

Judith Szapor

Between Self-Defence and Loyalty

Jewish Responses to the Numerus Clausus Law in Hungary,
1920–1928

Abstract

Enacted in September 1920 in Hungary, the numerus clausus law, the first antisemitic law in post-war Europe, introduced discrimination against Jews in higher education. Ostensibly a remedy against the “overcrowding” of universities, the law breached the previous liberal era’s concept of equal citizenship. This survey of Jewish responses to the law between 1920 and 1928 is based on the coverage of *Egyenlőség*, the representative weekly of assimilated Neolog Jews. The arguments voiced by contemporary commentators against the numerus clausus law highlight their precarious position between fighting to maintain full membership in the Hungarian nation while also nurturing a sense of Jewish identity. Ultimately, they reflect their views on the prospect of assimilation itself.

In the postwar era of resurgent ethnic nationalisms, the universities of East Central Europe became a battleground between competing elites. From Warsaw to Vienna and from Budapest to Bucharest, anti-Jewish violence erupted within the walls of academia.¹ Academic antisemitism in its many forms, ranging from tacit discrimination against Jewish faculty and students to open physical violence, was far from exclusive to East Central Europe: A de facto Jewish numerus clausus was practiced at the most prestigious North American universities into the 1950s.² Yet only in Hungary would it be affirmed by legislation.

Enacted in September 1920 by the Hungarian Assembly, Act XXV/1920, the so-called numerus clausus law introduced a “closed number” for university admissions. Replacing the previous practice of open enrolment, guaranteed by a diploma from a gymnasium, the law authorised the Minister of Education to annually determine the number of university students to be admitted. More importantly, the law set quotas for students of Hungary’s “races and nationalities” according to their ratio in the general population. Crucially, it departed from the liberal and still valid legislation governing Jewish emancipation, classifying Jews or “Hungarian citizens of the Israelite religion” as one of the “races and nationalities” and set the ratio of Jewish students at six percent, the percentage of Jews in the general population. In addition, universities

1 Recent scholarship on this phenomenon throughout East Central Europe in the interwar period includes Regina Fritz/Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe/Jana Starek (ed.), *Alma Mater Antisemitica. Akademisches Milieu, Juden und Antisemitismus an den Universitäten Europas zwischen 1918 und 1939*, Vienna 2016, especially the chapters by Raoul Cârstocea, *Students Don the Green Shirt. The Roots of Romanian Fascism in the Antisemitic Student Movements*, 39–66, and Natalia Aleksiu, *The Cadaver Affair in the Second Polish Republic*, 203–220; Alena Míšková, *Die Lage der Juden an der Prager Deutschen Universität*, in: Jörg Hoensch et al. (ed.), *Judenemanzipation – Antisemitismus – Verfolgung in Deutschland, Österreich-Ungarn, den Böhmisches Ländern und in der Slowakei*. Essen 1999, 108–128; Werner Hanak-Lettner/Danielle Spera (ed.) *Kampfzone Universität (1875–1945)*. Vienna 2015.

2 Michael Brown, *On Campus in the Thirties. Antipathy, Support, and Indifference*, in: L. Ruth Klein (ed.), *Nazi Germany, Canadian Responses. Confronting Antisemitism in the Shadow of War*, Montreal/Kingston 2012, 177–215.

were to take into consideration applicants' "loyalty to the nation and upstanding morals",³ reinforcing previous ministerial decrees from February and June 1920 that barred or expelled from all universities any student associated with the 1919 revolution.⁴

The makers of the law used the supposed overcrowding of universities and the liberal professions as a pretext, overstating its acute, negative impact on the prospects of the Christian (in contemporary parlance understood as non-Jewish) middle class in post-Trianon Hungary – but contemporaries on both sides of the law were aware that its agenda went far beyond a corrective to educational policy. Hungarian Jews rightly regarded it as not only an attack on their freedom of education but a breach of the liberal principle of equal citizenship. Right-wing politicians, ideologues, and radical right-wing student organisations, on their part, saw it – and expressed their view in no uncertain terms⁵ – as the first step to solving the 'Jewish question', reducing the Jewish presence in the professions and cultural life that had long been resented by the Christian middle classes.

As we are approaching the centennial of both the Treaty of Trianon and the numerus clausus law, there are clear signs that government-supported historians in Hungary are ready to revive this argument. By invoking the hardships and economic and social trauma wrought by Trianon, they justify, in retrospect, the numerus clausus as a necessary measure that served Hungary's national interests in the inter-war period.⁶ Bona fide historians of the numerus clausus, by contrast, point to the dubious nature of statistical evidence used to support this argument then and now, as well as the persistent myths surrounding it.⁷ Refuting the revisionist view that minimises the law's impact, they argue that the normalisation of discrimination against Jews on religious and, increasingly, racial grounds deeply penetrated Hungarian society, preparing the ground for the anti-Jewish laws of the late 1930s and, ultimately, the Holocaust in Hungary.⁸

This article is part of a larger study on the long-term social and cultural impact of the numerus clausus law. As part of the study's intended survey of Jewish responses to the law, it will begin by enumerating the reactions of representatives of its main intended target, namely assimilated Hungarian Jews. It will do so by looking at the reactions of the editors and writers of *Egyenlőség* (Equality), the main political and

3 Mária M. Kovács, *Törvénytől sújtva. A Numerus Clausus Magyarországon 1920–1945* [Wronged by Legislation. The Numerus Clausus in Hungary 1920–1945], Budapest 2012 is the most comprehensive, recent account of the parliamentary debate, political context, details, and significance of the numerus clausus law. See also Katalin N. Szegvári, *Numerus Clausus rendelkezések az ellenforradalmi Magyarországon. A zsidó és nőhallgatók főiskolai felvételéről* [Numerus Clausus Decrees in Counter-Revolutionary Hungary. On the University Admission of Jewish and Female Students], Budapest 1988, and Victor Karady/P. T. Nagy (ed.), *The Numerus Clausus in Hungary. Studies on the First Anti-Jewish Law and Academic Anti-Semitism in Modern Central Europe*, (=Research Reports on Central European History 1), Budapest 2012.

