

Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson

4 Iceland

A Study of Antisemitism in a Country without Jews

Translated by Jonathan Adams

Abstract: This article presents an analysis of the history of antisemitism in Iceland, a country that has never had a significant population of Jews or any Jews who practise Judaism. Due to their geographical location, Icelanders have always feared isolation and have readily embraced anything new from the outside world, including ideas and attitudes. Unfortunately, antisemitism was one of these new “ideas” that was adopted at the end of the nineteenth century in Iceland, where it made a good supplement to the traditional xenophobia that already existed. Antisemitism in Iceland during the twentieth century was part and parcel of the long process of building a national identity, both before and after the country’s independence in 1944. However, as the country was without Jews of its own, it transferred this newly discovered hatred to those it had already despised for years: Danish merchants and other foreigners. In many cases, it was claimed that Danish and German merchants who had no Jewish roots whatsoever were in fact of Jewish descent. The few real Jews who wound up in Iceland were not spared either. They were rejected and expelled, while a large group of Icelanders looked to Hitler’s Germany with interest. Very few individuals with a Jewish background chose to settle in the country after the Second World War and those who did lived cut off from one another and without any possibility of practising their faith. Since 1967 antisemitism has more frequently been vented in terms of anti-Zionism and hatred towards the State of Israel. Icelanders have always been distant from the wars and reality of Europe, so people engaging in acts of antisemitism in Iceland have not thought about its consequences. But in the globalized twenty-first century, antisemitism in Iceland has grabbed the world’s attention. It stands out as an anomaly in a country that prides itself on its tolerance, its free spirit, and its unequivocal defence of human rights.

Keywords: Antisemitism; Iceland; history; Jews; Icelandic society; xenophobia; human rights.

Introduction

Antisemitism can travel faster than fashion and speak many languages. Icelandic is one of them. The saga of the Jews of Iceland is a very short one. Despite the generally brief nature of encounters between occasional Jewish visitors and the Icelanders, this saga also includes one the worst aspects of Jewish history, i. e. different forms of antisemitism, among them verbal and physical discrimination, violation, and atrocities against Jews. Iceland is an excellent example of the fact that antisemitism is a prejudice that can flourish without the presence of Judaism or, indeed, of a single Jew.

In 2004 the author of this article presented a paper, “Iceland, the Jews, and Anti-Semitism, 1625–2004,” which related the whole story of Jewish-Icelandic encounters from the seventeenth century on.¹ Antisemitism was not the main topic of that article. This study addresses that shortcoming and is in a sense a continuation of the first one.

The presence of antisemitism in Iceland, a country where very few Jews have ever lived, is an interesting phenomenon. As an isolated island-nation, the Icelanders have often been eager to latch onto and adopt all manner of novelties, ideas, and innovations. However, not all ideas from abroad were suitable for a society of farmers and fishermen. In a country where Judaism was not practised until very recently and where no synagogue has ever been built, one would not expect to encounter antisemitism, especially if one believes that antisemitism is to be defined as “hatred towards Jews as a religious group.” However, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, antisemitic rhetoric as well as hard-core antisemitism has been far from alien to Iceland and certain groups of Icelanders. This is despite the fact that no Jews in Iceland have directly or indirectly been the cause of or involved in any incidents that could have provoked an antisemitic reaction or hate speech against Jews. This article seeks to explain why.

The term “antisemitism” has never been adopted directly into the Icelandic language, in part due to linguistic purism, the generally strict protectionist attitude against all foreign language influences on Icelandic. The Icelandic word for antisemitism, *gyðingahatur*, first appeared in the Reykjavík journal *Iðunn* in 1885 in a slightly modified Icelandic translation of an article from the Danish period-

¹ Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Iceland, the Jews, and Anti-Semitism, 1625–2004,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 16, no. 3–4 (2004): 131–56. Also published in Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Iceland, the Jews, and Anti-Semitism, 1625–2004,” in *Behind the Humanitarian Mask: The Nordic Countries, Israel and the Jews*, ed. Manfred Gerstenfeld (Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Institute for Global Jewish Affairs, 2008), 179–203.

ical *Tilskueren*. The article, entitled “Indtryk fra Russisk Polen” (Impressions from Russian Poland), is by the renowned Danish-Jewish writer Georg Brandes. He very correctly describes German Jew-hatred as being of the type “that has been decorated by the affected term ‘antisemitism,’ and that has of late also been introduced into Denmark by certain layers of Danish society with their habit of adopting German reactionism (*Reaktion*) and German brutality (*Raa-hed*).”²

Although the word antisemitism will be used throughout this article, the words *gyðingahatur* in Icelandic and *jødehad* in Danish are, of course, more precise words than the “scientific” term *Antisemitismus*, which was originally coined in 1879 by Wilhelm Marr, who was himself a Jew-hater, an antisemite to use his own creation. Antisemitism is in fact an ideal word to create an abstraction from a problem. Endless discussions about “where the border for” antisemitism lies, can provide a cover of legitimacy for people who wish to express their aggression, antipathy, and hatred towards one specific group of people.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the word *gyðingahatur* was mostly used to describe pogroms in Russia; it did not really become an Icelandic issue until the arrival of Jewish refugees in Iceland in the 1930s. Even then, the word was hardly used in connection with events in Iceland, e.g. it did not appear in the press when describing anti-Jewish sentiments among those Icelanders who did not want to help Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution.

Because of its geographical location, Iceland never attracted large numbers of new settlers or refugees after the initial settlement period in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. The first Jew appeared in 1625; he had converted to Christianity to be allowed to travel to Iceland.³ Subsequent contact between Icelanders and Jews did not elicit antisemitic reactions prior to the late nineteenth century. More recently, and despite how few Jews settled in Iceland, the country has experienced religious antisemitism (anti-Judaism) and biological antisemitism, as well as political right- and left-wing antisemitism. Furthermore, Holocaust denial has also been expressed publicly in Iceland since the 1980s.

When Jewish refugees sought a safe haven in Iceland in the 1930s, most of them were rejected by the authorities and large segments of society. Among the few who made it to Iceland, many were expelled by the authorities. The attitude towards Jews was not only influenced by a new extreme ideology and what Icelanders were witnessing in other European countries, nor was it a mere copy of

² Georg Brandes, “Frá Póllandi,” *Iðunn* 3, no. 2–6 (1885): 197; Georg Brandes, “Indtryk fra russisk Polen,” *Tilskueren* 2 (1885): 326. In the Icelandic version, Brandes’s criticism of “certain layers of Danish society” was not included.

³ Vilhjálmsson, “Iceland, the Jews, and Anti-Semitism, 1625–2004,” 133.

the strict Danish immigration policy that Iceland followed in most details. The Icelanders had, in addition to “good old-fashioned xenophobia,” also heard of religious and biological antisemitism, both of which were expressed in the press by Icelandic antisemites upon the arrival of the Jewish refugees. Antisemitism in its ugliest forms had made the journey to Iceland faster than the refugees had. The hatred was already present and culturally and politically well-rooted.⁴

Antisemitism within the religious realm

Antisemitism was not a particularly serious problem within the Church during the Catholic era (c. 1000–1550), nor was it during the following centuries when Lutheranism was the religion of the majority and, since the late sixteenth century, the state religion. Nor does Iceland’s important literary heritage from the Middle Ages – sagas and other texts – contain antisemitic episodes. Antisemitism proper is first found in Icelandic hymns from the seventeenth century which were heavily influenced by sixteenth-century German hymns.

From the Middle Ages until the mid-seventeenth century, there were no religious minorities in Iceland whom the majority could make the target of their hatred or persecute. The few sons from among the farming class who studied in Paris or England during the Middle Ages did not bring Jew-hatred back to Iceland with them. Nor did the three or four Icelanders who studied in the multicultural atmosphere of Enlightenment Leiden in the Netherlands, where two of them actually studied alongside Jews. If antisemitism found its way to Iceland before the nineteenth century, it was via religious influence from mainland Europe which reached Iceland rather haphazardly. Of course, antisemitism had very poor conditions for taking root, in a country where the inhabitants were largely unacquainted with Jews.

Certainly, Icelanders would have heard about Jews as part of the introduction of Christianity, which was officially adopted by law in 1000. The process of Christianization was far more peaceful than in most other places in Europe. We cannot rule out the possibility that there were some Christian individuals living in Iceland before 1000, but most of the earliest inhabitants believed in Thor, Odin, and the other Norse gods; whether they knew anything about Jews is an open question.

⁴ For a good overview, see Snorri Bergsson, *Erlendur Landshornalýður, Flóttamenn og framandi útlendingar á Íslandi, 1853–1940* (Reykjavík: Almenna Bókafélagið), 15–135.

The chieftain and author Snorri Sturluson (1171–1241) did not mention Jews (*gyðingar* or *júðar*) as such in his works, but he did mention Jews generally as “men who had spoken the Hebrew language.” In spite of recent interesting research into his knowledge about Jews, whom he probably never encountered in the flesh, his comments can only be understood as a rather uneven awareness of the prevalent – but ignorant and at times pejorative – view of Jews that circulated at the time.⁵ From extant Icelandic manuscripts, we can see that none of the Icelanders who are named as pilgrims to Jerusalem or travellers in Europe said anything negative about Jews. A certain *Gyðinga saga* (History of the Jews) was completed in the late Middle Ages as a conflation of translations from the First Book of the Maccabees and fragments by Flavius Josephus.⁶

In the hymns composed during the seventeenth century, there is, however, one exception. Under the heavy influence of the period’s increasingly antisemitic theology and religious poetry in Europe, the pastor and poet Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614–64) composed the *Passíusálmur* (Hymns of the Passion).⁷ Probably because of the circles and milieu he moved in, Pétursson was more influenced by European trends than his compatriots were. Pétursson’s contemporary, the pastor Jón “the Martyr” Þorsteinsson (1570–1627), published two works of hymns in 1664: *Genesis Psalmar* (Genesis Hymns) and *Psalltare Þess Konunglega Spamans Davíds* (Psalter of the Royal Prophet David).⁸ Þorsteinsson’s hymns were based on the Old Testament and, although they are not poetic gems in the same class as Pétursson’s *Passíusálmur*, they do not contain a single negative word about Jews.⁹

5 Richard Cole, “Snorri and the Jews,” in *Old Norse Mythology – Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Pernille Hermann, Stephen A. Mitchell, Jens Peter Schiødt, and Amber Rose (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 243–68; Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Óð Sturluson líka í gyðingahatri?” *Fornleifur* [blog], 20 November 2013, < <https://fornleifur.blog.is/blog/fornleifur/entry/1329905/> >.

6 See the entry on “Gyðinga Saga” in *Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for Nordisk Middelalder*, vol. 5, cols 603–04.

7 Hallgrímur Pétursson, *Passíusálmur* (Á Hólum í Hjaltadal, 1666). In English: Hallgrímur Pétursson, *Hymns of the Passion*, trans. Arthur Charles Gook (Reykjavík: Hallgríms Church, 2009).

8 Jón Þorsteinsson, *Genesis Psalmar* (Á Hólum í Hjaltadal, 1652); Jón Þorsteinsson and others, *Psalltare Þess Konunglega Spamans Davíds* (Á Hólum í Hjaltadal, 1662).

