Integration and its Discontents: Humorous Magazines and Cabaret as Reflections of the Ambiguous Transformation of Budapest Jews into Magyars of the Jewish Faith

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In 1910, the Jews of Budapest constituted approximately 23 percent of the 882,000 inhabitants of the town, making it the second largest Jewish city in Europe. Only Warsaw surpassed it—here in 1914 the percentage of Jews was 38 percent of the town’s population of 883,000. Jews felt extremely comfortable in the Hungarian capital. Their collective identification with the city found ironic depiction in a caricature of 1883 published in the Jewish humorous magazine *Borsszem Jankó* (Johnny Peppercorn). The image showed an obviously Jewish figure on his Sabbath walk, surveying with satisfaction the magnificent vistas presented by the recently constructed Andrássy Avenue. The caption reads ‘How goodly are your tents, O Jacob!’ the verse from the Book of Numbers sung at the beginning of the morning service in the synagogue. The image was intended to convey Hungarian Jewry’s unique sense of belonging and symbolic ownership in the city. The surprising juxtaposition of the ancient Biblical text and the modern urban scene had complex resonances that conveyed more than mere urban pride. It suggested nothing less than a conceptual, if not historical, overlap between the Biblical homeland and the contemporary city. Budapest appeared as the reincarnation of ancient Jerusalem, the site where the religious past and the secular future found a happy meeting ground. After centuries of wandering among strange lands and hostile people, commented a contemporary, the Jewish Ahasuerus discovered a home in modern Europe.¹
This view of the city was shared by its non-Jewish inhabitants. Endre Ady, the
great modernist poet who was also a self-declared liberal and philo-semite, could assume
a consensus on this subject when he characterized the modernity of the city in terms of its
Jewish character. ‘It is the Jews’ he wrote in an article of 1917, ‘who created for us
Hungarians] Budapest, along with everything else that from the distance gives the
appearance of being European but is nothing but gaudy illusion.’ As this quotation
suggests, there were many critics of the allegedly ‘Jewish’ character of the Hungarian
capital. In the 1890s, Vienna’s antisemitic mayor, Karl Lueger, famously coined the term
Judapest to designate what he took to be overwhelming Jewish influence over the
cultural life of the Hungarian capital. From the late nineteenth century, Hungarian
nationalists placed growing stress on the nomadic character of the original Magyars and
their origin in Central Asia, particularly in the celebrations in 1896 of the millenium of
Magyar settlement in Pannonia. The unspoiled East was juxtaposed to a degenerate West;
masculine self-reliance to modern effeminacy; healthy pragmatism to rampant
subjectivity. Given the inherent logic of this cultural imaginary, the city could only be
conceived of as the antithesis and, in time, the archenemy of national traditions. By the
early 1920s the construction of Budapest as a ‘modern Babylon’ was complete. The
severing of symbolic ties between modern Budapest and historic Hungary seemed
inevitable. ‘You may well ask’, a conservative journalist queried in 1922, ‘what possible
claim this city might have on the nation’s stormy, thousand-year-old past?’ The concept
of Judapest found full-blown ideological iteration under the conservative regime of
Miklos Horthy, which labeled Budapest the ‘sinful city’ (bűnos város) and vowed to
cleanse it of its Jewish elements.
modernity that had despoiled Hungarian national culture became the toxic inheritance of right-wing Hungarian politics. Its ambiguous afterlife continues to the present, inhibiting scholarly research or even serious conversation about the subject.

It is my view that the story of Jewish modernity is best studied not through the celebrated achievements of individuals and elite groups but through the everyday narratives, informal practices and popular rituals of urban life. These were the informal spaces where new forms of Jewish sociability and self-identity were invented and made visible in defiance of official liberal ideology committed to rendering Jewish life as invisible as possible within the culture.\footnote{The Jews of Budapest were certainly deeply committed to magyarization, which had transformed Buda and Pest from small German-speaking towns into the capital of the large Hungary created by the Ausgleich (Compromise) of 1867. Hungarian Jews constituted a significant proportion of the middle class carrying out the modernization and industrialization of the country. Yet, they were also very well aware of the ambiguous character of their situation.}

Jewish insecurity about their status and the threat of civic exclusion and political violence was brought to a head by two inter-related crises in the spring of 1882. The first was a notorious blood libel trial in which Jews were accused of murdering a Christian girl for their Passover festival; the second an explosive immigration debate about the potential influx of Russian Jewish refugees into Hungary in the wake of pogroms that had broken out in western and southern Russia in late 1881 and early 1882. The common thread that linked the two events was, of course, the ‘Jewish question’, which assumed overtly antisemitic tones in the months between the spring of 1882 and the autumn of 1883, radicalizing Hungarian public opinion.
The liberal defense of Jewish rights on this occasion proved successful but it did not dispel the widespread popular antisemitism. The integrationist Jewish establishment adopted a strategy of keeping silent and allowing their non-Jewish allies to defend them. Thus in 1884, when the lower house of the Hungarian parliament publicly condemned antisemitism in the wake of the election of sixteen antisemitic members, the Jewish deputies conspicuously recused themselves from taking part in the debate. *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* (The Hungarian Jewish Review) praised their action: ‘The Jewish deputies in the House displayed enough tact to refrain from participating in the pre-advertised debate, and enough self-esteem to refuse to enter into dialogue with the antisemitic gentlemen.’

The Jews adopted this strategy partly because one section of the Hungarian liberals attacked all forms of Jewish solidarity. Gyula Verhovay, the editor of *Függetlenség*, the paper representing the exiled Hungarian leader Lajos Kossuth, castigated the Jews for refusing to treat Tiszaeszlár as an ordinary criminal investigation and insisting on rallying to the cause of their co-religionists. Such gestures, he continued, had resulted in a ‘transformation in public opinion so general and so powerful’ that it resembled a raging flood that swept up in its waves ‘all social layers, from day laborers to the most enlightened persons.’ Jewish solidarity was thus seen as an unacceptable infraction against both the rule of law and the conventions of constitutional government.

The crisis of 1882-1883 solidified the self-conscious strategy of assimilation and excessive patriotism that became the hallmark of Hungarian Jewry at the *fin de siècle*. In the words Chief Rabbi Samuel Kohn of the Dohány Street synagogue:

*We know ourselves to be Hungarians body and soul. We are Hungarian even within the framework of our religious lives. And yet, we are also Jews; we*
identify ourselves as such, even within the framework of our Hungarian lives. The Jewish word is an adjective to the Hungarian word and means this: we are Hungarians, what is more, Jewish Hungarians, or if you like, Hungarians of the Jewish faith.

These heartfelt assertions seemed justified by developments within the larger Hungarian political world. In the early 1890s the Liberal Party introduced a series of ambitious secularization laws, which included the separation of church and state, the introduction of civil marriage, and the ‘Reception’ of Judaism as one of the official religions of the state. Hungarian Jews celebrated these measures with nothing less than euphoria, seeing them as the culminating achievement of Hungarian liberalism and the completion of the process of Jewish emancipation that began with the Emancipation Decree of 1867. According to an editorial in *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* in 1895:

> In almost every state on the European continent the flame of liberalism has been dimmed or snuffed out. ... Yet, in Hungary, Europe’s easternmost constitutional state, the sun of liberalism continues to shine with undiminished brightness and warmth. While everywhere in Europe we witness the growth of reaction and antisemitism, in Hungary—only recently and sometimes even today regarded as part of ‘darkest Asia’—politicians have deliberately and jubilantly torn down the last barrier ... dividing Jews from non-Jews.

Yet Budapest Jews were well aware that Jewish assimilation and the support it enjoyed from Hungarian liberals was far more fragile and fraught with anxiety than their public rhetoric would suggest. Their sincere and vehement affirmation of Hungarian patriotism had not banished the ‘Jewish question’ from Hungarian public life. Indeed, the
very effectiveness and visibility of Jewish cultural institutions and newspapers promulgating the creed of assimilation served as irrefutable proof to Hungarian society of continued Jewish autonomy and separatism.

The Jews responded with bitter irony to their ambivalent situation. In order to illustrate this, I will examine two pivotal expressions of Budapest Jewish public culture. The first is the Judenwitz (Jewish ironic humor), which found its most important embodiment in the humorous magazine Borsszem Jankó. The second is the Jewish music hall or Orpheum, which created the forms of a commercial entertainment industry that came to define the very nature of modern Budapest at the fin de siècle. Unlike the aura of nostalgia that commonly surrounds the history of Hungarian Jewry under the Dual Monarchy and which is reflected the testimonies of the Hungarian Jewish elite, the semi-bohemian journalists, humorists, music hall composers, and cabaret writers discussed here had a distinctly critical and acerbic view of their society. Indeed, the larger truth about Jewish Budapest is that it lacked a unitary voice. Its characteristic feature was the unstable juxtaposition of irreconcilable opposites: optimism with anxiety, conformity with subversion, certainty with ambivalence, rootedness with marginality.

