

Jewish Theatre in Budapest: The question of belonging 1939-1944

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Abstract:

The Hungarian government introduced a number of anti-Semitic laws that restricted Jewish 'presence' between 1920 and 1944, first in universities, then in professional spheres and finally, in public places. By 1941 hardly any Jewish-born theatre workers were employed by the Budapest theatres. Simultaneously, the authorities gave permission for a Jewish theatrical initiative to launch, within the confines of the cultural organisation of the Pest Israelite congregation (OMIKE). The initiative, entitled 'Artists' Action' was seen as a kind of 'cultural ghetto' by the authorities, but to its member it represented a fight for continuous access to culture. It was also a cultural mission which provided a livelihood for 400 artists and unified thousands of people. Studying the Artists' Action, its leaders, members and audience, also provides an insight into an identity in crisis: the search for a unified Hungarian Jewishness amidst social exclusion was actively supported by the practices of the cultural institution as well as the journal of the congregation.

Keywords:

Theatre, Identity, Exclusion, Holocaust, Hungary

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Introduction

When Oszkár Beregi, a celebrated actor of the Budapest Jewish theatre was asked to describe his experience of being a member of the company between 1939 and 1944, he said it was like a 'last breath before we asphyxiate'. (Beregi, 'Visszaemlékezések' Manuscript) The Artists' Action was an initiative of the Israelite congregation, which represented the fight of the Budapest Jews for continuous access to culture, in the form of both serious thought-provoking art and light entertainment. It was also an indication of the determination to provide aid for coreligionists at a time of escalating social exclusion. It operated within the congregation's cultural organisation, OMIKE, until the day of the German occupation of Hungary. But what could the Artists' Action and its actors give to the audience, besides entertainment? Could OMIKE's performances offer succour to members who were facing uncertainty as a result of social exclusion?

The examination of OMIKE's audience during the Artists' Action provides an insight into the experience of having both a Hungarian and a Jewish identity in the period of anti-Semitic exclusion. It highlights the questions and doubts that arose as a result of being pushed to the edge of society. The Jewish theatre was an opportunity for the actors affected to stay

employed and earn a little. The initiative only affected a small group of people, of largely similar social standing, but to that group, it played a crucial role in the period.

Interwar Anti-Semitism in Hungary

Out of the 724 306 Israelites questioned during the 1941 census, 585 265 identified as Hungarian and 139 041 said that they were Jews.¹ 95% of the latter group were inhabitants of regions controlled by Romania and Ukraine after the Trianon Treaty of 1920. (Ungváry, 2013:31) This meant that almost all Budapest Jews participating in the census considered themselves Hungarian first, in spite of the exclusionary legislation that was in effect by 1941. Jews were highly assimilated, especially in Budapest, and occupied typically middle-class professions as lawyers, doctors and journalists. They were also prominent in theatrical life mostly as actors or directors. The so called 'Jewish Laws', or, more accurately, (Anti-) Jewish Laws of the late 1930s banned many of them from exercising their profession.

Hungary's first explicitly (Anti-) Jewish Law was passed in the spring of 1938, with the secondary title: 'to ensure a more effective balance in economic life and society'. (1938) It targeted white-collar workers and established both the Chamber of Media and the Chamber of Film and Theatrical Arts, and regulated the already existing Chambers for lawyers, physicians, engineers and so on. The law empowered these institutions to fix a ratio of 80-20 amongst Christians and Jews in their own respective fields. According to the government's plans by the 31st of December 1939 around 15 000 Jewish professionals were expected to lose their jobs. (Braham, 1981:126)

The Chamber of Film and Theatrical Arts handled the case of 'Jewish' presence in theatres and it had already excluded many from the Budapest stages by the time the Second (Anti-) Jewish law came into effect. The Chamber's own 'numerus nullus', a complete elimination of 'Jews' from theatres, thus began. The Budapest 'Jews' working in theatre and film became dependent on the decisions of the Chamber, which often acted ahead of further exclusionary laws and dismissed more Jewish artists than the government quota prescribed. As László Bánóczy, director of OMIKE's theatre programme said after the hasty implementation of the First law, 'by the time the Second Jewish Law was born there was nothing to implement, as 'Gleichschaltung' had been carried out in the case of the theatres, most efficiently and with diligent speed.' (Hevesi, 1942:85)

