

## Jews and Jewishness in Post-war Hungary

by *András Kovács*

### Abstract

*The emergence of a seemingly harmonic symbiosis between Hungarian majority and Jewish minority in 19th century Hungary was a unique phenomenon in a European country where the proportion of Jews was close to 5 percent of the total population, and about 20 percent of the capital city, Budapest. However, after the shocking experience of the persecution in 1944 it was to expect that the factor –unlimited readiness for assimilation in the belief of the unlimited readiness of the majority for accepting it- that made the uniqueness of the Hungarian Jewry will cease to exist. Since quite a large group of the Hungarian Jews survived the Shoah it was not purely a theoretical question that what sort of identity strategies would emerge among the Jewish population of the country. How did the Jews react to the dramatic political changes that occurred in the decades following the Shoah, what kind of identity strategies they developed in the search for their place in the post-war Hungarian society? After a historical introduction the article discusses the changing socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the post-war Hungarian Jews, Jewish politics in the decades of communist rule and finally the identity problems emerged in the post-war decades.*

### I. Between emancipation and the Shoah

“Uniqueness of Hungarian Jewry” – this is the title of a little known essay of the reknown Israeli historian of Hungarian origin, Jacob Katz.<sup>1</sup> In his interpretation modern Hungarian Jewish history was a unique procedure of social and cultural assimilation that became the substantial determinant of the fate of the Hungarian Jewry both in good and bad times. And, indeed, the founder of Zionism, the likewise Hungarian-born Theodor Herzl seemed to exempt the Hungarian Jewry from the validity of his strategic vision. In a letter written in 1903 to Ernő Mezei, a Jewish representative in the Hungarian parliament, he said: “... Hungarian Zionism can only be red-white-green, and I am not so infatuated that I would take it ill in Hungary”.<sup>2</sup> Herzl’s defensive attitude was no wonder at all, since the Hungarian Jewish reactions on

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Katz, “The Uniqueness of Hungarian Jewry”, *Forum* (1977), 45-53.

<sup>2</sup> Gábor Schweitzer, *Miért nem kellett Herzl a magyar zsidóknak* [www.bparchiv.hu/magyar/kiadvany/bp604/herzl.html](http://www.bparchiv.hu/magyar/kiadvany/bp604/herzl.html)

the idea that being Jewish could mean an alternative national belonging provoked a series of indignant reactions like the one published in the most important organ of the contemporary Hungarian Jewry: "There is no Hungarian Zionism, it won't and should not be ever. It is not to reconcile with the soul of a Hungarian. A Hungarian is Hungarian, even if he is Jewish, his soul is Hungarian, his feelings are Hungarian. ... In Hungary Zionism can have only one designation: high treason".<sup>3</sup> What Theodor Herzl felt and Jacob Katz historically diagnosed is probably true. The process of assimilation and the emergence of a singular symbiosis between Hungarian majority and Jewish minority in 19th century Hungary was a unique phenomenon in a European country where the proportion of Jews was close to 5 percent of the total population, and about 20 percent of the capital city, Budapest. According to Viktor Karády and other researchers the explanation of this phenomenon was an unwritten "social contract of assimilation"<sup>4</sup> between the Hungarian political class and the emancipated Jewry. This social contract for assimilation meant a compromise between the liberal nobility and the Jewish middle class. According to this a unique distribution of roles was set up by which the liberal nobility supported the emancipation of Jews and the Jewish middle class in carrying out the economic modernization of Hungary which they themselves were unable to achieve, while they considered political power their own monopoly. The state governed by the liberal nobility protected the Jews from the antisemitism, mainly directed against the achievements of emancipation that the Jews repaid with unconditional loyalty towards the state while trying to achieve total assimilation through which they strengthened the position of the Hungarians in the multi-ethnic state. In this period between 1867 and 1918 the process of assimilation was unbelievably fast. In 1881 59% of the Jews living in Hungary declared Hungarian to be their mother tongue, but this same ration became 75% by 1891, or 85.7% among children.<sup>5</sup> In 1900 70.8% of the Jews in Hungary were Hungarian native speakers. The same ration was 75.5% in 1910, while only 54.5% of the Catholics in Hungary declared Hungarian as their mother tongue in the same year.<sup>6</sup>

Religious modernization, too, was speeded up in the period after the

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<sup>3</sup> Adolf Soltész, "Magyarországi sionizmus", *Egyenlőség*, 1897 október 31.

<sup>4</sup> Viktor Karády, "A zsidóság polgárosodásának és modernizációjának főbb tényezői a magyar társadalomtörténetben", *A zsidókérdésről*. (Ed. Fűzfa, Balázs, Szabó, Gábor, Szombathely: 1989): 95-136.

<sup>5</sup> Károly Vörös, "A budapesti zsidóság két forradalom között, 1849-1918", *Kortárs*, 12 (1986): 100-118.

<sup>6</sup> Victor Karády and Istvan Kemeny, "Les Juifs dans la structure des classes en Hongrie: essai sur les antécédents historiques des crises d'antisémitisme du XX siècle", *Actes de la recherches en sciences sociales*, n. 22 (1978): 4-28.

emancipation. By the end of World War I the "Neolog" - i.e. moderate reform - trend prevailed over orthodoxy, which greatly promoted secularization among the Jews. Gradually Hungarian had become the language of tuition in the denomination schools, and more and more Jewish children were enrolled into state schools, thus the educational segregation by denomination diminished. The strongest indicator of progress of assimilation is the annually increasing number of mixed marriages after 1895, the official reception of the Jewish denomination. The fast assimilation was accompanied by quick upward social mobility. In 1910 more than 40 percent of the countries medical doctors and lawyers were Jewish. Most of the country's Jews no longer faced poverty, as did their co-religionists living on Russian, Ukrainian, Polish or Romanian soil.

The basic experience of Jewish politicians of this period was that they could rely on the support of Hungarian noble liberals if they formulated their goals within the liberal-emancipation paradigm. The ruling politics took a firm stand against antisemitism, and the Jews of Hungary could rely upon the goodwill of Emperor Francis Joseph I – even against groups amongst the high clergy and the aristocracy with antisemitic sentiment. Almost all the Jewish objectives seemed achievable in this alliance – the climax of this development was the acceptance of the Israelite denomination as one of the four “historical denominations” (Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, and, from 1895 on, the Israelite Community) of the country. In Hungary, therefore, there were none of the typical bottlenecks that led in the other countries of Central and Eastern Europe to the development of autonomous Jewish politics.

This symbiosis was torn apart by the changes after the First World War – as a result of which “a country [that had been] previously ‘good for the Jews’ is transformed, almost overnight, into a country ... permeated with anti-Semitic hysteria” – and by the Hungarian Holocaust.<sup>7</sup> According to the newly emerged dominant ideology modernization, which began in the 19th century in Hungary, was not the integral result of Hungarian development but had been imported by aliens, Jews first of all, and in the long run served their interests exclusively. Assimilation on the other hand was only superficial and pretended: the Jews put on a Hungarian disguise simply in order to gain more opportunities to force back the Hungarian "historical classes", and to delete and disintegrate the nation from inside. This antisemitism based on the ethnic concept of nation was not anymore directed against the Galician immigrants wearing caftans and being reluctant towards assimilation, but against the middle class "cosmopolitan" Jewish citizens who had "apparently" assimilated and found their place in society.

