

Zvi Hartman

## Facing the Assimilation of Jewish Intellectuals (1918–1945)

Béla Zsolt and Károly Pap (Budapest), Ernő Ligeti (Kolozsvár)

The good nationalist guards rights,  
the bad nationalist slights them,  
– not least of the people he selfishly blights.  
Gyula Illyés (1970)

After Hungarian Jews were granted full civil rights in 1867, they played an active part in Hungarian society. They became thriving citizens of the Hungarian state, playing an essential role in westernising Hungary in the late nineteenth century, while the Magyars (used here henceforth to refer to those who saw themselves as ethnic Hungarian citizens of the Hungarian state – *trans.*) increasingly felt that they had been left behind. In order to swell the number of Hungarian citizens, the leaders of the Magyars “recruited” all the various ethnic groups of Greater Hungary prepared to embrace Hungarian language and culture. Among those groups, the Jews were the main ethnicity ready to become “statistically united”,<sup>35</sup> as Carlile A. Macartney put it, whereas other ethnicities tended to reject this. Thus the leaders of the Magyars enlarged their Hungarian-speaking population in a country which had the Germans as their neighbours to the west and the Slavs and Romanians as neighbours on the other side of Hungary, in the east.

The Jews of Hungary, including those who immigrated to Hungary from other eastern countries, were ready to embrace the Magyars’ “inclusivist policy” and as a result they made major contributions to Hungarian language and culture. This was the beginning of a new kind of interethnic cooperation. The Jews even attempted to win over other ethnicities to the acceptance of Hungarian language and culture.

### What led to the rise in anti-Semitism?

In Hungary, the Jews were able to succeed in every field of endeavour and the Magyars were envious of their success. Their defeat in World War I, the Treaty of Trianon, and frustration in daily life proved fertile ground for racist and fascist ideologies.

János Gyurgyák has traced the first manifestations of anti-Semitism in Hungary back to World War I, seeking to answer the question: what brought about these “winds of change”, after what had been formerly a “close relationship” between the Magyars and the Jews? Initially, the Magyars were satisfied that the latter formed an integral part of a flourishing

<sup>35</sup> Carlile A. Macartney: *A Short History of Hungary*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1962. 193.

society. Gradually, however their feelings and sense of dignity came to be offended by the “aggressive Jewish mentality”. They increasingly saw the Jews as a “national threat” to the “pure Magyar race”. Based on these national feelings, the Magyar spokesmen for racial theories voiced their exclusivist politics and demanded the removal of the Jews from leading cultural positions in Hungary.

One of the first spokesmen for anti-Semitic views was the Hungarian Socialist Péter Ágoston,<sup>36</sup> a contributor to the radical left-wing sociological review *Huszdik Század*<sup>37</sup> (*The Twentieth Century*), most of whose contributors were Jewish or Jewish converts to Christianity. He accused the Jews of avoiding military service in the Great War in which he himself was obliged to take part. As a Christian Magyar (Hungarian) he felt he was discriminated against. Ágoston’s philosophical approach to anti-Semitism is outlined in his book *A zsidók útja* [The Way of the Jews].<sup>38</sup>

In this book he claimed that Jews were different from Christians. Irrespective of the reason for this, he claimed, what mattered was the fact of their difference. If an intellectual like Ágoston, a leading figure in Béla Kun’s Marxist government, had doubts about the Jews being part and parcel of the Hungarian nation, assimilation was bound to be impossible. This shows how frustration caused by another ethnicity, whether factual or imagined, can easily become a trigger for a negative attitude towards the group targeted. Thus, the atmosphere of World War I and the postwar era paved the way for the growth of anti-Semitic sentiment in Central Europe.

Yet Ágoston denied he was anti-Semitic. He tried to convince his readers that an “objective” explanation for anti-Semitism was possible.<sup>39</sup> He expounded complicated theories, which, however, demonstrated that anti-Semitism was not a phenomenon capable of being described objectively, but stems from a “sentiment” that “might perhaps have a basis in reality”. He claimed to understand the roots of anti-Semitism. His attempt to disguise his anti-Semitic feelings well illustrates that he did not really believe in the possibility of Jewish integration into Christian society in general and into Hungarian society in particular. In other words, though he preached socialist equality, that did not include the integration of the Jews.

<sup>36</sup> Péter Ágoston (1874–1925) studied law at the University of Budapest and was a member of the Socialist Party. – Ágoston Péter a szociáldemokrata párt tagja volt. schg He was a minister in Mihály Károlyi’s “Aster Revolution” Government at the end of 1918, and for a week in August 1919 Deputy People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs during Béla Kun’s short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic. He subsequently went into exile (Moscow, London and finally Paris).

<sup>37</sup> *Huszdik Század* (*The Twentieth Century*), a radical social journal read initially mainly by Jews and former Jews. The first issue appeared, symbolically, in January 1900, as a kind of declaration of the dawning of a new century and a new political and social era.

