

Jewish Traces in the Inter-War Prose Writing of Assimilated Authors*



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SYNOPSIS

The study deals with the thematisation of Jewishness in the inter-war prose writing of four authors from assimilated Jewish families: Richard Weiner (born 1884), František Langer (born 1888), Karel Poláček (born 1892) and Egon Hostovský (born 1908). Whereas the prose of the last-named author has received considerable attention in contemporary literary history, in the case of the remaining authors their Jewishness remains on the periphery of scholarly interest, or is mentioned in works of a synthetic character. A detailed reading of the work of all three prose writers reveals that for them Jewish culture did not represent an essential literary theme, and indeed they barely mentioned it whatsoever. An exception relates to the abundant references to anti-Semitism in Karel Poláček's cycle of novels about the provincial town, which can be explained among other factors by the aggravated political situation in the second half of the 1930s.

KEYWORDS

Czech literature; Czech fiction of the first half of the 20th century; Jewish origin; assimilation; artistic depiction of Judaism.

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It is indisputable that a significant contribution was made to the shaping of literary and artistic events in the period between the two World Wars by authors of Jewish origin. These were mostly writers who had been raised in assimilated families, the members of which were not practising followers of the Jewish religion, and who outwardly and in their way of life did not differ from the majority Czech society. The same can be said of their work, which did not in any way signal their different origin, but rather the opposite: it would be difficult retrospectively to decipher their different ethnic background from their texts.¹ Nevertheless, even in the case of these fully

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¹ This would take its toll after the experience of the Second World War, and by contrast in the post-war period the Jewish origin of the authors would be emphasised, just as the



acculturated writers it is possible to find traces which refer to their origin, which naturally vary in their intensity and quantity.

This article deals with four² prose writers, who represent different authorial types and ways of depicting Jewishness artistically: Richard Weiner, František Langer, Karel Poláček and Egon Hostovský.³ They do not belong to the same generation of artists, which is evident from the years of their birth: between the oldest, Weiner (born 1884), and the youngest, Hostovský (born 1908), there is an age difference of almost a quarter of a century. Although between the wars Langer (born 1888) and Poláček (born 1892) were both members of the Čapek set, based around the newspaper *Lidové noviny*, they differ both in their creative beginnings and in their authorial poetics. František Langer made a significant mark on pre-war modernism both through his short stories and theatre plays, as well as in his activity on the editorial board of the journal *Umělecký měsíčník*, while Poláček did not start writing until after the Great War, and his talent was discovered by Josef Čapek. In contrast with Poláček, Langer focused far more intensely on the issue of justice and on questions of guilt and punishment, whereas Poláček, against his will, remained labelled as a humorist and satirist. Weiner, on the other hand, represents a textbook example of Czech expressionism, and from the late 1920s onwards he was also influenced by surrealism. Hostovský was also initially influenced by expressionism, though subsequently he increasingly profiled himself as a writer of psychological prose, after the Second World War with heavily existential elements.

Their individual fates also differed, marked at the beginning of the Nazi occupation by the introduction of the Nuremberg racial laws, which did not differentiate between assimilated and practising Jews, and took into account only genetic origin.⁴ Cynically speaking, Weiner had the good luck to die before this took place (1937), while Langer and Hostovský managed to escape into exile, where they survived the Second World War and subsequently engaged in post-war literary events, even if in a markedly different manner. Hostovský again went into exile after the communist putsch of 1948 and lived the rest of his life in the USA, dying in 1973 with a justified feeling that he had been unrecognised. Langer occupied a relatively high post in exile in London as the head of the medical corps of the Czechoslovak army (on the fate of František Langer

Holocaust and the Jewish tragedy in general would become a central theme of the work of these and other authors.

