

The Jews in Czechoslovakia

THE late Schmarya Levin once remarked that the Jews in Czechoslovakia were the only real Czechoslovaks, since the non-Jews were either Czechs or Slovaks. This *jeu d'esprit* was uttered at a time when hardly anybody had heard of the Sudeten Germans, otherwise he would not have simplified the ethnical composition of the country to such an extent. In fact, however, there are a great many Jews who refuse to be termed either Czechs or Slovaks; and, besides the Germans, the Republic contains three other main nationalities among its citizenry—Hungarians, Poles, and Ruthenians. In such a polynational State, it would seem only natural that the Jews should all declare themselves members of the Jewish nation, especially as this is legally permitted. The Constitution, which was drafted under the liberal guidance of Thomas Masaryk and Edward Benes, especially provided that everybody was free to declare his nationality irrespective of his mother tongue, and this freedom was explicitly guaranteed to the Jews. Czechoslovakia was thus the first State to recognise Jewish nationality. In the census regulations issued in 1930, the Jews were again reminded that they had the option of acknowledging themselves members of the Jewish nation, and 57 per cent. availed themselves of the right. Of the remainder of the Jewish population of 356,000, 25 per cent. declared themselves Czechs (or Slovaks), 13 per cent. as Germans, and 5 per cent. as Hungarians.

Cultural Differences

CZECHOSLOVAKIA consists of five main provinces—Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, Slovakia, and Carpathian Ruthenia (*Podkarpatska-Rus*)—which differ from each other in varying degrees ethnically, culturally, and economically, and these differences are reflected in their Jewish inhabitants. The Jews in Bohemia, who number 80,000, are mainly like the German Jews in the large cities; they are highly assimilated, partly to the German and partly to the Czech nationality. The Jews in Slovakia, who number 136,000, consist of two different groups: those in East Slovakia and Carpathian Ruthenia are, in national, religious, and cultural respects on a level with those in the neighbouring Galicia, while those in West Slovakia resemble the Jews in Hungary, to whom the territory formerly belonged. Lastly, there are the Jews of Moravia and Silesia, who represent an intermediate type between all these extremes.

The Jews form only 2½ per cent.

of the total population of the Republic, but in Carpathian Ruthenia they are over 15 per cent. of the local population. It is in this territory that we find the most extensive manifestation of national consciousness, over 93 per cent. of the Jews acknowledging Jewish nationality. They are almost all strictly orthodox, many still wearing a traditional garb, and they are under the spiritual sway of rival Chassidic Rabbis, who are frequently engaged in violent polemics and occasionally pronounce bans of excommunication against one another.

Equality of Rights

UNLIKE so many States in Central and Eastern Europe, which signed Minorities Treaties but ignored

them so far as the Jews were concerned, the Republic of Czechoslovakia has faithfully carried out its obligations towards its Jewish citizens, as towards all the national minorities. They enjoy to the full the same political and civil rights as all other citizens, and there is no bar to their occupying the highest positions. There are a number of Jews in the Government service, particularly in the Departments of Justice, Finance, Health, and Railways, and a Jew is a leading official in the department concerned with the concluding of commercial treaties with foreign countries.

The State gives a subvention to all religious denominations, which is calculated equitably on the basis of their ratio of the population, and the Jewish Community receives its proper share. The Prime Minister, Dr. Hodza, assured a Jewish national delegation on March 12th, 1937, that the Jewish minority would be treated exactly like all other minorities in respect of the grants for public and social purposes—a policy of direct benefit to the Jewish youth in Carpathian Ruthenia, where the Jewish population is in a poor economic position. He declared, on behalf of the Government, that the Hebrew elementary schools in that region would be taken over by the State and carried on as Government schools.

Jewish Political Activity

THOSE Jews who acknowledge membership of the Jewish nation are organised for political purposes

By
ISRAEL COHEN

as the Jewish Party. After the proclamation of the Republic, there was formed a Jewish National Council, as in many other countries in Eastern and Central Europe, to look after the interests of the Jewish population, and the National Council naturally led to the creation of the Jewish Party. Its policy was strongly opposed by many Jews who had become assimilated to the other nations within the State and who regarded the establishment of a separate Jewish Party as a reactionary step. They decried it as a return to the ghetto and as a menace to

Political and Economic Conditions

Jewish interests. They argued that they must throw in their lot with the Czechs, Germans, Magyars, or Ruthenians, with whom they had always felt politically identified, and

they accordingly joined some party or other of these various groups (each of which comprised two or more parties), except, of course, those that were tainted with anti-Semitism.

The Jewish Party, however, maintained that it was in the best interest of the Jewish people to steer clear of the medley of the other national parties, with all their rival claims and conflicting aspirations, especially as the Constitution recognised that they had the same right as all other minorities to separate political organisation and representation. But, owing to lack of sufficient support—even the Jews in Ruthenia being disunited—the Jewish Party was unable to return its own candidates to Parliament until 1929. In that year, thanks to a pact with the Polish minority, it secured the election of two Deputies of its own, and in 1935, on the basis of a pact with the Czech Social Democrats, it again secured the election of two members—Dr. Angelo Goldstein and Dr. Kugel—who are in the present Parliament. The Jewish Party has its own official room in the Parliamentary building, and its name is inscribed on the door.

