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Cultural Heterogeneity, Multiple Literary Ties and Plurality of Identities in the Work of Erzsi Szenes

While the personality and work of the poet, writer and journalist Erzsi Szenes (Rajec [now Slovakia], 1902 – Jerusalem, 1981) are familiar to and appreciated by readers in the Hungarian minority in Czecho/Slovakia as well as Hungarian readers and the Hungarian-speaking general public in Israel, as regards the Hungarian literary canon overall, she has remained virtually unknown. The career and works of Erzsi Szenes, who until 1942 lived mostly in Nagymihály (Michalovce) near Kassa (Košice, [now Slovakia]), exemplify double (multiple) cultural positionality: in interwar Czechoslovakia she worked for Hungarian-language dailies (*Kassai Napló*, *Prágai Magyar Hírlap*, *Magyar Újság*), while her poems were published in quality journals (and dailies), including *Nyugat*, *Múlt és Jövő*, *Pesti Napló*, *Szép Szó*, and the *Esti Újság* of Pozsony (Pressburg/Bratislava). Her three volumes of verse published in Budapest (*Selyemgombolyag* [Skein of Silk], 1924, *Fehér kendő* [White Kerchief], 1928 and *Szerelmet és halált énekelek* [Of Love and Death I Sing], 1936) were reviewed by the leading writers and littérateurs of the time. She also wrote novella (*Nyártól nyárig* [From Summer to Summer], 1943), as well as short stories. From 1938 on, however, being a Hungarian Jew, she was confined to the Nagymihály ghetto. In December 1942, she managed to escape deportation and fled to Budapest, though her family remained in Nagymihály. On 21 March 1944, she fell into the clutches of the SS: initially held in Zrínyi Street jail, she was dragged off to the concentration camp of Kistarcsa, near Budapest, from where she was deported to Auschwitz. She ended up doing forced labour in a factory making military equipment in Fallersleben [now part of Wolfsburg, Lower Saxony]. After she was liberated from the camps, it turned out that she was the only member of her family to survive. She was able to spend the next few years in Pozsony, writing articles for a Slovak paper, then, in December 1949, she went on Aliyah to Israel and worked for the Tel Aviv-based journal *Új Kelet*; during these years she published two volumes (*Van hazám* [I Have a Homeland], 1956, 1959 and *A lélek ellenáll* [The Soul Resists], 1966), gave poetry recitals, and worked in the Hungarian archive of Yad Vashem. When her diary *A lélek ellenáll* [The Soul Resists] was reissued by the Budapest publishing house Szépirodalmi Kiadó in 1966, she was once again able to present her work to the Hungarian public; she also visited Hungary and could speak out as a witness and a representative of Holocaust memory: of the processing of the past, in particular of the historical Hungarian Jewish past.

To capture Erzsi Szenes's multiple identities and the nature of the multiple bonds that appear in her writing, it seems best to utilise the conceptual framework of constructivist theories of identity and representation as well as of transculturalism (or transnational literary scholarship). For the texts and the positions of the subject invariably participate in intersecting relationships, that is to say, identity is not something that is

either of a single kind, nor is it fixed; rather, it evolves as a complex, heterogeneous construct in a network of relationships operating on a variety of axes (*identity linked to nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age-cohort, profession, etc.*);⁸¹ furthermore, falsely presupposing that self-identification is identity can bring about its own narratable form through its experience of otherness and alienation, of breaches and cracks (*narrative identity*).⁸² In this essay, which builds on my recent research in sources and archives and on interpretative processes,⁸³ I identify the complex network of relationships that defines the multiple cultural and political loci of Erzszi Szenes's career, as well as exploring examples from three particularly rich textual areas relevant to the complexity of the identity models that emerge from the writer's oeuvre, highlighting aspects relevant to multiple allegiances from her interwar lyrical poetry, her testimonial narratives (feuilletons and short stories) written in Israel, and her diary, *A lélek ellenáll* [The Soul Resists].

A double literary allegiance: a Hungarian writer in Czechoslovakia

One source of information about Erzszi Szenes's interwar literary activity is provided by the (modest) reception of her works, her diary, and from her recently unearthed writings published in the Israeli journal *Új Kelet*. The literary and journalistic career of Szenes began in Nagymihály, just as the circumstances of the Hungarian cultural community were undergoing upheaval. The transformation of the geopolitical situation in 1919–1920, the fact of belonging to the newly created Czechoslovak Republic, involved a wide range of experiences, demarcating and defining the framework of conditions of belonging to

⁸¹ See, inter alia, Stuart Hall: The Question of Cultural Identity. In Stuart Hall – Paul Du Gay (eds.): *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London, Sage, 1996. 274–323. Judit Malinák: A személyes identitás létrejötte a médiakultúra globalizálódásának kontextusában [The emergence of personal identity in the context of the globalization of the media]. *Jel-kép*, 2005. 1. 21–36.

⁸² See, inter alia, Paul Ricoeur: A narratív azonosság [Narrative Identity]. In János László – Beáta Thomka (eds.): *Narratívák 5. A narratív pszichológia* [Narratives 5. Narrative Psychology]. Budapest, Kijárat, 2001. 15–25; László Tengelyi: Élettörténet és sorseseemény [Life Story and Events of Fate]. Budapest, Atlantisz, 1998.

⁸³ Tímea Jablonczay: Megtalált (?) identitás. Szenes Erzszi: A lélek ellenáll [Found (?) Identity. Erzszi Szenes: The Soul Resists]. In István Dobos – Sándor Bene (eds.): *A magyarságtudományok önértelmezései. A doktoriiskolák II. nemzetközi konferenciája*. Budapest, 22–24 August 2008; Tímea Jablonczay: Nagymihálytól Jeruzsálemig. Az újrafelfedezett író: Szenes Erzszi [From Michalovce to Jerusalem. The Newly Discovered Writer Erzszi Szenes]. *Szombat*, 3. (2014). 30–34; Tímea Jablonczay: [Marginalizáltság és határkezelés. Az identitás kereszteződései Szenes Erzszinél](#) [Marginalization and the Negotiation of Borders. Intersections of Identity in Erzszi Szenes]. *Társadalmi Nemek Tudománya Interdiszciplináris eFolyóirat*, 4. (2014), 2. 18–36; Tímea Jablonczay: Száműzetés, melankólia, a nyelv idegensége Szenes Erzszi költészetében [Exile, Melancholy, and the Alienness of Language in the Poetry of Erzszi Szenes]. *Irodalmi Szemle*, (2018), 5; Tímea Jablonczay: „Csak szabadságban érdemes élni”. Az izraeli újrakezdés Szenes Erzszi írásaiban [“Only in freedom is life worth living”. Starting over in Israel in the writing of Erzszi Szenes]. *Múlt és Jövő*, (2018), 2–3. 151–166.

a new culture, a new community and a new set of values. Erzsi Szenes would have liked to have been recognised as a Hungarian writer, but she had to try to realise this ambition from her location in Czechoslovakia. Having become a member of the literary community of Czechoslovakia, or rather of Slovensko (*Szlovenszko* in Hungarian), as it was called in the discourse of the time, she found herself, on the one hand, in a community that, being outside Hungary's borders, struggled to maintain its Hungarian culture; at the same time, however, it is important to note that the nature of this community's Hungarian identity and culture differed from those of Horthy's Hungary.⁸⁴ The differences of emphasis in respect of choice of values were closely connected with the changes in areal and political loci. The writers and *littérateurs* who found themselves outside the borders of Hungary proper and under the new régime of Slovensko – among them Pál Szvatkó, Zoltán Fábry, Rezső Peéry, Mihály Tamás, Ernő Sebesi, Piroska Szenes, Dezső Győri, István Darkó, Pál Neubauer, as well as Erzsi Szenes – thought in terms of the creation of a minority Hungarian literature possessed of a distinctive character. Through the border changes – that is to say, by virtue of the fact that the Hungarian community of Czechoslovakia became extraterritorial – the concept of the homeland was revalued and its meaning was modified as a result of its relationship to the nation being transformed.⁸⁵ The concept of “the homeland”, now deprived of its national character, was invested with new content in its location through the metaphorical reinterpretation of space.⁸⁶

