

Eszter B. Gantner

“He is ugly and a Jew!”

The Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party and the Hungarian Jewish Community in the 1960s and 1970s

Abstract

The years 1967 and 1974 seemed especially significant as the anti-Zionistic rage caused by the Israeli-Arab wars stirred up Hungary’s internal affairs. The anti-Zionist policy adopted by the Kádár regime after 1956 meant more than ‘simple’ anti-Israel attitude in Hungary. The article provides some answers on the following questions: What characterized the policy of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party toward the Hungarian Jewish community? Which strategy did the Jewish Community develop in order to survive as a minority in a closed social and political system? How much was the Community able to represent special Jewish interests in the era of consolidation after 1956? Furthermore the article enriches the picture on the topic with new documents and features with regard to the relationship of the ruling party to a minority.

In the last decade, an increasing number of studies have dealt with the seemingly recent past 40 years of the Hungarian history. However, these studies laid the emphasis primarily on the 1950s, more specifically on the events of 1956. For the time being there are considerably fewer studies analysing the events of the sixties and seventies and their participants. The years 1967 and 1974 seemed especially significant as the anti-Zionistic rage caused by the Israeli-Arab wars stirred up Hungary’s internal affairs. Further, the anti-Zionist policy adopted by the Kádár regime after 1956 meant more than ‘simple’ anti-Israel attitude in Hungary. Therefore in the following study I seek answers to the following questions: What characterized the policy of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party toward the Hungarian Jewish community? Which strategy did the Jewish Community develop in order to survive as a minority in a closed social and political system? How much was the Community able to represent special Jewish interests in the era of consolidation after 1956?

It is my conviction that the following paper, even if only to a small extent, can enrich the picture with new documents and features as far as the relationship of the ruling party to a minority is concerned.

The beginning: The 1950s

“And really for the first time these Jews, without considering their party allegiance, sympathised with the liberation movement [...] and they knew that mainly the Communists are those, who are fighting with the most embittered Fascists. In this time the general opinion was that the Jews, who survived the horrors of the war, if not Communists, had to be Democrats without a doubt. [...] we fight against Zionists. This is certainly not antisemitism and the good Communists or non-party Jews who are loyal to our democracy and support this [...] we’ll esteem and reward them in the same way as we have until now.”¹

¹ Rákosi Mátyás felszólalása az MDP KV 1957 február 17. ülésén [Mátyás Rákosi’s speech on the session of the Hungarian Democratic Party, February 17, 1957]. In: Valéria Révai; Péter Hardi (ed.) (1991): Törvénytelen szocializmus. A tényfeltáró bizottság jelentése. Budapest: Zrínyi; Új Magyarország; p. 107.

The above quotation – a fragment from Mátyás Rákosi’s² speech in front of the Political Committee in 1953 – contains two defining elements of the party’s ‘Jewish policy’. On the one hand, the Party leadership realised that a considerable number of the Hungarian Jews were emotionally linked to the party through being liberated by the Red Army, through the Communist Party’s radical promises and attitude towards the right wing. Taking advantage of this, the party willingly ‘recruited’ members from among the Jews with higher qualifications who stayed in the country. In 1948 a new era started in Hungarian history through the coming to power of the Hungarian Communist Party with the help of the Red Army, consignments of which were stationed in the country. The new – Stalinist – system needed the mentioned well-educated members to strengthen the Communist structure in every field of the social, economic and political life.

On the other hand, the fight proclaimed against Zionism, when anybody could be labelled thus, did provide a handy, comfortable political weapon, redirect public opinion from the real social difficulties: the low standard of living, and the aggravating economic situation. It also helped the power to nip in the bud any manifestation of Jewish identity. The quoted paradigm of “bad Jews and good Jews” served as a basis for the party’s anti-Zionists policy and as a legitimization of this policy against “the bad Jews”. The party leadership with its ‘anti-Zionistic’ campaign offered a “language” that enabled to channel antisemitic feelings existent in Hungarian society without any consequences.³

“The years 52-53 were very oppressive. We lived in fear. The law prohibited antisemitism. But if on the train somebody said: ‘You dirty Zionist!’ that wasn’t a crime anymore and everybody knew what was going on.”⁴

The cynicism of this policy appeared twofold. On one hand, the party promised protection against antisemitism, but at the same time it played with antisemitic clichés underneath of anti-Zionism. On the other hand, the party declared, depending on the political situation and aims, what was to be understood under “bad Jews” and “good Jews”.⁵

The party allowed the manifestation of ‘Jewishness’ only on a religious level. At the same time, paradoxically, it suggested the existence of some kind of Jewish identity with the anti-Zionist trials, planned after the Soviet model during the 1950s. As it is well-known, from 1949 until 1954 a whole series of political trials took place based on accusations of Zionist activity. But the prisoners of such trials included Orthodox Jews, former Zionists, and Jewish leaders within the Community as well as victims of anti-Zionist purges within the Communist Party. A special manifestation of the anti-Jewish policies showed up in the forms of recording of Jewish background and the attempts to restrict the number of Jewish cadres.⁶

² Mátyás Rákosi (March 9, 1892 – February 5, 1971) was the General Secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party (1945–1948) and later the General Secretary of the Hungarian Working People’s Party (1948–1956).

