

Susanne Zepp (Ed.)
Textual Understanding and Historical Experience
On Peter Szondi

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On Peter Szondi

Wilhelm Fink

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YFAAT WEISS

Preface

The following book is based on a conference that took place at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in March 2013. It was, perhaps, not the most obvious location for holding a conference on the work of Peter Szondi. The two months that Szondi spent teaching there as a visiting professor in 1968 would not in itself have been sufficient reason for holding a conference in Jerusalem. His visit is documented in only a few pages in the Hebrew University Archive; routine administrative documents—except for one, his curriculum vitae, which contains a single line that catches the eye. In the sentences that precede the course of his elementary and higher education, the visitor notes the following:

Born May 27, 1929 in Budapest.
1929-1944 Budapest
1944 Bergen-Belsen

The life reflected in this document is completely different from the short autobiographical description Szondi composed a little over a decade earlier in an introductory letter to his publisher, Siegfried Unseld, of Suhrkamp Verlag:

Meine Lebensdaten sind: Geboren 1929 in Budapest. Seit 1944 in der Schweiz niedergelassen. Hochschulstudien in Zürich und Paris. Doktorpromotion 1954 (Universität Zürich).

Was it the nature of the document, an academic resume, that called for a smooth life devoid of lacunae, the *lückenloser Lebenslauf* of a conventional academic; or the place, Jerusalem, “Hamakom”, with respect to which he felt obliged to mention the other location? I wouldn’t know.

More traces of Szondi’s visit to Jerusalem can be found at the German Literature Archive in Marbach. Here we find two letters and a postcard sent to Szondi by his Jerusalem host, Lea Goldberg, the head of the Department of Comparative Literature. In her first letter to Szondi, written in German and dated March 12, 1967, Goldberg, a Lithuanian Jew who studied in Germany in the early 1930s, writes: “Es wäre sehr wünschenswert, dass Sie englisch lesen. Das ist die Sprache die die meisten Studenten können.” A short time later, in a second let-

ter, Golberg suggests that, “Wenn Ihnen das Französische für die Vorlesung geeigneter und bequemer scheint, können Sie natürlich französisch lesen.” Then, two weeks later, she writes: “Dear Peter Szondi, (Wie leicht doch die Anrede Englisch ist).” Goldberg’s search for an appropriate language may shed some light on and reflect her hesitation regarding the endeavor.

Szondi had great expectations with regard to Jerusalem, but was disappointed. Soon after his return, he wrote to Geoffrey Hartman, who had been rescued in 1939 through the *Kindertransport*, and was trying to persuade Szondi to come to Yale in the spring of 1968:

Sie können sich ja vorstellen, was in einem vorgeht bei dieser Ankunft, die, wie sehr sie sich als Besuch drapiert, sich als Rückkehr versteht, verstehen möchte und sich dabei doch eingestehen muss, dass sie es nicht ist.

Jerusalem signified a horizon of expectation aware of its limitations; whereas Berlin, although not the optimal solution, answered Szondi’s need for the German language “als Erkenntnis- und Ausdrucksmittel”. Indeed, Szondi spent the majority of his productive and professional life at the Freie Universität Berlin. Since he did not make it to Zurich, Berlin became his final stop, the solution to which he had not aspired. However, Szondi, a Hungarian Jew and Swiss citizen, was able to observe from Berlin how West Germany coped with its present and its past. His position as participant-observer cries out for attention from his letters in the wonderfully critical volume edited by two contributors to this volume, Christoph König and Thomas Sparr.

As we consider his reputation, it is the sphere in which Szondi operated, in Berlin rather than in Jerusalem, that fascinates us today at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. It is one aspect of contemporary history, but not the principal one. In the light of the extensive web of contacts he maintained—with Paul Celan and, as a scholar of Benjamin, with Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno—engagement for Peter Szondi appears to have been an obligation, a missing link. The Franz Rosenzweig Minerva Center is committed to the study of German-Jewish culture and literature. Szondi, I imagine, would have been extremely skeptical of this connecting hyphen. In a brief letter to Gershom Scholem following the publication of *Wider den Mythos vom deutsch-jüdischen Gespräch*, Szondi was quick to identify himself with Scholem’s positions and wrote:

Sie haben mit jedem Wort recht, und die Entschiedenheit und Unerbittlichkeit des Tones sind dem Ernst der Sache nur angemessen.

Shortly after his return from Jerusalem, and in the wake of disturbances following Adorno's lecture, he made a point of holding readings by Celan and conducting discussions with Scholem on Benjamin in closed circles and seminars, with pre-invited guests. Nevertheless, it was in Berlin that he lived and worked, in German, right up to his death—a death that he chose, just like his friend Celan, who had departed the previous year.

