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Hungarian–Jewish Organisations in Palestine–Israel (1918–1960)

The Hungarian-speaking Jews who emigrated to Palestine and later to Israel soon recognised that they could best represent their interests, resolve problems arising in their new environment, as well as maintain relationships and preserve shared memories, by establishing organisations based on their shared language and origins. The idea of returning to the Holy Land has always formed part of the Jewish religion and identity. Jews from Hungary visited Palestine, then ruled by the Ottoman Empire, from the seventeenth century onwards.⁹⁹ Chatam Sofer (1762–1839), the leader of Jewish Orthodoxy, favoured the return to the Holy Land as an antidote to assimilation, while others, such as Rabbi Akiva Yosef Schlesinger (1838–1922) was an even more ardent advocate of this view and left Hungary in the hope of settling in Eretz.¹⁰⁰

The first such organisation in the Holy Land was established by the disciples of Chatam Sofer. The aid agency Kolel Ungarn Monarchia regarded as its main mission ensuring the survival of those who wished to live out their lives in Jerusalem. Since the increasing numbers of immigrants in the 1870s and 1880s made housing provision uncertain, the association built a new settlement of ten residential houses outside the old town, on the initiative of Chaim Sonnenfeld.¹⁰¹ The Batei Hungarin (Hungarian Houses) were rented out free of charge for a one-year period to immigrants from the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy.¹⁰²

The end of the First World War saw the start of a more organised wave of emigration from Hungary and the adjacent territories with Hungarian speakers, which utilised the resources of the Zionist movement. Alongside the kibbutz founders, qualified engineers,

⁹⁹ David Giladi: A magyarországi zsidók és Erec Izrael [The Hungarian Jews and Eretz Yisrael]. In Anna Szalai (ed.): *Hágár országa: A magyarországi zsidóság – történelem, közösség, kultúra* [The Land of Hagar: The Jews of Hungary – History, Community, Culture]. Budapest, Antall József Alapítvány, 2009. 128.

¹⁰⁰ Walter Pietsch: *Reform és ortodoxia – A magyar zsidóság belépése a modern világba* [Reform and Orthodoxy. Hungarian Jewry in the Modern World]. Budapest, Múlt és Jövő Alapítvány, 1999. 89–98.

¹⁰¹ Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld (1848–1932). Born into a rabbinical family in Verbó, Hungary [now Vrbové, Slovakia], he studied at Bratislava's Yeshiva and became a rabbi. In 1873 he moved to Jerusalem where he became one of the leaders of the Orthodox Jewish community.

¹⁰² Pietsch (1999): op. cit. 77–78; Viktória Bányai: Magyar ajkú zsidó közösségek a világban [Hungarian-speaking Jews in the World]. In Nándor Bárdi – Csilla Fedinec – László Szarka (eds.): *Kisebbségi magyar közösségek a 20. században* [Minority Hungarian Communities in the Twentieth Century]. Budapest, Gondolat – MTA Kisebbségkutató Intézet, 2008. 412–417.

doctors and scientists made their way to Palestine.¹⁰³ The third wave of Aliyah¹⁰⁴ in 1919, followed by the fourth and the fifth in 1924, significantly increased the number of Palestinian Jewry, known as the Yishuv. And as a consequence of restrictions on immigration by the British authorities, 1933 saw the beginning of a new era: that of illegal Aliyah.¹⁰⁵ Immigration resulted in a string of social problems. Under the Mandate, the immigrant groups were at odds with each other and thus hindered the formation of a unified Jewish society. After the creation of Israel, the transit camps for new immigrants added a layer of social despondency to the ongoing social conflicts.¹⁰⁶ The social system of the Yishuv was structured along the lines of the immigrant groups. From the beginning of Palestinian in-migration, it was standard practice to exclude the latest wave of immigrants from the social and political institutions established by the preceding wave.¹⁰⁷

The immigrants integrated rapidly into the basic political and cultural structures of the Yishuv (and later of the country). The majority embraced the basic symbols and tenets of Israeli society: the existence of the Jewish–Israeli nation and loyalty to the country, accepting the security considerations that this entailed. Nevertheless, to some degree, the “ethnic identity” of the individual groups according to their places of origin was also preserved.¹⁰⁸ Accordingly, the integration of the immigrants and their position in the social and economic life of Israel was determined by their country of origin and their social network.¹⁰⁹ Socio-cultural groups were also distinct at the organisational level. The Landsmannschaft principle brought together Jewish immigrants from the same region or country, in order to provide a social structure and a measure of political capital and of community support to their members.¹¹⁰

The most striking feature of the immigrant groups was their linguistic distinctness. Like other immigrant groups, the Hungarian Jewish newcomers established numerous organisations, institutions and enterprises undergirded by the Hungarian language. For them their Hungarian mother tongue was not just an important element of their identity, but often also their only means of communicating, obtaining information, and enjoying

¹⁰³ David Giladi: *Pesti mérnökök – Izrael országépítői* [Engineers from Pest – Builders of Israel]. Budapest, Ex Libris – Múlt és Jövő, 1992. 9–16.

¹⁰⁴ Jewish immigration to Palestine and Israel.

¹⁰⁵ Anita Shapira: *Israel. A history*. Waltham, MA, Brandeis University Press, 2012. 106–107.

¹⁰⁶ Dvora Hacoen: *Immigrants in Turmoil: Mass Immigration to Israel and Its Repercussions in the 1950s and After*. Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press, 2003. 190–210, 230.

¹⁰⁷ See further Levente Olosz: A magyar ajkú zsidóság helye az izraeli társadalomban [The Situation of Hungarian-speaking Jews in Israeli Society]. In Csilla Fedinec (ed.): *Terek, intézmények, átmenetek. Határhelyzetek (VIII)* [Areas, Institutions, Transitions. Border Positions (VIII)]. Budapest, Balassi Intézet, 2015. 142.

¹⁰⁸ Shmuel Eisenstadt: *The Transformation of Israeli Society: An Essay in Interpretation*. London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985. 307, 319.

¹⁰⁹ Hacoen (2003): op. cit. 255.