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<sup>7</sup> Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 98.

With this ideology in the background a series of antisemitic laws were passed by the Hungarian parliament starting with the infamous *numerus clausus* law in 1920 which limited the numbers of Jewish students at the universities, until the Nuremberg type of anti-Jewish legislation at the end of the thirties which annihilated fully the emancipated status of the Jews.

The new situation created a dramatic tension for majority of the Jewish population. Assimilation had already alienated quite a few Jews from the tradition. These people now had to realize that however far they went down on the road of assimilation they would have to remain Jews. For many there seemed to be no way out of this situation. After almost a whole century of efforts for assimilation only very few opted for the psychological burden of resuming old traditions, while Zionism, a modern secular Jewish identity, which may have offered an alternative in principle found very little resonance among the Jews in Hungary even in this period. The majority put their heads in sand desperately trying to prove the genuineness of their assimilation, to "refute" the "arguments" of the anti-Jewish attacks, to get rid of, to cover up or to get accepted all the various kinds of allegedly "Jewish" qualities and habits. It is, therefore, little wonder that the Hungarian Jews despite of all anti-Jewish measures –what they considered to be only temporary, forced on the Hungarian governments by the allied Nazi Germany– firmly believed that Hungarian state will never tolerate the physical persecution of its citizens. In consequence, the Hungarian Jewish institutions and the Jewish population was fully unprepared and paralyzed when after the German invasion of the country in March 1944 in a few months more than a half a million Jews were deported with the assistance of the Hungarian authorities, and the majority of them were killed in the concentration camps.

## II. The post-war decades

After the shocking experience of the persecution it was to expect that the factor –unlimited readiness for assimilation in the belief of the unlimited readiness of the majority for accepting it– that made the uniqueness of the Hungarian Jewry will cease to exist. Since quite a large group of the Hungarian Jews survived the Shoah –due to the fact that the Jews of Budapest were not deported– it was not purely a theoretical question that what sort of identity strategies would emerged among the Jewish population of the country. How did the Jews react to the changes that occurred in the decades following the Shoah, what kind of identity strategies they developed in the search for their place in the post-war Hungarian society? These are the questions I would like to

discuss below.<sup>8</sup>

The post-war history of Hungary can be divided into four periods. The short democratic period between 1945 and 1948 was followed by the years of the Stalinist dictatorship (1948-1956), the post-Stalinist “Kadar-Regime” (1957-1989), and finally, after the fall of the Communist system in 1990, by the two decades of the new democracy. In all these periods, the external determinants of Jewish identity strategies were manifold, but the most important among them were the social-demographic changes in the Jewish population after the war and the changing political conditions.

## 1. The first post-war years: a democratic interlude (1945-1948)

### 1.1 Demography and socio-economic status

The Shoah destroyed the majority of Hungarian Jews. Depending on the method of calculation, estimates of the losses of Hungarian Jewry vary between 200-210,000 and 300,000. Scholars agree that in 1941, when the last census to include religion and origins was carried out, 400,000 persons of Jewish religion and 50-90,000 Christians of Jewish origins lived *on the territory of postwar Hungary* and survival *on the same territory* is assessed between 190,000 and 260,000. R. L. Braham arrives at his figure of 300,000 by subtracting the number of survivors registered by the Statistical Office of the Hungarian Section of the World Jewish Congress from the 1941 statistics.<sup>9</sup> Tamas Stark reaches his estimate of about 200,000 victims by adding up the numbers found in documents dealing with the deportations, forced labour, etc.<sup>10</sup> He believes that the difference in figures is due to the fact that using the subtraction method survivors who did not return to or soon left Hungary are also included among the losses. Due to the almost complete annihilation of provincial Jewry, the majority of the survivors,

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<sup>8</sup> Many of the subjects I discuss below I analyzed before in detail in three articles. See András Kovács, “Changes in Jewish Identity in modern Hungary”. Jonathan Webber (ed.), *Jewish Identities in the New Europe*, (London, Washington: Littmann Library of Jewish Civilization, 1994); András Kovács, “Jewish Groups and Identity Strategies in Post-Communist Hungary”, Zvi Gitelman, Barry Kosmin, András Kovács (eds.) *New Jewish Identities*, (Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 2003); András Kovács, “Hungarian Jewish Politics from the End of the Second World War until the Collapse of Communism”, Ezra Mendelsohn (ed.), *Jews and the State. Dangerous Alliances and the Perils of Privilege. Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, XIX. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Randolph L. Braham, *A magyar Holokauszt*, (Budapest: Gondolat, 1988), 454.

<sup>10</sup> Tamás Stark, *Zsidóság a vészidőszakban és a felszabadulás után 1939-1945*, (Budapest: MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 1995), 41-47.

144,000 persons, lived in Budapest and the Jewish community was reduced to a handful survivors in many provincial towns. It is estimated that one-third of the survivors was not Jewish by religion. In the following years numbers further decreased because of mixed marriages and low birth rates which reflected not only the disappearance or aging of spouses, but also the material and psychological consequences of persecution. Emigration contributed substantially to the numeric decline of Jewish population. In two large waves of emigration in 1945-48 and 1956-57 ca. 60-75,000 Jews left the country. Based on demographic extrapolations in present-day Hungary there are an estimated 80,000 to 140,000 people today with at least one parent of Jewish origin.<sup>11</sup>

If one looks at the demographic changes in the composition of the Jewish population then it appears that all the important changes favored further assimilation. Between April and July, 1944 all Jews living in the countryside were deported and very few ever came back. Thus the most important base of the traditional Jewry had perished, those families who were deeply religious, had many children and who almost completely refused apostasy or intermarriage. As it is known, the Jews were not systematically deported from Budapest and after the coup of Hungarian nazis in October 1944 in the chaos of the war-torn city those who had the necessary financial means or a great number of non-Jewish connections had a better opportunity to survive as it was easier for them to buy or get forged identity documents or hiding places. An indicator for the dominance of the assimilated Jews among the survivors is that the proportion of baptized Jews comprised about one third of the whole Jewish population of 1945 but among the young this proportion fluctuates between one third and two fifths.<sup>12</sup> The inequality of the chances for survival fundamentally defined the composition of the surviving Jewry: the greatest losses were among the men and the young. The consequence of this was that the possibilities of demographic compensation were extremely limited and the pressure to mixed marriages became extremely strong. These factors strengthened the tendencies towards assimilation.<sup>13</sup> Emigration's effect showed into the same direction: those surviving Jews who became convinced that assimilation was impossible and those who could not fit into their old surroundings after their families had perished left Hungary between 1945 and 1957. About one fourth of the Jews surviving the war

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<sup>11</sup> Tamás Stark, "Kísérlet a zsidó népesség számának behatárolására 1945 és 1995 között", András Kovács (ed.), *Zsidók a mai Magyarországon* (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő, 2002), 101-135.

