

The faith of the fathers, the future of the youth

Being Jewish on the periphery of the diaspora

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The article aims to analyse the various descriptions of crises among Norwegian Jewry as they were expressed in Jewish magazines and organizations in the interwar period. By analysing social, organizational and religious work I ask how Jews emigrating from Eastern Europe handled the transition from the Jewish *shtetl*/life to the homogeneity of the Scandinavian societies. Further, I discuss the various solutions to these crises. I suggest that by utilizing fixed ideas of Jewishness, such as 'traditions' and 'Zionism', the Norwegian Jews in fact created a versatile Jewishness that they labelled 'national work'. This paved the way to becoming 'Jewish Norwegians'.

It is way too clear that the sign of the times indicates that our Scandinavian Jewishness is severely damaged. (Editor, 'Hvad vi vil', *Israeliten*, 1/1920)

The Jews that immigrated [to Norway] many years ago have become mammon hunters – they have completely torn themselves apart from the chain that our people constitute – they have lost our people's sense of honour and consciousness, ideals and pride ... (J. T. Birsen, no title, *Israeliten*, 5/1917)

Arrive any Friday to one of our synagogues and a great sorrow will fill your heart: Where is the youth? (Editor, 'Hvem har skylden?', *Israeliten*, 4/1918)

The danger these days is that Jewish knowledge is vanishing and the will to a Jewish education is lacking. (M. F., 'Noen ord til de jødiske foreldre. Chanukka-betraktninger', *Hatikowh*, 1/1929)

These quotations demonstrate a great concern for the future of Jews, Jewish culture and Judaism in Norway in the interwar period. However, while minutes from Jewish organizations and periodicals communicate that a sense of the loss of an authentic Jewishness was on many minds throughout the period, definitions of a Jewish authenticity, or Jewishness, varied, as did the solutions

suggested by the authors and organization members. In this article I will analyse the various descriptions of a perceived crisis among Norwegian Jewry as well as the solutions to their particular version of the Jewish problem of the time. By analysing organizational, social and religious work I will ask how Jews emigrating from Eastern Europe handled the transition from a relatively consistent, but gradually decreasing, Jewish life in the *shtetls* to the secular but Lutheran-influenced societies of Scandinavia. In the light of postcolonial theories and scholarly research on the Jewish diaspora, I ask what the different generations perceived as being Jewish, how they felt that their Jewishness was threatened and what solutions they considered to be the best ones to solve these issues at the time. In addition, when possible, I compare my findings to scholarly research carried out on the other Scandinavian Jewish communities.

As most organizational archival material disappeared during WWII, I have relied on minutes and articles printed in Jewish periodicals at the time. The minutes cover the most important organizations in prewar Jewish Norway, such as the Mosaic Women's Organization, the Jewish youth organization and the Zionist association, as well as records from the different religious congregations in Norway. I have also included letters to editors and articles written by individual members of the community, and in combination they constitute the closest thing possible to a representative Jewish voice in the interwar period. And while there were, as I will discuss below, certain differences in opinion, the sources are mostly oriented in the same directions on the topic discussed in this article. Hence, when I use expressions such as 'the Norwegian Jews argued', it is not without substance.

In the periphery of the diaspora

In contrast to the other Nordic countries, the vast majority of the group that was to become the Norwegian Jews had emigrated from Eastern Europe from the last two decades of the twentieth century onwards. While many may have wanted to go to the United States of America, *di goldene medina* of the time, some ended up in Norway instead. The migration to Norway had the character of a chain migration where whole families and on several occasions two or three generations settled. While some had lived for a period in other Scandinavian countries, most arrived directly from Eastern Europe. Norway at the time was a very religious and ethnically homogeneous country, which only in 1851, after a constitutional ban in 1814, allowed Jews to cross its borders. The debates preceding, and the enforcement of, the ban clearly demonstrate that anti-Jewish sentiments were a part of a Norwegian discourse at the time, and these opinions did not disappear after the ban was lifted (Harket 2014, Ulvund 2014).

However, once allowed to settle, Jews enjoyed nearly full civil rights, and until the ban on kosher slaughtering in 1929, they were never discriminated against judicially because they were Jews (Snildal 2014). This does not mean that Jews were always socially accepted, and there were, for example, strong tendencies towards antisemitism among parts of the bureaucracy in the Ministry of Justice and among the Oslo police, both being key agencies in gaining a Norwegian citizenship (Johansen 1984, 2005). Further, anti-Jewish attitudes were visible within the Lutheran state church, in trade organizations, in literature and in certain political parties at times (e.g. Moe and Kopperud 2011). Despite these occurrences, antisemitism was a phenomenon of the written word and mostly a latent feature. And compared to other minorities, such as the Sami people, the Roma population and the Travellers, the Jews were treated well by the authorities.

A great majority of the Jews, men and women alike, worked in trade (Gjernes 2007, Banik 2015a). They owned their own retail businesses selling clothes, fruit, tobacco or cheap trinkets. Many had worked in trade, mostly as peddlers, while living in Sweden, and most likely they had also had trade-related jobs whilst living in Eastern Europe. In addition, Norway, and in particular Oslo, where the majority of Jews settled, was a country undergoing transformation. It was becoming industrialized, urbanized, in need of ready-made goods and people who knew retail. The Eastern European Jews had this kind of experience, and while its demand for knowledge in trade may not have been the reason for coming to Norway, it may certainly have played a part in the decision to stay.

