# Book prospectus: “Hungary May Even Be Grateful One Day” – Hungarian Jewish Students in Exile, 1920-1938

by Ágnes Katalin Kelemen

## The book’s purpose, audience, scope and contribution to scholarship

“We can go anywhere, if there is a university, where it is possible to study. […] We are not going anywhere in particular. We are only *coming* from somewhere, where we are banned from studying.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

This is how Lili Fenyő introduced the story of her emigration in 1929. The proposed book’s title is a paraphrase of her hope that Hungary would eventually appreciate the efforts of those who enabled its exiled youth to study and thus prevented a waste of talent. Fenyő was one of thousands of Hungarian Jews who studied abroad in the interwar period as a consequence of the first antisemitic law of the 20th century in Europe, the ‘numerus clausus’ (1920). Due to this law, the percentage of Jews among enrolling students in Hungarian universities was not allowed to be higher than six per cent, whereas a quarter to a third of applicants had been Jewish. As a consequence, similarly to Fenyő, five to ten thousand Hungarian Jews emigrated to study abroad between the two world wars. In historical literature they are called the ‘numerus clausus exiles’.

Yet not only Jews were pushed out from Hungarian universities by this law, but so were applicants who failed to comply with the criteria of “loyalty to the nation”, i. e., who were deemed to be politically subversive. In addition, women’s access to higher education was also restricted. Hence, peregrination (student migration) characterized the youth of many Hungarian intellectuals in the generation that came of age in the 1920s. In this period, the exclusion from higher studies based on gender and race was still the norm rather than the exception in many European countries and in North America. The triad of antisemitism, political oppression and misogyny banished thousands of students not only from Hungary, but from other East Central European countries as well. The specificity of the Hungarian case was the state-level legislation that – by infringing academic autonomy – obliged universities to take into consideration whether their applicants were Jewish, whereas in Austrian, Polish and Romanian universities, Jewish quotas were informal and differed across faculties. While before the Great War many went abroad just for a few semesters and eventually graduated in their home countries; after the war many did not find their place in the academic world of Hungary, Poland and Romania at all, thus spent their whole student life abroad without the intention to ever return. Therefore, the notion of exile became a dominant narrative framework of interwar student migration.

I propose a book that tells a story of the intertwining of (e)migration and studying that due to its place in time and space (interwar Europe) and protagonists (Jews, political rebels, women) speaks to a number of fields and interests: history, sociology, migration studies, Jewish studies, gender studies. The book is intended for scholars and students, as well as for the educated public interested in the history of education, women, left-wing movements; Jewish history and the history of Central Europe. Undergraduate students can especially benefit from this book that looks at history through the experiences of university students who emigrated because their ambition to study was frustrated. The reader of their story can learn about antisemitism, authoritarianism and misogyny from the relatable perspective of students.

The narrative is focused on the emigration of young women and men who found temporary refuge in the universities of Austria, Czechoslovakia, Italy and Weimar Germany. It involves stories of well-known intellectuals whose names the reader might already know from the history of the Manhattan Project (Dennis Gabor, Leo Szilard, Eugene Wigner), from Israeli history writing (Jacob Katz) or from American Jewish studies (Raphael Patai). Therefore, the context they came from is of interest and this context entails a historical sociology of the lesser known thousands of emigrant students. This historical sociological insight is based on the author’s database of sociological data of over a thousand Hungarian students in four foreign cities – Berlin, Bologna, Prague, Vienna – between 1920 and 1938.

## Annotated table of contents

### Book title:

“Hungary May Even Be Grateful One Day”

### Subtitle:

Hungarian Jewish Students in Exile, 1920-1938

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#### Introduction

The Introduction will give a short summary of why the story of a past generation of marginalized youth matters. The protagonists studied at universities against all odds: the 1920s was a decade of anxiety over university graduates’ “overproduction” and unemployment; the Hungarian political elite was eager to reserve the diminished labor market for the sons of the “Christian middle class”, and after WWI country borders had become serious barriers to migration. In addition, unlike in the 21st century, a university degree was not yet an indispensable prerequisite to achieving the social status of an intellectual. Yet, these young Jews, women and left-wingers chose to take the challenges of emigration with its material and psychological costs for the sake of their studies. Now, in the 21st century when migration has become a normal part of university students’ life all over the world, it is worth learning about the courage this choice took for the generation preceding WWII.

