

GEORG BRANDES AND THE JEWISH QUESTION

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Georg Brandes (1842-1927) pronounced an extremely harsh verdict on another contemporary and internationally well-known Danish figure, the philosopher Harald Høffding (1843-1931). Brandes felt he could truthfully say »... that he [Høffding] has not written one sentence I can remember, not even one I have learned anything from.«¹ However, this negative assessment, surprisingly enough, had one rather positive side to it where Brandes was concerned, as he continued: »And yet, he is a fine man. Among the thousands of people who have criticized me, he is the only one who did not confront me with my ancestry.«²

Georg Morris Cohen Brandes became infuriated when he was not called Georg Brandes. This famous European literary and cultural critic is one of the most controversial personalities to be found in Danish intellectual life. His position as the leading figure in the so-called *Modern Break-Through* is, of course, beyond dispute. The controversy has been and still is centered around the significance of his efforts. In this connection reference has often been made to his Jewish heritage as being something »non-Danish« or »foreign«. To be sure, anti-Semitism at its worst never really acquired a foothold in Denmark, but it did, however, come to play a decisive role in the disqualification of Brandes and in the discreditation of the name he left to posterity. There was always, he wrote, »... one additional insulting remark to throw at me than at the others.«³ No matter how things were worded, they always had something to do with Brandes' Jewish ancestry. Quite understandably, serious scholarly research, until recently⁴, has, on the whole, avoided this controversial aspect of such an already extremely controversial person. The question, you might say, has simply been circum-

vented. We cannot, however, continue to disregard it. Brandes himself considered it to be a mere biographical detail, but in view of the fact that his contemporaries were so occupied with his ancestry, and since it created such great problems for him, we are surely dealing with a problem complex too significant to simply be neglected. There are obviously things having to do with Brandes' life and works which cannot be explained unless we take into account his Jewish ancestry, a subject which, quite against his will, became one of the central themes in his life.

By way of introduction, let us consider several facts which can serve to delineate the framework of Georg Brandes' way of thinking and of his attitude toward the Jewish question.

In the first volume of his autobiography Brandes recollects one specific situation from the days of his youth, which is well-suited as a point of departure for illustrating his relationship to Judaism. Sometime in the 1860's Brandes had been to a party where, in his opinion, the Danish-Jewish author Meïr Aron Goldschmidt (1819-1887) had made a rather unfortunate speech, the contents of which he summed up in the following manner: »... then he [Goldschmidt] dwelt on the host's Jewish origin, and since he assumed that most of the guests were young Jews and Jewesses, he proposed a toast in honor of 'the Jewish woman who lights the Sabbath candles.' The young Jewish girls immediately began exclaiming to one another: 'The Danish woman! The Danish woman! We are Danish.' They were irritated by the old-fashioned romanticism into which Goldschmidt was pushing them. They lit no Sabbath candles; they did not feel like Jews,

neither religiously nor nationally. Their day and age was not yet anti-Semitic. There was therefore not yet any Zionism. Often they had also resented Goldschmidt's portrayals of modern Jews in his short stories, because he had turned their expressions and behavior back in time by half a century.⁵

When Brandes repeated this scene at a later date for Goldschmidt's literary heir Henri Nathansen (1868-1944), he gave the situation an extra dimension by adding the explanation »... that back then they were still living in the shadow of 1848, that there were still no exile Jews to be found in Copenhagen, and you [Nathansen] must understand that this protest was not uttered by surrendering youths capitulating in fear of being reminded of kinship with the oppressed, but out of disgust at seeing this affected fellow standing there and talking about the *Sabbath candles*, just like those peasants who pestered and tormented the citizens and lords still referred to the wooden horse, which really was only a museum piece.«⁶ – In addition, Brandes made it clear to the Zionist Nathansen that he, with his reintroduction of the Jewish tradition into Danish literature, stood in opposition to all those ideas he himself had fought for in his own life.

These ideas, for the most part, can be traced to the liberal notions of cosmopolitan rationalism, which Brandes saw manifested in »das merkwürdige Jahr« 1848 – « ... the only bright moment in a rotten century.«⁷ he wrote. The following year the Danish liberals managed to carry into effect the Constitution of 1849, which, among other things, insured full constitutional equality for the Jews. Brandes grew up in the tradition of '48. »During my school days there was no animosity toward Jews.«, he wrote and proudly continued: »Humanity was even triumphant for a moment.«⁸ Brandes considered himself as a representative of this triumph and of the liberated and assimilated Jew. Judaism, for him and for many others of his generation, came to stand for an antiquated mixture of old-fashioned religious rabbi-orthodoxy, judicial oppression and political reaction, to which no one in his right mind would ever dream of returning. The turning-point came in connection with the overall social and political reaction in Europe after 1870, in fact at about the same time Brandes introduced the ideas of the Modern Break-Through to Denmark. According to the view held by Brandes around World War I, when the Jews

