

# THE DISINTEGRATED JEW: JEW, HUNGARIAN, COMMUNIST

## AN IDENTITY SKETCH

ANDRÁS GERŐ

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest  
Hungary

The word “Jew” is used as a more or less self-evident identity category, even though the content it conveys has been just as much transformed by secularisation, modernisation, assimilation and acculturation as any other identity category. In the world before secularisation and the modern idea of the nation – up to the nineteenth century in Hungary – a Jew was somebody whose religion was Jewish. The internal cracks caused the Judaism-based concept of Jewishness in Hungary to fall apart within a couple of decades. The fragmentation of Jewry was no less down to the challenge of national and secular identities, but these challenges only took effect because of the confirmations they promised in different situations. Departing from traditional Jewish ways was “rewarded” by social and intellectual success. Zionism – whose founder, Theodor Herzl, was brought up in the culture of Budapest and Vienna – conceived Jewish identity as a national identity and attempted to bring Jews, who were following divergent routes, together through self-identification with the nation. The Holocaust did not change the historical nature of the disintegrated Jewish identity. The anti-Semitic, disenfranchising Hungarian national consciousness said: it does not matter what you are – if I say you are a Jew, you are a Jew. Communism said: it doesn't matter what you are, if you are not a Communist, you cannot be anything else.

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Our concepts often present themselves as ready interpretations. Their casual use saves us much effort by making something appear “self-evident” that would otherwise demand an explanation. The word “Jew” is used as a more or less self-evident identity category, even though the content it conveys has been just as much transformed by secularisation, modernisation, assimilation and acculturation as any other identity category. Whatever meaning we ascribe to it, the word “Jew” has denoted a minority throughout the diaspora, and as with every minority, what is decisive is the content of the category expressing the majority, and how that content changes. Majority and minority – under any interpretation – contextualise each other, and take their meanings with reference to each other.

The question of what is what, and how we define things, is a matter of decoding, or more precisely the means of decoding. For this, of course, we also need the words and concepts by which we attempt to say anything at all.

The means of decoding is history itself. History can be interpreted as the story of society, the course of politics, and as many other things, such as awareness, identity, self-identity, and classifications of ourselves made or expressed by others. This is true for Jews, Hungarians, and Communists. Seemingly straightforward identities could be ambiguous, and sometimes mutually entangled, or even deliberately confused. Interpretation is more and more difficult, if for no other reason than we also have to interpret the interpreter. The history of our identities is in a certain sense equivalent to ourselves.

### Jew

In the world before secularisation and the modern idea of the nation – up to the nineteenth century in Hungary – a Jew was somebody whose religion was Jewish. The Jewish religious enlightenment in German-speaking Europe reinterpreted much of religion and religious rules, and thus created major differences among believers of the same religion.<sup>1</sup> Followers of the diverging movements may have criticised, indeed vilified, each other, but this did nothing to change the fact that Jewishness meant Judaism, even if there were wider and wider differences as to what was regarded as Judaism. Jews argued and wrangled with each other, but everybody else regarded them as Jews on the grounds of their religion. In consequence, prejudices against Jews were known as anti-Judaism, since they were expressed in the name of Christianity, against Jews as followers of Judaism.

However, the internal cracks caused the Judaism-based concept of Jewishness in Hungary to fall apart within a couple of decades. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, religious identity and self-identity had broken into three distinct groups, namely: the Neology, orthodoxy, and “status quo ante” movements. Depending on the movement they adhered to, Jews went to different synagogues, dressed differently and led different lives. As Judaism’s cracks deepened, Jews in Hungary became divided. Their uniform image in the eyes of non-Jews could, of course, have remained intact, but other changes were taking their effects on the concept of the Jew.

The change was driven by the mutually reinforcing and interrelated processes of secularisation and the modern concept of the nation. The Christian universalism of the feudal world was steadily eroded by the new, particular, and at the same time secular concept of the community, the nation. A worldly community, the nation did not dissolve the religious differences between people, but reduced them to insignificance in comparison with the former world-view. Insignificance in effect

meant secularisation. It was a very bumpy journey, and conclusion in the church policy laws passed in the early 1890s, when state and church were divorced, and the state treated the Jewish religion as a “recognised denomination,” in short accepted it.

In the eyes of the state, at least, religion became a personal matter, or more precisely it was left to individuals, or free associations of individuals, to form their own world-view. Such a normative solution was accompanied by a much more contradictory process in society, since strong religious constraints retained their hold on marriages and social relations, but the legislation contributed to the breakdown of the old determinacies.

Jews representing a religious identity had no national consciousness. This left them free to choose, or rather forced them to make a choice, as regards their national affiliations. But national affiliation, as nations took form and the Christian universalism of the feudal world gradually faded, became an identity of increasing importance.

In the 1780s it was government policy to Germanise the Jews, forcing them to take German surnames. However, since the Germanising authorities were thinking in terms of imperial rather than national identity, the question still remained open. For Jews without national consciousness, the real challenge was Hungarian identity.<sup>2</sup> The Hungarian national movement involved more than just linguistic cohesion, it held the promise of an equal ranking membership in the political community. For the Jews, the promise of equal political rank was of double significance because they were the only social group without a national identity.

During the Reform Era and in 1848 the Jews experienced how often and in what way existing social prejudices, the tradition of anti-Judaism and the intention of equal rights can combine. They also experienced how the days of March 1848, with their promises of equality, were followed by riots involving anti-Judaist rhetoric and tending towards modern anti-Semitism. And of course they experienced the – somewhat belated – acceptance of equal rank by the modern Hungarian national consciousness when an act of Parliament was passed on the issue in 1849.<sup>3</sup>

Beset with pitfalls and setbacks as it was, the process nonetheless gained further reinforcement immediately after the Compromise in 1867, when equal rights and emancipation for Jews were specifically enshrined in law.

