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Ivan T. Berend. *History in My Life: A Memoir of Three Eras.* Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009. 280 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-963-9776-48-7.

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A Hungarian Cosmopolite's Tale: the Autobiography of Ivan Berend

"Describes the hard choices of intellectuals in a totalitarian state" is the laconic advertisement in Webster's Italian homepage for the book *History in My Life* by historian Ivan T. Berend.[1] The advertisement is an apt summary of the gist of the book. However, the book in question does not tell the story of intellectuals or of a totalitarian state. It is the story of a *Jewish* intellectual in *Hungary.* Moreover, the real issue is the combination. Jewish Hungarians are a special case in twentieth-century intellectual history.

Berend's memoir should be read with the full story in mind. This story has recently been retold by the Hungarian American historian István Deák in a review article, which has been published on both sides of he Atlantic Ocean. The article, which bears the eloquent title "Heroes from Hungary," presents the main story line of Tibor Frank's *Double Exile: Migrations of Jewish-Hungarian Professionals through Germany to the United States, 1919-1945* (2009) and Kati Marton's *Enemies of the People: My Family's Journey to America* (2009). Not only Frank's but also Marton's story is about Hungarian Jews. Or rather, as Deák points out, problems of labeling is an integrated part of the whole story. "The question thus arises whether the books being reviewed here are about famous Hungarians or about talented Jews who considered themselves Hungarians–sometimes over the violent objection of their non-Jewish compatriots."[2]

Writing in English for an international community of academic peers, many of whom are supposed to have scant knowledge of what it meant to try to be an intellectually honest scholar in a communist state and make an academic career there, places the author in a defensive and at times apologetic position. He presumes that many readers have a rather simplified view of academic life in János Kádár's Hungary, stemming from preconceived notions that communist societies were uniformly "totalitarian." The present reviewer has followed Berend's career since first meeting him during the World Congress of history in San Francisco in 1975 and is familiar with some of Berend's scholarly work and with the Hungarian society in which Berend worked. Therefore, I will argue that Berend is correct in the description of the system and his own role in it when he writes: "It was possible to work for reform and even criticize the system, with the exception of certain taboos.... Of course this meant that reformers had to make severe compromises. I made mine too" (p. 192). People like Berend helped erode the communist order.

Berend was born in Budapest in December 1930 into an intellectual lower-middle-class family and, together with his wife Kati, left Budapest for Los Angeles in September 1990. His fate illuminates the role of secularized Jews in Hungarian intellectual life and politics during the twentieth century. Waiting for the flight to the United States at Ferihegy Airport in Budapest, Berend happened to pick up a newspaper with an antisemitic article by the writer Sándor Csóri. The tenor of the article was that Jews did not belong in Hungarian society. Berend describes his reaction: "The old racist stuff–recycled. Outraged, I put down the paper, shut my eyes and thought about closing a huge chapter of my life and opening a new one. From that very evening I was joining the large contingents of 'Hungarians abroad"' (pp. 237-238).

Deák has highlighted that Berend belongs to a category which fits extremely well into Zygmunt Bauman's well-known concept of "ambivalence." This state was characteristic for emancipated and secularized Jewish people in twentieth-century Central Europe. Deák observes, pointedly: "Indeed, the ethnic and national identity of Theodore von Kármán, Karl Polanyi, Karl Mannheim, Lod Kaldor of Newnham, Eugene Ormandy, Sir Georg Solti, Joseph Szigeti, Antal Dorati, George Szell, Frits Reiner, Ferenc Molnár, Joe Pasternak, Sir Alexander

Korda, Michael Curtiz, Brassaï, André Kertész, Marcel Breuer and hundreds of other illustrious expatriates presented a dilemma to anti-Semitic and rightist Hungarians before and during World War II and, to a lesser extent, to Hungarian Communists after the war."[3] One must note the ambiguity of the rendering of the names. They are not typically "Jewish," "Hungarian," or "English" but some of them are typically Hungarian-Jewish-English. At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, traditional Jewish family names in German were Magyarized as an expression of Jewish integration or even assimilation in Hungarian society, and in the course of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, these names became Anglicized. It is a fair guess that any Hungarian will immediately recognize the Jew behind the name, but for other people the famous persons are often perceived as being Hungarian, English, or American. It is sad that this does matter.