Zoltán Fábry, the renowned writer and critic of the age, suggested that although regionality resulted in isolation from (mainstream) Hungarian culture, so that they did not have their own tradition, yet “Slovensko” became the “chief staging post for the transmission of humanity and internationalism of the Hungarian word”.⁸⁷ The work of literary creation counted as a social activity, so that far greater emphasis came to be laid on the depiction of social problems, social inequalities, and hence the ethical dimension of the literary text. Fábry's *vox humana* was the articulation of the ethical imperative of humane steadfastness.⁸⁸ Fábry considered it important to cooperate with progressive European literatures, to translate to and fro between Hungarian and Slovak literature, to ensure one kept one's distance from dilettante national-Christianity, paying more attention to social issues and to the demonstration of democratic values.⁸⁹ The emphasis on values built on social coexistence is virtually self-evident, as the Hungarian community

⁸⁴ See Zsófia Bárczy: *A másság reprezentációja. Magyar regények Szlovenszkon* [The Representation of Otherness. Hungarian Novels in Slovensko]. Nyitra, Nyitra Konstantin Filozófus Egyetem, 2014. 30.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 52.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 55.

⁸⁷ Lajos Turczel: *Hiányzó fejezetek. Tanulmányok a két világháború közötti csehszlovákiai magyar irodalomról és sajtóról* [Missing Chapters. Studies in the Hungarian Literature and Journalism of Interwar Czechoslovakia]. Bratislava, Madách, 1982. 33–44.

⁸⁸ Éva Gál: *A két világháború közötti csehszlovákiai magyar regény* [The Czechoslovak Hungarian Novel Between the Two World Wars]. Pozsony, AB-ART, 2012. 17.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

of Slovensko lived in a multicultural and multiethnic environment: being embedded in a Slovak–Czech–German environment meant that it was inclined to profess and instantiate democratic values and the principle of toleration and openness to the world. “We are the most westerly Hungarians”, avowed Pál Szvatkó.⁹⁰ Part of their self-definition consisted in the awareness of “multicultural Slovensko otherness”, the value of which they tried to have accepted also by the Hungarians of Hungary proper; however, as Zsófia Bárczy has pointed out, by the time they might have succeeded, this value was annihilated by the forces of Slovak fascism that had come to power.⁹¹

Thus, for Erzsi Szenes one kind of doubleness can be interpreted with respect to belonging to the literary community that affects the relationship between centre and periphery. In hindsight it can be seen that belonging to the Czechoslovak literary community expressed a progressive community identity with a democratic set of values, but for contemporaries the Hungarian literature of Slovensko, as a regional variety of Hungarian literature, meant a move to the periphery, with all its (negative) connotations. Thanks not least to the conservative turn in Hungarian literary politics that followed, it was almost impossible for Hungarian writers beyond the borders to be recognised as being of equal standing. As far as *Nyugat*, the most progressive Hungarian cultural journal of the 1920s was concerned, Czechoslovak Hungarian literature did not deserve much attention. Though its influential (co-)editor, the poet Mihály Babits, did publish Czechoslovak authors on its pages, he was not especially interested in their situation, did not review their work, nor did he ever award them the prestigious Baumgarten prize. This situation changed somewhat when the novelist Zsigmond Móricz took over as editor. As a curiosity, however, it is worth noting that Babits did on one occasion make an exception, awarding some money to – as it happens – Erzsi Szenes herself, when she was recovering from a serious illness in the Swiss resort of Davos.⁹²

In this connection it is interesting that Erzsi Szenes’s literary activity is judged by later Slovak Hungarian literature scholars in terms of her being the creative writer in interwar Czechoslovakia “who had, perhaps, the best chance of breaking out of its narrow confines, and becoming known and appreciated in Hungary and even further afield”.⁹³ Looking back, she did achieve recognition in the Hungarian literary world: her lyrical verse published in the 1920s and 1930s (*Selyemgombolyag* [Skein of Silk], *Fehér kendő* [White Kerchief], *Szerelmet és halált énekelek* [Of Love and Death I Sing]) were not merely noticed, but outstanding writers like Ignotus, Miklós Radnóti, Milán Füst and Aladár Komlós wrote excellent reviews of them. Contemporary recognition of her poetry was also provided by the fact that she was anthologised in volumes such

⁹⁰ Cited from Jenő Krammer in Gál (2012): op. cit. 27.

⁹¹ Cf. Bárczy (2014): op. cit. 39.

⁹² Lajos Turczel: Babits Mihály szlovákiai kapcsolatai [Mihály Babits and Slovakia]. In *Tanulmányok és emlékezések* [Studies and Reminiscences]. Bratislava, Madách – Budapest, Európa, 1987. 152–156.

⁹³ The eloquent title of the piece is a quotation from the author: “I am no longer identical with myself...” László Tóth: Nyolc arckép [Eight Portraits]. In *Elfeledett évek. Esszék, cikkek, interjúk* [Forgotten Years. Essays, Articles and Interviews]. Pozsony, Kalligram, 1993. 64–69.

as *Új Anthologia. Fiatal költők 100 legszebb verse* [New Anthology. Young Poets' One Hundred Most Beautiful Poems],⁹⁴ and the Italian anthology of Hungarian lyric poetry, *Accordi magiari* (1928), in which she appeared alongside such great poets as Endre Ady, Babits, Dezső Kosztolányi and Gyula Juhász.⁹⁵ She was known, and renowned, not only as a poet, but her shorter prose pieces, too, were regularly included in anthologies of Czechoslovak Hungarian writing.⁹⁶ As she herself pointed out, she was simultaneously a member of the Czechoslovak Masaryk Academy, the Writers' Union of Budapest and the Israelite Hungarian Literary Society (IMIT).⁹⁷ Thus, her presence in the literary public space offers evidence of her position at the meeting point of cultures: she had poems and short stories published in both *Nyugat* (between 1924 and 1929) and the Jewish cultural journal, *Múlt és Jövő* (between 1924 and 1944), as well as a handful of poems in the radical *Szép Szó*, the *IMIT Annual* and Aladár Komlós's Jewish yearbook, *Ararát*.⁹⁸ Her poems and journalism appeared not only in leading journals in Hungary proper; she also contributed regularly to the Czechoslovak Hungarian press, writing for the *Esti Újság* of Pozsony, the *Kassai Napló* of Kassa, the *Prágai Magyar Hírlap* of Prague, as well as *Magyar Újság*, which she also edited. For a few years after the war she had a regular column, *Knihy a Osudy* [Books and Fates], in a Slovak-language weekly, in which she explored themes of persecution and the Shoah.

Multiple cultural bonds, plural forms of identity

The interpretation of the context of Erzsi Szenes's interwar poetry and prose can be considerably nuanced by her feuilletons as witness testimonies involved in recalling past events, which she wrote in Israel from the 1950s onwards. One of the hypotheses of my research is that as a Hungarian Jew in Czechoslovakia, she was able to live with a plural identity; that is to say, she did not have to accept an identity forced upon her by the *Kulturnazion*, which was by definition discriminatory, but rather was able to exploit the simultaneity of her plural cultural bonds. The new cultural environment made possible the transmission of cultural heterogeneity and multiculturalism, the maintenance in interaction of identities, and we find impressions of this in her poetry at this time

⁹⁴ *Új Anthologia. Fiatal költők 100 legszebb verse* [New Anthology. Young Poets' One Hundred Most Beautiful Poems]. Budapest, Nyugat-kiadás, 1932.