The possibility and challenge of national identity became an increasingly broader reality under the liberal political disposition in the years that followed. The rising current of assimilation – a term that covers a highly complex set of phenomena – swelled to become the mainstream of Jewish affairs. Examining the appeal that assimilation held for the Jews explains much in social terms of what was behind religious fragmentation. The power of Neologism grew from national – and thus secular – identification. Jews, at least in the minds of many, became Hungarians, or more precisely Hungarians of the Mosaic faith. The power and depth of

assimilation may seem less convincing in retrospect, but the fact remains that more and more Jews in Hungary saw themselves as Hungarians and were increasingly looked on first of all as Hungarians, and only secondarily as Jews. Just like others for whom national identity was primary, with other considerations – such as being Catholic or Protestant – coming only in second place. It was this momentum of change that created the political conditions for the divorce of church and state.

And so the Jews, who had identified themselves by their religion, acquired for themselves a national identity. Still regarded as Jews on the basis of their religion, they nonetheless became Hungarians. They were statistically classified as such and were regarded as such by members of other nations.<sup>4</sup>

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the picture changed again.<sup>5</sup> It was a two-way change, stemming both from intra-Jewish affairs and from a discourse that reflected various processes and led to a new framework of attitudes.

Many Jews, as traditional Judaism gradually waned and identification with worldly affairs spread, began to regard religious Jewishness as a burden that could be shed. It was a burden in the first place because, even after reforms, it prescribed many regulations obstructing everyday secular life. It was simply uncomfortable. But abandoning religious constraints also made it easier to escape from prejudices against Jews. And on the spiritual side, the personal need for the Jewish religion diminished because it was replaced in many respects by membership of a community.

Responses varied depending on individuals' positions: Hungarianisation of names became common, and not a few people, after rising in society, actually converted to Christianity in the hope of speeding and securing their rise, and making themselves more firmly Hungarian. And then there came the opportunity to identify with something universal and very secular, going well beyond national particularism: socialism. Its promise and its rituals made it the universal religion of international and worldly redemption, sweeping aside every religious, national and other inherited cultural dimension.

The result was the hitherto unthinkable phenomenon of the Jew who was no longer a Jew. None of this ran to a final consummation, of course, and it was the divergences along the way that lent the traditional view of the process, the fragmentation and disintegration of the Jewry, its characteristic features. It was a double incompleteness. Firstly, no single approach proved to have sufficient merits to completely eliminate, liquidate, or prevent the progress of the other approaches. By the early twentieth century there were living in the same country the traditionally recognisable figures of religious orthodoxy, the muscular communities of reformed Jews, ambitious converted "Jews" who made it right up to ministerial rank, socialist intellectual agitators, and more-Magyar-than-the-Magyars writers,

poets, and patriotic poetasters.<sup>6</sup> Then there was the incompleteness of the individual kind. It was possible to take up diverging processes simultaneously, or to vary the tempo, and a single person or family often declined to follow one route or another to its conclusion. Socialist-minded young intellectuals pursued their studies with the financial support of families who maintained and cultivated Jewish traditions; the relations of converted Jews remained Jewish, and intellectuals declaring identification with Hungarian culture actually looked towards German culture. There was wide scope for variation and innumerable “inconsistencies.” All signs that the concept of “the” Jew had been shattered.

The fragmentation of Jewry was no less down to the challenge of national and secular identities, but these challenges only took effect because of the confirmations they promised in different situations. Departing from traditional Jewish ways was “rewarded” by social and intellectual success. Success took the form of honoured position and acceptance within Hungarian society, reputation, high office, or the grant of respect from the newly-entered community. Despite the many attendant contradictions, disintegration itself opened the way to everything that had been absent from the traditional life of centuries lived in social subordination and secondary status.

This confirmation in turn brought other consequences, however. In the feudal world Christendom represented the subordination of the Jewry within the power system in the form of anti-Judaism. Anti-Judaism fitted perfectly as the ideology for deprivation or curtailment of rights, since if Jewishness meant identity with the religion, then the religious argument was enough to “cover” the Jews.

So what was to happen as the traditional concept of Jewishness was disintegrating and Jews were appearing as an unprecedented social success story? The weapon of anti-Judaism could only be deployed against those stuck in traditionalism and thus not even competitors in the capitalising bourgeois world.

For ideas to enforce subordination, constraint and elimination of Jews, a new kind of argument had to be sought – across Europe as well as in Hungary.

The new language of the anti-Jewish discourse was anti-Semitism.<sup>7</sup> It often mixed in elements of anti-Judaism (like the “blood libel”) but the real targets were Jews in the mainstream of the developing bourgeois society.

However, anti-Semitism had to contend with the great paradox that the Jewish community, in traditional terms, had disintegrated. To be effective, it had to imbue that fragmentation with an underlying unity. A narrative had to be substituted for the reality.

This narrative appeared in several places, since similar processes were in progress elsewhere in Europe, but featured with particular prominence in the world of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The interesting story here does not concern the form of words, but what was actually said, or the propositions behind them. This

meant not stylistic differences, or certain statements, but the concept of Jewishness.

In this respect modern anti-Semitism partially followed anti-Judaism and partly went beyond it, presenting Jewishness – which was in fact going through a complete break-up – as a singular social and mental whole. In its view the Jew was a totality. The total Jew was a Jew in every area of life. He ate, spoke and thought as a Jew. A Jew was a Jew even when he was not a Jew. What made him dangerous was appearing to be something when he was in fact something else. Stigmatisation was a mechanism not reserved for Jews. Prejudiced thinking led to a similar way of attributing utter evil by the way of speaking about witches or sexual minorities. But the Jew was not just an absolute entity in the way implied or alleged for other groups by similar ways of speaking. The Jew appeared as a secret, hidden organisation, and his object was to control everything via a conspiracy pervading the nation and the whole world. In this conception the “Jewish conspiracy” was immeasurably dangerous because the Jew was absolute, while so often being invisible. The anti-Semitic conception varied in nuance, sometimes being strongly explicit, elsewhere somewhat cloaked, but constant in the essentials. The approach naturally demanded an explanation of the absolute Jew and did not hold back from drawing conclusions. The explanation shifted increasingly in the racial direction, and the conclusions towards demands for restriction and exclusion of people and phenomena interpreted as Jewish.

Just as the traditional Jewish identity was splitting apart, the “absolute Jew” idea came into existence and viewed the separation, a “reality,” as nothing more than an attempt to conceal, to mask the absolute.

