The Evolution of Jewish Revival in Budapest

By

Dora Darvas

Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Undergraduate Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Culture, Politics, and Society

Supervisor: Daniel Monterescu

Vienna, Austria

2024

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

I declare that this thesis is my independent work. All sources and literature are properly cited and included in the bibliography. I hereby declare that no portion of text in this thesis has been submitted in support of another degree, or qualifications thereof, for any other university or institute of learning.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the evolution of the Jewish revival in Budapest from the 1990s to the present, examining how various projects have redefined Jewish identity in the city. After providing background on Jewish identity and its transforming and evolving nature, the history of Hungarian Jewry from assimilation to the regime change of 1989, and the concept of Jewish revival, this thesis investigates these considerations empirically. The study finds that the evolution of the Jewish revival is most visible in the changing attitudes toward which aspects of Jewishness should be emphasized. In the 1990s, each project had their own approach and toolkit to support the community's flourishing, most commonly emphasizing Jewish culture, religion, or community engagement. Today's initiatives, however, attempt to integrate various elements of the Jewish experience, creating a more holistic and realistic approach to Jewish identity. This shift reflects a broader, more inclusive understanding of what it means to be Jewish in contemporary Budapest, ensuring that the community continues to thrive by adapting to new generational needs and perspectives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank CEU for teaching me how to think outside of the box, my supervisor, Daniel Monterescu for his help and support, my best friend Dürgő for her constant encouragement throughout these years, my colleague Rahel for making these years feel like seconds, Bence for his never-ending patience, my grandmother, and parents for having trust in me, and the community that inspired this study.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

After the regime change in Hungary in 1989, similarly to the entire Hungarian society, Hungarian Jews witnessed a drastic transformation, often called the Jewish revival. Virtually overnight, the Jewish landscape transformed from a seemingly dead stage to fertile soil for the local Jewry to redefine what it means to be Jewish after decades of communal destruction and oppression. The newfound liberty brought by the regime change offered Hungarian Jews countless opportunities to redefine their identity. Jewish youth organizations, summer camps, schools, kindergartens, and various formal and informal educational initiatives emerged, marking the beginning of the revival. As it is common in social transformations, the revival was also largely led and initiated by young adults who now had the means to contribute to the flourishing by creating projects for the battered local community.

Ever since, these projects persist in having an influence and continue to shape the Jewish revival scene of Budapest. However, as they were designed for and by a generation whose Jewishness had to be experienced underground if at all, new initiatives are emerging once again led by young Jewish adults who, due to being born in an already rich and flourishing Jewish space, have different approaches to what needs to be revived. Therefore, this thesis aims to explore the evolution of Jewish revival in Budapest from its preceding historical context to its current reality and understand a) what methods were used in the Jewish revival of the 1990s; b) how did these projects evolve; and c) what direction the Jewish revival shifts towards now. Does it follow the path paved by the projects of the 1990s or does it deviate from it? To address these questions, this thesis is divided into two parts: background and analysis.

The first part provides background on Jewish identity, the history of Hungarian Jewry that influenced its identity construction, and the concept of Jewish revival as a framework for analyzing past and present projects. Understanding Jewish identity as a changing, transforming,

and evolving entity is crucial for analyzing the shifting changes and patterns of the two waves of Jewish revival. For this purpose, I will utilize Stuart Z. Charmé's theory of the "Spiral of Jewish Identity" (2008), which provides insights into the fluid and diverse nature of Jewish identities and the role of external circumstances in shaping them. To adapt Charmé's theories to the Hungarian context, I will explore key historical events and periods of the 19th and 20th centuries that shaped identity constructs, leading to the development of a negative identity and the experience of Jewishness as a burden. Lastly, I will introduce and adopt the theoretical framework proposed by Daniel Monterescu and Rachel Werczberger (2022), whose concepts of Jewish revival serve as a tool to compare local revival projects.

In the subsequent second section, I will delve into these considerations through empirical investigation, drawing on interviews conducted with key figures who spearheaded the Jewish revival of the 1990s. My approach involves identifying common themes, patterns, and strategies prevalent in Jewish revival projects during this era, aimed at revitalizing the Budapest Jewry. I have categorized these into three main patterns: Jewish culture, Jewish tradition, and community engagement. Each pattern will be illustrated with a representative project from the 1990s, showcasing the local approaches adopted by the Budapest Jewry in redefining itself post-1990s. By providing this comprehensive overview of early revival projects alongside the background presented in the first section, I aim to set the stage for understanding the role and approach of new revival projects. Therefore, before concluding, I will introduce two projects that appeared in the Jewish sphere in September, marking the first attempts initiated by this generation to revitalize the Budapest Jewry.

This research is motivated by my personal connection and experience of the Jewish community. Today's Jewish projects that aim to employ young people in some way date back to the 1990s. Therefore now, when in September "Jewlennials" (Daniel Monterescu, Rachel Werczberger, 2022, p. 93) started to mobilize themselves, I felt compelled to delve into their intentions and

potential contributions. My hope is that this research will illuminate the evolving landscape of Jewish communal life and identity in Budapest. As a new generation assumes leadership in the community, it becomes imperative to discern changing patterns and adapt accordingly.

