

OBITUARY

István Deák (1926–2023): In Memoriam

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Abstract

This is a tribute to István Deák, a prominent historian of Habsburg history. The tribute covers his early life in Budapest, the son of a middle-class family of Jewish origins who suffered as a Jew in 1944. Deák left Hungary in 1944, spent several years in France and Germany, and then came to the United States in 1956. Much of the commemoration covers his career as a professor of history at Columbia University and his very significant scholarly contributions.

Keywords: István Deák; Jewish assimilation; Holocaust in Hungary; Deák's scholarship; Hungarian Revolution of 1848; Habsburg army officers; World War II in Europe

István Deák was our beloved teacher, our *Doktorvater*, with whom we remained intellectually and personally close long after we left Columbia University. He inspired us and the many others he mentored with a compelling model of how to be a historian and of the importance of being one. His work convinces thanks to his sensitive, logical, and elegantly written arguments, but also thanks to the sheer joy for historical research and interpretation that it conveys. Deák also taught us that history mattered, that he and we were studying issues central to the modern world. He made us appreciate that the place we studied—Habsburg Central Europe, the Austrian Empire, Austria-Hungary, and its successor states—offered a rich field for historical enquiry, fascinating in its own right, yet was also the birthplace of many positive and negative features of modern life. And he did so always as a consummate English stylist. Long after we earned our PhDs, he remained a beloved teacher and friend. At the conference we organized in 2000 to honor him, he rose after each of our papers to tell us how to improve, what to think about, and why it all mattered, and we loved him for it.

Deák came from the region he studied, and he knew its dark history intimately. This knowledge, however, did not prevent him from being able to study it dispassionately with a remarkable empathy for its actors. Born on 11 May 1926 to a middle-class family of Jewish origins in Székesfehérvár, Hungary, Deák grew up as a Catholic boy in Budapest in a warm, loving family consisting of his parents (Anna and István) and older sister, Éva. All fully bilingual in Hungarian and German, they were the result of a multi-generational process of Jewish assimilation in Hungary. Already by the middle of the nineteenth century, all four of his grandparents had adopted the Magyar language and Hungarian loyalties. His paternal great-grandfather Emanuel Deutsch was born in 1803 in Székesfehérvár, a free royal city which typically excluded Jewish residents unless they were prosperous and perhaps already beginning the assimilation process, although at that time they would have spoken German. Deutsch served in the Hungarian revolutionary guard in 1848, and a picture of him from the 1850s shows him wearing a Hungarian national costume. Deák's paternal grandfather (1852–1940) owned a large textile store on the main square in Székesfehérvár. Deák remembered him as a dignified, elegant man, who rode in a two-horse carriage and insisted that he and his visiting grandson wear white gloves when they rode in the carriage or walked on the Corso. Deák's father and his brothers served in the Habsburg army during World War I, and Deák's father regarded his service as an artillery officer as the highlight of his life.

When Deák was three weeks old, the family moved to Budapest. Around the time Deák was born, his father decided that the family should convert to Catholicism to become fully Hungarian. Despite this conversion, and thanks to Hungary's interwar antisemitic legislation, Deák's father, a graduate of the Polytechnical University, could not pursue a career as an engineer. Instead, his family helped him establish various businesses, which allowed for a respectable (but not rich) middle-class life. Because his immediate family had converted, Deák had a thoroughly Catholic upbringing, attended a Cistercian Gymnasium, and became a fervent Catholic in his teenage years, even flirting with becoming a monk. His zest for life, however, combined with doubts about Catholic theology and his unhappiness with the behavior of the Hungarian Catholic Church toward conservative nationalism and Nazism, and its anti-semitism, made him abandon Catholicism.

In a series of interviews with historians Holly Case and Máté Rigó in 2009, 2010, and 2013, Deák claimed that he was unaware of his Jewish origins until he was twelve years old.¹ While all his grandparents and other relatives had not converted, they apparently practiced no outward Judaism. He certainly understood the dangers of his Jewish origins when he suffered from antisemitic slights as a teenager, especially in the Boy Scouts, and he always understood that he had to work harder to be accepted in Hungarian society. Although Judaism never attracted him, he was deeply upset that Hungarian society turned savagely against the Jews, especially after the Nazi occupation in 1944. Hungarians wanted the Jews gone; they wanted a Hungary for "Hungarians," whatever that meant, he remembered. Although their relatively privileged position in Hungarian society and their residence in Budapest spared them from deportation to the death camps, the Deáks suffered as Jews in 1944. Their apartment was confiscated, Deák's father was interned for several months, and Deák himself served in a Jewish Labor Battalion in Transylvania from June to October 1944. He managed to leave his battalion when it moved to Újpest, and with the help of a non-Jewish anti-Nazi, he went into hiding in Budapest. His family eventually joined him in hiding. It was the "worst part" of his life, he remembered. They were safe, but he felt enormous guilt that they had not convinced his mother's mother to join them. She worried that if they were caught she could not prove she was Catholic because she knew nothing of that religion. Speaking to Case in 2009, Deák wondered why they had not insisted that she join them. Had they respected her wishes or had they worried more about their own safety? In November 1944, she was marched to Austria and killed. On 4 January 1945, the SS found the hiding place the Deáks shared with fifty others, but he and his family managed to escape, and ten days later the Russians arrived. Like Jews generally, he was grateful that the Russians had liberated them. The pain of the Holocaust remained with him always.

