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Hungary's Jews and the Hungarian Rainbow

At its birth, Hungarian national consciousness was homogenising in nature. Rather than as a diverse and integrating community, 'Hungariandom' was perceived as a homogeneous category. This was largely due to the fact that the birth of nationhood was accompanied by a feeling of endangeredness – as many Hungarians seriously felt that the national community was at risk of extinction. It is perhaps sufficient here to quote a few lines from Vörösmarty's *Appeal,* the most emblematic poem describing Hungarians' national consciousness:

> Or there shall come, if come there must,
> a death of fortitude;
> and round about our graves shall stand
> a nation washed in blood.
>
> Around the graves where we shall die
> a weeping world will come,
> and millions will in pity gaze
> upon the martyrs' tomb.[14]

In addition to national extinction, another feeling profoundly affecting the mood of contemporary Hungarians was that of misfortune, adverse destiny. Ferenc Kölcsey's *Anthem,* the other poem emblematic of Hungarian national consciousness,[15] characterises adverse destiny as an enduring, uninterrupted process, something that 'for so long didst frown'.

The substance of the message in all these cases was that Hungarians could not afford any fragmentation lest they drown, one way or another, in the Slavic and Germanic sea that surrounded them. This is why Hungarian national consciousness appeared on the scene in a monolithic form, rather than being constructed from diverse elements or, possibly, divergent regional realities. This was by no means self-evident, since for instance Romanian national consciousness was formed from a merger of several different regional variants, to say nothing of German national consciousness, whose unity – based on differences – is preserved even in the constitutional set-up of present-day Germany. Other examples include the national

[14] Mihály Vörösmarty (1800–1855): one of Hungary's greatest poets, a national classic. Translated by Theresa Pulszky – John Edward Taylor. www.babelmatrix.org/works/hu/V%C3%B6r%C3%B-6smarty_Mih%C3%A1ly/Sz%C3%B3zat/en/3522-Appeal

[15] Ferenc Kölcsey (1790–1838): poet, a Hungarian national classic. Author of Hungary's national anthem. Translated by William N. Loew. www.babelmatrix.org/works/hu/K%C3%B6lcsey_Ferenc/Himnusz/en/21666-Hymn

consciousness of Italians or the profound regional differences within Ukrainian nationhood which are decisive in generating anti- or pro-Russian sentiments to this very day.

After their Ausgleich (Compromise) with Austria in 1867, Hungarians found themselves in the driving seat in constitutional terms, although they did not represent the majority in ethnic terms. This was a further stimulus to the strengthening of homogenising trends. In fact, within Hungary's population, those who defined themselves as Hungarians became a majority only in 1900 – not least because Jewish people living within the country's borders had opted for a Hungarian identity. (That majority was, of course, a shaky one, as behind Transylvania's Romanians stood the Romanian state, while behind the Serbs in Hungary there stood the state of Serbia.) The Hungarian nationalism of the age of the Compromise could sustain the vision of greater Hungary as the land of Hungarians only by postulating 'Hungariandom' as a single entity. It was partly this vision of uniformity that produced a sense of political superiority, which then went on to develop into a feeling of cultural superiority. The idea of Hungarian superiority as postulated was incompatible with the vision of a fragmented 'Hungariandom'.

That homogenising Hungarian national consciousness was further boosted by the Trianon peace treaty, which denied Hungary the possibility of representing her interests. The feeling of being an endangered nation was confirmed by these events and, as a result, the main current of Hungarian national consciousness became ethnicist in character and viewed the national community as one and indivisible. Naturally enough, such an ethnic foundation was a stimulus to the exclusion of Jews who, 'whatever they might imagine, cannot be Hungarian'.

In the wake of the shock of Trianon, imposed on it by outside forces, interwar Hungary set out, of its own volition and permeated by its ethnicist national consciousness, on the path of an 'internal Trianon': the expulsion of its mostly assimilated Jewry, that is to say, towards national self-mutilation.

During the socialist era, national consciousness fell into a "hundred years of enchanted sleep" and the last thing the Hungarian state was concerned about was the rethinking of the notion of nationhood.

It is no coincidence therefore that, after the regime change, the conflicting forms of national consciousness reappeared as if thawed out from their deep-frozen state – in public life, in official policies of remembrance and in national and political rituals.

