Wednesday, June 30

Reading material for

“Jewish life in Hungary and Romania, interwar period 1919-1939”
In some crucial ways the situation of interwar Hungary was the very opposite of that which prevailed in the other lands of East Central Europe. Far from being an oppressed, “nonhistorical” people which had unexpectedly achieved statehood as a result of World War I, the Magyars had been one of the great ruling nations of prewar Europe. Indeed, they had ruled an empire of their own. Ever since 1867 Hungary had been an autonomous part of the Habsburg state, with its own government. A minority in their part of Austria-Hungary, just as the German-speaking Austrians were a minority in theirs, the Magyars dominated Slovakia, Croatia, Transylvania, Subcarpathian Rus, the Burgenland, and the Banat. Unlike most of the nations of East Central Europe, they had a strong stake in preserving the status quo.

The war, a great opportunity for so many East European nations, was an unmitigated disaster for Hungary. It lost all of the above-mentioned territories, which constituted more than seventy percent of its former territory and about sixty percent of its population. How different was Hungary's fate from that of Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and the Baltic states, all of whom emerged from the war with previously undreamed of successes. Trianon Hungary (so called after the treaty, signed with the victorious powers in 1920, which defined its frontiers) was a small, landlocked country of little importance in European affairs. Not only had the Hungarians lost their multinational empire, but some three million Magyars were now living under foreign rule in Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania. True, Hungary was now rid of the nationalities problem—interwar Hungary was, in contrast to Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia, a true nation-state, with only a small German minority of about one-half million to contend with. But national homogeneity was not regarded as a blessing, while the loss of territory was regarded as a terrible national humiliation. And this was not the only severe shock, for Hungary had also endured during 1918–1919 a two-stage social revolution, beginning with the moderate left-wing rule of the Károlyi government, which overthrew the old regime, and culminating in a Bolshevik regime led by Béla Kun. Kun was finally overthrown in the summer of 1919 and “order” was restored, but not before the country had experienced first a “red terror,” then foreign intervention by the despised
Romanians, and finally a "white terror." Thus Hungary suffered not only from the tremendous losses of the war but also from a national humiliation and a social upheaval unparalleled elsewhere in East Central Europe.

Nineteenth-century Hungary was a classic gentry-peasant society. True, toward the end of the century it had undergone something of an industrial and financial boom, which particularly affected the Budapest region. As a result, the country was somewhat more industrialized than were its neighbors. But much of the work of modernization was carried out by non-Magyars—in particular by Jews and Germans—and the Magyars, while developing an intelligentsia and a bureaucracy, did not develop a strong bourgeoisie. In this they were similar to the Poles and the Romanians, and unlike the Czechs. As in Poland, in Hungary the gentry, and above all the great landowning magnate group, was synonymous with the political nation. In prewar times the Hungarian gentry had an absolute monopoly on politics, and after the post-Béla Kun restoration it continued to rule the now much reduced country. Only in the 1930s was its position seriously threatened by the growing power of the radical right.

Interwar Hungary was obsessed with one great issue—revision of the Trianon treaty. The old regime, having been returned to power, had as its overriding aim the reestablishment of the Hungarian empire. For this reason, and for other, more traditional ones, it also set its face firmly against any social or political change. The left, demoralized after its abortive seizure of power, was unable to offer a serious challenge to the political establishment. Hungary during the interwar years was among the least democratic of all East Central European countries, and among the socially most conservative. Its peasantry, by far the largest class, remained impoverished and powerless. Revision meant, of course, the overturning of the East European status quo and hostility toward those countries which had annexed parts of old Hungary, above all toward Czechoslovakia and Romania. It also meant an invitation to foreign states to intervene, since obviously the Hungarians alone lacked the power to revise the Versailles settlement. Above all it was a green light for German intervention in East European politics and for a German-Hungarian alliance, based on mutual hatred for the postwar settlement. This alliance, welcomed by so many Hungarians because it promised a return of the lost provinces, linked Hungary's fate with that of Hitler's Germany and was in the long run a disaster for the country. It was even more of a disaster for the country's Jews.

If nearly all Hungarians, of all parties and factions, agreed on the need for revision, there was no agreement on how and when such a revision was to be implemented. During the 1920s Hungary was ruled by "moderate revisionists," whose commitment to the restoration of the old empire was tempered by caution, by the old "liberal" Hungarian political style (what this meant shall be discussed shortly), and by pro-Western, particularly pro-English, views. But already in the early 1920s there existed in the country a radical right-wing political force, which rejected the moderation of the traditional leaders and pressed for more drastic action. The great political struggle in interwar Hungary, given the absence of a strong socialist movement, was fought out between these two forces, with the radical right growing ever stronger until it finally took over the state in the late 1930s. The triumph of the radical right, which owed much to the revisionist obsession but which also fed on social and economic unrest, had important implications for the Jews, since the ferocious revisionists were also pro-Nazi and extremely anti-Semitic. It was they who violated traditional Hungarian practice and made the Jewish question a national obsession, which came almost to rival the national obsession with blotting out the infamous Trianon treaty.  

1. The Historical Context

If Hungarian history was unique in the context of East Central European history, even more unique was the history of the Jews in this country in the context of East European Jewish history. For one thing, by the eve of World War I most Hungarian Jews had adopted Hungarian culture and had become as acculturated as were the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia. Moreover, the process of magyarization, which had been preceded by a process of germanization, was accompanied by a considerable degree of what is often termed "assimilation," which was definitely not the case in the Czech lands or in the other regions where acculturation had made considerable inroads before the war, such as Wallachia or Courland. That is to say, in Hungary many Jews not only spoke Hungarian but also regarded themselves and were regarded by others as "Magyars of the Mosaic persuasion." In this respect they resembled not so much the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia but, rather, German Jewry.

What were the reasons for this unusual situation? One has to do with political power. Ever since 1867 the Hungarians were masters of their own home, and the Jewish minority, which to the extent that it is attracted to a secular culture is usually attracted to the secular culture in power, was naturally inclined to gravitate toward the cultural orientation of Budapest. The same factor prompted Prague Jews to adopt a Viennese cultural orientation, and at least some Vilna Jews to adopt the Russian orientation emanating from St. Petersburg. Moreover, the Hungarian political elite, that is the landowning class, actively encouraged the Jews not only to acculturate but also to regard themselves as members of the Magyar
nation. This was partly the result of a longstanding Hungarian policy to encourage non-Magyar—in particular Slavs, Germans, and Romanians living in the lands of St. Stephen—to become Hungarians, a policy resulting from the awareness that there were not enough ethnic Magyars to impose their will on the vast, multinational region known as Hungary. Hungarian nationalists, at least during the prewar period, were always prepared to welcome into their ranks sons and daughters of other nations so long as the latter were willing to renounce their former ethnic allegiance and become full-fledged Magyars. And, since joining the ranks of the politically dominant nation obviously paid off, socially and professionally, it is scarcely surprising that during the nineteenth century numerous Germans, Slovaks, Romanians, and Croats magyarized. Some, as is so often the case, became fanatic Hungarian chauvinists. But the traditional openness of the Hungarians was accompanied by extreme intolerance toward those who did not wish to become Magyars, and this intolerance in turn helped kindle the flames of nationalism among the subject peoples of the Hungarian empire. This fact rendered it all the more necessary for the Hungarians to enlist assistance, and the Jews proved themselves to be ideal allies. For unlike some Slovaks, Croats, Germans, and Romanians, the Jews did not develop their own nationalistic, anti-Magyar movement in the Hungarian lands. Rather, they opted almost exclusively for the Hungarian cultural and political orientation, accepting with enthusiasm the offer of alliance held out to them by the Hungarian ruling elite. The Jews, after all, have almost always been prepared to support the established regime, all the more so if that regime treats them well, and in Hungary the various governments, from 1867 on, did their best to combat popular anti-Semitism and recognized the Jews as first-class citizens.

Even before 1867 some Jews, inspired by the liberal views of the Hungarian revolutionaries, had demonstrated their Hungarian patriotism. Many of them had rallied around Lajos Kossuth in 1848, at a time when they were still second-class citizens and had much to gain from a revolutionary triumph, and that legendary hero became one of the first in a long line of pro-Jewish Hungarian statesmen. Indeed, one of the last acts of his revolutionary government was to emancipate the Jews. Kossuth and his successors clearly grasped the great value of the Jews as Magyars and as magyarizers, particularly in the borderlands where the Hungarians were in a minority—in Slovakia, in Transylvania, and in Subcarpathian Rus. And the Jews willingly—all too willingly in the view of the minority nationalities and their supporters—played the role of magyarizers in these regions. They therefore linked their fate to the fortunes of the regime in Budapest, which seemed perfectly logical in prewar Europe.4

HUNGARY

We have noted that the prewar leaders of Hungary, among them such famous statesmen as Baron József Eötvös and Ferenc Deák, were strong advocates of Jewish emancipation and assimilation (the only major exception being the famous reformer István Széchenyi). Such a stance was adopted not only because of the unique national problem within the Hungarian empire but also because these leaders, despite their gentility origins, were interested in economic modernization. They therefore recognized the usefulness of the Jews both as cultural magyarizers and as economic modernizers, as people who could perform economic tasks which the magnates approved of but could not or did not wish to perform themselves. These magnates also subscribed to a peculiar brand of liberalism, which certainly did not mean either democracy or social justice but which was far removed from modern racism and did allow for a certain degree of political pluralism and tolerance of minority groups, so long as these groups toed the Magyars line. As a result of all these factors, the Hungarian ruling class of the prewar period 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.4

It was not only the government's friendly attitude which encouraged the Jews of Hungary to acculturate and to attempt to assimilate. The rapid economic development of the last half of the nineteenth century was no less important. As in the Czech lands, Hungarian Jews began moving from towns to cities, above all to Budapest, and rapidly improved their economic status. By the end of the century many of them, in ethnic Hungary, at least, if not in the borderlands, had become solidly middle class, as they had in Bohemia, Moravia, and Germany. Thus Hungarian Jewry was on its way to becoming a Jewry of the West European—type despite its location in East Central Europe. Economic upward mobility, as always, hastened acculturation and assimilation. And both these processes developed with remarkable speed, engulfing a relatively young Jewry many of whose members had arrived in Hungary from the East during the nineteenth century. One of the most dramatic demonstrations of their impact was the Jews' readiness to magyarize their names. They were not the only ones to participate in this highly symbolic act, which was much encouraged by the government, but they did so en masse. This was noted with disgust by the enemies of magyarization. As the famous historian Robert Seton-Watson, the friend of the Slovaks and Romanians, put it, "Weiss, Kohn, Löwy, Weinberger, Klein, Rosenfeld, Ehrenfeld, Gansl, Grünfeld conceal their identity under the pseudonyms of Vész, Kardos, Lukács, Biró, Kis, Radó, Erdélyi, Gonda, Mezéi." The celebrated traveler and orientalist, Arminius Vámbéry, was born Hermann Vamberger, and Ferenc Molnár, the famous playwright, had as his original name Neumann. Nowhere else in nineteenth-century East
Europe, even in the interwar years, did a similar phenomenon occur; in the nineteenth-century Polish lands, after all, Jews were usually forced to adopt non-Jewish family names. Its occurrence in Hungary reveals the depth of Jewish pro-Magyar sentiments.

Another important indication of the acculturation and assimilation process was the emergence of Reform Judaism as a force in Hungarian Jewish life. The Reform movement, which stood for the modernization of Jewish religious life, made only a limited impression in Russia, Poland, or Romania, but spread rapidly from its German homeland to Bohemia and Moravia and to Hungary. By the 1840s it was already a factor in the Hungarian lands, led by such notable figures in the history of Reform Judaism as Leopold Löw (1811–1875) and Aron Chorin (1766–1844), who served as rabbis in Szeged and Arad.

Reform Judaism in Hungary was certainly less extreme than in Germany or in the United States. Hebrew was retained as the language of prayer, and the liturgy was barely altered. But services were held in a quiet, dignified atmosphere, sermons were given in German or in Hungarian, and a choir and organ were often employed. While this sort of "conservative" reform was generally accepted in the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia, there was furious opposition in Hungary to its modernizing message. This was particularly the case in the poorer borderlands of Transylvania, Slovakia, and Subcarpathian Rus, whose Jews were much less prosperous and much less inclined toward acculturation and assimilation. In 1868 a great religious schism occurred within Hungarian Jewry, which eventually split into three groups: Reform (known as Neolog), Orthodox, and "Status Quo" (a small group closer to the Orthodox side than to the Reformers). Reform predominated in the more prosperous regions of inner Hungary, and above all in the great middle-class community of Budapest, while Orthodoxy prevailed in the small towns and in the ethnically mixed borderlands. Slovakia, particularly its major city, Pressburg (Pozsony, Bratislava), remained a great center of Orthodoxy close to the German variety, while Northern Transylvania and Subcarpathian Rus remained great Orthodox centers of the Hasidic type. But the Western-type Jewry of inner Hungary now proceeded to build its Reform synagogues, in which Hungarian sermons were more and more frequently heard and whose minutes were taken in the Hungarian language. The cause of Reform came to be associated with loyalty to Budapest and with Hungarian patriotism (although the Orthodox, if less acculturated, were no less loyal and patriotic). The schism of 1868 was of momentous importance in Hungarian Jewish history. It ruled out any effective united action by Hungarian Jews and lent institutional confirmation to the internal division between small-town Orthodox Jews and Budapest Neologs, between Jews from inner Hun-

gary and those from the periphery, between richer Jews and poorer Jews. But we should point out that both Orthodox and Neologs agreed that the Jewish people was primarily a religious group, no matter how much they differed on the way to observe that religion. The Jews were definitely not to be regarded as a nation in the modern, secular sense of the word. This made it possible for both to be "Magyars of the Jewish persuasion" and made impossible the kind of schism between religious Jews and national-secular Jews which characterized the East European Jewish communities of Russia and Poland. As might be expected, Zionism made little headway in Hungary, although two of its most famous leaders, Theodore Herzl and Max Nordau, were born in Budapest.

It has been claimed by many observers that by the eve of World War I Hungarian Jewry was one of the most acculturated and most assimilated Jewries in the world, a Jewry whose commitment to serve the national interests of the dominant nationality in the state was absolute. As a leading Hungarian publicist of Jewish origin, Paul Ignatius, has written, the Jews became "... more fervently Magyar than the Magyars themselves." Oszkár Játszó, also of Jewish origin and a prominent Hungarian politician and intellectual during the early postwar years, made much of the "intolerant [Magyar] nationalism and chauvinism of the Jews" which, in his view, had done a great deal to poison relations between the Hungarians and the other nationalities of the prewar era; and Seton-Watson declared in 1908 that "the Catholic Church and the Jews form today the two chief bulwarks of Magyar chauvinism." But, while the Jews were mostly Hungarian by speech (although many retained the knowledge and use of German) and while they had concluded a mutually beneficial alliance with the Hungarian ruling class according to which they were to be regarded as Hungarians of the Jewish faith, just as there were Catholic and Protestant Hungarians, this did not mean that they were able to integrate fully into Hungarian society and thus fulfill their assimilationist expectations. The problem was that, from a socioeconomic as opposed to a national point of view, the Jews could not be absorbed. Hungary, after all, was a gentry-peasant society, and neither the gentry (which tended to despise the Jews socially, even if they welcomed them as accomplices in magyarization and economic development) nor the peasants afforded the Jews the possibility of social integration. Thus while in advanced Western nations the Jews did integrate to some extent, though never completely, into the middle class, in Hungary they remained essentially outside the "native" social structure, despite their evident acculturation and fervent magyarism. The process of assimilation, if we define it as identification with and acceptance by the dominant nationality, cut much deeper here than in the Czech lands, where (as we shall see) the acculturated Jews found it difficult to identify.
THEMSELVES AS EITHER CZECHS OR GERMANS, BUT IT DID NOT GO AS DEEP AS IT DID IN FRANCE AND, EVENTUALLY, IN THE UNITED STATES. THE JEWS IN HUNGARY REMAINED A GROUP VERY MUCH APART, ALTHOUGH THEIR SELF-DEFINITION AS "HUNGARIANS OF THE MOSAIC FAITH" ENJOYED THE RECOGNITION OF THE RULING ELITE.


THE JEWISH IMPACT ON HUNGARIAN LIFE IN THE PREWAR ERA WAS NOT LIMITED TO ECONOMIC ACTIVITY. THE CHILDREN OF JEWISH BANKERS, INDUSTRIALISTS, AND BUSINESSMEN, HERE AS ELSEWHERE IN EUROPE, FLOCKED TO THE UNIVERSITIES AND BECAME DOCTORS, LAWYERS, EDITORS, JOURNALISTS, SCHOLARS, MUSICIANS, AND PROBABLY MOST NOTABLY, SCIENTISTS. IN THE IMMEDIATE PREWAR PERIOD JEWS CONSTITUTED ABOUT 30% PERCENT OF THE STUDENTS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF BUDAPEST'S MEDICAL FACULTY. THEY ALSO WERE ATTRACTED TO POLITICS, ABOVE ALL TO THE RADICAL LEFT. YOUNG JEWISH INTELLECTUALS, DISGUSTED WITH THE CONSERVATIVE VIEWS BOTH OF THE RULING CLASS AND OF THEIR OWN BOURGEOIS AND PETTY BOURGEOIS PARENTS, BECAME PROMINENT IN THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND RADICAL PARTIES. SO IT WAS, HERE AS IN GERMANY, THAT JEWS BECAME IDENTIFIED NOT ONLY WITH CAPITALISM BUT ALSO WITH SOCIALISM, A DOUBLE CURSE SO FAR AS THE RADICAL RIGHT WAS CONCERNED. FAR MORE JEWS WERE CAPITALISTS THAN SOCIALISTS, OF COURSE, BUT THE CONSPICUOUS JEWISH ROLE IN THE SMALL AND HISTORICALLY WEAK HUNGARIAN LEFT WAS TO BECOME A MAJOR ISSUE IN POST-WORLD WAR I, AND POST-BÉLA KUN, HUNGARY.