⁹⁵ The volume appeared with a preface by Aladár Schöpflin and was reissued eight times up to 1941. See Gino Sirola (ed.): *Accordi Magiari*. Trieste, Parnaso, 1928.

⁹⁶ *Inter alia: Hegyvidéki bokréta* [Mountain Bouquet] (1934), *Szlovenszkói magyar elbeszélők* [Hungarian Short Story Writers from Slovensko] (1938), *Szlovenszkói vásár* [Market in Slovensko] (1980). When Erzsi Szenes was working with János Darvas, Dezső Györi and Dezső Vozári at the *Prágai Magyar Hírlap*, they published a volume, *Nyitott könyv. Prágai magyar költők antológiája* [Open Book. Anthology of Prague Hungarian Poets] (Prague, 1930).

⁹⁷ Erzsi Szenes: *A lélek ellenáll* [The Soul Resists]. Budapest, Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1966. 9.

⁹⁸ Erzsi Szenes: *Írjad, csak írjad* [Write, just Write]. *Ararát*, 1942. 30.

and subsequently also in her recollections of this period in her writing in Israel from the 1950s onwards.

Erzsi Szenes was born into a Hungarian Jewish family in Nagymihály; her father Mátyás Singer was a teacher of Hungarian. The family's mother tongue was thus Hungarian, but the Slovak environment made it equally possible for her to employ the Slovak language.⁹⁹ The family also spoke Slovak and German well and, continuing the rabbinical tradition, her father also taught her the Hebrew language when she was a child.¹⁰⁰ The acceptance and profession of her allegiance to a Jewish identity form constituent elements of her interwar texts, too. In the words of Aladár Komlós, she “dares to be Jewish” and at the same time she does not “sever the ties binding her to Hungariandom”,¹⁰¹ in other words, she was able to reconcile assimilation and Jewish consciousness thanks to the fact that the areal and political changes or, to be more precise, the coming into existence of the identity options that evolved in their wake, ensured for the Jews of southern Slovakia conditions different from those enjoyed by the Jews of Hungary. The exclamation of Komlós, since become famous, that: “The truth is, I am Hungarian, as well as Jewish, as well as international!”,¹⁰² seems to have been (briefly) realised precisely in this Czechoslovak environment between 1920 and 1938. Komlós moved from Kassa to Vienna, and then to Budapest in the 1920s. Unlike him, Erzsi Szenes did not resettle in Hungary in the interwar years (though in 1942 she was forced to flee to Budapest), but rather connected with Hungarian and Czechoslovak Hungarian literary forums from her home in southern Slovakia. This double political location defines not only the value system just described (Hungarian literature of Slovensko), but indicates great differences also as regards the self-identification of the Jews and their relationship to the nation. Before reflecting briefly on the history of the Czechoslovak Hungarian Jewry between 1920 and 1938, let us consider the more important changes relevant to our topic that took place in the politics of Hungarian literature.

The topic of double (Hungarian–Jewish) literary allegiance has generated much controversy over the last hundred years. For Hungarian literary historiography, it presents a problem: how, if at all, can we speak of “Jewish” literature and, if we can, how is it to be fitted into the national literary network? József Kiss's journal *A Hét* exemplifies how the reinforcement of the assimilatory contract helps integration into Hungarian national culture, especially literature: citizens and individuals of equal standing take part side by side in the creation of a modern Hungarian literature, that is to say, in the final decades

⁹⁹ In a reminiscence she writes that she spoke Hungarian only with her parents, but Slovak with her playmates. Felszakadó emlék [Fragment of a Memory]. *Új Kelet*, 22 September 1968. 6.

¹⁰⁰ She recalls that in this he was rather less successful.

¹⁰¹ Aladár Komlós: Zsidók a választúton [Jews at the Crossroads]. In *Magyar–zsidó szellemi történet a Reformkortól a Holocaustig. II. Bevezetés a magyar–zsidó irodalomra* [Hungarian Jewish Geistesgeschichte from the Age of Reform to the Holocaust. II. Introduction to Hungarian Jewish Literature]. Budapest, Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 1997. 20.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 11.

of the nineteenth century this duality or ambivalence does not appear to be an issue.¹⁰³ Petra Török agrees that before the turn of the twentieth century there were no theoretical debates on the question of Hungarian Jewish literature. *Múlt és Jövő*, under the editorship of József Patai, stood for a commitment to the Jewish tradition, while supporting, within Hungarian culture, a “programme of Hungarisation”,¹⁰⁴ that is, it supported the principle of dual allegiance, and urged acceptance of the presence of Hungarian-language Jewish literature as part and parcel of the nation’s literature. János Kőbányai stresses that *Múlt és Jövő* was a novelty with regard to the denominational press, too, in that it strove to create not an inward-looking religious literature but a modern Jewish culture, aspiring to western European cultural achievements in the Hungarian cultural context.¹⁰⁵ The journal made claims that occasioned major debates when it suggested that “art, literature and society have a Jewish reading: they can have not religious (denominational) content, but content, experience, and interpretation that relates to the people as a whole”.¹⁰⁶ From 1919–1920 onwards, however, as the atmosphere grew increasingly nationalistic and discriminatory, Hungarian Jewry was less and less able to stand by the principle of dual allegiance, as cleaving to a collective identity immediately set in train a chain of exclusionary, anti-Semitic attacks, with more and more anti-Jewish declarations in literary criticism emphasising the Jewish character of Hungarian literature.¹⁰⁷ Aladár Komlós, in his famous work *Zsidók a választúton* [Jews at the Crossroads], written in Eperjes [now Prešov, Slovakia] (1921) identifies the consequences of assimilation and dissimilation with fundamental precision: as a Jew “I am ashamed to admit that I am Jew”, because the acceptance of Jews, their emancipation, has been only half achieved, on paper; modern Jewry has lived through excruciating uncertainty, hiding, and shame, for it met with prejudices from the supposedly accepting party.¹⁰⁸ The Jews have made Hungarian culture and the Hungarian language their own, they are deeply involved in the lands

¹⁰³ Tamás Ungvári: Asszimilációs stratégiák [Strategies of Assimilation]. In Petra Török (ed.): *A határ és a határolt. Töprengések a magyar zsidó irodalom létformáiról* [The Boundary and the Bound. Reflections on the Forms of Hungarian Jewish Literature]. Budapest, Országos Rabbiképző Intézet, Yahalom Zsidó Művelődéstörténeti Kutatócsoportja, 1997. 56.

¹⁰⁴ János Kőbányai: *A magyar zsidó irodalom története. Kivirágzás és kiszántás* [The History of Hungarian Jewish Literature. Blossoming and Eradication]. Budapest, Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 2012. 151–152.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 157.

¹⁰⁷ Petra Török: A zsidó irodalom értelmezésének fordulópontjai a magyar zsidó sajtóban 1880–1944 között [Turning Points in the Interpretations of Jewish Literature in the Hungarian Jewish Press between 1880 and 1944]. In *A határ és a határolt. Töprengések a magyar zsidó irodalom létformáiról* [The Boundary and the Bound. Reflections on the Forms of Hungarian Jewish Literature]. Budapest, Országos Rabbiképző Intézet, Yahalom Zsidó Művelődéstörténeti Kutatócsoportja, 1997. 142.

