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Tribute to the Scholarship and Legacy of István Deák

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Introduction by Csaba Békés, Corvinus University of Budapest/Center for Social Sciences, Budapest

“István Deák: The Trans-Border Phenomenon”

Professor Emeritus of Columbia University István Deák was an exceptional man. He was an excellent historian, a highly influential academic, and a university professor who inspired generations of students, as well as an extremely educated, broad-minded, witty, good humored, very kind, friendly person who was open to everything and everyone.

Unlike most retired scholars, he was very proactive; besides publishing his most popular book at the age of 89,¹ he read articles, corresponded via email with many friends, colleagues and former students, presented papers at conferences via video calls, and actively followed the news both in the US and internationally and in his country of origin, Hungary, up until the last moment when he died at 96. No wonder that the news of his death, even at that age, caught everyone by surprise and then triggered quick and highly eulogistic laudations on social media at this sad occasion.

Mark Kramer of Harvard University, a renowned expert of the history of Cold War Eastern Europe, wrote that István Deák, “a professor at Columbia for many years, was one of the most renowned scholars of modern East-Central European history. I knew him for around 30 years and will miss his brilliant intellect and affability.”² Vladimir Tismaneanu, another prominent expert of Eastern European history and politics wrote that Deák “was a most distinguished, highly influential, and admirably perceptive historian of modern and contemporary East-Central Europe.”³ Stephen Morris, a political scientist and historian from Johns Hopkins University SAIS, as well as a former doctoral candidate in Political Science at Columbia mentioned that he “was a brilliant and charming man, the incarnation of the term ‘gentleman and a scholar’.”⁴ Barna Szász, the director of a 2020 video interview with Deák on his life, wrote: “One of the greatest Hungarians has died.”⁵ Péter Csunderlik, a young Hungarian historian wrote: “István Deák was one of the greatest persons I have ever met.” In him, “professional greatness was combined with an exceptional human being, I don't know of anyone else about whom everyone spoke to me only in superlatives.”⁶ These eulogistic instant reactions did not exaggerate.

István Deák was born in Székesfehérvár, Hungary in 1926, into an assimilated Jewish family that had converted to Catholicism. He went to a Catholic high school in Budapest and began his university studies in 1945 at Pázmány Péter University, which were not completed. He emigrated from Hungary in 1948, after the Communist takeover in the country. He then studied history at the Sorbonne in Paris and later worked as a librarian and researcher for Radio Free Europe (RFE) in Munich in West Germany. In September, 1956, he was transferred to the center of RFE in New York, where he studied modern European history at Columbia University. He obtained his PhD in 1964 and taught at Columbia until his retirement in 1997. He was the Director of Columbia's East Central European Center between 1967 and 1978. In 1990, Deák was elected as an external member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He met his wife, Gloria, an art historian, in New York, their daughter, Eva is an events manager in California.⁷

¹ István Deák: *Europe on Trial. The Story of Collaboration, Resistance, and Retribution during World War II* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2015).

² Mark Kramer - Facebook post, January, 12, 2023.

³ Vladimir Tismaneanu - Facebook post, January 13, 2023.

⁴ Comment by Stephen Morris on Mark Kramer's Facebook page, January 13, 2023.

⁵ Barna Szász - Facebook post, January, 12, 2023.

⁶ Péter Csunderlik - Facebook post, January, 10, 2023.

⁷ This short biography was compiled based on a post on Holly Case's blog, (<https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/34132>) and a reliable Wikipedia entry

I met István when I first visited New York in 1992 as a Visiting Fellow at the newly founded Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, and as the academic secretary of the 1956 Institute in Budapest, which had just been established in 1991. Later we met at international conferences, in Warsaw in 1995 and then in Budapest, at an international conference on the 40th anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian revolution, hosted by the 1956 Institute and organized by me. We met again a decade later, at Columbia University in 2006 at a conference on the 50th anniversary of the revolution as well as in Cleveland in the same year where the two of us were the keynote speakers. In the meantime, I was Center Fellow at the Project on the Cold War as Global Conflict, International Center for Advanced Studies at New York University (NYU) in 2001–2002, and then I was a Fulbright Visiting Professor at NYU in 2006–2007.

It was after the conference on 1956 at Columbia in October, 2006,⁸ where I was on the same panel with István, that he recommended me for the István Deák Visiting Professorship for East Central European History (Attila Pók writes about the establishment of this position in detail below). So, once I left NYU in June, 2007, I was lucky to come back to teach at Columbia from September in the same year. While we had known each other as colleagues for quite some time, now this was the beginning of a friendship, which became a very close one over the years, as I held the Deák professorship five times between 2007 and 2016, each time for one semester. Thus, I spent a lot of time with him and his wife Gloria, mostly as a guest in their apartment on Riverside Drive, near the Columbia campus, and we became close friends, despite the 30-year age gap. During the first three occasions, I lived in an apartment that was just one floor below theirs in the same building and even later my place was very close to their home. As a scholar, I never had a mentor in Hungary but now I was compensated by fate by having an excellent one in New York.

From the early-mid 2010s their daughter, Eva wanted to convince them to move to her home in Paso Robles in California as she simply could not take care of her beloved parents, now both over 90, with growing health issues, from such a distance. But this was a very hard decision especially for István, who was more of a New Yorker than most people who are born in the city. Every year a decision was made about moving but eventually it was always postponed to the next year. Then they introduced a mixed system: they spent the winter in California but returned to New York in the early spring. In 2017 István wrote to me that finally, that year they would move there for good and for sure. So, in November, my wife, Melinda Kalmár, who is herself a historian, and I decided to visit them, sensing that it would be more difficult for us to see them in California. I remember how surprised István was when he realized that we really had nothing else to do in New York (as I did claim before the visit), and that our only goal was meeting them, so we spent a wonderful couple of days together, talking a lot about everything and enjoying their company and hospitality.

Then, “of course,” it turned out that the move was postponed again. Anyhow, still, that was the last time we met in person as they finally moved to live with Eva’s family in November 2019. In fact, I planned to meet them at that time too, and I organized my trip to a conference in San Francisco so that I could visit them on my way in mid-November, just before they planned to move. But then their flight schedule was changed at the last minute, so they had been gone by the time I got to New York. István arranged for me to stay in their apartment which was a very weird experience, as for me it was simply impossible to imagine the flat without István and Gloria. Thus, I was perhaps the last person to stay in the famous apartment where they lived for

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Istv%C3%A1n_De%C3%A1k). On István Deák’s life in detail see the following sources: Life audio interviews with István Deák prepared by Holly Case and Máté Rigó, (<https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/34132>); Life video interview by Barna Szász, 2020, https://memoryproject.online/istvandeak/?fbclid=IwAR3dujvwvkKCKFGgzJGAaFj_VLG6LomuLGEpK7PlwmeM-MqVUoJJVacXQqo. See also Deák’s recently published memoirs in Hungarian: Deák István: *Maratoni életem. Emlékirat*. (Budapest: Kronosz kiadó, 2023).

⁸ You can watch the video recording of the 2006 conference at Columbia University on the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJm-AnRKLW0>

thirty years and where they hosted so many friends and colleagues for several decades, as it was returned to Columbia some two weeks later.

I was hoping that soon enough there would be another opportunity to visit them, but it never came. We kept in regular touch by email, informing each other about family and other developments, so he would report to me on his progress on his memoirs that he was working on at the time. He took care of himself, he lived a healthy life, he did gymnastics every day, and mentally he was bright as ever. He loved to live, and, unlike most people at that age, he had many plans, so I was hoping he would still be with us for a longer time. I will miss him a lot.

The Historian

In his essay, Attila Pók provides a detailed analysis and evaluation of the main features of István's books and scholarly achievements. Here I am simply summarizing the most important topics he dealt with in his long career and listing his main works. Deák's works focus mainly on the history of Central and East Central Europe, the Second World War and the Holocaust. They deal with the revolutions of 1848, the cultural and political scene in Weimar Germany, World War I in Central Europe, the rise of fascism, collaboration and resistance in Europe during World War II, and post-World War II judicial retributions. His publications include, *Weimar Germany's Left-wing Intellectuals: A Political History of the "Weltbühne" and Its Circle* (1968); *The Lawful Revolution: Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians, 1848-1849* (1979), for which he received the Lionel Trilling Book Award of Columbia College, and which also appeared in German and Hungarian, as well as *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848-1918* (1990), which received, among other things, the Wayne S. Vucinich Book Prize of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, and which also appeared in German, Hungarian, and Italian. His *Essays on Hitler's Europe* (2001), appeared also in Hungarian. He edited and partly wrote, together with Jan T. Gross and Tony Judt, *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath* (2000). His last and most high impact book is *Europe on Trial: The Story of Collaboration, Resistance, and Retribution during World War II*. (2015) which was published in six languages.⁹

As for his credo as a historian (as well as an educator), one point-black description is that of Dominique Kirchner Reill, who writes that István Deák "abhorred convenient histories and paid notice to uncomfortable truths."¹⁰ Indeed, he liked, in fact, he enjoyed challenging traditional convenient mainstream narratives; he was always thought-provoking, raising surprising or unusual and really, often purposefully uncomfortable questions that nobody wanted to hear. He was a born revisionist in the best sense of the word, as he always wanted to revisit old positions and use a fresh, critical and dialectical approach in dealing with his subject matter, and he never cared about any potential reactions. While his revisionist drive can be traced in all his works, this approach is truly culminating in his last book, *Europe on Trial*. As Attila Pók points out,

according to Deák's point of view elaborated in great detail, both large and small nations of Europe would have had a way to stop or at least to curb Hitler... Thus, for example, he

⁹ István Deák, *Weimar Germany's Left-Wing Intellectuals: A Political History of the "Weltbühne" and Its Circle* (Berkeley–Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1968); Deák, *The Lawful Revolution: Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians, 1848-1849* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Deák, *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Deák *Essays on Hitler's Europe* (Lincoln –London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001); Deák, Jan T. Gross and Tony Judt, eds., *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Deák, *Europe on Trial: The Story of Collaboration, Resistance, and Retribution during World War II*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2015)

¹⁰ Dominique Kirchner Reill, *Perspectives*, March 30, 2023
[https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/april-2023/istv%C3%A1n-de%C3%A1k-\(1926%E2%80%932023\)?fbclid=IwAR3itVnt_nFLsOMgqLiL7VpYPmDu2awAuywUaCF9Aws5CjVAMy4N5ylDS4](https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/april-2023/istv%C3%A1n-de%C3%A1k-(1926%E2%80%932023)?fbclid=IwAR3itVnt_nFLsOMgqLiL7VpYPmDu2awAuywUaCF9Aws5CjVAMy4N5ylDS4)

explains that the Germans and the Eastern European anti-German partisans shared the intention of ethnic cleansing...His broad horizon is also reflected in his claim that Romania's secession from the war shortened the Second World War at least as much as the Normandy landings, causing extremely serious difficulties for the German army.

