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Traces, Memories: On Péter Nádas

In Péter Nádas' recently published memoir, *Világító Részletek* (2017; 'Illuminated Details')¹, the word "kosher" makes an early appearance. Scarcely a bare few pages into the autobiographical narrator's childhood reminiscences, he recounts a day when

[m]y grandmother came to pick me up, my mother's mother, Cecília Nussbaum, who was on her way to the market hall on Klauzál square. Why there, I don't know, as I don't know exactly why at that very moment; especially since she usually frequented the market at Garay square. She had her marketeer there. And her kosher butcher too.² (Nádas 2017, 12–13)

It is a single word, mentioned almost in passing; an additional detail of quotidian life that constitutes the fine web of memories. And yet, "kosher" sticks out. Instead of melting into its narrative environment, as one more snippet of memory, it is noticeable (in part) because it carries a lot of weight. For it is with this single word that the first-person narrator establishes that on the maternal side he was born into a Jewish family that may not have observed kosher dietary laws anymore but certainly frequented Jewish merchants. How much work the word "kosher" performs becomes more evident if we consider the tempo with which the narrative moves. Relying on the narrative possibilities granted by memoirs, the narrative maneuvers skillfully between a maternal grandmother whose habits and speech resonate with the history and experience of the Orthodox Eastern European Jewry—and paternal grandparents who are assimilated, liberal Jews. From there, it transitions seamlessly to communist parents who fight in the Hungarian underground resistance movement during World War II, but for whom Christmas is nonetheless important enough to acquire a Christmas tree amidst the siege of Budapest by the Soviet Red Army: "[...] we lit a candle in an apart-

1 *Világító Részletek* has not been translated into English yet. For the sake of simplicity, I will use my translation of the Hungarian title in English throughout my essay in reference to the text. All translations from the Hungarian original are mine. Bibliographic references following the quotations in translation refer to the Hungarian edition. The original text in Hungarian will be supplied in the footnotes.

2 "A nagymama jött értem, anyám édesanyja, Nussbaum Cecília, aki innen a félig romos Klauzál téri vásárcsarnokba ment, nem tudom miért, nem tudom miért éppen akkor, ha egyszer ő a Garay téri piacra járt. Ott volt a kofája. Ott volt a kóser hentese."

ment on the third floor of the intact half of the house in Damjanich Street, which was bombed into two” (Nádas 2017, 53).³

For those familiar with Nádas’ oeuvre, the bold strokes with which two generations are quickly traversed and sweeping ideological changes are painted is a technique that is reminiscent of his two most celebrated and widely translated novels *A Book of Memories* (1997; *Emlékiratok könyve*, 1986) and *Parallel Stories* (2011; *Párhuzamos történetek*, 2005). What unites these three magnum opuses (Nádas can, in fact, boast with three of those) is their complex narrative tapestry, in which different narrative threads are woven together, be it through the exploration of memory as both a literary technique and a technique of the self—to echo Michel Foucault—as in *A Book of Memories* and in ‘Illuminated Details,’ or through the intricate forms of historical narration, as in *Parallel Stories*. Yet from the perspective that is most relevant for the volume at hand, these three main prose works are marked by significant differences regarding the ways in which they engage with questions such as Jewish origin, tradition, belonging, and history. More precisely, what shifts over the forty-year course of Nádas’ oeuvre, from the publication of *The End of a Family Story* in 1977 to the most recent, ‘Illuminated Details,’ in 2017, is how central a place these concerns are assigned within the texts, be that readily visible or not. What this essay aims to trace is thus a change in intensity in his oeuvre—a grappling with Jewish belonging that becomes more pronounced as we move toward the present.

While Nádas is today one of the most well-known and celebrated contemporary authors in his native Hungary,⁴ recipient of many literary prizes both at home and abroad,⁵ in the 1970s he was banned from publishing in his own coun-

3 “[...] mi a kettészelt Damjanich utcai ház épen maradt felében gyertyát gyújtottunk a karácsony-fán a harmadik emeleti lakásban.”

