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*Jewish Budapest: Monuments, Rites, History.*

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This book, a translation of the Hungarian edition *A zsidó Budapest* published in 1995, is the first of its kind. It offers a broad, comprehensive canvas of the life, circumstances, history and culture of the Jewish community in Budapest from its beginnings in the thirteenth century to our days. The significance of its narrative lies in the detailed, colourful, at times humorous, yet always rigorously accurate, and dedicated rendering of the world and culture of the Budapest Jews, including their interaction with and impact on, the development of the city and the country's legal, educational, economic and national life. Eagerly descending into 'the well of the past', the authors create a highly complex compilation, structured around the daily events, living quarters, prayer houses, cemeteries, relationships, successes, defeats, cultural life and communal gatherings of the Jews in Hungary throughout the ages. With its goal to capture their public movements in the context of the space where they lived, worked, prayed and gathered, the narrative follows their paths, focusing on their ways of life, religious and social customs, interactions and achievements, offering a wide vista of information. With photographs of the Jewish dwellings, architectural designs, synagogues, artifacts, ancient monies, grave stones and individual portraits accompanying the smoothly-flowing, well-organized text, the story of the Jews of Budapest demands to be known and recognized by the international public as a remarkable, significant link of unique design in the extraordinarily rich chain of Jewish culture.

Divided into fifteen sections, the book examines chronologically each district of Budapest in which Jews have lived ever since they were allowed to reside in Hungary in 1253, demonstrating, analyzing, scrutinizing their culture and relationship with their environment. It also calls attention to the ups and downs of Jewish life in the country over the centuries, the details of which demonstrate their flourishing at times, but at others, their fall: the attacks against them, including exiles, pogroms, and the destruction of the Jewish community at Buda in 1688 and during the Holocaust. Recalling the ancient and more recent hostilities as well as the success stories that recount the rise of some outstanding individuals and that of the community, this volume also presents broadly-drawn, but acute discussions on Jewish religious activities. It explains the history and workings of both the Jewish calendar and the Jewish holidays, their history, meaning, and practices including those of the dietary laws. It also reveals the background and nature of a variety of religious traditions that clashed against or absorbed one another. In fact, no matter which event, district, character, or development the text examines, a concomitant of the narrative is an ongoing commentary on the religious costumes and rituals of the Jewish community in Hungary.

In addition, the volume explores individual intellectual and artistic achievements as well as such political issues as assimilation and independent national life. It traces the

origins of outside and inside pressures that called for ever more ‘modernization’ in the Jewish communities and the bitter resistance of the more traditional circles to such attempts. Of course, the Hungarian version of this process was moved by forces similar to those appearing everywhere in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; but its motifs, inspiration, and outcome were essentially different.

For neither Germany nor France or Britain needed the Jews for their own national survival; Hungary did. In fact, as soon as the 1804 census revealed that ‘Greater Hungary’ comprised only 39 percent Hungarians, the deeply-concerned leadership started to pressure the country’s minorities toward intense Magyarization processes. Of course, this desideratum compelled not only the Jews to assimilate, but also all other nationalities. Yet the census of 1910 shows that while only a negligible number of these minorities became Hungarian, over 75 percent of the nearly one million Jews coming mostly from Galicia and further east to the Hungarian kingdom, registered as Hungarians. In addition, in no other country west from the Danube did the nobility prefer its own feudal privileges over the industrialization process marching forward in Europe. In Hungary, however, it did, encouraging the Jews to take over business. Blessed with such opportunities and the hope for living a dignified existence, most Jews of Hungary became passionately nationalist Hungarian patriots, modernizing the country’s economic life and participating in the professions. *Jewish Budapest* deals with these issues, revealing the arguments that moved between tradition and ‘modernism’ In this way, it evokes the desperate conflict between the older conservative and the modern, assimilation-eager groups, including their final break-up at the conference in 1869-70. Rendering the essential issues of that conference, the text also outlines the later developments of the Orthodox and Reformed communities in Hungary. In addition, it offers detailed pictures of the rise of an exceptional range of talent, in the industrialization processes as well as in the realms of the arts and sciences.

Arriving to the last parts of the book, while constantly returning to and interconnecting with the political changes of twentieth-century Hungary, the authors explore the circumstances and ways of life of the Jewish community during World War I, the interwar period, and World War II. They also describe the events around the Shoah and the terrible details of Jewish humiliation, expulsion, and mass murder. And they point not only to the rising despair of the humiliated Jewish community but also to its unpreparedness when confronted with the Holocaust. Ultimately, the narration doesn’t shirk from demonstrating that despite the tremendously rich Jewish contribution to the culture of their birth, the Hungarian Jews could feel just for a very short while as part of the nation they so deeply loved.

The narrative changes, of course, after World War II: Budapest lost half of its Jewish population, and the rest of Hungary became completely *judenfrei*. In addition, the Communist governments as well as those who supported the ‘new order’ opposed any discussion of the past. As the authors of *Jewish Budapest* testify. ‘[a]fter the war, Jewish history was basically hidden history’ (446). Yet despite the general ban on Jewish memory, however slowly and sparsely, there were a very few who dared to write about it. Discussing the significance of their works and the small steps of improvement that

took place in the last months and days of the dying Communist system, and also reporting the rise of new anti-Semitism in the Hungary of the 1990s, the authors reveal the complexities and tensions of Jewish life and being in the past few years.

The last section of the book deals with the ‘Invisible Jewish Budapest’, with the houses, synagogues, plazas, streets, and boulevards, created by Jewish architects, which make Budapest one of the most remarkably beautiful cities of the world. The section ends with the list of buildings and synagogues that have ended up in disrepair, actually, reflecting the overarching, long-term decline of the Budapest Jewish community.

Yet there is still hope for preserving the memory of the past and, therefore, for securing the continuity of Jewish life in Hungary as this magisterial book has demonstrated. Serving as a source of future works on the Hungarian Jewish community, it fills essential needs. With its editor, Géza Komoróczy, persisting over several decades to research and teach Jewish Studies in Hungary, with his young colleagues joining him in writing this book, and with the help of others working on such projects, the world of the Budapest Jews will be remembered and will become part of the future.

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