

## Family Microhistories and the Social History of Twentieth-Century Hungary: *Biri mama deportálási emlékirata* ['The Deportation Memoir of Mama Biri'] (1949) and the Kieselbach Series, *Sorsfordulók* ['Turns of Fate']

Louise O. Vasvári

**Abstract:** The deportation memoir of *Biri mama* (Irén Reményi) is the third publication by Tamás Kieselbach, of a book series he created, *Sorsfordulók: a 20. századi Magyarország drámai pillantai* ['Turns of Fate: The Dramatic Moments of Twentieth-Century Hungary'], in which his aim was to illustrate the four historical turning points of the twentieth century: 1919-1920, the Holocaust, 1956, and 1989. My interest in studying Reményi's work is, first, and most briefly, to locate its role in the Kieselbach series. Second, I want to provide the memoir with richer context, specifically with the aid of later documentation discussing Bergen-Belsen, the *Ungarnlager*, and the Celle DP camp. Third, I have aimed to create a kind of narrative reconstruction from fragments that I have been able to unearth of her family history to offer a deeper understanding of her family's complex private history as a microhistory that becomes part of macro or public history in the first half of the tortured twentieth century history of Hungary.

**Keywords:** *Szarvas, Ungarnlager, Bergen-Belsen, Strasshof, Árpád Balázs, Hillersleben DP Camp, Péter Hajdú, István Gyenes, Juan Gyenes, Anna Maria Habermann*

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### Introduction

In 2020 the Kieselbach Gallery published a forty-eight-page deportation memoir, originally handwritten in a notebook in 1949 by Mrs. Albert Kelemen, born Irén Irma Reményi (1884-1969). Written in the same hand on the cover of the original, the title is simply *Biri mama deportálási emlékirata* ['Mama Biri's Memoir']. On the back of the cover page is added, özv.



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*Kelemen Albertné, született Reményi Irén Irma élettörténete 1944 évi deportáció alatt és utána a hazatérés hónapjaiban a mai napig 1949 június 7-én* ['The life story of widowed Mrs. Albert Kelemen, born Irén Irma Remény, during her deportation in 1944 and after, during the months of her return home, to today, June 7, 1949']. The editors have added on the inside title page of the printed edition a quote from the author, *Haza, Istenem, csak haza segíts engem* ['Home, dear God, please let me return home'], which serves as an apt metaphorical secondary title since the author repeatedly writes how during her deportation, even in the midst of unbearable ordeals, she suffered from excruciating homesickness.



The cover of the Kieselbach Edition of *Biri mama*, Mimicking the Original

The *Biri mama* deportation memoir is the third publication by art dealer, art historian, and art collector, Tamás Kieselbach, in a book series he created entitled, *Sorsfordulók: a 20. századi Magyarország drámai pillantai* ['Turns of Fate: The Dramatic Moments of Twentieth-Century Hungary']. His aim was to illustrate the four historical turning points of the twentieth century: 1919-1920, the Holocaust, 1956, and 1989. In the Introduction to the second volume in the series, *Tamás könyve* ['The Book of Tamás'], Kieselbach expresses the aim of the series in these words:

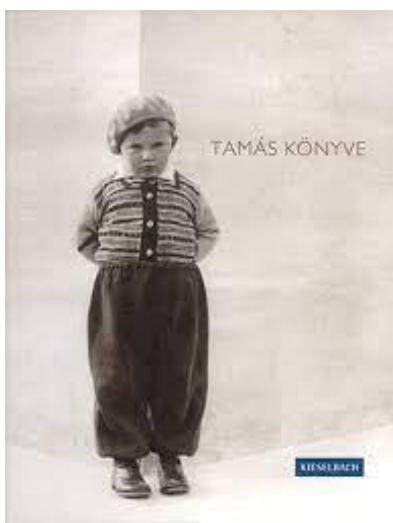
We experienced this drama emotionally, placing the characters in our own universe. I think we need to experience again the great dramas of twentieth-century Hungary, and thus solve the still existent problems today that continue to feed on them

[*érzelmileg átéltük ezt a drámát, beemeltük a szereplőket saját univerzumunkba. Azt hiszem, erre lenne szükség: érzelmileg újra átélni Magyarország nagy, 20. századi drámait, és így feloldani az ezekből táplálkozó, ma is meglévő problémákat*].

My own interest in studying Reményi's work in some detail is threefold. First, and most briefly, I aim to locate the role of the publication of *Biri mama* in the Kieselbach series of texts. Second, I want to provide the memoir with richer context than is given in this luxury edition, specifically with the aid of later documentation about Bergen-Belsen and the Celle DP camp. Third, because both Reményi's own writing and the Afterword in the Kieselbach edition lack information on the broader context of her life before and after 1944-45, I have aimed to create a kind of narrative reconstruction from fragments of her family history, to offer a deeper understanding of her family's complex private history as a microhistory that becomes part of macro- or public history in the first half of the tortured twentieth century history of Hungary.

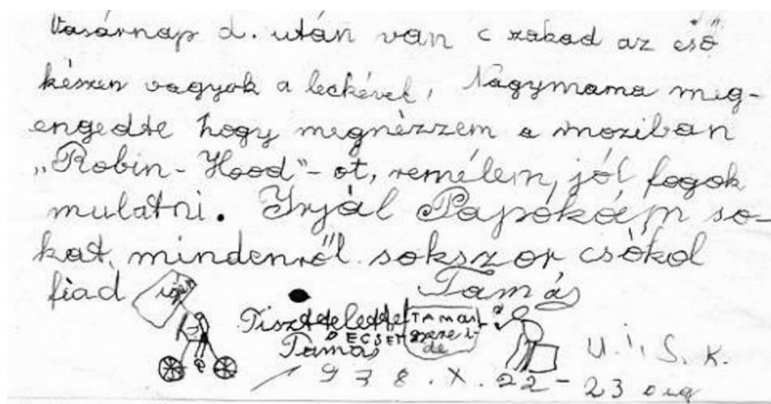
My primary focus in this study is on the *Biri mama* memoir but since it was published as part of a series with the powerful title of *Sorsfordulók: a 20. Századi Magyarország drámai pillantái*, it is worthwhile to begin by placing this memoir within the context of the previous two publications in the series. Published for the fiftieth anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution, the first volume in the Kieselbach series was the found diary of a fourteen-year-old boy who documented the revolution in a war-reporter and adventure-novel style, augmented by photos and drawings. It was art historian Peter Molnos (also author of the Afterword to *Biri mama*) who purchased the diary in 2002 at the Ecséri flea market in Budapest. This document did not even contain the author's full name and had probably been thrown out during a seasonal curbside trash disposal and found by a trash collector who sold it at the market. Kieselbach and Molnos published the beautiful facsimile volume in 2006 as *A magyar forradalom – 1956 – napló* ['The 1956 Revolution Diary'], without knowing the author's name; but his name, János Kovács, soon thereafter came to light through a series of interesting circumstances (see Kunt 2016).

The second publication in the Kieselbach series and the first on the Holocaust was the exceptional documentary volume, *Tamás könyve* (2008). Although in a very different way from János Kovács's diary, this manuscript was also a found volume, and not because it had been lost or discarded as unwanted, but rather because it had been hidden as the bearer of tragic family secrets. Like *Biri mama* it, too, illustrates through the story of a single life the story of a historic era.



The Cover of *Tamás Könyve* (2008)

The *Tamás* of the title was Tamás Hábermann, born in 1929 into a Jewish doctor family in Baja. His father Aladár had studied in Rome and Vienna before working as a doctor in Germany. In 1933, he traveled to Italy with his wife and little son to find work there. In Italy, he had his son baptized as a Catholic; in 1936 the parents separated, and the mother and son returned to Hungary and two years later the couple divorced. From 1933, Aladár received photos of Tamás, who, from 1936, regularly wrote letters to his father and attached charming photos of himself on a swing, bicycling, swimming in the Danube, or dressed in a scout uniform. In his letters he wrote of his childish pleasures, such as, *ha látnád, hogyan biciglizem, papikám* ['Daddy, if you only saw how I know how to bicycle'], but also of his grief and dreams, about how he missed his father and how he, too, wanted to become a doctor.



A Letter and Photos Sent by Tamás to his Father [*Tamás könyve*]

Meanwhile, after his divorce, Aladár married an Italian woman, with whom in 1943 he had a daughter, Anna Maria, who (like her father and grandfather) also became a medical doctor, as well as a concert pianist. Aladár spent the rest of his life in Italy, keeping his Jewish origins and past life a secret from Anna Maria; about Hungary he would only say to her: [*io in quel paese di*

*morti no ci metterò più i piedi* ['I will never again set foot in that land of the dead']. Ana Maria's own contact with Hungary was one visit, accompanied by her Italian mother in the summer of 1956, where she met Inci, her father's sister.

It was only in 2003, long after both of her parents were dead, that Anna Maria discovered a metal box well hidden inside a safety deposit box, which contained some one hundred family documents from between 1936 and 1945, letters from Aladár's parents, and the letters that Anna Maria's unknown half-brother, Tamás, had written to his father and the cache of photos, and even school report cards. We learn nothing about why Tamás's mother, Rózsi Klein, left her son to be raised by her mother, or why Aladár did not get him out of Hungary way before 1944. Anna Maria, who knew no Hungarian, eventually studied the language, travelled to Hungary and spent several years unearthing more information about her lost Hungarian family, mostly from her aunt Inci, who was the only remaining family member, having survived Auschwitz, Ravensbrück and a forced labor camp in Leipzig. Not yet fifteen, Tamás had been deported with his grandmother, but all trace of his fate disappeared after that. The box also contained documents from after the war, when Aladár tried to find information on whether his son had survived. The last cryptic item in the metal box was a Red Cross form letter dated January 12, 1946, which reported that Tamás had been deported to Auschwitz with his grandmother and that *visszatérése immár alig remélhető* ['his return can hardly be hoped for'].

