

## THE BEILIS TRIAL

Landauer began to address Judaism in depth only during the last years of his life. His comments in *Die Revolution*, for example, still reflect the conscious detachment of a secular radical. Even in his early mystical interest he reaches out to Christian rather than to Jewish teachings. In June 1909, however, the following note can be found among his letters: "I am not in the least inclined to forget the joy of my Jewishness even for a day."<sup>1</sup>

In 1913, Landauer publishes two of his most important essays on Judaism, "Sind das Ketzergedanken?" [Are These Heretic Thoughts?] and "Der Beilis-Prozeß" [The Beilis Trial]. The former is included in a book entitled *Vom Judentum* [On Judaism], edited by the Bar Kokhba League of Jewish Students in Prague. According to Hanna Delf, Landauer calls himself therein "a conscious Jew for the first time."<sup>2</sup>

"The Beilis Trial" addresses the 1913 court case against the Jewish builder, Mendel Beilis, in Kiev. Beilis was accused of ritually murdering a Christian child to bake matzo with the child's blood. He was eventually acquitted, but Landauer was appalled by the anti-Semitism that had made such outrageous allegations possible. He entitled the November 5, 1913, issue of *Der Sozialist* "Kiew" and dedicated it to Beilis. Next to "The Beilis Trial" (entitled "Kiew" in the *Sozialist* issue, renamed in later printings), the issue included articles commissioned by Landauer from non-Jewish friends. Landauer wrote in the editorial: "Socialism means action among human beings; action that must become reality within these human beings as much as in the outside world. When independent peoples propose to create a united humanity, these propositions are worthless when even a single people remains excluded and experiences injustice."

Landauer further reflects on Judaism in his 1913 essay on Martin Buber ("Martin Buber," *Neue Blätter*, Buber Special Issue), and in "Ostjuden und Deutsches Reich" (*Der Jude*, October 1916), a reflection on the relations between the Jews of Eastern Europe ("Ostjuden") and the German nation state. Noteworthy is also "Zur Poesie der Juden" [On Jewish Poetry] (*Freistatt*, August 22, 1913). Concerning Landauer's relations to Zionism and his influence on the Kibbutz movement please see "Landauer's Legacy" in the Introduction.

PEOPLE EMBARK ON LONG JOURNEYS TO DISCOVER THE PEOPLES OF ASIA, of Africa, and of the Pacific Isles. They describe the manners and customs of the so-called savages and barbarians that they find carefully and meticulously. However, I know of no more heartless barbarism than the one executed by scholars and publicists all over Europe against the Jews — a people who live right among them.

Six or seven million Jews live in Poland and Russia. Their forefathers emigrated there from Germany during the Middle Ages. Our linguists record every Alemmanic, Bavarian, and West Low German local dialect — yet they ignore a language that has retained the beauty of Middle High German at least to the same degree as Swiss German has.<sup>3</sup> They do this because common prejudice against the Jews is stronger in their philistine hearts than scientific curiosity. They detest nothing more than the Yiddish language.

There are dictionaries and scientific treatises on the language of gypsies, of outlaws, or of criminals. None of them have been written by gypsies, vagabonds, or criminals; nor were any written by their friends or on their behalf. They have all been written by scholars. However, if the Jews had not begun to explore their language and their folk songs themselves, this history would be an area even whiter than the white areas on the maps of Africa. This is just one example for something that applies very generally: nothing is known about the real life, about the manners and customs of the Jews. The reason is that no one wants to know anything about it.

Are any other people treated similarly? The Jews live in the midst of other peoples. Their lives are open, nothing is hidden. Yet all that is supposedly known about these lives rests on mere rumors. Let us say that a missionary described the following scenario: somewhere in the interior of Africa there live a people numbering one hundred thousand men and women. Among them live a smaller group of people numbering about five thousand men and women. Every now and again, the small community slaughters a child of the big community in order to drink its blood at the altar of their idols. Would we believe this?<sup>4</sup>

Everyone who wants can learn about the religious life of the Jews. All that is needed is to approach their communities with basic respect and kindness. Behind a number of superficial customs revolving around renunciation and penance, the following will soon appear as the core of the Jewish religion: the complete absence of Antiquity's representative priest-

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hood; the sanctification of man; and the connection with the heavens and the unspeakable — a connection that fills the whole community as well as the individual who lives guarded by his family.

I will intentionally not speak of the indelible traits of a Jewish national spirit that remain in myself and others like me — those who have separated themselves from traditional Jewish life. Instead, I will speak of the manners, the customs, and the ways of the communities where the confession is still alive.

Let us picture a small German village where the lives of the people revolve around plows, hoes, and manure. In the middle of all the neat small white-painted brick houses, on the village's highest point, stands a wide Romanic church built from centuries-old blazing sandstone. In its interior, there are high vaults, pillars, and paintings. The air is filled with incense. When I enter such a church, I do not just think of superstition and error. I also think of greatness and the longing for eternity; I think of the exuberance that must have filled this village once. But then I hear the litanies of the priests and I see the apathy of the old women and men who gather in the church and I know that this exuberance is gone.

