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# Dr. Géza Dombovány and the Budapest Circle of Jewish Legal Defenders

A Cultural History

## Abstract

From 1867 onwards, Jewish middle-class families played a key role in the modernisation of Hungary. Within this group, I focus only on those families in which two subsequent generations decided to pursue a legal profession. A prominent example of this was Géza Schulhof von Dombovár and his son, Géza Richárd Dombovány. Through their adaptation to Hungarian society and their struggles with antisemitism, I intend to show some of the inner dynamism within Hungarian society more broadly, in which these Jewish lawyer families functioned for decades. In the 1880s and 1890s, Jewish Hungarians emerged in larger numbers in the legal profession and also in other segments of Hungarian public life. Some non-Jewish Hungarians perceived this as an invasion and, since educated Jewish Hungarians were accepted to fight duels, duelling represented a sphere where social tensions surrounding Jewish/non-Jewish coexistence could be fought out. This article addresses this phenomenon and suggests that one can observe a higher self-esteem among young Hungarian lawyers that was based on a combination of the emancipation process and the legal and army training they received. Furthermore, there was an interrelationship between their duelling activity which followed from this higher self-esteem and the militant legal defender activism they performed following the First World War.

## Introduction

It was not uncommon to commit suicide around Christmas time. The 1938 Christmas edition of the Budapest newspaper *8 Órai Újság* (8 O'clock Daily) reported two fresh stories of notables who took their own lives in these festive days, both of them by firing into their own hearts.<sup>1</sup> The first was Dr. Liebermann, an ophthalmologist professor, whose brother thought the tragedy was related to the Second Anti-Jewish Law proposed by the Hungarian Prime Minister the previous day, on 23 December 1938. According to this planned law, Dr. Liebermann – although he was raised a Christian – was going to be counted as a Jew from the next year on, and he did not want to wait until this moment. Somewhat later, around midnight, a second suicide of the day was committed by Dr. Géza Dombovány, an attorney of law, who, before killing himself next to the Jewish cemetery, had left a farewell note on his desk to clarify the reasons behind his act. This message reads: “I don’t owe anyone even a penny, I leave because of the Jewish law!”<sup>2</sup>

1 Egy ismert ügyvéd öngyilkossága [The Suicide of a Well-Known Lawyer] and Agyonlőtte magát Liebermann Leó orvostanár [Leo Liebermann Medical Teacher Shot Himself], in: *8 Órai Újság*, 25 December 1938, 8.

2 “Senkinek a világon nem tartozom egy fillérrel sem, a zsidótörvény miatt távozom!”

This study concentrates on the background of this second suicide and tries to reconstruct Dombovary's mind-set based on episodes from the life of this man. He never wanted to deny his Jewish identity, yet he felt devastated by the draft of the Second Anti-Jewish Law (the later Act IV of 1939). The novelty of this law compared to the previous legislation was that it differentiated Jews from Hungarians on a 'racial' basis, moreover defining Jews as a foreign element in the Hungarian nation. This was inconceivable for Dr. Dombovary, a lawyer primarily known as a Jewish rights defender and activist, who in the years 1919 to 1921 led the Legal Aid Office at the Pest Israelite Community. Yet there is much more to his story than just this short public engagement in the immediate post-First World War period. In my research project, I investigate Dombovary's agency through which I want to present him as an eminent example of the second generation of Jewish Hungarian lawyers that was living and working in Budapest, an emerging metropolis of the era. As Penny Summerfield pointed out recently, decades like the 1960s and 1970s saw a shift from writing the histories of important individuals like statesmen or rulers, whose great characters would influence world politics, towards social forces such as larger groups and classes. Summerfield also noted that from the 1980s onward, the 'individual' returned to the centre of historical investigation, however, not "in isolation but as part of a community; the single voice is heard speaking both for itself and for a collectivity".<sup>3</sup> In this vein, I look for the voices of a significant part of the Budapest lawyers' chamber (Bar Association) in the story of Geza Dombovary. This is because after 1900 the ratio of Jewish Hungarians within the Hungarian Bar Association skyrocketed. In 1890, there were already 918 Jews among its 4,202 members, with even this relatively high number rising to 3,049 lawyers of Jewish background out of 6,743 Bar members in 1910.<sup>4</sup> To clarify what lawyers meant for representing Jewish Hungarians in public life: In 1928, there were six Jewish MPs sitting in the Hungarian parliament, five of whom were graduates of the Faculty of Law.<sup>5</sup> In addition, among the Jewish legal professionals there were a number of persons who, like Dr. Dombovary, made quite an effort in their legal practice to defend and advance the integration of Jews into Hungarian society. By shining a light on the circle of these Jewish Hungarian lawyers, one can learn a great deal about the Jewish community of Budapest.

That Dombovary took his own life was a consequence of the illiberal turn in Hungarian society at the time. In recent years, since 2014 especially, we have heard a lot about how Prime Minister Viktor Orban is guiding Hungary from liberal democracy into an illiberal one. This move includes using law and state funds for strengthening social differences and hatred, limiting space for NGOs, journalists, academics, and other potentially critical voices, advocating against pluralism, and over-emphasising the greatness of the Hungarian nation. Orban is an admirer of Regent Horthy, who led the first illiberal independent Hungary from 1920 until 1944. However, prior to him, especially between 1867 and the First World War, Hungarians displayed remarkably liberal ideas, particularly when it came to the legal rights of Jewish citizens. Hungarian society's approach towards Jews in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was a mixture of tolerance and antisemitism, but it was the former that was codified in laws. First of all, Act XVII of 1867 stipulated that Jewish and Chris-

3 Penny Summerfield, *Subjectivity, the Self and Historical Practice*, in: Sasha Handley/Rohan McWilliam/Lucy Noakes (ed.), *New Directions in Social and Cultural History*, London 2018, 21-22.

4 Data quoted in: Maria M. Kovacs, *Liberalizmus, Radikalizmus, Antiszemitizmus* [Liberalism, Radicalism, and Antisemitism], Budapest 2001, 22.

5 They were Marcell Baracs, Jeno Gal, Geza Desi, Erno Brody, and Bela Fabian, with the only non-lawyer being Pal Sandor.

tian citizens possessed exactly the same civic and political rights. Victor Karády even maintains that there was a tacit assimilationist social contract between Jews and elite non-Jews. Accordingly, the equal rights of the Jews were taken for granted and their bourgeois entrepreneurship was encouraged (especially as no Hungarian nobleman was aspiring to do such business) so long as Jews were willing to culturally assimilate and support the Hungarian elite's nationalist project vis-à-vis the Slavic minorities' separatism.<sup>6</sup> Some two decades after the emancipation law, Act XLII of 1895 confirmed the 'repecció' (admission) of the Jewish denomination. This meant that the structure of Jewish religious communities was made administratively equal with the Catholic and the main Protestant religious organisations.<sup>7</sup> On 4 March 1894, during the debate of the later law, reportedly about 250,000 Hungarians demonstrated on the streets of Budapest for liberalism and for the equal rights of the 'Israelites', as Jews were officially called.<sup>8</sup> Two decades later, however, in 1918–1920, pogroms and Jew-baiting became a part of everyday life on the very same streets.

Critics might say the comparison is exaggerated, but I think the post-1918 and the post-2010 radical turns from liberalism to illiberal exclusionary nationalism reveal historical parallels. What was crucial in both instances was that due to the exclusionary aspect of their nationalist propaganda both needed easy scapegoats. While Prime Minister Orbán's system instigates hatred more sophisticatedly against 'migrants' (Islam), George Soros (Jews), the LGBT community, and finally against Roma, the hatred of interwar Hungarians chiefly targeted the Hungarians of Jewish origin. In both cases, furthermore, Hungary mentally closed itself off and chose to pursue a different path than did the developed Western world.<sup>9</sup> This prompted both the League of Nations in the 1920s and the European Union in the 2010s to investigate whether or not the Hungarian government's acts breached international obligations. In addition, both Horthy's and Orbán's systems internally had the features of a quasi-feudal state, where connections, protections, and corruption defined one's place in the social hierarchy rather than talent, output, competitiveness, and performance.

