

Masked Ball at the White Cross Café: Introducing a Book about Jewish Emancipation and the Origins of the Holocaust*

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Today, in certain assembled groups, there will be Hungarians, Hungarian Jews, Jewish Hungarians, Jews who identify themselves only as Hungarians; and likewise, there are Englishmen, English Jews, Jewish Englishmen, and Jews who identify themselves only as Englishmen. Once upon a time, it was hoped that there would have been only two identifiable groups: Hungarians and Englishmen.

* A speech delivered 25 September, 2005 at Israel's Book Store, Toronto, Ontario, to launch *Masked Ball at the White Cross Café: The Failure of Jewish Assimilation*. Copyright © 2005 by University Press of America, Inc., Lanham, Maryland. Boulder. New York. Toronto. Oxford. The book examines the efforts of Hungarian Jews to assimilate after emancipation, between the years 1867 and 1920. Notably, it is written from the non-Jewish perspective, and hence, a byproduct of this work is to do away with the notion of anti-Semitism and typical renderings of anti-Semites. *Masked Ball* exposes the real issue at stake after emancipation, which gave rise to the Jewish Question: the assimilation of the Jews into the host society, the imperative to become 'just like us.' Crucial to understanding the pivotal role of assimilation is the centuries leading up to 1867 (which may be considered the benchmark for emancipation in Western and Central Europe). Chapters on the era of Toleration, the Enlightenment, and the Liberal era provide this grounding. Simultaneously, the book engages in a comparison with Britain, and shows that Jews' efforts to assimilate were unsuccessful not only in Hungary, but also in Britain. Within the limits set by the national context, both countries responded uniformly to the presence of unreformed Jews in their midst. By employing 1920 as the cutoff date, the argument is made that by this year the finality of the rejection of Jewish non-assimilation was clear. The role of contingency, which determined the precise fate of European Jewry, came into play at that time.

When I first scribbled down that it was the emancipation of the Jews that had caused the Holocaust, I had no idea that I would be on a journey that went backwards from 1939 all the way to the Enlightenment. It was a time-consuming exercise and one that forced me to suspend my own identity in order to carry out this work with integrity. What did make my task somewhat easier after a while is that I found these two hundred years were bound by one primary theme: the assimilation of the Jews. So sensitive did I become to the literature that eventually I could tell when a translation had not been faithful to the original meaning. Which is not to say that my translators were inferior in any way; they were excellent. What this does illustrate is that we have such preconceived notions about both the meaning and intent of comments directed at Jews from the Enlightenment on that they dictate what we see on the printed page, despite what is written there.

Summarily labelled as 'anti-Semitic', these references to Jews revolved around Jewish assimilation, even though the word itself was not always used. Beginning with the Enlightenment, it was hammered at ever since... That is, until the Holocaust. I would not say that the subject of Jewish assimilation has been neglected for the last sixty years. I would rather say it became taboo. Why? Because nobody wanted to admit into the historical record the rather popular opinion that Jews had failed to assimilate. To do so would be to indict the Jews as instruments in their own destruction, and this was an unthinkable proposition after the horrors of the Holocaust. At the same time, the image of Europeans as unwilling to live with Jews who were unassimilated indicted the Europeans in the Holocaust. An equally unacceptable proposition. Least of all did anyone want to admit into the historical record that already before 1900, this failure and its likely disastrous consequences were clear to a number of people — both Jews and non-Jews. "A new unrest is perceptible throughout the civilized world on the subject of the Jewish Question," wrote the Englishman Arnold White in 1899. "The conclusion, therefore, seems obvious, that either the situation must be dealt with — i.e., by Europe as a whole — or an alarming outbreak against the race and the clock of civilization thus be thrown back for a hundred years."¹ The best thing was to bury the whole issue of assimilation, for it implicated everybody. And so it has been.