in exile from the East had also arrived in Copenhagen,⁹ the tide was turned primarily by the replacement of that traditional European animosity toward Jews with a racially motivated anti-Semitism, which he felt had triggered off Zionism as a reaction. »Herzl did not have in mind the situation in Western Europe, but conditions I knew nothing about at the time, conditions prevailing in places where Jews live together in huge numbers, ...«,¹⁰ Brandes noted in 1917. In the course of the new century Brandes became aware of the fact that problems were somewhat different where the East European Jews were concerned, something which caused him to modify his standpoint. But where his own life was concerned he was clearly insistent: »If injuries inflicted by other people had not kept me from forgetting what kind of little community I was born into, I would never in my life have given it a thought. It has never occupied me in the least. I have never thought of Judaism as anything but a religion, and as a religion it was as foreign to me as Buddhism. I have never had any feeling of »national-patriotism« as a Jew, or any feeling of kinship with Jews in other countries. For me it has been an extremely superficial matter, something which I have been forced to consider only as a result of attitudes in the world surrounding me.«¹¹

In the present connection Brandes' assertions or the objective validity of his statements are of lesser interest than those fundamental considerations he actually devoted to the Jewish question in its various forms. Although his basic stance remained the same throughout his lifetime, his life was marked by so many breaks and so many lines of development that this too had its influence on his view of the Jewish question. These changes cannot be separated from the whole of Brandes' philosophy of life and the world, such as it developed from the 1860's to the 1920's, but indeed form an integral part of it – a fact which naturally makes them no less interesting.

In a famous passage from his memoirs Brandes relates that as a child he often heard other boys shouting something after him which he didn't understand. Upon his repeated questioning his nursemaid finally informed him that it was a nasty word. But one day, Brandes writes, »... when I had heard this shout once again, I wanted to know what it meant, and when I came home I asked my mother: What does it

mean? Jew! Mother said. Jews, they're a kind of people. – Nasty people? – Yes, Mother replied smiling, sometimes pretty awful people, but not always. – Could I see a Jew sometime? – Sure you can, Mother said, and quickly lifted me up in front of the mirror hanging over the sofa. I let out a yell, so Mother put me down on the floor again right away, and I looked so upset that Mother regretted she hadn't prepared me. Later she sometimes talked about it.¹²

This situation is an excellent concrete illustration of the way Brandes insisted that his Jewish ancestry was forced upon him as a problem by others. His parents belonged to the first generation of liberated Danish Jews; according to Brandes, their home was stripped of Jewish reminiscences. In 1862 when he experienced a difficult religious crisis, it was not Judaism he battled against but rather Søren Kierkegaard's existential view of Christianity.

His most serious problem in connection with Judaism seems to have been the fact that he received financial support as a student from the official Mosaic community, problematic because he felt he had taken the money under false pretenses. On paper Brandes remained a member of The Jewish Community until 1910, but just like his parents before him he never set foot in the synagogue.

The anti-Semitism which was later to poison debates on the cultural scene in Copenhagen was non-existent in the 1860's when Brandes, as the promising young scholar, made his entry into Danish intellectual life with the most clearcut contributions to the discussions concerning the relationship between religious beliefs and scientific knowledge. At no point during these sharp polemic exchanges was there any mention made of his ancestry. Brandes himself was the only one to call attention to it when, in his argumentation, he made use of the picture of an old Jewish believer shaking his head disapprovingly when the oil in the synagogue in Copenhagen was replaced by gas.¹³ In this light Brandes almost looked like a modern Prometheus in that he indirectly connected rationalism, freedom of thought and technological progress to his own Jewish heritage. In an essay on Goldschmidt written in 1869 this line of thought is pursued in a more theoretical perspective; here Brandes points out that the modern Jew, as a Semite, stands on an Archimedean point in relation to the Arian strains in European civilization. Brandes continues: »... the Jewish mind is already free at birth, Ro-

mance and anti-Romance culture, beauty of form and merit of content, Catholicism and Protestantism, Classical and Romantic civilization, everything is equally near and distant to him. He is the son of Spinoza. Thus, from birth onward he is in a position to be polemic against every form of European bigotry, free-born and conceived with freedom, both as a scientific observer and as a poetic reproducer. This intellectual racial stamp is no illusion, as fanciful as it may seem to many. Its enormous influence can easily be demonstrated. That which makes up the various great races is certain innate and hereditary predispositions. Just as there are hunting dogs and sheep dogs, work horses and race horses, there are also human varieties with abilities of various sorts. The origin of these various abilities is still no clearer to us than the origin of species as a whole.¹⁴

Although Brandes viewed the concept of race »... as a subject in which interest was greatly aroused and minimally gratified,¹⁵ his considerations were still apparently inescapably influenced and colored by the generally widespread assumptions concerning heredity and race of the Darwinistic era. Brandes was influenced particularly by Taine, whose conceptual triad, *la race – le moment – le milieu*, he sought to internalize as his own. The notion of race went down the wrong way, however. Brandes interpreted it biologically-genetically and deduced from it mechanical and premature generalizations concerning personality. Parts of his literary criticism tended towards racial criticism. As Taine's influence upon him lessened, he also stopped dealing with racial questions – in part because he became aware of the racist exploitation of these theories. And when the Goldschmidt essay was reprinted in Brandes' collected works (*Samlede Skrifter II*, 1899), he deleted the passage quoted above, giving the following explanation: »First of all because I no longer believe that the Jews of Northern Europe are Semites, and partly because at the time I wrote it I was under the influence of general opinion and of racial theories to the extent that I tended to attribute to heritage what I now consider to be an exaggerated significance.¹⁶

