

Such a Sad Read: The Image of a Jew in Moravian Folklore

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Psychology considers laughter and crying as elementary responses to emotional states in humans: laughter is an expression or the appearance of happiness, or an inward feeling of joy, while crying is mainly an expression of sadness; response to inflicted pain, feelings of anger, rage, and desperateness, as well as a strong feeling of joy.¹ This year's colloquy inspired me to think about another dimension of laughter and crying: not all laughter has to be happy and not all crying is sad. I would like to demonstrate both of them through the image of a Jew in Moravian folklore, particularly in folk songs and minor units of folk literature.

The research of ethnic stereotypes² and images³ within folk culture represents interdisciplinary research of cultural stereotypes, particularly of patterns of culture. Both stereotypes and more complex images are particular projections of experience, which contribute to social memory (see Uhlíková, 2005). In folklore they are presented within the opposition of "us" and "(others) them" and they are an important ethnic identification factor. Folklore studies of social memory enabled a disclosure of different historical layers of specific mental images, and

- 1) See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crying-Laughter>.
- 2) Stereotypes: essentials and common schemes used for processing social informations about groups of people. They include images which people have about themselves and about members of different groups. Each judgement or an image of the reality can be considered a stereotype, but most often it appears in connection with the image of outgroup (the others) or with image of ingroup (we), which differs from ingroup. According to the diferenciation, stereotypes can be racial, ethnic, national, religious, gender, or connected to the age (ageism).
- 3) The term image is superordinate to the term stereotype, it describes a more complex view. It can include a number of stereotypes, moreover in many historical layers, and other atributes, which cannot be included in the cathegory of stereotypes. The image is never a real reflection of reality: it is never complete, it's always fragmented.

these showed a selective approach to the preservation of individual signs; some elements have survived for centuries, some have been included only marginally, and some are missing completely. Some images and their particular layers are linked to a small territory; others represent large area connections, such as central European or pan-European. Genre determination is also important: particular types and genres of folklore differ in quantity and quality of specific themes and motifs, in their integration into historical reality, in the level of image stereotyping, and in a persistence of reflected approach. A long-lasting static image preservation is a specific feature of some folklore types and genres. These include folk songs, which reflect the image of "the other" at many semantic levels.

When analysing particular items of the image of a Jew I mainly dealt with Moravian traditional folk songs; I also worked with sayings, adages and proverbs, which are closely connected with song lyrics and which often appear as themes, topics and collocations there. Analysing a sufficient number of samples⁴ of these folklore texts (regardless of the artistic language, imagery and symbols) allows us find out how the image of Jews, their confession and behaviour, ways of speaking and livelihood were perceived. The texts also reflect the relations between this minority group and the majority population. The texts are not only a historical source, they relate to psychology and sociology as well. Here the issue of laughter takes a step to the forefront, but it is in the everlasting form of mockery and ridicule.

Consulting a Czech etymological dictionary⁵, the term Jew expresses negative emotional connotation in Czech language, sometimes they are

4) Text analysis is based on the corpus of approximately 500 songs, which were taken from the collections of the Institute of Ethnology of the Academy of Science in the Czech Republic in Brno and Prague (over 70,000 items were checked) and from printed sources, esp. from folk song collections (several thousand written records).

5) See Machek, V. (1968). *Etymologický slovník jazyka českého*. Druhé, opravené a doplněné vydání. Praha: Academia. See also The Archives of Vernacular Language, located at The Institute for Czech Language, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Brno.

even swear-words: *What a Jew you are* or *You Jew*. The saying *Don't make a Jew of yourself* refers to the image of a Jew as a miser and a penny-pincher. Images of the others first of all focus on a physical appearance and other visual differences. They are stressed in graphic cartoons, which are actually a straight visualisation of a stereotype. As to the visual stereotyping, two main features of Jews are usually emphasised: ugliness and a big nose (see a Czech expression *to make a crooked nose on a Jew*). Moravian folk songs provide a slightly different image of a Jew (in spite of its seeming richness, it is quite poor when compared for instance with the body of neighbouring Polish songs). Male and female Jews are mostly specified as red-haired (*for five red-haired Jews* - when being astonished, *as red-haired as Esau*). A Jew is usually depicted as bearded, which is noted in the sayings like *go like a Jew* (unshaved), *as bearded as a Jew*. Jews are also often compared to a billy-goat. Based on the pattern of "us" – "the others", a Jew is considered an unclean person: *to smell like a Jew* (to smell unpleasant or of garlic), *to avoid somebody like a Jew avoids water* (eagerly). It is possible, though, that a folklore text refers to the reality based on specific eating or hygienic habits.

