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# Multiple experiences of the Holocaust in Budapest

Laura Palosuo, *Yellow stars and trouser inspections: Jewish testimonies from Hungary, 1920–1945*, Studia historica Upsaliensia 231, Uppsala University Holocaust and Genocide Studies publications 1, Uppsala: Department of History & The Uppsala Programme for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, 2008. xiii + 271 pp. (Available at: <[http://www.diva-portal.org/diva/getDocument?urn\\_nbn\\_se\\_uu\\_diva-8482-2\\_\\_fulltext.pdf](http://www.diva-portal.org/diva/getDocument?urn_nbn_se_uu_diva-8482-2__fulltext.pdf)>.)

In the prologue to her dissertation, Laura Palosuo introduces "one of the voices" that she draws on in her study of Jewish perceptions and responses to anti-Jewish legislation and actions in Hungary. Her opening line describes how "Rozsa Solymosi was born in 1919 into a Jewish middle class family" (p. xi). From the outset both Palosuo's sources and approach are clear. Drawing on oral and written testimonies from survivors like Rozsa Solymosi, Palosuo is interested in the intersections of gender, age and social class and the multiple identities of individuals. Adopting an essentially chronological structure, Palosuo outlines the perceptions and responses of Jewish men and women of different ages and social classes to the anti-Jewish legislation introduced by the Hungarian State in the interwar and wartime years, before turning to their reactions to ghettoization and mass killings after the German occupation of the country in March 1944. Hungary is unusual in wartime Europe in that the Holocaust came so late and so quickly in this country. It was the Holocaust's last chapter. Palosuo's work, given her focus on Budapest, deals with the last few pages of the last chapter which is a relatively understudied history.

Palosuo's study draws on the life stories of 173 individuals – the majority Hungarian Jews – parsed from a mixture of oral interviews and memoirs. The single most important source are 116 interviews from the Raoul Wallenberg Archive (RWA) deposited at the university library in Uppsala. These interviews were recorded in 1989–1991 under the auspices of a project aimed at uncovering stories of Raoul Wallenberg's wartime activities. To broaden the scope somewhat, Palosuo supplements the RWA material with a small number of other oral history collections (as well as undertaking two interviews of her own) alongside eyewitness reports and memoirs and one diary. The RWA interviews have not been systematically studied before and one value of Palosuo's work is that she draws heavily upon them in her analysis of Jewish reactions to anti-Jewish legislation and actions.

However, while her use of the RWA material is a strength, it is also a weakness. Palosuo is aware that the requirement that those interviewed by the RWA were in contact with Wallenberg during the war raises the question, "whether these

interviews might be considered biased?" (p. 31) She raises two important issues: Firstly, how representative are the testimonies of those who had connections with Wallenberg, and secondly, how representative are the testimony of survivors given that they survived when so many did not? Responding to the second, Palosuo acknowledges that all survivors are in some senses atypical given their survival (although this is not the case in Budapest which forms the focus of her study), but their testimonies are worth examining "since the lives of the survivors before the Holocaust were not 'atypical'" (p. 31). However this fails to fully address the question of the representativeness of the sample she works with. Palosuo notes a relatively even balance of male (53 %) and female (47 %) survivors in the testimonies she works with, as well as a good mix of those who were teenagers at the time and those who were young adults. Missing are the voices of the elderly, although Palosuo points out that "second hand information concerning the elderly is richly detailed and will be used, even though this must be done carefully" (p. 35). Whilst aware of this skewing in terms of age, there is a class bias in the sample which is not fully considered. Palosuo notes that "the majority (112 out of 151 or 74 per cent) of the informants belonged to the middle classes", adding that "this reflects the general structure of Budapest Jewry" (p. 35). Her assertion that "Budapest Jewry was predominantly middle class" (p. 16) is unsubstantiated, and I would be more cautious about making such a claim. Rather than being broadly representative of Budapest Jews, the interviews that Palosuo works with contain a bias towards those in the upper middle classes given that they are largely Jews who survived with Swedish aid. Working with the RWA material as the core of the thesis skews the sample not just geographically in terms of Budapest, but more importantly, economically. Largely absent from both the RWA interviews, and therefore also from Palosuo's account, are the voices of lower class Jews.

