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## Ancient Legends, Modern History—Jewish Themes in the Works of Illés Kaczér

Illés Kaczér was unique among Hungarian Jewish writers in that he bridged the gap in his own lifetime as well as in his works between the reality of the tradition-bound, *shtetl*-like East European communities and the emancipated and increasingly assimilated, urban Jewish experience. In his *chef-d'oeuvre*, a four-volume family novel to which he gave the collective title *The Jewish Legend*—and the work which will be at the center of my discussion—Kaczér focuses, in a captivating yet sociologically credible manner, on the all-important transition from *shtetl* to city, and traces the origins of modern Jewish life in Hungary.

In a recently published introduction to the memoirs of the noted historian and anthropologist, Raphael Patai, the critic Miklós Szabolcsi mentions Illés Kaczér's name along with those of other writers—Lajos Hatvany, Tamás Kóbor, Béla Zsolt, Péter Újváry, Elie Wiesel—who wrote significant literary works about the Hungarian Jewish experience.<sup>1</sup> Yet Szabolcsi, like others before him, makes a careful distinction between those writers—Hatvany, Kóbor and Zsolt, for instance—who dealt in the main with the social history of essentially urbanized Jewish communities, with the spiritual and psychological dramas of secularized Jews, and those writers—Péter Újváry, Elie Wiesel and Illés Kaczér—who, because they themselves were closer to their Jewish roots, to the cultural and religious ethos of *Yiddishkeit*, chronicled the lives and times of village and small-town Jews steeped in Orthodoxy, in pre-modern folk cultures. It is in this connection that Sándor Scheiber—in an extensive survey of Jewish folklore in Illés Kaczér's fiction—compares Kaczér to someone like Isaac Bashevis Singer.<sup>2</sup>

But such comparisons and categorizations are in a way misleading. For while it is true that Kaczér's novels and stories about traditional East European Jewish life—their narrative riches, their earthiness as well as their fable-like, magical quality—do share common elements with some of the classics of Yiddish literature, including I. B. Singer, his orientation and perspective as a writer, his subject matter very often, as well as his language, his style, make him a very different sort of Jewish writer. For one thing, Kaczér did not only treat Jewish subjects. A great deal of his literary output is quite removed from, or only obliquely connected with the Jewish experience. For example, one of his novels, *Ikongo nem hal meg* [*Ikongo Will Not Die*, 1936], which was reviewed, rather critically, by László Kardos in *Nyugat*, the most prestigious literary journal of the day,<sup>3</sup> is about a young African in search of his identity in modern-day Paris and America. It may be argued, of course, that Kaczér's Jewish sensibility is much in evidence even in this work—after all, he is dealing with the problem of assimilation, the difficulty of protecting one's native heritage against the encroachments of an enticing though ultimately destructive modernity.

Yet, when approaching his Jewish subjects, Illés Kaczér shows himself to be a writer who, on the one hand, can maintain the necessary distance from the traditional Jewish world he is intimately familiar with, but who can also readily understand his pious Jewish characters' hostility toward forces they perceive to be alien and threatening. Thus, his uniqueness among Hungarian Jewish writers stems from the fact that traditional Judaism for him was not a distant memory, not simply quaint local color, but a living, vibrant reality, and

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<sup>1</sup> M. Szabolcsi, 'Patai Rafael emlékezése elé', *Múlt és Jövő*, 1989/2, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> S. Scheiber, 'Kaczér Illés és a zsidó folklór', in *Folklór és tárgytörténet*, Vol. 3 (Budapest, 1984), p. 296.

<sup>3</sup> L. Kardos, 'Ikongo nem hal meg—Kaczér Illés regénye', *Nyugat*, XXX, pt. 1., p. 300. See also *Korunk*, 1936/XI, pp. 987–88.

his representation of it could therefore be more authentic, more thoroughgoing, and also less nostalgic, less idealized, than similar depictions in the works of the contemporaries of his—and here again, we might mention novelists like Lajos Hatvany, Tamás Kóbor, András Komor—who, both as writers and Jews, represented a later stage in the assimilation process, for whom the earlier chapters of Hungarian Jewish life were based on shadowy memories, family legends and the like, and not on a historical reality that to Kaczér was still accessible, palpable.

Having said this, I must also add that Illés Kaczér was nevertheless very much a Hungarian writer—if we define a writer's nationality by the language he chooses to write in. And to my mind this is the only usable definition, even though I know we can all think of unique exceptions. Kaczér probably knew more Yiddish than any other Hungarian writer, and also spoke German, Romanian, Hebrew and English, but he never wrote in any other language but Hungarian. When we consider the extent of Hungarian Jewish acculturation and linguistic assimilation, this is not at all surprising. There were certainly many self-contained, *shtetl*-like communities in historical Hungary, especially in its eastern provinces, and—in the nineteenth century, at least—Yiddish was widely spoken in the country. But because of the predominance of German and Hungarian, it never caught on as a literary language. In spite of enthusiastic individual initiatives, no significant body of Yiddish literature was ever produced in Hungary. Indeed, there was—and to some extent still is—general disdain for Yiddish among Hungarian Jews. The term used for it (in Hungary as elsewhere in Central Europe)—*jargon*—is clearly one of contempt. It is therefore curious, yet in the light of the foregoing not at all surprising, that although most of the Jewish characters in Kaczér's novel are Yiddish speakers, the author has them speak not only proper, idiomatic Hungarian but one that is quite dignified, and in the case of peasant types, vivid and colorful. Very rarely do they lapse into Yiddishisms or non-standard Hungarian usage, though such lapses, in a realist narrative, would be perfectly normal, even expected. Kaczér also eschews the stylistic practice of some of the best American Jewish writers who in the diction of their Jewish characters manage to suggest the rhythms and cadences of spoken Yiddish. It is interesting to note that whereas a daringly experimental and stylized version of such speech can be found in the work of the most brilliant Hungarian Jewish writers of the century—in the novels and plays of Milán Füst and Dezső Szomory, for example—Kaczér, a far more self-consciously Jewish and also, admittedly, a less original writer, remained, in matters of style at least, a Hungarian purist.

Moreover, his representation of the Hungarian countryside, which from the late eighteenth century onward included a growing Jewish element, owes as much to Hungarian literary antecedents as it does to traditional Jewish sources. Various provincial Jewish types: the village innkeeper and shopkeeper, the Jewish peddler, the itinerant mendicant, the *shnorrer*, the *yeshivah* student, the *bokher*, the traveling musician, the wandering Jew in his many guises all make their appearance in Kaczér's richly textured narrative. But these characters are familiar from earlier Hungarian literature as well; they can be found in the works of such literary giants as Mór Jókai and Kálmán Mikszáth, who offer a similarly colorful tapestry of rural Hungarian society in their novels. And these figures and the motifs that accompany them are evoked with even greater artistry by many modern Hungarian literary masters, both Jewish and non-Jewish. (I need allude here only to stories by Zsigmond Móricz, plays by Ernő Szép, poems by Zoltán Zelk.)

We should emphasize again, however, that Kaczér's own background made it much easier for him to offer an insider's look into the world whose practices and laws and taboos were at once sacred and mundane. In his depictions, the mysteriousness of this world takes on an intimate, down-to-earth quality that is largely absent from writings which evoke the same world with a more abstract, more solemn, more sentimental knowledgeability. In this sense Kaczér can indeed be compared to the masters of Yiddish literature.

At the same time—and this is part of the uniqueness of his position—Kaczér was also a very cultivated, cosmopolitan writer. During his long, eventful and productive life, he lived in many different places. The centers of his early literary activities were Budapest, Pozsony [Bratislava] and Kolozsvár [Cluj]. But he also spent time in Vienna and Berlin. In 1938 he moved to London, and that city became his home for the next two decades. (Sándor Scheiber remembers the middle-aged Kaczér as an elegant, sophisticated man, a brilliant raconteur.<sup>4</sup> He spent the last twenty years of his life in Israel. He died there in 1980 at the age of 93.

Kaczér wrote the first two volumes of *The Jewish Legend, Ne félj szolgám, Jákob* [Fear Not, My Servant Jacob] and *Jerichó ostroma* [The Siege of Jericho] during his London years. In them he returns to the past and to his native region, the corner of northeastern Hungary closest to the Carpathian Mountains, an area known for its historical old towns and multiethnic rural communities largely untouched by the winds of change. It is a region that is not too distant from Galicia either, whence, during the course of the nineteenth century, Jewish immigrants in large numbers moved southward and westward, seeking a better life in the more prosperous parts of the Austrian, and later Austro-Hungarian, Empire.

