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Hungarian Jewish politics from the end of the war until the collapse of Communism

The present study examines Jewish politics in Communist Hungary. As it is widely known, politicians of Jewish origin played an important role in the political life of post-war Hungary as leaders of the Communist party or as officials in the Communist governments. Their activity had a considerable effect, both directly and indirectly, on the life of Hungarian Jews. "Judeo-Bolshevik" rule is still a favorite topic of contemporary antisemitic publications. No doubt, the question of whether the Jewish origin of these politicians had an impact on their decisions, and if so, to what extent, could be a relevant subject for historical study. However, this essay deals with a different topic. It is concerned only with those politicians in post-war Hungary who identified themselves publicly as Jews or openly represented Jewish causes. How did these politicians, who viewed Jews as a collectivity and sought to defend the Jews' collective interests, act in the troublesome post-war decades?

1. Prelude: from alliance to collaboration – Hungarian Jewish politics from Emancipation until the Holocaust

“Hungary was the most unfavorable environment for the emergence of modern Jewish politics.” This was the conclusion drawn by Ezra Mendelsohn from an analysis of the circumstances of Jewish politics in Hungary after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise (of 1867). (Mendelsohn, 1983. 107). Indeed, during the period in question, Hungary was the only country in Eastern Europe not to be affected by the political conflicts that led – in Russia,

Poland, the Baltic states, Romania and (after the First World War) in Czechoslovakia – to the development of autonomous modern Jewish politics and influential Jewish political organisations. In Hungary the governing political elite supported the emancipation of the Jews and their acceptance into society; indeed, in the second half of the 19th century, it even suppressed the occasional outbreaks of antisemitism; there was an absence of the rivalry between elite groups of various ethnic origins that would have forced assimilating Jews to make a choice, or would have encouraged them to develop their own minority identity, as they did in the Czech and Moravian areas of the Monarchy; as a consequence of rapid Magyarisation there was no development of the autonomous secular Jewish culture that gave rise – in Poland and in Russia – to modern Jewish politics. This was the situation in which “the maxim of participation in political life for Jews living in Hungary consisted of one basic rule: it was forbidden to appear as a Jew and represent particular Jewish interests in Hungarian politics” (Kovacs, 1994).

Nevertheless, modern politics was not without influence on the operations of Jewish institutions and the activities of Jewish public figures. There is no doubt that when it came to political arguments and conflicts that directly affected the interests of the Jews, Jewish politicians who strove to influence decisions basically followed the traditions of the “stadlanut-politics”. On the other hand, they did try to mobilise and obtain the support of Jewish public opinion by using the means of modern politics. The peculiar political attitudes of the Jewish institutions and personalities became particularly visible in the course of three historical events: the schism between the Orthodox and “Neolog” congregations, the wave of antisemitism in the 1880s, and the “reception” of the Jewish denomination (i.e. official recognition of Judaism as an accepted religion). In each instance, it was obvious that the outcome of events would directly affect the destiny of Hungary’s Jews.

As Jakov Katz has shown in his excellent work (Katz, 1999), at the time of the conflict between the Reform and Orthodox wings, which intensified in the years after Emancipation, it was in fact Orthodoxy – rather than the Reform wing – that wielded the weapons of modern politics more successfully. Whereas the Neologs – in the knowledge of the support of the liberal government – were practically sure of victory in the impending battle surrounding the rules and practices of the united Jewish representative institution, Orthodoxy with its surprisingly skilful and persevering campaign managed to persuade the decision-making

politicians to change their minds, Thus, in 1871 it was able to establish its own autonomous representative body. To further this goal, not only did the Orthodox rabbis and religious community figures establish a well-organised and efficient network, but also Orthodox Jews established an association – the *Hitór Egylet* [Guardian of the Faith Unit] – which we would today call a civil grouping and which represented Orthodox interests to the outside world and was used as an instrument of political pressure, expressed their views (“Hungarian Jew”) in the *Modern*, a Hungarian-language (!) newspaper, and organised an effective press campaign with the aim of disseminating their views both at home and abroad. And even more importantly, they won over influential political actors: they successfully lobbied Emperor Francis Joseph and even obtained the support of the extreme liberal opposition in the Hungarian Parliament, which rejected the establishment of a united Jewish representative body as an unacceptable limitation of religious freedom.

- The reaction of Hungarian Jewish politics to the wave of antisemitism in the early 1880s was similar (see Kubinszky, 1975, Katz, 1980, Welker, 2001). The most important public battles about the anti-semitic statements took place in the Hungarian Parliament where several anti-semitic representatives – Győző Istóczy and his associates – kept the “Jewish question” on the agenda during these years. Between 1878 and 1884 there were ten Jewish representatives in the Hungarian Parliament. Six of them had been baptised earlier on, while four were members of the Jewish denomination. Members of the first group did not react at all to the statements of the anti-semitic representatives, and the second group made just two contributions to the debate. Anti-semitic manifestations were confronted above all by the Parliament’s liberal non-Jewish representatives: Prime Minister Kálmán Tisza even expressed thanks to the Jewish representatives for their “self-restraint” in this matter (see Szabolcsi, 1993, p. 45).

In public politics, therefore, Jewish politicians attempted to avoid becoming conspicuous in skirmishes with the anti-semites. But in the background they were not fully idle. At the time of the Tiszaeszlár murder case, the Israelite National Office, which was the

government-recognised representative body of the Neolog congregation, employed as its lawyer one of Hungary's most famous writers and liberal politicians, Károly Eötvös. It was at the time of the Tiszaeszlár case (in October 1882) that the Jewish magazine *Egyenlőség* [Equality] was founded, whose chief editor and subsequent owner, Miksa Szabolcsi, reported from the scene of the court proceedings throughout the case and who not only contributed significantly to the development of public opinion but also had a considerable influence on the outcome of the case: in a classic example of investigative journalism, Szabolcsi found the witnesses and persuaded them to talk, and it was based on what these witnesses said that the most important element of the anti-Jewish construction collapsed. By the final proceedings of the trial, six thousand copies of the newspaper were appearing every day, three thousand of which were delivered to subscribers – thus it became the country's largest newspaper (see Szabolcsi, 1993, p. 40). Employing all the methods of modern publishing, the strident newspaper even criticised the government, if it thought that it was doing too little against antisemitism – for instance there were several articles condemning Minister of Justice Ákos Pauler's statements and inaction during the murder case – and thus the newspaper was quite different in tone from the Jews who were active in Hungarian politics. This was the generation that played a fundamental part in the next great conflict, the debate surrounding the “reception” of the Jewish denomination and the introduction of civil marriages (see Welker, 2001).

In this struggle, the young generation appearing on stage in the 1880s used the weapons of modern politics skilfully – in an effort to win over the Hungarian political elite. When the campaign for the “reception” began, their leader, Vilmos Vázsonyi, who later became Minister of Justice, appealed to Jewish congregations to organise into groups, and that members of the congregation should vote at the upcoming representative elections for representatives who promised to vote in favour of the reception law. 230 congregations outside Budapest followed this appeal. The leaders of the reception movement turned away from the distinguished leader of the congregation of Pest, Mór Wahrmann, who advised them to give up their activities

because they were only making the situation of the government more difficult and were merely fanning the flames of antisemitism (Szabolcsi, 1993, pp. 56-58).

The reception movement was successful and this only strengthened the general conviction that the political methods used by the movement were effective. In essence this was a modernised version of the *stadlanut* politics. In all three cases – orthodoxy’s struggle for autonomy, against antisemitism, and for the reception – non-Jewish political organisations and non-Jewish politicians fought the battle for Jewish objectives. But for politicians to support these goals, it was not enough that they should consider them a part of general liberal politics. The actions of politicians were also motivated by a fear of the political disadvantages they might suffer if they were to lose the support of the Jews – who were rapidly becoming middle class and whose social and economic status was improving – as well as by an expectation of benefits if they were to embrace these issues. Jewish politics carried out in the background and with modern methods strengthened such expectations.

These successes largely defined the development of modern Jewish politics in Hungary. The basic experience of Jewish politicians was that they could rely on the support of Hungarian noble liberals if they formulated their goals within the liberal-emancipation paradigm. The Jewish community saw in the liberal elite an ally – rather than a suppresser or an adversary with whom there was no choice but to collaborate for the sake of minor concessions. Almost all the Jewish objectives seemed achievable in this alliance. In Hungary, therefore, there were none of the typical bottlenecks that led in the other countries of Central and Eastern Europe to the development of autonomous Jewish politics. After the First World War, the social mobility of Jews in Hungary reached unprecedented heights. Most of the country’s Jews no longer faced poverty for generations, as did their co-religionists living on Russian, Ukrainian, Polish or Romanian soil. The ruling politics took a firm stand against antisemitism, and the Jews of Hungary could rely upon the goodwill of Emperor Francis Joseph I – even against groups amongst the high clergy and the aristocracy with anti-semitic sentiments (e.g. at the time of the adoption of the Reception law). If there had been fewer

possibilities of realising Jewish goals, then perhaps the positions of the supporters of minority politics would have grown stronger in Jewish politics. A switch to minority politics would, however, have constituted the abandonment of the national liberal paradigm, which would doubtless have been accompanied by a reduction in the number of opportunities for defending Jewish interests. An alliance with minority Croatian, Romanian or Slovak politicians could not be countenanced – and this was not only due to considerations of *realpolitik* but also to the fact that liberalism, which for the Jews both opened the way to social advancement and promised further benefits, was barely present in the field of minority politics and in the minority populations, which were relatively backward in terms of modernisation – indeed, strong antisemitism characterised some of the currents of minority politics.

Until the turn of the century, the symbiosis of Hungarian liberalism and the Hungarian Jewish community was more or less unbroken. As long as national liberalism remained the dominant force in Hungarian politics, the Jewish political strategy of activating and mobilising supporters by referring to common liberal principles whenever liberal politics became uncertain about truly representing the principles of emancipation, appeared to function. Nevertheless, the unfolding crisis of national liberalism after the turn of the century and its complete collapse after the First World War dramatically changed the underlying conditions of Jewish politics – and Jewish politics was incapable of reacting to the change. During an era in which mainstream politics considered the liberalism of the era of the Compromise to have caused the break up of the historical kingdom of Hungary, any reference to the liberal traditions of reception and emancipation was acknowledged by, at most, the small liberal parties and groupings that were carrying out rearguard actions. When, in 1920, the Hungarian parliament adopted the *numerus clausus* law – which imposed restrictions on the number of university students of Jewish descent – and thus passed the first piece of legislation in Europe to abolish the legal equality of the Jews, after some debate the most respected institutions and representatives of the Hungarian Jewish community bowed to the Hungarian government's wishes and declined to exert pressure through the League of Nations or with the support of the

international Jewish organisations on the government with a view to achieving the abrogation of the *numerus clausus* law. Indeed, they even distanced themselves from the efforts of the international Jewish organisations (for a detailed account, see Mendelsohn, 1983, pp. 108-111). It is worth quoting from a statement formulated by Vilmos Vázsonyi, which was submitted by a committee formed by the Neolog congregation to the general assembly of Jewish congregations in connection with the actions of the western Jewish organisations:

“We declare on behalf of Hungarians of Jewish faith who have assembled on the 30th anniversary of the reception of the Jewish religion: The legal equality of our denomination is part of the Hungarian constitution. Our civil and political rights were adopted by the Hungarian legislature in a free vote, and it was the legislature that registered our religion among the accepted religions.

Thus, for this reason, as we struggle against the *numerus clausus* institution, we may draw support from the Hungarian constitution alone, and we may not refer, and we shall not refer, to the section of the peace treaty that demands the equality of religious denominations.

We are Hungarians and profess to be a part of the Hungarian people, and the peace treaty, which is the sorrow of our nation, may not be a source of our rights [our law]. We express confidence that in the struggle for the completeness of our legal equality as guaranteed by law – a struggle that we shall continue as before – we shall not remain alone, rather that we shall be joined by the supporters of the patriotic traditions of the greatest Hungarian statesmen.

Based on the Hungarian constitution, and expecting from the resurrection of the noble Hungarian traditions the victory of our legal equality, we wish to deal with the matter of the *numerus clausus* here at home [in co-operation] with our own government and our own legislature. Thus, we have not turned, and shall not turn, to any foreign actors for assistance, and we shall avoid this, even if it stems from good intentions.” (Egyenlőség, June 1, 1926, quoted in Szabolcsi, 1993. 367.)¹

¹ Vilmos Vázsonyi was a Member of Parliament from 1901. In 1917-18 he was appointed Minister of Justice and

It was precisely this argument, and the reference to the liberal traditions of the Emancipation and the Reception, that lost its footing in the 1920s. It was no longer possible to create an alliance with the dominant forces of mainstream politics on this basis. The liberalism in whose framework Jewish politics had achieved its great successes, was now represented by only marginal small parties in Hungarian political life – e.g. Vilmos Vázsonyi’s National Democratic Party. In consequence of the changes that followed the First World War, the rhetoric of Hungarian Jewish politics became suddenly empty, although it had undergone not even the slightest change. Jewish politics was now unable to form alliances that might have enabled it to defend the earlier positions.