It has been a great honor for the Hebrew University of Jerusalem to hold the conference on which this volume is based in collaboration with the Freie Universität Berlin and the Peter Szondi Institut. Holding the conference in Jerusalem stems, as I have noted, partly from biographical motives. In any event, we, the organizers, did not intend to load superfluous significance on the choice of location, be it Berlin or Jerusalem. Szondi himself stressed the *Kategoriale Verschiedenheit von Dichtung und Biographie, von Kunst und Leben*. On the other hand, his tumultuous biography constitutes a starting point for the conference and the book, which seeks to analyze his research and understand his work.

Yfaat Weiss
Jerusalem, Autumn 2014

SUSANNE ZEPP

Introduction

This volume documents a conference that took place at The Franz Rosenzweig Minerva Research Center for German-Jewish Literature and Cultural History forty-five years after Peter Szondi's stay as a visiting professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Generously supported by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, it was the first conference on Peter Szondi to take place in Israel. During two conference days in March 2013 key aspects of Szondi's literary thinking were addressed through discussion on the historical implications of his critical hermeneutics. As a dialogue between historians, literary scholars and cultural historians, the discussions took place in an interdisciplinary setting in accordance with Szondi's own methodological convictions of situated interpretation in the nexus between historical experience and philological understanding. In his understanding of literature as one of the mediums through which we strive to understand the world in which we live, Szondi recognized literary texts as witnesses to history. Aesthetic experience offers access to accumulated historical experience within the artwork. When we read, think about, or write a literary text, we are making interpretations of these accumulated experiences. Szondi's literary thinking has much to offer to current discussion in his immanent critical method. His approach engages the properties of literary artwork and the author's handling of the tension between historical material and formal arrangement.

The cooperation between The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Freie Universität Berlin on the conference reflected a pivotal chapter in Szondi's intellectual biography. In a letter dated May 3, 1969 to Gershon Scholem, who tried to persuade Szondi to accept a chair for Comparative Literature at the Hebrew University, Szondi described Israel as a fixed point in his inner geography that had, since his guest semester, played an important role in his thinking as a 'self displaced person.' "Feeling homesick is a strange thing. A person can find his home (again) without noticing—and without accepting it."

In his introductory Jerusalem lecture, Szondi figured that in the history of literary studies, the 1950s and 1960s would come to be seen as the years in which literary interpretation and history had been reconciled, as the years in which a new way of writing literary history had

unfolded. He stated that he wished to pursue in his lectures and seminars in Jerusalem an investigation of history in and through the work of art. This methodological remark addresses what Szondi categorically recognised as textual understanding. For him, the only approach that does full justice to literature is the one that allows us to see history in the literary work.

Peter Szondi's life was imbued with the history of the twentieth century.¹ Born in 1929 in Budapest as the son of the prominent psychiatrist Leopold Szondi, he attended high school in Budapest until German troops invaded Hungary in 1944. The Szondi family was saved from death in the so-called Kasztner train, a train that transported 1,684 Hungarian Jews out of Nazi-controlled Hungary to Switzerland in the summer of 1944. The transport had to endure a several month long diversion to Bergen-Belsen until it reached Switzerland in December 1944.² The first essay in this volume by the historian MICHAEL SILBER (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem) investigates the fugue state of Jewish-Hungarian history.

The Szondi family arrived in Switzerland in December 1944. After the war, Szondi took his matriculation exam and began his studies in Zürich and Paris. French and German became his academic languages. DENIS THOUARD (Centre national de la recherche scientifique Paris/Centre Marc Bloch Berlin) contextualizes Szondi's intellectual horizon within the critical tradition of Hungarian literary thinking.

Szondi completed his doctoral studies with Emil Staiger at the University of Zürich with a dissertation on the theory of modern drama, published in 1956 by Suhrkamp Verlag. JOACHIM KÜPPER (Freie Universität Berlin) discusses the impact and legacy of this groundbreaking work that analyzes, among others, plays by Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg, Brecht, Wilder and Miller.

In pursuing an academic career after obtaining his research doctorate, Szondi composed a second research thesis (*Habilitation*). Traditionally, these second books are reviewed by and defended before an academic committee in a process similar to that required for the doctoral dissertation. Szondi defended his *Habilitation* in 1961 at Freie Universität Berlin with a thesis entitled "An Essay on the Tragic."