<sup>12</sup> Viktor Karády, "Szociológiai kísérlet a magyar zsidóság 1945 és 1956 közötti helyzetének elemzésére", *Zsidóság az 1945 utáni Magyarországon*, (Ed. Péter Kende, Párizs: Magyar Füzetek Könyvei, 1984): 70.

<sup>13</sup> See *Ibid.*, 88-90.

emigrated before 1957. The majority of those who remained in Hungary, however, had belonged to the most assimilated strata even before. Thus, the relative weight of the more urbanized, secularized, assimilated, middle-class section of Jewry in the total Jewish population grew significantly.

It was not only the demographic composition of the surviving Jews but also the social transformation of the Jewish society after the war which proved to be favorable for the process of assimilation. Following the enforced nationalization of the whole industry, real estate, and other properties, and the disappearance of the private sector of economy along with the private employee and the free-lance intellectual strata, many Jews lost their livelihoods and were forced to find new professions. On the other hand, in the process of re-stratification that extended to all social classes in Hungary Jews, owing to their better education, higher qualifications and traditionally higher propensity for mobility, as well as their political reliability after a persecution of which they were the victims, had a favorable starting position. Chances opened for them to pursue careers for which they were qualified but which they had not been able to follow for political reasons before the war. A number of Jews entered the reorganized administration, public service, political institutions and the power-enforcement organizations. Thus, the social structure of the surviving Jewry was greatly altered and the prewar occupational boundaries between Jews and Gentiles faded.

### *1.2 Jewish politics in the post-war years*

Considering all these socio-demographic factors, the initial post-war years brought a series of surprising developments: many surviving Jews turned to the movements and parties that proclaimed the necessity of autonomous Jewish politics. The rapid expansion of the Zionist movement is best illustrated by data on the numbers of the movement's members and supporters. According to these data, in the 1930s there were at most 4000-5000 members of the Zionist movement – an insignificant minority of the total Jewish population. However, in the first year after the war – according to the official congress report published at the time of the Twenty-second Zionist Congress, held in Basle in December 1946 – the number of purchased shekels amounted to 95,000.<sup>14</sup> This means that about two-thirds of the survivors supported the Zionist movement at that time. In 1948 the official report of the Hungarian Zionist Alliance mentions 15,000 registered members (8300 of whom were living in Budapest), which was more than 10% of the total Jewish population at the time.<sup>15</sup> In

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<sup>14</sup> Attila Novák, *Átmenetben. A cionista mozgalom négy éve Magyarországon*, (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 2000), 33.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 43, 154.

1949 the files with the complete records of the Hungarian Zionist Alliance fell into the hands of the Communist party. It contained 37,000 names.<sup>16</sup> The 1949 report of the State Security Authority (ÁVH) of the Ministry of Interior on the Hungarian Zionist Alliance mentions that the Hungarian Zionist Alliance had six sections and 80 local groups and a declared membership of 41,000, which – as the report itself determines – was obviously a considerable exaggeration.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, under the circumstances, even a fraction of this number would still have indicated considerable support for the Zionists.<sup>18</sup>

Viktor Karády has analyzed on several occasions the motives derived from personal-psychological<sup>19</sup> and social-political conditions<sup>20</sup> that led a substantial minority of the surviving Jews to choose dissimulation – in spite of their demographic characteristics. Clearly, many of the surviving Jews were diverted from their earlier identity strategies by various factors: their experiences of majority society at the time of the persecutions; attempts on the part of the majority to evade its responsibility for the persecutions and for compensation; the difficulties of integrating into post-war society; and the reappearance of antisemitism and its obvious manipulation by the political forces of the new system. For these people, Zionism – as the modern and secular alternative to assimilation – may indeed have been attractive. Nevertheless, for the Zionist movements and parties to strengthen in such an unprecedented manner and so quickly, a combination of circumstances was also necessary. The first of these circumstances was the unexpected increase in the prestige of the Zionist movements and of Zionism in Jewish public opinion.

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<sup>16</sup> The data of these files occur in the document dated December 5, 1949 and entitled “Az MDP KV Szervezési Osztálya javaslata a párt Titkárságának a cionista párttagok kizárásáról”, (Múltunk, 1993, 273-276).

<sup>17</sup> Attila Novák, “Átmenetben”, 295.

<sup>18</sup> This is especially so, given that post-war emigration peaked in 1949. By collating data from various sources, we may estimate the number of Jews leaving the country between 1945 and the end of 1949 at 40,000. Approx. 15-18,000 of this number emigrated to Palestine or Israel (see Viktor Karády, *Szociológiai kísérlet a magyar zsidóság 1945 és 1956 közötti helyzetének elemzésére*, 113; Novák, “Átmenetben”, 100-103; Novák, *ibid.*, 38; Tamás Stark, *Kísérlet a zsidó népesség számának behatárolására 1945 és 1995 között*, 104). Emigration – and emigration to Israel in particular – obviously resulted in a reduction in the number of Zionists in Hungary.

<sup>19</sup> Viktor Karády, “Antiszemitizmus, asszimiláció és zsidó identitás Magyarországon a régi rendszertől az ezredfordulóig – Összefoglalási kísérlet”, Viktor Karády, *Önazonosítás, sorsválasztás. A zsidó csoportazonosság történelmi alakváltozásai Magyarországon*, (Budapest: Uj Mandátum, 2001), 56-60.

<sup>20</sup> See Viktor Karády, “Szociológiai kísérlet”, 85-87.

One of the most shocking experiences of survivor Jews during the period of persecution was the complete failure to act of the official Jewish representative bodies. Irrespective of what these organizations – and above all the Jewish Council, which had been established by the German occupiers – had done or had not done, for the victims of persecution during the critical months, in the eyes of the great majority of those affected, they were institutions of betrayal; indeed, several of their leaders had to face accusations of collaboration. In contrast, the participation of small groups of Zionists in the resistance movement and in the human rescue effort raised dramatically the prestige of the Zionist movement.<sup>21</sup>

An immediate political factor also contributed to this sudden change in people's appraisal of the Zionist movement. The largest organizations of Zionism in Hungary – and especially the groups that had taken an active part in the resistance – were mostly of left-wing orientation. Zionist resistance closely co-operated – and in some places actually merged – with the small Communist resistance groups.<sup>22</sup> This factor contributed substantially to an increase in the prestige of the Zionist movement for two reasons: firstly, during the immediate post-war years, Jewish public opinion considered the two left-wing parties – the Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party – unreservedly anti-fascist political organizations; secondly, it was generally expected that these two parties would have a determining role in the new political system. The Zionists' left-wing views and their left-wing connections held out the prospect of realizing Jewish interests in a left-wing alliance – and doing so in an effective manner.