- 2 The article does not deal with all the Czech authors who were writing in the inter-war period and who came from assimilated Jewish families. We consider the selected writers to be representatives of various treatments of their Jewish origin and the thematising of Jewishness, in addition to which they are indisputably a part of the canon of modern Czech literature.
- 3 Authors of the inter-war period do not include Vojtěch Rakous (1862–1935), who in his prose writing programmatically thematised Jewish assimilation in rural Central Bohemia, from where he originated. Although his works were repeatedly published in the 1920s, his cycle of short stories *Vojkovičtí a přespelní* (Villagers and Outsiders), which also includes the well-known tales of Modche and Rézi, was published in 1910.
- 4 It is remarkable that the Nuremberg laws did not affect another distinguished representative of inter-war prose writing, Ivan Olbracht, whose mother was Jewish, since it was the mother's origin that was decisive in the racial selection conducted according to those laws.



in his wartime exile see Gilk 2018), and like many of his colleagues fell out of favour after the communists seized power, especially following the unsuccessful attempt of his son Jan Vladimír and two of his friends (one of whom was Marie Pujmanová's son Petr) to assassinate an agent of the state security service (Langer 2006, p. 267). After a decade of a certain degree of harassment from the state authorities, some of Langer's older theatre plays were published, followed in the first half of the 1960s by two collections of his short stories, and before his death in 1965 he managed to complete his acclaimed memoirs *Byli a bylo* (They Were and It Was, 1963). The only one of the four to become a direct victim of the Holocaust was Karel Poláček, who though he also considered fleeing into exile eventually decided to stay, paying with his life: in June 1943 he was transported to Terezín, where he enjoyed certain advantages, he then surprisingly survived the selection for Auschwitz following the transport in October 1944, and probably died in the march of death in January 1945 (see Gilk 2005).

However, let us return to the common aspects of the four above-named writers: their fathers were tradesmen, businessmen or merchants, and they had ceased to practise the Jewish religion and observe traditional customs for more or less pecuniary reasons. Because of the Sabbath, which is celebrated on Saturday, they lost profits to their Christian competitors, since Saturday was then a regular working day and the only free day was Sunday.⁵ Weiner was the oldest of five children of a relatively wealthy businessman, who ran a liquor store and a smaller operation producing confectioneries; the original plan had been for Richard to take over the family business from his father. Langer's father also owned a liquor store in the Královské Vinohrady district, which was then not yet a part of Greater Prague. Although František was the oldest, the business was eventually taken over by the middle son Josef; the youngest son Jiří, who was also active in literature, we shall come to later. Karel Poláček's father was a vendor of mixed goods with an operation on the main square in Rychnov nad Kněžnou; the author depicted his father in his prose in the form of the merchant Štědrý in the series of novels about the provincial town, and as the father of Petr Bajza in *Bylo nás pět* (There Were Five of Us, 1946). Hostovský was the youngest of eight children of the co-owner of a textile factory in Hronov.

A fundamental question that could bring us closer to the actual relationship of these prose writers towards their ethnic origin is the matter of whether they came into contact with any Jewish movement (Zionism, Czech-Jewish assimilationist circles) and representatives of these currents. In the case of Richard Weiner and Karel Poláček we have no record of any contact with Jewish political activity. Despite the fact that both Jindřich Chaloupecký (2013) and Věra Linhartová (1967) studied Weiner's correspondence stored in the Literary Archive of the Monument of National Literature in Strahov, neither mention any reflection on the part of the author concerning

5 A similar situation applied in the case of the anarchist firebrand František Gellner (1881–1914), whose father was a poor Jewish businessman in Mladá Boleslav. We do not include Gellner in this study for the reason that he was predominantly a poet (his only prose collection *Cesta do hor a jiné povídky* — Journey to the Mountains and Other Short Stories dates from 1914), and also because his untimely death prevented him from intervening in the inter-war period. We refer those interested in this poet to the recent monograph by Lucie Kořínková (2017).



his own origin. This is confirmed also by a segment of Weiner's relatively intimate correspondence, addressed to members of his family during the period of the First World War, which was edited by Vendula Drozdová in her master's thesis (Drozdová 2014). Poláček's later correspondence with his daughter Jiřina and his wife Dora Vaňáková, as well as the diary he kept in the first half of 1943, are also free of any such passages, unless of course we take into consideration his rather exceptional reflections on the current situation of the Jews, face to face with the ongoing Holocaust. Let us present as an example a passage attesting to the maintenance of hope until the last moment in the face of racial persecution, which is difficult to comprehend from our historical perspective (this concerns a letter to Dora dated 6 March 1943, by which time the actual fate of the Jews in the East was already being widely reported): 'Everything is possible, everything is known, it only continues to approach ever closer. But I still believe that our God shall not forsake us; he has already cast us down into the mire, but now he shall scrape us out of it' (Poláček 2001, p. 265).

