

Hungarian Jewish Identity: The Influence of Living in Israel on Jewish Identity

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## **Absract**

After the regime change in Hungary in 1989-1990 the Jewish Agency enabled people with Jewish ancestry to immigrate to Israel. Simultaneously, Jewish life started to flourish mainly in Budapest that gave space to many different Jewish attitudes. Those who had decided to settle in Israel slowly started to return to Hungary. Since their return, they have not been able to integrate into Jewish circles as they did not develop strong ties with Hungarian. They have a well-established level of attachment towards Israel which they do not testify in connection to Hungarian Jewry. The research uses five interviewees' life constructions and compares them to the already existing researches about Hungarian Jewish and Israeli identity.

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## 1. Introduction

The central topic of this thesis is role of Israel and the influence on Jewish Hungarian identity. Every year a small amount of Jewish Hungarians decide to immigrate to Israel with or without the explicit intention to live there for good. Without having any accurate information of the Jewish Hungarians who return from Israel, from personal experience I can assume a significant percentage of these people return to Hungary and show some special characteristics in their Jewish identity. Since not many Hungarian Jews have a strong Jewish family background, Israel can provide these people with some identity building stones whose affect will be visible from the discourse of the returnees. Therefore, the aim of this research is to find those characteristics that separate the returnees from the general Jewish Hungarian population.

### 1.1. Jewish identity

The complexity of the subject of this thesis is visible the most when a research is conducted about Jewish identity of individuals or of groups that define themselves based on their affiliation towards Judaism. Scholars tend to give a long description of what the research considers to be Jewish, whether it is based on the strict orthodox view where the mother needs to be Jewish according to the Jewish law, the *halakha* or the most liberal approach that only requires someone's self-identification to be Jewish for full acceptance.

In *Jewish Identity*, David Theo Goldberg and Michael Krausz, distinguish between Jewishness and Judaism, with the former concentrating on a common group history and the latter on religion and its set of laws and defined practices.<sup>1</sup> In particular, this division between religious and cultural identity is a very significant part of the questions raised about Hungarian Jewry. We will see that religion can be a more accessible way to reconnect immediately to the imagined Jewish community<sup>2</sup> while cultural identity without religious observance may be in contrast and conflict with the lack of religious belief and practice.

In *Modern Jewish Identities*, Jonathan Webber draws attention to the rediscovery of authentic traditions.<sup>3</sup> Many feel the need to merge into traditions that have been abandoned in the family. Their special demand on finding the most authentic way to practice Judaism leads many to extremes. Such demands are answered by new religious outreach programs like the Lubavitch Hassidic movement that attempts to attract people who want to return to traditions from any Jewish background. The fashionable root searches mean that Jewishness has started to mean more than the stigma of the persecuted. As Otto Maduro and Jonathan Sarna point out in *Suddenly Jewish*, being Jewish has become somewhat attractive as it provides an extra characteristic of being special, of not being just anybody.<sup>4</sup> I will use the findings of the extensive works of Kata Zsófia Vincze and Richárd Papp who both looked into

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<sup>1</sup> David Theo Goldberg, and Michael Krausz, *Jewish Identity*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993),1-12.

<sup>2</sup>More on the idea of imagined communities in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*

<sup>3</sup>Jonathan Webber, "Modern Jewish Identities" in *Jewish Identities in the New Europe*, ed. by Jonathan Webber (London and Washington: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1994), 74-85.

<sup>4</sup>Barbara Kessel, *Suddenly Jewish: Jews Raised as Gentiles Discover their Jewish Roots* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000),15.

the religious Hungarian groups and individuals' search for uniqueness and authenticity and those discovering Judaism as a way of life in a more adult stage of their lives.

In spite of the abundance of writings on Jewish identity, not many authors have had the courage or interest to sum up the most important elements that can be compared or analyzed in a quantitative manner. Norman Solomon claims that all the movements that aim to find authenticity and rediscover the real Judaism actually invent new tradition. In *Judaism in the New Europe: Discovery or Invention*, Solomon collected ten elements that comprise Jewish identity:

- |                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| 1. Family background             | 6. Holocaust                             |
| 2. Jewish history and culture    | 7. Israel                                |
| 3. National identity             | 8. Christianity                          |
| 4. European Identity             | 9. Minority status                       |
| 5. Liberal and democratic values | 10. External determinants: Anti-Semitism |

In my analysis I decided to use his categorization as I find it the most extensive of all the works about Jewish identity and it helps me understand and examine the issue the most excessively. Jewish history and culture that also include religion build up the backbone of the identity but it is just as important as national identity and the influence of European cultures. Solomon shows that there is a tendency of promoting liberal democracy and enhancement of the status of women. Moreover, tolerance towards sexual deviance is being read into religious text to reconcile the change in values. For understanding of one's place in history and society, the Holocaust takes a central role and identity factor in Europe for second and third generation Jews as well. Israel with its claimed status of the Jewish state usually attracts Diaspora Jews'

attention and many keep themselves up-to-date in the field of events in the Middle East. As per Solomon, some feel embarrassed and turn away from Israel while some find it difficult to trust Arabs or Muslims. From the Israeli point of view, those Israelis who emigrate from Israel do not identify with the Diaspora Jewry but stay Israeli and distance themselves from what they see the dark side of the Diaspora, namely Jewishness. Another element is Christianity. Jews are not Christians, which can be significant in self-definition as all Christian dogmas may be looked down on as irrelevant or preposterous, such as virgin birth. In a way the ninth element, minority status, explains the different so called Jewish peculiarities such as self-hatred or the ambition to excel and assimilate. The feeling of guilt and self-consciousness for acting in a way that would not bring bad reputation to the Jewish people or would not define someone as a Jew could be found in many prominent Jewish leaders', artists' resume, just to mention one of the most influential, Theodor Herzl, the father of political Zionism. Among Solomon's ten elements, the last one is external determinants that means being identified Jewish by others, which is not necessarily anti-Semitic in his understanding but in most cases is realized in anti-Semitic acts.

According to Cora Diamond in her essay "Sahibs and Jews," being Jewish means not only the identification of values, goals, emotions but also participation in the group's form of life with a strong emphasis on Israel's role, stating that by denying attachment to Israel one denies his or her own Jewishness.<sup>5</sup> Also Richard Shusterman in *Next Year in Jerusalem* goes further and claims that the ultimate aim for a Jew is the fulfillment of the Pesach saying of 'next year in

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<sup>5</sup> Cora Diamond, „Sahibs and Jews,” in *Jewish Identity*, ed. by David T. Goldberg and Michael Krausz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 93-107.

Jerusalem'.<sup>6</sup> Many Hungarian Jews have no visible connection to Israel and only a small amount define themselves based on their group affiliation.<sup>7</sup>

Others express exactly the opposite to Diamond, such as Gabriel Josipovici in *Going and Resting*<sup>8</sup> and Alan Montefiore in *Structures of Personal Identity and Cultural Identity*.<sup>9</sup> Both claim that Israel and its significance is overrated and it is just another imagined community where Jews fluctuate without emotional attachment. In this research we will find examples of strong Zionist background and religious longing for authenticity as well as people immigrating to Israel due to the fact that it is so easy and free which raised questions about the effectiveness of immigrant absorption policies, too.

The rejection of complete Jewishness as an applicable idea is the furthest that authors can reach in their analysis for which the perfect example is *A Way of Being a Jew; a Way of Being a Person* by Garry M. Brodsky where by realizing that there is not one single characteristic in all the Jewish groups that would unify them, we cannot even say that Jewishness exists.<sup>10</sup> In vain, he attempts to convince the reader that there is no collective aim in Jewishness, and the way of being a Jew is a way of being a person. His point would be proved by the complete assimilation and disappearance of the Jewish people which is yet to happen.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Shusterman, „Next Year in Jerusalem,” in *Jewish Identity*, ed. by David T. Goldberg and Michael Krausz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993),291-308.

<sup>7</sup> Kovács András, *Jews and Jewry in Contemporary Hungary: Results of a Sociological Survey*. Planning for Jewish Communities (Chandlers Printers Ltd, 2004),31

<sup>8</sup> Gabriel Josipovici, "Going and Resting," in *Jewish Identity*, ed. by David Goldberg and Michael Krausz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993),309-322.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Montefiore, "Structures of Personal Identity and Cultural Identity," in *Jewish Identity*, ed. by David Goldberg and Michael Krausz(Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993),212-244.

<sup>10</sup> Garry M Brodsky, „A way of being a Jew; a way of being a Person,” in *Jewish Identity*, ed. by David Goldberg and Michael Krausz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993),245-263.



## 1.2. Israel and the Diaspora

The question of a collective European Jewish identity may not be relevant since there is not a distinctive European identity as such. However, from an Israeli perspective it does have significance and the Diaspora and Europe are used interchangeably. In Eliezer Schweid's *Changing Jewish Identities in the New Europe and the Consequences for Israel* his Israel bias admittedly affects his opinion strongly and he states that Israel has become the center for defining Jewish identity since after the collapse of communist countries and the unification of Western Europe the natural identity crises were not resolved in a needed central European leadership that should have been founded.<sup>11</sup> According to Schweid the Diaspora's partial ethnic or religious identification is not primary to its bearers due to the non-Jewish environment compared to Israel where the focus is on a global national identity in a majority surrounding. Schweid continues with the eternal issue of polychotomy in Israel and also in the European Diaspora and he lists the axes by which Jewish communities are divided in the search for defining who and what is a Jew. In Israel, the opposition grows between the secular and religious groups. The distancing two parties define their membership on completely opposing grounds, namely the seculars emphasize peoplehood as a binding force while the religious, or what Schweid refers to, the orthodox with haredi type of radicalism follow the religious law, the Halakha as a strict guideline for the way of living and accepting members into their mostly segregated community. As time passes the debate in Israel becomes more and more desperate owing to the basic controversy of the foundation of Israel that claims to be Jewish and democratic simultaneously. Anticipation and preference by the author is that

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<sup>11</sup> Eliezer Schweid, „Changing Jewish identities in the New Europe and the consequences for Israel,” in *Jewish Identities in the New Europe*, ed. by Jonathan Webber (London; Washington: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1994), 42-57.

the secular, democratic majority will lead to a multicultural state without the haredi type of radicalism.

His insight is one of the Israeli mainstream ideas about the Diaspora Jewry and Israel. His idea, that in the post-Communist countries there is no chance of developing Jewish centers and that Israel is the last beam for natural identities, will be a returning question in some research on Hungarian Jewry and in some of the examined identity constructions of the present work.

### 1.3. Hungarian Jewry

In Hungary, research has been conducted about Hungarian Jews mainly after 1990, since during the communist regime the topic was largely ignored. The first sociological survey after World War II was carried out in 1985 by Ferenc Erdős, Katalin Lévai and András Kovács that mapped the experience of discovering one's Jewish background.<sup>12</sup> The almost 50 years of continuous attempts to erase the idea of religious communities and the huge trauma that all those surviving the Shoah had to bear to live with resulted in what could be witnessed in many sociological surveys that aimed to map the Hungarian Jews and their relation to their past, family, tradition, identity, anti-Semitism, attitude towards non-Jews and Israel, namely the disappearance of Jewish daily practices in the nuclear families.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Erdős Ferenc, Kovács András, Lévai Katalin. "Hogyan jöttem rá, hogy zsidó vagyok?: Interjúk". *Medvetánc* (2-3). (1985)

<sup>13</sup> There are some research interviews in Richard Papp's *Van-e zsidó reneszánsz* (p43) and Kata Zsófia Vincze's *Visszatérők a zsidó valláshoz* (p60) that testify the existence and liveliness of Jewish religious life between the 1950s and the 1990s as well, but there is no statistical data that can show how many religious Jews observed

In *Changes in Jewish Identity in Modern Hungary* Kovács first outlines a brief history from complete assimilation until the rejection of Jewry and the Holocaust in the Second World War.<sup>14</sup> Mainly the most assimilated survived the horrors in the capital, Budapest.

