

A tiszaezlári dráma. Társadalomtörténeti látószögek

[The Tiszaeszlár Drama. Social History Aspects].

By György Kövér. Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2011. 749 pp.

The history of anti-Semitism in Hungary occupies a relatively small part of the extensive international literature on anti-Semitism. Although Hungarian workers in psychoanalysis and social psychology have done much to explore the psychological background to prejudiced thinking, and empirical sociological studies offer an insight into the motifs of contemporary anti-Jewishness, there has been little work on the historical-cultural components, particularly as regards the nineteenth century. Indeed, it seems that interest waned in the 1990s, just when studies of the history of Hungarian Jewry started on a broad front. This is also true of the story of the Tiszaeszlár blood libel. On Saturday before the Passover of 1882 (1 April), in a village in eastern Hungary, the disappearance of a Christian housemaid, Eszter Solymosi, prompted the village inhabitants and the authorities to make an accusation of ritual murder against the local and some other Jews who were visiting for the election of the cantor and the kosher butcher. The events swelled into a criminal case that elicited national and international attention, and finally the case ended with the acquittal of those accused. The protagonists on each side of the barricade developed their own narratives after the trial, and the subject has inspired works of literature and film, however György Kövér's monograph is the first attempt to research the extensive and diverse sources and produce a comprehensive historical treatment of the contemporary discourses and subsequent narratives.

The book breaks from the tradition of blood-libel studies by lifting the affair from the context of Jewish-Christian antagonism.<sup>1</sup> In a way unique in the international literature of the subject, he attempts to reconstruct the events using the tools of microhistory and mentality history, analyzing the fault lines of society in this village by the river Tisza to build up a picture of the hostilities against the Jews as one of many disruptive local conflicts.

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1 The study of blood libels in the Jewish-Christian and Jewish-non-Jewish contexts is rooted in the Jewish historiographic tradition. It is from this viewpoint that some of the work produced in the framework of Jewish Studies, which has emerged from American historiography analysis, classifies and compares medieval and modern blood libels. The most recent review in a broad time frame is Hillel J. Kieval, "Blood Libels and Host Desecration Accusation," in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed. Gershon David Hundert, vol. 1 (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2008), 195–200.

The aim of elucidating psychological situations alluded to in the title shows up in the use of some elements of social drama theory methodology.<sup>2</sup> The author takes the approach of Victor Turner and distinguishes from formalized structures the social-conflict-generated “temporary structures” which “emerge in the minds of the actors as the purpose of actions and efforts and carry with them alternatives. These may be identified by analysis of “psychological factors” and are “recognizable to observers retrospectively, after the event” (pp.10–11). He elaborates the great drama as an “extended case history” from the multitude of small dramatic situations, set against the formalized structures explored in a monographic treatment of the village.

Although the two main parts of the book—the social history of the village and the micro-analysis of the case—are set on different timescales, they interweave at several levels. The social history, which covers changes over a period of about a century, provides the wider context always present behind current problems, while the analysis of the case, defining the history a very short period, frequently refers the reader to the first part, thus filling out the social background and character of the protagonists. Kövér also informs us of the driving forces behind the protagonists’ role and their actions in the affair. It is the longer of the two timescales which dominates, however, because it is the setting for the chronicle of the shorter period.

What makes the local social history special is that the author has gone beyond the hard sources (censuses, registers of births and deaths, tax registers, cadastral documents, etc.) and drawn on the publicity generated by the case itself, using documentation, press material and the narratives of the protagonists. We get a clear view of the village through his account of the settlement structure, major sections of society, social classes, families, individual mobility routes and local conflicts. In the course of this “perambulation”, he develops a picture of a village on the periphery, a place which has remained isolated despite geographical and structural changes. Tiszaeszlár emerges as being distant from almost everything, a situation aggravated by loss of internal centre of gravity as its territory expanded, coupled with the constant threat posed by the Tisza and

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2 The first to use the four-phase drama theory to explore a Hungarian historical subject was cultural historian Mary Gluck, in her investigation of an event that lay close in time and theme, the duel between the Israelite member of parliament Mór Wahrmann and Győző Istóczy. Mary Gluck, “A Problem Seeking a Frame: An Aesthetic Reading of the ‘Jewish Question’ in ‘Turn-of-the Century Hungary,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 22 (1992): 91–110.

the rapid growth of the Catholic and Jewish communities alongside the majority Reformed Church population.