As for articulating not unknown, but rarely publicized uncomfortable truths,

he raises many further disturbing questions in this book, such as “we may wonder whether Spain, Denmark, Vichy France, Belgium, the Netherlands, the Czech Protectorate, or even Switzerland and Sweden were not more useful to the German war effort than such official allies as fascist Croatia and Slovakia, in which internal revolts necessitated German military intervention and cost the lives of thousands of German soldiers.”

In her essay, Holly Case, István's former doctoral student who conducted a long and detailed audio life interview together with Máté Rigó with István between 2009 and 2013, also evaluates István's books from the perspective of how his writings affected her scholarly work and career.

István was also a frequent essayists, publishing long and substantive book reviews on modern European history in *The New York Review of Books* and *The New Republic* throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, as is discussed in detail by Pók and mentioned in Moshik Temkin's essay as well. Vladimir Tismaneanu wrote that

István's contributions to *The New York Review of Books* and *The New Republic* were always thought-provoking and refreshingly uninhibited...He had a deep understanding of the relationship between history, culture, memory, and politics. His prose was stylistically impeccable and psychologically penetrating.¹¹

Since at the time *The New York Review of Books* was one of the most significant magazines in the US, and was also read worldwide, his regular essays made him an internationally influential scholar.

The Educator

Teaching for István was much more than a duty. He loved it, and it was a kind of mission and way of life for him. Case and Temkin, two former graduate students of István's, write in detail about their experiences with him as an educator. My favorite quotation here is this: “István made history feel glamorous,” Temkin writes, before he “complains” that he was “mised” by István that “scholarly life, the world of academia, and the history profession would be a series of scintillating conversations, deep engagement with ideas, and almost pure, unadulterated *fun*—social, intellectual, and cultural.” Temkin also makes a very important statement: “If ever a graduate history seminar resembled a central European political salon, it was István's class. More than anything, we talked about history. Not just historiography, which is what one learns to obsess over in graduate school, but actual history.” Case remembers that István “was famous for offering all kinds of counterarguments to *his own* statements, effectively exhausting the field of possible critical engagement right before our eyes.” She writes that István

did not seek to explain away or theorize over incompatible details, but rather lived with them and among those prickly details, allowed them to trouble neat conclusions and withhold the cushion of moral certainty that otherwise tempts historians of the region and of the war in particular.

¹¹ Vladimir Tismaneanu - Facebook post, January 13, 2023

As Pók mentions, during “the nearly six decades [Deák] spent in university education, he had thousands of students, and led many more students to obtain their doctorates than the average university professor.” More than that, István regularly communicated with many of his former graduate students, many of whom are now full professors at US universities. He was very proud of them, and he often talked with me about the achievements of his students. Copies of their books were on show in their living room on a special shelf, together with his own, so that the many visitors he had could not fail to see them.

In February, 2022 a rather unusual event occurred: at age 95 (!) István participated (online) in a roundtable at the American Historical Association Conference in New Orleans that was organized by his former students with the title “How East-Central Europe Changed: The István Deák School of History.” The roundtable

assessed how Istvan Deak’s research has altered how modern European history is written, what questions are asked, and how nations, states, and world events are approached historiographically, with special emphasis on East Central Europe, transnational cultures, European imperialism, the Habsburg Empire, World War Two, and the Holocaust.¹²

(I cannot stand mentioning here that three years earlier at the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies conference in San Francisco in late November 2019 I overheard a conversation of a group of middle-aged colleagues sitting close to me in the cafeteria, mentioning “the István Deák School of History” and I really wondered what they meant by that. However, I was not brave enough to ask them for clarification.) Worldwide, there are numerous influential historians who have created a kind of “school” of thought during their teaching career, but I wonder how many such “schools” we could mention that were “officially” established by the *students* themselves without any interest.

“Why did so many students at activist Columbia flock to his classes during the 1970s–90s culture wars, even though he taught and wrote almost exclusively about white, mostly male Europe?”—asks Kirchner Reill¹³. She answers that Deák “...made a world where we don’t need to bow to master narratives. You let us have the oxygen to debate, to wonder, to never take any story as more important than another—and yet to not feel useless in our relativism.”¹⁴ And she concludes with a testimony that any historian would die for: “because of you, our vision of the past and present will never be the same.”¹⁵ No wonder then, that perhaps an unprecedented large collective tribute to István will soon be published in the *Journal of Austrian-American History*, with the testimonies of some fifteen of his graduate students, organized by Kirchner Reill. Soon we will thus learn much more about the nature of the “Istvan Deak School of History.” Another similar venture in the *Hungarian Studies Review* will address how István’s works affected other historians’ thinking, especially in East Central Europe.

The Academic Manager

While István was tenured at Columbia in 1965, soon, in 1967, at the age of 41, he was also appointed to the directorship of the East Central European Center, which he led with great dedication until 1978. As Volker Berghahn writes,

this field had greatly benefited from the 1957 Sputnik Shock when Washington decided to pour large amounts of money into research on Soviet Bloc countries, supported by Henry Roberts, one of the most influential figures in Russian and East European Studies. It was

¹² Dominique Kirchner Reill—Facebook post—February 26, 2023

¹³ Kirchner Reill, *Perspectives*, March 30, 2023

¹⁴ Kirchner Reill, *Perspectives*, March 30, 2023

¹⁵ Kirchner Reill, *Perspectives*, March 30, 2023

with his encouragement that István was eventually appointed director of the East Central European Center.

To commemorate István's legacy as long-time leader of the Center, in 1999 the above-mentioned István Deák Visiting Professor for East Central European History position was established at Columbia. In his essay Pók, who also received this honor, gives a detailed overview of this important venture, presenting that it was founded "primarily with the support of László and Olivia Bitó, [and it] has been operating at Columbia University for twenty-four years. For all colleagues who received this honor it was an experience that defined their entire lives and careers." I could not agree more. Since its founding, he goes on, "close to twenty scholars (historians, economists, political scientists) from four countries have occupied this position."

At István's 90th birthday, on May 11, 2016, a big commemorative event was organized by the Harriman Institute, the East Central European Center, and Columbia's History Department, with the participation of 150 colleagues, former students, family and friends, and of course, the celebrated person, a happy István. The same people will come together to remember István's legacy at a commemorative conference organized by the same institutions on October 6, 2023.

The One-Man Institution in New York

István's former colleague and friend Volker Berghahn remembers the famous and very popular parties István and Gloria held in their spacious apartment, which served as a kind of salon for New York intellectuals. More than that, he also regularly invited former students, friends, and colleagues who were visiting the city or living in New York, to dinner or a cocktail. It was always a great temptation to enjoy István's and Gloria's hospitality.

He also served as a "Hungarian institution" in the US. Regularly giving parties was, of course, not exceptional in New York, but the role István played as a *one-man intellectual center* for Hungarian scholars and intellectuals was truly unique. He was always ready to receive scholars or other intellectuals from Hungary who wanted to meet him, in his home at Riverside Drive, as from the 1970s on it was an unofficial "rule" that when in New York, you must meet István Deák, if at all possible. I was no exception: when I first met István in New York in 1992, as mentioned above, my bosses at the 1956 Institute in Budapest gave me, as the academic secretary of the institute, a clear assignment to meet him no matter what. So, in fact, my first encounter with him was an official duty for me, but he was perhaps the most pleasant and rewarding "task" my superiors ever gave me in my life. On István's side all this was not motivated only by some missionary drive, but also because he truly loved company, he was very curious, and loved to chat, to be informed, to have an exchange of views, to discuss high politics, history or even everyday topics. Kirchner Reill remembers that "Gloria, once quipped that they had probably hosted half of Hungary and a sizable chunk of eastern Europe in their Riverside apartment."¹⁶ And of course, many of these visitors needed some help or support, and István helped by connecting people, contacting colleagues in favor of the guest, giving advice, or in any other way he could.

In the 1990s István was among the founding members and the main organizer of a "Hungarian (round)table" that met in New York for decades. This was a group of Hungarian academics living in the city itself, or its neighborhood, who were also friends, and who were joined by the current Istvan Deak Visiting Professor at Columbia, as well as other occasional visitors, mostly renowned intellectuals from Hungary. As Berghahn remembers, this circle, which was "very much a Central European tradition of sociability," met monthly, for lunch in the far corner of a Broadway or Amsterdam Avenue restaurant, and was "absorbed in serious discussions of issues in a language that no one around them could understand."

¹⁶ Kirchner Reill, *Perspectives*, March 30, 2023

Kirchner Reill opines, I think, rightly, that “the avalanche of memorials in the works are in part a response to his publications. But I think it was his inclusive sociality that built the broad network so eager to commemorate him. István knit together people of every age, gender, denomination, ethnicity, and standing in formal and informal ways.”¹⁷

István brought together not only people but at an important historic moment he also helped the rapprochement of his two home countries: he was a strong supporter of the return of the Holy Crown to Hungary by the US government, which happened in 1978, and he became a member of the official American delegation bringing it to Budapest. This fascinating story is elaborately told in Pók’s essay.

The Man—A Mensch.

Describing István as a man, a personality, both Berghahn and Temkin call him a *mensch*. According to Leo Rosten, a *mensch* is

someone to admire and emulate, someone of noble character. The key to being “a real mensch” is nothing less than character, rectitude, dignity, a sense of what is right, responsible, decorous. The term is used as a high compliment, implying the rarity and value of that individual’s qualities.¹⁸

Based on the above, I hope the readers of this tribute will agree that István Deák was an exceptional person, a real mensch. Stephen Morris called him “the purest example of a Central European intellectual.”¹⁹ Temkin writes that István was *sui generis*. Pók emphasizes how supportive he was, as he selflessly helped the work and the carriers of many younger colleagues both in the US and in Hungary throughout his long life. I can add that he was also a genuine democrat and humanist who was sincerely worrying about the future of democracy in America, as well as in his other home country, Hungary.

