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The Ethnoreligious Identity of Transcarpathian Jewry (1867–1944)

Transcarpathia has always formed a distinctive geographical unit of historical Hungary, ethnically and culturally separate from other parts of the country, and remained so even after the post-World War I peace treaties, when Transcarpathia was severed from Hungary and became part of Czechoslovakia. However, not only is Transcarpathia a distinctive region of historical Hungary, but Transcarpathian Jewry form a distinctive group of Hungarian Jewry, possessed of a distinctive religious identity. This identity played an important role in the history of Hungarian Jewry in the past and continues to do so in the history of Jews worldwide. Here I would like to cite two contrasting texts to show that the phenomenon in question was a very paradoxical one. The first is taken from *Kazár földön* [In the Land of the Khazars],³ a political pamphlet (although one with some socio-scientific pretensions), written by one of Hungary's best-known nationalistic publicists, the jurist and member of parliament Miklós Bartha (1848–1905):

The rest of them also live this way. They don't study, they don't educate themselves, they don't wash. They just do business and make children. They tell lies. They often commit arson. They maim their enemies' cattle. They bear false witness. They bribe wherever they can. They corrupt everywhere and everybody. They light candles on Friday nights and bathe in ritual liquids. They pray noisily and cheat silently. They strip the tilth from the soil, and their skin from the people.

They are as prolific as bugs. They are as sharp as a knife. They destroy like rats. The people of the mountains, weakened by their landlords, were attacked by the Khazars in the way a dark, terrifying and revolting host of flies attacks a wounded and abandoned animal.⁴

The second text is from Ivan Olbracht (1882–1952), a Czech Communist writer, from his volume *Golet v údolí* [Golet in the Valley] (1937), regarded by the critics as his finest work:

On the floor the buckets were ready, full of milk. For the *mikveh* may contain only water from the spring, and in the eyes of the Lord only milk has the same value as water from the spring, because milk, too, comes from a pure source. This was the conclusion reached by the Sages after much debate, and this is what is written in the *Shulchan Aruch*.

Now the rabbi commanded that milk be poured into the *mikveh*.

³ NB In the political discourse of the time “Khazar” referred not to the historical Khazars, but to Ashkenazi Jewry, or its Eastern (Polish–Russian) part. Both Hungarian Jews and the anti-Semites of the day generally accepted the theory that all or most East European Jews were the descendants of the Khazars.

⁴ Miklós Bartha: *Kazár földön* [In the Land of the Khazars]. Kolozsvár, Ellenzék Könyvnyomda, 1901.

But what happened in the *mikveh*? What was the miracle that happened down there, at the bottom of the trench? Let all of you who have eyes look, and those that cannot see, listen.

The water vanished, the glass in the little spring vanished, and everything turned into milk, into milk, milk, milk, turning into the white of the white Shabbos gown, or the flower of the sour cherry. The *mikveh* vanished, the sin of Rivah vanished, the curse weighing upon the people of Polana; everything was hidden, shrouded in this whiteness, disintegrating in this eternity of time! Lo and behold, rejoice and feast, you Jews of Polana!

The milk rises burbling, rises all day long, and then it reaches that half-centimeter below the rim, then it separates from the water, the water is purified: the *mikveh* becomes the *mikveh* once more, and the people of Polana once again find favour in the sight of the Lord. Rejoice and feast!⁵

As can be seen, the first text speaks with strong antipathy about the Transcarpathian Jews, while the second speaks with strong empathy and love. But they agree in one respect: the importance of orthodox Judaism in the life of Transcarpathian Jewry. Their ethnoreligious identity was formed by a religious trend that arose in the 1860s, ultra-orthodoxy or, as it is called nowadays in Israel, *haredi* Judaism.

Hungarian orthodoxy, and its ultra-orthodox tendency, is not of course identical with the religious Judaism that existed before the Enlightenment, however keenly it would like to be perceived as such. Orthodox Judaism evolved from religious Judaism as that faced the various challenges of the Enlightenment and modernity, transforming and entrenching its religious traditions and in the course of this process the community – unconsciously and involuntarily – modified this tradition.