¹¹⁰ Eisenstadt (1985): op. cit. 319.

entertainment – all the more so as the Hebrew-language skills of the immigrants arriving from Hungarian language areas lagged behind those of other immigrant groups.¹¹¹

Two recent works have analysed the nature of Hungarian language maintenance in Israel. The literary historian Anna Szalai has written about the Hungarian theatrical productions of Béla Pásztor in Israel,¹¹² while Tímea Jablonczay has described the transition from the Hungarian cultural environment to the Israeli one through the life and work of a poet from Upper Hungary, or the Felvidék, (now the Slovak Republic) Erzsi Szenes.¹¹³ This paper focuses on the social organisations, institutions and groups torn between integration and Hungarian Jewish culture in the period from 1918 to 1960. This was when the number of Hungarian-speaking Jews in Israel was at its greatest and thus also the time when the influence of their organisations on the life of the community was at its most powerful.

Organization on the territory of the Mandate

The Kolem Ungarn Monarchia, created in the mid-nineteenth century, later became areally fragmented. During his 1909 visit to the Holy Land, Rabbi József Grünbaum already encountered kolels (communities) from Transylvania, Máramaros/Maramureş (now Romania) and Munkács/Mukachevo (now Ukraine) that had split off from the Hungarian community that came from Hungary proper. He considered that the reasons for this were the large numbers coming from outside Hungary proper, on the one hand and, on the other, the increased funding that the enlarged kolel could thus solicit. Transylvanian Jews established their own residential houses and houses of prayer along the lines of the “mainland” Hungarian ones.¹¹⁴

One group of young engineers committed to the Jewish national idea left Hungary in 1920. They continued their careers in Palestine while also serving Jewish national interests. This group led by Jenő Brünn was organised under the name Chagomlim.¹¹⁵ They lived in Jerusalem in a commune, sharing home, kitchen and income, thus trying to make their tough life in Palestine somewhat easier.¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, in Tel Aviv, the

¹¹¹ Olosz (2015): op. cit. 156.

¹¹² Anna Szalai: Volt egyszer egy magyar színház. Mozaikok Pásztor Béla izraeli magyar nyelvű társulatáról 1953–1957 [Once there was a Hungarian theatre. Fragments of a mosaic from Béla Pásztor’s Israeli Hungarian-language company, 1953–1957]. *Regio*, 25. (2017), 4. 192–226.

¹¹³ Tímea Jablonczay: „Csak szabadságban érdemes élni.” Az izraeli újrakezdés Szenes Erzsi írásaiban [“Only in freedom is life worth living.” Starting over in Israel in the writings of Erzsi Szenes]. *Múlt és Jövő*, (2018), 2–3. 151–166.

¹¹⁴ Giladi (1992): op. cit. 70; József Grünbaum: *A föld, mely mindenki előtt szent. Egy szentföldi társasutazás naplója* [The Land that Is Sacred to All. The Diary of a Visit to the Holy Land]. Dicsőszentmárton (now Târnăveni, Romania), Private edition, 1910. 37, 51–53.

¹¹⁵ Return, repay. It refers to charitable organisations.

¹¹⁶ Giladi (1992): op. cit. 55.

house of Jenő Vadas and his wife Lea Wertheimer became the centre of the Hungarian Yishuv. Here the new *olés* (Jewish immigrants to Israel) found help, advice and lodging. Those staying here included Avigdor Hameiri and József Patai. The organisation of the Halutz from the Danube Basin (in Hebrew: Agudat Halutze Duna) was composed of the immigrants clustered around the Vadases, husband and wife, in 1923 (or even earlier, according to some sources). The Hungarian Jewish immigrants from Tel Aviv did not want to include the designation ‘Hungarian’ in the name of their association, as they had become estranged from Hungary during the White Terror. The organisation had 20 to 30 members and was headed by its president Jenő Vadas, vice-president Zsigmond Salpéter and secretary Julius Salpéter.¹¹⁷

The Organization of Hungarian Immigrants (Hitachdut Ole Hungaria – HOH) grew out of the Danube Association and continued to dominate Hungarian Jewish organisational life in Eretz Yisrael. Only oral records of its founding survive. The immigrant organisation of the ‘Hungarians’ – at the time probably not yet called Hitachdut Ole Hungaria – was founded during Sukkot of 1927 by Dávid Barsi,¹¹⁸ Árpád Gut,¹¹⁹ Chaim Weiszburg¹²⁰ and Moshe Krémer, on the terrace of Tel Aviv’s beachside casino. The Hungarian association’s members met regularly and helped and supported each other.¹²¹

According to the articles of the association of the Hitachdut Ole Hungaria, it was officially registered by the Jerusalem administration on May 1932. This also marks the date it officially started to function and was no longer just a small-scale meeting place for friends. In 1932, its leadership consisted of Josef Tikvah (president), Jitsak Bilitzer (secretary), and Simha-Bunem Katzburg (treasurer). According to the articles of the association, its main goals were twofold: on the one hand, to offer advice on legal and real estate purchasing matters and, on the other, to strengthen the bonds within Hungarian Jewry and assist Aliyah.¹²² At this time there were just a few thousand Hungarian-speaking Jews living in Eretz Yisrael. Since there were few new immigrants, issues of housing and employment were not a priority for the association, which was involved, rather,

¹¹⁷ Ávrám Fuchs: Az első héber város magyarjai [The first Hebrew city’s Hungarians]. *Új Kelet*, 27 June 1969.

¹¹⁸ Dávid Barsi (1877–1954), paediatrician, made Aliyah in 1920. He set up the first kindergarten in Palestine.

¹¹⁹ Árpád Gut (Kéthely, 1877 – Tel-Aviv, 1948). An engineer, he moved to Palestine in 1921, where he took part in the construction of Tel Aviv’s Galé Aviv casino.

¹²⁰ Chaim Weiszburg (Diósfalu [now Orechové, Slovakia], 1892 – Israel, 1959). A lawyer and Zionist leader, he studied law in Budapest, where he joined the Makkabea, the Jewish Students’ Association. Returning from Russian captivity in 1918, he settled in Transylvania and participated in the establishment of the Transylvanian Zionist institutional network. In 1925 he emigrated to Israel.

¹²¹ Sándor Rosenfeld: A Hitachdut Oléj Hungária születési bizonyítványa [The birth certificate of the Hitachdut Ole Hungaria]. *Új Kelet*, 14 November 1952. 4; Dan Ofry: *A húszéves Izráel* [Israel at Twenty]. Tel Aviv, 1969. 318.

