

Levente Olosz: Biography of Ernő Marton

In respect of Hungarian-Jewish historiography of Zionist movement is highly incomplete, due to two reasons. Firstly, historically Zionism in Hungary occupied only a secondary position in the Hungarian Jewish society. Secondly, the scarcity and dispersion of sources have led historians to neglect the topic. In this context, Hungarian Jewry had a controversial attitude toward Zionism. The contradiction which has been indicated in almost every academic publication concerning Hungarian Zionism is that, despite the overrepresented Hungarian Zionist thinkers and actors (like Herzl himself) the new ideology did not gain much support from Hungarian Jewry. This contradictory attitude was best examined by Peter Haber on the period before the First World War, and Attila Novák on the interwar and post-Second World War period. After the Second World War Zionism in Hungary received an unexpected burst, however later the communist regime in East Europe seized political power and eliminated all political and social opposition, including the Zionist movement.

Even through, after the First World War one branch of the Hungarian Zionism movement managed to step out from societal isolation and create a new form of political movement, combined with new ideological particularities. Only it happened outside Hungary, specifically in Transylvania which was occupied by Romania after the war. During the interwar period the Transylvanian Zionist movement developed rapidly, attributable to the identity crisis caused by “dual minority” status and political activity of the Zionist organization.

However the history of the Transylvanian Zionist movement has not been processed, beside a few studies and books which touch the topic superficially and mainly using approach of institution history. As a result, a comprehensive work has not been made about this topic. The lack of research about the subject, most importantly about leaders of the movement is the chief reason for the absence of a monograph. History research has not answered questions like: What was the social background of the Zionist leaders? How did they come contact with Zionism? Or, what kind of skills and abilities did

them possess and use in their Zionist activities, in other words what was the personal key of success?

Therefore, the topic of my PhD dissertation is the biography of Marton Ernő, one of the most influential leaders of the Transylvanian Zionist movement. Despite he filled many leading positions in various political formulations, organizations and institutions, both in Romania and Israel, detailed biography has not been published about him yet.

Ernő Marton was born in Dicsőszentmarton (Târnăveni), Transylvania, in 1896. As a child he received religion education in Yeshiva, later on he acquired a thorough secular education as well, studying for his doctorate in jurisprudence at the universities of Kolozsvár (Cluj Napoca) and Budapest. Started his career in local public administration, but after the World War he devoted himself to the Zionist cause. In this new situation he and some of his colleague founded Zionist oriented paper, "Uj Kelet," and became the chief editor of the newspaper. Later entered politics and became the vice mayor of Kolozsvár.

With the beginning of ghettoization he fled to Romania and as the head of Zionist Emigration Committee, he desperately tried to rescue Jewish lives from Transylvania. Following Second World War, he appeared before the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry in Vienna, testifying to the grave conditions of the Jews after the War, and justifying the need for a national home as the only solution to the Jewish problem. In 1946 he emigrated to Palestine and participated on the establishment of the state. In 1948 he revived his daily paper, the Uj Kelet, became a leading member of the Zionist Progressive Party, and founded the World Federation of Jews of Hungarian Descent. He died on 29th August, 1960, at work.

Unfolding Marton's life and his work, goes beyond of his career as a Transylvanian Zionist, the dissertation has shown broader aspects of the Transylvanian and Hungarian Jewry. Based on Marton's professional activities and social embeddedness, multiple dimension of the Transylvanian Jewish history was explored, so far untouched by Hungarian-Jewish historiography. These are the followings:

1. History of the Jewish community in Dicsőszentmárton, most importantly the orthodox community's Zionist orientation.

2. The Zionist movement in Transylvania, especially ideology and method of organizing it.

3. History of the Hungarian Zionist newspaper, the "Új Kelet", including the social-political characteristic of its fellow worker, political-ideological affiliation or the hallmark of journalist work, both in interwar Romania and in Israel.

4. Process and details of the Zionist rescue activities directed on smuggling people across the Hungarian Romanian border in Transylvania, in 1944.

