

Jaszi's Viennese Years: Building Contacts with the Democratic Left in the Successor States

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The Viennese years of Oscar Jaszi were inserted between the two halves of his life, the Hungarian and the American ones. This period represents a kind of transition between these two lives, that of the Hungarian scholar and politician with international outlook, and that of the American professor with Hungarian preoccupations. Jaszi's Vienna years gradually disrupted or transformed his former existence, family circumstances, professional and political ties, and prepared him for his "second life" in a new world, for a new marriage, a new profession, and for a new approach to old problems.

"Since our last meeting in Budapest, a whole world had collapsed," Jaszi wrote to R.W. Seton-Watson in his first letter after the war.¹ When he left Hungary for Vienna on 1 May 1919, the "May Day" of the Soviet Republic, he could not yet realize that his old world had vanished forever. When, in 1925, he left Vienna for Oberlin, Ohio, he was already aware of it.

The Vienna years were the most tormented ones in Jaszi's long life. He spent them in a feverish state of constant inner crises and mental anguish, both public and private, and he could not calm down until after he had arrived in America.

Despite this, his performance was extraordinary. He wrote an account of the Hungarian revolution and counter-revolution of 1918–19 in Hungarian, German and English;² he attempted to draw up a balance-sheet of his social and economic theories in several book-sized manuscripts.³ He edited the daily *Bécsi Magyar Újság* (Hungarian Newspaper of Vienna) for three years and wrote hundreds of articles for Hungarian, German and other journals. He lived in Vienna but made frequent and long trips to meet friends and relatives in the Successor States and in Italy. In 1923–24 he spent half a year on a lecture tour in the United States. All the time, he conducted an enormous correspondence and kept a diary which remains an indispensable source for the history of all the emigres, from the Liberals to the Com-

munists, and of their political and diplomatic efforts never mentioned in printed sources.

As leaders of the democratic group of Hungarian exiles Jaszi and Mihály Károlyi aimed, in the first months of 1920, at uniting in a common front most of the anti-Horthy exiles. There was, a single but important difference: Károlyi wanted to include the Communists, while Jaszi wished to keep them out in a neutral position. All these efforts for unification were frustrated by various disagreements, above all in regard to international orientation. The Communists (and Károlyi) looked towards Soviet Russia; the Social Democrats hoped for the aid of the Socialist International and the Socialist and Liberal public opinion of the West; while the Liberals were divided between pro-Habsburg and anti-Habsburg elements.

Jaszi felt deeply disappointed by the Allies' attitudes and their peace-making in East Central Europe. He declared Entente policy regarding Hungary "wrong and short-sighted."⁴ Though he never gave up faith in the values of Western democracy — and the usefulness of its liberal and socialist aspects — he sought support from sources he considered more immediately concerned. He thought to have found this in the Successor States, in the countries of the future Little Entente, whom he called the "allies of Hungarian Democracy." The paramount interest of the governments appeared to be the elimination of the revanchist Hungarian regime which seemed to be preparing for war against them and fomenting unrest among their Hungarian minorities. It was, therefore, only logical for Jaszi to build contacts in these directions. He conceived this alliance not as a mere tactical one, necessary to defeat the Horthy regime, but as a long-term necessity in the strategy of seeking rapprochement with the Successor States, in the integration of Hungary in a new democratic environment and, as a final step, in a Danubian Confederation.

He considered this work of contact-building as one of the most important tasks of the exiles and as his personal mission, because he felt to be the right man to accomplish it. Indeed, his past, his whole political record qualified him to negotiate with the political and intellectual leaders of the Danubian states and to try to persuade them to assume a tough attitude towards the Hungarian regime and a friendly one towards the Hungarian people — at home and in their own countries. Actually, this was the very same plan which he had been unable to realize in 1918 as Hungarian minister of nationalities. Now he tried to initiate it from abroad and hoped to co-operate with his former adversaries, the Czech and Rumanian leaders.

