

**MIXING WITH MESHUMADS:
SOCIAL RELATIONS BETWEEN JEWS
AND CONVERTED JEWS IN MODERN HUNGARY**

There is no reliable statistical data on the number of Jews who converted to Christianity in Hungary prior to 1896. During the period between 1896 and 1917, according to the data published by the Central Statistical Office, 10,035 Jews converted to one of the Christian religions in the Kingdom of Hungary (not including Croatia-Slavonia). In addition, 486 Jews became *konfessionslos*, meaning that they left the Jewish religion without getting baptized and were officially registered as being without denominational affiliation.¹ However, the actual numbers were higher, since official statistics did not include children under the age of seven who converted with their parents.² According to the official interpretation, these children had not truly converted, but had simply followed their parents to the baptismal font. How many were they? From the annual reports of the Pest Jewish Community, we know that the number of Jews who announced their withdrawal from the Jewish religion rose in this period by 7.16 percent if we include their children under seven years of age in the calculation. If this percentage is applied to the entire Jewish population of Hungary, the total number of Jews baptized between the years 1896 and 1914 rises to around 10,753 and the total number of Jews who left the Jewish fold rises to around 11,274.³ Approximately half of them converted in Budapest.

How did their former coreligionists, unconverted friends, and family members relate to those who left the Jewish fold? This is the question with which this paper wishes to engage.

¹ See the yearbooks of the Statistical Office published under the title *Magyar statisztikai évkönyv*. There is no data on conversions for 1918.

² Minors between the age of seven and eighteen were not authorized to change their religion, except for married women converting to the religion of their husband.

³ The actual number of converted Jews may have been even higher. Indeed, the Statistical Office compiled its annual statistics on the basis of information received from the clergy, but it did not verify their accuracy since it was unable to send out an army of functionaries to review the baptismal records of the approximately 11,000 Catholic parishes and Protestant pastoral offices that operated in Hungary at the beginning of the twentieth century. In a strict sense, therefore, the official data regarding conversion does not reflect the actual number of Jews converted to Christianity, but the number of conversions reported by the Christian clergy to the statistical office. For details, see Miklós Konrád, *Zsidóságon innen és túl: Zsidók vallásváltása Magyarországon a reformkortól az első világháborúig* [Within and beyond Jewishness: Jewish conversions in Hungary from the Reform era to the First World War] (Budapest: MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Történettudományi Intézet, 2014), 224–27.

Informal and regular social relations between Jews and “apostates” represented a new phenomenon in the history of Ashkenazi Jewry. Before the era of secularization, acculturation, and emancipation, a Jew who became Christian changed social worlds. The convert’s new religious and legal status, as well as his new social environment, generally entailed the need to look for a new livelihood.⁴ However, at the turn of the twentieth century, Jewish university students who converted in Budapest remained university students, just as converted Jewish trainee lawyers remained trainee lawyers, converted Jewish physicians remained physicians, and converted Jewish schoolmistresses remained schoolmistresses. Even Jewish private employees who, once converted, were able to become civil servants, did not pass into a new social world. Some freshly converted Jews may have frequented new clubs and cafés or attempted to socialize more exclusively with Christians. However, their former coreligionists inevitably continued to associate with them at universities and within various professional, charitable, and cultural associations, as well as at their places of employment. At the turn of the twentieth century, Hungarian Jewish converts changed their denominational status, but they did not move from one world to another. They still lived in the same Hungarian society as their former coreligionists—who themselves related differently to the converts than their forebears did.

Although Jews remain Jews even after converting to Christianity according to *halakha*,⁵ in traditional Jewish society their family members did not mourn the converts after their death or observe the traditional week of mourning. Spurned by their former coreligionists, converts were regarded as even greater enemies of the Jewish people than Christians. Connections between converts and their family were usually severed, although the process of breaking all contact with unconverted spouses and business partners could require some time.⁶

As a result of the Enlightenment and the *Haskalah*, the disintegration of traditional Jewish mores and community structures, growing secularization

⁴ Elisheva Carlebach, *Divided Souls: Converts from Judaism in Germany, 1500–1750* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2001), 125–27; Deborah Hertz, *How Jews Became Germans: The History of Conversion and Assimilation in Berlin* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2007), 32.

⁵ Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish–Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 71.

⁶ Elisheva Carlebach, *Divided Souls: Converts from Judaism in Germany, 1500–1750* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2001), 14, 24–26, 111, 127; Fred Skolnik, ed., *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (2nd ed.) (Detroit, MI: Thomson Gale, 2007), vol. 2, 276–77. For the Middle Ages, see Malkiel, who contends that in many cases, Jews kept contacts with converts. Malkiel, David. “Jews and Apostates in Medieval Europe: Boundaries Real and Imagined.” *Past and Present* 194, no. 1 (2007): 23–28.

and acculturation, and the reduction in the social, cultural, and mental distance separating Jews and Christians, the attitude of Jewish society toward converts also changed. It became highly problematic for integrationist Jews to simultaneously advocate for and expect religious tolerance *and* condemn somebody “only” because he or she had begun to praise God in a different temple. The wish repeatedly expressed by Jews to draw closer to Christian society could hardly be reconciled with shunning those among them who became Christians. Acculturating Jews became less and less able and prone to sever contact with their former coreligionists.

In Germany and Vienna, such new attitudes toward converts emerged at the end of the eighteenth century.⁷ In Hungary, where the decomposition of traditional Jewish society began decades later, change became perceptible only in the so-called Reform Era (1830–1848), which preceded the revolution of 1848. Of course, aversion and hostility toward converts did not disappear among the Jewish population, whose overwhelming majority still lived in the world of tradition. German-language playwright and literary historian Gyula Lipót Klein, who in 1826 at the age of 22 had converted to Roman Catholicism in Vienna, returned to his hometown of Miskolc in 1830 to visit his parents. When his pious mother found out that he had forsaken his faith, she died of grief.⁸ In 1844, the parish priest of Somogy County published in a Catholic periodical a detailed account of the conversion of an 18-year-old domestic servant named Francziska Klein. According to the priest, who strove to prove that the servant girl was deeply sincere in her profession of Christianity and may thus have exaggerated the hardships she suffered on her road to salvation, Francziska had been forced to flee from her home after she announced her intention to leave her faith. Members of her family visited her several times during her religious instruction, trying to dissuade her from carrying through with her intention. They allegedly even offered her money if she remained true to her original faith.⁹ In 1846, Lajos Arányi, the father of Hungarian anatomic pathology, recounted a similar incident in connection to wealthy and “reformed” Jews. Arányi declared that if somebody from their circle planned to convert, “these enlightened rich

⁷ Michael A. Meyer, *The Origins of the Modern Jew: Jewish Identities and European Culture in Germany, 1749–1824* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967), 98; Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770–1870* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 112–13; Lowenstein, *Berlin Jewish Community*, 129–32; Deborah Hertz, “The Lives, Loves, and Novels of August and Fanny Lewald, the Converted Cousins from Königsberg,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 46 (2001): 106–107.