<sup>38</sup> This book had a stormy reception, as it was the first in the twentieth century to discuss the so-called “Jewish Question”. János Gyurgyák: *A zsidókérdés Magyarországon – Politikai eszmetörténet* [The Jewish Question in Hungary – The History of a Political Idea]. Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 2001. 89.

<sup>39</sup> Péter Ágoston: *A zsidók útja* [The Path of the Jews]. Nagyvárad, A Nagyváradai Társadalomtudományi Intézet kiadása, 1917, vol. II. 23.

In the spring of 1919, a Bolshevik government came to power in Hungary, led by Béla Kun, a Transylvanian Jew, and consisting primarily of Jews. However, this Marxist régime lasted less than six months before the prewar monarchy was restored with Miklós Horthy as “Regent” and István Bethlen as Prime Minister. This was the beginning of a “national Christian turn” in Hungary, intended to compensate the defeated Magyars. In the eyes of most Magyars, all the calamities visited upon Hungary between 1914 and Trianon in 1920 were attributable to Jewish involvement in every sphere of life.

The right-wing conservative regime in the interwar period expended little effort to make the local Jews feel at home in the Magyar society. One of the first steps taken against the Jews was the law imposing a *numerus clausus* in the universities. The next step was the efforts of the chief statistician of the Hungarian Central Bureau of Statistics in Budapest, Alajos Kovács, to count the number of Jews in the country. In 1922, he published a paper<sup>40</sup> which challenged the view that some Jews had successfully integrated into Hungarian society after the 1867 emancipation or had contributed to the country’s modernisation. Nevertheless he admitted that there was a definite need at the time for a “Greater Hungary”, in which the country’s ethnicities absorbed Magyar language and culture and swelled the numbers of Hungarians in statistical terms. The Jews proved themselves more ready than any of the other ethnicities to adopt this policy.

However, it was also the Jews who had imposed a Bolshevik régime and internationalist ideas upon the Hungarian spirit and Magyar national identity. In Kovács’s eyes this was an unforgivable sin. For him this was the point at which the “Jewish magic” evaporated. He sought a “scientific” explanation for the Jews’ behaviour in World War I. In his view, this was their way of taking vengeance on the Hungarian anti-Semitism that had existed for centuries before the emancipation, although it had lain dormant under Dualism (1867–1920), the period when the Jews were their “demographic kin”.

\*\*\*

For the Magyars it was essential for the recovery of their self-respect and self-image to exclude the “Other” – in this case the Jews.

In my view Hungarian society, following its defeat at the postwar peace treaties, felt cheated and laid all the blame squarely on the Jews. In Freudian terms: “It is the ‘Other’ that is always responsible for my problems”.

François Fejtő, the Hungarian Jewish French sociologist wrote in 1997 about the thousand years of shared Hungarian–Jewish history.<sup>41</sup> In his view these two ethnicities formed an “odd couple”. In fact, this theory was based on the poet Endre Ady’s assumptions from the beginning of the twentieth century, nearly a century earlier.

<sup>40</sup> Alajos Kovács: *A zsidóság térfoglalása Magyarországon* [The Expansion of the Jews in Hungary]. Budapest, published by the author, 1922.

<sup>41</sup> François Fejtő: *Magyarság, zsidóság* [Magyars and Jews]. Budapest, História – MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 2000.

Ady characterised this relationship as a love affair, with all its concomitant ups and downs. In 1917 he saw the partnership with the Jews as a blessing and not as a curse, essential to Hungary's future. He believed that Hungarian Jewish integration was necessary and that both sides should do their utmost to make this a successful project. In my view, Endre Ady was a genuine philo-Semite. In the eyes of many Jewish liberals, he represented the ideal Magyar (Christian) intellectual.

\*\*\*

In interwar Hungary there were no significant liberal forces capable of supporting Endre Ady's objections to anti-Semitic publications and activities. Hungary was not the only country where the dominant ethnicity had a policy of excluding the "Other". After the adoption of the Nuremberg Laws in Germany in 1935, the proto-fascist regimes in countries like Romania and Hungary, for example, felt free to introduce similar legislation three years later, in 1938. The climate was ripe for promoting the exclusion of the "aliens", namely the Jews.

In our case the question still remains: why did Jewish intellectuals fail to grasp the seriousness of the Hungarian Government's declarations, legislation and actions, especially after the Treaty of Trianon in 1920? It would seem that Jews in Hungary deluded themselves into believing that there were merely a few dozen criminals who, by some mistake, had ended up in positions of power in their country and that this was merely a transient situation.

Below I give a brief account of two careers that exemplify this statement.

Károly Pap (1895–1945) was a typical assimilated Jew, a gifted thinker and writer in interwar Hungary. There were times when he felt Jewish, and others when he felt Hungarian, and sometimes he felt he was both. He also had his communist moments. In short, he was continually trying to find his place in Hungarian society. He was able in his writing to describe his internal conflicts of identity. Born in 1895 in Sopron, on Hungary's border with Austria, his father, Miksa Mihály Pollák, a rabbi with Hungarian nationalistic views, brought up his son to follow him as a rabbi. The young Pollák changed his surname to Pap, which in Hungarian means both priest and rabbi, but soon distanced himself from the Jewish religion. In World War I, he enlisted in the Austro-Hungarian army like a good Hungarian citizen and fought on the Eastern Front. There he encountered impoverished Hungarian peasant-soldiers and had to confront their social background, resulting in his becoming a communist and deserting from the Hungarian army to join the Red Army. Back in Budapest he expressed his inner conflicts in essays focusing on morality and faith. He immersed himself in the study of Christianity and would probably have turned into an ardent Christian had it not been for the winds of anti-Semitism and violent Christian nationalism.