¹²² *Tahanot Hitachdut Ole Hungariah be-Eretz Yisrael* [HOH’s founding charter], Jerusalem: Grindeld, 1932. The original is in the National Library of Israel, while a copy is in the author’s possession.

in strengthening community bonds and in the provision of entertainment. Hungarian-speaking Jews were fond of visiting the association's spacious clubroom in Tel Aviv. The Hungarian Club hosted lectures and talks, balls and discussions for its members, who also often came here for informal conversation and to take advantage of the dining facilities. A typical recollection of Sándor Sauber, the president of the HOH elected in the mid-1930s, is of the association's traditional annual dance held by the association, which on one occasion made a net profit of £400.

The income from the ball occasioned a lot of head-scratching among the leadership of the organization, because they did not know what to do with the money. They needed no aid, the idea of shikun lending was unknown and few were privy to the address of the Sochnut. That was how, on the suggestion of a board member, we began to hold Saturday house-parties in one of the clubrooms, financed by the HOH. The costs were met out of the association's resources and every member had the right to invite a guest.¹²³

In line with the concept of the Landsmannschaft,¹²⁴ groups of olés arriving from various regions and cities of Hungary created their own, separate associations. For example, in 1931 a lawyer and prominent committed Zionist from Maramureş County, Illés Blank, set up the organisation Hitachdut Ole Máramaros.¹²⁵

The era of the illegal Aliyah

The number of Hungarian immigrants to Palestine significantly increased as a consequence of Hungary's anti-Jewish legislation and the rise of general anti-Semitic sentiment in the population. At the same time, the British authorities were limiting the number of immigrants, forcing the Jewish organisations from Palestine into illegal Aliyah. At the end of the 1930s, the HOH opened offices in both Jerusalem and Haifa. Their declared aim was to promote and reinforce the economic, spiritual and social integration of their members into the Yishuv.¹²⁶

The offices of the HOH addressed the most urgent needs of the illegal immigrants (Maapil). They secured overnight accommodation, distributed hot food and clothing, provided counselling, job placement, free medical and legal advice, and held Hebrew

¹²³ Sándor Sauber: Tizennyolc évvel ezelőtt... [Eighteen years ago...]. *Új Kelet*, 21 November 1952. 6.

¹²⁴ Landsmannschaften evolved in the United States as immigrant benevolent associations. They were formed and named after the members' place of birth or (East European country of) residence, and offered mutual aid, as well as housing and social assistance. See Daniel Soyfer: *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880–1939*. Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2001. 46–47.

¹²⁵ Eli Eshed haya gibor. 120 shana lehuledet doctor Eliaha Blanc [He was a hero. The 120th anniversary of Eliya Blank's birth].

¹²⁶ *Hitachdut Ole Hungaria Értésítő* [Hitachdut Ole Hungaria Bulletin]. Jerusalem, November 1941. 1–4.

language courses. Their bank was prepared to offer them small starter loans, of £5–£10.¹²⁷ With the help of the loan, the members of the first substantial illegal Hungarian Jewish Aliyah group were able to set up small industrial enterprises and workshops.¹²⁸ The Tel Aviv HOH established an industrial department where immigrants could retrain for factory work.¹²⁹ By way of illustration, between 1939 and 1941, the Jerusalem HOH provided support for 700 olés from Hungarian-speaking areas.

In 1943, after several months of negotiations, a central organisation was established on the basis of the collaboration between the three local HOHs, with Dr Viktor Jordán elected as its president. It was hoped that the unified organisation would carry more weight with the Yishuv's institutions. Like the local organisations, the central office also faced serious financial difficulties, and since it could not guarantee continuous funding, it was soon abolished. The local organisations continued their work in three cities: Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa.¹³⁰

During the war, the illegal immigrants caught by the British authorities were sent to camps, mostly in Cyprus. HOH launched a fund for the Hungarian residents of these camps and so managed to send them clothing, books and food.¹³¹ Temporary accommodation for olés fleeing from the European pogroms, who arrived penniless in Palestine, continued to be a problem in the long term. Many olés found accommodation in shelters or parks, the more fortunate got to spend the night in refuges or in vans. The Tel Aviv HOH's initiative to eliminate such unfortunate conditions raised both public and official awareness of the problem. On the day that Bnei Brak mental hospital's residents were relocated, officials of the organisation, accompanied by several dozen olés, took possession of the institution's three buildings. Invited representatives of the press reported the event in detail, and public opinion was favourably disposed to what they called the 'plisha' (invasion) of Bnei Brak.¹³²

For similar reasons the Jerusalem organisation established a *bet olim* (temporary accommodation). This hostel, named after Hanna Szenes, was inaugurated in 1945 in one of the main buildings on Jerusalem's David Street. However, "its vast dormitories and organization, reminiscent of the concentration camps", did not make a positive impression on the residents, so the shelter was moved at the end of 1947 into a newbuild ten-room house in the Nahlat Ahim neighbourhood.¹³³

¹²⁷ *Hitachdut Ole Hungaria Értésítő* [Hitachdut Ole Hungaria Bulletin]. Tel Aviv, 25 June 1941. 6.

¹²⁸ István Barzilay: "A HOH és a máápillhajók [The HOH and the Maapil ships]. *Új Kelet*, 14 November 1952. 5.

¹²⁹ *Hitachdut Ole Hungaria Értésítő* [Hitachdut Ole Hungaria Bulletin]. Tel Aviv, 1 September 1941. 1–2.

¹³⁰ *The HOH National Center's Bulletin*. Jerusalem, October 1943. 1–3.

¹³¹ *Hitachdut Ole Hungaria Bulletin*, 1947. The Memorial Museum of Hungarian-Speaking Jewry (hereafter: Museum), C9312; Barzilay (1952): op. cit.

¹³² Sándor Fodor: A bné-bráki plisa [Plisha (invasion) of Bnei Brak]. *Új Kelet*, 14 November 1952. 4.

¹³³ *Hitachdut Ole Hungaria Bulletin*. Jerusalem, 26 January 1948. 6.

