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THE JEWISH
CRITERION
IN HUNGARY

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PREFACE

This book consists of five essays.¹ All are about Jews. And about non-Jews. It could not be otherwise: with the waning of the medieval world, the rise of the bourgeoisie and the advent of secularization, professionalization, and assimilation, the Jews were released from ghetto life and the exclusive hold of Judaism. Jews changed. Their lives and destiny were determined by new relationships, new affiliations and—frequently—new confrontations.

In the modern age, Jews lost the distinctive common history and sense of identity which had hitherto provided the framework and substance of their existence. Their identities diverged. Some wanted to preserve everything from older times, others wanted to—and did—break away. Then came the moment when the chosen self-identity counted for nothing: a common history was forced upon them once again by the logic of origin and race. But an enforced common history was not able to keep together what was had broken apart. After the Holocaust, the divergent story continued, as it does today—but with a shared sensitivity to everything that derives from the Holocaust.

What prompted my interest in the story of Hungarian Jews in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in previous interpretations of that story, is what I sensed as problems. The problems formed into questions, to which I sought answers.

There are innumerable potential problems and questions.

I wanted to investigate why public debate has been confined to the dichotomy of assimilation and dissimilation. What about integration? If this question was not expressed at the time, is it possible to formulate it in retrospect? Can suitable language and terminology be found for something that probably existed but was not mentioned as such? What

about the symbolic Jew? What does he symbolize, and why? How did Jewish identity shatter? And if it has disintegrated, is there some kind of leftover Jewish essence? Is it possible to establish a Jewish criterion? If so, what is it? If not, then why is it mentioned, and what is understood by it? Is origin the most important aspect? Could a viewpoint that declares itself Jewish actually borders on the anti-Semitic construct?

Miklós Radnóti, one of the outstanding Hungarian poets of the twentieth century, was considered Jewish by the anti-Semitic Hungarian government of the time. He was also considered Jewish by Jews who believed in the power of origin. But Radnóti himself did not consider himself Jewish. For me, this is a problem. Or several problems at once. It is easy to make a mistake. We may wrongly perceive the problems; formulate questions wrongly; or find the wrong answers. And we may make the mistake of badly expressing what we want to say.

Nobody has a prerogative in erring. Everybody can do it. I am no exception. At the same time, I am sure of the existence of the problems, and I am sure of my questions. I am somewhat less confident as regards the answers. I am partly affected by intellectual inhibitions, but more importantly, I do not believe in the “right” answer. I prefer to think that I may become part of a long-standing, and still wide-open, discourse. Because the real answer is the discourse itself. This can also help us, perhaps, in ultimately saying properly what we want to say. Perhaps.