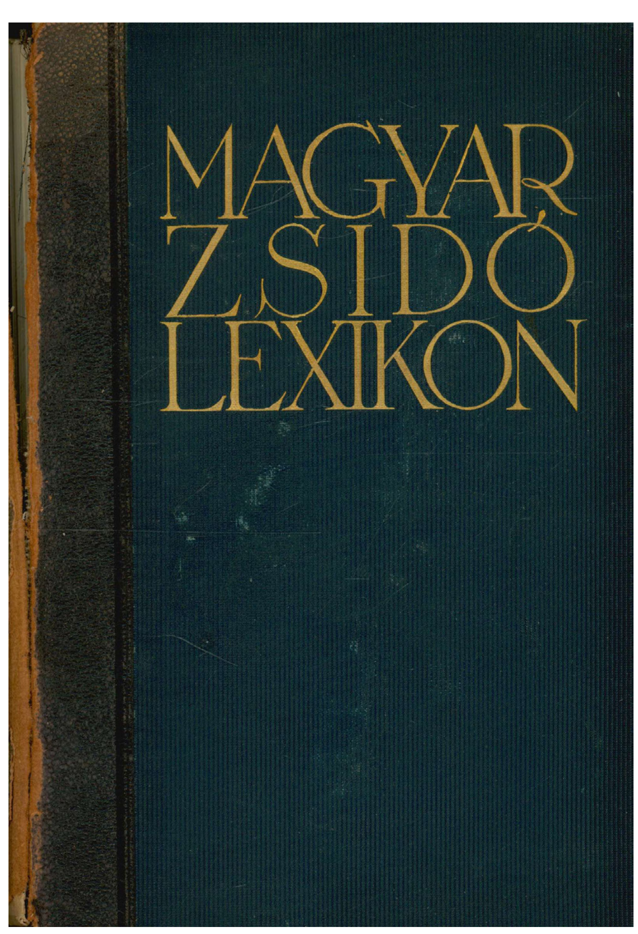
5 Key Themes

JEWISH IDENTITY • HUNGARIAN LITERATURE

1840-1945

STEPHANIE NEWMAN



Above: Magyar Zsidó Lexikon (Hungarian Jewish Encyclopedia), 1929
Cover: Lajos Hatvany (center), Date unknown

Introduction

In the mid-19th century, for the first time, Jewish people in Hungary began publishing literary works in the Hungarian language. As the population of Jewish Hungarians grew—in 1900, over 23% of Budapest was Jewish—so too did their contributions to the national literary culture. Sadly, only a small number of these books have been translated into English.

My aim with this booklet, and its accompanying map and timeline, is to provide a useful overview of Hungarian Jewish literature to English speakers interested in Hungary's literary culture, Jewish history, or both In the following pages, I outline 5 key themes that surface again and again in literature about Hungarian Jewish life from 1840-1945. Among the four works I reference—Ferenc Molnár's *Az éhes város* ("The Hungry City," 1908); Tamás Kóbor's *Ki a gettóból* ("Out of the Ghetto," 1912); Lajos Hatvany's *Urak és emberek* ("Lords and Men," 1927); and Károly Pap's *Azarel* (1937)—only one, *Azarel*, is available in English.

While not a complete rendering of this history (for that, please see the 'Further Reading' list), I hope that you will find this literary road map worthwhile.

Stephanie Newman
June 2024

Sándor Bródy, early 1910s

1 Struggles of assimilation

As the population of Hungarian Jews increased (it rose from approximately 240,000 in 1840 to over 911,000 in 1910), so too did the drive to assimilate. Though the pressure to *Magyarize* (become assimilated into Hungarian culture) existed as an external social and political force, it often manifested most keenly as an internal drive: the desire to integrate into Hungarian society and find acceptance and safety within it.

Hungarian Jewish literature encapsulates this phenomenon, often tinged with the fear that the comfort of assimilation is just a mirage. In Ferenc Molnar's 1912 novel *Az éhes város* (The Hungry City), we learn that protagonist Pál Orsovai, a Jewish-born bank clerk of modest means, Christianized his name "a week before he was baptized in the parish church." Yet, in Orsovai's first moment of vulnerability, he reverts to the insecure suspicion that he is "nothing but a poor, suffering Jew."

Lajos Hatvany's 1927 novel *Urak és emberek* (Lords and Men) treats this theme more substantially. In *Urak és emberek*, young Zsiga Bondy—the son of a wealthy Jewish merchant—yearns to become as Hungarian as possible, begging his family to speak Hungarian instead of German, and fantasizing about Hungarian heroes of the plain, only for his father to chastise him by claiming that in the eyes of a Hungarian, he will always be a Jew.

