

“Hybridity and the Habsburg Jews”

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Since Homi Bhabha’s influential contributions, and especially since the publication of *The Location of Culture* in 1994, literary critics and others in the humanities have utilized the concept of cultural “hybridity” to rethink relations of hegemony and subjugation in colonial and post-colonial contexts. While the stage for these investigations has typically been the developing world, it is ironic that the model Bhabha and others have used has been that of the Central European Jew between the Enlightenment and the Holocaust. The notion of hybridity as it has been used in these contexts certainly seems relevant to the focus of the website spacesofidentity.net and the historiography of Central European identities generally. But is “hybridity” an apt model for these identities, or a particularly useful one to apply? The examples I want to draw on to flesh out these questions involve Habsburg Jews, those from Cisleithania (the Austrian half of the monarchy, I don’t have to remind readers of this journal), who contributed to German-language literary culture.

One corner of this topic was covered by my book, *Prague Territories*, in which I cited Homi Bhabha, but in a slightly different context. In my conclusion, I noted Bhabha’s insight that positions which in particular historical contexts might be described as “marginal” are, in their closeness to borders, extremes, or limits (in the language of centers and peripheries), necessarily those the best placed to be “in between cultural spaces,” and hence to have a mediary function.¹ This is one of the ways that cultural studies theorists have sought to valorize positions that have previously been identified with oppression, persecution, or (again) “marginalization.”

Another way, linked but not identical, is suggested by the term “cultural hybridity.” In my understanding, this is a term that has been deployed by theorists of colonialism to describe the ambivalent effects of

the identities produced by the colonial processes. This complex ambivalence is spelled out in Bhabha's essays in *The Location of Culture*, and it is fair to say that the intervention has been misappropriated by those who understand it as an acceptance of a genus or category of the "hybrid" that is then celebrated for subverting the original, pure, colonizing species.² In an analysis informed by psychoanalytic sources, Bhabha usually avoids denoting a type ("the hybrid") who acts in certain ways under colonial conditions, but instead refers to hybridity as either a *process* or a *sign* of processes of domination and resistance.³ It is specifically not "a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures," a description in which we more than faintly recognize the image many have painted of certain groups of Habsburg Jews in the period of nationalist conflict, such as the German-speaking Jews of Prague.

Here are some problems with these models for the cultural context of fin-de-siècle Prague. First of all, it needs to be established immediately and without confusion that the identification of Prague Jews in this period as culturally marginal is inadequate. While we might adjust the demographic figures one way or the other to accommodate different boundaries of the city, or Jews identified as Czech rather than German, and so on, it is clear that, in the heyday of German-liberal cultural hegemony of the latter nineteenth century, the Jewish minority of Prague was unlike that of any other European city of its time in that it represented fully half of the culturally German population (that is, the ruling minority). Thus, Hans Tramer's influential diagnosis of the "three-fold ghetto" of Prague German-speaking Jews has needed to be revised.⁴ The Jewish Prague translators emerged from the generation after that of what we might call "high German-liberalism." Members of that previous generation had available to them an affiliation with German culture that was less problematic than it would be for their children – they remained powerfully identified as Jews (very few would ever be baptized, for example, in comparison with the Viennese or Berliners), but their understanding of themselves as Germans, and hence part of the rightly ruling minority, was not troubled in the way it would be for those born in the 1880s. Hillel Kieval has shown that far from all of the Prague Jews were German-identified, and those who were generally understood themselves, as I said above, as Jews.⁵ Yet they were comfortable with what Mendes-Flohr calls the German-Jewish "dual identity," more so perhaps than any of the German Jews.⁶ Once the challenges to German-liberalism – namely the Czech national movement

and the *völkisch* German one – reached a certain pitch in Prague, this situation changed radically. Franz Kafka’s generation inherited both an attachment to German culture and a consciousness of social position at the same time as they sensed the unstable, tenuous, peripheral state of their condition. They were in fact already a threatened Jewish minority, but one that remained nonetheless a slight majority of the traditionally dominant German population of the city; this was a population whose position in turn was threatened by rising illiberal ideologies, even as it also represented a language group privileged in the monarchy at large. These layers of identity trapped the young Prague German-speaking Jews between identities inside and outside of the power structure, so that an analysis of their literary products as representations of “minority culture” is itself problematic.

