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## Intergenerational Responses to Social and Political Changes Transformation of Jewish Identity in Hungary

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Jewish identity in the diaspora has always had its problematic sides, particularly in the last 100 years. As a consequence of factors such as secularization, the erosion or dissolution of traditional communities, and rapid assimilation processes, Jewish identity became more problematic, and its borders and definitions more vague, doubtful, or flexible. Definitions of “being a Jew” were relativized; they became various points on a scale that may range from belonging to a ritual community, to a distinct ethnic, religious and/or linguistic group, through belonging to more or less well-defined subcultures and/or traditions, to the point where no Jewish identity exists at all.

Nevertheless, before the rise of totalitarian regimes, it was, at least theoretically, the decision of the individual person where he or she wanted to belong or what form of Jewish identity among the existing choices he or she would prefer to maintain, cultivate, and pass on to the next generations. The assimilation process of Hungarian Jewry, however rapid and massive it was from the second half of the nineteenth century on, did leave open some room for individual choice. One could have been perfectly “assimilated” according to most of the sociological parameters (including choice of name, education, or even marriage and religion); this fact, however, did not necessarily prevent the individual from maintaining spiritual, social, or solidarity ties with other people perceived as Jewish. (On the assimilation process of Hungarian Jewry see, e.g., Hanák, 1984; Kovács, 1984; McKagg, 1989; Vágó, 1981). Moreover, Jews could belong to more than one community at the same time: They could be members of the Jewish community and, simultaneously, be full-fledged members of the political nation of which they were citizens.

It was the political anti-Semitism of the thirties and forties, raised to the level of official state policy, that first deprived them of their Hungarian identity and then imposed on them an externally and forcefully defined Jewish identity, based on race and blood. The Holocaust, the

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annihilation of the Jews, was, in this sense, the logical consequence of a policy that denies and forcefully determines identity as an act of state. The Holocaust was the final deprivation of human identity and, for the majority, of life.

For the survivors of the Holocaust and their offspring, communism, the new totalitarian system emerging after 1945, promised a new society where no discrimination, whether racial, ethnic, or national, would exist. The universalistic claims of communist ideology were particularly appealing for a significant portion of Jews, because this ideology and this form of social organization were perceived as a guarantee that at least one category of identity—human identity as such—could not be denied to Jews or to other groups. In addition, the new regime offered special benefits for Jews as being practically the only major group in the country that was in no way affected or infected by the right-wing or fascist movements and ideologies of the recent past. The price for all this was, however, very high: Those who decided to find their place in the new regime had to give up the remnants of their Jewish identity, at least in all areas in public view. Jewish identity was marginalized again, and this marginalization was concomitant with the repression of the memory of the Holocaust. (On this topic, see more details in Karády, 1984, 1992, 1993.)

The crucial question is: What happened to Jewish identity in the intersection of repression and marginalization? How was it further distorted under the superimposing effects of the Holocaust and communism?

Forty years after the Holocaust, in the early 1980s, András Kovács, Katalin Lévai, and Ferenc Erős started a research project on Hungarian Jewish identity (see the following reports on this research: Erős, Kovács, & Lévai, 1985, 1988; Erős & Kovács, 1988; Erős, 1996). The project was basically a collection of detailed life histories of people belonging to the “second generation,” whose parents survived the Holocaust. Most of our respondents were born in the period between 1945 and 1960. We found the signs of identity crisis and the search for identity in both what the respondents told us and what they did not talk about; the speech and the silence, the urge to talk as well as the fears and anxieties associated with raising these issues, all of this reminding us of our own ambivalent feelings. For many of us, the interview situation was the first step in a communicative experience; the interviews convinced both interviewer and interviewee that they were not quite alone in their ambivalences, in their dubious, vague feelings and knowledge about being Jewish—that there must be, however latently and marginally, a community or a group to which they could relate their own personal feelings.