³ Between 1945 and 1947 numerous acts and regulations had been passed against antisemitism. See: Csorba, László (1990): *Izraelita felekezeti élet Magyarországon a vészorkszaktól a nyolcvanas évekig* [Jewish religious community life in Hungary from the Age of Peril to the Eighties]. In: Ferenc L. Lendvai; Anikó Sohár; Pál Horváth (eds.): *Hét évtized a hazai zsidóság életében*. Budapest: MTA Filozófia Intézet Kiadása, p. 86.

⁴ Bacskaï, Sándor (1997): *Egy lépés Jeruzsálem felé* [One step toward Jerusalem]. New York; Budapest; Jeruzsálem: Múlt és Jövő Lap- és Kvk.; BFL, p. 44.

⁵ For example Jews who had been active in the left-wing parties and political movements before the WWII. See: Kovács, András (2010): *Jews and Jewishness in Post-war Hungary*. In: *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History* (1), p. 34–57.

⁶ Kovács, András (2003): *Magyar zsidó politika a háború végétől a kommunista rendszer bukásáig* [Hungarian Jewish Politics from the End of WWII until the Fall of the Communist Regime]. In: *Múlt és Jövő* (3), p. 3–39.

The picture this identity conveyed towards society was one evoking danger, threat, and such old antisemitic clichés as ‘an international Jewish conspiracy’, the capitalist ‘bloodsucking’ Jew etc.

The reduction of Jewishness to religion and the denunciation of everything else as Zionism offered a simple solution for the ‘accommodation’ of Jews into society: namely, its forceful assimilation into Hungarian society. However, the concepts ‘Hungarian of Jewish faith’, ‘Zionist’ and ‘Jew’ often overlapped and were at times interchangeable. This was clear during the trials when otherwise loyal religious personalities were arrested alongside the Zionist politicians and any religious leader could be sentenced on the accusation of being a Zionist. Thus, it is understandable that learning from experience, the community leaders rigidly refused the concept and use of any kind of Jewish identity and – just like a hundred years before – they spoke only of Hungarians who were of Moses’ faith: so called ‘Hungarian Israelites’. This concept showed up in the subtitle of the official journal of the Hungarian Jewish organized community from 1951 as well: “New Life: The Paper of Hungarian Israelites”.⁷

After 1945, in spite of the huge losses, especially in the case of the more traditional provincial Jews, life in the communities restarted. Since the Jews lived mainly in Budapest – 96537 Jews⁸ lived in the capital in 1949 – the Budapest Jewish community had a defining role in the life of the Hungarian Jewish community. The social structure of the country’s Jewish community changed partially because of the Holocaust, partially because of emigration. Whereas the religious or at least tradition-keeping provincial Jewish communities were almost entirely destroyed the assimilated middle-class who had the highest survival rate tried to find their place in the emerging Hungary. Religious life was soon reorganised, mainly by the reorganisation of the conservative communities. Other kinds of community organisations, such as associations, guilds etc. could only function until 1950 when they were forcefully destroyed. The congregations themselves were forced into one unitary religious community – by considerable state pressure. The National Representatives of the Hungarian Jews led them. This centralisation made possible a more efficient and more severe control of the community. The organisation was entirely loyal to the state. But not even this loyalty could prevent the leaders from state terror: Lajos Stöckler, the president of the Budapest Jewish community, became one of the victims of the anti-Zionist campaign. Jewish life was limited to a religious framework – and this is where the cynical duplicity of the party became manifest again – yet, not even the primary conditions of practice were assured. A special problem was the celebration of Sabbath in schools and other places as Saturday was proclaimed a weekday. It was only in 1954, when Imre Nagy became Prime Minister, the possibility was given to establish associations keeping the Sabbath, and where having Saturday as a holiday was feasible.

However, the haunting memory of the Holocaust⁹, the joining of Jews to the Party, the existence of a Jewish middle class, the accusation of Zionism and the antisemitism created a

⁷ *Új élet: a magyar izraeliták lapja* (1951-1989).

⁸ Stark, Tamás (1995): *Zsidóság a vészidőszakban és a felszabadulás után (1939-1955)* [Jews in the terror period and after the liberation (1939-1955)]. Budapest: MTA Történettudományi Intézete (Társadalom- és művelődéstörténeti tanulmányok, 15), p. 95.