4 Outside of his native Hungary, Nádas started to gain popularity through the translation of his works into the major metropolitan languages. The exact timeline of his reception varies from one linguistic context to the next. In the German-speaking world, he was introduced by Suhrkamp almost immediately after the Hungarian publication of *The End of a Family Story* in 1979, followed by a translation of most of Nádas’s works. In the English-speaking context, the first translation that appeared was *A Book of Memories* in 1997, followed by *The End of a Family Story* a year later. In France, Nádas was first translated in the 1990s, with his plays, after which *The End of a Family Story* appeared. *A Book of Memories*, moreover, won the Prize for the Best Foreign Book (Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger) in 1998. The first Russian translation of Nádas’s works appeared as late as 2015, with the *A Book of Memories*.

5 His prizes and awards include the Austrian State Prize for European Literature (1991), the Hungarian Kossuth Prize (1992), the Leipzig Book Award for European Understanding (1995), the French Prize for the Best Foreign Book (1998), the Franz Kafka Prize (2003), and the Brücke Berlin Prize (2012), among many others.

try. Born into a Jewish family in 1942, then baptized, his parents were committed communists. Nádas' mother passed away from illness early in his life: his father, a highranking political functionary in Hungary's communist regime after World War II, committed suicide after the Soviet intervention in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. In the majority of accounts, Nádas' Jewish origin warrants not more than a fleeting mention, which is to highlight that revisiting his oeuvre from the vantage point of its relations to Jewish references is a far from obvious undertaking. His first longer work of fiction, *The End of a Family Novel* (1988; *Egy családdregény vége*) appeared in 1977, after several years of censorship during which Nádas was limited to publishing theater critiques in one of Hungary's Catholic journals (*Vigília*).⁶

Set in Budapest in the 1950s, *The End of a Family Story* revolves around the first decade of communism in Hungary under Mátyás Rákosi, and at the same time in the world of Jewish stories, invoking the tradition of storytelling as such. The child protagonist Péter Simon's grandfather relates tales from both the Bible and the Talmud—which are interwoven with the newly emerging world of communism and call upon literary imagination for it to persist despite the Rákosi regime. Yet the novel remains true to its title insofar as it narrates an ending. It is a Jewish family history cut short, which translates into the actual brevity of the novel. *The End of a Family Story* begs to be read against the tradition of grand family sagas, which presuppose a sense of continuity—even as they narrate historical turmoil—against the backdrop of which generations can reproduce, necessitating the genre's habitually substantial length.⁷ Brevity, however, suggests the severing of ties, identities, and histories—a theme foreshadowed in this early novel that plays out in different forms in Nádas' novelistic enterprise.⁸

While still barred from publishing, Nádas embarked upon writing his magisterial *A Book of Memories*, a novel that brings together three distinct temporal dimensions: one thread revolves around, once again, the 1950s in Hungary but interweaves the childhood memories of the first-person narrator with the story of his ménage à trois with an actress called Thea and the writer Melchior in East-Berlin of the 1970s. The third thread goes back all the way to the fin de siècle

6 See Gábor Csordás, *Párhuzamos olvasókönyv*, 101. There is also a German translation of this compendium to *Parallel Stories*, which comprises different documents such as Nádas' letters, emails, notes, articles, and essays about the novel. See Graf, *Péter Nádas lesen*. (2012)

7 For a brief trajectory of the Hungarian Jewish family novel, see the essay "A magyar zsidó családdregény" by Károly Alexa.

8 While Nádas' text itself does not refer to Hassidic storytelling, what may reverberate here as well is the prominent role that the end of storytelling plays in the Hassidic tradition. (I would like to thank Natasha Gordinsky for drawing my attention to this connection.)

in Heiligendamm at the Baltic Sea. Whereas the Proustian theme of remembrance of the past reverberates throughout, the book's Jewish allusions and references are less foregrounded. Despite their tacit nature, they are significant for *A Book of Memories*, as Ivan Sanders has argued convincingly.⁹ Sanders, astute reading has revealed the web of Jewish references throughout the text, most notably the fact that the main female figures of the novel, Thea Sandstuhl and Hédi Szán—the first-person narrator's childhood sweetheart—are both Jewish; through their characters, the novel renders an entire milieu and a set of sensibilities. On whether *A Book of Memories* should be read as a "Jewish novel," Sanders remains ambivalent, noting that due to its inexhaustible richness the text lends itself to many different readings. Sanders is undoubtedly right, for what is most notable about *A Book of Memories* are the ways in which it takes up memory as both a subject of literary inquiry and its principal technique, playing deliberately with high modernist themes and forms. In doing so, the novel not only examines the legacy of modernism but employs it very deliberately in this belated fashion, if we will, to engage with the problem of bourgeois individuality—under socialism. While the novel itself thus grapples with the quiddity of self and selfhood, *A Book of Memories* also raises the theoretical question of what it means to invoke the literary canon of memory under the political conditions of socialism—tacitly calling upon figures such as Marcel Proust, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Walter Benjamin, to name just the most obvious representatives—, which has fundamentally shaped the (undoubtedly male) bourgeois subject.

For the purposes of this essay, however, individual works are less significant than the arc that appears once the focus widens to Nádas' oeuvre as a whole. Put differently: the point is not to determine if any single piece could be qualified as a "Jewish text," to echo Sanders, but to determine the trajectory that may become visible over time. Thus far, Nádas' two longer works of fiction have taken us from biblical references and Jewish tradition (and family story cut short), to characters of Jewish origin and allusions to the Holocaust and Jewish lifeworlds in Hungary after World War II. Once we arrive at Nádas' most recent and highly acclaimed novel, *Parallel Stories* (2012; *Párhuzamos történetek*, 2005) not much appears to have changed at first sight. Nádas's ambitious text—woven, once again, from multiple narrative strands that run in parallel fashion, as the title suggests, but also crisscross several times—tells a history of Central Europe in the "short twentieth century," as the historian Eric Hobsbawm

⁹ See Ivan Sanders, article "Metakommunikáció haladóknak: Nádas Péter Emlékiratok könyvének zsidó olvasata."

called the years between 1914 and 1989.¹⁰ The text switches back and forth in time, between Berlin and Budapest and multiple other locations, juxtaposing and conjoining different eras, intimating historical continuities beyond the temporal markers of 1918, 1945, and 1989.

Experimenting with the form of the historical novel, *Parallel Stories* is perhaps one of the few ones to have been written in the modernist mode.¹¹ Composed of a tantalizing number of scenes, which *peu à peu* emerge as narrative threads, *Parallel Stories* aims at painting a picture of Central Europe's twentieth century, while steering clear of employing a totalizing narrative structure. If we consider that Nádas, by and large, also does away with the established distinction between main and minor characters so that most narrative threads gain equal importance and are shown in their interrelatedness, a pressing question emerges: What, in fact, holds the complex narrative architecture of *Parallel Stories* together? How does the novel not disintegrate into an array of loosely connected episodes? The intense close-ups in the text, to borrow from a term from film analysis, often rendered in form of a stream of consciousness or extended interior monologues are both motivated and held together by the question: how could the atrocities of twentieth century have occurred? More specifically, the Holocaust. For the moderately attentive reader, this may not be apparent, as barely any direct representation of the death camps makes it into the novel, nor do they play any significant role at the level of plot. Circumventing the much-debated question of representational adequacy and attendant ethical quandaries, the Holocaust is transmuted into what Nádas calls the "silent poetic structure" of *Parallel Stories*: "For the last ten years [written in 2003], I have mostly been reading only about the Shoah, or the Holocaust. The Shoah or Holocaust, call it what you will, barely makes it into any scene at the level of plot, but both the Holocaust and its consequences determine the 'innermost structure' of the book."¹² What this means exactly, cannot be recapitulated here in detail—

10 See the title of Hobsbawm's book *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century* (1996).

11 See Perry Anderson's article "From Progress to Catastrophe" (2011), in which Anderson draws on Fredric Jameson to argue that "modernism proper, because of its commitment to the primacy of immediate perception, appears to have been constitutively incapable of generating the totalising retrospect that defines a true historical novel."

