

THREE

THE MIDDLECLASS IN SLOVAKIA BEFORE 1918

Assimilated Jews, including converts to Christianity, made up virtually the whole of the middleclass in Slovakia before 1918.

Since the middle of the 18th century - as I showed above - the Jews in Slovakia, then a part of Hungary within the Dual Monarchy, were permitted to pursue their religion, farm land, send their children to Christian schools, pursue many professions and trade freely. Nevertheless there were some restrictions. They could not hold higher Government posts, occupy the highest echelons in the army, judiciary and the like. As those Jews who converted to Christianity gradually penetrated into professions previously not open to them and became well-to-do, the whole assimilated community gained a middle-class status. By 1918 Jews had not only become more or less integrated with the middleclass in Austria, but in Slovakia they were virtually THE middle-class. The poorer Jews remained not only more orthodox and traditional in the observance and rituals of their religion but the class gap between the two widened.

Yiddish was only spoken by the poor Jews, the others spoke Hungarian and/or German. The middleclass was steeped in Hungarian/German cultural traditions and values. The latter made up the larger part of the middle and upper middle class in Slovakia, sandwiched between the Hungarian land-owning and politicking aristocracy and on the other hand the peasant small holders and manual labourers. Apart from these three main classes there was the lower middleclass of artisans, mainly the hard working ethnic Germans and the central and local government officials (including railway officials who were ranked like the civil servants in central government service). The Jewish middleclass, which I have defined inclusive of converts to Christianity, loyally supported the Emperor and for that reason was more often than not disliked by Slovaks. Slovak anti-semitism was mild compared with the virulent form of Russian and Polish anti-semitism, where it was fanned by the Government. It was as much due to the identification of the richer Jews with the hated Emperor and his oppressive régime, than to the fact that they were Jews or had been Jews. To the Emperor and his Government this middle-class was indispensable not only because of their political support, but because they were the tax-payers and because they provided bankers, lawyers, industrialists, medical doctors and all the other positions essential in a

country aspiring to greatness at the beginning of this millennium. Are Jews a race? an ethnic group? a religious fraternity? I don't think I want to enter this argument here in any detail. Certainly Jews tend to marry Jews, thus perpetuating a "race". But as soon as they have an opportunity to intermarry, they do so, like any other ethnic group. Certainly the poorer ones have kept their religious traditions but as they became more wealthy they either converted or kept only the most tenuous links with the synagogue such as observation of circumcision and bar mitzvah. Jews in Slovakia did not evolve the idea of a "chosen people" and there was little of the nostalgia to "return home to Jerusalem" as developed amongst the oppressed Jews in Russia and Poland. Only after the entry of Hitler on the political stage, did there develop in the 1930s support for Zionism and organisations like the Women's International Zionist Organisation (WIZO) ^{which} collected money for Jewish refugees. The Jewish middleclass considered themselves above all as the Austro-Hungarian bourgeoisie and had all the characteristics attributed to the bourgeoisie anywhere. What feeling of superiority they had was typical of the bourgeoisie, but I think without any arrogance. They looked down on poor peasants and labourers, though treated them better than the gentry treated their pseudo-serfs. Unfortunately these peasants and labourers happened to be mainly ethnic Slovaks, to a lesser extent Hungarians.

By the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, religion was of little importance to the wealthier Jews. Many became Christians as a further step of assimilation, having already changed their names into Hungarian-sounding ones. So Schlesinger became Szemző, Schlüssler became Szilard, Hamburg became Hajos, Löwy became László.

The phenomenon of an ethnic middleclass in Slovakia, different from the other classes in ethnic provenance, was almost unique. There are countries outside Europe where a somewhat analogous situation existed or exists: for instance the Chinese element in Malaysia or as the Indian shopkeepers & merchants used to be in Uganda. I believe, however, that nowhere else was or is the middle class so strictly represented by one loyal ethnic group, distinct from the other classes, as was the case in Slovakia.

My ancestors and parents belonged to this middleclass. They exhibited all its characteristics. For instance they intermarried. There were no fewer than 5 marriages between Schlesingers and Schwitzers, two of the largest clans in Slovakia of Jewish middle class families, in the generations of my grandparents and parents. Grandfather Schwitzer's second wife was a cousin of his first wife. There were two marriages between first cousins. Uncle Josef (Schnuki's

father) married a cousin as did Aunt Boris, George Polgar's mother. Yet there is also evidence that assimilation and emancipation led to the breakdown of conventions and prejudices. On my maternal grandmother's side two of her brothers married English girls (see family tree).

Typical of the process of assimilation, names were Magyarised: grandfather Schlüssler became Szilard, great-grandfather Hamburg became Hajós and some Schlesingers e.g. uncle Béla's family became Szemző. Also true to form we became Roman Catholics.

The real importance is that my ancestors had been middleclass for 2 - 3 generations. Their Jewishness was little in evidence and most became good and devout Christians. Mother and Anni were particularly religious and that comes through in their last communications. So was Boris. Aunt Frieda was transported away from a Catholic convent. They were persecuted, tortured and killed because they were of non-Aryan blood in Hitler's nomenclature but they died as Christians. Rather like the Christianised Jews were thrown to wild beasts in the arenas of Rome because they were Jews but who died as Christian martyrs.

I was born into this middleclass and identify myself with it.