

Jeffrey Kaplan

The Hungarian Jewish Community and the Question of Anti-Semitism Today

INTRODUCTION

On 28 and 29 June 2021, the Danube Institute sponsored a conference entitled ‘Anti-Semitism in Hungary: Appearance and Reality’. The conference brought together leading figures from the Hungarian Jewish community, Hungarian and foreign scholars, and a representative of the Hungarian government. A broad range of views were presented, but there was unanimous agreement that the problem of Hungarian anti-Semitism has declined significantly in the last decade, and that the Hungarian government has played an active role in this decline. This is the reality that was reflected not only in conference proceedings, but in reports issued by the EU, the United States government, and NGOs concerned with anti-Semitism.

By contrast, the portrayal of Hungary in the Western media presents a much more dire picture. Indeed, when I came to Hungary in the summer of 2020, a close reading of *The New York Times* assured me that the Hungarian Parliament had been closed to allow the prime minister to assume near dictatorial power and that the ruling party’s appeal was in part powered by a wave of anti-Semitism that threatened the Hungarian Jewish community. To my surprise, the Parliament was very much open for business and there had been only one violent anti-Semitic incident reported in the country in the last two years.

The contrast between appearance and reality could not be starker, and it was this dissonance that was the real genesis of the conference, and of the studies to follow.

THE HUNGARIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

The most reliable estimate of the Jewish population in Hungary is 47,000, although a more politicized estimate from MAZSIHISZ (Magyarországi Zsidó Hitközségek Szövetsége or The Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities) ranges as high as 100,000.¹ But the real question is who is doing the counting and who is being counted. Professor András Kovács sheds a good deal of light on the problem. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, with Orthodox Judaism nearly destroyed and the remainder having emigrated, no more than 10 per cent of Hungarian Jews aligned themselves with any religious community, while long-standing assimilationist tendencies reasserted themselves. In terms of measurables, in 2020, only 12,000 Jews paid the voluntary tax to Jewish groups and only perhaps 1 per cent of Jews actually attend synagogue regularly. Thus, while the Jewish population of Hungary is the third largest in the EU, the number of active Jews is really quite small.²

Visits to Jewish synagogues in Budapest and interviews with Hungarian Jews well illustrate the problem. The Dohány Street Synagogue in Budapest’s Jewish Quarter, the

second largest synagogue in the world, is an architectural wonder. For a first time visitor, it evokes echoes of the beautiful, Moorish-influenced architecture in Morocco from the outside, while the interior is a unique synthesis of Jewish, Catholic, and Anglican designs. It even boasts a pipe organ once played by Franz Liszt, which must have scandalized the Orthodox Jews of the time. Yet within its cavernous interior, still boasting tiered balconies that were once reserved for the women of the congregation, an average Sabbath service comprises no more than perhaps thirty souls, many of whom are tourists. Smaller congregations of Orthodox Jews have much the same problem. How dire the issue has become is well illustrated by an anecdote regarding an Orthodox rabbi in Budapest. Having suffered a family tragedy, he was unable to gather a *minyan*—the *halakhically* (*Halakha* translates to Jewish law) mandated ten adult males needed to constitute a religious service—in order to offer prayers for the family member without having to find foreign Jewish visitors on the street and ask them to participate.

In conducting interviews with the Hungarian Jewish community, the timeless question of ‘who is a Jew’ was frequently raised. According to *Halakha*, a Jew is defined solely as the child of a Jewish mother or a convert who has undergone an Orthodox conversion ceremony. The issue in Israel is starkly political. The Israeli Law of Return, fashioned in 1950 and revised in 1970 with Holocaust history in mind, defines a Jew qualifying for citizenship under the Law of Return as anyone with a Jewish family member, however distant, and any converts to Orthodox Judaism. In March 2021, the Israeli Supreme Court widened the gates still further, to include converts to any form of Judaism.³

The US approach is typically American. For all but the Orthodox, a Jew is anyone who feels he or she is Jewish, giving cultural and *Halakhic* Jews equal recognition. How all-encompassing this embrace can become is wonderfully illustrated by the 18-minute video, ‘The Tribe’, which contrasts the history of the ubiquitous Barbie doll with the many

flavours of cultural Judaism. Who would have thought that the blond and seemingly Aryan Barbie was actually Jewish, or that there was such a thing as a ‘Bujew’ for Jews who also practice Buddhism?⁴

The question in Hungary is equally complex. Orthodox rabbis interviewed for this study are in uncommon agreement with Neolog rabbis associated with MAZSIHISZ that the definition of a Jew must be according to *Halakha*, while secular Jewish leaders, particularly the current leadership of MAZSIHISZ, assert that cultural identity is more important. The crux of the argument, however, is not simply about what is needed to form a *minyan* or fill a synagogue. Rather, the real issue is about access to resources, specifically, subsidies from the Hungarian government to the Hungarian Jewish community. And therein lies a story.

