, but the centers of Jewish life had clearly shifted. Whereas in 1900, 82 percent of all Jews lived in Europe (69 percent in Eastern Europe), in 1925 the proportion had dropped to 62 percent (51 percent in Eastern Europe), and by 1939 it had gone down to 57 percent (46 percent in Eastern Europe). North America and, to a lesser degree, Palestine grew into new centers of Jewish life. As early as the mid-1930s the two cities worldwide with the largest Jewish population were in the United States: New York and Chicago.

A lasting characteristic of Jewish population developments was the urbanization that commenced in the nineteenth century. The Jewish community of Lodz grew from 2,700 in the mid-nineteenth century to more than 150,000 in the 1920s. In the same period the number of Jews in Moscow increased from 300 to 132,000. There were similar developments in central and western European metropolises: In Vienna the size of the Jewish population increased from 4,000 to 200,000; in Berlin from 10,000 to 170,000, and in London from 6,000 to 200,000. Jews were concentrated largely in the major cities in the 1930s; in some countries almost exclusively in the capitals—for example, in Denmark (92 percent), France (70 percent), Austria (67 percent), Great Britain (67 percent), and the Netherlands (60 percent). In 1933 more than half of all Jews in Germany lived in ten major cities (one-third in Berlin alone), and in the Soviet Union, where one generation earlier most Jews still lived in smaller cities, forty percent of all Jews were concentrated in six metropolises: Moscow, Leningrad, Odessa, Kiev, Kharkiv, and Dnipropetrovsk. In Poland, one-quarter of all Jews still lived in smaller towns and villages, and in Lithuania, more than one-third. In most countries, however, the once dominant rural Jewry threatened to disappear entirely.

Eastern European Jewry was concentrated in certain regions and cities. The Jewish presence was visible to any visitor. In the Polish city of Pinsk, for example, Jews made up 75 percent of the population; in the Ukrainian Berdichev, 65 percent; and in the Romanian cities of Kishinev and Jassy, 60 percent. Even in some villages in Germany, Jews made up about half the population, such as the Hessian town of Rhina. Throughout Europe the Jewish presence became evident in large urban centers. One in three residents of Warsaw was Jewish, one in four in Saloniki, one in five in Budapest, and more than ten percent even in

Amsterdam, Vienna, and Sofia. Frankfurt had the largest Jewish population share in a major German city, however, with only six percent Jews. The Jews of western Europe were largely centered in the areas of the upper middle class, but there was a high density of Jews also in the poor immigrant regions.

The structure of the Jewish communities varied from country to country. In Germany Jewish communities, like Christian church congregations, received financial subsidies through church taxes paid by their members. Although it was possible in the Weimar Republic for Jews to quit a local Jewish community without leaving Judaism, one initially became a member of a community automatically upon registering one's residence at a particular location and listing one's religion as Jewish. In France and Great Britain, however, membership in the Jewish religious community was a purely voluntary act and membership fees were paid as in a club. Thus the Jewish community of Berlin existed as an institution, but it did not have any real counterpart in London and Paris, where numerous Jewish organizations existed side by side. The large Jewish communities in Germany and in Eastern Europe often reflected a "city within the city," with their own welfare organizations, educational institutions, and athletic clubs. In Saloniki there were thirty synagogues, several hospitals, and pharmacies, as well as a large number of schools. Representatives of the communities were selected in community elections, in which various candidate lists—from Zionists to orthodox to liberals and socialists—competed in active election campaigns in Eastern and Central Europe.

Jewish occupational structures varied greatly from one country to the next. There were Jewish dock workers in Saloniki; diamond cutters in Antwerp and Amsterdam; and cattle dealers in Alsace and southern Germany. Everywhere, however, Jews were overrepresented in trade and commerce and underrepresented in agriculture. Historical conditions continued to have an influence for a long time. In the Soviet Union the proletarianization of Jews spread quickly; the number of workers tripled between 1926 and 1935. In the metropolises of Central Europe, the share of Jews among doctors and lawyers was particularly high. In the early 1930s, a majority of doctors and lawyers in Budapest and Vienna were Jews, which resulted in a high percentage of Jewish students at the universities of these cities. Because there was still discrimination against accepting Jews into the civil service, the number of Jewish professors, judges, and teachers was much lower. In Hungary, for instance, where half of all lawyers were Jewish, less than four percent of all judges were Jews. In the trades, the dividing line between Western and Eastern Europe was especially clear cut. In western Europe, where Jews had been excluded from trade guilds for centuries, there were very few Jewish

craftsmen, yet there were numerous Jewish tailors, cobblers, bakers, and goldsmiths in the East.

In all of Europe, complaints about the economic decline grew within the Jewish population. Anti-Semites in Poland and Hungary organized very effective boycotts against Jewish companies and at the same time demands were voiced to limit the number of Jewish university students. Why didn't more Jews leave Europe? This was not always due to the limited options to emigrate. Most Jews felt equally at home in the respective countries in which they lived as did their Christian neighbors. They had emotional ties to their city or village and viewed the increased animosity as a temporary setback. Furthermore, they were not the only group that came under pressure. Ukrainians in Poland, Hungarians in Romania, Germans in Czechoslovakia—all of these groups lived as minorities within a nation-state dominated by a majority. It was not always pleasant for Protestants to live in an area dominated by Catholics, and vice versa. Socialists and nationalists fought each other in the streets and the economic crisis generated millions of unemployed. From such a broad perspective, the special situation of the Jews was just one part of generally dismal circumstances. The everyday lives of most Jews were characterized neither by physical violence nor state repression. Like their Gentile neighbors, the Jews were concerned with earning a living, feeding a family, and being part of their respective religious congregation, local community, and homeland. Emigration to another continent was seen only as the last resort for most of them.