

Laczó, Ferenc 2016. *Hungarian Jews in the Age of Genocide: An Intellectual History, 1929-1948*. Leiden: Brill. 239 pp.

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Ferenc Laczó's monograph, *Hungarian Jews in the Age of Genocide: An Intellectual History, 1929-1948*, is part of a series of publications focusing on Central and Eastern Europe from regional perspectives in a global context and within an interdisciplinary orientation. Hungarian-Jewish intellectual history and its resources have for long been neglected for multiple reasons, including taboos related to the Holocaust of Hungarian Jews, the marginalization of Jewish topics years before World War II, decades of communist rule, and, as of the 1990s, continuing undercurrents of anti-Semitism. In the first part of his book Laczó maps out the issues preoccupying Hungarian-Jewish intellectuals during the Horthy era, while in the second part he discusses early postwar oral testimonies and also seven memoirs by four Jewish and three non-Jewish authors. Finally he focuses on four postwar monographs representing diverse Hungarian-Jewish responses to the Holocaust and Hungary's responsibility for the genocide of its Jews.

In the first four chapters, Laczó's objective is to show the specific features of Hungarian-Jewish history in the interwar period, which has often been called the era "beyond the age of assimilation" (5). Following the collapse of the multid denominational historic Hungary, once the home of the largest Jewish community in Europe, with the establishment of the Horthy regime, the status and life of the country's Jews drastically worsened. In 1920, the government created the infamous *numerous clauses* law in order to restrict university enrollment of Jews and, consequently, to limit their integration in politics and state offices. Notwithstanding the anti-Semitic policies pursued by the Horthy regime, the Hungarian State and its ruling elite still needed and availed themselves of the financial "contributions" of Jews (4, 89). The post-World War I changes also affected large Hungarian-Jewish communities that had become part of the successor states and whose loyalty to Hungary was now questioned as much as that of the Jews living within Hungary.

Laczó explores numerous aspects of the "Jewish question," meaning the debate over the place of Jews within Hungarian society in the interwar period as understood by both society at large and Hungarian-Jews themselves. In the mid-1930s, a period of high point of Jewish intellectual and cultural activities within modern Hungary, there existed fifty-six Jewish periodicals. Of these Laczó utilized as his primary sources the three most important Budapest Jewish-cultural periodicals: *Izraelita Magyar Irodalmi Társulat évkönyve*, IMIT ['The Israelite Hungarian Literary Society Yearbook'] of 1929-1943, which appeared fifteen times; *Libanon* ['Lebanon,' alluding to Biblical northern-Israeli landscape] of 1936-1943, a journal of thirty four

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issues; and *Ararát évkönyv* ['The Ararat Yearbook'] of six releases between 1939 and 1944. The IMIT Yearbooks, a diverse forum of leading Hungarian-Jewish intellectuals, addressed major issues of modern Jewish thought. On the subject of Hungarian-Jewish identity alone the author distinguishes seven different approaches ranging from viewing Jewishness as a denomination to calling for partaking of modern Hungarian nationalism, with most of these approaches sharing a stance of Hungarian patriotism.

Quite a few IMIT articles appearing in 1929 responded to the bicentenary of German-Jewish rabbi and philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786). For example, rabbi and scholar Ármin Kecskeméti calls for harmony between being a religious Jew and a Jewish Hungarian citizen, an issue intensely preoccupying religious Hungarian-Jewish intellectuals of the time. In contrast to Kecskeméti, Károly Sebestyén's discussion of "A zsidóság története levelekben" ['History of Judaism in Letters'] presents the negative aspects of the alienation from their own religion for Jews attempting to become good Hungarian citizens. This debate mirrors the anxieties of Hungarian-Jewish intellectuals about the effects of modernization or what they saw as "the Hungarianness of Jews" (48-49).

