The Jewish Bourgeoisie of Budapest

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The capital city of modern Hungary was formed in 1872 out of Buda (the royal residence), Pest (a free royal city), and Óbuda (an erstwhile manorial township, belonging from 1767 to the crown). There was continuous Jewish settlement in all three from the late 18th century until the Holocaust, although the history of the three Jewish communities differed. From the early 19th century, Pest attracted a growing stream of Jewish immigrants from inside and outside Hungary, especially after the 1840 law granted Jews the right of residence and freedom of enterprise in cities. This immigration consisted mainly of Jews with capital, skills and/or a propensity for professional mobility, which was easier to achieve in the central economic market of the country. The economy was almost completely open to Jews after the liberal Emancipation Act of 1867 (except for public employment). From then on, the Jewish bourgeoisie in Budapest, thanks to its sheer size and, even more, its economic, professional, and intellectual assets, prevailed in many ways over both the local middle classes and the provincial Hungarian-Jewish elites. It also constituted the major model for modern, educated middle class existence in Hungary.

The group can be summarily characterized by its relative economic power, its socio-professional stratification, its concentration in urban space, its typical choices of options from the mainstream of Jewish identity patterns, as well as its schooling strategies, social habits and cultural roles.

Economic Strength and Living Standards

In 1869, Jews made up 14.8% of the city's population, in 1910 – 20.3% (this figure dropping to 16% by 1941 – converts being discounted). Up to 1918, they constituted more than one fourth, and later (for most of the period) close to one half of Hungarian Jewry. In many professional and economic fields, the Jews of Budapest ascended from the bourgeois sector to eminent positions, and played a major role both in the
city's social set-up, and as regards the Jews of the provinces. They were over-represented in the middle class of the time. Even conservative estimates (which disregard converted Jews) suggest that nearly half of the Jews residing in the city before the Holocaust belonged to the bourgeoisie. This proportion is much higher than corresponding figures for the local Gentile population, as well as provincial Jewry. Jews were among the highest taxpayers of the city, entitled to special representation in the municipal government (virilists). Jewish presence was strongly felt between 1873-1917, as was implicitly demonstrated in a classical study of this privileged group. In a later period, in 1937 for example, at least 44% of those paying income tax and 43% of those paying capital tax were Jewish. Some 42% of Jewish inhabitants of the capital – as against only 15% of non-Jews – lived in apartments with three or more rooms, the minimal criterion for bourgeois accommodation. Similarly, 44% and 45% respectively of occupants of apartments with a bathroom or with a servant's room were Jewish. The proportion of Jews among property owners was 41% in 1930, while 44% of the owners of buildings of two or more stories were Jews. Even more significant was the statistical fact that in each and every socio-professional category of the active population of the city, the proportion of Jews living in "bourgeois" flats (three rooms and more), owning houses or paying income or capital tax was much higher than among their Gentile counterparts. In 1930, for example, among Jewish commercial employees, 23% lived in apartments with three or more rooms, as against a mere 7% among Gentiles of the same category. This was even true of the Jewish proletariat, where the figure was 5% as against less than 1% for working-class Gentiles. On the whole, Jews tended to hold more senior positions in each specific socio-professional hierarchy, so that even in the lowest brackets, some of them enjoyed "bourgeois" living conditions.

The internal and social stratification of the group can be analyzed empirically by sub-category, such as capitalist entrepreneurs, private executives, members of the liberal professions and intellectuals, and a small fringe group of civil-servants (mostly municipal employees). Jews were particularly dominant in capitalist entrepreneurship. Jewish traders played a leading role more or less throughout the late feudal, post-feudal and pre-socialist periods. From the early 19th century, some 70% of those involved in wholesale trading were Jews. With certain fluctuations, the proportion remained at around this level until the Holocaust. In 1937, 68% of all Budapest traders liable to income tax were
Jewish, with a proportion as high as 73% in the book trade. Jews attained even higher positions in banking, constituting some 90% of directors and 56% of clerks in financial business in 1910. But during and after the Gründerzeit in the 1860-1880s, Jewish entrepreneurs preferred to invest their mobile capital in new industries. The far-reaching consequence was that, in 1936, Jews owned no less than 59% of large concerns (with a workforce of more than 20) in the city, and some 63% of corresponding Jewish businesses throughout the country. On the eve of World War II, and despite the antisemitic drive for "economic aryization" then in full swing, the number of Jewish-owned factories in Budapest rose from 783 in 1936 to 853 in 1939. At that time, Jews controlled as much as 77% of the clothing industry, 71% of the textile industry, 63% of the printing concerns, 62% of the leather concerns and 60% of the paper industry in Budapest, and more than 50% of all but a few other branches. Some 55% of the Jewish-Hungarian industrial bourgeoisie was active in the capital city. Privately-employed executives and managers constituted an important addition to the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie. In Budapest in 1910, at least 67% of salaried managers in trade and banking, 56% in industry and even 23% in (mostly public) transportation were Jewish. These very high proportions were not maintained until the Holocaust, but Jews remained considerably over-represented in these white-collar categories until the introduction of the socialist regime. The bulk of the cluster (50.5%) was located in Budapest already in 1910, and their number rose subsequently.

