The Archive of David Simonsen

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Introductory Note

The Royal Library in Copenhagen has for 50 years been in possession of an archive of extraordinary scope, bequeathed to it by the former chief rabbi in Denmark, prof. David Simonsen (1853–1932). The archive (clausured until 1982) has now been made accessible for work of systematization which started in May 1985.¹

The significance of the archive should be immediately related to the important role played by David Simonsen during the First World War, in that he, after having renounced his rabbinical post in 1902, simultaneously functioned as political leader for that part of European Jewry residing in the neutral countries (i.e. the Nordic countries and Switzerland), and headed the international relief-work operations rendered to East-European Jewry during the war.

All correspondence pertaining to the lot of the Jews in Eastern Europe prior to the outbreak of the war, and during the ongoing hostilities, were filed by David Simonsen with utmost care. The sequence of events is thus minutely documented. For example, telegrams reporting an ongoing pogrom in Lemberg are followed by internal reports of meetings held by relief-committees, and by diplomatic correspondence, so that nearly every activity unfolded in relation to the specific event, is documented in strict contextual and chronological order.

The archive also contains correspondence and documents pertaining to the Russian revolution, its impact on East-European Jewry, and on Danish cultural life and politics.

Renowned for his eminent scholarship and prudence, Simonsen upheld his status as one of Western Europe's Jewry's most outstanding spiritual leaders until his death in 1932. The archive thus also contains letters and documents relating to his rabbinical and research activities.

In David Simonsen's personal correspondence, the historian may find a treasure of observations on Jewish, Danish, and European history at the turn of the century.

Although the main body of the documents belongs to the period around World War 1, it should be stressed that the time-span documented by the archive stretches about 60 years from ca. 1870 until 1932.

It is the aim of this article to present the archive of David Simonsen in the context of the international relief work already mentioned above. The choice of this context is due to the following considerations. First, David Simo-
sen devoted most of his life to the struggle for the amelioration of the conditions of East European Jewry. This struggle culminated with the relief work which David Simonsen headed during the First World War. Second, the documents belonging to the context of the relief work are the most readily accessible since many of these are in print, in contrast to David Simonsen's personal letters and research notes, which are in an extremely difficult handwriting.

Editor of Nordisk Judaistik, Nils Martola, who has become acquainted with some of the documents from the archive, proposed that I present from time to time material which may be of general interest to the readers of Nordisk Judaistik. The presentation to follow below is the first attempt of this kind. If circumstances will allow it, more presentations will come.

Since the archive is not yet systematized, it is difficult to present a series of documents in one and the same article. I therefore decided to focus on a single document which may satisfy the historical curiosity of the reader, and simultaneously serve as suitable material for the introduction of the archive in the context of the relief work.

Confined to a single document, the presentation naturally becomes synoptic in scope. This means that I am relying on a few important sources for information and interpretation, with the result that the frequency of quotations is perhaps higher than it ought to be.

A Document under Review

The documentary significance of David Simonsen's archive can, of course, only be evaluated through direct acquaintance with its content. In order to give the reader a notion of the sort of material that lies hidden in the archive (with the view of introducing it in the context of the relief work) I shall hereby present one of its rare documents—a proclamation issued in Hebrew and in Yiddish by the German and Austro-Hungarian joint military High Command. The proclamation was distributed to the Jewish population in occupied territories of Russian Poland shortly after the outbreak of World War 1 (in August 1914).

The two versions are printed on both sides of a single paper (33 x 21 cm). To be seen on p. is the version in Yiddish, and on p. the version in Hebrew. Both are essentially of identical content. It can be safely presumed that the proclamation was rendered into its Yiddish and Hebrew versions by Jews—probably German or Austro-Hungarian citizens in the military service. The Hebrew version is stylistically relatively advanced, sometimes even surprisingly modern. Presumably, the Yiddish version was the first to be produced, and it was then translated into Hebrew.

Both versions give witness to an intense emotional involvement, expressive of an accumulated animosity against czarist repressions and persecutions, and of highly optimistic expectations with respect to freedom, equality and cultural autonomy for the Jews under German and Austro-Hungarian rule. The following translation is from the Yiddish version.
על החרותים של פאולו

ה폿ר הים מנדירסומטרה נשר מחול יוטה וזו התרותו וברטניצ וברטניצי בנייה.

מאת הגフリー מנדירסומטרה נשר מחול יוטה וזו התרותו וברטניצ וברטניצי בנייה.

ז"ע ד"א אותם שונים פק"ד ד"ת בחינה ת"כמ"ס

אף על פי שהרי"ז מהותינו מצביעים על כך.
To the Jews in Poland

The heroic armies of the great Central-European governments, Germany and Austria-Hungary, have entered into Poland.

The mighty march of our armies has forced the despotic Russian government to run away.

