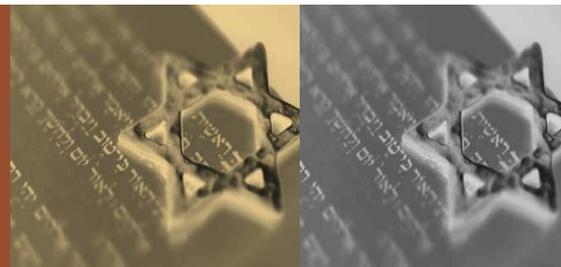


CHAPTER ELEVEN: COMMUNITY NUMBER FIVE THE JEWS OF HUNGARY



Hungary is one of the most interesting and dynamic centres in the Jewish Diaspora. It is a centre in the process of returning to life after more than a generation of cultural and religious death. Hungary was one of the only two places in Central and Eastern Europe (together with Russia) where the Jewish population was not wiped out by the Holocaust. Much of the population was indeed wiped out by the Nazis and their local collaborators but the Russians came in from the east before the work was done and an estimated 150,000 Jews were saved out of a pre-war number of about 800,000. After the war, however, the Russians, who had been the saviours, became the oppressors of Jewish life. As in other Communist countries, which they controlled, Russia basically outlawed Jewish life and in time persecuted many of the Jews, claiming that they were working against the Russian dominated regime. Only after the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe in the late 1980's did democracy return to Hungary. The Jews were now free to resume their life as Jews openly. But things were not so simple. A generation of Jews had forgotten what it meant to be Jewish. Moreover, many of them were very wary. As far as they remembered, being Jewish had been a stigma which marked the bearer as suspect in the eyes of the regime, fascist or Communist. Jewish life slowly and warily resumed. It had to be learned and many Jewish organizations from the west and Israel came in to try and help the community fight its way back to life and health. This then is the story of Hungarian Jewry. A community in the process of finding itself, defining itself and fighting its way back to life. Welcome to Hungary!

1. Who are the Jews in the national community? Where did they come from? How many are there? What is their geographical distribution inside the country?

The question of identifying the Jews in a country such as Hungary is much more complex than it sounds. Estimates of the numbers of Jews in Hungary vary between 50,000 and 200,000. The question revolves around the familiar issue of who is to be considered a Jew. The overall membership in Jewish community institutions of any kind is somewhere around 20,000 to 25,000 mark, and the officially accepted statistic at the moment for the Jewish population of Hungary lies at 50,000. But if one counts all those who either subjectively see themselves as Jews or are seen by their neighbours as Jews, we go towards the highest number mentioned previously. Only about 40% of these will have at least one Jewish parent, but a recent phenomenon of people who have only one or two Jewish grandparents identifying themselves as Jewish is increasingly common.

Jews have been in Hungary since the early Middle Ages and have had a very mixed history. On the whole they need to be seen as part of the Ashkenazi world that



spread east from the Germanic lands, but there are also elements of Sephardi Jewry there as well, dating from the time when the country was largely ruled by the Ottoman Empire. The Jews were a large and growing population in Hungary in the generations prior to World War 2. If at the end of the eighteenth century some 80,000 Jews lived in Hungary by the late 1860's the number had increased to around 540,000 and only forty years later, to some 900,000. Numbers went down in the inter-war period since sections of Hungary passed over to other countries such as Rumania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Parts of these areas passed back to Hungarian control through annexation in the early war period and by 1941, the Jewish population stood at around 800,000.

The Holocaust decimated the population, murdering almost all the Jews outside the capital city of Budapest, and starting the killings there too, but the Russians entered Budapest in time to stop the final annihilation of tens of thousands of Jews. At the end of 1945, around 150,000 Jews remained in Hungary. Of these many immigrated to Israel but in 1949 when Hungary went over to Communist rule the number of Jews was still very large. Under the systematic suppression of much of Jewish life under the Communists the numbers of active Jews dwindled and many tried to erase their Jewishness and pass as "ordinary" Hungarians. This was not so difficult for all the more traditional centres of Jewish life had been destroyed in the Holocaust and the vast majority of the Jews that survived came from the highly assimilated Budapest Jewry.