27% of the family members of 117 Jews interviewed completely distanced themselves from Hungarian Jewry and as a result, in general, many simply emigrated prior to 1957. Others embraced the irreligious Communism as a remedy to avoid persecution again. Being Jewish was a stigma. Stigma management in many cases forced Jews to hide their identity even from their immediate family members. This negative identity and the way of dealing with it were handed down to the next generation.

In 1990, the obstacles to pursue religious affiliations disappeared and although many families by then had abandoned their religious and cultural practices completely some interviewees were breaking away from their negative identity and their Jewishness gained new importance. The factors of the new positive identity include an awareness of a common fate, memory of persecution, special socializing methods, typical life strategies and the relationship with the Jewish state. In *Jews and Jewry in Contemporary Hungary* Kovács summarizes the results of a sociological survey conducted in 1999 and claims that there is a general need for religious and ethnic identities resulting from the frustration of the stigmatized Jewishness.<sup>15</sup> The survey also shows a tendency for religious revival which affects the younger generation but has no significant impact on middle-aged groups.

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their daily practice and also in these works these interview parts are mentioned on the side as if it was not important to acknowledge that there were religious communities.

<sup>14</sup> Kovács András. „Changes in Jewish identity in Modern Hungary,” in *Jewish Identities in the New Europe*, edited by Jonathan Webber. (London; Washington: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1994), 150-160.

<sup>15</sup> Kovács András, *Jews and Jewry in Contemporary Hungary: Results of a Sociological Survey* (Chandlers Printers Ltd, 2004), 37.

The same idea of revival interested Richard Papp in his anthropological work *Van-e zsidó reneszánsz?* [Is there a Jewish renaissance?]. He examined the religious community of Bethlen synagogue and found that there is continuity in Jewish traditions since religious knowledge is handed down from the first to the third generation after the Shoah.

Kata Zsófia Vincze in her dissertation *Visszatérők a zsidó valláshoz Budapesten* [Returners to Jewish religion in Budapest] questions the authenticity of Jewish observance of the existing groups as she claims that there is no continuity in being a member of any Jewish congregation due to the Shoah and the Communist system, and therefore observant Hungarian Jews are mostly returning to tradition (*hozrim batshuva*) with the help of non-Hungarian rabbis, not their own family members. Hungarian Jewish religious life is based on foreign influence, and there is little continuity at all between past and present generations.

In Kovács's research the findings revealed that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the interviewees are from religiously and ethnically homogeneous families but this phenomenon also alters with the third generation Jews where intermarriage is much more frequent. The center of Jewish identity is the memory of persecution and only 15 per cent declare a strong Jewish identity of any kind. The most frequent identity solution is dual Hungarian and Jewish. Three-quarters demonstrate a strong attachment to Israel. Its importance lies in pride and the feeling of security, but this does not lead to identification with Zionist ideas, let alone emigration. Even with  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the respondents recognizing an increase in anti-Semitism, the idea of aliyah seems alien to Hungarian Jews.

Raphael Patai in *The Jews of Hungary: History, Culture, Psychology* examines Hungarian Jewry more with a focus on history and representation in the public sphere.<sup>16</sup> The confusion in

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<sup>16</sup> Raphael Patai, *The Jews of Hungary: History, Culture, Psychology* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 617-638.

the estimated number of Jews living in Hungary (it varies from 15,000 to 200,000) started with the missing state registration of religion or nationality, so did Marranism, as Patai calls the phenomenon of hiding all Jewish elements in one's lifestyle during Communism. After limitations on religious life were removed, a high percentage of Jews took a role in artistic activities and many new platforms were opened in the field of education and arts. The three most prominent educational institutions were the Lauder Javneh School, American Endowment School and Anna Frank Gimnázium (Anna Frank Secondary Grammar School) which today is known by the name Scheiber Sándor Gimnázium és Általános Iskola (Scheiber Sándor Secondary and Primary School) where religion was only part of daily practice in the American Endowment School that followed orthodox guidelines. Self-definition emerged as a communal question when the government in 1992 raised the question to Jews are a religious or a national group. Jewish leaders first gave an ambiguous answer stating that Jews are an ethnic group defined by its religion and at the same time equal members of the Hungarian nation. As this was not a clear response finally they were forced to decide that they did not want a change in the legal status, therefore Jewishness was defined as religion. However, some touch of nationalism could be felt in the first announcement on the status of the Jews, the final conclusion was better defined religio-ethnic approach than only religious or ethnic.

After Leonard Mars outlined the same historic events that Patai detailed, Mars listed the identity options for Hungarians in *Discontinuity, Tradition, and Innovation: Anthropological Reflections on Jewish Identity in Contemporary Hungary*.<sup>17</sup> The three options are religious, ethnic, and social and cultural. Mars after spending several months in Hungary mapped the religious possibilities in Budapest, since Jewish presence is almost exclusively concentrated

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<sup>17</sup> Leonard Mars, "Discontinuity, Tradition, and Innovation: Anthropological Reflections on Jewish Identity in Contemporary Hungary," *Social Compass* 46/1 (1999)

in the capital of Hungary. After the forced unification of all religious branches during the communist era, in 1990 many small communities emerged. The traditionally present Orthodox group is small in numbers but as another small initiation, the Lubavitch Hassidic movement shows a small community can also be vibrant and dynamic. There are also study groups, Kollel is the orthodox and Szim Shalom is the reform gathering. In numbers, still the Neolog community is the most prominent but synagogue attendance changes in frequency and most people only show up on the high feast of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Also the low numbers of circumcision tell a lot about the measure of how assimilated the Neolog community members have become.

It would be logical to suggest that if the religious attachment is not that strong, probably the ethnic option would prove to be the leading drive for Budapest Jews. Zionism or Jewish nationalist groups are insignificant. There are three Zionist youth organizations, B'nei Akiva, HaShomer HaTzair and Habonim Dror that symbolize a gathering place more than a nationalist idea for young Jews, and they assimilated to given circumstances. Even the anti-clerical HaShomer HaTzair in Hungary has Friday night ceremonies. None of these institutions have the primary goal of emigration to Israel or aliyah, they only provide a platform for young Jews to gather together.

The third identity option is the social cultural one that has many platforms to attract audience and motivate participation from any kind of Jewish background. According to Mars, there is no religious revival in Hungary, but rather a reemergence of cultural ethnicity in the form of recreation, sporting, and private societies such as the Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association or the Bálint Jewish Community Centre. He also mentions that Hungarian Jews are committed to staying in Hungary and that emigration rates are really low.

It also needs to be kept in mind that the different research results represent different periods of Jewish Hungarian history. The works of Mars, Kovács, Vincze, Karády and Papp all are all used in this thesis to provide us with general support regarding the historical background of Hungarian Jewry, however mostly Kovács's *Jews and Jewry in Contemporary Hungary* is the most recent sociological survey that will help us in the comparison between Hungarian Jews and returnee Jews.

#### 1.4. Immigration and return

The most problematic part of gathering information from academic sources turned out to be related the questions related to emigration to Israel, or aliyah, and return migration to Hungary, or *yeridah*. Most of the few works dealing with aliyah are not relevant any more due to the fact that they were written from the 1950s until the 1980s and the literature that is occupied with return migration concentrates on Israeli return migration from the United States. There is no literature about tendencies of Hungarian aliyah and *yeridah*. Most scholars clearly declare that Hungarian Jews are not engaged in thoughts related to aliyah at all.

In *The Push and Pull factors of Aliyah and the Anomalous Case of Canada: 1967-1982*<sup>18</sup>, Michael Brown examines the historical and modern elements of aliyah and he draws the following cases: the push factors were economic distress in the home country, political chaos and anti-Semitism, whereas the pull factors were favorable economic climate for settlers, stable government, Zionist fulfillment and also the leftist government that attracted leftist intellectuals. Brown emphasizes that the main pull factor is Zionism and Zionist tradition is

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Brown. "The Push and Pull Factors of Aliyah and the Anomalous Case of Canada: 1967-1982." *Jewish Social Studies*, (1986),141-162.

the country of origin. Seemingly, what defines aliyah depends only on Israel and the country of origin. We can see it from the Hungarian researches and surveys that Hungarian Jewry did move towards Israel in times of distress when they had the opportunity. After World War II, in 1956 and after 1990 there were some bigger waves of immigration which aligns with Brown's theory.

As Vincze explains based on the non-representative data that she had at her disposal, only those started the return migration from Israel that left Hungary after the 1990s since it was much easier to find a way back.

Papp in his research "*Járható Ösvény.*" *Magyar zsidó fiatalok az izraeli ortodox társadalomban* ("Viable path." Hungarian Youth in the Israeli Orthodoxy) finds after making aliyah and starting to attend a *Yeshiva*, orthodox young Jews that were socialized in Hungary are not able to integrate into Israel's orthodoxy as their attitude of religious minority find little common ground with the sometimes aggressive Israeli practice that also looks down on the Hungarian peculiarities that the orthodox community in Hungary has developed. Their absorption fails as they refuse to integrate and on many occasions they return a couple of month after gaining Israeli citizenship.

Hungary's aliyah rate is stable and relatively small with a approximately 100 people moving to Israel each year<sup>19</sup>. In the international scholarly focus not much focus has been given to non-Israeli born immigrants, or *olim*, and their emigration from Israel after the 1960s as it is up until today considered as some kind of a taboo in the Israeli discourse. There is no information about the exact number of Jews returning to Hungary after they have lived in Israel, but as we see in the recent political discourse, it is used to demonize Hungarian Jewry

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<sup>19</sup> "עולים, לפי ארץ מגורים אחרונה" Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel, accessed on 8 February 2013, [http://www1.cbs.gov.il/www/yarhon/e4\\_h.htm](http://www1.cbs.gov.il/www/yarhon/e4_h.htm).



as such by claiming that Jews are loyal to Israel and most have dual citizenships and therefore dual loyalties. No research has been conducted about the group of returning Jews and their identity constructions compared to general Jewish tendencies.

This thesis aims to deal with the influence of aliyah and Israel in Jewish identity and the return movement of Hungarian Jews.

## 2. Methodology

My original interest was to see the different life contractions of Hungarian Jews that at any time of their lives made aliyah and I wanted to compare those living in Israel and those having returned to Hungary to see if I find any patterns that might provide us with a better insight on the subject. I was advised to concentrate more on the returnees as no research has been made on this issue. Following several consultations, I was convinced that taking the advice would lead me to a very interesting and undiscovered area of Jewish identities.

Starting from the late 1980s sociologist and social-psychologists conducted some broad questionnaire based researches that mapped Hungary's Jewry in a non-representative manner but they claim that the results are quite accurate. Since World War II there have been no data registered about religious or national affiliations and therefore carrying out a representative survey is very problematic. The findings concentrated on tradition and observance in the family, intermarriage, community participation, and present situation in Hungary, attitude towards Jews, the majority population and Israel.<sup>20</sup>

The questionnaire based method requires high participation and aims to be as representative as possible, which poses some difficulties for the abovementioned reasons. Moreover, the questionnaires do not give way to a deeper understanding of individual processes and attitudes.

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<sup>20</sup> Kovács András, *Jews and Jewry in Contemporary Hungary: Results of a Sociological Survey*. Planning for Jewish Communities (Chandlers Printers Ltd, 2004),5.