During these 15 years anti-Semitism was present in students' struggles, Parliament and everyday life. Jewish religious or cultural organisations, as a response, had to broaden their range of responsibilities to include more practical ways of providing social aid. OMIKE had been organising educational and cultural events and talks for the Jewish community. In the aftermath of the new laws, however, they had to become socially active in new ways. The Minister of the Interior, agreed to allow the Artists' Action to start in May 1939 just before passing the Second (Anti-) Jewish Law.² As the connection to Nazi Germany also indicates, this gesture of acceptance from the Ministers was not an example of tolerance that allowed relief to those forced out of their jobs by the Chamber. Instead it followed along the lines of Mihály Kolosváry-Borcsa's anti-Semitic work, who was director of the Chamber of Press. He defined the core of the 'Jewish problem' to be the lack of a clear contrast between a Jew and a non-Jew. According to those who agreed with such a vision, making the Jews more visible through separation was the first step towards a solution. (Horák, 1996:45) Approval for the Artists' Action was an element of 'cultural ghettoisation': setting up an artificial divide

between Jewish and Hungarian culture. As Komoróczy pointed out, the ‘ghetto [was] set up before its walls were erected’. (Komoróczy, 1999:364)

Hungarian Jewishness in OMIKE

Analysing the views, demands and tensions around the repertoire of the Artists’ Action will help to answer important questions about the initiative as well as its participants. Who were OMIKE’s members? What could the Artists’ Action do to satisfy its entire audience? As a result of the Chamber of Film and Theatrical Arts’ restrictions, OMIKE could not aim for an especially wide or diverse audience. Being a strictly congregational institution meant that all supporting members also had to be a part of the Jewish community. Although 60 000 visitors attended OMIKE performances in the 1940-1941 season, the number of supporting members only reached 3000, because of the unique supporting system and a largely returning audience.³ In contradiction to the Artists’ Action’s declared aim to provide a ‘comprehensive cultural mission’, the members of OMIKE did not come from diverse social backgrounds. The performances at the theatre’s venue, Goldmark Hall were almost exclusively attended by a group that Dezső Szomory called ‘middle and lower middle-class’. (KCsL, 1941.07.06:14) Wealthy and working class members of the Jewish congregation were equally absent from the theatre. It was this narrow, largely returning audience whose taste and needs determined the programme of OMIKE and who were, at the same time, under the influence of the performances and ideas at Goldmark Hall. My discussion focuses on the perceptions and identity of these few thousand middle-class Budapest Jews who constituted OMIKE’s membership.

A transformation from an academic, informative approach to a more emotionally-charged, communal one took place with the establishment of the Artists’ Action. In the pre-Artists’ Action era OMIKE mostly arranged lectures, literary evenings, poetry recitals and musical programmes with a focus on general Jewish themes. Such a state of affairs had to shift with the establishment of the Artists’ Action. This was done through a platform to create for the artists, and through the opportunity to attend cultural performances for the audiences. Jewish topics prevailed, as they had previously, but with a difference. There was a newfound enthusiasm for topics that had a more direct relevance to the present. Instead of filling an intellectual, informative and niche sphere, OMIKE’s cultural programme now targeted the audience’s everyday concerns. Performances came to focus on the historical suffering and exclusion of the Jews, usually with an uplifting message about morality or retribution in the afterlife, and always with emotional connotations. (Horák, 1998:320)