How would you have recognized an assimilated Jew? The point is, you wouldn't have. For an assimilated Jew was exactly 'just like us.' Precise definitions of assimilation are lacking. The reason for this, I would suggest, is that assimilation was considered an outcome, not a process: the process was the implementation of a series of reforms articulated by the Enlightenment thinkers (below) which culminated in assimilation. Thus, there were indicators of successful assimilation, as well as signs of failure to assimilate. For example, Péter Ágoston, author of one of the seminal works on the Jewish Question in Hungary in 1917, wrote that assimilation implied that Jews would

pick and choose from the whole population rather than tending to help only their coreligionists.² Signs that Jews had failed to assimilate came in the form of a general list as well as more specific complaints. Composing the former was the Jews' embrace of Zionism; their cosmopolitanism; the coupling of cosmopolitanism and Zionism with an enthusiastic nationalism (an irritating and impossible combination according to many, if not most Europeans); their supranational tendencies; their saturation of the professions; their monopolization of fields ranging from the theatre to the press to capitalist enterprises; their lopsided participation in the economy; their disproportionate involvement in radical politics; their stunning financial successes in times of economic distress for others; the large number of Jews who remained traditional and rejected the very concept of assimilation; the feeling, to use a quote, "that it doesn't matter what side he's on, because he can't begin to understand our problems or our ethics or our morality or our way of looking at things;"³ the domination and Jewification of society; and lastly, their 'Jewishness', which seemed so obvious to so many. More specific complaints include this comment by István Lendvai: "The Caesarian madness of the intellectual ghetto, which entertains that he is the only *civis europaeus* and everybody else is a stupid barbarian."⁴ Or, this statement by Charles Booth: "The whole district has been affected by the increase in the Jewish population. It has been like the slow rising of a flood... No Gentile could live in the same house with these poor foreign Jews."⁵

To be considered authentically Hungarian, or British, or French there was a litmus test. And the litmus test of successful assimilation was, in the words of Hungarian historian István Szabó: "If the assimilant, without any reservation has donned the new *volk* consciousness of his identity, and his lost identity is henceforth as indifferent to him as any other alien identity."⁶ There were probably only a tiny number of Jews about whom this could have been said. Obviously, we no longer adhere to this meaning of assimilation. Today, here in North America at any rate, the prevailing ethos is one of pluralism. Assimilation in a multicultural environment has more to do with the newcomer adjusting than becoming 'just like us.' In fact, there is no 'just like us.' This change in meaning has created all kinds of confusion and added to the difficulties of studying this subject. Thus, Barry Rubin writes in his book, *Assimilation and its Discontents*, "Most of their two millennia in the Western world, Jews assimilated only infrequently,"⁷ implying that assimilation has always been a possibility. The mechanism of assimilation as a way to join the larger society did not exist before the Enlightenment. Conversion was the only way Jews could find acceptance, and conversion has nothing in common with the notion of assimilation. And then, there is the well-known expression, "Jews were more German than the Germans," which is meant to underscore not only how assimilated German Jews were, but Jews in general, as well. Perhaps we should take a look at this expression. To be *more* German than the

Germans? Instead of assimilating, Jews simply forged a new distinction for themselves, and were considered caricatures. This failure to assimilate is what people called the Jewish Question.

Yet there are two countries which have received the Good House-keeping Seal of Approval for producing assimilated Jews, where Jews were accepted. One is Britain, and there is almost universal consensus on this point. The other is Hungary, where what I would call a regional consensus obtains. Hungarian Jews have been proclaiming for decades that nowhere else were Jews so assimilated. Would these reputations hold up under intensive examination? I am afraid they did not. Not only was the Jews' effort to reform and thereby assimilate unsuccessful in both Hungary and Britain, but many of the issues revolving around non-assimilation were similar. For example, concerning the fulfilment of their patriotic duty in Hungary during World War I, the military command called attention to the number of immigrant Galician Jews who hid out rather than enlisting or who deserted. Jews feel the same way they did in the Middle Ages, wrote Ágoston;⁸ wars then were no affair of theirs because they did not belong to any party. In Britain, less than one per cent of those eligible had enlisted as of October 1916.⁹ Lacking identification with Britain, English-born Russian Jews saw no reason to fight the Germans; in fact, some Jews expressed solidarity with their Anglo-German and Anglo-Austrian brethren. Lacking any appreciation for the fact that Russia was Britain's ally, they considered it grounds for indifference to the war cause. Of the many who did not enlist some cited opposition to war, their parents having left Russia so they should not be conscripted; others cited religious reasons.¹⁰