For the same reason, Kata Zsófia Vincze and Richárd Papp turned to field investigation and blended in to their target group's daily life with regular interviews with members of the target community (for instance *Baal Tshuvah* group in Hungary for Vincze and Hungarian Orthodox men in Israel for Papp). Their findings gave a very good insight into personal life stories and attitude changes as well as life constructions and a frame of built up Jewish identity.

When we speak about return migration from Israel, we do not only face the lack of exact data on Hungarian Jews but there is no information about return tendencies at all. Definitely, there is no community of the returnees and one can only find them by knowing a friend who can be the mediator to initiate the contact. This is one of the limitations of the research conducted in this thesis.

Without a well-defined group that is visible and approachable within Jewish Hungarian circles and with the urge to explore the undiscovered field of returnee Jewish identity I took a decision of conducting interviews of Hungarian Jews that made aliyah and returned to Hungary some years after.

Simultaneously with me finding the exact road to walk on, I got acquainted with the methodology of discourse analysis with the help of '*Mutatkozások*', by Éva Kovács and Júlia Vajda, which proved to be crucial to conducting my research.

Naturally I was drawn to the idea of discourse analysis or "the turn to the text" as Erica Bruman explains, which has been used in many disciplines and fields as shown in her work *Discourse Analytical Research*. Language or discourse is the tool to understand oneself and the outside world and it recreates and defines one's personal and cultural identities. The main idea of discourse analysis in social research is to find a general pattern in individual discourse that can be projected to broader society. Discourse analysis has been widely used in identity research, mainly in sociolinguistic circles since the 1960s. Social constructivists looked at

identity as "doing", which in our case is speaking, and not as being. Also it is more accurate to consider it as a process rather than a collection of stable characteristics. Therefore this constant changing entity is reconstructed all the time in discourse which can be examined and analyzed to gain general ideas of the social circumstances that surround this construction<sup>21</sup>.

The discourse analysis technique of Vajda and Kovács in *Mutatkozások* is, first of all, creating an artificial platform by putting the subject person into the interview situation and asking him or her to provide us with a narrative of his or her life. The interviewees reconstruct their life and the text that they create is used for analysis. The analysis aims to draw conclusions about the individual and the surrounding society as well, however it cannot determine general truth or general tendencies of any kind. Yet again, it eventually illustrates characteristics that are invisible to all other methods in social research and promises a more unique and personal apprehension.

Vajda and Kovács refer to the interviewing method of Gabriele Rosenthal which lets the interviewee build up their construction alone in the discourse and tries to interfere as little as possible with questions.

My attempt was to imitate their scheme; nonetheless, I must confess, that I experienced some problems with non-interfering. At the beginning of the conversation, I briefly explained that I was doing a research on Hungarian Jews who made aliyah and returned and my main focus was their Jewish identity. Afterwards, I asked them to tell their life stories in a chronological order. Some of the interviewees paused at the very beginning of our session and seemed to be looking for guidance, or more specifically, questions to answer. Altogether, I interviewed nine people that I contacted with the help of the snowball method. By accident, most of them were

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<sup>21</sup> T. A Dijk, *Discourse studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*. 2, (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011),267.

affiliated with some Jewish-Hungarian organizations; therefore I decided to deal with those five who work for the Hungarian Jewish Agency, the Israeli Cultural Institute, a Jewish theatre, and a kosher Restaurant. All of them made aliyah after 1991 and are 30-40 years old. In this way, the research manages to shed some light on the world of young participants, leaders of Jewish life in Hungary, and gives some implications about Jewish identity of Hungarian Jews in general and the role of Israel in shaping it as such.

I made sure the interviewees spoke about the following topics:

- family background before World War II
- the first Jewish related memory
- Jewish characteristics in family everyday life while growing up
- the reasons for making aliyah
- first impressions of Israel
- life in Israel
- change in religious observance in Israel
- connection with Hungary and family while being in Israel
- reasons for returning to Hungary
- first impressions of Hungary after return
- change in religious observance in Hungary
- connection with Israeli after return
- future plans

In my final analysis I decided to examine the interviewees' life constructions following Solomon's elements of Jewish identity, since I find it the most comprehensive treatment of this subject.

The interviews were carried out between March 1 and March 31, 2011, and in their length they are around 120 minutes. All the names of the interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.

### **3. Jewish Identities after Israel**

In this chapter I will introduce all five interviewees with a short outlined description of their life stories and examine their experience and their identity construction. My analysis is the comparison of their view and the research material that I have gathered and introduced in the Literature Review. My goal is to show the peculiarity of living in Israel and the effect and unique insight this experience can give to the individual.

#### **3.1. Outlines of Life Stories**

Before we have a look at the analysis, it is important to get acquainted with the background of each of the interviewees in order to be able to put them into context. Therefore, I have summed up their life story based on the details they had provided throughout the interview.

Rita (40)

Growing up in a religiously mixed family in the countryside, Rita did not have much connection to the more and more awakening Jewish communal activities of Budapest. Her maternal grandparents had carried the seeds of tradition before the Second World War, and actually fell in love during the days of horror in the ghetto of Budapest. However, devastated by the horrors, the grandparents abandoned their faith and turned to the new system of Communism with a full heart; however, they kept the memories of their past alive with stories in everyday life.

A visit in Auschwitz with her parents, when she was in her early teenage years, made her start to comprehend her family background. Following the trip, Rita started reading Jewish related literature but her focus was much more on reading itself than Jewish history or Judaism.

Her aliyah was almost a coincidence since she did not decide to move to Israel but rather to take a year off from university where she had been studying at the faculty of Hungarian Literature and Grammar. At this time, the Jewish Agency promoting studies in Israel in one of the major daily newspapers, in what was an aliyah campaign all across Hungary

From the moment Rita arrived in Israel, she enjoyed the comfort of the programs provided for young adults, and while she was studying Hebrew and preparing for the university in Israel she felt completely satisfied with her life and had the thought of staying in Israel for a much longer time than originally planned. Various options were available for young *olim*, and Rita took part in two 5-month courses, in addition to which she was also working as a waitress in several hotels. Nevertheless, just before the university course would have started she decided to return to Hungary to finish her degree in her mother tongue, which seemed more reasonable. She planned on returning to Israel after graduating in Hungary.

Following the initial depression in Hungary, the search for finding a replacement for Israel was to be resolved by joining one of the Jewish Youth organizations, UJS in Debrecen. For Rita the new phenomenon of Israelis studying in Hungarian institutions proved to be much more effective. As a matter of fact, she identified herself more with the values Israelis represented than the behavior of the people she encountered at UJS. Therefore, quite naturally, she became the coordinator and general assistant of the local Israeli students, helping them run errands on a daily basis. In the meantime, she was admitted to the position of an interviewer for Spielberg's Shoah Foundation. Also as an important part of planning her



return to Israel, she started studying at the University of Jewish Studies at the Social Worker faculty so that she could be working as a social worker in Israel.

After graduation with the help of a close friend, Rita managed to work for a couple of prestigious companies before she got admitted to her present position at the Jewish Agency, where she works with Israelis and has a very strong daily connection with Israel.

Gergő (38)

Gergő was raised in a mixed family to a Jewish mother and to a non-Jewish father. Assimilated before the Second World War already, the Jewish grandparents left all traces of their remaining Jewishness after surviving Auschwitz and turned enthusiastically towards the popular shelter of Communism that seemingly protected Jews from anti-Semitism. Gergő was oblivious to the grandparents' religious origin just as much as to any other religious denominations in general, as this particular topic was regarded a serious taboo in a strongly Communist family.

In 1989, an Israeli relative revealed the secret to the 14-year old Gergő through a phone call which was a watershed in the family's communication about the subject. Still, the family did not change its practices much, and Gergő was hardly interested in anything other than acting and girls. Therefore when he was not admitted to the Hungarian Film Academy after secondary school, he took the opportunity that was described at the Hungarian Jewish Agency as a possibility to study acting and meet girls, but in fact, it was making aliyah.

Originally, Gergő planned to spend half a year in Israel, but he eventually stayed for eight years. He did the army service and finished university at the theatre directing faculty. In 2000, he fell in love with a non-Jewish woman and three years later he moved back to Hungary for her. In Hungary, he founded a Jewish theatre, and has been a central figure of Jewish leaders in Budapest.

Joszi (30)

Joszi was born into a family whose ancestors were of religious and traditional backgrounds, both grandfathers working in crafts.

The horrors of the Holocaust lead to the death of many of Joszi's relatives, and those who managed to hold on the father's side were only the grandparents. The grandfather fled to Israel without anyone knowing. The father, who was thought to be a 10-year old orphan at the end of the war, found his mother only years after the end of horrors, abandoned or more precisely never received any in-depth teaching about his orthodox roots and grew into an absolutely assimilated Jew. The father never met the grandfather again.

On the other side, the mother's family bore more traditional characteristics. The grandfather used to be a prestigious shoemaker for the statesmen of the country and the nuclear family, the grandparents and the mother managed to survive.

The mother and the father met in a working environment, both after having divorced from their previous spouses, and recognized each other's Jewishness by their family names. Neither of them showed any interest in religious matters but still in choosing a partner the significance of a similar Jewish background played a major part. Born under the name István, Joszi did not have any awareness of his surroundings even despite the fact that the family traveled to Israel several times. Joszi as an only child was rather problematic up until the age of 11 when the parents decided to enroll him in the newly opened Jewish school on Wessélenyi street.

Joszi enjoyed his religious studies and after the eighth grade during a summer camp in Israel, he decided not to return to Hungary. The mother, who had already divorced the father, made up her mind to sell all her belongings and follow Joszi to Israel. Both the secondary school and the vocational school were boarding institutions which meant that visits home occurred

on the weekends, but most of the time Joszi was among immigrants mainly from Russia who all knew him by the name Josef.

Because of Joszi's request, the mother's household turned more kosher and in the meantime his Yeshiva studies were running permanently in the background, even after his recruitment into the army. In the middle of his service, during one of his visits to Hungary he met his future wife from a religious background and he returned to Hungary a year later to marry her. They have been living in Hungary ever since raising their children in an orthodox way. Joszi found a job within the religious community and has been working as a businessman in the past years.

#### Judit (35)

Judit grew up in a culturally Jewish family where the parents were MAZSIHISZ (Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities) founders, and the grandparents observed religious traditions. Both the paternal and the maternal ancestors had been religious and abandoned some of their practices after World War II. Close contact did not develop between the grandparents on the father's side and the granddaughter due the physical distance between Budapest and Munkács, where the grandparents resided. On the other hand, the maternal grandparents were active members of the Jewish religious community in Budapest, but Judit's knowledge and memory about them are blurry because they passed away in her early childhood. Traditional Jewish practices were not prevailing in the nuclear family and not constant in their frequency, meaning that in some years, the family did not celebrate any Jewish holidays together at all, but in other years, they gathered for Passover. Thanks to the more and more lively Jewish life in Budapest, more opportunities arose for an adolescent to learn about and merge into the knowledge related to the Jewish people and Israel. Even though she did not attend a Jewish

primary school, she joined a Jewish Zionist-Socialist youth organization named Habonim Dror with the aim of finding Jewish company at the age of 12-13. After several visits paid in Israel, she decided with a friend of hers that they would make aliyah when they finished secondary school and they would join the army with the aim to realize a heroic death for Israel. And, in fact, they made aliyah but instead of joining the army they chose to study at university. Slowly, she finished her studies and in the meantime, she started dating her present husband. Her interest directed more on writing and journalism and mainly following her boyfriend's advice, she decided that her career would be more successful in her own native language in Hungary than in Hebrew. She returned, soon followed by the boyfriend, and took a position in a prestigious newspaper. They got married and at the time of the interview, they were expecting their first born.