The humorous magazine Borsszem Jankó may not have invented the Jewish joke, but it undoubtedly helped transform it into the lingua franca of fin-de-siècle Budapest. Under the magazine’s auspices, Jewish humor became the common currency of an urban culture that was notoriously lacking in other unifying elements. In 1887, after almost twenty years of unprecedented success, the magazine’s editor, Adolf Ágai, playfully complained of the lack of even a hint of a worthy competitor to his venture. Borsszem
Jankó, he boasted, had single-handedly created ‘the genre of the new humour magazine’ in Hungary.⁹

The comic tradition that Ágai inaugurated with Borsszem Jankó was what contemporaries referred to as Judenwitz or the Jewish joke. Freud famously relied on it in his theoretical masterpiece Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious, which explored the subversive and creative potential of humor in human affairs. While Freud implicitly postulated an overlap between the universal significance of humor and its specifically Jewish manifestations, this was by no means a general assumption in the culture of his time. As Jefferson Chase has pointed out, in German-speaking Central Europe throughout the nineteenth century, a distinction was made between general humor, which was considered part of the national culture and served to integrate individuals into the community,¹⁰ and a specifically Jewish form of humor, which was seen as subversive and leading to cultural negation and instability.¹¹ Judenwitz implied more than simply jokes by or about Jews. It was identified with the nihilism of the Jewish spirit itself that found characteristic expression in irony and malicious laughter. Judenwitz was thought to be the creation of rootless outsiders who could never fully master the native idiom or contribute to the collective values of the nation. Inimical to the practices of both folk culture and high art, Judenwitz was closely aligned in popular imagination with the commercial press and modern journalism.¹²

The modernity of Judenwitz explains both its wide appeal and its contested status. It was a tradition, writes Jefferson Chase, which carried social stigma and intellectual allure at the same time. Ágai himself characterized audience reactions to Borsszem Jankó in terms of unavoidable ambivalence. ‘Those who loved it most.’ he confessed, ‘were
also the ones who berated it most. Conceptual ambiguity was inseparable from the creative function of Jewish humor and holds the secret to its central importance in the cultural life of fin de siècle Budapest.

Contemporary observers frequently pointed to a dangerous moral relativism inherent in the comic spirit of Borsszem Jankó. Jewish religious leaders themselves were troubled by the implications of Ágai’s subversive humor, which they feared undermined Jewish solidarity and challenged religious authority and cultural traditions. They maintained a decorous silence on the subject, failing to even acknowledge the existence of Borsszem Jankó in official Neolog publications such as Magyar Zsido Szemle. Judenwitz clearly did not belong among the accomplishments of Jewish culture these intellectuals wished to encourage or to celebrate. Yet there was never an open breach or direct confrontation between Ágai and the Jewish religious establishment, which did not want to add its voice to the chorus of antisemitic and nationalist detractors already attacking the Jewish-identified magazine.

The objections of the extreme right were, not surprisingly, the most violent and uncompromising. Antisemitic humor magazines such as Füstölő directly identified Borsszem Jankó with the nefarious influence of Judenwitz and called upon Hungarian society to resist it in the name of its national self-preservation. ‘We maintain’, the editors of Füstölő declared in 1881, ‘that any person who continues to subscribe to this magazine [Borsszem Jankó] is not a true Hungarian. This simple-minded publication is the enemy of Christian Hungarians and celebrates our most hated enemies, its own tribe, the Jews—Let’s burn the copies of Borsszem Jankó!’ The protests of antisemites were joined by
the more subdued opposition of conservative nationalists who also worried about the impact of *Judenwitz* on the cultural and linguistic tradition of the Hungarian people.

Significantly, such fears about the potential cultural and moral damage caused by Jewish humor remained mostly confined to intellectuals and ideologues. They failed to make a deep impact on the larger society, which seemed highly receptive to the scandalous appeal of *Judenwitz*. The interesting question, thus, is not why certain groups and individuals objected to *Judenwitz* but rather why such large segments of the population were open to its attractions. For there is no doubt that Ágai’s humour magazine, after some initial technical difficulties, was hugely successful among the general public. Starting with a subscription base of five hundred in 1868, the magazine increased its circulation to four thousand by 1870. Its popularity was to decline by the late 1890s, when newer kinds of humor magazines emerged, but during the first two decades of its existence, it provided the template for modern humorous discourse in Budapest. The characteristic readership of *Borsszem Jankó* was undoubtedly recruited from the Jewish urban middle classes, but it was by no means restricted to this audience. The magazine generated strong support and interest among educated non-Jewish readers as well, people who recognized their own social concerns and linguistic peculiarities in its parodic voice.

The comic idiom of *Borsszem Jankó* was inclusive, rather than exclusive, and its satiric attacks were applied with equal measure against Jews and non-Jews, urban and rural groups, elites and non-elites. In time, the recurring social types published in *Borsszem Jankó* became well-loved public figures, defined by idiosyncrasies of manner, speech, and appearance, which generated loyal followers. Its centrality to the culture was
confirmed by its status as the official humor magazine of the new liberal government that came to power with the Compromise of 1867, the result of an agreement between its editor, Adolf Ágai and Mór Ludassy, an insider of the Deak Party and a member of the political press office at the foreign ministry in Vienna.15

It was in the role of editor and cultural impresario that Ágai was to realize the full potential of this new cultural role. Borsszem Jankó was, in many respects, his personal creation, which reflected the novel attitudes and practices of the Judenwitz tradition. Although the editorial staff of Borsszem Jankó was by no means entirely Jewish, the magazine itself was Jewish-identified through the very symbolic space it occupied in the culture. From the 1870s this identification found informal confirmation through the ironic appellation of ‘Kagal’ that the editorial staff playfully adopted for its enterprise. The name was first used by the antisemite Győző Istóczy in a parliamentary speech of 1882, in which he expounded on the theory that world Jewry was striving for global domination through a secret society he called the Kagal. The concept had become current as a result of the denunciations of the institutions of Jewish self-government by the Russian Jewish apostate, Yaakov Brafman [Kagal was the russified spelling of ‘kahal’—the executive board that was chosen to run an autonomous Jewish community]. On discovering that the original meaning of Kagal was Hebrew for ‘community:’ the editorial staff of Borsszem Jankó immediately appropriated it as a badge of honor and applied to its regular editorial meetings on Monday evenings, when the content of the week’s number was thrashed out.

Ágai’s abiding models for his literary and journalist practice were Heine and Börne, whose names he frequently invoked in the course of his long career. There was
only one area where he rejected their example, and that was their conversion to Christianity. In a reported conversation with the Archbishop of Esztergom, Ágai gave the following response to the cleric’s tentative exploration of the possibility of his conversion: ‘This would not be advantageous for a writer such as myself. As the great Heine himself confessed, no one bothered him on account of his Jewish faith before his conversion. After that, they never ceased to throw this in his face…The same fate befell his contemporary Börne. Those who make their living through criticizing and irritating others, whose profession is to point out people’s weaknesses and mistakes; cannot afford to display weakness that will inevitably be turned against them.’

Ágai’s insistence that the viability of the Judenwitzier depended on his moral independence from established authority seems to be contradicted by his close association with the political establishment of the Dualistic system. In fact, however, the brand of radical journalism that Ágai pioneered in Borsszem Jankó was fully compatible with the political vision of the Deák Party. Its leaders entrusted Ágai with the editorship of a pro-government humor magazine with the expectation that he would establish the kind of innovative modern press capable or all meting wide popular support for the enterprise of Dualism.

Ágai, for his part, viewed the backing of the Deák Party as a source of much-needed legitimacy and national visibility for his magazine. The financial aspects of the arrangement were never made transparent in the official record, but there is little doubt that Borsszem Jankó received some kind of government subsidy, especially in the early years of its existence, before it became a self-sustaining commercial enterprise. It is also evident, however, that the implicit relationship between the magazine and its official
sponsors was based on more than mutual exchange. It was in fact a unique instance of the broader historic alliance between Jewish modernity and Hungarian liberalism that defined the period. Hungarian liberals promised to allow Ágai full intellectual freedom to develop the satiric potential of Judenwitz, while Ágai agreed to use the tradition to advance the causes of Dualism, Hungarian modernity, and Jewish assimilation.

Years after the original agreement, Ágai claimed to have fulfilled his end of the bargain with unswerving consistency; ‘Borsszem Jankó was the organ of the Deák’s Party,’ he wrote in 1890, ‘and, twenty-three years after it came into existence, [the magazine] continues to profess the party’s ideals and to fight for its principles.’ Ágai’s declaration of fidelity, however, was more complicated than appears on the surface. It implied continuing identification with the critical spirit of liberalism that the Deák Party had embodied in the 1860s, but it did not mean automatic support for the policies of the Liberal Party itself, which came into existence in 1875.

An implicit differentiation between the generic ideals of liberalism and the political ideology of the liberal establishment was central to the identity of Borsszem Jankó. The former was the necessary precondition for its very existence as a humor magazine; the latter was a frequent target of its satire. These cultural premises were spelled out early in the life of the magazine in a foundation story titled ‘A “Borsszem Jankó” látogatói’ (The visitors of Borsszem Jankó). The narrative evokes a string of imaginary and more-or-less unsavory visitors with diverse ideological agendas, who ask for admission to the pages of Borsszem Jankó. The unwelcome intruders included ultranationalists, ethnic minorities, aristocrats, Catholic clergy, and even an Orthodox rabbi. All are denied entry, with the exception of Count Szellemeri, an imaginary figure
who stood for nothing more serious than the spirit of French wit and intellectual
independence.\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{Borsszem Jankó}’s repudiation of ideology by no means implied a retreat from
daily politics. On the contrary, its independence gave it greater scope and latitude for
political satire. \textit{Borsszem Jankó} was famous for its inventive and cutting parodies of the
political leadership of Dualistic Hungary. A characteristic example of its wit was the
notorious caricature of Count Albert Apponyi, the leader of the moderate opposition,
whose prolonged exclusion from power was wickedly depicted as a never-ending Yom
Kippur fast. \textit{Borsszem Jankó}’s political satire did not spare liberal politicians either.
Among its characteristic practices was the depiction of liberal politicians in drag, with
extravagant finery and effeminate gestures that served to deflate their authority and
pretensions to dignity.