The consequences of this special duality were manifold, with the narrative setting off a widespread reaction. The break-up of traditional Jewry had set off the competitive appearance of Jews in areas where they had not hitherto been present. This, coupled with their attainment of equal rights in the secularising world, gave modern anti-Semitism its strength.

One major consequence was the appearance of Jewish ethnic awareness.<sup>8</sup> Those for whom the anti-Semitic narrative and its social force were proof that assimilation was doomed to failure, and that a return to traditional Jewishness was impossible, started to think in terms of a national alternative to the Jewish concept and Jewish identity. Zionism – whose founder, Theodor Herzl, was brought up in the culture of Budapest and Vienna – conceived Jewish identity as a national identity and attempted to bring Jews, who were following divergent routes, together through self-identification with the nation. It attempted to bring followers of both Judaism and socialism into the nation, especially since Herzl conceived the society of the future country of the Jewish nation, Israel, as a kind of socialist utopia. At all events, the end of the nineteenth century found Zionism taking its place as another subdivision of Jewry.

Zionism found few supporters, certainly among Hungarian Jews,<sup>9</sup> mainly because another kind of reaction seemed more practical against the attacks and power of anti-Semitism. Even Herzl hesitated, one of his visions being that the Jews should convert to Christianity, as if symbolically completing the process of assimilation. However, he accurately perceived that changing religion could not give a relevant response to the increasingly racial basis of anti-Semitism.

The more promising reaction at the time was to continue the logic of social assimilation, which was going on in any case. It was the articulation of the idea that assimilation would better weld together the citizens of the homeland at the social level, and the assumption of the national – Magyar – identity would do the same politically and psychologically. Hungarian Jewish leaders unceasingly proclaimed identity with Hungarianness and not infrequently gave voice to Hungarian nationalism.<sup>10</sup> The advantage of this constantly-asserted assimilative identity was that it obstructed the advance of anti-Semitism – as illustrated by the much stronger spread of anti-Semitism in Austria and Vienna, where there was no national identity. But it came at a price – a price that was most sorely paid in the twentieth century. Overemphasis on assimilative identity inhibited the development of a truly integrative identity. It also concealed some cracks and incongruities, which were arising in the assimilation process at the time – certain aspects of lifestyle and values suggesting that Jews could be Hungarian in ways other than those with whom they were trying to assimilate, or simply that there really were some divergent elements. A Jew turned baron could take on the full Magyar panoply just as a traditional Hungarian baron did, but there nonetheless remained differences at certain points. A Jewish law student could attend the same university as his Christian fellow-Hungarian, but his legal career would be predictably different for the sole reason that he was a Jew and the other was not. The list of examples goes on, and are in many cases quantifiable. Even so, in the world of identity policy, actual differences were concealed by assimilative consciousness, and the anti-Semitic reading misinterpreted them as signs of the enemy. There was no space for Hungarian Jews to express themselves – to either themselves or others – in terms other than just assimilation and anti-Semitism or, in their own view, in terms of assimilation and dissimulation (Zionism). The option of coexistence, or of integration, therefore, did not open up. Its absence concealed the actual differences and pettified, almost exalted, assimilative identity. (For instance, it made it possible to hold up as an example a Jew who achieved professorial status, but covered up the discrimination he encountered, and its ultimate effect.) Or taken from another aspect, the joys and virtues of assimilation were proclaimed, but traditional choices were preferred in marriage strategy.<sup>11</sup> This absence, or more accurately the failure to articulate and to find a real identity, left the Hungarian Jews almost completely defenceless when state policy ultimately disregarded their assimilative identification.

Hungarian Jews entered the twentieth century with their traditional identity in decay and the concept of the “Jew” having changed both for themselves and the society around them. The change had not swept away what was there before, but had created new variants on old themes. Religious consciousness ranged from orthodoxy to Neology, national consciousness from Hungarian nationalism to Jewish nationalism, and lifestyle from the traditional to the fully secular. And some Jews had gone beyond a shift in identity: taking full advantage of the secular world’s opportunities, they had abandoned all of these variations and become Christians, atheists, or socialists. The numbers representing the different identities varied very widely, of course, but this is a matter for social history rather than the history of identity.

The external world encouraged and tolerated this, and often granted confirmation of it. Encouragement, toleration and confirmation ensured the authenticity of a wide diversity and choice of the identities, however aesthetically jarring some, or all, of them might be. But while Jewishness was disintegrating, a reaction was developing against Jews that identified as its enemy the “total Jew.” Aspirations to integration crumbled, and the question from then on was: if Jewish identity has fragmented, but the imaginary creature of the total Jew is being identified as the enemy, what will happen next?

This question could only be answered by the majority, which we will refer to collectively as Hungarians.

### **Hungarian**

Hungarian national consciousness, and Hungarian nationalism, followed without many deviations the same standard structural course of birth and formation as those of other nations. What is important here, however, is the kind of national consciousness into which Jews assimilated, and how the internal content of that national consciousness changed in the twentieth century.

The defining force in the birth of the Hungarian national consciousness was the inability of a feudal, aristocratic society to satisfy bourgeois needs via the accustomed means of Christian universalism. Bourgeois energies could only be nourished by the creation of a new community, one in which as many people as possible had an interest in operating and maintaining it. Privileges had to be spread wider, and in a way that the new form of social organisation maximised its own potential.

National identity here meant that the privileged community was replaced by a linguistic, or a cultural community. This process started in the final third of the eighteenth century and continued up to the reform era. It unfolded as the result of much conscious effort, from a recognition of the Hungarian language’s impor-



tance to its adoption as the sole national language in 1844. It involved language reform, the creation of the Hungarian Academy, grammar, education – an enormous quantity and breadth of effort.

