



**Sociology Ph.D Program**

**THESIS SUMMARY OF PHD DISSERTATION**

**Antónia Szász**

**Progressive Judaism in Hungary**

Identity (re)construction in reform Jewish communities

**Supervisor:**

**András A. Gergely CSc**

Senior Research Fellow, Hungarian Academy of Sciences

Budapest, 2010

**Institute of Sociology and Social Policy**

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# **1. Preliminaries to the research and justification of the research topic**

## **1.1. Problem-raising**

The Sim Shalom Congregation is the first institution of progressive Judaism in Hungary, headed by a woman rabbi. During my first field research in the '90s I noted that large proportion of non-religious people also joined the organization offering religious activities as well. The integrational efforts of Sim Shalom were explicitly rebuffed by other Jewish religious organizations because of their non-conventional ideology and practices, however there were other (fundamental) reasons behind this. The aim of my research became to observe the plight of Hungarian progressive Judaism during a longer period, and to explore who joins this community and why, and why it can be attractive for non-religious people too. The first results of my more than a decade long research revealed that the motivation behind joining the progressive community can not be narrowed down to religiousness and to reverting to religion. Thus later on my research turned special attention to finding out and construing what factors shape personal and societal actions, and what role the progressive movement and its Hungarian institutions play in the lives of the followers and in society.

## **1.2. The approach to religion and religiousness in a secular world**

Throughout Europe there is a growing sociological interest in religion even though data show a rapid decline in the number of members since the 1970s. In reality, some of those who parted with organized religion stayed religious “in their own way”. (Tomka 1996a) In the meantime, many new religious movements and institutions have been formed, where collective identities can again be built and expressed. Critics of the classical secular theory (stating the death of religion in modern societies) refer to these empirical observations when pointing out that it is the role of religion and the attitude to religion that change in modern societies. (cf. Byrnes – Katzenstein 2006; Bögre 2002) Therefore, now researchers are mainly intrigued by the presence of religion and religiousness in society; their role in building identities, forming communities, and triggering socio-political changes, in the course of which the structure, type and function of religious institutions and ideologies differentiate.

Nowadays religion does not encompass every aspect of life; it is getting privatized and is becoming more and more a personal choice and subjective. (Berger – Luckmann 1975; Tomka 2000)

During and after the political regime change in Hungary we could also witness a wave of (re)religiousness parallel to the intensification of secularization, which does not necessarily mean the revival of the full system of the religious-cultural tradition. (cf. Földvári 2003: 21) Actually the

thought itself that the individual can not only decide about his/her own religiousness, faith but also about its contents and characteristics, and as a result does not necessarily have to accept the full religious option but rather he/she can choose from it as he/she wishes, that is „à la carte”, comes from the cessation of the general societal validity of religion. (cf. Dobbelaere 1993; Földvári – Rosta 1998) This is also true for the Hungarian Jewry, as it is confirmed by the research experience of András Kovács and his associates (Kovács 2002), furthermore of Papp (2005) and Vincze (2006).

Progressive Judaism is a reformer religious movement, however it is not the renewed religious form and content that is interesting but the reason and circumstances of the renewal, how it is developing, and the functions it fulfills in the life of a community and the society itself.

The changes in the socio-cultural environment affect the whole cultural system of a religion. The ideological streams and expectations of our times seep into religion as well and trigger changes in the belief system, the liturgy and the religious organization. New points of view and emphasis emerge in faith, new forms of religious practice develop, and individuals play a more active role in the life, work and decisions of the religious organization. (cf. Tomka 2000) This is the reason why I studied progressive Judaism and its Hungarian institutions on ideological, individual and organizational levels: highlighting the societal effects and processes, individual and organizational motives, societal actions; and I tried to grasp the place and role of the movement within its context rather than in isolation.

### **1.3. Studying religiousness**

There are many concepts for measuring religiousness. Tomka (2000) identifies three different trends. The first one is the self-classification, whose result is genuine, but hard to interpret (since it is ambiguous what it means by religiousness). The second one is the collection of the different types of manifestation of religiousness, from which conclusions can be drawn with the aid of multiple-variable mathematical-statistical methods. The third trend measures the different dimensions of religiousness separately, and according to researchers gives relatively objective results. (cf. Szántó 1998) The multi-dimensional approach sets out from the idea that religion and religiousness manifest themselves in different parts of life and culture without one appearance determining the need and the strength of appearance in the other area. The different dimensions are not comparable, therefore they can not be synthesized. (same) There are different models for identifying and measuring the dimensions of religiousness. Five dimensions are defined in the model by Glock and Stark (1965), which is considered a milestone in the history of empirical sociology of religion: 1. faith (ideological, cognitive dimension); 2. religious practice (ritual dimension); 3. religious feeling,

experience (adventure and experimental dimension); 4. religious knowledge and approach (intellectual dimension); and 5. religiousness in everyday life and behavior (consequence dimension). Some authors also mention the dimension encompassing human relationships, and within this the belonging to a religious community (we might call this the relationship-community dimension). Dobbelaere and Jagodzinski (1995) also mention the attachment to the church and the demand for transition rites. The participation in these transition rites and the incorporation of certain traditional elements are important indicators of religiousness of its broader definition.

