

Ernő Munkácsi. *How It Happened: Documenting the Tragedy of Hungarian Jewry*. Trans. Péter Balikó Lengyel. Ed. Nina Munk. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018. 396 pages. ISBN 978-0-7735-5512-9

Edited by Nina Munk, and with introductory essays by historians Ferenc Laczó and Susan Papp, Ernő Munkácsi's *How It Happened: Documenting the Tragedy of Hungarian Jewry* is an important contribution to the history of the Holocaust in Hungary. First published in Hungarian in 1947, *How It Happened* stands as an early and very important assessment of the destruction of Hungarian Jewry during World War II. Trained as a lawyer, Munkácsi served as chief secretary of the Central Jewish Council in Budapest from Spring to mid-October 1944, and was in a unique position after the war to write of his experience during the Holocaust, and to reflect on the actions (and non-actions) of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders alike. Making extensive use of documents that had survived the war, Munkácsi not only explores the broader historical forces that culminated in the genocide of Hungary's Jews, but also recounts the confused, painful, and often absurd day-to-day decisions that Jews were forced to make, both individually and collectively, as the horror of the Holocaust unfolded around them. Part critical analysis and part memoir, Munkácsi's account examines the complex array of "choiceless choices" that he and the members of his community faced, and in so doing provides an intimate if often tortured narrative that deserves to be read alongside other similar examples of Holocaust life-writing, such as Adam Czerniakow's Warsaw Ghetto diary, or Béla Zsolt's memoir *Nine Suitcases* (which was first published in serial form between May 1946 and February 1947).

What will no doubt strike the reader from the outset is Munkácsi's critical and perhaps controversial assessment of the role that the Jewish community played in laying the groundwork for their own destruction. Munkácsi argues that internal divides combined with a "sense of inertia" prevented Hungarian Jews from acting collectively and decisively in the face of the Nazi threat. It was, in other words, not just political division and disorganization within the community that sealed their fate, but also the detached and myopic stance of the Jewish leadership. Arguing that the vast majority of the Jewish leadership

stood “aloof” from the broader community they should have been serving, Munkácsi concludes that the inevitable gulf between Jewish leaders and their people “prevented [them] in the most critical hours from being able to exercise control over the large masses of Jews, let alone influence their actions in any meaningful way” (10). Noting that the Zionists were the only ones to fully realize and appreciate “the sheer magnitude of the historic juncture around the corner” (15), Munkácsi chastises other Jewish leaders who should have seen the writing on the wall, and who should have done more for their people. “History rarely produces accidents,” he writes, and thus “those familiar with the woes and problems of Hungarian Jewry should have been able to realize decades earlier that the tragedy would inevitably happen” (9).

The sense of inertia and tendency towards inaction that Munkácsi identifies in the very first pages of his account are themes that he returns to throughout the book, noting not only that many Jews, and especially the most assimilated, had wrongly convinced themselves that they held a special position within Hungarian society and were thus “safe,” but also that the Jewish leadership had for decades proven itself reluctant to stand up to a series of affronts and assaults, and that they had chosen instead to suffer “a quick succession of fatal blows in meek surrender” (148). Failed by its leaders, and split along social, political, geographical, and religious lines, the Jewish community within Hungary lacked both the solidarity and foresight needed to meet the combined challenges of Hungarian antisemitism and Nazi terror. By retreating into a politics of inaction, Jewish leaders put blind faith in the hope that Hungary would prove an “exception” during the war, and that it would remain a “tiny foothold of an island in a sea of devastation” (12). Forced after the German invasion of Hungary in March 1944 to confront the horrors of Hitler’s Final Solution, the leadership nevertheless continued to “fumble” by continuing its policy “of salvaging what it could” (65). Failing to deviate from an earlier path, Jewish leaders instead chose to follow the path of least resistance, clutching to the futile hope that they would escape their fate if they simply obeyed the commands of their executioners.

Though much of Munkácsi’s account focuses on analyzing — and perhaps rationalizing — the inaction and ineffectiveness of the Jewish leadership during the Holocaust, the book itself is testament to the cruelty perpetrated by Nazi genocidaires and their Hungarian collaborators. As important as it was for Munkácsi to account for and

understand Jewish decisions and (in)action, he is nevertheless very clear that Hungarian Jews would never have been forced to confront and ultimately live with the legacy of the “choiceless choices” presented to them by the architects of the Holocaust in Hungary were it not for the intent and behavior of perpetrators whose culpability should never be forgotten or underestimated. Munkácsi writes very clearly of the “devilish cunning and unscrupulous hypocrisy” (17) of the occupying Germans, noting that the actions taken by the Nazis were both cold and calculated. He is perhaps even more critical of the Hungarians who collaborated with the Nazis, noting that German testimony immediately following the war “revealed that the Gestapo had been so massively understaffed in Hungary that they simply would not have been able to carry out the deportations from the provinces without the assistance of the Hungarian Gendarmerie” (132). Having been abandoned by the Hungarian government, Jews were “at the mercy of their enemies,” a fact that rendered Jewish resistance increasingly difficult, if not impossible, especially when combined with the ineffective actions and misguided decisions of the Jewish leadership.

