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# CONSIDERATIONS ON THE SITUATION OF THE JEWS FROM ROMANIA AND HUNGARY DURING THE YEARS 1945-1953

*Anca OLTEAN\**

**Abstract.** *The Jews from Romania and Hungary hoped that the installation of communism will put an end to the discriminations they had to bear in the past which culminated with the Holocaust. In a few years they realized that communism will not improve their situation and a lot of them chose to emigrate in Israel, especially in Romania. In Hungary, much more Jews chose to integrate in the communist state and not to emigrate.*

**Keywords:** *Jews, Romania, Hungary, communism, assimilation, emigration*

## **Introduction**

Marx expressed his point of view on Jewish question considering that the emancipation of Jews in modern society meant the separation from Judaism (Wistricht, 1982: 25). In the conception of Marx to be a Jew meant to accept the religion of money and human progress had to be achieved after the end of this religion (Wistricht, 1982: 26). Marx was aware that the process of emancipation of Jewry manifested in the framework of capitalist society which he considered governed by private property and selfish interests. In several occasions, Marx manifested his critical opinion about the Jews. They became an interesting topic only by giving up to the quality of Jews.

The author Robert S. Wistricht explains that the orientation of Jewry towards radical ideas and towards socialism began at the end of XIX century, after 1870, and gives the example of German Jewry of leftist orientation and which get involved in Social Democrat Party. A lot of Jews who joined SPD were not of Marxist orientation and approached the social democrats from humanitarian considerations towards the oppressed social classes and because of their ideal to build a better society. What was interesting (Wistricht, 1982: 75) at Jews of leftist orientation was that they rejected their Jewish affiliation as Marx did it. The involvement of Jews in leftist movements was underlined by other authors<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanislaw Krajevski, *Jews, communism and the Jewish Communists*: "Most Jews who left the closed traditional communities tended to support political radicalism. If they did not choose Zionism, they supported the revolutionary left. Sometimes both. Secular Yiddish culture was predominantly leftist. What is even more relevant, Jews were important in communist movements. They were important among revolutionary leaders, both before and after the seizure of power by the communists". Also, Raphael Patai in the work *The Jews of Hungary. History, culture, psychology*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1996, p. 605, asserts that they were more social democrats and communists among the Jews than among the rest of the population. The Jews, considers the same author, were more receptive to ideas and movements who brought the change in social order.

### **The Jews from Romania and Hungary during the years 1945-1953**

Communism allowed a new emancipation of Jewry to the extent to which it was disposed to give up to the religion and traditional values, but also to the quality of member of Jewish community. The communism allowed the affirmation of some Jews but the situation of Jewish community was in danger. Stanislaw Krajevski shows that anti-Semites exaggerated the involvement of Jews in communism and considered it a Jewish creation implemented and imported exclusively by the Jews. Maybe because this anti-Semitism which some of us show in the interpretation of historical facts, is a consequence of disputes from the past or of a precarious culture from communist times when what was not Romanian was put under question mark. The examination of the role played by communist Jews, bring us to the point to see our part of responsibility. Because there were also a lot of Romanians who took advantage of communist governments, so as there were a lot of victims both on our side, but also of the Jews, among the political dissidents or political prisoners which worked on Dunăre - Marea Neagră channel.

Holocaust affected the whole Jewry totally. They were a lot of people who, after the war, lost their families, especially among the Jews. Communism needed these people who lost their roots, to form them in its own style and to use them. The Jewish street was a place which communism tried to conquer<sup>2</sup>. On the other side, while for majority of Romanian and Hungarian population the presence of Russians was a reason of fear, for the Jews this was a liberation because of the fact that Hitler and Stalin were in opposite camps. A lot of the Jews who became communist in the years 1950, believed in a moral setting right of the societies from these two countries, Romania and Hungary, by adopting communism. In a interview given to the magazine *Observator cultural*, professor Ion Ianoși asserts the enthusiasm which he had in these years for leftist ideologies: „I had the hope, after 1944, in a setting right of historical and social climate. Even for minorities. I was double minoritarian. I was a Jew, and at home we were speaking Hungarian. After that, I became a Romanian intellectual by my own decision” (Safirman, Volovici, 2007: 163) [transl. A.O].

