

**From scientist to scholar:
The turns of Michael Polanyi**

Tibor Frank

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary.
tzsbe@hu.inter.net

*Volume 2
Winter 2012*

*journal homepage
www.euresisjournal.org*

Abstract

This paper surveys the transcultural entanglement of the liberal scientist and scholar Michael Polanyi during the age of political extremism, dictators, and totalitarian regimes. It is an effort to present Polanyi's multiple exiles from Budapest -- through Berlin -- to Manchester in light of changing territoriality, as well as to reconsider his intellectual odyssey from chemistry to philosophy and the use of English as his main scholarly language instead of German, as a transcultural journey.

Polanyi was a perfect example of an outstanding scientist and scholar who found himself situated repeatedly at a territorial and/or cultural border-crossing while he built and maintained a steadily growing, international scientific and scholarly network on two continents. His deep involvement in the contemporary social and political issues of several European countries prepared him for the role he later played in both the world of science and the social sciences. Polanyi's collected correspondence, now preserved at the Joseph Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago, reveal him to be a man of intense and successful networking skills, someone who was able to liaise within his professional circles while working -- seemingly alone -- in his lab or his study. Polanyi's networking should be reconsidered in light of the major perils of the twentieth century: the two World Wars, the Holocaust, the Cold War, as well as the continued suppression of individual freedom and the transcultural movement. To what degree was the relatively free and tolerant legacy of the nineteenth century able to cope with the horrors that enveloped the world for much of the twentieth century? What could one man -- however important -- do to preserve something of the relative territorial freedom that marked the liberal era? Michael Polanyi's work serves as an analytical tool and guide in my attempt to answer some of these questions.

1. Assimilation and conversion

Michael Polanyi and his family belonged to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries generation of Jewish-Hungarians. To understand the long journey, the transcultural entanglement, and the changing territoriality of the Polanyis it is helpful, even necessary, to look at the processes of assimilation and conversion in Hungary and in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.¹ The crucial issues of change began with Jewish migration to the country and continued with a growing measure of Jewish assimilation, which seemed to be one of the most important gateways to opportunity in Hungary. *Magyarization* was a guiding principle in the attempt to strengthen the national identity of a society that was rather disparate and diversified, and in building a Hungarian nation that was — up to the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 — traditionally a composite mixture of ethnic, religious, and language groups of all kinds.

In a country that provided an almost unparalleled measure of religious tolerance before World War I, assimilation could include a language shift, name change, ennoblement, mixed marriage, and religious conversion. This was particularly true in Budapest, a city that was referred to by the contemporary poet Endre Ady as “made by Jews for us” [1]. The change from speaking German or Yiddish to speaking Hungarian, from self-identification as a Jewish family to self-identification as a Hungarian family, from practicing Judaism to practicing Roman Catholicism or various forms of Protestantism, served to integrate Jews into Hungarian society; yet these various forms of assimilation often created a spiritual vacuum, an aura of lost identity, a religious no man’s land.

Assimilation and its various manifestations reflected the measure of psychological insecurity, social uneasiness, and inner unrest felt by generations of Jews in Budapest, elsewhere in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and even beyond [6, 24]. This issue has been explored by a fascinating and growing literature on Jewish insecurity [13, 18, 19, 23, 24, 28]. Ironically, the insecurity of the assimilated Jew was particularly noticeable, revealing in converted individuals and families a tradition abandoned and a set of values yet to be conquered. Transcultural migrations brought with it major advantages but also immense costs: The price of assimilation for religious converts was the loss of roots, both social and psychological; its reward was promotion and social recognition. In the increasingly secularizing world of fin-de-siècle Budapest, it often seemed a reasonable bargain to exchange socially undesirable traditions for the psychological and commercial benefits of a seemingly secure position in gentile Hungarian society. The patterns of assimilation in the Pollacsek-Polányi family reflect these general trends in fin-de-siècle Hungarian society [39].

For those who converted during the World War I era and the immediate postwar years, the benefits were short-lived. Nevertheless, assimilation into Hungarian society provided

¹Parts of this section are based on the author’s article [10].

the Jewish middle class with a set of experiences that prepared them for later successful immigration and naturalization. Their success abroad was conditioned by having already experienced comparable change in Hungary and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. They were prepared for the typical problems of émigrés/immigrants, having already experienced multiple values, double identities, and a sense of living, as it were, in between different societies.

The single most remarkable characteristic of assimilation in Hungary around the turn of the century (and a measure of its success) was manifested in *Magyarization*. The abandonment of the German language for Hungarian was rapid: the number of Jewish German speakers dropped from 43 percent in 1880 to 21.8 percent by 1910, and the percentage of Magyar speakers in Hungary reached 75.6 percent [24]. To some degree, name change — already a frequent phenomenon in Hungary by the 1840s — was also part of this movement: under the Habsburg Emperor Joseph II family names were often changed from Hebrew to German ones, then in the nineteenth century from German to Hungarian, and later among émigrés and exiles, from Hungarian to American or international-sounding names.

The historian Peter Gay, briefly noted the widespread practice of changing Jewish-sounding names in late nineteenth-century Germany. His German examples resemble the corresponding practice in Hungary where the *Magyarization* of Jewish-sounding German names became increasingly customary [11]. The Hungarianization of names became a real movement in the 1880s–1890s and in the two decades preceding World War I when name changes amounted to 2,000–3,000 annually. An estimated 66,000 people of Jewish origin chose a new Hungarian name between 1848 and 1917.² Michael Polányi, Leo Szilárd, Theodore von Kármán, Sir Georg Solti, and Eugene Ormándy — just to mention some of the best-known cases — are all Hungarianized family names. Many German-Hungarians followed similar patterns of name changing and assimilation in the same period, including Ferenc Herczeg, Jenő Hubay, Viktor Rákosi, József Cardinal Mindszenty, and János Szentágothai.