In his book *Zsidó sebek és bűnök* [Jewish Wounds and Sins], published in May 1935, Pap saw the attitude of the "urban liberal Jews" towards the social problems of the Hungarian peasants as flawed. In Pap's opinion urban Jews had no right to interfere

with the Hungarian nobles' treatment of the peasants.<sup>42</sup> The Magyars should be left to solve their social conflicts on their own and the Jews should not attempt to influence the fate of any other ethnic group. He considered it quite obvious that no Jew should play a leading role in Hungarian politics. The Jews should accept their minority status in Hungarian society and should not make any effort to change it. Pap also tried to understand the anti-Semites' thinking and did, perhaps, understand better than any of his fellow Jews the nature of the failure of assimilation. In his Communist moments Pap saw Jesus as a "proletarian leader" who fought against both assimilated Jews and anti-Semites. Pap summed up his views in a 1934 article challenging the writer László Németh's anti-Semitic pronouncements. On occasion Németh espoused anti-Semitic views, though at other times he tried to understand the Jews' dilemma.

Pap outlined the situation of the Jews in the diaspora and in particular his own position in Hungary. He said that it was with fear in his heart that he took upon himself the task of trying honestly to explain the situation of the Jews in the diaspora both to the Magyars and to the Jews. Pap felt that, on the one hand, the faith of his ancestors, Judaism, permeated his body and soul. On the other hand, his strong sense of Hungarianness provided him with the roof over his head, his language, his writing and his livelihood. "Németh sees me as a foreigner or alien, and a representative of Jewish literature in Hungary", Pap wrote. "I was born a Jew and thus I am indeed a foreigner." He went on to say that he was reconciled to being treated as a foreigner and felt no resentment on this account, neither towards Németh nor other contemporary Hungarian writers. He wanted himself to come to terms with his position as a foreigner, but he depended for his livelihood on the Hungarian language and believed that all Hungarian Jews living and working in Hungary should recognise that they were dependent on the Hungarian language and Hungarian culture. In his view everyone in Hungary committed to this view counted as a Hungarian. In other words, the sense of belonging to a people expressed itself through labour.<sup>43</sup>

However, while the committed "labourer" should always live for the people he serves, those with a natural predisposition for exploitation will always damage the people amongst whom they live. Exploitation had now, in the capitalist era, become increasingly palpable both in Hungary and in other capitalist societies. The Jews had not only integrated into capitalist society but even advanced to leading positions. In Pap's Marxist view, capitalism and exploitation went hand in hand.

Pap claimed that anti-Semitism sprang from two main causes. One is the ongoing struggle for economic survival and the envy it occasioned, which in his view was an entirely natural reaction from society's majority. The other cause of anti-Semitism,

<sup>42</sup> "Because it was especially against the Magyar peasant that the Magyar middle and working classes had erred, and the Jewish middle and working classes had no right to make amends for this." See Károly Pap: *Zsidó sebek és bűnök* [Jewish Wounds and Sins]. In *Zsidó sebek és bűnök és publicisták* [Jewish Wounds and Sins and Journalists]. Budapest, Múlt és Jövő, 2000a. 66.

<sup>43</sup> Pap (2000a): op. cit.; Károly Pap: *Válasz egy különítményes vallomására* [Response to the Confession of a Death Commando Trooper]. In János Kőbányai (ed.): *A zsidóság útja. Esszék, 1848–1948* [The Way of the Jews. Essays, 1848–1948]. Budapest, Múlt és Jövő, 2000b. 242–247.

however, Pap could not describe accurately: Németh's claim that "every nation has its distinctive cast of mind (or soul)."<sup>44</sup> While Pap could not support this view, he nevertheless claimed, unlike other Jews like Lajos Hatvany or Pál Ignóty, that it was not tantamount to anti-Semitism.<sup>45</sup> Pap emphasised that the Jews always did their best to assist the various nations among whom they lived and that this should be born in mind by Németh when formulating his views. Németh acknowledged the fact that Pap was a devoted and loyal Jewish "labourer". While Németh held the Jews responsible for the outcome of the Treaty of Trianon, Pap thought that Németh exaggerated the role they played in the events. Yet at the same time he stated: "Every people should preserve the uniqueness of their spiritual values and it is not advisable that it be mingled with those of others".<sup>46</sup>

During the Shoah Pap was transported to Buchenwald, where he perished.

