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Hospital and School or Fortress and Temple – Jewish community buildings by Béla Lajta

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Abstract

Between 1905 and 1914 all major architectural realisations of the Budapest Neolog Jewish community (i.e. School for the Blind, Hospice) were designed by Béla Lajta. Art historical literature has mostly analysed these buildings in the context of the stylistic trends of period Hungarian architecture. It should not be overlooked, however, that these monumental, ornate edifices with emphatic Jewish character constituted a drastic break with the community's long tradition of building well-planned but architecturally indistinctive welfare buildings. Through the analysis of their reception in the Neolog press and by reinserting them in the context of contemporary political debates this paper attempts to show how these innovative buildings were envisaged and interpreted by different Jewish leaders and intellectuals to convey varying redefinitions of Hungarian-Jewish identity at the end of the liberal era.

Keywords: Budapest, Lajta, Béla, Neolog Judaism, Jewish iconography, welfare, architecture, Wechselmann School for the Blind, Hospice of the Chevra Kadisha of Pest, Egyenlőség journal, Patai, József, Mezey, Ferenc

It is a commonly known fact in specialised literature that many members of the 1900 generation of Hungarian architects, who were receptive for the liberating *art nouveau* ideas and open for the programme of Ödön Lechner regarding the creation of modern national architecture, were of Jewish origin.[1] This community of origin that gave rise to

[1] Viktor KARÁDY: „In addition to the Sociology of the Architect-students of the TU Budapest – at the end of the Dual Monarchy Era (1882–1919) ", *Utóirat – Post Scriptum*, 13, 2013, No. 8,

rather varying interpretations during the last century covered very different individual identities and social situations. A young architect making great efforts to rise from a petty bourgeois community of the countryside had rather different professional opportunities than a fellow architect of the same age who was born to one of the Jewish families of the influential haute bourgeoisie of the capital. These young artists represented quite different attitudes toward their original religious communities as well: the possible scale included points like conversion to Christian faith, total indifference, publicly admitted materialism, traditional religious zeal etc. A leading figure of this generation was Béla Lajta, known as Leitersdorfer until 1908, who was born to a Jewish industrialist and merchant family in Pest in 1873. This was the time when Pest, Buda and Óbuda merged to become the capital of Hungary and a true metropolis of European scale, and also when the Jewish community of the country broke into fractions, one group (Orthodox) following the strict religious traditions and an other (Neolog group) seeking to assimilate into the majority of society by reforming and modernizing the religious rules and customs, lifestyle, and cultural attitudes.[2]

The first known work by Lajta is a competition entry from 1899 for the new synagogue of the Neolog congregation of Pest – that included most of the Jews living in the capital and accounted for nearly one quarter of its population. While the monumental building was never actually realised, Lajta's design was awarded a third prize in the competition and was widely published, thereby making the young architect known to the community.[3] Five years later and as a result of another successful competition, Lajta became directly involved with the Chevra Kadisha of Pest – one of the most significant Neolog associations of the capital – that was becoming engaged in various aspects of social work, while, traditionally, it was in charge of caring for cemeteries and organising funeral services. In 1904, the Chevra hired Lajta to assume responsibility for the technical supervision of the Jewish cemeteries in Pest. While these mundane tasks

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p. 39-41; Rudolf KLEIN: „Secession: un goût juif? – Art Nouveau Buildings and the Jews in some Habsburg Lands", *Jewish Studies at the CEU*, 5, 2009, p. 91-124.

[2] François FEJTO, *Hongrois et Juifs – Histoire millénaire d'un couple singulier*, Paris, Ballands, 1997; Géza KOMOROCZY, *A zsidók története Magyarországon. II*, Pozsony, Kalligram, 2012, p. 101-133.

