Commentary

Central Europe Is Elsewhere

Steven Beller

Paul Robert Magocsi has written an informative and intelligent article about the relationship between the various nation-states of central Europe that found themselves behind the Iron Curtain and their respective national diasporas in North America. His comparison of the relationship between the countries and their diasporas at the "temporal nodes" of 1918 and 1989 suggests that the real difference between the two was that in 1918 the ideal of the nation-state was in the ascendancy, both in America and among the various central European national groups, whereas in 1989 the American diasporas were still beholden to the nation-state ideal at a time when their counterparts "back home" had moved on from the outdated nation-state ideal to embrace the supranational—or at least multinational—ideal of the European Union. This explains the relative importance of the diasporas in 1918 and their unimportance in 1989. Given the parameters of his subject, this is in general a useful and thoughtful thesis. There are, however, some points of detail that I would like to address; and, particularly for those who are interested in Austrian history and notions of Central Europe (with a capital "C"), there are broader aspects to the question, outside the given parameters, that merit discussion. It is to these broader aspects, centering on what we mean by "central European diasporas" and indeed "central Europe," that the following commentary is mainly devoted.

Both of the other commentators, Biondich and Stolarik, offer intriguing alternatives to Magocsi's approach. I am especially taken with Biondich's point that more emphasis needs to be put on the 1945 "temporal node" in central European history, and I agree with him, although for other reasons that will become apparent below. In the spirit of those commentaries, I can see various points in Magocsi's argument where the experience of one national diaspora counters that of another. When Magocsi claims, for instance, that central European diasporans had little if any impact on U.S. foreign policy in "1989" (that is, 1985–99), this

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might have been true of organized diasporan representatives of the particular diasporas that he discusses, but surely a different picture emerges when we are dealing with "Polish-Americans." It might well be true that *formal* diasporan groups were also ineffectual among Polish-Americans in influencing U.S. foreign policy, but the informal impact of having such a large Polish diaspora in the United States must surely have had some impact on U.S. policy decisions that did indeed urge a speeded-up integration of Poland into "the West," and in particular into NATO and the EU. Moreover, this Polish factor had several personal embodiments, not least in Zbigniew Brzezinski, who has remained a major player in the field of U.S. foreign policy since his days as President Carter's national security adviser. Brzezinski's fervent anticommunism and concentration on loosening the Soviet grip on Eastern Europe are, I would suggest and he would probably acknowledge, intimately connected to his Polish origins.

Formal and Informal Diasporas: The Soros Syndrome

Mention of Brzezinski also brings to mind a circumstance that is hard to square with Magocsi's implication that central European diasporas have had little if any influence on U.S. foreign policy, and that is the large number of individuals of central European origin who have been centrally involved in U.S. foreign policy, including such names as Henry Kissinger, Madeline Albright, John Shalikashvili, and Tom Lantos. Nor is the diasporan influence on American-Central European relations confined to U.S. foreign policy in the traditional sense. Another central European "diasporan" who has figured large in the relationship between the United States and central Europe in the events of 1989 is George Soros. Long before 1989, and long before even Gorbachev, Soros was helping to fund institutions such as the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (IWM, Institute for Human Sciences) in Vienna, in order to help break up the divisions between East and West and restore at least an intellectual link—both between East and West and *within* Central Europe. It may be true that, as Magocsi says, North American diasporan organizations were taken completely by surprise by the events of 1989, but there were many central European diasporans, both in America and in Europe, who were sensing a new politics, even if it was an anti-politics, many years before 1989, even some years before 1985, and preparing the way, culturally and intellectually, for this. George Soros, again, has been funding such efforts since the early 1980s.

