

**“Because words are not deeds.”
Antisemitic Practice and Nationality Policies
in Upper Hungary around 1900**

by *Miloslav Szabó*

Abstract

The study deals with the processes of transformation within political antisemitism in Hungary around 1900. It mainly investigates the extent to which the crisis of Hungarian political antisemitism in the early 1890s fostered antisemitic practice, namely, the social and economic boycott of rural Jews in particular through the establishment of cooperatives and credit unions. It is to be assumed that antisemitic practice was not restricted to a strictly antisemitic milieu, but propagated and executed by diverse anti-liberal actors such as political Catholicism, the agrarian lobby and the Slovak nationalists. The study illuminates antisemitic practice in the multi-ethnic Kingdom of Hungary in the context of agrarian and nationality policies. In the rural parts of Upper Hungary this practice was accompanied by propaganda against “usury” as a way of legitimizing cooperatives and credit unions. The study will elaborate to what extent the Hungarian campaigns against the Jewish money-lenders united ethnically diverse, non-Jewish actors, such as Hungarian conservatives and Slovak nationalists.

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I will first briefly describe the development of Hungarian antisemitism in the latter part of the nineteenth century and elaborate on so-called “practical anti-Semitism” as a legitimizing strategy for the boycott of land Jews. I argue that this legitimizing strategy diverged in part from that of political antisemitism in a narrow sense: its supporters distanced themselves explicitly from the anti-emancipatory tendency of modern anti-Jewishness by contrasting the latter with the emancipatory aims of the cooperative movement. At the same time, however, they distorted socioeconomic practices such as “usury” by imposing ethnic and even racial stereotypes on Hungarian land Jews.

I illuminate anti-Semitic practice in the multi-ethnic Kingdom of Hungary in the context of agrarian and nationality policies at the turn of the century. On the one hand, these were a reaction to the increased pauperization of the non-Magyar rural population in Upper Hungary in particular; on the other hand, they sought to accelerate the “assimilation” or “magyarization” of non-Magyar nationalities. Against this background, I refer to two case studies to show the extent to which the “ethno-populist” legitimizing strategy that underpinned

anti-Semitic practice was a basis for cross-party political consensus. The first case study is concerned with state assistance granted to Ruthenian small farmers in the Bereg County in the North-East of the country. As this campaign aimed to “magyarize” Ruthenian small farmers, I will explore the question of whether anti-Semitic practice was encouraged not only in oppositional anti-liberal milieus, but also in sections of the liberal establishment.

The second case study is situated at a centre of the Slovak nationalist movement in Northwest Hungary. In the Nyitra County, the anti-Semitic cooperative movement drew its support not from the state, but from members of the opposition, including many Slovak nationalists. Although they aspired to the “ethno-populist” legitimizing strategy and referred explicitly to the Ruthenian example, their efforts were utterly rejected by the Hungarian establishment. I clarify the extent to which the negative stereotypes propagated by official nationalism impeded the integrative force of anti-Semitic practice in this case.

1. The Transformation of Political Antisemitism in Hungary in the Early 1890s and the Legitimizing Strategies of Antisemitic Practice in Rural Upper Hungary

Following the granting of equal rights to Hungarian Jews in 1867, the “Jewish question” became increasingly virulent. In the early 1880s, the allegations of ritual murder in the Hungarian village of Tiszaeszlár prompted the establishment of an anti-Semitic party, which, however, disbanded after two legislative periods. In spite of isolated attempts, no further anti-Semitic party was established in Hungary before 1918. Nevertheless, from the 1890s there was a revival in anti-Semitic propaganda in other anti-liberal circles such as political Catholicism and the agrarian lobby.¹ Yet neither the Catholic People’s Party nor the agrarians within the Liberal Party included antisemitism in their official programmes. Both did, however, encourage practices aimed at the exclusion of Jews from the Hungarian economy and society. In the rural parts of Upper Hungary this practise was accompanied by propaganda against “usury” as a way of legitimizing cooperatives and credit unions.

Isolated calls to boycott Hungarian Jews appeared in newspapers close to political Catholicism as early as the late 1880s.² An anonymous seven-point programme which appeared in the Hungarian-, German-, and Slovak-language press in the run-up to the parliamentary elections of 1896 epitomizes this

¹ For a comprehensive overview of Hungarian antisemitism see: János Gyurgyák, *A zsidókérdés Magyarországon. Politikai eszmetörténet*, (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2001); Ralf Fischer, *Entwicklungsstufen des Antisemitismus in Ungarn 1867-1939. Die Zerstörung der magyarisch-jüdischen Symbiose*, (Munich: Oldenburg, 1988).

² See for example Tamás Dersi, *A századvég katolikus sajtója*, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1973), 67.

tendency. This seven-point programme was first published in the largest Catholic daily newspaper, *Magyar Állam*, and reprinted without delay by other anti-liberal press organs. It provided a summary of what it referred to as “true anti-Semitism,” which encompassed far more than just hostility towards Jews. The individual points did not deal with religious questions, rather, their authors called for the exclusion of Jews from the Hungarian economy and public sphere. In the first point, this intent is stated in no uncertain terms: “Jewish capital must be paralyzed, the power of Jewish money must be diminished through our freeing of the Christian people from the hands of the Jews.”³ The second point indicates that this is to be achieved principally through the boycotting of Jewish business. Yet the wording of the fourth point shows that the demands were not solely restricted to economic relations. Here, the reading of “Jewish newspapers” and membership of associations with Jewish members is forbidden. In an ominous recommendation, the authors also advised their readers to “burn their [the Jews’, M. S.] immoral books.” The following points prohibit any form of subordination of “Christians” to Jews in a social or work context, as well as any “close relationships” between Christians and Jews. Thus, the seven-point programme complemented the official programme of the Catholic People’s Party, which avoided openly anti-Semitic demands.

