

JEWISH MOTIFS IN THE WORK OF JULIUS ZEYER

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ABSTRACT: The study pays attention to the motifs of Jewishness in the lyrical, epic, and dramatic work of the Czech poet Julius Zeyer and analyses their functions in a specific text and the context of the poet's entire work. In the initial period of his work, they appear as integral props of the interiors of fictional worlds; in the middle period, they paraphrase biblical stories or as exotic, unusual spaces of the poet's restored images; in the peak creative period, the poet uses them to accentuate Christian themes.

KEYWORDS: Julius Zeyer. Jewish Motifs. Czech literature.

This study focuses on the reflection of Jewishness in the lyric, epic, and dramatic works of the Czech poet Julius Zeyer (1841 – 1901). Jewish motifs can be combined or used in verbal works to express universal themes such as love, faith, hope, suffering, justice (and the desire for it), or the struggle with destiny; they can offer a view of life and human nature from the perspective of Jewish culture. The Jewish issue may reflect various aspects of (Jewish) religion, history, culture, or lifestyle; it may reflect the writer's origin, religion, and philosophical beliefs, as reflected in the writer's artistic work. Jewishness may include paraphrases of stories from the Bible, the Diaspora, and Jewish migration; the theme of Jewish identity, including reflections on Jewishness and assimilation; references to traditional Jewish holidays and rituals; and various aspects of Jewish philosophy, ethics, and spirituality (in the 20th century, reflection on the Holocaust and its tragic consequences). Analyses of the literary relations indicated can be pursued on the linguistic, thematic, motivic, biographical, sociological, and philosophical levels. The paper examines the function of Jewish motifs in a particular text and the context of the poet's entire work. It seeks to ascertain whether the poet's approach was somehow motivated or influenced by something or someone, e.g., his origin, upbringing, studies, contemporary prejudices, or stereotypes. Julius Zeyer was included in a separate entry in the dictionary guide to the history of Czech-Jewish and Czech-Jewish-German relations in the 19th and 20th centuries *Literatura s hvězdou Davidovou* [Literature with the Star of David] (1998, 392 – 398) and in the monograph *Židé a židovství v české literatuře 19. století* [Jews and Jewishness in Czech Literature of the 19th and 20th centuries] (Donath 1932). The key to inclusion has always been the contribution “to the formation of [a given] literary community” (Mikulášek et al. 1998, 5). The connection between Julius Zeyer and Jewishness is traditional, although there is no direct link to his origins, religion, or philosophical beliefs, and the Jewish element does not constitute a major theme in his work.

Zeyer's extensive body of work (more than 5,000 pages of text) in its diversity of genre, theme, and subject matter, a work full of contradictions, contrasts, and paradoxes, allowing for a wide variety of approaches, while making a unified integrative approach, reflects, among other things, the poet's diverse interest in cultural and religious traditions, and Jewish culture is no exception. Contributing to this were the poet's numerous foreign journeys, his desire to get to know foreign things, landscapes, and people, his lifelong search for life's certainties and values, his transcendental faith with inclinations towards theosophy, his eclecticism, but also the emotional instability of a complicated personality with pronounced eidetic tendencies shaped by the deepening contradiction between his life's desires and concrete reality. From the permanent

anxieties brought on by the situations of everyday life, which culminated in a series of crises in the poet's life, Zeyer escaped by fixating on proven mechanisms, which for him were art and artistic creation and, towards the end of his life, faith in God. Julius Zeyer was partly Jewish, but his Jewish origins tend to be overestimated in the scholarly literature. The often-quoted sentences of Jan Voborník: "Mother Eleonora came from an old Jewish family in Prague [...] she liked to remember some Old Testament customs from home" (Voborník 1907, 6) are used as clichés at the beginning of Zeyer's biographies, without any further meaning or explanation.

Zeyer's mother's name was Eleonora Alžběta Weissesles (1811 – 1881), the daughter of a Prague merchant Simon Weissesles and his wife Anna, née Freund (more e.g., Holejšovský 1940, 77 – 97). Although she came from an "old Jewish family" (Voborník 1907, 6), she was a Catholic. The wedding of the poet's parents took place on 20 November 1834 in the Church of Our Lady before Týn (also the Church of Mother of God before Týn, Týn Church), located in Prague's Old Town near Old Town Square. According to his own words and the testimony of friends, Julius Zeyer had a strong emotional relationship with his mother, unlike his father. However, they were not close in character, and her influence on his upbringing, personality, studies, and possibly his work is debatable. His mother was a practical life-realist, and he had a personality of many paradoxes: a melancholic, highly sensitive aesthete, a contemplative humanist actively seeking solitude, which he took for granted as a space for creative work and individual experience as the primary source of artistic inspiration.