⁸ Anna L. Staudacher, *Jüdische Konvertiten in Wien 1782–1868* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002), vol. 2, 239; Gusztáv Heinrich, *Emlébeszéd Klein Lipót Gyula kültag felett* [Eulogy of Lipót Gyula Klein] (Budapest: A M.T. Akadémia Könyvkiadó-Hivatala, 1882).

⁹ “Egyházi tudósítások” [Ecclesiastical reports] *Religio és Nevelés*, February 22, 1844, 118.

people” collected money “in order to bribe [the potential convert] with one- or two-thousand forints and hold him back.”¹⁰

In a pamphlet published in 1841, the school teacher Móric Rosenthal, who urged his fellow Jews to convert without being ready to do so himself, alleged that the parents and relatives of converts “no longer disparage their act.”¹¹ Although Rosenthal’s generalization was clearly exaggerated, the first evidence of changes in Jewish attitudes was already manifest in associational life, as well as in familial and friendship relations. In the 1840s, several cultural and business associations in Pest had both Jewish and converted Jewish members.¹² The former could have hardly avoided contact with the latter even had they wanted to shun them in the first place. When Moritz Gottlieb Saphir, the renowned Lovasberény-born German-language satirical writer, converted in 1832, his Pest Jewish friends did not break off relations with him. On the occasion of his 50th birthday in 1845, his unconverted friend Fülöp Weil (who also wrote humorous German-language poetry) congratulated Moritz Saphir in exuberant verses.¹³ The biographer of Presbyterian missionary Adolph Saphir made the even more surprising claim that Pest Rabbi Löw Schwab did not sever relations with Adolf Saphir’s father after the latter’s baptism in 1843. The longtime friends allegedly continued to meet regularly in the private room of a bookstore in Pest.¹⁴ With regard to relations between family members, the wife and siblings of Moritz Ullmann, the most prominent entrepreneur in the Reform Era, did not discontinue their personal and business contact with him following his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1825. It would have been all

¹⁰ Lajos Arányi, *Rudnó és lelkésze 1844 és 1845ben, meg még valami, többi közt a mai magyar zsidó is* [The town of Rudnó and its vicar, and something else, among other things, the Hungarian Jew of today] (Pest: Emich Gusztáv, 1846), 151–52.

¹¹ Rosenthal, Móric: *A zsidó és a korszellem Európában* [The Jew and the Zeitgeist in Europe] (Pest: Esztergami k. Beimel József Betűivel, 1841), 89.

¹² Árpád Tóth, “Asszimilációs utak a késő-rendi társadalomban: A zsidóság szerepvállalásáról a reformkori pesti egyesületekben” [Paths of assimilation in the late-feudal society: The participation of the Jews in the associations of Reform-era Pest] In *Léptékváltó társadalomtörténet: Tanulmányok a 60 éves Benda Gyula tiszteletére* [Social history in a new key: Studies in honor of Gyula Benda on his 60th birthday], ed. Zsolt K. Horváth, András Lugosi, and Ferenc Sohajda (Budapest: Hermész Kör–Osiris, 2003), 171; Árpád Tóth, *Önszervező polgárok: A pesti egyesületek társadalomtörténete a reformkorban* [Self-organizing Burghers: The social history of the societies of Pest in the Reform Era] (Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2005), 157, 252; *A Pesti Műegyesület részvényeseinek névsora* [List of shareholders of the Pest Fine Art Society] (Pest: Landerer és Heckenast, [1846]) (Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, Plakát- és Kisnyomtatványtár, Kny. 1846 8o/22), 8–9, 15–17.

¹³ Sára Friedländer, *Saphir Móric Gottlieb: Tanulmány a zsidó asszimilációs törekvések kezdeteiről* [Moritz Gottlieb Saphir: A study on the beginnings of the Jewish assimilation efforts] (Budapest: Minerva-Könyvtár, 1939), 33.

¹⁴ Gavin Carlyle, “Mighty in the Scriptures”: *A Memoir of Adolph Saphir, D. D.* (London: John F. Shaw & Co., 1893), 26.

the more difficult since Moritz Ullmann and his converted sons continued to reside in the same house as his unconverted wife and daughters, although they did live on separate floors.¹⁵

There is less information regarding Jewish behavior toward converts during the period of neoabsolutism (1850–1867). However, evidence suggests that the earlier trends in this regard continued during this period. In any event, the aforementioned Catholic periodical continued to publish detailed reports about Jews who allegedly used every means at their disposal to deter coreligionists from carrying through with their intention to convert, using, for example, the case of a 32-year-old widow of Györszentiván, Anna Weisz, in 1854 or that of a butcher from Balassagyarmat in 1858.¹⁶ At the same time, in the capital city, converted and unconverted Jewish members of the nascent modern middle class worked regularly alongside one another in diverse associations, such as the Pester Lloyd Society founded in 1853, the editorial committee that oversaw the publication of the *Pester Lloyd* daily launched in 1854, the Pannónia insurance company established in 1861, or the various philanthropic organizations that operated in Pest.¹⁷

With the exception of Móric Rosenthal and Lajos Arányi, only at the turn of the twentieth century did contemporaries start to express their views regarding Jewish attitudes toward converts. In this case, “contemporaries” refers almost exclusively to Neolog intellectuals—here meaning rabbis and Jewish journalists, editors, and scholars who took an active part in the life of the Neolog community. We found only two examples of Christian contemporaries expressing their opinion on the question. In 1893, Géza Kenedi, the editor of the widely read liberal daily *Pesti Hírlap*, wrote in response to a letter sent to the newspaper (presumably by a middle-class convert) that one of the “undeniable” difficulties of conversion resided in the fact that “Israelite society, particularly its more pious portion, turns its back on the family of the convert.”¹⁸ As far as wealthy Jews were concerned, the ironic perception offered by playwright and author Ferenc Herczeg was diametrically different. In 1900, Herczeg published a feuilleton

¹⁵ Vera Bácskai, *A vállalkozók előfutárai: Nagykereskedők a reformkori Pesten* [The precursors of entrepreneurs: Wholesale traders in Reform-era Pest] (Budapest: Magvető, 1989). 148, 150; Bernát Mandl, “Két tragikus zsidó asszony” [The tragic tale of two Jewish women], *Egyenlőség*, April 9, 1921, 11.

