

## Introduction

The latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed the gradual erosion of aristocratic and ecclesiastical leadership in Hungary. Powerful social forces challenged the system of tradition and privilege that were the pillars of the thousand-year-old Christian state of Hungary.

The course of change was transitional rather than revolutionary. Progressive and liberal factions in the aristocracy had already softened the rigid confines of the jealously guarded sociocultural exclusivism of the old regime. The initial attempts at reform were vigorously supported by the emergent middle class. Having won economic respectability and grudging social acceptance, this class proceeded to challenge the aristocracy for political leadership. The social and political activities of the middle class rested on solid economic bases. Life in the cities reflected the proud, ostentatious display of riches and a growing love of luxury. Middle-class interest, however, did not stop at material and political fulfillment. Sensitively attuned to the intellectual activities and achievements of the West, progressive representatives of the middle class exerted pressure on the weakest point in the traditional structure of national identity: culture. Their attempt to raise the level of education was successful and it led to an unprecedented growth of middle-class interest and participation in cultural activity. More people read more books and newspapers than ever before. Plays in theaters were performed before steadily growing audiences. The cultural monopoly of the aristocracy and the Church was broken. The intellectual renaissance that began in the last decade of the nineteenth century confidently revealed the unmistakable signs of middle-class leadership.

A surprising, yet not unexpected by-product of the victory of the middle class was the emergence of the Hungarian Jews

from the strict confines of their protracted isolation. Although they had constituted an important force in the economic structure of Hungary by performing essential commercial and financial services since the birth of national consciousness, the Jews remained social outcasts and political and cultural nonentities. The victory of middle-class materialism brought unforeseen changes. It not only rendered the cherished system of values of the old regime hopelessly obsolete, but also broadened the limited scope of sociocultural acceptance and respectability. The call to assimilation, however, did not find the Hungarian Jews unprepared. Since the first half of the nineteenth century, they had made many successful, though not always rewarding attempts at social and cultural integration. They were allowed to settle in cities in growing numbers and gradually adopted Hungarian as the principal vehicle of daily communication and literary expression. Their cultural assimilation was so rapid and complete that Jewish intellectuals emerged, not only as grateful followers and enthusiastic supporters of the new order, but as powerful leaders as well. Indeed, the victory of the middle class could hardly have achieved lasting cultural results without the participation of Jewish writers and poets. They assumed positions of leadership in the evolution of modern Hungarian literature by the specific nature of their participation and professional versatility. Admittedly, Hungary's best writers and poets were not of Jewish origin. However, their discovery and popularization would have been postponed or rendered unlikely in some cases without the remarkable talent of the first generation of emancipated Jewish intellectuals for organization and criticism, and without the financial support of enlightened and farsighted Jewish patrons of literature and the arts.

The beginning of middle-class literature is usually traced to the appearance of the literary magazine, *A Hét* (*The Week*) in 1890. Its talented editor was the Jewish poet József Kiss. It proved to be a much-needed training ground and an increasingly popular mouthpiece for the first generation of middle-class writers and poets, both Christian and Jewish. It also established the dominant themes of progressive middle-class literature: spiritual soli-

arity with its Western counterparts, especially the French, and a searching self-view that revealed, interpreted, and debated virtually all facets of the new Hungarian society.

In 1908, the periodical *Nyugat* (*West*) emerged as the guiding force and coordinator of all progressive middle-class cultural activity. Its founders, principal benefactors, and editors were Ignotus (Hugó Veigelsberg), Ernő Osvát, Lajos Hatvany, and Miksa Fenyő—all of them Jews. For over thirty years it was the most influential Hungarian literary magazine. It also proclaimed solidarity with the progressive literary circles of Western Europe and pledged to serve the interests of the middle class, from which the majority of its readers came. Yet, it rarely placed restrictions on its literary contributors or forced them to cater to the taste of its readers. Thus the writers and poets of *Nyugat*, who gave twentieth-century Hungarian literature its most distinguished representatives, remained highly individualistic and independent of the steadily solidifying system of social values that their readers professed. Despite the danger of conflict, their popularity and influence continued to grow.

Not all Jewish writers and poets identified themselves with the progressive wing of middle-class culture. In opposition to the progressive, international outlook that *Nyugat* represented, powerful conservative circles upheld rigidly traditional views. They glorified nationalism and Hungary's special role as a bastion of Christianity. Contemptuous of the city and the middle-class outlook, their literary activity expounded the virtues of the "true" Hungarian ideal. They were guardians of the heritage of a bygone age of stagnant medievalism whose main characters, the courageous noble and the hardworking, honest peasant, lived in the peaceful setting of the scenic countryside. The conservatives dominated the most prestigious institutions of Hungarian culture: the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the Kisfaludy Society, and the Petöfi Society. In spite of the prevailing spirit of exclusivism, which rested on aristocratic and Christian values, they extended recognition of achievement to acceptable Jewish representatives of contemporary culture and invited them to become members.

The emergence of the proletariat deepened polarization in

Hungarian society. Gradually increasing interest in the portrayal and interpretation of the life of the workers gave birth to socialist literature. Although initially the proletariat did not make a firm impression on the masses of middle-class Jews, the hard life of the worker found a sensitive response in the works of a number of Jewish writers and poets.

