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Anthropological Reflections on Jewish Identity in Contemporary Hungary

I am not an historian but a social anthropologist. In my opinion history and social anthropology study the same subject matter—the comparative study of society and culture—but where history focuses on the past, anthropology concentrates on the present. I welcome the chance for a dialogue with my Hungarian colleagues from a variety of academic disciplines. However, I especially appreciate the opportunity to learn from non-academic persons, from ordinary people who live their daily lives here in Hungary, to learn from the man or woman on the No. 4 or 6 tram. The role of the anthropologist is a humble one—he comes as a novice to study the local culture and to grasp the principles of local social organization. As novices we make mistakes for which we are sometimes forgiven by the understanding locals. Since I am in the middle of my research here in Hungary my statements are provisional and susceptible to correction.

Section 1

Some introductory thoughts on identity in general

All identities, both personal and collective, are based on two definitions, one internal and the other external:

The *internal* one involves self-determination, whether by the individual or the group—however, a self-definition has to be validated or legitimated by significant others. The following Jewish joke illustrates this point. Sadie is boasting to her friend Esther that her son is a ship's captain since he walks the streets in a captain's hat and sailor's uniform. Esther replies, "By him he's a ship's captain, by you he's a ship's captain, but is he a ship's captain by ship captains?"

The *external* definition is one imposed from outside—usually by powerful others who decree who you are. An individual or group may have no personal commitment to this label which is ascribed. For example, the Nuremberg laws decreed who was a Jew and included persons who had been Christians for two generations and remote from Judaism, and the Jewish community.

Social or collective identity is not generated from within one's group. It is not to be comprehended in purely endogenous terms. Nor is it simply imposed from outside. Two simple diagrams which I take from A. L. Epstein¹, one of my anthropology teachers, should clarify this point.

¹ A. L. Epstein, 'Ethos and Identity Revisited: Some Aspects of Jewish Identity in Contemporary Britain', in *Studien zur Jüdischen Geschichte und Soziologie* (Heidelberg: Karl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1992), p. 19.

Diagram 1

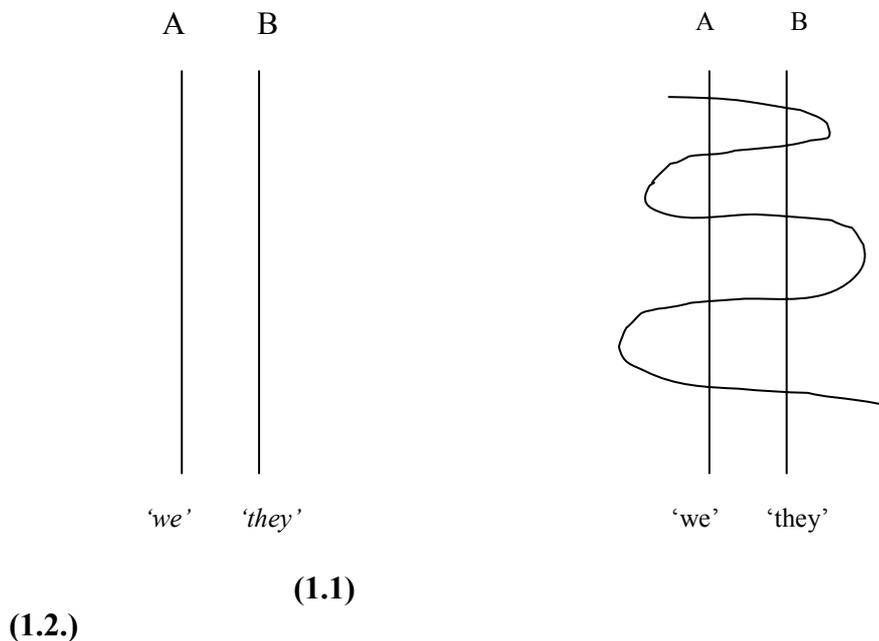


Diagram 1.1 represents a view which sees each group as separate and independent entities—the groups are so to speak stable and ‘fixed’. There is no ambiguity here about one’s identity, where one stands in society. The situation is static.

