

# The Fluctuating Identity of Arthur Eloesser

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# 1. Introduction

*“There is only one field of action left to the Jew, where the results depend mainly upon himself. This is the field of Jewish life.”<sup>1</sup>*

One should not presume to deconstruct the infinite wealth of an individual’s identity based on a retrospective reading of his professional writing. By considering the literary and theatrical reviews, as well as other essays and books, of the Jewish critic Arthur Eloesser (1870-1938), written in Berlin during the stormy era of the Weimar Republic and the following few years, this paper will highlight some of the central components of Eloesser’s Jewish and aesthetic identity and conceptions, which inevitably varied during that unstable and ominous era.

Although Eloesser’s story is as unique as any individual’s life inevitably must be, it contains many of the turning points, dilemmas, crises, and decisions characteristic of his generation of intellectual Jews active in the German culture, and therefore offers a platform for discussing the issues at hand as they affected the times. Comparing Eloesser’s theatrical and other writing in the pre- and post-1933 eras will enable distinguishing between the different elements in his writing and *Weltanschauung*, and showing what remained constant throughout the turbulent times and what fluctuated, while trying to explain why.

First, some basic information on the cultural and historical contexts is in order.

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<sup>1</sup> Kurt Lewin, “When Facing Danger” (1939), in **Resolving Social Conflict** (New York: Harper & Row, 1948), p. 163.

## 2. Culture, Theater, Germans, Jews

### 2.1 Jews in German Theater

*“Die Wichtigkeit des Theaters braucht man niemandem zu erklären.”*<sup>2</sup>

This discussion of Jews in the German culture focuses on certain relevant aspects of theater in the Weimar Republic era and the years following, in part because of the centrality of theater in the German culture of that era, a “special significance in terms of its public influence” that can in part be explained by the fact that “modern mass media had not yet been firmly established. There was, however, also a historical precedent for this privileged status, because the German theater was traditionally regarded as the predominant forum of national education.”<sup>3</sup>

This “predominant forum of national education” has “always been integral to national identity in Germany,” as a tangible expression of spiritual and physical ideals and concepts, brought forth by people of the appropriate appearance and upbringing quoting the lines of the great poets and thinkers, in the proper manner, intonation, accent, and so on. It follows that “German identity has been predicated on culture ever since the Sturm und Drang playwrights of the 1770s sought to change German dependence on French theatrical models.”<sup>4</sup> Since Europe had by then been intimate and to a degree compliant with Christianity and its ideas for many centuries, theater served as a means for mass communication of extra-religious values, pertaining to the political and national realms:

Ever since Lessing, theater in Germany had been seen as socially didactic—a site of training in moral and political enlightenment for the masses. According to Lessing, the function of drama was “to enlighten and improve the masses and not to confirm them in their prejudices or in their ignoble mode of thought.” In 1769, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing defended theatre as a “moral institution,” and “The

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<sup>2</sup> Arnold Zweig, **Juden auf der deutschen Bühne** (Berlin: Welt-Verlag, 1928), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Hans-Peter Bayerdörfer, “February 18, 1926: Playwrights and Theater Critics in the Weimar Republic Assume the Role of Advocates for Justice,” in Saner Gilman and Jack Zipes (eds.), **Yale Companion to Jewish Writing and Thought in German Culture, 1096-1996** (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 456.

<sup>4</sup> David Ashley Hughes, “Notes on the German Theater Crisis,” **TDR: The Drama Review**, 51, 4 (T196) (Winter 2007), pp. 134-135.

Stage as a Moral Institution” was also the title of a famous lecture given by the 25-year-old Friedrich Schiller in Weimar in 1784. Schiller was one of the young Sturm und Drang playwrights who used drama as a vehicle for social comment and critical moral judgment and who often emphasized the repressive aspects of their times, fearlessly tackling social taboos. In the early 19th century, Georg Büchner, influenced by the communist theories of Gracchus Babeuf and Henri de Saint-Simon, sought to use theater as a means of politically educating the peasantry.<sup>5</sup>

However, to complete the picture of the evolution of German identity through its stages, it is important to note “the lack of any strong national dramatic tradition in that country,”<sup>6</sup> which may actually have enabled greater flexibility in its theatrical activity and openness to new and diverse creators. Theater in Germany had changed drastically following the revolution of 1918, until which

...there had been three types of serious theatre: the *Hoftheater* (court theatre), the *Stadttheater* (municipal theatres) and the privately owned commercial theatres. The thirty-one Hoftheater were aristocratic foundations, created as a prestigious adornment of even modest courts. They were presided over by aristocratic directors, often appointed as a mark of favour rather than in recognition of any theatrical ability. Their audiences comprised the scanty resident nobility and the wealthier elements of the bourgeoisie. In these circumstances a visit to the theatre was regarded as a social rather than a cultural occasion, and productions tended to range from the incompetent to the tedious. With very few exceptions like the *Weimar Hoftheater* under Goethe or the famous Saxe-Meiningen troupe, the *Hoftheater* had become synonymous with conservative taste...the quality of the *Stadttheater* was little better.... Actors were treated as any other public performers.... As a result...few cities showed any sense of responsibility toward their so-called municipal theatres. Normally they would be leased out to a

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 135-136.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Patterson, **The Revolution in German Theatre 1900-1933** (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 1981, p. 1.

manager, who thus found himself subject to the same pressure as the commercial theatres.

The commercial theatres themselves tended to fare best by offering a light diet of variety and operettas...they had to respond to the generally trivial taste of the bourgeoisie.<sup>7</sup>

There were instances of bypassing the “rigorous censorship of the age,” such as the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen staging Henrik Ibsen’s *Ghosts* as a private performance in 1886, thus outmaneuvering “the ban on its public performance,” or the forming of the Freie Bühne of Berlin in 1889, which “under the directorship of Otto Brahm [acquainted the Berlin public] with a number of major works banned on the public stage,” and the Freie Volksbühne, “founded in Berlin in 1890 [as an] effort by some of the members of the *Freie Bühne* to apply socialistic principles to the theatre.” The Freie Volksbühne “showed theatre managements that the working classes were a potential audience for something more worthwhile than the commercial pap of variety shows.”<sup>8</sup>

Upon the abdication of the Kaiser and the ending of World War I “with the signing of the Armistice on 11 November [1918],” the establishment of the Weimar Republic had begun, changing among many other things the structure of the theaters in Germany. “The thirty-one *Hoftheater* came under control of the federal states, and many of the aristocratic appointments were replaced with new and often young directors better qualified to administer a theatre.... State and municipal theatres now became the norm and private theatres the exception.”<sup>9</sup>

And so we return to the Weimar Republic and the flourishing of its theatrical activity with an open question: what in the *German* culture caused it to be so susceptible to the magic of the theatrical moment, of the wealth of images portrayed by live people on a decorated stage? At this point we will cautiously suggest that the encounter between Christianity and the Germanic tribes was what helped clear the ground and create a void waiting to be filled by the theater:

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-25.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

Christianity has emptied Valhalla, felled the sacred groves, extirpated the national imagery as a shameful superstition, as a devilish poison, and given us instead the imagery of a nation whose climate, laws, culture, and interests are strange to us and whose history has no connection whatever with our own....<sup>10</sup>

This lack of “national imagery” might very well explain the dominance of theater in the German culture, since, as we saw, nothing creates national imagery with the same ease and efficiency as theater can. Where if not on a stage is there a creation of such imagery, a crystallization of national identity, in a sensually satiating manner? Germany is also the origin of Lutheran Protestantism, which frowns on religious imagery. Martin Luther’s argument with Rome was over the financial corruption of the Catholic Church, but the fact that Protestantism included iconoclasm in its agenda may have reflected the local tendency toward idolatry, whether in Catholic or other forms. And so the only legitimate sensual outlet remaining for the German Protestant would be the theater, which related to the local legends, myths, values, and aesthetics:

Every nation has its own imagery, its gods, angels, devils, or saints who live on in the nation’s traditions.... In addition to these creatures of the imagination, there also live in the memory of most nations, especially free nations, the ancient heroes of their countries’ history, i.e., the founders or liberators of their states scarcely less than the men of valor in the days before the nation was united into a state under civil laws. These heroes do not live solely in their nation’s imagination; their history, the recollection of their deeds, is linked with public festivals, national games, with many of the state’s domestic institutions....<sup>11</sup>

This concept of theater as the shaping instrument of the German culture and national identity can help clarify the overprotectiveness that Germans afflicted with (national) chauvinism felt toward their culture and theater, and especially toward foreigners of

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<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Hegel, **On Christianity: Early Theological Writings**, translated by T.M. Knox (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1948), p. 146.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

different ethnicity and hence national character, slyly writing and speaking the German language.

## **2.2 Jews in German Culture**

Take the Jews, for instance. “With the dismantling of the ghetto, the Jews of Central Europe rushed to drink the waters of German culture. Emancipated Jewry’s passionate adoption of the ethic of German *Bildung* – the studied cultivation of high culture and aesthetic refinement – also elicited a dedicated pursuit of higher education.”<sup>12</sup>

For a more comprehensive picture of Eloesser’s background as a Jewish-German critic, it is necessary to present some of the highlights of the Jewish-German equilibrium, cultural and otherwise. To avoid being pulled and tossed by the Rhein-like currents of this very deep and alluring topic, we shall only consider some of the central pertinent points that will provide the basic roadmap to the subject.

It is customary and logical to chronologically frame the limited admission of the Jews into some of the German cultural and civil institutions and the mutual effects, the reactions and influences from the Enlightenment period, or perhaps the nearly supernatural materialization of Moses Mendelssohn in the field of philosophy, to Hitler’s 1933 rise to power, or perhaps the practical beginning of the end of the physical Jewish presence in the German-speaking sphere.<sup>13</sup> Keeping Auschwitz in mind, it is difficult not to think that this symbiosis did not in fact occur in the traditional sense, but rather in the minds of the Jews, seeking minimal recognition from the hosting majority: “If Mendelssohn consciously fostered a ‘dialogue.’ it was not the external one between Germans and Jews but the internal, intellectual one between the Enlightenment and Judaism.”<sup>14</sup> Either way, it cannot be denied that a figure like Mendelssohn, who was a leading German philosopher and at the same time an observant Jew and spiritual

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Mendes-Flohr, “The Berlin Jew as Cosmopolitan,” in Emily D. Bilski (ed.), **Berlin Metropolis: Jews and the New Culture 1890-1918** Berkeley, University of California Press, and New York: The Jewish Museum, 1999), p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Amos Elon, **The Pity of It All** (New York: Picador, 2002) as well as Arthur Eloesser, “Literatur,” in **Juden in deutschen Kulturbereich**, Herausgegeben von Siegmund Kaznelson, Jüdischer Verlag, Berlin, 1962 (1934), pp. 1-67. Both chose Mendelssohn’s 1743 entry to Berlin as the starting point of the Jewish presence in German life.

<sup>14</sup> David Sorkin, “The Internal Dialogue: Judaism and Enlightenment in Moses Mendelssohn’s Thought,” in Klaus L. Berghahn (ed.), **The German-Jewish Dialogue Reconsidered** (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 25.



authority, personified the possibility to contain within oneself more than one facet of identity; not only German or Jew, but rather a religious or ethnic Jew on the one hand, with an affinity or even commitment to the German culture, on the other.

This modern and liberal perception shattered the racial convention of being entirely predetermined by one's race, or more graphically put, blood, but unfortunately could not be expected to be embraced by the majority of the Germans, composed not only of enlightened Lessing-like people; "even if Mendelssohn had been more decisive in clarifying the basis of his dual identity as a German (that is, by virtue of language and culture) and a Jew (however defined), German society of his day was too uncertain of its collective identity to entertain a pluralistic conception of its social and political fabric."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the new proximity and lack of essential barriers between Jews and Germans created a new source of pressure on the Jews, with most of the cultured Germans expecting "Mendelssohn and his fellow Jews to shed their Judaism and primordial identity.... This demand was aggravated by the pervasive assumption that Judaism was incompatible with liberal culture and sensibility."<sup>16</sup> Even on the Jewish front, there was much admiration for the German *Bildung* ideal, "regarded as 'the knighthood of modernity,' which, unlike its medieval antecedent, was opened to Jews and non-Jews alike. No wonder Jews embraced the ideal of *Bildung* with such eagerness and devotion," while some even went so far as to transform it "into a kind of religion."<sup>17</sup>

Such an outlook naturally had the capacity to distance the Jews from their Judaism, less and less attractive as German culture was more and more available, and fostered emotions such as hatred toward their own tradition.<sup>18</sup> The love and loyalty of the Jews to "the Enlightenment ideal of *Bildung* and *Kultur*" remained stable, "even when German thought and culture developed in other, more romantic, less cosmopolitan directions."<sup>19</sup> Yet again, the foundation of German national identity on its culture inevitably created a situation where once the German national identity changed course toward chauvinism, it

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Mendes-Flohr, *German Jews: A Dual Identity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

took its perceived culture with it, regardless and in spite of the contribution and at times prominence of those regarded by the majority as non-Germans.