Eventually many of the men went into the import or wholesale business, and a few obtained an academic education. It is important to note that the kinds of ethnic economy or niches, known among trading Jews in other countries, did not occur in Norway (e.g. Godley 2001: 68). While on occasion they sold goods primarily meant for Jewish customers, such as *tomor*, a kosher butter, for the most part their customers were non-Jews. The small number of Jews, always less than 2,000 individuals, did not allow for Jews-only dedicated shops. Moreover, and in contrast to the Jews of Stockholm and Copenhagen, who ran their own schools, Norwegian Jewish children attended local public or private schools. This implies that while the Jewish community certainly was close-knit, many interacted with non-Jews on a daily basis. Lastly, mastering the Norwegian language was important, and the children of the immigrant generation often spoke Norwegian to their Yiddish-speaking parents.

It was the number of newly-arrived Jews from Eastern Europe and a change in the laws concerning religious dissidents that made the founding of religious congregations possible in 1891. Later, social and cultural organizations

followed, and Oslo and Trondheim became the two centres of Jewry in Norway. The *Ostjuden* were a part of the Jewish social establishment from the beginning, although there is no doubt that the general social standing and a solid economy were important factors when the leadership was elected. Nevertheless, the frictions between established Jews and the Eastern European newcomers were less frequent and profound than in most other Western European countries at the time.

An unresolved existence

The social and cultural transformation of European Jewry that took place after the emancipation constituted a profound and irreversible change in Jewish lives. The breakdown of the influence of rabbinic Judaism in the Eastern European *shtetls* and the growing influence of a non-Jewish secular world made the Jews, as well as non-Jews, question their Jewishness, faith and position in society at large (Birnbaum and Katznelson 1995). The Jewish Question, which was asked by non-Jews, and, among other things, debated what civil, legal, and national status Jews as a minority group should have within European societies, also contributed to a sense of dissolution among European Jews from the last half of the nineteenth century. And while they took an active part in society and eventually gained social positions, a growing sense of a failure of the Jewish emancipation developed. Jews continued to be scapegoats when scapegoats were needed and anti-Jewish accusations and attitudes which were now attributed to the Jewish race and thus considered to reflect an unchangeable aspect of the Jewish nature, flourished periodically. In addition, many Jews felt that despite the fact that Jews in general toned down or completely eradicated their 'Jewishness' publicly, they were still defined and regarded first and foremost as Jews, not as a part of the majority population. It became evident that legal equality did not imply social acceptance. Further, a number of Jews argued that Jewish acculturation in fact occasioned contempt from non-Jews because it implied that Jews were trying to become something they could never be.

The feeling of an unresolved existence as a Jew, both individually and collectively, in Europe was also felt among the Norwegian Jews. The many perceived dangers of assimilation were a dominant feature of their discourse in the interwar period, and characterized as the 'biggest enemy of the Jewish world'.¹ Some argued that Jews, in order to become socially accepted and to avoid

1 Speech given by Aron Grusd on the Scandinavian Jewish Youth Association's congress, July 1919, minutes in *Israeliten*, 7–8/1919.

antisemitism, spent too much time becoming involved in the culture of their country of birth at the expense of knowing their Jewish background. Others claimed that some Jews regarded their Jewishness as inferior to other cultures.² In a speech made to the Oslo Jewish youth in 1920, the Swedish Chief Rabbi Marcus Ehrenpreis likened the Judaism of his times to an ailing patient, and he characterized the times as being one of the biggest crises that Jews and Judaism had ever experienced. One of the reasons for the disease was, among other things, the breakdown of 'Old Russia', which had caused the destruction of Eastern European Jewish communities and hence of their role as a cultural and spiritual centre.³ He also emphasised 'the moral and spiritual' dissolution of Jews in general.

In addition, Ehrenpreis argued that the consequences of World War I, and in particular the antisemitism that occurred during the war and in its immediate aftermath, led to Jews becoming cowards; an anxious, nervous and a far less resistant group. Others claimed that, as a result of the war and the increase in anti-Jewish sentiments, Jews lacked ideals that could guide them and give them a belief in the future, thus bringing about 'moral confusion'.⁴ Characterized as a 'plague that wreaked havoc on everything Jewish', antisemitism, either in the form of pogroms or other actions or as attitudes, also loomed large when explaining the position of the European Jews in society.⁵ Headlines such as 'A plea concerning the persecutions of the Jews in Berlin', 'A call to the Scandinavian Jews for immediate help to our brothers of faith in Kovno' and 'The pogroms in Lemberg' all demonstrate that readers of Norwegian Jewish periodicals closely followed what was happening to European Jewry and that there was fear concerning their physical and spiritual future throughout the interwar period.

