

JEWISH ANECDOTES AS A MIRROR OF NAMING PRACTICE. PERSONAL NAMES OF JEWS IN BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA¹

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Abstract: Jewish anecdotes reflect the changes over the course of history that have occurred in Bohemia and Moravia in the field of personal names of local Jews. Unlike the rest of the population, Jews could not freely choose any given names, as they were restricted by an official list (1788–1867). After a short period of freedom, another list of permitted names was brought by the Nazi regime (1938). Jewish anecdotes comment on the choice, the use, and changes of names as well as on the names themselves. They represent an important historical and documentary source.

Keywords: anthroponyms, Jews, jokes, Bohemia, Moravia.

1. Introduction

Jewish anecdotes are a very specific form of oral lore. They respond to various aspects of life including names.² In the past, they have been discussed from different points of view using many methods.

This study analyses anthroponyms as a target of Jewish anecdotes and shows how the anecdotes comment on some naming situations such as the choice, the use, and the changes of personal names. The study combines the analysis of literary proper names from Jewish anecdotes with a look at the evolution of real Jewish personal names in Bohemia and Moravia (i.e., parts of today's Czech Republic).

The study is based on Czech material (names excerpted from 37 Czech collections of Jewish anecdotes published between 1913 and 2020 or found on Czech

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² Personal names play an important role in Jewish anecdotes, they often help to identify the anecdote as Jewish, so we can assume “typical” Jewish names in them, or names considered typical (see Dvořáková 2020). This is also pointed out by M. Knappová (1989: 60–62): “So, for members of other nationalities appearing in literary works, the usual names are typical or common in the given national language. (...) By choosing a first name, a character can also be classified from a religious point of view, i.e. to signal his/her affiliation to a certain religion.” However, we should always distinguish Jewish anecdotes and “jokes about Jews” using often antisemitic stereotypes including names, cf. name *Itzig* in German pre-war jokes (Bering 1992: 3–11; Nick 2018: 62). This paper considers only the Jewish anecdotes.

humour web sites) but it is clear that anecdotes migrate and appear in different variants in different languages. The setting of some anecdotes is not always known, some of them take place abroad (esp. in Germany, Poland, Russia, USA, or Israel etc.), however even they can sometimes describe situations that can fit to our country as well.

2. History of personal names of Jews living in Bohemia and Moravia

2.1. Before 1787

Since Middle Ages, Jews living in Bohemia and Moravia have used not only traditional biblical names³ but also others based on Hebrew or Aramaic lexis (e.g., *Chaim* = “life”), Yiddish (e.g. *Hirsch* = “deer”) or languages of surrounding nations.⁴ Numerous diminutives and pet forms emerged from these names and then became independent. If we look for example at the tax books of the Prague Jewish Town from 1685 to 1687, we find that the most popular given names at that time were: *Moshe, Lejbl, Juda* and *Jidl, Jakob, Jokl* and *Jekl, Jizchak* and *Eisik, Hirsch, David, Abraham, Wolf, Meir, Schemuel* (and derivations *Sanwil, Schelomo* and *Salman*), *Chajim, Berl, Aharon, Jisrael, Schimon, Mordechaj* etc. (Muneles 1966: 9; Bondyová 2006: 24).

The following anecdote is based on traditional biblical names. The answer to the students is an allusion to the First Book of Samuel (9:3):

Three drunken students meet a Jew on a street.

“Good morning, Abraham!” says the first one.

“Good morning, Isaac!” continues the second student.

“Good morning, Jacob!” calls the third one.

“You are wrong,” answers the Jew. “My name is Saul and I went looking for three lost donkeys of my father. Now I see I finally found them.”

In some places in Europe, Jews began to use family names in early 16th century. Prague was one of these places and the original family names of Prague Jews thus represent one of the oldest layers of Ashkenazi surnames (Beider 1995: 1). Many of these family names were derived from Czech and Moravian toponyms (e.g. *Horowitz, Brandeis, Taussig*) and they were so common that this kind of surnames was considered to be typical Jewish (Beneš 1978: 17). Other family names were

³ In our collection, we can find anecdotes about biblical persons and their names as well, e.g.

