

**Pál Hatos and Attila Novák (eds.), *Between Minority and Majority. Hungarian and Jewish/Israeli Ethnical and Cultural Experiences in Recent Centuries* (Budapest: Balassi Institute, 2013), pp. 262.**

By *Ferenc Laczó*

The volume *Between Minority and Majority* results from a joint conference of Hungarian and Israeli historians and sociologists organized by and held at the Balassi Institute in Budapest in 2011 and simultaneously published in its Hungarian and English versions.<sup>1</sup> Few topics related to Hungary have received more international attention in recent years than the reemergence of Hungarian Anti-Semitism and the resulting tensions and controversies. The volume under review consciously aims to offer an alternative to such mainstream thematic priorities that, in the critical assessment of its two editors, Pál Hatos (intellectual historian and scholar of religion as well as Director of the Balassi Institute since 2010) and Attila Novák (historian, sociologist and a leading Hungarian expert on the history of Zionism), largely reproduce narratives of suffering (p. 7).

Instead, *Between Minority and Majority* starts from the perception of similarities between Hungarians and Jews/Israelis. More particularly, it aims to analyze and occasionally also to compare the history of Hungarian and Jewish diaspora and the shifting meaning of identities – without ignoring crucial differences. What might appear like a bold discursive move in the present in fact has a long and complicated intellectual prehistory as well as its more concrete scholarly origins in Hungarian minority studies of recent decades. Hungarian minority studies has namely not only flourished and become highly diversified since the end of communism but has found a balance between focusing on Hungarian minorities living outside Hungary and exploring other kinds of minorities, including Jews.

The conference volume features a majority of Hungary-based contributors, altogether nine of them, including highly accomplished authors such as, for instance, Balázs Ablonczy, Victor Karády or András Kovács, alongside three Israel-based academics, namely Judit Frigyesi, Guy Miron and Raphael Vago as well as two Hungarian scholars from Romania. It thus ought to come as no surprise that the volume as a whole partially reflects the aforementioned specific thematic mix of Hungarian minority studies. *Between Minority and Majority* offers a host of articles on various Jewish themes that range from an assessment of Jewish educational achievements in modern Central Europe (Victor Karády), reflections on (the relative scarcity of) Hungarian-Jewish musical compositions (Judit Frigyesi), a comparison of various waves and ideologies of the use of Hebrew in Hungary of modern times (Viktória Bánai)

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<sup>1</sup> The Balassi Institute is the Hungarian functional equivalent of the German Goethe Institute.

all the way to German Jewish and Hungarian Jewish (Guy Miron) as well as Transylvanian Jewish debates on the contours of the future in the inter-war period (Attila Gidó). All these topics are discussed by leading experts with relevant previous publications. At the same time, some of their findings are made available in English here for the first time.

The contributions on Jewish topics are framed by the first and the last study of the volume that, respectively, deal with the determinants of political community and its applicability to the triangular Hungarian-Romanian relations (Levente Salát) and with Hungarian public life and identity in the United States (Attila Papp Z.) that make no references to Jewish history or identity. In other words, *Between Minority and Majority* includes some of the major findings of Hungarian Jewish studies that are further enriched by the discussion of other important issues of Hungarian minority studies.

This also implies that the intriguing comparativist ambition of the book is only rarely realized. This ambition does, however, assume a prominent place, above all, in Tamás Turán's "Two Peoples and Seventy Nations" that insightfully traces the intellectual history of drawing Hungarian-Jewish parallels of national destiny. In this immensely learned contribution, Turán explores the theological-historical-philosophical aspects of such parallels instead of reproducing a characteristic reduction of modern times, namely that of restricting the scope of the question to the empirical-socioeconomic-political dimension. In the course of his balanced reflections, Turán explains that "core elements of ancient Jewish historiography played a role in the formation of Hungarian national consciousness" (p. 62). On the other hand, he also highlights the "inherent, strong ambivalence" of such "historical homologues and fate-comparisons" (p. 64).

The comparative question does reappear in other studies such as Raphael Vago's "Israel-Diaspora Relations: Mutual Images, Expectations, Frustrations" that identify a host of issues common to Jews and Hungarians without meaning to overemphasize their similarities (p.110). Tamás Gusztáv Filep's exploration titled "Hungarian Jews of Upper Hungary in Hungarian Public Life in Czechoslovakia (1918/19-1938)" adds a further complexity of Hungarian-Jewish history to the book: it focuses on the problem of a Jewish minority within a Hungarian minority. Presenting the "significant" and even "proportionately large" roles Jews played in the Hungarian political and social life of inter-war Czechoslovakia (169), Filep argues that the repeated non-Jewish Hungarian complaints of the time, according to which Jews had deserted the Hungarian minority, ought to be rejected through these rich evidences to the contrary. The desirable as well the probable future of a Hungarian- (but also German-)speaking Jewish minority was also heavily debated in inter-war Transylvania. This serves as the subject of Attila Gidó's study, "From Hungarian to Jew: Debates Concerning the Future of the Jewry

of Transylvania in the 1920s” that identifies three major options: the continuation of Hungarian affiliations, the strengthening of Jewish identity and the attempt at a new assimilation into Romanian culture and society. Gidó presents the much increased popularity of the secular Jewish national platform as the most significant inner-Jewish change of the times – which did not necessarily mean the end of Hungarian cultural involvement though.

In sum, *Between Minority and Majority* offers a coverage of some of the major themes and most significant findings of Hungarian Jewish studies, while it is also visibly indebted to the thematic priorities of Hungarian minority studies. Most significantly, it attempts to re-launch the Hungarian-Jewish/Israeli dialogue on a new basis of commonalities and shared experiences. It is a significant question whether this seemingly less confrontational but certainly not uncontroversial approach will yield further joint ventures: will the publication of this volume lead to the establishment of a novel scholarly platform or remain a single initiative of the turbulent early 2010s that aimed to challenge more mainstream framings of Hungarian-Jewish affairs?

*Ferenc Laczó, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena*