

JEWS, JUDAISM AND ZIONISM IN HUNGARY 1945-1953

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The fate of the 140,000 Jews in Post-Holocaust Hungary, a figure from 1949 based on denominational grounds, has been the subject of numerous studies, which have tackled the various issues from several viewpoints. For years the "Jewish question", and the life of Hungarian Jewry was a taboo topic, although this began to change with the process of liberalization in the last years of the Kádár regime. The collapse of the one-party-state, naturally removed all still existing barriers, and new vistas, based on previously less accessible sources were opened. Not only a flourishing historiography has emerged in Hungary, based on the work of Jewish and non-Jewish scholars, but scholars from the West and Israel currently enjoy the full cooperation of the authorities and institutions in Hungary.

Among the historical periods and issues on which current research focuses are the events of the period of the Communist take-over and the heyday of Stalinism in Hungary. While it seems that no surprising or spectacular documents and findings will emerge from the present trend in scholarship, the de-ideologization of the past along with the combination of various methods and approaches, drawing on sources from both inside and outside of Hungary, none the less allows a reexamination of past events and of the role of the various persons and organizations involved.

Naturally, the gradual aging of those persons who were active in the period under discussion, the rise of the post-war generation, as well as the understandable "deconstruction" of the myths of the Communist regime, are all factors which indicate the need for a critical reexamination of the past. It seems that the scholarship dealing with the period is rapidly and successfully emerging from unilateral dependence on official sources on the one extreme, and personal memoirs, on the other.

Among the many issues concerning the fate of the Hungarian Jewry after the War, and the "Jewish question" in general, we shall concentrate on several major issues. First, the phases of reconstruction following the Holocaust, secondly the denominational aspects of Jewish life and thirdly the place and

role of Zionism in shaping Hungary's Jewry in the period under discussion. These points shall be presented against the background of crucial factors influencing and shaping Hungarian Jewry's life, namely the psychological aftershocks of the Holocaust, the changing social structure, the revival of antisemitism, the emerging policies of the new regime and the Communist take-over, and the impact of the establishment of the State of Israel.

The crisis of identity

The remnants of the Hungarian Jewry returning home after the end of the War faced several urgent tasks. These included not only the grave problems of rebuilding shattered lives and problems of daily existence, but also the problems related to the restitution of property and rights. It seems that parallel to these burning questions shaping daily life and behaviour, there was a deeper problem: that of a crisis of identity¹ which manifested itself in the forthcoming years in a variety of ways. There was a sense of lost direction, of the failure of assimilation, of the failure of the Hungarian nation to defend the Jews (this most loyal element which considered itself as an integral part of the nation), culminating in a parting of ways, a radical break with everything that the recent past represented. Internal divisions among Hungary's Jews on the road to be taken were among the most acute among the surviving Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. Internal polarisation² took various forms, not only on the ideological aspects, but gradually also on the organizational level. Hungary's Jews had to decide, and daily realities compelled them to decide as soon as possible, between the few existing options – to assimilate, in spite of the former failure of assimilation, to try to rebuild and live a Jewish life in Hungary, or to take up the Zionist challenge and leave for Palestine, and after 1948 for the State of Israel. Each solution reflected in a way the crisis of identity, the political, social, economic realities of those days. Each option, whose chances of success fluctuated with the changing developments, presented a challenge to which it seems every person of Jewish origin had to relate and to take a personal decision. Each option had its appeal. The Communist one, promised the chance of integration into the “new, socialist Hungarian nation”, thus a repetition of the old, nationalist assimilation into the Messianic promises of a new, egalitarian, internationalist world which promised to erase the class and national divisions between people. The role of Jews in the Communist movement, which falls outside our present discussion, though a fascinating topic in itself, is frequently mentioned, even in post-Communist Hungary, as proof of the disloyalty of the Jews, without any real attempt to

understand the psychological and pragmatic factors behind the Jewish participation in the Communist movement. From a sociological point of view, Victor Karady's thesis that "Jews as a group... could offer many more suitable candidates for responsible positions in the new system than any other politically fit social group"³ could serve as a major starting point for the debate on why and how Jews took part in the establishment of the Communist regime.

The belief that Jewish life could be rebuilt in Hungary was based on the notion that a truly democratic Hungary would provide the legal and material possibilities to practice the Jewish faith. In spite of the deep differences between the three main branches of the Jewish religious and community structure,⁴ those adhering to this option, felt that there were enough possibilities and chances to rebuild a Jewish life in Hungary.