That is to say, the organized, national diasporan groups might have been caught napping, but that is not the same as saying that all individual diasporans were. While the organized national central European diaspora groups might have been stuck in the old nationalist ways of thinking and hence "out of step," many individual central European diasporans were a step ahead, in the vanguard of anticipating what Magocsi regards as the new, multinational, integrative policies of twenty-first-century Europe. In the aftermath of Solidarity, some American central European diasporans, together with Polish dissidents, German intellectuals, and self-styled

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Central Europeans, were actively helping to change the frame by which the West saw "Eastern Europe," and this effort was, I think, quite influential in changing Western perceptions of, and policies for, the region. More than that: Gorbachev and the Kremlin may indeed have decided to give up on the Eastern European empire, but I would wager that Soviet thinking on this was shaped by the fact that, as regards at least two major parts of that empire, Poland and Hungary, the idea of "Central Europe" being the part of the West stuck in the East had resonated not only among Western and diasporan intellectuals, but also in U.S. policy, *and* in the thinking of Poles and Hungarians in the countries themselves, even among members of the respective communist governments.[1]

Soros was in the middle of all this before 1989 and has been subsequently, as the Central European University shows, among many of his other Central European-oriented projects. He is at the center of a diasporan movement that was ahead of the times in the liberation of Central Europe, and was not at all taken by surprise when the change came, indeed was able to use it to full advantage. Yet Magocsi dismisses Soros as not part of his subject. In note 26, referring to the dearth of progressive, pluralist thinking among the "1989 diasporas" and their continued enthrallment with the political ideal of the nation-state, Magocsi writes the following: "There are, of course, individuals like the American philanthropist of Hungarian origin, George Soros, whose ideals are driven by integration and not the nation-state. But he is hardly representative or an active participant in any diasporan group."

Within the parameters of Magocsi's study, this dismissal of Soros is quite understandable. He is, after all, only an individual, and is not affiliated with the national diasporan groups that are Magocsi's subject. In a way, though, this exposes one of the problems with the relatively narrow parameters of Magocsi's study: if one is concentrating on the *national* central European diasporas in North America, it is hardly surprising that one finds that they are all fervently nationalistic, beholden to the nation-state ideal, even the ethnonationalist ideal, and hence "out of step" with the times in contemporary central Europe. After all, those who identify with, and participate in, these formally organized diasporan groups are almost bound to be more ethnically conscious and hence nationalistic than those who do not choose this formal designation. It is such people who become the classic exponents of what Benedict Anderson has called "long-distance nationalism."[2] Those for whom their ethnic or national identity remains paramount even in the quite different context of North American society might have a disadvantage within the broader society, but will have a large, inside advantage within their own, self-selected group, in which national identity can then become enhanced, some might say exaggerated, with possible extremist

[1]In both the Polish and Hungarian cases, the argument that 1989 took everyone by surprise is a little hard to accept, given the long liberalization process in Hungary and the Solidarity movement in Poland.

[2]Benedict Anderson, *Long-Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics* (Berkeley, 1992).

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consequences. This partly explains how Croat expatriates could come back, as Magocsi relates, and be as extreme, if not more so, than the Croat nationalists at home. The very fact that such people had, as they would see it, to fend off the lures of American or Canadian liberal pluralism to maintain their own sense of self might have exacerbated their nationalism. The irony is that, from the perspective of those "at home," the American credentials of such people would mark them as "modern" and "advanced," even when the fact of their return was partly due to their rejection of just such a—pluralist—modernity. Within the terms of Magocsi's own study, therefore, the conclusions he comes to about the anachronistic nationalism of the diasporans are reasonable.

Yet, as Biondich points out, for every Šušak there was an Ivo Banac. That is to say, there were those central Europeans who had lived in the West, especially in North America, and who had brought back to their homelands the sort of liberal, pluralistic, and integrative ideas one associates with modern (or postmodern) Western thinking. In response, Magocsi would probably point out that individuals such as Banac are about as typical of the organized diasporan communities as Soros, and that his study is not concerned with exceptional individuals so much as with the diasporan group experience and behavior. If so, however, there is a good argument to be made that the neglect of "exceptional individuals" outside the more organized, formal bounds of the various central European national diasporas means that some of the most productive and interesting aspects of the diasporan experience in America in the latter half of the twentieth century are missed. There is, for instance, hardly any mention in Magocsi's discussion of the many, fairly influential central European diasporans in American academia. Individuals such as Banac, Istvan Deák, Peter Demetz, and Leszek Kolakowski have not only contributed greatly to American academic life, but also, more relevantly, to American perceptions of central Europe.