While the concern for European Jewry was often of a very general nature, they also reflected an actual experience of Scandinavian Jewry. There is no doubt that Swedish and Danish Jews had undergone a process of acculturation

2 For example, A. L. 'Vår närmste uppgift', *Israeliten*, 1/1918.

3 Abstract of a speech titled 'Jødedommens fremtid' made in Israelitisk Ungdomsforening 26.12.1920, *Israeliten*, 7/1921. It is important to note that the expression 'Jødedommen' in my sources was used to denote Judaism or the Jewish people, its culture and traditions in general. While this may imply that they saw no difference between the religious and cultural aspects of being a Jew, I believe that a more accurate interpretation is that they regarded both as being a part of Jewishness, while at the same time recognizing that the emphasis between the two shifted over time and space.

4 Unknown, 'Kongres-betragtninger', *Israeliten*, 1/1921.

5 Unknown, 'Den nye ungdom', *Israeliten*, 4/1920.

that the Norwegian Jews read as a warning sign for future development. In a speech at the Scandinavian Jewish Youth Congress in 1932, Hugo Valentin admitted that while the Jewish congregations in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Copenhagen completely lacked a 'positive Jewish programme', the Jews in Finland and Norway were still 'instinctively disposed to Jewishness'.⁶ And there was some substance to his claim. For example, among the affluent Western or Central European Jews living in Stockholm in the latter half of the nineteenth century, there was an increasing tendency towards intermarriage and baptism, inevitably resulting in assimilation (Bredefeldt 2011: 69). In Denmark, half of the non-Eastern European Jewish population was married to a non-Jew in 1921 (Trap 1922: 8). In addition, a far wider range of opinions in terms of how a Jew should be defined, what Judaism and/or Jewishness was and whether the Jews constituted a nation were present in the Swedish Jewish discourse at the time. The Swedish economic historian Eli Heckscher was not alone in being convinced that the Jews did not constitute a nation and that his Jewishness was an entirely private matter. Thus, he argued that assimilation was the only solution to the Jewish Question of his times (e.g. Flakierski 1982).

In addition, there was a widespread feeling that the Scandinavian Jews were far from constituting a Jewish centre. With the exception of arguments made in a Zionist context, they were usually not defined geographically. However, a sense of a cultural, spiritual and geographical isolation prevailed throughout the interwar period, as exemplified by the treatment of the Norwegian Jews by the Zionist organization. In 1925, Israel Cymbal, a representative of the Zionist organization in Trondheim wrote to the headquarters of Keren Hayesod asking them to assist him in the publication of a Norwegian version of the Zionist pamphlet 'The Promised Land'. He scolded them for not replying to his initial letter on the matter, and emphasised that the lack of 'propagandists' or delegates from the international Zionist organization, as well as information regarding Zionism, made Zionist work extremely difficult. Further, he stressed that 'It is a crime on the part of the Keren Hayesod to overlook the importance of propaganda work among the Jews in Scandinavia', a complaint that was often made by Norwegian Zionist representatives in the 1920s and 30s.⁷ Lastly, except for the Scandinavian Jewish Youth, a formal cooperation between the Nordic Jews was non-existent, further enforcing a sense of isolation. The Norwegian Jews

6 Minutes from meetings at the S.J.U.F. congress, speech held by Hugo Valentin, *Hatikvob*, 1/1932.

7 Central Zionist Archives, Z4/2577, letter from J. Zimbal to Keren Hayesod, 6.1.1925.

were certainly situated on the periphery of the diaspora, few in numbers and uninteresting to most in terms of everything Jewish.

The Jews of Norway rarely blamed or accused their non-Jewish surroundings for their uneasy existence. It was more a case of feeling vulnerable outside the culturally and religiously, albeit never physically safe *shtetls*. In addition, a constant sense of being a very tiny minority in a new country, that the small numbers worked against them and inevitably would lead to too great a degree of acculturation, characterized the group. However, an important exception to the abstract threat of assimilation was how they perceived the works of the Israelsmissionen ('Israel Mission') among the Oslo Jews. Established in 1844, before Jews were allowed to settle in Norway, it was a part of a European organizational attempt to promote the love of Israel (i.e. the Jews) among Christians, and the love of Christ among Jews. While their main task was to work among Jews in Europe and Palestine, a unit that focused mainly on Jews in Oslo was founded in the late 1870s (Skarsaune 1994: 157). They initially offered relief for poor Jews, and later also summer camps for Jewish children. Their work was a constant thorn in the side of the organized Jewish community, and considered a major threat as they took advantage of impoverished Jews in their work to convert them. The summer camps were regarded as being a particular nuisance. The children attending had to eat *treif*, non-kosher food, and were forced to attend religious studies classes and sing Christian hymns.⁸ The Jewish community punished the parents of these children by exposing their names in the monthly magazine *Israeliten*, and they were also threatened with exclusion from Jewish organizations.

Not surprisingly, the work of the Israel Mission bothered the Jews throughout the interwar period, and it illustrates the particular concern for the youth on the part of the Jewish community. They were the 'future of Judaism', the ones that would inherit their forefathers' culture, customs and faith, the ones connecting the past with the present.⁹ Depriving them of a Jewish upbringing was like poisoning them and was fought by every means possible.