In largely agricultural Hungary, calls for the social and economic suppression of Jews gave rise to campaigns against “usury” – a phenomenon that had its roots not only in the capitalist transformation of the countryside, but also in the protracted crisis of agriculture in Europe. This crisis dealt a particularly severe blow to Hungary, a country dependent on the export of its agricultural produce, as only modernized factory farms could compete with low-priced grain from Russia and abroad. Some traditional big landowners saw the solution to this problem in the leasing of their land, while increasing numbers of indebted medium-scale and small farmers who had lost their land had no option but to emigrate.⁴

Accusations of “usury,” which were particularly virulent in Hungary for the reasons explained above, gave rise to legislation in the 1870s and 1880s. Furthermore, individual agrarians around Count Sándor Károlyi began to accumulate the necessary funds for the economic rescue of small farmers through the systematic establishment of credit unions.⁵ They were followed by further anti-liberal groupings, which generally alleged a causal relationship between “usury” and Jewish money-lenders and tradespeople. It is true that Jews were penalized for offences in connection with “usury” far more often

³ Fischer, “Entwicklungsstufen des Antisemitismus in Ungarn,” 105.

⁴ For a discussion of this emigration with reference to nationality policies see Tibor Frank, “From Austria-Hungary to the United States: National Minorities and Emigration 1880-1914”, *Nationalities Papers*, 3 (1996), 409-423.

⁵ See András Vári, *Herren und Landwirte. Ungarische Aristokraten und Agrarier auf dem Weg in die Moderne (1821-1910)*, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 159-176.

than Christians in Hungary around the turn of the century.⁶ Yet here we must take the employment structure of the Jewish population into consideration, which greatly increased the risk of such an offence. This fact may well explain anti-Jewish sentiment in sections of the Hungarian media, but it does not account for the interpretation of these offences in anti-liberal circles.

The organisers of Catholic cooperatives and credit unions also played on the supposed analogy between “usury” and the employment structure of the Jewish population in their use of the term “practical anti-Semitism” (*gyakorlati antiszemitizmus*).⁷ This term was shaped by the radical German anti-Semite, Otto Böckel, who had used it in the late 1880s to legitimize the expansion of cooperatives and credit unions in Hessen. Crucial for my investigation is the fact that Böckel emphasised that “something positive” could be achieved by encouraging anti-Semitic practice.⁸ What was meant here was the notion of self-help, which social reformers such as Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen had been proposing as an alternative to the capitalist reorganisation of agriculture since the mid-nineteenth century. With the help of cooperatives and credit unions, middlemen and “usury” would be stamped out and necessary loans secured at favourable rates on the basis of the borrower’s own capital contributions.

The historian David Peal, who investigated the transformation of German agriculture in the late nineteenth century, compared the anti-capitalism of the cooperative movement in Hessen with the populist movement emerging at the same time in the USA.⁹ Although anti-Semitic Shylock metaphors for “usury” were widespread in media close to late nineteenth century US populism, recent historical scholarship usually refrains from describing the populist movement as anti-Semitic because of its emancipatory character.¹⁰ Thus Peal argues for a terminological distinction between “practical” and “political” antisemitism, “between combating Jews as usurers and combating them as an evil race,”¹¹ based on the fact that in Hessen, cooperatives were also founded by other groupings apart from Böckel’s followers. In what follows, I will provide a more precise definition of Peal’s distinction while at the same time querying its analytical value. How can one distinguish between the socio-political and the ethnic motives of the founders of cooperatives at the turn of the century?

The Hungarian cooperative movement did not have an exclusively socio-economic character at this time. It was more accurately a performative,

⁶ For example, in 1904, for every single Christian convicted of “usury” in Hungary, four Jews were convicted. See Jakob Thon, “Die Kriminalität der Christen und Juden in Ungarn im Jahre 1904”, *Zeitschrift für Demographie und Statistik der Juden*, 7 (1907), 106.

⁷ See Dániel Szabó, “A magyar Néppárt ‘hosszú menetelése.’ A politikai katolicizmus előttörténetéből”, *Társadalmi Szemle*, 8-9 (1991), 128.

⁸ See David Peal, “Antisemitism by Other Means? The Rural Cooperative Movement in Late Nineteenth-Century Germany”, *Yearbook of the Leo Baeck Institute*, vol. 32 (1987), 142.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 144, note 20.

¹⁰ See for example Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6, 151-152, 319, note 47.

¹¹ Peal, “Antisemitism by Other Means”, 146.

populist practice, which was supposed to protect the “people” from liberal social and economic policies. I will explain this in detail with reference to the theory of populism formulated by the political scientist, Ernesto Laclau.¹² In Hungarian populism, the term “people” corresponded to Laclau’s definition precisely because it was an empty signifier, it polarized society. Thus in Hungary too, it appeared that the signifier “people” had the potential to channel the largely diffuse demands of broad sections of the populace into a programme for political action across various social classes. In what follows, I will explore under what conditions these assumptions could give rise to “ethno-populism.” In Laclau’s definition, this is distinguished from true populism in its distortion of the fundamental populist re-drawing of boundaries that places the *plebs* in the position of the *populus*. In the ethnicization of “people” by “ethno-populism,” the ethnically “other” is excluded from the outset, thus diverting attention from the real populist antagonism.¹³ I will explore whether this distinction is relevant to the ethnically heterogeneous Hungarian anti-liberalism at the turn of the century. To what extent did the Hungarian campaigns against Khazars, the stigmatizing Hungarian term to denote Eastern European Jews (*Ostjuden*), unite ethnically diverse, non-Jewish actors, such as Hungarian conservatives and Slovak nationalists?

2. The “Ruthenian Action”

In the early 1890s, the well-known agrarian politician Sándor Károlyi distanced himself from antisemitism and claimed that the cooperative movement had a purely “social character.”¹⁴ The agrarian lobby, which like the Catholic People’s Party was opposed to liberal social and economic policies, used the terms “cosmopolitan” and “mobile” as antonyms to “Magyar” and “fixed capital.”¹⁵ This dichotomy functioned as a linguistic code that could be inferred as anti-Semitic although it did not explicitly allude to “Jews.” This was characteristic of the partial transformation of Hungarian antisemitism around 1900. The dilemma of anti-liberals who didn’t want to be characterized as anti-Semites despite the fact that their views evinced significant anti-Semitic elements demanded a shift of emphasis with regard to the political antisemitism of the preceding decades. The cardinal aim of undoing Jewish emancipation now yielded to demands for the removal of Jews from their social and economic positions. Yet the desire to distance oneself from radical antisemitism necessitated new strategies of legitimization to “justify” such demands. As the “assimilated” Jewish citizens of Budapest and other provincial towns could not be openly criticized in the context of Hungary’s liberal-nationalist

¹² Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, (London: Verso, 2007).