Libanon of 1936-1943 and *Ararát évkönyv* of 1939-1944 both offer valuable insights to the most pressing Jewish problems of the time, especially after 1940, when Jewish publications drastically decreased. *Libanon*, subtitled *Zsidó tudományos és kritikai folyóirat* ['Journal of Jewish Studies and Critique'], was founded in 1936, prior to the times of severe anti-Jewish laws. Its contributors were mainly teachers of the Jewish Secondary School of Pest, though the journal also featured distinguished scholars such as folklorist and literary historian Bernát Heller, historian István Hahn, and scholar of Judaism and rabbi Sándor Scheiber. In addition, until 1939 *Libanon* reviewed publications in six languages. Jenő Zsoldos, a literary historian and one of the journal editors, focused in his writings on Hungarian-Jewish cultural assimilation, and his examples of philo-Semitism in Hungarian literature supported the assimilatory-integrationist stream among the country's Jews. In contrast, József M. Grózingér, a historian of philosophy and also the Editor-in-Chief of the same *Libanon*, concentrated on Jewish-philosophical ideas and emphasized the universality of Jewish culture (54-58).

The first issue of *Ararát évkönyv* ['The Ararat Yearbook'] was launched in 1939, when the Second Jewish Law limiting the economic activities of Jews even further than before came into force. The novel feature of this journal was that, in addition to its debates over European Jewish culture, it also dealt with modern Jewish literature and music. Moreover, the political views of the journal contributors mirrored the entire Hungarian spectrum of its time, from the semi-liberal to the nationalist. Its Editor-in-Chief, author Aladár Komlós, initially believed in a synthesis between the Jewishness of Jews and their Hungarian identity. At the same time several writers of the *Ararát* proposed an alternative position, wishing to bridge the Jews' demand for equality and their growing exclusion from major cultural arenas. However, by the 1940s these visions of compromise largely vanished. *Ararát* was also a stage for those expressing Zionist thought, although writers like Móses Bisseliches described the situation of Hungarian Jews as "transitional" and leading to the restoration of their previously "normalized relationship" within Hungary (72).

Following the rise of Nazism in Germany in 1933, Jewish intellectuals became unanimously critical about of the Horthy regime and its growing cooperation with Nazi Germany. The destruction of German Jewry convinced several authors of the IMIT Yearbook

that "Jewish scholarship came under threat too" (82); and according to historian Fülöp Grünwald, "contemporary events brought a catastrophic regression in the evolution towards complete Jewish legal equality, mercilessly disrupting the line of development of the previous century and a half" (83). In general, Hungarian-Jewish scholars who prior to 1933 viewed Jewish integration in the country in progressive terms now realized that they were facing the end of the liberal era they had for decades believed in. From 1938 and on the discrimination against Jews worsened and the situation of Hungarian-Jewish intellectuals, as that of most of the country's Jews, constantly deteriorated, yet the loyalty of the Jewish elite to the Horthy regime remained unabated. In 1944, with the Nazi occupation, Hungary reached the stage of mass deportation and murder of its Jews, thus making the "Final Solution" the ultimate answer to the country's "Jewish Question."

The second part of the book presents the early postwar oral and written recollections of Holocaust survivors and explores the beginning of Holocaust historiography in the years just before the Stalinization of Hungary. Between 1945 and 1948, the witness accounts of over five thousand Holocaust survivors were recorded by the newly founded *Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottság*, DEGOB ['National Relief Committee for Deportees']. Laczó focuses on the accounts of survivors of the Buchenwald concentration camp, the destination of the largest group ever of Hungarian-Jews deported from Budapest. These deportees, who later were transferred to and survived several camps, depict in their post-war accounts the differences among various Nazi camps, and many of them describe the Auschwitz crematoria and gas chambers, whose sights and smells govern their accounts. They also tell of the Jews employed in the *Sonderkommando* and their forced operation of the gas chambers. Laczó's textual analysis highlight the shared personal experiences of these survivors as well as their unique language when delineating their traumatic experiences.

