

JEWISH PERCEPTION OF ANTISEMITISM IN HUNGARY BEFORE WORLD WAR I

I.

Hungary, wrote Theodor Herzl in 1897, is an "oasis in the antisemitic world."¹ This view was not only shared by his contemporaries in Vienna,² but is also to be found, *mutatis mutandis*, in the accounts of modern historians³ and in the personal recollections of Hungarian Jews made between the two world wars. "The fulfilment of human dignity," wrote the distinguished journalist and literary critic Károly Sebestyén in his 1927 autobiography, "was for me imaginable only in a well-run state that rested on a firm legal foundation and only in a free society that sought to develop the intellectual and the moral capacities of the people to their fullest. Prewar Hungary was the ideal of such a state and the ideal of such a society."⁴

1 R. Fischer, 'Anti-Semitism in Hungary 1882-1932,' in *Hostages of Modernization. Studies on Modern Antisemitism 1870-1933/39*, ed. H. A. Strauss, vol. 2 (Berlin and New York, 1993), p. 863.

2 When, in 1895, Karl Lueger's Christian Social Party won an overall majority in the Viennese local government elections, upper middle-class Jews threatened to move to Hungary. See B. F. Pauley, *From Prejudice to Persecution: A History of Austrian Anti-Semitism* (Chapel Hill and London, 1992), pp. 43-4.

3 See, for example, P. G. J. Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria* (New York, London and Sydney, 1964), pp. 140-1; E. Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington, 1983), pp. 87-94; R. Fischer, *Entwicklungsstufen des Antisemitismus in Ungarn, 1867-1939. Die Zerstörung der magyarisch-jüdischen Symbiose* (München, 1988), p. 9; R. S. Wistrich, 'Dilemmas of Assimilation in Central Europe,' in *Between Redemption and Perdition. Modern Antisemitism and Jewish Identity* (London and New York, 1990), pp. 89-90; T. Hajdu, 'A hagyományos antiszemitizmusról a náci típusú antiszemitizmusig,' in *The Holocaust in Hungary - Fifty Years Later*, ed. R. L. Brahm and A. Pók, (Boulder, Colo., 1997), p. 59; H. J. Kieval, 'The Importance of Place: Comparative Aspects of the Ritual Murder Trial in Modern Central Europe,' in *Comparing Jewish Societies*, ed. T. M. Endelman (Ann Arbor, 1997), p. 147; *German-Jewish History in Modern Times. Volume 3: Integration in Dispute 1871-1918*, ed. M. A. Meyer (New York, 1997), pp. 214-5.

In contrast, Jakov Katz expressed a somewhat different position: "The residue of the anti-Semitic movement continued [after the 1880s] to show its strength as a divisive and subversive factor in Hungarian life, no less than it had in Germany where it had originated." See J. Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction. Anti-Semitism, 1700-1933* (Cambridge and London, 1997 [1980]), pp. 278-9.

4 K. Sebestyén, *Summa Vitae. Visszatekintés egy életre*, vol. 1 (Budapest, Athenaeum, 1927), pp. 117-8. The vision of the half-century of the Dual Monarchy as being the golden age of Hungarian-Jewish co-existence, appears as early as 1920 and then becomes a topos of Neolog writings in the period between the two world wars. See, for example, L. Szabolcsi, 'Előszó,' in *A magyar zsidóság almanachja. Védőírat*, ed. V. Szirmai (Budapest, 1920), p. 3.

Such a rosy view of prewar Hungary may have been shared by Jews in the interwar period, but did it really reflect the experiences – and perceptions – of Hungarian Jewry in the decades prior to the First World War? In what follows I shall concentrate on the perceptions of Neolog Jews and in particular on opinions expressed in the weekly magazine *Egyenlőség* (Equality), the only Jewish denominational organ which paid the so-called *kaució* (deposit) allowing it to deal openly with political matters.

Founded in 1882, the weekly magazine was edited by Miksa Szabolcsi from 1886 until his death in 1915. Thereafter, his son, Lajos Szabolcsi, became editor in chief. Based on contemporary estimates of 10 readers for each copy sold, the magazine's readership reached approximately 25,000 in 1910.⁵ *Egyenlőség* was considered by Jews and Gentiles as the main organ of Hungarian, or at least, Hungarian Neolog Jewry. The importance of *Egyenlőség* and of Miksa Szabolcsi, whose name became inseparable from the magazine, cannot be overestimated. "Nobody had a greater influence on the new Hungarian Jewry than Miksa Szabolcsi," wrote the cultural-Zionist József Patai on the occasion of Szabolcsi's death.⁶

One should note, however, that although *Egyenlőség* was the founder and leader of Neolog Jewish public life, the newspaper can be used to infer only the views of those middle-class Neolog Jews that adhered clearly to their Jewishness and kept in touch with – or were at least still interested in – Jewish community life. Yet this group represented only a small fraction of Hungary's total Jewish population – which numbered more than 900,000 in 1910 – and it formed a minority even among Neolog middle-class Jews.

II.