The postwar years were difficult, both economically and politically, largely because of the dangers of a Communist takeover in Hungary. Once, a Communist beat him up, accusing him of being a fascist, and the police looked the other way. More importantly, the chicanery and election tampering of the Communists in 1947 upset him deeply. He left Hungary legally in 1948, obtaining a passport, officially to accompany someone going to a fair in France to sell Hungarian folk art, who himself was refused a passport. Deák was then twenty-two years old. With a short-term visa, he went to Paris. Once his train entered the American zone in Austria, Deák recalled his sense that he had entered a different world, one more relaxed and happier than postwar Hungary. France, however, while wonderful in many ways, was also quite difficult for him. Deák was fluent in French, but his legal situation was completely tenuous. He never obtained a permanent identity card or work permit, and he lived as a refugee, regularly waiting in line at the police station to renew his temporary papers, working odd jobs for very little money, and receiving help from the International Refugee Organization. He nearly starved and even contracted scurvy. Yet he also studied history at the Sorbonne and was enmeshed in a community of fellow Hungarian refugees in France. He gradually realized, however, that although he loved France, he had no future there. He could never get a job or gain French citizenship.

A Hungarian journalist Deák met in Paris put him in touch with Radio Free Europe in Munich, which hired him as a librarian. In 1952, he sadly left Paris for Munich. He felt himself a failure, a

¹Extended Profile—The Life and Career of Professor Istvan Deak, <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/34132>. Most of the biographical material presented here comes from these interviews.

man without enough stamina to cope in France. Life in Germany, although materially quite good, left him profoundly conflicted. He worked for Radio Free Europe, reading the Hungarian and other East European press, clipping and summarizing interesting articles. But again he suffered under immense feelings of guilt, because his job for Radio Free Europe led the Communist regime in Hungary to expel his parents from Budapest in 1955 and force them to live in a small town on the Romanian border until the tumultuous events of 1956. Life in Munich was good in many ways: he made a decent salary and could send money to his parents in Hungary, with whom he remained in regular contact. He had the privileges of an officer in the American army, he could take courses for American soldiers run by the University of Maryland, and he enjoyed skiing and mountain climbing. He disliked working for the “colonial power” in postwar Germany, however, and he worried about the right wingers and former fascists who also managed to gain employment with Radio Free Europe. Although he believed that Radio Free Europe provided important information to Eastern Europeans, it also fundamentally misled the Hungarians in 1956 into believing that the United States would liberate them if they revolted against communism.

Deák came to the United States in September 1956, just before the Hungarian uprising that year. Thanks to the Eisenhower Refugee Relief Act which allowed several hundred thousand European refugees into the United States above the quota limits, he obtained a visa. At first, he worked as a freelancer for Radio Free Europe, then for a subsidiary agency, Free Europe Press, which sent Western books to East European intellectuals. It was there that he met his future wife, Gloria Gilda Alfano. He also registered at Columbia University in 1956 to study history, receiving a fellowship in 1959.

Deák wrote a PhD dissertation (1964), later his first book (1968), on the left-wing intellectuals of Weimar Germany who had produced the journal *Die Weltbühne*.² While finishing his dissertation he taught at Smith College for a year (replacing Klemens von Klemperer) and was then offered a full-time position at Columbia. He saw himself originally as a historian of Western Europe, given his interests in German and French history. But he was told by Henry L. Roberts, then Director of Columbia’s Program on Eastern Central Europe, that he would be needed for that program, which later became a full-fledged institute. Gradually he shifted fields and wrote more about East Central Europe, becoming its historian more because of his national origins than because of his original interests. For decades, he promoted this field as director of Columbia’s Institute on East Central Europe. Despite some qualms about his new field, Deák nevertheless swiftly became an influential voice within it. In 1966, he attended a major conference on the Habsburg monarchy held at Indiana University that brought together scholars from both sides of the iron curtain. There, he famously challenged his colleagues about the centrality they assigned nationalism to the field. For a panel entitled the “Ruling Nationalities,” Deák argued that “the subject of this debate is neither justified nor valid . . . there were no dominant nationalities in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. There were only dominant classes, estates, institutions, interest groups, and professions.” He went on to say that while “German and Magyar nationals formed the majority of these dominant strata of society,” nevertheless, “the benefits they derived from their privileged position were not shared by the lower classes of their own nationality.”³ This statement anticipated his distinctive approach to the history of the region and influenced the work of generations of his students.