"Urban Hungarian literature possessed ... a spirit of ferment activated by ambition, talent, and a deep desire for changes in an otherwise static social structure which were distinctly Jewish in origin."

-Lóránt Czigány,
The Oxford History of Hungarian Literature

2 Emergence of a Jewish bourgeoisie

As Lóránt Czigány notes in *The Oxford History of Hungarian Literature*, the Hungarian gentry considered "trade and commerce as 'ungentlemanly' occupations" and so relied on Jews to "perform the role the gentry was unwilling to undertake," namely to work in the financial sector. As a result, a class of upwardly mobile Jews emerged, many of its members becoming part of Hungarian high society alongside members of the gentry. The Bondy family in *Urak és emberek* is a prime example: Hermann Bondy, the father of the family and successful grain merchant, builds his wealth and purchases a regal home in the upscale Lipótváros neighborhood of Budapest, known as the home of the Jewish bourgeoisie.

Ferenc Molnár satirizes this phenomenon in *Az éhes város*, in which Orsovai marries the daughter of a wealthy American train baron, and, despite his incompetence and social faux pas, manages to perform the rich Budapest gentleman. In one of the climactic scenes, however, a dinner party guest at Orsovai's new villa rails at the other attendees, accusing them of greed and of turning their heads from poor, honest, working Jews, who bear the brunt of antisemitism in Hungary.

A HÉT

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First issue of literary magazine *A hét* (The Week), 1890

3 Urban poverty

On the other hand, many Jews living in today's 'Jewish district' in Budapest (around the VI. and VII. Districts) in the 19th century were living in abject poverty. Tamás Kóbor's *Ki a gettóból* (Out of the Ghetto) chronicles these hardships. Semi-autobiographical, the novel takes the form of a father named Misi who "made it out of the ghetto" and wishes to recall his childhood for his young daughter. (The ghetto to which Kóbor refers was not a walled ghetto—though the neighborhood did turn into one over the final months of World War II—but rather a metaphorical ghetto, in which the inhabitants were largely poor Jewish shopkeepers and traders.)

The life described is one of hunger and need. Misi's father's tinsmith business flounders during the recession of the 1870s, and the family "devolves into anarchy" centered on their starvation. The father leaves to try to find work outside Budapest, the boys stop going to school, where their hunger prevents them from paying attention; tears abound, and wintertime eviction looms. The family lives on Két Szerecsen utca (today, Paulay Ede utca), a name that the Jewish bourgeoisie of Lipótváros would immediately recognize as a sign of destitution. When wealthy Zsiga Bondy of *Urak és emberek* encounters a beggar, an elderly woman with "a hundred wrinkles," she tells him that she is Sáli Popper, and, with "greedy hope" for sympathy, says that she lives at 42 Szerecsen utca.

Challenges

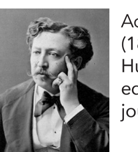
"Hungarian Jewish literature? Don't even try to define it."

I received this well-intentioned advice frequently when beginning my research. The concept of 'Hungarian Jewish literature' is a tricky one. Must the works in question include Jewish themes? Or, rather, does the term simply refer to books written by authors with Jewish heritage? Even that suggestion is controversial here in Central Europe, where categorizing authors by religion evokes the worst historical echoes of the Holocaust. An additional complication: conversion from Judaism to Christianity was commonplace in late-19th/early-20th century Hungary, intermarriage was typical, and assimilation and secularism were on the rise.

These questions loom large. In viewing the gallery on the following page, I ask that you allow me my American perspective: one that celebrates the coexistence of multiple identities inside a country's literature. My intention is not to label these writers, but to celebrate their participation in the tightly interwoven fabric of Jewish and Hungarian literatures.

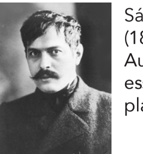
Without the following contributors, Hungarian literature would not be the same—and without a Jewish presence in Hungary, these writers, editors, and critics would not have been here to take part in its shaping.

Key Authors, Poets, Editors



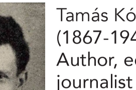
Adolf Ágai
(1836-1916)
Humorist,
editor,
journalist

József Kiss
(1843-1921)
Editor, *A hét*;
Poet, author



Sándor Bródy
(1863-1924)
Author,
essayist,
playwright

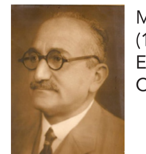
Tamás Kóbor
(1867-1942)
Author, editor,
journalist



Ignotus
(1869-1949)
Editor, *Nyugat;*
Journalist,
critic, cultural
organizer

Béla Révész
(1876-1944)
Journalist,
biographer

Ernő Osvát
(1876-1929)
Editor, *Nyugat*

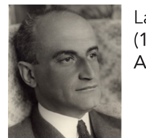


Miksa Fenyő
(1877-1972)
Editor, *Nyugat;*
Critic, essayist

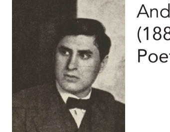
Ferenc Molnár
(1877-1938)
Author,
playwright