Between the covers of this book lies a world that will probably be as foreign to readers as it was to newly emancipated Jews. This world is the non-Jewish world, where Christians were living for the first time with Jews as part of their society, and not separate from them. And for many non-Jews, this was an experience that provoked disappointment, frustration, and bitterness. The difficulties inherent in assimilating have been recorded by some historians. But that was not the interest of Christian Europeans. Their interest was to see that Jews lived in harmony with their non-Jewish neighbours. And they had articulated the means by which Jews would be able to accomplish this. What they found was that Jews refused to comply, or they were incapable of complying, or they did not understand what was required, and thus remained unassimilated. To make matters worse, emancipated Jews started to display new traits that screamed non-assimilation. It was not, for example, a sign of embracing the norms of society, of wanting to be a part of society, of an expression of happiness or gratitude to be included in society at long last, to then take up arms against that society, having only been recently admitted to it. I do not mean this literally — except in the case of Jewish anarchists. But figuratively speaking, this is exactly what Jewish social iconoclasts and political revolutionaries did in substantial numbers. This is the non-Jewish

perspective on Jewish assimilation, the perspective framing *Masked Ball at the White Cross Café*.

Apart from the fact that the very subject of assimilation has been taboo for the last sixty years, there are a number of barriers that make it terribly difficult to come to grips with this issue. In exchange for pointing out some of these barriers which come in the form of misconceptions, beliefs, and myths, I would like to offer the facts.

It is a popular assumption that the Enlightenment opened the doors wide to acceptance of the Jews. Although, there is the less well-known view about the Enlightenment which argues the opposite: that Voltaire and many other *philosophes* were 'anti-Semitic.' Neither of these views can hold up under scrutiny. What Voltaire and the other Enlightenment thinkers recognized were the profound difficulties inherent in incorporating this people that had *never* been part of Christian Europe: not in the political, cultural, or social sense; never on 'intimate' terms, in the sense of breaking bread with them or marrying them; and whose day-to-day rhythm was so at variance with the Christian rhythm. They recognized that certain aspects of Jewish religious practice would make it difficult — if not impossible — for Jews to become full participating members of the polity. But, with the burden of universal humanism resting heavily on their shoulders, Voltaire and other Enlightenment thinkers began to wrestle with the idea of incorporating the Jews into society. The outcome of this process was what I have termed *the Enlightenment ideals specific to the Jews*. These were a series of radical reforms targeted specifically at the Jews. Hopefully, accomplishing these reforms would culminate in the Jews' assimilation. Perhaps, *then*, Jews would find acceptance in the broader society.

However, it does appear that the laborious efforts of the Enlightenment thinkers were ignored, for there is no mention of reforms attached to any of the bills of emancipation that were passed in Central and Western Europe during the nineteenth century. There is a good reason for this. While the Enlightenment thinkers had been weighed down by one burden, liberals were weighed down by another: the liberal ethos, which dominated much of the nineteenth century, and was dictating 'freedom for all.' Emancipation was hotly debated in each country that eventually emancipated its Jews. Liberals were embroiled in this debate as wholeheartedly as everyone else and they believed that reform was indispensable. But liberals convinced themselves that being emancipated and living in a free society would be sufficient impetus for the Jews to make the needed reforms and assimilate. And they went ahead and passed bills of emancipation. After that, only heretical liberals talked about the need for Jews to assimilate. These facts have been conveniently dropped from the liberal canon.