1. BACKGROUND

1.1. Jewish Identity

The answer to the question "Who am I?" as an individual, or "Who are we" as a collective, changes depending on the context or on the situation in which the question is posed. Therefore, when analyzing something as complex as identity, it is best to utilize theories that understand the fluid and changing dynamics that shape one's sense of self. Elisabetta Crocetti defines identity as a "life-long endeavor" that is never complete or attained but is constantly evolving (2022). Historically, Jewish people have been defined collectively as a religion, an ethnicity, and, especially the propagation of Nazi ideology, also as a race (Kaplan, 2010). While extensive research has been conducted on Jewish identity, there is yet to be a consensus on who the Jews are as individuals or as a collective. For my inquiry, I utilized a theory that acknowledges the complex nature of Jewish identity, avoiding an oversimplification to merely cultural, religious, or any other specific aspect commonly used when attempting to define it. Stuart L. Charmé's theory (2008) called "The Spiral of Jewish Identity" proved particularly insightful for this purpose, offering a diverse perspective.

In Charmé's theory, Jewish identity should be imagined as a double helix, using genetics as a metaphor for "the process by which what one generation passes on to the next, whether biologically or in the form of cultural transition, recombines, mutates, and evolves in response to ever-changing environments," similarly to human DNA (2008, 120). The author elaborates on this concept by arguing that there are a multitude of sorts along the helix that indicate elements of Jewishness, connected by an imaginary thread on both sides of the helix, representing a "range of possible ways to position oneself vis-à-vis that issue" (2008, 120). He emphasizes that the spiral represents a descriptive rather than a normative approach to Jewish identity, illustrating

how individuals navigate various elements including religious, ethnic, ideological, or communal aspects.

Charmé adds that all elements, as well as the centrality of Jewishness in one's life, will and should "fluctuate, change, and flow" in accordance with personal and historical contexts. Among the elements on the double helix, Charmé listed some that are connected to religion and religious observance like "synagogue", "yeshiva", "spirituality", and "God", but used other, more political, and sociological components like "antisemitism", "Zionism" "class", "gender", and "assimilation". He also added "friends" and "non-Jews" to the list of elements that can compose one's Jewish identity, which is a crucial contribution to a modern and diverse approach to the topic.

An interesting paradox in Charmé's theory is his argument that Jewish identity is shapable by external factors and circumstances under which they evolve, but artificially, for instance through education, they are not constructable. Charmé, among many other scholars of the field, criticizes Jewish education initiatives or other projects that set the goal of strengthening and building Jewish identities. The primary criticism surrounding identity building as an educational objective is that it implies the existence of both strong and weak Jewish identities (Zelkowicz, 2019). This poses a challenge because the educational program in question likely defines criteria for cultivating a strong Jewish identity, potentially categorizing or ranking individuals based on their community engagement or knowledge. In his analysis, Charmé refers to this approach to Jewish education projects as the "drink-your-milk" model, drawn from an analogy with "physical health and vitality" (2008, 118). The "drink-your-milk" approach understands Jewish identity, just like the human body, as something that must be nourished to get stronger, and Jewish educational initiatives often take the role of the nourisher.

I understand the consensus that educational initiatives should not aim to build identities, as this is an unachievable endeavor and demonstrates a lack of understanding of how identities

function. However, I believe that this narrative is mostly popular for its appear and should not be taken seriously. It is obvious that educational initiatives alone cannot and should not fundamentally shape an individual's sense of self. This narrative most likely emerged in a project, initiative, or Jewish organization that is concerned with Jewish continuity, which is a common concern nowadays, and due to its appeal, others adopted it and now, it has become a central point of many Jewish projects, including Hungarian Jewish revival projects. Overall, Charmé's theory of Jewish identity as an intangible, indefinable, and transforming state resulting from the interaction of multiple interrelated or unrelated elements offers a realistic depiction. To exemplify that contexts indeed affect how one answers the question "Who am I?", in the following section, I will provide an overview of some historical events of the 19th and 20th centuries that forced Hungarian Jewry to redefine its identity.

1.2. Historical Wounds of Hungarian Jewish Identity

As previously discussed, Jewish identity is not static; it evolves and transforms within different social, political, and cultural contexts. The history of Hungarian Jewry in the 19th and 20th centuries exemplifies the dynamic nature of Jewish identity, shaped by a complex interplay of voluntary changes and external pressures. Throughout history, Jews had to reinvent their identity, specifically how it can be expressed. In the book "Jewish Identities in the New Europe" (1994) András Kovács divided these events into three historical eras: the Social Contract of Assimilation, as originally coined by Viktor Karády (1867-1918), a Rethinking of the Assimilation Option (1918-1944), and finally Jewish Identity in Communist Post-War Hungary (1944-1990). The enduring traumas of the Shoah, the suppression of Jewish identity under communist rule, as well as the lasting repercussions of internal conflicts stemming from the beginning of forced assimilation, continue to cast a shadow over the local community to this day. Therefore, in this chapter, I will provide an overview of these eras that transformed the identity strategy of Hungarian Jewry, eventually leading to the Jewish revival.

The first era began with the passing of the Law of Emancipation in 1867, granting Jews equal rights and enshrining their emancipation in law. This marked the beginning of Hungarian-Jewish coexistence, which, according to Karády, had a contractual nature. Within the social contract of assimilation, the Hungarian political class supported emancipation and Jews' efforts to modernize the economy, and the state, in exchange for loyalty and total assimilation, protected Jews from rising antisemitism (Kovács 2010). The assimilation initiative proved remarkably swift and successful. By the 1890 Hungarian census, 64% of Jews identified themselves as ethnic Hungarian based on their mother tongue (Monterescu, Zorandy, 2022, p. 89). Two decades later, a greater number of Jews declared Hungarian as their mother tongue than Catholics (Kovács, 2010, p. 35). However, it is crucial to note that not all members of the Hungarian Jewish community embraced assimilation as the sole solution to emancipation. Internal disagreements led to the fragmentation of Jewish religious and self-identities into three distinct groups: Neology, Orthodoxy, and the status quo ante movement (Gerő, 2004). The split of 1869 remains impactful within the community, as the Jewish movements emerging from it persist to this day.