4 Kovács, *Törvénytől sújtva*, 214. The administration of Budapest University followed up by expelling or barring all students who had been members of the banned Galileo Circle, a left-wing student organisation. *Ibid.*, 228.

5 Kinga Frojimovics, "Mételyes már közéletünk, és fojtó-füllajtó lett levegője." A numerus clausus magyarországi rabbik templomi beszédeiben ["Our Public Life has Turned Noxious and its Air is Stifling." The Numerus Clausus in Rabbinical Sermons in Hungary], in: Judit Molnár (ed.), *Jogfosztás–90 év: tanulmányok a numerus claususról* [Stripped of Rights – Ninety Years. Studies on the Numerus Clausus], Budapest 2011, 233–243, analyses the parliamentary debate to show the unmistakable objective of the law, directed against the supposed "Jewish takeover" or subordination of Hungarian intellectual and economic life.

6 <http://ujkor.hu/content/interju-ujvary-gaborral> and http://hvg.hu/kultura/20180321_homan_balintrol_maskent_veritas (13 August 2018).

7 Kovács, *Törvénytől sújtva*, especially 13–59 and *idem*, *The Numerus Clausus in Hungary 1920–1945*, in: Regina Fritz et al. (ed.), *Alma Mater Antisemitica*, 85–111.

8 Kovács, *Törvénytől sújtva*; Tibor Hajdu, *Trianon, középosztály, zsidókérdés* [Trianon, Middle Class, Jewish Question], in: Molnár (ed.), *Jogfosztás–90 év* [Stripped of Rights], 70–77; Karady/Nagy (ed.), *The Numerus Clausus in Hungary*, 17.

cultural weekly of the Neolog community, and identifying their arguments against the *numerus clausus*. The reports and commentaries published in the weekly offer an unparalleled source, one that reveals both the immediate impact of the law on Hungarian Jewish youth and the efforts of their families and the larger community to find practical solutions, mainly through charity, to counter it.

At a time when widespread physical violence and state-sanctioned, official anti-semitism threatened the life of Hungarian Jews daily, the *numerus clausus* may not have seemed the most pressing concern for Jewish community leaders to address. Nevertheless, whether they addressed it directly or not, admitted it or not, contemporaries on both sides of the law realised its singular importance and the break it represented with the liberal tradition and the process of Jewish assimilation. At the same time, Hungarian Jews most invested in the assimilationist project recognised that as the ones most directly targeted and affected by the *numerus clausus* law, they had an obligation to respond to it. The development of strategies and arguments against it as articulated by their representatives on the pages of their main press outlet, at this crucial junction in the history of Hungarian Jews, thus reveals their views not only on the *numerus clausus*, but on the perceived, long-term prospect (or chances) of assimilation itself.

Historical Context and Scholarship

The *numerus clausus* law capped the most tumultuous and traumatic two years of modern Hungarian history to date. In the wake of Austria-Hungary's defeat in the First World War, the monarchy's dissolution, and a liberal followed by a Bolshevik-inspired revolution, in August 1919 Entente pressure and internal resistance ended the radical left-wing experiment. The January 1920 elections, conducted amidst the ongoing White Terror, brought to power a coalition government of right-wing, nationalist parties and acclaimed Miklós Horthy, the commander of the counter-revolutionary national army, as regent. However, the new post-war Kingdom of Hungary was much diminished: Following the Trianon Treaty signed in June 1920, Hungary lost three quarters of its pre-war territory and two thirds of its pre-war population to Romania and the new states of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Austria.

The counter-revolutionary regime built its popular support on a militant nationalistic agenda of *revanche*. It demonised and lumped together communists, socialists, liberals, feminists, and above all Jews, and blamed them all for the disaster of Trianon. Well before the rise of Nazism but prefiguring some of its noxious rhetoric, antisemitism thus became a vital part of the post-war Horthy regime's agenda. It was an antisemitism that amalgamated older, religious, Christian, as well as new-fangled, political, and racial elements and represented a clear break with the previous liberal era – delivering a devastating blow to Hungarian Jews committed to the project of assimilation.⁹

⁹ Miklós Szabó, *Az újkonzervativizmus és a jobboldali radikalizmus története, 1867–1918* [The History of New Conservatism and Right-Wing Radicalism, 1867–1918], Budapest 2003 explores the roots of extreme-right ideology in the pre-war period; while János Gyurgyák, *Ezzé lett magyar hazátok. A magyar nacionalizmus és nemzeteszme története* [This is Your Hungarian Homeland. The History of the Hungarian Nation and Nationalism], Budapest 2007 provides exhaustive detail on its development throughout the interwar period; Chapter 4 of my recent monograph, *Hungarian Women's Activism in the Wake of the First World War. From Rights to Revanche*, London 2018, 87–113, traces the emergence of antisemitic myths from 1916 onwards.

