

T. G. Masaryk's involvement in the Jewish issue

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Abstract

T. G. Masaryk's thought is famous for his concept of the Czech nation as well as his ideals of humanity. As a philosopher, sociologist, and politician, he was confronted with Czech anti-Semitism, and after Czechoslovakia was founded, with issues of the Jewish national minority. He tried to solve all the questions with respect to his ethical conviction and the ideals of democracy and equality. The most difficult personal situation for Masaryk emerged with the 'Hilsner affair', when his brave stance against anti-Semitism caused animosity and even hatred from the public. As a consequence of that Masaryk had to abandon his public activities including lecturing at university for some time. The philosopher Jan Patočka analysed Masaryk's involvement in this case and the following events in his study *Masaryk's struggle against anti-Semitism*. Patočka pointed out that there is an interconnection between Masaryk's involvement in this affair and his engagement in the question of Czech nationality, as Masaryk intended to improve the ethical level of the nation by disposing of bias and namely the ritual murder myth. The second part of the present contribution is focused on Masaryk's views on Zionism and the assimilation movement and his ambiguity in relation to the issue. It seems that Masaryk's concept of the Czech nation, formed for the struggle against the Habsburg monarchy, became inadequate in the new republic, as it was not inclusive of the many minorities, the Jewish one included. On the other hand, Masaryk's ideals of humanity provide a certain solution on the level of ethics.

Keywords: T. G. Masaryk, anti-Semitism, Hilsner affair, Jewish question, Zionism and assimilation movement, Czech question

Masaryk's involvement in the 'Hilsner affair' and its historical context

T. G. Masaryk's thought is famous for his concept of the Czech nation as well as his ideals of humanity. He never wrote a study that was solely concerned with ethics, but ethical themes form the backdrop to his thought, his work, and efforts, and are coupled with the view *sub specie aeternitatis*. Masaryk's objective was the moral and cultural improvement of the Czech nation, and this naturally also depended on political and economic conditions, but these were not an objective in themselves, rather a precondition and a means of moral progress (Drozenová, 2022). He tried to solve all issues with respect to his ethical conviction and the ideals of democracy and equality. As a philosopher, sociologist, and politician, he was confronted with Czech anti-Semitism. Masaryk's conception of ethics, uniting personal virtue and an effort to morally elevate the Czech nation, demonstrated itself in an extraordinary way when he spoke out against anti-Semitism during the 'Hilsner affair'.

Leopold Hilsner was a young Jewish man accused of committing murder in Polná. In 1899, a nineteen-year-old Christian woman named Anežka Hrůzová was murdered and her body was found in Březina Forest not far from Polná. Leopold Hilsner, an unemployed apprentice, was accused of the crime and the trial was accompanied by the biggest wave of anti-Semitism witnessed in the Czech lands in the nineteenth century (Kovtun, 1999b). As Anežka Hrůzová's disappearance had taken place during the Jewish holiday of Passover, the Jewish ritual murder (or blood libel) was assumed.² The trial was held during the years 1899–1900 and was

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² Ritual murder was not ultimately cited in the case against Hilsner, but he was sentenced to life imprisonment (at first to death). Hilsner was sentenced on the grounds of accusation of the murder of another woman, and was pardoned after 19 years in prison. Although the guilty ruling against Hilsner in the case was later overturned, he was never granted judicial rehabilitation. A number of questions surrounded the events and the entire process, and the real murderer was never discovered. The subject of the unsolved murder in Polná and the demands of Hilsner's rehabilitation appear in Czech literature even today (Kovtun, 1999b).

accompanied by pressure from the public and the way the investigation was conducted was unfair. Masaryk responded with sharp criticism. Adopting this public stance in the given circumstances required exceptional bravery as it turned the attention of the wider public in his direction and sparked reactions of open hostility, not just from the uneducated segments of the population but even from students at Prague University, a consequence of which was that he even had to cease lecturing at the university for a time. Masaryk considered his involvement in the Hilsner trial as part of the battle to maintain a standard of morality among the Czech population – he did not see it primarily as an effort to obtain justice for the accused (Pojar, 2019). While Masaryk certainly waged this battle to ensure that conditions existed for a fair trial, his primary motivation was to purge the Czech nation of immoral prejudices, especially of the superstition of ritual murder. He deemed this superstition incompatible with being a culturally and morally advanced nation, and he wanted to rid the nation of anti-Semitism altogether. The anti-Semitism of that time had multiple sources and not all were domestic in origin. There were never any original Czech theorists of anti-Semitism; there were, however, certain historical factors that lent strength to Czech anti-Semitism and that had to do with the Czech issue.

