



Encountering the 'ghetto'

Scandinavian writers on East European Jewry in German-occupied Poland, 1915–1918*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.109314>

ABSTRACT • In the history of Western perceptions of Jews and the ‘Jewish problem’, the First World War marks a period of change which was, among other things, influenced by the course of the war on the Eastern Front. The German occupation of large parts of Russian Poland in 1915 brought the difficult conditions of Eastern European Jewry closer to public attention in the West, not only in Central Europe, but also in neutral states. For the Scandinavian writers who travelled to occupied Poland in 1916 and 1917, the direct encounter with East European Jewry was a new and often disturbing experience. Their travelogues represent an illuminating and, so far, unused source for Scandinavian perceptions of Jews in Eastern Europe, focusing on the ‘ghetto’ as the physical embodiment of Eastern Jewish life. Analysing these accounts, the present article discusses the different depictions of Warsaw’s Jews thematically and identifies three interwoven perspectives of the ‘ghetto’: as a site of extreme poverty; as a foreign (‘oriental’) element in Europe; and as an archetype of Jewish life in general.

Introduction

During the First World War, German authorities invited correspondents from neutral countries to the Eastern Front with a view to eliciting positive press coverage of the German policies of restructuring Eastern Europe. Among the German measures, the reorganisation of Jewish life in occupied Poland was particularly fitting for propaganda purposes since it could be presented as an effort to ameliorate the conditions and to strengthen the future of Polish Jewry after the end of tsarist oppression. Among the observers invited were Scandinavian journalists and

intellectuals who recorded their impressions and conveyed them to their readers. Their travelogues, published in newspapers and books, provide an illuminating and, so far, unused source for Scandinavian views on Polish Jewry during the crisis-ridden years of the First World War. Most of the descriptions centre on the impoverished Jewish districts of Warsaw (the ‘ghetto’), which became a major sight for foreign visitors during the war. Given this focus, the travelogues of the Scandinavian correspondents can be understood as part of the long tradition of ‘ghetto writing’ by non-Jewish observers.

Since their establishment in the early-modern period, the closed Jewish quarters in European cities constituted a place of attraction for Christian visitors. Their eyewitness

* This article is dedicated to Lars M. Andersson on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday.



accounts often described the repulsive living conditions in the ghetto – the overcrowding, unhygienic housing, filth and stench – by blaming the Jews themselves, reducing them ‘to the status of vermin’ and thereby confirming widespread anti-Jewish prejudices (Bourke 1999: 16). At the time of the French Revolution, a critical view of these conditions emerged. When the Danish traveller Jens Baggesen visited the Frankfurt Judengasse in 1789, he regarded its inhabitants as unfortunate victims of systematic oppression comparable to the general oppression of the people and the slave trade (Hoffmann 2012: 56). When, following the French Revolution, the closed Jewish quarters were dissolved and Jews gradually became equal citizens in Western Europe, the term ‘ghetto’ embodied for many liberal Jews the essence of ‘medieval’ oppression and persecution, and was associated with cultural isolation, lack of enlightenment and backwardness. In this cultural meaning, the term came to denote Eastern European Jewish life. Having overcome their own ‘ghetto’ past, assimilated German Jews saw their unemancipated and impoverished eastern brethren, who were highly visible in their caftans and sidelocks, as often embarrassing representatives of the ‘ghetto-Jew’ (Aschheim 1982: 2; Hoffmann 2012: 61). In the Jewish ‘ghetto-literature’ on the other hand, which emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century in the Habsburg Empire, traditional and Eastern European Jewish life was depicted in a positive and often idealised way, emphasising the individuality, spirituality and humanity of the ‘ghetto’ inhabitants (Hoffmann 2012: 68–70). By contrast, the emerging antisemitic movement imagined the Eastern European Jewish quarters as a virtually inexhaustible source of undesirable poor migrants who, if not stopped, would come to dominate the West (Aschheim 1982: 58–62).

Amidst these diverse general notions of Eastern European Jewry, the Scandinavian visitors encountered the specific historical situation of 1916/17 when, during the war, questions of the status and the future of Polish Jewry arose. Their travel reports allow for a deeper insight into Scandinavian attitudes towards East European Jews and constitute an instructive source for the boundaries and expressions of antisemitic discourse in the Nordic democracies at the time. To analyse these travelogues, the present article outlines the historical context and specific circumstances of the visits, thereafter, presents and discusses the different depictions of Warsaw’s Jews thematically, and finally identifies three interwoven perspectives of the ‘ghetto’ which are inherent in the texts: the Jewish quarter as a site of extreme poverty; the Jewish quarter as a foreign (‘oriental’) element in Europe; and the Jewish quarter as an archetype of Jewish life in general.

