JEWS AND HUNGARIANS:
A VIEW AFTER THE TRANSITION

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The history of the Jews and anti-Semitism in Hungary has been a source of puzzlement for scholars of East European history. The reason for this is a feature of Hungarian history rarely found elsewhere in the region: an unusually large oscillation in the attitudes of the Hungarian political community between the extremes of resolute philosemitism on the one hand and obsessive anti-Semitism on the other. As Ezra Mendelsohn succinctly put it in his book on the East European Jews after World War I, "The Hungarian experience provides the researcher with a unique example of how a country previously 'good for the Jews' is transformed almost overnight, into a country racked with pogroms and permeated with anti-Semitic hysteria."[1]

Without opting for easy analogies, let me suggest that in some respects the recent explosion of the Jewish question in Hungary does confront us with an echo of the past. Much like in the period preceding World War I, it has again in the past two decades been possible to point to Hungary as the only country left in Eastern Europe that is, to use Mendelsohn's term, still "good for the Jews." Unlike Poland and Czechoslovakia, where tens of thousands of Jews who survived the Holocaust were forced to emigrate under the communist regimes during the 1960s and 1970s, government-sanctioned anti-Semitic persecution was absent in post-1956 communist Hungary. By the 1980s, Hungary was probably the only country in the Soviet bloc where public manifestations of anti-Semitism were considered bad political taste.

This changed almost overnight after 1989. The first massive reappearance of political anti-Semitism occurred during the campaign leading up to Hungary's first free elections in the spring of 1990. It was then that anti-Semitic appeals became part of the negative

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[1] Ezra Mendelsohn, The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 98.

campaigning of the populist-conservative Democratic Forum against its main rival, the liberal Party of Free Democrats.

Events since the spring of 1990 do not warrant a light-hearted dismissal of anti-Semitism as a mere obsession of some insignificant extremist force outside mainstream politics. The gradual infiltration of the upper echelons of the governing party by a few of the most outspoken anti-Semites, the recent promotion of István Csurka--a literary gadfly with a well-earned anti-Semitic reputation--to the vice-chairmanship of the Democratic Forum, as well as the consistent refusal by the Forum's more moderate leaders to denounce political anti-Semitism in the top ranks of their own party, all suggest that, once again, not unlike the aftermath of cataclysmic 1919, relations between Jews and Hungarians have become a source of serious tensions. They are, moreover, precisely the kind of tensions that may be exacerbated by the rapid rise of ethnic hostilities in the region.

Of course, all historic analogy warrants caution. Here, differences may be more important than similarities. True, once again, as in 1919, Hungary may appear to be transformed from a country once "good for the Jews" into a country where many Jews feel beleaguered, intimidated, and probably even threatened in their personal safety. But unlike 1919, when anti-Semitism took the form of mass hysteria, genuine pogroms, and officially sanctioned discrimination, we see none of this today. In other words, even though the pendulum has once again been set in motion, its sweep--so far--has remained surprisingly tempered.

Tempered how? To answer this question, let us attempt to locate the precise sphere from which manifestations of anti-Semitism emanate. What we see is that these manifestations are restricted almost exclusively to symbolic politics. They can be found only in verbal political discourse and in outright anti-Semitic, Nazi-type journals. Although the mainstream press is not totally devoid of anti-Semitic manifestations, these are as a rule coded in their rhetoric.

As for the rest of society, anti-Semitic appeals have not led to specific cases of anti-Jewish violence. Nor is there any evidence of discrimination by private or public businesses, public agencies, the state bureaucracy, or the police.

Another striking contrast to 1919/20 can be found in public attitudes, in the relative indifference to anti-Semitic appeals. As far as can be judged impressionistically from the spring 1990 elections, the net gain from anti-Semitic negative campaigning by the Democratic Forum was not substantial. Since then, majority attitudes toward the Jews have remained polite and tolerant. In this respect, the contrast to the post-1919 period is remarkable: in the interwar period, no party targeted with anti-Semitic propaganda of the kind directed today at the Free Democrats could have hoped to survive as the second largest force in parliament.