However, the contempt for the work of the Israel Mission was also a part of a much bigger picture. Throughout the period there was a general agreement that the quality of the religious teaching in the Jewish community, both on the part of the congregations and the parents, was poor, and hence that the children were not raised in the 'right Jewish spirit' (Mendelsohn 1986: 538ff.).¹⁰

8 Minutes from a meeting, 25.12.1925, IUF, *Israeliten*, 4/1925.

9 'Feriekolonisaken. Opprop', *Israeliten*, 10/1921

10 'Blir de herværende jødiske barn opdrat i den rette jødiske aand?', *Israeliten*, 5/1917.

The contrast with Jewish life in Eastern Europe was striking: Jewish schools, literature and friends were examples of what the youth living in Norway missed out on. As they lived in a society where Jewish knowledge was not transmitted in schools and other learning institutions, the community and the parents had an extra responsibility to teach the youth all the ‘beautiful things our men have created’ in order for the ‘youth of today to be raised as ‘national Jews’.¹¹ Just as in an ordinary school, learning was regarded as a case of maturation and personal development. And by the facilitation and the selection of topics done with the national spirit in mind, there was a belief that the children were being moulded and processed so that they would, in the end, albeit unconsciously, form a true reflection of the national spirit. Hence, the value of teaching was twofold, providing empirical knowledge and a sense of national belonging and pride. And while the community appreciated the national work and knowledge that formed the Norwegian sense of belonging of their offspring, they were concerned about the quality of the Jewish aspect. There was a general belief that after years of learning, the relationship of the children (i.e. the boys; for girls the *cheider* was optional) to religion was, at the best, impersonal. As a preparation for Bar Mitzvah, according to a parent, they recited prayers like parrots in Hebrew, a language they did not understand, and were taught from books written in other languages than Norwegian.¹² In addition, the teachers were accused of lacking pedagogic skills and being without knowledge of what happened outside the Jewish community. For example, Jo Benkow recalls his years in *cheider* at the beginning of the 1930s as a ‘continuous nightmare’, during which he tried to copy the swaying and gestures of the most pious men in the congregation when learning his prayers. He repeatedly feigned stomach illnesses in order to be exempted from tuition and was incredibly relieved when he had become a Bar Mitzvah (Benkow 1985: 85, 88, 96).

If Jo Benkow’s experiences are representative of the rest of the Jewish youth at the time, and judging by the periodicals there is every reason to believe that they are, it is not surprising that a result was that ‘the youth did not attend the synagogue’ on the Sabbath.¹³ How then, did they define and maintain their Jewishness?

11 Aron Grusd, ‘I.I.F.s maal og plikter’, *Israeliten*, 5/1917.

12 Unknown, ‘Vor skole og dens undervisningsformer’, *Israeliten*, 12/1917.

13 Schochet, ‘Hvem har skylden?’, *Israeliten*, 6/1918.

The faith of the fathers?

While organized religious teaching seems to have been a disappointment to most throughout the period, preserving a Jewish belonging for those above the age of Bar Mitzvah was still an important task. However, only a few argued that religious adherence alone could provide such a belonging and the number decreased as time went by. As stated earlier, secularization was something many experienced while still living in Eastern Europe, but in addition there are some causes specific to the Norwegian context for the diminishing religious influence of the group. Firstly, membership in any religious congregation in Norway was voluntary. In the case of the Jews, it meant that many for different reasons did not become members. This implied that the congregations often struggled financially, as everybody, regardless of membership, was entitled to the same service from the congregations. This meant that the members had to pay a higher membership fee, something that was a challenge for many in an economically unstable interwar period. In addition, the fact that those with means constituted the secular leadership led to the impression that they also indirectly dictated the rules.¹⁴

Secondly, the Oslo community was periodically riddled with internal strife.¹⁵ Personal differences rather than any major religious disagreements resulted in the establishment of a second Orthodox congregation in 1917, making cooperation in religious affairs, such as the *cheider*, impossible. Each built their own synagogue in the 1920s, and periodically employed a rabbi. Given the small number of Jews in Oslo, and the fact that even fewer had the opportunity to be an active member and to pay membership fees, the split resulted in a waste of human resources and a relatively poor economy for both synagogues. In addition, some regarded Zionism and other political or religious organizations such as the Agudists as factions that prevented unity among the Oslo Jews and for that reason as disintegrating factors for the small community. Lastly, the fact that the congregations were Orthodox with largely non-Orthodox members caused friction.

While religion ceased to be the sole decisive factor in defining Jewishness, it is worth noting that a flat rejection of religion was unheard of. Being a 'Yom Kippur Jew'; that is, attending synagogue services only on the high holidays, was disapproved of. Also, admitting publicly that religion was irrelevant and that attendance at the synagogue was out of the question, as the president of

14 Aktivt medlem, 'En interessant diskusjon', *Hatikvoh*, 10/1931.

15 For example, M. M., 'Nærmere til Maalet', *Israeliten*, 8/1923.

the youth association did in 1931, caused an outcry.¹⁶ Thus, there was a fine, but firm, line delimiting how one could define one's Jewishness, and being openly irreligious was outside any accepted boundary.