In his examination of the dynamics of the social structure, the author has used censuses and reports produced at different times, and based on different criteria, to describe the structural changes of the nineteenth century, the persisting elements of feudal society, and the tangible features of class society. This empirical approach challenges at several points the validity of the theoretical categories assigned to different sections of society. The analysis of the “nobility” shows above all a decline in wealth of large landowners. Of the three landed noble families who owned the fields around the village, only Pál Ónody had prospered after the freedom of the bonded peasants, and even his son was obliged to sell and take a lease on his part of the Tiszaeszlár estate. Gusztáv Kállay was also forced to sell his estate, and the new owner, the Dessewffy family, did not even live in Tiszaeszlár. The history of the local lesser nobility directly refutes the view that they formed a homogeneous group: by 1870 only the Farkas clan could boast of a viable estate, and many of the landless nobles had been assimilated into peasant society even before the emancipation of the serfs.

The central phenomenon among the peasantry in Tiszaeszlár was the swelling of the landless peasant (*zsellér*) population to twice its size within the space of fifty years. Beyond differences within the basic feudal/landless divide, inside of the latter category, beside distinction between those with, and those without their own households separate groups of craftsmen and servants can be seen, too. The analysis of the social structure also shows up the gradual settlement and spatial differentiation of Jews, a group which is difficult to describe in feudal terms. In the part of the village called Ófalu [old village], they occupied the traditional traffic intersections, but in Újfalu [new village], resettled after the 1855 flood, they were not segregated, and their houses lay on the farmers’ street and the outer landless peasants’ street. Kövér directs attention to the least-known section of the Jews in Hungary, the village-farmer Jews, finding little local evidence for the system proposed by the macro-theories: domination by the trading network all the way from the Jewish peddler to the great merchant, a functional unit without a fixed community-organizational structure.

The classification of the population according to election rights, property and taxation tells us about conditions after the emancipation of the serfs. The author’s terminology is close to the class definitions of Max Weber, who considered class-based society to have been interwoven with, rather than

displaced, feudal society. This classification is refined by a cluster analysis demonstrating the extreme compartmentalization of Tiszaeszlár society in a more differentiated structure. The landholding structure was uneven even by national comparison. There was a negligible proportion of rich peasants, and three great landowners held 80 percent of the land, while the 86 percent of peasants in the lower category, owning 0–5 cadastral holds, owned only 2 percent. The tax burden was also highly unequal by national and even county comparison: in 1864, taxpayers paying between 1 and 5 forints (“*össztrák értékű forint*”) formed the majority, there was a complete absence of the middle category (those paying between 50 and 100 forints) a substantial group elsewhere in the county, and a strong representation of the upper category (payers of between 200 and 1000 forints) which was very small in national terms.

The study of the social structure gives a static picture, if in multiple time frames, but is followed by an investigation of three channels of mobility between and within classes and generations. We see the parallels of spatial mobility and social differentiation in Újfalu, newly built after the 1855 flood, where the households of the farmers and landless peasants were separated after the relocation of the village. An exceptional source, the Reformed Church’s poor list, illuminates the elusive phenomenon of poverty, and case studies embedded in family histories mark out the various routes to impoverishment. A third type of movement, indicating the recruitment of incomers, is the rapid turnover and multiple generation-changes of educated people in the village.