Moreover the category of class presents further problems for Palosuo when she turns to analysis of the testimony data. Although she refers to Weber's four-fold division of class, Palosuo jettisons this, adding another category – "upper middle class" – and adopting a five-fold model. However, her categories potentially hide as much as they reveal. For Palosuo, "middle class fathers worked as clerks, merchants, teachers, bank owners, lawyers, or physicians" (p. 17). This catch-all category fails to consider that the call-up of the male "breadwinner" to wartime labour service was experienced very differently whether the "breadwinner" owned his own business or was a salaried employee. In the former case, there were opportunities for the wife to assume the role of running the business, as some did, which was not an option in the case of the latter. It is not only that the sample Palosuo works with is biased in terms of social class, but her analysis of that sample in terms of class is not sensitive enough.

However putting those criticisms to one side, Palosuo's decision to work with the post-war reminiscences of survivors makes good sense given her interest in

uncovering differing perceptions of interwar antisemitism and the events of the Holocaust. Within Hungarian Holocaust historiography the focus has tended to be on the question of why the Hungarian state collaborated so readily with Nazi Germany in implementing the Holocaust and therefore the paperwork of the perpetrators has been accorded more importance than oral or written testimony. In contrast, Palosuo's concern is to understand how the victims perceived and responded to the situations they faced, and thus she turns to the voices of survivors. Here she does not simply describe a variety of reactions, but seeks to examine whether gender, age and social class are significant factors in explaining differences in perceptions and responses. Working with the intersections of gender, age and social class is a fruitful framework, although there are times when I felt it became a straightjacket.

One advantage of Palosuo's approach is that by analysing anti-Jewish legislation and actions from the bottom up, via the survivors' memories, a more complex picture emerges than might be the case by simply working from the top down. In 1920 the Hungarian State introduced the so-called *Numerus Clausus* act which limited Jewish access to universities. This was the first piece of antisemitic legislation enacted in post-First World War Europe. A couple of decades later a further series of anti-Jewish laws were enacted. In 1938 and 1939, Jewish participation in the professions was restricted. In 1941, a law – along the lines of the Nuremberg laws – prohibited mixed marriages between Jews and non-Jews. The text of these laws and the parliamentary debates that surrounded them have been studied by historians. But examining what the law stipulated is only half of the story. In order to understand what this legislation meant as enacted on the ground, we need to turn to other sources. And this is where Palosuo's study of survivors' testimony is fruitful. These allow us to see how this series of anti-Jewish laws were responded to by Jews in Budapest. It is clear that some were able to evade these laws. Palosuo cites Sara Gresz whose father was well connected, which she perceived was the reason that she was able to gain entry into university despite the *Numerus Clausus* law. Here is the real value of the bottom-up perspective that Palosuo adopts. It presents a more complex picture with possibilities for evasion for those with the necessary connections or wealthy enough to send their children to universities outside Hungary, although Palosuo signals a reluctance to allow young women from "good families" to study abroad.

As this example suggests, Palosuo is concerned in her analysis with the intersections of gender, age and social class. Thus for her, Jewish women experienced "multiple jeopardy", not just the "double jeopardy" of being Jewish and a woman during the Holocaust, as Judith Tydor Baumel has argued (p. 11). Palosuo does not privilege gender over and above other factors in her analysis, but rather adopts a more multi-faceted social history which takes gender alongside age and social class in explaining how individuals perceived and responded to the Holocaust

differently. Where Palosuo looks at gender, and it is an important strand in the book, she considers masculinity alongside femininity. She notes that Jewish men, because they were circumcised, were vulnerable to the so-called "trouser test" when attempting to pass as a non-Jew on the streets of the city. A small number of survivors personally experienced a "trouser test", but a larger number refer to this phenomenon suggesting a more widely held perception that Jewish men were specifically vulnerable to their "Jewishness" being uncovered. Although women were not marked in the same way as Jewish on their bodies, it is clear from the testimonies Palosuo discusses that they were both vulnerable to, and fearful of sexual violence, specifically in the context of the Soviet liberation.