A Cultural and Intellectual History of the Central European Diaspora

Indeed, there is a whole cultural and intellectual history to be written of the way in which this *informal*, unorganized, individualistic central European diaspora on both sides of the Atlantic shaped the way in which we now think of the region. Artists such as Milan Kundera shaped an idea of Central Europe with a capital "C," an ideal/myth/legend of a multicultural, pluralistic part of the world that had been suppressed by Soviet barbarism; the idea had great resonance in the West, and was in turn adopted by Western authors, such as Philip Roth in *The Prague Orgy*.[3] There was what one might term a twentieth-century version of the "Chopin effect" of nineteenth-century Europe: where once Poles had basked in the reflected glory of the Romantic fervor of Chopin's patriotism, so now Central Europeans became an idealized group, whose history of tolerance

[3]Philip Roth, *The Prague Orgy* (Harmondsworth, 1987, orig. pub. 1985).

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and great cultural achievement should be rewarded with liberation from the shackles of the Soviet Empire. Given what Magocsi says about the organized central European diasporas, it is rather ironic to think that individual members of this academic/intellectual, informal Central European diaspora, such as Ernest Gellner, Anthony D. Smith, and even, at some remove, Eric Hobsbawm, were amongst the foremost exponents of the new thinking about the nature of nationalism. Whether they disputed the entire premise of nationalism, or only revealed its more fictitious aspects, these thinkers provided a more open and inclusive way of thinking about nationalism—not least in the region to which they could trace (at least part of) their origin—that stood in stark contrast to that of the organized diasporas, as described by Magocsi.

The picture of Central Europe that had emerged by the mid 1980s was quite influential not only in shaping educated public opinion on both sides of the Atlantic, but also in the corridors of power, in Washington as well as London, Paris, Bonn, and Brussels. "Central Europe" was "in" long before Gorbachev decided to cut the Eastern European empire loose. Moreover, it provided a means by which to understand the region, and to act in it, which made for integrative thinking, not only transatlantically, but also within the region itself. Such cooperative agreements as the Višegrad accords were deeply indebted to this sort of informal diasporan thinking and activity, if indirectly. The response of the informal, supranational Central European diaspora in the West (North America and Western Europe) was thus much more integrative, and more effective, than that of the formal, national diasporan groups described by Magocsi.

We could almost say that the Central European paradigm for eastern and central Europe ended up outwitting the Eastern European matrix with which most formal diasporan organizations had worked up until 1989. It did this, moreover, by emphasizing the supranational, multinational, pluralistic history of the region at the expense of the nation-state ideal preserved by the official diasporans. This was a smart move in terms of the European consensus of the time, and it might be an interesting comparative study to see how central European diasporas in Western Europe behaved in 1989, compared to their North American counterparts. At the same time, the emphasis on the idealized version of Central Europe also had at its core the idea that eastern Central Europe (behind the Iron Curtain) was historically really a part of the West, or at least part of a region that also had a part in the West (Germany and Austria). Eventually, the idea of "Central Europe" as a lost part of the West, and more particularly of "Europe," was to play a role in easing the accession of the states of the region into the European Union. In that sense "Central Europe" became but a staging post on the way to "Europe." Be that as it may, back in the 1980s it was vitally important—at the very least extremely convenient—for the advocates of Central Europe that the region was at the time seen in the West as a major center of the West's modern cultural and intellectual heritage. The argument for rescuing Central Europe was helped immeasurably, in other words, by the large contemporary Western interest in *Fin-de-siècle Vienna*, *Kafka's Prague*, and *Budapest 1900*—works, incidentally, all written by first- or second-generation central European diasporans.

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The 1945 "Temporal Node"

The notion of *Vienna 1900* being the center of a whole regional "Central European" modern culture was a key ingredient in popularizing the Central European cause. The whole cultural and intellectual context of the development of the idea of Central Europe by diasporans in the West cannot, and should not, especially in the *Austrian History Yearbook*, get by without addressing the crucial Austrian aspect to all of this. With Vienna, and Austria, however, and Germany for that matter, we come to a part of central Europe, and of the North American central European diaspora, for which the key "temporal node" is neither 1918 nor 1989, but rather 1945. When Magocsi mentions the 1945 node, he defines it as from 1939 to 1948, but this only fits the eastern part of central Europe. For the western part of the region, the key parameters for Germany are 1933–49, and for Austria they are from 1938 (and a good argument can be made for 1934) until 1955. Moreover, the "1945" node was also key for another country that has a central place in this discussion of "central European diasporas": Israel. The Jewish state, ironically, gained its independence in the same year that so much of eastern central Europe lost it, and it did so under the guidance of none other than a group of central European diasporans (broadly defined).