It was a bit like the child who pointed out that the emperor was wearing no clothes when many people started pointing out to the liberals that

Jews were not assimilating, that the liberals' assurance that Jews would assimilate once they were emancipated was a crock. But liberals resolved this embarrassment by immediately appropriating and altering the meaning of a term to isolate these individuals and demean their views: anti-Semite.¹¹ Ever since, anti-Semites are those who are marginal, irrational, hateful people who distort everything about Jews. Or, as historian Robert Wistrich described the first batch of anti-Semites of the late nineteenth century: "semi-radicalized, frustrated intellectual misfits and some sensation-mongering journalists."¹² While there were undoubtedly some irrational Jew-haters, it was the respectable views of some very respectable people with which public opinion concurred. In Hungary, for example, Gyula Verhovay was a member of parliament representing the ultra-left Independence Party, a strong supporter of the workers, and the darling of Hungarians. Yet his newspaper, the *Függetlenség*, stereotypically would be called an anti-Semitic rag. Bishop Ottokár Prohászka was regarded by many as the outstanding figure and symbol of the cultural and intellectual renaissance that took place in Hungary in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He worked ceaselessly for the poor, was a determined advocate of religious modernism, and three of his books were put on the Index by Rome because of his views on evolution. Yet a reading of his works on the Jews would place him at the forefront of the 'anti-Semitic' camp. We do not have to protect these liberals any longer, nor do we have to live with this dichotomy. These were reputable men whom we can respect. They were not suffering from a "disease of the mind," "damaging to reason," that afflicted "men and women of otherwise powerful and subtle thoughts,"¹³ as historian Paul Johnson put it in an article published earlier this year.

We come up against the same problem every time we use the term anti-Semitism. While the belief is that anti-Semitism is prejudice, discrimination, racism, false accusations, and an irrational hatred against Jews, the reality is, that between emancipation and the Holocaust, what is called anti-Semitism was the public discourse on the failure of the Jews to assimilate, and the negative effects that this failure was having on society. It cannot be emphasized enough how much the persistent use of the term anti-Semitism is one of the greatest barriers to exploring and understanding this period.

There is another barrier, and it is far more emotionally charged. For the most part, as much as we care to envision the ancestors of modern Jews, or, if you are Jewish, your forebears, Hollywood has helped us along by giving us very benign stereotypes. Fathers were fiddlers on the roof and mothers were *meine Yiddishe Mamas*. It is time to face some unpleasant truths. These Jews, who had been marginalized for centuries, repeatedly expelled, boarded up in ghettos, held in the lowest possible esteem by the host society, taxed beyond endurance, and forced into quasi-legal or outright illegal acts simply to survive, were probably, on the whole, most unappetizing

people. The well-worn descriptions of Jews as money-grabbing; immoral; of Jewish men lusting after Christian women; honourable only to their own kind; are not too far from the truth. Whether or not these unflattering characteristics were due to the marginalization and isolation of Jews over the centuries — which many Europeans from the Enlightenment period on did believe? the fact remains that they did not want these influences infiltrating their society. After emancipation, new issues arose and eroded this sympathetic explanation for negative Jewish traits. The development of a positive relationship to the state was *not* going well, and led to descriptions of Jews as unpatriotic. Many emancipated Jews remained strongly traditional and were in fact opposed to the very idea of assimilation. Others were 'modern' Jews, but they were displaying new 'unassimilated' tendencies: they were edgy, uneasy, iconoclastic, and spearheaded many of the revolutionary movements. They were so disproportionately prominent in certain endeavours that they monopolized them. They were socially cohesive; and they still stood out from mainstream society. These charges were also pretty well correct. The Hollywood image of fiddlers on the roof and *Yiddishe Mamas* is just a myth.