9 I myself am a descendant of Jón Þorsteinsson. The pastor is known as “the Martyr” because he was killed on Vestmannaeyjar in 1627 by Algerian pirates, among whom numbered several European pirates who had converted to Islam in Barbary. Another version of events told by one of the survivors is that Þorsteinsson was in fact murdered by an Icelandic enemy under the cover of the pirates’ attack.

After I drew attention to the antisemitism found in the Icelandic hymn tradition in an article in 2005,¹⁰ the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles requested an English translation of the hymns. The collection, comprising fifty hymns of up to twenty verses each in various metres, had initially been translated into English by Arthur Charles Gook, an English homeopath who lived in Iceland for a number of years.¹¹ Because of his philosemitic upbringing and attitude, the translator clearly tried to minimize the worst examples of malevolence in the many verses describing the Jews' deceit and wickedness. Yet despite his efforts, Jewish organizations of today basing their verdict on his translation consider this seventeenth-century work to be unambiguously antisemitic. The Simon Wiesenthal Center asked the general director of the Icelandic Broadcasting Service to reflect on the contents of the hymns and stop broadcasting them on the radio. Every year since 1943, different people – experts and laypersons, including the president of Iceland – have been asked to read one verse of the hymns aloud on the radio every evening during the fifty days leading up to Easter.¹²

In Iceland, this request from a world-famous Jewish organization sparked great outrage and what might best be described as a feeling of having been insulted. Condemnation and expressions of hate connected to the conflict in the Middle East could be read on social media for a long time afterwards. The general director of radio broadcasting refused to agree to the request. In the ensuing public debate certain Icelanders claimed that Jews were not themselves well-placed to determine what was and what was not antisemitism. Others were of the opinion that when Jews object to antisemitic literature, it is simply a case of rude – and possibly even Israeli – meddling in Iceland's internal affairs.

The *Passíusálmar* are normally described as some of the most magnificent examples of Icelandic poetry and some people held the view that if reading them were to be banned due to their seventeenth-century antisemitism, then you might just as well ban the New Testament. The Jews' role in the hymns, it was argued, was a kind of *pars pro toto* – they symbolize the sins of all humanity – and it was further claimed that everything in the hymns could be found in the New Testament. That claim is, however, not correct. The wording and terms of abuse that Pétursson uses to refer to Jews cannot be found anywhere in the

10 Vilhjálmsson, "Iceland, the Jews, and Anti-Semitism, 1625–2004," 132–34.

11 Pétursson, *Hymns of the Passion*.

12 The letter from Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, to the general director of the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service, Páll Magnússon, of 23 February 2012, has been published here: < https://fornleifur.blog.is/users/5c/fornleifur/files/rabbi_cooper_to_r_v_15703.pdf >.

New Testament. Just one professor in theology at the *Háskóli Íslands* (University of Iceland) appealed for introspection, for readers to scrutinize their own heritage (“gaumgæfa eigin arfleifð”), although he did not go so far as to call for the hymns to be taken off the radio.¹³ To this day, the hymns are still broadcast on the national radio.

The conflict over these hymns in 2012 clearly demonstrated that no Icelandic researcher on Pétursson’s poetry had ever considered whether the *Passíusálmar* were perhaps not a uniquely Icelandic phenomenon. In a blog article, I pointed out that at least as far as content is concerned, the hymns are in the tradition of the *Soliloquia de passione Jesu Christi* by the German poet Martin Moller (1547–1606), which, in contrast to Pétursson’s hymns, have never been broadcast on German radio – and with good reason, too. Furthermore, it would seem that experts on Pétursson’s writings had never considered how vehemently anti-Jewish the religious environment was at the cathedral school of the Vor Frue kirke (Church of Our Lady) in Copenhagen during the period that Pétursson was studying theology there. The fact that prior to his studies he worked as a smith for a Danish-Icelandic merchant in the free city of Glückstadt must have also had an impact on him. (The city is often confused with Glücksburg by Icelandic Pétursson experts.) Pétursson would have seen Jews of Portuguese origin every day in the city; they had been invited by King Christian IV in order to promote Danish trade and business. The Jews in Glückstadt were in competition with Pétursson’s employer.¹⁴

Since 2005, several members of the Alþingi, the Icelandic Parliament, together with government ministers have visited Grafarvogur Church in a Reykjavík suburb in order to read the *Passíusálmar*.¹⁵ This new tradition has proved especially popular among politicians who have publicly declared themselves to be atheists, agnostics, or areligious because of their left-wing political beliefs. Exactly why these politicians have felt a sudden urge to participate in the reading of eighteenth-century hymns is unclear. Some think that the hymns are an important literary tradition, while one might suspect that others’ sudden spiritual awakening upon reading these hymns could be connected to escalations in the

¹³ Professor Hjalti Hugason on the website *Hugrás*, which is published by the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Iceland in Reykjavík: < <http://hugras.is/2012/04/hallgrimur-og-gydingarnir/> >.

¹⁴ Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Spurning á 400 ára fæðingarafmæli Hallgríms Péturssonar,” *Fornleifur* [blog], 22 September 2014, < <https://fornleifur.blog.is/blog/fornleifur/entry/1444764/> >.

¹⁵ See, for example, < <https://grafarvogurinn.is/read/2016-03-21/sjalfstaedisflokkurinn-laetur-sig-malefni-grafarvogsibua-varða> >; < <https://postdoc.blog.is/blog/postdoc/entry/1226595/> >; < https://www.mbl.is/frettir/innlent/2016/03/23/sigmundur_david_las_passiusalmana/ >.

conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. The same atheist politicians who wish to read the hymns in church have been rather categorical in taking a position on the conflict – that is, a position against Israel.

An even more serious example of religious intolerance occurred when the Icelandic state church provided a forum in its yearbook for the former Icelandic prime minister, Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson, who had been forced out of office in 2016 after revelations about his own and his closest family's involvement in the global Panama Papers scandal. Gunnlaugsson wrote the following in the church yearbook:

Antisemitism is a known phenomenon which people are generally careful not to make use of, and sometimes people go a little too far in condemning things as antisemitic, but people are careful about how they talk about that religion. Now, as far as Islam is concerned, criticizing Islam has been defined as a psychiatric disorder, called Islamophobia; people must quite simply be crazy if they talk about Islam in a critical manner.¹⁶

The former prime minister's comments came in connection with his opinion about the general superiority of Christianity in the world. Just a year after he stepped down as prime minister and subsequently left the anti-refugee *Framsóknarflokkur* (Progressive Party), Gunnlaugsson made an antisemitic statement. In an interview on the private radio station *Útvarp Saga*, the former prime minister, while announcing his return to politics, stated that George Soros was behind his fall from office. According to Gunnlaugsson, it was no secret that because of Soros's hedge fund, no Americans were named in the Panama Papers revelations.¹⁷ Both statements are conspiratorial and as the first has nothing to do with the Icelandic state church, it is curious that it appeared in the institution's yearbook. Soros-phobia has been described as antisemitic by international Jewish organizations.¹⁸ Hatred towards Soros is an extension of the Rothschild canard, much beloved in Nazi rhetoric, with one single Jewish family or individual being blamed for all the evils of the world. In their hate towards

16 Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson, "Ávarp Forsætisráðherra," *Árbók kirkjunnar* (2015–2016): 19–20.

17 Gunnlaugsson, interview with Arnþrúður Karlsdóttir and Pétur Gunnlaugsson on *Útvarp Saga*, 27 July 2016, < http://utvarpsaga.is/thaettir/#!mg_ld=12023 >. Gunnlaugsson's opinion of antisemitism can be heard approximately forty-three minutes into the programme. The radio station *Saga* voted the former prime minister Man of the Year in 2016.

18 Eric Cortolessa, "How George Soros Became The Target of Both Anti-Semites and Right-Wing Jews," *The Times of Israel*, 3 November 2018. See also "Quantifying Hate: A Year of Anti-Semitism on Twitter," Anti-Defamation League, 27 May 2018, < <https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/quantifying-hate-a-year-of-anti-semitism-on-twitter#george-soros> >.

other groups, such as Muslims, radical right-wingers and racists in the West, including Iceland, seek to forge an “alliance” with Israel. They say that they cannot be described as racists because many Jews have the same conspiratorial view of Soros as they do. It is a banality, but racism is of course not the preserve of just one people.

In today’s tense atmosphere, where accusations of racism and fascism are also flying around in Iceland, it is good to remember the words of the theologian and later bishop Sigurbjörn Einarsson (1911–2008), spoken in a speech in 1948 which he titled “Against Seduction and Lies.” He wrote:

There is indeed much to fear in our time. But there is one thing that I am most afraid of – and that’s fear. Fear has caused more mishaps (*óhöpp*) than deliberate hatred and evil. The German nation fell into Hitler’s embrace because it had been driven insane from an exaggerated fear (*ofboðshræðsla*) of Bolsheviks and Jews.¹⁹

The theologian had apparently become more insightful with age. You can apparently hold one opinion before you hold another. Some years previously, in 1931, he wrote in his junior college newsletter:

One of the most powerful nations in the world is the Jews. The Aryan nations have really turned them into the teaching fathers, given that the law that the Semites composed almost 3,000 years ago must be considered the foundation beneath all the legislation of the most powerful nations of the Aryan races. And he is a Jew, he who is most often mentioned as the holiest of all men to have been born, according to most Aryans. The world’s money is in the hands of Jews. The greatest profiteers among the white races are of Jewish decent and some nations have had to acknowledge this in recent times, e.g. the Germans. The Aryans are about to be suffocated under their own name (Aryans = lords). Even here in Iceland, the Jew has become too much for the Icelanders can handle. And the Icelanders never seem able to thank the people who originally caused this enough.²⁰

An additional interesting fact is that Einarsson, who had expressed himself so antisemitically, was the man who in 1943 arranged for the *Passíusálmur* to be read aloud every year on Icelandic state radio.

One can also note a symbolic congruence with Nazism in Christian youth work. Long after the Second World War, at several YMCA and YWCA camps, as well as among scouting troops at various places in Iceland, it was customary to pay tribute to the Icelandic flag with an outstretched arm. The YMCA ex-

¹⁹ Sigurður A. Magnússon, “Fáein spor í sandi tímans: Eftirmæli um dr. Sigurbjörn Einarssonar,” *Herðubreið*, 30 June 2014, < <http://herdubreid.is/faein-spor-i-sandi-timans-efirmaeli-um-dr-sigurbjorn-einarsson/> >.

²⁰ Sigurbjörn Einarsson, “Þjóðin, trúin,” *Skólablaðið*, 14 March 1931, 2.

plained this as a Roman greeting – although the fact is that no one knows whether Romans greeted one another in this manner. Christian Icelandic friends of the author have told him about their stays as children at a YMCA summer camp east of Reykjavík, not far from the episcopal see in Skálholt, where one of the counsellors spoke to the children about Hitler and his treatment of the Jews in positive terms.

In contrast to the other Nordic countries and many other places in the world, antisemitism among the country's Muslims is not a significant problem in Iceland. There are fewer than one thousand Muslims in Iceland, distributed between two religious communities, out of a total population of some 348,000 (2018).

