

THE TREMOR OF CAIN: RETURN OF THE DEPORTED TO HUNGARY

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Imre Kertész was among the 82,000 Hungarian Jews who returned in 1945. The transition from camp to home, the adjustment from adolescent trauma to adult life is only hinted at in his works. This paper situates Kertész in the identity crisis of the immediate postwar period. The confusion of displaced identities in the aftermath of WWII, prompted psychologist Erik Erikson to universalize the adolescent identity crisis as a central contemporary problem. In Hungary not only Jews but the entire society was re forging identities. Borders were porous, so were political and religious affiliations. Kertész's identity was defined, at least in a negative way, by the Holocaust: as a Jew without being a Jew, as a survivor when it was best to keep quiet. He lived in the constant of the world of Buchenwald and of Stalinist Hungary, with their constricted options and ideological imperatives fashioned upon twisted idealisms. His recreation of the Holocaust in *Fateless* and of the existentialist experience of living with memory in *Kaddish*, has made for disquieting reading abroad, as well. In ignoring heroic clichés he has transgressed the identity of victim and victimizer.

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In Kertész's retelling of the Cain and Abel story, Cain, a peasant farmer, was jealous of his brother Abel, the shepherd. Cain loved Abel, and if Abel had been his sister, he would have raped her. Since he was his brother, he killed him. Denied the fruit of the land, and superstitious, he layed low at first. Cain recouped, built a life in the city with a family. When he happened to think about his brother, his hand trembled in memory of the good times past. When he thought of the Lord, he covered his mouth and snickered – he had one-upped God.¹ Cain suffered the spasmodic, troubling remembrance, but he also had the satisfaction of having gotten away with the crime. Elsewhere Kertész indicts God, or we might say Western Civilization, for inciting Cain's murderous jealousy by preferring Abel's offering

and then ignoring the murder and protecting the murderer – “just like a dictator,” Kertész declares.²

Americans find reading Kertész disquieting. Students anticipate another didactic unit on the Holocaust and expect nothing new. Florida students read Elie Wiesel’s *Night* in the ninth grade, and there are summer workshops for teachers, elementary through high school, on teaching the Holocaust. The University of Central Florida will soon be hosting similar workshops for Hungarian high school teachers.

My students were initially repelled by the lack of emotional attachment, insight, or engagement on the part of Köves, the protagonist in *Fateless*. Kertész transgresses the identity of victim and victimizer even to the point of having his character identify with Mengele. Through Kertész students contemplate the Holocaust as an existential experience, usually for the first time. Stripped of the moral pedagogy, the Holocaust moves from the incomprehensible evil to the tactile and real. Reading *Fateless* has had a collateral effect of enhancing students’ sophistication toward the historian’s craft. They come to understand that history is experienced without hindsight. But recently a student from last year stopped me to ask if I had met Kertész, because she wanted to know if his concentration campmate, Bandi Citrom, had survived. American students grasp for that happy ending – a happy ending that Köves’s return to a distant mother, a remarried stepmother, or an indifferent city did not provide.

It is with some relief that students read of Kertész’s insistence on retaining the Holocaust as his memory, his youth, and his experience. In rejecting the advice of the elderly neighbors, Köves has grown up, become wiser at the end. At last he stands up to shortsighted adults and stands as a person able to think on his own for himself, perceiving the world in terms of his own experience. The dominant narrative of the Holocaust concludes with the departure of the Jewish remnant from Central Europe. Leaving Europe, leaving the Holocaust, and the politics that bred it behind them. Kertész at fifteen was too young to leave. This was a period of flux, but the array of options for a fifteen-year-old returnee perhaps existed more in theory than in practice.

