Laczó, Ferenc: *Hungarian Jews in the Age of Genocide. An Intellectual History, 1929–1948*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers 2016. ISBN: 978-90-04-32464-0; XII, 240 S.

Rezensiert von: Marius Turda, Centre for Medical Humanities, Oxford Brookes University

Ferenc Laczó is one of the most promising scholars of his generation. Having already published two books in his native Hungarian, he turns his attention in his first English-speaking monograph to the Jewish engagement with and response to discrimination, persecution and survival during the period between 1929 and 1948. The erosion of Hungary's relationship with its Jewish communities began during the First World War and intensified after the communist experiment of 1919/20. A fragile national equilibrium was reached during the 1920s and 1930s but with anti-Semitism and racism gnawing at it persistently, it barely survived the outbreak of the Second World War. After the occupation of Hungary by the Nazi Germany in March 1944 the fate of the Hungarian Jews was sealed. The deportation of almost half a million of them to Auschwitz-Birkenau followed, with over 300,000 murdered upon arrival. The centuries-old history and culture of many of the Jewish communities in the post-1938 enlarged Hungary was tragically terminated.

The book is organised in seven chapters, together with an introduction and a conclusion. Following an overview outlining the main moments in Hungarian Jewish history before, during and after the Holocaust, coupled with some theoretical reflections on the state of research and recent historiographic trends, the book's first substantive chapter deals with aspects of Jewish identity, traditions and values as reflected by the contributions to the *Izraelita Magyar Irodalmi Társulatévkönyvei* (the Yearbooks of the Israelite Hungarian Literary Society). Under Samu Szemere's editorship, the Yearbooks provided a host of narratives about identity, belonging and assimilation. The chapter also discusses the work of the leading scholars affiliated with the Rabbinical Seminary of Budapest, such as Vilmos Bacher, Ignác Goldziher and Sándor Scheiber. Not surprisingly, salience is given to religious and ideological arguments, especially when the focus of much of the Jewish contributions to the Yearbooks was both on Hungarianness and Jewishness, seen as complementary forms of identification. Laczó shows how these authors underscored multiple identities to generate powerful cultural practices, of which assimilation was perhaps the most widespread.

The same textual approach is applied in chapter 3 which deals with two important Jewish journals, *Libanon* (1936–1943) and the *Ararát* yearbook series (1939–1944). A succession of Jewish authors such as József M. Grózinger, Fülöp Grünvald, Aladár Komlós, József Turóczi-Trostlesr, Jenő Zsoldos and Zoltán Kohn is introduced to the reader, alongside their ideas and publications. A militant rhetoric was often combined with a sense of fatalism in the wake of the major political changes, nationally and internationally. Many Jewish intellectuals felt increasingly threatened and cornered, particularly after 1938, and voiced their anxieties accordingly. Laczó's treatment of these men and of the associations, societies and organisations to which they belonged, such as the National Jewish Museum, is detailed and largely contextual in interpretation. It is, again, an engaging analysis, leading directly to the main focus of chapter 4, the aptly titled „The Audible Voices of the Persecuted." It is in this chapter that the idea of a particular Hungarian context, possibly different than others politically, is explored together with that of the increased realisation that the 'solution to the Jewish question' was indeed looming large over Central and Eastern Europe. The feeling of an impending catastrophe accentuates after 1942, but as Laczó rightly notes, the loyalty to the Hungarian state amongst the Jewish elites remained high.

Chapter 5, which discusses witness accounts of Holocaust survivors collected by the National Relief Committee for Deportees (Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottság or DEGOB), is speckled with interesting quotations. Focusing mainly on Hungarian Jewish accounts of Buchenwald from 1945–46, Laczó demonstrates how these testimonies not only affected the way Auschwitz and Buchenwald, for instance, were remembered by the sur-

vivors as „death camps," but ended up having a profound impact on how terms related to the annihilation of the Jews became embedded in the witness narratives during the postwar period. It is little known that a witness literature in Hungarian emerged as early as 1945, aiming to provide meaningful and substantive explanations for the tragedy of the Jewish people in Hungary and elsewhere.

To this effect, in chapter 6, Laczó discusses seven autobiographical narratives by Jewish and non-Jewish Hungarians which were all published in 1945/46. These include János Fóthy's *Horthyliget, a magyar Ördögsziget* (Horthyliget, the Hungarian Devil's Island), Sándor Millok's *A kínok útja* (The Tortured Road), and József Spronz's *Fogoly voltam Auschwitzban* (I Have Been a Captive of Auschwitz). These books provide a glimpse into the authors' attempt to explain a historical event which seemed so difficult to accept – personally, religiously, culturally, and politically. They also highlight strongly the need to come to terms with individual moral autonomy and collective guilt, themes which Laczó deals with in his final chapter. Here the focus is on a few monographs published in 1947/48 such as Sámuel Löwinger's *Germánia 'prófétája'. A nácizmus száz esztendeje* (The 'Prophet' of Germania. The Hundred Years of Nazism) and Endre Sós's *Európai fasizmus és antiszemitizmus* (European Fascism and Anti-Semitism). The most important achievement of these accounts is to expose the European intellectual history and cultural prophets that led to Nazism and the Holocaust and to hold them accountable for the tragedy of the Jewish people.

Interspersed with the biographical treatment of so many Jewish intellectuals is the analysis of 'the subtle lines of personal and discursive continuities in the aftermath of the Holocaust' (p. 18), which Laczó confidently asserted already at the outset of the book. Throughout it, he delivers on the promise. The outcome is a meticulously researched and well contextualised study, which engages critically with both the Hungarian scholarship on Jewish studies and the international debates on Jewish history and the Holocaust. The book's refreshingly persuasive interpretation is based on Laczó's noteworthy ability to explain difficult and complex debates in an accessible language, without however diminishing their rich internal cultural dynamism and specific topoi. Commendably, Laczó's empirical and analytical judgment is never clouded by nationalist bias and his analysis is not diluted by unnecessary generalisations.

All in all, this book is a good example of how useful history of ideas continues to be to the understanding of the past. It must be recommended as essential reading for any scholar of the history of East-Central Europe and of the Holocaust in Hungary.

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