Another avenue of assimilation was mixed marriage. The politically right-wing statistician Alajos Kovács estimated the number of Jewish-gentile intermarriages between the mid-nineteenth century and World War II to be 50,000.³

The boldest and least likely step toward gentile Hungarian society was ennoblement. The late William O. McCagg, Jr. provided a detailed survey of Jewish nobles around the turn of the century [24]. Ennoblement gave the Jewish upper middle class a chance to integrate into Hungarian high society, that is, into the nobility or, ultimately, the higher echelons of the aristocracy; Von Kármán and von Neumann were born into such families.

²Cf. Alajos Kovács, quoted by Miklós Mester [25].

³Kovács considered this a fairly small number: altogether some 0.7% of the Jewish population in the territory of partitioned Hungary. Cf. Alajos Kovács [21]; and the theoretical considerations of Victor Karády [17].



More than perhaps any other change, religious conversion from Judaism to Christianity marked the deepest level of assimilation. Religious conversion seems to have been an indication of a certain type of mental pattern that enabled and prepared some of the émigré intellectuals and professionals to adapt to the challenges of transcultural territorial changes.

The nineteenth century produced a long list of significant individuals who converted, including the French actress Sarah Bernhardt, British statesman Benjamin Disraeli, German poet Heinrich Heine, Hungarian-German violinist Joseph Joachim, the father of the political economist Karl Marx, and the family of the composer Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy [38]. Because of its importance as a social phenomenon in this period, conversion was discussed in a number of novels, short stories, and dramas, both in Europe and the United States, including *Die Jüdinnen* and *Arnold Beer* by Max Brod; *Israël, Après moi, L'Assaut*, and *Le Secret* by Henry Bernstein; *Quelques Juifs* by André Spiré; *Der Weg ins Freie* by Arthur Schnitzler; *Dr Kohn* by Max Nordau; *Az új keresztény* [The New Christian] and *A túlsó parton* [On the Other Bank] by Péter Ujvári [37].

Conversion to Christianity was a familiar form of assimilation in Germany where Jews played a strong role in the “free” professions. Still, as Peter Gay has noted, “The exodus was not massive.” One source estimated the number of converts in the nineteenth century to be around 22,000; however, anti-Semitism produced repeated waves of conversion. Half of Germany’s Jewish academics and most of its Jewish journalists and editors were, in fact, converts. Conversion was, as Peter Gay points out, the “one way to ease ascent on the academic ladder” [11]. When the Jewish medievalist Harry Bresslau complained to his professor Leopold von Ranke that his religion blocked advancement in his career, he was advised to convert. Until the 1870s conversion was essentially the only way to leave Judaism. It was only after 1876 that Prussian legislation made it possible for Jews to leave their faith without adopting another one, a turning point that facilitated escape from Jewish identity.⁴ It was not enough, however, to simply convert and baptize one’s children [11]:

Normally it took several generations, several intermarriages, possibly a change of name and of residence before the past of the new Christian faded into invisibility. Jews generally despised their baptized brethren as renegades, Christians despised them as opportunists. Converts, seeking to win by moving from one camp to another, lost in both. [...]

Everyone understood — everyone, philo-Semite and anti-Semite alike — that even those former Jews who had repudiated Judaism by religious conversion to Christianity, or legal disaffiliation from the Jewish community, were still somehow Jews: it never occurred to treat radicals like Karl Marx or the conservative legal theoretician Friedrich Julius Stahl as non-Jews. Berlin was full of Jewish agnostics, Jewish atheists, Jewish Catholics, and Jewish Lutherans. Indeed, these non-Jewish Jews were, if anything, more conspicuous than those who held, no matter how tepidly, to their ancient label, for they labored under the added reproach of cowardice, social climbing, secret service in a world-wide conspiracy — in a word, self-seeking mimicry. By the nature of things, these non-Jewish Jews were among the most prominent figures on the Berlin intellectual landscape.

⁴Cf. Carl Cohen [4].

Before 1910 the number of conversions in Hungary was relatively small and in the twenty years between 1890 and 1910, only 5,046 chose religious conversion. Although the tendency was relatively new and limited, contemporary urban authors like Ferenc Molnár referred to it as a typically Budapest phenomenon and used it as a major theme in his work as early as 1900 [26]. It took great political upheavals like the revolutions following World War I to turn religious conversion into a mass movement [41].

William O. McCagg, Jr. observed that “in 1919 and 1920 there was a massive wave of conversions out of Judaism among wealthy families. Contingent on this was a great deal of name changing and deliberate expunging of the past[...].” [24]. Between 1919 and 1924, 11,688 Jewish persons (6,624 men and 5,064 women) were baptized.⁵ In 1919 alone, the number increased by 7,146 [40].

The physicist Leo Szilard decided to be baptized in the Calvinist church of Hungary on July 24, 1919 (just before the fall of the Bolshevik-type system of the Hungarian Republic of Councils) at the age of twenty-one.⁶ Michael Polanyi was baptized into the Catholic Church on October 18, 1919 (well into the era of the White Terror), but it is unclear whether this was an act of faith or a practical step to facilitate his employment in Karlsruhe, Germany, where he was to emigrate shortly.⁷ The choice of the date — the last months of 1919 — is noteworthy and follows the pattern suggested by McCagg. In Hungary members of the Jewish intellectual elite could claim substantial rewards in terms of career opportunities and general advancement for converting. As a consequence, some had already started converting earlier in the nineteenth century or their children had at least been baptized. The mathematician George Pólya was baptized a Roman Catholic in Budapest weeks after his birth in January 1888, and the baptismal records identify his parents as Roman Catholic as well.⁸

Mass conversion became a serious proposition only as late as 1917. In a book on Jewish-Hungarian social problems [2], law professor Péter Ágoston suggested that total assimilation and mass conversion was the correct approach to solving the problem of growing anti-Semitism in Hungary.⁹ As a reaction to Ágoston’s proposition, the social science journal

⁵Cf. Alajos Kovács [20]

⁶Kivonat a budapesti VI-VII. ker. faszori református egyház keresztelési anyakönyvéből [Extract from the Baptismal Registry of the Calvinist Church at the Faszor, Budapest, VI–VII District] II. kötet, 14. lap, Budapest, July 24, 1919. Leo Szilard Papers, Box 1, Folder 11, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA.