Kertész lived in the constant of the worlds of Buchenwald and Stalinist Hungary with their strictly constricted options and ideological imperatives fashioned upon twisted idealisms. Recreating the Holocaust during the Kádár period, was not a simple act of remembering. The writing required reconstruction; revisiting the sites; testing and restoring memory. Kertész’s identity had already been formed by then, at least in a negative way: he was a Jew without being a Jew; a survivor where the meaning of Auschwitz had been stripped of its political import; a Hungarian novelist who translated German philosophy. Kertész confronted and held onto the past, but it was not a particularly usable past in that atmosphere of preferred silence or private whispers. Kertész’s novels are autobiographical; they

chronicle his own perceptions and transformations, yet “I as a fiction.” The division between public and private identity was particularly acute for Hungarian Jews, who collectively redefined and constructed new identities between 1945 and 1956. About 100,000 Hungarian Jewish survivors left Europe and in the process embraced different identities as Israelis or Jewish Americans. But for the approximately 80,000 Hungarian Jews who remained in Hungary, the transition years were critical but have remained largely unexplored.

After the Holocaust the former expectations of Hungarian Jews were dashed, self-understandings were damaged. Hungarian Jews had been stripped of their Hungarian identity and then were obliged to reclaim or repudiate it. Kertész locates his identity not in being a Jew, but in being tortured as a Jew. In *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*, an identity book, Kertész subsumes and intertwines his identity as a writer, as a Hungarian writer, the marginality of the Holocaust writer, with the burden of Jewishness, and the love of a Jewess. The image of the bald Jewish aunt is a traumatic negative identification. The alluring attractive woman coming across the green carpet is also just as immediately identifiable as a Jewess.

The transition from camp to home, the adjustment from adolescent trauma to adult life has not been a subject of either Imre Kertész’s fiction or prose works. Yet, the identity crisis of that moment – his consignment to a Jewish fate, his identity as a Magyar writer, and his embrace of existentialist theory and German literary culture speak to an adolescent training and scars. Hungarian Jewry was the largest surviving and remaining Jewish Community in Central Europe after World War II. Unlike Poland, Hungary never became *Judenfrei*, or nearly so. Anti-Semitism and Jewish reintegration faced their contenders rather than their ghosts. “I am a ghost”, Kertész once declared.³

In 1945 Budapest was a city of rubble. The walls of the ghettos fell with the bitter battle of Budapest in January and February 1945, and publicity about the concentration camps in March and April 1945 marked a second beginning to the liberation story in Hungary. The timing for the Germans as for the Hungarians could not have been worse. At the very moment when dependence on foreign succor was greatest, the full extent of the crimes became evident. Individually and collectively the Hungarian Christian majority felt like martyrs of defeat, rape, and pillage; yet as defeated German allies, they stood accused and felt threatened by the claims of the victims.

The Hungarian camp survivors began arriving back in Hungary in the fall of 1945. The deportees and the Budapesters, including Jews, had experienced two very different traumas. Citizens of Budapest look

... shudderingly at the bald, dirty, unkempt returnees. Returnees don’t speak much. They lie on the straw bedding of transient homes and in ... emergency hospitals, and except for the daily reading of the

list of the returnees and looking for their lost relatives and fighting for a little food, nothing interests them. They are totally paralyzed.⁴

Most returnees presented a depressed and lethargic persona, but the returnees would emerge from the “chrysalis of ugliness.”⁵ Kertész was among the 82,144 Hungarian Jews who returned in 1945. The surviving Hungarian Jewish population was demographically distorted. In Budapest the working aged men were taken to forced labor, so the surviving families often lacked providers. In the countryside the women, children, and elderly were most likely to die in the concentration camps leaving a disproportionate number of single men. The proportion of children, ages 0–15, in the Jewish population had dropped to one-third of prewar levels. Sixty percent of the returnees were women; 35 percent men, and five percent were children.⁶ The need for a companion was overwhelming. The average family size was only 1.7 persons. Returning Jews were lonely, and survivors were generally young, single, and eager to seek partners.

Many Hungarians, anxious about loved ones still imprisoned in the Soviet Union looked at the returning deportees with hostility. György Parragi, a Hungarian Smallholder Party columnist evoked the old hatred: “That damned race never suffered. They came home fatter than they left... Now there are more Jews in the country than before they were taken away for a holiday.”⁷ The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC) distributed approximately 1,360,000 meals; over forty percent of Hungarian Jews used their public kitchens, clothing and medical aid.⁸ In December 1945 the U.S. Legation warned that in Budapest daily rations were falling to an average of only 858 calories per person. An unstable currency and massive inflation exacerbated food scarcity in the city. A letter to the U.S. Legation from a teenager complained, “Why are all the food packages going to Jews, when we are more hungry and in greater need?”⁹