Inspired by the discovery of her father's story and with memories of her one visit to Hungary just before the revolution, Anna Maria first wrote a fictional romantic novel, *L'ultime lettere per Tibor* ['The Last Letters to Tibor'] (2001), about an Italian girl and her Hungarian love who dies in the fighting in 1956 (see Toth 2006, and Habermann 2006, for a Hungarian excerpt). Subsequently, she showed the actual historical documents in the metal box to Ildikó Tóth, a translator living in Milano, who, in turn, brought them to the attention of Tamás Kieselbach, who agreed to subsidize their publication. The three of them are jointly credited as authors of the Introduction in *Tamás könyve*. In 2012, Anna Maria alone also published an Italian version with the title *Il laberinto di carta* ['The Paper Labyrinth']. In Italian interviews she has referred to the book as a kind of epistolary novel, or *un romanzo documentario o documentario, che si fa romanzo* ['documentary novel, or a document that becomes a novel'] (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFj2Ux04Ock>).

The tragic history of the Hábermann family exemplifies not only the history of the Holocaust in Hungary, but also even more deeply the price of attempted assimilation to the point of destruction of self-identity and the continuing price of such a closeted life for the next generation. Although there were endless such histories of Hungarians of Jewish background who in emigration struggled to hide their origins, one very similar to that of Aladár Háberman is recounted, also in Italian, in Alessandra Farkas's *Pranzo di famiglia* ['Family Dinner'] (2006). In this work, the author also writes about her father, Paolo Farkas, scion of an extremely distinguished and wealthy Jewish family, whose father was murdered in Auschwitz and his mother killed on the street in Budapest, her body thrown into the Danube. Farkas dealt with his trauma by hiding his past, although in his case he did not take his secret of his Jewish origin to the grave but revealed the truth to his daughter when she was eleven. She wrote that the revelation changed her life. Ironically, a similar history of family secrets repeats itself in Irén Remény's family, although there is no hint of this fact in the Introduction to *Biri mama*, as I will discuss in the final section of this study.

### **The Deportation Memoir of *Biri Mama* in the Context of Its Historical Background**

The Kieselbach *Biri Mama* is printed in an elegant oversize hardcover art book or "coffee-table book" format, about twice the size of the notebook in which the original manuscript was written, with the facsimile of the handwritten text on one side and a printed version on the other. The dual text is supplemented by an Afterword by art historian Péter Molnos, who offers a synopsis of the contents and useful historical documentation but does not aim to undertake an analysis of the writing either in the context of the genre of the immediate postwar memoir or in relation to the question whether gender mattered in the Holocaust (on which see a succinct overview in Kaplan 2019; Huhák, 2016, for specifically Hungarian examples). The volume closes with a few postwar photographs of Biri Mama, including some of her descendants, most without captions and all without dates. There is only one photo of Reményi herself that was presumably taken from before her deportation. No other prewar photos are included, perhaps because none survived, but what is most sorely missed is any additional documentation on the author's life before or after the period covered by her memoir. There is also no information provided on how and by whom in her family the manuscript was preserved and how it came finally to be published seventy years after its writing. That no available additional information on the author's life is provided is surprising since both of her sons became well-known public figures, although through very different life trajectories.



Undated photo in *Biri Mama naplója* of Irén Reményi, likely taken before her deportation

Since *Biri mama emlékirata* cannot lay claim to being either a unique historical document or a literary work, the reader today might ask what we can learn from this tragic but sadly fairly common deportation story. The same question can be posed regarding other similar recent publications, none of which can add substantive new information to the historical facts and which provide only another history of suffering, so that their painful reading risks becoming a rote exercise. In her recent brief review of *Biri mama*, Orsolya Péntek (2021) attempts to answer the question of the value of memoirs that offer little new information, by emphasizing the unique value of every individual testimony. Péntek also argues that each individual who lived through such a tragic history should have the right to bear witness and we, in turn, are obligated to listen. She adds cogently that in any testimony there can still appear elements of information that at least lend nuance to our knowledge. Indeed, Reményi's memoir can be considered of special interest because she writes about survival in Bergen-Belsen as a sixty-two-year-old Jewish woman, which is unique for the simple reason that females that age did not normally survive the initial selection, except for those who by exceptional status or luck ended up in a special situation. As I will discuss, Reményi and other Jews from Szarvas were rerouted to Strasshof, and eventually from there to Bergen-Belsen. From there they were sent, without selection and allowed to keep the clothing and belongings they brought with them, to the *Ungarnlager*, a site originally meant to house prisoners for potential exchange. As bad as living conditions were in the *Ungarnlager*, until the last months the prisoners lived in relatively better conditions than those in the rest of the camp.

There are only two women of similar age to Reményi whom I can immediately recall writing a camp memoir, and both were privileged prisoners. One was Else Bernstein (1866-1949), a German author who spent three years in the *Prominententhaus* in Theresienstadt, reserved for people given special status by the authorities. The other was Gemma La Guardia Glück (1881-1962), a Ravensbrück survivor, who in 1961 wrote *My Story*, the sister of the legendary Italian American, New York City Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, both siblings born in New York to an Italian Jewish mother and a Catholic father. Elsa Bernstein was an old woman of seventy-five, frail and blind, when she was deported from Munich, yet she managed to produce her *Das Leben als Drama: Erinnerungen an Theresienstadt* ['Life as Drama: Recollections of Theresienstadt'] immediately after her release by using a special typewriter for the blind. Yet the book was not published until 1999 (Gillet 2018). Glück was married for thirty-six years to a Hungarian Jew, with whom she lived in interwar Budapest, where she had two children. She and one daughter and grandchild were interned in Ravensbrück as special prisoners whom the Nazis hoped to use for exchange of prisoners. She was sixty-four when released from Ravensbrück, but her postwar life was not easy either. She had difficulty in returning to the United States, as by the laws of the time she had lost her citizenship upon her marriage, which she was able to regain only because her husband had perished in Mauthausen. She was able to bring her family to New York only in 1947, four months before her brother's death, and her remaining life was spent under constrained circumstances. She died in 1962, about a year after she published her memoir (Glück 1961/2007). I cannot discuss Bernstein and Glück's texts here, but merely present them by way of comparison with Reményi's work, although both of these women, in contrast to Reményi, considered themselves Christian and had deep problems with dealing with their Jewish origins.

Women's Holocaust life writing has too often been dismissed by some historians, as either too personal and too subjective or not universal enough to be either good literature or serve as historical source material. In this sense, on a first superficial reading, *Biri mama* has little informational or aesthetic value to offer beyond what we have already read in other similar horrific recountings. The style is not in any way literary, but rather sober, episodic and chronological, without even occasional variations in the narrative by means of dialogue or anecdote, and it is essentially focused on the narrator herself, who reveals little if any character growth or self-reflection, beyond claiming at the end that in spite of her suffering she refused hatred after liberation. What she does is present a different mode of cultural memory from historical narrative, by privileging her personal history of trauma, a kind of memory that invokes passion and feelings, a contribution to the gender history of women's lives. Augmented in my study by details of her family history that are missing both from her manuscript and the published version, her deportation history becomes part of the social history of the great historical tragedy of the Holocaust.

Because the deportation memoir written in 1949 by Irén Reményi, known by all as Biri mama, has no significant new historical details to offer to readers today its potential interest is in the depiction by the protagonist of her trauma, as well as of her continuing suffering immediately after liberation. It is also of interest to contrast her self-focused narration with that of some other victims deported, who also ultimately ended up in the *Ungarnlager* in Bergen-Belsen. Most significantly, it is necessary to compare the camp diary of Jenő Weiczner, who, like Reményi, was also deported from Szarvas, but who provides a description of camp life with deep humanity, from the precise details of daily food allotments to, most importantly, names and details of the lives (and too often deaths) of fellow inmates, as well as many comments about the heroism of his own wife and of many other women, concluding that *az igazi hősök ebben a háboruban az áldozat kész, szenvedő zsidó nők* ['the real heroes in this war are the suffering woman, ready to make sacrifices']. Readers of *Biri mama's* memoir will gain much insight by also reading alongside it Weiczner's diary, some excerpts of which are accessible online (Weiczner 2012; see also the diary of Emil Weiss, 1945, whose author did not survive).

A fascinating recent find is also the camp diary of the photographer Pál Donáth, from Gádoros in Békés county, who also arrived in Belsen on December 7, 1944. Hidden inside the back of a mirror, his short diary was only recently found many years after his death (Szécsényi & Huhák 2021d). Primarily since 2000, there has also been published an exceptionally significant number of important scholarly works relating to stations of Reményi's Strasshof and Bergen-Belsen deportation experience. I will reference some of these studies below, which can help enrich the understandably narrow scope of Reményi's personal narrative.