¹⁶ “Egyházi tudósítások” [Ecclesiastical reports] *Religio*, July 13, 1854, 46; “Egyházi tudósítások” [Ecclesiastical reports] *Religio*, January 19, 1858, 50.

¹⁷ Antal Deutsch, *A Pesti Lloyd-Társulat 1853–1903* [The Pester Lloyd Society] (Budapest: A Pesti Lloyd-Társulat Könyvnyomdája, 1903), 239; Péter Busbach, *Egy viharos emberöltő: Korrajz* [The stormy tale of a generation] (Budapest: Kilián Frigyes Bizománya, 1898–1899), vol. 2, 111; “A ‘Pannónia’ című magyar viszontbiztosító-társaság” [The Hungarian “Pannónia” mutual insurance company], *Vasárnapi Újság*, September 22, 1861, 452; “Napi hírek” [Daily news], *Szépirodalmi Közlöny*, May 6, 1858, 1490.

¹⁸ “Szerkesztői üzenetek” [Editorial notes], *Pesti Hírlap*, October 12, 1893, 20.

in his own weekly paper, the conservative-liberal *Új Idők*. In the feuilleton, a recurring fictional character of his (Mrs. Horkay, a provincial landowner of noble descent) described the first ball held at the home of her neighbors, the „Jewish agrarian” Kapler family who had acquired nobility and owned an estate nearly forty times larger than her own. Although “flirtatious, cheeky women and boisterous gentry girls” also appeared at the ball, Mrs. Horkay could not be fooled: “Apart from myself, the Christians there were also Jews.”¹⁹ In Herczeg’s feuilleton, unconverted and converted Jews mixed with one another—indeed, they were members of the same milieu.

If Herczeg presented this casual mixing of Jews and apostates in a debonair way, the contributors to *Egyenlőség*, the most widely circulated Jewish weekly, found it utterly scandalous, viewing it as bitter evidence of the decay of traditional Jewish values and the lack of self-esteem among modern Jews. Until the first years of the 1900s, Neolog intellectuals urged Jews to sever all social relations with converts; not only because they were perjurers who changed their faith for despicably opportunistic motives and traitors who betrayed their people, but also because they represented a threat to all Jews. As Miksa Szabolcsi, editor-in-chief and owner of *Egyenlőség* wrote in 1903: “In those families from which one *meshumad* springs forth, another *meshumad* shall arise. . . . Wherever the *meshumad* gains entry, he shall propagate *shmad*, that is, eradication, the spirit of eradicating Jews.”²⁰ Vis-à-vis the one “who had excluded himself forever from the bounds of his former coreligionists,” declared Chief Rabbi of Buda Arnold Kiss in 1902, “who had fled like a miserable rat from a ship that he believes to be sinking,” and had sacrificed his past and honor for material advantages, exclusion was the only conceivable attitude. The Chief Rabbi concluded with the rhetorical question, “who shall receive in his abode pestilence, contagion, and moral abomination?”²¹

Just as with Miksa Szabolcsi, the unusually coarse tone struck by the Chief Rabbi of Buda stemmed from his belief that his fellow Jews were becoming unacceptably welcoming towards converts:

Apostasy is no longer a sin among us. Those gentlemen . . . who trampled upon our Holy Scriptures, who branded as a lie that for which our forefathers died at the stake, who besmirched our centuries-old banner, they sit down at our table with amiable faces, knock upon the door of our room, occupy

¹⁹ [Ferenc Herczeg], “Horkayné a kaszinóban: Ellesett párbeszéddek” [Mrs. Horkay at the Casino: Overheard conversations] *Új Idők*, March 4, 1900, 216–17.

²⁰ Miksa Szabolcsi, “Meturgeman: Megjegyzések egy lemondó levélre” [Meturgeman: Notes on a resignation letter], *Egyenlőség* February 15, 1903, 4.

²¹ Arnold Kiss, “Hitehagyottak” [Apostates], *Egyenlőség*, October 19, 1902, supplement, 1–3.

a place at the pure table of our family hearth, clasp our hand, and pretend that nothing happened, only a meaningless formality, a trifle, a mere nothing about which it is not worth talking. And we continue to clasp their hand as if indeed nothing had happened.²²

This kind of complaint first appeared in the Jewish press in the early 1900s. It was probably connected to the alarm raised by the growing number of converts shown in the official statistical data published from 1896 onward. As Miksa Szabolcsi wrote in 1903: “Today the *meshumad* is a *Respekstperson* and Jews constitute his court.”²³ One year later, Rabbinical Seminary student Andor Gábor stated in *Egyenlőség* that “the Jewish shoulders that lifted the convert continue to remain below him.”²⁴ Unsurprisingly, the charge was most often directed at upper-class Jews. During the summer of 1908, four young painters went hand in hand to the Pest Jewish Community’s rabbinical office to announce their withdrawal from the Jewish religion, as required by law.²⁵ The artists justified their decision with the hope that their Christian status would help them find Christian benefactors. *Egyenlőség* speculated that the painters were also aware that conversion would not deprive them of the support of Jewish patrons of the arts: “Do they experience that well-to-do Jews who support the arts turn away in anger and contempt from artists who made business out of their religion? They could not have experienced this. Rather they could have seen the opposite. Converts are coddled.”²⁶

Egyenlőség repeatedly castigated the leadership of the Pest Jewish Community for accepting among its members wealthy Jews who had authorized or even supported the baptism of their children.²⁷ However, the accusation of sinful benevolence toward “renegades” was not restricted to the upper strata of Jewish society. The Neolog press extended its criticism to all the Jews of Budapest, noting with dismay that in many instances the witnesses of those who declared

²² Ibid., 2.