Polish Jews under German occupation during the First World War

After the Russian retreat and, in August 1915, the establishment of the General Government of Warsaw as the administrative unit for the German-occupied parts of Russian Poland, German policies were characterised by an ambivalence between concessions to Polish and Jewish self-determination, on the one hand, and securing German influence as well as exploiting resources for the German war effort, on the other (Polsakiewicz 2015: 51). Confronted with the antagonism between Poles and Jews, the German administration initially relied more on the Jews who in some areas had welcomed German troops as liberators from tsarist oppression and, because of the linguistic ties between Yiddish and German, could be regarded as a ‘German’ element in the Slavic-speaking

East (Polsakiewicz 2015: 68–70; Grill 2018). Ideologically diverse German Jewish associations tried to influence German policies towards Eastern Jewry in the occupied areas. The Zionist-dominated Committee for the East advocated Jewish national and cultural autonomy in Eastern Europe as beneficial to German imperial interests, whereas the liberal German Association for the Interests of East European Jewry, defining Jewish identity as a religious affiliation only, endorsed the German Jewish ideal of Enlightenment and Emancipation as a model for Eastern Jewry. The Free Association for the Interests of Orthodox Judaism, for its part, defended Jewish religious autonomy against nationalist and secularist influences (Aschheim 1982: 157–68). In July 1915, an office for Jewish affairs was established in the German civil administration of the General Government. It was headed by the German Jewish lawyer and left-liberal member of the Reichstag, Ludwig Haas. As a secular, assimilated German Jew, Haas did not support Jewish ambitions for national autonomy, but worked for the reorganisation of Jewish life as a religious community (Stempin 2020: 447–9). Complemented in early 1916 by two German Orthodox rabbis, Emanuel Carlebach and Pinchas Kohn, the office of Jewish affairs introduced the reform of the Jewish school system by applying modern educational standards and helped to organise the Orthodox as a political party for the Warsaw municipal elections (Kauffman 2015: 114–23; Norrell 2017: 65–7). The most significant official act of German policies towards Jews in the General Government of Warsaw was the Ordinance of November 1916 regarding the organisation of Jewish communities in Poland. Composed largely by Haas and Kohn, it stated that the Jews of Poland were a religious community, not a nation (Schuster 2004: 270–6). As official religious bodies, the

Jewish communities were nevertheless given rather extensive tasks, covering cultural, social and charitable matters, and the right to collect communal taxes. The elected Jewish councils were to be organised on a local, regional and national level. Jewish reactions to the ordinance were mixed; it was welcomed by assimilationists and the Orthodox, but rejected by nationalists and socialists (Szajkowski 1966: 127–8; Kauffman 2015: 124).

By the time the ordinance was published, most Jews had already lost the hope that their conditions would change for the better under German occupation. After the Act of 5 November 1916, that promised the post-war establishment of a Polish client state, to be called the Kingdom of Poland, German policies towards the Jews increasingly took into consideration Polish viewpoints, even when they were shaped by chauvinist and anti-semitic biases. When the German authorities gradually handed over supervision of educational matters to the Provisional Polish Council of State, Jews became more unprotected, and their cultural rights were called into question (Norell 2017: 93; Stempin 2020: 463–70). In addition, antisemitic resentments against Eastern Jews were widespread among German soldiers and officials (Zechlin 1969: 200–1) and became more pronounced the longer the war dragged on. Moreover, the requisitioning of resources for the German war effort, including foodstuffs and (forced) labour, and restrictions on normal commerce imposed by the German occupiers, exacerbated the already disastrous economic situation and worsened the hunger crisis. The rapid decline of basic living conditions became apparent in widespread starvation and epidemics (such as typhus and tuberculosis), and a rapidly rising mortality rate (Blobaum 2017: 79–92). While Jews and Poles in Warsaw were both hit by the collapse of living standards caused by German

economic exploitation, the conditions of Jews deteriorated even more when aid from the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee stopped after the United States entered the war in April 1917 (p. 97). A report by a member of a Danish relief action committee in 1917 disclosed a rise in mortality among Warsaw's Jews of 350 per cent between 1914 and 1917 (Tage Ellinger 1917). The hunger catastrophe during the First World War became deeply ingrained in the collective memory of Warsaw's Jews (see, e.g. Singer 1969: 177–83).

Scandinavian correspondents in occupied Poland

During the First World War, both sides to the conflict used propaganda to influence international opinion. It notably targeted the public of neutral states, such as the United States (until 1917) or the Scandinavian countries, in which the relatively liberal conditions for the press allowed for propaganda activities (on censorship, see Ottosen 2014). Having lost the propaganda battle in the West after the brutal invasion of Belgium in August 1914, German propaganda efforts pointed to the Eastern Front, where the campaign could be presented as a fight against tsarist autocracy, as liberation of peoples from Russian oppression and as a civilising mission that demonstrated the superiority of German culture. In this narrative, the amelioration of the conditions for Eastern European Jewry was a case in point. It could be used to show a positive, humanitarian image of Germany to the civilised world, which for many years had been concerned about the misery and persecution of Jews in tsarist Russia. When the German ordinance on the organisation of Jewish communities in Poland was promulgated in November 1916, the German government exploited it for propaganda purposes

in neutral countries, especially addressing the American Jewish press (Szajkowski 1966: 134–5).