Hungarian Jewish orthodoxy was unquestionably the creation of Rabbi Moses Schreiber, known as Chatam Sofer, Rabbi of Pressburg (Pozsony/Bratislava) from 1806 to 1839. Here he founded a famous yeshiva and in the subsequent decades almost all the well-known rabbis of the Hungarian Orthodox community studied under him. Chatam Sofer emerged as the leader of the Hungarian Orthodoxy not only because of his extraordinary knowledge of the Talmud, but because of his profound personal spirituality and his talent as a teacher. Faced with the religious reform movement that emerged from Germany with the activity of Moses Mendelssohn and expanded into the Habsburg Empire, Chatam Sofer made the following principle the basis for expounding Jewish law: “The Torah prohibits everything that is new”. As he put it in one of his sermons in 1810: “In generation after generation the Holy One, blessed be His name, gave the Sages the power to introduce new customs to the people of Israel. And since the Sages formulated these customs and rules motivated solely by the virtuous intention of creating a protective fence around the Laws, and they have indeed taken root, no one has the right to effect any change in them”.

The decades following the death of Chatam Sofer in 1839 brought about decisive changes in the life of Hungarian orthodoxy. Many Hungarian Jews took part, in both word and deed, in the 1848–1849 Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence, demonstrating that they identified with the Hungarian nation and the Hungarian language. And the Hungarian political elite, in its struggle for national independence and the creation

⁵ Cited from the Hungarian translation Ivan Olbracht: *Bajok a mikve körül* [Troubles around the *Mikveh*]. In *Átokvölgye* [Accursed Valley]. Budapest, Magyar Helikon, 1969.

of a modern liberal nation state, also made clear, through the laws enacted during the War of Independence, that it was ready to emancipate Hungary's Jewry. At the same time, however, even a progressive thinker like Lajos Kossuth, untainted by any hint of anti-Semitism, considered the reform of the Jewish religion a necessary precondition of the Jews' emancipation. A Jewish community came into being in Budapest that challenged the previous authority of Pressburg by introducing reforms to the liturgy that made concessions to modern aesthetic demands and the Hungarian language.

Under the Austrian absolutism that suppressed the War of Independence, the issue of emancipation was put on the back burner, but the Bach régime modernised and expanded public education and it became clear that in a modern state Jewish children could no longer be expected to attend only traditional religious schools, but had to participate in public education in the German or the Hungarian language. In 1851, the orthodox Jewish community of Frankfurt elected as its rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the most influential exponent of modern Jewish orthodoxy, whose influence soon spread throughout Germany and into the Habsburg Empire, too. One of his disciples, Azriel Hildesheimer, soon came to Hungary and, despite his youth, became highly influential in Hungarian orthodox circles, founding a modern yeshiva in Kismarton (today Eisenstadt in Austria), which proved very popular. Hirsch and Hildesheimer held neo-orthodox views: while they too opposed any changes in the *halacha* and the liturgical reforms introduced by the reformers, they differed from the majority of the Hungarian orthodox rabbis on two issues. One was that Hirsch promoted the use of the modern German literary language, rather than of Yiddish. Hirsch wrote and gave his sermons in literary German. The other issue was that, in Hirsch's view, the study of secular sciences was compatible with orthodoxy. The rabbis of Hungary were divided on these issues. On the question of the secular sciences, Chatam Sofer did not adopt an unequivocal stance. His son and successor in Pressburg, Ketav Sofer (1815–1871), together with other rabbis in Upper Hungary (most of whom had been, as mentioned, educated in the Pressburg yeshiva), could not condemn the use of German in the synagogue because the Jews of Pressburg, and the Jews in Upper Hungary in general, were becoming increasingly Germanised and could not understand sermons in Yiddish. Because these two issues a split arose between the Orthodox Jews of Upper Hungary and those of north-east Hungary (the so-called Unterland).