Shortage of housing later became a pressing problem. The Tel Aviv HOH founded a shikun (housing project) construction company to build one- and two-room apartments in Giv'at Shmuel and in Nahlat Yitzhak, where the leaders of the Hungarian Yishuv lived alongside several immigrant families. The members of the Association were able to buy the apartments at a discount.¹³⁴ Additionally, in collaboration with Jewish national institutions, the Hungarian association helped dozens of Hungarian Jewish immigrant families to find homes.¹³⁵

However, such successes were overshadowed by the problems arising from the structure of organisational life. The number of HOH members fell below expectations. Its three groups (known as *sniffs*) numbered a total of only 1,000 members in 1943. Since the vast majority of its revenue came from (irregularly) paid membership fees, they were constantly short of money.¹³⁶ Even in 1948, the leadership of the Jerusalem organisation complained that proceeds from monthly membership fees did not exceed £20.¹³⁷ Except for a core of a couple of dozen, the members – and the Hungarian Yishuv in general – were indifferent to the organisation and the causes it represented. Even such straightforward requests as the compilation of a general register of members fell on deaf ears.¹³⁸

Many Jews in Palestine did not have a favourable view of groupings based on origins and cultural characteristics. Sceptical and critical voices were raised even within the Hungarian-speaking community. Lajos Löbl, the executive head of the Tel Aviv HOH, tried to convince members of the community of how necessary the organisation remained in 1941. He argued that “for the time being an organization is still needed to connect people who come from the same circles and language areas and grew up with the same mentality, with those who share their language, their problems and their greatest concerns, who know how to talk to them and are able to guide their first steps”.¹³⁹

The formation of the State of Israel and the new challenges

After the war, the increase in immigration resulted in more and more work for the organisations. By 1947, there were some 30,000 Hungarian-speaking Jews living in Palestine and their numbers tripled by 1949.¹⁴⁰ The larger settlements saw the establishment of further local groups. Such organisations were founded in 1946 in Netanya and in Rehovot and, in Petah Tikva, in 1949. By 1950, there were already ten active local HOH groups. After the proclamation of the State of Israel, immigration was no longer restricted, but housing and employment conditions and supplies could not keep pace with the

¹³⁴ Barzilay (1952): op. cit.; *Hitachdut Ole Hungaria Bulletin*, 1947. Museum C9312.

¹³⁵ *Hitachdut Ole Hungaria Bulletin*, March 1946. Museum C931.

¹³⁶ *The HOH National Center's Bulletin*. Jerusalem, October 1943. 1–3.

¹³⁷ *Hitachdut Ole Hungaria Értésítő* [*Hitachdut Ole Hungaria Bulletin*], 26 January 1948. 7.

¹³⁸ *The HOH National Center's Bulletin*, December 1946. 2–4.

¹³⁹ *Hitachdut Ole Hungaria Értésítő* [*Hitachdut Ole Hungaria Bulletin*]. Tel Aviv, 25 June 25. 5.

¹⁴⁰ Olosz (2015): op. cit. 147.

growth in population. Housing shortages and rationing were typical in this period. Many were obliged to change their career in order to earn a living.¹⁴¹ The local organisations of the HOH were no longer able to handle the continuing problems of housing and job placement. The plan of establishing a central organisation to construct housing and to set up a central loan bank was once again on the agenda.

A conference was convened in May 1950. The most important point on its agenda was whether the integration of the immigrants and the issue of discrimination, brought up by several delegates, should be solved on a political or on an organisational basis. Some would have liked to safeguard the interests of Hungarian-speaking Jews by turning the organisation into a political party. A good precedent appeared to be the German Jewish immigrants' organisation, which had turned itself into a political party in the 1930s. Others would have preferred a unified organisation capable of acting in the interests of the community while keeping its distance from the political arena. In the end, it was the arguments of the latter group that won the day, and the HOH did not reorganise as a political party.¹⁴² The two specific plans outlined at the conference were aimed at establishing a construction company and a central loan bank. Of these, it was only the latter that came to be realised. The bank provided small loans, primarily for business purposes. Later, in 1957, a similar fund known as the CHOMA was established to aid families. The bank's ten-year balance sheet showed that it had offered loans of between 400 and 700 shekels to 900 olé families.¹⁴³

The Office of the National HOH Centre was located in Tel Aviv, with Ernő Marton elected as its first president. In the towns, both large and small, there were local *sniffs* linked to the Centre. By 1960, there were 14 fully active and 4 temporary sniffs. It is no accident that the Centre was located in Tel Aviv, as this city was home to the greatest number of Hungarian-speaking Jews, and therefore equally unsurprising that Tel Aviv had an effervescent Hungarian cultural and organisational life. It was here that people were learning Hebrew in greatest numbers: in 1954, there were 3,000 attending language courses.¹⁴⁴ In 1953, the Hungarian Yishuv gathered in Tel Aviv's Great Synagogue in order to remember those of their fellows murdered in the Holocaust.¹⁴⁵ The social life of the HOHs from Haifa, Jerusalem and Netanya was also very lively. Haifa's HOH was known especially for its garden parties,¹⁴⁶ while the Jerusalem branch had a reputation

¹⁴¹ Szalai (2017): op. cit. 197.

¹⁴² For details of the debate see Olosz (2015): op. cit. 151–155.

¹⁴³ Ofry (1969): op. cit. 319.

¹⁴⁴ HOH közlemények [Hitachdut Ole Hungaria announcements]. *Új Kelet*, 8 December 1954. 3.

¹⁴⁵ Harminc elpusztult hitközség menórája lobogott hanukakor a tel-avivi nagytemplomban [Thirty menorahs of destroyed Jewish communities were blazing during Hanukkah in Tel Aviv's Great Synagogue]. *Izraeli Képeslap*, 17 December 1953. 5–6.