“Do you know why Moses’s father-in-law, Jitro, had seven names in Bible?”

“Because he has seven daughters and after the marriage of each of them, he filed for bankruptcy and started business again with a new name.”

⁴ J. Jacobs (1906: 155) says that the general trend of nomenclature among Jews in the Middle Ages was to adopt that of the countries in which they lived, the given names being often identical with those of the surrounding people. The adoption of two names, one for civil purposes, known as “the kinnuy”, the other (sacred name) for use in the synagogue and in all Hebrew documents was common. This tradition is still living in Czechia today (see Dvořáková 2021).

motivated for example by the occupation (e.g. *Glaser, Schreiber, Šochet*), some characteristics of their bearers (e.g. *Freund, Weisskopf, Klein*) or house sign, etc. Surnames as *Kohn* and *Levy* indicated the origin.⁵

The matchmaker: "All right, so you want to give up on getting married. But don't you feel sad when you think your surname will cease to exist?"

The groom: "Why should it cease to exist, Mr Schmauss? My name is Kohn!"

2.2. Patent of Joseph II (1787)

However, the natural development of Jewish personal names in our territory was interrupted by the issuance of the patent of Emperor Joseph II on July 23, 1787, effective January 1, 1788 (for details see Žáček 1936). The patent was part of a long chain of Jewish Josephine reforms. It made the adoption of a hereditary and unchangeable surname and a German given name obligatory. It is little known that the immediate impetus for this law was "the difficulties of the Teplice municipality [in Bohemia] with the large community of Teplice Jews whose names were so confusing that it was not possible to identify the individuals by their current names. The chaos was so great that for example one Jew was registered in the city books⁶ under six different names.⁷ This resulted in the Teplice municipality sending an exposition to the Royal Court of Appeal suggesting, among other things, that it would be good and necessary for Jews to be obliged to accept certain and permanent family names, like the Christians had" (Žáček 1936: 278). The Emperor agreed.

As from February 21, 1805, the validity of this patent was extended for Galicia (Žáček 1936: 296). In this area, there are popular legends about surnames that were assigned by officials and if the Jew wanted to ensure a "nice" family name, he had to bribe these officials to receive a surname derived for example from flowers or gemstones (cf.

⁵ The surname *Kohn* was derived from the common noun *kohen*, i.e., 'priest in the Jerusalem temple', and only descendants of these priests could be named *Kohn* (Beider 1995: 5; Bondyová 2006: 74). It was the most common Jewish surname in Prague before the World War II (Volfová 1994: 50), and it is still the most common among Jews in the USA (Rosenwaik 1990: 33) and in Israel (101 Most common...). At the same time, the surname *Kohn* was the most frequently used in pre-war Jewish anecdotes (cf. Dvořáková 2020: 227), so "The narrators of antisemitic jokes in the first republic could say only *Kohn* and *Levy* are going by train or *Kohn* and *Levy* are sitting in a café and they did not have to explain that these were Jewish as such names were never borne by Gentiles" (Bondyová 2006: 74).

⁶ The inventories of the Jewish population had not only fiscal reasons but a fundamental regulatory purpose as well, as they were based on the Familiant Act of September 25, 1726, limiting the number of Jewish families in the Czech lands to a predetermined quota (*numerus clausus*) which was 8 541 families in Bohemia and 5 106 in Moravia (Kuděla 2004: 29; Bondyová 2006: 87).

⁷ In the lists we can find quite different names for one particular individual, e.g. *Efraim Mayer, Mayer Efraim, Efraim Schwarz, Mayer Schwartz, Mayer Efraim Schwarz*, etc. (Kuděla 2004: 30–31). The father and his son could be called differently as well, e.g., *Moses Bendiner, son of Uri Horowitz* (Beider 1995: 4).

Baider 2004: 12; Bondyová 2006: 116; Matúšová 2015: 17). These ornamental surnames could become targets of Jewish anecdotes as well, e.g.:

Kohn and Roubíček are at a modern art exhibition, and they cannot agree on one painting whether it is a landscape or a portrait.

