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To cite this article: Tamás Turán (2020) 150th anniversary of the Hungarian Jewish Congress, *Jewish Culture and History*, 21:3, 203-212, DOI: [10.1080/1462169X.2020.1796371](https://doi.org/10.1080/1462169X.2020.1796371)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462169X.2020.1796371>



Published online: 08 Sep 2020.



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INTRODUCTION



150th anniversary of the Hungarian Jewish Congress

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A Jewish Congress was convened and held in Pest (today part of Budapest), Hungary, between mid-December 1868 and late February 1869, in order to establish a nationwide organizational framework for the Jewish communities of Hungary. On February 5–6, 2019, a conference titled *'Unhealed Breach' or a Good Divorce? The Hungarian Jewish Congress (1868–69) and the 'Schism' in Historical Perspective* was held in Budapest¹ to commemorate the 150th anniversary of that one-of-its-kind event. The conference was organized by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Institute of Minority Studies), together with Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest (Dept. of Assyriology and Hebrew). I wish to express my thanks to both institutions for their support, and particularly to my colleagues Viktória Bányai, Tamás Sándor Biró, and Szonja Komoróczy, for their cooperation in organizing this event. I would like to thank the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives, and its director, Zsuzsanna Toronyi, for making available to participants of the conference important materials in the holdings of the Archives.

The conference was also a (modest) tribute to Michael K. Silber, an outstanding historian, and a leading authority on Hungarian Jewry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, on the occasion of his seventieth birthday a few months earlier. The present issue, which includes eight of the twelve presentations at the conference, is dedicated to him. We will return to the articles and the honoree after a brief survey of the history and impact of the Jewish Congress and some reflections on the history and current state of research on this topic.

Historical outline

Progressive Judaism in Hungary started to take shape in the Vormärz period – i.e. prior to the failed revolution and war of independence against Habsburg Austria in 1848–49. Jewish religious progressives challenged traditionalist Judaism in Hungary and other parts of the Habsburg Empire with various aims and ideologies (as in Germany). Traditionalist Jews, in their turn, responded in a variety of ways, ranging from tacit sympathy through deep suspicion to uncompromising rejection. Hungarian Jewish progressives, who were allied with Hungarian liberal nationalists from the 1840s, became more organized in the 1860s, when a weakened Austria restored to Hungary some of the political rights that it had enjoyed within the Habsburg Empire until the revolution. Traditionalist Jewry, for its part, closed ranks in the 1850s and became more militant in the 1860s, when Ultra-

Orthodoxy first made its appearance.² In 1867 an agreement (usually referred to as the 'Compromise') was reached between Austria and Hungary. Shortly afterwards, Baron József Eötvös, a leading (Catholic liberal) political statesman and thinker, who served as Minister of Religion and Education between 1867 and 1871, launched his ambitious conservative-liberal plan to reconfigure relations between Church and State.

Local progressive Judaism, called Neolog Judaism, originating in early nineteenth-century Vienna, was a moderate form of Reform Judaism. It fitted the needs of an increasing number of urbanized and acculturated Jews who came from traditionalist families.³ This movement can be characterized by its support for Hungarian – political and cultural – nationalism and 'Magyarization,' as well as a conservative-liberal outlook in religious matters: while accentuating 'ethics,' it sought to maintain the validity of most traditional halakhic norms, without showing too much concern about their observance. These features and the limited changes it promoted (mostly cultural and aesthetic innovations related to synagogue life), befitted the predominantly Catholic, politically relatively liberal country that Hungary was in the post-Compromise decades, with a sizeable and influential Protestant population.

Relying on Neolog advice, in 1868 Eötvös convened a Jewish Congress with 220 delegates, representing all of Hungarian and Transylvanian Jewry⁴ (See the [figures 1](#) and [2](#)). This initiative enjoyed royal approval, and the representatives were elected on the basis of a regulated, (quasi-)democratic election procedure. In terms of mandate, make-up, procedures and outcome, the Congress was an unprecedented event in Jewish history. It bore only a remote resemblance to the Paris Sanhedrin of 1806 or other Jewish assemblies of the past in Hungary or elsewhere. It had many similarities, however, to the Congress of the (Serbian) Eastern (Greek) Orthodox Christians in Hungary, held in 1864–65, and to Protestant ecclesiastical institutions and conventions. All these served as a model and a point of reference not only for Eötvös, but also, in many respects, for the two main rival Jewish camps.