Also the language of the Jewish minority was considered incomprehensible or funny, and in folk songs used to be reflected in its acoustic form. This quasi-Jewish can be mostly found in the form of a chorus⁶, which makes use of distorted words and a typical way of sighing or moaning which is an inherent part of Jewish verbal communication (called *vajkání* in Czech; from an interjection *ai, vai*). The aspect of ridiculousness of Jewish speaking came also from the presence of aspiration: the noise which arises at the end of an articulation of closure vocals like *th, dh*. Aspiration is typical for Germanic languages. Yiddish, which in the past was the language of the majority of the Ashkenazim population in Europe, is one of them.

6) A chorus in Moravian folk songs is quite a rare phenomenon.

In folklore texts, the above-mentioned language phenomena have been regularly accompanied by Jewish lamentation: crying without any real mourning. It is actually a fake despair, crocodile tears by Jewish peddlers while they offer their goods and bargain prices, mentioning their bad business and low profits.

Even such an innocent feature of language in history encouraged Czech nationalists in their anti-Semitic attacks. In his anti-Semitic tract "For Jewish Fear" in 1870, famous Czech writer Jan Neruda wrote:

"Its own language the nation does not know, but our languages they speak and write as foreigners who have learnt them recently and quite wrong. The phrase 'to speak Jewish' is well known in all languages, and this language curiosity has been integrated into each literature as an impressive moment of the lower comic. German literature has many volumes of literature full of 'Jewish declamations'; Czech literature is as pure and good-natured as the Czech nation: there is just one example of a comic song and its refrain in Czech which makes fun of Jewish aspiration."

(Neruda, 1935, 19–20). This quotation shows not only Neruda's political thinking, but also his poor knowledge of Czech folklore.

The third phenomenon, which characterizes the speech of the Jewish minority, is marked by mistakes in Czech grammar and inserting Yiddish words into Czech. This is considered funny, in the same way as the two phenomena mentioned above.

The perception of Jews speaking loudly or having noisy behaviour has been reflected in many idioms. Some of them can be immediately classified as language stereotypes: *you are like Jews* (you are noisy), *to quarrel like Jews* (noisily), *as noisy as a Jewish place*, *it is like a Jewish school there* (which can be found in German as well: *da ist ein Lärm wie in der Judenschule, hier geht es zu wie in einer Judenschule*), *as intrusive as a Jew*, *to push like a Jew to a distillery room* (impudently, intrusively: this reflects the fact that many stillrooms were rented and later owned by Jews), and many others: *to stick to somebody as a Jew*, *to push in like a*

Jew in a chair, to spit like a Jew (angrily), to start speaking Jewish (to swear), and to make a Jew of oneself (to skimp).

Religion plays an important role in distinguishing between “us” and “the others” in folk culture. Different denominations contribute to the basic attributes of the image of a Jew not only in Moravian folklore but in European culture in general. In Moravian folklore, the texts show a negative approach, from the motif of Christian ridicule to general disdain (such as a frequent comment on the waiting of the coming of Messiah who had already come). Jewish religion is reflected in many sayings, such as: *wait for someone like a Jew for the Messiah* (for a long time and eagerly), *to go like a Jew with a golden calf* (a miser), *to stick to something like a Jew to a church fountain* (to turn aside, to try to avoid something), *to treat something like a Jew does the Ten Commandments* (awkwardly), *as soon as a Jew comes back from the pilgrimage* (never), *to keep it like a Jew keeps the faith* (not to keep the promise, a shift person). The last saying, which imputes - quite ironically - the lack of faith in the Jewish community, comes from the fact that many of them chose to be baptized due to the unbearable living conditions. However, the Christian majority was not willing to accept the facts, as is shown by another saying: *with a baptized Jew only to water again*. Making fun of the confession of the Jewish minority has been quite frequent in folklore texts:

Žedovko, pod' na ves!
Nephudu, mhám šhábés,
mhusím se khlaněti
zlatému theleti.

(Vyhliďal, 1908, 69, from Haná)

[In the heavily accented Czech rhyme, a Jew is ridiculed for staying at home on the Sabbath day].

