

**A JEWISH MINORITY  
IN A MULTIETHNIC SOCIETY  
During a Change of Governments:  
The Jews of Transylvania in the Interwar Period**

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**Introduction**

The study of a multiethnic state or region raises a number of crucial political, social, economic, and cultural issues, such as which ethnic group is in power, its relative size within the population, its attitude toward other groups, its economic and social standing, and the way it perceives itself and is perceived by others. Obviously, the scope of such a study must be limited to a specific period, since at any point in time, another ethnic group could seize power and transform the entire system. One of the major issues we shall examine in this paper is how fierce competition between two ethnic groups — in this case Romanians and Hungarians — can affect a third ethnic group, the Jews.

Transylvania, the western region of present-day Romania, was transferred from Hungary to Romania in 1920 following the Trianon Peace Treaty. Prior to that, the region had changed hands several times. An independent principality from the mid-sixteenth to the late seventeenth century, Transylvania was subsequently incorporated into the Habsburg Empire, and remained part of that empire until 1867. From

1867 to 1918 — which we shall call the “Hungarian Period”— it became an integral part of Hungary. From 1918 to 1940 — which we shall designate “the Romanian Period” — it was part of Romania. Although the present paper focuses on the Romanian period, in order to understand the dynamics of interethnic relations and the status of the Jews following the change of regime, a brief review of the Hungarian Period is in order.

According to the 1910 census carried out by the Hungarians, out of a total population of 5.2 million in Transylvania, 53.8% were Romanians, 31.6% were Hungarians, 10.7% were Germans (Saxons and Swabians), and 3.5% (about 183,000) were Jews.<sup>1</sup> To this must be added small minorities such as the Ruthenians in the north, the Serbs in the southwest, and pockets of Armenians and Gypsies scattered throughout the region. According to the Romanian census of 1930, there was a slight rise in the number of Romanians (57.8%), a substantial drop (7%) in the number of Hungarians (24.4%), and a minute decrease in the number of Jews.<sup>2</sup>

The historical struggle between the Romanians and Hungarians over control of Transylvania was reflected in the distortion of the statistics in favor of one or other side. Although neither of them questioned the fact that during both the Hungarian and the Romanian periods, the Romanians constituted the largest and the Hungarians the second largest ethnic group, they juggled the statistics in relation to the Jews. During the Hungarian period, anyone who spoke Hungarian — that is, the majority of Transylvanian Jews — was registered as Hungarian. In the 1930 census, the Romanians persuaded many Jews whose mother tongue was Hungarian to designate Yiddish as their native language,<sup>3</sup> in order to reduce the proportion of Hungarian speakers in the statistics. Thus, during both the Hungarian and Romanian periods, the Jews were used as pawns in a statistical game designed to enhance each group’s relative size in Transylvania. These manipulations, no doubt, partly account for the drop in the number of

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<sup>1</sup> S. Manuila, “Aspects démographiques de la Transylvanie,” *La Transylvanie* (Bucharest, 1938), pp. 70-73.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> J. Ancel and T. Lavie (eds.), *Records of the Communities of Romania*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1980), p. 8.

Hungarians in the 1930 census, although their emigration to Hungary after 1918 was also a contributory factor.

The Jews, therefore, were puppets in the power game between the Hungarians and Romanians, Transylvania's two main ethnic groups. The other sizable minority, the Germans, was a self-contained group, which switched loyalties according to expediency. Thus, during the Hungarian Period, they declared their loyalty to the authorities in Budapest, and immediately after 1918, transferred their loyalty to the administration in Bucharest. No special tension existed between them and the Jews. The other small minorities, as specified above, played no significant role in the inter-ethnic dynamics of the region.

### 1. The Hungarian Period

In 1867, Transylvania was incorporated into Greater Hungary as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In return for their willingness to integrate into Hungarian culture, the Jews were awarded full civil rights. In the last third of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the Jews of Hungary and Transylvania became the mainstay of Hungary's economic, financial, and cultural life and the backbone of its medical and legal professions. The capitalist development of the new Hungary was a direct outcome of the prolific activity of Jews in various economic fields. Thus for example, 85% of banking and finance was in Jewish hands, and 42% of salaried workers in these fields were Jews.<sup>4</sup> Jews also held key positions in the press, thereby actively participating in the shaping of public opinion. Last but not least, there were Jewish deputies in the Hungarian parliament.

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<sup>4</sup> C.A. Macartney, *Hungary: A Short History* (Chicago, 1962), pp. 190-193. Macartney provides detailed statistics on the economic activities of the Jews of Greater Hungary from the year 1910. Apart from banking, Jews accounted for 12.5% of self-employed industrialists and 21.8% of salaried industrial workers; 54% of independent businessmen and 62.1% of salaried workers in this field were Jews, as were 19.9% of large estate owners. Likewise, in the liberal professions, Jews accounted for 26.2% of Hungary's artists, 42.4% of journalists, 45.2% of lawyers, and 48.9% of doctors. It must be taken into account that the above figures apply to Hungary as a whole, not specifically to Transylvania, for which statistical data are unavailable. However, since, according to most of the sources, Transylvanian Jewry was highly integrated into Hungarian society, one may assume that there were no significant statistical discrepancies.

