"Martin Philippson (1846-1916), an (in)voluntary Grenzgänger? The case of a Jewish scholar in Wilhelminian Germany." 

Warland, Geneviève

Abstract

The German Jewish historian Martin Philippson can be viewed as an authentic representative of a “Germany transnational”. As an historian, he always tried to build a bridge between the Belgian, French and German historical science. He also considered history as being best understood from a transnational point of view. As a Jew, he was probably helped by his family’s network to get a chair at the University of Brussels. Moreover, he viewed his Belgian experience as a tool for a better understanding of the Jewish condition in Wilhelminian Germany. It is upon this experience that he committed himself to improving the Jews’ social and political situation after his return to Berlin. Last but not least, Martin Philippson’s language abilities and openness of mind towards foreign cultures were the precondition of his successful mediating activities.

Document type: Communication à un colloque (Conference Paper)

Référence bibliographique


Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/2078.1/156314
[Downloaded 2019/04/20 at 17:52:40]
Martin Philippson (1846-1916), a (in) voluntary Grenzgänger?  

The case of a Jewish scholar in Wilhelminian Germany  

Paper delivered to the Eniugh conference, Paris, 4-7 September 2014  

Geneviève Warland  

Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium

Martin Philippson is a fascinating figure in the intellectual exchanges between Belgium and France, on the one side, and Germany, on the other. He also mediated between two cultural heritages: one German (he received a philological and historical education at the universities of Bonn and Berlin) and one Jewish, given his family’s background and his ties with the Jewish community. Actually, the Philippsons are a very interesting German Jewish family of prominent rabbis, scholars, educators, journalists, doctors, bankers and scientists. One of the best known is Martin Philippson’s father: the rabbi Ludwig Philippson (1811-1889), founder of the leading Jewish journal in Germany pursuing the ideal of creating a synthesis of Jewish faith and German culture: the Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums. Under the perspective of intercultural mediation and activities, it would also be worthwhile to follow the trajectories of Martin’s brothers: the banker Franz Philippson (1851-1929), who established a bank in Brussels and acted as a great philanthropist for the city of Brussels and for international Jewish associations, as well as the geographer Alfred Philippson (1864-1953) who created the geographical institute at the University of Bonn and was a major representative of his field in Germany, endowed with an international reputation. In my paper, I shall focus on the mediating activities of Martin, the historian1.

The paper pursues three aims: firstly, it offers a case study in the field of transnational historiography. Martin Philippson’s historical work illustrates the professionalization and the internationalization of historical science at the end of the 19th century (part I). Secondly, it asks the question of whether German anti-Semitism was at the origin of a kind of compulsory transnationalism of the German intellectual Jewry (part II). Thirdly, it delineates the ‘ideal typical’ capacities of a cultural mediator (part III).

---

1 See Johanna Philippson,” The Philippson, a German Jewish Family 1775-1933”, LBIYB, 7, 1962, pp. 95-118.
Part I: Martin Philippson as a ‘cross-historian’ between Belgium, France and Germany

Some studies have shown the importance of scholarly exchanges at the end of the 19th century. The historian’s craft was most concerned by this trend as demonstrated by the creation of the international congresses of historians in 1900 (Erdmann, 1987). Hosting several international exhibitions (1894, 1897, 1905, 1910, 1911, 1913) before the First World War and being the seat of international organizations (International Socialist Bureau, International Institute of Bibliography, Union of International Associations, etc.), Belgium was a kind of model of internationalism (Laqua, 2013). It is particularly true for the Belgian historical science, which was willing to develop contacts with foreign historians and historical institutions (Middell/Warland, 2012). German historical science was considered at that time as being at the top of the professionalization and institutionalization of historical studies in Europe and in the world.

Against this background, Martin Philippson took an offer at the freethinking University of Brussels (ULB) in 1879. With the nomination of Martin Philippson, who had been educated at one of the most renowned Prussian universities, the University of Bonn, the ULB could enhance the prestige of its Faculty of arts. Martin Philippson was in charge of lessons in political history (Ancient times, Middle Ages and Modern times) and of practical exercises in history, which were viewed as the finest method for working professionally with sources (Fredericq, 1898).

Apparently, Philippson was appreciated as a professor and a colleague. He became Dean of the Faculty of Arts and was in 1890 elected as Rector of the University of Brussels. In one aspect, he did not succeed in his career at the ULB: he could not manage to establish an historical seminar based on the German model (Fredericq, 1898). He failed because of the lack of financial support and of the low student number.

