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Donna Meryl Goldstein

University of Colorado–Boulder

**From Yellow Star to Red Star:
Anti-Semitism, Anti-Communism, and the Jews of Hungary**

Popular Hungarian myths of the Jew as “Other” have proved to be both durable and flexible. Hungarians of Jewish background are still culturally constructed as foreigners in Hungary, despite their historical efforts to assimilate—e.g., through compliance with linguistic citizenship requirements in the eighteenth century—and their self-censorship of Jewish identity, whether in religious or ethnic form, in the years since World War II. Pre-war constructions of the Jew as capitalist—which were of diminished utility during the communist era, when Jewishness was linked with communism itself—have resurfaced with the transition to a market economy. The flexibility of these constructions has served to maintain not only anti-Semitism in Hungarian popular discourse, but of Jewishness itself as an element or identity within Hungarian society, an identity that is seen as being mutually exclusive in relation to Hungarian-ness. Contemporary ethnonationalist popular discourse thus publicly legitimizes anti-Semitism. In it, Hungarian-ness is linked to a myth of the rural peasantry which, in the context of the borders drawn after World War II, encompasses ethnic Hungarians beyond the physical borders of the nation. Jewishness, on the other hand, is linked to urbanism, specifically to Budapest, a national space that in the context of Jewishness is nonetheless foreign.

In 1993, approximately three years after the radical economic change from a centrally planned economy to a free market economy and in the midst of political rhetoric of anti-communism and democracy, Hungary experienced a rebirth of anti-Semitic discourse. Istvan Csurka, the vice-president of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (at the time, the ruling government party), announced there was an international, Zionist-inspired conspiracy against Hungary that included the International Monetary Fund.¹ During that year, I interviewed twenty middle and upper class citizens of ages varying from 14 to 84, most of whom felt some connection to a Jewish past. I hoped that understanding this particular group’s subject position—that is, how they viewed themselves and their own identity as Hungarian citizens—would provide clues to understanding the resurgent nationalism and anti-Semitism which characterized changing notions of citizenship that accompanied the Hungarian political and economic transitions.

The Hungarian construction of alterity seems to have changed drastically in the post-communist era. Jewish Hungarians in the post-1989 period are seen as the “Other” based on their location in metropolitan areas as well as their past political alliances with the Communist Party. These characteristics ought to be examined not simply as chance happenings, but rather as a “defining” feature for many of those Jews who reconstituted their lives in Budapest after the second World War and who opted to stay in Hungary after the events of 1956, in which an attempt was made to reform Communist politics by a broad spectrum of alliances from the political left and right. The metropolitanism connects Hungarian Jews to westernization/modernization processes and to new joint-venture capitalism projects. Jews are simultaneously re-imagined as “new capitalists” and as “old communists,” both potential enemies within the new Hungary.

Cultural Citizenship Along Religious, Linguistic, and Political Lines

Renato Rosaldo has used the notion of “cultural citizenship” to refer to “the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense” (Rosaldo 1994:402). According to Rosaldo, the idea of cultural citizenship assumes that, “in a democracy, social justice calls for equity among all citizens, even when such differences as race, religion, class, gender, or sexual orientation potentially could be used to make certain people less equal or inferior to others.” Rosaldo uses the term in a North American context to describe the historic exclusion of women from voting. He contends that, more recently, use of a “one language – one nation” model of the nation-state excludes polyglot citizens from standard citizenship. This construction of cultural citizenship is useful in tracking the shifting Hungarian notions of belonging with regard to Hungarians of Jewish background. In Hungary, notions of citizenship have moved from religious to linguistic to political markers, each time reconstructing notions of citizenship in a manner that made dual identity—or, in Rosaldo’s terms, “polyglot” citizenship—a conceptual and real impossibility.

Jews in the Age of Linguistic Nationalism

In the mid-1800s, Jews who found themselves living within the boundaries of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were able to choose an identity as Hungarian citizens. The Habsburg Monarchy and its army “showed no preference for any one nationality during the entire period of its existence” (Deák 1983:1). The Compromise Agreement of 1867 divided the territory into the Austrian Empire and the Hungarian Kingdom and made Magyar the official language for the Hungarian Kingdom. Hence, linguistic commitment became the sole prerequisite to claim citizenship. In this period, what could be called the “nationalization” of

the Jews of East Central Europe occurred. Between 1780 and 1914, over 700,000 Jews opted to become citizens of Hungary on the basis of language choice (Deák 1983:11).