It took about 30 years for Brandes to realize this (others never came to recognize it), and it marked a turning-point in his attitude toward Judaism, even though it never came to alter his view of the necessity of assimilation. The situation should perhaps rather be viewed as an at-

tempt to resolve the internal contradiction that allowed one to advocate assimilation on the one hand and to insist upon the existence of race specific characteristics on the other, characteristics which in themselves would necessarily exclude the possibility of true assimilation. This dilemma was one faced by many other Jews in addition to Georg Brandes, who was confronted with a rather virulent question of identity.

This contradiction manifested itself rather rapidly and in a most concrete manner. When Brandes criticized Goldschmidt for his perpetual and exaggerated obsession with Jews and Jewish themes – repeatedly having his grandmother served with zesty gravy, as he expresses it¹⁷ – it was from the point of view of assimilation. But when, at the same time, he wanted to comprehend Goldschmidt's writings from a racial point of view, he managed to place himself in a somewhat uncomfortable position by questioning, in 1871, the national values and the entire cultural niveau of Denmark. The impertinent questions posed in return went more or less like this: What right did this Jew have to put forward such devastating criticism of the Danish national culture: Wasn't he, being a Jew, disqualified in advance as an interpreter of the Danish cultural heritage? Wasn't he, being a Jew, incapable of understanding, evaluating and appreciating the exceptional heights to which Danish literature had ascended? – In other words, Brandes *himself* was perceived from a racial point of view and came to be viewed as the typical Jew.

It is important to realize that these questions aimed at Brandes' ancestry originally had nothing to do with the independent literary, philosophical and ideological questions which gradually formed a chasm between Brandes and bourgeois society. On the surface the points of conflict centered around Brandes' insistence on the right of the individual, freedom of thought, and not least his pronounced anti-clericalism. But lurking in the background there was that sense of panic and horror which had been engendered by the Commune of Paris and by the establishment of a Danish branch of the Socialist International (1871). The reason this conflict also helped to arouse feelings of anti-Semitism in Denmark was probably because it became integrated into a much larger complex of problems, those which Brandes himself grouped together under the heading *the reaction of the European bourgeois*. In fact,

one of Brandes' most influential opponents expressed a similar opinion by warning him with the following words: »... we would assume, if he really stops to think about it, that he still would have a bit of fondness left for the society that has so hospitably provided shelter for his fathers and which cannot be said to have been unappreciative of his achievements thus far, and that he would surely rather contribute towards its development than its dissolution.«¹⁸

This author was one of the founding fathers of the above mentioned Danish constitution, which expressly admitted no provision for the consideration of Jews as guests. By 1877 the hospitality in Denmark had become so limited that Brandes felt himself compelled to immigrate to Berlin, where he received a warm welcome from the flag-bearer of anti-Semitism, Pastor Stöcker, and, in addition, found his own immigration set in perspective at the sight of the Jewish refugees from Russia pouring into the Silesian railway station.¹⁹

In short, due to his heritage, Georg Brandes found himself in a situation so difficult that he was unable to treat it with the sovereign distance he otherwise felt it deserved. His dilemma was, on the one hand, that he could not define himself as a Jew, while, on the other, he was not accepted as being Danish. In addition to his loss of nationality he had also lost his means of existence. Caught up in these difficult circumstances, many of his ideas were abruptly altered and revised. His notion of individualism took on a more extreme slant, and his self-image as a European and cosmopolitan became intensified. Around this same time, however, Brandes also began to conduct a more serious search for his Jewish identity. Like other secularized Jews in Western Europe, Brandes stood lacking religious ties to Judaism. It was by no means a coincidence that he, during these very years, wrote the biographies of two of Europe's most prominent Jews, Benjamin Disraeli (1878) and Ferdinand Lassalle (1881). Opposite sides of the Jewish mind, Brandes wrote in a letter at the time, »... and yet both of these men are related, eager to fight, conceited, vain and ambitious. But Lassalle is the greater of the two, Disraeli the smarter and luckier. I have placed a little bit of my own nature into both of these portraits, even though I myself am a third and different nuance.«²⁰

Already in the introduction to the book on Lassalle Brandes concerns himself with the ra-

cial characteristics in his disposition, »... that trait of character he possesses, the seeds of which can most accurately be designated by the Jewish word *chutzpah*, that combination of resourcefulness, audacity, foolhardiness, impudence and intrepidity, which can easily be comprehended as that kind of extremity into which the timidity and forced compliance of a race of people tormented and repressed for centuries turns out of necessity when it is faced with cultural threats from without.«²¹ Lassalle's radical democratic opposition to existing society was something with which Brandes could immediately identify, but in addition to this Lassalle could provide him with a model for solving his own dilemma: the theory of the Jew as an aristocrat. Disraeli was the very personification of this theory in that he not only assumed the attitude of an aristocrat, but even actually became the Earl of Beaconsfield. Brandes, of course, had nothing similar in mind, although he was prone to enjoy the company of portions of the European aristocracy. But with Disraeli he discovered a historical justification for the Jewish aristocracy which he could make use of in another and much larger perspective.