However, the above development illustrates the fact that there was a need for new ways of expressing Jewishness, and in Norway important developments took place in the organizations outside the realms of the congregations. The most influential and long-lasting of these was the Israelitisk Ungdomsforening (I.U.F.).¹⁷ It was formed as early as 1909, at a time when Jewish immigration to Norway was still quite substantial. The initiative was taken by a few individuals in their early 20s who were mostly born or grew up in Scandinavia. While I have not come across concrete evidence, it is possible that they shared the concerns later expressed by Hugo Valentin and quoted above, as some had grown up in Sweden or spent time in Germany before settling in Norway. Interestingly their parents' generation initially opposed the establishment. While the explicit reasons for the skepticism are unknown, it is likely that the I.U.F.'s emphasis on Jewish culture, in contrast to religious teaching, contributed to their parents' doubts.

In many ways the members of this organization were pivotal in creating the first generation(s) of Norwegian Jews. While they shared concerns for the quality of religious teaching, this was regarded as one of many tools for preserving a Jewish consciousness. By being non-political and non-religious, it aimed to unify the Jewish youth in *national work* in order to make sure that the youth remained Jewish and aware of their heritage and unity.¹⁸ In 1917 the I.U.F. stated that 'Our task is to unify the Jewish youth by means of parties and social gatherings, to provide Jewish youth with a national consciousness and to help our poor brothers in faith as best as we can'.¹⁹ By means of lectures, debates and charitable work, as well as social gatherings and theatrical productions in Yiddish, they sought to help, inform and enlighten the youth and make them realize that Jewish poets, academics and musicians, and Jewishness in general, were just as good as their non-Jewish counterparts, thus promoting Jewish cultural pride. As the Swedish Rabbi Marcus Ehrenpreis emphasized in a speech to the Scandinavian youth in Copenhagen in 1929, those who did not dare or want to admit their Jewishness publicly were also assimilationists – and he argued that there were quite a few such 'deserters' among young Scandinavian

16 Foreningsmøte in I.U.F., 5.11.1931, in *Hatikvoh*, 11/1931.

17 In 1933 the organization changed its name to Jødisk Ungdomsforening.

18 Tikwo, 'Et Tilbageblik', *Israeliten*, 10/1923.

19 Aron Grusd, 'I.I.F.s maal og plikter', *Israeliten*, 5/1917.

Jews.²⁰ Hence, when the Jewish Broadway actress and singer Madeleine Grey visited Oslo in 1931, she was described as a model Jew because of the way she promoted her Jewishness in a non-Jewish world. According to *Hatikvoh's* reporter she spoke readily about her background and heritage, and ensured that she included Yiddish songs in her repertoire.²¹ From the context it was clear that the Jews of Norway had a long way to go. The Norwegian Rabbi Julius Samuel argued along the same lines when he argued at Rosh Hashanah in 1934 – in the shadow of the Nazi regime in Germany – that the solution to the Jewish question was *dissimilation*; to become less similar to their non-Jewish surroundings.²² Later he elaborated on the issue, maintaining that the choice was rather simple; renewal, or the future of Jewish life in Norway was perdition.²³

In addition, Oskar Mendelsohn (b. 1912) maintained that for him personally, Judaism was insufficient as a definition of his Jewish belonging.²⁴ Defining the Jewish part of him as an amalgamation of religion, nation and culture, he argued that the Jewish youth reacted negatively to the many religious rules and obligations and proposed that some of them should be changed. While he did not elaborate on which of these he wanted to alter, this is a strong indicator that his generation defined Jewishness differently from previous generations. However, he was not alone in wanting a simplification of the Jewish faith. The following year, Marcus Melchor, at the time the rabbi of the largest congregation in Copenhagen, gave a lecture in Oslo arguing along the same lines.²⁵ He maintained that intricate rules and regulations were a feature of a bygone life, and that a simplification of Judaism was necessary in order to adjust to life outside the walls of the ghetto. Importantly, it was argued that many in the audience shared Melchor's view, as a reform would ease the guilt many felt at not being able to comply with religious rules and thus make their lives more harmonious, and Judaism the source of liberation rather than restraint.

While it was emphasized that 'national work' was something beyond Zionism, there is no doubt that the impact of Zionism as a tool for Jewish belonging increased in the interwar period (Banik 2007). Even though a few

20 Unknown, 'Skandinavisk Jødisk Ungdomskongress i Kjøbenhavn', *Hatikvoh*, 9/1929.

21 Aksel Scheer, 'Et intervju med Madeleine Grey', *Hatikvoh*, 10/1931.

22 Julius Samuel, 'Rosch Haschonoh 5695. Tilbakeblikk og utsyn', *Hatikvoh*, 7/1934.

23 Speech given by Rabbi Samuel at the Scandinavian Youth's conference, in *Hatikvoh*, 7/1934.

24 'En ny jødisk ungdom, dens tanker og problemer', lecture at the I.U.F., 15.3.1937, *Hatikvoh*, 4/1937.

25 Unknown, 'Fra Zion skal læren utgå', *Hatikvoh*, 1-2/1938.

regarded it as an explicitly anti-religious phenomenon, and hence as counter-productive for maintaining a Jewish identity, others regarded the ideology as an alternative – and modern – interpretation of Jewishness. Zionism was portrayed as dynamic, future oriented and the continuation of an ongoing creation of a Jewish culture.²⁶ Rabbi Ehrenpreis, an early adherent of Zionism and a participant of the first Zionist congresses, argued that the rebuilding of Jewish Palestine was an important tool for the future of the Jewish youth in the diaspora.²⁷ While actual Zionist work was often limited to financial support for Zionist causes, many subscribed to Ehrenpreis' view of *Erez Israel* as a cultural or spiritual centre for a group living on the periphery of the diaspora.²⁸ Zionism, either as an ideology or as a movement, was regarded as another way of gaining sorely needed Jewish knowledge, and hence a tool for maintaining Jewish identity. Hence, it was just as much a means of maintaining Jewish identity in a secular world as a national movement with the goal of establishing a Jewish state in the territory of the Palestine mandate.

