Jewish Surname Changes in Hungary (19th–20th century)[1]

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Abstract
The paper presents Jewish surname changes as a part of the phenomenon of surname changes in Hungary, as well as a part of the history of Jewish communities in a surrounding majority. It is based on social historical studies and current onomastic research, and applies different sources (as Jewish jokes, original petitions or propagandistic statements of their time) to investigate the social, historical, political and ideological background, and the characteristics of surname changes of the Jews. It gives a summary on the origin of Jewish surnames, analyzes the role of these surnames as symbols of Jewish origin, and the different reasons that made the surname changes so typical for the Jews. It presents the assimilation process of persons and their personal names in general, and the history of Jewish surname changes in Hungarian history. The characteristic features of the surnames chosen and their typical motivations are also analyzed here, also in comparison with those of the non-Jewish society.

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1. The origin of Jewish surnames

The Jews of Central Europe began to use surnames relatively late in their history and mostly as a result of state regulations. In 1787, Emperor Joseph II of the Habsburg Empire (to which Hungary belonged at the time) issued a decree that required the use of unchanging surnames by all of its citizens. This decree also required the taking of surnames – which particularly affected the Jews who had yet to be incorporated into the society of the non-Jewish majority. Similar measures were also taken over the following decades in the German states, France and, later on, in Russia. (Karády and Kozma 2002: 20–23, Kaganoff 1978: 21–22, Mugden 1994–1995 #5, 9.) The aim of the Emperor's decree was the modernization of the state along with the integration of the Jews.

Surnames taken at that time could differ in many aspects from the historic ones, which evolved spontaneously throughout the previous centuries. Thus, the new names often became characteristic of their bearers. The vast majority of Hungarian Jews, not only because of Emperor Joseph II's decree, but also because of their linguistic background, took on German surnames (e.g., *Goldstein, Grün, Klein*). A much smaller portion took on Jewish surnames (e.g., *Katz, Kohn, Levi)*, and only few of them took on names of other origins. (For an overview of this name stock, see Frojimovics 2003.) The proportion of these surname categories within the group of the Jewish name changers of the 50 years prior to 1918 were: 85%, 12.5%, 2.5% (Karády and Kozma 2002: 23). Nevertheless we should remark that this distribution does not necessarily reflect their distribution among the whole of the Jewish population, as the bearers of the less characteristic Jewish surnames should not have been as motivated to change their name as those bearing the most typical Jewish ones*.*

2. Names as ethnic symbols

Through the birth of nationalism, surnames received a special function: they also became ethnic symbols. (For its analysis, see Farkas 2007; Maitz and Farkas 2008.) Surnames of foreign origin began to be associated with the foreign origin of their bearers by their linguistic character or,

more commonly, by the frequency of their occurrence in a given population of society. For example, a Slavic surname likely pointed to a Slavic origin, whereas a German surname probably alluded to German or Jewish roots. The fact that, in the first half of the 19th century, these German-Jewish surnames were only allowed to be altered in case of a religious conversion illustrated that these names could be not 'German enough' (cf. J. Kozma 2007). Moreover, what later became apparent is that when the same names were Hebraized in great numbers in Israel, they could not be regarded as 'Jewish enough' either (cf. Kaganoff 1978: 86–93, Bányai 2007). To what extent personal names were able to reflect Jewish characteristics is marked most significantly by the name decrees of the Third Reich (see Rennick 1970). But the same can also be surmised from a remark made by the head of the Hungarian State of the inter-war years (who was not an active anti-Semite personally), that explained why he was not in favour of Jewish name changes in general: "Den Vogel erkennt man an den Federn" (= 'A bird can be recognised by its feather'; cited in Karády and Kozma 2002: 180).

The adjustment to the dominant linguistic and cultural environment and its name system can be regarded as a natural process. However, it was likely also strengthened by prevailing social, ideological and political factors (cf. Karády and Kozma 2002, Kozma 2007b, Farkas 2007, Maitz and Farkas 2008, Maitz 2008). At a time when Hungarian surnames played a special role in expressing national identity, a surname bearing Jewish characteristics, apart from being 'alien', was also regarded as 'Jewish', thus even more easily stigmatizing the bearer. (For the stigmatization of Jewish names and the subsequent changing of names, see Bering 1987, cf. Singermann 2001: 116–117, etc.) It was not by chance that a new and former Jewish surname would sometimes be mentioned together at that time (and not only in Hungary) when referring to a Jew who had changed his (or her) name. This phenomenon was also reflected in jokes about Jews (and it is also revealing that similar jokes are known regarding double religious conversions as well; Farkas 2003: 157):

– "You have just changed your name from *Grósz* to *Nagy* (= 'Big'). Why did you change it to *Kis* (= 'Little')?"
– "Simply because if someone asks me what my name used to be, I can say: *Nagy*."

The act of changing surnames, due to the vast number of Jews who changed their names, became identified with Jews, not only in Hungary but in other countries too. As per another Jewish joke (Farkas 2003: 157):

– "What should I become? *Kovács? Kopárligeti? Kósavári?* If people hear these names they will say right away: Yes, he should have been a *Kohn*."
– "You should be *Grün*. Nobody will think that you used to be *Kohn* before."

Nevertheless, it also can be added that, before and during World War II, many from non-Jewish backgrounds tried to take back their original non-Hungarian names because they were thought of as Jews because of their changed names (I. Kozma 1997: 414, 440–443).

Finally, name changes among Jews are part of a more complex context than that of any other social groups – as can be simply expressed with a saying (in this case, not from Hungary) regarding the name changers of the Jews: "They can change their name from Moses, but they can't change their noses" (cited in Lapierre 1995: 301).

3. Name change as a Jewish trait

A change in name was considered to be a typically Jewish trait, as recorded by Jewish jokes, e.g., Question: "How do two Jews introduce themselves to each other?" Answer: "My name *was* Feldman. And what *was* yours?"; or: Question: "What is the title of 'Who is Who' in Israel?" Answer: "Who *was* who?" (Cited in Kaganoff 1978: 88; for more jokes on Jewish name changes,

see Frank 1993, Farkas 2003, Spalding 2001 passim etc.) Jewish names, formerly taken or received, inherited from generation to generation, could result in a separation from the majority of the society. As a result, the changing of names also became typical in Hungary where the proportion of the Jews was relatively high, even in comparison with other European countries (before 1918 it was 4.5–5% of the Hungarian population; cf. Karády and Kozma 2002: 76).

In Hungary, the vast majority of the official name changes during the "golden age" of name changes (i.e., between the middle of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century) was the change of surnames of foreign origin or characteristics to ones that sounded more Hungarian. The most typical group of name changers were the Jews, especially during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (1867–1918) which, by its national liberalism, offered a backdrop for their natural assimilation. (For the social and historical characteristics of the course of surname changes in Hungary, see the monograph of Karády and Kozma 2002.)

In historical multi-national Hungary (in other words, the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy), the Hungarian nationality itself only amounted to approximately half of the population. Therefore, in the age of nationalism, the importance of strengthening of the Hungarian nation could be viewed as a natural conclusion from this situation. Because the changing of names was considered to be a symbolic expression of assimilation, the prevailing social environment and the authorities more or less agreed or even supported this action (e.g., with simplified administration, reduced fees.) The Jews, desiring social integration, were therefore prone to willingly change their names and, when the occasion presented itself, took advantage of the opportunity, regularly far over-representing their proportion in society. They typically also formed the majority of name changers during the time of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy; with the exception of one single year, when a strong action within the state hierarchy influenced the rate, pressing many civil servants – typically non-Jews – to change their surnames also. (Meanwhile, the assimilation of Jews to the strongly positioned German population in Hungary, which could be represented by a *Pfeffersamen* > *Pfeffermann* type name change in 1854, was rather rare; the case cited in Telkes 1898: 56.) When considering the strong representation of Jews among the name changers, it needs to be taken into account that the name change is a singular demographic act, i.e., families that had already changed their names would not be part of the group that would later possibly take part in the so-called Name Magyarization (in other word, Hungarianization, i.e., adoption of a Hungarian sounding name).