Progressives won a slight majority at the elections to the Congress, which ended with mixed results. Much of Orthodox Jewry, questioning the legitimacy of the Congress already at the planning stage (although some of its representatives participated in its sessions until the very end), rejected its decisions. This rejection led to a 'schism' in Hungarian Jewry and the formation of a separate nationwide organization of the Orthodox communities. On the other hand, the organizational and educational statutes approved by the Congress did lay the foundation for close to half of Hungarian Jewry, who considered themselves 'progressive' and accepted those statutes as a basis for organizing their lives. These developments also served, ultimately, the Orthodox to follow the path they wished to pursue. The split gave rise to a third orientation too called Status Quo Ante communities which, for a variety of reasons, preferred to act as if no split had occurred, and did not join either the Orthodox or the Neolog nationwide federation of communities.

A large part of the Orthodox elite (probably the majority) was secessionist and therefore regarded the split as a success. Most Neologs, however, saw it as a failure. Motivated by communal and political interests, as well as a result of soul-searching, Neologs made repeated efforts at reunification. Defending their hard-won autonomy, the Orthodox easily dismissed these efforts. For them, it was a breach that could not be healed, an 'irreparable rent'.⁵

Reverberations of the Congress and its reception

The overwhelming majority of Jewish historians in Hungary who wrote about the Congress before World War II (most of them Neolog rabbis: Lajos [Ludwig] Venetianer, Sándor Büchler, Zsigmond Groszmann), as well as other leading Neolog voices, offered a deeply critical view of the Congress. Rabbis in the Neolog camp bore the brunt of the split and had to cope with its unwelcome consequences. While supporting and appreciating the intentions and strategic aims of the initiators of the Congress, Neolog critics laid the blame for the unwanted results on tactical mistakes of the Neolog advisers of Eötvös (of these Ignaz Hirschler, an ophthalmologist, was the most influential). Moreover, they condemned the organizers' hostile attitude toward rabbis that fuelled their efforts to limit rabbinic influence on community life. In this hostility they identified, retrospectively, a symptom of religious indifference and alienation from Judaism. A most outspoken (indeed extreme) representative of these Neolog critics was Immanuel Löw, who bluntly said: 'The testimony of history justified the goals of the "Guardians of the Faith"'.⁶

His father, Leopold Löw, a pioneer of progressive Judaism in Hungary, a great Judaica scholar and the first historian of the Congress, stands out as one of the rare dissenting voices of the progressive camp concerning the Congress. His positions differed substantially from the mainstream Neolog positions and changed with time. As a leading contemporary ideologue and a chronicler, he criticized the preparations for the Congress; later he admitted that the split had great potential from a progressive point of view.

As opposed to 'old-world' Orthodox historians (such as Yekutiel Yehuda Grünwald [Greenwald]), historians of previous generations with a (religious) Zionist or Jewish nationalist perspective (such as Simon Dubnow or Shmuel ha-Kohen Weingarten), as well as more inclusivist 'modern' Orthodox voices, tended to be critical of ultra-Orthodox secessionism.⁷ When one reads judgments like that of Salo Baron (the last universal Jewish historian), who regarded the Hungarian Jewish turbulences as 'merely symptoms of pulsating life,'⁸ one realizes that individual assessments of the split may depend not only on ideological proclivities, but on worldview and temperament as well.

More recent historiography also tends to take a negative view of the Congress, or at least of its outcome – although less explicitly than historians of earlier generations. In a summary overview, Jacob Katz analysed how the Congress 'tore apart' Hungarian Jewry and how 'painful processes' in the wake of the split led to internal conflicts within numerous congregations – even within families, and even during the Holocaust. He highlighted another trend too: the tightening of rabbinic grip on communities and traditionalist Jewry at the local level as well as countrywide.⁹

The Jewish Congress and its political context were unique to Hungary, but the struggle between various conservative and progressive movements and platforms was not. The Hungarian Jewish split and the role Orthodox Jewry played in it, has had strong resonances in Jewish communal politics in Europe, and later also in the Holy Land/Israel and the United States.