"The Hungarian ruling class of the prewar period," wrote Ezra Mendelsohn, "was uniquely open to the ideology of Jewish assimilation – more so, certainly, than was the German ruling class, not to mention the Romanian, Polish, or Czech elites."⁷ This was doubtless true, but the explanation has less to do with some kind of specific philosemitism among Hungary's nobility and aristocracy – who continued to dominate the country's politics – than with the fact that Jews were indispensable to these traditional elites. Their indispensability was twofold.

⁵ For the numbers of copies of *Egyenlőség* published, see L. Szabolcsi, *Két emberöltő. Az Egyenlőség évtizedei (1881–1931)* (Budapest, 1993), pp. 40, 50, 55, 181, 221, 293, 410. For subscriptions and the actual readership, see D. Lipták, *Újságok és újságolvasók Ferenc József korában. Bécs – Budapest – Prága* (Budapest, 2002), p. 147.

⁶ J. Patai, 'Szabolcsi Miksa,' *Múlt és Jövő* (July 1915), p. 262. Patai had also begun his journalistic career at *Egyenlőség*, before he broke with the traditional Neolog branch on the foundation of *Múlt és Jövő*.

⁷ Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, p. 89.

First, the political elite living under the spell of the Hungarian nation-state headed a country whose majority population was non-Hungarian throughout the 19th century. The fact that the Hungarian share of the total population rose to 51.4% in 1900 was due in large part to the linguistic acculturation of the country's Jews.

Second, Hungarian Jews played a decisive role in the economic modernisation of the country. By the turn of the century, it had become obvious that, contrary to the vision of the future put forward at the time of the Hungarian *Vormärz* – which foresaw the Hungarian nobility as the future backbone of the country's modern middle class – it was, in large part, the Jews who constituted Hungary's commercial and industrial middle classes, and particularly the upper-middle-classes.

Thus, in essence, and irrespective of the personal views of its individual members, the Hungarian political elite could not afford to pursue an openly antisemitic agenda.

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This is not to say that antisemitism was absent in Hungary. By the mid-1890s it was also quite evident that this Jewish industrial and commercial bourgeoisie "had become the ruling class in an economic sense."⁸ The containment of this group was the fundamental aim of both the Catholic People's Party, founded in 1895, and the League of Hungarian Farmers, a pressure group founded in 1896 and modelled on Germany's *Bund der Landwirte*.

Though naturally adapted to the Hungarian situation, their ideology, in essence, was based upon the critique of liberalism and romantic anti-capitalism of the *Bund der Landwirte* and the Christian Socialist parties of Adolf Stoecker and Karl Lueger.⁹

Their main argument was that the abolition of noble privileges in 1848 and Hungary's capitalist development after 1867 had caught the landowning nobles, the sole repositories of Hungary's national traditions, off guard. In the contest for economic power, this group had thus succumbed to the Jewish bourgeoisie, which owed its prosperity to the – *par essence* antinational – mobile capital, and which was *sui generis* incapable of identifying with the Hungarian nation. The preservation of Hungary's national and Christian character justified the struggle against the Jewish middle and upper classes.

The People's Party entered the Hungarian Parliament following the elections of 1896. Although it managed to retain parliamentary representation

⁸ M. Szabó, 'A magyar nemesi liberalizmus, 1825–1910,' in *Szabadság és nemzet. Liberalizmus és nacionalizmus Közép- és Kelet-Európában*, ed. I. Z. Dénes (Budapest, 1993), p. 176.

⁹ Concerning the following, see Szabó, 'A magyar nemesi liberalizmus,' pp. 175–81; M. Szabó, 'Nincs harmadik út. Gondolatok a magyar polgárosodás útvesztőiről,' *Beszélő* (January 2000), pp. 53–8; M. Szabó, *Az újkonzervativizmus és a jobboldali radikalizmus története (1867–1918)* (Budapest, 2003); D. Szabó, *A Néppárt, 1895–1914* (unpublished diss.) (Budapest, 1983).

until the end of the Dualist era, it nevertheless failed to achieve any real influence – even between 1906 and 1910 when it rose to executive power as a member of the so-called coalition government. In addition to the People's Party, political Catholicism, which became increasingly active after the mid-1890s, established a whole series of social organisations. The strongly antisemitic *Mária Kongregációk* (Congregations of Mary), founded by the Jesuit order with the objective of producing a militant Catholic political elite, acquired ever greater influence over the Christian middle classes.

From the turn of the century, the agrarian movement, centred around the League of Hungarian Farmers, acquired substantial influence in both the liberal government of Kálmán Széll and the coalition government, although it was unable to gain the support of the majority of the great landowners. Once one of their main demands (an increase in tariffs on imported agricultural goods) had been met, the battle between the agrarian and the so-called mercantile camps lost its momentum. A delicate but functional balance between the two camps was even established in the *Munkapárt* (Party of Work), which, as successor to the Liberal Party, came to power under the leadership of István Tisza in 1910.

Within the aristocrat-led Agrarian movement and People's Party, radical antisemitism was fostered by Christian middle-class government officials and intellectuals, who, by the turn of the century, already constituted a distinct group. In contrast to the neoconservative mainstream, which opposed economic liberalism but accepted the principles of political liberalism, this radical wing rejected the principle of equality before the law, the cornerstone of political liberalism, and demanded the repeal of Jewish emancipation. (This extremist antisemitic faction, which had already begun to conceive of a "conservative revolution," later became a breeding ground for the political activists of the counter-revolution in 1919).

