The Kamaraszínház of Budapest opened its new space, Tivoli Theater, in 1998, with Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, directed by Róbert Alföldi. It was one of the first productions which directly addressed the rise of anti-Semitism and racism in post-socialist Hungary. The production was a major success, winning all the major theater awards of the season and a special issue of the Jewish periodical *Múlt és jövő* [Present and Past] was devoted to an examination of the reception and the significance of the performance.1 In 2010, another production, George Tabori’s *Mein Kampf*, directed by Roland Rába at the National Theater in Budapest, addressed the issues of anti-Semitism and racism in similar way as Alföldi’s *Merchant*.2 Although the critics warmly welcomed this performance too, the website of the Alliance of the Hungarian Jewish Community initially published a harshly negative review. The Jewish forum’s intense response is surprising, as this production was also conceived with the intent to fight the extremism that corrupts contemporary Hungarian society. Only the different socio-political contexts can explain the radically different responses to these ideologically similar performances. Following the political changes

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1 Full disclosure: Although I never worked on the original production of *The Merchant of Venice* at the Tivoli Theater, I did collaborate with Róbert Alföldi as a dramaturg and translator in 2004 when he redirected the same performance at Portland Center Stage, Portland, Oregon. While most arguments reflect my own, perhaps somewhat biased opinion, the celebratory reviews of the Hungarian production of 1998, many of which I shall quote, corroborate my analysis.

2 At the time of the opening of *Mein Kampf*, Róbert Alföldi, was the General Director of the National Theater. Though severely attacked by the extreme right wing, he still holds his title, but it is not known if and for how long his tenure will last. He devoted the 2009/2010 season to the promotion of openness, tolerance and to the fight of racism and hatred. Besides *Mein Kampf*, other performances during the season included German playwright Martin Sperr’s *Hunting Scenes from South Bavaria*, a play about the struggles of a homosexual young man and Tennessee Williams’s *Orpheus Descending*, a play about a small town’s suffocating prejudices.
of 1989, anti-Semitism began to gain voice in the Hungarian public in the late 1990s, with the emergence of the first extreme right-wing party and its presence in the traditional print and live media. Yet the anti-Semitism that characterizes the Hungary of the 2010s—both contemporary politics, through a much more popular extreme right-wing party, and the public, through numerous anonymous contributors and commentators of the Internet—has taken a much more aggressive and frightening tone. While manifestations of anti-Semitism and their public reception may be different today from those of ten to fifteen years ago, they still share the same political and social roots and are grounded in a historic past with which Hungarian society has not yet come to terms.

The collapse of the Communist regime in Hungary in 1989 led to the strengthening of anti-Semitism in Hungarian society. Many think that this ideological change was inevitable for two interrelated reasons. On one hand, it suddenly became permissible to express and verbalize the anti-Semitic attitudes and ideologies that had been suppressed for 45 years. On the other hand, as sociologist András Kovács points out, “[I]n the first years after 1990, it seemed that anti-Semitism might rapidly gain ground in Hungarian society, as the country faced up to the economic and social challenges of the transition.” The disappointment in the new order, the unexpected experience of insecurity and poverty, made a section of Hungarian society return to the old habit of scapegoating. Similar to the populist anti-Semitism of the 1930s, which blamed Jews for the international economic crisis and the poverty that hit Hungary, and which eventually led to the collaboration with the Germans in the 1944 deportations to the death camps of 400,000 Jews in a joint effort of Germans and Hungarians, in the


4 Ibid.

5 According to the statistics in Tamás Stark’s “The Hungarian Jewry in the period of exigency and after World War II,” approximately 420,000 Hungarian Jewish victims were killed in the Holocaust. Between March and July of 1944, after the Germans invaded Hungary and the former ally became an enemy, nearly 500,000 Jews were deported. Tragically, despite the weakening German army and the imminence of the war’s end, almost the entire Jewish population in Hungary was deported to death camps within three months. This was achieved due to the discipline and diligence of the Hungarian Nazi Party’s (the Nyílasok) (Regió—Közösség, politika, társadalom: 3 [1993]). The approximate number of Jews living in Hungary after World War