From the scientific point of view, we were interested primarily in the specific features of identity formation, socialization, and personality development among the “second generation” in postwar Hungary. In the course of this research, we collected about 150 in-depth interviews, which are still only partly worked up. However, due to the sudden and, in many ways, unexpected political and social changes in the late eighties and early nineties, our interview materials became, in a way, “obsolete”; they belong now, so to speak, to the historical past. As is well known, in the past few years, the public representation of Jewish identity changed dramatically in Hungary. Nowadays, Jewish identity, or at least various elements of a Jewish identity, can be openly expressed. There are now different organizations, cultural and educational facilities, and there is a revival of, or at least a growing interest in, religious and cultural traditions and values. On the other hand, as is also well known, there is a growing, or at least more visible, tendency towards anti-Semitism in the country. (On anti-Semitism after 1989, see Erős & Fábíá, 1995; Postma, 1996.) The large-scale political, social, and economic transformation process has created new types of conflicts for Jews as well as non-Jews in Hungary.

When we conducted our interviews in the eighties, the hegemony of the communist party state was still, at least seemingly, unbroken. To be sure, the questions were the same as today;

for example, who is a Jew, what is a Jew, what does it mean to be Jewish in Hungary, what are the basic factual and ideological elements of a Jewish identity? However, these questions were pronounced only in the privacy of the interview situation. Let us now examine in some details the construction of Jewish identity as seen through these interviews.

## THE HOLOCAUST AND JEWISH IDENTITY

Our research project originated, historically, as a sociopsychological study of the post-Holocaust generation. It was no coincidence that the Holocaust was central in our questions. First, we felt that it was precisely the issue that was forcefully (and also voluntarily) excluded from public discussion; second, we learned, at that time, of the clinical, psychological, and psychoanalytical studies dealing with the traumatizing effects of the Holocaust and the (unconscious) transmission of the trauma to the next generation. These studies had been done in Western countries and in Israel, but similar work was started also in Hungary in the early eighties, almost parallel to our interviews, by Teréz Virág (1984, 1988, 1994; see also other relevant Hungarian psychoanalytic studies: Cserne, Petó, Szilágyi, & Szőke, 1992; Mészáros, 1990, 1992; Petó, 1992; Szilágyi, 1994; Vánai, 1994; Virág & Vikár, 1985; Vikár, 1994). Virág's work and the subsequent works of other therapists and researchers also revealed the so-called "Survivor's Syndrome" and the "Second-Generation Syndrome," which are so well known in the psychoanalytic literature on the Holocaust (e.g., Bergman & Jucovy, 1982; Daneli, 1982; Kestenberg, 1982; Krystal, 1968; Wardi, 1992).

Our interviews were, of course, not psychoanalytic, though we endeavored to utilize some principles and methods of analytic interview technique. When talking about their parents, many respondents described them as completely depressed, emotionally emptied persons who were, or still are, unable to talk about or cope with the memory of the extreme situations they survived, including the deaths of their close kin. When talking about themselves, our interviewees related their fears, anxieties, persecution dreams, and daydreams that haunt this generation. It was clear from our interviews that the memory of persecution was psychologically transmitted to the subsequent generation, which, in turn, made the Holocaust to appear as a primary constituent of identity. This process and its outcomes well agreed with the psychoanalytic finding that trauma would destroy the most primal, earliest attachments of the person, the very core of any healthy identity. Extreme traumatization may lead to silence and incapacity to communicate, and the traumatic experience becomes inaccessible, encapsulated in the psyche. Unconsciously transmitted to the second generation, this aspect of the trauma created the "Second-Generation Syndrome," a secondary, though somewhat fainter blueprint of the original "Survivor Syndrome." Our interview subjects more or less displayed the signs of this syndrome—albeit not so dramatically or consistently as what was reported in the clinical papers on the related population. The most striking feature of our interviewees was what is termed "object relational problems" in psychoanalytic literature: disturbed, ambivalent relations, or sometimes a complete inability to communicate with relevant "objects" of the external world—with parents, partners or peers, and so on.