In the case of František Langer the situation is markedly different, above all thanks to the journey taken by his younger brother Jiří, who as a student at the grammar school in Vinohrady began to take an interest in orthodox Judaism, and strictly observed the ritual prescriptions and traditional customs. Before the First World War he twice visited the Galician town of Belz, the centre of the Jewish Hasidic religious movement, in order to familiarise himself with their doctrine. During the war, when he established a friendship with Franz Kafka, he lived among the Hasidim in Mariánské Lázně, Mukachevo and Hungary, to where the rabbi from Belz moved together with his entire court. After the war he worked on the Zionist committee and in the Jewish community in Prague, and sporadically taught at a Jewish school. He spoke several languages, including Hebrew, Yiddish and Aramaic, and he travelled to Palestine and France. In 1939 he became gravely ill when fleeing from the Nazis by boat on the Danube, and he died in 1943 in Tel Aviv, where he is buried. In addition to his Hebrew-written poetry (an edition of which with a commentary in Czech was published in 2013 under the title *Básně a písně přátelství* — Poems and Songs of Friendship) and his reviews, his noteworthy works include especially the collection of Hasidic tales and legends *Devět bran* (Nine Gates, 1937), which has been translated into several world languages.

František dedicated one of the chapters of his book of memoirs *Byli a bylo* to Jiří. In it he refers among other matters to the bourgeois Jewish families of Prague who had almost perfectly adapted themselves to the majority Christian society, and describes the gradual assimilation in the two previous generations of his family, his rural grandfather and his merchant father. Langer recounts his brother's story and his interest in orthodox Judaism with great insight, and presents an especially colourful description of Jiří's return from his first stay in Belz in 1913:

My father informed me, almost with horror, that Jiří had returned. I understood his horror when I saw my brother. He stood before me in a worn out black cloak cut like a kaftan, flowing from his chin to the floor, and on his head he had a rounded, wide-brimmed hat made of black plush, thrust deep onto the back of his neck. He stood hunched, his cheeks and chin entirely covered in a ginger beard, and in front of his ears, almost down to his shoulders, there hung corkscrew curls of hair, payots. What was left of his face was a white, unhealthy complexion, and eyes that were by turns

tired and feverish. My brother had not come home from Belz to civilisation, he had brought Belz with him. [...]

It may be understood that at home we all found this religious or whatever kind of exhibitionism highly embarrassing. The whole family, like the entire Jewish community of that time had absolutely assimilated itself to all the outward manifestations and customs of our surroundings — did Jiří's appearance not now convict us all of pretence and hypocrisy? (Langer 2003a, pp. 178–180).

We are of the opinion that this represents an apposite characterisation of the stance of most Jewish families towards orthodox Judaism, which oscillates between mockery and horrified panic. The traditional Jewish life was by now so far removed from civilised Prague that it could not fail to trigger such emotions in those who lived there, regardless of their own roots. At the same time, František Langer was conscious of the legitimacy of Jiří's decision, in which he had entirely succumbed to the power of his original Jewishness and thereby placed a self-critical mirror before the 'de-nationalised' Jews of Prague. It is thus all the more astonishing that when František left for exile at the beginning of the Second World War, he felt far more endangered by his association with the ideas of Masaryk's democratic Czechoslovakia than by his Jewish origin (see Gilk 2018).

By far the greatest (and in contrast with František Langer, direct) experience with the Jewish community was maintained for several years by Egon Hostovský. Of all four assimilated Jewish writers, he was the only one to take notice of his Jewish identity, even if initially rather subconsciously: 'I used to ask myself where the Jewish motifs had come from in my first books' (Liehm 1990, p. 388). During his university studies in the 1930s he was actively involved in the Czech-Jewish movement. He was chairman of the Kapper Academic Association,⁶ and between 1931 and 1937 he edited its annual, the *Kalendář česko-židovský* (Czech-Jewish Calendar), in which he published short stories and chapters from forthcoming novels. Together with Jiří Langer and Otto Gabriel Muneles he even embarked on a journey to Poland and Subcarpathian Ruthenia in order to familiarise himself with the life of the Hasidim.