¹⁰⁸ Komlós (1997): op. cit. 12. See Aladár Komlós: A zsidó lélek [The Jewish Soul]. In *Magyar–zsidó szellemi történet a Reformkortól a Holocaustig. II. Bevezetés a magyar–zsidó irodalomba* [Hungarian Jewish Geistesgeschichte from the Age of Reform to the Holocaust. II. Introduction to Hungarian Jewish Literature]. Budapest, Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 1997. 38–41.

and the business of the Magyars, writes Komlós, yet having lost and/or given up their Jewish identity the response from the Magyar community was to expel them from the nation. It is the nation that decides about the individual/group, because nationalism can recognise identification with a categorical identity based on ancestry, “whereas it is not certain that you can yourself determine where you belong”. As Komlós puts it: “The age-old dilemma is based on a flawed view. As if it were possible for us to be either only Jews or only Magyars! Because we are both, if not in equal measure”.¹⁰⁹ With the intensification of anti-Semitism Hungarian Jewry became increasingly divided against itself. Being under threat produced several kinds of response, those who experienced a traumatising of identity already, before the Holocaust, showed signs of concealment, suppression, the denial of identity.¹¹⁰ The tragic-ironical realisation of the extreme version of what is known as Jewish self-hatred appears most powerfully in the novels of Béla Zsolt. At the same time, Ferenc Laczó points out that in the 1930s and early 1940s there emerged an identity discourse that concentrated on the attempt to elaborate, primarily, the conditions under which a dual identity might be possible. It is important to add that Aladár Komlós’s initiative – we are thinking mainly of the yearbooks *Libanon*, *Ararát* and *IMIT* – can be seen as a desperate attempt to guide the “banished” in the direction of “solidarity” at the time of dissimulation and terror.¹¹¹ Laczó, in the identities of collective discourse in the *IMIT Yearbooks*’ materials between 1929 and 1943, sees the development of the outlines of five kinds of Hungarian Jewish dual identity: a position on the side of religious Judaism (denominational identity), a hybrid form of double identity (unproblematic coexistence, “hyphenated” identity), an assimilatory accommodation that preserves Jewishness, a folk Hungarian Jewish identity, and a dual identity that asserts the primacy of Hungarian identity.¹¹²

The powerful presence of social discrimination also defined the course of literary historical developments. In Petra Török’s view, by the 1930s Hungarian Jewish literature had split in two, into the literature of those who had assimilated Magyar norms, and into denominational literature which, however, was unable to realise the melding of Jewish themes with a modern formal language.¹¹³ As regards the writers’ self-identification, however, János Kőbányai (like Ferenc Laczó) sees several types of response (stemming from the increase in the level of threat) in addition to attempted denial of identity: Catholicisation; its diametrical opposite, joining Zionism; there were also those in

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 17.

¹¹⁰ Viktor Karády: Trauma és zsidó identitás [Trauma and Jewish Identity]. In László Márton (ed.): *Zsidó identitás a Holokauszt után* [Jewish Identity after the Holocaust]. Budapest, Bibó István Közéleti Társaság, 2014. 32.

¹¹¹ Ungvári (1997): op. cit. 63.

¹¹² Ferenc Laczó: A magyar zsidó kettős identitás formái. Tudományos szövegek identitásdiskurzusairól [Forms of Hungarian Jewish Dual Identity. On Discourses of Identity in Scholarly Texts]. In Zsuzsanna Hanna Bíró – Péter Tibor Nagy (eds.): *Zsidóság – tradicionalitás és modernitás* [Jewry – Tradition and Modernity]. Budapest, Wesley János Kiadó, 2012. 119–126.

¹¹³ Török (1997): op. cit. 149.

whose work the importance of an allegiance was occasionally emphasised; furthermore, he mentions a group whose double allegiance was emphatic but whose names, as a result of the trauma and careers shattered by the Holocaust, remain unfamiliar. Kőbányai mentions in the latter group the names of Tamás Sári, Ernő Sebesi, Magda Timár – and “Erzsi Szenes, who after the camps found a home in Israel”.¹¹⁴ Ernő Sebesi, Béla Szabó, Erzsi Szenes, Piroska Szenes, Imre Forbáth, Sándor Berkó, Illés Kaczér and Pál Neubauer made their name in Hungary proper as authors belonging to the southern Slovak region, members of the Czechoslovak Hungarian literary community. The different social environment also defined how they made their voice heard and the depiction of their relationship to their minority identity. The presence of members of this group in this period of Hungarian literature, thus of Erzsi Szenes too, represents a distinctive voice, by demonstrating multiple identity and multiculturalism in a positive and progressive way.

There are sociopolitical preconditions to experiencing the fact of belonging to multiple linguistic and cultural traditions, for which the Czechoslovak Republic under the leadership of Masaryk provided opportunities. According to the Slovak historian Yeshayahu Jelinek, since the time the Jews settled in the area of Slovakia (“in the last three centuries”) the problem has been not the definition of ethnic and religious identity (they were clear about that) but the unequivocal nature of national identity. They could choose from among several national affiliations linked to areal identities, meaning German, Hungarian or Slovak assimilation.¹¹⁵ From the point of view of Jewry the fact that in the Czechoslovak Republic being Jewish was recognised as a nationality (what we would now call an ethnic minority – *trans.*) carried enormous weight.¹¹⁶ It is usual to interpret the possibility of the Jewish involvement in the national legal sphere as a matter for Zionism; Jewish national politics in Czechoslovakia was mostly a Zionist enterprise.¹¹⁷ So it was that the National Jewish Council submitted a proposal that Jewry in the newly-created state should have the status of a nationality (i.e. ethnic minority – *trans.*). Also established was the Jewish Party (*Židovska Strana*), which entered parliament in coalition with the

¹¹⁴ János Kőbányai: *Virágzás halál után. A magyar zsidó költészet 150 éve* [Blossoming after Death. 150 Years of Hungarian Jewish Poetry]. *Látó*, 21. (2010), 12; Kőbányai (2012): op. cit. 182.

¹¹⁵ Judit Kovács citing Jelinek. See Judit Kovács: *Az identitás kérdése és paradox volta Gejza Vámoš műveiben* [The Question and the Paradoxical Nature of Identity in the Work of Gejza Vámoš]. Budapest, Wesley János Kiadó, 2004. 11.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* 9; Rebekah Klein-Pejšová: *Mapping Jewish Loyalties in Interwar Slovakia*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2015. 35. Tamás Gusztáv Filep, on the other hand, regards “becoming an ethnic minority” as restricting. He claims that, on the one hand, they become second-class citizens, and on the other “when censuses were taken, the Jews of the occupied territories were encouraged, pressured or simply arbitrarily registered as such”. Tamás Gusztáv Filep: *Felvidéki zsidó magyarok a csehszlovákiai magyar közéletben, 1918/19–1938* [Jewish Hungarians of Upper Hungary in Czechoslovak Public Life, 1918/1919–1938]. In Pál Hatos – Attila Novák (eds.): *Kisebbség és többség között. A magyar és a zsidó/izraeli etnikai és kulturális tapasztalatok az elmúlt századokban* [Between Minority and Majority. Hungarian and Jewish/Israeli Ethnic and Cultural Experiences in Past Centuries]. Budapest, Balassi Intézet – L’Harmattan, 2013. 37.

¹¹⁷ Klein-Pejšová (2015): op. cit. 62.