HOW ARE WE TO EXPLAIN THE UNPRECEDENTED JEWISH PENETRATION OF HUNGARIAN ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL LIFE IN THE PREWAR PERIOD? THE FACT IS THAT THE GENERAL ENVIRONMENT WAS UNUSUALLY FAVORABLE TO THE JEWS. THE REGIME, AS WE HAVE SEEN, WAS BASICALLY PRO-JEWISH. THERE WAS, OF COURSE, NO LACK OF ANTI-SEMITISM IN PREWAR HUNGARY, AS ELSEWHERE IN EUROPE. IGNAZ GOLDZIHER (1859-1921), HUNGARY'S GREATEST ORIENTALIST AND ONE OF EUROPE'S MOST FAMOUS SCHOLARS, WAS ONE OF ITS MOST NOTABLE VICTIMS. WHILE STILL A YOUNG MAN HE HAD BEEN GRANTED A SCHOLARSHIP TO STUDY IN GERMANY, WHERE HE WAS ABLE TO SUPPORT HIMSELF BY UNIVERSITY TEACHING AND TO ACCUMULATE HIS WEALTH, TO TAKE A POSITION AS SECRETARY OF THE NELOG JEWISH COMMUNITY IN BUDAPEST. SOCIAL ANTI-SEMITISM, OF THE TYPE SO COMMON IN THE WEST, WAS EXTREMELY STRONG, AS THE FOLLOWING DESCRIPTION BY AN ACUTE OBSERVER OF THE HUNGARIAN SCENE INDICATES:


THIS SORT OF ANTI-SEMITISM, HOWEVER, DID NOT PREVENT THE MAJORITY OF HUNGARIAN JEWRY FROM RISING RAPIDLY ON THE SOCIAL LADDER AND FROM attaining MIDDLE-CLASS STATUS. POPULAR ANTI-SEMITISM WAS LIMITED IN THE PREWAR PERIOD. THE PEASANTS WERE TRADITIONALLY NOT MUCH INTERESTED IN THE JEWS, AND THERE WAS NOT ENOUGH POWERFUL CHRISTIAN BOURGEOISIE TO RESIST JEWISH COMMERCIAL SUCCESS. NOR WERE THE TWO CHRISTIAN CHURCHES (CATHOLIC AND CALVINIST) INVOLVED IN THE ANTI-SEMITIC MOVEMENT. TRUE, A CELEBRATED BLOOD LIBEL CASE INVOLVING THE ACCUSATION THAT JEWS USED THE BLOOD OF CHRISTIANS FOR RITUAL PURPOSES OCCURRED IN 1882 IN THE TOWN OF TISZA-ESZLÁR. MOREOVER, A SIGNIFICANT POLITICAL ANTI-SEMITIC MOVEMENT EMERGED IN THE 1880S, AS IT DID IN GERMANY AND IN AUSTRIA, BUT IN HUNGARY IT WAS QUICKLY PUT DOWN BY THE "LIBERAL" GOVERNMENT, WHOSE ATTITUDE IN THIS...
regard was crucial." The regime's opposition to political and popular anti-Semitism, its commitment to economic (as opposed to political) modernization, and the absence of a competing "native" bourgeoisie in gentry-peasant Hungary facilitated the remarkable Jewish breakthrough into positions of dominance in industry, commerce, and the professions. The situation here was quite different from that in Russian Poland, where, as we know, a growing Polish middle class both despised the Jews and organized against them, where the regime did not act to stamp out political anti-Semitism, where the Jews were often regarded as russifiers and therefore as enemies of Polish nationalism, and where the general economic situation remained one of great backwardness. It was also quite different from the situation in the Czech lands, where anti-Semitism inevitably accompanied the Czech struggle against German political and cultural hegemony.

Thus Hungary appeared to be a "paradise for the Jews," but potential dangers were certainly not absent. One obvious danger was the identification of the Jews with oppressive magyarization in the ethnically mixed regions. Another was the nexus between the Jews and the ruling elite, an elite which was antidemocratic and reactionary despite its pro-Jewish policy. Finally, there was the Jews' conspicuous role in Hungarian life, particularly in the economy. How long would this be tolerated? Prewar Hungary was, clearly, a good place for the Jews, but, as we now know, it would remain thus only so long as the country remained a multinational empire ruled by old-regime gentry liberals. Even before the end of the old regime, Theodore Herzl, a native son, had the prescience to write, in 1903, "The hand of fate shall also seize Hungarian Jewry. And the later this occurs, and the stronger this Jewry becomes, the more cruel and hard shall be the blow, which shall be delivered with greater savagery. There is no escape." Herzl, of course, was speaking as a Zionist, not as an impartial observer of the scene. But the interwar period was to prove him a prophet.

2. Hungarian Jewry and the End of the Old Order

We have remarked that World War I and the ensuing peace settlement had a devastating impact on Hungary. The same can be said for Hungarian Jewry. Just as Hungary lost vast territories and millions of people, so Hungarian Jewry was deprived of thousands of Jews in Transylvania (now attached to Romania), Slovakia, and Subcarpathian Rus (both now part of Czechoslovakia). This meant the loss of the most religious and least assimilated of Hungarian Jews, the strongholds of Orthodox and Yiddish speech in Pressburg (now called Bratislava), Szatmár (Satu-Mare), and Munkác (Mukačevo). Those who remained in Trianon Hungary tended to be more Neolog than Orthodox and more magyarized. Moreover, the collapse of Habsburg Hungary meant the end of the golden age of Hungarian-Jewish relations, an age which was never to return. One of the reasons for this was the demise of the multinational state. If the Jews were regarded in the prewar period as agents of magyarization, so useful to Hungarian rule in the peripheral regions, in the postwar period they were no longer needed to fulfill this function. Trianon Hungary, after all, was a nation-state, not a state of nationalities; as for the magyarized Jews of Slovakia, Transylvania, and Subcarpathian Rus, it was hoped that they would remain loyal to Magyarsdom, but it was also realized that they were in no position to bring about a revision of the postwar settlement. Thus one of the main reasons for traditional pro-Jewish feeling among the Hungarian elite, from Kossuth on, no longer applied.

Along with the collapse of multinational Hungary went a series of political upheavals which, although ultimately unsuccessful, were also to strike at the Hungarian-Jewish alliance. In October, 1918, the first (and only) Western-type liberal regime in Hungarian history, headed by Mihály Károlyi, took power. Károlyi's left-leaning coalition, supported by radicals and social democrats and including within its ranks several prominent Jews, was unable to halt the disintegration of the state. In March, 1919, it was replaced by a Communist government headed by Béla Kun (1886-1939), a Transylvanian Hungarian of Jewish origin who had spent most of the war as a Russian prisoner. If many right-wing opponents of Károlyi (who was of impeccable aristocratic origins) accused him of being a "Jewish stooge," there was no doubt in the minds of millions of anti-Communist Hungarians that Béla Kun's regime was Jewish through and through. In fact, the number of Jews who occupied prominent positions in Kun's ill-fated one hundred-day regime was truly remarkable. According to one student of this period, of twenty-six ministers and vice-ministers of the Kun regime, twenty were of Jewish origin. Of course, they were Jews only in the technical sense—Kun himself is quoted as having proclaimed in 1919, "My father was a Jew but I am no longer one, for I became a socialist and a Communist." But this made no difference to anyone. The fact was that the Hungarian Soviet government, despised by large numbers of Hungarians as the antithesis of traditional Hungarian politics and as a Russian effort to gain a beachhead in Central Europe, was from the beginning identified with Hungarian Jewry. The extraordinarily high rate of Jewish representation deserves some comment, for, although Jews were prominent in socialist movements everywhere in Eastern Europe, nowhere, and certainly not in Soviet Russia, did they play so great a role. Not only did Jews dominate
the Béla Kun government, but they were also very prominent in the prewar "Galileo Circle," the center of Budapest student radicalism, and in the prewar socialist movement. The traditional explanation for the prominence of Jews in the left, namely, that they were reacting to anti-Semitism, certainly has something to do with this phenomenon. True, prewar Hungary, as we have noted, was not extremely anti-Semitic, but the atmosphere changed radically after the war and even in the prewar period those Jews who were politically ambitious were likely to look to the left rather than to the gentry-dominated establishment political order. We should also recall that Hungarian Marxism was not a mass movement but chiefly an organization of intellectuals (as it was elsewhere in Eastern Europe), and the Hungarian intelligentsia, as we have already remarked, probably had more Jewish members than that of any other East European country. It was, in fact, characterized by the conspicuous presence of precocious and brilliant children of the Jewish bourgeoisie, who found on the left a more attractive environment than that offered by their banker and merchant parents. (More will be said on this subject later on.)

Jászí and other observers of the Hungarian scene have theorized that the Jews' overrepresentation in Hungarian radicalism was the result of the rootlessness, "half-assimilation," and lack of firm national tradition which characterized Hungarian Jewry. Confronting the problem of why so many Jews were involved in Béla Kun's "un-Hungarian" experiment, Jászí wrote in 1923 that

we must not forget that the contrast between Jewry and the Christian world is much greater in Eastern Europe than in the West. The Hungarian people is much more rural, conservative, and slow thinking than the Western peasant peoples. On the other hand, Hungarian Jewry is much less assimilated than Western Jewries, it is much more an independent body within society, which does not have any real contact with the native soul of the country.

This lack of contact with the Hungarian nation rendered the Jews much more prepared to devote themselves to the Bolshevik ideal than were the "rooted," conservative Hungarian masses. Indeed, for Jászí the peculiar situation of the Jews in Hungary made them prone to ideological excesses of all kinds, including not only Bolshevik internationalism but also Hungarian superchauvinism. The connection between Jewish rootlessness and Jewish Bolshevism, which fitted in well with racial theories about the Jews' inability to assimilate properly, was made ad nauseam by Hungarian anti-Semites during the interwar years. And if there is some truth in this analysis, the fact is that most Jews were patriotic Hungarians who were extremely hostile to Bolshevism and who wanted nothing less than the restoration of the prewar order. Nonetheless, they paid a heavy price for the high proportion of Jews in Kun's government, just as Russian Jewry during the civil war paid a high price for the conspicuous role played by Trotsky and other Jews in the Soviet regime.

Kun's regime, accompanied by considerable chaos and a modest red terror, called into life a voluminous and incredibly venomous anti-Semitic literature, the theme of which was the accusation that Kun was attempting to subjugate Hungary to Jewish domination. "St. Stephen's Hungary," read one typical entry, "has fallen under the rule of Trotsky's agent, Béla Kun, the embezzler." Under Kun, we are informed, "a new Jerusalem was growing up on the banks of the Danube. It emanated from Karl Marx's Jewish brain, and was built by Jews. . . ." Just as ominous, from the Jewish point of view, was that Kun's regime brought forth a powerful counterrevolutionary reaction. A loose coalition of fanatic right-wing anti-Bolsheviks and old-style Hungarian liberals rose up to fight Kun and socialism in the name of ancient Hungarian virtues. The latter group, led by István Bethlen and Pál Teleki, typical aristocrats of the old regime, was concentrated in Vienna, while the former, led by the future pro-fascist prime minister of Hungary, Gyula Gömbös, rallied around the flag in Szeged. (Gömbös and his followers were known as the "men of Szeged.") In the summer of 1919 Kun was overthrown, not so much by internal opposition as by French-backed Romanian military intervention. The counterrevolution took over the country, symbolized by the appointment as regent of Admiral Miklós Horthy, a venerable naval hero and representative of the old ruling class who favored the restoration, as much as possible, of the prewar regime.

The overthrow of Kun and the triumph of counterrevolution was accompanied by a white terror which was, among other things, a series of bloody pogroms directed against leftists and Jews, usually regarded as identical. This was the Hungarian version of the wave of anti-Jewish disturbances which swept over the Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, and even Czechoslovakia during 1918–1919. But if pogroms were fairly common in the lands of the old Tsarist empire, they were something new in the lands of St. Stephen. The white terror reached its height during August–September, 1919, but continued until the spring of 1920. Jews were murdered in some fifty towns, usually by military detachments. Hungarian public opinion regarded these events as just revenge for the sins of the Kun regime, and Horthy himself, upon his triumphant entrance into Budapest, promised to "punish" that sinful city which, as we recall, was identified in the Hungarian mind with Hungarian Jewry. The Jewish world, and in particular Hungarian Jewry, reacted with horror and amazement to these events, so unexpected in this "philosemitic" country. But the Hungarian ruling class, which before the war would never have tolerated such behavior, did not condemn the excesses. Terror, it
was felt, had to be fought by terror, and the Jews were clearly guilty of great crimes. They deserved what they got.

The Hungarian experience provides the researcher with a unique example of how a country previously "good for the Jews" is transformed, almost overnight, into a country wracked with pogroms and permeated with anti-Semitic hysteria. How did this happen? We have already seen how the community of interests which bound the Magyar ruling class to the Jews had been shaken by loss of empire and how the prominence of Jews in the short-lived Communist regime infuriated the great majority who were anti-Bolshevik. More generally, it might be said that the Hungarian nation underwent a profound national trauma during 1918-1919, when the humiliation of loss of empire was combined with the humiliation of a political takeover by a group of socially unacceptable intellectuals acting, so it was believed, under the guidance of foreign, anti-Magyar powers. These humiliations, greater than those experienced by any other East Central European nation during this period, created the overriding need for scapegoats. The Jews and the leftists were obvious targets, and if the old regime had once shielded the Jews from anti-Semitism, which was at any rate relatively submerged in prewar Hungary, it was no longer in a position to do so when anti-Semitism burst forth with unprecedented vigor during the white terror. In other words, Jewish well-being during the prewar period was a function of the old regime's ability to retain the empire and maintain social and political tranquility. The collapse of the Habsburg regime signaled the beginning of the collapse of the Jewish-gentry alliance.

To be sure, the restoration of the old regime in 1919 also restored, to a degree, the old situation so far as Hungarian-Jewish relations were concerned. But the restoration was more apparent than real. The Jewish condition in Trianon Hungary was quite different from that in prewar Habsburg Hungary, and even the victory of Horthy and Bethlen could not conceal this fact. The Jews remained great Magyar patriots, but the Hungarian ruling class was no longer pro-Jewish; meanwhile, a new political force, organizing on the extreme right, threatened the Jewish minority as no political force ever had before. But it was not only the attitude of the ruling elite and the emergence of a radical right which were new. If before the war the Hungarian nation was prepared to welcome reinforcements from other national and religious groups, it was now much less so. The traditional open nationalism of the prewar period was replaced by a closed, exclusivist nationalism which found its intellectual justification in the writings of such people as the outstanding historian of the interwar years, Gyula Szekfú. And if the Jews were able to play such a dominant role in economic and intellectual life before the war, when Hungary was a large, multinational empire undergoing rapid economic development, in the interwar period new economic conditions rendered their dominance much less tolerable. Hungary was now a much smaller country, where opportunities were suddenly reduced and where competition for employment was greater. A rapidly growing number of "native" university graduates were now searching for suitable work, and things were made worse by the influx after the war of large numbers of Hungarians from what was now Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia. The old world was gone forever, and Hungary became a most dramatic example, along with Bukovina, Transylvania, and Galicia, of how Jewish fortunes declined with the decline of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

3. Interwar Hungarian Jewry: Demography, Socioeconomic Status, Cultural Characteristics

According to the census of 1920, there were in Trianon Hungary 473,355 Jews (by religion, of course—the existence of a Jewish nationality, in contrast with the situation in Poland, was recognized neither by the state nor by the Jews themselves). The Jews constituted 5.9 percent of the total population, a much lower percentage than in Poland but a much higher percentage than in Czechoslovakia. By 1930 the Jewish population had declined to 444,567, or 5.1 percent of the total; this was mostly the result of a very low Jewish birth rate, typical of Western-type Jewish communities and similar to the situation in Bohemia and Moravia, where the Jewish community also suffered a decrease in absolute numbers during the interwar years. Some decrease was also a result of conversion, intermarriage, and emigration.

The most outstanding characteristic of Jewish demography in Hungary was the concentration of Jews in the capital. In 1920, 215,512 Jews resided in Budapest, constituting 23.2 percent of the city's total population and over 45 percent of Hungarian Jewry. The tendency of Jews to concentrate in capital cities is also a Western phenomenon. It was true in Bohemia, for example, where nearly 50 percent of all Jews lived in Prague, but it was not true of Poland, where only about 10 percent of the Jewish population resided in Warsaw. But outside Budapest, Hungarian Jews tended to live in the medium and small towns which characterized Hungary. The only other sizable Jewish communities, and they were none too large, were located in Miskolc (11,300), Debrecen (10,170), and Szeged (6,958). In 1920, 44.1 percent of all Jews resided in areas which were officially designated as rural ("comitats"), where they constituted 3.2 percent of the total population; 55.9 percent resided in "municipal districts," where they made up 17.2 percent of the total population. We must, therefore, modify to some extent our portrait of Hungarian Jewry as a Western group. In most respects it was, but since approximately one-half of its
members resided in little towns, mostly in the northeast of the state, it
shared some of the characteristics of an Eastern Jewry. Just as Hungary
itself was characterized by the sharp division between Budapest and the
“country,” so Hungarian Jewry was sharply divided between the Jews of
the capital and the small-town Jews of the provinces. This was, in fact, the
most fundamental division in Hungarian Jewish life.