Political satire represented the most visible and directly confrontational aspect of
\textit{Borsszem Jankó}. The magazine’s more enduring, and ultimately more radical, innovation,
however, crystallized around its regular social types, which became its defining features
from the mid-1870s on. Based on stereotypes of existing social groups or individuals,
these recurring figures were not simply puppets or intellectual mouthpieces of the editors.
In many cases, they were full-fledged artistic creations, whose letters to one another and
to the editors of \textit{Borsszem Jankó} were linked in a non-continuous narrative based on the
common themes of everyday life and politics.\textsuperscript{22}

Given the centrality of language in Hungarian national discourse, it is hardly
surprising that the impulse to express difference found its primary representation in the
satiric depiction of language use among the types. Almost every figure expressed itself in
parodic versions of Hungarian. The figure of the aristocrat, appropriately named ‘Monocles’, spoke Hungarian with a heavy French accent and invariably mixed French and English phrases in his comic disquisitions on ‘High Life’. The embodiment of the reactionary Catholic clergy, Pater Povadik Hyacinthus, spoke with a Czech accent and mixed his antisemitic tirades with Latin platitudes. The representative German burgher, Tobias Kraxelhuber, was equally deficient in Hungarian, invariably reverting to Schwabian dialect in his xenophobic outbursts against foreigners in general and Jews in particular. Even the type of the Hungarian gentry, Berczi Mokány; spoke with a local country accent that marked him as an outsider in the sophisticated cultural environment of the capital.

In this colorful gallery of idiosyncratic social types, the linguistic and cultural peculiarities of the Jewish figures hardly appeared exceptional. Indeed, their class and social diversity was more striking than their supposed cultural or ethnic solidarity, which politicians were perennially declaiming. The Jewish grocer Salamon Seiffensteiner was originally depicted as a naïve enthusiast and gullible follower of nationalist politics who was easily manipulated by flattery and ideology. The Jewish banker W. M. Börzeviczy, was modeled on Mór Wahrmann, the first Jewish Member of Parliament, who had represented the Lipótváros for almost a quarter century and who was also a wealthy banker and the president of the Neolog Jewish Congregation of Budapest. He was shown as a skeptic whose comments on the affairs of the world and parliament were invariably made in both Hungarian and German. He was prone to punning in Hungarian and then commenting on his own wit in German. The Jewish landowner David Vöröshegyi spoke his own version of hybrid Hungarian, which he employed in letters to
his steward containing harebrained instructions for the improvement of his estate. The moneylender Kóbi Blau was perhaps the least appealing of the Jewish types, one whose unsavory legal wrangling introduced yet another side of Jewish urban life. Significantly, the sizable Orthodox population of Budapest and the countryside found only indirect recognition in the comic figure of Reb Menachen Cziczibiser, whose inventive curses against assimilated Jewry offered no end of amusement to his readers.

Not surprisingly, the cultural message articulated by Borsszem Jankó had its most direct and consequential implication for the ideology of the ‘Jewish question’. Its comic vision denied the central tenet of this ideology, which focused on the need to erase Jewish difference as the precondition for social acceptance and equality. Such expectations found characteristic expression in the following liberal editorial of 1889:

If [Jews] want to be regarded as completely equal, they must not differ in any detail from the other inhabitants of the nation .... They have to alter their external appearance, their clothing, their way of life, their occupations. We acknowledge that, in themselves, these details are trivial, but collectively, they nevertheless become important factors that isolate Jews from the majority of the nation.24

What made this demand for Jewish identification with Hungarian culture so problematic was its implicit subtext that saw Jewish identity in essentialist terms. Thus, no matter how meticulously Jewish external differences were erased, traces of otherness inevitably remained, making it impossible to bring about a perfect alignment between Jewish identity and national culture. The internal contradiction of the Jewish question was that it both acknowledged and denied the legitimacy of Jewish presence in the nation.
It held out the promise of equality in the name of a perpetually deferred identity that was ultimately unreachable.

Borsszem Jankó mirrored the paradox at the heart of the Jewish question, exposing and deflating its seemingly coherent ideological claims. Using the indirect techniques of irony and comic exaggeration, it punctured all foundational claims about Jews. It spoke through negative Jewish stereotypes circulating in society in order to expose their absurdity. Such comic gestures were undoubtedly double-edged swords that ended up discrediting not only the tenets of the Jewish question but also formal visions of assimilation articulated by Jewish cultural elites and religious leaders. The ultimate goal of Borsszem Jankó, however, was not to repudiate assimilation or to reaffirm negative Jewish stereotypes developed by antisemites or opponents. On the contrary, it was to discredit all stereotypes, including their positive and normative formulations suggested by the Neolog establishment.

The most witty and sophisticated advocate of Borsszem Jankó’s cultural agenda on assimilation was Itzig Spitzig, the fictional Jewish journalist associated with Király Street in the Jewish Terézváros neighborhood. This area was one of the two poles of Jewish Budapest. The other was the Lipótváros where the Jewish commercial elite lived. It was a neighborhood, according to the Hungarian Jewish writer József Kiss in his Mysteries of Budapest, of tree-lined streets and handsome apartment palaces, where comfort, good taste, and boredom ruled. The staid and peace-loving inhabitants of the quarter only lost their equanimity when one of their stores failed to open because of bankruptcy. By contrast, the Terézváros was where the vast majority of the Jewish lower
middle classes lived and worked, and it was also where the city’s major music halls and places of entertainment were located.

Spitzig, who became Ágai’s acknowledged alter ego in *Borsszem Jankó*, first appeared on the pages of an earlier satiric paper called *Bolond Miska* in 1865. He made his entrance to the world of Jewish humour with the following memorable introduction: ‘Dear Mr. Editor, I am, if you please, a Jew, a Hungarian Israelite, and I am proud of it, for even if I were not proud of it, I would still remain a Jew.’ The essence of Spitzig’s message was the imperative to affirm rather than deny Jewish difference, which he consistently associated with external identity rather than inner conviction. Spitzig’s Jewishness was, in fact, independent of religious, cultural, or ethnic content. It was situational, based on the cultural codes and social interactions that defined Jewish everyday life in society.

Spitzig’s paradoxical Jewish self-identification was not a sign of disenchantment with the outcome of assimilation. His figure was conceived in 1865, two years before the emancipation of Hungarian Jewry, when the promise of liberalism was still undiminished. Spitzig’s cultural persona expressed Ágai’s essential optimism about the possibilities of assimilation, but it was an optimism tempered by a powerful sense of realism. He was convinced that conditions for the social integration of Jews had not yet arrived but needed to be created through the critical task of the humorist. Through the voice of Spitzig, Ágai attempted to imagine a novel cultural space and social terrain that would make genuine assimilation possible. His voice was both normative and utopian and motivated by the desire to bring into existence a new kind of Jewish identity capable of confronting with dignity and creativity the challenges of modern, secular life.
Spitzig’s ‘Letters from the Király Street’, the central thoroughfare in Terézváros, which became a regular feature of Borsszem Jankó between 1868 and 1882, were primarily directed at Hungarian secular Jews and focused on a wide-ranging critique of their attempts to translate literally the terms of assimilation. The delusion of trying to appear Hungarian and the futility of denying Jewish difference became the leitmotifs of his letters. He had a sharp eye for the foibles and vanities of the parvenu Jewish bourgeoisie, whose propensity to purchase noble titles and ape the customs of the Hungarian nobility were frequent objects of his ridicule. This ‘vanity fair’ as he called it, would eventually bring about a situation ‘where Hungarian noblemen would petition the ministry to be able to get rid of their titles of nobility and be declared peasants.’ He reprimanded his audience by reminding them, ‘You are descendants of the oldest and purest aristocrats and you abandon the ancient parchment to run after the Hungarian nobility’s dog skin.’

Spitzig denounced his fellow Jews for their political naiveté in confusing the legal formula of emancipation with the social reality of assimilation. He ironically invoked the example of his neighbor from Király Street, a certain Moritz Mandelbogen, who was so overwhelmed with enthusiasm on learning that the Jews had been emancipated that he immediately set out for a stroll in the city’s fashionable promenade, Váci Street, to celebrate his new status. He hoped to be greeted by the distinguished strollers and to be invited to their homes for dinner or a reception. Spitzig’s commentary on Mandelbogen’s futile expectations was a combination of understated wit and genial empathy: ‘He waited, but the invitations never came. And in my humble opinion, he can wait two weeks—what
am I saying, even three weeks!—for an invitation for a soirée at Count Károlyi’s to materialize.’

In 1875 the same theme provoked one of Spitzig’s most mocking denunciations against the Jewish community of Aszod, which apparently petitioned the government to have its official title changed from ‘Hungarian Jews’ to ‘Hungarian Israelites.’ ‘My dear brothers in Israel.’ Spitzig thundered. ‘Are you meshuge? I am embarrassed that you are Jews, because till now, people thought of us as a clever people. You no longer want to be Jews and appeal to parliament to be declared “Israelites”? Wie heisst? ... If we are called ten thousand times “Israelites”, we will still remain nothing else than Jews. And I don’t want to be anything but a Jew, a brave Moses hussar, who fights, not for a name, but for a cause. The word “Israelite” is an empty title, like calling an ass a negative wise man. Why do you need such negative wisdom?’

Spitzig’s critique of the delusions of assimilation was both compelling and astute. At the same time, it was profoundly paradoxical. His unceasing exhortation for Jews to assert their unique qualities as Jews lacked empirical content. What, after all, was the formula for Jewish difference that could replace the ideology of assimilation? How were secular urban Jews, who had given up their traditional religious practices and social roles, to affirm a distinctly Jewish identity? What were the physical, cultural, and linguistic markers that differentiated the Jewish from the non-Jewish self in the public spaces of modern life? There were no obvious answers to these questions, which reflected the very ambiguities of the modern condition. Insofar as there was a solution to the problem of Jewish difference, it came into existence within the realm of humor. According to the paradoxical tenets of Judenwitz, Jewish difference lay in the very stereotypes that
characterized society’s ingrained views of Jews. Its comic representation of Jews became inseparably intertwined with the parodic manipulation of negative Jewish stereotypes that circulated in society.