Roubíček goes to ask the museum guard, then he comes back and says: "So, we still know nothing. The painting is called Blumenfeld in Holland..."⁸

Those who did not pay could get derisive and derogatory names. This is the motif of one anecdote too:

Isaac had to go to the commission that assigned surnames.

"So, what name did you get?" His wife asks as soon as he arrives home.

"Hmm ... Don't ask..."

"So, what is your name?" The woman won't be refused.

"Soviňák."

The woman makes a face. "Couldn't you have chosen something better?"

"Better, better... Do you think that these robbers will give you a choice? Just for that extra -o- I had to pay five guldens!"⁹

However, let's leave aside the veracity of these stories. The situation in Bohemia and Moravia was different. In our country the Jews chose their surnames themselves. They could use their old family names if they had already had any. The list submitted to the Prague City Hall in 1788 by Prague Chief Rabbi Jechezkel Landau shows that while almost all personal names were changed (mandatory switch to German names), only over 100 family names were changed out of 5 260 (Volfová 1994: 7).

The patent regulations were clear. The only confusion, which was noticeable only in later times, was that the patent did not specify exactly what it means by the term "German" given name. Therefore, a list of 890 male and 409 female Jewish given names and their German forms (e.g., *Jisroel – Israel, Channo – Anna* etc.) was compiled by the official translator from Hebrew, P. L. Tirsch. The list contained, besides common biblical names, "a number of names only mentioned in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and never used by Jews, as well as the names of persecutors of Jews like Haman (...). The choice of female names was also strange: the list contained Hebrew words never converted to personal names like *Memscheles* (government), *Paroches* (synagogue curtain on the Torah), *Schacharis* (morning prayer) and *Acharis* (end of days)" (Bondyová 2006: 31). Then the list was reviewed and only 111 male and 35 female names were

⁸ *Blumenfeld* is common Jewish surname meaning 'field of flowers' (Guggenheimer and Guggenheimer 1992: 86).

⁹ *Soviňák* without the extra -o- would be *Sviňák*, a word derived from *svině* 'swine'; with -o- it seems like derivation from *sova* "owl". In another, more vulgar variant of this anecdote, the surname is *Schweissloch* (i.e. 'sweaty hole'), the extra -w- cost 50 guldens, otherwise the man would have been called *Scheissloch* (i.e. 'shithole').

permitted by court decree of November 12, 1787 (see Žáček 1936: 292–293; Kuděla 2004: 33). Jews responded to the law by a letter sent directly to the emperor, pointing out that there were too few permitted given names for the total Jewish population in the country. The emperor then “graciously” allowed them another 10 male and 2 female names. The choice was limited because the list included names that Jews would never choose for their children (like *Nabuchodonozor*) and because according to Ashkenazi tradition a child must not bear the name of a living parent or close relative (Guggenheimer and Guggenheimer 1992: 18). And for that situation we have a joke:

Mr. Načeradec visits his rabbi. “I need your advice. My wife just gave birth to a baby girl.”
“Mazal tov!”
“Thank you. Can we name her after a relative?”
“According to Jewish customs, you can name her only after a deceased relative.”
“But they’re all still alive,” Mr. Načeradec replies.
“Well, what a pity,” the rabbi says.

On the other hand, it is common to name a child after a deceased relative in his/her honour. In addition to the honorific function, these given names are also close to wishing and predestination names, so we can understand the parents from the following anecdote:

A Jewish couple had their first son, and their joy was endless. But soon they began to argue about the child’s name, whether he should be named after the man’s or the woman’s father.
“Your dad was a drunkard,” the woman screamed. “I will not allow my child to be named after a drunkard!”
“And your dad was a thief,” the man replied. “I will not allow my boy to be named after a thief!”
Finally, they gathered and went to the rabbi.
“What’s your father’s name?” the rabbi asks the man.
“Abraham.”
“What’s your father’s name?” he asks the woman.
“Abraham.”
The rabbi thinks for a moment and then says: “Name him Abraham.”
“But after which Abraham do we name him?”
“Time will tell: If he grows up and drinks a lot, he will have been named after his father’s father. And if he becomes a thief, he will have been named after his mother’s father.”