The special features of Jewish name changes can be explained, on one hand, by their specific names and a kind of stigmatization potentially linked to it and, on the other hand, by the typical social background of the Jews. In general, those who changed their names were usually in frequent contact with the dominant linguistic and social community, were on a high level of social mobility, were modern city dwellers, were better educated, and were those who came from a Hungarian-speaking background. These groups within the Jewish community had a high representation, not surprisingly mostly among the Reformed Judaists. The reasons for name changes can be better appreciated if viewed in the context of the advantages it presented and the disadvantages it eliminated, as influenced by the social factors and historical context of the day.

The changing of names within the Jewish community, especially in those groups of the social profile that were the most suitable for changing names, became a collective social experience, a common pattern. The two, probably most zealous promoters of name changes in Hungary, Simon Telkes and Zoltán Lengyel (establishing non-governmental organizations and writing prominent publications supporting this aim) were themselves assimilated Jews. It is worth quoting Telkes who underlined the importance of name changes sometime at the turn of the century as follows (Telkes 1898: 3–5):

> As one becomes Christian and is admitted into Christian society with the adoption of Christianity,
> one can gain full acceptance into Hungarian society, into the nation with a national baptism by

> changing his foreign name to a Hungarian one. Name must be considered as a political creed of a Hungarian citizen […] Magyarization of the name is an oath of allegiance, a patriotic vow.

For the above-mentioned reasons, Hungarianization of names in dominant society partly became a Jewish question as well, while the diverse views of the public concerning this phenomenon was also connected with how Jewish assimilation was perceived.

Nevertheless, the motivation for Jewish name changes cannot be limited to assimilation of national characteristics. It is also connected with the question of secularization and modernization, and with the role of individualization, as it identified the bearer of the name not as a 'Jew' but as a member of the nation. (Refer to Karády 2001, 2007; Fenyves 2008.) It is also connected to the question that in general the too frequently occurring names were replaced, to some extent, with a wider variety of unique names (up to 20%, according to an extensive study, refer to Forgács 1990: 26–27).

4. Assimilation and Hungarianization of names

The first phase of assimilation, i.e., basic integration by borrowing elements of the material culture, is followed by integrating elements of the psychological-intellectual culture, to which the development of bilingualism and the possibility of a language shift are linked. The mostly German- or Yiddish-speaking Jews were the pioneers of linguistic Hungarianization, far outpacing other minorities in Hungary in this regard. (The percentage of Hungarian-speaking people among Jews in 1880: 59%, in 1910: 77%; while also in 1910 among Germans: 23%, among Slovakians: 17%, among southern Slavs: 19%, among Rumanians: 5%. Cf. Karády and Kozma 2002: 51, Maitz and Farkas 2008.)

In the transformation of Jewish name usage, the first step was the spontaneous adoption, followed by the official adoption, of surnames. This was followed by the usage and giving of first names to Jewish children that originated from, and fitted well into, the dominant name system. Along with that, personal names in Hungary took the form of "surname + first name" in terms of order, which is the usual sequence in Hungarian. (It also needs to be noted that the custom of Jewish name usage could survive in parallel.) The next, and generally the final level of assimilation was the change of surname, which sometimes was preceded by the use of a non-official name (the adoption of a so-called alias). However, in the case of the Jewish community, there was one more factor that separated them from dominant society: religion, which they often changed as well, usually as the last step in their assimilation. The different phases of the assimilation process were sometimes linked, and their order could also be different as was seen before and during World War II among those who tried to sever all ties to their Jewish roots. (For the assimilation process among Jews in Hungary regarding their personal name usage, see Frojimovics 2003, Fenyves 2008. For the assimilation process of foreign surnames in general, see Farkas 2008c.)