Polish minority and the Czechoslovak Social Democratic party.¹¹⁸ The Czechoslovak Republic, as a *Rechtstaat* under the leadership of Masaryk, “gained considerable international approval by accepting the demands of the National Jewish Council as regards the complete equality of the Jews and the national (i.e. ethnic – *trans.*) minority rights of the Jewish nation”.¹¹⁹ Masaryk stood for tolerance, was proactive against anti-Semitism and encouraged Zionism.¹²⁰ Unlike the Zionist movement in Hungary – which enjoyed the support of only a narrow circle¹²¹ – the Czechoslovak organisation became a force to be reckoned with in identity formation, targeting the training of Jewish youth (e.g. encouraging agricultural work) and the teaching of the Hebrew language, with the goal of creating an independent Jewish state.¹²²

Naturally, the formation of the Jewish state did not happen without conflicts arising as regards social coexistence and from the angle of the state it obviously had political causes, too. Historians of this part of Europe point out that it was quite blatantly the goal of the government to separate the Jews from the Magyars.¹²³ This political act also laid the foundation for a distinctive political version of anti-Semitism within the community: it became intertwined with anti-Hungarian feeling.¹²⁴ Those who declared themselves Hungarians and spoke Hungarian were accused of alienation from the Slovak cause, while those expressing interest in the Slovak or Czechoslovak cause were accused by the Hungarians of disloyalty.¹²⁵ On the other hand, Jewry met with a much more sympathetic identity-choosing possibility, whereby assimilation was not a precondition – on the contrary, several kinds of identity “options” were available: assimilation, dissimilation, Jewish self-determination, or some hybrid form of these. In other words, as Éva Kovács

¹¹⁸ Judit Kovács (2004): op. cit. 9.

¹¹⁹ Klein-Pejšová (2015): op. cit. 35.

¹²⁰ Although blatant anti-Semitism was not permitted in public discourse, the rural anti-Jewish atmosphere and nationalism of the Slovak Catholic society led to anti-Jewish attacks and atrocities. Attila Simon: *Kettős szorításban. A dél-szlovákiai zsidóság Trianon és Auschwitz között* [The Double Constrained. The Jews of Southern Slovakia between Trianon and Auschwitz]. *Fórum: Társadalomtudományi Szemle*, 16. (2014), 4. 4–5.

¹²¹ See on this topic Attila Novák: *Átmenetben. A cionista mozgalom négy éve Magyarországon* [In Transition. Four Years of the Zionist Movement in Hungary]. Budapest, *Múlt és Jövő Kiadó*, 2000; Ferenc Laczó: *Felvilágosult vallás és modern katasztrófa között* [Between Enlightened Religion and Modern Catastrophe]. Budapest, Osiris, 2014. 124.

¹²² Éva Kovács: *Felemás asszimiláció. A kassai zsidóság a két háború között 1918–1938* [Lopsided Assimilation. The Jews of Kassa between the Two World Wars, 1918–1938]. Somorja, Fórum Kisebbségkutató Intézet – Dunaszerdahely, Lilium Aurum, 2004. 21.

¹²³ Cf. Éva Kovács (2004): op. cit.; Simon (2014): op. cit.; Filep (2013): op. cit.

¹²⁴ R. J. W. Evans dubs this variant of Slovak anti-Semitism “Magyarophobia”. See R. J. W. Evans: Hungarians, Czechs, and Slovaks: Some Mutual Perceptions, 1900–1950. In Mark Cornwall – R. J. W. Evans (eds.): *Czechoslovakia in a Nationalist and Fascist Europe 1918–1948*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007. 119.

¹²⁵ Simon (2014): op. cit. 6.

put it, in interwar Czechoslovakia instead of being shoehorned into a single, exclusive national identity, it was possible to exist in plural forms of identity.¹²⁶

This context, politically and culturally different from that of Hungary, has enormous significance from the point of view of dual identification, too. On the one hand, it is true that a small part of the Jewry of southern Slovakia, liberated from the Hungarian political nation, retained its Hungarian identity despite Czech/Slovak pressure and fulfilled a crucial role in maintaining Hungarian culture and in oppositional politics;¹²⁷ on the other hand, however, as regards its Jewish identity, it was able to choose between national and other denominational varieties.

Cultural diversity in the writings of Erzsi Szenes

In Erzsi Szenes's interwar poetry and in her feuilletons and short stories written in Israel, indications of dual (multiple) cultural bonds, the fact of belonging to several traditions, are simultaneously present and obtain their meaning in the socio-cultural context outlined above. Unlike in the work of writers in Hungary proper, the duality in her case becomes an indivisible unity by virtue of the fact that within this duality (multiple identification) several kinds of identity-content can become significant. That is, we must count on, rather, an identity that is dynamic and continuously in the course of formation and interaction, which depends precisely on that particular political and literary context of a way of life, on those social interactions which define the position and manner of articulation of those taking part in the dialogue. Thus the emphasis on a particular model of identity – denominational, Zionist, or Hungarian cultural, European (cosmopolitan), Hungarian–Slovak – changes depending on the context. I would like to offer a few examples of the realisation of these identity options.

Szenes, as already noted by László Tóth, “thought throughout in terms of the unity of Hungarian literature and Europe”.¹²⁸ The retrospective pieces that appeared in *Új Kelet* unambiguously suggest that it is difficult or even impossible to tie down a Hungarian writer living in interwar Czechoslovakia to a single identity, not only because their multiple identity derived from the fact that they belonged to a “multi-author” society, but equally because this culture made it possible for him/her to be constantly *en route*, both physically and symbolically (European identity, cosmopolitanism). The Czechoslovak democratic framework offered Szenes further opportunities, in particular the preconditions for developing a cosmopolitan attitude: Szenes, who by this time was fluent in four or five foreign languages, was constantly *en route* as a journalist between Prague, Berlin, Paris, Budapest and Florence, building links, watching with a sharp eye the intellectual movements and the technical advances of the age, participating in cultural events, and – above all – writing. It was in particular the open nature of Prague

¹²⁶ Éva Kovács (2004): op. cit.

¹²⁷ Filep (2013): op. cit. 39.

¹²⁸ Tóth (1993): op. cit. 65.

Hungarian life that she chronicled, exploiting its positive aspects, the possibility of a high degree of reflexivity formed through cultural encounters.¹²⁹

If we consider her poetry, we can see that it fits well into the experiments in lyrical poetry that began in the 1920s and develops a distinctive female voice. This personal, distinctive voice did not, however, simply evolve alongside initiatives in the modern lyric (dialogic verse forms that address the self); rather, Jewish biblical, ritual and literary traditions become an organic part of self-definition and self-expression in her poetry. In my view, the development of her own voice (her poetic identity) in the form of a modern poetic language relies on a Jewish tradition that is no mere stylistic feature. She often adjusts her themes – chiefly: love, relations between men and women, loneliness, resignation, life and death – and their modern elaboration to biblical imagery and content, but her formal world, too, is biblical: she wrote in a free verse that built upon the rhythms of thought. Rhythms of thought, realised by the structuring of the rhythm of the poem in terms of thought and language units, and images, can of course also be interpreted as an avantgarde influence; in this poetic oeuvre it represents not only modern progressivity but also, in equal measure, traditional biblical motifs. Nonetheless, the religious metaphors and form worlds appear as constitutive elements of the poems in a modern linguistic environment wherein the lyrical “I” confronts the experience of living an alien and outcast existence, and the feminine subjectivity of the “female” speaker articulates, through the language of the poem, a discursive position that constitutes a refutation of the patriarchal norm.