After Communism fell in Hungary at the end of the eighties, and Hungary became a full democracy, Jewish life started to revive and many started to identify themselves once again as Jews. That is the situation now.

Around 90% of all Hungarian Jews live in Budapest. The rest are scattered in small communities in a couple of dozen locations in the Hungarian provinces.

2. How can they be defined economically? What are their professions and occupations?

Jews in Hungary have always played a very prominent role as traders in the commercial life of the country. After Hungarian Jewry was emancipated in 1867 Jewish participation in a number of fields such as communications, agriculture, transport and the arts supplemented the more traditional positions in the fields of business and finance. Most of these sectors have remained central to Jewish life till today, augmented by academia and the liberal professions. Generally speaking, the majority of Jews tend to be well-educated and comfortable in economic terms according to Hungarian standards which, of course, are far lower than the equivalent standards in the West. A recent survey suggests that over half of the adult Jewish community have a university degree which places them well above the national average.



3. What is the religious orientation of the Jewish community?

Since the late nineteenth century, the leadership of the Hungarian Jewish community has been in the hands of the group called the Neolog Jews (traditionally somewhere between Conservative and Reform Judaism). After emancipation, the community split into three distinct groups of which the Neologs and the Orthodox were the most important. Most of the major institutions were Neolog including the monumental Doheny synagogue, the second largest synagogue in the world and the enormous Kozma St. cemetery, where the bourgeois leaders of Neolog Jewry were buried in extremely impressive (and not at all typically Jewish) burial structures. Orthodox Jewry (including some important Chassidic groups) was basically killed off by the Holocaust, situated as it was in the provinces where Jewish life was all but totally annihilated.

After World War 2, as Jewish life reemerged, almost all of those who wished to continue to identify as Jews in any religious sense affiliated with the Neolog stream. Nowadays, only a small minority of identifying Jews go to synagogue, although the number is not negligible. There exists a choice of some twenty operating synagogues in Budapest, some of them very small, but others, capable of attracting over a hundred to a Friday night service. There is a small but visible Orthodox Jewry in Budapest with its own community institutions and Chabad is active in the city. In 1996, Chabad published the first Hebrew Hungarian prayer book to be issued since W.W.2. with an initial printing of 10,000 copies.

There is also a small Reform congregation of about fifty active families led by a woman Rabbi, that was established in the early 90's. However, it must be emphasised, the vast majority of those who identify as Jews do not seek out the synagogue as an institution in which to express their Jewishness.

4. What Jewish educational and cultural life is there in the community?

Educational and cultural life is developing fast under the post-Communist regime. There are now three full time day schools in the community, one of which is Orthodox, one of which is secular (the Lauder Yavneh school which moved to a new and very impressive campus in 1996), and one of which, the Anne Frank community school (Neolog), operated under the Communist regime. There are also a number of kindergartens with several hundred children. In addition there is a Rabbinic training college (Neolog) and a teachers training college, the Pedagogium, recently affiliated with the university of Budapest. All in all there are some 1800 students in all of these institutions, all of which are in Budapest. In the provinces there are some rudimentary attempts at part time education for the small communities.

A large Jewish campsite, at Szarvas, in Southern Hungary, has been operating for a number of years and hosts around 2,000 youngsters from the former Communist countries in its annual camp. In addition, during the year, it hosts a number of activities.



In cultural terms a very vibrant Jewish Community Centre, the Balint club, was opened in 1994. I was the first full time J.C.C. in East Central Europe since W.W.2. It has a full time staff and runs or is home to several programmes, every day of the week. Large numbers of younger Jews - up to the thirties and forties - come to the club, not specifically for Jewish programmes, but to take part in general programmes with other Jews of their age.

There are an increasing number of Jewish activities offered in a wide variety of forums in Budapest, although the numbers of younger people especially, tends to be on the low side. Worth mentioning specifically are the Federation for the Maintenance of Jewish Culture in Hungary which had some 2,000 listed members in the late 1990's, Bnai Brith, the Hungarian Union of Jewish Students and a series of Zionist Youth Movements. Every year, there are Jewish cultural and arts festivals, some of which are connected with Israel.