Celebrating holidays and charising traditions rooted in religion does not necessarily implies religious faith, religious self-classification. Even amongst Jewry, religious feeling does not always correlate to religious-cultural practices. Because of this several contemporary researchers interested in Jewry investigate the question of religious-secular self-classification. (Graham 2003; Miller et al. 1996; Kovács 2002) During my research therefore, besides the scale and characteristics relevant in the different dimensions of religiousness, I also asked about religious self-classification to get an understanding about the interviewee's thoughts about religion and his/her aspects around it.

#### **1.4. Identity in sociological approach**

There are many approaches to interpret identity. Some of them differentiate between personal (internal) and societal identities, while others do not. One type of Pataki's (1988: 206–207) typology consists of the so-called self-emphasis approaches (investigating the feeling of self-consistency and the conservation of its continuity). The situational identity theories belong to another group, which presumes and observes the development of identity in interactions (like Mead, Goffman, Krappmann). The third type consists of the structural theories, which examine the formation of identity in the context of the effects of societal environment and the structure of current society (eg. the approach of Erikson and Turner). One part of the identity theories explore the formation of personal identity and the internal and external effects influencing it (eg. Erikson), while others focus on social identity and the processes of group identification (eg. Turner, Tajfel).

Social identity feeds from belonging to a social group, the knowledge about the group and the emotional attachment to it, and from bonding values, it also has a history and is built from social interactions. (cf. Krappmann 1980; Kovács 2004; Pataki 1980, 2001; Tajfel 1980; Turner 1980) Hall (1997) believes that the evolution of "cultural" identity comes from the interaction of the inner core of personality and society. Some researchers (eg. Tajfel, Turner) point out the role of social categorization in the process, saying that individuals determine their identity through identifying themselves with social categories, and this is how others categorize and place them in society. According to Tajfel

(1980) an individual would like to be part of a social group also emotionally, therefore tries to choose a group or a frame of reference that will enhance his/her identity with positive aspects.

An individual's social and personal identity changes over time, mostly reflecting internal and external, societal changes (cf. Bögre 2002), crucial events in one's life, major critical episodes, and decisive events such as wars, persecutions, socio-political regime changes. (cf. Mars 1999: 30) These often cause powerful feelings or unexpected (or so it might seem at first glance) actions in the individuals, which in the end can materialize in various identity strategies. – These phenomena, processes can be spotted in the Hungarian Jewry too. (cf. Kovács 2002)

### **1.5. Jewish identity strategies and options for identity alternatives**

According to András Kovács (2002a) assimilation does not provide adequate definition for the analysis of Jewish identity strategies after the Holocaust, Tajfel's theory on behavioural strategies of minorities is much more suitable for this. He claims that in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the behavioural strategies of certain subgroups of the Jewry were defined by two factors: changes in the external circumstances and the societal position achieved by the strategy of an earlier period. Among the Jewry devastated by the Holocaust the experience of common fate led to the homogenization of identity (cf. Karády 1992), and certain identity options (eg. Zionism, migration) emerged or were regarded with a higher value. Later the communist ideology offered relative equality, an option to get rid of the Jewish stigma for those who chose "refusal strategies". During the era of the regime change these behavioural patterns were questioned because it became obvious that these would not stop stigmatization. This encouraged certain Jewish individuals and groups to set up the strategy of 'acceptance and revaluation' and of the reconstruction of Jewish identity. (Kovács 2002a: 15–16)

Nowadays there are many identity alternatives for the Hungarian Jewry. Identity options are not limited (to religious, cultural and ethnic options), are entwined, constantly change, and new ones emerge. The religious choice itself is very heterogeneous because of the differences in the specific characteristics, acceptedness, offered identity strategies, and the relationship with tradition of its different streams.

In Hungary it was during the regime change and thereafter when (many) waves of return to religion, here specifically to the Jewish religion, became perceivable on the level of society, and when group-level identities were formed and people started to turn to traditions. (cf. Kovács 2002; Papp 2005; Vincze 2006) Hobsbawm (1993) highlights that the trend of returning to group identity/identities from the general social identity, of searching for roots and preserving traditions

is also perceivable. Thus the return to traditions (rooted in religion) can not be restricted to the appreciation of the religious option marginalized earlier but it has manifold social functions – as it is presumed and later proved during the empirical research.

The majority of the Hungarian Jewry does not define his/her own Jewishness based on religious or ethnic basis. Kovács (1992: 289) says that most people searching for identity define the positive content of their Jewish self-identity as ethnic identity. As the feeling of a common historical past, traditions considered meaningful, common fate of past and present, other (ethnic in nature) aspects, and through these as the feeling of togetherness, and the belonging to an ethnic group. It can also present itself in the attachment to Jewish culture and history, Jewish traditions and Israel, in the interest in Jewish topics and can be supplemented with other elements – for example endogamy, homophily in relationships, consumption of Jewish culture, preservation of Jewish traditions, celebration of Jewish holidays, pride over the achievements of Jewish scientists, prominent people and his/her own Jewishness.

Ethnic identity is very complex in its content. Miller (2003) describes two main types. One of them is based on the so-called mental ethnicity, that is on the sense of Jewish self-identity and the feeling of belonging to the Jewry. The other one is based on the so-called behavioural and social ethnicity which manifests itself in actions, and social attachments and interactions, such as interest, child-raising, membership in a community, practicing Jewish traditions.

