

Citation style

Welker, Árpád: review of: Pál Hatos / Attila Novák (eds.), *Kisebbség és többség között. A magyar és a zsidó/izraeli etnikai és kulturális tapasztalatok az elmúlt századokban*, Budapest: L'Harmattan-Balassi Intézet, 2014, in: *Hungarian Historical Review*, 2014, 4, p. 925-931, DOI: 10.15463/rec.1189730987, downloaded from recensio.net

First published:

http://www.hunghist.org/images/volumes/Volume_3_Issue_4/B...



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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 Ethnical and Cultural Experiences in the Last Centuries]. Edited by Pál Hatos and Attila Novák. Budapest: L'Harmattan–Balassi Intézet, 2014. 329 pp.

Hungarian Jews, historically speaking, represent a unique population in Central and Eastern European Jewry. There are many reasons for this. Some of these reasons have to do with the major traits that are attributed to the Jewry, some with their deeds, some with the political environment with which they had to cope or in which they actively took part, and some with the fate they suffered. When talking about Hungarian Jewry, one usually means a group of people residing in the territory of the Hungarian Kingdom at the time of the Hungarian nation-building project—or their descendants all around the world. This participation in the Magyarization project and Judaism are the basic attributes that seem to define the group. Research on Hungarian Jewry, as a rule, has mostly addressed this group of people (treating earlier Jewish settlements mainly as an introduction to the real story) or those who were seen as their successors in the post-assimilation era. The definition, however, is far from unambiguous.

Nineteenth-century discourses, representatives of the rising political anti-Semitism excluded, maintained for the most part the definition of Hungarian Jews as a group of Magyars who belong to a specific denomination. This appeared to be part of the “assimilation for emancipation paradigm,” or the assimilation pact as some would call it. Although operational for those parts of the Jewry who were willing to mingle with the rest of society, this discourse disregarded the non-assimilationist strata of contemporary Jewry. After research on Jews began in earnest in the 1980s (some of the pioneers of this research are among the contributors to the book under review here) and continued to flourish in the 1990s, one of the major shifts in paradigm was a turn towards those whose story was not told in the assimilationist, or Neolog—if using the Hungarian term to describe the Enlightenment-leaning wing of local Jewry—narrative. However, with the factual advancement of assimilation, which included a growing number of intermarriages and was also accompanied by a certain degree of secularization of the public sphere, the definition of Jewry as a religious group had become less and less satisfactory. This development was of course strongly driven by anti-Semitism, which was

occupied with questions concerning Jewish ethnicity and general otherness from the beginning and became increasingly racial until its full-fledged version ruled the scene in the interwar period. Hence the difficulty of talking about Jewish ethnicity in a neutral way. The pressure towards denying one's Jewish origins after World War II complicated things further. Research has thus defined post-assimilation Jewishness as a religion or a community connected by common origins, habits or cultural traits, but also in a looser sense, defining as Jews those who identify themselves, or are identified by others, with Jewishness.

Hungarian Jews have been described as showing traits of Western and Eastern Jewry, being urbanized but partly Orthodox, following patterns of political behavior typical to Western Jewry, but relatively numerous. The outstanding Jewish contribution to Hungarian culture, economy and modernization in general has been widely noticed. The emancipation of Hungarian Jews and the remarkable support it had from the Hungarian political elite at the beginning, and partly in later times, constitute the “most Eastern” example of Western-type emancipation projects. The Hungarian Holocaust, terrible in scope, almost entirely destroyed the Jewish communities outside of Budapest, while letting many to survive in the capital. The twentieth century also generated a remarkable diaspora of Jews with Hungarian origins in Western Europe, overseas, and in Israel.

Research on Jews flourished in particular after the transition—not forgetting the pioneering works and researchers who began to deal with the role and position of Jews in Hungarian modernization already in the 1970s and 1980s. The main thematic areas were the Holocaust, schooling and social inequalities, anti-Semitism, demography, economic history and culture. But while certain outstanding researchers were pioneers who set new goals for subsequent generations in terms of thematic foci, research has become even more diversified over the last two decades. We have also seen the establishment of several research centers dedicated to Jewish studies and Holocaust studies in the meantime. Of the most important achievements, I would point out the series of research findings published by Viktor Karády in many volumes and two enormous undertakings: Géza Komoróczy's monograph of the history of Jews in Hungary and György Kövér's book concerning the social environment

of the infamous blood libel case of Tiszaeszlár.¹ The volume under review is to be seen against this disciplinary background.

