

## 5 Religious observance and cultural traditions

The survey attempted to chart the transmission of various elements of Jewish religious observance and cultural traditions across generations. The questionnaire listed a series of religious practices and traditions, and asked to what extent they were observed or preserved during the respondents' upbringing and in their current households.

The data shown in Table 10 are revealing and clearly suggest that, for the sample as whole, the observance of Jewish religious and cultural traditions has greatly diminished in Hungary over the past fifty years. Nevertheless, comparing the patterns for different age groups enables us, simultaneously, to draw a more detailed picture. It appears that the process of secularization has manifested itself most strongly during the lifetimes of the older generations. The older groups currently observed fewer Jewish practices than they did

during their childhood years. Today's middle-aged group, those between 45 and 65, observed very few Jewish traditions, and the families in which they were brought up had already become secularized. This implies that the middle-aged generation underwent only limited behavioural changes during their own lifetimes. They also appear to have been little affected by the religious and cultural revival that has occurred since the fall of Communism. Significantly, however, the younger generations do show an inclination to return to tradition, with most of the examples of religious-cultural practices listed by the survey being observed more frequently than they were either in the families in which they were brought up or among the older generations.

The discernible increase of traditional Jewish practice among the younger age cohorts is representative of what appears to be a resurgence or renewal of

Table 10: Observance of religious practices and cultural traditions in respondents' upbringing and current households, by age group (% responding 'yes')

| Religious practice        | 18-25 |    | 26-35 |    | 36-45 |    | 46-55 |    | 56-65 |    | 66-75 |    | 76+ |    | Full sample |    |
|---------------------------|-------|----|-------|----|-------|----|-------|----|-------|----|-------|----|-----|----|-------------|----|
|                           | U     | C  | U     | C  | U     | C  | U     | C  | U     | C  | U     | C  | U   | C  | U           | C  |
| Sabbath observance        | 8     | 11 | 6     | 18 | 11    | 14 | 20    | 14 | 38    | 10 | 49    | 14 | 58  | 19 | 30          | 14 |
| Fasting on Yom Kippur     | 33    | 44 | 14    | 34 | 23    | 33 | 41    | 38 | 60    | 26 | 80    | 27 | 84  | 40 | 52          | 34 |
| Passover seder            | 24    | 37 | 13    | 35 | 20    | 34 | 33    | 35 | 46    | 24 | 61    | 21 | 49  | 24 | 41          | 29 |
| Keeping kosher            | 5     | 13 | 6     | 14 | 10    | 9  | 13    | 8  | 19    | 5  | 32    | 3  | 42  | 10 | 20          | 8  |
| Making cholent            | 44    | 50 | 40    | 31 | 50    | 38 | 57    | 43 | 64    | 38 | 73    | 34 | 77  | 35 | 59          | 38 |
| Mezuzah                   | 25    | 31 | 13    | 26 | 17    | 25 | 24    | 26 | 37    | 11 | 59    | 13 | 66  | 22 | 37          | 21 |
| Lighting Hanukkah candles | 27    | 39 | 13    | 41 | 22    | 38 | 33    | 36 | 47    | 26 | 67    | 23 | 69  | 28 | 43          | 32 |
| Bar mitzvah               | 20    | 25 | 10    | 12 | 16    | 17 | 21    | 16 | 37    | 11 | 59    | 13 | 69  | 16 | 36          | 15 |
| Jewish burial             | 58    | 51 | 46    | 41 | 58    | 44 | 59    | 50 | 68    | 34 | 79    | 40 | 80  | 45 | 64          | 44 |
| Circum-cision             | 21    | 23 | 13    | 18 | 19    | 17 | 29    | 12 | 47    | 13 | 65    | 15 | 72  | 22 | 41          | 17 |
| N                         | 254   |    | 174   |    | 241   |    | 376   |    | 262   |    | 360   |    | 346 |    | 2,013       |    |

U = upbringing C = current household

Jewish identity. This pattern has been observed elsewhere and the reasons for it—whether or not it does in fact represent an actual ‘return’ at all—are highly complex. Nevertheless, the patterns observed in this survey are probably due to a general strengthening of the demand for ethnic and religious identities throughout the Hungarian population after the collapse of the Communist system. This is a natural phenomenon at a time of great social change, which generally sends acquired social identities into crisis. The upsurge in Jewish identity has probably been enhanced by the wider acceptance of a multiculturalist orientation. The identity renaissance has also been facilitated by the opening of Hungary’s borders and, especially, by the rapidly developing relations with North American Jews and Israel. However, the main motivation behind the formation

of new identities has been the desire of younger people to cast off the stigmatized identities of the older generation. There are many Jews in Hungary, for instance, who only consider themselves Jewish when faced with antisemitism. For younger Jews, who have, since 1989, lived through a period without the political restrictions placed on their parents by the Communist system, such an identification is not only unattractive but one that has been wholly rejected. One result of the quest for a more positive identity could be the slightly diminishing rate of exogamy in the younger generations (see Table 9b) and the rediscovery of some religious-cultural traditions. Table 11b shows that this pattern of ‘revival’ also applied to synagogue attendance. The rate of those who never attended synagogue, even on important religious festivals, was very high, amounting to nearly