Those German nationalists became more and more ill at ease with the Jewish presence in the German culture and society, whether real or imagined, and created in their minds the myth of the 'Judaization' of the German culture, which "reflected the belief that Jews wielded disproportionate influence and occupied...pivotal positions of inordinate economic, political and cultural power.... *Verjudung* connoted a condition in which the 'Jewish spirit' had somehow permeated society and its key institutions, one in which Jewish *Geist* had seeped through the spiritual pores of the nation to penetrate and undermine the German psyche itself."<sup>20</sup>

The idea of the infiltrating Jewish spirit became part of the discourse. In a mild and benevolent version, it was discussed by Jews such as Leopold Jessner (1878-1945), theater director and manager of Berlin's Staatstheater, who saw in such a fusion a constructive step forward for the German theater. The fact that many Jews were active in the German theater of Berlin in the Weimar Republic was receiving too much negative attention: "Angesichts der Tatsache, daß – wie antisemitische Blätter immer wieder hervorheben – die Berliner Bühne heute 'in Händen von Juden' ist...." Jessner's plea does not attempt to deny this, rather to refute the claim of inherent and irrevocable difference between Germans and Jews, as evident in the disproportionate theatrical activity of Berlin Jews, which is to due to historical factors and not racial traits: "Ist doch – nicht oft genug kann dies erwähnt werden – jenes materielle Gesicht dem Juden erst durch jahrhundertlanges Fernhalten von jedem menschenwürdigen Beruf aufgezwungen worden...durch Vergewaltigungen aller Art blieb ihnen – den Zerstreuten – nichts anders als die Befugnis, zu handeln," thus developing the mercantile abilities so crucial to the management of modern theaters. "Das Geistigen aber konnte ihnen nicht genommen werden. Durch diese Synthese des Geistigen und Merkantilen...ist der Jude wie niemand anders zum Theaterführen befähigt...." The Jews' talent for theater is not only in the managerial domain: "Aus der Starkblütigkeit seines Temperaments heraus ist der Jude für die theatralische Welt geschaffen." Needless to mention, Jessner could not imagine the

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<sup>20</sup> Steven E. Aschheim, "The Jew Within: The Myth of 'Judaization' in Germany," in Judah Reinharz and Walter Schatzberg, **The Jewish Response to German Culture, From the Enlightenment to the Second World War** (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1985), p. 212.

artificial amputation of Jewish creators from the German culture, and considered himself “eines Manens, der jüdischen Glaubens ist, sich aber vollständig als Deutscher fühlt, dem die Bestrebungen eines zionistischen Ideals weder geläufig noch opportun erscheinen. Jude von Rasse, politisch aber und naturell ein Deutscher.”<sup>21</sup>

### **2.3 Jews as Critics**

*“Vienna was the city of talent, Berlin that of criticism, and unprejudiced, authoritative criticism, capable of grasping a subject rapidly, which was establishing a hierarchy of merit not among German writers alone.”<sup>22</sup>*

Having touched upon some of the complexities of the Jewish presence in the German culture, and bearing in mind the characteristics of Jews, whether racial or circumstantial, it is now the place to inquire whether the contemporary Jews were inclined to certain fields of cultural activity more than others.

In music, in art, in literature, as, indeed, in science and in medicine, the Jew has brought to bear a keen critical faculty, highly developed through centuries of intensive culture and an innate respect for intellect and intellectual activity. This is coupled with great receptivity, a reluctance to accept tradition *per se*, and perhaps a critical aloofness, natural in those whose identity has for centuries been maintained as that of a small minority in a hostile world. Thus there is inherent perhaps in the Jew a mental attitude which qualifies him peculiarly to brush away the cobwebs of conventions, though rendering him no less receptive to prevailing tendencies.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Leopold Jessner, “Das ‘verjudete’ Theater,” *CV-Zeitung* 1, 3 (May 18, 1922), p. 37; reprinted in Fetting (ed.), *Leopold Jessner* (Schriften), pp. 61-62. See similar attitude in Zweig, pp. 22-23.

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Eloesser, *Modern German Literature*, with an introduction by Ludwig Lewisohn, translated by Catherine Alison Phillips (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1933). Originally published as *Die Deutsche Literatur vom Barock bis zur Gegenwart. Band II. Vom Goethes Tod bis zur Gegenwart*, copyright 1931 by Bruno Cassirer, Berlin, p. 249.

<sup>23</sup> Cecil Roth, *Jewish Contribution to Civilization* (Cincinnati: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1940), p. 178.

It is not by chance that some of the leading contemporary literary and theatrical critics were Jews. To truly understand a written or staged piece, a good critic must possess an affinity for its values, aesthetic ideals, and concepts; at the same time, to truly review it, the same critic must retain a certain alienation from it, enabling the emotional distance necessary in order to produce a truthful and accurate review. These provisions bring to mind the words of Georg Simmel, who wrote in his *Exkurs über den Fremden* about the Stranger, who possesses “Die Einheit von Nähe und Entferntheit” and at the same time, “Qualitäten, die aus ihm nicht stammen und stammen können, in ihn hineingrägt.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, this near-yet-distant constellation entails a crucial characteristic for a good critic: objectivity. “Weil er nicht von der Wurzel her für die singulären Bestandteile oder die einseitigen Tendenzen der Gruppe festgelegt ist, steht er allen diesen mit der besonderen Attitüde des »Objektiven« gegenüber, die nicht etwa einen bloßen Abstand und Unbetheiligkeit bedeutet, sondern ein besonderes Gebilde aus Ferne und Nähe, Gleichgültigkeit und Engagiertheit ist.”<sup>25</sup>

Moreover: “Der Fremde ist ein Element der Gruppe selbst... dessen immanente und Gliedstellung zugleich ein Außerhalb und Gegenüber einschließt.”<sup>26</sup>

This contradictory duality could theoretically exist in any individual, but the historical conditions of the Central European Jews of the first third of the twentieth century were ideal for the materialization of this dichotomy. It is important to keep in mind that Arthur Eloesser, like many others of his generation and background, grew up in a family that did not observe Judaism religiously, and conveyed very little knowledge of the religion, practical or otherwise. This determined Eloesser’s marginal position in the culture and society as a culturally ‘homeless’ intellectual, standing outside the gates of Judaism for lack of interest or keys, looking on to the pastures of Western culture, possessing the knowledge and tools to take an active part in it, and being rejected by its self-appointed keepers because of his ethnicity. That condition was graphically captured by Franz Kafka (1883-1924), who, in a letter to Max Brod, described their “generation of Germanized Jews” as insects: “[T]heir hind legs were still mired in their fathers’

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<sup>24</sup> Georg Simmel, **Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung** (Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt Verlag, 1908), p. 509.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 510.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 509.

Jewishness and their thrashing forelegs found no new ground. The ensuing despair became their inspiration.”<sup>27</sup>

As for theater criticism in Weimar Republic Berlin, it is worth stressing the importance of the newspapers, which served as the daily platform for the reviews, as an immediate source of information, and much more: “Bis in die 1930er Jahre war die Zeitung das Nachrichtenmedium schlechthin. Allein Berlin erschienen über hundert Blätter, viele davon mehrmals am Tag. Bertolt Brecht war sogar sicher, ‘daß selbst Gott sich über die Welt nur mehr über die Zeitungen orientiert.’”<sup>28</sup>

Good theater criticism is nothing short of an art form, and can be seen as the acrobatic act of retaining the balance between being a high artistic evaluation and expressing the theater-viewer’s feelings and values. The dispute over the essence of a theater review naturally reflects the question of the purpose of theater, be it an effective vehicle of *Bildung* or a pleasant way to spend an evening, and is as old as theater criticism itself. An early example is a review from January 1887 by theater critic Paul Schlenther for the *Vossischen Zeitung*, in which Schlenther wrote enthusiastically about Ibsen’s *Gespenster*. In a later edition his own editorial staff disclaimed the review, asserting that art should provide “Genuß, Freude, Erhebung” and certainly not the “Entsetzen, Qual” and, “was noch schlimmer ist, hoffnungslose Verzweiflung,” which Ibsen’s play promoted. In 1902, as part of the debate over Hermann Sudermann’s pamphlet *Die Verrohung in der Theaterkritik*, critic Alfred Kerr took theater review another step further to formulate the convention equating criticism of art with art itself: “Die Wahrheit zu sagen in einer Kritik ist das wenigste; das ist die Voraussetzung. Es kommt darauf an, wie man sie sagt. . . . Ich trachte, die Kritik auf eine Stufe zu bringen, wo sie (nach meinen Absichten) eine dichtergleiche Kunst werden kann. Man wird ihm [Sudermann] nie einbleuen können, daß eine Rezension sogar dichterischer sein kann als ein Werk, das sie bespricht.”

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<sup>27</sup> Bryan Cheyette, “On Being a Jewish Critic,” *Jewish Social Studies* 11, 1 (Fall 2004), pp. 32-33. Cited in Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca, NY, 1991).

<sup>28</sup> For an exhaustive review of the history of theater criticism in Germany, see Gunther Nickel, *Die Ausdifferenzierung und Professionalisierung der Theaterkritik zwischen 1870 und 1933*. Internet source: [http://www.satt.org/literatur/06\\_09\\_theater.html](http://www.satt.org/literatur/06_09_theater.html). The following discussion will be based on Gunther’s article unless indicated otherwise.

The legendary critic Siegfried Jacobsohn, founder of the *Schaubühne* in 1905, took moving theater criticism deeper into the cultural discourse. In 1913, realizing the broader potential for his theater-focused journal, he wrote: “Aus seiner *Schaubühne* machte er daher sukzessive eine ‘Wochenschrift für Politik, Kunst, Wirtschaft,’ die im April 1918 den Namen *Die Weltbühne* erhielt.” The work of Jacobsohn, a Jew,

is deeply rooted in the concept of *Bildungsbürgertum* (the educated or classically cultured elite), and therefore his concept of theater as a *Kulturinstitut* should be seen within the broader context of a social milieu in which *Bildung* was seen as the primary social value.... Since Jewish writers made major contributions not only in the field of theater itself but also in the discourse about theater, Jacobsohn’s work must be seen in line with a tradition that was established and shared by such famous authors as Oscar Blumenthal (Jacobsohn’s uncle), Felix Hollaender, Monty Jacobs, Alfred Kerr, Alfred Polgar, and many others. All of them belonged to a secular Jewish bourgeois milieu and their writings played a strong role in the development of a metropolitan culture.<sup>29</sup>

It was to the memory of Jacobsohn that author and critic Arnold Zweig dedicated his book *Juden auf der deutschen Bühne*.<sup>30</sup> The book is a “systematic consideration of what [Zweig] calls the Jewish contribution to modern German theater” and apparently Jacobsohn intended to write such a book himself.<sup>31</sup> In the dedication, Zweig expounds to the readers Jacobsohn’s contribution to theater and its reviewing, and in the section “Theater als Besonderheit,” Zweig notes that (Jewish) theater critics, like any other sort of theater critic, decree both the fate of the play and its actors.<sup>32</sup> Theater reviews contain not only information about the play but also the possibility “die alten Traditionen der Berliner Theaterkritik zu pflegen: scharfe, rücksichtslose Sachlichkeit, leidenschaftlichen Ernst, burlesken Witz. Dabei ist zwischen jüdischen und nichtjüdischen Kritikern kaum

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<sup>29</sup> Peter W. Marx, “Arnold Zweig and the Critics: Reconsidering the Jewish ‘Contribution’ to German Theater,” in Jeanette R. Malkin and Freddie Rokem (eds.), **Going Public: Jews and the Emergence of Modern German Theater** (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, forthcoming), p. 3. Thanks are due to Dr. Malkin for allowing me a preview of this insightful article.

<sup>30</sup> Zweig.

<sup>31</sup> Marx, pp. 1-2.

<sup>32</sup> Zweig, pp. 81-83.

zu scheiden.”<sup>33</sup> The abundance and quality of Jewish theater critics in Berlin enabled every reader or theatergoer to find a befitting critic:

Unter der Berliner Kritikern jüdischer Herkunft sind alle Typen des heutigen Menschen vertreten, besonders wenn man nicht eng am augenblicklichen Zeitpunkt haftet, sondern den zu beurteilenden Zeitraum etwas weiter zieht. Da sah man neben der unbeirrbar reagierenden Theaterleidenschaft Siegfried Jacobsohns die tiefe Bildung Julius Bab, neben Gustav Landauers Zukunft bereitender Lebensänderung die feine skeptische Gescheitheit Eloessers, neben Fritz Engels gewissenhaften Abwägen die programmatische Schärfe Leo Burgs....<sup>34</sup>

The other side of this equation is the difficulty facing Zweig and others in neatly categorizing the concept of the Jewish-German critics, and producing a comprehensive characterization of their style. At the same time, Jewish critics used the platform of their reviews to advance their political radicalism.<sup>35</sup>

One Jewish critic who did not seem to advance political or other radicalism was Arthur Eloesser.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 87-88.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

### 3. Arthur Eloesser

Arthur Eloesser was the youngest of five children, born in East Berlin in 1870 into an assimilated family, which, on his father's side, had been in East Prussia since the sixteenth century.<sup>36</sup> Eloesser was made aware of his "deep German roots" from early childhood.<sup>37</sup> He graduated from the Berlin Sophiengymnasium with a clear plan for the future: to become a historian and help better the world by learning from and teaching history. Yet, at the time, the dominant figure in the History Department of the Berlin Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität was the anti-Semitic Heinrich von Treitschke, whose xenophobic remarks in class created an intolerable atmosphere for Eloesser and other Jewish peers. Instead Eloesser switched to literature, and studied under the liberal Erich Schmidt, whose "humanism and enthusiasm for literature as insight into human affairs and guide to intellectual thought was exciting and deeply appealing, exactly what Arthur was looking for.... Writers and poets, he now realized, were as good a source as historians for thinking about the betterment of human affairs."<sup>38</sup>

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, Prof. Schmidt's elite seminar on "Neueren deutschen Sprache und Literatur" was a central experience for aspiring critics. Besides Eloesser, it was attended by future critics Alfred Kerr, Ernst Heilborn, Max Osborn, Fritz Engel, Montague Jacobs, and Paul Wiegler.<sup>39</sup> Schmidt was also well connected in the extra-academic theater and literary worlds, and he helped his students land prime jobs in the field.<sup>40</sup> He taught his students to begin the study of a work of art by considering the biographical and material circumstances, the "statistische Wissenschaft," and to ask: "Stammt der Dichter aus einer Republik oder Monarchie?... wie er es mit der Religion.... Was ist, mit einem Worte, der Geist der Generation...."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> W. Michael Blumenthal, **The Invisible Wall: Germans and Jews – A Personal Exploration** (Washington: Counterpoint, c1998), p. 243

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 251-252.