THE GREAT DIVIDE

There is a joke among Hungarian Jews that should serve as a cautionary tale for all that follows in this section. Once there was a Hungarian Jew who was washed up on the proverbial desert island after a shipwreck. Years later he is found, and his rescuers are astonished to find that he has built not one but two synagogues. They ask him why he needs two synagogues. He replies, ‘This is the one where I go to pray and that is the one that I will NEVER pray in!’

The great divide of Hungarian Judaism is much like the apocryphal desert island. The great majority of Hungarian Jews are Neologs, and have long been represented by MAZSIHISZ. MAZSIHISZ, which emerged as the successor organization to the communist-era MIOK (Magyar Izraeliták Országos Képviselete or National Representation of Hungarian Israelites), was formed in 1992.⁵ It has become the umbrella organization for not only the Neolog community, but also for the small groups of American-influenced Conservative and Reform Jews. MAZSIHISZ estimates that they represent as many as 90 per cent of Hungarian Jews and, on paper, this is probably close to the truth.

In 1989, Rabbi Baruch Oberlander arrived in

Budapest, and would go on to assume the role of Chief Representative of Chabad Hungary. A brilliant scholar, he quickly won respect and some admiration throughout the Hungarian Jewish community.⁶ He soon attracted an acolyte, also brilliant and charismatic, but also far more abrasive, in Rabbi Slomó Köves. Köves, born Máté Köves in Budapest, went to yeshiva in Pittsburgh and brought back with him a very American assertiveness and boundless energy which did not play as well with much of the staid Jewish community of Hungary.

Rabbi Köves' background was utterly typical of Hungarian Jews of his generation. His upbringing was secular, and although his Jewish roots were not hidden from him as they were from many of his generation, they were not stressed either. In 1991, he met Rabbi Oberlander and embarked on a very different path—one that is the leitmotif of the Chabad mission. To understand the nature of the conflict which followed, a few words about Chabad are in order.

Chabad, known in the English language media as the Lubavitcher movement, developed into the only Jewish missionary group with secular Jews as their target audience, seeking to bring them back to Orthodox practice. The movement is global in scope and boundless in ambition. Its origins can be found in the emerging Hassidic world of the 1780s, when Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady founded the group in present-day Belarus. But it was not until 1950, with the ascension of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, that the group turned decisively toward messianism. An intense cult grew around the Rebbe, seeing him as the long-awaited Meshaiach (Messiah) for whom Jews have been waiting for millennia. Even his death in 1994 did not quell the messianic excitement around Rebbe Schneerson.⁷ Chabad members throughout the world continue to consult him through the multi-volume collection of his letters on such personal issues as education, marriage, and even real estate.⁸

Rabbis Oberlander and Köves attracted a small but growing following, marked for their energy and zeal, which stood in stark contrast

to MAZSIHISZ, which under the leadership of András Heisler had become more a civic than a religious organization. Rabbi Köves in particular appears to be as tireless as he is combative. In 2004, he was a founder of EMIH (The Unified Hungarian Jewish Congregation), the religious base from which all Hungarian Chabad activities spring.

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A list of his initiatives would take up more space than can be allotted in any journal, but on the religious side he leads Torah and other religious teachings, serves as a congregational rabbi, has formed media groups such as the conservative and often satirical *Neokohn* (itself a pun combining the American term Neocon and the Jewish *Kohen* or priest), a university (named Milton Friedman after the American economist), a new Holocaust Museum (House of Fates) and an NGO that tracks anti-Semitic incidents in Hungary (Tett és Védelem Alapítvány or Action and Protection Foundation), to name a few.⁹