[3] All mentioned work by Lajta, with every relevant architectural drawing, photographic and archival source described in English can be studied on my website, the Béla Lajta Virtual Archives: www.lajtaarchiv.hu/?lang=en. See also: János GERLE – Tamás CSÁKI, *Lajta Béla*, Budapest, Holnap, 2013.

required little to none artistic creativity, the Chevra was always greatly satisfied with the work of Lajta. It was probably due to these services that in 1905, Lajta was mandated by the Jewish congregation directly, without any competition, to prepare the designs for an important public building – i.e. the Boarding School for Blind Children, whose construction was financed from the foundation of master builder Ignác Wechselmann and his wife. **(Fig. 1.)** In the next decade, Lajta designed numerous awe-inspiring and mostly secular public buildings for the Chevra and the Jewish Congregation, and was also in charge of overseeing their construction works. These included the following projects: 1905-1908: the Wechselmann School for the Blind; 1907-1912: the Hospice of the Chevra Kadisha housing terminally ill patients; 1906-1908: ceremonial and gate building of the Salgótarjáni Street Cemetery; from 1912: the Chevra's Apartments for Homeless Couples and the Home for Blind Adults. Between 1910-1914 the Grammar School of the Pest Jewish Congregation was built according to the designs of the architect – the completion of this project was prevented by WWI and the early death of Lajta in 1920.

In the meantime, he also erected some thirty sepulchral monuments in the two Jewish cemeteries of Pest. This group of works which may be considered exceptional even in international comparison, included a wide range of objects including both minor tombs for relatives of the architect and the intellectuals of the community and monumental family vaults for aristocrats. However, Lajta received no other important architectural assignments from the families that commissioned him to design sepulchral monuments – with the exception of his own family –, and he had very few significant private contracts either. Nevertheless, the most important Jewish community buildings of the capital from the decade leading up to WWI were designed by Béla Lajta, although the local Neolog congregation worked with several other architects as well. Thus, Lajta was not an architect of the Jewish elite in Pest, but he was the semi-official architect of the Neolog congregation, the Chevra, and the Jewish cemeteries.

The special importance of the Jewish charitable institutions (also open to Christian residents in general) lay in the fact that the generous acts of charity looking beyond religious differences was a main positive aspect of the identity and image of assimilated Hungarian Jews. The ancient tradition of charity seemed to be the perfect tool to promote the acceptance of Jews by society, to challenge the negative stereotypes, and

also to keep the connection alive between the congregation and its members that may have grown apart from traditional religious practices.[4] The new institutes that moved in the buildings designed by Lajta belonged to a network of hospitals, orphanages, and schools that had been expanding continuously since the 1870s and extended the reach of social care and services to new areas. However, the architecture of his buildings differed from the previous ones radically.

Our analysis focuses on two works that are innovative and of exceptionally high quality according to contemporary architectural standards of Hungary: the Wechselmann School for the Blind and the Chevra Kadisha Hospice **(Fig. 2.)**, which have been forming part of canonised Hungarian architectural history since the 1930s and have hardly been omitted from any comprehensive work on 20th century architecture.[5] The two buildings are considered to be among the earliest examples of the reception of Scandinavian – primarily Finnish – national romanticism, due to the shape of the openings, the materials used, and especially the picturesque shaping of mass in the School for the Blind, accompanied by elements from Hungarian folk architecture and ornamentation. They are often linked to the slightly later work of Károly Kós and his peers, the "Fiatalok", and thus regarded as important stages of the quest for a national style in Hungarian architecture. It was Ákos Moravánszky who noted in his standard book on the architectural history of the Habsburg Monarchy that the most important clients of Lajta were charitable Jewish organisations and – with reference to John Lukács – he also saw a relationship between the erection of these novel buildings looking for a Hungarian national character and the idea that "the assimilation in Budapest of the Jews – and particularly of the wealthier families – was among the most complete in Europe. (…) Most Jews therefore supported the Hungarian national movement, joined Hungarian organizations – it was easier for them then in many other European capitals – and Magyarized their former German names."[6] According to a recent study by Rudolf Klein, the hybrid iconography of these buildings based on

[4] Miklós KONRÁD: "Zsidó jótékonyság és asszimiláció a századfordulón", *Történelmi Szemle*, 43, 2001, p. 257-285.

[5] Detailed analysis can be found for example in: Imre KATHY: "Lajta Béla", in Lajos NÉMETH (Ed.): *Magyar művészet 1890–1919*, Vol. I., Budapest, Akadémiai, 1981, p. 345-356; Attila DÉRY, *Nemzeti kísérletek építészetünk történetében*, Budakeszi, Plinthosz, 1995, p. 105-109.