In the spring of 1944 Szarvas, with a population of 25,000, was the second largest Jewish community in Békés county, with some eight hundred of its citizens judged as Jewish by the Jewish laws, of whom half were Neolog and half were Orthodox (Balogh 2007, Molitorisz n.d.). Irén Reményi very proudly refers to herself as the wife of the Neolog rabbi, Albert Kelemén. She does not clarify that he headed the Neolog congregation, nor does she mention the existence also of a smaller Orthodox *imaegylet* ['prayer congregation'] in Szarvas. Actually, Albert Kelemén was not exactly the official rabbi because the Szarvas congregation had decided in 1905 that they would name as such only qualified rabbis, and Kelemén, who was a retired middle-school teacher of religion but not a certified rabbi, only functioned in lieu of a rabbi (Molitorisz). (It is unclear if he had graduated from a seminary, although he might have still have received the term



“rabbi” as an honorific out of respect. As opposed to a certified *rav* or *ruv*, the term “rabbi” is also much used for those knowledgeable persons fulfilling a missing rabbi’s functions, such as instruction, halachic decisions and more.) Reményi recounts that her husband was a great Hungarian patriot and very proud of his distinguished service in World War I. Originally from Lőcse, after Trianon he was expelled by the Czechs as a Hungarian agitator and had to start life anew in the mother country with five small children. Presumably he was widowed, but Reményi does not provide information on his previous marriage. She also does not discuss that she herself was divorced, or when they married (for further details of her earlier life, not discussed in the memoir or in the Introduction, see below). From 1940, German, Austrian and Slovak refugees arrived in their community, among them even ten- to twelve-year-old boys fleeing alone, and they listened to them and helped them. From some they found out that Albert Kelemén’s brother, who was the rabbi in Lőcse, had been taken away with his wife. While all this news made Reményi full of dread about the future, her husband faulted her pessimism and, even as one Jewish Law followed another, he assured both her and his parishioners that *nekiünk, magyar zsidóknak nem kell félnünk* ['we Hungarian Jews do not have to fear'] because this was never going to happen *nálunk Magyarországon* ['by us in Hungary']. As Marion Kaplan (1999) has studied in the case of German Jewish families, it was often women who were less naive than their husbands and grasped the warning signs, in part because men and women led different enough lives to interpret daily events from differing perspectives, with women’s so-called “social antennae” more finely tuned.

The confidence of her Hungarian-patriot husband that Reményi describes at the very beginning of her narrative serves in historical retrospect as a kind of caricature of the misjudgment and self-delusion of so many Hungarian Jews. As Randolph Braham relays the situation (2000: 87-98), patriotic Jewish citizens who had identified themselves with the cause of the Magyars since the anti-Habsburg Revolution of 1848-49 had become convinced – in spite of the accounts of Jewish refugees, and in spite of the three racial Jewish Laws – that under the protection of the conservative-aristocratic leadership of Hungary they were not threatened with death. Albert Kelemén's credulity illustrates one of the most important characteristics of the belatedness of the Holocaust in Hungary, in terms of what the Jews of Hungary could know at the time, or what they were capable of believing about what the genocide unfolding around them meant for their future. If Kelemén represents the credulity of so many Jews, especially of Jews in the provinces, a telling counter example is that of Tivadar Soros, who describes in his memoir, *Deception* (2001, orig. ms. 1965), that he had no illusions about trusting anything from Hungarian authorities, something he had already learned in World War I as a Siberian prisoner of war. As a result, through wiles and connections, he and his family survived.

On May 15, two ghettos were set up in Szarvas, one for the Neolog congregation, one for the Orthodox. The former was located in Reményi's synagogue and environs, while the latter was first in a castle; when that was taken over by the Germans, it was transferred to the Orthodox synagogue and surrounding private homes. Reményi makes no mention of the Orthodox ghetto but only reports that on May 15, the day of her husband’s seventy-second birthday, they were locked out from their home, which became part of the ghetto. She describes how they had lived next door to the synagogue in a beautiful four-room house with a garden. Subsequently, she provides a relatively skeletal account of how the imprisoned Jews were robbed and mistreated, the women examined by midwives and she highlights that the gendarmes even pulled off the women’s wedding rings from their fingers, even though legally these did not have to be

rendered. Today very relevant additional testimony of the sadistic behavior of the gendarmerie, with specific examples from Szarvas, is available from the trial of one Gábor Sárközi (1916- ?) who, like many of the fascist guards, had only a sixth-grade education. The documentation on his trial before the people's court is, interestingly, reviewed by Gábor Vincze, a historian in *Ópusztaszeri Nemzeti Történeti Emlékpark* ['The Historical Memorial Park of Ópusztaszer'], in his book *Csendőrök 1945 után* ['Gendarmes After 1945'] (n.d.), which he wrote as a kind of apologia.

When, after the couple spent a week in the ghetto, the Germans arrived and took some of the men, including Albert Kelemén, to Szentgyörgypuszta near Debrecen, the couple thought they were saying their final good-bye. Even at the time of writing in 1949, Reményi did not know why her husband had been interned there but this town, also known as Hajdúszentgyörgy, where no Jews lived, functioned from April to June 27 as a *túsz tábor* ['camp for potential hostages'] for leaders of the Jewish congregations from a broad surrounding area. Meanwhile, after three more weeks of ghettoization in Szarvas, between June 17-19 the remaining Jews were sent to a collection camp in Szolnok, where conditions were unbearable, with some 500 people left out in the rain with no shelter or food. Reményi recounts how a young doctor couple from Kondorosi committed suicide, but did not give enough poison to their little girl, who survived and was taken in by her relatives. In Szolnok, they heard that a train was to take doctors and engineers to Vienna and somehow Reményi managed by sheer perseverance and luck to get on that first transport, which she lists as the first instance of her life having been saved, as later she finds out those who remained on a second train ended up in Auschwitz. She does not know why at Kassa their train (also initially bound for Auschwitz) was turned back. After days of hunger, thirst, and heat on June 27 her transport, with some inhabitants from Szarvas, ended up in the distribution camp of Strasshof (am Nordbahn) near Vienna, herded by rough Ukrainians.

In her memoir Reményi does not understand that the redirecting of some trains to the Vienna area had to do with the agreement Rezső Kasztner at that time achieved in the so-called "blood for trucks" negotiation with Eichmann, and also with the serious manpower shortage for which the slave laborers would be used, with Strasshof serving as the distribution center from where prisoners were sent to various parts to war, industrial and agricultural labor. By the end of June, when the agreement between Kasztner and Eichmann was reached, some 440,000 Jews had already been deported, the majority to Auschwitz. Some remaining deportees from three collection camps from Gendarmerie Districts V and VI (Debrecen, Szeged, Szolnok), from provincial Hungary, were therefore allowed to be kept on ice. In the summer almost 30,000 (mostly mothers, children and grandparents) were sent to Strasshof, where a kind of slave market functioned during the summer of 1944, and where Austrian industrial and agricultural entrepreneurs could obtain slave labor (Frojimovics and Kovács 2015, 2021, Lappin-Eppel 2015; see also Ember (1974), who in her majestic autobiographical novel, *Hajtűkanyar* ['Hairpin Bend'], described details of daily life in Strasshof, but from a child's perspective).

In Strasshof, Reményi thinks she will suffer a nervous breakdown, but is reunited with her husband, who arrives on another transport, but she hardly recognizes him. They are then transported to South Moravia, which in the *Anschluss* had been reattached to Austria; they are first sent to Znaim and from there to Teimhof and then to Auspitz (Hustopece) to do agricultural labor, where they are unable even to lift an ax. Reményi ends up working successfully in the kitchen. In Strasshof it was common in some camps for commanders to let older woman stay in the camp and cook, which occasioned a typical gender reversal for Reményi and her husband in

that she was able to do useful work in the kitchen and could have stayed there, but the boss did not want her old husband. After some seven weeks of grotesquely hard work in corn fields, collecting wheat, on a cold December morning a group of some twenty exhausted prisoners, including the Reményi couple, a seventy-eight-year-old woman and an eighty-six-year-old man, are sent back to Strasshof. After again traveling in a terrible state, maybe as long as a week to Bergen-Belsen, when the exhausted ragtag group arrives in Bergen-Belsen on December 7, they have no idea where they are. They are forced to walk seven kilometers with their belongings (some other sources say ten kilometers). En route they meet Hungarian Swabian soldiers who are singing in Hungarian and even in the midst of that horror Reményi's reaction is one of homesickness:

I don't deny it, my Hungarian heart remained Hungarian even in the mist  
of suffering, on hearing these songs homesickness took hold of me, even if  
they cast me from my sweet home where my parents and my ancestors  
for two hundred years back rest in the shade of sadness in the hilly Somogy  
countryside

[*nem tagadom, magyar szívem a szenvedés alatt is csak magyar maradt,  
ezekre a dalokra felsirt bennem a hazavágyás, még akkor is ha kiüldöztek  
édes hazámból, ahol szüleim és 200 évre visszamenőleg az őseim Somogy  
lankás vidékein szomorúfüzek arnyékában nyugszanak*] (41).

Reményi describes that although in Bergen-Belsen they did not have to work, they starved, everyday getting only *takarmányrépa* ['mangoldwurzel,' a variety of beetroot, cultivated as cattle feed). Interestingly, she mentions only in passing that in Bergen-Belsen there were camps for different nationalities and theirs was a *Sonderlager* ['special camp'], but she never refers to it by name as the special relatively privileged *Ungarnlager*, where families were able to stay together and wear their own clothes and keep their belongings since (at least initially) they were theoretically there for potential prisoner exchange or exchange for money. Reményi also does not seem to know, or at least did not discuss, that the *Ungarnlager* had originally been created for the interned Hungarians who were part of the special privileged Kasztner group, who departed in two groups from Budapest and were placed in the camp, established on their arrival. About two months later, one group of 318 was allowed to leave for St. Gallen. A larger group of 1,360 only left on December 4 and arrived at the Swiss border on December 6 (Lukács 2020). It was to that emptied camp that Reményi and many other Hungarians arrived on December 7. Two days after the last of the Kasztner group left the *Ungarnlager*, some 2,200 Hungarian Jews arrived from Strasshof to the same vacated *lager*, Biri Mama and her husband among them.

On the daily life of the earlier Kasztner group in the camp see the only recently published diary of Jenő Kolb (German translation in 2019, Hungarian original in 2021), who wrote from a Zionist perspective and with exceptional observational skills about the daily deteriorating life in the camp from July to December, when all the interned Hungarians left. Another diary that emerged from the Kasztner group that is perhaps more comparable to that of *Biri mama* is Rózsi [Stern] Bamberger's (1901-1953) forty-four-page deportation notebook, published in facsimile by Zsolt Zágoni (2012) as the dual-language *Budapesttől Bergen-Belsenig, egy füzet 1944-ből*.

