

# “ÁRPÁD AND ABRAHAM WERE FELLOW-COUNTRYMEN”

AN OUTLINE OF JEWISH LITERATURE IN HUNGARY

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The earliest Jewish literary works in Hungary were late-medieval religious writings in Hebrew, and literary contributions in the Hungarian language only began to appear toward the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first generation of Hungarian-Jewish writers firmly believed in the viability of a dual Hungarian and Jewish identity and in the prospects of Jewish and Hungarian coexistence, and these two concerns have remained central to Hungarian-Jewish literature ever since. Jewish emancipation was warmly supported by the intellectual and political elite of Hungary, and Jewish Hungarians gained full civil rights in 1867. However, to their bitter disappointment, they were soon facing a rapidly rising tide of anti-Semitism that ultimately led to the Hungarian Holocaust, in which over half a million Jewish Hungarians perished. Some Hungarian-Jewish writers responded to the rising tide of anti-Semitism with a classical dual identity position that censured assimilation involving a denial of Jewish identity, others responded by attempting to deliberately shed their own Jewish identities through conversion to Christianity or by becoming Communists, a handful of others by opting for Zionism, and in one controversial instance, by advocating the adoption of an ethno-national minority identity. After the Holocaust, many among the remnant Jewish Hungarians believed that Communism would help resolve the core existential questions facing them, but the studious silence of the totalitarian regime about the Holocaust merely left these sores festering in an unresolved limbo for decades. Curiously, the regime eventually did permit the publication of *Fateless* by Kertész, undoubtedly because of its anti-Nazi message, and quite missing the irony that its resolute anti-totalitarianism applied equally to them. During the 75 years between Emancipation and Holocaust, the magnitude of Jewish contributions to Hungary's literature, journalism, scholarship, culture, science, industry, banking and commercial enterprise had been almost without precedent in the annals of diaspora Jewish communities, and post-Holocaust Jewish Hungarians continue to play a prominent role in the literary, cultural, political, and academic life of contemporary post-Communist Hungary. However, the core issues of dual identity and co-existence that were first broached with such optimism in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are still unresolved and are likely to engage the attention of new generations of Hungarian-Jewish writers into the foreseeable future.

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The title of my paper starts with the assertion that “*Árpád and Abraham were fellow-countrymen*”. Árpád was the leader of the seven Hungarian tribes in the conquest of Hungary, a figure of history and myth not unlike Abraham. The quote is from Márton Diósy,<sup>1</sup> a Hungarian-Jewish poet, who served as personal secretary to Lajos Kossuth, the leader of the 1848–49 Hungarian uprising.<sup>2</sup> As we shall discover, the problem of dual Hungarian and Jewish identity has continued to play a central role in the work of the majority of Jewish writers in Hungary ever since.

The earliest Jewish literature in Hungary was written in the Hebrew language, which was followed by Yiddish, then by German and only later by Hungarian.<sup>3</sup> The spread of Protestantism and Humanism in the seventeenth century had a positive impact on Jewish learning, and Jewish community life flourished in the areas of Hungary under Turkish control, where Jews enjoyed a much greater measure of tolerance than elsewhere in the country.<sup>4</sup> In 1686 the Turkish-held fortress of Buda<sup>5</sup> was captured and sacked by the Habsburg imperial armies, and the Turks were soon pushed out of Hungary. For the Jewish community, it took over a century to recover from the effects of the brutal carnage.<sup>6</sup> At the same time the *Haskala*,<sup>7</sup> the Jewish Enlightenment movement, was emerging in the German lands under the leadership of Moses Mendelssohn.<sup>8</sup> It aimed at spreading the ideals of Enlightenment within the Jewish communities, and it eventually arrived in Hungary via Vienna and Prague.<sup>9</sup> The aims of the *Haskala* were met with approval by the majority, whose interest lay in encouraging assimilation by members of Jewish communities, in return for granting Jews civil rights. Acquiring a mastery of the vernacular spoken by the majority was clearly critical for successful assimilation and for meeting the progressive expectations of the non-Jewish population. In Hungary, however, this had to mean the acquisition of not one, but simultaneously two languages, German and Hungarian.<sup>10</sup>

But the Enlightenment also gave rise to some new forms of anti-Semitic prejudices, which laid the foundations of modern anti-Semitism.<sup>11</sup> This was also the age of Romanticism, with its strong affinity for the Middle Ages, which helped revive some ancient anti-Semitic superstitions from medieval times.<sup>12</sup> Both these sets of prejudices became integral to mainstream Hungarian culture and literature from then on, though in fairness, some among the Romantics viewed the Jewish people as harmlessly exotic, and one or two prominent non-Jewish Hungarian authors even portrayed Jews and Jewry in a consistently positive light.<sup>13</sup>

In its struggle against prejudicial depictions, Hungarian-Jewish literature had come into being in the early to mid-nineteenth century with a marked didactic emphasis, and lyric poetry did not begin to appear until the eighteen sixties and seventies.<sup>14</sup> This was the period when the concept of a Hungarian of the Mosaic Faith was born. Enlightened writers in Jewish communities aimed at presenting their Hungarian credentials by articulating their own Hungarian national sentiments, demystifying Jewish customs, and rehabilitating the image of Jewish people held

by the majority community of Hungarians, whilst at the same time vigorously protesting stereotyped, demonising depictions of their people in mainstream Romantic writing. By the same token, however, they were by no means averse to censuring certain Jewish customs in the spirit of Enlightenment, as and when they deemed that appropriate.<sup>15</sup>

In 1840 the impassioned lines of Móric Bloch's<sup>16</sup> *Jewish Appeal to the Scythian*<sup>17</sup> *Nation* were enthusiastically welcomed on behalf of the majority community of Hungarians by Péter Vajda, in the following words:

You are no longer the step-children of the nation –  
please feel welcome and make yourselves at home by the hearth of our national  
sentiments.<sup>18</sup>

And thus wrote Mór Szegfi, who fought as a captain of artillery during the uprising of 1848–49:

Because, if in answer to our fervent prayers  
The shackles of slavery were burst asunder  
Prove we would that in this whole wide world  
There could be no better Hungarian than a Jew.<sup>19</sup>

The first Hungarian-Jewish Almanac was published in 1848 and its preface proclaimed a program for Jewish authors in Hungary. This was where Diósy articulated the motto contained in the title of this paper, signifying that Jewish people in Hungary carried a dual identity and saw themselves as both proudly Hungarian and proudly Jewish.<sup>20</sup>

By 1848, the greater part of the Jewish community in Hungary sincerely believed that they had been accepted by and into the Hungarian nation and gave their enthusiastic support to the struggle for independence from the Habsburgs.<sup>21</sup> However, official emancipation with fully equal civil rights was only proclaimed during the last dying days of the independence struggle, and the rights gained were then promptly lost in the final defeat.<sup>22</sup>

The end of the 1850s brought about a cautious revival with the launch of several journals and the occasional publication of a novel or play. By the 1860s Hungarian-Jewish literature was evolving beyond politics and was beginning to include love lyrics,<sup>23</sup> while a number of masterpieces of Hungarian literature were being translated into German by Jewish authors. Emancipation, the great dream, was finally realized in 1867, in tandem with the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, and the significant measure of independence gained by Hungary as a consequence.<sup>24</sup>

Hungary at that time had little in the way of a middle class,<sup>25</sup> and during the seventy-five years between the Emancipation and the Holocaust the magnitude of Jewish contributions to Hungary's literature, journalism, scholarship, culture, sci-

ence, industry, banking and commercial enterprise had been almost without precedent in the annals of diaspora Jewish communities.

The older generations who had gone through the struggle for emancipation welcomed these developments with unqualified optimism.<sup>26</sup> József Kiss,<sup>27</sup> one of the greatest lyricists of Hungarian-Jewish literature at that time, was a true master of the Hungarian language and a paragon of avowed dual identity. He was at once Hungarian and Jewish, a conservative and an innovator, an urbanist representing city folk and a folkish ruralist representing the peasant folk of the country-side.<sup>28</sup> Although the trauma of the infamous ritual murder trial of Tiszaeszlár had shattered his faith in emancipation,<sup>29</sup> for him it nevertheless remained axiomatic – an absolute and self-evident truth – that it was the Hungarian nation where he belonged:

This land, where thou standeth, is the Promised Land!  
... Jewish brother, thou too have a Fatherland, at last!<sup>30</sup>

József Dóczi<sup>31</sup> was another significant Hungarian-Jewish writer of the same generation. Like Kiss, he was born during the Hungarian Age of Reform and was already an adult when he experienced the Jewish emancipation in Hungary. In contrast to Kiss, however, the dominant mood in Dóczi's writings leaned markedly toward disillusionment foreshadowing the mood of the generation of Hungarian-Jewish writers that were to come after him. Ultimately, Dóczi converted to Christianity, for the sake of his wife, but found no peace.<sup>32</sup>

Rapidly growing anti-Semitism during the eighties and nineties soon gave rise to ever deeper disillusionment within the community of Hungarian-Jewish writers and to a sense that the dream of the Hungarian of Mosaic faith would never be realized.<sup>33</sup> The ambivalent attitudes of this generation of Hungarian-Jewish authors were well-illustrated in the writings that appeared in the two most significant Hungarian-Jewish journals of the time: *Equality*,<sup>34</sup> founded in 1881, and *Past and Future*,<sup>35</sup> founded in 1911.<sup>36</sup> The title of the former bespeaks of a benchmark journal published by and for an assertive and self-respecting Hungarian-Jewish community that cherished the values of emancipation, critical as it might have been of certain aspects of assimilation. The second journal, however, reflected a growing sense of unease at the failures of assimilation and was willing to give publicity even to Zionism. Its editor-in-chief was József Patai,<sup>37</sup> who was also the most outstanding of the Hungarian practitioners of the *Ahavat Zion*<sup>38</sup> or *Love of Zion* genre of Jewish poetry. In fact, the thoughts and feelings voiced by Patai in his poems no longer bore any resemblance to those of either Kiss or Diósy:

Zion's heart beats only for you;  
For only a Mother can love, faithfully and forever.<sup>39</sup>

However, the most common stance of his contemporaries comprised adoption of a dual Hungarian-Jewish identity, critical of assimilation when it became unprincipled and destructive of a person's deepest sense of self, and also in search for a place under the sun within the fold of a majority ethnic-Hungarian community, which was signaling both acceptance and rejection.

Jewish themes were somewhat incidental to the art of Sándor Bródy,<sup>40</sup> one of the more eccentric figures in Hungarian literature. A representative of fin de siècle worship of beauty and youth, Bródy was also a latish example of dandyism in the Byronic tradition.<sup>41</sup>

Dezső Szomory<sup>42</sup> was an even greater stylist than Bródy, yet he was subjected to anti-Semitic attacks precisely because of the language of his plays and novels. Szomory was loudly accused of corrupting the Hungarian language, even though he was merely modernizing the pathos of the great romantic poet Vörösmarty and blending it with the language of Jewish people in Budapest.<sup>43</sup>

It was during that period at the beginning of the twentieth century that the controversial folkish-urbanist debate first erupted in Hungary. By creating a thoroughly sham and artificial distinction between the literature of "cosmopolitan Jewry devoid of national character" and works produced by "true Hungarians", the so-called folkish-urbanist distinction served mainly as a thinly veiled cover for coded anti-Semitism.