Why I mention all of this here is because it is striking that Dr. Dombovány made his mark in Hungarian Jewish history in a very narrow timeframe, between 1919 and 1922, exactly in the worst moments of the first illiberal turn. Géza Dombovány was already a 44-year-old man when the First World War ended, yet until this point he had not really been involved in the official dealings of the Budapest (or rather only Pest) Jewish Community. However, he made a crucial impact in this relatively short, immediate post-war era, a period coinciding with the peak of popular anti-Jewish aggression in Hungary. What were the underlying causes behind his public appearance? In order to trace the possible causes, I will investigate Dombovány's pre-1919 background and pose the following questions: Which groups did he identify with? What were the most evident changes in his self-understanding? I will also investigate to what extent it was a matter of choice or force that made Géza Dombovány fight for the acceptance of Hungarian Jews by the majority society and to scrupulously docu-

6 Victor Karády, *Zsidóság, modernizáció, polgárosodás* [Jewry, Modernisation, and Embourgeoisement], Budapest 1997, 19. Contrary to this, István Bibó thinks that assimilation was illusionary, and from the dominant elite's perspective it was only important that Jews learn Hungarian and declare themselves Hungarian at the census count: *Zsidó asszimiláció és zsidó öntudat* [Jewish Assimilation and Jewish Identity], in: István Bibó, *Válogatott tanulmányok* [Selected Works], Budapest 1986, vol. 2, 745-747.

7 Raphael Patai, *The Jews of Hungary: History, Culture, Psychology*, Detroit 1996, 361-365.

8 Lajos Szabolcsi, *Két nemzedék. Az Egyenlőség évtizedei 1881–1931* [Two Generations. The Decades of Equality 1881–1931], Budapest 1993, 64. Jews were called 'Israelites' because, at this time, they were perceived merely as a separate religious denomination rather than a national minority.

9 Of course, later much of the West got under authoritarian rule, led by Mussolini, Hitler and Franco.

ment and report to the authorities each and every anti-Jewish act of violence in the early interwar times. What did it possibly mean to him to ‘defend’, as it seems he felt very comfortable in his role as a legal ‘defender’ of the Hungarian Jews in the immediate post-First World War era.

### The Army Veteran

When seeking to reconstruct the driving forces behind Dr. Dombovary’s actions, it is perhaps best to start at his tomb. The speeches delivered at his funeral as well as a lengthy obituary in the biweekly *Egyenloseg* (Equality) – a newspaper closely associated with the Pest Jewish Community – can give us an idea on which paths we should walk in order to map the important experiences of this lawyer’s life. The obituary was written by Dr. Erno Ballagi, another lawyer, who recalled that he first met Dombovary when both of them were officers in the Austro-Hungarian Army.<sup>10</sup> Taking part in the battles of the First World War as Austro-Hungarian soldiers was a proud moment for these people. Jews often perceived army service as a chance to earn wider social acceptance and social integration through heroism. Therefore, during the war, the main Jewish media outlets, like the above-mentioned *Egyenloseg* or the *Mult es Jovo* (Past and Future), promoted the stories of Jewish Hungarian battle heroes.<sup>11</sup> In 1917, the lawyer Vilmos Vazsonyi became the first Jew in Hungarian history to be appointed a minister. His appointment underscores that the golden era of liberalism and assimilation thus extended through the First World War. However, the years 1914 to 1918 were also the period when the mainstream approach towards Jewish Hungarians was radically turned around. This was due to those politicians, journalists, and high-flying clergy representatives like Bishop Ottokar Prohaszka, who promoted a false representation of Jewish men as service shirkers and financial profiteers of the war, and of Jewish soldiers as cowards.

After the war, Dombovary did a lot to counter these claims, which is why his obituary’s second reference point refers to another kind of fight for Jewish self-respect through civic activism. He regarded himself as someone whom nowadays we would perhaps call a civil rights activist, and as such he purposefully chose legal cases where he could appear in public as a warrior of Jewish legal self-defence. One such occasion was a show trial in 1921/1922 at the Budapest court over the number of fallen Jewish soldiers.<sup>12</sup> Years after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the understanding of the war among Jewish and non-Jewish Hungarians still differed radically, so much so that a headcount of the lost souls seemed necessary to arrive at the truth. In January 1921, a Member of Parliament by the name of Mr. Avarffy published an article in the daily *Nemzeti ıjsag* (National Newspaper) claiming that no more than one per cent of Jewish soldiers died in combat during the First World War.<sup>13</sup> The chief editor of the journal *Egyenloseg* responded by calling him a liar, as one per cent

10 Bucsu Dombovary Gezatol [Farewell to Geza Dombovary], in: *Egyenloseg*, 29 December 1938, 4.

11 Publicising the stories of heroes was also a practice among other socially less appreciated groups such as women or workers. See: Eszter Balazs, The Image of the Jewish Soldier-Intellectual, in: *Mult es Jovo*, The Hungarian Review Promoting Jewish Cultural Renaissance (1914–1918), in: Gerald Lamprecht/Eleonore Lappin-Eppel/Ulrich Wyrwa (ed.), *Jewish Soldiers in the Collective Memory of Central Europe. The Remembrance of World War I from a Jewish Perspective*, Vienna/Cologne/Weimar 2019, 121-143, 126.

12 See: Erno Ballagi, *Elesni kozerdeket volt* [It was in the Public Interest to Fall], in: *Egyenloseg*, 10 December 1921, 1.

13 Elek Avarffy, *Nehany szo a galiciaiakrol es egy kis statisztika* [A Few Words About the Galicians and Some Statistics], in: *Nemzeti ıjsag*, 6 January 1921, 1-2.

would be hardly more than 500 casualties on the Jewish Hungarians' side. This was nowhere near the real figure of over 10,000 Jewish Hungarian soldiers who lost their lives during the battles of the First World War.<sup>14</sup> This debate interested Dombóváry all the more since being a war veteran was an integral part of his identity, little surprise that he got involved in it.

The discourse over the sacrifice of Jewish servicemen seemed to be a key question of immediate post-First World War discussions between Jews and non-Jews, thus a trial could potentially have a major impact on Hungarian public life. A lot was at stake because even the idea of a law on a numerus clausus – a regulation drastically limiting the entry of Jewish students to Hungarian universities – was rooted in this notion of Jewish unworthiness for equal rights. The Jewish editor calling the MP a liar provoked a court case: MP Avarffy sued him and it was Géza Dombóváry who acted as the defence attorney. To certain extent, Dombóváry also wanted to act as the defender of the entire Jewish community. He orchestrated strategic litigation in order to negate the ever more popular antisemitism, an anti-Jewish sentiment that saw the alleged lack of Jewish combat sacrifice as the very reason why Jewish Hungarians were unworthy of equal rights in Hungary. As a defence attorney, Dombóváry took two important steps, first prompting the court to contact the Hungarian Central Statistical Office to inquire about the official number of Jewish casualties.<sup>15</sup> Then, he ordered the staff of the Legal Aid Office where he worked as acting director to write to all the Hungarian Jewish communities including the smallest rural ones.<sup>16</sup> They responded with certified records from their religious registries concerning the losses of their community members in the years 1914–1918, with the cause and place of death indicated. Dombóváry thus managed in 1921 to mobilise large parts of pre-Trianon Hungarian Jewry and, by the end, two huge suitcases were needed to transport all the evidence collected by Dombóváry's team to the courtroom.<sup>17</sup> The editor was acquitted of all charges on 2 November 1922 and, more importantly, the Central Statistical Office released a report citing a figure of 10,000 fallen Jewish soldiers. Contemporaries commented that “with this trial and the resulting verdict [...] 25 months after the acceptance of the Numerus Clausus Act, the main argument of the antisemites about the untrustworthiness of Hungarian Jewry and their lack of loyalty were shown to be a lie”.<sup>18</sup>

