

the beginning of Stalin's purges — an unmanageable process, God forbid if it gets out of control. The need would then arise for a strong hand, in other words, for a dictator. The advent of a dictator is always a disaster; the country is on the brink of a disaster as it is, they say so themselves.

Would I stage a play on a Jewish subject if I were in Moscow now? I would have been guided, in the first place, by artistic criteria. All these gatherings [of Russian nationalists — ed.] are for me, above all, anti-artistic. I feel ashamed for those writers who find it possible to have discussions on that level.

In my twenty years of running a theatre in Moscow I had always seen everything through the prism of my artistic perceptions. I used to check my inner feelings: what was worrying me at this or that particular moment, what seemed to me alarming, important, and necessary. I always believed that I couldn't be alone in those feelings; if something concerned me so much, there must be other people just as concerned. I would have acted now in the same spirit.

A. Löwenheim

THE JEWISH QUESTION: THE VIEW FROM BUDAPEST, 1988

Since 1984, Hungary has become more liberal regarding the Jewish question (including the question of responsibility for the Holocaust of Hungarian Jewry during World War II), which had been dormant until then.¹ In this year Hungary marked the fortieth anniversary of its occupation by the Germans. Various ceremonies and events were held during 1984 in memory of the hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews who had been deported to the extermination camps by the Nazis and their Hungarian helpers. These ceremonies were held under the patronage of a governmental body, the "Patriotic Front" (*Hazafias Nepfront*), which imparted to them a nonpartisan pan-Hungarian nature (including the Hungarians dispersed throughout the world). The very fact that the Jewish victims were specifically singled out and named as such constituted a distinct change in the official Hungarian policy which had been in force since the establishment of the Communist regime and which had proclaimed that no "Jewish question" existed.

While these official events were being held, a book entitled *The Jewish Question, Assimilation, Anti-Semitism* was published in Budapest.² The 379-page book was edited by the Jewish academic Peter Hanak, who included a summary of his own, entitled "The Unfinished Debate",³ and contained an introduction written by the secretary of the Patriotic Front, Imre Pozsgay. Hanak provided a concise description of the problematics of the dilemmas of assimilation since the nineteenth century. He concluded that there were successful types of assimilation as well as failures; in a given situation, however, the process was deterministic. He noted that while there are undoubtedly those who hold that the Holocaust is proof of the failure of assimilation, on the other hand, there are Jews who, wishing to preserve the characteristic spirit of the Jewish ethnic group (especially rationalist skepticism, humanism, and the aspiration towards peace), will choose assimilation, adopting as their motto, "navigare necesse est, vivere non est necesse" (it is necessary to sail; it is not necessary to live).

The book also included selected responses to the questionnaire "The Jewish Question in Hungary", which had appeared in 1917 in the radical publication *The Twentieth Century*;⁴ statements by the Jewish Marxist theoretician Erik Molnar, who in 1946 had called for complete assimilation; and extensive selections from the essays of Istvan Bibo and Gyorgy Szaraz.⁵ These texts reflected the activity which had taken place

mainly among the Jews and the non-Jewish Magyar intelligentsia. In the opinion, however, of the Hungarian-Jewish historian Laszlo Varga,⁶ the repression of the public debate regarding the history of Hungarian Jewry, their past and present ties with their neighbours, and the responsibility for the Holocaust in Hungary, continued at least until the publication of Szaraz's essay. The wall of silence surrounding the topic has been breached mainly since the middle of 1985.

Recently there have been signs of a retreat from the official policy which opposes any expressions of ethnic hostility. It appears that since then there have been developments in the attitude of the intelligentsia and public in Hungary to the Jewish question, anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust. This can be seen from the interviews given by several Hungarian academics, most of whom are Jewish, who came to Jerusalem in January 1988 to participate in a conference on the economic history of Hungarian Jewry and whose views will be summarized below.

