

Editor's introduction

After the political emancipation of the Jews in Hungary in 1867, they became one of the most flourishing communities in Europe. Most of the estimated 900,000 Jews living in the Hungarian kingdom before the First World War followed the pattern of 'western' Jewry with regard to integration, economic and social mobility, and political orientation. This state of affairs was dramatically shattered by the anti-Jewish legislation of the 1930s and, finally, by the Holocaust.

The Holocaust annihilated the majority of Hungarian Jews. Depending on the method of calculation, it is estimated that between 200,000 and 300,000 Hungarian Jews perished in the territory that is present-day Hungary. Scholars agree that, in 1941, when the last census to include religion and ethnic origins was carried out, 400,000 persons of the Jewish religion and 50,000–90,000 Christians of Jewish origin were living in Hungary as defined by its post-Second World War boundaries. The number of survivors is estimated to have been between 190,000 and 260,000.¹

Due to the almost complete annihilation of provincial Jewry, the majority of the survivors, 144,000 persons, lived in Budapest. The Jewish community in most provincial towns was reduced to a handful of survivors; in 1949, 96,537 Jews lived in Budapest, comprising 9.1 per cent of the city's population. Of these, it is estimated that one-third were not Jewish by religion. There was a subsequent decrease due to emigration, mixed marriages and low birth-rates that reflected not only the disappearance or ageing of spouses, but also the material and psychological consequences of persecution. During two major periods of emigration (1945–8 and 1956–7) between 60,000 and 75,000 Jews left the country, effectively

¹ The territory of Hungary between 1938 and 1945 and in the post-war period was not identical. As a consequence of the revision of the post-First World War peace treaties, between 1938 and 1941 Hungary regained a portion of the territory of the pre-First World War Hungarian kingdom (Southern Slovakia, Northern Transylvania, Carpatho-Ruthenia, Northern Vojvodina) that included a substantial Jewish population. This population almost wholly perished in the Holocaust. If we added the number of victims from these territories to the number of those in pre-war Hungary, then the total number of Hungarian Holocaust victims would be around 500,000.

strengthening the trend towards assimilation among those remaining, as did the uneven age and gender distribution that resulted from the selective losses, forcing many Jews, especially women, to marry non-Jews. Consequently, the number of people belonging to the Jewish community declined but the number of those who had Jews in their family grew. According to a sample survey carried out in 1999, 2 per cent of Hungary's adult population of around 8 million people (aged eighteen or older) claimed to have a Jewish parent or grandparent.

The social structure of the surviving Jewry was greatly altered. While the more religious and traditional provincial Jews had been almost wiped out (or soon emigrated), the majority of the Jews of Budapest—especially those of the more urbanized, assimilated middle class—survived and found themselves in a favourable position in post-war Hungary relative to the general population. This was a result of their better education, higher qualifications and traditionally higher propensity for mobility; furthermore, following their years of persecution, they were perceived as being 'reliable' in terms of their political sympathies. For political reasons, opportunities opened up for them to pursue careers for which they were qualified but which had been unavailable to them before the war. Several Jews entered the re-organized administration, public services, political institutions and law-enforcement agencies.

Due to the role of the Soviet army in the liberation of the Budapest ghetto and the concentration camps, and the public commitment to end discrimination, some Jews became loyal Communists, joining the party and assuming middle- and high-ranking positions before the 1956 revolution. Moreover, they rejected their former identities, cultural traditions and community ties. At the same time, the Jewish middle class and *petite bourgeoisie* became victims of the government's anti-religious and anti-bourgeois measures that followed the Communist takeover. Jews were also threatened in anti-Zionist campaigns.

