

COMING OUT: JEWISH IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY HUNGARY

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Abstract: To be a Jew in communist Hungary between 1948–1989 was to be a person carrying a stigma. Jewish identity was suppressed in public and in many cases in private. Since the demise of the communist regime Hungarian Jews have begun to proclaim their identity publicly. In short Jews are “coming out”. In this paper I describe the ways in which Jewish identity is expressed and I analyse the factors, both internal and external that have facilitated such expression.

Keywords: Hungarian Jews, Jewish identity, social transformation

Since 1989 central and eastern Europe have experienced rapid economic, political and social transformations. The subsequent social scene in these post-socialist societies has been one of uncertainty as the welfare state of the socialist societies has been swept away; transnational corporations have moved in; some countries, including Hungary, have joined NATO and aspire to join the EU; new intellectual currents have crossed borders such as the feminist movement; new religions have arrived (VÖRÖS and HADAS 1997). These rapid and profound changes have caused individuals and groups in post-socialist societies to reassess their positions. Citizens seek to comprehend these changes and also to fashion new identities, some based on old ideologies e.g. nationalism, and others based on capitalism which is born anew in eastern Europe. Women may embrace gender politics and religious groups may turn to formerly repressed and suppressed identities. Groups and individuals seek to harness their cultural capital and to seek allies in the re-negotiation of these identities (MARS 2000)

In this article I focus on the Jews of post-socialist Hungary.¹ First, I shall discuss the methodological problems of conducting anthropological research among Jews in

¹ This paper is based on research funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (Grant No. R000221736) entitled “The reconstruction of ethnic and religious identity among Jews in post-Communist Hungary”. My wife, Ági, acted as my research assistant and her help was invaluable. I acknowledge the assistance of my Swansea colleague, John Parker, for his rigorous criticism of the draft project. My Hungarian colleague, Mihály Sárkány, has been a constant source of encouragement and support since I first set foot with him on Hungarian soil in 1992. An earlier version of this article was delivered at the 3rd annual conference of Anthropology Wales in Tenby 1999. A revised version was prepared while I was a visiting Professor in the Department of Sociology and Social Policy at the Budapest University of Economic Sciences and Public Administration (Jan.–May 2000). I am grateful to the head of the Department, Professor Lengyel György and his colleagues for their support.

Hungary; second I shall address the recent history of the relationship between Hungary and its Jews; third I shall give an ethnographic description of both private and public expressions of Jewish identity; finally I shall analyse the reasons for the increased willingness of Hungarian Jews to express and assert their identity in the post-socialist world.

METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

A major problem for the sociologist of religion in Hungary is the lack of statistical data on religious affiliation since the census of 1949 the last to record such information. Sampling for 1992 gives figures of 67.8% Roman Catholic, 20.9% Calvinist, 4.2% Lutheran and 0% Jews.² Figures for Christian denominations approximate the pre-war numbers but the zero return for Jews represents a reduction from 4.3%. This can be attributed to the destruction of the *Shoah*; emigration in the post-war period from 1945–1948; and Jewish response to the 1956 uprising when about 200,000 Hungarians left the country, 10% of whom were Jews. Jews are reluctant to appear on any official list as Jews, a precaution reflecting the *Shoah* when they were rounded up and murdered on data drawn from registers of births. Before World War II birth certificates recorded religious affiliation, usually Catholic, Calvinist, Lutheran, Jew but occasionally Orthodox, Baptist or Muslim. It is noteworthy that the *Social Portrait of Hungary*, published in English by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office in 1996, contains no data on religion. However it does have a section 'Nationality and Ethnic Groups' (pp. 95–101) from which Jews are absent being defined by the state and by themselves as a religious grouping.³

In a recent essay 'Denomination and Religious Practice', Tomka and Harcsa report a survey figure of 0.2% Jews in the Hungarian population, approximately 20,000 persons (TOMKA and HARCSA 1999: 63). Because of this low figure they focus on the major Christian denominations, but report 'the most important new phenomenon is the emergence and growth in the population of those not affiliated to any church' (TOMKA and HARCSA 1999: 71). However, while this trend continued under Communism it has since diminished.