<sup>39</sup> Heike Adamski, **Diener, Schulmeister und Visionäre: Studien zur Berliner Theaterkritik der Weimar Republik** (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2004), p. 57.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 72.



Eloesser was initially more drawn to literature than to theater, historically analyzing literary works so as to better understand social issues, including contemporary ones. When Gerhard Hauptmann's and other naturalistic works began appearing on German stages, theater became important to Eloesser as well.<sup>42</sup> It was under Schmidt's counsel that, in 1893, Eloesser wrote his doctoral thesis on the earliest German translations of Molière's comedies, following which he began "an ambitious four-year project for a book on bourgeois drama. It was to be his *Habilitationsschrift*, the first publication required of all aspirants for professional status in Germany. When the book was published in 1898 [under the title *Das bürgerliche Drama*] it was unusually well received in professional circles."<sup>43</sup>

This, however, was still not enough to enable an academic career for Eloesser. It was, again, Schmidt who informed him in 1898 that despite the quality of his work, he had no chance of a lecturing position in Germany so long as he did not convert to Christianity. Eloesser, notwithstanding his childhood dream of becoming a university professor, would not do so. This refusal might seem a decisive declaration of Jewish faith. It should be kept in mind, however, that while the number of mixed Jewish-Gentile marriages was on the rise, "outright baptism remained relatively rare in the first decade of the new century"<sup>44</sup> and was considered disgraceful (especially in the case of conversions for career promotion), as expressed in the front-page editorial of the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* of February 25, 1898, titled "Getaufte Juden." Eloesser's Jewish adherence was more likely an expression of 'tribal' pride than of commitment to a demanding religious lifestyle. Eloesser also "believed in the inevitability of progress and was full of youthful confidence that it was only a matter of time before the remaining restrictions would disappear and anti-Semitic biases fade away."<sup>45</sup> From that standpoint, conversion would be unnecessary and indicate weakness of character.

Following his refusal to be baptized, Eloesser embarked on a trip, and when in Basque, he received a telegram with an offer to be the theater critic of the prestigious

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<sup>42</sup> Doris Schaaf, *Der Theaterkritiker Arthur Eloesser* (Berlin: Colloquium Verlag Otto H. Hess, 1962), p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> Blumenthal, p. 257.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

*Vossische Zeitung* (henceforth: *VZ*). It turned out that the *VZ*'s previous critic Paul Schlenther, who had received an offer to direct the Wiener Burgtheaters, had read Eloesser's *Habilitationsschrift* and was impressed by Eloesser's "sehr ernsten, sehr objektiven Arbeit"<sup>46</sup> on *bürgerliche* drama. Although Eloesser had not planned a career as a theater critic, he saw this offer as his fate calling, as a road leading to the heart of German cultural and intellectual activity. As he wrote to his father: "Ich habe mich habilitiert, allerdings nicht bei der Universität, aber bei den Vossischen Zeitung."<sup>47</sup>

Eloesser's first review was published in the *VZ* on October 25, 1899, and he retained the position there under the *Feuilletonchef* Alfred Klaar for fourteen years, gaining knowledge and authority in the theater world including acquaintance with its directors, producers, and actors.<sup>48</sup> From 1913 to 1920, Eloesser was the dramaturge and director of the Lessing Theater, a position in which he was somewhat held-back.<sup>49</sup> In 1920, Eloesser resumed writing theater reviews as the critic for *Das Blaue Heft*, and in 1921 he began writing for the *Freie Deutsche Bühne*. With Siegfried Jacobsohn's death in 1926, Eloesser became chief theater critic for the *Weltbühne*. In 1927, Eloesser returned to the *VZ* to share the position of theater critic with Monty Jacobs. Following Alfred Klaar's death, Eloesser left the *Weltbühne* to become *Feuilletonchef* at the *Vossische Zeitung*. With the Nazis' rise to power in 1933, Eloesser was forced to leave his position at the *VZ* and became the theater critic for the *Jüdische Rundschau*. He also managed to visit Palestine twice, in 1934 and 1937. He returned to Berlin very ill from the second trip and died in the Jewish hospital there in 1938.<sup>50</sup>

### **3.1 Eloesser's Aesthetic Perceptions**

As already noted, "Eloesser gehört in die Reihe der akademisch gebildeten Kritiker," for whom the work of a critic included the pedagogic duty of educating the actors and appraising the production's direction, including whether the given ensemble's repertoire

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<sup>46</sup> Schaaf, p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>50</sup> "Arthur Eloesser," in **Lexikon deutsch-jüdischer Autoren**, Redaktionelle Leitung: Renate Heuer, Band 6, K.G. Saur, München, 1998, pp. 333-342; "Arthur Eloesser," in: **Metzler Lexikon der Deutsch-Jüdischen Literatur** (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, c2000), pp. 137-138; Adamski, pp. 154, 174, 177.

corresponded to its abilities. In short, for Eloesser, “Kritik ist mehr als Wiedergabe der Aufführung, sie ist nicht regerierend, sondern wertend.”<sup>51</sup>

Eloesser adhered to that standard in his prolific writing on theater. A survey of many of his theater reviews in the years preceding 1933 leads to the simple conclusion that Eloesser tended to keep his reviews as clean of extra-theatrical material as he expected the plays reviewed to be. It is true that one finds in Eloesser’s “Aufsatz zu Gerhart Hauptmanns 50. Geburtstag,” published in the *VZ* on November 14, 1912, the (Hauptmannesque) statement that a play must have a direct relation to contemporary life: “denn die Kunst vermehrt und befestigt das Leben, indem sie... seine Gesetzmäßigkeit aufhellt.”<sup>52</sup> That statement applies, however, to the written play, not the production or acting style. In other words, forcing a play to fit one’s *Weltanschauung* is a flawed approach; but if the play itself (i.e., the script) deals with a contemporary issue, then the production must naturally deal with it as such. A further distinction must also be made between the encouraged contemporary theater and that of propaganda (*Gesinnungstheater*), as we find in a piece on the work of Erwin Piscator from March 15, 1927: “Nur von Weltanschauung soll man nicht sprechen.... Intendanten, Direktoren, Regisseure sollen, außer in den Ferien, nicht die Welt anschauen, sondern gutes Theater machen.... Lassen wir die Religion und die Politik, wenn beides im Augenblick nicht dasselbe sein sollte.”<sup>53</sup> This might arouse the suspicion that Eloesser, like many other people, differentiated between representations of his own political opinions (‘contemporary’) and representations of political opinions foreign to his own (‘propaganda’). But the fact remains that Eloesser, in a relatively late review, declared the theater a religion-and-politics-free zone.

### **3.2 Eloesser’s Reviews and Writings**

The modification of tone in Eloesser’s theater reviews and other writings was well evident from 1926 to 1937, the year preceding his death. Theater reviews are a somewhat problematic source for analysis because there are not many anthologies of them, and

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<sup>51</sup> Schaaf, pp. 11-12.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Schaaf, pp. 14-15.

<sup>53</sup> *Weltbühne*, 1927, pp. 322-323.

those that do exist do not contain the entire body of reviews.<sup>54</sup> Most Weimar-era newspapers are available only in the Landesarchiv Berlin in a nondigital format, making a comprehensive study of Eloesser's reviews published in the *VZ* infeasible.<sup>55</sup> The sources that were available here and now were some of Eloesser's books; reviews published in the *Weltbühne* (henceforth: *WB*), the editions of which have been bound and catalogued and are available in Jerusalem; and his writings in the Jewish journals and newspapers, some of which have been scanned for preservation and are accessible on a very useful internet website.<sup>56</sup>

It will be helpful to divide the work on a chronological basis: up to 1932 and from 1933. A secondary division will be content based, that is, concerning what Eloesser wrote – be it theater reviews or other works. Two questions to be addressed are: to what extent does Eloesser note Jewish aspects of a theater production, literary work, or person; and what are his aesthetic concepts on theater and on writing about it, in the different periods?

### 3.2.1 Pre-1933

#### 3.2.1.1 Theater Reviews and Other *Periodika* Materials

From 1926 to 1928, Arthur Eloesser published in the *Weltbühne* forty theater and other reviews. These included reviews of new books and excerpts from books, as well as articles on living or deceased cultural figures.

From the theatrical point of view, Eloesser's theater reviews are totally straightforward. They supply the reader with the necessary background on the play as well as an overview of the stage design, the acting, the production in general, what could be improved on – in short, what one would expect. This remains the case with all the reviews surveyed over the years; there is no apparent change in Eloesser's attitude toward theater. However, as we shall see, what does change is the amount of extra-theatrical information or opinion Eloesser allows himself to include in his reviews.

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<sup>54</sup> This problem is also noted in Adamski, p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> One source for reviews from that period is Günther Rühle (ed.), **Theater für die Republik 1917-1933: Im Spiegel der Kritik** (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1967).

<sup>56</sup> Compact Memory, self-defined as an "Internetarchiv jüdischer Periodika," <http://www.compactmemory.de/>.

It is interesting to note the high proportion of Jews, living or dead, about whom Eloesser wrote in the *WB*. In 1926, for example, he wrote segments about Moritz Heimann,<sup>57</sup> Otto Brahm,<sup>58</sup> Else Lehmann,<sup>59</sup> Elisabeth Bergner,<sup>60</sup> and Siegfried Jacobsohn.<sup>61</sup> Besides Lehmann, they were all Jews; but in no case does Eloesser even hint at the Jewishness of his subjects. Nor does he make any reference to Jewish issues in the (non-Jewish) plays he reviewed that year, such as *Die Krönung Richards III*<sup>62</sup> and *Romains und Tschechow*.<sup>63</sup> That is not to say Eloesser did not express opinions in the *WB* – concerning, for instance, father-son issues. In his 1926 review of a book by Italian author, journalist, and art critic Ugo Ojetti,<sup>64</sup> Eloesser criticizes the contemporary youth as a generation of sons that does not recognize its elders as fathers. And in 1928, Eloesser’s *WB* review of *Mörder für uns* is worth reading not only for the delicious line of a weathered critic, “Der Talent zum Kitsch ist eine Naturgabe; du kannst ihr nicht entrinnen,” but also for the lament against ‘the youth’: “Wir waren von unsern Vätern noch hübsch an eine Ordnung angeschmiedet und haben an den Ketten gerüttelt. Die Jugend von heute ist vaterlos und hat mehr Freiheit als irgend eine vor ihr. Wenn ich sie recht verstehe, und sie hat sich ja förmerlich als Stand, als Nation eingerichtet, will sie aus der Freiheit zur Ordnung.”<sup>65</sup> A final example of father-son issues is in Eloesser’s review of Ibsen’s work, where he notes that “wir verdammten uns und vor allem unsre Väter, die nicht mehr oder noch nicht wieder in die Beichte gehen wollte.” He then summarizes the play as being “Voll von Moral und leer von Religion.”<sup>66</sup>

This has, of course, been a relevant issue since the first father had the first son, and father-son relationships cannot be seen as a typically Jewish topic even though they are central to the work of contemporary Jews such as Kafka and many others. Everyone has (or had) a father and potentially an array of issues with him, and his authority need not

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<sup>57</sup> *Weltbühne*, 1926, no. 4 (26.1.1926).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 5 (2.2.1926).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 29 (20.7.1926).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 43 (26.10.1926). This was actually taken from Eloesser’s upcoming book on the Jewish actress, published in 1927.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 50 (14.12.1926).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 51 (21.12.1926).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 52 (28.12.1926).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 12 (23.3.1926).

<sup>65</sup> *Weltbühne*, 1928, no. 11.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 13, p. 487.

represent merely the Jewish religion or tradition. Walther Hasenclever's play *Der Sohn* (1914) offers perhaps the boldest expressionistic confrontation between a son and his father, in which the former actually shoots the latter, and Hasenclever was not Jewish. Eloesser's reviews, however, provided a platform for expressing his sociological views when he chose to do so.

