

## About the Jewish Renaissance in Post-1989 Hungary Kata Zsófia Vincze

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**Abstract:** In her article "About the Jewish Renaissance in Post-1989 Hungary" Kata Zsófia Vincze presents perspectives in order to address the following questions: what are the reasons for braking with the Jewish traditions and why did half a century later young Jews return to Hungary? What kind of new conflicts generate this newly found ethnicity? Vincze suggests that the ethnic renaissance of Hungarian Jewry produced the born again Jews (not only in religious terms), who no longer hide their ethnic origin, but choose to emphasize them by selecting "typical" ethnic characteristics in which they express their rediscovered ethnicity. Being openly Jewish many times means the building of new communities, participation in identity building, learning about forgotten history, the relearning of language, participation in online and offline political and cultural debates, and also engaging oneself in specific conflicts between minorities and the majority, and or between the different cultures.

According to some scholars in Central and East Europe, since 1989 there is an ethnic revival among a number of ethnic groups (**Gitelman; Kovács É.; Mars**). The ethnic renaissance in Judaism has produced born again Jews, who no longer hide their ethnic origin, but choose to emphasize it by selecting "typical" ethnic characteristics in which they express their newly discovered ethnicity. For Hungarian Jews being openly Jewish often means not only becoming observant but also building new communities, learning about forgotten history, tradition and the Hebrew language, participating in online and offline political and cultural debates, and engaging in specific political conflicts between minorities and the majority culture. Using the methodology of ethnology based on field work and interviews, I investigate the reasons why many of Hungarian Jews deserted Jewish traditions after World War II and what triggered just half a century later some members of the third and fourth generation of Jews to return to Hungary, seeking a "new" Jewish identity after the fall of communism. **I begin with an excerpt from an interview I conducted in 2005 in Budapest.**

eventually I accepted that I was Jewish. When I found out I felt very bad at first; I did not want to be a Jew. I always thought that being Jewish was something shameful, I had no idea what it was, but these were my feelings. When I was called names at school, such as "you dirty Jew," I started to investigate my religion and family. Later on I heard about the Hanukkah [celebration] at Nyugati Square and I went there ... I really liked that some people were so proud to be Jewish. It seemed fun, all those Jews dressed in caftans, dancing happily, singing in a language that was mine, and although I did not understand the lyrics, I had never heard music so dear to my heart. Then I asked my mother to introduce me to the rabbi. I wanted to have a bar mitzvah. We had a big argument and finally she took me to the synagogue. She was very upset. She told me that her mother raised her as a good Hungarian, and forbade her to marry a Jewish man, because she never wanted to have anything to do with Judaism. I had to start to learn everything. I grew side curls whilst I prepared for my bar mitzvah. I wore a kippah even on the street, and since then I have not eaten pork and kept kosher. On Shabbat I do not travel by bus or any public transportation, I do not smoke or work on Sabbath. I try to keep the tradition. I pray three times a day. Ever since I became Jewish, my Jewish friends don't really socialize with me, some of them say that wearing a yarmulke attracts anti-Semitism ... My mother is also upset with me: she said that the "Jewish sect" has narcotized me (her grandmother was ultra-orthodox before the war) and my religious new life is sick, dark, and backward ... I had problems with handshaking. The company where I started to work has many women and according to the Jewish law I shouldn't shake hands with them. Many times I feel isolated, stigmatized, and I am called a separatist Jew ... I am not sure if I believe in some higher power, but I believe in the Jewish community and I want to raise my children Jewish. (unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine)

This first encounter of a 23-year-old man (I call him here Áron) with Judaism during a public celebration of Hanukkah was not an unusual experience for Hungarian Jewish youth in mid-1990s. Today, throughout the urban landscape of the U.S. and Europe it is common to see the loud and festive, public Hanukkah celebrations organized by the Hasidic group known as Chabad Lubavitch. In