The foremost scholar on Jews in contemporary Hungary, is Géza Komoróczy, Director of the Centre for Jewish Studies at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, established in 1987 and which has had a significant role in the revival of Jewish identity and culture. At Oxford in 1995 he referred to a figure of 80,000 Jews given by Hungarian Jewish officials and rabbis and one of 200,000 supplied by Israeli authorities – this latter he contends 'hardly can be anything else but a publicist's pretentious exaggeration' (KOMORÓCZY 1995: 2). We might conclude, following Kolosi and Rose, that 'the

² The 1949 figures record 70.5% Roman Catholic; 21.9% Calvinist; 5.2% Lutheran; 1.5% Jewish (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, Table 1 [1993: 5]).

³ See MARS (1999: 26–27) for a discussion of Jews and their reluctance to be classified as a nationality in Hungary.

strength of religion varies with the method of measurement' (KOLOSI and ROSE 1999: 17). Komoróczy records that 7,000 Jews pay their tax to the Jewish Community and with their families may total 30,000 people (KOMORÓCZY 1995: 2). These he terms 'religious' Jews, though, observing correctly, that religion is not the only form of Jewish identity. In his opinion one should add a further 70,000 to 120,000 persons 'secular Jews, Jews of origin, sympathy or nostalgia' (KOMORÓCZY 1995: 5).

Currently András Kovács, a sociologist at Eötvös Loránd University is engaged on a survey of Jews in Hungary which may clarify actual numbers. Here I quote my earlier observation on the difficulties of locating Jews by statistical, formal methods:

Most Hungarian Jews remain cautious about identifying with the organised Jewish community during their lifetime and hence do not register as members, but do so posthumously when they request a Jewish burial. These are the Jews of silence, the subterranean Jews of Hungary who make research challenging and difficult (why should they make it easy?) for sociologists and social anthropologists. (MARS 1999: 32)

The data for this paper were gathered by typical anthropological methods based on fieldwork, an umbrella term that embraces diverse techniques. I spent seven months in Hungary in 1996 and a further five months in 1998. On both trips I was accompanied by my wife, Ági, an experienced research assistant, whose mother-tongue is Hungarian. We both engaged, jointly and separately, in participant-observation in various contexts – cultural, educational, political, recreational, religious and social; we both conducted, again jointly and separately, formal and informal interviews in English and Hebrew. My own knowledge of Hungarian, though sufficient for routine daily life, was not adequate for formal, structured interviews and so these were conducted in Hungarian by Ági with those interviewees who were not proficient in either English or Hebrew. Most of the research was conducted in Budapest where more than 90% of Hungary's Jews live, but we also visited, participated and interviewed in provincial towns and cities, e.g. Debrecen, Kisvárd, Miskolc, Salgótarján and Szeged.

In this paper I draw on Epstein's observation that the richest data in anthropological research derive from close personal contact in what he calls the 'intimate culture' as opposed to 'public culture' to which sociologists gain access by sample interviewing and questionnaires (EPSTEIN 1978: 111). Epstein makes the point that different methods yield different data in the study of ethnicity and social identity. Participant observation, supplemented by formal and semi-formal interviews and the scrutiny of documentary sources enable social anthropologists to gain qualitative data inaccessible by surveys and questionnaires.

HUNGARY AND ITS JEWS

Before tackling the question of contemporary Jewish identity we need to examine the relations between Hungary and its Jews prior to the creation of the Dual Kingdom and Jewish emancipation in 1867. I begin with the common experience of Jews in the 1848 Revolution. Jews, especially those of Pest, fought alongside their fellow Hungarians against the Habsburgs who imposed a massive financial penalty on them. Subsequently part of this fine was refunded and used to establish the Pest Rabbinical Seminary (CARMILLY-WEINBERGER 1986: 6).

In Diagram 1 I schematise the period between 1867 and 1996 in four phases. Though crude and capable of refined sub-division they serve my heuristic purpose.