Referring to the question to which we try to find an answer, namely the Jewish contribution to the construction of communism, we consider that, professor Ianoși give a moderate answer and close to reality: „The Jews will be blamed in the same time or alternatively – for creating both the capitalism and socialism. They would have created the selfish capitalism, and, in the same time, would have dominated radical socialism. Both assertions are true (partial and complex), and, by absolutizations false” (Safirman, Volovici, 2007: 169) [transl.A.O]. On the other side, it must be remembered the Jews who fell victims of communist regime, not few, aspect which is asserted by Leon Volovici: „Paradoxically, during communist period, when the Jews of Romania got away of the fear of Holocaust, when they had their own state, the Jews entered <<with equal rights>> in the new society, at all levels from the superior hierarchy of party and in repressive structures, in Security, in Police etc., in the same time, the Jews gave a big number of political dissidents, both as Zionists and as representatives of class enemy, both as ex-communists and <<members of Nomenklature>> fell into disgrace as <<deviationists>> or <<saboteurs>>. Others are <<imperialist agents>>, accused of liberal sympathies or for sympathies for National Party of Peasants or even, some of them, of collaboration with

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<sup>2</sup> The fact that the Jews who lost family ties were a target for communists was also shown by Stanislaw Krajevski, *op.cit.*

Antonescu” (Safirman, Volovici, 2007: 104). Also, other authors describe the difficult situation in which the Jews were in the communist states from Eastern Europe<sup>3</sup>.

It must be remembered that the years which followed after the war were the time when Romanian state tried to make justice to the Jews by the processes directed against the war criminals which took place in the tribunals from Iasi and Bucharest. There were also imperfections of this try to make justice, quite some of the guilty persons succeeded not to be condemned, others were condemned and later rehabilitated and became even members of Romanian Communist Party (Friling, Ioanid, Ionescu: 2005). But, it was succeeded the cleaning of the Romanian state of Nazi reminiscences, and this aspect created for the Jews a proper framework for integration in the society which the communists wanted to create<sup>4</sup>. Anti-Semitism was eliminated in the years which followed the war, but it reappeared in public life because of the fight of Stalin against cosmopolitans and anti-Zionism manifested in the last years of his life. This politics reverberates in all communist block. The topic of Holocaust was ignored by communist historiography because of its ethnocentric logic and because of the lack of allocation of a role for the history of minorities in the national history (Friling, Ioanid, Ionescu; 2005: 345).

There are also opinions according to which Jewish community from Romania was privileged in the years which followed after the Second World War. Thus, Mioara Anton asserts: “On the other hand, Hungarian and Jewish minority evolved from the condition of victims of war to the condition of great beneficiaries” (Anton, 2006: 237). She considered that the Jews and Hungarians joined Romanian Communist Party and that “the unity of working class, independent of nationality, represents the antithesis of nationalism” (Anton,

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Bauquet et François Bocholier (dir), *Le communisme et des élites en Europe Centrale*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2006, p. 30 shows the precarious condition of the Jewish elites from Central Europe during communist domination: “En premier lieu, les tragédies de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale ont amorcé des processus de destruction sociale et physique de pans entiers des élites locales: extermination des élites juives, qui prive ces sociétés d’une partie notable de leurs élites économiques et culturelles; politiques systématiques de repression voire de liquidation d’élites susceptibles de constituer l’épine dorsale d’une résistance nationale, comme dans la Pologne soumise à la double domination stalinienne et hitlérienne; expulsions massives des Allemands de Tchecoslovaquie en 1945. Ici plus qu’ailleurs, les violences de la stalinisation ne font que prolonger un long cycle de violence et de repression dont le massacre de Katyn constitue un des épisodes particulièrement saillants”.

<sup>4</sup> In ensemble, the *Work Report Final (Final Report)* elaborated by the International Commission for the study of Holocaust in Romania shows the positive aspects of the end of the processes directed against war criminals: “Above the possible hesitations, above some errors in the course of the processes, of some inclinations towards politization, especially in the group Antonescu, the processes of war criminals were led in a legal framework. This can not be today not taken into consideration, so it suggests the ones who try to rehabilitate persons accused in these processes, on the ground that there were processes directed and made by communists. The processes enrolled in a coherent political context and post war logic and had a legal base similar with the process of Nurnberg. This institutional framework was inspired on one hand by valid international legislation concerning the war and situations of war, but also on the adhesion of the victors to values and principles specific to peace and humanism.