Jews were caught in a half-submerged discourse with a despondent, deprived, and resentful Hungarian nationalism. Gyula Illyés, populist poet-laureate, complained in his diaries that “about half a million Budapest gentiles, that would be every second citizen, had been instrumental in sheltering persecuted Jews, but the press and the Jewish community showed no gratitude for such rescue action, which in the minds of those sheltered was apparently a matter of simple moral duty requiring no special acknowledgment.”¹⁰ On the other hand, Dr. Ferenc Hevesi, Chief Rabbi at the Dohány Street temple, said: “We have the feeling of living among murderers, and I never know whether the man opposite me in the tram is not my father’s or my brother’s murderer.”¹¹ István Bibó, the Peasant Party theorist, sought to reframe the discussion of national responsibility by arguing that even if Hungarians had made efforts to save or protect Jews, it clearly was not adequate. The question was how to repair society after the catastrophe. He argued against the Jewish hope that Communism with its internationalist ideology would

eliminate the underlying ethnic animosities. Bibó warned of the potential vulnerability of a Jewish population with weakened confessional affiliations. The task of forging a post-Fascist identity for Hungarians would prove, as Bibó suspected, daunting.¹²

The traumatized Hungarian Jewish community that remained was also tattered, compromised, and divided. Blame was directed at Budapest from the provinces. The official Jewish leadership claimed unity, but after the “collective tragedy,” the collectivity was torn asunder. Accusations of complicity and murder were hurled at the Budapest Jewish confessional leadership. Orthodox and Hassidic provincial Jews suspected that assimilationist, urban society had knowingly abandoned them.¹³ The wounds were wide open. Ill will and blame burdened society, and a myriad of wrong choices and personal weaknesses overwhelmed individuals. A sense of betrayal adhered to the essence of the individual as a Hungarian, a Jew, and a person. Personal identities became disengaged.

The formation of post-Fascist, post-Holocaust identities, the identification of Jews as Hungarians, as Jews, or neither has to be placed within the context of an identity crisis of Hungarians as a whole in the wake of total defeat. While Hungarians may have taunted Jews for their suspect patriotism, Hungarian identity was clearly at a nadir. A crisis of identity among Magyars paralleled the displaced identity of Hungarian Jews. Both were agreed that to begin anew was essential, but how to proceed was more of an open question. The country lay in total ruin, so people said, but that was merely a flowery expression. In reality the country had not perished; to the contrary “it began to live vigorously”, the writer Sándor Márai suggested.¹⁴ Those who could imagine themselves in the new society stayed. The years between 1946 and 1948 could be prosperous years for Jewish survivors in Hungary. Currency stabilization, the issue of the new currency (the forint), the winding down of the black market, repair of the transportation infrastructure, made normal commerce possible. Pent-up demand for goods allowed businessmen with nothing to lose a chance for resumed prosperity.¹⁵ But there was a fragile underside. One Jewish vegetable and wine merchant discovered the driver of his truck had been a member of the Arrow Cross. He responded to the question of whether he had believed in Nazi ideology: “I believe in it the same way I believe what the Communists are teaching now. I believe in what I must in order to earn a living for myself and my family. I believe in what I am ordered to believe.” The merchant continued to employ his driver. “I knew his secret.” The driver, for his part, cautioned the merchant, “The Communists will put you behind bars... You’re a gentleman who is thankful to the Russians for saving your life. You have to acknowledge, though, that you do have a capitalist soul.” The driver let him know “that he had to report everything” about the merchant to the “authorities.”¹⁶

To survive at all, to reconstruct one’s identity, or to leave were all age-bound categories. The young went home; the old stayed put. Some stayed because they

found connections back in Hungary and determined that Budapest could be home again; others were too debilitated to start again anew. Identity was in flux, whether to stay or leave was an open question. As Viktor Karády has shown, emigration, Zionism, total assimilation, and Communism could all be understood as options or antidotes. Each required abandoning some essential aspect of individual past identities, such as language, religion, home environment, or occupation. Individuals sometimes attempted to embrace seemingly contradictory options simultaneously, such as, joining the Communist party and a Zionist youth group. It was easy for Jews and non-Jews to assume a new, or disguise an old, identity in Hungary. After all the whole of society had a dislocated identity. The Arrow Cross went underground; religion moved into a private sphere. The Communist Party wanted converts.

