JERUSALEM LETTER
Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

No. 351 25 Shevat 5757 / 2 February 1997

JEWISH HUNGARY TODAY

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In the last third of the 1980s, the progressive dissolution of the Communist Party's regime also brought important changes for Hungary's Jews. From about 1984 onwards, forty years after the Holocaust, the authorities began to permit trips to Israel to visit relatives. A bit later, the tight police control over everything Jewish, Israeli, or Zionist became looser and disappeared step by step. Private groups studying the Torah or Zohar in private homes on Friday evenings were no longer illegal. The Jewish or "Israelite" community was gradually allowed to do anything its lay or religious leaders dared to suggest. People attended services in synagogues, especially High Holiday services, more often and in much higher numbers than at any time before. Concert recitals and performances of Jewish ritual music were held for the general public both in synagogues and music halls. New Jewish organizations were established, first of all, the Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association. The words "Jew" and "Jewish" started to be pronounced aloud in a positive sense.

How Many Jews Are There?

How many Jews are there in contemporary Hungary? Demographic research during the last decades focused on establishing exact numbers of losses, including Jewish losses, during World War II. Mainly for political reasons, there are no reliable records available on the Jewish component of the population in contemporary Hungary, but some data exist, though fragmentary and secondary.

According to estimates made immediately after World War II, about 190,000 people escaped the Holocaust. In Budapest, about 119,000 people survived. The number of Jews returning from German concentration camps was estimated at 116,500. From these numbers, one has to deduct the unknown number of people who emigrated right after the war, sometimes right from the German camps, to Palestine and, later on, to Israel, including an estimated 15-16,000 in the very first year. In 1949, the last census in Hungary that did ask after one's religion registered approximately

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134,000 "Israelites."

The Budapest Community today registers more than 7,000 taxpayers. However, behind that particular figure are some families consisting of only an elderly couple or a widow. The Jewish Community's taxpayers and their families, the people maintaining a more or less traditional life, total about 30,000 in the capital and the provinces. The largest existing Jewish organization, the Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association, had at its beginning around 2,000 members, though this number has now decreased somewhat. The Lubavitch Hasidic community claims to have a list of 17,000 Jewish names and addresses. Jewish Community officials and rabbis speak of about 80,000 Jews in Hungary today. In fact, there is no way to get exact numbers since the number of Jews depends on the definition of Jewish.

Problems of Definition and Identity

Jewishness in contemporary Hungary has many different aspects. The strict *halakhic* definition, following the practice of Jewish law and the religious understanding of the word "Jewish," has to be enhanced by more secular or sociological definitions. Clearly, the largest of the Jewish groups living in contemporary Hungary are those who may perhaps be called secular or semi-secular Jews.

Degrees or levels of Jewish identity can be described, symbolically and in decreasing order, by the following key words:

(a) A *full Jewish life* (circumcision, *kashrut*, Community membership, *tefillin*, etc.).

(b) Different forms of *semi-secular Jewish life* (no circumcision, or no *bar mitzva*, perhaps a little Talmud Torah, attending services on High Holidays, reading only the Hungarian column in the prayerbook while looking at the Hebrew letters with a guilty conscience).

(c) A certain *Jewish nostalgia*, emotional self-identification grown in the soil of almost complete ignorance, but combined with interest and striving after knowledge (occasional appearances in synagogue, wearing a Magen David, Chai, or similar Jewish symbols on necklaces, learning some Hebrew, visiting relatives in Israel).

(d) Judaism as a weak *reminder of one's origins* (a great grandmother's Hanukkah candlestick, or a Magen David in the cabinet at home; preference for novels on Jewish topics or by Jewish writers like Singer, Malamud, Bellow and, recently, Wiesel; joining discussions on Jews with a certain passion).

(e) Life of a *fully secularized* Jew (no religion but otherwise many different elements of the social and cultural tradition, family ties, some living habits, urban life-style, cosmopolitan values, solidarity with or sympathy for Israel, sometimes motifs of political Zionism).

(f) Finally, there are people of Jewish descent who will not accept their Jewishness or reject any connection with Judaism, but are held as Jews by the society at large.

This author estimates Hungarian Jewry to include about 30,000 to 40,000 more or less religious Jews, and a further 70,000 to 120,000 people who are secular Jews, Jews of origin, sympathy or nostalgia, or Jews of a fading tradition, and thus, possible Jews or Jews-to-be, depending on the emerging Jewish society in Hungary today.