Formed for the most part by Jews migrating in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries primarily from the Austrian crown lands (Moravia and Bohemia in the Northwest, Galicia and Bukovina in the Northeast), Hungarian Jewry was culturally diverse, within a multi-ethnic and denominationally fractured country and empire. When its close-knit community life was threatened by modernization and attendant intra-Jewish movements, Orthodoxy took up

cudgels with success. Adopting the arsenal and rhetoric of contemporary Hungarian politics, its various streams succeeded in defending what they wanted to retain of whatever social forces had left of their traditionalist lifestyle and religious communal autonomy. Such was the historical experience of Hungarian Jewish Orthodoxy in the post-Congress decades, and it had an impact on neighbouring countries as well.¹⁰ Self-confident Hungarian Ultra-Orthodoxy, with its aggressively separatist agenda, transferred these experiences to new centres of world Jewry.¹¹ Emerging due to massive migration, particularly after the World Wars, these new centres had to accommodate numerous ethno-religious ‘communities’ (*edoth*) living next to each other. It was no accident that one of the leaders of Hungarian Jewish Orthodoxy, Sigmund Krauss (a ‘layman’) defended the feasibility and necessity of establishing multiple local Jewish communities by referring to the examples of the United States and Jerusalem, in addition to historical examples from the Ottoman Empire and Italy.¹² In these historical precedents, however, the establishment of multiple Jewish communities in the same locale (and their recognition by authorities) had historical roots, and it was primarily based on pre-modern cultural and religious heterogeneity on a local level, rather than on a compromise solution to nationwide *Kulturkampf* and mutual delegitimization.

Hungarian Ultra-Orthodox Jews who emigrated overseas were characterized by a grass-roots insular instinct, nurtured by a variety of cultural factors. Among the wider public this attitude became associated with emblematic rabbinic figures, urban colonies, and organizations such as rabbis Akiba Yosef Schlesinger and Hayim Yosef Sonnenfeld, or the *Ha-Edah ha-Haredit* and the *Mea She’arim* neighborhood in Jerusalem in the Holy Land; and rabbis Yoel Teitelbaum, Hayim Meir Hager and others, heading various Hasidic groups in Williamsburg and Borough Park in Brooklyn and elsewhere in North America. (Ultra-) Orthodox isolationism was a natural traditionalist response to modernity and not an exclusive Hungarian legacy; yet Hungarian Jewry, and particularly Hasidic groups within it, had a fair share in stabilizing this ideology and perpetuating it. The standards set by them had an impact even on Orthodox groups with East European roots that originally opposed this ideology. Insularity remained the strategic weapon of Ultra-Orthodoxy – and a hallmark of its Hungarian brand in particular – after World War II, even in entirely different political and cultural circumstances in Israel and the United States.

Militancy is a function of such circumstances. Conflicts ‘start with the other hitting back’ – as the bon mot has it. In religious struggles ‘my party’ represents and defends true tradition, while the ‘other party’ deliberately distances itself from this tradition and invents a new one – it is a ‘sect’. These arguments were often heard in Orthodox–Neolog altercations in Hungary for decades prior to the Congress, first from the Orthodox and then from the Neolog side.

The Hungarian Jewish ‘schism’ proved to be a difficult surgical operation, but the patient (Hungarian Jewry) is alive and kicking in a sense – albeit outside Hungary, mainly in Hasidic garb, still maintaining Yiddish. Huge segments of world Jewry are unhappy with, and deeply concerned by, the survival of this ‘outdated’ lifestyle, this separatist stratum of the Hungarian Jewish legacy. What were the side effects and the costs of the surgery? What were the alternatives? What would have happened had it not been carried out? Who was right in the onerous religious dilemma underlying the conflict: how inclusive should the definition and demarcation of the ‘people of Israel’ (*klal Yisrael*) be? Such questions are of course mostly outside the purview of historiography.

Sources and research perspectives

Press, polemical pamphlets and official documents related to the Congress' deliberations: these are the sources on which scholarship bases the story of the Jewish Congress (including its prehistory and aftermath). Many of these sources are covered in the important bibliography by Nathaniel Katzburg.¹³ It should be noted, however, that this bibliography does not include contemporary Hungarian press coverage (primarily in Hungarian, partly in German, and German in Hebrew characters) of the Congress period – which is an enormous amount of material. The main reason for this deficiency is that the Hungarian Jewish press of this period was, and is, only partially available in public collections worldwide.¹⁴

There is a wealth of other potential sources that are yet to be found and utilized by historians in order to give a fuller account of this momentous event in modern Jewish history. Local archives may yield much relevant material – on the election process, for instance, the history of which is virtually uncharted territory.¹⁵ Ignaz Hirschler was the (informal) campaign director of the Neologs for the Congress elections; his extensive correspondence on this matter needs systematic research.¹⁶ No primary sources are available on the negotiations of Eötvös with the Neologs; the protocols of the preparatory conference (held in February 1868) are also not extant.¹⁷ The published protocols of the Congress is an edited document; scholarship had no access to the original stenographic record. Similarly, historians were unable to utilize the protocols of the committees' work at the Congress.¹⁸ No historian has been able to consult Ignaz Hirschler's memoranda to Eötvös,¹⁹ or important diaries and memoirs, such as those of Hirschler and Samuel Kohn.²⁰ Many of these documents and sources, maybe most of them, are, apparently, irretrievably lost.

