

POLITICAL DILEMMAS OF THE RELIGIOUS JEWS IN THE 1960–70S

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“We want to restore the Jewish Community’s good reputation which – to tell the truth – was slightly jeopardised here as it was abroad.” Endre Sós made this statement on being elected as the new leader of the largest group of Hungarian religious Jews in the summer of 1957. With this address he hoped to begin a new period in the history of the Hungarian followers of the so-called “Moses-faith”.

To understand how the “reputation” of the official organisations of religious Jews was jeopardised in the post-war period, we need to survey the consequences of the collapse of Stalinism in Hungary from the point of view of the whole Jewish community during and after the revolutionary uprising of 1956. We shall focus on religious life because this topic reveals the most general problems of Jewish families insofar as a public self-identification of Jewishness only assumed religious forms during the socialist period of Hungarian history. The question of religious relations is also important in showing the manner in which the leadership of Hungarian churches and religious communities was politically manipulated. In particular, their sources were only made available for research on one occasion, neither before nor after which historians were able to have access to such materials.

The reason for this apparently strange occurrence was actually quite simple. Following the election of the Polish Karol Wojtyła as the Pope of the World Catholic Church in 1978, the leadership of cultural policy in the Hungarian “White House” – the well-known nickname of the central office of Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party – suddenly discovered the regenerating influences of religions and churches on the “building of socialism”. Lacking accurate information about their real political abilities, György Aczél, responsible for the ideology and control of culture at the top of the communist leadership, entrusted one of his close co-workers, József Lukács, to start a research program settled to the Philosophical Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. As a director of that institute, József Lukács undoubtedly served the so-called “hand-operated cultural policy of Aczél” but it must be said to his

credit, however, that he was among the first who analysed religion as an object of social science instead of as an object to be simply denounced. The final conclusion of this research, presented in 1985 inevitably reflected the claims of the regime, though it is important to note that the authors of research papers were free to work without direct control. Moreover, having been interested in discovering what the real situation was, the State Office of Church Affairs, the main instrument of communist ecclesiastical policy, was able to offer important help with the program.

As a member of a group of scholars surveying the history of the Hungarian Jews between 1918–1980, I received a permit to examine the neglected papers of the rapporteur of Israelitic Affairs at the Library of the State Office of Church Affairs. I am convinced that the employees of this library had no idea of the contents of these materials. The information contained in these miscellaneous files can start to reveal the trends of the political manipulation of religious communities in Hungary in the 1960s. After completing this research, the archives of the library were once again closed for research purposes and have not been opened to this very day. Following the silent death of the communist regime, the materials of the abolished State Office of Church Affairs were delivered to the National Archive (Department of the Modern Age) and – the best part of them – to the Ministry of Education. According to official opinion they have recently come under inspection for research without any deadline. But it is time to start a brief account of the problems of Jewish religious life in postwar Hungary. We should say first of all that the survivors of the darkest episode of Hungarian history have very contradictory experiences of persecution. On the one hand, the new “people’s democratic” regime started a process of judicial and financial compensation, called the perpetrators of the anti-Semite atrocities to account and legally declared the freedom of lifestyle for different religious and ethnic groups. On the other hand, however, the regime was unable to stop the revival of anti-Semitism. More than one bloody public disturbance of the unruly crowds of Communist and Peasant Party sympathizers revealed the dangers of a policy which opened the gates of parties to the “little Fascists” in an effort to gain mass support. But the experiences of the failure of assimilation faithfully followed in the previous decades resulted in only a minority of the Hungarian Jews choosing religious identity with a perspective of Zionism. The majority of them were once again willing to follow the new leadership of the religious community in joining the official – currently “people’s democratic” – policy. From a historical perspective this was nothing more than a renewal of a long tradition in the life of Hungarian Jews: an attitude in which the Jewish character was identified in religious, instead of ethnic, terms and a policy that sought to

secure Jewish life not through numerous autonomous organizations but only through the general protection of the state in exchange for political loyalty.