Synagogues

There are about twenty synagogues or prayer rooms in permanent use in the capital, and about the same number in other cities. On Kol Nidrei, nearly all are crowded. The Seder celebrated in the community rooms at these synagogues is run twice, both on the first and second evening, in order to accommodate everyone wanting to sit at the table.

This reveals that even family holidays are celebrated more and more in the community, sharing places, food, and the tradition with people less familiar with Jewish customs. It also reveals that many families cannot maintain the tradition alone anymore. Lack of Hebrew necessary to read the Haggadah, lack of self-confidence and familiarity with the tradition needed to run the Seder, even the lack of Pesach dishes, and many other factors, contribute to the gathering together of the community. It means that not only are community holidays, celebrations, and gatherings concentrated in the synagogue, but certain family traditions have moved to it as well.

The Center of Jewish Studies has published a reference book on Hungarian synagogues by the late Anikó Gazda, indicating that there are around 2,000 villages, towns, and cities in Hungary where Jews lived from the late eighteenth century in a concentration that required maintaining synagogues or prayer rooms. In around 1,000 places, former or still existing synagogue buildings or prayer rooms are well attested. Today, there are nearly 200 synagogue buildings in Hungary and Gazda has documented the architecture of around 130. The difference between synagogue buildings still in use or in community ownership and buildings that only were synagogues at one time is quite dramatic. Some of the former synagogues were rebuilt or remodelled into libraries, exhibition halls, administrative buildings, and the like. Some were just abandoned,

left to their fate, the weather, and spontaneous destruction. Many dilapidated synagogues were pulled down. During the last two decades, however, the utilitarian view has prevailed, with remodeling for new, and certainly not Jewish, purposes.

To sum up, from an historical perspective, Hungarian society and/or its legitimate representatives first cooperated in killing half a million or more Jews, Hungarian subjects; later on confiscated their possessions and properties; and finally, during the decades since World War II, have rebuilt the synagogues for their own use or removed them. This writer believes that the strategy and practice of handling former synagogue buildings was, and still is, wrong.

A part of the responsibility certainly lies with the former Community leadership that sold the synagogues and for far too little. Yet there were financial needs, as well as pressure from outside the Jewish Community, from the state and local authorities which had overall administrative control over Community affairs. The Community leaders all did their best. Still, the selling of the Rombach (Rumbach Street) Synagogue in Budapest in the early 1980s certainly was a grave error. The building began to undergo professional reconstruction with great artistic care and a sense of its former Jewish purpose. Rombach, built by Otto Wagner in 1873, is a gemstone in the Old-New Jewish quarter of Pest. Now the National Agency of Property has bought it, the restoration work has stopped, and the building stands unfinished and deteriorating. The state should return it to the Jewish Community to be used either as a synagogue again, or as a new exhibition and research facility, a new building of the Jewish Museum, or a new center for Jewish cultural affairs.

The Rombach Synagogue has a very special meaning for the Jewish history of the capital. In the Old-New Jewish quarter of Pest, once the largest Jewish city in the world, each of the main directions of Jewish ritual in Hungary maintained a representative synagogue. While the Dohány Temple was the center of *neologs* (corresponding to Conservative in North America), and Kazinczy representative of the Orthodox, Rombach represented status quo ante-type traditionalism (e.g., before the split between Orthodox and *neolog* in 1868/69).

Following the example from abroad, from Hessen, Germany, in particular, perhaps Hungary should reconstruct the synagogues as synagogue buildings to keep and maintain them as symbols of vanished Jewish life, monuments of the living and imperishable Jewish contribution to the development of Hungary during the last two centuries.

From "Israelites" to "Jewish"

In 1991, the overall organization of Hungarian Jewish communities, the Magyar Izraeliták Országos Központja (National Center of Hungarian Israelites), a centralized and up to that time less than independent organ, changed its name to Magyarországi Zsidó Hitközségek Szövetsége (Alliance of Jewish Communities in Hungary). The new name, symbolic for changes in structure, leadership, and strategy as well, put in the place of the traditional name "Israelite" the word *"zsidó"* or "Jewish." The word "Israelite" had served for one and a half centuries as the only officially accepted designation and self-designation of Jews in Hungary. The word *"zsidó"* was used in the recent past almost only in anti-Semitic contexts. In this author's interpretation, the renewed use of the word *"zsidó"* reassures the consciousness and even the pride of the community. Today the Jewish community of Hungary seeks presence and visibility.