No similar problems are expected with regard to Jewish press and other sources worldwide, which could serve as the basis for analysing the 'reception' of the Congress and its outcome in various segments of the Jewish elite and public opinion in Europe and in the United States. A survey of scholarship on the Congress is also a desideratum.

Divisions within the Orthodox camp have received more attention in scholarship than those within the Neolog camp. The extent of Neolog secessionism, for instance, is yet to be explored; deviating from the official party line, some of their activists and leaders (e.g. Henrik Pollák) favoured separation from the Orthodox.²¹ In general, profiling the Congress delegates and a comprehensive prosopography would be instrumental in charting the socio-ideological spectrum of Hungarian Jewry in Congress times.

The present issue

The city Michael Kalman Silber was born in (Debrecen – with one of the largest and most diverse Jewish populations in Hungary until World War II), his family background and upbringing in New York opened for him broad vistas on the historical legacy of Central European Jewry. An outstanding disciple of Jacob Katz,²² he has authored and edited seminal articles and books on the history of Jews in Hungary and the Habsburg Empire. Directing the Andrew and Pearl Rosenfeld Project for the History of Jews in Hungary and the Habsburg Empire at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, he helped to establish academic institutions related to this field and took an active part in almost all major academic events and projects in this research area. In presenting this issue to Michael,

I wish him, in the name of his numerous friends, colleagues, and disciples in Israel, Hungary, the United States and elsewhere, good health and serenity for the next fifty years, to enjoy life and to carry out his numerous and important research projects with the same passion and patience in searching new historical sources, with the same academic fastidiousness and meticulousness that have characterized his contributions hitherto.

The articles in the present issue are arranged according to a historical-chronological order. The first three papers explore the wider political-ideological context of the Congress. Carsten L. Wilke situates the Congress on the broad canvas of nineteenth-century ecclesiastical-political assemblies and synods that could serve as institutional-political models for convening a Jewish assembly – models and concepts that were floated in the Jewish press. The wide ideological horizon behind the religious policies of Minister József Eötvös, chief architect of the Congress, is investigated by Gábor Gángó, who also delineates the role that Jewish denominational affairs played in the minister's political plans. Tamás Turán tries to demonstrate the profound impact of Hungarian political culture on the Congress deliberations, analysing select issues. Utilizing the Congress records and unique late nineteenth-century statistics, Michael K. Silber offers a quantitative analysis of the differentiations within Congress deputies and post-Congress Hungarian Jewry, highlighting the existence of a 'moderate middle' within it. The next three articles, based partly on archival materials, are case studies in developments related to the Congress and its aftermath in local communities. Mihály Huszár presents the elections for the Congress in one electoral district and outlines the profile of a local Neolog rabbi elected to the Congress. Ljiljana Dobrovšak traces the divisive impact of the Hungarian Jewish 'schism' in the Croatian Jewish communities – most notably in Zagreb, where tensions and divisions within the Jewish community went back to the 1840s. In the large, diverse and conflict-stricken Jewish population of Nagyvárád, a short-lived Status Quo Ante community was established in 1881; its story is reconstructed by Edith-Emese Bodo. The final paper returns to nationwide politics: Anikó Prebuk documents the role of the Jewish split in the argumentation of the political forces opposed to upgrading the status of Jewish religion in Hungary until 1895, when it was granted the status of 'received' religion.

Notes

1. <http://jewishcongress1868.elte.hu/>
2. Michael K. Silber, "The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Invention of a Tradition," in *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 23–84.
3. Jacob Katz, *A House Divided. Orthodoxy and Schism in Nineteenth-Century Central European Jewry*, trans. by Ziporah Brody (Hanover, N. H. and London: University Press of New England, 1998), 40–6.
4. For basic bibliographic references on the history of the Congress, see especially the papers of Wilke, Gángó, and Turán in the present issue.
5. For the expression in this context (adopted by Jacob Katz in the title of the Hebrew original of his book, n. 3 above), see e.g. the editorial remark in *Iggerot Sofrim*, ed. Shlomo Sofer (Wien – Budapest: J. Schlesinger, 1929), *Kitvei [...] Ktav Sofer*, p. 26. This halakic metaphor is taken from the laws of mourning: a garment rent by the mourner upon the death of a parent, or upon other specific tragic events, is never to be mended again (*Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh deah, 340:8,15,37–39*). However, an exception is made in case the garment was lent to the mourner,