The 1928 editions of *WB* contain more of Eloesser's reviews of works by Jews in which he totally ignores the creators' Jewishness. Such is the case, for instance, regarding his enthusiastic review of a revue composed by Friedrich Holländer with words by Moritz (or Moriz) Seeler, both of whom were Jews central to the contemporary cabaret.<sup>67</sup> It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the piece titled "Durch die Theater"<sup>68</sup> about the play *Penthesilae* as directed by Jessner makes no mention of Jessner's Jewishness – even though it was noted by, on the one hand, a proud and defiant Jessner himself in his "Das 'verjudete' Theater" published in the *CV-Zeitung* in 1922, and, on the other, by theatergoers who booed bitterly at the "Jewishness" of his 1919 *Wilhelm Tell* production.<sup>69</sup>

It is important to note here that the *WB* was not reticent about such issues as Jews in Europe and European culture. Besides its self-declared intention, as expressed in its title, to be a *Wochenschrift für Politik-Kunst-Wirtschaft*, in which *Kunst* is framed between *Politik* and *Wirtschaft*, one finds in the very same 1928 edition a critique by Franz Blei of the anti-Semitic book *Die Juden* by Hilaire Belloc, which belonged to the school of thought deeming Jews unsuitable for Europe. Father-issues were not the only contemporary ones dealt with by Eloesser himself in his theatrical reviews. One must bear in mind the highly political awareness and involvement of the Weimar Republic theater, leaving the critic no choice but to make at least minimal reference to the historical context of the play. An example of that is Eloesser's review of Piscator's *Schwejk* production, which begins: "Kurz nach dem Kriege, den wir vergessen haben, kurz nach der Revolution, die wir uns immer noch einbilden erlebt zu haben, wurde in Berlin das dekorationslose Theater als zeitgemäß vorgeschrieben... Wer die beiden

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., no. 1, p. 27.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., no. 3, p. 105.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. the review of Jessner's 1919 production in Albert Party, *Berliner Tageblatt*, December 14, 1919; quoted in Rühle, p. 190.

revolutionären Dogmen der leeren Bühne und der vollen Lunge nicht anerkannte, wurde aus dem Arbeiterrat der Kunst hinausgeworfen.”<sup>70</sup>

This does not mean Eloesser was an enthusiastic fan of Piscator, as is evident from a later VZ review. Friedrich Wolf’s *Tai Yang erwacht*, reviewed by Eloesser on January 16, 1931, was a grim depiction of working-class China, and Piscator directed the production. Eloesser reminds his readers that in the past he had called Piscator “einen unerbittlichen Schulmeister,” and he retains this unflattering opinion after watching the story of Tai Yang.<sup>71</sup>

Some additional VZ reviews by Eloesser are of interest.<sup>72</sup> There are no major differences between these and the above-cited ones regarding Jewish issues or the principles of theater criticism. In an October 17, 1929, review of *U-Boot S 4*, a play based on the true story of the sinking of a war-ship. Eloesser draws a connection between theater and war victims, albeit of a ‘neutral’ type: “Alle Opfer der Kriegs- und Friedensindustrie verlangen unser Bedauern, auf alle können Stücke gemacht werden, wenn ein erschütterter Mensch dem Moloch, der sie verschlang, in den Rachen gesehen hat.”<sup>73</sup> At the end of the review, Eloesser reprimands playwright Günther Weisenborn for trying to be Piscator (who had recently left the Volksbühne, where the play showed) in a cinematographic production, and makes another remark about the audience in the house, who had been moved by the wrong elements in the play: “Es zeigte sich auch gestern wieder, daß das Publikum nach anfänglicher kalter Zurückhaltung sich verwirren ließ. Der Applaus am Schluß ging wohl weniger zugunsten des Verfassers, als zugunsten des Panzerkreuzers.”<sup>74</sup>

An interesting example of Eloesser possibly safeguarding his position and reputation as VZ reviewer is his critique of Walter Hasenclever’s *Ehen werden im Himmel geschlossen*, an iconoclastic play considered the “Skandalstück des Jahres.”<sup>75</sup> Hasenclever enraged many viewers by positioning God and angels on stage. Eloesser,

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<sup>70</sup> *Weltbühne*, 1928, no. 5, pp. 182-183.

<sup>71</sup> Rühle, p. 1066.

<sup>72</sup> If it seems that the reviews in the VZ were more political than those in the WB, one must keep in mind that the VZ reviews cited here are all taken from Rühle’s **Theater für die Republik 1917-1933: Im Spiegel der Kritik**, which contains only the most politically interesting reviews.

<sup>73</sup> Rühle, p. 896, from Review 17.10.1928.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 897.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 889.

however, makes no reference to that and the ensuing scandal. Instead he writes a balanced review, including the standard synopsis, analysis of acting, comments (on an actor's Austrian accent), and overall assessment of 'good play, could be better.' Might Eloesser have seen religion on stage as a disruptive element, foreign to the goal of theater – which is to create a meta-religious *Kulturwelt*, open to anyone abiding by the code of *Bildung*, regardless of race – and hence to be ignored in a review? Or did he not want to be in the position of the non-Christian praising an anti-Christian (to some viewers) production? Perhaps his liberalism and optimism dictated that he should ignore the scandalous element, which in his mind should not have created a scandal in the first place if only the viewers had the minimal theatrical comprehension.

A final comparison of Eloesser's reviews of a 1928 production, both in the *WB* and the *VZ*, may shed light on the state of his Jewish identity at that time.

Georg Kaiser, known for his great expressionistic plays such as *Von morgens nach mitternacht* (1912) and the *Gas* trilogy (1917-1918), also wrote a rather mundane and nonexpressionistic love-play in 1927, *Oktobertag*, which premiered in Hamburg. Eloesser attended the production there and seems to have enjoyed it, as he writes in his review in the *WB*: "Dieser 'Oktobertag' ist ausgezeichnet erfunden, Erfindung auf einer Nadelspitze, aber glänzend ausbalanziert."<sup>76</sup>

A few months later, when Eloesser attended the same production in Berlin's Kammerspiele, his (again positive) review for the *VZ* began with the use of the same metaphor previously applied, with a significant addition:

Es soll irgendwo im Talmud stehen, daß zehntausend Engel auf einer Nadelspitze Platz haben. Warum nicht auch ein Stück. Warum nicht das Stück eines Dichters, der die Seele eines Tänzers hat oder wenigstens eines Jongleurs, dem nach einer kaum noch absehbaren Reihe von Erfolgen und Mißerfolgen die Spielfreudigkeit mit den Sinnbildern des Lebens nicht verlorenging.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., no. 12, 20.3.1928, p. 461.

<sup>77</sup> *VZ*, Berlin, 31.8.1928, quoted in Rühle, p. 869.



To begin with, Eloesser was wrong in mentioning “somewhere in the Talmud” as the source for the thousands of angels. What, then, is the source? “The answer would in fact seem to be in...the anonymous fourteenth-century mystical treatise *Swester Katrei*, which refers to a thousand souls in heaven sitting on the point of a needle.” Add Eloesser’s Hamburg review, which mentions the angels’ act of balance, and the result might be “[t]he precise image of angels dancing...to be found in Isaac D’Israeli’s *Curiosities of Literature*, of 1791” in which the father of Benjamin Disraeli jokingly writes: “The reader desirous of being merry with Aquinas’s angels may find them in Martinus Scriblerus, in Ch. VII who inquires... How many angels can dance on the point of a very fine needle, without jostling one another?”<sup>78</sup>

Whether the source was *Swester Katrei*, D’Israeli mocking Aquinas, or otherwise,<sup>79</sup> it certainly was not from the Jewish world of rabbinical literature. Eloesser’s unconscious choice, however, is fascinating; he did not hesitate to (mis)quote the Talmud in a theater review of a German play in a German newspaper. Keeping in mind his rejection of baptism, this could be a further display of Eloesser’s Jewishness: while he possessed Jewish pride and confidence, he lacked knowledge of the Jewish religion and its writings, ironically the source of the disputable greatness of the people to which Eloesser affirmed his belonging.

In addition to his theater reviews and other *periodika* writing, Eloesser authored and contributed to books in that period.

### 3.2.1.2 Books

The “Eloesser, Arthur” entry in the *Lexikon deutsch-jüdischer Autoren* contains a list of twenty books written, edited, or published by Eloesser, including his various literary studies, sketches, collections, biographies, and books on theater – playwrights, actors, memoirs, genres. It might suffice to mention the books cited in the *Metzler Lexikon der deutsch-jüdischen Literatur*; besides Eloesser’s doctoral dissertation and *Habilitationsschrift*, the notable earlier books include *Literarische Portraits aus dem*

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<sup>78</sup> George Macdonald Ross, “Angels,” *Philosophy* 60, 234 (October 1985), p. 495.

<sup>79</sup> Such as *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, edited by C.I. Gerhardt, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1879), which contains a letter to Leibniz from Dutch philosopher and physicist Burcher de Volder with identical imagery. Cited in Ross, p. 495, fn. 2.

*modernen Frankreich* (1904), *Die Straße meiner Jugend: Berliner Skizzen* (1919), *Thomas Mann: Sein Leben und Werk* (1925), and the homage to Eloesser's friend, *Elisabeth Bergner* (1927). The subjects of his writing do not lead Eloesser into discussing or acknowledging Jewish questions in any way, despite the possibility of doing so via, for example, the matter of Elisabeth Bergner.<sup>80</sup> However, toward the beginning of the 1930s, one encounters what might be considered Eloesser's "*Hauptwerk*,"<sup>81</sup> *Die deutsche Literatur vom Barock bis zur Gegenwart*. It was published in two volumes: *Bist zu Goethes Tod* (1930) and *Die deutsche Literatur von der Romantik bis zur Gegenwart* (1931). As these titles suggest, the book is a sincere, verging on pretentious, attempt to sum up what is called *deutsche Literatur*. The first volume seems to have been well received, as indicated by a contemporary review:

The writer of any new History of German Literature may fairly be required to justify himself, either by making some definite contribution to the advancement of knowledge or by presenting known facts in a new light. His book is a conscientious attempt...to test traditional literary values, to correct them where necessary, and to secure the best focus for observation...this book is noteworthy for its careful perspective and its fine sense of proportion. We look forward with interest to the second volume.<sup>82</sup>

This favorable reviewer, however, wrongly assessed the purpose of Eloesser's thorough and extensive project, which, as we shall see, is revealed in the Epilogue of the second volume.

Any sound survey of German literature from Romanticism forth must include Jewish writers, some of whom openly dealt with the issues troubling European Jews at the threshold of modernity. In what can be seen as a legitimate literary decision, however, Eloesser tends to underplay writers' Jewishness, treating it as casually as Carinthian, Alsatian, or Rhenish ancestry. Thus, "Leo Berg, a Jew from West Prussia"<sup>83</sup> did not write

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<sup>80</sup> As far as reading of a chapter from the Bergner book, published in the *WB*, 26.10.1926, can show.

<sup>81</sup> To use the term from Metzler, p. 138.

<sup>82</sup> Review of book by G. Waterhouse, in *Modern Language Review* 25, 4 (October 1930), pp. 499-501.

<sup>83</sup> Eloesser, *Modern German Literature*, p. 49.

anything Jewish that Eloesser cared to mention; “*Der Weg ins Freie* [The Way into the Open], by Arthur Schitzler, contained several rather ill-assorted plots, accompanied by a great deal of clever analysis, in which the Jewish problem, too, was removed into a literary atmosphere in which it could not achieve a settlement, whether tragic or otherwise....”<sup>84</sup> “Max Brod... started with an analytical dissection of his youthful experiences and Jewish surroundings and next experimented with an excessive facility in the society novel, only to launch out in an ampler epic vein into the historical novel. His *Reübeni Fürst der Juden* [Reubeni, Prince of the Jews], a warlike Zionist of the sixteenth century, went forth from Prague to carve out a principality in the East.”<sup>85</sup> Locales also receive minor Jewish accreditation, when warranted: “Prague...belongs equally to a German, a Jewish, and a Czech community, all of equal antiquity and possessing the same passionately corporate sense....”<sup>86</sup> In some cases, the absence of a Jewish reference seems questionable – as, for example, in the cases of Kafka<sup>87</sup> or Stefan Zweig<sup>88</sup> or even the abovementioned Arnold Zweig.<sup>89</sup> Such omission could perhaps be justified in terms of Eloesser’s entirely legitimate professional liberty; perhaps he did not regard that aspect of those writers as central to their work.

In one instance there is a somewhat more thorough treatment of a writer’s Jewishness – surprisingly, the case of Martin Buber, who “was opposed to the denationalization of the Jews by assimilation, and also rejected Zionism.” Here we read of a “prophet” whose contribution to German literature in the form of his *Skizze zum Chassidismus* and new translation of the Bible was not reserved to the Jews alone; he “started from the more solid basis of Judaism, which was his creed, but, thanks to his clear intelligence and upright character, his influence extended far beyond his own religious communion.” His writings are “striking monuments of German literature, written by a stylist capable of the simplicity of legend.” Eloesser also enlightens the reader on Buber’s Judaism: “Buber called for a religion of action; and he found it in the true Judaism of the prophetic tradition, that places national and social questions on the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 281-282.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., pp. 405-406.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 393.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., pp. 409-410.

same footing and does not separate morality from belief, but stands for the unity of religion and ethics in accordance with the pure and ancient conception.”<sup>90</sup>

The reason Eloesser expounded on Buber and his contribution to German culture may very well lie in the fact that Buber represented a nonnationalistic (i.e., non-Zionistic) Judaism, one that could peacefully dwell on European lands. Eloesser certainly yearned for such a fusion at the time, as we shall see further on, when Europe still seemed the natural and inevitable home for Jews born and raised on the continent.