¹³ *Ibid*, 196.

¹⁴ See Vári, “Herren und Landwirte”, 174.

¹⁵ Fischer, “Entwicklungsstufen des Antisemitismus in Ungarn”, 96.

political culture, land Jews were targeted as a scapegoat for the social fallout of capitalist re-organization and the agricultural crisis. Notwithstanding Károlyi's demand, the anti-liberal press was not satisfied with mere social criticism and increasingly stigmatized land Jews as "foreign usurers," uncivilized and immoral migrants from the "East." This was an obvious line to take, given the long tradition of the *Ostjuden* stereotype in Hungary.¹⁶ As in the period preceding Jewish emancipation in the first half of the nineteenth century, the discussion of Eastern Jews aimed to put pressure on "assimilated" Jewish citizens. Károlyi's cynical call to his followers in 1898 to ally with "big" Jews (i.e. acculturated Jews) against "small Jews" in order to stop the latter's alleged "immigration" from Galicia can be understood in this context.¹⁷

This kind of propaganda was the backside of the cooperatives and credit unions that had been spreading rapidly throughout the Hungarian countryside since the 1890s. In this way, established agrarians like Károlyi hoped to gain some legitimacy for the anti-Semitic views of which they were ashamed and which they strove to conceal in public – as seen in the parliamentary debate on credit unions in May 1898, or the "Usury" survey conducted amongst Hungarian lawyers in 1902.¹⁸ Thus it is hardly surprising that it wasn't the cooperative movement initiated by Károlyi in Central and Western Hungary that became the most important context for propaganda against "Eastern Jews," but the so-called "Ruthenian" or "Highland" Action conducted under the auspices of the Ministry of Agriculture.

In 1900, the north-eastern Counties were among the poorest agricultural regions in the Kingdom of Hungary with a large Ruthenian population.¹⁹ In the 1890s, members of the region's small intellectual class, composed mainly of Greek Catholic priests, abandoned the Russophile orientation of their predecessors. They began to emphasize Hungarian nationalism, limiting their demands to language rights only, and taking a decidedly anti-liberal stance on religious, social, and economic issues. As a result, representatives of the Catholic People's Party, which had been established in the Carpathian region in 1895, were hopeful of a successful outcome in the parliamentary elections planned for autumn 1896.

¹⁶ The stereotype of the *Ostjude* impacted negatively on debates on Jewish emancipation in the first half of the nineteenth century. See for example Raphael Patai, *The Jews of Hungary: History, Culture, Psychology*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996) 230-239. In the context of the Tiszaeszlár affair in the 1880s the stereotype was revived.

¹⁷ See Vári, "Herren und Landwirte", 212. According to Walter Piesch the "immigration" of Jews from Galicia in the second half of the nineteenth century alleged by contemporaries is not confirmed by Hungarian statistics. See Walter Piesch, "Die jüdische Auswanderung aus Galizien und das Judentum in Ungarn", *Zwischen Reform und Orthodoxie. Der Eintritt des ungarischen Judentums in die moderne Welt*, (Berlin: Philo, 1999), 21-39.

¹⁸ *Az uszóra ellen. Jogi tanulmányok és a Magyar gazdaszövetség szaktanácskozása*, (Budapest: Magyar Gazdaszövetség, 1902); See Éva Kovács, "Államosítás vagy államosodás? Az 1898-as gazdasági és hitelszövetkezetekről szóló XXIII. törvény", *Regio*, 18/2 (2007): 113-139.

¹⁹ See Maria Mayer, *The Rusyns of Hungary. Political and Social Developments, 1860-1910*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 74-123.

Against this background, the Hungarian establishment resolved to stifle any rapprochement between the Greek Catholic clergy and the Catholic People's Party. The authorities managed to recruit the Greek-Catholic Bishop of Munkács (Mukatschewo), Gyula Firczák, who was able to prevent the success of the Catholic People's Party in the election. In return for this, he demanded improvements in the living conditions of the "Ruthenian people" from the government. The Hungarian historian Mária Mayer claims that this was the immediate impetus for the "Ruthenian" or "Highland" Action. These two designations were used to describe the programme implemented by the economist Ede Egan, to lease land to Ruthenian farmers in the Bereg County and organise them into cooperatives on behalf of the Hungarian Minister for Agriculture, Ignác Darányi. Yet the real motivation for the "Ruthenian/Highland Action" was political; it sought to limit the political influence of the Catholic People's Party, prevent an agrarian-socialist movement from taking root, and raise support among the non-Magyar population for the "concept of the Hungarian state."²⁰

In his attempt to thwart the Catholic People's Party, the representative of the liberal Minister for Agriculture tapped not least into the antisemitism it had been stirring up. This was particularly prevalent among the Greek-Catholic clergy, from whose ranks Egan's staff was locally recruited. However, it would be wrong to attribute this antisemitism solely to Catholic People's Party politicians. An official memorandum from early 1897 in which Bishop Firczák and members of parliament in Ruthenian districts called on Hungarian ministers for help shows that it had become a cross-party consensus not restricted to any single religious group.²¹ This memorandum makes clear that the antisemitism that accompanied the "Highland Action" was not merely a reaction to the real or supposed exploitation of Ruthenian farmers on the part of Jewish innkeepers and money-lenders allegedly entering the country in their droves.²² It was aimed far more at invoking the concept of a "moral community" beyond linguistic and cultural barriers represented by the "Ruthenian people," for which "Jewish emigrants" were a negative other.²³

²⁰ On the agrarian-socialist movement that gripped entire regions of the Hungarian Lowlands in the 1890s see Peter Hanák, *Der Garten und die Werkstatt. Ein kulturgeschichtlicher Vergleich. Wien und Budapest um 1900*, (Vienna: Böhlau, 1992), 185-201.

