From the Imperial to the Local

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**During the 19th century**, Jews in the Bohemian lands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (today's Czech Republic) started to undergo what seems to be a major paradigm shift. Their identities and loyalties began to shift from the imperial to the local, from their primary allegiance as subjects of the Habsburg rulers to aligning themselves with their immediate Bohemian neighbors—Czechs in particular. By examining the body of literary works and journalism in Czech and German, we can argue that this shift began sometime during the 1830s and 1840s. This should not come as a great surprise, for it was during these two decades that Central European public space was opening, and a wave of anti-monarchic sentiment that had its origins in the French Revolution was rising. Civic emancipation was gradually becoming visible at all levels, and it involved Bohemian Jews as well.

Two little-appreciated poetry collections from these two decades written by Bohemian Jewish authors—*Das Habsburglied* [The Habsburg-Song](1832) by Ludwig August Frankl, and *České listy* [Czech Leaves](1846) by Siegfried Kapper—offer significant help for demarcating the location of that paradigm change. These works not only fill in gaps in our knowledge of Bohemian Jewish literary history, ultimately demonstrating a continuity of Jewish culture in Bohemia, but, more importantly for our purposes, they express two very different positions with respect to a Bohemian Jewish stance on the empire. To put it simply, Frankl looks back, still professing loyalty to the Empire, while Kapper brings in a new dimension in asserting Jewish belonging to the local, i.e., to Bohemia. Indeed, Frankl is all about the Empire rather than Jewishness, while in Kapper’s poetry, Bohemian Jews stand at the center precisely as Bohemia’s Jews, and the imperial capital of Vienna is absent.
Who was Frankl? Ludwig August Frankl (1810–1894) was born and raised in the small Eastern Bohemian town of Chrast. He spent most of his life in Vienna, where he moved in 1828 to study medicine. However, what distinguished him was not medicine but his Habsburglied, a chronologically ordered set of poetic chapters in German celebrating the Habsburg rulers. This lineup of some 20 monarchs represented an attempt to construct a grand literary pantheon that affirms the steadfast continuity of the House of Habsburg at a moment when the stability of the Empire still seemed unquestioned.

About 14 years later, Siegfried Kapper (1820–1879) neither glorified the Empire nor wrote in German. Instead, he published his Czech Leaves in Czech. Although he was influenced by the Romantic poetry of the 1820s and 1830s and had a keen interest in folklore, both Slavic and Jewish, his Czech Leaves departs from this Romantic folkloristic line. And this is also what makes him interesting in an imperial cultural and political context: he is the first Bohemian Jewish poet to address his readers — Czech and Jewish — in Czech, he talks about Jewish issues, and he crafts his collection as a poetic narrative that identifies issues and proposes a solution. To resolve the status of Jews in Bohemia, he calls for a Jewish brotherhood with Czechs—not through assimilation, but as a relationship of peers. Significantly, he does not voice any statements of loyalty to the Habsburgs.

While Frankl’s conservative position is easy to contextualize, Kapper’s programmatic poetry, which was new for his time, invites a number of perspectives. One has been called Landespatriotismus; i.e., a position that highlights the coexistence of diverse ethnicities within the historical space of the Czech lands. Landespatriotismus is a concept that in part precedes, and in part wishes to avoid, nationalism. It considers the mixed nature of the
population merely as one of Bohemia’s many characteristics, and does not yet articulate the concept of nation-state. In Kapper’s days, Landespatriotismus assumed its late civic form, which revolved around a type of interethnic relationships within a shared territory that can be described as symbiotic, cooperative, and brotherly. This position is echoed repeatedly in Kapper’s poetry. Significantly, he chose it intentionally as the frame of Jewish existence in Bohemia since he was well aware of the rising nationalism and its incompatibility with Landespatriotismus.

While issues of nationalism—or rather, pre-nationalism—would have been transparent to Czech readers of the time, many passages, especially those that assert the Jewish diasporic existence and reject the idea of return to the Land of Israel, might appear unusual, if not incomprehensible, to them. I argue that the issues reflect an internal Jewish discussion that echoes the discourse of early Reform Judaism that was rising in Central Europe and polarizing many Jewish communities, especially in Germany. It also reached Prague, where, in 1832, a reform society for the “Improvement of the Israelite Rite” was formed. Although we cannot document Kapper’s direct involvement in this movement, the impact of Reform Judaism is fairly obvious. Lengthy passages in Kapper’s poems that question the sense of certain Jewish holidays, as well as his pro-diasporic and anti-Messianic stance, make perfect sense precisely within the framework of ideas that were widely circulated in Reform Jewish circles.

Finally, one should note that Kapper presented himself not merely as a poet; he also explicitly asserted his public role as a member of the community of literati. His language, especially his insistence on tropes of brotherhood, points to a euphoric and mobilizing stance that was characteristic for that period of searching for new political and social ideas, echoing the language of the (repeated) French revolutions.

So far, we have seen that Kapper’s stance has a whole variety of roots, which might suggest a great complexity of his position. Nonetheless, his program is actually quite clear and resolute: he is not interested in the Empire; he calls for Czech-Jewish cooperation; he places himself in a position that strongly resembles Reform Judaism; and he understands himself as a poet with a programmatic voice. The clarity with which Kapper negotiates this position creates a sharp contrast between him and Frankl. This contrast provides a valuable insight into the ways in which Bohemian Jewish identity began to change. It also sheds further light on ideological complexities of the period preceding the revolutions of 1848.