Mainstream Judaism in Hungary today centers on the traditional side of the *neolog* wing, dating back to 1867. In addition, there is an Orthodox community that plays an increasingly important part in contacts with Jewish communities in certain neighboring countries (Carpatho-Ukraine, for example). Beside them, the Lubavitch Hasidic community has taken a firm stand in Budapest and is increasingly gaining ground, proselytizing particularly among children of secular Jews.

Before World War II, Orthodoxy was dominant in the provinces, where their communities were deported and killed, and only the Budapest Jews, with their *neolog* majority, escaped the Holocaust in a single mass. *Neolog* Judaism, by far the largest and most influential single group in Hungary, has been able to reorganize its independent community structure, institutions, and inner life to a certain degree.

A small British-type Reform Jewish community is now emerging, a more or less spontaneous development connected, in part, with the movement for significant active participation of women in Jewish ritual life. The group now has a woman rabbi educated in England and about 20-25 members. For the time being, the rabbis and community leadership ignore them.

There is very little in contemporary Jewish life in Hungary involving modern Orthodoxy. There is, however, an abstract, ideal Orthodoxy that is increasingly serving as a reference in discussions on Jewish life, and contacts with Israel and the United States will strengthen this trend.

The synagogues in Hungary still use the Ashkenazi pronunciation in reading Hebrew, exactly as has been done for centuries. The former community leadership

had banned Sephardi pronunciation in order to keep Hungarian Jews more isolated from Israel. While we may expect the introduction of Sephardi/Israeli pronunciation in the synagogue, it must be acknowledged that Central or Eastern European-type Ashkenazi reading, as well as Yiddish, are intrinsic values of Jewish life and should be preserved as a component of Jewish diversity.

Present-Day Anti-Semitism

Everyday, almost routine, anti-Semitism certainly does exist in Hungary, and makes being a Jew sometimes very unpleasant. Yet, spontaneous anti-Semitism or aggressive ethnocentrism becomes a serious danger only if it is manipulated by politics. Wherever low-level anti-Semitism led to pogroms or worse, including the Holocaust, the responsibility was with the political power and the state authorities. From this point of view, there is no political or organized anti-Semitism in contemporary Hungary. The coalition government, or the Hungarian Democratic Forum that was in power from the first free elections in Spring 1990 until its failure in early Summer 1994, is correct when it insists that anti-Semitism plays no role in the official political life of Hungary, and defends its politics against any such accusations.

On the other hand, there is no liberal or pluralistic or even tolerant society in Hungary either. There has been, since the very beginning of free political organization, a very loud intellectual anti-Semitism present. Extremist nationalism is represented by certain journals and intellectuals that want to expose the danger of Jewish corruption of the deep Christian traditions of Hungary as well as pre-Christian, non-Jewish Hungarian traditions.

In Hungary today, the real danger is from the anti-Semitism of the populist wing in and around the "national" parties. This is an intellectual anti-Semitism that cannot be banned by law or prosecution because, in part, it uses symbols of the national tradition and Christianity, and by these separates the Hungarian "nation" from the "other." For example, the Chamber of Christian Physicians in Hungary means exactly what it says, Christian — that is, non-Jewish — doctors.

Bad as they are, neither popular nor intellectual anti-Semitism are, for the time being, actually disquieting. The real danger in Hungary today is nationalism, intolerance towards minorities, and the wishful thinking that identifies a parliamentary or political majority with the whole of the nation.

Significantly, in an unprecedented protest against anti-Semitism in Fall 1990, around 100 leading intellectuals signed an open letter to the President of the Republic asking him to help stop incitement against Jews. The protest, with its diversity of voice and argument, can be compared to the protest of 59 writers and intellectuals against the so-called first Jewish law, during the parliamentary debate in May 1938.

During the years 1990-1994, scholarly papers were published on Hungarian Jewish history in great number, arguing against any form of anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, and for a liberal and pluralistic society. Representatives of ethnic nationalism were put on the defensive, at least intellectually. For the first time in the history of Hungary, anti-Semitism is coming to be considered tasteless, insupportable, and inadmissible in legitimate politics and intellectual life.

Changes Since the 1994 Elections

After the parliamentary elections in May 1994, a coalition of the Hungarian Socialist Party and the Liberal Democratic Party came to power. The new premier, former Communist Party leader Gyula Horn, stated at a Holocaust commemoration ceremony on July 3, 1994: "Our historic burden is to apologize to the Jews for 600,000 exterminated and tens of thousands of deported Jewish compatriots." No Hungarian state official, nor the previous government, had ever expressed an apology in that or similar form since the end of World War II.