Folklore texts also directly ridicule Judaism, both some of the commands, such as keeping the Sabbath or food restriction, and religious acts and ceremonies. Here we can find the same motives which have

been used to ridicule Christian services and prayers. *Parodia sacra* was widely spread since the Middle Ages as part of the culture of laughter. It was based on ridiculing single terms, phrases, rhythmical schemes and melodies. The same formal and content strategies can be found in ridiculing Jewish religion. Moreover, derisive texts use Christian terminology and its call and response form in music: alternating the lead and the chorus, as it is known in Christian services.

In folk performances, a Jew is often presented as a representative of hell; terms like a Jew and a devil are used as synonyms. The term is also used as a synonym for a grocer, usurer and innkeeper, who was considered responsible for the poverty of the Czech peasantry. From the 1840s, alcoholism spread in East Moravia so widely that it was referred to as a liquor plague. It caused hatred against Jewish spirit sellers. Many enlightened individuals were against alcoholism, including priests. A motto, which was used by educators in the public in the 1870s sounds funny even today: "Czech beer in fight against Jewish liquor!".

On a social level, texts show reservations against Jews in moral and ethic norms, and can be found in minor folklore pieces: *worse than a Jew* (greedier), *to go like a Jew with a golden calf* (a miser), *to smell a Jew* (to be greedy, acquisitive), *to keep it like a Jew keeps the faith* (not to keep the promise, a shifty person), *to draw a Jewish weapon* (corruption), *a Jew's bag and the priest's soul go straight to the hell*, or *a Jew is a Jew to trick people*.

The opposites of the debtor and the creditor, together with the economic ability of some members of the Jewish population in connection with the prejudice of the majority population to a different ethnic and confessional group with a clear definition of "the others" as worse, led to an interesting phenomenon: a Jew is "the last of the least" on an imaginary social scale and less than a human on the one hand, but a master on the other hand, a member of the most powerful economical class both in the local and the larger environment.

This contradictory position influenced the understanding of Jews as a "false" upper class. Peasants then reflected the fact by The Jewish Dance,

which was spread in Germany (*Judentanz*), Poland, Czech lands and in Slovakia. As Krekovičová says, it represents “a newer group of imitating figural dances, with an important part of the comic” and it used to parody dances of upper social classes. (Krekovičová, 1999, 58). In Moravia, the dance was widely spread. However, its comic side was shown not only by the dance steps (such as pushing each other during a bow when standing back to back), but also in the lyrics, which laughed at alleged Jewish lordly manners.

A love relationship between the members of different confessions was also ridiculed. The largest group of texts could be categorized under the topic of a Jew as a womanizer. Variants of two semi-folk songs are quite frequent: “Poslyšte mně, lidé, malou chvíli” (“Listen to me people for a little while”) and “Kampak kráčíš, Mojžíši” (“Where are you going, Moses”). They combine single aspects of the image of a Jew, emphasising mainly the job of a grocer, which used to be the most common occasion of meeting people of both confessions, and laughing at the language of a Jewish seducer. Compared to the large number of lyrics dealing with the relationship between a male Jew and a Christian female, there is just a small number of songs about the relationship of a Christian male and a Jewish female. An explanation could be perhaps found in fewer opportunities of Jewish women for social contacts.

People, who are considered “the other” in any culture, are often a target of ridicule just for their difference. Laugh in this case stands in the role of a protective and critical reaction of the society, from a philosophical point of view it is the transposition of an affective and moral judgement⁷; it is a punishment for “non-sociability”⁸ (a behaviour that contradicts with the norms of a group) of the others. However, laugh can sometimes have a deeper meaning, such as, in folk culture, the best protection against evil. In the same function, but connected to a religious experience, it is an important part of medieval mentality: comic

7) See *The Theory of Humour* by Louis Cazamian. In: Ševčík, 2008, 59–76.

8) See Bergson, 1994, or Ševčík, 2008.

descriptions of the devil and parodies of religious ceremonies and prayers are a part of a well known “upside-down world”.

A mocking motive is an important attribute of folk culture as well; it can be found very often in songs, minor literary pieces and in children's folklore. Apart from focusing on “the others” in ethnic groups, it also aims against “the others” inside, which can be anything in children's folklore. In this context it is sometimes evidently useless trying to find other meanings or stereotypes bound with an exact bearer. Sometimes it is just an ending rhyme that matters, such as in nursery rhymes or children's games, which function identically regardless of text variability.

In conclusion, let me explain the title of my presentation. Years ago I was visited by Vladimír Merta, a popular Czech singer-songwriter. He and his colleague musician Jana Levitová wanted to prepare a music project based on folk songs with Jewish topics. After reading my materials they gave up their plans and Vladimír gave me the file back saying: “Such a sad read...”.

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