In the first decade, 'national work' and religious adherence were parallel developments in defining Jewish belonging. While they were not mutually exclusive, there were also underlying tensions that sometimes surfaced between the two. However, that seemed to have changed when the Mosaisk Trossamfund hired (Isaak) Julius Samuel as their rabbi in 1930. Born in Germany, he personified a unification of national work and religion. He was an outspoken Zionist and involved in the Mizrahi movement, and had been an elected delegate to two world Zionist congresses as a representative of the Mizrahi youth movement.²⁹ In addition, he was trained at the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin, during the period of the leadership of Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg. Weinberg was an advocate of Jewish neo-orthodoxy, which sought to unite religious orthodoxy with modernity. From Samuel's work in Oslo there is no doubt that he followed in his mentor's footsteps. Among other things, he argued that religion should be 'naturally connected' with the 'real living life' – that the two were a unit rather than separate parts.³⁰

26 Unknown, 'L. Berson', *Israeliten*, 5/1917.

27 Abstract of a speech titled 'Jødedommens fremtid' made in Israelitisk Ungdomsforening 26.12.1920, referred in *Israeliten*, 7/1921.

28 For example, discussion in I.U.F. 10.1.1924 titled 'Om assimilasjon og avnasjonalisering', minutes referred in *Israeliten*, 5/1924.

29 For an account of his life, written by two of his children, se Ester Samuel-Cahn and Amos Samuel, nd.

30 Julius Samuel, 'Rosch Haschonoh 5695. Tilbakeblikk og utsyn', *Hatikkvob*, 7/1934.

As getting rabbis to work in Norway was a challenge throughout the inter-war period, we do not know whether the hiring of Samuel was a conscious decision based on his outlook, or if it was a mere coincidence. Nevertheless, Samuel actively supported the merger of a religious and national Jewish sense of belonging in lectures, sermons and by means of exemplification. While he scolded members of the community when they arranged non-religious events on Jewish holidays, he also took part in such social happenings when it was appropriate.³¹ He never downplayed the importance of the religious congregation, but often added that the Jewish question was also a national question and that Zionism was a 'new chance' for the future of Jews.³² It is doubtful that he advocated a reform of Judaism, as his Danish colleague Melchior did, but he certainly upheld that Jewish living had to relate to its non-Jewish surroundings.

Bridging two nations: becoming Jewish Norwegians

On the one hand, Samuel was stating the obvious when he advocated a life in close contact with society at large. Only a handful, and of those most were first-generation immigrants, expressed the view that isolation was the best solution to the problem of acculturation. However, Samuel seems to have been the first religious leader to deliberately participate in public debates, and thus break ranks with the strategy of a 'low profile integration' previously upheld by the community (Gjernes 2007). He expressed his opinions readily in the media; he wrote for non-Jewish magazines and lectured to non-Jewish audiences. Hence, while in Samuel the Oslo Jews were exposed to a continental Jewishness that to a certain extent broke with their Eastern European background and views, most members of the community did not regard isolation as an option.³³ One example is that a will to integrate seems to have guided them in preferring public instead of Jewish-run schools, as the only Scandinavian Jewish community to do so.³⁴ At times, the Norwegian Jews were so preoccupied with their Norwegian-ness that attending the yearly Holmenkollrenn (an international ski jumping competition held in Oslo) was stated as the reason for the low attendance at an I.U.F. meeting.³⁵

31 Letter from Rabbi Julius Samuel, *Hatikwoh*, 1/1936.

32 E.g. Julius Samuel, 'Rosch Haschonoh 5695. Tilbakeblikk og utsyn', *Hatikwoh*, 7/1934.

33 For example, Israel Levin, 'Zionismen og Golusspørsmålet', lecture given at the I.U.F., 8.12.1925, in *Israeliten*, 1/1926; Moriz Rabinowitz, 'Hatikwoh (håpet)', *Hatikwoh*, 9/1939.

34 'En ny jødisk ungdom', lecture at the I.U.F., 15.3.1937, in *Hatikwoh*, 4/1937.

35 Minutes from a meeting held at the I.U.F., 13.3.1931, in *Hatikwoh*, 3/1932.

On the other hand, there were limits to the amount of contact it was deemed appropriate to make with the outside world, and the most visible of these was a firm resistance to mixed marriages. The prevention of such relationships was one of the main reasons for establishing the I.U.F. and later its Nordic counterpart, as stated by the rules of the organizations. Further, such marriages caused expulsion from the same associations. While the main reason for this resistance was the matrilineal definition of a Jewish person being a child born of a Jewish mother, it was also firmly believed that these marriages inevitably led to complete assimilation. Given that the community regarded the impact of the majority society to be so strong that they developed conscious strategies to counteract it, the attitude is hardly surprising. In addition, as mentioned briefly above, they knew from first-hand experience what these relations had resulted in in Sweden and Denmark. Conversions to Judaism seem to have been rare, and not completely accepted.

