



## “But Where Is Kohn?” Modern-Day History of the Hungarian Jews in the View of a Jewish Community’s Humor in Budapest

*Richard Papp*

Associate Professor, Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Cultural Anthropology

**Abstract:** The topic of my study is the identity, cultural memory and humor in the Bethlen Square Synagogue community in Budapest. I conducted my research among the regular participants in the daily rituals at synagogue. I have dealt in depth with the meaning of the jokes, humorous stories, the humor in the conversations and situations of the community. The example of jokes of my research connected to cultural-memory as well: the humor of the community structures the modern day Hungarian Jewish history into well separated periods.

The “golden age” points to the possibility of harmonious coexistence, at the same time to the criticism of “total” assimilation strategy.

Experience of the years following the Trianon Treaty, reinforces this criticism. Silence of humor about the time of the Holocaust, as well as the jokes referring to the following years, point to the survival of traumas and the conservation of tension between majority and minority.

Most of the jokes speak about the years of communism with complexity of political standings, as well as of the political-social “outsider” status of the Jews.

I could not find jokes about the years that followed the 1990-s political system-change. At Bethlen Square, when they mention it, they tell the ones about the age of the traumas, as they connected that period to the events of recent past and present during the interviews I conducted.

**Key words:** Jewish humor, cultural memory, identity, assimilation, trauma

### 1. Introduction

“Once, the Pope decided to ban the Jews from the Vatican. The Jews were outraged, so the Pope conceded and proposed; if a Jew wins a theological debate with him, they can stay. The Jews appointed a rabbi known for his wisdom for the “duel”. The Rabbi, to make it more interesting, suggested a non-verbal debate, and the Pope agreed. On the day of the debate, the Pope and the Rabbi sat across from each other with their followers around them.

*The Pope held up three fingers.*

*The Rabbi held up one.*

*The Pope drew a circle in the air.*

*The Rabbi pointed to the ground.*

*The Pope took out a holy wafer and a glass of wine.*

*The Rabbi pulled out an apple.*

*The Pope stood up at that and said:*

*- I give up. You are too wise rabbi. You all can stay.*

*Later, the cardinals ask the Pope:*

*-What were you and the Rabbi talking about?*

*The Pope answers:*

*- First, I held up three fingers to remind him of the Holy Trinity. He held up one to show that we both serve the one God. Then, I drew a circle in the air to indicate that God is all around us. He then*

*pointed to the ground to show that God is here, too with us. Finally, I took out a holy wafer and a glass of wine to indicate that God absolves us of our sins. Whereupon he pulled out an apple, reminder of the original sin. He had the answers to everything. What was there for me to do?*

*Meanwhile, the Jews gather around the Rabbi.*

*- What happened, rabbi? – they ask.*

*- First, he showed that we have three days to leave the city. I showed that not one Jew will leave. Then, he drew a circle in the air to indicate that he will clean out the entire city of the Jews. I pointed to the ground to show that we are staying here.*

*- And after?*

*The rabbi shrugged his shoulders:*

*- I don't know. He took out his lunch and so did I."*

You may find more than hundred instances of this joke on the Internet. When I typed in the first sentence of the joke to the Google search bar, more than fourteen pages of matches popped up. The joke is one of the favorites of the Synagogue at Bethlen Square community, among whom I conduct my research.

The biggest Jewish community in Central Europe lives in Hungary, and within Hungary in Budapest. We can estimate their number from 64 to 118 thousand (Stark 2002:119). As much as the application of demographic knowledge is problematic when applying to the Hungarian Jewry in its present, so is the empirical analysis which includes their self-presentations; the horrors of the Holocaust, decades of communism and the exodus during it, followed by the revival-phenomena and the anti-Semitic demonstrations occurring after the change in the political-social system, have created and shaped, and continue to shape today the existence of the multifaceted

connections and identities of Jewry (Kovács 2002).

British anthropologist, Leonard Mars sees three options: ethnic, socio-cultural and religious (Mars 1999: 24) as the typically possible identity choices of the Hungarian Jewry in the post-communist Hungary. Behind the three options, there are institutions and communities in Budapest, so circumstances seem ideal for the revival and permanence of the Budapest Jewish culture. Budapest's Jewish image is also well-known to the non-Jewish society, as the Jewish inhabitants of the capital have significantly influenced the life of civil society and social history of Budapest (Frojimovics-Komoróczy-Pusztai-Strbik 1995).

The synagogue at Bethlen Square, belonging to the neolog<sup>1</sup> fraction of Jewish Religious Community of Budapest, is one of those in the city where, in addition to the Sabbath<sup>2</sup> and other festive religious masses, a morning prayer is held every day. The circle of those who pray regularly is made up of twenty-five to thirty people. Members of every generation of the community are present in the community; the number of those under the age of thirty is more than ten. Fifty to sixty people, who attend the Kiddush<sup>3</sup> on Fridays, as well as the minor festive events, belong to the „outer circle” of the community. On major festive days several hundred people gather in the synagogue.

I conducted my research among the regular participants in the daily rituals at synagogue. I have dealt in depth with the meaning of the jokes, humorous stories, the humor in the conversations and situations of the Bethlen Square community. In the light of my research, I believe that through the analysis we can come to understand the lifestyle and identity of a community which has such an integrative cultural system as the Bethlen Square's has. More generally, we can say that



Jewish humor continuously reflects and interprets the cultural practices, the lifestyle and the effects of social movements in the life-situations of Jewry. (Raj 2006: 50-51, Oring 1992: 112-122)

Going back to the joke quoted at the beginning, I heard it and the laughter that followed many times in the synagogue at Bethlen Square. Contemplation on its popularity led me to the recognition; in-depth examination of memory of cultural-community depicted in the humour could be an important and exciting undertaking; for the fundamental motif of the humor connected to memory of cultural-community, analyzed next, is essentially depicted in the joke.

The joke points to the defining difference between the minority Jewish and majority non-Jewish communities, arising from their different life-situations. While the Pope in the joke focuses on theological problems, the Rabbi's main objective is the "survival" of the community. Outcome of the debate depends on the "*skillful*<sup>4</sup>", as it is called in the community, application of survival strategy, arisen from their necessary-vulnerable minority life-situation.