While the Scandinavian countries remained neutral during the war, public opinion sided for the most part with the Entente, apart from Sweden, where pro-German voices were also prominent (Segelke 2019: 57–65). German propaganda offices tried to influence public opinion in Scandinavia by such means as establishing a news agency, financially supporting pro-German newspapers, promoting pamphlets, books and films, and not least by engaging prominent Scandinavian writers and intellectuals to report as correspondents from the front or the occupied areas (Nævestad 2013: 24–6; Segelke 2019; Jørgensen 1982–3). The most prominent Scandinavian who followed the German campaigns both in the West and the East as embedded war correspondent and, in two bulky volumes, enthusiastically supported the German cause, was the Swedish explorer and geographer Sven Hedin. He even advocated that Sweden should give up neutrality and join the war on the German side to fight Russian expansionism (Österberg 1998: 171, 187). The Swedish literary historian Fredrik Böök was also among a group of ardent pro-German activists during the war. On behalf of the conservative Swedish newspaper, *Svenska Dagbladet*, he travelled to the Western and Eastern Fronts in 1915 and 1916. His travelogues, also published as books and translated into German, found a wide readership (Nordin 1994: 144–51). The Norwegian actor, theatre director and dramatist Björn Björnson managed the German Press agency Norden during the war, which provided the Scandinavian press with news from Germany and Austria-Hungary (Nævestad 2013: 24). In 1916, the Norwegian writer Erik Lie joined the German propaganda service as war correspondent in Berlin with the task of

communicating a positive image of Germany to his homeland. Together with his brother-in law, the playwright and essayist Nils Kjær, Lie visited the Eastern Front in the spring of 1917 (Roughthvedt 2010: 30).

Not all Scandinavian correspondents who wrote about their impressions of German-occupied Poland, and, in particular, of Eastern European Jewry, were pro-German activists or even directly engaged in German propaganda. Some were journalists, sent by their papers to inform their readers about the conditions in occupied Poland, while others represented Scandinavian charities supplying foodstuff and clothes to alleviate the suffering of the population. Since all visitors needed an entry permit from the German authorities, however, correspondents who were regarded as biased against Germany could be excluded beforehand.

After the establishment of the General Government of Warsaw, the German authorities developed a visiting programme for foreign correspondents from neutral countries. In this setting, German policies towards Jews figured prominently. The desperate conditions in Warsaw's Jewish poor quarters could be presented as a legacy of Russian oppression, whereas the German measures of reform in the realms of health, education and politics were shown off as achievements of a civilising mission. The significance of this topic for German propaganda can be seen in the fact that the head of the office of Jewish affairs, Ludwig Haas, himself functioned as a guide, showing foreign visitors around the Jewish quarters of Warsaw.

While the German authorities had their agenda, they could not, of course, control the impressions, thoughts and writings of the visitors. Especially on controversial issues, such as the establishment of a Polish state or the conditions of Polish Jewry, there were different views, and consequently a variety

of opinions in the travelogues. The reports of Scandinavian writers from occupied Poland differ also with respect to how central the encounter with Eastern Jewry was as a topic. In Hedin's account of the German and Austro-Hungarian campaign on the Eastern Front in 1915, Jews appear relatively seldom. It is true, Hedin recorded contradictory narratives about Jews and their role in Polish society. In one view, they appeared as poor and persecuted by both Russians and Poles, while in another view they were 'parasites on the country, that take from the poor and make beggars of the Poles' (Hedin 1915: 146). Entering Czernowitz in the Bukovina, Hedin described the squalor of the Jewish quarter 'with its stinking shops', but he also visited some families there 'who accepted life philosophically and lived quietly' (p. 328). As part of his interest in the diversity of ethnicities in the area, Hedin made sketches of three older Jewish men from Czernowitz in their traditional religious clothing and published the drawings (with their names) as illustrations in the book (Hedin 1915: 324–5, 327, 333; see also Österberg 1998: 173–4). He did not, however, address eastern Jewish life as a topic in its own right.

For Fredrik Böök, on the other hand, the encounter with Eastern Jewry was by far the most moving, and disturbing, experience of his journey to Germany and Poland in the spring of 1916. For several days, he strolled through the Jewish quarter of Warsaw 'as if in a fever' – torn between conflicting emotions (Böök 1998: 133). His travel account, first published in the summer of 1916 in *Svenska Dagbladet*, gave a detailed, knowledgeable and powerful depiction of Polish Jewry. In a review, written by the writer Per Hallström, it was characterised as a 'profound study of folk psychology' (Hallström 1916). Böök seems to have been genuinely interested in the topic; he had made himself familiar with

contemporary discussions on the Ostjuden in the German and German Jewish press. In addition, he was an experienced observer, efficient in translating travel impressions into persuasive and emotional language.

Bjørnson's and Lie's portrayals of Polish Jewry accounted for a small part of their book-length memoirs of the war years in Germany, while most of the travel accounts of Scandinavian writers were published shortly after the visit as reports in Scandinavian newspapers. All travels to the General Government of Warsaw took place in the period between spring 1916 and the summer of 1917.

Depictions of East European Jewry

Warsaw's Jewish cityscape

At the time of the First World War, Warsaw was home to the largest Jewish community in Europe. It made up between 35 and 40 per cent of the total population of around 800,000. At the beginning of the war, the Jewish share was even higher (around 45 per cent), when many refugees found temporary shelter in the city, although exact numbers are difficult to attain (Blobsaum 2017: 149–52).