During the “White terror” that followed the revolutions, and particularly from the latter half of the 1920s, as Ezra Mendelsohn has written, “[T]he old Jewish-Hungarian establishment alliance was reconstructed; it was built on much less firm soil than in the prewar period...” (Mendelsohn, op. cit. 104). This soil, however, was not just less firm; it was also qualitatively different from that which had represented the basis of the alliance in the era of Dualism. Whereas Jewish politicians still attempted to conjure up in elevated tones the traditions of the era of emancipation, their Hungarian political partners used pragmatic arguments – the importance of Jews to the economy, the image of Hungary abroad, the practical difficulties of implementing the restrictions etc. (see Mendelsohn, op.cit. 120-121) – to deflect the demands of the anti-semitic extreme right-wing; indeed, they even mitigated or revoked the legal regulations that had been introduced earlier on, in 1928 e.g. the *numerus clausus*. At the same time, however, they were quite willing to recognise the existence of the “Jewish question” and the necessity of its “resolution”. This caused much disappointment to

then Minister of Electoral Law. He was the first minister of Jewish religion in the Hungarian government. In the 1920s – until his death in 1926 – he was a member of the parliamentary opposition. His party, the National Democratic Party, had 4-6 seats in the Parliament, where – in alliance with the Social Democrats and several smaller parties – it fiercely attacked the “Christian-national” regime. The party’s power base was in Budapest, where in the various elections it consistently received almost twenty percent of the votes. Many of its supporters were (lower) middle-class Jews living in Budapest. Vázsonyi personally condemned the government and the *numerus clausus* law in numerous articles. The tone of the above text is considerably stronger than that of the text-version submitted by government supporters on the committee at the intimation of the government

those Jewish leaders who, from the latter half of the 1920s until as late as the mid-1930s, hoped for a restoration of the pre-war situation – but it did not prevent them from celebrating as a restoration of the old harmony various demonstrations of moderation on the part of the leaders of the government with regard to Jewish issues – whatever the motives for such moderation. (This mood is best reflected in the memoirs of Lajos Szabolcsi, which are quoted on several occasions). Obviously, the need for such externally directed and self-justifying rhetoric stemmed from the fact that by this time even the Jewish leaders believed in the strength of pragmatic considerations alone, rather than in the possibility of political co-operation based on principles.² This form of politics, which was based on the exploitation of mutual benefits deriving from momentary and rapidly changing interest-relationships rather than long-term communities of interest and an alliance based on the legitimacy of shared principles, we may rightly call collaboration.

One of the direct consequences of the politics of collaboration was opposition and hostility towards the Zionist organisations. The official Jewish representative bodies prevented³ the official registration of the Hungarian Zionist League until as late as 1927, and even after that year they did everything to stop the advance of Zionists within Jewish politics. A result in part of this policy was that many of the Jews who were active in politics became involved in non-Jewish politics – as supporters of the left-wing parties and the urban liberal parties. In addition to the support received in Budapest by Vázsonyi's party, this trend is well demonstrated by the data we have concerning the radical left-wing. Of the 40,000 Budapest left-wingers who were watched by the political police at the time (based on the data of a

authorities (see Szabolcsi, 1993, pp. 352-370).

² This is well illustrated by the arguments with which – as he wrote in his memoirs – Pál Sándor, the Jewish Member of Parliament and government party representative, in 1926 convinced Prime Minister István Bethlen to consent to representation of the Jewish denomination in the Upper House. As he told Bethlen, “ [this decision] will be of immeasurable benefit to Hungary. Do you know, my good man, what it will mean if Hungary, which until now was famous merely as the country of the *numerus clausus*, shall become notable for delegating two rabbis into its upper house? ... [I]f .. you consent to the Jewish priests taking their places amongst the Hungarian ecclesiastical notables, then tomorrow this will appear in great letters in the foreign press and particularly in America, because this will mean that by having rabbis as members of its upper house Hungary is setting an example to the liberal legislatures.” (Egyenlőség, January 1930, pp. 13-14. Cited by Szabolcsi, op.cit. 384-385.)

random sample of 1800 individuals) 28% were members of the Jewish denomination, which was 8% higher than the Jewish denomination's share of Budapest's total population (Borsányi, 1983, p. 25).

There is no doubt that collaboration brought some benefits. Jews of Hungarian citizenship were not subjected to physical persecution until after the German occupation. And although the anti-Jewish laws became increasingly draconian, there were still many loopholes. After the German occupation, Jews possessing good relations with the Hungarian political elite found it easier to avoid physical persecution. However, these and various other benefits of collaboration were enjoyed primarily by the upper sections of Hungarian Jewish society – and this was so even at the time of the German occupation, when the wealthiest and best-connected Jews could obtain exemptions from the legal regulations that weighed down on the Jewish masses, and Jewish families with the greatest economic power could leave the country, following agreements with the German SS.⁴

Nevertheless the Shoah brought a catharsis with respect to Jewish politics: for the surviving Jews, the pre-war Jewish leadership and politics had lost all its credibility and legitimacy. Moreover, considerable doubt and anxiety surrounded the ideology that had been professed and proclaimed by all Jewish leaderships ever since the Emancipation: the ideology of assimilation into the nation, which had built its rhetoric on the harmony of national and Jewish goals. In Hungary, the immediate post-war years became the era in which Jewish politics were born.

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⁴ These mechanisms functioned even during the most horrific months of Arrow Cross rule. An example of this is the ministerial decree issued on November 13, 1944 by Gábor Vajna, minister of interior in the Arrow Cross government, which exempted approx. 500 named Jews from the decrees of 1941 relating to the Jews. See Decree of the Minister of Interior of the Kingdom of Hungary No. 16.157/1944. II. B.M. (confirming exemption certificates). M.Kir Állami Nyomda, Budapest, 1944.

2. The brief golden age of Jewish politics: the immediate post-war years

In Hungary about 200,000 Jews survived the Shoah (and approximately one-quarter of this number were no longer members of the Jewish denomination). The social and demographic composition of the surviving Jewish population was very different from that of the pre-war Jewish community (see Karády, 1985). In the course of persecution, Jewish communities living outside Budapest had been almost completely destroyed, and in Budapest it seems probable that Jews with a wide range of non-Jewish friends and acquaintances had disposed of a greater chance of escape, and thus they had found it easier to obtain forged papers or to secure hiding places. This all meant that the post-war Jewish population was almost exclusively urban, and the proportion of Orthodox Jews (and religious Jews in general) was considerably smaller than before the war. It is also highly probable that the proportion of educated and middle-class Jews among the survivors was larger than it had been among the pre-war Jewish population. On the basis of the demographic indicators, it seemed that this secular and assimilated, urban and middle-class Jewish population was “doomed to assimilation” (Karády, 1985, p. 73).

Nonetheless, the initial post-war years brought a series of surprising developments: many surviving Jews turned to the movements and parties that proclaimed the necessity of autonomous Jewish politics. It is no exaggeration to state that during the first three years after the war the Zionist organisations and movements defined the nature of Jewish politics. Viktor Karády has analysed on several occasions the motives derived from personal-psychological (Karády, 2001, pp. 56-60) and social-political conditions (Karády, 1984, pp. 85-87) that led a “substantial minority” of the surviving Jews to choose dissimilation – in spite of their demographic characteristics. Clearly, many of the surviving Jews were diverted from their earlier identity strategies by various factors: their experiences of majority society at the time of the persecutions; attempts [on the part of majority society] to evade its responsibility for the persecutions and for compensation; the difficulties of integrating into post-war society; and the reappearance of antisemitism and its obvious manipulation by the political forces of the

new system. For these people, Zionism – as the modern and secular alternative to assimilation – may indeed have been attractive. Nevertheless, for the Zionist movements and parties to strengthen in such an unprecedented manner and so quickly, a combination of circumstances was also necessary. The first of these circumstances was the unexpected increase in the prestige of the Zionist movements and of Zionism in Jewish public opinion.

One of the most shocking experiences of survivor Jews during the period of persecution was the complete failure to act of the official Jewish representative bodies. Irrespective of what these organisations – and above all the Jewish Council, which had been established by the German occupiers – had done or had not done, for the victims of persecution during the critical months (we may now form a more discerning image of this than in the immediate post-war period), in the eyes of the great majority of those affected, they were institutions of betrayal; indeed, several of their leaders had to face accusations of collaboration. In contrast, the participation of small groups of Zionists in the resistance movement and in the human rescue effort raised dramatically the prestige of the Zionist movement. After the war, news of the armed actions of the Zionist groups quickly spread. But it was not just news of the Zionist resistance that reached the survivors: during the months of persecution in Budapest, very many of them had obtained forged papers or places to hide as the result of direct or indirect Zionist involvement.⁵

An immediate political factor also contributed to this sudden change in people's appraisal of the Zionist movement. The largest organisations of Zionism in Hungary – and especially the groups that had taken an active part in the resistance – were mostly of left-wing orientation. Zionist resistance closely co-operated – and in some places actually merged – with the small Communist resistance groups (see Demény, 1988, pp. 140-143). This factor contributed substantially to an increase in the prestige of the Zionist movement for two reasons: firstly, during the immediate post-war years, Jewish public opinion considered the two left-wing parties – the Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party – unreservedly

⁵ The history of Zionist resistance in Hungary has been elaborated most thoroughly by Asher Cohen. See, for

anti-fascist political organisations; secondly, it was generally expected that these two parties would have a determining role in the new political system. The Zionists' left-wing views and their left-wing connections held out the prospect of realising Jewish interests in a left-wing alliance – and doing so in an effective manner.

Another factor contributing to the development of a political atmosphere that was favourable to the Zionists was that during the post-war period the chances of establishing a Jewish state grew, and the Soviet Union, the Communist great power, supported this. Thus, quite suddenly, the main aim of Zionist policy was transformed from a distant dream into an achievable reality– which was particularly important, since for the surviving Jews, many of whom had lost most of their relatives, friends and acquaintances, the foundation of the State of Israel offered the possibility of a completely new start in life.

Finally, another important factor in the strengthening of the Zionist organisations was that immediately after the war representatives of the foreign Zionist organisations could operate in the country without any limitations or hindrance, and these representatives provided practical assistance towards the everyday organisational work and the operation of the newly-established institutions. The opportunities for organisational development were enhanced by the fact that – partly with their mediation and partly independent from them – the work of the Zionists was being supported by auxiliary organisations with substantial financial resources: primarily the Joint (Joe Schwartz, who was European chairman of the Joint at the time, was very sympathetic to the cause of the Zionists) (see Novák, 2000, pp. 23-28).

Changes in the external circumstances were not the only factors contributing to the change in Jewish politics. Another important factor was the need to accomplish new tasks, and the traditional community institutions were – at best – only partially capable of this. The immeasurable material and financial losses of the community, the full-scale impoverishment of large groups of survivors, the great number of orphans and single people (7000 of the

surviving children and young people were orphans, 30% of under-twenty-year-olds, Karády, 1985, p. 67.) represented unprecedented social and institutional tasks.

The repair of Jewish institutional infrastructure and the provision of social tasks – while often appearing to be irresolvable in the given circumstances – were still a part of the activities of the traditional Jewish institutions. However, after the war, new community tasks arose: the review and repeal of discriminative laws, legal remedies for the consequences of the discriminative laws, the proper restitution of the principles of legal equality, compensation for personal persecution and compensation for the damage suffered by the community as a whole – and, as an integral part of this process, the raising of the question of responsibility for the persecution of the Jews. All of these tasks appeared not only in the abstract form of legislation, but also as everyday issues and conflicts: the return of stolen or expropriated goods and property, the management and use of “abandoned” property – i.e. property that had been left without an owner – was the subject of daily debate in the immediate post-war period. Was it necessary to pay inheritance duties on goods and property of the dead? Were the Jews also to suffer the weight of the reparations imposed by the victorious states? Should there be a difference between compensation for those persecuted earlier on and those who suffered damage during the war? Should the Jews receive back the lands confiscated from them under the anti-Jewish legislation? And should they be allowed to keep them just like those who owned similarly large estates at the time of the 1945 land reform? (for more details, see Csorba, 1990, pp. 76-80). These and similar issues – as well as opposition to outbreaks of antisemitism and pogroms after the war – led people to ask whether the representation of Jewish interests in politics was appropriate. The question not only concerned the capability of the traditional denomination system to cope with the tasks created by the new system. The events of 1944 had led to an extraordinary decline in the confidence of Jewish people in the leadership of the community, and the fact that after the war old faces could still be seen in the key positions of management – the new chairman of the denomination was Lajos Stöckler, who had been a member of the

Jewish Council in 1944 – convinced many that the political representation of Jewish interests would have to be entrusted with new and uncompromised organisations and individuals.

The rapid expansion of the Zionist movement is best illustrated by data on the numbers of the movement's members and supporters. According to these data, in the 1930s there were at most 4000-5000 members of the Zionist movement. Following the return to Hungary of territories that it had lost after the First World War this number rose to 10000-12000 persons. Purchasers of the shekel numbered just 7300 in 1937 and 28,000 in 1939 (see Karády, 1985, p. 93; Novák, 2000, p. 16) – an insignificant minority of the total Jewish population. However, in the first year after the war – according to the official congress report published at the time of the Twenty-second Zionist Congress, held in Basle in December 1946 – the number of purchased shekels amounted to 95,000 (see Novák, 2000, p. 33). This means that about two-thirds of the survivors supported the Zionist movement at that time. In 1948 the official report of the Hungarian Zionist League mentions the purchase of 58,000 shekels and 15,000 registered members (8300 of whom were living in Budapest), which was more than 10% of the total Jewish population at the time. (Novák, 2000, pp. 43, 154). In 1949 the indexing system with the complete records of the Hungarian Zionist League fell into the hands of the Central Leadership of the Hungarian Workers' Party (the name of Hungary's communist party at the time). It contained 37,000 names.⁶ The 1949 report of the State Security Authority (ÁvH) of the Ministry of Interior on the Hungarian Zionist League mentions that the Hungarian Zionist League had six sections and 80 local groups and a declared membership of 41,000, which – as the report itself determines – was obviously a considerable exaggeration (Novák, 2000, p. 295). Nevertheless, under the circumstances, even a fraction of this number would still have indicated considerable support for the League.⁷

⁶ The data of this indexing system is processed in a document dated December 5, 1949 and entitled "Az MDP KV Szervezési Osztálya javaslata a párt Titkárságának a cionista párttagok kizárásáról [The proposal of the Administrative Department of the HWP CL to the Party Secretariat concerning the expulsion of Zionist party-members]" (see Múltunk, 1993, pp. 273-276).

