

THE 'PEOPLE OF THE BOOK' AND DENOMINATIONAL INEQUALITIES OF ACCESS TO PRIMARY SCHOOL LIBRARIES IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY HUNGARY

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Social inequalities in the distribution of knowledge available in a given societal formation represent an important issue for the understanding of fundamental mechanisms of modernisation. Opportunities to participate effectively in the process of building 'Promethean' societies have always been linked to the disposal of various forms of 'capital' – in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu – be they economic assets, social networks (personal connections, kinship solidarity ties, and other nexi), or 'intellectual' competencies which can be mobilised for innovations in terms of entrepreneurship, managerial success, technical or other innovations. Access to most of the latter is available in modern times via books. Hence reading facilities accessible to various social strata, ethnic groups, or denominational clusters may become a source of decisive inequalities in terms of social mobility, educational achievement, cognitive performance, and the like.

Traditionally, Jewish communities have invested on average more heavily than others in literate education, since the religious practice of at least the male members was closely linked to religious learning for which books – such as the Torah, the Talmud, and so on – served as indispensable references. Thus, it is not a far-fetched hypothesis that in the course of the very process of modernisation in Central Europe and elsewhere, some aspects of the mental set-up, as well as the capacity and interest to study generated by Jewish religious learning could and would often be converted into secular intellectual pursuits and propensities. In fact, the educational statistics of the Hungarian 'old regime', as well as recent survey results on the performance differentials of students in Hungarian secondary and primary education convincingly show that Jews regularly prevailed over non-Jews in school class competitions for the highest marks, especially in 'discursive' or 'textual' subjects demanding or presupposing an interest in reading, such as Hungarian literature, history, or foreign languages (German, Latin).¹ One of the conditions of such 'qualitative over-schooling' of sorts may be a more frequent availability of books for Jewish pupils, beyond schoolbooks proper. Such a by all means reasonable assumption is unfortunately very difficult to attest. We know, however, that Jews at an advanced stage of modernisation were strongly over-represented in Hungary too among professionals dealing in and with books (printers, publishers, salesmen of books, owners of bookshops, press tycoons, journalists).² There are also many literary hints about the distinctive importance granted by Jews to reading. But empirical research has as yet only exceptionally produced hardcore evidence to this effect.³ It even occurred to serious scholars to feel doubts or express uncertainty about the historical reality of Jewish intellectual distinctiveness based on reading usages and a more than average frequency of access to books. Given the rarity of information in this field, all new evidence must be welcome as a precious contribution to the understanding of the logic of development and the mechanics of cultural inequalities of an ethnic or denominational nature.

This note is based upon the exploitation of a unique databank shedding light not on group differentials of reading habits proper, but on the availability and, implicitly, accessibility of books in Hungarian primary schools in 1907–1908.⁴ The information emanates from a vast survey published by the Hungarian Statistical Office as follow-up research on the state of primary schooling before and after the enactment of the famous (or, for many non-Magyar contemporary observers, infamous) Lex Apponyi (1907), on the strength of which free elementary education was introduced in a large network of schools accepting state subsidies in exchange, not incidentally, for their participation in the programme of the forcible Magyarisation of teaching. Data relevant to reading facilities cover both teachers' and students' libraries. We use here the information related to the latter only, with the assumption that the reading habits of the upcoming young generations of the late Dualist period in Hungary

¹ See among other examples my study 'Social Mobility, Reproduction and Qualitative Schooling Differentials in Old Regime Hungary', *History Department Yearbook 1994-1995* (Budapest: CEU, 1995), pp. 134--156.

² On the marked over-representation of Jews in printing, publishing and other professions of book production see my study 'Acculturation nationale et esprit d'entreprise: les Juifs et le marché de l'édition en Hongrie avant 1945', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, No. 130 (December 1999), pp. 66--76.