The aftermath of the First World War and the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic (March-August 1919) shattered the fragile façade of the middle-class "melting-pot," and revealed the tenuous position of the Jews in Hungary. They had fought with distinction in the armies of the Dual Monarchy, and made substantial financial contributions to the war effort, yet they were accused of disloyalty, speculation, and profiteering. Because of the Jewish origin of a number of high functionaries of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, Jews were often branded as enemies of the nation by irresponsible, yet not unpopular exponents of political demagoguery and religious fanaticism. Despite the consolidation that followed the election of Admiral Miklós Horthy as Regent of Hungary (1920) and that gradually brought under control the bloody atrocities of the punitive "White Terror," the Jewish question became a central theme in virtually every sector of society. The nascent forces of neonationalism, spreading the inciting slogans of their fascist philosophy, were contained politically but allowed to remain organized. Their theory of exclusivism, which was built on the irreconcilable biological differences between Jews and Christians, envisaged the creation of a new Hungary with exclusion of its Jewish citizens.

The response of Jewish intellectuals was firm and determined. Their position seemed secure and they continued to adhere to the course of uncompromising assimilation. Most of them retained their Jewish identity but carefully isolated it from their profession, which they had put to the service of national culture. They strove to prove themselves to be unimpeachable citizens of the highest moral and professional caliber. The steady growth of neonationalism and its increasingly vocal and vicious propaganda, however, forced the Jewish writers and poets to reexamine the problems of assimilation and Jewish identity. Most of them

continued to maintain that adherence to religious tradition did not distract them from the fulfillment of social responsibilities. Their sophisticated intellectual reasoning, however, failed to alter or soften the racial interpretation of national and religious identity. Other Jewish writers went beyond what was considered ethically and professionally prudent. They hoped to escape the ever-growing menace of nationalism by turning against religious tradition and portraying Jewish characters in their works in a decidedly contemptuous manner. A notable exception to the hurried activities of Jewish intellectuals searching for solutions to their social predicament was Péter Ujvári, a truly Jewish writer who by choice remained dedicated to religious tradition, which for him was an inexhaustible source of inspiration and creative energy.

By the late 1930s, the battle for social acceptance through professional excellence was lost. Isolated from the general public by sweeping political restrictions, Jewish writers and poets were either silenced or forced to restrict their work to the cultural confines of the Jewish community. As a result, Jewish magazines and yearbooks became the sole repositories of Hungarian-Jewish literary works. Although purely secular, assimilationist themes appeared frequently, the Bible and Jewish history gradually became the dominant features of the newly resurrected ghetto literature. Jewish literary activity continued at a rapidly decreasing pace until October 15, 1944, when the Arrow Cross Party assumed control of the country and sealed the fate of Hungarian Jewry.

The Holocaust left a shattered remnant. The position of Hungarian Jewry in the postwar society was clearly defined and guaranteed by constitutional safeguards. It led to the reconstruction of community life. The revival of Jewish culture was a considerably more difficult task, since only a handful of Jewish writers and poets survived the destruction. It emerged with renewed energy by drawing from its principal source of inspiration: the physical existence of a drastically reduced community. To the traditional themes, the painfully emerging literature of the Holocaust was added. Those who resumed their literary

activity played a useful role in the evolution of the new socialist literature. They exposed the inhumanity of the Horthy era, the anti-Semitism of the idyllic "good old days" of the Dual Monarchy of Francis Joseph I, and praised the new leadership for returning law, order, and the freedom of religion. Otherwise, the post-liberation course of Hungarian-Jewish literature was not marked by substantial change. Jewish themes were usually confined to aspects of social assimilation and religious identity. Survival was assured by communal conformity to tradition in behavior and outlook. With respect to World Jewry, Hungarian Jews adhered to the spirit and practice of self-sufficiency. They upheld the concept of religious brotherhood, but rejected the implications of political internationalism. They supported the humanitarian and cultural aspirations of pro-Palestine movements, but kept aloof from political Zionism. The modest renaissance of creative energy combined the rich heritage of the past with the contemporary expressions of Jewish identity. At present, Hungarian-Jewish culture reveals encouraging signs of progress. The high quality of uninterrupted scholarship and literary creativity attests not only to the successful preservation of past achievements, but to continuity as well.

The purpose of this collection of short stories is to attempt to dispel the misconception that, because it is too strictly confined to satisfy regional taste, Hungarian-Jewish culture, particularly literature, has little or no appeal to the general Jewish public. To uphold that view is to misunderstand the nature and meaning of Jewish life in Hungary. Whereas the professed tradition of official community attitude glorified service in the interest of the Hungarian nation, individual Jews, having left the land of their birth, encountered little difficulty in making rapid sociocultural adjustment to the new social environment. The example of Theodor Herzl, Stephen Wise, Ferenc Molnár, George Széll, and Leó Szilárd indicates that their Hungarian-Jewish origin did not act as an impediment to significant literary, musical, and scientific achievement. Similarly, the evolution of Hungarian-Jewish

literature took place in an accommodating national cultural milieu. It responded to the intellectual needs of a Jewish community struggling for equality and respectability. Admittedly, national themes dominate Hungarian-Jewish literature, but the number of novels and poems dealing with biblical and general Jewish subjects is considerable. Therefore, the isolation of Hungarian-Jewish writers and poets from World Jewry evolved not as a result of the limited scope of interest that their works generated, so much as because of the forbidding barrier of the Hungarian language. Unlike their counterparts in Russia and Poland, who wrote in Yiddish, the traditionally preferred vehicle of supranational communication, Hungarian-Jewish writers and poets expressed themselves in the language of their countrymen. They played an indispensable role in the struggle of the Jewish community for equality and significantly furthered the cause of cultural integration.

The short stories in this volume were selected with the intention of presenting the most influential Hungarian-Jewish literary figures. It is hoped that the removal of the linguistic barrier will demonstrate that they rightfully belong to the mainstream of Jewish culture and retard the menacing descent of the veil of oblivion.