Itzig Spitzig was a master of this technique in his capacity as *Judenwitzler*. He not only preached the need to acknowledge Jewish difference but also performed it in numerous disconcerting ways. The graphic image that accompanied his ‘Letters from the Király Street’ invariably portrayed him with the characteristic hooked nose, dark curly hair, and crafty expression that were supposed to betray the inherent traits of the Jewish character. More significantly, Spitzig spoke a scandalously ungrammatical form of Hungarian, which betrayed his linguistic and cultural foreignness. Spitzig’s language resembled, but was not identical with, the Yiddish-inflected *Mauschel* commonly associated with caricatures of Jewish speech.²⁹ It was a novel invention of Ágai’s, who single-handedly created a uniquely Hungarian version of *Mauschel* based on humorous misspellings, awkward syntaxes, reversed word orders, and mangled grammatical structures that suggested an imaginary Jewish self incapable of mastering the linguistic conventions of Hungarian.

As indicated by Spitzig’s self-reflections about his use of *Mauschel*, Ágai was fully aware of the discursive possibilities of self-deprecatory humor, and he used them to full effect on the pages of *Borsszem Jankó*. At the same time, however, his practice of *Judenwitz* went beyond such purely pragmatic considerations. For him, *Judenwitz* was not simply a strategy for gaining recognition of Jewish difference within the popular public sphere. It was also the expression of a radicalized sense of self that could no longer be represented through stable or conventional professional identities. Itzig Spitzig
gestured toward this possibility in one of his earliest letters, in which he explained why he chose to become a humorist rather than a journalist ‘It came to me:’ he announced in hilarious Mauschel, ‘that I would most like to write about important public affairs, not in ordinary newspapers, but in comic newspapers, because, as you will agree with me, it is always far better if a clever man plays the fool, than if a fool plays the clever man.’

The joker or Judenwitzler gestured toward the creative possibilities of an unstructured self that had liberated itself from the rules of social conventions and political assumptions. Spitzig’s ‘Letters from the Király Street’ gave humorous expression to multiple combinations of these possibilities. He fancifully personified the icon of Borsszem Jankó as his ‘unbaptized godson’ and addressed him through the affectionate Yiddish phrase ‘Janko Leben,’ suggesting the hybrid nature of the magazine, as well as its producer. In a more serious vein, he adopted the habit of signing his letters as ‘Spitzig, the well-known Jew and patriot’ or alternatively, as ‘Spitzig, the well-known family man and patriot.’ The first signature poked fun at antisemitic discourses, which insinuated that Jews were incapable of being good citizens as long as they remained self-identified as Jews. The second problematized liberal axioms, which typically held that social stability required the separation between private and public functions. Spitzig’s unique freedom lay in his ability to transcend the binaries of modern ideology, which produced not only the lethal contradictions of the Jewish question but also the alienation of modern liberalism. As Judenwitzler, he affirmed a new, radicalized version of modern identity that prioritized difference over identity, change over stability, and everyday life over universal rules.
The tradition of Judenwitz provided assimilated Jewry with a paradoxical form of personal authority and cultural integrity in its conflicted encounter with post-emancipation society. There was, however, a price to be paid for this essentially cultural solution to the Jewish question. The Achilles heel of Jewish humor was politics. As Hannah Arendt famously pointed out in her Jewish essays of the 1940s, the playful irony of Jewish pariahs like Heine did not constitute a viable response to the world of power and politics. The exclusive valorization of creativity and subjectivity, she concluded, proved to be dangerous, if not irresponsible, in the context of the threatening political realities of late nineteenth-century Central Europe.

While the tragic outcome cannot be disputed, the actual relationship of Jewish humor to the political world was more complex than Hannah Arendt implied. Indeed, looking closer at the Judenwitzler as a cultural type, it emerges that he was not entirely divorced from the political world he satirized. He may have rejected the ideological premises of liberalism, but he was intimately tied to its structures, which provided the very condition of possibility for his freedom from politics. It is thus entirely appropriate that the comic figure of Itzig Spitzig came into existence during the heyday of Hungarian liberalism, when the compatibility between Jewish identity and Hungarian nationalism was a genuine possibility shared by wide segments of both Hungarian and Jewish intellectuals. The relevance of Spitzig’s unique brand of cultural politics was intimately tied to these conditions and gradually dissipated as these conditions changed. By the 1880s, the values of official liberalism were under attack from the ranks of chauvinistic nationalism closely linked to the rise of organized political antisemitism. In the new political environment, the role of humor in opposing antisemitism was far from self-
evident, and the problematic relationship between Jewish humor and politics came under scrutiny.

The weakness of this approach was revealed clearly during the crisis provoked by the Tiszaeszlár ritual murder accusation, which led to the formal withdrawal of Itzig Spitzig from the pages of *Borsszem Jankó*. His departure from the magazine was characteristically understated and without ideological fanfare. It was, however, unmistakably connected with the events of Tiszaeszlár. The announcement was made public through a letter sent by Spitzig to his brother-in-law, Salamon Seiffensteiner, about his decision to absent himself from Seiffensteiner’s Passover seder:

Dear Brother-in-law!

Thank you for the invitation. But I cannot accept it. I am a little indisposed and I do not like large gatherings. I will slaughter my own Eszter Solymosi at home in, the circle of my own family.

Good-bye, Itzig Spitzig

Spitzig never resumed his letters to *Borsszem Jankó*, whose satiric spirit he helped shape for over fifteen years. The distinctive linguistic marker of *Mauschel* was passed on to Salamon Seiffensteiner, who became not only Spitzig’s successor but also the official mouthpiece of Budapest Jewry in the magazine. The invention of Seiffensteiner was generally attributed to Ferencz Székely, a self-made man a generation younger than Ágai, who was an active member of *Borsszem Jankó*’s editorial board, even while holding down a day job as the president of a bank. The figure of Seiffensteiner was originally conceived as the garrulous grocer from number 3 Dob Street, who embodied the political mood and limited perspective of the Jewish lower-middle classes of the Terézváros. By
the 1880s Seiffensteiner had undergone a process of gentrification, no doubt reflecting
the career path of his creator as well as the social mobility of Budapest Jewry itself.
While retaining the graphic features of the round-faced, jovial shopkeeper clutching a
moneybag with the Star of David inscribed on it, Seiffensteiner metamorphosed over the
years into a skeptical urban observer who attended the theatre, read the newspapers, and
wittily reflected on the follies of politics and international affairs. Seiffensteiner’s
primary preoccupation, however, came to be defined by Tiszaeszlár, the problem of
antisemitism, and the inadequacy of official Jewish responses to the phenomenon.

He offered a distinctively pessimistic narrative of antisemitism that implicitly
rejected the inherited vision of Jewish liberalism. Rather than seeing antisemitism as an
atavistic remnant of medieval prejudice bound to disappear with social progress and
political enlightenment, Seiffensteiner perceived it as an essentially modern phenomenon
with no political meaning or solution. It was an irrational projection of populist politics in
which Jews were cast as symbolic scapegoats for Hungarian failures. As he explained:

For the past fifteen years, we have been bombarded with stories that our troubles
and miseries are caused by the joint affairs, the quota, the delegation, the
camarilla, the nationalities, and since we like to have as many enemies as possible,
we have added the Germans, the Russians and the Croats into the mix. Then
suddenly, it turns out that all these grievances were based on a misunderstanding,
since the real cause of every problem was to be found exclusively in the Talmud,
the Schulchan Aruch, matzos, payots, challah, and cholent.\footnote{33}

Equally sardonic was his reaction to the continuing efforts of contemporary
Jewish scholars to provide incontrovertible proof of Hungarian Jews’ historic roots and
longstanding identification with the nation. One such effort-based, on the supposed
correlation between the prehistoric Magyars and the Jewish tribe of the Khazars, drew
the following skeptical assessment from Seiffensteiner:

That Dr. Kohn, our rabbi, has just discovered that Árpád’s mother was a Khazar
Jewess, and he hopes that this discovery will advance the cause of Hungarian
Jewry and stop the cholera of antisemitism. Strange idea! Jesus Christ himself
was Jewish and it has been of no help to us at all! 34

The other institution that embodied the countercultural visions of Jewish Budapest
was the Orpheum or music hall. In the course of the final quarter of the nineteenth
century, Budapest rapidly developed into a vibrant metropolis that found itself in implicit
competition with both the imperial culture of Vienna and the political traditions of the
Hungarian nobility. The modernity of fin-de-siècle Budapest found expression not so
much in its innovative art scene as in its dynamic commercial life and its exuberant
embrace of popular culture. 35 It had a brash entrepreneurial spirit that caused
contemporary observers to remark—not necessarily in a complimentary spirit—that the
city resembled an American rather than a Central European metropolis. By 1892, when
Budapest was formally declared the co-capital of the Dual Monarchy, its identity as the
cultural other of Vienna had become firmly established.

The phenomenon found light-hearted commentary on the pages of popular urban
texts, feuilletons, caricatures, and music hall skits. As an 1896 guidebook to the city
ironically proclaimed, Budapest had triumphed over Vienna, if not in the beauty of its
historic squares and palaces, then certainly in the liveliness and modernity of its nightlife.
The article contrasted the youthful energy of Budapest with the stuffy conservatism of
Vienna and alerted prospective tourists to very different types of urban pleasures that awaited them in the two cities. Vienna, it pointed out, closed down at nightfall and provided the delights of peaceful sleep, uninterrupted from 10:00 in the evening till 8:00 in the morning. Budapest, by contrast, presented a frenetic scene of urban revelry and subversive entertainment that continued unabated from midnight until dawn. ‘Even we Budapestians,’ the author confided, ‘have to go to Vienna if we want to get an honest-to-good night’s sleep. We are the virtual slaves of our nightlife. We maintain without the slightest irony that we go to Vienna to sleep, and the Viennese come to us to have fun.’