The feeling of ethnic togetherness, the common characteristics and experience do not lead to the development of communities by themselves, they only facilitate it. (Weber 1992: 1/2. 96; Kovács 2004: 228–229; cf. Brubaker 2001) Therefore, aspects forming the individual and social actions need to be studied.

The in-depth focus of the research is to explore the different identity option(s) offered by the progressive organizations, the reasons behind individual and collective choices, the ways and contents of identity building, and the role and functions of the Jewish religion and tradition in all this.

## **1.6. Questions of the research, topics, and preliminary expectations**

Because my research is mainly explorative (focusing on facts, motivations and the exploration of the deeper structures of coherence) and interpretative, therefore my research strategy was built on the basis of inductive logic. Thus, its primary goal is not to test hypotheses but to find and interpret connections based on empirical data. (cf. Babbie 1998: 70–87) Therefore, in relation to my research questions, I clarified the fields and topics of research and the aspects of approach in the dissertation (cf. Mason 2001), and I formulated certain preliminary assumptions and

expectations. My research questions are partly specific to the field, are based on the characteristics of the observed community and stream, come from the observations and conclusions of my first field research, furthermore they borrow research criteria from contemporary Jewish research, the theoretical approach and empirical results of identity- and religion research.

I asked the most basic question in sociology of religion– which tries to define what role religion has in society - in relation to the Hungarian progressive Judaism too:

**What is the role of Jewish religion and the progressive movement in the Hungarian Jewry, and in the identity construction of people with Jewish attachments?**

I studied the question from a historical perspective, in its societal context, and on the individual, institutional and social levels. I examined in depth the emergence of the movement, its spread, its appearance in Hungary and its societal environment. I tried to describe the role of Jewish religion and the stream based on one hand on the visions of the Hungarian communities, and the aims declared and desired by them, and, on the other hand, based on the stories and opinions of the members of the communities. While describing its social reception I also explored and analyzed the attitude of the external, Jewish environment.

The main questions of the research are:

**1.) What are the societal aspects of the appearance and characteristics of the progressive movement?**

**2.) How, under what societal circumstances did the progressive movement appear in Hungary?**

**3.) How and what circumstances shaped the situation of the progressive organizations in Hungary?**

Namely a) its acceptance, integration, b) its social base, c) its resource-supply?

**4.) a) What identity option is offered by the new movement and the two Hungarian progressive communities?**

**b) Who finds it appealing and why?**

**c) How can the (re)construction of the members' identity be described?**

- What factors form the individual and social actions?
- Since joining the community, how has the content of the members' Jewish self-identity, the strength of its internal experience, and the characteristics of its external undertaking and representation changed – and what reasons can be found behind these?

*Preliminary expectations:*

- The higher acceptance of the progressive organizations and their participation in the Jewish dialogue can not be traced back to mainly internal, community reasons but to external, societal changes (in the Jewish religious and secular fields).
- It is assumed that the progressive ideology is more appealing for people with certain social status and conception: mainly intellectuals, and those who prefer equality and the right for the freedom of thought and choice even in religious life. People attracted to it are interested in Jewish tradition but until now have been in isolation from it, live in mixed marriages or are of mixed origin, and have Jewish attachments.
- Even now joining is not primarily (or not only) motivated by religiousness. The opportunity for acquisition of knowledge, and for personal and community experience is of paramount importance.
- Young members who have recently joined the movement have a significantly higher demand for spirituality too.
- In the beginning progressive Jews consider the ritual and the intellectual dimensions very important, and this prevails. Later on these result in the stronger role of the cognitive and then the experimental dimensions, and in the course of time, the consequence dimension also gets more accentual, which means taking religiousness and certain religious-cultural practices into the private sphere.

When I examine the social role and spread of the movement and the Hungarian communities, I explore as a more general (theoretical) question why they do not reach wider layers, and **why people do not join them in bigger numbers** (it could be asked why the movement did not achieve a resounding success in Hungary in spite of its modern views and practices). I also look for an empirical answer to the question what the members of the communities think about the future of the movement in Hungary.

**5.) How do the members and supporters of the communities view the place and role of the movement and the given community in the Hungarian Jewry? How do they see its future?**

Finally I will ask a theoretical question, which I will examine after the interpretation of the empirical data:

**6.) What theoretical frame would be appropriate for the interpretation of the empirical observations?**

My aim is that through the review of the relevant theories and thesis of literature, and upon reflecting on them – taking the similarities, differences and specificities into account – to build a frame where the interpretation of the experience from the research can be complexly embedded.

## **2. Applied methods**

### **2.1. The theoretical model of the research**

The research undertook the task to map and analyze the entwined processes and interactions of the different levels in society, therefore the most appropriate model to develop the research strategy on is the Barth-model (as a guideline and organizing principle for the approach, data collection, -processing, -analysis).

The model approaches the processes and the influencing factors of identity construction on micro-, meso- and macro levels, and in their relationship, which makes it possible to interpret its different levels (personal, group-level, ethnic, cultural, social). On the micro level the personal and interpersonal experience, evaluations, the events and scenes of one's individual life, personal identity, and the personal experience of the collective identity (or identities), on the meso level the group forming, community building processes, on the macro level the broader societal processes, political articulations can be seized, and their interaction with and mutual effects on the other two levels can be explored. (Barth 1996)

The dissertation will present the different levels not as separate entities but with reflections, in their relations and impact on one another. Parallel to the macro-sociological and socio-historical aspects of the Hungarian Jewry in the last one and a half centuries, it will allow a look into the micro-histories, personal experience and group processes too. Behind the institutionalization of Hungarian progressive Judaism the dissertation will demonstrate the social actions arising from individual intentions as well as the individual aspects in the background and consequences of organizational and community development. When exploring the motives of personal choices it reveals the individual and also the social reasons, and the identity options offered by the communities. Parallel to the personal identity (re)construction the collective identity building as well as the community building processes will be also uncovered.

