

PART III

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Society as Family: The Loyalties and Illusions of Laura Polanyi

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Judith Szapor. *The Hungarian Pocahontas: The Life and Times of Laura Polanyi Stricker, 1882-1959* (Boulder, Colorado: East European Monographs, 2005). viii + 218 pages. \$40.00.

On 11 August 1957, Michael Polanyi sent a collection of family documents to his older sister Laura, known affectionately as “Mausi.” He addressed them to “the custodian of the family's traditions.” (p. 190, note 148) Those traditions of achievement, he could assure himself, were worth preserving. He himself had had a distinguished career as a scientist and was beginning to make his mark as a philosopher as well. His older brother Karl was a social and economic historian whose book, *The Great Transformation* (1944), was recognized as a classic on publication. Several of their cousins, including the Marxist theorist Ervin Szabó, had made important contributions to the cultural life of *fin de siècle* Hungary. And as we now know, further distinction of the intellect and imagination lay in the future.

Judith Szapor, herself Hungarian born, became interested in the Polanyis after being introduced to the “Great Generation” (born between 1875 and 1905) by György Litván, who has done so much to make that generation's story known. Litván's guidance, along with her commitment to feminism, prompted her to write her dissertation on Laura Polanyi, but she soon discovered that that remarkable woman's life was deeply embedded in her family's history. As a result, she devotes a great deal of attention here to Laura's mother, Cecile Wohl, and daughter, Eva Zeisel.

Laura Pollacsek, her maiden name until 1912 (we have Szapor to thank for authenticating the date), was born in Vienna in 1882. Her father, Mihály Pollacsek, was, until misfortune arrived, a successful railway engineer of Jewish origin. He met Cecile Wohl, the daughter of a Vilna rabbi and historian, in the imperial capital and married her in 1881. Seeking even greater opportunity, Pollacsek moved his family to Budapest in the 1890s, by which

time his wife had presented him with two sons, Adolf (b. 1883), who later pursued a career in business, and Karl (b. 1886).

During her years in Vienna, Cecile had met Anna Klatschko, whose husband Samuel moved in a circle of émigré Russian revolutionaries. Excited by their utopian dreams and clandestine activities, she was not happy about having to move to Hungary and never, despite linguistic gifts, attempted to master the Hungarian language. Bored, she began to open her home to young intellectuals eager to explore new ideas emanating from Western Europe. To members of the Great Generation such as Oszkár Jászi, György Lukács, Béla Balázs, and Anna Lesznai, she soon became “Mama Cecile.”

There seems to be little doubt that Cecile hoped that her daughters, Laura and Zsófia, would pursue careers other than that of wife and mother. But as Szapor reminds us, educational and career opportunities for women in turn-of-the-century Hungary were not those of twenty-first century Canada, where she herself now lives and teaches. Nevertheless, Hungary's liberal government did make it possible for Mausi — if we may call her that — to enroll as a private student at the Lutheran Boy's Gymnasium before moving, in October 1896, to the National Women's Educational Association Gymnasium. In 1900, she matriculated in the University of Budapest's Faculty of Arts, where she studied Hungarian history under Henrik Marczali, a distinguished historian of Jewish origin.

In 1904, before she had completed her doctoral work, Mausi surprised her family by marrying Sándor Stricker, a successful businessman, and making a conscious decision to place husband and — eventually — children ahead of career. No doubt her mother regretted that decision. Szapor certainly does; or perhaps it would be fairer to say that she regrets that Mausi could not have “had it all”: husband, children, *and* career. This regret leads her to take a short detour from her narrative path through the thickets of feminist theory.

Szapor also regrets the fact that Mausi was more of a radical — closer to the social democrats and the “bourgeois radicals” around Jászi — than a feminist. “A woman,” Mausi once wrote, “is always in closer association with a man belonging to her economic class than with any other woman.”¹ And what is, to Szapor at least, just as depressing, she “remained silent on the less than stellar pre-war record of the Social Democrats and Radicals on the issue of women's vote.” (p. 65)

But however short she fell of the feminist ideal, Mausi did manage to complete her doctorate, help her cousin Szabó edit the *Bibliographia Economica Universalis*, and deliver lectures in which she issued calls for educational opportunities equal to those available to men. She made no attempt, of course, to seek a university appointment; family obligations alone militated against it. In order, however, to see to it that her own children were introduced to the progressive outlook on life and society, she founded an experimental kindergarten.

From 1911 to 1913, Mausi and others of like mind instructed a small group of children, including two of her own and the six-year-old Arthur Koestler, in reading, writing, arithmetic, and eurhythmics, all within the context of a "secular moral education." That, indeed, was the title she gave to a piece she published in *Szabadgondolat*, the journal of the Galileo Circle, a radical student group for which her brother Karl served as first president. In it she called for the rejection of a morality based upon religion and the adoption of a secular morality based, in some way not clearly stated, upon natural science and conducive to human "cooperation." "Happy the school boy or girl," she wrote, "for whom this word is as familiar as the names of the Sacraments are to us."²

Mausi had to close her school when her husband moved the family to Vienna for business reasons. In the last year of the Great War, however, the Strickers returned to Budapest, where she organized the women in Jászi's Radical Party. After the fall of the 1919 Soviet Republic and the formation of a counter-revolutionary government, the Strickers, who risked being targeted by roving bands of anti-Semites, elected to remain in Hungary — while the Polanyi brothers, Karl, Adolf, and Michael (b. 1891), chose to leave. They were soon followed by the Stricker children — Michael, Eva, and Otto (George).