\*\*\*

A second example of the assimilated Jew is provided by Béla Zsolt. Born in 1895 in Komárom on the Slovak border, he moved to Budapest in 1920 and over the following two decades became one of the most prolific authors in Hungary. He published ten novels and numerous articles in journals. In his writings he consistently expressed left-liberal views. He vehemently opposed the right-wing governments of post-Trianon Hungary and sharply criticised the "Agrarians", who glorified a "rural life" soaked in nationalist romanticism. In many of his writings he challenged the chauvinistic view that the supposed purity of the Magyar race was rooted in the Hungarian countryside. In his view, both urban workers and peasants would benefit from adopting the Western urban way of life.<sup>47</sup> In this respect he was similar to other liberals like Endre Ady, mentioned earlier.

Zsolt was perpetually torn between wishful thinking and harsh reality. He described himself as a man who felt closer to his fellow Christian Magyars than to Jews in other countries. He declared that Jews and Magyars in Hungary were similar with regard to their souls, culture and language, and even had common anthropological roots. He believed in the common fate of the Jews and the Hungarians, until reality slapped him in the face.

Zsolt and his wife left Budapest in the summer of 1939 and moved to Paris, but they soon made every effort to return and caught the last train back to Budapest. In 1942, he was transported by cattle truck to a Hungarian forced labour camp in Ukraine and in 1944 found him in the ghetto of Nagyvárad (Oradea) in Transylvania. At the end of the war, he returned to Hungary still hoping he could help make Hungarian society more democratic. This was the only place he could identify as a writer, here in Hungarian society he could express his views, in his own language and in the national milieu that he knew best. Here he

<sup>44</sup> Pap (2000b): op. cit. 244.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 245.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 244.

<sup>47</sup> Béla Zsolt: *Kőért kenyér. (Vezércikkek 1921–1939)* [Bread in Return for Stones. (Leading Articles 1921–1939)]. Budapest, 1939. 49, in an article: „Nagyerdő is nagyvilág” [The forest is also the wide world].

understood and knew exactly how to react to society's every tremor and murmur. Even after his country had rejected him, he still believed that he could change the nation back to the way it had been thirty years earlier.

The quotations below – the last two totally contradicting each other – suggest that Zsolt did not really see any alternative for Hungary than a return to liberal values, even though his feelings had been put to the hardest of tests and he sensed that he really did not have much say in the matter.

My homeland had sent me out to the front, not in order to protect it, but to test my loyalty and my physical limits by forced labour, stigmatization, cruelty, and soldiers behaving like animals, until I either died or began to loathe it enough to betray it. I did almost die but I did not betray my homeland because I am fundamentally incapable of betraying anybody or anything. I did not even come to really loathe it, but rather came into a terrible conflict with it, as if I had been callously rejected by my mother through poisoning me and spending my inheritance on drunken lovers.

...I haven't been able to exchange [my homeland] for another, not even in theory, while the Jews around me continue to dream of Palestine as the new homeland – although this is admittedly a purely theoretical matter at this point.<sup>48</sup>

If my homeland<sup>49</sup> [...] is sending me to the gas chambers,<sup>50</sup> then I do not need it anymore [...]<sup>51</sup>  
A homeland other than Hungary is of no interest to me.<sup>52</sup>

In 1945 Zsolt made his way back to Hungary from Switzerland, where he had been taken on Kasztner's train in 1944.<sup>53</sup>

Zsolt – a writer and journalist like so many of his fellow Jewish Hungarian writers – could not imagine himself living anywhere other than where he had grown up and could not fully identify with the Zionist ideal of Aliyah to Israel, as this would have meant not just learning a new language but also assimilating into another nation.

In contrast to scientists, physicists, mathematicians, chemists, for example, who (to simplify somewhat) “merely” needed to learn a new language in order to be able to practise their professions in the new homeland, writers needed to adjust to a new way of thinking, to grasp a “new reality”.

Zsolt's “rationalised” theory of the (Hungarian) acquired identity as his “real” identity failed in a most unfortunate fashion. Even the Holocaust could not free him of his addiction to the Hungarian mentality. To him, Zionism seemed utopia and he could not identify with any other Western society.

After the peace treaties and the crystallisation of the various nation states, no room remained for Jews. It was especially difficult for assimilated Hungarian Jews to appreciate the new, dark face of the Central European nationalisms.

<sup>48</sup> Béla Zsolt: *Nine Suitcases*. Trans. Ladislaus Löb. London, Cape, 2004. 49.

<sup>49</sup> The Wishnitz synagogue used as the “hospital of the Oradea ghetto in 1944”, see Zsolt (2004): op. cit. 1–4.

<sup>50</sup> Zsolt began to write his memoirs after the war, in 1945.

<sup>51</sup> Zsolt (2004): op. cit. 49.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 50.

<sup>53</sup> On Kasztner's train see Anna Porter: *Kasztner's Train*. London, Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2008.

Knowing what we know today, the inability to process the ‘Other’ – in our case the Jews of post-Trianon Hungary – should not come as a surprise. The newly created, frustrated post-Versailles nation states, Hungary included, could not adopt a liberal, welcoming stance towards the other ethnicities living on their political terrain. They considered that the nation state had to be built on the foundation of a “pure race”. There was no meeting point between the anti-Semites and the assimilated Jews, who were seen as a “threat to the Hungarian race”.