In his treatment of the phenomenon of being a Jew, Disraeli had begun with Christianity's roots in Judaism, thus reversing the entire problem by maintaining that the Jews were not a kind of step-children, but, quite oppositely, the first-born, who had originally been an aristocratic people and whose religion had later become the religion of the masses in Christian society. Christianity was, so to speak, Judaism for the multitude. If birth was the decisive factor, then Brandes was to be counted along with the aristocrats. But this was actually of lesser significance where he was concerned. The crucial fact was that he, as well nigh the only one in the kingdom of Denmark, had placed himself in such definite opposition to everything Jewish, including all its offshoots – Lutheranism being no exception. As he writes in his memoirs: »The entire country was saturated with Judaism, with ancient Jewish culture, ancient Jewish barbarity.«²²

Disraeli's ideas, later supplemented with those of Ernest Renan, helped Brandes in defining and defending his own position. When he gave the Jews primateship in the Christian tradition, it was because he aimed at rejecting the entire tradition. His idea of assimilation was not that the Jews should become a part of the

Christian society he opposed. Quite to the contrary. He characterized his book on Disraeli as a blow on the skull for Jew-haters, and added: »It was simply best, once and for all, to make them understand that they were the ones who were the Jews, and not us.«²³ Brandes expressed the hope that Disraeli would be »The last Jew,«²⁴ the last, as a Jew, to have asserted himself and made a name for himself. We today, he wrote in a letter, »... the outstanding among us, or men like Heine, Auerbach, etc., are no longer Jews, nor do they still support the Jewish mission of saving the world, and those who do, the old-fashioned orthodox, can be counted as non-existent. In D.[israeli] the race, with its ancient beliefs, joined forces for the last time in the history of the world, full of hostility towards the Aryans and Hellenism.«²⁵

The modern Jew, in Brandes' opinion, should above all be a non-Jew. Heinrich Heine, whose biography Brandes wrote in 1897, was surely the person who came closest to this ideal. From Heine Brandes drew one of the most central themes in his own thoughts: the contrast between Hellenism and the beliefs of the Nazarene, that is to say the spirit of ancient Judaism and tradition. In his book on Greece, *Hellas* (1925), he concretized this contrast in the following manner: »Israel never became tired of humiliating itself before that supernatural power referred to as the Lord. The Lord, however, never gets tired of commanding, forbidding, chastising and punishing. He who is pleasant in the eyes of the Lord, the prophet, commands, forbids, chastises and punishes in His name. Where the Greek hero is concerned, man feels his own strength, indeed his own power, and raises himself as a free and benevolent force. From the very beginning the hero is to a very great extent merely bodily strength, both crude and gruesome. But he gradually becomes more and more human and responds to the call whenever some great task may require him to muster all of his abilities.«²⁶ – The modern Jew should most preferably be a Greek!

Brandes' search for an identity he could accept continued all the way up into the 1880's. If we should go as far as to claim that he solved his problem, then the solution should be viewed as an integral part of the development of his thinking as a whole. But it is doubtful that he solved anything at all in a more concrete sense, since the solution lay on such a figura-

tive and abstract level that it could only be of interest to other Western European intellectuals on the same niveau as Brandes. Nor could you really speak of any practical proposal, but rather of a kind of stance, an attitude which Brandes formulated definitively in his treatise on Nietzsche, *Aristokratisk Radikalisme* (1889). This outlook was given an even more drastic perspective through Brandes' encounter with the so-called Eastern Jews, whose situation he had studied with his own eyes since the mid-1880's. »And what a horror to your eyes and nose these Gallic and Russo-Polish Jews are.«, he wrote to Nathansen, relating the following episode from Karlsbad: »Prince Paul Dolgorucki once said to me in Karlsbad as we stood overlooking the city: I do not go down into the city, I don't want to; because I *do not* want to become an anti-Semite, and I could not help but become one if I were to go down there and look at those horrible Jews.« – Brandes adds: »I understood him.«²⁷

Brandes' comments here tell us something about his relationship to Jews in general, and in particular to the Eastern European Jews, but even moreso it tells us something about his own self-knowledge. This intellectual aristocrat must have preferred not to think of himself as a Jew, otherwise he would not have understood the prince. On the other hand, the fact that Brandes was a Jew did not make the enormous cultural gap between himself and the Eastern Jews the least bit narrower. This gap could only be interpreted in two ways: as a measuring device for determining how far the Western Jews had come on the route to assimilation, or as tangible evidence of the past and not least of how terribly far there was yet to go. Brandes had become caught in still another dilemma, revealed on the one hand through his total rejection of everything »Jewish« (as he called it) and on the other hand through his continued interest in the Jewish minorities in Eastern Europe. He took no other considerations, spared no pains nor means, when he went about protesting against the pogroms and informing world opinion of the cruelty and terrorism to which the Jews of Eastern Europe were being subjected.²⁸ But as a rule he made a point of insisting that his concern had nothing to do with these Jews as Jews, but as people oppressed and mistreated. His position became no less difficult as a result of the accusations of treachery which were thrown at him by the Zionists.