But while neither the public nor public institutions have turned in an anti-Semitic direction, political anti-Semitism does continue to radiate from the political atmosphere. It is from there that today's anti-Semitic image of the Jew is being sketched out. This stereotype is made up of clearly contradictory elements. Such contradictions, of course, belong to the very nature of ethnic prejudice classically described by Gordon W. Allport.[2]

Given the overwhelming process of secularization of both Jews and non-Jews under four decades of communism, today's stereotypical Jew can best be given what Allport called a "social" definition: first, a Jew is born into a Jewish family, and others consider him a Jew. These facts produce certain elusive intellectual and emotional characteristics, which give rise to personal and political attitudes that are significantly shaped by the fact of being Jewish. This in turn distances the Jew from the native majority. Jews are thus described by anti-Semites as people whose loyalties inevitably clash with the interests and loyalties of Hungary's non-Jewish majority.

This view was expressed in so many words by the prominent and widely respected populist writer Sándor Csóori in a 1990 article spelling out the ways in which transition to democracy carries darker implications:

> The possibility of intellectual and spiritual unity [between Jews and Hungarians] ceased to exist after the communist revolution of 1919, the Horthy period, and especially after the Holocaust.... What we are facing today is an attempt by the Jewry at a kind of reverse assimilation: we observe an effort by the liberal Hungarian Jews to "assimilate" Magyardom to its own tastes, both in style and in mentality. For this very purpose, Jews have now become free to erect a parliamentary springboard of a kind they have never been able to erect in the past.[3]

Why only now, and why not in the past? What is it that has prepared the ground for this new, unprecedented "freedom" of the Jews? Why not in 1919, and why after 1990? Why is it that it is only now, at the end of the twentieth century, that the Jews have become free to "erect a parliamentary springboard" from which they can conspire to assimilate Hungarians in this breathtakingly paranoid vision?

To find an answer, let us for a moment return to our analogy from 1919. It is again the contrast--and not the similarity--to the present that is remarkable. When, in 1920, the Hungarian national assembly passed anti-Semitic legislation restricting Jewish enrollment in the universities, the political and psychological significance of that legislation extended far beyond higher learning. Again, as Ezra Mendelsohn put it, "What was alarming about this law was not so much that it limited the number of Jews in universities, but that it

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[2] Gordon W. Allport, The Nature of Ethnic Prejudice (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1958).

[3] Hitel 18, 1990, p. 6.

defined Jews as a special 'race' or 'nationality and therefore appeared to exclude them from Magyardom."[4] This bureaucratic procedure, this meticulous definition of who was to be excluded from the Hungarian political community on the basis of official, government-issued certificates, was repeated in 1938 and 1939, then already as an omen of the Hungarian Holocaust.

In contrast, by 1990, it had become practically impossible to furnish any quick and efficient identification of Hungarian Jews, even in the highly unlikely case of an imposition of anti-Semitic policies. In this strictly limited sense, Victor Karády and András Kovács are correct to argue that in contemporary Hungarian society Jews no longer constitute an easily identifiable, closely knit group tied together by bonds of shared communal feelings. For the time being, the absence of any such cohesion probably also renders any definition of a Jewish in-group identity meaningless.

But does this fact alone justify the conclusion that "by the late 1950s, the process of the social assimilation of Hungarian Jews was an accomplished fact"?[5] Granted that the discrimination of Jews ended after 1945 and granted the conspicuous absence of in-group cohesion among Jews, still, these emphatic statements by Kovács and Karády involve a degree of unwarranted methodological bias. What the recent anti-Semitism does seem to confirm is that the frustrations of today's anti-Semites largely stem from the fact that their targets, i. e., the real living people they would like to see identified as Jews no longer stand out as an easily identifiable group in Hungarian society. Weighing the evidence of post-transition anti-Semitism, this in itself is hardly a guarantee against either a new outburst of hostilities or the potential onset of a new wave of dissimilation. What today's anti-Semites have come up against is a typical stumbling bloc of promoters of ethnic conflict in a modern, secular society: the same people who accuse the Jews of being particularistic and seclusive also accuse them of hiding their Jewishness to enable them deceitfully to melt into Hungarian society.