Participants:

Csaba Békés is a Professor of History at Corvinus University of Budapest, and serves as a Research Professor in the Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Political Science, Budapest. He is the founding director of the Cold War History Research Center, Budapest and a recurring visiting professor at Columbia University. His main field of research is Cold War history, East–West relations, the history of détente, Hungarian foreign policy after World War II, and the role of the East Central European states in the Cold War. His numerous books include *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution. A History in Documents*. (Co-ed., CEU Press, 2002); *Soviet Occupation of Romania, Hungary, and Austria 1944/45–1948/49* (Co-ed., CEU Press, 2015) and *Hungary’s Cold War: International Relations from the End of World War II to the Fall of the Soviet Union* (University of North Carolina Press, 2022).

Volker Berghahn is the Seth Low Emeritus Professor of History at Columbia University. He taught at the universities of East Anglia and Warwick in the UK before moving to Brown University in 1988 and to Columbia in 1998. He has published some 20 books on modern German History, European-American cultural and business relations, and historiography, including *America and the Intellectual Cold Wars in Europe* (Princeton University Press, 2001); *Europe in the Era of Two World Wars* (Princeton University Press, 2006); *American Big Business in Britain and Germany. A Comparative Analysis of Two ‘Special Relationships’ in the 20th Century*

¹⁷ Kirchner Reill, *Perspectives*, March 30, 2023

¹⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mensch>

¹⁹ Comment by Stephen Morris on Mark Kramer’s Facebook page, January 13, 2023.

(Princeton University Press, 2014); *Journalists between Hitler and Adenauer. From Inner Emigration to the Moral Reconstruction of West Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

Holly Case is a historian of modern Europe whose work focuses on the relationship between foreign policy, social policy, science, and literature in the European state system of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her first book, *Between States: The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea during WWII*, was published in May 2009 by Stanford University Press. The book shows how the struggle for mastery among Europe's Great Powers was affected by the perspectives of small states. Her second book is titled *The Age of Questions: Or, A First Attempt at an Aggregate History of the Eastern, Social, Woman, American, Jewish, Polish, Bullion, Tuberculosis, and Many Other Questions over the Nineteenth Century, and Beyond* (Princeton University Press, 2018). In it she addresses when and why people started thinking in terms of "questions," and how doing so altered their sense of political possibility. It won the István Hont Book Prize for best book in intellectual history for 2018.

Attila Pók is former (1996-2018) Deputy Director of the Institute of History, Research Center for Humanities of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, former (2008-2015) Secretary General of the Hungarian Historical Association, a senior researcher at the Institute of Advanced Study in Kőszeg (since 2016). Attila Pók used to teach at the Institute of European Studies in Vienna (1989 to 2009), was a recurring visiting professor of history at Columbia University in New York (1999 to 2013). His scholarly interests include nineteenth and twentieth-century European and Hungarian political and intellectual history, nineteenth- and twentieth-century European historical writing, the theory and methodology of history and the history of nationalism.

Moshik Temkin is a Visiting Distinguished Professor of Leadership and History at Schwarzman College at Tsinghua University, and a fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University. He was previously an associate professor of history and public policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, where he founded and directed the Initiative on History and Public Policy. He has also taught at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, in Paris, and at Columbia University. A specialist in modern American and international history, he is the author of *The Sacco-Vanzetti Affair: America on Trial* (Yale University Press, 2011) and the forthcoming *Warriors, Rebels, and Saints: The Art of Leadership from Machiavelli to Malcolm X* (PublicAffairs, 2023).

“Memories of István Deák—Fellow Historian, Colleague, Friend”

It was rather late in our academic careers, in 1998, that István Deák and I met in person. But I first came across his work as a young historian some thirty years earlier in the 1960s when both of us published our doctoral dissertations on the history of the Weimar Republic. István had written on the political Left and the history of *Die Weltbühne*. It was a critical study of a circle of German intellectuals and the question—then very much in vogue—of what forces contributed to the eventual demise of Weimar and the Nazi seizure of power in 1933.¹

My dissertation had approached this question from the opposite end of the political spectrum, i.e., that of the radical Right and some of its prominent intellectuals, such as Ernst Jünger who had joined anti-Republican *Der Stahlhelm, Bund der Frontsoldaten*.² And after the parliamentary-democratic Republic had been destroyed by its ruthless enemies, some of the Stahlhelmers who were opposed to the Nazi dictatorship were either murdered or survived Adolf Hitler’s War in a concentration camp, as had been the fate of the members of the *Weltbühne* circle who did not escape in time.

However, from the 1970s István’s and my scholarly paths began to diverge. He wrote major histories of the Austro-Hungarian empire and the Hungarian revolution of 1848/49. By contrast, I turned to West European history and trans-Atlantic economic and cultural relations in the twentieth century. Yet, by the 1990s both of us had returned to our earlier research interests and had resumed studying the impact of Nazi Germany on occupied Europe and the fallout from this catastrophic period in post-war Europe and the region’s division during the Cold War.³

So, when I moved from Brown University to Columbia in 1998, István welcomed me very warmly. He had just retired from the Seth Low Chair in the History Department and I inherited his position, though I was hired to replace Fritz Stern to teach modern German history. When we finally met in person, István was writing on the 1930s and 1940s from the perspective of the European resistance to Nazism, complemented by collaboration during the war and the politics of retribution after 1945. His focus was primarily on the important field of writing on victims and perpetrators.

I had become interested in men and women inside Hitler’s Germany and Nazi occupied Europe who had survived the war in what Primo Levi had called the “gray zone.”⁴ They were the ones who had not fled or had been forced to flee, but stayed behind and had, in many marginal ways, collaborated to survive. Some of them had also opposed the dictatorship on the fringes of the active resistance without taking the final step of accepting the consequences of being caught, tortured, prosecuted, and murdered by a regime that by 1942/43 had become increasingly terroristic. It had not only launched the Holocaust and was murdering millions of Jewish families and other minorities, such as the Sinti and Roma, but was also imposing draconian penalties

¹ István Deák, *Weimar’s Left-Wing Intellectuals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

² Volker Berghahn, *Der Stahlhelm. Bund der Frontsoldaten, 1918-1935* (Duesseldorf: Droste, 1966).

³ See, for example, Deák’s *The Lawful Revolutionary. Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians, 1848-1849* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); *Hungary from 1918 to 1945* (New York: Columbia Institute of East Central Europe, 1986); *Beyond Nationalism. A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848-1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); *Essays on Hitler’s Europe*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001); and *Europe on Trial. The Story of Collaboration, Resistance, and Retribution during World War II*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2015). Compare with Berghahn’s *Europe in the Era of Two World Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), and *Journalists between Hitler and Adenauer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁴ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage International 1989), and his *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

on the slightest expression of dissent. A critical comment in a streetcar could land you in a concentration camp.

As István's books on the topics of resistance, collaboration and retribution have been widely reviewed and praised, I would like to turn to other aspects of his life and work that we discussed during the 2000s until he decided to leave his apartment near the Columbia campus and moved with his wife Gloria to California, to their daughter Eva and her family.

Apart from remaining an internationally acclaimed scholar, he continued to be a devoted and admired teacher. In fact, he never really retired and when it came to mentoring students and participating in the many seminars, lectures, and conferences that the Harriman Institute as well as the adjacent Institute for the Study of Europe organized in the School of International and Public Affairs he would be there. He also played a crucial role in the establishment of an annual visiting professorship for scholars from Hungary and other East European countries. It was László Bitó, a professor of ophthalmology at Columbia and the inventor of the anti-glaucoma medicine Xalatan who generously endowed this visiting position that came to bear István's name.

As an emeritus professor, he also continued to connect colleagues and guests by inviting them to receptions and parties at his apartment where they were treated to wine and Hungarian specialties. He and I also met for long walks along Riverside Park during which we regularly discussed current political issues in Europe and the United States. Both of us being immigrants to the United States, we also talked about our experiences and roots in Europe. The difference between us was, of course, that he had arrived on these shores as a refugee with very bad memories of the war and postwar Hungarian Communism. He escaped to the West in 1948 and landed in Paris where he barely survived as an assistant in a bookstore until he found a more stable job as a translator and writer for the American-run Radio Free Europe in Munich for the next several years during the early 1950s.⁵

The great change in István's life came after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and its repression by Soviet tanks, when the United States opened its doors for some 44,000 Hungarians. Just before the revolution, in September of that year, at his request he was reassigned by Radio Free Europe from Munich to the New York center. Not much later he was involved in a program of sending academic books to Hungary where he met Gloria. Subsequently, he was admitted to Columbia University to undertake graduate work in history. Having completed his doctorate, he first had a teaching job at Smith College in 1962 but was hired a year later as an instructor in the Columbia History Department. After a spell as an assistant professor, he was eventually tenured and promoted to a full professorship and finally to the Seth Low Chair. In the meantime, he had also been appointed to the directorship of the East Central European Center. This field had greatly benefited from the 1957 Sputnik Shock when Washington decided to pour large amounts of money into research on Soviet Bloc countries, supported by Henry Roberts, one of the most influential figures in Russian and East European Studies. It was with his encouragement that István was eventually appointed director of the East Central European Center. In short, by then he had fully integrated himself into Columbia University and had also adapted himself well to the academic culture of his department.

However, integrating himself as well into the American political system as a committed citizen did not mean acculturation (or assimilation) to American culture and society. He did not dress or behave like an American who had been born in this country and had family roots in one of its regions. True, over many years he participated in the New York Marathon with thousands of fellow citizens, but to the best of my knowledge he was never a fan of American football or baseball. Rather he had a complex hyphenated American-

⁵ For more on this aspect of Deák's life, the interviews that are available on Cornell University's e-Commons are instructive; "The Life and Career of Professor Istvan Deak," <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/34132>

Hungarian-West European identity, and if one scratched a little, some deeply ingrained Hungarian cultural habits and attitudes came out.

Anthropologists have pointed to the importance of these factors, and it seems that István's life in the United States was also shaped by them. Thus, the food that he had at home and chose when attending a buffet lunch or dinner gave his Central European upbringing away. His first course would be a soup rather than a salad. He was a regular at the Hungarian pastry shop on Amsterdam Ave and many of his closest friends hailed from Hungarian families. In the 1990s István was among the founding members of a Hungarian “circle” (very much a Central European tradition of sociability) who were close friends and colleagues. They met regularly for lunch in the far corner of a Broadway restaurant, absorbed in serious discussions of issues in a language that no one around them could understand. István's cultural affinities also explain why, hailing from a liberal-conservative family in Budapest, he felt greatly honored when the White House asked him to join a delegation that would return the Hungarian Crown that had been captured by the US Army in 1944 and kept at Fort Knox to its original place.