⁷[Author Not Indicated,] “Polanyi Biography,” Draft of Chapter One, Summer 1979, MS, George Polya Papers, SC 337, 86-036, Box 1, Folder 1, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA.

⁸Keresztlevél [Baptismal Record], Kivonat a budapest-terézvárosi római katolikus plébánia, Kereszteltek Anyakönyvéből, Vol. XXXIV, 6, January 9, 1888. I am grateful to Professor Gerald Anderson of the University of Santa Clara for showing me this document as well as his collection of Pólya documents that were to be transferred to the George Polya Papers, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, CA. It is interesting to note that the godfather of George Pólya was Count Mihály Károlyi’s uncle, Count Sándor Károlyi, one of the great aristocratic landowners of Hungary.

⁹Cf. Mária Ormos [27].

Huszadik Század (Twentieth Century) addressed some 150 leading intellectuals and public figures in spring 1917, focusing public attention on the Jewish question in Hungary.¹⁰ But the Jewish leader Ferenc Mezey considered conversion to be a cowardly device; such people would be seen as opportunists and conversion would not exempt them from future racism [16]. Mass conversions had a modernizing effect within the Jewish community itself in that they forced Jewish leaders to introduce a more liberal, worldly offshoot that was hospitable to new ideas: a Neology faction in addition to the Orthodox majority. Psychologically it was easier for those whose families had earlier changed from Orthodox to Neological theology (roughly the equivalent of “Judaism Reformation” in the U.S.¹¹) to convert from Judaism to Christianity [3, 7, 14, 15, 16, 23, 35, 42].

2. Michael Polanyi’s Copernican turn

The Hungarian-born physical chemist and philosopher Michael Polanyi [Polányi] (1891-1976) was one of the great, versatile minds who left Hungary after World War I. He settled first in Germany, but in 1934 moved on to Britain where he spent the rest of his life.¹²

For people like Michael Polanyi who were deeply rooted in the ideas and ideals of nineteenth-century liberalism and who had a tolerant vision of the world and of science, it was difficult to accept the brutal and manipulative forces of the developing inter-war totalitarian systems. He belonged to a generation of scientists, which, certainly not for the first time in human history, had to witness and were consequently shocked by the misuse of science for terrifying autocratic purposes. Polanyi first became aware of these threats to freedom in the Soviet Union, which he visited several times in 1930, 1932, and in 1935. According to a note in his *Personal Knowledge*, he met with Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin, who even personally tried to convince him “that pure science, as distinct from technology, can exist only in a class society” [34]. As a particular case study, Polanyi’s travels from Hungary through Germany to Britain and the Soviet Union clearly demonstrate that in the mid-1930s there was still an opportunity for knowledge to cross European borders.

In due course the director of the Institute of Physical Chemistry in Leningrad, the future (1956) Nobel laureate, Nikolai N. Semenov, offered Polanyi a department in his institute. Polanyi declined the job but consented to come to Leningrad for regular consultations (for six weeks twice a year).¹³ In about 1932 Michael Polanyi, who previously had some positive

¹⁰Partially republished by Péter Hanák [16].

¹¹For a stimulating contribution to this discussion see Nobuaki Terao, “Oscar Jászi and the Magyar-Jewish Alliance” (offprint, 1997).

¹²This section is largely based on my book *Double Exile: Migrations of Jewish-Hungarian Professionals through Germany to the United States, 1919–1945* [9].

¹³N. Semenov [Semenov] — M. Polanyi Correspondence, 1930–1932, Michael Polanyi Papers, University of Chicago Library, Box 2. Cf. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Chicago, 1990, vol. 10, p. 629; see also <http://www.nobelprize.org/nobelprizes/chemistry/laureates/1956/semenov-bio.html> (downloaded December



views of the Soviet Union [36], came round to the opinion of his brother, who was highly critical of what went on in Stalin's country and, as Karl reported happily to their mother, they reached an understanding: "our views of the Soviet Union that were dividing us for such a long time [and] now considerably coincide."¹⁴ It was at this junction that Polanyi was also forced to recognize the threat of the political change in Germany. He believed in the strength and survival of the tolerant, liberal political and social values of Weimar Germany and believed (almost to the point when it would have been too late for him to leave) that a right-wing takeover was impossible.

Radical shifts in the German political scene seem to have represented a much more fundamental shock to Polanyi than any totalitarian symptoms in the Soviet Union. For the liberal, often left-wing, émigré intellectuals and professionals from postwar Hungary, it was a painful and threatening experience to realize that the country throughout the 1920s had been a reliable haven, would no longer provide political asylum: Weimar Germany was rapidly transforming into the terrorizing *Third Reich* [43]. It was almost unfathomable to him that the free access to the whole of Europe that he had experienced as a young man was about to be lost.

Recalling these changes in a 1944 review of F. A. Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*, Polanyi remembered the bygone world of the nineteenth century with nostalgic longing [30]:

*Some of us still recall that before 1914 you could travel across all the countries of Europe without a passport and settle down in any place you pleased without a permit. The measure of political tolerance which commonly prevailed in those days can be best assessed by remembering local conditions which at the time were considered as exceptionally bad. The domineering and capricious personal regime of Wilhelm II was widely resented, even though it allowed, for example, the popular satirical paper, *Simplicissimus*, regularly to print the most biting cartoons, jokes and verse directed against the Kaiser. Europe shuddered at the horrors of Tsarist oppression, though under it Tolstoy could continue to attack from his country seat in Yasnaya Polyana with complete impunity the Tsar and the Holy Synod, and persistently preach disobedience against the fundamental laws of the State, while pilgrims from all the corners of the earth could travel unmolested to Yasnaya Polyana to pay tribute to him. After less than a generation, say in 1935, we find that all the freedom and tolerance which only a few years earlier had been so confidently taken for granted, has vanished over the main parts of Europe.*

It was the twin experience of Soviet-Russian and Nazi-German totalitarianism -- a shock for Polanyi's entire generation -- that ultimately forced him to take refuge in England. In 1934, when he finally understood the nature of the forces threatening his freedom and the freedom of science in general, he made a "Copernican turn" and changed not only his country

2, 2011) Other Hungarians in Berlin were also invited to work in the Soviet Union: as a young musician, János Kerekes, then in Berlin, was contracted in 1934 by conductor György Sebastyén [Georges Sébastian] who then served as music director of Radio Moscow, though the plan to become his assistant ultimately failed. The contract referred to a "*Verpflegung wie für ausländische Spezialisten*," suggesting that the invitation of foreign experts was routine. (János Kerekes' contract with Radio Moscow, courtesy János Kerekes; taped interview with Budapest Opera conductor János Kerekes, 1988.)