While Magocsi has concentrated on the post-1945 migration of escapees from central European communism, the story of the central European diaspora in North America and the West generally, and especially the *Central* European diaspora, really only makes complete sense when those who fled Nazism and other central and eastern European fascisms after 1933/34/38 are included. It is unnecessary here to go over once again the remarkable impact that this emigration to escape Nazism and fascism has had on modern Western culture: the effects on American (and British) culture and thought have been documented and discussed in many works and articles. Suffice it to say that this Central European diaspora, though it might have been relatively small in terms of numbers, profoundly changed Western thought.[4] The various national central European diasporas that Magocsi discusses might have been larger in number and might have had some political impact in the United States and Canada, but the cultural and intellectual power of the emigration of the 1930s was of another level, and it was the émigrés from Nazism who were far more influential in changing how Americans and Canadians thought. It was these diasporans who set the stereotypical image of the "Central European intellectual," embodied in such individuals as Karl Popper, Friedrich von Hayek, Ludwig Wittgenstein, George Steiner, Ernst Gombrich, Hans Kelsen, Arnold Schoenberg, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, and repeated on a perhaps less stellar, but no less influential, level in colleges and schools, newspaper rooms and publishing houses, even film studios, throughout the Western world. And the effect is far

[4]See, for instance, H. Stuart Hughes, *Sea Change: The Migration of Social Thought, 1930–1965* (New York, 1975); for Britain, see Daniel Snowman, *The Hitler Émigrés: The Cultural Impact on Britain of Refugees from Nazism* (London, 2002).

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from over: thinkers such as the "Australian" Peter Singer represent another generation of this tradition.[5]

There is, naturally, a myriad of links, some simple, some indirect, and some extremely complex, between this Central European diaspora, the post-1945 national central European diasporas, and the whole phenomenon of the informal Central European diaspora discussed above involving such figures as Kundera, Soros, Deák, and their Central European comrades. Mapping and evaluating these connections and relationships, seeing the central European and Central European diasporas in all their multilayered complexities, beyond the mere national groupings, would make a fascinating research project. The intellectual pedigree, for instance, of someone such as Soros is intimately bound up with this other, somewhat earlier, emigration of the 1930s. His great intellectual hero is Karl Popper, who left Vienna in 1935, and then went on to become famous as the author of *The Open Society and its Enemies*, originally published in 1945. Soros's anticommunism and sense of the need for liberalism and pluralism in Central Europe thus have their roots in this other Central European diaspora of the Hitler émigrés. Similarly, the relatively successful introduction of free market economics in central European countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary had something to do with the sense that the neoliberalism of figures such as Hayek was "native" to the region, to Central Europe. One could point out here that diasporans from North America might not have had the impact on political forms in central Europe in 1989 that their counterparts had enjoyed in 1918, but the story in the all important field of economics is quite different: through their roles as investors, financiers, experts, and consultants, Americans, many of them with a central European background and citing Hayek and company as their authorities, have had a huge impact on the post-1989 economic scene in the region.

Much of this history of mutual transatlantic influence between Central Europe, the West, and the Central (and central) European diasporas is extremely complex, and hardly any of it is straightforward. The national central European diasporas seem to have played a quite different role both in North America and back at home than the "Central European" diasporas I have just been discussing, and one that at times seems to have been in almost a different world. There are odd relationships between the central and Central European diasporas, where a parallax effect allowed many Westerners to see the national central European diasporans as figures of the Central Europe of the Hitler émigrés when they were in fact much more part of "Eastern Europe."

Austria—and the Jews

Then again, there are huge ironies in the relative experience of the diasporas. The Austrian example, for instance, stands out for the relative *lack* of influence of the

[5]See Peter Singer, *Pushing Time Away: My Grandfather and the Tragedy of Jewish Vienna* (New York, 2003).

