

The Jewish Identity of Dr. Jon— A Hungarian Jew and first generation Canadian immigrant.

(My interview of April 5, 2012)

I have known Jon for many years. We are both first generation Canadian immigrants. Jon defected from Hungary in 1985 when the open border with Austria made it possible. I have known Jon for almost 25 years first professionally and subsequently as a close friend. In fact we are members of a 2 person parliament that meets every (possible) Sunday at a Toronto Café for breakfast, as an excuse to attempt to solve some of the world's greatest challenges. We never do, but we have a lot of fun and plenty of intellectual stimuli trying. Our most favorite topic is the Israeli-Arab (Palestinian) conflict and the prospects for its resolution as well as geo-politics in general and United States politics and foreign policy in particular. Jon is a staunch conservative and as such is passionately anti-government involvement in individual lives. Jon was born and lived under Communist rule in Hungary for more than a third of his life and feared and hated it. As a Jew, his post trauma is not as much the Holocaust (even though many of his family members perished) as much as life under the oppressive Communist regime. Jon is married to Agnes, a medical doctor herself, a father of 2 boys with one grandson. Jon considers himself and would like all others to identify him as a highly educated, well-read intellectual.

Of all the heady subjects we have discussed and have argued about at our Sunday breakfast meetings over the years, our Jewish identity has never come up as a topic. But on April 5, 2012 it did. Jon was somewhat surprised and possibly taken aback when I tabled the topic. He hardly ever thought about it and was somewhat unprepared. I started the interview by asking Jon: "What in your mind makes you a Jew? In other words complete the sentence: "I am a Jew because..." Jon was hesitating and I think felt somewhat uncomfortable for not being prepared before responding: "I feel that this is the (Jewish) community I belong to" He thought some more and said, almost to himself: "I am not Canadian, I am not Hungarian so if I have to define myself that's what comes closest as identity". He proceeded to think loudly: "having said that I have a problem defining what is a universal Jewish community. I find that Hungarian (Jon is an unaffiliated secular Jew) Jews are different from American Jews or Sephardic Jews, maybe it's just the concept of being Jewish that I belong to in my mind." "What does Jewishness mean to you?" I asked. "It means that I am part of a culture, heritage, an obligation to support the world-wide Jewish community and Israel, to live up to traditional ethical values, to ensure that my off springs including future grandchildren whose mothers may not be Jewish will know their ancestry so they can choose to be Jewish. I also accept my place in and my obligation to past and future generations of Jews" You see, Jon is a non-conformist, actually a contrarian in all other respects. Jon is moving in his chair somewhat uncomfortably and I detect the depth of thought and contemplation that this interview is imposing on him. He continues: "Just as an observation, I have many in fact many more non-Jewish friends, and really good ones, but coming to think of it the closest and most trustworthy friends I have are all Jewish. There is this obvious bond, invisible that binds us together."

"How would you describe being Jewish to someone who truly doesn't know much of anything about Judaism?" I continue to probe. "Well, being Jewish and Judaism are completely two different things in my mind. Being a Jew is what I described before Judaism to me suggests religion and I am not a practicing religious Jew and know little about what it means." "What is your earliest Jewish memory?" I ask. Jon reflects for a moment and says: "At age 4 or 5 I came home from nursery school and repeated some derogatory and anti-Jewish statements I picked up there. It is then that my mother told me that I was Jewish and I shouldn't repeat things like this that are not true." It is clear that Jon, through this interview is in the process of understanding his own Jewish identity, something he may have never focused on with this kind of intensity. "We are still searching for your identity" I commented. "How

about your parents would their identity be a starting point?" He ponders: "My parents were somewhat ambivalent about being Jewish (This was Hungary under Communist Rule after the Holocaust and very assimilated). They never denied being Jewish but cared to emphasize that they were not different from other "Hungarians" Me, I tend to clarify up front with whomever I speak that I am Jewish" One or maybe two final questions: "To what degree is your Jewishness an asset or is it a liability in affecting your self-fulfillment professionally, spiritually etc., as a human being?" Jon responded without hesitation: "I would not give it up for anything; it is a huge asset to me; it gives me a healthy distance from conventional wisdom, and allows me to see things in perspective and differently from the average view (non-Jewish?)." Are all Jews contrarians like Jon? I wonder. I suspect that one could not complete an interview about Jewish identity without this last question: "Have you encountered first hand Anti-Semitism act (s) directed towards you or others you know, and if so, how did you respond to it?" "I have never in my 37 years in Canada encountered overt Anti-Semitism directed towards me or my family and friends. This was not so in Hungary. I encountered it many times in many forms even though under Communism overt Anti-Semitism was outlawed except of course by the state itself, mostly masqueraded as extreme Anti-Israel policies. "

Our interview was over. I collected my notes and was looking forward to making sense out of them in my discovery of Jon's Jewish identity. But Jon wouldn't let me. He asked me if I could give him some time to think about our interview and meet again when he had more time to think about the topic. As we parted I could "see" Jon's mind wheels turning. He truly never spent that much time and focus thinking about it and he needed more time. He made it home safely.

