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ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARICÆ

*Holocaust Victimhood in Hungary:
New Histories*

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Holocaust Victimhood in Hungary: New Histories

Alexandra Szabó and András Szécsényi
Special Editors of the Thematic Issue

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Budapest–Bergen-Belsen–Svájc: A Kasztner-vonat fővárosi utasai
[Budapest–Bergen-Belsen–Switzerland: The Budapest passengers of
the Kasztner train]. Edited by Anikó Lukács. Budapest: Budapest City
Archives, 2020.

The story of the so-called Kasztner train and Rezső Kasztner's activities were parts of one of the controversial episodes of the Hungarian Holocaust. Kasztner worked as the deputy chairman of the Vaada, the Zionist Aid and Rescue Committee. In 1944, as a result of his negotiations with the SS, he was able to organize the escape of several hundred Hungarian Jews to Switzerland. For each of the 1,684 passengers, thousand dollars had to be paid to the Nazis, and the train, which departed from Budapest on June 30, first took the refugees to the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen. Many of them managed to reach the safety of Switzerland only half a year later. Kasztner was criticized then and is still criticized today for having “sold his soul to the devil,” (a phrase used by the judge in his trial) in part because some people assume that only rich, prominent Jews were able to get on the list of passengers. As a consequence, Kasztner became involved in a trial in 1953, where he was accused of collaborating with the Nazis, and the trial drew attention to him which may have caused his death: three members of Lehi, a Zionist paramilitary underground group assassinated him.

Budapest–Bergen-Belsen–Switzerland: The Budapest passengers of the Kasztner train, a book published by the Budapest City Archives, contains the material from the exhibition of the same name, which was opened in June 2019. The material for this exhibition was compiled in the course of an exciting international cooperative endeavor connected to the discovery of approximately 7,000 data sheets with information concerning the owners and tenants of Budapest apartments from 1944 (the digitalized documents are available at <https://archives.hungaricana.hu/en/lear/Lakasiv/>). In this volume, documents concerning the life of Kasztner train passengers are combined from two collections: the Budapest City Archives and the Verband Schweizerischer Jüdischer Fürsorgen (VSJF), the Swiss association which aided Jewish refugees.

The book applies a previously neglected approach: the story of the Kasztner train is introduced through the fates of ten rescued persons or families on the basis of a variety of archival sources, photographs, documents, letters collected from private individuals, recollections, and diaries. The book is attractive, with photographs and documents arranged in a “scrapbook style.” Both the main

text and captions have been translated into English, making it accessible and engaging to the English readership too.

In Holocaust research, the perspectives of victims and microhistory are becoming increasingly prominent; this book is an example of this trend, as the core consists of the stories of survivors. Editor Anikó Lukács also mentions this in her foreword, where she emphasizes that the main focus was not on Kasztner's activity and its political aspects but on the refugees themselves.

A short writing by Annie Szamosi, in which she gives an account of how she learned of her family's past, fits into this concept. Szamosi's story is typical: her parents were reluctant to tell her and her brother what had happened to them during World War II; however, during a trip she took to Budapest, a relative disclosed the entire story. Thus, her interest was raised in how Kasztner had saved her grandparents from certain death, and the story of Zebulon Jonatán Sternberg and Margit Dach became part of the volume.

The family stories are contextualized by a short historical introduction. The reader learns of the actions of Kasztner and the Zionists and the story of the train. The recollections of the refugees themselves and the suggestive postcards by graphic designer István Irsai, in which he depicts the characteristic objects and scenes of the camp behind barbed wire, provide an expressive picture of their experiences during the time spent in Bergen-Belsen. Nonetheless, the lack of information about the camp's history and structure may be bothering. Finally, photographs, documents, and a short account describe the circumstances of the refugees after their arrival in Switzerland.

Then come the stories of the ten families, among whom we may find a contractor, an industrialist, a lawyer, a goldsmith, a scientist, and a merchant. The family stories are based on a rich collection of sources, and the main text is complemented with quotes from ego-documents and letters. Since the fugitives are in focus, they could have been given more space to tell their stories in their own words; but alongside the historical text, an abundance of photographs, forms, letters, and other documents also speak for them, providing further details about the families' lives.

The volume offers the reader a picture of the passengers' prewar situation, how their careers and lives were broken by the Holocaust, what it meant for them to get a chance to escape, and how they lived in Switzerland and after the war. From the point of view of the latter, the families whose stories were chosen for inclusion in the volume may be representative. Most of them never

returned to Hungary. Instead, they settled in various countries throughout the world, from countries in South America to Israel.

Though according to the historical introduction “almost every class of Hungarian Jewry was represented” on the Kasztner train, most of the ten families whose narratives were chosen for inclusion here were prominent members of the Budapest community: for instance, György Bamberger and his wife, Rózsa Stern, who was the daughter of Samu Stern, leader of the Pest Israelite Congregation; Nison Kahan, one of the leaders of Zionism in Hungary and Gábor Munk, a member of the board of the Pest Israelite Congregation, whose daughter married Nison Kahan. Others were given places on the train due to their outstanding artistic or scientific achievements, such as the abovementioned graphic designer, István Irsai, contractor József Apor, and world-famous physician and psychiatrist Lipót Szondi. This asymmetry is probably a result of the disproportionately larger number of sources documenting the lives of well-known personalities or those who were in leading positions. Given this abundance of sources, it is easier to write about their lives. However, the material compiled for the book seems to underpin the assumption that only rich or famous people were given places on the train. This is contradicted only by the fact that the young Gádor–Donáth couple and Zebulon Jonatán Sternberg and his wife, Margit Dach, were also included on Kasztner’s list, together with numerous other less wealthy persons whose stories are not well-documented and are not mentioned in the book.

The moral implications of the Kasztner train cannot be avoided, even if the lives of the refugees remain the focus and the process according to which passengers were selected is touched upon only indirectly. A final conclusion would be hard to draw, but one factor must be underlined, which can be demonstrated through the life of the Gádor–Donáth couple. László Gádor was 32 years old in 1944, and Blanka Donáth was 23. After they returned to Hungary in 1945, Gádor worked for the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and Donáth had a long and successful career as a doctor of educational psychology. Had they stayed in Hungary in 1944, probably they would not have survived until the end of the war. Kasztner’s train made it possible for some 1,700 persons to survive the Holocaust. The life stories of the passengers effectively illuminate this simple but important truth.

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University of Szeged

THE

Hungarian Historical Review

Aims and Scope

The Hungarian Historical Review is a peer-reviewed international journal of the social sciences and humanities with a focus on Hungarian history. The journal's geographical scope—Hungary and East-Central Europe—makes it unique: the Hungarian Historical Review explores historical events in Hungary, but also raises broader questions in a transnational context. The articles and book reviews cover topics regarding Hungarian and East-Central European History. The journal aims to stimulate dialogue on Hungarian and East-Central European History in a transnational context. The journal fills lacuna, as it provides a forum for articles and reviews in English on Hungarian and East-Central European history, making Hungarian historiography accessible to the international reading public and part of the larger international scholarly discourse.

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