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Austrian diaspora on the "homeland," even though the period when Austria was closed off from the West, 1938–45, was only seven years (seventeen for the Russian sector). There is indeed an odd sameness to the fate of Austrian diasporans after 1945 and other central European diasporans. The latter fled the region in the face of communist persecution and mostly stayed away until 1989, reasonably enough because of the political situation. The former, having fled in and around 1938, would, one might have thought, other things being equal, have flocked back to the "liberated" homeland. Instead, they either stayed away after 1945, or were in all essentials kept away by the resistance of the Austrians who had remained in "occupied" Austria after 1938. The émigrés were in very few instances actively invited back or fully compensated, and as we know now, this was an intentional policy on the part of the Austrian government, summed up in the now notorious phrase: "Ich bin dafür, die Sache in die Länge zu ziehen."[6] Those who did return did so under the unspoken assumption that they would not "dirty the nest." Hence the strange circumstance that the sometimes fraught relationships between the American east central European diasporas and their formerly communist-ruled homelands have been resolved more fully and earlier, than that between Austria and its Western diaspora from the emigration of the 1930s, despite the fact that Austria became part of "the West" some forty or so years before the others.

Underlying much of the complexity and irony of the relationship of the central European diasporas with the region in the latter half of the twentieth century was something that I, and Magocsi, have touched on, but that needs, as the Austrian example shows only too clearly, much greater discussion than it has been given here so far. That is the—unavoidable—Jewish aspect. Not all of the émigrés of the 1930s were Jewish, nor were they all fleeing central Europe because of Nazism and anti-Semitism. Hayek, for instance, was not Jewish and left Vienna for largely professional reasons to pursue his career in London. Most of them were Jewish or of Jewish descent, however, and most left to escape racial persecution and, indeed, annihilation. The various national migrations from central Europe to North America and the West in the twentieth century have had an interesting impact in the home countries as well as the lands of diaspora. Yet no other ethnic group has experienced the same sort of radical change as that of central European Jewry and its North American diaspora. If one takes the impact of the émigrés on American culture and society together with the effects on Central Europe of the destruction of Central European Jewry by the Nazis and their collaborators, then this represents a radical shift not only in American and Central European history, but also in Western history generally.

The overall effect of the emigration and the Holocaust taken together is what explains the fact that "Central Europe," the ideal Central Europe of liberal pluralism, tolerance, cultural and intellectual innovation, came to exist after 1945 more in the West than in its original homelands. Those that escaped took their Central Europe with them; most of the heart of what remained of Central Europe in the

[6]Robert Knight, ed., *Ich bin dafür, die Sache in die Länge zu ziehen: Wortprotokolle der österreichischen Bundesregierung von 1945–52 über die Entschädigung der Juden* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988).

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region died, was exterminated, in the death camps of the Third Reich. It is in this context that George Soros becomes actually a very poignant, *central* figure in the history of the relationship of "Central Europe's diasporas in North America" in the latter half of the twentieth century: his battle, as someone of Jewish descent, to establish a "Central European University" in Prague and Budapest, with all the native, national resistances that he has encountered, is emblematic of the disconnects between the various forms of "Central Europe" that have been discussed here, and of the continued survival of what might be termed the Jewish Central European ideal. This Jewish Central European diaspora may have been different in many ways from the other, more "normal" national diasporas, but it was nevertheless a key factor in the development of the relationship between the central European diasporas in North America and the central European homelands.

Jewish Central Europeans and Central European Jews—one can debate the difference—who came to settle in the West have lived in three diasporas in the twentieth century. Soros's intellectual inspiration, Karl Popper, is a good example of this experience.[7] As someone of Jewish descent, Popper, whether he liked it or not, was a product of the archetypal Jewish diaspora, in dispersion since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem; as a citizen of the Habsburg monarchy, who came to value the monarchy's supranational and multinational (imperial) character, he was without a real homeland after 1918; and as an émigré after 1935, he was a prominent member of the Central Europe-in-exile that I have been describing. This *threefold* diaspora allowed Popper, and those like him, to explore questions of the nature of the human experience beyond the confines of the nation-state frame in a way that a simpler fate might not have. Popper's idea of "culture clash," for instance, seems to arise almost naturally from such a biography. The complexity of this sense of being "thrice homeless"—a theme that echoes in Gustav Mahler's interpretation of his own predicament as a Jewish Bohemian Austrian—explains both the difficulties of getting a handle on the Central European diaspora in the West, and also, I suspect, the cultural and intellectual power of that diaspora. If this forum has produced nothing else—and indeed it has, with all my criticism of its relative neglect of the broader perspective, suggested several rich veins of future research, whether on a national or broader level—it should remind us all of how much of an impact the various central European dispersions have had, both on the host and native lands, in the twentieth century.