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Neolog Jews were naturally alarmed by the renewed upturn in antisemitism from the mid-1890s onward. Many of the articles published in *Egyenlőség* dealt with this topic, which is hardly surprising since one of the principal aims of the weekly newspaper, which had been brought to life by the outbreak of antisemitism in the 1880s and the Tiszaeszlár blood libel case, was to expose and denounce all forms of antisemitism. This was made clear in the calls for subscriptions, such as the following one issued in 1893–94: "Needless to say, all opponents of our denomination are our opponents: we shall never delay in raising our voice against illegitimate attacks, unjust accusations, and vile slander."¹⁰

The militant staff of the weekly, many of whom were also active in denominational institutions, repeatedly reacted to the mudslinging of the

¹⁰ Magyar Zsidó Múzeum és Levéltár, XVII-I-W: *Egyenlőség*.

agrarian camp and of the People's Party. They vehemently criticised measures favourable to the agrarian camp that had been introduced by the government of Kálmán Széll and by the coalition government. They were even more damning of the "terroristic and clerical" policy of the coalition government, which, as *Egyenlőség* declared in 1908, "had become ipso facto the guiding principle within the coalition majority."¹¹ After 1910, the focus of their attacks shifted even more to "clericalism," in particular the Jesuit congregations and their – quite successful – attempts to acquire influence in state-run schools and colleges.¹²

At the same time – and this is in itself indicative – in contrast to both Austria and Germany and in spite of a few isolated initiatives, Hungarian Jews did not establish any body or organisation with the declared aim of fighting antisemitism.

One reason for this was that the participation, or at least tacit support, of the Jewish haute bourgeoisie would have been necessary for such an organisation to be established. However, upper-class Jews had basically accepted the situation arising after 1910, if for no other reason than because they had acquired government power through their ties to the Party of Work. The *Realpolitik* pursued by István Tisza, whose main aim was to preserve the *status quo*, coincided with their interests.

But there was also a more fundamental reason, namely the very awareness that active political antisemitism did not pose a fatal threat, or more precisely that the existing framework set clear limits to the potential advance of antisemitism, and made it impossible for antisemitism to become a declared principle of the political authority, the traditional Hungarian political elite.

As Hugó Veigelsberg alias Ignotus, a well-known Jewish journalist and writer, wrote in 1897: "In Hungary there are too many Jews and too few Hungarians for antisemitism to succeed."¹³ In 1910, the same author described the second basic obstacle to antisemitism in the following way: "I do not think the reason for this is the tolerance of the Hungarian spirit or any particular affinity for Jews on their part. But, there is a reason, an interesting one: the Hungarian middle class coincides more or less with the Jewish population. And a middle class will always be needed: it is needed even in an aristocratic, even in an agrarian country. There has to be someone who trades, someone who makes money."¹⁴

¹¹ 'Hozzászólás,' *Egyenlőség*, 13 September 1908, p. 4.

¹² As *Egyenlőség* summarised in 1911, "It is a fact that in state-run high schools, the only men appointed as schoolteachers and headmasters are members of the Congregations of Mary. It is a fact that schoolteachers who do not want to enter the Congregations are subject to persecutions. It is a fact that headmasters are hounded from their posts if they do not want to belong to the Congregations. It is a fact that the only textbooks accepted now in state schools are written by Catholic authors, members of the Congregations." Idem [S. Mezei], 'Iskolák,' *Egyenlőség*, 12 February 1911, p. 6.

¹³ [Ignotus], 'Makai Emil,' *A Hét*, 10 January 1897, p. 29.

¹⁴ Ignotus, 'Zsidó liberalizmus,' *Nyugat*, 1 May 1910, p. 629.

The meaning of this in practical political terms was indicated in *Egyenlőség* in 1901 – the year in which the agrarian faction seemed to have a real chance of gaining ascendancy within the governing Liberal Party. "Do we not live here in complete freedom," asked Tamás Kóbor, one of the most fashionable writers of the period, "can we not stand on our heads if we like? We should simply dispel our fears, that is all. ... There is a limit to the excesses of reaction: that is the interest of the state, it is sure to stop there, and unfortunately, even the liberal government goes just as far."¹⁵

Thus, in this respect, Jews in Hungary felt fundamentally secure during the Dualist era. Among other indications, this is clearly demonstrated by the fact that whereas *Egyenlőség* reacted in lengthy articles to the anti-semitic mudslinging of such obscure magazines like *Műtrágyázási Közlemények* (Fertiliser Announcements),¹⁶ it did not even comment upon a parliamentary speech made in January 1907 by the People's Party representative Károly Hencz, calling upon the Minister of Education to ensure that "Budapest University should at long last introduce a Numerus Clausus against the Jews."¹⁷ It should be noted that according to the parliamentary diary, the reaction at the time on the parliamentary benches to Károly Hencz's statement was "energetic laughter."¹⁸

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But there was another perspective. For the writers of *Egyenlőség*, the real concern was whether or not the equality of rights guaranteed by the emancipation of Hungarian Jewry in 1867 had been completely realized. They truly believed in Hungarian liberalism and assumed that emancipation had opened all doors for Jews to freely realise their goals and that people's denominational background would no longer be relevant, since individual achievement would be the sole measure by which a person would be judged.