On the other hand, he appeared as a conservative man with a sense of tradition, regularity, and order; he took a lively interest in the events around him; he liked to move in a society that ostentatiously sympathised with his attitude to life, and he showed affection and respect for his person and artistic work. Julius Zeyer completed his formal education at the upper secondary level (according to the International Standard Classification of Education, CZ-ISCED 2011), which he unsuccessfully completed with a mathematics matriculation exam, followed by a short, extraordinary study at the Faculty of Arts. However, his relatively short-term and unsuccessful formal and informal studies did not negatively affect his relationship with lifelong self-learning. Informal lifelong learning, spontaneous and unsystematic, has become an immanent and permanent value, characterising his personality, and accompanying him throughout his life. Zeyer spoke several languages (Czech, German, English, French, Italian, Russian, Polish, and Spanish), including classical languages (Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, and Arabic), and was interested in the history of philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, and logic. He worked hard on the history and mythology of cultures across religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism), both in Europe (French, Italian, and Scandinavian motifs) and in the Orient (Indian, Semitic, Chinese, Japanese, ancient Egyptian, Persian, and Armenian motifs). The disparity between his (even in his time extraordinary) talents in the humanities or polyglotism, on the one hand, and the educational limitations of the natural sciences, on the other, represents one of the many significant paradoxes that characterise Julius Zeyer's contradictory personality. The poet's (self-)study was always teleological; he sought inspiration for his artistic work and was meticulous and precise. He was attracted by exotic cultures of the eastern Orient, distant from the Czech context of the time, but also by countries with a distinct and unquestionable historical tradition and rich mythology, i.e., everything he missed in Bohemia. Thus, interest in Jewish themes was part of the poet's enduring interest in other cultures and countries. Evidence of his interest in Jewishness are the titles from the poet's library in the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African, and American Cultures on Betlémské Square in the Prague Old Town, as well as a list of books Zeyer borrowed from this library (Poucha 1958, 593). After returning from Russia in the early 1870s for the first time, he studied Hebrew, Talmud, and Kabbalistic books. The motivation for the poet's interest in Jewish culture thus stemmed more from

his immanent, enduring desire to explore than from the direct influence of specific people in his environment, such as his mother, as is most often stated.

The Jewish element attracted Zeyer with its mystique, unquestionably great history, tragic fate, and the historically perceived passivity of its life attitude. Zeyer could relate to the destiny of the Jewish people as an oppressed minority without a homeland, suffering, uprooted, but never conquered. The need to (re)define the relationship to one's native language, country, history, and related feelings of disillusionment, injustice, and the desire to follow ethical principles such as justice, compassion, and the moral law may have been close to him. One of the major themes of Jewish philosophy resonates in his work, namely the question of explaining the existence of evil and suffering in the world (theodicy), especially in terms of God's justice and omnipotence. In his work, the poet often gives instructions on how to act, live and die properly, albeit through the lens of a Christian believer. Zeyer sought spiritual salvation in a distinctive artistic stylisation, first in Eastern religious contemplation or folk wisdom, later in the interconnection of ideas from different religions, to subsequently become a peculiar Catholic with an emphasis on individual aestheticization, the so-called temple Christianity.

