Fenyves, Katalin. ***Képzelt asszimiláció? Négy zsidó értelmiségi nemzedék önképe [Imagined Assimilation? The Self-Representation of Four Generations of Jewish Intellectuals].*** **Budapest: Corvina, 2010. 299 pp., illus.**

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Fenyves Katalin's new book is an important contribution to ongoing debates about the hopes, achievements and failures of Jewish assimilation in Hungary during the long nineteenth century. The title, "*Képzelt asszimiláció?"* (*Imagined Assimilation*), comes from a letter of Lajos Hatvany, written in 1928 at a time of deepening pessimism about Hungarian Jewry's future in the region. The question mark at the end of the phrase suggests Hatvany's divided state of mind, which recognized the objective impossibility of assimilation in Hungary, even while insisting on its subjective inevitability in his own personal life. Fenyves' account tries to trace the historical development of this paradoxical condition, which characterized not only Hatvany, but large segments of assimilated Hungarian Jewry. What was the connection between Jews' enthusiastic linguistic and cultural identification with the Hungarian nation and their increasing marginalization and stigmatization within its social and political life?

Although the anomalies of assimilation provide the subtext of Fenyves' narrative, this is not a history of assimilation in the conventional sense of the word. Indeed, as the subtitle indicates, the book's explicit goal is to explore how four generations of Hungarian Jewish intellectuals experienced and shaped their lives in the context of religious secularization, economic mobility and political emancipation. The object of the book, writes the author, is to find out, "What it was like, on the level of individual experience, lived reality, the 'life world', to be a Jew in Hungary before 1918" (11). The sources for answering these questions are primarily autobiographical accounts of selected groups of Jewish intellectuals, which have been preserved in a remarkable biographical lexicon, József Szinnyei's *Magyar írók élete és munkái (The Lives and Works of Hungarian Writers)*, which appeared between 1890 and 1914. Szinnyei's accounts provide a wealth of information about issues such as name changes and language usage; educational choices and professional opportunities; family relations and marriage strategies; attitudes toward religion, morality and nationality; and finally, social interactions between Jews and non-Jews. These questions constitute the essential organizational frame of each of the chapters devoted to four generations of Hungarian Jews who came of age between 1780-1810, 1811-1840, 1841-1870, and 1871-1900.

Perhaps the most persistent theme that runs like a red thread through the history of these four generations is the problem of naming and language identification. This is hardly surprising if we keep in mind that language usage carried both political and cultural implications within the Habsburg Monarchy as well as in the Hungarian Kingdom. From the time of Joseph II, whose decree of 1787 required all Jews to adopt German family names, Jews' relationship to the state and the nation was closely tied to their language identification. The complexity of Jewish identity lay precisely in an indeterminacy on this crucial issue. Jews living within the Hungarian half of the Monarchy tended to use different Yiddish dialects in the north-west and the north-east of the country, and German and Hungarian in the center. These distinctions, however, do not begin to describe the linguistic practices of Hungarian Jewish intellectuals in the

nineteenth century, who were generally proficient in Yiddish, German, Hebrew, Hungarian, and often in other European languages as well. As Fenyves tellingly notes, it is impossible to establish from existing sources what constituted the primary language of Jewish intellectuals, what their relationship to their various languages was, or what language they dreamed in. Only with the second generation, born between 1810 and 1840, does the process of Magyarization become an increasingly dominant trend, resulting in the mass transformation of Jewish-sounding German names into Hungarian, and the prioritization of Hungarian over German or Yiddish. By the fourth generation, born between 1871 and 1900, Hungarian had become the dominant language of everyday life and cultural exchange, and Hungarian-sounding family and given names had become the norm.

These trends were accompanied by more general transformations in Jewish life, associated with increased educational opportunities, economic expansion and social mobility, which helped create an essentially modern, secularized and individualistic Jewish social world. By the time the forth Jewish generation came of age between 1871 and 1900, Jewish intellectuals had lost all tangible and meaningful relations with Jewish religious traditions and cultural practices. Indeed, many converted to Christianity, either as a means for professional advancement or, on occasion, as a source of genuine spiritual fulfillment. The extreme alienation of this generation from its Jewish roots found articulation in an often-quoted passage by Lajos Hatvany, who considered conversion the only pragmatic and rational option for Hungarian Jews wishing to be accepted by the larger society. "Every enlightened Jewish father," he wrote in 1917, "has a responsibility to raise his children as Christians. For, as Harden put it to justify his own conversion, 'When one goes to a soiree, one puts on a tuxedo.' Outside the ghetto, one cannot walk around in a kaftan, either in the physical or spiritual sense of the word" (257).

The ultimate paradox of Hungarian Jewish assimilation is that even conversion failed to demolish the walls that separated Jews from the rest of the population. Fenyves' explanation of this phenomenon is illuminating and forms the most original part of the book. She suggests in her brief conclusion that the ultimate failure of Jewish assimilation in Hungary lay not only in persisting social prejudice or growing political anti-Semitism from the 1880s on. These were, no doubt, serious obstacles to the integration of Jews within Hungarian society. However, the proces of assimilation itself, which involved a radical transition from traditional Jewish to modern secular values, opened up a new breach between Jews and their host society, which could not be bridged by a common Hungarian culture. While erasing ethnic and religious differences, assimilation helped reinscribe a new kind of cultural difference between Jews and Hungarians, which found expression in Jewish modernization and individuation.

Fenyves provides a textured and nunanced depiction of these complex cultural trends, which are best reflected in the kind of autobiographical literature that she bases her account on. While it would have been helpful to expand her sources to include more traditional social and political evidence, there is no question that she has produced an important study that will undoubtedly open up new avenues for the study of Jewish assimilation in Hungary.