⁷ This is especially so, given that post-war emigration peaked in 1949. By collating data from various sources, we may estimate the number of Jews leaving the country between 1945 and the end of 1949 at 40,000. Approx. 15-18,000 of this number emigrated to Palestine or Israel (see Karády, 1984, pp. 100-103, Novák, 2000, p. 38,

The substantial growth in the influence of the Zionists is indicated not only by the above data, but also by the increasing importance of Zionist institutions within Jewish society. In 1945 3000 survivor children were being cared for in Zionist children's homes and this number rose to 6000 in 1946 (Novák, 2000, p. 26). In 1947 there were 3500 members of the Zionist industrial and agricultural collectives (Novák, 2000, p. 134) and in late 1946 more than 800 children were studying in the Tarbut-schools (Novák, 2000, p. 126).

A direct result of this strengthening of Zionist positions was the growing Zionist influence amongst Jewish congregations: in 1945 Rabbi Dr. Fábián Herskovits, the chairman of the General Democratic Zionist Block, became chief rabbi of Budapest's largest synagogue in Dohány Street, five of the twenty representative body members of the Pest Jewish Congregation were Zionists, and a further seven were supporters of Zionism. In 1947 the Zionists took seven of seventeen positions in the leadership of the Jewish Congregation (Novák, 2000, pp. 29, 32, 154). The change in the mentality of the Jews is shown by an event that caused uproar among official Hungarian and Jewish circles: the street demonstration organised by the right-wing Zionist Betar in protest at the pogrom in Kiskunmadaras in May 1946. On this occasion, the organisation was able to mobilise a crowd that was larger than its actual number of supporters. The demonstrators marched to the Parliament building in central Budapest, reciting the slogan "There is still enough lamp-iron, and Kunmadaras will be no more!" (see Novák, 2000, p. 101).

For the first time, autonomous Jewish politics began to acquire considerable influence in Hungarian public life. Nevertheless, simultaneously the general political atmosphere in the country became increasingly subdued. By 1947 the rapid and shameless advance of the Communist Party into the various positions of power and the Party's complete flouting of the democratic rules of the game had drastically restricted political pluralism in Hungary. And by 1948-1949 the Party had effectively destroyed Hungarian democracy. This process proved fatal for Jewish politics, too. Although the Zionist left-wing cherished illusions with regard to

Stark, 2001). Emigration – and emigration to Israel in particular – obviously resulted in a reduction in the number

Communist policies, the impartial observer could soon find out that the Communist Party viewed the Zionist movement with inherent hostility and suspicion, and that gestures once perceived as friendly had been nothing but the consequences of tactical considerations. While the international Communist movement still strongly supported the struggle for the establishment of a Jewish state, the leading ideologists of the Hungarian Communist Party had made it clear in the first year after the war that they could not accept any form of Zionism. “In Hungary there is both a reactionary and a progressive path to the resolution of the Jewish question”, wrote the historian and leading Communist Party ideologist Erik Molnár in a contribution to the Communist Party’s theoretical periodical in 1946 (Molnár, 1946). “The reactionary path is Zionism, which remains reactionary even if it proclaims socialism. ... The cannibal antisemitism of fascism may have driven together the remnant Jews, but this is just a temporary phenomenon, just as fascism was also merely a temporary regression on the road to human progress. Zionism’s current popularity in Hungary expresses this temporary phenomenon. The attempt of Zionism to restore the insignificant national consciousness of Hungarian Jews contradicts the direction of Hungarian social development and thus is a reactionary aim. ... In Hungary the progressive path to a resolution of the Jewish question leads towards the full assimilation of the Jews.” Even immediately after the end of the war, the official Communist Party daily, *Szabad Nép*, had already written in similar tones about a Zionist demonstration. Having compared the Zionist procession to a *Hitlerjugend* march, the article’s author continued as follows: “... among the handful of Jews that are still alive there are some who want to finish the half-completed fascist operation: the separation of the Jews from the Hungarian nation. Fascist external features and here and there the reflection of the fascist spirit accompany this strange attempt. The parades and marches of the Zionist youth foster antisemitism. They render it more difficult for Hungarians to come to terms with the spiritual heritage of counter-revolution, and make it more difficult to achieve a constructive national

joining of forces, but they do the worst service to the Jews themselves.” (Szabad Nép, 1945, p. 3)

In theory the Social Democratic Party also rejected Zionism, but the tone of its rejection differed from the Communist rhetoric. A document issued on October 4, 1946, which is the report of the SDP’s temporary committee dealing with the “Jewish question” and Zionism, stated the following: “The Party’s theoretical position on Zionism is still one of rejection, but it does also manifest understanding towards Jewish sections [of society] which – since large parts of their families have been annihilated and their homes destroyed, and they themselves have been subjected to immeasurable suffering – now feel that they can only bear the extent of their tragedy if they are able to develop their way of life somewhere else and amongst themselves. Thus, the Party cannot deny support and assistance to those who – after the suffering inflicted upon them, and driven by national, minority community or religious sentiments – now wish to migrate to Palestine. Nevertheless, the Party disapproves of any propaganda that seeks to encourage the emigration of people in whom the idea [of emigration] has never arisen or has still not strengthened.” (Múltunk [Our Past], 1993, p. 259). The underlying motives of the Social Democrats’ position are well demonstrated by the hand-written notes of Antal Bán, general-secretary of the SDP, which appear on a letter that Béla Dénes, leader of the Social Democrat Zionist Ichud-Mapai party, sent to the Social Democrats requesting recognition of the body and its membership the SDP: “The above seek to register as nationality [minority community] socialists. This endeavour is not new to us, and until now it has met with little opposition in the Party. We must find out more about this matter; we must have a look at them unofficially, before we broach the matter here. We should sound out the position of the Communist Party towards them. In my opinion, even now people will object in Hungarian political life if such a party makes an appearance”⁸ (Múltunk, 1993. 254).

⁸ The letter was written in April 1945. Antal Bán notes date from April 27, 1945.

The first disputes between the Zionists and the state bodies run by the Communists arose because of the activities of Bricha – the organiser of illegal emigration: in 1945 the organisers of such emigration were detained for a temporary period (in a manner that was typical at the time – they were freed for USD 20,000 per head), while in 1946 Minister of Interior László Rajk threatened to deport to the Soviet Union the Zionist delegates that were still active (for an overview, see Novák, 2000, p. 37). In 1947 a serious dispute broke out in connection with the activities of the Joint, the organisation that had made the greatest contribution to the restoration of Jewish life after the war and to the development of conditions in which the Zionist movement could function. In May 1947, in a letter sent to Mihály Farkas (one of the party's most important leaders), Dr. Miklós Ajtai, who was working at the time as a supervisor at the Ministry of Welfare (and who after 1956 became deputy prime minister and then chairman of the National Planning Office), frankly formulated the aims of the Communist Party: "At present our aim is to dig as deep as possible into the affairs of the Joint, we shall prevent their 10 million Forints from serving to support reaction and we shall force back the Zionist line" (Múltunk, 1993, pp. 260-261). According to the confidential report that was prepared for the Communist Party by the Ministry of Welfare official who was dealing with the Joint (see Múltunk, 1993, pp. 261-264), during the period in question the Joint was spending USD 700,000 monthly (the equivalent of 10 million Forints at the time) and 50 wagonloads of goods (worth 5 million Forints) on assistance in the country. But – according to the report – just a part of this amount was being spent on social goals, the rest "...is being used indirectly towards political goals. It constantly promotes and sustains the differentiation of Hungary's Jews from the Hungarian nation. For the purpose of having people emigrate, it is providing for several thousand young women and men in retraining camps amid a reactionary leadership regime. Through the so-called Department of Work and Plant Organisation it finances industrial co-operatives, factory sites, and maintains agricultural collectives, which constitute points of infection in the life of democratic Hungary in both Budapest and in the country areas. When it comes to grants and allowances, the benefits are constantly being given

to individuals or organisations with Zionist attitudes, ... At my suggestion, each month the Joint is now spending and shall continue to spend 5% of its full dotation mainly on support for the social institutions maintained by various progressive-minded left-wing parties.

Summary. Proposal.

1. The hard currency dollars and the 50 wagonloads of goods are needed by the country.
2. The support of about 40,000 people and in connection with this the functioning of an apparatus numbering 3500 workers and public officials is also beneficial from the perspective of social policy.

The question arises: Is it necessary that the Joint should continue to operate in Hungary? In the current situation it is absolutely necessary, because it means advantages from economic and social perspectives, but in terms of politics 'it must be brought under control'." The author of the report leaves no doubt about how the organisation should be "brought under control": "*We have to find a Jewish public figure whom the foreign reactionary leaders of Joint trust, but who will work in accordance with domestic intentions*" (my italics – A.K.).

Given such a background, it is obvious that the deterioration in the relationship between the Jewish Congregation and the Zionists from 1947 was not the result of personality conflicts. After the national elections of 1947, at which the Communist Party received the largest number of vote through electoral fraud, attempts to get rid of the Zionist organisations were stepped up.⁹ The tactics employed against the Joint were found by the Communist Party to be suitable for extending its influence elsewhere. By this time Communist-Social Democratic party cells were not just working in the Joint. In 1948 – rather unusually, given that it was a religious community institution – under the leadership of Dr. László Benedek, director of the Pest Jewish Congregation's hospital, the Hungarian Workers' Party [Communist Party] established the Pest Congregation primary party unit. The Communist party leadership began using the Congregation as a means of getting rid of the Zionist organisations. Initially, they managed to prevent the Zionists from taking part in the

⁹ The process by which the Zionist organisations were wound up is described in detail by Novák, 2000, pp. 40-43

Congregation's elections as an independent grouping. Then, in March 1948, at the Zionist League's elections Lajos Stöckler, chairman of the Congregation – according to contemporary reports under direct orders from the Communist Party (Novák, 2000, p. 215) – informed the Zionist leaders that co-operation between the Congregation and the Zionists had become conditional on left-wingers being granted the leading posts in the leadership of the League – which is exactly what happened. From late 1948 various government measures restricted to an ever-greater degree opportunities for legal and illegal emigration. At a meeting of the general assembly of the Hungarian Zionist League in late 1948, the Marxist Zionists assumed complete power, in what amounted to a coup. According to a letter written by the leadership of Hasomér Hacair (Novák, 2000, p. 157) this development was once again due to Stöckler, who had threatened “external interference”, should the outcome have been different. In early 1949, István Szirmai,¹⁰ the Communist Party functionary responsible for “Zionist affairs”, proposed in a memorandum addressed to the Secretariat of the Hungarian Workers' Party a ban on the Zionist organisations. In the letter, having made known the contents of his discussions with Stöckler – it seems very likely that Stöckler wished to maintain or restore limited opportunities for emigration – Szirmai wrote the following: “The operations of the Zionist organisations have been banned in the people's democracies of Eastern Europe. Until February 1948 their Eastern European headquarters were in Prague. After the change in policy by the Czechs, they moved their headquarters to Budapest. Many Palestinian citizens are residing in Hungary as Zionist agitators and organisers; these people are spreading bourgeois nationalism, they are adding to the emigration craze through their organisations, they are smuggling hard currency, ‘rescuing property’, and damaging the Forint. It is my suspicion that in the course of

and 145-172. The data provided by Novak serve as the primary source in the following.

¹⁰ István Szirmai himself began his political career in the Zionist movement in Transylvania. From 1931 he was a functionary of the Romanian Communist Party and then of the Hungary Communist Party. After 1945 he held various senior posts. In 1953 he was arrested in the course of inquiries leading to the Zionist trials and was subsequently convicted of Zionist activities (among other things). He was released in 1954. After 1956 he was admitted into the party leadership and in 1959 became the Central Committee's secretary responsible for ideological issues. In 1962 he became a member of the supreme decision-making body, the Political Committee [or Politburo]. He died in 1969.

emigration – a process that has not been properly controlled – they have smuggled out considerable amounts of property.

I propose:

1. The dissolution of the League of Hungarian Zionists and a ban on their organisations.
2. The expulsion of foreign nationals and Zionist agents employed by the Zionist League.
3. The issuing of emigration passports only to people aged over 50 years, except for justified cases.
4. The issuing of a government decree that fixes the maximum value of goods that may be taken out of the country in case of emigration at 5000 Forints.
5. The left-wing group within the Jewish congregation should begin a political information campaign against emigration among the Jewish population, and should declare war on Zionist influences.” (Múltunk, 1993, pp. 266-267)

The Secretariat’s response to Szirmai’s proposal was rapid (January 12, 1949). “The Secretariat theoretically approves of the proposal, but does not consider the present moment to be a suitable time for its implementation. The abolition of the Zionist League should take place in the form of a self-dissolution – with regard to its timing; Comrade Szirmai should make a proposal in one month’s time. The foreign nationals must be persuaded to leave the country.” (Múltunk, 1993, p. 268).

It was not long before the “suitable time” arrived. In February 1949 a co-ordinated action was begun¹¹: while a whole series of boorish anti-Zionist articles appeared in *Új Élet*, the Congregation’s newspaper, Stöckler informed the Zionists of the Party’s demands. Szirmai, meanwhile, threatened police action in case of resistance (Novák, 2000, p. 157; Múltunk, 1993, pp. 268-269). At first the Zionists tried to avoid self-dissolution, but, having been caught in the pincers of the Party and the Congregation and following the withdrawal of support from the

¹¹ The co-ordinated nature of the action is proven by Szirmai’s second proposal (submitted in February 1949) to the HWP Secretariat concerning the dissolution of the Zionist League: “The chairman of the Jewish congregation at *my suggestion* (my italics – A.K.) has met with the leader of the Hungarian Zionist movement, advising them to halt their emigration propaganda and to voluntarily dissolve the Zionist organisations. At the same time, an article objecting to emigration has appeared in the Jewish weekly *Új Élet*”. (Múltunk, 1993, p. 268.)