### **2.2. Methods of data collection**

The complexity of the research topic, the empirical study of its different aspects required more than one type of method and data collection process.

### ***2.2.1. Research in progressive communities***

Because the identity and opinion forming can be understood as a societal construction, the ontological starting point of the research aimed at exploring these is built upon constructivism, on the basis of which the individual as well as the collective identity, and opinion are socially formed and situative. The epistemological starting point of the research is based on the interpretivist paradigm because I tried to understand the individuals' identity construction and their motivation behind joining the community through their own interpretation. To achieve this the so-called field-near data collection methods and techniques which adapt well to the research field and are flexible enough were found to be adequate (discussions, structured, unstructured and half-structured interviews, deep and life-story interviews, participation in community activities, observation of dialogues). (cf. Letenyei 2006; Mason 2001) The selection of the applied data collection methods were influenced not only by the theme but also by the size and type of the communities. In sociology of religion observation as well as the method of observation, which requires deeper participation from the researcher, are often used methods for studying small religious communities. This type of research assumes trust and generates soft data and experience that can not be generated otherwise. (cf. Andorka 2006: 644; Horváth 1995)

It was during my field research when I acquired a new experience in which I saw a great data collection and methodological opportunity. This is the stories told not in interview situations but in their natural settings: introduction of the new and older members when the narrators summarize, reconstruct their life story or those parts that are considered important. It is revealed what type of family they are from, what their occupation is, how they discovered their Jewish origin, how they experienced their Jewish self-identity and how this has changed in the course of time. They share how they came into contact with the Jewish community and what aroused their interest.

These self-reports differ from the narrative life-story interviews in many aspects but are very useful. These are not for the researchers but for the community. When creating the story the narrator takes the expectations and presumptions of the community into account, and recurring topics (for example how they learned that they are Jewish) and new, sometimes even special elements are woven into it. The story starts as a monologue and continues as an interactive dialogue: the members of the community also ask questions, comment on the story, and call upon their own experience, feelings. Thus, on these occasions the narrative continued in a discussion, the personal life-story flowed into the life of the community, the feeling of Jewish self-identity mobilized the individual towards the Jewish community, in one word the feeling turned into a societal action, the (shaping process of the) personal and collective identity entwined.

### ***2.2.2. Research on the changes of attitude toward the communities***

The ‘hard’ facts and numerical data of the progressive communities (partnerships, organizational membership, cooperations, membership number, subsidies) were collected from official documents, statistics from National Tax and Customs Administration, and through thematic interviews. One part of the documents of official statements was published in the Jewish press, other details can be found in the official correspondence (and were also published in the newsletter of the communities).

The reason why I pay special attention to the analysis of the official opinions, discussions, written (on- or offline) publications is because these as public fora have great influence on public opinion, the personal- and group presumptions with their information content, intonation, attitude, reasoning and value system.

The official statements after 1998 have been fully processed. I have been collecting the texts of Jewish roundtables and the online fora since 2005. Their systematic documentation has been started, their analysis is to be published later on according to my plans. One part of the results has been published in my earlier publication and I have also used them in my dissertation.

### **2.3. Data analysis**

The analysis of the data was carried out by using the above described Barth-model.

Because the research took place over several years it provided the opportunity to observe and understand the changes, thus making a longitudinal analysis possible.

The relationships among the observations, conversations, interviews and the ‘soft’ data coming from the source material of written documents are analyzed using the method of qualitative interview- and content analysis, which are supplemented at certain points with the statistics compiled from the ‘hard’ data of the investigation. I studied the situation of progressive communities and the changes of attitude toward them through official documents, on- and offline sources, roundtable discussions with the method of document- and content analysis.

The field research using qualitative methods bring colorful, sensitive experience. My research results in the communities are sensitively presented but local and specific to the field. If we insist on the use of generalization or comparison we constantly have to look beyond our field of research, need to work with non-field-specific tendencies, research results, and have to look back on them from some distance. The research has to be both emic and etic starting from the collection of data sources until the analysis. (cf. A. Gergely 2005; Letenyey 2006) Thus I tried to interpret the experience about progressive communities in a comparative and reflexive way taking the macro-sociological context and the relevant literature into account, and in the light of broader societal processes.

### **3. Results of the dissertation**

#### **3.1. Social motives for the development of progressive Judaism**

The roots of progressive Judaism date back to the Enlightenment. Its liberal and reform branches were formed in the 19th century. The liberal stream in its approach and practice tried to reconcile the Jewish tradition with the philosophy and needs of modern life, so amid the pressure to assimilate it could offer an alternative against the total loss of Jewish identity and traditions. It spread rapidly in the western world and became the most populous Jewish religious stream.