The shift to more emotional topics and a deeper engagement with stories about Jewish fate meant that plays based on themes from the Hebrew Bible became increasingly widespread. Some examples of this include Hebbel’s Judith, based on the Book of Judith, or the artistic director, Bálint Lajos’s play, Támár. Such performances were reportedly followed by emotional reactions. Marcel Nagel’s letter, which he sent to the journal of the congregation, MZsL, after seeing Lajos Szabolcsi’s drama, Traitor, describes a strong religious response: ‘and as he [Oszkár Beregi] recited the Shema Yisrael, every single viewer burst into tears of joy[...] they have been allowed by the artists to feel closer to God and his spirit’. (Horák, 1998:302-3) MZsL portrayed a deepening Jewish identity amongst the members of the Artists’ Action, who were suddenly ‘much more responsive to Jewish patterns and mood’. (Horák, 1998:412) Based on these sources, it would be easy to conclude that the audiences’ religious bonds were strengthened. MZsL’s overwhelming positivity towards Jewish performances, however, was due to a handful of authors. The same names, like Marcel

Nagel's, appeared under the emotionally heightened letters and reviews. This raises the question: were the members so homogeneously enthusiastic about the prevalence of Jewish themes?

Hugó Csergő's statement, published in MZsL on the topic suggests otherwise. He described the importance of featuring Jewish-themed plays and the rightful, strong demand for that by the membership, but also said that 'unfortunately the number of people sharing this experience is below what was anticipated'. He admitted that while non-Jewish themed performances in Goldmark Hall always attracted a full house, during the religious plays there were sometimes 'gaps in the audience'. (Horák, 1998:532) This is one of the instances when a tension between demands amongst the members of OMIKE can be felt, which suggests that a strengthening of religious feelings was not necessarily unanimous in the membership. Moreover, contrary to MZsL's overwhelmingly positive reviews, the Artists' Action was frequently criticised for being 'overly Jewish'. The journal, *Képes Családi Lapok*, condemned the 'lowly claptrap' in OMIKE and denounced some of the performances as 'anti-Semitic caricatures of themselves'. (KCsL, 1941.10.30:6)

Another argument against the overwhelming dominance of Jewish themes came from the increasing number of members who agitated for furthering the theatre's 'independent artistic profile', which OMIKE also took pride in. (Horák, 1998, 523) By this they meant that OMIKE should stage the work of excluded writers, who often wrote about Jewish topics, but would also focus on great European classics such as Shakespeare or Racine, and modern European authors like Ibsen. The tension within the membership of Artists' Action was not between people who did and those who did not want to see Jewish plays in OMIKE, but rather between those who wanted the performances to be dominantly thematically Jewish and saw that as the most important component of OMIKE's cultural mission and those who aimed for a repertoire that was a celebration of Jewish, Hungarian and European culture at the same time.

The response to these tensions, both from the leadership of the Artists' Action and the MZsL, was a search for a compromise that would satisfy the largest number of people. Both OMIKE and the journal skilfully took advantage of the common ground between the two approaches. Firstly, by providing their own definition of what a 'Jewish play' might mean, they allowed themselves flexibility in assembling the repertoire. Instead of demanding that the writer be Jewish or that the focus be on a Biblical theme, MZsL formulated a novel approach, in its critique of *A Mother's Heart*: 'It isn't particularly the topic of the drama that is Jewish. [...] What's Jewish about it is the sentiment it concludes with: The sentiment of goodness and understanding'. (Horák, 1998:531) Explaining that a drama on a non-Jewish theme can nonetheless contain indirect Jewish elements allowed them to satisfy both demands.

The performances also sought to address the common ground more directly. The leadership could easily achieve this by responding to the phenomenon that all members of the Artists' Action were victims of: exclusion. An immediate response to the members' increasingly desperate situation could bridge the gap between the difference of opinions. Lessing's famous work *Nathan the Wise*, though thematically Jewish, most importantly preached tolerance amongst religions, specifically Christians, Jews and Muslims. Another work with contemporary relevance was S. Zweig's *Jeremiah*. The German dramatist's piece was written in the aftermath of the First World War and protested against the concept of war and violence through the life of the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah. Its last sentence explains why the audience could relate so easily to Zweig's drama: 'Men we can slay, but the God who lives in

them we cannot slay. A nation can be controlled by force; its spirit, never.’ The Biblical themes in these performances were of secondary importance relative to the comforting message they provided to the Budapest Jews.