¹⁴Karl Polanyi to Cecile Polanyi, September 27, 1932 [German original], Michael Polanyi Papers, Box 18, Folder 2.

of residence but also his language and, somewhat later, his field of research. In this sense, Polanyi chose a very special, complex form of emigration: first he abandoned medicine for chemistry, then Hungary and the Hungarian language; later he moved from Germany to Britain, as well as from science to philosophy and chose English rather than German as his exclusive language of publication.

It was by having undertaken this enormous change that he was able to work toward refining the social position of knowledge and science. Throughout his long journey from the “peace” of pre-World War I Hungary, through Weimar Germany, and into England, Polanyi promoted democracy and a liberal scientific atmosphere, while broadening his own intellectual horizons from that of a narrow scientific discipline to a wider philosophy of knowledge that was to become sensitive to both ethical and political issues.

3. Berlin: The drama of the 1930s

Polanyi’s philosophical inquiries developed from his scientific investigations as well as from the political drama he witnessed in Germany and the Soviet Union. This was indicated in his 1933 correspondence with Eugene Wigner, who reflected on his friend’s concerns as to the purpose of science and the scientist. “I must admit,” Wigner wrote to Polanyi from Budapest, where he still occasionally returned before settling in the U.S.,¹⁵

that the difficulties that I felt so acutely in Berlin are somewhat blurred here. It is so difficult to speak of these things — I think we are afraid that we may come to a false, i.e. unpleasant result. We have all gone through these questions at the age of 18 and had to give them up as insoluble, and then we have forgotten them. At our age when one is no longer geared so very much towards success, it is more difficult to do so. It seems to be an undertaking of ridiculous courage to be willing to question whether or not all that we have lived for, culture, righteousness, science, has a purpose. [...] I know that you have been dealing with these thoughts for a long time [...] Even if the basic problem is insoluble, when the purpose of science is concerned particularly, [...] the answer must contain the basic questions.

Michael Polanyi had several opportunities to leave Germany before the Nazis took control. In early 1932 the University of Manchester in Great Britain invited him to become professor of physical chemistry.¹⁶ It is important to observe Polanyi’s hesitation to relocate to Manchester in 1932–33. Professor Arthur Lapworth, FRS (1872–1941), senior chair of the Chemistry Department of the Victoria University of Manchester, approached Polanyi with a most favourable, indeed flattering, offer:¹⁷

¹⁵Eugene Wigner to Michael Polanyi, [Budapest,] June 30, 1933, Michael Polanyi Papers, Box 2, Folder 12.

¹⁶This section is based partly on my book *Double Exile: Migrations of Jewish-Hungarian Professionals through Germany to the United States, 1919–1945* [9].

¹⁷A. Lapworth to M. Polanyi, Manchester, March 1, 1932, Michael Polanyi Papers, Box 2, Folder 8.



Before considering any other names, the Committee [appointed by the University] wish to ascertain whether you, Professor Polanyi, would seriously consider the possibility of accepting such a Professorship here if the conditions of appointment were acceptable to the University and to yourself. [...] I wish to add that your name is the only one which the committee has in mind. They do not wish to consider any other name until they know the result of these conversations with you, Professor Polanyi.

The great colloid chemist, Frederick George Donnan (1870–1956), professor of chemistry at University College London declared “that your presence in England would be of enormous benefit to physico-chemical science in this country” and was among his British supporters.¹⁸

However, Polanyi declined to leave Germany, “where I am rooted with the greater part of my being.”¹⁹ He also felt that it was unfair to leave when the country was in such a difficult situation: “I am unwilling to leave a community which is currently in difficulty after sharing the good times earlier,” he replied to Professor Lapworth in Manchester.²⁰ Nevertheless, he started to make inquiries into the situation at the University of Manchester and established a set of preconditions in the event that he should decide to take up their offer. He requested that a new laboratory consisting of a suite of eight to ten rooms be built for him for the considerable sum of £20–25,000, and that it should be equipped with apparatus costing £10,000, complete with eight to ten “personal collaborators” to work with.²¹

The University of Manchester turned to the Rockefeller Foundation for financial support of Polanyi’s new physical chemical laboratories, but was determined to go ahead with the plans even before the Foundation responded. Throughout 1932 intensive planning was carried out to prepare for the venture and in mid-December Vice-Chancellor Walter H. Moberly sent a formal invitation to Polanyi to take the Chair of Physical Chemistry at Manchester for an annual stipend of £1500.²² As late as Christmas 1932 the University was still planning to erect the new building “as quickly as possible” in order to comply “fully with the requirements of yourself and Professor Lapworth.”²³

¹⁸F. G. Donnan to M. Polanyi, London, October 6, 1932, Michael Polanyi Papers, Box 2, Folder 9.

¹⁹Michael Polanyi to Arthur Lapworth, Berlin, March 15, 1932 (German original), Michael Polanyi Papers, Box 2, Folder 8.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹A. J. [?] Allmand to Michael Polanyi, West Hampstead, May 17, 1932, Michael Polanyi Papers, Box 2, Folder 8. Polanyi carefully evaluated the prestige of a British university vis-à-vis a major German research institution. His demands also reflect the outstanding reputation that he enjoyed in Germany and the corresponding level of technical support he received in Berlin and wanted to recreate in Britain.

²²F. G. Donnan to Michael Polanyi, London, May 19, 1932; Arthur Lapworth to Michael Polanyi, Manchester, June 3 and November 27, 1932; Walter H. Moberly to Michael Polanyi, Manchester, December 15, 1932; Michael Polanyi Papers, Box 2, Folders 8 and 10. By comparison, the average professor received £1200 p.a. at the University of Cambridge, according to Nobel laureate Paul A. M. Dirac (Physics 1933). P. A. M. Dirac to John von Neumann, Cambridge, January 12, 1934, John von Neumann Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Box 7, “1933: Some very interesting letters to J. v. N.”