Following this, negotiations between the new government, the Jewish Community, and different Jewish organizations including the World Jewish Congress, over the subject of indemnification, were begun again.

According to one privately distributed reference list, in 1991 some twenty different organizations and societies bore the word "Jews" or "Jewish" or used Hebrew words in their name. This does not include local communities, nor their national umbrella organizations. However, the list does refer to some Jewish umbrella organizations like the Federation of Zionist Organizations in Hungary. Just a few years ago, Hebrew names like Ha-Shomer Ha-Tzair, Bnai Akiba, Keren Kayemet, Kadima, Ha-Noar Ha-Tzioni, and the word "Zionist" alone would have been enough to draw police attention. Members would have been arrested, as were members of Friday night Torah reading groups as late as 1988.

A careful observer would notice that people wear *kipas* on the street and not, as for decades, only after entering the synagogue building. On the High Holidays, a crowd gathers in front of the synagogues, especially at Dohany Street, well before the service starts. Looking at the faces, one could feel it is London

or New York where one observes the solemnity and serious happiness of a fearless Jewish community.

Jewish Education and Culture

Since the 1990/91 school year, there are three Jewish secondary and high schools in Budapest. The traditional school (Anna Frank) is of the *neolog* community. While only a few years ago it was fighting for survival, it now has to run parallel classes. In a few years, around one hundred students with some knowledge of Hebrew will graduate every year. A second school (Masoret Avot) follows Orthodox customs. The third (Lauder Javne Jewish Community School) is secular with emphasis on Jewish subjects like Hebrew, Jewish history, and Jewish customs. Its new building is the first major construction undertaken by Jewish society in Central and Eastern Europe since World War II. The three schools roughly cover the sociological stratification of Jews in Hungary and all three are well attended. The secular school admits non-Jewish students as well, with no restrictions.

The Rabbinical Seminary, a *neolog* theological institution, has been a cornerstone of Jewish culture in Hungary for more than a century. It opened in 1877 and is now the only school of its type in Central and Eastern Europe. In 1995 its student body numbered eight people, including one from Romania. The last *semikha* (ordination) was given in 1992. The Seminary is suffering from a lingering lack of qualified teachers. Visiting old rabbis from Israel, who still can teach in Hungarian, cannot substitute for permanent faculty. An alternative solution would be to have a teaching program in Hebrew and English, but in order to introduce a new language of instruction, the potential students should first know the languages in question. In such a case, the Seminary would perhaps turn into a preparatory school where Hungarian identification, a firm element in the tradition of the Seminary, could easily get lost.

In 1992 the Schocken Institute of Jerusalem established a Jewish College in Budapest called in Hungarian "Pedagógium," loosely joined to the Seminary but aspiring for fully independent status. The College trains teachers of Jewish subjects (religion, Jewish history) for elementary and higher schools. The curriculum includes intensive studies in spoken Hebrew and a stay in Israel. Unfortunately, neither the curriculum of the Seminary nor that of the Pedagogium are formalized, so the level and quality of education strongly depends on the given circumstances.

Every day, one sees newspaper reports about Jews in Hungary or abroad. Jewish cantorial (*hazanut*) concerts, now organized fairly regularly, attract unheard-of crowds of Jews and non-Jews in both synagogues and concert halls. Many Jewish music recordings are in circulation. Jewish authors such as Malamud or Singer are among the most popular writers in Hungary.

In Spring 1994 a Jewish cultural center called Community House opened in Budapest. On the margin of the Old-New Jewish quarter in Pest, an old house was remodeled with money from private funding and from the Joint. The latter, it should be emphasized, plays an important role in maintaining Jewish life in Hungary, with commitment, responsibility, and creativity. Running Community House, with its rich cultural program, is part of the Joint's activities in Hungary. Community House organizes lectures, language and computer classes, exhibitions, film showings, music performances, and the like, making Jewish culture attractive for individuals and families.

The Center of Jewish Studies

The Center of Jewish Studies was established by an agreement between the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1987 and was joined to the Chair of Assyriology and Hebrew at the Philosophical Faculty of Eotvos University. The Center is involved in teaching, research, and public activity.