#### Chapter I. Migration in the History of Universities

Chapter I will provide a short story of peregrination in Europe. In the first eight centuries (11th-19th century) of the history of universities, long-distance migration was a necessity since there were very few universities. In the second half of the 19th century, however, with the transformation of European countries into nation states, all states invested into higher education to train professionals for themselves. The new nation states in Southern and Eastern Europe, supported their talented youth to study at prestigious foreign universities, with the expectation that they would return and use their knowledge in the service of the home country. In the meantime, the number of universities grew across the continent, the states enabled their higher education to train professionals for modernization. After WWI, a number of new nation states emerged on the ruins of the collapsed empires that intended to use higher education for strengthening the dominant nation. As a consequence, minorities faced discrimination. Thus, while pre-WWI peregrination was primarily characterized by pull factors, post-WWI peregrination was primarily a result of push factors.

#### Chapter II. Jews and Universities

Chapter II puts the relationship of Jews and universities into a historical perspective. In the age of emancipation, higher education became an important channel of upward social mobility and integration for Jews. This is the exact reason why universities were central to antisemites ever since the birth of modern antisemitism as a movement in 1879-1880. Simultaneously, once higher learning became available to Jews, the eventual restriction of their access (first in the Russian Empire in 1887) meant a great loss and triggered emigration. In Hungary in 1919-20, previously marginalized antisemites came to rule the country and immediately started the process of de-emancipating Jews by introducing the numerus clausus law, a restrictive Jewish quota at universities. The larger significance of this measure is that this was 20th century Europe’s first anti-Jewish legislation, preceding the Nazi Third Reich by nearly one and a half decades, providing a point of reference for antisemites across Europe. The quota meant a very grave limitation of the formerly free and, indeed, large-scale educational mobility of Hungarian Jewry. As a consequence, thousands of Hungarian Jews became part of the broader story of East Central European Jews’ westward student migration.

#### Chapter III. “The Numerus Clausus – The Soul of the Regime”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Chapter III directs the attention to interwar Hungary and its historical paradox. In the two decades (1920s and 1930s) when the state was more generous to universities in terms of funding than ever before or, in fact, later, in the history of science Hungary acted as a country of emigration. Brain-drain did not seem to be too high a price to pay for getting rid of Jews – including two future Nobel laureates (Dennis Gabor, Eugene Wigner). The shortcomings of pre-existing theories on the “necessity” of the numerus clausus and connected myths (such as calling the phony 1928 amendment an abolition of the law) are explained. While the vast majority of Jewish university applicants were turned down each academic year, those admitted often faced antisemitic violence on campus, especially during and in the intermediate aftermath of 1919. However, “Jew beatings” and “Jew-free days” organized by radical right-wing student fraternities remained and were regular occurrences up until the Holocaust. This abusive antisemitic atmosphere at universities is exemplified with the personal stories of well-known and lesser known Jewish students, such as Leó Szilárd.

#### Chapter IV. Numerus Clausus Exiles

In Chapter IV, the sociological background of Hungarian migrant students enrolled in Hungarian peregrination’s main target countries (Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, and Italy) is analyzed on the basis of over a thousand students’ university documents. Special attention is given to those of Jewish religion, representing over 80 percent of the sample, who left Hungary because of the practice and the spirit of the numerus clausus, i.e., antisemitism. Comparing their social background with that of Jews who enrolled in Hungarian universities, thus made it into the quota, shows that – contrary to prior assumptions – studying abroad was a way of upward social mobility for lower middle-class Jews, rather than an escape route reserved for the privileged. This point is illustrated with the stories of numerous Hungarian Jews who emigrated to study (such as engineers Gyula Karádi, László Kozma and physicians László Farádi, Miklós Kun, Ferenc Mérei).