It is now common for people to declare their friendship with Israel and Jews as a way to justify their hatred of Muslims. They assume that Muslims are the biggest antisemites today. The most crude expressions of hatred have been uttered by certain extremists in connection with Icelandic Muslims' plans to build a mosque in Reykjavík, as well as by members of certain political parties in the Icelandic parliament, including members of *Framsóknarflokkur*. The party has a long tradition of political xenophobia and was one of the two parties in the Alþingi that in the 1930s most vehemently opposed helping Jewish refugees who were trying to find asylum in Iceland. Politicians from the same party also took an active part in expelling stateless Jews from Iceland at the end of the 1930s.

In 2014, Salmann Tamimi, an Icelandic lay imam born in Palestine, allegedly shouted “damned Jew” (*helvítis gyðingur*) at a Christian Icelander. The Icelander was standing together with a small group of his fellow countrymen and was “cheering” for the Israeli women's national football team outside of Reykjavík's largest stadium before a football match between Israel and Iceland. However, it is a fact that the case was only alleged to have occurred by the person whom the imam was shouting at, who happens to be a person with a history of regularly expressing himself publicly in an extremely hateful manner towards Islam. Valdimar H. Jóhannesson is the spokesperson of the *Tjáningarfrelsi* (Freedom of Speech) association, whose main goal in terms of “freedom of speech” is to paint all Muslims with the same brush, as well as to vilify Islam and all non-Christian forms of multiculturalism in Iceland. In 2016, the association sent an Icelandic translation (*Þjóðarplágan íslam*; Islam, the National Plague) of the book *Islam, den 11. landeplage* (Islam, the Eleventh Plague), by Norwegian writer Hege Storhaug, to all graduates from Icelandic universities.²¹ The book contains

21 “Umdeild bók til þúsund háskólanema,” *Morgunblaðið*, 14 September 2016, < https://www.mbl.is/frettir/innlent/2016/09/14/umdeild_bok_til_thusund_haskolanema/ >.

conspiracy theories about Muslims which are very similar to those that the Nazis and others spread about Jews in the first half of the twentieth century. For his part, Salmann Tamimi publicly asserted that he had never shouted “helvítis gyðingur” at Jóhannesson.

Antisemitism in Icelandic politics

An Icelandic Nazi party, the *Þjóðernishreyfing Íslendinga* (Icelandic Nationalist Movement), was founded in 1933. The party had already split in two by 1934. The strongest faction, which was called the *Flokkur Þjóðernissinna* (Nationalist Party) and had contacts with the mother party in Germany, called for the total annihilation of “world Jewry” and Communism in its party programme. However, domestic matters were always at the fore for the Icelandic Nazis.

The Icelandic Nazis attracted members from all social layers, but primarily from among people who were unable to imagine an improvement in their social conditions through membership in Social Democracy or other Socialist parties. *Flokkur Þjóðernissinna* also attracted people who were unhappy with the policies of the *Sjálfstæðisflokkur* (Independence Party) and *Framsóknarflokkur*. Furthermore, the party attracted petty criminals, which at times proved quite handy as the party was involved in several burglaries at the offices of other parties. However, the party never received more than 2.8 per cent support from the electorate, and for this reason never entered parliament.

Even though *Flokkur Þjóðernissinna*'s activities had abated somewhat by 1939, the party itself continued until Great Britain, thankfully, invaded Iceland on 10 May 1940 and began its peaceful occupation. Nonetheless, *Flokkur Þjóðernissinna* did not officially disband until 1945; during the British and American occupation the party and all pro-German activities were forbidden, and politicians from other parties who were clearly sympathetic to the German cause suddenly adopted a low profile. The British and Americans kept a close eye on the Icelandic Nazis and arrested Germans residing in Iceland, transporting them to internment camps, such as those on the Isle of Man.

Although the usual hateful clichés about Jews could be found in the *Flokkur Þjóðernissinna*'s various weekly and monthly magazines, they were actually more common in non-Nazi dailies. Long-standing conspiracy theories about the Rothschild family were popular, but there were only two individuals who the Icelandic Nazis directed their hatred towards in print. One of them was the pianist Ignaz Friedman (full name, Soloman Isaac Freudmann, 1882–1948), who visited

Iceland in 1935 and 1938.²² The other was the politician Ólafur Thors (1892–1964), who served several times as prime minister between 1942 and 1963. With his dark curly hair, Ólafur Thors’s appearance was interpreted by Icelandic Nazis as a sign of Jewish descent, even though his hair had been inherited from his purely Icelandic mother’s side of the family. On certain occasions he was referred to by Nazis as the “honourable rabbi.” Thors was the son of Thor Jensen, a successful Danish merchant. Jensen, who the Icelandic Nazis and others tried to make into a Jew, was originally from an orphanage in Copenhagen and immigrated at a young age to Iceland. Thor Jensen’s much older half-brother, the architect Alfred Jensen Raavad (1883–1933), was a member of the *Dansk Antijødisk Liga* (Danish Anti-Jewish League) in Denmark.²³

Talk of the Jensen-Thors family’s Jewish background had absolutely no basis in reality, yet the family seemed to attract the attention of Nazis in all sorts of ways, both during and after the Second World War. One of Thor Jensen’s grandchildren, Margrét Þóra Hallgrímsson (b. 1930), married the founder of the American Nazi Party, George Lincoln Rockwell (1918–67).²⁴ The Icelandic Nazis found all manner of absurd reasons to make connections between merchant families in Iceland and Jews. When there were no Jews, they simply imagined their enemies into existence by branding Danes as Jews.

After the war, no legal action was taken against Icelandic Nazis, whether they had been members of *Flokkur Þjóðernissinna*, had gone to Nazi Germany and stayed there during the war, or had fought in German uniform in Europe. Icelanders volunteered for Nazi war duty and some spied for the Germans. Björn Sveinn Björnsson (1909–98), son of the first president of the republic, Sveinn Björnsson, volunteered for the Waffen SS in Denmark and was a war correspondent in the Balkans and Caucasus. From there he reported in radio broadcasts about, among other things, war crimes, which he described in a jovial manner as if nothing was more normal.²⁵ When the German occupiers took over the *Danmarks Radio* (Danish Broadcasting Corporation) in 1940, he was employed there. Later he worked with the SS Standarte Kurt Eggers, an SS unit which,

22 Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Þeir eru öfundsverðir sem afskektir eru,” *Fornleifur* [blog], 11 October 2013, < <https://fornleifur.blog.is/blog/fornleifur/entry/1319745/> >.

23 Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Bróðir Thors,” *Fornleifur* [blog], 30 May 2015, < <https://fornleifur.blog.is/blog/fornleifur/entry/1768653/> >; Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Auðunnir 100 dollarar,” *Fornleifur* [blog], 31 May 2015, < <https://fornleifur.blog.is/blog/fornleifur/entry/1770841/> >.

24 Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Thorsaraviðbætur – giftist íslenskt njósnakvendi Thorsara?” *Fornleifur* [blog], 12 December 2017, < <https://fornleifur.blog.is/blog/fornleifur/entry/2207945/> >.

25 Listen, for example, to < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWP0KJx9SMo> >.

among other things, was responsible for propaganda and intelligence interception in Copenhagen.

As a member of this group, he was involved in the arrest and deportation of the Danish Jew, Jacob Thalmy, who was later murdered on a death march from Auschwitz to Melk.²⁶ A few days before liberation, Björnsson was a judge in an SS court where he sentenced a German deserter to death. Fortunately, the sentence was never carried out.²⁷ Björnsson, who tried to flee Denmark, was arrested and imprisoned by the Danish resistance. In 1946 he was due to stand trial, just like other Waffen SS men in Denmark, but due to political pressure from Iceland he was released from custody without charge. The contents of these communications from Iceland remain unknown. The folder in the Danish National Archives that should contain the legal decisions about his case is empty, but his activities in Denmark during the war are known from evidence given in the trials of other sentenced Waffen SS men. In 1949 he moved to South America in an act of self-imposed exile; there he could socialize with old friends from the Waffen SS until the 1960s, when he returned to Iceland.

Other leading members of *Flokkur Þjóðernissinna*, who had left the party during or after the war, often enjoyed successful professional careers thanks to assistance from their new parties. One, for example, would become the National Police Commissioner in Reykjavík, while another would be the Governor of the National Bank. Davíð Ólafsson (1916–95), who had gone to Germany in 1935 to study economics, had been a leading force in the Icelandic Nazi Party. He was appointed Governor of the National Bank in 1967, a position he held until 1986. For a time, he was a member of the *Sjálfstæðisflokkur* parliamentary group. After the war, Davíð Ólafsson disclosed that he had completed a degree in economics in Germany, but neither of the two universities where he claimed to have studied have any record of his completing a degree there. Ólafsson's official biography on the Icelandic parliament homepage makes no mention of his Nazi past.

Since the Second World War there have been small groups of neo-Nazis, generally disappearing relatively quickly just a few years after being established. None of these parties has had enough support among the electorate for them to play a role in the political arena. It is impossible to know precisely how many attempts have been made to establish neo-Nazi parties since the war. In 1960 Iceland once again saw the creation of a Nazi party, dubbed *Ríkisflokkurinn*

²⁶ Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, *Medaljens Bagside: Jødiske flygtningeskæbner i Danmark 1933–1945* (Copenhagen: Forlaget Vandkunsten, 2005), 283.

²⁷ Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Sonur forsetans dæmdi mann til dauða.” *Fornleifur* [blog], 25 October 2015, < <https://fornleifur.blog.is/blog/fornleifur/entry/2109085/> > .

(The State Party); this was a short-lived enterprise which took material form in a photocopied party newsletter called *Mjöltnir* (the name of the Norse god Thor's hammer). *Mjöltnir's* racist content included antisemitism, and in particular white supremacist praise for South Africa and apartheid. The party organized ceremonies on Hitler's birthday at the graves of German Second World War Luftwaffe pilots in a Reykjavík cemetery. Members of this group would carry a Nazi flag around the cemetery and salute the fallen German soldiers with Nazi salutes. In 1961 an Icelandic daily used the word *Nýnazisti* (neo-Nazi), probably for the first time ever in Iceland, when one Paul Andersen made a stopover in the country on his way from Luxemburg to meet the American neo-Nazi leader Rockwell, who had been stationed in Iceland in the mid-1950s. Andersen wanted to arrange a meeting with one of the leading figures of the *Ríkisflokkurinn*, Bernhard Haarde, a young Icelandic bank clerk of partly Norwegian descent.²⁸

In Icelandic newspapers in the 1970s and 80s, one can read reports of sporadic meetings of Nazis which generally seem to have been attempts at winning their fifteen minutes of fame. In all these cases, they made sure to mention their fierce hatred of Jews and black people, as well as the dangers immigration posed for “the pure Icelandic race.” In 1990 a group of local neo-Nazis violently attacked some Greenlandic fishermen who were visiting the town of Ísafjörður.²⁹ For a short period in 1996 a small group in Iceland published a free magazine called *Arísk Upprisa* (Aryan Uprising) which contained antisemitism and other forms of racism.³⁰ Similarly, in 2001 there was a group in Iceland that called itself the *Félag íslenskra þjóðernissinna* (Union of Icelandic Nationalists).

