## IMAGE VERSUS IDENTITY: ASSIMILATION AND DISCRIMINATION OF HUNGARY'S JEWRY

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The contradictory process and the ambivalent result of Jewish assimilation in Hungary between 1867 and 1944 were shaped both by the Neolog-Orthodox duality and the fast acculturation of the Neolog Jewry. The image persistently attached to the Jew in Hungary, the basis of any sort of anti-Semitism, was the denominational bound Jewishness; the identity created and sustained mainly by the urban Neolog Jewish bourgeoisie was, however, definitely Magyar. When image and identity came to be confronted with each other, then political anti-Semitism could get a firm footing; this had happened from just around the late nineteenth and especially the beginning of the twentieth century. Still, there is more than simply a continuity between the form of anti-Semitism characterizing the age of Dualism and the one accompanying the interwar period, when it even became a state policy. The former was rooted in the mental construction of a cultural code, while the latter was most closely associated with the cognitive construction of political code. This also meant that while the former was exclusively carried by some social movements hostile to the issue of Jewish assimilation, the latter led to rigid state discrimination applied against all those the image of whom was identified with Jewishness.

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"Well: I was trained as Magyar. I firmly believed that my confession is only Jewish, but I am ethnic Magyar. Since, however, I am not a faithful Israelite, I have no community with the Jewry. Then I became cosmopolitan at the university. All this was a mistake and lie!" The kind of mixed identity thus expressed by Aladár Komlós in 1921 characterized many Hungarian Jews at around the beginning of the twentieth century. Before the mid-nineteenth century, however, the label Jew simply meant that someone belonged to the Israelite denomination. In the aftermath of Jewish emancipation this changed fundamentally. Although few converted and/or contracted a mixed marriage (which also demanded apostasy prior to 1895), after 1868 the label 'Jewish' was applied not only to the members of the

Israelite denomination. Since it might even have happened that an individual was born into a Jewish family, was baptized as an infant or a child, received a Christian (Catholic or Protestant) education, and he or she was not even aware of his/her Jewish origin. This is the reason why historians prefer to use the term, of Jewish origin instead of the word, Jew.<sup>3</sup>

But that is not the whole story. Following 1868, due to the split of the Israelite Church into Neolog and Orthodox (and even *status quo ante*) parishes, adherence to the Israelite Church came less and less to express the real self-consciousness of an incessantly growing number of Hungarian Jews. Social history studies have clearly demonstrated the great difference between a Neolog and an Orthodox Jew, both in their social advance and their degree of assimilation. As opposed to the urban Neologs, Orthodox Jews, who made up about half of Jewry around 1910, showed little or no evidence of embourgeoisement, modernity, economic and intellectual innovation. There is hardly any doubt that in itself Jewish religious status did not invest Jewry with a "special group susceptibility", which caused the development of an "achievement ethics and work morale rare in Hungary" – as Karády regularly holds.<sup>4</sup>

As regards ethnicity, especially if we use the criterion of mother tongue, a major part of the Jews (with the exception of some Orthodox elements) has successfully been assimilated into the Hungarian nation. Still, in spite of their rapid and massive cultural assimilation (acculturation), the Jews as a whole still retained some sort of otherness well into the twentieth century. The resurgent political anti-Semitism of the post-war years occasionally defined it as racial separation, and tied it at the beginning (in the 1920s) to denominational criteria; later, especially after 1941, at the time of the anti-Jewish laws, it kept track of the Jews by heredity, in line with the Nazi notion of race. The ethnic difference of the Jews cannot signify that they constitute a national minority; they were never given such status, and they never claimed it. Moreover, the Jews cannot be described as a group with an unassimilated language. There was only one reason why they preserved some of their distinct status in the interwar period; namely that they were victims of pronounced political and social discrimination.