The period lasting from 1867 to 1918 had represented the longest prosperous and liberal period in modern Hungarian history, during which the Hungarian Jews both contributed to and benefited to a great degree from its political, economic, and cultural achievements. Jews received full citizenship rights as individuals in 1867 and collectively in 1895 when Judaism became one of the so-called accepted religions. This is not to say that there were no bumps on the road, such as the infamous Tiszaeszlár blood libel trial in 1882/1883. In retrospect, the trial and the antisemitic riots following the acquittal of the accused would seem to signal a breakdown of the assimilation process – yet the liberal political establishment at the time presented a reassuringly united stance in condemning the accusation, a leading Hungarian writer and liberal deputy took on the defence, and even the iconic revolutionary leader Lajos Kossuth protested the trial from his exile in the name of European civilisation. As for the Antisemitic Party, founded in the wake of Tiszaeszlár and as a reaction to the massive immigration of Galician Jews from the monarchy's periphery to central Hungary, it experienced only brief success, before flaming out in the early 1890s.

By the outbreak of the First World War, Hungarian Jews – at least those who were invested in assimilation – had come a long way in breaking down economic, social, and cultural barriers. The willingness of the Hungarian political elite to grant full citizenship and social acceptance to Jews – in exchange for concessions ranging from the abandonment of religious orthodoxy to the embrace of Hungarian language and culture, the changing of German-sounding family names to Hungarian ones, and conversion to Christianity – is often explained in slightly simplistic terms as a social contract. As long as Hungary ruled large ethnic minorities within its borders, so goes the argument, this unwritten social contract of the traditional political elite with Hungarian Jews assured Hungarian majority. Conversely, following the peace treaty, when Hungary became ethnically almost homogenous, Hungarian Jews no longer held the balance and the social contract was off. The introduction of the *numerus clausus* law a mere three and a half months after the signing of the Treaty of Trianon would seem to confirm with this explanation.¹⁰

In fact, cracks in the assimilationist project had begun to show well before that. Leaders of the emerging Social Catholic movement had voiced antisemitic arguments well before 1914 and, in the last two years of the First World War, antisemitic myths such as the stereotypical figures of Jewish black marketeers and Jewish shirkers had gone from marginal to mainstream.¹¹ The two revolutions in 1918 and 1919, their failure to stop the disintegration of multi-ethnic Hungary, and the relatively high number of Jews – even if they had long broken their ties with the Jewish community – among the revolutionary political leaders, especially in the leadership of the Republic of Councils, further fuelled this pre-existing, popular, and increasingly racial antisemitism. By the time the revolutions were defeated, leading right-wing ideologues tied liberalism, Bolshevism, and Judaism, firmly together as all part of an international conspiracy and established a Hungarian version of the *Dolchstoßlegende*.¹²

During the final weeks of the Republic of Councils, Horthy's paramilitary detachments unleashed pogroms in the countryside and afterwards were allowed to extend

10 Guy Miron, *The Waning of Emancipation. Jewish History, Memory, and the Rise of Fascism in Germany, France, and Hungary*, Detroit 2011, 157.

11 Péter Bihari, *Lövészárkok a hátszágban. Középosztály, zsidókérdés, antiszemitizmus az első világháború Magyarországon* [Trenches on the Home Front. The Middle Class, the Jewish Question, and Antisemitism in Hungary during the First World War], Budapest 2008, 203-207.

12 A prime example is: Cécile Tormay, *Bujdosó könyv. Feljegyzések 1918–19-ból* [The Proscribed Book. Notes from 1918/19]. Budapest 1920, reprint accessible in the Hungarian Electronic Library: http://mek.oszk.hu/17400/17435/pdf/17435_1.pdf (13 August 2018).

their terror to the streets of Budapest, which went on for months. In the autumn of 1919, the violent occupation of universities by extreme right-wing student organisations forced the faculties to suspend the academic year. After the election of January 1920, right-wing students engaged once more in unpunished physical violence against Jewish students, blocking them from entering the buildings, demanding the introduction of numerus clausus, and putting pressure on legislators.¹³

The parliamentary debate on the numerus clausus law in September 1920 took place mere weeks after the signing on 6 June of the devastating peace treaty, providing the chance for politicians to affirm their nationalist credentials and lay the blame on the revolutions. It also allowed them to demonstrate that they were addressing an immediate social need. Ostensibly intended to reserve university spaces for student refugees from the detached territories, the numerus clausus law in fact addressed ideological and political rather than practical needs.¹⁴ It ended the much-maligned “overrepresentation” of Jews in higher education and the professions that the Christian middle classes had resented – and felt threatened by – for at least a decade.