Meanwhile, however, gradual changes were taking place. It has become politically ever more evident that Hungarian minorities living in the neighbouring countries form parts of the national community and it has also become clear that in cultural terms there are several ways of being Hungarian. That realisation was embodied by two laws enacted in 2010. One was the dual citizenship act (Law XLIV of 2010), while the other was the law decreeing the establishment of the Day of National Cohesion (Law XLV of 2010). Both laws were intended to embody the notion of Hungarian nation in a way that implicitly acknowledged an integrative vision of Hungarian nationhood.[16]

[16] The Day of National Cohesion. In: András Gerő: *A Hungarian National History Book*. Public Foundation for the Research of Central nd Eastern European History and Society – Institute of Habsburg History, Budapest, 2015. 173-210.

A process was thus launched which – for the first time in Hungarian history – articulated nationhood as a united but not homogenous entity and that change became a concrete cultural and political experience for large numbers of people. At the levels of both popular and high culture we have witnessed – and are continuing to witness – a process whereby the integrative vision of Hungarian nationhood is being shaped and is taking root.

That is an unprecedented development in the history of the Hungarian national consciousness.

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People of Jewish descent living in today's Hungary regard themselves almost without exception as Hungarians. Those who wanted to leave the country and to choose a Jewish national identity have been free to do so without any negative legal consequences for almost the last three decades. On the other hand, people of Jewish descent living here have multiple identities: a few are religious; many more are secular; while among the latter there are several divergent identities; yet others attach no importance to their ancestry.[17]

I realise that people often base the notion of Jewishness on descent. Personally, I am inclined to see identity as the determining factor. I am of this view not only because I want to distance myself from the notion of Jewish descent as discredited by racial theory in the course of history, but also because as modern societies have evolved, they have progressively adopted a concept of identity based on free choice by the individual.[18] Yet, whatever our preferences, the idea of free choice cannot be discarded, because if someone decides that the defining factor is descent, that decision itself is a personal choice. I basically agree with Gyula Illyés, who said:

> Brother, to prove today that you're a son of the people, you should say
> not where you come from, but where you're headed.[19]

[17] Sociological evidence, too, is available on this topic: András Kovács – Ildikó Barna (eds.): *Zsidók és zsidóság Magyarországon 2017-ben. Egy szociológiai kutatás eredményei* [Jews and Jewry in Hungary in 2017. The Results of a Sociological Study]. Budapest, *Szombat,* Journal of the Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association, 2018. 64–83. The publication includes a summary in English with details relating to the notion of identity, 215–216.

[18] The priority of identity is vividly exemplified from the history of the workers' movement onwards, up to and including gender theory. For my more detailed remarks on the importance of Jewish identity, see András Gerő: *Magyar másik. Értelmezések és reprezentációk* [The Hungarian Other. Interpretations and Representations]. Budapest, Public Foundation for the Research of Central and Eastern European Society and History, 2014. 13–64.

[19] Gyula Illyés: Egy népfira [To a Son of the People]. *Nyugat,* 29. (1936), 9. Gyula Illyés (1902–1983): poet, writer, playwright and editor.

Paraphrasing Illyés, I can thus say: to prove your Jewishness you don't have to display your descent, but rather your identity. If you have no Jewish identity in any sense of the word, why should you be Jewish?[20]

The issue of assimilation is a rather important and determining one in any discourse on Jews, whatever we mean by that term.

There are those who believe that empirically speaking, as a result of mass assimilation, there are no Jews left in Hungary. Such an interpretation amounts to an intellectual consummation of the Holocaust, for it eliminates 'the Jew' on the intellectual level. It does so unintentionally, but paradigmatically. I consider such a view detached from reality, ignoring the multiple nature of identities and failing to pass the test of empiricism.[21]

A less extreme position expressed, among others, by religious Jewish circles sees assimilation as a threat because in the long run it may remove 'the Jew' from society.

On 19 July 2017, the prime ministers of Hungary and Israel paid a joint visit to the Dohány Street Synagogue. At the end of their visit, both statesmen made speeches. The audience was first addressed by their host, the chairman of the Association of Hungarian Jewish Faith Communities, who remarked, *inter alia:*

> Our most important task is to preserve our traditions and continue with the work of education and value creation. On the surface, everything seems to be fine. Many speak of a Jewish renaissance. In actual fact, however, we are waging a horrendous struggle, but not against the government or a transfer of populations, not even against anti-Semites – but against assimilation. In the long run, the question is whether our children and grandchildren will live as Jews. We long for a positive Jewish communal identity, which presupposes a Jewish consciousness and a strong Israel. We are convinced that both Hungary and the State of Israel have a vested interest in not dividing or alienating the Hungarian Jewish diaspora and giving every possible assistance to enable us to build our communities, continuing to experience and sustain the Hungarian and Jewish traditions of our ancestors.[22]

[20] I therefore feel it somewhat awkward that some use the term 'non-Jewish Jew' to describe those with a Jewish ancestry but without a Jewish identity. The term 'non-Jewish Jew' expresses, I suspect, either an ethnic or a halachic preconception.

