The Flexible National Identities of Bohemian Jewry*

The problem of the national identity of the Jews in the traditional Czech lands of Bohemia, Moravia, and Austrian Silesia is considerably more complex than that in Germany, Hungary, or elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Whereas

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With respect to periodicals, Jahrbuch für die Geschichte der Juden in der Tschechoslowakischen Republik (1929-38) is indispensable. Three other journals which place considerable emphasis on this topic are Historia Judaica, edited by Guido Kisch in Moravská Ostrava and New York (1938- ); the Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Juden in der Tschechoslowakei (Brünn, 1930-38); Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Judenmutes, Tel Aviv; and finally Judaica Bohemiae (Praha, 1965-79). A brief, useful bibliographic guide is Frank Meissner, "German Jews of Prague: Tapping Primary Sources," a paper delivered at the Ninth Congress of the Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Sciences at Cleveland State University, October 1978.

Not surprisingly, the approximate theme of the present article has occupied a number of writers, most notably Max Brod in Streitbares Leben (München: F. A. Herbig, 1969); Johannes Uezeit in various works; Pavel Eisein in Franz Kafka and Prague (New York: Griffin Books, 1950), and Hans Tramer in "Prague-City of Three Peoples," LB Year Book, 9 (London: Leo Baeck Institute, 1964). In as much as these only discuss conditions in Prague, they concern us less than a number of other pieces which deal with all of Bohemia and by implication also with Moravia. Particularly relevant are: Ruth Kestenberg-Gladstein, "The Jews between Czechs and Germans in the Historic Lands, 1848-1918," The Jews of Czechoslovakia 1 (1968), 21-71, and Hans Kohn, "Before 1918 in the Historic Lands," ibid., pp. 12-20; as well as two articles by Eduard Goldstücker, "Jews between Czechs and Germans Around 1848" (pp. 17-29) and "Prague German Literature: Its Socio-Historical Setting" (pp. 31-43) in The Czech National Revival, the Germans and the Jews (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1972). Finally, Christoph Stözl's Kafka böses Böhmten (München: Edition Text und Kritik, 1975) is also important.

Gladstein's essay differs from mine in several important respects: she paints a broad picture of the latter half of a period spanning 130 years, while I focus on the problem of
in Eastern Europe Jews maintained to a larger degree their ethnic and linguistic identity, in Germany and Hungary the process of integration, although never completed, went in the direction of assimilation to German and Hungarian culture. The Jews in the Czech lands (for the purpose of the article we shall largely restrict ourselves to Bohemia) were caught in the bitter nationality struggles between the Czechs and Germans which gained in intensity in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There the main characteristics of the German development—the dissolution of the ghetto and Judengasse, the alienation from traditional religion, the entry into intellectual, professional and industrial life, the assimilation to upper bourgeois attitudes and life styles—found its parallels as did the growth of anti-Semitism from the 1870s on. The loss of religious ties proceeded more rapidly and more radically in the Czech lands than in Germany, where, unlike in Bohemia and Moravia, a vigorous reform movement provided for many a middle ground between traditional religiosity and indifference or conversion. Yet in the Czech lands the process of assimilation to German culture was to an extent rechanneled as new pressures in the 1870s made for greater adhesion to a Czech community the Jewish dilemma between German and Czech nationalistic ideologies from the late eighteenth century on. There are important differences between her and my assumptions about assimilation, orthodoxy, and perhaps other problems. Hans Kohn, with characteristic conciseness and clarity, identifies the Bohemian Jewish community for good reasons as Central European and points out two visible alternatives among the possible identities of Bohemian Jewry: pioneering in Palestine or sharing in Masaryk’s civilized First Republic.

The last two authors I have selected among the many further illustrate how multi-faceted the history of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia in the last century really is: In the first of his two articles introducing the Jewish question, Goldstücker discusses the attitude of some of the leaders of the Czech national renaissance toward the Jews; in the second essay, which despite points of disagreement I consider particularly brilliant, he briefly discusses the most outstanding German-Jewish writers in Prague, who have come to be known as the Kafka generation. Among the two suggestions Goldstücker offers to account for that phenomenon, the first, namely that such outbursts are likely to occur when an era, in this case the liberal one, is about to come to an end, bears further investigation. His second suggestion concerns the fact that many of the writers who used the German language were concerned with examining language as such philosophically or linguistically, and often also knew one or more other languages. This suggests to Goldstücker that they did not feel quite at home in the German language. I see no more evidence for this view than for the related one; namely, that “Prague German (being) the product of isolation [due to] the absence of contact and interplay with the living tongue of the people (was marked by) stagnation and ... a bookish, abstract character.” Why should this be true in times of modern travel and communication, and could it be true of a group which Goldstücker himself singles out as remarkable?

While Goldstücker here is primarily concerned with the Prague German writers, Stölzl complements the Czech writer’s essay by stressing the hostility of the gentile environment toward the Jews, and particularly the antecedence of Czech, compared with German, anti-Semitism.