[6] Ákos MORAVÁNSZKY, *Competing Visions: Aesthetic Invention and Social Imagination in Central European Architecture, 1867-1918*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) – London, MIT Press, 1998, p. 256-262: 256.

Hungarian folk motives and Jewish religious symbols "gives an architectural dimension to the faith in the emancipation of Hungarian Jews, and even represents the symbiosis of the Jews and the Hungarian people in a physical form".[7]

In this paper, I make an attempt to prove these two excellent researchers wrong, by arguing that the novel and awe-inspiring appearance of these secular buildings by Lajta Béla indicate the doubts of their clients regarding the success of their integration and assimilation, witness their conflict with Hungarian state, and express the Jewish intelligentsia's strengthening discomfort and awareness of the approaching crisis.

The works designed by Béla Lajta for the Jewish congregation were welcomed and applauded in Hungarian art circles almost without exception. The ceremonial opening of the School and the Hospice were covered by most of the Budapest based daily and weekly newspapers, some even featuring photographs and lengthy analyses written by renowned art critics. The two buildings were also covered by domestic architectural and art press (e.g. A Ház, Magyar Építőművészet) in detail and with numerous photographs, as well as by major periodicals abroad (e.g. The Studio in London, and Der Architekt in Vienna).[8] These writings appreciated the functionality and aesthetics of the buildings, and also made some rather sensible and appropriate observations. They discuss the works of Lajta in the context of Hungarian national architectural efforts, most of them also noting that they carry on Lechner's intentions while pursuing new aesthetic ideals and using new architectural tools. While these articles did appreciate the charitable efforts of Jewish organisations, the secular press tended to trace back the novel forms of expression used in these buildings solely to the personality of the designing architect, making no attempt to analyse the intents and goals of the clients.

In the early 20th century numerous Jewish press organs were catering to different readers in Hungary – all papers associated with Neolog Judaism reported on the opening of the two institutes. Egyenlőség [Equality] was an over five decades long influential weekly newspaper, closely related to the leadership of the Neolog congregation in Pest, with extensive readership – while it was primarily a political paper, it also covered

[7] Rudolf KLEIN: "Lajta építészete és a zsidó szellem", in J. GERLE - T. CSÁKI: "Lajta…", p. 41-56: 43.

[8] Béla MÁLNAI: "A vakok tanintézete", *Vállalkozók Lapja*, 29, 1908, No. 52, p. 5–6; d. [István DÖMÖTÖR]: "A vakok új intézete", *Új Idők*, 15, 1909. No. 1, p. 17-18. See the other articles at: www.lajtaarchiv.hu

religious and cultural affairs frequently. In addition to covering the opening ceremonies and publishing the speeches, both buildings were appreciated separately by the deputy-editor Samu Haber, writing under the pseudonym of Sándor Komáromi, in 1908 and 1911, respectively.[9] Of the two articles following and using rather similar approaches and style, the article "A szeretet vára" [Castle of Fraternal Love] describing the Hospice merits closer inspection. In the course of describing the building in detail, the author frequently emphasises one or two architectural elements and presents their presumably typical Hungarian prototypes used in traditional architecture. According to the author, the pediment of the central avant-corps and the conic roofs of the staircase bays recalled peasant houses, the design of the roof windows the old downtown burgher houses in Pest and Buda, the main entrance with tympanum recalled the verandas of old manor houses, and the rubble-clad front an old and giant baronial castle. The description of the indoor spaces emphasises the colourful and bright nature of the interior that was believed by the author to be the result of Lajta employing Hungarian folk art ornaments previously unused by architects and designers. He also believed that the secret to the powerful impact of the building was the internal contrast between its robust, castle-like exterior and the interior expressing gentleness and tenderness. In the view of Komáromi, the character of the Hospice was traditionalist and rustic, bearing the signs and incorporating the artistic and architectural heritage of several groups of Hungarian society – but the Jewish community.