“Dissimilation from Magyarism” would have entailed a “burdensome self-denial.” Kertész was bound to his mother tongue. The compulsion to Magyarize was strong. Budapest, at the very least, provided the comfort of the familiar and a community of others having shed the same identities in similar ways.¹⁷ For many Budapest Jews being inconspicuous had become a life-saving reflex. Invisibility and suspicion were key responses to the immediate postwar chaos. In Hungary many who had survived by submerging in the wider gentile population made complete their assimilation. Large numbers of Jews withdrew their names from the Jewish rolls; name changes were ubiquitous, and in 1949 intermarriage reached 37 percent. This “laying down the burden of Judaism” was an updated version of assimilationism.¹⁸ The disproportionate number of Jews who left Hungary in 1956 suggests that the conversation within Budapest Jewry about whether to stay or emigrate continued in a subterranean fashion during the era of Stalinism in Hungary.

In the aftermath of World War II, Hungarians, Hungarian Jews, German Hungarians, and other subjects of Trianon Hungary hurried to shed inconvenient associations and scrambled to assume new identities. These new identities shared an iconic quality with pronounced normative characteristics: the Soviet Man, Zionist kibbutznik, or Americanized consumer. The Cold War interrupted the sorting out process of postwar Hungarian culture and politics, and rigidified the options for the remaining Hungarian Jewry. After the Stalinist takeover in Hungary the border was no longer porous. For those who remained in Hungary – Jew and non-Jew – this meant being stuck with the last of the many identities they had assumed, that of Communist subject.

The search for a post-Fascist Hungarian identity settled into a seemingly slavish imitation of Moscow and among Budapest Jewry a flight from bourgeois norms. The years of transience, flux, and identity shifts were overshadowed, because these three years of extraordinary movement of peoples were followed by forty-three years of immobility, with a brief hiatus in the fall of 1956. Yet, identity was less resolved than stylized, frozen in place. The Communist spiritual prison,

Kertész noted, demanded a certain pantomime of its occupants and dispensed with the obligation to define any “authentic” national persona. In the Kádár era Jewishness was submerged in Hungary, but the intelligentsia and the public at large compensated with a presumed sixth sense about Jewish identity. The “Jewish question” lived somewhere between underground and a circle of innuendo. Some surviving deportees knew who they were, or where they had been, but managed public lives successfully in public silence about their Jewishness. Others determined to obliterate the suffering and danger of the memory of Auschwitz for their progeny, but Kertész concluded that no Jew could escape his Jewishness. As the memoirist of Auschwitz, Kertész complained of his marginal sales and rejections by the publishing mills of Goulash communism. Kertész was alienated from the intelligentsia. Yet in *Kaddish* at the party with the green carpet, Kertész trumped them all, because he had been to Auschwitz, and because he went to his room every day to write about Auschwitz. It was not a martyrdom anymore; rather, it was a consignment to limitations and the boredom of a choked conversation about the Holocaust that preoccupied him in the Kádár era.

The patchwork and fluidity of Hungarian Jewish identity suggests that identity may be quite opportunistic. Certainly, more caution is needed in the general trend to attach agency and motivational drive to proclamations of identity, however heartfelt. A “hard” concept of identity that suggests a core to one’s personality, nationality, or ethnicity fails the postmodern test for fluidity and multiplicity, while a “soft” concept trails off in a miasma of overlapping and contradictory identifications. Identity is a term that has overreached, claiming too many holdings.

Yet for the historian, the concept of identity is tethered to this period of the aftermath of World War II. It is precisely Kertész’s adolescent age group for which it had most immediate significance. The confusion of displaced identities in the aftermath prompted Erik Erikson in the 1940s to universalize the “identity crisis” as a central contemporary problem. Erikson’s own identity crisis revolved around the contrast between his Scandinavian features and his Jewish upbringing. His work, of course, focused on adolescents, a life-stage denied by the war and concentration camp experience that had disassembled society into adults, who could work or make war, and children or the old, who could not. The central tension of Imre Kertész’s novel *Fateless* is that its adolescent protagonist chooses to move step-by-step through the conditions demanded by his identity as defined by others. His identity had been impressed upon him and had become depersonalized.

