

András Kovács, *The Stranger at Hand. Antisemitic Prejudices in Post-Communist Hungary*, Boston-Leiden: Brill 2010, pp. 211

by *Adam Kerpel-Fronius*

International attention has focused on Hungary since the landslide victory of right-wing parties in the general elections of 2010. The emergence of an extremist right-wing party, Jobbik (Movement for a better Hungary), gaining almost 17% of the vote with radically xenophobic slogans, seemed especially alarming. Many commentators spoke of a disturbing rise in antisemitism, creating the impression that, for one of Europe's largest Jewish communities, life has become dangerous.

But are these notions supported by empirical data? Are Hungarians more antisemitic than, say, their Western European counterparts? Are antisemites in Hungary particularly militant and politicized? And what about knowledge of the Holocaust? Are Hungarians unaware of their country's role in the mass extermination of Jews in 1944/45, or do they tend to deny it?

In empirical studies conducted on a regular basis since the early 1990s, the sociologist András Kovács of the Central European University in Budapest has tried to find answers to these questions. It is obvious from the very beginning that he is not looking for easy explanations, but seeks to provide a comprehensive model of the structure of antisemitism in Hungary today.

The first chapter of the book describes how the »Jewish question« resurfaced in Hungary after the fall of communism. This makes worthwhile reading even for those who are more familiar with the subject. We learn that although under the communist regime the issue had been a taboo, it had never completely disappeared – neither on the part of the regime that consciously kept track of the Jewish or non-Jewish descent of its subjects, nor in intellectual milieus, which more often than not defined themselves along the divide of supposedly Jewish or non-Jewish dominated groups. This phenomenon later found its continuation in the row between »urban« and »popular« intellectuals in the 1990s.

The re-emergence of supposedly long-forgotten antisemitic topics and codes in public speech came as a shock to many, but Kovács sees the main reason behind it not so much in the prevalence of anti-Jewish sentiments, but in the logic and the dynamics of the political competition after the fall of communism. The new parties, which essentially all stood for the same set of political goals (dismantling of the old system, parliamentary democracy, free-

market economy) had to find a symbolic space in which they could differentiate themselves from one another. That symbolic space was found in history, especially in the way the new political actors interpreted the Horthy regime of the interwar period. While the urban, liberal side rejected virtually everything Horthy stood for, the conservatives – exactly because Horthy was declared a fascist throughout the communist era – sought to rehabilitate the pre-war regime. Inevitably, a row has ensued on the responsibility of the pre-war elites for the Holocaust. As for antisemitism, this melange proved particularly explosive: »For the conservatives' opponents, the most effective means of shattering the legitimacy of the conservative position in the eyes of the public was to call attention to the possibility of a hidden antisemitism behind it. Meanwhile, the conservatives – employing a similar strategy – attempted to portray their liberal and left-wing opponents as covert or overt apologists for the communist regime. They accused them of hiding behind the veil of antifascism, which, in certain cases, they considered to be motivated by the memory of the Holocaust. In this manner, by means of the identity-politics debates, antisemitism became the direct focus of the political debate.« [p.26f.]

It was in this context that openly antisemitic opinions appeared at the centre of the political debate, namely those advocated by the recently deceased playwright-turned-nationalist-politician István Csurka. Csurka made a point of condemning the Holocaust, but presented the »Jewish question« as highly relevant in the Hungarian nation's supposed struggle to preserve its identity and freedom. He and others spoke of »us« and »them«, »they« being those who have always served foreign, »cosmopolitan« interests in order to colonize and exploit »our« country.

Here, Kovács also points out the relevance of the linguistic continuum in which these debates took place: while some moderate conservatives, without being antisemitic, were apologetic towards some aspects of Horthy's regime, real antisemites felt encouraged to move into the arena and, by talking about the same subjects, had the opportunity to present their views as part of the legitimate discourse.

Chapter Two presents the empirical data on antisemitism. The two main studies analysed were conducted in 1995 and 2002 respectively. The assembled data and the thoroughness with which the author interprets them is fascinating, although occasionally, a few of these passages are somewhat tedious to read. The data show that Hungarian antisemitism is neither above average in international comparison (in fact, it is lower than in most Western European countries), nor was there significant growth in the number of antisemites since the 1990s: they still account for about a quarter of the adult population. The

studies allow us to identify social groups that show more inclination to be antisemitic than others: they tend to be more anomic, more conservative and slightly more religious than non-antisemites, and typically live in Budapest. Anti-Jewish sentiments are not particularly high when compared to the respondents' feelings about other »foreign« groups living in the country; in fact, only the German minority is more popular than the Jews, while the Roma minority population is rejected by most respondents.

Chapter Three is about the general knowledge of the Holocaust in Hungary. The results indicate that while the level of knowledge on this subject is acceptable in international comparison, there are only very few people who have profound knowledge of the facts. A majority of the Hungarians also know about and accept their country's responsibility for the deportation of her Jewish citizens. Still, most of the respondents also think that Hungarians suffered as much as the Jews did, and thus relativize the Holocaust. On the other hand, outright denial of the Holocaust is a marginal phenomenon.

The notion that the level of antisemitism has not risen significantly since the end of communism is also underlined by the latest data in the book from 2009 (the Hungarian original was published in 2005). However, one important development did take place during the period covered: the emergence of a new group whose extreme antisemitism was of a distinctively political nature. These people weren't antisemites because they felt particularly frustrated, but because antisemitism became part of their nationalistic ideological identity. Also, particularly in recent years, antisemitic rhetoric has become part of mainstream discourse, thus creating the impression that antisemitism was out of control. Thus, the question which arose in 2005 was: if a political party should emerge which opts to exploit the antisemitic electoral potential, what would be the reaction of the established parties at the political centre? In 2010, this scenario in part became reality, and while Fidesz (»Alliance of Young Democrats«), led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, has succeeded in containing the threat Jobbik posed, it never totally distanced itself from the far right in order not to alienate too many of its own nationalist voters. Still, in the light of what we learned it seems logical that Jobbik's main strategy has been to capitalize on negative sentiments against the Roma instead. With regard to Jobbik's antisemitism, Kovács suggests: »This does not mean that antisemitism is absent from the rhetoric of the radicals, but that it does not take the form of anti-Jewish political demands.« [p. 201] And yet, the outcome of this political adventure is still uncertain.

András Kovács has presented us with a standard reference work on the origins and the nature of antisemitism in contemporary Hungary. His book not only

offers in-depth interpretation of the vast amount of data gathered, but also provides an excellent introduction to the nature of intellectual discourse in Hungary over the last two decades. As a next step, it would certainly be interesting to juxtapose Kovács's findings with studies on the subjective perception of Jews of their own situation in Hungary today.

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