Historians have noted that many of the Jews in this context willingly gave up religious practice and spoke Magyar as a sign of loyalty to the Hungarian nation-state and their willingness to become Hungarian citizens. That Jews in the Austro-Hungarian Empire were already highly assimilated and never very religious was frequently offered as an explanation by my elderly informants concerning their own ancestors. Many elderly Jews described with pride their parents who spoke German and Magyar equally well. They were always, to borrow Rosaldo's notion, "polyglot citizens." According to Deák, the representation of both Germans and Jews as separate ethnic groups which occurred in Hungary long before the 1940s:

The Jewish communities in the Habsburg Monarchy flourished as much as the German, thanks to the successful urbanization of the Jewish rural population and the influx of immigrants from Russia. But parallel emigration to the West, a declining birth rate and the total assimilation of many into the Gentile world caused the Jewish population to diminish in some parts of East Central Europe even before the end of the Habsburg Monarchy (Deák 1983:2-3).

In this first round of becoming Hungarian in the mid-1800s, Jews in urban settings gave up any vestiges of religious identity and made Magyar their language of choice in order to belong. In this particular "social contract" between the liberal ruling class and assimilating Jews, the categories declared Jews to be Magyars in *nationality* and Israelites in *denomination*. This construction gave rise to a long-term identity crisis among assimilated Jews in Hungary (Várdy 1986).

Jews as Capitalists

Much of the literature analyzing the Holocaust has explored anti-Semitism and the accompanying imagery of the "Jew as capitalist" in pre-war Europe that helped to inflame the anti-Semitic program. In Hungary, the statistics concerning the class position of Jews before the war have been analyzed as part of an ethnicity/class model for explaining anti-Semitism. In 1945, only about a third of the Jews of Budapest were working class, despite the 1920 *Numerus Clausus*² which forced many Jews to emigrate or to take menial jobs (Karady 1986). An institutionalized selection process that began in 1920 and continued through the anti-

Jewish Laws of the 1930s restricted the employment of Jews to certain professions and limited their access to university education.

Among the “self-descriptors” used by informants of Jewish background to describe their ancestors, being “talented” or “clever” frequently recurred. Given the many institutionalized barriers to Jewish survival and mobility, it makes sense that these words emerge so often in oral history reports. If there is any common thread of identification among these individuals, it lies in the pride each of them expresses about some “clever” or “talented” relative who persevered even as Hungarians of Jewish origin were forced into ghettos and more than 500,000 perished in Nazi concentration camps.

Jews as Communists

Hungary lost 67% of its national territory and over three million ethnic Hungarians in the border shifts at the end of World War I, and the pain of this loss is periodically rekindled by nationalists. It is also estimated that 60% of Jews within the area of present-day Hungary perished in the second World War. Many who survived the war reestablished their lives in Budapest (Várdy 1986). Some Jews who survived returned to Hungary seeking “compensatory” education for what they had lost in the war. Many of the new institutions were Party schools which produced a new power elite.

The survivors’ children, who were very young during the war years or were born immediately after the war, generally are atheists. Most are thoroughly urban and claim they did not know they were Jewish until they were adolescents. Their parents, many of whom became Communist Party members after the war, hoped that the question of Jewish identity would be erased by complete devotion to the Party. They shrouded their Jewish origins in self-censorship and vague references to the past, especially with regard to the war years. Members of that second generation of adults explain almost ritualistically their surprise upon learning they were “of Jewish origin.” Many of them replicated this strategy of self-censorship with their own children. The consistency of these stories of “closeted identities” highlights the extent to which Jewish identity was and continues to be a label maintained externally rather than by the subjects themselves. Just as Magyar was the marker of citizenship in the creation of the nation-state, political allegiance to the Party was the marker and the guarantor of citizenship in the Communist era. For many Jews, claiming devotion to the Communist Party was not only a form of claiming citizenship, but was also a final assimilatory note into an ideological stance which made Party affiliation and Jewish identity incompatible.