In Julius Zeyer's literary work, Jewish motifs appear in a number of his writings, in particular *Duhový pták* [The Rainbow Bird] (Lumír 1873), *Jeho svět a její* [His World and Hers] (Lumír 1874), *Miss Olympia* [Miss Olympia] (Lumír 1874), *Xaver* [Xaver] (Lumír 1876), *Román o věrném přátelství Amise a Amila* [Romance About the Faithful Friendship of Amis and Amil] (Lumír 1877), *Smrt Evy* [Eve's Death] (1877), *Co slza zmůže* [What a Tear Can Do] (Lumír 1877), *Báje Šošany* [Shoshanna's Tales] (printed 1880), *Sulamit* [Sulamit] (Lumír 1883), *Sestra Paskalina* [Sister Pascalina] (Lumír 1884), *Na Sinaji* [On Sinai] (Ruch 1888), *Z dob růžového jitra* [From the Time of the Rosy Dawn] (Květy 1889), *Doňa Sanča* [Doňa Sancha] (printed 1889), *Tři legendy o krucifixu* [Three Legends of the Crucifix] (Lumír 1892), *Asenat* [Asenat] (Lumír 1895), *Ištar* [Ishtar] (Lumír 1895), *Radúz a Mahulena* [Radúz and Mahulena] (Květy 1896), *Zahrada Mariánská* [The Marian Garden] (Nový život 1897/1898), the poems *Kaditelnice* [The Thurible] a *Osud* [The Fate] (Poesie 1903). An auxiliary criterion for sorting such an extensive set of works containing Jewish motifs can be the depicted space (Mikulášek et al. 1998, 393), clustering together Biblical (taking place in the *Old Testament* space, e.g. *Smrt Evy*), Spanish (taking place on the territory of a specific state, e.g. *El Cristo de la Luz*), and Central European (they take place in Central Europe, e.g. in Germany, *Báje Šošany*) works. Time can also be used as a classification criterion (Donath 1923, 64), grouping works with Jewish motifs according to specific historical periods, i.e., Biblical (*Na Sinaji*), Medieval (*El Cristo de la Luz*) or Modern (from the contemporary period, *Duhový pták*).

The Jewish element appears most prominently in the poet's work in paraphrasing stories from the *Old Testament* (*Smrt Evy*, *Co slza zmůže*, *Na Sinaji*, *Sulamit*). The influence of Zeyer's interests, studies and readings was significant in the initial period of his creative development, i.e. in the 1870s and early 1880s, and references to Jewish themes can be found in almost all of his works from this period. The Bible is a ubiquitous requisite in the poet's narratives from this period; characters like to read in it (*Knihy Makabejské – Duhový pták* [The Books of the Maccabees – The Rainbow Bird]), confess their love through it (*Píseň písní – Jeho svět a její* [The Song of Songs – His World and Hers]), and it is part of the interiors (*Xaver*); other requisites include the Jewish cemetery, the synagogue, and the Jewish street. The temporal connection with Zeyer's interest in Jewish culture, as we know it from the poet's personal correspondence, is obvious and confirms the direct relationship between the poet's studies and his artistic work. The interest in Jewish themes is also reflected in many biblical anthroponyms (Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Israel, Matthat, Nathanael, Simon, Michael) and toponyms (Sidon, Gilboa, Jerusalem) in Zeyer's work. They accentuate the element of exoticism and unusualness in the text. The characters are always typified, representing the Jewish nation (Ben-Yehuda, i.e., the son of Judah) or the narrator's ideas about it

(Shoshanna – Lily). Later – in line with the Christian outcome of Zeyer’s work – they act as bearers of conversion, either already completed, the character having embraced Christianity (Rispa), or in the process of spiritual quest (Abisaín from the Toledo legend *El Cristo de la Luz*, from the book *Tři legendy o krucifixu*).

Leaving aside the poet’s paraphrases of biblical stories, the theme of Jewishness is most represented in Zeyer’s work in the introduction to *Báje Šošany* and in the Toledo legend *El Cristo de la Luz*, from the book *Tři legendy o krucifixu*. In the introduction to *Báje Šošany*, the protagonist Valerius stays in Frankfurt “two steps” from the Jewish Street. He meets an older man, the Moroccan Jew Ben-Yehuda, the father of Shoshanna, whom he calls Anpiel, referring to their first meeting after the angelic protector, the patron saint of birds. Valerius is enchanted by the former Jewish ghetto, the interior of a Jewish house, the mystery of Ben-Yehuda, and the extraordinary beauty of Shoshanna. The fictional space is filled with Jewish motifs that evoke the mysterious and the exotic. Vague references to well-known Jewish traditions, the festivals of Passover and Shabbat, or the greeting “*still here today and perhaps in Jerusalem next year! Today still slaves and next year perhaps sons of freedom!*” (Zeyer 1877, 6) complement the idea of a poetic space created by partial details in an updated form alluding to Jewish life in the Diaspora. The explicit mention of the injustice of the cruel fate of persecuted people supports the attribute of exceptionalism. Everything is descriptively named to create an adequate image as a visual prop for a similarly conceived narrative. The names of the two characters, including the mention of their foreign origin, complete the overall picture of the created space. The characters appear as literary types, i.e., as representatives of the poet’s ideas about Jews.

