



On board of life

The ship passage of German Jews to Palestine 1933 to 1938 as experience of transit between time and space

Extended Abstract

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The article deals with the passage of German Jews to Palestine between 1933 and 1938. Neither the departure nor the arrival will be portrayed but the very passage on the ship itself. The protagonists are migrants, who left Germany in order to make Palestine their new home as well as travelers, who had no intention to migrate and would return to Nazi Germany after a couple of days or weeks in Palestine. The protagonists of this article are Jenny Aloni, Herbert Friedenthal (later Herbert Freeden), Gertrud and Willy Cohn, Paul Mühsam, Gabriele Tergit, Martin Hauser, Manfred Sturman, Heinemann Stern and his wife.

I focus on the stories, descriptions and reflections of the protagonist that can be found in diaries, letters, travelogues, or even novels, which some of them wrote after the trip. I show how these people acted on the ship, how they perceived their fellow travelers, what the trip as such meant to them, what they thought about their destination, about their past, present and future, and last but not least: what general thoughts they had of their own place in life.

Even though the material presented here is available in different published forms it has never been composed and analysed in this way before. Most of research on the topic in this very period concentrates either on the place and process of departure or the place and process of arrival. The time and space in between, however, is blurred. Almost no scholarly work has been written yet on the ship passage itself. Even less is known about those German Jews, who traveled to Palestine in order to return to Nazi Germany instead of keeping aloof. Insofar this article contributes to the growing field of Jewish cultural studies, which concentrates on processes of transition which a dire focus on the people itself, who were the protagonist of these processes. And it can also be perceived as a contribution to a very new field, still in its very beginning, than might be termed as Jewish maritime studies, recently introduced by Joachim Schlör.

The findings of this research are astonishing. After boarding the ship, within a couple of hours, almost all of the protagonists fell in a kind of limbo. The moving of the ship, the Jewish fellow travelers, the passage between time and space affected them deeply. All thoughts and reflections became almost metaphysical. The travelers found themselves torn between different spaces: Europe, Asia, and “the Orient” and also between different times: The Old Europe of the enlightenment of the individual and the New Jewish Homeland of the redemption of the



Jewish collective. The ship itself seemed to be something like a stage, on which the future of the Jewish people had its dress rehearsal. The Jewish homeland was in the making and the Jews had to prove that they were worthy to be called the Jewish people. Thus, the passengers suspiciously watched their fellow travelers, argued about Judaism, Zionism and many other topics and tried to balance their mixed feelings towards the admired and at the same time disgusted East European Jews.

More confusing, however, was still the prospect of Eretz Israel, the Holy land, that they came closer day by day. What was this land, which was in the first place only the profane Mandate Palestine? They knew the holy land from prayers, text books and songs but they did not know so much about the land they were about to enter in a couple of days. Moreover, questions arose what the personal connection was to the holiness of the land, or at least to the profane soil of it. They knew so much about it but did not know anything. They were so strongly connected to it but had never been there before. It was part of their being as Jews but nothing of their being as German Jewish individuals. With the increasing confusion about their connections to the Holy land, Eretz Israel, Palestine also their confusion increased about their selves. What are they, what is Jewish about them and what is the connection between the glory of Jewish history and the misery of daily life under worsening conditions not only in Germany but in whole Europe?

Confusion is the word that most accurately describes the dominant feeling that came to the fore in most of these thoughts and reflections by German Jewish travelers on their way to Palestine. These personal confusions reflect the general confusion about the connection between Jewish past, present and future. That this connection was about to disintegrate was a common fear in Europe of the 1930s. On the ship passage to Palestine, in the personal reflections of ordinary German Jews this dilemma of Jewish existence in the modern world can be traced in miniature as well as in its almost pure form.

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