In the first chapters of the novel we meet Shulem, a very pious and very poor Jew from the East who settles with his family in a tiny village near Nagykároly [now Carei]. The time is the early 1820s; by a fortunate accident, or as our hero sees it, as a result of the guiding hand of divine providence, he shows up in the right place at the right time—he is offered a lease on the village tavern by the local landowners. Kaczér describes Shulem as a specifically East European Jew, well-versed in the Bible and the Talmud and Jewish lore but knowing little about the world, whose forebears were Jewish peasants, dirt-poor tillers of the land; and although he married the daughter of a more distinguished, Germanized Jewish family, he struggles to eke out a meager living, facing adversity every step of the way. But Kaczér also depicts Shulem as the eternal Jew. “How long has he been on the road?” the narrator muses as he describes Shulem and his family trudging along the highway in their rickety cart toward a still unknown destination “Four days? Four years? Or a hundred?” To his wife it seems

the buggy’s been clattering, rolling along since time immemorial, and she’s been tossing forever in that carriage with her fathers, her mothers, and her children, both living and dead and about to be born. Where did the highway begin? Where does it lead? Who can tell? The family, the large, ever-growing family—oh how very numerous are Jacob’s dispersed people!—is forever on the road. In her immediate family, among the Nikolsburgers, what they recalled most often were stories of persecution, wanderings, flights. How often she had to run and hide and roam; how often she crouched in tumble-down carts, in tattered sailboats, while her ancestors spoke of a history not three thousand years old but only three hundred. Some of these ancestors ran, with crosses pressed on them, from Toledo and Seville, from Cordova and Tudela. Traveling on hidden roads and secret byways, they fled to Portugal, or to the Low Countries. And when the cross, the Inquisition, the fire followed them, they ran even further. They crossed the seas, they treaded the hot sands of Africa. And they trudded along French highways, Flemish highways, through German, Polish, Turkish, Moravian, Hungarian lands.<sup>5</sup>

But Kaczér—because he is also an enlightened humanist—places his Jewish characters and their traditions in a broader cultural context, viewing some of their practices and rituals from an almost anthropological perspective. For example, he tells us that Shulem during morning prayers covers himself with his *tallit*, his prayer shawl, with “an age-old gesture”. “That is how the citizen of Athens flung his chlamys over his shoulder. The dying Roman pulled his toga over his head with the same gesture. And it is how the desert Bedouin wraps himself in his burnoose.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> S. Scheiber, ‘Kaczér Illés és a zsidó folklór’, p. 295.

<sup>5</sup> I. Kaczér, *Ne félj szolgám, Jákob* (Tel Aviv: Alexander Publishing House, 1953), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> I. Kaczér, *Ne félj szolgám, Jákob*, p. 11.

In later volumes of his family novel, Kaczér has a great deal to say about the effects of Enlightenment ideas on his traditional Jewish characters. He shows that the battle between fundamentalists and assimilationists was first waged in the realm of culture—in art and literature. We learn, for instance, that Shulem’s wife, Malka, an otherwise pious woman, reads German and French classics on the sly. There is an interesting scene between her and a liberal Christian doctor in Ötvár (in reality, Szatmár, Kaczér’s home town, which would later become a Chassidic stronghold) where much of the action of *The Siege of Jericho* takes place. In the doctor we meet a man who accepts Jews conditionally, if “they live up to his standards and enter the family of nations”. But like Christians in general, Kaczér writes, “he cannot abide them if they insist on remaining in their tight-knit communities”.<sup>7</sup> Yet the portrait of the doctor is not a negative one. In the backwaters he represents progress. He and Malka chat about poets and artists in the doctor’s Ötvár surgery:

He spoke appreciatively about the younger generation of poets. He brought along a volume of verses entitled *Buch der Lieder* and showed it to Malka. The book threw German youth into a fever of excitement. It appeared not long ago, but he could only get the seventh edition. He read the poems again and again, he almost knew them by heart. They are like a breath of air, a shaft of light: “Saphire sind die Augen, dein . . .” “Im wunderschönen Monat Mai . . .” One can scarcely believe that somebody actually wrote these lines, that they didn’t burst forth spontaneously. The poet is a Jewish youth from Düsseldorf, but he ceased to be a Jew a few years ago. He acted wisely. If you are a genius, you should quit the ghetto . . . Another time he was sitting in a theater in Stettin: a diminutive eighteen-year-old lad with a shock of curly hair conducted his own composition, an overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. It was captivating. They say he was composing music at the age of ten. He, too, is of Hebrew origin. His father’s name is Abraham, his grandfather was Moses. But his own name has a more pleasant ring: Felix. That is the name by which he is known in his country, and his fame is spreading throughout the civilized world. *Felicitas multos habet amicos*. And he is happy not only by virtue of his name. His sensible mother brought him to Luther’s church, and with that a whole new world opened up before him.<sup>8</sup>

The two Jewish-born artists the good doctor speaks so highly of are, of course, Heinrich Heine and Felix Mendelssohn.