²¹ See Mayer, "The Rusyns of Hungary", 277-298.

²² According to the Israeli historian, Yeshayahu A. Jelinek, Jews from Galicia continued to migrate to the northwest Carpathian region of the Hungarian Kingdom in the second half of the nineteenth century. Yet in his opinion this did not constitute a mass influx, not least because many of supposed "immigrants" were actually refugees from Russian and Romania who emigrated overseas shortly afterwards. See Yeshayahu A. Jelinek, *The Carpathian Diaspora. The Jews of Subcarpathian Rus' and Mukachevo, 1848-1948*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 31-36.

²³ Thus the "Ruthenian Action" corresponds with Bernhard Gießen's definition of propaganda. See Bernhard Gießen, *Kollektive Identität. Die Intellektuellen und die Nation 2*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 97-102. With the aim of "renewing the moral centre" (the Hungarian state), anti-Semitic propaganda in Hungary at the turn of the century invoked a dichotomy between "victims" (non-Magyar nationalities) and "perpetrators" (Jews), who were

Thus the memorandum alleged that a “people proud of its patriotism” was being suffocated by the “overwhelming flood” of “intellectually backward” Jewish immigrants from Russia. It accuses these alleged “spies” and draft dodgers first and foremost of undermining “patriotic values” with their “cosmopolitan views,” which would distract people from their “patriotic duties.” The allegation that these “imposters” were engaged in “usury” and responsible for poverty throughout the region was secondary.²⁴

Initiated at the end of 1897, the “Ruthenian action” began to make headlines from the spring of 1900. On 12 February 1900 at a conference in Munkács attended by both liberal MEPs from Ruthenian districts and many of the Greek-Catholic clergy led by Bishop Firczák, the Government Commissar Ede Egan reported on a journey to the Bereg County. After he had portrayed the social and economic predicament of the Ruthenian farmers and made suggestions as to how they could be helped, Egan named those who he believed to be responsible for this state of affairs. The logic of his argumentation is paradigmatic for the transformation of Hungarian antisemitism into ethno-Populism at the turn of the century. Egan assured his listeners that he was no anti-Semite and even called for the swifter assimilation of Hungary’s Jews. Yet his verbal attacks of Jewish innkeepers and money-lenders (“Jewish proletariat”) in north-eastern Hungary were far from measured. On the contrary, Egan propounded their ethnicization by representing them as a “race” allegedly distinct from established Hungarian Jews. For Egan, key physical features such as height, hair colour, and skull shape demonstrated the alleged cultural backwardness and moral deficiencies of these “renegade Caspian Khasars, who became Jewish only later.” However, Egan was not consistent in his distinction between “assimilated Jews” and “Khazars” with the result that his racist remarks extended to all Jews. Thus he asserted that he feared for the “national character of the country” and indeed for “its very existence,” if the influence of the Jews were to increase. Egan threatened Hungarian Jews with exclusion if they were to seek solidarity with their co-religionists in the “East” rather than support the cause of Hungarian nationalism.²⁵

Egan’s remarks were seized on immediately by the Budapest press. Just two days later, Minister for Agriculture Darányi was asked by the MEP Lajos Fest if the reports of Egan’s speech in the press “and in particular of his criticism of a religious confession (amusement on the benches of the Catholic People’s Party)” were accurate.²⁶

Shortly afterwards Minister Darányi read out a statement by Egan to the assembled parliament, in which the latter maintained his critical stance on the “proletarian elements from Galicia,” while at the same time regretting any

both situated at the margins of society. While the integration of the “victims” was desirable, the “perpetrators” were meant to be excluded.

²⁴ Mayer, “The Rusyns of Hungary”, 284-285.

²⁵ See Gyurgyák, “Zsidókérdés Magyarországon”, 350-355.

²⁶ *Képvisei házi napló*, 1896, vol. 26, 340.

unintended affront to “any recognized [state, M.S.] religion.” Darányi seemed satisfied with this statement. Yet when heckled with calls of “the Jewish element” by People’s Party MEP Ferenc Buzáth, Darányi expressed his conviction that “Hungary’s Jews” (*bazsai zsidóság*) also approved of Egan’s “castigation” of the Jewish “proletariat.” Thus he claimed that Egan’s speech had not only been “well received” among the Greek-Catholic clergy, but also by a large number of “our Jewish citizens” and indeed by the MEP Ödön Barta, himself a representative of the “Jewish confession.”²⁷

By May 1901 at the latest, the MEP Ödön Barta must have had a change of heart, because at that point he questioned Minister for Agriculture Darányi on the matter in parliament. On this occasion he was highly critical of Government Commissar Egan. During his interpellation, in which he accused Egan of discrimination in his treatment of Jews and non-Jews, Barta was persistently interrupted by antisemitic heckling from People’s Party MEPs. While he acknowledged that not “every Jew in the Carpathians is a gentleman,” Barta exclaimed at this point that he was not prepared to put up with MEPs’ decrying of “Jews” in the Hungarian Parliament. When People’s Party MEP Rakovszky objected that what concerned him was “economic protection” and not assigning blame to a particular race, Barta responded by pointing to the indescribable poverty of the Carpathian Jews and emphasizing that they were engaged to the same extent as Ruthenians in physical labour and were also suffering under the current economic conditions.²⁸

This confrontation between the Jewish member of the oppositional national liberal Independence Party Ödön Barta with People’s Party MEPs was characteristic of populist antisemitism at the turn of the century. Its supporters only betrayed their anti-Jewishness indirectly by using populist phrases such as “the economic protection of the people.” Barta’s speech is scandalous because he sensed the new anti-Semitic strategy of senior state officials. Yet Minister Darányi kept his cool in the face of Barta’s criticism and attempted to appease him in a memorandum which stated that Government Commissar Egan was personally liable for loans to two impoverished Jews.²⁹

The example of Miklós Bartha, like Ödön Barta a member of the Independence Party, shows just how relative such lines of argument were in the context of populist antisemitism. His cry of “At last an end to the slander!”³⁰ in the midst of the heckling prompted by Darányi’s speech is recorded in the parliamentary minutes. Yet it was Bartha in particular, who affirmed the ethno-populist distinction between “Magyars of Jewish faith” and the “racially” distinct “Khasars” alleged by Egan in the Hungarian media. Like Sándor Károlyi and agrarians from the ruling Liberal Party, Miklós Bartha subscribed to statist ideas. From the outset, the respected publicist Bartha was

²⁷ *Képviselet házi napló*, 1896, vol. 26, 431-432.

