FEATURED REVIEW


What is a (Neolog) Jew? Ferenc Laczó’s monograph, adapted from his PhD thesis, is an attempt to answer this apparently simple but actually highly complex question. His approach is idiosyncratic in several respects. Firstly, as the author notes several times, the shadow of the Holocaust lurks behind the entire investigation, although he does not subject thoughts expressed prior to 1944 to the teleological reading that genocide was their inevitable outcome, but traces a more complex causality. He asks how much contemporaries knew of Auschwitz, whether they were aware of its significance and, if so, how they behaved and reacted. It is this aspect of Hungarian Jewish thinking between the wars that comes in for his analysis. He also shows that the historians, literary historians, etc. who have treated this period have mainly been interested in – to use the words of Isaac Deutscher – “non-Jewish Jews,” people whose work was very important from the individual point of view, but whose activities do not and cannot characterize the official Jewish forums, associations, weekly and monthly periodicals, cultural journals, etc.

The author has focused his research on the question of what it meant to be Jewish for the authors of the yearbook of the Hungarian Jewish Literary Society (Izraelita Magyar Irodalmi Társulat, IMIT; yearbook revived in 1929 and survived until 1943), the journal Libanon (1936–1943) and the yearbook Ararát (1939–1944). While keeping the Neolog aspect in view, the author consistently maintains that this was not some kind of homogeneous discourse, but involved highly diverse values, organizing principles and goals, making it extremely difficult to reconstruct what was Jewish and what it meant to be a Jew in this period. A lucid expression of this dilemma is Béla Zsolt’s novel Kilenc koffer [Nine Suitcases], about the diversity and even moral divergence of people crammed together into the ghetto of Nagyvárad (now Oradea, Romania) and legally regarded as all of a kind. “Then there emerged a different kind of finickiness: the progressive,
European-looking Jews did not want the payot-wearers to mix with them. There were murmurs of, “There’s always trouble with that lot.”¹

The moral imperatives of the Holocaust have caused us ex post facto to regard the Jews of the time as homogeneous, but the historical reality was different. It was not simply a matter of denominational divisions (Orthodox, Neolog, and status quo ante) and the distancing arising from the associated externals, but the very meaning – in a society that was becoming “modern” – of the Jewish religion and the culture intimately bonded to it. This is the implicit social-theory message of Laczó’s book. Although eleven chapters are devoted to analysing the discourse of the yearbooks and journals, it is not, in terms of its approach, a work of media history. The distinction arises from the thematic rather than descriptive nature of the analysis. The thematic criteria have been chosen to bring the academic discourse on Hungarian Jewish thinking into line with international studies. This is an essential condition for the critical treatment of international academic work on Hungarian Jews and the adaptation of the associated methodology, concepts and comparative approach. The author consciously distances himself from the metaphors and half-truths that abound in the Hungarian public discourse and journalism; he requires a discourse that looks at the Hungarian Jewish past from the outside. Significantly, a large proportion of the 69 footnotes in the introductory historiographical chapter are foreign-language references.

The first chapter takes as its context the creation of Jewish religious institutions and examines attempts to harmonize thinking based on religious tradition with the modern professional academic ideal that had been emerging since the nineteenth century. Following Michael Brenner, Laczó demonstrates the dual character of the Wissenschaft des Judentums, an endeavour that transcended national borders and national problems, although it was also propagated in the Hungarian language. It both promoted the emancipation of the Jews among non-Jewish majority society and pushed for internal reform and modernization of Jewish communities. One of the most important stations in attempts to harmonize the Jewish religion and modern academia was the foundation of the Budapest Rabbinical School in 1877 and the opposition it provoked among Orthodox Jews. Of similar significance was the setting up of IMIT in 1894. IMIT adopted a broad profile which embraced the translation of the Jewish religious, literary and historical tradition into Hungarian and support for the

¹ Béla Zsolt, Kilenc koffer [Nine Suitcases] (Budapest: Magvető, 1980), 58, 59, 60. The expression “progressive” meant what we now call the Neolog movement. Zsolt was born into such a family in Komárom in 1895.
Hungarian Museum. It published yearbooks regularly from 1895 onwards. The process was interrupted at the end of World War I, but IMIT relaunched the series in the period under study, so that IMIT yearbooks appeared between 1929 and 1943. The reason for mentioning this set of sources at such length is that they form much of the base for Laczó’s book, and he analyses them in chapters 1–7.

Chapter two examines the Neolog movement and the issues of fitting religion into modern society and conveying to the non-Jewish majority the “essence of Jewishness” in a secular framework – other than through history, music and the arts. Particularly interesting is the ambivalent assessment of the role of Moses Mendelssohn, in which Ármin Kecskeméti went as far as to state that re-evaluating and appreciating culture at the expense of religion was upsetting what he saw as a traditional balance. He did value Mendelssohn, however, for having the two-pronged objectives of bringing culture to the Jewish community and bringing Jewishness into “cultural Jewishness,” which meant convincing the increasingly irreligious Jews of the central role of tradition in faith. Laczó considers as a unique feature of the Neolog movement the discussions in the IMIT yearbooks surrounding how Jewishness relates to morality, and truth to mentality.