Almost all Jewish organisations and initiatives are products of the post-Communist years. There is also an independent Jewish monthly newspaper, critical of the community leadership.

5. What is the situation of assimilation and intermarriage in the community?

The Jewish community of Hungary – and most especially that of Budapest – was assimilating strongly in the last years of the nineteenth century. Emancipation had brought the community close to the non-Jewish society and this became a model for imitation for many of the middle class Jews in the community. In the years immediately before W.W.2, as the Hungarian government brought in increasingly anti-Semitic legislation against the Jews, many Jews responded by converting to Christianity. This situation was stopped when a 1941 law changed the definition of a Jew from a religious definition to a racial one, preventing intermarriage (and actually increasing the number of Jews considerably by seeing many ex-Jews who now considered themselves Christians as Jews).

Under the Communists, much Jewish activity was suppressed, and the phenomenon of “passing” in Christian society (i.e. pretending to be Christian or at least non-Jewish) became very common. There were many who did not tell their children that they were Jews and many others who kept Judaism a family secret and instructed their children not to admit their Judaism in general society. For many Judaism became a badge of shame. The Jewish organisations that were allowed to function, dwindled and the majority of identified Jews were in the older age-groups.

Since the fall of Communism at the end of the 1980's, the situation has markedly changed. Slowly, like tortoises putting their head out of their shell, many young people came slowly and carefully, to identify or re-identify as Jews. The case then in Hungary is that the numbers of Jews who are identifying as such, are actually increasing. The major way of identification is clearly subjective identification – admitting to a feeling of being Jewish – rather than an objective act such as joining a



Jewish community organisation. But, it seems, slowly more people are being drawn into the circles of some kind of Jewish activity, social, cultural or even religious. However, it must be stressed that there are still many who refuse to identify, either because the link to a subjective feeling is simply too weak or because they are still afraid of the price of identification, especially, in a situation where (as we shall see) anti-Jewish feeling is far from dead.

It should once again be mentioned that the majority of the Jews of Hungary (in the widest sense) are products of intermarriage or are themselves intermarried. It is hard to see that anything else might have been expected in the situation of post-war Jewry. There is, however, reason to believe that the future will, in this respect, be different from the past.

6. Are there any major historical circumstances that affected the inflow or outflow of Jews to and from the community?

If we were to examine the long past history of the community, we would see many inflows into and outflows from the Jewish community, as a result of specific and general circumstances. To a large extent we would see patterns of migration not unlike many other European communities. There were times when the Jews were expelled, and times when they were let back in again because of the economic needs of the society. There were times of terrible persecution and times of comparative liberalism. All of these things affected the migrations to and from the Hungarian community.

But if we restrict ourselves to the modern community, we can see three things that have affected the outflow of Jews while there has been very little attraction into the community. In the wake of the Holocaust and the pogroms that followed it in some locations once the war was finished, large numbers of Jews decided to leave Hungary and went to Palestine or to the lands of the west.

In 1956, there was a famous abortive revolution which attempted to oust the Communists. The revolt was brutally put down by the Russians and thousands of Hungarians fled out of disappointment or of fear of reprisals. Many of these were Jews. Finally, Israel attracted numbers of Jews although under Communism, both Zionist activities inside Hungary and immigration to Israel were banned or curtailed.

The only thing that actually brought more Jews into the community in recent generations were the annexations of former Hungarian territories in the years preceding or at the start of W.W.2.



7. Are there welfare problems within the Jewish community? Are there welfare organisations within the community?

As mentioned previously, the majority of Hungarian Jews are economically secure in Hungarian terms and enjoy a reasonable to good standard of living by Hungarian standards, which, it is important to emphasise, are not western. However, as always, there are pockets of poverty and hardship especially among the elderly and the sick. The major organisation that is directly involved in welfare work inside the community is the American Joint Distribution Committee that has been working in Hungary since W.W.2, sometimes openly and sometimes in a clandestine fashion. The Joint does very important welfare work among the poorer and more vulnerable elements of the community.