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What then is the reason for the uninterrupted anti-Semitism in spite of the many apparent signs of a successful integration of the Jews? (Integration is meant here as assimilation since along the norms dictating the building of nation-states in the "long nineteenth century", integration has not yet gained ground in a fuller sense.) One possible reason could be what Saul Friedländer has also stressed in his book on German anti-Semitism that although anti-Semitism always implies a pre-exist-

ing hostile attitude or disposition, still the Jews in spite all of their efforts remain a distinct group as being easily or more or less recognizable by the most various criteria.<sup>6</sup>

This can also be justified in Hungary's case. Karády's statistically based research findings have abundantly demonstrated that after acculturation, Magyarization of names, rather than religious conversion, was the method most generally chosen for a shift of identity. It indicates that the more loosely a given attribute was linked to denominational identity, the easier it was to break away from it in the interests of adaptation. Hence, following only slight initial resistance, very large numbers of those assimilating gave up Yiddish, and, as a second step, changed their names.

Thus little evidence seems to support the thesis of overfulfilling the assimilation norm, a doctrine advanced by several scholars (including Karády). As has already been mentioned, Jewishness based on identification with a particular confessional status, does not represent the authentic (Jewish) identity. Milton M. Gordon called marital assimilation (the mixed- or intermarriage) as "keystone of the arch of assimilation". In applying the notion of "inter-confessional" mixed marriage not exclusively to the ones contracted between the Jews and the Christians, but even to those contracted among the Jews themselves, it can be discerned that the more the Neologs were assimilated, the more the Orthodox Jews were ready to separate themselves from the "sinners of Israel" as they called their Jewish counterparts. Quantitative evidence is now available to show the infrequency of such "intermarriages" between Neolog and Orthodox Jews. The separation observed in that regard was so extreme that, as Jakov Katz has contended, in the life of the third generation, born in the 1900s, "the Neolog and Orthodox Jews functioned even as two distinct social entities".

Successful integration on the one side was thus plainly opposed by the increasing mutual alienation among the Jews on the other side. The process discussed finally led to two important consequences. First, the Jews who persistently insisted on their traditionally defined religious identity, met several insurmountable barriers in their assimilation, if willing at all to be assimilated. This went hand in hand with their unfavourable social status and immobility. Most of them lived in villages, pursued lower paid occupations not carrying high prestige, and in consequence remained more or less strangers in their own local communities, which were dominated mainly by agrarian populations.

As a piece of evidence one may cite the observation of an anthropologist, who has described the relationships between the Jews and the peasants in a Transdanubian village.

The Jewry of Aba, by virtue of his ethnic and economic character, differed from the rural society. Notwithstanding the fact that the Jews were already emancipated due to the intense symbolic contacts held

in everyday life, not even their two hundred-year presence in the local community resulted in a complete identification in the values and the way of life, not yet with the bourgeois stratum. In terms of the latter, they remained a caste, and as such were prevented from amalgamation by religious taboos. These sanctions, chiefly the religious endogamy made impossible for the Christians, first of all the peasants (who wanted more to approach the Jews) to accommodate them unconditionally. <sup>10</sup>

Second, not only assimilation, but even internal Jewish integrity was at the stake in this process. Social stratification played a great role in choosing this or that path even including several Orthodox Jews. A representative of the latter recalls from the interwar Szombathely the following way: "many refused to come to my Bar Micva holiday since I was pupil of a lay school (polgári iskola). It was forgiven for the rich Eiland children that they studied at the grammar school (gimnázium), but not for me, the poor". 11

The true identity of many Jewish people can only be discerned by microscopic investigation of daily social practice. So it is no wonder that everyday perception and particularly the anti-Semitic representation of the other took mostly into account not the individual identity but the group image inherited from the not too distant past. This, in addition, was further supported by some evident social facts.

The social indicators of modernity – Karády also admits – clearly divide Hungarian Jewry into two major sectors, which broadly correspond to the Orthodox-Neolog division. Still, the main conclusion of this investigation ... should stress the importance of secondary divisions cutting across the Neolog-Orthodox divide. <sup>12</sup>