"Survival", the continuous "equalizing" of minority life-situation, adaptation to "*tsores*<sup>5</sup>", formulates with the depiction of exclusion by the majority community. In the depiction of various meanings of "wisdom", we can see that while for the Pope "wisdom" means theoretic-theological knowledge, "*wisdom*" of the Rabbi is the intelligence required for survival, and "*skillfulness*" needed for continuous adaptation.

The joke points out that both parties misunderstand these two kinds of "wisdom", these two types of life-situation which then it serves as the source of luck for the Jews: the misunderstanding, originating from the difference in the life-situations, makes it possible for the Rabbi to "conquer" the Pope.

"Survival" and "exclusion" as social realities, misunderstanding as the idiosyncrasy of communication, furthermore, life-situations caused by those are recurring elements of humor connected to the cultural-memory.

Social rules of coexistence, opportunities to apply adaption strategies define in the memory of the cultural-community the evaluation of each period, the style of humor and its meanings belonging to those. Cultural-memory does not help the objective, scientific understanding – if that at all is possible – of history. The cultural-memory of a community encompasses the interpretation of history, reflection of the past on the present, and the constructions of the connecting community-identity.

What does history "teach" us, what does it "say" to the contemporaries? Which eras, time periods were considered "good" and "bad" in the past of the community? What kind of patterns the past provides for us to experience our cultural present? Cultural-memory structures history in the reflection of these interpretations. Passing on the past happens in mythical patterns, through the institutional channels of the memory transmission (such as national holidays, education, community organizations and actions, artifacts), also through cultural practices (such as rituals, passing on traditions, folklore events), (cf. Assmann 1999:29-87). In light of that, humor may be one of the important sources and channels of the cultural-memory.

My current dissertation does not attempt to describe Hungarian Jewish history from a historiographic perspective. My goal is to take a look at my collection of examples of Jewish humor, and see how those "organize", introduce, and evaluate, or attach meanings to periods of Hungarian Jewish history.



## 2. Periods of modern-day history of the Hungarian Jews in the cultural-memory

Examples of humor I came across reflect on the modern-day Hungarian Jewish history, separating four periods within it, thus corresponding with the division of cultural anthropologist researcher, Leonard Mars' division of the Hungarian Jews' historical background of identity-strategies (Mars 1999).

Mars defined the first period of Hungarian Jewish history of identity-strategies as the period that falls between 1867 and 1920. In this period, the Hungarian Jews – as the continuation of the emancipation pursuits of the 1848-1849 revolution in respect to civil rights – became equal with all other Hungarian citizens. The condition (and consequence of that) was the increased assimilation to the majority's society, culture, and language. Recognition of "Hungarian citizens with Jewish faith" meant that Jews were not recognized as ethnically separate. Thus, in the Kingdom of Hungary, Hungarians and Jews together constituted the majority.

The second period, between 1920 and 1945, was defined by the aftermath of the Trianon Treaty. Following WWI, in accordance with the Treaty of Trianon, Hungary lost two thirds of its territory and half of its population, thus became ethnically almost homogeneous. As a consequence, Jews started to be stigmatized as "outsiders", excluded by law and economic means, until their social integration was made impossible. Finally, with the introduction of the "Jewish Laws", they all together got excluded from the non-Jewish community. Eventually, this led to the destruction of the majority of Hungarian Jews.

In the third period, during the decades of communist, then socialist state-authority era, a radical form of assimilation of Jews was offered. In accordance with the internationalist ideology,

this meant the abolition of traditional-religious Jewish culture, commitment of severing all such attachments. After the horrors of the two World Wars, there were those who chose this road, yet again those who once again (by then as "bourgeois-class-aliens") became the victims of political-social discrimination. In the meanwhile, state-politics cut off the majority of Hungarian Jews from the outside world, and Israel. It was the same with the Jewish history and Jewish tradition as well. Mentioning recent traumatic events and the Holocaust was shunned, and left out of the public social conversation.

The fourth period, the change in the political-social system, has created a new situation in the life of Hungarian Jews. Since 1989, members of the Hungarian Jewry may freely choose from the colorful options and alternatives of Jewish culture and identity (Mars 1999:21-24).

Tension caused by the tragedies and traumas of the past (primarily the times of the anti-Jewish laws and the Holocaust), still exists in Hungary. The appearance of anti-Semitic remarks in public speeches, and political pursuits that feed on those, further contribute to it (Kovács-Vajda 2002: 46-57 cf. Karády 2002: 241-258).

## 3. The "Golden Age" and the "Age of Assimilation"

My conversation partners called the period between 1867-1920 as the "golden age", and/or the "age of assimilation". The period prior to WWI remains a positive image in their cultural-memory. This positive image exaggerates the multiculturalism of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and in it the colorful life and freedom of the Jews.

Joviality of the Jewish life-style depicted in the following joke, too. The joke takes us back to the time when the "minyan<sup>6</sup>" got together even in



private Jewish homes, not only in synagogues. In this period many prayed together with their neighbors and friends; and on occasion, if it so happened that the required ten did not come together, it was enough just to step outside, or call out from the window to invite an acquaintance or a passerby to join in the *minyan*. This idealized time-period is being recalled in the following “typical Hungarian Jewish” joke with the two stereotypical characters, “Kohn and Grün”.

*“Kohn always says his prayers at home, but one day only nine men gather. They wait and wait, but the tenth just does not show up. Kohn finally calls to his wife:*

*- Hey, Sarah, why don't you call out from the window and ask someone to come up for the minyan.*

*Sarah looks out and sees Grün out there. She calls out:*

*- Hey Grün, would you come up to be the tenth one?*

*- To be the tenth? I wouldn't come up to you even if I were the first one!”*

In addition to the recollection of the joviality of Jewish life, other jokes depict the peaceful atmosphere of the Christian-Jewish coexistence. Unlike in the avoiding the ban from the Vatican-joke, in these the theme and context are given by harmonious, friendly relationships, and joyful kidding of one another. As we read it, during this period the Jews were identified as “Hungarian citizens with Jewish faith”. According to this, differentiation in faith did not mean (at least not officially) minority-majority type of discrimination such is the one based on ethnicity. This type of “equality” and related coexistence, reality of a possible culture-and-faith based symbiotic relationship reflected in the meeting of a priest and a rabbi-type of jokes:

*“The priest and the rabbi are having a conversation. The priest says:*

*- Listen, according to your faith, eating pork is forbidden. I've tried both, pork and kosher meat, and I don't understand you. I find no difference between them!*

*- I don't understand you either – replies the rabbi. According to your faith, you have to practice celibacy. I've tried both, that and love making, too. What a difference!”*

In the next joke the priest and the rabbi ‘kid’ each other:

*“The priest says to the rabbi:*

*- Listen, I had a terrible dream last night! I died and went to heaven... But to Jewish heaven! Such ‘wirtschaft’<sup>7</sup>! People running around, chattering endlessly, cutting into each other's words, telling jokes, making deals. Nowhere any sacredness!*

*- You don't say? – says the rabbi, pretending to be surprised. As it happens, I dreamt last night, too. I too died and went to heaven, to Christian heaven! Such radiance! Impeccably clean, bells ringing, sense of piety everywhere, and no-one to be found!”*

These jokes depict the close connectedness of the priest and the rabbi. Their theology based witticism suggests the equality and of familiarity with each other's faith and culture. The next joke also points to the possibility of a trusting, friendly relationship in spite of differences:

*“The rabbi pays a visit to the Catholic priest. The priest invites the rabbi to join him in the confessional to see how confession is being conducted. Comes the first sinner, confesses. The priest says, 30 Forints, and grants him absolution. Then there is a call, the priest has to administer the last rite to someone. So, he says to the rabbi:*

*- Would you take my place while I'm gone! You saw how it is done.*

*- Fine – says the rabbi.*



A young woman comes. She confesses:

- Father, I have fallen into fornication. Twice.
- It's alright, my child – says the rabbi. Pay 60 Forints and it is forgiven.
- But all I have is a 100 Forint bill – says the young woman.
- That's fine. I take that, and your next fornication is paid for.”

The punch line of the joke in both cases derived from the difference in world view and the interpretation of existence. At the same time, precisely with the exaggeration of that difference, it shows that peaceful coexistence is possible while these differences are jointly laughed about. Decades of peaceful coexistence, as those jokes suggest, made it possible for priests and rabbis to find themselves together around a card game table:

*“The Catholic priest, the Calvinist minister, and the rabbi are playing a card game. Suddenly a gendarme steps in and yells at them:*

*- You are playing poker here? What are you thinking?! You know that gambling is illegal! Playing poker is forbidden! On top of that, you are clergymen! Is this the way you set an example?! Now, all of you follow me to the precinct!*

*Well, that would be a tremendous shame if folks find out that they played poker and ended up in jail. So, they politely try to persuade the gendarme not to lock them up.*

*- Well – says the gendarme – after all, you are clergymen... I won't take you in if you swear, never again play poker.*

*- Oh no – they are thinking – perjury is not a good thing either. Their faiths forbade it. In short, they are facing a big dilemma, what to do now... Finally they accept the bargain, after all that's still better than going to jail.*

*- Well, says the gendarme to the Catholic priest – swear on the Holy Cross that you never play poker again!*

*After some hesitation, grappling with his conscience, finally the Catholic priest says:*

*- I swear on the Holy Cross never to play poker again!*

*- Then the gendarme turns to the Calvinist minister:*

*- And now you swear on the Holy Bible that you never play poker again!*

*With great struggle the minister finally says:*

*- I swear on the Holy Bible never to play poker again!*

*Finally the gendarme turns to the rabbi:*

*- And now you swear on the Torah that you never play poker again!*

*The rabbi looks at him, spreads his arms and lifts his shoulders:*

*- Nu, but how I, by myself could play poker ever again?!”*

One of the most significant elements of the quoted priest-and-rabbi jokes is the message that in spite of differences fruitful coexistence is possible. Along with that, as we have seen it in the last joke, the positive self-stereotypes, the character type of the ‘skillful’ Jew, the ‘intelligence’ of cleverness derived from necessity, remains emphasized even in those. As we can see, the cultural distances, arising from different life-situations, remain unchanged even in these jokes.

In connection with that, we could see that at the synagogue at Bethlen Square they label the pre-Trianon period as the “golden age” or the “age of assimilation”. The equal rights of citizenry, and the opportunity of social integration of the time brought along the process of assimilation to the culture of the majority.

This is how in the Bethlen Square humor the “age of assimilation” appears:



*“Early on in the past century, when so many began to convert, Kohn was a doctor. He was summoned to conduct a child delivery. He enters the apartment, asks for a cup of coffee, sits at the table and starts a conversation with the expectant father. In the meantime they can hear the wife wailing in the bedroom in pain:*

*- Jesus Christ, Holy Mother, Jesus Christ, Holy Mother!*

*The worried husband asks Kohn to help the woman. However, Kohn calmly remains, sips his coffee and says only this much:*

*- It's not time yet.*

*So, they sit when they hear the woman once again screaming in pain:*

*- Jesus Christ, Holy Mother, Jesus Christ, Holy Mother!*

*The husband is really nervous by now and yells at Kohn in exasperation:*

*- Can't you hear how my wife suffers; she is about to give birth. Go help her!*

*However, Kohn calmly sips his coffee and only says:*

*- It's not time yet.*

*By then the woman screams continuously:*

*- Jesus Christ, Holy Mother, Jesus Christ, Holy Mother!!!*

*The husband is at the verge of a nerves breakdown:*

*- What kind of a man are you?! – he shouts. Can't you hear my wife screaming? She is giving birth in any minute and you are just sitting here sipping your coffee!*

*Kohn still remains seated, and says only this much:*

*- It's not time yet.*

*Then, all of a sudden, there is another screech coming from the bedroom:*

*- Shema Yisrael<sup>8</sup>!!!*

*At that Kohn jumps to his feet and says to the husband:*

*- Nu, now it is time!”*

The joke wittily points to the criticism of the assimilation. No-one can be an unadulterated “Christian Hungarian”, if “originally” he/she was a Jew – the joke suggests. At the same time, it criticizes neither the “golden age” of coexistence, nor the adaptation of the language, culture, society, identity of the majority. The point of the joke is nothing more than criticism of the complete assimilation: the complete assimilation, as a misguided identity-strategy, is bound to fail.