Already in the early 1860s, the Hungarian Jewish leadership understood that, as part of the struggle for emancipation, it was essential to set up an umbrella organization to represent the Jews before the authorities. But an official schism occurred within Hungarian Jewry after an abortive attempt at unification (the 1868 Congress, held a year after obtaining civil rights), and at the same time, varied assimilationist trends existed. The conservative Orthodox community, fearing religious reform, set up its own association called “Guardians of the Religion”; only a few of its members spoke Hungarian.<sup>55</sup> Simultaneously, two modern streams emerged: the Neologists,<sup>6</sup> and the Status Quo Ante movement;<sup>7</sup> many of their members were assimilated into Hungarian society.<sup>8</sup> In Transylvania, the ultra-Orthodox community was concentrated mainly in the north and north-west of the province, while the moderate Orthodox communities lived elsewhere. Neologist communities coexisted alongside the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox communities.

In order to consolidate their status within the multiethnic state, the authorities in Budapest introduced, in the last third of the nineteenth century, a policy of “Magyarization,” or Hungarian cultural indoctrination. The number of Hungarian schools grew, and at a certain stage, the statutory language of instruction in all schools — except for denominational institutions — was Hungarian. Discrimination against Romanians and Slavs, who did not conform to this assimilationist policy, was commonplace. The Jews, on the other hand, saw this situation as a historic opportunity for climbing the economic and social ladder. Impoverished Jews from Galicia and the eastern states began streaming into the region seeking to integrate into Hungary’s

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<sup>5</sup> R. Patai, *The Jews of Hungary — History, Culture, Psychology* (Detroit, 1996), p. 313.

<sup>6</sup> The Neologists were a modern movement — similar to the Conservatives in the United States today — which tried to introduce innovations into Judaism. They were also known as “Congressionalists” since they became an official and recognized movement after the 1868 Congress.

<sup>7</sup> The Status Quo Ante movement was a relatively small group, which did not join the Neologist organization or the Orthodox communities, but retained their former pre-Congress status, and refused to recognize the schism that had occurred at the Jewish Congress.

<sup>8</sup> On the Congress of 1868-1869, its antecedents, and consequences, see Patai, *The Jews of Hungary*, pp. 312-327.

economic, cultural, and political life, while insinuating themselves into the Hungarian elite. Jews also served as the catalysts of Hungarian culture in Transylvania. For this reason, the Jews there were frequently accused by the Romanians — especially after 1918 — of colluding with the “foreigners” (the Hungarians).

In the late nineteenth century, there was no attempt at all by Transylvanian Jews to cooperate with the Romanians for several reasons. First, the dictates of *Realpolitik* determined that they support the rulers, who also guaranteed their rights. Second, the Romanians, predominantly peasants, with only a very small middle class and a virtually non-existent industrialist class, represented only 4.5% of the urban population in 1910, and only 10.5% in 1930, while the Jews and Hungarians constituted the majority in the urban areas. Third, the Romanian peasants considered the “foreigners,” i.e., the Hungarian landowners and Jewish land lessees, businessmen and bankers — but not the Romanian landowners and industrialists — as the class enemy. Finally, many members of the Transylvanian Romanian National Party, the party of the tiny Romanian “intelligentsia,” considered Jews and Hungarians as obstacles to the development of Romanian society. It must be borne in mind that this “intelligentsia” comprised college graduates or civil servants, and constituted 0.4% of the Romanian population. Of these, over one third were priests, less than one third were elementary school teachers, while the rest were local bureaucrats.<sup>9</sup> Many members of the Romanian National Party also published virulently antisemitic tracts. All in all, the antagonism between the Jews and Romanians reached a peak during the Hungarian period, and the distrust between these two ethnic groups continued well into the Romanian period.

The above notwithstanding, it is important to point out that anti-semitism existed among the Hungarians, too. It was not always easy

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<sup>9</sup> K. Hitchens, *Romania 1866-1947* (Oxford, 1994). See the Romanian translation of this book, p. 240. Hitchens quotes the following data for 1910: Romanian “intellectuals” (Hitchens’s quotation marks) in Transylvania and Hungary totaled 11,538, which according to S. Manuila (see note 1 above) is about 0.4% of the total Romanian population in this area (2,830,040). This figure includes 3,979 members of the clergy, 3,117 elementary school teachers, 1,394 petty civil servants, 370 lawyers, and 314 doctors.

for the Hungarians to witness the Jews' success in almost every field they penetrated. As Macartney put it: "... it was not easy for the Magyars... to feel that their new brothers in statistics [were] brothers indeed."<sup>10</sup> The social and economic reforms introduced by the authorities in Budapest, which coincided with the emancipation of Jews, provided a fertile breeding-ground for antisemitism. As part of these reforms, serfs were emancipated and granted small plots of land, which nevertheless proved insufficient for their needs. As a result of this reform, small and medium-sized landowners who could no longer count on the free labor of serfs, had to find work as civil servants or petty clerks.<sup>11</sup> The emancipated serfs and the middle and lower aristocracy, who had lost their assets, were a willing audience for the antisemitic outpourings of a frustrated junior judge named Győző Istóczy. Istóczy was dismissed from his position after bungling a case involving a Jewish petitioner.<sup>12</sup> In 1872, he was elected to the parliament, where he devoted all his energy to submitting antisemitic motions. It was he who devised the slogan "Jews to Palestine"; he also proposed denying citizenship to Jews who came to Hungary from the East.<sup>13</sup> Istóczy saw Jews as a nation that was resistant "to absorption" or assimilation.<sup>14</sup> The atmosphere he created made it possible for the Tiszaeszlár blood libel of 1882 to take place.<sup>15</sup> A year later, Istóczy set up the antisemitic National Party, which, in 1884, won seventeen seats in the parliament.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the antisemitic atmosphere fostered by the National Party's parliamentary deputies, many politicians denounced antisemitism. For

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<sup>10</sup> Macartney, *Hungary*, p. 193.