²³E. D. Simon to Michael Polanyi, Manchester, December 22, 1932, Michael Polanyi Papers, Box 2, Folder 10.



In mid-January 1933 Polanyi abruptly changed his mind. Two weeks before Hitler was sworn in as chancellor he finally declined the invitation to Manchester, citing his unwillingness to settle permanently in Manchester and the poor climatic conditions of the area as his main reasons for refusing. But although he initially believed that his military service during World War I would exempt him from the early anti-Semitic legislation of the Third Reich and leave him secure in his position at the university, within weeks he realized the gravity of his mistake. He indicated to his British friends that he had changed his mind again and was now ready “to accept the chair in Manchester on any conditions that are considered fair and reasonable by the University, in consideration of the changes that have occurred since [I refused the position in December] January.”²⁴ It was almost too late, since in the meantime Manchester had invited an organic chemist to take up a post, and although a modest invitation was extended to Polanyi as a third professor, “the University could not give a salary of more than £1250, and as they have in the meantime embarked on other projects as capital expenditure, they would not be able to embark on the proposed new laboratory for at least two or three years.”²⁵ Another invitation in early May 1933 to take up a research professorship in Physical Chemistry at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, also came too late: by then Polanyi, well known in the United States from Princeton to Minnesota, had finalized his arrangements to go to Britain.²⁶

On April 26, 1933 the *Neues Wiener Abendblatt* reported the resignation of Professor Polanyi in Berlin; on July 14 *The Manchester Guardian* announced his invitation to the Chair of Physical Chemistry at the University of Manchester.²⁷

4. Manchester: New language, new field

Once in Britain, Polanyi fought vehemently against the enemies of his new home both outside and inside the country, Nazis and Jewish black marketeers alike. In a singeing attack on the latter “swindlers,” he clearly identified himself as a Jew and repudiated the wishy-washy explanations “of leading Jews on the Jewish offenders in the Black Market” [29]. On this occasion he combined his hatred of the Nazis with a pure, old-world sense of deep-seated honesty, adding:

²⁴Michael Polanyi to F. G. Donnan, [Berlin, n.d.] draft, Michael Polanyi Papers, Box 2, Folder 11.

²⁵F. G. Donnan to Michael Polanyi, London, April 7, 1933, Michael Polanyi Papers, Box 2, Folder 11.

²⁶Thomas S. Baker to Michael Polanyi, May 10 and June 1, 1933, Michael Polanyi Papers, Box 2, Folder 12. Cf. William Foster [8].

²⁷Clippings, Michael Polanyi Papers, Box 45, Folder 3; Box 46, Folder 4.



As disloyal citizens of a great nation at war, these people are despicable; as Jews in a war against Hitler they are beneath contempt. At a time when our nearest kin are being dumped down by trainloads to die in the Ghettos of Poland, when deathcarts piled high with unidentified corpses collected in the streets of these towns can be seen in illustrated papers, there are Jews who form conspiracies in groups up to a dozen to defraud the country on whose victory the avenging of these murders depends, the country whose fall would spell extermination to us all. This is the kind of scum for whom we Jews all together and our small children, and even the descendants of these children, will all be made to suffer if we continue to explain these people away instead of eliminating them [29].

Often chastized for his essentially anti-Soviet stance by his brother, the economist and economic historian Karl Polanyi,²⁸ Michael Polanyi built up and maintained his ill will towards the Soviet Union. Karl's criticism of an unspecified paper of Michael's reveals the differences between the two brothers:²⁹

The greatest pity is perhaps that you did not succeed in getting rid of your antipathy towards the USSR and your sympathy towards capitalism. [...] My impression is that you take the alleged materialism of the Russians word by word and measure the success of their cause accordingly. This is completely without any impact in today's world where Socialists just as much as Fascists set openly anti-materialist goals for themselves. The Communism versus Socialism part is refuted most acutely by the fact that Fascism, which is the only non-Socialist movement of our era, is unwilling to make any distinction between those who would want to nationalize the capital goods alone, and those half-fools (if there are any) who would eliminate the market.

Soon after World War II Michael Polanyi revealed the liberal roots of his "sympathy towards capitalism." According to an appreciative review of his *Full Employment and Free Trade* (Cambridge University Press, 1945) by J. C. Gilbert, his assumption rested upon a "passionate desire for a society in which individual freedom has as full play as possible and he firmly believes that such freedom depends on a system of free competition and capitalism"[12]. In Chapters II to IV Polanyi dealt extensively with the notion of full employment in the Soviet Union. Referring to the Soviet example, he pointed to the difficulties that come with full employment. This was a particularly important subject in postwar Britain, where the pioneering Liberal scholar Sir William Beveridge (Lord Beveridge as of 1946) had published his contribution on the subject in 1944 under the title *Full Employment in a Free Society*. Together with his 1942 Beveridge Report, this was to form part of the social welfare program of the Labour Party. The subject gained prime importance under the incoming Labour administration in 1945, which tried to address this issue without copying the Soviet model. Polanyi's views contributed to the debate at a turning point in British history.

In a 1947 article for *Time and Tide*, Polanyi reflected again on Sir William's 1944 book, declaring: "It was not difficult to recognize, even at the time when Beveridge's book was

²⁸Karl Polanyi (1886–1964) Hungarian-born social scientist, founder of the radical Galileo Circle in Budapest. Left Hungary in 1919 for Austria, later for Britain and ultimately for Canada. Author of *The Great Transformation* (1944), *Dahomey and the Slave Trade* (1966), editor of *Trade and Markets in the Early Empires* (1957). Taught at Columbia University in New York.