By the 1860s, it had become clear that Habsburg absolutism in Hungary would not be sustained for much longer and that the creation of a Hungarian national state was in the offing; a state would deal with Jewish affairs in such a way that the feudal system of the Jewish communities would be replaced by a unitary national confessional organisation under the aegis of the state. The Orthodox feared that in this organisation they would be in a position subordinate to the Neologs, those Magyar Jews who followed the so-called "conservative" tendency of German Jewry (founded by Zacharias Frankel) and were prepared to introduce elements of acculturation to the Magyar environment into Jewish education and liturgy.

It was at this time that two new leaders appeared on the Jewish scene: the rabbi of Szikszó, Hillel Lichtenstein (1814–1891), and his son-in-law, Akiva Yosef Schlesinger

(1838–1922). They both attacked their opponents with unrelenting religious rigour – not so much the Neologs, but rather Hildesheimer and modern orthodoxy, and even those Orthodox in Upper Hungary who were more moderate than they, not sparing even Ketav Sofer himself. Although they continually claimed to be appealing to the authority of Chatam Sofer, their orthodoxy surpassed his in its conservatism, since they held not only that the Jews had to insist – in addition to the Laws – on all of their historic customs and traditions, but also that they should preserve – especially under modern conditions, the conditions of Jewish emancipation – their national identity in a quite specific way. In Lichtenstein’s view Jewish identity had three hallmarks which had to be preserved: the person’s name (“shem”), the mother tongue (“lashon”), by which he meant Yiddish, and the garb (“malbish”). From these three words Lichtenstein, Schlesinger and their followers fashioned the acronym “shalem”, which in Hebrew means “complete”. To be a “complete” Jew one had to be “shalem”, that is – beyond the full observance of the Laws – have a Jewish (i.e. not Magyarised) name, use the Jewish language (Yiddish), and wear Jewish apparel. But because this definition of Jewishness could in no way be derived from the traditional sources of the *halakha*, the ultra-orthodox camp based their conception on a particular verse in the book of the prophet Jonah (Jonah I:9), and a midrash composed in the 10th century. In this verse the prophet identifies himself thus: “I am Hebrew and I fear the Lord”, which the ultra-orthodox interpreted as meaning that national identity is not the same as religious identity, that is to say, Jewish national identity is primary and for this very reason it is necessary to preserve even those features of it that are not prescribed in explicit terms. And according to the midrash Tanna Debe Eliyahu, the reasons Jews merited the Exodus and the Sinaitic revelation was by ensuring they preserved their national identity, customs and language even in the oppressive conditions of the Egyptian exile.

The tendency represented by Lichtenstein and Schlesinger soon gained ground in Transcarpathia. What is the explanation for this? On the one hand, the proportion of Jews in many cities and villages was extremely high: for example, in Munkács (Mukachevo, now Ukraine), they formed half the population, hence the imperative to assimilate and acculturate was considerably weaker than elsewhere. On the other hand, the majority of the non-Jewish population consisted of very poor, backward and uneducated people. Thus, there was no bourgeoisie, middle class, or (lower) nobility for any upwardly mobile Jews to assimilate into. The Jews did not feel any pressure to adjust in linguistic or other respects to those non-Jews that they encountered in the region: the motivating forces that elsewhere made assimilation/acculturation such an attractive option for Jews did not exist in this environment.

Lichtenstein and his camp attempted to impose their religious views on all of Hungarian Jewry by convening a general rabbinical conference – representing, in principle, all of Hungarian Orthodoxy – at Nagymihály (Michalovce, now Slovakia), where they made the “council” pass a halachic decision (*psak din*) concerning a whole range of issues that divided Neology from Orthodoxy. The Council of Nagymihály prohibited sermons being held in synagogues in any language other than Yiddish, changing any ancient custom of the community, moving the *bimah*, the platform for reading the Torah, from its

traditional place in the middle of the synagogue to in front of the Ark of the Torah scrolls, to even enter a synagogue that employed a choir, and so on, because these were seen as the adoption of Christian customs. There was one item, however, which Lichtenstein and Schlesinger failed to push through: a full ban on secular studies. Many Orthodox rabbis refused to sign the Nagymihály proclamation, expressing their reservations to Lichtenstein and his supporters, while Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer publicly opposed it.