12 "Seit etwa zehn Jahren gilt meine Lektüre wieder fast ausschließlich der Shoah oder dem Holocaust, nenne man, wie man will, werden in die Handlung meines Buches szenisch kaum eingehen, sie und ihre Folgen bestimmen aber die innere Struktur" (Graf 2012, 96; translation mine). I am quoting here from the German edition of the compendium to *Parallel Stories* because this text was originally composed in German as a report for the Institute of Advanced Study in Berlin (*Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin*), which supported Nádas' work with a fellowship. Nádas also uses slightly divergent terms, as Gábor Németh pointed out in his interview with Nádas.

suffice it to say that the novel's emphatically close look and sustained gaze at the twentieth century is animated by the urge to not only understand motives and actions but also to trace how these give rise to the century's atrocities.

This leave us to ask how we can make sense of the trajectory that starts with stories from the Bible and the Talmud, invokes the tradition of Jewish stories and storytelling, and leads to the all-encompassing question of the Holocaust that suffuses the poetic structure of *Parallel Stories* without necessarily being foregrounded at the level of plot; from there it shifts to the grappling with Jewish belonging and intellectual legacy in 'Illuminated Details.' It is at once accurate and inaccurate and not to describe the trajectory that I have just sketched as one in which Jewish references, allusions, and themes become more pronounced over time. The ambivalence occurs because the question can be taken in the absolute or relative sense, by taking political circumstances into consideration or leaving them aside. It is difficult to ascertain how references to the Old Testament and the Talmud in *The End of a Family Novel* in communist Hungary of the late 1970s relate to the mention of the halachic practices of the grandparents in 'Illuminated Details,' published in 2017. The conditions of what can be said have shifted. Was it because of the interweaving of Jewish religious texts—invoking the tradition of storytelling not only *in* but also *in spite of* the early communist years of the 1940s— that this early text of Nádas' had to wait several years for its publication? Perhaps, the censorship was more concerned with the ways in which those initial years of communism were portrayed? Or did Nádas' modernist aesthetics in *The End of a Family Novel*, its fragmentation into different narrative threads, raise objections?

Read side by side, the word "kosher" in 'Illuminated Details' certainly appears more overt, gesturing towards a milieu. Particularly in conjunction with "butcher," it is suggestive of an entire world of daily habits and customs that regulated life, from the quotidian to the feast days, for a part of the population who were was numerous enough to sustain a Jewish meat merchant. Perhaps the invocation of biblical stories, related by Péter Simon's grandfather in *The End of a Family Novel*, was read as just as direct a gesture in the historical present of 1977 as is the mention of the word "kosher" in 2017. *Direct* less in the sense of literary technique—as the stories are thoroughly woven into the text, which is precisely what makes their insertion less apparent—and more in the sense of its immediate legibility, as an act of deliberate marking. From the vantage

While in the report cited above Nádas speaks of "the innermost structure," in an article for the Hungarian literary weekly *Élet és Irodalom*, he also calls it "silent poetic structure" (see also Graf 2012, 111).

point of the contemporary moment, their potentially provocative nature has been rendered illegible, not only by the forty years that have since passed, but also by the change in the political circumstances that co-determined the conditions of not only what could be said and published in socialist Hungary at the end of the 1970s, but also how things were read.

Is the early appearance of the word “kosher,” signifying the fact that Nádas’ autobiographical narrator was born into a Jewish family, an answer to the intensifying antisemitic political and public discourse in Hungary at the dawn of the twenty-first century? The way in which ‘Illuminated Details’ unfolds—to which I turn shortly—also allows for a more nuanced reading thereof:

A long time, a really long time, perhaps even half a century or more had passed in my life before I grasped that my Hungarian patriotism was utterly futile. [...] I could have lived my life a lot more comfortably had I been able to align myself either with the big family of Hungarian nationalists or that of Jewish nationalists. Because of the hefty weight of my intellectual legacy, I find both repulsive.¹³ (Nádas 2017, 117)

These are the words of the narrator, and as if to lend the already powerful statement further emphasis, a few lines later he reiterates that “I should have contended the failure of the Hungarian Jewish tradition of patriotism, roughly fifty years later. But I did not do that either” (Nádas 2017, 118–19).¹⁴ In what follows, I zero in on a few select moments in ‘Illuminated Details’ that allow us to give contours to the ways in which Nádas’ memoir engages with the questions of Jewish origin, tradition, and belonging.

If I started this essay by noting the near-immediate appearance of the word “kosher” in Nádas’ memoir ‘Illuminated Details,’ it was precisely to highlight the unusual nature of this occurrence within his oeuvre, echoed perhaps only by a scene in his ‘Autobiographical Sketch’ (*Életrajzi vázlat*, 1994), in which the first-person narrator relates the moments before his birth in the following way:

It is with the elemental happiness of my verbosity that I let you know that I was born into this world on October 14, 1942; it was such a warm summery day, according to my mother, that she was wrapped in a light silk dress only when she took the tram to the Jewish hos-

13 “Sokáig, nagyon sokáig, tán fél évszázad eltelt az életemből, és még mindig nem láttam át, hogy magyar patriotizmusommal a levegőbe beszélek. [...] Jóval kényelmesebben zajlott volna az életem, ha a magyar nacionalisták vagy a zsidó nacionalisták nagy családjának valamelyikébe sikerült volna befarolnom. Tudati örökségem mozdíthatatlan tömege miatt mindkettő taszít.”

14 “A magyar zsidó patrióta hagyomány csődjének minden tanulságát, mintegy fél évszázados késséssel, nekem kellett volna belátnom. De én sem láttam be.”

pital after her first contractions set it, so much so that it did not even cross her mind to take any warm clothes with her.¹⁵ (Nádas 1994, 16)

What connects the mention of the Jewish hospital in which the mother gives birth and the grandparents' grandmother's kosher butcher—perhaps a sign for the grandparent's adherence to kosher law— is not only their factual nature but also that they are referred to in passing, as seemingly incidental.¹⁶ Put differently: while they could become markers of the narrators' Jewish identity, they fail to do so. For their function is not to signify continuity but rather to mark a rift, which is underscored by the way in which they are presented in the narrative; that is as isolated facts. Thus, in a peculiar way, they remain unactualized, in the sense that there is no thick story of belonging or family tradition that ensues from them and into which they, conversely, would be embedded—this hearkens back to the end that is referenced in the title, *The End of a Family Story*.

I have singled out these two details from Nádas' autobiographical texts because they are indicative of the vexed status of a Jewish origin and/or belonging for their respective narrators. To give this reading further nuance, these instances should be read in juxtaposition with the very first mention of the word "Jew" in 'Illuminated Details,' which appears in a very different form and context. Though "kosher" remains an isolated fact to which the narrator has no apparent personal connection anymore, it is nonetheless employed as a self-description by him when relating his childhood memories. In contrast, the word "Jew" enters the narrative in the form of a semi-quotation from an official decree published in the bulletin of Budapest called *Fővárosi Közlöny*¹⁷:

It had to happen this way, because on June 16, 1944, the *Fővárosi Közlöny* ['Bulletin of the Capital'] published the decree that Jews had to move into houses marked by a yellow star, and the house on Pozsonyi út 12 was declared a yellow star house. According to the decree,

15 "Közlékenységem elemi örömeivel tudatom veled, hogy 1942. október 14-én jöttem e világra, anyám beszámolója szerint egy olyan nyáriasan meleg napon, hogy amikor megjöttek első fájtásai, egyetlen szál selyemruhában villamosozott be a Zsidó Kórházba, s eszébe se jutott valami meleg holmit vinni magával" (translation mine).