#### Tamás (33)

Tamás was born in 1980, in the countryside, into a traditional Catholic family. Both parents were Christian and the grandparents on the mother's side had always been observant Catholics. On the father's side, the grandparents were also baptized, however, they had been born Jewish, originally they were from poor Jewish families where everyone worked as a tailor. His grandmother was a labor concentration camp survivor and his grandfather was summoned for labor service during the war. Both of them decided to convert to Christianity after the Second World War and they never mentioned their origins or their memories again. Tamás was oblivious to this until the age of 22 when he found some of the grandmother's pictures in which the family members were wearing a yellow star on their clothing. From that moment, Tamás grew a strong interest in Jewish related subjects; he joined the Jewish community of Szombathely, attended their Friday prayers weekly and decided to volunteer in the Israeli Army for 3 weeks. Following his 7-year service in the Hungarian army, he decided to make aliyah in 2006 to a kibbutz called Magan Michael near Haifa. He spent half a year

there studying Hebrew and 2.5 years working in one of the factories. While he enjoyed the comfort of the kibbutz life, he chose to apply to one of the religious kibbutzim to start his orthodox conversion. After half a year in Hungary, he returned to complete his studies and his conversion in which he succeeded in half a year. Having nowhere to go, he returned to Magan Michael for some time where he met his present girlfriend, a Hungarian girl, with whom he returned to Hungary. He has been working in various Jewish and Israel related jobs ever since.

### 3.2. Family Background

Before World War II, similarly to many developed countries, Hungary had a large Jewish population that included a significant amount of religious Jews and also a great ratio of assimilated Jews. Due to several historical events, namely the Shoah where 500,000-600,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered and the new regime after the war that discouraged religious initiatives, many Jews denied their roots and became irreligious and/or Communists. In their nuclear family this was present in the form of denial, silence and/or secrecy. In the interview collection of Ferenc Erdős, András Kovács and Katalin Lévai of *Hogyan jöttem rá, hogy zsidó vagyok?: Interjúk* the main focus is the second and third generation's discovery of their own Jewish origin which for many was a shocking experience as they felt part of a disadvantaged group and more in the third generation it gave some explanation and positive meaning to their life.

In the five interviews I conducted we can also see that even the families that did not break their Jewish continuity after World War II kept a low profile and hid their Jewishness in front of their surrounding communities. The five families of the interviewees can be categorized by

the intensity of their detachment or attachment. Their attitude is put in a greater picture that is provided by the sociological survey of *Jews and Jewry in Contemporary Hungary* from 2005. The percentage shows their representation in the Hungarian society according to the same research.

1. Complete attachment: "I have a very strong awareness of my Jewish identity and it means a lot to me. 15%" Religiously homogeneous Jewish family with strong Jewish consciousness, inclination to keep Jewish traditions but lacking the regularity. The parents are founders of one of the Jewish organizations and Judit has a strong well defined need to find Jewish circles. The communication outside the family about Jewish background is the strongest here.
2. Attachment: "My feelings about being Jewish are quite strong but other things are also important to me. 52%" Communist religiously homogeneous Jewish family where there is a strong Jewish consciousness that is not communicated outside the family but is manifested in the family visits in family and the enrollment of Joszi into the newly founded Jewish school. Their secrecy is more related to the father's party position than to the fear of anti-Semites.
3. Partial attachment: "I know that I am Jewish but I don't care too much about it. 28%" Communist religiously mixed family where religion is despised but the Jewish roots are accentuated and kept part of family discourse. The mother's visit to Israel and the family's trip to the death camp show their attachment to their past. In their daily practice, no Jewish traditions are kept as in the case of Rita.
4. Detachment: "I know that I am Jewish but I don't care too much about it. 28%" Communist religiously mixed family where religion is a taboo, only after the death of the fervent Communist grandfather and the regime change do they start to turn

towards Jewish subjects, but they do not merge into it. They welcome Gergő's interest in Jewish subjects but they do not get involved themselves.

5. Complete detachment: "I don't know. 5%" Christian family living in the countryside, having no trace of Jewish background at all as in the case of Tamás. The parents here define themselves as Christians and the grandparents never speak about their background. They do not welcome Tamás's interest in Jewish subjects.

In the case of complete detachment, it also supports Mars's findings that provincial Jews, the grandmother of Tamás, who returned to their village after the Shoah abandoned their religious practice completely<sup>22</sup>. It is also remarkable that the reaction to the individuals' realization of their own Jewish roots was mostly a positive experience. The interviewees do not find themselves in conflict with what their already existing knowledge had been about Jews, which most likely shows the relative irrelevance of Jews in Communist Hungary and the disappearance of verbal anti-Semitism from public discourse. Moreover, many sociological and psychological surveys have shown the specifications of different generations in terms of psychological difficulties<sup>23</sup> and relation to their origin and therefore it is now widely accepted that the pattern is the following<sup>24</sup>:

First generation of Shoah survivors: breaking away from traditions, traumatized, attempt to forget,

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<sup>22</sup> Leonard Mars, "Discontinuity, Tradition, and Innovation: Anthropological Reflections on Jewish Identity in Contemporary Hungary," *Social Compass* 46/1 (1999),5.

<sup>23</sup> Várnai György, "A holocaust késői pszichoszomatikus és pszichoszociális hatásai," *THALASSA* 5. évfolyam 1-2. szám (1994),147.

<sup>24</sup> Kovács András, "Zsidó csoportok és identitásstratégiák a mai Magyarországon," in *Zsidók a mai Magyarországon* ed. by Kovács András (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő, 2002),25.

Second generation of Shoah survivors: unaware of traditions, traumatized and ashamed, secretive,

Third generation of Shoah survivors: rediscovery of traditions, pride, positive identity.

All five individuals in this research are third generation Jews and their turn towards Judaism is part of the general tendency of their age group. Therefore we could suggest that their Jewish self-identification was built on positive emotions or indifference.

For Joszi, the experience was a very positive one:

*“That was the moment at that meeting that my parents said that they would bring the papers and that it's no problem, that they would simply bring the papers (the documents proving Jewish ancestors). I was like, ‘what?’. I got really excited.”<sup>25</sup>*

*“It is a really interesting thing because as soon as I got to Wesselényi (the name of the school), suddenly a kind of easiness started to prevail in me. A year passed and little Isti was still not fired from school as it happened every time previously.”<sup>26</sup>* (Joszi's original name is István, Isti is a nickname for István)

*“Wesselényi started the whole thing, since when I got there I had just got to know that I was Jewish and from there, from the things that I saw there, I started going to Kazinczy [Synagoge] for extra classes, my personal interest made me go there. But that gave the basis. So to say that ignited my appetite.”<sup>27</sup>*

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<sup>25</sup> Joszi interview,1.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 11.



Two very important tendencies are visible from Joszi's experience. First is a personal self-definition of aiming to be something unique, something unusual. For the third generation, the negative connotations of being Jewish were not prevailing in public communication and therefore it proved to be easier to identify with the uniqueness of this group and the fact that not everyone was accepted as a member.

The second phenomenon is the absence of information within the family. The lack of communication that typifies the first and second generation is generally explained by the effect of the Shoah and the fear of anti-Semites and is described as a typical Jewish post-World War II psychological characteristic. These ideas often use the "dual communication" phrase that refers to the difference in how people interacted within the family and outside their inner circles.

*"To be honest, when I was a child I was not allowed to share things with other people, because of my father's job. He used to work for the ministry and there were all kind of dinners arranged in our house with all kind of guests that I was not allowed to speak about. So it was like we went on holiday (...). Where did we go? Somewhere. When I didn't want to say it, I just didn't say it."*<sup>28</sup>

We can see from this that the political and social structure was also built up on the constant consciousness of what can be said and what is forbidden. The fact that many Jews did not communicate about their Jewishness could partially be due to the fact that people did not have open discussions about basic family and professional matters in public conversations as it is described in Hannah Arendt's description of the totalitarian state<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 11

<sup>29</sup> "In a system of ubiquitous spying, where everybody may be a police agent and each individual feels himself under constant surveillance; under circumstances, moreover, where careers are-extremely insecure and where

As the focus of this research is the role of Israel and the influence on Jewish identity, the lack of Israel centered family background may also imply that Zionist ideas were not part of the Hungarian post-World War II Jewish consciousness. Zionism was never considered to be as strong movement in Hungary<sup>30</sup>. None of the interviewees tell us about the family's involvement in Zionist discussions, plans, not even thoughts. Moreover, their decisions to make aliyah were not rooted in the family, and most of the time the family was only fairly somewhat supportive, but did not extensively encourage aliyah or advise it as a life option. Only one of the interviewees showed some Zionist affiliations in her childhood. Her childhood need to find Jewish friends led her to join a Jewish youth group, Habonim Dror, where they implanted all her Zionist aspirations:

*"I was 12 when I was in a bar/bat mitzvo camp in Israel (...) then in the first and second year of high school we were in a military preparatory program to get the needed Zionist consciousness. And then we got home from there with one of the girls. We said that we would join the army and die for our country [Israel] after high school."*<sup>31</sup>

To sum it up, none of the families were religious or provided an aliyah friendly atmosphere; therefore we can say that they were part of the general Jewish circles that were assimilated and inactive until the late 1980s.

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the most spectacular ascents and falls have become everyday occurrences, every word becomes equivocal and subject to retrospective "interpretation." /Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1962),431./

<sup>30</sup> Leonard Mars, "Discontinuity, Tradition, and Innovation: Anthropological Reflections on Jewish Identity in Contemporary Hungary," *Social Compass* 46/1 (1999),8.

<sup>31</sup> Judit interview,1.

### 3.3. Jewish History, Culture and Religion

In the previous part we could see what different or similar family patterns were the starting point for the five individuals, from which all of them set off to Israel. None of the five households of the interviewees had any strict religious practices; however, it is known to them that before the Second World War all the families were observant. Nor did they have a strong Jewish cultural background, and if anything then only the common ancestry and the feeling of not being Christian characterized the Jewish Joszi's and Judit's families. Gergő and Tamás were distant from any influence as a child that could have shaped their cultural ideas or their interest in common history as such.

The breakthrough, if it can be described as such, occurred around the time of the aliyah for all of them. Tamás and Joszi had just discovered the religious approach of Jewishness, and Judit had been a fervent Zionist by the time of the emigration. For Gergő and Rita, however, it still meant nothing more than a great opportunity to see the world and a good starting point for developing their secular pro-Israel standing. For all the five of them there has been no influential change in how they see themselves as Jews since the first days of being in Israel. Without any exception, all of them consider themselves Jews, the religious stayed religious and the secular stayed secular. Even upon their return to Hungary, the core of their daily practices continued unchanged and none of them took a sharp turn ever since. However, their affection and belonging to Jewish and Israel-related circles led them to work for such institutions, but without any further significant alteration in their self-definition or interest. Their self-perception can be categorized as complete attachment or *"I have a very strong awareness of my Jewish identity and it means a lot to me"*<sup>32</sup>. Except for Judit, whose family

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<sup>32</sup> Kovács András, *Jews and Jewry in Contemporary Hungary: Results of a Sociological Survey*. Planning for Jewish Communities (Chandlers Printers Ltd, 2004), 28.

already belonged to this group, everyone moved up in the attachment ladder and became highly involved.

