HATRED TOWARDS JEWS AS A POLITICAL CODE?
ANTISEMITISM IN HUNGARY

András Kovács

I. Introduction

Surveys conducted in the mid-1990s indicated that approximately one-tenth of the Hungarian adult population was strongly antisemitic and that a further one in four Hungarians harbored some form of anti-Jewish prejudice. The data of the surveys demonstrated beyond doubt that antisemitism afflicted a significant part of the adult population—although the figures have not been exceptional by international standards (Kovacs 1999).¹

Antisemitism in Hungary seemed to be a phenomenon of the capital city: antisemitic prejudice occurred more frequently among residents of Budapest than among residents of other settlements. Excluding the place of residence, and the possession of economic and social resources, other social-demographic variables did not directly correlate with antisemitic prejudice. Age, education, and disposable economic-social resources did, however, indirectly affect the degree of anti-Jewish prejudice—by way of other attitudes. Xenophobia has been more common among older and less educated groups; and antisemitism was one of the manifestations of this phenomenon. Our observations indicated that in sections of society with diminishing economic-social resources the feeling of anomie were stronger than in other social groups disposing of a greater number of such resources. In turn, anomie induced antisemitic feelings both directly and indirectly, by generating xenophobia. In combination, anomie and conservative attitudes strengthened, in particular, the inclination towards extreme antisemitism. By themselves, religious-conservative views and attitudes did not induce antisemitism. The inclination towards antisemitism among groups with such religious-conservative attitudes was most pronounced among

¹ The surveys conducted between 2005 and 2007 signalize a noticeable growth in the proportion of blatant antisemites in Hungary. The analysis of these data see in my forthcoming book Kovács, The Stranger among Us. Antisemitic Prejudices in Post-Communist Hungary (Boston; Brill, 2010).
those groups in which the feeling of anomie was strong or in which antisemitism performed the function of a code for the expression of ideological and political positions. In this last group, which amounts to about 1% of the total adult population, antisemitism has been a political phenomenon.

Several hypotheses may be formulated to explain the appearance and dynamic of antisemitic prejudice after the political changes of 1989–90. First, although antisemitic prejudice declined during the post-war decades and was present only in isolated pockets among certain generations, nevertheless, hostility towards Jews never disappeared completely. Various factors served to preserve it: the continued existence of prejudice below the surface of public life; its more or less coded presence in intellectual disputes; and the policies of the communist party state which sustained the “Jewish question” in a great variety of ways for the duration of the regime (Kovacs 2004). For this reason, the appearance of antisemitism after the fall of Communism in Hungary’s intellectual debates, as well as its emergence as an overt form of prejudice and a phenomenon in political life, surprised only those people who had considered the taboo as tantamount to the eradication of prejudice. It was to be expected that the conflicts caused by the collapse of the communist regime and the difficulties and challenges faced by ordinary people in the new social and economic environment, and the absence of a political culture capable of offering a variety of explanations for the newly emerged problems would indeed permit certain forces to mobilize cognitive patterns and ideological systems, such as antisemitism, which were still present in society even though they had been marginalized.

Nevertheless, nobody could predict exactly how the dynamics of antisemitism would develop in the ensuing years. It is an old observation that as the language of the “Jewish question” becomes acceptable in the various elite discourses, so the legitimacy and vociferousness of antisemitic prejudice increases in ordinary everyday life. In view of this, a distinct possibility was that some groups would succumb to the temptation to imbue antisemitism with political content and to use it for political mobilization purposes. If this were to happen, anti-Jewish prejudice would obviously spread rapidly. But one could also envisage a situation in which the opinions and behavior of cultural and political elite groups for whom antisemitism was both morally and socially unacceptable as well as shameful would have a greater effect on the spread of anti-Jewish prejudice. Moreover, it seemed possible