Antisemitism on the left

Antisemitism in Social Democrat and other left-wing circles was not an entirely unknown phenomenon in the Nordic countries during the twentieth century. This form of antisemitism was not, for example, unknown in Denmark. The Social Democrat Hans Hedtoft, who became the prime minister of Denmark, was

28 “Nýnazisti á yfirreið,” *Tíminn* [daily], 13 February 1962, < http://timarit.is/view_page_init.jsp?pageId=1049098 >. Bernhard Haarde had just arrived in Oslo for treatment for cancer together with his father who was ill with the same type of cancer. The Nazi leader Haarde died in an Oslo hospital on 2 March 1961 followed by his father in May the same year.

29 “Erum nýnasistar og hötum Grænlandinga,” *DV* [daily], 5 June 1990, 4, < http://timarit.is/view_page_init.jsp?pageId=2572001 >.

30 “Ég vil vekja upp hatur hjá þér,” *Alþýðublaðið* [daily], 3 December 1996, 8, < http://timarit.is/view_page_init.jsp?pageId=3348480 >.

among those politicians in 1938 who demanded “uniformity in the attitude of the Nordic countries” towards Jews. The Social Democrats did not designate Jews as refugees worthy of assistance, as opposed to Social Democrat refugees from Nazi Germany. In 1940, just prior to the German occupation of Denmark, Hedtoft was one of the politicians who most insistently called for a change in the law that would have effectively made it punishable to hide Jewish refugees. As it was, Jews in Denmark did not have refugee status unless they could document that they were fleeing for political reasons and that they had belonged to a party banned by the Nazis. In 1942, an Icelandic woman living in Copenhagen was given a five-year suspended prison sentence for hiding a Jewish man who was the father to her son. The man was deported from Denmark by the Danish authorities in 1942 and murdered in Auschwitz.³¹

After Iceland gained sovereignty under the Danish crown in 1918, Icelanders had full responsibility for their affairs with the exception of defence and foreign affairs, which were still handled by Copenhagen. In the 1930s, refugees fleeing Nazism also arrived in Iceland, and here too, there were Social Democratic politicians who were opposed to Jews and fascinated by Nazism.

Guðbrandur Jónsson was educated in Germany and was a regular member of *Alþýðuflokkur* (Social Democracy). Along with two other Icelandic Nazi sympathizers, he visited the German prince Friedrich Christian zu Schaumburg-Lippe in 1939 and asked him to consider becoming the king of Iceland, if – as they hoped – Nazi Germany were to invade. The prince, a member of the Nazi Party since 1929 and an official of the Third Reich, took this request seriously and brought it to Josef Goebbels. According to the prince’s autobiography, published in 1952, Goebbels liked the idea but Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop dismissed it.³²

In 1936 Jónsson was himself invited to Germany by the Nazi regime for a tour, during which he spoke three times on the radio. Jónsson was so fascinated by Nazi Germany that he specifically asked to be invited to visit the Dachau concentration camp in Bavaria. He was entirely uncritical of what he saw and of what was happening in the camp. He could not understand his party colleagues’ criticism of his fascination with Germany and stressed in his 1938 book that he was a Social Democrat and an opponent of National Socialism and the Nazis.³³

31 Vilhjálmsón, *Medaljens Bagside*, 260–62.

32 Örn Helgason, *Kóng við viljum hafa!* (Reykjavík: Skjaldborg, 1992). Prince Friedrich Christian zu Schaumburg-Lippe’s book was titled *Zwischen Krone und Kerker* (Wiesbaden: Limes Verlag, 1952).

33 Guðbrandur Jónsson, *Pjóðir sem ég kynntist: Minningar um menn og háttu* (Reykjavík: Bókaverzlun Guðmunds Gamalielssonar, 1938).

Apparently, though, not enough of an opponent to prevent him from using his German-language skills to help the Icelandic Ministry of Justice and the Police Authority in Reykjavík to compose letters in German and Danish to the police authorities in Copenhagen. These letters were cover notes for the Jewish refugees whom the Icelandic authorities were deporting after having rejected their requests for residency permits. These letters stated that should Denmark refuse to accept the refugees, then Iceland would pay the costs of deportation on to Germany.

Icelandic antisemites could also be found even further to the left of the political spectrum. In 1946 a journalist from the newspaper *Þjóðviljinn* (The Will of the Nation), the principal mouthpiece of the Icelandic Communist Party, attacked Teodoras Bieliackinas (1907–47) in print. Bieliackinas was a Lithuanian Jew from Kaunas (Kovno) who after a study trip to Norway had travelled to Iceland in 1937, where he subsequently studied languages at the University of Iceland. In 1946, in a series of articles in the daily *Morgunblaðið*, he wrote about the situation in the Baltic countries and criticized the Soviet Union. This did not please those Communists in Iceland who were loyal to Moscow and they attacked him in an article, calling him a “Fascist Jew” who had previously allied himself with Goebbels. The article, written by a certain Björn Franzson, is the worst incidence of antisemitism seen in print in Iceland after the Second World War. Franzson accused Bieliackinas of all but copying word-for-word from Nazi papers such as *Der Angriff*, *Der Stürmer*, and the *Völkischer Beobachter*. Among other things, Franzson wrote about Bieliackinas, who had lost his family during the Lithuanian and later the German destruction of the country’s Jewry:

Can you, dear reader, imagine a more repulsive or disgusting phenomenon than a Jew spreading Nazi propaganda after the Nazis have hanged, shot, gassed, and burnt in the flaming ovens seven million of his race? ... least of all should a Jew take it upon himself to do the work of Nazism if he did indeed have even the smallest shred of human dignity.³⁴

After this, Franzson called Bieliackinas a Jewish Quisling. This attack on Bieliackinas was the first time since the Second World War that Icelanders had been witness to such public antisemitism on the left. It was perhaps not unex-

³⁴ Björn Franzson, “Litúvískur fasisti launar íslenska gestrisni,” *Þjóðviljinn*, 13 August 1946, 5. See further Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson, “Formáli,” in Ants Oras, *Órlaganótt yfir Eystrasaltslöndum* (Reykjavík: Almenna Bókafélagið, 2016), 8; Ieva Steponavičiūtė Aleksiejūnienė, “Teodoras Bieliackinas: mes visi sugrįšime į mūsų Lietuvą,” *www.15min.lt* [website], 15 February 2018, < <https://www.15min.lt/kultura/naujiena/asmenybe/teodoras-bieliackinas-mes-visi-sugrisime-i-musu-lietuva-285-923862> >.

pected, as antisemitic accusations, propaganda, and associated caricatures with a direct relationship to Nazi caricatures of Jews, had been part of Stalin's show trials in the 1930s that were aimed at purging the Communist Party of Jewish members. Party-faithful Communists in Iceland and other countries did not criticize these purges, rather the opposite in fact.

Iceland was declared a republic in June 1944 and the remaining ties to Denmark were severed while Denmark was still, until 1945, occupied by Nazi Germany. In the new republic, which could boast of having the oldest parliament in the world, antisemitism did not disappear. In addition to the attacks on the Jew Bi-liackinas, the Social Democrat Jónas Guðmundsson (1898–1973) was responsible for the ugliest antisemitism to be expressed in public life in Iceland. Head of the Ministry of Social Affairs and a Social Democratic member of parliament,³⁵ he was obsessed with “Jewish and Zionist plans for world domination”; from 1946 to 1958 he published a journal, *Dagrenning* (Dawn), which focused mainly on the “dangerous Jews.” Guðmundsson was a follower of a British eccentric named Adam Rutherford, who in 1939 published a book maintaining that the Icelanders were the descendants of the “real” Jews, specifically the lost tribe of the Benjaminites. As he wrote, while enjoying employment as a well-paid Social Democratic civil servant: “The role that Iceland and specifically the Icelandic nation has been given is that this nation, as the first among nations, should make it clear that it is part of God’s great people of Israel and acknowledge publicly that this is so.” Furthermore, in 1951 Guðmundsson published an Icelandic translation of the antisemitic forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.³⁶

Eventually the Social Democrats had enough of Guðmundsson’s sideline occupations and excluded him from the party. To his own mind this happened because he had written in Social Democracy’s newspaper about “pyramids and occult subjects.” His exclusion did not, however, adversely affect his career as a well-paid civil servant, and he later served as Iceland’s representative on various pan-Nordic committees.

Guðmundsson explained the Second World War in the following manner in his journal, *Dagrenning*: “The Second World War was also their [the Communists’] invention and the Zionists organized a fabulous plan to destroy Germany, the bulwark of the free states of Europe. They created and supported the Nazi Party and introduced Hitler as its leader. The quest for the destruction of the

35 Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Krati og gyðingahatari.” *Fornleifur* [blog], 9 September 2016, < <https://fornleifur.blog.is/blog/fornleifur/entry/2179692/> >.

36 Jónas Guðmundsson, ed., *Samsærisáætlunin mikla: Siðareglur Zíonsöldunga*, trans. Kristmundur Þorleifsson (Reykjavík: Jónas Guðmundsson, 1951).

Jews was only a propaganda trick, created in order to fool opponents.”³⁷ Only five years after the Second World War, a Social Democrat in Iceland could express himself in this way without any legal consequences.

Jónas Guðmundsson’s activities were an extreme case of Icelandic island-style xenophobia, which affected politicians from all the country’s different political parties. Antisemitism and racism were a part of this trend. In 1938, Prime Minister and Minister of Justice Hermann Jónasson (1896–1976) told a Danish counsellor at the Danish embassy in Reykjavík, that “It is a principle, Iceland has always been a pure Nordic country, free of Jews, and those who have come here in later years must leave again.”³⁸ The Icelanders wanted to keep Iceland “racially pure” from “Jews, Blacks, and Slavs.” From the Second World War until the 1960s, several Icelandic cabinets led by different political parties asked the US military authorities not to send black soldiers to the NATO bases in Iceland – and the US government complied. This became more difficult after the US human rights legislation of 1964 was introduced.³⁹

Another Social Democrat who has made antisemitic comments is Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson (b. 1939). He opposed the investigation of the Nazi war criminal Evald Mikson, who after having played an active role in the murder of Jews now resided in Iceland. In 1992, the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s Jerusalem office encouraged the Icelandic authorities to investigate Mikson’s wartime activities. After the Second World War, Mikson had settled in Iceland and changed his name to Eðvald Hinriksson. Hannibalsson was among those politicians who accused the State of Israel of being behind the request for an investigation of Mikson’s murder of Jews. Israel’s motivation was said to be an attempt to cover up its own military activities. The request was delivered by the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s Jerusalem office to Prime Minister Davíð Oddsson during a state visit to Israel; Hannibalsson and other Icelandic politicians mistakenly assumed that the State of Israel stood behind the request. A number of Icelandic politicians, both on the right and the left, publicly called for Mikson to be protected. In their opinion, the request for an investigation of Mikson’s wartime activities came from a state which they claimed was actively annihilating a people and was thus guilty of war crimes, and they insisted that the evidence against Mikson had been fabricated by the Soviet Union. In their attempts to protect Mikson some Icelanders compared Israel to Nazi Germany. After his death in 1993, the Estonian Historical

37 Vilhjálmsson, “Iceland, the Jews, and Anti-Semitism, 1625–2004,” 142.

38 Vilhjálmsson, *Medaljens Bagside*, 10–11.

39 Vilhjálmsson, “Iceland, the Jews, and Anti-Semitism, 1625–2004,” 143.

Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity confirmed the Simon Wiesenthal Center's claims that Mikson was a war criminal.