How strongly did Europeans really feel about this non-assimilation? Well, if we believe the myth that after the emancipation of Jews in Western and Central Europe, life for Jews was essentially good, and that the good times lasted until the advent of the Nazis in 1933, then we would have to conclude that Europeans were not really upset about the unassimilated behaviour of Jews. But this is another myth. There were some good times after emancipation, of course. However, by 1920, most assuredly, the good times were over. By 1920, many people were not only looking for a solution to the Jewish Question, they were demanding one. Not only this. By 1920, the status of the Jews had already been internationally renegotiated — a fact that historians have virtually ignored — and a grievous oversight. With one stroke of the pen, the Balfour Declaration, which laid the groundwork for a Jewish state; the *Numerus Clausus* law in Hungary, which reclassified Jews as a nationality or race; the Minorities Treaties forged at the Paris Peace Conference, which counted Jews among the minorities in the newly established states; and, the decision of the Bolsheviks to classify Jews as an ethnic group, erased the entire body of Enlightenment and liberal thought as it pertained to the Jews, along with their two-pronged program for the Jews' emancipation: wholesale reform, and the classification of Jews as citizens of the Mosaic faith. Jews were once again identified as a separate entity, distinct from the majority society. Why did this occur? Well, emancipation had been based on the expectation that Jews would make the appropriate reforms and assimilate. This expectation had not been fulfilled.

Thus, by 1920 a watershed was reached, at which time Europeans served the Jews notice that they were in the process of settling the Jewish Question. It is that loose cannon — contingency — that determined the Jews'

precise fate. Yet the popular belief is that the Holocaust occurred because of the demented fanatical ideology of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, discrimination, prejudice, racism, ignorance... modernity. There is no mention in this list of the failure of Jews to assimilate, but I hardly see how it can be excluded. My original germ of an idea — that emancipation was the cause of the Holocaust — has remained the underlying thesis of *Masked Ball at the White Cross Café*. No one had ever entertained the idea of living with the Jew as Jew in their midst. Theological objections to the Jew as Jew had been overcome by the offer of conversion to Christianity. Later, secular objections to the Jew as Jew were overcome by a program of reform which would culminate in assimilation. Emancipation ruptured a 1500-year-old continuum and placed in society Jews whose ways and behaviours were at odds with it.

About the Holocaust itself, there are two beliefs that I would like to highlight. One is that we can derive the benefit of a lesson from it. That the Holocaust contains lessons for humankind, warning each of us of the lethal dangers of prejudice and discrimination. This year, Auschwitz is the messenger of this lesson, and we have been saturated with the lessons that we must learn. If prejudice and discrimination and so on were the genuine reasons for the Holocaust, it might make sense to speak of educating people as to how to overcome these pernicious biases. But these cannot be considered the fundamental reasons, and therefore there is no lesson to be learned. The other belief is that the Holocaust is manifest proof of the need for a Jewish state. With the phrase 'never again' ringing in our ears, Israel is seen as the protector of Jews and as a place that can provide a safe haven for Jews. This is actually a very late version of the Jewish perspective on why the creation of the state of Israel was necessary. Since 1798, at any rate, there are records showing that Jews were quite desperate to re-establish a homeland.¹⁴ There is also the non-Jewish perspective on this matter. Very succinctly put, the creation of the state of Israel was a very good way to get rid of the remaining Jews left in Europe after 1945. This is also a very late version. The idea of ridding Europe of its Jews by establishing a state for them had already been articulated in 1793.¹⁵ Since the seventeenth century, certain Christian groups have been advocating that Jews be restored to what was then Palestine. This was for religious reasons. Then, there have also been political reasons. Britain, since the mid-nineteenth century, and America, for the last several decades, have both had an interest in maintaining a bulwark in the Middle East. Exactly who has been most served by the creation of the state of Israel? In the grand scheme of things, the Holocaust figures only in a small way in the establishment of the state. Other factors have played a much larger role in its creation, and will continue to exert an influence over its existence.

These are only some of the many tentacles adhering to this book. *Masked Ball* inadvertently challenges a number of historical and current notions pertaining to the Jews. These notions persist because the importance

of assimilation has not been acknowledged and will persist as long as it is not acknowledged.