For the Scandinavian visitors to Warsaw, the mere presence of a large number of Jews on the streets was an unexpected and noteworthy experience. The Danish journalist Valdemar Galster noticed that the physiognomy of the city was shaped by a constant flow of poor Jews trying to sell their goods (Galster 1916). Also, Böök was impressed by the fact that he had seen more Jews in Warsaw in half an hour than in all his previous life, and described his feelings about the encounter:

Initially, one is amazed about them, afterwards you have to smile. ... It is impossible to resist the grotesque comic that sur-

rounds the Jews. I sat for hours observing them on Krakowskie Przedmiescie [famous boulevard in Warsaw's centre, C. H.], and they have amused, delighted and enchanted me. They walk back and forth in groups, busily discussing, mysteriously whispering, fervently quarrelling, small and pale, dirty and undernourished, but tireless and full of incredible lust for life that shines through their gesticulating and their quick-witted, alert looks. They do business. They sell newspapers ... (Böök 1916: 61–2; unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author)

For Böök, the Jews of Warsaw were different from the Jews he had met in Western Europe. They were 'a new people' whose existence he had scarcely surmised before. Accordingly, he observed them with the gaze of an explorer, describing their characteristic features, and constructing a particular collective nature of East European Jewry. It must be noted that this encounter was exclusively one-sided. There was no direct communication between the observer and the observed; Jews were just passive objects of study and had no voice or individuality of their own. Based on outward appearances and fleeting impressions, Böök's depiction of Warsaw's Jews was characterised by a high degree of subjectivity, making the recording of his emotional reactions a central part of the narration. There can be no doubt that his portrayal was written in an orientalising fashion that emphasised the otherness of East European Jews. The first impression of Warsaw, he wrote, lay in its 'oriental character', which to him became most apparent in the 'cowered and submissive' figures of the Jews: 'With overwhelming force, one is struck by the Asian traits of the whole race, incompatible with all European concepts' (Böök 1916: 49). At the same time, he expressed, albeit in a patronising manner,



Fig. 1. Poland, Warsaw. - General Government Warsaw. Street scene with Jewish men and women, c.1915/18. German Federal Archives/Bundesarchiv, Bild 104-10244 (photographer not specified).

a vivid interest, and a certain empathetic attachment to the life and fate of this foreign people.

In exploring the city, Harald Wagner followed the question of where the ‘real Warsaw’ was to be found – a Warsaw that might overcome the long history of oppression, misery and bitterness. In his eyes, the Jews of the Polish capital were of no help in rebuilding the city’s self-confidence, since they were a ‘foreign, unfortunate and submissive race’ that did not blend with the surrounding culture. Wagner illustrated his point by condescendingly describing the foreign appearances of Jews on the streets (Wagner 1917). In a similar way, Gustav Smedal noted an immediate feeling of repulsion sparked by the encounter with Jewish peddlers in Warsaw and explained the instinctive reaction by differences of race: ‘We are Europeans, Jews are and will remain Asians’ (Smedal 1917). Lie’s

depiction of Warsaw emphasised the contrast between a modern metropolis and the ‘medieval’ scenery shaped by Chassidic Jews walking to the synagogue on a Sabbath. ‘One was suddenly taken back to the times of the Old Testament’ (Lie 1918: 78). Looking at Warsaw’s Marszalkowska street, Nils Kjar was reminded of boulevards in Berlin or Paris but complained that the international big-city flair was undermined by the presence of ‘the many Jews’.

Are all Polish Jews always outdoors and walking? Is it their ancient privilege as a wandering people, they never tire of invoking? They stroll both ways along all streets, alone or in groups, all with the same indistinct smile around the thick lips. ... The black figures move around silently and softly like tired bats. They are taken from a nocturnal world and squint towards the

sunshine. What are they brooding over? A statement in the Torah or a sentence in the Talmud? I am unable to tell. (Kjær 1917: 2)

Like most of the other Scandinavian visitors, Kjær described the appearance and behaviour of the Jews on Warsaw's streets in a condescending way, as foreign, grotesque and repulsive. In addition, unlike the others, he frequently alluded to well-known antisemitic clichés. When a Jewish youngster offered him tours to various sites in Warsaw, using the persuasive repertoire of an experienced street hawker, it made him in Kjær's eyes 'a promising aspirant of a white slave trader' (Kjær 1917: 2). In this way, Kjær's perception was channelled and shaped by negative preconceptions of Jews.

The Jewish quarter

In the course of the nineteenth century, the north-west quarter of Warsaw had become the main site for Jewish residence. It was home to more than a quarter of a million people and constituted in many respects a neighbourhood of its own, separated from the rest of the city. It was mostly an area of poverty, but upper- and middle-class Jews lived in some parts. Nalewki Street, its main north-south avenue, became synonymous with the quarter, and the expression 'the secrets of Nalewki' in Polish fiction referred to the Jewish quarter 'as dark, mysterious, and threatening, but also vibrant and exciting' (Corrsin 1989: 46). At the time of the First World War, the 'Judenstadt' became a major attraction for foreigners, above all for German soldiers seeking night-time entertainment (Berger 1916: 146).