In order to understand the significance of these changes, we should mention a few of the fundamental facts regarding the attitude of the Magyar society and government towards the Jews, which have already been revealed by historical research.⁷

In July 1941 the authorities handed over about 20,000 Jews "lacking citizenship" to the S.S., who (with the assistance of Hungarian regular army troops) killed most of them in Kamenets-Podol'sk, a city in the western Ukraine. There was nothing new in the Hungarians' persecution of Jews "lacking citizenship", most of them of Galician origin, especially during World War I. Regular Hungarian army troops conducted a "cleaning-up operation" in "liberated" Ujvidek (Novi Sad) where 3,309 people, including more than 700 Jews, were killed in January 1942. The Hungarian army drafted Jewish men of military-service age and placed them in labour battalions in the most dangerous sectors of the front, which was a sure method of killing them. This act of murder was conducted in accordance with section 230 of Law no. 2, 1939, of the Hungarian parliament which established the rules for the military employment of men not fit for active military service; it led to the deaths of more than 40,000 male Jews.

The actions of the Hungarian government against its Jewish citizens reached a peak with the deportation of most of these Jews to the death camps, and the Hungarian-initiated killing operations of Budapest Jewry. It is well known that anti-Semitism did not die in Hungary, even after the German troops had left its territory. Furthermore, it assumed a new appearance after the war, e.g., a whispering campaign about Jewish vengeance, about the Jews seizing the government, about Jewish profiteering. Many people denied the accuracy of the reports of the Holocaust or of its dimensions; others claimed that while it was true that the Jews had suffered during the war years, the Magyars had also suffered, and were still suffering today. Anti-Jewish riots even broke out here and there in clearly Magyar regions.⁸

In the above-mentioned interview to Israeli radio, Laszlo Varga noted that although

a hesitant and haphazard discussion of the question of responsibility for the Holocaust continued after 1945, the period of silence about and suppression of such issues caused a trauma for both Christian and Jewish Hungarians (the question of responsibility, on the one hand, and the problem of identity, on the other). He expressed the hope that the clarification of the problem, despite the pain this entails, would lead to a process of purification for all the parties involved, both non-Jews and Jews. Such a debate could be very fierce and arouse opposing viewpoints, but he considered it essential that it be conducted in a controlled manner. In his opinion, in the past the use of euphemisms in reference to the Jews, such as the "oppressed" and "the victims of Auschwitz" or "Urbanos" and "Uj-Lipotvaros",⁹ only intensified the problem. However, the situation is different today when the Jewish issue has become topical among many circles in Hungary, even though there still has not been a breakthrough of thorough scientific research in this field.

Regarding the vulgar and brutal nature of the anti-Semitism that has recently erupted in incidents in the streets or on the soccer fields,¹⁰ Varga believes them to be the acts of confused youth from the lower economic strata, whose only wish is to draw attention to themselves and to shock their audience. Knowing that an attack on Jews arouses attention and that saying "Jew" is regarded as an ugly act, they do this intentionally. Varga regards the "Gypsy problem" in Hungary as being much more serious. According to him, many Hungarians have murderous feelings regarding the Gypsies.

Professor Peter Hanak, who edited the above-mentioned book, was interviewed in the Israeli Hungarian-language journal *Uj Kelet* and by Israeli radio. (The interview with Professor Hanak was broadcast on January 5, 1988. The article appeared on January 15, 1988.) He noted the increasing public manifestations of anti-Semitism in Hungary, specially emphasizing the outbursts during soccer matches. In his opinion, this may be only an indicator of an accumulation of tensions within Hungarian society due to the economic crisis. Hanak asserted that there was no "Jewish problem" in Hungary, but rather a problem of anti-Semitism and that there were circles interested in fanning the flames of this problem in order to find a scapegoat upon whom the economic crisis could be blamed. This phenomenon, he claimed, was not new; but what was surprising, was that it was happening after two generations of Hungarians had lived under a socialist regime. He himself is deeply disappointed by this. After he was liberated from the forced labour battalions at the end of World War II, he expected to live in a world without anti-Semitism. According to him, feelings of remorse, suspicion and fear were aroused among the Hungarians after the Holocaust. They were careful not to make anti-Semitic claims, especially since this was liable to lead to trouble with the authorities. Today there is freedom of expression in Hungary, the result of the relative economic prosperity that existed in Hungary during the 1960s

and the 1970s. During that period, the Jews were of no interest to the general public; today, when the general public has to tighten its belt, the "Jewish question" is aroused once again.