Having assimilated and given up religious identity in an earlier round of citizenship politics, many of these survivors felt there was no reason to make any specific claim to a Jewish identity. My informants indicated that claiming a Jewish identity necessitates a religious faith which they did not share. They were more comfortable describing themselves as having “a Jewish background.” At the same time, however, their lives had been forever transformed by their collective war experiences. The collective biography of suffering and the political choice to support Communist Party politics led to a new level of erasure of Jewish identity in any overtly ethnic or religious sense. Communist Party politics were anti-nationalist and, for the most part, prohibited overt manifestations of anti-Semitism. The formal, meritocratic language which sought to abolish class and status privileges as well as anti-Jewish restrictions proved an attractive ideology to this surviving cohort (Karady, 1986:77).

Religious and ethnic affiliations were supplanted by Communist Party activities. Jews in the Communist Party willingly accepted the form of anti-Semitism within the Party which they said “kept anyone with a Jewish face outside of the public view.” They also accepted the Party’s practice of promoting members from non-bourgeois roots rather than those with urban bourgeois origins. In this non-religious, non-ethnic world, Jews in the Hungarian Communist Party felt as Hungarian as anybody else and accepted what they considered rather muted anti-Semitism in exchange for full citizenship.

The discourse of assimilated Jews in Budapest in 1993 partially reflects this early history. Informants mention their ancestors’ participation in the founding of the Hungarian nation as proof of their Hungarian-ness. This, in turn, is usually cited as proof of their own personal distance from any Jewish cultural or religious identity. One could not be a religious Jew and a secular Hungarian at the same time, a dichotomy that still exists in the minds of most Hungarians today. Indeed, the few remaining religious Jews in Hungary question the “Jewishness” of the survivors in Budapest. One Orthodox Jew who is part of a religious community in Northern Hungary said of the Budapest Jews: “They don’t know anything about the Jewish religion—you cannot separate culture and religion. They celebrate Christmas, intermarry with non-Jews and they know nothing of the traditions. Most of them are communists. So what makes them Jewish anymore?”

The Reinvention of the Past in Times of Political Transition

The 1950s brought an increasingly Stalinist-style Communist Party to power in Hungary, which included Rákosi, the Soviet-appointed chief widely known both for his Jewish origins and for his own anti-Semitic purges. For most Hungarians, he was known ironically as the

“first Jewish king of Hungary.” Rákosi had spent many years in exile in the Soviet Union before taking power and was despised as the pinnacle of “foreign” Soviet domination.

For many Hungarians, the continuity and autonomy of the nation was symbolically broken during this particular reign of “Jewish” terror. For non-Jewish Hungarians, this confluence of images of the “Jew as foreigner” and of the “Jew as communist” was a powerful one. It became as accepted as the “Jew as capitalist” image had been in the years preceding the second World War. The historical re-imaginings and constructions of the Jew as “Other” have encouraged Hungarians of Jewish background to censor their Jewishness completely. Such censorship is illustrated in acts of the subjects themselves: converting to Christianity, changing one’s name, and hiding details of events during the second World War from later generations all reflect a desire to distance themselves from a Jewish identity. The newest manifestation of “assimilation” is to avoid mentioning loyalty to Communist Party politics and to avoid revealing one’s sentiments concerning the events of 1956.

The Uprising of 1956 and the Struggle for the Interpretation of the Past

The uprising of 1956 began as a reform movement within the Communist Party and was intended to move the Party away from Soviet domination. Hungarian nationalists have attempted to monopolize the interpretation of the events of 1956 and celebrate its nationalist and revolutionary nature as expressive of the first wave of discontent with the Soviet system. Hungarian Communists, especially those of Jewish origin, recognize some of the reformist agenda, but cite criminal and fascist participation in the uprising as justification for the subsequent Soviet domination. Attempts to define the 1956 uprising in a specific way have generated so heated a debate that recently an institute was set up in Budapest to study day-by-day, and hour-by-hour the events that occurred during late October and early November of 1956.