But it is the Chabad alliance championed by Rabbi Köves with the Hungarian government that makes him a particular golem in the world of András Heisler. Which brings us to the question of resources. At the ‘Anti-Semitism in Hungary: Appearance and Reality’ conference, Heisler quoted an article that had appeared ‘recently’ in *The Times of Israel*, that said ‘it is unacceptable’ that ‘in our countries’ Jewish organizations are not treated in the same way, and those that ‘sympathize’ with the government are given preferential treatment. He then also quoted the statement

of ten international Jewish organizations that turned to the European Commission asking that Jewish ‘representative organizations’ with a ‘historical embeddedness’ in a given country be treated equally to others whether ‘in terms of support in the public arena or financing’. The statement said that ‘several European governments do not ensure that and provide preferential treatment to non-representative Jewish denominations’. In her response, Heisler said, von der Leyen said the Commission calls on governments to ‘make sure there is a diverse Jewish public life’.¹⁰

The statement was clear enough, though its meaning is multi-layered. On the one hand, MAZSIHISZ receives as much as 80 per cent of the normal government distribution of resources to the Jewish community. On the other, Rabbi Köves has nurtured and often served as go-between in the special relationship between prime ministers Viktor Orbán and Benjamin Netanyahu, which has flowered into close relations with Israel. This has opened the gates to considerable governmental largesse, allowing EMIH to flourish and undertake such high profile but extremely expensive undertakings as the House of Fates, Action and Protection Foundation, and the Milton Friedman University, which seeks to import world class Jewish scholars to join its faculty.

András Heisler, an implacable foe of the Orbán government and all things EMIH, was suitably outraged. This led to the bizarre spectacle of two Orthodox communities, EMIH and MAOIH (Autonomous Orthodox Jewish Community of Hungary) suing MAZSIHISZ for US\$33 million in the Bet Din, or rabbinical court in Jerusalem. The Bet Din obviously has no enforcement power in Hungary, but it does have a moral weight that would be hard for a Jewish group to simply ignore.

The EMIH goal is to renegotiate the 2012 agreement for the restitution of funds for property seized in the Second World War under the terms of a 1991 law. The agreement gave MAZSIHISZ 80 per cent of the funds, or about US\$5 million annually. EMIH and MAOIH each got US\$600,000 per year.¹¹ In this, MAOIH is very much the junior partner with a total membership of perhaps fifty people.

On the other hand, it is better established than EMIH, with a stronger historical claim to be the successor to the thriving Orthodox community that once comprised hundreds of thousands, but which was decimated by the Holocaust. MAOIH's current leader, Robert Deutsch, notes that he was advised to front the lawsuit by his own rabbis, whom he does not name but who are probably Oberlander and Köves.

Which brings us full circle to the ‘who’s a Jew’ argument. András Heisler notes that while all three groups use the money for the Jewish community, MAZSIHISZ is much larger, and so the 2012 agreement should be upheld. In reply, Rabbi Köves alludes to the 12,000 Jews who earmark 1 per cent of their taxes for the Jewish group of their choice. That, however, is still a relatively small number.

According to Rabbi Köves, the fact that people give their 1 per cent to a Jewish community does not mean they are Jewish and it does not mean they are members of a congregation. It just means that they prefer this money go to the Jewish community rather than to the government.¹²

In other words, many of those 12,000 are not *halakhically* Jewish, and if the figure of only about 1,000 Jews as active participants in the Jewish community is sound, the MAZSIHISZ claim to represent most of the roughly 47,000 members of the Hungarian Jewish community rings hollow indeed. Again, it depends on who is doing the counting and who is being counted. This is the US\$33 million question.

For his part, Heisler is already all but conceding defeat in the Bet Din, given that it is an Orthodox institution judging a case brought by two Orthodox communities. In his view, surely, the Slomó Köves golem looms large. Not only is Rabbi Köves connected to the Israeli government, but he hosts key figures in the Jewish world when they visit Hungary.

‘Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi David Lau visited Hungary three times, and not once did he inform my organization that he was coming’, said Heisler. ‘He came to Budapest, visited the prime minister together with EMIH, and afterward we saw it in the newspaper.’

‘I wrote him a letter saying that this isn’t proper, that if you’re the Ashkenazi chief rabbi and you come to Budapest, please inform us. At least let us invite you to sit down for a coffee—we are the biggest Jewish community in East Central Europe. And the second time he came, nothing. The third time, nothing. So while this is not a religious court ruling per se, it’s a very strong sign for us’, he said.¹³

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ANTI-SEMITISM IN HUNGARY TODAY *The Strange Saga of Jobbik*