In 1912 the eminent historian of literature János Horváth mounted a savage onslaught on the journal *West*<sup>44</sup> and the literary and intellectual circle around it. From its beginnings *West* had served as the most important workshop in Hungary for introducing modern literary trends from the West, and there were many Jewish writers who contributed to the journal both as authors and as editors. Horváth leveled the accusation that *West* was corrupting the Hungarian language but in a subsequent letter he also made it clear that he thought the real culprits at the journal were the "dodgy Jews" who created its contents.<sup>45</sup> As a direct sequel, the journal *Twentieth Century*<sup>46</sup> published a survey question that frankly asked whether there was a Jewish question in Hungary,<sup>47</sup> thereby provoking an absolute storm of reaction from every corner of Hungarian intellectual, social and political life.

Despite rapid assimilation, an intensifying wave of anti-Semitism was gathering pace and was giving rise to embittered reactions from Jewish writers, reactions that would have been almost unimaginable a decade or two before.<sup>48</sup> Increasingly powerful voices were calling for a proud espousal of dual identity – as against unprincipled assimilation – and also for broad solidarity with the Jewish people.

From the turn of the century onwards Hungarian-Jewish novels began to increasingly challenge and censure the ways of assimilated Jewry. Péter Ujvári's<sup>49</sup> novel *The New Christian*<sup>50</sup> depicted just such a family in a pitiless portrayal of assimilationist Jews.<sup>51</sup> Lower middle-class tradesmen were the characters in *Out of the Ghetto*,<sup>52</sup> a novel by Tamás Kóbor,<sup>53</sup> who perceived in their miserable lives

a great deal more human dignity than in the lives of wealthy Jews, who converted to Christianity.<sup>54</sup> In *The Boys of Paul Street*,<sup>55</sup> a novel by Ferenc Molnár,<sup>56</sup> Geréb, a boy from a snobbish family, who gradually became alienated from his own traditions, was contrasted with Nemecek, the son of an impoverished tailor, who remained tenaciously true to himself, no matter what.<sup>57</sup>

Clearly, the prominent role played by radical Jewish youth in the short-lived Communist dictatorship was only one of a number of underlying reasons that precipitated a rapidly deteriorating situation for the Hungarian-Jewish community between the two world wars.<sup>58</sup> The worsening situation cast the problem of Hungarian-Jewish identity into increasingly sharp relief, and the impact of the existential problems that were being faced inevitably came to be reflected in the literature of the times.

In his notorious essays, *The Age of Assimilation in Hungarian Literature 1867 to 1914*,<sup>59</sup> Gyula Farkas perceived literature in racial terms and saw the ethnic German and Jewish talent that successfully assumed leading positions in Hungarian literature after 1867 as suppressors of all that was worthy and noble in indigenous Hungarian qualities. The assertions of his paper were of course quite nonsensical<sup>60</sup> but represented relatively widespread attitudes among ethnic Hungarian intellectuals at the time.

Hungarian-Jewish writers responded in terms of five distinctly different approaches to the existential problems of being Jewish in Hungary.

The first of these was the “classical” dual identity position, as represented by, among others, Lajos Szabolcsi<sup>61</sup> and Aladár Komlós.<sup>62</sup> Although the works of András Komor<sup>63</sup> and Béla Zsolt<sup>64</sup> evinced a much more savage tone, they nonetheless still followed the path of emancipation, albeit with a strong emphasis on retaining a Jewish identity.

A mystical Catholicism was the second kind of response. Conversion to Christianity was a sincerely experienced act of redemption for literary figures like Sándor Sik,<sup>65</sup> Antal Szerb,<sup>66</sup> Miklós Radnóti,<sup>67</sup> Anna Lesznai,<sup>68</sup> György Sárközi.<sup>69,70</sup> On the other hand, István Vas<sup>71</sup> believed in a Christianity rooted in Jewish foundations.

A third small group had opted for Zionism, and disillusionment with embourgeoisement led a fourth group to turn to Communism, thereby also breaking away from their own Jewish identities equally as radically as the converts to Catholicism.

The fifth, and at the same time perhaps most striking response came from Károly Pap<sup>72</sup> – a Hungarian literary figure who had long been undeservedly neglected and only lately rediscovered – who urged an acceptance of Jewish destiny as a minority group.<sup>73</sup> But whilst uncompromisingly Jewish, he also felt tightly bound to Hungarian culture. Indeed, Pap had shown himself to be perhaps the most consistent Hungarian-Jewish writer of all, in the way he resolutely con-

fronted the tensions between the two. He experienced Jewishness not as religion, but as people, tradition and culture. His views and proposed program were set forth in his polemic essay *Jewish Wounds and Sins* that soon became a hot topic in literary circles.<sup>74</sup>

No review of Hungarian-Jewish literature of the first four decades of the twentieth century could be complete without mentioning the literature of the metropolis. Jewish authors of lesser and greater talent were solidly represented among the practitioners of various forms of popular art, such as chansons and cabaret, popular literature and movies. Jenő Heltai,<sup>75</sup> Ernő Szép,<sup>76</sup> Menyhért Lengyel,<sup>77</sup> and Jenő Rejtő<sup>78</sup> were celebrated writers of popular works, the latter having perhaps been the most outstanding writer ever of Hungarian light fiction.<sup>79</sup>

The Holocaust, in which over half a million Jewish Hungarians perished, also resulted in irreplaceable losses to Hungarian literature. Apart from Rejtő, its victims included such luminaries as Károly Pap, Antal Szerb, Miklós Radnóti, Endre Andor Gelléri,<sup>80</sup> Zoltán Nagy,<sup>81</sup> and Dezső Szomory.<sup>82,83</sup> In *Night*, an autobiographical account of the horrors of his own Holocaust experiences, Nobel Prize winning author Elie Wiesel created a harrowing memorial to the last days of his own Orthodox community of Máramaros.<sup>84</sup>