One of the most absorbing intellectual exchanges concerning the Neolog interrelationship between “religious Jew” and “polgár” [member of the mainstream middle class] was the issue of incompatibility. The debate surrounded how Jews who tried to take their places in secular life but wanted social assimilation without acculturation could identify themselves in modern Hungarian society. Since this involved a dual identity arising from equal love of homeland and religion, the key question is how to define or discover the essence of Jewish self-consciousness (from which, logically, a constitutive element of identity arises). Here Laczó distinguishes seven types, differing from each other only in nuance. The first four are: denominational identity; joint or mixed Hungarian-Jewish (assimilating but remaining) identity; the subtly different progressive, “forward looking” identity that upholds retention of Jewishness; and the idea of the “Jewish people,” whose members are also Hungarian Jews. The author admits that these are subtle distinctions, difficult to formalize, and are all characterized by a wish for consensus and harmonization.

Chapter four deals with a discourse that always offers a legitimating force to minorities, the question of “contribution.” What did the Jews contribute to Hungarian scholarship, culture, economy and everything else that, in its time, was
regarded and appreciated as an accomplishment? Laczó takes a critical approach to this question, perceiving that its underlying assumption of a need for self-justification affords it the status of an apologia. In addition, it creates the false impression of being a kind of group-forming force, while actually regarding the minority to be an integral, inseparable part of majority society (or to be no more than formally distinct). Chapter five discusses the Hungarian Jews’ connections to Erec, which was centrally concerned at the time with the question of political Zionism. About twenty years ago, Gábor Schweitzer convincingly demonstrated why Hungarian Jews, some of whose most prominent figures had dressed up in the Hungarian ceremonial military and civil attire during the Millennium celebrations, people like Berthold Weiss, Sándor Deutsch of Hatvan, Lajos Krausz of Megyer and Zsigmond Kornfeld, had no need for political Zionism.2 The causes, or rather stereotypes, mentioned right at the beginning include being “unpatriotic” or “irreligious.” These concerns were clearly in direct opposition to what we have seen were the aspirations of the Neologs. Indeed, through all the disputes and confrontations among the three divisions of Hungarian Jewish society (Neolog, Orthodox and status quo ante), aversion to Zionism almost uniquely constituted a common thread. Nonetheless, the author’s analysis of the IMIT yearbooks has convinced him that despite the paucity of writing on the themes of Zionism and Erec in general, certainly compared with the attention paid to Hungarian Jewish identity, Zionist voices were still present in the Neolog milieu between the world wars, as were reports about Palestine, and these unavoidably contained talk of the Jewish people.

While the preceding chapters partly attempt to adapt the problems inherited from the nineteenth century to the new context within the territory of post-Trianon Hungary, chapters 6–10 concentrate on reactions to the steadily worsening situation and attempt to characterize them. The central concept here is crisis. What did contemporaries know about the discrimination of the time and the passage of laws that scorned basic legal principles, and how did they perceive these developments? Did any kind of crisis consciousness emerge in response? From his analysis of the IMIT yearbooks, Laczó concludes that until the passage of the First Jewish Law in 1938, the Neolog discourse predominantly followed

---

what Bourdieu and Boltanski called a “compliance strategy”, and reproduced the prevailing political discourse almost without criticism.\(^3\)

Despite the rising volume of critical voices in the IMIT yearbooks following the Nazi takeover of 1933 and – even more so – after the passage of the Jewish Law of 1938, and despite the pronouncement of “end of the liberal era” and the emergence of crisis consciousness in response to European (German) and Hungarian events, the internally-constructed identity policies, however sophisticated, lost ground. As Laczó points out, reports by Fülöp Grünvald made clear at least a year before the deportations started exactly what was meant by the *Endlösung*, and “when the crime of the century was being committed, (…) Hungary’s Jewish intellectuals could have been the force to shake the slumbering conscience of people living within the Axis Powers” (p.172), but the published revelations remained a cry in the wilderness. Amid the internal constructions and debates over identity, the authors of the IMIT yearbooks seem to have overlooked the change in the external political – and increasingly the legal – context of their debates, so that the self-understanding of the (Neolog) Jews and their positioning among Hungarian citizens were no longer the issue. In this changed discourse, the definition of “Jew” came from outside the communities, because the closed ideological system, by virtue of its closedness, was uncompromisingly defining the political language in which the world was to be conceived.

The unbinding of the analysis unbinds from its sources – the IMIT yearbooks and the periodicals *Libanon* and *Ararát* – presumably aims to fulfil the objective promised in the subtitle of discussing general and thus not exclusively Neolog “Hungarian Jewish thinking”. In fact, to dispense with the interpretative adjective “Neolog” would imply an objective for the book which is almost unattainable, because even the other periodicals coming out during that period, *Egyenlőség, Múlt és Jövő*, and even *Századunk* (carrying on the spirit of *Huszadik Század*) kept this issue on the agenda. The left-wing journals *Szocializmus* and *Korunk* also addressed this problem, and the list goes on. The contents of the bibliography make clear that Laczó is aware of this, and so the critic is somewhat at a loss to understand why the subtitle, which usually narrows down the subject, remains so wide (even if it does not bear the definite article). Since the book sketches out the background and context of each journal, its virtue would have

been to place the analyses in a conceptual field and not talk about “the” Jews in the interwar period. If he was bent on broadening the base of his sources, he could have extended his discussion to the Jewish Museum, which he does mention several times (e.g. p.46); its role and function at that time is being steadily revealed through the research of Zsuzsanna Toronyi.\(^4\)

One not entirely fortunately formulated sentence and a slightly imprecise subtitle should not distract us from the many virtues of this short monograph. By integrating the problem into international historiographical and methodological developments and providing minute analysis of hitherto largely neglected sources, *Felvilágosult vallás és modern katasztrófa között* does great service to the better understanding of the history of ideas among the Jewish community of the time.

Zsolt K. Horváth

---