Hungary the celebration takes place at Budapest's Nyugati Square, accompanied by loud Klezmer music, dancing by "orthodox looking" people, and Hanukkah doughnuts (*sufganiyot*) handed out to curious spectators as they gather around the huge Hanukiah (*candelabra*). Some right-wing extremist groups in Hungary make use of these public events as a source for conflict. Every year since 2001 the right-wing party *Jobbik Magyarország* has responded to Chabad Lubavitch's public Hanukkah festivities by placing a huge cross next to the Hanukiah, adorned by a quote from the New Testament which presents it as superseding the Hebrew Bible and granting redemption only for those who accept Jesus Christ. In 2008 another anti-Semitic political group, *Magyar Gárda*, together with the above mentioned *Jobbik Magyarország*, organized an aggressive counter-demonstration against a Jewish group which wanted to set a record for lighting the most Hanukkiot in Budapest's Heroes' Square, which, according to the right-wing organization, constituted a dishonor against what they called "their sacred place." In part because of the fear of such anti-Semitic backlash and because of other fears that public displays of Jewish identity might cause them, many Hungarian Jews insist they would never participate in such a loud, flashy, and public Hanukkah celebration. Organizers of such events, for instance Chabad, however, claim that the purpose of these public celebrations is precisely to celebrate Jewish identity through an attractive, joyful, and even "trendy" representation of Jewishness in order to reach out to Jews to encourage them to strengthen their Jewish identity and to bring them back to the traditions of the religion. In Hungary, in contrast to many other countries such as the United States, the outreach work of Chabad and other outreach organizations is still directed primarily to those Jews who are still afraid to "come out" publicly, and often even privately, with their Jewish identity.

According to a census in 1941, in Hungary there were 725.007 Jews and about 100.000 converts who were defined as Jews (**Braham, *Rescue Operations in Hungary: Myths and Realities* 173**). The wartime losses of the Hungarian Jewry were established at 565.000 and of the 260.500 Jews who survived the Holocaust, 130.650 were from Budapest and the rest from the provinces (Braham, *The Politics of Genocide* 174). Today, while scholars estimate the total number of Jews in Hungary to be approximately 70.000-100.000 (Stark 101-27), if we compare these figures with the far lower figures that appear in the latest national census conducted in 2001, the numerical discrepancies between the two figures suggest that almost 80% of Hungarians of Jewish origin refuse to declare themselves Jewish, either in ethnic, national, or religious terms. The reluctance of so many to accept openly their Jewish origins should not come as surprise since according to a sociological survey conducted in 2002, Jews, along with Roma, Romanians (which refers here only to ethnic Romanians and not to Hungarians from Romania), Chinese, Serbs, Ukrainians, and Arabs were considered to be the most stigmatized ethnic groups in Hungary and were the victims of both latent and openly expressed, aggressive racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia (Kovács András, *A kéznél lévő idegen* 158, "Identitás és etnicitás").

To understand the reasons why Hungarian Jews hide their identity, I present the historical context of the phenomenon. Denying, hiding, concealing one's Jewish origin seems to be a typical Hungarian approach that has a long history and a complex background. Just like in Western Europe by the second half of the nineteenth century, many Hungarian Jews more or less voluntarily desired to assimilate or acculturate in order to attain social respect and certain rights (see, e.g., Karády, "Egyenlőtlen elmagyarosodás"; Vörös) and they often led a double life by separating their private and public lives (see Kovács-Vajda; Virág; Vasvári). The application of the Nuremberg Laws in Hungary, however, put an end to such attempts at assimilation. After 1945 even for those Jews who survived the Holocaust social integration did not go all that smoothly owing to the resurgence of a new anti-Semitism in many forms, including violence against Jews who tried to reclaim their property, against "newly communist Jews" and even blood libel pogroms (see Nemes; Pelle; Pető). Since after the war anti-Semitism was forbidden by law and by the supposed egalitarian communist ideology, the term anti-Zionism came to be employed as the new code word for anti-Semitism in public discourse (see Bacskai; Pelle; Standeisky; Varga). The social and political tensions surrounding Jews in post-war Hungary resulted in confusion in Hungarian-Jewish identity. On the one hand, the assimilation process with its roots in the nineteenth century was all but total for many, but on the other hand, for many others, even for many from assimilated backgrounds, it was increasingly difficult to feel assimilated to a society that had been culpable in the annihilation of their people. Those who were still seeking their roots found it impossible to reclaim their Jewish identity, because they no longer had a conscious knowledge of religious traditions and in most cases they no longer had living older religiously observant relatives from whom to seek guidance. Most of the older religious Jews who might have conveyed such traditions had perished in the Holocaust, as the religious, mostly provincial population, had far lower survival rates than had the assimilated Jews living in Budapest (see Braham, "Rescue Operations"; Karády, "A Shoah, a rendszerváltás," "Asszimiláció"; Hanák; Erős, "Zsidó identitás").