³ I myself have only found rather rare empirical proofs – and of limited scope only – in this matter. One concerns Jewish lawyers surviving the Shoah, who possessed twice as many books, read journals or subscribed to them much more often than their gentile counterparts. See 'Lawyers and the Rise of Fascism in Hungary. Study of the Internal Divisions of a 'Liberal' Profession in the Early 1940s', in Charles McClelland and Stephan Merl, *Professions in Modern Eastern Europe* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1995), pp. 60-89. (Giessener Abhandlungen zur Agrar- und Wirtschaftsforschung des Europäischen Ostens, Vol. 207). Another case in point concerns traders in interwar Budapest, among whom those clusters with the highest proportion of Jews (over 50 percent) showed a distinctive 'cultural' profile, among other things with twice as many readers of and subscribers to professional journals as compared to other clusters. See my book *Iskolarendszer és felekezeti egyenlőtlenségek Magyarországon (1867--1945)* [School system and denominational inequalities in Hungary, 1867–1945] (Budapest: Replika-könyvek, 1997), especially p. 34.

⁴ *Hungarian Statistical Reports*, No. 31, p. 77*, and pp. 268--69 (in Hungarian).

would be influenced mostly – even if not quite exclusively – by libraries directly accessible to pupils, which was normally not the case with teachers’ libraries.⁵

The interest of such a databank is enhanced by the fact that the contemporary primary school market was absolutely dominated (up to three-quarters of its size) – especially outside Budapest – by denominational schools⁶ recruiting their pupils preferentially (up to 93--98 percent of their intake) among members of their own denomination.⁷ Hence, our information relative to students’ libraries in confessional schools offers a good estimation of global denomination-specific access differentials as regards reading facilities in primary schooling as a whole. Still, references will also be provided concerning additional inequalities of the same kind due to the unequal likelihood of various religious clusters attending public (state-run or municipal) elementary teaching institutions in the period examined.

⁵ There is a specification of the average number of readers in various primary school libraries in the source used. While a mean number of 57 readers was listed per pupils’ library, only one reader among the pupils was indicated per teachers’ library. *Hungarian Statistical Reports*, No. 31, p. 77*.

⁶ In 1907–1908 out of 16,547 primary schools 75.7 percent were under church management (*Hungarian Statistical Reports*, No. 31, 40*). If this proportion was diminishing year by year (to 72.6 percent by 1910–1911 – *Hungarian Statistical Yearbook* [Budapest, 1911], p. 349) it remained a sizeable absolute majority throughout the Dualist period. In fact, the proportion of denominational schools was even higher in the provinces, since the large majority (up to 95 percent) of Budapest primary pupils attended public municipal schools following the 1867 *Ausgleich* until the end of the ‘old regime’. See the data for the period under study for example in *Statistical Yearbook of the Residential City of Budapest, 1909--1912*, p. 386 (in Hungarian).

⁷ For more precise data on this matter see my forthcoming overview ‘Szegregáció, asszimiláció és disszimiláció. Felekezetek az elemi iskolai piacon (1867--1942)’ /Segregation, assimilation, dissimilation. Denominational groups in the Hungarian primary school market/, *Világosság*, (Budapest), 2002.

Table 1 Denominational indices of access to pupils' libraries in Hungarian primary schools (1907–1908)