The remainder of this paper elaborates on this curious contradiction and addresses the post-Holocaust re-adaptation of the surviving Jews to Hungarian society. The questions are as follows: First, how, if at all, did the persecution of the Jews during World War II and the Holocaust modify the traditional social profile of Jews in Hungarian society? Second, what effect did four decades of communism have on the stereotypical image and self-image of the surviving Jews?

Today, Jews in Hungary are best characterized as a hyper-assimilationist minority who, for the past four decades, have exhibited a consistent drive toward full dissolution in Hungarian society. This hyper-assimilationist profile of the Jews follows from three cumulative factors: first, the socially selective chances of escaping annihilation in the war;

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[4] Mendelsohn, op. cit., p. 105.

[5] András Kovács, Identitás és etnicitás (Identity and ethnicity), manuscript, p. 2.

second, the selective nature of the postwar emigration of the Jews; and third, the absence of official or government-sanctioned anti-Semitism in the communist years.

How was survival selective? Despite the fact that Hungary was Germany's military ally in the war, until March 1944, Admiral Horthy's wartime government rejected Hitler's demands to hand over and deport Hungary's 825,000 Jews.[6] With the exception of 63,000 Jews who perished in war-related activities or in labor battalions on the Russian front, the rest of Hungary's Jewish population, still numbering 762,000, survived more or less intact until March 1944, when German forces occupied the country.

Beginning with the German occupation, the deportation of virtually all Jews from the Hungarian countryside was completed in only a few weeks. With this, the fate of the bulk of the orthodox, deeply religious Jews was sealed.[7] However, by the summer of 1944, when the rounding up of Jews was to begin in Budapest, Admiral Horthy was able to use his remaining influence with the Germans to halt the deportations. As a result, with the exception of about 105,000 Jews who died in labor battalions after March 1944 or at the hands of the Hungarian Arrow Cross, the Jews of Budapest, numbering approximately 144,000, were saved.[8] Thus, with the exception of about 46,000 Jews who survived either outside the country or outside the capital, the survivors of the Hungarian Holocaust were overwhelmingly the Jews of Budapest.

This then, was a highly select group, the best educated and most assimilated segment of the prewar Jewish population. According to Victor Karady, a good indication of this selectivity was the high proportion of converts to Christianity among the Budapest Jews. In contrast to the proportion of converts outside Budapest, eight percent, Karady puts the proportion of converts among the capital's Jews at 18 percent. Given the fact that converted Jews were more likely to survive the Holocaust, Karady estimates that the overall fraction of converted Jews among the Holocaust survivors is as high as 30 percent.[9]

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[6] Randolph Braham, A magyar Holocaust (The Hungarian Holocaust) (Budapest: Gondolat, 1988, and New York: Blackburn Inc., 1988), vol. II, p. 505. This figure includes the 725,000 Jews registered by the 1941 census and the 100,000 Jews who, despite converting to another faith, continued to be treated as Jews by the anti-Jewish legislation of 1941 (op. cit., p. 453).

[7] Randolph Braham, The Hungarian Jewish Catastrophe (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 2. The number of Jews living outside Budapest in what was called "Trianon Hungary" (Hungarian territory before the re-annexation of lands from neighboring countries lost through the Trianon peace treaty) was 217,000. Out of this number, only 19,000 survived the Holocaust.

[8] Braham, op. cit., p. 229.

[9] Victor Karady, "Szociológiai kisérlet a magyar zsidóság 1945 és 1956 közötti helyzetének elemzésére" (A sociological attempt to analyze the situation of Hungarian Jews between 1945 and 1956), in Zsidóság az 1945 utáni Magyarországon (Jews in Hungary after 1945) (Paris, 1984), p. 70.