However, his relationship to his country of birth was not merely marked by positive feelings. There were, to begin with, the memories of his precarious life during the war, when he was surrounded by a vicious antisemitism. Although the Deáks had converted to Catholicism decades earlier and as a boy István had regularly gone to church, this inevitably made him more conscious of his Jewish family roots. After 1945, the Communist takeover forced him to flee to Paris, as has been mentioned. When in later years he went to do research for his books in Hungary, the authorities treated him with great suspicion. He detested the Kádár regime and was glad that the return of the Hungarian Crown did not involve contact with the Hungarian Communist Party and its functionaries. Given his firm belief in democratic values and a liberalism that was more West European than American, he was, not surprisingly, increasingly unhappy about the course of Hungarian politics under Viktor Orbán.

At the same time, he also agonized over the rise of Trumpism in the United States and the politics of the Republican Party in Washington and other parts of his adopted country. Yet, his critique of these developments remained always very cautious, and this seems to have been due to both his life in wartime Hungary and his unwavering feelings of gratitude that the United States had not only offered him a refuge and had integrated him as a citizen when he arrived in 1956, but had also made it possible for him to find professional success in the open and cosmopolitan world of New York and Columbia University.

I am told that István eventually wrote his memoirs in which he will hopefully also talk about the role of Gloria, a well-known historian of books on New York, and their family and give his own account of his experiences as a refugee from war-torn Europe who became an acclaimed scholar, teacher, and Mensch in this country.

“On History and Human Experience: In Memory of István Deák”

I first met István Deák in 1998, in Ljubljana. From the fall of 1997 to the spring of 1999, I was on a Fulbright Scholarship in Slovenia. Slovenia itself was quite new. Fulbrights there were so new that, although I had applied for one in Hungary, the Fulbright powers offered me one in Slovenia. I did not know Slovene but was keen enough to learn, so I rented a top-floor apartment in the heart of Ljubljana. It was furnished with gorgeous but tremendously uncomfortable Biedermeier furniture and at all hours almost completely dark. In winter a wood-burning stove covered in ceramic tile was the only source of heat; every day the wood had to be carried up the three flights of stairs, the ashes in a metal bucket back down. The toilet was off an outdoor corridor. In a sense, I was inhabiting the Dual Monarchy.

My shins were perpetually bruised by heavy wood protrusions from the chairs or the immense parlor table. The bed was bracketed on both ends by slatted wood panels, necessitating a curled pose. The shape of someone half my size was worn into the mattress, so when assuming the curl I felt the subtle but intractable ridges of the ghost inhabitant's outline. It seemed for a time impossible to adapt to these surroundings. Like many former inhabitants of the Habsburg lands, I learned that the best way to live within its rigid and fussy forms was to see them as belonging to a past that is about to disappear.

Although I had originally wanted to do research relating to the war in Yugoslavia, the subject seemed so patently anachronistic and absurd given my surroundings that I yielded to the clear mandate of the furniture and the white-starched linens and moved fully into the nineteenth century. I learned to read handwritten Habsburg-era bureaucratic shorthand, practiced writing it at home, and encountered in the handwriting of those scribe-craftsmen the reassuring competence that emanates from the voice of a taxi dispatcher or an air traffic controller. The scribes clearly did not make the rules but were exceedingly good at lending them documentary heft and form to the workings of a massive, heterogeneous state. In the afternoons I would sojourn to a small library where I undertook to read every word of the Slovene- and German-language press spanning the period from 1848 to 1852. From page to page I watched the rules that had structured the lives of so many fall away, first in a patter, then in a deluge. The perpetually unfolding newness was exciting and unsettling, as it must have been for many who lived it.

After days spent engrossed in the intense verbiage of a newly free press as it edge tested both the Slovene language and its speakers, in the evenings I did a bit of linguistic edge testing of my own. My neighbor across the courtyard was Alan McConnell Duff, an Anglo-South African writer who spoke several languages fluently. He fit right in to the Kakania I inhabited.¹ We often dined together and playfully deployed our overlapping languages—Hungarian, Serbian, English, and soon Slovene—in long conversations. He would buy the fish, I would prepare (but never drink) Turkish coffee in a copper *djezva* as Franz Schubert's music was spinning in the CD player.

I

After dinner and on weekends I'd go back to my parlor-bedroom and read, which is when I first met István Deák. In *The Lame Revolution: Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians 1848-1849*, I encountered a revolutionary leader who, like the dutiful craftsman-scribes, stood on rules and sought to keep the revolutionary romanticism of

¹ The word “Kakania” was derived by the writer Robert Musil to describe the Dual Monarchy in the eighth chapter of his famous novel *Man without Qualities*. It refers to the abbreviation “k.u.k.” or “k.k.” for “kaiserlich und königlich” (imperial and royal), indicating the dual role played by the person of the emperor/king and the duality of the post-Ausgleich state more generally. See Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (Berlin: Rowohlt Verlag, 1957), 31-35.

the Sándor Petőfi of the world firmly in check.² But unlike the scribes, Lajos Kossuth was also in a position to rewrite some of those rules as head of state and leader of the Hungarian 1848 revolution. I have written elsewhere about the “paradoxical plurals” that István Deák embodied, those polymorphisms capably documented by a great many Habsburg-era, and above all post-Habsburg writers (Robert Musil, Gregor von Rezzori, Roda Roda, Miroslav Krleža, Joseph Roth, Ivo Andrić, etc.).³ Kossuth’s “lawful revolution” was another of these oxymorons, or paradoxical plurals.

After that first book I acquired a Hungarian edition of Deák’s history of the Habsburg officer corps, *Beyond Nationalism* [*Volt Egyszer egy Tisztikar*]. It opens with a scene from March 1848, with Emperor-King Ferdinand:

Before his throne paraded continual delegations of national politicians, each demanding a greater share of rights for his own constituency. All professed undying loyalty to His Imperial and Apostolic Royal Majesty, while casting covetous eyes on the lands of their neighbors in the realm and furtive glances at whatever foreign power might be enlisted to support their aspirations.

Deák went on to describe 1848 as “the greatest internal crisis theretofore known in the course of [the Habsburg Monarchy’s] long and complex history.”⁴ Yet it weathered that crisis in relatively short order. That much was clear from the press of the time, a massive wave in both quantity and intensity that started to break already in 1849, such that by 1852, only small ripples remained. Deák continued:

Such prolonged survival in the face of overwhelming odds was assured by two factors: the presence of the multinational Habsburg army and the sixty-eight-year reign of Emperor-King Francis Joseph. That this diligent, upright, judicious, seemingly cold, and rather unimaginative prince succeeded in holding the monarchy together was due in large part to the magic of his longevity, but also to the loyalty and devotion of his army. The latter was there at the dynasty’s side in March 1848, and it was still there at the beginning of November 1918, even after the breakup of the monarchy itself.⁵

As the young emperor/king Franz Joseph was just beginning to appear in the newspapers I read by day, by night in *Beyond Nationalism* he was already the symbolic glue, uniting in his person the Austrian and the Hungarian halves of the post-Ausgleich Dual Monarchy and the disparate peoples thereof, each with an emergent national movement and mental map.

At a weekend street flea market across the bridge from Breg, I came across a framed print of the Habsburg double-headed eagle against a gold background. A slogan within a drawn ribbon was printed in German Fraktur “Gott erhalte” [God save (the Emperor)], the first words of the imperial anthem [Kaiserhymne] of the Habsburg Monarchy. The image had likely once adorned the wall of a classroom or state office. Deák’s history of the officer corps described, without explaining away, the contradictions between the precarity I saw in the heady logic of the press and the “Gott erhalte” on the one hand, and the tremendous power manifest in the empire’s intractable stodginess on the other. The simultaneity of longevity and sickness, and above all

² István Deák, *The Lawful Revolution: Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians 1848-1849* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

³ Holly Case and Máté Rigó, “From a Place of Paradoxical Plurals,” Forum on István Deák forthcoming in *Journal of Austrian-American History*.

⁴ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848-1918* (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1990), 3.

⁵ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, 4.

the directional ambiguity of Habsburg reality was encapsulated succinctly in Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*:

People who were not born then will find it difficult to believe, but the fact is that even then time was moving faster than a cavalry camel... But in those days, no one knew what it was moving towards. Nor could anyone quite distinguish between what was above and what was below, between what was moving forward and what backward.⁶

Deák wrote of army maneuvers from 1906, at which the first armored car was presented to the elderly emperor: “But, as legend has it, Francis Joseph dismissed it as a gadget of no real military value because it frightened the horses.”⁷ If Chancellor Otto von Bismarck’s Germany was the product of “blood and iron,” Franz Joseph’s Dual Monarchy was forged out of pure irony, such that even the melody of “Gott erhalte” was destined to become the German national anthem: “Deutschland, Deutschland über alles.”

II

I learned from conducting a number of interviews with scholars of the region that difficult and very personal matters often cannot be confronted head on, at least not at first. Carl Schorske writes in the introduction to *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna* about how plunging into the crisis of liberalism of the late nineteenth century was his way of trying to make sense of the turbulence in his own time.⁸ In an interview, Habsburg historian Pieter Judson (a student of Deák’s) spoke of how studying nationalism and liberalism in the Dual Monarchy was his way of trying to make sense of the way “liberalism turned on itself” after the election of Ronald Reagan and especially during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s.⁹ While interviewing Deák, I came to believe that he had turned to the late Habsburg period to try to figure out what it meant to be “both/and” where the terms seemed mutually exclusive: both lawful and revolutionary, precarious and powerful, and in the case of István Deák’s father, both an officer who was loyal to the Habsburg emperor/king and a patriotic Hungarian, and in Deák’s own case, both a Hungarian Catholic and a Jew.

It was this latter theme that preoccupied Deák by proxy in much of his work on the Second World War and retribution.¹⁰ When as a youth he had wanted to join a scouting troop, he was admitted—in spite of the anti-Jewish laws in force in Hungary at the time—on the grounds that his father was a hero of the Great War.¹¹ There is also a photo of the young Deák in a Hungarian scouting uniform.¹² The image is haunted by another,

⁶ Cited in Carl Schorske, *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 116. For original, see Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, “Die Zeit bewegte sich. Leute, die damals noch nicht gelebt haben, werden es nicht glauben wollen, aber schon damals bewegte sich die Zeit so schnell wie ein Reitkamel; und nicht erst heute. Man wußte bloß nicht, wohin. Man konnte auch nicht recht untei scheiden, was oben und unten war, was vor und zurück ging,” 13

⁷ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, 71.

⁸ Schorske, *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna*, xx.

⁹ Case, “[Interview with Pieter Judson—May 15, 2017](https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/52257),” *East-Central Europe Past and Present* (blog), min. 20. <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/52257> [accessed June 12, 2023].