This structurally complex picture of the “place” of German-speaking Prague Jews in the Central European landscape lends itself to languages of center and periphery, to images of “liminality” and cultural transmission. There is clearly something valuable in this way of looking at things, although one wants to do so with close attention to the historical specificity of this particular case. Now, it is clearly more than a coincidence that the practice of *translation* is of special interest to theorists of this complex process of “cultural hybridity” and also the special province of Jewish writers in the context of the Czech-German conflict of the turn of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Taking off from Franz Fanon, Bhabha offers the rich image of liberatory people in times of struggle as “bearers of a hybrid identity... They are caught in the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation...”⁷ These metaphors resonate evocatively with my own in *Prague Territories*, but also with those of the Prague translators themselves in the particular time I am now discussing. Part of my purpose in my longer discussion of the Prague translators was to recuperate this rhetoric through an intensive reading of the peculiarity of the act of translation and its self-conception in its own particular moment – this is what I understand to constitute genuine historicization.⁸ The cliché I thought worthy of avoiding in this case – one that I felt was truly “deceptive” in the sense of representing historical figures in a way directly contradicted by their self-understanding in their own time – was the image of a population of liberal humanist Jews seeking to reconcile two illiberal communities. Of course, the translation efforts in which they engaged did have powerfully humane, universalist,

and selfless effects. But the translators were at the same time creating a world of their own in a way that we can too easily lose sight of.⁹

Beyond Prague, Bohemia was full of Jewish German-speakers, for each of whom the category of “hybridity” could be applied both usefully and problematically. Some Jews resident in the German-language “islands” within the majority-Czech interior identified particularly strongly as Germans, such as the journalist, novelist, and philosopher Fritz Mauthner (1849-1923). Mauthner resided in Berlin for much of his career, but his staunch German-nationalist sympathies emerged out of the burgeoning Czech-German conflict in Bohemia in the last third of the nineteenth century. Jews of Mauthner’s generation were able to identify as German nationalists without thinking of this as a potential conflict with their Jewishness; only in retrospect in his 1918 memoir did Mauthner consider that being a Jew among Christians may have contributed to his sense of displacement as much as being a German surrounded by Czechs. Mauthner’s philosophical work, *Contributions to a Critique of Language* (1901/02), was an introduction to the philosophy of language that presaged the Viennese Ludwig Wittgenstein’s work. Scholars have speculated on the relationship of these critiques of language to the polyglot environment of the Habsburg Empire, the language conflict in this period, or the flexible national identities of Central European Jews in this period.¹⁰

The adjacent province of Moravia was similar to Bohemia in its mixture of Czech and German speakers, including Jews; the Jews of Moravia were generally more strongly identified with German language and culture, or at least in greater percentages and for longer, than those in Bohemia.¹¹ A great many German writers hailed from the province’s capital of Brünn/Brno and the surrounding countryside. An important if also idiosyncratic exemplar is Alexander Friedrich Roda Roda (1872-1945), whose early work has been characterized as emblematic of the “Habsburg spirit.” He was born in Drnowitz, Moravia in 1872, but his family soon moved to Zdenci in Slavonia, the furthest eastern province of today’s Croatia. Roda Roda’s Central Europe ranged into German Austria and Germany itself, where he became famous as a satirist and cabarettist, rubbing elbows with leading literati and political writers of the age. This life and career stunningly fits a certain familiar image of “Central Europe”: peripatetic, highly cultured, and yet distanced and sardonic, a figure that is at once perennially an insider and a hapless outsider – in a word, “hybrid.”