At the roots of the religious revival we can find macro-level socio-cultural changes as well as micro-level transformations: change in the societal situation, values and judgement of values, and intentions of the groups representing the religious revival. Among the worldwide motives leading to the religious revival we have to highlight modernization, the general desire for the freedom of thought, the broader achievements of emancipation, the progressive assimilation of the Jewry into mainstream society, the growth of secularism, and, almost in parallel with these, the appearance of need for (re)devoutness or at least for preservation of traditions, as the manifestation of the desire for the search for roots. In addition, individual motivations, attitudes and needs show a very diverse picture – due to the different historical experience and socio-cultural situation of the various regions and individuals.

In Hungary there were only short-lived reform initiatives in the middle of the 19th century. The progressive movement appeared one and a half century later, during the time of the political regime change. In 1992 from a group-level formation it developed into the country's first progressive, liberal Jewish congregation under the name of Sim Shalom Progressive Jewish Congregation.

#### **3.2. Societal circumstances of the stream's appearance in Hungary**

Before examining the appearance of the stream in Hungary I briefly reviewed those chapters of the Hungarian Jewry's history that were determinative not only for the generations of that time but also for the later ones, and which form part of the contemporary Jewry's collective memory. I highlighted those historical events and the feelings about them which became vital moments in the individuals' life and determined the trend of their search for identity. I looked back on the society of the Compromise, which made the Jewry part of the Hungarian nation, and at the Holocaust when it became an outcast, then at the socialist party-state system which re-accepted it into the nation but which also pushed certain Jewish (religious, Zionist) identity options to the periphery. I also looked

at those events and processes which, at the beginning of the regime change, led directly or indirectly to the formation of the first Hungarian progressive congregation.

1989 was the period of turbulent political changes and large-scale rearrangements. From the 1980s various groups, organizations, formations, movements, religious communities were formed one after another, offering new identities for their members or allowing the open manifestation of identity-elements that had been pushed to the periphery. (Angelusz – Tardos 1992) The Sim Shalom is the result of the process also called as Jewish Revival when, during the societal changes, the suppressed identity elements came to the surface, and amid the insecurity caused by the transformation the search for Jewish roots and for identity, and the longing for a new community often led to communities cherishing Jewish traditions.

The people who formed the first Hungarian progressive congregation had double, a Hungarian and a Jewish identity, and felt the need for a new and modern realization for learning about and experiencing the traditions in Hungary. A chance encounter with an English progressive Jewish couple was the reason behind a small group of friends joining the progressive movement: their experience aroused the friends' interest and it was also through the couple that they got into contact with the English movement. The second progressive congregation in Hungary, the Bet Orim Reform Jewish Congregation, was formed in 2006 by a group that had left Sim Shalom. They, encouraged by their rabbi (who is of Hungarian origin, and worked in the United States for 35 years ), follow the American-style reform stream.

### **3.3. The situation of the progressive movement in Hungary**

#### ***3.3.1. The reception of the stream in Hungary***

The first Hungarian institution of progressive Judaism was surrounded by aversion and its efforts for integration were firmly refused. Their ideology and practice were stigmatized in the Jewish societal field. Even the congregation's *Jewish identity* was questioned. The Alliance of Hungarian Jewish Faith Communes (a neolog umbrella organization) did not accept their membership. The reason for rejection was on the basis of norms and values, but there were financial, institutional and other reasons in the background: aversion toward the role-egalitarian philosophy and the female rabbi, fear of losing their members, who might join a more liberal community, and worries about the “disappearance” of the Jewry and the Jewish tradition, and also about excessive liberalism. The exclusion from the Jewish religious institutions and the discussions in the Jewry made the existential situation of the Sim Shalom Congregation difficult and narrowed down its possibilities.

### ***3.3.2. The interpretation of changes***

During the decades of the transition period more and more answer-alternatives were given to the question what it meant to be a Jew and how it was possible to live as a Jew in the Hungarian society, and how the relationship between tradition and modernization could be interpreted, or in certain cases reconsidered. The process accelerated in the Jewish religious and secular fields between 2005 and 2008. In 2005 the diversity emerging in the Jewry was admitted on the level of organizations, and the scientific circles also started to reflect on it. Besides the already existing institutions and ideologies the individuals and groups attached to the Jewry began to search for and set up new ways, organizational and communication forms, which included the online space, Jewish blogs and fora as well. As a result of this process diversity, and the plurality of thoughts and institutions become a value in the Hungarian Jewry, which creates a societal context where the progressive communities can also find acceptance and partnership.

In setting up and strengthening organizational contacts, and in the tonality of the interpersonal and institution-level communication with representatives of other communities old acquaintances, personal contacts (in Granovetter's term: the strength of weak ties), the acceptance of plurality as a value, and the acceptance that progressive Jews are different play an important role. Individuals and groups belonging to the various Jewish organizations make acquaintances on online and offline fora where global and local questions are discussed, and in connection with some themes they turn with curiosity to different opinions and practices, including the progressive ones.

It seems that conversation and the new ties launch certain processes, change the attitude, and create concrete results or possibilities, which until now could not be achieved by the progressive communities in their official, organizational and congregational capacity. All this seems to justify my preliminary assumption that behind the improvement in the situation of the progressive organizations we should not look – directly and mostly – for internal reasons but for external, societal changes and their effects. However, the internal resources were able to enhance the positive effects and to stabilize the achieved results.