According to the data of the interviews I conducted **between 2002-2009 in Budapest**, after the war and especially after the 1948 communist takeover, the majority of observant Jews left the country

and there did not remain in Hungary more than perhaps one hundred orthodox Jews who were still attempting to lead an orthodox way of life and thus there was only a small group that tried to maintain the traditional conservative (*neolog* in Hungarian) Jewish identity. The majority of Jews who remained in Hungary, and even many who emigrated continued to be closeted to such a degree that their children born after the war were often not told of their Jewish origins, with the original assimilatory reason for hiding the family's identity augmented after the Shoah by an even more complex identity dynamics of taboos, traumas, and confusions of survival trauma (see Virág; Erős, "Megtörni a hallgatást"; about the representation of this tension in film, see Portuges).

The mother of young Áron, quoted at the beginning of this paper, recalled this tension as follows: "My mother had the Auschwitz numbers tattooed on her arm, but we could never ask her anything about it. She always wore long sleeves, hiding her past. I didn't know what to tell to my children about it either. I knew it was some kind of a dark secret, but we never talked about Judaism. All I remember that Christmas was painful, because we never had Christmas trees and I never got any presents. We were not Jews, neither really Hungarians, we had no idea what we were ... I guess we were 'communists' ... 'equal to all' ... My father died in the Holocaust, no one could say the Kiddush on Friday night or lead the Seder service anymore ... When my son started to wear a kippah and keep kosher we were panicked." During communism, denying and concealing one's Jewish origins with strategies of silence became a typical attitude, with the interiorized shame or negative stigma of being Jewish then transmitted to the next generation (see Kovács András, *A kéznél lévő idegen*; Erős, "Megtörni a Hallgatást"; Száraz). Communist atheist ideology helped the hiding to spread even more by deleting the box referring to religion in the identity cards in Hungary (also in Romania and Poland), in itself a positive step and one never achieved, for example, in communist Soviet Union, where "Jew" was considered an ethnic category. Raphael Patai has dubbed Hungarian Jews the twentieth century "Marranos" (after the crypto-Jews in Spain of the fifteenth century), whose self-imposed religious and cultural silence was intensified by life under the communist regime (56). Áron's mother called the post-war communist period "the time of confusion": "My mother told me if we are asked somewhere what is our religion we should just say we are Catholics, good Catholics. But in the school the children found out that we had no Christmas tree at home. I was very ashamed, I felt we had nothing."