¹⁰ See, for example, Deák, Jan T. Gross, and Tony Judt, eds., *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Deák, “[Scandal in Budapest](https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2006/10/19/scandal-in-budapest/),” *The New York Review of Books* (October 19, 2006), <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2006/10/19/scandal-in-budapest/> [accessed June 12, 2023]; Deák, *Europe on Trial: The Story of Collaboration, Resistance and Retribution during World War II* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2015).

¹¹ Case and Rigó, “[Extended Profile: The Life and Career of Professor István Deák](https://ecpastandpresent.blogspot.com/2013/09/extended-profile-life-and-career-of.html),” *East-Central Europe Past and Present* (blog), *First Interview Series, Part II* (Dec. 5, 2009), min. 15:40. <https://ecpastandpresent.blogspot.com/2013/09/extended-profile-life-and-career-of.html>, <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/34132> [accessed June 12, 2023].

¹² Case and Rigó, “[Extended Profile: The Life and Career of Professor István Deák](https://ecpastandpresent.blogspot.com/2013/09/extended-profile-life-and-career-of.html),” *East-Central Europe Past and Present* (blog), “[Young István as a Hungarian boy scout at about age 7, on Pasaréti út in Budapest, at his](https://ecpastandpresent.blogspot.com/2013/09/extended-profile-life-and-career-of.html)

now famous photograph of two young boys in Hungarian scouting uniforms, standing on the platform near a cattle car at Auschwitz in 1944.¹³

But while István Deák was starting to think and write more about the Second World War, I was still entrenched—quite literally—in the nineteenth century. After reading the two monographs Deák had written about the Habsburg era (*Lamful Revolution* and *Beyond Nationalism*), I sat down to write him a letter. At the fold-out writing desk, I told him of my admiration for his work and interest in studying under his tutelage. At the time I had perhaps already come across an anecdote that has since stuck in my mind of a group of students sojourning to the apartment of the great Hungarian Turkologist and polyglot Ármin Vámbéry (1832-1913), since the professor could never be found at the university. When Vámbéry appeared at the door, they begged to be taught Persian. They had already learned Aramaic, Hebrew, and German, as well as having taken courses in Arabic and Indo-German linguistics and studied Persian grammar on their own, they told him. The next day he examined them rigorously on their knowledge of Persian and concluded: “You’ve learned that very well, but there’s no way any of you is going to become a Persian scholar so you’re wasting my time utterly.”¹⁴ In the spirit of Hungarian intellectual rigor, then, which the libertarian psychiatrist Thomas Szasz once boasted had driven many a schoolboy to suicide, I composed the letter in Hungarian.¹⁵

I don’t recall what I wrote, or Deák’s precise reply, but he did answer, and in a friendly and approachable manner familiar to so many of us who experienced the intellectual and personal generosity with which he encouraged especially young aspiring scholars. So I extended my stay in the nineteenth century, reading my way through the revolutionary years. As my Slovene got better, I stopped leaning so heavily on the German press and made ever bolder and longer forays into the Slovene press of the time, with its uneven orthography and earnest-newcomer debates: How should we write about agriculture with a largely illiterate agrarian would-be readership? What should the Slovene word for “constitution” be? All this as the Slovene state was under construction just outside my door, with its two state universities (in Ljubljana and Maribor) and small cadre of bureaucrats, politicians, historians, and intellectuals working to give the state a history, a literary canon, and new—sometimes old—names to streets, squares, and institutions.

When I got good enough with the language, I asked a friend to recommend a work of Slovene fiction. He suggested *Doberdob* by Prežihov Voranc (1893-1950), a hefty tome first published in 1940, about the Slovene soldiers who fought in the Habsburg army on the Italian front at the Battle of Doberdò.¹⁶ The battle appears on the first page of the introduction to Deák’s *Beyond Nationalism*.

To be a youth in Hungary in the 1930s meant to live with the memories, triumphs, defeats, paraphernalia, and lingering nostalgia attached to the Habsburg monarchy. Soldiers wore the

godfather’s villa (~1933).” <https://ecepastandpresent.blogspot.com/2013/09/extended-profile-life-and-career-of.html>, <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/34132> [accessed June 12, 2023].

¹³ The photograph appears in The Auschwitz Album, a collection of photographs made by an SS photographer in May of 1944, documenting the arrival of two transports from Eastern Hungary. “Jewish brothers from Subcarpathian Rus await selection on the ramp at Auschwitz-Birkenau,” *The Auschwitz Album*, Photograph Number 77218, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Yad Vashem (Public Domain), Source Record ID: FA 268/049. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa8299> [accessed June 14, 2023].

¹⁴ Ferenc Löwy, *Vámbéry Árminről* (Maros-Vásárhely Révész Béla Könyvnyomdája, 1914), 4.

¹⁵ Thomas Szasz, “An Autobiographical Sketch,” in Jeffrey A. Schaler, ed., *Szasz Under Fire: The Psychiatric Abolitionist Faces His Critics* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 9. According to Szasz, the atmosphere in college preparatory schools (gimnáziumok) could be “summed up very succinctly in the saying, ‘Megszoksz vagy megszöksz,’” or “‘Get used to it or get out.’” “In Budapest in the 1930s, most students behaved properly and did their school work as expected; and it was not the teachers’ affair if a youngster was depressed, failed, or committed suicide, which was by no means rare, especially before and after the matura examination.” One of Szasz’s literary idols, the humorist Frigyes Karinthy wrote a comic novel about the intense atmosphere in Hungarian gimnáziumok. Frigyes Karinthy, *Tanár úr kérem*, first published in 1916.

¹⁶ Prežihov Voranc, *Doberdob* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1969).

uniforms, carried the flags, and—this being impoverished little Hungary—still shouldered the rifles of the defunct Austro-Hungarian army. [...] On the street corners stood bemedaled beggars with shaking heads; “Doberdo,” they used to stutter, referring to the rocky plateau on the Italian front, where so many had suffered shell shock.¹⁷

Voranc’s *Doberdob* came out shortly before the Axis powers invaded Yugoslavia in 1941. Thus the Second World War seemed to be coming at me from all sides. It haunted my study of the Habsburg era and the Great War through Deák’s history of the Habsburg officer corps and the history of Doberdob (a word that, whenever uttered in conversation with Slovenes, would generate an automatic chorus of “slovenskih fantov grob” [the graveyard of Slovene youth]). It was also the reference point for the symbolic politics of the Wars of Yugoslav Succession, after Emir Kusturica’s film *Underground* (1995) replayed newsreel scenes of German troops who were entering Ljubljana and Zagreb being greeted by wild cheering. Among the other artifacts I saw at the flea market across the bridge, dislodged from attics and nooks in the homes of deceased elderly Slovenes: porcelain bowls printed with Swastikas, and a certificate of German citizenship [Einbürgerungsurkunde] issued to a seventy-six-year-old woman in November of 1941.

When I finally visited Columbia University, I recall how kind István was, and how his manner of speaking Hungarian carried a casual refinement that was pleasant to the ear. He had left Hungary after the elections in 1947 with five dollars in his pocket and another hundred hidden in a tube of toothpaste.¹⁸ Many of his Hungarian friends in New York had themselves emigrated following the failed 1956 Hungarian revolution. Their manner of speaking carried traces of a once-formal society—where people still made regular reference to hand-kissing and deployed intensely fussy iterations of the third person in formal forms of address—that had begun to loosen up following World War II, the state socialist takeover, and emigration.

III

In the end I didn’t go to Columbia but to Stanford, one reason being that István Deák had said he would retire soon and be away, on and off—at Stanford. I thus had the good fortune to have *two* extraordinary mentors in Norman Naimark and István Deák. On one of my first days on campus in 1999, Naimark said he was glad I had acquired some research and publishing experience in the history of the Habsburg Empire and the Slovene lands. With the archives opening across the region, however, there was much work to be done on the history of the Second World War in particular. Naimark had written a path-breaking book on the Soviet occupation of Berlin, and in 2000, *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath* appeared, co-edited by István Deák, Jan T. Gross, and Tony Judt.¹⁹

How incongruous it seemed, far from the dark and heavy Biedermeier, the heavy buckets of wood and lighter ones of ash, and the often-freezing corridor to the bathroom, to be at Stanford with István Deák in the perpetual sun and seventy-degree weather amid the scent of juniper and citrus blossoms. Although he had grown up in the shadow of the Habsburg Empire’s collapse and was even then nearing retirement, he was among those in the vanguard of rethinking the field in light of the flood of new documents coming out of Central and Eastern Europe in particular. The atmosphere in his seminar on collaboration and resistance in

¹⁷ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, vii.

¹⁸ Case and Rigó, “Extended Profile: The Life and Career of Professor István Deák,” *East-Central Europe Past and Present* (blog), *First Interview Series, Part III* (Dec. 5, 2009), min. 46. <https://ecpastandpresent.blogspot.com/2013/09/extended-profile-life-and-career-of.html>, <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/34132> [accessed June 12, 2023].

¹⁹ Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945–1949* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Deák, Gross, and Judt, eds., *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

wartime Europe was both pedagogical and exploratory in that it covered issues that would later appear in his 2015 book *Europe on Trial: The Story of Collaboration, Resistance and Retribution during World War II*.²⁰

At the end of the course, I turned in a final paper that Deák returned with a grade of A minus, followed by a few lines saying that it was a good paper, but why had I not argued with him more in the seminar? After consulting with some of my classmates, we discovered that several of us had also received a similar grade and comments. We thought it was a little unfair, because during the seminar Deák was famous for offering all kinds of counter-arguments to *his own* statements, effectively exhausting the field of possible critical engagement right before our eyes. It was only later that I came to appreciate the value of his example. He did not seek to explain away or theorize over incompatible details, but rather lived and thought among those prickly details, allowed them to trouble neat conclusions and withhold the cushion of moral certainty that otherwise tempts historians of the region and of the war in particular. Speaking in the understated yet powerful idiom of A minuses, he taught us humility in the face of human experience, which is irreducibly and irreconcilably plural, including—indeed especially—*within* nations and groups.

IV

When I began research for my dissertation on Transylvania during World War Two, Deák was both mentor and primary source. He had been in Transylvania during the war, first with his father, and later alone with an apprenticeship at the Korond ceramic factory.²¹ His experiences mirrored some of the internal tensions among Hungarian speakers that I had seen in the slander cases in the archives of Cluj and Budapest.²² And when I taught my first solo class on the social history of the Second World War, Deák spoke to my students how at age twelve he had discovered that he was Jewish after making an anti-Semitic comment in the presence of his parents.