Our flags bring you Right and Freedom: equal civil rights, freedom of belief, freedom to work undisturbed in all branches of economical and cultural life, in your own spirit.

Too long have you tormented yourselves under the Muscovite iron yoke.

We come to you as friends. The barbarous alien government is through.

Equal rights for Jews shall be built upon solid foundations.

Do not, as so many times before, let yourselves be fooled by flattering promises!

For, has not the Czar also in 1905 promised equal rights to the Jews, and has he not issued the highest manifest to that effect?

How has that debt to you been paid, a debt that has been assumed in the eyes of the whole world?

Remember the expulsions that are carried out every day, the driving out of the Jewish masses from their established places! Remember Kishinew, Homel, Bialystok, Siedlec and hundreds of other bloody pogroms.

Remember the Beiliss case and the endeavour of the barbarous government to spread the horrible lie about the use of blood by the Jews.

Such is the way in which the Czar has kept his royal word (a word) that he gave while in trouble. Now he is again in trouble!—Precisely this is the reason for his promises.

Your holy duty now is to gather all energies to cooperate for the sake of liberation.

All the energies of the people: your younger generation, your communities (Kehilot), your associations (Hevrot) must stand as one man to support the sacred cause.

We expect that you will prove, through facts, your good judgement and your devotion.

Turn with the greatest confidence to the commanders of our military forces in places nearby your locations.

All kinds of supply will be well paid on the spot.

Pave the way for the complete subjugation of the enemy, and for the victory of freedom and justice.

The High Command of the Federate German and Austro-Hungarian Armies

Now, in what follows, I shall first attempt a brief interpretation with regard to the question of the authenticity of the promises and expectations that are expressed in the proclamation. Next, I shall situate the document in relation to the reactions of the Russian authorities toward the Jewish population in the war-zones. These reactions created the need for the international relief-work operations that were headed by David Simonsen.
The Authenticity Question

The question as to the authenticity of the promises and expectations that are expressed in the proclamation obviously concerns the long-term political plans of the German and Austro-Hungarian governments, that is, their political concept of postwar relations. The key to an understanding of these plans is to be found in the very first sentence of the proclamation: notice the use of the term Central-European, by which the conquering armies present themselves politically. The military federation, in other words, is founded upon a political coalition which is based, in turn, on a program signified by the term Central-Europe.

The Central-European idea refers to "the concept of a German-directed central European union" and can be traced back to the medieval Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. It underwent various transformations and was transmitted to the situation of the First World War by Friedrich Naumann (1860–1919), a former Protestant minister who had been a member of the German Reichstag since 1907. The concept was then adopted by the governments of Germany and Austro-Hungary during the war.

Naumann projected his Central-European concept on the notion of a German and Austro-Hungarian alliance which would satisfy both the Austrian monarchy’s interest in preserving the empire from disintegration and Germany’s interest in economic and military world power. "The mid-European union was to include Germany, Austria-Hungary, and European and Asiatic Turkey". With the addition of some neighboring European states, primarily the Balkan states and an extended German colonial empire, the prospective union was to occupy about 10 percent of the earth’s surface.

The union was to be based on a military and economic alliance—economically, as a customs partnership (consisting of a regional tariff system), and militarily, through a "common army and navy statute for all the mid-European lands, which meant, in fact, not merely a military alliance, but common military forces." According to Naumann’s plans, Germany’s intended control of the economy and military forces of such a union would enable the granting of "complete autonomy in almost all the other fields and state activities—at least as far as appearances were concerned". With the pacification through such concessions of national autonomist feelings, the principle could be upheld of "the union’s noninterference in questions of education, religious affairs, and the entire administrative organization of the national groups".

With qualifications the plans of Naumann were approved by a considerable part of the German Austrian Social Democracy (as articulated by Karl Renner) in that it was believed that "the Great mid-European union, particularly in its economic aspects, meant a step forward in the direction of the great stateless Socialist world community". It was held that "the allegedly decreasing political significance of the role of the small national state would persuade the nationalities to agree readily to incorporation into a federal central European union". It was believed, further, that "due to the powerful economic, military, and political strength of such a union, it could readily grant federalization in a limited sphere of cultural activities", thus changing the function of the nationality problem—from being the foremost element in the formation of states, it would become "the foremost element in their internal organization".

Whether the future of Europe, in the case of a successful outcome of the war for Germany and Austria-Hungary, would have conformed to this plan, is highly questionable, since Germany’s world power "could have been sustained only by forceful repression of national movements". At the outbreak of the First World War, however, the plan was taken seriously enough so as to attempt the realization of some of its preliminary demands in the territories occupied by the German and Austro-Hungarian armies.