Diagram 1.2 shows a more complex situation which is dynamic and fluid. It demonstrates that identity is not derived simply from within one’s own group, nor simply as an expression of a relation of opposition or contrast between groups—rather it emerges as a product of interaction between the internal perception of members of a group and the external response. In a plural society—plural in terms of class, religion, nationality or ethnicity—how we define ourselves depends on how we perceive the wider social system and is also a response to how others perceive and define us. These mutual perceptions and definitions vary over time and so a historical approach is inevitable and essential.

Most of Epstein’s work was conducted in Africa and Melanesia. His book, *Ethos and Identity*, probably the first anthropology book to include the term ‘identity’ in the title, was written in the USA when he was thinking about ethnic identity, African, Jewish and Melanesian. In the last three to four years identity has become a fashionable topic of research for anthropologists, especially connected to postmodernism and the choice of identity that individuals have. One book worthy of mention is Anthony P. Cohen’s on social identity.²

Jewish identity and history

Jews are a historic people—the term ‘historic’ is multivalent. In one sense it means that the Jews existed for a long time—too long for one historian, Arnold Toynbee, who described Jews as “living fossils” (suggesting that they had no right to be alive). In another sense it can mean that Jews are very conscious of their history, and not only of their own history as a people, but also of the people with whom they have co-existed, fought against, intermarried.

² A. P. Cohen, *Self Consciousness: An Alternative Anthropology of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994).

So, the Jewish religious calendar is replete with Festivals and Fasts that link Jews to powerful, foreign peoples and civilizations—to mention only three Festivals and one Fast day.

Passover: celebrates freedom from slavery in Pharaoh's Egypt

Purim: salvation from ancient Persians

Hanukkah: the Festival of Lights and a victory over the Hellenes

The Fast of Ab: the destruction of the first and second Temples by the Babylonians and the Romans

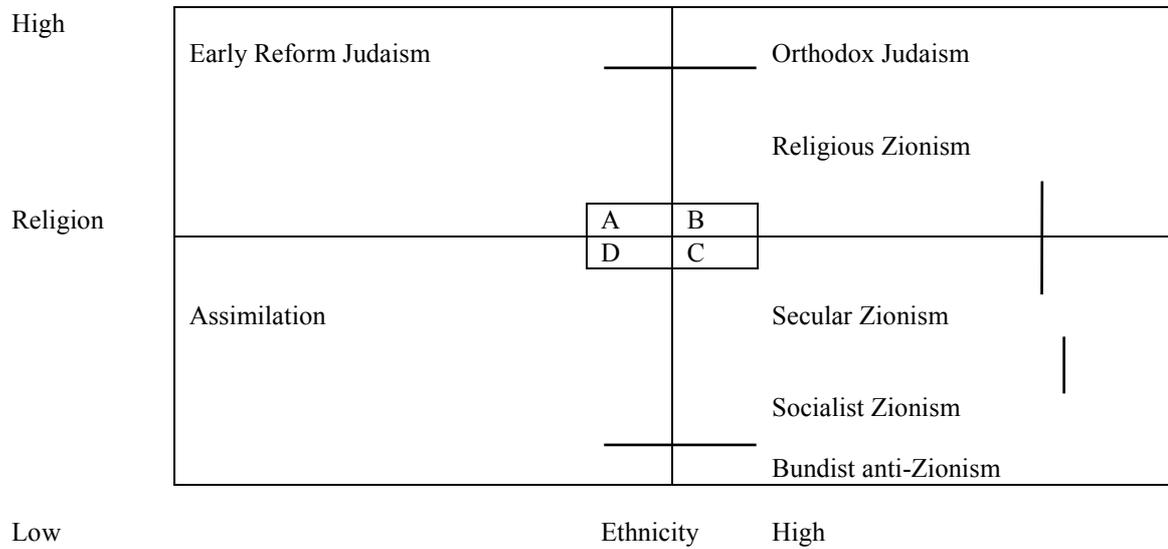
A third meaning of the term historic is that Jews have been active in the writing of history, again their own history as Jews but also the history of the people around them. Jews have been literate for millennia and have been urged “to bear witness”, that is, to record and report, and to comment and analyze on those recordings. Jews and Jewish identity are bound up with literature—expressed in the phrase that “Jews are the People of the Book”.