Over the two decades that followed, I learned more about Deák's earlier life, partly during many visits to him and his wife Gloria in their apartment on Riverside Drive near the Columbia campus, partly through occasional participation in the Magyar Asztal (Hungarian Table) of expats who gathered at a Chinese restaurant in Morningside Heights, and partly through a series of interviews I conducted together with Máté Rigó, both with Deák and with other members of the Hungarian Table.²³ The interviews with Deák spanned 2009, 2010, with the last one in 2013. This was not due to any sense on his part that he had a life story worth telling. A typical exchange from the recordings, which recurs in various iterations across the interview (this one just after he had spoken of his arrival at Rue Budapest in Paris and been escorted by two young

²⁰ Deák, *Europe on Trial*.

²¹ Case and Rigó, "Extended Profile: The Life and Career of Professor István Deák," *East-Central Europe Past and Present* (blog), *First Interview Series, Part II* (Dec. 5, 2009), min. 40. <https://ecepastandpresent.blogspot.com/2013/09/extended-profile-life-and-career-of.html>, <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/34132> [accessed June 12, 2023].

²² Case and Rigó, "Extended Profile: The Life and Career of Professor István Deák," *East-Central Europe Past and Present* (blog), *First Interview Series, Part II* (Dec. 5, 2009), min. 49. <https://ecepastandpresent.blogspot.com/2013/09/extended-profile-life-and-career-of.html>, <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/34132> [accessed June 12, 2023].

²³ In addition to István Deák (*regular* and *extended*), we also conducted interviews with the translator and literary/cultural historian *Ivan Sanders*, the biologist *Miklós Müller*, the architect, architectural and social historian *András Körner*, and the businessman and philanthropist *Andrew Romay*. <https://ecepastandpresent.blogspot.com/2009/06/interview-with-istvan-deak-seth-low.html>, <https://ecepastandpresent.blogspot.com/2013/09/extended-profile-life-and-career-of.html>, <https://ecepastandpresent.blogspot.com/2014/03/extended-profile-life-and-career-of.html>, <https://ecepastandpresent.blogspot.com/2014/08/the-life-and-career-of-miklos-muller.html>, <https://ecepastandpresent.blogspot.com/2014/05/extended-profile-andras-korner.html>, <https://ecepastandpresent.blogspot.com/2014/05/extended-profile-andrew-romay.html> [accessed June 12, 2023].

prostitutes to a hotel and had his hundred dollars from the toothpaste tube gambled away by an unscrupulous Hungarian neighbor) went like this:

Deák: Should we continue?

Case and Rigó: Yes, absolutely!

Deák: I'm so bored with my own stories. [laughter] Are you not?

Case and Rigó: No!²⁴

Though at the time I was tuned to the rich detail in his memories and the background of events—the Second World War, the Holocaust, the immediate postwar period in Hungary—when I revisit his works and the many hours of interviews and my own memories of him now, I am struck by something else entirely, namely the love István Deák had for his scholarly community, family, and friends. For his father, the ghost that haunts every page of *Beyond Nationalism*:

There were the campaign ribbons in my father's drawer and the two silver medals, which he had earned for acts of bravery that he never wanted to discuss. There was also the heavy iron canteen, glazed in green, with a large shell-torn hole in the middle, which I regarded with religious reverence, for I sensed, however dimly, that had my father not happened to wear it on his hip that day, I might never have been born.²⁵

For his mother, about whom he told me he dreamt while being treated for melanoma in the 2010s. For “Nagyéva” and “Kiséva” [big Éva and little Éva], his beloved sister and her namesake, his daughter. For his wife Gloria, herself an author of great talent and a New Yorker of unrelenting attentiveness, intelligence, and social grace. (Deák dedicated both *Beyond Nationalism* and his published essays on WWII to these three women.²⁶) For the close family friend Béla Stollár who helped several members of the Deák family—including István—survive the war, and who himself was killed by the Arrow Cross in December 1944.²⁷ At the time of his death, Stollár was betrothed to Deák's sister, Éva. Deák's last book, *Europe on Trial*, was dedicated to the young couple—“Dr. Juris Béla Stollár (1917-1944) and his then fiancée, Éva Deák Veress (1922-2010)” —who would never marry.

²⁴ Case and Rigó, “Extended Profile: The Life and Career of Professor István Deák,” *East-Central Europe Past and Present* (blog), *First Interview Series, Part III* (Dec. 5, 2009), min. 52. <https://ecepastandpresent.blogspot.com/2013/09/extended-profile-life-and-career-of.html>, <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/34132> [accessed June 12, 2023].

²⁵ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, vii.

²⁶ Deák's sister (Éva Deák Veress), his daughter (Eva Peck), and his wife (Gloria Deák).

²⁷ On Béla Stollár, see <https://www.yadvashem.org/yy/en/exhibitions/righteous-sportsmen/stollar.asp> [accessed June 12, 2023].

“István Deák, the Transatlantic Hungarian Historian”

I first talked to István Deák at a conference on the minority problems of East Central Europe in Bucharest in 1985 and met him quite often on numerous occasions at various scholarly events inside and outside Hungary until the very end of his life. Our last encounter took place in a comfortable home for elderly people in California a couple of days before Christmas in 2022. He helped me professionally and personally in many ways, first of all by arranging my visiting professorships at the University of Chicago in 1993 and 10 semesters at Columbia University in New York between 1999 and 2013. He revised my manuscripts and advised me on the complexity of American academic life. My whole career would have developed differently if I had not met him about four decades ago.

István Deák’s research interests were deeply rooted in his personal life. He was born in 1926 in an upper-middle-class family in a by Hungarian standards middle-sized town about 40 miles West of Budapest. With about 35,000 inhabitants, Székesfehérvár was one of the fastest developing Hungarian towns at that time, and was home to an ever-increasing layer of a successful bourgeoisie. He completed his primary and secondary school studies in Budapest. He and his family were also affected by the government policy of the early 1940s that discriminated against Hungarian Jews and ultimately sent many of them to death. His sister’s fiancé, Béla Stollár, lost his life as a member of the resistance that developed after the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944. This was one of the defining experiences of his entire life. At the same time, as a remarkable and rare exception, his family received back the valuables they had deposited during the time of crisis from all acquaintances, friends, and colleagues. These experiences in his youth led him to become a historian. He began his studies in Budapest, and the rise of the Communist Party prompted him to emigrate in 1948. He first went to France, studied history at the Sorbonne in Paris, and then worked for Radio Free Europe in Munich. In 1956 he moved to New York, where he continued to work for Radio Free Europe and studied modern European history at Columbia University. In 1964 he earned his doctorate there and after that, his teaching and research career always connected him to Columbia University.

His scientific oeuvre related to three sets of problems. His first major field of research, encouraged by Professor Fritz Stern, who supervised his doctoral work in the early 1960s, was the intellectual and political life of Weimar Germany. His PhD dissertation, which was published under the title *Weimar Germany’s Left-Wing Intellectuals. A Political History of the Weltbühne and Its Circle* in 1968, analyzed the politics of the journal *Weltbühne* during the time of the Weimar Republic. The topic is German but the motivation to deal with it was rooted in Deák’s youth in Hungary. As he argues in the preface to the book:

Just as the previous generation had looked to Paris for inspiration, the Hungarian intellectuals of the interwar period, whether Communists, democrats, populists, conservative revolutionaries, or fascists, looked to Berlin. But the German intellectuals, to whom I inevitably turned, proved to have had neither power nor influence in their political world. In twentieth-century Hungary the literati were at least partly responsible for two revolutions, those of 1918-1919 and 1956, and for the political and social ferment of other years. Their brilliant German counterparts achieved almost nothing. My first attempt to understand why led to a doctoral dissertation...¹

This journal, originally focusing on theater criticism, was a prestigious forum for German left-wing intellectuals between the fall of 1918 and the spring of 1933, but it also published the works of French authors who sympathized with them, and even the Russian revolutionary, Leo Trotsky wrote three articles for

¹ István Deák, *Weimar Germany’s Left-Wing Intellectuals. A Political History of the Weltbühne and Its Circle* (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968), vii.

them. They supported the demilitarization of Germany and took a firm stand against all restrictions on civil and human rights. Among its famous editors was the pacifist journalist Carl von Ossietzky, who was deported to a Nazi concentration camp. Although he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the Nazi authorities did not allow him to travel to receive it. Kurt Tucholsky, both as an editor and an extremely prolific author, attacked Nazism with caustic satire in many genres. When a public book burning was organized on May 10, 1933 in Berlin's Opera Square, most of the authors of the books burned belonged to the circle of the *Weltbühne*. István Deák presents the magazine's life and struggles with great empathy and an almost dramatic visual force, giving a broad cultural and political background to their activities. The family of his PhD advisor, Fritz Stern, also fled the Nazis, and ended up in the United States. Stern's works provided one of the first in-depth analyses of the roots of Nazi ideology. Based on extensive primary source research, they offer with very emphatic, balanced evaluations, are always reflective and multifaceted, but at the same time radiate a clear and strong humanitarian commitment.²

This attitude is reflected in István Deák's entire life work. This includes his publications related to his second major research area, the formation and tragedies of the Hungarian state and society from 1848 to the end of World War II. Since he always examined the problems of Hungarian history using a comparative method, embedded in Central European, European and global contexts, I include here his large monograph on the military officers of the Habsburg Monarchy between 1848 and 1918 from the perspective of social and political history as well. This second major book of his thus deals with the most important event of nineteenth-century Hungarian history, the 1848 Revolution and Freedom Struggle, first published by Columbia University Press in 1979 entitled *The Lawful Revolution*.³ In 1983, one of the most prestigious Hungarian publishers of the time, Gondolat, brought it out in Hungarian under the title *Lajos Kossuth and the Hungarians in 1848-49*, the subtitle of the original work.⁴

This marked the first time that a book by a Hungarian historian living in the West was published in his homeland. This was the case in spite of the fact that 10 years earlier Deák, who had been dealing with this topic since 1970 and had spent much time in working in Hungarian archives supported by American research grants, was expelled from Hungary at short notice without any explanations. He was allowed to return the following year but was under strict observation during his 10-day-stay. However, four years later he was arriving in his native country as an official American guest, stepping on the red carpet from the plane carrying the Hungarian Holy Crown home. This was indirectly made possible by the inauguration of Jimmy Carter as president in 1977. The new president wanted to open his foreign policy in several directions, and Cyrus Vance, an experienced New York lawyer with great diplomatic skills who served as Carter's secretary of state, proved to be an excellent partner for this.