According to the basic thesis of the book Eszter Solymosi’s disappearance was not an isolated event, but fitted into a series of traumatic local conflicts. Kövér thus devotes a whole chapter to the complex interrelationships of a community fraught with local squabbles and clashes, and the personal and communal aspects of the nineteenth-century structural changes. We get a glimpse into the landowning Kállay family’s legal actions over their estates, antagonism between landlords and tenants, and quarrels among tenants. The author traces the origins of the term *zsidó bérlet* [Jewish landlease] and examines how the resentments against Jewish tenant farmers actually reflected on the whole system of landleasing. The activities of the Christian tenants on the Kállay lands and the Jewish tenants on the Bánffy lands do not bear out the claim that Jewish tenants moved on faster than their Christian counterparts, or that they did not cultivate the land and, having acquired a lease at “robbery price” in the middle of the century, sold it on at the highest price at the end. The Tisza flood of 1876 divided the village between those who wanted to relocate

and those who wanted to rebuild the levee. The conflicts between congregations and priests give an insight into quarrels within Christian denominations. The brawling which accompanied the local authority elections of 1881 betrays the uncertain position of the local leadership. Names of the protagonists become familiar as they periodically recur, the same members of the local community giving voice in different disputes, their roles varying accordingly. Through the networks of kin and neighborhood, we see who had a dominant presence and acquired experience in the local and county techniques of conflict management.

In the chapters up to this point, the protagonists appear as small components of the social structure, cropping up apparently randomly as participants in the conflict. By contrast, the multi-generation family reconstructions focus on the principal figures in the story. The story of the Ónodys, and particularly Géza Ónody, gives an alternative explanation for the noble family's impoverishment. Kövér considers the possibility that the second generation changed over from accumulating to dissipating its wealth, although the opposite may also be true. The story of a prominent Jewish tenant, Mór Lichtmann, and his sons, gives new insights into tenant farming based on royal usufruct and the anti-Semitic stereotypes attaching to it. The Farkas family is an exceptional case of a prospering "peasant-noble" family and its ascent in the leading bodies of the village. An indication of the local influence of Gábor Farkas, elected magistrate in 1882, is that several people, including Károly Eötvös, saw in him the architect of the blood libel. An example of a family rising from the ranks of the peasants to be the village judge, was that of József Papp, while the condition of the poor peasants is illustrated by the story of the Solymosi family. In characterizing the Scharf family, the author breaks with a historiographic tradition of ignoring the adult memoirs of one of the key witnesses at the trial, Móric Scharf (because of doubts about its credibility). Through careful textual analysis of this unique source, he sifts out the details of childhood, loss of mother, schooling and relations with his step-mother. The author is inclined to treat the contradictions as factors which humanize the narrative rather than undermine its credibility.

Whereas the social history, spanning a long period and written in a loose, fragmented structure of self-contained stories in main chapters and smaller sections, forms a coherent whole, the description of the micro-world of the trial results in the narrowing-down of timescales. The key sources are: the investigation records and the trial transcripts; the hitherto unexplored legacy of manuscripts and later reports by the examining magistrate, József Bary, and the defense attorney, Károly Eötvös; the local and national press; and every

other document with useful information, such as pictures of the protagonists. This great bulk of material, much of which recorded events on the basis of the contemporary logic of the two opposing sides—i.e. those who accepted and those who rejected the guilt of the Jews—presents a strong demand for contextualization of the sources. Kövér softens up the rigid divide by constantly contrasting reports and witness statements. The story of the trial ventures beyond the constraints of historiography, and the author had called on the aid of ethnography, criminology, cartography, pathology, forensic medicine, psychoanalysis, social psychology and legal history.