According to Hanak, the Jews cannot pretend that nothing is happening. He also opposes appealing to the government to intervene and suppress the anti-Semitic claims. He even rejects requesting the government authorities to soften the positions in the debate or clarify the problem within the framework of the Communist Party, where the party will have the final say. In his opinion, the Jews are the ones who have to demand that the issue be clarified in public debates conducted in a liberal and democratic atmosphere. The Hungarian Jews must point to the benefit they have brought to Hungarian society and, conversely, to the damage caused by anti-Semitism and Fascism to Hungary. If they fail in this attempt, they will once again find themselves in conditions similar to those that existed fifty years ago. "And then the two sides will have no choice but to draw the necessary conclusions", he stated, without explaining his meaning. Hanak added that he is not at all optimistic regarding the results of this debate, but, in his opinion, it is unavoidable.

At the end of the interview in *Uj Kelet*, Hanak turned to a discussion of the roots of the problem. In his opinion, the events of 1918 were a tragedy, because this was not only a Hungarian disaster, but rather one of all Central Europe. (The reference is to the collapse of the unified political framework of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). Similarly, the events of 1944 were not a solely Jewish catastrophe, but rather a Hungarian and Central European one: the Hungarians, the Czechs, the Austrians and the Jews lived, according to Hanak, within a common framework; it was a disaster that this unity was severed, especially considering the circumstances in which this happened. (This can be seen as an expression of the Hungaro-centric sentiment in Central Europe, like the claim regarding the shared fate of the Jews and the Magyars).

From among all the signs of unrest regarding the Jewish question among Hungarian intellectuals, Hanak chose an example from the field of fiction, because of the profound influence fiction exerts upon Hungarian social life. (It is sufficient to mention the role played by the Magyar poets in the resurrection of the Magyar language and culture in the nineteenth century, especially the activity of Sandor Petofi during the March 1848 revolution in the city of Pest). The journal *Mosgo Vilag* (No. 4, 1987) included a poem by the young Jewish poet Gyorgy Spiro.¹¹ The nightmarish atmosphere of the poem aroused a vigorous debate within the Magyar Writers' Association (*A Magyar Irok Szovetsege*), along with censure of the poem and its timing. Spiro was rebuked for reawakening the old debate between the "Urbanos" and the "populists" which during the 1930s had prevented the formation of a unified front of Magyar intellectuals against fascism. Those who censured the poem did not mention the word "Jew" even once, but their intent was clear. Thus, for example, Feren

Karinthy, the son of the noted writer Frigyes Karinthy, told Spiro: "You might have heard that my mother died in Auschwitz?" (His mother, Dr. Aranka Bohm, a physician, was Jewish). The strongest criticism was leveled by the president of the Writers' Association. Tibor Cseres, a writer whose work *Hideg Napok* (Cold Days) provided a graphic description of the horrors of the mass killing conducted by the regular Hungarian army in Ujvidek in 1942. He condemned Spiro's poem as "an attack on the nation". The debate, whose content was censored to some degree, aroused an extensive response among Hungarian intellectuals.