Religious groups can be well defined and concentrated around their synagogue or their community gatherings. Most of the scholarly focus also deals with these communities also because of the ease of access they can be granting during their research. However, as in our example, there are characteristics that can be relevant and significant from academic point of view about individuals that not necessarily have group affiliations. Jews that returned from Israel do not belong to an association that can be examined. However, the question of how they see their own Jewishness is relevant and it even appears in political discourse where they question the loyalties of this group<sup>33</sup>. In their self-definition as a Jew we can see that their loyalties vary, however the main focus is not the question of whether they feel Hungarian or not, but more if they define themselves as religious or secular:

*“For me this Jewish thing is a community. Everyone can decide if they want to belong to it or not. If someone takes part in our common destiny, for me that person is a Jew. When they join a protest or the March of the Living and they are attacked, no one will ask them if they are Jewish or only supporters. So for me it’s sharing this common destiny.”*<sup>34</sup>

*“Now, as a grown-up that I am, when one has not grown up in this, it is really hard, for me, it is hard to separate tradition and religion, all the Jewish holidays are related to the Torah and all the prayers and blessings are related to religion which is an*

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<sup>33</sup> “Jobbik: Listát a zsidókról!,” accessed 15 May 2013, [http://index.hu/belfold/2012/11/26/jobbik\\_listat\\_a\\_zsidokrol/](http://index.hu/belfold/2012/11/26/jobbik_listat_a_zsidokrol/)

<sup>34</sup> Gergő interview,6.

*artificial something for me since I'm not a believer, I'm not religious, I don't fear God, so from this aspect it's a difficult question, and there is not a judgment in it whether I'm sorry or I'm not sorry. All the Jewish holidays are religion related and if I had the option to choose, I'd want to have some holidays that are not related"*<sup>35</sup>.

*"I believe in the Jewish religion, because I think it is true, and because if I didn't think it was true I would not believe in it. And I need to give this faith to my children, so that in some situations when I am not with them, or I will not even be alive, it will help them move on."*<sup>36</sup>

*"Jewishness, Jewishness is the identity for me. And that's sure that I have no connection to religion, so for me it is a people."*<sup>37</sup>

*"It was more like an inner drive, an inside motivator or identity that one thread had been torn in the family, and I will continue it."*<sup>38</sup>

For the interviewees, the three main building blocks of Jewish identity are family, religion and Jewish peoplehood. Religion is a conflicting element of being Jewish for a generation that was socialized in an atheist atmosphere as we can feel the detachment in Rita's words. As she puts it, it is a problem that Jewishness is manifested in religious terms, since she does not have the ability to connect or relate to it.

If there are Jews that are not religious and they are part of a people, do they have any relation to the state-defined religious group? The old question of Jews as a nationality emerges. When

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<sup>35</sup> Rita interview,11.

<sup>36</sup> Joszi interview,7.

<sup>37</sup> Judit Interview,30.

<sup>38</sup> Tamás interview,30.

most of the Jews in Hungary show no interest in religious matters and they feel part of a people, then how is it possible that they are categorized as a religious group? Actually, this dilemma is not new, since Jewish leaders were asked to decide whether they want to be defined as religion or as a nationality in 1992. Out of fear of being stigmatized as non-Hungarians<sup>39</sup>, they chose to be counted as members of a religious group, not a national minority.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, the representation of those Jews that do not wish to be defined as a member of a religious group, but have very strong Jewish consciousness does not appear in the any of the sociological researches conducted about the general Jewish population.

Actually, the idea of non-religious Jews who are part of a people echoes the thoughts of the great Zionist and pre-Zionist thinkers. As Shlomo Avineri collected in his comprehensive book *The Making of Modern Zionist* as early as in 1803 Nachman Krochmal (1785-1840) published his '*In the Guide to the Perplexed of our Time*' in Hebrew and he established the idea of Jew as nationals that are characterized by their spiritual contribution to the world. Heinrich Graetz (1817-1891) in his '*History of the Jews from the Early Times to the Present*' *invented* a new understanding of one's Jewishness by defining a secular identity for Jews as a people.

For many Jews, Graetz's understanding is the only applicable category as in the case of Judit, Rita and Gergő. As a matter of fact, this is the notion that is most widely accepted of the Israeli self-definition<sup>41</sup> as described in Lilly Weissbrod's work "Israeli identity in transition". Mars names it as "cultural ethnicity" that he claims to be the most widely accepted identity

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<sup>39</sup> Leonard Mars, "Discontinuity, Tradition, and Innovation: Anthropological Reflections on Jewish Identity in Contemporary Hungary," *Social Compass* 46/1 (1999),8.

<sup>40</sup> "Legyen-e nemzeti kisebbség a zsidóság?," accessed on 15 May 2013, <http://regi.sofar.hu/hu/node/100547>

<sup>41</sup> Lilly Weissbrod, "Israeli identity in transition," *Israel Affairs*. (1997),48.

option<sup>42</sup> in Hungary. However, in Kovács's sociological survey 50% of the examined population declared themselves religiously Jewish which shows that Kovács and Mars have a different understanding of what religiously Jewish and "culturally Jewish" mean. Kovács takes the self-definition of the participants and Mars only expresses his conclusion based on his experience in Hungary since his work did not include a sociological survey. The five interviewees chose to be secular or orthodox religious which in a way mirrors the crowd they were surrounded by in Israel.

### 3.4. National Identity

When Solomon speaks about national identity as an integral part of Jewish identity, he means in our case Hungarian and not Jewish nationalism. He raises the topic of whether a Jew could feel nationalism towards the home country and whether the ethnic identity can give space to embracing a nationalism outside of Israel.<sup>43</sup> Different answers are given at different times in Hungarian-Jewish history. As the following quote will show it to us, Hungarian nationalism can be a defining part of one's Jewish identity:

*"Our readers may know it very well that we do not share any of the origins or aims of Zionism, neither its execution tools. We take a completely different stand and we always will as long as our Hungarian heart beats in our chest. There is no other home*

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<sup>42</sup> Leonard Mars, "Discontinuity, Tradition, and Innovation: Anthropological Reflections on Jewish Identity in Contemporary Hungary," *Social Compass* 46/1 (1999), 10

<sup>43</sup> Norman Solomon, „Judaism in the New Europe: Discovery or Invention?," in *Jewish Identities in the New Europe*, ed. by Jonathan Webber (London; Washington: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1994), 92.

*for a Hungarian than the fields surrounded by the four rivers, and on the globe there is not a better or more beautiful place to be.”<sup>44</sup>*

It may be more than 100 years old, but through this one example it is very obvious that highly assimilated Hungarian Jews took significant part in the “social contact” that was took place after the 1867 Compromise and full emancipation or integration into the Hungarian majority by giving up some cultural and religious customs<sup>45</sup>. By the Jewish laws and tragedy of the Shoah this contract was annulled from the majority’s side and the already assimilated Jews were mostly looking for shelter in the promise of protection by Communism.

Hungary in the past 20 years has developed or rediscovered the strength of nationalism that has been a powerful tool to politically activating certain groups ever since. However, preceding the transition in 1989, the emphasis in education and culture had been moved towards the socialist pro-Soviet ideology that did not leave much space for national pride in any platforms<sup>46</sup>. As a consequence, all the interviewees had grown up in an atmosphere that did not intend to embed strong affiliation for Hungarian culture.

Moreover, none of the Hungarian Jewish groups are identified with Hungarian nationalism on an official or unofficial level either.<sup>47</sup>

However, in their discourse it is visible that in Hungary they tend to refer to themselves as Jews but in parts where they speak about themselves in Israel they appear as Hungarian.

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<sup>44</sup> Adolf Silberstein, “Mennyiben lehetünk mi sionisták,” *Egyenlőség*, 37th issue. (1897), accessed 15 May 2013 <http://baderech.hjm.org.il/Article.aspx/Hu/HunJewZionism>.

<sup>45</sup> Karády Viktor, “Asszimiláció és társadalmi krízis. Adalékok a magyar-zsidó társadalomtörténet konjunkturális vizsgálatához,” *Világosság* (1993), 26.

<sup>46</sup> Csepeli György and Örkény Antal, “A magyar nacionalizmus változó arca,” in *Társadalmi riport* ed. by Andorka Rudolf, Kolosi Tamás and Vukovich György (Budapest: TÁRKI, Századvég, 1996), 273

<sup>47</sup> Kovács András, *Jews and Jewry in Contemporary Hungary: Results of a Sociological Survey*. Planning for Jewish Communities (Chandlers Printers Ltd, 2004), 41.



Compared to Hungarian Jews who have never lived abroad, the interviewees during their stay in Israel were most probably identified as “the Hungarian” which can result in some nationalist change in their attitude:

*“I’m proud of my roots, so I wear the cockade on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March, but not in Israel. And when they asked me in Israel where I was from, it was always like American? No. German? No. Dutch? No. Russian? No. Hungarian? Oh! And I was like what is this face?? It is a very good place, a very nice one. With very rich culture, no need to scorn. (...) In theatre circles, it is highly valued. Hungarian theatre is world known and has always been<sup>48</sup>.*

In the Israeli surroundings the Hungarian background gained more importance and differences were defined as “me the Hungarian” and “them the Israelis.” On many occasions the comparison that the interviewees made was based on their cultural superiority to Israelis:

*“Fresh graduates after high school were telling me that they had no idea who Stendhal was and I don’t know what. I was enough of a snob to be shocked by this. And of course I projected this to all Israelis, that they are like this and like that.”<sup>49</sup>*

*“And when I got the university knowing exactly who Chekhov was and let’s say I had also seen The Cherry Orchard or The Three Sisters, I had so much advantage over Israelis that they were like ‘Oh my god, you are so cultured!’<sup>50</sup>*

Another important fact in examining nationalist feelings is the return to Hungary. In *Argentine Jews or Jewish Argentines* Raanan Rein describes Argentine Jews that make aliyah

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<sup>48</sup> Gergő interview:11.

<sup>49</sup> Judit interview:17.

<sup>50</sup> Gergő interview:11.

and “discover that the Argentine component in the mosaic of their individual identities was strong enough to pull them back to their country of origin”<sup>51</sup>. Some force pulled all the interviewees back to Hungary a couple of years ago and they have not left since. It might imply some emotional bond to Hungarian values that we can understand as a form of nationalism, a pull factor of their return. Their attachment is voiced in their appreciation of the Hungarian language, better opportunities and the cultural superiority of Hungarians.

*“I really couldn’t become a journalist there (...) I wouldn’t have been able to get there, it is very likely. (...) It seemed so hopeless, and now retrospective I say that is unlikely that I had the chance to start there.”*<sup>52</sup>

*“And since she wasn’t Jewish, though she loved Israel, but she had not much to do there, her family, her friends... and I after all I speak Hungarian, I have some kind of roots here. This is why we moved back to Hungary in 2003 together and ever since I live here. Yes.”*<sup>53</sup>

Still, their expression of national belonging is not very accentuated and also there is the impression that they diminish the importance of being Hungarian. Gergő did not say he was Hungarian; instead, he explained that he spoke Hungarian and had some “kind of roots” there. There is a really strong distancing from nationalism that I feel in most of the interviewees’ discourse.

*“I don’t feel Israeli. Absolutely not. Not that I wouldn’t like to feel Israeli, I simply just don’t feel it. (...) Hungarian? To be honest, that doesn’t work, either. For me the*

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<sup>51</sup> Raanan Rein, *Argentine Jews or Jewish Argentines?: Essays on Ethnicity, Identity and Diaspora*. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 23.

<sup>52</sup> Judit interview: 28.

<sup>53</sup> Gergő interview: 4.

*Hungarianness does not count at all. This is this bad cosmopolitan phrase, but really, not at all. Mostly thanks to the recent political events. (...) In secondary school it was obvious that on the 15th of March, I would wear the cockade. I didn't make a fuss out of it. Now, I make sure not to wear one.*"<sup>54</sup>

The cockade appears in two of the life constructions as a symbol of Hungarian belonging. It is not a coincidence since its use had been highly politicized by the political right who expropriated its use in 2002 which led to on-right sympathizers not wearing it.<sup>55</sup>

Due to the present political atmosphere that monopolizes nationalist feelings for a certain group and on many occasions expresses that Jews and Israelis are alien to Hungarian culture and a threat to state security, it is a challenge for left wing and liberal voters to identify with Hungarian nationalism.