With Zionism the Jewish question entered into an entirely new phase, something which also influenced Brandes' attitudes and reflections. The first time he became acquainted with this modern attempt to solve the Jewish question was in 1896 when Theodor Herzl sent him his book, *Der Judenstaat* (1896), which immediately provoked a brief exchange of opinions between the two. Brandes summed up his own point of view with these words: »I doubt that we can still call the Jews a people today. They have no common background, no common upbringing, no true national pride, and they all have a non-Jewish native country which they regard, more or less justifiably, as their own. For my own part I have never felt like a Jew, even though I have often been reminded of my Jewish heritage, and Jews in other countries have never treated me as a fellow-countryman, something which Danes, Swedes, Norwegians and Finns, however, have.«²⁹

Much to Brandes' surprise, Zionism rapidly became an international movement growing by leaps and bounds. In 1901 when he voiced his opinion publically for the first time he rejected Judaism, both as a race and as a nationality, expressing the hope, however, »... that a hundred years from now Palestine, cultivated like a garden and populated by several million extremely enlightened and industrious Jews, would provide a place of refuge for those ancestral brothers whose country of birth offered them no abode.«³⁰ In 1905 he declined to participate actively, explaining that he feared renewed outbreaks of famine and new massacres in Palestine.³¹ However, in view of the situation in Eastern Europe, he was sympathetic to the progress made by Zionism, even though he had found its form and methods objectionable right from the beginning: »a perpetual harping on Jewish nationality, incessant, ridiculing attacks on the Israelites who have merged with the peoples in other nations who have accepted them, boisterous assurances to the effect that animosity towards Jews would never subside and that the Jew who calls himself a Frenchman or an Englishman is a contemptible person, one who renounces his brothers. It is only natural that the great Jewish financial dynasties refrain from participating in a movement which is so illogical and so blundering, and which downright invites expulsion as the sole response.«³² The contention that the Jews comprised a nation, which had a right to demand its own state, was characterized by

Brandes as a claim ignoring everything that had happened during the past 2000 years.

It has repeatedly been claimed that Brandes altered his view of Zionism during his last years. The evidence cited in support of this assumption has always been the document published by Henri Nathansen in his book on Georg Brandes from 1929.³³ The document is dated January 7, 1918 and bears the title *Das neue Judentum*. Recently the authenticity of this document has been questioned.³⁴ Its contents correspond almost word for word to the article published in December 1917 in Martin Buber's periodical, *Der Jude*, here under the title *Meine Stellung zum nationalen Judentum*. Except for a few insignificant details this article is identical to a later English version.³⁵

The author of these two virtually identical articles adheres to each and every fundamental viewpoint held by Brandes, but he comes to the conclusion that his views on the Jewish question have changed a lot during the last few years, i.e. during World War I. Leaving the Jews of Western Europe aside for the moment, he maintains 1) that the massive Jewish population in Eastern Europe has a right to constitute itself politically as a state, 2) that previously he had not understood Theodor Herzl, 3) that the Zionist movement has his complete sympathy, even though he himself was a cosmopolitan, and 4) that Zionism shows good prospects for the future, because the realization of the Zionist colonization is one of the tasks history has set forth for the Jews.

Had Brandes altered his views on Zionism? Both yes and especially no! Only a year later he wrote: »Zionism is nationalistic romanticism, like so many other forms of nationalistic romanticism these days, which hopefully will be the last to witness such flaming outbreaks of nationalism. A homeland in little Palestine may well provide a small group of oppressed and homeless Eastern European Jews with that stronghold they have needed. For those men and women of Jewish descent who have been allowed to experience the benefits of civilization and who have contributed toward the civilization of Europe, each according to his own ability, Palestine is of very little interest as a cradle of culture in comparison with Hellas and Rome.«³⁶

Brandes' dilemma clearly came to a head during these years. He took a firm stand against the nationalistic and racist propaganda-warfare around him, but recognizing how ra-

pidly the bestial persecution of the Jews in Eastern Europe was escalating, he finally could see no other alternative than Jewish emigration. With this he had also found a temporary alternative for himself: the subdivision of the Jewish question into a Western and an Eastern section. This particular solution to his dilemma, however, he apparently rejected again in 1925 when he wrote in the conclusion to his comments on the situation of the Eastern Jews, in the periodical *The American Hebrew*: »Heretofore Zionism has been sheer romanticism which is destined to crumble under the power of the Arabs.«³⁷ This was Georg Brandes' definitive standpoint, in the sense that this was the last time he expressed himself on the subject.