In 2011, Hungary had an anti-Semitism problem and it was serious. Its parliamentary face was the Jobbik Party, which was formed in 2003. It initially met with little success, garnering a mere 2.2 per cent of the vote in the 2006 parliamentary elections. Shortly thereafter, Jobbik formed Magyar Gárda (Hungarian Guard Movement), which was all too reminiscent of the pre-war Arrow Cross. In 2007, Jobbik gained 14.77 per cent of the vote in the European Parliamentary elections and topped this with 16.67 per cent of the vote in the 2010 Hungarian parliamentary elections. It was now the third largest party in the Hungarian Parliament.¹⁴

Magyar Gárda was the most high-profile of a number of small but active far-right paramilitary groups who acted in concert in 2011 and 2012 to conduct violent anti-Roma and anti-Jewish demonstrations throughout the country. Actions of this sort were occurring throughout Europe at the time, most notably in Germany, and so they attracted little notice in the Western media. That changed when

Jobbik MP Márton Gyöngyösi introduced a proposal for the creation of a ‘Jewish list’, a list of Jews in government who ostensibly posed a security risk. It was a bridge too far, and although Jobbik immediately claimed that Gyöngyösi’s proposal had been misunderstood, it was the beginning of the end for Jobbik Mark 1. There were anti-Jobbik demonstrations across the country, its vote tallies began a precipitous decline, and in 2018, its leader Gábor Vona resigned.

But for Jobbik what began as *Sturm und Drang* ended in farce when Csanád Szegedi, one of the party’s leading anti-Semitic firebrands, was confronted with the fact that he was Jewish. More than that, Szegedi’s grandmother survived Auschwitz, and his grandfather survived the labour camps that in fact saved the lives of many Jewish men during the Holocaust. This is an old story with a particularly Hungarian twist. In the early 1960s, the charismatic leader of the American Nazi Party, George Lincoln Rockwell, drew an idiosyncratic band of misfits and lunatics to his banner, and they all lived together in a wildly dysfunctional ‘barracks’, dressing up in imitation Third Reich brownshirt uniforms. One of the most rabid was Dan Burros, who wrote the group’s official *Stormtrooper’s Manual* and ‘endeared’ himself to the group by strangling their only loyal friend, a pet dog affectionately named Gas Chamber. Confronted by *The New York Times* with evidence that not only was Burros Jewish, but his father was a cantor in the local synagogue and Dan had been duly given a Bar Mitzva and had himself studied in a yeshiva, Burros was unable to bear the dissonance, and committed suicide.¹⁵ The Hollywood film *The Believer* is loosely based on Burros’ life.

Szegedi’s path was less traumatic but much more Hungarian than that of Dan Burros. As noted, a common trope among Hungarian Jews is that they either were unaware of their Jewishness or were raised in a secular, assimilationist atmosphere, and so their Jewish heritage was little more than a family anecdote. Moreover, Hungary has the highest rate of Ashkenazi Jewish blood of any country in the world save Israel¹⁶—a testament

to Hungary’s successful assimilation of non-Roma minorities. Certainly, Jewish intermarriage rates in Hungary have always been high, again a combination of assimilation and an accident of history: the survival of far more Jewish men in labour brigades than Jewish women, who were deported to death camps in Poland.

Asked to leave the party and give up his seat in the European Parliament, Szegedi turned to Rabbi Slomó Köves rather than the Grim Reaper. Following profuse apologies to the Jewish community and a visit to the Holocaust Museum, Szegedi has become an advocate for Israel, Zionism, and the Jewish community.¹⁷ A very Hungarian cautionary tale.

Jobbik today is, at least rhetorically, a very different animal. In 2020, Péter Jakab whose heritage is openly Jewish, took over as party chair and expelled some of the party’s most extreme members. Jobbik no longer uses anti-Semitic rhetoric, though an anti-Roma barb may slip out now and then. It has moved toward the conservative mainstream by rebranding itself Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom (Jobbik—Movement for a Better Hungary). In 2018, it gained 16.7 per cent of the vote and holds 47 seats in Parliament.¹⁸ In fact, Jobbik entered into an alliance with neo-liberal partners in 2019. But this was no more strange than the 2018 endorsement of the then leader of the Jobbik Party Gábor Vona by the peripatetic Rabbi Slomó Köves.¹⁹ Politics make strange bedfellows indeed.

HUNGARIAN ANTI-SEMITISM TODAY

In Hungary today, public expressions of anti-Semitism are proscribed by law. There are no anti-Semitic demonstrations as there were a decade ago, and since 2019 there has been only one violent anti-Semitic incident reported according to both international and Hungarian sources.²⁰ The Action and Protection Foundation’s annual reports illustrate the dearth of anti-Semitic incidents. In 2019, there was one reported assault, six cases of damage to property, and 27 incidents of hate speech. From January to June 2020, there was only one report of discrimination, four cases of damage to property, and eleven

incidents of hate speech.²¹ All sources agree that anti-Semitic violence in Hungary today is statistically negligible, and among the lowest in Europe.