For reasons grounded in the particularities of Hungarian social history, including the reluctance of the traditional, Christian middle classes to participate in the modernising economy, by the early twentieth century Hungarian Jews came to play prominent roles in the financial and commercial sectors and the emerging modern press and popular entertainment. They also became highly represented in the legal and medical professions (at a proportion of close to or more than 50 percent). Their ratio among university students in the legal, medical, and engineering faculties also reached high percentages – around 25 percent on average, rising to 35 percent and over at the end of the war.¹⁵

The numerus clausus law’s six percent quota set for Jewish students, equal to the percentage of Jews in the general population, was based on the claim that Jewish “overrepresentation” was stifling the prospects of Hungarian Christian students; it overlooked such demographic considerations as the concentration of Jews in urban populations and their high ratio among high-school graduates.¹⁶ The claim of a “Jewish takeover” of Hungary’s cultural and intellectual life was not new, and even the idea of a Jewish quota was bandied around before the signing of the Trianon Treaty.¹⁷ Leading right-wing antisemitic ideologues regularly called for measures to stop the Jewish influx and university administrators, on their part, used all available means to protect the faculties from the influence of left-wing student organisations. The emerging counter-revolutionary ideology that blamed the revolutions and most of all Jews for Trianon gave an opportunity to university administrators and militant right-wing student organisations to “cleanse” the faculties of Jewish, female, and left-wing students. Reversing the 1918 October liberal revolution’s decree that opened all faculties to women, universities rushed to tighten the admission of women – in an extreme but not uncharacteristic example, the medical facul-

13 Andor Ladányi, *Az egyetemi ifjúság az ellenforradalom első éveiben* [The University Youth in the Early Years of the Counterrevolution], Budapest 1979; Róbert Kerepeszki, *A Turul Szövetség* [The Turul Association], in: Ignác Romsics (ed.), *A jobboldali hagyomány, 1900–1948* [The Right-Wing Tradition], Budapest 2009, 364–367; Róbert Kerepeszki, “The Racial Defense in Practice.” *The Activity of the Turul Association at Hungarian Universities between the Two World Wars*, in: Karady/Nagy (ed.), *The Numerus Clausus in Hungary*, 136–150.

14 Kovács, *Törvénytől sújtva*, especially 13–53.

15 Viktor Karady, “The Restructuring of the Academic Market Place in Hungary,” in: Karady/Nagy (ed.), *The Numerus Clausus in Hungary*, 112–135.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Kovács, *Törvénytől sújtva*, 221–222.

ty of Budapest University effectively banned women from enrolling until the 1926 school year.¹⁸

The numerus clausus law succeeded in drastically reducing the ratio of Jewish students to single-digit percentages throughout the interwar period while, in a demonstration of the intention of its authors, affecting no other ethnic or national group.¹⁹ While the law interrupted the trend of Hungarian Jews' – including that of Jewish women's – participation in higher education, it failed to achieve the intended result, namely a significant rise in the number of non-Jewish university graduates. Even an admissions system extremely tilted to favour non-Jewish students could not prompt them to fill the available spaces – and this, rather than the oft-lamented lax application of the law accounted for the ratios slightly higher than the prescribed six percent of Jewish students. To fend off the objections of the League of Nations over the breach of minority rights, a modification of the numerus clausus law in 1928 deleted the reference to Jews but added a condition based on the profession of the applicants' fathers that resulted in a continuing discrimination against Jewish students. Moreover, university administrators were free to keep the previous practice intact, with the result of only a slight increase in the ratio of Jewish students until the 1938/1939 anti-Jewish laws, which introduced even severer restrictions.

The everyday physical violence against Jewish students may have abated following the early counter-revolutionary years and in 1922 the government did rein the paramilitaries in, yet sporadic anti-Jewish violence at universities remained the hallmark of the entire interwar era. This, along with the numerus clausus, led to the flight of thousands of Hungarian Jewish students to universities abroad. While the returnees may have been armed with degrees from the finest universities in Europe, they faced a long bureaucratic battle to validate their diplomas and further discrimination when looking for employment in the public sector.²⁰

The political and legal history of the numerus clausus legislation has been well covered.²¹ Andor Ladányi addressed the continuity of the practice of the numerus clausus throughout the interwar period, refuting the persistent myth that it was discontinued from 1928.²² A collection published to mark the ninetieth anniversary of

18 Katalin Fenyves, "Se nő, se zsidó?" Diplomáselet felfogások és a numerus clausus ["Neither Woman nor Jew?" Views on the University-Educated Elite and the Numerus Clausus], in: Molnár (ed.), *Jogfosztás – 90 éve*, 215–230; in English: Katalin Fenyves, *A Successful Battle for Symbolic Space. The Numerus Clausus Law in Hungary*, in: Karady/Nagy (ed.), *The Numerus Clausus in Hungary*, 151–164; and Andor Ladányi, *Két évforduló. A nők felsőfokú tanulmányainak száz éve* [Two Anniversaries. One Hundred Years of Higher Education for Women], in: *Educatio* 3 (1996), 375–389, here 379.

19 Mária M. Kovács, *A numerus clausus Magyarországon* [The Numerus Clausus in Hungary], in: Molnár (ed.), *Jogfosztás–90 éve*, 29–59. The issue of how Jewish students were identified is complex and evolved over the period in question: In theory, the law used religion, in itself a paradoxical marker, to identify Jews as members of a "race" or "nationality". Jews who converted to Christianity after 1919 also counted as Jewish, revealing the inherently racial bias of the law. In practice, students were subjected to physical violence and discrimination by members of right-wing student organisations and the university administration based on their looks or suspected Jewish background.

20 This little-researched aspect of the numerus clausus law deserves a separate study. In her doctoral dissertation in progress, Ágnes Kelemen is exploring evidence of resistance to the validation – in the contemporary Hungarian usage "nostrification" – of foreign medical diplomas by the professional association of Hungarian physicians. Further studies, including the larger research project by the author of this article, should also shed light on the ratio of permanent exiles versus "returnees" among the numerous clausus exiles.