Israeli diplomatic representatives in Budapest,¹² they admitted defeat. On March 13, 1949 the Hungarian Zionist League dissolved itself.¹³

The break up of the Zionist organisations and finally their liquidation was an inevitable consequence of the Communist take-over. The Zionist organisations were far from being the only bodies that were not tolerated by the party-state system. Indeed, by 1950, the Communist regime had either wound up or taken over all the institutions of the limited democracy of the 1945-1948 period. Even in this earlier period the Communists had tolerated Zionism for immediate political reasons - primarily in reflection of the Soviet Union's policy toward Palestine. As Communist power grew, and following the change in the Middle Eastern policy of the Soviet Union, the fate of the Zionist organisations throughout the Soviet sphere of influence was sealed

From the perspective of Hungarian Jewish politics, however, it is worth noting the *manner* in which the dissolution of the Zionist organisations took place as well as the reaction of the Jewish organisations to the increasing pressure – if only because these events led to the development of mechanisms that were to characterise Jewish politics later on.¹

The tactics employed by the Communist Party were aimed at making it appear to the public that the clamp down on Zionism was an internal Jewish affair. The functionaries who were assigned this task on the one hand placed leading members of the Congregation under direct pressure – above all the chairman of the Congregation, Lajos Stöckler – and on the other hand sent unquestionably loyal Communist Party members, who could be mobilised at any

¹² A consular report, issued on March 28, 1949, stated the following: “We saw no possibility of the Hungarian Zionist League managing to survive, and we did not want to make a special sacrifice. We wanted to stop the arrests and we wanted to rescue the funds that had been collected together ... as well as the Zionist funds”. Letter in Hebrew to the Eastern European section of the Israeli Foreign Ministry. Subject: The dissolution of the Zionist League and the organisation of the Hungarian Zionists. Budapest, March 28, 1949. CZA S68-282. Quoted and published by Novák, 2000, p. 295.

¹³ The announcement of the “self-dissolution” of the Hungarian Zionist League appeared in the Communist Party daily *Szabad Nép* on March 25, 1949: “The National Executive Board of the Hungarian Zionist League resolved at its meeting on 13 March to dissolve the League. The resolution states: as the State of Israel has been formed and thus the main objective of the League has been fulfilled, and because normal diplomatic relations are today maintained between Hungary and Israel, the Executive Board shall cease the operation of the Hungarian Zionist League. It has also dissolved the Hungarian Palestine Office”.

time, into the important posts of the Congregation and other Jewish organisations (e.g. the Joint) – for example, Dr. László Benedek, the head physician of the Jewish Hospital, or the chief editor of *Új Élet*, the Congregation's newspaper. Once this had been done, there was nothing to prevent congregation politics from becoming merely an extension of the party politics. Thus, after a short detour towards autonomous politics, Jewish institutional politics settled back into the old routine: unconditional co-operation in public with the practitioners of power, in the hope of achieving possible benefits in the background.

Interestingly, however, the Zionist representatives of autonomous Jewish politics were not without self-delusions with regard to the new political system. After the war, left-wing groups – the Communist Hasomer Hacair, the Social Democratic Ichud Mapai, the Achdut Haavoda, and the left-wing of the General Zionists, as well as the youth organisations of these bodies – formed a majority within the Hungarian Zionist movement¹⁴. From the very start, the left-wing had great influence within the leadership of the Zionist League, and this influence grew over time. At the Zionist leadership elections in March 1948, only left-wingers were elected into the leadership of the League – an apparent reason for this was that Lajos Stöckler, the chairman of the Congregation, had stated before the elections: “in future the Congregation shall only be willing to co-operate with the Zionists if left-wing groups make up the leadership of the League (Novák, 2000, p. 43). In early 1949 the extreme left-wing Zionists (the representative of the Hasomer Hacair and the Achdut Haavoda) assumed complete power in the Zionist movement by employing methods similar to the Communist Party's tactics – i.e. by implementing a well-organised coup. Once again they appear to have been motivated by Stöckler's threats of external interference – in the event of a different outcome (Novák, 2000, pp. 156-157). The strength of the left-wing among Zionist members is indicated in a report of the Zionist League, according to which in the autumn of 1948 more than half of the Zionist party membership belonged to left-wing organisations, while 26 % belonged to the General Zionists (Novák, 2000, p. 154). In 1949, when the Hungarian Worker's Party ordered a review

¹⁴ Between 1945 and 1949 the Zionist left-wing organisations frequently underwent changes or merged. For

of the party membership of former Zionists, an internal party report stated that 12,275 of the 37,000 individuals appearing in the 1948 Zionist membership records were Communist Party members, and even in 1949 9000 of them were members of the Hungarian Workers' Party (Múltunk, 1993, pp. 273-274).¹⁵

After 1944 it was with great illusions that the left-wing Zionists and Communist sympathisers became involved in Zionist politics. Some of their leaders had close contacts with the Communist resistance. Indeed, the boundaries between the small groups of Communists and Zionists taking part in the resistance were not always clear. Shortly after the end of the war, it seemed that the binding force of shared goals – the proper realisation of anti-fascist policies, the calling to account of fascist crimes, the struggle for left-wing goals in the new political system – was stronger than the Communists' immediate aversion towards Jewish national ambitions. Moreover, the anti-Zionist rhetoric that was manifest from time to time could be interpreted – and was interpreted by some Communist Zionists – as a deviation by local Communist leaders from the main line of policy as determined by the Soviet Union, for in these years Soviet policy firmly supported efforts to establish the Jewish state.¹⁶ Therefore, immediately after the war, the Communist Zionists began to build contacts with the Communist Party. At first they consulted fairly regularly with Communist leaders, and some of them became involved in the work of the political police force. During the elections, they called upon their members to vote for the Communist Party – and, despite the warning signs, they deluded themselves into thinking that the hostility of the Communists towards Zionism was merely the consequence of the presence of “reactionary forces” within the Zionist

information on these changes, see Novák, 2000, pp. 44-52.

¹⁵ The strictly confidential report of the Administrative Department of the HWP CL to the Party Secretariat also noted the presence of 8327 Zionist Communists in Budapest and 3948 Zionist Communists in other areas of Hungary. Outside Budapest, the numbers were particularly highest in the north-eastern counties of the country, while in Budapest there were more than 1000 Zionist Communists in each of the following districts: V, VI, VII, and VIII.

¹⁶ At a Shomer meeting in Budapest on May 29, 1947, the following was said: “Gromyko’s speech has confirmed our belief that our the correctness of our analysis will be recognised by the international proletarian movement. We see in the speech the development of the Soviet Union’s position concerning Zionism, which has been no means reached ‘its end-point’.” Quoted by Novák, 2000, p. 51.

movement (for an overview, see Novák 2000, pp. 44-52). Thus, the willingness of the left-wing Zionists to implement communist salami tactics within the Zionist League was not only due to external pressure. Another contributory factor was perhaps the conviction that a Zionist movement led by Communists would be acceptable – as a fellow traveller – to the Communist Party. All of this, however, clearly facilitated the realisation of Communist tactics that were designed to eliminate the movement.

3. Defencelessness or collaboration: the years of Stalinism

By the summer of 1949 the construction of the Communist party-state was complete in Hungary. Having eliminated parliamentary democracy, the political parties, freedom of speech and freedom of the press, the Communist authorities began to exert increasing political pressure on the churches and religious denominations. From 1948 – under the slogan of a war on “clerical reaction” – the Communist regime employed ruthless means of repression in an effort to destroy the institutions of the churches and religious denominations and to eliminate their autonomy and social influence (see Gergely, Kardos, Rottler, 1997, 210 skk).

The nationalist – amidst great controversy – of church schools and the subsequent abolition of compulsory religious education served to destroy the social foundation of the religious denominations.¹⁷ Church leaders that attempted to oppose or protest these measures – such as Primate József Mindszenty, the head of the Hungarian Catholic Church, and Lajos Ordass, a Lutheran bishop – were imprisoned on trumped up charges. In subsequent years, there were a whole series of trials leading to the convictions of various – mainly Catholic –

¹⁷ The legislation proclaiming the nationalisation of church schools was adopted by the Hungarian parliament in June 1948. Under the law, 6505 schools passed into state ownership, more than two-thirds of the country’s schools. Almost half of these schools had formerly been owned by the Catholic Church (see Nagy, 2000, pp. 175-181). After the nationalisation of the schools, the religious denominations were allowed to retain the following schools: the Reformed (Calvinist) Church – six grammar schools and two training colleges for primary teachers; the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church – two grammar schools; and the Jewish denomination – a grammar school. The Catholics were returned eight of their schools after the signing of an agreement between the Hungarian State and the Hungarian Bishops’ Conference in 1950 (see Nagy, op. cit., p. 180). Compulsory religious

church figures. The intimidation led the leaders of the various denominations to sign agreements with the Communist state between 1948 and 1950 (the Catholics were the last to sign in 1950). In these agreements the churches recognised the power status quo and pledged their co-operation. In 1951 the State Office for Church Affairs was formed with the purpose of controlling the everyday activities of the churches. The new body was competent in all legal, economic and personnel matters affecting the denominations. Staffing policy was integrated into the *nomenklatura* system, that is, ecclesiastical and denominational appointments were made subject to the approval of the appropriate state or party organs.

The policy statements of the Communist Party had indicated ever since 1945 that the Party – in line with post-emancipation custom – was prepared to treat Jewish affairs at best as denominational issues. This intention was clearly visible in the party’s rhetoric concerning Zionism – and this was so even though during the first two years after the war the Party co-operated with left-wing Zionists for tactical reasons. After 1948, however, there was no room for any illusions: the secret party document – mentioned above – about former Zionists within the Communist Party (Múltunk, 1993, pp. 273-275) proposed the “removal” of former Zionists from the Party and included details of how this was to be achieved. In the trial of László Rajk in 1949, the indictment stressed the Zionist past of the various defendants, and in the early 1950s various personnel departments recorded former membership of a Zionist organisation and former membership of the Arrow Cross Party under the same rubric in the files. In 1949 the first Zionist trial was held – the trial of Béla Dénes, the leader of the Social Democratic Zionist organisation (the Ichud Mapai), and his associates (see Dénes, 1999)¹⁸.

The policies of the Communist party-state towards the Jewish denomination were practically no different from the policies pursued against the other denominations – and the

education was discontinued in September 1949.

¹⁸ The physician and journalist Béla Dénes was active initially in the Social Democratic Party and then, from 1933, in the Party’s autonomous Zionist organisation, the Poale Cion. After the Second World War, he became the leader of Ichud Mapai and a deputy chairman of the Hungarian Zionist League. He was arrested in May 1949 and spent almost five years in prison. He left the country in January 1957 and died in Israel in 1958. He wrote his memoirs in Israel, an abbreviated version of which was published in Hungary in 1999.

leaders of the Congregation that were still in their posts behaved very similarly to the leaders of the Christian churches – once the attempts at resistance had been crushed. The agreement between the Jewish denomination and the Hungarian state was signed on December 7, 1948. The Jewish negotiators (Lajos Stöckler and Samu Kahán-Frankl, the leaders of the Neolog and Orthodox communities) gave their consent to the nationalisation of the denomination's schools and – a year later – to the introduction of voluntary religious education (i.e. the abolition of compulsory religious education). While the former measure was obviously a great sacrifice, since the religious community schools – and particularly the Budapest Jewish Grammar School – had been important institutions of Jewish community life, the abolition of compulsory religious education, or “its being made voluntary”, could be seen as conforming to Jewish tradition, which finds it difficult to integrate state church elements. Nevertheless, given that the denomination was at the complete mercy of the State, the fact that the leaders of the Congregation explained their approval of the measure in terms of Jewish tradition seems to be more than cynical (see Csorba, 1990, p. 114). The final step in the transformation of the Jewish denomination in line with the wishes of the State, was the forced union of the institutions of the Neolog and Orthodox congregations: In February 1950, in the great hall of the Congregation, under portraits of Lenin, Stalin and Rákosi, the representatives of the Jewish National Assembly adopted a resolution establishing a uniform national organisation – a body that the State could obviously control more easily. In doing so, they abolished the independence of the Autonomous Orthodox Central Office. From this point onwards, the Orthodox wing functioned as a branch of the united organisation led by Lajos Stöckler.¹⁹ An important element of full state control was the rabbinical regulation, which was adopted at the beginning of the decade. Section 25 of this regulation declared that a rabbi “could not preach sermons whose content or philosophy contradicted the political, economic or social order of the Hungarian state, or which conflicted with the interests of the Hungarian Jewish

¹⁹ In a letter dated June 5, 1950 Stöckler requested Zoltán Vas, an important party leader, that the Orthodox chief rabbi, Samu Kahána-Frankl, and the former deputy chairman of the Orthodox congregation, Dr. Imre Reiner, should be permitted to emigrate, because they had lost their livings with the unification of the two congregations,

denomination” (quoted by Csorba, op. cit. p. 131). Finally, in 1957 senior appointments in the Jewish congregation and the rabbinate were formally made subject to the approval of state bodies – and thus the leadership of the Jewish congregation became an institutional part of the *nomenklatura* system of the party-state (see Csorba, op. cit. p. 141.)

Nevertheless – as László Csorba, author of the only comprehensive study of post-war Jewish denominational life, has shown (op. cit. p. 116.) – in the course of their negotiations with the state bodies the Jewish leaders did attempt to obtain several minor concessions – and they were sometimes successful.

Thus, while the repressive policies employed by the party-state against the Jewish denomination were no different from policies pursued against other religious denominations, Jews were affected by forms of repression that in the case of the other churches were clearly absent. Such repression was inflicted on real or perceived manifestations of secular Jewish identity or – where political accounts needed to be settled – an opponent’s Jewish descent was used merely as a pretext for repression. From 1949 until 1954 a whole series of political trials based on accusations of Zionist activity took place – the imprisoned or interned victims of such trials included former Zionists, Orthodox Jews, as well as the those who succumbed to the wave of anti-Zionist purges within the Communist Party. The anti-Zionist campaign that began in the Soviet Union in 1952-1953 led in Hungary not only to the imprisonment of various senior officers of the Communist political police force – a majority of whom were of Jewish descent – but also to the arrest on charges of Zionism of Lajos Stöckler and Dr. László Benedek, two men who had consistently represented Communist interests within the Jewish Congregation. István Szirmai, the party functionary responsible for the elimination of the Zionist movement, was also arrested (see Schmidt, 1998).