⁹ In the article we use the term “Holocaust” instead of “Shoah” because in the Hungarian historiography commonly the word “Holocaust” is used.

particular, very uncertain – it might be even called ‘floating, suspended’– situation for the Jews under the Rákosi regime. The accumulating dissatisfaction in the population could be directed against them at any time. This fear and defencelessness strengthened the paradoxical situation of the Jewish community. A considerable proportion of the Hungarian Jews and the Community expected defence by the party ‘fighting against the Fascists’, while the party itself stirred the inimical atmosphere which caused this fear.

“In political respects, these years were the most dangerous; at this time we were mostly afraid. In the newspapers we could read about a Zionist conspiracy and about the Doctors’ Trials in Moscow.”¹⁰

The role of the Communist leaders in the Zionist trials and the antisemitic campaign became clear for most Jews first during the period of ‘amelioration’ after Stalin’s death. Nevertheless, the basic survival strategy of the Community – hoping for protection by the state – will be detectable in the period after 1956 as well.

“Continuation and consolidation”: The 1960s

After the repression of the 1956 revolution, the new regime tried harder to involve the functionaries of working class or peasant descendents into the higher leadership of the party. The functionary changes brought about in the party were clearly aimed at weakening the positions of those of Jewish origin. The inner political struggle, the resulting rivalry and the defence of the obtained positions only increased the new functionaries’ antisemitism against the Jewish functionaries often coming from intellectual families. The latter ones ‘leaked back’ into the state apparatus during the consolidation period. János Kádár, however, took that to keep the number of Jewish functionaries low in especially important positions.¹¹ Certainly, these phenomena turned up only in the party’s inner discussions and they became known for the wider public only as rumours.¹²

A letter by the party functionary György Marosán from 1962 clearly illustrates the phenomenon of ‘personal antisemitism’ within the party, which was used in many cases as weapon in the inner intrigues and was manifest obviously only behind political curtains:

“[...] On another occasion the dismissal of a Central Committee secretary, who was also a district secretary was discussed. I started defending the respective person and asked them to give reasons for his dismissal. Comrade Sándor’s answer was pithy: ‘He is ugly and a Jew!’”

I was astonished and burst out ‘Why didn’t they notice in 1956 that he was ugly and a Jew?’ And that at any rate it was immoral to dismiss somebody on such grounds. I could not look into people’s eyes again. [...]”¹³

But the existence of this ‘personal antisemitism’ within the party increased the suspicions against Hungarian Jews. The party’s policy towards the community was interwoven by this lack of trust strengthened by the antisemitic clichés about the rootless, liberal Jewish intelligentsia. The congregation, placed between the power structure and the Hungarian Jews, was forced to express its opinion: that is to emphasise its loyalty even in cases which

¹⁰ Bacskai, p. 23.

¹¹ Révész, Sándor (1997): *Aczél és korunk* [Aczél and our times]. Budapest: Sík kiadó, p. 135–136.

¹² Kovács (2003), p. 24.

¹³ György, Marosán (1962): 1962 szeptember 1.-i beadványa (The letter of Marosán György). Mol: M-KS-288-4/58.öe, p. 60.

involved the large Jewish community, the question of Zionism, the relationship towards Israel and not the religious community life directly. The party considered the Jewish Community a kind of official representative of the Jews, though only a small part of the Hungarian Jews had anything to do with it. This practice proved that though the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party wished to reduce the Jews to religious life – just like it was done in the 1950s – it also presumed the existence of Jewish ethnicity beyond the religion. This contradiction can be detected in its policy regarding Israel, as a result of which the Community – as a strictly religious organisation – was compelled to make ‘loyalty vows’ again and again.

In the 1960s the basic tone was defined by anti-Zionism and mingling with it antisemitism in parallel with the increasing tensions in the Middle-East. However, the Kádár regime was careful enough not to turn the policy against Israel into a ‘Jewish problem’ in the internal affairs, as was the case in Poland and the Soviet Union.

The anti-Zionist and antisemitic ideas appeared quite soon, in 1961, in the leadership of the party and in the Political Committee during the Eichmann trial – an outstanding event in the history of Israel. Special attention should be paid to the opinion of the party leadership in connection with the Eichmann trial about the persecution and annihilation of the Jews. According to it, the emphasis was laid on the fact that the victims were Hungarian citizens rather than that they were Jews. In this way, facing the Jewish problem and the responsibility of Hungarian society seemed avoidable. On the other hand, this conception meant the ‘belittling’ of the persecution of the Jews, especially when the role of the antifascist, Communist martyrs was emphasised:

“[...] Comrade István Szirmai:

I would like to draw the comrades' attention to such circumstances, which are not included in the suggestion. In my opinion the Israeli government is interested in the arrest and trial of this Eichmann, because there are facts that gravely compromise the Israeli government and the Zionist movement. These are facts that Eichmann knows, as well, and they don't want to make it public. [...] There was the Kaszner case – the Israeli government had him killed to make him shut up. It was again a very confused case, but the gist is that even the head of the Israeli government had common interests with the Gestapo. There is something quite interesting here. Eichmann was kidnapped from Argentina and after three days the courtroom, where such public trials could be held, burnt down. This is not a coincidence.