- under certain conditions (ibid., 340:34). Disavowal of Neology as a 'lent garment' by the Neologs, amounting to their 'repentance,' seems to have been a minimum condition of the Orthodox for reunification.
6. 'A történelem tanúsága a Hitőr törekvéseit igazolta.' – Immanuel Löw, *Kétszáz beszéd. 1919–1939* [Two hundred sermons. 1919–1939] (Szeged, 1939), vol. 1, 455. The sermon, delivered in 1932, offers an incisive page-long appraisal of the Congress-struggles. Löw (1854–1944) was a leading Semitist philologist and rabbi in Szeged. 'Guardians of the Faith' was the political organization of the orthodox 'movement,' established in 1867, that coordinated the struggle against the Neologs. At the time Löw made the statement cited, he was the Neolog representative at the Hungarian Upper House.
 7. Adam Ferziger, "Hungarian Separatist Orthodoxy and the Migration of its Legacy to America: The Greenwald – Hirschenson Debate," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 105, no. 2 (2015): 250–83.
 8. Salo W. Baron, *The Jewish Community; its History and Structure to the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1942), vol. 1, 19.
 9. Katz, *A House Divided*, 217–33.
 10. Rachel Manekin, "Tsemihatah ve-gibushah shel ha-ortodoksia ha-yehudit be-Galitsiah: Həvrat 'Mahazikei ha-dat,' 1867–1883" (Ph.D. diss., The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 2000); Michael K. Silber, "Orthodoxy," in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed. Gershon Hundert (New Haven, 2008), vol. 2, 1292–7, esp. 1295–6; Benjamin Brown, "'As Swords in the Body of the Nation': East-European Rabbis Against the Separation of Communities" (Hebrew), in *Yosef Da'at. Studies in Modern History in Honor of Yosef Salmon*, ed. Jossi Goldstein (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2010), 215–44.
 11. Michael K. Silber, "Schlesinger, Akiva Yosef," in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, vol. 2, 1672–4; and Ferziger, "Hungarian Separatist Orthodoxy."
 12. Sigmund Krauss, *Wissen und Glauben, oder: Der Mensch und der Israelit. Zwei Betrachtungen nebst einer Einleitung als Schlusswort nach beendigtem Kongresskampfe zwischen den Juden orthodoxer und neologer Richtung* (Pest: Bendiner und A. Grünwald, 1871), 58. Similar positive remarks on the American model of freedom of religion, including the establishment of multiple local Jewish communities, were made by Leopold Löw in the same year (Tamas Turan, "Jewish Heterodoxy and Christian Denominationalism: Leopold Löw's Comparative Perspective on Modern Hungarian Jewry," *Modern Judaism* 38, no. 3 [2018]: 368), and by Akiva Yosef Schlesinger few years before (Silber, "The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy," 78).
 13. Nathaniel Katzburg, "Ha-Kongress ha-yehudi be-Ungarya bi-shnat Tav-Resh-Khaf-Tet. Reshimah shel meqorot," *Areshet* 4 (1966): 322–67. (In what follows: Bibliography.) This bibliography was made available on the conference website: <http://jewishcongress1868.elte.hu/>.
 14. Cf. Katzburg, Bibliography, nos. 25, 67. Only two items from the Hungarian Jewish press are mentioned there: Addenda, nos. 304, 305.
 15. Cf. "Az Országos Magyar Zsidó Múzeum kongresszusi kiállításának katalogusa. 1935. márc. 3.–16." [Catalogue of the Congress-exhibition of the Hungarian National Jewish Museum. March 3–16, 1935], *Évkönyv, kiadja az Izraelita Magyar Irodalmi Társulat* (Budapest, 1935): 362–79, nos. 98–113, 117–28.
 16. The correspondence covering this period is currently among the holdings of the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem.
 17. These protocols were referred to briefly by Zsigmond Groszmann, *A magyar zsidók a XIX. század közepén (1849–1870)* [Hungarian Jews in the mid-nineteenth century (1849–1870)] (Budapest: Egyenlőség, 1917), 91. See also "Az Országos Magyar Zsidó Múzeum kongresszusi kiállításának katalogusa," no. 59.
 18. One of the Neolog leaders and participant of the Congress relates shortly after the Congress that the Neolog Fülöp Holitscher, who presided over the Education Committee of the Congress, is going to publish the protocols of the work of his committee: Pál Tenczer, *Album. Második füzet. 1869. április 26.* [Album. Second fascicle] (Budapest: Pesti

Könyvnyomda-Részvény-Társulat, 1869), 22. This did not happen, to the best of our knowledge.

