

Photographs from a Scrap-Book

Jewry in Cluj-Kolozsvár after the Holocaust

The Transylvanian Jewish-Hungarian community surviving the Holocaust was characterized by the dilemma of whether to return home or to emigrate, the urge to look for disappeared/escaped relatives, the fight against bodily and psychic traumas caused by the events, the strenuous analysis of the causes that lead to the tragedy, the issues related to those responsible for the atrocities committed during the war, the problem of how to relate to the new social and economic situation, the reorganization of Jewish life, the integration in the framework of new circumstances and by questions related to identity.

At first, a great number of survivors became adepts of the new rule, especially as the soviets were the ones to free them and save their lives. Nevertheless the members of the Jewish community were quick to recognize: the communist society built in the shadow of the Red Army was not capable of settling the ethnic issue in a comforting way. Ethnic and racial intolerance, chauvinism and anti-Semitism did not disappear under the new circumstances: they emerged instead in different forms.

The scrap-book recently found at Cluj was undeniably a token of collective memory and helped in the search for lost relatives of the survivors. Its creator, Katz Márton, living in Cluj, had himself, with his two sons, experienced the hell of German death camps, used to operate a typography under the name Orient in Bolyai street (then Vlăhuța no.6) after his return home. The owner of the typography shared the fate of the 18 thousand Jews gathered by the Hungarian authorities in Cluj and county Cluj, confined at first to the ghetto around the Cluj brick factory and later deported. According to his note in the scrap-book, Katz Márton was taken away with the second Cluj transport, on the 29th of May. Other sources revealed that the train of cattle carriages was transporting 3417 persons to the Auschwitz camp.

With the book of Cluj Jewish martyrs perished in deportation (the text on its front page spells: Photographs of our martyrs deported from Cluj, 1944) Katz fulfills his obligation towards his comrades “felled on the blood-field”, pays tribute to the “holy martyrs of the Cluj Jewry” and tries to win back “part of” his inner quiet. In fact he builds a monument for the Cluj Jewish community of over 16 thousand souls in 1941, of which only a few managed to survive the war. Meanwhile he is quite aware of the fact that there might be, among the persons depicted in the photographs gathered from the remains left behind by the deported and generally taken in between the two world wars or during the time of the monarchy, some who managed to escape, come home or migrate to other countries or persons who appear on those photographs as friends, acquaintances of the deported Jewish families.

According to the notes of the Kosice railway commander, there had been six transports of Jewish citizens from Cluj to Auschwitz, on the following dates (with the number of the deported in between brackets): May 25th (3130), May 29th (3417), May 31st (3270), June 2nd (3100), June 8th (1784) and June 9th (1447). Consequently the trains leaving from Cluj transported a total of 16 148 persons from Cluj to the death camps.

Before the Holocaust, there lived an approximate number of 165 thousand persons of Israelite or other religion, falling under the validity of the Jewish laws, in Northern Transylvania. Three thirds of this community perished in death camps, work camps or under other circumstances during the Holocaust. The number of those who

managed to return to Northern Transylvania, together with refugees from Southern Transylvania, other parts of Romania and Bukovina and Basarabia, was estimated to be between 23 and 30 thousand in 1945. Beside these, an estimated number of 8-10 thousand escaped the death camps but fled directly to the West.

It is still impossible to estimate the precise number of victims. Calculations are made difficult by the lack of creditable registries, the migrations in Transylvania after the war, that are still unknown on the level of details, the scarce data referring to refugees coming from abroad and transiting Romanian in their way to Palestine, and the fact that information on the number of Transylvanian Jews fled to the West are still far from precise. Thus the exact proportions of the huge loss of people were unknown, nevertheless the survivors in Cluj have clearly experienced its consequences. This experience has caused further psychic traumas and directed the members of the community towards dissimilative self-identity strategies.

Part of the men taken to work camps beginning with 1942 returned to their homeland already with the Soviet army or directly after its arrival. Nevertheless survivors of death camps had to wait until liberation, and owing to various circumstances their majority could return only in the summer of 1945 or later.

These people had no means for making a living at all, even their accommodation was problematic while their majority came home exhausted and in a very bad state of health. The calamities and tortures experienced, the loss of close relatives have decisively determined their psychic and physical state. No wonder thus that the first Jewish community institutions to operate after the war were hospitals and canteens.

The Cluj press has presented the tragedy of the Transylvanian Jewry already in autumn 1944. *Világosság* recounted the earlier happenings in Northern Transylvania and Cluj between April and June. The series of articles revealed it: the author knew nothing of the fact that the Jewry was taken in Germany not to simple camps but to death camps, consequently knew nothing about the impossibility for the majority of the deported to return.