I would suggest the following: our propaganda should not only benefit from this trial so that the fascists of the Federal Republic of Germany are revealed, but it should also attempt to unmask the Israeli government.[...]

Comrade János Kádár:

[...] It is not advisable to turn these miserable fascist cases into an exclusive Jewish problem. If we become involved, the decisive factor should be that this Eichmann murdered hundreds of thousands of Hungarian citizens. This is the line that should be emphatic and not the one that turns it into a Jewish problem. Eichmann didn't kill only Jews; there were others, as well. This is not a Jewish problem, but a question of fascism and anti-fascism. We acknowledge the right of the Israeli court of justice in this case. Only this much about the Jews.”¹⁴

¹⁴ (1960): A PB. 1960 június 28.i ülésének jegyzőkönyve (Report of the session of the Political Committee). MOL: M-KS-288-5/189.öe, p. 10-11.

The anti-Zionism, casting a shadow on the relationship with Israel, which was a common characteristic of the accusations of an Israeli ‘imperialist’ policy and its strong relationship with the USA, constantly overlapped with the ‘Zionist’ epithet which the party used to allude to any kind of ‘national’ identity,¹⁵ feeling or intention of defending their interests on behalf of the Hungarian Jewish community. This kind of Zionism was to be repressed and the power structure expected the Jewish Community to take a stand against possible Zionist phenomena or to report them, though the Community as a religious organisation theoretically had to perform religious duties and tasks. At the same time, the party took firm steps against the sometimes surfacing nationalism and the often-accompanying antisemitism on the ‘receiving’ end.¹⁶

The party’s firmness of conduct against the antisemitic phenomena strengthened the conviction in the Community that in exchange for its loyalty it can hope for protection against antisemitism. This attitude – which was formed in the 1950s, as we have seen – contributed to the fact that the Community, true to the role imposed on it, always took the stand in the questions concerning the Jews according to the expectations of the party. This was so, even if personal opinions differed considerably from the official standpoint. This was evident in the atmosphere reports from within the community. Accordingly, the leadership of the Community described in detail the relationship between itself and the Israeli Embassy, the attitude of the inner, Zionist, opposition. Naturally, this was noticed by the simple members, that is by a part of the Hungarian Jews, who would have liked a more courageous standpoint, even a more emphatic representation of the special Jewish interests. This was especially visible during 1967.

Up to 1967 a defining element of the life of the religious community and the policy towards it had been its relationship to the Embassy of Israel and to the international Jewish organisations. This made it clear that there was more behind the religious community – and the Jews in general. The ‘Jew’ couldn’t be limited to a mere religious interpretation, though the authorities spoke strictly about a religious institution and community. Both the relationships to Israel and to the international Jewish organisations, as has been previously suggested, worked out basically according to the foreign policy interests of the Hungarian state. The participation of the Hungarian Jewish Community in the workings of the World Jewish Congress caused many problems. The fact itself that the delegation of the Community could be present—for some time, at least – at some of the sessions of the Jewish World Congress, an organisation which did not define itself on religious principles, exposed the paradox once again: not even the authorities could differentiate between the denominational concepts and the term ‘Jew’ or give a precise definition for them. As a result of state pressure, the Community resigned from the Congress in 1960. In 1969 the president of the Jewish community initiated its presence as observer, but the suggestion was rejected by the State Office for Church Affairs on account of the Jewish Congress’ hostility towards the Soviet Union and its Zionist policy.¹⁷

As already mentioned, the relationship with the Embassy of Israel played a defining role in the life of the religious community. The authorities tolerated this until 1967, and due to

¹⁵ Csorba, p. 146–148.

¹⁶ MOL: M-KS-288-5/2027öe; p. 46–47.

¹⁷ MOL: M-KS-288-5/191 öe: p. 1–2.

detailed reports the shaping of this relationship could be traced precisely. However, when this relationship became quite close and wide-range, the state organs were sure to interfere immediately. The activity of the embassy, which kept in touch with the religious community, with the high school and the Rabbinical Seminary, handed out medicine and purchased certain objects of value, caused dissension within the Jewish community. The leadership of the community saw the guarantee for the safety and flourishing of the Hungarian Jews in their loyalty to the state power. Accordingly, in its reports (regular reports of the Jewish Community leaders to the State Office for Church Affairs) it accused both the ‘inner opposition’ as well as the representatives of the Embassy of Zionism. These reports served as a basis for the surveillance and control of all those persons who wished to do something different from the religious community trend.