Entering the Jewish quarter, Böök's feelings changed from enchantment to disgust, mixed with compassion and regret. Portraying Jewish life in the 'ghetto', he

employed analogies with ants and vermin and even expressed a certain understanding for the persecutors of the Jews:

The narrow, winding and dirty streets are swarming with people all day long like an anthill where the agitation never dies down. It seems that the Jews were living on the street, their life is a continuous wandering, a never-ending conversation, an endless striking of small bargains. One cannot help thinking the terrible thought: this is a people of sluggards and idlers, a people that does not know hard work. The whole reminds one of vermin, of senselessly crawling vermin. Immediately, one understands all the vileness of the pogroms, the brutal reactions of the fists and the horsewhip, and the relentless Polish boycott. One understands this all with a shudder of fright, compassion and regret. (Böök 1916: 65)

This description, employing stereotypical tropes from anti-Jewish imagery, was presented in a self-exculpatory manner. It was, Böök insinuated, not the biased lens of the observer but the overwhelming experience of Eastern Jewish otherness that forced the visitor to think like a Jew-hater, and, in turn, feel guilty about this 'terrible thought'. While this position may reflect Böök's sincere opinion, it made, in the last analysis, the Jews themselves responsible for the negative thoughts (and the entailed pricks of conscience) of the well-meaning Scandinavian visitor. In this self-righteous view, he had no qualms about using generalising and offending formulations. Commenting on the large number of children among Eastern Jews, Böök wrote: 'This people is like weed. It can be trodden down, but not eradicated' (Böök 1916: 68).

It is true, that Böök's description of the

Jewish quarter did not only convey negative impressions. In the dark and damp hovels of the quarter, he saw an old Jewish man who attracted his attention and pleased his aesthetic sensibilities:

Looking through a broken window into one of the black, damp hovels ... a pale majestic Moses-like head with beautiful high temples beneath the thin and dirty locks can be seen ... It has a beauty as painted by Rembrandt. Out of poverty and sorrow, out of rags and neglect still shines a mysterious spiritual beauty of human greatness. The dirty forehead shows a nobleness of lines that does not lie and could not be destroyed by centuries of misery in the ghetto. (Böök 1916: 67–8)

Böök's portrayal of Eastern Jews in Warsaw's Jewish quarter was characterised by extreme contrasts. It oscillated between dehumanising ('senselessly crawling vermin') and reassuring, humanising ('spiritual beauty of human greatness') points of view. This dualism can also be found in other accounts of Eastern Jewry by the Scandinavian visitors.

Travelling not only in German-occupied Poland but also in Habsburg Galicia, Bjørn Bjørnson's encounter with Eastern European Jewry was more varied and comprehensive than that of other visitors. His depiction of Jewish poverty avoided generalising characterisations and was restrained by an awareness of Jewish suffering.

There were many Jews on their way to Lemberg. Meeting an utterly miserable wretch, one thought it could not get worse – but it always got worse – so unappetisingly that one almost forgot the pity over the unease at the sight. (Bjørnson 1917: 226)

Confronted with the extreme poverty in the Jewish quarter of Warsaw, Bjørnson refrained from describing the squalor, pointing out that many others had already done so. Instead, he mentioned the beauty of the 'grief-stricken music' he had heard the same day in a Warsaw synagogue, and recalled the meeting with an old Jew from Warsaw in Berlin who, in tears, had told him about the sufferings of the Jews under Russian rule. The disturbing experience of Jewish misery was thereby framed as a new chapter in the long and pitiful history of Jewish suffering (Bjørnson 1917: 283–4). For Bjørnson, the suffering of the Jews demanded identification and sympathy. He even drew a parallel to the Passion: 'A Jew stood there as a prisoner – with a pale long face. He could have been a model for the suffering Christ' (p. 233).

While Bjørnson's presentation of Eastern Jews was written with compassion, emphasising the human tragedy of their hopeless conditions, such a perspective was largely missing in the accounts of Erik Lie and Nils Kjær. Both participated in a tour of the Jewish quarter guided by Ludwig Haas in April 1917. Not only did Haas show them the streets of the quarter from the outside, but he also forced his way into one of the houses to show the visitors how desperate conditions were, and consequently how difficult the task of the German administration. As it happened, a woman in the house had died the day before from starvation. Mourners were gathered, and Haas had to arrange care for the children (Kjær 1917: 2). The shocking event caused Kjær to reflect upon the limits of compassion:

There is a human misery so deep, a despair so nameless that an onlooker feels ashamed to be an onlooker – and forgets his pity. The excess of pain numbs the nerves, you do not feel it. Confronted by boundless

misfortune, you remain perplexed, as if the heart were being hardened. (Kjær 1917: 2)

It may be difficult to establish whether these thoughts were meant sincerely or just as a self-justification for the benefit of the civilised Scandinavian reader. There can be no doubt, however, that Kjær's depiction of the inhabitants of the Jewish quarter was written with a 'hardened heart'. Using offensive language and dehumanising analogies to bats, snails and rats, it expressed disgust, aversion and disdain. 'This population seems to discharge dirt like snails sweat slime', he wrote, and added: 'The street is swarming with people like a sewer with rats.' As we have seen, Kjær also associated present observations with traditional clichés from the antisemitic arsenal. Seen through Kjær's lens, the Jews in the Warsaw quarter appeared as

subhuman creatures. Their miserable conditions were an expression of their unalterable nature. They could neither be helped nor become civilised (Kjær 1917: 2).