Despite these numbers, perception and reality differ considerably. The December 2018 Eurobarometer survey asked questions concerning anti-Semitism among the general public. Of those surveyed, 45 per cent of Hungarian respondents said anti-Semitism was a ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ important problem in Hungary, significantly fewer than the 77 per cent of Hungarian Jews in the FRA survey. Other significant findings include:

- Just 26 per cent believe anti-Semitism had increased over the past five years, significantly lower than the 38 per cent EU average, and 22 per cent believe anti-Semitism had decreased, the largest percentage in the EU after Romania.

- 46 per cent believe ‘expressions of hostility and threats towards Jewish people in the street or other public places’ are a problem.

- 46 per cent believe ‘people denying the genocide of the Jewish people, the Holocaust’ is a problem.

- 40 per cent believe ‘anti-Semitism in schools and universities’ is a problem.²²

Although there is now a general sense of physical security among the Hungarian Jewish community, the perception that anti-Semitism in Hungary is a significant problem is widespread and a matter of near certainty in the Western media. How to account for this dissonance is a fascinating exercise. It is made more complex by an observation made in an interview by György Szabó, the president of the Hungarian Jewish Heritage Public Foundation. He is a former Fidesz MP and remains close to the Hungarian government. More to the point however, he is an EMIH member and dresses the part of an Orthodox Jew. In our interview with him, he wondered how Jews who report public anti-Semitic incidents or remarks can be recognized as Jewish. There is nothing to distinguish them from other Hungarians.²³

It is a fair question, and one that can in part be answered by one of the more liberal

members of the Jewish community, Adam Schönberger, President and CEO of Marom, Konzervatív vallásos, cionista diákszervezet (Conservative Religious Zionist Students' Organization). Marom is a youth group affiliated with the conservative stream of Judaism, which is centred in the United States but has affiliates in Israel as well. He recalls:

'Yes. In my childhood definitely in the 1980s, early 1990s in school, there was of course, a difference between me and the other kids in school. It always stopped in verbal attacks, but it could be harsh also. So, it was like a type of anti-Semitism in the beginning. Then I went to Jewish school so then these things I just didn't really meet with. But then when I got involved with the Hungarian university system it became also very real for me. I went to university not in Budapest, but in Pécs. I went to liberal arts and I had a lot of encounters with students of history. And those people, I think, at that time, at least who I met, 70–80 per cent of them had a sort of anti-Semitic sense at that time. It was many years ago, like fifteen years ago, or something like that, but that was my tensions. And if I went to a party, they started to chant after a couple of beers far-right or some sort of Nazi slogans, and these kinds of things. Also in Pécs, there was a German faculty and a lot of Germans. Hungarians went there to study and among them, and I met with a lot of them, there were a lot of anti-Semitic feelings in that community as well.

Among the young people, yeah, definitely. And it is interesting because when I started to work in this organization [Marom], and parallelly this whole social media bubble was created and I found my place in this bubble, and therefore, I just had fewer and fewer encounters with those people than when I went to university and went to school, and these type of encounters with the other bubble actually almost ceased to exist in my life. And then, when I met with anti-Semitism, it was actually on the internet in comments and the other things that one can easily find on different pages and so forth. So physical encounters are of course significantly reduced in my

*life with anti-Semitic people and therefore, I didn't really meet with this in my personal life. I didn't really work in those types of environments where people were actually verbally anti-Semitic, so after university I never met with this type of atrocities, and this type of people, and this type of groups.'*²⁴

Internet-born anti-Semitism is both ubiquitous and global. It knows no state boundaries and shares information, speculation, and vitriol freely across borders. It is beyond our scope, so we return to Hungary and a more academic take.

AN ACADEMIC INTERLUDE

Professor András Kovács²⁵ notes that the overall rates of anti-Semitism in Hungary are as follows:

Table 1 The percentage of anti-Semites among the Hungarian adult population, 2006–2017.

	2006	2017
Extreme anti-Semites	18	26
Moderate anti-Semites	16	10
Non-anti-Semites/Unclassified	66	64

Overall, the numbers indicate that while those who are not anti-Semitic remain over the decade steady at 66 per cent of the Hungarian population, there has been some changes in extreme anti-Semitism, which has grown, and moderate anti-Semitism, which has declined. This can in part be accounted for by the rise of left-wing anti-Semitism stemming from anti-Zionism and opposition to Israeli policies in Palestine.