The nation as a linguistic-cultural community is a structural element in the formation of every nation. A quirk of the Hungarian case, with a unique implication for the identity question, is that fear was one of the inspirations for nation-formation, and indeed one of its results. The “inspirational” fear was that if the Hungarians did not become a European nation, then they would be left out of the current of European civilisation and be cast into poverty. Some were also afraid that the aristocratic structure did not offer sufficient protection against absolutism. And some were afraid that only a new community consciousness could offer protection against peasant dissatisfaction. From our point of view it is indifferent which fear was well grounded and which was not. Coming from different directions, the fears all pointed in one direction: the need to create a nation, a national consciousness. But as soon as the *ideal* had been coined, there came another fear: the Hungarian nation could easily subside in the surrounding sea of Germans and Slavs. In other words, the vision of national death arose almost immediately. If the aristocratic order, devoid of national character, remained, then both the aristocracy and the country would come to an ignominious end; but if the nation came into being, then the Hungarian would be rent asunder by the overwhelming power of other nations.

There was only one solution offering any real prospects, and the cultural-based national consciousness found the appropriate response almost immediately, while constantly maintaining the fear motif.

This response asserted the insufficiency of thinking in terms of a cultural community alone. There was also a need to form a political community consciousness, almost in parallel. The content of political community could be none other than civil liberty. Civil liberty was the only course that could ensure the leading social role of the existing elite, while offering the peasantry – which made up the mass of the country’s inhabitants – some real prospects, and something with which they could identify. A necessary concomitant of equal rights and civil property rights was liberation of the serfs. The national awareness that formed during the Reform Era and came to political fruition in 1848/49 thus stretched out along two axis: cultural and political. The concept of “being Hungarian” was harnessed to the concept of liberty, thus granting the opportunity for affiliation to those who could not meet the cultural criteria. Many who took up arms for the Hungarian cause in 1848/49 could hardly speak the language. In 1849 several people executed by the suppressors of the War of Independence, and thus raised to the “national pantheon” as martyrs of the Hungarian cause, would not, in cultural terms, have satisfied the criteria of Hungarian national identity.

The political concept of the nation – “one political nation” – remained alongside the cultural one even after 1867, since the same liberty applied to everyone re-

ardless of national affiliation in the cultural sense. There was no national distinction in terms of rights, and the universal value of freedom took expression in the Hungarian political nation.<sup>12</sup>

This national identity had its own limits, of course, finding it hard to deal with those who considered their own cultural identity more important than the values of liberty applying equally to everyone. Quite simply, this Hungarian national identity was not acceptable to some ethnic groups, since they were more interested in forming their own identity. (On the other hand, liberal Hungarian nationalism did not really suppress such initiatives.) At the same time, liberal Hungarian national awareness enabled German-speaking town dwellers, without any duress, to become Hungarianised, and also opened up to the assimilation of Jews. Indeed, as has already been mentioned, the Jews were first offered personal equal rights and then religious rights, and the Jews could hardly have wished for better. Those seeking in liberty a remedy for fears found common cause with those seeking to escape from a secondary and subordinate situation, even if, as we have seen, it was a cause full of conflicts and internal cracks. The Jews quickly learnt Hungarian, and the Hungarians could count on more and more Hungarians.

The Hungarian national identity naturally, like all identities, had its own vision of the enemy. However, the enemy was primarily not within the ranks. The threat was from the Germanising, assimilating Habsburg power, and from ethnic groups seeking their own identities. This led to war with the Habsburgs and some of the ethnic groups in 1848/49. It could quite reasonably be termed a civil war, except in the remarkable fact that armed conflict did not take place among all ethnic groups and above all not between the Hungarians themselves.<sup>13</sup> This meant that liberty was to a certain extent capable of counterbalancing the threat of national and social conflicts.

The vision of the enemy remained even after the Compromise of 1867, but became politically segmented. Those who saw the enemy as a combination of the Habsburgs and the ethnic minorities were bitterly opposed to the compromise and kept a cold distance from the ethnic movements. The espousers of settlement with the Habsburgs saw the main danger in the ethnic minorities. And finally, there evolved a democratic national consciousness which wanted to make allies out of the ethnic groups, so as to be able to confront the Habsburgs (Kossuth).

The differences in emphasis betrayed some alterations in the state of national identities, but none of these saw the main enemy as being within. On the contrary, Hungarian identity, because of the power of the enemy in whatever conception, began, in a sense, to come together. For example, regional self-identification within Magyars shrank to insignificance. There were the odd patches of colour, like the Palóc, but Hungarian identity did not take form as a fabric of regional identifications. It was a coherent whole that at most took on regional nuances.

A national consciousness envisaging an internal enemy appeared in the 1870s, in the form of the political party of anti-Semitism.<sup>14</sup> This national consciousness increasingly placed the concept of being Hungarian along the ethnic – “Magyar” dimension, and set out to make restriction of liberty a part of national identity and Christianity an exclusive cultural element of being Magyar. This is why it found Jews as the main enemy and asserted a national consciousness of which equality under the law was not part of the Hungarian national identity. It wanted to extract indivisible liberty from the ideal of the Magyar nation.

The political party formation of the Magyar national consciousness pursuing narrowed rights and cultural criteria, and seeking an internal enemy, soon fell apart, but the new national identity was there to stay. Those in power kept to the “original” concept of identity, since the ethnic Magyars were in a minority in their “own” country, and so a “truncated” national consciousness lay very far from their interests. However, this did not cause the narrowing interpretation of the nation to go away, or prevent it gaining new force in the mid-1890s with the formation of the Catholic People’s Party.<sup>15</sup> What drove the ideals and organisation of the Catholic People’s Party was the struggle against the separation of church and state. It conceived Magyar and Christian to be the same thing, and liberal developments, such as the ecclesiastical policy acts, to be destroying that link. It should be added that the separation of church and state was a long drawn-out process, urged by Ferenc Deák even in the 1870s, and was important for reasons that went far beyond liberal dogma. The purpose was to minimise the significance of the Catholic-Protestant antipathy and thus strengthen the power of cultural solidarity among minority Hungarians.

By the turn of the century, Hungarians – not least because of Jewish assimilation to the liberal Hungarian identity – had become the majority in Hungary. This fact, coupled with the problems created by a sclerotic system unable to make social reforms, strengthened the national consciousness seeking an internal enemy just as much as the appearance of social-political radicalism in its various forms. The latter put the main emphasis on social and political, rather than national identity, and by this means sought to distinguish between good and evil.<sup>16</sup> The former, the narrowing national consciousness, partly in reaction to socio-political radicalism, found more and more criteria for not admitting, indeed for excluding people from the nation. The original, “traditional” national consciousness sounded increasingly empty, since it was least able to supply what there was the greatest demand at the turn of the century: an internal enemy.