The above-mentioned political orientation of Jewish leaders undoubtedly had a certain logic and was supported by a real, but one-sided interpretation of several historical experiences. Therefore it caused a paradox in the Hungarian Zionist movement. Although sympathising with the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine and increased religious activity for the sake of the Jewishness outside of Hungary, many Hungarian Zionists did not want to emigrate from Hungary forever. They chose Zionism, rather, for an opportunity to oppose the official Jewish policy and, on the other hand, to provide different – not always religious – ways of Jewish self-identification. Therefore it might be considered that the contentment of Jewish leaders with the official condemnation of Zionism was an important event by which the leadership of the Jewish community compromised itself in the eyes of their contemporaries abroad. Furthermore, it was a generally accepted notion in 1956 that absolute loyalty to the “people’s democracy” during the Rákosi-era had been determined not only by the well-known antireligious policy of the communist dictatorship, but also by the corruption and degeneration of the leaders.

The materials at the Archive of the State Office of the Church Affairs mentioned earlier, contained no data which might have verified this serious charge. But Endre Sós and his followers, although they were aware of logistical problems, didn’t want to begin their activity with a juristic “clean sweep”. The solution to a multi-faceted crisis of Jewish religious life caused by the fleeing of around 200,000 persons in the fall of 1956 required a new policy to compensate for the miserable stagnation in the first half of 50s. “We don’t want to sink to a level of ‘soup-kitchen Jewishness!’”, the newly elected president said and added: “We have been ‘cultured-Jews’ and we want to remain as ‘cultured-Jews’.” The majority of the approximately 100,000 Hungarian religious Jews probably preferred, however, Sándor Scheiber’s formulation mentioned in his address to the new leadership: “We remained here, because we were held back... by shouldering responsibility, by caring for those who depended on us, by caring for the fate of our institutions, by our affection for the Hungarian language and culture, by scientific goals – absence of a thousand years – whose search for data can only be accomplished here.” One thing is certain: it was not the positive qualities of the new leaders, but two other elements of the new political situation that were responsible for the rapid consolidation of basic necessities in the following decade: first, the increasing activity of the believers’ groups operating within the greater freedom of movement afforded by “Kádárism”, and, secondly, the increasing aid of international Jewish organisations which flowed into the country through channels recently opened by the communist government.

I have neither the time nor the space to survey in detail the impressive prosperity resulting from the restoration of synagogues to a greater availability of kosher foods, from the reorganisation of kindergartens and schools to the restoration of orphanages and hospitals, from the abundant cultural programs of more than forty Jewish communities to the Public Institute of Rabbinical Studies, which was one of a kind during the whole socialist period in Eastern Europe. Our focus, instead, is on the strange events resulting from a conflicting relationship between 'Síp utca' – one of its buildings houses Budapest's Hungarian Jewish community – and the Embassy of Israel. A confidential note that President Sós sent in 1965 to János Pratner, the then President of State Office of Church Affairs, complained that the Israeli diplomats had become active in an "incredible number" and "they are penetrating all spheres of the Hungarian Jewry". They had made a strong impact on the parents of Jewish educational institutions supported by the directors of secondary schools and they managed to utilize the commemoration of the Holocaust as well as medical assistance from abroad to spread their dangerous ideas. 'Zionism' was the magic word which alarmed the communist leaders, who faithfully followed the Soviet interests in their one-sided support of Arab countries in the complicated political situation of the Middle East.

The 'Zionist' label had at least five different meanings in the 1960s in Hungary. As in all countries in the communist block, the official media used it as a synonym for the current policy of Israel, as a sort of feature of American imperialism, and as a servant of the interests of worldwide capitalist exploitation in the Middle East. Secondly, 'Zionism' referred to a historical movement aimed to organise Jews into a modern nation and to establish a new country with an Israelite/Jewish national consciousness. Thirdly, a particular national consciousness of an ethnic or religious minority was called 'Zionism' if its followers sought to realise a special Jewish way of life in their own countries while recognizing Israel as a distant homeland of Jewishness. Fourthly, any kind of claims for an autonomous Jewish life and community outside of Israel – with the exception of the strictly-controlled religious organisations – was qualified as 'Zionist'. And finally, mere sympathy or friendly feelings towards Israel and its inhabitants were also branded as 'Zionist'. In his unconditional political solidarity with the communist government, president Sós did not want to separate the different and confused meanings of this complicated idea. He probably put his faith in a policy that guaranteed the security of Jewish life through loyalty to the state, but was also aware that 'Zionism' was a traditional manifestation of the opposition of Hungarian religious Jews against its leadership.