The 1956 uprising has been celebrated in Hungary since the fall of the Communist Party in 1989 and has become a symbol of Hungarian nationalism and independence from the Soviet Bloc. During the 1992 celebration, skin-heads bearing swastikas appeared at the national celebration and forced the president to leave the podium without speaking. The appearance of these young neo-fascists at the October celebration confirmed for many Communists and for those of Jewish origin that national independence and autonomy from the former Soviet Union are linked to the rise of nationalism, fascism, and increasing anti-Semitism. Tensions over the meaning of the 1956 uprising continued in October, 1993 when an opposition journalist was dismissed because he had allegedly doctored a tape of the previous year’s

celebration. This journalist, widely respected and known to be “of Jewish origin,” was accused of exaggerating the strength of skin-head participation in the events and thus of tainting the government’s image at home and abroad by implying the government tolerated fascist skin-heads. The opposition television news program—the only alternative to the pro-government program—was closed down. Moreover, the dismissed journalist was replaced by a right-wing, pro-government director who was quoted as saying that Hungarian television had been “ruled by the bleating sing-song of Yiddishism.”³

The “New” Nationalism after 1989: Erasing the Communist Past

The recent, peaceful abdication of power by the Soviet-aligned Communist Party and subsequent resurgence of Hungarian nationalism in the aftermath of forty years of Communism have contributed to recent Jewish exclusion; once again, the Jew is situated as “Other.” One explanation is that in times of rapid political change minority groups are excluded from the image of citizenship so that a coherent (if imagined) image of “we” can emerge (Mouffe 1993). Images of Hungarian Jews as both metropolitans and communists in the post-War period and, more recently, as metropolitans and capitalists in the post-Communist period contrast deeply with the images of the rural Hungarian peasant folk tradition.

Since 1989, Hungarians have achieved a new level of social, economic, and political autonomy. At the same time, there has been a re-imagining of Hungarian national identity. All over Budapest, street names have been changed from Soviet era names to the names of Hungarian poets and national heroes. Red stars are being replaced by the Hungarian coat of arms. Statues of Lenin and Soviet soldiers liberating Hungary from Nazi control now reside in a cemetery for Soviet-era monuments far from the city’s center. Museums’ exhibits of Hungarian folk culture proudly display maps of Hungary’s pre-Trianon treaty borders. Revivals of the Hungarian nationalist play “Bank Ban” and a new rock musical “Attila” celebrate Hungarian autonomy and independence from “foreign” invaders, including Jews. Hungarian folk songs and dress—distinct from those promoted during the Soviet era—have been revived as well.

The continual re-imagining of Hungarian culture as something purely folk rather than urban (*népy* rather than *urbános*) identifies “authentic” Hungarian-ness with a mythical peasant, rural past and figures significantly in right-wing nationalists’ new discourse of exclusion. A reaction against the forced “Communist brotherhood” ideology that marked Hungarian post-War history, this construction of national identity imagines ethnic Hungarians living within

the boundaries of present-day Romania as “untouched” by the Soviet period of influence. Prime Minister Josef Antall has been known to say that he was the guarantor of all Magyars, and not just those living in Hungary itself.⁵

At the same time that Magyar-speaking peasants living in Romania are being hailed as the “authentic Magyars,” urban middle-class Jews are construed as foreigners. In the discourse of right-wing nationalist intellectuals, Budapest is a “foreign” city, one dominated by Jews and other international invaders. The image of the post-Second World War Jew is permanently connected with urban culture in a symbolic economy which celebrates the rural and excludes anyone with a Jewish history from being “truly Hungarian.”

It is in this context that the third generation of Hungarian Jews must attempt to construct its identity. Recently, Jewish organizations from abroad have arrived and are attempting to claim the grandchildren of assimilated Communist Jews back into Judaism and Jewish culture. Two schools have opened: one religiously oriented, the other teaches Jewish history. Each is attempting to re-create the possibility of being both Hungarian and Jewish at the same time. Many of the students at one of the schools spoke of the resistance they encountered from family members in choosing this school. One fourteen year-old student told me, “My grandmother said that I was now willingly entering the ghetto.” Her mother told her, “I am afraid that if you go to this school—if it happens again—they will know who you are.” The girl told me proudly, however, that her mother had named her Miriam—the first person to be named Miriam in Hungary since 1945. She said that, for her generation, “Being Jewish is just a fact, like being born male or female. I am Jewish and there is nothing I can do about that. I am not religious, but I feel that I am different; that I am Jewish as well as Hungarian.”

