

‘A Melancholy Enterprise’? Revisiting German and Jewish Minorities’ Cooperation in Interwar Europe (1925-1933)

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Prologue

The annual gathering of the Congress of European Nationalities in Bern in September 1933 did not go as planned. Its second biggest delegation, which represented Jewish minorities, demonstratively left the Congress after its demand for an explicit condemnation of the Nazi policies against the Jews in Germany was declined by the majority of delegates. The edifice of ethnic minorities’ unity, common tasks and transnational cooperation, painstakingly built over years, was shattered to smithereens.

Founded eight years previously by the Estonian German Ewald Ammende, the Congress (1925-1938) purported to bring together European ethnic minorities – who by the mid-twenties were getting increasingly disillusioned with the Minority Treaties that had promised equality on paper but failed to deliver it in practice – and to provide them with a platform to discuss common issues and exchange best practices. The Congress set up its headquarters in Geneva, in close proximity to the League of Nations, which it optimistically hoped to advise on minority matters. At the height of its days, the ENC could claim 200 delegates from 15 European states representing 20 different minority groups.¹ The two strongest factions (in numbers, as well as in influence) within the Congress were the Germans and the Jews; those, in the words of Mark Mazower, ‘two great minorities of 1918’ spearheaded minority rights struggle during the interwar period, often making electoral alliances on the domestic scene, as well as joining forces internationally. Initially dismissed out of hand by both the national governments and the League of Nations, the Congress had been painstakingly building its reputation of ‘the authorised mouthpiece of the national minorities of Europe’, as a League’s official would describe it in retrospect.²

¹ The 219 delegates (including six observers and a representative ‘without a country’, Leo Motzkin of the *Comité des Délégations Juives*) that gathered during 1925-1937 hailed from Poland (51 delegates), Romania (29), Czechoslovakia (29), Spain (23), Germany (13), Yugoslavia (12), Latvia (12), Estonia (11), Austria (11), Italy (9), Hungary (9), Lithuania (4), Bulgaria (93), Belgium (1), and Denmark (1). Together they represented 20 minority groups: Germans, Jews, Catalans, Ukrainians, Hungarians, Russians, Poles, Czechs, Bulgarians, Basques, Lithuanians, Slovenians, Sorbs, Belarussians, Danes, Greeks, Swedes, Galicians, Croats, and Romanians. (Bamberger-Stemann 2000: 11, 118)

² Pablo Azcarate, *League of Nations and National Minorities. An Experiment* (Washington: 1945).

But all of these years of hard work were now in danger of being undone – several days prior to the start of the Congress, its President Josip Wilfan, himself a Slovene from Trieste, received an official statement from one his Vice-Presidents, the head of the Jewish faction Leo Motzkin. Motzkin, on behalf of all Jewish members, declared that unless the Congress agreed to issue an explicit condemnation of the Nazi policies against Jews in Germany, the Jewish faction would not attend the gathering in Bern, or, indeed, any future Congress's gatherings.³ The Jewish statement was not exactly news to either Wilfan or Ammende, who, over the past couple of weeks, had been desperately trying to patch things up between the Jewish and German delegations (the latter had objected to a statement explicitly mentioning Germany, insisting on a purely 'academic' discussion), but it was the final ultimatum. In the remaining few days until the official start of the Congress, Wilfan and Ammende doubled their efforts in trying to reach a compromise between the two parties, but neither would budge. The 9th Congress of European Nationalities went ahead without the Jews.

Their absence would inevitably undermine the unity of the organisation's remaining members, and the overall significance of the Congress would dramatically fade in the coming years. The now-unrivalled German faction would get the main say in all the Congress's decisions, and, with the majority of the German delegates increasingly looking towards the Third Reich, the organisation would eventually become a mouthpiece of the Nazis, rather than of minorities it claimed to represent – before finally ceasing to exist in 1938.

Introduction

The events of September 1933 and the subsequent Nazi takeover would cast a long shadow over the Congress. In the post-war climate of minority rights retreat, the organisation that in 1932 was singled out by a British liberal politician as 'markedly not encouraging extremist claims'⁴, started being viewed by historians as a Trojan horse for revisionist minorities.⁵ The unprecedented democratic cooperation among European ethnic minorities at the international level, which the Congress embodied in the 1920s, was seemingly irreversibly eclipsed by the grave post-1933 developments. The organisation was now seen, absurdly, as a decades-long ruse cunningly designed by the German minorities with a view of serving the purposes of the future Third Reich.

With the fall of the iron Curtain and the consequent 'revival' of minority rights in the face of numerous ethnic conflicts in the post-socialist Europe, that negative attitude has slowly started to shift. Most recent studies of the Congress portray its democratic period in the 1920s as a rallying point for liberally-minded minority rights activists who engaged in a brave attempt of internationalising minority

³ For the full text of the letter dated 8 September 1933, see *Sitzungsbericht des Kongresses der organisierten nationalen Gruppen in den Staaten Europas. Bern, 16. bis 19. September 1933* (Wien: 1934).

⁴ Noel Buxton; House of Lords Debates on 15 June 1932, *Hansard*, vol. 84, p. 888.

⁵ Sabine Bamberger-Stemmann 2000 **ADD REFERENCES**

rights ‘from below’, to complement the effort of the League to internationalise them ‘from above’ with the help of the Minority Treaties.⁶ But if the dark cloud shrouding the Congress’s past was lifted, it has not been dispelled for good. Relatively recent studies in Jewish history still casually depict the Congress and the German-Jewish cooperation on minority matters as a clever German ploy.⁷

In the wise words of Mosse and Vago, ‘Men cannot see into the future, and it may be well to keep in mind when judging many of the men and events ... The may seem futile or even bizarre in retrospect, but all historical events must be seen within and not without their span of time.’⁸ This paper will re-examine the history of the Jewish and German minorities short-lived collaboration during the interwar years within its own span of time, by tracing the origins of that cooperation to the times long preceding the aggressive foreign policies of the Reich, and by following its main protagonists, Jewish and German minority activists, from the local scene in Poland, Romania and Latvia to the international minorities forum in Geneva before analysing the events leading to the split between the two minorities in 1933. In conclusion, the paper will contemplate some of the initial preconditions for successful interethnic minority cooperation.

The peculiar alliance – or else, as it became known, a ‘problematic symbiosis’ – between the Germans and the Jews up to the 1930s has been extensively studied by scholars, primarily from a cultural angle.⁹ For some reason, the two minorities’ collaboration in the field of minority rights in post-Versailles Europe attracted much less attention; whilst some instances of German-Jewish political cooperation in specific East European countries have been previously addressed in literature¹⁰, the full scope of this pan-European, transnational phenomenon that, arguably, left a deep mark on our understanding of minority rights in theory and practice, remains largely unexamined. This omission is

⁶ John Hiden *Defender of Minorities* (London, 2004); John Hiden and David J Smith *Ethnic Diversity and the Nation-State* (London and New York, 2012); Martyn Housden *On their Own Behalf* (Amsterdam and New York, 2014); Ferenc Eiler ‘The Congress of European Nationalities and the International Protection of Minority Rights, 1925-1938’, in: Anna Mária Bíró (ed.) *Populism, Memory and Minority Rights* (Leiden, 2018); David J Smith, Marina Germane and Martyn Housden ‘Forgotten Europeans: transnational minority activism in the age of European integration’, *Nations and Nationalism*, xxv, ii.

⁷ Loeffler, Weiss

⁸ George Mosse and Bela Vago ‘Preface’, in: Bela Vago and George L. Mosse (eds) *Jews and Non-Jews in Eastern Europe, 1918-1945*, (New York, 1974), xvi-xvii.

⁹ See, for example, Gershom Scholem, ‘Jews and Germans’, ‘The German-Jewish Dialogue’ and ‘Once More: The German-Jewish Dialogue’, in: Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis. Selected Essays*. (Philadelphia, 2012); David Bronsen (ed.), *Jews and Germans from 1860 to 1933: The Problematic Symbiosis*. (Heidelberg, 1979); and Tobias Grill (ed.), *Jews and Germans in Eastern Europe. Shared and Comparative Histories*. (Berlin, 2018).

¹⁰ Mariana Hausleitner, ‘Transformations in the relationship between Jews and Germans in the Bukovina 1910-1945’, in: Tobias Grill (ed.) *Jews and Germans in Eastern Europe* (Munich, 2018); Marina Germane, ‘P. Schiemann, M. Laserson and Cultural Autonomy: A Case Study from Interwar Latvia’, in: Ephraim Nimni, David J Smith and Alexander Osipov (eds), *The Challenge of Non-Territorial Autonomy: Theory and Case Studies* (Bern, 2013).

particularly startling if one takes into account the remarkable similarities between the two minority groups, as summed up by Ezra Mendelsohn: both were extraterritorial minorities who spoke their own language; both professed a religion – for the Germans, often; for Jews, always – different from the majority population. Both were predominantly urban minorities whose moderate elements were keen on integrating into the life of their host societies, becoming, respectively, Hungarian Germans, or Latvian Jews. Both were being constantly challenged by more extreme types advocating either German nationalism or radical Zionism. In the 1930s, faced with oppressive regimes at home and disappointed in the League of Nations, both started looking elsewhere: East Germans – toward the Reich, and Jews – toward Palestine.¹¹

There were also two significant differences: unlike Germans, Jews had never been in a privileged position under the old imperial order; nor did they possess a kin state. However, in the eyes of their new masters – predominantly agrarian states – Jews possessed disproportionate economic power, domineering urban middle classes, industries and professions, as well as being overrepresented in higher education. During the interwar period, international Jewish organisations such as the British Joint Foreign Committee, the French *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, and – from 1936 – also the World Jewish Congress advocating on behalf of East European Jews often acted as kin-state proxies.