Moreover, Szabolesi's circle, which became increasingly influential in Neolog Jewish public life at the turn of the century, tended to be far less patient and tolerant of anti-Jewish discrimination than the previous generation had been. In their view, the Magyarization of Jews – or at least of the Neolog Jews – had definitively removed any prior justification for discrimination. Nonetheless, it continued to exist. In spite of the ennoblement of a growing number of Jews and the appointment of a few Jewish cabinet members (all but one converted), on the whole, discrimination even seemed to be on the rise. If one had to encapsulate how this group felt about Hungarian-Jewish coexistence in the two decades prior to World War I, the answer would be clear: growing anxiety, bitterness, and failing hope.

¹⁵ T. Kóbor, 'Új nóta,' *Egyenlőség*, 9 June 1901, p. 2.

¹⁶ 'A hétről,' *Egyenlőség*, 17 September 1911, p. 5.

¹⁷ 'Glosszák a hétről,' *Egyenlőség*, 13 January 1907, p. 3; *Képviselőházi Napló 1906–1911*, vol. 5 (Budapest, 1907), p. 196.

¹⁸ *Képviselőházi Napló 1906–1911*, vol. 5, p. 196.

Their disillusionment stemmed from the combination of two phenomena. First, equality before the law had still not been completely achieved. Second, the Jews' social integration was slowly being whittled away.

As far as legal equality was concerned, the *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* (Hungarian Jewish Review) summed up the Jews' plight in 1907. Apart from the so-called *Reception*, i.e. the granting of legal equality to the Jewish denomination in 1895, "the only thing we can take delight in," declared the *Magyar Zsidó Szemle*, "are declarations about equal rights."¹⁹ The Jewish denomination had not received representation in the upper house of Parliament, even though this had been its due since the *Reception*. Successive governments justified this rejection by arguing that Jewish representation in the upper house would only be possible if the Jewish denomination were to possess a united body, comprising both Neolog and Orthodox Jews. At the same time though, the repeated petitions of the Neolog National Office calling for the government to convoke a Jewish congress with a view to establishing such unity were regularly rejected on the ground that Orthodox Jews would clearly be dismissive of any fusion.

Nor was legal equality applied when state assistance was being granted to the various religious denominations: in 1912 the Lutheran, Reformed (Calvinist), and Unitarian denominations – which together accounted for 21.8% of the population in 1910 – received 6,167,508 crowns. If the assistance had been proportionate, the Jewish denomination, representing 5% of the population, would have received 1,414,566 crowns. In fact, however, it only got 320,000 crowns.²⁰

Furthermore, there was a renewed surge in discrimination in state and government offices after 1900. "This country," wrote *Egyenlőség* in 1900, "is not a denominational state, but only members of Christian denominations can expect to be given official posts. Nobody persecutes us, but if we want to live, we are asked for certificates of baptism. And this is due not to Abbot Molnár, a People's Party member, but to the royal and supposedly liberal Hungarian government."²¹ In the following years, *Egyenlőség* complained more and more about increasingly institutionalized discrimination. "In all of Hungary's state and government offices," declared an article from 1911, "there smoulders, almost without exception, a latent antisemitism, manifested not by a freezing out of Jews, but by a silent consensus not even to admit them. There are offices where this became such customary law that nobody would even think of a civil servant of Jewish religion taking up a post in the same manner as someone of another religion."²²

The second source of disillusionment stemmed from the progressive slowing down of the Jews' social integration, or, as *Egyenlőség* observed

¹⁹ 'Társadalmi szemle,' *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* 24 (1907), p. 21.

²⁰ *Magyar törvénytar. 1912. évi törvénycikkek* (Budapest, 1913), p. 846; M. Balogh and J. Gergely, *Egyházak az újkori Magyarországon 1790–1992. Adattár* (Budapest, 1996), p. 161.

²¹ T. Kóbor, 'Modern makabeusok,' *Egyenlőség*, 16 December 1900, p. 1.

²² 'Glosszák a hétről,' *Egyenlőség*, 10 September 1911, p. 4.

after noting that not a single Jew was among the 1,500 official guests at the 1902 Lawyers' Ball, "the shameful advance of social antisemitism, which is far more dangerous than official antisemitism."²³ The indignation of *Egyenlőség* was all the greater, given that the organising committee was headed by none other than Sándor Wekerle, the former prime minister, who had once fought so determinedly for the *Reception* of the Jewish denomination and the introduction of civil marriage – a measure enabling Christian-Jewish marriage.

Articles on the spread of "Jew-phobia,"²⁴ "religious discrimination and even hatred,"²⁵ and "hostile social exclusion"²⁶ struggled to explain this phenomenon, especially since the rise in "social antisemitism" coincided with the very adoption of *Reception*, which Jews had expected to "open a new and glorious era of liberalism and social peace."²⁷

The advance of neoconservative ideas among the traditional elite and Christian civil servants, and, more importantly, the growing labour market competition among the liberal professions after 1900, further deepened the chasm between the Christian and Jewish middle classes. "The separation," wrote Miksa Szabolcsi in 1907, "is today incomparably more pronounced here in Hungary than it is in Catholic Austria, where there is an antisemitic political party, but no antisemitic society."²⁸ By the 1910s, *Egyenlőség* was treating anti-Jewish sentiment among the Christian middle classes as an undeniable fact. "All Christian middle-class professionals," wrote the weekly in 1911, "have been subverted two or three times over by clerical ideas."²⁹

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The main factor for us to appreciate here is the emotional hurt, disillusionment and loss of hope that was expressed with increasing frequency and openness from the late 1890s onward. "There is no doubt that neither the state nor society have been affected by the practical power of emancipation," wrote Ernő Mezei, a former MP, in 1907, the 40th anniversary of Jewish emancipation in Hungary.³⁰

23 'Hazug demokrácia,' *Egyenlőség*, 26 January 1902, p. 10.