But it was the Noble Prize awarded to Imre Kertész<sup>85</sup> that has really put the spotlight on Hungarian Holocaust literature.<sup>86</sup> During the decades of Communist totalitarian dictatorship,<sup>87</sup> the fundamental questions regarding the Hungarian Holocaust were always studiously avoided.<sup>88</sup> At the time, his Nobel Prize winning novel *Fateless*<sup>89</sup> could only be published after considerable difficulty, and the regime ensured that there would be barely any reaction at all on the part of either the public or the community of literary critics. The work of Kertész was defined by his own experience of the Shoah and is located well within the context of the historic search for existential answers by Hungarian-Jewish writers.<sup>90</sup> In order to adequately project the inhuman horror of it all, Kertész deliberately used a stunningly dispassionate tone and style. He courageously wrote and published his work in a Communist country where the totalitarian control mechanisms were virtually indistinguishable from those of Nazism, but whose rulers apparently failed to catch on to some darker ironies which were equally as applicable to them as to the Nazis.

Hungarian-Jewish writers responded in two main ways to the years under Communism: a minority continued to explore questions of identity, though most no longer did. The hidden anti-Semitism of the authorities and their efforts to consolidate Hungarian society created a far from ideal environment for manifestations of a Jewish search for identity, and it was therefore entirely unsurprising that few such could be found. In any case, only those writings could be published that conformed to images of Jewishness permitted by the Communist Party, and as in the case of Kertész, neither literary criticism of the published works nor any public discussion of the issues raised was ever actually permitted.<sup>91</sup> Ágnes Gergely<sup>92</sup> was

among the few who continued to explore the issue of dual identity,<sup>93</sup> whilst Péter Nádas<sup>94</sup> opted for assimilation in his novel, *The End of a Family Story*.<sup>95</sup>

However, most Hungarian-Jewish authors simply did not concern themselves at all with questions of identity; some openly abandoned their own Jewish identities and many became adherents of Communism.<sup>96</sup> The horrors experienced during the Holocaust were primary drivers for Jewish Hungarians to join the Communist Party during the early years of the Communist regime.<sup>97</sup> The communist writers and poets, as for instance László Benjámin<sup>98</sup> and Zoltán Zelk,<sup>99</sup> remained zealous adherents of the regime to the end, but some among them, such as István Eörsi<sup>100</sup> and György Konrád,<sup>101</sup> joined the democratic opposition in the seventies, as did prominent Hungarian cultural figures, such as Ágnes Heller and Sándor Radnóti.<sup>102</sup>

The Zionist authors comprised a small, but distinctly separate group. József Patai, who was already mentioned earlier, ultimately emigrated – made his aliya – to the Land of Israel, as did Avigdor Hameiri<sup>103</sup> and Hannah Szenes,<sup>104</sup> who later volunteered for war service with the British and in the end was captured and executed in Hungary. There were also Pál Salamon, Itamar Józ-Keszt, and a group of journalists who comprised the elite of Israeli journalism over a long period of time.<sup>105</sup> Many among them began their writing careers in Hungarian, and there were some who continued to write in the Hungarian language even in Israel. György G. Kardos<sup>106</sup> lived for years in Israel after the war, though later he returned to Hungary. He achieved considerable success with his trilogy<sup>107</sup> of tales of ordinary life in the Yishuv<sup>108</sup> in the years leading up to the Israeli War of Independence, which for some reason the Communist era censorship did not find threatening.<sup>109</sup>

After the regime change in 1989 and the democratic transformation that followed, the Jewish community resumed its struggle with the legacy of the Shoah<sup>110</sup> and with the unresolved issues of co-existence between Jewish and non-Jewish Hungarians.<sup>111</sup> There was the issue of coming to terms with the roles played by Jewish Hungarians during the forty-five years of Communist rule, and questions arose again and again as to the religious, cultural and national dimensions of Jewish self-definition, in particular the nature of its relationship with the State of Israel.<sup>112</sup> At the same time, Jewish intellectual life and literature began to thrive and flourish once again, in all its prolific colours. But its survival and its future directions will depend entirely on how the existential questions of being a Jewish Hungarian would ultimately be answered. The core issues of dual identity and co-existence that were first broached with such optimism in the middle of the nineteenth century are still unresolved and are likely to engage the attention of new generations of Hungarian-Jewish writers into the foreseeable future.



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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Diósy (1812–1892) represented a generation of Jewish people in nineteenth century Hungary who deeply believed in the prospects of coexistence between Jewish and non-Jewish Hungarians.
- <sup>2</sup> The same Kossuth, who afterwards became also well-known in the United States.
- <sup>3</sup> I am referring here to literature in the broadest sense, since the first Jewish written records in Hungary – whether in Hebrew or Yiddish – were *Responsa*, which were religious in nature. The first significant achievement was *Sefer HaMinhagim* or *The Book of Customs* (סֵפֶר הַמִּינְהָגִים) (1400), the work of Rabbi Yitzhak (Eizik) Tirnau or Nagyszombat (*Tyrnau* in German, *Trnov* in Slovak, a multi-ethnic township in historic Hungary, now in Slovakia), and the first work of literature was the still extant *Kinoth* or *Lamentations* (חִינּוֹת) in the Cracow Codex (1494), in which Joshua ben Chaim commemorated the auto-da-fé of the Jews of Nagyszombat.
- <sup>4</sup> Ephraim HaCohen (1616–1678), a significant scholar of the period, published his *responsa* in Turkish-ruled *Buda – Ofen* in German, a historic multi-ethnic township located in the area of present day Buda or Western Budapest – in a collection titled *Sha'ar Ephraim* or *Ephraim's Gate* (רֵעַשׁ מִירְפָּא) (1688) and it was also around that time that the first Yiddish language works appeared: first Chaim Bochner's *Commentary* (1710 then the Yiddish translation of *Sefer HaMinhagim*, (1400).
- <sup>5</sup> On the site of Castle Hill in present day Budapest.
- <sup>6</sup> The magnitude of the carnage carried out by the armies of Eugene de Savoya was such that it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that the Jewish community in Hungary had finally managed to recover from its consequences. In *Megilat Ofen* or *The Story of Buda* (מֵגִילַת אֹפֶן), *Greater Lamentations* and *Lesser Lamentations*, Izsák Schulhoff depicted scenes of siege and massacre of shocking brutality. (Schulhof Izsák, *Budai krónika*, Magvető, Budapest, 1978) In the *Kinoth*, Schulhoff recounted the story of his family and of the Jewish community

of Buda, respectively. The event was also commemorated by Aharon ben Joseph of Prague, in his Yiddish language poem *A splendid new song of Buda* (*Ajn sajn naje lid fun Ojven*).