Then, at the National Israelite Congress of 1867–1868, Orthodoxy and Neology finally parted ways. Hildesheimer tried to form a group of the “educated orthodox”, but remained isolated, and ultimately left the country. But the Council of Nagymihály’s religious perspective also failed to dominate in the emerging Hungarian Orthodox organisation which, after a long and painful struggle, secured independence from the Neologs, although the Council’s decrees remained points of reference in debates within Orthodoxy. In subsequent years, Hungarian Orthodoxy was divided between a “centrist” and an “ultra-orthodox” wing, and the heartland of the latter remained Transcarpathia. The not-so-extreme orthodox Jews in Dualist Hungary did not insist on the traditional dress-code, and although the language of the sermons remained almost invariably Yiddish, they issued Hungarian- and/or German-language publications, and always emphasised that they identified with the Hungarian homeland. As for education, although they viewed advanced studies with some suspicion, they did enrol their children in state-supervised confessional elementary schools and colleges, while the ultra-orthodox Jews sent their children to the traditional “cheder” (religious school), used the Magyar language at most when conversing with non-Jews, and insisted on wearing traditional Jewish garb.

Ultra-orthodoxy and Hasidism are not, in origin, identical concepts: for instance, Chatam Sofer explicitly opposed Hasidism, because – along with many other Orthodox rabbis and scholars – he suspected that the movement’s mysticism and its cult of charismatic leadership would come at the cost of the intensive study of the Talmud and the strict observance of the religious law. But after the Austro–Hungarian Ausgleich (Compromise) of 1867, the ultra-orthodox current recognised that the Hasids’ insistence on the traditional garb and their rejection of secular studies made them indispensable allies in the struggle against modernity.

On the one hand, while Hasidism initially articulated the rebellion of the poor and uneducated Jewish masses against the leading role of the rabbis and well-to-do elements in the Jewish communities, in the nineteenth century their relationship to the world of learning changed dramatically and the courts of the Hasid charismatic rabbis became, in fact, famous yeshivas, centres of Talmudic studies. The great Transcarpathian yeshivas also welcomed orthodox students from other parts of the country in large numbers. By the Dualist era, ultra-orthodoxy and Hasidism in Hungary had become more or less synonymous. Originally, the Hasids had poured into Hungary from Tsarist Russian Poland and Galicia, but by the middle of the nineteenth century independent Hasidic rabbi dynasties had become established in historic Hungary: the Weisses in Szaplónca (Spinka in Yiddish, now Săpânța, Romania), the Spiras in Munkács (now Mukachevo, Ukraine), the Teitelbaums in Sziget (now Sighetu Marmației, Romania). However, Hungary was

also home to followers of some great Hassidic rabbis abroad: the rabbis of Vizhnitz (now Vyzhnytsia, Ukraine) and Tsanz (now Nowy Sącz, Poland), for example.

Contrary to general belief, there was no large-scale Jewish immigration from Galicia into Dualist era Hungary. However, because the ultra-orthodox Jews of Galician origin in Transcarpathia multiplied rapidly and tended to migrate from the north-east of the country ever further into central Hungary, and especially towards Budapest, the myth arose that there was a mass immigration of Galician Jews, who were neither willing nor able to assimilate into the Hungarian nation. Curiously, this myth was also endorsed and transmitted by some liberal Jewish circles: this was a way that these liberal Jews could emphasise that Jews who had lived in Hungary for centuries had a Magyar identity and feelings and wanted to assimilate, and that it was only the Galician immigrants who were “alien” to the Hungarian nation.

The village people of Transcarpathia – Ruthenes and Hungarians – coexisted with the Jews in a more or less harmonious way. The Jews were the shopkeepers, the moneylenders, the innkeepers, acting as “all-purpose suppliers” to the peasantry. There were generally few anti-Semitic riots in the region, and in the parliamentary elections in many cases Jewish representatives were elected for the region.