<sup>11</sup> Patai, *The Jews of Hungary*, p. 356.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> M. Carmilly-Weinberger, *Istoria evreilor din Transilvania (1623-1944)* (The history of Transylvanian Jewry, 1623-1944) (Bucharest, 1994), p. 150.

<sup>15</sup> Patai, *The Jews of Hungary*, pp. 349-352. In 1882, in the village of Tiszaeszlár, a 14-year old girl committed suicide for unknown reasons. The evidence was tampered with in order to implicate a number of local Jews in the girl's death. The "suspects" were held under arrest and subjected to interrogations for about one-and-a-half years. The antisemites of the period had a field day, exploiting the incident to launch a virulent anti-Jewish propaganda campaign throughout Hungary. After much suffering, all the accused were acquitted.

<sup>16</sup> Macartney, *Hungary*, p. 193.

example, Lajos Kossuth, the famous Hungarian revolutionary of 1848, called for an end to the persecution of Jews from his place of exile in Turin, and denounced the Tiszaeszlár blood libel as a throw-back to medieval superstition.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, already by 1892, Istóczy's antisemitic party and its various factions had disappeared from the political map.<sup>18</sup> In 1885-1895, as Hungary's economy improved, antisemitism began to ebb. In 1895, Jewish communities were awarded equal status to that of Christian denominations. With this step, the emancipation of Jews in Greater Hungary was complete.

## 2. The Romanian Period

With the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 and Transylvania's transition from Hungarian to Romanian rule, the Jews of the region underwent a serious identity crisis. Three multi-ethnic regions, Bukovina, Bessarabia, and Transylvania, were added to the old Romanian Kingdom, known as the *Regat*. The change was an essentially political one. The main ethnic groups of Transylvania underwent a radical transformation. The Romanians, who felt they had been discriminated against over the previous fifty years, became the rulers, whereas the Hungarians became the ruled. As for the Jews, they felt that the ground had been cut from under their feet. They feared they would lose the civil rights granted them by the Hungarians in 1867, and looked anxiously at their brethren in the *Regat*, who had not yet been granted civil rights. Moreover, the Old Kingdom had a reputation for being antisemitic. William Oldson writes that, from 1859 to 1914, antisemitism in Romania (the Old Kingdom) became "an integral part of Romanian intellectual life." Indeed, the word Romanian became a synonym for antisemite. Antisemitism was supported by Romanian authors and historians, and by "the cream of the intelligentsia."<sup>19</sup>

### *The responses of Jewish communities*

The various Jewish communities in Transylvania greeted the political change in different ways. The Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews

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<sup>17</sup> Patai, *The Jews of Hungary*, p. 351.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.

<sup>19</sup> W. Oldson, *A Providential Anti-Semitism: Nationalism and Polity in Nineteenth-Century Romania* (Philadelphia, 1991), pp. 9-10.

in the north, who were poorer than other Jews in the province, showed little interest in the political change. Emancipation was the least of their concerns. Therefore, while they did not rejoice at receiving minority rights in 1867, neither did they mourn their loss in 1918. They did not try to integrate into the general system, but remained aloof from historical events and geopolitical developments. Their identity was determined by “religious principles,” not national criteria. They felt a greater affiliation to the courts of the Hasidic rabbis of Galicia or Carpatho-Russia than to politicians in Budapest or Bucharest. Naturally, they rejected the Zionist idea for religious reasons. One of the key personalities representing this approach was the Szatmár Rebbe, Yoel Teitelbaum.

This extremism on the part of the ultra-Orthodox led to a political backlash among certain Orthodox communities and the establishment of Mizrachi, the religious Zionist party, as in other areas of Eastern Europe. One of the leaders of this movement in Transylvania, and an honorary president of the Zionist Organization after 1918, was Rabbi Moses Samuel Glasner, the Orthodox chief rabbi of Cluj, the province’s unofficial capital.

The Neologists were the standard bearers of Jewish assimilation to Magyar culture. Many of the Neologist rabbis in Transylvania were graduates of the rabbinical seminary of Budapest, where, in addition to Jewish studies, they were schooled in general education and Hungarian culture. One of the diehard representatives of assimilation to Hungarian society was Rabbi Lipót Kecskeméti, the Neologist Chief Rabbi of Oradea, a city in western Transylvania. Kecskeméti was a sworn enemy of the Zionist movement. For him, the Jews of Transylvania were simply Hungarians of the Mosaic faith. It was Kecskeméti’s contention that “Jewish national sentiment contained unhealthy elements”<sup>20</sup> — a claim he advanced both before and after 1918.

The above notwithstanding, it should be stressed that many Neologist intellectuals and rabbis, despite being assimilated to Hungarian culture, did not identify with the Hungarians’ national aims. It was this group that gave rise to most of the Zionist leaders of Transylvania,

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<sup>20</sup> Carmilly-Weinberger, *Istoria evreilor din Transilvania*, p. 117.

among them Joseph Fischer and Rabbi Mátyás Eisler, the Neologist chief rabbi of Cluj.