How much the patent interfered with Jewish names is demonstrated by an example of one family from Kynžvart – all members had to change names: *Meyr Löbl* > *Markus Hirschhorn*, his wife *Pesel* > *Esther*, their daughters *Hedl* > *Anna* and *Telzil* > *Rachel* (Hofmann 1984: 24).

According to the patent, new names should have been constant. The court decree of 1826 contained a clause on the change of name, which was allowed only during conversion or promotion to nobility.

Mair Löbl came to a Protestant clergyman to be baptized. He also asked to change his name and chose the name Martin Luther.

"Why are you asking for the very name of the founder of our religion? It is not possible, surely there are other names you might like."

"It's because of my underwear, at least my monogram stays the same."

The emperor himself had the right to decide on other extraordinary permits to change someone's name. Permission to change the name was therefore an act of grace (Žáček 1936: 329).

The next generation began to fight against this restrictive list of names. It was argued, among other things, that "in no other part of the Austrian monarchy are Jews confronted with such obstacles as in Bohemia and Moravia" (Žáček 1936: 299). The disputes lasted for many years. Finally, by court decree of July 20, 1836, Jews were allowed to choose any German given names, including those of all Christian saints.

2.3. Act on General Civil Rights (1867)

Equalization of the entire population of the Austrian monarchy, including Jews with the rest of the population, came in 1867 by the Act on General Civil Rights. At that time, all restrictions on the choice of names were also lifted (Žáček 1936: 328–329). Many Jews then have changed their given names or surnames. "The history of Jewish names in Bohemia and Moravia as well as of their bearers varies between two opposing poles: between clinging to and setting free from the past, between preserving the uniqueness of Jewish existence and assimilating, between the desire to preserve the legacy of the ancestors and the desire to get rid of it as soon as possible. Jewish names, as well as their bearers, are in a constant flow" (Bondyová 2006: 10). With the birth of nationalism, names became ethnic symbols, referring to the origin of their bearers, and therefore names considered Jewish could stigmatise them.

"Is it the apartment of Mr Kohn? Can I speak to Moshe, please?"

"There is no Moshe. There is only Miroslav."

"Well, can I speak to Miroslav, please?"

"Moshe, come here!"

The tendency of renaming corresponds to the situation in other parts of the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy (to which Bohemia and Moravia belonged) at that time. As T. Farkas (2009: 377; 2012: 5) points out, in Hungary a new name was chosen mainly by Jews with higher education living in towns and coming from the Hungarian language environment, who predominantly professed reformist Judaism. Thus, the name changes were associated not only with assimilation but also with secularization. The situation in our country was similar. These changes were criticized and became a popular target of many Jewish jokes, e.g.:

Mr Kohn walks his dog in the park. He spots a friend and says: "Good morning, Mr Wassermann."

"My name is Vodička," says the friend, and Mr Kohn smiles apologetically.

After a week they meet again and Mr. Kohn greets: "Good morning, Mr Vodička."

And he gets a gruff answer: "My name is Potůček, damn it!"

Mr Kohn gets angry: "What the hell! I knew you as..."

"Just keep your hair on, Mr Kohn. It sounds better when a man can say he is Potůček né Vodička than Vodička né Wassermann!"

2.4. Czechoslovakia (1918–1938)

As stated by R. Bondyová (2006: 38), the most common given names of Czech and Moravian Jews in later years of the Habsburg monarchy and during Czechoslovakia before the World War II were: *Josef, Karel, Rudolf, Otto, Emil, Franz (František), Georg (Jiří)* for boys and *Anna, Julie, Rosa, Olga, Irma, Truda, Berta, Greta, Věra* and *Marie* for girls. In the previous study, a comparison of this repertoire with names from the Jewish anecdotes published in this period was given. The analysis showed that the most frequent given names used in anecdotes by O. Pick (1925) and K. Poláček (1933) corresponded to the most common proper names of Czech and Moravian Jews of that time (see Dvořáková 2020 for details).

