Book Review

Borbála Klacsmann, *Holokauszttörténetek* (Stories of the Holocaust), Budapest: Park Könyvkiadó, 2023, 360 p. ISBN 978-963-355-834-8.

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Holokauszttörténetek is a popular scholarly collection of Holocaust microhistories from Hungary. The book, Borbála Klacsmann's first, includes – following a foreword penned by the author's mentor, and now fellow historian, Andrea Pető – a brief explication of the volume's overarching agenda; a useful, if rather unoriginal chapter of historical contextualization; and – most importantly – no fewer than eighteen thematic sections. The latter sections are devoted to varied themes such as perpetrators and collaborators; the Hungarian version of "Aryanization"; "everyday antisemitism"; the practice of exemptions; questions of resistance; or the basic unfairness, even absurdity of restitution policies (the main subject of the author's recent PhD dissertation). These eighteen sections are further subdivided into 114 relatively short pieces, with each section containing at least three but not more than ten.

These brief pieces – a selection from an even larger pool of case studies that the author has written and continues to share online – are based on extensive original research primarily into archives related to Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun county. *Holokauszttörténetek* offers numerous direct citations reproducing the most impressive stories with Klacsmann's commentaries that contextualize and help the reader interpret her plentiful sources. The book is thus a somewhat unusual hybrid: while *Holokauszttörténetek* offers strikingly original depictions based on newly uncovered materials (more on which below), it also amounts to an easily accessible book meant for the broader public. The geographic focus is well chosen, as Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun was not only a large county in the central part of Hungary at the time of the Holocaust (it included areas just outside the capital city of Budapest) but, more crucially, because it functioned as a laboratory for anti-Jewish radicalization due to the local activities of key perpetrator László Endre, but far from only him.

Covering a host of themes through examples on the micro scale, *Holokauszttörténetek* explores a broad spectrum of roles and behaviors in the age of the Holocaust in Hungary and raises uncomfortable – and previously all too often marginalized – questions regarding the breadth and depth of social responsibility. Klacsmann does well to highlight several irresolvable moral complications and the resulting moral conflicts: her chapter on the conflict that emerged within the Eibenschütz family

after the Holocaust, where two lines of the family could equally legitimately claim to be the rightful heirs of the property of genocide victims, is particularly powerful in this respect. The book's prime focus though is clearly on the malevolent, typically self-interested, and often petty involvement in the persecution of Hungary's large, legally discriminated, forcibly segregated, and mostly violently murdered Jewish community. The book's chief interest is not in physical violence but rather in studying the more extended and more mundane process of multifaceted persecution which directly accompanied the genocide in Hungary and provided the immediate context to policies of mass murder.

Klacsmann's overarching aim is to dissect human decisions, explore the motivations behind them, and show what persecution meant to "ordinary people." The diverse pieces collected enable intriguing glimpses into key actions and experiences of hundreds of individuals in Holocaust-era Hungary. Cases studied shed light on the flexibility of the Hungarian rules and regulations, and the willingness to radicalize anti-Jewish persecution from the lower levels through their harsh and arbitrary interpretation; pro-active ghettoization policies which local authorities drove forward; the extensive involvement of state actors in the process of persecution, whether local administrations, the gendarmerie or financial authorities, including the National Bank; the financing of the genocide through funds "legally appropriated" from Jews (what Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági have labelled "self-financing genocide"); the "casual acceptance" of mass persecution by companies and their operatives; the willingness to implement antisemitic policies even when its consequences clearly harmed non-Jews as well; the detached, even dehumanizing language of persecution and the humiliating abruptness of bureaucratic communication which failed to articulate any reasons, illegitimate or otherwise; the exceedingly difficult process of getting hold of relevant documentation of one's ancestry and the bureaucratic insensitivity towards those difficulties; how "non-Jews" aimed to justify their claims to "Jewish property" and how Jewish survivors were denied the chance to reacquire their recently stolen property and, more generally, the lack of help they received to relaunch their lives; the widespread and rapid theft of the belongings "left behind" by those who had been deported in 1944; the symbolic case where a house owned by the deported was not only emptied but entirely demolished to re-use all its component parts; the arbitrary denial of basic services to Jews such as ferrying them across rivers, or such petty and hostile forms of discrimination and injustice as a general directive to reduce milk rates for them.

Amidst what must be qualified as a profoundly depressing ensemble of human insensitivity, cruelty, and gain-seeking, Klacsmann competently offers contrasting cases to show that it was possible to act differently. Her chapter on how an individual arranged a burial for Holocaust victims just outside Budapest during the Second World War is perhaps the most symbolically apt example in this regard. At the same

time, the book is clear on how the immediate consequences of persecution were far from over in 1945. Crucially, despite the nominal end to a regime of worsening discrimination, the minority of survivors usually continued to be denied their right to their property after 1945 and were not given any substantial help to restart their lives either. As the author shows, the belief remained widespread among "non-Jews" that having taken property from persecuted Jews was a rightful act and did not constitute a form of theft. The book's chapter on survivors who were forced to reside in the same house with those who had tried to acquire their house in the Hungarian year of extermination is particularly memorable in this regard.

Borbála Klacsmann rightly claims that microhistories, when selected and crafted well, can provide surprising and striking insights into the clearly asymmetrical, evolving, profoundly unjust and often deeply disturbing relations between those who were respectively qualified as non-Jews and Jews around the time of the Second World War; they can help us grasp broader historical processes. The strength of *Holokauszttörténetek* lies in its demonstration just how wide the scope of action was on the lower levels and just how often people chose to behave in an inequitable, insensitive, and harmful manner; it lies in the author's ability to show the multilayered character of the persecution of Jews and of Roma (the main subject in one of the eighteen sections) in Hungary. This makes the book an essential, potentially paradigm-shifting and, sadly, also a highly relevant read in a country where the apologetic – and politically all too convenient – idea of "all was the work of just a few Nazi collaborators" has continued to define mainstream understandings for way too long.

However, Klacsmann's impressive book makes such an essential intervention without developing a clear and convincing analytical vocabulary of how to categorize cases – whether in terms of types of action, forms of motivation, or kinds of responsibility. Ultimately, her book makes an exceptionally well-documented case that people could and should have acted differently, i.e., it offers a powerful *moral critique*. It does less to try to grasp historically why people in Hungary acted the way they did, i.e., how come moral notions got so badly perverted, and behaviors that not only facilitated but indeed actively drove forward the persecution of fellow citizens apparently became so normalized. That is a moot historical *and* moral question which might perhaps be addressed in a sequel to Klacsmann's path-breaking current volume.