Jews from the Eastern reaches of Cisleithania, particularly Galicia, with its very large Polish-Jewish population, were less likely to contribute to German literature. The Habsburg character of the region was strong, and the population in several areas quite mixed, including German-speaking aristocrats and other German speakers, among them assimilating Jews. But the vast majority of Jews in these areas lived within a strong Yiddish-speaking cultural environment, and while some at the time thought of Yiddish (or “Jargon” as it was commonly called) as a dialect of German and not a language in its own right at all, neither did Yiddish authors consider themselves to be contributing to a German literary tradition nor is their literary production today considered to be a part of it. Several Galician Jews did make significant contributions to German literature. Two very important examples to name would be men whose background as East European Jews cannot be considered incidental to the content of their contributions. Martin Buber (1879-1965), raised in Lvov/Lviv/Lemberg, presented mediations of Hasidic tradition to a German audience that were obviously linked to this background, as was his crucial journal *Der Jude*, and even his philosophical writing, or so one could argue. Joseph Roth (1894-1939) was born in Eastern Galicia (today’s Ukraine) and became an important Austrian writer, and indeed a modern author whose great significance is sometimes overlooked. Yet, in both these and other cases, these authors’ contributions were made after their emigration, as it were, to German-speaking lands beyond the invisible boundary of Eastern Europe. They thus can be said to have made their contributions as émigrés rather than as East European writers of German as such. Yet, this path was not unusual for a certain tier of Galician Jewish society, who took German to be the language of higher culture and education and had their children schooled in it, even if as a second, third, or fourth language (after Yiddish, Polish, scholarly Hebrew, and sometimes Ukrainian). Such was the path of writers Manès Sperber (1905-1984), Soma Morgenstern (1890-1976), Salamon Dembitzer (1888-1964), W. H. Katz, the scholar Nahum Glatzer (1903-1990), and psychoanalytic writers such as Sigmund Biran (b. 1901). Most made their path via Vienna; many studied or worked in Germany.

The remaining region of Cisleithania whose Jewish inhabitants made a substantial contribution to German literature is the Bukovina.¹² Bukovina was the northeastern corner of what was considered Romania, and was the part of Romania under Austrian control. Jews were present in substantial numbers in Romanian lands ruled by the Hungarian half

of the Habsburg monarchy, but did not tend to identify with German speakers. Transylvanian Jews acculturated to the politico-culturally dominant Hungarian population rather than its Romanian and German cohabitants, and other Romanian Jews identified strongly with the Romanian majority. Bukovina, in contrast, had a long history of mixed populations, had been under the sovereignty of various kingdoms, principalities, and empires in every direction (including e.g. the Ottoman empire, the Kingdom of Hungary, Rus, Moldau, the Habsburg monarchy and then Romania). Hence Bukovina had been considered by the German leaders of the Habsburg Empire to be a key strategic site for Germanization since the reign of Joseph II, whose campaign included the settlement of many Germans from the West as well as the active Germanization of some local populations, including especially Bukovina's Jews. German-language education was formally required of them in various ways (as prerequisites of Talmudic study or marriage, for instance), and by the nineteenth century the Jews of its many country towns and especially its capital, Czernowitz, were largely German-speaking and strong supporters of the monarchy. The region continued to attract Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants from surrounding areas, however. In the early twentieth century, Jews made up nearly half of the population of Czernowitz and well over a tenth of a population of nearly one million where no ethnic group commanded a majority. It is in the twentieth century that the German poetry of this region blossomed due to the extraordinary creativity of Bukovina's Jews.

An important German writer from this region who should not, however, be considered a typical one was Karl Emil Franzos (1848-1904). German writing from the Bukovina did not have significant Jewish representation before the latter third of the nineteenth century, and Franzos's contribution was very different from that of those who would come after him. This novelist, essayist, and poet was a fierce German nationalist and an important contributor to the nineteenth-century German "orientalist" image of Eastern Europe and its Jews (this last especially through several volumes of "cultural vignettes from Half-Asia").¹³ Franzos was one of the most popular German-Jewish writers of his generation, and consideration of him as a prime exemplar of the phenomenon of "Jewish self-hatred" is complicated. Yet, like Mauthner, I do not think it can be seen as casual that this particular "orientalism," which would have such sway in the German perception of Eastern Europe in the half century of Franzos's life and the further half century after his death (and longer) hailed from a Jewish writer from that

world, rather than a resident of the German Empire proper. "Hybridity" does not necessarily yield sympathy as such. Yet, there is in the very exoticism of Franzos's descriptions, as in the very different and yet kin ones of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, for example, a home-ly familiarity.