5. Social, political and intellectual characteristics of the Hungarian speaking Jewry in Palestine and Israel.

Marton Ernő's heritage constitutes the base of the primary sources, which is located in the The Strochlitz Institute, Haifa. These documents mainly concern Marton's professional activities, like his correspondents, reports or research and presentation made for the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry. Another bulky source unit is Marton's articles written for "Új Kelet" and other journals, newspapers. Marton published series of articles in the Új Kelet during his position as a chief editor (33 years), mostly in the issue political representation, discrimination, local politics. The third source unit is the document of institutions, political blocs and organizations in which Marton participated. These documents were researched in Israeli, Romanian and Hungarian archives.

Traditional parental and religious upbringing, as well as the traditional way of life, shaped Marton's Zionist worldview, but the presence of Hungarian culture in his life cannot be neglected either. Orthodox education and the stories he heard from his father first laid the foundation for the self-awareness of the deep-rooted Jewishness. Marton was certainly torn out of the Orthodox way of life by the divisive forces prevailing in the Jewish community of Dicsőszentmárton. However, despite his emerging career as a journalist and politician, he did not hide his views, on the contrary, he openly assert his Jewishness.

After the First World War, Marton appeared as the background man in Transylvanian Zionism. He laid the foundations of the movement with his ideological work and organizing skills. He managed to gain recognition for himself in editing the Jewish daily, the Új Kelet. The Transylvanian Jewish National Association can be

considered the central institution of the movement, as the Új Kelet contributed to increase its social base. The success of the paper came from journalists from Hungary and the content innovation, which, in addition to the writings encouraging Zionism, provided a modern information transfer for Transylvanian Jews. Through the high-quality daily newspaper, national thoughts reached a wide audience.

After the Second Vienna Award, when Northern Transylvania returned to Hungary, the government initiated a series of Antisemitic law, proving the correctness of the Zionist position. Relying on the use of the remaining movement frameworks and the system of international relations, Marton tried to speed up emigration and steel the inner Jewish life, but he was unable to shake up Hungarian Zionist movement. Marton's every effort was far from proving incapable of eradicating division in the movement and building a stable mass base. The Transylvanian part was in an incomplete position vis-à-vis the Budapest center, so it could not enforce the autonomous prerogatives it had enjoyed until then. The defeat was mainly manifested in the fact that the Transylvanians received almost nothing from the emigration quota received by the Hungarian Zionists.

When the concrete rescues had taken place with the commencement of the deportations, Marton looked completely helpless. Despite his Hungarian-Romanian political connections, Zionist movement network and personal prestige, he could hardly save his own life. After fleeing to Romania, he worked by all possible means to save the surviving Transylvanian Jews. He may have had some success in providing financial support to rescue a few people in border towns and in aiding smuggled persons, but his diplomatic endeavor, similar to those of the Kasztner, proved useless. Based on this, Marton's activities during the Holocaust fit Yehuda Bauer's definition of resistance, according to which all activities during the Holocaust that helped preserve the human dignity and social cohesion of persecuted Jews (smuggling, making fake papers, patient care, maintaining Jewish cultural organizations) were considered resistance. Marton's actions also support the view of historians who said the Zionists could carry out only minimal rescue work in a distressed situation, vulnerable to the occupying Germans.

In the newly formed Jewish state, Marton would have had the opportunity to embark on a diplomatic and even political career, but he rejected these offers. He wanted to continue to serve Hungarian Jewry and to improve the condition of new immigrants. Because of Hungarian Jews' extensive assimilation into the Hungarian culture in the 19th

century, this cultural attachment was strong among those who moved from the Hungarian-speaking areas to Palestine and then to Israel. Marton and other founded Organizations on the basis of the Hungarian language, which aimed to eliminate the perceived discrimination and to help new immigrants in their integration into the Israeli society. The division within the group prevented the coordination of services and the formation of a unified body under the Hitachdut Ole Hungaria. The organizations operated on a dual level: they initiated actions to facilitate integration, but Hungarian culture and Hungarian social structure were also preserved by their cultural activity and their own existence. Because of this dichotomy, a part of the community lived in a Hungarian cultural bubble for a long time.