Besides all these similarities in the situation that both minorities found themselves in the aftermath of World War One, there was a pre-existing cultural affinity, a somewhat uneasy relationship between the two that the Prague intellectual Max Brod aptly named as the *Distanzliebe*¹². The roots of the significance of German culture in Jewish life of Central and Eastern Europe prior to World War Two had been traced back to the German enlightenment of the 17th-18th centuries, which served as the main impulse for the Jews' own enlightenment, the *Haskalah*, paving the way for Jewish modernity from Russia to the Balkans, and eventually leading to political emancipation. As Adolf Jellinek, the famous Viennese Jewish preacher and scholar of the 19th century, wrote in a 1848 article, 'To feel German means to feel free'.¹³

Early Zionists unsuccessfully tried to capitalise on this cultural affinity, presenting Eastern European Jewish communities as the outposts of German culture to the German Foreign Office. An ill-judged attempt at joining forces with the *Auswärtiges Amt* was made by German Zionists at the outbreak of World War One, in order to fight the "sole" enemy of Zionism, the Russian Empire. The project was quickly brought to a halt amidst the loud protests within the World Zionist organisation against this blatant breach of neutrality – the Central Zionist Office was, for good measure, moved from

¹¹ Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East and Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington, 1983).

¹² Max Brod, *Der Prager Kreis* (Frankfurt am Main, 1979).

¹³ As cited in: Robert S Wistrich, 'The modernisation of Viennese Jewry: The Impact of German Culture in a Multi-Ethnic State', in Jacob Katz (ed.), *Toward Modernity. The European Jewish Model* (London and New York, 1987).

Berlin to neutral Copenhagen.¹⁴ Nevertheless, East European Jews continued to be perceived, to their own detriment, as ‘pioneers of Germanness’.¹⁵ Those suspicions were stoked up by the preferential treatment often meted out to the Jews in the occupied countries by the Germans, some dictated by sheer convenience (like a better knowledge of German among Jews), others clearly targeting the segregated Jewish population as the perfect subversion material, prompting forced evacuations of Jews away from the approaching front line. And although the vast majority of East European Jews shied away from the Germans’ unwanted advances, the stigma of being the ‘German allies’ would be opportunistically exploited by local nationalists for years to come.¹⁶ The alleged treachery was also used as a justification for the escalating wave of antisemitic violence that washed over the Central and Eastern Europe in the last days of the Great War, demonstrating that the newly liberated East European nations could rival the late Russian Empire in its proverbial antisemitism.

These alarming developments prompted the World Zionist Organisation to issue the so-called Copenhagen Manifesto in October 1918, which was co-authored, along with Victor Jacobson, by the future Vice-President of the Nationalities Congress Leo Motzkin (1867-1933).

The Ukraine-born Motzkin, who had lived in Berlin since the age of 15 and became fully integrated into the life of ‘Western’, German Jewry – whilst remaining fully aware of the plight of the Russian Jews – was an early, pre-Herzlian Zionist. Under the influence of Nathan Birnbaum’s Jewish autonomy and self-emancipation ideas, he founded the famous Russian-Jewish Scientific Society in Berlin in 1889, which became a crucible for future Zionist leaders (Chaim Weizmann, who was also a member, regarded Motzkin as his mentor). Motzkin was one of Herzl’s most important recruits and, at the same time, one of his most vociferous critics, albeit loyal to the end. A founder – along with Weizmann and Martin Buber – of the short-lived Democratic Faction (*Demokratische Fraktion*) that sought to challenge Herzl’s Byzantine-style leadership of the Zionist Organisation, Motzkin since early days believed in the importance of the work in the diaspora in addition to the struggle for a Jewish home in Palestine, and in cultural autonomy for the Jewish people combined with democratic political participation in their countries of residence.¹⁷ The *Gegenwartsarbeit* (a concept popularised, among others, by Martin Buber¹⁸), took central stage at the 3rd Congress of Russian Zionists in Helsingfors in 1906, causing lively debates. Motzkin, along with Yitzhak Gruenbaum from Poland and Vladimir Jabotinsky from Odessa, was one of its main proponents. It was therefore only logical that the Manifesto penned by Motzkin together with Jacobson demanded not just political and civic equality, but also

¹⁴ Max Bodenheimer, *Prelude to Israel. The Memoirs of M. I. Bodenheimer*. (New York, 1963); Chaim Weizmann, *Trial and Error. The Autobiography of Chaim Weizmann. Book One (1874-1917)* (Lexington, 2013).

¹⁵ Grill *Jews and Germans in Eastern Europe*, p?

¹⁶ Gruenbaum 1930, the Samuels Report LoN archive

¹⁷ Alex Bein (ed.) *Sefer Motzkin* (Jerusalem, 1939); David Vital, *Zionism. the Formative Years* (Oxford, 1982); Ben Halpern *A Clash of Heroes. Brandeis, Weizmann, and American Zionism* (New York, 1987).

¹⁸ Buber ‘Gegenwartsarbeit’ 1901

social, cultural, and political autonomy for the Jews, as well as the admission of the Jewish people to the League of Nations as equal members.

But what the Manifesto's authors did not lack in courage and political imagination, they certainly lacked both in clout and means. Whilst the British, French and American Jews all sent their delegations to the Peace Conference to lobby the peacemakers, the largely impoverished East European Jews, despite being absolutely determined to make their input, faced great logistical difficulties. It was the new German Republic that extended a helping hand: understandably concerned about the vulnerable position of the newly created German minorities, Berlin had its own interest in the Jewish initiative. Besides, apart from the official German delegation that was kept at separate quarters in Versailles, Germans were not welcome in Paris (in fact, Reifer mentions that Jewish delegates from German Austria were also denied visas).¹⁹ The German Foreign Ministry therefore assisted Jewish emissaries from all across East and Central Europe in travelling to Paris, as well as providing maximum publicity for anti-Jewish incidents.²⁰

The scope of representation furnished by the Committee remains a bone of contention among scholars (Hannah Arendt, for one, took a very sceptical view of it).²¹ East Europeans, for one, seem to have been represented rather well: sources mention delegates of sixteen national councils, federations, and associations, 'not only Zionist, but all-Jewish', from all around the world; as well as delegations from Eastern and Western Galicia, Czechoslovakia, Bukovina, Transylvania, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, Italy, Romania, Bessarabia, and – upon Motzkin's initiative – also from Palestine.²²

A new wave of pogroms broke out in Pinsk and Vilna in March and April 1919. Exactly at that time, the American Jewish delegation belatedly arrived in Paris, armed with their own Jewish Bill of Rights (adopted, in December 1918, by the newly created American Jewish Congress, the Bill did not go as far as the Copenhagen Manifesto, but similarly included not just demands for civic and political equality, but also the 'autonomous management of minorities' own communal institutions'²³). The Americans joined the already established, by Motzkin and Nahum Sokolow, Committee of Jewish Delegations at the Paris Peace Conference (*Comité des Délégations Juives auprès de la Conférence de la Paix*), a body of common Jewish representation created by the decision of the World Zionist Conference in London in March 1919.

¹⁹ Manfred Reifer 'Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina (1919-1944)', in: Hugo Gold (ed.) *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina*, Vol. 2, (1962, Tel Aviv: Lidor Press), p. 3.

²⁰ Carole Fink *Defending the Rights of Others. The Great Powers, the Jews, and International Minority protection, 1878-1938*. (2004, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

²¹ See Hannah Arendt 'The Minority Question', in: Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (eds) *Hannah Arendt. The Jewish Writings* (New York, 2007).

²² Florian Sokolow, *Nahum Sokolow. Life and Legend* (London, 1975), p. 179. Reifer 'Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina', p. 3.

²³ A. Leon Kubowitzki (ed.) *Unity in Dispersion, A History of the World Jewish Congress* (New York, 1948).

The role of the Committee in helping to formulate the Minority Treaties is well documented; and so are its internal tensions.²⁴ The main dividing line lay between the West European Jewry, represented by the conservative Joint Foreign Delegation of the British Jews and the even more conservative French Alliance Israelite Universelle (whose leaders were well accustomed to dignified quiet lobbying of their prospective governments behind the scene) and the East Europeans, with their loud demands of political equality and autonomy. The American delegation acted as a mediator between the warring factions.

In the end, a compromise was reached, and the somewhat watered-down Jewish desiderata were submitted to the peacemakers. It is fair to say that both parties contributed equally: whilst the Westerners carried more clout and were more skilled in diplomatic negotiations, the true authorship of the ideas behind their lobbying efforts belonged to the Easterners.

Although the final version of the League's Covenant contained no reference to minorities, minority rights were firmly attached to the conditions of new statehood, and the Polish Minority Treaty was the first to be – reluctantly, on the Polish part – signed in June 1919, serving as a template to the other minority treaties and unilateral declarations.

The Committee of Jewish Delegations dropped the second part of its long name, and became, under the leadership of Motzkin, a permanent establishment striving to represent East European Jews at the League of Nations²⁵ – its efforts being constantly rivalled by both the *Alliance*, and the Joint Foreign Committee (the latter almost single-handedly run by the indefatigable Lucien Wolf). As those two organisations were favoured by the heavy-weight members of the League, namely France and Britain, they had much easier access to the Minorities Secretariat of the League, being a tough act for Motzkin to follow. The American Jews, trusting the League, if not the newly created East European republics, were also opposed to the establishment of a permanent Jewish body overseeing the implementation of the treaties. Such an organisation, in their opinion, could only serve to further irritate the new democracies that already felt profound resentment towards the imposition of Minority Treaties. In the end, the only – scarce – financial support that Motzkin was able to obtain for the Committee came from the Zionist Organisation, provided somewhat begrudgingly and mostly out of respect for Motzkin himself. Constantly besieged by financial difficulties, the Committee would have to rely, in its future work, on the dedicated Jewish parliamentarians in their respective countries.²⁶

The German delegation's counterproposal to the Allies' conditions of peace included a notion that 'Germany advocates in principle the protection of national minorities' within the scope of the League of Nations, as well as being resolved to treat minorities of alien origin in her territories according

²⁴ Janowski, Fink

²⁵ *Extracts from the Reports of the Executive of the Zionist Organisation to the Twelfth Zionist Congress (Carlsbad, September 1921)* (London: 1921), pp. 19-20.