In summary, the jokes referring to the common era of the “golden age” and the “age of assimilation” judge this period in a complex manner. Primarily, it is joviality and the time of peaceful coexistence that comes through these jokes. Interesting however, that even in those cases when there is no explicit reference made to the time period, (as is the case in the “bargain price” of penitence or in the role of the “gendarme”) my conversation partners list every single joke as the ones belonging to the time period of the “golden age”, when – as they say – “things were going well”.

Such explicit separation of the jokes makes it obvious that joviality and the time of peaceful coexistence characterized none of the following periods. This joviality and peacefulness is being already overshadowed in this period by the misguided complete assimilation, referred to in the last joke. We must note that cultural-memory “views” the past from the present, interprets and labels historical experiences with common meanings. Looking at it from this perspective, criticism of complete assimilation and its reflection on the “golden age” must had been brought on by those tragic historic events, which meant the failure of assimilation for the victims of the anti-Jewish laws and the Holocaust.



The anti-Jewish laws and the Holocaust mean the failure of complete assimilation even for those living today. Looking back at it, the time period of “golden age” cannot be considered as positive. In the reflection of the following period it is perhaps even more painful to think of how differently all this could have happened in the event of reciprocal support and peaceful coexistence. However, post-Trianon traumas weaken the “idyll” of the “golden age” even in the cultural-memory.

#### 4. Age of the traumas

Next period of the cultural-memory that can be separated falls between 1920 and 1945. In there we can also include the time between the end of WWII and beginning of communist dictatorship. Related to the subject matter of this study, the question arises: is humor capable to reflect on these tragic years and the traumas people had lived through?

It might come as a surprise, but in my collection there are jokes reflecting on this tragic period. One of those is a favorite, told often in the merriment of the audience.

*“During the time of anti-Jewish laws Grün walks down the street past Kohn’s confectionery shop, and sees the sign: ‘We don’t serve Jews!’*

*Outraged, he enters the shop and demands: ‘Kohn, how can you say this?!’ To which Kohn replies: ‘What do you mean? Have you ever tasted my ice cream?’”*

Intention of the joke is to ease the tension caused by the anti-Jewish laws and the following trauma of the Holocaust. The punch line, thanks to the “skillful” and ready to adapt Kohn, serves just that purpose. As we also can see from the joke, trauma and tension – which are the context and the punch line of the joke – is being passed on every time the joke is told. The joke, when it is

told, eases the painful memory of tragic events, at the same time it preserves and passes on the tension carried by it. This way traumas and tensions remain live components of the community-cultural-memory, that humor can only ease, but not to resolve in the long run. As for the horror of the Holocaust, humor remains silent in the community. Trauma of the Holocaust, and the silence surrounding it in the Hungarian society, is unable to use the narrative of humor in order to help easing it.

Unexplained and unresolved trauma of the Holocaust and the fear of it still live on in the community-memory. Excerpt from an interview with a twenty-some year old young woman I conducted, vividly demonstrates that:

*“When you think about it, it is gruesome what happened to our grandparents. It is not a dim and distant past in memory. I cannot imagine what would happen if it were to repeat itself. I am Hungarian, it is my native language and all, but I am Jewish as well. So are my grandparents. This is what Hungarians betrayed, you understand? They betrayed other Hungarians. I cannot imagine what I would do if they betray me. This is always the case when Nazis get a chance in Hungary, and they do because people let them. This is an open sore. Open and painful, and the essence of it is that it’s not history.”*

The “open sore” she mentioned, as we can see, defines the Holocaust trauma even today. This painful “sore” and the attached “gruesome” fear and tension are brought back by the anti-Semitic social-political acts and events, too. It is no wonder that humor has no place in it. I came across only one such joke that reflects on the time of the Holocaust.

On the other hand, we do find jokes reflecting on the years following the Holocaust. These jokes can speak, they can reflect on the theme of the Holocaust, too, because the life-situations





depicted in them are connected to the comprehensible reality. This is how we can meet in 1946 with Kohn and Grün in the memory-recall of the jokes:

*“After the war, in ‘46 two beggars sit on the steps of the Basilica, holding up signs.*

*One of the signs reads: ‘Count Alfred Bersekovszky war-invalid’, the other: ‘Móric Kohn, Auschwitz survivor’.*

*The Catholics leave the church after mass, and of course they give their money to the Count while Kohn gets nothing.*

*After a while, the priest comes out and says:*

*- ‘Mr. Kohn, I don’t mean to offend you, but shouldn’t you go and sit in front of the synagogue?’*

*When the priest leaves, Kohn turns to the other man and says:*

*- ‘Did you hear that Grün ? He thinks he can teach us to do business!’”*

The joke wittily tries to ease the Holocaust-trauma and release the tension apparent in the minority-majority relation-system. If we take a close look at the text, we can see how the personal pronouns and expressions emphasize the complexity and contradiction of the relation to the non-Jewish majority. In here we can see the presence of closeness to non-Jewish Hungarians (in the kindness and helpfulness of the priest), and the distance that separates, too: Catholics, a year after the Holocaust, *“of course they give their money”* to the Count. In addition, even though the priest sincerely tries to help Kohn, he does not understand the whole situation and *“us”* – that is Kohn and Grün, the Hungarian Jews, the Hungarian Jewish survivors.

The story of the joke takes place in Budapest. It portrays those who have returned, those who want to continue their lives at home, in their homeland. Here is where they try to *‘skillfully’* adapt. The

joke, in this situation, uses the patterns of positive self-stereotypes of Jewish-humor, confirming the continuation of survival and coexistence strategies, and the “permanent” and “fatalistic” presence of those in the minority Jewish life-situation. And in this life-situation – as we could see in the joke – distance is more significant than nearness. Defining factor in this situation is the tension, originated in the years following the Treaty of Trianon and the traumas of the Holocaust. The tension in question, even after the survivors’ return, did not ease significantly in the community-cultural-memory. This is how one of my conversation partners, an elderly man summarized all this:

*“They were really into assimilation here. Then, assimilation was abruptly interrupted by the Holocaust, and those who were big on assimilation, those who were to be more Hungarian than the Hungarians had to realize that because of their ‘Jewishness’, they are not only robbed, but also taken to death camps. They were betrayed, even if there were those who helped them, still, the majority were traitors. And when they returned, what were they told?! More of you came back than those who have left. They were told this because they dared to ask for the home they left behind when they were taken away. And what is happening today? It is the same thing!”*

The excerpt from the interview places the situation survivors faced when they returned in the spectrum of assimilation-history. It gives voice to the criticism of failure of assimilation, typical mistake of those *“who were to be more Hungarian than Hungarians”*. The Holocaust takes away the myth of the *“golden age”* from the cultural-memory. Tragedy of the Holocaust is that the *“majority”* that the minority wanted assimilate into, *“betrayed”* the Jews almost in unity. Anti-



Semitism, experienced by the returning Holocaust survivors, put the emphasis on the complete failure of assimilation.