The aftermath of the First World War signaled the onset of the second era, characterized by the emergence of an antisemitic narrative that accused Jewish assimilation of being a guise for political gain, aimed at undermining the nation from within (Kovács, 2010 p. 36). This surge in antisemitism, fueled by nationalist sentiments, reached its peak in 1920 with the enactment of the *numerus clausus* law, which restricted Jewish students' enrollment in universities. In response to escalating persecution, a significant number of Jews sought conversion to Christianity following the implementation of the anti-Jewish laws in 1938. Despite numerous attempts to navigate and reconstruct their identities amidst rising political hostility towards Jews, assimilation efforts were shattered in March 1944, when Germany occupied Hungary. Within a span of fifty days between March and July, over 470,000 Hungarian Jews were deported and murdered, with the majority sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, marking this operation as the swiftest and largest of the Holocaust.

Without the assistance of the Hungarian authorities and anti-Semitism of Hungarian civilians, it would have been impossible to execute the Nazi's plan (Váradi, 1985). However, by the time Miklós Horthy, governor of Hungary, halted the deportations due to internal and external pressure, only the Budapest Jewry could be saved.

After the Holocaust, Hungarian Jewry faced further challenges that continued to shape their identity and community dynamics. The post-war period witnessed a significant decline in the Jewish population due to various factors, including mass emigration to Israel, mixed marriages, and low birth rates stemming from the trauma of the Holocaust. In 1948, the Hungarian Communist Party rose to power, implementing policies influenced by the Soviet model that aimed at the complete elimination of religion. Two years after it came to power, the party merged the Neology and Orthodox Jewish congregations under the umbrella organization MIOK (Magyar Izraeliták Országos Képviselete, or National Representation of Hungarian Israelites in translation). After the horrors of the Holocaust, policies of the communist regime that nationalized Jewish institutions, persecuted Zionism, and restricted religious life posed new challenges for the Hungarian Jewry and its identity building strategies.

According to András Kovács (2010) despite the oppressive nature of the regime, a notable portion of the surviving Jewry initially supported the communist system for several reasons. Firstly, many viewed the Red Army's role in liberating the Budapest ghetto and concentration camps as a form of salvation, fostering a sense of gratitude and allegiance to the communist government. Secondly, the ideologies and measures propagated by the party, although repressive, were perceived by some as a new form of assimilation and identity strategy for the surviving Jewish population. These developments further limited the options available for Jewish identity strategies during this era, exacerbating the challenges faced by Hungarian Jewry in maintaining their cultural and religious heritage (Kovács, p. 46.).

In conclusion, the history of Hungarian Jewry in the 19th and 20th centuries reflects the complex nature of evolving Jewish identity amidst a backdrop of social, political, and cultural upheaval. During these periods, Jews were perceived as a religion, an ethnic group, partners and then enemies of the nation, Zionists, communists, and everything in between. The story of Hungarian Jewry serves as a reminder of the fluidity and complexity of Jewish identity, shaped by a myriad of internal and external forces. From the initial era of emancipation, marking the beginning of Jews as part of the Hungarian society, to the tumultuous period of antisemitism and the horrors of the Holocaust, and finally, the challenges posed by communist rule and post-war reconstruction, Hungarian Jews navigated a multitude of identities and strategies for survival. However, after the regime change of 1989, the stage of survival ended, marking the beginning of Jewish revival. Before delving into the practical and empirical investigation of Budapest projects, in the following chapter, I will conceptualize the modern discourse of Jewish revival.

1.3. Concepts of Jewish Revival

Throughout history, Jewish revival has manifested in various events, transforming, and profoundly impacting the lives of Jews and reshaping the boundaries of the Jewish experience. From the revitalization of Hebrew as a spoken language in the late 19th and 20th century to the physical survival and reemergence of European Jewry after the Shoah and the birth of Israel in 1948, these phenomena encompass a spectrum of transformation, catalyzing significant change within Jewish life. However, all these periods had their unique motives and social, cultural, religious, and political realities, demanding a different approach to define what revival is in that unique context. In the book *Jewish Revival Inside Out: Remaking Jewishness in a Transnational Age* (2022) scholars of the field provided a systematic reflection on the concept of Jewish revival, focusing on cultural, social, spatial, political, and historical aspects. Throughout my exploration of the Budapest revival scene, I will adopt Daniel Monterescu and Rachel Werczberger's

framework as a lens to analyze revival projects and to compare different approaches across generations.

In the book, Scholar Asher Biemann explores the history of revival (2022, 24–38) and emphasizes the role of philosopher Martin Buber's impact on Jewish revival discourse. In response to the German Jewish Renaissance during the first half of the 20th century, philosopher Martin Buber defined (1903) Jewish renaissance as a "rejuvenation of the Jewish people in language, customs, and art" (Buber 1999, 176). Buber emphasized that renaissance should not be thought of as a reform of old patterns and ideas, but rather as the emergence of a "newborn creature" (Buber 2001-2020, p. 157), a complete transformation of pre-existing patterns. He described this process as one of "return and revolution" rather than mere "continuation and improvement" (Buber 1993, 28.). Buber was the first to recognize that the Jewish Renaissance should not be seen as merely tradition reforms or new understandings of Judaism, but rather as a complete transformation of Jewish life. His views deviated Jewish revival discourse from being used only in terms of reinterpreting traditions, marking an important shift. But then what is Jewish revival? Is it a movement? Is it a synonym for transformation in Jewish life, tradition, or experience? To answer these questions, we must understand the contextual nature of Jewish revival. According to Daniel Monterescu and Rachel Werczberger, Jewish revival has a threefold definition:

- "It is the attempt to answer the call for adaptation and reconstruction of Jewish practice in temporal terms from the perspective of the communal present continuous.
- The framing of social action in terms of Jewish memory and tradition through textual and ritual reinterpretation
- The effort to seek new social and communal frameworks for Jewish life." (Monterescu, Zorandy, 2022, p. 3)

In their analysis, Jewish revival is used as an umbrella term for the following three distinct temporalities: survival, revival, and renewal (2022, 4-5). Survival refers to a "state of emergency in the traumatic present, necessitating the physical survival of the Jewish people and the preservation of Jewish heritage and material culture" (2022, p. 4.) Revival, on the other hand, is past-oriented, emphasizing continuity with tradition and a return to the cultural and religious practices of the past. In contrast, renewal adopts a present- and future-oriented perspective, drawing inspiration from the past to innovate and adapt to contemporary circumstances.

To further conceptualize Jewish revival, Monterescu and Werczberger provide four building blocks upon which revival projects, attempts to transform a ritual, textual, or communal aspect of Jewishness, rest upon: temporality, institutionalization, spatiality, and subjectivity.

The temporal articulation of a project, past or future-orientation, is what distinguishes revival and renewal projects, as mentioned above. Institutionalization refers to the initiator body, space, or institution of revival projects, such as distinguishing between local, global, state-sponsored, or grassroot projects. The subjectivity element highlights the importance of the social, historical, political, and cultural context to which revival projects must align to be effective. Lastly, spatiality refers to the concept of "Jewish space" coined by Diana Pinto (1996) and defined as the phenomenon of integrating the Holocaust into European countries' national history, and the revival of "positive Judaism', referring to "the sense of Jews have of themselves as a living, vibrant people, engaged in a symbiotic relationship with the cultures of their countries" (1996, p. 6). While these modalities may appear broad at first glance, their adaptation when analyzing Jewish revival projects from different generations helps when searching for changing patterns and strategies for social and communal transformation in Jewish life.

Similarly, to Charmé's identity theory, an essential message conveyed by the concept of Jewish revival is the necessity to consider the historical, cultural, social, and political context of a particular community when exploring its revival scene. Monterescu and Werczberger's notion of

Jewish revival underscores the significance of context. As my thesis focuses on a generational shift in identity and community-building strategies, the emphasis of Jewish revival theory on context is crucial. Revival is not a constant nor linear process, but an evolving phenomenon that must align with the target community's context. Through the concepts of Jewish revival and Jewish identity, it becomes conspicuous that revisiting the evolution of patterns in identity and community building strategies is indispensable.

1.4. Methodology and Ethical Considerations

To empirically examine these considerations, I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with individuals identified as key contributors to the Jewish revival scene of Budapest both in the past and present. The interviews were conducted between the 11th of February and the 9th of May. Every interview lasted approximately 1,5 hours and were conducted in Hungarian, recorded then transcribed. Out of these 10 interviews, I selected 6 for inclusion in the final analysis. The selection criteria were based on the relevance and depth of the insights provided, the diversity of perspectives represented, and the coherence with the overall research objectives. The excluded interviews, while informative, did not align as closely with the central themes and research questions of this study. The final sample consists of individuals spanning different age groups, ranging from 22 to 60 years old to ensure insights into generational shifts in patterns, methods, and approaches.

The most significant ethical question that arises is related to my long-standing membership in the community under evaluation, dating back to my early childhood. However, I believe my in-group positionality has provided me with the network and tools to connect with key figures of the Jewish revival efforts and gain meaningful insights into how it evolved overtime.

2. ANALYSIS

2.1. Jewish Revival in Practice

After the regime change of 1989, another transformative period began, compelling Jews to reconsider their identity once again. Unlike previous eras marked by repression, this time witnessed a shift towards flourishing and experiencing Jewishness on one's own terms. During this period, endless options emerged for Hungarian Jewry to redefine what it means to be Jewish. Youth camps, Zionist youth movements, and other Jewish project initiatives emerged, fostering a sense of community and connection among the younger generation. Virtually overnight, the Jewish scene transformed from a seemingly dead state to a dynamic and fertile soil for local Jewry, still affected by the historical legacy of communal destruction and oppression. As these early projects emerged, each had its approach to what should be the focus of its efforts. I divided these approaches to three distinct categories: Jewish culture, Jewish religion, and community building. Based on my research and interviews, as well as the experience I had as a community member since early childhood, these are the aspects of Jewishness emphasized in revival projects.

For Jewish culture, my interviewee is Zsuzsanna Toronyi, director of the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives, who played a pivotal role in the restoration of Jewish culture both in the physical and spiritual sense. For Jewish tradition, I interviewed Baruch Oberlander, the head of the Hungarian representation of Chabad. While the contemporary effects of the Chabad movement, specifically its reinterpretation by local Jewish leaders building upon its visions are controversial, its efforts in the 1990s to revitalize the community are undeniable. For community, I interviewed Ádám Schönberger, the head of Hungarian Marom and founder of Sirály and Auróra.

Then, to demonstrate how during the evolution of revival, these components are becoming increasingly intertwined, I will present Szarvas Camp, a revival project that emerged in the 1990s but almost three decades later, has not lost its relevance as it manages to showcase several aspects of Jewishness all at once. Lastly, I will present two recent projects initiated by young adults, both strongly connected to Szarvas Camp, that show what direction the Jewish revival is shifting towards in the present.