['From Budapest to Bergen-Belsen, a Notebook from 1944']. Rózsi Stern was the daughter of Samu Stern, a rich upper-class Jewish banker and community leader, head of Hungary's Neolog Community and one of the elected leaders of the German-created *Judenrat*, or *Budapesti Zsidó Tanács* ['Hungarian/Budapest Jewish Council'], who was obliged to negotiate with Adolph Eichmann, about whose aims he had no illusions. Stern's maneuvering between cooperation and collaboration with the Germans is still a controversial topic –on which see his own *Emlékiratom* ['My Memoir']. Rózsi Stern was deported, along with her husband, György Bamberger, and daughter, to the *Ungarnlager* in Bergen Belsen due to her father's position, as part of the privileged Kastner group. The focus of her memoir is not on Kasztner's activities or on political aspects, but on the suffering of the refugees. Like Reményi, Stern wrote up her notes of the ordeal in an exercise book, but she did so late in 1944, once in safety in Switzerland, as the name of the hotel Caille is printed on the back cover the of the exercise book. Although almost sixty years after her death the diary was edited with care by Zágoni and provided with a study by the noted historian, Krisztián Ungváry, it provides little beyond a litany of personal suffering by a woman who, under the hideous circumstances of the time, nevertheless counted among the privileged.

Reményi, her husband and all the deportees from Szarvas were in the first group of Hungarians who arrived to the *Ungarnlager* at the beginning of December 1943 from Strasshof, along with families from the *Alföld* ['the Great Hungarian Plains'] who had been during the summer and fall in various Austrian slave labor work. At first, they were relatively better off in their special camp, compared to others in Bergen-Belsen. Lacking in Reményi's account, detailed descriptions of camp life are well documented in some other accounts. Families stayed together and kept their own packages, names, clothes and even their watches, so time did not disappear. They did not do slave labor, per se, but had duties such as clearing of barracks and taking care of children. The old and sick were allowed to stay in barracks. Some of the peculiarities of the camp were that the prisoners were allowed to maintain internal autonomy and organization. Compare the account of Joseph Kastner (1929- ??) on the importance of prisoners being to keep their own clothes. He was deported at fourteen to Bergen-Belsen to the *Ungarnlager*, where they did not have contact with people in other sections of the camp, and was also on the same train as Reményi, which was liberated by the Americans, as discussed below. In his interview, his main recollection, in addition to the usual about cold and hunger and seeing death, was, "We felt more human, because as long as you have your own clothes, you still feel like an individual" (Kastner 2017). <https://museeholocauste.ca/en/survivors-stories/joseph-kastner/>. (He subsequently spent a year in a sanatorium and then returned to Hungary, where he was imprisoned in 1951 for two and a half years. He left in 1956 and emigrated to Toronto in 1957.) However, conditions even in the *Ungarnlager* quickly deteriorated when the new Camp Commander, the notorious SS *Hauptsturmführer* Josef Kramer, took over in late December, and there began increasing crowding and much worse food supplies and an outbreak of typhoid. Kramer, who arrived with his staff after the evacuation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, had there as camp commander been responsible, among other crimes, for the murder of several hundred thousand Hungarian Jews.

Reményi's husband died on Christmas Eve but they were still able to put him in a casket and bury him and four others. Right after his death, she contracted bronchitis and for six weeks was very sick but was nursed by Ilona Fleischer and her daughter, Katika, with whom she slept in one bed throughout their stay in Bergen-Belsen. They are among the relatively few people in

the camp who Reményi mentions by name, yet she does not say if they survived. I was curious about their fate, which I found out from the obituary of Ilona Fleischer's other daughter, Agnes E. Baker (Szarvas, 1935-2020, Florida). Agnes's obituary states that she was born to Imre and Ilona Fleischer and was sent with her entire family to Bergen-Belsen, where all perished except her mother and her sister Kati Ramot (b. 1934), who had predeceased her and that they were liberated on April 13, 1945, under the American Command of Lt. Carol Walsh. This fact means they were liberated along with Reményi, from a train which, as I discuss below, was to become famous seventy years later.

Reményi describes the ever-increasing crowding in the camp, from 15,000 to more than 40,000, followed by 60,000 by the beginning of April, with prisoners arriving from evacuated transports from Bor, Auschwitz and Buchenwald. She describes that the men brought to the camp from Bor looked much worse than they did and were dying by the hundreds. In one month some 18,000 died. From her window, she saw the carriages twice a day that took the dead to be burned. Yet, unbelievably, right after recording such horrors, she writes that what was most painful was her homesickness, especially when younger people sang Árpád Balázs's "*Csak még egyszer tudnék hazamenni*" ['If I Could Only Return Home Once More']. Balázs (1874-1941) was an extraordinary popular songwriter of World War I and other songs, who successfully adapted melodies from Hungarian folksongs. In a short biography published in the 1931 *Képes Krónika* (31) he was extolled for how his compositions still kept their popularity after the war, even in *előretörő néger muzsika világában* ['in the advancing negro musical world'].



Árpád Balázs in the *Képes Krónika* (1931)

Dating from 1917 or perhaps earlier, with lyrics by Ferenc Berényi (1884-1964), this song became incredibly popular and has been sung by diverse groups of Hungarians for whom its sighing refrain expressed a deep yearning to return home. It was sung early in the century by emigrants and prisoners of war. A 1936 *A Magyar Muzsika Könyve* ['Book of Hungarian Music'] cites it as *az első ismert irredenta dalok egyike* ['one of the first known irredentist songs'], sung by refugees from Transylvania. It was again sung by Hungarian soldiers after World War II in Soviet captivity, then in the early 1950's by deportees in internal deportation. Even in 1962, it was reported to have brought to tears immigrants in Adelaide when a visiting gypsy troupe played it (Molnár 1936, Baróti 1975). Its full lyrics are as follows:

I don't need anything in the world,  
only to be able to go home once more.  
**If only I could be with you once again,**  
Your white velvet shoulder would be my pillow,  
If only I could go home once again.

The sky will be more beautiful, everything will be more beautiful  
If we can once again go home from here.  
Everything will be more beautiful, will be better, you'll see,  
If we see each other once again

[*Nem kell nékem a vilagon semmi,  
Csak még egyszer tudnék hazamenni.  
Csak még egyszer lehetnék tenálad,  
Párnám lenne fehér bársony vállad,  
Csak még egyszer tudnék hazamenni.*

*Szebb lesz az ég, szebb lesz akkor minden,  
Ha majd egyszer hazamegyünk innen.  
Szebb lesz, jobb lesz akkor minden, meglásd,  
Ha majd egyszer viszontlátjuk egymást....]*

Reményi's intense nostalgic reaction to *Csak még egyszer tudnék hazamenni* was by no means unique because this song also became a sort of dirge in the concentration camps. This can be witnessed in Auschwitz in one awful memento of the refrain – here within a slightly different version of the text – engraved on August 16, 1944 on the side of a cot, among other engravings of names, addresses and dates. It was found by Dezső Feig (1952), who in 1948 took part in a Hungarian Jewish *kever/kivrei avot* [Heb. 'Graves of Fathers'] mission to Auschwitz as a *locus memoriae*, which is the custom of visiting the graves of one's parents and close relatives for the purpose of prayer, usually between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur or on the Hebrew date of the deceased person's death]. The author of the engraving signed herself as *özv. Kohn Béláné* ['widowed Mrs. Béla Kohn'] from Pécsvárad, who according to my research probably did not survive. She wrote, or, rather, carved the words:

She, who suffered inhumanly for her homeland,  
She whose homesickness is greater than that of anyone,  
Today there still lives in my soul the hope that I will reach home.  
But who knows what tomorrow will bring,  
If only I could go home once more.

[*Aki a hazáért embertelenül szenvedett,  
Kinek honvágya nagyobb mindenkinél,  
Ma még lelkemben él a remény, hogy hazakerülök.  
De ki tudja itt mit hoz a holnap,  
Csak még egyszer tudnék hazamenni.]*

Statements of homesickness similar to that of Reményi can regularly be found in the memoirs of survivors, as, for example, in Zsuzsanna Fischer Spiro's recounting, how after an endless death march with fellow inmates from Markkleeber for some two weeks, when they were finally liberated on May 8, 1945. Spiro managed to arrive back in Hungary a month later, where, as she saw the border, she was ashamed to admit that she was homesick for the country that had treated her so badly (Vasvári 2016). Jenő Weiczner, also a prisoner in the *Ungarnlager*, as mentioned above, described the feeling of homesickness better, as being so truly deep that people got ill from it but that it was much more a desire for freedom and home than for Hungary. Nevertheless, later, in his diary, he, too, added that *sajnos én is magyarnak érzem magam, és nagy honvágyam van* ['I unfortunately also feel myself to be Hungarian and have enormous homesickness'] (Weiczner 2010, n.p.).

Throughout all her suffering in deportation, Reményi writes that it was her faith and belief that God still had life in store for her that kept her alive. As the end was nearing, the prisoners would hear more and more airplanes and just waited and waited, wondering how long they could survive. On April 6 or 7, she could not recall for sure, they got order to pack and once again, after five months of imprisonment, the next day they had to walk seven kilometers to the station, now accompanied by *durva és goromba* ['rough and rude'] Swabian Hungarians



Swabian Hungarian sentry in Belsen [[USHMM.org](http://USHMM.org), photo 7691]

According to available records, under the order of Commander Kramer, between April 6 and 10, three trains containing maybe 7,000 to 7,500 prisoners were evacuated with the original intention of being sent to Theresienstadt. One did arrive there after twelve horrible days; another, which came to be known as the "lost train," could not reach Theresienstadt and was liberated by Russian troops at Tröbritz after a long journey. Reményi and all the prisoners who had arrived from Strasshof on December 6 were on the lucky train, which carried many Hungarians and was liberated near Farsleben by Magdeburg (Saxony, Germany) on April 13, 1945 by the Thirtieth

Division of the Ninth U.S. Army. The American forces found approximately 2,500 sick and emaciated victims, with a significant number of them dying after liberation.