Professor Kovács further identifies three strands of anti-Semitism in Hungary. Religious anti-Judaism encompasses a range of beliefs such as the existence of a global Jewish conspiracy, charges of deicide in the killing of Christ and the like. Secular anti-Semitism ranges from opposition to Israeli policies to the belief that Jews have too much power in Hungary and the like. Emotional anti-Semitism is the hardest to quantify. The issue is a simple scale of sympathy for Jews and antipathy towards Jews.

Table 2 Different types of anti-Semitism in 2011 and 2017 (percentage)

	2011	2017
Religious anti-Judaism		
Non-anti-Semites	55	45
Moderate anti-Semites	19	20
Extreme anti-Semites	10	14
Unclassifiable	16	21
Secular anti-Semitism		
Non-anti-Semites	27	25
Moderate anti-Semites	27	26
Extreme anti-Semites	16	19
Unclassifiable	30	30
Emotional anti-Semitism		
Non-anti-Semites	59	63
Moderate anti-Semites	13	8
Extreme anti-Semites	20	22
Unclassifiable	8	7

In sum, anti-Semitism exists in Hungary as it does in every nation of the world. The increase in left-wing anti-Semitism is notable, while the other forms of anti-Semitism have remained stable or declined over the last decade.

THE VIEW FROM ABROAD

The case against Hungary, which can be found in the Western press and in elite discourse, follows two primary tributaries. In Israel, the collective memory of Hungarian Holocaust survivors remains strong, and continues to shape popular perceptions of Hungary.²⁶ The close diplomatic relationship between Israel and Hungary, and the even closer relationship between prime ministers Orbán and Netanyahu play exceedingly well on the Israeli right, but among the slightly more than 50 per cent of Israelis who detest the former Israeli prime minister, the picture is less sanguine. The Israeli view will, of course, change and evolve over time, but archetypal beliefs change more slowly than ongoing political trends.

In the US, the case is much more complex. There is little popular awareness of the history of the Hungarian Holocaust. Rather, the view of Hungary is shaped by the memory of the Cold War. Thus the dominant theme is 1956, and it is reinforced by the many Hungarian refugees who came to the West in the wake

of the Soviet invasion. Hungarians are seen as the brave freedom fighters who stood alone against Soviet oppression.

The evidence presented against Hungary in the Western media is therefore much more contemporary in nature. The main charge in this indictment centres on the György Soros campaign. The short-lived poster campaign and some of the more extreme rhetoric did seem to have an element of classical anti-Semitism. With headlines like 'Viktor Orbán's anti-Semitism problem' and 'A Friend to Israel, and to Bigots: Viktor Orbán's "Double Game" on Anti-Semitism', Hungary and the Orbán regime are commonly depicted as both anti-Semitic and anti-democratic, with each trope intertwined and mutually supporting.²⁷

In reading more deeply into the charges, we find a familiar cast of characters. A very cautious witness for the prosecution is none other than András Heisler, whose grievance is less the anti-Soros poster campaign—which depicted the financier in a way that was strikingly reminiscent of the 1930s-era 'Smiling Jew' German propaganda poster—than the cover of *Figyelő*, a Hungarian magazine that depicted a cover shot of Soros's face as a gentle rain of forint banknotes falls all about him. He took this as an anti-Semitic attack, and there may have been an element of truth in that, but he is no favourite of the prime minister—an antipathy that may date to his invitation to a gathering with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Before Netanyahu's arrival, the Soros posters were removed, but Heisler—who is no one's idea of a diplomat—raised the topic in front of the Israeli Prime Minister. That embarrassment was an element in the EMIH–Fidesz embrace that is seldom remarked upon, but very much exists.²⁸

'There is this double game', Heisler said in an interview. He described the Orbán administration's relationship with Hungary's 100,000-strong Jewish population as 'incredibly positive', but added that officials often make gestures that 'ruin the values that they purport to espouse'.²⁹

And if András Heisler is the witness for the prosecution, who else but Rabbi Slomó Köves would take the stand for the defence?