¹⁴⁶ Haifa nagy eseménye: a HOH nyári kertmulatsága [Haifa's big event: HOH's summer garden party]. *Izraeli Képeslap*, 3 June 1954. 3.

for its cultural events.¹⁴⁷ The HOH in Netanya, among many other initiatives, recruited from the ranks of the membership its own amateur theatre troupe, which gave regular public performances.¹⁴⁸

Outside the major cities, however, HOH encountered serious logistic, technical and financial challenges. For example, in the Negev, due to the great distances, the organisation of public lectures and entertainment for the Hungarian-speaking settlers posed severe difficulties. One solution was to send sound recordings of the cultural events on tape to all the Negev municipalities.¹⁴⁹

The HOH regarded as one of its basic duties the support of the Aliyah of Hungarian Jews. It therefore petitioned the Hungarian Government, demanding unrestricted Aliyah for Hungarian Jewry. The document had tens of thousands of signatures.¹⁵⁰ The HOH also represented the interests of the Hungarian-speaking community *vis-à-vis* the Israeli Government. In 1960, it successfully campaigned against the axing of Israeli Radio's Hungarian-language broadcast, keeping on air a thrice-weekly, 10-minute broadcast.¹⁵¹

However, the Hitachdut Ole Hungaria was not successful in uniting the divided Hungarian-speaking community of Israel. Its divisions stemmed from political, religious and, especially, geographical differences. The success of the Transylvanian interwar Zionist movement carried over to Israel, hence the HOH's leadership was concentrated in the hands of Transylvanian Jewry. Consequently, a substantial part of the Hungarian Yishuv did not identify with the organisation, sometimes even mocking it behind closed doors as "Hitachdut Ole Transylvania".¹⁵² This led to the burgeoning of organisations representing their respective home communities on the basis of their own ideological or political beliefs. In 1961, there were 16 active organisations¹⁵³ wholly or partly involving Israel's Hungarian Jewry.¹⁵⁴

Bnei Herzl was established in 1952, on the initiative of the immigrants from post-Trianon Hungary. This organisation assisted with the psychological, cultural and economic

¹⁴⁷ Óriási siker jegyében folyt le a jeruzsálemi HOH élőújságja [Huge success for the HOH's living newspaper]. *Új Kelet*, 5 July 1960. 7.

¹⁴⁸ HOH közlemények [Hitachdut Ole Hungaria's announcements]. *Új Kelet*, 30 October 1952. 2.

¹⁴⁹ Közműhelyt rendez be Tel-Avivban a HOH [The HOH in Tel Aviv sets up a workshop]. *Új Kelet*, 3 October 1954. 2.

¹⁵⁰ Teljes sikerrel zárult le a magyar alijáért indított petíció [The petition for the Hungarian aliyah was a total triumph]. *Új Kelet*, 21 November 1952. 1; Ernő Marton: Harcban a magyar zsidóság alija jogáért [Fighting for the right of the Hungarian Jews' aliyah]. *Új Kelet*, 5 December 1952. 3.

¹⁵¹ Szerkesztői üzenet [Editorial statement]. *Izraeli figyelő*, September 1965. 6.

¹⁵² A HOH országos konferenciája [Report. The HOH's national conference]. Magyar Országos Levéltár (MOL), [National Archives of Hungary] Izrael KÜM XIX-J-1-k, 10 d 20/d i. 05427 d.

¹⁵³ These were: Brit Rishonim, Aviv Barissa, Chug Kadima, Israeli Branch of UHJA, Bnei Herzl, Makkabea College Students' Association, Senior Workers' Association, Chug Yotse Hungaria Hamizrachi, Bnei Brith Nordau Lodge, Kadima, Hitachdut Ole Merkaz Europa, Igud Yotse Karpatorus, Irgun Ole Máramarossziget, Tsur-Salom, Chug Chatam Sofer, Hitachdut Ole Hungaria.

¹⁵⁴ *A Magyar Zsidók Világszövetségének II. kongresszusának jegyzőkönyve* [Protocol of the World Federation of Hungarian Jews' Second Congress]. Tel Aviv, 15–16 April 1961. 3.

integration of olés. It was characterised by a focus on charitable works, mutual respect and an apolitical stance. It held a memorial evening each year on the day of Herzl's death. The Herzl Prize, established in 1966, was awarded to two people for outstanding achievements in the Zionist movement and journalism.¹⁵⁵ The organisation of the religious Hungarian-speaking Jews, Chug Yotse Hungaria Hamizrachi, aided the integration of the olés and carried out cultural and social activities, providing immigrants with cultural events, a loan bank, Hebrew language courses and instruction in the Talmud.¹⁵⁶ Similarly, the organisation of the immigrants from Sighetu Marmătiei, Hitachdut Ole Máramarosziget, focused on social work, providing support for the Hasidic families from this region.¹⁵⁷

The distribution of the charitable donations collected by the Hungarian Jews of America (UHJA) also proved divisive. This organisation set up an Israeli section in 1954 under the leadership of Gyula (Julius) Salpéter, in order to assist with the professional integration of the older generation and their professional retraining. To this end, a retraining centre and retirement home was established in Ramat Gan.¹⁵⁸ Leaders of the HOH criticised the organisation because the Israeli member organisation did not share any of the financial aid collected for Israelis in the United States, so its projects repeatedly failed.¹⁵⁹

In the 1950s, increasing numbers of “Hungarian” clubs were established in Israel in order to promote social and cultural activities, including the national circle of Jewish immigrants from Hungarian-language territories, the cultural club of Hungarian-speaking Jews in Safed, and the Golden Club. Club members held regular meetings and took part in a wide range of events and public readings. Organisations with specific objectives were also established: for example, the Israeli Association of Former Nazi Forced Labourers, whose membership of 8,000 sought compensation from the German government.¹⁶⁰ The Hungarian section of the international Jewish women's group known as the Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO) was established in the mid-1960s. It organised high-quality cultural events and seminars with great success for many years.

In order to secure the votes of the Hungarian-speaking olés, the Israeli political parties established Hungarian membership groups to attract potential voters through use of their mother tongue at their events and often through their own publications.¹⁶¹ The best known of these was the Hungarian section of the Clal-Zionist Union, Chug Kadima. These party

¹⁵⁵ Ofry (1969): op. cit. 337–340.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. 343–344.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. 346.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. 341–342; Letették az UHJA ramat-gani otthonának alapkövét [UHJA retirement home's foundation stone laid in Ramat Gan]. *Új Kelet*, 9 May 1956. 2.

¹⁵⁹ Sándor Sauber: Számoljon el az UHJA [UHJA: accounts needed]. *Izraeli figyelő*, November 1960. 1–2.