In her situation Reményi was not able to understand the logistics of the evacuation, but mentions in passing that the *Oberwalter* – a reference to Camp Commander Kramer, whose name she does not appear to know – had kept a *csinos zsidónő* ['good-looking Jewish woman'] by his side and provided her with everything in Bergen. Since this woman was now coming along she thought that they were not being taken to their death. The prisoners had been placed in the train, at first moving eastward to the Elbe River. When the train could not move because of advancing Russians, they were redirected to Farsleben, but in that direction they were heading into the advancing American army. The prisoners later heard that the engineers had supposedly been directed to drive the train off the damaged bridge into the river or blow it up. Instead, the prisoners just found one morning that the Germans had abandoned them. They subsequently went without food or water for some five days there on a hillside. The younger people went to the nearest community to beg while Reményi ate raw potatoes and raw beets and had no water. It is there they were suddenly discovered by the Americans. They still went hungry until the next morning, when the Americans forced the mayor in the nearby town to deliver them hot soup.

Writing in 1949, Reményi could have no idea how over seventy years after liberation the train from which she was liberated would suddenly become famous when photographs of its liberation were published. The photos were discovered by history teacher Matthew Rozell in a shoebox in the home of George Gross, a professor of English at San Diego State, who, in 1945, was tank commander with the 743 U.S. Tank Battalion which secured the train. The photos were taken by one Major Clarence L. Benjamin, but the small Kodak camera he used belonged to Gross, whose wife had sent it to him in combat.



The Evacuation Train from Bergen-Belsen Liberated by Americans on April 13, 1945  
[USHMM.org, Courtesy of George Gross]



Vasvári, Louise O. "Family Microhistories and the Social History of Twentieth-Century Hungary: *Biri mama deportálási emlékirata* ['The Deportation Memoir of Mama Biri'] (1949) and the Kieselbach Series, *Sorsfordulók* ['Turns of Fate']." *Hungarian Cultural Studies*. e-Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 15 (2022): <http://ahea.pitt.edu> DOI: 10.5195/ahea.2022.466

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The photos had never been seen outside of family and friends until 2013, when Rozell helped USHMM acquire them and published a book on the history of the train (Rozell 2016, see the photos with the original captions by Gross at <https://teachinghistorymatters.com/the-liberation-photos>). Adding to the poignancy of the photos is the fact that, when they were published, some survivors were still alive and identified themselves and told their stories. The photos have been called some of the most powerful photos of the twentieth century: what is amazing in them is that they are not the usual horrifying images of victims transported or arriving at the camp but of liberation (although some died of starvation before food could reach them). In 2009, Rozell reported that nearly 250 survivors of this train transport have had contact with their liberators sixty-five years after liberation (Rozell 2009).



People Liberated from the Train in Farsleben, April 13, 1945 [Courtesy of the Gross Family]

The one photo of the group at the moment of liberation that became iconic is of an initially unidentified woman holding a little girl by the hand, running uphill from the train that has been liberated by the American Troops, with other women following behind.

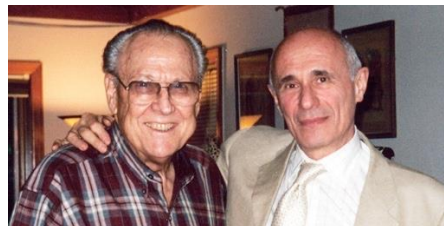


Initially unidentified woman and child liberated on April 13, 1945  
[USHMM, Courtesy of George Gross]

The woman and child were eventually identified by a granddaughter living in Europe as originating from Makó, in Southeast Hungary, where they had returned to after the war. She recounted that her seventy-seven-year-old mother, who the five-year old child in the photo, was still alive but the grandmother, who was thirty-five-years old in the photo, had died in the nineteen-eighties. The granddaughter also revealed that both suffered from psychological problems throughout their lives and she therefore preferred to keep their names anonymous. (See <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/MAGAZINE-72-years-later-woman-from-iconic-holocaust-photo-identified-1.5464513>, which shows a beautiful photo of the woman, clearly recognizable as the same from the liberation photo, with her grandchild, which cannot be reproduced here due to copyright restrictions.)

Alongside the recounting of the liberation of that famous train in the *Biri Mama* memoir, we also have the account of Hilde Huppert, a thirty-six-year-old woman liberated with her eight-year-old son. Huppert's story is particularly dramatic, as following liberation she travelled with 529 children to Palestine. Three months after her arrival in Palestine, between August and October, 1945, she composed a memoir in German with the title *Warum ist das uns geschehen!* ['Why Did It Happen to Us?'] (Sayner 2007: 15-74). Her memoir was initially judged as being "too soon" after the war. It subsequently went through an extremely complex publication history in six different languages, the last in English and revised by Huppert's son, as *Hand in Hand with Tommy: A Testimony, 1939-1945* (1997), over half a century after the event. (In 2020 Matthew Rozell wrote a touching tribute to the death of one of the orphans saved on the train by Huppert and taken to Palestine [Rozell 2020]).

We possess still another memoir recounting the events of the famous train, this one by Peter Lantos, who wrote his recollections sixty years after the event and a decade before the discovery of the iconic photos. Lantos's life story is one more microhistory that illustrates the tragic history of Hungary in the twentieth century through the life of several generations. If Reményi was one of the oldest survivors, Lantos was one of the youngest, as he was five when he was deported to Bergen-Belsen with his family. Like the mother and child in the iconic photograph, Lantos was also from Makó. His only brother and his father perished, as did twenty-one of his relatives. Only he and his mother survived and returned to Hungary. Years later he completed his medical studies in Hungary and accepted a postdoctoral fellowship in London in 1968; when he did not return to his post in Szeged he was sentenced to prison in absentia for defection. As he recounts, it was the third time in less than three decades that the family lost all their material possessions, first siezed by the fascists in 1944, then in 1949 the Communist closed down the family's enterprise, and in 1970 his Szeged apartment was sealed and sold with all its contents. In England, he has had a distinguished career as a neuropathologist and professor in King's College, London. In 2003, he visited George Gross, the American Tank Commander and in 2006 he published a memoir, *Parallel Lines: A Journey from Childhood to Belsen*, in Hungarian, *Sínek és Sorsok* ['Rails and Destinies'], where he describes that he was only six and lived life in the *Ungarnlager* in part as an "adventure" he never quite understood. In his memoir, the confusion and grief of childhood is interwoven with his return sixty years later, making the same journey to return as an adult to Bergen-Belsen and to Celle and finally meeting with an American soldier who had liberated his train.



Peter Lantos with his mother in 1945, and in 2003 with George Gross, who is on the left.

### **Irén Reményi's Liberation, Life in Hillersleben DP Camp, and Homecoming**

Despite the absence of precise data, it is estimated that more than half of the 60,000 Belsen survivors were Jews. Survivors were taken to Hillersleben, a small town of some eight hundred inhabitants in the German province of Saxony-Anhalt. Fourteen kilometers from Magdeburg, Hillersleben was turned into a displaced persons (DPs) camp, but by the time the survivors were transferred to the former German military camp, about 14,000 had died, and most of the dead were Jews. (On the deportees in Hillersleben, see Szécsényi 2019). Reményi claims that Hillersleben was Hitler's favorite resort. While I could find no documentation of Hitler

going there for relaxation, he and Goebbels did personally visit the Nazi military site at Hillersleben, built in 1935, which was the primary place for testing new artillery and for the development of the so-called *Wunderwaffe* ['Superweapon'] that was supposed to assure Nazi victory.

What Reményi writes about the six-month period she spent *after* liberation in the Bergen-Belsen DP camp is potentially more interesting, especially from a gendered perspective, than her recounting of her deportation calvary. Eleven months after leaving home, the survivors got to live in wonderful real apartments, confiscated by the U.S. army from the local German inhabitants in the *Beamtenviertel* ['official employees district'], who had fifteen minutes to vacate their apartments and were placed in a park in the neighborhood. She describes in detail how comfortable the homes were, down to the stoves and the beautiful gardens (cf. Szécsényi, 2020 for a detailed description of the topography of Hillersleben, as experienced by another survivor). Reményi, who seldom mentions her fellow prisoners by name, here mentions her best friend from Szarvas, a Mrs. Nagy and her husband, who were in the hospital and died almost at the same time and were buried together. A few days later another older Szarvas couple were also buried. The younger people went to see bombed out Magdeburg, and the young children got bicycles and roller skates and played happily. The survivors would take daily walks and meet each other on the promenade, some of the young women flirted with the Americans, and several engagements and weddings took place, sometimes with parties of seventy. The survivors organized concerts and Reményi was able to attend because a dear friend gave her an appropriate dress that the women had made from the curtains of the casino, meaning that many had dresses from the same fabrics, over which they all had a good laugh.

The Americans stayed only five or six weeks and were replaced by the British, who in some respects even outdid the Americans in their care for the survivors. Finally, in July 1945 the Russians took over and stayed, even bringing their families. (In fact, the Red Army never did leave and the area became part of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, making Hillersleben into the biggest and most secret military training grounds outside the Soviet Union. About 30,000 soldiers were eventually stationed there and it was called the Little Moscow, with the last Soviet soldiers only leaving in 1994.) From the Russians, the Hungarian Jews got some news of the situation in Hungary; around the same time they also finally began to hear about Auschwitz from young women prisoners who had been liberated from an underground slave labor-factory 200 kilometers away. From these survivors, Remény learned that her own siblings and other relatives from Csurgó, where she was born, had been gassed.