In 1979, Deák published *The Lawful Revolution. Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians*.⁴ This remarkable book—which reads at times like a drama—analyzed the complexities of the Hungarian revolution and war of 1848–49, the “bloodiest conflict of a European revolutionary era.” Deák oriented the story around the figure of its main protagonist, Louis Kossuth (1802–94). As he noted at the outset, no professional historian in the twentieth century had yet attempted a biography of Kossuth or a scholarly analysis of the revolution. Moreover, Kossuth and his disputed legacies remain profoundly controversial, with even his ardent supporters holding contradictory views of his personality and his

²István Deák, *Weimar Germany’s Left-Wing Intellectuals. A Political History of the Weltbühne and its Circle* (Berkeley, CA, 1968).

³István Deák, “Comments,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 3, no. 1 (1967): 303.

⁴István Deák, *The Lawful Revolution. Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians* (New York, 1979).

accomplishments. Deák told a gripping, balanced, and empathetic tale that at the same time clarified the complexities of Hungarian history, from nationalities, religions, and social classes, to rival personalities and institutions. His personal connection to this history is reflected in the book's dedication: "to my father who served Emperor Francis Joseph in the Great War and to the Memory of my great-grandfather who served Louis Kossuth in 1848." The book brought Deák back to Hungary for three research visits in the early 1970s. And in 1979, he traveled to Budapest for the Carter administration as a member of the US delegation that returned the Crown of St. Stephen to Hungary. He traveled there again many times, to do research for later books, to lecture, and to visit friends and family.

Deák's third scholarly book, *Beyond Nationalism. A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps*, appeared in 1990.⁵ In this extraordinary book that historians today regularly cite, Deák went further to fulfill the promise of those remarks made at Indiana University in 1966. In the preface, he notes that in writing the Kossuth book he discovered "that at least as many Hungarian officers remained loyal to the Habsburg dynasty as joined the camp of Louis Kossuth." It was they, he wrote, who "had bonded the empire at that time." "Who were the men who made up this strange, multilingual, multiconfessional, supranational band" he asked? The book examined not only the history of the military and its officers, but also, in thematic chapters, the experiences and lives of officers, from family life to training to career advancement, to personal values, and to wartime experiences. Deák argued that although nationalist ideologies did make some inroads into the Habsburg officer corps in the late nineteenth century, officers for the most part did not ascribe to one or another national identity. They were Habsburg officers, loyal to the emperor, and they all had to know not only German and Hungarian, but also the language(s) of the regiment in which they served. Notably, this book also surveyed the opportunities and experiences afforded Jews as officers in the long nineteenth century, comparing their opportunities to those of Jews in other European societies. Unlike the Prussian army, for example, the Habsburg army accepted Jews as reserve officers, and indeed, around 1900, 18 percent of all reserve officers were Jewish in a country which was only 4 percent Jewish. *Beyond Nationalism* provided a rich social history of a very important Habsburg institution, and it also profoundly altered how we understood the monarchy.

After these works, Deák turned his attention to more recent histories, and ones with more personal links to his own experience. In 2001, he published *Essays on Hitler's Europe*, a collection of review essays, many written for the *New York Review of Books*, where Deák always believed he reached a much bigger audience than with his scholarly books.⁶ In 2013, *Europe on Trial: The Story of Collaboration, Resistance, and Retribution During World War II* analyzed complex questions of collaboration and resistance, retribution and justice in postwar Europe.⁷

Deák was a beloved teacher and mentor, in part because of his unfailing commitment to writing history that fundamentally sought to help readers to understand people, often in situations not of their own making. Institutions, states, politics, all came down to the people who made them up. Not surprisingly, he, along with Gloria, was also an inveterate party-giver who joyfully brought people together from the very different worlds he frequented. He ran the New York marathon several times and could be seen at any time of year running with friends in Riverside Park, often past the statue of Louis Kossuth that dominated the view from his study. In later years, Deák expressed extreme unhappiness with the direction of politics in Hungary, which he followed closely and critically. But he experienced great joy from his friends and family, especially from his daughter Éva (born in 1965) and her family.

We have all benefited extraordinarily from István Deák's scholarship, from the model he provided to us of an academic historian, from his love of life and concern for us all. We are grateful he played such a large role in our lives, and we miss him profoundly.

⁵István Deák, *Beyond Nationalism. A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps 1848–1918* (New York, 1990).

⁶István Deák, *Essays on Hitler's Europe* (Lincoln, NE, 2001).

⁷István Deák, *Europe on Trial. The Story of Collaboration, Resistance, and Retribution During World War II* (New York, 2013).