Carnival season, the prelude to Lent, was a popular time in Hungary and was ushered in annually in January; the year 1896 was no exception. In this particular year, an article appeared in a local newspaper announcing that the Israelite Women's Association would start the carnival season with their ball to be held at the White Cross Coffeehouse (*Fehér Kereszt Kávéház*) on the 11th of January. In considering this pre-Lenten event, the name of the venue only adds emphasis to a faultily constructed syllogism: 'Everyone goes to a pre-Lenten ball in Hungarian society. I (the Jew) am part of society. Therefore, I too, will go to a ball.' Missing in this syllogism is that crucial piece of information that Hungarian society was a Christian society, a fact that Lajos Hatvany, a prominent publisher and 'man of letters,' and baptized Jew, was keenly aware of. He, too, wrote about Jews attending balls, twenty-five years after this announcement appeared. 'My dear Jews,' he wrote, 'you must put on frock coats if you want to go to the ball.' (In the context of Hatvany's comments, 'frock coats' stood for conversion.) In sponsoring this ball which was, after all, only the social aspect of a profoundly religious period, Christian society might easily have understood that in religious matters, these Jewish women's apprehension of the dictum that the Jews should 'become just like us' extended as far as, but no further than participating in the customs that appertained to the Christian religion.¹⁶

For Jews, many parts of this book will make for very painful reading. For those who consider themselves liberals, this book may be disconcerting, to say the least. And for some non-Jews, the book may be an articulation of what they always knew, and they may feel vindicated.

Thus, there is much at risk here in publishing this book. And so I understand how tempting, even compelling it is to perpetuate the current versions of this period of history. But I should like to think that the time has finally come when we can put the issue of Jewish assimilation back on the table again.

NOTES

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¹ Arnold White, *The Modern Jew* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1899), 273-75.

² Péter Ágoston, *A zsidók útja* [The Way of the Jews] (Nagyvárad: A Nagyváradai Társadalomtudományi Társaság, 1917), 290-95.

³ Ford Madox Hueffer (Ford), *Mr. Flight* (London: H. Latimer, 1913), 221.

⁴ István Lendvai, "Szép Ernő, Patika és egyebek," [Ernő Szép, English Pharmacy, and Others] *Új Nemzedék*, 21 March 1920; Lendvai, *A Harmadik Magyarországon – Jóslatok és tanulságok* (Budapest: Pallas, 1921), 145-53. Lendvai was a prominent journalist, publicist and poet who later joined the Christian National Party.

⁵ Charles Booth, quoted in Stephen Aris, *The Jews in Business* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, Reprint, 1971), 37-38.

⁶ István Szabó, quoted in János Gyurgyák, *A zsidókérdés Magyarországon* [The Jewish Question in Hungary] (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2001), 18-19.

⁷ Barry Rubin, *Assimilation and its Discontents* (New York: Times Books, 1995), xiv.

⁸ Ágoston, *A zsidók útja*, 287-90; Ottokár Prohászka, "Pro juventate 'catholica,'" *Alkotmány*, 26 May 1918, 11.

⁹ Julia Bush, *Behind the Lines: East London Labour* (London: Merlin Press, 1984), 167, 172, 173.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹¹ See Moshe Zimmermann, *Wilhelm Marr: The Patriarch of Anti-Semitism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 89-92.

¹² Robert S. Wistrich, *Between Redemption and Perdition: Modern Anti-Semitism and Jewish Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 38.

¹³ Paul Johnson, "The Anti-Semitic Disease," *Commentary*, June 2005, 33-34.

¹⁴ Franz Kobler, *Napoleon and the Jews* (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1976), 30-32.

¹⁵ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, quoted in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 309.

¹⁶ Janet Kerekes, *Masked Ball at the White Cross Café: The Failure of Jewish Assimilation* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Oxford: University Press of America, Inc., 2005), 140-41.