If one attempted to draw a mental history of Géza Dombóváry, one might assess that he often acted as someone with wounded pride, and this was certainly the case in the early 1920s concerning the issue of his time in the military. It follows from this, as well, that the above detailed court case was very important for him. We possess some information about how Dombóváry saw himself, and to be certain, he was very proud of his army achievements. Following the First World War, a cancellation of membership fee liabilities had been offered by the Budapest Lawyers' Association (Bar Association) to war veterans. Dombóváry accepted the offer, declaring that “I was away from Budapest and fought through the entire World War from the first day to the last.”<sup>19</sup> Regarding what taking part in the war meant to Dombóváry, we can find further evidence in a correspondence between the Ministry of Defence and the

14 Avarffy hazudik [Avarffy is Lying], in: *Egyenlőség*, 15 January 1921, 1.

15 Szabolcsi, *Két nemzedék*, 325.

16 *Ibid.*, 318, 322.

17 The popular daily *Az Est* mentions that Dombóváry submitted to the court the data of thousands of fallen Jewish servicemen on no less than 56 pages. Find this in: *Az Est*, 8 February 1922, 8.

18 Ernő Ballagi, cited in: *Ibid.*, 319.

19 A Budapesti Ügyvédi Kamara Irattára [The Archives of the Budapest Bar Association], Dr. Dombóváry Géza, file no. 2397, see the document dated 3 March 1920.

Pest Israelite Community from 1920. The cause of this exchange of letters was a complaint from a certain Mr. Eibenschütz, who turned to the Jewish community's legal aid office to tell how violently he had been treated by some Hungarian soldiers one day in late May 1920. According to the claimant, unknown soldiers arrested him on the street without any reason other than being Jewish, and detained him and his four friends at the makeshift army headquarters in the former stock exchange building. There, all of them supposedly were beaten by stocks of rifles and bayonets, and later their injuries had to be treated by emergency doctors. Mr. Eibenschütz turned to the Jewish legal aid office for help, and Dombovány had no reason to question the credibility of the claimant, who had visible injuries from beatings and was covered with bandage red from fresh bloodstains. Dombovány therefore prepared a report about the case, which was then immediately mailed to the Ministry of Defence.<sup>20</sup> The ministry's angry response rejected part of the accusations and, in a letter dated 3 July 1920, they claimed that only two persons had been arrested and not five, and even those two had not been beaten. At the same time, the ministry requested the personal data of that "biased worker of the Jewish community who could prepare such a report full of exaggerations based on fake information and whose letter was taken as an insult against the Hungarian army and its officers".<sup>21</sup> Dombovány's alleged error offers further clues about his commitments to the military. In the letter of response, the head of the Jewish community defended him for the following reasons: First, Dombovány, even though he was solely responsible for all documents leaving the legal aid office, worked for free and had dealt mostly alone with a great number of clients, whose number exceeded 1,000 in the last year. Second, the Jewish community's letter underlines that Dombovány had strong affections towards the Hungarian army especially as he had fought through the entire World War. He volunteered for frontline combat and was decorated for his brave services as a commander of a machine gun unit in Montenegro.<sup>22</sup> No doubt, in 1920 this information had to be made public by Dombovány himself, who always approached his fellow war veterans with the utmost respect and who always remained nostalgic about his world war experiences. It seems to me that Dombovány's and the obituary writer Ballagi's post-war pride was a general feeling among Jewish Hungarian men, and their sentiment found its way into the self-consciousness of the entire Hungarian Jewry. Evidently, Jewish Hungarians acted as if they had gained something with their bravery in the trenches. To exaggerate this notion, they behaved and thought of themselves almost as if they had been some kind of winners, even though the Austro-Hungarian army had lost the war, and Hungary had consequently lost some two thirds of its territory, which is an important point to consider.

Hungarian Jewish lawyers' experiences in the First World War seem to have had long lasting consequences. This is because, for decades, Jewish Hungarians frequently recalled their army service as proof of their Magyar identity and as a counterargument against antisemitism. It supposedly proved their equality with the rest of Hungarian society, both in terms of their patriotic feelings and their readiness to make sacrifices for the homeland. What is more, even the Hungarian state showed its appreciation towards those Jewish veterans who were decorated because of their First World War services at the front by exempting them from the effects of the anti-Jewish laws in 1938/1939. Precisely because these regulations prompted Jewish families

20 Magyar Zsidó Múzeum és Levéltár [Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives] (HU-HJA/HU-MZSL), PIH-I-E, boxes no. B 10/2 and 3, Black Book, Eibenschütz case, number 23.

21 Ibid., letter dated 3 July 1920 and signed by Lieutenant Colonel Perczel, 102/920.

22 Ibid., response from the Jewish Community signed by Ferenc Székely, 101861.

and various authorities to preserve the evidence of wartime decorations, we have numerous sources concerning the participation of Jewish Hungarians in the First World War, in addition to those files stored at the army archives of Vienna.<sup>23</sup> In the case of Dr. Dombovary, we should not forget those documents, which are to be found in the archive of the Budapest Bar Association. It was when the First Anti-Jewish Law came into effect that the lawyers' chamber enquired about their Jewish members' army records. To get exemption from the law, Dombovary, for example, filled out a form in June 1938. He counted himself to the *tuzharcos* or "combat fighter" category and attached a statement by Colonel Kratochwil from November 1917 that declared Dr. Geza Dombovary to be the recipient of the Karl Troop Cross.

### The Duel Hero: Militant Youth and the Hungarian Noble Ideal

Dombovary's bravery in combat earned him a decoration, and this bravery has a lot to do with another important cultural factor which greatly affected the life of many Jewish lawyers, namely the phenomenon of duelling. For the likes of the young Dombovary to become duel-worthy was a hybrid form of Jewish emancipation in the sense that legislation forbade duelling, but it was approved by cultural habits and by the leniency of its criminal punishment. Around the last third of the nineteenth century, it represented a relatively novel institution, whereby armed Jews could defend their honour, and it opened up a new form of social intercourse between educated Jews and non-Jews. Unlike in Hungary, many nationalist student fraternities in Austria followed the Principle of Waidhofen excluding Jews from duels and other honorary affairs. It was not the case in Budapest, and although obviously not too many people were directly involved in duels, contemporary media in Hungary always reported them. Finally, duelling is of central importance to this particular paper because Dombovary himself was a famous duelling hero. In his later years, he even became a leader of the Jewish athletic club VAC's fencing branch.<sup>24</sup> One could try to understand his tragic suicide as a symbolic moment: He protected his body with blades throughout dozens of duels, but destroyed it with firearms when anti-Jewish legislation made his existence impossible. It is no mistake that the obituary's author depicted Dombovary as a martyr "whose soul was taken to the grave by the sorrow of his Jewish community", his martyrdom having been caused by the proposed new anti-Jewish legislation.<sup>25</sup> In any case, the cultural discourse concerning whether or not a Jew could become a loyal member of the Hungarian nation was the question around which the institution of duelling evolved, and as such it contributed to the construction of Geza Dombovary's identity.

The above quoted obituary leaves no doubt that there was a close companionship between the writer, Dr. Ballagi, and the deceased, Dr. Dombovary, and what tied these two lawyers together was a jointly waged campaign. Besides being a lawyer, Ballagi was also a journalist, and in that capacity, he documented various stages of this fight.<sup>26</sup> One gets the feeling that although these gentlemen constituted the second educated generation after the formal emancipation of the Hungarian Jews, it

23 osterreichisches Staatsarchiv – Kriegsarchiv.