Nevertheless, all the interviewees testify that their opportunities were wider upon their return to Hungary, but no emotional connection is shown to any Hungarian related matter. Joszi and Gergő express their willingness to defend Israel more than to do so for Hungary.

Only Tamás's discourse contains some signs of Hungarian nationalism. He explains that he was shocked when the Jewish community commemorated the independence of Israel. He identifies as a Hungarian who observes the Jewish religion. He lacks the understanding of Jews as a people, but still, he does not show much interest in Hungary and is planning his future elsewhere.

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<sup>54</sup> Judit interview:30.

<sup>55</sup> See: Spirk, József. "Rehabilitálható-e a kokárda" accessed 16 May 2013, <http://index.hu/belfold/kokard0313/>.

Hungarian nationalism is not an integral part of their Hungarian Jewish identity and the fact that in Israel identification is based more on the country of origin, it may result in temporary nationalistic attitude, but upon return, this mostly evaporates. However, on the other hand, Israeli nationalism is more of a characteristic in the individual self-definition. I will look more into this in the chapter that deals with Israel.

### 3.5. Liberal and Democratic Values

Before the 1990s the general ideology was not liberal and democratic by far, and it is quite clear from the life stories that Communism had its impact on the general educational and family background of most of the Hungarians.

56% of the general Jewish population in Hungary identify themselves with liberal values and 35% are left-wing conservatives whereas Religious conservatives take up 9%<sup>56</sup>.

In our sample, liberal values are present but not dominant in the discourse of the interviewees. Based on the fact that Judit works for a liberal newspaper we can conclude that she may be affected by liberal thinking, however, it does not shine through her words and she does not show any conflict to us that would let us investigate deeper. Only in Gergő's discourse we can see that he bears equalitarian beliefs that claim that everyone is equal. For him, this idea contradicts to tradition of the "Jewish chosenness". Exactly this issue is what he is attempting to resolve in his artistic actions:

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<sup>56</sup> Kovács András, *Jews and Jewry in Contemporary Hungary: Results of a Sociological Survey*. Planning for Jewish Communities (Chandlers Printers Ltd, 2004),41.

*"It is not a Jewish theatre because I address Jews. On the contrary, I want to show the wide public what we are like. So I don't really invest energy in publicity within the Jewish community. Of course, it is amazing when they come, they should come, but they will find neither Purimshpil, nor Greek invasion of the temple.(...)When I hear that after a performance people say to each other that they have no clue why this was Jewish, that is the biggest compliment for me.(...)When people start to believe that Jews are like everyone else.. you know what? To put it even more profane, they eat, drink, love and hate like everyone else, it will be a step further towards a better society. I know, this also means that for us, Jews, we need to accept that we are like everyone else. This is the challenge, for 5000 years we have been programmed to think that we are better than others. (...) At the moment our task is to show everyone that we are like you, we are frail, and we want to be better."*<sup>57</sup>

As a matter of fact, this notion reflects Brodsky's understanding that Jews do not hold any particularities, and that being a Jew is simply being a human being<sup>58</sup>. However, Gergő does not clearly share the aim of complete assimilation that is of Brodsky's and therefore he represents a more conservative and traditional centered approach. As a Jewish public figure, he is not able to allow himself to wish for the complete assimilation as it would lead to why he left Israel that is not being "unique."

None of the testimonies tell us that activism, volunteering or fighting for some disadvantaged groups would be a significant element for these five people. Even Jewish related volunteering

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<sup>57</sup> Gergő interview:9.

<sup>58</sup> Garry M Brodsky, „A way of being a Jew; a way of being a Person,” in *Jewish Identity*, ed. by David Goldberg and Michael Krausz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993),245-263.

is missing; all the deeds were in a way ego-centric with no aim to reach some social development.

### 3.6. Holocaust

*“From Braudel’s remorselessly accumulating cemeteries, however, the nation’s biography snatches against the going mortality rate exemplary suicides, poignant martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars and holocausts. But to serve the narrative purpose, these violent deaths must be remembered/forgotten as ‘our own’.”*<sup>59</sup>

Naturally, the sorrowful events of World War II impose an enormous impact on world Jewry up until our present day. For most Hungarian Jews the primary identity element is not religious or cultural but the connection to the memory of the Shoah<sup>60</sup>, their "own violent deaths."

From a psychological perspective, this phenomenon is called “the Holocaust syndrome” which refers to the collection of mental and physical disease that has accompanied the first, second and third generation’s coping with what this memory has imposed on them<sup>61</sup>.

In all of the interviews the topic of the Shoah proved to be a starting point for the relation to the individual's Jewish roots. Nevertheless, my findings show that these individuals avoid being identified with the victim role and they attempt to show that they are not affected by this historical burden:

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<sup>59</sup> Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006),210.

<sup>60</sup> Kovács András, *Jews and Jewry in Contemporary Hungary: Results of a Sociological Survey*. Planning for Jewish Communities (Chandlers Printers Ltd, 2004),29.

<sup>61</sup> Vincze Kata Zsófia, “Visszatérők a zsidó valláshoz Budapesten” (Phd diss. Budapest, 2005),57.

*“My mother’s parents met in the ghetto of Budapest. So I can’t even say that on this side I’d have negative Holocaust experience in front of me, more like an opportunity for my grandmother and my grandfather to meet.”<sup>62</sup>*

*“I don’t know, the Holocaust isn’t part of my Jewish identity independently from the fact that although my grandparents survived it, four-fifth of the family didn’t. They were walking home from Auschwitz and their brother died on the way home. But this is not part of my Jewishness; it is a little bit like a family story.”<sup>63</sup>*

*“I think exactly that it needs to be taught at school and it must not ever happen again, but I also don’t like when Jews define their identity with this. And there is a lot of them as we all know, and it is really far from me.”<sup>64</sup>*

Distancing from the community that is defined by the commonly shared memory of the genocide is a very strong exit from the “victim community” that is kept together by the remembrance of the Shoah. All the interviewees show a very hostile attitude towards this victim community as they feel that the topic has been “used too much.” As a matter of fact, this phrase appears many times in anti-Semitic rhetoric that accuses Jews of making business out of the Holocaust whose significance is overrated in the historical context.<sup>65</sup>

On the other hand, there has not been a word said about Israel’s relation to the Holocaust. The interviewees seemingly identify the “victim community” only with Hungarian Jews and do not show any sign that they would make a connection between the Shoah and Israel. In the

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<sup>62</sup> Rita interview,2.

<sup>63</sup> Gergő interview,4.

<sup>64</sup> Judit interview,29.

<sup>65</sup> Many anti-Semitic articles and websites use the word ‘Holocaust business’ or “Holokamu” that is a word for “Holocaust lie” in Hungarian.

Jewish state much emphasis has been placed on this linear link, which is visible in the Declaration of Independence:

*“The catastrophe which recently befell the Jewish people - the massacre of millions of Jews in Europe - was another clear demonstration of the urgency of solving the problem of its homelessness by re-establishing in Eretz-Israel the Jewish State, which would open the gates of the homeland wide to every Jew and confer upon the Jewish people the status of a fully privileged member of the comity of nations.”*<sup>66</sup>

Recently, sociological research has shown that the 98.1% of Jewish Israelis place the acquired memory of the Holocaust in the center of their guiding principles, even as more important factor than the feeling of belonging to Jewry, Israeli society or their own family<sup>67</sup>, which seems to be a much stronger and more voluntary connection to the Shoah than in the case of Hungarian Jews.

Much debate has been held in Israel about the actual social stand concerning the Shoah and the survivors. One of the topics the Zionists and post-Zionists argue about is whether Israelis have rejected or embraced the tragedy's true meaning. Zionists were looking more for the heroes and did not sympathize with the victims. Post-Zionists, on the other hand, claim that the Holocaust has always been part of the national memory:

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<sup>66</sup> The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel

<sup>67</sup> Yechiel Klar, Noa Schori-Eyal and Yonat Klar, "The "Never Again" State of Israel: The Emergence of the Holocaust as a Core Feature of Israeli Identity and Its Four Incongruent Voices," *Journal of Social Issues* (2013), 126.



*“Israeli society nationalized the memory of the Holocaust – through leaders and spokesmen who had not been “there” – and organized it, within its hegemonic public space, into a ritualized, didactic memory,...”*<sup>68</sup>

Actually the topic of the Holocaust in Israel is still a very powerful political tool and it is present in daily discourse<sup>69</sup>, and the word Holocaust appears in daily newspapers as much as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>70</sup> Therefore its emphasis is more accentuated in Israel than it is in present Hungary.

All the interviewees take a stand on the Zionist side that does not accept the traumatized role and distances themselves from the weak “victim community” and show negative feelings towards the Holocaust identity. Only one of the five visited the death camps of Poland which also symbolizes their lack of interest in what they perceive as negative identity.

### **3.7. Israel**

Many claim that it is very problematic to define Israel’s role in the Jewish world. Based on Zionist ideologies, Israel on many occasions took the representative position to speak in the name of world Jewry and considered the Diaspora dependent and weak that was in need of Israel’s strong leadership. Some, in fact, express that the existence of the Diaspora is temporary that will end with the ultimate assimilation into the dominant culture. Apparently, this statement shows an absolute misunderstanding of the Jewish Diaspora. We do not need to

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<sup>68</sup> Idith Zertal, *Israel’s Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>69</sup> “Lapid orders additional NIS 50 million for Holocaust survivors,” accessed 19 May, 2013, [http://www.israelhayom.com/site/newsletter\\_article.php?id=8149](http://www.israelhayom.com/site/newsletter_article.php?id=8149).

<sup>70</sup> Yechiel Klar, Noa Schori-Eyal and Yonat Klar, “The “Never Again” State of Israel: The Emergence of the Holocaust as a Core Feature of Israeli Identity and Its Four Incongruent Voices,” *Journal of Social Issues* (2013), 127.

look far to find the American Jewish community that equals the Israeli population in its size and may even excel in general strength and influence.<sup>71</sup> Since Hungary's diplomatic relations were only made possible after the Communist era, therefore Israel's direct influence has been almost non-existent. For 20 years, the United States together with Israel took part in rebuilding what had been lost and forgotten by most and as it is shown by Vincze and Papp the search for authenticity resulted in many religious communities that were headed by non-Hungarian founders and spiritual leaders. However, many Hungarian initiatives have made the Hungarian Jewish community less Israel dependent.

Encouragement to make aliyah emerged with the Jewish Agency and some Zionist youth movements 20 years ago. By making aliyah, Israeli citizenship was granted immediately to the interviewees and the fact that they did not stay in Israel does not mean that they have no connection to Israel. Without an exception, all interviewees testify their strong positive attitude towards the Jewish country and this even exceeds their love for Hungary.

The first months in Israel gave the feeling of euphoria for some:

*„ Simply, everything was just great. Eventually I started thinking, oh my god, I had been studying Hungarian literature and Media Pedagogy, but I wanted to live in Israel, why would I come home? ”*<sup>72</sup>

*“I felt so good there from the first day, it was so different, I fit in so much, I'd had so much difficulty getting myself accepted in Hungary or it was so easy to get accepted there, really easily that I felt at home, immediately. ”*<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Stanley Waltermann, *Cultural Politics and European Jewry* (London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research: JPR Report, 1999), 18-19.

<sup>72</sup> Rita interview, 7.

This euphoric feeling is called "milk and honey" expectations, where Israel takes a very positive role in the process of making aliyah<sup>74</sup>. Definitely, immigration to Israel can be compared to a package tour where participants can enjoy their time without being troubled about accommodation or planning. Without an exception all the interviewees started their life in Israel in one of the state funded aliyah programs that provides olim with security and easiness. However, it also separated them from the non-immigrant society.