While there was no such thing as a single Polish, Romanian, or
Czecho-Slovakian Jewry, there was a Hungarian Jewry, bound together by
a common political history under the Hungarian crown, by its adoption of
Hungarian culture, and by its identification with the Magyar nation.
Virtually all Hungarian Jews in Triannon Hungary spoke Hungarian and
regarded themselves as Hungarian by nationality. Yiddish could no
longer be heard in the country, now that Transylvania, Slovakia, and
Subcarpathian Rus were annexed to other states. The major cultural
division within the community was not linguistic, as in Romania or in
Latvia, but rather religious. In Triannon Hungary the Neologs were
stronger than the Orthodox, claiming the allegiance of about 65 percent,
but the latter held on, particularly in the small towns and among the
poorer Jews of the northeast. The capital of Neolog Hungary was, of
course, Budapest, and its symbol was the famous modern rabbinical
seminary established there before the war. The seminary, which in
American terms would probably be considered more “conservative”
than reform, was the home of such celebrated Jewish scholars as the aforemen
tioned Goldziher. Its students, who also studied at the University of
Budapest, were expected to be learned both in secular and in Jewish
subjects. It was, of course, anathema in the eyes of the Orthodox, whose
great religious institutions had been lost to Hungarian Jewry as a result of
the Triannon treaty. Some 80 percent of the old Hungarian yeshivas were
no longer in Hungary, but a fairly large number continued to function and
to turn out Orthodox rabbis in the traditional fashion. Hasidism was
confined to the northeast region; the famous rebbes of Munkács and
Szatmár, along with most of their followers, were now Czecho-Slovakian
and Romanian subjects.

Hungarian Jewry was basically distributed among the various strata of
the middle class, ranging from the haute to the lower bourgeoisie. At its
apex were the giants of finance and industry, the great Jewish families of
Budapest. At the bottom were the artisans and small merchants of the
little towns. There was no Jewish factory proletariat, but there was no
lack of Jewish poverty, though it was certainly much less pervasive than in
the Eastern-type communities. Table 2.1 compares the economic pursuits
of all gainfully employed Jews and Christians in 1920. The figures are
comparable to those relating to Bohemia and Moravia, except for the fact
that a larger number of Jews in Hungary were engaged in “industry and
crafts,” presumably these were mostly the artisans of the small towns,
who were less numerous among the urbanized Jews of the economically
more advanced Czech lands. As was almost always the case in East
Central Europe, those Christians not employed in the agricultural sector
were more likely to be employed in industry than in commerce, whereas
among the Jews the opposite was the case. During the interwar period
Jews played an insignificant and declining role in the bureaucracy, from
which they were by now basically excluded, but their role in commerce,
industry, and the professions was remarkable. Despite the fact that they
constituted only 5.9 percent of the population, the number of Jews active
in trade was almost the same as the number of gentiles. In 1920, 50.6
percent of all lawyers, 59.9 percent of all doctors, and 34.3 percent of all
directors and journalists were Jews, as were 39.2 percent of all privately
employed engineers and chemists, and 26.8 percent of all musicians. In
1930, 61.7 percent of all large commercial firms (employing twenty or
more people) were in Jewish hands, as were 47.4 percent of all large
industrial establishments (similarly defined). Not appearing in the statistics,
but of great importance, were the famous banking and industrial
groups of Jewish or partly Jewish origin—the Chorins, the Weiszes, the
Goldbergs and others. It was their activities, and those of their less
wealthy but solidly middle-class coreligionists, who led Macartney to
write that the Jews occupied a “commanding position” in the Hungarian
economy. And while this was a familiar claim of the anti-Semites, in
Hungary as elsewhere, and while the existence of large numbers of poor
Jews should not be forgotten, the statistics appear to bear him out.

We have remarked that Hungarian Jewry was basically of the Western
type, although this designation applies more to the Neologs of Budapest
than to the Orthodox communities of the small towns. There was, as we
might expect, a significantly high rate of intermarriage, though the Ortho
dox community’s weight within Hungarian Jewry kept the figures well.
below the Bohemian-Moravian level. During the years 1931–1935, 19.3 percent of all Jewish grooms in Budapest married outside the faith, while the figure for Jewish brides was 16.5 percent. In the little communities, intermarriage was infrequent.49 There were also more conversions in Hungary than anywhere else in East Central Europe, and they occurred in bunches, during the white terror of 1919–1920 and again in the late 1930s, when the extreme anti-Semites won the upper hand. In 1919, 7,146 Jews converted, an insignificant number compared with that at the very end of the interwar period.61 Such statistics reflect the reaction of a part of the acculturated community to outbursts of anti-Semitism previously unknown in Hungarian history.

Intermarriage, low birth rates, Reform Judaism, the lack of an autonomous modern Jewish culture in either Hebrew or Yiddish—these are the characteristics of Hungarian Jewry. If we compare it to the Jewries of Bohemia and Moravia, also distinctly of the Western type, there appear to be at least three significant differences. Hungarian Jewry, which in Trianon Hungary lived in a monocultural setting, failed to develop that kind of Jewish nationalism which in the Czech lands resulted largely from the Jews’ delicate position between Czechs and Germans. On the other hand, Orthodox Judaism survived in Hungary, as it did not in the Czech lands, and even the Neo-Orthodox created an important rabbinical school. Thus both traditional Judaism and modern Jewish scholarship (centered in the Budapest Seminary) were able to exist and even thrive in Hungary. In this respect Hungarian Jewry of the interwar years is more similar to German Jewry than to the Jewish communities of the Czech lands. Finally, as we have seen, the small-town Jewish community survived in Hungary to a much greater extent than either in the more developed Czech lands or in Germany. While it is doubtful that the Budapest Jewish community dominated Hungarian Jewry, much as New York Jewry dominates Jewish life in the Eastern United States, the presence of the more conservative, more religious, less intellectual, and less wealthy Jewish communities of the Hungarian northeast should not be forgotten.

4. The New Hungary and the Jewish Question: Part One

Historians of interwar Hungary usually divide the period into two parts—the period of the “liberal” restoration, when Hungary was ruled by the old aristocratic elite, and the period when the country fell under the control of radical right forces. The first period extends until 1932 and comes to an end with the appointment of Gömbös as prime minister. This scheme is far from foolproof (there was, for example, an old-style “liberal” Hungarian prime minister during the years 1942–1944), but it is useful, and its usefulness extends to our discussion of the position of the Jews in the state. Roughly speaking, so long as the old elite held on to power, albeit in the new environment of Trianon Hungary, Jewish well-being was not seriously impaired. This was not the case under premiers of Gömbös’ type, although we shall see that the bark of this first avowed Hungarian fascist to rule the country was considerably worse than his bite.

Two men put their stamp on Hungary of the 1920s: the regent, Admiral Miklós Horthy, and the prime minister for much of this period, István Bethlen. Both were old-style landowners, both were avowed enemies of the Versailles settlement and of Communism, and both wished to preserve the social and political system of prewar Hungary. This meant the ascendancy of the old gentry elite along with the preservation of a certain degree of political pluralism. Opposition groups were allowed to exist, but since democracy was foreign to the Hungarian system, and remained anathema to her new leaders, party life on the Czechoslovak or Polish model never developed. So far as its attitude toward the Jews was concerned, the political elite was far less friendly than the prewar rulers of Hungary, but in substance its policy during the 1920s differed little from that of its predecessors. Even at the height of the struggle against Kun and his “Jewish government,” Horthy was careful not to blame all Hungarian Jews for Kun’s crimes. His attitude is reflected in his memoirs, written after World War II, when he noted, “The Jews who had long been settled among us were the first to reprobate the crimes of their co-religionists, in whose hands the new regime almost exclusively rested.”62 This distinction between “real Hungarian Jews” and the others, presumably recent immigrants, became a common theme in the writings of the leaders of the restoration. It was not wholly reassuring to Hungarian Jewry, but it was at least not a purely racist position, and it allowed for the existence of good, patriotic Hungarian Jews who could be counted on to support the regime. It was made in the clearest possible way by the future prime minister, Count Pál Teleki, a great magnate and establishment politician who, when in the United States in 1921, insisted that Hungarians disliked only the “Galician Jews,” by whom he meant recent arrivals from Poland who were clearly not assimilated Hungarians. “...it is a mistake,” he added, “to think that the anti-Jewish movement, which really existed and which still exists in Hungary, is one against the Jewish religion or Jews in general.”63 In a lecture given in 1926 Teleki elaborated on this theme:

For centuries we have had a nationally thinking and valuable working Jewry in the process of assimilation. Over the past decades, however, the ratio of immigrants from Russia, Romania, and Galicia has multiplied. The unassimilated, unnational or even antinational Jewry became pre-
dominant, first numerically, then in certain professional lines, such as the
press and literature. Its flexible, combatant cosmopolitanism has un-
dermined the way of thinking of individuals, and started destroying the
pillars of the state. And in the years subsequent to the World War, the
cohesive force of the Jewish thought proved to have been stronger than
the national thought.41

It makes no difference that the theory of the “Galician invasion” had
little basis in fact. So long as Hungarian leaders took out their wrath on
the “Galicians,” and not on the “nationally thinking and valuable work-
ing Jewry,” state-inspired anti-Semitism remained limited. And some of
the traditional reasons for limiting anti-Semitism still prevailed. Jews
might not be able to serve as magyarizers in Transylvania now that that
province was attached to Romania, but they could still provide great
financial assistance to the government. They did, in fact, support the
new-old regime with an enthusiasm born of certain knowledge that that
regime’s opponents on the right were fanatic anti-Semites whose victory
would prove fatal to Hungarian Jewry. For their part, Bethlen and
Horthy also had much to fear from the radical right, whose attitude
ward social and economic questions posed a threat to the status quo.
Thus the old Jewish-Hungarian establishment alliance was reconstructed;
it was built on much less firm soil than in the prewar period, but while
the war as the old-regime politicians continued to rule new Hungary. As
Macartney has put it, “the big Jewish interests became one of the most
powerful pillars of his [Bethlen’s] whole system.”42 The Jewish oligarchy
continued to co-opt Hungarian aristocrats into its firms and sometimes
even intermarried with the sons and daughters of the aristocracy. Jews
continued to serve as lessees of large estates. And while the Jewish rich
(and, as we shall see, the Jewish political leadership) lent its strong
support to the regime, the regime resisted popular pressure from the
extreme right to curtail Jewish rights and to strike at the Jewish economic
interest. This meant, of course, that Jewish well-being continued to be
firmly linked to the preservation of the conservative (or even reactionary)
order just as it had been before the war. This was not a happy position for
Hungarian Jewry to find itself in, but it is difficult to see what other choice
it had. And surely the situation of Hungarian Jewry during the 1920s was
happier than that of the Jews of Poland, where the basically racist attitude
of the Endek movement prevailed and where the Jews’ lower-middle-
class and proletarian character made them especially vulnerable to anti-
Semitism. Teleki and his colleagues did not love the Jews, and we shall
see that they came to love them less and less, but their attitude was
preferable to that of Dmowski and other leaders of the Polish right, who
could not concede the possibility that Polish Jewry might be of benefit to
the state.

HUNGARY

There was one attempt during the 1920s to curtail Jewish rights, and
that involved the effort to establish a numerus clausus at Hungarian
institutions of higher learning. In 1920, the year of the signing of the
humiliating Trianon Treaty, at a time when the devastated country was
being invaded by Magyars from the annexed territories and when Béla
Kun was still a fresh memory, the government passed a law limiting
attendance at universities to the percentages which various “races and
nationalities” constituted within the general population. The word “Jew”
was not mentioned, although there were no other possible targets for the
law.43 It was defended in the League of Nations (to which, as we shall see,
complaints were brought by international Jewish organizations) as a
measure to reduce the too large number of intellectuals in the state. Said
the Hungarian representative, “There is no international obligation in
existence by which a state could be compelled to give education to a mass
of persons of the intellectual class which it would be unable to support.”44
He added, perhaps not entirely facetiously, that the government re-
garded this measure as something of a favor to the Jews, since universities
were unwilling to accept “unpatriotic” candidates and, were it not for the
numerus clausus, would not accept any Jews at all.

What was alarming about this law was not so much that it limited the
number of Jews in universities, but that it defined the Jews as a special
“race” or “nationality” and therefore appeared to exclude them from
Magyardom. Such a definition, devoutly desired by many Polish Jews, and
by Zionists everywhere, went against the grain of Hungarian Jewish
history, for it implied that the prewar formula “Hungarians of the Mosaic
faith” no longer applied. Vilmos Vázsonyi (1868–1926), minister of jus-
tice during World War I and one of the few prominent Hungarian politi-
cians of Jewish origin not identified with the left, pointed this out in an
appeal to Bethlen issued in 1923:

The numerus clausus does not speak of religious groups [confessions] but
of race. . . . This law therefore considers the Jews to be a race or a distinct
nationality. And this at a time when, in Paris, Count Teleki and Count
Bethlen have declared that the Romanians and Czechs are wrong to
consider the Jews as a separate race, since the Jews [in Slovakia and
Transylvania] are Hungarians.45

How, Vázsonyi wondered, could the Hungarian government expel Hun-
gary’s Jews from Magyardom while claiming, for irredentist purposes,
the allegiance of Hungarian Jews in the lost provinces? He could not have
been reassured when, in 1925, the Hungarian representative at the
League of Nations announced that the Jews were partly a race, partly a
religious group, and partly a nationality, and that “a Jewish minority
cannot be defined in the same way as other minorities, in view of the unique position occupied by Jews throughout the world. But in the 1920s, at least, the conclusions implied in such statements, which appeared to threaten the legal equality of Hungarian Jewry, were not explicitly drawn. The *numerus clausus* law remained on the books but was not strictly enforced. The number of Jewish students at institutions of higher learning declined sharply in 1920–1921, but in 1921–1922 it rose to 13.4 percent of the total—far higher than the Jewish percentage within the population, although lower than in the prewar years. This was again different from the Jews’ experience in Poland, where an attempt in 1923 to institute *numerus clausus* had failed but where the percentage of Jewish students declined steadily during the 1920s. Moreover, the government insisted that it regarded the law as a temporary measure, and it was eventually allowed to lapse. Nonetheless, this episode was a revealing one. It would not have been possible in the Habsburg years, and it demonstrated how tenuous the reconstructed Hungarian-Jewish alliance was. It is an illustration of how acute the problem of competition between Jewish and Christian intellectuals and potential members of the professions had become after the collapse of the Hungarian empire, and it also showed how the Magyar ruling class, while maintaining its close ties with the Jewish oligarchy, was prepared to punish those Jews it considered most responsible for the revolution—namely, the intelligentsia—while making it easier for the “native” middle class and intelligentsia to find employment. Jews were punished in other ways as well during the 1920s. Not only did their members in the universities fall short of prewar figures, but also they were, as has been mentioned, effectively kept out of the bureaucracy as well as out of the army officers corps (the former was a preserve for Magyars of the Christian faith, the latter an important avenue of advancement for the German minority). Such exclusion was not a calamity for Hungarian Jewry, which was much richer and therefore much less vulnerable economically than were the Jews of the East European type. But it was another sign that things were not as they had been. We have noted that in chauvinist, revisionist Hungary of the interwar years opportunities for Jews were not so great as they were in Habsburg times, and this was particularly true for those young people—and there were many such—who did not wish to follow in the footsteps of their “bourgeois” parents. It was during this period, after all, that such celebrated Jewish scientists as Szilard, von Neumann, and Teller left their native land. We do not find in Hungary the Polish phenomenon of a “youth without a future,” certainly not in the 1920s and not during most of the 1930s. But neither was there the feeling, as there was in the Czech lands, that virtually all careers were open to the talented. In retrospect the 1920s seem to have been a good period for Hungarian Jewry.

5. Jewish Politics and Jewish Leadership in Hungary

Of all the lands of East Central Europe, Hungary was the most unfavorable environment for the emergence of modern Jewish politics. In this sense it was the exact opposite of Poland. In Hungary, as we know, Jews defined themselves as a religious group, not as a nationality, and so long as virtually all Hungarian Jews regarded themselves as Hungarians of the Mosaic faith a Jewish political platform based on the notion that the Jews were a modern nation was impossible. The basic split in Hungary was between Neolog and Orthodox Jews, while in the Jewries of the East European type it was between secular-national Jews and religious Jews. To be sure, in the peripheral regions of old Hungary the multinational situation did make more likely the establishment of a secular Jewish national tradition, but even in such regions as Slovakia and Transylvania modern Jewish politics was very weak in the prewar period. It was even weaker, of course, in the monotheistic Hungarian heartland. True, Herzl and Nordau were Hungarian-born, but they became Zionists after they had left their childhood home. Most Hungarian Jews in the interwar years would surely have agreed with the Neolog rabbi of Buda, Samuel Kohn, who had declared in 1897 (the year of the first Zionist Congress), “I consider political Zionism, which wants to establish a new Jewish state in Palestine, a reckless... and dangerous folly.” Hungary was the only country in East Central Europe where the dramatic events of 1918–1919 did not lead to a much greater national consciousness on the part of the Jewish community. Even the pogroms of the white terror did not have this effect. The Jews of Trianon Hungary, unlike their coreligionists in Czechoslovakia, Transylvania, Slovakia, and Lithuania, did not suddenly find themselves in a new cultural and political setting. There was no cultural and political vacuum here, as there was in so many other regions. They continued to be Hungarian Jews living under Hungarian sovereignty, as they had since 1867. This, along with the fact that in most respects they were a Western-type Jewry, precluded the process of nationalism which affected most East Central European Jewries, from the Jews of Bohemia to the Jews of Galicia. We should not be surprised, therefore, if in 1937, when extreme anti-Semitism was rampant in Hungary, a mere 6,044 shekels were sold in the state, or that in some years the
Jews of the Vilna region in Poland purchased nearly as many shekels as did all of Hungarian Jewry. There is no better proof that anti-Semitism alone does not inevitably lead to Jewish nationalism. It was only after 1938, when Hungary regained some of her lost territories, and along with them many Jews who had participated in the national movement in Romania and Czechoslovakia, that Zionism was able to make something of an impact in Hungary.