“The first Jewish wave was at seven o’clock when about 150 people arrived there. The second Jewish wave was at half past eight when another 150 invited persons arrived. The sense in organising a second and third wave, why they invited two special Jewish waves besides the general guests was that neither the leader of the synagogue in Dohány street, nor the provincial orthodox personalities who can’t even speak Hungarian properly would have fitted into the circle of the guests from the ministry and diplomacy. [...]

The embassy sent invitations not only to the religious leaders and the staff of the Rabbinical Seminary, but also to the second and third line Zionist and Zionist sympathisers. All the Zionists of the Budapest orthodox wing were there.”¹⁸

As it could be seen from the cited sources, the crucial decisions affecting the Jewish community were born in the PB (Political Committee) based on the work of the State Office for Church Affairs. These decisions marked the limits of the possibilities of the community for political manoeuvres. However, the leadership of the community did not even try to test this and remained strictly in line with the rules, set out above.

The party’s distrust towards the Hungarian Jews, the anti-Zionist campaign, and in parallel the verbal abuse, accusations of Zionism within the religious community, strengthened in 1967, when the Arab-Israeli war broke out.

1967

The Middle-East crisis forced the socialist countries to take a stand beside or against Israel. At the meetings of the Political Committee, the international situation and its echo, reception in the country, was an issue of priority. At the Summit of the socialist country leaders, on June 9, 1967, in Moscow, Israel was denounced as a Zionist aggressor, while support was voted for the Arab countries. However, it was not simple to make the Hungarian public opinion accept the artificial political scheme what stamped Israel as the ‘bad’ aggressor and the Arab countries as the ‘victims’.

The regular ‘atmosphere’ reports, prepared by the Central Committee Agitprop Centre and sent to the leadership, proved that the whole of the Hungarian society did not react according to expectations to the given situation. The antisemitism was manifest in the graffiti and rude remarks, then there were anti-Soviet remarks and in the ranks of the so-called

¹⁸ Endre Sós to President József Prantner: The increasing activity of the Budapest Embassy of Israel (confidential). MOL: XIX-A-21-c/138/2/530, p. 1-2.

Jewish middle class (plus the party members of Jewish origin) there was a distinct sympathy towards Israel.

“[...] Extreme views, emotional instability can be seen among the Jewish middle class and the Arab students at the university. In many places there are signs of antisemitism. [...]”¹⁹

“[...] Among the initially formed extremist positions (like antisemitism, the Jewish people's behaviour, the activities of hostile elements) the antisemitism strengthened, and sometimes quite rude remarks are to be heard. [...]”²⁰

The Political Committee analysing the situation, concentrated especially on the propaganda within the party, because it was afraid both of the intensification of antisemitism and of the sympathy of the functionaries of Jewish origin, which would have unavoidably meant criticism of party decisions.

“Comrade János Kádár:

“[...] A small number of the party members – let me not be misunderstood – but a small part of it existing in a certain field and having great impact did not behave as true Communists. And I do not want to turn it into a racial problem, and I can understand that not everyone is clear about who the aggressor is. A certain amount of worry can be understood, yet this does not allow them to argue about the standpoint of the government in such a decisive question: on whose side and against whom we fight [...]. And if I meet somewhere people feeling sorry for Israel I shall punish them severely!”²¹

“Comrade János Kádár:

“[...] Besides, I remember another field – and this is worth thinking about. There are denominations in Hungary. Here is the Jewish Community. We have a State Office for Church Affairs. It would be worth it if this Office would sit down for a calm discussion with the leaders of the Israeli circles. And even the right person from the Agitprop Department could talk to them and ask them how they feel. Naturally one could not ask them to blame Israel officially but we could give them advice regarding what to do. Among others we could tell them that we are not antisemitic but we'll stand up against the oppressor.”²²

After the war, the Soviet Union – which hid a conscious antisemitism, serving internal political objectives behind its anti-Zionism²³ – severed its diplomatic relations with Israel. This step had also been taken by Hungary. Such ‘anti-Zionist’ campaigns or purging within the party like in the Soviet Union and Poland, did not take place in Hungary, in spite of the fears of the Hungarian Jews.²⁴ Some sources²⁵ do speak about a wave of purging of Jews in various organs in 1968, as it happened in Poland after the Arab-Israeli War and the Prague Spring, but this cannot be substantiated with documents yet.

¹⁹ (1967): Report Nr .2. Concerning the atmosphere created by the Middle East situation. MOL: M-KS-288-11/2144, öe, 7 June 1967, p. 1–2.

²⁰ “A kezdetben kialakult szélsőséges álláspontok /antiszemitizmus, a zsidó kispolgárok magatartása, a hazai ellenséges elemek firkáló tevékenysége / közül főleg az antiszemitizmus erősödik és helyenként egészen durva kijelentések hangzanak el.” (1967): Report Nr. 3 Concerning the atmosphere created by the Middle East situation. MOL: M-KS-288-11/2149 öe. 10. June. 1967, p. 1–3.