²⁶ Yitzhak Gruenbaum 'Motzkin's Vicissitudes', in: Alex Bein, *Sefer Motzkin*, pp. 22-25 (translated from Hebrew by Assaf Costi).

to the same principles.²⁷ Shortly before the Versailles Treaty was signed on 28th June 1919, the German Government issued the *Appeal to the German People* that made it apparent that the fate of the Germans separated from the Reich was high on the list of priorities of the Weimar Republic: ‘We shall never forget those who are to be severed from us. They are flesh of our flesh. Wherever it can be done, we shall take their part as if it were our own. They will be torn from the Reich, but they will not be torn from our hearts’.²⁸ And so the post-war European scene was set, and in the early 1920s, East European minorities, having taken the promises handed out to them by the peacemakers at face value, started enthusiastically building their community lives in their new democratic homelands, with the Jews and the Germans being in the lead. The next section will identify the leading German and Jewish minority politicians in Poland, Romania, and Latvia and examine the origins of collaboration among them whilst considering their personal backgrounds against the backdrop of local politics.

EXERCISING MINORITY RIGHTS IN NEW DEMOCRACIES

The most famous instance of German-Jewish political cooperation is the Minorities Bloc created during the Polish *Sejm* elections of 1922. The previous election, to the Constituent Sejm (1919-1921), was confined to the areas under Polish control and only later extended to include the ex-Prussian province and eastern borderlands. Thus the Belarussian and Ukrainian minorities were not represented at the Sejm until 1921; the seven German deputies present were largely silent in the immediate aftermath of the war; and it fell to the eleven Jewish deputies to represent the interests of all minorities – something they undertook ‘with more valour than prudence’, and to the detriment of their relations with the majority nation.²⁹

The electoral law adopted by the Assembly in 1921 for the elections to the *Sejm* and the Senate was democratic at first blush, but it favoured large parties over small ones (thus immediately putting minorities at a disadvantage), whilst gerrymandering in the east made the election of Ukrainian and Belarussian deputies and senators particularly difficult. Under the circumstances, if Polish ethnically, religiously, socially and politically diverse minorities wanted to have a say in parliamentary politics, they needed to combine their efforts.

These developments prompted two minority leaders, the head of the German faction in the Polish Senate Erwin Hasbach (1876 -1970), a German estate owner from Thorn (Torún), Pomerelia (Pomorze Wschodnie), and a Zionist from Warsaw, the MP Yitzhak Gruenbaum (1879-1970), to initiate

²⁷ As cited in Alma Luckau, *The German Delegation at the Paris Peace Conference* (New York, 1971), 325.

²⁸ Luckau, *The German Delegation*, 496.

²⁹ Joseph Rothschild ‘Ethnic Peripheries Versus Ethnic Cores: Jewish Political Strategies in Interwar Poland’ (1981-2 *Political Science Quarterly*, Volume 96, Number 4 (Winter), pp. 591-606), p. 597.

a united list for the German, Jewish, Ukrainian, and Belarussian minorities in the elections of 1922 – an idea that was not universally supported by any of the four minorities due to their internal divisions.

Historians emphasise the regional differences within the German minority in Poland, and cite frequent disagreements between the Germans of Pomerelia and those of Poznan and Upper Silesia; another dividing line was between the Germans in Congress Poland, and the ones in the newly acquired territories.³⁰ Overall, Germans from West Poland were more inclined to look towards the Reich rather than to seek building bridges with other Polish Germans, not to mention other ethnic groups. Against this background, Hasbach, a conservative-nationalist German senator from Pomerelia, cuts an intriguing figure.

Hasbach's unorthodox behaviour could have something to do with the fact that as a scion to a textile manufacturers' dynasty, he was actually born and raised on the family estate Dojlidy near Bialystok, a Polish town in the east. Until World War One, Bialystok lied within the Russian Empire's Pale of settlement, and the majority of its population was Jewish. The highly-educated Hasbachs were music and theatre enthusiasts, and Polish intelligentsia mingled with Germans at their regular soirees. The family library featured a vast collection of Polish literature, and young Erwin was given Polish lessons. He later studies agriculture at the university of Halle.³¹

As for Gruenbaum, by 1922 he was an experienced Zionist who, together with Motzkin and the future leader of Revisionist Zionists Vladimir Jabotinsky, pushed through the *Gegenwartsarbeit* resolution at the 3rd Congress of Russian Zionists in Helsingfors in 1906. It must be said that, his collaboration with the Russian Zionist Organisation notwithstanding, Gruenbaum 'had always seen himself a Polish (as opposed to a 'Russian') Jew'.³² Polish Zionists were at the time treated with deference by the Russians; Jabotinsky repeatedly describes them as the East European Zionist 'elite' in his recollections of that period.³³ Polish was Gruenbaum's native tongue; under his mother's tutelage, he grew up as familiar with Adam Mickiewicz's poetry as he was with Jewish history. Besides being the Head of the Zionist Federation of Poland, as well as an internationally recognised Zionist leader (David Engel, for example, describes Gruenbaum as 'arguably the Jewish political leader with the

³⁰See Edward D. Wynot 'The Polish Germans, 1919-1939: National Minority in a Multinational State' (1972, *The Polish Review*, Volume 17, Issue 1 (Winter), pp. 23-64); Richard Blanke *Orphans of Versailles. The Germans in Western Poland 1918-1939*. (1993, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky); and Winston Chu 2012 *The German Minority in Interwar Poland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Chu *The German Minority*.; Blanke *Orphans of Versailles*; Chu *The German Minority*.

³¹Stefan Dyroff 'Als Deutscher unter Polen. Die Erinnerungen von Senator Erwin Hasbach', unpublished presentation given at the Workshop 'Deutsche in Polen und deutsch-polnische Beziehungsgeschichte. Neue historische und kulturwissenschaftliche Forschungsansätze' Essen, October 2016]. See also Elzbieta Kozłowska-Swiatkowska and Jozef Maroszek, *Hasbachowie. Z rodzinnego sztambucha*. (2011, Bialystok: Miedzynarodowe Stowarzyszenie Bialostoczan).

https://repozytorium.uwb.edu.pl/jspui/bitstream/11320/601/1/Hasbachowie_Z%20rodzinnego%20sztambucha_skladki_low%20res.pdf

³² Vital *A People Apart*, p. 781

³³ See, for example, Vladimir Jabotinsky, 'At the Cradle of the Helsingfors Programme', typed manuscript

largest following anywhere in the world' in the 1920s³⁴), he was well versed in Polish politics and strongly believed that Polish Jews should participate in municipal and parliamentary life of the new republic as equals.³⁵

Being fluent in the Polish language and steeped in Polish culture set Hasbach and Gruenbaum apart from most Polish minority MPs and senators of the time, making them more outspoken during the *Sejm* sessions, and willing to engage in active debates with their Polish counterparts. Overall, both were known for their assertive political stances, which were often considered too far-reaching, or even provocative, by certain sections of their respective ethnic groups and Poles alike; both were, however, grudgingly respected by fellow Polish parliamentarians.³⁶

Hasbach and Gruenbaum had taken first tentative steps towards cooperation in the last days of the Constituent Sejm, when the Jews had become frustrated with being dependent on the Polish Socialist Party, and the Germans had given up their futile attempts at lobbying the right-wing Polish parties. The two factions joined forces, but their combined votes of 21 were still not enough – further measures were needed in order to gain a voice in the *Sejm*.³⁷

Nevertheless, a minority bloc proved to be a controversial idea, the main opposition coming from within the Zionist camp. In a similar vein to the Germans, the internal divisions among Polish Jews reflected not just their economic situation and political allegiances, but also their differing previous experiences under one of the three former masters (Russians, Austrians, and Prussians). Consequently, the Galician Jewish leaders, in the tradition of the Habsburg Empire, advocated pragmatic cooperation with the authorities rather than an alliance with other minorities that they viewed as an open insurrection endangering the Jewish situation in Poland; their stance was shared by the Jews of Lwow and Cracow. In a somewhat surprising turn, the orthodox *Agudah Israel* lent its support to Gruenbaum, albeit stressing that it was only joining to uphold Jewish unity. The Jewish Left unanimously shunned the proposed alliance as a union with the 'bourgeois' – as well as antisemitic – Ukrainian and Belarussian minorities.³⁸

³⁴ David Engel, *The Assassination of Symon Petliura and the Trial of Sholem Schwarzbard, 1926-1927. A Selection of Documents* (Göttingen: 2016), a biographical note on p. 447.

³⁵ Ezra Mendelsohn, *Zionism in Poland. The Formative Years, 1915-1926* (New Haven, 1981); Shlomo Netzer 'Poland as the Core of the Jewish Diaspora: Jews and the March 1921 Polish Constitution', *Justice* No. 28 Summer 2001, pp. 19-23

³⁶ Ezra Mendelsohn 'The Dilemma of Jewish Politics in Poland: Four Responses', in: Bela Vago and George L. Mosse 'Jews and non-Jews in Eastern Europe, 1918-1945' (1974, New York and Toronto: John Wiley & Sons)

³⁷ Gruenbaum Milchamot

³⁸ Hirschhorn, S. 'Zydzi wobec bloku mniejszościowego' [Jews against the Minority Bloc], *Nasz Kurjer*, No. 270, 08.10.1922, p. 2; Politicus 'Czy istnieje solidarność mniejszościowa?' [Is there Minority Solidarity?], *Nasz Kurjer*, No. 254, 21.09.1922. See also Ezra Mendelsohn *Zionism in Poland. The Formative Years, 1915-1926*. (1981, New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p. 214; Celia S. Heller 1994 *On the Edge of Destruction. Jews of Poland between the Two World Wars*. (1994, Detroit: Wayne State University Press), p. 174.