The naming freedom, however, did not last long...

A new wave of name changes occurred before World War II in an effort to get rid of the stigmatising Jewish surname. J. Matúšová (2015: 44) lists some of them which she has retrieved from the records of the Prague City Hall office. Jewish surnames were replaced by German or Czech surnames as well as forms created by a variation of the sound inventory of the original form (e.g. *Anna Kohn > Kohout*). We can see this effort not only in our country, but also abroad:

Mr Katzman lives happily in Paris, but in 1938 he sees the situation evolving unfavourably, so he decides to change his name. Just in case...

He comes to the office and the official asks him what he would like to be called. Katzman explains: "I would like to translate my name into French: Katz,¹⁰ it's like a cat (chat), and man, it's like a man (l'homme), so I'd like to be Mr. Chalom."

2.5. World War II (1939–1945)

During the occupation, the German law of January 5, 1938, applied in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia¹¹ required that Jews use either names from a list

¹⁰ The surname *Katz* does not mean 'cat', but it originated from the abbreviation of the term 'Kohen Tzedeq', i.e., 'priest of justice'. It is documented in Prague as early as 1536 (Bartůšek 1971: 27).

¹¹ In the Sudetenland (i.e., in the northern, southern, and western areas of former Czechoslovakia), the law entered into force by decree of January 24, 1938. In the territory of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the law entered into force on February 1, 1940, by a circular of the Protectorate Ministry of the Interior (Dvořáková 2019: 214–215).

of authorized names or add the second name *Israel* or *Sara* to their existing name. The list contained 185 male and 92 female names, which were prepared for the Ministry of Interior by the Reich Bureau of Genealogical Research. In the list were unusual names that assimilated German (as well as Czech and Moravian) Jews did not use or rare biblical names, some of which Jews would never use as a name because it denoted negative biblical characters (e.g. *Herod*, *Jezebel*). As stated by I.M. Nick (2018: 64), at that time the most common names among German Jews were *Rosa*, *Bert(h)a*, *Johanna*, *Elsa/Else*, *Frieda*, *Mart(h)a*, *Gertrud/Gertraud*, *Anna/Anni/Anne*, *Margaret(h)e/Margaret(h)a* and *Hedwig* for girls and *Max*, *Julius*, *Her(r)man*, *Alfred*, *Joseph*, *Han(n)s*, *Si(e)gfri(e)d*, *Curt/Kurt*, *Jackob/Jakob* a *Ernst* for boys. The first name *Adolf* was also popular. Only in this historical context we can understand the paradox of the following situation:¹²

Shortly after Hitler came to power, a newly admitted young teacher with a Nazi swastika on his suit entered the classroom at a Berlin school. He writes down the names of students before starting the class. They all sound pure Germanic.

"Baldwin."

"Great."

"Helmut."

"Great."

"Knut."

"Great."

Finally, a little boy with a very crooked nose rises timidly.

"And what is your name, little Jew?" the teacher asks mockingly.

"You will not believe it. My name is Adolf ..."

Thus, the authors of the list deliberately chose foreign names to emphasize the strangeness of their bearers, or names with negative connotations, which corresponded to the antisemitic rhetoric of the Third Reich (cf. Rolker [n.d.]). Its purpose was obvious: clear identification of Jewish people and their differentiation from others. The given name was supposed to fulfil the function of national/religious/racial classification and became an instrument of antisemitic policies (see Rennick 1970; Nick 2018: 63; Dvořáková 2019). Policies leading to concentration camps where even names were stolen and replaced with prisoners' numbers...

2.6. After 1945

After the war, these antisemitic restrictions were abolished, and a new wave of renaming began in an effort to get rid of the stigmatising Jewish or German names. According to J. Beneš (1998: 80), half of the applicants for change the surname after 1945 were Jews, so the renaming was not exclusive to Jews, as many Czechs with German surnames also preferred to be renamed at that time (for details, see Matúšová 2015: 45–57; cf. Bukovská and Mlynář 2019).