The secondary-division, or more plainly, the still existing Jewish unity also manifested itself, to cite one example only, in the discourse on philanthropy and altruism. Both the Neolog and the Orthodox discourse aimed to establish an intrinsic connection between charity and the authentic Jewish "soul", by interpreting philanthropy as one to come from true generosity rather than social obligation only. True, however, that the Neologs alone were to emphasize the inter-denominational character of Jewish charity to counter the blames of an uninterrupted "Jewish solidarity". And this was even a real practice as evidenced by the average case of the legacy of Izsák Tafler, a wealthy Budapest wholesale merchant and house-holder, who died in 1891. Tafler, to match the expectations known in the Israelite Church, allotted a large sum to charitable ends; apart from the money provided for some poor members of his family, forty per cent of the sum went to the poor of Budapest (without any denominational specification) and fifty-six per cent was given to various Jewish institutions (hospital and the Chevra Cadisha). 14

Assimilation shaped by these and the similarly contradictory circumstances, also covered the growing divergence between the identity of many Jews and the

widely held image usually attached to Jewishness. This resulted in an ambivalent mental state of all those who were deeply involved in the assimilation process. That is the reason why one may question any "essentializing" understanding of contemporary Jewishness. The obvious temptation to adopt an essentialist view is based on two reasons. First, it has a lot to do with the essentialist thinking, which unanimously dominated the minds of contemporaries. They in their "drive to uniformity" tended to fully match the expectations that they were exposed to in the course of nation-state building. So, it is not wholly an accident that due to "the increasing power of the discourse [of that kind], Jews too, willy-nilly, became enmeshed in its logic, forced to conduct the dialogue within this essentialist framework". In truth, Aladár Komlós, who publicly confessed his double commitment and flexible identity was more of an exception than a rule.

Second, the historical sources historians are regularly working with, notably statistics (census data in particular) strongly suggest or even prescribe the essentializing reduction of Jewish identity. This is because statistics are an inevitable part of the national discourse aiming at furthering homogenization rather than reflecting the growing fragmentation and diversity of group self-consciousness.<sup>17</sup>

I am ready to break away from this essentialist notion of historical Jewry, a doctrine which also took the form of historicist integrationism (an approach that was aptly criticized by András Gerő some years ago). Instead, I would adopt the co-constitutive approach in terms both of assimilation and nationalism. "Co-constitutionality" means that group identities are not seen as fixed social entities, but "as negotiated constructions in which, at critical points, the role of the Jews (whether or not identified as such) is conceived not simply as contributory but well-nigh *co-constitutive*." Accepting the position that Steven E. Aschheim takes on the issue, I would also emphasize the fact that such complex cultures and identities like the Jewish one to be found in Hungary at that time are always contextually and interactively constructed. In

The conceptual framework advocated here makes the distinction between identity and image an important issue. The much quoted facts or events like (1) the sharpening competition of professionals in the labour market, or (2) the large influence exerted by the new Galician immigration during the war, or (3) the negative repercussion of the swift emergence of war millionaires (with many Jews among them), and (4) the drastic change concerning the political elite during the late 1910s (in 1918 and in 1919) seem not to explain in themselves the resurgent tide of extreme anti-Semitism following through the Dual Monarchy. The problem of how the mechanism of modern political anti-Semitic sentiment actually worked could most easily be approached through the example of 1918 and especially 1919, the memory of which became one of the reference points of Jewish discrimination policy and ideology in the interwar period.

The important role the Jews played in the events of the two revolutions, more closely, their over representation in the elites of both the Republic of 1918 and in that of the Commune of 1919 in particular, was an effective and durable vehicle for the state supported political anti-Semitism in the Horthy regime. I may cite the following paradigmatic case. When a delegation of the Alliance (a Jewish organization) visited the "completely liberal aristocrat" Count Khuen-Héderváry, ambassador of Hungary in Paris, to consult about the first anti-Jewish law passed in 1938, Khuen-Héderváry stated that the enmity Hungarians obviously felt to the Jews in Hungary rooted in the permanent "memory of Béla Kun's and his Jewish comissars". <sup>20</sup>