I now examine Jewish identity in the modern world, especially since the French Revolution (the political revolution) and the Industrial Revolution (the economic revolution). What was happening to the Jews in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was also happening to non-Jews. Thus, on the political side we have the emergence of the modern nation-state and on the socio-economic side industrialization and urbanization—in short the onset of modernity. The impact of these revolutions was universal but was manifest in particular ways among Jews; this twin process is perhaps best captured in J. L. Talmon's collection of essays entitled ‘The Unique and the Universal’—I draw the banal conclusion that history and the identity of the Jews cannot be looked at in isolation. As we have seen, this was just as true in biblical times as it is in the modern period.

Jewish identity in Europe before the French Revolution was based on the fusion of two elements—a religious and an ethnic element—Jews were both a people and a religion. The French Revolution split this fused identity into its components. In Western Europe, first of all in France, full civil rights were bestowed on French Jews. They became citizens of the French state, members of the French nation as *individuals*, not as a *group*. Religion became a private matter—a question of individual conscience, a voluntary act of self-identification. Jews were now Frenchmen and French women of the Jewish religion, similar to fellow Frenchmen who may be Roman Catholics or Protestants. The ethnic element of group identity was de-emphasized and was supposed to wither away. In Eastern Europe in the Russian Empire where most of Europe's Jews resided in the Pale of Settlement, the fusion of religion and identity was to persist—Jews were a people with a religion and a *lingua franca* in the form of Yiddish.

I depict the two elements in the following diagram.

Diagram 2



As the nineteenth century progressed so Jews were faced with the possibility of choosing an identity whereas in earlier centuries this status was fixed.

Section 2

Hungary and its Jews

Before tackling these contemporary questions it is necessary to examine the relations between Hungary and the Jews over the past 130 years or so, with the creation of the Dual Monarchy in 1867 and the emancipation of the Jews in the same year. I should actually begin a little earlier with the common experience of Jews and Hungarians in the 1848 Revolution. Jews, especially the Jews of Pest, identified with, and also fought alongside, their fellow Hungarians against the Habsburgs. Indeed, for their efforts they were subject to a massive financial penalty which was later used to fund the establishment of the Pest Rabbinical Seminary.

In Diagram 3 I schematize the historical period between 1867–1996 in four phases. I am aware that these four time zones are crude and are capable of a more refined subdivision by historians but they serve my heuristic purpose.

Diagram 3
Hungary and its Jews, 1867–1996

Regime	Habsburg	Horthy/Nazi	Communist	Post-communist
	1867–1919	1920–1945	1945–1989	1990–
The nation-state and the Jews	Jews as a religion	Jews as aliens	Dejudaization and suppression of all particularisms	Jewish diversity Religious, ethnic, cultural
	Civil rights in exchange for cultural magyarization	Official anti-Semitism	Formal equality/anti-Semitism proscribed	Civil rights
	The social contract	Magyar particularism	Universalism	Pluralism
	Inclusion	Exclusion	A new start for survivors but isolation from Jewish past; from Israel and outside world	Inclusion and choice

My thanks to A. J. Parker for his help and advice

In 1867 Jews were offered what Victor Karády termed “a social contract”³ by which they would receive civil rights in exchange for accepting cultural magyarization. For Jews this involved the acquisition of the Hungarian language, the acceptance of Hungarian names, and their self-recognition and recognition by others as Hungarian citizens of the Jewish or Israelite religion. They were not to be regarded as an ethnic group or nationality such as the other national minorities, e.g. the Slovaks or the Romanians or the Serbs. This social contract was of benefit to the Hungarian political elite since the Jewish population amounted to 5 per cent of the kingdom, which figure combined with the ethnic Magyars totaled approximately 50 per cent. The other 50 per cent comprised the national minorities of the multiethnic Hungarian kingdom. As a result of this contract, Jews were included in and identified, or even over-identified, with the Hungarian nation-state.