For a brief moment, the First World War gave new strength to the traditional national consciousness, since the population had above all to be mobilised against an external enemy. At the end of the war, the avoidance of the consequences of defeat preferred the socially radical “Magyar” concept or – when this seemed to be insufficient – class-based internationalism going beyond Hungary.

But the consequences of defeat in war proved unavoidable. It was this, and not the revolutions, that dictated the content of Hungarian national consciousness. In the truncated country, Hungarians became an overwhelming majority, but Hungarian nationalism had suffered a catastrophic defeat, losing two-thirds of its historic state territory, and one-third of the people, who thought of themselves as Hungarian, found themselves subject to another state. Some of the traditional enemies of the Hungarians had won. The Habsburgs had disappeared, but the ethnic groups reaped an unprecedented triumph.

The new counterrevolutionary regime drew its own lessons from the defeat, or at least grasped the opportunity of raising its own national consciousness to state policy. It viewed the catastrophe as having been caused by liberal policy, which had been too yielding. Liberal Hungarian national consciousness thus took the blame for the defeat. By resurrecting the "restrictive" national consciousness, the regime could hold up the image of an enemy against which they had a chance of "winning." It was a view that completely obscured the unique achievement of liberal Hungarian national consciousness in extending the existence of historical Hungary; and in pursuing it, they avoided confrontation with the fact that no form of Hungarian national consciousness could guarantee the long-term existence of Greater Hungary.<sup>17</sup>

With the concept of "Hungarian" having branched in many directions, the thoughts and acts of the Horthy era increasingly followed the path of "restriction." These thoughts were just a continuation of a line going back to the 1870s, but the acts immediately declared that Hungarianness was incompatible with the concepts of equality under the law and the indivisibility of civil liberty. A programme of legislation instituted discrimination on religious grounds, targeted primarily at the Jews. However, at least until the late nineteen thirties, the system did not yield to pressure for a national concept based on race, and the guiding state principle remained that of cultural restrictions. (Indeed, in the later period of consolidation, the regime granted concessions even here, although it did not completely renounce the discriminative nationality concept on the unofficial level.)

This was the concept of nation, and national identity, that was invested with political power. Of course there were other versions existing in society, including the culturally inspired, liberal concept of the nineteenth century. National identity was not a homogeneous concept that applied right across society, but since Hungary was an independent country, the authenticating force of state power could keep diverging identities in check. Thus, the "official" category of national identification, given expression through state rituals, political messages, and even legislation, nonetheless took on a special significance.

By the 1930s the culturally restricting national consciousness was gradually losing its official endorsement, giving way to a proposition of identity aimed at defining Hungarianness in terms of race. This demanded more than just Christian-

ity, since racial origin derived from pagan Magyar roots, to which Christianity was just a mongrel addition. This led to numerous paradoxes: Gyula Gömbös, a prominent apostle of the racial idea, had German forebears, and another fanatic, Ferenc Szálasi, Armenian.<sup>18</sup>

State power essentially adopted variations of the national consciousness that sought restrictions of rights. The choice of exactly which variation, and when, was guided by domestic and international affairs.

It was after the Nazi victory in Germany (1933) that the purely Christian-based Hungarian national consciousness started to lose out, being gradually replaced by the racially-based Hungarian identity, in terms of which rights were bestowed by virtue of birth and origin.

From the late 1930s it became clear that laws were being passed in Hungary depriving people of rights on racial grounds with the aim of gradually excluding one group of Hungarian citizens, the Jews, from the nation.<sup>19</sup> Since this arose as a racial and not a religious issue, the widely divergent complex of Jewish identities, and identities of people who had renounced their Jewishness, was reduced to a single category. It then became irrelevant whether somebody was orthodox, Neologist, converted, atheist, or any of the many other possibilities. They were just Jews – even though they had hitherto lived under the full conviction that they were Hungarians.

Standing against the reality of the disintegrated, fragmented Jews was a Hungarian national consciousness – now in a position of power – that adopted as its image of the enemy, and thus as a fundamental part of itself, the “total Jew” concept. The narrative of the “total Jew” became a cold reality, viewed with incomprehension by most Jews, for whom it was completely irrelevant to their own identity.

Those who had assimilated, had assimilated into another Hungarian national consciousness. They cited their patriotic figures, their contribution to the elevation of the Hungarian nation, their propagation of culture, and many other things. But they were addressing a national consciousness that no longer existed, at least not in the realms of power. The new, racially motivated national consciousness, relegating legal equality in the name of protection of the race, was simply deaf to the voice of the old Hungarian national consciousness.

The 1944 endgame cannot be blamed solely on the Nazi invasion. The essential mental and state preparations had already been made, and the racially-based, liberty-depriving Hungarian national consciousness was already in place. Years before the endgame, officialdom had spelled out what and how much could be taken away from the Jews, had made it acceptable to take someone’s rightful property, and give it to someone else.

The Jews, clinging to the co-ordinates of traditional Hungarian national consciousness, reacted by intensifying their loyalty, their respect for the law, and

thereby their own defencelessness, since anything that could have made them eligible for being regarded as the enemy was completely absent from their own identity.<sup>20</sup>

The racial, disenfranchising Hungarian national consciousness was now experiencing unbroken victory. The scope of life for Jews narrowed, they were deprived of everything that had been theirs, including, for many, life itself. It counted for little whether one was an Olympic champion, an eminent scholar of Hungarian literature, a great poet, or a law-abiding citizen. Whoever you were, equality under the law was replaced by the equality of destruction.<sup>21</sup>

### **Beyond Jew and Hungarian – the Spectre of Communism**

The Holocaust brought unparalleled destruction. Some forms of Jewish identity lost much of their pre-genocide sociological weight within the Hungarian Jewish community through sheer physical elimination. Such was orthodoxy, which had been strong in some parts of the country outside Budapest. Since the vast majority of non-Budapest Jews were liquidated, it effectively vanished.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time the Holocaust created a unifying experience for very diverse identities, a common history. This common history herded together those who had long been far apart from each other. It could also be said that whereas anti-Semitism could be lived with, got round, or got over, the Holocaust did not permit this avoidance behaviour and attitude. The words of racially-based anti-Semitism became final and total acts, and the acts could not be ignored. In the logic of the events of the Holocaust, identity became worthless, giving way to an inexorable common history and shared suffering.