Brandes held no illusions concerning those changes in the foundation of societies which are normally accorded such great significance. »You would have to be a child to imagine that the recent revolution in Russia, with its releasing of the legal bonds upon the Jews, will be accompanied by a change in people's view of them. The fire of hate will not be extinguished so easily. Just something like the fact that Trotzky, who has usurped power there, is a Jew will come to be avenged on the Jews of Russia some day. The population is too uneducated not to despise them, and the Jews in Russia are still too uneducated to be capable of making themselves indispensable in greater numbers.«³⁸ This is what Brandes wrote after the socialistic revolution in Russia in 1917. On the other hand – and this means on the Western front – he was never in doubt as to the sociological and ideological roots of anti-Semitism. In 1909 he had summarized his view of the Jewish question as seen from this perspective. The occasion was the performance of Henri Nathansen's play *Daniel Hertz* (1908); Brandes writes: »If I were in the main character's position I would long for the old ancestral pastures no more than Lassalle or Karl Marx. It even occurs to me, with reference to these men, that your [Nathansen's] play does the working class an injustice. It is certainly not this group that gives rein to anti-Semitic tendencies. It has never confronted any of its own Jewish leaders, men like Lassalle, Marx, Bernstein, Strauss and others, with a single syllable referring to their ancestry. It is the bourgeois and the nobility that cling to clannish and racial prejudices. The very simple man is the last to think of ancestry; that is to say in Western Europe where your play is being performed ... What if you wrote a

play about the noblemen, and about how they suffer living together with the bourgeois, marrying into the middle class, about how they end up longing for their ancestral home, for the family manor, for their own. This would not strike me as being any more reactionary than your present play.

When they presented the young Bonaparte with a family tree proving he belonged to the nobility, he rejected it with a smile. He belonged to those who *produced* descendants. He belonged to an age that declared all routes open for talent and left things up to the individual. God bless him and his era for that!

Individualist for ever!³⁹

Part of the explanation for Georg Brandes' conflict-filled attitude towards Judaism lies in the fact that his original, relatively unproblematic, circumstances were made complicated by rather violent pressures from without. Another part of the explanation can be found in the very fact that these problems were incorporated into the already extremely controversial and contrast-filled world of Brandes' thoughts. The difficulty lies in the fact that these two aspects cannot be separated in their relationship to that extremely conflict-ridden world in which Brandes lived and breathed – and which he himself also played a role in creating.

If we suppose for a moment that a non-Jew, living under the same political, religious and intellectual conditions during the 1860's to the 1920's and having the same temperament as Brandes, had advocated the same viewpoints, then the reactions would probably have been the same; in any case his non-Jewish friends of like mind were not handled with kid gloves. But there was always one additional insult to throw at him. Like Brandes, I view this *additional* insult as an accompanying factor, secondary in relation to the offence aroused by his views taken as a whole. The Jewish problem, for Brandes, emerged out of these secondary circumstances, which, to be sure, constantly became converted into something primary.

He attempted to solve the problem within the framework of his own thinking and not on the premises set for him from without. His attitude towards Judaism was determined fundamentally by that principle, which, in the end, was always the decisive factor in his thinking in general: *individualism*. He viewed Judaism as an intolerable restriction on the individual's free development and rejected it in the

same way he rejected each and every religious and national limitation on individual human potential. Essential to this individual development was individual freedom, and for Brandes this meant freedom from all arbitrary clerical and secular authorities, the rejection of every kind of privilege and bond determined by ancestry and birth. In short: the whole of that universal humanism which had found expression in the liberal ideas of the Enlightenment and in the revolutionary ideals of 1789. These too were the ideas which stirred Brandes into action when he so persistently engaged himself in the causes of national minorities, among these that of the oppressed Jews. A summary of his basic viewpoints can be read under the title: *The Cosmopolitan Ideal*.⁴⁰

And indeed, Brandes was justified in continuing to work within this tradition, because Jews everywhere found themselves to be much better off in places where the tradition from the Enlightenment was strongest. But there was no indication that the question could be reduced to an individual concern. He could, of course, do this in theory and did. But in the mirror of reality he also gradually learned to see others beyond himself, even though he was surely just as frightened as he was the time his mother held him up in front of the mirror. Both incidents gave rise to certain psychological reactions, which no doubt were of a far more complicated nature than Brandes had imagined in 1869 when he predicted that the modern Jew would feel more homeless than anyone else.⁴¹ In this he saw something truly tragic, but at the same time something fortunate. His experiences were also of a mixed nature. The most recent Jewish encyclopedia views Brandes from the tragic point of view – as one of the outstanding representatives of the greatness and tragedy of the assimilated European Jew,⁴² but in *this* sense he was not a tragic figure. Quite the contrary; the mirror image must be reversed. Georg Brandes' stature can only be determined by an evaluation of his critical writings; within one part of his literary activities reflections are found of a number of conditions of a social nature which rightfully can be called tragic. As a representative of Jewish assimilation, however, he should rather be seen as an encouraging Danish example, who, in spite of everything, also extends beyond those subsequent tragic circumstances referred to by the Jewish encyclopedia.

The American Brandes scholar Henry J. Gibbons, who has provided us with the most significant contribution to date concerning Brandes' relationship to Judaism, has given his article the title *The reluctant Jew*.⁴³ This is an extremely unfortunate characterization, apparently constructed on the analogy of an expression used by the Danish Biedermeier author J.C. Hostrup (1818-1892), who called Brandes his »reluctant admirer«.⁴⁴ But where do we find Brandes' reluctance in relation to Judaism?