In the immediate postwar period, a large number of Hungarian survival narratives appeared, of which Laczó analyzes seven autobiographical accounts by both Jewish and non-Jewish survivors, thus showing that not only Jews shared the fate of Nazi camps and later published testimonies about their suffering there. The memoirs of Sándor Millok, *A kínok útja Budapesttől Mauthausenig* ['The Tortuous Journey from Budapest to Mauthausen'] (Budapest: Müller Károly, 1945), György Parragi's postmemory, *Mauthausen* (Budapest: Keresztes, 1945), and Károly Rátkai's account of his survival, *A két torony. Magyar politikusok Mauthausenben* ['The Two Towers: Hungarian Politicians in Mauthausen'] (Budapest: Génius, 1945) depict their authors' personal experiences since their imprisonment by the Gestapo in March 1944 and deportation to Mauthausen. As prominent journalists, Millok, Parrag and Rátkai were part of a small Hungarian privileged group in Mauthausen that was separated from the Jewish inmates of the camp. It should be noted also that these three political writers were arrested before the beginnings of mass deportations of Hungarian Jews. In spite of their shared experiences and views that their persecution was linked to the German occupation of Hungary, there are marked differences between the memoirs of the three, especially regarding their acknowledgement of the Jewish genocide. Millok, a Social Democrat and a Hungarian patriot who accused the Hungarian Right of treason, nevertheless remained more than insensitive to the Jewish tragedy as he painted an anti-Semitic image of Jewish capitalism. Parragi also failed to address the tragic fate of Hungarian Jews and instead viewed Hungary as Nazism's ultimate

victim. Only Rátkai stands out in his more sensitive approach to the extermination of Hungarian Jews.

Of the seven Holocaust memoirs surveyed by Laczó, the remaining four were composed by Jews or converts of Jewish origin and present diverse experiences and stances: János Fóthy, *Horthyliget, a magyar Ördögsgiget* ['Horthy Island: the Hungarian Devil's Island,' alluding to the Dreyfus Affair] (Budapest: Müller Károly, 1945), László Palásti, *A bori halálút regénye* ['The Saga of the Deadly Road to Bor'] (Budapest: Gábor Áron, 1945), István Rásonyi, *A halálvonat utasa voltam. Visszaemlékezés 1944-re* ['I Was a Passenger of the Death-Train: Recollections of 1944'] (Budapest: Horváth, 1946), and József Spronz, *Fogoly voltam Auschwitzban. Emlékezések* ['I was a prisoner in Auschwitz: Recollections'] (Budapest: Gergely, 1946). Fóthy, a journalist of Jewish origin, was arrested on political grounds and in his memoir he recounts the brutal treatment he suffered from the Hungarian gendarmes in the internment camp of Szigetszentmiklós, called Horthy Island. Palásti, likewise a journalist as well as a labor serviceman, was transported to Serbia on the same train as the noted Jewish-born Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti. Palásti delineates his ordeal at Vorarlberg, a subcamp of the infamous Bor labor camp, the camp's evacuation from Serbia to Hungary in September 1944, and he is determined to bear witness to the slaughter of his fellow Jewish labor-servicemen at Cserevenka. In contrast to the previous two authors, both Rásonyi and Spronz were labor-servicemen who had been rounded up in June 1944, during the period of mass deportations of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz. While Rásonyi managed to escape, Spronz was not as fortunate and, subsequently, he wrote one of the first Hungarian-Jewish accounts of Auschwitz.

Finally, Laczó analyzes the writings of a four major Hungarian-Jewish intellectuals responding to the extermination of Hungarian Jews: Sámuel Löwinger, *Germánia 'prófétája,' A náciizmus száz esztendeje* ['The Prophet of Germania, A Hundred Years of Nazism'] (Budapest: Neuwald, 1947), Ernő Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt?* ['How Did It Happen?'] (Budapest: Renaissance, 1947), Jenő Lévai, *Zsidósors Magyarországon* ['Jewish Fate in Hungary'] (Budapest: Magyar Téka, 1948), and Endre Sós, *Európai fasizmus és antiszemitizmus. Az üldözések kora* ['European Fascism and Anti-Semitism: The Era of Persecution'] (Budapest: Magyar Téka, 1948). The views of these authors range from the perception of Nazism as a kind of religion to the belief that only socialism can redeem Europe from fascism.

Ferenc Laczó, in his pioneering and meticulously crafted study of the interwar debates of Hungarian-Jewish intellectuals, highlights Jewish concerns of the time against the background of the overwhelming assimilation of Hungarian Jews of the Horthy era and no less overwhelming anti-Jewish winds of that time. His analyses offer a deeper understanding of the fatal mistakes of Hungarian Jewry of this era, like their lack of leadership and falling short of devising defense strategies, all for the baseless hope for the return of bygone better times. Thus Laczó's study reshapes the understanding of one of the darkest chapters in Hungarian and Hungarian-Jewish history.