If there was no Zionism, and of course no Bund or Folkist tradition either (we may recall that Yiddish was unknown in interwar Hungary and that the left in general was not very strong), what was the nature of Jewish politics and leadership? Instead of the autonomous “new” Jewish politics of the Polish variety which dominated Jewish communities of the Eastern type and which made great inroads even in the Czech lands, we have the preservation of the old, nondemocratic Jewish leadership, largely drawn from the wealthy Neolog community in Budapest. (The Neologs and the Orthodox maintained separate organizations throughout the interwar years.) The policy of this leadership was to emphasize time and again the loyalty and patriotism of Hungarian Jewry and to denounce any suggestion that the Jews were anything but good Hungarians. This policy made them ferocious enemies of such Jewish separatist doctrines as Zionism, as well as of Hungarian right wingers who believed the Jews to be anti-Hungarian. It also led them to take positions identical to those of the ruling elite. During the white terror the leaders of the major Jewish communities issued statements condemning Béla Kun and his colleagues as violators of the holy precepts of Judaism and emphasizing the readiness of Hungarian Jewry to sacrifice itself for the fatherland. In 1920 an important Hungarian Jewish organization declared itself in favor of revising the Trianon treaty and returning to Hungary her lost provinces, thus proving itself to be no less patriotic than Horthy and Bethlen. We should recall that such patriotic statements were made during the pogroms of 1919-1920, which were not denounced by the new rulers of Hungary.) Vilmos Vásásonyi, who was not an official Jewish leader but who often spoke out on the Jewish question and was regarded as a Jewish spokesman, was a Hungarian superpatriot, a great opponent of Bolshevism, a revisionist, and a fierce enemy of Zionism. His views on general issues mirrored those of the ruling class, and he was highly valued by the moderate counterrevolutionaries. In 1919 he was recommended to Horthy by Prince Lajos Windschgraetz as “the most pronounced antagonist in Hungary of the revolutionary Jewish journalism, which during recent years has had such a great role, and he bides his time only until he can break those who, also in his opinion, have ruined the country.” Thus Vásásonyi, the “good Hungarian Jew,” was contrasted to the wicked Jewish journalists who paved the way for the victory of Béla Kun. And it is a fact that the official leaders of Hungarian Jewry saw themselves in this light, carrying on the glorious tradition of Jewish Hungarian patriotism which went back to Kossuth and which was responsible, so they believed, for the great achievements and happy condition of Hungarian Jewry. In all this they closely resembled the official leaders of German Jewry, who also lost no opportunity to emphasize the patriotism of German Jewry and its loyalty to the state.

The Magyar patriotism of the Hungarian Jewish leadership had as one of its consequences the tendency not to call undue attention to the anti-Semitism of the new regime. In a discussion between an English Jewish leader and a Hungarian Jewish journalist attached to the Hungarian embassy in London—a certain Dr. Rácz—the latter remarked that “we patriotic Hungarian Jews do not like to discuss the question of anti-Semitism because we feel a little ashamed of ourselves and our people when we think that, after all we owe to Hungary, nearly all the leaders of the Bolshevist revolution should have been Jews.” Of course, representatives of the Neolog and the Orthodox communities spoke out against the white terror, but they also were quick to point out that there were some Jewish victims (twenty-seven were discovered) of the red terror as well. Particularly interesting and revealing was their attitude toward the numerus clausus law of 1920. One might have expected them to denounce this effort to limit the number of Jewish students at Hungarian universities, as did the Hungarian social democrats and liberal opponents of the regime, but in fact there were no official protests. (Vásásonyi’s remarks, quoted above, represented his own views, not those of the official Jewish leadership.) It was left to foreign Jewish organizations—the Foreign Committee of the British Jewish Board of Deputies, and the French Alliance Israélite—to protest to the League of Nations, and their actions were opposed, not supported, by the Hungarian Jewish leadership. Such opposition was based on the belief that outside interference could not help the cause of Hungarian Jewry and would only reinforce anti-Semitic views of the Jewish people as an international body allied with anti-Hungarian powers. Moreover, the intervention was based upon certain clauses in the Trianon treaty that promised equality to all groups within Hungarian society, a treaty which Jewish leaders rejected since it called for the dismemberment of the old Hungarian state. We therefore have the curious spectacle of British and French Jews pleading the cause of Hungarian Jewry at Geneva while Hungarian Jews insisted that they needed and wanted no such help. This situation was naturally exploited by the Hungarian representative to the League, who pointed out with evident delight that opposition to the 1920 law derived from “organizations entirely foreign to the Hungarian Jews—who have, in fact, not only disapproved the action of these organizations but solemnly
protested their intrusion. . . .” The Jewish leadership, closely wedded to the Horthy-Bethlen regime, evidently believed that it was best not to make a commotion over the law, which, so it believed, resulted from intense pressures from below and did not signify a real change in policy on the part of the ruling class. How different their behavior was from that of the Polish Jewish nationalists, who actively courted international intervention, Jewish and non-Jewish, on behalf of Polish Jewry and who fought tooth and nail against a Polish effort to institute the numeros clausus in 1923. No greater contrast can be imagined in the world of Jewish politics than that between a Grünbaum, for example, and the Neolog leadership of Budapest.

The behavior of the official Hungarian Jewish leadership was regarded with scorn by the Jewish nationalists of Eastern Europe. It has been characterized by modern historians as cowardly, and its practitioners have been accused of ignoring the interests of the Jewish masses. It certainly did appear to deserve the derisive appellation shtadlonim. But we must be careful not to accept such accusations blindly. The leaders of Hungarian Jewry, whether Neolog or Orthodox, were certainly sincere Magyar patriots. They were also convinced that their only hope in the struggle against radical, racist anti-Semitism was to preserve at all costs their alliance with the regime. It was far better, they thought, to acquiesce in a numeros clausus in which (in their view) the leadership did not really believe and which at any rate would be only temporary than to endanger their good working relations with Horthy and his friends. By so doing they were obviously playing an extremely dangerous game, for it was by no means clear where the line should be drawn. How anti-Semitic would the government have to be in order to rouse the leadership into action? On the other hand, what was the alternative? Hungarian Jewish leaders did not believe in the efficacy of foreign intervention at the League of Nations, and they cannot be faulted for this. All minorities need allies, and in Hungary, which lacked a strong left and which possessed no strategically important national minorities, the only possible allies of the Jews who possessed some influence were precisely the moderate anti-Semites. True, they were responsible for the numeros clausus law, but they also played bridge with the Jewish oligarchy, despised the radical right, and believed that there were some “positive” elements within Hungarian Jewry. Thus the reaction of the Jewish leadership to the numeros clausus affair, which established an important pattern of behavior, to be repeated many times during the 1930s and 1940s, is perfectly understandable. It also highlighted the dilemma of the Jewish leadership in Hungary, to which there were obviously no easy answers.

Whether or not Jewish leaders in interwar Hungary were “cowards,” their policies were not seriously challenged during the interwar years. If

the masses were inadequately represented, they did not offer any alternative leadership. No nationalist opposition arose to oust the shtadlonim, as it did in Poland, Romania, and the Baltic States. No national Jewish party emerged, as it did in Czechoslovakia and Romania. Those Hungarian Jews who did not agree with the established leaders of the two communities, and there were plenty of them, did not vent their displeasure by joining the Zionist movement or by embracing any other form of Jewish nationalism. Rather, in the time-honored prewar tradition, they turned against the bourgeoisie and the reactionary ruling class, both gentile and Jewish, and went into Hungarian left-wing politics. Thus the war between fathers and sons in Hungary did not take the form, as it did in Poland, for example, of joining a pioneering youth movement or the Bund. Those who were disgusted by the official Jewish leadership did not offer an alternative Jewish leadership, but turned their backs entirely on Jewish affairs and plotted revolution. As we have noted, this was nothing new. Ever since the end of the nineteenth century, Jewish intellectuals, sons and daughters of the commercial and industrial bourgeoisie, had been castigating the reactionary behavior of Hungarian Jewry. Thus George Lukács (1885–1971), the famous Communist intellectual, has the following to say about his childhood:

As is well known I came from a capitalist, Lipótváros family. [The Lipótváros is a district in Pest which was then fashionable among the town’s richer merchants]... From my childhood I was profoundly discontent with the Lipótváros way of life. Since my father, in the course of his business, was regularly in contact with the representatives of the city patriciate and of the bureaucratic gentry, my rejection tended to extend to them too. Thus at a very early age violently oppositional feelings ruled in me against the whole of official Hungary...”

The loathing many young, sensitive Jews felt toward the Hungarian Jewish bourgeoisie was truly remarkable and led many to what can only be called a severe case of Jewish self-hatred. An excellent example of this was the radical sociologist Oszkár Jász, a minister in the Károlyi government, who in his well-known writings denounced the Jews for aiding and abetting the oppression of the minority nationalities and for propping up the reactionary old regime. They were, in his view, “an unscrupulous instrument of feudal and financial class-domination” as well as “the loudest and most intolerant representatives of Magyar nationalism.”

Many Jewish intellectuals held identical views throughout the interwar years. Even the great Jewish scholar Goldziher, who could scarcely be accused of self-hatred, was driven to despair by his dealings with the Jewish leadership of the Neolog community and by the Jewish “rabble” (Pöbel) who ran the yellow press and sat in the Budapest cafés. But,
again, this Jewish version of what was considered anti-Semitism when uttered by gentiles did not bring about a new Jewish leadership. In this area, as in so many others, Hungarian Jewry did not undergo anything like the revolutionary change experienced by other Jewries in East Central Europe during the war and in the immediate postwar period. Its cultural orientation and political policy remained, for better or for worse, what they had been.

If there were no autonomous Jewish politics, neither was there much autonomous secular Jewish culture, certainly not on the Polish model. Jewish education in Jewish languages was nonexistent, although there were a number of private Jewish schools. There were many Jewish newspapermen, but no newspapers in Jewish languages. Jewish writers, scholars, and journalists, such as the celebrated playwright Ferenc Molnár, were extremely conspicuous in Hungarian cultural life, but regarded themselves first and foremost as Hungarians working in and contributing to the Hungarian cultural tradition. There can be no doubt that there was a special Jewish subculture in interwar Hungary, but its contribution to modern Jewish culture was certainly not striking. This acculturated community offered little scope for specifically Jewish activity to those among its children who no longer took any interest in religion or in preserving the status quo. The alternative Jewish identity afforded by secular Jewish nationalism was not available in Hungary. Someone like Jássói, a disaffected son of middle-class parents, might have become in Poland a Jewish socialist or a member of Ha-shomer ha-tsair; here, his most natural course was to become active in the Hungarian left. If one was not willing to take the position of Vázsonyi, that was the most obvious choice available.

6. The Beginning of the End: Hungarian-Jewish Relations in the 1930s

During the 1930s the radical Hungarian right, kept out of government by Bethlen and his allies in the 1920s, finally rose to power. That this happened was to some extent the fault of Bethlen and his allies, since during the 1920s the established regime, while persecuting the left and effectively banning it from political life (we should note here the contrast with the situation in Poland), was ambivalent toward the extreme right and even agreed with it in some ways, as in its demand for total revision of the postwar settlement. And its search for allies in its revisionist policy led the moderate right to establish friendly relations with fascist Italy, a country much admired by Hungary’s extreme right wing. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, new factors combined to strengthen the extreme right. One of the signal achievements of Bethlen was the restoration of eco-

nomic prosperity, but this broke down under the devastating impact of the Great Depression. Economic misery in the countryside grew worse, as did the lot of the too numerous university graduates with little hope of suitable employment. Meanwhile, the Nazis were growing ever stronger in Germany, and the extreme right in Hungary, losing interest in the Italian alliance, was ideologically inspired by Hitler and began to see in him the key to the revision of the Trianon settlement. In this connection we should note the dramatic and foreboding turnabout in the politics of Hungary’s one-half-million-strong German (Swabian) minority. During the nineteenth century this community had undergone a process of magyarization not unlike that of the Jews, although as Christians they certainly found it easier to integrate into Hungarian society. During the 1920s their leaders maintained their traditional loyalty to Hungary and behaved much like the Jewish leaders. Their position changed in the 1930s, when, like the other Volksdeutsch communities of East Central Europe, the German Hungarians fell more and more under Nazi influence. They now began to “demagyarize” and reassert their “Germanism,” providing an interesting example of how a long process of denationalization may be arrested and even reversed. (Once again, there are suggestive Jewish parallels.) The Hungarian Germans, always more anti-Semitic than the Magyars were, played a particularly important role in military life, and the result was that the Hungarian army became a center of the radical right, of Nazi influence, and of fierce anti-Semitism. We shall see that this army had a good deal to do with the tragic fate of Hungarian Jewry.

Thus more and more people fell under the sway of various organizations which preached extreme Hungarian chauvinism, hatred both of capitalism (and Budapest, the center of modern Hungary) and Bolshevism, and admiration for European fascism. The undisputed leader of this camp during the 1920s was Gyula Gömbös, a military officer of partly German origin who had led the “men of Szeged” during the counterrevolution of 1919–1920 and who had, even in the 1920s, expressed his admiration for German National Socialism. In 1932 the regent of Hungary, Admiral Horthy, yielded to pressure from the right and appointed Gömbös to lead a new Hungarian government, thus putting an end to the rule of the moderates.

The advent of Gömbös appeared to be extremely dangerous for Hungarian Jewry. Here, for the first time in modern Hungarian history, was a prime minister who was an open racist, who stood for a “Christian Hungary,” free of Jewish influence, and who in 1925 had helped organize an international anti-Semitic conference in Budapest. No sharper break could be imagined with that pro-Jewish tradition of Hungarian statesmen which extended from Kossuth to the last premier of Habsburg Hungary.
and which, at least to a certain degree, was carried on by Bethlen in the 1920s. The platform of the new government, published in 1932, spoke in traditional terms of the need to revive the Trianon settlement and to increase the "national strength" of Hungary, but it also included a more ominous clause which stated, "We desire to secure our own national civilization based on our own special racial peculiarities and upon Christian moral principles." In 1933 Gombos became the first prime minister of a foreign country to visit the recently elected Chancellor Adolf Hitler in Berlin, and close ties were established between the two leaders. And during his term in office, which lasted until his death in 1936, Gombos was a great proponent of a German alliance, which he supported both for ideological reasons and because he believed that only Germany had the strength and will to revise the postwar settlement. Moreover, he made clear his contempt for the political pluralism and personal liberty which had been part of the old Hungarian liberal system and which had been maintained by Bethlen. His government persecuted the insignificant left with new vigor, and, while it did not in fact succeed in transforming Hungary into a fascist, one-party state a la Italy and Germany, it did not conceal the fact that those were its political models.

All this augured badly for Hungarian Jewry. And yet, to everyone's surprise, Gombos' reign did not appear to signal a radical departure with the past so far as the Jewish question was concerned. While this five-year period did contribute greatly to the eventual conversion of Hungary into an extreme right-wing state wedded to a Nazi alliance, it did not witness any concentrated effort to strike at the half-million Hungarian Jews. Indeed, upon taking power, Gombos, the convinced anti-Semite, performed something of an ideological somersault. The new prime minister quickly came to an agreement with the leaders of the Neolog community in Budapest, and in return for Jewish support (presumably financial) he announced that he had "revised his ideas on the Jewish question." Sounding precisely like Bethlen and Horthy, he now declared that "that part of Jewry which recognizes that it has a common fate with our nation, I wish to consider my brothers as much as my Hungarian brethren. I saw in the war Jewish heroes. I know Jews who have the golden medal and I know that they fought courageously." Once again appeared that famous distinction between "good Hungarian Jews" and "bad Jews," although Gombos indicated that even the "good Jews" were not quite "Hungarian." Nonetheless, Hungarian Jewry was able to take solace in these remarks. And Gombos made no move to emulate the Nuremburg laws or even to revive the numerus clausus.

How is this remarkable turnabout to be explained? In the opinion of Gombos' right-wing allies, he had sold out to the Jewish interests and had treacherously moved toward a Bethlen-like position. For others, his shift to the center was a statesmanlike reaction to his sudden and unexpected ascendancy to power. Whatever the case, it is clear that Gombos discovered that it was to his advantage to secure Jewish support. And just as Bethlen, during the 1920s, fought off his enemies on the right, now Gombos, called by one historian a "conservative fascist," had to wage war not so much against the weak and demoralized left as against even more extreme rightist forces who now regarded him as a traitor to the movement. By 1933 these ever-growing forces were chiefly organized in the Arrow Cross Party, led by Ferenc Szalasi, Hungary's most prominent "radical" fascist leader during the second decade of the interwar period. So far as the Jewish leadership was concerned, the devil they knew was far better than the devil they did not know, all the more so since Gombos turned out to be not nearly so bad as they had feared. They now clung to him, as they had once clung to Bethlen.

But for those with eyes to see, by the mid-1930s it was clear that the tide was turning against the Jewish interest. The extreme right was there to stay, and, if Gombos refrained from striking at the Jews, those who came after him did not. Personalities may have had something to do with this, but more important were the growing ties with Germany and the linkages established among the Nazi alliance, the hopes for revision, the strengthening of Hungarian fascism, and government anti-Semitism. It is true that these trends were offset to a certain extent by old Hungarian liberal traditions, which refused to die out altogether, along with an aversion in some circles to the alliance with Nazi Germany, considered by many to be, along with Austria, the hereditary enemy. Nonetheless, Hungarian-Jewish relations during the second half of the 1930s were shaped by the triumph of the extreme right and of the Nazi alliance. The alliance won back for Hungary much of its lost empire, at least temporarily, but it also led it into World War II and eventually into the Soviet orbit. As far as the Jews were concerned, it signaled the end of their legal emancipation and the beginning of their physical destruction.

If 1932 is regarded by most Hungarian historians as the great turning point in interwar Hungarian politics, for Hungarian Jewry the crucial year was 1938. This, of course, was the year of the German takeover of Austria and of the first partition of Czechoslovakia. The latter event was of great significance for Hungary, since it returned to Hungary parts of Slovakia and Subcarpathian Rus. Here was proof that the Nazi alliance was strong enough to begin the righting of the terrible wrong of 1920. In this atmosphere of growing affection for the Nazi ally and of a surge of nationalism fed by the prospects of revising the Trianon settlement, along with rising fears within the government due to the rapid growth of the Arrow Cross Party, pressure mounted to "solve" the Jewish question. The pressure came not only from within Hungary but from Germany as well, since the
Nazis strongly urged their Hungarian friends to emulate their Jewish policy. In May, 1938, even before the return of parts of Slovakia, the pro-German prime minister, Kálmán Darányi, enacted the so-called first Jewish law, the first such law to be passed in East Central Europe. The major provisions of the law were summed up by an official Hungarian publication as follows:

Industrial and commercial undertakings and banking houses employing more than ten persons are given five, or in certain cases ten, years in which to adjust the proportion of employees and of salaries, bonuses, and so on, to conform with the general rule that does not allow the Jewish share under any of these headings to exceed twenty percent of the total. In chambers of industry and commerce and in the legal, medical, and engineering professions, new Jewish members will be admitted at the rate of only five percent, until the Jewish proportion is reduced to the limit of twenty percent. New chambers in journalism and in the entertainment industry will be set up by the end of the year, and the twenty percent numeros clausus will come into force at once.  