¹⁶⁰ Feljegyzés az Izraelben élő magyar származásúakról [Report: A note on Israeli citizens of Hungarian origin], 23 September 1953. MOL, Izrael KÜM XIX-J-1-k, 10. b. 20/b i. 08243 d; Szafadi levél [Letter from Safed], 21 September 1953. MOL, Izrael KÜM XIX-J-1-k, 10 d 20/b i. 096/2 d.

¹⁶¹ Új magyar nyelvű hetilapok a választások alatt [New Hungarian-language weeklies during the elections]. *Izraeli Képeslap*, 17 February 1955. 6.

organisations and their publications typically functioned only during election periods and finally disappeared by the end of the 1960s.

The World Federation of Hungarian Jews

The World Federation of Hungarian Jews was established out of a desire to ensure that the flow of funding remained uninterrupted and to create a body that could represent and advocate for their interests more powerfully. Ernő Marton, the Israeli president of the HOH and Ignác Schultz,¹⁶² one of the leaders of Hungarian Jewish community in the United States, helped establish it in 1952. This umbrella organisation provided an institutional framework for Hungarian-speaking Jews worldwide. Somewhat optimistically, the founders calculated that there were 600,000 Hungarian-speaking Jews in the world.¹⁶³ Initially, member organisations were established in as many as 21 countries, but they survived only in the larger Hungarian Jewish centres. Naturally, the role of the World Federation's Israeli section was fulfilled by the HOH.¹⁶⁴ Like other members' groups, it enjoyed full autonomy. The objective of the World Federation was not to divide, but to lead Hungarian Jewry back into the universal Jewish community. However, as they pointed out, this task required that problems specific to Hungarian Jews be dealt with first.¹⁶⁵

This unification of the widely scattered Hungarian Jews served, above all, the interests of Israel and its Hungarian-speaking Jewry.¹⁶⁶ The World Federation offered, in the first place, financial assistance to its Israeli member organisations. The more ambitious projects were carried out by the HOH, with funding provided by the Americans. The membership fees of the Israeli organisation covered only its own operating costs.¹⁶⁷ The Federation provided sewing machines for the industrial workshop established in Tel

¹⁶² Ignác Schultz (Galánta [now Galanta, Slovakia], 1894 – USA, 1954). A politician, writer and poet, he was an outstanding representative of Hungarian activism in interwar Czechoslovakia. He emigrated to the United States in 1938.

¹⁶³ A Magyarzármaszű Zsidók Világszövetségének ünnepélyes megalakulása [Celebrating the foundation of the World Federation of Hungarian Jews]. *Hatikva*, January 25, 1952. 4–5; Miklós Nánási: Visszapillantás és előre nézés [A backward glance and a look ahead]. *Izraeli Figyelő*, 2. (1961), 2. 3.

¹⁶⁴ A haifai konferencia általános vitája [The general debate at the Haifa conference]. *Új Kelet*, 5 December 1952. 5.

¹⁶⁵ Frigyes Görög: Előszó a konferenciához [Foreword to the conference]. *Izraeli Figyelő*, 2. (1961), 2. 1.

¹⁶⁶ *A Magyar Zsidók Világszövetségének II. kongresszusának jegyzőkönyve* (1961): op. cit. 4.

¹⁶⁷ Ben Hagai: Ki fedezze a HOH központjának költségvetését? [Who should cover the budget of the HOH's headquarters?]. *Új Kelet*, 19 June 1953. 6.

Aviv¹⁶⁸ and sent parcels of clothing and welfare boxes to the needy.¹⁶⁹ Its advocacy objectives and the integration of the olés into the social, economic and political life of Israel were aided by the World Federation's nationwide Social Centres. Construction of the centre named after the organisation's first director, Ignác Schultz, began in Tel Aviv in 1954.¹⁷⁰ Similar buildings were erected later in Haifa, Netanya, Rehovot, Be'er Sheva and Jerusalem. Here, the members of the Hungarian Yishuv participated in cultural events and benefited from job placement and housing agency services, while also receiving medical aid and legal support.¹⁷¹

Despite the wide range of its welfare work, the HOH was never able to fulfil its goal of becoming the leading unified organisation of Israel's Hungarian-speaking Jewish population. Both the 1950 conference and subsequent efforts¹⁷² proved to be fruitless. For many members of the community the main problem was that Hungarian Jews had inherited from mainland Hungarians the 'Turanian Curse' of dissension and strife.¹⁷³ The Hungarian Yishuv thus remained "unorganized, and even unorganizable". The establishment of the World Federation did, however, alleviate the problem to some extent, and a number of Hungarian Jewish organisations joined it in the hope of receiving financial support.¹⁷⁴

In response to constant criticism that the organisations involved in helping the Hungarian immigrants were actually hindering the evolution of a unified Israeli society, the leadership of the HOH stressed the special needs of the Hungarian olés. Moreover, it emphasised that it would maintain its organisational structure only until it achieved their complete integration: culturally, economically and intellectually. A further, if unarticulated, goal of the leadership was to raise the status of the Hungarian Jewish community, as they thought that it wrongly occupied a lower rung in Israeli society than both its size and its cultural-economic capital warranted.¹⁷⁵ The Israeli Government

¹⁶⁸ Közműhelyt rendez be Tel-Avivban a HOH [The HOH in Tel Aviv sets up a workshop]. *Új Kelet*, 3 October 1954. 2.

¹⁶⁹ István Barzilay: Második és utolsó interjú Schultz Ignáccal [The second and the last interview with Ignác Schultz]. *Új Kelet*, 11 October 1954. 7.

¹⁷⁰ Letették a Schultz Ignác nevét viselő telavivi kultúrház alapkövét [The laying of the foundation-stone of Tel Aviv's "Ignác Schultz" Cultural Centre]. *Új Kelet*, 8 November 1954. 1–2.

¹⁷¹ Dániel Szántó: Jubilál a Tel-Avivi Social Center [The Tel Aviv Social Centre's jubilee]. *Izraeli Figyelő*, 2. (1961), 2. 4.

¹⁷² In 1954 leaders of the HOH delegated certain individuals to contact various organisations in the Hungarian yishuv and find ways of integrating them into the HOH. See Tanácskozás a magyar jisiv szervezeti egységéről [Consultation on the organizational unity of the Hungarian yishuv]. *Új Kelet*, 24 November 1954. 3.