The most important of the German poetry written by Jews in Bukovina was created in the twentieth century, especially after World War I and the succession of the region to Romania. Here the most apt comparison may be made to the German literature produced earlier by Jews in Prague. The disproportionate contribution can be thought of in the context of "minority cultures," where the hegemonic status of the German language had already been superseded by other national claims, so that the previously privileged language of culture was now a minority culture maintained and promulgated largely by German-aculturated Jews. In both Bukovina and Bohemia, contemporaries and scholars have argued that the disproportionate literary talent might be linked to the isolation of these "language islands" and the perpetuation of a high-cultural tradition from century's past. But these sites were hardly considered language islands before the onset of the national movements that would create them as such, and the assumption that isolation from working-class elements or dialects is salutary seems transparently ideological. It is true that the Jews of Bukovina cherished a high cultural European heritage that seemed old-fashioned to many residents of both the surrounding Slavic and Romanian populations and those of most of German-speaking Europe as well. Another important influence is said to have been played by the so-called "Ethical Seminar" at the University of Czernowitz, where some Jewish students, notably Rose Ausländer (1901-1988), were steeped in a German neo-idealist philosophical tradition. The poetry of German-Jewish Bukovina is perhaps best known as Holocaust literature, although the greatest contributions clearly begin in the interwar period. Many and perhaps even most of the writers emigrated or spent substantial time in Germany, Austria, France, England, the U.S., or Israel. Some of the most important, in addition to Ausländer and Celan, include Alfred Margul-Sperber (1898-1967), Klara Blum (1904-1971), Alfred Kittner (1906-1991), Alfred Gong (Alfred M. Liquornik, 1920-1981), Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger (1924-1942), Moses Rosenkranz (1904-2003) Immanuel Weissglas (1920-1979), to name only the best known of many authors. Women writers were probably more strongly represented in this group than in any other contemporary German literary setting. This was specifically not the case for German writers in other areas of Central

Europe, so I hesitate to claim it as an ancillary effect of “hybridity” – but something about the peculiar cultural milieu of this extraordinary place and time played a role in the facilitation of spaces in which women’s artistic voices could flourish and be appreciated.

To return to my book on Prague writers, and in particular my discussion of the Czech-to-German translators, I argued that, rather than “hybrids,” these particular Central European Jews could be conceived as a “middle nation” (from *Mitteleuropa*): their poetry was a new sort of “national literature,” grounding an alternative to “nations” in the ordinary sense of the word. To the degree this can be said to be true, it is important to recall that such a literature was not a “Jewish literature,” and that such a nation – “Middle Nation” – was not Zion. It functioned, so my argument goes, as an alternative – and, yes, a subversive – one to the ideological complex binding essential peoples to eternal literatures and sovereign territories.

And in this lies the distinction between a view of the translators as a “middle nation” and a view of them as representatives of “cultural hybridity.” While the hybrid is introduced as something potentially subversive, it is perhaps only so within the terms – in this case, the explicitly *racialist* terms – of the system it is supposed to resist. Clearly, there can be no “hybrid” without the “pure” – that the Jewish example was a model for Bhabha is less encouraging to me than the appropriation of this sort of discourse is unsettling. Furthermore, even if we bracket the specific vocabulary of the pure and the hybrid, how can we characterize this immense, rich, diverse, and important contribution to German literature as in any way less than just that, “German literature”? The great value that a theory such as Bhabha’s offers students of Central European cultures may be just this: it offers us a language in which to articulate a problematic of identity that seems salient when we survey all of these contributions together, even as it offers a warning about historical or critical practices that reproduce discourses they thought they were resisting. So, in the end, I am circumspect about the appropriateness of this figure of hybridity for the subject of Habsburg Jews. One often cited objection to terms like this is that they represent foreign interventions by latter-day theorists, and would have been inscrutable to the historical subjects in their own time. I have never found this particular, very defensive reaction convincing. In fact, I think the notion of hybridity is arguably quite native to this Central European historical context, in particular the Jewish one. One truly extraordinary example is found in a very short piece by Franz