Meanwhile, he distanced himself from all kinds of Magyar nationalism and was ready to accept the basic condition of any co-operation with the Successor States: the acknowledgment of the *status quo* and the renouncing of the idea of forcible revision of the Trianon treaty. The Károlyi-Jaszi group was the first and, for a long time, the only Hungarian political con-

stellation which recognized the lasting nature of the post-1920 international order in East Central Europe. This stand separated them from the overwhelming majority of their compatriots. They were denounced as "traitors" and "Masaryk's agents" by official Hungary and the entire right-wing press. Jaszi shouldered defiantly this role for 25 years, without abandoning his patriotic feelings, and his loyalty to Hungary's true national interests.

In a memorial talk on Thomas G. Masaryk, given before the Assembly of Oberlin College in 1937, Jaszi related that he once asked the President: "If you were a Hungarian statesman, what would you do?" Masaryk answered: "Well, in this hypothetical case I would try to do two things: First, I would fight for an honest carrying out of national autonomy for the Hungarians. In the second place, I would advocate the return to Hungary of those territories in the frontier regions where the Magyars constitute a solid, homogeneous majority."⁵ Undoubtedly, Jaszi quoted these words as the supreme justification of his own stand. He had exactly the same two reservations in his friendship to and moral support of the Successor States. The first one he outlined in an editorial about the possible alliance of the Democratic exiles. Hungarian Democracy, he wrote, may renounce revanche but can never give up claiming the same rights for its separated Hungarian kinsmen which it had demanded before the war for the oppressed nationalities of old Hungary.⁶ The second reservation, a peaceful correction of the new frontiers in favour of a democratic Hungary, Jaszi found impolitic to declare publicly, but raised it in his private talks with Czech statesmen.

These confidential talks started in October 1919, when Jaszi visited Masaryk, Beneš and Tušar in Prague, for the first time. His visits there became regular during the next years. Czechoslovakia was, as the first democracy in Central Europe, the most important country in Jaszi's international connections.

On March 30, 1920, together with Mihály Károlyi and Pál Szende, Jaszi had a long and decisive conversation in Prague with Eduard Beneš. According to Jaszi's diary, the Hungarians put the following questions to the Czech statesman: 1. Whether Beneš saw any sense in an organized Hungarian political emigration without the participation of the Communists? 2. Whether Czechoslovakia was willing to redress the injustices of the Peace Treaty? 3. Whether Beneš was ready to acknowledge the Hungarian democratic emigration in a semi-official way?⁷

Beneš answered all the three questions in the positive. He asserted that the regime in power in Budapest was unacceptable and intolerable, because "this feudal island cannot maintain itself amidst the democratic Successor States." He assured his visitors that he regarded them as the only group suitable for leading Hungary and for creating a new equilibrium in East Central Europe. The most important thing was, Beneš emphasized, to

create honest and sincere communication between the democratic forces of their nations.

This was exactly what Jaszi wanted to hear and to put into practice. During the following months he greatly extended the range of his activity. In November 1920, he made his first Balkan tour, visiting Belgrade, Bucharest, and Zagreb, to meet both the government and opposition leaders of Yugoslavia and Rumania . . .

I felt the necessity for some time, [he said in a statement] to inform the Southern Slav and Rumanian political circles about the true situation of Hungary and on the views of the Hungarian democrats and, at the same time, to build direct contacts with the democratic and progressive wing of these circles. Also, I received invitations from my old Yugoslav and Rumanian friends to renew our connections which were interrupted by the war and the revolutions. Of course, I spoke everywhere in my own name, but I am sufficiently familiar with the conception of all shades of Hungarian exile [opinion] to feel entitled to speak also in the name of the others, except for the Communists who continue their policy of the world-revolution catastrophe.