Table 11a: Religious observance of respondents and respondents’ parents, by age group (%)

| Age group   | Religiously observant | Observing High Holy Days | Non-practising believer | Not religious | Atheist | Total | N     |
|-------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|---------|-------|-------|
| Father      | 15                    | 30                       | 12                      | 28            | 15      | 100   | 1,936 |
| Mother      | 16                    | 34                       | 13                      | 27            | 10      | 100   | 1,971 |
| Full sample | 6                     | 25                       | 17                      | 37            | 15      | 100   | 1,995 |
| 18–25       | 5                     | 34                       | 11                      | 39            | 11      | 100   | 251   |
| 26–35       | 5                     | 28                       | 17                      | 42            | 8       | 100   | 169   |
| 36–45       | 4                     | 26                       | 13                      | 38            | 19      | 100   | 241   |
| 46–55       | 4                     | 26                       | 13                      | 41            | 16      | 100   | 373   |
| 56–65       | 2                     | 21                       | 21                      | 38            | 18      | 100   | 260   |
| 66–75       | 5                     | 23                       | 18                      | 34            | 20      | 100   | 358   |
| 76+         | 12                    | 20                       | 27                      | 29            | 12      | 100   | 343   |

Table 11b: Synagogue attendance of respondents and respondents’ parents, by age group (%)

| Age group   | Daily | Several times a week | Weekly | Monthly | High Holy Days | Less frequently/ never | Total | N     |
|-------------|-------|----------------------|--------|---------|----------------|------------------------|-------|-------|
| Father      | 3     | 4                    | 10     | 3       | 36             | 44                     | 100   | 1,900 |
| Mother      | 1     | 3                    | 9      | 3       | 42             | 42                     | 100   | 1,947 |
| Full sample | 1     | 1                    | 5      | 4       | 26             | 63                     | 100   | 2,006 |
| 18–25       | 1     | 4                    | 6      | 7       | 34             | 48                     | 100   | 253   |
| 26–35       | 2     | 1                    | 8      | 6       | 25             | 58                     | 100   | 173   |
| 36–45       | 1     | 1                    | 6      | 4       | 29             | 59                     | 100   | 241   |
| 46–55       | 1     | 1                    | 5      | 4       | 31             | 58                     | 100   | 376   |
| 56–65       | 0     | 1                    | 2      | 3       | 22             | 72                     | 100   | 260   |
| 66–75       | 0     | 0                    | 4      | 2       | 26             | 68                     | 100   | 359   |
| 76+         | 1     | 2                    | 5      | 2       | 18             | 72                     | 100   | 342   |

two-thirds of the whole sample. However, among the youngest sector of the sample, there has been an apparent reversal of the pattern of secularization, once again suggesting that there has been a revival of interest in Judaism and Jewish traditions among the young.

Importantly, analysis of respondents' levels of religious observance and other key indicators, such as synagogue attendance, demonstrates that the survey sample was much less religiously observant than members of other religious groups in Hungary. While about 50 per cent of the Jewish respondents considered themselves religious (in the broadest sense of the word), other data on religiosity indicate that, among the Christian denominations, the rate is as high as 70 per cent.

#### Participation in established Jewish communal life

The data presented in Table 12 indicate that most Jews in Hungary have little regular contact with organized Jewish communal structures. More than one-quarter of the entire sample showed a complete lack of interest in existing Jewish communal organizations and cultural institutions. Another quarter was only loosely affiliated with them: from time to time they participated in some kind of cultural event. A little less than half of the sample showed a deeper involvement. Within this group a closer connection to the various Jewish socio-religious organizations was the dominant feature. The percentage of those who maintained multiple ties was just over 10 per cent. Of those who participated in the activities of the various religious-social organizations, most were usually also active in Jewish cultural life, although, interestingly, the converse was not usually the case.

Based on several questions in the survey about participation in various Hungarian Jewish institutions, the following typology gives five types of relationships to organized Jewish activities.

Table 13: Typology of relationships to organized Jewish activity

| Type | Cultural | Socio-religious | Definition   |
|------|----------|-----------------|--|
| 1    | 0        | 0               | No cultural or socio-religious activity                                    |
| 2    | ×        | 0               | Loose cultural connection (occasional attendance at cultural events)       |
| 3    | ×        | 0               | Active participation in cultural arena (with none in socio-religious life) |
| 4    | 0        | ×               | Participation in socio-religious life (no attendance at cultural events)   |
| 5    | ×        | ×               | Integrated participation (both socio-religious and cultural)               |

Table 12 shows the distribution of data according to this typology among the sample as well as by the different categories of ethno-religious origins described in Table 8. As expected, among those classed as 'homogeneous', with four Jewish grandparents, the proportion that demonstrated 'integrated participation' in the established Jewish community through socio-religious organizations was markedly higher than those in the 'partly homogeneous' or 'mixed' categories.