Jews maintained a steady proportion from the end of the 19th century in the academic profession, from which they had been excluded before emancipation (with the exception of medicine). By 1910, 62% of lawyers, 59% of physicians, 52% of veterinary surgeons, 44% of self-employed engineers and 33% of pharmacists in Budapest were Jewish. These proportions declined somewhat, but not radically, in the antisemitic period, primarily because of the infamous anti-Jewish Numerus Clausus enforced in Hungarian higher education from 1920. Whereas before 1918, they constituted a minority (36%) among Hungarian professionals (however disproportionate this minority may have been), in the inter-war years a large majority of all Hungarian-Jewish professionals (55%) resided in the capital.

A large number of freelance or self-employed intellectuals also played an important role in the sector under scrutiny, whether as entrepreneurs in the fast-developing modern "cultural industry" of the Hungarian capital (as publishers, founders of journals, theater managers, film producers, etc.), as staff members or as journalists,
writers, independent scholars, actors, musicians and other artists. According to the
1910 census in Budapest, some 48% of journalists, 30% of actors, 32% of those active
in literature and the arts as well as 36% of scientists, independent scholars and those
in non-academic occupations of public or humanitarian interest, were Jews.

**Residential Dispersion**

By the end of the 19th century, the vast majority of Budapest Jewry had left Óbuda
and Buda and moved to the central districts of Pest (over 80% in 1900). Hence, the
above-defined "bourgeois" sector was now even more heavily concentrated in Pest.
The proportion of these Jews, owners of apartments of three rooms and more, was just
over 50% in 1906 in the first three districts (Buda and Óbuda), and as high as 78% and
66% in the central IVth, Vth and VIth districts of Pest, and again only 50% in the
VIIth and as low as 41% in the VIIIth and the rest of the capital. Clearly enough, the
Jewish bourgeoisie preferred to reside in the very center of the city. This was in
contrast to the Jewish poor, most of whom dwelt in separate districts. Among the
Gentiles, the upper crust lived in Buda (considered the most ancient and aristocratic
section), while the lower classes lived in the peripheral proletarian or petit-bourgeois
suburbs.

Jewish bourgeois residence in Budapest can be broadly divided into three main
sectors. The highest echelons of the sector monopolized the relatively new and
modern housing facilities in the so-called Lipótváros and its extension (Újlipótváros),
developed in Pest near the Danube, mainly in the inter-war period. Lipótváros came to
epitomize the very essence of Jewish bourgeois life in modern Budapest. The more
middle-class, professional and medium bourgeois groups were centered in Terésváros,
and area bordering on the circular boulevard (Nagykörút) of Pest. Part of Terésváros,
and of Józsefváros, to its northeast, were typical provided residential areas for lower-
class Jews.

**Religious Affiliation and Identity**

The above-mentioned three-tiered residential distribution can be identified also in
terms of religious trends. Józsefváros and part of Terésváros were the residential
center of the Orthodox, who mostly belonged to the lower-middle class. The
remainder were inhabited mostly by Neologs or secular Jews, the bulk of whom
belonged either to the skilled working class (printers, etc.) or to the middle and higher
bourgeoisie, as defined above.
The absolute majority of Budapest Jewry, over 90% in the 20th century, was associated with Neolog Judaism. As witnessed by the proportion of births, marriages and deaths registered in the records of the Orthodox and the Neolog communities, the former accounted for not more than 5 to 8% of the Jewish community from the late 19th century onwards. The Orthodox share of the educated middle and higher bourgeois brackets was obviously far more limited. In 1926 among those in Budapest who defined themselves as Sabbath observers, there were only 12 doctors and 14 lawyers, less than 1% of the Jewish professionals. Not unexpectedly, from very early on (since the 1848 Revolution, and more significantly, after the 1868-1869 Jewish Congress), the middle and higher echelons of the local Jewish bourgeoisies were strongly inclined toward the Neolog ideology and way of life.