In 1993 some of the same politicians who wanted to protect Mikson refused to meet Shimon Peres when he was on a state visit to Iceland. Instead of welcoming a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, they branded him a war criminal. Many of these politicians came up with various reasons not to attend an official dinner that the president of Iceland held in honour of Peres. Steingrímur Hermannsson (1928–2010), a member of *Framsóknarflokkur*, was among those who refused to meet Peres. He was, however, more than happy to meet Yasser Arafat in Tunis in 1990, returning to Iceland with Arafat's propaganda stories that he quite uncritically relayed to the media.⁴⁰ Hermannsson was the son of former Prime Minister and Minister of Justice Hermann Jónasson, who had worked so hard to stop Iceland from accepting Jewish refugees in the 1930s.

Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson has also made antisemitic comments in connection with the conflict in the Middle East. In a radio broadcast in August 2011, he compared Israel to Nazi Germany, saying: "There we have a nation who are the descendants of those who were victims of German Nazism and European racism, who have become just like the Nazis."⁴¹ In 2015 Hannibalsson went even further and likened Israel to ISIS.⁴² This happened after he had ended his career in parliament, a career that had reached its high point with appointments as Minister of Finance and Minister of Foreign Affairs. After this he held the post of Iceland's ambassador in Washington and later in Helsinki (1998–2005). Hannibalsson's political downfall occurred in 2012, when it emerged that he had written letters on letterhead paper from the Washington Embassy to his wife's underage relative, in which he harassed her with his sexual fantasies. In Iceland writing offensive letters of a sexual nature is more damaging to one's political career than making antisemitic remarks.

40 Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, "Emanuelis Zingeris, Star of the Red-Brown Road Show, Turns Up in Reykjavík on the Jewish New Year," *Defending History* [website], 18 September 2012, < <http://defendinghistory.com/emanuelis-zingeris-star-of-the-red-brown-road-show-turns-up-in-reykavik/41744> >.

41 J. B. Hannibalsson, interview on *Á Sprengisandi*, Bylgjan radio station, 28 August 2011. The programme can be heard here < <http://www.visir.is/k/clp5961> >.

42 J. B. Hannibalsson, interview on *Á Sprengisandi*, Bylgjan radio station, 15 November 2015. The programme can be heard here < <http://www.visir.is/k/clp41001> >.

Academic antisemitism

There were several academics among the small number of Jews who managed to find temporary asylum in Iceland at the end of the 1930s, but these well-educated Jewish refugees had great difficulty finding work. They included Jewish doctors, such as Karl Kroner from Germany and the married couple Felix Fuchs and Stephanie Karpeles-Fuchs from Vienna. Nor were these doctors able to gain permanent residency in Iceland. Felix and Stephanie were deported to Denmark at the end of 1938; from there they risked their lives sailing via Gothenburg to the USA on a convoy ship. The opportunity to have a career in Iceland had been denied them by Icelandic doctors and the Icelandic Director of Health despite there being a great shortage of doctors in the country at the time.⁴³

Otto Weg (1893–1984) was a highly educated geologist and mathematician from Leipzig who fled to Iceland after spending time in Buchenwald concentration camp where his brother was murdered. He did manage to settle in Iceland but was never able to have an academic career: in spite of holding a doctorate in geology, he had to support himself by offering private tutoring.⁴⁴

Róbert Abraham Ottósson, the only academic of Jewish descent who was able to find employment at the University of Iceland in the first decades after the Second World War, was – despite his surname Abraham – a Catholic. His family had converted to Catholicism in the nineteenth century. His surname was, however, more than enough to ensure that a Danish trade union and the Danish authorities had prevented him from ever finding employment as a musician in Denmark, which was the reason he ended up moving to Iceland.

Since 1980, straightforward plain antisemitism has often surfaced in academic circles in connection with comments about the conflict in the Middle East. Anti-Zionism, which is how most critics of Israel define their criticism, can in many cases amount to pure antisemitism. Icelanders, who often have absolutely no idea about the history of Zionism, happily compare it to Nazism, the State of Israel with Hitler's Germany, and the policies of the state with apartheid, to simply note the main themes of the anti-Zionist narrative. What follows are just a few examples.

⁴³ Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Útrunnin Vegabréf,” *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins (Morgunblaðið)*, 21 March 1998, 6–8.

⁴⁴ Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Gyðingar í hverju húsi,” *Fornleifur* [blog], 14 February 2013, < <https://fornleifur.blog.is/blog/fornleifur/entry/1279701/> > .

In 2003, eighty-one employees of the University of Iceland signed a petition from three of their colleagues.⁴⁵ This petition was based on a false news report on a pro-Palestinian website that claimed that 187 Israeli professors had warned of an imminent ethnic cleansing of Palestinians under cover of the Iraq War. The false report pretended that the Israeli professors had called upon their colleagues around the world to be wary of the Israeli rulers who wanted to take advantage of the war in Iraq to drive all the Arabs out of Israel and Palestine. The author of the petition was the philologist Pétur Knútsson (formerly Peter Ridgewell, b. 1942).⁴⁶ Among the signatories was professor of history Gísli Gunnarsson (b. 1938), professor of sociology Þorbjörn Broddason (b. 1943), professor of philosophy Vilhjálmur Árnason (b. 1953), and professor of Literary Studies Helga Kress (b. 1939). The question that needs to be asked here is: did any of these academics ever warn against acts of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, Darfur, or elsewhere in the world? The answer is no. The blinkered focus was on Jews and on Israel.

In 2019, professor emeritus in history at the *Háskóli Íslands*, Gísli Gunnarsson, again came under the spotlight in connection with antisemitism in Iceland. In 2004, he wrote an article on the university's Science Web, *Visindavefurinn*, where people can ask the experts at the university about any subject between heaven and earth. The article was a reply to the question: "Why have the Jews been persecuted throughout the centuries?"⁴⁷ In 2018, Merrill Kaplan, associate professor at Ohio State University, contacted the editorial staff at *Visindavefurinn* and pointed out a number of dubious and incorrect claims and mistakes in Gísli Gunnarsson's arguments.⁴⁸ Among other things, Gunnarsson blamed Jews themselves for the persecutions. Kaplan, who worked on her PhD in Iceland, sent a detailed nine-page explanation of her arguments to the editorial staff at *Visindavefurinn* and asked that the article be removed on account of the prejudices and proven errors that it contained. Instead of taking note of her arguments when he received them from the editorial staff, Gunnarsson chose to take to Facebook to air the matter and there he made patronizing critical comments about Kaplan interwoven with conjecture about whether the criticism was a conspiracy aimed at

45 "Áskorun," < <https://notendur.hi.is/~peturk/ISRAEL/askorun.htm> >.

46 Knútsson has also signed a declaration claiming that the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001 was not proven to have been committed Muslims, but was instead a conspiracy.

47 Gísli Gunnarsson, "Hvers vegna hafa Gyðingar verið ofsóttir í gegnum aldirnar?" *Visindavefur* [Q&A web of the University of Iceland] 2004 and a revised version of 14 January 2019, < <https://www.visindavefur.is/svar.php?id=1646> >.

48 "Niðurstaða Visindavefsins 'að Gyðingar hafa sjálfir kallað yfir sig ofsóknir'," *Kvennablaðið* [web-magazine], 11 January 2019, < <https://kvennabladid.is/2019/01/11/nidurstada-visinda-vefsins-ad-gydingar-hafa-sjalfir-kallad-yfir-sig-ofsoknir/> >.

him in particular. On his Facebook page, Gunnarsson claimed that he had not received any arguments from the critic. He received them in a letter from the editors of *Vísindavefurinn* before he chose to air the matter on Facebook. In the following discussion, in which he largely received support from his fellow friends-of-Palestine, Gunnarsson had to admit that he was really not an expert in the area he had been asked about.⁴⁹ He subsequently changed his article. Also in this context, Gunnarsson for a long time advanced the long-debunked claim that Ashkenazi Jews are the descendants of Khazars who had converted to Judaism long after the “original” Jews, i.e. those alive at the time of Jesus. Only recently, after he was introduced to DNA studies that unequivocally prove that the Khazar theory is utter nonsense, has Gunnarsson dropped this argument. The Khazar hypothesis of Ashkenazi ancestry is a well-known antisemitic canard that contributes to the destruction of the Jewish people along with gas and bullets.

In certain Icelandic academic families antipathy and hatred towards Jews, their religion, and more recently the State of Israel, has reared its head generation after generation. In the 1920s the German composer and musical director Franz Mixa (1902–94) came to Iceland, where he married an Icelandic woman. As a dedicated Nazi he joined the NSDAP in 1932 as member number 782,617. While in Iceland, he opposed the employment of Jewish musicians in the country. In 1938 he left Iceland and became *Landesleiter der Reichsmusikkammer Gau Steiermark* (State Director of the Reich Music Institute for Reichsgau Styria) until 1943. Being a German soldier he was arrested by the French and imprisoned until 1947.

In 2009, his son, the doctor Ólafur Mixa (b. 1939), made comments on his personal blog. Clearly affected by the situation in the Middle East, he declared his support for Palestine in the following manner:

It has long been evident that Israel has absolutely no intention of negotiating about anything to do with Palestine. Their ideology seems to revolve around just one thing: being a master race (*herraþjóð*) in the ancient Palestinian territory and conquering everything little by little. And seeing it as their right given to them by God himself, this ferocious, vain, jealous, and vengeful Yahweh who appears in ancient tall tales that were collected around 600 BC and turned into holy scriptures.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Gísli Gunnarsson’s Facebook, 9 January 2019, < <https://www.facebook.com/gisli.gunnarsson.75/posts/10212540560605215> >.

⁵⁰ Ólafur Fr. Mixa, “Hvað þykir ‘raunhæft’ í Ísrael,” *Ólafur Fr. Mixa* [blog], 1 January 2009, < <https://olimikka.blog.is/blog/olimikka/entry/762411/> >.

The third generation of the Mixa family, Dr Már Wolfgang Mixa (b. 1965) is a national economist and lecturer at *Háskólinn í Reykjavík* (Reykjavík University) who regularly writes in the media about economic matters. In 2011, in an article entitled “Who controls the world?” in the Icelandic online paper *eyjan.is*, he posited without evidence that: “At the beginning of the twentieth century it was said to be impossible to wage war for very long without the Rothschild family and their collaborators having agreed to fund it.”⁵¹ Már Mixa’s sister, who has publicly stated that she does not think that her brother’s stance on Jews being behind wars is hateful, has for many years been the chairperson of the pro-Palestinian *Félagið Ísland-Palestína* (Association Iceland-Palestine). In this group, the choice of words is often hateful; for example, the then chairperson of the association, Sveinn Rúnar Hauksson, wrote an article with the headline “Israel, Israel über alles.”⁵²

The Icelandic press and antisemitism

At the end of the nineteenth century, the antisemitism found in the Icelandic press was characterized by the same mindset as found among politicians, i.e. a general fear of foreigners. They tried, for example, to brand certain foreign families in Iceland as Jewish. Very few Jews were involved in trading in Iceland during the second half of the nineteenth century, and those who were never spent any time in the country. The only Jew to settle in Reykjavík at the beginning of the twentieth century was Fritz Heyman Nathan.⁵³ However, he was never subjected to antisemitic attacks, but rather was teased because of his poor eyesight and tics, which today would be recognized as Tourette syndrome.