7 חלכשה

8 Its objective was to modernise Jewish culture and religion, one outcome of which was an endeavour to liken Jewish religious services to those of the Lutheran Church. Examples in point were the layout of Reform synagogues, the emergence of the organ and choir in religious services, and the fact that Drasoth *דראסות* or sermons were increasingly given in the vernacular language. The Reform movement initiated by the Haskala eventually developed into the modern Conservative, Liberal and Reform streams of Judaism. It also brought about the beginnings of evolutionary changes in the use of the Hebrew language, and genres from modern European literature began to find their way into Hebrew poetry. These were the first beginnings of a process that a century later culminated in the revival of spoken Hebrew and the birth of the Modern Hebrew language.

9 In 1816 Salamon Lövisohn published a collection of poems entitled *Melitzat Yeshurun* or *Yeshurun's Poésie* (*חצילם יורושי*); several other volumes of poetry and drama were also published around that time in Hungary.

10 On the one hand, knowledge of German was mandatory, because it was the language of Habsburg rule, the lingua franca of the empire and the vehicle that conveyed the learning and ideals that were gradually percolating from the West. On the other hand, Hungarian national aspirations were becoming increasingly vocal and vigorous, and consequently it became also mandatory to acquire a mastery of the language of the Hungarians. The *Pest City Association for Propagating the Hungarian Language among Local Israelites* (*Honi Izraeliták Között Magyar Nyelvet Terjesztő Pesti Egylet*), later the *Society for Hungarianization* (*Magyarító Egylet*), was formed in 1843 with the aim of promoting the use of Hungarian language by members of the Jewish Community. In their daily life, the Orthodox used Yiddish as their vernacular, and although numerous Hungarian poems were translated into Hebrew, the actual use of Hebrew was confined almost entirely to liturgy and religious studies. Fearing assimilation, the Hatam (Moses) Sofer (1762–1839), the influential rabbi of *Pozsony* (*Pressburg* in German, *Bratislava* in Slovak) – a multi-ethnic town near Vienna that used to host the Hungarian Diet in historic Hungary and is now capital of Slovakia – took a firm stand in favour of Yiddish in 1831; but by that time Jewish community aspirations were unequivocally moving in favour of adopting the local vernacular.

11 On the one hand, it charged the Jewish people with the crime of having turned Christianity loose on the world, but in the very same breath it also charged them with the crime of having rejected that Christianity, resulting in a rather invidious lose-lose position from a Jewish perspective. By the same token, however, most Enlightenment thinkers – among them Christian Dohm, a leading figure of German Enlightenment – held that individual Jewish persons became corrupted only by nature of their religion and culture, but that they could redeem themselves and become useful members of wider society if they broke away and emancipated themselves from their dark religious and cultural bonds.

12 Such as ritual murder, the figure of the rapacious Shylockean usurer, and the depiction of the Jew as predestined for evil doing from birth, and doomed to eternal damnation for the sin of crucifixion.

13 Jewish heroes were depicted with genuine sympathy, and as Hungarian patriots, by Mór Jókai, the most celebrated novelist of the era. Closer to our own times, another significant novelist, Zsigmond Móricz, perceived a quality of life in Jewry and a culture-shaping force that was in positive contrast with the backward conditions prevailing in the still predominantly rural Hungary of that time.

