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AN OPERA FIGHTS HUNGARY’S RISING ANTISEMITISM
Rachel Donadio

Ivan Fischer is best known as a first-class conductor whose Budapest Festival Orchestra has entranced audiences worldwide. Last week, Mr. Fischer took on a new role — social critic — when the orchestra gave the premiere of an opera he had composed as a rebuke to what he and others see as growing tolerance for anti-Semitism in today’s Hungary. Based on an infamous 19th-century case in which a group of Jews were wrongly accused in the death of a Hungarian peasant girl, Mr. Fischer’s opera, “The Red Heifer,” is a vivid display of how cultural figures have emerged as some of the most vocal critics of Hungary’s rightward and authoritarian drift under Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

At a time when the traditional left-wing political opposition is hobbled by corruption scandals and its Communist past, Mr. Fischer is among a growing group of artists challenging a government that has tested the ideals of the European Union. The others include the pianist Andras Schiff and a popular theater director, Robert Alfoldi, who was ridiculed by right-wing politicians for his homosexuality.

The tensions in Hungary come as many right-wing parties are on the rise across the Continent and cultural figures from France to Greece to Eastern Europe are starting to respond. At the same time, many former
Soviet countries are wrestling with their identities, pulled between the market and social forces of the West and deeply rooted national tendencies.

But in few places are cultural figures taking as strong a part in the debate as they are in Hungary. Since coming to power in 2010, Mr. Orban’s government has changed the constitution to limit the power of the judiciary and restrict press freedom, civil liberties groups say. More troubling, the far-right Jobbik party controls about 12 percent of Parliament, with a nationalistic, anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant platform unthinkable in most of Europe. “The Red Heifer” is based on a blood libel from 1882 that divided the country much as the Dreyfus affair later did in France. His ambitious composition uses both a full orchestra and a Gypsy band, with references to music from Klezmer to rap to Mozart. The production, featuring adults and children, is set in the 19th century but includes pointed contemporary references. Onstage, a red papiermâché cow stomps on the peasant girl’s foot. Another scene features lively folk dancing by the same crowd that later turns into soccer hooligans blowing vuvuzelas, waving Hungarian flags and calling for retribution against the Jews. After that, the 19th-century Hungarian statesman Lajos Kossuth arrives out of the past, singing in a deep bass-baritone: “I am ashamed by the anti-Semitic agitation; as a Hungarian, I feel repentant toward it, as a patriot, I scorn it.”

In an interview this month, Mr. Fischer said that he had long wanted to write an opera based on the case, but it was the rise of Jobbik that spurred him to action. “In the last one or two years, it came up to me, and I thought, ‘Now I have to write it,’ ” Mr. Fischer said as he sat in the study of his airy home here, near a grand piano and a wall of books in many languages — an island of cosmopolitanism in a country increasingly turning inward. “Culture shouldn’t be interested in day-to-day politics,” said Mr. Fischer, who has also been the principal conductor of the Washington National Symphony Orchestra. “We want to be valid next year and the year after. But I think culture has a strong responsibility to find the essence, the real concealed truth which lies behind the day to day.”

Today, that picture shows Mr. Orban subtly courting voters on the far right, hoping to preserve his majority in elections scheduled for next spring. This has contributed to a climate in which, as part of more generalized criticism against foreign forces — especially the European Union and the International Monetary Fund — it has become acceptable public discourse to blame Jews for the country’s economic problems. Last year, Imre Kertesz, Hungary’s Nobel Laureate novelist, compared Mr. Orban to the Pied Piper and said democracy had never fully taken root in Hungary. That same year, Mr. Schiff, a renowned pianist, stirred debate when he said he would not set foot in his native Hungary while Mr. Orban was still in power. Mr. Fischer, who is Jewish, said he doesn’t feel the same way and is dedicated to the Budapest Festival Orchestra, which receives funds from the government. Still, he has moved his family to Berlin, commuting to remain part of the conversation in Hungary.

The blood libel, known as the Tiszaeszlár (tea-sa-ESS-lar) affair, after the eastern Hungarian town where it took place, is well known in Hungary. Last year, a member of Parliament from Jobbik urged lawmakers to reopen the case, in which the Jews were eventually acquitted of the girl’s death. He was roundly condemned. Indeed, the Orban government has taken pains to separate itself from Jobbik. “There is no cooperation or partnership with Jobbik, and its support is not required for any decision in Parliament,” a government spokesman, Ferenc Kumin, wrote in an e-mail.