An event without any precursor during the history of the paper, the next issue of Egyenlőség included a stand-alone piece on, and a photograph of the architect who designed the Hospice.[10] The portrait offers an interpretation of Lajta's previous works and of the Hospice using the terminology and phrases of art critics who stood for the Lechner version of national art nouveau in contemporary Hungarian press. According to the article, the novel and Hungarian shapes of the building made Hungarian architecture go miles forward and – since the pioneering work of Lechner Ödön – the Hospice was the first real revelation of mature Hungarian-style architecture. The relationship between the architect, his works, and the community that commissioned them was mentioned only in the final paragraphs of the article, with the following words:

[9] K. S. [Sándor KOMÁROMI]: "Világtalanok világa", *Egyenlőség*, 27, 1908, No. 52, p. 9-11; Sándor KOMÁROMI: "A szeretet vára", *Egyenlőség*, 30, 1911, No. 21, p. 1-2 - Melléklet.
[10] Sándor MEZEY: "Lajta Béla", *Egyenlőség*, 30, 1911, No. 22, p. 158-159.

"Hungarian Jews should be proud again, because they are the source for the conquering genius of Béla Lajta. Now, we stop him for a moment on the path of his rising career to welcome him and to present him with a branch of the future's palm-grove." Thus, in the view of Egyenlőség, the School for the Blind and the Hospice were Hungarian-style works of an architect of Jewish faith and Hungarian identity. Representing a giant leap in the history of modern Hungarian national architecture they also served as evidence for the constructive contribution of local Jews to Hungarian national culture.
Traditionally, the Neolog press appreciated the work and creations of all Jewish artists in this manner – and Egyenlőség reported on Lajta's career before 1908 and after 1911 in the same way as well. It proudly discussed the close relationship between the Jewish institutions and the art of Lajta, as well as the expression of Jewish sentiments in his buildings, while always placing a strong emphasis on the thoroughly Hungarian appearance of those works – implying, that they do not bear any sign of Jewish heritage in their shape and form. As Lajta was a member of the closest circle of colleagues and followers of Ödön Lechner and his art was related to the attempted establishment of a national style, he and his work was perfectly suited for presenting to non-Jewish readers the high level of cultural assimilation of Hungarian Jews, and the value of their works to national culture; also, the reports on the external acceptance and success of the artist serving his community were intended to strengthen the self-respect of Jewish readers.
Shortly after the opening of the Hospice and the publication of Egyelőség's reports, the works of Lajta were presented with a very different approach, but the same level of appreciation, by the Magyar Zsidó Almanach [Hungarian Jewish Almanach], a rather sophisticated and modern-style almanac compiled by József Patai, a young author who used to work as a member of the editorial staff of Egyenlőség.[11] Patai sympathized with Zionism and sought to exceed the denomination-focused Neolog identity he considered to become rather shallow due to the progress of secularisation by developing a new, culture-focused Jewish identity. He also attempted to pique the interest of middle-class and intellectual readers in Jewish culture by publishing pieces of literature and art covering Jewish topics at a high aesthetic level and with novel design and formal

[11] On Patai in English see the memoires of his son: Raphael PATAI, *Apprentice in Budapest: Memories of a World That is No More*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2000.

solutions. The Almanach covered the works of numerous writers, painters, sculptors living in other countries – as well as a single Hungarian artist, Lajta Béla.

"Magyar zsidó építészet" [Hungarian Jewish architecture] was a provocative paper written by József Patai in an attempt to present his agenda.[12] It broke from traditional Neolog discourse radically, and set course to define a particular Jewish architectural style – or at least a Hungarian-Jewish that could be developed into the desired Jewish style later on. In the historical introduction to his essay, Patai made an attempt to clarify the reasons why no such style could have emerged during the long history of the Jewish people. This analysis may be considered to be a Jewish travesty of Lechner's manifestos with complaints concerning the historical lack of a Hungarian national architecture: it describes the external factors and historical disturbances that prevented the development of such a style. Going even further, Patai offers a similar criticism of 19th century architectural historicism that lacked any national character, in an era, that otherwise brought about social and economic prosperity.