### **Assimilation in Multi-ethnic Transylvania: A Double Failure – The Case of Ernő Ligeti**

Transylvania provides just one of many examples of a multi-ethnic society in Europe, where myths complicated the lives of the various cohabiting ethnicities. Sketching the interrelations between various ethnicities in the Transylvanian triangle – Romanians, Hungarians and Jews – is quite a complicated task. Looking back upon events, we can say that none of these ethnicities acted wisely, even though each found what was to them a rational reason to act as they did.

As in post-Trianon Hungary the postwar agreements proved to be a turning point for Jewish fate in this area. In retrospect it turns out that the Jews in Transylvania before World War I were caught in the Hungarian “honey trap” of assimilation to Hungarian culture, as they really had little alternative. In 1920, however, when Transylvania became part of Romania, the Jews awoke to a new world.

After the Versailles Treaties of 1919–1920, the Romanian nation state, now including the Old Kingdom (the Regat), Transylvania, Bukovina and Bessarabia, became a multi-ethnic entity where only 71.9% of the population was Romanian.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, it was difficult to find a common denominator for all its inhabitants. On both sides of the Carpathian Mountains (Transylvania and the Old Kingdom), the Jews provided the best pretext for explaining the “malignancies” of the new nationstate. The leading circles in Bucharest seriously believed that these “foreign elements” were impeding the natural development of Romania.

Throughout the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, the Hungarians had treated the Romanians who formed a majority in Transylvania quite cruelly. In order to increase their influence in the area, the Hungarians, who were in a minority, encouraged the Jews to become their “statistical brethren”. In return, the Jews would receive equal rights. Since the Jews had no ties to any neighbouring land, they were prepared to declare their loyalty to the Hungarian language and culture.

The Kolozsvár (Cluj)-born Jewish writer Ernő Ligeti, né Lichtenstein (1891–1945), published books and articles in the interwar period suggesting that he had not assimilated the changes in the mentality of the nations surrounding him. In retrospect, it would seem he deliberately kept his eyes firmly shut. He believed that assimilated Jews had a chance

<sup>54</sup> Institutul Central de Statistică. București, 1930. XXIV.



of being part of Hungarian society and wanted to persuade, first and foremost himself, but also the Magyars, that Jewish intellectuals like himself should form part and parcel of the society in which he lived. This was his credo regardless of the situation that prevailed in real life. He was trapped in his misconception of a liberal society. He represented the views of a large part of assimilated Jewry as well as a thin stratum of both Romanian and Hungarian intellectuals in Romania who believed in a liberal and democratic society.

Ligeti began his journalistic career at *Nagyvárad* *Napló*, a liberal *daily* in Nagyvárad, which also launched the career of the well-known Hungarian poet and journalist Endre Ady in 1900.<sup>55</sup> Later Ligeti matured into one of the leading journalists at Kolozsvár's *Keleti Újság*, which in 1927 became the official paper of the Hungarian Party in Transylvania. In the 1920s, these were the two leading Hungarian liberal newspapers in Transylvania. The Romanian nationalist revival in Transylvania began long before World War I: the Romanian National Movement in Ardeal (the Romanian name for Erdély/Transylvania – *trans.*), the Banat and Hungary was founded as early as 1881. The Hungarian authorities dealt harshly with the Romanian national leaders and some of them were arrested.

During World War I, when Ligeti was studying law at the University of Kolozsvár, he was aware of the tension between the two ethnic groups but did not appreciate its gravity. As early as 1911, the Hungarian writer Károly Kós (1883–1977)<sup>56</sup> had noted the increasing tensions between Hungarians and Romanians. After the war, the young Transylvanian author Ligeti became aware of the rift between the various ethnicities. Influenced by this atmosphere he wrote his novel, *Föl a bakra* [Up into the Driver's Seat] (1925), describing the typical “ethnic” characters in his hometown Kolozsvár: Romanians, Hungarians and Jews. This novel is characterised by a great deal of irony. The heroes are trying to find their places in life after the war. They try to understand the changes and find ways of dealing with the new situation. Péter Elekes, a Hungarian junior bank clerk promises that he will not interfere in the lives of other minorities. He is depicted as a constantly conflicted, hesitant Hungarian,<sup>57</sup> while the other Hungarian characters in the novel are mourning the “loss” of Transylvania. Though Elekes was – as mentioned – initially indifferent to the changes that occurred in 1918, he gradually began to take an interest in the fate of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania and followed events with growing anxiety.

Another protagonist, Ștefănescu, on the other hand, a high-ranking Romanian officer, confidently<sup>58</sup> assures the Hungarians that he will not prevent them from dancing the *csárdás*.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Nándor Hegedűs: *Ady Endre nagyvárad* *napjai* [The days of Endre Ady in Nagyvárad]. Budapest, Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Irodalomtörténeti Intézet, 1957. 11.