The vital issue arising at that point concerns the exact nature of the relationship between identity and image in terms of the left-wing intellectuals and short-lived politicians, who have always been blamed for their alleged Jewishness. As regarding Béla Kun (and his comrades) there seems to be a widely shared consensus among historians that he did not give the least manifest sign of a distinct Jewish consciousness. And this behavior appears to be wholly in accordance with his family socialization. Kun's father was a village notary, who later worked as clerical worker in Kolozsvár. In addition, Béla Kun was pupil of the well-known Kolozsvár Protestant College and was in his youth filled with some sense of national patriotism. Due to the close and continuous commitment to the working class movement thereafter, he also became immunized from any direct influence of Jewishness, which would have been mediated mainly by the Israelite religion and church. 22

Or an other case in point is Oscar Jászi, a prominent politician of the Károlyi government in 1918 and one of the leaders of the radical democrats of the early twentieth century. Jászi was also branded in the interwar period as representative of a specific Jewish spirit. As opposed to this judgement, György Litván argues in his recently published Jászi biography, "Similarly to many other assimilationists and Christianized Jewish contemporaries of him [Jászi was baptized even as a child] he also grew up and behaved in a manner for long as if he would have been born a Calvinist Magyar. Calvinism meant for him more a habitus than a religion, as he had never had a close link to the latter; and apart from his free thinking youth, he always retained a faith in God until he died." And this is justified even by Jászi's well-known critical attitude both towards the assimilationist Jews and figures such as Béla Kun, an issue that has frequently been discussed by historians. And the strength of the content of the content

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We can conclude that the image-making process plays a far more important role in shaping anti-Semitic perception than does the sense of identity, since the

latter due to the circumstances of co-constitutionality seems not to be able to produce sharp group contours and easily identifiable social meaning. This is the starting point for a postmodern notion of identity proposed here.<sup>25</sup> If we look closely at the incessantly changing role that identity and image have fulfilled in the various societal processes, the doctrine assuming continuity in the development of modern political anti-Semitism from the late nineteenth century on, cannot be accepted at face value. Shulamit Volkov is right in asserting that the anti-Semitism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has no close tie to such later developments as the Nazi type anti-Semitic ideology and politics.<sup>26</sup> A rigorously contextual approach is advocated by her with the aim to have a much better understanding of the peculiar nature of twentieth-century anti-Semitism. Volkov has also stated that the pre-1914 German anti-Semitism and the Nazi one was linked together only through the mental construction of a cultural code. It signifies that everybody belongs to one particular cultural camp or universe. The cognitive process expressed by this term provides the most fertile basis for the precise assessment of the kind of anti-Semitic ideology and political practice resulting in the Final Solution. However, the old anti-Semitic political parties, movements and social associations cannot be seen as merely anticipating the Nazi type anti-Semitism.<sup>27</sup>

The problem is also familiar in Hungary. Miklós Szabó who pioneered such scholarship in applying the term "neo-conservatism" to identify the social bases and the ideological content of pre-fascist tendencies of the turn of the century, also suggested a very similar continuity between various forms of anti-Semitisms. In reconstructing the social movements (taking the form of social associations), which could mobilize large segments of the state and administrative salaried classes, the so called Christian middle class, Szabó postulated close relationship between the pre-1918 anti-Semitic movements (their organizations) and the ones appearing after the collapse of the Commune in the process of establishing the counter-revolutionary regime. <sup>29</sup>

There is no room for an exhausting critique of this argument. Instead, I want to return for a moment first to Volkov's concept of pre-Nazi anti-Semitism, and second to the paradigm of the scapegoat seeking political anti-Semitism already mentioned in connection with Béla Kun and Oscar Jászi. The function of the turn-of-the-century anti-Semitism fed by a cultural code was plainly to negate even the mere possibility of Jewish emancipation (and assimilation) as declaring the absolute Jewish *cultural alienness*, one which cannot be eliminated. The preoccupation with the essentialist understanding of the Jew in that case was entirely tailored to the traditional image of immigrant Jewry. This special sort of perception of the Jew, however, failed then to dictate the (also essentialist) nationalist discourse amidst the co-constitutionality so much characterizing the age of emancipation and assimilation.