²³ Szabolcsi, “Meturgeman: Megjegyzések egy lemondó levélre,” 4.

²⁴ Ábrahám [Andor Gábor], “Kitérések” [Conversions], *Egyenlőség*, July 24, 1904, 3–4.

²⁵ Hungarian state laws only regulated the passing from one religion to another in 1895. From then on, before getting baptized, a Jew had to declare his intention to leave his religion two times at the rabbinate of the Jewish community located at his place of residence. On the regulation of conversions in Hungary, see Konrád, *Zsidóságon innen és túl*, 184–204.

²⁶ Miksa Szabolcsi, “Meturgeman: Vallással csereberélő művészek” [Meturgeman: Artists dickering with religions], *Egyenlőség*, August 2, 1908, 5.

²⁷ Miklós Hajdu, “A lélekvásár” [The soul market], *Egyenlőség*, August 27, 1905, 2.

their intention to convert at the rabbinical office were also Jews, friends, or even fathers, who accompanied their sons and daughters on this road of betrayal.²⁸

In later years, *Egyenlőség* moderated its previous call for total ostracism toward converts to the demand that no unbaptized Jews “who in his family not only tolerated but promoted the separation from the Jewish religion” be permitted to occupy positions of leadership within the Jewish community. The old complaint nevertheless endured; this very same 1909 article contended that for young Jews pondering conversion, the sinful indulgence of their coreligionists made the temptation only more alluring. As the anonymous author noted: “Why would they refrain from attempting to expand their latitude for success if they can do it without suffering any prejudice?”²⁹

However, benevolent neutrality toward converts was not as widespread among Jews as the Neolog intellectuals claimed. In joke books, short stories, dramas, and novels published by Hungarian Jews at the turn of the twentieth century, the figure of the convert was almost always portrayed in a negative—or, at best, ridiculous—light, depicted as someone who chose baptism for opportunistic reasons, then attempted to conceal his origins.³⁰

According to a reader’s letter published in *Pesti Hírlap* in 1895, Jews considered conversion to be unprincipled. The young man, who claimed to speak on behalf of the “modern Israelite youth,” grabbed the pen to protest the refusal of Neolog rabbis to bless mixed marriage couples who married civilly. “For us the rabbis are nothing and nobody,” exclaimed the young man, who contended that his generation had nothing to do with “the Bible or other religious laws, which can only be regarded as the codices of bygone centuries.” All “formal aspects” of the Jewish religion had to be sacrificed on the altar of “Hungarian national progress,” all the more so since the “implacable rule of nature” dictated that “the larger mass swallows, dissolves, amalgamates into itself, and assimilates the smaller one.” Nevertheless, the young man rejected the idea of conversion precisely because of the moral judgement of his coreligionists, who “today regard this to be a question of character.”³¹

²⁸ Miksa Szabolcsi, “Hívek egylete” [Association of the faithful], *Egyenlőség*, February 8, 1903, 1; Pártközi [Mór Fényes], “Még egyszer az orthodox-neológ kérdéshez” [Once again on the Orthodox–Neolog question], *Hitközségi Szemle* 3, no. 6 (1911): 215.

²⁹ “Elszakadók és renegátok-toborzók” [Secessionists and renegade-recruiters], *Egyenlőség*, March 7, 1909, 3.

³⁰ This was, for instance, how the dramatist and writer Ferenc Molnár depicted the protagonist of his first novel published in 1901. See Ferenc Molnár, *Az éhes város* [The hungry city] (Budapest: Révai, 1901).

³¹ “Izraelita ultramontanizmus: Dr. Erasmus levele” [Israelite ultramontanism: A letter from Dr. Erasmus], *Pesti Hírlap*, December 17, 1895, 3.

Evidence both refutes and supports the young man's claims. Yet all in all, contrary to the perception of Neolog intellectuals, it seems that broad segments of Neolog Jewry felt a strong antipathy towards converts. We do not mean to say that the complaints appearing in the Neolog press were unfounded. The fact that in the final decades of the Dual Monarchy, some influential and wealthy Jews who had supported the conversion of their (usually female) children kept their leadership positions in Jewish communities attests to the dramatic erosion of traditional Jewish values. In Budapest, wholesaler and landowner Henrik Schosberger remained a member of the representative body of the Pest *Chevra Kadisha* after the conversions of his daughters Otilia and Ilona, who were baptized in 1882 and 1883 respectively in order to marry Hungarian aristocrats. Schosberger's wife also retained her position within the Pest Israelite Women's Association. Vilmos Ormody, CEO of the First Hungarian General Insurance Company, likewise retained his positions of leadership within various Jewish institutions following the conversion of his only daughter Rose, who converted to Catholicism in 1897 to marry a hussar lieutenant. The three daughters of Ferenc Chorin Sr., the grandson of Rabbi Aaron Chorin, all converted between 1899 and 1914, unsurprisingly to contract socially advantageous marriages. Chorin himself, who served eight terms in the House of Representatives and received lifetime appointment to the Upper House in 1902, converted near the end of his life in 1925. Yet in 1913, he was still a member of the Pest Jewish Community's governing body and remained on the directory board of the National Hungarian Israelite Public Fund until 1916.

This kind of institutional tolerance towards parents of converts was not confined to Budapest. In 1903, *Egyenlőség* chastised an unnamed Jewish women's association in provincial Hungary that had not excluded a member who supported the conversion of her daughter and grandchildren.³² In 1911, the Neolog weekly pilloried the Jewish community of Fiume (today, Rijeka, Croatia). Its president, the lawyer Henrik Sachs, resigned after he had approved his daughter's conversion; a necessary sacrifice for an extremely beneficial marriage with a Viennese Catholic entrepreneur 42 years her senior. Yet the community members unanimously reelected Sachs who took back his office.³³

Regarding Jewish aversion towards converts, a childhood incident recounted by bookseller Miklós Práger in his memoirs is all the more telling about Hungarian Orthodox Jewry's attitude to "apostates." The more than mild orthodoxy of the Jewish community of Kiskunhalas, located near Budapest, was light-years away from the ultraorthodoxy of *Unterland* Jews, yet Práger, who was born in 1904,

³² Miksa Szabolcsi, "Meturgeman: Vidéki nőegylet" [Meturgeman: A rural women's society] *Egyenlőség*, October 18, 1903, 7.

