

Book review

Oring, Elliott (ed.) (2018). *The First Book of Jewish Jokes: The Collection of L. M. Büschenthal*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

In his foreword to *The First Book of Jewish Jokes: The Collection of L. M. Büschenthal*, Elliott Oring openly admits that the title of the book is “a deliberate provocation” and is “demonstrably false” (p. vii). These claims are not just eye-catching. They stimulate interest in the history of the publication of Jewish jokes and the notion of the “Jewish joke” itself, as well as reflection on the very idea of what a joke is. The book addresses all these aspects, offering a curious blend of academic analysis and examples of early 19th century humour.

The book is a logical continuation of Elliott Oring’s long line of research into Jewish humour (Oring 1981, 1983, 1984, 1992: 112-121, 2003: 116-128). It presents many of the author’s theoretical postulates about Jewish jokes in a concise form, but the main body of the volume is the joke book itself. Oring thus provides readers with an opportunity to test his ideas about Jewish jokes on a rich set of empirical material. Going back to one of the first known sources of Jewish jokes, he helps us to trace their genesis.

The First Book of Jewish Jokes consists of two main parts. The first part is titled “Introduction” and provides a theoretical overview of the joke collection. The overview is subdivided into two chapters. The first chapter offers a detailed description and analysis of the joke collection by Lippmann Moses Büschenthal, which constitutes the core of the book. Elliott Oring begins with a discussion of how a “Jewish joke” is conceptualised, thus pursuing his quest for “the origin and the development of this idea [of Jewish jokes]” (Oring 1992: 114). He refers to Sigmund Freud and other early and contemporary theorists who wrote about Jewish jokes and identifies several features that are claimed to characterise these jokes, most notably their self-deprecating nature (pp. 3-4). Other commonly held assumptions about Jewish jokes include: they are allegedly superior to those of other nations, employ a distinct and peculiar logic, and serve a compensatory function. However, Elliott Oring challenges these assumptions and advocates for a comparative approach as a way to put them to the test. According to Oring, there has yet been no comprehensive comparative study (for examples of comparative studies of some aspects of Jewish humour with non-Jewish humour, see Davies 2002: 51-107; 2011: 113-153); consequently, it is more accurate to speak of “a mythology of Jewish jokes” (p. 7) rather than to assert a definitive set of features these jokes possess. The author also suggests his own definition, which approaches the matter from a phenomenological perspective, defining Jewish jokes as any jokes that have been “conceptualised as uniquely, distinctly, or characteristically reflective of, evocative of, or conditioned by the Jewish people and their circumstance” (Oring 1983: 262; 1992: 114-115).

Elliott Oring then looks at the Jewish joke collections of the past through the prism of this definition. He argues that jokes were not initially considered to be the core genre of Jewish folklore; rather, the perception of the Jewish people as inherently humorous likely originated only in late 18th to early 19th century Germany (p. 9).

This theoretical background is necessary for a further discussion of the figure of Lippmann Moses Büschenthal and his joke collection. After tracing Büschenthal's biography, Oring provides a thorough analysis of the joke book that he compiled in 1812. Oring discusses the generic peculiarities of the jokes in this collection and the most recurrent topics of these jokes, pointing out that, on the whole, the items in Büschenthal's collection do not bear the distinctive features that are customarily ascribed to Jewish jokes. Oring also discusses the relation between Büschenthal's collection and an earlier publication of Jewish jokes, "Der Judenfreund", which was published in 1810 under the pseudonym of Judas Ascher. As some 75% of joke texts in Büschenthal's collection were appropriated from Ascher's publication, Oring pays particular attention to the texts and topics that were present in Ascher, but that did not find their way into Büschenthal's book.

Finally, at the end of this chapter, Elliott Oring notes that Büschenthal's collection is not only (probably) the first book of Jewish jokes that was published by an identifiable author, but also the one that "offers the first published theory of the Jewish joke" (p. 21). This theory explains the Jewish wit by the oppression the nation had to endure. Oring also interprets Büschenthal's intention to publish his collection (prefaced by a brief theoretical explanation) in the context of the ideas that educated Jews of the early 19th century wanted to convey to their compatriots and non-Jews alike. He also emphasises the heuristic potential that the first collection of Jewish jokes had for the discourse about the Jewish joke as a concept.