		Roman Catholics	Greek Catholics	Calvinists	Lutherans	Greek Orthodox	Unitarians	Jewish	All
1	Number of schools ⁸	5 306	1 862	1 882	1 327	1,652	35	455	12,519
2	Distribution of schools	42.4	14.9	15.0	10.6	13.2	0.3	3.6	100.0
3	Number of schools per library	7.2	50.3	5.8	2.7	10.9	2.7	2.1	6.3
4=1/3	Global number of schools with a library	737	37	324	491	152	95	217	1,967
5	Distribution of schools with a library	37.5	1.9	16.5	25.0	7.7	0.5	11.0	100.0
6	Average number of books per library	155	75	122	155	111	199	171	147
7= 4x6	Global number of books	114 235	2 775	39 528	76 956	16 872	1 890	37 107	289 149
8	Distribution of all the books	39.5	1.0	13.7	26.6	5.8	0.7	12.8	100.0
9	Mean number of <i>Hungarian</i> books per library ⁹	138	28	121	69	11	199	160	109
10= 4x9	Global number of <i>Hungarian</i> books	101 706	1 036	39 204	33 879	1 672	1 890	34 720	214 403
11	Distribution of <i>Hungarian</i> books	47.4	0.5	18.3	15.8	0.8	0.9	16.2	100.0
12	Number of <i>hardbound</i> books per library	115	40	89	124	50	153	164	113
13= 4x12	Number of all <i>hardbound</i> books	84 755	1 480	28 836	60 884	7 600	1 454	35 588	222 271
14	Distribution of <i>hardbound</i> books	38.1	0.7	13.0	27.4	3.4	0.7	16.0	100.0
15	Global number of pupils	680 295	120 295	193 592	133 196	136 164	1 905	34 391	1 300 065
16	Number of pupils in schools of their own confession	658 658	114 233	178 443	123 239	133 582	1 476	32 226	1 241 857
17	Distribution of pupils in schools of their own confession	53.0	9.2	14.4	9.9	10.8	1.2	2.6	100.0
18=16/1	Mean number of pupils in a school of their own confession	124	61	95	101	81	42	71	99
19=4x18	Number of pupils in schools of their own confession with a library ¹⁰	91 388	2 257	30 780	49 591	12 312	399	15 407	194 733
20=13/11	Distribution of pupils in schools of their own confession with a library	13.9	2.0	17.2	40.2	9.2	27.0	47.8	15.7
21	Mean number of reading pupils per library	60	32	53	51	50	23	52	54
22=21x4	Number of all reading pupils	44 220	1 184	17 172	25 041	7 600	219	11 284	106 218
23= 22/15	% of readers among all the pupils	6.5	0.01	8.9	18.8	5.6	11.5	33.0	8.2
24=7/15 x1000	Number of books per 1000 pupils in schools of their own confession	173	24	222	624	126	1 280	1 115	233
25= 13/15 x1000	Number of <i>hardbound</i> books per 1000 pupils in schools								

⁸ *Hungarian Statistical Reports*, No. 31, p. 32*.

⁹ Rounded values calculated following the percentages indicated in the source.

¹⁰ Estimate based on the assumption that the average size of the student body in each school is equal to the number of pupils in schools equipped with a students' library within each denominational network.

26=10/15	of their own confession	129	12	161	494	57	985	1 104	179
x1000	Number of <i>Hungarian</i> books per 1000 pupils in schools of their own confession	154	9	219	275	13	1 280	1 077	173

The first observation to be drawn from the table – the data will be referred to here by the number of the line in which they appear – concerns the absolute scarcity of libraries (line 3): on average less than one-sixth of the institutions listed have a students' library of their own. The primary school network was thus, on the whole, very poorly endowed with reading facilities, even if we take into consideration the teachers' libraries from which pupils could, occasionally (by no means regularly), also profit. The data source states that 276,199 pupils, plus 18,658 members of youth organisations made use of the pupils' libraries, while teachers' libraries had only 3,551 readers among pupils and another 967 members of youth organisations.¹¹ However imprecise such a count may have been, it is obvious that only pupils' libraries and not those of the teachers could significantly promote a commitment to reading in the primary school 'clientele'.

It is also important to note that public schools were, on the whole, much better endowed in this respect (as well as in other respects) than denominational institutions. There was a library in almost every state-run school (1.1 school per library) and in almost every second municipal school (1.9 schools per library), while there was a library only in every sixth denominational school (6.3 schools per library).¹²

This sharp contrast is also reflected in the similarly unequal distribution of libraries according to the language of teaching. By 1907–1908 schools operating in Hungarian were indeed the majority (75.8 percent), but they were over-represented among schools with a library as well (88.2 percent). So were German schools (2.8 percent of primary institutions, but 5.2 percent of those with a library), while all other schools run in a minority language remained crassly under-represented among schools owning a library – except maybe for Serbo-Croatian schools, which represented 1.6 percent of all institutions and 1.3 percent of those with a library.¹³ This means that the endowment of schools with a students' library was closely connected with the Magyarisation process. State and other public schools, all or most of which were built as Hungarian institutions after 1867,¹⁴ were regularly completed with a library, with the obvious aim of promoting the Magyarisation of their readers, since their books were almost exclusively Hungarian – up to 91 percent in municipal and 99 percent in state schools.¹⁵ In the denominational sector, however, the situation was less favourable to the Magyarisation efforts of the government. Minority schools were concentrated in this sector and their libraries contained mostly non-Hungarian books, but – as shown above – they possessed libraries much less frequently, with the notable exception of German-Lutheran schools.¹⁶