- <sup>14</sup> It bears mentioning, however, that strong interest in public issues was also a feature of mainstream Hungarian literature, yet for all that, vigorous ideological orientation rarely ever came at the expense of quality.
- <sup>15</sup> For instance, Mór Szegefi urged religious reforms, but at the same time he also depicted the wonderfully warm intimacy of Orthodox Jewish family life and especially that of *Kabalat Shabbat* (שלבת שבת), the weekly ritual of greeting the advent of Sabbath in observant households.
- <sup>16</sup> (1815–1891), also known as Mór Ballagi, after he Hungarianised his name and converted to Christianity.
- <sup>17</sup> People of a mythical Central Eurasian land of gold and horsemen, fondly presumed by the literary imagination of some in Hungary to have been among the forebears of ancient Hungarians.
- <sup>18</sup> Free translation of “*Nem vagytok többé mostoha gyermekek – érezték ezt, és helyezték be magatokat – nemzeti érzelmek közepébe*” (Komoróczy – Frojimovics – Pusztai – Stribik, 127).
- <sup>19</sup> Free translation of “*Mert ha végre hő imánkra / Szétszakad a rabbilincs / Megmutatjuk a zsidónál / Jobb magyar a földön nincs*” (Szalai, 60).
- <sup>20</sup> That kind of thinking was also reflected in the works of Galician born Michael Heilprin (1822–1888), who made a name for himself with his Hungarian language poems by the age of twenty. After the failed 1848–49 uprising he emigrated and became a noted scholar in the United States.
- <sup>21</sup> The anti-Semitic atrocities after the outbreak of the revolution and the banishment of Jews from the newly formed National Guard therefore both came as serious disappointments to Jewish Hungarians. But at that time, the wounds were still able to heal. The vast majority of Jewish people in Hungary were enthusiastic supporters of the cause of Hungarian independence, and leaders of Hungarian intellectual and literary life came out in vigorous support of the Jewish community. Jewish voices of disappointment were therefore few and far between (cf. Bernstein, Zsoldos).
- <sup>22</sup> After the defeat, the Jewish community in Hungary could no more escape punitive retribution by the Habsburgs than the rest of the nation, and as a result there was significant emigration from the country.
- <sup>23</sup> Such as those of Bertalan Ormódi (1836–1869), whose work was warmly praised at the time by the great Hungarian poet, János Arany himself (cf. Komlós, p. 85). However, though themes exploring the psyche of the individual began to receive greater attention, the accent continued to remain one of the core issues of Hungarian-Jewish co-existence and the nature of Jewish identity.
- <sup>24</sup> Emancipation gave full civil rights to resident Jewish persons under Hungarian law, but it was expected that in return, from that point forward, Jewish people in Hungary would identify themselves as Hungarians of Jewish faith rather than as mere Jewish ethnics, and thereby help inflate the population count of ethnic Hungarians vis-à-vis other large ethnic groups under Hungarian jurisdiction within the territories of historic Hungary. During the second half of the nineteenth century the wave of surname Hungarianisations was mainly attributable to this.
- <sup>25</sup> This situation was further exacerbated by the fact that in contrast to the British upper classes which were commercially oriented by tradition, Hungarian nobility had little interest or aptitude for pursuing economic value adding activities. On the other hand, business had always been the sole practical source of livelihood for Jewish people throughout their long history, and their aptitudes in this field filled a vacuum in post-Compromise Hungary.
- <sup>26</sup> However, with the passage of time, critical perspectives on the processes of assimilation became more pronounced and several different modes of existence came into being within the Hungarian-Jewish community, most notably the Reform-Conservative, or Neologue, and the

Orthodox streams of religious observance. Nonetheless, the use of Hungarian language remained a unifying feature of almost all Hungarian-Jewish literary works.

27

(1843–1921).

28

The literary ideal of the times was the folkish-nationalist poetry best represented in the work of the two giants of Hungarian literature, Sándor Petőfi and János Arany. In contrast to many others, Kiss was no mere derivative imitator of the balladry of Arany but enriched the genre by giving poetic expression to the village Jewish person's dream of emancipation, and created heroes, such as Judith Simon, who in their thoughts and feelings did not differ one iota from the Hungarian peasants among whom they lived. Kiss was also the first in Hungary to elevate chanson writing and the so-called urbanist genre of poetry to the level of literary works of art.

29

“Open plunder became he in his native land, // Disinherited, wretched, exiled. // Maybe the grave would give him peace, // But even it would perhaps cast him out” – a free translation of “Szabad zsákmány volt a hazában, / Kitagadott, szegény, hazátlan. / A sír tán nyugtot ad neki, / de lehet, hogy az is kiveti” (cf. Komlós, p. 137).

30

Free translation of “E föld, hol állasz, az ígéret földje! (...) / Zsidó, immár van neked is hazád!” (cf. Komlós, pp. 2, 191).

31

(1848–1919).

32

In one of his later essays he expressed an inconsolable alienation in terms of a bitter lament over not knowing what to make of a world where ethnicity counts for more than decent humanity.

33

With that, the image of the Hungarian-Jewish peasant also disappeared gradually from Hungarian-Jewish writings. However, despite reservations and some openly critical attitudes, the vast majority of Jewish people in Hungary were by that time already irreversibly assimilated in spirit to the majority community of Hungarians. Thus, they had little interest in the idea of Zionism that was being vigorously promoted by the Hungarian-born Herzl, and his ideas never really gained popularity among Jewish Hungarians, except among largely unassimilated, Yiddish-speaking Orthodox communities in outlying rural areas, and in particular in the very large Orthodox communities resident at the time in the Transylvanian and Ruthenian provinces of historic Hungary.

34

*Egyenlőség.*

35

*Múlt és Jövő.*

36

There were of course numerous other significant journals and forums for debating the existential questions of dual identity and assimilation by Neologue (reform) Jewish journalists, intellectuals and rabbis, in particular the *Hungarian Jewish Review* (*Magyar Zsidó Szemle*) and other publications of the *Israelite Hungarian Literary Society* (*Izraelita Magyar Irodalmi Társulat*). Over the past decade and a half the works of some key contributors to this debate, such as Lajos Blau, Vilmos Bacher and Ignác Goldziher have been republished – in particular by the *Past and Future* (*Múlt és Jövő*) publishing house, which has been re-established after the regime change under the direction of editor-in-chief János Kőbányai (also cf. fn. 112).

37

(1882–1954). Among Hungarian-Jewish writers of the time, it was perhaps Patai who had moved furthest away from the generally accepted Hungarian-Jewish ideal of his generation.

38

(חבדא קרייט)

39

Free translation of “Tiértetek csak Cion szíve dobban / Örökké, híven csak anya szeret” (Komlós 2, 150).

40

(1863–1924).

41

His language and style were at once naturalist, secessionist and impressionist. In *Liza Timár* he censured the snobbishness of a rich Jew and brought him to heel for his disloyalty to the Jewish people; in *Doctor Faust* (*Faust Orvos*), he dealt critically with the topic of apostasy; in 1915 he wrote with compassion about the plight of Jewish refugees from Galicia. At the same time he

expressed a longing to leave Budapest for Bethlehem, and in the anti-Semitic atmosphere following the First World War and the short-lived Communist dictatorship, in the end he too felt compelled to convert to Christianity.

42 (1869–1944).

43 Indeed, as a writer, Szomory was the unmistakable voice of the Jewish public of Pest, the Eastern half of Budapest, where the bulk of the Jewish community resided.