24 M. Szabolcsi, 'Két irány,' *Egyenlőség*, 14 February 1896, p. 7.

25 A. Soltész, 'A zsidóság a társadalomban,' *Egyenlőség*, 31 January 1897, p. 4.

26 Á. Lipsey, 'Az idegesek,' *Egyenlőség*, 1 April 1900, p. 1.

27 B. Vajda, 'Szabolcsi Miksa. 1857–1915,' in *Évkönyv. 1916*, ed. J. Bánóczy (Budapest, 1916), p. 211.

28 M. Szabolcsi, 'A katolikus nagygyűlés ötletéből,' *Egyenlőség*, 1 September 1907, p. 2.

29 'Változatok szabadkőművesekről,' *Egyenlőség*, 11 April 1911, p. 4.

30 E. Mezei, 'Negyvenéves forduló,' *Egyenlőség*, 29 December 1907, p. 6. Such a conclusion was not only voiced by Jews. In 1903, Count Miklós Zay wrote: "In theory, nobody protests against legal equality for the Jews, but how many people actually apply this in practice?" In 1912, Zoltán Szász wrote: "Although in legal terms there is no difference between Jews and non-Jews, ... nevertheless one cannot deny that in Hungary, state and social relations are such that, given an equal amount of energy spent, Christians make better progress than Jews in most trades and professions." M. Zay, 'Zsidók a társadalomban,' *Huszdik Század*, vol. 8 (July–December 1903), p. 967; Z. Szász, 'Pénzemberek,' *Világ*, 24 March 1912, p. 33.

Concerning the position of the state – that is to say, the real extent of equal rights – Gyula Weiszbürg, general secretary of the Jewish Community of Pest, drew the balance in 1912. In the monthly *Hitközségi Szemle* (Religious Community Review), he wrote: "It is neither novel nor bold to state that the equality of Jews is in fact a lie, and that no one even began to take it seriously; everyone knows this from the prime minister to the last village night watchman, from the Jewish member of the House of Lords to the Chevra shammas with the most feathery of forelocks."³¹ As for Jews' social integration, Miksa Szabolcsi declared in the same year: "They do not want us. We approach them quite willingly, and just when we think we've reached them, they push us back and deride us. ... We'll never win their favour. ... Whatever we do, in their view we do it badly, and even if we do make some fine works, they cannot overcome their antipathy."³² Szabolcsi gave full expression to the bitterness that stemmed from the impotence felt by Magyarized Jews, a sentiment that was echoed in other articles in *Egyenlőség*. "In the final analysis," declared one article, also in 1912, "as things are, even if we do stand on our heads and for two generations do nothing but contribute to Hungarian culture, press, education, finance, and trade, for them, we'll still just be putting on a show, since for us Hungary is merely a place to live rather than a homeland, and if someone should ask who or what we are, what kind of people, what kind of nation, then our arrogant answer will be: *We are Jews!*"³³

III.

Still, there was an indirect advantage to such desperation: it exerted a clearly liberating effect on Neolog opinion-formers. The Neolog ideal type of the Hungarian Jew was based largely on a rejection of "ghetto Jewry," to use a contemporary expression. Condemnation of the Yiddish language, of Jewish Orthodoxy, and above all of Hasidism, was the outcome both of the internal evolution of Reform Judaism, of internalised modern Western mores and tastes, and of the compulsion to satisfy the expectations of the majority population. It would ignore external pressures, if we were to assume that this did not determine in any manner the Neolog discourse, which subconsciously kept one eye on non-Jewish society.

By the turn of the century, however, Neolog Judaism was experiencing an internal crisis. The countless articles and essays on the growing detachment of Neolog Jews from their religion and from their religious community demonstrated a desperation all the more severe given that none of the proposed antidotes proved effective: neither innovations in the form of

31 Gy. Weiszbürg, 'Jogfosztás rendszerrel,' *Hitközségi Szemle* (September 1912), p. 189.

32 M. Szabolcsi, 'Az utolsó lecke,' *Egyenlőség*, 8 October 1912, p. 4.

33 E. Lengyel, 'Cserkészés,' *Egyenlőség*, 9 June, 1912 p. 3.

religious services, nor compulsory religious instruction for young people, nor the cultural institutions that were established with the precise aim of enhancing the self-esteem of cultivated middle-class Jews.