Returning now to the proclamation "To the Jews in Poland", it can be presumed first, that the central European plan with its projected granting of religious-cultural autonomy to the different nationalities must have had a strong appeal to Russian Poland’s Jewry, and
second, that the promises in the proclamation (i.e. "equal civil rights, freedom of belief, freedom to work undisturbed in all branches of economical and cultural life, in your own spirit") must have been meant seriously by the German and Austro-Hungarian authorities—especially so with regard to a minority such as the Jewish, which did not lay claim to territorial status and state-formation. (Jews were not considered a nationality in Austria-Hungary.)

The Context of Relief Work

It is reasonable to assume that there must have existed a sound intuition on the part of the Russian authorities of a general Jewish sympathy towards Germany and Austria-Hungary. During the war, however, this sympathy was perceived by the Russian authorities in grossly distorted terms. This resulted in disastrous consequences for Jews who resided in the war-zones under Russian control. In addition to already established humiliating restrictions, the Russian authorities now hurled charges of espionage against the Jews. Since the Jews were accused of being collectively traitors and spies, this led to mass-expulsions of Jewish inhabitants from the war-zones.

Several factors combined in distorting the Russian authorities' views. First, the Polish Jews' Yiddish speech "which resembled German, and their peculiar attire, so unlike that of the general population, excited the suspicions of the Russian armies". Second, hostile Poles exploited these circumstances and "validated" Russian soldiers' suspicions through rumors of Jewish espionage. Third, the background of ancient prejudices provided the accusations with a general credence in that charges of espionage against the Jews were expressed in crude religious anti-semitic imagery, in the main picturing the Jews as heirs of Judas, who according to Christian legend betrayed Jesus. The aspect of religious anti-semitism was so dominant that the elderly Georg Brandes who wrote on the conditions in Russia in 1914, felt himself prompted to make the following comment: "The accusations are ... always believed, as the Jew has throughout two thousand years been characterized as Judas. The legend about Judas can without exaggeration be described as one of the most foolish legends made in antiquity; that it has been believed is one proof among thousands of the indescribable simplicity of mankind. Few legends carry like it the stamp of lie on their faces, and few legends have millennium after millennium caused such an amount of mischief and horrors. It has tortured and murdered by the hundred and the thousands. ... in the conception of the rude masses this Judas—as he was called—has become the Jew, the typical Jew, the traitor, and the spy."}

Not only did the general credence regarding Jewish treason lead Russian officers to order whole-sale expulsions of Jews, but Jews were also shot arbitrarily since cases of espionage were tried in secret without keeping a record of the proceedings and, consequently, without an obligation to prove the validity of the charges. On top of it all, a bizarre system of hostages developed, in that the military commanders "began to make hostages of leaders among the Jewish population and held them responsible for the loyal conduct of their co-religionists." This soon led to a system of trafficking with the richest people who were taken successively in order to be released for a certain ransom.

The sufferings caused by the mass-expulsions of Jews from the war-zones created the need which called for the international relief work that was headed by David Simonsen. A word such as 'mass-expulsion', however, is still only a generalization which does not tell what happened in terms of the particularities of human history. This can first be conveyed, I think, in the form of narrative. For, as Steven D. Kepnes puts it, narrative preserves the human temporal element in history. It relates the life, the suffering, the death, the actions and interactions of human beings in history. If the connection between narrative and history is severed, a line to the life of the past and even the future is severed.

This is how Isaac Bashevis Singer opens his narration of the expulsion of the Jewish in-
habitants of Tereshpol Minor shortly after the outbreak of the First World War.

A few days after the war broke out, the Tereshpol Minor town crier read aloud in the market square an order that all Jews were to leave the town within twenty-four hours. Immediately pandemonium set in. To the elders of the Jewish community the magistrates announced that the orders had come from Zamosc, but the NACHALNIK would not even receive them. The order, he sent out word, had come from the Czar's uncle, Nikolai Nikolaievich, commander-in-chief of the Russian armies.

Those who had horses and wagons immediately began to pack their belongings together. The others tried to hire or buy any sort of conveyance from the neighborhood peasants. The Poles who lived in the town acted as though what was going on was none of their affair. They went unconcernedly about their chores. Markewich, the slaughterer, slit the throat of a pig; Dobush, the butcher, went on with his corn-threshing and apple-gathering. Antek Liss, the bootmaker, left his bench to stroll over to the shop of Mottel, the leather dealer, and propose that the stock of leather be sold to him for a third of its value. "They'll take it away from you anyway", he announced. "And there are rumors that they're going to kill all the Jews." He drew his finger suggestively across his gullet. "K-k-k-k!"

The Jewish housewives ran to their gentile neighbors to wail and sob, but the gentiles were too busy to listen to them. They were occupied with sifting flour, putting up preserves, churning butter, making cheese. The older women sat spinning flax, while the children played with dogs and cats or dug in the ground for worms.

They could get along very well without the Jews.