44 *Nyugat*.

45 In fairness, his critique did not restrict its censure to Jewish authors only, but the ominous sentence in his letter had nonetheless further poisoned an already unhealthy atmosphere.

46 *Huszadik Század*.

47 “Van-e zsidókérdés Magyarországon?” in *Huszadik Század, A magyarországi zsidókérdésről*, special edition, Autumn 1917.

48 Imre Nagy, for example, longed to return to the village ghetto and Zoltán Somlyó (1882–1937), who opted for exile in 1912, held up as ideal not the assimilated Hungarian-Jewish peasant, but the village shopkeeper, who remained steadfastly loyal to his Jewish identity.

49 (1864–1931).

50 *Új keresztény* (1909).

51 Who converted to Catholicism, in order that they be allowed to build a Catholic church. As a consequence, the majority of their Jewish neighbours turned away from them, and when the church collapsed, the entire village turned on them, too.

52 *Ki a gettóból* (1911).

53 (1867–1942).

54 Not from sincere conviction but out of middle class conformism, thereby heedlessly surrendering their own deepest sense of self.

55 *A Pál utcai fiúk* (1909).

56 Whose plays made him world famous between the two world wars. (1878–1952).

57 Though only a small subsidiary thread in a larger story, the juxtaposition of these two characters is nonetheless integral to the essence of this novel.

58 The period started with pogroms in rural areas, then saw the introduction of numerus clausus (discriminatory policy in favour of ethnic Hungarians to restrict Jewish participation in higher education), later the inexorable rise to power of the organizations and parties of the extreme right, and later still the introduction of anti-Jewish legislation based on the Nuremberg laws, which ultimately ended in the Shoah.

59 *Az asszimiláció kora a magyar irodalomban 1867–1914* (1938).

60 Not least because Hungarian-Jewish writers in particular were at the forefront of processes of constantly ongoing creative regeneration in Hungarian literature, both in their innovative uses of the Hungarian language and in their innovative adaptations of new literary trends from the West.

61 (1889–1937). Lajos Szabolcsi was the publisher and editor-in-chief of *Egyenlőség*. In his *Bar Kochba, Son of a Star* (*Bar-Kochba, a csillag fia*), a historical novel published in 1918, Szabolcsi presented the story of the heroic Jewish war of independence led by Bar Kochba against the Romans, in symbolic proof of the bravery of Hungarian-Jewish soldiers during the First World War, and repudiating thereby the charge of cowardice that was often used as the pretext for anti-Semitic atrocities.

62 (1892–1980).

63 Jenő, the hero of Komor’s novel *The Descendants of Fischman S* (*Fischmann S. utódjai*) (1919) remained unaccepted by the upper classes to whose ranks he aspired, despite having converted to Christianity. Komor (1898–1944) presented the lower middle class Jewish char-

acters of this awkward tale as being totally devoid of human dignity and morals; people who were patently not Christians, but definitely no longer Jewish either.

64 (1895–1944).

65 (1889–1963).

66 (1901–1945).

67 (1904–1944).

68 (1895–1966).

69 (1899–1945).

70 Whether they undertook those conversions as the next logical step to follow upon the reform of Judaism or as a deliberate act of breaking away from their own Jewish identities. Oddly enough, this group became pioneers of a Catholic renewal in Hungary.

71 (1910–1991).

72 (1897–1945?).

73 His novel *Azarel* (1937) was autobiographical in its inspiration. In this novel Pap gave a compelling portrayal of the conflicts within the psyche of a child whose grandfather remained Orthodox, but whose father – modelled on his own father, the eminent scientist Miksa Pollák – was spell-bound by emancipation and almost completely assimilated. The little boy felt equally alienated from both their worlds, as did Pap himself, who also rejected both these positions. In his other significant novel, *The Eighth Station of the Cross* (*Nyolcadik stáció*) (1931), Pap portrayed a young painter who aspired to distil a Jesus of dogma-free religiousness from the sufferings of Christ. The novel happens to present a fascinating parallel to Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev*, whose Hassidic Jewish hero was also a painter, although actually, what he attempted to represent in terms of the sufferings of Christ on the cross were the sufferings of his mother. Both these works raised interesting issues regarding the nature of the image of Christ among the Jewish people. Pap's other works, such as his novel *You Have Liberated Me From Death* (*Megszabadítottál a haláltól*) (1928/29) and his play *Bat Sheba* (*Betsabe*) (1940) also had Biblical themes, albeit taken from the world of the Old Testament, rather than that of the New.

74 *Zsidó sebek és bűnök* (1935). Many, such as László Németh, concluded that Pap's program substantiated the proposition that ethnic Hungarians and Jewish Hungarians belonged to separate and utterly alien racial groups, but this view was based on a complete misunderstanding of what Pap wrote.

75 (1871–1957) – Was Herzl's nephew.

76 (1884–1953).

77 (1880–1974).

78 (1905–1943).

79 With his detective stories, rollicking sea adventures and adventures in the Foreign Legion, Rejtő created an undying memorial to the characteristic Jewish humour of Pest. But entertaining as it was, his humour concealed a certain wisdom and a peculiar sense of melancholy. One of his novels, *The Bone Brigade* (*Csontribrigád*), in fact turned out to be a fearfully prophetic and shockingly accurate depiction of the horrors of concentration camps, a prophecy that was ultimately fulfilled in the horrors of the Shoah.

80 (1906–1945).

81 (1884–1945).

82 (1869–1944).

83 Among the murdered there were also representatives of the tiny Yiddish language literature in Hungary, such as József Holder (1893–1945), who translated the masterpieces of Hungarian literature into Yiddish. His last major work, a translation of the Hungarian classic *The Tragedy of Man* (*Az ember tragédiája*) by Imre Madách, could never be completed. Orthodox commu-

nities in the outlying eastern and northeastern provinces of historic Hungary continued to cherish Yiddish and use it as their principal vernacular alongside Hungarian – as well as the Romanian, Ukrainian and German that were all commonly spoken in those areas – whilst Hebrew they used solely for purposes of liturgy and religious studies.

