

Preface

Oscar Jaszi, to Hungarians known as Oszkár Jászi, was the leading figure in turn-of-the century Hungary's bourgeois radical movement. He was born on March 2, 1875, in the city of Nagykároly (today's Satu Mare, in northeastern Rumania). His father was a Jewish doctor who had converted to the Reformed faith and who instilled in his son a love for learning and a sympathy for the common people. Jaszi completed his higher education in Hungary, France and England, and by 1911 he was teaching as a lecturer in constitutional studies at the University of Kolozsvár (today's Cluj, in Rumania). By this time he had also become prominent in Hungary's non-Marxist radical reform movement. He was one of the founders and sustainers of the Társadalomtudományi Társaság (Sociological Society) and became the editor of the reformist periodical, *Huszadik Század* (Twentieth Century). He also published numerous pamphlets and some longer studies on subjects relating to sociology, politics and what nowadays is known as "ethnic studies." Still later he was elected president of the National Radical Party. In the short-lived postwar revolutionary government of Mihály Károlyi, Jaszi was the minister in charge of nationality affairs, and shouldered the difficult task of negotiating with Hungary's national minorities at a time when the country, indeed the whole of the Austro-Hungarian Dual-Monarchy, was disintegrating.

Jaszi was unable to stop this process of disintegration. He resigned from his post and, several weeks after the collapse of the Károlyi regime, left Hungary to begin his long exile, the first leg of which took him to Vienna. Here, he worked feverishly to organize the democratic elements of the Hungarian emigration. For some time he edited the *Bécsi Magyar Újság* (Hungarian Newspaper of Vienna). He tried to establish contacts with the leaders of the Successor States (Hungary's new neighbours), in preparation for a possible takeover by democratic forces in Hungary and a subsequent rapprochement between that country and its neighbours. When it became evident that the leaders of the Successor States were not interested

in supporting Jaszi's (and Károlyi's) aspirations, he made plans to abandon his avocation of full-time political émigré and sought employment as an academic in the United States. In 1925 he succeeded, and from that time until his retirement after the war, he taught at Ohio's Oberlin College. Both during the time of his Viennese exile, and during his life as an émigré academic in America, Jaszi conducted a war of words against what he called "unreformed" and "feudal" Hungary and its postwar leadership, in particular, Admiral Miklós Horthy. Jaszi's aspirations—the creation of a democratic Hungary, an equitable revision of the territorial provisions of the postwar Treaty of Trianon and rapprochement between Hungary and its neighbours—were never realized. His hope that the Second World War might bring about the achievement of his dreams was dashed by the war's after-effects: the further growth of chauvinism in Czechoslovakia, Rumania and Yugoslavia, and the coming of Soviet domination over East Central Europe. Jaszi died a disappointed but unrepentant democrat in Oberlin on 13 February 1957. He had outlived, by a few days, his post-1919 political nemesis, Miklós Horthy.

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Jaszi has been a controversial figure not only in the realm of Hungarian politics, but also in historiography. Early assessments of him as a thinker and a political activist had been negative, no doubt because as a cosmopolitan intellectual who had served a revolutionary regime, he was an anathema in post-1920 "counter-revolutionary" Hungary. His advocacy of radical land reform, his opposition to the privileges of the feudal ruling class, his criticism of the Roman Catholic Church's role in education, his befriending of the leaders of the non-Magyar minorities, were deeds that doomed him an opponent of a "Christian-National" Hungary.¹ After the passing of the Horthy era in Hungary at the end of the Second World War, a different assessment emerged of Jaszi in a liberal, post-war Hungary. He now came to be seen as a democrat and a reformer in the tradition of the Enlightenment and nineteenth century liberalism. This view of Jaszi was soon to change however. After the imposition in Hungary of a communist dictatorship under Mátyás Rákosi, communist historians declared Jaszi a man with petit-bourgeois ideas who, as time went on, became increasingly opposed to true proletarian socialism.²

The dark days of Stalinism were fortunately not long lasting in the Hungarian People's Republic. In the 1960s winds of change began to be felt in the country and, especially, the world of Hungarian scholarship. Increasingly, non-communist progressives became acceptable to the regime and all sorts of reformers of the Magyar past were co-opted into the pantheon

of the nation's heroes. As one contemporary historian argued, Hungary was not so richly endowed with social and political reformers that she could afford to disown Jaszi.³ Indeed, from the 1960s on, Jaszi's reception by Hungarian scholarship became more and more positive. Of course, he was still criticized for not accepting a Marxist viewpoint, but the fact that he had been an opponent of the Communists throughout his life was not voiced. On the contrary, his anti-communism was sometimes glossed over by historians dealing with him.⁴ And, as intellectual dissent in socialist Hungary increased, it became more and more fashionable to praise people who sought a road to reform that did not involve the bloody revolutionary path advocated by the Soviets. By the mid-1980s, when Hungarian scholars could endorse anyone except outright counter-revolutionaries, Jaszi had become an attractive focus for research and reflection. As a result, his reputation reached new heights. It is probably safe to assume that Jaszi's historical stature had peaked at the end of the 1980s, as it seems unlikely that in post-communist Hungary a critic of capitalism and an associate of Mihály Károlyi would continue to have a camp of enthusiastic admirers. Because most of the papers in this volume were produced in the period that Jaszi's historical figure stood at its highest, this collection of essays might well constitute a tribute to him the like of which has not appeared in the past and might not appear in the future.