I pointed out that we can consider the Hungarian Jewish religious and secular milieu as a field in Bourdieu's terminology where there is a fight for specific fractions of capital (for economic, ritual-cultural resources, for recognition and acceptance) on one hand, and on the other hand for the redefinition of the game rules (for the acceptance of the reform communities, and for the reconsideration of the Jewish status, that is “who is considered to be a Jew”), and there is also a struggle among the leaders of the field (neology and its institutions) for retaining capitals and the game rules. During this fight the progressive communities activate their capitals (their personal and

institutional network, their leaders' knowledge capital, recognition and prestige, and also their members' cultural and human capital while undertaking tasks), and aim at finding access to new ones (to gain financial resources and material donations, to establish partnerships, to build their knowledge capital, and to create their image). (cf. Bourdieu 1978, 2000; Lengyel – Szántó 1998)

From year to year they try to create the conditions for their operation with their members' and supporters' assistance (membership fees, donations, designation of 1% of their personal income tax) and volunteer work, and as well as from funding sources, foreign support, and the (financial and ritual-material) donations of the progressive faith communes and individuals.

In the last few years, seeing their common interests and the role they play in the Hungarian Jewry the leadership of the two communities established diplomatic relations, and they think, write and talk about each-other as the “other” Jewish reform organization.

### **3.4. What characterizes the progressive Jewish identity option and who finds it appealing**

#### ***3.4.1. What does the progressive alternative offer and who does it attract?***

Each Hungarian progressive Jewish congregation offers education about Judaism and liturgy, song learning, interpretation of source texts, cultural opportunities and children's programmes. In Sim Shalom the bigger interest in Jewish religious education is more articulate, though it is due to the bigger membership as well, so the education of liturgy and the Hebrew language, and the activities for children are differentiated according to age and the level of knowledge. Bet Orim offers more programmes for getting acquainted with Jewish culture, the historical and contemporary Jewry, and in the framework of this they organise open-university lectures, film clubs, literary evenings and performances. Both communities try to reach everybody interested in the Hungarian Jewry by offering them the possibility to join the life and programmes of an open, liberal community, to learn about Jewish culture and religion, and to develop the Jewish identity.

In the beginning the congregations grew through the personal network of their members. Later people who read about them, got attracted by their programmes, met their representatives on external events, or just found their website also joined the communities. Some were attracted by the programmes while others by the philosophy of the stream, the friendly community, one particular person (religious leader, friend) or the possibility to learn. Many joined the congregation after losing a close relative, while others during their individual search for identity.

Nowadays the options offered by the Hungarian congregations mostly address those who have been living rather isolated from Jewish traditions, and would like to get closer to Jewish culture and traditions through extending their knowledge and gaining experience. The communities are open to

everybody who shows interest, and they welcome those living in mixed marriages or having mixed origin too. They especially attract those men and women who even in a religious context need the freedom of thoughts, the emancipated concept and practice, and the possibility of free choice. The majority of those frequenting the progressive communities are intellectuals, mostly with a university degree. These results support my preliminary assumptions.

Groups calling themselves a community can be considered as a community in the terminology of sociology as well. (This is how they think about themselves, and the outsiders also see them as a community.) Their members as a social group share the same goals which they carry out together, and they have a sense of “us”. The members and the supporters always highlight the emotional aspects and the friendly atmosphere among the characteristics of the communities, which mean an attractive and retaining factor for them.

### ***3.4.2. Identity (re)construction in progressive communities***

People joining the progressive communities have multiple identities: Hungarian, Jewish and European (or other). They would like to experience their Jewish identity within the framework of Hungarian culture, and try to harmonize their two identities.

We can divide those who join the communities into two groups on the basis of how their identity changed after becoming a member of the congregation. One group of them did not have strong Jewish identity before, and after spending some time in the congregation their identity got stronger, became emotionally more intense, and richer in content. The other group already had strong Jewish identity, and this is why they joined a Jewish congregation. In these cases their Jewish identity gained more colours and content, and their progressive Jewish identity also developed. It is true for both groups that the reactive (and hiding) aspect of their Jewish identity decreased.

Their Jewish self-identity orients (but does not determine) their interest, social contacts, and attitude and attention towards certain topics. It is also visible in their interest in Jewish topics, in the need for extending their knowledge, in their cultural and media consumption, as well as in their orientation towards Jewish traditions and in reviving certain religious-cultural practices.

### ***3.4.3. Characterization of the attitude towards Jewish religion and tradition***

Some of the people joining the congregations always had interest in the Jewish tradition, in other cases it livened up through individual (adolescent or adult) search for identity, or through a decisive encounter or reading experience. Members of the progressive Jewish communities follow more habits and tradition than earlier, in their childhood families. The only exceptions are those who were

born before the world war and lived in practicing families where the traditions were preserved, but later drifted away from the religion – compared to the past they follow less now. (cf. Kovács 2002)

Some people attend the congregation's programmes not because of a religious-spiritual interest but rather due to the community itself or to some intellectual interest. Others, as they gain more knowledge and become more experienced in liturgy, start enjoying these moments more, get closer to the religion too, and become open to accommodate new knowledge. Taking on Jewish traditional elements takes place in small steps, after an internal drive, learning and preparation. Deeper religiousness of the private sphere (with daily prayer, blessings, increasing attention to the laws of kosher diet) is characteristic to a narrow (but widening) circle. In Sim Shalom, in the younger generation the growing interest in religion, the more active participation in the congregation's religious life, and the revival of more religious-cultural practice has become rather noticeable in the last few years (one of their young members even started his rabbinical studies). In Bet Orim, among young people the need for spirituality has also become stronger. This tendency seems to confirm my preliminary expectations.