According to Patai, Lajta was the only contemporary artist in Hungary in line with the Jewish artistic renewal of the age and being also significant for the purposes of Jewish culture. Patai noted that while there were other artists of Jewish faith in Hungary, "they are Jews only in terms of faith, but their art has nothing to do with the Jewish people". Similarly to Sándor Komáromi, József Patai attempted to characterize the buildings of Lajta through their details and ornaments. However, where the author for Egyenlőség found traditional shapes of Hungarian architecture, Patai noticed a mixture of Hungarian and Jewish motives and a twofold visual play. While Komáromi noticed "clear Hungarian contours" on the main gate of the School for the Blind, Patai described the same gate as showing "Székely [Sekler] motives at first glance, but at a closer look, one might notice the seven-branched menorah and the angled deer frequently used in the illustrations of Jewish codices" kept in the Russian tsar's library in Saint Petersburg. The author for Egyenlőség considered Hungarian peasant houses and country mansions to be the precursors of the pediment and the

main entrance of the Hospice. However, Patai also drew attention to the palm-tree motives appearing between them, on the second floor wall of the avant-corps. While being clearly of Hungarian origin (from Gömör county peasant houses), they also

[12] József PATAI: "Magyar zsidó építészet", *Magyar Zsidó Almanach*, 1, 1911, p. 179-183.

resemble the Tree of Life mentioned in the Bible. Patai also considered these motives to form a single composition with the relief of the pediment depicting Moses with his prayer for his ill sister written in embossed golden Hebrew letters above it. The characteristic use of materials on the buildings was also interpreted differently by the two authors: the extensive use of rubble-stone on the main front of the Hospice reminded Komáromi of an old "giant baronial castle", the same wall covering method – used on the ceremonial building in the Salgótarjáni Street Cemetery – was considered by Patai to represent the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

The interpretation method of Patai is somewhat arbitrary and can hardly be considered as well-grounded, but he also noticed a rather new aspect of the School for the Blind and the Hospice: a clear Jewish iconography appeared on both buildings. By 1911, the Neolog community of Pest had established an extensive network of social and educational institutions, and most of those institutions were located in individual and purposefully designed buildings.[13] While they were designed by renowned Hungarian architects who also worked on numerous public and private buildings, these edifices – e.g. the Chevra Kadisha Retirement Home, or the Hospital and the Institute for the Deaf and Mute of the Neolog Congregation – were simple and utilitarian constructions. **(Fig. 3)** Low price and durability were the main criteria during their design, meaning that buildings were brick-clad without exception, and their fronts were also free of any decoration other than the most basic architectural ornaments. With one exception no Hebrew inscription was displayed on the facades of these buildings – their relationship to the Jewish community was only indicated by the word "Izraelita" [Israelite] or the abbreviation "Izr." appearing in the frieze of the avant-corps entablature.

The overall modest appearance covered buildings of varying architectural distinction – even the different works of the same architect, for example Vilmos Freund, showed significant differences in this respect. Certain works created at the turn of the century (e.g. the Boys' Orphanage and its in-house synagogue, designed by Alfréd Wellisch, or the Girls' Orphanage designed by the Kármán and Ullmann office) were more monumental and more "public building-like" than others.[14] However, none of these

[13] Géza KOMORÓCZY (Ed.), *A zsidó Budapest. Emlékek, szertartások, történelem*, Budapest, Városháza – MTA Judaisztikai Kutatócsoport, 1995, p. 364-395.
[14] n.n.: "Új izraelita fiúárvaház", *Magyar Géniusz*, 9, 1900, p. 859-864; n. n.: "Árvák hajléka", *Egyenlőség*, 20, 1901, No. 48, p. 5-6, 17.

buildings featured any Jewish iconography, sculpture, or Hebrew inscription. These conventions were even followed by some buildings built in the same period as the discussed works of Lajta. A leading Hungarian industrialist, Manfréd Weiss, baron of Csepel, set up two significant foundations in memory of his wife who deceased in her youth. One foundation was offered to the Chevra Kadisha Hospice, this is why the name of Alice Weiss was carved above the richly ornamented entrance of the female ward **(Fig. 4.)**; the other foundation was used to set up by 1910 the Alice Weiss Confinement Home, the building of which was designed by Zsigmond Quittner – also the architect of the Gresham Palace, a true gem of the Budapest art nouveau – and fits into the line of indistinctive Neolog public buildings of the previous decades perfectly.[15]

The buildings of the Neologs – describing themselves as "Hungarians of Jewish religion" – used for religious ceremonies (synagogues, cemetery buildings) followed a "Jewish" style, meaning that they were mainly built using "Oriental" forms different from the styles common in civic architecture; but the congregation's public buildings serving secular purposes were built in the same form as any government or Christian denominational building of the same function. This inornate, almost blank utilitarian architecture was in fact the adequate expression of the identity of the Neolog Jewish community that wished to, and did rather successfully, integrate into the Hungarian society during the liberal era at the end of the 19th century. We do not know of any call for revision of this architectural practice coming from either within or outside of the Neolog community prior to the designing of Lajta's buildings. The Jewish press was proud of the modern and well-equipped facilities built from significant donations of community members, while these buildings also earned the appreciation of the secular public opinion and seemed capable of serving their ideological purposes even without any Jewish characteristics – i.e. they showed the world the philanthropic efforts of the assimilated Jews of Budapest.