Another factor contributing to the development of a political atmosphere that was favourable to the Zionists was that during the post-war period the chances of establishing a Jewish state grew, and the Soviet Union supported this. Thus, quite suddenly, the main aim of Zionist policy was transformed from a distant dream into an achievable reality – which was particularly important, since for the surviving Jews, many of whom had lost most of their relatives, friends and acquaintances, the foundation of the State of Israel offered the possibility of a completely new start in life.

Finally, another important reason of the strengthening of the Zionist organizations was that immediately after the war representatives of the foreign Zionist organizations could operate in the country without any limitations or hindrance, and these representatives provided practical assistance towards the everyday organizational work and the operation

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<sup>21</sup> The history of Zionist resistance in Hungary has been elaborated most thoroughly by Asher Cohen. See Asher Cohen, *The Halutz Resistance in Hungary*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>22</sup> Pál Demény, "A párt foglya voltam" (Budapest: Medvetánc Könyvek, 1988) 140-143.

of the newly-established institutions. The opportunities for organizational development were enhanced by the fact that – partly with their mediation and partly independent from them – the work of the Zionists was being supported by auxiliary organizations with substantial financial resources: primarily the Joint.

## **2. Under Stalinist rule (1948-1956)**

### *2.1 Social status and social mobility*

After the communist take-over, two main tendencies determined the status of Jews in the new social and political system. Although new channels of mobility opened up for Jews, at the same time a substantial number of Jews lost their former social status: their property was nationalized and the Jewish middle class and petty bourgeoisie were victims of the anti-religious and anti-bourgeois measures of the government. Along with non-Jews, many Jews who were considered to belong to the so-called "exploiting classes" were sent into internal exile. On the other hand, new channels of upward social mobility opened up for Jews who had been active in the left-wing parties and political movements before the war and who, therefore, were considered "reliable". They could now embark on careers in the state and party apparatus, in the police and in the army. Other Jews, who had been unable – because of the anti-Jewish laws – to find work in accordance with their qualifications or to attend university, now made use of the new channels of social mobility. This upward mobility triggered by the radical political and social changes characterized only a minority of the surviving Jewish population – but this minority was a very visible one. In the early fifties the top leaders of the Communist party, the political police and the army were in large numbers functionaries of Jewish origin who obviously rejected their former identity, cultural traditions and community ties. Thus, upward mobility after 1945 further reinforced the assimilatory trends inside of the Jewish population. This tendency was strengthened by an ideological one. Due to the role of the Soviet army in the liberation of the Budapest ghetto and of the concentration camps and the commitment of the communists to end discrimination, a part of Jews became militant supporters or simply were loyal to the communist system. Additionally, for many Jews, whose aim was earlier to attain complete reception into the nation, tried to find another framework for assimilation after the war. For this substantial group the communist ideology offered a new way of assimilation. Many Jews were now convinced that the new communist system would create a society where there would be no "Jewish problem" or antisemitism. They believed that joining the communist party would mean a final and positive integration into the society, an integration which is even superior to the assimilation they tempted to achieve before the war because the communist program

strives after a qualitative change not only of the life of Jews –like the liberal offer of assimilation into the nation- but of the whole society. As the Jewish-communist hero of a novel placed in the years after the war says: "Jews and non-Jews, we are all the children of a bad and unjust society... bearing its mark on us. We all must assimilate ... to the new ideal of man. We all must transform into socialist people." <sup>23</sup>

## 2.2 *The politics of repression*

The presence of Jewish communists in the party leadership and in the state apparatus did not mean at all that the Jewish population of the country would have exempted from the oppressive measures of the system. Although the Zionist left-wing cherished illusions with regard to Communist policies, the Communist Party viewed the Zionist movement with inherent hostility and suspicion from the outset, and leading ideologists of the Hungarian Communist Party had made it clear already in the first year after the war that they could not accept any form of Zionism. "In Hungary there is both a reactionary and a progressive path to the resolution of the Jewish question", wrote the historian and leading Communist Party ideologist Erik Molnár in a contribution to the Communist Party's theoretical periodical in 1946 . "The reactionary path is Zionism, which remains reactionary even if it proclaims socialism. ... The attempt of Zionism to restore the insignificant national consciousness of Hungarian Jews contradicts the direction of Hungarian social development and thus is a reactionary aim. ... In Hungary the progressive path to a resolution of the Jewish question leads towards the full assimilation of the Jews."<sup>24</sup> Also, it was not surprise at all, that after the communist seizure of power in 1948 the Zionist Association (the umbrella organization of all Zionist organizations and movements) was immediately forcefully disbanded, subsequently several of its members and leaders were arrested and put on trial.

The policies of the Communist party-state towards the Jewish denomination were practically no different from the policies pursued against the other denominations – and the leaders of the Community that were still in their posts behaved very similarly to the leaders of the "pacified" Christian churches. The agreement between the Jewish denomination and the Hungarian state was signed on December 7, 1948. The Jewish negotiators (Lajos Stöckler and Samu Kahán-Frankl, the leaders of the Neolog and Orthodox communities) gave their consent to the nationalization of the denomination's schools. The final

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<sup>23</sup> Ervin Gyertyán, *Szemüveg a porban*, (Budapest: Magvető, 1975) 387.

<sup>24</sup> Erik Molnár, "Zsidókérdés Magyarországon", *Társadalmi Szemle*, 7 (1946): Reprinted in: *Zsidókérdés, asszimiláció, antiszemitizmus*: Péter Hanák (ed.), (Budapest:1984) 30.

step in the transformation of the Jewish denomination in line with the wishes of the State, was the forced union of the institutions of the Neolog and Orthodox Communities: In February 1950, in the great hall of the Community, under portraits of Lenin, Stalin and Rákosi (the Stalinist leader of the Hungarian Communist Party), the representatives of the Israelite National Assembly (Izraelita Országos Gyűlés) adopted a resolution establishing a single, uniform national organization – a body that the State could obviously control more easily. In doing so, they abolished the independence of the Autonomous Orthodox Central Office. From this point onwards, the Orthodox wing functioned as a branch of the united organization. An important element of full state control was the “Rules for Rabbis”, which was adopted at the beginning of the decade. Section 25 of this regulation declared that a rabbi “could not preach sermons whose content or philosophy contradicted the political, economic or social order of the Hungarian state, or which conflicted with the interests of the Hungarian Jewish denomination”.<sup>25</sup> Finally, in 1957 senior appointments in the Jewish Community and the rabbinate were formally made subject to the approval of state bodies – and thus the leadership of the Jewish Community became an institutional part of the *nomenklatura* system of the party-state.<sup>26</sup>

While the repressive policies employed by the party-state against the Jewish denomination were no different from policies pursued against other religious denominations, Jews were affected by forms of repression that in the case of the other churches were clearly absent. Such repression was inflicted on real or perceived manifestations of secular Jewish identity or Jewish descent was used merely as a pretext for political repression. From 1949 until 1954 a whole series of political trials based on accusations of Zionist activity took place – the imprisoned or interned victims of such trials included former Zionists, Orthodox Jews, as well as those who succumbed to the wave of anti-Zionist purges within the Communist Party. The anti-Zionist campaign that began in the Soviet Union in 1952-1953 led in Hungary not only to the imprisonment of various senior officers of the Communist political police – a majority of whom were of Jewish descent – but also to the arrest on charges of Zionism of those Jewish leaders, who had consistently represented Communist interests within the Jewish Community. Another special manifestation of the policies of intimidation imposed on the Jews was the recording of Jewish background and the attempts to restrict the number of Jewish cadres.