The rise of the far right also comes amid a significant Jewish revival in Hungary since the fall of the Berlin Wall. This month, Hungary’s deputy prime minister said in Parliament that Hungarians must accept responsibility for the Holocaust. Next year, Hungary plans to dedicate millions of dollars for programs commemorating the 70th anniversary of the deportation of Hungarian Jews. Mr. Fischer said he welcomed the steps but wished the government would go further, “to isolate themselves from everything that the far-right does.” As part of a family-values campaign, in the past two years, Jobbik politicians have publicly
ridiculed Mr. Alfoldi in Parliament for being gay. He was ousted as director of the National Theater last summer, replaced by a director closer to the government.

While Mr. Fischer is better known abroad than at home, Mr. Alfoldi has become something of a national hero. Before his ouster, Mr. Alfoldi’s productions, from revamped Hungarian classics to Tony Kushner’s “Angels in America,” had been so popular that people camped out all night for tickets. He is now starring on television in the Hungarian version of “The X-Factor,” which he said averages 2.5 million viewers in a country of 10 million. A speech he delivered this month in Vienna about the role of culture in a democracy was widely republished and debated in the Hungarian press. In an interview here, Mr. Alfoldi touched on its themes. “I am not what the government thinks a Hungarian citizen ought to be,” he said. “According to them, a good citizen ought to be Christian, heterosexual, have more than one kid; he should not have a critical attitude and should believe in the past.” He added: “A citizen should not ask questions either. But I think it is the job of a theater director, especially the job of the director of the National Theater, to ask questions, and to ask questions that are important for the whole society.”

Hungary has a vocal civil society. Since 2011, thousands have taken to the streets to protest the government’s changes to the constitution and its new media law. Journalists and analysts say that the changes have not stifled free speech but are a potential threat — a weapon the government could use if it decided to. The result has been self-censorship. (The government denies that the law represses free speech.) After the performance of “The Red Heifer,” audience members debated its impact. “If 700 or 800 people see this opera, it will have no effect,” said Josef Janos. A friend, Katalin Patkos, chimed in. “We shouldn’t be so pessimistic,” she said. “It’s a contribution. How effective a contribution, that isn’t Fischer’s problem.”

In the first half of the 20th century, the political and social perspective of the American Jewish community was defined by its collective experience of anti-Semitism — both in the countries from which Jews had emigrated and, in far more muted form, inside the United States. Four percent of Americans were estimated to be Jewish at mid-century, twice as many as at present. But the Jews of that time were insecure about their place in American society and often unwilling to make a show of their background and faith. They felt themselves a people apart, and they were. It was difficult if not completely impossible for them to live as American Jews entirely on their own terms.

Now the situation is reversed. As an explosive new survey of 3,400 American Jews reveals, 94 percent say they are proud of being Jewish. That data point dovetails neatly with the current place of Jews in American society — a society in which they make up 2 percent of the population but in which there are virtually no barriers to full Jewish participation. American Jews can live entirely on their own terms, and they do. But the stunning finding of Pew’s A Portrait of Jewish Americans — the most comprehensive portrait of the community in 20 years and, in the richness of its detail, perhaps of all time — is the degree to which American Jews are now choosing not to live as Jews in any real sense. Secularism has always been a potent tradition in American Jewry, but the study’s analysis of what being Jewish means to its respondents reveals just how much irreligion has taken center stage in American Jewish life.

There has been a startling increase over the past quarter century of Jews who say they regard themselves as having “no religion.” Intermarriage rates in that group are now at 70 percent. And the proportion of families raising their children as Jews by religion is 59 percent, while only 47 percent are giving them a Jewish
education. Jews are not being driven from Judaism due to social difficulties. Fewer than 20 percent claimed to have experienced even a snub in a social setting, let alone an anti-Semitic epithet, in the last year. Such numbers are not only without precedent in American history; they are without precedent in the millennia-long history of the Jewish people. The Pew survey paints a portrait of a group that feels none of the shame or fear that once played a major role in defining Jewish attitudes toward other Americans. But this loss of shame, and the concomitant growth of pride when it comes to having a Jewish heritage—these have come at a heavy cost, it appears. It is now inarguable that American Jewry, or at least the 90 percent that does not hew to Orthodox practice, is rapidly shrinking, and the demographic trend lines are stark.