<sup>56</sup> Lajos Kántor: Ligeti Ernő – és amit átélt [Ernő Ligeti – and what he lived through]. *Kortárs*. (2002), 2–3. 148

<sup>57</sup> Ernő Ligeti (1925): *Föl a bakra* [Up into the Driver's Seat]. Kolozsvár, Erdélyi Szépművészeti Céh, 1925. Elekes is mentioned several hundred times in the book as one of the “anti-heroes” of the new regime.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 40.

<sup>59</sup> The Hungarian dance. *Ibid.*

In the aftermath of the war Romanian, Hungarian, Szekler (an ethnically distinct, Hungarian-speaking group of over half a million in central Transylvania – *trans.*) and “Saxon” (German) “National Councils” were established and one or other of these groups would march down the main streets of Kolozsvár almost every day.<sup>60</sup> Ligeti describes the situation through the comment of Elekes’s wife, Mariska, as she watches, stunned, Romanian soldiers marching in the Transylvanian city: “I would never have imagined that there were so many Romanians in the world”.<sup>61</sup>

Stern, the Jewish character in the book is a journalist like Ligeti and speaks of Jewishness being deeply rooted in Hungarian culture and about his difficulties in trying to adapt to the Romanian regime. Stern does not deny the fact that he is Jewish but reminds the reader of his Hungarian cultural roots and his aspiration to live in a liberal society.

\*\*\*

Ligeti explains to his readers his definition of “Transylvanism”. “Every ethnicity should be tolerant of every other and have equal rights to its own language and culture.”<sup>62</sup> *Live and let live* was Ernő Ligeti’s credo. He begged his Hungarian kinsmen not to allow their thoughts and feelings to be ensnared by nationalistic slogans. For himself as a Jew, he demands the right to define himself as a Hungarian: the right to write in Hungarian, his mother tongue, without being reviled for it. There should be only one goal – peaceful coexistence. “We Transylvanians are incurable romantics”,<sup>63</sup> says Ligeti, via Stern’s words.

In the 1920s, Ligeti voiced his conviction that there was an unbreakable bond between the Hungarians in Transylvania and in Hungary. This situation, however, lasted only until 1918, when each ethnic group tried to redefine its national identity and to ensure its presence in the area it inhabited. There was no tolerance toward “the foreigner”, “the Other”. Ligeti, who as a liberal always claimed he was for peaceful change, became disillusioned. He was filled with nostalgia for the era of the emperor Franz Joseph.

At this time, too, Ligeti collaborated closely with the Hungarian Transylvanian journalist Árpád Paál (1880–1944), a leading light in liberal circles before he became an extreme right-wing anti-Semite. They were among the founding members of the Hungarian Writers’ Association of Transylvania, the *Erdélyi Szépmíves Céh*,<sup>64</sup> membership of which was open to all those writers and poets in Transylvania who wrote in Hungarian during the years 1928–1944. Many of its members were Jewish.<sup>65</sup>

In 1934, after working for *Keleti Újság*, Ligeti founded in Kolozsvár the weekly *Független Újság*, an independent paper with liberal views which he hoped would be

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.53.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 64.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 112.

<sup>64</sup> Lajos Kántor: Ligeti Ernő – és amit átélt [Ernő Ligeti – and what he lived through]. *Kortárs.* (2002), 2–3. 144–150.

<sup>65</sup> Ferenc Galambos: [Erdélyi Helikon repertórium 1928–1944.](#)

a counterweight to the growing fascist press.<sup>66</sup> In 1940, the northern part of Transylvania again became a part of Hungary and the anti-Jewish laws enacted between 1938 and 1940 came into force here, too, and in 1943 Ligeti moved to Budapest where he began working for the right-wing daily *Magyar Nemzet*. Although he had a letter of safe conduct from the Hungarian authorities, which meant that he could not in principle be executed, he was nevertheless murdered by the Hungarian fascists of the Arrow Cross in January 1945.

\*\*\*

As early as in 1922, Ligeti articulated his views on national identity: “Identification with a particular nation is rooted in culture”.<sup>67</sup> In his view, ethnonational identity is based on historical memory. In spite of the fact that the Hungarian nation refused to accept an assimilated Jew like himself, he considered himself Hungarian in every respect. He had been born into Hungarian culture and could express himself only in Hungarian. Yet he doubted the Magyars’ goodwill towards the Jews. On the other hand, he thought they were right in thinking that Jews could never form an integral part of Hungarian society, neither in Hungary nor in Transylvania.

In contrast to most of the Transylvanian Jewish Hungarophiles, Ligeti dreamed of cooperation with the Zionists,<sup>68</sup> who were as disappointed by the inability of both (apparently liberal) Romanians and Hungarians, to achieve the goal of integration. At the same time he was aware of the fact that this kind of cooperation was, very likely, wishful thinking. Ligeti was appreciative of the Transylvanian Zionist Movement’s understanding of the postwar Hungarian Government’s new discriminative legislation. In other words, as a Hungarophile he had doubts about his own conduct.