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted by László Csorba, “Izraelita felekezeti élet Magyarországon a vészkorszaktól a nyolcvanas évekig”, L. Ferenc Lendvai, Anikó Sohár, Pál Horváth (eds.), *Hét évtized a hazai zsidóság életében*, (Budapest: MTA Filozófiai Intézet, 1990), 131.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

### 2.3 *Identity options*

The communist dictatorship narrowed down the identity options of the Jews. In line with all post-emancipation policies the communist regime was prepared to treat Jewish affairs at best as denominational issues. The public display of any other identity forms was banned. Zionism was persecuted, and secular Jewish culture was considered to be a remnant of a reactionary old world. Even the memory of the Holocaust was repressed: with the Communist seizure of power in 1948, the former vivid debates on responsibility were abruptly stopped and the theme of the Holocaust was expelled from the public sphere.<sup>27</sup> The wartime persecutions appeared embedded in the boring Manichean narrative of the “official” ideology. This narrative was constructed around the principle of heroic struggle of Good – the Communist parties and movements – against Evil – all other players, i.e., the conscious or unconscious representatives of the exploiting classes. Between 1948 and 1956 the fact that the majority of victims were Jews remained in the background and was hardly mentioned in the history textbooks.<sup>28</sup>

Since the Jewish population of the country was already highly secularized and, additionally, religious life was drastically restricted (Shabbat was a working day, kosher food was hardly available, etc.), religiosity could not serve as basis of identification for substantial Jewish groups, either. The official Jewish representation, the leadership of the religious community accepted the given conditions and never tried to deviate from the official definition of Jewishness, i.e. that of the religious one. Consequently, the potential target group of their policies was only a minority of the survivor population.

The position of the leaders of the Jewish Community may be regarded as a decision based on a sober estimation of the possibilities. They may have really believed that it was worth giving up secular Jewish goals, which were untenable anyway, in order to preserve the viability of the religious institutions. A radical (and ritually repeated) rejection of Zionism in the statements of the Jewish leaders and in the Jewish press, as well as a harsh criticism of Israel could be the consequences of sensible considerations. It appears, however, that in some matters of great importance and affecting the everyday lives and existence of many Jews, the behaviour of the leadership of the Community went

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<sup>27</sup> Imre Kertész, *K. dosszié* (Budapest: Magvető 2006).

<sup>28</sup> As historian László Karsai has noted, “There was a peculiar bidding game of who suffered most and who lost more people in the course of which Hungarian textbook writers attempted to conceal the uniqueness, essence and peculiarities of the Jewish Shoah. The ‘ranking order’ of victims is remarkable from this aspect: in accordance with the emphasis on class struggle, communists were listed first, followed by political prisoners and Soviet prisoners of war”. László Karsai, “Tankönyveink a Shoáról”, *Világosság* 7 (1992), 534.

beyond what one might call political realism and it bordered on collaboration.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the process which led to gradual alienation of the Jewish majority from the official Jewish representations, which started already in the period of the persecution accelerated, the distance between the Jews and the Jewish institutions permanently grew.

The socio-demographic composition of the Jewish population, the new political circumstances and the behaviour of the Jewish institutions together greatly contributed to the rise of an identity pattern which was only sporadically present among the Jews of the country before. Whereas on one hand a Jewish minority group by accepting the offer of the new ruling ideology experimented with the identity strategy of the total dissimulation, on the other many former Zionists and the Jewish Orthodoxy – the two groups that suffered most from Communist repression – while wanting to preserve a well articulated Jewish identity clearly considered the Communist party-state to be an anti-Jewish regime,<sup>30</sup> the great majority of country's Jews took a middle-of-the road position. Among Hungary's secularized Jews there must have been many who considered the political regime -whose measures had caused them great suffering as "members of the bourgeois classes" and had created material conditions that were far worse than before the war- a dreadful thing, but not something that bore down on them as Jews, and quite clearly the "lesser evil" – when compared to the era of persecution. Additionally, they might have felt that under the new circumstances they could get rid of from the stigma of being Jewish much easier than before, since not only any public display of Jewish identity was banned but all open forms of antisemitism as well. Hiding Jewishness and other forms of "stigma management" by passing became a frequent phenomenon. A characteristic indicator of this is a piece of data from an interview project carried out in the mid-eighties with members of the "second generation". In the families of the 117 persons we interviewed it was not an exceptional case if the family never revealed the secret of a child's Jewish origin. 31 interviewees found out from strangers and not their relatives or members of their families that they were Jews or deduced the fact from certain indications. For an other 24 person it took a long time to find out the truth about their origin. It was only when a difficult situation occurred –f.e. the child started to make antisemitic remarks at home- that their parents had to "enlighten" them

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<sup>29</sup> See Kovács, "Hungarian Jewish Politics".

<sup>30</sup> Sándor Bacskai, "A magyarországi zsidó ortodoxia története 1945 után", *Múlt és Jövő* 4 (1993), 73-83; Sándor Bacskai, *Egy lépés Jeruzsálem felé*, (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő Könyvkiadó, 1997); Béla Dénes, *Ávósvilág Magyarországon. Egy cionista orvos emlékiratai*, (Budapest: Kairosz Kiadó, 1997); Imre Goldstein, *Novemberi tavasz*, (Budapest: 2000).

and reveal the secret of their Jewishness.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. The post-Stalinist period (1957-1989)

The reception of the 1956 revolution differed among the various groups of Jewish society. For religious Orthodox Jews the revolution meant liberation from the oppression of an atheist state that persecuted religion – and not least the possibility of being able to leave the country. A significant group among the secular Jews was also sympathetic to the changes promised by the fall of dictatorship. On the other hand, there was also renewed fear of antisemitism: a great number of reports of antisemitic manifestations and groups – almost all of which were never confirmed – circulated in Jewish society in Budapest. No doubt, the fear of a renewed outbreak of antisemitism led many Jews to leave the country. But two other factors were more important than this motive: the experiences of the first decade after the war had made it clear to many Hungarian Jews that life would be easier elsewhere – both for those Jews that wished to retain their Jewish identity and faith *and* for those Jews who finally wished to free themselves from their old bonds. According to estimates, about 20,000-30,000 Jews left Hungary in the course of the wave of emigration of 1956-1957.<sup>32</sup> There were quite a few Jews who actively participated in the events led to the revolution and in the revolution itself. Many of them came from the group of the earlier devoted communists: facing the reality of Stalinism, the majority of the intellectual Jewish communists were gradually disillusioned and many of them joined the emerging opposition and became militants of the 1956 revolution. In the days of the revolution, the Jewish Community issued a statement in which it supported the revolution and announced the dismissal of the old leaders.<sup>33</sup>

After the period of retribution that followed the 1956 revolution – from the latter half of the 1960s onwards – Communist politics changed in comparison with the situation in the 1950s. The nature of the political system was unaltered; the party still refused to tolerate the operation of independent institutions and continued to control public

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<sup>31</sup> Ferenc Erős, András Kovács, Katalin Lévai, “Comment j’en suis arrivé à apprendre que j’étais Juif?”, *Actes de la Recherches en Sciences Sociales* 56 (1985).