Ferenc Erős, András Kovács, and Katalin Lévai analyzed 117 interviews recorded in the 1980s and examined how the second generation inherited the taboos regarding their origin and how some discovered their family history only as adults, and often from strangers in an anti-Semitic incident. Twenty years later I found similar results in my interviews, as a well, with Áron's mother no exception: "Our neighbor's kid, a young boy once called me a dirty little Jew, I went home and I asked my mother, what is a Jew. She didn't answer but she just said: I knew they knew." Half of the interviewees in the Erős, Kovács, and Lévai survey recalled the memories of when they first learned about their Jewish origins as extremely negative and viewed their Jewishness as a mark of shame (129-44). The study concluded that 50% of the respondents regarded their Jewish origins as so stigmatizing that they wanted to avoid acknowledging it to the outsiders and passed on their concealment strategies to their children (see also Kovács-Vajda). The interviewees also remember how they often used various tricks to show their neighbors that they were not Jewish, such as visiting Catholic churches, publicly celebrating Christian holidays, and dissociating their public and private family life (Kovács M. Mária 284-86). As many members of the second generation slowly started to discover their Jewish roots and awakened from the shock and identity confusion caused by the Holocaust, some began to reconstruct their "Jewishness," but the majority was not able to cope with the lack of content of their identity. Thus, the attempt to create a meaningful Jewish revival was largely left to the less traumatized third generation. However, up to today there is still a deep conflict between the second generation, one that overwhelmingly wishes to remain invisible, and the third and fourth generations, which initiated the "Jewish renaissance" of the 1990s owing to the fall of communism. During my interviews with Áron, which lasted for weeks, his mother was also present from time to time, giving me the chance to hear her side of the family story get a better understanding through this particular case of the conflict between two generations: "We are constantly fighting since he became part of this sect; first he wanted to go to the Jewish high school, after a long debate I agreed, assuming he cannot learn anything bad there, but now he has turned his life upside down: he goes to prayer every morning, reads only Jewish books, has only Jewish friends, and suddenly he wanted to keep kosher at home. On top of that, he wears a kippah and side curls, so that all my neighbors and colleagues have found out that we are Jewish. I begged him, to at least not do it so visibly. If I could sell my apartment, I would move, he brought so much trouble on me."

Rediscovering one's ethnicity, as illustrated in such stories, created conflicts between the parents who did everything to forget their Jewish origins and their children who wanted to be Jewish again. Many Hungarian Jews who had invested much energy in becoming invisible and had sacrificed their socio-cultural ties to eradicate the stigma, are now still hiding or trying to hide. They continue to do this not only out of fear, but also because since the end of the nineteenth century there has been a

strong correlation between assimilation and Jewish emancipation: getting rid of the "weird," "dark," ancient traditions, the stigma of Jewishness and assimilating to "civilized Europe," and becoming finally equals with the majority. From this perspective, the newly observant Jews are (to their assimilated families) returning to an archaic religion, a step back. After the fall of communism, many national and international Jewish organizations set up and supported outreach activities in Budapest in an effort to revive Jewish communal life and to reinvigorate and reconstruct Jewish identity. These outreach organizations hoped that the present generation would have the potential to overcome the consequences of the assimilation process and the legacy of the Holocaust by building a vibrant Jewish life rooted in the community and linked to secular and religious traditions. These organizations have been established or re-organized with the primary purpose of fostering an ethnic revival, under the motto "Jewish renaissance." Among the institutions, events, and educational programs that epitomized the formation of a consciously positive attitude towards Jewish identity, traditions, culture, and mentality are several synagogues, museums, research groups, magazines, theaters, cultural centers, Zionist organizations, three Jewish schools, several orthodox, Hasidic, conservative, reform, and secular study groups, and the Rabbinical Seminary which has been upgraded to a university in 1990. In different ways, many young people have used the opportunities provided by the newly-established religious institutions and started to study and observe Jewish religious laws, learn Hebrew, and built closer ties to Israel. Despite the efforts made by organizations and support groups, for the great majority of Hungarian Jews in the first ten years after the fall of communism was still not clear about the choice between religious and secular Jewish identity. Many Jews had an undefined longing for some sort of Jewish identity that was not satisfied by the semi-religious or symbolic traditional language that was promoted to express Jewish identity after 1989. Aron remembered his first years of searching for some Jewish identity as a long journey where he was lost many a time: "I just wanted to be Jewish, especially when I was faced with anti-Semitism. I didn't know where to start so I went to the rabbi. I became observant ... Observance is an expression of my identity. But I am not sure I believe in some kind of God. Sorry ... Sometimes I need a break from the religious community. When I go abroad, I don't eat kosher food ... When I go to Israel, I don't need to be religious either but in Hungary this is how I am Jewish."