The evidence of the table demonstrates above all that access to pupils' libraries proved to be especially unequal among denominational clusters, the probability of having a library varying from 1 to 20–25. Almost every second Jewish school (and somewhat fewer Lutheran and Unitarian schools) was endowed, as against merely one out of fifty (!) Greek Catholic and one out of eleven Greek Orthodox schools (line 3). Thus, the sharp hierarchy of schools with regard to levels of library endowment is immediately outlined: Jews, Unitarians, and Lutherans were well ahead in this respect, Roman Catholics and Calvinists in the middle, and the Greek churches far behind. Incidentally, let us note that the same hierarchy appears in the distribution of marks for educational excellence in secondary or primary schooling, since the best achievers were usually Jews and Lutherans and the least successful Greek Orthodox or Greek Catholic, as is shown in topical survey results (even if the Unitarians are mostly ill perceived in this context, due to their insignificant presence in the samples).¹⁷

Considering pupils attending their own confessional schools (lines 16 and 17), a somewhat modified hierarchy emerges among denominational clusters because of the differences in the mean size of schools (line 18). Combining this with the number of pupils attending their own schools with a library (line 19), it is easy to calculate the overall proportion of pupils who could use a local library (line 20). This was the case with an average of only 16 percent of them, a rather low figure, confirming our previous observation relative to the general scarcity of primary school libraries in the period under scrutiny. However, this average figure expressing the theoretical accessibility of local libraries once again covers – as may be expected – enormous inequalities. Almost half of the Jewish pupils and two-fifths of the Lutherans were able to read books in their own schools, with much lower proportions for all other denominations (even for the Unitarians) (line 21).

¹¹ *Hungarian Statistical Reports*, No. 31, pp. 268–69., No. 31, pp. 268–69.

¹² *Hungarian Statistical Reports*, No. 31, pp. 268–69.

¹³ *Hungarian Statistical Reports*, No. 31, p. 39* and p. 268.

¹⁴ A few municipal schools had operated before 1867, but most of them, as well as all the state schools, were built, or converted ('nationalised') from church schools, later on. All state schools and up to 86 percent of municipal schools taught in Hungarian. *Hungarian Statistical Reports*, No. 31, p. 39*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.* It is worth noting that even in the non-Hungarian municipal schools the majority of the library books were Hungarian: 87 percent in the German, 87 percent in the Slovakian, 94 percent in the Romanian and Serbo-Croatian municipal schools. *Hungarian Statistical Reports*, No. 31, p. 269.

¹⁶ Of 321 Saxon schools 226 had a students' library as against 238 of the 814 Hungarian Lutheran and 33 of the 158 Slovak Lutheran schools. But close to one-third of the books in the latter were in Hungarian, while in the German-Saxon school libraries only 7 percent of the books were. *Hungarian Statistical Reports*, No. 31, p. 269.

¹⁷ See for example my book *Iskolarendszer és felekezeti egyenlőtlenségek*, p. 96.

There is interesting information in the databank concerning the average number of pupils actually regarded or recorded as 'readers' in various school libraries (line 21). Today it is unclear how such registration could have been carried out and how reliable and exact it was, nevertheless, thanks to these figures one can estimate the proportion of 'readers' in each school type (line 23). Here again we have extremely strong variation, with one-third of the Jewish pupils reading as against barely more than half that proportion among Lutheran students, followed by Unitarians, but almost nil among Greek Catholics. By this estimation too, Jews appear to be far ahead of all other denominational groups, even as compared to other 'reading champions' like Unitarians and Lutherans.

Once this general result is obtained, we must turn to other details of the table to identify various degrees of 'conditional' inequalities in library access – conditioned by the overall hierarchy of probabilities of finding books in local primary schools.

First, we must look at the number of books in each library, since it contributes directly to determining the overall availability of books for pupils. Here again a hierarchy largely if not entirely as above is apparent, the size of Unitarian and Jewish libraries being by far the largest on average – with 199 and 171 books respectively – followed by Lutheran, but also by Roman Catholic school libraries (line 6). Thus the proportion of books in Jewish schools (line 8) exceeds the proportion of Jewish schools with a library (line 5) and by as much as *three and a half times* that of Jewish schools (line 2) in the denominational school market. For the sake of comparison, none of the other denominational libraries 'at the top' (those of Unitarians and Lutherans) show a similar degree of over-representation as to the overall number of books in their libraries, while all the others are under-represented: their share as regards books is smaller (for the Greek Catholic and Orthodox much smaller) than the proportion of their schools in the market (line 8).

