

Katalin Fenyves

Jewish languages and Jewish women in fin de siècle Hungary

Habilitation treatise

Abstract

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Jewish languages have been subject to scientific scrutiny for more than a century, while gendered memory belongs to more recent objects of research. The present treatise is aimed to highlight some steps of the transition from Jewish multilingualism to Hungarian monolingualism and to make a contribution to the burgeoning history of Jewish women. Both issues are related to the modernization of everyday Jewish life in fin de siècle Hungary but can also be considered from the perspective of East European Jewish history. The two parts of the treatise are both closed by an English text where this different perspective is taken into account and the findings are put in a relevant international context defined primarily by the works of Benjamin Harshav, J. D. Finkin, Marion Kaplan, Paula Hyman, and Benjamin Maria Baader.

Besides discourse analysis the sources consulted are as different as onomastics, architecture history and social statistics, covering many a field of new cultural studies. Well known publications like the history of the Szeged Jews or issues of the excellent reviews by Ben Chananja and *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* are revisited along with the less known weekly for Jewish women *Magyar Zsidó Nő*, launched in 1900 as well as Yiddish anecdotes spread all over Europe, Hungarian cabaret sketches, or women's galleries, i.e. specificities of synagogue building.

The findings can be summarized by claiming that both evolutions: the transition from Jewish multilingualism to Hungarian monolingualism and the increased presence and social visibility of women met the demands of modernization. Nevertheless, from a present-day perspective the linguistic evolution seems to be a loss for the Jewish communities, while the changes in the role of women would appear as an important progress. Still, the sources consulted tell a different story, the way contemporaries were judging these processes was just the opposite.

Despised by the secularly learned Jewish elites as an impure jargon, Yiddish, the mother tongue of all East European Jews grabbed the interest of ethnography, the science in the making around the turn of the century, as the depository of popular culture and genuine Jewish tradition. Almost simultaneously with the foundation of the first Jewish folklore society in Germany the linguist József Balassa and Lajos Blau, editor of the respected scholarly *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* launched an appeal to save and catalogue the remnants of the fading popular culture, including Yiddish. From 1900 on *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* published a considerable number of contributions on folklore, but after the first five years the “jargon

project” petered out. For some five more years the collected material was superseded by Hungarian translations of uncertain originals by the rabbi Arnold Kiss and entertaining articles from the journalist Ede Vadász, only to disappear afterwards. But even at the heyday of the project, in its first two years there were only a handful of people who sent in collected material, with the exception of three provincial schoolteachers, all one-time students of the Rabbinical Seminary. And despite all the efforts of Lajos Blau even the nearly one thousand Yiddish proverbs collected were not integrated in the renowned international publication of the genre.

In my treatise special attention was given to a small sample of collected material, the Yiddish translations of Hungarian folksongs. Signs of a strong assimilation for Lajos Blau, expressions of the symbiosis of popular souls for the rabbi Miksa Pollák, one of the collectors, nobody knows who had written these pieces, when, for what audience and with what intention. As a part of them was first published by *Borsszem Jankó*, the best satirical magazine of the time, there is a chance that these are nothing but ironical jokes of some urban intellectuals. Notwithstanding their origins, they document the vigorous survival and the creative possibilities of Yiddish. Moreover, most of these “translations” are adaptations: far from demonstrating the alignment of Jewish popular culture with Hungarian popular culture, even the simplest texts convert Hungarian cultural facts into Jewish ones in translation.

My treatise also contends that Yiddish *café chantants* and their successor, the exclusively Hungarian cabaret of fin de siècle Budapest all stemmed from the famous Yiddish anecdotes. Interestingly enough the Chasid of the internationally known “Dokter Kovatsh” story is very sympathetic to the smartly dressed young gentlemen on the train heading to Máramarossziget, with a cigar in his mouth and reading a “*goyische*” newspaper (printed in non-Hebrew script), while Ferenc Molnár, writer of the most exhilarating cabaret piece *Pork feast in Lipótváros* shows contempt for his characters, the converted *nouveau riches* of the rapidly growing capital city. Humour in this context was therefore also the means to gauge what seemed to be the right – acceptable/desirable – measure of assimilation for a mostly Jewish audience, that is, the reasonable balance of tradition and assimilation.