The three eras in the title of Berend's autobiography refer to interwar and wartime Hungary, communist Hungary, and post-1989 United States. They represent the three main political and social systems experienced in the Western world after World War I: fascism/Nazism, communism, and democracy. The author records both his professional and his private life in minute detail. The first era–childhood and early adolescence–naturally is about private life. However, it is of more than private significance because of Berend's experience as a Holocaust survivor.

It is not for nothing that the author refers to Jorge Semprun's famous autobiographical novel *The Long Voyage* (1964) (Semprun was deported to Buchenwald) and is keen to mention that he met Semprun and thanked him for inspiring him to write about his own journey. Mentioning famous people whom he has met is the baseline of Berend's memoir. He is self-ironic concerning this. It turns out that an important inspiration behind Berend's urge to mention all the famous people he has met, such as Pope John Paul II (the book includes a photograph of Berend with the pope), Immanuel Wallerstein, and George Soros, among them, has been to counterbalance the harsh verdict on Berend as a stooge of the Kádár regime by the chronicler of the velvet revolutions in Central Europe, Timothy Garton Ash. That Ash made the usual caveat that "'the fortunate Westerner is in no position to sit in judgment,"' obviously could not heal the wound in Berend's soul (p. 204).

Berend's story is colored by the fact that he made not only a Hungarian academic career but also an international one, both before and after 1989. He describes how he had a central position in establishing the discipline of economic history and research on East Central European economic history under the conditions of Marxist hegemony in Hungary. He goes on to tell how he gained recognition from scholars in the West, not the least in the United States. This fact became of crucial importance when Berend was out-maneuvered from his position as director of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences after the system change in 1989 and was pushed to the sidelines. Then the American connection became a valuable asset. When Berend describes the scene at the Ferihegy Airport in 1990, he records the *peripeteia* of his life.

It was not Berend who had to change his views or manners to make a second academic career in the West after more than four decades as a scholar in a communist state. Rather, it was political and social realities that changed, not only in Central Europe but also in other parts of the world. Berend could continue his original trajectory. In a lecture in Indonesia in August 1990 on the theme "Why Has East European Communism Failed?" he explained that he welcomed the "changeover"–the Hungarian concept for the events in 1989–"because Western Europe meanwhile had undergone an important transformation itself … moving in the direction of developed Scandinavian socialism" (p. 223). This quotation, which Berend, of course, borrowed from Joseph Schumpeter, is not an apt description of the American society that the author ended up living in. However, he apparently felt that the world had changed to his liking.

In many respects, Berend's autobiography is a travelogue. As a specimen of this genre, it ends with an enumeration of rather banal experiences, banal at least in the eyes of the seasoned "Westerner." This part of the book may make a better read in Hungarian, for a public that is not familiar with middle-class life in California.

Notes

[1]. www.webster.it/book_usa-history_my_life_memoir_three-9789639776487.htm (accessed July 1, 2010).

[2]. István Deak, "Heroes from Hungary," review of *Double Exile: Migrations of Jewish-Hungarian Professionals through Germany to the United States, 1919-1945*, by Tibor Frank, and *Enemies of the People: My Family's Journey to America*, by Kati Marton, *The Hungarian Quarterly* 51, no. 197 (Spring 2010): 121-128, quotation on 122. See also István Deak, "Heroes from Hungary," review of *Double Exile: Migrations of Jewish-Hungarian Professionals through Germany to the United States, 1919-1945*, by Tibor Frank, and *Enemies of the People: My Family's Journey to America*, by Kati Marton, *The New York Review of Books* 56, no. 18 (November 19, 2009): 24-26.

[3]. Deák, "Heroes from Hungary," *Hungarian Quarterly*, 122.

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