³³ Sz. M. [Miksa Szabolcsi], "Botrány" [Scandal], *Egyenlőség*, February 12, 1911, 9.

recalled how he and his little schoolmates, who were playing in front of the school during recess, ran back into their classroom in horror when they caught sight of the son of a local beer wholesaler whom they had heard would come back to his hometown to declare at the *dayan's* office his intention to withdraw from the Jewish religion.³⁴

Yet aversion toward apostates was far from being confined to Orthodox Jews. In September 1904, *Egyenlőség* reported that some of the mostly poor Jews attending the outdoor religious service for the High Holidays organized at the Budapest City Park by the Pest Jewish Community pummeled a missionary that appeared there to preach the word of Christ, and who, to his misfortune, “clearly bore on his face the traces of his previous religious affiliation.”³⁵ Even more significant was the speech that Democratic Party leader Vilmos Vázsonyi delivered to the predominantly Jewish petty-bourgeois audience at a party meeting in Budapest on April 27, 1912. Vázsonyi, who had won four consecutive elections to the House of Representatives since 1901, devoted his speech to denigrating the young Bourgeois Radicals. He depicted the movement’s leaders as political extremists and cloistered scholars without any empirical knowledge of real Hungarian society. Among the verbal brickbats he threw at them, Vázsonyi did not neglect to mention that “these shrewd young fellows . . . are also astute in that they exchanged their faith for peanuts and chose baptism as the first step on their way to free thinking.”³⁶ Vázsonyi, who knew his supporters well, evidently believed that this kind of statement would arouse or intensify their antipathy toward his political competitors.

The emotional drive behind this antipathy would vary. The recollections of poet and writer Lajos Hollós suggest that in the case of the Jews of Óbuda, such aversion was still rooted in traditional hostility toward converts. Lajos Hollós was born in 1905, the fourth and last child of Mózes Weisz and Ida Multas. Mózes Weisz was known among the Jews of Óbuda as a carouser who squandered much of the revenue derived from the family’s coffee house. At the time of Lajos’s birth, Weisz announced to customers at the coffee house—perhaps merely to create a

³⁴ Magyar Zsidó Múzeum és Levéltár (MZsML), Práger Miklós emlékei, XIX: Hagyaték.

³⁵ “A főnneppek” [The main holidays], *Egyenlőség*, September 25, 1904, 8.

³⁶ Hugó Csergő, and József Balassa, eds., *Vázsonyi Vilmos beszédei és írásai* [Speeches and writings by Vilmos Vázsonyi] (Budapest: Az Országos Vázsonyi-Emlékbizottság kiadása, 1927), vol. 1, 466–71. On Vázsonyi’s attitude toward bourgeois radicals, see Attila Novák, “Két világ – két nézet? Vázsonyi Vilmos és a polgári radikálisok (1910–1912)” [Two worlds—two worldviews? Vilmos Vázsonyi and the bourgeois radicals (1910–1912)] *Történelmi Szemle* 50, no. 3 (2008): 335–57. On the identity dilemmas of the bourgeois radical leader Oszkár Jászi, baptized by his parents at the age of six in 1881, see György Litván, *A Twentieth-Century Prophet: Oscar Jászi 1875–1957* (trans. Tim Wilkinson) (Budapest–New York: CEU Press, 2006), 3–4, 84–86, 115–18, 379; Konrád, *Zsidóságon innen és túl*, 382–83, 533–38.

scandal—that he would have his newborn son baptized. Word of Mózes Weisz’s intention spread quickly among the Jews of Óbuda, who, although aware that he never went to synagogue and did not observe any religious laws at home, considered the baptizing of his son to be an unacceptable provocation and a dishonor affecting the whole community. The next day, the notary and two leading officials from the Jewish community of Óbuda appeared at the family coffee house to dissuade Weisz from carrying through with his intention. He refused to meet with them. A couple of his Christian friends visited him at the behest of the Jewish community of Óbuda to appeal to his better instincts, but it was to no avail. The day after, Illés Adler, the Chief Rabbi of the Jewish community himself visited Weisz to bring him back on the right path, but his harangue fell upon deaf ears. At the local parish, however, Mózes Weisz was told that according to the law, he could baptize his son only if he converted too. As he was unwilling to do so, he decided that he would then “only” abstain from having his son circumcised. Yet it seems that the Jews of Óbuda considered this to be only a slightly lesser sin. Even the extremely wealthy and influential industrialist Leó Buday-Goldberger intervened on behalf of the Jewish community to convince Weisz to have his son circumcised, but Weisz remained intractable. As a result, the Jews of Óbuda boycotted the family’s coffee house.³⁷

The high-school classmates of István Kulcsár did not like converts either, though in their case, their antipathy, as well as his, stemmed from different sentiments. Most of Kulcsár’s classmates were children of suburban tradesmen and artisans. The Jews among them, including Kulcsár himself, had received very little religious education at home and scorned the obligatory religious instruction and services held for high-school students. Yet neither Kulcsár nor his classmates, who entered high school at the beginning of World War I, regarded Jewish converts with indifference. As Kulcsár recalled:

Christians of Jewish origin were the target of jokes among Jews. They investigated the pasts of their parents with great diligence and sometimes even mentioned this in front of them. Once one of the Jewish boys—my only Jewish pal and the most impudent kid in the class—asked our converted homeroom teacher after Yom Kippur if he had fasted. We felt some kind of malignant satisfaction toward converts: “What are you swaggering about, you are exactly like me.”³⁸

³⁷ Lajos Hollós Korvin, *Óbudai búcsú: Önéletrajzi elbeszélések* [Farewell in Óbuda: Autobiographical stories] (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1961), 29–49.

³⁸ Balázs Körmendi [István Kulcsár], *Zsidó gyónás* [Jewish confession] (Budapest: Interart, 1990), 77–78.

Kulcsár and his Jewish classmates were much more alienated from their Jewish identity than the Jews of Óbuda. For these students, the community of the Jews meant close to nothing—yet, although for different reasons, they too condemned those who had abandoned it.