It was believed that the correct choice of a spouse was vital for the maintenance of a Jewish home. In this respect women had a specific role; to give the children a Jewish upbringing and hence teach them 'where they belong' at an early age.³⁶ Therefore, men marrying non-Jewish women, who seem to have been more frequent than their gender opposites, were problematic. Further, as in the case of the *cheider*, an important concern involved the children of such relationships. It was presumed that these would receive a much weaker Jewish upbringing, if any at all, and unavoidably lose their Jewishness.³⁷ Children were regarded as the link between the past and the future, and it was of the utmost importance, in particular because of the modest number of Jews in Norway, that they were able to continue the Jewish legacy.³⁸

Interestingly, the attitude towards mixed marriages changed profoundly in the second half of the 1930s. From being the most proactive in the Nordic Youth Association regarding the prevention of such relationships, and defenders of the exclusion clause in particular, leading members of the I.U.F., including its *grand old man* Aron Grusd, spoke in favour of abolition of the rule.³⁹ He maintained that over the years he had seen several examples of intermarriages that did not lead to assimilation and that eventually had convinced him that

36 Ed., 'Hen til jødedom', *Israeliten*, 1/1922. For the role of women in Jewish families in the first decades of the twentieth century, see, e.g., Kaplan 1991.

37 For example, I. Levin, 'Assimilation', *Israeliten*, 11/1918. The article was reprinted because of its relevance in *Hatikvoh*, 6/1931.

38 Unknown, 'Feriekolonisaken', *Israeliten*, 10/1921.

39 Unknown, 'Jødisk Ungdomsforening', *Hatikvoh*, 1/1936.

the clause was unnecessary. In addition he argued that they could not afford to be selective – every individual was needed to preserve the Jewish community.

Another important boundary against the non-Jewish world was the maintenance of the Sabbath – at least publicly. While it was tolerated that many needed to work or keep their shops open on Saturdays for economic reasons, not observing the Sabbath otherwise was frowned upon and the Scandinavian Youth Association tried to help those who did not want to work on Saturdays to find jobs. Hence, when pious individuals observed Jewish children doing errands for their parents, or youths attending sports events on that day, it was criticized publicly.⁴⁰ In fact, the main reason for setting up Jewish sports associations was to prevent community members from participating or competing on Jewish holidays and the Sabbath.⁴¹ However, when Jews did well in sports as members of non-Jewish teams, it was duly, and with a sense of pride, noted in *Hatikvoh*. Lastly, the issue of obligatory schooling on Saturdays was resolved by the community coming to an agreement with the authorities that Jewish children would attend, but not be forced to write, on Saturdays.

The future of the youth

The narrative of loss, operationalized, among other things, in the concept of ‘assimilation’, was for a long time a common feature of Jewish history writing dealing with the transition to modernity and post-emancipatory developments in Europe (van Rahden 2005, Frankel 1992). Further, the historian Bernhard Wasserstein has argued that the dissolution of a Jewish Europe began in the 1880s, when the large-scale emigration of Jews began (Wasserstein 1996: 283ff).

However, as Todd M. Endelman argues, such understandings have been ‘ideologically predisposed’ by the predominant Zionist rejection of the diaspora of the time, and in the last couple of decades the concepts have been re-evaluated and nuanced (Endelman 2011: 51). Guided by gender studies and other disciplines, there is now a common acceptance that processes of assimilation were less common compared to acculturation, and that the idea of assimilation has often had a moralistic undertone that characterizes unwanted developments within Jewry, be it religious, national or cultural (e.g. Hyman 1995).

Despite the scholarly development of the concept, this article demonstrates that there was a genuine concern among European Jews in the interwar period

40 For example, Bob, ‘Blir vor ungdom fordærvet?’, *Israeliten*, 11/1918.

41 Aron Grus, remark made at S.J.U.F.’s Congress, July 1919, in *Israeliten*, 6/1919.

concerning the future of the Jews, and that this was also shared by the newly immigrant Jews of Norway. However, the Norwegian case clearly demonstrates that the concept of loss is indeed inadequate when explaining their concerns. Instead of mourning the past, the Norwegian Jews, and in particular the children of the immigrant generation, also looked to other constructions of Jewishness for conceptualizing their future as Jews. Interestingly, by utilizing phenomena such as 'traditions' or 'Zionism', which are essentialist in nature, they in fact created a versatile version of Jewishness fit for the future and labelled it 'national work'.

Further, I have not discussed in depth how external factors, such as the religiously and ethnically homogeneous Norwegian society, or its attitude towards Jews and other strangers, played a part in defining their Jewishness. It is clear that the adoption of a low profile, previously mentioned, was to some extent caused by a society that did not encourage Jewish immigration, but there were relatively few openly hostile incidents, and all were of a written or oral nature. While there is no doubt that the fear of antisemitism guided the public behaviour of many Jews (Banik 2015b) they did not succumb to the fear by becoming assimilated.