The steps in the assimilation process need to be examined not only in the case of individuals but also through successive generations. This was authentically portrayed in István Szabó's film entitled 'Sunshine' (1999). In this film, the ancestor of the *Sonnenschein* family*, Emmanuel*, arrives in Hungary from Galicia in the second half of the 19th century, where, as *Sonneschein Manó*, he becomes the founder of the family factory. His son, *Sonneschein Ignác*, Hungarianizes his surname to *Sors* (= 'Fate') somewhere in the early 1900s to help further his career. His sons inherit this new family name and receive typical Hungarian first names, *András* and *István*. A change in religion also takes place during this generation before the start of World War II. After the war, a member of the next generation of the family, *Iván*, searches for his place in the new post-war world, and the family members who survived the war later change their surnames back to their ancestors' *Sonnenschein.* Although the story is fictional, it is historically plausible, except

perhaps for the last part, as reverting back to an earlier surname, although possible at the end of the 20th century, was not typically done.

5. The history of Jewish name changes in Hungary

A decree in 1814 lifted the 1787 ban on name changes in Hungary, therefore, the history of official surname changes dates from this point in time. (For an overview of this history, see Karády and Kozma 2002.) For Jews, name changes were at first only allowed if accompanied by a religious conversion as well*,* but from the middle of that century onwards, name changes could take place without it. Although Jews were still a minority in the first wave of name Hungarianization that took place in Hungary during the Revolution and Freedom Fight of 1848/49, later the number of Jews who changed their names grew steadily. Most of the members of the first Jewish name-changing generation were mostly middle-aged. In this case, name-changing was an expression of their individual results of their cultural assimilation*.* But the typical name changers of the following decades were members of the younger generations for whom Name Hungarianization was a voluntary, strategic step linked to improving future career prospects. During the decades preceding 1918, the Jews were over-represented ten-fold in Name Hungarianization when compared to other minorities. On average, every 8–12th Jew changed their name while approximately only approximately only 1/100 did the same among other minorities (From 1895 to 1918, on average, only 1/26 Germans, 1/23 Slovakians, 1/40 Rumanians, and 1/238 South Slavs changed their surnames. For these data, see Karády and Kozma 2002: 53, 76–77.)

World War I, the communist rule in 1919, and the implementation of the ensuing peace treaty resulted in a large-scale loss of area and population of Hungary. This fundamentally changed the situation. By that time, the most mobile part of the Jewish population had already Hungarianized their names, whereas some others left Hungary and started lives in other countries. Applications for name changes in Hungary were, for some years, only approved if strict conditions were met, and the number of Jewish name changes was also limited in accordance with an internal quota. Up until the 1930s, the number of name changes grew again, to a proportion which even overtook the figures of the 19th century. What followed is that name changes were, at first, restricted to religious Jews. Then, from 1938 onwards (which was also the year of the first law that limited the rights of Jews in the country), the same restriction for name changes was extended even to Jews who already had been converted*.* A decree was not needed for these restrictions as in several countries under German rule (cf. Kaganoff 1978: 67) since the administrative system for approving the applications could manage it. For the annulment of former Jewish name changes, one of the counties introduced a bill ("so that a Jew cannot be mistaken to be Hungarian"*,* refer to Karády and Kozma 2002: 247–248), but the bill never passed. But at the same time religious conversions became more frequent among the Jews, which may have seemed to be the only way to escape.

During the years following 1945, many surviving Jews got rid of everything, even their names that alluded to their Jewish identity. While the *Pro Domo* notes of the ministerial bureaucracy in Hungary earlier regarded Jewish origin as a reason for rejecting name change applications, they now used it as a strong argument in support of that. (It should be mentioned that the other large group of name change applicants consisted of Germans, who were collectively labeled in a way as guilty of war crimes. The reasons for their often rejected applications are interestingly in parallel with the motivations of the Jewish applications of the previous period.) The communist party sometimes also supported or even requested Name Hungarianization to be applied to their party members of Jewish origin.