President Carter appointed Zbigniew Brzezinski, a Polish nobleman, to the other key foreign affairs post: national security adviser. Brzezinski used to teach at Columbia University and was a colleague and good friend of Deák. In mid-October 1977, Brzezinski asked Deák to prepare a short study on the significance of the Holy Crown for the Hungarian nation. Deák argued in favor of the return of the crown, a gesture that was important for the international prestige of the Hungarian Communist regime. This might perhaps explain why his Kossuth book could be published without any revision of the substance. One change, however, was called for and that was the title. The concept of the "Lawful Revolution" was, to the best of my knowledge,

² Stern's most important books include Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study In The Rise of The Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961, 1963); Stern, *The Failure of Illiberalism: Essays on the Political Culture of Modern Germany* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1972); Stern, *Gold and Iron: Bismarck, Bleichröder, and the Building of the German Empire* (New York: Knopf, 1977); Stern, *Dreams and Delusions: The Drama Of German History* (New York: Knopf, 1987). Stern, *Einstein's German World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, *Five Germanies I Have Known* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

³ Deák, *The Lawful Revolution: Lajos Kossuth and the Hungarians in 1848-49* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

⁴ Deák, *Kossuth Lajos és a magyarok 1848-49-ben* (Budapest: Gondolat 1983).

first used by Deák. He was very good at giving eye-catching titles to his works. Describing the spring 1848 events in Hungary as both lawful and revolutionary brilliantly expressed the complexity of the events. Deák explained how loyalty to the Hungarian political system represented by the Hungarian king came into conflict with the loyalty to the Habsburg emperor when the same person was in both positions. Since the editors who worked for the Budapest publisher feared that the original title could be interpreted as a reference to the 1956 revolution, they decided to use the original subtitle as the title of the book. He also uses the term civil war, which refers to the clash of the peoples living in the Monarchy and the Carpathian Basin. Without any pathos, he writes in an empathetic and critical way about the leaders of the revolution.

His concluding evaluation of Lajos Kossuth's historical role and significance is a good example of his balanced but most emphatic approach to complex issues. Kossuth, the leading personality of the 1848 revolution and the struggle for freedom had been celebrated in Hungary as the greatest figure of modern Hungarian history; his cult has never abated. There is no Hungarian settlement without a Kossuth street or square, the most important public space in the Hungarian capital is named after him. Deák writes as follows:

In reality, after 1849 Kossuth had contributed little to the political evolution of his country, or to that of Europe. He had learned little, remaining forever a child of the Enlightenment and of the Romantic age. He believed firmly in reason and the perfectibility of man. He thought that he could improve humanity and his own nation through goodwill, the power of persuasion, and hard work. It would be foolish to pretend that he failed completely, for he gave hope to the oppressed, he opened the way to the modernization of the country, and by inspiring, causing, or provoking national revolutions, he changed the course of Central European history. But he burdened the shoulders of his compatriots with more problems than he was able to solve. He was a charismatic leader who reinforced the Hungarians' suicidal notion that theirs was a particularly exalted destiny, and that the Hungarian contribution to all mankind was crucial. Yet there was in Kossuth no trace of the cynicism, callousness, and furious brutality of Napoleon I or of the twentieth-century dictators.⁵

It was in 1990 that Deák published another impressive synthesis under the title *Beyond Nationalism. A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Office Corps, 1848–1918*. (Oxford University Press, New York Oxford, 1990.) In the preface he explains how his research into the history of 1848–49 led him to this new topic:

...while doing research in the Vienna War Archive on the Hungarian revolution of 1848–1849 and its leader Lajos Kossuth, I came upon the marvelously rich materials it contained on all aspects of Habsburg military history, particularly the men in service to the emperor. The documents highlighted the harrowing dilemma confronted by the soldiers of the 1848–1849 revolutions and wars to whether continue to serve the emperor or to enter the service of the nation into which they had been born. The documents also made clear—in contradiction to my education—that in 1848–1849 at least as many officers remained loyal to the Habsburg dynasty as joined the camp of Louis Kossuth. I discovered that it was the Habsburg army and the officer corps in particular that had bonded the empire at that time, furthermore, that it was primarily the officers who held the monarchy together until 1918.⁶

Based on the extremely rich archival material, the general documents of the army, the personal documents of hundreds of officers, unpublished memoirs, autobiographies, diaries, private correspondence and, of course,

⁵ Deák, *The Lawful Revolution*, 351.

⁶ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism. A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Office Corps, 1848–1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), ix.

the relevant literature in English, German and Hungarian, Deák's prose almost passionately develops the main thesis:

In an age when the monarchy's inhabitants were inundated by every conceivable type of nationalist and social propaganda, when parliamentary deputies engaged in fist fights rather than legislation, the army and its foremost soldier, the emperor offered a vision of peace, order, tolerance, and continuity. Only after the emperor had become very old, early in the twentieth century, did the army undergo a drastic reorganization under new leadership...increasingly politicized, at once overly confident and overly pessimistic, and therefore more and more willing to seek spiritual and moral refuge in all-out war. By adopting its program in attacking Serbia in July 1914, the monarchy spelled its doom.⁷

Deák was able to formulate his theses very sharply, provoking debate, challenging established opinions, a good example of this is what he writes about the Emperor Franz Joseph:

A more imaginative and enterprising monarch might have exposed the officer corps to novel political ideas and influences, thereby hastening the collapse of the military edifice and thus of the monarchy as well. It is not easy to see what benefit its peoples would have derived from such a precipitous development, considering that even the relatively late collapse in 1918 brought no change for the better.⁸

The overview of the final chapter of the book about the fate of the officers of the Habsburg Monarchy after World War I leads to Deák's third major area of research, to the European and especially Central European history of World War II. According to his argument, due to the radical rise of ideologies

At war's end, Habsburg officers found that gone forever was their sense of shared purpose in a professionalism directed chiefly toward preserving peace. Beyond this military professionalism built up over a century, no political ideology could claim them as an indissoluble fraternity in the far-flung region that was once the Habsburg Monarchy.⁹

At the time he was writing of the book about the Habsburg officers, Deák was more and more often asked by one of the most prestigious magazines in the United States, the *New York Review of Books* (NYRB) and the equally prestigious *New Republic*, to write essays reflecting on recently published books on modern European history. According to the NYRB's archive, he published for the first time in February 1981, in a review of Alan Sked's *The Survival of the Habsburg Empire: Radetzky, the Imperial Army, and the Class War, 1848*.¹⁰ A year later, his essay on Randolph Braham's book on the Hungarian Holocaust started a debate that continues to this day.¹¹ As he had with his work on Kossuth, Deák again provocatively challenged established ideas when pinpointing a most crucial question in the history of the Hungarian Holocaust. He called for a re-evaluation of the decisions that led to the occupation of the country by the Germans in March 1944. Researchers in the field agree that without the German occupation most of the Hungarian Jews could have survived the war. The other side of the coin, however, is that without Hungarian state support, the deportation of Jews would not have been so quick and effective. Deák agreed with Randolph Braham, the author of the first

⁷ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, 8.

⁸ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, 9.

⁹ Deák, *Beyond Nationalism*, 212.

¹⁰ A Radical Field Marshal, February 19, 1981

¹¹ Deák, "Could the Hungarian Jews Have Survived?" *The New York Review of Books*, XXIX: 1 (February 4, 1982). For reactions to this article see among others Helen Fein, Dr. Albert B. Belton and William McCagg Jr.'s comments and Deák's reply: "Genocide in Hungary: An Exchange," *The New York Review of Books*, XXIX: 9 (May 27, 1982).

comprehensive history of the Hungarian Holocaust,¹² who argued that the German occupation of Hungary could have been avoided if the Hungarian political elite had much better collaborated and served the Germans. Part of Deák's always thoughtful and thought-provoking reasoning here is that he describes the option of the collaboration as an acceptable strategy but also included a warning: Germany's Adolf Hitler attached strategic importance to the destruction of the Hungarian Jews, and collaboration could have facilitated this process.

Through his most relevant essays in the following decades, he became one of the most respected experts in the comparative history of the Holocaust. He always addressed a long list of questions, such as the roles of popes Pius XI and Pius XII, the responsibility of Central and Eastern European politicians and societies, the situation within extermination and labor camps, and the pitfalls of anti-Nazi military and political cooperation. Rich as his list of questions is, the list of answers is restrained. He held very strong views on some issues; for example, although he mentioned the Vatican's motives for non-action (fear of Bolshevism, help taking place quietly in the background can be more effective than public action), he often argued that the Vatican could have done much more for the sake of the Jews who had been condemned to annihilation.¹³ His essays on other topics also led to discussions in the columns of the NYRB, as for example, on the possibilities and limitations of Hungarian politics in 1956 or the consequences of the regime change in 1989–1990. In 2001, at the request of the University of Nebraska Press, he published a selection of eighteen of his essays in a book entitled *Essays on Hitler's Europe*,¹⁴ which cover various aspects of the most tragic years of the twentieth century: patterns of behavior in the German society, in Jewish communities, among the victims, the perpetrators and the onlookers, who comprised the most populous group in all countries. At this time, he began planning a comprehensive, voluminous monograph on the history of collaboration, resistance, and retaliation during and after World War II. One of the first results of this work was a collection of essays by American, East and West European experts he edited together with two other renowned New York historians in the field, Jan T. Gross and Tony Judt, entitled *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath*.¹⁵

The research plan was ultimately accomplished by 2015 when Westview Press published his book on collaboration and resistance in Europe during World War II in English and Argumentum Kiadó in Hungarian.¹⁶ The English title, *Europe on Trial*, typically reflects Deák's approach: it can be interpreted as a reference to a series of great efforts by Europe to stop Hitler or that Europe is to be prosecuted for not being able to stop Hitler. According to Deák's point of view, which he elaborated in great detail, both the large and the small nations of Europe would have had a way to stop or at least to curb Hitler. He also deals with resistance and collaboration against the Nazis in a thoughtful and most balanced way, showing with numerous examples how easily the line between victim and perpetrator could be crossed more than once. Thus, for example, he explains that the Germans and the Eastern European anti-German partisans shared the intention of ethnic cleansing, which was not necessary in France, since the assimilation process was already very advanced there by that time.¹⁷

¹² Randolph Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2 vol.; 2nd ed. 1994; Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs, 3rd ed. 2016).