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

The Jewish postwar experience in the communist era was mixed. For Jews, the new communist regime offered a radical solution to “the Jewish problem”. Since the 1920s Jewishness and Judaism had been handicaps which some were prepared to jettison in order to create a new social system of an universalist kind, in which particularism, whether ethnic, local, or religious, would become irrelevant. A new form of assimilation became available and was attractive to some. Those Jews who accepted the offer found new careers in the political system, 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*”.⁴ However, those Jews who embraced the Communist Party’s cause and who

³ V. Karády, ‘Antisémitisme et stratégies d’intégration: Juifs et non-Juifs dans la Hongrie contemporaine’, *Annales Économie, Société, Civilisation* 2, 1993, p. 242.

⁴ V. Karády, ‘Antisémitisme et stratégies d’intégration’, p. 250.

assumed new careers in the postwar political regime were very much a minority. Most Jews experienced the loss of their livelihoods as a result of nationalization, as did non-Jews, and insofar as they were members of the bourgeois class they faced discrimination. All Jews in Hungary were cut off from contact with the Jewish past, Israel and the outside world. Specific Jewish experience, especially of the Shoah, was denied or ignored and subsumed under the general rubric of “victims of fascism”.

Jewish identity options in post-1990 Hungary

Since the end of communist rule Hungary has been reexamining its own national identity and so too have its Jewish citizens. The renegotiation and reconstruction of both Hungarian and Jewish identity is occurring in the wake of massive social, economic and political changes characterized by the ability of individuals and groups to choose from a variety of identities. Hitherto, freedom of choice, for all citizens, was restricted by the communist regime. Choices, pace Giddens,⁵ are not made by some decontextualized individual in a quest for self-identity but rather in the context of social networks and resources. These choices are taken within a framework embracing the state, a mode of production and within the Jewish group itself, which latter is not homogeneous since it contains diverse subgroups with divergent views and values, sometimes opposed to each other.

The question I pose is how a group, in this case Hungarian Jews, recovers and refashions its identity when the chain of tradition has been broken, when parents are ignorant of their religious and cultural heritage and when the grandparents have chosen to forget. What are the identity options open to Jewish individuals and groups in Hungary today? How do persons exercise these options? How do they mobilize themselves as groups and how are they assisted by outside cultural and religious brokers and institutions to develop new forms of Jewish identity some neo-traditional, others innovative and radical?

I shall give a brief sketch of these identity options under the headings religious, ethnic and socio-cultural.

Religious option

Most of the Jews in provincial Hungary were murdered in the Shoah—those that survived either emigrated, or if they remained, rejected their religious heritage. The majority of Shoah survivors were the more socially and culturally integrated Jews in the capital, Budapest, who were for the most part Neolog, that is, Hungarians of the Jewish religion, or “Israelites”. The communist regime generally suppressed expressions of religiosity or controlled religious groups through the Office of Religious Affairs. The Communist Party equated religion with places of worship, either churches or synagogues. Thus, it became impossible to hold a *Seder* (Passover Meal or Service) in which the extended family and friends could participate—such a large collection of people in one place was defined by the authorities as a political gathering. If a *Seder* were to be held then it constituted a religious event and had to take place in the synagogue. The communist party also forcibly integrated the Orthodox, Neolog and Status Quo Jewish groups into a single organization in order to control it more easily. The Jews as a religious group shared similar experiences with fellow Hungarians of the Catholic, Calvinist and Lutheran faiths.