The public received first-hand information on the true facts only three months later. On February the 20th 1945 the first small group of Jews escaped from German death camps in Poland arrived to Cluj. They related how the deported were first selected in Birkenau, where healthy, strong adults were directed to the right and the rest to the left. The escaped ones could only guess at what had happened to those directed to the left. Nevertheless they could tell that the “chimneys of crematoria smothered day and night” and “the smell of burnt flesh and bone was poignant for weeks”. They added “we do not know whom did they kill”. Yet not even the Jewry living in Transylvania paid attention to these words.

In November 1944, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Joint), the Jewish Agency and the Bucharest branches of the International Red Cross have delegated Marton Ernő, the former editor in chief of the Cluj paper *Új Kelet*, to visit Northern Transylvania. The aim was double: to establish the number of survivors and to assess the situation in search of necessary measures. According to the report, the delegation found a number of 7200 Jews in Northern Transylvania. From among these, 1500 lived in county Cluj. Marton found only one thousand Jewish men and 20-30 Jewish women in Cluj.

Jewish religious congregation started nevertheless to function again, the Jewish hospital opened its gates in Cluj once more and survivors were placed in homes operated by various organizations. This happened so as most of the survivors were unable to move back to their former homes as those had been in meantime

bestowed upon others. These people couldn't even find their belongings, which had been stolen, lifted during the war. In Cluj, restitution was especially difficult as during the 1944 bombings a great number of dwelling houses collapsed and the authorities had moved their owners into the homes of Jewish people. The more valuable part of their belongings had been taken by Hungarian and German officers and clerks while the rest was squandered by the local populace. The left-wing powers in rule requested the Jewry to remain patient and fearing the revival of anti-Semitism, Jewish leaders often attempted to temper the demand for restitution. Still, demands for the restitution of Jewish goods led to Hungarian-Jewish tensions.

Interimary Northern Transylvanian authorities had Jewish members as well, which eased the defense of Jewish interests. The city council formed on October the 13th 1944 in Cluj for instance had, according to the paper *Világosság* "17 Romanian, 11 Hungarian and one Jewish member." A few days later, on the 21st of October the Northern Transylvanian Democratic Committee was founded in Cluj.

Following the entering of the Soviets, the Democratic Jewish Popular Assembly (Demokrata Zsidó Népközösség, DZSN) was founded. The Cluj leaders of the organization commented its program at the beginning of November 1944. They said their goal was to create a new order together with Romanian and Hungarian democratic powers. They operated a hospital in the Papp (Párizs) street Joint seat and a commission for welcoming the survivors in Cluj in the nearby Peter-Paul villa. They also pointed it out that the Jewry was not led by the cause of individual revenge, nevertheless they demanded that the leaders of ruthless anti-Jewish actions receive due punishment, the law of possession and right be restored, the Jewry compensated, their integration into industry and commerce made possible within the framework of a general economic program.

In March 1945, DZSN demanded the transportation home of the deported, especially of the elderly and the children, which revealed that they had still no clear vision on the realities of death camps. The Groza government finally allotted a train for the transportation of the deported – which traveled between Oradea and Krakow and Cluj and Prague from the 25th of March till the end of June 1945. The majority of the deported returned in this period or in the summer and autumn of 1945.

Despite official propaganda claiming the opposite, anti-Semitism surfaced again owing to economic and commercial difficulties, to the lack of food and the great drought in 1946, and spread quickly. In spring 1946, certain rumors spread in Cluj and other Transylvanian cities according to which Jews who had lost their children in death camps would have been gathering and killing Hungarian children. The Jewish press was firm in refusing the blame, seeing the solution to the anti-Semitic "fascist provocation" in the reinforcement of the "democracy of people living together".

As one third of the Jewry in Romania (especially the Jewish communities in Moldavia, Transylvania and Bucharest) lived under conditions of severe poverty and needed substantial material support, in the period 1945-1948 the Joint sent to Romania several ten million dollars in aid. Except for Jews, indigents of other nationality were aided as well. Despite this fact, the Romanian Communist Party banished the organization Joint from Romania on February the 18th 1949. This decision influenced many Jews in deciding to emigrate to Palestine.

The Jewry had quickly realized the new system was making the exercise of their traditional professions (small industry, commerce, freelancing) impossible, consequently legal and illegal emigration reached impressive proportions. By the end of 1947, a few weeks before the forced abdication and banishment of king Mihai, the Romanian authorities have contributed to the emigration of 15 thousand Jews, while

another 4000 were aided to get to Israel by various Zionist organizations in 1948. Still, tens of thousands have fled through the green border to Hungary and further west.

At the beginning of 1949 Zionist organizations were banned, their possessions confiscated, the leaders imprisoned – which heightened the inclination towards emigration. In the following decades, a great number of the Jewish community surviving the Holocaust had left Transylvania and Cluj behind. Their significant part, together with children born after the war, found new homes in Israel, while others settled in Western Europe and the American continent.

According to the 2002 census, 223 persons of Jewish nationality lived in Cluj. Very few persons and places guard the memory of the past community in Cluj today. This is why the emergence of this scrap-book by Katz Márton bears huge significance.