24 Dombovary's name is included in an entry about the VAC Vivo es Atletikai Club in: Peter ujvari, Magyar Zsido Lexikon [Hungarian Jewish Lexicon], Budapest 1929, 955.

25 Bucsu Dombovary Gezatol, 4.

26 See for example: Erno Ballagi, A belyeges seregben [In the Stamped Army], Budapest 1930, or Ballagi's countless articles in *Egyenloseg*.

was the very first generation to refuse to silently accept the anti-Jewish attacks from non-Jews. In reconstructing the background of these Jewish legal defenders, it is fair to assume that while they were proud Hungarians, at the same time they also nurtured a strong Jewish identity. It was possible to be proud of this hyphenated Jewish-Hungarian identity, even though this identity was confronted by anti-Jewish sentiment every day.<sup>27</sup> Here we need to clarify what antisemitism meant in these days. Today, the experience of the Shoah has made antisemitism forever unacceptable. Yet, around 1900 in East Central Europe, it was culturally acceptable to maintain an openly anti-Jewish attitude as a cultural code without shame or embarrassment.<sup>28</sup> Thus, these immediate post-emancipation times were marked by social tensions in Hungary. Understandably, Jewish individuals like the young Ballagi and Dombóváry wished to be accepted by the majority society, yet the frequency of publicly expressed antisemitism embarrassed the Jewish Hungarians. They encountered discrimination regularly, from their schooldays onwards. In 1885, the neolog (reform) Pest Israelite Community mulled over the initiative of setting up a separate high school for Jewish students because of the widespread maltreatment the Jewish youth experienced in public schooling and in Christian gymnasiums.<sup>29</sup> At this point in time, the Jewish leaders rejected this idea as they were afraid that a separate school would derail the integration of their offspring.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the very discussion shows that there was a need for protecting the 'Jewish' part of the Hungarian Jews, even though at this time assimilation remained a stronger desire among the community leaders.

Considering the broader picture, one gets the impression that Jewish communities in Central Europe to this day often find themselves in crisis, only because it is so hard for them to decide how assertive the official Jewish standpoint should be vis-à-vis the majority society. For example, Jews living in Wilhelmine Germany at the end of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a new Jewish generation confronting antisemitism much more proactively than their forefathers had. This generational change was marked with the appearance of the Centralverein Deutscher Staatsbürger Jüdischen Glaubens in 1893, while in Hungary a comparative generational change was most notable in an activist group campaigning for the 'receptió' (admission), meaning the equal legal recognition of the Jewish religion along with the Christian denominations.<sup>31</sup> Regarding the Centralverein's generation, Jacob Borut convincingly differentiated their form of Jewish activism from that of previous German Jewish leaders.<sup>32</sup> The latter, Borut argued, received emancipation from

27 Jay Winter created the term "hyphenated-identity": Jay Winter, *Remembering War. The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*, New Haven/London 2006

28 Raul Cârstocea/Éva Kovács, *The Centre Does Not Hold: Antisemitism in the Peripheries between the Imperial, the Colonial and the National*, in: Raul Cârstocea/Éva Kovács (ed.), *Modern Antisemitisms in the Peripheries. Europe and Its Colonies 1880–1945*, Vienna 2018, 9–14.

29 Avigdor Löwneheim, *Befogadók és kirekesztők, A pesti Izraelita Hitközösség 1904. évi alapszabálymódosításának háttéréről* [Receptionists and Excluders. The Background to the Amendment of the 1904 Statute of the Pest Israelite Community], in: *Múlt és Jövő* (1993) 3, 10–21, 10

30 Guy Miron claimed that "[t]he central political aim of modern Jews in Hungary, Neolog as well as modern Orthodox, in the last decades before World War I was to consolidate their emancipation and to become integrated within the Hungarian state as equal citizens". See: Guy Miron, *The Waning of Emancipation*, Detroit 2011, 158.

31 As Konrad Jarausch maintains, "Most Jews who joined the Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith (CV) hoped that they would eventually be fully accepted as Germans.": Konrad H. Jarausch, *Broken Lives*, Princeton 2018, 33.

32 Jacob Borut, *Jewish Politics and Generational Change in Wilhelmine Germany*, in: Mark Roseman, *Generations in Conflict. Youth Revolt and Generation Formation in Germany 1770–1968*, Cambridge MA 1995, 105–120.

above, from the authoritarian government of Bismarck, who was encouraged by German liberal politicians to act. This earlier German Jewish generation therefore had a greater trust in the authorities and generally refrained from standing up openly against antisemitism and from requesting more rights. Thus, up until the early 1890s, Jews were extremely worried about their public image, until a new wave of antisemitism broke in upon the next generation of Jewish activists, who took a much more self-defensive standpoint. Similarly, when the young Vilmos Vázsonyi called for the 'recepció' in Budapest, he was criticised first and foremost by the reigning Jewish Community leaders, who thought a movement like this could cause the re-birth of a latent antisemitism. They thought antisemitism was slumbering among Hungarians – let us not forget that the Tiszaeszlár Affair had happened less than ten years ago. Similarly, according to Jacob Borut, German Jews thought that standing up publicly against anti-Jewish charges would only fuel German antisemitism.<sup>33</sup> German Jewish leaders were also worried about confronting authorities when representing Jewish interests because they thought it could be taken as an "unwillingness to integrate", an argument that we saw appearing in Budapest during the debate whether or not to found a separate Jewish high school.

For the Budapest Jewish leaders, the desired assimilation seemed like a reasonable goal following the formal emancipation of Hungarian Jewry in 1867, and progressive Jewish leaders were hesitant to hinder this process. One has to keep in mind the *quid pro quo* character of the emancipation law: At least the leaders of the Neolog community understood that emancipation was offered on the condition that Hungarian Jews underwent a serious magyarisation and westernisation.<sup>34</sup> The Orthodox did not follow this trend: They regarded Jewishness as a nationality, whereas the neologs defined themselves as Hungarians of Israelite faith.<sup>35</sup> When the representatives of this neolog community discussed and finally rejected the idea of a Jewish high school, Géza Dombovány was only eleven years old, and he attended a Lutheran gymnasium. As a teenager, he had various hurdles to overcome to become a lawyer. One was attaining the baccalaureate, but antisemitism was much more prevalent at the university level, where there was a sharply growing Jewish presence in these decades. While in 1870, the ratio of Jewish Hungarian students at the Faculty of Law at the University of Budapest was around 17 per cent, in 1885 this number had risen to 35 per cent.<sup>36</sup> Victor Karády suggested that once Jews were freely admitted to all levels of elite schooling, they appeared to be more successful than their non-Jewish schoolmates because of their cultural and religious background. The Jewish Hungarians' "advanced measure of literacy in Hebrew, [...] multilingualism, their 'religious intellectualism' based on the habit of Talmudic learning, the socially in-built appreciation of studying, and the cult of (sacred) texts and books" proved to be a significant advantage over the Hungarian students studying with them in secondary level or in universities.<sup>37</sup> Suddenly, Jews became overrepresented in these schools, and Jewish

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>34</sup> William McCagg, *Jewish Nobles and Geniuses in Modern Hungary*, New York 1972, 91-94. McCagg demonstrated this situation through the example of Dr. Ignác Hirschler, chairman of the Pest Israelite Community from 1860 to 1883.

<sup>35</sup> Hungarian Jewry split into three separate factions in 1869/1870: the neolog, the orthodox, and in between them the status quo groups. It is difficult to estimate the respective size of each group, but orthodoxy was surely in the majority in the countryside, while many more reform Jews resided in Pest.