*"I really liked it, but after awhile, you realize that this is not reality. You don't need to care for anything; you don't pay for rent, gas, electricity. (...) Actually, this is why I left the place, it was too much of a bubble...it was too much of a separation."*<sup>75</sup>

Making aliyah for them was definitely a watershed for developing dual affiliations and a strong pro-Israel attitude. Nevertheless, they are in Hungary and they do define themselves as Hungarians more than as Israelis.

Their young age and the programs available for young olim contributed to the nostalgic feeling that they show for Israel now.

*"I didn't miss Hungary. On the contrary, I miss Israel now."*<sup>76</sup>

Except for Judit, everyone projects their real or aspired future in Israel. Judit explains us that her last visit was a great disappointment and she does not see herself living there, nor in Hungary. All the other returnees consider Israel as a future destination, most with joy and filled with hope for a better future. Joszi, on the other hand, expresses with a heavy heart that

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<sup>73</sup> Gergő interview,2.

<sup>74</sup> Rivka Weiss Bar-Yosef, "Desocialization and Resocialization: The adjustment process of immigrants," in *Studies of Israeli Society* ed. by Ernest Krausz (New Brunswick: Transaction books, 1980),23.

<sup>75</sup> Tamás interview,2.

<sup>76</sup> Gergő interview,2.

returning to Israel will be a necessity for the religious education of his children since proper orthodox institutions are still yet to be established in Hungary.

Unlike secular groups, for many religious Hungarians, making aliyah is a step towards finding authenticity and an imagined perfect Jewish life that is, for them, impossible to fulfill in Hungary<sup>77</sup>. The two religious interviewees also merged into Israel's orthodox circles.

*"...I also saw that it might be easier to lead a Jewish life there (...) I thought it back then, related to the social structure that people don't work on Friday and Saturday and the laws of Kashrut."*<sup>78</sup>

As many of the *baal tshuva olim*, also Tamás was disappointed by the Israeli reaction about his religious background.

*"I just couldn't handle this, that there were fully Jewish people that were completely ignorant of religion. So they are just born into this and they consider themselves fully Jewish but they know completely nothing. And me, I am studying it and they tell me that I am not Jewish? How can this be?"*<sup>79</sup>

Upon arriving in Israel many religious *olim*, after the first relief of being in a Jewish country, started to pay more attention to their differences from their receiving orthodox community and became more Hungarian Jewish than Jewish Israeli.<sup>80</sup> In the life construction of the interviewees this does not appear as a significant factor at all.

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<sup>77</sup> Vincze Kata Zsófia, "Visszatérők a zsidó valláshoz Budapesten" (Phd diss. Budapest, 2005), 210-213.

<sup>78</sup> Tamás interview, 10.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>80</sup> Papp Richárd, "Járható ösvény." Magyar zsidó fiatalok az izraeli ortodoxiában, in *A magyar kulturális antropológia története* ed. by Kézdy Nagy Géza. (Budapest: Budapest: Nyitott Könyvműhely, 2008), 122-137.

Only 23% of Hungarian Jews are indifferent about the existence of Israel and 31% have considered at some point in their lives the option of emigration to Israel<sup>81</sup>. Therefore, it can be said that Israel's place in Hungarian Jewish circles is significant, however, based on the statistical facts, no more than a yearly one hundred Hungarians leave for Israel with the intention to live there for longer period. Hence the connection may be more of a symbolic nature.

Obviously, the interviewees are atypical to the general population since they did not only consider making aliyah but they are actually returnees from Israel and therefore their affiliation is much more expressed. Moreover, in some of the cases the Israel experience constructed their Jewish identity, ergo, their Jewish identity is more Israel than Hungary centered. In many cases, they express that they feel disconnected from the Hungarian Jewish scene since their identity is more Israeli.

*"I don't think that I need to define myself, but let's put it this way, I feel much more comfortable with Israelis around me. (...) It's crystal clear that I joined UJS because I wanted to belong to a Jewish organization and so I got to know more and more Hungarian Jews that reinforced the fact that this was not to my taste at all. I was much more an Israel fan and pro-Israel than a Hungarian Jew."*<sup>82</sup>

*"I felt there that I needed to do nothing to be a good Jew because I was there at the right place."*<sup>83</sup>

*"There it is clear and it isn't such a big question what to do with our Jewishness or how to define ourselves, we are just Jews and that's all."*<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Kovács András, *Jews and Jewry in Contemporary Hungary: Results of a Sociological Survey*. Planning for Jewish Communities (Chandlers Printers Ltd, 2004), 31.

<sup>82</sup> Rita interview, 18.

<sup>83</sup> Judit interview, 15.

### 3.8. Christianity

When Solomon collected the 10 elements that build up European Jewish identity, he chose Christianity as one of the 10 due to the fact that most of the European countries have Christian dominance. In spite of the fact that Hungary is proclaimed to be Christian, and the rise of state imposed universal religious (mostly Christian) studies in primary schools<sup>85</sup> is about to be launched, the influence of Christian institutions was rather weak during the Communist regime where the Catholic church was the enemy of the state. It can also explain why it does not appear as a very central question in Jewish identity research in Hungary.

Christmas is the only Christianity related element that appears in most constructions.

*"Allegedly as per the family legend when I was really small I told my parents that we didn't need a tree because we didn't keep that tradition."<sup>86</sup>*

*"At the beginning absolutely, we had Christmas. Then I asked what is it for and I found out that they just wanted to be nice to me with the tree, because everyone had it and I wouldn't. First we had a pine branch next to the window and then we realized that it was meaningless. I don't know, I was around 8 when we stopped having a tree."*

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<sup>84</sup> Judit interview,28.

<sup>85</sup> "Csak állami iskolában lesz kötelező a hittan". accessed 22 May 2013, [http://index.hu/belfold/2013/03/16/csak\\_allami\\_iskolaban\\_lesz\\_kotelezo\\_a\\_hittan/](http://index.hu/belfold/2013/03/16/csak_allami_iskolaban_lesz_kotelezo_a_hittan/).

<sup>86</sup> Judit interview,2.

<sup>87</sup> Joszi interview,4.

*"We had Christmas without Baby Jesus and with a huge red star on top of the tree as it should be in a proper Communist family. So there was no singing, we just bought presents and gave it to each other, but it was not explained that it had a Christian side as well. It was only a family holiday and that's it."*<sup>88</sup>

*"In my family Christmas was connected to the holiday of love, so I really think that Hungarian Jewry shouldn't be ashamed to celebrate Christmas, it is more being born into a cultural circle. (...) I had my name day and I didn't get a present for Chanukah. I didn't even know what it was."*<sup>89</sup>

*"We kept it; my parents still keep Christmas and Easter. But it is not religious; it is a social holiday, at Christmas the family is together."*<sup>90</sup>

As seen from all the quotations above as well, Christmas was the symbol of cultural integration that many families were trying to achieve or had achieved. When the interviewees suddenly said no to the Christmas tree, they gained consciousness of their uniqueness and the Christmas tree turned out to be a tool for this. Apparently, this only occurred in the Jewish families and the ones that were mixed or not Jewish at all, the role of Christmas was a natural part of everyday life. In this context, "the other" is not necessarily Christian. In none of the constructions there is trace of relevance of Christianity. Solomon also defines Christians as basically "the other" the non- Jewish that is not accepted into the "us" circle and their existence defines what is Jewish. In our example, the conclusion is much softer; Christianity was not relevant and has not gained more significance in Israel or ever since, either.

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<sup>88</sup> Gergő interview,4.

<sup>89</sup> Rita interview,2.

<sup>90</sup> Tamás interview,3.

### 3.9. Minority Status

All the great Zionist thinkers arrived to a conclusion that living in the Diaspora, having the minority identity damaged the healthy development of Jewish communities and individuals. We can see how from mere frustration of the failure in full acceptance as individuals, Jewish intellectuals turned towards the holy land and longed for a new world order that was based on equality and recognition. In 100 years, we can say the Zionist movement reached its goal with the declaration of the Jewish State on the land of Israel. However, their original aspiration of eliminating the Diaspora experience was wished for in vain. Nonetheless, some scholars do believe that Jews are assimilating and are about to completely disappear in Europe<sup>91</sup> which has been refuted on many occasions<sup>92</sup> by others. As we can see, altogether approximately 455,000 people arrived to Palestine between 1882 and 1947<sup>93</sup> and 3,108,678 between 1948 and 2012<sup>94</sup> which could be considered impressive and a good indication of the successful Zionist activities. Nevertheless, when we compare these numbers with millions of Jewish immigrants arriving in the United States of America, we understand that Palestine was not the main target. Today 58% of the world Jewry lives in the Diaspora<sup>95</sup>. Still, ignoring

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<sup>91</sup> Bernard Wasserstein, *Vanishing Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 283.

<sup>92</sup> Gabriel Sheffer, "The European Jewish Diaspora: The Third Pillar of World Jewry?," in *A Road to Nowhere?* Ed. by Julius H. Shoeps and Olaf Glöckner (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 35.

<sup>93</sup> Gabriel Lipshitz, *Country on the move* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 38.

<sup>94</sup> "Immigration to Israel: Total Immigration, by Year," accessed 23 May 2013, [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Immigration/Immigration\\_to\\_Israel.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Immigration/Immigration_to_Israel.html).

<sup>95</sup> "World Jewish Population," accessed 23 May 2013, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/jewpop.html>.



these numbers the Israeli perspective considers the communities outside of Israel not viable and dependent on Israeli culture.<sup>96</sup>

In their discourse, the interviewees show some general shared characteristics in their relation to the Diaspora and Hungarian Jewry that reflect the Zionist/Israeli rhetoric:

- Diaspora's Jewish identity is not healthy.

*„ ...I can recall that when I telling people that I wanted to go back to Israel they responded asking why I wanted to go back, when being a Jew was the most authentic there and then. So this rather disgusting attitude was typical. ”<sup>97</sup>*

*"A young Jewish circle has been raised, that kind of newly-rich, cool Jewish guys, who I would call not opportunist Jews, but more the abusers of the Jewish connections. They wear a huge Star of David, and they emphasize that they are Jewish, but there is no lexical knowledge behind it. The majority of the society cannot really accept this.... ”<sup>98</sup>*

*“Especially this middle aged group, they are still locked up, and see anti-Semites everywhere. (...)But it disturbs me when I see that we are scared too much, and we are nervous too much which I never saw in Israel. ”<sup>99</sup>*

*"It's really important for me that public figures, actors, directors, politicians identify themselves as Jews in Hungary. I do believe it will help a lot. But not in a way that I*

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<sup>96</sup> Stanley Waltermann, *Cultural Politics and European Jewry* (London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research: JPR Report, 1999),18-19.

<sup>97</sup> Rita interview,13.

<sup>98</sup> Tamás interview,11.

<sup>99</sup> Judit interview,28.

*boast about how Jewish I am and I want to get what I deserve as it is the case in general. It needs to be shown that it is a natural part of life."*<sup>100</sup>

Most interviewees show a rather negative approach towards Hungarian Jews labeling them as “paranoid”, “not unified”, “ignorant in religious matters”, “artificial”, “arrogant” and “opportunistic.” Some even make excuses and explain that it is due to the historical background of the Diaspora that led the community to arriving at its present state, which shows partial acceptance and identification with Hungarian Jewry. In the comparison to Israel, the interviewees consider Hungarian Jews inferior and find it difficult to integrate in any of the groups, religious or secular. They tend to identify with Israelis more than with Hungarians, which provides them with a more positive self-perception. Since they are involved in Jewish circles and are opinion makers their attitude may have an effect on the future generations.