1 An essential biographical essay on Szondi is Andreas Isenschmidt, "Peter Szondi. Portrait des Literaturwissenschaftlers als junger Mann," in: Nicolas Berg and Dieter Burdorf (Eds.): *Textgelehrte. Literaturwissenschaft und literarisches Wissen im Umkreis der Kritischen Theorie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 389-408.

2 See Anna Porter, *Kasztner's Train* (London: Constable, 2008).

DANIEL WEIDNER (Zentrum für Literaturforschung Berlin) presents a reading of this important study with reference to Walter Benjamin's thinking.

After his *Habilitation*, Szondi served as associate professor and *Privatdozent* in Heidelberg and Göttingen and was then appointed Professor of General and Comparative Literary Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. In 1962 he wrote "On Philological Knowledge," a work that seeks to inquire into the mode of understanding in literary studies. CHRISTOPH KÖNIG (Universität Osnabrück) discusses how Szondi's concept of textual understanding is linked to his perception of literature as an ethical medium.

Szondi's *Celan Studies* marked the beginning of critical work on one of the most important poets of the second half of the twentieth century. Szondi wrote three essays on Paul Celan, each of them concentrating on a different Celan poem and following the movement of poetic language into territory previously undisclosed to epistemic reason. GALILI SHAHAR (Tel Aviv University) discusses Szondi's essay "Eden," addressing Celan's poem, "Du liegst," on the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Szondi was with Celan when the poem was written. It addresses the relationship between the historical facts to which a poem refers and its composition.

Peter Szondi conceptualized his professorship of Comparative Literature at Freie Universität Berlin in a way that came to define the discipline in Germany—not only in his research, teaching, and engagement in university politics, but also his policy of guest invitations. Among those Szondi welcomed to Berlin were Jacques Derrida (before he attained world-wide recognition), Pierre Bourdieu, Lucien Goldman, Paul de Man, Gershom Sholem, Theodor W. Adorno, René Wellek, Geoffrey Hartman and Peter Demetz. ANNE FLEIG (Freie Universität Berlin) revisits Szondi's understanding of literary forms in *Theory of Bourgeois Tragedy* as socio-historical constructs, showing how Szondi established an ethical connection between methodologically trained philology and sociology in his literary thinking.

Since it could only exist in constant dialogue with the text, in the constant derivational reduction of knowledge, and the understanding of the poetic word, Peter Szondi was convinced that philological knowledge had a distinctive dynamic aspect. In his view, philological understanding should not be reduced to mere actual knowledge. In his approach to Szondi's *Studies on Friedrich Hölderlin*, DIETER BURDORF (Universität Leipzig) reconstructs the importance of Hölderlin's poetry for Szondi's epistemic interest in textual understanding.

As precisely as Szondi distinguished between philological and historical knowledge, he also constantly stressed the character of literature as determined by language and the determinate character of historical understanding through the historicity of knowing. CLAUDIA OLK (Freie Universität Berlin) traces the importance of English drama from Shakespeare to Beckett in the universe of Szondi's literary thinking.

The lectures Szondi held during his visiting semester in Jerusalem are presented and discussed by SUSANNE ZEPP (Freie Universität Berlin). The closing essay by THOMAS SPARR (Suhrkamp Verlag/Jüdischer Verlag) remembers Szondi's stay in Israel on the basis of his vast knowledge of Szondi's archival estate.

In 1993, two authors of this volume, Christoph König and Thomas Sparr, edited a volume of Szondi's letters. This volume is an important source for understanding Peter Szondi's inner geography. In the often-quoted letter to Scholem, Szondi explained his decision not to accept the chair at the Hebrew University as follows:

Once in Jerusalem you said, in an insightful sentence that was not surprising but indeed unforgettable, why I live in Germany and probably will stay here: because I have unlearned being at home (I was as little at home in my Budapest childhood as in Zürich and strictly speaking, was likewise never at home with my parents either). That is a sickness that perhaps could be healed with the drastic treatment of emigration, becoming necessary for whatever reason. But based on my own free will, I cannot find the strength for this. All the more so because two years ago in Jerusalem, I not only felt that I'm at home there, but also that I can't stand this feeling. I know that this could and should change, but that knowledge is not strong enough to break the resistance in me now, and that means, for as long as I can stand it here in Germany.