²⁹K. Polanyi to M. Polanyi, London, n.d. (193?), Michael Polanyi Papers, University of Chicago Library, Box 17, Folder 13. (Hungarian original).



published, that residual unemployment must not be reduced beyond the point at which the effects of inflationary pressure become harmful"[31]. Just as he was almost everywhere else, Polanyi's article was highly critical of the Soviet system and argued, "I affirm that no modern economy ever functioned, nor ever can function, unless its enterprises are allowed to adjust themselves effectively by direct mutual arrangements on a commercial basis; which I definitely mean to apply also to the Russian system"[31]. At another juncture the British-Hungarian thinker "dedicated to the service of liberty," added his comparative views on totalitarianism where the "effects of a forcible displacement of the traditional *bourgeoisie* could be observed under Hitler and Mussolini and its effects are still with us in Russia. They fall little short of a complete cultural collapse"[31].

A year later, in an article titled "The Case for Individualism," Michael Polanyi vehemently attacked the Marxist "movement for the planning of science" in Britain, which was modelled on the practice of the Soviet Academy of Sciences and allocated "annually to the scientific institutions of the country the problems which required investigation, and each institution then worked out its own detailed plan for the whole year, and assigned a target to each individual scientist"[32]. Reminding his readers of "the 'planning of science' as exercised by Trofim Denisovich Lysenko" (1898–1976), he declared: "It falls to us to fight the false and oppressive doctrine forced upon our Russian colleagues, which even while they are bitterly suffering under it, they are compelled to support in public"[32]. As the Cold War developed into a deadly confrontation, Polanyi became more and more inimical and combative vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, which he called a "pitiless system," and a "merciless movement" in an 1952 review of Alex Weissberg's book, *Conspiracy of Silence*, "the standard biography of Modern Destructive Man"[33].

This old-style liberal, deeply rooted in the world of the nineteenth century, had yet to experience the dictatorial measures exercised by a third country, this time the United States during the McCarthy era. Although he was an avowed anti-Communist, Polanyi was nonetheless denied an entry visa to the United States when he applied for one in 1951 to teach Philosophy of Science at the University of Chicago. Liberal opinion in America, particularly on campus, enthusiastically supported Polanyi. *The Summer Crimson*, Harvard University's weekly paper during summer school session, commented that "Security has fallen into bad hands," on August 7, 1952 and lamented the case of "an eminent man and a thoroughly non-communist." Arguing in a way that may seem familiar to us from the post-9/11 era, *The Summer Crimson* pointed out that [33]

[security] has become the pet crusade of the American Legion and the McCarthys and the little loud men who know a good crusade when they see one. It has become a mysterious word to be rubber-stamped somewhere on a State Department visa application. It has not become what it must be; a careful compromise between the powerful external pressures of totalitarianism and the strong need to keep down totalitarianism at home.

To strengthen its case *The Crimson* quoted Polanyi's letter to *The Manchester Guardian* from early March 1952 in which he stated that he had been "an insistent critic of Soviet Communism ever since 1917 and [his] attitude was never more distinctive and outspoken than during the period of 1942-3, though the popularity of Soviet Russia was at its height in Britain and America at the time..."³⁰ Even *Life* magazine attacked the Internal Security Act of 1950, better known as the McCarran Act, referring to it in an editorial from March 10, 1952 as "The McCarran Curtain" that "shields the U.S. not from Communism but from adequate knowledge of it."³¹ Polanyi was the first of an illustrious group of scholars and scientists mentioned by *Life* who were barred by U.S. authorities from coming to "the land of the free and the home of the brave." "Friends of America," the editorial sternly protested, "are disgusted and disheartened when they hear of the exclusion, even as visitors, of names like these: Michael Polanyi [sic], the Hungarian-British philosopher, Alberto Moravia, the Italian novelist, Dr. E. B. Chain, Nobel Prize chemist, Gustav Regler, German anti-Communist, A. Stender-Petersen, Denmark's leading Slavic scholar, and many others."³²

In its October 1952 issue the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* published a letter written by University of Chicago professors against the refusal to grant Michael Polanyi a visa to enter the United States. The signatories included Lawrence A. Kimpton, Chancellor of the University of Chicago; Professor Samuel Allison, Director of the Institute for Nuclear Studies; Professor Cyril Smith, Director of the Institute for the Study of Metals; and Professor John Nef, Professor of Economic History who declared that they were "deeply concerned with the adverse effects on the intellectual life of the university."³³ Introduced by an editorial entitled "America's Paper Curtain," the special issue of the *Bulletin* published ten articles on the visa measures sponsored by Senator Patrick McCarran, a Nevada Democrat who was making a vigorous attack on the visa and passport policies of the United States Government.³⁴

Together with Joseph McCarthy, Pat McCarran was a leading anti-Communist with a great deal of influence. "Senator Joe McCarthy, the freshman minority-party senator from Wisconsin had no real power, but Senator Patrick McCarran – majority-party senior senator from Nevada, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, master political infighter and populist turned anti-New Dealer and ardent anti-Communist – did," remarked Michael J. Ybarra in his pioneering article on Pat McCarran.³⁵

After his retirement from Manchester University in 1958 and from Merton College, Oxford in 1961, Polanyi was compensated for his humiliating experience during the McCarthy era

³⁰Letters to the Editor: American Political Tests, Michael Polanyi to *The Manchester Guardian*, March 3, 1952.

³¹*Life*, March 10, 1952, p. 30.

³²*Ibid.*

³³*The Daily Telegraph*, October 30, 1952.

³⁴*The Globe and Mail*, October 13, 1952.

³⁵Washington Gone Crazy: Senator Pat McCarran and The Great American Communist Hunt, Part II, *Ralph, The Review of Arts, Literature, Philosophy and the Humanities*, Number 137, Early Fall (2005).

by continual invitations to come to the United States, first from the University of Virginia (1961–1962), then from the Institute of Advanced Studies at Stanford (1962–1963), and Duke University (1963–1964).³⁶

5. Michael Polanyi in retrospect

Michael Polanyi is a perfect example of the complex twentieth-century European intellectual who was able and willing to transgress the borders of countries, science, and scholarship. He seemed to be solidly anchored in the field of physical chemistry while being at the same time a polymath with an admirable interest and expertise in a whole range of different disciplines. For an early twentieth-century scientist he had a wide array of territorial experiences and traveled from the Hungary of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy through Weimar-Germany to Britain, with occasional visits to the Soviet Union and later also to the United States. He gave up his well-established position in science (which some thought would eventually garner him a Nobel Prize)³⁷ and became a philosopher and author of a number of notable books including *Science, Faith and Society* (1946), *Logic of Liberty* (1951), *Personal Knowledge* (1958), *The Study of Man* (1959), and *Beyond Nihilism* (1960), all of which were written in English – his third language.