Since 1990 there has been a trend towards increasing diversity among Jewish religious groupings. In the first instance, at an institutional level, the shotgun marriage between the Orthodox and the Neolog communities has ended in divorce and two organizations now exist, though the Orthodox is far smaller in size. If we briefly examine the Orthodox sector, what do

⁵ A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

we find? We see that in addition to the old Orthodox organization there are some developments, to mention but two.

The Lubavitch Hasidim: still very small, but dynamic under the leadership of Rabbi Oberlander—an American of Hungarian extraction and an example of a cultural broker who uses his Israeli and American networks to promote Judaism in Hungary. The response of local Jewry to his mission can be seen in the growth of his congregation and his recruitment of young people. In the recruitment of assimilated Jews, Lubavitch in Budapest is similar to Paris, London and Manchester. Even more successful has been the Lubavitch publication of religious texts, especially the *Shmuel Jewish Prayer Book*, which has been embraced by the Neolog movement, and the reprinting of the *Hertz Biblia* (the Pentateuch and Commentary by Israel Hertz the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and the British Empire—himself of Hungarian origin).

The Kollel: another manifestation of Orthodoxy is the *Kollel*—a study group that meets in the evenings in the Orthodox headquarters to study Talmud. Again, numbers are small and again, its leader is an American of Hungarian origin.

Szim Salom: at the other end of the religious spectrum is a group of Reform Jews called *Szim Salom* who first came together ten years ago as an informal group of people but particularly women from an assimilated background who wished to discover their Jewish heritage. Several of them were similar to those researched by Erős, Kovács and Lévai in their article published in 1985 called “How I discovered that I was a Jew?”. Outsiders identified them as Jewish after their parents, survivors of the Shoah, had concealed their Jewish ancestry. Seeking to give some content to their new-found Jewish identity they began to study together. One of their members, a woman, is now in the penultimate year of her training to be a rabbi at the Leo Baeck College in London. She intends to establish a formal religious congregation from this informal set of people. Again it is a small group—at its community *Seder* in April over 70 persons attended, double the number of three years previously. As with the Orthodox groups, the small size is not the issue, rather what is relevant is the range of choices available to those seeking to express their Jewishness in a religious context. Once again we see the importance of outside links—this time the British connection—reinforced by visitors who come from abroad to offer their expertise and advice, and to maintain its members’ morale in the difficult task of establishing and maintaining a voluntary association. This difficulty is exacerbated by the lack of support from existing Jewish religious and communal organizations and even obstruction, unlike the reception of Lubavitch.

The Neologs: the Neolog movement is still the dominant form of Jewish religious organization. It is simultaneously Hungarian and Jewish—the symbiosis of the two identities is exemplified in and on the gravestone of Sándor Scheiber, the former head of the Rabbinical Seminary who died in 1985 and whose funeral was attended by dignitaries both Jewish and non-Jewish from many walks of life. Most Neolog Jews wear their Judaism lightly. They attend synagogue infrequently for most of the year but fill the synagogues at New Year and on the Day of Atonement. In this way they resemble most of the Christian population. In short, religious observance has a low priority manifest in the small number of circumcision ceremonies conducted here compared with Western Europe, where even the most assimilated and secular Jews have their sons circumcised.

Ethnic option

Just as there is caution in expressing the religious dimension of Jewish identity, though as I have indicated there are small developments in this area, so too the political ethnic option has generally been rejected. Zionism has never been strong as a movement in Hungary (despite it being the birthplace of Herzl); the overwhelming majority embraced the social