It should also be mentioned that one factor that has improved the situation of some of the elderly is reparation payments that have been made in recent years to the survivors and their families. However, the payments were felt by many to be insultingly low and were in fact rejected by many of the recipients. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that these payments, however small, have indeed improved the situation of some elderly Jews in the community.

8. What is the feeling of physical security of the Jewish community? Has there been and is there today a problem of anti-Semitism?

If we go back in time then we see that right from the earliest periods of their history, Hungarian Jews were plagued by problems of anti-Semitism from different sections of society. A mixture of theological and economic resentment caused periodic outbreaks of violence against the Jews and almost constant pressure on their communities. They suffered from all the ills of Jewish communities throughout Europe – pogroms, blood libel accusations and expulsions.

If we restrict ourselves to the last two or three generations, the end of the first World War saw a socialist republic led by a Jew Bela Kun set up in Hungary and when it was brought down, a strong reaction against leftists and socialists led to a witch hunt against Jews which led to the deaths of thousands. After this, things calmed down but anti-Semitism was ever-present in the inter-war period and from time to time this translated into anti-Jewish laws, that caused immense hardship. In the period leading up to the second World War, the laws against the Jews and the general anti-Jewish sentiment became much stronger. Fascist parties came to power and finally the government, an official ally of the Nazis, moved directly against the Jews, marginalising them in Hungarian society and paving the way for the murder of tens of thousands. As mentioned, the Nazi holocaust itself decimated the Jews of Hungary, hundreds of thousands dying at their hands. The immediate post-war years saw a number of pogroms break out against the Jews, despite the fact that anti-Semitism itself was now officially outlawed by the new government who tried and imprisoned many who had been involved in the deportation and killings of Jews in the war.



When Communism came to power in 1949, many aspects of Jewish life were suppressed forcibly, and in the early fifties, tens of thousands of Jews were forced to leave the cities. Legislation restricted the activities of openly identifying Jews. Jews had anything but an easy time under the Communists despite the fact that there was comparatively little physical abuse in this period. When Hungary became a democracy in 1989, the restrictions were once again officially removed from Jewish community life and from the Jews themselves. Nevertheless, social resentment remained among the country's right wing groups and became stronger at times of social and economic discontent. There has been a fair amount of vandalism in recent years and the Jewish community feels increasingly vulnerable to what it feels to be a rising tide of anti-Semitic activity.

9. What are the major problems on the agenda of the Jewish community?

There is no question that many of the community members – both affiliated and unaffiliated will mention anti-Semitism as a major problem for them. There is great awareness of the issue and an almost tangible feeling of vulnerability pervades the discussion of the issue by the local Jews. Much of this fear is based on the echoes of their previous history that still overshadow so much of community life and shape so much of the contemporary Jewish consciousness. Nevertheless, it is clearly an issue of concern today.

However, the major issue is unquestionably the ability of the old-new community to revive community institutions to a high level and provide a meaningful level of Jewish life which will become the major factor in local Jewish identity and will bring many more “hidden” or marginal Jews into the orbit of the community institutions. According to recent surveys, the major components of Hungarian Jewish identity are still Holocaust and anti-Semitism above anything else. Given the murderous history of the community, this is hardly surprising and very natural.

In order for a healthy and “more normal” Jewish identity to emerge, these factors need to be supplemented and ultimately supplanted among the young at least, by other “more positive” elements. This will need not only time but an inspired community leadership. There are major questions raised over the capacity of the current layer of older leadership that still controls the community, to lead the community in these new directions. It might be that only a younger and fresher community leadership will be able to provide the necessary fresh directions. This remains to be seen.

10. What are the demographic trends within the community? Can anything be said about the future of the community?

The demographic trends in a Jewry like that of Hungary are particularly complicated. As mentioned, there is great lack of clarity as to who should be seen as part of the community. To talk about community in a place like Hungary is actually misleading. In most countries the basis for deciding who should be seen as constituting part of the community is determined according to certain objective factors. Community



membership plus Jewish birth according to matrilineal or in certain cases patrilineal descent are the clearest examples of such objective criteria. In Hungary, however, for reason mentioned above, these two things cannot be relied on. Official membership in Jewish institutions applies to only a minority of people who see themselves as Jews. Moreover, many see themselves as Jews who have one or two Jewish grandparents. It is clear that in Hungary, for good or for bad, subjective identity is the major indicator of identification with the Jewish community in the widest, non-official, sense.

