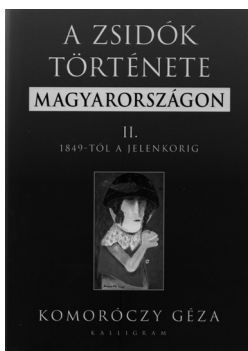
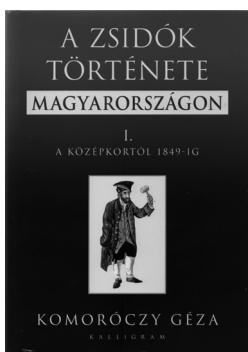




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## Hungarians and Jews. An Important Monograph with Deficit<sup>1</sup>



The book, to which the prominent Assyriologist and Hebraist Géza Komoróczy (b.1937) devoted ten years, aims at no less than providing a full scale picture of the history of the Hungarian Jews. When turning the pages of this monumental, two and a half thousand page long work, we have to be impressed and lost in admiration, since we are undoubtedly encountering the opus magnum of an outstanding scholar. We are looking at a work which should be found on the bookshelves of all who are interested in this topic. Most likely there is no one in Hungary who has the same deep and detailed knowledge of the history of the Hungarian Jews as Professor Komoróczy. And rarely can a similar venture be found, where the author all by himself undertakes to treat such a comprehensive subject synthetically. That is why our attention has been drawn and we have thought it worthwhile to deal with this work. The two volumes, each one richly illustrated on approximately 1000 pages, cover the whole history of the Hungarian Jews, from the very beginnings to 1848/49, the year of the Hungarian revolution in the first volume and then, in the second one, from 1849 to recent days.

<sup>1</sup> Géza Komoróczy: *The History of the Jews in Hungary I-II.*, Kalligram, Pozsony, 2012. 1230 and 1213 pp.



The author's concept of history is characterized by a special dichotomy. Ultimately, the history of the Hungarian Jews is considered as a success story in terms of their survival, but, at the same time, he – with thoroughly documented presentations – persistently emphasizes the history of their misery. The first Jews appeared in Hungary as traveling merchants, then some of them settled and set up coinage and money lending businesses, while others turned to farming. In the Middle Ages many advantages adhered to the charter of keeping Jews (i.e.: permission given to the Jews to settle on a given territory of a landlord) for both the landlords and the kings. That was the reason why more beneficial rules were applied to the Jews here than in other countries of Europe. However, well documented reports can be read in the book about expulsions, persecutions and pogroms of the Jews and absurd blood libels against them.

When Buda was recaptured in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the imperial army killed the Jews along with the Turks. However, after the Turks were expelled from the country, the deserted parts of the countryside were partially colonized by Jews, so the Jewry was able to re-organize itself and to develop further in the next centuries. But, parallel to these achievements, pogroms had already begun and the glorious chapters of Hungarian history were all blooded and stained by the atrocities against the Jews: the Thököly and Rákóczi rebels carried out mass killings of Jews. Later, during the Hungarian Revolution and Independence War in 1848/49, there were pogroms in both Pozsony and Pest. From the Jewish perspective these all cast a different and special light on the glorious events and figures of Hungarian history: they may be seen differently than by mainstream opinion. The question of the Jewish emancipation emerged during the Revolution, but the leading politicians were not in agreement: Count Széchenyi was against it, Kossuth and Pál Vasvári were for it, as was Baron József Eötvös, one of the founders of Hungarian liberalism. At that time, many Jews considered themselves to be Hungarians, as evidenced by the large number of Jewish soldiers fighting for the Revolution. Though their patriotism was as high order as that of their fellow Hungarians, their emancipation only came about in 1867, together with the Austro-Hungarian Compromise. (More precisely: it was the individual emancipation of each Jew, while the Jewish religion would later, in 1895, be a coequal religion and became one of the so-called “established” religions.)