2.2. Restoring Jewish Culture: Zsuzsanna Toronyi

Right after the regime change, community life was not the only aspect of the Jewish scene that needed restoration. Zsuzsanna Toronyi, a museologist and archivist, began her work in the Jewish community when, as a student at Eötvös Lóránd University, she learned that the books confiscated by Adolf Eichmann had returned to the Rabbinical Seminary's library in 1991. Thousands of books stolen in 1944 and placed under the German Protectorate in Prague, with the purpose of using them for enemy research after a supposed German victory. Toronyi, 20 years old at the time, was interested to learn and took on the role of organizing the books within the university's library. Then, just two years later, the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives was robbed, resulting in the theft of all artifacts and coin collections, together worth more than four million dollars. Soon, the objects were found and Toronyi started her work in the museum. Her "maddening mission to tidy up"[1] began and likely has not stopped as, almost three decades later, she is the director of the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives. After a culture shock evoked by her first trip to Israel, Toronyi realized that Jewish heritage "does not have to remain in the mechanical rind of the 18th century and can be used as a secular reference base."[2] Motivated by her realization, Toronyi and others interested in Jewish culture, tradition, and

[1] Zsuzsanna Toronyi interview, April 23, 2024.

[2] Zsuzsanna Toronyi interview, April 23, 2024.

literature, started the Yahalom Jewish Free University in the mid-1990s, inviting guest lecturers every second week.

With a son in his twenties, I asked her opinion about Jewish youth and whether she identifies significant differences. According to Toronyi, the concept that Judaism is just a religion, stemming from the 19th century, and the local institutional approach that often supports that claim is an understandable discouragement for the youth. She believes, ex officio, that "Jewish culture is a gateway drug, through which people can be brought in, but only without pressuring them."[3] She describes getting closer to Jewish culture as a step-by-step process that can start with eating flódni, finding joy in Jewish gastronomy or art. Also, she mentions Israel as a focal point to bring people closer to Jewish culture, using the example of how a visit can lead to realizing that a "song or expression born within the walls of a synagogue does not necessarily have to stay there."[4]

Jewish culture comprises infinite elements, from Jewish films to certain expressions only Jews are familiar with. However, in the beginning of the revival, key figures like Toronyi were essential to restore Hungarian Jewry's cultural heritage, both in a physical and spiritual sense.

2.3. Revival Through Tradition: Baruch Oberlander and Chabad

Exploring the Hungarian Jewish revival scene without mentioning the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement would mean overlooking an essential piece of the whole picture. Baruch Oberlander born in 1965 in New York, and his wife moved to Hungary in August 1989 as the first Chabad emissaries in the country. According to Oberlander, the ultimate purpose of his and his wife's arrival was to help the local community, still under the effects of communism, and spread Judaism. When they arrived, they felt the effects of communism firsthand, as there was a

[3] Zsuzsanna Toronyi interview, April 23, 2024.

[4] Zsuzsanna Toronyi interview, April 23, 2024.

visible and feelable lack of opportunity, as well as a lack of youth presence in synagogues. Upon his arrival, Oberlander's command of the Hungarian language was weak, but it did not stop people from wanting to hear something "new, interesting, and authentic"[5] and from the beginning on, his lectures enjoyed success. Within one year, he initiated a lecture series in the Oneg Shabbat Club that functioned within the walls of Bethlen synagogue. Young adults, coming from different but mostly secular backgrounds, filled the synagogue every Thursday night to learn more about Jewish tradition.

Spreading knowledge has always been central to the agenda of Chabad. Oberlander recalls a time when someone from the congregation told him that there was no need for knowledge of the Talmud in Hungary. However, he always believed that eliminating ignorance and propogating knowledge would ultimately create demand. From book publishing to online presence, every Chabad project was based upon the principle of spreading knowledge and providing information for the local community. Later, Chabad opened synagogues, kindergartens, and the local headquarters of CTeen, Chabad's youth movement. I asked Oberlander about how youth can adopt the values promoted by Chabad and what identity-building strategies are used. He claims that there is "no magical method"[6] for those who did not have a religious upbringing; the only way is if they get a taste of it.

Oberlander believes that success is when people know Judaism is more than folklore. The ultimate purpose is to "strengthen the identity of people, at least to the level by which they know there is treasure, philosophy, law, history, and so much more in Judaism.[7]" When I asked him about those feeling closer to Jewish culture than religion, he explained how culture can be a starting point, the beginning of a journey. Oberlander approaches culture as a perfect base for those wanting to immerse themselves in Judaism but believes that culture is harder to pass on to

[5] Baruch Oberlander interview, May 9, 2024.

[6] Baruch Oberlander interview, May 9, 2024.

[7] Baruch Oberlander interview, May 9, 2024.

the next generation. Another point he makes is that a cultural identity misses the "fire and does not give the power to overcome difficulties, while religion gives power, resilience, and bravery"[8].

I believe Oberlander brought immense knowledge to the Budapest Jewry, and his efforts to the Jewish revival are undeniable. To this day, he helps educators and rabbis, Jews, and non-Jews alike to learn more about Judaism and its intricacies. However, readers of this thesis who are familiar with the Hungarian Jewry would expect me to reflect on the movement's impact on the community today. My research deliberately avoided to include internal communal conflicts as for that, I would need more time, knowledge, and information from all sides to provide an unbiased reflection. Also, as all participants have controversies surrounding them, I believe it would take years to contribute something informative to the understanding of these conflicts. To conclude this chapter, Oberlander's arrival to Budapest had a significant contribution to the base knowledge of Hungarian Jewry, and therefore to the Jewish revival of Budapest. However, Chabad as a movement, more than thirty years after its arrival, is both a key player and an initiator of numerous conflicts within the Hungarian Jewish community, leading to significant internal strife.