The book in hand is the outcome of a joint Hungarian–Israeli conference held in Budapest in 2011. The reader is not given especially extensive information either on the background of the conference or the criteria used in the selection processes. The lack of such data leaves the reviewer guessing about background information. A list of contributors at least with some biographical notes would perhaps have helped give the reader an impression of the whole. This would have been all the more important, since the articles differ considerably in length and style, some being previously published while some seem to be identical with the paper presented orally at the conference. Some clarification would have been helpful. Especially as—according to the title page—the publication is blessed with the luxury of a copy editor, in addition to the two scholars who are the editors—and apparently conference organizers. Nonetheless, the reader cannot escape the feeling that some proofreading would have worked miracles for this publication, and some effort towards uniformity of style would have made the book more professional-looking. Fortunately, for those who do not read Hungarian, an English version of the book was published in Tel-Aviv entitled *Between minority and majority. Hungarian and Jewish/Israeli ethnical and cultural experiences in recent centuries*, a strict translation of the Hungarian original.² Very rare and fortunate that conference proceedings see daylight in two languages, especially in two parallel volumes. This fact seems to indicate that the conference bears some special importance.

If it is of scholarly value, the editors fail to communicate this to the readership. Based on the description of the project provided by the editors, the occasion was more closely connected to the field of history politics or diplomacy than to pure scholarship. The conference was organized by the Balassi Institute, which characterizes itself on its website as the “top Hungarian governmental organization of cultural diplomacy.” Tibor Navracsics, deputy Prime Minister at the time, appears to have been the main patron of the conference, József Pálinkás, then president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, being the patron. Ms. Aliza bin Noun, Israel’s ambassador to Hungary at the time, opened

1 Géza Komoróczy, *A zsidók története Magyarországon* [The History of Jews in Hungary], vol. 1–2 (Budapest: Kalligram, 2012); György Kövér, *A tiszaeszlári dráma. Társadalomtörténeti látószögek* [The Tiszaeszlár Drama. Social History Aspects] (Budapest: Osiris, 2011). See Anikó Prebuk’s review about the latter in *Hungarian Historical Review* 1, no. 1–2 (2012): 253–62, accessed November 20, 2014, http://www.hunghist.org/images/volumes/Volume_1_Issue_1-2/Bookreviews5.pdf.

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

the conference. If this is a piece of public history, which serves essentially political, ideological, and diplomatic purposes, as the list of supporters suggests, there is perhaps no need for further elaboration on the scholarly value of the book or the conference. In this case, the question as to whether this compilation of articles serves purposes of public history or political representation might well be more relevant. Seeing, however, that the actual articles, although differing in quality, style, subject and scope, are without exception works of scholarship leads us to the examination of the scholarly value of the publication.

As said, there is not much to examine. Instead of an introductory chapter, one finds a two-and-a half page “Preface,” most of which consists of an enumeration of the supporters of the conference, the articles’ topics, and the names of their authors. Again, a bit more elaboration on the background and purpose of the conference would have been welcome, for instance some insight into the genesis of the chapters and the backgrounds of the participants. The editors argue that the conference had a particular purpose and brought new approaches to the topics at hand, but this is hardly convincing. “The topic of the symposium differs to some extent from the approach that usually characterizes conferences meant for the Hungarian speaking academic public on Jewish history,” according to their formulation (p.7.). The allegedly different approach lies in the fact that (again, allegedly) “this book does not discuss Hungarian and Jewish history (including the history of Hungarian Jews) merely as a passion narrative, but how these communities are constructed, how narratives of individual and collective identities influence each other [...] these stories receive their meaning in a comparative manner” (p.7). While this is a very legitimate approach, it is difficult to see the novelty of it. Discussions concerning Jews’ position and identity between majority and minority status is a common topic in the realm of Jewish studies, and the more established participants in the conference have all been engaged in such research earlier. The reference to Hungarian and Jewish history as “passion narratives” is rather perplexing also. The manifest-like contention by the editors, according to which “the authors and the editors realize the uniquely tragic significance of the Hungarian Holocaust and deprivation of rights that lead to it” (p.8) does not make things any clearer, despite the apparent intention. In which sense are the editors entitled to speak on behalf of the participants on issues that are more ethical than scholarly? Why is it even necessary? It might not be self-evident, however, to understand the similarities between the Holocaust and the peace treaties following World War I in terms of scholarship. If the intention was to argue that discussion on the fate of Jews and on the loss of

territories according to the Trianon Treaty are similar, this would require explicit exposition of the this thesis. The editors apparently found the issue provocative and settled instead for a defensive move.

More problematic is the fact that the papers included in the volume do not really reflect on the problems described in those few sentences. Although the “Preface” lays emphasis on Jewish—Hungarian identity and its representation in a comparative manner, in the first sentence it describes the conference as one organized to tackle the problem of diasporas. However, none of the papers seem to intend on answering any of those questions except for the one by Viktor Karády, who starts his article with the following sentence: “It is highly problematic to answer directly the question posed by the Balassi Institute: where can we find possible parallelisms in the development of Hungarian and Jewish diasporas” (p.107). He spends several pages of his paper explaining why the topic outlined seems irrelevant. It is somewhat unusual, but one does not find a contradictory argument in any part of the book. Also, if the aim was to compare diasporas, the volume is rather one-sided. The Israeli diaspora is discussed in only one comprehensive article (Raphael Vago), while the non-Jewish Hungarian diaspora is only discussed in an article concerning Hungarian organizations in the United States (Attila Z. Papp). Guy Miron writes about the conceptual changes in the self-understanding of European Jewry under Nazi pressure, comparing German and Hungarian Jews in particular. Apart from that, the problematic of diasporas is hardly present in other articles.