From the second half of the nineteenth century, an important driver of anti-Semitism was that, in the conflict between Czechs and Germans, many Jews sided with the latter, having been pushed in that direction by the Josephine reforms directed at favouring the German language over others. In the late nineteenth century, Jews were consequently often portrayed in the press as the main sources of Germanification in ethnically mixed regions and cities (Frankl, 2007), even though in reality Jews were by that time largely assimilated within the Czech population. As Kovtun notes, since the time of the Tolerance Patents of Joseph II, the Austrian authorities had purposefully focused the process of Jewish emancipation in the direction of German culture, but over the course of the nineteenth century Jews, to increasing degrees, shifted this original German focus, and by 1900 almost 54 percent of Jews in Bohemia and Moravia declared Czech to be their language of communication (Kovtun, 1999a, pp. 18–19).

The nationality question came to an extreme head in the years between 1897 and 1899, after the Czechs' request for language equalisation was rejected. This involved a dispute over a language ordinance issued by Prime Minister Badeni, which sought to put the Czech language on an equal level with German throughout the Czech lands. The German side, however, asserted the demand to introduce administrative independence for regions along the inside border of the Czech lands with a majority German-speaking population. After the Badeni government fell (November 1897), an ensuing attempt at language equalisation in the Czech lands introduced under the Thun government in the autumn of 1899 also failed. Clashing Czech and German demands led to an escalation of demonstrations, but also to disorderly conduct on both sides, and on the Czech side there was a tendency to accuse Jews of supporting the German element (Kovtun, 1999a). This fed an anti-Jewish atmosphere in the Czech lands and there were even anti-Jewish riots and attacks on Jewish shops (Šolle, 1999).

As well as what was occurring in the Czech lands, however, sources of anti-Semitism were also appearing in Austria-Hungary in the last third of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, there were forms of political anti-Semitism associated with various ideas of progress, where the Jews were accused of being connected to a system of economic exploitation, but on the other hand there were displays of anti-Semitism that were linked to conservatism and even to clericalism. Nonetheless, religious and theological interests played a secondary role in anti-Semitism at that time. Kovtun points out that the spread of the ritual murder myth (or a particular type of anti-Semitism) is often incorrectly associated with religion and especially the Catholic Church; in reality, it is necessary to distinguish between individual journalists who participated in rapid campaigns to support their own popularity even within the Catholic press, on the one hand, and the position of the church itself on the other. "The higher echelons of the

Catholic Church repudiated charlatans like August Rohling and were sometimes in direct conflict with anti-Semitic demagogues who based their political activities on Catholicism” (Kovtun, 1999a, p. 18).

In the nineteenth century, anti-Semitism also had a European dimension to it that became coupled with the myth of ritual murder, a false belief that Jews need or use the blood of Christians in secret ceremonies of some kind. Seventeen years before the case in Polná, a group of Jews in Hungary were accused of murdering a Christian girl in a synagogue in order to drain her blood; a court trial, however, proved that the accusation was nonsense and that the girl had committed suicide by drowning. Similarly, in Germany’s Rhineland region this canard led to a Jewish citizen being charged with the murder of a Christian boy; in the trial, however, even the prosecutor reached the conclusion that the accused could not have committed the crime (Kovtun, 1999a, p. 18). The same solution was not however reached in Polná, where the superstition of ritual murder hovered over the investigation of the case from the very outset and was fostered – along with a wave of anti-Semitism – by a sensationalising press. The ‘Hilsner affair’ sparked a wave of anti-Semitism that in turn influenced the course of the investigation: from the outset there were signs that the evidence was tampered with, and it was Masaryk that threw a light on this in the press. In doing so, he drew a wave of outrage, anger, and hatred upon himself.