However, Neolog affiliation served often as a cover for indifference and secularism and even led, in many cases, to a complete break with religious Judaism. Four-fifths of the growing number of converted Jews in Budapest between 1931 and 1937 came from the bourgeoisie. In 1941, the proportion of Christians assumed to be of Jewish background (including Christian children born of mixed marriages) was close to 30%. A similar proportion (28%) was found within a representative sample of converted lawyers regarded as Jewish in 1941. Even before antisemitic pressure began to grow in 1938, religious commitment was weakening, a process which was reflected in the increase in administrative concealment of Jewish origins. Between 1930 and 1937, some 42% of Jewish births were not recorded in the rabbinical offices of the city.

Recent (yet unpublished) research confirms that an increasing proportion of candidates for intermarriage (one-fifth of Jewish bridegrooms in 1936-1937) were members of the educated bourgeoisie.

The same was largely true of supporters of the movement to Magyarize foreign surnames. Before 1918, some 61% of such Magyarizers nationwide were Jewish. This declaration of an attempt at formal adoption of assimilated national identity was attractive to the educated middle class above all. By 1940, 63% of Jewish lawyers in Budapest (and 85% of their converted counterparts) bore Hungarian surnames. This was true of 52% of Jewish doctors (1939), 31% of students graduating from the Jewish High School (1928-1943), 34% of Jewish students graduating from the Lutheran High School (1872-1944) and 32% of the survivors recorded in the highly "bourgeois" IVth and Vth districts in 1945. This was in contrast to a figure of 18% of survivors in the VI-VIIIth districts and a mere 7% of those observing Sabbath (1926).
Deliberately-adopted, cherished Magyar identity was especially important to members of the group under scrutiny who aspired to high social standing. Consequently, this strategic "Magyarism" was regularly accompanied by militant anti-Zionism, refusal to acknowledge any kind of Jewish political separatism, and support for Magyar nationalist governmental policies in the Liberal Era (before 1918). Later, in the 1930s and 1940s, it was also characterized – in many cases, especially among Jews of the higher entrepreneurial class – by qualified "understanding" or even acceptance of legal anti-Semitism (which was regarded as a lesser evil than Nazism). It is also true, however, that, from the beginning of the 20th century, younger elements in the same bourgeoisie, even some members of the second or third generation of economic tycoons, fell increasingly under the spell of universalist social ideologies, like radicalism, social democracy, socialism and communism. They often exchanged the "nationalist" commitments of their parents for Leftist utopian theories. A good case in point is the career of György Lukács, who shifted from idealist esthetics to Marxist philosophy and participated, as military leader and commissar for public instruction, in the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic. His father was a banker in Budapest, a friend of Béla Bartók and a generous sponsor of Hungarian artists and writers.

Social Reproduction and Schooling
In the social reproduction of the Jewish bourgeoisie of Budapest in the pre-Holocaust era, demographic and educational strategies played an increasingly important historical role – in addition to the bequeathing of wealth, social networking and managerial positions in family firms – in the entrepreneurial class. Demographic strategies were focused from the end of the 19th century on the reduction of the number of offspring and the maximization of their life expectancy, as well as on the minimization of births out of wedlock. This was, of course, the general drive in all middle class groups undergoing demographic transition, but the relevant Jewish clusters in Budapest succeeded demonstrably earlier and better at this than did their non-Jewish counterparts, as suggested by recent research. In the years 1926 and 1931, for instance, the Jewish birthrate declined both in absolute numbers (by nearly 10%) and in its proportion of all births (from 30.1% to 26.9%) within the Budapest population which was statistically defined as "bourgeois", though in a somewhat broader sense than above (including all employers, self-employed and liberal
The same population accounted for over 33% of married couples. This can serve to indicate more "rational" control of fertility, reflected both in smaller family size and in rapid reaction to the economic crisis.