Due to the almost total absence of Jewish *gymnasiums*,³⁹ Jewish high school students could not avoid the company of converted schoolmates. In the same way, there was hardly any possibility for Jews to shun contact with converts in the numerous professional organizations, charitable, and cultural associations that made up the fabric of social life in the Hungary of the Dual Monarchy. The intimate sphere of family life remained the social frame within which Jews still had the greatest latitude to relate to converted family members in accordance with their personal feelings and convictions. This probably explains why, as we shall see in the concluding part of this paper, this most intimate sphere was also the one where attitudes toward converts (or those contemplating conversion) were the most diverse, ranging from warm support to tragic repudiation.

To begin with the obvious, relations between upper-class Jews and their children (generally, their daughters) for whom they permitted or encouraged the conversion, underwent little if any change after the conversion had in fact occurred. In 1882, Ottilia Schosberger married Baron Pál Bornemisza the day after she converted to Catholicism. Not only did her entire family attend the wedding, men even showed up wearing the so-called *díszmagyar*, which was the traditional, uniform-inspired Hungarian formal attire.⁴⁰ Considering such a collective and symbolic manifestation of assent and support, it is highly improbable that the unconverted Schosbergers would have subsequently avoided the company of the baroness. In 1904, Manfréd Weiss, one of the most prominent Hungarian industrialists, expressed reservations about the betrothal of his daughter Elza to the convert Alfréd Mauthner. According to Manfréd Weiss's granddaughter, "Grandfather Weiss told his daughter: a man who leaves his religion has no character. Therefore, he objected not only that his future son-in-law was not Jewish, but also that he had changed his religion."⁴¹ Nevertheless, Manfréd Weiss approved the marriage under the condition that the couple would raise their children as Jews. That was indeed how it happened until the pogroms following the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919,

³⁹ In the Dualist era, the tiny high school section at the Rabbinical Seminary of Budapest was the only Jewish gymnasium in Hungary. Nevertheless, there was another Jewish secondary school, a *rediskola* (Realschule) in Vágújhely.

⁴⁰ *Jüdische Delikatessen*. Öregebb Bonyhád Perczel István tulajdona. OSZK Kt. Oct. Hung. 730/23, 70. f.

⁴¹ Gabriella Mauthner, "Meg kell mondanom mindenkinek, hová tartozom" [I must tell everybody where I belong], *Múlt és Jövő* 11, no. 3–4 (2000): 237.

which a large part of the Hungarian public viewed as “Jewish.” The so-called White Terror prompted an unprecedented wave of baptisms. The flight from Judaism was particularly dramatic among members of the Jewish economic elite.⁴² Manfréd Weiss remained in the fold, but he told his daughter that he would no longer oppose the conversion of her children. Elza baptized her four children and seized the opportunity to follow them into the Catholic Church.⁴³ A final example is offered by József Lukács, the ennobled banker father of the philosopher György Lukács. The son converted to Lutheranism in 1907 at the age of 22. As their correspondence clearly attests, his apostasy did not have any impact on his father’s esteem and solicitous affection.⁴⁴

By marrying the legal scholar Bódog Somló in 1907, Margit Bánóczi, the daughter of literary scholar József Bánóczi, also married a converted Jew.⁴⁵ We do not know how József Bánóczi and his wife initially reacted to their daughter’s intention to marry Somló, but the warm letters the young man wrote to his in-laws, in which he greeted them as “Dear Papa” and “Dear Mama,” attest to their cordial relations. Somló even kept in touch with his wife’s parents following his divorce in 1912.⁴⁶ If the friendly relations between József Bánóczi, who played a central role in the life of the Neolog Jewish community, and his converted son-in-law may be surprising, the attitude of writer and journalist Tamás Kóbor was even more so. Indeed, Kóbor, who wrote the editorials of *Egyenlőség* in the early 1900s and fully embraced his Jewishness throughout his life, explicitly urged his daughter Noémi to marry the composer and music historian Antal Molnár, a recent convert to Calvinism. The couple was betrothed in 1915, but three years later, after a lengthy period of inner struggle, Antal Molnár broke off his engagement. In a letter written shortly afterwards to his mother on July 29, 1918, he recalled that at the beginning of his engagement to Noémi, he had informed his prospective father-in-law that “the pecuniary issue also played an important role” in his marriage plans, to which Kóbor had responded that Molnár should only make his daughter happy and leave the rest to him. This “pecuniary issue” was the precise reason why Molnár hesitated so long. As he wrote to his mother a few days earlier on July 23, while Kóbor was still trying to

⁴² Todd M. Endelman, *Leaving the Jewish Fold: Conversion and Radical Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (Princeton–Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 150–51.

⁴³ Mauthner, “Meg kell mondanom,” 237–38.

⁴⁴ Júlia Bendl, *Lukács György élete a századfordulótól 1918-ig* [The life of György Lukács from the turn of the century to 1918] (Budapest: Scientia Humana, 1994), 156–57, 165–66, 169–71, 173–74. On Lukács’s road to conversion, see Konrád, *Zsidóságon innen és túl*, 404–409.

⁴⁵ Somló had converted to Catholicism in 1890 at the age of 17. On Somló, see Konrád, *Zsidóságon innen és túl*, 400–402.

⁴⁶ Magyar Zsidó Múzeum és Levéltár (MZsML), Bánóczi József hagyatéka, XIX-5

convince him to abide by his engagement, “Kóbor will get me any kind of job he wants to get me, he can make me as rich as I want.”⁴⁷ The question to which we do not have the answer is why the assertive Jewish Kóbor wanted so desperately to have this talented but converted and greedy young man as his son-in-law.