The initiative was a great tactical success – the Minorities Bloc won 89 out of 444 seats in the *Sejm*, and 27 out of 111 in the Senate in total, with the Jews’ share being 36 seats in the *Sejm*, and 12 in the Senate. That dramatic increase in minority representation through a joint effort was heralded by Gruenbaum and his allies as a ‘truly historic event of outstanding importance’³⁹. Reality, however, soon dampened minorities’ hopes. The resulting representation was still lower than the overall proportion of minorities in the country, and simply not enough to carry sufficient weight in parliament, especially considering that even the Polish Left shunned cooperation with minorities. Internal disagreements and the absence of a united platform, rather than just purely tactical considerations, were also an obstacle in the path of the Minorities Bloc that for the rest of the term existed largely nominally.⁴⁰

Hasbach and Gruenbaum made two further attempts at a Minority bloc, during the parliamentary election of 1928, and then, after the Third Sejm’s dissolution, also in 1930. The differences among the minorities, however, were becoming more and more entrenched. In 1930, the Ukrainians refused to participate in a Minority Bloc on the grounds that in their respective regions, they constituted a majority, and that to maintain a union with the other, ‘scattered’ minorities was not in their interest. In this last attempt at minority cooperation in interwar Poland, the Zionists of Congress Poland under the leadership of Gruenbaum joined forces, in six regions, with the German minority of Central and Western Poland. In the end, only the Germans did well in the elections, whilst the Jewish seats were reduced to six – a total fiasco, largely blamed on Gruenbaum and his policies of ‘aggravating’ the Poles; in the aftermath of the disaster, Gruenbaum was forced to leave Poland for a while.⁴¹

By that time, Poland was already in the grip of the Great Depression; after the death of Stresemann in 1929, the Polish Germans were increasingly looking towards the Reich for protection, rather than asserting their rights in parliamentary struggles. As for the Polish Jews, the re-emergence of violent antisemitism in the 1930s led to the radicalisation of Jewish politics both on the Left and the Right, with the rise of Vladimir Jabotinsky’s Revisionism in the Zionist camp and the growing popularity of the Bund and the Communist Party.

In Romania, the Jews and the Germans most closely cooperated in the province of Bukovina, where different ethnic groups had enjoyed a significant degree of cultural autonomy within the latter-day Austro-Hungarian Empire as a result of the Bukovinian Compromise of 1909.⁴² It was in Bukovina

³⁹ Apollinary Hartglas, *Na pograniczu dwóch światów* (Warsaw: 1996), pp. 217-218

⁴⁰ See Rothschild ‘Ethnic Peripheries’ p. 597; Chu *The German Minority*, p. XX; Mendelsohn *The Dilemma*

⁴¹ Halpern, *Vital A People Apart*

⁴² Mariana Hausleitner 2018 ‘Transformations in the Relationship between Jews and Germans in the Bukovina 1910-1940’, in: Tobias Grill (ed.) *Jews and Germans in Eastern Europe. Shared and Comparative Histories*. Berlin, 2018); on the Bukovinian Compromise, see Börries Kuzmany, ‘Habsburg Austria: Experiments in Non-Territorial Autonomy’ (*Ethnopolitics* 2016 Jan 1; 15(1): 43–65), pp. 52-55.

that the educational reform of 1925-28, with a telling moniker ‘cultural offensive’, was met with the most organised resistance. Besides the general Romanisation of all schools, Romanian schools during the reform were more often than not improved at the expense of the minority ones.⁴³

In Bukovina, the ‘cultural offensive’ primarily targeted Ukrainians and Jews.⁴⁴ The Germans, being a small territorially enclosed minority, were of somewhat lesser concern to the Romanian authorities. and also because, being a territorially enclosed minority, they were not suspected of irredentist aspirations. Besides, the Germans of Bukovina had pledged their allegiance to the Romanian Kingdom as early as in 1918, having negotiated, with the provisional government the conditions of their loyalty. These conditions, drafted by the newly created *Volksrat* under the leadership of Alfred Kohlruss and Alois Lebouton, included citizenship with full equality; maximum autonomy in religious affairs; recognition of the right of the *Volksrat* to speak on behalf of Germans; and preserving German as the main language of instruction at the University of Czernowitz.⁴⁵ By contrast, the Jewish National Council of Bukovina, formed around the same time under the leadership of the Zionist Mayer Ebner (1872-1955) and the Social Democrat Jakob Pistiner, refused to pledge allegiance to Floridor’s government after it declined to recognise the Jewish autonomy project in Bukovina that had been formulated by the Council in accordance with the Copenhagen Manifesto of 1918.⁴⁶

By that time Ebner, who, as a student at the University of Czernowitz regularly contributed to Nathan Birnbaum’s *Selbstemanzipation*, was a weathered Zionist. He was among the delegates of the First Zionist Congress in 1897, where he was elected to represent Bukovinian Jews on the General Council of the Zionist Organisation, and where he also met Motzkin, his future collaborator. One of the earliest advocates of the *Gegenwartsarbeit*, he promoted parliamentary and municipal political activity in the Diaspora as a way of improving Jewish social and economic standing, as well as of getting better prepared for the future in Eretz Israel. For Ebner, *Palestina-arbeit* and *Gegenwartsarbeit* were the two pillars on which the universality of the Zionist movement rested; he considered withdrawal from active political life ‘a sign of intellectual backwardness’ that turns the public life of a people into a ‘swamp’.⁴⁷ True to his word, after returning to Czernowitz in 1917 (during the Russian occupation of Bukovina in 1914, Ebner was deported to Siberia), he threw himself into Romanian democratic politics, becoming first an MP, and then a Senator. In Parliament, he was a fearless and persuasive speaker respected by his Romanian peers (even the nationalist Romanian politician Nicolae Iorga, who was not a stranger to antisemitic rhetoric, had allegedly professed deep respect for Ebner).⁴⁸

⁴³ For the detailed analysis of the ‘cultural offensive’, see Livezeanu *Cultural Politics*.

⁴⁴ Livezeanu *Cultural Politics*.

⁴⁵ The government agreed to all their conditions, save for preserving the University as a German institution; see Sophie A. Weilich 1980 ‘Bukovina Germans in the Interwar Period’ (1980, *East European Quarterly*, Volume 14, Issue 4, pp. 423-437), pp. 424-425.

⁴⁶ Manfred Reifer ‘Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina (1919-1944)’, in: Hugo Gold (ed.) *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina*, Vol. 2, (1962, Tel Aviv: Lidor Press), p. 2.

⁴⁷ Mayer Ebner ‘Jüdische Realpolitik’, *Die Welte* 22.02.1901, pp. 6-7

⁴⁸ Reifer *Geschichte der Juden*.

When the Education Law of 1925 declared Romanian the official language in education in private schools as well, the Jewish and German deputies protested in unison. Kohlruss demanded, in Parliament, that the autonomy of education guaranteed in 1918 be maintained in practice. The Jewish senator Salo Weisselberger, also from Czernowitz, criticised the decree in the Senate. Hoping for international intervention, but too timid to forward a petition to the LoN in their own name, the Romanian Jews lodged a complaint with an old friend, the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, who forwarded the complaint to the LoN.⁴⁹ Neither of these efforts brought any tangible results.

During the same year, a Baccalaureate exam not in use since 1908 was reinstated; in the autumn of 1926, minority student failed the exam in great numbers (in Bukovina alone, two-thirds of all examinees and eighty percent of the Jewish ones), while the majority of Romanian students passed. German and Jewish minority leaders, including Kohlruss and Ebner, organised a joint meeting with the school inspector in charge of the region, during which they suggested replacing the outside examiners with local teachers; their proposal was declined. Ebner refused to give up, forwarding a protest to the League of Nations, as well as publishing an article in the *Ost Jüdische Zeitung* that advocated for all minorities' rights against the discrimination in education. A reply followed from the Romanian League of Nations Association, stating that following Ebner's complaints, the right of being an examiner was withdrawn from one particular professor – a victory, however small.⁵⁰

Whilst Hungarians and Germans had formed their own parties early on, a Jewish one was not formed until 1928, despite numerous attempts at its creation by Ebner (his opponents from the Bucharest-based Union of Romanian Jews preferred to back up 'the most likely winner' among the ethnic Romanian parties, who they hoped, would keep antisemitism in check in return for Jewish votes).⁵¹ On the occasion of the creation of the Jewish Party, Ebner published an editorial in the *Ostjüdische Zeitung*, explaining the rationale behind it, as well as – in a reference to the Bukovinian Compromise of 1909 – why the initiative had to come from Bukovina:

We are best understood in the Bukovina, because we Bukovinian Jews felt ourselves in Austrian times, too, nationally and politically nothing else than Jews. We considered ourselves a Jewish nation, recognised as such side by side with the Bukovinian Germans, Roumanians and Ukrainians. We are accustomed to conduct our politics as Jews, as an equally-entitled factor, and not as a national appendix of other parties.⁵²

In July 1927, the Germans together with the National Jews, supported by the Hungarian and Ukrainian minorities, attempted to form a minority voting bloc whilst also seeking support from the League of Nations; their efforts bore no fruit.

⁴⁹ Gold *Geschichte der Juden*

⁵⁰ *Roumania Ten Years After*, p. 87.