In spite of the terrible news about Auschwitz, life in the Hillersleben DP camp continued to be very active, with frequent concerts, and with the most popular harmonica player, Péter Hajdú (1924-2006), even being invited by the Russians to play at their events. Hearing his name, I was curious to find out what I could about his subsequent fate, hoping that maybe he had better luck in his subsequent life than some of the survivors. Although Hajdú was an artist formally trained in the Budapest Franz Liszt Academy, he achieved success with polkas, jazz improvisations and other popular music. Indeed, in postwar Hungary from 1946 to 1956 he appears to have enjoyed continued success, with his name appearing repeatedly in radio programs and live performances.

Vasvári, Louise O. “Family Microhistories and the Social History of Twentieth-Century Hungary: *Biri mama deportálási emlékirata* [‘The Deportation Memoir of Mama Biri’] (1949) and the Kieselbach Series, *Sorsfordulók* [‘Turns of Fate’].” *Hungarian Cultural Studies*. e-Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 15 (2022): <http://ahea.pitt.edu> DOI: 10.5195/ahea.2022.466

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From late in that year his name disappears, as he fled with his wife and three daughters to Austria, where he formed new orchestras, and had another long successful career, and even appeared in 1969 in the U.S. on the then prime variety show, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, (where even the Beatles were originally introduced to the U.S. audience). Between 1969 to 1972 his name also pops up in the *New Yorki magyar élet* [‘New York Hungarian Life’] as a guest performer from Vienna in local restaurants in New York and Toronto.



Photo of Hajdú as a young man, much as *Biri mama* must have known him.



An advertisement for a Hajdú concert [[peterhajdu.com](http://peterhajdu.com)], and Hajdú on the harmonica in 1953 [photo Ándor Tormai, Archivum MTVA.hu]

By August 1945, many survivors had left the Hillersheim camp, but the Szarvas survivors had difficulties obtaining means to travel home. Reményi does not mention that, unlike Western countries, the Hungarian government took no responsibility in repatriating the survivors (on which see further the three excellent 2021 articles by Szécsényi and Huhák, listed in the bibliography, which include photos). When the Hungarians are finally able to leave, further unpleasant adventures still await them, as they end up forced to stop and live under terrible circumstances in another lager in Doberlug, Germany. It is here that Reményi mentions that one of the survivors was the eighty-three-year-old mother of a Szarvas doctor, which could only be a survivor from among those who were in the *Ungarmlager*.

Finally, although it took them eight days, the group arrives in Budapest. On two occasions, she recounts with pride how, even arriving home from deportation, she was able to bring gifts to her son. She had some money because she had sold her husband's coat and also something she had picked up from a house somewhere to a Russian and was able to buy cigarettes at a train stop, and had even managed to bake a box of cookies at another stop, because, as she said, *egy anya nem érkezhethet meg üres kézzel még ha deportálásból, akkor sem* ['a mother can't arrive home with empty hands, not even from deportation'] (81). When she finds her son safe back in Budapest, she repeats with pride what an impression it must have been on him that *az ő anyja még deportálásból is csomaggal érkezik* ['even from deportation his mother arrived with a gift'] (85). Upon returning, she finds out the devastating news that her beloved daughter had not returned, but even in 1949 she will be unable to convey any details of her daughter's deportation and death. She also mentions in half a sentence alongside her *elveszett drága Bözsi-kém* ['her dear lost Betty'] that her *drága Jancsikám és édes kis családjá* ['my dear Johnny and his dear little family'] are well in another land, without divulging any details of his whereabouts (on which see further below). While she is still in Budapest with her other son, about whose survival she also gives no information, she learns that her house in Szarvas was totally plundered, yet still insists on returning there rather than staying in Budapest.

As Barbara Klacsmann (2016) discusses in her "Abandoned, Confiscated, and Stolen Property. Jewish-Gentile Relations in Hungary", it is imperative to consider the aftermath of the Holocaust as an integral part of Holocaust Studies, as postwar reconstruction of Hungary and the Holocaust did not come to an end with liberation and returning survivors found their homes empty or occupied by non-Jews and their property stolen. Upon her return, Reményi, too, found her home ransacked and she details how she did not find a trace of her beautiful home and belongings: *[szep úri négy szobás lakásom tele szőnyeggel, két tele szekrény fehéreneművel, ruháink, bundáink, mindennek vége van* ['beautiful four-room elegant home, full of carpets, two armoires full of linen, our clothes and furs, all is gone'] (87). The emphasis on the loss of possessions after her unspeakable suffering and much greater personal losses may seem surprising, but as Russell Belk (1992) discusses, the attachment to possessions becomes an extension of the self, which contributes to the sense of identity that we use to signal who we want to be and where we want to belong. Belk defines the Extended Self as consisting of four levels: the individual level of personal possessions, the family level of residence and furnishings, the community level of the neighborhood or town and the group level of the social group to which we belong, all of which Reményi had lost. Now a new calvary was to start for her because she could not even move back into the empty house, because "The Joint" (the Jewish relief organization, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee or JDC) had taken it over and gave her only a blanket and a pillow and she had to work in her former home as a servant under demeaning conditions until March. She does say that it is *kedves kötelessége megemlékezni* ['her pleasant duty to remember'] and mentions Dr. Zoltán Kelemén, son of her husband, whose own wife and little girl perished, yet he helped her a lot (but she does not report on the fate of her husband's other four offspring).

At the very end of her work, Reményi mentions the names of the other survivor families who helped her and recounts that she never got her former residence back but was able to settle in a small house on the outskirts of town that she and her husband had bought for investment. She offers no details about her life between 1945 and the writing of her memoir beyond reporting that in April 1948 her son Pista got engaged and in June married. She ends by saying that *én*

*megfogadtam, szent fogadalmat tettem, hogy életemben senkit meg nem bántok, hangosan rá nem kiáltok senkire, mert megtanultam érezni az emberi rosszaságot* ['I vowed, it became my saint vow, that as long as I lived I would not hurt anyone, I would not shout at anyone, because I had learned to feel human evil'].

At Reményi's death, obituaries appeared in the *Népszava* ['The People's Word'] and *Az Ujság* ['The News'] with the words, [*megpróbáltatásokkal és szépségekkel teli életének 85-ik évében csendesen elhúnyt* ['departed quietly in her 85th year after a life full of trials and pleasures']], signed by her two sons, as well as by Dr. Zoltán Kelemén and in the name of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

### **From Irén Reményi's Deportation Memoir to Family Chronicle**

In his edition of Reményi's memoir, Péter Olmos is content with stating that we do not know much about her later fate. Although a handful of family photos are included at the end of the volume, except for her two sons, others are not identified. There is actually no information provided about Reményi's earlier life either, or of her first marriage, much less of the secrecy that is at the core of silences by Reményi herself about any such details. In short, what is missing is to re-establish the continuity of her family's private history, which spans four generations emblematic of Hungarian Jewish life in the twentieth century, including urbanization, attempted assimilation, the outstanding role of Jews in the arts, immigration and of course of the losses in the Holocaust, and often evasive and distorted family narratives meant to hide one's origins.



Photo of Irén Reményi with her sons, István Gyenes[left] and János/Juan Gyenes sometime after the war  
[*Biri Mama naplója*]

In his attempt to reconstruct the life and voice of his heroine and her family as a case study of Hungarian cultural history, Lajos Parti Nagy in his recent novel, *Árnyékporocska*.

*Emlékmondatok Kner Piroska Életéből* ['Dust in the Shadow. Recollections from the Life of Piroska Kner'] (2021), asks, *Hogyan lehet valakit száz oldalon visszahozni a felejtésből?* ['How can someone be brought back in one hundred pages from having been forgotten?']. Parti Nagy only had a cookbook from Piroska Kner and information about her important family but virtually nothing about her personally, even, in fact, if she survived the Holocaust. In the case of Reményi, we do possess her own deportation memoir, but it still provides almost no family information. Nevertheless, it is possible to reconstruct a fragmentary family chronicle through other sources because local newspapers wrote about her father and first husband, both of whom were local personages, while Spanish sources have written extensively about one of her sons, János, who became an important public personality as Juan Gyenes. Ironically, Irén Reményi's own name is traceable in only two very housewifely newspaper accounts: in *Az Újság* (1932 January 8) in a column on "*Háztartási fogások*" ['Household Hints'], she is cited as giving advice on how to clean wool clothing with hot water and vinegar, of which an extra benefit is that clothing washed down this way will lose its wornout sheen, and she also advises using the inside of fresh bread to wipe down a dirty wall so that paint will remain fresh.

Irén Reményi's father, Samu Reményi (1851-1935), was from Csurgó, a village close to Kaposvár, where his house at 12 Petőfi Square still stands. By profession he was a glazier, framer, small business owner, and later a director of a savings bank. He was also a locally important personality whose name appears in a 1916 ad in the Neolog periodical, *Egyenlőség* ['Equality'], as the president of his synagogue. He was also an organizer and leader of the first volunteer fire brigade, in which he was active until 1906 and then again during World War I. He had two sons who died before the war: Béla Reményi, who died in 1937 of heart failure at age fifty-nine (*Új Somogy*, 1937 April 15), and Dr. Zoltán Reményi, who was secretary of the Csurgó fireman's organization, and was already victim of the White Terror in 1934. An unknown number of his other offspring perished in the Holocaust, as Reményi mentions that her siblings perished but without giving their sex or number. Samu Reményi is buried in the Jewish cemetery in Csurgó. In 1999, on the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the fire brigade, a memorial plaque was placed and today it carries his name.



Samu Reményi, The Founder of the first volunteer fire brigade in Somogy county  
Irén Reményi was first married to Izsó Gyenes (1874-1961), father of her three children, István, Erzsi, and János, but the couple divorced in 1927. Born Izidor Guttman, Izsó Gyenes was



the son of József Guttmann, who, legend has it, was one of the hundred soldiers whom Kossuth chose to accompany him in exile. Guttmann, however, was arrested at the border and as punishment was enlisted by force into the Austro-Hungarian army. In 1913, Izsó took on the name Gyenes and after having served in the army orchestra, settled in Kaposvár, where he established Somogy county's first music school and was a legendary violin teacher and performer. He and his wife also ran a music store by the name of *Harmonia* ['Harmony']. Under the Red Republic, Gyenes organized camps for proletariat children at the Balaton, which provided him with difficulties after 1919. Yet, according to his son István, the family was able to live in good economic circumstances in a four-room apartment, with a maid and a German *Fräulein* (Szilágyi 1996). In Kaposvár, Gyenes had an active leadership role in the development of the musical life and arranged many activities, including inviting Béla Balázs, Ernő Dohnányi, and other outstanding musicians. He also arranged the first opera performance in the city, of *Barbiere di Sevilla* (Kocsis 2018). After the couple's divorce, Gyenes moved with his son János at first to Győr, then to Budapest and Balassagyarmat. He lived a long life, dying at the age of eighty-seven. (I was not able to obtain any information on how he survived the Holocaust, as his son István, in interviews about his family did not mention either of his parents' wartime experiences, or for that matter, his mother's second marriage.)



The young Izsó Gyenes (1874-1961)

Of the Gyenes couple's three children, their daughter, Erzsébet, as mentioned above, perished in the Holocaust, the circumstances of whose death Reményi was unable to address in

her memoir. Erzsi was a pianist, likely first taught by Reményi, who was a music teacher, of which she also makes no mention in her memoir. A student of Dohnányi, Erzsi taught the daughter of Horthy's *garde du corps*; as a result, she supposedly had a letter of protection from Horthy, but was nevertheless deported and perished in Ravensbrück (Sztankay 2000). The firstborn of the three siblings, István Reményi-Gyenes (Kaposvár 1909-Budapest 2001) was a journalist, translator and talented writer of song lyrics. The younger son, János/Juan Gyenes (Kaposvár 1912-Budapest 1995), who worked in Spain as a photographer beginning in 1940, became world famous. The friend of many artists, including of Picasso, he was also the court photographer of the royal family and a member of the Spanish Royal Academy of Arts (Juan Gyenes 1984, Olmeda 2011).



István Reményi Gyenes

Within the same year his parents divorced, István Reményi-Gyenes graduated from *gimnázium* ['academic secondary school'] and from commercial school in 1928 and moved to Budapest from Kaposvár. He worked in a bank, but to make ends meet at night he worked as a bar musician, playing violin and jazz saxophone in the *New York Kavéház* ['New York Café'] and other popular venues. Of his wartime survival he has recounted that thirty-two of his relatives perished, but that he managed to survive the labor service, with his violin always at his side. He worked in the iron works in Dunapentele, where he was protected by the workers, and after liberation by a Russian officer, who was a journalist. After liberation, Reményi-Gyenes, feeling that a new beginning was needed, joined the Party and became a reporter for Béla Balázs's *Fényszóró* ['Spotlight'], the weekly socialist cultural and theater and film publication, which survived only one year. Beginning in 1945 he became a member of MUOSZ [*Magyar Újságírók Országos Szövetsége*, 'The National Association of Hungarian Journalists'], the Hungarian Journalists' Guild and through his career he wrote for many daily and weekly periodicals. From 1949-1976, his principal employment was at a car and motorcycle magazine, from where he eventually retired. From 1954 he also became a translator for French *chansons* by Aragon and Prévert and others, and for Gershwin songs, and musicals, including *West-Side Story*. He recounts that in 1956 his brother urged him to come to Spain but that he replied, *magyar vagyok* ['I am Hungarian'] and chose to remain in his homeland (Kiss 1999, Sztankay 2000). He did visit Spain: in 1972, together with his brother, he published a travel book, *Granadától Segoviáig*, ['From Granada to Segovia'], for which he provided the text and his brother the photos.

Reményi-Gyenes's best known publication is *Ismerjük őket?* ['Do We Know Them?'], (1995, 1997, and in 2000 an expanded edition, with an improbable introduction by Otto von Habsburg). The aim of the volume was to catalogue Hungarians of Jewish origin, including also

those who may have renounced their roots, but all of whom had in common that someone somewhere took account of their Jewish ancestry, whether in positive or negative light. Reményi-Gyenes promised that every reader would discover surprises in the book, and I did, discovering that the sculptor of the famous enormous bronze statue on Buda Castle Hill of the mythic falconlike *turul* bird, associated with a number of rightist ideologies, was Jewish. I was also surprised to discover that Reményi-Gyenes, even in his 2000 expanded edition, did not mention Imre Kertész, although by then 300 writers, including Ákos Kertész, were listed.



In reading the Introduction to the *Biri mama* memoir I found it a lack that there was no mention of how and from whom the manuscript was obtained, although I had to assume it was from relatives who (for peculiar reasons) wanted to remain anonymous. Then I happened to find a curious article about how, after the death of her mother in 1982 followed by that of her father, István Reményi-Gyenes, his (unnamed) daughter contributed her parents' collection of 343 souvenir costumed dolls from the 1960s from numerous countries, but mainly from Spain, to the Museum of Ethnography. The collection was of interest, as it represented a period in Hungary when travel was very restricted for the general population (Szojka 2003). It is then likely that Irén Reményi's handwritten memoir was also part of that inheritance, which her son had left untouched at his death and that it was Reményi's granddaughter who allowed it to be published.

While István Reményi-Gyenes spent all of his long life, which covered virtually all of the tortuous twentieth century, in Hungary, where he died at the age of ninety-two, the fate of his younger brother János Gyenes took a very different turn from the time he left Hungary for good in 1937. Like so many Jewish artists and intellectuals in the interwar years, he left both because of difficulty finding an adequate livelihood and because of antisemitism. He began a career abroad as a freelance photographer, in some respects typical of other Hungarian-Jewish photo artists like the Friedmann/Capa brothers, Gyula Brassai, Georg Kepes, Marton Munkácsi, or André Kertész. But unlike any of them, he rapidly achieved lifelong almost unimaginable professional fame in Franco's Falangist Spain, a fame which was to continue in the new democracy as well. The price of that fame was to create for himself a new identity and a subsequent equivocation about his family's origins and certainly silence about his mother's deportation. In this sense, the story of János's emigration story is not unlike that of Aladár Háberman, the father in *Tamás könyve*, the second volume in the Kieselbach series discussed in the beginning of this article, who went to his grave never telling his daughter the truth of his past. It is unclear if Gyenes told his own daughter about his origin, but in the many articles and short biographies about him in the Spanish press as well as in Hungarian during his lifetime it was not mentioned, or rather, studiously avoided. For example, his detailed biography by the *Real Academia de la Historia* ['Royal Academy of History'] does not mention his origin (<http://dbe.rah.es/biografias/11476/juan-gyenes-remenyi>). Similarly, in a Hungarian interview in a volume by András Gervai (1998) that features thirty-three Hungarians who emigrated from Hungary, most, if not all, of the subjects who emigrated in the interwar years are of Jewish background. Yet for Gyenes this detail is carefully left out, although Hitler is mentioned, as is that he is a believer. By contrast, his own oft-repeated, humorously favorite ways to refer to himself was regularly cited in many Spanish sources: [*soy feo, católico, y sentimental* [I am ugly, Catholic and sentimental]], a quote from Ramón del Vallé-Inclán, a great dramatist of the Spanish "Generation of 98."



János Gyenes as a teenage violinist [courtesy of Olmeda 2011]

As a youth in Kaposvár, János began musical studies with his father, who hoped to make a prodigy of him. When it became evident that he was not going to succeed equally to his father as a musician and he eventually also failed some courses in secondary school, he was sent to be an apprentice to an electrician.

Luck had it that the town at the time already had over a half-dozen Jewish-owned photo studios; at age fourteen the youth was soon seduced by the new technology and started experimenting with photography. In 1928, his life changed drastically because his parents divorced and at sixteen he moved with his father to Győr and decided to study photography. At eighteen, he went to Budapest to seek work. According to one story, János got a start in his career by making a photo in 1929 of the first *Miss Hungaria*, Jewish beauty Böske Simon, at the railroad station in Győr, as she was traveling to Paris to the Miss Europa contest, which she also won (on whose life see Vasvári 2019). As a result, he got a job with the entertainment weekly, *Színházi élet* ['Theater Life'] from 1930 to 1937. During these years, he took hundreds of photos of Budapest and Viennese theater, musical and social life. He liked to tell amusing anecdotes about his exploits, such as how in 1934 during Edward VIII's secret visit to Budapest with his lover, Wallis Simpson, he managed to photograph them in a cabaret. Given his special involvement in music, he also took hundreds of photos of many figures in the musical world, including Kodály, Bartók, Lehár, Toscanini, and Furtwängler, among others. By way of example, here are two photos of Kodály, the first one in the company of Béla Bartók, the second with his piano student, Ági Jámbor (on whose history see further Vasvári 2022: 16).