In addition to members of the Jewish economic and cultural elite, an immeasurable portion of lower-class Jews also adopted a lenient attitude toward converted family members. Born in a small village in southern Hungary, Miksa Fenyő, who cofounded the modernist literary review *Nyugat* in 1908, moved to Budapest in 1887 at the age of 10 to live with the nine-member family of his paternal uncle who operated a clothing store. The family, who lived in a two-room apartment, still kept a kosher kitchen, a sign of enduring commitment to traditional religious values. Yet the young Fenyő was authorized to make regular Sunday visits to his maternal uncle, who had converted in order to marry a music-hall singer. The family of Fenyő’s paternal uncle resented his conversion (at least as much as they resented his marriage to a woman of dubious character), but family relations were maintained.⁴⁸ In the equally modest but completely secularized family of the social scientist and anarcho-syndicalist Ervin Szabó, who had become fatherless at a young age, his conversion in 1895 to Calvinism at age 18 aroused no opposition whatsoever. Szabó, who evidently conceived his conversion as a strategic move intended to facilitate his worldly ambitions, took care to convert shortly before he finished high school so that his secondary-school diploma would already indicate his new denominational status. His family approved the step; his mother herself converted to Lutheranism in 1911.⁴⁹

The conversion in 1920 of the psychiatrist István Kulcsár at the age of 19 is also worth mentioning, though it took place slightly after the period under examination here. In his case, it was in fact his mother’s family who instigated his conversion. Indeed, among his maternal relatives, “conversion had been a customary thing for generations and thus there were no obstacles to it,” nor did Kulcsár’s tailor father voice any objection to his conversion. Kulcsár went to the rabbinate of the Pest Jewish Community to announce his intention to convert in the presence of his mother and one of his uncles, both of whom remained unconverted.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ János Demény, ed., *Boëthius boldog fiatalsága: Molnár Antal leveleiből és írásából* [The happy youth of Boethius: Selections from the letters and writings of Antal Molnár] (Budapest: Magvető, 1989), 368, 372.

⁴⁸ Miksa Fenyő, *Önéletrajzom* [My autobiography] (Budapest: Argumentum Kiadó, 1994), 49, 94–95, 98.

⁴⁹ György Litván, *Szabó Ervin, a szocializmus moralistája* [Ervin Szabó, the moralist of socialism] (Budapest: Századvég, 1993).

⁵⁰ Körmendi, *Zsidó gyónás*, 89–90.

When we turn our attention to more hostile reactions to the conversion of family members, examples concerning the Hungarian Jewish upper class are certainly rarer, but not missing altogether. The philanthropist Sándor Wahrmann, the older brother of the famous wholesaler, financial entrepreneur, and politician Mór Wahrmann, died a bachelor in 1899. In his will dated June 29, 1893, he left 805,000 krone to various Jewish causes. He bequeathed the remainder of his estate to three of his four siblings, but left out the fourth one, her sister Amália, whose children (with one exception) all became Christians; to this one unconverted nephew, Sándor Wahrmann left 200,000 krone. His brother Mór Wahrmann's three children were also left out of his will, though at that time only two of them, Ernő and Richárd, had converted; Mór Wahrmann's daughter Renée would follow suit four years later, becoming a Calvinist in 1898.⁵¹ Renée's conversion had its own consequence. As her three-year-old daughter automatically followed her into her new faith, the little girl's uncle, the childless Lajos Krausz, disinherited her, leaving one million krone to charitable works, with one third of the sum going to Jewish philanthropic institutions.⁵² To mention another example, *Egyenlőség* made the unverifiable claim that the Hatvany-Deutsch family, one of the wealthiest and most illustrious Jewish families of Hungary, desperately attempted to dissuade one of their members, the sportsman Károly Hatvany-Deutsch, to leave the fold. When he ultimately converted to Catholicism with his wife and children in 1910, his relatives allegedly severed all relations with him and forced Károly to leave the family company.⁵³

Putting aside the Budapest Jewish elites of the 1900s, let us return to the lower-class Jewish homes of the 1870s in the *Terézváros* district of the capital city. Tamás Kóbor grew up in this neighborhood in a family of seven. His father, a devout tinsmith, found employment for his 18-year-old daughter Anna as a domestic servant at the nearby home of his wife's sickly and elderly brother. Anna suffered greatly in this servile position and beseeched her parents in vain to permit her to return home. One day, she escaped from her uncle's house and

⁵¹ Weiser Károly közjegyző iratai: 1893, Wahrmann Sándor végrendelete. BFL. VII.185. – 1893 – 1648. Konrád, *Zsidóságon innen és túl*, 472–75.

⁵² "Társadalmi szemle" [Societal review], *Magyar-Zsidó Szemle* 22, no. 3. (1905): 213–18. 215. György Kövér, "Liedemann és Wahrmann: 19. századi kereskedő-bankár családi stratégiák" [Liedemann and Wahrmann: Strategies by 19th-century merchant-banker families], in *A felhalmozás íve: Társadalom- és gazdaságtörténeti tanulmányok* [The curve of accumulation: Studies in social and economic history] (Budapest: Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó, 2002), 42.

⁵³ Mardochái Hajehudi [Miksa Szabolcsi], "A szeretet jegyében" [In the name of love], *Egyenlőség*, January 16, 1910, 10; Miksa Szabolcsi, "Meturgeman: M–R." [Meturgeman: M–R], *Egyenlőség*, January 23, 1910, 12. Though dates do not perfectly match, we do know that Károly did not take part in the management of the company from 1909 to 1935. György Kövér, "Deutsch Ig. és fia" [Ig. Deutsch and son], in *A Hatvanyak emlékezete* [The memory of the Hatvany], ed. Horváth László (Hatvan: Hatvany Lajos Múzeum, 2003), 18.

disappeared; a few weeks later, the news came that she had converted to Catholicism and become a nun. Kóbor's parents lit a memorial candle and, sitting on footstools, wept and prayed in mourning for their daughter, whom they regarded as deceased. Following the days of mourning, Kóbor wrote, "my father left his footstool and resumed his old life, though more drably, more dejectedly, more bitterly. It was forbidden to mention Anna's name anymore and nobody indeed mentioned her."⁵⁴

We have found no evidence of similar animosity toward converts in Jewish lower-class families at the beginning of the twentieth century. This does not mean that such cases did not occur, since even in usually more secularized middle-class families, conversion, or the simple prospect of it, led sometimes to serious conflict, disinheritance, or even tragedy. The story recalled in his family memoirs by writer Géza Hegedüs was indeed a tragic one. At the time of his birth in 1912, his father, the businessman Andor Hegedüs, confessed to his wife that if not for his Orthodox Jewish relatives, he would convert to Catholicism with her and their children. He surely knew what he was talking about. Andor Hegedüs was raised with his five brothers in Nagyvárad (today Oradea, Romania) by a strictly observant father, a cobbler and then shoe retailer, who joined the local Orthodox Jewish religious community following the Neolog–Orthodox schism of 1869. Though some of his sons distanced themselves from his traditional ways, when he died in 1908, the whole family observed the traditional one-week mourning period. Shortly after returning to his home in Szombathely, Miksa, one of Andor's brothers, wrote a letter to their mother informing her that he had fallen in love with a Catholic woman and would convert to marry her. The eldest brother, Arnold, responded to Miksa in his capacity as the new head of the family: "It [the letter] essentially said that the family would rather know him dead than an apostate," and that if he converted, "they would sit a *shiva* for him just as they would for a dead person, though if they saw him alive they would spit at his feet." After receiving his brother's letter, Miksa shot himself. In his will, he bequeathed the pistol to Arnold, who used it to shoot himself as well; however, unlike his younger brother, he survived his attempted suicide.⁵⁵