This type of experience is depicted in one of the jokes I collected. Its main characters are “Arisztid and Tasziló”. They, in the Hungarian joke-folklore, portray aristocrats who ended up lower down on the social ladder.

*One day Arisztid and Tasziló meet on the street. Arisztid is getting out of an oversized Mercedes. On his wrist and around his neck heavy gold chains are dangling. He is obviously loaded with money.*

*Tasziló asks him:*

- *Say, where did all this money come from?*
- *From hiding Jews.*
- *What?! The war ended years ago!*
- *Yeah, but I've never told them.”*

As we could see in the examples, Jewish humor is built on self-reflection, and “insider’s” interpretation of events. Exception is the joke quoted above, as it points out how emphasized and difficult it is to process the tension -- caused by the traumas and disappointments suffered at the time of return -- in the cultural-memory of the community.

Returning to the excerpt of the interview quoted above, according to my conversation partner, it is the “*same thing*” today. Tensions arisen from traumatic historical events live on in the cultural-memory and the interpretation of the present.

## 5. Decades of communism

Third period of cultural-memory encompasses the decades of communism. Evaluation of the beginning of communism cannot be separated from the experience of disappointment of those who returned from the death camps. After the Holocaust, Jews found themselves facing anti-Semitism even under communist dictatorship.

Reality of anti-Semitism persisting during decades of communism is wittily presented in Ben Lewis: *Hammer and Tickle. The History of Communism Told through Communist Jokes*, a collection of the author.

*“Trotsky and Lenin are travelling through a small town in Russia.*

*Children run out and greet them with the chant: ‘We know who you are, we know who you are!’*

*‘Look’ says Trotsky. ‘The Revolution has made us famous. Even children recognize us.’*

*But before Lenin could respond, the children’s chorus chants: ‘You’re Jews, you’re Jews.’ (Lewis 2008:94)*

The joke places “emphasis” on that particular stereotypical lesson in the cultural-memory, that there is no change, not even in communism, in the “general”, “eternal” experience of Jewish minority’s existence; “people are people” regardless of time periods, regimes, therefore, Jews always have to be prepared to deal with anti-Semitism. “Kids” in the joke depict the bitter temporal continuation and repetition of that reality. Political ambitions using “internationalist”, communist ideology fueled by aggression towards Jewish faith and traditional values, persecution of significant percentage of Jewish citizens as ‘bourgeois-class-alien’ members of society, and anti-Semitic lawsuits common within the communist party in the 1950-s, upheld this type of experience. Occurrence of it in Hungary, and the ongoing presence of the Holocaust’s traumas together yielded perhaps the “strongest” and “darkest” punch lines of the jokes I have collected.

*“Kohn and Grün, labeled as class-alien citizens are deported to the communist work camp of Recsk. The train arrives at the camp. Kohn and Grün get off. Grün looks around and says:*

*- Ayve, Kohn. This is much like Auschwitz.*



*Kohn sighs:*

*- Oh, Auschwitz...”*

The next joke about anti-Semitism is “essentially” present even in communism:

*“The American and Soviet presidents are walking on Red Square in Moscow. The Soviet president talks about the freedom of religion in the Soviet Union.*

*- Ah, Mister President – says the Soviet – as you can see, in communism all religions are accepted and respected. All those who wish can attend masses and services and pray in churches.*

*At this moment they stop in front of a synagogue, which is all locked up. The American president then asks the Soviet counterpart.*

*- Would this be your freedom of religion?! There is no-one here! You should let a rabbi to come here!*

*- The Soviet replies:*

*Not a problem! A year from now, by the time you come again, everything will be taken care of.*

*A year passes; they once again are walking on Red Square. The American president notices the synagogue. It is still locked up. Indignantly he asks:*

*- What is happening here? What about your freedom of religion? Couldn't you find one single rabbi in the whole country?*

*- No, no, that's not it – says the Soviet president. We searched for a rabbi, there were plenty of applicants, too, but imagine... all of them were Jews!”*

None the less, the community-cultural-memory and humor include, along with the continuous threat of the Jewish-existence, the ‘tsores’ that affects all under communist dictatorship. Main characters of the following joke once again are Kohn and Grün, but the theme this time is the general criticism of the communist regime:

*“Kohn and Grün are at the party-meeting. The party leader boasts about the success of communism, how nice and fine everything is; communism is getting built up, internationalism is flourishing, all is hopeful, wonderful and promising.*

*All of a sudden, Kohn stands up:*

*- This is all fine and well, but where is the food from the stores?*

*- One week passes. It's party-meeting time again. Once again they boast about how wonderful all are, how rapidly communism and the bright new world are being built.*

*Then Grün stands up:*

*- This is all fine and well, he says. But where is Kohn?”*

The joke is a general criticism of communism. At the same time, as we see in the character of “Kohn and Grün”, they are the only ones to speak up at the party-meeting. The joke is not clear on whether – because they are coming from a culture that does not suppress disagreements – their communication habits, strong sense of justice and fairness, and some sorts of bravery make them speak up, or is it because they just don't realize the ultimate power of a totalitarian regime. What is unmistakable though is that the two stereotype character of Hungarian-Jewry does not fit the world of party-meetings. For them the totalitarian political system and ideology is a completely unknown territory.

The fundamental difference between the world of traditional Hungarian Jews and the communist regime is depicted in the joke in which Kohn find himself completely outside of the political-social reality that surrounds him:

*“Kohn is summoned in the party headquarter to be interrogated:*

*- Do you know Marx, Engels, and comrades?*



- *Well, the first two gentlemen I haven't heard of, but the third one... wasn't his name Kaminetsky before he had converted?"*

In both jokes, Kohn relates to the political system and ideology from the realm of his own culture and its adaptation strategies. Kohn's candid question in the party-meeting presupposed the same freedom of expression and opinion he was used to in his own cultural environment. The Kohn, who was being interrogated at the party headquarter, supported by his culture's positive self-stereotypes, used his "skillful" adaptation ability to compensate for the lack of familiarity with the ideology. At the same time, in there, only his familiarity with his own culture – referring to the conversion of foreign-sounding names to Hungarian – helped him, although, in this case it was not necessarily much of a help there.

