

“Glaube an den Menschen” [Faith in humanity: A diary from Bergen-Belsen]. By Jenő Kolb. Edited by Thomas Rahe and Lajos Fischer. Translated from the Hungarian by Lajos Fischer. Bergen-Belsen – Berichte und Zeugnisse 7. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019. 280 pp.

“Hit az emberben”. Bergen-belseni napló. [Faith in humanity. A diary from Bergen-Belsen]. By Jenő Kolb. Edited by Thomas Rahe and Lajos Fischer. Bergen-Belsen – Berichte und Zeugnisse 8. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2020. 280 pp.

In recent years, there has been considerable interest among historians in diaries related to the Holocaust. This is part of a paradigm shift in the secondary literature on the Holocaust, which has come to focus more on family sources, mostly ego-documents. Nonetheless, historians (Hungarian historians in particular) only rarely make use of contemporary personal materials (such as diaries, correspondence, and photographs) as sources on modern history which are as relevant as archival documents.

One of the highly disputed chapters of the Shoah is the history of the so called Kasztner train. Rezső Kasztner (also went by the name Rudolf Kasztner and Israel Kasztner) worked as the deputy chairman of the Zionist Aid and Rescue Committee (Vaada) in Budapest. In 1944, as a result of his negotiations with Kurt Becher and Adolf Eichmann, he was able to organize the escape of more than 1,500 Hungarian Jews to Switzerland for a huge amount of money, which was transferred to the SS. This rescue action was part of Himmler’s big “exchange plan” formed with the Allies, for which Bergen-Belsen had formed by the SS back in 1943.

The personal sources related to the Kasztner passengers have peculiar significance. Jenő Kolb and his daughter managed to get on the Kasztner train. Kolb was born in Sopron in 1898 to a secular middle-class Jewish family. He studied art history in Austria and Germany, and in the 1920s, he became a member of the prominent Jewish liberal intellectual circles of Budapest as a lecturer and journalist. In the early 1930s, Kolb turned to Marxist-Socialist-Zionist ideas, and by the end of the decade, he had become a leading figure in the Hasomer Hacair movement. He kept a diary from the moment of his deportation from Budapest (June 30, 1944), throughout his time in Bergen-Belsen (July 9–December 4, 1944), and after his successful escape and his first days of

freedom in Switzerland (December 6–12, 1944). His work was not unknown to historians. The original handwritten Hungarian text was donated to the Yad Vashem by his daughter, Shosana Hasson-Kolb, and preserved by the Jerusalem-based Institute and Archive from the late 1950s, but it was essentially forgotten until 2000, when the Bergen-Belsen Memorial (*Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen*) decided to publish it. While this German-language edition met the scholarly expectations of its time, there have been many new research findings since then, so this new edition, complete with commentaries and notes, is a welcome publication. It is unique in part because of the publisher's aim to reach both an international readership and the Hungarian readership. In order to attain this goal, Wallstein Verlag published Kolb's diary almost simultaneously with the very same editorial contributions in 2019 and 2020, first in German and then in Hungarian.

The volume is divided into two major parts. In the first, the editors (Lajos Fischer and Thomas Rahe) explain the circumstances surrounding the publication of the new editions. Rahe also offers an epic study on the connection between Jenő Kolb's diary and the fates of the passengers on the Kasztner train in the concentration camp. This ambitious summary focuses on almost every aspect of the Kasztner story, giving a remarkable historical framework to the diary based on current research findings and sources which have been methodically interpreted. Rahe analyzes the societal components, including the number of the passengers, concluding that it may have been 1,684, though no one has conclusively determined the exact number of passengers so far. Rahe also analyzes the nationalities, religious distribution, and ages of the Kasztner group in Belsen, demonstrating (based on his own research) that 1,179 passengers (71 percent) seem to have been Hungarian, while the rest were Romanian, Yugoslavian, Czechoslovakian, and Polish Jews. They were mostly middle-aged Jews, frequently Zionists, with a significant number of East-Hungarian Orthodox Jewry and "Neolog" inhabitants from Budapest. It is worth noting that the significant proportion of elderly people (8.5 percent) was the second largest ratio of old inmates in the concentration camp world (after Theresienstadt). Rahe then demonstrates how the heterogeneity of these factors contributed to the heterogeneity of the group as a whole, which led to several inner problems during the process of deportation from Budapest, problems which mostly came to the surface in the *Aufenthaltslager* of Belsen. The second part of the study reflects on the most essential questions of the daily lives of the prisoners inside the camp. They were "prominent Jews" as part of the "exchange program," so they were treated differently by the SS and were