Those responsible for communist ecclesiastical policy understood the ulterior motives in the president's note, because their similarities provided a basis

for the building of a system of mutual dependence between religious leaders and the State Office of Church Affairs. Instead of an answer to this letter, I have found a denunciation of Endre Sós written in the fall of 1965 in which Sándor Scheiber, the famous historian and director of the Public Institute of Rabbinical Studies was labelled a “favourite of the Embassy of Israel” and his institute as a centre of Zionist opposition during the campaign for the new election of the Jewish community’s leaders. Although president Sós lost his office, his successor, Géza Seifert developed even stronger ties to the organs of state ecclesiastical policy. At the end of the first decade of the Seifert period, a rapporteur of State Office of Church Affairs honoured Seifert’s achievements in a non public address as follows: “the development of ecclesiastical policy and political pressure have resulted” in the fact that the leaders of the Hungarian Israelites have always reconciled their positions with official opinion. This relationship was mutually beneficial: the State Office of Church Affairs “provided sufficient political assistance to religious leaders both in international and internal (personal) affairs”. President Seifert really deserved this “progressive” label, a favourite of the regime in its political classification of Church leaders. Seifert was willing to support official communist foreign policy with respect to the Middle East, and he offered the following stereotypical response to the most important questions of Jews living abroad: first, Hungary had no Zionist movement because Hungarian Jews did not want to emigrate; and secondly, there were no anti-Semitic tendencies in Hungary, only anti-Semites, but even their influence was minimal because the state deterred them through educational and judicial means.

President Seifert’s opinion written in this address, however, differed from his speech. Contrary to the above-mentioned denial of Zionism in Hungary, he informed the State Office of Church Affairs about “Zionist organisations” in a letter dated December 20th, 1966. Chief Rabbi Imre Sahn in Debrecen and Chief Rabbi Artur Geyer in Budapest – the latter being one of the former leaders of Hungarian Zionism in the postwar period – organised programs among Jewish youth about the Israeli State and taught courses in the New Hebrew language. Seifert considered these actions as an “immediate encouragement for defection” – this act, “defection” (in Hungarian ‘disszidálás’) was one of the deadly sins in the communist world because it symbolised the failure of a real salvation of human creatures within its boundaries. For this reason Seifert considered the activity of Rabbi Tamás Raj at Szeged more dangerous because he organized trips to visit Hungarian Jewish youths in Szabadka and Újvidék in Yugoslavia, where – according to Seifert – they were subjected to the influence of heated Zionist propaganda. The president declared that “in my opinion the Embassy of Israel in Budapest should remain in the background of this Zionist turmoil”.

Although Hungary broke off diplomatic relations with Israel following the war of '67, the sporadic but on-going manifestations of a "nightmare" of Zionism made nervous both Jewish leaders and their partners in state ecclesiastical policy-making in the 1970s. The reason was quite simple: their desire to create a Jewish life separate from the close framework of the religious organisations, on the one hand, and the expression of sympathies towards Israel on the other. It was no surprise that when the Public Institute of Rabbinical Studies began to criticize Seifert's style of leadership, the President accused the director of this famous institution of Zionism. This same accusation resurfaced in a letter written by Miklós Máté, the director of the Jewish Secondary School, in September 1973. According to Máté, the reason the Rabbinical Seminary had been frequented by foreign visitors was that Sándor Scheiber had been judged "on the basis of information received abroad and he was considered a Zionist". This denunciation was effective because the following confidential conclusion was noted on the reverse side of that same letter by a rapporteur of the State Office of Church Affairs: "this note reflects the division between the Rabbinical Seminary and the progressive leadership of the Jewish Community."

The folder at the Archive of the State Office of Church Affairs did not contain any confidential records following the death of president Seifert in the mid-1970s. When we conducted our research the papers of this period were still in use by the employees of that office. But the issues addressed in the so-called "samizdat" literature of that time indicated that the leadership of the Hungarian religious Jews could not defeat the phantom of Zionism. The beginning of a new political age and an unmistakable mark of an unsuccessful policy of loyalty to the communist regime was the formation of the illegal group, "Shalom" – but its history will be a topic of another lecture on another occasion.