The same American Jewish community that is bursting with pride also now regards Jewish identity as a matter of ancestry and culture almost exclusively. Forty-two percent think a good sense of humor is essential to being Jewish; almost exactly the same number, 43 percent, think it means supporting the State of Israel. When asked about the fundamentals of Judaism itself, Jews speak of values and qualities that apply equally to other faiths and are followed just as readily by those who have no faith at all. After all, there is nothing distinctively Jewish about believing one should lead an ethical and moral life or about working for justice. And yet these are the defining characteristics of Judaism for American Jews. Only 28 percent think being Jewish has something to do with being part of a Jewish community. Only 19 percent think it means abiding by Jewish religious law.

This is what happens after several generations of the most highly educated minority group in the United States have allowed themselves and their children to become functionally illiterate about Judaism itself, its belief system, its history, and the obligations of Jewish peoplehood. The Pew data make it abundantly clear that the cultural values of secular Jews have proved to be perfectly portable—they can carry their liberal political and cultural beliefs everywhere without having to carry the Jewish trappings that go with them.

The increasing Jewish desire to give up what is distinctive about Jewish faith and practice while maintaining mushy positive attitudes about their colorful backgrounds and the social-justice aspect of the tradition is more than a recipe for self-extinction. The ingredients have been assembled and mixed, and the dough has begun to rise. American Jewry is on the brink of a demographic catastrophe. And yet here is the paradox: This catastrophe is also a triumph—a triumph both for American Jews and for the American experiment.

The existential crisis that threatens the future of American Jewry has only been made possible by this nation’s embrace of the Jewish people. There is no social or economic penalty to be paid in this country for making an open showing of Jewish identity. Jews face almost no difficulty making friends with non-Jews, working with non-Jews, playing with non-Jews, socializing with non-Jews—or marrying non-Jews. A quarter century ago, a White House aide named Richard Darman desperately offered to provide scoops and inside information to a Washington reporter if she would agree not to reveal he’d been born a Jew and had actually received a bar mitzvah. A few years later, the newly appointed secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, professed herself astounded to discover her parents were Jewish. Albright and Darman, born in 1937 and 1943 respectively, were the last American Jews who would ever imagine the need for such disreputable subterfuges and denials. Consider: Darman served as head of the Office of Management and Budget in 1989. Two decades later, that same post was filled by Jack Lew, an Orthodox Jew who later became White House chief of staff—itself a position previously held by a Jewish day-school graduate (and son of an Israeli immigrant) named Rahm Emanuel, now mayor of Chicago.

The transformation of the fearful, largely passive community into the more assertive ethno-religious group that throws its weight around on national issues is primarily the function of the marginalization of anti-Semitic attitudes that were once part of the American mainstream. In public affairs, that marginalization enabled the creation of the so-called Israel Lobby that inspires fear and loathing from the Jewish state’s opponents. To their frustration, they find themselves opposed by a group that inspires support across the entire spectrum of American politics. A figure such as former Senator Joseph Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew
who observed the Sabbath even when he was the Democratic Party’s vice-presidential nominee in 2000, was admired for his faith, not abused for it.

Thus, even as a rising tide of anti-Semitism calls into question the future of Jewish communities in Europe, and as hatred for Israel becomes a thinly veiled substitute for traditional Jew-hatred around the globe, the acceptance of Jews at every level of American life might be the ultimate proof of American exceptionalism. America is not insisting in any way that Jews assimilate, give up religious practice, or do anything differently. It is Jews themselves who are choosing this path...[for the remainder of this article please use the following link].