Polanyi's generation from the immediate pre-World War I period was gifted and ambitious and had been nurtured with politically liberal and sometimes leftist views that were intended on changing the outdated social and political system of their country [22]. Many of this generation became internationally renowned and included eminent people like the philosopher Georg Lukács; the art historians Frederick Antal, Arnold Hauser, and Charles de Tolnay; the film-theoretician Béla Balázs; physicists Leo Szilard, Edward Teller and Nobel laureate Eugene Wigner; mathematicians John von Neumann, John Kemeny and George Pólya; aviation pioneer Theodore von Kármán; film directors Michael Curtiz, Sir Alexander Korda and Joe Pasternak; conductors Fritz Reiner, Eugene Ormandy, George Szell, Sir Georg Solti, Antal Dorati — just to mention some of the more well-known names. Most of them were educated in the spirit of solidarity and networking, qualities that had survived both World Wars to keep this generation together. Michael Polanyi associated with many of the leading intellects of his time, and the scope of his network was truly international and transcultural. The rich, cross-cultural heritage in which his generation was embedded prepared them for the unexpected social, political, and scientific challenges of the twentieth century.

Nobel laureate John C. Polanyi of the University of Toronto commented on the centennial of his father at the 33rd IUPAC Congress in 1991 in Budapest, Hungary:³⁸

³⁶“Obituary: Professor Michael Polanyi, Eminent scientist and philosopher,” *The Times*, February 23, 1976.

³⁷Michael Polanyi's son, John C. Polanyi (b. 1929) actually shared the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1986 with Dudley R. Herschbach and Yuan T. Lee.

³⁸“Comments of the Occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the Birth of Michael Polanyi.” Published by



The National Socialists (the Nazis) in Germany, and the Marxists in the Soviet Union – each of whom engulfed this country [Hungary] in horror – held to the view that what was not part of science could not sensibly be regarded as existing. It followed that morality did not exist, except as a remnant of outdated superstitions. Truth, Justice, and tolerance had been, they believed, shown to be mere impediments to scientific progress.

This was a flagrant distortion of reality. The fact is that science owes its power to its commitment to precisely these values. Science respects opinions which are honestly held — and not because of the race, religion, or social class of the individual who holds the view. Science flourishes only to the extent that it respects the individual and tolerates dissents. Justice is served by requiring each new scientific proposition to prove itself before the court of scientific opinion.

Science does not need to levy fines or impose prison sentences on those who fail to acknowledge the curvature of the earth or the existence of atoms. The truth, if it is indeed the truth, does not need to be established at the point of a bayonet. Nor, if it is not the truth, will a bayonet make it true.

Michael Polanyi is a fine example of imaging transnational liberalism in a moment when this kind of liberalism had all but disappeared. Polanyi introduced an important argument against planned science, and published on the “social message of pure science.”

Although he explained his liberal credo as that of the lonely researcher, Michael Polanyi was far from being an isolated individual in the world of science and scholarship. He was a member of a number of networks in Germany and Britain; he had a large circle of international coworkers, friends, and students and was always ready to support professional networks in the best European tradition. Chemistry, his first major field of study had an extremely well connected and politically active academic community. In addition, Polanyi was a founding member and chair of the Committee for Freedom in Science (founded in 1941), and after World War II, of the anti-Communist Congress for Cultural Freedom (founded in 1950).

As previously mentioned, in the early 1950s Polanyi had visa problems in the U.S. where some saw him as a communist because his brother Karl Polanyi had founded the radical Galileo Circle in 1906 in Budapest. Michael Polanyi was deeply involved in academic networks, although he sometimes thought of himself as a lonely researcher in the best tradition of the nineteenth century. He patronized the Free German League of Culture in Great Britain, which was founded by German and Austrian refugee organizations and British supporters in Manchester, and, while disliking the Soviet Union, he became a member, albeit only for the year 1946-47, of the Society for Cultural Relations between the British Commonwealth and the USSR (founded in 1924) [5].

Michael Polanyi’s self-proclaimed loneliness and *de facto* international networking reflect on a particular moment in the history of science: the gradual transformation of the notion of

Tradition & Discovery, Vol. XVIII, No. 3, 33–34, as well as by *Polanyiana*, vol. 2, No. 1–2, Spring-Summer (1992), pp. 5–6.

a lonely lab devoted to a narrow field, into a discipline involving international and cross-cultural teamwork, the rising interconnections of natural and social sciences, and the growth of social responsibility for science as a whole.