Jews who had converted to Christianity prior to August, 1919 were exempt from these draconian measures (but those who had participated in the rather large wave of conversions following the fall of Béla Kun and during the white terror were not). Exempt too were Jews who had fought at the front during World War I, as well as the widows and children of Jews killed in the war.  

Government spokesmen justified this law on three grounds. First, the high percentage of Jews in commercial, industrial, and professional life was obviously “abnormal” and could not be allowed to continue forever, certainly not when thousands of Christian Hungarians were starving. Second, the growing strength of Nazi Germany had caused great panic among the Jews, who were under the impression that they would be subjected to the same kind of anti-Jewish terror prevalent in the Reich; therefore, “it was necessary to reassure the Jews by laying down the limit of the restrictions which the Government was prepared to approve as just and equitable.”  

In other words, the state had done the Jews a favor. Finally, it was claimed that the great majority of Jews had not really become proper Magyars, that they had not really assimilated, despite a superficial process of acculturation. Thus they were not worthy of equal treatment before the law. All these claims were rejected by the Jewish leadership, which, now, in contrast with its reactions during the 1920s, registered a strong public protest. The Union of Hungarian Jews pointed out that the law “creates a distinction between Hungarian citizens of the Jewish and of other faiths [and] is a gross offense against the principle of equality of rights.” It was, in fact, a violation of the noble tradition of 

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Hungarian tolerance, embraced by the great Hungarian statesmen and revolutionaries of the nineteenth century—by Kossuth, Deák, and Eötvös. The Jewish leadership declared, logically enough but rather naively, that 

since no field of occupation was closed to Hungarian Jews, no one has the right to accuse them of having taken up too great a number of positions in economic life—particularly in fields from which, according to the motivation of the Bill, citizens professing other religions have kept away. No one can deny that without the activity of Hungarian Jews, the most important areas of industry, commerce, and credit in Hungary would not have been cultivated to their needed extent. Neither has anyone the right to reproach the Jews of Hungary for having participated in every field of intellectual endeavor to the best of their ability, and for faithfully serving the country’s interest, the people’s welfare and national culture in this as in other spheres of endeavor.  

Having established the obvious unfairness and un-Hungarian character of the law, the Jewish organization went on, in time-honored fashion, to denounce the view that the Jewish population was not fully assimilated and did not identify itself wholeheartedly with the Hungarian cause: 

We protest against making our Jewish faith appear as if adherence to it is opposed to the faithful observance of the nation’s historical traditions and as if these traditions do not represent the same values for Hungarians of Jewish faith as they do for other Hungarians. We protest against the pretense that the adherence to the Jewish faith could in any way influence assimilation to the Hungarian spirit. And we particularly protest against the terming the abandonment of the Jewish faith as assimilation to the Hungarian spirit, and thus terming loyalty to religion as incompatible with loyalty to the nation. This declaration of reasons for the Bill is a condemnation of the Jewish religion before the forum of the nation. It is an insult to the most sacred patriotic feelings of more than four hundred thousand Hungarian citizens of the Jewish faith.  

We maintain and declare that we are and will remain faithful Jews by religion, faithful Hungarians by sentiment. We suffer from the doom of Trinon equally with all our compatriots. Our efforts are directed towards the realization of the great aims of the nation. We will share in the newly initiated work of saving the nation with the same utmost effort and faculty for sacrifice that we have demonstrated in the past, fighting against every attempt at disturbance from whatever quarter it may come. The spirit of Rákóczi, Kossuth, Vörösmarty, Petőfi, Jókai, and Arany stand before us as our national ideals.  

Such ringing declarations show that even the cautious and conservative Jewish leadership would not remain silent in the face of such an obvious
attempt to make the Jews into second-class citizens, although they also demonstrate that its Hungarian superpatriotism remained firm. Moreover, now as in 1920, the Jewish leaders rejected the idea of foreign intervention on behalf of Hungarian Jewry and were even prepared, at least in private, "to accept a tolerable level of anti-Jewish measures." In return for not attempting to rally world and Jewish opinion against the law, they hoped that the government would do its best to subdue the extreme right.

The first Jewish law was debated in parliament, where members opposed to the government, few and ineffectual as they were, were allowed to voice their opposition. One common theme in this opposition, one which was likely to strike a responsive chord among many Hungarians, was that the new law was "made in Germany," that is, drafted with an eye toward appeasing the Nazis. Another theme was the unequal treatment meted out to Jews and to the Swabian Germans, Hungary's only national minority. Why, asked the socialist deputy Peyer, were the Jews told that their failure to assimilate had cost them their equal status while the German Hungarians (whose cause was dear to the hearts of the Nazi government and who were disliked by many Hungarian nationalists) were allowed to remain loyal to their ethnic heritage? Finally, there was opposition on moral grounds. The law, some deputies thought, was obviously contrary to that Hungarian tradition which had consistently opposed racism and whose only criterion for legal equality was loyalty to the Hungarian state. Those arguments had no effect on the government, of course, and it is interesting that the law was defended by such representatives of the old ruling class as Pál Teleki, whose views on the Jewish question are quoted above. Writing in early 1939 to an English acquaintance, Teleki had the following to say:

It was in 1919 or 1920 when I told some Jewish leaders of our public life: "You are Jews and you are Magyars. There is a conflict between the Christian Magyars and between the Oriental [i.e., East European] Jews who came in great nájás to our country in the last half-century, and the continual infiltration of which did not stop and does not stop. You have to choose your place in this conflict because it is an earnest conflict, it is a problem of life and death for the Hungarian people. You must choose between your Magyar compatriots and between your Oriental coreligionists." Unhappily the greatest part of Hungarian Jews chose the latter. They help the Oriental Jew with money, by way of adoption and by giving them work, to come into the land, to get here a footing, to stay and fight his life[s] in competition with the autochthonous Christian people.

Such were the views also of Horthy and other pillars of the establishment. The Catholic church, less active in the anti-Semitic campaign here than in

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Poland, and fearful lest the anti-Jewish hysteria strike at Christians of Jewish origin, nonetheless also supported the 1938 law.

The first Jewish law was not one-hundred-percent racist in character. It did, after all, exempt some Jews and also recognized pre-1919 converts as Hungarians. Teleki, Horthy, and their allies maintained the old tradition of allowing for the existence of "Magyar Jews." Moreover, these "moderates" insisted that the first Jewish law, even if it was not justified on moral grounds and even if it violated the spirit of Hungarian history and the Hungarian constitution, was a reasonable way out of a situation in which external and internal pressures combined to make some sort of action necessary. Thus Teleki informed his disapproving English correspondent that "I have probably more connections with most different circles of people than many parliamentary politicians. And I know quite well how public opinion wishes a very radical solution of the Jewish problem." Failure to act might provide "the opportunity to any neighbor and especially the big one [Germany] to interfere." And besides, it was argued that the law was not very harmful to the Jews, since it was to be implemented over a long period of time and since Hungarians were at any rate not nearly so efficient as Germans.

Such arguments, first trotted out during the numerus clausus affair of the 1920s, continued the old pattern of behavior according to which "moderate" Hungarian politicians argued for the acceptance of "moderate" anti-Semitic measures as an alternative to the great danger of a revolt from below (that is, a takeover by the Arrow Cross Party) which would finish off the Jews (and the old elite) altogether. It is by no means clear to what extent the views of Horthy and Teleki were shaped by expediency—the need to buy off the extreme right and the Nazis—and to what extent they reflected a growing acceptance of Nazi racism. Whatever the truth of the matter, one thing was clear: the Hungarian ruling class did not hesitate to strike cruelly at its erstwhile Jewish allies, much preferring such action to social reform and knowing full well that the Jews, lacking any other allies, would continue to support it in preference to the still worse alternative. From the Jewish point of view, as we have already noted, this was a very dangerous game, since the stakes were constantly rising. One might live with a numerus clausus not strictly enforced, but could one live with the law of 1938? And would this be the last Jewish law?

It turned out that this was not the end, but rather the beginning. During 1938–1939 the links with the Nazis grew stronger (and bore fruit in the return, in 1939, of the rest of Subcarpathian Rus to Hungary) and so did the Arrow Cross Party. The need to steel the thunder of the extreme right in order to maintain the power of the "moderates" was now even greater. In late 1938 the government of Béla Imrédy initiated a "second Jewish
law,” and after Imrédi’s fall (in ironic circumstances, described below) the measure was passed by the new prime minister, Pál Teleki, whose strong anti-Nazi and anti-Arrow Cross views did not prevent him from steering it through parliament. The new law, which took effect in May, 1939, was far more severe than its predecessor. Its definition of a Jew was still not entirely racial; children of Jewish parents both of whom had converted were not regarded as Jews, although children one of whose parents was a nonconverted Jew were, and exemptions were still granted to Jewish war veterans who had won medals and in invalids. Champions of Olympic games of Jewish origin were also exempted. But the numeros clausus was made more restrictive, and a host of other limitations were introduced. The following is a contemporary summary of the regulations:

The Law limits the Jews to 6 percent of the membership of the Chambers of the liberal and academic professions; restricts the participation of the Jews in public contracts to 20 percent, and from 1943 to 6 percent; forbids them to occupy any controlling, managerial, or influential position in newspaper offices, theatres, cinemas, or film studios; utterly excludes them from the Civil and Municipal services, and from the staff of social insurance organizations and all public institutions, as well as from the occupations of notary and sworn interpreter. It requires that all Jewish professors and teachers in colleges and higher grade schools, and all Jewish district notaries shall be retired by January 1st, 1943, and all Jewish public prosecutors by January 1st, 1940, with compensation. Jewish students at Universities and higher grade schools are to be limited to 6 percent. All licenses held by Jews for the sale of State monopoly articles must be withdrawn within five years and not renewed, and trade licenses issued to Jews must be limited to 6 percent of the total held in the local community. Jews have no right to buy or sell land, except by permission, and they can be compelled at any time to sell or lease their agricultural property on terms fixed by the authorities—a provision that amounts to forcible expropriation. In industrial concerns, mines, banks, money exchanges, and insurance companies Jews must be limited to 12 percent; they can be dismissed at any time on short notice, and their compensation or pension depends upon the generosity of the employer."

As was the case with the first Jewish law, there was opposition to this law—and this time not only from the handful of left-wing and Jewish deputies in the parliament. In January, 1939, the former premier Bethlen and other distinguished Hungarians voiced their opposition in a letter to the regent, Horthy. To be sure, Bethlen did not take a pro-Jewish position. He too believed that the Jewish question (along with the question of land reform) had to be solved immediately:

If these two problems remain unsolved before elections are called, any internal or external revolutionizing tendency will attempt by way of these problems to deflect our nation—a nation small, and therefore hardly able to accept great risks and loads—from the lawful path of historical development, and divert it to the path of unforeseeable revolutionary risks. If these two problems are not settled, the agitation of the Arrow Cross men will roll over the four thousand communities of our country, in an unprecedented manner, and it is beyond doubt that they will dispose of abundant financial means from foreign sources."

“The essence of the Jewish problem,” Bethlen continued, “is that there are too many of them and their influence is too great.” But the proposals of the Imrédi government would not provide the cure, according to Bethlen, since they created panic among the Jewish population and threatened to destroy the Hungarian economy. The former ruler of Hungary therefore attacked the second Jewish law, not on moral grounds and not even on the grounds that it was “made in Germany,” but on the same pragmatic grounds which were responsible for Gömbös’ moderate position during his tenure as prime minister:

Within the country the Government are about to turn close to one million [sic] intelligent Jews over to an internal element hostile to the Hungarian nation [apparently Communism] and capable of doing anything. The growth of strength which the reannexation of the Highlands [Slovakia] means might be completely offset by a faulty settlement of the Swabian and Jewish problems, moreover such a settlement might call into jeopardy our position as a nation in every respect. For the future development of our foreign trade and our finances the settlement of the Jewish problem might be decisive importance, and it may perhaps suffice to mention that on the day of the march into Kassa [a Slovakian city, in November, 1938] the pengő was quoted at about 70 centimes in Zurich, while during the past week it was already around 35 centimes. The revolutionizing policy of the Government, and the Jewish Bill drafted for purposes of propaganda have reap[ed] their first fruit: throughout the country enterprise has come to a standstill, and normal business life is on the decline. The expanded employment of the armament industry may for a short time cover up the decay, yet the catastrophe will come to pass as soon as the extraordinary requirements of the army will be covered. The level of government revenue is sinking, the budgetary equilibrium has been upset, and panic among the Jews and the liquidation of Jewish business turns hundreds of thousands of Christians into unemployed. The present Jewish Bill does not serve Hungarian interests, but aims at satisfying base passions with the intent to prop up the position of a weak government in the eyes of irresponsible elements, irrespective of how much this success costs the country.”
Here is the authentic voice of the old Hungarian seigneur, fearful of the masses, afraid of German expansionism, and conscious of the vital (and even beneficial) role played by the Jews in the economy.orthy also was unhappy with Imrédy’s policy and complained that the latter had tabled the law “without my previous consent.” But while the existence of these and other critical voices demonstrates that Hungary in 1939 was not Nazi Germany, the fact that Teleki agreed to see the second Jewish law through parliament demonstrates to what extent the old ruling class had become the captive, whether willingly or not, and for whatever reason, of the radical anti-Semitism of the extreme right. The passage of the two laws also demonstrates the extent to which Hungarian politics had become obsessed with the Jewish question by the late 1930s, an obsession resulting from economic distress, the triumph of Hungarian chauvinism, the great prestige and influence of Nazi Germany, and the government’s fears of the ever-growing fascist movement. One of the victims of this obsession was the highly anti-Semitic prime minister Béla Imrédy, author of the second Jewish law, who was forced to resign from office when his enemies (among them Horthy) published documents showing that he possessed a Jewish great-grandfather.” The victims of the anti-Jewish hysteria were therefore not confined to the Jewish population alone. But this was small comfort to a Jewish community now augmented by the annexation of thousands of coreligionists from Slovakia and Subcarpathian Rus.

What was the impact of the first two Jewish laws on Hungarian Jewry? In the view of some it was very limited. The new regulations were enforced in the “Hungarian way,” that is, inefficiently, and not as in Nazi Germany. Macartney remarks that “the business went on as before, all the real work being done by the Jews, while the requisite changes in the proportions of Jewish and non-Jewish employees, etc., were effected by simply taking on extra non-Jewish employees, many of whom did little more than draw their salaries.” The efficient Germans looked on with contempt, believing that the anti-Jewish legislation was merely for show and not really intended to harm the Jewish interest.” And, of course, the local Hungarian fascists agreed with their Nazi allies. The truth seems to be that the first two laws left the Jewish financial and industrial elite untouched, but did strike fairly hard at the middle and lower middle class and at the professionals. Thousands were discharged and reduced to poverty. In some small towns (where one-half of all Hungarian Jews resided) Jewish landowners’ property was confiscated, the few Jewish civil servants were dismissed, and Jewish artisans lost their licenses, but in others the laws were simply not enforced.” Much depended upon the attitude of the local authorities. But it is clear that the laws signaled a new and dangerous deterioration of relations between Jews and gentiles, since they legitimized anti-Semitic attitudes in a way in which even the white terror had not and made the Jews fair game for job hunters. The “aryanization” of the Hungarian economy might have been bad for the status of the currency, as Bethlen pointed out, but it gave thousands of Hungarians a stake in the new anti-Semitic “system,” as well as official sanction to the baser instincts of the Hungarian population.

In one sector of Hungarian life, the military, the situation became particularly ominous in 1939. According to the second Jewish law, Jews were no longer allowed to serve as officers, but the question as to whether they were worthy of serving at all alongside Christian Hungarians remained open. In May, 1939, some progress was made toward solving this issue by founding several special “labor battalions.” These battalions were at first not earmarked for Jews alone, but in subsequent years Jews were deprived of the right to bear arms and were drafted exclusively into such formations. The results, as we shall see, were disastrous.”

The impact upon the Jews of the laws of 1938–1939 was not limited to economics. The leadership, as we have noted, was no longer content to remain silent, but on the other hand it did not offer new guidelines to the Jewish community. It held fast to its traditional line—the reiteration of Jewish-Magyar patriotism, denunciation of any effort to separate Hungarians of the Mosaic faith from other Hungarians, and a willingness (now born out of desperation) to go along with any regime so long as it was not a regime of the Arrow Cross.” Samu Stern, President of the Jewish community of Pest, spoke for assimilationist Hungarian Jewry when he wrote, in 1938:

> It is easy to love the homeland when... the homeland offers glory and happiness to those who love it; but the homeland must be loved even when it does not bestow upon us the totality of its love. God must be worshipped even when he reduces us to dust... we worship him whether he rewards or punishes us. We worship him even when he appears to turn his love away from us and we worship our earthly God, our homeland, whatever our fate may be in this homeland."