Martin Philippson’s Belgian period was very productive: he wrote several books in French and in German, mainly on political and religious matters in Europe in the 16th-17th centuries (France, England and Spain). Moreover he could not constrain himself to considering national history within the nation’s narrow frame, as shown by his Geschichte Preussen or Heinrich IV und Philipp III. Die Begründung des französischen Übergewichtes in Europa. 1596-1610, to take only two examples. Philippson’s books were reviewed in the leading historical reviews, be they English, German or French: English Historical Review, Historische Zeitschrift, Revue Historique.
Martin Philippson’s publication’s strategies also demonstrate his will to cross the borders: his books were published in Berlin as well as in Paris; his articles appeared in the *Revue Historique* and in the *Historische Zeitschrift*. He really envisioned himself as building a bridge between Belgium, France and Germany. Philippson’s reviews of German literature on the 17-19th centuries for the *Revue Historique* (1901 and 1907) express best his willingness to inform the French-speaking readership on German historical publications.

**Part II: Martin Philippson as representative for Jewish internationalism/transnationalism**

Appointed at the University of Brussels, Martin Philippson was an unwilling migrant in Belgium for more than 10 years. His nomination was not only due to the fact that he was a brilliant and promising representative of the German historical science, but also to the fact that he was unable to get a position as a full professor in Germany because he was a Jew ("Ein Jude als Historiker für deutsche Geschichte war undenkbar", A. Mehmel, *Alfred Philippson, Bürger auf Widerruf*, p. 14; “the secret regulation of the Prussian government not to promote a Jew to a full professorship”, J. Philippson, LBIYB, p. 3).

I wonder if the creation of Martin Philippson’s position at the University of Brussels was due to the intervention of his Jewish networks (it is a case I still have to elucidate). The University of Brussels was a quite recent creation of the Liberals and freethinkers in the new Belgian State (1834). As opposed to the much older Catholic University of Leuven, it followed the freethinking principles, which implied the strict independence from all religious obedience. The University staff, professors and students came from liberal, socialist and Jewish circles. Worth mentioning here is the influence of the Jewish family Errera, several members of which were professors at the ULB. They were also active in Belgian politics as members of the Liberal party. The Erreras were close friends of the Philippsons, not only of Ludwig, Martin’s father, but also of Franz, Martin’s younger brother, who accomplished his training in the Erreras’ bank before he was able to create his own bank in the Belgian capital, where he settled down at the beginning of the 1870’s.

At the end of 19th century, the situation of the Jews in the Belgian State was totally different from that in the Wilhelminian Germany. If they were recognized as full citizens since the Reich’s creation in 1870, the access to high positions as civil servants in the State’s administration was quite impossible. Consequently, many highly educated German Jews were lawyers or physicians, but none or very few were magistrates or full professors.
It is a contrast which Philippson highlighted in his comments on the *Antisemitismusstreit* (1879-80), provoked by an article of the Prussian historian Heinrich von Treitschke. Letters from Philippson to another renowned historian from the Berlin University, Theodor Mommsen, illustrate this. For instance, in a letter dated from December 14th, 1880, Martin Philippson expresses his ideas as follows: in Belgium, the Jews are not „unter beständigen Fußtritten und Beschimpfungen sondern durch die Gewährung freiheitlicher Religionsübungen ‘vortreffliche’, ‘geschätzte’ Staatsbürger (...“ (Martin Philippson to Theodor Mommsen, Brussels, December 14th, 1880). He continues: „Ein nun zweijähriger Aufenthalt im Ausland lässt mich ein einfacheres Mittel zur Angleichung dieser Schwierigkeiten vorschlagen. Wie wäre es, wenn man überhaupt nicht mehr die Menschen nach dem äußerlichen Bekenntnis füge, ebenso wenig, wie nach ihren wahren religionsphilosophischen Anschauungen? Wenn man das Individuum nur nach seinen eigenen Leistungen beurtheilte u. klassifizierte?“ (ibid.).

My point here is to show that Martin Philippson’s life in a foreign country made him more aware of the deficiencies of the Jewish emancipation in Germany and more conscious of the ways to overcome them. After his return to Germany in 1891, he was committed to his Jewish fellows on an ideological and political level through the *Verband der deutschen Juden* (1904).

The complexity of Martin Philippson’s hybrid identity (as Jew and German in a French-speaking environment) is at case in the circumstances of his departure from Brussels. Martin Philippson made a good career at the ULB, as Dean of the Faculty of Arts and in 1890 as Rector, as I have already mentioned. This institution, composed of people from different generations, illustrates the political controversies of the time between liberal conservatives on one side and liberal progressives on the other. A conflict in late 1890, provoked by the denial of a PhD in psychology, opposed Philippson (who supported the decision of the Faculty) to the students (who contested the Faculty’s decision). Unexpectedly the conflict took on a political dimension (with the students’ demand to be represented in the university’s committees). Confronted with the lasting hostility of the students, Martin Philippson decided to resign from all of his functions (not only as rector but also as professor) at the ULB and to return to Germany. In 1891, he settled down in Berlin and became a leading Jewish intellectual following his father’s path, in particular as president of
the Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaft des Judentums (1902), aimed at developing scientific studies on Judaism in order to give a sense of identity to the Jews.