²⁸ *Képviselet házi napló*, 1896, vol. 36, 276-282. For Barta see, *Magyar zsidó Lexikon*, ed. Péter Ujvári, (Budapest: Pallas, 1929), 92.

²⁹ *Képviselet házi napló*, 1896, vol. 36, 284.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

highly sympathetic towards Egan's "Mission." He too believed it to be the only feasible way to achieve the total "Magyarization" of Hungary's non-Magyar nationalities. For him, the Carpatho-Ruthenians, in whom he could detect no great national sentiment, represented an ideal group on which to test new "assimilation" policies. In Bartha's view this would require first and foremost the improvement of the socio-economic situation of the Ruthenian farmers. While Miklós Bartha was well aware of the complex origins of this situation, like Egan in his speech at Munkács, he over-emphasized and indeed distorted the activities of Jewish innkeepers and money-lenders.³¹

Shortly before the parliamentary debate of May 1901, Miklós Bartha summarized his views on the "Highland-Action" in a series of articles. The series was later published as a brochure with the striking title *Kazár földön* (In the Land of the Khazars) just a few weeks after Egan's mysterious death in the same year and immediately prompted a huge public reaction. In the articles, Bartha used vivid and at times racist "usury" metaphors to draw a contrast between "Ruthenian-speaking Magyars" and "Khazars," his term for the "Polish Jews" he alleged had emigrated to Hungary mainly after 1868.³²

Miklós Bartha too accused the "Khazars" of a lack of patriotism. The apparent ambivalence of his antisemitism lies in his concept of the nation. Although scathing of liberal economic and social policies, he was nonetheless insistent with regard to the liberal concept of the "assimilation" of ethnic and cultural minorities. He believed the Hungarian/Magyar nation should encompass all cultural and ethnic groups in the country – even the hated "Khazars." In his brochure Bartha called on "Magyars of Jewish faith" to "magyarize" their Jewish brethren: "Teach this people [the Khazars, M. S.] Hungarian; awaken patriotic feelings in it; nurture in them warm feelings towards their homeland and nation; accustomize them to productive work. In a word, encourage them to assume European cultural mores and moral laws."³³

In this way the "Ruthenian Action" could hardly be characterized as antisemitic – as a demand for the reversal of Jewish emancipation or for open persecution of Jews –, as Miklós Bartha was at pains to emphasize.³⁴ However, elements of Bartha's brochure jarred with his assurances to "Magyars of Jewish faith." Thus he appealed to their "love of truth and patriotism" which would prevent them being blinded by the "German-Jewish and Hungarian-Jewish newspapers" insinuating that Egan's "Ruthenian Action" had anti-Jewish

³¹ For a different interpretation see Gyurgyák, "Zsidókérdés Magyarországon", 356-362.

³² Miklós Bartha, *Kazár földön*, (Kolozsvár: Ellenzék Nyomda, 1901), 86. Surprisingly, Bartha resisted the temptation – at least more than Egan did – to describe the historical origins of the "Khazars." Indeed, the history of this stereotype has yet to be written. One possible explanation might be found in the antisemitic reversal of the so-called "Khazar theory" which the Jewish historian and Budapest Rabbi Sámuel Kohn used in the early 1880s to suggest that Hungarians and Jews represented a "community with a common destiny." He claimed that Hungarian Jews were the descendants of Jewish nomads (Khazars) who had come to Europe together with the old Magyars.

³³ Bartha, "Kazár földön", 111-112.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 322-323.

tendencies. It was precisely through their religious solidarity that “Magyars of Jewish faith” were undermining national morale.³⁵

Miklós Bartha proposed extending Egan’s “Action” to Transylvania and Upper Hungary as a whole.³⁶ He wasn’t the first to flag this idea in public. Just a few weeks after Egan’s Munkács speech in February 1900, in an address to the Hungarian Parliament the People’s Party MEP Rezső Páder claimed that in Counties with a high Slovak population, the “people” was suffering to the same extent as under the Ruthenians. Páder attributed this to the “immigration of eradicators of the people.” At the same time, Páder, who had no connections to the Slovak national movement, attempted to defuse the nationality conflict on the basis of populist antisemitism. Páder suggested that Egan had provoked accusations of antisemitism with his references to the Jews. He warned that if a similar “aid action” were to be initiated among the Slovaks, its organisers would have to prepare themselves for something else, “because the experience there has shown that anybody who protects the people and points to those who seek to destroy it, will be called a pan-Slavist.”³⁷

3. The Slovak Nationalists in the Nyitra County

Progress on the “Ruthenian Action” soon came to halt and the government decided against extending it to the northwestern Counties. Nevertheless, at the end of the nineteenth century cooperatives and credit unions were founded there. Most of these were organised by Károlyi’s organisation *Hangya* (ant), but some were run by Catholic politicians and, increasingly, by Slovak nationalists.³⁸ As was the case with the Transylvanian Saxons, the Magyars, and the Rumanians, in Upper Hungary these cooperatives and credit unions were not only instruments in “ethnic conflicts,”³⁹ but also undergirded antisemitic praxis. Below I will assess the importance of antisemitic praxis for the political mobilization of the Slovak national movement on the basis of developments in the Nyitra County – a stronghold of the Anti-Semitic Party in Upper Hungary throughout the 1880s. To what extent did the aggressive ethnicization of Jewish innkeepers and traders characteristic of the “Ruthenian Action” play a role in this context?

As in other regions of Upper Hungary, in the Nyitra County in the 1890s proponents of political Catholicism were active in associations, usually with a pronounced antisemitic tendency. After the bad result of the 1896

³⁵ Ibid., 184.

³⁶ Ibid., 185.

³⁷ *Képvisei társaság napló*, 1896, vol. 27, 262.