Sharing the same experiences as his brother-in-law, Erik Lie's account was equally gloomy, emphasising the filthy conditions and the disgraceful behaviour of the inhabitants in the Jewish quarter, 'where the misery and the despair of the whole world seemed to be piled up' (Lie 1918: 81). Unlike Kjær, however, he did not place these observations explicitly into an antisemitic frame of interpretation.

Among the travelogues of Scandinavian visitors, H. O. G. Ellinger's report distinguishes itself by its strictly humanitarian perspective. Ellinger was head of a Danish relief action that donated food and clothes to destitute inhabitants of Warsaw and Łódź.



Fig. 2. Warsaw – Jews in front of the Jewish shop M. Goldknopf in 1918. German Federal Archives/ Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-S51619 (photographer not specified).

While in Warsaw in January 1917, he visited the most impoverished neighbourhoods, among them the Jewish quarter, where he was shown around by the well-known Polish Jewish neurologist and social activist Samuel Goldflam. Ellinger's account of the Jewish quarter was shaped by his concern for the welfare of its inhabitants. He ironically distanced himself from a merely touristic point of view: 'Warsaw's ghetto is a well-known sight of the city, in so far as one can count the despair of human existence an attraction' (Ellinger 1917). He then described, in a concrete and realistic way, the destitute conditions he observed in a house with 900 occupants. In contrast to many other visitors, he did not conflate the miserable conditions of the quarter and the people who had to live there. To him, the 'ghetto' was a place that showed 'the despair of human existence'; it was not a characteristic manifestation of Eastern European Jewry.

The causes of Jewish poverty

Confronted with the extreme poverty of Jews in Poland under the First World War, the Scandinavian writers took up the question of what had caused the misery. Given the fact that most were officially invited by the German administration and shared pro-German and anti-Russian sentiments, it came as no surprise that they did not mention the current exploitation of the German occupiers, but blamed the long-term segregation, oppression and persecution of Jews under tsarist rule. Bjørnson, for example, quoted the accounts of Jews he had met on the way, who shared their experiences of pogroms and other persecutions by Russians (Bjørnson 1917: 233-4, 247-50, 283-4). Going deeper into economic life, Böök outlined the negative effects of the 'shameful' Russian policy towards the Jews: the forced settlement

of Jews in the Western Polish districts and the fear of pogroms caused a concentration of the Jewish population in the cities, where they often made up over half the population. As a result, they competed 'to death' and were pressed down into 'increasingly deeper misery' (Böök 1916: 64). Looking beyond first impressions, Böök realised that offensive business practices, such as smuggling and pimping, were dictated by the economic plight of the Jews, who were clutching 'at a straw like a drowning person' (p. 63).

Including also Poles as victims of Russian oppression, Lie emphasised two elements in the 'list of sins' of the Russian regime: the conscious and systematic effort to keep the people down in an 'animal state of ignorance', and the omnipresent 'rule of terror and violence' (Lie 1918: 82).

In addition to the external pressure by Russian rule, the accounts of the Scandinavian observers also emphasised internal conditions that supposedly contributed to Jewish poverty, above all the predominance of orthodox Judaism. In Bjørnson's view, the practice of religious education made young Jews unfit for life.

From eight o'clock in the morning until six in the afternoon, the children of the poor are sitting, dirty and ragged, in delapidated rooms muttering the Talmud in Hebrew. The murmur of a waterfall without nuances – a mumbling without thinking. They learn by rote words the fewest of them understand. But this hypnotising, intense clinging [to the words] leaves so much sediment that they go on through life with this drone of the Talmud singing to them incessantly. (Bjørnson 1917: 281-2)

Pointing to the paradox that Jewish girls of richer orthodox families were sometimes given a modern education, but then thrown

'back into the Middle Ages' when they were forced to marry an 'ignorant, caftan-wearing, unclean, fanatical Talmudist', Bjørnson insinuated that the conditions would not improve as long as the 'iron hand of orthodoxy' ruled the inner lives of Eastern Jewry (Bjørnson 1917: 282).

For Böök too, Jewish religious practice in Warsaw was just 'a flight from all tasks and problems into a fictitious world'. He described the service in a Hasidic synagogue as 'narcotisation, hypnotisation, opium against distress and misery, endless repetition, waste of time and idleness, raised to the character of piety' (Böök 1916: 77).

