

Kunt, Gergely. 2017. *Kamasztükrök – A hosszú negyvenes évek társadalmi képzetei fiatalok naplóiban* [‘Multi-Faceted Reflections – The Diaries of Jewish and Non-Jewish Adolescents in Wartime Hungary’]. Budapest: Korall. 456 pp.

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Gergely Kunt’s detailed examination of twenty diaries written by both Jewish and non-Jewish adolescents as they experienced the social and historical changes Hungary underwent from 1938 to the 1950s actually began ten years ago, with the simple act of placing ads in a selection of local, national and denominational newspapers. Since historical archives and collections contain very few personal narratives written by “everyday” people during this period, at the beginning of his project Kunt first had to gather the material for his research by inviting individuals to share their (or a relative’s) diaries with him. As incredible as it may seem—who would willingly show his or her adolescent thoughts to a total stranger?—not only did diarists reply to Kunt’s newspaper ads, in many cases they generously donated their records of what they and the individuals around them had seen, heard, thought and experienced while witnessing Hitler’s rise to power, the decree of anti-Jewish laws, the German occupation of Hungary, the ghettoization and deportation of Hungarian Jews, the barbaric atrocities committed at the direction of the Arrow Cross Party and the Soviet Army’s siege of Budapest.

Currently, Gergely Kunt’s collection of personal narratives recording daily life in Hungary from roughly the 1930s to 2011 contains more than one hundred original sources. Upon reading Kunt’s *Kamasztükrök* [‘Multi-Faceted Reflections’], I can only hope that this collection will continue to grow as the author’s research deservedly gains an ever-widening audience in both academic and non-academic circles thanks to book launchings held at Central European University, Eötvös Loránd University and the Holocaust Memorial Center in Budapest, a radio broadcast presented on Kossuth Radio (<https://www.mediaklikk.hu/musor/regeny-es-tortenelem/>) and a number of critical reviews published in Hungarian media. In an interview published in the weekly journal *HVG*, Kunt reveals further information regarding his collection and discusses the long-lasting effects of certain social myths, such as the idea of the interwar period as a “Golden Age” in Hungarian history, or the deep-rooted cult that both Christian and Jewish families cultivated in connection to Miklós Horthy. Kunt furthermore adds that his book focuses on teenage narratives because this particular age group still depends on its own social and family background for guidance, yet increasingly turns its attention to the outer world

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(http://hvg.hu/kultura/20180524_Ennel_intimebb_nem_is_lehetne_a_tortenelem). Ádám Kolozsi’s detailed review ultimately paves the way for further, more in-depth reflections on how Hungarians today must interpret their own complex, family histories within the current, political climate

(https://index.hu/tudomany/tortenelem/2018/03/07/negyvenes_ek_kamasz_naplo_ii_vilaghab_oru_holokauszt_bolsevizalas_privat_tortenelem_mentalitastortenet/).

While the historical events I listed above mainly refer to World War II, the diaries explored in this volume were selected with the aim of comparing what changes in mentality may have occurred among members of various social classes and religious denominations throughout Hungary’s interwar, post-war and Stalinist era. While the 1956 Hungarian Revolution is not discussed in equal depth, extending the period under examination to 1956 enables the author’s precise reconstruction of the lives led by the twenty adolescents featured in this volume to present a clear image of the war’s short-term as well as long-term effects. (It should also be mentioned that Gergely Kunt’s paper tracing the adolescent diaries of two boys during the 1956 Revolution was published in this journal’s 2016 issue, which commemorated the 1956 Revolution’s sixtieth anniversary with a special Cluster analyzing the Revolution’s significance. See <http://ahae.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/ahae/article/view/252>.)

On the macro-level, the volume provides convincing arguments concerning the waves of anti-Semitic sentiment that rippled through Hungarian society in relation to certain social pressures or historical events. On the micro-level, following these narratives to 1956 allows the reader to weigh many of the decisions and actions Kunt’s subjects carried out as adults in their twenties. Although a statistician or sociologist may find a group consisting of only twenty individuals too small for drawing general conclusions, the fact remains that having any personal narratives at all by eighteen, mostly lower middle-class young women (including one rural teenage girl who worked as a maid) and two young men (one of whom survived deportation to a work camp located near Vienna) borders on miraculous. To mention one such miracle, a passer-by saved the Jewish teenager Sára Nagy’s three-volume diary from a rubbish pile standing on a curb where it awaited garbage collection, and then passed the diary on to Kunt after reading his newspaper ad. In cases in which a diarist or family member contacted Kunt personally, the resulting encounter enabled Kunt to add interviews and family histories to his research, an addition that not only supplements his analysis of the written texts, but also entails the fact that some authors were only willing to share limited parts of their diaries, or granted access with stipulations.