Whereas the abovementioned favorable review, as noted, missed the main purpose of Eloesser’s two-volume book, the book’s clairvoyantly pessimistic Epilogue gives the “justification” and “contribution” of “[t]he present work,” which “was written during a period of social crisis and economic collapse.”<sup>91</sup> By then, it was clear to Eloesser what the crisis and the collapse were leading to in Germany. He then gives a strikingly significant analysis of the troubled condition of local Gentiles, a population Eloesser, as a Jew, clearly was not part of:

The German possesses no recognized, easily perceptible forms in which to express his intellectual and spiritual attitude in a vivid, plastic form, and for this reason the Germans have always remained an unknown, disquieting, perplexing people among the other peoples. The cultural ideal based upon the antique, which presupposes participation in traditional knowledge and ideas, can no longer be offered as a norm to the masses whose rise is a recent phenomenon, and who do not even require to reject it, for they do not know it....<sup>92</sup>

The modern, post-Bismarckian era brought together great numbers of diverse Germans. In times of crisis, they sought a unifying momentum to overcome the difficulties. But, rather than finding a positive cohesion in the universal optimism of Enlightenment and its cultural teachings, the masses, not all possessing the capacity or inclination to the “participation in traditional knowledge and ideas” as Eloesser wished for, found (or were led to) a different solution. This contained an alternative to the cultural foundations of

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., pp. 355-356.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 414.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 415.

enlightened humanism: “Nationalism has produced a new form of miraculous belief – a faith in the creative force of race and blood *per se* and the irrational values of all that is instinctive and passionate.”<sup>93</sup> In short, Eloesser sought to reinforce the cultural tradition of the Fatherland, which was being threatened by “loud and, indeed, clamorous voices” that “have been raised in favour of the demolition of all tradition.” Eloesser, before the Holocaust, knew that “there can be no cultural existence without tradition, unless we wish to revert to a savage state, like land that has fallen out of cultivation.”<sup>94</sup> Using an anecdote to illustrate his literary endeavor and at the same time sum-up both volumes in terms of the poet and thinker who represented, more than anyone else, universalistic, humanistic albeit German thought, Eloesser invokes Goethe, who “was fond of imagining that his friend Wieland had been translated to the heavens after his death in the shape of a constellation; for, he said, such a mind could not become extinct and cease to give forth light. The present work has been written in the same belief....”<sup>95</sup>

At that stage, before Hitler’s parliamentary and final seizure of power, Eloesser, while well aware of the growing animosity in German society and the menace it posed to Jews, saw the remedy as lying in the roots of German culture itself, which, in its healthy version, definitely had space and tolerance for mildly different social elements. The Germans needed to be reminded of where they came from; to look back into their culture and find the answers they sought in nationalistic directions. The tone of his concluding appeal and especially his surprising use of the third person for “the German,” implying that he, born, raised, and educated in Berlin, is at present a foreign observer, indicates that Eloesser was not confident such a change in attitude was about to occur; at the same time, he knew of no other way to preserve the Jewish-German equilibrium that would maintain the Jews’ position in the equation.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 415.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 415-416.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 416.

### 3.3 The Kulturbund

*“One is involuntarily reminded of the sinking of the Titanic when the band played until the last moment to prevent a panic.”<sup>96</sup>*

To term the year 1933 a disastrous watershed is certainly an understatement, especially for the European Jews. In that year Hitler and his party seized full and official power of German government, and wasted no time in implementing their Nazi agenda. Some of the first to experience the dramatic changes beginning to occur in German society, on every formal and informal level of life, were of course the Jews employed in German institutions, whose legal rights were canceled in April that year. As noted, Eloesser was painfully aware of the changes taking place in German society, and he clearly expressed his apprehension in the “Nachwort” of his 1931 *Die deutsche Literatur*. But being fired is a different level of change, especially if it is Eloesser, a highly regarded, very important and experienced figure who was fired from the VZ. As noted earlier, Eloesser began writing for the *Jüdische Rundschau (JR)* in 1933; in addition, as was his wont, he contributed to various *Periodika* and wrote books or contributed chapters to collections. It is important to note that from that point onward, Jews were allowed to write only in the Jewish newspapers, read by Jews (and Nazis keeping track of things), which no doubt affected the subject matter and tone. We shall now review Eloesser’s writings in this period, first considering his theater reviews, then the other *Periodika* and books, beginning with background on the main platform for Jewish cultural activity, the Kulturbund.

On August 17, 1933, the readers of the Jewish newspaper *Central Verein Zeitung* encountered a clear and loud appeal, taking up nearly half of the eighth and last page of that day’s edition: “Wir rufen Euch! Tretet ein in den KULTURBUND DEUTSCHER JUDEN.” The reader curious as to what exactly this Kulturbund was, could read the following parenthesized explanatory line: “behördlich genehmigte Organisation zur Pflege des geistigen Lebens innerhalb des Judentums.” The appeal goes on to say that the

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<sup>96</sup> Freedon, p. 144.

Kulturbund came into being primarily in order to provide hundreds of dismissed people “Arbeit, Existenz, Lebensmut, Sammlung,” while at the same time manifesting Jewish “religiöse und stammesmäßige Verbundenheit” and enabling Jews to see plays and hear concerts on a membership-based system (the reader could fill out the form and send it to the Kulturbund office with the monthly fee of RM 2.50; initial registration fee – RM 0.50).<sup>97</sup> Its honorary presidency consisted of Jewish-German spiritual and cultural luminaries such as Leo Baeck, Martin Buber, Georg Hermann, Max Liebermann, Jacob Wassermann, and Arthur Eloesser, and was established and chaired by Dr. Kurt Singer, a medical doctor very active in the field of music – performing, organizing ensembles and groups, and writing about it – who was also previously *Intendant* of the Berliner Städtische Oper. Additionally, the rich, detailed program was impressive, including plays under Julius Bab’s dramatic directorship (*Nathan der Weise*, *Wie es euch gefällt*, and so on), operas, concerts, and lectures on a wide variety of topics.

Dr. Singer’s initiative followed Hitler’s rise to power and the consequences for the Jewish performers: “Many Jewish artists working for state or local government artistic institutions lost their jobs as a result of the Civil Service Law of April 7, 1933. Later that same year, most Jewish artists were dismissed from or denied membership in the *Reichskulturkammer* for theater, film, radio, music, literature, visual arts, and the press; since membership was compulsory, denial of membership amounted to dismissal.”<sup>98</sup> However, by then Dr. Singer had prepared the ground for this remarkable body, and almost immediately after the boycott of German Jewry began on April 1, 1933, Singer “called together Jewish experts to work out an organizational framework for a Jewish cultural institution. He took his proposal to the German authorities...and on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June permission was granted.”<sup>99</sup> The Nazi in charge was Hans Hinkel, “a co-founder of Alfred Rosenberg’s *Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur*...he became absolute authority for artistic production in these newly founded communities. On the one hand he acted as a ‘grand protector,’ keeping the Gestapo and other secrets agents from harassing and

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<sup>97</sup> Though it should be pointed out that “Until November 1938 Jews were permitted to visit general places of entertainment, and many did so, so to speak through the front door, even after the Jewish performers had been ‘sacked’ through the stage door.” Herbert Freedon, “A Jewish Theatre under the Swastika,” *LBI* 1 (1956), p. 144.

<sup>98</sup> Rebecca Rovit, “Cultural Ghettoization and Theater during the Holocaust: Performance as a Link to Community,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 19, 3 (Winter 2005), p. 466.

<sup>99</sup> Freedon, p. 144.

interfering...on the other, he acted as a supreme censor of all material used by this new cultural organization,”<sup>100</sup> which, according to Hinkel, would both separate the Jews from the Germans and their culture, while enabling them to “nurture their Jewish culture within their own circles.”<sup>101</sup>

And what new material was used by the Kulturbund? Initially, the theater productions staged were such that would reflect ‘Jewish concerns,’ creating endless disputes over what in fact were ‘Jewish concerns’; how such concerns ought to be represented on stage; whether Yiddish and Hebrew plays should be staged, much to the delight of East European Jewry and miscomprehension of Westerners; whether plays by Jews should receive a higher priority than classics by the likes of Goethe and Shakespeare, and so forth. There were, in fact, dozens of such centers around Germany, since the persecution of Jews by the Third Reich was not limited to the borders of Berlin, and each Kulturbund had its own character and tone. The focus here is on the Berlin Kulturbund, in which “the first ‘Jewish’ play...and a resounding success at that, was Stefan Zweig’s *Jeremiah*, performed in the second year. Encouraged by the response and driven by an ever-growing Jewish consciousness,” more and more Jewish plays were staged, while the “Eastern-Jewish literary treasure supplied most of the material.”<sup>102</sup> The Kulturbund Berlin concocted a threefold plan “for the future repertoire: to keep alive for the Jews the great treasures of world literature: Shakespeare, Goethe, Lessing, Shaw, Molière, Tolstoy, and Ibsen; to present playwrights who, being Jewish, were banned from the German stage: Schnitzler, Molnar, Frank, Werfel, Heimann, Bernstein, and Langer; and to translate plays from Hebrew and Yiddish.”<sup>103</sup>

Keeping in mind that most professional Jewish actors then and there had little knowledge and experience of Jewish matters, especially concerning the stage, it is not surprising that the “Kulturbund theater offered to introduce pedagogical methods for actors (including classes in Hebrew and Yiddish inflection) by which they might enlighten their audiences about Judaism”; however, “not only have former actors

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<sup>100</sup> Bruce H. Zortman, “Theatre in Isolation: The Jüdischer Kulturbund of Nazi Germany,” **Educational Theatre Journal** 24, 2 (May 1972), pp. 160-161.

<sup>101</sup> Rebecca Rovit, “An Artistic Mission in Nazi Berlin: The Jewish Kulturbund Theater as Sanctuary,” in Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb (eds.), **Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs** (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 31.

<sup>102</sup> Freedon, p. 153.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.



admitted their inability to play religious roles, but the so-called Jewish events were also poorly attended. And audiences ostensibly remained largely unconcerned with plays featuring biblical themes or about Jewish life in Eastern Europe...the most successful play of the Berlin 1936-37 season was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.”<sup>104</sup>

Not only the Jews had trouble pursuing the proper direction of the Kulturbund. The Nazi rules and regulations regarding the Jewish cultural establishments were unclear and “often changed, depending on the situation or particular work in question.”<sup>105</sup> These, however, became more definite by 1936, when the Nazis “rejected plays and musical works by all non-Jewish Germans...and barred many topics which were either misunderstood or might be subject to misinterpretation. In addition, the Kulturbund was forbidden to transfer royalties out of the country to living playwrights. Foreign playwrights who had been dead for over 50 years, however, could be performed, as royalty payments were no longer necessary.”<sup>106</sup>

Momentarily ignoring the precise reasons behind the rise and demise of the establishment, it will suffice to note that the theater of the Kulturbund was reluctantly forced into being, and its political agenda, though not entirely clear and stable, preceded its artistic motive and ideals. This was precisely the type of theater Eloesser did not believe in, to recall his words written six years before 1933: “Nur von Weltanschauung soll man nicht sprechen.... Intendanten, Direktoren, Regisseure sollen, außer in den Ferien, nicht die Welt anschauen, sondern gutes Theater machen.... Lassen wir die Religion und die Politik, wenn beides im Augenblick nicht dasselbe sein sollte.”<sup>107</sup>

This abnormal theater – its professionals the second-line of local Jewish theater-people (most of the wealthier stars having left for the United States or elsewhere),<sup>108</sup> its audience captivated par excellence, its repertoire limited and censored – energetically began to stage plays, which were reviewed by the only media allowed to view and write about them, the Jewish newspapers. Arthur Eloesser, expelled from the prestige of the *Vossische Zeitung*, became the theater critic of the *Jüdische Rundschau*. The fact that he

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<sup>104</sup> Rovit, “An Artistic Mission,” p. 34.

<sup>105</sup> Rebecca Rovit, “Jewish Theatre: Repertory and Censorship in the Jüdischer Kulturbund, Berlin,” in John London (ed.), **Theater under the Nazis** (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 197.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>107</sup> *WB*, 1927, 422-423.

<sup>108</sup> Schaaf, p. 111.

was an honorary president of the Kulturbund, which appealed to Jews to become paying members and see its theatrical and other productions, most likely did not help him retain his critical distance. But even without this special intimacy, Eloesser would most likely have had to alter his review-writing modes, as may be read in one of the later editions of the *Mitteilungen des Reichverbandes der Jüdischen Kulturbünde in Deutschland*:

und doch ist jüdische Theaterkritik heute vollen Problematik und schwieriger als sich gegenüber den allgemeiner Aufgaben vor gewesen ist.... Sein soziales Gewissen übertönt meist solche Anwandlungen, um wie viel mehr heute, wo ihm die soziale existenz von gefährdeten Brüdern mitanvertraut ist...so braucht auch der jüdische Schauspieler des Kulturbundtheaters die Reibung, den Ansporn, die Spannung durch die Kritik. Es gilt in einer Zeit allgemeiner Berufsumschichtung die letzte Auslese berechtigter Künstlerschaft zu schaffen.

These are not the right conditions for good theater reviews, and when the ideal behind the theater needs recognition, the reviews will also reflect the motivating force of the enterprise. The Jews, whether they liked it or not, were becoming more and more of a closed, intimate, and united community. That process, which began in 1933, accelerated as the years went by, till these 1938 observations could be written: “Wir sind heute, Schaffende und Betrachtende, eine grosse Gemeinschaft. Eine grosse Familie, wenn man so will – und die Gefahr besteht, dass wir ein wenig zu familiär werden.”<sup>109</sup>

### 3.3.1 Post-1933

The first theatrical production staged by the Berlin Kulturbund was *Nathan der Weise* on October 1, 1933. Eloesser did not review this play for the *JR*, though we shall see some later references to it in his first review of *Othello*. The focus now turns to some of Eloesser’s reviews published in the *JR* from December 1933 to October 1937. The supplementary material from the books and other *Periodika* will help round out the picture of Eloesser’s Jewish-German condition. However, before considering *Othello*, the

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<sup>109</sup> Lutz Weltmann, “Kritik und jüdisches Theater,” in *Mitteilungen des Reichverbandes der Jüdischen Kulturbünde in Deutschland*, Nr. 9, April 1938, pp. 2-3.

first Kulturbund production Eloesser reviewed, it is worth looking at something Eloesser wrote shortly before that production.