³⁸ See *150 rokov slovenského družstevníctva. VI. a zväzová a prehľad*, ed. Roman Holec, (Bratislava: Družstevná únia SR vo VOPD Prúdy, 1995), 21-78.

³⁹ See Attila Hunyadi, “Three Paradigms of Cooperative Movements with Nationalist Taxonomy in Transylvania”, *Cooperatives in Ethnic Conflicts: Eastern Europe in the 19th and early 20th Century*, ed. Torsten Lorenz (Berlin: Berliner Wiss.-Verl., 2006), 81.

parliamentary elections, Catholic People's Party politicians called increasingly for the establishment of "Christian" cooperatives. When this demand was reiterated at a meeting of Catholic associations in the summer of 1898 in Budapest, the Hungarian Prime Minister Dezső Bánffy asked the District Supervisor to report to him on the "confessional and political tendencies" of such cooperatives.⁴⁰

Of all the reports from the Nyitra County, that from the Vágújhely district (today Nové Mesto nad Váhom) was the most differentiated. Although Bánffy's circular did not refer explicitly to the anti-Jewish tendencies of "Christian" cooperatives and credit unions, these appear to have been particularly virulent in Vágújhely. While only a "confessional tendency" was acknowledged for a credit union in Podola (Podolie) founded by the Nyitra Industry Association and run by members of the Catholic clergy, the report suggested that the sole aim of a cooperative and credit union founded in 1897 in Pobeďim was "to compete against and eliminate the Israelite hucksters there." In Verbó, where two Anti-Semitic Party candidates were elected to parliament in the 1880s, the notion of "self-help" was the ostensible reason behind the establishment of a commercially-oriented association with "an anti-Semitic character, revealed most tellingly in the fact that it has not had one single Israelite member to date."⁴¹

Although the report makes no reference to the Vágújhely district municipality, in this period it became a new centre of the cooperative movement – led this time by Slovak nationalists. In the parliamentary elections of 1896, the Catholic People's Party put forward its own candidate, a man notorious for his anti-Jewish statements, who also had the support of Slovak nationalists. After his failure to be elected, the anti-liberals in Vágújhely modified their strategy. In January 1897 they founded a People's Bank with the aim of securing the finances necessary for their future politics. The landowner Ágoston Pongrácz was elected president of the new company, although according to the official report he took no active part in its internal affairs. It was envisaged that investment would come – apart from local "priests and pan-Slavists" – from other Hungarian Counties, even from as far afield as Bohemia and Moravia. This and the fact that the management positions in the bank were occupied almost exclusively by Slovak nationalists was proof of its "pan-Slavic" orientation for the reporting official. Although the new bank paid its customers 0.5% more interest than the old Vágújhely Savings Bank, he predicted that it would not be successful there and would fare little better in the surrounding areas that were already served by self-help organisations.⁴²

Similar to the cooperation between Catholics and Slovak nationalists in the 1896 parliamentary elections, the activities of the People's Bank were directed

⁴⁰ Štátny archív v Nitre, Őupa Nitra I, HlavnoŐupanské spisy 1861-1918, dôverné, i. Ő. 16-1899-5.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, i. Ő. 12-1895-14.

against Jews.⁴³ In contrast to the official report on the People's Bank, which made no mention of the Slovak nationalists' antisemitism, Jewish citizens saw this as a mere symptom of "pan-Slavism," the main enemy of Hungarian nationalists.⁴⁴ Yet the political views and practices of the leading protagonist of the anti-liberal opposition in Vágújhely, Július Markovič, reveal the true extent to which many Slovak nationalists subscribed to an ethno-populist antisemitism. Although a Lutheran, Július Markovič was one of the most prominent supporters of a rapprochement between Slovak nationalists and the Catholic People's Party, for whom he had coordinated the 1896 election campaign. Following the decision to found a "Christian financial institution to protect Christian people from usurers,"⁴⁵ Markovič became one of its most outspoken proponents and was later appointed manager of the new bank.

As a medicine student in 1880's Vienna, Markovič was already preoccupied with the "question of antisemitism," which in his view resulted from "the tremendous pressure exerted by capital on small-scale property." The origins of the contrast the agrarians would later draw between "mobile" and "fixed" capital⁴⁶ are clear in the dichotomy he asserted then between capitalism ("the consumptive element") and the pre-capitalist economic order ("productive element"). Although his dichotomy was also informed by antisemitism, Markovič did not become a radical antisemite. He subscribed rather to a "practical programme," which, through the establishment of cooperatives and credit unions would compete against Jewish traders and financial institutions and eventually drive them out of business. As he was afraid of being labelled a "pan-Slavist" by the authorities, he attempted to implement this "practical

⁴³ In the early modern period, Vágújhely was already home to a significant Jewish community, which was faced with anti-Jewish attacks in the spring of 1848. Thanks to the energetic intervention of local authorities, the community was spared a similar fate in the context of the Tiszaeszlár Affair in the early 1880s. At the turn of the century, the Jews of Vágújhely still made up more than 20% of the total population. Although the majority of them continued to speak German as their mother tongue, they supported the cause of Hungarian nationalism and the "magyarization" of the public sphere. Many of them were members of the upper middle class and active in trade and industry. In the early 1890s, the local council comprised mainly Jewish councillors and the mayor was chosen from among their ranks until 1918. See František Loubal, *Nové Mesto nad Váhom v národnom vývoji slovenskom*, Nové Mesto nad Váhom: J. Trnovský, 1927; on the Jewish religious community of Vágújhely see Ujvári, "Magyar zsidó Lexikon", 933-934.

⁴⁴ See Miloslav Szabó, "Gegen die 'weltvergiftende Idee des Antisemitismus' Publizistik als Gegenwehr. Jüdische Reaktionen auf den Antisemitismus in der ungarischen Provinz um 1900", *Einspruch und Abwehr. Die Reaktion des europäischen Judentums auf die Entstehung des Antisemitismus (1879-1914)*, ed. Ulrich Wyrwa (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2010), 215-229.

⁴⁵ Julius Markovič, *Nitriansky politický trestný proces*, (Turčiansky sv. Martin: Julius Markovič, 1903), 13.