From the point of view of the powers-that-be – which in the age of Dualism aspired to create an ethnically unified Hungarian national state, and regarded the most important means of this the expansion of education in the Hungarian language – the main problem with Transcarpathian Jewry was that they were neither willing nor able to establish confessional schools and run them in accordance with the educational norms of the Hungarian state, but instead sent their children to unregistered, one-room religious elementary schools, where the children were taught by a *melamed*, a teacher retained by the Jewish community but lacking any secular education. Jewish children were either not sent to public schools at all, or they attended them only in addition to going to religious schools, with deleterious effects on their education: large numbers of them could not even read Hungarian. Both the Hungarian nationalists and the Neolog Jewry demanded that the state take effective legal action against these unregistered orthodox schools, but the state enforcement of the educational laws was only half-hearted. (There were often surreptitious arrangements between the authorities and the Orthodox communities, whereby in return for tolerating the unregistered Orthodox schools, the rabbis would guarantee Jewish votes for the governing party.)

The only occasion there was serious conflict between the Magyar state and Transcarpathian Jewry was in 1896, when the state launched the so-called “mountain action” for the relief of the impoverished Ruthenes, who had been ruined by the *latifundia*. The project was headed by an agricultural engineer (whose father was Scottish), Ede Egán (1851–1901), who sought to alleviate the hardship of the population through state-financed credit unions and consumer cooperatives. The “mountain action” was in direct conflict with the interests of village Jews, who made their living from trade, the sale of alcohol and the provision of small amounts of credit to the villagers, and the tension was exacerbated by Egán’s extreme anti-Semitism, since he was convinced that the misery of the Transcarpathian people was caused by the immigrant Jews’ usurious practices

and illegal trade. But when Egán expounded his views in a public lecture in 1900, the liberal Széll Government removed him from his post. Shortly after this Egán died in suspicious circumstances and it was in his defence that Miklós Bartha wrote the book cited at the beginning of this paper.

Thus it may be said that, in general, despite some changes Transcarpathian Jewry preserved its traditional unitary identity until the Treaty of Trianon (1920). Although all the communities were Orthodox, there was also, in the cities, a cultured Jewish middle class, who no longer observed the *halacha*.

However, World War I, and the revolutions that followed, as well as the newly created Czechoslovak state that now administered the region, came as a profound shock to the Transcarpathian Jewish community. Only a few Jews wanted to adopt an entirely new “Czechoslovak” identity – but the traditional Jewish community had to confront a new challenge: that of Zionism. Before World War I, Zionism was a fairly insignificant force in Transcarpathia. However, during the war the British Government (in the Balfour Declaration), and then the League of Nations (in the San Remo Resolution) recognised, in principle, the aims of Zionism. The Wilsonian ideology of national self-determination pervaded the political life of the European countries after the war, with Jewish minority parties (both Zionist and anti-Zionist) coming into existence in Poland, Romania and Czechoslovakia, too. The Czechoslovak state, which owed its very existence to the ideology of national self-determination, provided especially fertile soil for the Zionist movement, as the Czech Government sought to sow division in Slovakia’s Magyar minority (which included many Jews who sincerely held Magyar national sentiments) by supporting the awakening Jewish national consciousness, the Zionist movement. The new situation, where a significant part of the Transcarpathian Jewish masses, who were very poor even before the war and were now even poorer and saw a way out of their desperate condition through emigration to Palestine, increased the attraction of Zionism for many Transcarpathian Jews. In the new state, the Transcarpathian Jews almost all declared their nationality as Jewish. Zionist intellectuals established Hebrew schools in the region, among which the Hebrew high school in Munkács was the most renowned. Although only about 4 to 5 per cent of Transcarpathian Jewish pupils attended these schools, their influence on the Jewish intellectual life was far greater than this might suggest. On the other hand, the ultra-orthodox Jews were incensed even by the mere use of Hebrew for everyday purposes, for they regarded Hebrew as a “sacred” language, and, to cap it all, most Zionists did not lead a devout life by Orthodox standards. Last but not least, most of the Orthodox rabbis and thinkers believed that the return of the Jews to the Holy Land would and should occur only through divine intervention, on the return of the Messiah: thus the Zionists, by hastening the redemption of Israel by political means, were defying the will of God. Although the Mizrahi movement, which sought to reconcile Zionism with orthodoxy, did gain a foothold in Transcarpathia, it failed to achieve much success: the conflict between Zionism and Orthodoxy proved to be irreconcilable.