My conception, [Jaszi continued] presented to the South Slav and Rumanian democratic public opinion, was roughly as follows: The Hungarian problem concerns closely the Little Entente. Without its proper solution it is impossible to create those conditions which would allow the development of Central Europe. Hungary is the Archimedean point of this fatally sick Central European world. This must be the starting point of either a regeneration or a final dissolution . . . the collapse of the Horthy regime is therefore the vital interest of the Little Entente.⁸

However, he warned against a military intervention. Instead, he proposed political pressure, insistence on demobilization, and a delay of the evacuation of the Southern town of Pécs and Baranya county by Yugoslavia. At the same time he advocated free trade and a solution of the problem of the Hungarian minorities whose situation he defined as depressing.

The poor refugee—coming from a Viennese bed and breakfast place, and traveling day and night by slow trains—was received as a statesman and a true friend by Pasić, Pribičević, Drashkovic and others in Belgrade, by Averescu, Take Ionescu, Gareflid, Duca, Octavian Goga and other ministers, Iuliu Maniu, Bratianu, Iorga Mihalache, Gusti and other leaders in Bucharest. Some wanted to introduce him to the King. However, his person was better received than his proposals.

“I got many encouragements but no definite promises,” Jaszi wrote to Károlyi. “The leftist parties and the young people greeted my ideas enthusiastically, while the right-wing parties and old people did not understand

me. Averescu or Take Ionescu would more easily communicate with an agent of Horthy. In spite of their great politeness, their old diplomatic and militaristic brains cannot accept the thought that there are Hungarians who oppose revanche sincerely and in principle.”⁹ Very soon, however, Jaszi had to experience a similar attitude displayed by the “modern” and “progressive” representatives of the Successor States.

In March 1921, just a few days after the Károlyi family was expelled from Italy and Jaszi was prevented from boarding a ship in Naples bound for the United States, Eduard Beneš met the Hungarian foreign minister Gusztáv Gratz. The Successor States began to accommodate themselves to the Horthy regime, which they actually preferred to a strong and democratic government in Hungary, which might have been attractive to the Magyar minorities of their own countries. Accordingly, their relations with the emigres became looser and more businesslike. They regarded them rather as political tools than allies and partners for the future.

Jaszi, too, began to differentiate more sharply between the governmental and the genuinely democratic forces in the Successor States. He trusted less and less the former and tried to base the cause of a Danubian rapprochement on the latter. Before the end of 1921 he presented a detailed plan of a Danubian Cultural League to be formed of the democratic elements and the intellectual elite of these countries. The tasks of this multinational organization would have been to make mutually known the history and culture of every Danubian nation, to analyze their social and economic problems, to popularize their cultural achievements, to publish a review, to organize conference and—last but not least—to combat chauvinism and defend the national and human rights of the minorities in each country. A remarkable plan indeed, even for today!

The problem was, however, the weakness of such independent elements and forces in East Central Europe. The keenest interest for Jaszi’s plan was shown in Rumania, both among the Rumanian intellectuals in Bucharest and the Hungarians in Transylvania. The left-wing Bucharest review *Revista Vremii* published a series of articles by Jaszi on Danubian problems and on the proposed cultural league.¹⁰

In May, 1923, Jaszi spent three weeks in Bucharest and in six cities in Transylvania. Again, he was received sympathetically by political authorities and scholars in the capital. In Transylvania, however, he was confronted with the daily practice of Rumanian nationality policy and the realities of minority life. He had to realize that his benevolent urging for an active and loyal civic attitude became, in the eyes of the Hungarians, tantamount to national submission. During this dramatic trip he came to see clearer than ever before that the policy of the Little Entente, which was tolerant towards the Hungarian regime and intolerant towards the Hungarian minorities, was ruining and compromising his own position and activity.