84 Also known as *Máramarossziget* – *Sighet* in Yiddish, *Sighetu Marmăției* in Romanian – a North Transylvanian market town located in present day Romania, which used to be one of the most significant Orthodox communities in historic Transylvania.

85 (1929–).

86 Apart from memoirs written by survivors, such as Ernő Szép, *Stench of Humans* (*Emberszag*) (1945) and Jenő J. Tersánszky, *The Story of a Handcart* (*Egy kézikocsi története*) (1949), and the poetry of Miklós Radnóti, Holocaust literature in Hungary was primarily the work of two authors, both of them outside the Communist mainstream. One was the Catholic poet János Pilinszky, the other Imre Kertész.

87 Communism resembled Nazism in many respects, and not least in that both official and grass-roots anti-Semitism were just as rife in countries of the Soviet block, albeit taking somewhat more muted, subterranean forms. Consequently, it was unsurprising that the cultural politics of the time did its best to remain silent on the novel by Kertész, given that in light of its official anti-Nazi stance, it was hardly in a position to openly attack the novel for its chosen topic.

88 Questions such as how could it have happened that so many in Hungarian politics and among ordinary Hungarians became such active participants in the disenfranchisement of Jewish Hungarians, the misappropriation of their property, and ultimately in their deportation to the death camps. The undigested horror of the Hungarian Holocaust remains an unresolved issue in Hungary to this day, for Jewish and non-Jewish Hungarians alike.

89 *Sorstalanság* (1975) – Translation of the title as *Fateless* by Katharina Wilson, Professor of Comparative Literature at University of Georgia, was a not unreasonable adjectival compromise with the nominalised Hungarian form of the word.

90 Gyuri Köves, the hero of the novel, was innocently convicted, exactly as Josef K was in *The Trial* by Kafka. Totalitarianism degrades human beings into faceless and fateless objects, where victims come to regard what befell them almost as matter of course, the natural order of the world. This is why Gyuri spoke of bliss in the camps.

91 Among those who nevertheless addressed some of the existential issues of being Hungarian and Jewish in post-Holocaust Hungary were authors like Mária Ember, Pál Várnai, Pál Bárdos and György Gera.

92 (1933–).

93 “Let my withered right hand be the Amen, // To forgetting thee, O Jerusalem! // And let my aching face convulse unto my lips, // Upon forgetting thee, János Arany!” in free translation of “Hát kihűlt jobbom legyen rá az Ámen, / ha elfeledlek egyszer Jeruzsálem / És fájó arcom rángjon majd a számhoz, / ha elfeledlek egyszer Arany János.”

94 (1942–).

95 *Egy családregény vége* (1977). The hero of the novel bore the dual name of Peter Simon, thereby symbolizing the intention of the grandfather for the Jewishness represented by Simon to dissolve into the Christianity of Peter.

96 As for instance, Tibor Déry or István Örkény. Actually, this process was already ongoing well before the war, having started at around the time of the First World War. At that time Jewish Hungarians tended to join the Communists for reasons of disillusionment with emancipation and out of faith in the advent of a society without religious or ethnic divisions. Not a few intellectual luminaries joined the Communist Party at the time, as for instance György Lukács, the eminent philosopher of aesthetics and literature.

- 97 There was mutual interest at work. On the one hand, the Communists needed to boost their numbers with politically reliable cadre in a defeated but basically hostile country. On the other hand, many among the Holocaust survivors were not merely seeking revenge, but came to be sincerely convinced, at least for a while, that perhaps salvation could indeed lie in an idealist, classless, race-free and internationalist Communist society.
- 98 (1915–1986).
- 99 (1908–1981).
- 100 (1931–).
- 101 (1933–).
- 102 Former students of György Lukács and subsequently his close associates.
- 103 (1890–1970) – Formerly Feuerstein, arrived in Israel in 1921.
- 104 (1921–1944).
- 105 Among them the Israeli journalist, editor, politician and now government minister Tommy Lapid, formerly Tamás Lampel, a leader of what used to be the “Hungarian Gang” in the community of journalists in Israel.
- 106 (1925–1998).
- 107 *The Seven Days of Abraham Bogatir (Avraham Bogatir hét napja)* (1968), *Where Have the Soldiers Disappeared (Hová tűntek a katonák)* (1971), and *End of the Story (A történet vége)* (1977).
- 108 יישוב (Settlement), shorthand reference for the Jewish community in British Mandatory Palestine before the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel by David Ben Gurion on 14 May 1948.
- 109 It ran into several editions, and was virtually alone in having been able to slip through Communist censorship and present to the Hungarian public a more balanced picture, in sharp contrast to the rabid anti-Zionist propaganda of the Communist Party.
- 110 Including further Shoah memoirs, such as Miklós Nyiszli’s *Auschwitz: A Doctor’s Eyewitness Account (Mengele boncolóorvosa voltam)* (1993).
- 111 Indeed, these questions engaged not just the Jewish community, but also many segments of the ethnic Hungarian community as well, some on positive ways, some recalling the worst excesses of Hungarian anti-Semitism in the past.
- 112 As attested by recent works of post-Communist Hungarian-Jewish authors, such as György Dalos, Imre Goldstein, János Kőbányai and Gábor T. Szántó, and the publishing and editorial work of figures such as Kőbányai (also cf. fn. 36) and Szántó, who is also the editor-in-chief of *Szombat*, a quality current affairs journal published by and on behalf of the Jewish community of Hungary that features the work of leading Hungarian-Jewish journalists and commentators, such as László Seres, Attila Novák, János Gadó, and György Tatár.