Diagram 1

Regime	Habsburg 1867–1919	Horthy/Nazi 1920–1945	Communist 1945–1989	Post-communist 1990–
The nation-state and the Jews	Jews as a religion	Jews as aliens	De-Judaisation and suppression of all particularisms	Jewish diversity: Religious, ethnic, cultural
Dimensions of government policy	Civil rights in exchange for cultural magyarisation	Official anti-semitism	Universalism	Pluralism
Effects on Jews	Inclusion	Exclusion	A new start for survivors but isolation from Jewish past; from Israel and outside world	Inclusion and choice

In 1867 Jews were offered what Victor Karády (KARÁDY 1993a: 242) termed ‘a social contract’: they would receive civil rights in exchange for cultural magyarisation. This involved acquisition of the Hungarian language, acceptance of Hungarian names, and self-recognition as Hungarian citizens of the Jewish or Israelite religion. They were not regarded as an ethnic group nor as a nationality like Slovaks, Romanians or Serbs. This social contract benefited the Hungarian political elite since Jews were 5% of the kingdom, and, with the ethnic Magyars amounted to approximately half the population. The other half comprised the kingdom’s national minorities. By virtue of this contract Jews were included in and identified, even over-identified, with the Hungarian nation-state.

1920–1945 brought a different scenario. After the treaty of Trianon in 1920, Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory, half its population and became ethnically homogeneous. Jews were now seen as aliens, no longer required to boost Magyar numbers. They were regarded as Jews (*zsidók*) and not as Hungarians of the Jewish religion (*Izraeliták*). They were now excluded from the body politic, first by legislation then by liquidation in the Nazi death camps.

Jewish experience in the Communist era was mixed. The new regime offered a radical solution to ‘the Jewish problem’. Since the 1920s Jewishness and Judaism had been handicaps which some jettisoned to create a new universalist social system where ethnic, local, or religious, particularism would be irrelevant. Assimilation became available and was attractive to some. Those who accepted it found careers in politics, state administration and the army, positions hitherto denied them. Jews active in the elite of the Communist Party became in Karády’s words, ‘Dejudaized apparatchiks’ (KARÁDY 1993: 250). However those who embraced the Party and assumed political careers were very much a minority. Most Jews experienced a loss of livelihood as a result of nationalisation and as members of the bourgeoisie faced discrimination. All Jews in Hungary were isolated from their Jewish past, and contemporary Jewish life outside Hungary – in Israel, the USA and Western Europe. Specific Jewish experience, especially of the *Shoah*, was denied and subsumed under the general rubric ‘victims of fascism’.

In the mid 1980s the regime relaxed restrictions on cultural and scientific explorations of Jewish identity. I supply four examples of this tolerance. First, in 1983 an exhibition by the photographer Tamás Féner was mounted at the Budapest Ethnographic Museum. One year later a book based on that exhibition, ... *and Tell it to Your Son*, edited by Sándor SCHEIBER, was published by Corvina Press (FÉNER–SCHEIBER 1984). Photographs depicted Jewish rites of passage from birth to death; religious festivals; activities of the Jewish High School and the rabbinical seminary. The exhibition portrayed Jews as a religious group, which reflected state policy. However, in his speech opening the exhibition, János Hajdu described Jews as a people and referred to Randolph BRAHAM’s book *The Politics of Genocide*, devoted to the Nazi destruction of Hungary’s Jews. This he pointed out, was published in English and by implication not available in Hungarian.⁴ This public reference to the *Shoah* (which Hungarian Jews call the Holocaust) breached the official ban by its specific mention of Jewish victims.

Second, also in 1984, Zorica KRAUSZ published her cookbook *Jewish Dishes in Hungary*. Komoróczy describes its publication as ‘a real social event’ (KOMORÓCZY 1999: 465). ‘... a Jewish cookbook is never just about food. It necessarily deals with Jewish customs, Jewish life’ (*ibid.*). The traditional Jewish home, festivals, *kashruth* were explained to a Hungarian Jewish readership that was ignorant of religious tradition and practice. Though many dishes were common to eastern and central European Jewish communities, several indicated a Hungarian variant of Jewish culi-

⁴ A Hungarian translation was published in the USA in 1988.

nary practice. One criticism in Jewish circles was that the book described dishes as if derived from a defunct and alien community not from contemporary Hungarian Jewry. Perhaps that was the price paid to smooth publication.