The reconstruction of religious and community life started soon after the war with the re-establishment of 258 communities, most of which were Neolog (Conservative or moderate Reform). However,

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because of internal migration, emigration and political change, barely more than a quarter of these continued into the 1950s, and they were mostly in larger towns. In 1950 the institutions, organizations and associations of the Orthodox and Neolog branches of the Jewish community were forced to merge under the leadership of the National Office of Hungarian Israelites and the National Representative Organization of the Hungarian Israelites. This brought about the disappearance of an independent Orthodox community. These organizations functioned strictly as religious associations within limits set by the state. They were loyal to the regime to the point of denouncing Zionism and distancing themselves from Israel. Jewish life was restricted to religious observance and even this was increasingly difficult; moreover, all forms of secular community life were suppressed. However, throughout this period, the community was permitted to run a hospital, an orphanage and a care home for older people and to provide kosher food products.

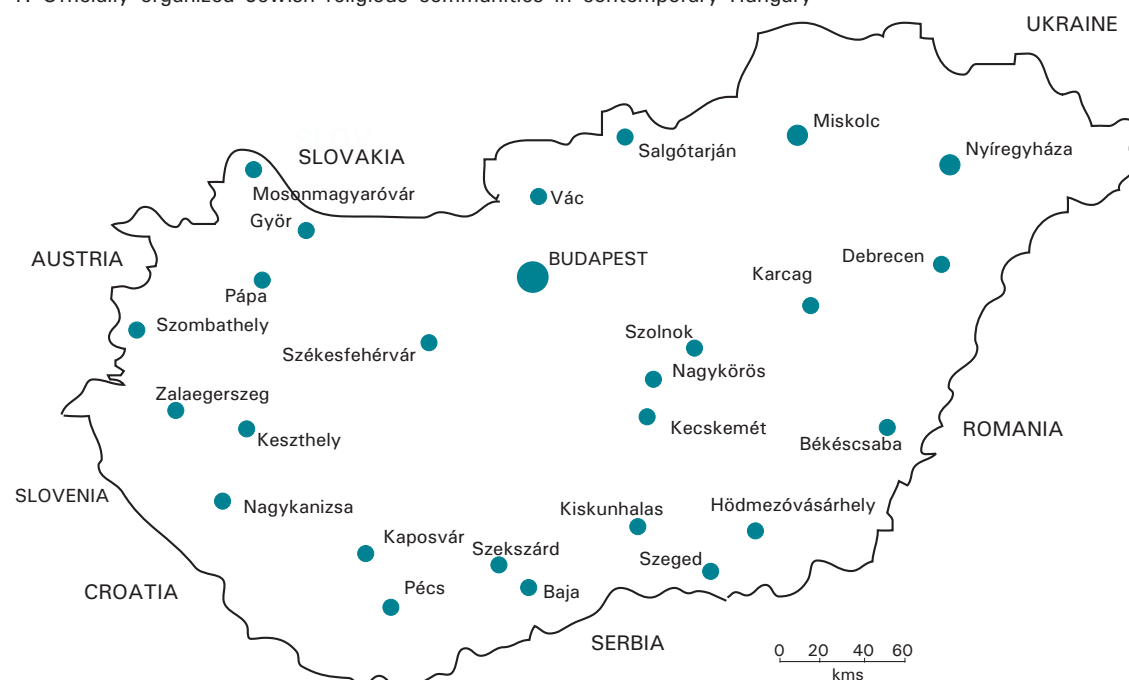
The seventeen Jewish primary schools, seven secondary schools and a teachers' training college that had survived the war were nationalized. A single secondary school and the National Rabbinical Seminary both continued to function under the supervision of the Communist-controlled State

Office for Religious Affairs. The Seminary, with a substantial library, was the only institution of its kind in Communist Eastern Europe, and attracted students from neighbouring countries as well, though the numbers of students and teachers were very low. The Jewish secondary school was increasingly poorly attended—there were only ten students in 1976—but this trend changed at the beginning of the 1980s.

Following the fall of the Communist regime in 1989 attempts to develop particularist identities were no longer suppressed and people could choose freely among the emerging identity options. The number of Jews who started to take an interest in Jewish religion, traditions and culture increased, and several cultural, religious and Zionist organizations were either established or revived. Jewish publications also proliferated and Jewish education expanded. Today there are four Jewish primary and secondary schools in Budapest with approximately 1,200 students. Despite this, only a small number of Jews have become more observant. In 1992 community leaders estimated that only around a quarter to a fifth of Hungarian Jewry was associated with communal institutions.