The case suddenly changed during the late 1910s and especially following 1918 and 1919. Anti-Semitism from that time on started to play a key role in the nationalist discourse due in part to the expansion of ethnic nationalism influencing the whole of Europe (not exclusively Central-Europe) at that time.<sup>30</sup> The specific contribution of Central Europe to the creation of a new form of anti-Semitism was to fill the Jewish image with a clear-cut political content. It "turned out" that the Jew, who up to this point was viewed only as a culturally alien element, might even mean a political "threat" to the host society. This was the most important message of 1918 and 1919 in the eyes of all those who were frightened by the events.<sup>31</sup> It is true that the language adopted by interwar anti-Semitism, retained some links with the pre-existing forms of hating Jews. However, more radical manifestations and entirely new meanings were then added to the traditionally known political anti-Semitism. These in taking the form of a political code were able in themselves to justify the anti-Jewish discrimination policy, which showed total neglect or even insensitivity to the authentic (although ambivalent) identity of many Jews. The great force of the new sense then attributed to nationalism and the irony hidden at the depth of the tragic story of Hungary's Jewry have clearly been evidenced by the fact that the most obvious (and irreversible) divergence between identity and image happened at a moment when the most assimilated and the least Jewish Jews lived in Hungary, namely in the period after Trianon.

## Notes

Aladár Komlós, "Zsidók válaszúton (1921)" [Jews at the crossroads (1921)], in *A zsidóság útja* [The Road of the Jewry], ed. Kőbányai, János (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 2000), 168.

Viktor Karády, "Asszimiláció és társadalmi krízis" [Assimilation and social crises] in Zsidóság, modernizáció, polgárosodás. Tanulmányok [Jewry, Modernization, Embourgeoisement. Studies], by Viktor Karády (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1997), 132–150.

Tibor Erényi, A zsidók története Magyarországon a honfoglalástól napjainkig [History of the Jews in Hungary from the conquest until recent times] (Budapest, n.d.), 50–51.

Viktor Karády, "A zsidóság polgárosodásának és modernizációjának főbb tényezői a magyar társadalomtörténetben" [Main factors of Jewish embourgeoisement and modernization in Hungarian social history] in Karády, op. cit., 91.

This argument goes against Erényi's contention according to which the Jews were not only a religion but also a specific ethnic group constituting a part of the Hungarians. Erényi, op. cit., 71.

Saul Friedländer, A náci antiszemitizmus. Egy tömegpszichózis története (Budapest: Uránusz, 1996), 23. (Original French edition: L'antisémitisme Nazi. Histoire d'une Psychose Collective) (Paris, 1972).
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The thesis was advanced again and again by Viktor Karády.

Milton M. Gordon, Assimilation in American Life. The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 80-81.