In both jokes as we could see, communism is alien to the Hungarian Jewish culture, and being alien once again carries distress for minority-existence. With that, as we could see in the "*But where is Kohn?*" joke as well as in the synagogue-jokes, preposterous nature of communism affects not only the Jews, but all people. The next joke testifies to that:

*"What does freedom mean in the communist countries?"*

*It means that free citizens of a free country can do only what they are free (allowed) to do."*

One of my conversation partners often characterized the time of communism with the following phrase: "*This is how we all lived, if you can call this living*" - reflecting on a joke about the quality of life in that period:

*"The secret police shows up at Kohn's apartment.*

*One calls through the door:*

*- Does Móric Kohn live here?*

*Someone from inside answers:*

*- No, Kohn does not live here!*

*- Open the door! What is your name, anyway?*

*- I'm Móric Kohn.*

*- You are Móric Kohn? Then why did you say, Kohn does not live here?!*

*- Behind the closed door Kohn sighs, lifts his shoulders, spreads his arms and says – would you call this 'living'?"*

Connecting life and the "living" of Kohn to the general, all affecting kind of life-situation emphasizes that during decades of communism; Jews had suffered the same way as had everybody else. Majority of the above jokes therefore belong to the shared repertoire of joke-folklore told during the decades of communist (cf. Homa 1994, Katona-Dornbach 1994). Furthermore, the quoted jokes are also part of the intercultural folklore of communist-jokes circulating in communist countries (Lewis 2008:110).

All these also shed a light on the complexity of memory connected to communism. The latter quoted jokes, as we could see, did not connect directly to the special life-circumstances, traumas, or tension related to being a minority group of the Jewry. This and other jokes told in different groups of society connected to the synagogue-humor, therefore emphasize the 'tsores' shared with the majority group. Connection to the majority through shared "tsores" then plays a part in the "equalization" of minority's life-circumstances. Part of it is that during this period, Jews were not deported to concentration camps, anti-Semitic harassments of the '50s ceased with time. These, along with anti-Semitism – albeit together with the discourse on the Holocaust – thanks to state control, were pushed out of the public discussion of society. In the communist society – if one accepted the compromise forced on by political circumstances – social mobilization and integration became possible for the Jews. This is what the next joke is about:

*“What is the difference between a rabbi and a party-leader?”*

*It is that at Yom Kippur the rabbi eats in secrecy, while the party-leader fasts secrecy.”*

The joke once again speaks of the Jews with self-irony. Mockery of the “adaptation-strategy” of the party-leader also points to that in communism, Jews were allowed to play authoritarian social-political roles. The joke also illustrates the fact that the price of participation is giving up or hiding one’s Jewish identity.

Contradiction and complexity of the period’s evaluation surfaces in the views of community members I interviewed. One of my conversation partners, for example, refers to communism as the period, along with the Holocaust, that ruined the Jews:

*“WWII brought along significant change for the Jews. At the same time, it ruined us, for it annihilated the Jewry. Those who survived, following the death of relatives and whole families, arrived to the conclusion that God does not exist, and had given up their Jewish identity. Still, those who grew up in a Jewish environment, cannot do anything else but using their childhood as their point of reference. Another is the decades of communism with its completely atheist ‘spirit’, in which it was conceivable – now it is unbelievable – that someone could grow up in a family to learn about his/her Jewish origin only when reached eighteen-twenty years of age.”*

According to the interview excerpt, communism is one of the contributors to the “annihilation” of Jewry, further intensifier of the processes originated from the tragedy of the Holocaust.

One of my conversation partners, in agreement with the quoted interview excerpt, made an attempt to explain, how did communism contributed to the “dissolution” of the traditional Jewish culture:

*“During the Rákosi-era<sup>9</sup>, Jews were given an opportunity, a new world-view, according to which the Jewish – non-Jewish problem will come to an end. According to the communist ideology ethnic and religious differences will no longer matter, for the division of society is based on the classes, which eventually will phase out, too. The sense of us, the “conscientious proletariat” was like a folding-screen at the time of emancipation, when the Jew meant to blend into the crowd by trying to be “more Hungarian than a Hungarian”. Now do the same here: “be more communist than a communist”, “more of a revolutionary than a revolutionary”. That’s how many of the Jews became the ‘chazzan’<sup>10</sup>, the ‘sliahcibur’<sup>11</sup> (Unterman 1999:94-95) of the Party.”*

My conversation partner cleverly described the Jewish activists of the Party by using examples from Jewish rituals. In the interview excerpt criticism of the total assimilation also gets re-verbalized, likening the assimilation strategies and the failure of those to the tragic consequences of the “golden age” and the period following it. Once again, in this context, we find criticism of desire of assimilation, the aim of becoming “more Hungarian than a Hungarian” being compared to the aim of becoming “more communist than a communist”, “more of a revolutionary than a revolutionary” in the communist period. Looking at the period of communism from this perspective, equating it with the negative events of earlier tragic periods, sense of endangerment of their own culture is recognizable.

From this perspective, the identity narrative of one of my conversation partners is especially interesting. As an active party-member, a leader, he used to be the “chazzan of the Party”. In 1967, during the Israeli Six Days War, he had to realize, that the Hungarian state regards Israel as an



enemy. Victory of Israel “awakened” the Jewish identity of my conversation partner, who grew up in an orthodox family-environment. This led to confrontations with the communist politics and the offered advantages of assimilation:

*“’67 meant, we Jews are people, too. We have our own nation; we are no longer second class citizens. This is when something started in many of us, something that led us back to being Jews, for in Jewry are my people, the ones I belong to: Israel.”*

Before the conflict, the offered advantages, the possibility of assimilation made my conversation partner the “chazzan of the Party”. As the Six Days War led him back to the appreciation of his Jewish identity, he experienced the anti-Israel sentiment of the political power; to resolve his internal conflict, he “returned” to his Jewish roots. From the interview excerpt it seems that traditional Jewish identity and life-style is fundamentally antagonistic to the world of communism, according to my conversation partner.