Third, 1984 marked the publication of a book edited by Péter HANÁK, *The Jewish Question, Assimilation, Anti-Semitism*. This contained István BIBÓ's celebrated essay, *The Jewish Question in Hungary after 1944*, hitherto suppressed. Bibó's piece, both passionate and rational, detailed the role of the Hungarian state and society in the destruction of its Jewish citizens.

Fourth, in 1985 a social psychologist, Ferenc ERŐS and his colleagues, published in *Medvetánc* a paper which simultaneously appeared in French. This addressed the existential dilemmas of the second generation of *Shoah* survivors, whose parents had suppressed their Jewish identity and had presented themselves as Communists, for whom religion was passé, or had defined themselves as Hungarians.

These four examples show that Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals were beginning to explore questions of Hungarian Jewish experience even before the collapse of the Communist regime which was itself cautiously encouraging such explorations and which significantly did not punish those who engaged in them. The sudden demise of that regime in 1989 did not mark an abrupt disjunction but rather a transition which showed continuity in cultural and social processes.

EXPRESSIONS OF JEWISH IDENTITY: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

During the communist regime Jews kept a low profile and towed the party line in suppressing their particularistic identity. This response conformed with the earlier assimilative tendency of the post-emancipation period and was facilitated by the post-war demographic structure of Hungarian Jewry since the more religiously orthodox Jews, who tended to live in the rural and provincial areas of the country, had been murdered in the *Shoah*. The surviving remnant, like much of Western and North American, is highly educated⁵ and highly assimilated. Indeed survival of the *Shoah*, especially of the Budapest Jews, can be attributed to their greater integration into Hungarian society; ability to pay for asylum;⁶ to the fact that the Germans and their Hungarian allies lacked time to deport them from the Budapest ghetto into which they had been concentrated because the city had been surrounded by the Soviet army. Later, during the communist period those Jews who embraced Communism were obliged to renounce Judaism and to repudiate their origins. Many proclaimed themselves atheists and their children were frequently unaware of their roots until informed by outsiders.⁷ One apocryphal story, shortly after the 1956 uprising, reports a teacher asking:

⁵ Cf. ANDORKA *et al.* (1999: 67).

⁶ Cf. KARÁDY (1993b: 4–5).

⁷ Cf. ERŐS *et al.* (1985).

‘And what religion are you, András?’

‘I am a Catholic.’

‘And you, Vera?’

‘I am a Calvinist.’

‘And you Iván?’

‘I am an atheist.’

‘Ah, so you are a Jew.’

Another example, based on an interview with a woman who was eight years old in 1956, reports a teacher instructing pupils to go home and ask about their religious affiliation and whether they might receive religious education at school. Having no concepts of ‘religion’ or ‘religious education’ she returned home repeating the words as she went along. Her best friend also did not comprehend these terms but she hoped they both shared the same religion. At home grandmother told her they were Jews (*Zsidók*) but she needed to ask her father about receiving religious education. Her father initially refused but the following day he relented. The next morning she met her friend and asked her religion. ‘We are Hebrews (*Izraelita*)’. ‘Oh, what a pity that we do not share the same religion’, responded my informant.

Both anecdotes illustrate the acquiescence of certain Jews to the suppression of their identity but the first story also suggests that this did not deceive their non-Jewish neighbours.⁸

I now turn to two cases of individuals and their personal experiences of their identity and exemplify general trends. I commence with a remark by an internationally famous scholar who had recently celebrated his 50th birthday, and who told me, “I have given five decades to my Hungarian identity and now I shall give the next decades to my Jewish identity.” What prompted this statement and what does it signify about Hungarian and Jewish identity?

