

Book Reviews

Gluck, Mary. *The Invisible Jewish Budapest: Metropolitan Culture at the Fin de Siècle*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016. Hardcover. ISBN 9780299307707. 254 pages.

When a cultural historian as insightful and elegant as Mary Gluck writes a new book, it is difficult not to have high expectations; particularly because she is among a handful of scholars providing an English-reading audience access to the nuances and intricacies of Hungarian Jewish literature and culture. Such high expectations notwithstanding, this book does not disappoint. On the contrary, Gluck has produced a true *tour de force*, seamlessly wedding together the most engaging aspects of Hungarian Jewish history, cultural, and urban life.

From the outset Gluck whets her readers' appetites, particularly those of us with some familiarity with the complexity of Habsburg and Hungarian Jewish history. Her point of departure is to elucidate what, for more than a century, has been glossed over in a few pat statements: namely, that most Jews in Budapest were highly assimilated and devotedly Hungarian. Building on a historiography that has dwelt largely on the political and ideological dimensions of this axiomatic representation — that Hungarian Jews and, in particular, Neolog Judaism, were the great beneficiaries and defenders of Hungarian Liberalism and single-mindedly devoted to Magyar nationalism and culture — Gluck dives in headlong to ask the singularly important yet hitherto largely un-posed follow-up questions: what does this mean? how did this assimilatory devotion to *magyarság* manifest itself? and how did an ongoing sense of Jewishness survive and even thrive across several generations of assimilating Hungarian Jews?

Gluck finds the answers to these questions in the rich cultural tapestry of Budapest Jewry, the largest, most progressive, most diverse, and most Hungarian of Jewish communities. Drawing on careful and nuanced reading of literary and journalistic sources, she uncovers an "invisible Jewishness" of urban culture that, ironically, is not really that invisible. She interrogates relentlessly the Jewishness

of the contributions to high and popular culture by Jewish writers without settling merely for the easier question, “Why is this Jewish?” Yet this crucial query radiates subtly on virtually every page. She deftly avoids the pitfall of compiling a laundry list of Jewish contributions to Western Civilization; but also steers clear of condemning the lack of a self-consciously articulated Jewish pride as self-hatred.

Instead, she situates several generations of cultural creativity in the cauldron of an urban culture teeming with ambivalence and diversity. She challenges her readers to set aside pre-conceived notions by insisting from the outset that only by recognizing the absence of clearly delineated boundaries and categories is it possible to comprehend the comprehend and appreciate this cultural universe. As the author notes at the outset: “Amorphous in the extreme, it lacked stable definition. Its fragmented codes were inscribed in the city’s coffeehouses, music halls, editorial offices, and boulevards, which embodied the dynamic spirit of the age.” (p. 4) This is not always easy, given how firmly entrenched taxonomy and typology are in the writing of nineteenth and twentieth century Jewish history.

The book is well suited for readers with or without a deep understanding of the mentality and history of Budapest and its Jewish community. Those who are less familiar will find one of the best cultural history of Budapest since John Lukacs’s seminal *Budapest 1900*. Gluck leads us through the streets, squares, coffeehouses, and theaters of Terézváros and Lipótváros, Budapest’s two main Jewish neighborhoods; and vividly recreates key events in the history of the city and its Jewish community: the career of Mor Wahrman, an active ongoing Jewish engagement with Győző Istoczy and Hungarian Anti-semitism, and public debates over the Jewish Question. Those who are more familiar with the city and its history will find the book no less replete with new insights on familiar topics and personalities — from Adolf Agai’s humor magazine *Borsszem Jankó* and the phenomenon of *Judenwitz* to the popular culture emanating from Budapest’s Orpheum Theater.

Indeed, with respect to these cultural institutions, the author presents a dynamic cultural world that responds to broader political and social developments in Budapest and beyond. The heart of soul of the *Borsszem Janko’s Judenwitz* was its most popular and prevalent literary character, Itzig Spitzig. This character, the author notes, represented “the imperative to affirm rather than deny Jewish difference... based on the cultural codes and social interactions of every-

day life in society.” (p. 121). A lesser book would have merely presented this character as a reflection of popular Jewish culture. Gluck probes further, setting Itzig Spitzig in the ebb and flow of liberalism, thereby blurring Hannah Arendt sharp boundary between politics and culture. As Gluck demonstrates, the highpoint of this literary character was a means for Jews to denounce Anti-Semitic upstarts like Istoczy. The cartoon of Itzig Spitzig taming Istoczy, one of the many wonderful images that Gluck includes in this book, speaks volumes for the complexity of Jewish humor’s engagement with liberalism and its discontents. Eventually, as Liberalism began to recede, especially in the aftermath of the Tiszaeszlár Blood Libel of 1882, Itzig Spitzig disappeared from the world of Jewish humor.

Along similar lines, the discussion of the Jewish-dominated popular theatre culture centered around the Orpheum. Here the author notes not only the city of Budapest challenging Vienna as the most vibrant center of culture in Central Europe, but also the contrast between older Viennese culture and a new vibrant Budapest culture. Budapest, Gluck notes, “had a brash entrepreneurial spirit that caused contemporary observers to remark — not necessarily in a complimentary spirit — that the city resembled a American rather than Central European metropolis.” (p. 141). This perceived American-ness and Jewishness of this popular culture bred excitement among some but powerful ambivalence among others. The uncertainty toward Jews and their cultural creativity, reflected a broader ambivalence toward the city of rapidly expanding and increasingly culturally vibrant city of Budapest.

At this point, I suppose the author could have fleshed out the tantalizing comparison between Budapest and American cities like New York. After all, the Jewish role in Budapest popular culture anticipated a similar Jewish role in a generation or two later in New York City. Rather than see this as a flaw, I would suggest instead that Gluck has laid out a template for a more comprehensive study of the role of Jews and Jewish culture in the development of urban culture, and, more broadly, of the complex interchange between Jewish and urban identity.

Howard Lupovitch
Wayne State University