However, the creation of an exclusively Hungarian-speaking cabaret was surely a sign of progressing monolingualism as well as the heated debate in the weekly *Egyenlőség* in 1900 on the necessity and the usefulness of teaching Hebrew in religious classes. When two respected Jewish citizens from the two Budapest districts with the highest Jewish population demanded

the teaching of Hebrew be stopped in elementary schools, a big upheaval ensued. Even though the demand was not fulfilled, it was clear that by the beginning of the new century more and more citizens of Jewish faith considered Hungarian language as the language of their religion as well.

Thus the language question was very much an identity question pertaining to the essentials of being Jewish. The pressure for monolingualism was very strong not only because of the Hungarian linguistic nationalism, represented above all by the measures of the Bánffy government, but because of the modernistic value of cultural homogenisation. Hence the Magyarization of Jews in Hungary was part of their modernization. And while it certainly brought about cultural loss and led to the – not only linguistic – isolation of Hungarian Jews amongst their European correligionaries, sticking to Yiddish or to the more respectably bourgeois German would have meant living in constant political tension and enmity, and miss out on the opportunities of economic and social ascension.

The findings concerning the situation of Jewish women are no less contradictory. During the 19th century the role of Jewish women underwent a tremendous change. In pre-modern Jewish society their mission was to help their husbands to accomplish their religious duties. To be able to perform this they were exempted of time-consuming rituals and prevented from learning the sacred language. Their religious obligations (*chala, nida, hadlaka*) were of a private nature, only married women were allowed to visit the synagogue. But they were supposed to contribute to the livelihood of the family, often by selling products of the family farm, or working in the tavern or the shop leased by their husbands. They were not prohibited to learn the local languages and they moved with more ease amongst the Christian population than Jewish men. But being given civil rights Jewish men gained access to all kinds of professions and were bound to work at all hours, thus were unable to spend the greater part of their days with religious duties. Synagogue rituals slowly changed, synagogue speeches were made in German then in Hungarian and became moral admonitions, galleries for women became huge and by the end of the 19th century women were considered by Jewish men as designed bearers of the religious tradition.

This was in no way different from the viewpoint of the Christian denominations at that time. In the modern bourgeois family women had to play the role of “the Priestess of the Home”, in so far the changes in the Jewish family were part and parcel of assimilationist modernization. But the ways Jewish women went by becoming employees, teachers, high school and

university students, busy with social welfare, artistic, sports and even political activities far from the secluded walls of their bourgeois homes was the real modernization, which set them aside from the social mainstream. Based on the above mentioned sources my treatise attempts to trace this evolution.

While the Jewish press and even liberal Jewish intellectuals deplored the increasing social presence of women, anti-Semites were quick to proceed to an associative merger confounding “ubiquitous” Jews and women. They also tried to prevent both from intellectual professions and important positions. The most striking example for this associative merger is the history of the *numerus clausus* finally introduced in 1920. First designed to keep aspiring female students at bay in the early 1900’s, after the revolutionary turmoil of 1918/19 the law was redirected against the Jews.

One of the most important findings of this treatise is to show how misogyny, antifeminism and anti-Semitism converged when it came to drive Jews and women back from higher learning. The argument of Jewish overrepresentation appears as a mere sham in the face of the never mentioned absolute numbers: according to the 1920 census there were only 17 554 (10,5%) people of Jewish faith working in the public services and in the free professions, 4361 of them being women. The real problem of Hungarian society was backwardness, and to overcome it a *numerus clausus* was certainly an irrational and highly anti-Semitic choice. Until 1927, women fared even worse than Jews: without being mentioned by the law they were simply kept outside several university faculties, such as medical and law schools.

The originality of this treatise comes from filling in some gaps in the views on the transition from Jewish multilingualism to Hungarian monolingualism amongst the Jews of Hungary and from having gathered and interpreted some trustworthy sources of Jewish women’s history as well as placing them into an international context.