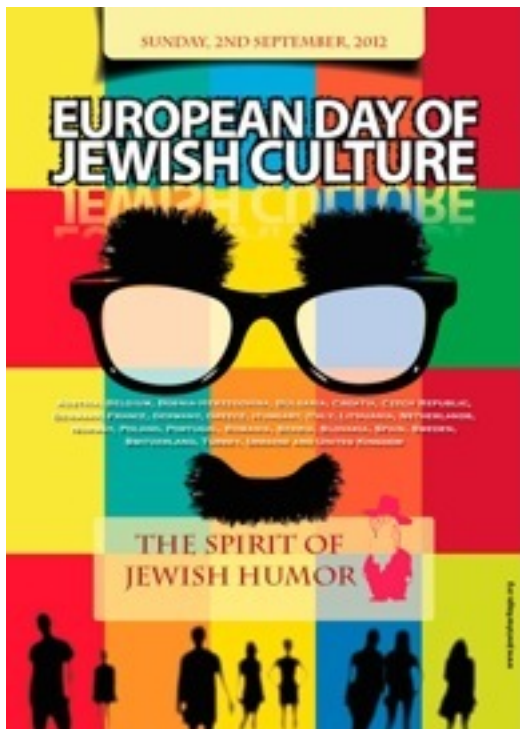


Bulgaria: "THE SPIRIT OF JEWISH HUMOUR", by Hanna Lorer



This year, the organizers of the traditional day of Jewish culture chose "The spirit of Jewish humour" as a theme. There is no doubt that humour in art always demonstrates distinctly the traits of the nation that creates it. In world literature, one can find different publications on the subject, such as Jews are laughing, Jewish humour, Jüdischer Humor, Mathematicians joke, Physicists laugh. These are publications that not only describe the characteristics of this particular type of folklore, but also enrich it by different short examples of funny situations, jokes and anecdotes.

Our eminent scholar, Prof. Issak Passy, defined the term "joke" as "a short, made up funny story, which is usually told to make the listeners laugh", while, according to him, an anecdote would have the same aim, but would be based on a true story. The joke is a comic miniature, based on witticism, it is short, but this does not prevent us from viewing it as a work of literature, in which an artistic turn is used in a specific way. The joke has been formed in more recent times, and with the development of book-printing, more and more books of jokes in different languages have come up. Such books present the reader with traits that mark the specifics of different regions, even nations.

The world-known physicist and philosopher, Prof. Azaria Polikar, member of numerous academic institutions, one of the most gifted authors and "spreaders" of jokes, believed that the most common way to popularize jokes was "from mouth to ear", rather than by press. He also thought that for a joke to be valued well, it should be "neither sweet, nor too bitter". No one knows where or by whom good jokes are made, yet it is certain that they would spread around in a matter of days. To enjoy a joke, one should try not to look for logic, but just to feel the funny part.

Humour is a specific expression of people's aspirations to bring about a happy mood in a

conversation, in order to lead then to a sincere, genuine laughter; it provokes the will to have fun. People react to humour regardless of age, they love to be entertained, to smile and to laugh- in other words, they show "a sense of humour". To feel the joke means to be aware of the twofold nature of life and to make it understandable for the listeners, so they would accept it from its funny side.

One definition of humour given in literature is by the well-known humorist Chudomir, born in Kazanlak (Bulgaria). In the introduction of his selected works (1971) he says: "They say nations are like children - they don't like being given moral advice, and they want to find out truths by having fun. They also say that if satire is like a surgical knife, humour is a healing balm for wounds. If this is true, we have nothing left but to wish each other that this balm would be mass-produced and given to everyone, since at home, there are many wounds to heal."

Jewish humour

There isn't just one type of humour, there are distinctions dividing humour into different categories, according to nation, class or profession, but what they all have in common is that they are all funny, and also often provoke in us a deeper insight into things. According to the great German poet Heinrich Heine, German humour is as heavy as German beer, English humour is misty like whiskey, French humour is light, fizzy and shiny like champagne, whereas the Scots are deprived of any sense of humour.

The roots of Jewish humour were set in the Torah (Pentateuch) and in the Midrasha (Biblical study for analyzing texts), in other words, we can trace it all the way back to ancient times, but mainly it was created more recently, as mentioned above, by spreading humorous stories, -authentic or made up-, "mouth to ear". "Laughter helps us not only to live and work, but to get through everything that is in our way of living and working". At traditional events in Jewish life, well-meaning people moderating celebrations like weddings tell joyful jokes to entertain hosts and guests alike. But those are not your court jesters, who would spit out peppery and ambiguous comparisons; rather, they are jolly chaps using their jokes to humour all and to kind-heartedly spread love for mankind. A distinctive mark of Jewish humour is the presence, in jokes, anecdotes, vaudevilles and satire, of a well expressed self-irony.

There is a distinct difference between jokes made up and told by Jewish people about themselves, and jokes about Jews made up by non-Jews. Even though the first don't lack imputed flaws, such as fibs, smaller or more significant wiles, or going around the truth, egotism and inclination to dodge out of tough situations and so on, they still express sympathy, compassion and willingness to forgive negative acts; criticism is not mean, it always contains a certain kind of softness. However, jokes made up about Jews by non-Jews, invariably give out a taste of anti-Semitism. The humour and the witticisms are directly anti-Jewish, there is cruelty, hatred, and the Jewish "hero" of the story is represented solely by negative characteristics, such as stinginess, stone-heartedness, badly covered revengefulness - all of them flaws imputed in Shakespeare's character, the money-lender Shylock from "The Merchant of Venice". From a historic point of view it is possible that, on the grounds of this kind of a collective portrait of the Jewish people, stem all those beliefs that Jews were responsible for all negativity in the world -

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a misconception as old as the world, an approach which does not search for the real reason for disasters, but blames innocent people, notably the Jewish.

Many more things could be said about humour. The sense of humour is the most valuable gift of nature for a person, and the Jewish people are richly bestowed with it. According to Cicero, "jokes and witticisms are pleasant and always useful, but those qualities are not to be studied, the efforts of learning by lessons, the making up and the telling of a joke or a witticism are pointless. The attempts by those deprived of a sense of humour, to crack jokes, become a tasteless exercise doomed not to be understood, as a result of the toothless and boring wittiness and a futile spirit."

There is a famous anti-Jewish joke from the time of the fascist regime in Germany: Goebbels - the Minister of Propaganda in Hitler's Germany was inspecting a school. The teacher, who wanted to please the minister asked the students the following political question: Friedrich, tell us why did Germany lose the First World War?

The student stood up and said:

The reason for the loss of the war is that there were Jews in the army. They are cowards and they ran away from the front.

The teacher was pleased with the answer.

Hans, what do you think, why did Germany lose the war?

Hans confidently answers, that there were Jews in the commandantship, and as is popular they are thieves, they stole all the food and that's how Germany lost the war. The teacher greeted Hans and turns to the student Goldstein with the question:

Now, Jew, you answer, why did Germany lose the First World War?

Goldstein stood up and said:

The loss occurred because there were Jewish people in the general staff

What are you talking about? There were never Jews in the general staff of Germany!

I never said there were Jews in the German general staff. I meant that there were Jews in the French general staff, that's why Germany lost the war.