In reconstructing the blood libel, Kövér takes frequent recourse to changes of scale in time and space. He gives a minute-by-minute, step-by-step account of the day the servant girl disappeared, 1 April, 1882, in the parallel contexts of the Saturday before Passover and Palm Sunday, and then approaches from two directions the events in the month between the disappearance and the start of the investigation. When the official procedure starts, he returns to the longer timescale, following the story of the dead body found in Csonkafüzes and the clothing in a separate strand that runs right up to the final trial. In the meantime, we are removed in space from the world of the village towards county and national publicity, and the detective story, through the narrative of corpse smuggling and corpse flotation, takes us right up the eastern border of the country. We never actually find out what happened to Eszter Solymosi, but we gain an insight into the workings of public opinion in the village and beyond, the opinion-forming role of local personages and occasional women's coalitions, and the complex system of neighborhood and kin networks. The confessions extracted from the accused show how a suspicion incubated in village opinion set off institutional mechanisms and made the activities of the investigating and prosecuting authorities increasingly biased and absurd. We see an informal network which operated in parallel with the official procedure, passing news of the case from local personages to the national public. The mutually contradictory and withdrawn confessions reveal a "determination to lie" rather than pursuit of the truth. We also see the failure of conspiracy theory-based constructions of the trial on both the prosecution and defense sides.

Although the analysis points out that the dangers inherent in using sources for purposes removed from their original functions present historians with a serious methodological problem, the information gained from the confessions yields interesting anthropological descriptions on the local inhabitants' day-to-day lives and feast-day activities. In the reconstruction of Eszter's journey, we

have a glimpse into Passover preparations and pre-Easter spring cleaning, and even the details of local wine pricing. We learn about how the rhythm of work regulated peasant people's sense of time. The well-organized world of the river raftsmen is revealed to us, and we find out about the differences among various types and generations of Jews in north-eastern Hungary.

The author has passionately researched the driving forces behind the protagonists' behavior and taken into account the cultural dimensions and mentalities behind their decisions. He very subtly demonstrates the operation of centuries-old reflexes in the way the church servant József Scharf casts suspicion on his co-religionists. He puts in a new light the confession of Móric Scharf in Nagyfalu, regarding it as the result as a plea bargain to save himself and his father. He reveals the petty personal squabbles that lay behind the action of the enraged farmers' wives who took up the cudgels in accusing their Jewish neighbors and defending Christianity. In analyzing the conduct of Eszter Solymosi's mother when she did not identify her child in the corpse raised from the river Tisza, the author asks—in contrast to Eötvös, who stressed the widow's financial interests—whether she was actually driven by the desire to free the memory of her daughter from the moral burden of elopement or suicide.

We are introduced to several individual- and group-psychological aspects of the investigation and the trial situations, and at several points, the micro-history becomes a veritable psychohistory. The author draws on psychoanalysis to explain the behavior of the two Scharf boys. Using the ideas of Teréz Virág, he ascribes the words of five year-old Samu—who accuses the kosher butcher, his father and his brother—to castration anxiety. He also delves into the subconscious in search of an explanation for the greatest psychological mystery of the trial: what caused Móric to deny his identity and turn against his father. In contrast with Eötvös, who stressed the promises and threats, he explains the change in the child's personality to the isolation in the prison, the threats inherent in anti-Semitism and the desire for release from tensions within his own family.

No less interesting is the discussion of the role of the contemporary media. The analysis shows how press publicity interacted with the case itself: the newspapers attempted to shape the trial in their own image, resulting in the fateful polarization of press coverage. It also renders understandable the summary judgments of press history and the claim that the case opened a new chapter in the history of Hungarian journalism. The newspapers went beyond reporting and commenting, and became protagonists and determinants of events. A newspaper's position could affect its circulation and thus its



own future, and indeed open it up to the threat of litigation. A legal action was taken out against the Szabolcs County newspaper *Közlöny* for publishing the *Eszlári néballada* [Tiszaeszlár Folk Ballad]. Kövér identifies as the author of this gruesomely anti-Semitic verse the daughter of village magistrate Gábor Farkas, thus seriously challenging the alleged impartiality of the magistrate and his family during the investigation. The analysis subjects the enormous press material to diligent philological study, approach some details from different angles by setting newspaper reports against each other. Thus we find out about the cooperation between the Catholic priest in Tiszaeszlár and the Catholic daily newspaper *Magyar Állam* in making the disappearance public. It is also via press reports that an event mysteriously omitted from reports of the time, the “popular disturbance” of Whit Monday, is reconstructed.

