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Humiliation In My Brother's Image

Jews in Hungary after World War One faced the humiliation of being blamed for Hungary's loss in the war. As a result of anti-Semitism, Béla Popper, the grandfather of Eugene Pogány, like many others, converted to Catholicism and even changed his last name in order to have a civil service job. Pogány, however, suggests that a more personal humiliation contributed to his grandfather's decision to convert. When Béla introduced his fiancée to his relatives at a Passover seder, his bourgeois brother-in-law made his disdain for the young woman very plain. As a result in 1914, Béla found it quite easy to leave his family's religious traditions behind and take his young family with him into a new life as a Catholic. According to Pogány, many of the religious choices his beleaguered family members before and during the Second World War stemmed from an effort to reject unpleasant memories of humiliating circumstances of helplessness. To complicate matters Gyuri, Pogány's uncle became a Catholic priest. Gyuri's twin brother, Miklós, Pogány's lawyer father, faced different challenges from his brother the priest. Gyuri was sheltered in Italy during the war by the remarkable Padre Pio while Miklós' concentration camp experiences convinced him to return to his religious roots as a Jew. Although humiliation was an important factor in most of the religious decisions that family members made during that troubled period, Pogány went to great lengths to reconstruct the feelings and commitments of all the parties, Catholics and Jews alike. As a result, the book's portrait of two conflicted but impressive men proves that with the passage of time and a considerable effort, it is possible to convert a story of repeated humiliations into one that celebrates human dignity and survival.