However, if the reader does not concern themselves with the aim of the project, the product seems to be the result of a good if quite “regular” Jewish studies conference, with contributions by some of the most established scholars in the field. Regarding topics, the papers form various clusters. There are several articles on the problems of Hungarian Jewish identity. The one most directly targeting identity is András Kovács’ article about changing identity formation strategies, entitled “Stigma and Renaissance” (pp.129–36). He describes the major findings of intergenerational research among Hungarian Jews with those two words. Stigma refers to the attitudes of those who survived the Holocaust and their children, who tried to distance themselves from Jewishness, while renaissance describes groups which, after the fall of Communism, actively seek a Jewish identity. Judit Frigyes, known for her expertise in Jewish music, contributed a fascinating article entitled “Is there such a thing as Hungarian-Jewish music?” (pp.55–88). The question might seem rather provocative, and she gives an elaborate answer. The source base of the article is the outcome of fieldwork carried out during the

1970s among traditional Jews in Hungary. Her findings regarding the interaction between liturgical music and the music of the surrounding non-Jewish population are intriguing, and she includes Jewish secular music in her analysis.

Regarding questions of identity, Viktória Bányai comes up with an especially well thought-out, sophisticated analysis of the role of language in Jewish identity projects during the long nineteenth century. While the linguistic assimilation of Hungarian Jews has been a frequent topic in scholarship since the nineteenth century, there has been less discussion of the role of Hebrew in the modernization projects. The article also gives an assessment of the changes in the factual knowledge of Hebrew among different Jewish groups. Another expert of Jewish studies, Tamás Turán, contributes with a lengthy and generously documented (while some of the papers lack references altogether, he attaches a bibliography that is several pages long) article that offers a highly interesting Jewish–Hungarian comparison. The reader might even think it contains two texts. The analysis of Hungarian literary references to similarities between Jewish and Hungarian history is connected to the semantics of antique Jewish texts concerning collective identities by the concept of “shared destiny.” It would be interesting to know what the original language of Turán’s article was, but the only information given is that it was translated into Hungarian. Viktor Karády, an indisputable expert on Jewish schooling and problems involving the inequalities between denominational groups, has contributed an article that widens the geographical scope of analysis substantially. Following an extremely interesting discussion of the nature of diaspora in Jewish history, he compares data on schooling from all over East Central Europe to show how investment in education was a collective strategy of Jews in the region.

Two parallel papers reflect on the position and possible strategies of Jews between the dominant ethnicities of the respective successor states of the Habsburg Monarchy and the Hungarian speaking minority. Gusztáv Tamás Filep focuses on Jewish involvement in the public life of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, especially from the perspective of the possibilities of representation of minority interests. Attila Gidó analyzes the options of Transylvanian Jewry in the midst of Romanian, Hungarian and German anti-Semitism. His article summarizes the factors which shaped the social reality surrounding Jews and examines in particular a debate on possible Jewish “roads” from the 1920s. Levente Salat’s article seemingly belongs to this thematic group, as it concerns the Hungarian minority in Romania. Salat contributes with an analysis of the

notion of political community and its repercussions for the Hungarians in Romania. His article is among the lengthiest and most elaborated chapters of the book, appearing as a republication or revised version of three different articles.

Several papers are connected to the Holocaust, anti-Jewish legislation and the fate of Hungarian Jewry after the rise of Nazism. Balázs Ablonczy's essay, which is the leading chapter of the volume, attempts to establish a typology of letters sent to prime minister Teleki at the time of the introduction of the second anti-Jewish law (1939). Attila Novák, one of the editors, tells the story of the negotiations between the Jewish Agency and the Hungarian government. Szabolcs Szita uncovers some details about returning survivors from the Mauthausen camp.

It is difficult to determine, on the basis of the volume described above, whether the conference achieved its alleged goals. As far as I can tell, the published papers do not represent approaches that were not present in the study of Hungarian Jewry earlier. That Jews and non-Jews influenced each others' lives and adopted various strategies of identity formation in different moments of history in differing environments may be a thesis worth presenting to the larger public, but it is hardly any news for students and scholars of Central European history. However, thanks to the contributors, the volume makes interesting reading and sheds light on important aspects of the many collective identity projects in which Hungarian Jews have been involved over the course of the last two centuries.

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