

Judit Szapor\*

## TO THE EDITORS

---

I welcome the opportunity to respond to the remarks made by Dr. Thomas G. Polanyi and Mrs. Barbara Striker on my article ("[Laura Polanyi \(1882-1959\); Narratives of a Life](#)", *Polanyiana*, vol. 6. no. 2 (Winter 1997). Firstly, it gives me a chance to correct a typographical error (hitherto unnoticed) that crept, of all places, into the title. Laura Polanyi's date of death in the title should be, of course, as it is in the text, 1959, not 1957.

Further, the letters of Mrs. Striker and Dr. Polanyi allow me to address larger issues such as the potential pitfalls faced by historians of the recent past. Their remarks remind us of the debt we owe to the witnesses of this past; as someone deeply aware of this debt, I am grateful for the illuminating details in their letters and only sorry I received them under such inauspicious circumstances. (Take for instance Dr. Polanyi's reproach for my getting the first name of his elder brother wrong: without his testimony, how could anyone ascertain that his brother whose first name invariably appears in official documents as Louis should go by his middle name, Michael.)

The usual sensitivities involved in writing a family's history are even more pronounced in the case of the Polanyis, a family which not only had a fate intertwined with some of the most debated political and intellectual trends of this century but which was also one with no shortage of independent-minded intellects and strong opinions.

My lecture had the twin objectives of providing an outline of Laura Polanyi's life, including an explanation for the interruptions in her professional career, as well as offering a glimpse into the myths and misconceptions that have grown up around the family. To the first, I made the suggestion that the decline of Laura Polanyi's intellectual output from the mid-1930s was mainly due to the fact that the immediate tasks of rescuing her daughter, and helping her family escape from Europe and settle in the United States took precedence over her career. I do not dispute Mrs. Striker's right to emphasize the accomplishments of her own generation, including the professional connections helping them in their emigration to the U.S. Nor did I state that Laura Polanyi accomplished the feat single-handedly. I maintain, however, that her role as the family's emotional anchor and, with Michael Polanyi, its organizational mastermind, was crucial to the success of the family members in and after their emigration.

As far as the second point is concerned, Mrs. Striker and I seem to be in perfect agreement about the validity of Peter Drucker on the Polanyis – even if we do not seem to be reading

from the same page. Despite my qualification of Drucker's reminiscences of the Polanyis as "outrageous fabrications" and "nonsense" (p. 52) – the extensive quotes from his book drew laughs befitting a stand-up performance from my audience –, she still accuses me of using Drucker's material uncritically and therefore further legitimizing it. I am happy to report that in at least one instance, my remarks fell on more sympathetic ears: as a result of my article the acclaimed Canadian journalist Robert Fulford, also quoted in my article, has come to admit that he should have been more suspicious of Drucker's data – no small accomplishment considering Drucker's stature in North America.

Which brings me to Dr. Thomas Polanyi's letter and the differences of historical perception between participants and historians, as well as between the North American and the Hungarian public.

Dr. Polanyi is of course right in spotting the ominous sentence; granted, it has been awkwardly put and while adequate for the purpose of the more informal and compressed genre of a lecture, it should have required further elaboration in the article. In any case, my audience at the CEU, many of them American historians and students familiar with recent American historiography, appreciated the case of the Polanyi brothers, Jewish refugees from Italy, applying on the Hungarian quota, stranded in Cuba, as a typical example of the absurdity of the refugee experience.

In actual fact, the documents, preserved among Laura Polanyi's personal files, depicted the Polanyi brothers' immigration as a much more arduous process than what Thomas Polanyi described. The evidence of personal correspondence and official documents not only illustrated the reactions and anxieties common to the intellectual refugees faced with an inflexible and often hostile immigration policy, but also the magnitude of efforts needed to bring them into the States and the obstacles to be overcome. Laura's warning to avoid the indication of race as Hebrew on the immigration application forms at any cost (her emphasis), to urge them to "take care of the religious matters", her careful registration of new State Department instructions in June 1941, advising its officials to bar the immigration of alien refugees with close relatives left behind, the fact that their application was refused in the first round, etc., were all clues pointing to the feasibility of the explanation I suggested.

I realize in retrospect that by printing it, I may have overstepped the delicate line dividing personal and public history.

However, on the broader issue of American immigration policy prior and during the years of WWII, a topic I only touched on in my lecture, I cannot accept Dr. Polanyi's characterization of my position as "thoroughly unfair". Far from being my partisan opinion, the existence of latent but systemic anti-semitism as part and parcel of the American immigration policy in this period is now the commonly accepted wisdom of

North American immigration history. Let me just refer to the highly praised work of Roger Daniels (*Coming to America; A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), citing irrefutable evidence indicating how State Department officials did everything in their power to obstruct the entry of Jewish refugees into the country (Op. cit., pp. 296-301 ).

And, finally, one could not ask for more fitting ammunition than the recently published autobiography of Peter Gay, one of the most respected American historians (*My German question: growing up in Nazi Berlin*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998). Despite having close relatives and sponsors in the States, his family's immigration turned out to be a long and tortuous affair, attributed by Gay to "the internal resistance of anti-Semites in high places". And he goes on to cite the example of "Breckenridge Long of the State Department, who sabotaged the entry of German Jews to the best of his ability" to the point of instructing consulates, as in a memorandum of 1940, to 'resort to various devices which would postpone and postpone the granting of the visas' (Op. cit. p. 146).

The irony of Peter Gay's testimony in this context lies in the fact that, on his way from Germany to the U.S. through the Cuban route, he may have actually passed the Polanyi boys on the streets of Havana; their parallel yet conflicting renderings of a shared experience thus provide a striking illustration of the ways people construct their own history.

---

\* Judit Szapor, author of the study "[Laura Polanyi 1882-1957: Narratives of a Life](#)" published in *Polanyiana* Vol.6. No.2. 1997. In her 'Letter to the Editors' Judit Szapor responds to remarks and criticisms made by [Barbara Striker](#) and [Thomas Polanyi](#).

---

**Polanyiana** Volume 8, Number 1–2, 1999  
<http://www.kfki.hu/chemonet/polanyi/>  
<http://www.ch.bme.hu/chemonet/polanyi/>

---

[Back to Contents](#)