In response to my question, Professor Hanak explained the significance of the Latin proverb at the end of his essay "The Unfinished Debate" (see p. 89, above). According to Hanak, the Jews are a cosmopolitan people that navigates its way between the non-Jewish peoples. The Jews have had a mission throughout the course of history to make the human race more humane. They disseminated rational ideas and played a great role in the advancement of science. The monotheism which was spread by the Jews was also a rational idea. All these rational ideas are also humanistic: their goal is to unite people. Furthermore, during the course of thousands of years of persecution suffered by the Jews, they developed the concepts of the love of man and the obligation to battle against persecution. This is the Jewish fate, and this role is even more important than existence itself. At the same time, however, a separate ethnic existence within the context of an independent state is also justified. It appears to me that Hanak's statement constitutes a later version of the concept of the *Te'udah* (the "mission of the Jews").

A justification for separate Jewish political existence also appears in the new edition of the book *Valsagos evtizedek* (Decades of Crisis) by T. Ivan Berend,¹² an economic historian and President of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (*Magyar Tudományos Akademia*), who is also Jewish. The author, who also participated in the Jerusalem conference, devotes many pages to the history of European Jewry between the two world wars and describes Zionism as a national liberation movement.¹³

It appears that the Jewish historians in Hungary are making a sincere, courageous, intellectually honest attempt to deal with the problem of Jewish existence and Jewish identity in a changing reality. They approach the issue with a great deal of openness and logic and manifest loving concern for their dual heritage. It is possible that they are aware that this is not an unprecedented situation: for example, there were Jewish intellectuals in Hungary who sincerely wanted to be Magyars, but who also aspired to raise the ethical and cultural level of the assimilating environment. Furthermore, the Jews constituted a bridge between the Magyars and the national minorities in their country, thereby fulfilling a vital national function (along with their progressive economic role). All this, however, did not preserve them from hostility.

It is possible that we are witnessing today an additional stage of a cyclical process.