These ambivalences and disturbed object relations were characteristic for many respondents in their relationship to Judaism itself. For most of them, Jewish identity essentially meant belonging to a persecuted group, being "children of the Holocaust." One of our respondents expressed it in the following way: "Among surviving Jews, there is a kind of . . . disunited or unconscious sympathy toward the person who—if not himself, then his parents—suffered through the same thing. You cannot ignore it, if, when you are speaking with someone, his

shirtsleeve slides up and discloses a number tattooed on his arm. Among a person's close and distant acquaintances, there is certain to be someone who fell victim . . . but even if everyone in the entire family survived the catastrophe, that, too, will have caused terrible damage. Of course, this . . . is a kind of unifying force."

We can conclude that at the depth of Hungarian Jewish identity in the eighties, the trauma of the Holocaust was still a major determining factor. The reduction of Jewish identity to the common experience of being victimized or being a child of victims signifies the fact that in the decades after the war, there was practically no possibility for Jews in Hungary to work through the past; the public taboo contributed to the prolongation of private sufferings. This reduction was, on the other hand, part of another tendency: assimilation.

In our interviews, we attempted to explore sociological and historical dimensions, too, by asking our respondents to narrate the life histories of their family members going back three generations. These life histories reveal typical assimilation strategies. Identity formulations, themselves based on the Holocaust and on the awareness of common sufferings, worked, in many cases, as a special assimilation strategy. We mean here that someone can be perfectly unaware of the elements of Jewish religion, tradition, or culture; someone might have no essential relationship to Judaism at all, but, at the same time, the person can assume that there is no need to rediscover such ties, because being a child of survivors is sufficient by itself to make him or her belong to the Jewish group, in such a way and to such an extent as the person might wish it. In principle, then, someone can be a good Hungarian, a good Christian, a good Communist, and so on; being Jewish has nothing to do with the person's actual group affiliations. In other words, for most of our respondents, being Jewish meant belonging to some kind of secondary or virtual community, based not so much on common interactions as on allusive identifications.

### THE STRATEGY OF SILENCE

In the second layer of Hungarian Jewish identity, we found what we called the "strategy of silence." Whereas secondary traumatization means unconscious transmission of the trauma suffered by the parents, the "strategy of silence" means a more or less conscious effort on the part of the parents to conceal the fact of their belonging to the once-persecuted group. Children growing up in these families experienced an inconceivable family secret and were socialized in an environment where tradition had been more or less eliminated and the generational continuity of the family history broken. Analysis of the interview material within the context of the question, "How did you come to realize that you are Jewish?" revealed that, for many respondents, even learning that they were Jewish proved to be an extremely conflictual emotional experience. Often, they had been "enlightened" by strangers, and, even when the "enlightenment" took place in the family, it was typically a reaction to a painful situation experienced by the child or adolescent outside the family (see more details in Erós *et al.*, 1985, 1988). A respondent told us: "At the age of 13, I didn't know what it meant to be Jewish. I didn't even know the word. This may sound strange, but at that time, when I first heard the word, it was not from them [the parents], but from a friend 4 years older than myself. He told me that we were Jews and all about what happened to the Jews. It was then that I learned for the first time what happened to us, and I became very frightened, and ever since then, I haven't been able to accept these facts. The truth of the matter is that I have never been particularly willing or able to deal with it, believing, as a matter of principle, that if I close my eyes, they cannot see me. In short, if I don't deal with the problem, then there won't be any, just there won't be any anti-Semitism."