Gibbons is correct in his assessment of Brandes' position: »With no religious affinity to Judaism and not a trace of Jewish cultural consciousness, he could hardly define himself as a Jew.«⁴⁵ In spite of this, Gibbons implies that there was something »Jewish« about Brandes. In connection with the fact that Brandes remained a member of the synagogue for 35 years without ever crossing its threshold, we are told: »In this respect, too, Brandes was a reluctant Jew, his Jewishness externally imposed.«⁴⁶ The point made by Gibbons – that it was the pressures from without that gave Brandes the mark of a Jew – is weakened considerably through his indirect reference to »the inner Jew«. »Was he not«, Gibbons asks, »despite his Danish schooling and so forth, still »Jewish« in ways he was reluctant to admit to himself but which were immediately apparent to his contemporaries? Was he not, perhaps, overlooking certain identifiable, recognizable traits which marked him as a Jew; certain mannerisms, gestures, styles, and figures of speech; certain foibles, tastes, and aversions; certain of those subtle, nearly undefinable things which go into making up a personality? Is it possible, in other words, that Brandes' Jewishness was evident in ways he wished to minimize, deny or ignore?«⁴⁷

Answering such a question presupposes that we have a definition of what it means to be »Jewish«. Gibbons makes no attempt to provide one, but suggests »... that Brandes unconsciously identified with Jews more than he knew, and that he repressed that identification.«⁴⁸ Attention is also called to the fact that Brandes' contemporaries – friends as well as enemies – considered him to be characteristically Jewish. But this »fact« cannot really be of any use to us: »The question of whether certain features of Brandes' personality can legitimately be attributed to his Jewishness is not wrong, it is simply misplaced. Because the important fact is that certain of his contemporaries, both

friends and enemies, were prepared to regard *any* characteristic he exhibited as »typically Jewish«. Given that, the question of whether, objectively speaking, he retained visible traces of the Jewish past becomes moot.«⁴⁹ With this the arguments in favor of characterizing Brandes as *The reluctant Jew* are rendered invalid; in turn, however, the question remains as to what actually makes up a Jew. If Gibbons' position is retained, then the logical answer would be: *as yet nothing whatsoever* – except being born of Jewish parents. But even the criterion of birth can be criticized and, if viewed ethnically, cannot be said to be a particularly *Jewish* criterion. A Jew seems more like something a person can become. Growing up in the religious and cultural tradition of Judaism can produce Jews. But the example of Brandes teaches us that the society in which this tradition exists can also create Jews – with or without Jewish birth certificates. It is the characteristically Jewish way of life and its interaction with various national, social and political surroundings that produces »the Jew«. If we wish to talk about facts in connection with single individuals within this complex of problems, then these facts must be understood on a level where the existing anti-Semitic tradition defines the limits for the mutual relationship between the internal Jewish stamp and various external factors. The historical fact is that anti-Semitism has its origins precisely in this relationship, which forms the core of the Jewish question: the relationship between Jews and non-Jews *or rather* between the Jewish *minority* and *the majority*. The Jewish question is a minority problem, which, like any other historical phenomenon, must be viewed with reference to its historical development if it is to be understood fully.

Georg Brandes held the Jewish question at a distance, but found it forced upon him after his marked appearance in 1871, by which time anti-Semitism had gained momentum in Denmark. He was not the cause, but he was the first to feel the effects. Brandes engaged in discussions of this question, not only from the point of view of his own personal and national experiences, but also within an international perspective. In his differentiation of the question Brandes apparently came closest to the Zionist view on the founding of an independent Jewish state. But he cannot be accused of being blind to the fact that the creation of such a state would not solve the Jewish question, but, qui-

te oppositely, would give it some entirely new dimensions.

Notes

All Danish quotations have been translated into English. Quotations from Brandes' own works have been taken from the first Danish editions.

Where unpublished correspondence is concerned, quotations stem from the original letters, all of which are located in the manuscript collection of the Royal Library in Copenhagen.

The Brandes Archives are abbreviated as *BA*.

Inacc. (with accompanying number) indicates a quotation from an inaccessible manuscript collection.