¹⁷³ Miklós Buk: Megszervezhető-e a magyar jisiv Izraelben? [Can Israel's Hungarian Yishuv be organized?]. *Új Kelet*, 12 May 1950. 6.

¹⁷⁴ Sándor Rosenfeld: És az elszáradt ág kivirágzik [And the withered branch will flower]. *Izraeli Figyelő*, 2. (1961), 1. 1.

¹⁷⁵ For example, Shlomo Lőrincz, who was for a long time the only member of the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) of Hungarian Jewish heritage, in 1961 declared before the representatives of the Israeli

frowned on the expansion of Hungarian culture, but tolerated it nonetheless because of the support the organisation provided for the immigrants by relieving the state of extra burdens, aiding the Aliyah and raising additional funds that ultimately supported the interests of Israel as a whole.¹⁷⁶

Hungarian culture in Israel

The leaders of the Hungarian Jewish community were convinced that until their coevals mastered Hebrew properly, it was their duty to provide them with cultural activities in Hungarian. This was because immigrants from Hungarian-speaking areas were hungry for as much culture as possible. Amos Oz, the world-famous Israeli novelist, recalled that the Hungarian-speaking Jews suffered from “the lack of theatre, ballet or opera in Jerusalem in the Hungarian language, which would have made it accessible to them. They also suffered from being unable to participate in the intellectual life of the time, as that was limited to written formats”.¹⁷⁷

The various local HOH organisations regularly organised cultural evenings in Hungarian. Famous artists performed at these events, and representatives of the Hungarian Jewish community and scholars lectured on various topics. Less frequently, though regularly, the HOH arranged evenings of entertainment, such as dances, meet-ups and dating evenings for the Hungarian Jewish youth.¹⁷⁸ At Purim, the Jewish holiday, it organised balls, where participants could dance, see a show, listen to a concert, eat and drink, and choose a belle of the ball.¹⁷⁹ During the 1950s, events were organised in major cities on a weekly basis. The Organization founded an Artistic Support Committee, which provided opportunities for newly arrived artists to showcase their talents before the Israeli public. These events served a dual purpose: they highlighted the intellectual and artistic prowess of the Hungarian-speaking Yishuv, while income from the events supported the Hungarian-speaking artists’ further education and training in Israel.¹⁸⁰ From 1944 onwards, top Hungarian Jewish writers, artists and scholars were annually

Government and state bodies that the way they could show greater respect for Hungarian Jews was “by ensuring that the political parties represented them in parliament in proportion to their actual numbers”. See *A Magyar Zsidók Világszövetségének II. kongresszusának jegyzőkönyve* (1961): op. cit. 5.

¹⁷⁶ Hogyan látja Ben Gurion a magyar zsidóságot? [How does Ben Gurion view Hungarian Jewry?]. Newspaper clipping. Museum. 003/C.3861.1197.

¹⁷⁷ A háború ellentéte nem a szerelem, hanem a béke. Kőbányai János interjúja Ámosz Ozzal [The opposite of war is not love but peace. János Kőbányai interviews Amos Oz]. *Múlt és Jövő*, (1992), 1. 73.

¹⁷⁸ The events were advertised in the Hungarian press. For examples see *Új Kelet*, 11 October 1949. 2; *Hitachdut Ole Hungaria Bulletin*. Tel Aviv, 6 April 1946 – Museum.

¹⁷⁹ A HOH ez évi bálján [At this year’s HOH ball]. *Új Kelet*, 16 January 1953. 2.

¹⁸⁰ HOH közelmények [Hitachdut Ole Hungaria’s announcements]. *Új Kelet*, 4 November 1949. 11.

awarded the Nordau Prize. Among its recipients were the writer and literary translator Avigdor Hameiri in 1944, József Patai in 1946, Ferenc Kishont in 1953, and writer and graphic artist Ervin Abádi in 1955. Cultural events were sometimes linked to relief work: a fashion show was held at the Dan Hotel in 1957 in aid of newcomers who had fled Hungary during the Hungarian Revolution of the previous year.¹⁸¹

The most wide-ranging cultural and entertainment possibilities were offered by lending libraries, cinemas and theatres. Major cities, towns and even kibbutzim with significant Hungarian-speaking Jewish populations maintained Hungarian lending libraries. The DAAT, probably the biggest of these, operated countrywide as early as 1941,¹⁸² while readers' needs were served in Haifa by Samuel's lending library and in Tel Aviv by the lending library of Erzsébet Jámbor.¹⁸³ According to Hungarian diplomats, in 1953 there were eight lending libraries/bookstores in Israel, the majority in Tel Aviv and Haifa.¹⁸⁴ The newspapers were full of advertisements for libraries and bookshops. The HOH and the Hungarian Embassy organised film screenings up and down the country.¹⁸⁵ Béla Pásztor (1895–1966), a renowned actor, director and lecturer, founded the Hungarian Language Theatre of Israel. The company performed 13 Hungarian and Israeli plays between 1953 and 1955, which played numerous times in the major cities to large audiences.¹⁸⁶

Altogether 85 Hungarian newspapers and periodicals were published in Israel between 1936 and 1985.¹⁸⁷ The best-known and most prominent daily was certainly *Új Kelet* [New Orient], founded in 1948, which had a circulation of 15,000 copies on weekdays and 20,000 to 25,000 copies at weekends.¹⁸⁸ Two other important weeklies of the period were *A jövő* [The Future], between 1948 and 1955, and *Izraeli Képeslap* [Israel Illustrated], published between 1953 and 1959. Hungarian newspapers relied mainly on experienced journalists, but they also provided opportunities for younger talents. Famous writers and artists, such as Ephraim Kishon (Ferenc Kishont), Tommy Lapid, Kariel Gardosh (Dosh) and Yaakov Farkas (Zeev) all began their careers on *Új Kelet*. By the mid-1950s, they were all working in the editorial office of one of the biggest Israeli newspapers,

¹⁸¹ HOH divatbemutató a Dan szállóban [HOH fashion show in the Dan Hotel]. *Izraeli Képeslap*, May 23, 1957. 10–11.

¹⁸² *Hitachdut Ole Hungaria's Bulletin*. Tel Aviv, 25 June 1941. 3.