Nonetheless, the Holocaust did not change the historical nature of the disintegrated Jewish identity. At most it altered the internal proportions. The anti-Semitic logic of the “total Jew,” even though it took the lives of hundreds of thousands in Hungary, did not come out victorious in the history of identity. Some Jews who survived, having in many cases lost their families, left the country and – out of conviction, need, or for emotional reasons – chose the Zionist solution and became Israelis. Some left the country for countries other than the newly-forming Israel. They could no longer live here, but that did not mean they broke from their Hungarian identities. The Neologist consciousness also remained, but its adherents were much reduced in number and dwindled even further under the later pressure of state secularisation. Many also chose Christianity. And there also remained that other established route out of Jewishness, class-based identity. The latter also became spectacularly articulable, since the formation of the Communist system reduced or eliminated the opportunity for expressing other identities. The suppression and obscuration of alternative forms of consciousness was a special

feature of the Communist system – one of the reasons it is referred to as a dictatorship – and was not restricted to Jewish self-expression. This all meant that old self-definitions of Jewish identity such as Hungarianness, in the forms of minor property owner, petit bourgeois or grand bourgeois, could not appear publicly, but they still existed and lived on in the ritual of private lives.

However, for those seeking a way to cast off their Jewishness, communist-socialist identity meant more than just another familiar option, even if it had already existed before the war. To abandon Jewishness was now an act supported and promoted by the authorities. It should be re-emphasised here that a commitment to class-based and universal self-identification, if consistently pursued, meant abandoning any form of Jewish identity.

Taking such a step was influenced by both repulsion and attraction: repulsion from retaining any aspect of Jewishness and attraction to class-based Communist identity with its negligible national content. The repulsive forces fed on the weakness of existing bonds, the lack of comfort offered by Jewish spirituality for the radical stigmatisation and disadvantage experienced during the Holocaust, the failure of any Hungarian form of Jewish identity to provide a relevant response, and the reduction of Jewishness in direct memory to no more than shared suffering. The attraction was that Communism at least promised to overcome anti-Semitism, so that nobody would be suppressed, a new, fully-fledged identity, a kind of worldly religion.<sup>23</sup>

The attraction of Communism was not confined to Jews of assorted backgrounds. But the motivation for post-Holocaust Jews to identify with Communism stemmed from more than the promise that the Communist order would overcome anti-Semitism. What was on offer was a world-view in which anti-Semites themselves, and the perpetrators of the Holocaust themselves, were held up as the principal enemies. Nazis, fascists, whatever they were called, were fixed as the antithesis of Communist identity. Of course, there were internal dissonances. The dissonances did not in the main derive from an identification of the strong similarities between Nazi and Communist methods and ways of thinking. The ideal of “class war” and the savagery of the war had obscured these, or at least made them subject to argument. The strength of emotional and political legitimisation of the struggle against the “evil class enemy” and the Nazi brute proved powerful enough to keep the doubts at bay. A much bigger problem was that in the model country of socialism, the Soviet Union, anti-Semitism had been incorporated into official policy. However, anti-Semitism was a much lesser part of socialist politics in Hungary than in the Soviet Union, and identity did not become so detached from experience, which is perhaps why the socio-psychological phenomenon of cognitive dissonance did not occur so strongly here. The conception that Communist identity held up anti-Semitism as the image of the enemy could thus be more or less sustained.

However, there was one factor that made the choice of Communist identity easier for those who had a national identity, in this case a Hungarian national identity. Communism in Hungary – despite stereotypes to the contrary – set out to assert its power by means of vigorous national propaganda,<sup>24</sup> although the emphasis and strength of the national rhetoric changed its nature somewhat during the socialist period. It is undoubtedly true that the “national” world-view was highly selective, containing only what proved currently useful for socialist ideology. In general, two elements were highlighted: one was the “progressive” aspect of national history, and the other was the aspect of independence. It might be summed up by saying that the more authoritarian the system became, the more it promoted insurgents as its precursors; the less independent the country, the more it touted the historical personalities of independence. However, the desire for identification was little moved by such paradoxes. After all, every religious world-view had always carried with it irresolvable contradictions. So now those Jews who had survived assimilation, had a Hungarian consciousness, naturally treated anti-Semitism as the enemy, and became the potential and actual subjects of Communist identity.

People whose Jewishness retained a religious meaning, or to whom middle-class lifestyle and personal property were important, naturally enough regarded Communism not so much as an attraction but as a development from which to distance themselves.

The reaction of each individual was thus a combination of these repulsions and attractions. Some became party members to avoid trouble, more as a “tribute” paid to the dictatorship than identification with it. With racially-based deportation out of the way, some nonetheless found themselves sitting on a train again, this time the victims of their class situation.<sup>25</sup> But there were some who adopted Communist identity with faith and identification, and it was a matter of chance, or the strength of character, whether they became propagandists of the new faith, or its inquisitors.

So it was not to avenge the Jews that they took this step but to escape from any kind of Jewishness, and find relief in a new identity. Vengeance for the Jews was out of the question in any case, because those retaining Jewish or Jewish-middle-class status were oppressed by the system just like everybody else. Either because they were religious or because they dared to show themselves as secular Jewish citizens.<sup>26</sup>

The anti-Semitic, disenfranchising Hungarian national consciousness said: it doesn't matter what you are – if I say you are a Jew, you are a Jew. Communism said: it doesn't matter what you are, if you are not a Communist, you cannot be anything else. Communist – in its aims, and for a while in practice – wanted to expunge and suppress any identities differing from it, thus forcing people into disguise or self-deception. It was to be feared, and fear is something into which one can escape.