Among the Jews who live in true, unspoiled communities there is no distinction between priests and laypeople. Every pious Jew, no matter how dirty his worldly affairs, begins the day by turning to God. And every now and again throughout the day, he will take fifteen minutes to do the same. In their *shul*<sup>5</sup> — a word that Jews prefer to the foreign word “synagogue” — it is the community as a whole that celebrates holiness. It is hard to find the same repentant longing for purity elsewhere.

I speak of true Jewish communities here; not the ones modernized and trivialized by today's Christian priesthood and its Sunday celebrations; not the ones that have desecrated the work day. I speak of those Jewish communities that are — repeatedly and everywhere — accused of adding the blood of slaughtered Christian children to their Easter bread.<sup>6</sup> What lies behind these accusations — as currently in Russia and as in Western Europe before — has been summed up by one of the attorneys during the last ritual murder case in Germany in 1892 in the town of Cleves: “This case is not unresolved because the accused is a Jew — the accused is a Jew because the case is unresolved.”

What allows this to happen? It is the fact that a mixture of superstition, shyness, fear, and contempt keeps a society's majority from getting to know

the Jewish people, as well as the fact that those in power encourage this ignorance and use it for distraction; we only have to look at the despicable way in which the corrupt, bureaucratic tsarist Russian state does this right now.

When I try to appeal to the German spirit to revolt against this bestiality, I usually lose heart and have to lower my pen. What we are witnessing in Russia right now also remains possible in Germany. Even the finest German minds do not recognize Jewish life and do not acknowledge it in the same way that they acknowledge other spiritual and national communities.

Haggling defines Jewishness as little as drinking beer defines Germanness. Jewishness is not cowardice, just as Germanness is not rowdiness. Jewishness is not intellectual coldness and calculation, just as Frenchness is not rhetoric and phrase. Neither is Jewishness excrescence and deterioration of Jewishness.

Jews are as bellicose as any other people, but their bellicose spirit has turned inwards. This is not only a result of their dispersion and dissolution among foreign peoples. "I did not come to bring peace but to bring the sword." These are not just the words of Jesus the Jew and Muhammad the Arab; these are first and foremost the words of Moses who stands as the biggest of all war heroes in the midst of the Jewish people. Through him the war to unite with God, the war against sin, the war for purity and sanctification has entered the heart of the Jewish people, of the Jewish community, and of each individual Jew. It is a war that is led by no representative, no pioneer, no savior, no saint, and no priest. It is a war of renouncement, of cleansing one's soul, of going inwards, of praying, of uniting the community in repentance.

Many customs that have once been meaningful have turned meaningless, but there is neither superstition nor fetishism. And since there is no fetishism, there can be no cannibalism either, and it becomes impossible for the soul's holy war to turn into a bloody war against people of a different faith. It has indeed long been impossible for soul-searching Jews to go to war against others, or to cause wounds to anyone but to themselves.

Jews always kept their spiritual, their national uniqueness, even if individual Jews who decided to join humanity have hid their Jewishness or have tried to overcome it. The movement that goes through Jewry today, mostly under the name of Zionism, should have, no matter the developments around it, the following aims: to help Jews shape their particular being — that they, like any other nation, have developed over millennia —

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purely, creatively, and under the guidance of spiritual and strong natures; to defend their freedom, their self-determination, their unity of soul, and their embrace of holiness both from the mess of ignorance and from mechanical habit; to fill the Jewish community with vision and life; to allow Jews to give themselves to humanity — humanity that cannot forgo Jewry or any other stage or shade of humankind. Humanity does not mean sameness; humanity means alliance of the plenty.

It is not only Jews who have to find themselves if they want to join humanity. The same goes for all nations on this planet. However, none of these nations can truly find itself and join humanity if it does not seek to understand the Jews, their inner being, and their reality. After all, there are twelve million Jews dispersed across the planet who constitute an indivisible entity. Half of them live in big communities among other nations.

There are of course some who already know that Jews have no cannibalistic customs; who know that Mendel Beilis, like so many before him, is persecuted and tortured as an innocent man. These people must not keep quiet. They must speak out. Privately and publicly. Wherever they may be.



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1. Letter to Constantin Brunner (born Leopold Wertheimer, 1862-1937, Jewish philosopher), in *Gustav Landauer. Sein Lebensgang in Briefen*, 1: 262.
  2. Hanna Delf, "Wie steht es mit dem Sozialist?" Sozialismus, Deutschtum, Judentum im Briefwechsel Gustav Landauers und Fritz Mauthners" ["How Are Things with *Der Sozialist*?" Socialism, Germanness, and Jewishness in the Correspondence of Gustav Landauer and Fritz Mauthner], in Ludger Heid and Arnold Paucker, eds., *Juden und deutsche Arbeiterbewegung bis 1933. Soziale Utopien und religiös-kulturelle Traditionen* [Jews and the German Workers' Movement until 1933: Social Utopias and Religious and Cultural Traditions] (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1992), 127.
  3. Modern Swiss German remains much closer to the German of the Middle Ages than other German dialects.
  4. Landauer refers to blood libel, i.e., the accusation of slaughtering human beings — often children — for ritual consumption of their blood. Although diverse social groups have been accused of blood libel, the accusations have most commonly been raised against Jews, already in Antiquity.
  5. Landauer uses *Schule*, the German word for "school."
  6. Landauer uses the Christian term *Osterbrot* instead of matzo here.