But Kaczér, through some of his other characters, also echoes the ridicule and contempt heaped on overeager apostates by Orthodox Jews. For example, in the last volume of the tetralogy, *Kossuth Lajos zsidaja* [Lajos Kossuth’s Jew], there is a dramatic confrontation between two wealthy merchants in Pest—one a staunch supporter of Orthodoxy, the other a leading member of the newly created Liberal congregation, whose even wealthier brother left the fold altogether. The Orthodox Jew, Joel Goldberg, refers sneeringly to the Christian convert as a man “who carries a foot-long candle while singing Ave Maria at the Feast of St. Stephen. Back home in Ulm, his rabbi father must have rapped him on the knuckles if he did not march in a holy procession singing Ave Maria.”<sup>9</sup>

We must reiterate that Illés Kaczér’s dual—traditional and modern—perspective on the Jewish experience stems from his origins. The fact that he was born in Szatmár in 1887, of rigorously Orthodox parents, and the fact, too, that unlike most Hungarian Jewish writers he gravitated as a young journalist to such regional culture centers as Pozsony [Bratislava] and Kolozsvár [Cluj] and never really became a Budapest writer, help to explain why he focused his attention on Jewish life in the eastern provinces of Hungary and in Transylvania—on small towns and villages where assimilation made far fewer inroads. By remaining in the provinces, Kaczér could stay in touch with the world he knew from childhood. And although *The Jewish Legend* is a historical novel, we could say that it is much easier to delve into the

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<sup>7</sup> I. Kaczér, *Jerichó ostroma* (Tel Aviv: Alexander Publishing House, 1954), p. 121.

<sup>8</sup> I. Kaczér, *Jerichó ostroma*, p. 120.

<sup>9</sup> I. Kaczér, *Kossuth Lajos zsidaja* (Új Kelet, 1956), p. 205.

past where the long ago does not seem that far away. (It is true of course that among the multitude of characters who fill the pages of the book, many end up in Pest, and a significant portion of the novel takes place in that city; but we must remember that the Pest of the 1820s and 1830s was still a staid, relatively insignificant town, a far cry from the bustling metropolis it would become fifty years later.)

Inasmuch as it is rooted in a specific time and place, the novel chronicles change: rapid change, dramatic change; but in a very important sense it also describes an unchanging, timeless world. Kaczér's Jewish saga is yet another version of the history of the Jews—a history fitted with auspicious starts, abrupt reversals, catastrophes and miraculous rebirths. Thus, it is fair to say that *The Jewish Legend* is a modern fable about the eternal Jewish fate—its most significant Jewish themes and motifs highlight the repetitive, cyclical, and therefore essentially unchanging nature of the Jewish experience. The novel is full of Biblical, Talmudic and folkloric echoes and parallels. What follows is a representative sample:

The title of both the first and second volumes of Kaczér's work are, of course, allusions. The first title, *Fear Not, My Servant Jacob*, is the refrain of a still popular Hebrew song, frequently sung on Saturday evening, as a farewell to the Sabbath. It harks back to a passage in the Book of Isaiah: *Al tira avdi Yaakov* (Isaiah, 44:2).<sup>10</sup> Shulem often recalls this line; he clings to it in times of trouble, it becomes the watchword of his faith, a testament of divine solicitude.

The title of the second volume is *Jerichó ostroma* [The Siege of Jericho]. The Jericho of Kaczér's novel is Ötvár (Szatmár, that is), a Hungarian royal town which throughout the eighteenth century barred Jews from settling permanently within its gates, though they filled its shops and markets during the day. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the city was under siege by hundreds of Jewish families—merchants, tradesmen, professionals—living in neighboring villages and waiting for the walls of prejudice and intolerance to come down, so they could become lawful citizens of the town, alongside its Hungarian, German and other inhabitants. Finally, the years of struggle and delicate political maneuvering are crowned with success: a handful of Jewish families are granted permission to settle. But the victory is short-lived. Sometime in the 1820s there is an outbreak of cholera in Ötvár. Jews are blamed for the epidemic and are driven out of the city, though the real loser is the town itself, for the new settlers, including Shulem's adopted son, an ambitious and gifted entrepreneur with important connections, have given Ötvár a much-needed economic and civic boost.