The second chapter of the Introduction provides an overview of the life of Jewish communities in Central and Western Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. A lot of attention is dedicated to the Jewish populations' economic status, rights of settlement, relations with the rulers of European countries, and, most importantly, their emancipation. Oring positions the issue of emancipation in the context of intellectual and philosophical movements (Enlightenment and Romanticism) and major political events of that time (the French Revolution, Napoleonic Wars, and their aftermath). He shows that the process of emancipation was not linear or homogeneous, but displayed significant variation even within any single country. The author also pays attention to the work of some of the most prominent Jewish thinkers of the time, namely Moses Mendelssohn and David Friedländer. This chapter helps the reader to understand the macro-context in which the jokes from Büschenthal's collections emerged and were published. Unfortunately, the chapter does not pay the same amount of attention to the micro-level contexts of Jewish communities' life: information about family relations, education, and everyday life is scarce, although it could also have contributed to a better understanding of the jokes in the book.

The Introduction is followed by the text of Büschenthal's joke collection itself. The collection begins with a short foreword in which the compiler contextualises Jewish humour in wider Jewish culture and history. The joke collection consists of 106 numbered texts and concludes with biographical and autobiographical accounts of Nehemie [Nehemiah] Jehuda Leib, a Jew from Poland who had encountered many misfortunes, travelled a lot to make ends meet, tried to rob a fellow Jew in desperation, and was charged by a German court. While no explanation is offered for the inclusion of these non-humorous accounts, they provide another lens into the realities of the oppression that many Jews experienced at the time (pp. 19-20).

The jokes themselves cover a considerable variety of topics. A significant part of the jokes revolves around economic activities, primarily trade and usury. Other activities, such as medicine, scholarship, travelling, etc., are also reflected in the jokes. Private life (family, sex) is not particularly prominent, but still did make its way into the collection. While many jokes feature interactions between a Jew and a Gentile, a large number of jokes only feature Jewish characters. When interactions between Jews and Gentiles do take place, it is mostly the Jew who outwits his opponents. However, some of the jokes' humorous effect is based on the

stupidity of Jewish characters, often shown through their actions outside of a “verbal duel” with another character.

Many of the joke texts in Büschenthal’s collection are accompanied by notes that refer to similar jokes in other collections. Some of the notes also contain background information required for understanding the joke, for example, a brief biography of a joke character or a cultural reference that was mentioned in the joke. When a joke corresponds to one of Uther’s folktale types, the note also mentions the relevant type.

Büschenthal’s collection is then followed by the joke texts that had appeared in Judas Ascher’s publication two years earlier but were left out by Büschenthal. These, too, are accompanied by notes that provide further context. Many of Ascher’s jokes that were excluded from Büschenthal’s collection revolve around the same themes as the ones that did make it in; others, however, focus on darker and more violent topics, such as duelling, flogging or execution, which were mostly neglected by Büschenthal (p. 18).

The jokes in both collections vary significantly, both in terms of their structure and content. While some of them are longer narratives that can be referred to as joke tales (Krikmann 2008), others are typical canned jokes with a punchline. A lot of the jokes are deeply rooted in the context of late 18th and early 19th century Jewish life. Understanding this context is, thus, often a prerequisite for comprehending the jokes, even if it does not necessarily guarantee that the jokes will amuse the reader.

However, the book does achieve something more profound than amusement. The two joke collections it is based on demonstrate that cultural aspects of humour should not be taken for granted. The incomprehensibility of the humour of some texts suggests that even such an ostensibly well-established category of humour as the Jewish joke used to look and function very differently from the way we understand the term today. The jokes in Büschenthal’s and Ascher’s collections might not elicit the same response in today’s audiences as they did in the compilers’ contemporaries, but that is exactly why they are significant: they offer us a glimpse of what people referred to as humour two hundred years ago, and deepen our understanding of the changes in this very concept. Similarly, some of the theoretical postulates expressed in the Introduction also extend beyond Jewish humour. Jokes in the *First Book of Jewish Jokes* make us think how ephemeral our understanding of humour is and how we cannot lift the serious burden of social and economic context even when we are laughing light-heartedly.

Anastasiya Fiadotava
University of Tartu, Estonia
zhvaleuskaya@gmail.com

References

- Davies, C. (2002). *Mirth of Nations*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Davies, C. (2011). *Jokes and Targets*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Krikmann, A. (2008). “ATU Jokes”: Old and abandoned. Presentation at the International Society for Humour Studies Conference, Alcalá de Henares, Spain, July 7th–11th. Retrieved November 9, 2018 from http://www.folklore.ee/~kriku/HUUMOR/KRIKMANN_ATU_ready.pdf
- Oring, E. (1981). *Israeli Humour: The Content and Structure of the Chizbat of the Palmah*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Oring, E. (1983). ‘The people of the joke: On the conceptualization of a Jewish humour’. *Western Folklore* 42 (4), pp 261-271.

- Oring, E. (1984). *The Jokes of Sigmund Freud: A Study in Humor and Jewish Identity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Oring, E. (1992). *Jokes and Their Relations*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Oring, E. (2003). *Engaging Humour*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.