2.4. Revival Through Community: Ádám Schönberger and Marom

Marom is and has always been an exciting project since the end of the 1990s when it launched its first programs, mainly because it attempted to blend the previously discussed elements of culture, and religion. According to Schönberger, initially, Marom served as a cultural sphere for third-generation Jews who, during a period of "awakening," needed a space to connect both with each other and their Jewish heritage. Schönberger claims that Marom was the first organization to realize that "being Jewish can mean something outside the walls of a synagogue as well."[9] Paradoxically, the organization started its journey within the walls of Bethlen synagogue, but the

[8] Baruch Oberlander interview, May 9, 2024.

[9] Ádám Schönberger interview, April 10, 2024

collaboration ended soon after its leadership and Marom had "different ideas" of Jewishness. After being expelled from the synagogue, Marom began to hold its party events and fun activities in nightclubs, bringing Jewish events to non-Jewish spaces for the first time. This was an interesting experiment, as before each "fun activity", there was a lecture, panel discussion, or another form of an educational component. Schönberger mentions a Purim fun event from the early 2000s, where rabbis from different branches had a panel discussion about the role of women in Judaism. This is interesting for two reasons: a) because it could effectively combine tradition, culture, and fun[10] and b) because, while Schönberger could not name the leaders that led the discussion, this kind of interdenominational cooperation is almost impossible to imagine today due to fragmentations within the community, marking an essential difference between the early 2000s and today.

While Marom launched as an exclusively Jewish initiative mostly for Jewish university students wanting to rediscover their Jewish heritage, the organization has become a space that is not exclusively Jewish anymore. The shift occurred in the early 2000s and Schönberger explains it with the myriad of similar projects emerging that time. He notes that: "others started to organize cultural life in a similar way, so we thought it would be worth to do something else" [11] From then on, Marom expanded its scopes from Jewish community-building to building a community that is connected by a "shared-value system"[12] Under Marom, Auróra opened which serves as a creative space for artists, activists, and everyone else who identify themselves with those values promoted by Marom. Despite the shift, people are generally aware of the Jewish roots of Marom, as it still integrates Jewish elements in its programs. For instance, Marom also established Bánkitó Festival, which, similarly to Auróra, is a place of creation, activism, and

[10] In our interview, Schönberger defined the „fun" element of Jewish identity as: „We are Jewish, and we are happy about it together!" As vague as it sounds, fun Jewish identity does exist and often feels like it also dominates the Jewish youth. However, these fun activities always occur in a Jewish setting, meaning that it is framed in a Jewish holiday or other celebration. Obviously the "fun" leg is connected to all other aspects of the Jewish experience.

[11] Ádám Schönberger interview, April 10, 2024

[12] Ádám Schönberger interview, April 10, 2024

advocacy. The festival usually includes Jewish elements or projects, like Israeli dance house, or children's programs organized by Jewish organizations.

Marom's evolution from an exclusively Jewish project to a space where Judaism and Jewish tradition are present yet aim to build a community based on shared values, extends beyond the confines of Jewish discourse. This approach appeals to a broader audience that shares these ideals. Schönberger's efforts bring Jews and non-Jews closer together, creating a space for everyone who identifies with these values. Ádám Schönberger and his work remain a cornerstone of the Jewish revival, offering an innovative perspective by linking Jewish values with non-Jewish projects. His approach can serve as a model for the next generation of Jewish leaders, the young Jewish adults of today.

2.5. The Heartbeat of Jewish Revival: Zsuzsanna Fritz and Szarvas Camp

Szarvas International Jewish Youth Camp launched its first four sessions of two-week camps in 1990 as a collaborative project between the JDC (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) and the Hungarian representative body of the Jewish Agency for Israel, Szochnut. Between 2007 and 2019, I participated in the camp in several capacities, first as a camper, or "*chanich*" in Hebrew, and later as a "*madrich*," or group leader. Therefore, I will combine my personal experiences with the oral history provided by Zsuzsanna Fritz to offer insights into the evolution of Szarvas Camp and explain why I consider it the heartbeat of Jewish revival for the Hungarian Jewish community.

Starting her involvement as a representative of the JDC's Jewish Educational Research Center, Zsuzsanna Fritz transitioned through various positions, including group leader and unit head, responsible for coordinating madrichim (group leaders) for specific age groups, and eventually becoming the program and education director. Since the birth of the camp, Fritz—affectionately known as Frici by everyone who has set foot in the camp—has been a constant presence.

Frici recalls that the structure of the camp was similar to what it is today, meaning that there were four sessions during the summer, each lasting initially for 14 days and later for 12 days. However, she adds that the content of the camp was drastically different from what it is today. Today, if one visits Szarvas Camp, there are endless options to learn about Jewish culture and religion, both in a formal and informal setting. From lectures, called *peulot*, and free activities for group-building during *madrich time*, to learning Israeli songs and singing together with people from different countries, or participating in traditional Israeli dance classes, Szarvas offers infinite possibilities. In the first camp of 1990, the educational component was led by Israeli emissaries, or *shlichim* in Hebrew, who held lectures about Israel's history, geography, and Hebrew language. Frici recalls that "this approach luckily did not last long, and a new structure started to unfold".[13]The popularity of the camp peaked in 1994 with around seven hundred Hungarian campers, along with hundreds more from Central and Eastern Europe. However, due to financial instability, the camp experienced a decline between 1996 and 2004[14]. During this period, the number of sessions decreased to two, and the number of campers was halved.

Since 2004, interest in the camp remained consistent until the emergence of COVID-19, which led to its closure for two years. Frici argues that from the very first camp, participants felt something special about Szarvas, prompting them to return annually and eventually send their own children. Participation in the Szarvas Camp has become a cornerstone of the summer experience for Jewish youth today. But what exactly makes Szarvas Camp the heartbeat of Jewish revival?