contract of assimilation, hence the trauma of the Horthy period and of the Shoah when Jews who identified with the country were first denied their civil liberties and then later denied the right to live. It was during this period that Jews were defined by others, and against their will, not as Hungarian citizens of the Jewish faith, but as *zsidók*, Jews as a people, an ethnic group, and moreover, one that was alien and incompatible with the Hungarian nation and people. Indeed, as the Nuremberg definition of a Jew was applied, so persons of the Christian religion with remote Jewish ancestors fell into this category. In short, it was the state that determined the identity of a Jew irrespective of the latter's self-definition and irrespective of his or her consciousness. It is important to note here that the term 'Jew' was employed in the Census of 1941, whereas from 1880 onwards the term 'Israelite' was in force having replaced the term *zsidó* which had been used before in the enumeration of the population. One important area of my research is to investigate the semantics of the terms 'Israelite' and *zsidó*. What is apparent is that more and more of Budapest's Jews and Jewish organizations are reclaiming the term *zsidó*. They are stripping it of its pejorative meaning and embracing it with pride. It is in the context of the Shoah and of the classification of Jews as a nationality—an ethnic minority—that we can comprehend why Hungary's Jews rejected the opportunity to be designated as a nationality for the purpose of the Law "On the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities".⁶ This option was resisted despite the fact that Jews qualified for such recognition under the act. Moreover, this law offered support and protection against anti-Semitism. Why then was it rejected? Why did not even one thousand Jews sign a petition which would have entitled the Hungarian parliament to consider an application to be included in the list of recognized national minorities?

The answer to this question is to be found in the historical past of Hungary's Jews. Despite the brutal shock that the supporters of assimilation had experienced between 1920 and 1944, the majority of contemporary Hungarian Jews subscribe to the assimilation model albeit with reservations. This caution is manifest in a low profile—a sort of public invisibility marked literally by the absence of circumcision. Registering as a minority would have been an overt, public manifestation of social difference, of a separate corporate identity.

Moreover, though the Jewish community might have been prepared to accept the good will of the government of the day in seeking to protect all of its minorities—the Jewish collective memory is suspicious of the intentions of the State, even when those intentions appear benign and for their benefit. It is aware that registration under the law could serve as a pretext for discrimination in employment, exclusion from debating national issues, expulsion, and even worse, should a more malign government gain power. Support for these fears was reinforced by the fact that among the most ardent advocates of defining Jews as an official, national minority were nationalist groups with anti-Semitic agenda.⁷

Zionist groups: though Jews rejected registration as an official ethnic majority there exists a variety of Zionist organizations associated with Israeli political parties, ranging from the right to the left. At present my knowledge of them is weak but I do not think, from discussions with others who are more knowledgeable, that they are strong. There are also Zionist youth groups which recruit their youth leaders from Israel but which too are minute and more in the nature of social clubs than ideological or political organizations. They serve more to bring Jewish youth together than to promote immigration to Israel. It is interesting to note that the religious, Zionist youth movement Benei Akivah lacks support in Budapest whereas the center-left Habonim-Dror and the more left Ha-shomer Ha-tsair are stronger. Significantly these groups have to accommodate to the Hungarian scene—thus, Ha-shomer

⁶ Law No. 27, 1993. Residence in Hungary for at least 100 years; Hungarian citizens with a language, culture or tradition and consciousness as a group.

⁷ A. Kovács, 'Are Jews a National Minority? Remarks on a Public Debate', *East European Jewish Affairs* 24(2), 1994, p. 70.

Ha-tsair, which in Israel and elsewhere is stridently secular, even atheist, feels obliged to observe the Friday night rituals of lighting candles at its meeting in order to instil a sense of religious Jewish identity in its members. This small example of the impact of Hungarian Jews on the cultural broker demonstrates that these cultural brokers have to adapt to the specific local circumstances if they are to have any success in their ventures. They must be prepared to modify their own practices and to recognize that their interaction with local Jews involves reciprocal change.

Social and cultural option

A variety of organizations and institutions, indeed innovations, has come into existence since 1990 with the help of outside organizations, cultural brokers and benefactors. In the Jewish community new schools have been created to serve different sectors of the Jewish and, in some cases non-Jewish population. During the communist period one Jewish day school, the Anna Frank Gymnasium, existed though it only served a small section of Budapest's community. In 1976/77 for example it had less than 10 pupils and in the 1980s a score.⁸ This state school was and still is supported by the Budapest Jewish Community. Indeed until 1965 its name was *A Budapesti Zsidó Hitközség Gimnáziuma*. The term *zsidó* was then dropped. Today it has 200 pupils and will be moving into new premises in the near future in anticipation of further expansion.