The phenomenon of linking people with a foreign background to Judaism was later cultivated by Icelandic Nazis and, as mentioned earlier, continues to the present day. In 2014 an Icelandic historian came to the peculiar conclusion that two Scottish cloth-traders had to have been Jews. Just like previous genera-

51 Már Wolfgang Mixa, “Hverjir stjórna heiminum?” *eyjan.is* [website], 28 September 2011. The article has been removed from *eyjan.is*, but is still available here < https://postdoc.blog.is/users/3d/postdoc/files/hverjir-stjorna-heiminu_14971.pdf >. See also Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Mixa und die Juden,” *Er ekkert í ísskápnunum* [blog], 29 September 2011, < <https://postdoc.blog.is/blog/postdoc/entry/1194414/> >, where the article has been criticized.

52 Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Gyðingahatrið í Gaza-umræðunni,” *Er ekkert í ísskápnunum?* [blog], 7 March 2014, < <https://postdoc.blog.is/blog/postdoc/entry/1413583/> >.

53 Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Nathans hankat,” *Rambam: Tidskrift for jødisk kultur og forskning* 18 (2009): 68–71.

tions of antisemites who linked Jews with the import of cloth carrying the plague and clothes taken from battlefields, the historian claimed that the names “Tierney” and “Harmitage” were derived from East European Jewish names. A quick search reveals, however, that these “cloth-Jews” were in fact Baptists with Irish and French backgrounds who were from Leith near Edinburgh.⁵⁴

One Icelandic media figure stands out clearly as most frequently having made antisemitic comments in the press, even though he reportedly did not perceive himself as an antisemite. He referred to his opinions as just and fair criticism of the State of Israel. However, in nearly every case his comments were also an attack on the citizens of Israel. This was Jónas Kristjánsson (1940 – 2018), who was both the editor of several tabloid newspapers in Iceland and later also his own blog.⁵⁵ The blog had a record-breaking readership and was best known for its abrupt and to-the-point style, but never as fierce as when discussing Jews and Israel.

We should stress that Kristjánsson was definitely not the only one in Iceland who had fierce opinions and views. For over two decades, many other Icelanders have engaged in the same kind of excesses and sometimes much worse on social media and later in internet comments sections. Kristjánsson’s opinions about Jews in Israel follow the usual formulas. The most common is: “I don’t hate Jews, but I hate Zionists and the State of Israel,” which are then compared with Nazis and Nazi Germany. Another popular formula: “Many of my best friends are Jewish and I only hate Israelis who act like the Jews’ executioners, the Nazis.”

The comparison of Jews to Nazis defines a particular kind of antisemitism, not just seen as such by Jews, but also by non-Jewish researchers. Here is a small selection of Jónas Kristjánsson’s antisemitic remarks:

18 January 2009

The Israelis are Nazis ... [I] first visited Israel in 1965 and was captivated by the nation. Nonetheless, I began criticizing Israel in 1980. My first criticism concerned the same thing that Israel is criticized for today: random bombardment of people to win the elections at home. In total, I have written 311 articles about the country, the state, and the nation. My criticism has become stronger since a stay in Jerusalem in 1996. I became afraid for the nation itself, its aggression in daily life. I thought that it had ended up in an impasse and that it resembled its earlier tormentor, Hitler. The bloodbath in Gaza seemed like the bloodbath in Warsaw in 1943. The Israelis are the modern-day Nazis.

28 September 2010

Israelis are bullies ... I was in Israel on two occasions for two weeks. As I was exiting a hotel

54 Vilhjálmsson, “Gyðingar í hverju húsi.”

55 Jónas Kristjánsson, *Jonas* [blog]. < www.jonas.is >.

lift, some Israelis barged into it so that I had to make my way out of it again. The people in the tourist branch lied so that I had to dig up information about the opening hours of the Dome of the Rock by myself. Border guards and airport officials were Nazi-style louts. They view tourists as insects. For several years, Israel has bred a master race. Under the protection of the USA.

19 November 2012

Israel is a nation of scum.

14 July 2014

[I] have never had anything against Jews on the grounds of belief ... The last time I was in Israel, I felt that the conditions had perverted the state and the nation. Violence and aggression reigned. People view the Palestinians as dogs, or what is even worse. Extremists have taken power and been given the titles of ministers. When I managed to cross the river to Jordan I met polite Jordanians and felt as if I had come home to Europe. Liberated from a crazy state and a perverse nation.

18 July 2014

Israel's Nazis ... [a] terminally ill country with insane voters annihilates a people under the protection of a very sick USA. It is absurd that fate has turned Israel into a monster that in the tiniest detail is reminiscent of the worse Nazis from seventy years ago.

1 August 2014

Thoroughly rotten Israel ... The issue is not about Jews around the world, those who support this are few and others are against it. The issue is about Israel as a state, as a society, as individuals. Everything that goes by the name Israel has become a fire-breathing monster belonging to the world's greatest terrorist, the USA. The USA has full responsibility for having bred a monster and turning it into something that all good people feel antipathy towards.

18 December 2014

Israel is becoming isolated ... Netanyahu only screams about the Jews' Holocaust seven decades ago. Europeans today do not, however, owe the country anything; they established the EU to prevent nationalism and racism in the present and the future. The time for Israel's racism and terror is over.

18 September 2015

Israel is poison ... Israel's apartheid is reminiscent of South Africa's apartheid. I would not dream of knowingly buying goods from Israel. [I] think it is fine that Reykjavík does the same thing. This is not about antisemitism, Jews are not the same as Israel.⁵⁶

In his journalism, the editor Jónas Kristjánsson did not show any antipathy towards any minorities other than Jews or any states other than Israel. He was active until the end and involved himself in the debate that arose in 2017 when Icelandic members of parliament from very different parties started a campaign against the religious circumcision of baby boys in Iceland. The campaign was

⁵⁶ See the late Jónas Kristjánsson's website, < <http://www.jonas.is/page/2/?s=Israel> >.

primarily supported by people in Icelandic society who had a negative view of Muslims. In no way did the maximum penalty called for in the bill, with sentences of up to six years in prison for violating the proposed ban, reflect its noble intentions, e.g. only ten per cent of all Icelandic doctors at home and abroad supported the bill. On the subject of circumcision, two months before his death Kristjánsson wrote:

Circumcision is a bodily attack on the individual, who is unable to speak for himself. There is no tradition here for that sort of attack. That is why it is just to ban the circumcision of all children in Iceland, with fines and prison sentences as a consequence if this is not respected. We do not have to get mixed up in the traditions of the medieval states of Muslims and Jews, but we ought not to open the door to criminal traditions.⁵⁷

Antisemitism in art

A small and isolated people, Icelanders have at times felt a real fear of things foreign and unknown. However, it was never foreign ideas or trends or progress that Icelanders were afraid of, but rather foreign people made of flesh and blood.

This mindset was clearly encouraged by well-known Icelandic authors, children of their time, adopting this xenophobia. A renowned author such as Halldór Laxness (1902–98), who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1955, wrote about Jews in his works. Laxness was in Berlin in 1936 during the Olympics. At that time he was a dedicated Socialist, if not a Communist, who had also converted to Catholicism and been a monk for a while. A “Jewish girl with a hooked nose,” as Laxness described the daughter of an alleged Jewish acquaintance, whose name Laxness never mentioned, provided him and a fellow Icelander with tickets for the games at the *Reichsstadion* in Berlin on 9 June 1936.⁵⁸ Laxness did not tell his readers about a second trip he made to Berlin in 1936, however. That trip took place after he defended Stalin at a PEN conference in Rio de Janeiro. This time the purpose of the author’s visit to Nazi Germany was to collect the royalties that the Austrian publishing house Zinnen owed him and his Danish agent.⁵⁹ Laxness eventually wrote in one of his memoirs that he had problems with the publishing house’s offices in Germany because of rumours that

57 “Trúarofsóknir á börnum,” < <http://www.jonas.is/truarofsoknir-a-bornum/> >.

58 Halldór Kiljan Laxness, *Dagleið á Fjöllum* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1962), 267–69.

59 *Rigsarkivet* (Danish National Archive), Archive of the Foreign Ministry, the Legation in Berlin (delivered in 1951): 81.A. 91: Icelandic author Halldor Laxness. The letters in the dossier are from the period 17 October 1936 to 24 March 1937, as well as March 1938.

he had a hostile attitude towards Nazi Germany.⁶⁰ More likely, the publishing firm, which was owned by Jewish families in Austria and not by Social Democrats as Laxness claimed, had difficulties paying the authors whose works the branch in Germany published. The Danish Foreign Ministry quickly sent a letter to the Danish legation in Berlin which was supposed to assure the German authorities that Laxness was totally non-political – or possibly a Social Democrat, at most.⁶¹

In a brilliant new book on attitudes towards foreigners and refugee policy in Iceland in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century,⁶² the Icelandic historian Snorri G. Bergsson strongly suggests that Laxness flirted with antisemitism. Bergsson shows his readers how Laxness equates antisemitism with hatred of dogs.⁶³ In an article in the newspaper *Þjóðviljinn* on 31 October 1948, which Laxness titled “Parísarbréf” (Letter from Paris), he wrote:

The murderer of Europe drew these helpless refugees up here [to Paris] in the spring of 1940. I had a few acquaintances in their ranks. They were Polish. I have heard that they were murdered. They were probably transported eastwards to the concentration camps in Ásvits [sic; a spelling of Auschwitz unique to Laxness], where Hitler had five million Communists and suspected Communists murdered in the years 1940–45, and, of course, “Jews.” [sic; the quotation marks are Laxness’s own]⁶⁴

Of course, opinions in Iceland are divided as to whether Snorri Bergsson’s analysis is correct. Being the only Icelandic recipient of a Nobel Prize, Laxness has saint-like status in Iceland. I have, among other things, been accused of sacrilege by one Icelandic historian. In 2018, Hannes Hólmsteinn Gissurarson claimed that I also thought that Laxness was an antisemite because I welcomed Bergsson’s analysis in a review of his book.⁶⁵ The critic is a member of the EU organization Platform of European Memory and Conscience, which actively participates in the relativization of the Holocaust in the Baltic States. The organization endorses Es-

⁶⁰ Halldór Kiljan Laxness, *Vettvangur Dagsins, Ritgerðir* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1942), 282–89.

⁶¹ *Rigsarkivet* [Danish National Archive], Archive of the Foreign Ministry, the Legation in Berlin (delivered in 1951): 81.A. 91.

⁶² Bergsson, *Erlendur Landshornalýður*.

⁶³ Bergsson, *Erlendur Landshornalýður*, 164.

⁶⁴ Bergsson, *Erlendur Landshornalýður*. Note that Laxness was not actually in Paris in 1940.