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**ON JEWISHNESS, AS THE FIDDLE PLAYED**

*Alisa Solomon*


“Fiddler on the Roof” — created by Jerry Bock (music), Sheldon Harnick (lyrics), Joseph Stein (book) and Jerome Robbins (direction and choreography) and based on the stories of Sholom Aleichem — was a blockbuster success when it opened in 1964, smashing all box office records in its day. The initial production played 3,242 performances, the longest-running show on Broadway for years. There have been four Broadway revivals and countless national tours; some 200 schools across the country put it on each year. As the first work of American popular culture to recall life in a shtetl — the Eastern European market towns with large Jewish populations — “Fiddler” felt tender, elegiac, even holy. It arrived just ahead of (and helped to instigate) the American roots movement. It was added to multicultural curriculums and studied by students across the country in Jewish history units, as if “Fiddler” were an artifact unearthed from a destroyed world rather than a big-story musical assembled by showbiz professionals.

Beyond its continuing vibrant life in the theater, “Fiddler,” like no other musical before or since, has seeped into the culture more widely, functioning in sometimes contradictory ways, which makes sense, since the show’s essential gesture is dialectical: it looks backward and forward, favors both community and individual needs, honors the particular and the universal, struggles between stasis and change, bewails and celebrates. Tevye, the milkman hero, seems to be constantly caught in these opposing forces and, before our eyes, weighs the arguments of every dilemma — on the one hand, on the other hand ...

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“The Simpsons,” “but I have rented ‘Fiddler on the Roof,’ and I intend to watch it.” How could a commercial entertainment do this? How does a work of popular culture glow with a radiant afterlife, illuminating for different audiences the pressing issues of their times? The answer lies in large part in where “Fiddler” came from and how it was made. “It never entered our minds that it was Jewish,” Mr. Harnick recalled. “We all felt the same way about the stories, that they were just very beautiful and we couldn’t wait to work on them.”

Or as Stein liked to put it, “These were stories about characters who just happened to be Jewish.” Robbins kept searching for what he called a special “ordinary” quality for his cast — he didn’t want actors who looked too polished or flashy to be convincing as poor Jews. Yet he and his collaborators also didn’t want actors who, in their view, overplayed some put-on idea of Jewishness. They rejected stereotypical portrayals that showed vestiges of the American vaudeville “stage Jew” with Old Country accents, flailing hands or singsong intonations; they quickly eliminated anyone who seemed to have arrived at the audition hall directly from Second Avenue, which was largely the erstwhile home of the Yiddish theater district, or from the borscht belt. (They did, however, arrange with the Hebrew Actors’ Union — the 65-year-old association...
of Yiddish performers — to audition some of its members.) Robbins’s notes on the show repeatedly sound his contempt for representations of Jews as “lovable schnooks,” and his collaborators shared his concerns.

Whoever played Tevye first would have to combine the general realness Robbins insisted on with the magnetism and virtuosity — the ineffable “it” — that make a Broadway star. The actor would have to live in two places simultaneously onstage: inside the world of the play as a convincing Pale of Settlement patriarch and on the outside of the dramatic action as a crowd-pleasing performer of magnificent feats. And he would have to be equally and constantly lovable in both realms: intimate with audience members and beyond their ken, winning their empathy and their awe.

Zero Mostel and Robbins had briefly worked together, and the once-blacklisted actor and the director who had named names before the House Un-American Activities Committee did not like each other. So Robbins’s eagerness to cast Mostel, and Mostel’s zeal for the part, spoke to both men’s prevailing sense of artistry — they recognized and respected each other’s talents. Even more, the draw of the Sholom Aleichem material trumped their mutual distrust and distaste.

Two more opposite temperaments are tough to imagine. Mostel was confident and free as an actor could be, Robbins a sack of insecurity as a director. Their very bodies exemplified the contrast: an uncontainable, jiggling mass on the one hand, an utterly flab-free, erect carriage on the other. For both of these Jewish artists, albeit in vastly different ways, this project was personal. Mostel would have seemed the perfect choice to Robbins for a deeper reason, too: He represented an image of Jewishness that Robbins had done all he could do to distance himself from but that exerted a pull on him all the same. He described it in one of his journals as a “crude, vulgar, but healthy and satisfied” way of being, a way of saying, “I don’t care what they think.”