Szenes’s poetry was interpreted in a similar way by literary audiences in both Hungary and by Czechoslovak Hungarian readers, but it is important to note that in the evaluation of its characteristic features there are different emphases. In the reception of her interwar poetry we can see that it is chiefly the feminine “nature” of the utterance, “the self-expression of womanliness” that is seen as constitutive of her poems, emphasising the striking formal feature of the free verse built upon rhythms of thought, and it is everywhere evident that a poet with a voice of her own is being praised. Zoltán Fábry’s praise for Szenes is unequivocal, but for him what is important is her embeddedness in the literature of Slovensko.¹³⁰ She also received succour from reviewers in Hungary: among those who wrote positively about her poetry in *Nyugat* were Miklós Radnóti, Milán Füst, Aladár Komlós and Ignótyus.¹³¹ It is noteworthy, though, that a typical feature

¹²⁹ Erzsébet Szenes: A prágai magyar szigetről [On Prague’s Hungarian Island]. *Prágai Magyar Hírlap*, 10 August 1930. 10.

¹³⁰ Zoltán Fábry: Nőíró Szlovenszón [A female writer from Slovensko]. In *Kúria, kvaterka, kultúra. Adalékok a csehszlovákiai magyar kultúra első fejezetéhez (1918–1938)* [House in the Country, a Drink and a Chat, Culture. Contributions to the First Chapter of Czechoslovak Hungarian Culture]. Bratislava, Slovenské vydavateľstvo krásnej literatúry – Budapest, Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1964. 61–65.

¹³¹ A selection from the reviews: Aladár Komlós: Magyar költészet Szlovenszón [Hungarian Poetry in Slovensko]. *Nyugat*, (1926), 17; Ignótyus: Vers és verselés. Nevojtina 3 [Poetry and the writing of poetry. Nevojtina 3]. *Nyugat*, (1926), 18; Ignótyus: Szenes Erzsébet: Fehér kendő [Erzsébet Szenes: White Kerchief]. *Nyugat*, (1927), 22; Milán Füst: Szenes Erzsébet: Fehér kendő [Erzsébet Szenes: White Kerchief].

of her lyric verse, its reliance on the network of biblical references, is mentioned only by reviewers in Czechoslovakia, while in Hungarian criticism, her allusions to Jewish tradition are downplayed. Zoltán Fábry is able to characterise her poem *Oly messze vagy* [You are so far away] (from *Fehér kendő* [White Kerchief]) as “true love lyric that manifests a Jewish biblical simplicity and rejects sentimentalism”, and he writes more generally about her poems as being “in a weighty, biblical language”.¹³² Sándor Csanda, another Czechoslovak literary historian, writing in the 1960s, characterises her poetry as follows: “In it may be found several basic motifs of her later, mature poetry: the Jewish mysticism of the Old Testament, a lachrymose view of life that inclines to the tragic, an abundance of poetic similes connected to nature, etc.”.¹³³ By contrast, from Hungary Ignotus alludes merely to the fact that “the differences in the weight of her words acquires the savour of a form of versification, an example that sets the standard for the free rhythm of the poetryless poem”,¹³⁴ nor does Komlós mention Old Testament parallels, referring only metaphorically and indirectly to this connection.¹³⁵

In Szenes’s poems we can see her allegiance to Jewish linguistic and literary tradition in the evocation of themes and images such as marriage and bridehood in Jewish ritual which, though she has become alienated from it, in terms of the issue of observing the law (in accordance with Jewish tradition) remains fundamental. Divergence, indeed alienation from the patriarchal model, the rejection of marriage, and the consequences of resignation are themes in several of her poems, e.g. *Ó Mennyasszony!* [Oh, Bride!] and *Nem fáj nekem* [It Does Not Pain Me]. The opening lines of the latter poem – *The orange blossom wreath on the girls’ brow does not pain me, / I shower them with raisins, / As I do the bridegrooms in the temple before the wedding, / In accordance with my ancestors’ faith* – suggest a distancing from the patriarchy of marriage, from the female role sanctified by Jewish ritual.¹³⁶ Her poem *A férfî szó* [The Male Word],¹³⁷ which appeared in *Nyugat* in 1927 (and was collected in her volume *Fehér kendő* [White Kerchief]) is

Nyugat, (1927), 22; Miklós Radnóti. Szenes Erzsi új versei [Erzsi Szenes’s New Poems]. *Nyugat*, (1936), 6; Ilona Görög: Szenes Erzsi költeményei [The Poems of Erzsi Szenes]. *Szép Szó*, (1936), I. 190; Aladár Komlós: Irodalmi Napló. Szerelmet és halált énekelek [Literary Diary. Of Love and Death I Sing]. *A Toll*, (1936). 104–106; Magda Gálos. Szerelmet és halált énekelek [Of Love and Death I Sing]. *Magyar Könyvbarátok Diáriuma*, (1936). 144; Viktor Egri: Szerelmet és halált énekelek [Of Love and Death I Sing]. *Magyar Írás*, (1936), 5. 108–109.

¹³² Zoltán Fábry: Szenes Erzsi verse [Erzsi Szenes’s Poem]. In *Fábry Zoltán. Összegyűjtött írásai 2. Válogatta, összeállította Fonód Zoltán/Fábry Zoltán* [Collected Works 2. Compiled and edited by Zoltán Fonód/Zoltán Fábry]. Bratislava, Madách Kiadó – Budapest, Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1981. 256–257.

¹³³ Sándor Csanda: Szenes Erzsi költészete [Erzsi Szenes’s Poetry]. *A Hét*, 12. (1967), 9. 12.

¹³⁴ Ignotus (1926): op. cit. 464.

¹³⁵ Cf. Komlós (1936): op. cit.; Aladár Komlós: *Kritikus számadás* [A Critical Accounting]. Budapest, Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1977. 279–281.

¹³⁶ Erzsi Szenes: *Szerelmet és halált énekelek* [Of Love and Death I Sing]. Budapest, Franklin, 1936. 58.

¹³⁷ Collected in Erzsi Szenes: *Fehér kendő* [White Kerchief]. Kassa, Genius, 1927. 57.

characterised by the presence of the duality of modernity and dependence on religious tradition, and what is distinctive about it is the prospect of achieving a distinctive female voice of her own through positing a relationship to paternalistic tradition via language and culture. One of the important metaphors of the poem, “the temple there, in Jerusalem”, the timelessness of the word of God the father, appeals to an unequivocally biblical and folk tradition, taking Jewish religious memory, both in form and image, as its starting point.

In the texts written after the Shoah, the feuillets as testimonies and short stories composed in Israel in the second half of her career, we can discern the topoi of identity loss and the attempts to reconfigure multiple allegiances. These writings are memorial texts, in which reflections linked to Jewish tradition and identification and the rewriting of the past come to the fore, in which witness, mourning the dead and memories of the lost home, too, are emphasised. In these decades she tries to evoke the past, partly on the basis of such manuscripts as remained and partly from memory, and as a witness she wishes to immortalise the life of a lost world and its inhabitants: she evokes the world of the destroyed Jews of Nagymihály, her family, the life of which she, too, has been deprived. In several pieces (*Emlékezés a nagymihályi zsidókra* [Remembering the Jews of Nagymihály], *Az én kis városom* [Little Town of Mine]), she summons memories of Czechoslovakia’s fledging Zionism. Many are preparing, and leaving for, Eretz, she writes: “Even before the regime change the faint light of the desire for the ancient land was burning, but almost immediately after the change occurred, as if fed by a thousand flames, it suddenly flared into a blazing torch”.¹³⁸ The works of Herzl and Nordau were widely read, and lectures were held by such luminaries as Max Brod, Avigdor Hameiri, József Patai and Péter Újvári. “Hameiri twice visited Nagymihály”, she writes. “I introduced his first lecture. He was celebrated like some royal envoy from David’s city, Jerusalem (...).” She herself gave a lecture on Zionism before the Second World War in Florence,¹³⁹ in March 1944 she was awarded a Goldberger Prize alongside the writer Károly Pap. She had a special interest in the Jewish culture of Prague: several of her pieces are about Prague’s Jewish cemetery, and she mentions that before the war she was awarded a year-long journalist scholarship by the city of Prague for her Jewish-themed writing about the city.¹⁴⁰

In the collection *Van hazám* [I Have a Homeland], the novella *Apám fája* [My Father’s Trees] is perhaps one of Szenes’s most beautiful.¹⁴¹ In this reminiscence, biblical and religious tradition and remembrance of the population’s Zionist efforts are interwoven with those of her own family, and are superscribed upon the Israeli present; that is to say,

¹³⁸ Erzszi Szenes: *Az én kis városom* [My Little City]. *Új Kelet*, 13 October 1968. 12.

