THE DILEMMA OF THE JEWS IN THE HISTORIC LANDS OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 1918-38*

In their thousand-year history in the so-called Historic Lands of Czecho- slovakia—Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia—the Jews had to face many problems. In 1848 there was added the problem of their nationality, which became pressing and more important after 1918.

It is difficult for anybody who did not live in Austria-Hungary or in Czechoslovakia to understand the intricacies of the nationality problem with its often ridiculous and sometimes violent struggle for every school, every street name, and, more seriously, for every little job in the other nationality's territory. Even the former Austrian prime minister Count Eduard Taaffe did not understand it, and he exclaimed in exasperation: "Um das zu verstehen muss man halt ein gelernter Deutschboehme sein" (In order to understand that one has to be a skilled Bohemian German).

Today from the perspective of half a century one can reflect upon the past, upon the years between 1918 and 1938, with more objectivity, and with more insight. There was the narrow-minded nationalism that poisoned the relationship of the peoples in Czechoslovakia and which was partly mirrored by the national division of the Jews there. Today, looking back, many things seem petty and futile. There was nationalistic outrage and hatred. In the first years after the establishment of the Czechoslovak republic regular battles took place between Czech and German students at the Gymnasium. During one of these battles in Pilsen (Plzen), the writer Oskar Baum, then a student, was blinded by a stone thrown by one of the Czech students.1

But the times changed. Despite periodic anti-Jewish riots, despite lingering anti-Semitism, especially among some of the most famous Czech writers, despite bigotry and chauvinism, and in the end even attacks from small groups of fascists, the Jews of all convictions—Czech, German, Zionists, and national Jews—enjoyed equal rights not only by law, but also in practice. The Czechs generally accepted Masaryk's aphorism as a guideline: "A nation's attitude toward the Jews is the measure of its cultural matur-

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ity." The leadership of Masaryk, his fight for justice and truth under Austria-Hungary, his humanism, reassured the Jews of all political and national persuasion, and the veneration of his person was general.

This was expressed many times in publications and was the conviction of all Jews. For example, the book *Aus Geschichte und Leben der Teplitzer Judengemeinde*, a publication of this German-Jewish and national Jewish community in northern Bohemia, notes the transition from monarchy to republic at the end of World War I thus: "The Jews... adapt with confidence to the new circumstances which were created by the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic. The personality of the first president, T. G. Masaryk, whose intercession in favor of justice and truth is gratefully remembered, provides the Jews with the happiest expectation for mutual peaceful and harmonious work in the new state." And Max Brod noted in his *Prager Kreis* that Plato’s thesis seemed to become true, namely, that the rule by philosophers is best and that kings should be philosophers. Czechoslovakia had a philosopher as president and in his republic there was no official discrimination whatsoever against the Jews. President Edvard Beneš also adhered to the principles of liberalism and humanism in the first republic. In June, 1933, he said: "It is my belief that in Czechoslovakia all nationalities must be fully protected. No Jew declaring himself a member of the German nation—and I underline that—could be persecuted in our country because of this, as long as his allegiance to our state remains beyond doubt." The Jews of whatever nationality were united in their allegiance, in their attachment to the state, and in their patriotism.

The Jews of the Historic Lands had a peculiar fate. They lived in between two peoples who, in the course of a thousand years of Jewish presence in Bohemia, sometimes lived next to each other, sometimes with each other, and more often than not, especially since 1848, fought with each other. They emphasized what separated them and seldom what united them, but they lived in the same cities and towns, intermarried, and as the names illustrate, often switched from one group to the other. For instance, the name of the leader of the German Social Democrats, a Jew, was Czech and the name of one of the important Czech Social Democrats was Němec (which in Czech means German). But during the first decade of the first republic there was little private contact between Czechs and Germans. Only later was the wall