¹² This joke is also built on the stereotypical image of Jewish physiology ("a very crooked nose"). Cf. Felsenstein (2015).

After the World War II a man came to the municipal office with a request to change his name. "And what is your name?" asks the clerk. "Adolf Stinkfuss."¹³ "Of course, I understand. That is very pejorative. And what should the new name be?" "Moritz Stinkfuss."

The survivors tried to start a new life and did not want to draw attention to themselves, especially after the coup by the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia and the so-called "Victorious February" in 1948.¹⁴ We can see this effort not only in our country, but also in other countries of the Eastern Block, cf. the following Russian anecdote:

The famous Russian singer Zinoviev was asked on his European tour when at a party: "Are you related to the commissioner Zinoviev who was executed by Stalin?" The interviewee immediately ruled out the possibility: "No... I am Finkelstein, while he was Apfelbaum."

This political climate provoked a wave of Jewish emigration. For Jews who remained here, this led to the hiding of their roots.¹⁵ Emigration (which was often accompanied by the change of name) was a popular theme of Jewish anecdotes in the post-war as well as in the pre-war period.

Moshe Bernstein emigrated to America, he established himself well here and invited his old father to live with him. During the welcome at the airport, the father gave his son a big hug. "My dear, dear Moshe!" "Please, dad," his son warns him, "don't call me Moshe. I am Morris here." "And where is your wife, Serafina?" "She's Shirley now, dad." Father pauses for a moment. "I hope that even in the new country you observe our traditions, you do not work on Shabbat, you only eat kosher food..." The son fumbles. "But, dad, I live in America. It is not so easy..." The father can no longer hold back: "Tell me the truth! Did you at least stay circumcised?"

At present, the law on registers, name and surname No. 301/2000 applies to all Czech citizens without any differences.

¹³ *Stinkfuss* means 'smelly foot' in German.

¹⁴ R. R. Wisse (2015: 2988) believes that Jewish anecdotes were so popular among Czechs under repressive regime because "It seems that as long as Jews experienced intimidation, repression, and terror aimed at them specifically, their humor held little attraction for onlookers who wanted to stay clear of the fray. Once fascism and Communism routed and regimented the rest of the population as well, though, Jewish humor resonated with citizens under similar attack, and became emblematic of the kind of freedom that 'Roubitschek' personifies."

¹⁵ For details about first name of Czech Jews in post-war period see Dvořáková (2021).

3. Conclusion

Jewish anecdotes represent an important historical and documentary source. They have a long history and rich tradition. They not only function as a source of entertainment, but also reflect values, contexts and their changes, and therefore represent a form of intergenerational transmission of traditions and thus an important component of identity formation (Salner 2002: 137). Jewish humour was always a defence mechanism to ward off the aggression and hostility of others.

*A Jew crosses the street and plunges into an antisemite.
"Swine!" shouts the man.
"Glückstein," the Jew bows.*

These anecdotes do not belong in a museum. As D. Gillota (2013: 51) states, "contemporary Jewish comedians continue to draw from the conventions of traditional Jewish humor that can be traced back, at least, to the nineteenth century shtetl (small village) humor of eastern European Jewry. These conventions include irony, self-deprecation, and a notorious sense of comic pessimism". The anecdotes are still alive and respond ironically to new circumstances, as we can see in the following anecdote:

*Mrs. Kohn meets Mrs. Silberstein in the city.
"What happened to you? Why are you so sad?" she asks.
"My son wants to get married," answers Mrs. Kohn.
"But that's wonderful! Mazal tov. What is the name of the bride?"
"Stefan."
"Well, that's not a common Jewish name."*

Jewish anecdotes comment on various naming situations as described in this study. They reflect Jewish traditions connected with choosing the name for a newborn child, they react to an acceptance of hereditary family name as well as to changes of names due to different reasons (baptism, assimilation, emigration, fear of persecution, etc.). In a few presented anecdotes, the whole history and evolution of names of Jews in the Czech context are hidden.

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