Böök emphasised that the spiritual life in the Jewish quarter was more intensive than probably anywhere else. But this intensity was, in his eyes, not an advantage, but rather a symptom of fruitless intellectualism:

These Jews, not firmly rooted in the ground, stretch out their branches to all sides; they are feverish with concepts, dialectics, dreams and plans, studies and learning. The muscles dwindle, the brains work in an overstrained, nervous and heated manner. ... The intellectual hypertrophy among Jews is simply a sign of mental unhealthiness, a lack of balance. (Böök 1916: 73)

Adopting characteristics of the East European Jewish *luftmensch*, that typified 'a kind of spiritual, rootless intellectual figure' (Aschheim 1982: 87), Böök argued that the economic misery of Eastern European Jews was made worse by a specific mentality of religious rigorism and intellectual escapism. It made many Jews shy away from hard physical work or, since it was irreconcilable with the observation of the Sabbath, the work in the factories, and led to a concentration of occupations within small handicraft and, above all, in petty trade and peddling (Böök 1916: 63–4).

While Bjørnson's and Böök's explanations of East European Jewish misery pointed to (external and internal) historical factors that were open to change, Kjær employed the essentialist concept of an unchangeable Jewish 'nature' as an explanatory tool. He doubted the widely held opinion that the Jewish poor were victims of their circumstances, especially their long history of oppression and suffering. 'It is not known whether they [the inhabitants of the Jewish quarter] over the centuries have adapted their nature to their surroundings or have adapted their surroundings to their nature.' In Kjær's view, the 'ghetto' was not the product of circumstances, but the outcome of the nature of the Jews, an expression of 'all Jerusalem's hideousness' (Kjær 1917: 2).

Prospects for reform

As part of a wider discussion about the restructuring of Eastern Europe under German domination, the war also caused intense and controversial discussion of the future of East European Jewry (Aschheim: 157–82; Grill 2018). Böök, who had followed contemporary debates on the Ostjuden in the German and German Jewish press, agreed with Martin Buber and other Zionists that the future of East European Jewry lay only in Jewish nationalism. The encounter with Eastern Jewry in Warsaw had convinced him that a policy of assimilation was not feasible (Böök 1916: 89–99). The other Scandinavian correspondents did not go deeper into this general question. Based on their own impressions and the information they received from Haas, they were content with conveying their thoughts about the policies of the German occupying authorities towards Polish Jewry.

As was to be expected, there was no principled criticism of the German measures. There were rather different grades of approval

– reaching from polite, but sceptical, goodwill to unstinting support for what was regarded a German civilising mission towards Eastern Jews.

Most enthusiastic was Böök, who described the arrival of German officers, civil servants, and physicians in Warsaw as a favourable turn of events. It did not show yet in results, he maintained, but still constituted a new quality, something great, promising, and revolutionising: ‘the principles of order, of a sense of responsibility, of expert knowledge and of good intentions clear their way for the first time into the overgrown, muddy swamp’ (Böök 1916: 68–9). Walking the streets of Warsaw together with Haas, Böök learned about a recently established children’s home for orphaned boys who had been living penniless on the streets and now got a home and an education: ‘small wild animals who are to be tamed’ (p. 70). Moreover, there was a new home for sick, old and handicapped people, and for the refugees from the war. Amongst the disabled, Böök recognised a young, beautiful Jewish nurse and praised this ‘Lily of Sharon’ as a symbol of hope and charity, lightening up the ‘dark of the ghetto and the soul of the foreigner’ (p. 72). Even in the religious elementary schools, the German authorities, these ‘incurable idealists’, had initiated reform by telling the pupils to go beyond memorising and talk about the meaning of the text (p. 77–8).

Using metaphors of domesticating nature, such as ‘draining the swamp’ or ‘taming wild animals’, and of illuminating the dark, Böök employed classical tropes of European narratives of civilisation, enlightenment and progress. He thereby conveyed a two-fold message: it was possible to ameliorate the conditions of Polish Jewry by means of social welfare and reform; and the German policies towards Eastern Jews were exemplary in this regard.

Visiting Warsaw almost a year later, Lie and Kjær were less convinced about the prospects of German reform measures in the ‘ghetto’, in particular with respect to the struggle against overcrowding and unhygienic living conditions. It seemed that the German authorities were also somewhat disillusioned. After describing their visit to one of the poorest houses in the quarter, Lie quoted a frustrated Haas:

What can be done with a quarter like this one? It is a *mixtum compositum* of 15,000 Jews, and they do not want any change. They want to live in dirt and stench. Impurity and laziness have got into their blood. ... The German government has offered to set up 1,000 shacks, but the offer has not been accepted. ... We do what we can. ... But conditions are difficult. The differences are too big. (Lie 1918: 81–2)

In his typical brash way, Kjær discussed the difficulties of German reform efforts in the ghetto: ‘Germany shall and will cleanse the Augean stables that the Russians have left behind. Unfortunately, the work is hampered by the Jews’ own unyielding stubbornness’ (Kjær 1917: 2). Other writers too, mentioned, and made fun of, the opposition to German disinfecting (delousing) measures among the poor Jews of Warsaw as proof of (Jewish) backwardness and lack of understanding (Wagner 1917). The inhabitants of the Jewish quarter were thereby themselves blamed for the persistence of their poor living conditions. Pointing to the notion of an unchangeable Jewish nature and employing traditional Christian stereotypes of a specific Jewish intransigence and stubbornness, these accounts were pessimistic about the possibility of improvement and the prospects for reform in the ‘ghetto’.