As for life expectancy in the same "bourgeois" population, it was significantly higher among Jews in the same period. Infant mortality, which is the best indicator of general conditions of hygiene and medical care, amounted to only 47 per thousand births for Jews as against 71 among non-Jews. A similar disparity – 2.8% against 3.2% - can be observed in the proportion of stillbirths, and illegitimate births – 1% against 3%. On the whole, the Jewish middle classes of Budapest maintained an increasing degree of demographic discipline more efficiently than did their non-Jewish counterparts.

Education has always been of paramount importance in all Jewish circles, reflecting closely the choices as regards denominational and social identity. The educational strategies of urban middle class Jewry in Budapest were aimed above all at the maximization of the prospects for social integration and upward mobility of their offspring, as well as the legitimization of the socio-economic status achieved by the families.

Though it is very difficult to ascertain trends to quantitative over-schooling of sons of the local Jewish bourgeoisie due to the dearth of relevant data or its inaccuracy, recent research has provided some evidence on this issue. In a large sample of pupils attending grammar schools (Gymnasium and Realschulen) in Budapest between the 1870s and 1930s, 56% of the offspring of entrepreneurs and people with private means were Jewish, a proportion most probably exceeding their proportion in the corresponding socio-economic bracket. Moreover, the performance of these Jewish students, mostly from the capitalist bourgeoisie, was comparable with the best performances of all social categories (together with children of professionals and intellectuals), and was far better than that of non-Jews from the same "leisure classes". To their probable quantitative over-schooling should be added significant academic excellence. On a scale of 1-4 points (1 being the best) the difference, for instance, between Jewish and Catholic students of these social strata was more than half a point (0.52) in German, almost half a point (0.46) in Hungarian literature and grammar, 0.33 in Latin and 0.25 in maths. The particularly high standard of children of the Jewish higher bourgeoisie in the "national subjects" (Hungarian and Latin), as compared even with maths, indicates the function of elite schooling in the drive for symbolic assimilation.
The preference of this group for state or – whenever accessible – Christian institutions is indicative of the same trend. Jewish students constituted the majority of those enrolled in the Liberal Lutheran High School of Pest (some 55% of the student body was Jewish between 1873 and 1918, according to the school's annual reports). On the other hand, before the introduction of the Numerous Clausus in secondary schools (1939), the Jewish High School (opened in 1919) attracted only a small proportion (between 8 and 15%) of the students concerned, and an insignificant proportion of the higher echelons of the bourgeoisie.

Cultural Functions and Social Life

The Jewish bourgeoisie in Budapest was marked by its involvement in the political, social and intellectual life of the Hungarian metropolis, and its distinctive efforts to foster modern Hungarian literature, arts and sciences.

Only a small proportion, albeit significant, of these activities were limited to Jewish circles or to exclusively Jewish occupations. Among them should be mentioned the Lipótvárosi Kaszinó, founded in 1883 as a reaction against the aristocratic Nemzeti Kaszinó from which Jews were excluded in practice if not formally, and the philanthropic, educational or cultural services and organizations of the Jewish community.

Most of the social and intellectual commitments of the Budapest Jewish bourgeoisie were marked by an assimilationist approach. Thanks to their prominent economic involvement in the political press, publishing, printing and other branches of culture, and to the advanced education received by the second and third generations of Jewish capitalist dynasties, it is not surprising that Lipótváros (or Lipócia to the initiated) became synonymous in Hungarian urban life with cultural modernity, provocative experimentation, avant-garde snobbery and, more generally, high brow intellectual pursuits. These activities were pursued, often almost ritually, in literary cafes, managed mostly by Jews (like Cafes Emke, Astoria, Japán, New York, Belvárosi and others). Jewish bourgeois patrons performed similarly indispensable functions in Budapest on behalf of modern Hungarian music, theater, painting and architecture. There too, Jews from Lipótváros supported creative endeavors, not only as donors and contributors, but also as responsive readers or audiences or in many other capacities.

