

Salo Aizenberg, 2013. *Hatemail: Anti-Semitism on Picture Postcards*. Published by the University of Nebraska Press as a Jewish Publication Society Book. Philadelphia, PA/ Lincoln, NE. pp. viii + 238, color illustrations. Softbound. ISBN 978-0-8276-0949-5. Available from the SIP Education Fund.

Book Review by Marty Zelenietz, Dartmouth, NS, Canada

Salo Aizenberg has done it again. In 2010, he brought us **Postcards from the Holy Land**, a richly illustrated book chronicling the Ottoman Era in the Middle East, in which he demonstrated the utility of using picture post cards to explore social history. In his new book, **Hatemail**, he goes a step further to examine a dark side of human behavior and attitude. Dipping into his vast collection, he documents the use of picture postcards to spread hate and loathing around the world. I don't know what is worse: the way people used these couriers of hate to unthinkingly share casual, even banal, messages and thoughts, or the instances when the written contents reinforced the negative stereotypes portrayed on the printed cards. In either case, the cards are a clear marker that anti-Semitism was so deeply rooted and accepted in so many societies that the senders didn't think twice about their actions.

## DREYFUS AFFAIR

Aizenberg begins his exploration by examining the Dreyfus Affair, which marks the practical origin of the anti-Semitic postcard. Dreyfus, a French army officer, was falsely accused of selling military secrets to the Germans. His conviction in 1895 triggered a wave of French anti-Semitism that found voice in the newly popular and affordable picture postcards (Figure 1).

## THE “OTHER”

In the next chapter, he looks at “The Main Stereotypes and Canards” found on the postcards coming from Europe and the Americas starting in the 1890s, the dawn of the Golden Age of picture postcards. The thrust of the images is to separate the Jew from the rest of society, to isolate the Jew as the “Other.”

Illustrated are such racist stereotypical physical features as the large hooked nose, deformed body, and oversized feet. Behaviors such as greed, cheapness, thick accents, and hand gestures are among the traits “profiled” by the cards. The Jew is shown rootless and/or ruthless, eternally wandering, or scheming to seize control of the world. Dehumanization is furthered by comparing Jews to animals or the Devil. Jews are shown as inept, unsuitable for military service, unassimilated. In short, the Jew is not one of “Us”.

Having established this unsettling global background (cards from places such as French Indochina and Morocco are included (Figure 2)), Aizenberg proceeds to a detailed exploration of the major countries where the cards were produced and circulated.

## GREAT BRITAIN

Chapters are devoted to Germany, France, Great Britain, and the United States. Each chapter looks at the particular forms of anti-Semitism manifested in the different locales. German cards single out “the enemy within”, a reaction to the influx of Eastern European Jews. French cards show the same xenophobia, identifying the “Jewish Peril” and exhorting “France for the French.”

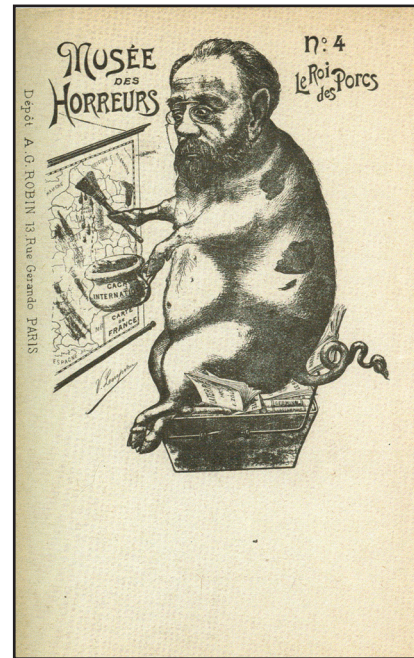


Figure 1  
Emile Zola a French journalist who exposed the “Dreyfus Affair.”