At the end of his journey, like a *deus ex machina*, R.W. Seton-Watson appeared in Kolozsvár [Cluj] and Jaszi, according to his diary, shared with him his doubt whether it was permissible to continue his political activity and to keep up his one-sided alliance with Prague, Bucharest, and Belgrade. Seton-Watson, as Jaszi noted, “understood the dilemma and promised to tell Beneš that he [Beneš] must decide whether he will or will not cooperate with the [Hungarian] exiles.”¹¹

Beneš, however, as Jaszi himself suspected, had very much changed his mind since 1920. Jaszi believed that the Czech leader was thinking the following way: “the exiles, once they get home, would pursue the same nationalist policy of territorial integrity [as Horthy does]. Otherwise, the exile is not an appropriate partner because he passed the limit which no emigre should, vis-a-vis his country’s public opinion.”¹² In this cynical view, Jaszi was sadly right. Still, he was unable and unwilling to change his mind on the future of Danubia and the necessity of an understanding with the Successor States. Since he was prevented from representing this idea in all honesty on the political level and on the spot, he had no other choice but to abandon politics in favour of scholarship, and leave Danubia and head for America.

As an independent American scholar, in the 1930s, he criticized the domestic policies and minority policies of the Successor States, even those of Czechoslovakia.¹³ But he maintained his sympathy towards this endangered democracy, especially in the dark years of 1938–39. For this attitude, Oscar Jaszi had to pay a high price in terms of his relations with Hungary, and most of his compatriots.

Nevertheless, he was ready to pay this price in the hope that the Czech leaders learned their lesson from the easy collapse of their multinational states, and that they will promote – as Beneš had personally promised him during the war in Chicago – Danubian understanding and federation after the conflict.

When, in 1945, he witnessed the opposite trend, Jaszi tried to do everything to stop the forcible expulsion of the Hungarian minorities from Slovakia. He wrote letters to Beneš,¹⁴ Harold J. Laski,¹⁵ British journalist W. Steed, and, in the end, to the *New York Times*.¹⁶ And in a private letter, he confessed to his beloved first wife that the great mistake of his life had been overestimating “our Czechs!”¹⁷

Jaszi’s efforts to establish closer contacts with democratic elements in neighbouring countries did not have many supporters in the seventy years after his arrival in Vienna. Even his call for the establishment of a Danubian Cultural League has fallen on deaf ears.

NOTES

1 Jaszi to R.W. Seton-Watson, Nov. 29, 1919. Columbia University, New York,

- Butler Library, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Jaszi Collection.
- 2 *Revolution and Counter-revolution in Hungary* (London, 1924). Second edition: New York: Howard Fertig, 1969.
 - 3 Jaszi Collection.
 - 4 Jaszi to Seton-Watson, Nov. 29, 1919, *cit.*
 - 5 "The Significance of Thomas G. Masaryk for the Future," *Journal of Central European Affairs*, April 1950, pp. 1–8.
 - 6 "A magyar demokrácia szövetségesei" [The Allies of the Hungarian Democracy], *Bécsi Magyar Újság*. Dec. 15, 1920.
 - 7 Jaszi Collection.
 - 8 *Bécsi Magyar Újság*. Dec. 12, 1920.
 - 9 Jaszi to Károlyi, Dec. 14, 1920. *Károlyi Mihály levelezése* [The Correspondence of Mihály Károlyi] (Budapest, 1978), p. 729.
 - 10 See Sándor Balázs' article in *Századok* (Budapest), 5, 1985.
 - 11 Jaszi's Diary. June 1, 1923. Jaszi Collection.
 - 12 Jaszi to Károlyi, March 21, 1922. Jaszi Collection.
 - 13 "Czechoslovakia's First Years," *The Yale Review*, 1934, pp. 701–734. "War Germs in the Danube Basin," *The Nation*, Nov.-Dec. 1934.
 - 14 O. Jaszi and R. Vámbéry to Eduard Beneš, Sep. 11, 1945. Jaszi Collection.
 - 15 Jaszi to H.J. Laski, Sept. 19, 1945. Jaszi Collection.
 - 16 "Hungarians in Slovakia. No Solution in Minority Problem seen in Czechoslovakia's Plan" *The New York Times*, Dec. 2, 1946.
 - 17 Jaszi to Anna Lesznai, May 19, 1945. Jaszi Collection.