The Zionist challenge was a crucial one. Zionism never took firm roots in pre-War Hungary, and Zionists did not play a major role in shaping pre-War Hungary's Jewish life. Their role during the Holocaust, especially that of the youth movements, is a saga that recent scholarship has only started to deal with in the past decade or so. After the Holocaust, thousands, especially from the younger generation, flocked to the various branches of the Zionist movement, in its secular, religious, socialist or middle class forms. Zionism had one major aim, even if its implementation could take various forms – the reorientation of the Jews to Palestine/Israel, and the negation of the "galut" – the Diaspora. Thus, the Zionist option *a priori* had to negate the two other ones, both of which were based on the continuing existence of Jews on Hungarian soil. Zionism attempted to solve the crisis of Jewish identity in its most blunt and direct form – those who are and feel Jewish, should leave and build up their historical homeland. Thus, from a purely Zionist perspective the nature of the political regime is important only in its attitude toward emigration and Zionist activity prior to that step, and the renewal of Jewish spiritual, religious life along with communal and educational institutions is important as a staging ground for the next step, that of implementing the Zionist ideal. Without elaborating on the complexity of Zionist ideology or rather ideologies, in its religious, secular, socialist, even Marxist, and ultra-conservative, nationalist forms, it should be clear that one of the main pillars of Zionism is that Jews have prayed for two thousand years to return to Jerusalem, but have done very little to do so in reality.

Did Hungary's Jewry solve the crisis of identity in the post-war years? The answer is: only partially, and in Hungary, as elsewhere, there were those who oscillated between the various options, and we have to remember that it was often the political regime, and day to day realities which compelled people to take one road or another. In fact, the completion of the Communist take-over left few options to choose from.

Reconstruction

The reconstruction and revival of Jewish life in post-war Hungary is a very complex story, and present day historians still do not have all the necessary information at their disposal. Reconstruction entails the complicated struggle for the restitution of Jewish property as well as rights, the organized opposition to all manifestations of antisemitism, together with the reorganization of pre-war structures, and the formation of new ones. The problem of Jewish unity and the unification of the religious, communal organizations became a top priority, a fact never realized until Hungary's Jewry was compelled to do so by the Communist regime.

The Hungarian Jewish community showed a remarkable vitality in reconstructing its religious and communal structures, taking into consideration the difficult post-war times, the polarized political atmosphere and the rising tides of antisemitism. While much was done through foreign financial aid, in line with the Jewish world's mobilisation after the Holocaust to aid the destroyed communities, the groundwork on all levels of Jewish communal life was done by Hungarian Jewish organizations. What was even more remarkable in this period of reconstruction, was that it took place against the background of an intensifying power struggle between the various forces active in the community, especially in Budapest, the major center of post-war Jewish existence.

The intricate Jewish politics of post-war Hungary, centered around the emergence of Lajos Stöckler, and the gradual involvement of the new regime, especially the Communists, in promoting reliable elements from their perspective, was not much different from the models that emerged in other East European states. In Hungary, as in other East European states like Poland, Romania and Czechoslovakia, the achievement of "Jewish unity" among all segments of Jewish public and religious life was a top priority. However, in Hungary as elsewhere, the efforts for unification took a different turn when the Communists started to intervene and manoeuvre, in order to promote loyal elements.

At least until 1947, when the Communists intervened more forcefully into shaping Jewish politics, the reconstruction in Hungary proceeded in such forms that it provided a workable framework between the surviving Jewish community and the post-War Hungarian state. Communal and religious institutions, educational facilities, social services built up by the Jewish community were not in contrast to the post-war efforts of reconstruction in Hungary. As we shall indicate later, the Zionist activity and the attitude of the Communists was to change drastically the rules of the game between the state and the organized Jewish community.

The process of "democratization" of the Jewish community took on similar forms in Eastern Europe. In Hungary, however, the Communists did not opt for the formation of a "Jewish Democratic Committee", as for example in Romania, formed already in June 1945, which was to swallow gradually, by salami tactics, all elements of Jewish activity, including the religious one. In Hungary, the Communists were determined to channel the newly reconstructed Jewish life into full cooperation with the regime. To this end, Stöckler and his colleagues were employed, until, having completed their mission, they were removed, as were other top Jewish leaders in Eastern Europe almost without a trace. We can conclude that the organizational framework and the various representative bodies of the Hungarian Jewry were presented on a silver plate to the Communists, only to be destroyed by them, when these bodies had completed their tasks. After 1949-1950 Hungarian Jewish organizations became a tool in the hands of the regime, not different from other public organizations. The Hungarian Jewry had at its disposal in the first post-war years a remarkable structure of civil society, which from a Communist point of view had to be destroyed. The various forms of so-called "unified representation of the Jewish faith" in Hungary were not much different from those in other states, and in fact one can trace an almost exact comparative timetable of parallel developments between the various states. Thus, the Communist take-over of the reconstructed Jewish life can serve as a case study for the process of communization in Hungary. The last years of Stalinism in Hungary were the Jewish community's dark years. Coupled with the anti-Zionist campaign, the community's so-called "unification" erased in fact all remnants of the period of reconstruction built up after the War.