[21] As the historian Gábor Gyáni sees it, "Empirically speaking, there are thus hardly any Jews left in today's Hungary, or none at all, and in this sense, in our country the historical process of assimilation is now complete". (See Gábor Gyáni: Imaginárius és ideológiai „zsidók" [Imaginary and Ideological 'Jews']. *Szombat,* 29. [2017], 10. 6). Gyáni believes that Hungary's Jewry has been dissolved by assimilation (that is, as I see it, the aim of the Holocaust has been fully achieved by peaceful means), completely ignoring the fact that Jewish identity does not necessary run counter to assimilation, quite apart from the existence of secular Jewish groupings, institutions, Jewish religious organisations, and flesh-and-blood folk who consider themselves Jewish – providing empirical proof of what he denies. As a historian of society, he must be aware that the power of a phenomenon does not necessarily depend on its sheer numbers, but rather on its strength of character. For example, the proportion of business tycoons in society is extremely small but no account of that society can ignore them.

[22] Heisler András: múltunk és jövőnk összeköt bennünket [András Heisler: Our Past and Future Connect Us]. *Breuer Press International,* 19 July 2017.

The secular leader of the Neolog religious community thus sees assimilation as the main threat.[23]

As we know, the Neolog movement was institutionally organised in the wake of the 1869 Congress of the Jewish Denomination, but of course in practice it had already existed earlier. It was distinguished from the Orthodox and the Status Quo Ante (i.e. everything should stay as it is) movements by the very fact that it wanted to align Jewish religious practices more closely with those of the Christian society around it. The reason for doing so was the increasing commitment of mainly urban religious Jews to emancipation and assimilation, which manifested itself in numerous ways.

Lipót Löw, the first Chief Rabbi of Neolog Jewry, was the first to preach in Hungarian; he supported Jewish participation in the 1848–1849 Revolution and introduced the prayer 'for King and Country'. Neolog rabbis began to wear clothes like the vestments worn by Catholic priests, and ceased to sport sidelocks. Organs and pulpits like the ones in Christian churches became a common sight in Neolog synagogues. We could adduce many similar examples.

Although a number of other factors played a role in the birth of Jewish neology, the intention to assimilate was undeniably the social backdrop to this new denomination. It was the propulsive force of neology. The trend to assimilation was strong enough to make Hungarian become the first language of Jewish people within a few decades.

Not only did assimilation and neology not contradict each other – they actually reinforced one another; Neolog synagogues were being built hand over fist. One might even say that Neolog Jews became parts of the Hungarian nation. It is no coincidence that the Budapest-born Theodore Herzl, at a time when he was already known as the founder of political Zionism, allegedly told his cousin Jenő Heltai[24] that from the point of view of Zionism, Hungary's Jews were a withered branch of Jewry.

And now let me take a big leap in this admittedly sketchy overview. The Holocaust did not spare Neolog Jews. The most seriously affected, however, were the Jews outside the capital, where Orthodoxy was strong. Thus, after the war the followers of the Neolog branch represented the majority of surviving Jews. All the other branches had virtually disappeared.

The Communist regime was hostile to religion of every kind and therefore had a deleterious impact on the vitality of the remaining Jewish faith communities. Holocaust survivors, on the other hand, as I have already mentioned, could – and did – choose from several options. Some emigrated after the war; some opted for atheism; some simply concealed or buried their Jewishness; some converted to the church of the new materialist creed, while others remained faithful to their faith of old.

[23] The speaker is not alone in holding this view. As the historian Attila Novák says: "…continuous assimilation, the endpoint of which is the gradual disappearance of Jewry…". On this basis he suggests that "further assimilation of Hungary's Jewry should be halted (as far as possible)…". Attila Novák: A nem zsidó zsidóságot már nem kellene képviselni [Non-Jewish Jewry Ought no Longer to Be Represented]. *Szombat,* 29. (2017), 10. 16.

[24] Jenő Heltai (1871–1957), writer, poet, journalist.