It is well known that a person’s social and personal identity changes over time particularly associated with rites of passages or with major events such as the 1956 Revolution or the Six Day War of 1967. In this case the scholar had two experiences in recent years which had caused him to reconsider his identity. The first experience occurred when he was a visiting professor in the USA. On the Day of Atonement he visited a synagogue but was unable to read or follow the prayers: this inadequacy caused him some embarrassment and anxiety. The second experience was the death of his father who had a Jewish burial. On this occasion he was unable to recite the prayer for the dead, the *Kaddish*. He expressed his frustration to his closest friend, also a Jew, who had attended the funeral, but the latter did not share his concern. One obvious conclusion and not original we can draw is that specific critical occasions, such as birthdays, in a person’s life and in their relationships with others trigger off these reflections about personal and social identity.

⁸ There is a wealth of such jokes on this theme of assimilation and self-deception, many of which hark back to the Habsburg regime. Of course, these jokes are not confined to Hungarian Jews and apply to the diaspora generally.

We can draw a further conclusion, namely that this person, and he is not alone among Jews of the immediate post-war generation, believes that it is difficult to combine the identities of Hungarian and Jew. In the past he opted for the Hungarian, now he will choose to focus on the Jewish. The idea that he can combine the two, seemed alien to him at the time. The same person invited me and my wife to his home and honoured us by producing from a cupboard, precious family relics, namely a *menorah*, the *chanukah* candelabra and two *shabbat* candlesticks, plus his father's *tallith*, the prayer shawl. Even in his home the candlesticks were concealed from his own private view. In the future so he told us these Jewish symbols will come out of the closet.

This existential dilemma of possessing a dual identity as a Jew and as an Hungarian was recently addressed by the Hungarian-Jewish sociologist and novelist, György Konrád, who remarked that it was easier to be a Jew and an Hungarian in Berlin than in Budapest (KONRÁD, 1998: 8). The same issue was raised by the Hungarian President, Árpád Göncz, in May 1998 when he addressed a mainly Jewish audience in Budapest to celebrate Israel's fiftieth anniversary as a state when he reassured them that it was possible to be both Jewish and Hungarian, that is to say, to possess a dual identity in contemporary Hungary. My own research interviews also indicate the problematic nature of this issue for Hungary's Jewish citizens.

The second person is a retired, working-class man, an autodidact, who was born in a provincial town and brought up as an Orthodox Jew. He, his two brothers, three sisters and parents survived the *Shoah* – the only family in that town to survive intact – this very fact gave them an exceptionally strong sense of family solidarity. In 1948 he and his two brothers illegally emigrated to Israel and joined the Israeli army. They hoped that the rest of the family would follow shortly. My interviewee abandoned his religious Orthodoxy on arrival in Israel and in fact never resumed it. Subsequently since it proved impossible for his parents and sisters to gain permission to join their three sons, they collectively took the decision to return to Hungary after five years in Israel.

This man who has not been a member of a synagogue since his return in 1953 and who had little contact with Jews outside of his immediate family began to write Hebrew poetry, two years ago, eight years after the death of his Jewish wife. He also translates Hungarian poetry into Hebrew. More significant however is the fact that last year for the first time he wrote a letter in Hebrew to his younger brother, not in Hungarian nor in Yiddish which he learned in his childhood. The main purpose of the letter was to urge his “younger brother and friend” to maintain family contact from which he had recently withdrawn. In the epistle he impressed on his brother the need to remember their own specific experience of the *Shoah* and of Israel.

We have here an example of a man who has consciously chosen to select a secular Jewish identity. Again both my wife and I had the privilege of viewing “his most valuable possessions”; namely his membership card of the Israeli Trade Union Movement, the *Histadruth*, his Israeli ration card book from 1951; his unemployment record card for that same year, and a photograph of his late wife.

I shall not proceed with further individual examples. I supply them to put a recognisable human touch to an otherwise abstract portrait of Hungarian Jewish experience. Of course it is vital to consider the large impersonal forces, urbanisation, industrialisation, modernisation and globalisation but it is essential to see how these forces impinge on the everyday lives of real human beings. Moreover they impinge in different ways and at different stages of the life-cycle. People make choices within these broad parameters based on their social networks, personal resources and individual inclinations. My task is to connect these personal experiences to the broader historical, economic, political and social forces that affect both Jews and non-Jews, but have especially influenced the ways in which they perceive each other and the ways in which they relate to each other.