The family of Ignác Hoffmann, born in Szombathely in 1855, had moved away from traditional piety much earlier than the Hegedüs family, as a painting of Hoffmann's beardless paternal grandfather indicates. Hoffmann's father opened a general store in 1847 before joining the Hungarian national guard during the 1848 revolution. He later built a vinegar factory, the management

⁵⁴ Tamás Kóbor, *Ki a ghettoából* [Out of the ghetto] (Budapest: Franklin-Társulat, 1911), vol. 1, 22–26, 132–34. Quote from page 134.

⁵⁵ Géza Hegedüs, *Előjátékok egy önéletrajzhoz* [Preludes to an autobiography] (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1982), 70–72, 321.

of which Ignác Hoffmann and his brother Henrik assumed in the 1890s. Ignác Hoffmann also served as superintendent (*Vorsteher*) of the Neolog community in Szombathely and remained a member of the managing board of the local *Chevra Kadisha* for thirty years. He usually attended synagogue on Fridays and always during the high holidays. Although he fasted on Yom Kippur, he still did take time between prayers to read the business mail that was brought to him. During the 1910s, Hoffmann's Frankfurt-born sister-in-law attempted to persuade his brother, a military physician named Lajos, to convert. In his diary-memoirs written between 1940 and 1944, which were addressed to his children, Hoffmann's son János, murdered at Auschwitz in 1944, wrote the following about this episode:

Uncle Lajos was not glad about this idea, because he had great regard for the honor of his coreligionists. . . . However, Aunt Mally had her mind set on conversion—if I remember correctly, immediately before the birth of her first child. And this is when the unforgettable and staggering incident took place that my father, who worshipped his younger brother and respected his sister-in-law, ordered Aunt Mally to leave the house and declared that if he [Lajos] converted, he did not want to have any more contact with him. I cannot tell whether my father's dramatic actions had such an effect or if it was something else, but the family of Lajos Hoffmann remained Jewish.⁵⁶

Moving increasingly away from tragedy to more moderate degrees of discord, we find the case of leaseholder József Goldschmied of Dombóvár. His father Lipót had been a man well versed in Jewish texts. One of his brothers became a rabbi and another served as the president of the Status Quo Ante community of Dombóvár at the beginning of the 1900s. József himself filled leadership positions in the local community, as well as in the *Chevra Kadisha* of the small town. An article published in the Zionist *Zsidó Szemle* in 1917 characterized Dombóvár as one of the most uncaring Jewish communities.⁵⁷ It may have been true; however, József Goldschmied, who died in 1916, stipulated in his will that if his grandchildren renounced their faith (or even changed their surname), they would be disinherited.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ János Hoffmann, *Ködkárpit: Egy zsidó polgár feljegyzései 1940–1944* [A tapestry of fog: The notes of a Jewish Burgher, 1940–44] (Szombathely: Szombathely Megyei Jogú Város kiadványa, 2001), 111.

⁵⁷ "Dombóvár." *Zsidó Szemle*, December 28, 1917, 7.

⁵⁸ Istvánné Takács, *A dombóvári zsidóság története* [The history of the Jews of Dombóvár] (Dombóvár: Dombóvári Városszépítő és Városvédő Egyesület, 2007), 80, 105.

Is it coincidental that we know of only one case in which a Hungarian Jewish intellectual demonstrated animosity toward a converted family member? Following the death of the prominent writer Sándor Bródy in 1924, Irén Sas published an article in *Múlt és Jövő*, a cultural Zionist monthly modelled on the German Jewish *Ost und West*, in which she quoted at length from a conversation she had had with Bródy four years earlier. At that time, Sas recalled, Bródy had “returned to his Jewishness” as a result of the violent upsurge of antisemitism. Sas was certainly biased, but there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of her account. She quoted Bródy as having said in the course of their discussion: “I was not a good Jew before, but I now regard it as my most sacred duty to be one. Today being Jewish is not a laughing matter, one can neither joke about it nor steer clear of it. It is today the most serious and consequential problem and those who run away from it in these times of danger are contemptible and cowardly.” Bródy recounted the story of the sole convert in his family—a niece, who the context of the article suggests had adopted Christianity before World War I. According to Bródy, the young woman had visited him following her baptism and tearfully begged for his forgiveness, but to no avail: “She tried to grab my hand, she wanted to kiss it, but I did not let her. I chased her out of my room, I said not a single kind word to her, although my heart almost broke, I loved that girl so much.”⁵⁹

How many more stories could be told if it were possible to peer into the homes of Hungarian Jews at the dawn of the twentieth century? How much would this change the overall picture? In the absence of answers, we would rather emphasize the diversity of reactions reflected in the sources which we do have. With the passage of time, an increasingly smaller proportion of acculturating Hungarian Jews regarded the conversion of their coreligionists, colleagues, acquaintances, and family members as a cardinal sin. Most Jews probably continued to condemn conversion, but many no longer attributed great significance to it. Some Jews repudiated and disinherited converted family members; others reacted with indifference or some slight understanding, while still others explicitly supported them. If one thing is certain, it is that speaking of a supposedly more or less homogenous Neolog Jewish identity in the Dualist era is to ignore that by the dawn of the twentieth century, Neolog Jewry had lost its internal cultural cohesion

⁵⁹ Irén Sas, “Néhány vonal Bródy Sándor portréjához” [A few lines to the portrait sketch of Sándor Bródy] *Múlt és Jövő* 14, no. 10 (1924): 302–304.

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András Kovács, Michael L. Miller, and Carsten L. Wilke

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