From a comparative and transnational point of view, it is particularly interesting to look at the reasons given in the literature for Martin Philippson’s sudden resignation and return to Germany. German and English encyclopedias and dictionaries (see, for instance, Mehlme, 2002) refer to the anti-German attitude of the students as being the cause of Philippson’s resignation of his professorship at the ULB. One leading encyclopedia, the Lexikon deutsch-jüdischer Autoren (2010) combines the anti-German element with the anti-Jewish one: „Seit 1891 lebte er als Privatgelehrter wieder in Berlin, nachdem es gegen ihn als deutscher Juden zu unerfreulichen Demonstrationen in Brüssel gekommen war“ (p. 27. my emphasis). In fact, Belgian society was at that time neither anti-Semitic nor anti-German. The only true reason is given by the evidence (see Martin Philippson’s papers at the ULB) on which the biographical notice on Philippson published in the Belgian Biographie nationale (1973) relies. All other encyclopedias underlining the anti-Germanism actually follow Martin Philippson’s own interpretation which gained publicity through an article of his own in the German press.

Part III: ‘ideal typical’ capacities of a cultural and scientific mediator

Until now I have presented Martin Philippson as a scientific mediator in the historical profession and as a cultural mediator in the matter of the social integration of Jews. Both attitudes imply some abilities: a good command of several languages and an interest in foreign cultures, which are linked in Philippson’s case to a good education. Philippson’s early learning of French, English, Italian and Spanish was due not only to his family cultural environment but mostly to his interest in European history in the Middle Ages and Modern times.

Even though all the best historians at the end of the 19th century knew many modern and classical languages, they did so mostly passively. With his active use of (at least) two languages in speaking and writing (French and German), Martin Philippson is an exception. Paul Fredericq’s review of Philippson’s book on La contre-révolution religieuse au XVIe siècle (Paris-Bruxelles, Muquardt-Alcan, 1884) makes this point clear: “M. Martin Philippson, professeur à l’université de Bruxelles, a publié deux livres d’un mérite supérieur. Ancien professeur à l’université de Bonn, l’auteur écrit ses ouvrages tantôt en allemand, tantôt en
Beyond the linguistic capacities, the cultural or scientific mediator is also a person who tries to look at contemporary events and at history in a transnational perspective. Philippson’s comparative and transnational insight has been illustrated here by his reaction to German anti-Semitism, which refers to Philippson’s Jewish identity. From the point of view of Philippson as an historian, the topics of many of his books are related to this way of considering the European past, such as the study of the religious wars. As an illustration of Philippson’s capacity to grasp tendencies transcending/crossing national borders, I want here to put forward his inaugural lesson at the University of Brussels on the historical importance of the Middle Ages: Importance historique du Moyen âge. Discours d’ouverture du cours d’histoire du Moyen Age prononcé le 5 mars 1879 par M. Philippson (Bruxelles, Mayolez, 1879). In this lesson, Philippson presents the history of the European civilization as an alliance between the German spirit (characterized by its impetuosity and by ethnic and cultural diversity), the classic Greek spirit (which tends to harmony) and the Christian spirit (made of transcendence, deepness, discipline, but also fanaticism and repentance). Three main principles of European society appeared in the Middle Ages: a common (Christian) vision of human being, State authority and self-governance (mainly in the cities). It is along these three lines that Philippson wanted to structure his lesson on this period: as shown by the program, he delineated a truly European overview without a nationalistic perspective.

Conclusion

The German Jewish historian Martin Philippson can be viewed as an authentic representative of a “Germany transnational” to refer to the title of our panel. As an historian, he always tried to build a bridge between the Belgian, French and German historical science. He also considered history as being best understood from a transnational
point of view. As a Jew, he was probably helped by his family’s network to get a chair at the University of Brussels. Moreover, he viewed his Belgian experience as a tool for a better understanding of the Jewish condition in Wilhelminian Germany. It is upon this experience that he committed himself to improving the Jews’ social and political situation after his return to Berlin. Last but not least, Martin Philippson’s language abilities and openness of mind towards foreign cultures were the precondition of his successful mediating activities.

**Short bibliography of selected works**

Walter Boehlich (ed.), *Der Berliner Antisemitismusstreit*, Frankfurt am Main, Insel Verlag, 1988.