As he put it, ‘When the prime minister of the country openly praises the Jewish state and the leader of the Jewish state, I don’t think there’s any other tool which is more effective at decreasing the anti-Semitism of the local population’, Köves told *The Times of Israel*.³⁰

‘Internet-born anti-Semitism is both ubiquitous and global. It knows no state boundaries and shares information, speculation, and vitriol freely across borders’

CONCLUSION

What has come out of this research is that, in contrast to the Western press, very few Jews we have interviewed believe that the Soros campaign was in fact anti-Semitic either in intent or execution. With only a few exceptions, the Soros campaign is seen by those we have interviewed as entirely political; moreover, neither he nor the rhetoric surrounding his activities is seen as having any connection to the Jewish community in Hungary whatsoever. A significant exception to this consensus is the Chief Rabbi of Hungary, Róbert Frölich, who sees a more ominous reading of the anti-Soros campaign, although he does not state that the intent was explicitly anti-Semitic.³¹

This view, however, was lost on the Western media, or simply ignored. Rather, the charge of Hungarian anti-Semitism became an element of a wider critique of what has come to be called *illiberal democracy*, and this could be rolled into an indictment of conservative parties in Europe, which could then be equated with fears that the Trump administration constituted a threat to American democracy as well. This media-driven view of Hungary as anti-Semitic and anti-democratic has not taken deep root in the US, however, and after the events in Washington DC on 6 January it has drawn less and less public interest.

In sum, the Hungarian government has taken significant steps to combat anti-Semitism, and this has led to the dramatic decrease in the anti-Semitic violence that was common in Hungary a decade ago. The government’s embrace of Rabbi Slomó Köves does not draw rave reviews in the wider Hungarian Jewish community, and the MAZSIHISZ–EMIH divide grows ever more heated and colours much of the perception of the steps taken by the Orbán government to support the Jewish community. The complaint that the government favours EMIH is obvious and has a good deal of truth to it. That however is a political question for the Hungarian Jewish community. What all agree on is that under the Orbán government, Jews in Hungary are more secure than a decade ago, and significant steps to combat anti-Semitism have been undertaken with some considerable degree of success.

NOTES

¹ Berman Jewish DataBank, ‘World Jewish Population, 2018’ (2019), [https://www.jewishdatabank.org/content/upload/hjdb/2019_World_Jewish_Population_\(AJYB,_DellaPergola\)_DataBank_Final.pdf](https://www.jewishdatabank.org/content/upload/hjdb/2019_World_Jewish_Population_(AJYB,_DellaPergola)_DataBank_Final.pdf). For the MAZSIHISZ estimate, <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/about/communities/HU>.

² András Kovács and Ildikó Barna, ‘Zsidók és zsidóság Magyarországon 2017: Egy szociológiai kutatás eredményei’ (Jews and Jewry in Hungary 2017. Results of a Sociological Research), (2018). Interview with Prof. András Kovács, 3 June 2021.

³ Noah Feldman, ‘Who Is a Jew? Israel’s Supreme Court Expands the Answer’, *Bloomberg Opinion* (2 March 2021), <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/>

[articles/2021-03-02/israel-expands-its-right-of-return-and-sparks-a-debate](https://www.moxieinstitute.org/articles/2021-03-02/israel-expands-its-right-of-return-and-sparks-a-debate).

⁴ For a link to the video and a long in-depth discussion of the film, see ‘The Tribe’, *The Moxie Institute*, <http://www.moxieinstitute.org/films/the-tribe/>.

⁵ Raphael Patai, *The Jews of Hungary: History, Culture, Psychology* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2015), 614–615, 48–50.

⁶ Interview with Rabbi Róbert Frölich, 12 May 2021.

⁷ On early Chabad history, see Immanuel Etkes, *Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady: The Origins of Chabad Hasidism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2014). Biographies of Rebbe Schneerson come in two flavours, academic and hagiographic. For one of each,

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⁸ Interview with György Szabó, 22 April 2021.

⁹ Interview with Rabbi Slomó Köves, 1 June 2021.

¹⁰ András Heisler conference address, 28 June 2021. Translated by Zsófia Tóth-Bíró.

¹¹ Yaakov Schwartz, ‘Israeli Rabbis Order Hungary Government to Freeze Payouts to Sparring Local Jews’, *The Times of Israel* (23 April 2021), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-rabbis-order-hungary-government-to-freeze-payouts-to-sparring-local-jews/>.

¹² Schwartz, ‘Israeli Rabbis’.

¹³ Schwartz, ‘Israeli Rabbis’.

