

## CONCLUSION



In this study, I have sought to provide an overview of Viennese Jewish *Volkssänger* while simultaneously investigating the question of their Jewishness. I have focused primarily on burlesques and farces that Jewish *Volkssänger* either wrote or performed, as a method for analyzing their Jewish self-understanding. Given this focus, it is also important to ask whether the insights we gain by investigating their conception of Jewishness pertain solely to the fictional characters in their works or whether we may also draw conclusions about Jewish *Volkssänger* and their personal experiences in the real world.

I have proposed to answer this question by plumbing Albert Hirsch's biographical details, specifically his professional life. Chapter 3 offered insights into his sometimes difficult relationship with his colleagues. At the height of the "*Volkssänger* war," he presented his colleagues with statements that speak to his conception of Jewishness. At the same time, I have ascertained numerous similarities between individual protagonists in his plays and Hirsch's biography. We may reasonably conclude that his farces more or less clearly trace his own personal understanding of Jewishness. Because there are numerous similarities between the portrayal of Jewishness in Hirsch's performances and the plays penned by other Jewish *Volkssänger*, I argue that their manuscripts and performances provide insight into their self-understanding as well, no matter how fluid it may have been.

These *Volkssänger* plays, I assert, repeatedly address certain topics, despite that a variety of authors penned them and numerous ensembles performed them. This repetition potentially indicates that they were topoi that the public both recognized and anticipated seeing in the performances. But these themes may have also preoccupied Viennese Jews (or at least a portion of the Viennese Jewish population) to a considerable extent and therefore consistently appeared in theatrical works. Seen in this light, these farces represent important sources regarding everyday life among Viennese Jewry.

One of these themes that these farces often incorporate is suicide or the threat of suicide by plunging into the Danube. As I discussed in the introduction by

analyzing the example of Anna Katz, more than a few Jews chose this form of suicide. The high number of suicides or attempted suicides, carried out in this manner according to a culturally prescribed pattern, may have been the subject of heated debate among both Jews and non-Jews in Vienna, explaining why the theme found its way into the works of Viennese *Volkssänger*.<sup>1</sup>

Another frequent theme in these theatrical works is marital discord brought on by the reversal of traditional gender roles. In these burlesques, women often steer the course of everyday events in the household and oppress their husbands. An emblematic example of a play that features this theme is *The Journey to Grosswardein*. Lipperl and Maxi flee from their wives because the women behave in an authoritarian manner and try to dictate their husbands' behavior through force. Comic effect may have been one reason why the play depicts the Jewish man as weak and the Jewish woman as masculine. But it also likely served another purpose. This depiction of "reversed" gender roles also served, I argue, to invalidate the stereotype of the effeminate Jew, a widespread idea in the late nineteenth century. We see the social relevance of this concept in the fact that even the sciences, in particular medicine and anthropology, actively engaged with the stereotype and attempted to substantiate it with facts. In a series of studies, physicians and anthropologists asserted that certain physical characteristics and physiological processes were more prevalent among male Jews than among male non-Jews—qualities that usually characterized non-Jewish women as well. These included a low chest circumference, indicating a weak physical condition, the alleged inability to perform military service, as well as a high susceptibility to nervous diseases. The feminization of the Jewish man was thus determined by concrete characteristics, ostensibly proven by empirical evidence.<sup>2</sup>

The "effeminate" Jew is a common trope in *Volkssänger* theatrical works. We see this in *The Apostle of Schottenfeld* in the scene where Mr. Goldmann begins to totter in the face of Father Lorenz's request to give him 1,000 gulden. His wife tersely comments on his reaction, stating, "I've known for a long time now that you are a weakling with no virility."<sup>3</sup> In the play *Im Schwarzen Rössl*, performed by the Budapest Orpheum Society in 1899, the Warsaw merchant Kiewe rents a room in the hotel Im Schwarzen Rössl for a few days with his mistress. As a cover for this assignation, he tells his wife that he has been summoned for military exercises. She does not believe him and secretly follows him. When Kiewe catches sight of his wife descending the stairs at the hotel, he is deeply shocked and afraid that she will beat him.<sup>4</sup> Again, the Jewish woman is portrayed as violent and her husband as a coward. As a final example, we identify another form of female dominance in *Wrestlers at the Kosher Restaurant* (see chapter 2). In this case, there is no threat of physical violence, but Yentl is mentally superior to her husband Zalma and therefore regrets marrying him. Zalma is dependent on her and seems unable to manage the challenges of life without her.

Just as the *Volkssänger* take up the notions of a Jewish nose and Jewish speech patterns and attempt to strip them of their antisemitic sentiment, the distorted portrayal of the Jewish man was intended to dissolve the widespread prejudice of his effeminacy into laughter. The frequent reference to the feeble Jewish man underscores that Viennese Jews were preoccupied with the stereotype of the effeminate Jew and endeavored to respond to it. An analysis of *Volkssänger* plays, I have argued throughout this study, allows us insight into the everyday life of the Jews around 1900, their sensitivities, problems, and concerns.

The explorations I have undertaken in this book began with the question why the topic of Jews in the general Viennese popular culture around 1900 has remained relatively unexplored. One of the reasons for this neglect may be the analytical tools that historians use. In the following chapters, I have introduced Jewish *Volkssänger* groups and a series of plays that they produced and performed. By analyzing these works and their historical contexts, I have deduced several features that constituted Jewishness among the Jewish *Volkssänger*. Their relations with non-Jewish colleagues, in summary, were notably complex and interwoven. Dichotomous categorizations cannot account for this complexity. These Jewish–non-Jewish interactions were also fraught with tension, and anti-Jewish hostility sometimes expressed itself. Antisemitic sentiment, however, was likely less pronounced among the *Volkssänger* than in other areas of Viennese society.

## Notes

1. Hannes Leidinger, *Die Bedeutung der Selbstausslöschung: Aspekte der Suizidproblematik in Österreich von der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zur Zweiten Republik* (Innsbruck: Studien-Verlag, 2012).
2. Because many scholars have already written about the prejudice of the “effeminate Jew” based on physical and medical characteristics, I do not discuss it in detail here. On this, see in particular Sander L. Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Klaus Hödl, *Die Pathologisierung des jüdischen Körpers: Antisemitismus, Geschlecht und Medizin im Fin de Siècle* (Vienna: Picus Verlag, 1997), 164–314.
3. Albert Hirsch, “Der Apostel vom Schottenfeld,” *Niederösterreichisches Landesarchiv* [NÖLA in subsequent citations] (Theaterzensur), Box 21/22 (1902), 51.
4. Bernhard Haskel, *Im schwarzen Rössl*, NÖLA (Zensur), Box 115/35 (1898), 81.