Since Jewish Studies is a completely new subject at the university, it has been necessary to develop our own teachers, helped by close cooperation with the Rabbinical Seminary. In the meantime, *hebraisztika* in Hungarian, that is, Hebrew or Jewish Studies, has become a regular university major. Students can enroll, after a two-semester preparatory course (elementary Hebrew and Jewish history) and a subsequent entrance examination, in courses on Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, medieval Hebrew texts in the original (Rashi, Maimonides) or in Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation (Saadia Gaon), Jewish history, introductions to biblical and talmudic literature, Jewish liturgy and prayerbook, Jewish bibliography, and ancient prints, etc. The curriculum is conservative in that it is built on Jewish languages (Hebrew and Aramaic, with optional Greek and Latin, or Arabic, or Yiddish) and traditional texts. So-called topical courses — from Eastern European Jewish music to Jewish community law to Holocaust — are also offered, but only in addition to the core curriculum. This structure reflects the firm conviction that university students have to learn the primary sources and methods of their interpretation first. Modern Hebrew is taught from the very beginning and

preference is given to Sephardi/Israeli reading in classical texts too.

Research is part of the scholarly work of the Center of Jewish Studies, with emphasis on Hungarian Jewish history. The Center has already published ten large volumes, including the handbook on synagogue buildings in Hungary mentioned above (Anikó Gazda); a directory of Jewish holdings in Hungarian archives (György Haraszti); a bibliography of Hungarian Jewish newspapers and journals published between 1847 and 1992 (Alexander Scheiber); the data from the census of Jewish communities ordered by the German authorities in April 1944 (comprising 740 communities) (Joseph Schweitzer and Kinga Frojimovics); a bibliography of Hebrew grammars in Hungarian or printed in Hungary from the seventeenth century on (comprising about 90 titles) (Andrea Strbik); the edited memoirs of Lajos Szabolcsi, editor of the most important Jewish weekly for half a century (*Egyenlöség*); a book on the architecture and history of the Rombach Street Synagogue (Ines Müller); and a book by Jacob Katz in Hungarian translation (*Out of the Ghetto*). A bestselling book entitled *Jewish Budapest*, with 800 pages and 617 photos, was written by three former students of the Center (Kinga Frojimovics, Viktória Pusztai, and Andrea Strbik) together with this writer who also edited the volume. A history of Jews in Transylvania (Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger) is due to appear and a catalog of Jewish matricula is in preparation. A full bibliography of community regulations (*takkanot*), with more than 2,000 titles, will be published in 1997. A project on Hebrew sources in the history of Hungary and Jews in Hungary (until the end of the seventeenth century), including Hebrew texts with translation and commentary, is underway (Shlomo Spitzer of Bar-Ilan University and Andrea Strbik). A Ph.D dissertation at Columbia University on *responsa* of rabbis in Hungary is in preparation (Tamás Turán).

Reemerging Jewish Identity

Since 1985 a prominent topic for discussion has been Jewish identity and the prospects of living an authentic Jewish life after decades of silence. Children have learned of their Jewish affiliation, a fact that was often concealed by their parents and grandparents who had wanted to help their children escape the psychological and physical suffering they had experienced. For most of these children, the recognition of being different in a society divided along ethnic boundaries was a dramatic event. In many cases, the discovery opened the way for processes leading toward a positive identification. By and large, these processes have now been completed and there is hardly anyone in Hungary who does not know of his or her Jewish origins, leading to a certain dissolution from Hungarian society and a regaining of Jewish identity. Yet, unlike in Russia, the Jewish population in Hungary that is regaining its Jewish identity does not intend mass emigration, at least for the present.

Instrumental in developing a positive Jewish identity in Hungary were the Eichmann trial (1961) and the wars in Israel in 1967 and 1973. Shortly after the Eichmann trial, one of the journalists who reported the trial for the Hungarian press published a book on the case which included the worst anti-Zionist propaganda. Still, almost all of this author's Jewish friends and acquaintances kept the book on their bookshelves for years afterwards. As one explained, "It is the name of Israel and the word 'Jews' that fills up all the pages." Israel was a password for suppressed Jewish identity during the decades of silence and official anti-Zionist politics.

Today, Hungary has established good relations with Israel at the political, economic and civil levels. Being able to visit relatives for the first time is a great gift for those living in both countries, the fulfillment of lifelong dreams, and is becoming a pleasant routine.

In order to give Jews a chance to live Jewishly in Hungary, there is much still to be done. Most important in this respect is to establish a liberal and democratic society that makes any form of ethnocentrism impossible. From this point of view, Jewish destiny in Hungary depends on the destiny of the country as a whole, including Gypsies, Slovaks, and Germans, Christian churches and alternative religious or non-religious groups, and other minorities. Liberal society should become mainly a civil society, where responsibilities lay not with the state alone but with every single citizen.

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