The atmosphere generated in Lipótváros illustrates perhaps better than anything else the long-standing Jewish-Hungarian cultural symbiosis. It also gave rise – precisely in the last decade of the old regime, which was characterized by the antisemitic turn in
government policies – to the polarization of the conflicting intellectual trends among the regime's opposition. This confrontation was waged between "urbanists" (i.e., those advocating inter-communal cooperation, openness to Western influence, liberal democracy and basic social reforms) and "populists" (who pressed for reform based on "national" needs and values linked to peasant civilization, and were not free of völkisch-type xenophobia). Though battered by institutionalized antisemitism, though shaken by the blows inflicted on it by institutionalized anti-Semitism, the Holocaust and communism, the legacy of the "urbanist" outlook, which was fundamentally liberal-bourgeois in character, has survived to some extent in the political culture of post-communist Hungary (as have its antisemitic counterparts). The recollection of past glories infuses Jewish life in that country (now almost exclusively centered in the capital) with a nostalgic flavor of its own.


Jews of the Hungarian Provinces Until 1918

Raphael Vago

The Jews of Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia lived in what was possibly the most ethnically diversified and multinational area of Hungary. The Jewish population, which numbered some 100,000 at the end of World War I, comprising some 15% of the population, had lived for generations among Ruthenes, Ukrainians, Poles, Hungarians, Slovaks and Romanians. Sub-Carpathian Jewry was shaped by the waves of emigration into the region from northern and eastern areas, from Poland and the Russian Empire, and a small Sephardic community in Ungvár added to the diversity of the Jewish community. The administrative changes through the years, as well as the emerging character of the Habsburg, or rather Hungarian rule over the area, makes it difficult to pinpoint special local characteristics of the Jewish community. But, there is no doubt that in their religious fervor and adherence to their traditional ways of life in this backward area of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the Jews of the area created
unique ways of life, blending the various influences that shaped the character of the area.

About two-thirds of the Jews in the area lived in small communities, but with the slow advance of urbanization there was a marked growth in the urban Jewish population, especially in Munkács, which became the educational and cultural center for the Jews of the region. The urbanized Jews made their living from similar trades and professions to those in Hungary proper, and were active promoters of the emerging process of modernization in the area, which never reached the proportions is attained in the major urban centers of Hungary. Soon, the Jewish traders, artisans and members of the liberal professions made up the bulk of the local petit-bourgeois and even of the more well-to-do stratum of the local society. The rural Jewish population lived in great poverty, and their economic situation was not much better than that of the local Ruthenes and Ukrainians, although they were better educated than their village neighbors. Most of the rural Jews worked on the land or cultivated livestock.

Modern antisemitism, which appeared in the area by the end of the 19th century, was based on different motifs to the antisemitism of the more developed areas of Hungary, especially Budapest. The argument that the Jews had infiltrated the economy, the culture and all of society was not feasible in the backward Sub-Carpathian region. The local antisemitic arguments were based, rather, on the role of the small Jewish merchant and peddler and were aimed against the newly arrived emigrants from Galicia, who were depicted as parasites, compared to the more established veteran Jewish population of the area. With the process of urbanization and the emergence of a more prosperous Jewish middle class, antisemitic agitation was aimed, prior to World War I, at the new social developments.

The nature of the region, the harsh conditions, the underdevelopment and backwardness, as well as the complex relationship with the local multi-ethnic population, dictated the nature of the Jewish communities, which largely preserved their traditional ways of life. Nature itself seemed to contribute to the atmosphere, as the scenery of the Carpathian Mountains served as a background for the mystic experiences and the rise of Hassidism. The yeshivot of the regions were among the most influential in Hungary, especially those of Munkács, Huszt, Ungvár. The split within the Jewish communities was very bitter and the ideological struggle between those advocating changes and adaptation to the new realities and those preserving the traditional Orthodox life was among the most intense among Hungary's Jewry.
The deep divisions which also affected the Orthodox camp continued into the inter-war period and the debates and power struggles between the Munkács rabbis had their roots in the pre-war period.

The divisions and splits within the Jewish community influenced the educational institutions as well. The opening of Jewish schools including high schools in Munkács and Ungvár in the inter-war period reflected the desire of the younger generation to provide their children with a more general education as opposed to the world outlook of the Orthodox leadership. Following the split between the Orthodox and Neolog communities, only a few joined the Neologs in the beginning, and two small communities were formed in Munkács and Ungvár.

After World War I, the Jews of Slovakia and Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia entered into a new period until 1938, the Czechoslovak chapter. In spite of being cut off from Hungary and its Jewish communities, the Jews of the two regions continued to preserve their Hungarian language and culture, the result of the cultural infrastructure laid down since the period of emancipation.