¹³⁹ Erzszi Szenes: *A héber nyelv rajongói a világirodalomban* [Enthusiasts of the Hebrew Language in World Literature]. *Új Kelet*, 29 September 1961. 5.

¹⁴⁰ Erzszi Szenes: *A prágai zsidó temető* [Prague’s Jewish Cemetery]. *Új Kelet*, 3 February 1962. 11; Erzszi Szenes: *A prágai régi zsidó temető a magyar költészetben* [Prague’s Old Jewish Cemetery in Hungarian Poetry]. *Új Kelet*, 30 June 1967. 6.

¹⁴¹ According to the table of contents in *Van hazám* [I Have a Homeland], it was awarded the literary prize of the United Hungarian Jews of America.

past and present meld into one and the scene that is evoked is simultaneously biblical and contemporary, both linked to the world and time of the galut. The central metaphor of the text is the soil and the tree, which intertwines with its meaning in Jewish religious tradition and Zionism. Szenes's narrator brings to life how the renewal of Zionism launched a movement in Czechoslovakia linked to the settlement of Palestine: trees were bought and planted in what was later to become the soil of Israel. For the Jewish National Fund had advertised, decades before the formation of Israel, a programme of forestation through land purchase, and the Jewish settlers tried to achieve the transformation of the soil through afforestation. It was part of the Szenes family tradition to plant trees in people's names in Palestine; according to the narrator, the father would send the trees ahead, making the habitation of the land possible, and thus linked the memory of the family to the soil of Israel. In Jewish tradition trees also play the role of memorials: when the name of a person or group is given to a forest, the names of the dead become attached to the soil, linking past and present to each other.¹⁴² The trees addressed in the text, however, become living memorials, mourning the victims of the Shoah as well: the trees dispatched in advance by the father create a link with the galut past, the memory of the murdered, and the homeland, and symbolically aided arrival and settlement in the land of Israel.

For Erzsi Szenes the fact of belonging to Hungarian culture – her Hungarian and European identity – continued to be important in Israel, too. When describing her father's library, she recalls how it comprised, in equal measure, Hebrew rarities, works with copper engravings, Bibles, haggadas, Zionist works, and also the works of Schiller, Goethe, Storm, Keller, Shakespeare, the Hungarian poets Dániel Berzsenyi and János Vajda, as well as the Hungarian classics. Szenes herself enriched the library with more recent Hungarian literature that she had to smuggle across border: the works of Endre Ady, Attila József, Gyula Illyés and István Vas.¹⁴³ Several articles bear witness to her love of Hungarian literature and poetry; she is particularly interested in the Jewish links of European and Hungarian writers, and after the Shoah, an important theme of her work is who did (and did not do) what during that period,¹⁴⁴ and she bears witness to the Hungarian Jewish martyr writers. In an article devoted to the memory of Zoltán Fábry (mentioned earlier), *Hódolat Fábry Zoltánnak* [Homage à Zoltán Fábry], she considers him not only an outstanding figure of contemporary antifascist literature, but also a champion of humanity, who “even in the darkest days of Hitler”, “fought uncompromisingly against anti-Semitism”.¹⁴⁵ She writes about Mór Jókai, József Kiss, Frigyes Karinthy and Ferenc Molnár, as well as Dezső Kosztolányi and János Arany,

¹⁴² Esther Benbassa, Jean-Christopher Atthias: *Izrael – föld és szentség* [Israel – Land and Sanctity]. Máriabesnyő–Gödöllő, Attraktor, 2008. 135.

¹⁴³ Erzsi Szenes: A könyvtár [The Library]. *Új Kelet*, 13 September 1968. 4.

¹⁴⁴ Erzsi Szenes: Magyar írók a vészkorszakban [Hungarian Writers in the Holocaust]. *Új Kelet*, 9 March 1962. 13; Erzsi Szenes: Szlovák írók a vészkorszakban [Slovak Writers in the Holocaust]. *Új Kelet*, 30 March 1962. 6.

¹⁴⁵ Erzsi Szenes: *Hódolat Fábry Zoltánnak* [Homage à Zoltán Fábry]. *Új Kelet*, 12 July 1968. 13.

but also has a fine piece on the Hungarian author, Margit Kaffka. Kaffka visited Berlin in 1911, and on her way home spent two days in Prague. This was when she wrote her cycle *Város* [City], which includes her poem about the city's Jewish cemetery invoking rabbi Löw, a work that she considers, even bearing in mind József Kiss's poem on the same topic, a unique, special contribution to the corpus of Hungarian poetry.¹⁴⁶ The poet Attila József frequently crops up in her memories, and several of her interwar poems show an intertextual relationship with his poetry. A propos of this, a minor episode is worth mentioning: in 1930, Erzszi Szenes organised a concert in Budapest's Academy of Music for a Czechoslovak children's choir (Bakule). Over a few afternoons in the Café Japán, she prepared rough translations of Czech and Slovak folksongs for Attila József. When in the 1960s, the publishing house of the Hungarian Academy published the latter's complete works in four volumes, it was Erzszi Szenes who retrieved those translations of Czech and Slovak folksongs and ensured they had a place in the volume devoted to his translations.¹⁴⁷ In the 1960s, the number of writings "processing the past" multiply, and she returns repeatedly to the life of the destroyed Jewish communities of Nagymihály, as well as writing about the years of persecution and the concentration camps.

As regards certain aspects of Czechoslovak/Slovak Hungarian Jewish minority existence, the poems she composed in the 1920s and 1930s are a rich and fruitful source, but – branded a Jew – her life was at risk, first in Slovakia and then, from the end of 1942, in Hungary, and she suffered atrocities because of her origins, becoming a victim of the Shoah. When the Masaryk era ended in 1938 with the coming to power, as the Nazi Germany's puppet state, of Hlinka's party, the fate of the Jews in Slovakia was immediately sealed: the elimination of the Jews from the majority population was carried out through a radical anti-Semitic programme. Szenes wrote a diary in the Nagymihály ghetto between 1939 and 1942, which forms the basis of her book *A lélek ellenáll* [The Soul Resists], published in Hungary in 1966. With the publication of the diary, she became one of the representatives, indeed diplomats, of the processing of the past that began in the 1960s and of the short-lived period of Israeli–Hungarian cooperation that blossomed at this time. Compared with the writings that appeared in *Új Kelet* and the short prose of *Van hazám* [I Have a Homeland] (1956, 1959), in which the self-reflexive memories are interpreted through the prism of the Israeli present, *A lélek ellenáll* [The Soul Resists], is emphatically addressed to a Hungarian audience in Hungary. In the diaries, her Hungarian cultural identity emphasises the fact that she belongs to the Hungarian community: the flow of the writing is determined by literary-linguistic elements belonging to her Hungarian–European cultural identity, while the confrontation with exclusion and death necessarily shape the formation of her identity as a traumatised Jew. The diary can be seen as a form of resistance through the written word. It emerges from the text that in the ghetto she read European and Hungarian writers in order to try to spiritually and intellectually survive the ordeal. But she also records that: "Our friends and contemporaries, almost

¹⁴⁶ Szenes (1967): op. cit. 6.