It is mainly the pious and learned Shulem who on every occasion, be it happy or sad, perplexing or catastrophic, can cite the appropriate Biblical or Talmudic parallel—very much like Sholem Alechem's Tevye, the milkman, except that Shulem's citations tend to be more solemn and more accurate. But many of the novel's other characters are likewise sustained and vindicated by tradition. They, too, lead double lives, as it were, re-experiencing ancient calamities and drawing strength from ancient glories. For example, to the Orthodox community leaders of Pest, the renegade reform movement is the equivalent of Korach's rebellion against Moses in the Bible, a rebellion that must be halted, put down. And of course the Liberals can also cite Biblical antecedents for their position.<sup>11</sup>

But the most obviously Biblical character in the novel is an old peddler named Rabbitskin Aba. He is an Old Testament prophet in modern disguise; his lamentations and exhortations bring to mind the words of a Jeremiah or an Isaiah. But his warnings and terrifying visions—like the warnings and visions of most prophets—go unheeded. When one of Shulem's sons, Mailech, a budding industrialist in Pest, is about to establish an ink and paint factory in a new settlement outside the city walls, Aba, because he likes the eager young man, cautions him and his friends:

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<sup>10</sup> S. Scheiber, 'Kaczér Illés és a zsidó folklór', pp. 372–73.

<sup>11</sup> I. Kaczér, *Három csillag* (Új Kelet, 1955), p. 179.

The days of woe are coming. Days of minor sorrow and major woe. The walls of your houses will be torn asunder, your shops will be leveled, your mighty factories will go to rack and ruin. A hundred men will set out and only ten shall return; and even they will have been lamed. Woe is to the world but double woe to Israel. Satan spills a bottle of ink in the sea and turns it black and bitter. And smoke will rise from the water and scrawl a message on the sky. The sky will turn black and bitter, and so will the earth and the sea, and the sun and the moon and the stars will lie black and bitter in the bottom of deepest Sheol.<sup>12</sup>

At the very end of the novel, even after seeing the impressive results of Jewish diligence and resourcefulness in the new settlement of Megyerpuszta, the stubborn, delirious peddler–prophet repeats his warning, evoking once again an air of doom:

I have said to you not to build homes, not to raise factories, but embrace humility and poverty. For when the great sorrow, the great *tsures* comes, it should not find you unprepared. And I have told you also: Do not approach the anointed heads of the strange ones, do not listen to their prophets, for they shall not redeem you. If you walk by their shores, they will snatch you with their fish-hooks. If you swim in their waters, they will trap your sons and daughters in their net. And woe is to you if they cast you into their bubbling cauldrons.<sup>13</sup>

Yet the profusion of religious symbols, the essentially parabolic, allegorical framework do not preclude extensive, naturalistic narrative development. Indeed, one of the remarkable things about the novel is that it presents an accurate and revealing picture of early nineteenth-century Hungarian rural society—its backwardness, its rigid class structure, its static character. Kaczér shows, for example, that between the firmly entrenched provincial nobility and the downtrodden, unchanging peasantry, there was room—indeed a need—for a middle stratum that was more mobile, more innovative, more equipped to engage in commerce and trade—activities which began to play an increasingly important role in the economic life of the country. And as elsewhere, this gap was filled to a large extent by Jews, people who because of their historical experience were quick to adapt to new conditions, and who learned long ago how to live by their wits, how to battle and work around intolerance.