But for many Jews this position was no longer satisfactory. Ever since the mid-1930s the idea of emigration had been growing more popular, and, although emigration could never become a mass movement (since there was nowhere for the masses to go), some left, including Jewry’s most famous writer, Ferene Molnár.” Another response to the Jewish laws was a new wave of conversions, more significant than that of 1919–1920. During 1938–39 over 14,000 Jews converted, a number unparalleled anywhere else in Eastern Europe—even though conversion, as we know, did not exempt Jews from the various disabilities imposed upon them.” Finally, during the years 1939–1944 Jewish nationalism finally came to
play a role in Hungarian Jewish life. That it did so was the result not so much of an emerging Jewish nationalism among the Jews of Transylvanian Hungary, but rather of the return to Hungary of Slovakian, Subcarpathian, and (in 1940) large numbers of Transylvanian Jews. The Jewries of these three regained or partially regained provinces were much more nationalist- and Zionist-inclined than Transylvanian Jews, and their national leaders, some of whom moved to Budapest, established a new Jewish leadership which, if it did not supplant the traditional one, at least offered an alternative. Zionist youth movements sprang up as well. Another indication of the new mood among some Hungarian Jews was the rather dramatic rise in the number of students attending the rabbinical seminary in Budapest. None of this indicates any change in the basically acculturated and anti-nationalist nature of Hungarian Jewry, but the virulent anti-Semitism of the late 1930s and early 1940s did induce some Jews to convert to Zionism, just as it induced others to convert to Christianity. Neither phenomenon, however, was to save Hungarian Jewry.

7. The War Years

In strict adherence to the scope of this book, our survey of Jewish history in interwar Hungary should end with the second Jewish law of 1939. However, because Hungary retained its national sovereignty until 1944, a brief description of the fate of Hungarian Jewry during the first six years of World War II is in order. This period was a truly remarkable one, since, despite the outbreak of war and Hungary's entry into it as a loyal ally of Nazi Germany, the traditional tug-of-war over the Jewish question continued with no real resolution. As in the late 1930s, the German Nazis pressured Hungary to solve the Jewish question along German lines, as did the local fascists, while the Hungarian regime, now much more in German thrall than before the war, continued to pass anti-Semitic laws while to some extent resisting Nazi pressure. The great symbol of the preservation of traditional Hungarian policy even in the new wartime environment was Horthy, the old Habsburg admiral, still regent of Hungary and still a force in political life. In the course of his efforts to preserve Hungarian sovereignty, he continued to differentiate between "good" Hungarian Jews and "bad," while at the same time acquiescing in the ever-harder treatment meted out to all the Jews. This approach meant, among other things, solving the Jewish question in the "Hungarian way"; as late as July, 1944, Horthy wrote to Hitler that he preferred to solve the Jewish question without having recourse to "brutal and inhumane methods." New anti-Jewish legislation was enacted in 1941, this time prohibiting intermarriage between Jews (defined in this context as a person with one Jewish grandparent) and gentiles. In 1942 the status of

the Jewish region was reduced from that of an "established cult" to that of a "recognized" one. Hungarian officials continued to argue, however, as had Bethlen in 1939, that it was simply impossible on practical grounds to do what the Germans had done. In 1943 the Hungarian Foreign Office prepared a memorandum for use during discussions between Germany and Hungary. While pointing out that Jews were by now virtually excluded from the professions and intellectual life, the memorandum noted that the Jews were proportionately far more numerous in Hungary than in Germany and played a much greater role in economic life. It followed that they could not be excluded from the Hungarian economy without dreadful consequences which would serve neither Hungarian nor German interests. In 1942 Horthy managed to assure the appointment of Miklós Kállay as prime minister, a man whose views were similar to those of Bethlen in that he disliked both the Nazis and the Hungarian fascists. Under this last "liberal" Hungarian premier yet another act in the already familiar Hungarian-Jewish drama was played out, according to the by now well-established rules. Like his predecessors, and under much greater foreign pressure than either Darányi (the premier at the time of the first Jewish law), Imrédy, or Teleki, Kállay announced in parliament that "the restriction of the Jew in the economic field is a basic condition for the economic progress of the Hungarian people, at which none can take offense." He then proceeded to initiate more anti-Jewish legislation (this time confiscating Jewish-owned estates) while at the same time making no secret of his anti-Nazi views and urging Jews to "understand" his actions in light of the terrible situation of wartime Hungary. As he put it, in what was fast becoming a truly classical style,

...my introduction and commendation of the Expropriation bill was—for all the injustice of it, like any discriminatory action or any interference with individual liberty perpetrated—a successful move on my part. I had to gain time. I had to provide a safety valve for the overstrained anti-Semitic feeling in the country and to divert it from the racist line and from the threatening possibility of individual action. I therefore chose a solution which—as will be seen later—was never finally followed up and could have been partly or wholly undone after the war or at least equalized with similar measures applied to non-Jewish land."

How similar this sounds to official apologies for the numerus clausus law of 1920. And now, as then, the wealthy pillars of the Jewish community continued to look to "moderates" like Kállay and Horthy for aid and comfort, pleading yet again the cause of Hungarian-Jewish partnership in the face of the Nazi-Arrow Cross onslaught. As always, they had nowhere else to turn.

We may be skeptical about how moderate Horthy and his allies were
during the war years, and we have observed how such “moderation” had led to severe anti-Jewish legislation. Nonetheless, it is a fact that so long as Hungary remained sovereign and under the control of such men, Hungarian Jewry was far better off than were the Jewries of Nazi-occupied East Central and Eastern (Soviet) Europe. True, Hungarian Jews were humiliated and impoverished. With Hungary’s entry into the war, Jews were drafted into labor battalions and sent, unarmed, mostly to the eastern front, where they were brutally treated and died in great numbers. Others were employed in slave labor in Yugoslavia, where their fate was no happier. In 1941 thousands of Jewish refugees were forcibly “repatriated” to Poland, where most were murdered by the Nazis, and in 1942 thousands of Jews and Serbs were butchered by Hungarian forces in the region of Újvidék (Női Sad), formerly part of Yugoslavia. But up until 1944 the “final solution” had not yet been attempted, despite intense Nazi pressure. However, after the occupation of Hungary by German troops in March, 1944, the Nazis, aided by Hungarian collaborators, began the process of ghettoization and deportation organized by Adolph Eichmann. Between May 5 and June 7 of that year close to 300,000 Hungarian Jews were sent to death camps. Horthy, who still retained some power despite the German occupation, was able to prevent the deportation of Budapest Jewry. (This was his last service to the Jews of the capital, the “real” Hungarian Jews whom he and his friends consistently distinguished from the “Galician” Jews of the hinterland.) In October, 1944, the Nazis engineered a coup which placed Szálasi and his Arrow Cross Party in control of the country, and, in the few months which remained before the liberation of Hungary by the Soviet Union, pogroms and death marches took their toll of the Jews of Budapest as well. Horthy, arrested by the Germans and then taken into custody by the Allies, eventually made his way to the West, where he received financial support from some of his millionaire friends of Jewish origin—the final act of the ancient alliance between the Jewish elite and the Hungarian ruling class. At the time of the Soviet conquest of Budapest, over half of the capital’s Jewish community remained alive. The Jewish communities of the provinces had been almost entirely wiped out.

8. Some Final Thoughts

The peculiar relationship between Jews and Magyars in Trianon Hungary was based to a large extent upon illusions. The spokesmen of the Jewish community believed that their community’s long history of loyal service to the Hungarian cause and to the ruling class would ensure its continued prosperity. How pathetic were the words of the son of Vilmos Vázsonyi, a deputy in parliament, who stated during the debate on the first Jewish law, “When the fatherland calls again, then Hungarian Jewry will find itself at the front.” Its Jewish sons did, in fact, find themselves at the front during World War II, but in humiliating labor battalions, without the right to bear arms, persecuted by anti-Semitic officers and contributing to the Nazi cause in Russia. Jews were sent to these battalions and removed from the Hungarian economy with the express consent of that same ruling class which was supposed to be opposed to anti-Semitism. In the end it became apparent to all that the Telekis, Horths, and Kállays, moderates though they might be in comparison with the men of the Arrow Cross, and opposed as they might be to brutal Nazi measures, were willing to sacrifice Hungarian Jewry—not only the so-called Galicians but all Hungarian Jews—to the exigencies of the German alliance and to the need to buy off the radical right by passing anti-Jewish laws.

For their part, at least some of the moderate Hungarian leaders cherished the illusion that they could play the Jewish game according to their rules—that they could pass anti-Jewish laws while making clear their aversion to racism and, at a given point, put a halt to the deterioration in the Jews’ status and in Hungarian-Jewish relations. This was part of a larger illusion that Hungary could regain its empire, accept the Nazis’ embrace, and yet retain its freedom of action. The high price for this belief was paid not only by Hungarian Jewry but by all Hungarians.

There were, of course, good reasons for the behavior both of Hungarian Jews and of the Hungarian leadership. The former were wedded to a ruling class which was obviously not adhering to its liberal traditions. Horthy, moreover, was no Masaryk, and the fact that he and his allies were capable of condoning the Jewish laws demonstrates the essential difference between Czech and Hungarian liberalism. In the Czech case liberalism meant a commitment to political democracy and a firm rejection of religious discrimination. In the Hungarian case, in the new interwar environment, it did not. But the Jews could not turn, as they could in Poland, to possible allies on the moderate left or among the nation’s minorities, and we have seen how the history and nature of Hungarian Jewry precluded the possibility of the rise of Jewish nationalism as a rallying point. The marriage between Jewry and the traditional Hungarian ruling class may have been based on an illusion, but there were no other possible partners. And there was therefore no likelihood that the Jews would seek a divorce.

As for the Hungarian leaders, they too could claim that, given the obsession with revision, there was no choice but to act as they did. And they could also claim that, while they bent in response to Nazi and Arrow Cross pressure, they preserved the physical safety of Hungarian Jewry
until the German occupation and even, to a degree, until October, 1944. If Horthy was no Masaryk, neither was he a Hitler. He and his circle may have betrayed the traditional pro-Jewish views of the Magyar ruling class, but they preserved at least some elements of that tradition until the very end.

In the final analysis it was a truly disastrous and unexpected set of circumstances which combined to doom Hungarian Jewry. There were, as we know, observers who had predicted before World War I that the Hungarian-Jewish honeymoon would not endure, but few would have predicted so rapid a disappearance of all those factors which had made Hungary a promised land for its Jewish population. For this particular type of Jewish community, the interwar period was an especially cruel tragedy. Having so enthusiastically magyarized and having embraced the ideology of "Hungarians of the Mosaic faith," although never really succeeding in integrating into Hungarian society, these Jews were less prepared for the blows which fell upon them and less capable of defending themselves than were the nationalist-minded Jewries of the Eastern type. Their fate is proof of the fact that what the Jews did and how they behaved had little impact on what happened to them. The bulk of Hungarian Jewry remained, during the years 1918-1944, as it had been during the last half of the nineteenth century. With the exception of a vocal but small radical left faction, attracted to Hungarian socialism or Communism, its ideology did not change. It was not more prominent in the economy of 1933 than it had been in 1918, and no less patriotic. The utterly different treatment it received was a function of the collapse of the old Hungarian empire destroyed by the first World War.
2. Hungary


11. Katz, “Yihuda,” pp. 20–21. See also Macartney’s observation that “the Jews always remained something of outsiders,” in his *October Fifteenth*, 2:21; conversion did not do much to alter this situation.


Gegenrevolution und Restaurationsversuche in Ungarn 1918-1921 (Munich, 1973), pp. 112-27. There appear to be no statistics on the number of Jews killed; the reference to fifty cities is in Katzburg, Hungary and the Jews, p. 41.

29. See, for example, Nicholas Horthy, Memoirs (London, 1956), pp. 98-109. Horthy does write in his memoirs that he opposed the pogroms, but he also writes that he did not regret the white terror, which was necessary in order to rid the country of Bolshevism.


31. For material on Jewish demography see B. D., "Di yidn in ungar," Yidishe ekonomin 1 (1937):184-88; The Jews of Hungary: Census of 1920, American Jewish Yearbook 29 (1927-28):275. In 1932 14.3% of all students were Jews, but in the late 1930s there was a rapid decline. See Klein, "Hungarian Jewish History," pp. 84.


36. "Di yidn in ungar," Yidishe ekonomin 1 (1937):271. These figures do not include doctors and lawyers employed in various government offices, where the percentage of Jews was much lower. For statistics on Jews in the civil service see ibid., pp. 274-91. By 1930 only 4.3 percent of all civil servants were Jews; in 1920 the figure was 7.4 percent.

37. Ibid., pp. 280, 282. These statistics are admittedly not completely accurate, since the religious affiliation of the owners was not always listed.

38. Macartney, October Fifteenth, 1: 19.


41. Horthy, Memoirs, p. 98.


45. The Jewish Minority in Hungary. The Hungarian Law, No. XXV of the Year 1920["'Numerus Clausus'] Before the Council of the League of Nations, Dec. 10 &
Moskovits concludes that during the interwar years Hungarian Jewry was headed toward "the gradual abandonment of its schild" (p. 293). For a survey of the Jewish role in Hungarian culture, see Erzsebet Bela, "The Jews of Hungary: A Cultural Overview," in Hungarian Jewish Studies, ed. Brahm, 2: 85-136.


67. The National Program of the Hungarian Gombos Government (Budapest, 1932), chapter 23, no. 83.

68. See the documents in Elek Karsai, ed., "The Meeting of Gombos and Hitler in 1933," The New Hungarian Quarterly 3 (1962):170-96; from the German perspective, Gombos' visit broke the "official isolation of national socialism" (p. 196).

69. Macarthy, October Fifteenth, 1: 117.

70. Quoted in Klein, "Hungarian Politics," p. 83.


72. This term is used by Nagy-Talavera, The Green Shirts, p. 90.

73. On the Jewish question and foreign policy, see Macarthy, "Hungarian Foreign Policy during the Inter-War Period, with Special Reference to the Jewish Question," in Jews and Non-Jews in Eastern Europe, ed. Vago and Moosse, pp. 125-36.


77. Ibid., pp. 27-28. Those named are great Hungarian patriots of past centuries.


79. See the remarks of Dr. Rassay quoted in Weidlin, Der ungarische Antisemitismus, p. 66. For the debate in general, see ibid., pp. 53-94; Katzberg, Hungary and the Jews, pp. 94-113.

80. Weidlin, p. 76.


82. Weidlin, Der ungarische Antisemitismus, pp. 31-32; Brahm, The Politics of Genocide, 1: 122-35.


84. This is also the position of Macarthy, October Fifteenth; see, for example, his discussion of the first Jewish law (1: 218-19).


3. Czechoslovakia

1. In the use of the terms "Rusyn" and "Subcarpathian Rus," I follow Paul R. Magocsi, The Shaping of a National Identity: Subcarpathian Rus, 1848-1948 (Cambridge and London, 1978). The peasant people which made up the majority in this province are referred to sometimes as Ruthenian, sometimes as Ukrainian. The language they spoke shall be referred to here as Ruthenian.

2. For general information on the minority nationalities, see ibid.; Owen Verne Johnson, Sestrian Cultural and National Development in Slovakia, 1918-1938;
The Tragedy of Romanian Jewry
by Randolph Braham

Columbia Univ. Press, N.Y. 1944

Romanian Jewry During the Interwar Period

Raphael Vago

Was There a "Romanian Jewry"?

The composition of the Jewish population of Romania in the period between the two World Wars indicates that for this period the notion of "Romanian Jewry" is not easily definable, and that perhaps the term "Jews in Romania" would be more appropriate. It is evident at first glance that after World War I the Jews in Romania reflected—in demographics, feelings of common bonds, even language and culture—the same pattern as the Romanian national state, "Greater Romania." With the acquisition of Transylvania, Bukovina, and Bessarabia the Romanian state doubled its population and size; it thus had to cope with modernization and nation-building within the context of widespread areas and a population diversified in social, economic, and ethnic composition. The roughly 800,000 Jews in interwar Romania were similarly diversified. They consisted of two groups: the existing populations in "the Old Kingdom" (representing about 30 percent of the total Jewish population after 1919), and the Jews who until then had lived under the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and Czarist Russia (about 70 percent after 1919).

Thus after 1919 a significant majority of the Jews in Romania regarded Romania as a "host state" with which they had little in common; the history, language, culture and mentality of Romania and the Romanian nation were strange to them. At the same time the "new Jews" were viewed by the Romanian regime as a peculiar element that compounded the "Jewish problem" of the Old Kingdom. The great differences in the degree of assimilation and acculturation between the Jewish communities in the new territories and those in the Old Kingdom influenced and shaped both the interrelations of the Jewish population and their relationship with the Romanian authorities.

The gaps between the various subgroups of Jews in Romania did not narrow significantly during the twenty years or so of the interwar period. The character of Jewish leadership, of community structure, religious life and political activity in Romanian political life that will be detailed below all indicate that the Jews of Romania never really integrated into a cohesive "Romanian Jewry," and that they mostly remained separate in the prewar subgroups until World War II and the territorial redrawing of Romania in 1940. Nevertheless, various attempts to achieve integration, cooperation, and an awareness of a common fate among the Jews in Romania had a positive impact in terms of a more unified Jewish community.

Just as in the Romanian state, where the relationship between the center and the periphery was not often clear—for example, Romanian politicians from Transylvania claimed that Bucharest was culturally inferior to them and that the center tended to treat the new parts of the state as colonies—corresponding views and conceptions (or perhaps misconceptions) emerged in the Jewish communities. Bucharest never played the role of "the center" of Jewish life in Romania, or more accurately, there was no single political or spiritual center of Jewish life. Thus, the great contribution by Jewish leaders who emerged from the new territories to Jewish politics in general, and to the Zionist movement in particular, created a strange situation in which Jewish life was neither directed nor coordinated from any one center. In terms of religious life, community organizational structure, and patterns of leadership, Jewish life in Romania was essentially fragmented. While this can also be said of the situation in other parts of East-Central Europe, in terms of the mutual relationships within the various communities and organizations as well as
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relations with the state authorities, the problems of the Jewish community were more severe in Greater Romania because of the deep cleavage that reflected the Romanian state’s composition.

In general, the Jews were not assimilated; many perceived themselves as a “national minority,” although this term was not necessarily interpreted by the Romanian body politic in the same way as by the Jews. The Jewish social, political, and cultural organizations that flourished in interwar Romania—ranging from Jewish sports clubs to the Union of Romanian Jews, which advocated integration within Romanian society from a Jewish national point of view—reflect the existence of a strong national spirit and sense of identity. However, they led to the emergence, not of a single “Romanian Jewry” but of multiple “Romanian Jewries.”