## JEWES AND COMMUNISTS

The previous quotation speaks for itself. If you don't speak about the problems, they don't exist, and what is more important, if you close your eyes, they cannot see you. The strategy of silence and "closed eyes" was, first of all, characteristic of those families where communism was the dominant ideology. "We were communists, not Jewish." "Our family had nothing to do with Jews. It was only an accident that we were Jewish; we were communists, and it was much more important. . . . We belonged to a larger family, and in relation to this, our being Jewish had no significance." These and similar statements show the efforts of the parents to get rid of their Jewishness by accepting and enforcing the "universalistic" values of communism. One of our respondents found—in her later years—the cadre file of his father. In the cadre file, she read the curricula vitae (CVs) her father was forced to write in the early fifties. Each year, the father wrote: "I have a 4- [or 5-, 6- . . .] year-old daughter. My greatest wish is to raise her so that she becomes a valuable member of our socialist society." As these children were growing up, they were told, "If people ask you what your religion is, you should tell them that you have no religious affiliation." For children growing up in the fifties, this itself sometimes became the basis of discrimination. For example, in contrast to the majority of their classmates, they celebrated not Christmas but the birthday of Comrade Stalin (December 21). It would be easy to argue that these parents refused to be Jewish because they strongly believed in communist ideology. We think, however, that there were deeper and more complex motives. These motives are clearly stated in a sentence quoted by one of our respondents from his father, who was a high-ranking functionary: "There is no God after Auschwitz. After all those things happened to us, there is, there must, be no God." If there is no God, there are no traditions; one has to break with everything that, even distantly, has associations with God. In this respect, communism was a radical negation of religion, because it absolutely excludes the existence of God. Communism is a revenge against the God who allowed all this to happen. The same respondent told us: "When I was a little child, I needed a circumcision for simple health reasons. The doctor said, 'He must be circumcised!' But my parents did not consent to the operation. My father somehow procured some penicillin (it was very difficult in the fifties), and I was cured."

He related then the following story. An uncle smuggled food to the ghetto in a Hungarian Nazi (arrow-cross) uniform. He was caught, made to pull down his trousers, and beaten almost to death. This narrative explains clearly the deeper, nonrational motive of affiliating with communism. It was depression, the emptiness of the self. "My father," our respondent told us, "did not exist inside. . . . After Auschwitz there was no inside, as there is no Jewish life. This is our tragedy, and this will be the tragedy of our children: the inhibition of the internal family life. In a certain sense, this made the family dead . . . because we were in the selection process. If there had been any family life, any inside solidarity, it should have been Jewish. But who wanted it?"

## BREAKING THE SILENCE

Is this the end of the story? In a certain way, it was only the beginning. The next layer is what we would call the "breaking the silence." For many respondents, these interviews were the first occasion at which they could speak about this topic in a more or less systematic way. We asked them to tell as many family legends, stories, childhood memories (even the most insignificant ones) as they could remember. "Just tell everything that occurs to your mind in relation to this topic!" We were then able to observe the narrative construction of Jewish identity,

the process by which identity was created through telling “stories.” These stories were full of pictures of a lost world, secondhand memories, and incomprehensible words that were, for the first time, put together into a systematic narrative. In this way, the process of reconstruction of the continuity of the family history may have begun.

To be sure, most of the identity-relevant statements were formulations of a marginal identity. To be Jewish means a vague feeling of being different, but the terms in which these differences are measured are not always clear. The majority of our respondents stated that most of their friends, as well as their partners, were Jewish, without their having consciously sought out only Jewish contacts. In any case, however, the discovery of whether another person is Jewish or not is basically a metacommunicative experience, as it is very difficult to formulate the criteria verbally by which a person’s affiliation can be ascertained.

This is the ideological side of identity, the ideological elaboration of group differences: what it means to be Jewish. It is the elaboration of group differences, that is, the way of finding out in what way Jews and non-Jews differ from each other. Most of our respondents worked out highly personalized criteria for this. They often described Jews as being more emotional, more family loving, more intelligent, possessing a greater sense of self-irony and humor, and drinking less alcohol. We also encountered highly intellectualized ideologies concerning the role of Jews played in Hungarian or European history and culture.

Beyond the ideological formulations, there is another aspect of identity that we may call “interactional identity.” It is an identity model according to which the person manifests his or her self in actual social situations that can be sometimes conflictual and tense. According to our experience, “being Jewish” in concrete situations is a “borderline” problem. This means that Jewish identity may come up only as a reaction to an extreme situation, for example, if one becomes target of anti-Semitic statements or attacks. “Basically, I am not Jewish, but if I meet an anti-Semite, I become Jewish” is the typical formulation of a reactive, marginal, “borderline” Jewish identity manifested in concrete interactions.