A special element which must be underlined in this context is the fact that the processes analyzed individual faults, a basic feature of any state of law and did not rely on collective guilt. The element of change is the fact that these processes demonstrated that not only the one who push on the trigger is guilty of crime, but also these persons who prepare politically and institutionally the context in which discrimination and mass crime, on ethnical, political and racial criteria become reality”. [ transl. A.O] (*Raport final*, p. 337)

2006: 238). We consider that this unity was not genuine taking into consideration the way in which communism was imposed, at least in the first years after the war. Among the Jews there were a lot of people who brought the progress of the societies where they lived and surely these people could not be satisfied by the restrained universe of Romanian state. And when they had the occasion, they emigrated to a large extent to Israel, where not only that they built socialism so as some communist leaders would have wanted, but they also contributed to the construction of their own democratic state. Their wish to emigrate was so high that they renounced to their jobs of superior level and even at their houses which were confiscated by the state, only because they wanted to go to Israel.

In Hungary, Raphael Patai (Patai, 1996: 597) considers that the Jews did not trust Hungarians, and they did not believe that Hungarians are no more anti-Semite and the reality was that there were a lot anti-Semite Hungarians after the war. This aspect was due to the repressions suffered by the Jews during Holocaust. The Hungarian Jews were better educated than the Hungarian ethnics (Patai, 1996) and this created the premises to get important jobs. Both in Romania, and in Hungary, there were frictions between Hungarian owners and the non-Jews who wanted to keep the houses which they succeed to get in fascist period. There are proves that also after the war, anti-Semitism continued to exist. In Hungary, anti-Semite manifestations reached the situations of pogroms. In time, after the war, the Jews from Romania and Hungary assimilated getting closer to Romanian culture, respectively Hungarian, getting involved in politics or entering in dialogue with the majority. We can say that both in Romania and in Hungary<sup>5</sup> the Jews had the wish to be the same like the majority of population and hence their wish to assimilate. The assimilation was achieved by change of names, mixed marriages or by passing to Christian religion. Harry Kuller describes very well this variation of the Jews between integration and emigration, this expectations or reticence which the Jews of Romania had towards the communism<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Raphael Patai (Patai, p. 604) considers that Hungarian Jews had the wish to be the same like Hungarian people and a consequence of this aspect is their wish to integrate after the war. We consider that this assertion is true also in the case of Romania, but the assimilation to Romanian culture and society did not stop the process of emigration of Romanian Jews.

<sup>6</sup> Harry Kuller in the work "Evreii în anii tranziției spre comunism (1944-1948)" / The Jews in the years of transition to communism (1944-1948) in Acad. Nicolae Cajal, Dr. Harry Kuller (coord), *Contribuția evreilor din România la cultură și civilizație*, Ed. Hasefer, Buc, 2004, p. 155 describes the moral and soul state of Romanian Jewry after the war: „After August 23 1944, a great part of Jewish bourgeoisie had the ilusion, for a while, that „Americans are coming”. The Jewish communists, in opposition, embraced the communist-intellectualist ideal. Americans did not come when they were waited for and communism was not built in Romania and elsewhere, according to the expectations. The majority of Romanian Jewry which was formed from a larger category, overwhelmed by the numerous and heavy dayly burdens was oscillating between integration and emigration (...)

The years 1945-1949 were, in consequence, years of expectations and confruntations – between organisms and organisations, between their leaders, followed by larger or smaller groups. A state of democracy, some would say; paradoxically the general social-political current did not lead towards democracy. At horison it appeared a socialism of Soviet type; there were Jews who wanted it, others who tried to avoid it, making compromise until they achieved their aim, until the emigration; last but not least a considerable number decided to remain in the place where they were born „in worse, or in good times”. None of the above mentioned categories did not „bring” socialism in Romania. But they did not stop its coming, because it would have been impossible”. [transl. A.O.]

For the Hungarian Jews the coming of Red Army was a moment of liberation which put end to deportations. Both in Romania and in Hungary, the local inhabitants feared of Soviet occupation. The different perception of Soviet occupation determined the fact that the Jews did not perceive the communism as a disaster, at least at the beginning (Patai, 1996: 617). Raphael Patai explains that, in contrast with Nazi genocide, the communist view with regard to Jews was more open and non-violent. The communists tried to assimilate the Jews, to make them subordinated citizens of Hungarian state and to make them to renounce to the condition of Jews, to these particular elements which made the Hungarian Jews to be different from Hungarians. If the Jews suffered more in communist period, it was because among the Jews there were more elements of bourgeoisie than among Hungarians (Patai, 1996: 618). The Jewish life almost did not survived in Hungary after the war. The Hungarian Jews were often discriminated, the ones who did not obeyed to communism or economic and cultural elites were deported, it was forbidden to them to emigrate or their community or religious life was destroyed<sup>7</sup>. In the communist view, the Jewish question was a product of capitalism and had no utility in communist society. Communism tried to destroy cultural differences, to assimilate national minorities.