These claims, though slightly exaggerated, were not without substance. In the decades between 1880 and 1914, Budapest became famous for its edgy music halls, opulent Orpheums, and titillating all-night coffee houses, which were widely admired and emulated throughout Central Europe. According to the tongue-in-cheek remark of Adolf Ágai, the Orpheum was fast becoming Hungary’s national symbol abroad, displacing such historical icons as ‘Petöfi, Tokai wine, and Hungarian horses.’ Night-time entertainment was more than a tourist attraction or a source of urban distraction. It came to define the very meaning of modern experience and identity in Budapest. The music hall stage was the public forum where the transformative energies of metropolitan life were crystallized, performed, and made visible to a newly constituted urban public. Writing in the 1910s, by which time the golden age of music hall was over, one of its comic stars, Dezső Gyárfás, confirmed the centrality of music hall for the age. The city itself, he reminisced, had become ‘an enormous Orpheum, with beautiful women, third-rate popular dives, and cafe chantants featuring sparkling talents. The streets resounded
with the sound of Orpheum hits and Viennese waltzes. In those days, our magnificent Pest was truly one gigantic Orpheum.  

This phenomenon did not receive official approval. The Hungarian political establishment condemned the capital’s entertainment industry as alien to Hungarian historical traditions and dangerous to the health and identity of the nation. So compromised was the very topic of music hall that when it emerged in the context of a parliamentary debate in 1891, the prime minister, Gyula Szapári, rejected the subject as beyond the ‘bounds of good taste.’ The pariah status of the Budapest music hall appeared unprecedented to entertainment professionals, who were in a position to compare the situation to other European cities.

A surprising voice in the litany of complaints about official attitudes toward commercial entertainment was that of Endre Nagy, the inventor of Budapest cabaret in the first decade of the twentieth century. In his autobiography of his early engagement with the avant-garde genre, Nagy made clear that cabaret was not spared the social ostracism reserved for music hall. He remembered with bitterness the deafening silence that the daily press maintained toward his enterprise, which night after night drew full houses and enthusiastic audiences.

Nagy was tantalizingly vague about the nature of the ‘badge of shame’ that branded cabaret, but for contemporaries the reference would have been transparent. The problem with cabaret was its close association with music hall and with the Jewish lower middle classes whose ranks supplied most of the audiences, proprietors, managers, writers, and performers of these venues. The physical location of the entertainment industry was itself sufficient to identify its ethnic and religious origins. As a
contemporary entertainment journal helpfully hinted, Budapest music halls were situated in an identifiable urban space bounded by ‘the Andrássy Avenue, the Erzsébet Boulevard, and the Kerepesi Avenue, whose streets were almost as lively by night as by day.’ It was common knowledge, of course, that these streets formed the heart of the Terézváros, whose population was three-quarter Jewish and amounted to roughly 150,000 inhabitants by the turn of the century. The major thoroughfare of the neighborhood, Király Street, was the center of the industry, with innumerable music halls lining its narrow sidewalks and adjoining streets.

Antisemites were less oblique in spelling out the Jewish character of commercial entertainment. Right-wing students regularly demonstrated against music halls in the Terézváros, in order, as they put it, ‘to safeguard the honor and reputation of the fatherland.’ Their moral, aesthetic, and patriotic objections invariably centered on the language of performance in these places, since Budapest music hall was still exclusively German at the fin de siècle. ‘The Folies Caprice’ wrote a typical critique in 1904, ‘is a hornet’s nest of disgusting German jokes .... This place of spiritual corruption daily spews forth the poison that is eagerly absorbed by the deluded masses in their search for amusement. Despite the patriotic efforts of a few admirable artists, Hungarian entertainment is overwhelmed by the mass production of German indecencies.’

So serious was the language issue in popular entertainment that in 1895, the minister of the interior issued an ordinance requiring all commercial venues to perform at least fifty percent of their programming in Hungarian. Music halls complied with the formal language requirement by beginning their programming two hours earlier with a special Hungarian performance, and continuing at 8:00 p.m. in German, which was the
everyday language of Budapest Jews. Only by the first decade of the twentieth century, with the emergence of a new generation of urban Jews equally at home in Hungarian and German, did the language of Budapest night-time entertainment finally change to Hungarian. Whether performed in German or Hungarian, however, the fact remained unchanged that popular entertainment was considered beyond the bounds of national culture.

The Jewish-identified entertainment industry presented a problem not only for Hungarian officialdom but also for the city’s upwardly mobile Jewish middle classes. On one level, the often crude, sexually explicit, invariably lower class world of music hall threatened Jewish aspirations to respectability and social legitimacy. More disturbing still were the explicitly Jewish themes and jargon performances of music hall, which clashed with assimilated Jewry’s desire to erase all signs of ethnic or religious difference. On another level, however, music hall, with its irreverent gestures and spirit of parody, was a source of irresistible attraction to middle-class Jews. It reflected the conflicts of the Jewish social experience, offering a safe place for articulating, amplifying, and laughing at the paradoxes of assimilation. The comic characters of music hall, often drawn from familiar Jewish social types, offered a source of temporary community and secret identification for middle-class audiences struggling to live up to external cultural expectations. Jewish difference, when stylized and performed on stage, was not only safe but often exhilarating. Under the circumstances, Budapest Jews responded to music hall culture with unacknowledged inconsistency: they privately patronized it and publicly condemned it. Their unresolved attitudes were reflected in the official Jewish press, which remained mostly silent on the entire subject. One of the rare articles to comment
on the topic singled out music hall’s jargon performances for criticism. Such performances, it commented, typically appealed to antisemites, who saw their own negative stereotypes reinforced, or to unassimilated Jews, who recognized their own early experiences in the shows. In either case, these spectacles were harmful or, at best, lacking any redeeming cultural value. They were the simple-minded amusements of ‘cultural neophytes, who sought only games and distraction, rather than genuine cultural experience.’

Entertainment professionals, recruited almost exclusively from the Jewish lower-middle classes, responded to the hostile environment with caution and discretion. Shrewd businessmen, they implicitly acknowledged the climate of disapproval surrounding their enterprise, but they attempted to present it in as favorable light as possible. Their first publication, the Mulatók Lapja (Journal of carousers), came out in 1890 with identical Hungarian and German texts printed side by side on the same page. A decade later, the journal was succeeded by the more ambitious Mulató Budapest (Carousing Budapest), which was written entirely in Hungarian. The immediate objective of these publications was the practical task of providing useful information about the times and places of music hall programming in the city. Inevitably, however, they also acted as mediators between the entertainment industry and its public. They avoided all claims to serious aesthetic merit or cultural value in explaining their enterprise to their readers. The goal of commercial entertainment, the founder of Mulatók Lapja explained in his opening editorial, was nothing more serious than to ‘banish people’s troubles, to drive away their gloom, to entertain the audience and amuse the reader.’ The same minimalist program characterized the public position of Károly Somossy, possibly the most flamboyant
Orpheum proprietor of the age. Linking music hall to the challenges of urban life, Somossy proposed that his sole mission was to provide ‘night-time entertainment to a mass audience, physically and mentally fatigued by the daily work of the modern metropolis.’ While amusement was the primary function of music hall, Somossy did point to its possible benefits. He suggested that the acrobatic performances and artistic spectacles presented on the stage of the Orpheum had the potential to awaken in the audience an interest in the perfection of the body and the refinement of their taste.48

Such normalizing discourses successfully sidestepped the social and ideological stigma surrounding music hall, but they failed to shed light on the true complexity and actual function of the phenomenon. By all accounts, the appeal of music hall extended well beyond the narrow streets of the Terézváros. Fans converged on the neighborhood from Prague, Vienna, and Graz, often heading to their favorite music hall directly from the train station.49 The Hungarian provincial nobility also made regular trips to Budapest to sample the offerings of the capital’s notorious nightlife. Such excursions included, we are told, an obligatory visit ‘to the Folies Caprice in order to laugh at the greatest comic of the age, the “little Rott” They also involved the enjoyment of the most up-to-date crop of German and Jewish jokes, to be recounted at the county casino at home; and the mastering of the latest dance step, the shimmy ... which was performed at the local ball of the ladies’ auxiliary.’50

Aristocratic patronage of music hall was also a common practice and famously illustrated by the example of the Blaue Katze, a notorious establishment on Király Street, which counted among its clients not only the local inhabitants of the neighborhood but also an assortment of aristocrats and members of the nobility.
These random examples of music hall lore do not, of course, provide a coherent image or convincing analysis of nighttime entertainment in Budapest. The frugal Jewish couple that identified music hall with the catchy tunes overheard on street corners was one kind of music hall consumer. The county gentry that approached music hall as an object of urban pleasure and conspicuous consumption, was yet another type. And the eccentric aristocrat, who patronized music hall in the spirit of upper class slumming, was still another. None of these examples are definitive. They do, however, illustrate the diversity of audiences and the variety of cultural meanings associated with the phenomenon. They suggest that there is no single overarching narrative to explain the simultaneous attraction and uneasiness provoked by music hall.

Unlike the coffee house, which appeared to contemporaries as an unproblematic source of urban sociability, the resonances of music hall seemed more ambiguous and troubling. Critiques invariably pointed to the vulgarity and immorality of music hall, whose programming was sexually explicit and whose premises were not infrequently sites of formal and informal prostitution. The scandal of music hall, however, went deeper than its associations with urban low life. The institution implicitly challenged both national ideals and bourgeois norms by reconstituting the very nature of modern experience and identity in the metropolitan setting. The fact that this challenge was invariably associated with the Jewish presence in the city only helped deepen and exacerbate the conflict, lending it a distinctly political and ideological charge it did not have in other European capitals.