## BEYOND IDENTITY CRISIS

In our interviews, however, we discovered the beginnings of another kind of Jewish identity: a positive relation to Judaism, the recognition that “being Jewish” means not just humiliation, suffering, psychological disturbance, and discrimination. The development of a positive identity comes after “breaking the silence.” This creates a new situation. When “being Jewish” appears primarily as an intrapsychic, emotional problem, there are no open conflicts. After “breaking the silence,” however, one has to choose and reveal one’s identity in public situations, too. The previous regime, the Kádár era, when our interviews were done, was the world of “private deals” between citizens and the state. The problem of “being Jewish” was, in a way, an “underground” problem; Jewish identity existed as a marginal identity. The open, public manifestation of identity was blocked out by a series of political and social obstacles. One of the basic experiences of post-Holocaust second-generation Jews was that the topic of Jewry was silenced and treated as a taboo; it was considered a kind of hidden secret in both public and informal channels of social communication. Discussion of the topic between generations and peers could only take place in a restricted family–friend environment. Such an experience—depicted in interviews, case studies, and other reports—determined and accompanied early and late (adolescence, youth) socialization and identity development of the second generation.

However, at the end of the seventies and early eighties, in an era of changing social, ideological, and political conditions, a series of historical, sociological literary works and films

cracked the wall of silence by giving access to the topic of the history of the Hungarian Jewry, anti-Semitism, and certain other topics related to the Holocaust. The fact that a problem that remained hidden for long decades has now surfaced proves that silencing has been replaced by processes involving remembering and working through. A condition for initiating such processes was realized by establishing communication and collective reflection related to the topic of Jewry. István Bibó's study (1984) on the Jewish question in Hungary, originally published in 1948, became accessible to the larger public in this era, a basic study, to date, concerning political and historical discussion of the subject. The basic traits of the history of Hungarian Jewry—especially its modern, 20th-century history—commenced to be defined in works published in the seventies and eighties. Publications presented themes involving the role of Jewry in the establishment of a modern Hungary and Hungarian bourgeois culture, the contradictory process of assimilation and its tragic dilemmas, development of modern anti-Semitism and its process of radicalization, detailed research of the history of the Hungarian Holocaust, and, last but not least, the place of the Jewry as a social group in the Rákosi and Kádár regimes—sociological and social psychological aspects of the relationship between Jews and non-Jews (see, e.g., Bibó, 1984; Braham, 1990; Ember, 1994; Hanák, 1984; Kovács, 1984; Várdy, 1984).

Historical, sociological, and artistic debates in the late seventies and early eighties played a major role in open public discussion and intellectual awareness of problems related to Jewry, and served as a basis for establishing a Jewish identity for second-generation Jews. For this generation, it became more and more important to search for “roots,” to discover the repressed and forgotten past and Jewish culture, to become acquainted with Jewish history and tradition, and to establish group experiences that would create a solid ground for Jewish identity (Jewish cultural groups, discussion groups meeting in private apartments, introduction and performance of religious rituals and customs, and self-organization within the framework of politically determined limits). Therefore, some of our interviewees started to reflect on the question: Which of the existing models of Jewish identity should they accept? Religious, traditional, cultural, ethnic, and national models and their combinations had already emerged as possible models of Jewish identity.

In our day, the problem of Jewish identity seem to be acquiring new aspects. On the one hand, new and public appearances of anti-Semitism or “neo-anti-Semitism” awaken the feeling of being Jewish even in some of those people who, until now, tried to avoid the problem by applying the “strategy of silence.” On the other hand, the new, sometimes rather harsh anti-Semitic propaganda evokes new fears and anxieties. In general, however, it is hoped that the emerging new, autonomous civil society will give the full possibility for renewal of Jewish identity and commitment to this identity without any external and internal constraint. It is difficult to predict what models and forms of Jewish identity will be dominant, or even if any of these will be dominant. It seems to us that it is not possible to prescribe any uniquely valid identity model. The plurality of identity models can really be developed only after “breaking the silence,” that is, only in a process in the course of which the elements of social and individual pathology gradually lose their significance. This development also presupposes that there are no social and political situations in which certain categories of identity are forcefully exiled to the margin. In this respect, the question of Jewish identity is a question of democracy—as are all questions of minority identity throughout the world.