Firstly, since its inception in 1990, Szarvas Camp has developed a robust educational program tailored to different age groups, catering to campers from ages 6 to 18. Secondly, as previously mentioned, the camp offers a rich immersion into Jewish culture through Israeli dance lessons,

[13] Zsuzsanna Fritz interview, May 3, 2024.

[14] Zsuzsanna Fritz interview, May 3, 2024.

songs, and various other programs. Thirdly, it places a strong emphasis on community building. To become a madrich (group leader) at Szarvas Camp, individuals undergo extensive training covering group dynamics, community building, Jewish culture, and traditions, and must demonstrate competence to be selected. Lastly, it combines different elements in its strategy to be a place for all Jews and non-Jews interested in Jewishness. In practice, that means that while campers learn about Jewish tradition, they pray before and after each meal, eat kosher, and their day starts with a morning prayer, they also play tennis, practice capoeira, dance, sing, do sports, and art simultaneously. Frici highlighted that

> Equal emphasis and attention are given to team and community-building as to Jewish identity. The interest in Judaism is sparked by the relationships formed at the camp, relationships that individuals want to maintain because they were fostered in a Jewish environment. It is really that simple connection. People want to continue these experiences because they've made friends who are part of this environment (Zsuzsanna Fritz interview, May 3, 2024).

The magic of Szarvas Camp lies in its ability to encompass the entirety of the Jewish experience within just 12 days, without prioritizing one aspect over another. It serves as a gathering place for Orthodox, Reform, and Neology Jews, as well as for non-Jews who may have had Jewish neighbors and were recommended Szarvas. Whether one seeks to learn, meet new people, or simply immerse oneself in a new world filled with endless opportunities, the camp caters to all. It has become an integral part of the Jewish experience in Budapest, showcasing how the combination of religion, culture, community, and secular activities can harmoniously coexist and create an inclusive environment for all who are open. At Szarvas Camp, there is no pressure to fit into a predefined notion of Jewishness. Instead, the camp encourages exploration and personal interpretation. Campers and group leaders alike are given the space to discover what Jewishness means to them individually. It is a journey of self-discovery where everyone is empowered to take what resonates and define their own Jewish identity on their own terms.

While the camp accommodates children from elementary school through high school and offers pathways for them to assume leadership roles, individuals may eventually find themselves outgrowing their involvement in the camp. Recognizing this transition, the two newest revival projects aim to fill this gap by providing a space for young adults to connect after transitioning beyond the "Szarvas Generation".[15]

2.6. Continuity or a New Direction: Kesher Foundation and the Rumbach Project

David Dickmann, the founder of the Rumbach Kabbalat Shabbat project, and Péter Kulcsár and Bálint Kardos, founders of the Kesher Foundation, demonstrate a cohort of young Jewish leaders in Budapest, each driven by a shared motivation: to address the evolving needs of young adults transitioning beyond conventional Jewish youth environments like Szarvas Camp.

David Dickmann, born in 1998, drawing from his rich background in Jewish education and community engagement, has spearheaded the Youth Kabbalat Shabbat project at the recently revitalized Rumbach synagogue. This initiative, which draws approximately 120 young adults every second Friday, offers a dynamic platform for Shabbat celebration and communal interaction, effectively filling a previously unmet niche in the community. Dickmann notes that while the cultural aspect of being Jewish is essential and "gives the beauty of the Jewish experience," if all new initiatives targeting this age group focus only on that, "Jewishness will gradually disappear."[16] Since the project started in September, the synagogue has been filled with mostly young adults and a few teenagers every second Friday, which is an extraordinary sight in Budapest's synagogues.

[15] Péter Kulcsár interview 6 April, 2024.

[16] Dávid Dickmann interview, 11 February, 2024.

As a regular attendee of the Rumbach synagogue, I have observed an interesting connection between Szarvas Camp and the Kabbalat Shabbat project. On a Friday night in April, the synagogue was almost empty, and when I inquired why, another attendee reminded me that there was a Szarvas Camp group leaders' annual training weekend far from Budapest. Beforehand, I had not realized how closely knit the Szarvas group leader community and the attendees of Rumbach are. Rumbach has become a space where this group of Szarvas leaders can meet outside the camp's setting and celebrate Shabbat together. Additionally, people who are no longer actively involved with Szarvas Camp often join to see their former colleagues, reconnecting with the community even years after they have left it.

From Dickmann's perspective, it is a project that emphasizes religious observance and Jewish tradition while providing space for connection, a "win-win situation".[17] Seeing a young adult like Dickmann, who is twenty-five years old, in the role of a rabbi adds to the project's attractiveness. Dickmann is not a rabbi, but his dedication to learn about Jewish tradition in the past years makes him a fitting candidate to lead the Rumbach Project. As the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities (MAZSIHISZ) provides the space and meals, it suggests they recognize the need to provide institutional support for this age group, often "left hanging in the air"[18] after outgrowing youth movements.

The Kesher Foundation, founded by Péter and Bálint, aims to "connect young adults to each other and their Jewish identity."[19] Although the official launch is set for September, the foundation has already organized multiple unofficial events. Péter and Bálint first pitched their idea after organizing a Seder dinner in just two days, which was attended by around 100 young adults, making it the second largest communal Seder night in Budapest last year. After the

[17] Dávid Dickmann interview, 11 February, 2024.

[18] Dávid Dickmann interview, 11 February, 2024.