Another special manifestation of the policies of intimidation imposed on the Jews was the recording of Jewish background and the attempts to restrict the number of Jewish cadres. As various sociological analyses have shown, the collapse of the old pre-war anti-semitic

regime opened up previously unknown possibilities to various groups of Jews (Karády, 1985, pp. 110-121, Kovács, 1985, pp. 13-15). Jews who had been active in the left-wing parties and political movements before the war and who were considered reliable could now embark on careers in the state and party apparatus, in the police and in the army. Jews who had been unable – because of the anti-Jewish laws – to find work in accordance with their qualifications or to attend university, now made use of the new channels of social mobility. According to the cited works of research, such conjunctural mobility characterised only a minority of the surviving Jewish population – but this minority was a very visible one. For this reason, the Communist leadership, which immediately after the war had made barely concealed gestures towards anti-semitic groups among the lower classes (Standeisky, 1992, Standeisky, 1995), simply continued a “quiet numerus clausus” personnel policy, that is, it did everything to support the advancement of “people’s cadres” and pushed cadres of Jewish descent into the background. All the signs indicate that behind this policy – a characteristic document of which is a letter written by Géza Losonczy, Secretary of State for Education, to his superior, Minister of Education József Révai, one of the most important politicians in the Party – stood the party leader Mátyás Rákosi. Losonczy, who lists the criteria that will form the basis of his efforts to build the Ministry’s apparatus on a “healthy social basis”, wrote the following. “Comrade Rákosi ... has emphatically underlined that we should steer clear of ‘clever, petit-bourgeois Jewish intellectuals. We might have just as many problems with them as with the intelligent workers that we are going to bring in – with the difference, however, that whereas, in the case of the worker cadres, several years of laborious and toilsome work will bring forth its own fruit, in the case of the former group we may never know when they will become spies and when they will spoil our efforts under the pretext of enforcing the party line” (Losonczy, (1949) 1985, p. 224).

What could the Jewish interest groups and representatives of Jewish politics do in this situation – which was so unlike anything they had gone before? During the decades after the First World War, the benchmark of Jewish politics had been clear: the struggle against legal

discrimination against the Jews and their exclusion from society. And then at the time of persecution, the achievements and failures of the effort to rescue lives had defined Jewish politics – i.e. the success or failure of the search for allies, collaboration and resistance. After 1949, however, for the Communist regime it did not matter whether the institutions of politics and civil society that it suspected of being possible centres of resistance to the construction of its dictatorship were Jewish or non-Jewish. Whatever was the case, the regime strove to destroy or control them completely. Communist politics in Hungary – while sometimes taking advantage of the mobilising force of anti-semitic sentiment and constantly watching the Jews who were considered to be “infected with bourgeois views” – was anti-religious rather than anti-semitic. It was a politics that perceived mortal peril in national endeavours and in social and cultural pluralism, and thus suppressed the Jews as such. This “reverse emancipation” – the situation in which the Jews, having been denied their rights, became equal with other members of society – established an unknown dilemma for Jewish politics. Suddenly, the range of potential allies interested in opposing the authorities became very wide indeed – it included practically all of the religious denominations – but present in the group were some of the actors of the anti-semitic politics of the previous regime. Political repression almost completely paralysed Jewish religious and community life, but it also bore down on those who shortly before had jeopardised the very physical existence of the Hungarian Jewish community, a community that after the years of persecution understandably still greatly feared antisemitism. Many former Zionists and some parts of Jewish Orthodoxy – the two groups that suffered most from Communist repression – clearly considered the Communist party-state to be an anti-Jewish regime (see Dénes, *op. cit.*, Bacskai, 1993, 1997, Goldstein, 2000). But among Hungary’s secularised Jews – with their traditional aversion to Jewish politics – there must have been many who considered the political regime (whose measures had caused them great suffering “as citizens” and had created material conditions that were far worse than before the war) a dreadful thing, but not something that bore down on them as Jews, and quite clearly the “lesser evil” – when compared to the era of persecution. During the years of Stalinism, apart

from the extraordinary extent of repression and the narrow limits on movement, it was this dilemma that fundamentally determined Jewish politics.

According to László Csorba, the Jewish denominational leadership weighed up the possibilities and then pursued a policy of political realism. Although "...the official line looked like becoming startling similar to the catastrophic policies of the holders of these same posts before the war" he writes, "... the best of the leadership of the denomination, having doubtless considered the overall fate in Hungary of the Jewish community, i.e. both its past and its future possibilities, and having taken into account the geopolitical situation and the expected internal trends of development of Hungarian society, and pervaded by a profound spiritual and emotional commitment to the defence and protection of the Jewish community as a value in itself, quite consciously chose this political path" (Csorba, op. cit., p. 118-119). There is no doubt that under the Stalinist dictatorship there were few opportunities for resistance – and those who did resist ended up in prison²⁰. What Csorba writes, may be said about the thoughts and actions of the leaders of all of the denominations. In the light of this, the position of the leaders of the Jewish Congregation, which considered religious affairs alone to be the affairs of the Jews, may be regarded as a decision based on real possibilities. They may have really believed that it was worth giving up secular Jewish goals, which were untenable anyway, in order to preserve the viability of the religious institutions. This decision led, by way of consequence, to a radical (and ritually repeated) rejection of Zionism in the positions of the Jewish leaders and in the Jewish press, as well as to brazen criticism of Israel. Further consequences were the disruption of contacts with most western Jewish organisations, as well as participation in the activities of institutions that served to legitimise the Communist regime, such as the Patriotic People's Front or the "priests for peace" movement. Still, Csorba maintains that the denominational leaders did manage to squeeze out of the regime some of the conditions necessary for everyday religious practice (Csorba, op. cit. p. 129).

²⁰ Imprisonment was the fate not only of the Catholic leaders and priests who refused to co-operate with the regime, as well as many other Christian figures, but also of the members of an illegal Zionist group organised by Tibor Engländer, who were convicted in 1953 for spying, incitement and breach of faith (Tibor Engländer's

It appears, however, that in some matters of great importance and affecting the everyday lives and existence of many Jews, the collaboratory behaviour of the leadership of the Congregation went beyond what one might call political realism based on sensible considerations. In 1951 the Communist leadership decided to banish from Hungary's cities to the countryside members of the "former ruling classes". The resettlement order applied to many Jews who, before the war, had been entrepreneurs, merchants, or senior public officials – that is "members of the bourgeois classes". According to the official report compiled for the party leadership and containing aggregated data on the resettlement actions, between May 21 and July 18, 1951, 5182 families (12,704 persons) were banished from the capital city, and later – according to estimates – a further 1200-1400 families were forced to resettle in country areas. Several thousand people were also banished from Hungary's other cities.²¹ The report indicates that 781 of the heads of families ordered to resettle were of professions traditionally practised by Jews before the war (factory owners, bankers, directors, wholesalers).²² On the basis of these figures, perhaps as many as 2000-3000 Jews were resettled. Very many Jewish families must have been affected – indirectly or directly – by the measures.²³ Thus, it is hardly surprising that, as the contemporary sources reveal, a great panic broke out amongst the Jewish community. Many people sought the protection of the Congregation or the Israeli embassy.²⁴

personal recollections).

²¹ For the document about the resettlements from Budapest, see MOL 276.65/183. The data mentioned in the document were first analyzed by Rátki, 1981. Elsewhere, the number of "resettled" people has been estimated at 14-15 000. See Romsics, 1999 p. 343.

²² The proportions of the above categories and "other" categories were the same among a further group of about 5000 people who were "resettled" from Budapest between May and July 1951. See Rátki, 1981.

²³ Before 1990, when the archives of the Communist era were still inaccessible, the numbers of resettled people (including the numbers of Jews affected) were estimated – on the basis of contemporary western Jewish press reports – to be considerably higher than this. (See Fejtő, 1960, Kovács, 1985).

²⁴ On June 8, 1951 Zoltán Vas sent a memorandum to Mátyás Rákosi in which he reported that Lajos Stöckler had visited him on the same day. Stöckler had told him that panic had broken out among the Jews of Budapest because of the resettlement orders. In Stöckler's view, the Israeli embassy and the Zionists were inflaming this panic. He had asked Zoltán Vas "...to take steps against on the one hand the Israeli embassy and on the other hand the Zionist groups, which evidently still existed". In a manner characteristic of the era, Vas wrote by hand the following note at the bottom of the page: "I assume that Stöckler wants to persuade us to take steps against the Israeli embassy so that subsequently they will talk openly about this issue, that is, he would like to cause diplomatic complications". MOL KS-276-65.-367.-88.

Although in individual cases the leaders of the Congregation did make attempts to secure concessions,²⁵ nevertheless in their official statements they identified completely with the measures and rejected any solidarity with Jews that were being driven out – and this only a few years after the great persecution. On July 19, 1951 the leaders of the Jewish community issued the following statement in the Jewish magazine *Új Élet*: “The highest organs of the Hungarian Jewish community consider it their duty of conscience to issue their word of protest against the slander that is being spread by the western press, radio and the inciters that are behind them about the behaviour of our people’s democracy towards Hungarian Jews. On behalf of both rabbi bodies, our rabbi councils, and the Hungarian Jewish National Executive, we solemnly declare that in accordance with the full freedom of worship laid down in the Constitution of the Hungarian people’s democracy our brothers in faith are not prevented in any manner from freely exercising their faith; our congregation and its institutions are operating without hindrance throughout the country; and denominational discrimination is not being employed by anyone against our brothers in faith. In the course of the current resettlement actions, not a single Jew has been included among those to be resettled on account of his being a member of the denomination. On the contrary, all of them – as super-wealthy wholesalers, factory owners, and landowners – were part of the Horthy-regime, whose persecution of the Jews is known in the whole world and from whose system those who have now been resettled benefited materially and morally. ... This protest and rejection also applies to the position and activities of the diplomatic representation in Hungary of the State of Israel. We note with indignation that even the bodies of the Jewish State have joined the lapdogs of the agitators, and are repeating their slander like parrots, whereas they could easily convince themselves of the falsehood of such slander”. This cynical statement – and the articles written in a similar tone that subsequently appeared in the Jewish press – which portrays the banishment of Jews as rightful punishment for collaboration with the pre-war anti-semitic

²⁵ Some of the banished Jews received assistance from the Congregation, which also helped to find them places in charity homes. According to the documents, 300-400 people received such assistance. Zsidó Levéltár, XXXIII-5-b/2. 191-300.

regime, was not only a clear message to Jews (who were once again losing their homes and their properties within a few years of the end of war) that they should not count on the protection of the Jewish organisations. It was also a cover for a repressive Communist regime on the important international front. Officially, antisemitism was not a factor in the selection of those who were to be banished (although the significance of anti-Jewish sentiment as regards the individual decisions of local functionaries is another matter). But in this specific situation, in which those affected were counting on assistance as Jews, this factor has no significance. Another type of policy – silence, the denial of open support for repression, and assistance in as many specific cases as possible – might have served to indicate to Jews that the Jewish representative bodies were at least on their side, even if they were unable to do much for them. This was the first decisive stage in a process that continued throughout Communist rule and which led in the end to the alienation of the vast majority of Hungarian Jews from the official Jewish organisations, and to a situation in which only an insignificant minority considered the Jewish Congregation to be their own community organisation. (Moreover, a denial of open support might have made it more difficult for the government to mitigate the considerable foreign pressure that stemmed from the resettlement actions, and this might have opened up the possibility of emigration to many “class-alien” Jews – a possibility that the Israeli government had offered).

The policy of the Jewish leadership had a further consequence, whose harmful effects became apparent only later on. The anti-church and anti-religious policies of the Communists created a community of interests among the denominations in Hungary. Although room for manoeuvre was limited, co-ordinated actions would doubtless have made it more difficult for the Party to apply its policy in full. Under the circumstances, even a limited amount of resistance would have had an enormous significance; occasionally it would have been enough to bring about a moderation of the repressive Communist policies – as shown by the example of the Polish Catholic Church. Not only did the Hungarian Jewish leadership fail to seek co-operation with the other denominations, but when Catholic Primate József Mindszenty

was arrested in 1948, the Neolog and Orthodox Congregations, as well as the soon-to-be-disbanded Zionist League, supported the measure in statements that were extremist in tone.²⁶ There is no doubt that Mindszenty, the conservative high priest, had shown little inclination to reconsider the issue of Catholic responsibility for the anti-Jewish laws and the persecution of the Jews, and had failed to initiate a dialogue on this issue with the Jews in the years after the war – which had been the path taken by various important figures in the Calvinist Church. It is also true that in the battle against the anti-church policy of the Communists, Mindszenty had received the backing of various former politicians who were correctly suspected of antisemitism. Nevertheless, the statement of the Jewish representatives was not only unjustifiable from a moral point of view, but it also bore witness to complete political blindness: it could bring no benefits whatsoever in the field of the regime's treatment of the Jewish denomination, and clearly caused great indignation and distrust in Christian circles, which could have become potential partners in the struggle against the Communist regime. At the time of the resettlement actions, the possibility of issuing a joint protest with the Protestants did arise. Nevertheless, Lajos Stöckler, the leader of the Congregation, firmly rejected the Lutherans' offer.²⁷

The policy of the denomination's leadership in the first half of the 1950s not only alienated Jewish society from the Jewish institutions, but also isolated the Jewish

²⁶ "We have watched with anxiety how the people who were the drafters of and active participants in the awful tragedy of Hungarian Jewry, have planned a new Auschwitz while backing Archbishop Mindszenty. We have seen how the Arrow Cross and Hitlerite elements, the enemies of democracy, the people, human equality, and the equal rights of the denominations, under Mindszenty's leadership, are kindling antisemitism in the processions, the church pulpits and at religious gatherings, are spreading the still unextinguished fire of the hatred of the Jews, and thus are crushing the lives of the Hungarian Jewish remnant. For this reason, Hungarian Jews received the news of Mindszenty's arrest with great relief. Through this measure the Hungarian government has placed the head of the pogrom-centre that jeopardises the destiny of the whole of Eastern European Jewry where he deserves to be. ... The responsible leaders of Hungarian Jewry appeal to the leaders of their fraternal organisations in America and Western Europe to inform interested parties, the press, and public opinion, as well as our leading brothers in faith, of the real situation. They should make it known that Mindszenty and his circle are detested fascists, anti-semitic forces who sought to destroy Hungarian and East European Jewry, and allied themselves to the former Hungarian politicians (Horthy and his associates), who are responsible for the destruction of a majority of Hungary's Jews".