Zoltán Kodály and Béla Bartók in the early thirties  
[Juan Gyenes / Együd Árpád Kulturális Központ Vaszary Képtár/ OSZK]

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Zoltán Kodály and Ági Jámbor at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music, 1933  
[*Színházi Élet* 1933/50.30]



János Gyenes and Jesse Owens at the Berlin Summer Olympics, 1936  
[*Színházi Élet* 1936.no. 35]

While in his later brilliantly successful career in Spain Gyenes was to specialize in portraiture, in his work for *Színházi élet* in 1936 he covered both the winter Olympic games in Garmisch-Partenkirchen and the summer Nazi Olympics, August 4-16, in Berlin. Part of the August 9 and 16 issues (nos. 34 and 35) of *Színházi élet* features photos of Hungarian winners, including the unexpected win in the 100-meter swim by Ferenc Csik (1913-1945), who won a gold medal. The magazine also featured photos of the four-time US gold medalist, Jesse Owens (1913-1980). One photo, not taken by Gyenes, features Gyenes himself showing Jesse Owens a copy of *Színházi élet* in which he was featured.

Gyenes left Hungary in 1937 and tried freelancing in Paris and London and Egypt, where in 1939 he photographed the wedding of King Faruk and in Tirana the wedding of the Albanian King Zog I to Hungarian baroness, Geraldine Apponyi. When war broke out in 1940, Gyenes by chance ended up in Spain on his way to New York, where myth has it that a Metro Goldwyn-Mayer contract awaited him. In Spain, he immediately got work because he arrived at the right time to become one of the few photographers to fill the vacuum that had been left by all the republican photographers who had had to flee the country after the Civil War. However, the unimaginably rapid professional success that was to follow in the subsequent decades, almost impossible to comprehend for a penniless refugee, was due to his meeting in 1941 José Demaría Vázquez Campúa (1900-1975), the legendary rightist Spanish photographer and theater empresario, who during the Civil War had photographed the royal family and had taken war photos and was also a close friend of the Franco family. Vázquez hired Gyenes and they also seem to have become fast friends and worked together until Gyenes opened his own studio in 1948. He soon met and, in 1943, married Sofia Vázquez Péres, who worked as a secretary in José Vázquez's studio and, who given her name, was also likely related to him. Gyenes and his wife's daughter Irenka [sic], named after his mother, Irén[ke], was born in that same year.



A selfie made in the 1940s of Juan Gyenes with his mentor, José Vázquez "Campúa"  
[\[https://campuafotografo.es/tag/gyenes/\]](https://campuafotografo.es/tag/gyenes/)

By 1948, Gyenes had gotten Spanish citizenship, apparently by special government decree, and opened his own studio and from then on success followed upon success. He had a capacity for adapting to the times and lead a non-political life, becoming an intimate of both Franco and the Bourbon royal family and the official photographer of both. In the second half of the twentieth century, the most influential personalities of the Francoist regime posed for him in his studio, with the *caudillo* himself at its head but later also important figures of the transition. When, from 1953, Spain entered the United Nations and the regime wanted to change its image and needed an official portrait of Franco that was less harsh, it was Gyenes's portrait that was printed on millions of stamps and circulated from 1955. This portrait became his most used photo, since it appeared on a stamp in multiple denominations. On various occasions Gyenes remarked in interviews that Franco was a good model who did not get impatient.



In 1962, the year following his father's death, Gyenes was already in a position to establish a music prize for the best young Spanish violinist in his name, the *Premio Isidro Gyenes*, which since 1968 has been funded by the state. In 1976, Gyenes also became the official chronicler of the *Teatro Real* ['Royal Theater']. He also did the first official photograph of King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia in the Zarzuela Palace, which became the most important institutional photo of the later democratic regime because it hung in all public offices. In 1990, another enormous professional recognition was given to Gyenes when he became the first photo artist to be named to the *Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando* ['The Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando'], with a speech entitled "*Retrato del cuerpo, retrato del alma*" ['Photo of the Body, Photo of the Soul']

Calling himself the "photographer of optimism," Gyenes was a great portraitist, who with his technique and his social skills photographed everyone who was anyone from the 1948 opening of his studio through the eighties. These portrait subjects not only included Spanish aristocracy, but also personalities in international political and cultural life, from Picasso and Dali to Errol Flynn, Imelda Marcos, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Omar Sharif and hundreds of other famous people. He also photographed fifty years of cultural and social life, immortalized the most important cultural and social events of the second half of the twentieth century, with all those who considered themselves important in the period posing for him. He additionally published three photo books on ballet, two on theater, and two on bullfighting, another on Picasso. He also published his supposed autobiography, which was that in name only, *Gyenes por Gyenes. Memorias de un fotógrafo en España* ['Gyenes by Gyenes. The Memoir of a Photographer in Spain'] (1983). This accounting only offers the usual repeated anecdotal details about his past, with the excuse, as he liked to repeat, *no me da tiempo escribir mi vida porque la*



*estoy viviendo*" ['I don't have time to write about my life because I am living it.']. Not surprisingly, his 1995 obituary in *El País* reported that *los manuales de historia del medio poco saben de su vida (apenas nada)*" ['the manuals of history of the field know very little about his life (almost nothing)'].



Autoportrait of Juan Gyenes, where he attempts to illustrate his dual artistic talent in music and photography

Although it is not specifically about Gyenes, a rather interesting commentary is provided by Spanish journalist Eugenio Suárez Gómez (2002) regarding the presence of Hungarians who sought refuge in post-Civil War Spain. This description shows that Gyenes, as his self-mythologizing would have it, did not likely just happen to be passing through Spain. Suárez-Gómez was interested in Hungarians because he had been a correspondent in Hungary in 1941-1943, about which he wrote the only Spanish book about that period, *Corresponsal en Budapest* ['Correspondent in Budapest'] (1946; re-ed. 2007). He describes Budapest as a lively city with baths and a nightlife he loved even during wartime and which found far more exciting than Madrid. Over half a century later, in a 2002 article in *El País* he wrote:

Post-Civil War Madrid was the stage for a strange individual emigration of Jews who were fleeing Nazi persecution. Sometimes it was only a stop and an inn on the way to the promising American lands They would gather with that inclination of Central Europeans for cafés, in one on the Gran Vía, called Lys. They were all Jews [and] all Hungarians.

*[El Madrid de la posguerra civil fue escenario de una extraña emigración individualizada de hebreos que huían de la persecución nazi. Puede que sólo fuera una parada y fonda hacia las prometedoras tierras americanas.... Se reunían con la inclinación centroeuropea por los cafés, en uno de Gran Vía, llamado Lys. Todos judíos, todos húngaros.]*

In 2011, a Spanish journalist, Fernando Olmeda, published a biography of Gyenes, in which he primarily discussed his professional career but also investigated his youth in Kaposvár, down to details of his school enrollment and providing photos of his parental home. Olmeda

talks about the Jewish background only of the Reményi side of the family yet does not figure out that Gyenes's name was also Hungarianized, although presumably he had the collaboration of some family member in the preparation of the book. Olmeda's book was translated to Hungarian in 2016 and at the book presentation in Kaposvár Irenka Gyenes was also present, as seen below, flanked by a translator ([https://kapos.hu/hirek/kultura/2016-10-21/juan\\_gyenes\\_az\\_optimizmus\\_fotografusa.html](https://kapos.hu/hirek/kultura/2016-10-21/juan_gyenes_az_optimizmus_fotografusa.html)). (See also many protected images of her with Queen Sofia of Spain in 2012 at an exhibition of her father's work in Madrid at <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/irenka-gyenes-and-queen-sofia-of-spain-attend-the-gyenes-news-photo/151955474>)



Irenka Gyenes Vázquez in Kaposvár in 2016

In interviews about her father, Irenka likes to repeat that the secret of his photography was to make visible the invisible, to capture the soul inside the body, and she also said that he worked all the time and was making photos until ten days before his death. In Budapest after his brother István's death in 2001, an additional, previously unknown 1,500 photos by Juan Gyenes were found, which István had kept from decades of correspondence, wherein Gyenes had sent messages about vacations and the growth of his daughter written on photos (Grászli 2020). Given the publication of Olmeda's book four years before, it is hard to understand an interview Irenka Gyenes gave in 2015 ("Retrato de una mirada al siglo XX" *Diario Sur*, 26 March), in which she recounts that her first recollection of her father was in 1945 – when she was not yet two years old – sitting in a velvet sofa in their Madrid living room, with his face in his hands, crying unconsolably, because the Russians have invaded his beloved Hungary. In fact, he would likely have been crying because he had just learned that his sister had perished in the Holocaust and that his elderly mother had, against all odds, survived.

Irén Reményi was among the about seventy percent “fortunate” deportees, including children and elderly deportees from Szarvas, who survived. Many experienced serious problems of maladjustment after life in the camps. Today the memorial in the cemetery in Szarvas lists 220 Neolog and 135 Orthodox Jews who perished. While there are still commemorations, Dr. Pál Molitorisz, local historian and author of several books about Szarvas, reports that today’s younger generations in Szarvas know nothing at all about all its onetime important Jewish population (<https://www.newjsag.hu/2016/06/03/holocaust-szarvasi-aldozataira-emlekeztek-vasarnap/>).



The Memorial to the Jewish victims in Szarvas

There remains the question I posed at the beginning of this study: what can we learn from still another Holocaust story? What does it bring to the many already existing testimonies? In this long excursus on Biri Mama's memoir and its historical context, I have tried to show the truth of Maria Ember's rueful motto, which she wrote in her own handwriting on the title page of her Holocaust autofictional memoir, *Hajtűkanyar* ['Hairpin Turn'] (1974), that the story of Jews deported from the Szolnok area to Austria, the “lucky” exception to Auschwitz, that “The subject of this book is not ‘the’ Jewish fate. What this book discusses is Hungarian history” [*ennek a könyvnek a tárgya nem ‘a’ zsidó sors. Amit ez a könyv elbeszél, az magyar történelem*]. That is, the broader question concerns the place of Jews in Hungary’s past and present.

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