The overwhelming number of young women featured in his analysis, Kunt explains, is primarily due to the fact that mostly women replied to his newspaper ads, yet may also be related to the higher occurrence of diary-writing among women (Kunt 2017: 18). While studies of World War II or the Holocaust in the West are more accustomed to the influence held by Anne Frank’s diary or the approach used in *Salvaged Pages – Young Writers’ Diaries of the Holocaust*, Alexandra Zapruder’s research regarding the narratives of young Jewish diarists (Yale UP, 2015), far too little historical analysis has been published in Hungary that presents the mid-twentieth century from a predominantly young, unknown *and* female perspective; this factor alone would be enough to make Gergely Kunt’s research unique within Hungary. Even though Kunt’s hint at a gender-based interpretation of wartime narratives unfortunately remains

unexplored, a staggering array of information is provided regarding the effect—to mention just a few of the topics—social class, family background, housing, school curricula, religious belief, knowledge of politics, the media, etc. had on these young people based on information the author painstakingly culled from his subjects’ narratives. Further analysis of women and their wartime narratives, however, could only be enriched by the theoretical background established in this topic by feminist interpretations of life-writing, such as Cynthia Huff and Suzanne L. Bunkers’ study found in their 1996 Introduction to their co-edited volume, “Issues in Studying Women’s Diaries – A Theoretical and Critical Introduction” (*Inscribing the Daily - Critical Essays on Women’s Diaries*. Eds. Bunkers and Huff. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1–20.) Given the circumstance that a Hungarian reader will most likely be genuinely astonished by the extent to which so many young, female diarists expressed opinions regarding politics—a habit that is traditionally left to men in Hungary—a gendered interpretation of these personal narratives would have filled a significant gap in Hungarian scholarship.

Other than the rich amount of textual material that he directly quotes from his (mostly unpublished) sources, Kunt is sensitive to the need to underscore the value that these notebooks and journals present as historical artifacts and he subsequently includes reproductions of absent-minded doodles preserved in margins, a hand-drawn menu listing meals at a work camp, a yellow star worn by a four-year-old girl acting in the comedic role of an “old Jew” in a wartime skit, poems and other kinds of artwork as well as images displaying original, handwritten pages from the diaries themselves. What, however, makes the reflections and words of these twenty adolescents (whose command of grammar, style and spelling makes me reflect quite uncomfortably upon the education received by teenagers today) even more personal is the photos Kunt provides of his subjects, pictured as they appeared at the time of the war.

Until now, this review of Kunt’s volume has only listed basic facts: at this juncture it would be easy for me to conclude my description with my obvious admiration for Kunt’s scholarly work, his enjoyable writing style and his praiseworthy ability to create a clear narrative out of over four hundred pages covering a mindboggling array of topics and material. Furthermore, it would be appropriate for me to urge publishers to have this work translated into English as another, valuable addition to scholarly discourse on Hungary’s role in World War II and the Holocaust as it offers an extremely rare juxtaposition of how both Jewish and non-Jewish adolescents experienced and viewed their surrounding world during World War II. As such, *Kamasztükrök* epitomizes what James E. Young argues is the challenge that “postmodern Jewish memory-work” poses to “our own disciplinary biases and structures, forcing us to enlarge our critical modes of inquiry—and in doing so to enlarge our definition of Jewish memory and history.” In other words, Kunt’s narrative fulfills Young’s recognition that Jewish memory-work cannot be continued without expanding its borders to include the memories and narratives of non-Jews as well (“Jewish Memory in the Postmodern Age” *Modernity, Culture and the "Jew."* Eds. Brian Cheyette and Laura Marcus. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998, 213).

In the end, however, it is the photos, those black-and-white images of lovely, fresh-faced, young people interspersing the pages of *Kamasztükrök* that make me pause to gather breath before taking the plunge into the murky deep underlying Gergely Kunt’s work. Included with the diarists’ permission, these photos represent the undertow that most Holocaust histories avoid for fear of being dragged under; namely, the fact that thirteen of the adolescents gazing with so

much hope at the camera’s lens were bystanders who watched, recorded, and observed as their Jewish neighbors, classmates, friends and acquaintances were deported. Out of this thirteen, very few jotted down any indication of pity or regret. The majority either openly agreed, or tacitly supported the regime’s actions; some were even gleeful. I suppose we should be thankful: any statistician or sociologist would insist that a group of thirteen is insufficient for drawing any meaningful conclusion. For anyone who reads *Kamasztükrök*, the first-hand accounts written by thirteen adolescents provide ample proof that Gergely Kunt’s detailed exploration into a previously uncharted, micro-level of society casts a dark reflection upon the silent, yet vast majority.