After France, Russia and the Ukraine, present-day Hungary has the largest Jewish population in

Figure 1: Officially organized Jewish religious communities in contemporary Hungary



continental Europe. How will this sizeable community develop in the future? Is it a vanishing diaspora community or could it be the basis of an effective identity revival? Can it enjoy a peaceful and harmonious co-existence with the ambient majority or will the continuing existence of a Jewish subgroup within Hungarian society be a source of permanent conflict? What are the content and forms of expression of Jewish identities in contemporary Hungary? Unfortunately, our knowledge of Hungarian Jews at the time of the fall of the Communist system was not sufficient to answer these and many other substantial questions on the economic and social status of Jews in Hungary as well as on their social and political attitudes and opinions. The most recent reliable demographic data on Hungarian Jews were provided by the 1945–6 registry of survivors compiled by the Statistical Office of the Hungarian branch of the World Jewish Congress and by the 1949 Census, which contained a question on religion. In the fifty years following, no systematic investigations into the Hungarian Jewish population were carried out. Our survey is the first to fill this gap.

Between March and November 1999, a research group at the Institute for Minority Studies of the Institute of Sociology at Loránd Eötvös University in Budapest conducted a questionnaire-based sociological sample survey of contemporary Hungarian Jewry. The study investigated demographic data, social and cultural characteristics, religion and Jewish ancestry as well as the ideological, social and economic attitudes of the interviewees.

This investigation had several concrete goals. The first was to gain insight into the changes in the social position of Hungarian Jewry over several generations, and to determine as closely as possible the social and economic position of Jews within Hungarian society at large. To do this, the survey gathered key demographic and social data spanning four generations: the people we interviewed, their parents and grandparents, and their children.

Another important goal was to monitor the attitudes of today's Hungarian Jews, both towards their own Jewish origins and towards Jews and Judaism in general. In doing so, it was possible to compare the attitudes of today's Jews regarding their Jewishness with those of previous generations.

We also examined opinions on assimilation, integration and renewal. The survey also sought to determine the degree to which Jews in Hungary participated in organized Jewish community life, as well as the extent of their knowledge and opinions relating to Hungarian Jewish organizations and cultural institutions.

Separate questions examined respondents' evaluations of the current situation of Jews in Hungarian society, their relations with the non-Jewish population, their opinions regarding antisemitism in Hungary after 1989, and their overall political, economic and social attitudes. Finally, the survey looked at attitudes toward the state of Israel and at personal assessments of the impact of the Holocaust.

A total of 2,015 individuals aged eighteen and over were interviewed. One of the greatest problems of the survey was in generalizing from the data collected, especially because the sample was unlikely to be fully representative. Because of the sampling method used, the sample population tended to be 'closer' or more attached to Judaism than the wider Hungarian Jewish population.² Nonetheless, each characteristic subgroup of the Hungarian Jewish community is represented in the sample, though probably not in the proportion that corresponds to their numbers in reality.

I would like to thank Professor Barry Kosmin of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, London, Professor Zvi Gitelman of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Professor Viktor Karády of the Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Paris, and Dr David Singer of the American Jewish Committee for their invaluable help in bringing the survey to fruition.

Róbert Angelusz, András Kovács, János Ladányi and Róbert Tardos carried out the data analysis; and Tamás Stark made the demographic calculations. Sampling, interviewing and data processing were carried out under the guidance of Gabriella Borsós and Zoltán Szendrő. I am indebted to Professor Stanley Waterman, Szilvia Balassa, Ruth E. Gruber and Antónia Szenthe for their contributions to the English version of this report.

² The problems of the sampling method are discussed in Appendix 1

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Finally, the survey was financed by the American Jewish Committee, the American Joint Distribution Committee, the Claims Conference, the Jewish Agency,

the Federation of Jewish Communities in Hungary (MAZSIHISZ), the Hungarian Jewish Heritage Public Foundation and the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation.

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