⁵¹ Bela Vago 1972 'The Jewish vote in Romania between the two world wars', *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, Vol. XIV, No, 2, pp. 229-244 p. 232

⁵² 'Why Have We Created a Jewish Party in Roumania: Dr. Ebner States His Case', *Daily News Bulletin (Cable and Mail Despatches by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Ltd)* Volume XII, No. 109, 14.05.1931

Throughout the 1920s, Ebner closely cooperated with the Saxon leader from Transylvania Rudolf Brandsch (1880-1953). Brandsch, a son of a Protestant pastor, had studied theology and philosophy in Marburg, Berlin and Cluj, and was one of the few minority leaders in Romania with previous political experience – in 1910-18 he was a deputy in the Hungarian Parliament, where he pursued cooperation between all German delegates. In post-Trianon Romania, he was first elected to Parliament, and then became a Senator. It was mainly thanks to him that the *Volksräte*, organised at the dawn of Romania's independence in every province, were united into the *Verband der Deutschen in Rumänien*, later making a natural progression to a German party. Brandsch's considerable political skills also allowed him to stay on relatively good terms with majority politicians, and in 1931-32, he famously served as the Undersecretary for Minorities in the Democratic Nationalist government of Nicolae Iorga. Brandsch favoured cooperation with the Jewish minority over the Hungarian and Ukrainian ones, as he believed that the union with the latter two, being 'frontier' minorities with clearly irredentist aspirations, could harm Romanian Germans' own prospects. Similarly, Ebner believed in cooperation with the Germans in Bukovina, who, having been surrounded by Romanians, Slavs and Jews for centuries, were, in his opinion, quite different from their Prussian brethren. He did, however, consider that the lack of strong political leadership among the Bukovina Germans – as opposed to the Germans of Greater Romania, in a clear reference to Brandsch and his colleague Hans Otto Roth (1890-1953) – hindered their participation in the common struggle for minority rights.⁵³

Brandsch and Roth attempted to act as spokesmen for all Romanian minorities in parliament during the debates on the Romanian Constitution of 1923, demanding the inclusion of minority provisions in accordance with Article 7 of the Trianon Treaty. However, the Jewish deputies under the leadership of Weisselberger – elected on the ticket of the ruling Romanian National Liberal Party – conducted separate negotiations with the government, eventually accepting, instead, the formulation that all Romanians should enjoy civic freedoms 'without regard to birth, language and religion'. On that occasion, Ebner sided with the German minority leaders, interpreting the Jewish deputies' actions as a betrayal of the minority cause. In an editorial in the *Ostjüdische Zeitung*, he branded Weisselberger's position on the matter as 'a little opportunistic point of view', juxtaposing him with Roth, who, in Ebner's opinion, understood 'the true magnitude' of the struggle for the constitutional basis of minority rights – a struggle that had been now lost.⁵⁴

The events of 1931, with the return of King Carol and his choice of prime minister Iorga, a known internationalist, signalled hope for Romanian minorities. The appointment of Brandsch as the

⁵³ Ebner 'Deutsche und Juden', *Ostjüdische Zeitung*, 17.1.1923, cited in: Hildrun Glass 1996 *Zerbrochene Nachbarschaft. Das deutsch-jüdische Verhältnis in Rumänien (1918-1938)*. R. Oldenbourg Verlag München, p. 205

⁵⁴ Mayer Ebner, 'Die Juden und die Verfassung. Eine Antwort auf die Rechtsfertigung der Bukarester jüdischen Parlamentarier', *Ostjüdische Zeitung*, 11.04.1923, as cited in: Hildrun Glass 1996 *Zerbrochene Nachbarschaft. Das deutsch-jüdische Verhältnis in Rumänien (1918-1938)*. R. Oldenbourg Verlag München, pp.210-211. See also Hugo Gold *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina*, Vol. 1, (Tel Aviv: 1958).

Undersecretary for Minorities was widely celebrated by minorities both in Romania and abroad, but it soon became apparent that not only was his political office a mere front, but that Brandsch himself was also not the man he had once been. Glass writes that the transformation of Brandsch's political views was gradual, rather than sudden, reflecting the changing political situation abroad and the growing antisemitism both in the Reich, and among the Romanian Germans. In 1933, he publicly broke ties with the Jewish community after accusing them – along with the Hungarians – of only pursuing common minority interests when it suited them (a charge angrily denied by Ebner). From then on, Brandsch openly pursued the interests of Romanian Germans at the expense of other minorities.⁵⁵

The fate of Latvian state sovereignty, unlike those of Poland and Romania, was not decided at the Paris Peace conference by the victorious Allies – rather, it came about as a result of the kaleidoscopic chain of tumultuous events starting with the February Revolution in Russia in 1917, and ending with the optimistic proclamation of independence on 18 November 1918, when parts of Latvia's territory were still under German control. The new state was then immediately against threatened by multiple offensives by the Germans, the Bolsheviks, and a rogue White Russian army, all of whom had set their sights on Latvian territories. The War of Independence was finally won on 11 August 1920, when a peace treaty was signed in Riga with the Soviet Russia. But despite receiving the affirmations of the *de facto* recognition from a number of European states, Latvia would not be recognised *de jure*, by the Supreme Council of the League of Nations, until 26th January 1921.⁵⁶

This uncertain situation, coupled with the fact that Latvia – again, unlike Poland and Romania – could claim no prior state independence, had arguably made Latvian nationalists eager to demonstrate their sufficient political maturity and liberal democratic credentials to the outside world; one of the ways to prove it was an affirmation of the just treatment of ethnic minorities in the new state. Prior to February Revolution 1of 917, the pinnacle of nationalist aspirations was autonomy within the future democratic Russia; Latvian social democrats, who led the nation's 'spiritual revival' at the turn of the centuries, were deeply influenced by the idea of non-territorial cultural autonomy developed by Austrian Marxists at the end of the 19th century in a bid to salvage the disintegrating multinational Habsburg Empire. When the tides of history unexpectedly turned, same principles that Latvians deemed appropriate for themselves in the past were courteously extended to ethnic minorities. The newly appointed Prime Minister K. Ulmanis solemnly declared that 'the rights of all ethnic groups will be guaranteed by the Latvian state'; a promise was handed out to minorities to secure their cultural autonomy in the future constitution.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Glass *Zebrochene Nachbarshaft*

⁵⁶ Max M. Laserson 1943 'The Recognition of Latvia', *The American Journal of International Law*, pp. 243-247.

⁵⁷ *Jaunākās Ziņas*, Nr. 4, 19.11.1918.

In December 1918, the newly elected National Council passed two laws, on general and minority education. These two laws, being the most liberal minority legislation in Europe at the time, together gave minorities substantial control over their educational and cultural affairs prior to the inclusion of cultural autonomy in the future constitution. The ‘multicultural’ vision of the new statehood drafted by the novice Latvian lawmakers did not, however, withstand the test of time.

A Jewish MP, recollecting the joyous atmosphere at the time when the law on minority education had been passed, observed that ‘the situation has changed completely, however, when the question of national minority rights passed from the field of internal legislation to that of international security’, i.e. when upon joining the League of Nations in 1921, Latvia was required to sign, along with Lithuania, Estonia, Albania, Bulgaria, and Greece, a unilateral declaration affirming the principles of minority protection enshrined in the Minority Treaties.⁵⁸ The Latvian government argued, like other governments of the newly created and enlarged states, that minorities’ protection was already enshrined in the country’s liberal domestic legislation and that the imposition of minority treaties on selected states was both a violation of the principle of equality and an infringement upon their state sovereignty.⁵⁹ After two years of increasingly unhappy negotiations, Latvia finally signed the declaration in July 1923, famously avoiding the use of the word ‘guarantee’ in relation to minorities.⁶⁰

By that time, the majority-minorities relations were already deteriorating. In parliament and in the press, it became customary to talk about ‘excessive democracy’ and minorities as its undeserving recipients. Latvia was announced to have become an ‘Eldorado for minorities’.

Those increasingly hostile innuendos only strengthened Latvian minorities in their resolve to exercise their rights within the framework of the new democratic state. Minority politicians were represented in the Constitutional Assembly and in all four interwar parliaments. The Baltic Germans formed the biggest faction; due to their high level of internal discipline and the excellent ability to mobilise voters they consistently held more legislative seats than their respective share of the population would have warranted; the Jews were represented proportionally, and the Russians were underrepresented.

In parliament, minorities formed their own bloc, under the long-term leadership of the indefatigable Paul Schiemann (1876-1944) of the German Balt Democratic Party. The Minority Bloc dated back to the Constitutional Assembly, where in the absence of a clear majority, the seventeen minority votes were capable of tilting the balance, and were always sought after – begrudgingly – by both the Left, and the Right. Minorities traded their votes for promises to support minority-related legislation; this situation would continue until the dissolution of the *Saeima* after the authoritarian coup in 1934.

⁵⁸ Max Laserson 1971. ‘The Jews and the Latvian Parliament, 1918-1940’, in: Bobe, M. (ed.) *The Jews in Latvia* (Tel Aviv: 1971), p. 128.

⁵⁹ Robinson *et al.*, *Were the Minorities Treaties a Failure?* (New York: 1943).

⁶⁰ LoN Archives

The Minority Bloc was riddled by internal divisions, which were most pronounced between the Germans and the Russians, smaller minorities forced to taking sides. Each minority was also deeply divided by socio-economic and ideological lines. Those multiple divisions inevitably led to countless disagreements and a lack of tactical unity, often leaving the Bloc's leader Schiemann, who also tried to keep good working relations with the Latvian majority, in a bind. And never had those internal disagreements manifested themselves so clearly, and with such long-lasting consequences, as during the minorities' quest for national autonomy in 1922-1925.