#### ***3.4.4. The development of Jewish and progressive Jewish identity***

Parallel to the (re)construction of Jewish identity not only the Jewish but also certain progressive Jewish self-identity, so to say congregational identity developed in the members of the progressive communities, which in most cases is based more on the feeling and knowledge of belonging to the community, and the identification with the values and ideology of the stream than on the concrete religious worship, so it can rather be interpreted as a cultural than religious self-determination. The most important aspects of religious-congregational attraction are the sense of belonging to the community, getting acquainted with and cherishing traditions, learning, and the possibility for developing individual and collective identity.

I agree with Eisenstadt (1992: 273) who claims that nowadays certain elements of tradition and the act of following them have become the symbol of collective identity, and finally the means and manifestation of experiencing Jewish self-identity. I see their importance in culture preservation and continuity too. Learning about and cherishing traditions feed individual and collective memory, demonstrate and strengthen ethnic and group identity, give meaning and value to the legacy of the past, and help preserve that for future generations.

The funding and later-coming members of the congregations spoke about the construction process during which a strong(er) and more secure Jewish identity, also colourful in content, was built from the feelings and knowledge. These “identity-stories” are not only told during interviews but – and this is much more important – also in front of and for the community. These stories are told during transition rites as reflections not only on the personal history but also on the Jewish history and

doctrines while looking back on one's whole life, the family and personal life story (and its societal context), and considering the changes that have been triggered off after joining the community. These stories are very important not only for the individuals but also for the community. Personal identities were formed in the community through the interactions with community members and common activities, experiences. They represent feedback and confirmation for the community: about the realization of its goals, its operation, the importance of its role in identity development, and in the personal, family, community and social continuity of passing on traditions and developing Jewish identity. These stories also strengthen collective (community, Jewish and reform Jewish) identity.

#### ***3.4.5. Social basis and support of the progressive movement***

The situation and external perception of the progressive communities improved, and due to their wider visibility and internal development their membership and sphere of influence, along with their social basis and support grew. Their membership consists of about a hundred, and their sphere of influence of a couple of hundred persons. However, it is also indisputable that people do not join the progressive communities en masse. Facts show that it is not the progressive Judaism where the majority of Hungarian Jews searches for and finds answers. Copying and adapting the model very popular in the west does not automatically result in the same success. It appeared in a different era, during different societal conditions, needs and historical experience, so –as I pointed out in the ideological framework of *multiple modernities* – the future of religious reform and progressive alternative can have several layers and directions depending on the relationship between societal conditions and the forthcoming societal changes.

### **3.5. Place and role of the progressive movement and the two congregations in the Hungarian Jewry**

The progressive communities provide possibilities to get closer to the Jewry, to gain knowledge, and to enrich and express Jewish identity. They support the development of individual and collective Jewish identity through cultural, community and spiritual experiences. Their liberal, modern view and practice make a Jewish life-form attractive and liveable which feeds the sense of individual and collective Jewish self-identity through the revival of Jewish religious-cultural practices. Thus their adherents and supporters believe that the movement and certain progressive communities play an essential role in the (re)construction of Jewish identity, in getting acquainted with and preserving Jewish traditions, and finally in preventing the complete loss of Jewish identity among the Hungarian Jewry. They believe that the progressive communities can reach those layers that would not join

traditional congregations, and that they make Jewish culture and tradition reachable and popular for people with a secular way of life too.

Thus it is probable that for many people the (religious, tradition-cherishing and cultural) identity options offered by the progressive Jewish communities will become an appealing alternative in the long run. At least the followers of the stream see its future hopeful.

### **3.6. Interpretation of the return to the Jewish religious-cultural tradition**

When analysing the results of the research I came to the conclusion that in case of the individuals and their groups it is *not* the *religious conversion* that is behind their interest in Jewish traditions and the religion, or their choosing communities offering religious service too, but the *sense of their Jewish identity*, and their *search for grasping and expressing self-identity* (either with religious belief or without it). I pointed out certain ethnic elements in the background of their sense and expression of Jewish self-identity and togetherness. I also found that the sense of ethnic self-identity by itself does not provide enough motivation for studying, cherishing traditions or joining a community: it is the *desire for the individual and community experience, the (re)construction and the expression of their Jewish identity, and the individual and collective search for identity that form the individual and social actions.*

My experience confirms Kovács's (2002a) thesis according to which it is not the religion's popularity that is in the background but rather the younger generations' urge to *get away from the stigmatized identity* of the older generation, and the *search for a new identity*, which in their case means the interest in Jewish culture and the revival of certain religious-cultural practices. (cf. Mars 2001)

In the background of the return to Jewish traditions and religion I found the approach (cf. Graham 2004; Kovács 2002a) emphasizing the new attempts for definitions, the searches for new identity and diversity an *adequate framework* for the progressive communities as well, because it explains the motivation and social actions of the followers by combining the multi-layer and multi-functional process – the predominantly individual and group-level search and shifts perceivable on the level of society –, and it also expresses the diversity of the communities. It resolves the problems occurring in the description of phenomena in the context of assimilation-theories, religiousness or ethnic return, and also in all the relevant restrictions.