One expression of the search for identity triggered by the paroxysmal change of government in 1918, was the establishment of a Zionist movement in the province. Although its precursors already existed before the First World War, the political transformation in the region served as a catalyst for setting up an organized Zionist movement in Transylvania. On November 20, 1918, the founding conference of the National Union of Transylvanian Jewry took place in Cluj, where the demand was raised for equal national rights for Jews, on a par with those of other ethnic group in Transylvania. The idea was the brainchild of Dr. Hayim Weissburg, a native of Transylvania, who had been a Zionist activist in Budapest even before the war. He favored the revival of Jewish culture, and a return to the Hebrew language as a preparation for emigration to Palestine. In the 1930s, he went even further by claiming that a knowledge of Hebrew was more important than the training activities run by the Zionist movements to prepare people for life in Palestine.<sup>21</sup>

It was not long before the National Union turned into the Zionist Organization of Transylvania. This body operated on two parallel tracks: it represented the interests of the Jews of Transylvania during the interwar period and worked toward furthering the Zionist cause, on both an ideological and organizational plane. In the interwar period, the leaders of the National Union embraced both objectives, with varying emphases, depending on the exigencies of the times. Both aims found expression in the Union's Hungarian-language mouthpiece, *Új Kelet*, which was also Transylvanian Jewry's most important journal. In 1922, Weissburg, one of the founders of the journal, published an illuminating article on the problem of the national identity of Transylvanian Jewry, entitled "Hungarian, Romanian, Yiddish, or Hebrew?" The article begins with a moving appeal to Romanians, as an ethnic group, which had fought for national rights, to show understanding toward the national aspirations of Transylvanian Jewry. He attacks both the Magyarization practiced by the previous regime, and the attempts

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<sup>21</sup> M. Avidan, *From Barissia to Habonim* (unpublished), Archives of the Struchlitz Institute for Holocaust Studies, Haifa University, (n.d.), pp. 6-8.

at Romanization introduced by the new regime. He also exhorts both sides to refrain from assimilating the Jews, whom in any case they despised. As to the “Yiddish versus Hebrew” controversy, he rejected Yiddish on the grounds that it was the language of the Diaspora. All great Jewish works, he asserted, were written in Hebrew. It was essential for Jews to embrace Hebrew as the Jewish people’s original tongue. Although their presence in the Diaspora (in this case, Transylvania) was temporary, the Jews had to learn the language spoken in a given location and time, i.e. Romanian. However, the language of instruction in Jewish schools, he believed, should be Hebrew.<sup>22</sup>

Weissburg invested all his energy and money into promoting the Zionist idea in Transylvania. He took part in the establishment of the National Union of Transylvanian Jewry, the Jewish National Fund, *Keren Hayesod*, and the youth movements, emigrating to Palestine himself in 1925.

An article in a Romanian nationalist paper published in 1933 by a Romanian nationalist and antisemite, Petre Nemoianu, sheds light on the problem of interethnic relations in the interwar period. Ironically, the entire article is full of praise for Weissburg. Both Weissburg and Nemoianu fought in the Austro-Hungarian army; they were captured by the Russians and ended up sharing a room in the prisoner-of-war camp in Siberia. Nemoianu points out in the article that, unlike other Hungarian-Jewish prisoners, Weissburg openly declared he was a Jew. The Hungarian Jews, according to Nemoianu, considered themselves first and foremost Hungarian, and only then Jewish. Weissburg’s insistence on being identified as Jewish caused him to suffer on two counts. Not only was he labeled a Hungarian enemy by the Russians, but he was also looked upon as a Jewish traitor by the Hungarian officers in the camp. As a fervent nationalist, Nemoianu despised Jews who aligned themselves with Hungarians in the province, and admired Weissburg for identifying himself first and foremost as a Jew. It should be noted that the double label, Jewish-Hungarian, which was slapped on Jews in Transylvania by antisemitic Romanian intellectuals, was an inaccurate generalization, as shall be discussed below.

The Jews of Transylvania, who had become so deeply entrenched in

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<sup>22</sup> *Új Kelet*, May 14, 1922.

Hungarian society and culture, were unable to shift gears so abruptly. Weissburg, aware that a political change was taking place, sought, already in the early months of Romanian rule, to establish channels of communication with the new leadership. In late 1918, the new provisional Transylvanian Romanian council, called “the Directing Council,” was inaugurated under the leadership of Iuliu Maniu, who during the “Hungarian Period” had served for many years as the president of the Romanian National Party. In 1906, he became chairman of the Romanian faction within the Hungarian Parliament. As a graduate of Budapest University, he showed more tolerance toward the Hungarian-speaking Jews of the province.

### *A new Romanian policy*

Maniu is considered one of the more democratic members of both the Transylvanian Romanian leadership and the central leadership in Bucharest. The provisional Directing Council was responsible for the administration of Transylvania until the signing of the Trianon peace treaty in 1920, when this province became a de jure part of Romania. After 1918, the Romanian leaders of the province were divided into two camps: those who advocated swift unification by the assimilation of Transylvania into Greater Romania, creating a kind of organic unification; and those who, like Maniu, saw Transylvania as a distinct entity, with more affinity to Central Europe than to the Old Kingdom, and advocated a kind of cultural autonomy within the province, while not opposing unification with the new Romania. They were called “Regionalists” by their opponents. The group that favored organic unification included a large proportion of antisemites, while the regionalists tended to have a higher proportion of liberals.