By the mid 20th century, the golden age of Name Hungarianization came to an end, and name changes became far less frequent, motivated first of all by the factors of private life and becoming

independent of prevailing ideologies. At the same time, in society and for researchers, the subject became more or less taboo due to its historical, social and political context. Therefore, research in this area has only been gaining acceptance in Hungary over the past two decades (cf. Kozma 2007a, Farkas 2008b; for the bibliography of research on surname changes in Hungary, see http://nevvaltoztatas.elte.hu).

6. Names in the Jewish surname changes

The majority of Jewish descendants in Hungary now use names obtained in the past as a result of name changes. The number of names that are typically Jewish have decreased significantly. For example, in the present-day telephone directory of Budapest, only 5 entries can be found for *Kohn*, 1 for *Grün*, and 3 for *Lévy*. In addition, as already mentioned, the Jewish name changes resulted in new sets of names that were more varied than the names of the original surname stock of the applicants. (In the case of non-Jewish name changes, the variety of names has not been changed statistically.)

In Hungary, just as in other countries, the history of Jewish name changes can be characterized by the choice of simple, common surnames, at least when compared to the choices made by non-Jewish contemporaries (see also Maass 1958: 169, Scherr 1986: 293, etc.). Here, the desire to assimilate as seamlessly as possible, and also a more developed, more civil name taste likely played a role. It can be identified in the case of the adopted names and in their semantic categories as well. Nevertheless, there were also fewer examples among the adopted surnames of the Jews that belonged to an old-type orthography, which were linked to a higher social prestige at the time of Name Hungarianizations. However, it needs to be recognized that these old type orthographical forms were less often permitted by the state for the Jewish applicants.

The Hungarian name changers chose or created new surnames most frequently by deriving them from their original names. The former names of the Jews concerned could, in this way, influence the new set of names, from which, along with the previously-cited examples, typical old > new surname-pairs originate, e.g., *Kohn > Kovács* 'smith' / *Kun* 'Cumanian (ethnonym)' / *Kertész* 'gardener' / *Kardos* 'sword-cutler' / *Kalmár* 'merchant' / *Kemény* 'hard, stiff' / *Komlós* 'hopper'; or *Weisz > Fehér* 'white' / *Vajda* 'voivode (a dignitary)' / *Váradi* 'locality name + -i locative' / *Vidor* 'a first name created in the 19th century'. In these cases, the retaining of the initials; the more or less exact translation of the names; the semantics of the new surnames; and the adjustment to the existing surname system, are all significant. (For more details, refer to Farkas 2008a, 2008c). It is also revealing that there is a popular Jewish joke, which can be cited from many sources, about two Jews travelling by train and, even if they do not know each other personally, the surname of the person coming from the city to the village, can be guessed from his supposed old name – as "it was obvious". (For different Polish and Hungarian variations, see Spalding 2001: 21, Frank 1993: 47–48, Farkas 2003: 156, etc. The typical ways of changing the names are also documented in the jokes, cf. in the literature cited here.)

A comparison of the frequency of new surnames between Jewish and non-Jewish name-changers reveals significant variation. An examination of the "top 10 list" of new surnames of Jews and non-Jews (refer to Table 1) based on a large number of samples from the Austro-Hungarian period (N=32704, an electronic database provided courtesy of Viktor Karády), indicates that there are only two surnames (*Kovács* 'smith', *Molnár* 'miller') that are represented in both lists of this kind. The representational proportion of one of these names, i.e., *Kovács*, which is the most frequent one on both lists, also varies significantly.