However, during the times around 1905 and 1908, the clients who commissioned Lajta to design the School for the Blind and the Hospice felt the need to break this practice for some reason. The school – designed in 1905 and built by 1908 – does not totally disregard the previous conventions, but certainly pushes them to their limits. The fronts

[15] Sándor KOMÁROMI: "Szegény gyermekágyas otthon", *Egyenlőség*, 29, 1910, No. 14, p. 1-3 - Melléklet.

of the T-shaped building are brick-clad, but the utilization of cladding bricks as a homogenous surface, the picturesque asymmetry of the building volume – regarded by contemporary spectators as castle-like –, the unique forms of the openings and the fine detailing made the entire building one of its own kind. The main entrance and the fence – their original design was significantly revised in 1907 – were completed by the end of 1908 and featured wooden, metal, and glass elements with rich ornamentation combining and merging diverse folk motives with a few Jewish symbols (menorah, deer, palm), which certainly went beyond the previous conventions of Neolog architecture both in terms of artistic quality and Jewish character. This was accompanied by an elaborate series of inscriptions partly on the wooden doors of the main entrance, partly – in Braille – on metallic tablets inserted in the fence with excerpts from the Torah and from classical texts of Hungarian literature on sight and blindness or religious faith and patriotism. Hungarian ornaments and simplified versions of the Lechner-style art nouveau brick cladding were also frequently used on the state and municipal schools of the era – but it was clear to all contemporary observers that the School for the Blind made no effort to espouse this standard style of school architecture –, both the brick cladding and the folk ornaments were used by Lajta in an entirely different and novel manner.

The building of the Hospice broke with the conventions of Neolog architecture radically. In addition to the elaborate arrangement of the symmetrical building mass and roof structure, the novel use of materials Hungarian architecture was not used to – i.e. the main front being covered with rubble-stone up to the ceiling line on the first floor – gave the building a monumental impression that was uncommon for hospital architecture. The innovative use of heterogeneous details is also foreign to this genre. It has to be noted, that at the time of its official opening ceremony the ornamental wrought-iron gates of the Hospice and the richly sculptured stone plates flanking the two side-entrances were not even in place. While the Moses-relief of the pediment had already been present on Lajta's competition drawing of 1907, these components only appeared at a later stage of the design process around 1910 and were put in place in late 1911 or 1912. Their iconography was examined in detail by Rudolf Klein: the ornaments include general and well-known symbols, such as the menorah, the star of David, and the symbols of the 12 tribes of Israel – inserted between ornamental stripes

based on motives of Hungarian folk embroidery. The Moses relief and the golden Hebrew inscription of the pediment – rising above the surrounding buildings and trees, thus being a prevailing element of the cityscape – made it clear even to distant spectators, as did the carved stone plates to those entering the building that the charitable institute using the building is of Jewish denomination. The interior design of the building is also unusually pompous: the foyer covered with polychrome marble plates and the main stairway with also marble-clad walls were not a mere service area in a hospital, but the pantheon of Jewish philanthropy with sculptures and inscriptions in marble honouring the founders and donors.

However, this building was started as a regular Israelite building as well. The founding proposal tabled in February 1906 noted that, with regard to the planned building, "a modest approach should be taken in the beginning, in addition to serving future progress", and suggested that the building should have the same size as an existing puritan Catholic hospice in Budapest.[16] According to the terms of the 1906 architectural competition, the front was to be designed using "raw pressed bricks in the most simple style, in line with its purpose".[17] With regard to these expectations and in comparison to the solutions of the other contestants, the winning entry by Lajta was rather monumental. The selection committee – consisting of, among others, architects who designed the Neolog community buildings in the previous decades – did not approve the elevation and ordered the architect to rework it on numerous occasions. In the autumn of 1907, Lajta was instructed to cut the construction costs, so he had to reduce the dimensions of the building, and he was also made to omit the planned stone, brick, and construction ceramics cover of the front and the indoor spaces.[18] While we have much fewer documents at our disposal regarding the later events of planning and construction, it is obvious that the underlying concepts were changed during 1908 and 1909: saving on the budget was not a main criteria any more, and the Hospice was built by 1911-12 with more expensive cladding and more elaborate ornaments than originally planned.