²⁷ The visit of the Lutheran Church's lay leader and his appeal to Stöckler to issue a joint protest was reported by Stöckler to Zoltán Vas, who subsequently informed Mátyás Rákosi in the cited memorandum.

representatives in the denominational field in which the Jewish community had been placed by Communist politics. The loss of Jewish society's support and the associated reduction in internal legitimacy, as well as the loss of opportunities for forming external alliances, meant that the official Jewish representative body and the official representatives of the Jewish community were increasingly at the mercy of the Communist state. After the 1956 revolution this dependence plunged Jewish community politics in Hungary into disaster.

4. Post-Stalinist communism and the death of Jewish politics

The reception of the 1956 revolution differed among the various groups of Jewish society. For religious Orthodox Jews the revolution meant liberation from the oppression of an atheist state that persecuted religion – and not least the possibility of being able to leave the country (see also Goldstein, 2000, Bácskai, 1997, p. 50). A significant group among the secular Jews was also sympathetic to the changes promised by the fall of dictatorship. On the other hand, there was also renewed fear of antisemitism: a great number of reports of anti-semitic manifestations and groups – almost all of which were never confirmed – circulated in Jewish society in Budapest. Although – as we now know from the sources – the number of anti-semitic acts committed during the revolution was very small²⁸, nevertheless, barely ten years after the Shoah, the fear of a renewed outbreak of antisemitism led many Jews to leave the country. But two other factors were more important than this motive: the experiences of the first decade after the war had made it clear to many Hungarian Jews that life would be easier elsewhere – both for those Jews that wished to retain their Jewish identity and faith *and* for those Jews who finally

²⁸ The official Communist propaganda publication on “counter-revolutionary” anti-semitic atrocities that appeared after the revolution, reports fifteen cases that were anti-semitic in character. The report was based on a “memorandum” compiled by officials of the Jewish congregation after the revolution. These data may be considered reliable because it was evidently in the interests of the party propaganda, which sought to reveal the “counter-revolutionary” nature of events, to list as many “fascist atrocities” as possible. It was also in the interests of the congregation officials to make public as many cases as possible, because it had to find a reason for the high proportion of Jews among the 1956 emigrants. Since the report was published, several further cases have come to light. In total, there could have been about 20-22 documented cases (see Antiszemita jelenségek, én., Kovács,

wished to free themselves from their old bonds and to realise their chosen strategies of identity (in Israel, in the United States, or in any of the western democracies).²⁹ According to estimates, about 20,000-30,000 Jews left Hungary in the course of the wave of emigration of 1956-1957³⁰. In the days of the revolution, the Jewish Congregation issued a statement in which it supported the revolution and announced the dismissal of the old leaders – this action, however, brought no response.³¹

After the period of retribution that followed the 1956 revolution – from the latter half of the 1960s onwards – Communist politics changed in comparison with the situation in the 1950s. The nature of the political system was unaltered; the party still refused to tolerate the operation of independent institutions and continued to control public institutions, but it now refrained from exercising control over people's everyday lives. Post-Stalinist communist politics did not attempt to mobilise society constantly and made numerous concessions to the individual, who – after the political frustration that had followed 1956 – now desired an undisturbed existence at least in the private sphere. The Communist Party's policy on the churches reflected this general political change. In the period after the retribution that followed the revolution, the pressure on religiosity and everyday religious practice gradually declined. Although a substantial trial was staged against Catholic priests in 1961, nevertheless from the mid-1960s the political supervision of the denominations took the form of bureaucratic controls rather than terror. Accordingly, the main body of control became the

1985, p. 31.)

²⁹ Characteristic is the manner in which one of the leaders of the Orthodox Talmud Torah recalls the atmosphere during the days of the revolution: "On the twenty-third of October in 1956 I still had six hundred pupils - all Orthodox children from Budapest. At the end of October and the beginning of November there was some fear of anti-semitic atrocities, but that's not what people fled from – in Hungary the extreme right would never have won. The Jews were more fearful of the upcoming Communist retribution, and that this would completely destroy religious life. By March of '57, when the wave of emigration subsided, the Talmud Torah had been depopulated; I had perhaps two hundred children, most of whom had moved up from country areas." (Bacskai, 1997. 50. old).

³⁰ The most recent review of the data concerning the emigration of Jews from Hungary is that of Tamás Stark. He too has confirmed – on the basis of his inquiries – the variously cited figure of 20-30,000 Jewish emigrants in 1956 (Stark, 2001)

³¹ This was reported in the November 2, 1956 edition of Magyar Nemzet. According to other sources, however, the retirement of the old leadership took place only in January 1957 (Csorba, 1990, p. 140)

State Office for Church Affairs, which regulated church life primarily by monopolising the rights of decision in areas such as church finance and ecclesiastical appointments.³² Although the means of intimidation did not disappear entirely – priests were imprisoned even in the 1960s – the policy of the state was fundamentally directed at placing individuals at the head of the denominations that were prepared to collaborate without reservation. In the case of the Jewish Congregation, this aim was achieved in full.

After the 1956 wave of emigration the profile of Jewish society in Hungary changed once more. The remaining Jewish population outside Budapest disappeared almost completely: many Jews emigrated or moved to the capital city. Religious Jews – particularly the younger and middle-aged ones – left the country in large numbers. Of 190 pupils enrolled into the Budapest Jewish Grammar School in 1956, just 47 remained in 1957 (Felkai, 1992, p. 153, 168). It appears that most of the Jews that had been involved in the post-war Zionist movement also emigrated. In early 1956 the Budapest Jewish Congregation had 15,000 tax-paying members. After 1956, however, this number fell considerably, although according to estimates (Stark, 2001) in 1960 at least 115,000 Jews were still living in the country.³³ In 1960 the Budapest Jewish Congregation registered just 12 births, and this number fell even further during the following ten years: the Congregation's records show 3 births in 1965 and 9 births in 1970. (Szombat, 1998).

As a result of the changes, the social background of the Jewish interest groups shrank even further. This background comprised Jews that were linked in some manner to the Jewish

³² Under Law-decree no. 22 of 1957, the prior approval of the Presidential Council of the People's Republic of Hungary was necessary for the following appointments (and dismissals): National Representation of the Hungarian Israelites – chairman, deputy chairmen, general secretary; the Budapest Israelite Community – chairman, deputy chairmen; Neolog Rabbinical Council – chairman; and Orthodox Rabbinical Council – chairman. The approval of the State Office for Church Affairs was necessary for the appointment of directors to the Jewish Grammar School and the Rabbinical Seminary.

³³ The social background of Jews that emigrated in 1956 may be reconstructed on the basis of secondary sources alone. In late 1953 the political police force compiled a report for Community Party General Secretary Mátyás Rákosi concerning Jews who intended to emigrate. The report (Múltunk, 1993, pp. 291-292) indicates approx. 10,000 potential Jewish emigrants, of whom 80% were Orthodox. This represented approx. 80% of the Orthodox Jewish population. About half of those who intended to emigrate were aged 35-55. The primary reasons for emigration included religious or Zionist convictions, as well as relatives living in Israel.

institutions and the work of the Congregation. The decline may be demonstrated once more by the dramatic reduction in pupil numbers at the Budapest Jewish Grammar School: in 1959-1960 75 pupils received certificates from the united grammar school; this number rose in the following years to over 100; then from 1967 it declined steadily to a low-point in 1977 when just 7 pupils were studying at the grammar school. It was not until 1986 that the number of pupils rose once again to more than thirty. (Felkai, 1992. 152-153).³⁴ The work of the Congregation began to focus on solving the social problems of its elderly membership, upon assisting and caring for the elderly. Against this background, the program of the new Jewish leadership that entered into office in 1957 – as the new chairman of the Congregation, Endre Sós, wrote in a program article that appeared in the Congregation’s magazine: “We were cultural Jews, and we want to remain cultural Jews” – sounded remarkably hollow. There were no significant groups in the part of Jewish society that was still linked to the denominational institutions whom this program might have addressed. The definition of the Jewish community exclusively as a denomination excluded a great part of Hungary’s Jewish population from the circle that Jewish politics sought to represent. In addition, in the 1960s it was already becoming clear that the young secular Jews who adhered in some form or another to Jewish identity, could only imagine manifesting this outside the official Jewish institutions. Thus, the Jewish Congregation could not count upon any significant social support. The Congregation was not backed by any group whose reactions needed to be considered by Hungary’s national politicians as they made decisions concerning Jewish institutions and the Jewish community in general. Moreover, there was no change during these years in the anti-Zionist policies of the Jewish Congregation and its rejection of any public identification with Israel. In consequence, the possibility of exerting pressure from abroad on domestic political decisions was reduced to a minimum. In this situation – a state of complete internal

³⁴ The fact that demographic factors were not the primary cause of the decline in pupil numbers is proved by the fact that by the academic year of 1990-1991 the school had 119 pupils. Since 1990 the number of pupils attending Jewish schools in Budapest (four primary schools and three grammar schools) has been approx. 1200. The Congregation’s school has had about 300 pupils.

and external isolation – the Jewish Congregation and Jewish institutions became fully dependent upon the Communist state.

Among the possible general objectives of Jewish politics, the primary objective – that of maintaining the Jewish community, as an objective per se – was effectively rejected by the Hungarian Jewish Congregation when it failed to broaden the narrow definition of the Jewish community as a religious denomination. The Congregation also failed in the field of preserving the religious and cultural heritage of the community: state (and a small amount of foreign) assistance, upon which – given the absence of social background support – the Jewish institutional system was dependent, was insufficient even to provide for minimum social and educational tasks. In the decades after 1956, the Congregation sold off or abandoned decaying synagogues, Jewish cemeteries, as well as other properties of historical value that were still owned by the community. The one remaining political goal, which served to legitimise the Congregation, was the defence of the Jewish community from antisemitism. But this was also the field in which the Congregation's leadership, in its complete dependence on the state, attempted to prove its unconditional loyalty to the Communist party-state. The Congregation's press was full of news reports about neo-fascist elements laying waste in the western world – particularly in western Germany. The purpose of such reports was to underline that the sole guarantee of protection from fascism was the Communist system. A document illustrating this attitude is a declaration from 1958 in which the leadership of the Congregation encouraged the Jewish faithful to support the official candidates in the parliamentary "elections" (there were no other candidates to vote for): "Brothers and Sisters! Whoever saw in 1956 the Jewish families fleeing from the Nyírség [a rural area in north-eastern Hungary], the shocked children, the Talmud teacher covered in wounds who was the supporter of no political regime: he was a Jew and he was among the first to be hit by the enemies of the people's democracy, whoever saw this, understood that there is no third way even for Hungarian Jews. There are just two paths ahead: socialism, that is, the possibility of life – and fascism, that is, death" (quoted by Csorba, 1990, p. 141).

The Communist party-state appeared willing to stifle public manifestations of antisemitism³⁵ – obviously fearing that antisemitism and anti-Communism might become intertwined – but it placed strict conditions on protection against antisemitism. The first condition was that the Jewish organisations should adhere declaratively to the definition of the Jewish community as a religious denomination, and that they should reject any endeavours to speak of the Jews in any other manner. “Whoever does not consider the complete assimilation of the Jews into the surrounding society possible or desirable”, wrote one of the leading political publicists of the Kádár era, that is, whoever thought that some kind of Jewish identity was possible outside the walls of the synagogue, “with his ideas, justifies Hitler and the gas chambers” (Száráz, 1976. 265). But the ideas underlying this approach were also explicitly formulated by a leading politician of the Kádár era and a member of reformist wing of the Party: Imre Pozsgai. In the preface to a book containing old and new articles about Hungarian Jewish history – the first to be published for many years – Pozsgai wrote the following: “The man that chooses assimilation, chooses a nation. In Hungary he shall be a son of the Hungarian nation, accepting its social framework and identifying with its history and its program”. For today’s Hungarian Jews there is no alternative to assimilation, but assimilation is also in the community’s interest: “It is a historical fact that a majority of the Jews of Hungary have chosen this path, and are walking along this path voluntarily today, and thus nobody has the right to use in connection with them the pronouns we and they.” (Pozsgai, 1984, p. 11) The offer was simple: assimilation, identification with the nation meant identification with the Communist system and its program, and it was acceptance of this that established the right to protection from antisemitism.

In the three decades after 1956, this principle determined the Jewish policy of the Hungarian post-Stalinist regime. The policy consistently applied two fundamental principles:

³⁵ See, for instance, the Ministry of Interior’s proposal of September 1960, which mentions “nationalist and antisemitic” chanting at football matches and the planned attack of the “hooligans” against the students of the Budapest Rabbinical Seminary, and demands authorisation to take a tougher stand from the Political Committee. See Belügyminisztérium “Előterjesztés egyes preventív intézkedések bevezetésére” [Ministry of Interior: Proposal for the introduction of preventative measures]. Magyar Országos Levéltár, M-KS-288-5/198, pp. 10-11.

