

ANDRÁS KOVÁCS

Introduction

Jewish Studies at the Central European University 1996–1999

The idea for a Jewish Studies Program at Central European University emerged in 1996. In June of that year, at the suggestion of three members of the Board of Trustees, Leon Botstein, Bronislaw Geremek and Miklós Vársányi, a Jewish Studies Planning Session was held in Budapest to explore the possibilities for Jewish Studies activities at CEU. The meeting was attended by leading academics from North America, Israel, and Western and Eastern Europe, who discussed the issue from all viewpoints. Their conclusion was that, thanks to its particular international and regional character, CEU could make an important and perhaps unique contribution to the development of Jewish Studies.

Since then, the guiding concept in promoting Jewish Studies at CEU has been that of creating a center for the teaching and research of Jewish history, culture and society which would reflect the long and rich contribution of Jews to the region, as well as for the study of their tragic fate. As is well known, East Central Europe was home to the bulk of world Jewry: over 70 per cent in 1900, and still some 55 per cent on the eve of the Shoah. The region is very rich in modern Jewish history, and there is a wealth of invaluable source material which can only be accessed and analyzed here. In fact, East Central Europe can be considered the cradle of various religious, political and cultural movements which have powerfully influenced Jewish consciousness and life in the modern era.

In addition, the history of Jews in the countries of the region is an integral part of the national history of these countries. The so called “Jewish question” in the history of Central Europe and the former Soviet Union has been and remains an indispensable aspect of national self-definition. Moreover, since anti-Semitism is both actually and metaphorically a vital and continuing reality in each of the constituent nations of this region, the historical and contemporary position of the Jewish population will continue in complex and subtle ways to play a role in the development of local political structures and identities.

There are many Jewish Studies departments around the world, including some in East Central Europe, but there is none that concentrates specifically on Eastern and East Central European Jewish culture, religion, history and sociology. Since in communist Eastern Europe both the past and the present of Jews in the region were often disregarded or treated as taboo, little serious and objective research was carried out in Jewish subjects. Thus, there are serious gaps in our knowledge in this field. Located in Budapest and attracting students and faculty from throughout the region, CEU offers ideal possibilities for a critical and non-sectarian Jewish Studies Program focusing on Jewish issues in East Central Europe. Such a program fits in perfectly with CEU’s intellectual organization because of its fundamental multidisciplinary framework.

Since the 1996 planning session, CEU has sponsored two separate Jewish Studies projects. Summer university courses in Jewish Studies directed by Michael K. Silber of Hebrew University, Jerusalem were offered in three consecutive years. The first one in the summer of 1997, was entitled *Out of the Ghetto: Jewish Tradition in Crisis*. A graduate level course, it drew an impressive number of applicants, mostly from the region but also from Western Europe and the USA. It acquainted young faculty and advanced students in modern history and religion with some of the major trends in Central and Eastern European modern Jewish history. The 1998 summer course was entitled *Integration and Distinctiveness in Multicultural Settings: The Variety of Jewish Identities in Eastern and East Central Europe*,

1700–1989. It examined the problems and issues which Jews living on the territories of the Russian and Habsburg empires and their successor states—a very heterogeneous region with great national and religious diversity—experienced in the modern period when they were faced with the often conflicting trends of integration into the host societies and preservation of Jewish distinctiveness and particular collective identity. The lecturers of the 1999 summer course, *Jews and Nationalism in the Modern Era*, re-examined the subject of Jewish collective identity and nationalism by turning to the historical record of the past two hundred years.

CEU's second main Jewish Studies activity was a public lecture series organized by the Jewish Studies Program in cooperation with the History Department, the Nationalism Studies Program, the Mediaeval Studies Department, the Open Society Archives and some outside institutions, such as the Austrian Institute of Eastern and Southeastern European Studies. In the 1996/97 academic year we hosted a series of lectures entitled *Jews in Central European Societies*. The following year a new series, with the title *Chapters in Jewish History* was launched. This was followed by *Jews in Non-Jewish Worlds* in the 1998/99 academic year. Up to April 1999, 27 lectures took place on a regular basis, attended by a total of more than 1,200 people.

The Jewish Studies Program has also contributed to conferences and seminars. Such past contributions include the conference *Authoritarianism and Prejudice* (Budapest, 1998), organized under the auspices of the CEU Department of Political Science, the Institute of Psychology of the Hungarian Academy of Science and the UNESCO Department of Ethnic and Minority Studies, and the international seminar *Jewish Culture in the Twenty-First Century* (Paris, 1999), organized by the American Jewish Committee, the Jewish Policy Research Institute, London and the Alliance Israélite Universelle, Paris.

Through the lecture series, the Jewish Studies Program has established and maintains academic contacts with and regularly consults a number of scholars and institutions specialized in Jewish matters, among them the most important centers of research in both the Western world and Eastern Europe. We have invited academics and other experts from both Eastern and Western Europe, as well as from Israel and the United States as speakers. The lecturers have addressed a wide variety of historical and contemporary topics, including Jewish history, philosophy, sociology, religion, culture, and Jewish/Gentile relationships, both in the general theoretical perspective and, more importantly, in the specific Central European region. Our present volume includes a broad selection of the lectures from the last three years, as well as articles written by the lecturers, related to their research topics. A full list of lectures and lecturers is to be found in the appendix of the volume. In line with the philosophy of the lecture series, our aim in this volume was not to provide a comprehensive picture of one or a few topics but to show a rich variety of research and studies in the field of Jewish Studies, hence we have not organized the contributions into thematic units.

In closing, we would like to express our gratitude to the *Nathan Cummings Foundation*, the *Dorot Foundation* and the *Andrew W. Mellon Foundation* for supporting our lecture series over the years 1996 to 1999. CEU matched these grants by providing infrastructure and services throughout the whole period and also covered the total cost of the summer courses.

The publication of this volume was made possible by the generous support of the Rich Foundation.