¹³ David G. Dalin, *The Myth of Hitler's Pope: How Pope Pius XII Rescued Jews from the Nazis* (Washington: Regnery Publisher, Washington 2005)

¹⁴ Deák, *Essays on Hitler's Europe* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2001)

¹⁵ Deák, Jan T. Gross, and Tony Judt, *The Politics of Retribution in Europe. World War II and Its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹⁶ Deák, *Europe on Trial. The Story of Collaboration, Resistance and Retribution during World War II* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2015), Deák, *Európa próbatétele. Együttműködés, ellenállás és megtorlás a második világháború alatt* (Budapest: Argumentum, 2015)

¹⁷ Deák, *Europe on Trial*, 96.

His broad horizon is also reflected in his claim that Romania's secession from the war shortened the Second World War at least as much as the Normandy landings, causing extremely serious difficulties for the German army. By not joining the Romanians when they changed of sides, Hungarians lost the last opportunity to avoid much of the upcoming suffering and destruction in their country. The mutual enmity of the two nations had prevented any kind of cooperation between the so-called allies. Unlike the Romanians, he further argues, the Hungarians could not have left the war because they were geographically in a much worse place, and besides, Governor Miklós Horthy wanted to conclude an armistice without dishonesty. Despite their frequently expressed loyalty to Germany, King Michael and his generals were dishonest from this point of view, since they turned against Germany without any hesitation. Deák raised many further disturbing questions in this book, such as

we may wonder whether Spain, Denmark, Vichy France, Belgium, the Netherlands, the Czech Protectorate, or even Switzerland and Sweden were not more useful to the German war effort than such official allies as fascist Croatia and Slovakia, in which internal revolts necessitated German military intervention and cost the lives of thousands of German soldiers. Or how useful to Germany was fascist Italy, Germany's main ally, which the German leaders increasingly saw as an intolerable burden?¹⁸

This book has so far been published in six languages (English, German, Italian, Slovenian, Chinese, and Hungarian) and was well received.¹⁹ Most reviews greatly appreciate the author's ability to explain the complexity of the frequently thin line between collaboration and resistance, and while recognize his skill to develop his arguments based on secondary literature, occasionally miss the use of primary, archival sources.

István Deák's style was as colorful and exacting in his speech as well as his writing. During the nearly six decades he spent in university education, he taught thousands of students, and led dozens of students to obtain their doctorates. The visiting professorship named after Deák, which was established primarily with the support of László and Olívia Bitó, has been operating at Columbia University for twenty-four years, and the writer of these lines held this position for ten semesters between 1999 and 2013. This honor was an experience that defined our entire lives and careers. The idea of paying tribute to Deák's achievements as a scholar, teacher and public intellectual came in 1998 when László Bitó (a Columbia researcher of ophthalmology who left Hungary in 1956) offered part of the substantial revenue originating from his patent for an eye-drop curing glaucoma to support East Central European Studies at Columbia University. The original idea was to set up a new chair to be named after Deák. In preparation, the University supported a visiting professor for every academic year from 1999 to 2003. In addition to teaching, the visiting professor was also expected to help the fundraising process for the realization of this plan. In 2003 the plan was slightly modified: instead of a chair, an endowment to finance a visiting professorship was created. Since then, close to twenty scholars (historians, economists, political scientists) from four countries have occupied this position. Until Deák left New York in late 2019 to live in his daughter's house in California, he made every possible effort to help the work of these visiting professors.

¹⁸ Deák, *Europe on Trial*, 83.

¹⁹ Hereby a selection of reviews of *Europe on Trial*: Péter Csunderlik, *The Hungarian Historical Review*, vol. 7, no. 2, (2018): 399–402 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26571612>); Timothy Snyder, *Austrian History Yearbook*, 47: 230-231 (doi:10.1017/S0067237816000382); Kees Boterbloem *Hungarian Cultural Studies*. e-Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 8 (2015), <http://ahea.pitt.edu> DOI: 10.5195/ahea.2015.1941; Ivan T. Berend, *The Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Volume 30, Issue 1 (Spring 2016): 157–160, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dcw014>; Ahlrich Meyer, "István Deák, Kollaboration, Widerstand und Vergeltung im Europa des Zweiten Weltkriegs. Aus dem Ungarischen übers. v. Andreas Schmidt-Schweizer. Wien/Köln/Weimar, Böhlau 2017," *Historische Zeitschrift*, vol. 307, no. 3, (2018): 893-895 (<https://doi.org/10.1515/hzhz-2018-1591>).

Deák's final project was the autobiography that he started working on in 2019. He does not use the concept of ego-history in that work, but he cultivates it. He set himself a clear professional goal:

Naturally, the main topic of my autobiography is my eventful life, which was almost inevitable for the inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe at the time. However, for me, my other related topic is no less tempting: the attempt of a significant part, perhaps the absolute majority, of the many millions of Jewish people living in Central and Eastern Europe to make themselves accepted by the so-called Christian middle class, ideally the historical aristocracy. Many of them hoped not only for acceptance, but for complete assimilation.²⁰

The world of the First World War, the world of the Hungarian middle class between the two world wars, the catastrophe of the Holocaust, the life of the emigrant young man in Paris and Munich, and the story of fitting into American academic life come to life in the pages of the book. And although he spent 74 of his 96 years outside his country, and he met his wife in New York and they raised their daughter there, he remained in constant contact with his family back home, and when circumstances allowed, he visited Hungary. While his entire professional oeuvre is written in English, his last work, this autobiography, is written in Hungarian and was published in June 2023. With this last book he has arrived back home.

²⁰ István Deák, *Maratoni életem. Emlékirat* (Pécs: Kronosz Kiadó, 2023), 18-19. (Translated by Attila Pók)

Essay by Moshik Temkin, Harvard University

“On István Deák, Teacher and Friend”

I hold István Deák responsible for giving me false ideas. It makes writing this piece particularly bittersweet. Meeting him, studying with him, and befriending him when I was in graduate school at Columbia University, more than two decades ago, led younger naïve me to believe that the scholarly life, the world of academia, and the history profession would always be a series of scintillating conversations, deep engagement with ideas, and almost pure, unadulterated *fun*—social, intellectual, and cultural. Alas, I learned the hard way that István was *sui generis*, and although there have been a few such moments in the years since I met him, they have been far and few between—a letdown after spending time with István, both inside and outside the classroom, when I was an overaged but bright-eyed and brash new PhD student.

I liked István from the first time I met him, but in retrospect, I am not sure why he took a liking to me—I came into the program, vaguely, as a Western Europeanist, with a growing interest in modern American history. I wasn’t in his field, and although I had visited his homeland Hungary once, some years before, long before we met, we didn’t inhabit the same world. The East-Central Europeanists at Columbia—István was their mentor and leader—fascinated me: their subfield seemed to me to be both somewhat insular but also sparkling and filled with intellectual energy and cultural panache. It took me a while to understand that this was due mostly to István, not necessarily to the subfield, which turned out to be like any other one in our discipline. István made history feel *glamorous*. The intellectual stakes always felt high.

Early on in my first year at Columbia, I made the choice to seek out and take classes with the historians there who were either retired or retiring imminently. I took Robert Paxton’s seminar on fascism—the last time he taught it, and shortly before he published his great analytical work *The Anatomy of Fascism*.¹ But perhaps the class that impacted me the most in that first year, as a future teacher of history, was István’s graduate seminar: not necessarily because of the content, but because of the atmosphere István created. If ever a graduate history seminar resembled a central European political *salon*, it was István’s class. More than anything, we talked about history. Not just *historiography*, which is what one learns to obsess over in graduate school, but actual history: The importance of specific leaders. The nature of mass politics. The scope of genocide. The relationship between elites and the masses, and between religion and the state. István had the ability, so important for a historian and yet so seemingly rare, to shift seamlessly from the most micro, detail-oriented perspective to the big picture.

István had already officially retired two years prior, but he continued to teach, seemingly for fun, and he did it with the energy and enthusiasm of a newly minted junior professor. It also quickly became clear to all of us why he was a longtime fixture in the pages of the then-outstanding *New York Review of Books*, under the late editor Robert Silvers. This foreigner, who immigrated to the United States at age 30, spoke and wrote English more eloquently and clearly than any American professor I ever met. The Hungarian lilt was a nice touch. And although István was on the whole a modest man, he was not modest about writing for the *NYRB*. It was one of the first things he mentioned in our class, and it was obvious he was proud of it (back then being handpicked by Silvers was a source of pride even for the most established scholar or writer), but he didn’t make it seem like a towering achievement. He explained to us what they liked and preferred, instructed us to always avoid jargon, and encouraged us to write in ways that would appeal to editors like Silvers. His graduate training was not just about research: it was a professional workshop, with István dispensing strict but practical advice, based on his decades in the profession: how to present papers, how to edit, how to say something when we weren’t sure if we were correct or not. I have never seen anyone make more intricate, detailed comments on a student paper.

¹ Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004)

István could be tough and straightforward. He once took apart, over an otherwise pleasant lunch in his favorite Chinese restaurant, an article I had written for a magazine about a new book on the Holocaust. He was not being unkind; just a stickler for exactitude and high standards. And he was no slouch when it came to supervising scholarly work, as I discovered when the time came to produce the final paper for that seminar. I still think that the most complex historical topic I ever wrote about in any capacity was the German Revolution of 1918-1919 (which wasn't exactly a revolution, more like a chaotic and vicious struggle over the future of defeated and starving Germany after the Great War). Analyzing the historical scholarship on that event for István—we both felt the ominous implication of the failed Revolution's aftermath, which was the chronic weakness of Germany's Weimar Republic and the eventual rise of the Nazis—was a trial by fire. After that, I felt like I could handle anything.

Over the years, as I learned more about István's life ("he was *Jewish!!??*") and was able to situate his biography in the broader context of what was happening in the world and especially in the United States, I realized how directly connected his life and academic career were to World War II and especially the Cold War, which shaped his professional trajectory and political sensibilities and which he continued to live and breathe long after it was over. I did not work with him when I wrote my dissertation or at any point after that, but we stayed in touch, mostly because he was such a *mensch*. And he still had some surprises in store. In 2010, he was 84 and had long ceased teaching when I returned to Columbia to talk about my first book, on the Sacco-Vanzetti Affair, based on the dissertation I wrote at Columbia.² Nothing made me happier than seeing István in attendance. After the talk, over dinner, he shared with us a small confession: he had always, he told us, felt an affinity, a closeness, a sympathy, with Sacco and Vanzetti. I was taken aback for a moment by the idea of István, this quintessential Cold War liberal, identifying with two Italian working-class immigrant anarchists who were executed by the state of Massachusetts for a robbery and murder they claimed they didn't commit. But then I quickly remembered the István I first met, the one who took an inexplicable liking to me, and somehow it all made sense.

² Moshik Temkin, *The Sacco-Vanzetti Affair: America on Trial* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011)