<sup>32</sup> The most recent review of the data concerning the emigration of Jews from Hungary is that of Tamás Stark. He, too, has confirmed – on the basis of his inquiries – the variously cited figure of 20-30,000 Jewish emigrants in 1956. See Stark, “Kísérlet”, 122, 123.

<sup>33</sup> This was reported in the November 2, 1956 edition of the daily “Magyar Nemzet”. According to other sources, however, the retirement of the old leadership took place only in January 1957. See Csorba, “Izraelita felekezeti élet”, 140.

bodies, but it now refrained from exercising control over people's everyday lives. Post-Stalinist communist politics did not attempt to mobilize society constantly and made numerous concessions to the individual, who – after the political frustration that had followed 1956 – now desired an undisturbed existence at least in the private sphere. The Communist Party's policy on the churches reflected this general political change. In the period after the retribution that followed the revolution, the pressure on religiosity and everyday religious practice gradually declined. The main body of control became the State Office for Church Affairs, which regulated church life primarily by monopolizing the rights of decision in areas such as church finance and ecclesiastical appointments.<sup>34</sup> The policy of the state was fundamentally directed at placing individuals at the head of the denominations that were prepared to collaborate without reservation. Like in the case of all other denominations, in the case of the Jewish Community, this aim was fully achieved, as well.

### *3.1 Demography, social mobility and social status*

After the 1956 wave of emigration the profile of Jewish society in Hungary changed once more. The remaining Jewish population outside Budapest disappeared almost completely: many Jews emigrated or moved to the capital city. Religious Jews – particularly the younger and middle-aged ones – left the country in large numbers. Of 190 pupils enrolled into the Budapest Jewish Grammar School in 1956, just 47 remained in 1957.<sup>35</sup> It appears that most of the Jews that had been involved in the post-war Zionist movement also emigrated. In early 1956 the Budapest Jewish Community had 15,000 tax-paying members. After 1956, however, this number fell considerably, although according to estimates<sup>36</sup> in 1960 at least 115,000 Jews were still living in the

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<sup>34</sup> Under Law-decree no. 22 of 1957, the prior approval of the Presidential Council of the People's Republic of Hungary was necessary for the following appointments (and dismissals): National Representation of the Hungarian Israelites – chairman, deputy chairmen, general secretary; the Budapest Israelite Community – chairman, deputy chairmen; Neolog Rabbinical Council – chairman; and Orthodox Rabbinical Council – chairman. The approval of the State Office for Church Affairs was necessary for the appointment of directors to the Jewish Grammar School and the Rabbinical Seminary.

<sup>35</sup> László Felkai, *A budapesti zsidó fiú- és leánygimnázium története*, (Budapest: Anna Frank Gimnázium Kiadása, 1992), 153, 168.

<sup>36</sup> Stark, "Kísérlet", 119.

country.<sup>37</sup> In 1960 the Budapest Jewish Community registered just 12 births, and this number fell even further during the following ten years: the Community's records show 3 births in 1965 and 9 births in 1970.<sup>38</sup> The number of Jews who remained affiliated in some manner to the official community further diminished in the following decades: the decline may be demonstrated once more by the dramatic reduction in pupil numbers at the Budapest Jewish Grammar School: in 1959-1960 75 pupils received certificates from the school; this number rose in the following years to over 100; then from 1967 it declined steadily to a low-point in 1977 when just 7 pupils were studying at the grammar school. It was not until 1986 that the number of pupils rose once again to more than thirty.<sup>39</sup>

In the years of the post-Stalinist "soft" dictatorship the upward mobility of the Jewish population continued. A demographic survey on the Jews of Hungary (carried out in 1999) revealed that Jews have a very high level of educational achievement. The percentage of those with academic degrees, is extremely high: more than two-third of those who were born between 1945 and 1965 have university or college graduation. Correspondingly, the social status of the Jewish population moved further upwards in the decades between 1956 and 1988: ten years after the fall of the Communist system the percentage of managers, academic professionals and the self employed was higher than 70 per cent. Thus, the majority of the Jews moved towards an upper-middle class position.

### *3.2 Communist policy and the Jewish institutions*

In the decades after 1956 a pragmatic compromise characterized the relationship of the state and the Jewish institutions. The Communist

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<sup>37</sup> The social background of Jews that emigrated in 1956 may be reconstructed on the basis of secondary sources alone. In late 1953 the political police compiled a report for Communist Party General Secretary Mátyás Rákosi concerning Jews who intended to emigrate. The report - see *Dokumentumok. A magyar zsidóság és a hatalom 1945-1955. 32 dokumentum*, ed. by László Svéd, (Múltunk, 1993), 291, 292 - indicates approx. 10,000 potential Jewish emigrants, of whom 80% were Orthodox. This represented approx. 80% of the Orthodox Jewish population. About half of those who intended to emigrate were aged 35-55. The primary reasons for emigration included religious or Zionist convictions, as well as relatives living in Israel.

<sup>38</sup> János Gadó, "Zsidó újszülöttek bejegyzése 1945-től 1996-ig", *Szombat* 1 (January 1998), 8.