Last Sunday we met again. Jon was well prepared this time. It would appear that he has done some serious soul searching. Now he was the one taking the lead on the topic:

"When people relate to things I's mainly in the context of their direct experience. I would suggest that being born in Israel you read the bible in Hebrew, you studied history you were tested on it so you know all the major events and whatever you relate to in terms of imagery is in that context, a Jewish context. My imagery including what's acceptable behavior, what are the virtues of the society you have to conform to are not Jewish imagery, it's Hungarian imagery. To a very large extent our cultural life was influenced by Jews but these were largely assimilated Jews who had some ambivalence about their Jewishness because they had to succeed in Hungary despite being Jewish. It is an expectation in every society that if you want to be successful you have to comply with the cultural norms. Take for example the German Jews of the 19th century who wanted to be great poets they did what was expected of them. There is also a theory that if I do not exhibit characteristics that are generally ascribed to Jews, they would like me. People do not understand that Anti-Semitism is not about what the Jews do. Anti-Semitism is what they (gentiles) think of Jews irrespective of what the Jews do." Now Jon was within his element. He thought about it, internalized it and was now lecturing (in a good way). "Interestingly given that there was no Jewish education at least not for me in Hungary and given that even my grandfather was secular so this whole Jewish identity was an abstract notion for me." He proceeded: "Despite the fact that most of my father's friends were Jewish they never talked about Judaism per se. Most of my friends are considered Jewish by ancestry but other than that we accepted ourselves as Jews and there was a Jewish way of expressing yourself and thinking, it was not particularly Jewish it was so local that you couldn't tell, even though some of our grandfathers were Talmudic scholars, that it was a Jewish

discourse. ***So when you ask about my Jewish identity it is probably very local, namely a Jewish Hungarian identity.*** “In the words of Professor Higgins: “By God (s)he’s got it!”

Jon is not done. This has gone far beyond him volunteering as a subject for my mid-term academic assignment. I may have touched a nerve. Jon proceeded:” I accept the fact that I am part of the past, it’s about continuity and it matters what my father and grandfather were. I am very proud that the past (heritage) achieved so much. I will do everything within my power to ensure that my successors who will not be 100% Jewish like my grandson (who is half Jewish half Chinese) will know that they came from this past that Hungarian Jews were so famous of hiding it. Mind you I have many non-Jewish friends whom I meet very regularly, but the two or three people with whom I can actually bear my sole, they are all Jews, including you who are Polish by ancestry, which Hungarian Jews despise. Jon is relieved now that he discovered his Jewish Identity and he can afford to use some humor. I should have quit while I was ahead but I couldn’t help it but ask: “Is it important to you for the sake of continuity that your children marry Jews?”. I should have known better. “In my case one married a Chinese American and the other a half Jewish South African , British but she was not raised a Jew rather as a catholic but interestingly enough her characteristics to the degree that there are Jewish characteristics are very Jewish. Did I mind that they married non-Jews? Here I have to make a confession coming from a Jewish Hungarian background I never met in 37 years a Canadian Jewish woman that I would want to marry. So I couldn’t demand from my children to marry a Jewish women mainly because of the characteristics normally attached to Canadian Jewish women who are not very appealing to me. My children have a similar value system and my wife is worse than me in terms of being critical of Canadian Jews.

My younger son for whom it was very important to marry a Jew, he really tried for a year and a half to meet Jewish girls but after 50 dates or so he ended up marrying a non-Jew or half Jew but without a Jewish identity. I had a preference, they had a preference also. In an inter marriage I highly doubt that children who are exposed to a little bit of this or that will choose to become Jewish. The assumption must be that they will not. Is this the end of the chain? The question is if I, who is a 100% Jewish, was I part of the chain? What does it mean that I was part of the chain? The fact is that I accepted being part of the chain without knowing too much about the chain and I married a Jewish women who was also part of the chain but was also totally ignorant about the chain so what is the chain? Religion is important in that you have to be rooted in certain traditions so you are part of a chain and secondly it will give you an opportunity to be part of a community. My advice to my son was that if his son is not going to learn about Judaism at all it would be impossible for him to make a choice later in life that he wants to be a Jew because it is difficult to be a Jew especially when you are secular. My advice to my daughter in law was for him to learn about Judaism as unlike Christianity when you accept Jesus Christ as your savior you are a Christian. Not so in Judaism. After all what’s the difference between a secular Christian and a secular Jew in a modern society particularly if you’re half Chinese?” This is now very personal and Jon sighs and concludes: “

It’s very difficult to have a Jewish identity if you are secular and you do not live in Israel.”

My interview with Jon reinforces in many ways the findings and conclusions of Cohen & Eisen:2001¹. *The importance of childhood memories*: Jon, while an unaffiliated Jew is a proud and committed Jew. It may well be that his early experience in Nursery school and the early discovery of being a Jew and the understanding that Anti-Semitism is not a personal reflection of self and as his mother explained – not true, shaped his pride in and commitment to his Jewish identity. Similarly my second meeting with Jon clearly demonstrates that “What matters to the Jews we interviewed, rather, are powerful individual memories and experiences. Personal journeys and experiences, especially if shared with other family members, are the stuff out of which their Judaism is now imagined and enacted, a Judaism constructed and performed one individual at a time.” I would not rush to define Jon as a post-modernist, yet he fits the pattern recognized by Cohen & Eisen: “Their Judaism is personalist, focused on the self and its fulfillment rather than directed outward to the group. It is voluntarist in the extreme: assuming the rightful freedom of each individual to make his or her own Jewish decisions. As a result, Judaism must be strictly nonjudgmental. Each person interacts with Judaism in ways that suit him or her. No one is capable of determining for others what constitutes a good Jew.”

¹ Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *THE SOVEREIGN SELF: JEWISH IDENTITY IN POST-MODERN AMERICA*, Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints, Jerusalem Center for Public affairs, No. 453 1 May 22001