This being the case, it is difficult to talk about demographic trends in absolute terms. What perhaps makes more sense is to talk about the possibility of bringing more marginalised and non-involved Jews into more involvement in the organised Jewish community. Here, the prognosis can be seen to be optimistic. A major role in this process is being played by the education system, particularly the three day school who have between them over fifteen hundred pupils and the youth organisations and movements. All of these institutions (of which only the single community school existed - in a poor state – under Communism), are developing and expanding both in terms of numbers and in terms of the quality of their Jewish programming. The vibrant community centre in Budapest has a great number of activities which succeed in pulling in considerable numbers. The camp at Szarvas is a very meaningful fixture in the life of the community and the teacher and rabbinic training programmes are indeed beginning to attract young people. The monthly training programme for Jews from communities outside Budapest is also worth noting in this respect. On the assumption that these trends continue, the demographic future of Hungarian Jewry, at least in the next generation, gives reasons for optimism.

11. What is the general contribution of the community to Hungary as a whole?

The mid 19th century to the early 20th century was the high point of the Jewish community. At that time it is indeed possible to point to the influence of the Jewish community on Hungarian society as a whole. There is no question that the Jews played a vital part in the transformation of Hungary into a modern state, in the framework of the Austro-Hungarian empire, especially after 1867 when Hungary became an autonomous (self-ruling) part of the empire with its own constitution at which point the Jews were emancipated and received equal rights with the rest of the population. It was in this period that the Jews became a major commercial and professional force (a bourgeoisie) within Hungary in general and most particularly, within Budapest. The Jews as a whole were transformed into a dynamic middle class which helped propel Budapest into one of the major commercial cities in Central Europe. Jews also made their mark in this period in the field of science and medicine. However, after the fall of the Empire and the emergence of an independent Hungary after W.W.1, the Jewish community found itself on the defensive and their influence as a force in Hungary waned, never to rise again to its former heights. In the field of culture it is hard to point to a distinctive Jewish contribution to Hungarian society. Many Jewish writers emerged in the "golden period of Hungarian Jewry" but unfortunately, those of greatest talent and those



who made the greatest mark tended to turn their backs on their Jewishness, either through outright conversion or through a conscious distancing of themselves from anything Jewish. Thus the Jewish writers need to be thought of as Hungarian writers who happened to be Jewish rather than as writers who were proud of their identity and who created as Jews.

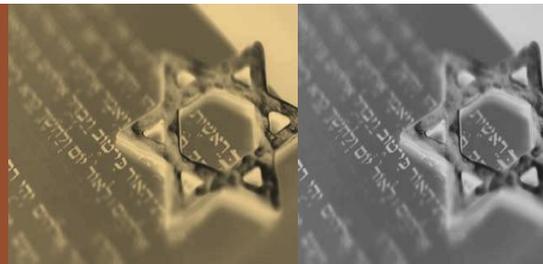
12. What is the relationship with Israel in the community as a whole?

Despite the fact that Herzl was born in Budapest (although he lived his adult life and died in Vienna), Hungarian Jewry played no real role in the development of Zionism. Hungary was not a very "Jewish" Jewish community, and apart from the significant Haredi and Chassidic population of Hungary, most Hungarian Jews were far too caught up in the push towards acceptance and belonging in Hungarian society to be interested in a nationalist movement aimed at restoring the Jews to Palestine. Ironically, the most central contribution of Hungarian Jewry to Eretz Israel in the modern periods was the emigration of considerable numbers of staunchly anti-Zionist Haredi Jews into Palestine where they became part of the traditional community, settling especially in Jerusalem. As anti-Jewish legislation affected the population of Hungary in the 1930's, Zionism became more popular and there was some Zionist aliyah, but the major group of Hungarian Jews who came to Palestine did so in the years following the Second World War up until the Soviet crack down on Zionism and Jewish life in general in 1949. In those years several thousand Hungarian Jews made their way to Palestine and the fledgling State of Israel.