Another factor contributing to the hyper-assimilationist profile of Hungarian Jews was the selectivity of Jewish emigration after the war. According to estimates, only two-thirds of the 190,000 survivors remained in Hungary, while the rest left for Palestine and other countries after the war and during 1956.[10] Those who left were overwhelmingly people to whom assimilation in Hungary no longer seemed a viable option in the wake of the Holocaust. By contrast, the assimilationist tendencies of those who stayed were only intensified by the communist policy of discouraging Jewish group identification.

The most conspicuous feature of the redefinition of the profile of the Jewish minority was the loosening of its ties to the Jewish religion. According to my interviews with officials of the Jewish community organization of Budapest, the share of those who preserved their connections to the Jewish community amounts to, at best, 20 percent of all Jews living in Hungary. To some extent, the loosening of Jewish religious and communal ties may have been a response to the communists' persecution of religion. But the major motivation is found elsewhere, namely, in the conscious adoption of hyper-assimilationist strategies by the visible majority of the Jewish survivor population.

After the war, the abandoning of Jewish communal and religious ties was typically no longer accompanied by conversion to Christianity. In contrast to the period preceding the Holocaust, Jews no longer viewed conversion as a viable option. Instead, many turned toward a new, experimental strategy to evolve a fully secular identity resting on the complete denial of and secretiveness about their Jewishness. Thus, the loosening of Jewish communal ties at once involved a turn to a highly abstract, artificial notion of a new identity, in reality a warmed-up version of Emperor Joseph II's Staatspatriotismus, now seen as a utopia of the citizen who claims to have left all local loyalty and cultural or ethnic dilemmas behind.[11]

This hyper-assimilationist tendency was a major factor explaining the disproportionate involvement of Jews on the political left, including communism, after 1945. Since Jewish involvement in communism is probably the most frequently recurring component of the post-Holocaust Jewish stereotype, let us examine the precise nature of that involvement. Admittedly, Hungarian communism in the fifties had a strong Jewish profile, and yet neither the Jewish Stalinist dictator, Matyas Rákosi, nor the other major Politburo figures of Jewish extraction shared the Hungarian Jewry's special Holocaust experience, and none of them was at all sensitive toward that experience. They were Muscovite communists, who had emigrated to Soviet Russia before World War II. Their lack of special regard for Jews was best shown by the 1950s deportation under Rakosi's orders of about 20,000 out of a total of 100,000 Jews--who made up about 30 percent of those deported--to communist

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[10] Karady, op. cit., p. 102-104.

[11] Peter Hanák, "A lezáratlan per" (The trial without a verdict), in Zsidóság, asszimiláció, antiszemitizmus, (Jews, assimilation, and anti-Semitism) (Budapest: Gondolat, 1984).

internment camps.[12] Thus, at least for these leaders, the recurring charge of the "Jewish revenge" for the Holocaust is not at all convincing.

As for the non-Muscovite majority of the Jewish communists, their special Jewish experience no doubt played an important role in identifying with the new regime. One may wonder why, given their hyper-assimilationist drive, those Jews who remained in Hungary after the Holocaust would not have been equally disposed to identify with any kind of regime, whether communist, conservative, or liberal, as long as it held out the promise of no discrimination on racial grounds.

Still, whatever the answer to this hypothetical question, the question for today is to what extent such hyper-assimilationist strategies will remain feasible in the future. In other words, will it now emerge that the post-Holocaust, hyper-assimilationist image of the Jew as a Staatspatriot was nothing more than a replay of a failed utopia from the enlightened past? That it was nothing more than a perplexing case of self-delusion that was tenable only as long as the firm hand of the state kept ethnic hostilities under strict control? Or will Hungarian society stand up to its own anti-Semites who will likely tolerate the Jew wearing a skull-cap and side locks but are far from ready to accept the absorption of Jews into Hungarian society?

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[12] András Kovács, "Zsidokerdes a mai magyar tarsadalomban" (The Jewish question in contemporary Hungarian society), in Zsidosag az 1945 utani Magyarorszagon (Jews in Hungary after 1945) (Budapest: Magyar Fuzetek, 1984), p. 32.