NOTES

1. Publications on Jewish topics were not published in Hungary after the revolution in 1948 (*A fordulat eve* in Hungarian) in which the Communist Party took power, except for the discussions within the context of the Jewish community, and even these were published only in a very controlled manner. Exceptions to this rule are the book *Hajtukanyar regeny* (Dangerous Curve; a Novel) by the Jewish writer Maria Ember (Budapest: Szepirodalmi, 1974), a "novel" that describes, through the eyes of a teenager, the fate of one transport which arrives, by mistake, in Strasshof, in Lower Austria, instead of Auschwitz (the epigraph of the book symbolizes the common Magyar-Jewish fate: "The subject of this book is not the Jewish fate. The book tells of Magyar history"), and the response to it by the late publicist Gyorgy Szaraz (who died in December 1987), a broadminded, sensitive person, in the book *Egy eloitelet nyomaban* (In the Wake of One Prejudice) (Budapest: Magveto, 1976). Most of the book had initially appeared in the August 1975 issue of the magazine *Valosag*. Szaraz argued that Hungary, unlike the West, had a history of tolerance towards the Jews. The bearers of anti-Semitism within the country were mostly the German bourgeoisie. The chain of disasters that befell its Jews starting in 1919, reaching a peak with the 1944–1945 Holocaust, came after they had begun to accustom the little man to ostracize the Jews and to view them as different, employing intimidation, to prevent people from assisting the Jews or alleviating their distress. The Hungarian people, he asserted, was no guiltier regarding the Holocaust than any other European people, despite the efforts of the Horthy regime and, following it, of the fascists, to make it a partner to the crime. He called for a moral stocktaking and to seek a way in which Jews and Magyars could live together, while respecting the right of the Jews to choose their identity as they wish. Szaraz thus continued the philosophy of the intellectual and publicist Istvan Bibo, who had published his book *A Harmadik ut* (The Third Way, i.e., neither fascism nor Communism) in London in 1969.
2. *Zsidokerdes, asszimilacio, antiszemizmus: Tanulmányok a zsidokerdesrol a huszadik századi Magyarországon* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1984).
3. Peter Hanak, *A lezaratlan per* in *ibid.*
4. *A zsidokerdes Magyarországon, a Huszadik Szazad Korkerdese* (Budapest: 1917).
5. I have in my possession a manuscript which describes in detail the book and its background.
6. In the interview he granted to Israeli radio on January 5, 1988, on the occasion of the "Conference on the Economic History of the Jews in Hungary", Jerusalem, January 4–6, 1988.
7. From among the rich literature about the Holocaust of Hungarian Jewry, mention should be made of three works:
 1. A rich collection of original documents from Hungarian and German archives about the forced labour battalions: *Fegyvertelen alltak az aknamezokon, dokumentumok a munkaszolgálat történetéhez Magyarországon* (Budapest: A Magyar Izraeliták Országos — Kepviselete Kiadása, 1962), 2 vols. (They Stood Unarmed in the Minefields: Documents on the History of Forced Labour in Hungary, published by the National Bureau of the Hungarian Israelites), edited by Dr. Elek Karsai, a Jewish academic, the director of the Hungarian State Archives;
 2. Randolph Braham. *The Politics of Genocide: the Holocaust in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 2 vols.
 3. *The Tragedy of Hungarian Jewry: Essays, Documents, Depositions, Social Science Monographs* (Boulder and the Institute for Holocaust Studies of the City University of New York, 1986). The preface by Randolph Braham is especially relevant for the topic under discussion.
8. A murderous riot took place in Kunmadaras, in the eastern part of Hungary, on May 30, 1946. A mob, composed mainly of women and youths, killed three Jewish inhabitants of the village who had survived the Holocaust. All the other Jews fled the village. The riots were preceded by rumours that the Jews kidnapped Christian children and made sausages out of their flesh, for sale on the black market. See *Uj Elet* (New Life), May 30, 1946; an article in the official organ of the Communist Party, *Szabad Nep* (Free People), on June 10, 1946, entitled "Ezek terjesztik a vervad mesejet" (They Are Spreading the Blood Libel), which discussed incitement in villages and cities throughout Hungary, such as Sopron, Foldeak, Debrecen, Tiszaladany, Pely, Mezokovatoshoza, Mecsekhaza; an article on the pogrom has recently appeared in Hungary: Janos Kobanyai, "A kis utazas, a Kunmadarasi pogrom emlekere" (The Short Journey: in Memory of the Pogrom in Kunmadaras), in *Kultura es Kozosseg* (Culture and Society), 1986/7, pp. 95–112. A pogrom also occurred in the Diosgyor-Miskolc complex of industrial cities, which are located in northeast Hungary. A mob of workers from the factories in these cities murdered two Jews, while freeing Christian Hungarian officials who had fallen into its hands. See Eugen Duschinsky, "Hungary", in *The Jews in Soviet Satellites* (Westport, 1971), p. 471; Paul Lendvai, *Anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe* (London, 1971), pp. 33, 303–7.
9. During the 1930s, there was an ongoing argument between the *falukutatók* (the "researchers of the village"), who were a kind of Hungarian populist (who were also called *nepiesek* — "populists"), and the *urbanosok* (the "urbanites"), who favoured drawing closer to cultural trends in Western Europe; the latter group contained a strong Jewish element.
10. There were recently violent incidents and anti-Semitic slogans chanted by spectators during the games of the MTK soccer team, which in the past was considered to be a Jewish team, although today there is no trace of a Jewish presence on the team.
11. Gyorgy Spiro (Budapest, 1946–), author of the novels *Kerengo* and *Ikszek*, plays, including *Az improztor es a Csirkefej*, and poems.
12. T. Ivan Berend, *Valsagos evtizedek, a 20 század első fele Közép es Kelet — europai történetek interpretacioja* (Decades of Crisis: an Interpretation of the History of Central and Eastern Europe during the First Half of the Twentieth Century) (Budapest: Magveto, 1987), p. 257.
13. Berend also criticizes the opposition to Zionism by the leaders of the assimilationist secular Jewish movements.