Other members of the community, however, do not regard this period so unfavorably:

*“There were religious Jews among us even in the Rákosi-era. They took their vacation unnoticeably around major holidays in order to attend services at the temples. They formed cooperatives for the specific purpose of allowing them to keep the observance of Shabbat.”*

*“I always disagree with those who said, and emphasize it even today, that in the times of difficulty, meaning in the ’60-s and ’70-s, it was not possible to be Jewish... There were about as many synagogues as there are nowadays, however there were more attendees then. They had ‘minyan’ in the evening and in the morning as well. And there are us here today to keep the tradition and to pass it on.”*

As we can see from the excerpts of recollections, they do not defend or build a positive image of the communist regime. They do emphasize however, that during that period, it was possible for the Jews to keep and practice their religious-ritual way of life, even though to make that possible, they had to apply their resource and ‘skillful’ adaptation techniques like, among others, the “Sabbath cooperatives”. Operability and viability of those during the communist regime are well illustrated in the interview excerpts describing religious lives in Budapest.

Juxtaposed with the negative experience of total assimilation, we find the positive interpretation of the “skillful” adaptation’s success here, much like we find it in the humor. Even though, communism as a political-social organization is not compatible with the traditional-ritual values and practices of the Jewish ethos, years of communism, after all, made possible the practice and continuation of the Jewish way of life after the Holocaust.

Complex evaluation of the communist period is complemented with the remembrance of the particularity of the 1956 Hungarian revolution and uprising in the cultural-memory. Evaluation of events of 1956, in spite of the public celebrations and constitution of unifying national memory, is lacking concordance.

Events of 1956 from the perspective of the Jewish cultural-memory are complex; included are the memory of heroic freedom fighters and martyrs with Jewish ancestry and Jewish identity battling for democracy against Soviet occupation, Jewish Party members’ participation in the events, as well as actions of anti-Semitic rioters (cf. Szabó 1995:242-254).

Community-cultural-memory has not come to consensus regarding these complex events and related experiences. Jewish humor, on the other hand, responds with sensitivity. The following joke was told in the community when the subject



of our discussion was of the events of 1956. Interesting characteristic of the joke that it originates from the traditional base of Jewish humor, adapts the traditional patterns of it in order to interpret the events of 1956:

*“Kohn is standing on Public Square, when he sees a large crowd approaching, chanting:*

*- Damn the communists! Away with the Party!  
Long live the revolution!*

*Kohn looks at them, nodding approvingly:*

*- You are so right!*

*Another group shows up on the opposite side of the Square, chanting:*

*- Damn anti-revolutionaries! Away with capitalism! Long live the Party!*

*Kohn looks at them, nodding approvingly:*

*- You are so right!*

*Hearing this, Grün steps up to him and snaps at Kohn:*

*- Can't you see how these want just the opposite what the others want?! And on top of it, don't you realize they are going to get into a fight in any minute?! How could you say to both that they are right?! Both cannot be right!!*

*Kohn looks at Grün, nodding approvingly:*

*- Grün, you are so right!”*

This joke is about the irony of non-commitment. With this, Jewish humor defuses the tension rising from the conflicts created by completely opposite “truths”. All this may be connected to the experience of stereotype “Jewish life-situations”, too: “exaggerated” experience in the humor depicts the state of being “outsiders” in the political and community conflicts concerning primarily the majority, just as it is reflected by the following, considered a “classic” joke:

*“It's Sunday in Belgium. As usual, both Flemish and Walloons get drunk. Kohn and Grün are there, having a good time along them. Later, as things progress, Flemish and Walloons get into a*

*fist fight. Germanders arrive, beat up everybody before ordering:*

*- Flemish to the left, Walloons to the right!*

*Kohn and Grün are shaking in their pants. Finally they ask:*

*- Nu, and what about the Belgians?”*

The “outsider” base-scenario in the joke compliments the lack of taking-a-stand narrative, while depicts the absurdity of defenselessness and complete assimilation. In addition, the joke points out that the socio-political periods – much like the social-political conflicts in the majority society – create pressure on the Jewish community to find newer and newer additional adaptation techniques and solutions in their culture. Changes in the political system may also create tension in the Jewish community. After all, the changing context of applied adaptation techniques may carry along the muddled “unfamiliarity” of the otherwise familiar life-situations. The following joke, by depicting the atmosphere just before the political system-change, suggests just that.

*“They are asking the rabbi in the synagogue:*

*- Communism has ended, it's for sure. What is going to happen now? Aren't you concerned about what awaits us afterwards?*

*- I'm not concerned about that, only about what will happen before we get there.”*

Joke connected to another change of the political-system change refers to a historical experience stored in the cultural-memory:

*“At the political system-change the head of the Party walks up to the portrait of Lenin hanging on the wall of his office and asks:*

*- Well, comrade Lenin, what will happen now?*

*While Lenin replies from the picture:*

*- What would happen? They will unhang me from here, while they hang you (by the neck).”*



6. *“It’s the same, even today.”* Interpretation of our days in the reflection of cultural memory.

The political system-change in Hungary fortunately went peacefully. Jewish life could renew itself, too. The Zionist organizations were no longer needed to operate illegally; religious life did not require such forced adaptations as it did in the days of the ‘Sabbath cooperatives’. New education and cultural organizations were born; Jewish public life has been invigorated.

In the life of the synagogue at Bethlen Square change was noticeable, too. The number of youth visiting on the regular basis doubled, and on every Shabbat fifty-sixty people came for the service. Celebrations of major holidays attract hundreds of people. Members of *“minyan”* in the synagogue do not consider this as the “Jewish renaissance”, for the ritual-traditional Jewish life-style and ethos practiced by them is not as signified in the more general social-public Jewish revival processes. At the same time the present and future of ritual life in Hungary seems to be guaranteed, so the gradual renewal of religious values may not be excluded either, at least the possibility of renewal of it is given.