<sup>36</sup> Victor Karády, *Jews in the Hungarian Legal Professions and among Law Students from the Emancipation until the Shoah*, in: Carsten Wilke/András Kovács/Michael Miller (ed.), *Jewish Studies at the Central European University VIII 2011–2016*, Budapest 2017, 23-54, 38.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 27.

over-schooling in elite educational tracks became a popular strategy for achieving partial assimilation and full social integration.

It was also during this time period, the last third of the nineteenth century, that for the first time in Hungarian history some Jews were accepted as opponents in duels. Until this moment, it was unthinkable that a full member of Hungarian society could or should defend his honour against Jews – generally perceived as lower-ranked humans – in the egalitarian context of a duel. However, formal emancipation, but even more acculturation and embourgeoisement empowered Jewish members of the higher middle classes, and if these people were graduates of high schools, then they were regarded as *satisfaktionsfähig*.<sup>38</sup> A large portion of the Jewish middle class developed a special sensitivity on both parts of their hyphenated Jewish-Hungarian identity, which was the underlying reason behind their various social conflicts. Avigdor Löwenheim explained in his excellent although little known piece *Jews and Duelling* that the phenomenon of the duel for Hungarian Jewish individuals itself represented both a form of self-defence and an aspect of assimilation to the majority society, through which they could express their self-esteem.<sup>39</sup> Traditionally, only certain gentlemen were eligible for duel, predominantly of course the aristocrats, army officers, or university graduates. Although Act V of 1878 specifically forbade duelling in Hungary, this highly formalised fight remained in practice as a reminder of the recent feudal social setup. Here it is worth mentioning Péter Hanák's concept of the ideal type of Hungarian in the nineteenth century. The proto-Hungarian was a strong nobleman with a twirled, tapering moustache, lavish in his spending and a daredevil when it came to the question of honour.<sup>40</sup> In many ways, Jewish acculturation involved mimicking this noble proto-Hungarian man, which resulted in Jewish youngsters engaging in bravado in duels. In 1888, there were 71 persons sentenced for duelling in Hungary, of which nine were Jewish Hungarians.<sup>41</sup> In 1885, the Jewish fencing trainer Mózes Freyberger opened his famous fencing studio.<sup>42</sup> Ever more young Jews joined fencing clubs, ever more of whom could afford paying special attention to building and strengthening their bodies.<sup>43</sup> It was this emerging duelling pattern that trained the generation of the young Géza Dombovány. These youngsters here learned to defend their Jewish Hungarian honour and thus this became the first generation that was not willing to accept racial slurs. Following the admired Hungarian noble tradition, they wanted to challenge their abusers and wanted them to pay for their acts with pain. One of the Jewish Faculty of Law students, Jenő Fuchs, went as far as winning the Olympic gold in fencing at the London and the Stockholm games. As the chief editor of the *Egyenlőség* journal phrased this in a dialogue with Theodor Herzl in 1903: "The Jews in Hungary became Hungarians not only regarding their language, but their temperament was also magyarised, therefore, if someone smashed their head, they were going to smash the attackers' head. We stand on our feet and defend ourselves."<sup>44</sup>

38 Ibid., 29.

39 Avigdor Löwenheim, *Zsidók és a párbaj* [Jews and Duelling], in: *Múlt és Jövő* (1992) 4, 83-94.

40 Péter Hanák, *A kert és a műhely* [The Garden and the Workshop], Budapest 1988, 84-85, 94-98.

41 Löwenheim, *Zsidók és a párbaj*, 87.

42 Mihály Kalman, *Cutting their Way to Success. Hungarian Jewish Sportsmen in the Interwar Era*, in: Leonard Greenspoon (ed.), *Jews in the Gym. Judaism, Sports and Athletics*, West Lafayette IN 2012, 132. Freyberger later magyarised his name to Károly Fodor. He was the trainer of the famous Olympic champion fencer Attila Petschauer.

43 Löwenheim, *Zsidók és a párbaj*, 91. See also: Dániel Bolgár, *Miért van olyan sok magyar zsidó olimpiai bajnok?* [Why are there so many Hungarian Jewish Olympic Champions?], in: *Népszabadság* (NOL), 2 October 2016; <http://nol.hu/kultura/miert-olyan-sok-a-magyar-zsido-olimpiai-bajnok-1634169/> (5 September 2019). Here Bolgár rightly noted that in these years doing sports was an option exclusively open to the richer social strata.

44 Szabolcsi, *Két nemzedék*, 86.

According to the historian Avigdor Löwenheim, a strong wave of anti-Jewish violence occurred among the Budapest university students in 1896 following the Hungarian parliament's approval of the 'receptió' (admission) of the Jewish denomination. This law – initiated, as mentioned above, by another Jewish Hungarian lawyer, Dr. Vilmos Vázsonyi – in effect meant an official recognition of equality between the Jewish and Christian denominations. Before then, for instance, Jewish weddings had been not officially recognised like Christian marriage ceremonies.<sup>45</sup> The new legislation solved such problems, but in doing so it galvanised popular antisemitism.<sup>46</sup> Jew-baiting became especially frequent in October 1896, around the time of the student self-government elections at the university. Many students recited anti-Jewish slurs popular among Viennese citizens at the time, particularly among the supporters of Karl Lueger.<sup>47</sup> Jewish contemporaries, on the one hand, commented on the immature nature of these attacks, while on the other hand asserting that the Jewish youth behaved in a 'magyar manner' even when it came to virtue and bravado in duelling. To quote one of them: "The Hungarian university students of Jewish faith showed that they do not tolerate any kind of insults and that they take the offence directed against their religion as an offence against themselves."<sup>48</sup> The disturbances among the students continued the following year and, in one incident, when antisemitic songs were heard in a Budapest café, a Jewish student from the Faculty of Law asked to stop the music. This request prompted a fierce argument in which two students raised swords against each other. A report about the duel, in which the non-Jewish counterpart suffered a head injury, mentioned the young Géza Dombovány as the duel assistant.<sup>49</sup> However, he was named as Richárd Schulhof, thus he disguised himself behind the name his family had used prior to magyarising and used his middle name instead of his first name.<sup>50</sup> He himself fought several heroic fights. Marcell Hajdu, a duelling hero, lawyer, and politician, was the head of the National Fencing Club. Another young Jewish Hungarian duelling hero of this time, Marcell Baracs, decades later acted as the defence lawyer for Immánuel Löw, the rabbi of Szeged, when in 1920 the rabbi had to stand trial for insulting Regent Miklós Horthy.<sup>51</sup> In the same year, Géza Dombovány was busy writing reports to governmental officials about the hundreds of physical attacks committed against Jews by the extreme right.<sup>52</sup> In 1923, Dombovány initiated a duel against a journalist because of his opinion concerning a Hungarian poet's love affair with a Jewess.<sup>53</sup> So seemingly, the practice of active self-defence in university circles therefore appeared to be a formative experience for some Jewish students at the Faculty of Law, which some of them kept practising in the interwar years as well, now as adult men. Meanwhile, some of those who had been ready to fight duels against antisemites during their university years

45 See: *Ibid.*, 53-73.

46 Löwenheim, *Zsidók és a párbaj*, 83.

47 Such as the expression *Saujud*.

48 Károly Sebestyén, *A magyar ifjúság* [The Hungarian Youth], in: *Egyenlőség*, 18 October 1896, 3, cited in: Löwenheim, *Zsidók és a párbaj*, 90.

49 Löwenheim, *Zsidók és a párbaj*, 90.

50 Géza Dombovány received a short, two-day prison sentence in 1908 for duelling with another lawyer, J. Fuchs. See: *Budapesti Hírlap* 207 (29 August 1908), 10.