Two new schools—private foundation schools—have emerged since 1990, one serving the more Orthodox or traditional sector of the community, though in fact most of its pupils do not come from an Orthodox background. This school, the American Foundation School, also known as *Masoret Avot*, or the Reichmann School, or most commonly the Wesselényi School after the street on which it is located, is diminishing in size so that from a figure of 500 a few years ago it now has 300, a significant number of whom are immigrants from Israel. It would seem that demand for a more Orthodox religious education is low in Budapest and that the ideals of its benefactors, the Reichmann brothers, do not match local conditions.

The other foundation school, the Lauder Yavne Jewish Community School and Kindergarten is a secular, Jewish day school which does not officially record the religious identity of its pupils, indeed several of its students are not Jewish in terms of self-ascription and others do not meet the identity requirements of the Jewish Religious Law on which the American Foundation School insists. Recently, the Lauder school appointed a local rabbi as head of its Jewish Studies program.

It would seem then that the secular school is becoming more religious and that the religious school is becoming more Orthodox. We should be cautious, however, about concluding that there is a religious revival among Jews in the sphere of schooling. Most Jewish parents continue to send their children to secular state schools where the religious affiliation of their children is irrelevant. One tentative conclusion I would put forward is that we might be seeing some form of social and educational stratification based on social class in the Jewish day schools. Thus, the new economic elite sends its children to the Lauder School; the middle stratum to the Wesselényi and the less well off to the Anna Frank Gymnasium.

Associated with the growth of the Jewish day schools is the creation of the *Pedagógium*—the Teacher Training Center—whose graduates will service the Jewish day schools and also the Jewish welfare organizations. This venture is supported by the American Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish Agency.

To sum up so far. In contemporary Hungary I do not think that we have a religious

⁸ L. Felkai, *A Budapesti zsidó fiú-, és leánygimnázium története* (Budapest: Anna Frank School, Director's Office, 1992), p. 154.

revival among Jews; nor is there a political, ethnic revival. What we do see is a manifestation of cultural ethnicity: a burgeoning interest in Jewish history, culture and tradition, an increasing demand to learn modern Hebrew and to a lesser extent Yiddish. This cultural identity is fostered by attendance at conferences, exhibitions, music festivals (in November 1996 alone there were three conferences in one week—overlapping one another in time). From an anthropological perspective, like Webber,⁹ 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 monolithic—it is not a single, undifferentiated entity. Religion as the sole criterion of Jewish identity has been rejected, so too political ethnicity has been embraced by a mere handful of persons.

In post-1990 Hungary, Jewish cultural, recreational, sporting and private societies are the locus and focus of contemporary Jewish identity. The earliest of such groups is the Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association—a grass-roots, secular body independent of the communal and religious organization. Its membership has dropped since it was founded in 1988 but it is the parent body of the very successful journal, *Szombat* and of the Lauder School. This organization is largely funded by its members and by private, local benefactors. To some extent it has faced competition since 1994 with the opening of the Bálint Jewish Community Center which provides a variety of activities and services—social, cultural, educational and religious. Bálint House, as it is known, is funded by the Joint. Well-resourced and equipped, it caters for all members of the Jewish community, irrespective of age or religious affiliation. In a sense, Bálint House is the modern equivalent of a *Beit Kneset*, a house of assembly or synagogue. It recruits Jews from diverse backgrounds and different interests, brings them together in public to express their identity which until recently had been confined to the private sphere.