Szondi took his life in Berlin in October 1971 after he had accepted a chair at the University of Zürich. Today, new international interest has emerged in Szondi's critical hermeneutics. In fall 2007, the quarterly journal *Telos* dedicated an entire volume to Peter Szondi and critical hermeneutics. In their introduction, editors Russell Berman and Joshua Robert Gold pointed out that Szondi

pursued a philosophical examination of works of art with the goal of uncovering the dialectic interplay of aesthetic form and historical substance. Because of an explicit Hegelianism in his understanding of history, this interpretive project had a critical character—hence a “critical hermeneutics”—although his understanding of the art work does not depend on the same avant-garde radicality attributed to it by Adorno. Nonetheless, Szondi's engagement with literature faced opponents on

two fronts: the variously regressive accounts that, de facto, rendered art solely ornamental by insisting on a reified separation from the wider social condition; and the emerging instrumentalism of the student movement, which, in retrospect, appears less as an expression of a neo-radicalism and more as the great leap forward of a new class of managerial professionals, with little use for works of art.

In continuation of this approach, the current volume focuses more strongly on the existential motivation, ethical basis, and historical foundation of Szondi's textual criticism in order to highlight the importance of his work to current debates in literary studies, history and cultural studies. At a time when the future of the humanities in universities is being discussed, we face an urgent need to address the challenges represented by the impact of new technology, by our digital routine on historical judgment, and by the essentialism that we find still being applied to questions of ethnicity, gender, religion, nation and class. Peter Szondi's critical literary thinking prepares us with critical self-consciousness and confidence to address these issues. It is not a coincidence that researchers from Freie Universität Berlin and The Hebrew University of Jerusalem jointly undertook the task of transmitting Szondi's critical legacy to a new audience of researchers. Both universities cultivate the broad reflexive analysis of humankind and its artifacts, and are dedicated to instill in their students the importance of responsible global citizenship through cultural self-reflection, ethical reasoning and historical understanding.

In their opening remarks, Professor Reuven Amitai and Professor Yoav Rinon underlined the importance of the privileged partnership between The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Freie Universität Berlin, a partnership that both universities hold in the highest esteem. The conference and this volume are part of this partnership and the joint effort of humanist education in the twenty-first century, an effort that prepares students for the challenges of the next generation.

I would like to thank Andreas Isenschmidt (Berlin), who was involved in setting the tone and the agenda of the conference. During the course of two evenings I learned much from his deep insights into Szondi's intellectual universe. I'd also like to thank the colleagues who chaired the conference panels in Jerusalem, in alphabetical order: Professor Cyril Aslanov, a linguist specializing in the diachrony of Romance languages and in the study of languages in contact; Professor Richard Cohen, who holds the Paulette and Claude Kelman chair in French Jewry Studies in the Department of Jewish History at the Hebrew University; Privatdozent Dr. Jörg Deventer, Deputy to the Direc-

tor of the Simon Dubnow Institute for Jewish History and Culture at Leipzig University; Professor Birgit Erdle, who holds the DAAD Walter Benjamin chair at the Hebrew University; and Professor Ruth Fine, who holds the Salomon & Victoria Cohen chair in Spanish and Latin American Literature and is the Director of The European Forum at the Hebrew University. Finally, I am very grateful for Keren Sagi's support in organizing the conference.

The editing work on this volume was made possible through the generous support of the Simon Dubnow Institute for Jewish History and Culture at Leipzig University. Frederick Reuss is not only among my favorite fiction writers, but also a dream editor in every respect who makes the editing process a joyful intellectual dialogue about the different layers of a text.

I am deeply indebted to Lucrezia Delphine Guiot and Estefania Jaramillo Cuero, two students currently working with me at Freie Universität, for their support in recompiling and updating the bibliography. Lucrezia and Nia also proofread the entire volume with me. I would like to express my deepest appreciation to both of them. Niels Eggerz and Paolo Brusa also proofread the entire volume, I am very grateful for their astute review.

Peter Szondi's inaugural lecture at Freie Universität Berlin was dedicated to Walter Benjamin and focused on his concept of "Eingedenken," or remembrance. In the lecture, he traced how the oscillation of this concept between future and past appears to project a past "that is not past and finished, but is open and holds a promise of future." It is in view of these words that I'd like to express my deepest gratitude to the director of the Rosenzweig Center, Professor Yfaat Weiss, for the joint realization of the conference and for inviting me to edit these proceedings for the series "Makom."

Susanne Zepp
Berlin/Leipzig, Autumn 2014

MICHAEL K. SILBER

Sunshine. Hungarian Jews in a Fugue State

A “fugue state” is defined as a “confusion about personal identity, or the assumption of a new identity.” *Mutatis mutandis*, the term may here serve as a dual metaphor: both for the state of Hungary, and for the state of mind of Hungarian Jewry in the first half of the twentieth century. The word “Sunshine” in the title of this essay is to evoke István Szabó’s 1999 film by that name: *A Taste of Sunshine* (“A napfény ize” in the Magyar version). The movie shall here serve here as a suitable starting point for this brief survey of Hungarian Jewish history until 1945, in order to contextualize Peter Szondi’s historical experience.