Even before the present outburst of Nazi agitation, there were sporadic attacks by anti-Semitic Deputies in Parliament, to which the Jewish members always made an effective reply, with the support of the overwhelming majority. The circulation of such works as "The Protocols of Zion" and Hitler's "Mein Kampf" is forbidden, and if any anti-Semitic publication appears it is confiscated. Anti-Semitism has been mainly fostered among the German element, especially among the students, who have been encouraged by their professors and have been responsible for some serious disturbances, particularly in Prague. In 1922, Professor Samuel Steinherz, who occupied the Chair for History at the German University in Prague, was elected Rector for the following year, but the



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JEWS IN CZECHO-SLOVAKIA

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German national students protested against the "Judaising" of the University, declared a strike, and organised violent demonstrations. The agitation spread to universities in other countries — Austria, Poland, Lithuania, and Rumania; and, under the pressure of persistent disorder, Professor Steinherz resigned in the spring of 1923 on the ground of ill-health.

Contributions To Culture.

THE Jews of the capital have always played a great part in the furtherance of German culture owing to the small German population there. They have produced many important writers and novelists, such as Oskar Baum, Max Brod, Franz Kafka, and Egon Erwin Kirsch (who had an adventurous time in Australia), and at least one of world fame, Franz Werfel. The Jews of Bohemia have also contributed to Czech literature notable writers like Frantisek Gottlieb, Frantisek Langer, and Richard Weiner. In the realm of music, they can boast of a fine composer in Jaromir Weinberger, while before the War Angelo Neumann was the director for many years of the German Theatre in Prague, at which Gustav Mahler and Leo Blech first established their fame.

The community of Prague, which has over 32,000 Jews, is not only the oldest Jewish Community in Bohemia, dating back to the beginning of the tenth century, but also one of the oldest and most interesting in Europe. Indeed, it was for a time the capital of European Jewry in the matter of leadership and scholarship. It was from there that such Rabbinical luminaries as the "Hohe Rabbi Loew" and Yomtov Lipman Heller shed their radiance afar. The old ghetto, with its "Rathaus" which is still distinguished by a clock with Hebrew lettering and its quaintly-designed "Altneuschule," is full of historic associations, romantic memories, and legendary traditions, of which the best known is the story of the "Golem." The interior of the mediaeval Synagogue, into which one has to descend, is interesting not only on account of its curious architecture, but also because of the gold-embroidered flag displayed therein, which was presented to the Jews for bravely defending the Karl Bridge against the Swedes in the Thirty Years' War.

Economic Activities.

IN the field of economic activity the Jews are found in all branches of commerce and industry, in the liberal professions, and also in agriculture.

The economic activity of the Jews in Carpathian Ruthenia is particularly interesting because they provide three-fourths of all the innkeepers and also because they show the highest percentage of Jewish farmers in any country. About 25,000, forming twenty-seven per cent. of the Jewish population in that region, are dependent upon farming, but this is of a rather primitive character. The soil of the mountain villages is poor and the climate is cold. Most of the farms are quite small, limited to one or two hectares, on which the farmer grows just enough potatoes for the

needs of his family, and enough fodder for a single cow that also supplies merely his own requirements. These Jewish farmers, who are strong and hardy, living in wooden cottages, are obliged to eke out their livelihood by an additional occupation, and most of them are wood-cutters or waggoners, employed for about a third of the year in carting logs over long distances to the nearest railway station. In Slovakia, over 14,500 Jews derive their living from agriculture, and in Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia some 3,500, but they own larger farms than those in Ruthenia and are mainly engaged in dairy-farming and fruit-growing.

The Sudeten German Peril.

THE Jews who are now exposed to the most serious and imminent danger are those in the Sudeten districts, where they number about 22,000. When Herr Konrad Henlein gave an address at the Royal Institute of International Affairs on December 9th, 1935, he said, in answer to my criticism, that he had never spoken against the Jews and there was no Aryan paragraph in the Articles or Constitution of his Party. But when I visited Prague at the end of March, a fortnight after Germany's annexation of Austria, I found that his statement, so far as it was intended to imply that there was no hostility to the Jews on the part of the Sudeten Germans, was entirely falsified. The Party had now adopted an Aryan paragraph in its Constitution, but it only involved the resignation of two members, as its anti-Semitic character had always been so notorious that no self-respecting Jew would join it. But far more serious was the open and organised intimidation by the Sudeten Germans, who, beginning with a systematic boycott of the Jews in trade, professional, and social relations, created such a state of terror that many of them had already begun to liquidate their businesses, sell their property, and migrate to Prague or to some other place that was considered safe.

The Zionist Movement had always enjoyed considerable support in a country where Jewish nationalism was officially recognised, but the panic produced by the fate of Austria had made vast numbers of Jews Palestine-minded who had previously regarded the Movement with scorn or indifference. Even if the independence of Czecho-Slovakia remains intact, it was feared that the Sudeten Germans would acquire such powers of autonomy that their treatment of the Jews would practically be as barbarous as in Nazi Germany. That was why the Palestine office of the Zionist Federation had suddenly become the most important Jewish institution in the country: in the peril by which the Jews were now faced, Zion seemed to many the only safe refuge. But, at the same time, the leaders of the Community rallied all sections to a sense of their duty to their country, and should any attack be made upon its security or independence, the whole of the Jewish population will be found ready to make the utmost sacrifices in its resolute defence.

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