Denominational aspects of Jewish life

By the beginning of 1950 the unification of the three branches of Judaism in Hungary was achieved, in the classical pattern of the Communist take-over of religious establishments. Ironically, it was the Communist regime that forcibly and artificially erased the long held traditions of the Hungarian Jewry. The process by which the new regime brought Jewish religious life under its heel has been discussed by, among others, Prof. Csorba. We have a fairly complete picture of the phases of that process, especially from 1948 on when it was clear that any form of independent religious activity would not be tolerated. The separation of state and religion, as indicated in the December 1948 agreement between the Hungarian State and the leadership of the Jewish community, went on quite smoothly as significant features of the free pursuit

of religious life and education were restricted, and those which were promised were usually not kept in subsequent years. In spite of the fact that some activities were preserved, such as the Rabbinical Seminary, which often served a propaganda purpose, and other activities amply described by Professors Csorba and Tamási,⁵ the limitations on Jewish religious life were very evident.

Without presenting here the doctrinal aspects of denominational activity, or the process through which all religious establishments became by the early fifties poor reflections of their previous forms (forms that were rebuilt after the War), we shall limit our comments to several main features of the process of the Communist take-over of religious life. One of these is that the Communists were pursuing the integration of the churches into the new system, and within the Jewish community they found the leadership, which of course was promoted by the new forces, very cooperative in this project because, ironically, both the Communists and the Stockler leadership had found a common enemy, the Zionist movement.

Secondly, the regime was interested in fostering a leadership that would stress religious matters, and thus, the emerging regime was ready to allow a certain degree of freedom of activity, as long as it was disconnected from Jewish life abroad. The result was that by and large, Jewish life in Hungary acted in a void, in which religious holidays and other elements of Judaism were practised as if Judaism was a sect particular to the Hungarian environment, without any outside roots or base. At best, small scale cooperation was allowed with other socialist states.

Thirdly, although Jewish religious life was cut off from the outside world for many years, the regime, it seems, needed for public relations purposes and as proof of the freedom of religion, a shadow of religious activity, which in some cases was even more liberal than the policy pursued towards the Christian Churches.

Yet, the regime was very careful that the small scale practice of Judaism would not become a widespread phenomena among the Hungarian Jewry, and that the Jews would not identify religion as a symbol of national identification, as indeed was the case in the sixties and later on. Furthermore, it seems that the more advanced one was in age, the greater the tolerance of the regime. While the more elderly were considered a lost generation, the clear aim was to keep the younger generation from practising the freedom of religion that the regime was so proud of.

The Zionist factor

As indicated, Zionism became a major force in Hungarian Jewish life. The Zionist movement took an active part in the reconstruction of Jewish life, and

the emissaries from Palestine, representing the various political movements were very active among the younger generation. The Communist leadership, with its large proportion of members of Jewish origin, allowed for a time a free hand to the Zionist movement. Hungary became a primary transit point for the post-Holocaust emigration to Palestine, part of which was illegal, because of the position of the British government. Yet, the Communist–Zionist cooperation was based on pragmatic lines, namely Soviet support (with reservations) for the Zionist plans in establishing the state of Israel, a policy that lasted until September 1948. The Hungarian Communists made clear in Erik Molnár's article in 1946 that they reject Zionism, and that total assimilation had to be the solution to the "Jewish question".⁶ Yet, with ups and downs they tolerated the activities of the movement, and it even became a convenient source of income in hard currency, which the Zionists paid to the Party. It seems that the Communists became annoyed with the Zionists not only after they denounced most forcefully the resurgence of antisemitism⁷ and criticized the left for not doing enough, or even promoting the mass hatred towards Jews, but especially after the Zionists entered and took over some significant positions in the Jewish community. As indicated, in the ensuing power struggle the Zionists had to be blocked, as they opposed Stockler and his friends' perception of "Jewish unity". Reports from the Zionist Federation in Hungary sent to Palestine in 1947 indicate that the Zionists opposed the "autocratic" line of Stockler, and the attempts of the community leadership to "orient the congregation and community totally toward a religious line".⁸ How ironical that leftist Zionists were opposing the religious trend of the official leadership, which was in fact supported by the Communist Party, for the reasons mentioned before! The Zionists acted in this way because they clearly understood that the Judaism allowed by the Communists would be one emptied of its national–Zionist content.