- Jakov Katz, Végzetes szakadás. Az ortodoxia kiválása a zsidó hitközségekbol Magyarországon és Németországban [Disastrous Schism. The Secession of Orthodoxy from the Jewish Parishes in Hungary and Germany] (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 1990, 303. On the several difficulties (and familial tensions) caused by leaving the Orthodox parish for the sake of Neolog one see, Gábor Gyáni: "Middle class kinship in nineteenth-century Hungary". Forthcoming.
- Michael Sozan, "Zsidók egy dunántúli falu közösségében" [Jews in the Community of a Transdanubian Village] in ... és hol a vidék zsidósága?... [... And Where is the Jewry of the Countryside?...] eds Zita Deáky, Zsigmond Csoma and Éva Vörös (Budapest: Centrál Európa, 1994), 166.
- Edit Balázs and Attila Katona, eds, *Baljós a menny felettem. Vallomások a szombathelyi zsidóságról és a soáról* [Ominous is the Heaven Above Me. Confessions on the Jews of Szombathely and the Soah] (Szombathely, 2001), 135.
- Victor Karady, "Religious divisions, socio-economic stratification and the modernization of Hungarian Jewry after the emancipation" in *Jews in the Hungarian Economy*, ed. Michael K. Silber (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1992), 176.
- Miklós Konrád, "Zsidó jótékonyság és asszimiláció a századfordulón" [Jewish charity and assimilation at the turn of the twentieth century], Történelmi Szemle XLIII, 3–4 (2001): 257–287.
- <sup>14</sup> Budapest Főváros Levéltára (Budapest Capital Archive) IV 1411 b. Legacy of Izsák Tafler, 1891.
- Steven E. Aschheim, *In Times of Crisis. Essays on European Culture, Germans, and Jews* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 91.
- The metaphor he applies is the following. True that the national sentiment felt by the Jews is merely a surface, but: "If Hungarianness of us is a skin only (Hungarian language, Hungarian education, more attraction and interest to the field and all the thing attached to the Hungarians), man does not give up his skin very easily and it is impossible to cast it quickly both for moral and technical reasons." Komlós, *op. cit.*, 182.
- Viktor Karády, the main proponent and practitioner of this essentializing approach in Hungary uses statistics only in his own research. Cf. Victor Karády, "Social mobility, reproduction and qualitative schooling differentials in ancient regime Hungary" in CEU History Department Yearbook 1994–1995, ed. Andrea Pető (Budapest: CEU, 1995), 133–157; Idem, "Aspects of unequal assimilation in liberal Hungary. Social geography of the movement to Magyarise alien surnames before 1918," in CEU History Department Yearbook 1997–1998, ed. Eszter Andor et al. (Budapest: CEU, 1999), 49–69; Idem, "Jewish over-schooling revisited: The case of Hungarian secondary education under the Old Regime (1900–1941)" in Jewish Studies at the Central European University, ed. András Kovács (Budapest: CEU, 2000), 71–89.
- András Gerő, "New Jewish past", in Andor, *op. cit.* 35–49. The book he reviewed was edited and in part written by Géza Komoróczy.
- 19 Aschheim, op. cit. 87.
- The source cited is to be found in Nathaniel Katzburg, *Zsidópolitika Magyarországon* 1919–1943 (Budapest: Bábel Kiadó, 2002), 245. (The original edition: *Hungary and the Jews* 1920–1943. Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1981.)
- Ibid., 31–36; Erényi, op. cit. 63–66; William O. McCagg, "Jews in the revolutions. The Hungarian Experience", Journal of Social History 28 (1972): 78–105; György Borsányi, "Zsidók a munkásmozgalomban" [Jews and the workers' movement in Hungary] Világosság XXXIII, 2 (1992): 145–152; Tibor Erényi, "Zsidók és a magyar baloldaliság" [The Hungarian Left and the Jews], Világosság XXXIII, 2 (1992): 152–160.
- Cf. Kun Béláné, Kun Béla (Emlékezések) [Béla Kun (Recollections)] (Budapest: Magvető, 1969), 7–20.
- <sup>23</sup> György Litván, *Jászi Oszkár* [Oscar Jászi] (Budapest: Osiris, 2003), 19.

See Walter Pietsch, Reform és ortodoxia. A magyar zsidóság belépése a modern világba [Reform and Orthodoxy. Admittance of Hungarian Jewry in the modern world] (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 1999), 99–109; János Gyurgyák, A zsidókérdés Magyarországon. Politikai eszmetörténet [The Jewish Question in Hungary. A History of Political Ideas] (Budapest: Osiris, 2001), 495–509.

- For more about this see Márta Csabai and Ferenc Erős, *Testhatárok és énhatárok. Az identitás változó keretei* [Body Borders and Self Borders. The Changing Frameworks of Identity] (Budapest: Jószöveg, 2000), 50.
- Shulamit Volkov, "The written matter and the spoken word. On the gap between pre-1914 and Nazi anti-Semitism," in *Unanswered Questions. The Nazi Germany and the Genocide of Jews*, ed. François Furet (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 33–55.
- Shulamit Volkov, "Anti-Semitism as a Cultural Code. Reflections on the History and Historiography of anti-Semitism in Imperial Germany," in *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, XXIII (1978): 25–45.
- Miklós Szabó, Az újkonzervativizmus és a jobboldali radikalizmus története (1867–1918) [The Neo-Conservativism and the History of Right-Wing Radicalism, 1867–1918] (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2003.)
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- The social psychological concept, *threatened identity* is described by Ferenc Erős, *Az identitás labirintusai* [Labyrinths of Identity] (Budapest: Janus/Osiris, 2001), 74–78.