The greatest period for the Hungarian Jews were the years between the Compromise and 1918, the last year of WW1: their numbers grew significantly and their contribution to the modernization of the country was outstanding. The expansion of the Jews, however, was stressful and provoked tensions. Non-religious anti-semitism, first appearing at the end

of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, continued to grow from 1919/20 until the Holocaust. The Jews were increasingly eliminated from the social and business spheres by the white terror - which reigned after the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic - and the *numerus clausus* introduced by the new Horthy-regime. This happened with the consent of the ruling classes of Hungary. Moreover, the deportation of half a million Hungarian Jews was aided by both the unconcern and the active help of Hungarian society in general (as Jewish property could be taken over for free). But, as Komoróczy points out, if the German occupation had not happened, then the mass killings of the Jews would not have taken place.

The Hungarian responsibility for the persecution (prosecution) of the Jews was described with exemplary credibility by the politician, scholar and sociologist István Bibó (1911-1979) in his essay titled *The Jewish problem in Hungary after 1944*, which was published by the monthly *Válasz (Answer)* in 1948, practically in the last days of freedom. However, the text only provoked a response in the second half of the eighties. Bibó stresses that "it is necessary for everyone to make the balance, to know who is responsible for what or in which responsibility one had a hand ..." The political climate, however, was not appropriate for debate at the time of its publication. ( see: II. 909.)

The figures show the drastic decrease in the number of Hungarian Jews since WWII. According to the author, half of the population of Hungarian Jews perished between 1941-45. One year after the war, two fifths of those who survived the Holocaust did not define themselves as Jews. At that time many Jews rejected their faith. Later, emigration also decreased the numbers of Hungarian Jews. Since 1989, the Jewish communities have partially been renewed, therefore, in spite of great losses, the persistency of the Hungarian Jews has been stressed in the book.

The work has great breadth and profundity, with an encyclopaedic plenitude in the number and variety of intellectual and factual records, the amounts of documents and literature studied and discussed and the multidisciplinary approach of the author. As if everything which is linked to the history of the Hungarian Jews - or, more precisely, to universal history, since the story-telling is connected and expanded to the universal - had to be squeezed into one work.

The subject of the work, the history of the Hungarian Jews, appears simultaneously in two embracing perspectives. On one hand we see it in the universal context of European and the Hungarian history and, on the other hand, in the micro-historical view. The history of the Hungarian Jews as a research subject, in Komoróczy's opinion, includes a great many smaller and greater elements, such as liturgical books, interpretations of religious rules, legal, political and economic texts, laws, rules, code books, private and

official correspondence, glossaries, collections of terms of specific jobs or lexical expressions, but also archeological finds, architectural monuments, spiritual and intellectual trends and movements and a great many other facts and phenomena. In a word: the Jewish history is anything that can be connected with Jewry.

Such broadly interpreted topics could be comprehended only by means of a similarly broad scientific methodology. The book is a good example of multidisciplinary: it approaches its topic from the archeological points of view as well as the history of politics, economics, religion and culture. This striving for an encyclopaedic plenitude could be achieved only on the basis of an unquestionably huge, nearly inexhaustible factual knowledge. The author writes in the Preface that during the work, “with the convenience afforded by word processing he went on an almost never-ending road”. This feeling demonstrates how many dangers he could have met on that way. Professor Komoróczy explains that he had to close the manuscript “not because the material was used up, but because the size of the book had become so immense for the author, editor, and reader alike.” (I. 9.) We have to agree with Sándor Révész, one of the reviewers of the book, who thought that a more powerful editorial intervention would have made a much more “reader-friendly” book. In fact, as the author himself realized, that the volume would be hard for the perception, its dimensions had become more and more boundless, most probably an abridged manuscript would have been more expedient. In addition, it must be stressed that this remark does not refer only to the size of the text, but warns that without regulations the “never-ending road” can easily transform into an impassable labyrinth.