In his eyes the Romanians were trying to separate the Jews from the Magyars by suggesting that the former should be “Zionists”. The Jews should focus on their own national aspirations and not try to be part of the Hungarian national movement. This sounded reasonable to Ligeti, although he was somewhat sceptical about the reasons for the Romanians’ promotion of the Jewish national movement. He suspected that their ulterior motive was to boost the size of the Romanian population statistically, just as the Hungarians had striven to do so before 1918. In order to do this, they would first have to separate the Jews from the Hungarians.

\*\*\*

Ligeti was concerned about the new trends in Hungarian internal policy. The Transylvanian Jewish writer was worried that the new Christian trend in Hungary meant exclusionist behaviour towards the Jews. The first significant step in this direction by the post-Trianon

<sup>66</sup> See for example the right-wing Hungarian paper *Erdélyi Lapok*, founded in Nagyvárad in 1932. This paper was financed and politically supported by the Hungarian Catholic Church.

<sup>67</sup> Ernő Ligeti: A zsidó kérdés Erdélyben?! In Ernő Ligeti: *Erdélyi vallatása*. Kolozsvár, 1922. 75–87.

<sup>68</sup> Ernő Ligeti: *Ibid.* 81

Hungarian Government was the introduction of the *numerus clausus* limiting the number of Jewish students in the universities.

According to his own testimony, what bothered Ligeti in 1922 was not the definition of his own identity but, much more, the Magyars' perception of the Jews. In spite of his ability to profoundly appreciate the changes which the Hungarians had undergone and which no longer allowed any mental and emotional freedom of expression, what was unable to fully appreciate was the ever darker aspects of this "Christian-national" turn. Ligeti's attempt to convince himself and those of his fellow Jews who were Hungarophiles of their Hungarianness proved unsuccessful. The more the Hungarians treated the Jews as foreigners, the more the Jews strove to express their "Hungarianness" in every possible way. The Magyars accused them of trying to climb onto a train that was not at all inclined to take them on board.

Ligeti's approach runs directly counter to Anthony D. Smith's theory of ethno-symbolism.<sup>69</sup> According to the ethno-symbolists, amongst whom we also find Montserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson,<sup>70</sup> the identity or self-definition of the nation continually adjusts to prevailing circumstances. Historical memory and ancient myths, however, remain intact down the generations.

According to Ligeti, what he called "acquired identity" is the individual's fundamental identity, from which no escape is possible: it becomes second nature. Ligeti characterised as "mood swings" (his term) those times that the Jews recalled their ancestors and their ties with the Orient. He saw no need for them to deny their past. He supported this with the example of the prominent English statesman Disraeli. It was common knowledge that the latter's ancestors "never sat at King Arthur's round table".<sup>71</sup> Ligeti tried to shed light on this both for himself and his readers: Jews can be part of Hungarian society in spite of their otherness. They are still wholly Hungarian.

Unfortunately, Ligeti's theory that the individual's acquired identity is pre-eminent, proved to be untenable. The Magyars could not truly accept their Jewish fellows. They saw the Jews as a threat who tried to control their lives, depriving them of their values, or worse: forcibly replacing them with their own.

In his indictment of the Hungarians he tried to make them appreciate how the Hungarian community regarded a Jew as a good Jew when opened his wallet but not his mouth. Ligeti wanted the Hungarians to change their ways. This was wishful thinking deriving from the feeling that he himself could never be anything but Hungarian and he could not imagine Hungarian culture without Jewish influence.

He was astounded that many Hungarian nationalist theorists believed that "authentic" Hungarians were those who tilled the soil. Ligeti ridiculed the "earthbound, provincial Hungarians", as he called them, who claimed that the land of Transylvania belonged to those who had never abandoned it, meaning the farmers and the peasantry. These

<sup>69</sup> Anthony D. Smith: *Myth and Memoirs of the Nation*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

<sup>70</sup> Montserrat Guibernau – John Hutchinson (eds.): *History and National Destiny: Ethnosymbolism and its Critics*. Oxford, Blackwell, 2004.

<sup>71</sup> Ernő Ligeti: A zsidó kérdés Erdélyben?! In Ernő Ligeti: *Erdély vallatása*. Kolozsvár, 1922. 83.

provincial Hungarians accused the Jews of being the first to flee the sinking ship in times of crisis. In contrast to the view of the Hungarian nationalist press, that the Jews were unreliable internationalists, Lipót Kecskeméti, Nagyvárad's Neolog Chief Rabbi refused to abandon his congregation in order to serve as Chief Rabbi in Budapest, even though it would have meant a significant promotion for him. For Ligeti, Kecskeméti, who had profound knowledge both of the Hungarian language and of Judaism, embodied the ideal of the Hungarian Jew.

After the period under discussion here, that is 1918 to 1940, Ligeti published a book summarising the unfortunate fate of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania in the preceding two decades.<sup>72</sup>

Four years later he and his wife were killed by the Hungarian Arrow Cross.