References

- 1 Ady, E. 1977, "Korrobori", in *Ady Endre publicisztikai írásai* [The Journalism of Endre Ady] vol. III (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó), p. 520.
- 2 Ágoston, P. 1917, *A zsidók útja* [The Way of the Jews] (Nagyvárad: Nagyváradai Társadalomtudományi Társaság).
- 3 Barany, G. 1974, "Magyar Jew or Jewish Magyar? Reflections on the Question of Assimilation", in *Jews and Non-Jews in Eastern Europe 1918–1945*, eds. B. Vago & G. L. Mosse (Jerusalem: Keter), pp. 51–98.
- 4 Cohen, C. 1961, "The Road to Conversion", *LBI Year Book*, vol. I, pp. 259.
- 5 Coleman, P. 2006, "A Note on Michael Polanyi and the Congress for Cultural Freedom", *Polanyiana*, 15, pp. 56–64.
- 6 Ettinger, E. 1995, *Hannah Arendt/ Martin Heidegger* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press).
- 7 Farkas, Gy. *Az asszimiláció kora a magyar irodalamban* [The Age of Assimilation in Hungarian Literature] (Budapest: Franklin, n.d.), p. 199.
- 8 Foster, W. 1929, "Princeton's New Chemical Laboratory", *J. Chem. Ed.*, 6, 2094–2095.
- 9 Frank, T. 2009, *Double Exile: Migrations of Jewish-Hungarian Professionals through Germany to the United States, 1919–1945* (Oxford: Peter Lang), pp. 264–269.
- 10 Frank, T. 2010, "The Budapest Roots of Michael Polanyi's Liberalism", *Polanyiana*, 19, pp. 5–24.
- 11 Gay, P. 1979, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans. Masters and Victims in Modernist Culture* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press), p. 96–98, 116, 174–75.
- 12 Gilbert, J.C., "Professor Polanyi's Full Employment and Free Trade", *The Manchester School*, vol. 14, Issue August 2, 1946, p. 85.
- 13 Gilman, S. L. 1986, *Jewish Self-Hatred: anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press), pp. 22–67, 139–308.
- 14 Hanák, P. 1974, "Polgárosodás és asszimiláció Magyarországon a XIX. században." [Embourgeoisement and Assimilation in 19th Century Hungary], *Történelmi Szemle*, Vol. 17, pp. 513–36.
- 15 Hanák, P. 1983, *Stages and Types of National Assimilation in Hungary in the 19th Century* (Budapest, MS).
- 16 Hanák, P., ed., 1984, *Zsidókérdés, asszimiláció, antiszemitizmus, Tanulmányok a zsidókérdésről a huszadik századi Magyarországon* [Jewish Question, Assimilation, Anti-Semitism. Studies on the Jewish Question in Twentieth Century Hungary] (Budapest: Gondolat), pp. 13–115, 235–50.



- 17 Karády, V. 1985, "Vers une théorie des mariages inter-confessionnels: Les cas de la nuptialité hongroise sous l'Ancien régime", *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 57, pp. 47–68.
- 18 Karády, V. 2000, *Zsidóság Európában a modern korban*. [Jewry in Modern Europe] (Budapest: Új Mandátum), pp. 125–284.
- 19 Katz, J. 1980, *From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism, 1700-1933* (Cambridge, Mass., London, England: Harvard Univ. Press), pp. 203–09, 221–42.
- 20 Kovács, A. 1922, "A zsidóság térfoglalása Magyarországon" [The Jewish Takeover in Hungary] (Budapest: Author's ed.).
- 21 Kovács, A., *Adatok a zsidók bevándorlására és kikeresztelkedésére vonatkozólag* [Facts Concerning the Immigration and Religious Conversion of Jews]. MS for [Prime Minister] Count Pál Teleki, April 24, 1939, *Központi Statisztikai Hivatal Könyvtára*, V B 935.
- 22 Lukacs, J. 1988, *Budapest 1900* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson), pp. 140-41.
- 23 McCagg, W. O. Jr. 1987, "Jewish Conversion in Hungary", in *Jewish Apostasy in the Modern World*, ed. Todd Endelmann (New York: Holmes and Meier), pp. 142–164.
- 24 McCagg, W. O. Jr. 1989, *A History of Habsburg Jews, 1670-1918* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press), pp. 25–47, 47–158, 190, 240.
- 25 Mester, M., "Magyar nevet minden magyarnak!" [A Hungarian Name for Every Hungarian!] parts I-II, in *Nemzeti Figyelő*, December 31, 1939, p. 3; January 6, 1940, p. 3.
- 26 Molnár, F. 1993, *Az éhes város* [The Hungry City], series ed. G. Bodnár (Budapest: Pesti Szalon), pp. 6–7, 13–14, 165–66.
- 27 Ormos, M. 2011, *A katedrától a halálsorig – Ágoston Péter 1874–1925* [From Professorship to Death Row – Péter Ágoston 1874-1925] (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó).
- 28 Patai, R. 1996, *The Jews of Hungary: History, Culture, Psychology* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press), pp. 230–441.
- 29 Polanyi, M., "Anti-Semitism", *The New Statesman and Nation*, June 27, 1942.
- 30 Polanyi, M., "The Socialist Error [The Road to Serfdom, by F. A. Hayek]", *The Spectator*, March 31, 1944.
- 31 Polanyi, M., "What Kind of Crisis?", *Time and Tide*, October 4, 1947, p. 1057–58.
- 32 Polanyi, M. "The Case for Individualism", *The Listener*, September 16, 1948, p. 412.
- 33 Polanyi, M. "Communist Revolts", *The Manchester Guardian*, March 28, 1952.
- 34 Polanyi, M. 1958, *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago, Ill.: Univ. Chicago Press), p. 238.
- 35 Rozenblit, M.L. 1983, *The Jews of Vienna: Assimilation and Identity, 1867–1914* (Albany: SUNY).
- 36 Scott, W. T. & Molesky, M. X., S.J. 2005, *Michael Polanyi: Scientist and Philosopher* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press), pp. 160–61.
- 37 Seltmann, R., "Asszimiláció" [Assimilation], in *Magyar Zsidó Lexikon*, ed. P. Ujvári, pp. 63–65.
- 38 Seltmann, R. 1929, "Aposztázia és kitérés a zsidóságból" [Apostasy and Jewish Conversion], in *Magyar Zsidó Lexikon*, ed. P. Ujvári, pp. 54–57, 63–65.



- 39 Szapor, J. 2005, *The Hungarian Pocahontas: The Life and Times of Laura Polanyi Stricker, 1882-1959* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs), p. 15.
- 40 Tieder, Zs., “Magyarországi zsidóság statisztikája” [The statistics of Hungarian Jews], in *Magyar Zsidó Lexikon*, ed. P. Ujvári, p. 553–564.
- 41 Ujvári, P., “Áttérés” [Conversion], in *Magyar Zsidó Lexikon*, ed. P. Ujvári, p. 65.
- 42 Venetianer, L. 1986, *A magyar zsidóság története. Különös tekintettel gazdasági és művelődési fejlődésére a XIX. században* [The History of Hungarian Jewry. With special attention to its economic and cultural development in the 19th century] (Budapest: Könyvértékesítő Vállalat), pp. 147–73.
- 43 Weitz, E. D. 2007, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton Univ. Press), pp. 331–360.