The traditions, political culture, religious attitudes and mentality that the Romanian Jews carried with them after the formation of Greater Romania had a direct impact on subsequent relationships among the Jewish communities in Romania. Not even the Jews of the Old Kingdom can be considered a unified group: there were two subgroups, one consisting essentially of Moldavia, where most of the Jews were concentrated in Bucarest, there was a large degree of acculturation and to a certain extent the Jews were “Romanian Jews,” moulding their Jewry in the image of the Moldavian Jews. Moldavian Jewry was more of an “Eastern type,” resembling in many respects the nearby Galician Jewry in terms of religious practices and distinctive clothing.

The Jews of Bukovina, in contrast to the Jews in the Old Kingdom with their slow pace of emancipation, had long been emancipated and enjoyed full equality. German-speaking and emancipated and modernized in Czernowitz (Cernăuți), Yiddish-speaking and basically Orthodox in the smaller rural communities, Bukovinian Jewry achieved an interesting blend of the traditions of Hasidism with those of Galician Jewry’s emancipated group, loyal to the Austrian crown.

Bessarabian Jewry brought a rather different legacy to the Jewries of Romania. Mostly Yiddish-speaking and historically under Czariist rule, with a small “Russified” intelligentsia, the area was a breeding ground for modern Jewish politics and culture. The pogroms of Kishinev (Chișinău) in 1903, the waves of anti-Semitic violence after the 1905 revolution, the expansion of the Zionist movement, and political as well as ideological fragmentation turned Bessarabian Jewry into a community with a high level of political awareness and something of a siege mentality. In general, the Bessarabian Jewish community welcomed the region’s transfer to Romanian control.

Transylvania presents yet another picture. Large segments of Transylvanian Jewry were culturally and linguistically assimilated with the Magyars. Other segments, especially in Northern Transylvania, remained Orthodox and Yiddish-speaking, and included large Hasidic communities. In the urban areas, the Jews of Transylvania (like those under Hungarian rule generally) regarded themselves as Magyars of the Jewish faith. Their religious communities followed the pattern that existed in Hungary of three distinct Jewish organizational structures: Orthodox, Neolog, and Status Quo. This was yet another feature that added to the diversity of religious life in Greater Romania’s Jewish community—in the Old Kingdom the Jewish communities were not subdivided into separate groups depending on whether they were Ashkenazi or Sephardi.

It should be noted also that the Jewish communities had almost no contact with each other, knew very little about each other’s life, and had no common language except Yiddish. Furthermore, the Jews of the new territories had mixed feelings about the new country in which they found themselves; they were more hesitant in Transylvania and somewhat more hopeful in Bessarabia.

Demography and Socioeconomic Situation

The formation of Greater Romania changed the demographic characteristics of the Jewish population, along with its socioeconomic situation. The official Romanian census of 1930 reported 756,930 Jews, i.e., 4.2 percent of the total population.
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(Although some Jewish sources considered this figure too low, the results of the census are generally considered accurate.) The most striking feature of the demographic composition was that Romanian Jewry, which had comprised some 240,000 people before the expansion of the country, became one of the largest Jewish communities in Europe, although the proportion of Jews in the total population was lower than in Hungary or Lithuania.

The overall distribution of Jews across the country was uneven. There were also significant internal differences within the various subgroups, both on the demographic level and in the socioeconomic context.

In the Old Kingdom, Wallachia and Moldavia were quite distinct. In Wallachia (historically consisting of Muntenia and Oltenia) there were close to 100,000 Jews, and in Oltenia only 3,500. In Wallachia the Jews lived mostly in urban centers, especially Bucharest, and there was no traditional type of Jewish settlement (shtetl), as in Moldavia and Bessarabia; Jews constituted some 11.8 percent of the population of Bucharest. In Moldavia, the more than 160,000 Jews lived in the few urban centers—for example, Jassy (Iași), where they constituted one third of the population—and in small towns and villages located in the most backward region of Romania.

The 200,000 Jews of Bessarabia constituted some 7.2 percent of the area's population. Chișinău's population was 36 percent Jewish, but half of the total Jewish population lived in small towns and villages. Bessarabian Jewry was the largest of the groups that joined Romanian Jewry after the First World War.

Bukovina had some 93,000 Jews, representing about 10 percent of the area's population. Thus, in Bessarabia and Bukovina, the percentage of Jews within the total population was at least twice the national average. A large part (more than 40 percent) of Bukovinian Jewry lived in Cernăuți. Some changes occurred in the Jewish population after World War I, as several thousands left for Austria.4

Transylvania's 200,000 Jews represented about four percent of the total population. The majority lived in the northwestern part of the province, in Crișana-Maramureș, where they constituted 12.6 percent of the total population. Sighet's population was 40 percent Jewish, and in several other urban centers such as Cluj, Arad, and Timișoara Jews were 10 to 14 percent of the population.

Romanian anti-Semites claimed that the actual number of Jews reached into the millions and spread the myth of an "invasion" of Eastern Jews. They also alleged that a fast-growing Jewish birth rate—an unfounded assumption—implied the national character of the Romanian state. The Romanian census of 1930 became a political issue, as the anti-Semites accused the Jews of conspiring to conceal the real facts.5 The Nazis corroborated the Romanian anti-Semitic claims and placed the number of Romanian Jews at 1.1 million. The myth of an "Eastern invasion" was actually based on the crossing of Romania's borders by not over 45,000 Jews in the wake of the Russian and Ukrainian Civil Wars (1919-1921), of whom the great majority left again within ten years for Palestine or for the West.

The 1930 census provided important data on group identity, mother tongue, and religious character within the Jewish population. According to the census, 756,930 persons declared themselves to be Jews by religion, while 728,115 described themselves as Jews by nationality. Generally, these data indicate that most Jews—excepting only those who were totally assimilated, a minor group in most parts of Romania—did not feel that they "belonged" to either the Romanians or the Hungarians in terms of nationality. While the Jews in Romania did undergo a Romanization, this was mainly in the cultural sense, without affecting their group identity or sense of belonging.

As to language, some 70 percent of the Jews identified Yiddish as their mother tongue, with the rest indicating Hungarian, German, or other languages. In regions and areas where the process of assimilation was hindered by anti-Semitism, the figures on national, religious, and linguistic identity were almost the same. Although Yiddish was on the decline, especially in Muntenia (Bucharest) and parts of Transylvania (especially the
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southern part), it retained a predominant position and remained an indicator of group identity. It is unknown how many Jews knew Hebrew, the teaching of which was one of the top priorities of Zionist education, especially in the youth movements.

Regional differences within Transylvania and the Old Kingdom reflected the degree of assimilation and acculturation. In the big cities, some of the patterns evident in the 1930 census changed further. By the beginning of the 1940s there had emerged a new generation that was integrated within the Romanian educational system and had mastered the Romanian language. Most Jews in Romania were bilingual or even trilingual, as in Transylvania, a feature that was not reflected in the statistical data culled during the interwar period. Romanization pressures were evident and by 1940 there was a decline in the use of Yiddish, especially in the urban areas.

In 1930 about 90 percent of the Jews in Bessarabia registered their mother tongue as Yiddish. The post-World War I generation learned Romanian in addition to Russian, which was well known to most of the Jewish population. In Bukovina, where, especially in the urban areas, German was spoken in addition to Yiddish, Romanian schooling pushed the other languages further into the background during the interwar period.

There were no significant changes in the geographical distribution of the Jewish population during the interwar period, except for a drift from the smaller rural areas to urban centers. Almost half of Romania's Jews lived in a "northern belt" that included Northern Transylvania (especially the Maramureș district), Bukovina, and the eastern areas of Bessarabia. Overall, Romanian Jewry in the northern part of the country, including the northern belt, accounted for some 80 percent of the Jewish population, with the remainder in the southern part including Bucharest, with its almost 100,000 Jews, as well as Southern Transylvania and the Banat. This geographical distribution greatly affected the majority of Romania's Jewish population in the wake of the territorial changes that followed Romania's dismemberment in 1940. In Northern Transylvania and in Bes-

sarraia and Bukovina—the areas annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, and recaptured by Romania in June-July 1941—the Jews suffered all the tragic consequences of the shifting border.

In pre-World War I Romania more than 80 percent of the Jews lived in urban areas (including small towns), constituting almost 15 percent of the urban population, and even reaching 40 to 60 percent in some towns such as Herta, Dorohoi, and Jassy. This basic pattern remained unchanged in interwar Greater Romania: while 76.8 percent of the total population of Romania lived in rural areas, only 32 percent of the Jews did. Overall, in 1930 Jews constituted 13.2 percent of Romania's urban population and 1.6 percent of its rural one. Basically the same pattern was evident in Transylvania where some of the towns, for example Sighet, had a markedly Jewish character.

In contrast to the anti-Semitic propaganda regarding the high birth rate of the Jews in Romania, the Jewish population was in fact stagnating, due to low birth rates as well as emigration to Palestine and the West. Both the low birth rate and the patterns of emigration reflected the sense of insecurity and anxiety within the Jewish community. By the end of the 1930s the number of Jews was in fact in decline, again in sharp contrast to anti-Semitic allegations. It should be noted that while emigration was not a prime factor in the stagnation of the Jewish population, the departure of the mostly young Jews who emigrated during the interwar period (some 20,000) had a marked impact on the demographics of the community. Romanian Jewry was not much affected by intermarriage and conversion, except in Transylvania.

The diversity of the Jewish population in Romania was also a function of the differing socioeconomic situation in the various components of regions of the state. The great differences in economic development did not change much during the interwar period, despite the modernization process then taking place. The legal status of the Jews during this period and the ongoing modernization in all spheres of economic activity allowed the Jews to participate, for the first time, in all branches of the
economy and to attain positions in accordance with their training and talents. The Romanian regime assured the Jews of the new territories that there would be no regressions from the status they had achieved in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy or in Russia. New channels of economic advancement also opened for the Jewish population in terms of vocational training based on the existing prewar infrastructure and on a network of Jewish economic enterprises.

The general pattern indicated a dominant role for Jews in trade, commerce and crafts in Bukovina and Bessarabia (a feature exploited by anti-Semites in their campaign against Jewish “domination” in certain branches of the national economy). The large Jewish bourgeoisie was concentrated in Bucharest, where numerous Jewish financiers and bankers reached influential positions. In 1938, Jewish-owned industrial enterprises in Bucharest amounted to 36 percent of the total. In Transylvania, a relatively strong Jewish middle class was active in various branches of the economy. It is safe to assume that the Jews’ economic role was considerably more visible in the non-agrarian sectors of the more economically backward regions of the country – the “northern belt” of Northern Transylvania, parts of Bukovina, Moldavia, and Bessarabia – where most Jews were very poor and by and large remained so.

Jewish leaders were well aware of the anomalies within the Jewish economic and socioeconomic structure. Much attention was directed to attempts at redirecting segments of the Jewish population toward what was generally termed “positive work.” Economic change during the interwar period is reflected in a lowering of the percentage of Jews employed in the small trades, an increased Jewish presence in Jewish trade schools and credit institutions, and higher Jewish participation in modernized industries. After 1919 Jews played a more prominent role in various trade associations and on the boards of crafts guilds. Likewise, professional organizations were set up for Jewish “liberal professionals” such as engineers. These organizations were primary targets for anti-Semites, who pointed to their alleged “Jewish power.”
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Almost overnight, a high percentage became declassed and economically weakened, a situation which affected the community's inner cohesion and preparedness for the trials that awaited them.

Community Life

The emergence of local community institutions in interwar Romania reflected the patterns and developments that existed in the various provinces, both before and after the 1919 unification. In general, the Jewish communities expanded their activities in all spheres of education, culture, social welfare, and many aspects of the law (especially relating to religion); they even developed their own structures for security and self-defense. In the Old Kingdom, organization of the communities had started gradually in the nineteenth century and followed closely the ups and downs of government policies regarding the attempts of the Jews to build their own organizational structures.

With the emergence of Zionism and secular culture before World War I and in the interwar period, serious dissension arose within the communities regarding the optimal directions that community activities should take. This was a struggle between those holding religious and secular orientations: Zionists, who were hoping to "conquer the communities," and non-Zionists. Jewish politics at both the local and the national level was linked with the intra-community activities, so that the representation of the Jewish population depended on the local power centers and structures of the respective Jewish communities. Since assimilationists and extreme leftists on one side of the spectrum and ultra-Orthodox elements on the other side did not participate in community organizations and activities, such groups or individuals were, in effect, not part of the community. It is difficult to evaluate the extent to which community life isolated the Jewish population from its surroundings or whether the community, in fact, strengthened the Jews' sense of group identity and provided them with services that the state was not willing to give them. In retrospect, the final balance seems undoubtedly positive—even if from the contemporary point of view commu-
nity life seemed to consist of constant power struggles and politics that did not involve the bulk of the Jewish population.

Usually the Jewish community organizations and structures were stronger in smaller communities than in the larger ones that provided leadership on the national level. In 1923 there were only 8,500 registered members of the community of Bucharest, although an estimated 60,000 Jews lived in the city. The major representative community organization that originated in the Old Kingdom was the Union of Jewish Communities, known after 1922 as the Union of Romanian Jews.

In 1928, after long deliberations, the Romanian Parliament adopted the Law of Religions, legalizing existing religious structures of the Jewish community and granting them autonomy. In fact, the Romanian legislation recognized the different types of Jewry in Romania, including the existing Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities in the Old Kingdom, the Orthodox, Status Quo, and Neolog ones in Transylvania, and the unified religious communities in Bessarabia and Bukovina. Interestingly, Rabbi J. Niemirov was elected Chief Rabbi of Greater Romania by a congress consisting exclusively of Jewish representatives of the Old Kingdom. (He served in this position until his death in 1939.) After 1927 he served in the Senate as the representative of the Jewish religion. As the Chief Rabbi of Romania he was a religious authority, although at times it seemed that he was regarded as such only by the communities in the Old Kingdom.

Starting in the late 1920s, the Romanian government attempted to restrict the autonomy enjoyed by the Jewish communities. This became quite clear by 1933, and was the cause of constant frictions between the state authorities and the Jewish organizations.

Following intensified anti-Semitic pressures and heavy financial burdens imposed on the Jewish communities, a unique Jewish body was founded in 1936: the Federation of Jewish Communities, led by Wilhelm Filderman. As an umbrella organization, the Federation coordinated the activities of communities all around the country, integrating the regions for lobbying purposes. It formulated patterns of cooperation, information sharing, and common policies. The Federation's function as a lobbying arm of the Jewish community continued well into World War II and was to play an important role in postwar reconstruction.

Community politics not centered on religious matters were far from smooth. The communities underwent a process of "democratization" that at times was a cover for personal differences and power struggles. Voting rights were often a function of financial willingness to support the community, and it was only by the mid-thirties that community leaders were elected by secret ballot. Community positions automatically served as a power base for the well-to-do members. Community life was "politicized" in the sense that it became a source of friction between contesting forces, especially following the Zionists' successful attempt to gain control within numerous communities. The fact that Chief Rabbi Niemirov was the leading Zionist figure of the period contributed to the Zionist efforts to take over leadership of the communities. In turn, within the Zionist camp there was intense debate regarding the implications of engaging in local politics instead of concentrating fully on Palestine-oriented activities.

Financially the Jewish communities were never on solid ground because the subsidies allocated under the 1928 Law to all recognized religious denominations were smaller for the Jewish communities than for the others. The intensification of anti-Semitic pressure resulted in a decrease in the Romanian government's financial support for the Jewish communities; after 1939 they were eliminated altogether. Such worsening conditions occurred at a time when the ability of the Jewish communities to raise funds from within was dwindling. The communities were mostly able to maintain services such as welfare and education at a relatively high level, but they had to face a rapid increase in the number of needy members while both internal and external fundraising sources were on the decline.

Being politically fragmented, the Jewish population lacked a unified leadership throughout the interwar period. However, in
the face of intensifying anti-Semitic pressure, it became evident that a more united stand was required for an effective struggle for Jewish rights. A Supreme Council was formed in 1935 for this purpose; it was an important step toward a unified Jewish leadership, although committees formed after 1936 to facilitate a joint representation of Jewish communities and organizations failed to achieve satisfactory results. The three members of the Council were Chief Rabbi Niemirover (after his death, replaced by Alexander Šafran), Wilhelm Felderman representing the Union of Romanian Jews, and Teodor Fischer representing the Jewish Party. The achievement of Jewish unity unfortunately came too late to ensure an efficient, well-ordered body during the Holocaust.

Despite the failure to form a cohesive leadership within individual communities, there were some impressive achievements. Community structures often took over functions that should have been provided by the Romanian state in the areas of social welfare, medical care, old-age homes, and maintenance of educational facilities, especially the religious ones. Even though some facilities were financed by private funds and foundations outside of the community structure, the record of the communities in this regard is impressive and was maintained at a high level until World War II. Additionally, the community organizations provided accommodations and support for Jewish refugees from the Ukraine in the wake of the Civil War during the 1920s and 1930s, later from Germany and Austria, and in 1939 from Poland. After the outbreak of World War II they provided support for thousands of refugees en route to Palestine.11

Education and Culture

Although many families sent their children to state schools, where the language of instruction was Romanian, Jewish education thrived in interwar Romania. The Jewish communities could not afford to fully finance a network of Jewish educational institutions and were greatly dependent on the state funds allocated between 1929 and 1939. Numerous requirements were set by the authorities, such as that Romanian history, language, and geography had to be taught exclusively in the Romanian language and that all teachers in Jewish schools had to pass Romanian language examinations. Although legitimate to some extent, these requirements interfered with the running of a Jewish educational system. In the new provinces the language of instruction was a special problem, as most of the local teachers did not know Romanian well. At least six languages were used in Jewish schools in interwar Romania. In addition to Hebrew and Yiddish, Russian was used in Bessarabia, Hungarian in Transylvania, and German in Bukovina. The Zionists promoted an increased use of Hebrew as the language of instruction at the expense of Yiddish, the promoters of Yiddish, especially the non-Zionist Bundists in Bessarabia as well as traditionalists in the Old Kingdom argued for Yiddish as the "national" language of instruction.