### Summary

The three Jewish intellectuals discussed here, journalists and authors in the Hungarian cultural sphere, Pap and Zsolt in Budapest and Ligeti in Kolozsvár, all clung to that Hungarian cultural sphere with all their might to the bitter end. This was the only culture they could live and breathe in. They were masters of the language with all its nuances. They shared both the joys and the tribulations of the Hungarian people. These three men of letters reached the peak of their careers and creativity between the two world wars and watched with profound sorrow and dismay the process of the Jews' exclusion. Although they tried to deny the reality, they gradually came to understand that after the First World War the situation of the Jews in society underwent a change and had to admit that the concept of the nation state could never be receptive towards any minority, and especially not to the Jews.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the fact that he lived in Transylvania, Ligeti was the first of the three to notice, in 1922, that the Magyars in the new Hungary had begun to distance themselves from their fellows, the Jews. Ligeti, who fell between the two stools of the Romanians and the Hungarians was already aware in 1921 of the first steps that the Hungarians in Budapest were taking against the Jews.

In contrast to most assimilated Jews and converts, Pap in Budapest understood that the Jews stood no chance of integrating into Hungarian society. He therefore pleaded with his fellow Jews to give up their dream of assimilation and to admit that they were a minority and, above all, that they should not try to tell the Hungarians how to run their country.

The most reluctant of the three to understand that the Hungarians would never accept the Jews as Hungarians was Béla Zsolt. In his writings he did everything he could to try and convince his Christian Magyar readers that his identity and his culture was wholly and exclusively Hungarian and begged them not to betray him or reject him. Yet at the same time he was obliged to admit that the majority society would never truly accept him.

<sup>72</sup> Ernő Ligeti: *Súly alatt a pálma. Egy nemzedék szellemi élete – Emlékirat* [Palma sub Pondere. The Intellectual Life of a Generation – A Memoir]. Kolozsvár, Fraternitas, 1941.

All three refused to believe that their homeland would reject them. Pap was dispatched to a concentration camp, where he died, while Ligeti was shot in broad daylight by the Arrow Cross in January 1945. Only Zsolt, miraculously, survived.

### Bibliography

- Ágoston Péter: *A zsidók útja*. Nagyvárad, Nagyvárad Társadalomtudományi Társaság, 1917.
- Fejtő Ferenc: *Magyarság, zsidóság*. Budapest, MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 2000.
- Filep Tamás Gusztáv: *Ligeti Ernő – Egy urbánus transzilyanista*. Budapest, MMA Kiadó, 2019.
- Gyurgyák János: *A zsidókérdés Magyarországon. Politikai eszmetörténet*. Budapest, Osiris, 2001.
- Hegedűs Nándor: *Ady Endre nagyváradai napjai*. Budapest, Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Irodalomtörténeti Intézet, 1957.
- Kántor Lajos: Ligeti Ernő – és amit átélt. *Kortárs*, 46. (2002), 2–3. 144–150
- Katz, Jacob: *From Prejudice to Destruction. Anti-semitism 1700–1933*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Kovács Alajos: *A zsidóság térfoglalása Magyarországon*. Budapest, szerzői kiadás, 1922.
- Lichtmann Tamás: *Pap Károly*. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1979.
- Lichtmann Tamás: *Az igazságkereső Pap Károly*. Budapest, Múlt és Jövő, 2001.
- Ligeti Ernő: *Föl a Bakra*. Kolozsvár, Erdélyi Magyar Szépművészeti Céh, 1925.
- Ligeti Ernő: *Súly alatt a pálma. Egy nemzedék szellemi élete. 22 esztendő kisebbségi sorsban*. Kolozsvár, Fraternitas R.-T., 1941.
- Ligeti Ernő: Erdély zsidósága. In Kőbányai János (szerk.): *A zsidóság útja. Esszék (1848–1948)*. Budapest, Múlt és Jövő, 2000. 253–260.
- Macartney, Carlile A.: *A Short History of Hungary*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1962.
- Pap Károly: *Zsidó sebek és bűnök. Vitairat. Különös tekintettel Magyarországra*. Budapest, Kosmos, 1935.
- Pap Károly: *Zsidó sebek és bűnök és más publicisztikák*. Szerkesztette Nagy Sz. Péter, Sebes Katalin, Kőbányai János. Budapest, Múlt és Jövő, 2000.
- Pap Károly: Válasz egy különítményes vallomására. In Kőbányai János (szerk.): *A zsidóság útja. Esszék (1848–1948)*. Budapest, Múlt és Jövő, 2000. 242–247.
- Porter, Anna: *The Kasztner Trains. The True Story of Rezső Kasztner, Unknown Hero of the Holocaust*. Vancouver, Douglas & McIntyre, 2007.
- Recensământul general al populației României din 29 decembrie 1930*. II. kötet. București, Editura Institutului central de statistică, 1930.
- Smith, Anthony D.: *Myth and Memoirs of the Nation*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Zsolt Béla: A nagyerdő és a nagyvilág. In Zsolt Béla: *Kőért kenyér. Vezércikkek 1921–1939*. Budapest, (k. n.), 1939. 46–52.
- Zsolt, Béla: *Nine Suitcases*. London, Random House, 2004.