There are, to be sure, oversimplifications. Kaczér often reverts to stereotypic characterizations: his Hungarian noblemen are invariably eccentric and impulsive, his peasants, long-suffering and brutal. There are also exceptions, of course. During the course of this very long novel, we do encounter humane and enlightened aristocrats, thoroughly decent peasants, and for every earnest and charitable Jew, there is a greedy and conniving one. On the whole, though, the sociological underpinning of the novel is sound. For example, a large portion of the narrative is devoted to a description of the birth and early history of Megyerpuszta, a settlement outside of Pest founded largely by Jews. The land was originally owned by the aristocratic Károlyi family, but the settlers enjoyed full civil rights from the beginning. Megyerpuszta became one of the first places in Hungary to abolish feudal privileges and establish the foundations of a civil society. Actually, Megyerpuszta is another name for Újpest [New Pest], which later became a thriving, industrial suburb of Budapest and whose population, until recently, remained heavily Jewish. Recent sociological surveys of this suburb confirm the historical accuracy of Kaczér’s detailed fictional narrative.<sup>14</sup>

Kaczér’s examination of the roots of anti-Semitism in early nineteenth century Hungary is also illuminating, and firmly grounded in historical fact. He shows, for example, that powerful economic interests—those represented by traditional trade associations and

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<sup>12</sup> I. Kaczér, *Három csillag*, pp. 284–85.

<sup>13</sup> I. Kaczér, *Kossuth Lajos zsidója*, p. 269.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Gy. Berkovits, ‘A Gyarmat–Újpest történeti szociográfiája, 1835–1868’, *Valóság* XXIV, No. 8 (1981), pp. 32–50. See also the entry on Újpest in *Zsidó Lexikon* (Budapest, 1929).

guilds—were behind attempts to keep Jews out of cities. Fearful of competition, leaders of guilds and other local notables drew freely on familiar anti-Semitic ploys and myths, and by spreading rumor and calumny they succeeded in whipping up anti-Jewish hysteria. As mentioned, one of the climactic moments in the novel is the expulsion of Jews from the town of Ötvár during an outbreak of an epidemic. The pattern is familiar: the ritual cleanliness of observant Jews, which happened to coincide with precautions urged by enlightened medical professionals, is misread, misinterpreted by the town elders, and the fact that fewer Jews succumb to the disease is seen as evidence of some dark Jewish cabal. The town's Jewish residents are accused of actually spreading the disease, of casting spells, poisoning wells—and saving their own skin. The fact that there are Jewish victims as well—Shulem's own brother, a miserable beggar named Gimpel Zurech, for example—makes little difference to the accusers.

The situation is not much different in Pest. There too the guilds are threatened by Jewish incursions, and their members resort to the most blatant anti-Semitic clichés in order to preserve their hegemony. For instance, the locksmith guild bars Jews with the following explanation: “If we were to allow Jews to learn the locksmith trade, the number of burglaries would sharply increase in Pestbuda, being that every Jew is a born thief or, at best, an accomplice.”<sup>15</sup>

Late in life, Illés Kaczér became an ardent Zionist. As already mentioned, he spent the last twenty years of his life in Israel. We might add, though, that he expressed Jewish nationalist yearning as early as 1923, in his novel *Az álomtelepes* [The Dream-Settler], and in an even earlier story, *Feljött az öldöklő Babilonra* [A Killer Arose in Babylonia], about an ancient Hebrew prince who chooses love of country over the love of woman, in this case a Babylonian princess.<sup>16</sup> Yet I feel it would be wrong to conclude—as some Israeli critics and commentators have done—that Kaczér's *Jewish Legend* is, in the final analysis, a cautionary tale, that the author does ultimately identify with the peddler–prophet Aba—that the novel does serve as a warning to those Hungarian Jews who “after Hitler and Hungarian fascist rule still seek admittance into Ötvár, and wish to build homes, plant trees, and spread light in an alien land.”<sup>17</sup>

I do not believe Kaczér's message is that simple or unequivocal. After all is said and done, he remains a chronicler, and his chronicle sheds light on the various forces—political, social, religious—that shaped Hungarian Jewish history. Those members of Shulem's family who leave the family nest and settle in Pest undergo a change, inevitably. This second generation of Hungarian Jews is more worldly, more successful, more Hungarian. Some of them come into contact with leading personalities of the Hungarian Age of Reform, and as new Hungarians they incur the wrath of the Austrian Imperial authorities. Yet Kaczér, a sober, realistic chronicler, clearly suggests that because of their upbringing and chastening adult experiences, the members of this generation never stop being cautious, wary, skeptical Jews. He also knows, of course (though never explicitly says), that it is the children and grandchildren of these people who will become the assimilated, ardently nationalistic Israelite Hungarians of the end of the century. And because he wrote his chronicle a hundred years after those early developments, he cannot but be aware of the disastrous consequences of the more recent chapters of East Central European history.