The second story falls in time in Zeyer’s late (peak) creative period, in which the poet found the starting point for his narratives in Christianity. The representation of Jewish motifs is subordinated to this; the legend mediates the conversion of a member of the Jewish nation to Christianity. Toledo legend *El Cristo de la Luz* is set in Toledo, where Jews and Christians live together. A young Jewish man, Abisaín, loves a Jewish girl, Rispa, whom he wants to marry. Meribal, Rispa’s father, wants to marry her only to a true enemy of Christians. Abisaín wants to prove his hatred of Christians by smearing the foot of the miraculous statue of Christ with poison, which Christians customarily kiss. Rispa, a secret Christian, overhears Abisaín’s conversation with Meribal. The intention to kiss the foot of Christ to save the other Christians in the church is prevented by a miracle when the statue lifts its foot, so it cannot be kissed. The enraged Abisaín goes to the church at night, stabs the statue and takes it to his house. In the morning, the Christians follow the bloody trail of Christ to Abisaín’s home, where they lynch him to death. Abisaín sees through his blindness; he comes to faith in Christ, stops feeling pain, and dies reconciled and happy (satisfied). In *Báje Šošany*, the Jewish element is part of the space without direct influence on the plot of the narrative, while in the Toledo legend, it is used in the plot’s structure and the plot’s resolution.

Jewishness most often represents one of the themes, (visualised) spaces or the poet’s renewed images; the use of Jewish motifs for compositional construction in the Toledo legend *El Cristo de la Luz* is entirely unique in Zeyer’s work. The renewed and dramatized images form a quantitatively significant group of works in Julius Zeyer’s prose oeuvre: *Obnovené obrazy I – Vůně, Král Kofétua, Vertmnus a Pomona, Tankreadův omyl* [Images Restored I – Fragrance, King Kofétua, Vertmnus and Pomona, Tankread’s Mistake]; *Obnovené obrazy II* (1896) – *Amparo* (Lumír 1892), *Píseň za vlahé letní noci* (Lumír 1885), *Zrada v domě Han* (Lumír 1881), *Asenat* (Lumír 1895), *Kunálový oči* (Lumír 1892), *Ištar* (Lumír 1895), *Rustem a Sohrab* (Květy, 1898) a *O velkém bolu boha Izanagi* (Lumír 1891) [Images Restored II – Amparo, A Song for a Balmy Summer Night, Betrayal in the House of Han, Asenat, Kunal’s Eyes, Ishtar, Rustem and Sohrab, On the Great Pain of the God Izanagi]; *Obnovené obrazy III – V soumraku bohů, Legenda o rytíři Albanu* [Images Restored III – In the Twilight of the Gods, The Legend of the Knight Alban]. Other texts can be freely assigned

to this narrative type *Smrt Evy* (Lumír 1877), *Báje Šošany* (Ottova Sal. bibl. XV, 1880), *Sestra Paskalina* (Lumír 1884), *Král Menkera, Sníh ve Florencii* (Lumír 1887), *Feniciin hřích* (Květy 1888), *Stratonika* (1892), *Gdoule* (Lumír 1889) a *Večer u Idalie* (1892); *Fantastické povídky* (1882): *Z papíru na kornouty* (Lumír 1874), *Opálová miska* (knižně 1893), *Vánoční povídka* (Lumír 1879), *Na pomezí cizích světů* (Lumír 1876) [The King of Menker, Snow in Florence, Phoenicia's Sin, Stratonika, Gdoule, Evening at Idalia's; Fantastic Tales: From Paper to Cones, The Opal Bowl, A Christmas Tale, On the Verge of Foreign Worlds]. Together, they represent distinctive adaptations of adopted plots with mostly exotic themes. The restored images are a compilation of an uncomplicated adopted plot and (external) environment composed of many partial details, as the poet visually created (evoked) them based on his studies. The narratives are characterised by Art Nouveau composition, colour, decoration, and ornamentation, associated with an emphasis on the sensory perception of the fictional reality, induced by the high representation of external features of the described fictional reality.