16 What remains unmentioned is that the Jewish Hospital in Budapest still existed in 1942. In fact, it operated throughout World War II also treating also members of the SS, Hungary's Arrow Cross Movement, and Hungarian soldiers. After Hungary's occupation by the German force on 19 March 1944, the hospital was forced to relocate from Szabolcs utca to Wesselényi utca.

17 The literal translation would be "Bulletin of the Capital."

every Jewish family was allowed one room, so our apartment ceased to be our apartment.¹⁸ (Nádas 2017, 47)

Even though quotation marks are not employed, the word “Jew” makes its way into the text as an external ascription by way of the narrator, who relays the official language of the decree that orders Budapest’s Jewish population to relocate into one of the “Yellow Star Houses” by June 21, 1944. By filtering the official language through his idiom, modulating it with his own words, rather than incorporating it as a quotation proper, the narrator appears to try on the label “Jew,” the designation that official political discourse has attached to him. Read together with the word “kosher” from the very beginning of ‘Illuminated Details,’ they delineate the space within which Nádas’ autobiographical narrator moves between, on the one hand, the kosher laws and Jewish traditions that have become dead facts of the past for him, and, on the other hand, there is the seemingly inescapable labeling as Jewish by official political discourse. However, we may also extend this to public discourse. This position is nothing new when it comes to the assimilated Hungarian Jewry, and it resonates with Mary Gluck’s assertion that for Hungarian intellectuals of the time, their “Jewishness was fundamentally irrelevant” (Gluck 2016, xi).

What is new however, is the way in which Nádas’ narrator confronts this position in ‘Illuminated Details.’ What is left between the abandoned Jewish tradition of his grandparents’ generation and the label “Jew” that is ascribed to him? To answer this question, we have to turn to a moment in the text that receives extensive narrative attention, unfolding as it does over long stretches in the first volume of Nádas’ memoir. It revolves around the publicist and politician Ernő Mezey, the younger brother of the narrator’s great-grandfather Mór Mezey. Nádas grants Mezey a formidable entry into the text by way of Mezey’s epistolary exchange with Theodor Herzl. It is, in fact, more accurate to say that Nádas introduces Mezey via his dispute with Herzl, a dispute that concerns precisely the patriotism of Hungarian Jews. That the text becomes bilingual here, as Herzl and Mezey’s epistolary exchange is translated by the narrator within the text, if we will, interlacing the original German and Hungarian translations within sentences, is a striking linguistic strategy that can only be mentioned but not unraveled here. Herzl’s words, and the gist of their disagreement—also

¹⁸ “Már csak azért is ekkor és így kellett megtörténnie, mert 1944. Június 16-én jelent meg a *Fővárosi Közlöny* 30. Számában a rendelet, amely kötelezővé tette a zsidóknak, hogy sárga csillaggal megjelölt házakba költözzenek, a Pozsonyi út 12. számú házat pedig csillagos házzá nyilvánították. A rendelet szerint egy zsidó családnak egy szobára lehetett igénye, s ezzel a lakásunk meg is szűnt a mi lakásunk lenni.”

rendered without explicit quotation and integrated directly into the narration—read as follows: “The antisemitism will hit the Hungarian Jews brutally as well, es wird auch über die ungarischen Juden kommen, and the later, the harder, je später um so härter [...] There is no escape. Davor gibt es keine Rettung”¹⁹ (Nádas 2017, 115–16). Nádas’ autobiographical narrator—addressing us at the dawn of the twenty-first century—agrees with Herzl, and yet rejects of the political position that both conditions and follows from Herzl’s statement.