OMIKE also made considerable efforts to emphasise the coexistence of cultural and religious Jewishness and a cultural and patriotic Hungarian identity. This suggests that exclusion brought along a doubt about this duality amongst the members. The Artists’ Action’s founder Géza Ribáry highlighted the idea in his first, opening OMIKE speech by saying: ‘I am opening my heart, which suffers as it is Jewish and my soul which is still proud in this humiliation as it is Hungarian.’ Through its performances, OMIKE showed that such a balance was possible. (Sándor, 2010) The introduction to the play *Alice Takáts*, as an account from November 1941 describes it, was a good example of how careful OMIKE was to represent both ties within its performances. (Horák, 1998:399) As a prologue, Gyula Bartos performed *Summons* (which is considered to be the second Hungarian national anthem) symbolising OMIKE’s ‘eternal focus on serving the Hungarian national sentiment’. He continued by reciting Endre Sós’s poem *The Hungarian Jewish Religion* before the play, written by a Jewish author, began. OMIKE also tried to show that Hungarian and Jewish cultural traits are not only compatible but also highly beneficial for each other. In tribute to coexistence, OMIKE also published an anthology where both Jewish poetry and Hungarian literature were celebrated. The message of the anthology was that the two cultures, both outstanding, mutually influenced each other. (Horák, 1998:434)

The tensions that surfaced around the role of the Artists’ Action and the disagreement concerning a dominantly Jewish or more diverse repertoire, were handled carefully by OMIKE. The need to determine what Hungarian Jewishness meant within the theatre points to broader insecurities around the possibility of a mixed identity. To people torn between their religion and their homeland, OMIKE suggested that they can be both Jewish and Hungarian simultaneously. Therefore, beyond the two self-determined aims of the Artists’ Action, helping excluded artists and providing access to culture for the congregation, it also aided its members in the crisis of identity that arose as a result of exclusion.

Conclusions

The narrow, largely homogenous group of members became unified in their longing for culture and in seeking a solution to their crisis of identity. The leadership of the Artist’s Action made conscious efforts to achieve further unity and bridge the differences of opinion. As a response to exclusion some became more deeply engaged with their religion, while others increasingly held onto their Hungarian roots. The theatre, with the help of the journal of the congregation, recognised the disparity of identity and created a repertoire that could reach all of its members. It celebrated Hungarian Jewish art and culture. But above all, it provided comfort in establishing a forum for the continued existence of Hungarian Jewish identity in the Jewish middle-class of Budapest.

The premieres announced in MZsL on 9 March 1944 never took place. German troops occupied Hungary on the 19th of March 1944. The symbolic importance of the Goldmark Hall theatre can be seen in the speed by which German soldiers appeared in OMIKE on the day of the occupation. As ghettoization began, Hungary’s remaining ‘Jews’ were not only excluded from professional and artistic spheres but also from public life and society. Jews from outside the capital were rapidly deported to concentration camps. Those living in Budapest were no longer confined to a purely cultural ghetto. ‘Jews’ were ordered to live in

'yellow-star houses' and in the newly-erected ghettos of Budapest. The theatre hall became a kitchen and food storage of the Pest ghetto. As the artistic director, Lajos Bálint remarked 'The actors disappeared and so did the audience'. (247)

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Biography:

Anna Kalmar is a recent history graduate of St. Catharine's College, Cambridge. She is originally from Budapest, the place where her curiosity towards history began while studying at one of the top grammar schools in the country. During the past three years in Cambridge, she pursued her interest in modern European history, with a focus on political thought and cultural themes.

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Endnotes:

¹ To avoid an alignment with the vocabulary of the times when I use the term ‘Jew’ in the sense that authorities in the period would have done, I always indicate it with quotation marks.

² The permission of authorities was probably granted by widening OMIKE’s license piece by piece (Harsányi). This process probably started in September 1938 (Komoróczy), continued in November 1938 (Horák) and became finalised in May 1939 (Bálint). The documents granting permission have not been found.

³ The authorities forbade the selling of tickets, which forced OMIKE to develop an alternative method of funding. The ‘benefactor system’ allowed viewers to pay for a seasonal ‘supporting’ pass, reserving seats for them and their families for 24 productions in a season.