A sub-chapter entitled “performers” adds new protagonists to the already long cast list. Seven small sections included in the chronology continue the personal threads of the family-history part of the social history, but now introduces the leaders of the investigation, the defenders, the public and private accusers, and the priests, journalists, doctors and stenographers. Presented with all of these career histories, the reader may be astonished at the number and diversity of professional people engaged in the case. We find out the individual and social motivations of the participants and perceive the effects of the trial on personal careers.

The history of the origin of the autopsy report on the body recovered from the Tisza is an excellent example of contextualized analysis of sources. Working from the original wording of the autopsy report found in the notes of examining magistrate Bary, Kövér finds more than contradictions arising from medical and legal logic, and concludes that “the descriptive parts were retrospectively adjusted to what was later concluded to be the required opinion” (p.486). A philological comparison of the various text variants shows which protagonists “attempted to influence and manipulate identifiability in which direction” (p.503). We find out that opinions were probably formed collectively during the local investigation, while the exhumation report did not provide the positive evidence of the identity of the corpse which would have been needed for a conviction.

The last section of the main monograph analyzes the after-effects of the trial, the complex interrelationships of blood libel and collective violence in the context of the wave of violence that followed the acquittal, the election of county officials, and the 1884 parliamentary elections. He subtly reassesses the



political historians' picture of relative calm during the 1880s, and challenges at several points the theses of "Jewish provocation" and "*ab ovo* anti-Semitism" by pointing out the absence of high-ranking organizers in the acts of violence, the presence of popular-culture folklore elements, and the effects of antagonisms lurking in the deep strata of society. He also places Hungarian events and contemporary anti-Semitic movements and blood libels in the international context, but ascribes at most an indirect effect on local occurrences to events outside Tiszaeszlár and outside Hungary.

Although the author states in the introduction—perhaps to the disappointment of some readers—that he was not trying to solve the mystery surrounding Eszter Solymosi's disappearance, the book does not leave us unsatisfied. Instead of clearing up the disappearance, he brings to light much more important connections: we see the Tiszaeszlár drama unfolding at the intersection of several lines of force, and the story subtly elaborates the scapegoat-creating mechanisms of an "average" eastern Hungarian village. The blood libel thus started life as only one of many local conflicts but was formed by national attention into the focus point of local antagonisms. The analysis is a textbook example of how to use tiny clues to built up all of the causal relationships and contexts of an individual case. It is an excellent example of a researcher's ingenuity in using the same sources to bring out different points of view. For the micro-historian, there are no trivial details. Source criticism and continuous contextualization of sources clearly delineate the limits within which a document can be used. The author's analysis occasionally turns to irony, lighting up moments of comedy in the drama, but he refrains from neat judgments, and leaves the readers to draw their own conclusions.

Seeing the complex interrelationships within the story, we should not be surprised that both contemporaries and subsequent narratives reached for long-established myths as handles on the events. Building on an analysis of local society, Kövér has attempted to identify the mythological elements in the smallest of details, and indirectly challenges the liberal canon which "solves" the Jewish question and dismisses anti-Semitism. Having been touched by the deep strata of the drama, we are left with no illusions that the deeply-rooted prejudices and fixed cultural codes ceased with the acquittal of those accused. It is also doubtful whether the blood libel succeeded in repairing the village's "disintegrated group cohesion". A knowledge of the structural tensions rather implies that the metaphor of the atmosphere of the local community as a "seething, bubbling swamp" did not lose any of its validity. The book has the particular merit of

leaving a story which attracted so much national and international attention in its own medium, the “mud of Tiszaeszlár”, and thereby weakening the established contemporary and retrospective myths and the identities that feed on them.

*Translated by Alan Campbell.*

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