Let me conclude my discussion by saying a few more words about Illés Kaczér's place in Hungarian literature. Very little is known about Kaczér and his works in contemporary Hungary. There is a short entry about him in the three-volume *Magyar irodalmi lexikon*, published in the mid-1960s, but the more recent *Kortárs magyar írók kislexikona* (1989) does

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<sup>15</sup> I. Kaczér, *Kossuth Lajos zsidaja*, p. 214.

<sup>16</sup> *Az Izraelita Magyar Irodalmi Társulat Évkönyve* (Budapest, 1916), pp. 285–311.

<sup>17</sup> See the publisher's blurb in Kaczér, *Jerichó ostroma*.

not even mention his name.<sup>18</sup> The only contemporary Hungarian literary historian who seems to be aware of the importance of Kaczér's work is the London-based Lóránt Czigány. In his *Oxford History of Hungarian Literature*, Czigány considers Kaczér the "doyen of Israeli Hungarian literature" and praises *The Jewish Legend* as an "ambitious family novel . . . with a host of well observed characters, both Jews and Gentiles".<sup>19</sup> It is true of course that *The Jewish Legend* was published, in Hungarian, in Israel, between 1953–1956. (Parts of the tetralogy also appeared in Hebrew, Spanish and English translations.)

Kaczér may strike the contemporary reader as a quaintly old-fashioned writer. He was, as we said, a storyteller *par excellence* who could weave a wonderful tale, though many of his stories have not only the charm but the naiveté of fairy tales. In his historical fiction there are too many twists in plot, too many coincidences, too many unlikely encounters. In the pages of *The Jewish Legend*, obscure provincial Jews rub elbows with the financial and cultural elite of Vienna; young Jewish upstarts meet a succession of Hungarian notables, including Ferenc Kölcsey, Gergely Czuczor, and Lajos Kossuth. All this, in what is after all a realist narrative, is a bit much. Kaczér's meandering novel is also too crowded with characters, filled with too many subplots. "Restive readers may skip a hundred of the 594 pages without missing basic issues", commented a New York critic in an otherwise positive review of the English translation of Kaczér's novel.<sup>20</sup>

In an important sense, Illés Kaczér follows the narrative tradition perfected by some of the greatest Hungarian storytellers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—novelists such as Jókai, Mikszáth and Móra. Kaczér, too, is an exponent of what Hungarian critics term anecdotal realism, and shows both the strengths and weaknesses of this style. It could be argued all the same that Kaczér is also a modern writer—stylistically sensitive, psychologically sophisticated. If that is indeed the case, his modernity is likewise marred by lack of discipline. His palette is too rich, his fictional brews a bit too heady. László Kardos alludes to this problem in his essay on Kaczér; noting, in connection with his novel, *Ikongo nem hal meg*, that "we would need fewer words here, fewer colors, less blood, less heat".<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, Illés Kaczér deserves to be better known. His *Jewish Legend* should stand among the most significant Hungarian Jewish family novels—Lajos Hatvany's *Urak és emberek* [Men and Gentlemen, 1927], András Komor's *Fischmann S. és utódai* [S. Fischmann & Successors, 1929], or to cite a recent example, Péter Nádas's novel, entitled, appropriately, *Egy családregény vége* [The End of a Family Novel, 1974]. But in order to be better known, his writings have to be available. At the end of his survey of Jewish folklore motifs in Kaczér's novels, Sándor Scheiber notes that in the past thirty-five years "not a single line" by Kaczér appeared in print in Hungary.<sup>22</sup> Scheiber first published his study in 1982. The situation has not changed since then.

I can only agree with the late Professor Scheiber: it is time to get reacquainted with Illés Kaczér.

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<sup>18</sup> Kaczér does merit an entry in *Nyugati magyar irodalmi lexikon és bibliográfia* (Budapest, 1992). This publication also contains a bibliography of Kaczér's works in translation. See also *Romániai magyar irodalmi lexikon*, Vol. 2 (Bucharest, 1991), p. 575.

<sup>19</sup> L. Czigány, *The Oxford History of Hungarian Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 476.

<sup>20</sup> *The New Herald Tribune Book Review*, June 28, 1953, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> L. Kardos, 'Ikongo nem hal meg', p. 300.

<sup>22</sup> S. Scheiber, 'Kaczér Illés és a zsidó folklór', p. 381.