From the nineteenth-century until the Shoah, assimilated Hungarian Jews had tended to conceptualize their Jewish identity much more in religious rather than ethnic terms. They saw themselves as Hungarians of the Mosaic persuasion, a concept rooted in the so-called "assimilation contract," which had once promised the full acceptance of Jews as Hungarian citizens, in exchange for their ethnic and cultural assimilation and limiting their Jewish identity to religion (see Karády, "Egyenlőtlen elmagyarosodás"; Miron; Vörös). The history of this so-called contract of assimilation might be why sometimes even the most secular and even atheistic groups, such as anti-religious Zionist organizations need to celebrate with symbolic gestures some religious holidays, or they have to have candle-lighting on Friday nights in order to attract people (Mars 165). The historical tradition of Hungarian Jews to define their Jewishness in religious terms contrasts with, for instance, ex-Soviet Jews who defined themselves and were defined by the society at large in ethnic terms, or Polish and Romanian Jews, who were emphasizing the Yiddish language and cultural aspect of their Jewish identity (Gitelman, "Becoming Jewish" 108). Therefore, in the first wave of the renaissance of the Hungarian Jewry the religious aspects seemed to gain an enormous importance. However, according to my interviews, after communism, the revival—although through religious gestures and behavior—was often a reconstruction of the distinct cultural and ethnic identity, rather than a return to real Jewish religious life. According to the Kovács survey conducted in 1999 and published in 2002 ("Zsidó csoportok"), slightly more than 20% of Hungarian Jews between the ages of 18 and 35 were more interested in Jewish tradition, culture, and history than were their parents and they also had closer ties to Israel, and were more observant than their parents. Whereas only 13% of these young Jews who were interested in returning to their roots kept Hanukkah as children by 1999 roughly 41% observed this holiday, and while only 6% had kept the Shabbath as children, as many as 18% kept it as adults. Similar increases in observance could be found with regard to *kashrut* and many other traditions (Kovács András, "Zsidó csoportok" 23-24; with regard to other European countries, see Gitelman, "Reconstructing" 30-50).

The post-1989 renaissance of the Hungarian Jewry was followed by a second wave of renaissance after 2000. The first ethnic revival was primarily centered around "coming out of the closet," facing the past, reconstructing history, family stories, and Holocaust memories, discovering and learning Jewish religious traditions, decoding the existing anti-Semitism, and eventually building from these fragments a Jewish identity. The second revival was based on a new trend of expressive ethnicity and the cult of being different, with the motto: "it is cool to be Jewish, it is cool to be different." While first wave centered on the awareness about the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, compensation, reorganization, and reconstruction in order to make up for the lack of historical awareness, the second revival popularizes Jewish diversity and polarizes various options for a new positive Jewish identity, reaching beyond the borders of Hungarian Jewish culture, and opening the doors for cultural contacts

with Europe and the Middle East. New, more secular outreach centers and cultural institutions were founded and—although cultural events still incorporate Jewish religious traditions—these "underground" institutes offer a wide variety of opportunities for experiencing and expressing a non-religious "cool" Jewish identity.

Within the broader frame of the European trend of multi- and intercultural frameworks, Jewish festivals use ethnic symbols to conjure up and express Jewish ethnic identities, both for Jews and non-Jews. For example, in the punk/hip hop/klezmer/rap music we find some of the ancient Jewish motifs, Hebrew religious tunes, in the lyrics the elements of the liturgy, mixed with some other trendy ethnic components, such as Arabic, African, Latino or Serbian rhythms. The "cool music" employs folklore in an innovative way and unlike the music of the 1990s, it is no longer used to go "nostalgically back to our origins." Now the attractive elements and symbols of the "typically Jewish" culture are presented with humor, cynicism, sometimes even self-criticism and self-sarcasm. This reflects a new self-assessment that "we are not 'good' Jews anymore," "not traumatized, persecuted, stigmatized Jews," "we are now strong, cool Jews," and that "it is fun to be Jewish." The musical and visual language of these youth organizations combines the new, trendy "exotic" and "ancient" Jewish representations with sarcasm directed against the old stereotypes and creating new ethnic stereotypes and a new "mainstream." The message of cool ethnicity and the sarcastically unmasked stereotypes are popularized through the new art languages in cultural centers, coffee houses, and "underground places" located mainly in the Jewish quarter such the clubs Sirály, Szóda, Szimpla, Ladinó, or Gödör (see Gruber). Bands like Shrayem, HaGesher, or Ofer "Schoolmaster" Tal, Uri "MixMonster" Wertheim, and many other popular singers and bands on their Purim, Hanukkah or Sukot performances mix the Jewish content with other ethnic groups' "cool" symbols, i.e., dreadlocks, or hip hop, reggae, jazz, and different retro trends creating a popular trend among Jews and non-Jews, while they also intend to show non-Jews what Hanukkah or Pesach are all about.

