

Beyond the Pest Vicc

Sarcasm and derision: Jews about Jews in the Pesti Vicc

Pest Jokes are deeply rooted in Jewish humor. And Jewish humor is rooted in traditions. In his brilliant joke collection, *The Treasury of Humor*, Isaac Asimov suggests that Jewish stock jokes, which pop up in thousands of variations, are actually the collective subconscious of Jewry, a living memory of almost 5,500 years of Jewish culture.

Hundreds, if not thousands of books are trying to explain the quintessence of Jewish humor. Their authors mostly agree that it is essentially composed of "laughter through tears" and that it arose out of the grimmest chapters of Jewish history, taking place mostly in Eastern Europe. *William Novak* and *Moshe Waldoks*, the editors of *The Big Book of Jewish Humor* (Harper Perennial 1981) challenge this view claiming that the phrase wrongly emphasizes the humor that developed through suffering and implies that the Jew's endless struggle with adversity provides its dominant theme. "The evidence suggests otherwise. For every joke about anti-Semitism, poverty, or dislocation, there are several others dealing with less melancholic topics... What all these jokes have in common, aside from a remarkable combination of earthiness and subtlety that appeals to common folk and intellectuals alike, is not that they are primarily sad or wistful, but that they are wise and - no small matter for 19th century humor - genuinely funny even today."

Jewish humor is frequently self-critical and sometimes even self-deprecating. As Sigmund Freud noted in his book "The Joke and Its Relation to The Unconscious": "I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character." Some of Freud's followers have taken his observation and expanded it into a general insight into Jewish character. Nowak explains that "according to this view, Jewish humor arose as a way for Jews to cope with the hostility they found all around them, sometimes by using that hostility against themselves." Psychoanalyst Martin Grotjahn adds to this (*Dynamics of Jewish Jokes – Berger, 1987*): "Aggression turned against the self seems to be an essential feature of the truly Jewish joke. It is as if the Jew tells his enemies: 'You do not need to attack us. We can do that ourselves – and even better....'"

Jewish jokes in Budapest

In one of Brussels' main squares a huge crowd is gathering to demonstrate national identity. The police trying to separate demonstrators give instructions through loudspeakers: Flemish people please stand to the right. Walloons, please stand to the right. A fresh immigrant from Budapest, Kohn, taps the shoulder of a policeman. "Please Sir, and we Belgians, where should we stand?"

But if Jewish humor is so cosmopolitan and international, what is it that makes a Pest Jewish joke different from other Jewish jokes? After all, regular topics of Jewish jokes – scholars, rabbis, *chutzpas*, *schnorrers* and *schlemiels*; the eternal comedy of food, health and manners; business and family relations – are universal. These topics, naturally, are also present in Pest jokes, but the latter is much more charged politically. It reacts to actual events without delay and with embarrassingly clear insight. A Pest joke, even in the darkest times, can be a most dangerous weapon: it can ridicule political principles, discredit megalomaniac ambitions, and destroy carefully nurtured ideals and personal cults. In an autocratic, dictatorial regime joke telling on the sly is almost like a minor revolt; a sort of complicity between a joke teller and the listener.

One night after the German occupation, the Gestapo breaks into the house of Kohn. They pull him out of the bed and start off with two huge slaps in the face. "Do you know Schwarz?" "No." They punch him in the stomach and the face. "Do you know Schwarz?" "No I have never heard of him." Kicks into the ribs. "Well, do you know Klein?" The half-dead Kohn in a faint voice: "Then I would rather know Schwarz..."

Jewish jokes flourished on Pest streets during the German occupation, although those years when almost the entirety of Hungarian Jewry (600,000 people) perished, were not funny at all. With the liberation of Hungary by the Soviet army, Hungarian Jews may have been saved from total extinction, but, their country falling into another form of totalitarianism, the few joke makers who miraculously survived the Holocaust, again had a job to do.

In the early '50s, the elderly Kohn goes to the Communist Party boss at the factory. "Comrade Kovács, I have made up my mind, I wish to emigrate." Kovács is aghast: "But, Comrade Kohn, how can you make such a foolish thing?" "Comrade Kovács, in this country anti-Semitism rages again, I can't stay here anymore." "But, Comrade Kohn, why do you think, anti-Semitism rages again?" "Comrade Kovács, I chose hundred names from the telephone directory randomly, called each of them and when they picked up the phone, I just told them: 'All our problems are caused by the Jews and the bicyclists.' "But why the bicyclists?" asked the Party boss. "Exactly, Comrade Kovács. They all asked the same question!"

There was, however a major difference: unlike German Fascism, communist dictatorship did not single out Jews as their common enemy. While formerly, Jewish jokes served mainly to cure the Jews' own problems, in communist times Kohn and Grün (regular protagonists of the Pest Jewish jokes) fretted and fumed on behalf of the entire society. Jews and non-Jews had the same difficulties to grumble about: the lack of basic human rights and civil liberties, dwindling intellectual life, constant shortage of commodities, and so forth.

In the 1970s and 1980s Hungary was known as "the most cheerful barrack" and not without reason. János Kádár, an exceptionally popular communist leader, made a clever deal with his people: if you accept one-party rule, the presence of the Soviet army and restricted press, in turn you can enjoy relatively free travel and access to goodies offered by consumerism. The people happily compromised and turned their own opportunism into a laughing stock in vitriolic Pest jokes.

The omnipotent First Secretary of the Soviet Union, Leonid Brezhnev pays an official visit in Hungary. Brezhnev is surprised that security agents do not surround them. "Look János, is it always like this that you are just walking without security in the streets?" "Yes, Comrade Leonid."

“And aren’t you afraid that somebody would attack and hit you?” “But no, Leonid, in our country 95 percent of the people are honest citizens, they would never do such things.” “Well, how about the remaining 5%?” asks Brezhnev. “Oh, the remaining 5%?” comes the answer. “They are bound by Party principles...”

In a true democracy political jokes lose their flavor. Kohn and Grün with little Maurice and the other Jewish characters, calmed down after the collapse of the communist regimes and have remained quiet in the past two decades. But current times, with the economic crises, mass impoverishment, growing popularity of rightwing parties and increasing anti-Semitism, raise the nightmare of the 1930s. Kohn and Grün have good reasons to be scared of a renaissance of Pest Jewish jokes.

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Next: The Wisdom of the little Bunny: Animals in the Pesti jokes.