Besides the above-quoted *Mitteilungen des Reichverbandes der Jüdischen Kulturbünde in Deutschland* (which appeared in fourteen editions during 1937-1938), the Kulturbünde had other literary organs. The first edition (October 1933) of the *Monatsblätter* (“herausgegeben vom Kulturbund Deutscher Juden”) contained an illuminating piece by Eloesser, in which he reflects on the inevitable duality of those whose identity has been nurtured by a force that has separated into clashing elements.<sup>110</sup> In this piece, Eloesser not only makes the case for the previous and indisputable Jewish contribution to the German arts, but also expresses his confidence in the future of the fusion. True, times are hard, but Jews from the German culture are inseparably part of it, much as a child belongs to its mother:

Die Sprache schien...daß sie nicht nur...ersetzbare Instrument der Mitteilung ist, sondern unentreßbarer seelischer Besitz, Gabe aus der Väter und aus Gottes Hand.... Wir sagen, und das ist eine wundervolle Unterscheidung, Vaterland und Muttersprache. Das eine kann Gewalt uns entreißen, das andere nicht, und wenn man uns die Zunge ausschneide, würde dieses Innerste unserer Seelenkraft noch stumm fortleben.<sup>111</sup>

Even in times of strife between mother-tongue and fatherland (this couple is Catholic and does not believe in divorce), the powerful connection between the Jews and the culture they came to be part of will prevail:

Heute sind diese Streitigkeiten in der Familie unzeitgemäß... Was bleibt uns übrig?... Wir beharren...bei unserer Liebe zu der Sprache, die unsere Mutter mit uns sprach, die uns von den Vätern überliefert wurde, bei der Liebe zu ihrer Größe und Rauheit, zu ihrer Innerlichkeit und Lieblichkeit; wir beharren in der

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<sup>110</sup> Arthur Eloesser, “Judentum und deutsches Geistesleben,” in *Monatsblätter*, herausgegeben vom Kulturbund Deutscher Juden, 1. Jg., Nr. 1, Oktober 1933. Quoted in **Geschlossene Vorstellung: Der Jüdische Kulturbund im Deutschland 1933-1941**, Akademie der Künste, Edition Hentrich, 1991, pp. 237-239.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

Treu zu den großen Schöpfern, denen wir unseren geistig-seelischen Aufbau verdanken, wir beharren in der freudigen Erwartung von würdigen Nachfolgern und werden ihnen wie immer auf dem ersten schweren Wege entgegen gehen. Wenn es deutsche Art ist, eine Sache ihrer selbst wegen zu treiben, so bietet sich jetzt die beste Gelegenheit.

The article's closing lines invoke the taciturn forces of fate as evidence of the power of the connection: "...unsere alte Einpflanzung in das deutsche Geistesleben ein Schicksal aus inneren Gründen und darum ein unwiderrufliches geworden ist."<sup>112</sup>

### **3.3.1.1 Theater Reviews and Other Material in Periodicals**

Eloesser's first review of a Kulturbund theater production does not begin with the play reviewed, but with its house. Eloesser tells the readers about the still-fresh Kulturbund stage, without getting into the touchy issue of how the organization came into being.<sup>113</sup> He also takes the occasion to flatter his colleagues Kurt Singer and Julius Bab for locating such talents as are seen on the Kulturbund stage. As to the production itself, Eloesser remains the same theater critic, commenting on the play that fulfilled the uncertain promise of Nathan, "gewiß auch mit Hilfe Shakespears," the directing, acting, and so on, and ending his review with a paragraph that begins thus: "Man konnte verstehen, das der Kulturbund mit 'Nathan der Weise' begann. Man wird vielleicht statt des 'Othello' auf andere Werke gewartet haben, die mit jüdischen Schicksal mehr zu tun haben...."

Eloesser is writing not only as a theater critic but also as an active functionary in the new and conceptually delicate Kulturbund. While he cannot change the way he views a play, he can comment on the context of it, and does so here. This review suggests that, in the ongoing discourse in the Kulturbund over whether it should be a stage for Jews to remain in touch with Western classics or a platform for fostering a new, relevant Jewish identity, Eloesser was inclined toward the second direction. Although the reason may lie in Eloesser himself, that is, his need for a Jewish identity to offset his impeccable

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>113</sup> *Jüdische Rundschau (JR)*, 15.12.1933.

knowledge of Shakespeare's work, it remains the case that through this orientation Eloesser published his first review of the Kulturbund theater.

The next review by Eloesser is on another Shakespeare play, albeit of different tone: *Was Ihr wollt*.<sup>114</sup> This review begins with a potent anecdote that compares the Jewish theater and its function to the classical Greek theater:

Als das griechische Theater noch jung war und seinem orgiastischen Ursprung näher, pflegten die traditionstreuen Athener, wenn ein Drama von diesem mystischen Unterstrom nicht getragen schien, den kritischen Einwurf „Nicht für Dionysos?“ zu erheben.... Wo heute jüdisches Theater gemacht wird, aber ich möchte lieber sagen, wo heute Juden für Juden Theater spielen, stehet dasselbe Fragezeichen.

Again there is criticism of the choice, this time of a Shakespearean comedy and its relevance to the Jews and their emergent new cultural and other identity. The comparison to Greek theater is meant to emphasize the weight the Kulturbund theater should have in the collective identity of the Jews. The Greek classics were based on collective myths, staged to the masses during religious festivals, and formed a crucial component in being (an ancient) Greek. Eloesser wanted the new Jewish theater to have the same shaping and defining function. This was a form of public congregation, dealing with texts central to one's national identity or ethnicity, entailing participation in a mass ceremony – in a nonreligious context. Although Jewish by birth and self-conception (even before the Nazis' infliction of the latter on assimilated Jews), Eloesser did not have the tools to become 'Jewish' in either of the two possible ways – Zionism or religion. He was simply too much of a cultivated European to undergo a religious revelation, or see any way he himself could emigrate to a primitive Middle Eastern county like Palestine, dreadfully lacking what made a locale tolerable – an abundance of European culture. It is touching to read his account of his journey to Palestine, where his son Max was among the pioneers; Eloesser himself simply cannot connect to 'the country of our fathers.'

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 15.5.1934.

In his review of *Was Ihr wollt*, Eloesser expresses awareness of the simple problem facing the Kulturbund in its will to stage Jewish work: “Der jüdische Autor verbürgte noch lange kein jüdisches Stück, und wir werden noch eine Weile warten müssen, bis er es kann und will, weil er muß.” That is not all there is to say on the future of the Kulturbund theater; Eloesser sees it as a training ground for young actors who will someday be the stars of the Jewish stage: “Das Theater des Kulturbundes, das mit Prominenten nicht rechnen kann und soll, hat die Verpflichtung, junge Talente zu entdecken und den Nachwuchs vor Verkümmern zu hüten....” Since the sources of actors for that theater were drastically limited, and not all the greatest stars were available, this stage was to be where the next Granach or Kortner would develop and gain experience. Therefore the viewers, as well as critics, should show lenience and understanding; after all, they were all in this together.

It is also with lenience and understanding that Eloesser concludes his review. It is an elegant ending and answer to his first stated question on the play’s relevance for this Jewish stage: “Es war ein guter Abend, und der erste, für den Zentralausschluß zu wohlthätigen Zweck bestimmt, hat Haltung und Stimmung einer einfachen, würdigen Festlichkeit behauptet.” The Jews of Berlin have been going through very difficult times, and an enjoyable, neutral Shakespearean comedy may be just the right choice for an evening out.

The following review is of *Candida* by George Bernard Shaw, a man who, according to Eloesser, is living proof “daß man auch mit einem starker Intellect Dichter sein kann.”<sup>115</sup> This same man “fell in love...as a young man with *Candida*” and Eloesser proceeds to discuss the issue the play presents: *Candida*’s loyalty to her husband in the face of a romantic adventure with a young poet. Eloesser questions this play’s relevance to the 1935 Berlin Kulturbund:

Geht uns das noch an? Ich denke: Ja, solange eine *Candida* noch möglich, noch wünschbar scheint, solange wir Veranlassung haben, an dem sehr mehrwürdigen und wohl zur Ewigkeit bestimmten Institut der Ehe etwas zurecht zu rücken. Wobei wir auch nicht vergessen wollen, daß die Mosaische Gesetzgebung der

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 26.4.1935.

Frau zuerst eine moralisch gesicherte Stellung gegeben hat. Das Familienleben hat es im Judentum zu eine besonders engen und zarten Verwachsenheit gebracht, um so mehr wahrscheinlich, je weniger es ein Ausbrechen in ein großes öffentliches Leben gab. Wir erwarten keine Deborah oder Judith mehr; wir erwarten von der jüdischen Frau einen anderen Heroismus des Mitduldens, Mittragens, einen Hauptanteil an der Erhaltung der Familie; wir stellen uns ihr Wesen gern als unpathetisch, ihre Macht als eine still geschäftige vor, mit einer gegen den Mann selbständigen Kritik, was wieder den Humor hervorbringen muß. Ich hatte den Eindruck, daß das Publikum gegen eine verzwickte Dialektik von Shaw erst zurückhaltend blieb, bis das Stück sich am Schluß selbst erklärte, worauf es vor dem Abschied noch eine beifällige Zustimmung gab.

Eloesser converted *Candida* and portrayed her as a Woman of Valor, a type who can and should be found in each of the Jewish community's female members, becoming more conservative (i.e., Jewish) by the day.

The same biblical Jewish heroine to whom Eloesser compared *Candida* received her own production and review less than six months later. The Kulturbund theater relocated in Berlin eastward to the Kommandantenstraße, specifically to the very same building that was the seat of the Hernfeld brothers' Jargontheater established forty years earlier. Eloesser, in his review of Christian Friedrich Hebbel's *Judith*,<sup>116</sup> conveys the essence of Dr. Singer's opening words, highlighting the symbolism of moving eastward, back to Yiddish culture.

Eloesser begins with a short socio-historiographic review of Hebbel's play: "er kontrastiert Judentum und Heidentum, die Idee der Heiligkeit, die durch der Offenbarung gegeben ist, und den individuellen Lebenswillen, der sich vergöttert oder vergötzt, bis zur Selbstvernichtung.... Er protestierte gegen die Emanzipation der Frauen zur Zeit des Saint-Simanismus und des jungen Deutschlands...." This is all that could suffice to qualify a play as rich in content and worthy of being produced, even on the highly significant and selective Kulturbund stage (in its new location). But that was merely a prelude to the true meaning of this play:

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 4.10.1935.

Aber das ist nur eine Aspekt von unten her. Judith ist vor allem Jüdin, ihre Tat nur möglich in ihrem Volke, das Gott gehört. Heiligkeit und Sünde bedingen sich gegeneinander. Der mit der Bibel aufgezogene Dichter hat auch ihr Volk gut getroffen, das schon durch die Unsichtbarkeit, durch die Unnennbarkeit seines Gottes aller Umwelt unverständlich und Fremd war. Martin Buber spricht einmal von dem jüdischen Pathos und er hat es mit dem schönen Wort erklärt: es bedeutet das Unmögliche verlangen. Und der Dichter scheint dieser Erklärung zugekommen; so gering auch manche Exemplare des Judentums hier ausfallen mögen, es ist ein Volk, das als Ganzes doch im Unmöglichen leben kann. Schon mit dieser Grundstellung muß uns die Tragödie immer wieder willkommen sein.

Eloesser here ignores that fact that he is dealing with a theatrical production and not only a biblical story, and he uses the story, fresh in the minds of the viewers, to remind his readers of the uniqueness of the chosen Jewish people. Judith, who saved her city with a violent act of courage, remains proof that Jewish national pride and action need not only occur through the divine prism: “Wenn Judith zu dem geretteten Volke von ihrer Tat sagt: ‘Werdet heilig und rein, dann kann ich sie verantworten, da sprach eine innerliche Zerstoßenheit, eine Einwilligung, Opfer zu sein, Einordnung und Unterordnung in die göttliche Fügung. Diese Umkehr hat kaum eine von ihren glänzenden Vorgängerinnen so überzeugend gemacht.

Eloesser is inspired by the production. Although it could use some more work, it harbors the poetic forces capable of inspiring the introspection and pride that the Jewish audience needs: “Die Aufführung wird gewiß noch mehr zusammenwachsen. Die tragische Dichtung Hebbels hat wie immer mitgerissen, hat bei aller dramatischen Hochspannung nach innen geführt, uns auf uns selbst zurückgeführt.”

Jewish pride and courage are not only evident in biblical themes, but also in the contemporary building of the Jewish homeland; that is one of the conclusions arising from Eloesser’s review of the *Neuer östlicher und Palästina-Bildbogen*, staged as part of the Kulturbund’s Chanukah program.<sup>117</sup> The show itself was a cabaret composed of

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 24.12.1935.



pictures (*Bilderbogen*); Eloesser did not regard it highly from the artistic standpoint, but credited it for containing a Jewish trait that has the power to help people through hard times like these: “Alle Leistungen...waren eigenartig geprägt, meistens auf den jüdischen Humor, der über aller Pathetik des Leidens mit seinen Narrenglöckchen klingelt und uns zu sagen scheint: Wenn wir gar nichts mehr haben, haben wir wenigstens uns selbst.” It is almost as if seeing this production as an entirely internal Jewish affair, disconnected from the brooding German culture despite the physical affinity.

