

## Book Reviews:

# Beginning Again and Again: Hungarians in Exile

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Tibor Frank. *Double Exile: Migrations of Jewish-Hungarian Professionals through Germany to the United States, 1919-1945*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2009. Exile Studies, volume 7. 501 pages. Paperback. \$85.95.

Kati Marton. *The Great Escape: Nine Jews Who Fled Hitler and Changed the World*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006. 271 pages. \$27.00.

**Exile is one** of the master themes of the cultural/intellectual history of modern Europe, not least that of Hungary. There is no greater evidence of this than the experience of the “Great Generation,” many of the members of which (b. 1875-1914) made international reputations after emigrating from Hungary; it is important to note at the outset that the majority of them were of Jewish origin. No one knows this better than Tibor Frank, Professor of History and Director of the School of English and American Studies at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. In this thoughtful and meticulously researched study, Frank presents Jewish-Hungarian emigrants “by way of *prosopography*, a vision of a group rather than just a series of personal biographies.” (p. 13)

One of the most important facts about members of the group, as Frank points out, is that they were more Hungarian than Jewish. Perhaps it is because she chose the foreboding *Great Escape* as her title that Kati Marton, herself born in Hungary to assimilated Jews, refers to her Hungarian-born subjects as “Jews.” Marton, who comes by journalism honestly — her parents Endre and Ilona worked for the AP and UPI respectively — writes engagingly about illustrious figures, virtually all of whom, by her own account, identified themselves as Hungarian. “We called ourselves ‘Magyars,’” the Nobel-Prize winning physicist Eugene Wigner remembered, “and this word had magical

properties.” (p. 35) The legendary photographer André Kertész, Marton writes, “regarded himself simply as Hungarian.” (p. 50) He once told a young friend “if you want to understand me, you must read the poetry of [Endre] Ady,” (p. 216) that most Magyar of Magyars. All nine of her subjects looked back on their pre-World-War-I lives in Budapest with nostalgia. “All that is treasured in my life,” Kertész once declared, “had its source in Hungary.” (p. 51)

There was, Frank observes, a “social and intellectual chemistry” (p. 14) in *fin de siècle* Budapest that brought the best out of a generation, even if it cannot account for the appearance of genius. After making a serious attempt to explain the large number of superior minds born in the same place at about the same time, Frank wisely concludes that Michael Polanyi, the distinguished scientist-philosopher of Jewish-Hungarian origin, was right when he observed that “the work of genius offers us a massive demonstration of a creativity which can never be explained in other terms.” (cited on p. 433) Still, he is right to call attention to the energies of what, at the turn of the century, was the fastest growing metropolis in Europe.

Everywhere the people of Budapest looked, they could see new thoroughfares, new bridges spanning the Danube, and new edifices such as the splendid Opera House and imposing Parliament. They could take pride in the continent’s first subway and share in the excitement generated by the modern culture taking shape in the city’s democratizing coffeehouses and bustling editorial offices. Marton puts it this way: “The city of their youth, pulsing with energy and in love with the new, and however briefly, secure but not smug, marked them for life.” (p. 7)

The fact that so many of the distinguished emigrants came from assimilated Jewish homes was itself of no little significance. Such homes placed a high value on culture and learning. Edward Teller’s earliest memories of his mother, for example, were “intertwined with Beethoven’s sonatas,” and he himself was an accomplished pianist.<sup>1</sup> “Leo Szilard’s elders,” Marton reports, “created a perfect environment for raising exceptional children.... Leatherbound copies of Goethe, Schiller, and Heine filled his parents’ library.” (p. 37)

Frank stresses the shaping force of German culture and the German language, spoken in almost every Jewish-Hungarian home. Perhaps most important was the German influence on Budapest’s *Gymnasia*, where the faculties were composed of teacher-scholars more than the equal of contemporary American university professors. The “Model” *Gymnasium*, founded by Mór Kármán, educated, among others, Theodore von Kármán (Mór’s son),

Teller, and Polanyi. The “Lutheran” could boast of having prepared Wigner, the philosopher-literary critic Georg Lukács, and John von Neumann, the mathematical genius, formulator of game theory, and pioneer of computer science.