¹⁴ András Bíró Nagy, Tamás Boros, and Zoltán Vasali, ‘More Radical than the Radicals: The Jobbik Party in International Comparison’, in *Right-Wing Extremism in Europe: Country Analyses, Counter-Strategies and Labor-Market Oriented Exit Strategies* (2013), 229.

On Jobbik, see also András Kovács, ‘Antisemitic Prejudices and Dynamics of Antisemitism in Post-Communist Hungary’ (Berlin: Jüdisches Museum Berlin, 2013); Jeffrey Stevenson Murer, ‘The Rise of Jobbik, Populism, and the Symbolic Politics of Illiberalism in Contemporary Hungary’, *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, 24/2 (2015), 79–102.

¹⁵ A. M. Rosenthal and Arthur Gelb, *One More Victim: The Life and Death of an American-Jewish Nazi* (New York: New American Library, 1967); Jeffrey Kaplan, *Encyclopedia of White Power: A Sourcebook on the Radical Racist Right* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2000), 33–35.

¹⁶ Cnaan Liphshiz, ‘Hungarians Show Highest Rate of Ashkenazi Genes after Israelis, Company Says’, *The Times of Israel* (13 August 2019), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hungarians-show-highest-rate-of-ashkenazi-genes-after-israelis-company-says/>.

¹⁷ Eyder Peralta, ‘Leader of Anti-Semitic Party in Hungary Discovers He’s Jewish’, *NPR* (14 August 2012), <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2012/08/14/158773637/leader-of-anti-semitic-party-in-hungary-discovers-hes-jewish>.

¹⁸ Shaun Walker, ‘Does Electing a Leader with Jewish Roots Prove Jobbik Has Changed?’, *The Guardian* (12 February 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/12/electing-leader-jewish-roots-jobbik-changed-hungary-shift;Norsk.Senterfor.Forskningsdata>, ‘Hungary – Political Parties’, https://o.nsd.no/european_election_database/country/hungary/parties.html.

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[trust-the-radical-hungarian-partys-rebranding/](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Antisemitism_per_cent20in_per_cent20Europe.pdf).

²⁰ *Antisemitism in Europe: Implications for U.S. Policy*, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (Washington, DC), 20–21, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Antisemitism_per_cent20in_per_cent20Europe.pdf.

²¹ *Anti-Semitic Hate Crimes in Incidents in Hungary 2019. Annual Short Report*, Action and Protection Foundation (Budapest, 2020), 6, https://tev.hu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/APL_annual-short_2020JAN-JUN_72dpiKESZ.pdf; *Anti-Semitic Hate Crimes and Hate Incidents in Hungary 2019. Annual Short Report, January–June 2020*, Action and Protection Foundation (Budapest, 2021), 4, https://tev.hu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/APL_annual-short_2020JAN-JUN_72dpiKESZ.pdf; Interview with Kálmán Szalai, 2 June 2021.

²² European Commission, ‘Perceptions of Antisemitism’, January 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/comfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/85035>.

²³ Interview with György Szabó, 22 April 2021.

²⁴ Interview with Adam Schönberger, 16 April 2021. In 2019, the Marom community centre was attacked and vandalized by neo-Nazis. However, Schönberger notes that this was not an anti-Semitic attack. Rather, it was anti-LGBT and stemmed from his work with LGBT groups.

²⁵ All data and tables in this section are from Ildikó Barna and András Kovács, ‘Religiosity, Religious Practice, and Antisemitism in Present-Day Hungary’, *Religions*, 10/9 (2019), <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/9/527/pdf>.

²⁶ Interview with Prof. Jehuda Hartman, 4 January 2021.

²⁷ William Echikson, ‘Viktor Orbán’s Antisemitism Problem’, *Politico* (13 May 2019), <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-antisemitism-problem-hungary-jews/>; Patrick Kingsley, ‘A Friend to Israel, and to Bigots: Viktor Orbán’s “Double Game” on Antisemitism’, *The New York Times* (14 May 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/14/world/europe/orban-hungary-antisemitism.html>.

²⁸ Interview with Rabbi Slomó Köves, 1 June 2021.

²⁹ Kingsley, ‘A Friend to Israel, and to Bigots’.

³⁰ Yaakov Schwartz, ‘Fans of Orbán or Not, Hungarian Jews Are Optimistic ahead of PM’s Israel Visit’, *The Times of Israel*, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/fans-of-orban-or-not-hungarian-jews-are-optimistic-ahead-of-pms-israel-visit/>.

³¹ Interview with Rabbi Róbert Frölich, 12 May 2021.