By the turn of the century, Miksa Szabolcsi's generation had come to the realisation that, in its current form, Neolog Judaism was incapable of ensuring lasting bonds to Jewish identity, still less pass it on. This realisation raised doubts concerning the path taken by Neolog Jews. "That part of Jewry that craved avidly for secular culture," wrote Ármin Flesch, chief rabbi of Mohács, in 1908, "went beyond the boundary it should have preserved."³⁴ This feeling of "having gone too far" directed the attention of Neolog opinion formers towards those Jews who manifestly adhered more closely to their Jewishness.

However, external political and social factors imposed severe limits on the public expression of this inner intellectual evolution. It was these limits, as well as the self-censure they entailed, that began to collapse at the turn of the century. "Let us not delude ourselves," wrote an influential member of the representative body of the Jewish Community of Pest in 1905, "that any amount of assimilation will bring about a reconciliation between the Jews and those for whom Jewish people are a log in the eye."³⁵

The increasingly pervasive sentiment that Jews, irrespective of their merits, would necessarily be met by rejection as they drew closer to Hungarians, placed a question mark over how they should respond to the real or perceived expectations of Hungarians: "Let us do what we recognise to be good and wise," wrote Szabolcsi in 1912, "because it is good and wise, and not because we wish to please Christians."³⁶

We still tend to regard the Neolog opinion formers as a group who professed unchanging and unshakeable views throughout the half-century of Dualism and who adhered even more stubbornly to their positions in the face of Zionism. In fact, however, their search for new ways of strengthening Neolog Jewish identity and, as a result of this search, their new perception of Orthodox and even ultra-Orthodox Jews – who continued to exhibit profound and undisturbed bonds to their Jewishness – led to a radical change and a reevaluation of previously condemned practices and phenomena.

The change of approach was a conscious one. In 1911, Miksa Szabolcsi devoted a long article to the yeshiva of Hunfalva, which was at the time the country's greatest yeshiva. "Some decades ago," he wrote, "on seeing such a yeshiva, I might well have asked: and what is to happen to secular education among Jews? This question no longer bothers me today. There are now sufficient numbers of cultivated Jews; in fact, they are so cultivated that their Jewishness has drowned in culture. Those that I have seen dwindle in

³⁴ Á. Flesch, *A zsidó* (Mohács, 1908), pp. 328–9.

³⁵ M. Schächter, 'Az assimilációról,' in *Évkönyv. 1905*, ed. J. Bánóczy (Budapest, 1905), p. 281.

³⁶ Szabolcsi, 'Az utolsó lecke,' p. 4.

number, causing me anxiety, are Jews of conviction, familiar with our scriptures."³⁷

By the brink of the First World War, mainstream Neolog writers, with few exceptions, were referring in eulogistic terms to rabbinical and Hasidic Orthodoxy, offering long, appreciative, often dithyrambic portraits of the best-known Hungarian and Galician rabbis. They wrote in captivating tones about the beauty of the Yiddish language, which, they argued, expressed the Jewish soul more faithfully than any other language. They praised, translated and published, in denominational publications and special editions, the works of modern Yiddish literature. They spoke of the literary and cultural life unfolding among Russian Jews as being "similar to the Spanish-Jewish golden age."³⁸ In other words, they praised the very aspects of Jewish life whose rejection had been a fundamental element of Neolog Jewish ideology until the 1890s.

IV.

Growing pessimism over the social integration of Hungarian Jewry posed a conceptual challenge to Neolog Jews, for it made it difficult to sustain the existing interpretation of antisemitism. This interpretation, as expressed in 1894 by the chairman of the Jewish community in Brassó (Brasov), held that "civilisation and enlightenment, owing to the divine power that sustains them, are constantly and irrepressibly advancing, and with every passing minute a weapon is removed from the hands of our opposers."³⁹ But what would happen if the passage of time did not "though slowly, surely eliminate the weeds"?⁴⁰ What would happen if it was not true that "the spirit of the times" and "the particular inclination of the Hungarian nation" direct historical development "only towards liberalism"?⁴¹ What would happen as it became increasingly evident that "sympathy for Jews is not keeping pace with the advance of culture"?⁴²

The dogma of the inexorable advance of enlightenment could, of course, be marginally corrected: "Here and there the tide of hatred for Jews produces higher waves," wrote the *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* in 1900, "... but this whole phenomenon is nothing but a temporary step backwards, which is no rare event in the advance of culture."⁴³ But, by the 1910s, this explanation was no longer sufficient.

³⁷ Szabolcsi Miksa, 'Pihenés közben. Magyar útleírás-féle. II. Régi sírkő körül,' *Egyenlőség*, 8 October 1911, p. 8.

³⁸ 'Perez,' *Egyenlőség*, 25 April 1915, p. 13.

³⁹ I. Welsz, *A zsidók és a nemzetiségek* (Brassó, 1894), p. 15.

⁴⁰ Dr. G., 'Farsang alatt,' *Egyenlőség*, 28 February 1886, p. 1.

⁴¹ Á. Neumann, 'Emlékbeszéd Wahrmann Mórról. Elhangzott a bécsi Oest. Isr.-Union díszgyűlésén,' *Magyar Génius*, 25 December 1892, p. 432.

⁴² Flesch, *A zsidó*, p. 315.

⁴³ [L. Blau], 'A letűnő évszázad,' *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* 17 (1900), p. 1.