51 Immánuel Löw, the rabbi of Szeged, received his PhD from the University of Leipzig in 1878. In 1920, he was arrested and tried for treason, but later acquitted. He spent close to three months in prison, until he was moved to house arrest on 13 July 1920. Nine days later, assassins fired shots into his apartment, but the rabbi was unharmed. See: Máté Hidvégi/Tamás Ungvári, *Löw Immánuel válogatott művei* [Selected Works of Immanuel Löw], Budapest 2019, 41.

52 HU-MZSL/HU-HJA, PIH-I-E, Box no. B 10/2.

53 The journal *Ellenzék* (Opposition) reported on the case under the headline: *Párbaj Petőfi miatt* [Duel Because of Petőfi], in: *Ellenzék*, 26 January 1923, 5.

now showed readiness to also use their legal knowledge to counter antisemitism in post-First World War Hungary. Géza Dombovary and Marcell Baracs belonged to this group, both acting as defence attorneys in show trials against Jewish notables between 1920 and 1922.

### Family Background and Expectations

Returning to the obituary published after Dombovary suicide, in one of the final paragraphs the author explains, in a tone of a close friend, why the police found Dombovary’s elegantly dressed body next to the Jewish cemetery: “Every Sunday you came here to the Jewish cemetery, [...] you visited the tombs of your father and mother. Every week you came, you would never miss a Sunday visit, your faithful child’s heart drove you here, just as during that tragic night, when again your broken heart brought you to your parents’ tomb.”<sup>54</sup> Clearly, the obituary writer here reflected on the strong bonds that tied the two generations together. Geza Dombovary’s father – Geza senior – passed away in June 1918, and I believe, the pain caused by his father’s death contributed to Dombovary’s public engagement on behalf of the Jewish community. My reading of Geza Dombovary’s life, and especially of his potential mindset from 1918 onwards after experiencing the proximity of death on the battlefield and then hearing the news that his father had passed away, is that these two factors triggered something in him. It is difficult to be certain what happened here, but maybe he just decided to do something meaningful. We only know that prior to this, he was mostly appearing in the press because of his duelling bravado or for representing members of the nobility in the courtroom.<sup>55</sup> Contrary to this character, in November 1918 he was suddenly quoted as a negotiator sent by the Jewish community to the ambassador of the newly formed state of Czechoslovakia. There, he requested information about the more than 1,000 Jewish Hungarians who had been arrested by the Czechoslovak authorities when they took control of the Upper Lands (Felvidek) in now Slovakia.<sup>56</sup> Although they were radical when responding to antisemitism, unlike some top intellectuals of Jewish origin like Georg Lukacs, the second generation of Jewish lawyers did not confront their parents’ value system. Rather, they generally followed their fathers’ principles. I therefore aim here to capture in Dombovary’s actions the type of cultural transfer that took place between him and his father, which certainly influenced his choices and preferences. To this end, I will briefly introduce the stories of a few other Jewish Hungarian lawyers from the same historical era as a potential comparison to support my findings based on the Dombovary case, for instance some members of the Barach/Baracs and Weiszfeld/Vazsonyi families.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Schulhof/Dombovary family was living through remarkable times, therefore the young Geza had many reasons to hide his real name when he got into trouble because of his duelling. His father was a successful lawyer in Budapest who had been ennobled by King Franz Joseph in 1885 and who wanted to make a gentleman out of his son. A police report on his suicide quoted in *8 Orai Ujsag* stressed how well-dressed Geza Dombovary was when his body

<sup>54</sup> Bucsu Dombovary Gezatol, 4.

<sup>55</sup> See for example an article entitled Poros hitbizomany [Fidei Commission on Trial] in *Budapesti Hirlap* of 20 September 1910, 11, where Dr. Dombovary is mentioned as the legal representative of Count Wrbna-Kaunitz.

<sup>56</sup> Szabolcsi, *Ket nemzedek*, 255/256.

was found next to the Jewish cemetery. Looking at his photo, his face, and his precisely cut, spiky, Franz-Joseph-style moustache, one might think he looked like the kind of proto-Hungarian nobleman discussed above. His whole appearance suggests that he was a Hungarian gentleman.



Géza Dombovány around 1937,  
Archives of the Budapest Bar Association, file no. 2397.

In fact, the choice to send him to army officer training at the age of nineteen signals what his father planned for the young Géza Dombovány's life. A career in the Austro-Hungarian army was often a means for noble families to direct their children's lives.<sup>57</sup> In a way, his parents did determine his future through this upbringing, by imagining that their son was going to be a well-integrated member of the nobility. This is what they wanted to prepare him for. Compared to his grandfather's early adult life in the tiny backward town of Dombovár in the first half of the nineteenth century, it is noteworthy to what extent the young Géza Dombovány's upbringing followed the pattern of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy's elites at the end of the same century. From the information stored in his army file, it becomes clear that Géza entered the army as a volunteer as early as 1 October 1893, some fifty days prior to his nineteenth birthday, where he joined Regiment no. 2.<sup>58</sup> Such one-year voluntary service was typical for the offspring of Austria-Hungary's leading classes. At the end of the training, most young men could pass the officers' exam and earned the right to publicly wear a sword. Following the exam, the young Lieutenant Dombovány was transferred to the reserve unit and discharged on 13 October 1894. Less than a year later, on 28 August 1895, he was called up for a 28-day weapon exercise ending on 24 September and, from this time onwards, he repeated this practice regularly in his adult life. Géza Dombovány was thus already a reserve officer of the *k. und k.* (kaiserlich und königlich) Austro-Hungarian imperial and royal army, when he embarked on his legal studies and he knew exactly how and for what to use guns. Spending his formative years partly in the army, partly as an undergraduate at the Faculty of Law of Pest University, Dombovány grew up in a militant defensive milieu. He was a Jew, but at the same time an army officer, who was soon to become

<sup>57</sup> According to Péter Hanák, Hungarian noblemen exclusively engaged in certain careers, becoming for example military officers, diplomats, and religious or political leaders: Hanák, *A kert és a műhely*, 96.

<sup>58</sup> Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv – Finanz- und Hofkammerarchiv, Archiv der Republik, Kriegsarchiv, see the so-called Qualifikationslisten, 479, box Domansky – Döme.

a lawyer, which meant he also became fully aware of his rights and obligations as equal to any citizen of the Habsburg Empire. He learnt that he had to fight and fend off anti-Jewish attacks and he carried this drive in his heart until his suicide at the Pest Jewish cemetery.

Nevertheless, aside from high paternal expectations, the child and teenager Géza received something else at home: He saw his father's remarkable success and learned a great deal about his family's mobility. William McCagg, the author of *Jewish Nobles and Geniuses in Modern Hungary*, finds that "a family atmosphere in which mobility and mobilization were taken for granted" was an important factor in children's later achievements.<sup>59</sup> McCagg focussed on the offspring of Hungarian Jewish noblemen around 1900, some of whom became world famous scientists. But his statements on the importance of mobility patterns seem to be true for lawyers as well. Géza Dombovány's father, Géza Ferencz Schulhof, was born in Dombovár on 11 March 1848, just four days before the outbreak of the great Hungarian Revolution. His father, Adolf Schulhof, was a physician. Géza senior was still a child when the Schulhof family moved to Pécs, where he later finished high school. He completed his first year of legal training at the University of Vienna, the second year he spent in Prague, and only in the third and fourth years did he study and finish at the University of Pest.<sup>60</sup> Prior to the First World War, this was possible since universities across the Habsburg Empire recognised semesters and courses taught at any institution within the empire.<sup>61</sup> In 1869 – with a legal degree in hand – Géza Schulhof moved back to Pécs and was appointed deputy notary of Baranya County. Two years later, he received his doctorate in law and in the autumn of 1871 he opened his law firm in Budapest. He got married in 1874 and on 29 November of that year his son Géza junior was born. In the early 1880s, he completed and published a three-volume *A magyar büntető törvénykönyv magyarázata* (Explanation of Hungarian Criminal Laws), a book highly appreciated and widely used both by the members of the juridical system and the defence attorney community.

