

Introduction by the Editor

When our grandchildren were given the task in school of drawing their family tree, and thus, on their level, undertaking research into their family history, we dug out for them several photos and letters hiding at the bottom of various drawers and cupboards. While browsing among these materials, we found a real treasure.

The title of the diary, written into a school exercise book by our uncle, murdered at the age of 31 on the Eastern Front of the Second World War because of his ethnic origins, promises a private chronicle of the events of the 1930s, but offers much more. It contains the reflections of a sensitive soul transitioning from his student years towards adulthood, but never quite arriving there due to his tragic death. It contains reflections about macro-historical events, the erupting wars culminating in genocide, but also on the more subtle internal developments and the characteristic cultural and intellectual challenges of the period.

It is thus not a typical adolescent diary. Born in 1911, he already has a complex cultural and educational background which would normally offer him a splendid scholarly career. His father, János Waldapfel was a prominent pedagogue with reformist ideas, representative of the fin-de-siècle generation of upwardly-mobile Central European Jewish intellectuals who were committed to an agenda of modernization, developing strong patriotic sentiment, while also preserving their attachment to reform Judaism. László's older siblings also started scholarly careers in the 1930s, even though the increasing racial discrimination made it impossible for them to get proper academic positions before 1945. After the war, in a very different situation, becoming adherents of the communist regime which seemed to offer an internationalist solution to the problem of racial discrimination, his two brothers and sister all became prominent scholars: József in the field of literary history, Eszter in archival studies, and Imre in classical philology. The oldest brother, Gábor, however, chose a different path, becoming a high-ranking clerk in the economic "empire" of the Weiss Manfréd company, the biggest industrial conglomerate in the country at the time, which (as we will see later) most probably contributed to his arrest and untimely death following the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944.

There is little written about the father figure in the diary, but if one goes deeper into the history of the family, we will see that he played an important role in the life of his children as well as in the orientation of his youngest son.

János Waldapfel was born one year before the Austro-Hungarian compromise, and the determining decades of his youth overlapped with the promising economic and cultural modernization of Hungary. In this period, the previous barriers to the social advancement of Jewish burghers, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals were lifted (all this was symbolically linked to the introduction of civil marriage in 1894) and although anti-Semitic discourse was present (and was even reinforced in the 1880s), it could be considered a leftover from the past which would be gradually eliminated by the unstoppable march of modernization.

Nevertheless, this period was also marked by serious contradictions. In the dual Monarchy the Hungarian political elite still felt insecure both in view of the central power in Vienna and the emerging national movements of the non-Magyar population in the country. In order to meet these challenges, the Hungarian political class was trying to speed up the process of assimilation of the nationalities, suppressing their educational institutions and trying to extend the use of Hungarian in the public sphere.

János Waldapfel grew up in the multiethnic region of Upper Hungary (today Slovakia), populated by Slovaks, Hungarians, Jews, and Germans. His father was a Jewish innkeeper with Hungarian identity but no knowledge of the Hungarian language, coming from a village with mostly Slovak peasant population but also a sizable Jewish community. János' background and his early socialization in the area of Trenčín (Hun. Trencsén) made him aware of the complexities of his patria, and after his

move to Budapest (and his study trip to the University of Jena, a contemporary center of reform pedagogy) he remained emotionally attached to his native region. Along with the mainstream liberal discourse of the time, most prominently expressed by the political theorist József Eötvös, he argued in many of his writings that the minority populations could retain their mother tongue in the private sphere and also their popular culture, but at the same time with the help of adult educational societies should learn Hungarian language and culture that could also help them to enjoy the fruits of political and socio-economic modernization, thus becoming patriots of a politically unified but ethnically and culturally still pluralistic Hungary.

This was a beautiful liberal vision, but it was increasingly becoming obsolete as the *Zeitgeist* moved toward a more intransigent—Social Darwinistic—version of nationalism, projecting an implacable struggle for survival among the different nations, undermining the conception of multiethnic political nationhood. This became obvious, during the World War (if not earlier), and the concomitant collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy in 1918.

With the dramatic demise of the world of the *belle époque* he grew up in, János Waldapfel's career also suffered a setback after 1919 when the anti-Semitic new regime considered him unreliable and marginalized him even though he could hardly be expected to have any sympathy toward socialist radicalism. He continued his reformist pedagogical work until his early retirement in 1924. This is relevant here mainly from the perspective of comparing the life-worlds and ways of thinking of the

father and his children's generation. It can be described as two rather divergent stories of acculturation and assimilation. The differences are not due to intellectual factors (we can see rather a strong continuity here) but the divergence of the historical contexts. The liberal self-confidence rooted in an impressive professional career and remarkable social network of the father contrasts vividly with the social and institutional marginalization and identity crisis of the son, who could not even start his academic career. With his teacher's diploma, he could not find a permanent job and could be happy that with the help of his brother he was eventually hired as a clerk in the cannery owned by the Weiss family.

He did not dream of such a life! While studying mathematics and physics at the university, he was also interested in pedagogical, psychological, and philosophical questions and was busy attending seminars on these topics at the university and intellectual circles outside of it. From the short references in the diary, it becomes clear that his circle of friends consisted mainly of those who attended these seminars and debate circles.

While the references to daily events and these institutions and networks must have been self-evident 85 years ago, today the editor of this diary needed to do thorough research to decode them. When reflecting on these names and organizations, it becomes evident that one of the most interesting aspects of this diary is the network of connections that could form around a Hungarian student with Jewish background in the intellectual universe of the mid-1930s. It is all the more surprising that we find out that most of the knots of this network were made

from the very same thread, namely the Protestant "Awakening movement" born in Northern Europe and having strong repercussions in Hungary as well. The reader can find a more detailed description of this movement in the notes of the volume.

As for the Jewishness of László and the complex story of assimilation and dissimilation reflected in his diary, two important clarifications are due. At the very first "proper" entry (not accidentally, 24 December 1933) he reflects on his resolution to study the Bible (both the New and Old Testaments): "it is about time that I know what it means that I am a Jew,—not only in the general terms I am aware of at present." From the entry we can also find out that László was tempted by the idea of leaving behind his inherited Jewish religious tradition and joining a community seeking to face the social problems of Hungary in the spirit of the Gospels.

However, in the historical storm the idea of conversion was dropped as it became clear to him that being or not being Jewish was not the matter of a philosophical or theological choice of values. As the anti-Semitic legislation was unfolding from 1938 and the atmosphere became increasingly suffocating, László started to think of emigration but he did not feel comfortable in the Zionist milieu organizing this. In his entry from 6 October 1938, six months after the first anti-Jewish law limiting the economic and cultural presence of Jews, he reflected on a Zionist meeting discussing emigration and expressed his distance both from Hungarian and Jewish "nationalism," while stating that "the situation in

internal politics created a huge divide between the Hungarian Jews and the other Hungarians.”



When we recommend this book to the attention of a readership beyond Hungary, we hope that most of the text speaks for itself. A smaller part, due to the historical distance from the events and contexts depicted, however, needs explanation. We hoped to revive all the words (events, persons, and organizations) of this diary, covered by the debris of decades that passed between the 1930s and today. In some cases, this was easy to do, relying on readily available secondary sources and references, but in other cases we had to proceed from source to source, hint by hint, to find a solution. This was the most interesting “detective work”—but there were also some riddles (though not too many) which proved irresolvable. We hope, however, that they do not prevent the reader from understanding the essence of the “story.”

Imre Trencsényi