Indeed, Budapest music hall needs to be understood as simultaneously playing a cultural, as well as a political, role in the life of the fin-de-siecle city. It became, first and
foremost, the source and symbol of a distinct kind of cosmopolitan modernity that transformed the very fabric of metropolitan life and affected all layers of the population. It was also, however, a specific instrument of Jewish self-fashioning that ultimately provided alternative paths to assimilation and collective identity for Budapest secular Jews. These two strands of the story were obviously inseparable and experienced as part of the same reality. Nevertheless, they have different implications and outcomes and are best told separate from each other. For this reason, the following attempt to recuperate the erased history of Budapest music hall will be of necessity fragmented and mosaic-like.

The true vernacular of Budapest music hall was the characteristic Juden-Deutsch of everyday Jewish life in Budapest, which found humorous exaggeration and parodic distortion in music hall performances. The acknowledged innovator of the genre of Jewish humor was the Folies Caprice, which was unquestionably the most artistically ambitious and respected Jewish satirical review in Budapest. The brainchild of Antal Oroszi, a former bookkeeper who had become enamored of the creative possibilities of music hall parody, the Folies Caprice featured such spoofs of classical theatrical pieces as ‘Iokel Gerger’, ‘Cyrano de Berger Jakab’, and ‘Romeo Kohn and Julia Lewy’. Oroszi was not only a talented author of Jewish burlesque but also a brilliant talent scout who was able to recruit to his company some of the outstanding actors and comics of the age.

The Folies Caprice’s most important asset was unquestionably Sándor Rott, who was generally recognized as the greatest comic artist of his age. The avant-garde Viennese critic Karl Kraus referred to him with respect, but he was equally appealing to popular audiences, who flocked to see his famous interpretations of the ‘the figure of the little Jewish proletarian.’

Though frequently compared to Charlie Chaplin, Rott’s stage
persona had a distinct quality that unmistakably reflected a Central European Jewish stereotype. He performed the role of the archetypal outsider ‘who scandalizes his environment with his amazing and conscious turpitudes, but also projects the joy and pleasure of having managed to outwit the world.’ Rott’s reputation transcended the world of Jewish music hall. Prestigious drama instructors from the national theater sent their students to the Folies in order to observe and learn from the technique of the great comic. Given the scandalous reputation of the place, however, this professional advice could only be made unofficially and in strict confidence. Both students and teachers made the trip to the Folies ‘with their collars symbolically turned up, incognito.’

The most opulent example of commercial entertainment in Budapest was the Somossy Orpheum, which first opened its doors in 1894. The Somossy did its best to emulate the upscale review theaters of London and Paris and transplant their features to Budapest. Like its models, the Somossy combined ‘material luxury, sexual license, and cultural hybridity’ in a dazzling array of experimental programming directed mostly at wealthy male patrons.

While the broad appeal of music hall is beyond question, the nature of the music hall experience itself remains elusive and difficult to decipher. Simple questions such as what took place in music halls and how audiences incorporated the music hall spectacle into their daily lives prove surprisingly difficult to answer.

More than simply facilitating the recuperation of the everyday, music hall songs helped define a distinctly metropolitan style and sensibility. They gave expression to qualities of knowingness and worldliness that conveyed skepticism about the conventions of respectable society and official culture. Music hall lyrics were invariably risqué and
titillating, light-heartedly exposing the hidden underside of modern urban life that everyone knew about but no one talked about in public. They told elliptical tales about working-class girls who end up in fancy brothels; unemployed lawyers who pray for the indefinite prolongation of their court cases; female coffee house patrons who haggle over their bills; amorous couples who sing the praises of unavailable birth-control devices; and cuckolded husbands who celebrate the birth of their newborn sons with their ever-helpful shop assistants, whose contributions to the family business extended beyond his official functions.55

Music hall’s challenge to the respectable facade of Victorian society was made in a spirit of collusion and joviality that contained no hint of serious social or political critique. For all its light-heartedness, however, its goals and impact were both serious and far-reaching. Music hall was, in the final analysis, a revolt against moral absolutes of all kinds, including the sanctity of domestic life. The subject found characteristic expression in comic one-act plays such as one originally performed at the Folies Caprice and later published as a short story. The play is an account of marital infidelity with a happy ending. It tells the story of the beautiful twenty-year-old daughter of a textile merchant who marries a wealthy older man but continues to see her young lover, who is employed by her new husband. On giving birth to a son, she asks her happy husband to provide a raise for her lover, who is thus allowed to marry and set up a family of his own. Not only does this tale amiably repudiate the conventions of traditional family life but it also seems to flaunt its own transgression by including the seemingly gratuitous detail that the rabbi granted absolution to the actions of the adulterous couple.56
A celebrated music hall skit, first produced on the stage of the Folies Caprice in 1889, provides a convenient entry point into our analysis of the cultural and political work performed by music hall. ‘Eine Klabriaspartie’ (The card game) was the brainchild of Antal Oroszi, who had made his reputation as a producer of Jewish music hall parodies at the Folies Caprice.57 ‘Eine Klabriaspartie’ was, in many respects, a continuation of the tradition Oroszi helped establish. It was a satirical sketch with musical interludes that depicted the comic interactions and off-color banter of four Jewish card players in a fictional Budapest coffee house called the Cafe Abeles.58 All of Oroszi’s plays were successful, but this particular conception of Jewish lower-middle-class urban life created an instant sensation. Adaptations and offshoots of the play spread like wild fire, first among Budapest music halls, and then throughout Central European capitals with large Jewish populations. In Vienna, ‘Eine Klabriaspartie’ became the signature piece of the Jewish-inflected cabaret, the Budapester Orpheum Gesellschaft, where it was performed uninterrupted for more than a quarter century.59 In Berlin, the play became part of the repertoire of the famous Herrnfeld Theater, which specialized in jargon performances depicting humorous episodes from contemporary Jewish life.60

What was the seductive appeal of this seemingly trivial example of music hall buffoonery? Why did it captivate the imagination of such wide and diverse audiences? The answer is neither simple nor self-evident. As is the case with most music hall productions, it is impossible to re-create the comic impact of the actual performance. We can only speculate about the original performance at the Folies Caprice, which featured an exceptional cast of actors, including the ‘little Rott’ in the title role of the kibitzer among the card players.61 However, two published versions of ‘Eine Klabriaspartie’ have
fortuitously survived and provide some idea of the cultural formulae that were activated in the innumerable productions and adaptations of the skit. The first example is a Viennese transcription by Adolf Bermann, which was presumably the basis for the performances of the Budapester Orpheum Gesellschaft. The second is a revised and abridged version of the play, written by Oroszi himself, and published in 1902 in a transient humor magazine he edited.62

Both versions of ‘Eine Klabriaspartie’ present emphatically Jewish characters defined by their inventive and hilarious vulgarity. In Bermann’s incarnation of the skit, the card players are loud and contentious; they endlessly interrupt and contradict one another; they cheat at cards and lie about it; they secretly drink from one another’s coffee cups; and when opportunity presents itself, they demonstrate their lack of respect by insulting the wife of one of the card players. In Oroszi’s version, they are also associated with sexual irregularity and petty dishonesty that is ironically smoothed over at the end in a gesture of camaraderie and complicity. On the most obvious level, the clownish characters of ‘Eine Klabriaspartie’ were re-enactments of negative Jewish stereotypes whose jargon dialect and uncouth behavior immediately identified them as cultural pariahs.

The comic message of the play was inscribed into the insistently and emphatically Jewish names of the characters. At a time when the vast majority of Budapest’s Jewish population was assuming Hungarian names in order to erase all signs of ethnic or religious difference, the protagonists of ‘Eine Klabriaspartie’ flaunted their Jewish-sounding names. In fact, their names became the defining feature of their comic personae, encoding and in a sense dramatizing their Jewish identities. The play was not about
individual characters but rather the quality of Jewishness itself, as perceived and defined by society at large. This explains why the names of the protagonists were freely interchanged in the various productions of ‘Eine Klabriaspartie,’ In the original Folies Caprice version, for instance, the card players were called Kohn, Lewi, Brill, and Grün, in the Viennese production, they became Dalles, Reis, Janicsek, and Dawidl; and in Oroszi’s 1902 transcription they were Lewi, Maier, Stiglitz and Grün. ‘Eine Klabriaspartie’ was a deliberate spoof, presenting Jews through the eyes and cultural imagination of mainstream society, It ironically mirrored the cultural stereotypes of the age, which saw Jews collectively as vulgar, dishonest, and irredeemably foreign.

The transgressive implications of ‘Eine Klabriaspartie’ lay precisely in its ability to exploit and reverse these conventional stereotypes. Through comic exaggeration, the play exposed the abstract, ideological nature of these collective images and forced both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences to confront their own complicity in perpetuating them. The satirical performance of Jewish difference on stage lifted the taboos surrounding the subject in empirical social life, creating a carnivalesque celebration of the very ambiguities associated with Jewish identity. What was ultimately at stake behind the comic conception of ‘Eine Klabriaspartie’ was its repudiation of the very possibility of defining Jewish identity as a coherent and recognizable phenomenon. According to the logic of the play, Jewishness had no empirical content and thus the so-called Jewish question had no solution. The Jewish question could not be solved, for the simple reason that no such question existed.