Complexity of the question is clearly demonstrated by the following interview excerpts, too. Many of my conversation partners, from the perspective of synagogue-life, regard the years after the political system-change as positive:

*“I think there is something new being born here. There are more of us in the temple, and look at it, everyone finds a long-term place here at Bethlen Square. We stay here, don’t want to leave, and if we miss one of the services, we feel badly about it.”*

*“There is a full Jewish life here once again: bar-mitzvahs, weddings, love-relations, friends, who are here together. We see each other every day,*

*we are a community once again, and this is a Jewish community, Jewish life.”*

Others view the revival of the Jewry critically:

*“What’s there at Bethlen Square and at another few places, those are curiosities, it is a narrow segment only where old and young study and pray together.*

*“The problem is that it is not enough if someone feels Jewish. He/she has to be truly Jewish, has to be brought up as one. For someone to be Jewish both religiously and ethnically, that’s not happening today, that’s very difficult. By coming to the temple only ten-twenty of them will become Jew, but that still brings the crowd along.”*

As we can see, the above quote, originating from a ritual-religious value-system perspective, is a criticism of the Jewish lifestyle neglecting religious practices. These criticisms however, are formulated in such a free atmosphere in which Jewish life-styles and world-views are more important than the curtailment of freedom of the Jews. Looking at it from this perspective, the period after the political system-change considered unquestionably positive, for the reevaluation and discussion – supported by humor as well – of the Jewish life-styles and identities became possible.

At the same time, members of the community regularly come across anti-Semitic sentiments on the Internet, directly or indirectly experience prejudices in the public life of society. All these keep the traumas in the cultural-memory alive. Members of the older generation continuously share their memories with the younger ones, thus drawing them into their stories and discussions of traumas.

Not surprising perhaps that I could not find jokes in the cultural-memory related to the years following the political system-change. When the subject of recent past came up during the





conversations and joking, jokes of the earlier periods' traumas were told. To the jokes, covering the period from the Trianon Treaty to the beginning of communism, my conversation partners always added: *"It's the same, even today."*

In other cases, discussions of current events brought up the jokes. The *"Kohn is begging on the stairs of the Basilica"* joke, for example, was told during a discussion when the subject was the situation of the Hungarian Jews. One of my conversation partners said to me: *"Whatever it is, we are still sitting on the stairs of the Basilica, like the Kohn and the Grün."*

The jokes, therefore, still release the same tensions, while also deepen those by reflecting them to the recent past and present, as the ones we saw at the description of the age of the traumas. With that, the tensions in the form of irony also surface in the synagogue humor. This is how we meet the criticism of the emphasis of *"tsores"*, too, like we do in the jokes related to the self-ironic exaggeration of the minority status. Referring to that, we often hear in the synagogue the adage, which has become part of the folklore of Jewry of Budapest: *"Not even the 'tsores' is the same today."*

## 7. Summary

To summarize the example of jokes connected to cultural-memory, we could see that humor can structure the modern day Hungarian Jewish history into well separated periods. Ordered to these periods are meanings which make it possible to interpret the components, questions and problems of modern day Hungarian Jewish minority culture and identity:

The "golden age" points to the possibility of harmonious coexistence, at the same time to the criticism of "total" assimilation strategy.

Experience of the years following the Trianon Treaty, reinforces this criticism. Silence of humor about the time of the Holocaust, as well as the jokes referring to the following years, point to the survival of traumas and the conservation of tension between majority and minority.

Most of the jokes speak about the years of communism. Reason for that is that many of my conversation partners lived through it. In addition, abundance of jokes arises from the complexity of the period: criticism of the suffering from dictatorship speaks of the equalizing *"tsores"* shared with the majority, borrowing from the much used repertoire of the period-jokes. In connection, there have been the example and possibility of social mobilization and the leading of a religious life for the Jews, even if it had required forced-compromising. The jokes also speak about the complexity of political standings, as well as of the political-social "outsider" status of the Jews.

I could not find jokes about the years that followed the 1990-s political system-change. At Bethlen Square, when they mention it, they tell the ones about the age of the traumas, as they connected that period to the events of recent past and present during the interviews I conducted.

All this may seem peculiar from the perspective of Jan Assmann's theory of cultural and communicative memory I referred to in the Introduction. According to the theory, it takes 80 to 100 years, lifetime of three to four generations for the memories of those who had the experiences which they had passed on to the next generation to fall into a structured pattern (Assmann 1999:29-87).

In the example of community-cultural-memory I presented, we can see how most of the periods – in case of my elderly conversation partners, all four of those – connect to their own, or known through their parents', therefore equally



significant, determinant experiences. Along with that, pattern of humor, connected with the community-cultural-memory, appear to be distinctively structured, as their complexity and multifaceted nature appear in these separated periods.

These complexities precisely point out that from the perspectives of the minority – as it happened in the case of Kohn in 1956 – it is difficult to decide “*who is right*”, and take a stand to support any given political-social group or effort. Maintenance of that complexity therefore is the maintenance of that “permanent” experience in the memory by which Jews are able to adapt to the processes and life-situations taking place in the majority’s society. If we examine the stereotype life-situations and characters appearing and returning in all the period-jokes, we will find “skillful” character-traits and positive self-stereotypes conforming to the forced-situations of adaptation.

From the Jewish perspective, the most determinative motif of history is the minority adaptation’s “permanent” presence in the life of the Jews. Humor – by emphasizing the adaptation skills in various contexts, situations, and periods and by presenting stereotypical “skillful” character role-players deepening the positive self-stereotype images – attempts to ease the dramatic, often tragic interpretation of past events formulated in the cultural-memory.

## Notes

1. Neolog: The segment of Hungarian Jewry which was more inclined toward integration during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
2. Sabbath: From Friday night to Saturday night, a day of rest and religious observance commemorating the creation of the Universe.
3. Kiddush: A ceremony of prayer and blessing over wine, performed by the head of a Jewish

household at the meal ushering in the Sabbath, or a holy day, or at the lunch preceding it.

4. ‘Skilful’ in this context means “canny”.
5. Tsores: Yiddish term, meaning trouble, hardship.
6. Minyan: A quorum of ten or more Jewish adult men, required for certain religious obligations.
7. Wirtschaft: Word of German origin, means business, commerce. In this context it is its Hungarian adaptation, meaning chaos.
8. Shema Yisrael: The first two words of the Torah that serves as the centerpiece of the morning and evening Jewish prayer services.
9. Rákosi-era: Dictatorship in Hungary from the end of the 1940-s throughout the first half of the 1950-s.
10. Chazzan: A person who leads the prayer services in the synagogue, a cantor.
11. Sliahcibur: “Messenger of the congregation”, who transmits the prayers to the Eternal One.

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