The challenge was not just how to progress beyond the dogma of the inversely proportional relationship between the advance of enlightenment and the dwindling of antisemitism. The classical Neolog interpretation held that antisemitism was alien to the Hungarian spirit, and that if it sometimes manifested itself, "it was always a foreign product that has been imported from abroad,"⁴⁴ wrote the chief rabbi of the Jewish Community of Pest in 1880. The disseminators of antisemitism were foreign princes ascending to the Hungarian throne, ethnic minorities living in Hungary, Rome, Vienna, pan-Slavism.

The main point, of course, was to absolve Hungarians of responsibility. This element needed to be incorporated in any new interpretation of antisemitism, for otherwise it would have been difficult to sustain the ideal of Jewish assimilation into the Hungarian nation. The new theory was advanced in 1912 by Miksa Szabolcsi in an article published in *Egyenlőség*. The article was extraordinary in terms of both length and structure. Extending over four full pages, it recounted the imaginary life course of a young Hungarian Jew. Having been expelled from the yeshiva on grounds of his excessive interest in secular culture, the young man embraces the life of modern Hungary. He learns Hungarian and "becomes a Magyarized cultural Jew."⁴⁵ But at each key stage of his social progression, he faces the hostility of majority society, which grows in proportion to his individual successes. The young man's enlightenment comes in his final despair.

The article follows the structure of *mise en abyme*. The fictional hero of Szabolcsi's parable pours out his soul in a letter written in Hebrew to his former master, the rabbi that heads the yeshiva. Then he cites "word for word" what the rabbi told him when he was expelled from the yeshiva. The final explanation thus comes from the mouth of the Orthodox rabbi: "Whatever you do, those of you who want to follow their paths: *they will not recognise you*. They will reject you, just when you think that you can embrace them. ... *God wants us* to avoid becoming one with them, this is the source of their stubbornness, and that is why they reject those who run after them. Because the Everlasting One wishes to retain his people, whom great tasks still await. Israel would disappear, it would cease to exist, if it were to be so willingly accepted by the nations as it is willing to become one with them. Because, I am telling you, it does not depend on Israel, but on the nations. The Creator has great plans for Israel, that is why it should not be swallowed up by the nations."⁴⁶

Szabolcsi did not mention what these great plans would be. As he was clearly giving expression to his own convictions through the Orthodox rabbi (and through the parable's hero, too), he was probably referring to the idea of the "mission of Israel," the central idea of Reform Judaism which served

44 S. Kohn, *Mit tegyük az ellenünk intézett támadásokkal szemben?* (Budapest, 1880), p. 4.

45 Szabolcsi, 'Az utolsó lecke,' p. 1.

46 Szabolcsi, 'Az utolsó lecke,' pp. 3-4.

to legitimise the Diaspora by asserting that God dispersed the Jews among the nations in order to spread monotheism.

In a bold move, Szabolcsi kneaded this together with the premodern interpretation of hatred towards Jews, which held that anti-Jewish sentiment was part of God's plan for his people, since it was His will that the Jews, having been exiled from the Holy Land on account of their sins, should suffer at the hands of non-Jews until the coming of the Messiah.⁴⁷

The essence of Szabolcsi's concept was evidently dissociation. "No, no," writes the young man in his letter to the rabbi, "I don't want to believe that they hate us, because they are bad people. Heaven preserve me from even thinking such a thing."⁴⁸ To claim that Hungarians' rejection of Jewish advances was the will of God, absolved them from any moral responsibility. Moreover, if Hungarians rejected Jews owing to God's will, the rejection itself did not call into question the correctness of Jews' identifying with the Hungarian nation.

By raising anti-Jewish sentiment to a manifestation of the will of the Creator, and what's more, to a means for Jews to fulfil the tasks placed upon them by their God, Szabolcsi's explanation - and this was its goal - offered an opportunity to become reconciled with antisemitism.

* * *

Szabolcsi's argumentation was clearly ingenious. Of course, the question is to what extent this sort of explanation, which divorced antisemitism from any earthly reality, could facilitate living with growing anti-Jewish resentment. It seems it did not really do so, as is clearly demonstrated in the pages of *Egyenlőség* prior to World War I.

One manifestation of this growing exasperation was the increasingly frank manner in which the magazine expressed its disenchantment with the parliamentary parties. In a speech given on 7 April 1911, Géza Polónyi, a former cabinet member of the coalition government, exposed at length his views on "Jewish expansionism." *Egyenlőség* did not even bother to comment on the speech of this politician who "had slowly but surely become an antisemite," but offered a lengthy description of the reactions to it on the parliamentary benches:

It is some time since Parliament showed us such an interesting spectacle. Next to Polónyi, there sat Apponyi and Sággy, as well as the entire Kossuth Party, and they were as pleased as Punch. They just couldn't wait to hear what was being said, bobbing up and down with excitement, and just itching to strike down the Jews, before their very eyes. Every minute they shouted "hear, hear," in response to Polónyi, whose curls had turned grey in his struggle for the truth, while Apponyi elegantly affirmed him. In the Kossuth Party, old Agrarians were stirred from

47 B. Halpern, 'Reactions to Antisemitism in Modern Jewish History,' in *Living with Antisemitism: Modern Jewish Responses*, ed. J. Reinharz (Hanover and London, 1987), pp. 4-6.