Her analysis of gendered difference follows a fairly well-trodden path of gender historians, although Hungary remains relatively understudied in terms of gender and the Holocaust and Palosuo makes an important contribution with this book. But what is particularly strong about her approach is that she interweaves gender differences with the other major identities that she examines – age and class. Thus pointing to examples of what gender historians have dubbed "food talk", where survivors would recount favourite dishes as a way to cope with their hunger, Palosuo notes that this was something that both male and female survivors remembered, although for at least one younger survivor the behaviour of older women was incomprehensible. One of the survivors she interviewed, Judy Cohen, recounts that Auschwitz was "a living hell", "and besides that, there was this humorous part of our existence that the women were cooking all the time. Ah, it used to drive us younger girls crazy! They were cooking, they were baking, they remembered what they used to do for the Jewish holidays. Sometimes they argued how many eggs to go in this, and like they were virtually cooking" (pp. 196f.). It is striking that Palosuo's focus on multiple identities at times downplays the importance of gender, relative to other factors. So for example she concludes her study of responses to the persecutions in 1944 by suggesting that, "social class, age, civil status, and earlier life experiences seem to have affected the ways of reacting in times of upheaval, perhaps more so than gender. Even though patterns of gendered behaviour can be found, female and male reactions were more often similar than dissimilar" (p. 217).

Her reflections on age are perhaps particularly important, given the relative dearth of scholarship examining how children perceived the events of the Holocaust. A small number of interviewees who were children at the time remember wearing the yellow star and ghettoization in fond terms. Ivan Gabor remembers his mother sewing a yellow star on his jacket and feeling proud – "I said that I am a general" (p. 146). Tomas Ungvári tells of his happiness when members of his extended family were forced to move into his apartment as a consequence of ghettoization, resulting in "the smell of a larger family finally reunited" (p. 149). Palosuo concludes that, "children coped with the situation differently from the

adults. For some of the children, this period was unlike ordinary everyday life, and the concentration of the families into specific houses meant more friends and more sparetime activities" (p. 200).

However Tomas Ungvári's response to ghettoization raises a broader concern I had with Palosuo's approach. Interrogating her sources through a framework of the intersections of gender, age and class lends the book a rather repetitive writing style, is sometimes a little formulaic, and blinds Palosuo to other relevant factors and approaches. In her section on the relocation of Jews into yellow star houses in Budapest in the summer of 1944, Palosuo writes of this experience as effectively a homogenous experience where differences in perception and responses are explained in terms of the gender, age and class of the survivors. However, this misses out on the reality that it made an enormous difference whether ghettoization meant having to move, or being allowed to stay put. For those who had to move, ghettoization came as a traumatic break and is spoken of in very different ways from those who stayed put. Ungvári's description of ghettoization in fond terms contrasts markedly with another survivor interviewed by the RWA, who recollects: "my mother did not want to move from our home. Our neighbor and me together held her back from the windowpane. And looking back, she was right! Because only afterwards came the real sufferings and tribulations".<sup>2</sup> As this example suggests, there were more variables at play than simply the gender, age and class of the survivors. There were also real differences in experiences, stemming from the way in which ghettoization was enacted.

Here Palosuo would have benefited from paying more attention to top-down sources – or at least the rich secondary literature based on these – to complement her bottom-up approach. Although illuminating, the testimonies she uses tell us little about state plans and policy. And yet, Palosuo extrapolates back from the wealth of testimonies relating experiences of Arrow Cross – the native Hungarian fascist party – raids in the winter of 1944, to argue that, "During the Arrow Cross rule, the difference between 'Jews' and 'Jews' became less distinct. Even women were drafted into the labour service, and persons who earlier had been exempted from the anti-Jewish laws through their contacts now became targets of antisemitic actions" (p. 139). This conclusion is misplaced. Firstly, the call-up of Jewish women for labour did not broaden the category "Jew", but rather broadened the category of Jewish labour from being solely male, as was the case in the labour battalions a couple of years earlier, to include women as well as younger and older men in the last months of the war. Secondly, there is a need to distinguish here between the Arrow Cross state policy and Arrow Cross party practice. Far from thinking solely in terms of one Jew, the Arrow Cross government broke the category Jew down into six sub-categories who were to be exposed to different

2. File 335, F2C:15, Raoul Wallenberg Archive, Uppsala University Library.

"solutions" in the winter of 1944. Those Jews who could work were marched westwards. Those who could not were placed into the Pest ghetto. Those who were protected by the neutral powers were placed into the International ghetto, which included a couple of houses where Jews exempted by the Interior Ministry lived.