Table 12: Participation in Jewish socio-religious and cultural organizations, by ethno-religious group (%)

| Type  | Ethno-religious origins |                    |       | Full sample |
|-------|-------------------------|--------------------|-------|-------------|
|       | Homogeneous             | Partly homogeneous | Mixed |             |
| 1     | 27                      | 32                 | 37    | 29          |
| 2     | 23                      | 27                 | 35    | 26          |
| 3     | 7                       | 10                 | 8     | 7           |
| 4     | 31                      | 19                 | 12    | 27          |
| 5     | 12                      | 12                 | 8     | 11          |
| Total | 100                     | 100                | 100   | 100         |
| N     | 1,451                   | 118                | 446   | 2,015       |

However, these differences were less well marked when the data were examined by age. The core of the membership of cultural and religious organizations appeared to be people aged around 50 and their children, aged between 18 and 25. Older age in itself appeared to be associated with a decline in participation. It is also possible that members of the older generations who cut all ties to Jewish organizations during the Communist regime are more reluctant to become involved again than younger people.

According to the survey data, most Jews affiliated with the established Jewish community by attending cultural events. More than 60 per cent of respondents said that they occasionally attended some kind of organized event. Ten per cent said they frequently attended concerts organized in the synagogue, Klezmer music programmes and programmes offered by the Bálint Jewish Community Center (operated under the auspices of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee); a further 30 per cent said they attended such events fairly frequently. Events staged at the Goldmark Hall (the auditorium of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Hungary) were less well attended; some 3 per cent said they attended programmes there frequently, and 22 per cent fairly frequently. The Goldmark Hall primarily attracted members of the older age groups, while events at the Bálint Community Center were more popular among young people.

The data show that participation or membership in socio-religious organizations was much less prevalent than attendance at cultural events. Thirty-nine per cent of those asked said they belonged to some kind of Jewish organization or

participated in activities put on by a Jewish organization. Twenty-six per cent of these respondents reported membership in the Federation of Jewish Communities in Hungary (MAZSIHISZ), and 2 per cent said they also performed some sort of function within the organization. A further 20 per cent of respondents mentioned other socio-religious organizations with which they had occasional contact, and most of them referred to the Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association (MAZSIKE). Only 6 per cent said they participated in the activities of the Union of Jewish Students, Habonim Dror, B'nai Brith, Sim Shalom Progressive Reform Community or the Hungarian-Israeli Friendship Society.

#### Perceptions of the Jewish community

The survey asked several questions aimed at gauging respondents' feelings about what the role of Jewish communal bodies should be. Six areas of activity were identified and respondents were asked to select three to which they felt communal leaders should pay special attention. Table 14 shows the data in order of frequency. As the results illustrate, the social, economic and cultural functions of the Jewish community were much more important for the respondents than the religious and political ones.

In another question, respondents were asked to assess their satisfaction with the quality of Jewish communal activities. Altogether, some 40 per cent of the respondents were unable to answer, stating that they were not in a position to form an opinion. The ability to form an opinion about the Jewish community was closely related to the categories of participation described above in Table 12. A lack of connection with the community was manifested by an inability to form an opinion.

Table 14. Perceptions of the priorities of the Jewish community (%)

| The Hungarian Jewish community should pay special attention to | Agree | N     |
|--|-------|-------|
| Social work, financial aid                                     | 75    | 1,504 |
| Dissemination of Jewish culture                                | 55    | 1,107 |
| Combating antisemitism   | 53    | 1,068 |
| Developing educational institutions                            | 46    | 922   |
| Maintaining conditions of religious life                       | 45    | 909   |
| Representing Jewish interests politically                      | 36    | 728   |

Among those who did express an opinion, slightly more people provided a positive assessment than a negative one. Five per cent of those interviewed said they were 'very satisfied' with the way the Jewish community operated, and 19 per cent said they were 'satisfied'. At the other end of the spectrum, 4 per cent said they were 'seriously dissatisfied', 10 per cent said they were 'dissatisfied' and 20 per cent described themselves as 'satisfied as well as dissatisfied'. Age appeared to be important

in the responses to this question: the percentage of respondents giving a positive assessment was much higher among the older age groups. However, among the younger population, the youngest group gave a more favourable assessment of the Jewish community. More active or more religiously observant groups tended to be more satisfied; however, the age of the respondents seems to have had the greatest impact on levels of satisfaction.