On the other side, the cosmopolitan spirit of the Jews and their wish to maintain the connection with other Jews from Israel and other states of free world were forbidden. The creation of the state of Israel was perceived with a lot of reticence by Hungarian communists, and the situation became more hostile in the same time with the advance of Stalinist anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe. As in Romania, also in Hungary the Zionist leaders were persecuted.

The Hungarian Jews who returned from deportation were around 160000 - 190000 (Fejto, 2000: 282). We attach a table regarding the number of deported persons returned from deportation registered by National Committee for the Care of Deported Persons. The people who returned from deportation chose to assimilate in the new Hungarian state<sup>8</sup>. They suffered more profound traumas than the Jews of Romania. They were attracted by the universalism and proletarian solidarity promoted by communists. It is sometimes difficult to understand why the Hungarian Jews decided to collaborate with Hungarians to the edification of socialist state, why they chose to assimilate when they suffered so much<sup>9</sup>. And that happened because the instauration of communism meant for them the separation of an older past when the Jews were persecuted.

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<sup>7</sup> Raphael Patai shows that the number of Hungarian Jews after Holocaust was 100 000. Gyurgyák János, *A Zsidókérdés Magyarországon*, Osiris Kiadó, Budapest, 2001, p. 581 shows that after the census from 1946, the number of the Jews on the territory of Hungary was about 165.330 of Jews, but considers that the data were not complete because a lot of Jews did not declared themselves Jews, especially in the Province. The same author provides us the data of the census from 1949 which registered 133, 862 of Hungarian citizens of Jewish religion and 101.259 of them had lived in Budapest.

<sup>8</sup> Romcsics Ignác, *op. cit.* shows that the adherence of Jews to Communist Party was due to their difficult experience when, during Holocaust, the whole Hungarian society mobilized against them. For the Hungarian Jews shows, Romcsics Ignác, the Red Army and USSR were liberating them and felt towards them gratitude. They felt that, in communism, their identity was protected. So, the Jews increased the ranks of Communist Party.

<sup>9</sup> Assimilation had as finality also to get closer of Hungarian culture. There were a considerable number of writers of Jewish origin who became important names in Hungarian culture. Such writers were Kertész Imre, Konrád György, Nádás Péter. In communist period, the majority of Hungarian

Number of returned Jews from Deportation in Hungary

Table 1

Time	Number of returned Jews
Before April 30, 1945	9000
May	12 758
June	25 678
July	14 759
August	9909
September	5550
October	2859
November	1131
December	500
<b>Total for 1945</b>	<b>82 144</b>
January 1946	166
February	108
March	102
April	84
May	116
June	161
July	201
August	93
September	156
<b>Total for 1946</b>	<b>1187</b>
<b>Total combined for 1946 and 1945</b>	<b>83 331</b>

**Source:** Hungarian Jewish Archives. Documents of National Committee for the care of Deported Persons, L 4/6. Apud Tamás Stark, *Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust and after the Second World War, 1939-1949: A statistical review*, East European Monographs, Boulder, distributed by Columbia University Press, New York, 2000, p. 79.

Stephen J. Roth (Roth, 1997: 733-753) shows that in Hungary, after the war, the Jews who survived the Holocaust were compensated. The principal measure, shows Roth, was the decree 200/1945 M.E. from March 17 1945 which stipulated that the deprivations of property from fascist period were discriminatory and declared null the deprivation of rights. The agricultural and horticultural property was not returned if it did enter under provisions of agrarian reform and of nationalization of land. (Decree 600/1945, Law VI from 1945). But also other goods could not have been recuperated such as mobile goods, equipments, the stocks of Jewish factories and shops were destroyed, deposits of money lost their value as a consequence of inflation, and the goods taken over by Nazis were never returned. In November 15 1946 was created a National Jewish Fond of Rehabilitation which inherited the goods of the Jews who died in Holocaust and which were not the subject of above mentioned laws<sup>10</sup>.

The new installed communist regime from Hungary needed new personnel with a good education. The Jews were more educated than Hungarians and could take the jobs

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Jews had the tendency to hide that they were Jews, wanted to be considered the same as Hungarians, wished to be no reason of discrimination or difference.