It is important to point out that Munkácsi does not consider all Hungarians to be equally culpable or responsible for the fate of the Jews in Hungary, though he does make it clear that a broader shift within Hungarian society in the wake of World War I made it very difficult, if not impossible, for non-Jewish Hungarians to act in a way that would have mitigated or prevented the atrocities that were committed during World War II. Pointing to the role of the churches during the “so-called Christian Era” — that is, the Horthy Era from 1919 to 1944 — Munkácsi claims that the clergy, alongside outspoken Christian writers and politicians, contributed greatly to the erosion of liberal structures and practices, and also to the deteriorating relationship between Hungary’s Jewish and non-Jewish communities. Articles published in newspapers by “the lesser clergy with the purpose of inciting hatred against the Jewry,” for example, coupled with Christian politicians (many of them priests) who “distinguished themselves as ardent anti-Semites” in the National Assembly as early as the 1920s served to displace and stigmatize Hungarian Jews in the interwar period (160). Despite the “heroic struggles” of some Christians, Hungary’s Jewish community obviously could not be saved, though Munkácsi is quick to point out that a different path would have been very difficult to forge given the antisemitic conditions prevailing in Hungary at the time. He concludes, however, that “had the churches

evinced more verve, courage, and resolve, they would have been able to point the way out of the cataclysm for those Hungarians who had not been tainted by fascism" (173).

Particularly haunting in light of Munkácsi's assessment of the lack of effective resistance on the part of Jews and "righteous Christians" alike is his analysis of the appearance and reception in Hungary of the Auschwitz Protocols in 1944. Though these Protocols provided a clear description of the concentration camp and its horrors, Munkácsi suggests that their dissemination in Hungary did not embolden the resistance of Jews or righteous Christians as "neither side had the strength to act." Likening the Holocaust in Hungary to the terminal phase of a disease, Munkácsi concludes: "Never before had we glimpsed the true depth of the abyss, to the brink of which we had been pushed by twenty-five years of antisemitism, the plague spread by the anti-Jewish laws, a shackled press, and everything that every Hungarian government from Gömbös to Sztójay stood for. Most of the country had fallen for the fascist propaganda, and could hardly wait for the next anti-Jewish measure to be issued. They were eager to witness the progress of deportations from the provinces and, more important, eager to finally lay their hands on what mattered to them most: their share of the spoils" (131-132).

Writing in the immediate wake of the Holocaust, Munkácsi was convinced that "a full balance of accounts" would emerge with the passing of time. He was confident that future generations of Hungarians would be able to trace out a much fuller picture of the tragedy he had just lived through, and that a more accurate understanding of the intent and actions of "the real makers of history" would ultimately emerge (65). Yet, a full seventy-five years later, scholars still debate the difficult questions raised by commentators like Munkácsi, and have yet to agree on what course of action Jews and their allies might have taken to alter the fate of those who suffered and perished during the Holocaust. Hungarian society, moreover, still struggles to recognize and account for its own role in the Holocaust, a task made all the more difficult by a current regime bent on burying rather than understanding certain aspects of the nation's past. For these reasons alone, *How It Happened* is a welcomed and important addition to the history of the Holocaust, both in Hungary and in general.

Nina Munk has done an excellent job as editor in assembling a team of scholars capable of putting Munkácsi's work in historical

context. Though short and to the point, Papp's essay provides just enough information on the life and times of Munkácsi to help provide the reader with a clear sketch of the world that he and his family inhabited. Laczó's essay, in turn, offers nuanced insight into Munkácsi's text, and helps to situate his observations and conclusions in a critical historiographical context. Regardless of whether the reader empathizes with Munkácsi's situation, or dismisses his analysis as an attempt to distance himself from the actions of the Central Jewish Council that he served during the Holocaust, his account is a painful reflection on how difficult it is to see a dangerous situation "properly," and how profoundly challenging it is to organize and mobilize people quickly and effectively against such a profound existential threat. Beyond its value as a primary source, Munkácsi's account is compelling as a human story, and will no doubt prove to be provocative reading for students, scholars, and the general public alike.

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