Maniu tried to gain the support of all ethnic groups, including the Jews, for Transylvania’s incorporation into the new Romania, as set forth by the Bucharest government. It was against this background that ties evolved between him and Weissburg. He exploited these contacts with Maniu when Jews were evicted from their homes in Cluj to make way for Romanian tenants,<sup>23</sup> an action that marked the onset of the Romanization of Transylvania’s cities. Maniu, who was legalis-

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<sup>23</sup> H. Eichler (ed.), *Weissburg’s Memoirs* (unpublished), Archives of the Struchlitz Institute for Holocaust Studies, Haifa University, (n.d.), p. 8.

tic in his approach, helped the Jews get their apartments back. The Romanian leader was friendly with most of the Transylvanian Zionist movement leaders. In an interview with *Új Kelet* in early 1919, he stated that he was aware of the difference between Transylvanian Jewry and *Regat* Jewry, which still had no rights and suffered from rampant antisemitism. He assured the Transylvanian Jewish public that “with the establishment of a new, democratic Romania, everyone will enjoy full civil rights and there will be no discrimination against any ethnic group.”<sup>24</sup> In a declaration he made five years later, in 1924, on the subject of minority groups in Greater Romania, he asserted, *inter alia*:

The question of racial, linguistic, or religious minorities has not yet been resolved through a special statutory minorities’ law. The Constitution [of 1923] speaks of the equality of all citizens before the law. These rights were already established in the Constitution of 1866 [in the Old Kingdom] but so far, there have been no provisions stipulating how the various minorities will benefit from the equal rights granted them by law... A practical, albeit temporary solution has been found for the inhabitants of Transylvania through Order-I promulgated by the provisional government there. This order endorses the Hungarian Equal Rights Law of 1868, with one amendment: that wherever the law specifies Hungarian as the official language, it shall be replaced by Romanian [as the official language]. The rights the Romanians received under this law shall apply to the Hungarians and other minorities.<sup>25</sup>

The Transylvanian Romanian leader understood that not enough had been done in the five years since the Romanian takeover, to normalize the rights of minorities in Greater Romania. He even alluded to the fact that although in Transylvania a declaration of intent had been made already in the early days of the provisional government, the central government in Bucharest was still dragging its feet. In his opinion, minority rights had to be assured in practice as well as in theory. He ended by castigating the Hungarians who, although theoretically granting equal rights to the minorities in 1868, were lax in applying these rights as far as the Romanians were concerned.

The integration of Transylvanian Jews, most of whom were urbanized, into Romanian society was no simple matter. Most towns in Transylvania had a Hungarian majority, while the majority of Roma-

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<sup>24</sup> *Új Kelet*, January 9, 1919.

<sup>25</sup> I. Maniu, *Problema minorităților* (The problem of the minorities) (Bucharest, 1924), p. 8.

nians, both before and after 1918, were peasants. In most towns and cultural centers, the main language — an important parameter in the process of social integration — was Hungarian. In Cluj, for example, where in 1918 50% of the population was Hungarian, 30% Romanian (mostly recent migrants from the villages), and 12% Jewish,<sup>26</sup> the dominant language was Hungarian. In Oradea, 73% of the population was Hungarian, less than 5% Romanian, and over 20% Jewish.<sup>27</sup> The dominance of Hungarian culture was absolute in these and other cities, and Romanization was hard to enforce, not only on the Hungarians and Jews, but strange as it may seem, on the Romanians themselves. In 1922, Romanian Education Ministry inspectors reported that in the western part of the province the situation was so bad that Romanian children had to be taught their mother tongue before “... [the teacher] may introduce them into the mysteries of science.”<sup>28</sup>

In 1926, the Romanian elites of Cluj who were conversant with Romanian still preferred to speak Hungarian in the stores, streets, and at parties, because it was more “refined.” In a critical article, which appeared the same year in a Romanian paper that supported “organic unification” with Romania, the journalist laments this state of affairs, claiming that “Cluj has not yet been ‘won over,’” despite the fact that eight years have elapsed since the unification. This city is not the only one in this “deplorable situation... other towns were even worse off. In Satmar, Oradea, Sighet, the situation is even sadder. Hungarian is spoken often [by Romanians].”<sup>29</sup> With Hungarian still being considered the more cultured language in many places in Transylvania, even by the Romanians themselves, it was hard to blame the Jews for still being attached to Hungarian culture.

Immediately after the establishment of the provisional government in 1918, the education officials, some of whom belonged to the “organic

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<sup>26</sup> Ancel and Lavie, *Records of the Communities*, vol. 2, chapter on Cluj, p. 244.

<sup>27</sup> The ethnic composition of Oradea is based on data from two sources: Ancel and Lavie, *Records of the Communities*, chapter on Oradea, p. 62; and I. Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania* (Ithaca, 1995), p. 160, note 110.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168, note 142.

<sup>29</sup> C. Condarcea, “Kolozsvar-Cluj: Problema romanizării oraşelor din Ardeal” (Kolozsvar-Cluj: the problem of the Romanization of Transylvanian towns), *Țara Noastră*, June 27, 1926; see also Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania*, p. 154.

integration” camp, planned a swift process of Romanization to replace Magyarization. However, they failed to take into account objective difficulties, such as the shortage of Romanian teachers and textbooks.<sup>30</sup> Although some Romanian educators with a more liberal approach proposed a more gradual process of Romanization, their proposals were turned down.<sup>31</sup> Already in 1919, all Hungarian state schools, with their high percentage of Jewish students, were closed and all schools, except for denominational institutions, were instructed to teach in Romanian. Thus, although there were provisions for Hungarians and Germans, none existed for Jews. Their only option was to study in Jewish schools which taught in Hebrew or Yiddish — languages they were not familiar with — or to study in a Romanian state school, in a language only a few were conversant with. The Romanians’ aim was clear: to destroy the Hungarian cultural infrastructure.