48 Szabolcsi, 'Az utolsó lecke,' p. 4.

their dreams – those who had fallen asleep at the time of Tiszaeszlár and who only now awoke to the familiar sounds. Alongside them, in the corner, there sat three People's Party representatives and an abbot. The broadest of smiles covered the face of the abbot, while the three People's Party representatives applauded and grinned like small children whose puppets are rocked to and fro in front of them. On the vacant benches of the Justh Party, there cowered a few silent people in sadness and helplessness. As for the Party of Work ... it did not trouble Polónyi. Elderly men sometimes nodded their heads together on the governing party backbenches, the former district administrators were reminded of their pleasurable and sweet memories of little provincial pogroms; pleasure shone in the eyes of the young gentry, their tongues were tied only by party discipline. No, Jews are not loved too much even in the government party, and if the representatives had not been wearing their "watch out, I'm a liberal" badges, they too would have applauded Polónyi. How sad and how depressing Parliament was on Friday! Nothing could stop them; their prejudice shone in their eyes, it was felt in the clasp of their hands, it was evident in their silence. No, they were all pleased by Polónyi's speech.⁴⁹

This exasperation was also reflected in the increasingly vehement outbursts against the government. In 1914, shortly before the outbreak of war, a young Jewish secondary schoolteacher, who had been told not to expect an appointment unless he converted, committed suicide. "The state," wrote a lawyer by the name of Sándor Mezei, "by enabling you and your fellows to study, induced and persuaded you to take up a career in which with its support it promised advancement, and instead of advancement offered you the bullet of a revolver, only because you are a Jew, for no other reason than that you are a Jew. ... You had to live in misery because you were a Jew, you did not get a job because you were a Jew, and you had to die because you were a Jew. In front of your grave, when taking leave of you, we shall clench our fists in anger and bitterness."⁵⁰ Evidently, this is quite some way from singing enthusiastic hosannas to Hungarian liberalism.

More significantly, the disillusionment was manifest in the decreasing frequency, indeed the almost complete disappearance of the decades-old enthusiasm for the allegedly accomplished fusion of Jews and Hungarians.

Then came the world war. Its outbreak immediately transformed disillusion into the hope that the ultimate sacrifice, the offering up of Jewish lives on the national altar, would rebut once and for all allegations that the Jews were not – could not be – true Hungarians. "So now," wrote *Egyenlőség*, condensing into one sentence its hopes of a fusion with both Hungarians and Orthodox Jews, "our blood will be forged as one without religious and organizational distinction, won't it?"⁵¹

49 'A tisztelt Házból,' *Egyenlőség*, 11 April, 1911, pp. 4–5.

50 Idem [S. Mezei], 'Beszélgetés egy halottal,' *Egyenlőség*, 26 July 1914, p. 2.

51 F. Mezey, 'Zsidó hősök a hadseregben,' *Egyenlőség*, 2 August 1914, p. 3.

THE CASE OF THE TELEKI STATUE: NEW DEBATES ON THE HISTORY OF THE NUMERUS CLAUSUS IN HUNGARY

Following Hungary's regime change in 1989, the history of Hungary's anti-semitic legislation in the interwar era triggered new controversies among professional historians and the wider public. The debate reached beyond the history of Hungarian Jews and touched upon the politically sensitive choices that post-communist political elites need to make about the recreation of the national pantheon, about the selective adoption or rejection of Hungarian historical traditions and symbolism. New political groups that emerged following the fall of communism began looking to the pre-communist past to find a "usable" past, a heritage with which they are able to establish an amount of intellectual and political continuity. It was in this process that groups on the political right rediscovered the emblematic figure of Pál Teleki, who, in 1920, introduced the first anti-Jewish law in Hungary. Twice Prime Minister, a distinguished professor of geography and a self-defined modern conservative, Teleki was an energetic and ideologically oriented politician and an academic intellectual who left behind a voluminous oeuvre of political and scholarly studies available for exploration by generations after him. But Teleki's real claim to fame originates less from his oeuvre and more from his politically motivated suicide in April 1941 when Britain threatened to declare war on Hungary in case Hungary collaborated in the upcoming German attack against Yugoslavia. The Prime Minister's suicide was a dramatic admission of his own failure in steering Hungary on a neutral path between Britain and Germany, keeping the goodwill of Britain while accepting the help of Nazi Germany in the rectification of Hungarian borders at the expense of Hungary's neighbors. Though Teleki failed as a politician, his suicide is regarded in Hungary as a gesture of moral heroism that, according to his admirers, must be acknowledged by all available forms of historical remembrance, including a statue in a central location of the capital city. After 1989 repeated initiatives to set up such a statue received the support of prominent public figures, such as Presidents Árpád Göncz and Ferenc Mádl, Prime Ministers József Antall and Viktor Orbán, the liberal mayor of Budapest, Gábor Demszky, and the historian Domokos Kosáry, President of the Academy of Sciences. Eventually, in 2001, on the sixtieth anniversary of Teleki's death, the right-wing government of Viktor Orbán supplemented the funds collected by the Teleki Memorial Committee and the statue was finally commissioned with the understanding that it was to be set up in central Budapest.

However, as the statue was nearing completion, voices of protest also began to appear. How could it be possible, opponents asked, that democratic