- Israeli Jews emphasize peoplehood, Diaspora emphasizes religion.

*“Majority of the Israeli society is not religious. They consider Jewishness as a nationality not as religion.”*<sup>101</sup>

*“I’m not an organic part of any religious community; maybe because my identity is not fed from religion, its center is not the synagogue, but the community. Just look at the communities living in the Diaspora! In Israel the most important part is not religion by far, not back then and most likely not today, either. It’s shared destiny, culture.”*<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Gergő interview, 6.

<sup>101</sup> Tamás interview, 21.

<sup>102</sup> Gergő interview, 5.

First of all in Hungary officially there is no Jewish minority, only Hungarians of Jewish faith, which both the secular and religious interviewees articulated to show their disapproval of the opposing side. For the seculars, it is effortful to return to a society that does not embrace the idea of Jewish peoplehood and does not look at Jews as a nationality, which is more widely accepted in general Israeli discourse. By this fact, we can also feel that these interviewees did not have closer contact with the vast religious Israeli community that for example Joszi was part of. The religious find it easier in Israel from the facilities point of view; however, the high number of secular Jews gives Tamás some discomfort in Israel since he is unable to relate to the peoplehood idea. Nonetheless, Tamás does not feel comfortable with the Hungarian Jewish circles, either and only goes to orthodox Lubavitch community's services in spite of the fact that he works for MAZSIHISZ, two competing Jewish communities. He defines himself as an *épater les bourgeois* type of person that does not fit anywhere.<sup>103</sup>

Ideas that are more attributed to Israel appear more often in the life constructions of the interviewees; however, there is one central notion that appears very often in their discourse, the fact that in Hungary they have better opportunities and they are more unique as individuals and also as Jews.

*"For me Hungary reinforces my Jewish consciousness. In Israel, I am one of the theatre makers, nothing special, not even that I am originally from Hungary."*<sup>104</sup>

*"I can get by a bit better in Hungary than in Israel. From a financial point of view? For sure, since in Israel there are a million people like me..."*<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Tamás interview, 19.

<sup>104</sup> Gergő interview, 11.

<sup>105</sup> Joszi interview, 18.

*“In the last year I started looking for jobs, for something normal. It seemed completely hopeless. (...) Here, at home I found a job much faster ... as a journalist ‘though it is not easy here, either. Now when I think about it, I’m sure I wouldn’t have succeeded there.”*<sup>106</sup>

All of the interviewees returned to Hungary before they needed to face life without the secure frame of the army, university or yeshiva. Their return was never planned and all of them describe it as an accident or something that happened without a particular reason, but actually we see that they have more possibilities for self-fulfillment in the Diaspora where they can use their mother tongue and take part professionally in (Jewish) life with much fewer difficulties. Nevertheless, they feel outsiders and they look at the Hungarian community with hostility. They question its authenticity and show some signs of despise towards the Hungarian Jewish pride.

### **3.10. Anti-Semitism**

The phenomenon of anti-Semitism reappeared just as the limitations concerning the freedom of speech were removed. Assaults on the streets, Jew baiting on football matches became more and more frequent. Nevertheless, the government did not take any steps against anti-Semitism, although they condemned it publicly. One of the most well-known extreme right wing politicians that time, István Csurka, started to publicly get engaged in building up a Jewish conspiracy theory saying that Jews were engaged in a satanic game against the Hungarian nation which has been carried on by the Jobbik party proved to even more

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<sup>106</sup> Judit interview, 19.

successful and that won 17% of the seats in the Parliament in 2010<sup>107</sup>. Still Jewish communal life has been characterized by the revival of education, religion, arts, literature, scholarship, contact with world Jewry and Israel and hope for the future.<sup>108</sup>

In Israel, anti-Semitism around the world is a topic that reaches the cover page of newspapers and news portals immediately whenever some anti-Semitic attack occurs and there is a general aim to act as a defender of Jewish communities in times of danger. As a reaction to the escalating anti-Semitism in Hungary, Israeli politicians have expressed their disapproval and expectation from the Hungarian government to act on these assaults<sup>109</sup>.

In their childhood, the interviewees mostly did not have any consciousness about anti-Semitism except for Rita who faced anti-Semites quite often in her life. There are some separate characteristics that can be seen from the life constructions:

- inspiration from anti-Semitism;
- sharing anti-Semitic generalizations.

Inspiration from anti-Semitism:

*"My identity is reinforced by it. Exactly due to the action-reaction law (...) the more the anti-Semite or the anti-Semitic thoughts are visible, the more time and energy I spend on being Jewish..."<sup>110</sup>*

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<sup>107</sup> Kovács András, "Antisemitic Prejudice and Political Antisemitism in Present-day Hungary," in *Journal for the Study of Antisemitism* vol. 4:443 (2012), 460-464.

<sup>108</sup> Raphael Patai, *The Jews of Hungary: History, Culture, Psychology* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 640-647.

<sup>109</sup> Even the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu visited Hungary to meet the President of Hungary and to discuss the issue. See: Chana Ya'ar, "PM Meets with Hungarian President On Anti-Semitism" accessed 25 May 2013, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/157940#UaDcv8zfUk>.

<sup>110</sup> Gergő interview, 12.

*“And the funny part is that instead of being angry up till today I can feel that happiness ..., when I came back from Israel and they spat on me just because I was Jewish, and then in that moment it was a great feeling. This may sound stupid, but it was really good. And yes, they discriminated me. For me, this feeling is always uplifting.”<sup>111</sup>*

We can see here that instead of the general stigma management attitude there is a very strong positive role for the anti-Semites that encourage these individuals to be more motivated and to feel more unique as Jews. Some even claim that the secret to Jewish survival has been the persistence of anti-Semitism that identifies Jews and make them a unique minority a phenomena also emphasized by Barbara Kessel in *Suddenly Jewish*<sup>112</sup>. The feeling of being "on the right side", those who are hated and note those who hate can add a huge plus to being a Jew in Hungary, which as a matter of fact would not be a factor of living in Israel. There the feeling of uniqueness does not play a special role in everyday life since everyone is Jewish. Anti-Semitism, obviously, is only a threat outside of the country which does contribute to forging Israeli identity, however within the borders no one is stigmatized for being a Jew.

Sharing anti-Semitic generalizations:

*"The negative atmosphere exists, but generally it's the Jews fault, too, in a huge extent that this atmosphere was created. (...) It's not easy for the majority if someone wears a*

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<sup>111</sup>Joszi interview, 8.

<sup>112</sup> Barbara Kessel, *Suddenly Jewish: Jews Raised as Gentiles Discover their Jewish Roots* (Hannover and London: Brandeis University Press, 2000),15.

*5x5 centimeter big Star of David on his chest and brags about how much of a Jew he is."*<sup>113</sup>

*"On top of it there is this glaze that everyone is so proud of, this lip service that is so disturbing, Really, many people have a Jewish background and they do things out of interest. Luckily, I could stay out of this."*<sup>114</sup>

Naturally, many Jews are also influenced by the anti-Semitic rhetoric and consciously or unconsciously they believe in some of these notions. Especially, when in public discourse the amount of expressed positive attitude is so little that all the emphasis is put on anti-Semitism and anti-Israel related issues. Added to this, the feeling of being an outsider, someone who already lived in Israel makes the interviewees distant from communities that they work in and in a way it enables them to develop an opinion of a non-member that does not bear the characteristics of the community.

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<sup>113</sup> Tamás interview, 23-24.

<sup>114</sup> Rita interview, 24.

#### 4. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to introduce a new topic to Hungarian Jewish identity research that is the returnee identity. By no means, this survey had the goal of being representative and with the five interviews I intended to find some characteristics that are not described in general researches. I understand the limitations of my results and I believe that this can be a good starting point for future works on this topic.

In all previous academic material, we could see that there is a gap in the subject of modern Hungarian *aliyah* and phenomenon of *yeridah*. To my knowledge, this subject has not been discovered in Hungary, and as a matter of fact not in any other countries to a great extent.

I decided to use Solomon's 10 elements of Jewish identity since I found it practical and extensive enough to examine individual affiliations and inclinations. Also it enabled me to refer to the already existing statistical data about Hungarian and Israeli attitudes and to show some special characteristics of the returnee experience.

In the beginning, we could see that the background of the returnees was typical of their generation, therefore not religious and even in some cases living with hiding Jewish roots. All the five families had a different stage of attachment to Jewish culture and tradition starting from complete detachment to complete attachment.

The decision of making *aliyah* was more of an opportunity to be in another country than to fulfill the Zionist dream, without the explicit intention to stay there for the rest of their lives.



In Israel, some of them developed some pride about Hungarian culture and educational system but this positive identification as a Hungarian national disappeared upon arrival in Hungary. Also their attachment level became completely attached and stayed like that ever since.

When the interviewees returned to Hungary they got acquainted with the Jewish communities of Hungary, which made them feel closer to Israel than to Hungarian Jewry since they have not been able to identify with the Hungarian "victim community" ideology and their bonding to Israel seems to detach them from the non-Israel centered Hungarian communities. Their connection to Israel is very strong and four out of five wish to live in Israel in the future. Nonetheless, there have better opportunities in Hungary than in Israel and they can reach their personal goals more efficiently due to the fact that they have connections, they speak the language and in some cases that they have lived in Israel.

The secular Jews have difficulties in identifying with the religious nature of the Hungarian Jewish scene and also show hostile emotions towards the community that they see as proud without a reason. Only one out of 5 showed no negative feelings for the Hungarian community.

Christianity does not have much relevance in any of the life constructions and Hungarians do not appear as a Christian nation in the eyes of the interviewees. The only importance it has is the question of celebrating Christmas that is considered to be of non-religious significance.

All the interviewees are aware of the existence and the increase of anti-Semitism in Hungary, but they do not show fear or frustration about it in any way which some of them attribute to the Israeli way of thinking. Some get their inspiration from the Jew-hatred and get more motivated which leads them to feeling more Jewish. Others are indifferent or even supporters of anti-Semitic thought that blame Jews to provoke anti-Semitism by their behavior and

attitude. Here, we can also sense their detachment from Hungarian Jewry to an extreme extent.

The experience of living in Israel does have a strong effect on their Jewish identity and it does not lose its significance upon arrival in Hungary. It seems that there is a huge difference in what the interviewees consider Israeli and Hungarian understanding of what being Jewish means and the conflicting ideas come to realization in all the life constructions. Being a Jew in Israel is a natural experience for *olim* but being a Jew in Hungary raises many questions of religious affiliation, of group belonging and being a target of anti-Semitism. Most of the interviewees resolve this problematic situation by showing more interest in living in Israel in the future and by losing their Hungarian national belonging due to the anti-Semitic rhetoric aimed at them.

## 5. Glossary

**Aliyah:** the act of immigration to Israel for a person of Jewish origin

**Yeridah:** the act of emigration from Israel for a person of Jewish origin

**Ole-Olim:** a person who has immigrated to Israel. Ole is singular, olim is plural

**Ulpan:** the expression refers to the Hebrew language course newly immigrants are provided with upon their arrival in Israel

**Kibbutz:** a type of agricultural settlement in Israel that is based on communist values

**Shoah:** Holocaust is often referred to as Shoah in Hebrew and in Jewish circles.

**Halakha:** collection of religious law

**Baal tshuvah:** a religious Jew who has been secular

**Hozrim batshuva:** the process of becoming religious for a Jew that has been secular

**Bar/bat mitzvo:** also pronounced as bar/bat mitzvah a religious ritual that symbolizes the beginning of adulthood around the age 12-13. Bar mitzvah is for boys and bat mitzvah is for girls.

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### Interviews

Gergő interview

Joszi interview

Judit interview

Rita interview

Tamás interview