A large section of Jews, whatever their Jewish identity, took the option of disguise. Do not talk about it, forget it, cover it up. It was something like an administratively-enforced assimilation.<sup>27</sup> But this applied equally to dissenting articulations of Hungarian national consciousness. As if national identity, at least formally, had dozed into some kind of “socialist patriotism.”

And all the time, every identity that had entered the twentieth century was still there, sleeping, taking cover, being articulated only in the barest outlines, if at all. Life seemed to take its course along curious paths, with strange mythologies and counter-mythologies. From rabbi novice to Communist, from Communist to security policeman (AVO), from security policeman to a critical pressure-release valve within the system. Starting as a Jew, he found that everything that was Jewish had disappeared by the time he grew up. And the process sometimes went into reverse: from Jew to Communist and back to Jew again.<sup>28</sup> And of course there were those who lived here, beheld the spectre of Communism, and just wanted to survive.

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In the clear air of freedom, we discovered the existence of things we had never seen, and found many things whose existence we had assumed to be mere illusions. What seemed to have disappeared was here all the time, and what was here may no longer exist.

What is with us is the past, and the need to interpret it. And interpret we must, because we have to come to terms with everything that has happened. Or if not come to terms, at least to understand, to get the past in proportion, and put it in its place.

We need all this to interpret individual lives. To interpret our utterances. To understand ourselves. Because we ourselves are the full history of identity. Everything else is just a sketch.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> There is a substantial literature on this subject. I find the most useful for appraising the background and the process Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto. The Century of Jewish Emancipation, 1770–1870* (Budapest: MTA Jewish Studies Group, 1995), (originally published in English in 1973); and by the same author – particularly for its Hungarian features: *Final Break. How Orthodoxy Split from the Jewish Religious Community in Hungary and Germany* (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 1999) (originally published in Hebrew).
- <sup>2</sup> For the wider historical context: William O. McCagg, *A History of the Habsburg Jews* (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1992) (originally published in English in 1989). Sketchier, but with a wider scope is Nathaniel Katzburg, *Chapters from Modern Jewish History in Hungary* (Budapest:

Hungarian Academy of Sciences [HAS] Jewish Studies Group, Osiris Kiadó 1999) (originally written in Hebrew in 1975).

- 3 The developments of the Reform Era are dealt with very subtly, via a particular area – education – by Viktória Bányai: *Jewish Education in Hungary 1780–1850*. PhD thesis, Budapest-ELTE 2001 (manuscript). On the role of Hungarian national consciousness, András Gerő, “Jewish Roads within Hungarian Bounds in the 19th Century”, in *Magyar Polgárosodás* (Budapest: Atlantisz, 1993), 295–318. On the 1848/49 situation, Béla Bernstein: *The 1848 Hungarian War of Independence and the Jews* (Budapest, 1898) (Reprinted by Múlt és Jövő Kiadó in 1998); *1848–1849 in the Life of the Hungarian Jews*, ed. Jenő Zsoldos (Budapest, 1948) (Reprinted by Múlt és Jövő Kiadó in 1998). The fullest treatment of the emancipation: Ambrus Miskolczy, *Jewish Emancipation in Hungary in 1849* (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 1999).
- 4 Viktor Karády has made the widest studies of Jewish secularisation and modernisation in recent years. His works have appeared in ever greater numbers. He mainly uses quantification methods. I found particularly useful: Viktor Karády, *Jews and Social Inequalities (1867–1945)* (Budapest: Replika, 2000).
- 5 Essential for an understanding of turn-of-the-century affairs: Péter Hanák, *The Garden and the Workshop* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1988); Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna. Politics and Culture* (Budapest: Helikon, 1998) (Originally published in English in 1961); Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews 1867–1938. A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Gábor Vermes, *István Tisza* (Budapest: Századvég Kiadó, 1994). The turn-of-the-century changes are treated by John W. Boyer’s two monographs: *Political Radicalism in Late Imperial Vienna. Origins of the Christian Social Movement 1848–1897* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1981), and the sequel: *Culture and Political Crisis in Vienna. Christian Socialism in Power 1897–1918* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); Brigitte Hamann, *Vienna and Hitler. Formative Years of a Dictator* (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 2000) (Originally published in German in 1996).
- 6 These phenomena and the associated attitudes are well illustrated in: Lajos Venetiáner, *History of the Hungarian Jews from the Conquest to the Outbreak of the Great War, with Particular Regard to Economic and Cultural Development* (Budapest: Fővárosi Nyomda Rt., 1922) which was republished in an abridged form in 1986 by Könyvértékesítő Vállalat.
- 7 An attempt at a thorough review of anti-Semitism and its variations is: András Kovács, ed., *Anti-Semitism* (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2000).
- 8 The most easily accessible treatment in Hungarian is Zoltán Halász, *Herzl* (Budapest: Magyar Világ Kiadó, 1995). It does not meet the criteria of an academic work, but gives a good account of how the originally assimilative consciousness transformed into a Jewish national outlook.
- 9 The limits to the spread of Zionism are revealed by several approaches. To understand the limits of its influence see: “Jews in Budapest” *Budapesti Negyed* (1995/summer, no. 8); and Kinga Frojimovics, Géza Komoróczy, Viktória Pantai, and Andrea Strbik, *Jewish Budapest. Memories, Rituals, History* (Budapest: Városháza, Hungarian Academy of Sciences [HAS] Centre for Jewish Studies, 1995).
- 10 A good illustration of the attitude outlined here is the journal *Egyenlőség* [Equality]. See Lajos Szabolcsi: *Two Lifetimes. The Decades of Equality 1881–1931*. Recollections and Documents with a Preface by Miklós Szabolcsi (Budapest: HAS Centre for Jewish Studies, 1993).
- 11 I am referring to one of the most striking careers of assimilation of the age, and its conclusion: Henrik Marczali and his “affair”. Henrik Marczali, *Memoirs* (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 2000), and Judit Biró, The Singer-Marczali Affair, in *Scandals in Hungarian Public Life, 1843–1991*, compiled by András Gerő (Budapest: T-Twins Kiadó, 1993), 117–136.
- 12 There is an enormous number of sources and an extensive literature on the formation and character of Hungarian national consciousness. For the sake of simplicity, I mention here only one,

which is both a treatment and a source, since it contains studies by greatest authorities and the words of contemporaries. The series published in 1998 by Új Mandátum under the title *Hungarian Liberals*. The twelve volumes give a thorough picture of liberal Hungarian national identity.