¹⁸³ *The HOH National Centre's Bulletin*, December 1946. 7.

¹⁸⁴ Jelentés. Magyarok Világszövetségének Izraeli levelezői [Report: Israeli correspondents of the World Federation of Hungarians], 10 September 1953. MOL, Izrael KÜM XIX-J-1-k, 10 d 20/a i. 0518 d.

¹⁸⁵ Levél. Tárgy: A "Déryné" vetítése Tel-Avivban [Letter. Re: Screening of "Déryné" in Tel Aviv], MOL, Izrael KÜM XIX-J-1-k, 9 d 18/g i. 0128 d.

¹⁸⁶ Szalai (2017): op. cit. 206–225.

¹⁸⁷ Zoltán Féder: *Izraeli Könyvtárakban: Két Bibliográfia* [In Israeli Libraries: Two Bibliographies]. Tel-Aviv, Eked, 2004. 128–168.

¹⁸⁸ Szalai (2017): op. cit. 226; Jelentés. Az Izraelben élő magyar emigráció helyzete és tevékenysége [Report. The situation and activities of the Hungarian emigrants in Israel], 14 December 1960, MOL, Izrael TÜK 1945-64, XIX-J-1-j, 8. b. 20/b i. 008347 d.

Ma'ariv. This quartet dominated *Ma'ariv's* coverage and all of them achieved success on this newspaper. The public called the group *Ma'ariv's* “Hungarian mafia”.¹⁸⁹ Some writers, journalists and artists never managed to learn Hebrew fluently and so continued to write and publish in Hungarian. In the 1950s, they found an eager audience; however, with the subsequent contraction of the market, writing in Hungarian was no longer in demand and they no longer played any role in Israeli literature.¹⁹⁰

Some political and social groups defended the primacy of the Hebrew language and urged its exclusive use in every sphere of Israeli life, regarding the Hungarian-language press, for example, as an unacceptable compromise. Administrative measures were taken against *Új Kelet* and later, in 1951, a law was drafted banning all non-Hebrew newspapers in the country.¹⁹¹ *Új Kelet's* editorial staff were especially concerned about new immigrants who did not speak any Hebrew and argued that what it offered was Israeli culture to the olés in the Hungarian language, thus strengthening their Israeli identity: it should be allowed to continue to serve their needs.¹⁹² Hungarian-language theatre was criticised for the same reasons, but Béla Pásztor defended it, emphasising that he was not propagating Hungarian culture in Israel, merely offering a cultural experience and entertainment to a Hungarian mother-tongue audience that did not yet understand Hebrew.¹⁹³ From 1952 onwards, however, the climate improved and the dissemination of Hungarian Jewish culture started to be more widely accepted.

The World Federation of Hungarian Jews also planned to publish a comprehensive history of Hungarian Jewry, but lack of financial support delayed the realisation of this major historical project. In 1960, the Federation set up a history committee, which later published several books about the history of Hungarian Jews (*Hungarian Jewish Studies – 1966–1973*, *Hebrew Poetry in Hungary – 1966*, for example).¹⁹⁴ The HOH also published the Hebrew–Hungarian dictionary of the linguist Eliezer Grosz.¹⁹⁵

Conclusion

Because of their far-reaching assimilation into Hungarian culture in the nineteenth century, Hungarian Jews who moved from the Hungarian-speaking areas to Palestine (and then Israel) remained for the most part strongly attached to it. Organisations established in the Hungarian language and on geographical lines aimed to fight discrimination and

¹⁸⁹ J. Levine: A tremendous demonstration of vitality. *The Jerusalem Post*, 15 May 2008.

¹⁹⁰ Magyarok Izraelben [Hungarians in Israel]. *Izraeli Képeslap*, 23 May 1957. 8; Ephraim Kishon: *Volt szerencsém – Kishont Ferenc önéletrajza* [Glad to Have Met You – The Autobiography of Ferenc Kishon]. Budapest, Magyar Könyvklub, 1994. 136.

¹⁹¹ Dezső Schön: Feltámadás az *Új Keleten* [Resurrection of *Új Kelet*]. *Új Kelet*, 21 February 1969. 16c.

¹⁹² Ernő Marton: Mit akarunk [What we want]. *Új Kelet*, 11 August 1948. 1–2.

¹⁹³ Szalai (2017): op. cit. 201.

¹⁹⁴ *A Magyar Zsidók Világszövetségének II. kongresszusának jegyzőkönyve* (1961): op. cit. 9–20.

¹⁹⁵ Grosz Eliezer szótára [Eliezer Grosz's dictionary]. *Izraeli Figyelő*, November 1960. 5.

support the new immigrants' integration into Israeli society. Internal divisions prevented the coordination of the provision of services and the formation of a unified body under the Hitachdut Ole Hungaria. The organisations operated on two levels: they initiated programmes to facilitate integration, but also sought to preserve Hungarian culture and Hungarian social structures through their cultural activities. As a result of this dichotomy, a section of the community lived in a Hungarian cultural bubble for a long time.

The eternal dilemma of the Hungarian Jewish organisations, caught between the rock of longed-for integration and a hard place – building a strong organisation – created a Hungarian Jewish subculture, both in Mandate Palestine and later in Israel. Among the new immigrants and those who did not speak Hebrew well a dual identity emerged,¹⁹⁶ Hungarian Jewish and Israeli. The programmes offered by the organisations were typically best received in the big cities, while in the kibbutzim Hungarian Jews learned Hebrew quickly and rarely encountered Hungarian culture or the Hungarian language. In the 1940s and 1950s, thousands attended cultural and entertainment events, but from the 1960s onwards the number of those taking part in these fell drastically. The burden of dual identity and the difficulty of integration afflicted not only Hungarian Jews: the same phenomenon can also be observed in other groups of first-generation immigrants.¹⁹⁷

The oeuvre of Ephraim Kishon and the “Hungarian mafia” demonstrates that the Hungarian Jewish subculture was capable of becoming part of the Israeli mainstream. These writers and artists offered distinctive reflections on Israeli society, in time becoming part and parcel of Israeli culture, thanks to the *Ma'ariv* newspaper.

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¹⁹⁷ Gelber (1993): op. cit. 339.

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