Looking from the perspective of the Arrow Cross as popular movement, Palosuo is right to point to frequent cases where exempt or protected Jews were summarily rounded up and sometimes executed, or cases where the age limit of those mobilised for labour was stretched. In the chaotic period of the winter of 1944–45, there was a mismatch all too often between what was being said by national government, and what was in fact happening on the ground. Here is both the advantage and disadvantage of the sources that Palosuo draws upon. The advantage (as seen in the case of earlier anti-Jewish legislation) is that we get a sense of what actually happened and not just what was planned. However the disadvantage comes when Palosuo extrapolates back from what happened to what was planned.

What was planned were two different ghettos for two different categories of Jews. However Palosuo concludes on the basis of survivor testimony that, "in the beginning of the period under investigation, differences in how the informants experienced the events were more obvious than by the end of the SWW. Eventually experiences seemed to have become more similar – it did not matter whether one was female or male, young or old, rich or poor" (p. 231). In contrast to this claim, my own sense is that having connections and money was perhaps especially significant in 1944. Palosuo asserts that, "during the autumn the neutral legations differentiated less between individuals seeking help, and the social background of the protected became more diverse" (p. 236), however this statement is unsubstantiated, and I would question how far the international ghetto became a place reflecting the broad cross section of Budapest Jews. There were two different ghettos in Budapest in the winter of 1944. They were not separated primarily by gender or age, although the Pest ghetto was largely made up of children and the elderly. Rather it was social class that was a key factor in distinguishing between Budapest Jews, and yet this issue tends, because of the sample that Palosuo uses, to lie under-explored. She offers us the voices of an elite housed in the International ghetto, but the voices of poorer Jews housed in the Pest ghetto are largely unrepresented.

Whilst she does offer us the voices of survivors, she could have listened harder both to what remained unsaid as well as what – and how – things were said. Throughout, Palosuo notes how many of her sample reference specific legislation or actions. She notes that 26 per cent of the testimonies refer to the *Numerus Clausus* Law, 21 per cent to their family's situation after the 1938 and 1939 laws and only two to the 1941 law. What these individuals say forms the basis for her discussion of Jewish perceptions and responses, but she does not ask why three

quarters of the testimonies do not mention the anti-Jewish laws. Here she could have asked how far the categories that she works with – gender, age and class – are significant in explaining silences.

Moreover, Palosuo could have thought more carefully about how survivors tell their stories. Not only does Piri Herling's description of the call-up of her husband to labour service challenge Palosuo's own conclusion that, "women were not physically persecuted at this stage, but they suffered because of the absence of their husbands, fathers, and brothers" (p. 119), but it points to the value of adopting discourse analysis. Piri describes: "I kept the business and I really did well. I learned a lot and I did the export business and I had good business at that time. Yeah, [everything was okay] except that the men w[ere] taken, we stayed in our own apartment and we had our own business. And my sister had children. And we knew that the men were alive." (p. 110) The story she tells of the absence of her husband providing an opportunity for her personal development and achievement is striking, as is the apparent pride with which she tells it. This example suggests a need for greater sensitivity to the linguistic nuances and modes of telling of testimonies as narratives.

In short, this is a flawed, yet valuable study. Palosuo does make a genuine contribution to Hungarian Holocaust historiography through this social history of Budapest survivors' perceptions and responses, and also offers an approach that challenges the tendency within gender studies of the Holocaust to focus largely on women, and downplay the significance of other factors such as age and class. Throughout the thesis, one thing struck me in particular. Drawing on the victims own words, Palosuo gives them a name and a voice, and negates the tendency to reduce them to a homogenous mass devoid of agency. As the central element of her project makes clear, these victims were men or women of particular ages and class backgrounds, living in different parts of Hungary with differing levels of commitment to the Jewish faith. They were persecuted as Jews but were individuals and groups with multiple identities. But more than this, these were not simply passive victims, but those who sought to evade anti-Jewish measures. That took place in 1920 with upper class Jews using their connections to gain entry into university for their children. And it also happened all the way through to the end of the war, even within the dark year 1944 when it is easy to assume that in the midst of the German occupation the victims were powerless. Looking at the stories of particular individuals as Palosuo does makes the complex picture of the Holocaust even more complex. Her study highlights different – as well as shared – perceptions and responses and forces us to engage with the complexity of the way that Jews living in Budapest through the events of the Holocaust responded in multiple ways.

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