Once Hungary’s relation to the West became fluid after 1989, the scramble for identities became active and public once again. With the collapse of Eastern European Communism, the real anomaly seems to have been the era of forced identity choices of either/or, either here or there. In Hungary there is a new Jewish

self-awareness, a discovery of Jewishness, where self-deception or parental decisions had created a chasm of information. Today finger pointing abounds.

Notes

- 1 Imre Kertész: “Világpolgár és Zarándok” (Pilgrim and citizen of the world] in *Budapesti Aggadák; Novellaantológia. Holocaust utáni próza* (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő, 1999), 289–297. From *Az angol lobogó* [The English banner] (Budapest: Holnap Kiadó, 1991).
- 2 Imre Kertész: *Galeerentagebuch* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1999), 23.
- 3 “Imre Kertész über den Holocaust” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Oct. 10, 2002, <http://www.faz.net/s/RubCC21B04EE95145B3AC877C874FB1B611/Doc~EFAE11B38D1DA4ACDA61677317326767F~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent.html>.
- 4 Ilona Benoschofsky: “The Position of Hungarian Jewry After the Liberation”, in *Hungarian-Jewish Studies*, ed. Randolph L. Braham (New York: World Federation of Hungarian Jews, 1966), 240.
- 5 Neil Belton: *The Good Listener. Helen Bamber; A Life Against Cruelty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 107.
- 6 Rita Horváth: *A Magyarországi Zsidók Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottsága (DEGOB) története* (The story of the Hungarian National Committee for the Care of Deported Jews), MAKOR (Magyar Zsidó Levéltári Füzetek) (1997/1): 25–26.
- 7 László Karsai, ed.: *Befogadók* [Shelterers] (Budapest: Aura, 1993), 179, as cited in Miklós Hernádi, “Unlearning the Holocaust: Recollections and Reactions” in *The Holocaust in Hungary Fifty Years Later*, Randolph L. Braham and Attila Pók, eds. (East European Monographs, No. 477, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 665.
- 8 NARA, RG-84.
- 9 U.S. National Archive, College Park, Maryland (NARA), U.S. Legation correspondence, RG-84, Dec. 14, 1945.
- 10 Gyula Illyés: *Naplójegyzetek 1929–1945* (Journal notations) (Budapest, 1986), 379. Cited in Miklós Hernádi: “Unlearning the Holocaust”, 669.
- 11 Országos Levéltár, Jewish Archive, Pest, XXXIII, Dec. 31, 1945.
- 12 István Bibó, “Zsidókérdés Magyarországon 1944 után” (The Jewish question in Hungary after 1944). *Válasz* [Answer] 8, October–November 1948, 778–877. Reprinted in Zoltán Szabó, ed., *Harmadik út* (Third way) (London, 1960), 227–354.
- 13 Országos Levéltár, Jewish Archive, Dr. Ernő Munkácsi’s response to accusations in Fisch circular, ML, XXXIII-8-a #14/1947-18 (1-d), Budapest, 1947, Dec. 23.
- 14 Sándor Márai: *Memoir of Hungary, 1944–1948*, transl. Albert Tezla (Budapest: Corvina and Central European University, 1996/2000), 122.
- 15 Márai: *Memoir of Hungary*, 222.
- 16 Edmund Mandel: *The Right Path; The Autobiography of a Survivor* (as told to Lynn Egerman) (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1994), 218.
- 17 Victor Karády: “Identity Strategies Under Duress Before and After the Shoah”, in *The Holocaust in Hungary, Fifty Years Later*, 170; András Kovács: “The Jewish Question in Contemporary Hungary”, in *Holocaust in Hungary, Forty Years Later*, edited by Randolph L. Braham and Béla Vágó (Social Science Monographs, No. 190, New York: distributed by Columbia University Press, 1985), 215.
- 18 Karády: “Identity Strategies,” 169.