²¹ (1967): Minutes from the meeting of the Political Committee on 13 June 1967: MOL: M-KS- 288-5/427.öe, p. 31–32.

²² Ibid, p. 34.

²³ Szabó, Miklós (1995): És a Kádár-korszak? [And the Kádár period]. In: Szombat (4), p. 36.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 36.

²⁵ E.g.: Kende, Péter (1989): Röpirat a zsidókérdésről [Pamphlet about the Jewish question]. Budapest 1989. p. 24.

As the above quoted minutes of the meeting of the Political Committee shows, in reaction to János Kádár’s suggestion, it decided that the Jewish Community should take a stand regarding the events in Israel.

The events of 1967 were some kind of signal for the party in any case. The echo of the Arab-Israeli war here at home showed clearly that the Jews were still an unsettling group within Hungarian society, which stirred various passions in spite of its apparent integration. This phenomenon was so not only present within the Hungarian ‘socialist’ society, but characterised the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party as well. The old and new prejudices, the antisemitism due to the inner political power struggles within the party, and the local vibrations of the Soviet Union intensified antisemitism. Further, because of the Arab-Israeli war all alluded to the presence of the ‘Jewish problem’ hidden under the surface. Contrary to expectations, as mentioned, there was no huge ‘anti-Zionist’, i.e. antisemitic campaign, though this was expected of the Kádár leadership by certain socialist countries such as the Soviet Union. However, Kádár, who officially did not tolerate any manifestation of nationalism or antisemitism, prevented it in spite of the fact that within the party and in certain ‘popular’ intelligentsia circles this would have been welcome. At the same time, sympathy with Israel in the ranks of the Jews resulted in intensified control over the Jewish Community and other Jewish institutions. As the quoted sources reveal it, the crucial decisions concerning the Community were made, ‘over its head’ by the Political Committee. This decision making was based on the reports and work of the State Office for Church Affairs. These decisions marked the boundaries of freedom of the religious community. These boundaries were never even tested by the leaders of the Community – they strictly obeyed the regulations coming from above. The intensified control was also made possible by the fact that the State Office for Church Affairs actively participated in selecting the leading board of the Jewish Community.

The period 1967-1974

At its meeting held on 10 October 1967, the Political Committee discussed a letter by Endre Sós, an ex-Community president, regarding the Jewish Community and the situation within it. This piece of writing that carries the overheated voice of an offended person characterises in some detail the situation within the religious community. The letter was completed and opinions were given for the Political Committee meeting by the Agitprop Centre.

With Endre Sós, a politically reliable Communist journalist became the leader of the Budapest religious community. His programme of the ‘cultural Jew’²⁶ addressed to the ‘Hungarians of Jewish faith’ was in complete harmony with the concepts of the party. Consequently, no Zionist manifestation was allowed – this was considered by the Sós leadership as an attempt to create dissension among the Hungarian Jews, as attack against the ‘cultural Jew’ programme, and as an element endangering the loyalty towards the state power. Nevertheless, this leadership could hold its own only until 1966 when there was a board renewal meeting. Then, beside Endre Sós, the Presidential Council nominated Géza Seifert as candidate for the presidency of the Budapest Jewish Community. The latter, also having the support of the State Office for Church Affairs, won the elections. As mentioned,

²⁶ Csorba, p. 140.

the handing over of the power happened only in 1967 and the mutual incriminations of the inner struggles showed only too clearly the real state of affairs within the religious community. In order to solve the inner conflicts or destroy the ‘inner opposition’, the office holders turned sooner or later to the state power. The serious role the authorities played in the selection of the leaders and the dismissal of the opposition denounced as Zionist is also demonstrated by the following document:

“The report of the Agitprop Centre of the HSWP to the Political Committee concerning Endre Sós’ letter

[...] The relationship between the state and the Jewish Community has shown improvement in the past ten years. The majority of the leading board of the Jewish Community and the Rabbinical board are politically progressive persons. We can exercise our influence in the most important questions. [...]

3.) It is a fact that Endre Sós had a politically positive attitude during the counter-revolution and for years afterwards, as a president. He defended the interest of Socialism even in difficult situations. But, because of the above mentioned reasons, his being removed from the leading position was already discussed at the beginning of the sixties.

The president of the State Office for Church Affairs talked to him privately, offering him an honorary presidency and outstanding pension [...].