As the title suggests, this cabaret was composed of two parts, the Eastern (European) and the Palestinian, and Eloesser felt that the second part deserved more weight than it received in the production: “Knapp und Karg war der Palästina-Teil. Die Botschaft aus dem Lande unserer Kinder und unserer Hoffnungen hätte gerade bei einer Chanukkah-Bescherung reichlicher ausfallen sollen.” Here Eloesser is no less than preaching Zionism, from which he excludes himself. Palestine is the country of Jews’ children and their hopes; in Eloesser’s case, as noted, this was indisputably true. This statement is yet another testimony to Eloesser’s hopeless entrapment, spiritual and not physical; he traveled to Israel twice, in 1934 and 1936. Even with his comprehension of the dire situation in Germany, even with his son being in Israel, even with his hesitant and touching Jewish pride, so eager to become bona fide Zionism or Judaism, Eloesser simply lacked the capacity to become one of those people he admired so much, those who were building the country, including its cultural institutions, with the power of their divine determination. He concludes with a brilliant passage about the way European Jews, with their ironic (albeit well-earned) perspective, deal with material from the ‘neue alte Heimat’:

Und wenn man eine Anleihe beim “Matate” gemacht hätte, irgendeinen charakteristischen Gruß an einer Gemeinschaft, die sich erst aus der Zersplitterung wieder neu bildet, die ihre vor einem hohen Ziel noch vorhandenen Mängel mit witziger Selbsterkenntnis, mit der Heilkraft Ironie behandelt – mit der alten Begabung des Judentums, die es aus so vielen Exilen der Diaspora in die neue alte Heimat gerettet hat.

The next review to be considered has an entirely different tone. Written in March 1936, some four months after the supplementary law to the Nuremberg Laws determined that Eloesser was no longer a German citizen, it is on one of the most politically potent classics in the Western canon.<sup>118</sup> It may almost come as a surprise to encounter what can be termed a ‘classic’ review: background on Greek tragedy, some notes on the story of Antigone, the problematique of the chorus in modern productions, notes on the director, the setting, the actors – and nothing beyond a droll line wrapping up Eloesser’s opinion of the play: “Kurz, es ist löblich, die Antigone zu spielen oder spielen zu wollen, und es wäre sehr schön und der hohen Aufgabe würdig gewesen, wenn man es auch gekonnt hätte.”<sup>119</sup>

The lessons Eloesser could have drawn from the story of Antigone courageously standing up against powerful, evil forces in the name of a ‘higher truth’ are endless. How is Candida worthier than Antigone? It may be that the Nazi supervision of the play and subsequent discussion had become too tight for Eloesser to speak his mind.

The same ‘clean’ attitude subsists in the review of Franz Molnar’s *Große Liebe*, of whom Eloesser writes in the first line of the review: “der nach seiner Abstammung zu den unseren gehört...”<sup>120</sup> That is the only deviation from the pure theatrical information, and no doubt reflects the racial frenzy the Jews, as well as non-Jews, of Germany were subjected to at the time. Owing to Shakespeare’s Anglo-Saxon heritage, there is not even that much of a nontheatrical comment in Eloesser’s review of *Sommernachtstraum*.<sup>121</sup> However, in the next joint review of two plays, *Postamt* by Rabindranath Tagore and *Der Hochzeit der Sobeide* by Hugo von Hofmannstahl, Eloesser takes care to note that Hofmannstahl is “österreichischen aus väterlich jüdischem Blut...”<sup>122</sup> Eloesser was already very careful with tagging the playwrights whose materials could be used. He does, however, make a significant comment on the both social and redeeming nature of theater: “Theater ist nun einmal eine Gemeinschaftskunst, und der Kulturbund bestätigt

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<sup>118</sup> It should suffice to mention the political adaptations of Sophocles’ masterpiece by Jean Anouilh (1944), Berthold Brecht (1945) – both, incidentally, relating to Hitler’s regime; Athol Fugard’s *The Island* (1973); and the film *Deutschland im Herbst* (1978), in which the section using Antigone’s story was written by Heinrich Böll.

<sup>119</sup> *JR*, 17.3.1936.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.8.1936.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.12.1936.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.2.1937.

sich, indem er das allermenschlichste Talent der Menschendarstellung, das der jüdische Seele nun einmal gegeben ist, als einen Schatz verwaltet, der nicht verloren gehen darf.”

This caution became more evident in the following review published a mere month and half later.<sup>123</sup> Here Eloesser managed to write about a very Jewish play, a stage adaptation of Max Brod’s novel on the false messiah David Rëubeni, without saying anything politically significant about it. This production was by the Kulturbund’s Jugendbühne. Eloesser writes a deliberate, thought-out review, emphasizing the analysis of the plot – the story of a Jew who wanted his people to be strong and proud – and, as noted above, makes absolutely no analogy to contemporary events. By that point in history, the Kulturbund could only stage Jewish themes by Jewish authors. Eloesser stresses the problems related to plot in this sort of historical production, which does not have a clear protagonist and is instead composed of a collection of stories. The play is better or worse according to each episode. Eloesser also takes care to praise the young actors whom, as noted, he considers the future of the Jewish theatrical scene.

The last review to be noted here was of S, Anski’s *Der Golem*. Eloesser wrote it toward mid-October 1937,<sup>124</sup> and it manifests some of the changes he had undergone over the years. As necessary when reviewing a play that is not a well-known classic, Eloesser relays some information on the story of the Golem. As noted earlier, in his *Oktoberstag* review Eloesser misquoted a Jewish source (“Es soll irgendwo im Talmud stehen”) with the utmost ease. Eloesser now appears, however, versed in the Jewish sources (Bible, Talmud, Kabala, Salomo Ibm Gabirol, the Maharal of Prague) and eager to share his knowledge with the readers on the sources, function, and significance of the Golem. It is easy to imagine the appeal this Jewish-concocted and controlled superhero with extrahuman powers must have had for the Jews of Berlin, waiting for their *deus ex machina* as time and opportunities for salvation slipped away. In his review, Eloesser subtly and carefully touches on some of the main issues of the play, including the different concepts of Jewish redemption, without making a clear analogy to his time. One must again assume that the Nazis’ presence cast a shadow on this review. Eloesser, however, still cannot help but remark what the applause at the end of the play was for:

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 19.3.1937.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 12.10.1937.

“nicht nur die der Dankbarkeit, sondern auch die des Stolzes auf eine im Innersten ebenso jüdische wie künstlerische großartige Leistung.”

Eloesser’s nontheatrical writing is entirely devoted to promoting Jewish causes, as they fluctuated over the few years of activity between the Nazis’ rise to power and Eloesser’s death in early 1938.

### **3.3.1.1.2 *Errinerungen eines Berliner Juden***

Perhaps the most interesting example is Eloesser’s self-testified portrayal of his Jewish upbringing and lifestyle (or lack thereof) in the seven-installment column “*Errinerungen Eines Berliner Juden.*” Published in the *JR* from September 21 to November 16, 1934, it relates the years of his life up to his rejection of his professor’s implicit suggestion to baptize.

It is striking that even in this series, which is a showcase of Eloesser’s new Judaism and Jewish pride, the opening line goes to none other than “Der achzichjährige Goethe...”<sup>125</sup> The second paragraph recovers from the wontly reference and expresses the essence of the series:

Wir Juden und gerade wir, die wir uns für sehr assimiliert halten durften, haben trotz allen Schicksalsschlägen die eine Entschädigung gewonnen, und – ich muß das Wort hierher setzen – die eine glückhafte Erhebung erlebt, daß wir uns als Juden entdecken durften, daß wir, auf unsere Vergangenheit, demgemäß auf unsere Bestimmung zurückgewiesen, unser Sein aus sehr vergrabenen Wurzeln wieder erneuern....<sup>126</sup>

By the end of 1934, Eloesser was a proud, born-again Jew, ready to view his previous sixty-four years as an odyssey from assimilation to triumphant rediscovery. Also interesting is that Eloesser does not imply that the newfound roots and identity come to replace something else – not even the forces that brought upon the Jews the deterministic and anonymous strokes of fate, *Schicksalsschlägen*.

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<sup>125</sup> Eloesser, *JR*, 21.9.1934.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

As is clear from the use of the term assimilated in his self-reference, Eloesser's family was neither religious nor traditional in the traditional sense: "Wenn irgendeine Tradition noch weiter gegeben wurde, so war es mehr eine von ostpreußischer als von jüdischer Eigenart."<sup>127</sup> Although his household was not committed to them, Eloesser was not totally ignorant of the symbols of Judaism. For instance, the home where he was born and spent the first years of his life had a mezuzah until the family had to move: "Die Mesusah ist dann bei unserem ersten Umzug nicht mitgekommen."<sup>128</sup>

Therefore, it was important to expand Eloesser's dormant Jewishness into other fields, and he delves into the stereotypical traits affiliated with Jews: "Mein Großvater in Ostpreußen...lebte nicht mehr im Ghetto, wußte nichts mehr von Cheder und Talmudstudium, aber er hatte trotz wechselnden häuslichen Umständen die alte jüdische Ansicht, daß Kinder so viele wie möglich lernen sollten.... In diesem Verhalten erkenne ich heute eine ehrwürdige und große jüdische Tradition."<sup>129</sup> Eloesser's scholastic inclination is apparently an old Jewish tradition.

As a person of fine literary sensitivity, it is no surprise that Eloesser was an avid Bible reader; he speaks here of his initial exposure to the Bible:

Zu meinem vierzehnten Geburtstag...bekam ich von einer Tante... eine Bibel geschenkt. Die Frau war in England in einer christlichen Familie Erzieherin gewesen...und sie hatte wohl bemerkt, daß da in jedem respektablen Hause eine Bibel zu finden war. Seit jenem Tage war ich Bibelleser.... Ich dachte nicht einmal wie heute viel daran, daß es meine Vorfahren waren, die da ihre Schicksale austrugen, daß es unsere Gott war, von dem die Geschichte zuerst Rechenschaft ablegen mußte; ich las die Bibel wahrscheinlich, wie die ganze Welt sie lesen kann, wie sie sie vor vierhundert Jahren empfangen hat als eine der ganzen Menschheit gemeinsame Familiengeschichte, von den Erzvätern an....<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 28.9.1934.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 2.11.1934.

This bibliophilic act should not, however, be read out of its historical context. In late nineteenth-century Europe, reading the Bible was not only a Jewish act of religion but rather a precondition for participating in the mainstream culture, which was conversant in the Scriptures. Eloesser also goes so far as to implicate divine forces in his choice of studies; it takes a good deal of belief to see one's career choices as religiously determined: "Ich dachte nicht einmal wie heute viel daran, daß es meine Vorfahren waren, die da ihre Schicksale austrugen, daß es unser Gott war, vor dem die Geschichte zuerst Rechenschaft ablegen mußte."<sup>131</sup>

Eloesser's above-noted rejection of baptism in 1898, as it appears in the seventh and last segment of the *Erinnerungen*,<sup>132</sup> most likely ended the series. It simply was Eloesser's last 'Jewish' free-willed action; shortly thereafter, Eloesser received the offer to write theater reviews for the *VZ*, with nothing inherently Jewish either in the position or in Eloesser's conception of it. It is interesting to note that Eloesser simply ends his 'memories' at that point in time, as though since 1898 he had done nothing till 1934. He thereby kept his 'Jewish track' impeccable for the emphatic and encouraged Jewish readers of the *VZ*, each finding in Eloesser's tale connecting points to their own.

In his review of friend and colleague Julius Bab's book *Rembrandt und Spinoza*, published in the (Jewish) periodical *Der Morgen*,<sup>133</sup> Eloesser quotes a line from the book that can certainly apply to his writing as well: "Wenn ein deutscher Jude heute ein Buch schreibt, so wird er zu der Frage seiner Existenz als Deutscher und als Jude einen Beitrag liefern müssen." As noted, from 1933 Jews were allowed to write for Jews only, creating an intensive self-occupation. Not only reporting on present events, but also reminiscing on past Jewish matters was desirable. In March 1934, Eloesser wrote an article about the Jewish history of the Deutsches Theater titled "Von L'Arronge bis Reinhardt".<sup>134</sup> He proudly noted that the three founding fathers and dominant spirits of the Deutsches Theater, "die ihm Bedeutung und Weltruf gaben," were actually not Teutonic: "L'Arronge hieß, wie gesagt, ursprünglich Aaron, Otto Brahm war ein Abrahamssohn gewesen und Max Reinhardt hat ursprünglich auch anderes geheißen.... Was die drei

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 16.11.1934.

<sup>133</sup> Arthur Eloesser, "Rembrandt und Spinoza," *Der Morgen*, December 1933, Jg. 9, Heft 6, p. 380.

<sup>134</sup> Arthur Eloesser, "Von L'Arronge bis Reinhardt," *Gemeindeblatt*, March 17, 1934, p. 3.

Regenten des Deutschen Theaters geschaffen haben, darf nicht vergessen werden. Es bleibt eine schöne stolze Erinnerung, und Erinnerungen verpflichten.”<sup>135</sup>

By then Eloesser already appears to have been summarizing and reminiscing, as though there would be no further Jewish contribution to the German stage, which had wrongfully rejected the people who were so central in making the German theater what it was. In a review of the book *Eine Zeit stirbt* by Georg Hermann just three months later, Eloesser continues the retrospective reflections, musing on “woher wir gekommen, durch welche Wandlungen wir gegangen sind, damit, wie der Dichter in seinem Vorwort sagt, von uns mehr übrig bleibt als der zarte Abdruck eines Grashalms und eines Blättchens in der Kalkplatte der Versteinerung.”<sup>136</sup>

In his 1937 review of the book *Eine Reise Nach Jerusalem* by St. John Ervine, an Irish theater critic for the weekly British newspaper *The Observer* and playwright,<sup>137</sup> Eloesser still writes about Palestine and its potential to flourish, while he himself was already preparing to go there a second time to visit his son. He would return from this trip ill, and eventually die at the beginning of 1938. “Die Juden sind auch wieder Bauern geworden, wie sie es in biblischen Zeiten waren.... Palästina, so heißt es am Schluß, braucht die Initiative der Juden und die Dauerhaftigkeit des Arabers; dann wird es aufblühen wie eine Rose. Ich denke, daß unser Glaube nicht geringer sein darf.” It is notable how little his outlook on Palestine had changed since his first trip there in 1934, on which he wrote a short series for the *JR* titled “Palästina-Reise.”<sup>138</sup> Eloesser describes there his great anticipation in arriving at Palestine for the first time: “Es war mein Wunschtraum seit der Schulzeit, das kleine Land zu sehen, das von Dichtern, Künstlern, Philosophen, Rednern bevölkert war.” He is, however, terribly disappointed in the land, and says why: “...weil Milch und Honig da durchaus nicht mehr Floß, weil es wieder zur Wüste und fast zum Niemandland geworden war.” Palestine is a backward place full of pioneers working hard to make it hospitable; still, Eloesser ends the article with the unequivocal “Wir sind angekommen. Wir sind zu Hause.”