⁶⁵ Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Sagnfræðileg perla komin út úr skel fyrir Vestan,” *Fornleifur* [blog], 23 November 2017, < <https://fornleifur.blog.is/blog/fornleifur/entry/2206939/> > .

tonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Polish authorities who wish to honour the murderers of Jews as freedom fighters.⁶⁶

Laxness's attitude towards Jews is at best peculiar. Contrary to what he himself writes, he never had demonstrably close contacts with Jews. Comparing anti-semitism to hatred of dogs also suggests a fundamentally antisemitic attitude. A man who relativizes the history of the victims of Auschwitz, claims that the murdered were Communists, and only adds "Jews" in quotation marks and in passing, clearly has a rather warped attitude towards Jews.

Gunnar Gunnarsson (1889–1975), who lived outside of Iceland for much of his life, in Denmark for the longest period, is another great author who was closely connected to Nazism. After the war many people in Iceland thought that he deserved the Nobel Prize for his literary prowess. Although Gunnarsson was not a member of the Icelandic or the Danish Nazi Party and never made anti-semitic public statements, he did ally himself with Nazism in the most unfortunate manner: he was a prominent member of the Nordic branch of the *Nordische Gesellschaft* (Nordic Society). The *Nordische Gesellschaft* worked to encourage antisemitism among its members. Gunnarsson associated with the leadership of this Nazi organization, including Alfred Rosenberg, who was one of the main ideologues of the Nazi Party and its propaganda against Jews. In 1940, shortly after Gunnarsson had moved from Denmark to East Iceland, he went on a lecture tour of forty towns in Germany, including Berlin, where he received an audience with Hitler. Today Gunnarsson is remembered through a state-funded research and memorial centre on his former farmstead, Skriðuklaustur in East Iceland. The leader and board of the *Gunnarsstofnun* (Gunnarsson Institute) do not want to talk about the Nazi part of Gunnarsson's life and officially deny that he was a dedicated Nazi sympathizer, even though he associated with top Nazis, met Hitler, and, among other things, praised the Anschluss (the annexation of independent Austria in 1938 by Nazi Germany) in the Icelandic press. The Danish embassy in Berlin in the 1930s considered Gunnarsson to be a Nazi; he was called in to meetings at the embassy and warned against socializing too much with top German Nazis. Yet the Gunnarsson Institute is of the opinion that you have to have worn a uniform and preferably murdered Jews in order to be a Nazi. Despite much criticism of the Gunnarsson Institute's tackling of the issue of Gunnarsson's Nazism,⁶⁷ in 2018 there is even less information and

⁶⁶ Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, "Holocaust Obfuscation and Double Genocide: The Show Goes On," *Defending History* [website], 13 June 2014, < <http://defendinghistory.com/holocaust-obfuscation-show/67054/> >.

⁶⁷ Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, "Iceland's Nazi Ghosts," *Fornleifur* [blog], 17 September 2012, < <https://fornleifur.blog.is/blog/fornleifur/entry/1257968/> >.

only in Icelandic on the Institute’s new homepage about the low points of the author’s career and life than has previously been the case.⁶⁸



Figure 4.1: Icelandic author Gunnar Gunnarsson leaving the Reichskanzlei together with Hinrich Lohse following a meeting with Adolf Hitler, 20 March 1940. Photo by Heinrich Hoffmann. Fotoarchiv Hoffmann O.28, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek/Bildarchiv. With permission.

Another Icelandic author with Nazi tendencies was Guðmundur Kamban (1888–1945). Some also remember him as the victim of a war crime: Kamban was shot by resistance fighters in Denmark at the end of the war during a commotion at a guesthouse in the Østerbro neighbourhood of Copenhagen when he resisted arrest. Kamban was a blatant Nazi sympathizer and one of the three Icelanders who suggested to Goebbels that Prince Friedrich Christian zu Schaumburg-Lippe should be crowned king of Iceland if the Germans invaded the country. For a short period during the occupation, Kamban was the director of *Danmarks Radio*, appointed by the Germans. He often visited the Gestapo headquarters in Copenhagen; during one of these visits, Kamban recognized a Danish Jew, Jacob Thalmay, who had coloured his hair and was trying his hand at being

⁶⁸ “Skáldið,” < <https://skriduklaustur.is/skaldid> > and “Gunnarsstofnun,” < <https://skriduklaustur.is/gunnarsstofnun> > on the website of Gunnarsstofnun (<https://www.skriduklaustur.is/>).

a double agent in the Gestapo headquarters. Thalmay's plan was to try and leave the country to rescue some of his relatives who had been deported to Theresienstadt in 1943. Kamban and Thalmay had lived at the same guesthouse in Østerbro, so Kamban was able to denounce Thalmay, who was subsequently arrested and imprisoned as a Jewish spy. Thalmay was sent to Auschwitz and later died on a death march.⁶⁹ In spite of this fact, there is still a memorial plaque for Kamban on the front of number 20 Upsalagade in Østerbro, where he is remembered as an innocent victim of “random revenge killings” in 1945. People in Iceland still talk of the “murder of Kamban.”⁷⁰ Some years ago, I gained access to the police file concerning the death. The name of the man who shot Kamban is not yet in the open access period and therefore he cannot be identified, but from the report it is difficult to see how this was a premeditated killing. The distortion or denial of the facts of war as well as the glorification of perpetrators is also a problem in Iceland, as in many other European countries. The refusal of Icelandic politicians to prosecute the Estonian war criminal Evald Mikson, who settled in Iceland after the war and changed his name to Eðvald Hinriksson, is a good example of how Icelanders see their nationality as some sort of immunity against doing anything bad or wrong.

Hannes Pétursson (b. 1931), a leading poet in the postwar period in Iceland, has continued the island people's tradition of making foreigners appear suspicious or turning them into Jews. In the poet's autobiography, published in 2012,⁷¹ Pétursson recounts his youth in the village of Sauðárkrókur in North Iceland. His story is spiced up with a tale about a certain Albert Volker Lindemann who settled in Iceland in the 1930s. Lindemann ran a grocery store and a guesthouse in Varmahlíð in Skagafjörður. Pétursson explains to his reader that Lindemann was a homosexual who assaulted underage boys and that because of his sexual deviance he ended up having to leave Iceland. In addition to enlightening the reader in a very negative way about unsubstantiated details of Lindemann's life, Pétursson declares the sinner a Jew. It was not enough to make Lindemann a paedophile, he also had to be a Jew.

The most recent example of antisemitism in Icelandic art was produced by the Icelandic performance artist Snorri Ásmundsson (b. 1966). In June 2014, Ásmundsson posted a video on YouTube with the title *Hatikva*. According to Ás-

69 Vilhjálmsson, *Medaljens Bagside*, 283. The first “Stolperstein” (*sneblesten* in Danish) to be laid in Denmark was in memory of Jacob Thalmay (Carl Plougs Vej 7, Frederiksberg) in 2019.

70 Borgþór Arngrímsson, “Sjöttíu ár liðin frá uppgjöf Þjóðverja og morðinu á Guðmundi Kamban,” *Kjarninn*, 5 May 2015, < <https://kjarninn.is/frettir/sjotiu-ar-lidin-fra-uppgjof-thjodverja-og-mordinu-a-gudmundi-kamban/> >.

71 Hannes Pétursson, *Jarðlag í tímanum. Minningamyndir úr barnæsku* (Reykjavík: Opna, 2012).



Figure 4.2: Still from the music video “Hatikvah” by Icelandic artist Snorri Ásmundsson, published on youtube.com in 2014: < <https://www.youtube.com/user/snorriasmunds> >. Public domain.

mundsson, the video is a protest against Israel’s treatment of Palestinians. In it, the artist wears drag – a tight-fitting metallic dress, lipstick, and eye shadow – as a reference to Dana International, the transgender Israeli who won the Eurovision song contest in 1998, and sings the Israeli national anthem alongside two other adult performers in a very degrading manner. Somewhat spasmodically and with little grace they dance to the anthem with accompanying animated gestures and grimaces. One of those in the video is meant to be an Israeli soldier and a female participant is dressed as a Muslim woman who is attacked by the soldier at the beginning of the video; for the rest of the film she dances dressed in a cowgirl outfit. In addition to these characters, there are two young men with Down syndrome performing, dressed in large black overcoats and hats and with stuck-on sidelocks (*peyot*) in order to represent Hasidic Jews.⁷² In an article in the English-language weekly *Icelandic Grapevine*, Ásmundsson explained what he wanted to achieve with his video. In addition, he described how he avoided being accused of and prosecuted for antisemitism under Icelandic law. Ásmundsson employed the frequently used alibi that he has Jewish friends: “Snorri added that he realized his artwork was highly controver-

⁷² “Hatikva” performed by Snorri Ásmundsson, < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mj-wRxdB42A> >.

sial and that it would make people angry but that some of his Jewish friends had had a good laugh about it.”⁷³

Economic hardship and antisemitism

A banking crisis hit Iceland in 2008, when several of the badly and irresponsibly run banks collapsed after several years of financial excess in Iceland and elsewhere. Responsibility for the banking crisis lay first and foremost with greedy financiers in Iceland. The worst effects of the crisis on the country’s economy were mitigated by the majority of Icelanders as well as the state refusing to accept responsibility or act as guarantors for the private bankers’ crimes and their customers’ naivety. Nonetheless, for a long period one could see psychological stress among the Icelandic populace which was expressed in different ways. Among the crowds who gathered to demonstrate in front of the parliament in Reykjavík to express their frustration, a small group of Icelandic neo-Nazis could be seen waving an old German Nazi flag. A female member of the global neo-Nazi group Combat 18 was the self-appointed “Führer” of the group. The group’s solution to Iceland’s economic crisis was “Aryan supremacy” and putting a complete stop to the immigration of foreigners – especially Muslims – to Iceland. As so often before in world history, some people saw foreigners as the reason for all their problems.

The other groups of protestors in front of the parliament did not take long to eject this neo-Nazi enclave from their spontaneous demonstrations. The protests were partly aimed at the financial crisis, which to a large extent many ordinary, albeit gullible and enthusiastic, Icelanders had brought upon themselves by borrowing from banks that claimed that they could provide better returns than, for example, banks in the oil states. But the protests were also aimed at politicians who were attempting to remedy matters by working for Iceland’s integration into the EU. By doing so they believed that Iceland could regain the good economic position it had enjoyed before the collapse, and quickly too, despite the fact that the financial upswing before the crash had not been a real recovery.

There were some among those Icelanders prosecuted for financial irregularities who placed blame on Jews. Jón Ásgeir Jóhannesson, who owned and led the Icelandic *Baugur Group* (BG), which was active in several countries including the UK and Denmark, suffered huge, self-inflicted losses during the banking crisis.

73 < <https://grapevine.is/culture/art/2014/07/16/hatikvah/> >; See also < <http://icelandreview.com/news/2015/03/06/icelanders-accused-anti-semitism> >.