For Zeyer, the process of renewal entailed a thorough study of the primary sources from which the poet took the basic plot, enunciating the unspoken from the original, explaining the ambiguous, placing them in a typified setting, and mediating faster and more concentratedly (to the principle of Julius Zeyer's work with Poucha sources, 1958, 537). Julius Zeyer's renewed and dramatized image represents a narrative decomposable into a sequence of many successive concrete images. In scope, these are shorter prose pieces, characterised by a high degree of dramatization and an uncomplicated plot structure. "The principle of breaking down the whole into individual details that begin to live their own independent lives is a characteristic feature of the poetics of the turn of the century and the years that followed" (Kšicová 1998, 33) and a typical hallmark of Art Nouveau. In Zeyer's prose, man's relationship to his surroundings is redefined by the characteristic determination of spatial context. The narrative is mediated as an event depending on a specific place and time. The spatial and temporal localisation of the plot becomes a determining factor in the structure of the plot. The setting of the presented plot in an (unusual) place and time, the introduction of (unusual) acting characters, i.e., all the concretisation of the reader's imagination, take on the character of stylistic dominance in this set of poet's prose. The narrated plot is scenically fixed by space. The narratives are lyrically and timelessly conceived as if they were constantly occurring in those places. The Jewish space (the former Frankfurt ghetto, medieval Toledo) is one of the environment images in which the poet inserts his renewed image.

Jewish motifs and the theme of Jewishness appear in Zeyer's work mainly in the form of an unusual spatial context. The mosaic combination of the partial attributes of the chosen theme evokes a distinctive image of Jewishness, created from the poet's ideas of the *Old Testament* or medieval world as he formed them through careful study. Zeyer's treatment of Jewish motifs can be seen as subjective, reflecting his idealised ideas about the culture based on his reading and self-study. However, it will always be original, standing outside established stereotypes and traditions. The updates were always based on the poet's ideas about a given place, culture, and people, as he built them based on his (self-)study, reading, and personal experiences from his travels and compiled them in his imagination. "By the same mistake, we imagine the ancient Jews constantly praying, offering sacrifices or singing psalms to Jehovah – even though Amos and Isaiah tell us about the drunken songs that the guests, resting on ivory beds beside goblets adorned with flowers, sang to the sounds of kinorah, lutes and tambourines; although the Song of Songs proves to us the existence of Jewish erotic poetry; even though old poems or fragments of poems preserved in history books, the song of Deborah, statements about the tribes of Israel, are entirely free of religious character" mentions just to the margin of his study *Pohádky a romány staroegyptské* [Tales and Novels of Ancient Egypt] (Zeyer 1874, 4).

Julius Zeyer's literary work is rich in Jewish motifs; they appear in his epic, lyrical and dramatic work. In the early period of his work, they appear as integral requisites in the interiors of fictional worlds, in the middle period in paraphrases of biblical stories or as exotic, unusual spaces in the poet's recreated images, and in his peak creative period, the poet uses them to accentuate Christian themes. The Jewish motifs fulfil decorative and characteristic functions in Zeyer's work; they are part of a coherent mosaic of a temporally and spatially localised restored image. The element of Jewishness can be interpreted as one of the manifestations of Zeyer's enduring interest in Eastern religions, cultures, history and mythology. His interest in Jewishness probably stemmed from his lifelong education and reading, essential prerequisites for his artistic work. The poet's approach to Jewish motifs was subjective, despite a conscious effort at representativeness, always "Zeyer-like" original. His perception of Jewishness was not influenced by the time in which he lived nor by the context of the time; instead, it reflects the poet's poeticised idea of it, as he created it based on his (self-)study. Julius Zeyer's affiliation with the Czech-Jewish community is traditional, mainly stemming from his interest in Jewish culture, as reflected in his literary works, rather than in the specific contribution or significance of Jewishness (not only) for his artistic work.

SUMMARY

The literary work of Julius Zeyer is rich in Jewish motifs; they appear in his epic, lyrical and dramatic work. In the early period of his work, they appear as integral requisites of the interiors of fictional worlds; in the middle period, in paraphrases of biblical stories or as exotic, unusual spaces of the poet's restored images; in the peak creative period, the poet uses them to accentuate Christian themes. The Jewish motifs represented by Zeyer fulfil decorative and characterisation functions; they are part of a complete mosaic of a temporally and spatially localised renewed image. His interest in Jewishness probably stemmed from the poet's lifelong education and reading, a necessary prerequisite for his artistic work. The Jewish element in Julius Zeyer's work can be interpreted as one of the manifestations of his permanent interest in Eastern religion, culture, history, and mythology.

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