4.) Since the election several people have been removed from the leading board, which were well known for their Israel nostalgia. Among others, Marcell Steiner, the president of the Chevra Kadisa, Imre Wittenberg, former vice-president, Jenő Zsoldos, ex headmaster of the gymnasium and Sándor Scheiber, the Religious Education teacher.”²⁷

In the period between 1968 and 1974, there was no official relationship between Hungary and Israel. Consequently, the embassy could not nourish Zionism locally. The leading board took special care that there was no upsetting phenomenon. This was helped by a hotline between the Community and the State Office for Church Affairs.²⁸

The basic policy of the Seifert leadership was not much different from his predecessor’s. The starting point was the formula: “a Hungarian Jew can only be a Hungarian citizen of Jewish faith.” According to this, no other form of manifestation of Jewish consciousness was tolerated. How harmful this was for the Hungarian Jews, what long-term consequences the denial of its Jewishness had, may be topics of possible future studies. However, one thing seems certain: there was a demand for other patterns of being Jewish than the forms offered by the state and the Jewish Community. This can be demonstrated by the fact that Sándor Scheiber’s *kiddushim*²⁹ with lectures on Israel and on Jewish culture in general, became highly popular among the youth a few years later.

The former foreign policy was practised, too. Although the president travelled ever more often, especially from the beginning of the 1970s, the interests of the Community did not differ. On the contrary, they remained in complete harmony with Hungarian foreign policy.³⁰ Not only did the number of the president’s visits increase, but so did the visits by

²⁷ MOL: 288.f/5/436.öe; p. 116–118.

²⁸ Csorba, p. 152.

²⁹ The term *Kiddush*, literally “sanctification”, is a blessing recited over wine or grape juice to sanctify the Shabbat and Jewish holidays. The expression also refers to refreshments served at a synagogue following prayer services on Shabbat, beginning with the recitation of Kiddush.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 7.

representatives of international organisations to Hungary. On such occasions delicate questions were raised, such as the ones, which touched primarily on Zionism and antisemitism. The answers were naturally the ones expected: “Zionism is not supported in Hungary, nobody wishes to emigrate and there is no antisemitism either.”³¹

Basically, these statements were true, but the reality was more complex. Nevertheless, the guests, among them Armand Kaplan, the head of the international department of the Jewish World Congress, were quite well-informed in other respects. On the occasion of his visit in 1969, Kaplan informed the leadership in detail about the events in Poland³² and spoke about the oppression of the Soviet Jews.³³ The president reported the discussion to the State Office of Church Affairs and he represented repeatedly the official point of view concerning the events. This attitude is remarkable, as the Hungarian Jewish community was worried about the Soviet and Polish antisemitic campaigns unfolding after the Arab-Israeli war in 1967 and the Prague Spring in 1968, especially about its possible effects on Hungary.

It is obvious from all this that the leadership of the Community conformed even more strictly and rigidly to the expectations of the authorities. It defined itself as an organ fulfilling strictly and solely religious roles and it did not even attempt to represent other ‘Jewish’ forms of consciousness. The Community chose to keep silent about the events of 1973, as well – on the pretext of the new Arab-Israeli war, which was not even mentioned in the community press *Új Élet* to the subscribers’ utter disappointment.³⁴

The economic reforms, which started in 1968, created a serious inner opposition with Zoltán Komócsin’s leadership. He was Kádár’s main rival. Moscow supported this group as well as the Soviet leaders increasingly disliked the reforms and accused the Kádár leadership of economic deviation from the Eastern bloc. One of the famous scenes of the prolonged power struggle was the open attack against György Aczél, the most influential politician in cultural life, who was called a ‘Jew’. At the ideological conference, a speaker named Gábor Sütő, who belonged to Komócsin’s close circle of councillors, sharply criticised the media and culture policy, saying that a strong Zionist influence was evident. He gave as examples: the Chagall exhibition, which opened in 1973, and a play on the theatre programmes, the ‘Fiddler on the Roof’. Unsurprisingly, the media coverage did not mention this speech, which thus cannot be found, but because of its signal character, the news about it leaked through quickly.³⁵

To summarise, the events of 1974 clearly showed that the party was not willing to analyse and settle the question of antisemitism openly. It was forbidden to use the word Jewish pejoratively, yet the problem was not looked into. Thus, it can hardly wonder that in the web of fears and undercurrents, the Community followed and completely accepted the political ‘path’, laid down by the party until the end of the eighties.

³¹ Csorba, p. 156.

³² The 1968 state sponsored “anti-Zionist” campaign in Poland is meant here.

³³ MOL: XIX-A-21-c-551/2/1969.

³⁴ Csorba, p. 160.

³⁵ Fodor, András (1995): *A hetvenes évek. Napló 1973-1974* [The Seventies. Diary 1973-1974]. Budapest: Helikon, p. 16.