“Jewish matters” do not exist and therefore cannot appear in the political arena (or if they do then only where they may be treated as subcases of “church affairs”); the state would take a tough stand against anybody who appeared either within the power apparatus or outside of it and as either a mediator of “Jewish affairs” or as the enemy of the Jews. This political concept was also applied to two important matters in the 1960s: the ruling party’s handling of the Eichmann affair in 1961, and the consequences of the Six Days’ War in 1967.³⁶

In June 1961 after it became clear that due to Eichmann’s activities in Hungary as well as the documents and witnesses in Hungary associated with those activities, the Hungarian state authorities would have to submit statements in the course of the trial, the Party’s supreme body, the Political Committee [or politburo] debated which policy the Hungarian state should pursue in the matter – in agreement with the other Communist countries. The official proposal suggested that the affair should be used for propaganda purposes against “West German neo-fascism” and Hungarian émigrés. István Szirmai – who was now a member of the highest party leadership – added that in his opinion the affair could be used to reveal the wartime co-operation between the Zionist movement and the fascists, thereby compromising the Zionist Israeli leadership. Then it was the turn of János Kádár, who said the following: “I agree with the idea, but I have some reservations. It’s not a good idea to turn these awful fascist affairs into exclusively Jewish questions. If we do act in this affair, the decisive thing should be that Eichmann murdered thousands of *Hungarian citizens* (my italics - K.A.). This is where the emphasis should be, rather than turning this affair into a Jewish question. Eichmann did not only murder Jews; others were there too. This is not a Jewish question; this is a question of fascism and anti-fascism. We recognise the right of the Israeli court in this matter. And that’s as far as it goes, when it comes to the Jews. We must watch out for this.”³⁷

³⁶ I am grateful to János Gadó and Brigitta Eszter Gantner for their assistance in researching the documents of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party and the former political police force.

³⁷ See Minutes of meeting of the Political Committee of June 28, 1960. Proposal concerning the Eichmann affair. (M-KS-288-5-204). Kádár also suggested that after the Israeli court proceedings Hungary should ask for Eichmann to be handed over, but this demand was withdrawn following consultations between the Hungarian foreign policy leadership and the Czechoslovak, Polish and Soviet leaderships. In the end, it was decided that they would not ask for Eichmann and would submit the documents – albeit through unofficial non-governmental channels –

A similar logic drove the party organs as they pursued their policy after the “Six Days’ War”. In the period after the war, a noiseless purge was undertaken in the foreign, military and security services: several cadres of Jewish descent, who were otherwise loyal and trusted Communists, were dismissed or transferred to minor posts. It is only recently – with the opening of the Political Committee’s archives [politburo archives] – that it has become possible to gain an insight into the background to these measures.

The documents reveal that the outcome of the Six Days’ War caused a considerable upheaval in the party. It appears that the party leadership feared both an upsurge in antisemitism³⁸ and (perhaps even more so) Hungarian public opinion, which viewed the Communist regime’s pro-Arab policy with incomprehension and the Israeli victory with barely concealed glee. Hungarian Jews – including party members – on the one hand feared that the Israeli victory would lead to an upsurge in antisemitism in everyday life and in politics but, on the other hand, almost unanimously rejected the official policy of the Hungarian government. A memorandum prepared for the party headquarters by an unknown informer operating in the Jewish Congregation reports on twenty-three discussions – with named discussion partners – that he had held with officials of the Congregation, rabbis, and people in various jobs who appeared in the vicinity of the Congregation. Summarising what he had heard, he wrote the following: “Although most of them [his discussion partners] stress that they believe in the communist social system and do not wish to support the capitalist system and imperialism, nevertheless many of them disagree with the Soviet Union’s position when it comes to that part of the middle eastern conflict that concerns Israel, and especially the

to the Israeli authorities. These documents were to be compiled in such a manner that they would not just refer to the era of the deportations but could be used to further the original political aim; the documents should also favour the summoning by the court of “properly prepared” witnesses (see MSZMP Külügyi Osztálya, Előterjesztés az MSZMP K.B. Politikai Bizottságához. Tárgy: Eichmann-ügy. 1960. szeptember 29. 189/SE/1960 [Foreign Department of the HSWP, Proposal to the Political Committee of the HSWP CC. Subject: Eichmann affair. September 29, 1960, 189/SE/1960]. Magyar Országos Levéltár, Politikai Bizottsági Anyagok.

³⁸ See MSZMP Központi Bizottsága Párt- és Tömegszervezeti Osztálya, Agitációs- és Propaganda Osztálya, 3. számú tájékoztató a Közel-Keleten kialakult helyzettel kapcsolatban. 1967. június 10. [HSWP CC, Department of Party and Mass Organisations, Agitation and Propaganda Department, Information Sheet no. 3 on the situation in the Middle East. June 10 1967]. M-KS-288-11/2149 1967.

question of whether Israel is the aggressor or not. In their opinion Israel acted in a defensive situation”. The opinion of Jewish communists is perhaps best reflected in the following opinion of a party secretary in a small factory: “We communists, who by descent are also Jews, do not agree with the Soviet Union on this issue, because the Arabs have always been antisemites and anti-Communists. It is impossible to believe that they have changed and are now progressive thinkers. The Israeli people are far more progressive, for three Communist parties are operating there. Communists have never been persecuted in Israel, as for instance they have been in Syria and in Egypt. We – who otherwise support the Soviet Union – in this area fear for the prestige of the Soviet Union.”³⁹

Obviously, this mood characterised not only Jews appearing near the Congregation. There were many signs that the Israeli victory in the Six Days’ War had become a point of departure for a redefinition of Jewish identity among young Jews. This change in mood is perhaps alluded to in a contribution by János Kádár to a meeting of the Political Committee dealing with the situation that had arisen as a result of the war.⁴⁰ “A small section of the party membership – and I hope I shall not be misunderstood – but a section that exists and is rather influential in a certain area, behaved in a non-communist manner. And I don’t want to make a racial thing out of this, and I understand that it is not sufficiently clear to everyone who is the aggressor, the attacker; it is possible to understand a certain anxiety, but this does not mean permission to challenge the position of the party and of the government in such an important question as whom we should support and whom we are fighting against.” Kádár did not hesitate to draw the consequences: “I would not allow this to go without a response. It is a vital to our system that the party should be intact and firm. And if we then have fewer party members, this is the smaller evil, than if they were to fluctuate. We must not tolerate or allow that. If these trends spread, we shall have to draw up new regulations. Because, that we

³⁹ Feljegyzés a közel-keleti konfliktus kérdésében a magyar zsidóság hangulata tárgyában [Memorandum on Middle East conflict and the mood of Hungarian Jews]. Magyar Országos Levéltár, M-KS-288/22/1967/9 őe, pp. 39-44.

⁴⁰ See Jegyzőkönyv a Politika Bizottság 1967. június 13-án tartott üléséről [Minutes of the meeting of the Political Committee on 13 June 1967]. Magyar Országos Levéltár, M-KS-288f.5/427.

should fatten up people in good jobs who then behave like this in critical situations, this cannot be permitted!”

Kádár thus issued clear instructions to the party apparatus to purge itself of “unreliable” Jewish cadres. At the same time, the activities of the political police force were stepped up in connection with informal groups – of mostly young people and sometimes loosely linked to the temple districts – that were regarded as seed-buds of Zionist activity.⁴¹ Nevertheless, all of this took place behind the scenes and away from public view. Kádár and the party leadership, on the basis of the experiences of 1956, feared any conflict that might disrupt party unity and

⁴¹ In a “summary report” issued on June 28, 1967, the political police force initiated criminal proceedings against several university students on the basis of alleged “Zionist activities”. According to the report “...Zionist youth groups are operating in various congregation districts in Budapest and in other areas of the country – primarily Szeged. In general, the groups hold gatherings twice a week: sometimes in the cultural halls of the districts and sometimes in private apartments. The groups comprise young people aged 16-25. The young people are university and college students, civil servants and intellectuals. Zionist propaganda activities are being pursued in the groups, with the ultimate aim of the departure of the young people to Israel by legal or illegal means. At the gatherings, in addition to religious and Zionist issues, everyday political issues are also discussed – with a bias against the system. According to our data, the group members, the numbers of which rose in the course of one year from 20-25 to 150, are operating with the knowledge and support of the Israeli embassy. ... there are indications that the leaders of the Zionist group in Budapest are specifically involved in organising and assisting the desertions. ... [I]n the course of 1966, more than 13 young Jews escaped to Israel through Yugoslavia or other western states, some of whom belonged to one or other of the known Zionist groups and were in contact with the Israeli embassy.” (Történeti Hivatal, V-155325/2.). In March 1968 two leading members of the group were convicted by the courts of “continuous incitement against the state”; they received suspended sentences of four months’ imprisonment. The stated reasons of the courts for the sentences were as follows: “In this matter, the events stretching back several years are of particular significance, because as such they gradually resulted in the commitment of a criminal offence. These events began in fully legal and unquestionable circumstances, when the accused, having received a religious upbringing and while they were still children, and wanting to acquire a more profound religious education, regularly met with several of their fellows at Talmud-Tóra courses. Their initial feelings of religious cohesion began to be transformed inside them into nationalistic sentiment, as a result of various influences, stemming from relatives living in Israel, acquaintances, and above all propaganda reaching them from the Israeli embassy. The gatherings held after the Talmud-Tóra course and in private apartments, as well as the jointly organised excursions, were no longer of a merely religious nature. This is proven by the works that were read out there, the problems that were debated there, the heightened interest in the State of Israel, and the demand – almost without criticism – for anything that comes from Israel. ... This all gave rise to the idea that whatever comes from Israel must be good, and the uncritical demand for all this led the defendants to the point where they began swapping among themselves press items coming from there – ignoring the said items’ hostility towards the form of government of their own people’s democracy and homeland, the People’s Republic of Hungary. For the sake of completeness, it should be pointed out that responsibility for these religious gatherings ending up where they did, is also borne by the defendants’ religious leaders, Chief Rabbi Dr. Artúr Geyer, Rabbi Dr. Tamás Raj, as well as the defendants’ parents. The young people’s spirit developing in this community is the hotbed of more serious crimes against the state (Történeti Hivatal, V-155325/2.).

the social consensus – clearly the whipping up of antisemitism might have had such consequences. For this reason, the party leadership did not allow the open and vociferous anti-Zionist campaigns that emerged in some Communist countries after 1967 – above all in the Soviet Union and in Poland – to spread to Hungary: any attempts by the party apparatus to move in this direction were swiftly suppressed (see Kovacs, 1994) and antisemitism on the streets continued to be hounded.

When it came to implementing the policy of “no Jews and no anti-semites” the leadership of the Jewish Congregation proved a willing partner of the Communist government. László Csorba, based on a review of the publications of the Jewish denominational magazine *Új Élet* and the documents of the State Office for Church Affairs, showed as early as 1990 that the Jewish leadership attempted to maximise the political expectations both outwardly in the public sphere and in connection with the State Office for Church Affairs, the body that exercised political control (see Csorba, 1990, pp. 150-170). Based on the party documents and the remaining files of the former political police force that are still available today, we may form a more comprehensive but overall rather similar picture. The documents reveal that the leadership of the Congregation requested the opinion of the functionaries responsible for church affairs in all important matters. The leadership also reported in detail on events taking place within the denomination, and opinions voiced in public and in private. Indeed two consecutive chairmen of the Congregation, Endre Sós and Géza Seifer, were kept on record by the political police force as agents working under the cover names of “Sipos” and “Sárosi” and their reports were handled as agents’ reports.⁴² A document that is typical of the era is a report by agent “Sipos” dated March 7, 1960: “...In Békéscsaba ... at the request of the ... the local head of the State Office for Church Affairs ... I arranged for the dismissal of the chairman of the

⁴² Based on the sources currently available, it is impossible to say whether Sós and Seifert did in fact sign the recruitment declaration that signified a willingness to serve as a secret agent, or whether their reports – which they wrote out of “official obligation” – were simply recorded by the political police force as agents’ reports. At all events, a secret service report issued in 1962 stated the following: “We have, at present, four agents working in the sphere of the denomination and the Zionists. Our agents are placed in the senior leadership of the denomination.” (the document appeared in Szombat, Cited by János Gadó) ?????

Congregation and issued a stern warning to deputy rabbi Berkovits. I told the Orthodox deputy rabbi that unless he behaved decently, I would dismiss him. The deputy rabbi is adapting with difficulty to the spirit of socialist-construction Hungary. He has strong Zionist attitudes. ... I arranged for G. E. to be elected as the new chairman. He is a member of the town council ... with anti-nationalist attitudes. After the election, in agreement with the new leadership, we offered the building of the old great synagogue to the municipality of Békéscsaba at a very reasonable price. The smaller Orthodox temple is sufficient for the small congregation. In two and a half years we have sold about fifteen synagogues to the state or to municipalities and communities. We have always taken steps to ensure that state interests are properly applied. In several cases, we had to break the resistance of some congregations in a great struggle.”⁴³

In the years after 1956, and particularly after 1967, co-operation between the party-state and the institutions of the Congregation was unimpeded. Time and again the protection of the Jewish community from antisemitism served to justify such co-operation. The most difficult task was to gain acceptance for the idea that the Congregation should support the anti-Israeli and pro-Arab policies of the regime. In this area, party-state politics refused to accept that the community might go its own way – and Jewish officials not only acknowledged this as a political demand but also made it a central part of their own policy. And this – as the documents reveal – could not have been an easy thing even within the narrower medium of the Congregation. At a meeting of the National Rabbinical Council on 27 January 1968, the chairman of the Congregation Géza Seifert established: “[E]ven if emotional threads link us to the Israeli people, we should never lose the so-called normal position, according to which we are Hungarian citizens and builders of the Socialist social system.” Chief Rabbi Imre Benoschofsky – who had been imprisoned in the early 1950s on charges of Zionism – also used explicit terms: “[W]e may have relatives in Israel, and the community of religious culture may link us, but >a rabbi may not take the skin of his denomination to the market. A rabbi’s responsibility is to the community, and the faithful should be conscious of this in the course of

⁴³ Történeti Hivatal, file no. 0-171699

everyday conversations<”.⁴⁴ In the spirit of this policy, the rabbis and Congregation officials obediently participated in the work of organisations – such as the Patriotic People’s Front, the Peace Council etc. – that were used by the Party to assemble its “fellow-travellers” – non-party intellectuals, church personalities, priests etc. – and to demonstrate its support in society. On journeys abroad, such men promoted the official Hungarian policy⁴⁵ even when this resulted in conflict. And at home they dutifully wrote reports for the State Office for Church Affairs or the political police force on “Zionist suspects” and Zionist phenomena within the Jewish community.⁴⁶ Thus, an functionary who was responsible for the “Israelite denomination” was quite right when – in 1975 – he wrote in a summary report to the State Office for Church Affairs that “The Hungarian Israelite church (sic) leadership and the great majority of the rabbis and the faithful are willing to co-operate politically with the socialist state. ... In the past decade – as a result of the church policy development and political influence – the practice has been established whereby the Israelite Church Leadership (sic!) requests the position of the State Office for Church Affairs prior to the making of any important decision. The State Office for Church Affairs provides appropriate assistance to the church leadership in both international and domestic (personnel) questions”.⁴⁷

This policy was confronted by small informal pockets of resistance alone. As the already cited documents of the political police force reveal, such pockets of resistance sometimes arose

⁴⁴ Both quotes are from a report by Géza Seifert, chairman of the Congregation, entitled “Memorandum concerning the meeting of the National Rabbinical Council on 27 January 1968”, which was compiled for the State Office for Church Affairs. (MOL, XIX-A-21-c-5.9)

⁴⁵ In November 1965 Chairman Endre Sós wrote the following about a foreign journey in a “confidential memorandum” compiled for the State Office for Church Affairs: “Dr. Rosen stated at the meetings of the World Jewish Congress that Romania is a >free country< because the Jews can leave that country whenever they want. Then Dr. Nahum Goldmann rightly asks ... why does Hungary not pursue a >free policy< similar to Romania? Why can’t Jews leave Hungary en masse? When I and Dr. Seifert explained to Dr. Nahum Goldmann two years ago in Zürich that Hungarian Jews do not want to emigrate, Dr. Nahum Goldmann reproached us, saying that we >should not tell him the official Communist Hungarian position.<”. (MOL)

⁴⁶ See Csorba, 1990, pp. 144-167. Some of the documents analysed by Csorba, as well as other similar documents that have surfaced in the meantime, have appeared in the magazine *Szombat*, 2000, Nos. 4, 5, 6, 7.