Masaryk stressed that refuting the myth of ritual murder was in the interest of the Czech nation, which was held back by such notions, and he also employed science and rational arguments in his criticism of the very trial. Masaryk pointed out the contradictions in the trial, in which even statement arose claiming that the body of the murdered girl had been drained of blood – in spite of the fact that the medical evidence eliminated this possibility. Arguing against anti-Semitism and specifically against the myth of ritual murder Masaryk also referenced the public’s familiarity with Judaism. He included comments on the broad general knowledge of the Jewish religion – especially of the Old Testament (which Christians also embraced) in the Czech countries: this general knowledge is totally incompatible with the ludicrous superstition against the Jewish religion, namely that of ritual murder. Also, it is an obvious fact that Jews had been living in close contact with the Czech nation for centuries – and there was no way that the Czech nation would have been able to live all this time alongside a sect practising criminal rituals – such as those this superstition unjustly attributed to the Jews – and still maintain a certain cultural standard. Masaryk saw the failure here as lying mainly with the Czech intelligentsia. He devoted a number of articles in the press and two pamphlets to arguing for the moral need to review the Polná trial, and an important role in this still had to be played by debunking the belief in the myth of ritual murder. He summed up his reasons for becoming involved in this case in a response to K. Lueger, for example, in the Imperial Council: “I then wrote a pamphlet, not in order to defend Hilsner, but in order to protect Christians from superstition. It distressed me that such a sinister superstition could be based – I must admit – on opinions put about by doctors and other authorities... I stepped in not to defend the Jews, that is their affair, but in order to sweep away our people’s superstition...” (Pojar, 2019, pp. 103–104).³

³ In a brief afterword of the second pamphlet, Masaryk wrote: “... my critique of the Polná trial has taught me that the state of politics corresponds to wider social conditions... I would now like to bring this study of the Polná case to a close by expressing the wish that it should help to eradicate the ritual murder myth. It became clearer and clearer to me as I worked on it that the ritual murder myth is a terrible indictment of the Czech nation. Czech Jews and the Jews of the Czech lands in general (as confirmed by many educated and highly critical experts on Judaism) are among the elite not only of Austrian Jewry, but of Jewry in general. How it is possible to impute to them a barbaric ritual murder?! And if among these educated Jews of high moral standing there was a ritual sect – how barbaric would the general cultural condition of us Christians have to be for such a sect to evolve maintain itself?! The more one reflects on the ritual murder myth the more absurd it appears, and the more dangerous for our people.

Despite a long and rabid campaign against Masaryk, he was ultimately considerably successful in combating the false belief in the ritual murder libel among the Czech population. This became apparent some years later in connection with the trial of Mendel Beilis, a Jewish worker in Ukraine who (in 1911) was accused of murdering a thirteen-year-old boy in Kyiv. His trial in 1913 was openly driven by the belief in blood libel, and the European public, including the Czechs, came out in protest against it. Jan Patočka in his study *Masaryk in struggle against anti-Semitism* noted: “Thirteen years on things had finally progressed to the point where the Czech intelligentsia not only disagrees with the ritual canard but is even protesting against it. Masaryk had already stated in 1901 that there was a shift occurring in the Czech intelligentsia, and not only had it persisted, but the effects of it were becoming apparent in the wider public” (Patočka, 2006, p. 109). Beilis’s trial ended in utter fiasco for the prosecution, as the case proved to have been staged from the outset. This time Masaryk was very pleased with the conduct of the Czech intelligentsia and he came out with a call for a new trial for Hilsner, whom he believed had been wrongfully convicted.