1. Brandes to Lis Jacobsen, 13.3.1913, *Inacc.* 489.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Brandes to Henri Nathansen, 18.4.1917, *Inacc.* 281.
4. Henry J. Gibbons: *The reluctant Jew*. In: *The activist Critic*. A symposium on the political ideas, literary methods and international reception of Georg Brandes, pp. 55-89. Edited by Hans Hertel and Sven Møller Kristensen. *Orbis Litterarum*, Supplement 5, 1980.
5. Brandes: *Levned I* (1905), p. 243.
6. Brandes to Henri Nathansen, 8.4.1917, *Inacc.* 281.
7. Brandes to Henri Nathansen, 14.12.1916, *Inacc.* 281.
8. *Ibid.*
9. The daily newspaper *Politiken* considered the problems which arose in this connection in an editorial on 7.9.1913.
10. Brandes to Henri Nathansen, 18.4.1917, *Inacc.* 281.
11. Brandes to Henri Nathansen, 18.8.1912, *Inacc.* 281.
12. Brandes: *Levned I* (1905), p. 20.
13. Brandes: *Dualismen i vor nyeste Philosophie* (1866), p. 72.
14. Brandes: *Kritiker og Portraiter* (1870), pp. 400-401.
15. *Ibid.* p. 118 (the essay on Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*).
16. Brandes to Vilhelm Andersen, 10.4.1902. This correspondence has been published by Steen Johansen in *Danske Studier* 1967, pp. 71-102 (p.79).
17. Brandes: *Kritiker og Portraiter* (1870), p. 398.
18. The newspaper *Fædrelandet*, 17.2.1872.
19. Cf. pp. 485-492 in *Berlin som tyske Rigshovedstad* (1885).
20. Brandes to Emil Petersen, 28.12.1878. This correspondence has been published by Morten Borup in *Georg Brandes og Emil Petersen* (1980), pp. 245-246.
21. Brandes: *Ferdinand Lassalle* (1881), pp. 12-13.
22. Brandes: *Levned III* (1908), p. 38.
23. Brandes to Marie Pingel, 16.12.1878, *BA*.
24. Brandes to Ferdinand Levison, 10.2.1879, *BA*.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Brandes: *Hellas* (1925), p. 20.
27. Brandes to Henri Nathansen, 14.12.1916, *Inacc.* 281.
28. Several of Brandes' articles have been collected in Volume XI of his *Samlede Skrifter* (1902) and in *Verdenskrigen* (1916), pp. 117-147.
29. Brandes to Theodor Herzl, 7.12.1896. This correspondence was first published by Rafael Edelmann in *Judisk Tidsskrift* (Stockholm 1937), pp. 83-89.
30. The daily newspaper *Politiken*, 2.12.1901.
31. *Ibid.*, 12.12.1905.
32. Cf. note 30.
33. Henri Nathansen: *Georg Brandes. Et Portræt* (1929), pp. 257-266. - In the German version under the title *Jude oder Europäer. Porträt von Georg Brandes* (1931), pp. 181-188.
34. Henry J. Gibbons (cf. note 4) writes: »It is true that, in the wake of brutal persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe during the First World War, Brandes may have modified slightly his feelings about the Zionist solution to their plight, but one should not overestimate this about-face on the basis of »The New Judaism.« For the fact is that Brandes did not write the article himself and apparently felt that the views expressed in it differed so much from his own that he refused to allow an American republication of the article. In 1919 an American, Albert Mordell, wanted to reprint the article and was refused permission. (Gertrud Rung to A. Mordell, February 2, 1919, *BA*). The article is a compilation by interviewers of impressions and recollections of their conversations with Brandes and should not be regarded as an authentic expression of Brandes' views on Zionism.« (p.89, note 90).
The leader of the Jewish socialist workers' movement Poalé-Zion, Leon Chasanowitsch (pseudonym for Katriel Shub (1882-1925)) announced in a letter from Stockholm, 26.11.1917, that he would visit Brandes. In a subsequent letter, 9.1.1918, Chasanowitsch writes to Brandes: »In der Anlage überreiche ich Ihnen 2 Exemplare Ihres Artikels, den wir in einigen Sprachen verbreiten.
Der Artikel wurde von der Redaktion »des Juden« für das Dezemberheft übernommen und wurde auf telegrafischem Wege dem »Jewish Chronicle« in London übermittelt. Er wird in einer Reihe von Zeitungen und Zeitschriften verschiedener Länder erscheinen. Ich danke Ihnen nochmals aufrichtig für die Worte der Sympathie, die Sie in Ihrem schönen Aufsatz der jüdischen nationalen Bewegung gewidmet haben; sie werden unserer Sache einer grossen Dienst tun.« (*BA*).
Additional material concerning this question can be found in the pronouncement made by Brandes in December, 1917, printed in *Tidsskrift for jødisk Historie og Litteratur*, pp. 135-136.
35. Brandes: *My attitude to national Judaism*. In: *The Zionist Review*, Nr. 1, May 1918.
36. Brandes: *Tragediens anden Del* (1919), p. 42.
37. Brandes' remarks in *The American Hebrew*, 23.1.1925, pp. 332 and 341, were brought in answer to Stephane Lauzanne's article *Treaty of Versailles and Minority Rights* in the same periodical, 2. and 9.1.1925.
38. Quoted from *Tidsskrift for jødisk Historie og Litteratur* 1917, p. 135 (no title).
39. Brandes to Henri Nathansen, 8.3.1909, *Inacc.* 281.
40. In the American paper *The New Student*, 18.11.1922 (New York).
41. Brandes: *Kritiker og Portraiter* (1870), p. 400.

42. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 4 (1971), col. 1302-1304.

43. Cf. note 4.

44. Brandes to Vilhelm Andersen, 10.4.1902, cf. note 16.

45. Cf. note 4, p. 70.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

49. *Ibid.*