The structure of the book, the arrangement of the chapters, the organization of the material do not ease but make it even more difficult to navigate within the book itself. The historical narration has at every turn been blocked by diverse spreadsheets, tables, registers, lists, which seem to be very informative and useful, but should rather be in an appendix or at the end of each chapter. The reception of the text is also encumbered by the changing of the viewpoints of the author from macro- to micro-history within the same chapter. Therefore, it is very easy to lose the thread of the narration pursuant to the abundance of changes in perspective and the heterogeneity of the chapters with different vistas. Surely, this diversity may often prevent the orientation of the reader within this very extensive text, since one can really feel there is a labyrinth in which he roams and cannot find the way out.

From time to time Professor Komoróczy inserts characteristic micro-histories of specific communities into the big narration. Portraits of

outstanding personalities of the Hungarian Jewry are also inserted into the history of events and happenings. A detailed portrayal is made of Löw Lipót/ Leopold Löw, the renowned 19<sup>th</sup> century chief rabbi of Szeged, vanguard of the emancipation of the Hungarian Jews as well as of Mór Wahrmann, remarkable politician of the age of dualism, the first Hungarian Jewish MP, who – as a member of the ruling Liberal Party of PM Kálmán Tisza – made significant steps to boost trade, while, as the secretary of the Jewish community in Budapest, helped to establish and build some important communal institutions.

We are given a portrayal of the Budapest-born Herzl Tivadar/Theodor Herzl, founder of Zionism, of Ignác Goldziher, the internationally renowned orientalist, the pioneer of Hebrew and Islam studies, and of Sándor Scheiber, the most famous Hungarian Jewish professor of cultural studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And, of course, of other renowned scientists, rabbies and public figures.

A concise historical summary is given of the most important from among the 350 or so Jewish families that blended into the Hungarian aristocracy and monied classes. There is mention of the barons of industry and the so-called money-aristocrats - such families as Kornfeld, Weiss, Hatvany-Deutsch, Schossberger, Goldberger, Chorin, Fischer and Pick. Among others, the social scientist Oszkár Jászi and the philosopher György Lukács, the politicians Béla Kun and Vilmos Vázsonyi, and eminent writers Milán Füst, Ernő Szép, Károly Pap, Miklós Radnóti, Antal Szerb or Béla Tabor are also noticed. Thus the whole picture is made out of many pieces.

All this would not be a problem if the mosaics, portrayals, detailed historical chapters and subchapters were followed by summaries, conclusions and longer evaluating passages – requisites of a good reference book. But they are missing. As it turns out, the first positive impressions give place to embarrassment, discontent and frustration, caused not only by the structural problems described above, though undoubtedly connected with them.

The real issue behind the dissatisfaction and the embarrassment is the following: a very important and basic question was not cleared up, or the answer was elaborated insufficiently. The question is essential and determinant for all following reflections and steps. A thorough answer from the author should have been given to the question of who or what in the author's opinion can be deemed a Jew/ Jewish. This definition should be the basis on which the building of the book can be erected, it should be a thread on which the history of the Hungarian Jews can be strung.

One can agree with the author that it is not very easy to answer the question and it is certainly not possible to indicate any precise dates. As is stressed by him: “before the 18/19th century the Jews were undoubtedly

an independent people, who formed an organic unity on the basis of their common origin or a consciousness of it, on the cultural tradition ( religion ) and - to a certain extent – on the language (Hebrew was used as a ritual language only in the diaspora)”. (I.20.)

Being a part of the Jewry before the Enlightenment – as the French anthropologist Marcell Mauss defined it - was a “total social fact”, which determined its collective unity on the one hand and its separation from the other parts of the society on the other, from the point of view of religion, society, business and biology (genealogically as descent from Jewish mothers). (See: Karády, Viktor: *Jewry in Europe in the Modern Age*, Új Mandátum Kiadó, Budapest, 2000, 249.). The emphasis is evidently on the adjective “collective “.