Like Robbins, Mostel fought an inner war over Jewish identity, but the enemy fire came from a different place. Mostel never sought to evade his Jewishness — on the contrary — but he rebelled against, and came deeply to resent, the Orthodox practice his parents maintained and expected their eight children to carry forward. The family lived in the concentrated community of some 230,000 Jews in Brownsville, Brooklyn, in 1915, when Mostel was born (his given name was Samuel), and later moved to the Lower East Side. Yiddish was spoken at home and in the neighborhood. Mostel would have made an excellent rabbi, his father thought. Mostel understood that choosing to pursue painting and performance meant leaving his family’s world behind.

The part offered a kind of vindication, a reconciling of Mostel’s past with his present, a means of honoring the background he had to reject in a form that, in itself, expressed, even celebrated, that rejection: playing Tevye on Broadway, he could have his krepplach and eat it too. Robbins, in contrast, had run from a specter of weakness that rose from his ignorance and fear and from his desire for acceptance. Mostel knew what he had given up and could represent it with affection as a trace of the past; Robbins was joyously discovering a cultural wealth that he’d been denied and that the show could display as a gleaming treasure — but crucially, one from long ago and far away.

In different fashions, both men were internally making the show’s primary contradictory gesture: embracing Jewish practice at arm’s length. Through “Fiddler,” Mostel and Robbins — and millions of spectators in the decades to come — could cherish, honor and admire a legacy in the safely secular, make-believe space of a theater. When Mostel blasted into rehearsals after the second week, he started ridiculing Robbins right away. “A couple of weddings in Williamsburg and that putz thinks he understands Orthodox Jews!” he’d snort with a roll of the eyes that seemed to trace the full circumference of the globe. Day after day he found a way to entertain his fellow cast members at Robbins’s expense. And most of the company — especially the younger actors — cheered him on with their laughter.
When they argued at all, it was over substance, and often over Jewish substance. “What are you doing?” Robbins demanded at one rehearsal as Mostel touched the doorjamb of Tevye’s house and then brushed his fingers over his lips. Mostel offered the obvious answer: “I’m kissing the mezuza.” Robbins responded bluntly, “Don’t do it again.” But Mostel insisted that Tevye, like the Orthodox Jews with whom the actor had grown up, would never neglect to make the customary gesture of devotion that acknowledges the case of sacred parchment affixed to doorways of Jewish homes. Robbins bristled. Mostel held firm and kissed the mezuza again. Without raising his voice — in fact, the more emphatic he became, the more firmly and calmly he spoke — Robbins demanded that Mostel stop. The actor relented. And then, when he walked through Tevye’s doorway once more, he crossed himself. He’d made — and won — his point. The mezuza kissing stayed in.

No one was surprised that “Fiddler” swept the Tony Awards, winning as best musical as well as for book, score, direction, choreography, costumes, production and performances by Mostel and Maria Karnilova (as his wife, Golde). Mostel famously accepted his statue noting that, since no one else from the show who had been on the podium that night had bothered to thank him, he would thank himself. Then he carried on a bit in Yiddish.

On Topic

Pope Tells Jewish Community Leaders Christianity and Antisemitism are ‘Incompatible’: Zach Pontz, Algemeiner, Oct. 13, 2013 — Christianity and anti-Semitism are incompatible, the Pope told a group of Jewish community members Saturday during a meeting at the Vatican, the Catholic News Agency reported.

Top 10 Non-Jews Positively Influencing the Jewish Future 2013: Brian Efune, Algemeiner, Oct. 17, 2013 — Since publishing my first annual list of non-Jews who have wielded significant positive influence over the Jewish future, it seems that the popularity of the practice of list-making has ballooned. It is my sincere hope, however, that this list merits special attention, both in the Jewish world and beyond, as the individuals who are featured herein are truly worthy of recognition.

10 Israeli Technologies That Are Changing the World: Sophie Imas, No Camels, Oct. 15, 2013 — Israel has been coined the “Startup Nation”; the country with the highest concentration of startups in the world. Over the past 63 years, thousands of Israeli startups have given rise to innovations in fields as diverse as irrigation; GPS navigation; and cherry tomatoes.

Obituary: Marcel Reich-Ranicki: The Telegraph, Oct. 1, 2013 — Marcel Reich-Ranicki, who has died aged 93, survived the Warsaw Ghetto to become, in the words of one colleague, “Germany’s most read, most feared, most observed, and therefore most hated literary critic”.

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