Bálint House is an example of cultural innovation—the first Jewish institution of its kind to be established in East Central Europe for almost 60 years. Here we find an external organization, the Joint, which works with local people to resuscitate and develop Jewish culture in all its diversity. Moreover, Jewish culture is made available to the non-Jewish population so that interfaith communication is promoted.

Significantly, the Joint does not seek permanent responsibility for this project. Rather it intends gradually to transfer the institution into the hands of the local Jewish community. In this sense the Joint acts as an enabling rather than an imperial power.

Conclusion

So far I have discussed Jewish identity from a general historical and organizational perspective but I should like to conclude by referring to actual individuals and their personal experiences of their identity. These are particular experiences that illustrate and exemplify general trends which I intend to pursue more fully when I return in 1998 for four months of further research.

I commence with a remark by an internationally famous scholar who had recently celebrated his fiftieth birthday. What he said is the following: “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 passage or with major events such as the 1956 Revolution or the Six-Day War of 1967. In this case the scholar had had two experiences in recent years

⁹ J. Webber, ‘Modern Jewish Identities’, in *Jewish Identities in the New Europe* (London: Littmann Library of Jewish Civilization, 1994), p. 81.

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 *Kaddish*, the prayer for the dead. He expressed his frustration to his closest friend, also a Jew, who had attended the funeral, but the latter, a usually sensitive person, did not share his concern. One obvious conclusion, and not original one, that 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.

We can draw a further conclusion, namely that this person, and he is not alone among Jews of the immediate postwar generation, believes that it is difficult or impossible to combine the Hungarian and Jewish identities. 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 honored us by producing from a cupboard, precious family relics, namely a *menorah*, the *Hanukkah* candelabra and two Sabbath candlesticks, plus his father's *tallit*, 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.

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 and his brothers and sisters and parents survived the Holocaust—the only family in that town to survive intact—the 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 the three boys, 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 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 *Histadrut*, his Israeli ration card book from 1951 and 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 recognizable human touch to an otherwise abstract portrait of Hungarian Jewish experience. Of course, it is vital to consider the large impersonal forces, such as urbanization, industrialization, modernization and globalization 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 as my research continues 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.

Contemporary Hungarian Jewry, which is predominantly Budapest's Jewish community, is both Hungarian and Jewish. Most of its constituents belong to the Neolog movement, a uniquely Hungarian type of Judaism, who see themselves as Hungarians of the Jewish religion. There are a smaller number of Orthodox Jews, and a number of new groups from Reform to Lubavitch Hasidism; beyond these groups there is a large pool of Jews with a sense of Jewishness that is not manifest in either the religious or the ethnic sense of Jewish identity. Most of these Jews, irrespective of their affiliations and Jewish identities, are committed to remaining in Hungary—there is, for example, very little immigration to Israel, though there is increased contact between Israel and Hungary and an increasing number of pupils from the Jewish day schools and other Jews spend some time in Israel, learning both modern Hebrew and Jewish culture.

The critical question for Hungarian Jews and for non-Jews is what form the Hungarian state and society will assume. What will be its political culture? Will it maintain a liberal pluralism tolerant of ethnic, religious, and also non-religious minorities? Will it develop a civic culture? Will religious congregations be autonomous, self-governing, self-financing bodies? In short, will the institutions of civil society, that is, those institutions intermediate between the family and the state take root? The development of civil society which requires a reeducation of the population will not happen overnight; decades of dependence on the state, with the culture that it instilled, especially the sense of powerlessness, cannot be overcome simply by a change in the political system. Changes in social and cultural attitudes take longer to evolve. Grass-roots organizations that do emerge need encouragement and assistance either from existing institutions that enjoy the patronage of the state or individual philanthropists. However, it is not only the Hungarian state and society that needs to adopt and maintain a liberal, democratic outlook but, equally important too, so do the powerful established Hungarian Jewish organizations. These organizations should welcome and support religious and cultural innovation within Hungary's Jewish society. Diversity, and the tolerance of diversity, should be the slogan of the leaders of the Jewish community, as well as of the state and the wider society.

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