

BOOK REVIEWS

Egy előítélet nyomában (In the Wake of a Prejudice). By György Száraz. (Budapest: Magvető, 1976). 285 pp.

"It is a disgrace that there should be a Jewish question in Hungary," wrote Lajos Kossuth, Hungary's celebrated governor during the 1848–1849 War of Independence. The letter from his Italian exile was prompted by the infamous 1883 Tiszaeszlár ritual murder trial. In his play *Tiszaeszlár* (1967) Iván Sándor viewed the trial as a prelude to the holocaust. In his *A vizsgálat iratai (Documents of the Inquest)* (1976) Sándor argued that Tiszaeszlár and the holocaust were bred by the same manipulative technique — mass psychosis.

In the Wake of a Prejudice is the extended version of a similarly titled 1975 article published in *Valóság*. Száraz believed the time ripe to re-examine Hungarian anti-Semitism because his generation was the last one to have personal memories of the Nazi era, and because the Jewish question was a special issue. Száraz of course implied that the ghost of prejudice still lingered in Hungary. He therefore focused on the perennially delicate Jewish question. But "delicate is only that which is not being talked about," wrote Pál Pándi defending the performance of Sándor's play. The Jewish problem was once again current in Hungarian press and letters. That socialism had been ineffective in eradicating anti-Semitism was now admitted.

Száraz's work was inspired by Mária Ember's *Hajtűkanyar (Hairpin Bend)* (1974), one of the numerous recent novels based on the holocaust. Ember, like a number of other authors, merely chronicled events. Others, such as György Moldova, Hungary's most popular writer, proffered judgments: "Nowhere else have I seen such zeal and cruelty in the treatment of the Jews." This view, expressed by one character in *Szent Imre induló (Saint Emery March)* (1975), was challenged and moderated elsewhere in the novel by another character: "A few murderers do not represent the entire nation." Other writers have focused on the predicament of the returnee: "Do you know what persecution is?" asked Ágnes Gergely's *A tolmács (Interpreter)* (1976). "You too stayed alive only by chance. What keeps you in this country?" In other words:

why return to Hungary, the population of which on the whole tacitly supported Jewish deportations and accorded a less than cordial welcome to the survivors? In *Csodatevő (Miracle Maker)* (1966), András Mezei questioned the wisdom of saying anything at all: "Never remind people of their past, of things they would rather not talk about." In *Terelőút (Bypass)* (1972), György Gera shared the Hungarian-born Elie Weisel's attitude; he could neither hate nor forgive. The narrator, suffering the "curse of double identity," encountered indifference and hypocrisy all around.

Száráz suggested a remedy for this alienation. Why indeed should one be burdened permanently with a split personality? Why not become a Hungarian without repudiating the traditions of the old Jewish culture? Száráz's proposition appears to be a realistic alternative in contemporary Hungary because Kádár's liberal socialism permits the preservation of minority cultures.

This is the most important Hungarian work on Jewish persecution since István Bibó's long 1948 essay in *Válasz*, "Zsidókérdés Magyarországon 1944 után" (The Jewish question in Hungary after 1944).

Many observers consider Bibó to have been one of Hungary's finest intellectuals, a representative of the so-called "third road." Bibó, like Száráz many years later, addressed his countrymen on the uncomfortable subject of their share of the responsibility for the war crimes committed against the Jews. In discussing the guilt and culpability of Hungary's political, administrative, religious, and intellectual élite, Bibó pointed out that only in a sick society could anti-Semitism become a crucial social problem. He challenged the official view, readily seconded by the masses, that Jewish losses merely represented a small part of the overall sufferings of the Hungarian people at the hands of the fascists. Bibó described as "frivolous" and "dishonest" the convenient view that equated Hungarian with Jewish losses. Detecting manifestations of recurring anti-Semitism, Bibó pleaded for vigilance and a spirit of responsibility. He advocated a humane approach based on equality and free of prejudice. Alas, Bibó's remarkable essay remained a lonely voice in the wilderness. In the following twenty years or so, by mutual agreement of both Jews and Gentiles, the word "Jew" seldom found its way into print. Jews were cited tactfully as the "persecuted." Silence may have its merits but it solves nothing.

Space prohibits a detailed commentary on Száráz's historic data. He emphasized that while Jewish massacres were a common occurrence in Western Europe during the Crusades and plague years, Hungarian Jews enjoyed a relatively favoured status up to the second half of the

fourteenth century. Indeed, Hungary often served as a haven for Jews escaping persecution. In 1361, during the reign of Louis the Great, Jews were expelled from Hungary for the first time. Száraz noted the Italian — *i.e.*, foreign — origin of this king. He also observed that, although isolated charges of ritual murder were levelled against Jews as early as 1494 (Nagyszombat) and in 1529 (Bazin) the popular misconceptions and superstitions rampant in Western Europe during the Middle Ages were echoed in Hungary only at the time of the Tiszaeszlár trial. The author attributed extremism and Hungarian anti-Jewish measures to foreign elements or influences, illustrated by countless examples. In the 1848 revolution anti-Semitic fervour gripped only Hungary's German population; and a similar wave engendered by Jewish immigrants escaping Russian pogroms Száraz once again described as a foreign import.

In the Middle Ages Hungarian Jews were largely spared persecution because "backward" Hungary was slow to adopt Western European practices. But this anachronism created severe problems for Hungarian Jews later, when anti-Semitism finally arrived from the West. Száraz quoted Engels who disagreed: "Anti-Semitism is always a sign of a backward culture." Hungarian Jews became emancipated in 1867 which enabled them to play a decisive role in the development of capitalism in Hungary, a country hitherto lacking a sizeable middle class. At the same time, and, paradoxically, due to their mobility, sensitivity to new ideas, and a highly evolved social conscience, the Jews became the avant-garde of progressive ideas and culture. "They were talented and good allies of real talent," noted the author. The ill-fated Soviet Republic (1919) was followed by the White Terror, which exacted its toll mostly among the Jews, allegedly for being Bolsheviks.