#### Chapter V. Political Exiles

As will be shown in Chapter V, beyond the racial quota directed against Jews, the numerus clausus law also defined “loyalty to the nation” as a prerequisite of university admission. Originally, this meant non-involvement in the so-called 1918 Aster Revolution and the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic. As years passed by, this matter lost its relevance as younger cohorts came of age, but the relevance of excluding students caught as rebellious activists (especially if communist ones) remained. Importantly, however, the Hungarian political emigrant communities (concentrated in Vienna and Berlin) were heterogeneous, the first waves being refugees from Béla Kun’s communist takeover in 1919 and the second wave consisting of communists, later joined by Hungarians pushed out from Hungary for various political reasons. Vienna and Berlin were also the most important diasporas of Hungarian emigrant students. The perspective of students as young and fresh emigrants who engaged with the older generation of Hungarian exiles in those cities provides new lenses through which to look at the political emigrant milieu.[[3]](#footnote-3)

At the same time, many students were first exiled from Hungarian academia as Jews or as women and it was only during their emigration that they discovered left-wing activism for themselves. The phenomenon of political student exile is exemplified by the story of communist students expelled in 1932 from Hungarian universities. The politicization of Jewish emigrant students is presented through the stories of well-known future engineers who after WWII engaged in rebuilding Hungary and in “building socialism” and yet during the Stalinist dictatorship were put on show trial and executed as members of the “Swiss group” (Tibor Szőnyi, Ferenc Vági) and of the “Brno group” (Zoltán Radó, Miklós Szücs).

#### Chapter VI. Exiles of Misogyny

Chapter VI will show that in the early 20th century it seemed the direction of history would point towards the emancipation of women. In 1918 all university faculties of Hungary were opened to them. Therefore, the abolition of this reform in 1919 was a step back, an act of de-emancipation. In fact, in 1919-1920 the de-emancipation of women and Jews went hand in hand, “antisemitism and sexism met”.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the end, the 1920 numerus clausus law did not establish a quota for women. At the same time, numerous faculties did not admit women at all in the years to come. This chapter’s starting point is the story of women who emigrated to study something they could not have studied in Hungary (Magda Elizabeth Polanyi, Zsuzsanna Bánki). Through their personal stories, the emphasis is placed on the difficulties they faced in the intellectual professions even after their graduation. Nevertheless, the chapter elaborates on why Jewish women were more likely to study abroad than their non-Jewish peers excluded from universities. Thus, at foreign universities we mostly find Jewish Hungarian female students and hence their stories dominate this chapter (memoir author Lili Fenyő, pediatrician Emmi Pikler, medical student Ida Somló, psychoanalyst Erzsébet Kardos, radiologist Zsuzsa Leichner).

#### Conclusion

The conclusion will highlight the impact emigration had on the minds and lives of Hungarian students who left because of antisemitism, political persecution, and sexist exclusion during the interwar period. As the Third Reich expanded and WWII started, there was less and less space for foreign, especially Jewish students all over Europe. Hence, emigrant students typically returned to Hungary. In fact, very few of them managed to escape overseas. The knowledge they had gained abroad had an impact on their chances of employment and residence chosen in Hungary. Usually they settled in Budapest even if they had originally come from the provinces. This greatly influenced their chances to survive the Holocaust.

## Assessment of the work’s fit with existing literature

My manuscript is the first monograph on student migration provoked by the numerus clausus. Regrettably, for a long time, the numerus clausus was interpreted in public discourse as if it would have been in vigor only between 1920 and 1928 and as if it would have been albeit an “overreaction”, but still an explicable response to the post-WWI problems of universities and the shock caused by the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919. This interpretation has to do with a delayed Hungarian *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (facing the past).

*Down by Law* by Mária M. Kovács analyzed why the 1928 abolition of the numerus clausus was merely a myth, whereas in fact it was but a phony amendment.[[5]](#footnote-5) Kovács also insisted on the continuity of the antisemitism leading up to the introduction of the numerus clausus and of the murderous version of prejudice causing the exceptionally quick genocide of Hungarian Jewry in the Shoah with the active participation of Hungarian society. Kovács impacted my research greatly both as a historian of the numerus clausus and as a mentor.

Prominent Jewish intellectuals’ emigration from interwar Hungary was presented in *Double Exile* by Tibor Frank who focused on the most famous ones among them who settled in the Weimar Republic and then fled the Nazi takeover to the United States.[[6]](#footnote-6) My book builds on his research, but it focuses on youngsters targeted by the numerus clausus law as university applicants in Hungary who therefore studied abroad. It is purposefully a history of a group whose majority did not become world-famous and did not make it to America, but perished or survived the Shoah in Europe.