While the first part of the Latvian constitution was adopted in 1922, the second part, which contained an article guaranteeing autonomy to minorities, was not passed because of vehement disagreement in the Saeima on the workers' rights to strike. Minorities then took the only remaining option, namely to secure autonomy by a separate law. Schiemann and the Jewish MP, Socialist Zionist Max Laserson were the foremost proponents of NTA for minorities in Latvia, publishing on the subject extensively in the biggest German and Russian dailies respectively.

Both Schiemann and Laserson spent their childhoods in Mitau (now Jelgava), the capital of Courland. Schiemann, a son of a liberal Baltic German lawyer, attended a private German primary school. Instead of entering a secondary school in Mitau, where, in accordance with the tightening policies of Russification, the main language of instruction was Russian, he was privately tutored at home before being sent to a school in Elberfeld, Germany. He then pursued legal studies in Berlin, Marburg, Munich, and Bonn, and briefly served as an officer in the Russian Army. His application for release from the Russian citizenship having been unsuccessful, Schiemann – as a foreigner – could not be admitted to the bar in Germany, and decided to practice journalism instead.⁶¹

Schiemann's parents were not alone in their belief in the superiority of German education; the young Laserson, a scion to a wealthy tobacco merchant's family that spoke German at home, attended the famous *Realschule* in Mitau, before continuing his education at the universities of St Petersburg, Berlin and Heidelberg. Upon his return to St Petersburg in 1916, he became the first Jew appointed as a law lecturer in the history of the University. However, just one year later, Laserson abandoned his post to become a Deputy Head of the Department for National Minorities in the Provisional Government of Alexander Kerensky. After the Bolsheviks took power in Russia, Laserson returned to his native Latvia.

Both Schiemann and Laserson embraced Latvia's state independence, immersing themselves in her new democratic politics. But although both were unreservedly committed to liberal democracy, Latvian sovereignty, and minority rights at the same time, they did not always see eye to eye. Their first principled disagreement dated back to the summer of 1922, when they assumed conflicting positions on the draft laws on minority languages reviewed by the Constitutional Assembly. Laserson was convinced that one main law guaranteeing the rights of minorities to use their respective languages in

⁶¹ John Hiden, *Defender of Minorities. Paul Schiemann, 1876-1944*. (London: 2004).

state institutions and courts was required, arguing that if the draft laws for each minority were discussed separately, decisions would be dictated by affinities in the case of some ethnic groups and languages, and by repulsion in the case of others. The only way to avoid this, stressed Laserson, was by adopting a single uniform law that would have been ‘maximally favourable towards all’.⁶²

In Schiemann’s view, such a uniform law would be too ‘bureaucratized’ and time-consuming, whereas speed was an issue if minorities wanted their laws passed before the Constitutional Assembly finished its work: ‘if we just passed one separate language law now, more would be achieved for the interests of all minorities in general than if we continued discussing general theory for another half a year’.⁶³ In the end, no laws on minority languages were ever passed.

During the same year of 1922, to the utter dismay of Laserson, Schiemann also supported the idea of a separate law on cultural autonomy for each minority, and successfully lobbied for it at the Constitutional Assembly. Separate German, Jewish, and Russian autonomy draft laws were accepted for review that was later postponed until the election of the First *Saeima*. In 1923, the German draft law successfully made it through the deliberations of the *Saeima*’s Public Law Committee, but once it was passed to the Education Committee, whose chair was fervently opposed to minorities’ autonomy, the draft mysteriously ‘disappeared’ from the agenda.⁶⁴

This experience made Paul Schiemann reconsider his position – he now put his faith in the general law on cultural autonomy, so passionately advocated by Laserson. However, their attempt at joint action was thwarted by the Baltic German conservatives, whose leader described it as ‘detrimental to our historic position in the country and our influence among the population’.⁶⁵

The autonomy laws for each minority were submitted separately, but, notably, Schiemann appended his signature to the Jewish draft. It was the Jewish autonomy project that attracted most attention and press coverage; during deliberations it became clear that, Latvian opposition notwithstanding, there was no unity on the question of autonomy among the Jews either, with Zionists, the Bund and the *Agudah* unable to agree on its scope. The problematic choice between Yiddish or Hebrew as the official Jewish language inspired nation-wide debates in which other minorities and the Latvian majority were actively involved. All this disorderly confusion added to the majority’s consternation, being interpreted as the further proof of minorities not being ready for the cultural autonomy to be bestowed upon them. One by one, the minorities’ draft laws were dismissed from the *Saeima*’s agenda. Schiemann and Laserson were now of one mind that minorities should work together, by the end of 1925 it was clear to both that minorities’ autonomy in Latvia was hopelessly out of reach.

⁶² Laserson, M. ‘Zakon o yazykah men’shinstv’, *Segodnya*, 30.06.1922.

⁶³ Schiemann, P. ‘Die Sprachengesetze’, *Rigasche Rundschau*, 30.06.1922.

⁶⁴ Ludvigs Adamovičs, *Skolu lietas Latvijā* (Rīga: 1927).

⁶⁵ Hiden *Defender of Minorities*, p. 104.

GENEVA

By the mid-twenties, minorities all across Eastern Europe were getting increasingly disillusioned with the new world of nation-states. The Minority Treaties, on which such high hopes had been once pinned, ultimately disappointed, as in practice they denied minorities any meaningful agency. Nation-states vigorously resisted the League's rather feeble attempts to interfere on minorities' behalf; moreover, each such intervention unavoidably soured relations between respective majorities and minorities.

But minorities' faith in the League of Nations itself was still strong – they believed that if they found a way to circumvent nation-states and establish a direct dialogue with the League, supplying accurate information whilst also offering possible solutions, matters could be significantly improved. The Germans took the lead; the *Verband der deutschen Minderheiten in Europa* (hereafter *Verband*), created in 1922 by the aforementioned Ewald Ammende, was envisioned by him as a pilot project for creating a pan-European forum for all national minorities. In 1925, he deemed the time was right for the Congress of European Nationalities, his endeavour being supported by other ethnic groups.⁶⁶ Paul Schiemann and Leo Motzkin were among the founders of the Congress, whilst Yitzhak Gruenbaum and Erwin Hasbach from Poland; Mayer Ebner, Rudolph Brandsch, and Hans Otto Roth from Romania; as well as Max Laserson from Latvia were among the most active delegates. The Congress, emboldened by the recent success of non-territorial autonomy in Estonia (where, unlike Latvia, a law on minorities' autonomy was passed in 1925), made NTA into the cornerstone of its programme, hoping that it would create a solid legal basis for minority cultural self-government, instead of cultural rights being bestowed upon them as an act of charity on the part of nation-states.

It was hardly surprising that the minorities' initiative was met with wariness, especially in Poland and other Central and East European states containing sizeable German minorities. In order to dispel any suspicions, the Congress followed very strict rules of engagement during its sessions, limiting discussion to general principles of concern to all minorities; insisting that participants declared loyalty to their countries of residence; and prohibiting any accusations directed at individual governments. Ironically, just several years later these very same rules would play a big part in the Congress's eventual downfall.

The Congress called for the creation of a Standing Committee of Minorities at the League, and the replacement of the existing Minority Treaties by a genuinely pan-European guarantee of minority rights based on the NTA model. But in reality, there was no unity within the Congress itself on the matter. Whereas Baltic Germans and Jews were adamant in their advocacy of NTA as a solution to the 'minority problem', other member groups were not necessarily convinced. The strongest opposition

⁶⁶ Smith, Germane and Housden *Forgotten Europeans*, p. 6.

came, at the time, from the Sudeten Germans, who, as a large and closely settled group, favoured territorial autonomy instead.

There was also a tension between the Congress's Jewish faction led by Motzkin – overwhelmingly represented by the Eastern European Zionists of the *Gegenwartsarbeit* persuasion – and the rest of the World Jewry. The Orthodox Jews were by definition against attracting too much attention by overt political actions, preferring, instead, the centuries-old practice of *Shtadlanut*. (the occasions when the *Agudah Israel* lent its support to more politically ambitious projects, like cultural autonomy in Latvia, or a minority coalition in Poland, were rather exceptional). The *Palestina-arbeit* Zionists believed that the precious energy that could have been channelled toward the creation of a Jewish State was wasted on cooperation with other minorities in their *a priori* hopeless confrontation with nation-states. British and French Jews preferred behind-the-scenes diplomacy through well-established connections, the AIU and the Foreign Committee successfully competing with Motzkin for the attention of the League. For Lucien Wolf, Poland and Romania were the constant objects of concern; in the 1920s, he also paid a lot of attention to the violations of Jewish rights in Latvia, repeatedly appealing to the League on behalf of those Eastern European Jewish minorities.⁶⁷ These endeavours of Western Jews to speak for East Europeans ones, no matter how well intended, often irked the local communities who were rarely consulted beforehand; moreover, the resulting interventions by the LoN were, in the opinion of local minority politicians, often missing the point. For example, albeit the Latvian government was, admittedly, dragging their feet in signing the unilateral declaration with the LoN, Jewish MP Max Laserson complained that the LoN negotiator M. da Gama had not taken into proper consideration the on-going process of the legalisation of minority rights in Latvia so clearly demonstrated by its education laws.⁶⁸ Instead of capitalising on these existing achievements, da Gama went after relatively minor rights, like the right to observe religious holidays, thus never proceeding to discuss the question of cultural autonomy. In short, East European Jewish minorities believed that their defenders were neither adequately informed nor sufficiently ambitious in their interventions.