As we have seen, Jewish intellectuals began to investigate recent Jewish history in the 1970s⁹ and more so in the 1980s. What engaged these scholars was the retrieval and reclaiming of Jewish identity both in reconnecting to their own past and also in establishing contact with fellow Jews in the West. They were proclaiming their own Jewishness in their own voice – they were speaking for themselves, not being spoken about or spoken for. Dr. Róbert Turán, director of the Jewish Museum, made this point forcefully, ‘We want to express *Jewish* [his emphasis] opinion about our history.’ And again, ‘we want to express our view of our history’.¹⁰ He saw the Museum’s role as educating both Jewish and Christian Hungarians, and noted that the Museum had ‘to fight the shadow of the past’ especially ‘a selective memory which blamed only the Germans for the *Shoah*’.

In giving voice to Jews the Museum itself has changed from the repository of religious artefacts to one that also shows the ethnic dimension, with its new room devoted to Theodore Herzl, the Hungarian-born Zionist ideologue. It also contains a permanent exhibition of the *Shoah* in Hungary which gives this Jewish museum its Hungarian dimension and which serves to educate both Jewish and non-Jewish visitors about recent Hungarian history and the fate of its Jewish citizens.

We might say of the willingness of Hungarian Jews to assert their Jewish identity that they have ‘come out of the closet’. The self-imposed, quasi-Marrano existence, is slowly changing. There are several examples. First, the embrace of the word *Zsidó* previously employed pejoratively. During the Horthy period Jews were defined not as Hungarian citizens of the Jewish faith, but as *Zsidók*, an ethnic group, alien to, and incompatible with, the Hungarian nation and people. As the Nuremberg definition of a Jew was applied, so Christians with Jewish ancestors also fell into this category. Thus the State determined the identity of a Jew irrespective of the latter’s self-definition or consciousness. It is important to note that the term ‘Jew’ was revived in the census of 1941; before this, the term ‘*Izraelita*’ had been in force since 1880, having replaced the earlier ‘*Zsidó*’.

⁹ One of the earliest was Mária Ember’s novel *Hajtűkanyar* (The Hairpin Bend), 1974, which discussed the *Shoah*, and which pointedly bore the dedication ‘the subject of this book does not deal with the Jewish fate, what this book addresses is Hungarian history’.

¹⁰ Interview, 30 April 1998.

In 1988 the Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association (MAZSIKE) was established. It proudly proclaimed the word ‘Zsidó’ in its title, as did its secular school the *Lauder Javne Zsidó Közösségi Iskola és Óvoda* (The Lauder Yavne Jewish Community School and Kindergarten). There is a public sign outside the school which boldly declares its identity in Hungarian. Much information resides in the title of the institution about the position of (some) Jews in contemporary Hungary. First, the name ‘Lauder’, which represents the patron, Ronald Lauder, of the cosmetics company founded by his mother Estée Lauder who left Hungary for the USA. Second, ‘Javne’ has symbolic significance in Jewish culture. It refers to the scholarly institutions established in Roman Palestine after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE (the Common Era, or AD in Christian terms). Then the rabbis left Jerusalem to re-establish Jewish culture in a provincial area. It is clear that the founders of the school were also looking for a renaissance in Jewish life after the stagnation and suppression of the Fascist and Communist periods. Thirdly, the term ‘Zsidó Közösség’ (Jewish Community) requires elucidation. The MAZSIKE was formed a year or two before the collapse of Communism in opposition to the Jewish religious community that was recognised and funded by the state. It resuscitated the term ‘Jew’ and displayed this on its nameplate on the street. MAZSIKE was avowedly secular in outlook. By calling itself ‘The Jewish Community’, it challenged the officially recognised religious Jewish community.