The philosopher Jan Patočka analysed Masaryk’s involvement in this case and explained the wider circumstances around it.⁴ Patočka stated that the analysis Masaryk made in 1899 of the causes of anti-Semitism in the Czech population was the most extensive analysis of this issue he had ever produced. “It is also telling that where the rest of our public saw so much injustice being visited upon us and trivialised all the rest as unimportant and secondary, Masaryk saw and posed the question of our culpability and our conscience. His position here thus follows with true consistency from his attempt at a life sub specie aeterni, and not from the political positivism with which Czech parties at that time were happy to make do. Even here the link between the Czech question, as Masaryk understood it, and the Jewish question is visible, even here Masaryk is following one and the same line” (Patočka, 2006, p. 48).

The state of Czechoslovakia, the question of Zionism, and assimilation

Given the international awareness of the Hilsner affair, Masaryk over the years earned moral credit, not just in Czech society and in Austria, but also more internationally. There was a certain parallel between the Hilsner affair and the Dreyfus affair in France: The Dreyfus affair found its psychological extension in the Polná trial (Šolle, 1999, p. 53). While Alfréd Dreyfus was fully exonerated in 1906, no judicial rehabilitation was ever granted to Hilsner. The Hilsner affair was part of the most difficult decade in Masaryk’s life, a time when he was silenced and was thus unable to play a public role, and when his family was also persecuted (Polák, 1999). In the end, however, the affair resulted in Masaryk becoming a famous figure – both at home and abroad. This proved to be particularly important during the effort to establish a Czechoslovak state, in which a significant role was played by support from Jewish circles in the United States, and the support from the Jewish press at home and abroad had a very significant impact on public opinion (Kovtun, 1991a). As a confirmed advocate for democracy, Masaryk strove to create a state and a society that would provide for equality and justice.

The formation of a new Czechoslovak state did not in itself mean issues regarding nationality were resolved. As K. R. Popper aptly put it: “Masaryk’s Czechoslovakia was probably one of the best and most democratic states that ever existed; but in spite of all that, it was built on the principle of the national state, on a principle which in this world is inapplicable. An inter-

It is a myth that blinds people and coarsens them – this is graphically evident in the Polná trial, on a large and small case” (Masaryk, 1900, English translation of the passage in Pojar, 2019, pp. 103–104).

⁴ Zúmr has noted that Patočka began analysing Masaryk’s work connected with the trial against Leopold Hilsner in 1950, after he was forced out of the Faculty of Arts of Charles University and found refuge at the T. G. Masaryk Institute, where he had a rich archive of materials collected on this subject at his disposal. The T. G. Masaryk Institute was shut down in 1954 (as the communist regime strengthened its grip) and Patočka’s study was only able to be published in 2006 as part of a book of collected writings (Zúmr, 1999). Patočka’s study has not been translated into English.

national federation in the Danube basin might have prevented much” (Popper, 2002, pp. 772–773, footnote 53). Popper considered Masaryk (alongside Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill) to be one of the most ground-breaking figures in the work of creating an open society, both in theory and in practice (Pojar, 2019).⁵

Inscribed in Masaryk’s concept of the nation was a certain inclination to understand the nation in ethnic terms. Though this did not present itself as a tendency towards unequal treatment, it apparently influenced Masaryk’s stance on the questions of Zionism and assimilation. Masaryk supported the Zionist movement that was seeking to create a Jewish state. His preference for this solution to the Jewish question is the most logical outcome of an ethnic understanding of a nation, and, by founding their own state, the Jews would resolve the issue of their unequal status in other nations. The state’s attitude was supportive, Zionist congresses were held in Czechoslovakia,⁶ publications came out covering Masaryk’s visit to Israel, where such places as Kfar Masaryk and Masaryk Forest were founded.

Not all Jews, however, wanted to leave Czechoslovakia, which many regarded as their homeland. Czechoslovakia was for them a society with an extremely welcoming foundation, because it allowed them to claim the nationality they chose to be – Czech, German, or Jewish – while it also supported equal rights for minorities. When, in February 1920, recognition of the Jewish nationality was declared in Czechoslovakia, “it was the first time that a democratic country had recognized the rights of Jews not as individuals (as in France) but as a nation” (Pojar, 2019, p. 160). Secularised Jews, in particular, felt very at home in the country, and, as the Czechs also became more secularised, Jewish assimilation continued to accelerate.