⁴⁷ The document, dated June 19, 1975, bore the title “A memorandum concerning the relationship between our state and the Hungarian Israelite Church and some specific issues associated with the Israelite church”. It is signed by Vilmos Lóránt.

within the framework of the Congregation. A group comprising mainly young people developed around a young rabbi, attracting the attention of the political police force. Or another group – again young people – tried to establish a meeting place or club within the Congregation, where they hoped to evade the control of the Congregation apparatus. Such attempts ended in failure. There was no need for the intervention of the political police force; the Congregation leadership disciplined the recalcitrant rabbis itself – dismissing some of them from their posts. And any information at the leadership's disposal concerning potential young organisers was sent to the appropriate department of the political police force. The official Jewish leadership faced greater difficulties when, in the 1970s, a group of young Jews formed around the respected and internationally known leader of the Budapest Rabbinical Seminary, Sándor Scheiber. The young people regularly attended Scheiber's Friday evening kiddush and then continued their debates and conversations in coffee houses and in apartments. Although Scheiber's Friday evening lectures adhered strictly to religious themes, nevertheless in the archives of the State Office for Church Affairs and the political police force one may find many reports on the "Zionist-suspect" activities that were taking place in the Rabbinical Seminary (some of these reports have been presented by Csorba, 1990, pp. 161-166).

Under such circumstances it was perhaps inevitable that most of the informal groups of Jewish society were established outside the official Jewish institutional system. Research into groups forming in the 1980s (Lovász, 1995, Rácz, 1995) has revealed that these network-type organisations were subcultural in nature rather than religious or political. They failed even to reach the degree of institutionalisation that was characteristic of contemporary informal Jewish educational groups in the Soviet Union and in Poland. If they did have a political character, this was perhaps the fact that they discussed in an informal manner otherwise forbidden subjects such as non-religious Jewish identity, Israel, and the conflict in the Middle East.

The greatest insight into the life of such groups is offered by one of the surveillance dossiers of the political police force. Between 1971 and 1975 the secret service department concerned

with internal affairs kept a group of young Jews under surveillance. The group met on Tuesdays in a restaurant in Budapest. The file on this group – code-named “Jubilálók” – is at least one thousand pages long. Observation of the group was justified in the following way: “The grouping has been operating in effect without interruption for ten years. The group’s numbers have been growing, and membership now stands at about 290 people. Records (including personal information) are kept of the group’s members. Gatherings are usually held in the “Moszkva” restaurant on Tuesday evenings throughout the year. About 20-40 people generally attend a gathering; the composition of participating persons varies. The grouping usually organises a larger annual gathering, in a place of public entertainment. Gatherings of smaller groups have also been organised in apartments ... The grouping has a “keddist flag” [Translator’s note: kedd = Tuesday], which has the following appearance: a red background with a yellow letter K (symbolising keddism) and the date of foundation: 1960. Soon after the group was formed, a newspaper appeared entitled “Keddista Híradó”, but this was discontinued after two editions. An investigation into the significance of Tuesday has revealed that in Jewish tradition and religion Tuesday is a benevolent and fortunate day. ... The aim of the grouping was indicated as follows: to prevent mixed marriages, to hinder assimilation, to nurture and maintain Jewish national sentiment. .. We also have some ... indications that one of the leaders of the “Keddist” group was recently involved in a so-called “marrying off” scheme. Apparently the aim was to enable women of, for instance, Soviet citizenship to settle in Hungary, and then to assist them to defect from Hungary to the West when the time was ripe. ... Having analysed the data that we acquired through operative surveillance, we may now conclude that we face a well-organised illegal Zionist organisation, whose goal is to arouse and keep alive Jewish national sentiment in young people of Jewish descent within the framework of the organisation, and thereby to hinder the integration of these young people into our socialist society and their assimilation. These objectives demonstrate that in essence the group strives for racial separation. .. Based on our findings – which reveal that some of the members of the grouping defect, over time leave the group, and become involved in various

more acute anti-state activities – the conclusion may be drawn that the grouping, code-named “Jubilálók”, serves as a breeding-ground for more intensive Zionist activity...The methods, forms and aims of the grouping’s activities – according to our findings – are identical to the World Zionist League’s programmes and objectives for Jewish young people.”⁴⁸ Regular and detailed surveillance was unable to prove the truth of the accusations. The activities of the observed group – apart from several isolated remarks – were not found to be political. Thus, in 1975 the secret service closed the investigation for the following reasons: “The existence of the grouping is a fact, but in terms of content it does not amount to the activity that was supposed at the beginning of the processing work. The gatherings have no political content; in the course of the investigations, we did not become aware of hostile activity or any endeavour to prepare for such. The leaders and members of the groupings use the gatherings to look for sexual partners. Occasional activation attempts on the part of persons leading the groupings, the mere fact that these groupings exist, and the appearance from time to time of persons with Zionist attitudes in the groups, represent in themselves a danger of activation.”⁴⁹

The appraisal of the political police force is an accurate one: these groups were not points of crystallisation of a spontaneous Jewish political movement. But the police evaluator was also right to conclude that there was some danger in the continuity of these diffident but re-fabricating Jewish social networks: under certain circumstances, they might respond to external impulses.

In the course of the decades between 1956 and 1989, the gap between the official institutions of Hungarian Jewish politics and Hungarian Jewish society became unbridgeable. A new voice in Jewish politics could only appear outside the official Jewish system of institutions: and indeed this voice would have to be sounded from a position of open

⁴⁸ Összefoglaló jelentés. Tárgy: “Jubilálók” fn. ügyben. Belügyminisztérium III/II. Csoportfőnökség, 4/A.alosztály, Budapest, 1971. október hó 14. [Summary report. Subject: affair code-named “Jubilálók”. Ministry of Interior III/II. Group Section, 4/A subdepartment, Budapest, 14 October 1971]. See Történeti Hivatal no. V-155-325/1 sz.

⁴⁹ Belügyminisztérium, III/III/1-c. alosztály. Tárgy: “Jubilálók” fn. 13-Cs-758 sz. dosszié lezárása [Ministry of Interior, III/III/1-c. subdepartment. Subject: Affair code-named “Jubilálók”, closure of file no. 13-Cs-758]. See Történeti Hivatal V-155-325/1 sz.

opposition to the Communist system. And this is just what happened: in the mid-1980s there appeared – in the illegal press of the fledgling democratic opposition to the Communist party-state – a political programme which, for the first time in thirty-five years, formulated both the demand for sovereign Jewish politics and the possible principles of such politics (Salom, 1984).⁵⁰ The “Salom” [Shalom] manifesto rejected the purely religious-based definition of Jews, and stated that Jews formed a group that was also defined by historical, cultural and ethnic factors. It declared the loyalty of conscious Jews to the Hungarian nation, but established that this did not mean a loyalty to political regimes and governments. The Communist system, in particular, could not demand the loyalty of Jews for the simple reason that the main obstacle to the expression of Jewish identity was the lack of civil and citizens’ rights, which was an inherent feature of the party state.

Finally, the Shalom manifesto declared the Communist policy and the position of the official Jewish institutions on Israel to be unacceptable. It established that it is the natural right and moral duty of Jews living in the Diaspora to take a stand against the hidden antisemitism of anti-Zionist rhetoric and to express openly their solidarity with Israel – whatever differences there may be among Jews with regard Israel’s policies. The developments sparked off by “Shalom’s” open letter represent, however, a part of the history of post-communist Jewish politics.

Throughout the modern era, Jews living in the Diaspora have faced a fundamental question: How should they relate towards majority politics, as they seek to promote their own interests? In Hungary, after Emancipation, Jewish political leaders chose the political alternative of integration, and they adhered to this alternative for the following century and a half. Their original goal was the survival, prosperity and protection of the Jewish community as an integral part of Hungarian society. This choice, however, meant that the success of their political goals became conditional on securing influential allies and building an alliance based on ideology, which was more durable than passing, momentary interests. Meanwhile the

⁵⁰ For *Salom’s* open letter and the debate about it in the illegal press, see Kovács, 1994.

Jewish leaders also had to strive for objectives that were accepted as legitimate goals of Jewish politics by a relatively large section of Jewish society. These three conditions were realised in combination only during the era of Dualism. After the Shoah and the brief democratic interlude that followed the Second World War, in essence Jewish politics maintained just one of its original goals: the struggle against antisemitism. There is no doubt that whereas under Communist dictatorship it was impossible to articulate or realise particular political goals – including the objectives of Jewish politics – there did appear to be, within the ideological framework of anti-fascism, a favourable opportunity for taking a stand against antisemitism. Nevertheless, the fact that Jewish politics assumed without reservation and then vociferously supported the Communist version of the ideology of anti-fascism – which was the most important ideological instrument legitimising anti-western sentiment, anti-capitalism, and cold war politics – fatally restricted both the scope of political goals and the range of potential allies. In such a narrow field opposition to the Communist regime became impossible.⁵¹ The disastrous consequences of this policy, which was consistently pursued, became obvious after the 1960s, when the Jewish leadership proved unable to react to the general political thaw and thus became completely isolated both in Hungary and abroad.

Of course, the question arises: Is it even possible to apply the term “Jewish politics” to the work of the Hungarian Jewish organisations at the time of the Communist regime? Are we not expecting something from these Jewish organisations that was not only impossible, given the political circumstances of the era, but also unwanted by the Hungarian Jews? The concept of modern Jewish politics will be analytical rather than normative if we use it to analyse historical situations in which the demand for the realisation of interests in the political field is clearly made within the Jewish community as a collective. But in my opinion, it also represents a legitimate conceptual framework for analysis if the Jews are treated by non-Jewish politics as a social entity – irrespective of the extent to which the Jews themselves want to appear in politics as a collective – for, whether or not they want this, this is how they become an object

⁵¹ For Communist manipulation of the ideology of anti-fascism and the effect of such manipulation primarily in

of politics; moreover this factor regularly contributes to the construction of their group identity. In the course of our analysis we have attempted to show that there *was* a definitive demand for (interest-realising) Jewish politics among Hungarian Jews in the post-Shoah period. However, after the Communist take-over, this demand was stifled by the Stalinist policies. A benchmark for the evaluation of Jewish politics may be the extent to which it was able to preserve the earlier institutional structures, to keep alive the relationship between Jewish institutions and Jewish society, to protect Jews from repression, and to maintain the possibility of co-operation with the widest possible range of other political, religious and social victims of such repression. By way of summary of the findings of the inquiry, we may state that Jewish politics failed to produce the minimum results that would have been sufficient to prevent the distance and distrust between Jews living in the country and the Jewish organisations from becoming greater than ever before.

During the decades after the 1956 revolution, owing to the internal transformation of Jewish society, the political changes and the consequences of Jewish politics in earlier periods, the demand for autonomous Jewish politics disappeared – or was manifest only in small marginal groups. Nevertheless, official politics continued to regard the Jews as an entity – the documents demonstrate that for various reasons the party and state organs were concerned with “Jewish affairs” throughout the era, and such “affairs” were not always related to the (religious) denomination. None of this, however, was visible to the public. In accordance with this policy, the representatives of state politics demanded that the leaders of the Jewish organisations should consistently apply “externally” the position that “Jewish affairs” do not exist (or even if they do, to embrace them merely benefits the anti-semites). “Internally”, however, they should always be prepared to “resolve” conflicts regarded by politics as “Jewish affairs” in accordance with the expectations of official politics – concerning gaining acceptance for the regime’s policy on Israel, the relationship towards foreign Jewish organisations, or domestic “Zionist activism”. The Jewish leadership – isolated as it was from Hungarians Jews,

Germany, see Grunenberg, 1993.

international Jewish life, and even non-Jewish civil society, and therefore completely at the mercy of state – not only willingly implemented this policy but, feeling constrained to justify itself, even created and then “solved” such affairs, and continued to do so even when – for example in the final years of the Kádár era – there arose several opportunities for denominational or community interest politics. A consequence of all this was that the official Hungarian Jewish institutions experienced the final collapse of communist power in a state of full paralysis.

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