The well-heeled Jewish audiences that flocked to performances of ‘Eine Klabriaspartie’ seemed increasingly receptive to the new perspective pioneered by
commercial entertainers and radical intellectuals. In the course of the 1890s, the scandalous music hall skit became a respected cultural icon consumed by broad segments of polite society. At the same time, however, the original play underwent some transformations to fit the tastes and imaginations of the Jewish bourgeoisie that was appropriating it. A new version of the play that opened in May 1894 suggests the nature of these changes. The venue for the performance was no longer the notorious and slightly disreputable Folies Caprice but the elegant Somossy, which had traditionally kept clear of explicitly Jewish music hall numbers. The style of the play was also altered from its original form. The new version of ‘Eine Klabriaspartie’ was performed in Hungarian rather than in German, unmistakably signaling its shift from the margins to the center of cultural life. Perhaps the most telling feature of the new performance was the identity of the actors, who had been recruited from the established stars of the National Theater rather than from the rank of the music hall comedians who had originally interpreted the play. To leave no doubt about the newfound respectability of the piece, the management self-consciously announced that the proceeds from the performance would be donated to charity. Music hall was becoming both respectable and Hungarian by the end of the century.63

Conclusion

The historical culture of Jewish Budapest came to an abrupt end with World War I. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in October 1918 irrevocably destroyed the complex social fabric and political institutions that had allowed this cultural world to flourish for more than a half century. From being members of a sprawling Central
European empire with multiple ethnicities and nationalities, Hungarian Jews found themselves transformed into citizens of a truncated ethnically homogeneous state, where their status as a religious and cultural minority was increasingly contested.

The reconstituted Kingdom of Hungary of 1920 had lost 72 percent of its territory to neighboring states and 64 percent of its former population, including millions of ethnic Hungarians. The historic trauma of 1918-1919 proved devastating for Hungary, provoking a ferocious nationalist reaction that had a direct impact on its Jewish citizens. Jews became the focus of national frustrations and were designated as the culprits for Hungary’s disastrous losses.⁶⁴ The diminution of Jewish influence in the affairs of the state became part of official policy in the conservative nationalist government of Admiral Horthy that took power in 1919. One of the earliest signs of official retrenchment of Jewish rights came with the passage of the notorious numerus clausus Law of 1920. The law restricted the enrollment of Jewish students at universities to 5.9 percent of the student body, which represented the proportion of Jews within the general population.⁶⁵ The overt purpose of the law was to remedy the overrepresentation of Jewish students at institutions of higher learning, a problem that had aroused controversy even before the war. Further reaching than its pragmatic considerations, however, were the underlying legal and symbolic implications of the new law. These were spelled out even before the passage of the measure in parliament. The minister of religion and education issued an ordinance at the beginning of the fall semester of 1920, pointing out ‘that in student admissions for the 1920-21 academic year, the Israelites would be considered a ‘separate nationality’.⁶⁶ For the first time since their emancipation in 1867, the Jews of Hungary were declared to be an ethnically foreign group with curtailed legal rights within the state.
Jewish responses to the gradual erosion of their civic status in the new Hungary were not unified and did not happen overnight. Long-held political identities and cultural reflexes died hard, and in many cases not at all. Hungarian Jews had been accustomed to think of themselves as integral parts of the nation and found it difficult to abandon their habits of national identification and patriotism.

Some Jewish and non-Jewish liberals chose internal emigration. This, however, was only one of the options available to Hungarian Jews in the 1920s and 1930s. Many of the most creative members of this generation, including some non-Jews as well, decided to emigrate from Hungary, choosing to settle in Vienna, Prague, or Berlin, where the intellectual and political atmosphere was less stifling and professional opportunities more abundant than in Budapest. Berlin was by far the most attractive of these destinations, since the Hungarian émigrés spoke fluent German and often had personal relations and professional contacts in German universities and avant-garde intellectual and artistic circles. Germany, however, did not turn out to be the final destination of the group. With the rise of Hitler in 1933, most of the émigrés moved on to the United States, where they found renewed opportunities to establish their lives and exercise their talents.

Tibor Frank has described the trajectory of this massive intellectual migration in the interwar years as a ‘double exile’, which involved a triangulation between the cultural worlds of Budapest, Berlin, and New York. As his nuanced study makes dear, the emigrant experience varied considerably for individuals and groups. Some, especially the scientists, were spectacularly successful in finding opportunities and recognition in their new environments. Others, especially the writers, artists, and musicians, were often less so. Notable among the success stories were Budapest filmmakers and actors, who often
established flourishing careers in Hollywood. For some of these transplants, emigration was only a superficial episode that did not significantly interrupt their ongoing engagement with Hungarian culture. Ignotus, for instance, who moved to Vienna in 1919, and then to the United States in the 1940s, always maintained close intellectual and cultural ties with Hungary, returning to Budapest in the final year of his life, in 1949. For others, emigration was a permanent condition that involved a deliberate obliteration of their former identities as Hungarians. This latter type of emigration characterized the star of Budapest music hall Szőke Szakáll, who established a successful acting career in Hollywood under the name of S. Z. Sakall and chose never to return to his country of origin. He signaled his disaffiliation from Hungary by intentionally identifying his official birthplace as ‘Austria-Hungary.’

Those who chose to remain in Hungary after 1919 faced different but equally complex tasks of readjustment and redefinition. The most urgent need was to formulate a collective response to antisemitism by refashioning the public image of Jews in the radicalized world of right-wing Hungary. The second, less obvious task was to come to terms with the cultural inheritance of the fin de siècle, whose subversive modernism was increasingly irrelevant within the politicized environment of the interwar years. One of the earliest attempts to clarify these issues was undertaken by Tamás Kóbor, the former editor of the modernist literary weekly, A Hét. In a pamphlet from 1920 titled Mi az igazság? A zsidókérdésről (What is the truth? The Jewish question), Kóbor set out to publicly articulate a coherent defense of the Jewish position in the face of growing political exclusion and cultural marginalization.
Anticipating by two years the Viennese journalist Hugo Bettauer’s satirical account *The City without Jews,70* Kobor attempted to visualize the drastic consequences of a symbolic expulsion of Jews from Hungarian life. Would the nation survive such an operation he asked rhetorically? What would be the consequences of measures that led to the extirpation of Jews ‘from the national body where they have served the functions of vital organs? Is it imaginable that this perilous operation could succeed, when all else has failed?’71 In order to make such a procedure unthinkable, Kóbor proceeded to refute clause-by-clause the common antisemitic accusations made against Jews in the contemporary mass media. These included the charge that Jews had played a disproportionate role in the Hungarian Bolshevik Revolution of 1919; that they exercised undue and illegitimate domination over the economy; and finally, that they repaid political emancipation by contributing to the destructive forces undermining the nation.

Kóbor’s negation of these claims required a subtle but important transformation of previous strategies for conceptualizing Jewish life and identity in Hungary. In marked contrast to the practices of prewar Jewish politicians, who refused to engage intellectually with antisemites, Kóbor had no choice in the matter. Faced with a political environment where antisemitism had become a legitimate political discourse, he was forced to take their ideas seriously if he wanted to remain a relevant participant in the national conversation. The very act of engagement with antisemitism, however, required serious intellectual concessions and a loss of cultural complexity.

In making his claims for a Jewish public identity in Hungary, Kóbor appropriated the same essentialist and collectivist models used by his antagonists. He countered antisemitic claims against Jewish individualism and subversion with the discourse of
identity and nationalism. This strategy involved a categorical affirmation of the Hungarian roots of Jewish identity, which had already been sounded in less absolutist terms in the prewar narratives of the Jewish elite. Kóbor’s essentialist argument, however, led to startling and contradictory conclusions. Pursuing his ideas to their logical end, he claimed that Jews needed to be considered not only as irreducibly Hungarian but also as irreducibly Jewish. Within the absolutist nationalist universe of the 1920s, there was no room for the hybrid identities performed in Jewish music hall, or even for the hyphenated identity developed by prewar ideologists of assimilation. For Kóbor, as for his environment, Jews could only be considered a racial group. Over the centuries, Kóbor illustrated, Jews had acquired the characteristics of a race whose ‘distinct racial features were visible and perceptible in both its physical and spiritual qualities.’ In his attempt to counter the claims of antisemitism, Kóbor had paradoxically reaffirmed the very position he had set out to confront.

Kóbor’s contradictory article reflected the tragic choices faced by Hungarian Jewry after the war. Under conditions of unprecedented political pressure, they had no choice but to dismantle the theoretical underpinnings, if not the superficial achievements, of prewar modernism. Kóbor, the former modernist, whose nuanced portraits of fin-de-siècle Budapest had given voice to the complexity of the metropolitan experience, became a cultural essentialist, disowning the urban project he himself had helped create. His break from the past was perhaps more categorical than that of other contemporaries, but it contained a cultural logic that would be more and more explicitly played out during the coming decades. A political world that considered Jews as suspect outsiders whose very existence needed to be justified in national terms could not be mollified by the ironic
discourse of difference and self-parody developed by Jewish popular culture in the prewar years. In the same article in which Kóbor refuted antisemitic accusations, he made one significant concession to his opponents: Jewish culpability for the creation of the modern mass media in Budapest. ‘I acknowledge unconditionally,’ he wrote, ‘the role of the modern media in spreading immorality, cynicism, triviality, and frivolity in family relations. But here, an optical illusion is self-evident. For those are the decadent symbols of Western culture, not those of the Hungarian Jew. The cult of scandal, the screaming headlines, the curiosity-mongering advertisements, these are all copied by Hungarians from the foreign press. They cannot exactly be described as Jewish traits.’