The author systematically analysed the various economic and socio-political reasons for the growth of Hungarian anti-Semitism. Száraz understood that Christian ostracism prompted the Jews to adopt a "ghetto mentality;" that long years of persecution caused Jews to become hyper-sensitive, which only resulted in the development of more prejudice. Like Bibó, Száraz saw the evolution of a vicious circle, in which Christians and Jews were poisoned by mutual suspicions. The remedy for this evil rested in the hands of those in power. Száraz blamed the intensification of Jewish persecution in twentieth-century Hungary on historic forces. The aborted Bolshevik revolution followed by counter-revolution, and the spirit of Trianon all bred the Hungarian tragedy which also became the special tragedy of the Jews. Invoking Marx, Száraz stated: "A nation which oppresses others in turn becomes

oppressed." One might add that a nation itself struggling to survive is unlikely to be sympathetic to the plight of its minorities.

The most important part of this book deals with Hungary's treatment of the Jews in 1944. The author agonized: "Was this a fascist nation? No, it was not. How then could this happen? How could the 'jovial' anti-Semitism of the *fin de siècle* lead to this?" The question, "how could this happen?" emerged repeatedly. "It was not us," the author maintained. "We did not do it. The fascists did it. The Arrow Cross men. The Germans. The Gendarmes. We only put up with it. Only looked on. I know when 500,000 dead tip the scale there can be no room for argument, no room for excuses." But Száraz was primarily interested in the attitudes of the average Hungarian. "The mob. The spectators. We felt sorry for the Jews. We sheltered them or denounced them, smuggled food to them or ridiculed them, protected them or stole their belongings." István Vas, who has dealt extensively with this problem in the pages of *Kortárs*, and of whom Száraz speaks "with respect and gratitude," came to the rescue. He explained that, whereas in "more fortunate lands" the safeguarding of the country's independence coincided with democracy and the protection of human rights, in Hungary, with its tradition of autocracy and foreign oppression, the situation was not so unequivocal, and the defenders of freedom could not rise to the occasion.

It follows from Száraz's discussion of Jewish policies in neighbouring countries that, despite the severe restrictions imposed on Hungary's Jews, they were, at least for a while, in an "enviable" position compared to some of their co-religionists elsewhere. Hungary agreed to deport its Jews en masse only when the Germans seized the country in March of 1944. But with the exception of Northern Transylvania, which was re-annexed to Hungary in 1940, the Jews of Rumania and Bulgaria fared much better than Hungarian Jews. Moreover, Hungary established Jewish auxiliary labour battalions as early as in 1939-40. 50,000 Jewish men were dispatched to the Russian front in 1942. The savage cruelty inflicted on these labour brigades, resulting in a staggering loss of life (42,000 by 1944), was to a considerable extent the responsibility of Hungarian officers. Unfortunately, Száraz analyzed the degree of Hungarian complicity simplistically. He also ignored the plight of 35,000 Jews expelled from Carpatho-Ruthenia in 1941. The deportation of these wretched people, mostly non-Hungarian refugees, was initiated entirely by the Hungarian authorities. About 20,000 of them were shipped to Galicia, where about 15,000 were murdered at Kamenets-Podolsk, with the participation of Hungarian troops.

In Holland one can hear Jews praised for their role in making Amsterdam what it is. Similar expressions of appreciation are less likely to be encountered in Hungary. But Száraz did notice a widespread feeling of guilt in Hungary among those who witnessed the events of 1944. Unfortunately, guilt easily blocks reconciliation. Summing up present Hungarian attitudes, the author had to concede that a barrier separating Jews and Gentiles still remained. One manifestation was the irresponsible telling of cruel and tasteless jokes. "One can survive anything. See, some people survived even Auschwitz." The myth lives on.

Bibó wrote his essay while the survivors still mourned, while wounds were fresh, and while injuries were vividly remembered. Bibó's voice was statesmanlike and his indictment seemed harsh. Thirty years later, in a different, more consolidated Hungary, the mood understandably must be different, though neither less committed nor less passionate. Száraz's voice does compel the reader to face the shame of this "conspiracy of silence" which had made the tragedy possible.

In the Wake of a Prejudice is a candid and courageous book, 50,000 copies of which were sold out immediately — an unprecedented sale for a study of this kind. Száraz's work begins with the epigraph from Mária Ember's *Hairpin Bend*: "The Jewish fate is not the subject of this book. The subject of this book is Hungarian history." One can only hope that this timely work will find a sensitive and appreciative audience.

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The Baranya Dispute 1918-1921: Diplomacy in the Vortex of Ideologies. By Leslie Charles Tihany. Boulder: East European Quarterly, 1977. Distributed by Columbia University Press. 138 pp.

Leslie Tihany's second book, unlike his first — an ambitious undertaking encompassing the history of Central Europe "from the earliest times to the age of the world wars," concentrates on a very small, self-contained, and largely unknown episode: the Yugoslav occupation of the greater part of the Hungarian county of Baranya and its capital city of Pécs between November 1918 and August 1921. The Yugoslav troops arrived in Pécs three days after the Belgrade Military Convention established an armistice line on Hungary's eastern and southern borders. Although the Treaty of Trianon later fixed the political border between Hungary and Yugoslavia in this particular region farther south, the Yugoslavs refused to leave. It took considerable pressure from the