Renée Erdős
(1879-1956)
Poet, author

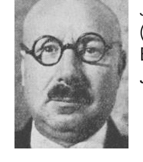
Lajos Biró
(1880-1948)
Author



Lajos Hatvany
(1880-1961)
Author, critic



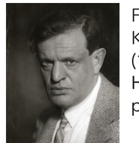
Andor Peterdi
(1881-1958)
Poet



József Patai
(1882-1953)
Editor, *Múlt és Jövő*; Poet

Béla Bálazs
(1884-1949)
Film theorist

Ernő Szép
(1884-1953)
Poet, author, playwright

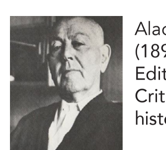


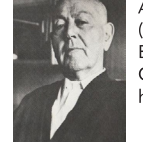
Frigyes Karinthy
(1887-1938)
Humorist, playwright

Illés Kaczér
(1887-1980)
Author, journalist

Milán Füst
(1888-1967)
Poet, author

Zseni Várnai
(1890-1981)
Poet





Aladár Komlós
(1892-1980)
Editor, *Ararát*; Critic, literary historian

Tibor Déry
(1894-1977)
Author

Anna Lesznai
(1895-1966)
Artist, poet, author

Béla Zsolt
(1895-1949)
Journalist, memoirist

Károly Pap
(1897-1945)
Author, essayist

András Komor
(1898-1944)
Author, poet, critic

Antal Szerb
(1901-1945)
Author, critic, literary historian

Miklós Radnóti
(1909-1944)
Poet

Múlt és jövő (Past and Future) literary magazine, April 1914

4 Sense of lost tradition

Among Hungarian Jews, one common objection to assimilation was that it could lead to the loss or disappearance of Jewish traditions. Tamás Kóbor's *Ki a gettóból* addresses this fear in the form of a father expressing disappointment in his son. Misi's older brother Moni comes back home after years trying to earn money abroad. Surprisingly, he has succeeded in business and assimilated into the upper-crust of European Jewish society—but in so doing, has stopped celebrating the Sabbath and keeping kosher. Moni explains to his father: "Out there in the world, where work is arranged according to Sunday, they don't ask the poor Jewish boy when he wants to celebrate… You are a wise man, Father, you will see that," to which his father bitterly replies, "Oh yes…I can see that our religion is going to waste."

This dynamic is especially palpable in Károly Pap's *Azarel*, in which each of three generations of men represents a different (and subsequently less religious) Jewish sect: the grandfather is a highly observant Orthodox Jew, who sees assimilation as akin to paganism; the father is a Neolog rabbi (Neolog being similar to conservative Judaism); and the son Gyuri finds himself entertaining agnosticism, even wishing he were Christian. Symbolically, Gyuri's grandfather passes away squeezing onto the fringe of Gyuri's prayer shawl, so that the boy, wrapped in this mantle of Jewish tradition, is unable to pull himself free.

"'The [Hungarian] Jewish soul is not like a circle that has one center, but rather like the ellipse that has two focal points,' that is, Hungarianness and Jewishness."

-Aladár Komlós (1936), as quoted by Raphael Patai, *The Jews of Hungary*

5 Humor

The humor in Hungarian Jewish literature serves as a lifeline for readers and characters alike, offering laughter as a salve for discrimination and identity turmoil. In *Az éhes város*, this humor takes the form of social critique, rendering absurd the complex maneuvers of those unsure whether to pander to anti-Semites or bend over backwards to champion Jews. When Orsovai enters the home of his portraitist, for example, the painter is busy preparing his walls by replacing his hanging portraits of Christian nobility with images of Jewish baronesses. Then, panicking that Orsovai might in fact be baptized ("one can never tell with a baptized Jew whether he is anti-Semitic or not," the painter moans), he quickly goes about flipping the Jewish portraits over, so they face the wall. The gesture is so ridiculous as to evoke laughter.

In *Azarel*, young Gyuri's alienation from his Jewish identity reaches fever pitch as, in a hilarious attempt to dispose himself of the God whose presence he can't shake, he rebels. The boy cartwheels down the muddy streets of his town, then runs rain-soaked into Christian shopkeepers' stores, posing as an orphan and begging for coins. Gyuri stops himself short, though, before letting himself shout, 'Glory be to Jesus Christ.' "I thought twice about this," he reveals. "No, I wouldn't say it after all." With characteristic self-irony, he finds himself once again Jewish.

Further Reading

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