As long as the Jewry can be considered as a well separated community, the description of the history of the Jews is trouble free with Komoróczy. In this sense, the first volume and the second volume (until 1867 ) are good, as is the depiction of the Holocaust (an extraordinarily long, important and dramatic part of the second volume). In the latter case, the Jewry are also to be treated as a community that the Nazis wanted to eliminate from among European societies, as a collective entity, regardless of the self-assessment of the individuals, i.e. whether a Jew deemed himself a Jew or not.

The principle of collectivity can be well traced through the history of Jewish confessional trends and religious movements, the orthodox and reformed Jewry, the communities of Hasidics and Sabbatarians. From the 18-19th century, however, the history of the Jews all over Europe and in Hungary is about the history of the Jews’ integration into mainstream society ( and, from the perspective of the Shoah, its failure in the end). The assimilation, though it follows collective behavioral patterns, is based on individual decisions and is a creative work done by an individual on himself. The aim of the process is to transform one individual into another, who then assimilates into the culture, widely interpreted, of the majority society. The work one does on oneself as an individual changes fundamentally the structure of one’s identity.

Therefore, from the second half of the 19th century, (from 1867, the date of Jewish emancipation, when the process of assimilation accelerated), identity can no more be fixed simply and clearly. As Komoróczy accurately says: “the Jewish model of identity can be compared to concentric circles, where neither the center, nor the circles themselves are rigidly marked”. (I. 20.) This Jewish identity, created by many individual ways diverging from each other in several different directions, is not presented by the author in its historical aspect. The reader misses these facts very much, since important periods of the Hungarian culture have remained untold.

It is well known that the role of the Jews in the modernization of Hungarian society, economics and culture was indisputable. Without naming everybody concerned, here are few examples. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Sunday Circle* ( *Vasárnapi Kör* ) was the pioneer in the reforming of the social sciences. Members of this Circle included the poets and prose writers Anna Lesznai and Béla Balázs, philosopher and art sociologist Arnold Hauser, sociologist Károly Mannheim, art historian Frigyes Antal and the philosopher György Lukács.

An incomplete list could include: Sándor Bródy, József Kiss, editor of *A Hét* ( *The Week* ), the monthly *Nyugat* ( *The West* ), whose editors were Ernő Osvát, Miksa Fenyő, Oszkár Gellért and Ignotus (Hugó Veigelsberg), their reviewers Aladár Komlós and Aladár Schöpflin, and writers Dezső Szomory, Endre Andor Gelléri, Károly Pap, Tibor Déry, István Vas, Milán Füst and Ferenc Molnár. Another important press group were the evening papers with chief editor Lajos Mikes. One could also mention *Szép Szó* ( *Beautiful Word* ) edited by Ferenc Fejtő and such writers as Andor Gábor or Ervin Sinkó – and the list can go on and on.

The structure of the new city culture, the new public places, from coffee houses to swimming pools, from bourgeois salon to concert hall and theater or movie theater, in the creation of all of these the Jews had their part and constituted a part of the audience. The period between the wars cannot be depicted without mentioning the Jews. They, the multilingual, open, sensitive and traveled Jewish writers, journalists, artists, composers, filmmakers, painters, actors and directors made what can be called modern Hungarian culture. However, they are not mentioned or even sporadically named in the book (in other contexts), and their anonymity is shared by artists of Jewish origin, who lived after 1945.

It seems these modern and post-modern fragments of cultural history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are not inseparable parts of Géza Komoróczy's historical concept. We may have a suspicion as to its cause: basically, the danger of being guilty of imputing identity (threat not to fall into the evil guilt of identity imputation) (the Nuremberg laws had the vigour) moderated the author.

What is left then is nothing less than a community-collective approach, which regretfully narrows the rich and valuable history of Hungarian-Jews/Jewish-Hungarian, so full of intellectual-cultural achievements, to a confessional one.