The internal disagreements within and among ethnic groups represented at the Congress undermined its credibility in the eyes of the LoN Minority Secretariat. In a special 1931 report – commissioned after persistent lobbying from Ammende – League's representative Ludvig Krabbe claimed that the Congress had failed to present a convincing case for applying NTA beyond Estonia. Krabbe's closing argument, that a spirit of tolerance and liberalism would hardly be encouraged by institutionalising separation between groups, sounds oddly familiar to a modern ear. Krabbe also casuistically used the example of Latvian Germans and Jews, who, in the absence of legally enshrined cultural autonomy, still had significant control over their own cultural affairs – according to Krabbe,

⁶⁷ LoN Archive ref

⁶⁸ Laserson, M. 'Veleno podozhdai', *Segodnya*, 11.07.1923.

that just served to show that NTA was unnecessary.⁶⁹ (As a footnote: just one year later, the newly appointed Latvian Education Minister Atis Kēniņš would start chipping away at these rights with full impunity.⁷⁰)

Besides ideological disagreements among its members, the ENC was always struggling financially – these struggles, in the words of Housden, were the Congress's 'Achilles heel'.⁷¹ Financial woes were inevitably heightened by the Great Depression, and over the years, the Congress became more and more reliant on the subsidies from the German government, who, under the leadership of Gustav Stresemann, assumed the role of minority protector in Europe. This financial dependence, which became a liability after Stresemann's demise and the subsequent radicalisation of German politics, was another factor that contributed to the Congress's eventual ruin.⁷²

The Congress was often caught in larger geopolitical games, where it was no match for nation-states, and which undermined the Congress's unity and its reputation – the most striking example being the friction between Poland and Germany, which prompted the withdrawal of all Polish minority groups, as well as of the Association of National Minorities in Germany, from the Congress in 1927.

As for the relations with the organisation that the Congress aspired to serve and assist, the League of Nations, they were coolly cordial at best. The Secretariat preferred to hold the Congress at arm's length, albeit sending observers to its annual meetings. It is symptomatic that Pablo Azcarate, the second and the last Head of the Minorities Section, writing in 1945, acknowledged that the treatment meted out to the ENC was unjust, describing the Congress as an organisation that 'achieved considerable importance' in representing European minorities, but that was despite of that denied the recognition it sought both by the national governments and by the LoN.⁷³

But it was the start of anti-Jewish discrimination in Germany in 1933 that became the real crucible for the Congress's ideological coherence, organisational capacity, financial independence, and the unity among its members all at the same time. The question of dissimilation (as opposed to assimilation, i.e. the rejection of aliens not belonging to the national community), as it became known among the Congress's members, turned out to be the ultimate test that the organisation would ultimately fail.

⁶⁹ 'L'autonomie culturelle comme solution du probleme des minorites'[Cultural Autonomy as a solution to the problem of minorities]. Note by M. Krabbe dated 18 November 1931.' R2161. Minorities. 7th ENK. 29 to 31 August 1931. 4 / 31096 / 3817.

⁷⁰ For a detailed analysis of the Latvian minorities' quest for cultural autonomy, see Germane 'Paul Schiemann, Max Laserson and Cultural Autonomy in Interwar Latvia', in:

⁷¹ Housden *On Their Own Behalf*

⁷² See Housden *On Their Own Behalf* Hiden and Smith

⁷³ Pablo Azcarate, *League of Nations and National Minorities. An Experiment* (1945, Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace).

The very idea of dissimilation stemmed from the works of another Baltic German, the sociologist Max Hildebert Boehm (1891-1968), who had been preoccupied with the questions of nation and ethnicity for many years, becoming the most famous exponent of the *Völkisch* theory of nationalism between the two world wars. Boehm had always taken a strong position on assimilation, which he considered unhealthy and damaging to an individual's sense of self-worth.⁷⁴ Boehm was not alone in his preoccupation with the question of assimilation, which, being central to any debate on minority issues, similarly occupied the minds of other thinkers. Both Schiemann and Motzkin repeatedly addressed assimilation in their work: neither of them considered it desirable, but they were united in the opinion that, above all, assimilation was a personal choice. Overall, Motzkin's succinct statement 'No country has the right to deny Jews assimilation, but it also does not have the right to force it upon them'⁷⁵ was in full harmony with the official policy of the ENC until 1933.

However, just as Boehm's writings of the 1930s started to show an unmistakable drift toward an illiberal conception of ethnicity, the general mood at the Congress started to change. Starting from 1932, the journal *Nation und Staat*, which covered minority issues and was closely associated with both the *Verband* and the Congress (Schiemann, Ammende, Motzkin, Brandsch, and Gruenbaum all being contributors in the past), published several articles advocating the dissimilation of 'foreign elements' – above all Jews – from the German nation. Those publications were in stark contrast to the ideological tone of previously published material that had reflected the democratic underlying principles of the ENC and its liberal understanding of minority rights.⁷⁶

When Hitler was appointed Chancellor in January 1933, the idea of forceful dissimilation transcended the realm of theory, becoming embodied in Germany's rapidly growing anti-Jewish legislation. The Jewish faction's demand of an outright condemnation of Germany's policies by the ENC, met by the *Volksdeutsche* with hesitant reluctance, reignited the dissimilation debate among its members.

As already mentioned, the organisation's rules of conduct expressly forbade the discussion of specific cases and governments, being limited to matters of general interest to minorities everywhere. The situation was further complicated by the fact that German Jewry refused to recognise themselves as a minority, insisting on being an intrinsic part of the German nation instead. This gave Ammende and others the grounds to justify their inaction, as, technically, the Congress only supported ethnic minorities. At some point, Ammende even asked Motzkin to find a group of German Jews who could promptly organise themselves as a minority group. Motzkin, however, firmly insisted that antisemitism

⁷⁴ Max Hildebert Boehm, *Das eigenständige Volk* (Göttingen: 1932). _

⁷⁵ Cited per Bein, *Sefer Motzkin*

⁷⁶ See, for example, Guerke and Ükxhül

and minority rights are incompatible – that alone, in his opinion, was sufficient grounds for the Congress to take a stance and condemn the treatment of Jews in Germany.⁷⁷

Besides the unwillingness, on the part of most of the German delegates, to denounce their ethnic Fatherland out of the sense of loyalty, the aforementioned fact that the very Congress's existence was now dependent on continued subsidies from Germany was another contributing factor to the ENC's procrastination.

As the Congress kept dallying, the Jewish members started losing faith if not in minority rights movement itself yet, then at least in the ENC leadership and the overall distribution of power within the organisation. Housden cites a letter from Motzkin to Jacob Robinson, a Jewish MP from Lithuania, where he bemoans the insufficient involvement of the Jews in the minority movement – had they been more dedicated (presumably, also financially), he claimed, then their position within the Congress would be stronger.⁷⁸

The balance of power within the ENC lay at the very centre of the crisis facing its members: whilst the Germans were keen on keeping the Jews there as their long-term closest allies, the Hungarians and Ukrainians were worried, with good reason, that with the Jewish faction's departure, the Germans would outweigh everybody else.

During the preparations for the Bern Congress, Ammende still believed that the Jews would attend, desperately trying to negotiate with both the German and the Jewish groups. He even came up with a diversionary strategy of the Congress addressing the escalating famine in Ukraine – something he believed a Ukrainian-born Motzkin would be compelled to take part in. However, Motzkin, whose resolve must have been reinforced by the heart-rending impressions from a recent trip to Berlin, refused his attention to be derailed from the situation of Jews in Germany.

By that time, an imperceptible shift occurred in Motzkin's own thinking on assimilation, as at the Second Preparatory World Jewish Conference that took place in Geneva on 5-8th September 1933, just ten days prior to the ENC gathering in Geneva, he said: '... it is an elementary fact that an element of a population can no longer claim membership of a nation if the main part of the nation, the uncontested one, does not recognise it as such.'⁷⁹

For a brief moment, it seemed that a compromise could be reached in the form of the representatives of both minorities (Schiemann for the Germans and Emil Margulies, from Czechoslovakia, for the Jews) reading out their respective declarations at the Congress, with a stipulation that no general debates would follow. In the end, though, the Jewish delegates chose not to

⁷⁷ *Hidden Defender of Minorities*, Housden *On Their Own Behalf*

⁷⁸ Housden *On Their Own Behalf* p. 287.

⁷⁹ Cited in Housden *On their own*, p. 298.

attend, whilst Hans Otto Roth delivered, in their absence, a declaration on behalf of all German groups. Roth avoided a direct reference to Germany, but when he spoke of the ‘recently observed’ dissimilation policies – which he also called ‘fundamentally justified’ – there was no room for doubt.⁸⁰ Under the same breath, Roth declared that ethnic minorities created through the process of dissimilation possessed the same kind of rights that the Congress always stood for. The author agrees with Stillschweig that the second part of the statement notably deviated from the official Nazi line that refused to recognise German Jews as a minority.⁸¹ Was it added out of ideological conviction, or purely out of desire not to be taken for a German government’s puppet is impossible to know, but in any case it failed to soften the blow.

The written response of the Jewish delegates was that they considered any further cooperation with the Congress impossible. To the credit of the Catalan, Hungarian, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian factions, they insisted that a following sentence was added to the final resolution of the Congress: ‘We consider the wave of particularly anti-Semitic measures that have recently been observed in some states, violations of general human rights and irreconcilable with the principles of our Congress.’⁸² This ambiguous formulation demonstrated the limit of just how far the Congress was prepared to go in the defence of their Jewish colleagues.