Conclusion

To answer the question in the introduction, it can be pointed out that the surfacing of the ‘Jewish problem’ in various contexts, the antisemitic manifestations within the party, and the ‘discrete’ use of antisemitism in the trials after 1956 all point to a complex, unsettling phenomenon. The concept of ‘Hungarian citizen of Jewish faith’ of the Rákosi regime, which was already worked out in the last third at the middle of the 19th century, was present after 1956, too. This concept did not tolerate the manifestation of Jewish identity in any other form – the control over it was assured by the Community itself beside the State Office of Church Affairs. As a matter of fact, the concept of ‘Jewish faith’ meant an ethnic minority, which was denied the possibility of self-definition and cultural life by the party. The socialist block taking a stand against Israel further complicated the situation: the reactions of the Jews and the outbursts of antisemitism could not be disregarded. All these phenomena strongly determined the official policy towards the Community. Under such circumstances it was also obvious that the party, which regarded the Jews as a religious group, did not take possible interests of the Jews into consideration. These interests certainly included the possibility of further, non-religious manifestations of Jewishness. And this was denounced as Zionist by the leadership. All those who offered the Jews something different, like the Rabbi Sándor Scheiber, were liable to harassment. However, the example of the Rabbinical Seminary shows that, though within quite a modest framework, the maintenance and representation of different opinions were possible.

The erroneous character of the Kádár regime’s assimilation policy became obvious in 1989/90. The Jewish problem and the ‘sweeping under the carpet’ of antisemitism, as well as the decline of the Hungarian Jewish culture and identity, i.e. its atrophy as an inheritance from the former regime, makes its effects felt even to our days in Hungary.

As György Aczél, János Kádár’s close collaborator and the most powerful person responsible for the Hungarian culture points out:

“I was wrong when I believed, said and thought for 45 years that the Jewish problem can only be solved definitely through assimilation. History made things happen in a different way. In this misconception I recognise my personal defeat but I know that my ‘mea culpa’ cannot help me.”³⁶

³⁶ Révész, p. 399.

Bibliography

Archive sources (MOL – Hungarian National Archive)

- (1960): A PB. 1960 június 28.i ülésének jegyzőkönyve (Report of the session of the Political Committee). MOL: M-KS-288-5/189.öe, p. 10-11.
- (1967): Minutes from the meeting of the Political Committee on 13 June 1967: MOL: M-KS-288-5/427.öe, p. 31-32.
- (1967): Report Nr .2. Concerning the atmosphere created by the Middle East situation. MOL: M-KS-288-11/2144, öe, 7 June 1967, p. 1-2.
- (1967): Report Nr. 3. Concerning the atmosphere created by the Middle East situation. MOL: M-KS-288-11/2149 öe. 10. June. 1967, p. 1-3.
- Endre Sós to President József Prantner: The increasing activity of the Budapest Embassy of Israel (confidential). MOL: XIX-A-21-c/138/2/530, p. 1-2.
- Marosán, György (1962): 1962 szeptember 1.-i beadványa [The letter of Marosán György]. Mol: M-KS-288-4/58.öe, p. 60.
- MOL: 288.f/5/436.öe.
- MOL: M-KS-288-5/191 öe.
- MOL: M-KS-288-5/2027öe.
- MOL: XIX-A-21-c-551/2/1969.

References

- Bacsikai, Sándor (1997): Egy lépés Jeruzsálem felé [One step toward Jerusalem]. New York; Budapest; Jeruzsálem: Múlt és Jövő Lap- és Kvk.; BFL.
- Csorba, László (1990): Izraelita felekezeti élet Magyarországon a vészorkszaktól a nyolcvanas évekig [Jewish religious community life in Hungary from the Age of Peril to the Eighties]. In: Ferenc L. Lendvai; Anikó Sohár; Pál Horváth (eds.): Hét évtized a hazai zsidóság életében. Budapest: MTA Filozófia Intézet Kiadása, p. 61-190.
- Fodor, András (1995): A hetvenes évek. Napló 1973-1974 [The Seventies. Diary 1973-1974]. Budapest: Helikon.
- Kende, Péter (1989): Röpirat a zsidókérdésről. Budapest: Magvető.
- Kovács, András (2003): Magyar zsidó politika a háború végétől a kommunista rendszer bukásáig [Hungarian Jewish Politics from the End of WWII until the Fall of the Communist Regime]. In: Múlt és Jövő (3), 3-39.
- Kovács, András (2010): Jews and Jewishness in Post-war Hungary. In: Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History (1), p. 34-57.
- Révai, Valéria; Hardi, Péter (ed.) (1991): Törvénytelen szocializmus. A tényfeltáró bizottság jelentése. Budapest: Zrínyi; Új Magyarország.
- Révész, Sándor (1997): Aczél és korunk [Aczél and our times]. Budapest: Sík kiadó.
- Stark, Tamás (1995): Zsidóság a vészorkszakban és a felszabadulás után (1939-1955) [Jews in the terror period and after the liberation (1939-1955)]. Budapest: MTA Történettudományi Intézete (Társadalom- és művelődéstörténeti tanulmányok, 15).
- Szabó, Miklós (1995): És a Kádár-korszak? [And the Kádár period]. In: Szombat (4), p. 34-36.