It is a natural consequence of Hostovský's interest in Jewish culture and religion that this was manifested in his prose writing. It is reflected in the title of his third book *Ghetto v nich* (The Ghetto in Them, 1928), and most strikingly in his literary apex of the inter-war period, the psychological novel *Dům bez pána* (House Without a Master, 1937). Because considerable attention has been focused on manifestations of Jewishness in Hostovský's work recently (Papoušek 2012; Kroulíková 2016; Holý 2018), and also due to lack of space, we will not deal with this relatively complex problem here. We shall only draw attention to two recent studies which present a thoroughly erudite analysis of partial aspects of Jewishness in Hostovský's inter-war prose texts:

6 Kateřina Čapková wrote of the association that its 'young generation of Czech Jews [in the inter-war period] was by now more or less fully integrated into the Czech nation. They had grown up in a Czech environment, attended Czech schools and taken part actively in Czech cultural life. The majority of them had no closer relationship to the Jewish religion' (Čapková 2005, p. 137). Hostovský evidently resisted this characterisation through his interest in Jewishness.



Milan Hanyš contemplates the reflection of anti-Semitism (Hanyš 2020), and Ondřej Pavlík compares manners of adaptation of the Hasidic legend in the work of Jiří Langer, Ivan Olbracht and Egon Hostovský (Pavlík 2021).

Throughout his entire life, Richard Weiner had to reconcile himself to a relatively complicated psycho-sexual mechanism. He was distinguished by his hypersensitivity, through which he observed the incomprehensibility and complexity of the world, full of irrational, inexplicable traps. For his whole life he suffered from low self-esteem, which also sprung from his closet homosexuality and a feeling of lack of recognition from readers and literary critics. This was accompanied by an awareness of metaphysical guilt, which he perhaps best expressed and identified in the short story *Prázdná židle* (The Empty Chair — in the collection *Škleb* [Grimace], 1919). A personality profile of Weiner is convincingly presented by Jindřich Chaloupecký, and documented among other things by a quote from a letter to his family dated 5 December 1910: 'I'm doing well, except for the fact that it sometimes strikes me that I'm completely useless' (Chalupecký 2013, p. 9). More precise characterisations of Weiner's personality were chosen by Karel Čapek, who described him in his obituary as a 'shy and gentle eccentric', a 'great sufferer' and a 'man of pain', who was 'oddly lonely, preoccupied and volatile' (Čapek 1937, p. 5).

Weiner could not escape the feeling that life was slipping through his fingers, or that 'the ground is sinking beneath my feet' (Chalupecký 2013, p. 66) until his untimely death. This was most probably the reason why literary scholars also characterise him as an author whose poetics are distinguished by existential aspects. Vladimír Papoušek writes of an 'anticipation of existential figurativeness' (Papoušek 2004, p. 175) and an 'interface between an avant-garde and an existential orientation' (*ibid.*, p. 182), while Petr Málek writes of an inner dialogism that 'from the beginning is of the nature of existential discord and inner personal tension' (Málek 2009, p. 31). Nonetheless, like Jiří Holý (2018, p. 14) we are of the opinion that the existential motifs in Weiner's work are not explicitly linked with Jewishness; besides his prose writing we also do not find any documents of this in either his journalism or his published correspondence.

Although it is true that his poetry collection *Usměvavé odřikání* (Smiling Renunciation, 1914) contains the poem *Ahasver*, referring to the archetypal figure of the eternally Wandering Jew, this character is such a universal symbol that it cannot be associated solely with Jewish culture, however much it comes out of this tradition. This is attested to by the numerous appearances of this figure in literature from the early modern era to the present day. In Weiner's work, the character of Ahasver is moreover repeatedly interconnected with the motif of the inexplicable guilt and damnation of man, which is characteristic of his writing (Chalupecký 2013, p. 13).