<sup>10</sup> From the Jewish community from Oradea, we have the information that in Romania was created a Fond of Jewish Property administered by Jewish Community from Romania. For instance, a great part of the houses of the ones who died during Holocaust were administered by Jewish Community, but existed also exceptions.

from state administration. More than that, they were people who were not compromised during fascist regime and they fit to the system (Fejto, 1957: 283). The perspective of joining the new regime, saved the Jews from the shock of loosing their property. The Hungarian Jewry took part more than Hungarians in administration and governance.

The wealthy Jews had to bear the same persecutions as Hungarian bourgeoisie<sup>11</sup>. They were deported to the same extent. This is why when we try to evaluate the role of the Jews in communist system, we do not have to leave aside also the Jews who were oppressed by communists. In order to assimilate, several Jews passed to Christian religion.

Jews from Budapest who changed their religion

**Table 2**

<b>Number of Jews who changed their religion according to:</b>			
<b>Year</b>	<b>Churches which received them</b>	<b>Statistical Office from Budapest</b>	<b>Jewish Communities</b>
1934	352	732	-
1935	363	890	775
1936	454	1141	1128
1937	377	1058	1088
1938	2211	6127	3956
1939	1495	3558	1626
1940	936	1866	2533
1941	643	1607	1733
1942	926	2052	2173
1943	674	1061	1060
1944	5521	-	3385
1945	388	-	261
1946	326	-	282
1947	247	-	-
1948	167	-	-
1949	61	-	-
1950/1955	32	-	-
1956	42	-	-
1957	101	-	-

**Source:** Viktor Karády, Traumahatás és menekülés [The effect of trauma and evadation] in *Múlt és Jövő* 1994/2 Apud Tamás Stark, *Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust and after the Second World War, 1939-1949: A statistical review*, East European Monographs, Boulder, distributed by Columbia University Press, New York, 2000, p. 84.

The ones who chose to dissimilate were few. The most pregnant form of dissimilation was Zionism. However, the number of the ones who chosed immigration, was much smaller in Hungary than in Romania<sup>12</sup>. Emigration was possible after 1945 and

<sup>11</sup> Kovács András, Zsidóság az 1945. A zsidókérdés a mai magyar társadalomban, in *1100 Évés Együttélés* (The life together during 1100 years), 2001, p. 14 shows that among the population of Hungary which was sent to Gulag, the Jews represented 30%.

<sup>12</sup> The Zionist movement activated in Hungary also during Holocaust when it was achieved the rescue of a number of Jews. Fejto Ferenc, *op. cit.*, asserts that during 1945-1947 left Hungary, 28 103 Jews. When ceased its existence (13 III, 1949), the communists considered its members as the fascists of Szalasi and arrested them. Also in Hungary and in Romania took place antizionist trials. Raphael Patai, *op.cit.*, shows that between the years 1945-1947 left Hungary between one third and a quarter from Hungarian Jews who survived in Hungary, 28 000 in Israel and together with the ones



for a short time. Also for a short time the Zionist movement enjoyed liberty of action. In 1949 a radical change of Hungarian state took place towards Zionism and Zionist organizations were forced to end their activity. The Zionist leaders were arrested. Zionism was now condemned as a consequence of a press campaign<sup>13</sup>. These events took place in the context of a change in the attitude of USSR towards the Jews which reverberated in all communist space. So, in 1948, when the state of Israel was formed, Soviet Union was the first state which acknowledged it. But when it became obvious the pro-Occident attitude of Israel, USSR changed its politics. Starting with 1948, anti-Zionist manifestations took place in Poland and Romania. In Hungary, anti-Zionist propaganda was sustained by the press. The Slanski trial from Czechoslovakia and white gown affairs from USSR, marked in the communist block the pick of anti-Semite politics.

The ones who assimilated hoped that communist party could settle the discriminations to which they were subjected in previous times and during the Holocaust. The ones who assimilated realized later the mistake which they did embracing communism. They tried to assimilate to the Hungarians and talked no more about the fact that they were Jews.

The Jews from Romania and Hungary had to bear the same regime as national ethnics. Their community life was affected during communism and a lot of them assimilated. The ones who emigrated, in a larger number in Romania than in Hungary, were looking to have their own state and were not satisfied with the life in a communist state.

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emigrated in Western Europe and overseas, the total number of emigrants was 56 000 of Jews. Gyurgyák János, *op.cit.*, shows that during the years 1945 and 1947 approximatively 60 000 of Jews chose the path of emigration.

<sup>13</sup> Gyurgyák János, *op.cit.*, p. 588. Also in Romania the Zionists were persecuted by the communists starting with the year 1949. All the communist block was influenced by Stalin's antisemite politics during the last years of his life.

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