The fate of the Zionist movement was sealed with the change in the Soviet policy by the end of 1948. *Új Élet* would be a very poor source to read about the existence of a Jewish state, unless mentioned in the connection that Zionism is a reactionary movement, and that Israel is a spearhead of Western imperialism. Hungary had its own Zionist trials, that of Dénes Béla, and some references in the Rajk trial. Fortunately Mindszenty, accused of being an agent of most existing Western intelligence services, was not accused of being an Israeli one too. It seems that the big show in Hungary was to have taken place later, spoiled by Stalin's death, in which Zoltán Vas and others would have been the accused in a major Zionist trial.

The history of Zionism in post-war Hungary has yet to be written, and its tremendous impact among Hungary's Jewry has yet to be assessed, but we can conclude with several major points.

One of these is the great appeal of the movement among Hungary's Jews. Secondly, Zionism, in all its forms, challenged the emerging power structure of the Jewish community, as it stressed the need for enthusiastic activity aimed in fact at closing down the final chapter of Jewish existence on Hungarian soil. The new regime along with its limited policy of emigration had to assure the complete loyalty of the remaining Jews. Zionism presented a greater danger to them than the Jew who wished to remain a Jew and sought the possibility to pray for Jerusalem, in its spiritual sense. The Jew wishing to implement the prayer, was considered more of an enemy. It seems that the Communist regime's calculation was that a Judaism emptied of its real content, cut off from outside communities, along with the social restructuring of the Hungarian society, would not present any real challenge. Thirdly, Zionism, and not so much Judaism, reminded the Jews of their true identity. Thus, for those not opting for assimilation, Zionism, including religious Zionism, was a danger which the Communists and those Jews who cooperated with them, had to combat.

The existence of the State of Israel was a great source of pride for the Jewish communities in the Communist countries, and there is no doubt that one of the major reasons for the turn to the worse in the Soviet attitude, followed by the other bloc states, was the attraction of Israel, either for emigration, or for expression of national identity. The taboo on Israel imposed on the Jewish community after the end of 1948, was yet another clear manifestation of this policy of Judaism emptied of its present day significance.

The revival of Jewish life in Hungary in the last years enables us to look again into the history of those turbulent years when officially the "Jewish question" ceased to exist. Only today, can we perhaps realize the complexity of the issues facing the generation which placed so much faith in the new post-war era.

Notes

1. See Peter Vardy, "The Unfinished Past—Jewish Realities in Postwar Hungary", in Randolph L. Braham (ed.), *The Tragedy of Hungarian Jewry*, Social Science Monographs, Boulder, Colorado and Institute for Holocaust Studies of the City University of New York, 1986.
2. Bela Vago, "Communist Pragmatism Toward Jewish Assimilation", in Bela Vago (ed.), *Jewish Assimilation in Modern Times*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1981, 115.
3. Victor Karady, "Some Social Aspects of Jewish Assimilation in Socialist Hungary, 1945–1956", *The Tragedy of Hungarian Jewry*, *op. cit.*, 81.
4. See Csorba László, "Izraelita felekezeti élet Magyarországon a vészkorszaktól a nyolcvanas évekig", in *Hét évtized a hazai zsidóság életében*, MTA Filozófiai Intézet, Budapest, 1990.

5. See Csorba László and Tamási György's studies in *Hét évtized... op. cit.*
6. Molnár Erik's study, "Zsidókérdés Magyarországon", published in *Társadalmi Szemle*, July 1946, reprinted in *Zsidókérdés, Asszimiláció, Antiszemitizmus*, Gondolat, Budapest, 1984, 117–134.
7. See Ständeisky Éva, "Antiszemita megmozdulások Magyarországon a koalíciós időszakban", *Századok*, no. 2(1992), 284–308.
8. Report of the Hungarian Zionist Federation (MCSz) to the Executive of the Jewish Agency, April 17, 1947, *Central Zionist Archives (CZA)* S 5/757.