21 Andor Ladányi, *Az egyetemi ifjúság az ellenforradalom első éveiben*; Katalin Szegvári, *Numerus Clausus rendelkezések az ellenforradalmi Magyarországon*; Karady/Nagy (eds.), *The Numerus Clausus in Hungary*; Molnár (ed.), *Jogfosztás–90 éve*; and, most comprehensively, Kovács, *Törvénnyel sújtva*.

22 Andor Ladányi, *A numerus clausus törvény 1928. évi módosításáról* [On the Modification of the Numerus Clausus Law in 1928], in: *Századok* (1994) 6, 1117–1148; and Andor Ladányi, *A numerus clausustól a numerus nullusig* [From the Numerus Clausus to the Numerus Nullus], in: *Múlt és Jövő* [Past and Future] 1 (2005), 56–74.

the law explored its wider domestic and international context.²³ Older and more recent studies explored the records of Hungarian Jewish students enrolled in Vienna, Prague and Brno, Berlin, and northern Italy respectively.²⁴ The article of Katalin Fenyves highlighted the important aspect of gender, arguing that misogynistic and antisemitic university policies and the law affected Jewish women disproportionately, evidenced by the temporary ban on women's admission at the faculties of medicine and arts that was in effect until 1926.²⁵

Kinga Frojimovics surveyed the sermons of three leading Neolog rabbis for reactions to the *numerus clausus*.²⁶ She also identified a new strand, "Cultural Zionism", emerging from what she sees as the identity crisis of the Neolog community and the antisemitic policies of the early 1920s, which aimed to establish a more autonomous Jewish culture.²⁷ Ilse Lazaroms explored a unique source, the testimonies of the Legal Aid Office set up by the Jewish Community of Pest, which aimed to provide legal assistance to victims of paramilitary violence. Her analysis of the rhetoric of Jewish community leaders, read after the completion of this article, seems to reinforce its findings.²⁸

Responses to the *Numerus Clausus* in *Egyenlőség*, 1920–1928

Since the early 1880s, *Egyenlőség* – the very name of the weekly, "equality", was a reminder of its founding in defiance against a previous attack on Hungarian Jews, the Tiszaeszlár blood libel case – served as the voice of the assimilationist Neolog Jews. Between 1868 and 1920, the Neolog and Orthodox communities, divided after the schism of Hungarian Jews in 1868, were about equal in number, with the Orthodox forming a slight majority.²⁹ In post-Trianon Hungary, the majority of Orthodox communities found themselves in the detached territories now belonging to Romania and Czechoslovakia, making the Neolog community the majority – representing approximately two-thirds of Hungarian Jews, as opposed to the one-third Ortho-

23 Molnár, *Jogfosztás–90 éve*.

24 Viktor Karady's pioneering study, *Egyetemi antiszemitizmus és érvényesülési kényszerpályák. Magyar-zsidó diákság a nyugat-európai főiskolákon a numerus clausus alatt* [University Antisemitism and Forced Career Trajectories. Hungarian Jewish Students at Western European Universities during the Numerus Clausus], in: *Levéltári Szemle* [Archival Review] 42 (1992) 3, 21-40 was followed, more recently by Tibor Frank, *Double Exile. Migrations of Jewish-Hungarian Professionals through Germany to the United States 1919–1945*, Oxford 2009; Michael L. Miller, *From White Terror to Red Vienna. Hungarian Jewish Students in Interwar Austria*, in: Frank Stern/Barbara Frank-Eichinger (ed.), *Wien und die jüdische Erfahrung 1900–1938. Akkulturation, Antisemitismus, Zionismus*, Vienna 2009, 307-324; and Michael L. Miller, *Numerus Clausus Exiles. Hungarian Jewish Students in Inter-War Berlin*, in: Karady/Nagy (ed.), *The Numerus Clausus in Hungary*, 206-218; Ágnes Kelemen, *Leaving an Antisemitic Regime for a Fascist Country. The Hungarian Numerus Clausus Refugees in Italy* (MA thesis), Budapest 2014; Ágnes Kelemen, *Migration and Exile. Hungarian Medical Students in Vienna and Prague, 1920–1938*, in: János Kenyeres/Miklós Lojkó/Tamás Magyarics/Éva Eszter Szabó (ed.), *At the Crossroads of Human Fate and History. Studies in Honour of Tibor Frank on his 70th Birthday*, Budapest 2018, 222-241.

25 Fenyves, "Se nő, se zsidó?", 215-230.

26 Kinga Frojimovics, *Mételyes már közéletünk* [Our Public Life is Already Stagnant], in: Molnár (ed.), *Jogfosztás–90 éve*, 233-243.

27 Kinga Frojimovics, *Meeting-Point Between Zionism and the Neolog Trend. Cultural Zionism in Hungary in the Interwar Period*, in: *Studia Judaica* 15 (2007), 11-20.

28 Ilse J. Lazaroms, *Marked by Violence. Hungarian Jewish Histories in the Wake of the White Terror, 1919–1922*, in: *Zutot. Perspectives on Jewish Culture* 11 (2014), 1-10.

29 For an overview of the religious division of Hungary's Jews in the dualist period, see: Kinga Frojimovics, *Szétszakadt történelem. Zsidó vallási irányzatok Magyarországon, 1868–1950* [History in Pieces. Jewish Religious Trends in Hungary, 1868–1950], Budapest 2008.

dox.³⁰ Consequently, *Egyenlőség* now took on a greater moral and intellectual responsibility, standing up for a more homogenous Jewish community under attack.

