

Ágai, Adolf. *Az örök zsidó. Régi naplók, életképek (1862-1906) [The Eternal Jew: Old Diaries and Life Sketches (1862-1906)]. Budapest-Jerusalem: Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 2010.*

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Az örök zsidó [The Eternal Jew], a collection of sketches, stories, and diaries by Adolf Ágai (1836-1916), is the third book by this largely forgotten nineteenth century Hungarian Jewish writer to have been published since 1998. While the other two are reprints of Ágai's originally self-contained works with a focus on general Hungarian interests, *Az örök zsidó*, published by Múlt and Jövő, presents Ágai's work that had initially appeared in Jewish journals and magazines from 1862 to 1906. János Kőbányai's selection of narratives is a fascinating read that enables readers interested in the colorful and rapidly changing landscape of late mid- to late-nineteenth century Jews living in Hungary to witness the process of transformation of identities from alien Jews to Jewish Hungarians along with the personal triumphs, national anxieties and general failures this transformation occasioned.

Ágai—who mostly published under the penname Porzó and whom his contemporaries recognized as the longtime first editor of the popular satirical magazine *Borsszem Jankó* (1868 to 1938)—draws both his humorous and serious sketches from Hungarian Jewish life in various stages of assimilation. Ágai's stories contain both criticism and praise towards the traditionally Orthodox and the recently assimilated with traces of nostalgia for the former intermingled with hostility and disdain and despair towards the latter for pretending that their assimilation is unreservedly embraced by Hungarian society in general. Thus, the title of the book is especially aptly chosen from one of the lectures included in the book as it reflects Ágai's perception of Jewishness as an eternal and inescapable condition that is both a curse and a privilege.

The first part of the book is comprised of lectures Ágai gave late in his life in which he proudly recalls his own family's journey of assimilation into Hungarian culture. Using his parents' diaries, Ágai recounts his father's transformation from an Orthodox Jew into the uniquely Hungarian assimilated Neologue. Ágai writes with reverence and admiration about his father, an exceptionally gifted young Jewish scholar in Vishnic, Poland, who later in life became medical doctor with important publications in Hungarian. Ágai, a master of satirical writing vividly describes the downfall of his father's family from one of the prosperous pillars of the Jewish community to penurious outcasts as a result of the forbidden love between his aunt and a local nobleman that resulted in the girl converting to Christianity. Perhaps, it was this protracted experience of increasing hostility from some members of the Chassidic community towards a distraught family disgraced by a daughter who disappeared with her Christian lover that nourished Ágai's own overwhelming negativity toward the Chassidic figures he represents in his writings. Thus, he can invoke a tone of surprise and indignation regarding Chassidic condemnation of his father's interest in learning anything other than the traditional course of studies as prescribed by the Yeshiva system. Yet, learning to read in German (reading Schiller

amongst others) and studying Hebrew grammar were but two of the “sins” for which the Chassids condemned Ágai’s father (18).

Descriptions of various locations in which Ágai’s father studied is interlaced with such Yiddish/Hebrew words as *chulluch*, *chaser-bocher*, *mataher*, *rishonim*, *acharonim* and *shir* in order to accentuate Jewish flavor to his audience in the lecture hall of Izraelita Magyar Irodalmi Társulat (IMIT) founded in 1895. A whole series of trips from one Yeshiva to the next follows as the gifted young boy’s progress is always cut short by the inevitable arrival of his family’s bad reputation occasioned by his sister’s elopement. Ágai writes with ill-concealed pride about his father’s accomplishments as a young doctor heroically battling against the ravages of the great cholera epidemic of 1831 (55-63). This episode, which depicts a Jew in Austro-Hungary as a materially significant assistant in battling misery and death amongst Hungarians, serves to illuminate the overall basis on which the pre-emancipated Jews placed their hopes of being accepted by the Hungarians as positive, constructive and patriotic Hungarian Jews.

Ágai’s descriptive narrative about the Hungarianization of his mother’s family is designed to show that any Jew, whether Ashkenazi or Sephardic, may become truly Hungarian in the course of time. Ágai uses many of the tropes of travel writing as he provides the colorful, romantic, and exciting adventures of his great-grandfather, Yitzchak, originally from Istanbul, making his way to Hungary with a girl he helps to escape from a shipment from Georgia destined for a Turkish harem. The story’s climax is the blessing the young foreign couple received from the enlightened Emperor Joseph II at their wedding procession over the Danube River, supplemented by a gift of gold coins that helped to establish the store selling Oriental products. As the writer describes, the emperor asks permission to see the heavily veiled bride, “if Jewish laws do not prohibit it,” (100) and is astonished by the beauty of this Georgian girl who had just converted to Judaism. Thus, Ágai signals that acceptance of even respect for Jews in Hungary is possible when it originates in the highest spheres of power. By the time his 114-year-old great-grandfather dies, the family is thoroughly Hungarianized with the young Ágai present as his grandfather touchingly bewails the passing of his father (102).