Among the émigrés who left Hungary in the wake of the 1956 Revolution, Jews were rather overrepresented by comparison with their proportion in the population as a whole. Of the roughly 200,000 who left Hungary, those of Jewish ancestry numbered perhaps 20,000 to 25,000.[25] Some of them opted to go to Israel, that is, for a Jewish national identity. Many, of course, were not propelled by attraction, but rather repulsion, and ended up scattered all over the world. Many also left between the 1960s and the 1980s. These were dubbed defectors. We have no idea what proportion of these were Jews, nor about where they ended up.

After the regime change of 1989, people were free to travel and settle elsewhere. For almost three decades now, Jewish people who did not wish to live here have been completely free to leave. Furthermore, in free Hungary Jewish people have been free to choose to be considered a national minority. In spite of several attempts, the 1,000 signatures required to put the issue on the parliamentary agenda have never been collected.[26] As a matter of fact, the overwhelming majority of Hungary's Jews have rejected the idea of being considered a national minority. But once religious Jews do not consider themselves to be a national minority and stay in Hungary because they have freely decided that this is where they want to live, then in national terms they cannot be anything other than Hungarians. They speak Hungarian – that is their mother tongue – and are part and parcel of Hungarian society.

They are certainly not Hungarian in the same way as those whose families did not experience the anti-Jewish legislation of the late 1930s and early 1940s, or the Holocaust. They are Hungarians in a different way, but they are Hungarians nevertheless; their national consciousness may be stronger or weaker, but in no way does it lack some degree of Hungarian national culture and consciousness.

The kind of assimilation that Hungary's Jewry went through from the 1840s onwards was not coercive in character. It was stimulated on both sides by the recognition of mutual interests, although on neither side was everyone fully aware of those interests. Those involved regarded the process of assimilation as successful *grosso modo,* although its potential and actual failures were apparent in several areas. Nevertheless, that process and its results were severely shaken by the official anti-Semitism of the interwar period and by the Holocaust. Theodor Herzl, who died in 1904, could have said in 1944: 'I told you so.' He would not have been right, but it would have been difficult to argue with him.

A new look at the process of the assimilation of Hungary's Jews and its consequences is entirely justified. It should not, however, include questioning the good intentions of those who wanted to assimilate the Jews, or of those who wanted to assimilate to the majority. While despite its many pitfalls, assimilation for a long time looked like a success

[25] Tamás Stark: A magyar zsidóság a vészkorszak után [Hungary's Jewry after the Holocaust]. *História,* (1995), 8; László Hablicsek – Sándor Illés: Az 1956-os kivándorlás népességi hatásai [The Demographic Impact of the Wave of Emigration in 1956]. *Statisztikai Szemle,* 85. (2007), 2. 157–172.
[26] See https://magyarnemzet.hu/archivum-magyarnemzet/2005/10/zsidosag-vallas-vagy-nemzetiseg-2

story, in hindsight the validity of the entire process was questioned in light of the mass murder that was raised to an official level.

It is all the more remarkable to see both religious and non-religious Jews in Hungary willingly continuing to call this country their home, although the State of Israel, where there is no separation between church and state, has been available as a Jewish nation since 1948.

It is thus legitimate to take a new look at the process of assimilation as it occurred in the past. It is legitimate to raise doubts and it may be legitimate for many to reject the idea and the strategy of absorption and full assimilation into the majority society. That was what Zionism offered from the outset. But one need not be a Zionist to seek an alternative, for instance believing that the future of the religious Jewish community should be defined in terms of integration rather than assimilation.

The legitimacy of that position is all the more sound if it is formulated by people with a great deal of credibility. A lack of credibility, on the other hand, would put in doubt the legitimacy of any position.

As I have already mentioned, religious and non-religious Jews who do have some degree of Jewish identity belong ontologically to the Hungarian national community: because they live here; because they could have opted for another solution; because their mother tongue is Hungarian; because they have their own social environment here; and also because this is where they intend to exercise their right to seek a decent and happy future.

To present assimilation as a danger for the Neolog Jewry whose history is intertwined with assimilation would be scarcely credible, especially as nearly all religious Jews in Hungary are Hungarians in terms of nationality. Any anti-assimilation notion devoid of credibility would, on the other hand, certainly be dangerous, because it would allow religious Jews living in this country to be detached from the nation and be considered as, at best, citizens of Hungary – but not Hungarians.

It would be much more legitimate and credible to stress that a homogeneous vision of nationhood and of the political and cultural practices that it entails might sooner or later inevitably become exclusionary in character and thus a genuine threat to both religious and non-religious people who consider themselves Jews in any sense of the word.

There are several ways of being Hungarian, there are several legitimate kinds of Hungarian identity, and the Hungarian story, which has never been homogeneous, is composed of divergent sub-stories.