Instead, ‘Illuminated Details’ embarks upon a detailed recapitulation of Ernő Mezey’s political work. More specifically, his speech given to the Hungarian Parliament on the occasion of the ritual murder trial of Tiszaeszlár—a case that, at the end of the nineteenth century, not only made it onto the front page of Hungarian newspapers but garnered much attention across the European press. In short: after the disappearance of a Christian girl called Eszter Solymosi in April 1882, thirteen Jewish defendants from a small village called Tiszaeszlár, located in northeastern Hungary, were arrested and charged with ritual murder. As a member of the Hungarian Parliament for the Independence Party, Ernő Mezey weighed in. Addressing the Secretary of State for Justice, he charged the justice system with procedural errors, the state secretary himself with negligence in handling the investigations, and the country with sliding into the state of lawlessness. Not only in Mezey’s talk recapitulated in painstaking detail in ‘Illuminated Details,’ but what also makes its way into the narrative are the reactions of the members of parliament. Channeling the official minutes of the parliamentary sessions, two entwined stories unfold: that of Ernő Mezey and his appeal to reason and justice, on the one hand; and on the other, that of rampant anti-Jewish sentiment manifesting in disruptive comments, sarcastic laughter, and demands directed at Mezey to “Stop that right now. Immediately.”²⁰ (Nádas 2017, 153). Rendered not as quotations from the official protocol but incorporated into the narration sans quotation marks, these passages are also interspersed with the narrator’s comments, not only highlighting the emotionally gripping nature of the session, but also actualizing it in and for the present.

Mezey thus plays an important role in the first volume of ‘Illuminated Details’ on at least two different accounts: his figure is certainly crucial for historical reasons, as it is through him that Nádas recapitulates—*pars pro toto*, so to speak—the political atmosphere of late nineteenth-century Hungary and its pal-

19 “Az antiszemitizmus azonban brutálisan le fog sújtani a magyar zsidókra is, es wird auch über die ungarischen Juden kommen, s minél később, annál keményebben, je später um so härter, annál vadabbul, minél hatalmasabbak lesznek addig, umso wilder je mächtiger sie bis dahin werden. Nincs menekvés. Davor gibt es keine Rettung.”

20 “Hagyja abba. Álljon el.”

pably growing political antisemitism and antisemitic public discourse. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, Mezey also carries personal importance, as it is through him that it becomes clear what the “hefty intellectual legacy” that made Nádas oppose both Hungarian and Jewish nationalism might mean. For Nádas’ autobiographical narrator, Mezey represents an attempt to fill the space that opens up between the Jewish tradition of the grandparents and “Jewish” as a label employed by political discourse. Through the figure of Mezey, the Hungarian Jewish tradition becomes an intellectual one. More specifically, he is a representative of the “futile Hungarian Jewish patriotism,” as the narrator calls it—the futility of which he himself should have long since come to terms with, as he states (“I should have contended the failure of the Hungarian Jewish tradition of patriotism;” Nádas 2017, 119). Futile, because as Herzl predicted, belief in the principles of liberalism and free thinking did not save Hungarian Jews from anti-semitism and persecution (Nádas 2017, 115–16). And yet there is an undoubtedly recuperative aspect to this textual politics of ‘Illuminated Details:’ while the figure of Ernő Mezey, along with his speech, may have become lost in the annals of history, in Nádas’ memoir, they are granted ample narrative space to stand in for a tradition that has proven neither politically opportune, nor successful.

What to do with this legacy, ‘Illuminated Details’ seems to ask. It poses this question with reference to not only the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; indeed the urgency of the inquiry that shines through in Nádas’ memoir appears to be motivated in equal measure by the political realities of early twenty-first century Hungary: its dwindling democracy, increasingly authoritarian political structures, and the preponderance of both anti-European and xenophobic political and public discourse.

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