19. "Dr. Hirschler Ignác utolsó előterjesztése dr. Pauler Tivadar vallás- és közoktatásügyi miniszterhez" [The last memorandum of dr. Ignác Hirschler to dr. Tivadar Pauler, Minister of Religion and Education], *Magyar-Zsidó Szemle* 8 (1891): 771–7, here 773–4.
20. For Hirschler's diary, see "Az Országos Magyar Zsidó Múzeum kongresszusi kiállításának katalógusa," no. 243. Kohn himself mentions his memoirs; see Sándor Büchler, "Levelek" [Letters], in *Emlékkönyv [...] Kohn Sámuel [...] születésének századik évfordulójára* [Memorial volume ... to the centennial of ... S. Kohn's birth], ed. S. Löwinger et al. (Budapest: n. p., 1941), XXXIV.
21. *Magyar Zsidó* 1, no. 11 (Febr. 20, 1868): 82. Cf. Ludwig Philippson, "Der ungarisch-israelitische Congress. IV," *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* 33, no. 4 (Jan. 26, 1869): 63–4.
22. Katz, *A House Divided*, 2.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).



Figure 1. The seating plan of the plenary sessions of the Hungarian Jewish Congress (1868-69), which took place in the General Assembly Hall of the Pest County Hall. Generally speaking, 'Orthodox' delegates were seated on the left (99 assigned places), and 'Neologs' on the right (117 assigned places), in addition to the presidential podium in the middle. Image courtesy of the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives, Budapest.

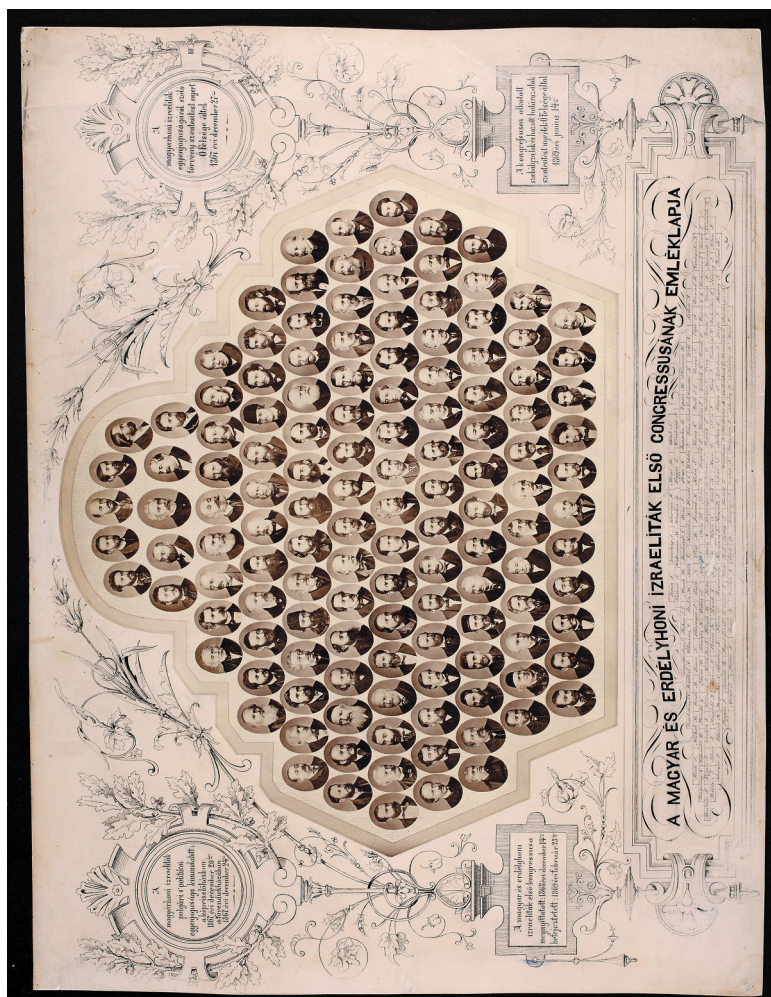


Figure 2. A memorial tableau of the Jewish Congress, with portraits (and names) of 133 of its delegates. Image courtesy of the Hungarian National Museum, Budapest.