The life of Géza Schulhof senior is thus a good example of mobility. Dr. Vilmos Vázsonyi, the man behind the 'receptió' (admission) law of the Jewish denomination (Act XLII of 1895), was born Vilmos Weiszfeld in 1868 in a poverty-stricken Jewish community. His father was a poor Jewish teacher in Sümeg, yet their material poverty was compensated by a spiritual and cultural wealth: Apart from the father being a teacher, two of his uncles were rabbis.<sup>62</sup> Vázsonyi himself saw the foundations of his later political success in everything he got from his father and his family during his childhood, because the Jewish family – he thought – provided stories about the Jewish experience of centuries, without which a Jew could not succeed in life.<sup>63</sup> Vázsonyi was the seventh child of teacher Weiszfeld, a pious Jew, who moved his family to the centre of Budapest in the hope of better opportunities. Opportunity did arrive when his son Vilmos entered the Faculty of Law. Besides studying, he became a student leader. In his anti-government speech of 1889, he was still quoted by Budapest dailies as Vilmos Weiszfeld, and from 1890 onwards he wrote popular political articles in *Pesti Hírlap* (Pest Journal).<sup>64</sup> Our protagonists knew each other well. In 1894, Vilmos

59 McCagg, *Jewish Nobles and Geniuses*, 69.

60 See Géza Schulhof's CV attached to his ennoblement file: Magyar Országos Levéltár [Hungarian National Archives] (MOL), K148-1907-2, file no. 241., 25-29.

61 Judith Szapor, *The Hungarian Pochontas. The Life and Times of Laura Polanyi Stricker*, Boulder CO 2005, 120.

62 Ballagi, *A bélyeges seregben*, 34-38.

63 Vilmos Vázsonyiné, *Egyszer volt* [Once Upon a Time], Budapest 2015, 15.

64 *Ibid.*, 16.

Vázsonyi founded the Magyar Demokrata Party, the Hungarian Democratic Party, to represent the petit bourgeoisie.<sup>65</sup> In 1898, Géza Schulhof senior, Géza Dombóváry's father, was one of ten members of the directory board of this party.<sup>66</sup> Marcell Baracs, the former duelling hero and the defence lawyer of Immanuel Löw, became an MP of the same party, while Marcell Hajdu represented this party on the municipal level in Budapest. Marcell Baracs was also vice president of the Budapest Bar Association, the chamber of lawyers, which until today keeps individual documentation of these gentlemen. Yet this is just a fraction of the available sources: Since many of these lawyers showed remarkable activity in public affairs, inevitably they left behind rich research materials.

### Public Engagement and Ennoblement as Assimilation Techniques

As mentioned earlier, the ideal type of Hungarian in the nineteenth century was the strong, brave nobleman, who lived on an unreasonably high standard of living, and here we should mention yet another important characteristic of this noble ideal, which was public engagement. The two decades prior to the 1848 revolution were a time of radical social reforms in still feudal Hungary, reforms in which liberal noblemen played a leading role. Moreover, even the 1848 revolutionary leadership was made up primarily of noble Hungarians.<sup>67</sup> This is why William McCagg thought that “[t]he Magyar Nobles also were an inspiration” for the Jewish capitalists of the late nineteenth century.<sup>68</sup> Consequently, numerous Jewish but also German assimilation candidates sought ennoblement to become real Magyars and the authorities advised the new noblemen to magyarise their names.<sup>69</sup> Péter Hanák added to this that the Hungarian bourgeoisie were not an integral part of the political establishment in these decades and that it accepted the aristocracy and gentry as the leading political force.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, becoming part of the nobility and engaging actively in public life crowned the emancipation efforts of certain Jewish Hungarians. It is interesting that most of the quoted historians – Löwenheim, Hanák, as well as McCagg – suggested that Jews in Hungary somewhat exaggerated assimilation. They idealised the nobleman, took part in duels, and became active in national politics. But instead of judging these as unnecessary steps in adjusting to the majority society, we should remind ourselves that this was a general notion in Hungarian culture around 1900. At a time when Viennese authors, artists, and scientists were withdrawing from public affairs and concentrating on the psyche, on dreams, and so forth, the Hungarian elite was busy eliminating the backwardness of its nation.<sup>71</sup> Part of this process was the overemphasis of national belonging, which might also explain why certain Jewish individuals went so far in their assimilation and why they wanted to join the sphere of political leaders and the nobility. To be certain, this increased public activity by Jewish Hungarians explains why we have so many valuable historical sources, for example Dombóváry's father's, Géza senior's official request for Hungarian ennoblement. In 1884, he submitted this five-page curriculum vitae to the Budapest mayor's office,

65 Ibid., 13.

66 Vilmos Vázsonyiné, *Az én uram [My Lord]*, Budapest 1931, 73.

67 McCagg, *Jewish Nobles and Geniuses*, 76.

68 Ibid., 75.

69 Ibid., 79-80.

70 Hanák, *A kert és a műhely*, 136.

71 See Hanák's lengthy comparison between Vienna and Budapest in *ibid.*, 130-174.

which transferred the documents to the prime minister.<sup>72</sup> This text is full of references to public engagement, as it describes what Géza senior had managed to add to Hungarian legal academia and the legal order and the ways in which he had institutionalised help for the poor. His clear intention was to improve Hungarian society as a whole, but his words reflect such traditional Jewish values as charity and solidarity. From a Jewish studies point of view, this text could even be read as a form of *tikkun olam* (healing the world), a concept in Judaism that makes the improvement of the world and of society a religious commandment.<sup>73</sup> What the request for ennoblement does not mention, however, is that Géza senior represented the leaders of the first labour movements in Hungary free of charge when they were arrested for organising strikes among the workers. Through this pro bono work, Géza senior in fact set an example for his son, who worked tirelessly after the First World War for the Jewish Legal Aid Office.

### Jewish Legal Defence in 1918–1921

As mentioned earlier, the Jewish community's history in Hungary took a major turn in late 1918, moving sharply from a phase of empowerment towards a form of victimhood. At the end of the war, the brutalisation effect of the four-year battles and the inevitable suffering that accompanied them radicalised the popular anti-Jewish sentiment and, from November 1918 onwards, resulted in deadly pogroms in various parts of Hungary. Although the great majority of Hungarian Jews still lived in poverty in the countryside, a certain type of assimilated Jewish male had appeared in Budapest by that time: He was well-integrated, had finished his legal studies, and lived a socially active life. He was a veteran of the First World War and had experience in politics, journalism, or academia. By then, approximately every second member of the Budapest Bar Association was of Jewish origin.<sup>74</sup> Géza Dombóváry was one of them. At the end of the war, turbulent times arrived in Hungary: The Habsburgs were dethroned, but the first independent and democratic Hungarian Republic lived for no more than four short months. It was replaced by the Béla Kun-led communists, who perpetrated the so-called Red Terror. Once the Entente powers had defeated Béla Kun's Red Army, Hungarian paramilitary groups were formed by the extreme-right officers of former troops of the Austro-Hungarian army. These militias then regularly molested and beat Jewish Hungarians in Budapest, while the most horrible brutalities were committed by members of the Rongyos Gárda (Ragged Guard) militia in the area of Kecskemét, with hundreds being tortured to death and lynched. Since the Judeo-Bolshevik myth was widely spread, the aggression endangered all Hungarians of Jewish origin. Moreover, on 1 March 1920, Miklós Horthy was elected as regent of Hungary and a couple of weeks later the country had to sign the Treaty of Trianon, which meant that Hungary lost more than two thirds of its territory (71.4 per cent). The extremist propaganda then blamed the Jews even for the territorial losses. In 1920, the Hungarian parliament accepted the Numerus Clausus Law (Act XXV of

72 HU-MOL K148-1907-2, file no. 241., the ennoblement of Géza Schulhof, 25-29.

73 Another parallel from German Jewish circles here appears in George Mosse's memoir. Mosse claims no less than that "Jews seem to have been over-represented among philanthropists" around 1900 what Mosse sees as a self-confirmation of their newly won social positions. Find this in: George L. Mosse, *Confronting History. A Memoir*, Madison WI 2000, 23.