With universities becoming the battleground, the numerus clausus turned into the lightning rod of antisemitism – and the rare complaint the Jewish community was able to raise at a time it had no recourse against the anti-Jewish violence raging on the streets or at the gates of universities. The first issues of *Egyenlőség*, published in the aftermath of the enactment of the numerus clausus, illustrate the precariously narrow room Jewish leaders had to navigate between self-defence against physical violence, advocacy against the numerus clausus, and the continuing publication of the weekly against a relentless censorship.

The issue published on 25 September 1920 announced the enactment of the law on its front page, with the title “It is finished” invoking a disaster on a biblical scale – but with the censor erasing the lead’s crucial sections.³¹ Three weeks later, on 20 October, the weekly addressed the law on its front page again. In an editorial titled “Lament over a student suicide”, it turned the suicide of a 21-year-old Jewish student, reportedly rejected by Budapest University’s medical faculty, into an indictment against the numerus clausus. The article carried over to the next page where a perhaps strategically placed, short news item highlighted the extreme limitations faced by the weekly – and, by extension, the Jewish community – to address the threats to its existence and rights. Under the title “Fistfights at the university”, the censor’s hand left a blank space, save for the comment “deleted” in brackets.³²

A somewhat more elaborate response to the numerus clausus was articulated in a front-page editorial only days after the enactment of the law. Written by the editor-in-chief Lajos Szabolcsi (1889–1943), it identified without reservation the intent to undermine equal citizenship and to define Hungarian Jews in racial terms. “With a majority they decided that from now on only 5 percent of university students can be Jewish and it was also decided – with 50 votes to 8 – that, going against the laws concerning the reception [of the Jewish religion, in 1895] and emancipation [of 1867, which declared Jews to be full citizens] Jews are a nationality, a race.”³³ Szabolcsi went on to stress the law’s intent to erase the achievement of the previous liberal era and reverse the trend of Jewish assimilation: “During the parliamentary debate the leaders of our enemies Ottokár Prohászka and István Haller, who submitted the legislation, pointed to the path that according to them Hungarian Jewry has to take”, namely the path of Zionism.³⁴ Szabolcsi’s rhetorical response, presumably to maintain pride in the assimilationist project, was almost fully excised by the censor.³⁵

If Jewish leaders were powerless to stop or reverse the legislation itself, they would at least attempt to fight the myths that legitimised and justified it. To counter the claim that the two revolutions were masterminded by Jews, they advanced the counterclaim that the majority of Jews, far from advancing the revolutions, were among their victims. The article, entitled “How Communism destroyed Jewish religious

30 Kinga Frojimovics, Who Were They? Characteristics of the Religious Streams Within Hungarian Jewry on the Eve of the Community’s Extermination, In: *Yad Vashem Studies* 35 (2007) 1, 143-177.

31 *Egyenlőség*, 25 September 1920, 1. The weekly is fully accessible on the website of the National Library of Israel. All following references to the weekly refer to the digitally accessible version. <http://www.jpress.nli.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI/?action=search&text=Egyenl%C5%91s%C3%A9g#panel=document> (13 August 2018).

32 *Egyenlőség*, 16 October 1920, 1-2.

33 *Egyenlőség*, 25 September 1920, 1.

34 *Ibid.* The charismatic Catholic bishop Ottokár Prohászka (1857–1927) was among the main exponents of antisemitism, while Haller was the Minister of Religion and Education who submitted the numerus clausus legislation.

35 *Ibid.*

life”, pleaded that “good Jews” suffered their equal share under communist rule.³⁶ Countering the absurdity of the myth of an all-Jewish solidarity cutting across class boundaries, it pointed to the majority, law-abiding, patriotic Hungarian Jews and the “infinitely few Jews, when compared to the overall numbers in the population, who in any case long abandoned their faith”.³⁷

During the early days of counter-revolutionary violence, it would have been futile to appeal to common sense – namely that “communism is innately hostile towards Jews whom it regards as the embodiment of the bourgeoisie”.³⁸ However, while this myth solidified into the dogma of the new regime without much opposition, the efforts of *Egyenlőség* to undercut the antisemitic myth of the Jewish shirker never ceased. In their view, the invocation of the significant bloodletting of Hungarian Jews in the war went to the heart of the fight for reclaiming equal citizenship; it was also an issue directly relevant to the *numerus clausus*, whose regulations, in theory at least, exempted and offered admission to Jewish veterans. Under the title “Hungarian Jewish soldiers in the World War”, *Egyenlőség* published a list, based on its “war archive”, of Jewish soldiers who had served.³⁹ Each line of the list contained a number, in this issue starting at 32092, and stated name, year and place of birth, rank, unit, length of service, and injury or death, if applicable.⁴⁰

In perhaps the most consistent and longest-running argument used to fight exclusion from the nation, *Egyenlőség* appealed to a fundamental element of the pre-war social contract: Highlighting the Jewish contribution to Hungarian culture and learning, the weekly regularly referred to outstanding Hungarian Jewish poets, mathematicians, and scientists. While it would require a more thorough examination, one can perhaps take as a tacit acknowledgement that their patriotic rhetoric had failed to reach its intended result the fact that by the 1930s, such references were more and more directed at Jewish achievements in universal, rather than specifically Hungarian learning and science. Moreover, the weekly made a pointed use of historical references and language, upholding liberal political and historical traditions such as the contrast between the extreme right-wing student organisations that championed the *numerus clausus* and the “noble March youth”, an allusion to the liberal students who spearheaded the national revolution of 1848.⁴¹