Not without reason, Frank stresses the mathematical and scientific education these unapologetically elitist schools offered, but such disciplines were always placed in a broader cultural context. Brilliant students such as Wigner, von Neumann, Polanyi, and Szilard were not trained as narrow specialists; in addition to their scientific studies they read widely in the classics and humanities. “For the rest of his life,” Marton writes, “von Neumann could quote Thucydides in Greek, and Voltaire in French.” (p. 42) Michael Polanyi made the transition from physical chemist to philosopher smoothly. Frank tells us that George Pólya, author of the pedagogical classic *How to Solve It*, “liked to show his erudition by quoting Socrates, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Herbert Spencer, Thomas Arnold, J.W. von Goethe.” (p. 360n.)

Profound familiarity with German culture and, often, advanced study at German universities, made Germany the obvious destination when, after what Frank calls “the Hungarian Trauma” of 1918-1920 — the lost war, the Soviet Republic, the White Terror, the *Numerus Clausus* — many Jewish-Hungarians chose emigration. Polanyi and von Kármán had already established themselves in the Weimar Republic and helped to pave the way for others; “cohorting” and “networking” became of critical importance. Hungarians settled in more than one German city, but Berlin was the choice of most. During the 1920s, the German capital underwent an extensive Americanization that proved to be of benefit to resident Hungarians, especially those of Jewish origin. After Hitler’s *Machtergreifung*, the latter set their sights on the United States.

For a number of understandable reasons, gaining entry into America was not, at the time, without its difficulties, but many Hungarians, especially those who could offer the New World useful expertise, succeeded. Because of their names or the fact that they were arriving from Germany, not a few Hungarians were mistaken for Germans, and Frank poses an interesting question: was it “their country of origin or that of their training that determined their national connection?” (p. 321) The importance of formative years would seem to tilt the scale in favor of the former.

Both Frank and Marton write at some length of Szilard, who conceived the idea of a nuclear chain reaction and, through Einstein, alerted President Roosevelt to the possibility of an atomic bomb — though he subsequently regretted having done so. Both praise him for his efforts to warn of

a nuclear holocaust and contrast them with the enthusiastic efforts of Teller and von Neumann to advance research toward the development of still more terrifying weapons of mass destruction. There were many reasons for their differences with Szilard, but a greater fear of communism was the most important. “*Darkness at Noon*,” Teller wrote in his memoirs, “brought together and crystallized the objections to the methods of control used by Russian communism, which had been forming and accumulating in my mind for fifteen years.” (Marton, p. 140) The author of that famous novel was, as everyone knows, Arthur Koestler, another of Marton’s subjects.

That so many Hungarians played pivotal roles in America’s World-War-II effort was a result, Frank maintains, of their proclivity for problem solving, which he attributes to an art of survival developed over centuries of political domination by foreign powers. That may or may not be so, but there is no doubt that an interest in and talent for solving problems is evident in the lives of many of his and Marton’s subjects.

Kati Marton is primarily interested in telling a good story, and while there is nothing wrong with that, her book is less important than Frank’s more searching and knowledgeable study. When she strays from the lives of her subjects to Hungarian (and European) history, she is out of her element. She thinks, for example, that Hungary was “fascist” throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Frank recognizes the essential decency of István Bethlen’s government (1921-31) and writes that “it must be noted that from the late 1920s through 1938 [note that this includes the years that the national socialist Gyula Gömbös wielded power], Hungary proved a relatively peaceful haven, a quasi-tolerant island in Europe.” (p. 327) The book to be read, then, is Frank’s masterly account of a greatly gifted generation, most of the members of which had twice to begin their lives anew in foreign lands.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Edward Teller with Judith L. Shoolery, *Memoirs: A Twentieth-Century Journey in Science and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2001), p. 6.