

MARK TWAIN ON THE JEWISH PROBLEM

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A VAGUE impression seems to prevail that the Nazi outburst against the Jews is a retort to Jewish offensiveness during and after the Great War. It is not definitely stated, but it is very widely suggested, that the toleration and even general friendliness which had previously been shown by Germany to that alien race thus suddenly broke down, because the strain had become too great for German patriots to bear. But a glance at an article by Mark Twain, written thirty-five years ago, under title "Concerning the Jews," will show that, on the contrary, this Teutonic passion even then was at a white heat, and that almost exactly the same charges with which we are now familiar were then being urged.

The immortal humorist had been living in Vienna, where he had watched the strife of nationalities within that strange Austro-Hungarian aggregate which George Meredith called "an Empire bound with iron hoops". He describes that terrific scene in the House in December, 1897, when temper rose so high over the proposal that Czech instead of German should be made the official language in Bohemia. It is to Mark's pen that we owe the unforgettable picture of a parliament in that stately capital which made him imagine he was back half a century earlier in the Legislature of Arkansas—one party leader menacing his opponents with an uplifted *fauteuil*, another brandishing an open penknife, a third hammered on the head with the President's bell. But the parties, various as they were, had one point of agreement, a point reflected in the rioting of the streets: sometimes Germans were the rioters, sometimes Czechs, "but in all cases the Jew had to roast, no matter which side he was on". It was not different in Berlin, where a few years earlier Mark had found a fierce demand that all Jews should be expelled from Germany. No less suggestive of the mood in Berlin to-day was the reason then put forward. The American observer was amazed at the plea, not only acknowledged but emphasized, that the Jews should be driven out because the race had 85% of the successful lawyers in the capital, and about the same percentage of large lucrative businesses of all sorts through-

out Germany. The estimated population then was 48,000,000, of whom 500,000 were Jewish; lately it was 60,000,000, with 600,000 Jewish. But the predominance remained similarly disproportionate to numbers. Here is a passage, which might come from a Nazi organ of two years ago, describing how a public speaker worked up the resentment of a Berlin audience about 1893:

The man claimed that in Berlin the banks, the newspapers, the theatres, the great mercantile, shipping, mining, and manufacturing interest, the big army and city contracts, the tramways, and pretty much all other properties of high value, and also *all* the small businesses, were in the hands of the Jews. He said the Jew was pushing the Christian to the wall all along the line; that it was all a Christian could do to scrape together a living; and that the Jew *must* be banished, and soon—there was no other way of saving the Christian.

A truly amazing acknowledgment of collapse on the part of 99 per cent. in conflict with 1 per cent. of the population! Where a majority is so overwhelming, recourse to violence is seldom required.

This, in Mark Twain's judgment, was one secret of the trouble. The Jew, like others, had set his heart on money, and proved so serious an obstruction as to become maddening to "less capable neighbours who are on the same quest". Hence his unpopularity, despite his numerous titles to be regarded as an exemplary citizen—his industrious habits, his remarkable freedom from quarrelsomeness, the conspicuous absence of Jewish names from the docket of criminal trials, his domestic and family virtues, his well-known care for the less fortunate of his own race, the Jewish charities providing for them in destitution so that they are seldom a charge on public funds. All is outweighed in the esteem of his Gentile neighbours by his intolerable superiority in achievement—a superiority which has contrived to assert itself despite every handicap. Legal disabilities, exclusion from specified trades and professions, deprivation of educational opportunities, all have been of no avail. "Ages of restriction to the one tool which the law was not able to take from him—his brain—have made that tool singularly competent".

It would not, however, have been worthy of that keen analyst of human nature to leave the situation so. Mark Twain knew well that however one may be impelled by motives of mere jealousy, a more creditable ground of resentment must at least be pretended, and the disinterested onlooker must somehow be convinced that such better grounds exist before he will sympathize

with the complaint of a beaten competitor. From some cause, bitter anti-Jewish feeling has spread far and wide among peoples that have no personal grievance, real or imaginary, to allege. Mark Twain bids us, if we would understand the reason, re-read the forty-seventh chapter of the *Book of Genesis*.

It describes a famine in Egypt, where a Jewish prime minister had foreseen what was coming, and had taken in advance such measures as one associates with the Jewish financier still. He had contrived to secure a monopoly of the food supply, and he used this to extort from the desperate necessities of the populace a surrender of all they had, including even the enslavement of their persons. Mark's words are too picturesque to paraphrase:

Joseph, with that opportunity, made a corner in broken hearts, and the crusts of the poor, and human liberty—a corner whereby he took a nation's money away, to the last penny; took a nation's livestock away, to the last hoof; took a nation's land away, to the last acre; then took the nation itself, buying it for bread, man by man, woman by woman, child by child, till all were slaves; a corner which took everything, left nothing; a corner so stupendous that, by comparison with it, the most gigantic corners in subsequent history are but baby things, for it dealt in hundreds of millions of bushels, and its profits were reckonable by hundreds of millions of dollars, and it was a disaster so crushing that its effects have not wholly disappeared from Egypt to-day, more than three thousand years after the event.

One is not concerned with the justice of such re-writing of the record of Joseph. In the light of recent plans to limit wheat acreage so that the farmer may get a higher price for this necessity of life, still more in view of the recent outburst of joy over the plague of grasshoppers in one area which kept the wheat dearer in another, we may return with more respect to that prime minister of Pharaoh, who operated in different fashion upon the food supply. Instead of getting alarmed lest the seven years of plenty should ruin "commodity prices", he seized his chance to store the surplus grain against a time of dearth which he foresaw—as any shrewd Egyptian minister might, from knowledge of the caprices of the river Nile. Rather than distribute "doles", Joseph seems to have anticipated the Charity Organization Society, helping the destitute to help themselves. If he gave them loans on mortgage of their farms and livestock, why should an American publicist—writing in an environment of Trust Company advertisements—be the first to cast a stone? For the item about slavery in which Mark's narrative reaches its climax, one has to note in historical

justice that the date of this proceeding was long prior to Lincoln's edict, and even to the *Declaration of Independence*, that there was at least nothing singular in the institution such as to make Joseph seem the father of a new inhumanity, and that the terms he drew up were relatively most considerate. What a paradise for many a European farmer in feudal times, if he might have held his land on condition of rendering just one-fifth of its produce annually to the King!