held in a separate sector (*Sonderlager*, later referred to as the *Ungarnlager*) of the exchange camp area. Rahe's examination offers a portrait of a comparatively multi-ethnic, privileged group of Jews from the Carpathian Basin who were hoping to be spared. He examines the children's schooling, the surprisingly diverse array of cultural activities in the barracks, the religious customs and activities of the prisoners, and other instances and forms of self-organization among them. The last section of the study is about the diaries which were kept by the inmates in Bergen-Belsen, regardless of how they arrived in the camp or which part of the camp they were held in. Rahe mentions 30 diaries, though he does not include in his discussion all of the Hungarian diaries documented in the secondary literature in Hungarian.

Rahe's discussion is followed by a short study by Szabolcs Szita concerning some of the details of the Kasztner train. Surprisingly, Szita did not use the most relevant and current bibliography for his work, so his remarks add little new information to our knowledge of Kolb's diary. In contrast, the personal accounts by Kolb's daughter Shoshana Hasson-Kolb give intimate details about her father's life before and after deportation, highlighting his activity in the Hasomer Hacair's movement.

The second, largest part of the volume is the diary itself. The text suggests that, as an influential and agile intellectual, Kolb played a key role in the *Ungarnlager*. He was responsible for Zionist cultural activities, and he established a choir and held lectures on music and art history in the group's accommodations in the 10–11. barracks. Kolb write log entries every day or at least every other day, which is why his diary is the richest and most extensive of the diaries from this "prominent group." These informative entries present the history of the Kasztner train, from the detention camp in Budapest, the boarding of the train at the Rákosrendező railway station, and the long journey from the Hungarian capital to Bergen-Belsen and then to Switzerland. The longest and most detailed entries were written while Kolb was in the concentration camp. Many entries are about his beloved homeland and his anxieties concerning the fates of his relatives and friends. Other entries offer an impression of everyday problems within the barrack, including the constant sense of fear, insecurity, hunger, and the lack of information. Kolb also provides a great deal of information about the distinctive personalities of some of the inmates and, in particular, the cooperation among the rival Hungarian groups, especially between the orthodox and the Haluc youngsters. He was obviously prejudiced because of his attachment to the Zionist movement, but the editors offer more than 270

footnotes to explain his biased comments or they call the reader's attention to the current historical bibliography. In some cases, it might have been preferable had Rahe and Fischer resolved some of the issues that arise because of the old-fashioned foreign phrases in the diary entries. They include two additions which offer nice supplements to the diary. Kolb felt that he and the other inmates were the inhabitants of a kind of closed small town in the middle of the horrific concentration camp. He often wrote about the different levels of the self-organization system of the Ungarnlager under SS control, from its leadership to the everyday mechanisms of different subdepartments. The editors have included official Operation Rules of the Ungarnlager as an annex, which provides useful context for the diary entries, and they have also included short biographies of all the individuals mentioned in the pages of the diary, plus a useful glossary on the most common Hebrew words found in the entries.

This publication of Jenő Kolb's entire diary with the accompanying editorial materials constitutes a serious contribution to the social history of the Hungarian Holocaust and our understanding of the complex realities of the Nazi concentration camps.

András Szécsényi
Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security
szecsényiandras@gmail.com