<sup>39</sup> László Felkai, "A budapesti zsidó fiú- és leánygimnázium", 152, 153. The fact that demographic factors were not the primary cause of the decline in pupil numbers is proved by the developments of the period after 1990: by the academic year of 1990-1991 the school had 119 pupils. Since 1990 the number of pupils attending Jewish schools in Budapest (four primary schools and three grammar schools) has been approx. 1200. The Community's school has had about 300 pupils.

party-state appeared willing to stifle public manifestations of antisemitism<sup>40</sup> – obviously fearing that antisemitism and anti-Communism might become intertwined – but it placed strict conditions on protection against antisemitism. The first condition was that the Jewish organizations should adhere declaratively to the definition of the Jewish community as a religious denomination, and that they should reject any endeavors to speak of the Jews in any other manner. “Whoever does not consider the complete assimilation of the Jews into the surrounding society possible or desirable”, wrote one of the leading political publicists of the Kádár era, that is, whoever thought that some kind of Jewish identity was possible outside the walls of the synagogue, “with his ideas, justifies Hitler and the gas chambers”<sup>41</sup> But the ideas underlying this approach were also explicitly formulated by a leading politician of the Kádár era and a member of reformist wing of the Party, Imre Pozsgai. According to him, for today’s Hungarian Jews there is no alternative to assimilation, but assimilation is also in the community’s interest: “It is a historical fact that a majority of the Jews of Hungary have chosen this path, and are walking along this path voluntarily today, and thus nobody has the right to use in connection with them the pronouns *we* and *they*.” The offer that followed was simple: assimilation, identification with the nation meant identification with the Communist system and its program, and it was acceptance of this that established the right to protection from antisemitism.<sup>42</sup>

In the three decades after 1956, this principle determined the Jewish policy of the Hungarian post-Stalinist regime. The policy consistently applied two fundamental principles: “Jewish matters” do not exist and therefore cannot appear in the political arena (or if they do then only where they may be treated as sub cases of “church affairs”); the state would take a tough stand against anybody who appeared either within the power apparatus or outside of it as either a mediator of “Jewish affairs” or as the enemy of the Jews.

The definition of the Jewish community exclusively as a denomination excluded a great part of Hungary’s Jewish population from the circle that the Jewish institutions sought to represent.

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<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, the Ministry of Interior’s proposal of September 1960, which mentions “nationalist and anti-semitic” chanting at football matches and the planned attack of the “hooligans” against the students of the Budapest Rabbinical Seminary, and demands authorisation to take a tougher stand from the Politburo. See Belügyminisztérium “Előterjesztés egyes preventív intézkedések bevezetésére” (Magyar Országos Levéltár, M-KS-288-5/198) 10-11.

<sup>41</sup> György Száraz, *Egy előítélet nyomában*, (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó 1976), 265.

<sup>42</sup> Imre Pozsgai, *Bevezetés, Zsidókérdés, asszimiláció, antiszemitizmus*: Péter Hanák (ed.), (Budapest: Gondolat Könyvkiadó, 1984), 11.

Consequently, the Jewish Community could not count upon any significant social support. The Community was not backed by any group whose reactions needed to be considered by the Hungarian politicians as they made decisions concerning Jewish institutions and the Jewish community in general. Moreover, there was no change during these years in the anti-Zionist policies of the Jewish Community and its rejection of any public identification with Israel. In consequence, the possibility of exerting pressure from abroad on domestic political decisions was reduced to a minimum. In this situation – a state of complete internal and external isolation – the Jewish Community and Jewish institutions became fully dependent upon the Communist state. Beside of the support of elderly people, the one remaining political goal, which served to legitimize the Community, was the defense of the Jewish community from antisemitism. But this was the goal by which the Community's leadership, in its complete dependence on the state, also attempted to legitimize its unconditional loyalty to the Communist party-state. As a Community document expressed it: "There are just two paths ahead: socialism, that is, the possibility of life – and fascism, that is, death".<sup>43</sup> Under these circumstances, those young Jews who adhered in some form or another to Jewish identity, could only imagine manifesting this outside the official Jewish institutions. However, the self-organizing young Jewish groups that appeared after the late sixties on the scene, proved to be weak, and were oppressed without hesitation by the authorities – often with the assistance of the community leadership.<sup>44</sup>

### *3.3 Identity options*

The above presented socio-demographic tendencies and political conditions – growing dominance of the secular groups, upward social mobility, assimilationist state policy and defensive community reactions – further strengthened the assimilatory pressure. An obvious indicator of this was that during the 1985 survey on the identity of the Jewish generation born after the war, we often met with the phenomenon that quite a substantial number of our interviewee attributed only a reactive content to their identity. Jewishness only assumed a meaning for them when they were faced with judgments of a non-Jewish environment concerning "Jewish differentness", or outright antisemitism. They could not cope with the fact that they remained Jewish in the eyes of their surroundings though they considered themselves fully assimilated. A "negative" identity based on this stigma emerged and became gradually widespread: those concerned, communist or not, believed that it was only antisemitism that made them Jewish. They felt that the boundaries separating them from others are externally defined; they did their best

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted by Csorba, "Izraelita felekezeti élet", 141.

<sup>44</sup> See Kovács, "Hungarian Jewish Politics", 145, 146.

to hide everything that could identify them as Jewish, nevertheless, this stigmatized identity infiltrated their thinking and behavior. As Erving Goffman has analyzed it, stigmatized individuals - even if they think that their stigmatization has no real foundations - try to develop behavior patterns and communicational rules that make it easier to live with the stigma.<sup>45</sup> As a result, they also draw, often involuntarily, boundaries between their own group and others. They are afraid - and in this respect, it is unimportant whether with good reason or not - of social conflicts, political phenomena and rhetoric that do not invoke fear in others. They behave and communicate differently and assign different meaning to certain gestures, words and behavior within the group and outside it. Consequently, it is easy for both members of the ingroup and outgroup to identify this behavior developed in order to coping with the stigma. Identification in this case, however, develops into identity and this identity is often a painful and burdensome one. No wonder that after the fall of the communist system for a younger generation of Jews who could start to live without the political restrictions placed upon their parents in the Communist system one of the main motives behind their efforts aiming at a renewal of Jewish identities was that such identity has been not simply unattractive but absolutely unbearable.

#### **4. After 1990: an ethnic revival?**

After the collapse of the old system – despite of the Jewish majority’s highly secular and assimilated status and its the distance from all Jewish institutions – signs of a Jewish revival appeared. A growing number of Jews started to take an interest in Jewish religion, traditions and culture. Religious life became animated and a number of cultural, religious and Zionist organisations have been set up or revived. One reason for the resurgence of Jewish identity was obviously a general strengthening of the demand for ethnic and religious identities. This is a natural phenomenon at a time of great social change which generally plunges acquired social identities into a crisis. This search for identity was enhanced by the growing acceptance of multiculturalist orientations. Finally, the revival was facilitated by the opening of borders and above all by rapidly developing relations with Israel and Jews in the United States. But – as I have mentioned before – the main motive behind the new identity strategy seemed to be the desire to throw off the stigmatized identity of the older generation.