Symbolically, if not empirically, Jewish Budapest ended in 1918, bringing to a close the activities of two generations of cultural innovators that had helped create the urban world of late nineteenth-century Budapest. The first generation, which had come of age in the progressive decade of the 1840s and had lived through the hopes of the dualistic compromise and Jewish emancipation of 1867, was mostly gone by the early 1920s. Mór Wahrmann had died in 1892, Karl Somossy in 1902, and Adolf Ágai in 1916. The only member of this founding generation to survive the war was József Kiss. In 1922 he tellingly distanced himself from his celebrated role as the iconic national poet who had brought the Hungarian and Jewish traditions into aesthetic synthesis with each other. In an amendment to his final testament shortly before his death, Kiss dramatically renounced his dual identity as a Jewish Hungarian poet and declared his allegiance to Judaism as the primary source of his identity: ‘I was born a Jew and that is how I want to remain. When I lay down my head in eternal sleep, place my body in a rough-hewn wooden coffin according to Jewish traditions. I forbid all elaborate mourning rituals.'
don’t need a memorial. There are so many memorials in this country that a revision of the
custom will not do any harm. Among my writings, there are one or two rhymes that
cannot be banished out of existence. I don’t fear for them. 74

Despite the disenchantment with the modernist experiment, expressed by many of
the founding members and participants of Jewish Budapest, the project never really came
to a close. The genie that had been allowed to escape from the bottle could not be forced
back, and Budapest retained its metropolitan character, renowned for its spirit of
irreverence, subversion, and irony. Insofar as Jewish Budapest was a state of mind and
not just an identifiable community, it could not be eradicated from the collective
consciousness and experience of the general population. Budapest remained the ‘sinful
city’ despite the concerted efforts of right-wing nationalists to extirpate its modernist
spirit. In 1935, almost a quarter century after Adolf Ágai published his celebration of
metropolitan life in Budapest, another lover of the city, Béla Bevilaqua, attempted to give
his own definition to the city. His version proved remarkably similar to Ágai’s. Bevilaqua,
too, painted a city of restless mobility and constant change that was torn between the
noisy cosmopolitanism of Pest and the eternal romanticism of Buda. With or without
Jews, Budapest had become an emblematic symbol of the modern condition that
challenged foundational definitions of culture and identity. 75
1 Ignotus, ‘Kronika, Reczepcio’ [Chronicle, reception], *A Het* [The week] 5, no. 39 (September 30, 1894): 609.
3 Teno Lechner, *A regi Pest es Buda* [The former Pest and Buda] (Budapest, 1922), 3.
4 For the classic formulation of this position, see Zoltan Bosnyak, *Fovarosunk elzidosodasa* [The Judaicization of our capital] (Budapest, 1935).
5 ‘Az orszaghazbol’ [The annals of parliament], *Magyar Zsido Szemle* [Hungarian Jewish review] 1, no. 9 (1884): 580.
7 Ferenc Mezey, ‘Az Izraelita Magyar Irodalmi Tarsulat megalakulasa’ [The founding of the Jewish Hungarian Literary Society], *Magyar Zsido Szemle* 11, no. 2 (1894): 74-75.
8 Gabor Schwartz, Epilogus a receptiohoz’ [Epilogue to the Reception Law], *Magyar Zsido Szemle* 12, nos. 10-11 (1895): 469.
10 For a reformulation of the positive, integrative role of humor, see F. H. Buckley, *The Morality of Laughter* (Ann Arbor, 2005).
14 Agai Adolf,’ *Fustolo* [Smoke-house] (November 1, 1881): 5.
15 Mor Ludassy (1825-1885) was a Hungarian journalist, writer, and editor, who in the early 1860s moved to Vienna, where he became a contributor to the journal *Debatte*. He was known as a passionate advocate of the Compromise Agreement between Austria and Hungary and gained influence with Gyula Andrassy as a spokesman for this cause. The Deak Party was a political group that came into existence in 1865. Under the leadership of Ferenc Deak, the titular head of the group, it negotiated the Compromise Agreement that gave rise to the Austro- Hungarian monarchy.
16 For a recent study of the social and cultural strategies associated with Hungarian Jewish assimilation, see Miklos Konrad, *Zsidosagon innen es tul: Zsidok vallasváltasa Magyarországon a reformkortol az elso vilaghaboruig* [Beyond and within Jewish identification: Religious conversion of Jews in Hungary from the age of reform to the First World War] (Budapest, 2014).
17 The archbishopric of Esztergom was a historic diocese in the territory of Upper Hungary. Though the source does not identify Ágai’s interlocutor, it was almost certainly János Simor, who was archbishop between 1867 and 1891.
23 See Vilmos Toth, ‘Wahrmann Mor temetese es a Wahrmann-mauzoleum’ [The funeral of Mor Wahrmann and the Wahrmann mausoleum], in *Honszeretet es felekezeti huseg: Wahrmann Mor, 1831-1892* [Love of nation and loyalty to religion: Mor Wahrmann, 1831-1892], ed. Tibor Prank (Budapest, 2006), 205-11.
24 ‘Ujabb tanacs’ [More advice], quoted in *Egyenloseg* [Equality] 8, no. 6 (February 10, 1889): 8.
25 Boland Miska [Mike the fool] (November 5, 1865), in *Mokany Berczi es Spitzig; Gore Gabor mog a tobbiek ... A Magyar tarsadalom figurái az elelapokban 1860 es 1918 között* [Mokany Berczi and Spitzig Itzig, Gore Gabor and the others ... The figures of Hungarian society in the humor magazines between 1860 and 1918] (Budapest, 1988), 518.
26 ‘Kiralyutcai levelek: Az uj nemesekrul es a regi goleszrul’ [Letter from the Kiraly Street: About the new nobility and the old god], *Borsszem Janko* 3 (May 1, 1870): 187.
27 ‘Kiralyutcai levelek’ [Letters from the Kiraly Street], *Borsszem Janko* (January 12, 1868): 18.
30 Boland Miska (November 5, 1868), in *Mokany Berczi es Spitzig Itzig, Gore Gabor mog a tobbiek*, 518.
32 ‘Tonodesek Seiffensteiner Salamontol’ [Salamon Seiffensteiner’s reflections], *Borsszem Janko* (March 25, 1883): 2.
33 ‘Tonodesek Seiffensteiner Salamontol’ [Salamon Seiffensteiner’s reflections], *Borsszem Janko* (February 21, 1884): 4.
‘Tonodesek Seiffensteiner Salamontol’ [Salamon Seiffensteiner’s reflections], *Borsszem Janko* (February 25, 1882): 4. The book he was referring to was Samuel Kohn’s *Zsidok tortenete Magyarorszagon* [The history of the Jews in Hungary] (Budapest: Atheneum, 1884).


Salamon Odon, ‘Budapest a nyugat varosa’ [Budapest, a western city], in *A mulato Budapest* [Budapest, the city of entertainment], ed. Henrik Lenkei (Budapest, 1896), 17.


For the connections between commercial entertainment and lower-middleclass Jewish identity, see Konrad, ‘Orfeum es zsido identitas Budapesten a szazad fordulon.’

‘Pesti ejjel’ [Nightlife in Budapest], *A mulato Budapest* [Entertainment in Budapest], no. 5 (November 17, 1906): n.p.

*Journal de Budapest* (December 22, 1901): n.p.

*A Szinhaz* [The theater] (1904), 12, quoted in Molnar, *A pest; mulatok*, 193.


Samu Haber, ‘A gajdosok’ [Ribald voices], *Egyenloseg* (February 7, 1897): 6.


Elemer Boross, *Velak voltam* [I was with them] (Budapest, 1969), 83.

Jeno Heltai, *Szines kovek; Elbeszelesek; emlekezesek* [Colored pebbles: Anecdotes and memories) (Budapest, 1957), 497.


Boross, *Veluk voliam*, 85.

Ibid., 82.


The lyrics of music hall songs were published in cheap editions that were associated with both the author of the songs and the music hall where they were performed. See *Szoke Szakall legojabb kuplei: A Steinhardt mulato es a Folies Caprice milsordbol* [The newest songs of Szoke Szakall: From the program of the Steinhardt music hall and the Folies Caprice] (Budapest, n.d.), *Vasvari Mulato musorabol: Egy delutan a Weingruber nel; Szoveget es zenejet irta: Sas Naczi* [Prom the Vasvari music hall; An afternoon at Weingruber’s; Lyrics and music written by Naczi Sas] (Budapest, 1911); *A
Steinhardt mulato musorabol: Hunyadi Emil kuplei [From the program of the Steinhardt music hall: The songs of Emil Hunyadi] (Budapest, 1913).


57 Kalabriasz is a card game for two, three, or possibly four players that resembles Piquet and is played with the same thirty-two-card deck. The game probably originated in Hungary, but it was known throughout Europe by a variety of names such as Klabiash, Klabbjerass, Clobby, or Clobber. For convenience, I have consistently used the German title, ‘Eine Klabriasparthe’, to refer to the skit, though it was also referred to in Hungarian as the ‘Kalabraiz-parti’.

58 ‘Eine Klabriaspartie’ seems to have resonances to this day. I received a letter recently from an American reader of one of my articles who inquired about the physical location of the Cafe Abeles. From the letter, it emerges that the epithet ‘Cafe Abeles’ had entered into family legend as synonymous with someone who cheated at cards. In such circumstances, the father would invariably reprimand the offending member with the question: ‘Wo spielen wir, Im Cafe Abeles?’ (Where are we playing, in the Cafe Abeles?). The family had immigrated to the United States from Vienna and Budapest, and the son logically assumed that the Cafe Abeles must have been a real place in either of these cities. He was surprised to learn that it was a symbolic place that had entered common usage from the fame of ‘Eine Klabriaspartie’.


60 See Otte, Jewish Identities in German Popular Entertainment, 125-197.

61 A graphic account of the improvisations of Rott is provided in Molnar, A pesti mulatok, 204.


63 Molnar, A pesti mulatok, 205.


68 Molnar, A pesti mulatok.

69 A similar attempt was undertaken a little later by Aladar Komlos in Zsidok a valaszturon [Jews at the crossroads] (Presov, 1921).
72 Ibid, 11.
73 Ibid, 10.
74 Jozsef Kiss, ‘Fuggelekek vegrendeletelemhez’ [Appendix to my final will and testament], Petőfi Literary Museum, Budapest (V5239/442).