Table 1

The most popular adopted surnames of Jews and non-Jews of the Austro-Hungarian period in Hungary

		Among Jews (position / %)		Among non-Jews (position / %)	
Kovács	**'smith'**	**1.**	**2.11%**	**1.**	**1.64%**
Székely	'Secler' (ethnonym)	2.	1.91%	18.	0.56%
Kertész	'gardener'	3.	1.41%	21.	0.50%
Fodor	'curly'	4.	1.31%	50-51.	0.31%
László	'a Christian name'	5.	1.24%	90-96.	0.22%
Vajda	'voivode' (dignitary)	6.	1.14%	178-182.	0.12%
Molnár	**'miller'**	**7.**	**1.10%**	**2-3.**	**1.05%**
Révész	'ferryman'	8.	1.09%	59.	0.29%
Kemény	'hard, stiff'	9.	1.02%	37-38.	0.39%
Radó	(a former first name)	10.	1.01%	139-144.	0.15%

Further research has found more significant differences between lists of surnames exclusively or predominantly chosen by Jews or non-Jews. Based on these findings, it can be hypothesized that, in the formerly existing name-choosing trends among Jews in Hungary, a new grouping mechanism might be detected besides the mechanism associated with assimilation tendencies. (For this analysis, see I. Kozma 2007c.)

The differences in the choice of names can be seen by examining not only the frequency of individual names, but also by looking at the recurrence rate of certain categories of these surnames. Using research results from two studies from two different periods, further comparisons can be made (1. 1897–1908, N=7780: I. Kozma 2007c; 2. 1948, N=400: Farkas 2001: 321). (See Table 2a and Table 2b below.)

Table 2a

Name categories of adopted surnames among Jews and non-Jews in Hungary
(main categories)

	Period of sample taking, proportion of cases			
	1897–1908		1948	
	Jews	non-Jews	Jews	non-Jews
From a place name	12.4%	40.9%	40.9%	67.9%
From a first name	22.9%	11.0%	21.2%	4.1%
From a common word	59.4%	41.9%	34.9%	22.8%
Other and special cases	5.4%	6.1%	3.0%	5.3%

Surnames based on place names (and, not uncommonly, pseudo, i.e., non-existing place-names) occurred far more frequently among non-Jews than among Jews. This type is the most typical surname type in the Hungarian surname stock, even if their proportion is lower there than among the surnames adopted by name changes. The surnames based on place names also corresponded more to the romantic taste in surnames, gave more flexibility to unique name formation, and could resemble more closely the names of noble families. In contrast, surnames derived from first names (especially from ones that were used at that time) were more commonly used by Jews, probably also in remembrance of Jewish naming tradition. Deriving names from common words that had a more 'civilian' character were also more popular among Jews. (Joining to Table 2a, this is presented in Table 2b below.)

Table 2b
Name categories of adopted surnames among Jews and non-Jews in Hungary
(surnames from common nouns)

	Period of sample taking, proportion of cases			
	1897–1908		1948	
	Jews	non-Jews	Jews	non-Jews
Ethnic groups	7.8%	5.6%	3.0%	2.9%
Occupation	29.8%	22.8%	20.5%	13.5%
Social / political status / function	5.2%	2.8%	1.5%	3.5%
Characteristics	9.6%	6.5%	4.5%	1.8%
Object, living creature, natural phenomenon	5.2%	2.8%	5.3%	1.2%
Other or uncertain	1.7%	1.3%	–	–

The special features of name choice trends varying in time and in different social groups of the Jewish population deserve further investigation. (Not much attention was paid to these aspects by the corresponding research. But refer to the studies of V. Karády, I. Kozma, and K. Fenyves.)

7. Conclusion

This paper attempted to provide a brief overview of the history, the historical-social function, and the main characteristics of Jewish surname changes, focussing on examples taken from the 19th–20th centuries in Hungary. Recognizing that further research is needed in this area, it is perhaps best to conclude with an anecdote (cf. Farkas 2003: 158) which highlights the complexity of this subject matter area:

Katzmann, who lives in France, complains that his Jewish sounding name causes him a lot of problems:
– "Change it!", advises his friend.
– "What to?"
– "The simplest way is if you just translate word by word. Let's see, *Katz* in French is *chat,* and *Mann* is *l'homme...*"

Note

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