

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

by Catherine Horel

The book presents the results of a doctoral as well as post-doctoral research undertaken by a young Hungarian scholar. Supervised by Viktor Karády at Central European University Budapest, the author already shows great maturity and expertise in his field.

There have been numerous studies about the Holocaust in Hungary, but seldom has the reaction of Hungarian Jews before and after the tragedy been examined.¹ This is of utmost importance considering that Hungary, as opposed to other countries of the soon to be Communist Bloc, has seen a lively debate on the question of the origins and responsibilities of anti-Semitic politics. As a piece of intellectual history, the book focuses on analyses and responses to the endeavor of the Hungarian State to “dissimilate” the Jews (here I use an expression by Viktor Karády to characterize the progressive divorce between the State and the Jewish community after decades of assimilationist policies), without harming them physically. The author is right in considering that neither the Numerus Clausus Law of 1920, or the anti-Jewish laws of 1938, and those promulgated up to 1942, were necessarily leading to the deportations that started after the German invasion of 19 March 1944. Even though the responsibility of Regent Horthy and his governments is crucial, this was no fatality. The author is cautious to avoid teleology and anachronism.

In order to understand fully the context born out of 1918-1919, it would have been more logical to start from the Counter-Revolution, the White Terror and the so-called Szeged ideas developed in the circles surrounding Horthy. The years of the consolidation of the regime instead are the starting point of the study: here the consensus on revisionism (claiming back the territories taken from Hungary with the Trianon Treaty) is an important element of identification of the Jews, because of their well-comprehensible nostalgia for the pre-1918 era. This can be seen also in Austria and other former Habsburg

¹ On the aftermath, see: Catherine Horel, *La restitution des biens juifs et le renouveau juif en Europe centrale (Hongrie, Slovaquie, République Tchèque)*, (Wiener-Bern: OsteuropaStudien-Peter Lang, 2002).

lands. Perhaps, a more *longue durée* perspective and comparisons would have made it easier for readers non-familiar with Hungarian history to understand all this. The author offers nonetheless a very precise bibliographical survey of studies, mainly in Hungarian and English, that allow the interested reader to get a more complete overview of the subject.

The intellectual history of the period before 1944 is based on three journals published by institutions linked to the Jewish community: the author is conscious of the limited scope offered by these academic publications edited and read by elites from the Budapest community. However, they provide a synthesis of the Jewish responses to the progressive alienation of the Hungarian State and society from their Jewish compatriots. After the Holocaust, critics will be heard reproaching this merely intellectual attitude, at a time when more active self-defense would have been required. Indeed the audience of these periodicals was rather limited and they did not reach the core of the community in the provinces, precisely those who would be the victims of deportations in spring-summer 1944. The debates agitating the neighboring countries (Jewish nationality and Zionism) do not seem to have been raised in these journals. Also the question of Zionism and possible emigration after the war is not mentioned extensively as an alternative: Zionism on the one hand seems to be the justification for the “return” to Judaism of many, on the other hand it represents a solution. Yet, if we compare Hungary to other countries in the region, relatively few Hungarian Jews chose to emigrate to Israel. The author gives a clear and correct picture of the identification options of the Hungarian Jews (p. 31), also pointing at the very relevant argument of the coincidence between Hungarian extreme nationalism and Jewish assimilation.

The study of the journals confirms what some scholars had already noted: Hungarian Jews were not ready to dissociate themselves from a State that had given them the opportunity to realize considerable achievements at all levels. In comparison to other Jewries (mainly the Czechs and certainly the Germans, in the first place), the Jews of Hungary remained attached to the German language and culture, being reluctant to accept that Nazi Germany was rejecting them (p.60). The journals preached for the necessity to be more Jewish or better Jews without becoming less Hungarian, since many intellectuals and artists were already deeply acculturated if not assimilated. There was an undeniable critique of the Neologue movement but, at the same

time, Orthodoxy was not an option. On the contrary, the sometimes very insightful conscience of the upcoming danger, strengthened the support for Hungary – that was seen as a haven for Jews (p.98). In this context, the German occupation of March 1944 was a surprise for everyone: here, a reflection on the consensus for Horthy would have been welcome.

The study gives an excellent overview of the post-war situation, where Hungary again is in some aspects an exception (but a comparison with Czechoslovakia could be instructive). First, there was the interviews' campaign that allowed Holocaust survivors to talk about their experience; second, the “democratic parenthesis” (Miklós Molnár) produced a considerable number of testimonies as well as debates on Hungary's responsibility and on the “Jewish question.” For many, the German invasion, the deportations and finally the Arrow Cross rule were subsumed in the notions of catastrophe, national shame and loss of honor for the country (pp.142 and 176). This was combined with the accusation of treason (Church, elites) and more generally with the acknowledgment of Horthy's responsibility and incapacity to preserve the independence of Hungary.² At the same time, the author shows that the Jewish leadership also came under attack for not having been able to organize a resistance: at the turn of 1947-48, the Jewish Council was constantly criticized for its passivity (p.172). In fact, even though the deportations were conducted by Hungarian gendarmes and army, some authors are ambiguous in accusing on the one hand the German influence in Hungary – which was a reality in the armed forces, but also because of specific organizations (for example the *Volksbund*) interested in ethnic Germans, like in other countries of Central Europe – and on the other hand putting all the blame on the authorities and society of the Hungarian State (p.184). To some extent, people were confident in Horthy and chose, to begin with political leadership, to bury one's head in the sand and to wait for the end of the storm.

Like in Western countries, after a short period during which Jewish survivors were able to speak, silence, taboos and self-censorship followed: Jewish testimonies were replaced by the narratives of political deportees. In Hungary the repression was particularly sensible after 1948 and the subsequent beginning of Communist rule. It is regrettable that the author does not explain

² Catherine Horel, *L'amiral Horthy. Régent de Hongrie*, (Paris: Perrin, 2014). Hungarian translation, *Horthy*, (Budapest: Kossuth kiadó, 2017).

this more clearly, but only mentions it implicitly: for example, when it comes to the emigration of Samuel Löwinger in 1950 (p.163), at the time when Jewish communities (Neologue and Orthodox) were forced to merge and fell under State control. When the author clearly points at the fact that most of the people who wrote about the war belonged to the Left and delivered an ideologized speech, he could have mentioned István Bibó's study on the Jewish question and the debate that erupted around it (that is indeed famous, but not to readers unfamiliar with Hungarian history). How the Communist version finally prevailed and which its elements were, only are alluded. The many articles József Révai, seen then as one of the main ideologues of the Party, or Erik Molnár wrote, about the "future of the Jewish question" enable to explain how and why independent voices, Jewish or not, were soon silenced, to the benefit of the argument that once Socialism is attained, ethnic and religious categories would become obsolete. Whereas some of the protagonists of this debate adopted the Communist rhetoric, others kept silent or emigrated. In this respect, the conclusion of the book is too superficial. This said, this is a very recommended book by a scholar who dominates the subject. It is to be hoped that his work will stimulate new research on these topics in Hungary and in the neighboring countries. Ferenc Laczó himself will certainly contribute with other studies that will enrich the historiographical debate.

Catherine Horel, CNRS/SIRICE (Paris I University)