### *The educational and cultural sphere*

In an attempt to overcome this problem, three Jewish educational networks were set up, each of which represented one of the three main currents within Transylvanian Jewry after the change of government. The first network of “Tarbut” schools was set up by Weissburg and other Zionist leaders, and comprised nursery and elementary schools and two high schools (one in Cluj). In all these institutions, Hebrew was to be the language of instruction, while Hungarian would be retained for a transitional period that had yet to be specified. Ironically, just as the Romanians were embarking upon an intensive process of Romanization, Weissburg obtained a concession from Braniste, the provisional government’s education minister, to teach in Hungarian for a transitional period of ten to fifteen years, with the proviso that Romanian would also be taught during this period.<sup>32</sup> Although the Romanian authorities endorsed this plan, the schools never really thrived. The Romanian authorities, incensed by the practice of importing teachers from Hungary, also stipulated that all teachers had to be Romanian citizens.<sup>33</sup> In light of the above, it is hardly surpris-

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 150-151.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 157, note 96.

<sup>32</sup> H. Weissburg, “Egy ora a nagyszzebeni kultuszminisztériumba” (One hour in the Ministry of Cults in Sibiu), *Új Kelet*, August 28, 1919.

<sup>33</sup> S. Yitzhaki, “Jewish Schools in Transylvania,” in Ancel and Lavie, *Records of*

ing that in 1927 the high school in Cluj was forced to close its doors for “technical” reasons, such as unsuitable buildings, sports and gym facilities and the like.

The second institution, with its overtly pro-Hungarian approach, was set up in Oradea by Rabbi Kecskeméti, who made no concessions to the new political situation. A fervent opponent of Romanization, Kecskeméti declared himself to be a “proud Hungarian” and outright anti-Zionist. His Jewish school was also subjected to the dictates of the new regime. In 1927, a Romanian deputy-headmaster was appointed, who was made responsible for the school syllabus; he proscribed Hungarian as a language of instruction.<sup>34</sup> The third school, set up in Timișoara in 1919, wisely adopted the middle road by teaching in Romanian, but including Hebrew and Erez Yisrael studies in the curriculum. This school managed to offer a Jewish, pro-Zionist education, while adhering to government stipulation to teach in Romanian.<sup>35</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that this school remained open for twenty-five years.

The three schools reflected three different currents of identity within Transylvanian Jewry. The first school, in Cluj, espoused Zionism and the Hebrew of the “new Jew,” while remaining steeped in the city’s predominantly Hungarian culture. The second school, in in Oradea, failed to adapt to the new political reality, continuing instead to foster a Hungarian identity with only an abstract affiliation to Judaism. It was Rabbi Kecskeméti’s contention that “we [Jews] are a people... a people of one God, and a people of [all] humanity.”<sup>36</sup> The third school, set up in Timișoara, was also pro-Zionist but understood the necessity of teaching in Romanian. Perhaps this, together with its healthy financial situation, explains why it survived until 1944. It must be emphasized that most Jewish students attended Romanian state schools, while speaking Hungarian after school, at social gatherings, and in youth movements, and patronized Hungarian theater.

Despite attempts at Romanization, Jewish cultural life continued

*the Communities*, p. 51.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52; see also T. Lavie (ed.), *Records of the Communities of Romania*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1970), chapter on Timișoara, p. 312.

<sup>36</sup> Carmilly-Weinberger, *Istoria evreilor din Transilvania*, p. 117.

to be predominantly Hungarian. Moreover, Jews penetrated, and even dominated, all aspects of Hungarian culture. Almost all Hungarian papers had Jewish correspondents, and some even had Jewish editors. All Jewish journals were printed in Hungarian, except for a few German or bilingual (Hungarian-German) journals. Jews played a prominent role in the journal put out by the Hungarian National Movement of Transylvania. The director of the Hungarian national journal, *Keleti Újság*, was also a Jew, Sándor Weiss.<sup>37</sup> Even the Hungarian National Theater in Cluj was run by a Jew.

### ***The Transylvanian mentality of the local Zionist movement***

Transylvanian Jewry's adherence to Hungarian culture and mentality affected relations between them and the Jews of the *Regat*. Integration between the Jews of these two regions proved extremely difficult. We have only to look at the structure of the Zionist movement in Greater Romania in the 1930s for proof of this state of affairs. For a start, Transylvania had its own autonomous' Zionist Organization and Palestine Office, with headquarters Timișoara. Frequently, arguments erupted between Timișoara and the head office of the Romanian Zionist Movement in Bucharest. In 1938, for example, the Bucharest Palestine Office asked the World Zionist Organization to raise the quota of aliyah certificates for the four regions of Greater Romania. Consequently, in the first half of 1938, only 250 aliyah certificates were granted for the *Regat*, Transylvania, Bessarabia, and Bukovina together.<sup>38</sup> The Transylvanian Palestine Office, for its part, negotiated directly with the World Zionist Organization, over the head of Bucharest, for its own quota of aliyah certificates as well as funds to set up a training farm in Transylvania.<sup>39</sup> The ensuing argument

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<sup>37</sup> R. Vago, "Yehudei transilvania — bein integratsia le-ihud" (The Jews of Transylvania — between integration and unification), R. Vago and L. Rothman (eds.), *Toledot yehudei romania* (The history of Romanian Jewry), vol. 3, (The interwar period) (Tel Aviv, 1996), pp. 200-201.

<sup>38</sup> S. Avni, *Ha-no'ar ha-zioni be-romania 1939-1949* (Ha-No'ar Ha-Zioni in Romania, 1939-1949) (n.p., 1992), p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> The Central Zionist Archive (CZA), S6/1894. The Palestine Office in Bucharest sent a letter, dated January 20, 1938, to the Immigration Department of the Palestine Office in Jerusalem, claiming that "Transylvania has separatist tendencies, to which we are opposed. We wish to emphasize that any separate funding to Transylvania will simply encourage these separatist trends..."

between Bucharest and Timișoara had to be arbitrated by the head office in Jerusalem.

The difference between Transylvanian Jews and *Regat* Jews was particularly evident in the youth movements. Although the world Zionist leadership encouraged the formation of joint youth groups incorporating youngsters from Transylvania and the *Regat*, in practice this hardly ever happened.

The following two testimonies prove the point. The first was written by a prominent member of the Ha-Shomer ha-Za'ir movement which, it will be recalled, upheld not only Zionist fulfillment, but also the inherent equality of all people. Despite this belief, all attempts at integration between Transylvanian Jews and Jews from other regions in Romania, particularly from the *Regat*, failed. As Joseph Ben Zvi (Joseph Hirsh), a prominent member of the Ha-Shomer ha-Za'ir movement in Cluj, stated:

... In the 1930s, Ha-Shomer ha-Zair cells were established throughout Transylvania and yet our regional affiliation remained problematic. I remember that, despite substantial opposition on our part, the World Leadership [of Ha-Shomer ha-Za'ir] decided to incorporate us into the Romanian organization. Consequently, I attended a summer camp held by the Romanian movement in the Carpathian Mountains, near Mount Omul. We had a wonderful time, went on marvelous excursions. The scenery was fantastic. There was also a group leaders' seminar with a varied program of lectures. And yet, we all came away with the feeling that we did not, and could not, belong to this movement. For some reason, they were foreign. They did not behave like us, they did not think like us. Although we both belonged to the same movement, and shared the same ideas, we were worlds apart. Our background was different from theirs, and our movement was different from theirs. Of the Hungarian movement we knew absolutely nothing. It was across the border and totally beyond our reach.<sup>40</sup>

The second testimony was written by Mordechai Becker, a member of the Transylvanian Ha-no'ar Ha-zioni movement, and one of the first group of *haluzim* to participate in the Umrarești training camp, in the Old Kingdom in 1932. He describes the difficulties in finding a common language — both literally and figuratively — with the movement's branch in the *Regat*. He reported that as well as experiencing objective difficulties — hard physical work, Spartan living

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<sup>40</sup> S. Yitzhaki and G. Ya'akovi (eds.), *Ne'urim shel ta'am ha-shomer ha-za'ir be-transilvania, 1929-1949* (Meaningful years — ha-shomer ha-za'ir in Transylvania, 1929-1949), (Givat Haviva, 1991), p. 80.

conditions — the Transylvanian *haluzim* also experienced subjective difficulties in relating to the *Regat* youth.

Those who made up the training groups came from different social and linguistic-cultural backgrounds. This variance produced different regional “mentalities,” as we called them. And whereas the Transylvanian contingent had spent many years in the movement, most members of the *Regat* contingent had only joined the movement shortly before embarking on the training program.<sup>41</sup>

While Becker agrees with Joseph Ben Zvi regarding the different mentality of the *Regat* Jews, he invokes an additional, movement related factor to account for the differences between them, namely the fact that the *Regat* youth had not been adequately prepared for the training program. These are but two of many testimonies indicating how the Transylvanian Jews — including the Zionists — not only did not integrate culturally and socially with the Romanians of Transylvania or of the *Regat*, but were equally incapable of getting along with their Romanian co-religionists from the *Regat*.

### *Political identity*

On the political plane, the interaction between Transylvanian Jewry and the main ethnic groups in the province, and between Transylvanian Jewry and the authorities in Bucharest, was more complex. In an attempt to shed some light on the issue of the political identity of Transylvanian Jewry after 1918, I shall borrow the sociological model devised by the Hungarian researcher, Sándor Balázs, in his article “Ethnicity, Culture, and the Political Option,” which appeared in 1991.<sup>42</sup> Within this model, Balázs defines **ethnicity** as a person’s origins, which are a given, and **culture** as a person’s language and customs, which are acquired, and therefore subject to choice.

Based on these two variables, he divides Transylvanian Jewry in the interwar period into three categories:

- a. **Jewish Jews:** those whose origins and culture are consistent, yet they have not shut themselves off from other cultures.
- b. **Hungarian Jews:** those whose origins are inconsistent with the acquired culture, although some meshing exists between the culture

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<sup>41</sup> H. Hermesh, *Shiva la-makor* (Returning to the source) (Kibbutz Kfar Glikson, 1989), pp. 9-10.

<sup>42</sup> S. Balázs, “Etnikum kultura, politikai opció” (Ethnicity, culture, political options), *Korunk*, vol. 3, no. 8, 1991, pp. 970-976.

of origin and the acquired culture (partially Magyarized Jews), c. **Jewish Hungarians:** These are Jews who have internalized the acquired culture to such an extent that it has eclipsed their culture of origin (totally Magyarized Jews).

I would not entirely agree with Balázs's assumption that the only conceivable **political option** (the third parameter) at the time was the Hungarian one. To my mind, the Romanian political option was equally viable, as we shall see. This simply proves how difficult it is for both Hungarian and Romanian researchers to remain objective on issues of ethnicity.