Ghetto writing: slumming, Orientalism and the 'Jewish question'

The Scandinavian visitors' perceptions of Warsaw's Jews were influenced by the policies of the German occupying authorities, above all by Ludwig Haas, who set the agenda and showed them around. At the same time, the travel accounts of the Scandinavian correspondents reflect their personal perspectives, expressing diverse observations, attitudes and opinions. To untangle their multifaceted presentations, three different levels of interpretation can be distinguished: the Polish Jews as victims of extreme poverty; the Polish Jews as 'oriental' foreigners; the Polish Jews as quintessential Jews.

During the First World War, the Jewish quarter of Warsaw was the site of a severe humanitarian crisis, and at the same time an attraction for visitors. This paradox points to the phenomenon of 'slumming' that describes a social practice in which 'members of wealthy population groups visit residential areas of poor urban groups in their leisure time' (Steinbrink 2012: 218). What today is known as township tourism in South Africa or as poverty tourism in Brazil, India or Kenya, originated as 'moral slumming' in London's East End in the nineteenth century and as 'ethnic slumming' in big American cities in the early twentieth century. Slumming has been associated with cultural processes of 'ethnic categorization and essentialization of social reality' (*ibid.* p. 227). The poor sanitary and hygienic conditions of the slum are thereby interpreted as a cultural expression of the 'nature' of its inhabitants. While the Scandinavian correspondents in German-occupied Warsaw were no tourists, the backdrop of slum tourism might be helpful in putting their descriptions of Jewish poverty into perspective. At one end of the scale lies the account of H. O. G. Ellinger that described the inhuman

conditions without ethnicising them. At the other end of the scale lies Nils Kjær's depiction, that explained the omnipresence of filth, dirt and disease in the 'ghetto' as an expression of the unalterable nature of the Jews. The large majority of the travel accounts are situated between these extremes, giving a kind of dual message, on the one hand applying stereotypical and denigrating descriptions of the Jewish poor, on the other hand pointing out that the unfortunate, as human beings and victims of oppression, were to be pitied. Or, as for example in Böök's log, by making up for dehumanising collective ascriptions ('vermin') with idealised individual examples ('Moses-like head', 'Lily of Sharon').

A second level of interpretation classified the Polish Jews as 'Orientals' who constituted a foreign element in 'European' Warsaw. The dichotomy was illustrated by vivid descriptions of Eastern Jewish otherness, focusing on the specific custom of clothing, the 'public' way of life taking place on the street in the form of trading, haggling and begging, and the dominance of orthodox religion. The view of the (Jewish) Other was thereby shaped by an interpretative pattern that construed 'the East' as a counter-image to Western self-perception. Accordingly, the Polish Jews appeared as uncivilised, unenlightened and backward. The fundamental view of Western superiority was shared by most Scandinavian visitors. Some recorded in addition an instinctive dislike when encountering Eastern Jewish life, whereas Böök, on the other hand, also expressed a certain sympathy, emphasising the vitality of this 'nation' that was not stifled by assimilation.

In distinction to orientalising views and practices of othering, the interpretation of Eastern European Jews as 'quintessential' or 'authentic' Jews was related to discussions about the nature of Jewish identity in modern Europe. It assumed that Jews in the West had

lost most of their traditional Jewishness as a result of assimilation, whereas Eastern Jews had remained 'real' Jews. From the perspective of Jewish nationalists, Eastern Jewish ethnicity was therefore regarded as a crucial cornerstone in the process of the targeted nation-building process. In the imagination of German antisemites, on the other hand, the Ostjude showed the inferior character of the Jews in general, undisguised by the window-dressing of assimilation. The pronounced negative image of the Eastern Jew in antisemitic propaganda was accordingly directed against all Jews.

Among the Scandinavian travellers, only two related their observations in occupied Warsaw explicitly to the broader issues of the 'Jewish question'. To Fredrik Böök, the encounter with Polish Jewry became an eye-opener: 'In the ghetto of Warsaw you understand more of Judaism and the Jews than all books could have taught you; the isolated individuals do not become understandable until you have seen the people' (Böök 1916: 83). Böök argued that only Jewish nationalism, preaching the 'gospel of productive work' and implementing national pride and physical training among young people could achieve the 'physical and spiritual regeneration of the Jews' (pp. 94–6). As we have seen, this advocacy of Zionism was compatible with stereotypical, negative views on Eastern Jewry in Böök's travel report. The combination of pro-Zionist and antisemitic notions remained characteristic of Böök's writings on the 'Jewish question' during the 1920s (Arvidsson 1977: 224–7).

Unlike Böök, Nils Kjær was not interested in any cure for the impoverished Jews in Warsaw. To him, the 'ghetto' revealed the true nature of the Jews; it expressed 'all Jerusalem's hideousness', that could not be changed. Presenting his observations through a biased lens and applying offensive analogies to snails

and rats, his travelogue was shaped by his antisemitic worldview (Noreng 1995: 31–2) and is today regarded as one of the most antisemitic texts in Norwegian literature (Dingstad 2021: 39–41). In its denigrating and dehumanising diction, it foreshadowed the Nazi propaganda against East European Jews before and during the Second World War. ■



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