

Két évtized: A kolozsvári zsidóság a két világháború között [Two decades: The Jewry of Kolozsvár between the two world wars]. By Attila Gidó. Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2016. 356 pp.

Attila Gidó is a skilled and successful young Transylvanian historian associated with the Cluj-based Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities. In recent years, he has conducted several valuable research projects involving research in the major Romanian, Hungarian, and Israeli archives. Dealing with the interwar history of the Jewish community in Cluj (Kolozsvár in Hungarian), one of the major cities and cultural centers of Transylvania, his new book is an expanded version of his doctoral dissertation, which was first published in Romanian (*Două decenii: Evreii din Cluj în perioada interbelică* [2014]).

The Jews of Cluj were proud Hungarians before 1920, and they were almost fully integrated into the society of the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy. Later, under Romanian rule, they tended to refer to the previous period as the Golden Age of the Hungarian/Transylvanian Jewry. After acquiring Transylvania, the Romanian authorities did practically everything in their power to dissociate Transylvanian Jews from the Hungarians, promote the dissimilation of the community from its Hungarian language and culture, and force the assimilation of the Jewish inhabitants of the region into the Romanian state. At the time, this strategy was an essential demographical and political matter for the young nationalizing state of Greater Romania.

Gidó is convinced that without a full understanding of the identity strategies of the Transylvanian Jewry, one cannot understand the anti-Semitism of the 1930s or the Hungarian reproaches and anti-Jewish accusations of the early 1940s. Neither, according to Gidó, can one comprehend the post-Holocaust Jewish disillusionment with anything and everything connected to Hungarian identity and culture. Accordingly, Gidó states already in the introduction that the period under scrutiny is of key importance in the history of the integration of Jews. This is probably why he extended and contextualized his research period: to analyze first the situation of the Jewish community of Cluj before the First World War and to conclude with a presentation of the situation of the community after 1940, when under the provisions of the Second Vienna Award the city, together with the northern and southeastern parts of Transylvania, became part of Hungary again, followed less than four years later by the deportation of the Jews in these territories to Auschwitz.

Gidó adopts an unusually complex approach: in addition to using classic historical research methods, he also employs a variety of anthropological and sociological tools. Consequently, his work is not simply historical writing, but rather an interesting experimental attempt at a comprehensive monograph of the Jewish community of Cluj. It is therefore not surprising that the author examines his topic with particular focus on the questions of identity strategies and social integration.

The book is divided into ten chapters, each analyzing the history of the community from a different perspective: historiography and sources; the frames of the research; the history of the community before the First World War; demographic and settlement structure; occupational structure and economic potential; exclusion and restrictions of rights; internal organization of the community, including religious and secular institutions; education and schooling strategies; various identity policies; and the fate of the Jews of Cluj after 1940.

The author offers a clear description and in-depth analysis of the condition of the Jews of Cluj after the First World War, when their history, together with that of the city, went through many dramatic changes, affecting most of all the economic environment and behavior, but also political, social, and cultural relations, as well as religious and minority institutions. Demanding more and more space for themselves in the city and in Transylvania, the Romanians used a wide array of tools to expel Hungarians and Jews from public institutions, prominent places in economic life, liberal professions, and in many cases even from their own homes. The existence of Jewish institutions was also greatly impeded or made impossible. For example, in 1927, the Tarbut, the only Jewish high school of the town, was closed. The institution was accused of being “the nest of Hungarian irredentism,” and it was not permitted to function because the Romanian administration sought loyalty from the Jews to the new state. Furthermore, they also questioned the citizenship of Jews, and this condemned many families in the community to poverty, because there were several occupations which one could only pursue if one had Romanian citizenship.

An intriguing part of Gidó’s work is his presentation of the activity of the Romanian student movements in support of the introduction of the *numerus clausus* principle (already adopted by Hungary) as a defining expression of anti-Semitism in interwar Romania. He describes the psychological and the physical acts of aggression against Jewish students, intellectuals, merchants, craftsmen, village barkeepers, and simple citizens during the first years after the Trianon Peace Treaty. He elaborates on the most severe instances, such as the student

protests of December 1927, which culminated in the so-called “traveling pogrom,” during which the Romanian students of the Old Romanian Kingdom, traveling by a special train, vandalized and set to fire numerous Jewish religious and secular institutions and businesses on their way through Oradea (Nagyvárad), Huedin (Bánffyhunyard), and Cluj.

An unspoken question seems to run through the book: did the Jews of Transylvania in some sense betray the Hungarians during the interwar period, as alleged by some Hungarian contemporaries and historians, or did they simply try to find workable personal solutions in order to adapt to the new realities and conditions of Greater Romania? Gidó’s analysis is not confrontational, he does not argue for or against these anti-Jewish accusations. Rather, he tries to exploit and parse an impressive amount of press, archival, and bibliographical information to reveal historical facts, influences, conditions, traps, and, ultimately, the historical truth.

Based on the results of the Romanian census of 1930 and his own approximations, Gidó’s conclusion is that around 1930 more than half (54 percent) of the Jews of Cluj declared themselves to be of Jewish ethnicity, while the rest of the community continued to identify as Hungarian. Although the author notes that the great majority of the Jewish population of Cluj continued to speak Hungarian at home and in public, consumed Hungarian cultural products, and had many ties with the Hungarian minority society (and thus continued to act as a kin-minority), he is somewhat reluctant to admit that such a dramatic change could not have taken place in the period of one decade. In fact, the Jews of Cluj, like many other members of the Transylvanian Jewish community, realized that the political options of the Hungarians and of the Jews living in Transylvania were not always convergent, and by establishing a Jewish Party, an important part of the community started to cast “Jewish votes” instead of Hungarian ones. Otherwise, when for example the non-Jewish Hungarians were supporting the party of Octavian Goga in droves, Jews would have been forced to vote for a political party with an anti-Semitic program.

Nonetheless, Gidó provides an excellent and highly suggestive example how impossible far-reaching dissimilation proved in a short period of time: that of Mór Deutsch, who in November 1918 filed a request to change his last name from Deutsch to Dévényi. The Hungarian Ministry of the Interior informed him on January 30, 1919 that his request had been approved, but by then Mór Deutsch was already living under Romanian rule, and the Romanian authorities did not recognize the decision of the Hungarian administration. We know from

other sources that eventually Deutsch changed his name to Dévényi, probably sometime between 1940 and 1944, because in October 1943 his son was enrolled as András Gábor Dévényi in the Jewish High School of Kolozsvár. Beginning in 1953, András Gábor Dévényi lived and worked as a renowned physicist in Bucharest, and when he passed away in December 2015 he still bore the same last name: Dévényi. The Deutsch-Dévényi example may illustrate how advanced the Hungarian assimilation of the Transylvanian Jewry was.

Gidó's well-documented book, which contains some 1,260 footnotes and an exhaustive bibliography, offers us a good opportunity to clarify the origins of many clichés and stereotypes, and to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the complicated history of the Jewish community of Cluj and, through it, of Transylvanian Jews as a whole as part of Hungarian and Romanian history.

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