Masaryk on several occasions voiced disagreement with Jewish assimilation movements, though he then tried to offer an interpretation of his words that would not alienate the movement’s supporters in Czechoslovakia. This particularly related to some statements made during appearances abroad that in some form contained criticism of the assimilation movement. Patočka addressed this issue in his study *Masaryk in struggle against anti-Semitism* in the chapter *Zionism and assimilation. Masaryk’s attitude to these problems of Czech Jews* (Patočka, 2006). Here, Patočka refers to Masaryk’s interview on the Hilsner affair in the USA, which was published on 23 March 1907 in the *Hebrew Standard* and, in it, Masaryk expresses a lukewarm view of the assimilation movement along with his support for Zionism. This sparked displeasure among Masaryk’s supporters who backed assimilation, especially Viktor Vohryzek and Eduard Lederer (both of whom were prominent exponents of the Czech Jewish assimilation movement), and they requested an explanation. Masaryk’s response to them has not been preserved. – Similarly, Zionists cited Masaryk’s interview with the Vienna correspondent of *Wschód* magazine published in Lvov, and some passages of it were reprinted in the Zionist *Selbstwehr* in Prague (in 1909). In a passage cited in the Prague press, Masaryk expressed himself as follows: “I respect the social and altogether democratic Zionist movement... I confess that assimilation as a popular movement is impracticable and ludicrous” (Patočka, 2006, p. 107). To subsequent objections and the question as to whether his opinions on the assimilation movement as impracticable were cited correctly, Masaryk responded in *Rozvoj* on 9 April and there he clarified his comments. Masaryk’s critical relationship to the assimilation movement and his preference for Zionism are, however, clear from his contribution

⁵ Karl R. Popper pronounced this in a lecture on Masaryk at the 3rd Faculty of Medicine of Charles University, which he gave on his visit to Prague in 1994 to receive an honorary doctorate from Charles University in Prague (Pojar, 2019, p. 221).

⁶ In 1921, during a visit to Slovakia, Masaryk himself said about this: “I saw that the Jewish people are remarkably loyal; we show a great interest in Jewish issues in our country. I also saw this on the occasion of the Zionist congress that just took place in Karlovy Vary. I believe that the Jewish people in our country are doing well.” *Bratislauer Zeitung am Abend*, 20. 9. 1921 (Pojar, 2019, p. 164).

to the publication *Zionisten und Christen* that was published in Leipzig in 1900 (Patočka, 2006, pp. 84–85).

The assimilation movement was at odds with Masaryk's idea of a nation even in terms of cultural identity, in which, for him, religion was an important component. There is a certain paradox in Masaryk's negative stance towards the assimilation movement, as Jewish intellectuals in particular were among the strongest champions of Masaryk's politics and supporters of his Realist Party; many of them also took part in meetings of the so-called Friday Group (*Pátečníci*).⁷ It would appear, then, that Jewish assimilation was not incompatible with Masaryk's understanding of practical politics. It was rather the concept of a 'Jewish-Czech' identity that was difficult for him to accept because it did not fit his philosophical construction of the meaning of Czech history. We can consider this one indicator of how this construction was inadequate. The problem with Masaryk's philosophy of Czech history and its ethnic interpretation of the nation was also highlighted by Michael A. Riff in his article *The Ambiguity of Masaryk's Attitudes on the 'Jewish Question'* (Riff, 1989): Masaryk's national philosophy followed the Romantics and Herder; he believed that membership in the Czech nation was based on ethnic criteria. The appropriate ethnic identity was a prerequisite for membership in the national community, so that a Jew or German (having not the right ethnicity) could not become a Czech. On the other hand, as Masaryk's ideals of humanity are universalistic, his position is, in a way, non-nationalistic. In focusing specifically on the Czech nation, it was not Masaryk's intention to ascribe unequal value to different nations or races: Masaryk proclaimed that all nations have an equal right to strive for their individual rights (Masaryk, 1946), and he believed (following Ján Kollár) that Providence had a plan for each nation and its role in history of humankind (Masaryk, 2000).