A year earlier in 1987 Professor Komoróczy, who is not a Jew, had established his Centre for Jewish Studies (see page 36, this volume). He too faced opposition from the state-supported, Jewish community and helped to rehabilitate the term ‘Zsidó’. A plaque bearing this word was displayed publicly in the university. Another public manifestation of Jewish identity involves wearing jewellery with Jewish emblems, such as the Star of David or *Chai* earrings.¹¹

WHY THE INCREASED WILLINGNESS TO COME OUT?

To explain the preparedness of Hungarian Jews to emerge from shadows we need to examine three factors, first, the internal structure of Hungarian Jewish society; second, its relations with the Jewish world outside of Hungary; and third, the changing relations between Hungarian Jewry and the Hungarian state.

In the 1970s and the 1980s the children of the survivors of the *Shoah*, the “second generation” had reached maturity. Those whose parents were members of the Communist party, or who feared for their career prospects, had been socialised at home to repress their Jewish identity and had been taught in the educational system to embrace the universalistic values of socialism. In short, differences within society were being systematically eroded and homogenous human beings were being fashioned such as workers, socialist men and women, whereas other identities were

¹¹ ‘Chai’, represented by the Hebrew letter ‘chet’ and which begins the Hebrew word *chaim*, meaning life.

denied or not allowed expression, such as religious affiliation, ethnic identity, other political persuasions. Those identities that had been denied expression in the public domain remained dormant in the private domain. This was true for both Jews and non-Jews. Officially research into modern Jewish experience, especially the *Shoah* in Hungary had been proscribed, indeed all social scientific research had to be approved¹² by the party. In the early 1980s Ferenc Erős, a social psychologist, and a member of the “second generation”, initiated independent research into Hungarian Jewish identity. In reflexive mood he explains what motivated him to begin this work. He remarks that he had three motives: First the scientific, second the sense of “mission”, and third the personal. The scientific concerned his professional interest in the study of identity, the mission was,

“To discover at least something about the generation which seemed then to have disappeared in the wave of assimilation and whose members seemed to remain completely alone with their problems” (ERŐS 1996: 58).

Thirdly,

“Beyond “science” and “mission”, there was, at least for me personally, a third motive: to find my own identity” (ibid).

Jewish identity was a taboo topic so that the experience of the interview both for the interviewers and the interviewees, 150 in total, had the unintended consequence of generating a sense of community among those who had hitherto been unable to express their feelings about being Jewish.

“For many of us, the interview situation was the first step in a communicative experience – the interviews convinced both interviewer and interviewee that they were not quite alone in their ambivalences, in their dubious, vague feelings and knowledge about being Jewish – that there must be, however latently and marginally, a community or a group to which they could relate their own personal feelings” (ibid).

In this instance it was the intellectuals among Hungarian Jews who began courageously, and at some personal risk, to put into the public domain the issues surrounding Jewish identity. The risks in the 1980s were certainly less than those faced by Haraszti in the 1970s as no punitive sanctions ensued from this semi-clandestine research part of which was published in Hungary and in France in 1985.

The opening up of Hungary to the outside world after 1989 enabled local Jews to activate their external links with members of their families who were living abroad and also with Israeli and other foreign Jewish organisations and agencies which were

¹² For example, in 1973 the sociologist, Miklós Haraszti was put on trial for his participant observation study *A Worker in a Worker's State* (1977) which had not been sanctioned by the authorities.

eager to come to offer assistance to their fellow Jews. Those individuals and institutions that came to Hungary after 1990 to act as cultural brokers and donors did not encounter an empty landscape. As discussed earlier, Jews in Hungary, especially in literary, artistic and scholarly circles, had begun to address their own, problematic sense of identity. The scene was set therefore for Hungarian Jews and institutions to receive these outsiders and to enter partnerships with them. Elsewhere I have discussed the impact on Hungarian Jewish identity of these many sources and diverse forms of transnational cultural aid (MARS 2000). In particular I focussed on aid under the rubrics of education, religion and ethnicity. I concluded that there were divergent and conflicting attitudes among Hungarian Jews to the ideological objectives of donor organisations and individuals. For example, there were those who chose to celebrate their difference as Jews and who create walls around themselves, though these are few in number. But also there are those who stress their Hungarian identity and who eschew the world of Jews. Finally there are those, increasingly more of them, who are striving to reconcile their Jewish and Hungarian identities and who are able to do so because of the new liberal political culture of the country which has espoused a multicultural attitude.

