

Foreword – “Die schönsten Lieder der Ostjuden”

When ‘Die schönsten Lieder der Ostjuden’, forty-seven selected folk songs, was published by Jüdischer Verlag in 1920, the publishing house was experiencing a heyday in its existence. It was founded in 1902 as part of the Zionist movement in Berlin and its first programmes reflected a return to its own Jewishness, its history and its present. Five years earlier, in 1897, Theodor Herzl’s groundbreaking work ‘The Jewish State’ had been published. The founders of the Jewish publishing house wanted something new: to bring Western and Eastern Judaism closer together and create a ‘new Jewish self-evidence’ through ‘Jewish content’.

The publishing house owed its central position in the years following its foundation to the fact that German was the lingua franca of Judaism at the time. Among the co-founders of the Jewish publishing house were Martin Buber and Chaim Weizmann, Ephraim Moses Lilien, who also designed the publishing house’s logo and the layout of the books. Ahron Eliasberg steered the publishing house through the external and internal crises of the war and the immediate post-war period until Siegmund Kaznelson took over the publishing house in 1921. The 1920s were a decade of prosperity in which the publishing house brought out important standard works: the five-volume ‘Jewish Lexicon’, a complete German-language encyclopaedia of Judaism that is still valid today, the ten-volume ‘World History of the Jewish People’ by Simon Dubnow, the works of Theodor Herzl, Joseph Klausner’s book ‘Jesus of Nazareth’, the richly illustrated ‘World of the Bible’, the twelve-volume translation of the Babylonian Talmud by Lazarus Goldschmidt, works by S. J. Agnon, Scholem-Alejchem, Elias Auerberg, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Moses Mendelssohn and others.

During this heyday, ‘The Most Beautiful Songs of the Eastern Jews’ was published. Since its foundation, one of the publishing house’s most urgent goals was to bring Eastern and Western Jewry closer together, or more precisely: to open up the Eastern Jewish intellectual world, which was completely unknown in the West at the time, by translating Yiddish and Hebrew works. This also included the songs of the Eastern Jews - in 1920, as today, the discovery of a special world of its own, which at that time had its own place in the Scheunenviertel, with its ‘shuls’, prayer houses and small teaching centres, workshops and kosher restaurants in the Scheunenviertel in the centre of Berlin. One hundred years later, it is the fashionable centre of the metropolis, where little remains of the old quarter where Jews fleeing the pogroms in Tsarist Russia, Poland or Hungary found a home. The world of the Eastern Jews in their outer poverty and inner wealth. Fritz Mordechai Kaufmann collected the songs of the Eastern Jews and published them in 1920, for some a document of their origins, for others, Jews from the Western hemisphere, and non-Jewish readers the discovery of a new world of life and song. Martin Buber wrote about this world in his collection of Hasidic stories.

National Socialist Germany destroyed this world after 1933 and murdered most of its inhabitants. The Jewish publishing house was smashed in 1938 and re-established itself as a small company in Jerusalem. The publishing house returned to Germany in 1950 and is now a subsidiary of Suhrkamp Verlag, which is once again based in Berlin.

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