The weekly also seems to have come up with the term “*numerus clausus exiles*”, using a Hungarian term (*száműzött*) that conjured up previous cohorts of Hungarian exiles from the late eighteenth century to 1848, who all fought for national causes.⁴² The editorial comment added to the report – “Misery and pain, that is the share of our sons who remained true to their religion, their Hungarian identity, and science”⁴³ – served to reinforce the indivisible unity of Jewish, Hungarian, and universal values inherent in the assimilationist program. The contemporary reader of course would have found nothing wrong with the fact that only “sons” and no young women were mentioned. In this instance, it could have been explained by the allusion to historical eighteenth and nineteenth-century precedents, although one should not exclude the potential, chilling impact of the strong anti-modern tenor of the early counter-revolutionary discourse on the editors of the weekly.

³⁶ *Egyenlőség*, 6 December 1919, 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Egyenlőség*, 16 October 1920, 15.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Üzenet a zsidó diákoknak [Message to the Jewish Students], in: *Egyenlőség*, 24 June 1922, 4.

⁴² A *numerus clausus* száműzöttei [The Exiles of the Numerus Clausus], *Egyenlőség*, 29 July 1922, 6.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Yet another argument voiced on the pages of the weekly turned the discriminatory logic of the numerus clausus around. If Hungarian Jews were now considered a “race” or “nationality”, then they should be entitled to the rights secured by the Trianon Treaty’s clause of minority rights. According to articles 54 and 55 of the Hungarian parliament’s Act XXXIII of 1921 that enacted the peace treaty, minorities had the right to freedom of education. As a result, representatives of the Jewish community would voice the demand for a Jewish university as early as in the parliamentary debate of the numerus clausus law,⁴⁴ a demand that continued to be voiced throughout the entire interwar period. It is difficult to determine whether it was offered as a genuine proposition – after all, other stipulations of the Trianon Treaty were regularly breached by the Hungarian government – or perhaps merely as rhetoric, to highlight the absurdity of the law.

In every issue, *Egyenlőség* invoked the financial and emotional hardship of Hungarian Jewish students who were forced by the numerus clausus law to study abroad and used its reach within the Neolog Jewish community to organise financial and practical assistance for them as early as the autumn of 1920.⁴⁵ By 1922, a Central Committee for the Aid of Jewish Students [Központi Zsidó Diáksegítő Bizottság] took over these activities that had by then outgrown the editorial office.⁴⁶ The editors also kept invoking the deeper impact of this charitable initiative. They referred to its roots in the centuries-long tradition of Jewish learning and its result: the contribution to the Hungarian national community in the fields of science, the arts, industry, and commerce. Assessing the financial results of the charitable organisation in 1928, they provided a balance sheet in terms of the total donated and took pride in the committee’s success and well-oiled work. At the same time, they also pointed to the unintended, paradoxical result of the numerus clausus in strengthening the solidarity between various Jewish religious strands and socioeconomic classes.⁴⁷

The Elusive Female Numerus Clausus Exile: A Rare Testimony

A memoir published in 1929 offers a rare testimony to the experiences of female “numerus clausus exiles”.⁴⁸ In contrast to most written and oral testimonies, the memoir was published immediately after the author’s university years abroad in the 1920s. It is thus untainted by the later, more traumatic events, from the growing discrimination of the late 1930s to the war and the Holocaust – events that retroactively coloured and to a large degree obscured the memory of the 1920s in most testimonies. The value of this source is amplified by its ability to provide insight into the specific experiences of Hungarian Jewish women, often rendered invisible in the primary sources and the available scholarly studies.

The writer was a young woman, a student at the medical school in Florence in the mid-1920s. Her lively vignettes depicting financial deprivation, alleviated by the beauty of the Renaissance city and the solidarity of fellow Hungarian Jewish and Italian students, scholarly success, youthful exuberance, and heartbreak offer valu-

44 *Egyenlőség*, 25 September 1920, 1. Kovács, Törvénytől sújtva, 227.

45 *Egyenlőség*, 20 November 1920, 8.

46 *Egyenlőség*, 27 November 1920, and *Egyenlőség*, 1 April 1922, 3.

47 A numerus clausus mérlege [The Balance Sheet of the Numerus Clausus], in: *Egyenlőség*, 28 January 1928, 2. I thank Ágnes Kelemen for information on the Central Committee.

48 Lili Fenyő, Pillanatképek a külföldön élő magyar diákság életéből [Snapshots from the Life of the Hungarian Students Living Abroad], Budapest undated.

able insight into the specific experience of women students. Fenyő also offered barely filtered reflections on her complex identity and that of her classmates. She described Passover in Florence spent with a local Jewish family and the joy upon receiving the much-awaited allowance from the Central Committee for the Aid of Jewish Students, highlighting the sense of Jewish solidarity reaching beyond national boundaries.⁴⁹ At the same time, she related the persistent commitment to a Hungarian national and cultural identity: Fenyő and her friends recited Hungarian poetry to anyone who would listen and at friendly gatherings sang Hungarian songs, with popular, faux-folk songs being particular favourites.⁵⁰