[19] Péter Kulcsár interview, 6 April, 2024.

founders' pitch, several attendees expressed interest in participating if the foundation was established. Now, Kesher has sixteen enthusiastic volunteers who work tirelessly to prepare the launch in September. As of today, the programs are still in their planning stage, but the foundation will organize fun activities, panel discussions, art exhibitions, and will attempt to be a space, similarly to Szarvas Camp, where Jewishness can be expressed and experienced in infinite ways. In our interview, the founders emphasized the role of the camp in establishing Kesher. When asked how the preparation of Kesher fits into the lives of a soon-to-be doctor and an engineer, Péter answers

> „Why are we doing all this? Because we like doing it. Because we grew up in Szarvas, we are madrichs, because we have the motivation to build the community and we like to pass knowledge on to people and we like to take knowledge from people. We like to be part of the community. We want to be a space where people can drink and have fun together, because that is important, but they can also learn, talk, and think together. We want this place to be there for people who outgrow youth camps and youth movements. We want to be the place they can come after, so they do not have to fear losing 40% of their friends just because they do not have a place or a reason to connect." (Péter Kulcsár interview, 6 April 2024).

Both projects that emerged recently reflect the importance of Szarvas Camp in community-building efforts and demonstrate how various aspects can fit into the Jewish experience. To some extent, both the Rumbach project and the Kesher Foundation attempt to fill the void left by outgrowing the camp and other youth movements. Undeniably, the Rumbach project operates without a strict concept, but its success lies in providing something new to the community that feels exclusively tailored to this age group, making synagogue attendance and religious observance more digestible for the youth. On the other hand, Kesher is building something new with knowledge gained from the founders' participation in Szarvas Camp and other youth movements. Its team is composed of young individuals who, while studying and often working in other spheres outside of the Jewish trajectory, aim to give something back to the community and support its flourishing.

CONCLUSION

In my thesis, I attempted to shed light on how multifaceted and context-dependent Jewishness is by exploring the evolution of Jewish revival in Budapest. Since the middle of the 19th century, the local Jewish community has had to redesign its identity multiple times due to external forces, leading to negative and hidden Jewish identities. This created a demand for a complete transformation that eventually appeared in the form of Jewish revival after the regime change of 1989. This revival was led by enthusiastic young adults who, for the first time in decades, had both the means and motivation to contribute to the transformation. Each project approached Jewishness from different angles, some focusing on religion, culture, or community.

From the early initiatives of the 1990s, such as the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives, to the appearance of Chabad in the local Jewish scene, and the transformation of Marom from a youth club without a concept into a significant civil organization, each project and its own evolution has added to the diversity of the local Jewish landscape. Szarvas Camp outstands as a groundbreaking revival project that successfully combined many aspects of Jewishness and serves as a base upon which new initiatives from a new generation can be built upon.

To answer the primary question of this thesis – how revival projects evolved over time – I believe that the most significant difference is the new projects' more realistic and multifaceted approach to Jewishness. Building on earlier initiatives, new projects are less likely to promote one aspect of what being Jewish means but aim to provide insight into how many different things it can mean. While each project had its own approach to Jewishness, all stem from the shared purpose of contributing to the development of a community these individuals feel they belong to. The continuous efforts to contribute, seen in initiatives like the Kesher Foundation and the Rumbach Synagogue Project, suggest that secularization, assimilation, and varying degrees of religious observance are less important than the shared motivation to strengthen the community, regardless of the tools or approaches utilized.

REFERENCE LIST

Biemann, A. (2022). Reflections on the Normativity of Jewish Renaissance. In D. Monterescu & R. Werczberger (Eds.), Jewish Revival Inside Out: Remaking Jewishness in a Transnational Age (23-38). Wayne State University Press.

Charmé, S., Horowitz, B., & Hyman, T. (2008, July 16). Jewish Identities in Action: An Exploration of Models, Metaphors, and Methods. Journal of Jewish Education, 74(2), 115-143. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/15244110802126640?needAccess=true

Crocetti, E. (2022). Identities: A developmental social-psychological perspective. European Review of Social Psychology, 161-201. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10463283.2022.2104987

Gerő, A. (2004). The Disintegrated Jew: Jew, Hungarian, Communist. Journal of the International Association for Hungarian Studies and Balassi Institute, 179-198. https://akjournals.com/doi/10.1556/hstud.18.2004.2.4

Karády, V. (1989). The social contract of assimilation. Journal of Modern Jewish Studies, 5(2), 98-120.

Kaplan, S. (2010). If There Are No Races, How Can Jews Be a "Race? Journal of Modern Jewish Studies , 79-96. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14725880305901

Kovács, A. (1994). Jewish identities in the new Europe. In J. Webber (Ed.), Jewish identities in the new Europe (pp. 44-58). Littman Library of Jewish Civilization. https://archive.jpr.org.uk/object-eur80

Kovács, A. (2010). Jews and Jewishness in Post-war Hungary. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History, 34-57. https://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/jews-and-jewishness-in-post-war-hungary/

Monterescu, D., & Werczberger, R. (2022). Jewish Revival Inside Out: Remaking Jewishness in a Transnational Age. In D. Monterescu R. Werczberger (Ed.), Wayne State University Press Detroit.

Pinto, D. (1996). A New Jewish Identity for post-1989 Europe. Institute for Jewish Policy Research. https://www.jpr.org.uk/reports/new-jewish-identity-post-1989-europe

Váradi, L. (1985). The Hungarian Jewry in the Twentieth Century. Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae, 409-421. https://www.jstor.org/stable/42555497

Zelkowicz, T. (2019). Jewish Educators Don't Make Jews: A Sociological Reality Check About Jewish Identity Work. In J. A. Levisohn, Beyond Jewish Identity (pp. 144-166). Academic Studies Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1zjg2x1.10