After 2000 most of young Hungarian Jews shifted their community life—previously practiced in synagogues—"underground" coffee houses, and, most importantly, to the internet, creating several active and large online Jewish communities (e.g., judapest.org, pilpul.net, jmpoint.hu, etc.) with online networks, debates, study groups, blogs, and occasionally offline activities. The online Jewish community life has created the new cyber-Jewish existence. The virtual Jewish identity, expressing itself in blogs and debates phrased much more defined opinions and questions about their own cultural or political issues than the previous generation. As we can see, the second wave of ethnic revival is less dramatic and less burdened with history, as it focuses more on the happy, joyful side of Jewish culture, expressing Jewish identity with a positive attitude. The new entertaining aesthetics and funky representation of a stigmatized ethnic identity not only popularizes Jewish diversity, but also tries to build a stable and positive Jewish identity. I wonder, whether this new self-presentation of Jewishness may be the only way to legitimize the public presence of stigmatized ethnic groups to the outside world, and whether this is the only way to soften latent xenophobia and show the once shamefully concealed culture to outsiders. For non-Jews in Hungary the new elements of politically correct language, the new "funky hip," counter-cultural ethnic movements, the ethno- music and ethno-cultural resurgence, as well as the works of several civil centers against racism, are gradually changing some elements of the public opinion towards not only accepting the stigmatized minorities, but also towards recognition of the positive ethnic identity. Simultaneously with the increasing popularity of ethnic diversity, ever since ethnic revival became visible not only among Jews but also among others ethnocities like the Roma, the anti-Semitic response has become equally loud (see Kürti; Tötösy de Zepetnek). Politically incorrect language has become an accepted by some young people, parallel to the multicultural openness by others. Putting a huge wooden crucifix next to the Hanukkiot is a response to the symbolic takeover of the public space, the fact that young Jews dare to express their Jewishness by wearing a kippah or organizing ethno festivals, concerts, and public Hanukkah celebrations shows the importance of public expression of ethnicity.

The increasing Jewish presence both on the cultural and political scene is resulting in new ethnic conflicts and producing new versions of the old stereotypes of "Jews are everywhere" and "Jews dominate the culture, the media, and the world" (see Shafir 211-29). Side-by-side with the ethnic revival, the street- and cyber anti-Semitic response to public Jewish ethnicity gets louder, even expressed in new anti-Semitic extremist right-wing "cool" music trend called "national rock" ("nemzeti rock"). At the same time, elite discourse is characterized by a sophisticated ambiguity: while politically correct language is slowly introduced, codes and catchphrases referring to the "nation's enemy" have become richer, more widespread, and more frequently used. According to my interviews, 70-75% of non-Jewish Hungarians who have encountered some aspects of the ethnic revival have changed their opinion primarily in a positive direction regarding Jews and Judaism. The public display of ethnicity either filled a gap in their lack of knowledge or made them reflect on their previous prejudices. Between 30% and 35% formed a very positive opinion about Jewish culture after they learned more about it, and some (4%) even considered to converting to Judaism. On the other hand, about 10-17% of those who previously held neutral opinions regarding Judaism, have now

formed, under the influence of the public display of ethnicity a negative or a critical opinion about Jews. In this group of respondents, 7% have strong anti-Semitic and racist opinions and 10% hold a latent anti-Other opinion.

In conclusion, the results of my study show that although the new manifestations of a traditionally stigmatized ethnic culture bring up deeply-rooted and pre-existent ethnic conflicts, they also "soften" the image of the "stranger," the hated, feared phantom by allowing the majority to get familiar with the "other's" music, traditions, aesthetical symbols, gastronomy, and art. The naive touristy folklore kitsch, the funky public celebration of certain holidays unveils "the unknown other" and makes it more familiar and friendly.

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