A napfény ize is the saga of a Jewish family in Hungary over the course of four generations—from about the middle of the nineteenth century (Szabó does not provide a precise date in the movie, one can only guess the year from the context) until the last years of the communist era.¹ Whatever the merits of the film—which has been praised, as well as severely criticized, in Hungary and abroad—it does provide a convenient entry into both the history of Hungarian Jewry in general, and into the particular past of Péter Szondi, by noting the significance of family names.

For “Sunshine” also alludes to the original surname of the film’s Jewish protagonists—“Sonnenschein” in German—which, in time, is changed to the rather unusual Magyar name, “Sors.” I will come back to its meaning in Hungarian. Originally, “Sonnenschein” had also been the name not only of the great-grandfather of the film director Szabó, but also that of Péter Szondi’s grandfather. In fact, the families may very well have been related: both originated from the important market town Nyitra in what is now Slovakia, and they both changed their names around the same time, at the turn of the past century.²

1 Susan Rubin Suleman. “Jewish Assimilation in Hungary, the Holocaust, and Epic Film: Reflections on Istvan Szabo’s *Sunshine*,” in: *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14 (2001), 233-252.

2 Both Szondi and Szabo’s ancestors appear in the list of name changes published on the eve of Hungary’s Millenium celebrations: Márton Szentiványi, *Századunk névváltoztatásai 1800-1893* [Surname changes of our century] (Budapest: Hornyánszky, 1895), 206 and 224. A few years later, in 1896, yet another *Sonnenschein* from Nyitra, the eighteen-year old Sándor, also changed his name to Szondi. While the Magyarized names were seldom faithful translations from the German, often only adopting the

Magyarization of names is perhaps the most readily recognizable manifestation of Jewish acculturation and integration into Hungarian society. For some, it doubtlessly signified a profound identification with Hungarian nationalism; for others, a pragmatic choice to abandon German names that made them all too recognizable as Jews. While some states such as Germany placed numerous obstacles to Jewish name changes, the Hungarian state, at least until the interwar period, encouraged the move. At the turn of the century, about 60% of those Magyarizing their last names were Jews.³ To place this in proportion, at the time Jews comprised only 5% of the general population, and even if a more relevant comparison is taken into account, they constituted about 10% of the non-Magyars of Hungary.

When visiting Hungary nowadays, one gets the impression that this must have been a widespread phenomenon; in fact, it primarily reflects a post-World War II reality. Earlier, the trend lasted until 1920, but was all but suppressed by the state during the post-Trianon years. Indeed, the rise and fall of name changes faithfully chart the role of the state in regulating the possibilities of Jewish integration before World War I and the seismic changes for the worse that took place in its aftermath. Nevertheless, it must be stressed against received wisdom that even during the heyday of the phenomenon only a fraction of Hungarian Jews actually Magyarized their names. Hence the actions of the various Sonnenscheins who did adopt new surnames was not at all typical even for their time, but should be appreciated as being highly exceptional.⁴ Although

first letter of the original name—hence Szabó and Szondi, rather than, say, Napfényi—one who did translate literally not into Magyar, but English, was the Hungarian born Rose Sonnenschein (sic!), the founder and editor of a magazine for Jewish women, *The American Jewess* (1895-1899), who went by the nom de plume Rose Sunshine.

3 An excellent study of Jewish name changes in Germany is Dietz Bering, *The Stigma of Names: Antisemitism in German Daily Life, 1812-1933* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992). For Hungary, see the following: Simon Telkes, *Hogy magyarosítsuk a vezetőkéneveinket* (Budapest: Állami nyomda, 1906); József Palatinus, *Szabadkőművesek Magyarországon* (Budapest: Könyv- és lapkiadó, 1944), 244 and n. 26.

4 I have argued elsewhere that “Magyarizing family names was a relatively marginal phenomenon,” in my entry, “Hungary, until 1918,” in: Gershon Hundert (ed.), *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, vol. I, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 770-782, 778-779. The encyclopedia is conveniently accessible at <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org>. Typical of the unfounded claims that wildly exaggerate the trend is the statement that “one-third or more [of Hungarian Jews] Magyarized their names during the last quarter of the nineteenth century,” as in John Lukacs, *Budapest 1900: A Historical Portrait of a City and its Culture* (London: Avalon Travel, 1988), 95-96. At most 10,000 Jews were recorded as having changed their names between 1875 and 1899, and of these more than half were minors.