Because of what one might call Mausi's internal exile during the interwar years, Szapor turns her attention next to Eva's misadventures in Soviet Russia. A gifted ceramist who had been perfecting her art in Germany, Mausi's daughter visited the Soviet Union in 1932, where, as she and other political pilgrims believed, a great social "experiment" was under way. She went first to Kharkov in Ukraine to join her fiancé, the physicist Alex Weissberg, who was helping to "build socialism." At Mausi's insistence, she married Weissberg, and began work in the Soviet china industry. Recognizing her abilities, the Soviets entrusted her with important positions in Leningrad and Moscow, where, in May 1936, she was caught up in the Terror.

In the middle of the night, Mausi, who was staying with her, woke her and whispered that the secret police were in the living room. They took her into custody and charged her with plotting to assassinate Stalin. Szapor has read her unpublished account of her sixteen-month ordeal and finds it disconcertingly inconsistent, though some of the details she provides match those she once confided to Koestler, who, over her objections, borrowed them for *Darkness at Noon*. Nor is Szapor impressed by Eva's attempts to explain why the Soviets eventually released her; that remains a mystery.

Many pages later, and in a different chapter, Szapor picks up the threads of the Soviet story, and we learn that Mausi, her daughter's false arrest and brush with death notwithstanding, hoped to write a book extolling the virtues of Stalinism. Unlike her brother Michael, who, after meetings with Soviet scientists in Moscow, saw through communist propaganda, she "took

Stalin's official line at face value." (p. 139) In a letter of 1943, she wrote this to a friend:

It seems clear to me now that the policy to make a *happy family* [emphasis mine] of the Soviet people — nationalities, classes (workers, peasants, intelligentsia), generations, plants and kol-khozes, believers and unbelievers — was not only set but was deemed of such first class importance that not even the consequences of the unforeseen murder of Kirov (in December 1934) could prevent that 1935 was a year devoted to teach the people the pursuit of happiness. (p. 139)

Mausi dreamed of a society that was a family writ large: she projected her own selfless attitude toward her family upon people living under Soviet rule. As a result, the fact that her daughter fell into the clutches of the Soviet political police did not dash her hopes for Stalinist society: like her brother Karl, she was one of those for whom socialism had become a religion. Whether or not she subsequently changed her mind about the Soviet Union, we do not know. It is unlikely, however, that she would have abandoned the social and political beliefs that had given her a sense of public — as opposed to private — purpose.

That Mausi never wrote her planned study of Soviet family policies was due not to any disillusionment but to the fact that, as Szapor shows in a moving chapter on "the odyssey of the Polanyis," she had all she could do to help family and friends escape Nazi occupied Europe; she herself was briefly detained in Vienna, but, on the eve of the war, made it to New York, where she lived out her life. It must have broken her heart that neither she nor anyone else was able to save her sister Zsófia, her brother-in-law Egon Szécsi, and their child.

Sometime in the early 1950s, an aging Mausi seized upon an unexpected opportunity. Bradford Smith was writing a biography of Captain John Smith, during the preparation of which he had come across an article by Lewis Kropf, a historian of Hungarian origin, according to which John Smith's account of travels in Hungary and Transylvania was fanciful. Because the Captain's veracity was of such importance to the early history of Virginia, Bradford Smith decided to seek a second opinion; Karl Polanyi recommended his sister for the task of historical investigation.

She accepted the challenge eagerly and her subsequent research endures as a model of thoroughness and scholarly inspiration; she demonstrated conclusively that Smith's account was, in fact, remarkably accurate. As Szapor observes, however, Smith's rehabilitation "became a veritable obsession of Laura's last years." (p. 146) One reason for that obsession, I once suggested, was her admiration for an authentic "hero of the commoners and the commoner hero."³ Szapor thinks my explanation inadequate, and she

is probably right. Mausi, she says, "identified with him because of the tremendous odds he had to face, both in his life and after his death." (p. 149) Mausi too had had to triumph over many odds and Szapor has done a fine job of recounting them. After reading her book, one is left with a feeling of regret concerning her political illusions but of admiration for her devotion to family.

NOTES

¹ Cited in "Néhány szó a nőről és nőnevelésről," in *Írástudó nemzedékek: A Polányi család története dokumentumokban*, ed. Erzsébet Vezér (Budapest: MTA Filozófiai Intézet Lukács Archivum, 1986), p. 51.

² Laura Polanyi Stricker, "Világi erkölcsstanítás" in Vezér, ed., *Írástudó nemzedékek*, p. 62.

³ Laura Polanyi Stricker, quoted in Lee Congdon, "The Hungarian Pocahontas: Laura Polanyi Striker," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 86, 3 (1978): 276.