But if the ENC demonstrated timidity when it came to the actual defence of minority rights, so did the League of Nations when it met for its 14th Assembly in October 1933. The Minorities Section put forward a resolution advocating the so-called ‘most favoured minority treatment’, calling on the states not bound by the Treaties to nevertheless observe high standards of toleration toward their racial, religious, and linguistic minorities, with a caveat that the States should apply these high principles to all minorities without exception. While the German delegates accepted the first part of the proposed resolution, they rejected the caveat as an indirect reference to Germany; thus the adopted resolution, as *The Times* commented, involved ‘no more than a pious hope that the States of the League would treat their minorities with moderate decency’.⁸³

In the aftermath, Schiemann – who had not attended the Bern Congress citing ill health – wrote a letter to Motzkin calling him ‘one of the fathers of minority movement’ and expressing his regrets about the latest events at the Congress.⁸⁴ Ammende and Wilfan also repeatedly tried to get in touch with Motzkin and other Jewish members, hoping, against reason, to persuade them to return. The damage to minorities’ unity was, however, irreparable – in his farewell letter to Wilfan from 30th October 1933, Motzkin wrote: ‘The Jews decided, with a broken heart, to abandon the quest for common solidarity after they had been forced to do so by the behaviour of their comrades. This is behaviour that I cannot

⁸⁰ *Sitzungsbericht des Kongresses der organisierten nationalen Gruppen in den Staaten Europas. Bern, 16. Bis 19. September 1933* (Wien: 1934).

⁸¹ Kurt Stillschweig, *The Jews of Germany as a National Minority* (1949), p. 67.

⁸² Cited in Eiler

⁸³ *The Times* ‘League Assembly Ended. Germans and Minority Resolution’, 12 October 1933, p. 11.

⁸⁴ CZA, Bein

comprehend, and which saddens me to this day, as my faith in minority movement was absolute'.⁸⁵ Eight days later, on 7th November, Motzkin died of an illness in Paris, where since his departure from the Congress he had continued working in aid of the German Jews.

EPILOGUE: 'A MELANCHOLY ENTERPRISE'?

Gershom Scholem once observed that to speak of Jews and Germans over the past two centuries is 'a melancholy enterprise'.⁸⁶ Arguably, melancholy suffuses not just the history of this particular relationship, but also the entire history of the Congress of European Nationalities, of the interwar minority rights movement, and the League of Nations itself, especially looking back at it through the prism of World War Two and the breakdown of international order. By the end of the 20th century, 'political melancholy', interchangeable with 'melancholy politics', became a fashionable term to designate the uneasy mix of nostalgia for the past, traumatic historical memory, disappointment with the present, and uncertainty about the future.

It is perhaps best left to political scientists and philosophers to address the latter two. As for nostalgia and traumas of the past, historians have been tirelessly re-examining the events of the first half of the 20th century trying to understand how 'the war to end all wars' had resulted in a short optimistic interlude ultimately leading to the collapse of the European civilisation. And as far as a consensus has been reached, it is that there were many factors at play. Still, some contributing elements – often out of considerations of present *Realpolitik* needs – in retrospect received harsher treatment than others.

For example, although the failure of the League of Nations' minority protection system was only one of the many factors that contributed to the start of the war, the entire concept of minority rights was tainted by association and brought into disrepute.⁸⁷ The architects of the post-war world order decided – as Hanna Arendt had suggested already in 1940 - to "throw the baby out with the bathwater"⁸⁸, and substitute the allegedly all-encompassing individual human rights for the 'disgraced' minority rights. This change, widely heralded as a progressive step, was reflected in all post-war principal international legal documents, such as the Charter of the United Nations (1945), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and The European Convention on Human Rights (1953), which

⁸⁵ As cited in Bein *Sefer Motzkin* p.XX (translation by Eyal Fisher).

⁸⁶ Gershom Scholem, 'Jews and Germans', in: Werner J. Dannhauser (ed.) *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis. Selected Essays* (Philadelphia, 2012), 71.

⁸⁷ See Inis L. Claude, Jr., *National Minorities. An International Problem.*(Cambridge, 1955), 108.

⁸⁸ Hannah Arendt 'The Minority Question', in: Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (eds) *Hannah Arendt. The Jewish Writings* (New York, 2007), 129.

referred exclusively to human rights, including the individual's right to non-discrimination on ethnic grounds.⁸⁹

But although the reputation of the international minority rights regime of the League of Nations has since been significantly rehabilitated, such was not the fate of the grassroots minority rights movement represented by the Congress of European Nationalities, as the tendency to view it exclusively through the prism of the tragic later events just would not go away. Arguably, such approach, albeit perhaps a convenient shortcut, obscures more than it reveals: to present the Jewish members of the Congress as guileless victims readily falling into the trap set up by the conniving Germans is not just a historical distortion coloured by hindsight wisdom. This portrayal also does Motzkin, Gruenbaum, Ebner, Laserson and many others a great disservice, as it denies them agency, mocking their wisdom, courage and dedication, as well as belittling their achievements in the field of minority rights.

Seen within its own span of time, the events of the 1933 split between the German and Jewish minorities at the ENC demonstrate that the unity of the interwar minority movement could not withstand the external pressures, which, as described in the previous section, were countless. Still, at the time when the rest of the outside world demonstrated remarkable indifference to the anti-Jewish legislation implemented in Germany, when nobody – least the German Jews themselves – could possibly imagine the scale of the impending catastrophe, the rejection the Jewish members' demand for the outright condemnation of the Reich's policies among the Congress's members was far from unanimous. Even within the German faction, there was a whole range of attitudes towards it – from the solidarity on Schiemann's part to Ammende's cowardice, and to Roth's admiration for the idea of Greater Germany. In the end, the Jewish faction at the Nationalities Congress was betrayed by its fellow members (but not, as is often alleged, *duped*). Betrayed for a variety of reasons, including misplaced loyalty to one's kin, financial considerations, ideological stubbornness, theoretical inflexibility, and, above all, pure cowardice. Without any doubt, growing antisemitism played a role – but in 1933, it would still be years before the Sudeten Germans finally took over the Congress.

As for antisemitism *per se*, it would be insulting to think that Motzkin and colleagues naively believed that the Congress was free of it (in fact, Laserson bitterly observed, later, that out of all Germans there, only Schiemann 'did not have an antisemitic bone in him'). After all, they were all experts on antisemitic behaviour, arguing against it in parliaments, petitioning governments and international organisations, and publishing countless newspaper articles at home and abroad. But as experts on the matter, they were also fully aware that German antisemitism before the arrival of National Socialism was, in comparison to the antisemitism that Jews experienced in their home countries in Eastern Europe, of a decisively milder variety.

⁸⁹ For the latest studies see Kurz, Loeffler, Giladi (forthcoming)

When examined within its own span of time, the history of the Nationalities Congress reveals that the roots of German-Jewish cooperation in the field of minority rights can be traced back to their respective countries of residence, rather than to the schemers at the *Auswärtiges Amt*. Having met with the unsurmountable resistance at home, the minority rights movement under the Jewish and German leadership transcended national borders. Serendipitous paths led this paper's protagonists from Warsaw, Czernowitz and Riga to Geneva: all of them started out as advocates for their own ethnic groups, progressing to the universalist claims of minority rights for everybody. After all too short period of unity, their paths diverged again: Gruenbaum left for Palestine, where he subsequently became Israel's first minister of interior. Roth, having refused to join the Waffen SS, served in the Romanian army during the war; in the communist Romania, he was persecuted and died in a concentration camp in 1953. Ebner made aliya in 1940. Hasbach joined the Nazi party; after the war he settled in West Germany. Laserson left first for Palestine, and then for the United States; he taught constitutional law at Columbia University until his death in 1953. Schiemann passed away in 1944 in Riga, where he and his wife were sheltering a Jewish girl.

At first glance, the story of the Nationalities Congress fits neatly into the deterministic triadic nexus composed of nation-states, minorities and kin-states⁹⁰. A closer look, however, reveals that it also challenges its very core. Post-war commentators habitually describe the European Jewish minority as a 'weak' minority, universally persecuted, with no kin-state to provide support. But within the Nationalities Congress, the Jews were always regarded as a 'strong' minority, second only to Germans, and not just because of their numbers. The story of the Jewish faction at the Congress tells us about a minority that against all odds carved itself a prominent position at the helm of the interwar minority rights movement – determining, alongside Germans, its overall course – through sheer ingenuity, massive theoretical contribution, tireless activism, dedication of its members and the unshaken belief in the rightness of their cause.

At the time when nationalist populism is yet again on the rise, and when multiculturalism, once everybody's darling, is all but dead letter, the century-old idea of NTA is being dusted off and reconsidered as a possible solution to the perennial question of ethnic diversity. The main charge levelled at the NTA by its critics echoes the previously cited 1931 statement by Ludwig Krabbe – namely, that NTA institutionalises groupism and separateness, being against the spirit of liberalism and tolerance. But the history of the Nationalities Congress tells us that the kind of autonomy advocated by its members was based upon the unequivocal active participation of minorities in the political life of their respective home countries. Schiemann, Gruenbaum, Ebner, and Laserson were deeply integrated

⁹⁰ Rogers Brubaker, 'National Minorities, Nationalizing States, and External National Homelands in the New Europe', *Daedalus* 1995, 124 (2).

within their respective societies; their parliamentary activities in equal measure concerned the matters of state as they did the matters of particular interest to minorities – which they saw as the intrinsic whole. What they were asking for, was not an institutionalised separateness, but the *right* to decide on the matters of their own culture, rather than being granted permission – however benevolent – to do so. Above all, the history of the Congress clearly demonstrates that a minority rights movement denied independent funding and institutional support from international organisations invites undue influence of nation-states that opportunistically use it for their own goals; it is, literally, ‘open for grabs’.

Without any doubt, the present-day political climate and institutional setup are very different to those of the interwar period, but it is also painfully clear that some similarities persist. The nation-state, whose decline has been repeatedly predicted over the past century, seems only gaining strength. As long as it remains strong, it will be always followed by its perennial companion, the problem of ethnic minorities. Non-territorial autonomy may or may not be the right solution to it, but while the jury is still out, the history of the Nationalities Congress and its two leading minorities is worth revisiting – melancholy notwithstanding.