Masaryk understood that the mission of the state and that of the nation were different, the state was a political institution and the idea of a democratic republic depended also on the support of national minorities. He did not articulate the idea about the ethnic nature of a nation: He pronounced explicitly that the nation was a cultural organisation (Čapek, 1944). Masaryk's cultural and explicitly ethical conception of the nation put love for one's homeland in the service of humanity, and thus of all humankind: "We must express our patriotism by a conscious public spirit. No doubt the state is ours, it is ours in virtue of historical right, according to the principle of majority, and by the title that we have built it; but we have considerable minorities... We have duties toward the nation, and we have duties toward the state... it is our task to win over to the idea of our democratic republic the minorities with whom we are living... Between the love for one's nation, the love for one's country, and humanity there is no disagreement..." (Čapek, 1944, pp. 210–212)

Masaryk's ideal of humanity possessed the depth and breadth required for it to be a pan-human ideal. There is evidence of this, for example, in Jindřich Kohn's interpretation of Masaryk. Kohn was one of the most prominent representatives of the Czech-Jewish assimilation movement, and his wide-ranging activities extended into politics, education, and journalism. Masaryk had a key influence on his thought and work. As Kohn saw it, the Jewish question was analogous to the Czech question; it was encompassed within it to the extent that the Czech question was understood in its European and pan-human dimensions. To Kohn, assimilation did not mean Jewish identity would be dissolved in Czech identity, but that it would be

⁷ 'Pátečníci' or the Friday Group was a group of prominent representatives of different areas of culture and politics, who would meet every Friday; members of this group were supporters of Masaryk and Masaryk sometimes attended their meetings himself. The meetings took place at the home of the brothers Karel and Josef Čapek between 1923 and 1938 and around one-quarter of them were from the Jewish community, including Otokar Fischer, Alfred Fuchs, František Langer, Kamil Hoffmann, Josef Kodíček, Arne Laurin, Karel Poláček, Karel Kraus, Julius Firt (Pojar, 2019).

integrated into a larger entity characterised by Masaryk's project for self-development and a progression in the direction of humanity. Kohn did not interpret humanity as a fact but as a task, a direction to work towards, to neglect which would necessarily result in disaster (Droženová, 2014).

Conclusion

Masaryk's position on the Jewish question demonstrates the high standards of his ethics, both in the individual moral and in the socio-political as well as the philosophical-theoretical dimensions. Masaryk's democratic ideals and his educative endeavour had a significantly elevating effect on Czech society. Masaryk understood the Jewish question as an ethical question, and his struggle against Czech anti-Semitism was motivated mostly by the love of his own nation. Patočka pointed out that there is an interconnection between Masaryk's engagement in the Hilsner affair and his engagement in the Czech national question, as Masaryk intended to improve the ethical level of the nation by disposal of bias and namely the ritual murder myth. Masaryk's preference for Zionism is a logical consequence of his conviction that a nation has to fight for its own freedom and national state.

However, it seems that Masaryk's concept of the Czech nation formed in the struggle against the Habsburg monarchy became inadequate in the new democratic Republic, as the conception was not inclusive of the many minorities, counting the Jewish one. Masaryk's ideas on '*The Czech question*' or '*Our present crisis*' were formulated in the nineteenth century and reflected his effort to answer contemporary challenges, but Masaryk's promotion of 'the meaning of Czech history', his philosophical construction of the history of the Czech nation, was a kind of ideological construct that pervade all his work. During the war Masaryk even encouraged nationalism, and he defined the conflict as a war between 'Theocracy' and democracy (Masaryk, 1925; 1946), which was 'unfortunate simplification' (Kohák, 2004, p. 238). This kind of nationalism contaminated the ideal of the new democratic state of Czechoslovakia.

On the level of ethics, Masaryk's ideals of humanity provide solution, proclaiming equal rights to all individuals and all nations, and cooperation between them (Masaryk, 1946). The moral ideal Masaryk declared comprises personal lives and conduct in society. This moral ideal was also the motive for Masaryk's struggle against Anti-Semitism and his lifelong involvement with Jewish affairs.⁸

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