The remaining ten narratives are supposedly based on Ágai’s experiences in various parts of Austro-Hungary, thematically organized in order to shed light upon the nature of Jewish life from every segment of Hungarian society. With titles such as “Jahec’. Gyermekek emléke [Yakhec: a Childhood Memory], “A cheder. Zsidó életkép [The Cheder. Jewish Vignette],” “Lakodalmom [Wedding],” “Temetkezés [Funeral],” “Húsvét [Passover], “Jom kippur. A hosszú nap falun és a fővárosban [Yom Kippur. *The Day of Awe in the Countryside and in the Capital*],” “Reb Smelke. Kóser tréfa, melynek azonban szomorú a vége [Reb Shmelke: Kosher Fun with a Sad Ending],” Zsidó konyha. Antiszemita ínyencek épülésére [Jewish Cuisine. For the Edification of Anti-Semitic Gourmets],” and “Az örök zsidó [The Eternal Jew],” Ágai’s colorful, informative, amusing, and tragic stories run the entire gamut of Jewish experience. A trained violinist, Ágai tells his stories with the sensitivity of a musician, keenly aware of the tone, pitch, and volume required for each effect he wishes to convey.

In this smorgasbord of stories selected by Kőbányai, the contemporary reader encounters familiar themes as well as some features peculiar to the times written in an engaging if at times somewhat artificial style. From the story of a young Jewish boy’s friendship with a non-Jewish boy terminating when the latter insults another Jew and then

his friend himself (“Jakhec”) to a highly satirical, yet clearly nostalgic, sketch of the cheder, a Jewish schoolroom, in which Ágai masterfully plays on a Dickensian register as he vividly portrays the abusive yet tragically broken teacher, Reb Shmelke (“A Cheder”); from a list of differences between Jewish and non-Jewish girls and love and Ágai’s hilariously disastrous experiences as a hired violinist (“Süheder koromból” [From my Youngster Years]) to narratives about Jewish weddings, funerals and other life events concluding in a lecture entitled *Örök zsidó* from 1897, intended to be humorous yet, to the post-Holocaust reader goose-bump-inducing dismissal of the genocidal solution to the Jewish question as “inexpedient” and “at the dawn of the new century” totally inconsiderable, this book provides something for every reader interested in literary accounts of Jewish life as experienced by the so-called New Hungarians of the nineteenth century.

The two major afterwords by Aladár Komlós (1892-1989) “Egy Magyar zsidó a múlt században” [A Hungarian Jew in the Last Century] originally published in 1936 and János Kőbányai’s recent piece, “Atlantisz-világ üzenete: Ágai Adolf és a Magyar zsidó sajtó” [Message from the World of Atlantis: Adolf Ágai and the Hungarian Jewish Press], contextualize Ágai within the institutionally evolving Jewish world in Hungary. While alluding to Ágai’s significance as a pioneering children’s writer, a humorist, and a popular writer within nineteenth-century Jewish cultural landscape in Hungary, Komlós focuses on Ágai as a Jewish writer representing a generation for which total cultural assimilation was paramount—even to the detriment of traditional affiliations and religious practices. Komlós contrasts the mostly realized goals of that generation to the challenges of his own in the 1930s, a thoroughly Hungarianized generation struggling to find a suitable response to the apparent failure of the Hungarian Jewish project in the face of increasing institutional intolerance as codified by the discriminatory laws known as *Numerus Clausus*. While representing a different approach, Komlós treats Ágai and his generation with remarkable sensitivity as he acknowledges that “the road on which Ágai’s generation traveled had to be tried out once and the experiment had to be conducted just then” (228). Yet, he hastens to add the following: “To their luck, they were so close to their origins that they, virtually against their intention, were saved from falling obliviously into their environment which those who followed them effected a breach in their inner and outer identity” (228). Kőbányai’s final afterward discusses the importance of Komlós before offering his own detailed survey of the various Jewish publications (such as the *Izraelita Magyar Irodalmi Társulat* established in 1895, *Múlt és Jövő* established in 1911, *Magyar Izraelita* and various others) in which Ágai’s writings appeared and the religio-cultural trends each represented.

The republished selected works of Ágai and the two afterwords in *Az örök zsidó* — with a diminutive Jewish figure trotting over the Globe inscribed as *Magyarország* clutching an umbrella on its emblematic front cover—provide both an informative and an entertaining look into a period in Hungarian Jewish history in which significant cultural (trans)formations emerged in the lives of Jews living in Hungary. Volumes such as *Az örök zsidó* should facilitate much needed conversations regarding both historical and contemporary figurations of Hungarian Jews and Jewish Hungarians.