

Kovács, Mária M. 2012: *Törvénytől sújtva – a numerus clausus Magyarországon, 1920-1945* (Down by the Law - the Numerus Clausus in Hungary, 1920-1945). Budapest, Napvilág Kiadó, 2012. 267 pp.

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The name of historian Mária M. Kovács of the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, Hungary, is well known. She studies the history of Hungarian Jewry, especially its legal history and relationship with the Christian Hungarian intelligentsia in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Generally, Christian Hungarian intellectuals (i.e., doctors, lawyers, engineers) conceived of the country's Jews as their competitors and therefore claimed that the Jews were "overrepresented" in Hungarian elite circles. This situation worsened during and following World War I, as the myth of profiteer Jewish purveyors became very popular and re-sounded in the Hungarian Parliament. The 1919-1920 "era of revolutions" was not long, but Hungarian public opinion was greatly determined by the Hungarian Pro-Soviet Republic of the time, as well as by the "red" and "white" terrors, which made the situation even tenser. Then, in the mid and late 1920s, the evolving counter-revolutionary government had to face many other problems besides the rate of Jews among its intelligentsia, as besides the lost war there was also an influx of numerous refugees into Hungary.

It is at this historical moment that Maria M. Kovács picks up the thread of discussion. Some readers may be surprised by the book's title -- *Törvénytől sújtva* (Down by the Law) -- and even more by its subtitle, *A numerus clausus Magyarországon, 1920-1945* (The Numerus Clausus in Hungary, 1920-1945), because it is generally believed that the Act on Numerus Clausus was adopted in 1920 and amended in 1928. However, Kovács shatters this false notion in her study's first, introductory chapter, in which she reveals that the Numerus Clausus was or has been a leading principle during the counter-revolutionary era, the 1930s and World War II, because even though the original Act was later amended, its spirit persisted or, so-to-say, survived the modification. Moreover, Hungarian politics has always, meaning before as well as after the inter-war period, been influenced by Germany, and this factor became even more crucial after Hitler's coming to power in 1933.

In Chapter Two, the author describes a very interesting and exciting picture of the background for the enactment of the law in question. Essentially, she deals with two fundamental issues. The first is the definition and identity of the Jews: Are they a race? Are they a nation? Does blood determine the answers to these questions? The author makes clear that already in 1919 or 1920 the expression "Christian" meant "non-Jew/ish" in the eyes of the Hungarian elite. Here, inevitably, the author inserts a discussion of the personality of Bishop Ottokár Prohászka,



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who was not only a member of the Hungarian Bench of Bishops that coined the term "hungarizmus" [Hungarianism], but also the main ideologist of the national Christian ideology. Interestingly, Prohászka was also the spokesman of the Christian socialist movement in Hungary; thus the two ideologies of anti-Semitism and socialism were also linked in his mind and activity. Kovács cites Prohászka's wording extensively to enliven and transmit the force of his ideology. These citations and their recurrence in the Hungarian anti-Jewish legislation clearly testify to the impact of Prohászka on the anti-Jewish tendencies of the time. It seems that anti-Semitism was a kind of religion for Prohászka and his widening circle of followers. The second crucial issue or, in fact, question that Kovács deals with in this chapter is not merely (or: not really) whether Jews were entitled to study at Hungarian universities, but how could the Hungarian State prevent Jews from studying in its universities and institutions. The State's answer to this question was: by discrimination, meaning by anti-Jewish legislation that restricted the right of Jews to higher education to their proportion in the general population.

Chapter Three, "A numerus clausus és a faji paragrafus első évtizedének mérlege" ("The Balance of the First Decade of Enacting the Numerous Clausus and its Race Section"), discusses the results of the Act on Numerus Clausus. This chapter contains numerous statistic data on the religious affiliation of university undergraduates in Hungary in the 1920s. It is often said that facts are stubborn things, and here the facts ascertain that the number of Jewish students, or those of Jewish origin, was significantly – by 10-20% – decreased in this decade; however, this was so mainly in the capital of Budapest, whereas in the countryside universities the decrease was less drastic. In fact, one of the most valuable sections in this study is the one about the universities in the countryside, in which Kovács explains the difference between the capital and the countryside by claiming that the former could do without and probably preferred to have fewer Jewish students, but the latter were more in need of students, even if they were Jewish; moreover, this trend persisted despite the growing number of anti-Jewish atrocities and the spreading of this atmosphere in the late 1920s and early 1930s in the countrywide.

Chapter Four, "A numerus clausus törvény módosítása és a nyílt zsidókvóta visszaállítása" ("The Changing of the Numerous Clauses Act and the Overt Restoration of the Jewish Quota"), describes the foreign response to the Act and to the new norm of a "Jewish quota," as well as Hungary's consideration of this response in later formulations of the Act. It is a well-known fact that the Act on Numerus Clausus stood in the crossfire of foreign and international criticism, which made the Hungarian government both try to protect this law and promise that the Hungarian Parliament would later amend it. The Act was pronounced in 1925, but the modification was only voted on in 1928. Although the amended Act, or rather its annex, did not contain the wording "Jew" or "Jewish," it now contained a new knack called the "employment quota." The Hungarian liberal opposition has been aware of the essence of this Act in its various versions, and at any rate, the "West," including international organizations (e.g., the League of Nations), largely accepted it.

By the end of the 1930s the Hungarian policy toward the country's Jews, or rather "the Jewish question," became the main issue in the country's public political sphere. An initial "solution" for this "question" was offered by the first anti-Jewish law of 1938, which re-defined in racial terms the legal status of Hungarian Jews. Almost a year later, in 1939, a second anti-Jewish law, limiting Jews in economic and political life, was adopted as well as further

declarative elucidations as to who was considered a Jew. This Act brought back the Jewish quota, though this time it was a new Numerus Clausus, as it placed the quota on 6% instead of the 5% of the 1920s original Act. The third Jewish Law of 1941 that forbade inter-marriage with Jews and deprived Hungarian Jews of their Hungarian citizenship as well as of their assets, paved the way to their total annihilation in the frame work of Hungary's enactment of the "final solution" of its "Jewish question."

In her historical study about the stages and implications of the Hungarian Act on Numerus Clausus, Maria M. Kovács invites her readers to an intellectual journey, leading us from the early 1920s anti-Jewish Acts to the mass deportation of Hungarian Jews to their death in Auschwitz in 1944. Thus, Kovács claims for the State's ideological continuity and operative consistency throughout these two and a half decades, despite the façades of the Act's dis- and re-appearances in the course of this fateful period.