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<sup>135</sup> L'Arronge, who inaugurated the Deutsches Theater in 1883 and was considered by Eloesser a Jew, was probably not Jewish. Cf. Fritz Engel in **Juden im Deutschen Kulturbereich**, p. 201.

<sup>136</sup> Arthur Eloesser, “Eine Zeit stirbt,” **Der Morgen**, June 1934, Jg. 10 (1934), n. 3, pp. 139-140.

<sup>137</sup> Arthur Eloesser, “Eine Reise nach Jerusalem,” **Der Morgen**, March 1937, Jg. 12 (1937), n. 12, pp. 573-575.

<sup>138</sup> Arthur Eloesser, “Palästina-Reise,” *JR*, 12.6.1934. We only have the first segment.

### 3.3.1.2 Books

The two books Eloesser seems to have been involved with after 1933 deal with the Jews and their relation to German culture. One, published by Siegmund Kaznelson at the end of 1934, was titled *Juden in deutschen Kulturbereich*. The book, over one thousand pages long, is a documentation of Jews who were active or left their mark on German culture in its broader sense: the chapters, written by leading (Jewish) authorities from each field, cover not only theater, music, and visual arts but also psychology, commerce, Christian theology, law, medicine, sports, chemistry, and chess, to mention a few. At the end of this book is an appendix, “Tabelle von Nichtjuden, die für Juden gehalten wurden” – perhaps as a show of Jewish pride, expressing the notion that ‘we are a group of our own, and these respectable people are actually part of a different club.’ The table contains, when available, the reason each of these Gentiles was mistaken for something he or she was not (Jewish-sounding name, Jewish spouse, Jewish appearance, etc.).

Eloesser compiled the section on “Literatur,”<sup>139</sup> and in nearly seventy pages dedicated to the topic (his segment is the longest in the book), he tells of the prominent Jews in German literature from Mendelssohn till the most recent translators of contemporary European plays. Although the writing is factual and informative, Eloesser frames the entire section, and perhaps the book, with a subtle remark reflecting the new and untenable condition of Jewish creators in Germany, whose existence has become a predicament for the new regime: “Im Jahre 1743 wanderte der vierzehnjährige Moses Mendels Sohn... von Dessau...nach Berlin, das ihm kein Denkmal errichtet hat, obgleich er zu den wenigen bürgerlichen Figuren gehört, die sich mit ihrem Menchenwesen in die sonst so spärliche bürgerliche Überlieferung der Stadt eingeschrieben haben.”<sup>140</sup> This illuminates a reality the Jews themselves might have been trying to forget: even before Hitler, Jews were not seen as equal to Germans in this land. Eloesser participated here in what was viewed at the time as a display of Jews’ contribution to Germany. As a response to the Nazis’ message and actions, the intent was to show such positive involvement as to make notions of weeding this ethnic group out of the German realm

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<sup>139</sup> Arthur Eloesser, “Literatur,” pp. 1-67.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.



preposterous. In sad retrospect, what remains of that effort is an exhaustive, final summation of the Jews' contribution to Germany and its culture.

The last book Eloesser wrote was *Vom Ghetto Nach Europa: Das Judentum im geistigen Leben des 19. Jahrhunderts*, published in 1936.<sup>141</sup> It may appear to be yet another Jewish publication on how the Jews were part of German culture, or the spiritual life of an era. A second glance at the title, however, may seem to indicate an important difference: that this book is about Judentum (Judaism), as it shaped the spiritual life of German Jews: “Das Verzeichnis enthält alle irgendwie genannten jüdischen Persönlichkeiten und von nichtjüdischen alle diejenigen, mit denen das Judentum in seiner geistigen Entwicklung besonders zu tun hatte, oder die mit ihm, sie es auch als Gegnerschaft, zu tun hatten.”<sup>142</sup> If Eloesser was capable of tracing Judaism's influences on the non-Jewish artistic work of Jews, this would seem the perfect illustration of his change from alienation to intimacy with Judaism. However, that is not how the book works. It is, indeed, yet another compilation of Jews in German culture without much reference to their religion. It should be kept in mind that “precisely those Jews who had left their imprint on German artistic life were those least versed in things Jewish.”<sup>143</sup> This naturally applies to Eloesser as well, and could explain why the content of the book did not live up to its title.

Nevertheless, the mere fact that Eloesser apparently had the desire to write such a book is indicative of his conceptual odyssey: from immersion in German culture to expertise on Jews in German culture to Judaism despite German culture.

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<sup>141</sup> Arthur Eloesser, **Vom Ghetto Nach Europa: Das Judentum im geistigen Leben des 19. Jahrhunderts** (Berlin: Jüdische Buch-Vereinigung, 1936).

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>143</sup> Freedon, p. 142

## 4. Summing Up

### 4.1 A Social-psychology Excursion

Eloesser's reallocation of the Jewish-German balance in the components of his identity is not hard to comprehend in the light of his rejection from German society. Even the alterations in his aesthetic perception are not unjustifiable, taking into consideration the great disappointment with the German culture that, until that point, had dictated his work as a critic of the culture.

A contemporary and landsman of Eloesser, Kurt Lewin, born in Prussia in 1890, is considered the founder of social psychology. Himself a Jew who served on the German front in World War I, wrote his PhD at the Berlin University, and fled Germany to the United States in 1933, some of Lewin's writings during his exilic years in the United States before his death in 1947 shed light on issues pertaining to Eloesser. Lewin was acutely aware of the condition of prewar Diaspora Jews who were not actively religious, and unsure of the theoretical and practical implications of their Jewishness in relation to the collective:

The Jews have been regarded sometimes as a religious, sometimes as a racial group, and they themselves have been rather uncertain about the character of the group. The feeling of the average Jew of belonging to the country of his birth was in some countries (for example, in Germany) far stronger than his feeling of belonging to the Jewish group. Unlike similar minorities, the Jews have for more than a thousand years lacked a geographical region of their own, which they could regard as a 'homeland.' This obviously had the effect of making the unity of the group somewhat 'abstract' and unreal....<sup>144</sup>

Not only did Eloesser, and those of a similar bent, not actively belong to the Jewish group, they most probably did not belong to any group at all as the nationalistic and xenophobic forces in Europe gained momentum, as evident in Eloesser's harsh words

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<sup>144</sup> Kurt Lewin, "Psycho-Sociological Problems of a Minority Group" (1935), in **Resolving Social Conflict** (New York: Harper & Row, 1948), p. 158.

against “the Germans” in the above-quoted Epilogue to his 1931 book on German literature. Eloesser’s identity must be seen in the context of his larger Jewish kinship, which might have created a broader base of belonging for him and modified his private identity accordingly. Assuming that “identity reflects the adaptation of the individual self to the sociocultural context [and] identities changed in response to historical changes in the social and cultural context,”<sup>145</sup> it is almost to be expected that Eloesser, in the wake of the painful exodus from the German cultural realm, found “only one field of action left to the Jew, where the results depend mainly upon himself. This is the field of Jewish life.”<sup>146</sup> That would account for Eloesser’s newly discovered passion for things Jewish. Nevertheless, his seemingly utter conviction and enthusiasm strikes a dissonant chord in the light of his German upbringing, in which Judaism played a tribal, primordial, and nonintellectual role. Eloesser’s statements on Judaism and Jewish pride could not, in the short time-span until his death in 1937, achieve the intellectual depth of his writings on German culture. At the same time, in such instances the collective experience of Eloesser and his coreligionists must foster a great necessity to model and participate in a constructive Jewish culture:

To counteract fear and make the individual strong to face whatever the future holds, there is nothing so important as a clear and fully accepted belonging to a group whose fate has a positive meaning. A long-range view which includes the past and the future of Jewish life, and links the solution of the minority problem with the problem of the welfare of all human beings is one of these possible sources of strength.<sup>147</sup>

Judaism thus turns from a condition afflicting some unlucky individuals who happened to be born into the wrong religion into a constructive set of values (and instructions to those who will take them) for being a better, more moral human being. However, this transition cannot be acknowledged as a coercive act. Free will, or the illusion of it, is crucial in the choice of any dogma:

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<sup>145</sup> Baumeister, p. 415.

<sup>146</sup> Kurt Lewin, “When Facing Danger” (1939), p. 163.

<sup>147</sup> Kurt Lewin, “Self-Hatred Among Jews” (1941), pp. 188-189.

It may be pointed out, however, that if re-education means the establishment of a new super-ego, it necessarily follows that the objective sought will not be reached so long as the new set of values is not experienced by the individual as something freely chosen. If the individual complies merely from fear of punishment rather than through the dictates of his free will and conscience, the new set of values he is expected to accept does not assume in him the position of super-ego, and his re-education therefore remains unrealized.<sup>148</sup>

To retain his peace of mind, then, Eloesser had to establish his new identity – whether on a conscious or unconscious level – as one that he chose and not one that he was forced into by a murderous fascist regime. The more dominant the presence of the external motivational factor (i.e., the Nazis) for Eloesser, the more he had to prove to his surroundings and primarily to himself how utterly and freely Jewish on his own account he had become.

Like many religions, Judaism is a collective one. It applies to a group and sees its individual adherents as part of this group, namely, the Jews. To complete the transition in his identity, Eloesser had to cast himself into the collective beliefs and perceptions of the Jews among who he lived, speaking for his group and becoming part of something larger than himself, even if that belonging was the source of his plight in the first case: “Only by anchoring his own conduct in something as large, substantial, and superindividual as the culture of a group can the individual stabilize his new beliefs sufficiently to keep them immune from the day-to-day fluctuations of moods and influences to which he, as an individual, is subject.”<sup>149</sup>

## **4.2 Final Remarks**

To make space for his values as a cultural Jew determined to help pave the way to the future of Jewish arts, Eloesser had to compromise his values as a theater critic. A theater critic with no agenda other than reviewing a play would overlook no flaw, have little

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<sup>148</sup> Kurt Lewin, “Conduct, Knowledge and Acceptance of New Values” (1945), p. 65.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

compassion for beginners' misdemeanours, let the readers know the truth about a play and, if necessary, save them time and money. Much more than artistic integrity was at stake here. Although it was unlikely that Jews would stop being members of the only theater, the Kulturbund, that would still accept them through the front door as spectators and through any door as performers, Eloesser was loyal to his people and their artistic attempts and would no longer be the aloof critic displaying his wit and wisdom at the expense of an unsuccessful production. In his role as critic of the Kulturbund theater, Eloesser emphasized the unfashionable faculty of educating through reviews – that is, educating the director and actors as well as the audience. While he would still expose the flaws of a play, it was not to get the production off the stage but rather to encourage improvement.

Moreover, since the Kulturbund was now the site of Jewish theater and was both obligated and eager to produce Jewish plays, Eloesser's critiques inevitably dealt with the substance of the plays, thus framing the reviews in a Jewish context. Eloesser became more and more confident and open about the Jewish dimensions of the productions (so long as he was free to be). At the same time, Eloesser did not essentially change the way he viewed and reviewed theater. His post-1933 reviews contained the same elements as his pre-1933 work – a few words on the play if it is not a classic, general impressions, notes on the director and directing, the design, music, actors, and so on. In other words, Eloesser's concepts of theater and the art of writing about it did not change. What did change was the status of theater itself. If Eloesser used to see it as sacrosanct and would not tolerate artistic compromises and sacrifices for social or political messages, there were now other causes that theater must serve. It is not that theater's status had been lowered; rather, forces higher than theater had come into the picture and theater inevitably became subservient in certain ways to these higher forces, which pertained to the mounting momentum of Jewish collectivism in its many manifestations.

Eloesser did not turn his back on German culture. He could not have even if he tried; he was a product of it par excellence, since for him as a Jew the German culture did not offer chauvinistic opportunities. Using his metaphor, he was loved and hence 'brought up' only by a mother (tongue), representing culture and nurturance, while being disowned by the base, strict, and oppressive father(land). He had no way of looking at the world

than through the eyes that had read modern literature in Erich Schmidt's seminar at the Berlin University. He had spent dozens of years writing about theater and literature for the sake of art – before his pen had to promote a cause; believing in the cause could not transmogrify his education, training, and experience into something else.

Yet, at the same time, Eloesser became more and more a part of the Jewish culture and society in Berlin. It seems it was hard for him to determine what kind of a Jew he wanted to be: practical Zionism did not appeal to him, as was evident in his distanced writing about Palestine and his two trips there; and neither could the practical life of observant Jews, which 'assimilated' Eloesser would have found very difficult to adopt. Eloesser became a Jew involved in his community, trying to shape the future of Jewish theater and culture through his reviews on the Kulturbund productions, seeking the Jewish perspective of the plays, and letting his reviews become less theatrical while emphasizing Jewish agendas.

It is unclear to what extent Eloesser believed in what he preached on Judaism and Zionism. Nevertheless, his fascinating life journey and unending passion are an inspiring monument of the changes he and his generation experienced, revealing the composition of the inner processes, the power of habit and upbringing, and the quest for an identity that would ease the psyche's trepidation, thus fostering a new set of values to uphold.

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