74 Official statistical data shows that in 1910, 3,049 out of 6,743 lawyers in Hungary were Jewish, which represents approximately 45 per cent. See: Kovács, *Liberalizmus, Radikalizmus, Antiszemitizmus*, 22.

1920), thereby radically restricting (to six per cent) the enrolment of Jewish Hungarians in the universities.<sup>75</sup> This was the general picture when Géza Dombovary took up the position of director at the Legal Aid Office of the Pest Israelite Community.

Without going into the detail, Geza Dombovary then put all his time and energy into countering and documenting the everyday aggression perpetrated against Jews in these immediate post-First World War years. He recorded statements by the victims about the attacks and tried to initiate either legal proceedings or at least to get the responsible authorities to intervene. In cases where the official armed forces committed anti-Jewish attacks, he reported them to the authorities and did not shy away from reporting hate crimes by dignitaries like Ivan Hejjas to the police, thereby adhering to the rule of law even in this time of lawlessness. He and his colleagues documented hundreds of cases and corresponded with the countryside Jewish communities if it was necessary to represent their interests. This was the case, for example, with the atrocities targeting the Izsak Jews. The Ebredo Magyarok Egyesulete – EME (The Association of Awakening Hungarians) founded its branch in this village in February 1920, and this was the moment when Jew-baiting began. This organisation often invited guest speakers to its meetings from the leadership of the Ragged Guard and, as underlined in a police report completed in October 1921, every meeting ended with the harassment of local Jewish individuals or the smashing of windows in Jewish homes.<sup>76</sup> Since the local functionaries did nothing to stop these events and did not even attempt to punish the wrongdoers, it seemed that they approved the harassment of Jews, especially the Chief Constable Lajos Forster. In the next phase of the anti-Jewish actions, the head of the local chapter of EME ordered local Jewish men to the town hall, where these people were beaten and were told to leave the village. There were Jewish males who were attacked at night in their homes. The same leader of the EME (called Balogh) organised “fundraising” for the national army of Hungary, which meant in practice that he ordered the Jewish families of Izsak to pay large sums. Mano Rozsa alone paid 40,000 Crowns to this fund.<sup>77</sup> As a consequence of this series of attacks, basically all Jewish Hungarian citizens left Izsak, while their former homes were robbed by the EME’s awakening Hungarians. In the end, the EME donated these Jewish owned houses to refugees arriving from the territories lost after the Treaty of Trianon. In this type of cases, Dombovary went as far as to send the names of the offenders to the public prosecutor.<sup>78</sup> He represented the victims in the resulting trials and also negotiated with ministries whether or not it was safe for the Jewish inhabitants of Izsak to return to their village.

## Conclusion

In this article, I tried to draw up a cultural history of the second generation of Jewish Hungarian lawyers. A particular group of Jewish Hungarians, among them the Budapest Jewish lawyers, benefitted greatly from legislative changes granting equal rights to Jewish citizens. They took part in the modernisation of the country, some

75 See: Maria M. Kovacs/Viktor Karady (ed.) *The Hungarian Numerus Clausus Law and Academic Anti-Semitism in Interwar Central Europe*, Budapest 2011; Maria M. Kovacs, *Disenfranchised by Law*, in: S.I.M.O.N. Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 1 (2014) 2, 136-143.

76 See the police report on the atrocities committed in Izsak from 1921, in: Budapest Fovaros Leveltara (HU-BFL) [Budapest City Archives] VII\_5\_e\_1949\_20630, 2816-2824.

77 *Ibid.*, 2820.

78 HU-MZsL/HU-HJA, PIH-I-E, Box no B 10/2, particularly a letter from Dombovary addressed to public attorney Albert Vary, 81.270.

were even ennobled, and many more of them took part in public life. Certain segments of non-Jewish society felt threatened by this relatively quick Jewish emancipation and assimilation: They regarded it as a Jewish invasion of Hungarian social space. Since educated Jewish Hungarians were permitted to fight duels, duelling represented a sphere where social tensions surrounding Jewish/non-Jewish coexistence could be unleashed. Undoubtedly, these lawyers did not belong to the top elite of Hungarian intellectuals, who – like Oszkár Jászi, Felix Bódog Somló, or Georg Lukács – went much further in modernism and objected Magyar nationalism and on whom a substantive literature exists.<sup>79</sup> Likewise, it would be false to claim that these Jewish lawyers were representative of Hungarian Jews, as the bulk of Hungarian Jewry in these years was a largely uneducated group living in poverty, often orthodox in its religion and foreign in its language. However, these lawyers were among a small circle that negotiated the nationwide regulations and actions concerning the Jewish Hungarians. Thus, my project cast new light on a small group of intellectuals, which group was nevertheless sometimes in a position to influence the lives of many. Being an integral part of my larger study, the present article aimed to highlight how certain youth experiences – such as duelling or army training – could influence the later legal practice of a Jewish Hungarian lawyer. Furthermore, at least in the cases of Géza Dombovány and Marcell Baracs, there was an interrelationship between their duelling activity, which followed from their higher self-esteem, and the militant legal defender activism they performed following the First World War.

With my closer reading of the sources left behind from Dr. Dombovány's life, I also attempted to define factors which contributed to the constructing of this lawyers' self and his identity. These factors almost certainly included being a war veteran, a duelling hero, and a good son. He often showed the characteristics of an offended nobleman as well and he never stopped being a well-known defence attorney with the intention of relying on the rule of law in any circumstances. In addition, I wanted to show through the example of Dombovány what an illiberal exclusionary system does with individuals like him. It forces them again and again to radically reconstitute their self, sometimes in discourse, but most of the time in defiance of mainstream social views. In the long run, Dombovány's actions seemed very responsive, he usually went against the current when responding to antisemitism by taking jobs at the Jewish community, or by duelling, and certainly, his suicide was a responsive act as well, as was made crystal clear by the last note he left on his empty desk.

My research was made possible thanks to a post-doctoral fellowship jointly sponsored by the Leibniz Institute for Jewish History and Culture – Simon Dubnow and the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies. I have received further support from Jasen Mark.

<sup>79</sup> Many progressive intellectuals formed a circle around periodicals such as *Huszadik Század* [Twentieth Century] or *Nyugat* [West] and gathered in clubs like the so-called Társadalomtudományi Társaság [Social Science Society] or the Galilei Kör [Galilei Circle]. See for example: Judith Szapor, *The Hungarian Pocahontas*, and McCagg, *Jewish Nobles and Geniuses*, 102-109 as well as 195-198, or Péter Csunderlik, *Radikálisok, szabadgondolkodók, ateisták. A Galilei Kör története* [Radicals, Free Thinkers, and Atheists. The Story of the Galilei Circle], Budapest 2017.

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Quotation: István Pál Ádám, Dr. Géza Dombóváry and the Budapest Circle of Jewish Legal Defenders. A Cultural History, in S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. 6 (2019) 2, 56-74. DOI: 10.23777/SN0219/ART\_IPAD01

[https://doi.org/10.23777/SN0219/ART\\_IPAD01](https://doi.org/10.23777/SN0219/ART_IPAD01)

Article

Copy Editor:  
Tim Corbett

**S:I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON.**  
is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for  
Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192

6 (2019) 2  
DOI: 10.23777/SN.0219

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The Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) is funded by:

 Federal Ministry  
Education, Science  
and Research

  
WIEN  
KULTUR

 Federal Chancellery