Kafka, actually entitled "A Hybrid" ("Eine Kreuzung," written around 1917 and only posthumously published in *Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer*). Readers who know the piece will remember it is the uncanny description of an unusual pet, half-kitten and half-lamb, that the narrator has received as inheritance from his father; a fascinating, loving, and also somehow pathetic creature, uncomfortable in its own skin, for whom the narrator knows the butcher's blade would perhaps be the appropriate "solution," but one that he cannot provide. I am not going to join with the many critical voices who have taken this to be Kafka's clear allegorical statement about the status of German-Jewish life in diaspora, or in Central Europe in particular. Rather, that very interpretation is inscribed in the story; hybridity is in this tale what I have elsewhere called a "trap," compelling an allegorical interpretation that is itself part of the narrative.¹⁴ Here as elsewhere, it seems to me, Kafka is appropriating his own appropriation, thematizing the "hybridity" of a German author born in a conflicted Central Europe to Jewish parents. For what is this piece, if not the "purest" of moments of German literary modernism? And the hybrid, the half-breed, the "cross" and the "crossing" of this fragment – is it Jewish or Christian, animal or man, is it European or simply human? So let us not take too literally, as it were, the "liminality," "marginality," "hybridity," and so forth, of our subjects, but recognize these as figures that can serve different functions – one of which, however, has been creative opportunity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Scott Spector, *Prague Territories* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000): 237.
- 2 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).
- 3 *ibid.*, see esp. 112-15.
- 4 See Hans Tramer, "Die Dreivölkerstadt Prag," in: *Robert Weltsch zum 70. Geburtstag von seinen Freunden*, (Tel Aviv, 1961), 138-203. Translated into English under the title "Prague – City of Three Peoples," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 9 (1964).
- 5 See Kieval, Hillel Joseph, *The Making of Czech Jewry: National Conflict and Jewish Society in Bohemia, 1870-1918* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), *passim*. Cf. *idem*, *Languages of Community: The Jewish Experience in the Czech Lands* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), see esp. 114-80.

- 6 Cf. Paul Mendes-Flohr, *German Jews: A Dual Identity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999).
- 7 Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 38.
- 8 This I add because of a recent comment by Hillel Kieval at a keynote speech on Prague Jews and translation in which he flatteringly cited my chapter, but suggested that it was “deceptive” not to further “historicize” and “contextualize” within a longer and broader tradition of Jewish translation activities. Certainly the (temporally) longer and (geographically) broader tradition of translation by East Central European Jews is a relevant context for the profusion of such activity in Prague in this period; “historicization,” however, primarily consists in fleshing out the historical specificity of the particular moment under study. “Translation” was not precisely the same act, I argued and maintain, in this particular context as it had been in others, or would later be.
- 9 See Spector, *Prague Territories: 195-233*, and idem, “Mittel-Europa? Some Afterthoughts on Prague Jews, ‘Hybridity,’ and Translation,” in a forthcoming issue of *Bohemia: A Journal of History and Civilisation in East Central Europe*.
- 10 See Spector, *Prague Territories*: esp. 75-82; Allen Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein’s Vienna* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973); Wilm Iggers, “The Flexible National Identities of Bohemian Jewry,” *East Central Europe* 7, no. 1 (1980): 39-48.
- 11 See Wilma Iggers, *Die Juden von Böhmen und Mähren: Ein historisches Lesebuch* (Munich, 1986).
- 12 See Amy Colin and Alfred Kittner, eds., *Versunkene Dichtung der Bukowina* (Munich, 1994); Cécile Cordon and Helmut Kusdat, eds., *An der Zeiten Ränder. Czernowitz und die Bukowina. Geschichte, Literature, Verfolgung, Exil* (Vienna, 2002).
- 13 Karl Emil Franzos, *Aus Halb-Asien. Kulturbilder aus Galizien, der Bukovina, Südrußland und Rumänien* (Leipzig, 1876), and *Vom Don zur Donau. Neue Kulturbilder aus Halb-Asien* (1877), and *Aus der großen Ebene: Neue Kulturbilder aus Halb-Asien* (Stuttgart, 1888).
- 14 See Scott Spector, “From Big Daddy to Small Literature: On Taking Kafka at His Word,” in *Evolving Jewish Identities in German Culture: Borders and Crossings*, eds. Linda E. Feldman and Diana Orendi, foreword by Sander L. Gilman (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000).