The new willingness of Jews to publicly proclaim their identity would not be possible without the support of both local and national government. I supply three examples: First, in retrieving the past, a number of memorials record the efforts of foreign diplomats to protect Jews during the *Shoah* – the most famous is Raoul Wallenberg, commemorated by the Communists with the name of a street and an undated bronze plaque that bears a relief of him. Significantly there was no mention that those he saved were Jews. Equally significant is the memorial to the Italian, Giorgio Perlasca, erected in 1993, which specifically mentioned his rescuing Jews. This plaque proclaims its authorisation by the Confederation of Hungarian Jewish Communities, the Mayor of the XIIIth district, the Budapest Mayor's Office and the Hungarian Foreign Ministry. Second, the annual festival of Jewish culture, part of which is celebrated outside the Jewish Community Centre, Bálint House, involved the closure of the street to traffic and the event's protection by the Budapest police. Several stalls sold items of Jewish culture and Klezmer music groups from Hungary and abroad performed. Third, an Orthodox Jewish wedding was held in 1998 in public in the street which attracted an audience of both secular Jews and non-Jews. Again traffic was barred from the route. In short, Jews were no longer invisible, they had taken to the streets patrolled by policemen in the service of the state.

The Hungarian state has contributed to the revival of Jewish culture despite opposition from some right-wing circles. Thus 90% of the costs of restoring the Dohány u. synagogue (several million dollars) were borne by the government. At the ceremony to celebrate its rededication the Hungarian President, Árpád Göncz, described it as a national treasure and therefore worthy of national funds. I conclude that I do not think we have a religious revival among Jews, nor an ethnic revival. What we see is a burgeoning manifestation of cultural ethnicity; an interest in Jewish history, culture, tradition and an increasing demand to learn modern Hebrew and also Yiddish. This cultural identity is fostered by attendance at conferences, exhibitions and music

festivals. From an anthropological perspective, like Webber (WEBBER 1994: 81), I see these events as secular rituals in which Jewishness is celebrated by the participants, who come together as Jews to acknowledge one another and their heritage in public. Hungarian Jewish identity, like other Jewish diaspora identities, is not a single, undifferentiated entity. Religion as the sole criterion of Jewish identity has been rejected. So too has political ethnicity which is embraced by a mere handful.

What we observe are more Jews emerging from the shadows to declare themselves as Jews. This self-definition may not be accepted by Orthodox rabbis and their followers since they may not have been born of a Jewish mother. But their own sense of identity impels them to mix in Jewish circles and define themselves as a Jew. The Hungarian-Jewish sociologist and novelist, György Konrád observes, ‘What makes a person a Jew is saying they are one’ (KONRÁD 1998: 22).

There are obvious problems with claims based on self-assertion since identity requires validation by a significant reference group, in this case fellow Jews. However in Hungary, after the *Shoah* and forty years of Communism, it is unlikely a person would claim Jewish identity without some basis in fact. Konrád’s definition allows half-Jews, or whatever fraction, to claim that identity. Choice rather than ascription is acknowledged; lack of religious practice is not a barrier to self-definition, since, as Konrád notes in the same essay,

“There are many Jews throughout the world who are bourgeois, non-practising, and possibly even avoid the life of the organised denomination, they may nevertheless have several Jewish relatives, friends and acquaintances, in other words, they are connected to Jewishness by real life bonds, connected to Jewish society, which can even be called a global society” (KONRÁD 1998: 22).

Although only a small percentage of Hungary’s Jews is registered with the official Jewish community, more are beginning to ‘come out’. My research confirms Konrád’s observation that many non-practising Hungarian Jews confine their intimate, social interaction to fellow Jews. In short, their social networks are predominantly Jewish and include non-Jewish spouses who become quasi-Jews by association. In this respect there is not a sharp disjunction with the past, at least for Budapest’s Jews who tended to congregate with their co-religionists, both in the Communist and pre-Communist era.

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