Besides having Hebrew-language secondary schools, Transcarpathia enjoyed a lively Jewish public life and a multi-faceted, mostly Yiddish-language, Jewish press. In addition, the Czechoslovak state achieved important successes in expanding public education.

And Jewish youngsters went more willingly to Czech public schools than to the Ruthenian or Hungarian confessional ones, because the former also permitted the preservation of their religious-national identity.

Thus ultra-orthodoxy now had to face not the challenge of modernity in general, but the challenge of a specifically Jewish modernity: that of Zionism. Lázár Spira, the Munkács *rebbe* who enjoyed the greatest respect among the charismatic leaders of Transcarpathian Jewry, responded to the new developments by articulating a distinctive theology. The *rebbe* saw in World War I, and the new international order that followed, with all of its transformations, crises and conflicts, the sign of the immediate coming of the Messiah: he believed that these historical trends represented the “birth pangs” of the redemption of the world. In these circumstances, religious Jews therefore had but one duty: to prepare for the redemption by strictly observing *halakha* and by studying the Torah. They had to cut themselves off from politics, even from the politics of Orthodoxy. Spira thus condemned not only Zionism (threatening with excommunication – *herem* – parents who sent their children to the Hebrew high school in Munkács), but also the international anti-Zionist orthodox organisation, the Agudath Yisrael. Although Spira ruled the Munkács community with an iron fist, he was unable to extend his ideological influence to all the Orthodox of Transcarpathia, if only because of a rather distasteful conflict between him and the Belzer *rebbe*.

With the mass poverty brought about by the Great Depression, the revival of anti-Semitism, and the re-annexation of the region to Hungary, the Jews of Transcarpathia lost the rich possibilities of self-expression, self-organisation and identity formation that Czech democracy provided in the 1920s. In the re-annexed territories, the Hungarian state applied the (anti-)Jewish Laws more strictly than in the motherland, prohibiting all forms of Jewish social organisation, apart from the religious. Many Transcarpathian Jews were deported and killed in 1941 in the massacre at Kamianets-Podilskyi, and the entire Transcarpathian Jewish community perished in the Holocaust in 1944. The few who survived the death camps and returned to their homeland could not preserve their Jewish religion and identity under Soviet rule and most of them made Aliyah to Israel in the 1960s. Today there remain only a very few and very tiny Jewish communities in Transcarpathia. In its homeland, therefore, the history of Transcarpathian Jewry practically came to an end – though it survived elsewhere in the world, especially in the USA and Israel.

Joel Teitelbaum (1887–1979), who came from a Hasidic rabbinic dynasty in the town of Máramarosziget (Sighetu Marmăției), founded the sect of the Satmar Hasids, who today represent the most powerful current of *haredi* Judaism, rejecting both Israel and Zionism. The *rebbe*, who survived the Holocaust, elaborated in his book *Vayoel Moshe* an anti-Zionist theology. According to his conception Zionism – the establishment of a secular state in the Holy Land – is an open and collective revolt against God and His Torah, and plays a role in history similar to the Christian concept of the Antichrist: the cumulation of evil at the end of history. And according to the *rebbe* the Holocaust, too, was God’s punishment for Zionism. The Satmar Hasidim and the survivors of several other Orthodox communities of Transcarpathia established flourishing communities in

America and Israel. In these communities the importance of the yeshivas and Talmudic studies is more marked than it was in earlier times: sociologists describe the *haredi* community of Israel as a “society of Talmudic scholars”. The *haredi* camp – reproducing at a rapid pace, refusing to recognise the State and military service, and devoting itself almost exclusively to study – is causing more and more problems for Israel, its integration being an important topic of public debate in Israeli society. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that, with its distinctive approach to religion, the Jews of Transcarpathia have contributed significantly to the evolution of the current complexion of Israel and of world Jewry.

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