The problem was more complex in Transylvania, where few teachers were able to teach in Romanian while the use of Hungarian was obstructed by Romanian nationalists. Surprisingly, the Romanian authorities allowed or even supported Hebrew-language instruction as a means of distancing the Jews from the Hungarian language and culture. The emerging network of Jewish education in Transylvania was very successful and served as a model for the whole of the country.12 Transylvania had three Jewish high schools until 1927 when the Tarbut School of Cluj (Kolozsvár) closed down, as well as 23 elementary schools, three junior high schools, and a commercial school. A major problem confronting Jewish education was the high cost of such separate education compared to the free education provided by the state.

Jewish education in Bukovina and Bessarabia could point to some significant achievements.13 Although there are no exact figures on the number of pupils at the various levels of Jewish education, in some parts of Romania less than half of the families sent their children to Jewish schools. Thus, while the educational activities of the Zionist youth movement did not exactly contribute to the integration of Jewish youth into Romanian society,
they did provide the younger generation with Jewish and Zionist values.

Interwar Jewish cultural life reflected the divisions between the Jews of the various regions. In all parts of the country, a basic question had to be asked: was there a specific Jewish culture in Romania, or were there different types of culture which reflected the cultural heritage of the Jews in the specific areas? Jewish writers in Transylvania wrote in Hungarian and appealed to a specific readership with a close connection to Magyar culture. Were they part of "the Jewish culture," or was the latter to be defined as Romanian-Jewish, Hungarian-Jewish, or German-Jewish depending on the local situations?

The present observations are not meant to present an overall picture of Jewish culture, but to highlight some of its basic features. Problems that arose involved emancipated intellectuals who attempted to find their role and place within Romanian society and cultural life. For the nationalist minded, i.e., for those whose identity was clearly Jewish and who targeted their works to the Jewish public, the interwar period did not present any specific dilemmas. The booming Jewish press is in this category. Jewish journalists—politcized, polemical, and influential—represented a major feature of the cultural-political life of the Jewish public. *Renasare a Noastră* (Our Rebirth) in Bucharest, *Uj Ketet* (New East, in Hungarian) in Cluj, and dozens of publications in Bukovina and Bessarabia, many of them in Yiddish, were highly esteemed by a large readership. In this lively press Zionism ideals, problems facing the community, the struggle for civil rights, and news from Palestine were among the main topics.

Jewish scholars in the fields of philology, folklore, and the social sciences assumed an active role in Romanian intellectual life, while keeping their Jewish identity. Research on Jewish history, especially the history of Jews in Romania, was high on the agenda of the scholars, adding yet another dimension to the intellectual and cultural life of the community even though only a small number of Jews were academics. Some of the journals and magazines were of a high intellectual caliber. Chișinău and Cernăuți were centers of Yiddish literature. Yiddish-language Jewish theater was a major feature of Jewish cultural life, enjoying a great popularity. In interwar Transylvania, Jewish writers were among the best known, with works on both Jewish and non-Jewish topics.

The great contribution by Jewish intellectuals to the political Left, especially in Transylvania, is noteworthy. Although the assimilated leftist intellectuals cannot be considered to have been promoting "Jewish culture," they too played a role in the overall Jewish contribution to the cultural and intellectual life of the country.

Jewish themes were prominent in the works of Mihail Sebastian, who became well known in Romanian literature. His *De două mii de ani* (For 2000 Years) was considered one of the masterpieces of Jewish literature in the period. Ury Benador, another writer of the interwar period, also was outstanding in his treatment of Jewish subjects. Artists of Jewish origin played a major role in the avant-garde movement, although they did so mostly from outside the country, especially France.

Things were more difficult for emancipated Jewish intellectuals hoping to find their place in the Romanian culture. They had to face not only the general climate of right-wing extremism but the hostility of Romanian intellectuals in the forefront of extremist anti-Semitic movements. Suddenly, as Romanian society rejected their advances, those who were ready to assimilate had to cope with an identity crisis.

**Jewish Politics and Jews in Romanian Politics**

The Jewish community faced several political problems that caused much fragmentation in the interwar period. The basic issue was the very nature of "the Jewish question" from a Jewish perspective: were the Jews a national minority and should they obtain rights as such, or should they follow the assimilationist route and strive for integration into Romanian society as a group with a religious identity and a different ethnic origin? As a direct
outcome of this heated debate there arose much discussion on whether the Jews should form their own political parties and organizations. The alternative option was that individual Jews, as ordinary Romanians, would join those existing parties that were favorable to "the Jewish cause." However, finding a Romanian party with such inclinations was almost impossible given their generally Judeophobic character.

Obviously, the dilemmas facing Jewish politics were a function of the objective situation of the community, its political and civic status, and the impact of anti-Semitism. The Jews in Romania never really solved their political dilemmas, nor could they decide on the road to take.

Jewish political life was shaped by the different legacies borne by the various parts of Romanian Jewry. Thus, the Jews in Transylvania and Bukovina, who had been emancipated earlier than those in the Old Kingdom, were better versed in parliamentary life. These two communities opted more for a national-minded Zionist orientation and sought the status of a national minority. On the other hand, by 1919 the Jews of the Old Kingdom already had a strong and influential political organization, the Union of Romanian Jews. The Union rejected the demand for the status of national minority and, while favoring the idea of a separately organized ethnic community, was opposed to the idea of a "separate Jewish" political way. In the long run, the Union was overshadowed by the emergence of the Jewish Party, formally established in 1930, which represented the Zionist line in Romanian Jewish politics.

The Union of Romanian Jews encouraged the Jews to vote for those parties that were most favorable to the Jewish cause, a tactic which proved inefficient in the immediate postwar years. In the first postwar elections the Union went along with the Zionists, but their candidates failed under a system that was largely based on rigged elections. One prominent Jewish leader, Adolf Stern, was elected to Parliament in 1921 through an agreement with the National Peasant Party, a tactic that was to be repeated in the years to come. By the late 1920s Jewish parlia-

mentarians formed a "Jewish parliamentary club," an effective political lobbying group that represented the interests of the Jewish community. The group bargained with conservative and liberal Romanian elements for political support.

In the new territories, political activity took different forms than in the Old Kingdom, the power base of the Union of Romanian Jews. In Transylvania, the Jewish National Union, established in Cluj in 1918, served as an umbrella organization for all national-oriented Jewish organizations. At first after the area became part of Greater Romania the Union championed the autonomy of the Jewish national minority in Transylvania, a concept that was never really well defined. In Bukovina after 1919 the Zionist Committee of Bukovina served as an umbrella organization. It combined purely Zionist activities with political lobbying and activities for Jewish causes.

With the formation of the Jewish Party in 1930, Jewish politics in the interwar era entered a new phase. While the Jewish party did not completely overlap with the Zionist federations, its national-identity orientation resulted in its conducting the struggle for Jewish rights from a Zionist perspective. In the 1931 and 1932 general elections, the heyday of Jewish representation, five members were elected to Parliament by more than 67,000 votes. The Jewish parliamentarians carried on a wide variety of activities in their attempts to combat the rising tides of extremism. The Jewish Party proved that there was a sound base for Jewish political activity on the national level, but was not strong enough to cope effectively with the rise of anti-Semitism and nationalist agitation. It should be noted that Transylvanian and Bukovinian leaders played a major role in the formation of this party as well as its leadership and parliamentary representation, and more of its supporters were Jews from Transylvania and Bukovina than from the Old Kingdom. It was headed by A. L. Zissu.

Overall, Jewish politics were fragmented throughout the interwar years, on both ideological and territorial grounds. The record of the Jewish political leaders is generally positive; it must be remembered that they had to operate within a rather corrupt political system and an unstable monarchy unable to
cope with the slide toward extremism. They did their best, under the existing conditions, to represent the Jewish population. There is no way to assess what influence a more united Jewish community might have had in mitigating the country’s drift to the right.

Zionism in Interwar Romania

The Zionist movement in Romania comprised four regional organizational structures, one in the Old Kingdom and three in the new territories. Several attempts were made to build a unified movement (they only came to fruition just before World War II) but on the whole the country’s Zionist movement remained fragmented. In the Old Kingdom the Zionist movement had played a major role before World War I, especially during the first waves of emigration to Palestine when pioneers from Moldavia were among the first to settle in Palestine after 1882. However, in Wallachia and even Moldavia it did not strike deep roots. After 1910, the Union of Native Jews, the precursor of the Union of Romanian Jews, was formed and became the main organization struggling for Jewish rights and emancipation. Thereafter the Zionist movement’s activities were often overshadowed by those of the Union of Romanian Jews.

The Zionists in the prewar Old Kingdom were successful in promoting Jewish autonomy by limiting the interference of local authorities in the daily life of the Jewish communities. Especially when it became evident that they were less successful in promoting mass emigration to Palestine, they continued to champion local rights through autonomy; in fact, the implementation of principles of autonomy became the major aim of the Jewish organizations in which the Zionists played a leading role. At the same time, young Zionists took an active role in the mainstream of Jewish communal life.

A major policy issue that divided the Zionists in Romania was reflected in the debate between those advocating Gegenwartsarbeit (work in the present, in the Diaspora) and those advocating work only, or mostly, relating to Palestine. Such
dissension existed in most Jewish communities across the country. The pattern that emerged after the formation of Greater Romania was to combine “work in the Diaspora” with Palestine-oriented activities. In the new territories the Zionists favored an active part in local Jewish life. In the Old Kingdom itself the arguments for or against “work in the Diaspora” were never really settled, and remained a source of contention within the branches of Romanian Zionism. The disagreements were more than a matter of Zionist tactics and strategies; they reflected some of the basic issues confronting the Zionist movement—how to relate to local Jewish politics and what role to play in shaping Jewish life, education, and culture. At the same time the Zionists had to ask themselves to what degree their involvement in Jewish politics would be beneficial in the long run for the Palestine-oriented activities, and the degree to which Zionists should be involved in the representation of the Jews in relations with the state. The emergence of the Jewish Party in the early 1930s was a clear indication that the Zionists had found a way to influence Jewish life. This party, with Zionist leadership and representing a Jewish national-oriented approach, combined the representation of the community in Parliament with the active promotion of Jewish national-oriented and Zionist goals.

In the immediate post-World War I period the Zionists were politically active, their representatives joining the Jewish delegation at the Paris Peace Conference in May 1919. The Romanian Zionists demanded that Romania, in line with its international obligation, pass laws naturalizing Jews in its territory. The emerging Zionist leaders, including A. L. Zissu, were not ready to settle for civil rights alone: they wanted the status and rights of a national minority, with cultural autonomy. Thus, the Romanian Zionists saw no contradiction between Zionist ideals and national autonomy. The Zionists in the Old Kingdom were Hebrew-oriented, opposing the Yiddishist trends evident in some East European communities. One of the first declarations published by the Romanian Zionist Federation at the beginning of 1919 pertained to its objectives of political, cultural, and
religious autonomy as well as recognition of the Hebrew language as the national language of the Jewish people.

Zionist activity in the Old Kingdom took a new turn after the end of World War I with the formation of Greater Romania, the changing situation in Palestine, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and the Balfour Declaration of November 1917. In 1919 the first Zionist daily, *Mântuirea* (Salvation), appeared, giving voice to Zissu’s ideas. The paper was published until 1923, when the weekly *Renărea Noastră* was started. It was published during 1923-1942 and 1944-1948, championing the Jewish national cause, and taking a strongly anti-assimilationist position.

Personal rivalries, characteristic of Jewish politics in all of Eastern Europe, played an important role in the development of the Zionist movement. In retrospect one can see that many of the personal differences and power struggles were of minor importance in comparison with the growing ideological divisions within the Zionist camp. Romanian Zionism, which before World War I had mostly consisted of and been led by well-to-do middle-class people and which represented this social class, gradually expanded to include the major ideological streams within European, especially East European, Zionism.  

One of the first ideologically motivated subgroups was the *Renărea* (Rebirth) Circle formed in 1922, which served as a basis for the founding of the Jewish Party. The *Renărea* group opposed the predominance of the upper bourgeoisie in the Jewish communities, demanding their "democratization," but at the same time stressed social harmony and opposed the application of the principles of class struggle. The group, and later the Jewish Party, combined "work in the Diaspora" with "work for Palestine." It also emphasized that as long as Jewish rights were not guaranteed on Romanian soil, Zionist work could not make progress.

As mentioned earlier, the impact of the new territories on the ideological diversification within the Zionist camp was great and some of the socialist groups had their power base in Bessarabia and Bukovina. Thus, *Zeirei Zion* (The Youth of Zion), a moder-
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mentarian Ernő Marton, was strongly Zionist but stressed the need for ongoing political activity at the same time.

The Zionists in Transylvania considered their main task to be the assurance of rights for the Jews, who as a group were considered by the Romanian regime to be "pro-Magyar" because of their Hungarian language and culture. While the middle-class General Zionists enjoyed strong support in Transylvania, a reflection of the social status of some segments of the Jewish population, the other main ideological streams of Zionism formed their own organizations. This trend was especially evident in the youth movements, which prepared thousands of Transylvanians young people for emigration to Palestine.

The Zionist leaders of Transylvania played an important role in Jewish politics in addition to representing Romanian Jewry in Parliament. Ernő Marton, Teodor Fischer, and József Fischer—the so-called "parliamentarian trio"—were active in attempts to forge Jewish unity. In 1924 the first institutional contacts were established between Zionists in Transylvania and those in the Old Kingdom. At that time a delegation participated at the annual meeting of the Zionists in Transylvania. In fact, territorial divisions between the Zionist organizations prevailed through the interwar years. Contacts between the various federations continued with the major aim of achieving unity in the face of the growing rightist extremism and anti-Semitism. Separate channels of communication with the Zionist leadership in Palestine were kept up and leading representatives of the Zionists in Palestine continued to participate in the annual meetings of the Zionists in Transylvania.

In Bukovina Zionism was strongly middle-class. It provided some of the major figures of interwar Jewish politics in Romania, among them Meir Ebner, who was elected to the Romanian Parliament in 1926. Based on organizational frameworks carried-over from the prewar Austrian era, by the mid-1920s the Zionists took over the Jewish community of Cernăuți, and held leading positions in most of the Jewish centers in Bukovina. They also undertook numerous educational and cultural projects in which Hebrew education played an important role.

In Bessarabia, by contrast, Zionism was strongly socialist in character, a legacy from the Czarcist era. With the rise of anti-Semitism Zionist activities concentrated on educating and preparing the youth for emigration to Palestine. As in other parts of the country it was the youth movements that carried out this task. Zionist control of the Chișinău community, and growing Zionist influence in every community, assured a strong impact on the younger generation.

The youth movements were an important part of Zionist activities in Romania as a whole as at the level of the individual large Jewish communities. There were youth movements affiliated with all shades of the political spectrum: the Socialists, the Revisionists, and the religious Zionists, for example, had their own sizable youth sections and movements. Aside from the clearly politically affiliated movements, there were some, such as Bârzăști-Avița in Transylvania, which were targeted especially to young Jewish intellectuals.

With the help of the youth movements hundreds of young Jews from all parts of Romania emigrated to Palestine in the interwar period, joining existing settlements and forming new ones. Unlike their sponsoring political movements, the youth movements were not engaged in "work in the Diaspora" and channeled all their energies toward Palestine. Thus, the younger generation and the emerging leadership was not involved in the struggle for Jewish rights in Romania and in internal Jewish politics. The Romanian authorities conformed, if not actually encouraged, the activities of the Zionist youth movements on the assumption that by furthering emigration they contributed to the solving of the "Jewish question" in Romania.

With the disintegration of Greater Romania in 1940, the situation of the Jewish communities in the various areas again diverged drastically; the Jews of Northern Transylvania became victims of the 1944 Holocaust in Hungary; the Jews of Bukovina and Bessarabia suffered terrible losses after the recapture of these territories by the Romanian Army in 1941; and the Jews in the Old Kingdom were ruled by the fascist regime of General Ion
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Antonescu. Thus the history of these communities, which despite numerous internal differences had shared a common fate in the interwar years, was again split into separate streams.

NOTES

2. For studies on the composition of the Jewish communities in Romania, see Shvut, no. 16, 1993, a publication of the Diaspora Research Institute, Tel-Aviv University, Goldstein-Goren Center for the History of the Jews in Romania (in Hebrew).
3. Breviarul Statistic al României (Statistical Summary of Romania), vol. II (Bucharest, 1939).
4. See David Schary, "Jewish Culture in Multinational Bukovina Between the Two World Wars," Shvut, no. 16, 1993, pp. 281-96.
5. Iron Guard propaganda claimed for years that the real number of Jews was much higher. See, for example, Bună Vestire (Good News), Bucharest, November 20, 1940, quoted in Bela Vago’s, Jews and Antisemism in Interwar Romania, 1919-1940 (unpublished manuscript).
8. Information on Jewish participation in Romanian economic and financial organizations can be found in Artur Axenfeld, Memoria Discriminări economice (Memorandum. Economic Discrimination). Unpublished manuscript. Historical Documentation Center, Hafia University, R3 B6.
10. On the Zionist movement see Efrain Ofir, "Tzionim be'guv ha'arayot" (Zionists in the Lion’s Den), Tel-Aviv University, Goldstein-Goren Center, 1992 (in Hebrew), and Bela Vago, "The Jewish Vote in Romania Between the Two World Wars," Jewish Journal of Sociology, vol. XIV, no. 2, 1972, pp. 229-42.

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11. On the problems confronting Romania’s Jewry at the outbreak of World War II, see Alexandre Safran, Resisting the Storm, Romania 1940-1947 (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1987).
12. On the subject of Jewish education in Transylvania, see Shlomo Yizhak’s entry in Pinkas Hakehilot-Romania, op. cit., pp. 49-56.
18. Mendelsohn, op. cit., passim.