Drawing on the inspiration of the postcolonial works of Stuart Hall, we see that their identity as Jews had a cultural starting point and was shaped not only by a fixed idea of origin but also by history's ruptures and discontinuities, such as the dissolution of the *shtetl* life and migration from east to west, and how these shaped them in the present and thus also in the future (Hall 1990). Being Jewish in the interwar period was an ongoing process of positioning along parallel, and sometimes convergent or crossing lines, consisting on the one hand of religious, traditional, national and cultural understandings of Jewishness, and, on the other hand, the attitudes and actions towards Jews and Jewish perceptions of 'Norwegian-ness'.

In contrast to Stuart Hall's work on Black Caribbeans, the empirical evidence presented in this article strongly points to a group that were far from victims of its non-Jewish surroundings. While Jews certainly were constructed as an 'Other' in the period, and had been the European 'Other' for centuries, they only to a certain extent accepted that label. The Jews in Norway utilized their 'Otherness' to become Jewish in new ways.

The emphasis on 'national work' implies that the concept of *Galuth*, the diaspora experience as an entirely negative condition, as argued by Zionists of the time, was not generally recognized among the Norwegian Jews. The absence of such an understanding underlines my claim that Zionism was regarded as a tool for defining their Jewish identity as well as an expression of nationalist

aspirations as such. They regarded themselves as members of an imagined *Jewish* community, demonstrated by a concern for the victims of pogroms, antipathy towards the Israel Mission and pride in Jewish actresses, which they strove to preserve and support – a community defining itself beyond the narrow constraints of Zionism (Anderson 1991).

Nonetheless, Zionism became increasingly important, and while they rarely considered moving to *Erez Israel*, the idea of a cultural and spiritual centre in the lands of Biblical times was appealing to many. Lastly, the hiring of Rabbi Samuel unified religion and Zionism as a definition of Jewishness in a way that included most members of the community.

When compared internationally, the chosen ‘survival strategies’ are hardly surprising. However, it is interesting to discuss what were the strategies that were omitted as well. For example, the stress on Jewish culture and traditions did not include an emphasis on, or revival of, the Yiddish culture which did take place in other Jewish communities (Fishman 2005).⁴² Yiddish was a means of communication mostly for the first generation immigrants, less so for the subsequent ones. While they read I. L. Perez and other Yiddish writers, put on plays by them, and enjoyed the work of Yiddish performers visiting Norway, the relatively coherent ideology that constituted Yiddishism were absent. For example, their periodicals, as opposed to some in Denmark and Sweden, were always printed in Norwegian. Rather, the features of Yiddish culture seem to have been subsumed into the much larger ‘Jewish culture’ or ‘national work’ analysed above.

Related to the lack of interest in Yiddishism is the fact that while they sometimes expressed nostalgic views when they discussed the parlous state of the Norwegian Jews, there seem to have been few that longed for the actual life that they had left behind in Eastern Europe. In a report on his travels in Lithuania, submitted to *Hatikvoh* by Harry Koritzinsky, he expresses how he was fascinated to be part of the majority population in the first ‘real Jewish village’ he had ever visited.⁴³ However, he also saw its limitations as a provider of the Jewish life he wanted, and he characterizes the lives of those living outside the big cities as constrained.⁴⁴ He was also fully aware of the poverty that many lived in, and that antisemitic experiences were a part of their daily lives. It is evident that his Jewish future was perceived by him to be somewhere else.

42 For an interesting personal account on Yiddish pre-WWII Denmark, see Beilin (2001). For a brief overview of Yiddish in the Nordic countries, see Thing (2008).

43 Harry Koritzinsky, ‘Fra en reise i Lithauen og Polen I’, *Hatikvoh*, 8/1933.

44 Harry Koritzinsky, ‘Fra en reise i Lithauen og Polen III’, *Hatikvoh*, 10/1933.

Possibly, but not necessarily, related to the absence of *Yiddishkeit* among Norwegian Jews, is the absence of Jewish political parties. While there certainly were Jewish individuals with political sympathies, and while their social position implies that a substantial number would have socialist or communist leanings, they never initiated a chapter of Bund, the Jewish socialist movement. By contrast, the *Ostjuden* of Copenhagen initiated such a chapter as early as in 1905 (Thing 2008: 278). Again, as in the case of schooling, the Norwegian Jews chose to join the already existing organizations in the wider society in which they found themselves.

As the *Ostjuden* were already in the majority when the congregations and associations were established, the tendency to stigmatize these as the Jewish ‘Other’ was a less prominent feature than in most other places, including Sweden and Denmark. While there was a hierarchy based on income, cultural background was less important. The homogeneity of the group, despite its internal strifes and struggles, was most likely an advantage for them, as there seem to have been a kind of overall agreement of what constituted a Jew and how Jewishness was best maintained. Further, what the community at the time regarded as its major weaknesses; their modest numbers, their economic position, and their lack of social recognition, may also have worked to their advantage. From a very early stage they debated who they were as Jews, who they wanted to be and what was needed to do to become such an individual and community. While they did not always succeed, there is reason to believe that their efforts contributed to the fact that the Norwegian Jews were less acculturated than their Scandinavian counterparts at the outbreak of Second World War. They were, by their own choice, *Jewish Norwegians*.

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