One would be tempted to interpret the memoir's title, "Snapshots from the Life of Hungarian Students Studying Abroad", as further evidence of Fenyő's self-identification as Hungarian – but it could be equally or more likely ascribed to the potential readers' ability to read between the lines. A particularly interesting episode described the plan by Italian students to submit a letter to the local newspaper, condemning the *numerus clausus* – and implicitly the Hungarian government – and the agonising decision of Hungarian Jewish students to veto the planned action, because "the child does not complain about her mother, even if she spanked her unjustly".⁵¹

These episodes seem to suggest that the ambiguous stance of *Egyenlőség*, attempting to maintain a Jewish cultural identity while also maintaining a commitment to the Hungarian political nation, played out in the everyday experience of "numerus clausus exiles". This source reinforces the message of the countless letters to the editor, printed in almost every issue of the weekly during the 1920s, by Hungarian Jewish students studying abroad. They all relate their struggle to reconciling rather than choosing between these two commitments: an unabashed Hungarian identity and a growing awareness of Jewish identity.

Conclusions

The *numerus clausus* law represented an early case of social engineering: It regulated access to higher education, previously left to its own devices. It attempted and to a large degree succeeded in overwriting social mobility by repressing the previous trend, the rise of a merit-based elite from the ranks of Hungarian Jews, in the name of protecting Hungarian national interests – but without accomplishing the intended result, the strengthening of an ethnically "pure" Christian elite. Further studies should reveal more about the long-term impact of the law on Hungarian academia and intellectual life, beyond the loss of such eminent "numerus clausus exiles" as the oft-cited, famed "Martians", the great émigré scientist generation of John von Neumann, Eugene Wigner, Edward Teller, Leo Szilárd, and Michael Polanyi or the social scientists Karl Polányi and Karl Mannheim, to name but a few.⁵²

A more in-depth exploration of socioeconomic and cultural developments among assimilated Hungarian Jews (a self-identification shared by the majority in this period) represented in the interwar period could shed further light on the specific ways the *numerus clausus* law reinforced or weakened a Jewish or, conversely, Hungarian

49 Ibid., 71-73.

50 Ibid., 20, 29, 34, 51.

51 Ibid., 66-67.

52 Frank, *Double Exile*; István Hargittai, *Martians of Science. Five Physicists Who Changed the Twentieth Century*, reprint, Oxford 2008. The "Martians" in the title refer to a contemporary anecdote, a comment on the Hungarian, impenetrable to outsiders, spoken among themselves by these famous émigrés.

identity – or, as the above examples seem to indicate, a more complex dynamic of these and other political and cultural factors of identity. Further studies would be needed to determine the law's impact on family and gender dynamics within Hungarian Jewish families of various degrees of religious affiliation and/or commitment to modernisation and assimilation – all before the anti-Jewish laws of the late 1930s and the following war and persecution took their deadly toll.

The responses to the numerus clausus law in *Egyenlőség*, the flagship of the Neolog Jewish community in the early 1920s, shed light on the perspective of Hungarian Jews who were the main targets and victims of the law. They suggest a continuing commitment to full membership in the Hungarian nation and a reluctance to cultivate – even if only in cultural terms – a separate Jewish identity. This conclusion raises more questions to explore about the intellectual leaders of the Neolog community: Why their insistence on staying the course, the program of full assimilation? How were they able to continue to believe in and advocate its future, with such strong evidence pointing to its failure? And why the hesitation, the ambiguity, when proposing a Jewish cultural autonomy, even if only to defend such elementary rights as the freedom of education?

As for the arguments articulated in their valiant fight against the numerus clausus, we find them, for the most part, drawn from previous decades. Historians working today may find it challenging to keep hindsight in check. Yet assimilated Hungarian Jews could be forgiven if, following the most successful decades of the liberal assimilationist project, they still hoped that the post-revolutionary antisemitic wave would prove to be temporary and eventually die down. These considerations may help us to understand and interpret the ambiguity between hope and despair, between the maintaining or waning of commitment to the assimilationist project.

Faced with the impossible task of defending their community against unprecedented physical violence and a state-sponsored, legal measure stripping them of full citizenship, the leadership and members of the Neolog community could not change direction, could not stray from the path of loyalty. Whether they genuinely believed their own arguments or not when combatting the official antisemitism of the early interwar years, they had already been invested in the path of assimilation for at least three generations with a deeply felt loyalty and commitment. Despite all the warning signs, such as the murderous physical violence unleashed on them in the early counter-revolutionary period, the noxious antisemitic rhetoric penetrating public discourse throughout the entire interwar era and the continuing discriminatory practice of the numerus clausus stifling the prospects of the next generations, they maintained their commitment to the pre-war, liberal programme of assimilation, even as that very programme was increasingly hollowed out. They entertained no illusions about the interwar regime's deeply rooted antisemitism and yet, on the tenth anniversary of the legislation vowed to raise the next generation “in the service of Hungarian national spirit and loyalty to the Jewish faith” – in that order.⁵³ This may offer an explanation for the unknown but likely numerous cases of “numerus clausus exiles” returning to Hungary, many of them, in the satirical writer Pál Királyhegyi's famous quip, “just in time to catch the express to Auschwitz”. This may also account, at least in part, for the willingness of the survivors to enter into a new contract, with a new ruling political elite, after 1945.

⁵³ *Egyenlőség*, 18 August 1928, 5.

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Judith Szapor
Historian, McGill University
judith.szapor@mcgill.ca

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Contact: simon@vwi.ac.at