Diasporas from Where? Central Europe and Israel

There is, though, one final, ironic twist on the nature of the central European diaspora in North America, and specifically the central European Jewish diaspora. While many Central European Jews, such as Popper, chose to concentrate

[7]Malachi Haim Hacohen, *Karl Popper: The Formative Years, 1902–1945: Politics and Philosophy in Interwar Vienna* (Cambridge, 2000).

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on their relations with their Central European roots, their connections to the ideal, pluralistic, supranational Central Europe of their youth and nostalgic memories, other central European Jewish diasporans in North America have chosen, in increasing numbers, to emphasize much more that other, archetypal diaspora, the diaspora from Israel. This goes back quite a long way, to at least the first of Magocsi's "temporal nodes" of 1918, where "Zionists" were one of the national diasporan groups that signed the Declaration of Common Aims of the Independent Mid-European Nations in Philadelphia in October 1918. One of the most intriguing stories of the central European diasporas in North America is the struggle between the ideal Central European homeland and the national "Jewish homeland" of Israel for the hearts and minds, as it were, of Jews from central Europe who settled in America and the West.

Popper, be it noted, was a fervent opponent of Zionism, with an ardor on the issue that verged on anti-Semitism. From his perspective, as a Central European who advocated pluralism and attacked the confining nature of nationalism, one can perhaps see why Israel, a Jewish nation-state, would prompt such ire. There does indeed, on some level, seem to me as well to be a contradiction between the Central European Jewish experience in the diaspora I have sketched out above, and the support of the American Jewish diaspora for Israel as the national Jewish homeland. There has always been something of a split in any case between the relatively small central European Jewish diaspora in America and the much larger eastern European (Russian) Jewish diaspora, which explains much of this contradiction. Even though Magocsi would include most of eastern Europe in his definition of central Europe, in the Jewish case, there does seem to be a major difference between the Central European and Eastern European Jewish experience. Nevertheless, such differences have been blurred by time in North America, and there were at all times connections and outliers that straddled the divide, Herzl being the most obvious. The contradiction is not only between groups within the Jewish community: it has existed, and continues to exist, within many individual American Jews.

This contradiction is not, I believe, insuperable or fatal, but it does have about it a slightly tragic air. Moreover, it offers an enlightening parallel to the story Magocsi has told us about the national diasporas being beholden to an anachronistic nation-state ideal. Some have suggested that the liberal pluralistic ideal of American Jewish self-identity, which so many Central European Jewish diasporans adopted, has in recent years been losing out to a far more nationalistic Jewish self-definition, which emphasizes loyalty to Israel, the Jewish nation-state, above all else. Just at a time when the central European nations are entering a European Union, and a European community, in which the nation-state is less central than it once was, and in which liberal pluralism and inclusive, multiethnic comity are key values, a Europe of which Central European Jews and Central European Jewish diasporans dreamed, the same values are being superseded here, in North America, by a return to a solely *national* version of Jewish identity, represented by the tendency of groups such as AIPAC and other American Jewish organizations to demand loyalty to Israel and current Israeli government

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policy, and to swoop down on any criticism of Israel as anti-Semitism and, if voiced by a Jew, Jewish self-hatred.

I hope that this is not the case, and another parallel with the other national diasporas discussed here could be that the views of the *formalized* expressions of the diaspora, as in AIPAC, the American Jewish Committee, or the World Jewish Congress, which have, it seems to me, become more "nationalistic," do not represent the feelings of the more informal American Jewish diaspora. If it *is* the case, this would be a tragic, unfitting, final irony, for the complex but fascinating history of the central European diasporas in North America. Magocsi has only opened a narrow window on that history, but in doing so he has done us a great service in allowing that window to be opened further, for broader perspectives.

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