We can find even fewer Jewish motifs in the work of František Langer, since they do not appear either in his neoclassicist short stories or in his legionnaire prose writing or journalism, despite the fact that he had come into contact with the Eastern Jews during his military campaign in Siberia, as illustrated by the scant mentions of their existence in his collection of short stories *Železný vlk* (Iron Wolf, 1923). We would search in vain for any Jewish traces in his theatre plays or in his only novel, *Zázrak v rodině* (A Miracle in the Family, 1929), which presents an original portrayal of Prague society in the time of the First Czechoslovak Republic. The only exception is the short story *Colonia Popper*, which he published in the spring of 1932 in the maga-

zine *Pestrý týden*, and which was later included in the collection *Filatelistické povídky* (Stamp Collecting Tales, 1964). In this the stamp collector Král narrates the story of a poor Jewish beggar, also known as schnorrer Popper, who is sent by the Prague religious community (because he cost them too much money) to the southern tip of South America, to the Tierra del Fuego among the gold diggers. Although here too he lives in a very similar manner, by selling trinkets and begging, at the same time on his errands he begins to deal with the letters of adventurers, as a postmaster. He then makes an arrangement with a Chilean print works, the owner of which is a Czech compatriot, to print him special stamps bearing the title Colonia Popper. He sends these stamps to the Prague stamp collector, who mistakenly believes that Popper has discovered a seam of gold and established his own colony in no man's land. After the schnorrer's return to Bohemia, when his illegal stamp business is exposed, Mr. Král learns the truth and Popper is eventually sent to the workhouse. The short story thus oscillates between a (as it transpires, fictional) fairytale about a pauper who achieves unprecedented success in a foreign land, and a text which affirms Jewish enterprise and ingenuity.

What we might consider most surprising is the fact that a relatively large amount of explicit mentions relating to the Jewish element can be found in the writing of Karel Poláček. In two cases they are present immediately in the titles of his works, namely in the collections *Povídky izraelského vyznání* (Tales of Israelite Faith, 1926) and *Židovské anekdoty* (Jewish Anecdotes, 1933). The second title, which met with a considerable critical reception, is a collection of the traditional popular sub-genre of anecdotes, which remains in favour to this day. However, we do not know the extent to which this actually concerned stories which Poláček had heard and recorded, and the extent to which he concocted the individual tales himself, taking as his basis the patterned regularities of this sub-genre. In any case, the collection fulfils and does not problematise our tradition of perceiving the negative characteristics of the Jewish community, which include 'calculation, wiliness, pragmatic adaptation and garrulousness' (Holý 2016, p. 310).

We can find similar character traits also in the protagonists of the collection *Povídky izraelského vyznání*, in which the author allegedly attempted to 'present a faithful image of the specific attitude of middle-class Czech Jews from the time of the First Republic towards minor events of everyday life' (Hájková 1999, p. 55). Most of the short stories are built upon a dialogical principle, in which what is fundamental is the comic effect of the protagonist's stance in the given situation, thus combining the character and situational components into one. As an example let us present the pair of short stories based around the central figure of Adolf Blum. First of all in *Rozhovor o náboženských otázkách* (A Conversation about Religious Questions) he intends to abandon the Jewish faith because of the high religious tax. However, after Mr. Blau begins to describe the delicacies of Jewish kosher cuisine that he would miss out on, Blum reconsiders his original decision, and presents himself as a cavalier who does not mind spending money on something worthwhile. In the following text, entitled *Následky vystoupení z církve* (Consequences of Leaving the Faith), though Mr. Blum does indeed leave the faith of his ancestors, he continues to demand that he too be congratulated on the occasion of Jewish festivals, using the excuse of the children, who need to be taught respect. The story ends with a humorous reconciliation: 'Mrs. Hermína acknowledged



that pedagogical moment of congratulation. It was therefore resolved that Mr. Blum would be congratulated on Jewish festivals, not because it was important to Mr. Blum, but because it was the right thing to do' (Poláček 1995, p. 185).

While in these shorter texts the image of Jews is more or less unified and most certainly does not defy stereotypes, in the cycle of novels about the provincial town the representation of Jewishness is far more diverse. It is already clear from the leit-motif of *Okresní město* (Provincial Town, 1936), which is an evening promenade on the square, that the Jewish community of the town is subject to segregation:

On the northern side there walked those to whom it fell to rule the town. On the opposite side there mingled the journeymen, students and daughters of craftsmen. And in the middle of the square, along the diagonal cobblestones, there swayed the Israelites. Beneath their hard hats they carried their business concerns. Life in the provincial town was as regular as the changing of the seasons. The northern promenade could never mix with the noisy promenade of the craftsmen and students, just as winter would never join with summer. And the diagonal cobblestones would be different from both for eternity (Poláček 1994, p. 66).⁷