- 13 The mood of 48/49 is in my judgement best expressed by the first comprehensive treatment, whose author was also a participant: Mihály Horváth, *The History of Hungary's Fight for Freedom in 1848 and 1849* (Geneva: Miklós Puky, 1865).
- 14 The "internal enemy" is not intended here to mean open social oppositions, since social conflict is in a sense a constant element in the history of communities, even if the concept of society in the modern sense only came into being in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here it clearly means the perceived internal enemy of the "nation." On the anti-Semitic party of the time see: Judit Kubinszky, *Political Anti-Semitism in Hungary, 1875–1890* (Budapest: Koszuth Könyvkiadó, 1976).
- 15 The Catholic People's Party, of considerable importance in understanding some utterances of the Horthy era – and some even nowadays – attracts relatively little attention from writers of Hungarian history. The best work in this area is a dissertation by Dániel Szabó, only a manuscript to my knowledge. There are several references to the People's Party and its ideology in Miklós Szabó's political and historical essays, Miklós Szabó, *Legacy of the Mummies* (Budapest: Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó, 1995).
- 16 Social-based enemy-formation came to the forefront on both the left and the right. The logic that stamped the social democrats and the radicals as "anti-national" was firstly an ideology setting out to overthrow the "class structure" and secondly a central element of the discourse.
- 17 On this see Ignác Romsics, *The History of Hungary in the 20th Century* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 1999). A slightly different emphasis is given in Jenő Gergely and Lajos Izsák, *The History of the Twentieth Century* (Budapest: Pannonica Kiadó, 2000).
- 18 Jenő Gergely, *Gyula Gömbös. Political Career* (Budapest: Vince Kiadó, 2001) and László Karsai, "Ferenc Szálasi" in *Reformists and Radicals in Hungary*, ed. Ferenc Glatz (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1990).
- 19 A documentation of racially-based legislation: *Jewish Acts and Decrees in Hungary 1938–1945*, compiled by Róbert Vértés (Budapest: Polgár Kiadó, 1997). Thanks are due here to Krisztián Ungváry for permitting me to read his manuscript on the intellectual run-up to the expropriation of the Jews. A contribution to thinking on the background to the legislation: Ervin Csizmadia, *János Makkai* (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2001).
- 20 Highly enlightening as regards identity history, Sándor Tibor, *After the Change of the Guard. The Jewish Question and Film Policy 1938–1944* (Budapest: Hungarian Film Institute, 1997); Mária Schmidt: *Collaboration or Cooperation? The Budapest Jewish Council* (Budapest: Minerva, 1990); and János Hoffman, *Curtain of Mist. Notes of a Jewish Citizen 1940–1944* (Szombathely, 2001).
- 21 The classic work on the subject is Randolph L. Braham, *The Hungarian Holocaust*, vols I–II, (Budapest: Gondolat, 1988) (originally published in English in 1981). The question is put into a European context in: László Karsai, *Holocaust* (Budapest: Pannonica Kiadó, 2001). I should note that the destruction of legal safeguards brought about by the policies of disenfranchisement and genocide, bathed as they were in anti-Communist rhetoric, opened the way for the Communist policies of expropriation and deprivation of legal rights. There is an implicit reference to this in István Bibó's work, *The Jewish Question in Hungary after 1944*.
- 22 Unfortunately, for several reasons the subject of the Hungarian Jews and Jewish identity in all its forms in the post-war period has been comparatively neglected. There are many blank spots and very little thorough research, although the political transition brought some welcome developments. On religious life and the intellectual life surrounding religion in the post-war pe-

riod: László Csorba, "Israelite Sects in Hungary from the Age of Peril to the Nineteen Eighties," and Györgyi Tamási, "Jewish Intellectual Life in Hungary after 1945", in *Seven Decades in the Life of the Hungarian Jews*, vols. I–II (Budapest: HAS Institute of Philosophy, 1990), vol. II, 61–300. (The other contributions in these books, covering earlier periods, are also well worth reading.) János Gyurgyák's wide-ranging book, containing a lot of data, *The Jewish Question in Hungary. The History of Political Concepts* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2001) only covers the post-1945 era in the "Epilogue". Tamás Ungvári: *Ahasvérus and Shylock: the Jewish Question in Hungary* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1999) deals more with post-transition debates than affairs after 1945.

23 Also not to be neglected are the instances of Jewish persecution even after the war. See: János Pelle, *The last Blood Libels. The History of Ethnic Enmity and Political Manipulation in Eastern Europe* (Budapest: Pelikán Kiadó, 1995).

24 I have dealt with this problem in another book: András Gerő, *The Nationalised Revolution. The Centenary of 1848* (Budapest: Új Mandátum Kiadó, 1998).

25 An interesting view of this is given by the Gulyás brothers' documentary film on the relocations.

26 The formation of secular Jewish consciousness merits study of its own, since both the secular socialist world and the resolutely anti-Israeli Communist propaganda were both involved in its creation. This form of Jewish identity became especially visible following the political transition, although its precedents had already appeared in the discourse, in urban folklore and in dedicated samizdat publications.

27 On these issues see contributions by Ferenc Erős, András Kovács, Judit Mészáros, and Katalin Pető in *Jewishness, Identity, History*, eds.: M. Mária Kovács, Yitzhak M. Kashti, and Ferenc Erős (Budapest: T-Twins, 1992). For another – a literary – approach to the problem, see Iván Sanders, "Advanced Metacommunication. The Jewish Reading of Péter Nádas' book 'Memoirs'", in *The Boundary and the Bounded. Thoughts on Forms of Hungarian-Jewish Literature*, ed. Petra Török (Budapest: National Rabbi Training Institute, Yahalom Jewish Cultural History Research Group, 1997).

28 In this sense, István Szabó's film *The Taste of Sunshine* is pure history of identity. One of the strengths of the film is the demonstration that the horrors of Communism do not exonerate what gave rise to Communism.