## Statement of anticipated length and schedule for completion

The manuscript is anticipated to be 90,000 words long, including notes and bibliography. Thirteen black-and-white charts (tables), two black-and-white photos and four colorful maps are also going to be parts of it. The manuscript is about seventy percent ready. It is a developed and revised version of my doctoral dissertation (defended at the Central European University in 2019). Thus, it includes the findings of my research conducted during my Ph.D. studies in five different countries (Hungary, Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Israel), but in a very different structure. In addition, I integrated in this work new research results I found since 2019 during my work as a research fellow of the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences. In my dissertation the empirical testing of hypotheses about the social background of numerus clausus exiles was at stake and I had a scholarly target audience only. Hence, my findings were organized into chapters based on the type of source material (press, university documents, ego documents, databases).

In my manuscript, presenting a broader picture of student migration and its interconnection with different types of discrimination are at stake and the target audience includes not only specialists of the topics concerned (Jewish studies, social history, history of education, Central Europe), but undergraduate and graduate students as well as the educated public. Therefore, the presented information is organized around the reasons of students’ emigration (antisemitic, political and sexist discrimination) so that readers can easily find this book based on their central interest. (For instance, someone specializing in women’s history but not in Jewish history is likely to discover this book thanks to the chapter on exiles of misogyny.)

Within six months from September 2021 I am going to dedicate several days a week to the book manuscript and thus I can submit by the end of March 2022. My full-time job at the Masaryk Institute and Archives also brings about research and writing pertaining to the manuscript, since in my work I engage with Hungarian migration to the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938). A result of it is a forthcoming book chapter on the significance of Brno’s former German Technical College for Hungarians in the age of the numerus clausus and beyond, up until the 2010s.

## Author’s Curriculum Vitae

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### Academic work

2019- **Research Fellow** in the ERC Consolidator grant “UnRef: Unlikely Refuge? Refugees and Citizens in East-Central Europe in the 20th Century”. Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic

### Education

2015-2019 **Ph.D.** in Comparative History, Central European University (CEU), Budapest, Hungary

2014-2015 Fellowship at Paideia-The European Institute for Jewish Studies in Sweden, Stockholm, Sweden

2012-2014 **Master of Arts** in Nationalism Studies with a specialization in Jewish Studies, CEU

2008-2012 **Bachelor of Arts** in History and Religious Studies, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Budapest

2009-2010 Studies in Modern History and Contemporary History, Università degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza, Rome, Italy

### Publications

#### Book

2014 Ármin Bálint, *Feljegyzések Gyuri fiam részére. Napló 1944-ből* [Notes for My Son, Gyuri. A Diary from 1944]*.* Foreword and notes by Ágnes Katalin Kelemen (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő)

#### Peer reviewed articles and book chapters

2018 “Peregrináció, emigráció, száműzetés. A két világháború közötti magyar diákvándorlás és a numerus clausus összefüggései [Peregrination, Emigration, Exile. The Interconnection Between Interwar Hungarian Student Migration and the Numerus Clausus),” *Múltunk* 63:4, 4-31.

2018 “Migration and Exile: Hungarian Medical Students in Vienna and Prague, 1920-1938,” János Kenyeres et al. (Ed.), *At the crossroads of human fate and history – Studies in honour of Tibor Frank on his 70th birthday* (Budapest: Eötvös Loránd University, School of English and American Studies), 222-241.

2017 “<Az asszimiláció az élet nagy iskolája volt.> A zsidó önazonosság és szolidaritás kérdései Erdélyben az első világháború után [<Assimilation Was a Great School of Life.> Questions of Jewish Identity and Solidarity in Transylvania After the First World War,” *Múltunk* 62:4,137-159.

2015 “The Semaphore of Mobility: Hungarian Jewish Press and Peregrination to Fascist Italy,” *Annali di Storia delle Università Italiane* 19:2, 41-53.

2014 “The Exiles of the Numerus Clausus in Italy,” *Judaica Olomucensia* 2014:1-2, 56-103.