Some of the Jewish housewives tried to store furniture with their neighbors for safe keeping, but the latter complained that their houses were already too crowded. Just the same, they were ready to take bundles of clothing, linen, silverware, and jewelry.

It was on a Monday morning that the town crier read out the proclamation. By noon on Tuesday three quarters of the Jews had left. The Lublin road was jammed with wagons, carts and pedestrians. The Jewish butchers drove their livestock ahead of them. The poor folk had packed their few possessions in bundles and were carrying them on their backs. The scrolls of the law from the synagogue had been carefully placed on beds of straw in a wagon, the holy objects covered with prayer shawls and Ark curtains. A group of men and women walked alongside to guard them. The peasants and their wives came to the doors of their cottages. Some brought out pannikins of water to the fleeing Jews; others laughed and jeered. "Oi, oi! Sheenies! Pappele, Mammele!"

Rabbi Dan and his family left the village with the last group to go. The old man had given orders that the books in his study be hidden in the garret. He was carrying with him his prayer-shawl bag and a couple of cherished volumes. He crammed his manuscripts into the mouth of the stove and then watched them burn. "The world will survive without them" he remarked. 21

NOTES

1. This work was undertaken within the so-called Job-Offer arrangement and lasted only 7 months. It is to be hoped that the extensive computerization program currently under implementation, will enable the renewal of systematization along more comprehensive lines.

2. There is one interesting deviation in the Hebrew version. Se note 4 below.

3. There is one spelling mistake in the Hebrew version: HST\textsuperscript{RWT} instead of HST\textsuperscript{E}RWT, and one printing mistake: GKYWT instead of ZKYWT.

4. The Hebrew version deviates at this point from the Yiddish version through the addition of an interesting sentence. The whole passage in the Hebrew version reads as follows (I have marked the added sentence): "We come to you as friends. The barbarous alien government is
through. A new era will start in Poland. Let us put our trust in all our energies and we shall become a stronghold for the salvation of all the inhabitants of the country."

Notice the change in pronouns—from the second-person-plural in the Yiddish version, to the first-person-plural in the Hebrew version.


6. "...through the German Bund of 1815, the grossdeutsche dreams of 1848-49, the projects of Schwarzenberg, Bruck, Fröbel, Constantin Frantz, and many others", R.A. Kann, op.cit. p. 246.


8. ibidem, p. 249.

9. ibidem.

10. ibidem.

11. ibidem, p. 252.


14. ibidem, p. 250.

15. Jewish sympathy was especially strong for the Austrian emperor Franz Josef who consistently combated antisemitic politicians such as Dr. Lueger. In Austria-Hungary, the attitude of the Jews towards Franz Josef was indeed affectionate. The called him "OUR Keizer" and they nicknamed him "FROYIM YOSEL". They celebrated his birthday (August 18) with joy, decorating and illuminating their streets, houses and synagogues for the event, and holding a special service in the great synagogues attended by officials and Jewish reserve officers who afterwards paraded in their gala uniforms on the streets of the shtetls. "On each Saturday and on holidays a special prayer for the well-being of the Emperor was said in the synagogue and in all SHTIBLEKH." (See: Joachim Schoenfeld: Shtetl Memoirs, Jewish Life in Galicia under the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in the Reborn Poland 1898–1939, Hoboken, New Jersey, 85.)

16. Limitations with regard to settlement (the Pale of Settlement), pogroms, and legal disabilities of all kind were "natural" ingredients of Russian Jewry's lifeworld under the czarist regimes.

At the beginning of the First World War an estimated number of 400,000 Jews served in the Russian army, the Jewish population thus delivering its full quota of reservists. The Jews, distinguishing between the czarist regime and the Russian people, were seized with enthusiasm to fight for Russia which they considered their fatherland (a large number of Jews volunteered). The Russian High Command and an antisemitic press, however, were insistent in regarding the Jewish population as an internal enemy. Thus, an "order placed Jewish physicians under special surveillance because, allegedly, they had been corrupting the troops with revolutionary propaganda". Another order "...imposed more severe penalties for frauds commited by Jews than by offenders of other nationalities". Further, "...acts of heroism or sacrifice on the part of Jews were played down or censored in the press", "Jewish soldiers wounded on the battlefield were sent to the Pale" while "...the families of Jewish privates stationed outside the Pale were refused the privilege of visiting their wounded relatives at their place of service". (Louis Greenberg, The Jews in Russia, vol. 2, New Haven 1951, p. 95 and p. 98.

17. Louis Greenberg: op.cit. p. 96

18. Georg Brandes’ Conditions in Russian Poland appeared in the Danish newspaper Politiken on the 25th and 26th October 1914. It was then translated into English, German and French, and sent for publication to the leading newspapers in England, The United States, Germany, and France. The quotation from Georg Brandes is a part of a longer passage on religious antisemitism which was omitted from the translated versions (probably at David Simonsen’s suggestion).