His former business partner, the Brit Philip Green, offered to purchase BG's properties for 30 per cent of their market price, and Jóhannesson agreed to the deal. Many people in Iceland thought that by doing so the Icelandic banks lost any chance of recovering BG's assets to cover the group's debt. This caused many Icelanders to bring up Green's Jewish background. On social media, allegations were made that banks and flamboyant rich men with Jewish names were responsible for the Icelandic crash. The Iranian-born Iraqi-Jewish brothers Robert and Vincent Tchenguiz, who had partly invested in the Icelandic bank Kaupþing but had largely borrowed from the bank, were made into the principal villains, even though their role in the crash was certainly exaggerated. Partly due to allegations made by a certain Icelandic prosecutor, one of the brothers was taken into custody by the UK's Serious Fraud Office. In 2012 it was shown that the allegations were false and the evidence insufficient. The Tchenguiz brothers lost millions of pounds from the collapse of the Kaupþing bank, however in Iceland many who cannot face reality remember them as the villains behind the crash.

Some foreign journalists also made similar aspersions when they, jokingly, tried to portray the Jewish first lady of Iceland, Dorrit Moussaieff (b. 1950), as being partly responsible for the collapse of the Icelandic banks. For example, there was an unusually unkind article by the journalist Robert Boyes in the British newspaper *The Times* in which he wrote about the financial crisis in Iceland. Boyes published similar articles in several international newspapers. He included among other things this comment from a man on the street, who judging from the wording was probably one of the tabloid journalists who he collaborated with in Iceland: "That gold rush, at the beginning of this century, has spun the illusion of wealth. Dorrit Moussaieff, the jet-setting jewellery-designer wife of President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, set the tone, with her coteries of girlfriends." One of these "girlfriends" who she apparently socialized with was, we learn, the American retail executive and television personality Martha Stewart. Stewart was indeed once invited to Iceland by the former president's wife, but neither Dorrit Moussaieff nor the president had anything whatsoever to do with the economic crash. Robert Boyes helped spread Icelandic slander that held the president's Jewish wife responsible for the crimes of the banking speculators.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Robert Boyes, "Scating on thin ice," *The Australian*, 10 October 2008, < <https://www.pressreader.com/australia/the-australian/20081010/281882999161333> >; Robert Boyes, "Bankruptcy's cold winds sweep Iceland," *Waikato Times*, 11 October 2008, < <https://www.pressreader.com/new-zealand/waikato-times/20081011/283107064841315> >. The article in the *Waikato Times* refers to Britain's *The Times* as the original publisher of the article. The same prejudices against Dorrit Moussaieff appear in Boyes's highly untrustworthy description of Icelandic society during the

Born in Israel, the president's wife had previously been forced to admit that her background did not please all Icelanders, both on the right and the left. At a conference on antisemitism at *Háskólinn á Akureyri* (University of Akureyri) in 2006, I provided examples of antisemitic comments directed at the president's wife which could be found after a brief internet search. In connection with this I provided examples of how many Icelanders expressed their frustration about the activities of domestic criminals by blaming Jews for the global economic situation.⁷⁵

Already in 2001, to be precise on 11 September, a young university student, Egill Guðmundsson, wrote on his homepage about his experiences that terrible day. He concluded his piece with the words “Burt með Dorrit!” (Dorrit out!). A more detailed explanation of this statement can be found on his blog *Sokkasafi* (Sock juice) from 14 September 2001:

In Iceland today there is a Jew in Bessastaðir [the president's official residence]. Extremists in the Middle East have recently been getting stronger, as should be clear to all, and they really do not like Jews. It would be a piece of cake to hijack a plane from Icelandair and fly it into Kringlan [Reykjavík's second largest shopping mall]. Does Iceland deserve a Jew at the top?⁷⁶

Subsequently, the same student published a survey about Jews in Iceland which he called “Die Bessstadt Juden,” concluding, “It is quite clear what people think about Jews. The nation has spoken.”⁷⁷

Ástþór Magnússon, a former Icelandic candidate for the presidency who only had a marginal chance of being elected to the post, has often publicly presented Dorrit Moussaieff's Jewish background as a problem. For example, in 2008 he wrote the following in the comments section of a picture that he posted of a badly wounded child:

financial crisis: *Meltdown Iceland: How the Global Financial Crisis Bankrupted an Entire Country* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 105–07.

⁷⁵ Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “It begins with Words...” Handout B, distributed at a seminar on the history of the Jews and antisemitism in Iceland, Akureyri University, 8 April 2006, < https://postdoc.blog.is/users/3d/postdoc/files/varia/handout_2_2332.pdf >.

⁷⁶ Egill Guðmundsson's blog *Sokkasafi* has now been archived under the title *Pleasure, pleasure!* 9 September 2001, < <http://sokkasafi.blogspot.com/2001/09/> > or < http://sokkasafi.tripod.com/2001_09_01_gamaltblogg.html >.

⁷⁷ Vilhjálmsson, “It begins with Words...,” 6.

Mrs Dorrit Moussaieff, you who were born and raised in Jerusalem, are you going to sit idly by in the “enormousest [sic] country in the world,” Iceland the island of peace, while the “littlest” [sic]⁷⁸ souls of the world, the government of Israel, kill the people next door?

Dorrit, aren't you going to lift a finger to help these victims?

I wrote a letter to you earlier this year and asked you to support and promote the message of Friður 2000 (Peace 2000)⁷⁹ in the Middle East. ... You didn't answer the letter? Why? Is your heart as cold as the stone that you bought at auction in London for 735 million?⁸⁰

This attack on Dorrit Moussaieff, in which her background and nationality as well as her profession as director of her family-owned jewellery company were used to smear her, was far from being an isolated incident in the years following the collapse of the Icelandic banks.

In 2008, the journalist Árni Snævarr, who today works for the United Nations Regional Information Centre (UNRIC) in Brussels, wrote an article on *eyjan.is*, in which he expressed his personal outrage over the situation in Iceland after the banks collapsed. Snævarr allowed his feelings caused by the financial crisis to rub off on his personal opinion of Dorrit Moussaieff. She had just publicly expressed a few well-intentioned words proposing a more simple and less materialistic way of life in the difficult economic situation. Snævarr made Moussaieff accountable for her husband President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson's visions and optimism. Grímsson had, like many other Icelanders, naively put his faith in the bright, new Icelandic world of finance. As the father of the country in an office with limited political power, he called upon his fellow countrymen to be optimistic in difficult times. Snævarr's article, targeting the president, but first and foremost his wife, was headlined: “Stay at home and count your diamonds.”⁸¹

Foreskin issues

With assistance from the Danish branch of the American anti-circumcision group Intact, the group Intact Iceland was established in 2017. In many cases, the people who rallied around Intact Iceland on Facebook showed that they were primarily driven by hatred towards minorities. Two women, writing on *Píra-*

⁷⁸ Magnússon is here mocking Moussaieff's inability to speak correct Icelandic by using incorrect superlative forms.

⁷⁹ Friður 2000, a charitable organization founded by Magnússon himself.

⁸⁰ Comment written by Ástþór Magnússon on Jónsson's blog, 28 December 2008, < <https://jonmagnusson.blog.is/blog/jonmagnusson/entry/75568/> >.

⁸¹ Árni Snævarr, “Vertu heima að telja demantana,” *Eyjublogg Árna Snævarrs*, 19 October 2008, < <http://arni.eyjan.is/2008/10/af-hverju-bori-i-ekki-svi-kkur.html> >.

taspjall (“Pirate chat,” the Facebook page of *Píratar*, the Icelandic Pirate Party), described religious circumcision of male children as a sex crime; they were reported to the police for hate speech. The police authorities in Reykjavík, demonstrating a gross misinterpretation of the penal code, chose not to pursue the case.⁸²

During the time leading up to parliament rejecting the proposal to outlaw male circumcision, the *Píratar*’s Facebook page was awash with antisemitic and racist statements in the comments sections. The party otherwise defines itself as opposed to all forms of racism, but the debate about religious circumcision revealed the prevalence of the lowest forms of racism among the party’s supporters.

Ironically enough, other politicians, such as Björn Bjarnason, a former minister for *Sjálfstæðisflokkur*, were against the proposed ban. Bjarnason does, nevertheless, have his own issues with Jews and Muslims. Referring to completely unsubstantiated conspiratorial articles written by the rabidly antisemitic American journalist Wayne Madsen, he claimed that *Píratar* were taking bribes from George Soros and supported unrestricted immigration by Muslims.⁸³

During a public hearing on the proposed ban, the Icelandic parliament received a number of statements supporting the right to religious male circumcision, but also many statements against it. Among the latter was a statement from the organization Jews against Circumcision, led by a 62-year-old man from New York State who has used several different names and pretends to be Jewish even though he is in fact a Christian. An Icelandic man, who claimed to have been circumcised in Iceland as a child at a time when no circumcisions did in fact take place, was given the opportunity to speak in support of the ban. In online media outside of Iceland this same man has grossly slurred Jews; for instance, in 2016 he called Israel’s prime minister “sub-human.”⁸⁴

After much media attention from abroad, the bill against circumcising male children was rejected by the Icelandic parliament in 2018. Such a ban would be counter to the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Icelandic constitution. Among those who spoke during the deliberations on the bill were Jewish communities and organizations from several countries, the national Church of Iceland, and Catholics from Iceland and abroad. They all warned of the consequen-

⁸² Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “Umskurðarbannsmenn fá svínslegan stuðning,” *Er ekkert í ísskápnunum/Postdoc.blog.is* [blog], 2 March 2018, < <https://postdoc.blog.is/blog/postdoc/entry/2212241/> >.

⁸³ Björn Bjarnason, “Soros, Píratar og umskurður,” *Dagbók*, 13 February 2018, < <https://www.bjorn.is/dagbok/soros-piratar-umskurdur?> >.

⁸⁴ Vilhjálmsson, “Umskurðarbannsmenn fá svínslegan stuðning.”

ces of a circumcision ban and condemned the unnuanced arguments presented by those in Iceland who were opposed to circumcision with their widely varying, but principally ignoble, motives.

Concluding remarks

A new generation is now growing up in Iceland, more tolerant than ever before. In spite of the aforementioned cases of intolerance over the years, there is hope for Jews and other minorities. With help from Chabad the few Jews who live in Iceland now have a rabbi and the ability to express themselves religiously. The movement has not attracted any enmity from the surrounding society. Today Iceland is truly a more tolerant country when it comes to minority rights, which is why it is desirable to quell antisemitism and eradicate it from the country for good. The country has excellent legislation to combat hate speech and racism. Nonetheless, on the two occasions that someone has tried to get the authorities – the attorney general and the chief constable of Reykjavík – to investigate anti-semitic attacks, they have refused to do so. There are laws against racism, but only twice has someone been prosecuted successfully under these laws. The problem will not disappear as long as Icelandic media continue to accept rampant antisemitism and Islamophobia as well as statements supporting Holocaust denial in their comments sections. Nor have the authorities followed up on their promises from 2000 in Stockholm, where they vowed to introduce classes on the Holocaust into the school curriculum.⁸⁵ Ignorance is probably the greatest problem. This article has been written to provide an overview of a problem which really should not exist in Iceland, where generally no, or at times very few, Jews have ever lived. The problem is global and the solution is education.

⁸⁵ Vilhjálmsón, “Iceland, the Jews, and Anti-Semitism, 1625–2004,” 145.