Of the numerous inhabitants of the provincial town, a significant group in terms of the portrayal of the Jewish element is a gathering of townfolk who regularly meet by the Merciful Brother pharmacy, from where, fortified by hard liquor, they go on to the local brothel. These include the forwarding agent and coal merchant Wachtl, who does not like to be recognised as a Jew: 'As a result he drank beer, clamoured around in pubs, liked to brawl and sing bass so as to resemble a Christian. In the amateur dramatic group he played officers, bandits, strict fathers of reprobate daughters, conspirators and Hussites who suffer for their faith' (ibid., p. 30). In his effort to ingratiate himself and deny his Jewish origins he even goes so far as to tell anti-Semitic jokes to his companions.

Wachtl's opposite number is the retired postmaster Pecián, a sworn anti-Semite: 'He spoke of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, about a secret council of Jews named the Sanhedrin. He had many books which revealed the plans of an international Jewish conspiracy' (ibid., p. 53).⁸ While the former tract, originally published in Russia in 1903, represents a falsified text of a plan for the world domination of the Jewish nation, and ranks as part of the traditional armoury of anti-Semites, the name of the conspiratorial association is lesser known. The term Sanhedrin (from the Greek Sunedrion, meaning council), or also Syndedrion (Great Council) appears in the Old Testament (primarily in the Book of Ezra), and is also mentioned in the New Testament Acts of the Apostles. It was also referred to as the Supreme Court in ancient

⁷ This arrangement takes its toll in the fourth part, *Vyprodáno* (Sold Out, 1939), when the individual groups, under the influence of the chaos of war, become intermingled. Nonetheless, this does not represent a sign of acceptance of Jewish otherness, but rather a general disintegration of the social hierarchy and set of values that the First World War brought to the provincial town.

⁸ Further documents of Pecián's coarse anti-Semitism are presented by Holý (2016, pp. 293–313).



Israel, which was composed of seventy-one members headed by the High Priest, and it functioned during the era of the 'Second Temple' (516 BC — 70 AD). Among other matters the Sanhedrin judged Jesus and some of the apostles.⁹ The Supreme Court is mentioned in the New Testament — alongside the Pharisees, priests, Jews, Pontius Pilate and the Romans — as 'one of the suspects' in the crucifixion of Jesus, or as the body that ordered his arrest (Much 2011, pp. 73–76).

Although such a possibility can almost certainly be ruled out (*ibid.*, pp. 25–26), it is clear as to why this appellation for the Supreme Court or council entered the anti-Semitic discourse. It makes no difference whether Poláček was basing this on his own experience or using the term Sanhedrin as an illustration of a re-evaluation of its meaning and ideological misuse by the enemies of Jewry. Nevertheless, motifs of anti-Semitism do not appear in other of Poláček's texts, which is probably linked with the time of origin of the cycle of novels; in the second half of the 1930s — under the influence of reports of the brutal wave of anti-Semitism in neighbouring Germany — anti-Semitism again began to take on monstrous dimensions also in the Czech lands.

In conclusion, let us summarise that our discourse here has documented a broad portfolio of appearances of Jewish motifs in writers originating from assimilated Jewish families. Whereas in the case of Richard Weiner and František Langer they play a marginal, essentially negligible role, in the prose works of Karel Poláček and Egon Hostovský we find them relatively frequently. However, in Poláček — unlike Hostovský — these motifs do not contribute markedly to the semantic structure of the prose texts, and serve exclusively as a characterising feature of the environment or the protagonists.

Nevertheless, this finding cannot refute the fact of the consummate incorporation of the predominant part of Jewish culture within the majority Czech culture, in which issues of national origin were not of decisive importance. After the beginning of the Second World War, under the influence of the Nazi racial laws and the subsequent process of the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question', this situation was inverted into its opposite. The theme of Jewishness, in particular the suffering of the Jews during the Second World War, became a more or less conjunctural theme of the whole of the post-war literature (a situation which persists to this day), irrespective of whether it is written about by Jewish authors who survived the Holocaust, their descendants, or writers of non-Jewish origin, who naturally constitute the majority.

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⁹ At a much later time a number of attempts were made to restore this institution, of which we may mention the Grand Sanhedrin convened by Napoleon Bonaparte, or efforts to re-establish the Sanhedrin after the creation of Israel in 1948.



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