On the other hand, it provides an explanation why a stream which is ready to continuously reconsider the questions of *being a Jew* and *living as a Jew*, and which finds the constant *reinterpretation* (according to the given era and societal conditions) of tradition and the attitude towards it natural can show a potentially attractive alternative in Hungary in the long run.

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## 5. Author's Related Publications and Conference Presentations

### *Articles Published in Refereed Periodicals:*

Szász Antónia [2011]: Alternatív zsidóság. A Bét Orim Reform Zsidó Közösség. *Kisebbségkutatás* (draft accepted)

Szász Antónia [2010]: Progresszív zsidó tanulás. *Iskolakultúra*, 2010/11. sz. pp. 118–133. (ISSN 1215-5233)

Szász Antónia [2008]: Kultúrák diverzitása, modernitások pluralitása. *Kultúra és Közösség* – az MTA Szociológiai Kutatóintézet művelődéstudományi folyóirata. III. folyam, XII. évf. 2008/IV. sz. pp. 5–13. (ISSN 0133-2597)

### *Article Published in Other Periodical:*

Szász Antónia [2009]: Határmezsgyén. Progresszív közösségek a zsidó vallási mezőben. *Publicationes Universitatis Miskolcensis, Sectio Philosophica*, Tomus XVI.-Fasciculus 1., E Typographeo Universitatis, Miskolc, pp. 163–177. (ISSN 1219-543X)

### *Studies Published in Edited Conference-Papers:*

Szász Antónia [2008]: A progresszív judaista mozgalom és a tradicionális zsidó értékek és normák. A hazai mozgalom ideológiája és gyakorlata által indukált társadalmi diskurzus, egyéni és intézményi reflexiók. In: *Értékek és normák interdiszciplináris megközelítésben* (szerk. S. Nagy Katalin – Orbán Annamária) Gondolat Kiadó, Budapest, pp. 97–107. (ISBN: 978-963-693-028-8)

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Szász Antónia [2007]: Interkulturális konfliktus a zsidó vallási mezőben – Intercultural conflict within the Jewish religious field. In: *Valorile Multiculturalității – Multicultural Values* (szerk. Brassai László – Victor Sibianu) Státus Kiadó, Csíkszereda, pp. 270-279. (ISBN 978-973-1764-22-1)

Szász Antónia [2006]: A progresszív judaizmus társadalmi beágyazódása Magyarországon. In: *Az Andorka Rudolf emlékkonferencián elhangzott előadások*. Elektronikus megjelenés. [http://web.uni-corvinus.hu/szoc/doc/andorka\\_konferencia/szasz.pdf](http://web.uni-corvinus.hu/szoc/doc/andorka_konferencia/szasz.pdf)

**Book:**

Szász Antónia [2002]: *Parázs. A magyar asszimilált zsidóság útkeresése. I. Szim Salom Progresszív Zsidó Közösség. Etnoregionális Munkafüzetek 87.* (Sorozatszerk.: A. Gergely András) MTA Politikai Tudományok Intézete Etnoregionális Kutatóközpont, Budapest. (ISBN 963 9218 64 2)

**Book chapters:**

Szász Antónia [2011]: A progresszív zsidó vallási megújulási mozgalom magyarországi helyzetének változása. In: *Kisebbségi és vallási identitás. Dolgozatok az antropológiai kutatómódszertan köréből* (szerk. A. Gergely András – Papp Richárd – Ausztrics Andrea), Nyitott Könyvműhely Kiadó, Budapest. (being published)

Szász Antónia [2011]: Miben hoz újat a reform judaizmus? Hasonlóságok és különbségek a neológ, a maszorti és a reform irányzat között. In: *Kisebbségi és vallási identitás. Dolgozatok az antropológiai kutatómódszertan köréből* (szerk. A. Gergely András – Papp Richárd – Ausztrics Andrea), Nyitott Könyvműhely Kiadó, Budapest (being published)

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Szász Antónia [2010]: „Definíciós és önreflexiós gátlásaink.” – Rékai Miklós gondolatai arról, miért nincs zsidó néprajzkutatás. (Összefoglaló és reflexió.) *Antroport Lapozó* online periodika, 2010. őszi szám; [http://antroport.hu/lapozo.php?akt\\_cim=181](http://antroport.hu/lapozo.php?akt_cim=181)

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Szász Antónia [2004]: Reformzsidó mozgalom – élén egy rabbinővel. *Kistáska – az ELTE Társadalomtudományi Karának lapja*, 2004. november, pp. 7–9.

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**Conference presentations (abstracts / conference papers published):**

Szász Antónia (2010): Kritikus történelmi események nyoma az egyéni és kollektív emlékezetben c. bevezető előadás. „Kritikus történelmi események nyoma az egyéni és kollektív emlékezetben” c. műhelybeszélgetés az MTA PTI Kortárs és Történelmi Zsidó Kutatócsoport szervezésében, MTA PTI Tanácssterem, Budapest. 2010. február 18.

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**Other presentation (presentation and related workshop):**

Szász Antónia (2007): Érték- és érdekütközések. Workshop és műhelybeszélgetések. „Szimbiózis Napok 2007”, „Érték- és érdekütközések” c. blokk, Kortárs Építészeti Központ, Budapest. 2007. május 11–12.