A similar result is achieved if number of books is compared to the size of student populations attending their own confessional schools (line 24). Unitarians and Jews represent the only denominational clusters to have more books than pupils in their schools, while Lutherans have over one-third fewer books and all the others incomparably fewer. These figures mean that Unitarians and Jews (as well as Lutherans, though to a lesser extent) had a reasonable chance to borrow books from their own school libraries, meanwhile this is highly improbable for the other groups, unless they attended a public institution and not their own schools.

The contrast is not quite different by nature but even sharper among denominational groups, if we take into account the distribution of books in the Hungarian language (line 11). Here only Unitarian schools can compete to some extent with their Jewish counterparts in the high degree of over-representation of books in the official language of the state. A denomination of 'purely Magyar stock' and of Transylvanian origin, the Unitarians' share of Magyar books (line 11) is three times higher than that of their schools in the market (line 2), but the comparable proportion in Jewish schools is four and a half times higher (line 2 and line 11). Still, if we consider the number of Magyar books per 1,000 pupils attending their own confessional schools (line 26), Unitarians appear to be somewhat better off than Jews – with 1,280 volumes in Hungarian as against 1,077. But these numbers exceed by almost four times the number of Magyar books available for Calvinist pupils – who belonged to what was regarded as 'the most Magyar religion' – and seven times that of Roman Catholics. Since Unitarian schools were all but invisible in the school market due to their small number, Jewish pupils emerge as the absolute paragons of readership in the national language – with approximately seven times more chance of having access to Hungarian books in their own schools than most Christian pupils (outside Unitarians, of course).

This is a very interesting result on at least two counts. As such, it attests to the powerful assimilationist commitment of official Jewish institutions to 'Magyarism' (including a devotion to Hungarian literature, published not incidentally mostly by Jewish publishers at that time¹⁸). Magyar cultural orientation was particularly popular in precisely those Jewish communities which maintained schools of public status of their own (mostly represented among the reform-minded, modernising *Neologs* or the Western type Orthodox – exempt from Hassidic influence¹⁹). It is well known that the Jewish primary school network was the only one to have fully converted itself into teaching in Hungarian by the period studied here. Thanks to this operation they formed the third completely Magyar denominational school network, beside the Calvinist and Unitarian ones, which had always been quasi-exclusively teaching in Hungarian – given the historical fact that their clientele were also exclusively of Magyar stock.

This result also reveals the strategic nature of Jewish endeavours to invest more heavily than others in Magyar cultural assets, such as Hungarian books. Compared to other denominational schools, a much larger

¹⁸ For details of the dominant position of Jewish publishers in the publishing market of both the national classics and the avant-garde see my study cited above, 'Acculturation nationale et esprit d'entreprise'.

¹⁹ On examples of the unequal distribution of such Jewish schools in geographical space and on the cultural map of Hungarian Jewry defined by religious obedience see my books: *Iskolarendszer és felekezeti egyenlőtlenségek*, pp. 29–31 and *Zsidóság, modernizáció, polgárosodás* [Jewry, modernisation, embourgeoisement] (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1997), pp. 262–63.

proportion of (if not most) Jewish schools in the databank must indeed have been established close to the time of our study, that is, in the course of the post-1867 drive for assimilation (and specifically following the troublesome 1882–1883 years of the Tiszaeszlár blood libel trial).²⁰ In this period Magyar books in Jewish school libraries often represented an instrument of acculturation via reading in Hungarian for many pupils still unfamiliar with Hungarian. It was a daring venture indeed for several Jewish school boards to massively buy Hungarian books, since they were sometimes destined for pupils among whom German or Yiddish speakers could, locally, be a sizeable minority. If they were willing to do so, it could only be in the framework of a strategy of assimilation proper (a ‘self-assimilation’ of sorts) or both the illustration and the demonstration of Magyar national loyalties and cultural commitments.