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[16] Ferenc MEZEY, *A Pesti Chevra Kadisa elöljáróságához benyújtott előterjesztés a létesítendő Betegek Otthona (Idült Betegek Hajléka) szervezése tárgyában*, Budapest, Márkus Samu, 1906.
[17] n. n.: "A pesti izr. szeretetház tervpályázata", *Magyar Építőművészet*, 1, 1907, No. 12, p. 26-32.
[18] Hungarian Jewish Archives, Fond XIII: Pest Chevra Kadisha papers, Minutes of the Hospice's Construction Committee, Béla Lajta's report on the differences between the original and the revised design, 19. 11. 1907

What was the reason for this change in concept?

At the turn of the century Jewish groups seeking to assimilate into Hungarian society held an optimistic attitude and positive vision for the future, as they felt more and more accepted by society. After years of struggles for being recognized as a religious denomination that is equal to its Christian counterparts, the corresponding act of Parliament adopted in 1895 was the last significant success of the 19th century assimilation efforts. However, a decade later, the majority of the Jewish intelligentsia was overwhelmed by pessimism.[19] One reason for this was that the government did not actually implement the adopted act on "reception": the Jewish congregations – due to their alleged fragmentation and unlike the Christian denominations – were not granted autonomy, government subvention, nor were they represented in the Upper Chamber of the Parliament. High government offices and academic positions remained closed to the Jews who insisted on their religion, while they had to face increasing competition in the private sector as well. The political fights of the 1890s gave rise to anti-Semitism: the programme to cut back on the "Jewish encroachment" – i.e. to press back Jews from the social and economic positions they acquired during the previous decades – appeared on more and more fields of social life. 1905 is a turning point of this history, because, after the fall of the Szabadevű [Liberal] Party – in power ever since the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise –, the new coalition cabinet included the openly anti-Semite Catholic People's Party that pursued the above agenda. The Neolog leadership found that the Jewish communities and chevras were subject to direct harassment and humiliation during the rule of the coalition cabinet, and public education was overtaken by militant Catholicism.

The Neolog elite did not have a general agreement on the policy to be followed in relation to the increasingly hostile government. The group willing to confront the government in public included Ferenc Mezey: an influential figure in Neolog affaires, secretary of the Chevra Kadisha in Pest, the man who envisioned the Hospice, drafted its architectural program and oversaw its entire construction – and the most important

[19] Miklós SZABÓ, *Az újkonzervativizmus és a jobboldali radikalizmus története (1867-1918)*, Budapest, Új Mandátum, 2003, p. 179-281; Miklós KONRÁD: "Az antiszemitizmus zsidó percepciója Magyarországon az első világháború előtt", *Múlt és Jövő*, 16, 2005, No. 3, p. 70-80.

patron, as well as friend and best man of Béla Lajta.[20] His views were reflected by the editorials – appearing under the title Társadalmi Szemle [Survey of Social Affaires] – of Magyar Zsidó Szemle [Hungarian Jewish Review], which regularly demoted the government policy of religious intolerance after 1905, as it was harmful to the Jewish community and also undermined the structures of liberal Hungarian governance. In response, the paper called for the political organisation of Hungarian Jews. However, it became clear by 1909, that such organisation would not be feasible, presumably due to the lack of support by the Jewish upper haute bourgeoisie that was dominant in the Pest congregation. Thus, the defensive activism shifted to other, indirect, symbolic and cultural fields: the coming years saw an ever increasing number of Jewish organisations aiming to preserve identity and maintain social positions.