In the modern reawakening of Hungarian Jewry since the fall of Communism, Zionist organizations such as youth movements have developed and the community has in many ways become conscious of Israel, sending groups of young people to seminars and activities in Israel.



Introducing Hungarian Jewish voices.



Ignatz is a late 19th century merchant in Budapest.

"This is the time to be alive. What a great city Budapest is and what potential there is for us Jews to be part of the new prosperity. How strange to think that our grandparents' generation – even that of our parents – lived lives that were marginal in Hungary. They were not part of the main developments in society and had to eke out a living on the margins of society. But look at us! We don't have to hide. We are part of the heart of Hungarian life. Why, look at the Dohany synagogue! What a monument to our success in this place. It looks like a veritable temple. That's it! The Temple has been rebuilt in Budapest. This is our homeland and may we continue to enjoy our present good fortune and be ever more accepted in Hungarian life. We have equality. We enjoy the same rights as everybody else here.

Of course it is true that there are many circles in Hungarian society who do not accept us and the truth is that in order to be accepted it is necessary not to emphasise the fact of our Jewishness too openly, but that is a small price to pay for acceptance. We are loyal members of the Austro-Hungarian empire and it seems that the Emperor himself sees in us loyal subjects. I think it is not too much to hope for to believe that one day we will be accepted socially as well as legally by all Hungarians. They will realise that all the nonsense about us being a disloyal and foreign minority group is precisely that - nonsense. We serve in the army, and we serve our fatherland with distinction and pride. I hope that when we are finally accepted by all, this distasteful rush of many of our youngsters towards Christian baptism will cease. I understand the motives of those who believe that only through adopting Christianity will they ever be truly accepted in this society, but I can't agree with them. It is not necessary to stop being Jewish. It is only necessary to make our Judaism a little less conspicuous. It is those black garbed extremists in the provinces who are giving us a bad name. If they would stop being so obstinate in clinging to their old customs and traditional way of life, I'm sure that all misunderstandings would be ironed out and we would be enabled to continue our triumphant march into the heart of modern Europe as Hungarian Jews, accepted by all."

Katerin is Ignatz's great granddaughter. She is in her early 40's and also lives in Budapest. She is a lecturer in social work at the university and is married with two children in their mid-teens.

"Yes, I know of my great grandfather. His photograph still stands in my house. He was an optimist, one of the last in our family. He thought that the Jews would be accepted, and history proved him wrong. In almost all of the last eighty or ninety years, since Hungary became an independent state, it has not been an advantage to



be a Jew. We have suffered under almost every government and regime that has ruled. It has not been worth being Jewish here. The truth is that I never told my children that they were officially Jewish when they were young. Even though they grew up in a democratic Hungary, after the fall of Communism, I didn't believe in this freedom. All of my experience told me that the good days had been few and far between and that they always passed to be replaced by long years of oppression. My husband is not Jewish and I thought that the kids could - and should - grow up ignorant of my origins and of the fact that they themselves were Jewish by Jewish law. My own colleagues and most of my friends had no idea that I myself was Jewish. Why inflict a burden on myself and my children?

But at a certain point, I began to feel a little more confident. I started going to community gatherings. When a new community centre was opened I went quietly to some of their evenings, without making a noise about it. Finally I decided that I should tell the children and stop passing as a non-Jew in society. They were more than a little confused when I told them. They didn't know what it meant. They had no idea what Jews were! I realised that I had committed myself and that there was no going back. I enrolled them at the new Jewish school, the Lauder-Yavneh school in Budapest. My husband was supportive. He is one of these intellectuals without any deep rooted faith. If it was important to me, he was willing to go along with it. The kids have been in the school for four years now. At first they were a little bemused by the whole thing. With time, they were drawn in by the culture and the celebrations – even some of the religious rituals. Now we light candles every Friday night and have even started doing some special things on some of the holidays. It's a funny situation. I learn about being Jewish from my children. It's really meant to be the opposite. I don't know what my great-grandfather would think, but I like to think he'd smile."