In the newly started Jewish ethnic renaissance, we see three major tendencies. One is the religious one, strengthening of religious identity, which is not limited to either the more intensive approach to religion by families who had been religious even earlier, or to stricter observance of religious rules, though the latter was supported by newly emerging possibilities

(kosher food shops, Jewish schools, and so on). However, individual conversions, returning to the Jewish religion, can be observed in Hungary in increasing numbers. The American Foundation School is, for example, a creation of this religious renaissance. The second trend is modern Zionism, forming Jewish identity as a national one. The symbolic system of this identity is well elaborated and through the intervention of Israeli and American Zionist organizations, it has already appeared in Hungary. Still, it seems to us that Zionism is not an attractive force at this time. The third, most intensive trend is the creation and strengthening of a group identity defined by liberal Jewish Hungarian traditions. Specific elements of this identity are liberal political attitudes, preserving Jewish Hungarian cultural traditions, the lifestyle of large-city (Budapest) intellectuals, secularism, and stressing only the cultural and historical elements of the religion. Javne Lauder Community School “targets” the demands of this liberal Jewish intellectual subculture.

In the fall of 1989, two independent twelfth-grade Jewish schools were founded in Budapest: the American Foundation School and the Javne Lauder Community School. These schools have not only played an important role in the identity transformations of the adult generation, but also created new possibilities for the younger generation. The Jewish character of these schools is, of course, important for the parents, though to various degrees. For some of them, the Jewish nature itself is the most important, but there are many parents who appreciate the tolerant or even liberal mentality of the schools, or just the mere fact that twelfth-grade schools may save their children from high school enrollment on a strong, competitive basis. Nevertheless, the Jewishness of the school is always a decisive element of choice. Parents who take their children to these schools allow the world to identify them through the school as Jews, and as “liberals,” too. In this context, choosing a school means choosing an identity as well (see the extensive sociological and social psychological research on the Jewish schools in Budapest done by É. Kovács and Vajda, 1994).

The life of the third generation is not thoroughly determined by the communist period. They were born in the era of “consumer socialism,” and they are thus children of a more pragmatic, up-to-date, technocratic world. By the time a genuine sensitivity to social problems developed in them, the old political regime was over. For them, the polyphony of the world is much more natural than for the earlier generation. They are not even surprised by the fact that a Jewish school can be created from one day to the next. Of course, we know from psychotherapeutic case studies that this generation may also carry the trauma of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, they are the ones—especially those who go to Jewish schools or actively participate in Jewish organizations—who fulfill a kind of a mediating role between Jewish culture and tradition, and the older generations. They are the ones who “take home” Jewish culture, and they are the ones who make their parents and grandparents encounter and face their Jewish origin. (On the “third generation,” see also Gur, 1992.)

These are the main trends that determine the identity of three Jewish generations after 1945. Individual family histories, life stories, and personal experiences may greatly vary within them. As to the changes in relation to Jewish identity, the situation of members of the second generation is the hardest, since they, even if born Jewish, had been growing up as if this fact had not played a role in their identity. For many of them, it was truly traumatic in adolescence or in young adulthood to face the fact and weight of their origin. This was then followed by a quiet period in the seventies, when the problem of Jewish origin was pushed into the background, only to emerge again in the eighties. Among the many taboos touched upon during the change of the political regime, claims to conceptualize Jewish identity came into the forefront again. Jewish institutions have been mushrooming. Now, this euphoria seems to have disappeared, as if Jewish identity and related discussions are not so important any longer. To reveal the causes of this phenomenon is a

task of further research. Members of this generation reflect social changes in a rather sophisticated way, since their relation to their own identity is closely connected to these problems. This phenomenon is interesting even in itself, since this generation fluctuates between choosing or pushing into the background ethnic or cultural identity. If so, then we face a typical Central European “identity,” which other ethnic groups in the region share, because traumas caused by permanent changes of political systems and state boundaries in the last century, and also ethnic polyphony, might have made other ethnic groups uncertain as to their identity as well.

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