Most books appear to have been bought relatively recently in Jewish school libraries and consisted more often than in other libraries of ‘serious’ works, meant to serve many pupils for a long time. The evidence for this is suggested by the high proportion of hardbound volumes (line 12). The average number of such books was indeed the highest in Jewish schools (164), followed by Unitarian schools (153), and Jewish schools were well ahead of Lutheran (124) and Roman Catholic (115), let alone other schools. If we examine the distribution of hardcover books (line 25), Jewish libraries were the only ones to offer more than one volume per pupil on average. Unitarian schools offered almost as many, but Lutherans half that number and the other schools much fewer. Jewish pupils had at their disposal one hundred times (!) more hardcover volumes than their Greek Catholic fellow pupils.

The systematic advantage Jewish students enjoyed in terms of reading facilities in their own schools was complemented by their more general advantages to the same effect in public schooling, since they attended state or municipal schools more often than others (except for the smallest Protestant clusters, such as Unitarians and Baptists). In 1910–1911 for example more than half of the Jewish primary school pupils (55 percent) were enrolled in non-denominational schools (both public and private) as against 78 percent of the Unitarians, but only 22 percent of the Lutherans and between 26 percent and 34 percent of the other denominations.²¹ The reasons for this distinctive use of public schooling by Jews were partly of a socio-morphological, partly of a strategic nature. Over-urbanised as they were, the Jewish contingent of primary schooling was several times more likely than others to live in cities and especially in Budapest,²² where public educational institutions prevailed. But members of the ‘reformist’ or ‘modernist’ sectors of contemporary Jewry, such as religious Neologs or secular Jews, also tended to prefer state or municipal schools to those of other denominations or even their own schools, as they regarded the former as a strategic vehicle of ‘national’ assimilation. Be that as it may, such large participation in public schooling provided Jewish pupils with a much greater than average probability of access to public school libraries as well, the number of which far exceeded the number of libraries in denominational schools, as noted above.

Thus, whatever indicator is applied, pupils belonging to ‘the people of the Book’ fared by far the best, well ahead of all other denominational clusters, in terms of their chances of finding books in the schools they attended. However, school libraries, given their general scarcity, could help to promote reading only to a limited extent. For a better clarification of social inequalities in the field of ‘active literacy’ – the recourse to books and the intellectual pursuits of upcoming generations in modern Hungary connected to reading – other investigations are badly needed, especially those offering insights into the private and public reading habits of the time: the book trade, group-specific expenses in books and subscription to journals, use of public libraries, and so on. But, for the moment, the research results based on the study of school libraries amply verify the hypothesis of the pre-eminent position of Jews in the Hungarian ‘reading market’ of the late Dualist period.

²⁰ In 1868–1869 there were only 364 Jewish primary schools with public status. Ten years later, following the start of the anti-Semitic agitation, they numbered 447 and as many as 469 by 1881, the first high-point of mass organised Judeophobia in the country. In the first year of the critical period initiated by the 1882–1883 blood libel trial at Tiszaeszlár the number of Jewish schools reached 510, in its second year 516. Their numbers were swollen in the following years, with an apogee of 578 in 1891. Afterwards, probably due to the relaxation of tensions, many of these institutions were discontinued or, more often, transformed into state or municipal schools, so that by 1907–1908 with 455 units the Jewish school network was reduced to its size of a quarter of century earlier, only to further decrease during the rest of the Dualist period (with only 371 schools in 1914–1915). In contrast, the number of Catholic, Lutheran, or Calvinist schools was approximately the same in 1867 as in 1907. See *Hungarian Statistical Reports*, No. 31, p. 27* and relevant years of the *Hungarian Statistical Yearbooks*.

²¹ In 1910–1911, 34.4 percent of Jewish pupils attended state schools proper, 17.9 percent municipal schools and 1.3 percent other private schools. Data from the *Hungarian Statistical Yearbook* (Budapest, 1911), p. 353.

²² In 1907–1908 as many as 18.2 percent of Hungarian Jewish pupils studied in Budapest, as against only 3.8 percent of Roman Catholics, a mere 1.9 percent of Lutherans and Calvinists, and even smaller proportions of others. Calculations based on data in *Hungarian Statistical Records* No. 31, pp. 207 and 211.