East Central Europe has only recently lived through experiments with radical socialism and with official anti-clericalism, and has been left with the bitter after-taste of these explorations in alternate politics. As a result, Jaszi the left-leaning reformer and critic of the Church might not be the figure that will solicit praise from the present generation of historians. On the other hand, Jaszi the advocate of East Central European reconciliation and integration will no doubt continue to receive attention in the future. His dream of a federated Danubian Europe remains unfulfilled. At the same time, the division of that part of the world into competing and potentially quarrelsome independent states will no doubt be seen as the major weakness of the region. As the problems of disunity will probably plague East Central Europe for some time to come, Jaszi will be remembered as one of those few who had proposed to prevent that disunity as soon as it became evident that the old Habsburg Empire was not acceptable to its component nations. Jaszi then, will most likely continue to have his admirers, if for no other major reason than for his advocacy of Danubian federalism. And, we can also predict with reasonable assurance, that he will remain a controversial figure of modern Hungarian history.

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Most of the papers in this volume were prepared for a conference dedicated

to the memory of Oscar Jaszi that had been held at Jaszi's American university, Oberlin College, several years ago. For quite some time, the proceedings of the conference had languished on the desks of various would-be editors—and they had spent quite some time in the filing cabinets of the present ones also. In the meantime some of the papers were revised and updated by their authors, a fact which prodded the editors of this volume to resuscitate the project and resume—or begin as the case might be—the work of editing. Some of the papers given at the original Jaszi memorial conference were not included in this collection, either because their authors had not been able (or willing) to update them, or because turning them into publishable prose would have taken more time than the editors felt they could afford. These decisions were arbitrary and had been taken without the type of consultation that our journal and its camp of contributors and advisors had been accustomed to in earlier years.

The first paper in the collection is an overview by Péter Hanák, Jaszi's biographer and the doyen of Hungarian historians of the turn-of-the-century. It deals mainly with the subject Jaszi will probably be most remembered for in the third millennium: the question of Danubian patriotism. The next essay, written by Hungarian historian Attila Pók, explores the quite neglected subject (at least as far as historical literature in English is concerned) of Jaszi the political tactician and organizational leader of Hungary's reform movement. The following paper, by Canadian historian Thomas Spira, offers a case study of Jaszi's dealings with Hungary's minorities during his brief 1918 tenure in office as Minister of Nationality Affairs. Next, György Litván, another long-time Hungarian student of Oscar Jaszi's life and writings, outlines the exiled Jaszi's efforts during the early 1920s to build contacts with the progressive statesmen of the Successor States. Then, in the penultimate paper in the collection, American historian Thomas Szendrey deals with another non-chronological theme: Jaszi's philosophy of history. The concluding essay examines a less prominent phase of Jaszi's life. It treats some of his activities during the Second World War and sketches his reflections on the "Hungarian Problem" some quarter century after he had disappeared from the main stage of Hungarian history. This study paints a less flattering image of Jaszi—in this case Jaszi the isolated and disappointed émigré academic—than that presented by those who deal with his career in his younger days. However, rather than intending to rain on the Jaszi enthusiasts' parade, this essay wishes to remind readers that Jaszi too, had his weaknesses—especially as he was approaching old age—and that he is a controversial figure in Hungary's evolution.

By publishing this collection of papers, we not only wish to honour Jaszi's memory but hope to rekindle interest in a man who was an outspoken critic of the Hungary of his day, and who dedicated his life to changing the social and political system of his native land, and indeed, the fate

of all of East Central Europe. Now that the centenary of Jaszi's debut on the Danubian political stage is slowly approaching, we hope that a new assessment of his life's work might be possible, one which is not coloured by the ideologies—and the ideologically induced emotions—that had prevailed in Hungary in the more than three-quarters century since he had fled his homeland.

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NOTES

- 1 Lee Congdon, "History and Politics in Hungary: The Rehabilitation of Oszkár Jászi," *East European Quarterly* IX (Fall, 1975), pp. 319f.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 320–23.
- 3 Historian József Varga cited *ibid.*, p. 324.
- 4 Passages that revealed Jaszi as an anti-communist, were simply left out of a published collection of his writings. Tibor Hajdu to the writer of these lines, in a private discussion in October, 1983, Bellagio, Italy.