Ironically, what has preserved Jewish identity in Hungary is the continued construction, whether under Communist Party rule or democratic rule, of the Jew as somehow not belonging. Now, despite all attempts by the Communist Jewish survivors to end the so-called “Jewish question,” their own grandchildren are embracing a Jewish identity as something completely compatible with their identity as Hungarians. They are, perhaps, the one group that can forge a dual or polyglot identity that would not threaten their place and rights to citizenship within contemporary Hungary.

The "Closeted Jew"

Historically, Hungarians of Jewish descent tried to abide by the strict rules of citizenship governing the ethos of the times: they converted to Christianity or gave up religious practices, spoke Magyar instead of German and other minority languages, and became Communists during the era of Soviet influence in Hungary. Such extreme examples of accommodation reflect the specific demands for assimilation and requirements for citizenship during different historical periods, demands which led to the production of "closeted Jews" (Dominguez 1993). Jews have been marked as "Other" by "yellow stars" during the period of Nazi occupation and then by "red stars" in the post-Communist period. These historical experiences could be said to perpetuate "the closet" as part of a survival strategy.

In examining the construction of Jewish alterity over time, there is no certainty or agreement about what exactly constitutes the category of "Jew." In pre-war Europe, Jews were constructed as capitalists and as representative of the corruption brought by modernity and industrialization. In post-Soviet Hungary, they are constructed as both "old communists" and "new capitalists." These two categories contrast with the rural peasant and provoke, in the first case, ambivalence about past Soviet domination and, in the second case, ambivalence about the economic reforms and possible hardships brought on within a newly promoted capitalism.

The Hungarian search for identity may be understood as a process that has shifted over time, sometimes looking West and at other times looking East; sometimes celebrating modernity and at other times tradition. Throughout, there has been clarity about who should *not* belong rather than who should. Mouffe argues that, in times of political transition and in the case of the Communist bloc countries, "there is a resurgence of old antagonisms—ethnic, national, religious and others" (Mouffe 1993:3–4). To some extent, it may be a misnomer to call what is emerging in Hungary the "new" nationalism (Jakubowska 1983) since so many of these antagonisms have long histories. On the other hand, in the case of Jews in Hungary, we see the emergence of old antagonisms in what appear to be new forms. We also see that even extreme forms of assimilation do not abolish the construction of Jew as "Other": Hungarian history demonstrates that there can be a "Jewish question" and anti-Semitism even in the absence of a group that self-identifies strongly as Jews.

Conclusion

Re-examining the politics of cultural citizenship concerning Jews in Hungarian history sheds light on contemporary attempts to understand the structure of ethnonationalism and ethnic tolerance in Hungary. It also suggests that new analytical directions, such as studies of political affiliation, may help explain how ethnicity functions even in the absence of an explicit religious or group feeling. I have tried to identify the strands of identity linking Hungarians of Jewish background to the climate in which lines of cultural citizenship were drawn. A common strand in these different historical moments is that ambiguity and duality were inconceivable concepts: one had to be Christian and Hungarian, for one could not be Jewish and Hungarian; one had to favor Magyar and not another language in order to be Hungarian; one could not be simultaneously a practicing Jew and a Communist; one could not be both folk and urban. Today, the same Jews who historically adapted to these changing prerequisites for citizenship are now excluded because of their Communist past or their metropolitan location or even for their perceived links to the West. The question remains whether, in a democratic environment, Hungarians will continue to identify Jews as foreigners or will re-imagine the possibility of a Hungarian who is somehow Jewish.

Notes

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1. "Hungarian Steps Up Attack on Rightist Opponent," *The New York Times*, March 9, 1993, p. A7.
2. *Numerus Clausus* officially limited the number of Jews permitted to enter the University system.

3. Zygotian, Dork. "Anthro 212: To Know or Not to Know," Editorial. *The Hungarian Times*, Monday, November 1, 1993, Issue No. 23, p. 1.
4. "Hungarian Steps Up Attack on Rightist Opponent," *New York Times*, March 19, 1993, p. A7.
5. "Meciar conciliatory toward Magyars," *Budapest Week*, October 14–20, p. 9 Volume III, No. 32, 1993.

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