If there is such a thing as an integrative national consciousness, then assimilated Jews in Hungary do have sufficient scope to express their identities and traditions in an integrative way.

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The integrative transformation of Hungarian national consciousness offers an ideal opportunity for the devout, or those who may be mostly secular but cherish a Jewish identity of whatever kind, to continually signal that they are also Hungarians, although

in a different way. That difference may not be confined to their religious convictions but may extend to the differing family histories that they represent and the differing attitudes towards the various topoi of national memory, as well as to their own traditions; in other words, they may, and do, embody an integrative position within the framework of assimilation. For that to happen it is worth re-examining the notions of assimilation and integration. These categories have not, in fact, been contradictory in the course of history. We have had several examples of people within given assimilated groups who have represented divergent degrees of assimilation and embodied specific structures of identity. There are plenty of such cases in today's Hungary, as well. There are many people of 'Swabian'/German descent who consider themselves Hungarians but nevertheless display their Swabian traditions on certain occasions. There are many who consider themselves Hungarians and see a link between their identities as Hungarians and Christians; while for others, being Hungarian means cherishing the nation's pagan ancestry and beliefs.[27]

If we now want to seek a pattern for the Jewish integration model within the framework of an existing assimilation, even if that is not always clearly articulated, then we can identify several such phenomena.

One good example at the level of high culture is that current of Hungarian literature which has an emphatic relationship to the plight of the Jews of Hungary/Hungarian Jews, from Imre Kertész through György Konrád and Géza Röhrig to Gábor T. Szántó.[28] At the level of popular culture the same phenomenon is exemplified by the popularity of the numerous klezmer bands, Jewish festivals and especially Jewish cuisine.[29]

Nor can we disregard the existence of the Jewish State of Israel since 1948. Attitudes towards Israel are mental coordinates that can distinguish those with any kind of Jewish consciousness. It may be a double identity, a mere interest in, or simply an attachment to the existence and the secure borders of the state of Israel. That 'Israel factor' is operational – and not only for those with any kind of Jewish identity (!) – despite the fact that some religious Jewish organisations happen to be indifferent towards it. A good example is an initiative I took part in which gathered over 12,000 signatures over a short period of time in support of the decision by the President of the United States to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.[30] This has been the largest mass initiative in Hungary to date in support of the Jewish state.

Integration in the framework of assimilation is underway in many walks of life. This is a new and increasingly significant phenomenon in the history of post-regime change Hungarian Jewry. It is happening and people participate in it – but they are not always

[27] See the circular of the Hungarian Episcopal Conference.

[28] Imre Kertész (1929–2016), Noble prize-winning writer; György Konrád (1933–2019), Herder prize-winning author; Géza Röhrig, (1967–), actor, writer, poet; Gábor T. Szántó (1966–), writer and editor.

[29] People are increasingly aware that as well as matzo-ball soup and cholent, flódni, too, is a Jewish dish.

[30] Jerusalem Capital of Israel.

conscious of what they are doing. Integration within assimilation is an ever more palpable fact, while being only sporadically articulated in strategic terms.

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It is thus my view that the situation in Hungary has not, for a long time, been as favourable as it is today to people articulating and exercising their specific identities. Hungarian national consciousness is becoming increasingly integrative and therefore offers great opportunities for the various Jewish identities to flourish. Meanwhile, all these identities are components of the Hungarian rainbow of which we are all part and parcel – each of us adding our own colour but producing a single array of colours.

Hungary's European Union membership legally forbids discrimination by the state, including any negative discrimination at the expense of anyone considered in any way Jewish by the state or by government policies. And since such discrimination is banned in the Union and thus in Hungary, it is also becoming harder to practise it on the social level. There may be a 'Jewish question' in certain segments of Hungarian society, but as a matter of public policy it is completely inconceivable.

The main thing is that everybody should have the courage to display their own identity. In the case of Hungary's Jews that means to be Jewish differently from those living in the Jewish state, and to be Hungarian differently from those of their compatriots whose families did not experience racial persecution and stigmatisation, or the Jewish religious tradition.

It is not circumstances that are hindering an ever more extensive development and display of Jewish integrative identity within assimilation. If an obstacle exists, it is rather to be found in our own insensitivity, lack of clear vision, or stubborn prejudices.

The environment is more favourable today than it was at any time during the twentieth century. It is up to Hungarians who consider themselves Jewish in any sense to realise this.

In this respect, I am only moderately optimistic.

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