The shadow of the political tensions also dulled the opening ceremony of both buildings discussed in this paper: as a demonstrative act, the invited representatives of the cabinet did not attend the opening ceremony of the School for the Blind – which also served Christian children free of charge –, causing outrage both within and outside the Jewish community, as similar events were normally attended at least by the competent minister, but normally by the Prime Minister himself.[21] On the other hand, the Catholic People's Association held a congress in the capital to protest against the "Judaification of Budapest" and to urge the curbing of Jewish influence in local politics, just one week before the opening ceremony of the Hospice. In response to this loud and clear expression of religious hatred, both the chairman of the construction committee of the Chevra and the editor-in-chief of Egyenlőség pointed to the Hospice – the former in his ceremonial speech, the latter in an article – as a noble example of Jewish philanthropy that goes beyond the differences between the various denominations.[22] The jubilee issue of the 30th year of Egyenlőség – with a cover designed by Lajta and displaying the menorah motive of the Hospice's prayer room – was published ten days after the

[20] Ödön KÁLMÁN, *Dr. Mezey Ferenc élete és működése*, Budapest, Mezey Ferenc Emlékbizottság, 1929.
[21] Idem.: "A kormány tüntet", *Egyenlőség*, 27, 1908, No. 52, p. 1-2; n. n.: "Vakok, tanítók, minoriták", *Az Újság*, 6, 22.12.1908, p. 9.
[22] n. n.: "A pesti Chevra Kadisa Szeretetházának megnyitó ünnepélye", in *A Pesti Chevra Kadisa elöljáróságának Jelentése és Kezelési Kimutatása az 1910-iki közigazgatási évről*, Budapest, Márkus Samu, 1911, p. 39; Miksa SZABOLCSI: "Glosszák a vasárnapi antiszemita gyűlésről", *Egyenlőség*, 30, 1911, No. 21, p. 3-5.

opening of the building, featuring – among others – a rather sombre and combative article written by Ferenc Mezey on the situation of the Hungarian Jewish community.[23] Mezey believed that the Hungarian Jews and Jewish organisations, living in an increasingly hostile social environment, needed to stick to their traditional, liberal, humane, and patriotic ideals – including the continuance of charitable acts regardless to religious differences –, but they also had to take resolute and coordinated action to protect their acquired rights and positions. "With regard to the events of our public life, it is impossible for our instincts of lawful defence and self-preservation to remain dormant. We face hostility everywhere. (...) Clericalism is progressing at an enormous speed. Each square-inch conquered by it is a loss for us. Its spread challenges our religious and moral life, and even our legal status, for which we fought. (...) We need to stand up, meet on the barricades, and join our arms against this fierce enemy. (...) Let us fortify our bodies and institutes so that we can stand among the forceful intellectual disturbance."

The context of the articles published in Egyenlőség, describing the School for the Blind, the Hospice, and the career of Lajta sticking to the traditional Neolog discourse is formed by these and similar texts that give a more direct picture of the contemporary social and political tensions than any piece of writing on architecture. I believe that this context must be taken into account in any effort seeking to provide an accurate interpretation of the architecture of these buildings as well. Around 1908-10, Mezey and his peers felt that the efforts to perfectly and smoothly assimilate into Hungarian society failed, since even the perfectly assimilated Jews were regarded as strangers by a significant portion of the majority. It is quite possible that this feeling made them question the sense and purpose of an inexpressive architectural style seeking to make their buildings and institutes fit into the cityscape and the long line of buildings built for the same functions. In Béla Lajta they found the perfect person to design their institutional buildings: someone who collected and studied Jewish religious antiques and pieces of Hungarian folk art with the same eagerness, was attracted to the challenges of monumental architecture, and had proven his talent in this field through his sepulchral monuments. Through the monumentality and singularity of these two buildings, their unique formal solutions, the emphasis placed on the Jewish nature of the

[23] Ferenc, MEZEY: [Letter to the editor], *Egyenlőség*, 30, 1911, No. 22, p. 9-10.

institutes through the extensive use of Jewish iconography, Hebrew texts, and sculptures, the combination and juxtaposition of these motives with those of Hungarian folk art, and even the “castellated” architectural aspect of the buildings – presumably in line with the figurative expressions used in the writings by Mezey – Lajta gave an impressive architectural shape to the new Jewish attitude that could be characterized by self-confidence, and yet a strong attachment to Hungarian national culture, within an increasingly hostile social and political environment.