Which Jewish groups initiated the revivalist tendencies and what was their status in the Jewish society? A survey which was carried out among the Jews in Hungary in 1999-2000 offers good insights into the

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<sup>45</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma. Notes on the management of spoiled identity* (Penguin Books, 1984) 57-128.

nature and extent of these new phenomena.<sup>46</sup>

In the analysis of the survey results firstly, we examined the extent to which each of the various generations has moved away from the Jewish religious-cultural tradition. Secondly, we tried to develop types of multi-generational patterns of identity strategies. The result of our analysis was, that 18% of the total sample fell into a *fully assimilated group* in which neither the parental family nor the current family exhibited any elements of tradition at all. On the other hand, in the case of 11% of families, *traditions were observed by both generations*. These two groups represent the extremes of an imaginary identity scale. The third group (28%) abandoned traditions in the lifetime of its members: although parents still observed traditions, the respondents themselves indicated that they don't follow this path at all. A fourth group (15%) has shown the clear signs of ongoing secularisation. The parents observed traditions but the children celebrated only some of the High Holy days. In a fifth group (15%), tradition was symbolically present in both generations, mainly by celebrating some of the main Jewish feasts. The *revivalist group* consisted 13% of the population: in this group Jewish traditions were stronger in the current family than they had been in the parental family.<sup>47</sup>

If we examine the different groups, it becomes apparent that three factors have a special role in determining the identity patterns of the group: *age, social mobility, and the strength of Jewish tradition at the time of generational changes*. Our basic supposition was that a combined effect of the generation factor and social mobility has had the strongest influence on identity strategies.

In the course of the examination, we divided the four generations of Jews living in Hungary today into separate groups. The members of the first generation were born before 1930, who were already adults at the time of the Shoah. The second generational group comprised those who were born between 1930 and 1944, whose life-forming experiences were made during the era of Stalinist Communism. To the third generational group belonged those who were born between 1945 and 1965, i.e. the generation that grew up under consolidated Communist rule and Kadarism. Finally, the fourth group comprised those born after 1966, whose most powerful experiences as a

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<sup>46</sup> Between November 1999 and July 2000 we held personal interviews with 2015 individuals. The group surveyed consisted members of the Hungarian Jewish population aged over 18 years. The basic results of the survey see András Kovács (Ed.), *Jews and Jewry in contemporary Hungary: results of a sociological survey*, (London: Jewish Policy Research Institute 2004. [http://www.jpr.org.uk/Reports/PJC\\_Reports/no\\_1\\_2004/pjc\\_1\\_2004.htm](http://www.jpr.org.uk/Reports/PJC_Reports/no_1_2004/pjc_1_2004.htm))

<sup>47</sup> A detailed analysis of these data see András Kovács, "Jewish Groups and Identity Strategies in Post-Communist Hungary", Zvi Gitelman, Barry Kosmin, András Kovács (eds.) *New Jewish Identities* (Budapest: New York: Central European University Press, 2003), 228-236.

generation may have been the disintegration and collapse of the Communist system. On the basis of our data it becomes apparent that detachment from tradition and the abandonment of tradition were most frequent amongst the 65-75 age group (27 and 43 %), i.e. amongst the young survivors of the Shoah who were born between 1924 and 1933. This is the age group which experimented with new and radical means of exiting the Jewish community and which was most exposed to the anti-religious policies of the Communist regime. The complete lack of tradition is particularly characteristic of the children of this generation, who were born between 1954 and 1974 (31%). But this same age group – which experienced the collapse of Communism aged between 15-35 – has the highest proportion of reverts to tradition (24%).

Upward social mobility speeded up the abandonment of tradition, and the fading away of Jewish identity considerably influenced the next generation's relationship to the Jewish community - but it did not prevent the resurgence of the demand for a redefinition of the substance of Jewish identity, especially among those born after 1970. If look at the six multigenerational identity groups described above, we have to notice, that in the “old” groups (groups 3 and 4 in which the older generations are stronger represented), mobility is clearly the strongest factor that influenced the registered identity pattern. The extent of the group member's progression down to the path of assimilation – i.e. whether they completely abandoned tradition or retained certain symbolic elements – depended from which social status the parents' generation departed, for in this generation tradition was present in equal strength in both groups. In the “young groups” (groups 1 and 4) mobility had merely an indirect effect: in both groups higher social status was characteristic even of the parents' generation. The main factor influencing the first group to choose a strategy of complete assimilation and the second group to choose a strategy of “symbolic acceptance of tradition” appears to have been the extent to which Jewish tradition was still alive in the family after the path of mobility had been closed off.

The “revivalist” group comprised mainly young people – four-fifths of the group belong to the younger age groups. This is the first group in which the gender ratio differs from the average: the proportion of women in the group is higher than in other groups. Usually, the parents of members of the group are university or college educated, the mobility leap occurred between the grandparents' generation and the parents' generation. Members of the group generally live in favourable circumstances. The employment structure of the group includes significantly more academic professions than that of the other groups. Although the group's Jewish identity is undoubtedly strong, it is an acquired identity. “Reverting to tradition” does not mean the revival of religious orthodoxy: just 10% of members of the group strictly follows the religious rules, many of the group members (41% ) observe the

major Holy Days only. However, in their parental families and in their childhood no tradition was present at all – many of them did not even know that they were Jewish (15% of the group were already adults when they discovered that they were Jews). In general, members of the group refuse assimilation and strongly sympathise with Israel. A significant proportion of the group opposes mixed marriages, and many members of the group (69 %) have mainly or exclusively Jewish friends. This group is the group of “voluntary Jews”<sup>48</sup> – the possibility of an “exit” strategy had been open to them, but they have chosen a “return” strategy, instead.

For the future, it seems so, that a complete revival of religious tradition affecting all aspects of life will probably be the new identity strategy of a few. The renewed elements of tradition seem destined to serve as identity marker, token of an ethnic group consciousness. The first and foremost function of ethnic groups is the securing of conditions necessary for the self-maintenance of the group as an important social identity source. The stability and strength of the ethnic group depends up on its level of institutionalization as well as the ability of its institutions to focus on the problems considered by the group to be its own.<sup>49</sup> These factors will determine the future of the ethnic revivalist movements in Hungary, too.

Similar movements and tendencies may be observed among the Jewish populations of the other former Communist countries of East Central Europe. Nevertheless, in an extremely important respect, the situation of the Hungarian Jews differs from that of the Czech, Slovak or Polish Jews. In the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland, owing to the small size of the Jewish communities in these countries, the ‘revival movements’ seem unable to prevent the gradual disappearance of the Jewish Diasporas. In Hungary, however, where according to various types of estimates there are between 80,000 and 140,000 Jews, the size of groups searching for a new identity probably may exceed the critical point that is indispensable to slow down or even counterbalance the process of attrition at the margins. Unless a strong emigration wave occurs due to a dramatic deterioration in external conditions, it is these factors that shall determine the extent to which Hungarian Jews develop an ethnic group consciousness and identity in the future.

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<sup>48</sup> Diana Pinto, “The Third Pillar? Toward a European Jewish Identity”, András Kovács (ed.), *Jewish Studies at the Central European University. Public Lectures 1996-1999*, (Budapest: CEU, 2000) , 188-189.

<sup>49</sup> For the effect of these factors both in general and specifically – e.g. in the case of the Polish Jews – see Claire A. Rosenson, “Polish Jewish Institutions in Transition: Personalities over Process”, Zvi Gitelman, Barry Kosmin, András Kovács (eds.), *New Jewish Identities*, 263-290.

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