On the same theme, Balász brings Nándor Hegedüs — a Transylvanian Jew born in 1884 — as an example of the totally Magyarized Jew. After graduating from Budapest University, Hegedüs worked, from 1918, as editor of one of Oradea's most prestigious journals. A historian of Hungarian literature, Hegedüs was also, in the 1930s, a political essayist, who wrote mainly for the Hungarian national journal *The Hungarian Minority* (the name is self-explanatory). He was a senior member of the Hungarian National Party and one of its deputies in the Bucharest parliament. He campaigned for the rights of the Hungarian minority and vigorously condemned the dismissal of Hungarian railway workers. He strongly opposed the Romanians' attempts to restrict the use of the Hungarian language. Strikingly, for all his public activity, Hegedüs never once embraced a Jewish cause. His total assimilation to Hungarian politics would not have been possible if he had not completely assimilated the Hungarian national identity.

Two other militant activists of the Hungarian National Party were Rabbi Kecskeméti and Sándor Weiss. Ironically, Weiss, who fought for the rights of Hungarians and represented the Hungarian Party in the Bucharest parliament, ended his life in the Bergen Belsen concentration camp after being exiled by the Hungarians.<sup>43</sup>

Yet, the Hungarian option was not the only one, despite what the Hungarian researcher, Balász, would lead us to believe. Another political option, the Romanian one, was open to the Jews. The heads of the National Union of Transylvanian Jewry, who were also leaders of the Zionist Organization of Transylvania, and among the leaders of the

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<sup>43</sup> R. Vago, "Yehudei transilvania," p. 201.

Jewish Party of Greater Romania, chose this option. Using Balász's model, these Jews could be described as being ethnically Jewish, culturally Hungarian, and politically Romanian.

Weissburg was the first to adopt the Romanian political option, forging ties with Maniu as far back as in 1919-1920. After his emigration to Palestine in 1925, the Transylvanian Zionist leadership — which included Theodor Fischer, Joseph Fischer, and Ernest Maxton — strengthened its ties with the Transylvanian Romanian leader. Indeed, in the 1927 Romanian elections, the Transylvanian Zionist movement merged with Maniu and Mihalache's National Peasants' Party, to form a joint electoral bloc.<sup>44</sup> Naturally, the Jewish leaders of Transylvania placed their trust mainly in the Transylvanian faction of this party, particularly in Maniu. The friendship between them continued almost throughout the entire interwar period.<sup>45</sup> In 1928, the Transylvanian Jews were instrumental in setting up the Jewish Party of Greater Romania. It should be noted that the Jews of Bukovina and some Jews in the Old Kingdom also voted for this party. One of the reasons why support for the Jewish Party was stronger in multi-ethnic regions such as Transylvania and Bukovina, was that in these regions, the question of identity was subjected to more rigorous tests.

The Jewish Party cooperated with Maniu, and from 1931, participated in the Romanian elections as an independent party, winning five parliamentary seats: two from Transylvania, two from Bukovina, and one from the Old Kingdom. Most Jewish votes in Transylvania went to the Jewish Party, followed by the Hungarian Party. The Romanian parties hardly garnered any Jewish votes.<sup>46</sup> Just as the Jewish Party in Transylvania had its own Zionist triumvirate — Joseph Fischer, Theodore Fischer, and Ernest Marton — so too did the Hungarian Party; its Jewish triumvirate included Rabbi Kecskeméti, Sándor Weiss, and Nándor Hegedüs.

The choice of the Romanian political option by the Transylvanian

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<sup>44</sup> B. Vago, "The Jewish Vote in Romania between the Two World Wars," *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1972, p. 236. It is important to note that the Romanian National Peasants' Party was founded in 1926 by the merger of Maniu's old Romanian National Party with its Transylvanian membership, and Mihalache's Peasants' Party with its *Regal* membership.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

Zionist leadership was inspired by pragmatic considerations. Although large-scale emigration to Palestine was its prime concern, it understood that until such a goal could be achieved, cooperation with the Romanian authorities, especially with Maniu, was essential. Yet, despite this political choice, it felt a far greater affinity with Hungarian culture.

Prior to the December 1937 elections, Maniu, out of electoral consideration, signed a non-aggression pact with the “Iron Guard,” the Romanian Fascist movement,<sup>47</sup> bringing to an end the cooperation between him and the Jewish Party and in effect, spelling the end of the Romanian option.

The Jews of the Hungarian Party “stoically” resisted Romanian antisemitism for one-and-a-half decades, resigning themselves to being accused by Romanian nationalists of having a dual Jewish-Hungarian identity. In the late 1930s, as the nationalist orientation of the Hungarian Party, with its strongly antisemitic overtones, intensified, the Hungarian option, too, ceased being viable. By the end of the 1940s, the era of the two political options for Jews had drawn to a close.

### Summary

The dilemma of Jewish identity in Transylvania was not resolved until the outbreak of the Second World War. The Jews of the province, who enjoyed full civil rights, and were firmly entrenched in Magyar society during Hungarian rule, became politically divided after the 1918 change of regime, although collectively retaining a Hungarian cultural identity. Thus, they were caught up in the acute ethnic conflict between the two main groups of Transylvania — the Romanians and Hungarians — and this had a far-reaching effect on the shaping and development of their Jewish national identity.

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<sup>47</sup> A. Stan, *Iuliu Maniu — Biografia unui mare român* (Iuliu Maniu — the biography of a great Romanian) (Bucharest, 1997), pp. 314-330. The Romanian historian, A. Stan, who tends to glorify Maniu, devotes an entire chapter of his book to attempting to justify why the leader of the Romanian National Peasants' Party signed an electoral pact with the leader of the Romanian Fascist Party (the “Iron Guard”), C. Codreanu. According to Stan, Maniu's objective was “to preserve national dignity” and prevent the rise of the rival party, the National Liberals, led by King Carol II's “irresponsible” council (*camarila*). The pact soured the relationship between the Jews and Maniu.