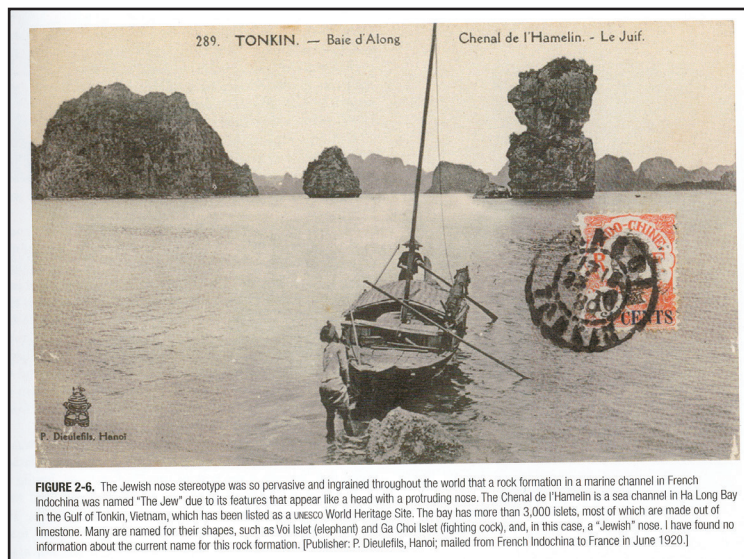


FIGURE 2-6. The Jewish nose stereotype was so pervasive and ingrained throughout the world that a rock formation in a marine channel in French Indochina was named “The Jew” due to its features that appear like a head with a protruding nose. The Chenal de l’Hamelin is a sea channel in Ha Long Bay in the Gulf of Tonkin, Vietnam, which has been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The bay has more than 3,000 islets, most of which are made out of limestone. Many are named for their shapes, such as Voi Islet (elephant) and Ga Choi Islet (fighting cock), and, in this case, a “Jewish” nose. I have found no information about the current name for this rock formation. [Publisher: P. Dieulefit, Hanoi; mailed from French Indochina to France in June 1920.]

Figure 2  
Indochina “The Jew”

Cards from Great Britain recall money-grubbing Jewish characters in English literature: Shylock, Fagin (Figure 3).

## UNITED STATES

Perhaps most chilling, because it is so close to home and so close to our time, are the subtle “exclusionary” messages embedded in advertising cards from United States hotels, motels and real estate developments: phrases such as “select clientele”, “restricted lake”,





Figure 3  
Oliver Twist and Fagin

"a carefully restricted community" conveyed the message that Jews (and other minorities) were not wanted (Figure 4). Sometimes the message was more direct: "strictly Gentile clientele" or "No Hebrews need apply".

## OTHER COUNTRIES

Cards from a host of other areas (Austria, Poland, Hungary, Ukraine, French North Africa, Argentina, Belgium, Mexico, and Switzerland) are collectively examined in another chapter. An entire chapter is devoted to the cards of "The Little Cohn", an anti-Semitic "comic" song that took the German theatres and music halls by storm in 1902. "Little Cohn" is a philandering husband whose plans are thwarted by the untimely appearance of his wife on the scene. His plight seems to have triggered a "Where is Waldo" search for the diminutive, bumbling Jewish rake, who, like his co-religionists, couldn't get anything right.

Two additional chapters plumb the depths of European anti-Semitism. "The Spa Towns of Karlsbad and Marienbad" looks at the clash of vacationing Jews

and Gentiles, and the segregation of populations. "Nazi-era Postcards" gives a brief glimpse of Nazi portrayals of the alien "Other" in the Third Reich. The book closes with a short examination of more-or-less contemporary anti-Israel postcards, reminding us that "The latest trend in anti-Semitism is substituting Israel and Zionism as a proxy for Jews".

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Aizenberg structures his book with a clear, coherent text that makes constant reference to the illustrated cards. The cards, shown in full color (and presumably in full scale), reinforce the message of the text with strong visual images. Each card, in turn, is extensively captioned to support the author's main argument, and to illuminate specific details. The cards are identified by publisher and year of printing, when known.

Postcards offer a window to other times and places: they are brief public statements of the social history



Figure 4  
Restricted living area

and attitudes of their day. They are, as Aizenberg notes, the "tweets" of the past. And the postcards presented in **Hatemail** should give us pause about our immediate past, where we have come from. This is not a book that you sit down to "read": the contents are too disturbing and powerful to absorb all at once. Instead, this is a book to be taken a chapter at a time, to reflect and ponder. Above all, this is a book that teaches us how easy it was to spread hatred in the absence of critical thinking and questioning. This is a lesson for us all that we ignore at our own peril. ■