⁴⁶ "Národné hospodárstvo", *Národné noviny*, 99 (1883).

programme” under the auspices of the Catholic People’s Party, which he saw as “an anti-Semitic party.”⁴⁷

Markovič justified this with reference to an alleged incompatibility of Christian and Jewish morality. In a brochure on the history of the anti-liberal movement in Vágújhely, he claimed that “more or less every Christian” took recourse in antisemitism, even though “social position, caution, or dependency often prohibit an open acknowledgement of antisemitic views.”⁴⁸ Yet Markovič did not want to be seen as a “blood-thirsty antisemite.” For him, antisemitism as “common violence that knows only brute force” was “unchristian.” Thus he called on his supporters to fight “Semitism” “in a legal and morally sound way”:

“Let us be firm and constant in our Christian faith. Let us suppress our wayward bodily desires for alcohol and gratuitous luxury. Let us educate ourselves and learn how to live a good life. Let us not be frivolous, but earnest and cautious in our affairs. Let us not envy each other, but hold together. Where one person does not suffice, we shall form associations. Through this kind of antisemitism we shall soon recover our lost positions and win back the place due to us because of our number. Then we will no longer complain about having to serve Jews, we will never again cry that Jews are never the servants of Christians. Let us help ourselves, and God will help us in return!”⁴⁹

This quote displays the principal elements of populist antisemitism: its emphasis on social justice and the attempt to achieve this by practical means. Yet ultimately, the ideas of Markovič and his likeminded contemporaries were unsuccessful due to the contradictions inherent in the alleged emancipatory aim of anti-Semitic practice and the anti-emancipatory basis of the anti-Semitic programme.

Against the authorities’ expectations, the Slovak nationalists in Vágújhely were able to convince increasing sections of the Slovak-speaking population in the surrounding area to lodge their savings in the new People’s Bank and take out loans there. Shortly afterwards, they began to establish cooperatives to serve the rural population and stamp out Jewish innkeepers and middlemen. Igor Hrušovský, a young employee of the People’s Bank, played a particularly active role here. Endowed with expert knowledge and impressive organizational skills, he focused mainly on the Lutheran communities of Alsóbotfalú (Dolné Bzince), Felsőbotfalú (Horné Bzince), Hrušó (Hrušov), and Lubina, which together formed a single administrative unit.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ See Archív literatúry a umenia Slovenskej národnej knižnice, call n. 85 E 1 (Ivan Dérer, *Politika v Prešporku a na Záhorí, 173-174*); Štátny archív v Nitre, ňupa Nitra I, Hlavné upanské spisy 1861-1918, dôverné, i. ň. 16-1899-17.

⁴⁸ Markovič, “Nitriansky politický trestný process”, 11.

⁴⁹ “ňidovstvo na našich krajoch”, *Povážské noviny*, 3 (1903), 17-18.

⁵⁰ See Slovenský národný archív Bratislava, fond Fedor Houdek, i. ň. 52.

Alarmed by the increased activities of Slovak nationalists in the Nyitra County, it was from here that state authorities took action to put a halt to this development. This was prompted by the parliamentary elections of 1901, in which Július Markovič's brother Rudolf stood for election in Vágújhely and lost to a Liberal Party candidate. Shortly afterwards, both Markovič brothers were charged by the official in charge with "incitement of the Hungarian nationality" in their pre-election speeches in Lubina. This official substantiated his charge with reference to the witness statements of several Jewish small traders. In early 1903 all three defendants were convicted and given prison sentences and fines. Yet in the summer of the same year, the Supreme Court in Pressburg overturned this conviction and the Slovak nationalists were freed on the basis that the witnesses who had spoken against them had been biased.

Led by Július Markovič, the Slovak nationalists consciously exploited the turn of public opinion against the "Khazars" in the wake of the campaign, emphasizing that almost all of the witnesses who had testified against them in the Nyitra trial were land Jews, who had indeed suffered under the boycotts launched against them. Throughout the witness hearings and while presenting their own defence, the defendants also sought to convince the jury that the "new immigrants" or "Khazars" were neither "Magyars" nor even "patriots."⁵¹ The public would not have been aware that the authorities in Upper Hungary had denied a "Jewish invasion" in the northwestern Counties at the turn of the century. While a temporary increase in the number of "Russian and Polish Jews" in the Vágújhely district was noted in 1897, "only very few of these settled here" – just five families.⁵²

In his defence statement, Július Markovič made direct reference to the "Ruthenian Action" and claimed that he had become a target of hatred for "usurers and leeches who suck the life-blood out of the people" because they believed he was "some kind of Egan sent by the government."⁵³ Yet like Egan, Július Markovič did not restrict his castigation to "the plague of locusts that destroys everything" and whose "immigration" had allegedly prompted emigration from Hungary,⁵⁴ but extended it to the established Jewish population of Vágújhely. He stated this in no uncertain terms in his letter to the Nyitra County Supervisor in June 1902, in which he complained about the treatment of himself and his comrades by local authorities. For him, the real culprits were elsewhere: "We have over five thousand unproductive parasites

⁵¹ Markovič, "Nitriansky politický trestný process", 205.

⁵² Štátny archív v Nitre, ťupa Nitra I, Hlavnoťupanské spisy 1861-1918, administratívne, i. ť. 191-1895-194. The Hungarian government received a similar report in the summer of 1898 at the height of the anti-Jewish violence in Galicia from the border district of Csaca. See Štátny archív v Bytťi, Trenťianska ťupa I, hlavnoťupanské spisy administratívne, i. ť. 145-1898/I-3.