2014 “Visszapillantás a toronyőrre. Bálint Györgyről [The Tower Watchman in Retrospect. György Bálint],”Teri Szűcs and Gábor Schein (Eds.), *“Zsidó” identitás-képek a huszadik századi magyar irodalomban* [“Jewish” Identities in Twentieth Century Hungarian Literature](Budapest: ELTE Eötvös Kiadó), 91-100.

#### Book reviews

2020 “A jó a gonosznak kedvezett? [The Good Has Promoted the Evil?],” *Élet és irodalom* LXIV (2020):42, 20. Book review on the Hungarian edition of *Europa gegen die Juden: 1880 – 1945* by Götz Aly.

2020 “Ne legyünk Fretwurstok [Let Us Not Be Fretwursts],” *Élet és irodalom* LXIV (2020):17, 20. – Book review on the Hungarian edition of *Volk ohne Mitte* by Götz Aly.

2020 “A Jewish Communist in Weimar Germany: The Life of Werner Scholem.

(1895–1940) by Ralf Hoffrogge,” *East Central Europe* 47 (2020):1, 157-160.

2019 “Családregény és várostörténet [Family Novel and Urban History],” *Élet és irodalom* LXIII (2019):30, 21. – Book review on *Századok hullámain* [On the Waves of Centuries] by Éva Bácskai.

2018 “Catastrophe and Utopia: Jewish Intellectuals in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1930s and 1940s by Ferenc Laczó and Joachim von Puttkamer,” *East Central Europe* 45 (2018):2-3, 372-375.

2017 “Zionists in Interwar Czechoslovakia: Minority Nationalism and the Politics of Belonging by Tatjana Lichtenstein,” *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire,* 24 (2017):4, 657-658.

### Conference participation

2021 *35th Annual Conference of the Hungarian Studies Association of Canada* (online)

2020 *Anti-Jewish Quotas in Central Europe*, Central European University and Tom Lantos Institute (online)

2019 *51st* *Annual Convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES),* San Francisco, USA

2018 Distinguished Student Panel at the *11th Congress of the European Association for Jewish Studies (EAJS),* Krakow, Poland

2017 *A kisebbségi lét politikája, szelleme és etikája* – konferencia Gáll Ernő születésének 100. évfordulója alkalmából [*The Politics, Spirit and Ethics of Minority Status –* Conference for the Centenary of Birth of Ernő Gáll Sociologist), Institute of Political History, Budapest

2016 *48th Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies*, San Diego, USA

2015 *A Cedaka –Társadalmi igazságosság* [Tzedakah – Social Justice], University of Jewish Studies/Rabbinical Seminary, Budapest

2014 *International Conference on Jewish-Italian Literature,* Ljubljana, Slovenia

### Language proficiency

Hungarian (mother tongue)

English (proficient user)

Italian (proficient user)

German (independent user)

Czech (basic user)

Modern Hebrew (basic user)

Yiddish (basic reading)

Latin (basic reading)

Classical Hebrew (basic reading)

1. Lili Fenyő, *Pillanatfelvételek a külföldön élő magyar diákság életéből.* [Snapshots from the Life of Hungarian Students Abroad.] (Budapest: Jupiter Nyomda, 1929), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jenő Gál, “A numerus clausus –A kurzus lelke [The Numerus Clausus –The Sould of the Regime],” *Egyenlőség*, 07.02.1925: 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. About this milieu see: Lee Congdon, *Exile and Social Thought: Hungarian Intellectuals in Germany and Austria, 1919-1933* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Tibor Frank, *Double Exile: Migrations of Jewish-Hungarian Professionals Through Germany to the United States, 1919-1945* (Oxford-Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009); Eszter B. Gantner, *Budapest-Berlin. Die Koordinaten einer Emigration, 1919-1933* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Katalin Fenyves, “When Sexism Meets Racism: The 1920 Numerus Clausus Law in Hungary,” *Hungarian Cultural Studies* 4, no. 4 (2011): 87-102 (87). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mária M. Kovács, *Törvénytől sújtva: A numerus clausus Magyarországon, 1920-1945* [Down by Law. The Numerus Clausus in Hungary, 1920–1945] (Budapest: Napvilág, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tibor Frank, *Double Exile: Migrations of Jewish-Hungarian Professionals Through Germany to the United States, 1919-1945* (Oxford-Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)