¹⁴⁷ Miklós Szabolcsi found a copy of the concert programme at Bence Szabolcsi's – after searching for two years. In Erzszi Szenes: Visszfényben [Reflected Light]. *Új Kelet*, 22 October 1971. 14.

without exception, sold us downriver. But at least: if only they remained silent, yet they speak; if only they did not pick up a pen, yet they do”.¹⁴⁸ Her diary tells us that, under the increasing pressure of Slovak fascism, she experiences stigmatisation and exclusion, and also because of the distinctive political situation, a double ostracism that afflicted her as a Hungarian Jew. “Jewish and Hungarian: to be one is a sin, to be the other, too, is a sin, and greatest sin is to be both together.”¹⁴⁹ Another reason her situation is distinctive is that with her literary and scholarly work she truly served Slovak Hungarian culture in a context that made Hungarian culture all but impossible. “If the Jews of this city did not speak Hungarian”, she writes, “it would hardly be possible to hear any Hungarian at all. Jews are now repeatedly forbidden to speak Hungarian, but this is done in vain [...]. Aryans no longer greet Jews in the street gladly, if at all. Some people, when they are on their own, and not in company, greet us as they did of old, and do so humbly, as if begging our pardon, but when there are several of them together, their obvious fear of one another makes them look away or look through us. To my father, who taught Hungarian here once and brought up two or three generations, even those in G-uniform (the Guardists) generally say hello, of course, only when no one else is watching, and my father always responds as of old: Hello, my dear boy.”¹⁵⁰ As one persecuted for her Hungarianness and her Jewishness, she expects the Hungarians’ help in 1941, but she already knows: “[...] with every nerve and sinew I am bound to a world, to a community, that does not want to know about me”. And this is precisely what makes her fate even more tragic, if possible: in the end it is the Hungarian state, as a collaborator with the Nazi prosecutors of genocide, that ensures she gets into the clutches of the SS on 21 March 1944.

The book published in Budapest aimed to claim the interest of the Hungarian public: she wanted to demonstrate that she belonged to Hungarian culture, that she had been excluded from it, that she had been the persecuted, and to signal her own literary past. Numerous reviews of the diary appeared in 1966–1967; most of them considered it important to highlight those elements of it which reinforced the writer’s Hungarian identity. “Someone who clings so tightly to European and Hungarian literature, who seeks from it strength and support with so much hope, someone who even in mortal danger buries herself in Hungarian folktales, reads the letters of János Arany and Mihály Tompa, enthuses about Arany’s Toldi trilogy, and calls for help from those who believed in civilization’s powers: Martin du Guard, Mihály Babits, Dezső Kosztolányi, Attila József, and Marcell Benedek, someone like this offers edifying proof of where she belongs, defying the currents of the age.”¹⁵¹ András Mezei also stressed that even in the shadow of the extermination camps, her thoughts “constantly revolve around the Hungarians: My homeland”.¹⁵² At the same time as the publication of the book, Erzsi Szenes reappeared on the Hungarian literary and cultural scene: at the invitation of

¹⁴⁸ Szenes (1966): op. cit. 38.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. 316.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 178.

¹⁵¹ István Ágh: Szenes Erzsi: A lélek ellenáll [Erzsi Szenes: The Soul Resists]. *Új Írás*, (1967), 1. 123.

¹⁵² András Mezei: A lélek ellenáll [The Soul Resists]. *Élet és Irodalom*, 17 September 1966. 4.

the poet Ferenc Juhász she visited Hungary in 1966 and was guest of honour on that year's Day of the Book.¹⁵³ Endre Illés, the managing director of Szépirodalmi Kiadó, contracted her volume of poetry *Selyemgombolyag* [Skein of Silk], originally published in 1926, for republication.¹⁵⁴ She was interviewed by several newspapers and on radio, as well as making an appearance on the stage of the University Theatre. According to Ágnes Fedor, Erzszi Szenes's diary can be seen as that of a Hungarian Anne Frank, with the difference that it was written by an adult who, by something verging on a miracle, managed to survive and "bear witness to her experiences".¹⁵⁵ In interviews at the time Szenes spoke of being a witness in the Eichmann trial¹⁵⁶ and at the trial of Hunsche and Krumey in Frankfurt in 1964, for she was on the transport that was called back from the border by Horthy, but which, as she put it, on Eichmann's orders, was slid over the border for a second time by the SS. Her public appearances in Hungary were also important because in her person she embodied the representation of the Hungarian Jewish historical past, and she tried to contribute to processing that past by reformulating the traumatised nature, history and literary-cultural definitions of Hungarian Jewish identity from the perspective of Israeli Hungarian Jewish identity.

According to Szilvia Peremiczky, "because Hungarian Jewry's protracted struggle for emancipation appeared for a long time to have been an incontrovertible success", Zionism could not appear as a force within Hungarian literature, while after the Shoah double identity could not become dominant for political reasons.¹⁵⁷ On the contrary, the Hungarian Jewry of interwar Czechoslovakia, which kept alive both Hungarian language and culture in an environment that was antipathetic to Hungarian, was at the same time able to maintain and strengthen both its religious and its minority identity. Between 1920 and 1938, the Hungarian Jewish writers who lived in a multicultural and multiethnic environment were able to identify with a freer, more open, plural set of forms of identity, signs of which are also evident in their writing. This is why it is possible for us to discern in Erzszi Szenes's poetry, prose and situation as a whole, a positive relationship to Jewish identity: because in the Czech/Slovak multicultural social environment she did not have to deny either Jewish or Hungarian tradition. It is also worth noting that in her poetry the relationship to Jewish tradition is interrogated along the fault line of female identity and compared to her experience of modernity. For the writer seeking, after the persecutions, a new home and homeland in Israel, the experience of belonging to a dual (multiple) culture(s) was also crucial, but what remains definitive – because of its unprocessable nature – is the fundamental experience of a life broken in two by the Shoah.

¹⁵³ Szenes (1966): op. cit.

¹⁵⁴ See [Anonymously]: Szenes Erzszi további sikerei Budapesten [Erzszi Szenes's successes in Budapest continue]. *Új Kelet*, 24 June 1966. 7; Pál Benedek: Szenes Erzszi halálára [On the death of Erzszi Szenes]. *Új Kelet*, (1981) April. 2.

¹⁵⁵ Ágnes Fedor: Egy elásott napló sorsa. Szenes Erzsébet beszél „A lélek ellenáll” című könyvéről [The fate of a buried diary. Erzsébet Szenes on her book “The Soul Resists”]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 25 May 1966. 4.

¹⁵⁶ Her testimony at the Eichmann trial (25 May 1962) is available online on the homepage of Jewishgen (Museum of Jewish Heritage, New York) <https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/Michalovce/documents/Testimony-of-Erzszi-Elisheva-Szenes.pdf>

¹⁵⁷ Szilvia Peremiczky: *Jeruzsálem a magyar irodalomban* [Jerusalem in Hungarian Literature]. Budapest, Gondolat, 2012. 200.

József Gréda, writing in *Új Kelet*, recalls Erzszi Szenes thus: “Of the many Hungarian Jewish writers and journalists who appeared on the pages of Nyugat, she was the one whom it is not because of her origins, but because of her passionate concerns and bonds of sympathy, that we can call a Hungarian Jewish artist [...], who always shouldered what is tough about Hungarian Jewish fate”.

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