⁵³ Markovič, "Nitriansky politický trestný process", 181-182.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 240. Even the radical democratic economist Lóránt Hegedťs hinted at a direct connection between Jewish immigration and Ruthenian emigration in 1899. See Frank, "From Austria-Hungary to the United States", 418.

here, who quench their thirst with the sweat of the people.”⁵⁵ It is not entirely clear to whom Markovič was referring with “we” here – Hungarians or only Upper-Hungarians. He did however openly identify the “five thousand unproductive parasites” as Jews. The anti-Semitic practice promoted by his movement had in Markovič’s words not only impacted on “usurers in the narrow sense of the word, [...] but also on Israelite lawyers, doctors, traders, hucksters, innkeepers, etc., because together they form an organic unit.”⁵⁶

In his “political study” on the “Nyitraer trial,” Markovič naturally made no mention of the wide-ranging consequences of his anti-Semitic practice. Instead, he sought to give the impression that his motivation was purely “defensive” and that the protests of Jews were unwarranted. To this end, he alleged that the patriotism of “assimilated” Jews was not genuine. According to Markovič, the latter had come to the defence of their non-assimilated brethren against their better judgement and had “depicted us as persecutors of their race, in the interest of their race.”⁵⁷ Thus the exposure of the Lubina “Khazars,” who identified themselves as “Magyars” although they didn’t speak a word of Hungarian,⁵⁸ was also intended as a dig at “assimilated” Jews who displayed their patriotism so openly and vilified Markovič and his supporters as “pan-Slavists.”

We find the same strategy in the *Považské noviny* newspaper. This was published by Július Markovič between 1902 and 1904 in Vágújhely and edited by credit union employee, Igor Hrušovský. The *Považské noviny* had a relatively high circulation and its editor saw it as an instrument to stir up support for the populist anti-Semitic movement in Vágújhely. Thus in an editorial with the title *Slováci a Židia* (Slovaks and Jews), Markovič polemicized against a “fruitless, inflammatory anti-Semitism.” He prized Egan, the initiator of the “Ruthenian Action” as a counter-example and quoted extensively from his Munkács speech. With reference to the “Jewish solidarity” allegedly used by Jews to gain social and economic dominance, he encouraged anti-Semitic practice: “Let us finally recognize – as the Jews do – *that words are not deeds!*”⁵⁹ While rejecting a view of antisemitism as “reactionary intolerance,” Markovič nevertheless projected racist analogies onto the Hebrew Bible. This allowed him to contemplate a radical solution to “the Jewish question”:

“The Jews have already succeeded once in totally enslaving a farming people. That was the time when they – laden with their hosts’ silver and gold, yet dressed in rags – returned to Palestine from Egypt. There they found a blue-eyed blonde people, which had since settled there. According to the Old Testament, the Jews then forced this people under their control and enslaved

⁵⁵ Štátny archív v Nitre, Úpa Nitra I, Hlavnoučupanské spisy 1861-1918, dôverné, i. č. 16-1899-17.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Markovič, “Nitriansky politický trestný process”, 20.

⁵⁸ “Ein Rundschreiben”, *Neutraer Zeitung*, 7 (1903), 2.

⁵⁹ “Slováci a Židia”, *Považské noviny*, 7 (1902), 55-56.

them. Yet if the Jews think that they can play the role of ‘the chosen people’ in our land, they are gravely mistaken. There are already a great many people here who are more comfortable with the idea of expelling the Jews than they are with the thought of a farmer, sitting and weeping on the roadside next to the property wrenched so cunningly from him. If we were truly fundamental anti-Semites, we wouldn’t give such advice to Jews, because nobody is more responsible for the spread of antisemitism than the Jews themselves, by continuing to act against us. Every race makes its own hell.”⁶⁰

This quote demonstrates how ethno-populism put paid to the emancipatory pretensions of anti-Semitic practice. An emphasis on the “liberating” practice could not downplay the semantics of “national anti-Semitism,” which portrayed allegedly a-national and anti-national Jews as “enemies” of all people and nations and even went as far as contemplating their expulsion.⁶¹ The press trial of the journalist Hrušovský in the spring of 1904 clearly shows that the ethno-populism of Slovak nationalists transcended even their animosity towards the Hungarians. The prosecution charged Hrušovský with attempting to stir up feeling against “the Magyar nationality” in an article in which he had used the term “our true enemies.” Hrušovský protested that members of the jury only needed to read a few editions of the *Považské noviny* to see that he was highly sympathetic towards “true Magyars,” claiming that the “enemies” of the article in question referred to “those permanent enemies of the people, who are ruining the Hungarian people with their ruthless usury and whom Egan was also sent to combat.”⁶²

The fact that Hrušovský was nevertheless found guilty of an “incitement of the Magyar nationality” by the jury is characteristic of the perception of antisemitism among the Slovakian-speaking population of Upper Hungary at the turn of the century. Thus the acquittal of the Markovič brothers, in which Hungarian public opinion against the “Khazars” is sure to have played no small part, did not really set a precedence. In contrast to Egan’s “Ruthenian Action,” the Vágújhely affair did not resonate with Hungarian anti-liberals. This was particularly evident among representatives of political Catholicism such as Rezső Páder, who in a statement in the Hungarian Parliament in the spring of 1900 invoked an anti-Semitic alliance with Slovak nationalists, by suggesting that claims of “Pan-Slavism” were a diversionary tactic on the part of the Jews. The populist antisemitism of Slovak nationalists was overshadowed by the official nationality policy, to which the Catholic People’s Party increasingly subscribed after the turn of the century.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁶¹ See Klaus Holz, *Nationaler Antisemitismus. Wissenssoziologie einer Weltanschauung*, (Hamburg: HIS Verlag, 2001).

⁶² “Tlačová pravota Považských novín. Příloha „Považských novín”, *Považské noviny*, 2 (1903).

Miloslav Szabó, born in 1974 in Zvolen, Slovak Republic. Research fellow - funded by the Foundation Gerda Henkel and the German Research Foundation - of the Centre for Research on Antisemitism at the Technical University Berlin. He studied History and German language and literature in Bratislava, Vienna and Koblenz/Landau, graduate study of History at the Charles' University Prague, where he completed his Ph.D. on Alfred Rosenberg and his book 'Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts'. Topic of his research: Slovak nationalism and anti-Semitism, 1875-1922.

Among his recent publications: *Vertraute Feindbilder. Die transnationalen Bezüge des slowakischen Antisemitismus um 1900*, in: *Bohemia* 51/2 (2011); *National Conflict and Anti-Semitism at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century. The Case of the Czech Slovakophiles Karel Kálal and Eduard Lederer*, in: *Studia Bohemiae* 44/1 (2009).

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