

UNITED STATES
HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

CENTER FOR ADVANCED HOLOCAUST STUDIES

Hungary and the Holocaust
Confrontation with the Past

Symposium Proceedings

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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In Charles Fenyvesi's contribution "The World that Was Lost," four stanzas from Czeslaw Milosz's poem "Dedication" are reprinted with the permission of the author.

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Foreword

Paul A. Shapiro and Robert M. Ehrenreich

The Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum convened a symposium entitled *Hungary and the Holocaust: Confrontation with the Past* on November 9, 1999. The objective of the event was to examine the Holocaust's legacy in Hungary, particularly attempts to come to terms with or to avoid coming to terms with this most horrific period of its history.

This symposium was part of an ongoing series organized and hosted by the Center to promote and support Holocaust research; to inspire growth of the field of Holocaust studies; to ensure continued training of future generations of Holocaust scholars; and to bring to bear the knowledge, wisdom, and insight of Holocaust scholars and survivors on topics of major significance. These goals are priorities of the Center because study of the Holocaust is at a moment of generational transition. Eyewitnesses now in the United States, some of whom have been moved to become the principal scholars teaching and writing about the Holocaust, and survivors whose telling of their stories rivets our attention on the greatest crime of the twentieth century, are reaching the ends of their careers and will pass from the scene in the twenty-first century. This is occurring just as an avalanche of newly available documentation about the Holocaust is pouring out of formerly closed archives in Eastern Europe, including those of the former Soviet Union, and the West, including those of the United States. Thus, ironically, just as the people upon whom we have most relied finish their careers, research materials are becoming available that provide unprecedented opportunities to understand the whats, hows, and whys of the Holocaust; to ensure the survival of memory of the Holocaust at the small town, village, and individual level; and to explore the lessons of the Holocaust for ourselves and our children.

Four scholars and five survivors spoke during the two sessions of the symposium. The morning session comprised presentations by Professors Randolph Braham and István Deák, both senior scholars in the field, and Drs. Tim Cole and Paul Hanebrink, who have more recently entered the field and are conducting exciting new

research based on the archival collections lately released from Eastern Europe. The afternoon session consisted of the testimony and observations of five survivors of the Holocaust in Hungary, who interwove historical data and personal recollections to show how the Holocaust affected all of the citizens and residents of Hungary, and to offer a course of action by which Hungary could better come to terms with its role in the Holocaust. The survivors were George Pick, Mrs. Evelyn Hevesi Ehrlich, Dr. Albert Lichtmann, Rabbi Laszlo Berkowits, and Charles Fenyvesi. Short biographies of the speakers are provided in the Appendix at the end of this publication.

Four motivations for studying the Holocaust in Hungary were reiterated throughout the course of the day. The first was to try to understand why these events occurred so late in the war and with such amazing speed. The ghettoization and deportation of Hungary's Jewish citizens occurred within a matter of three and a half months and at a time when Germany's defeat was imminent. The second was to examine how a country like Hungary could have been transformed from a relatively tolerant to an oppressive, racially motivated state within a matter of years. The third motivation was to demonstrate that the Jews who were persecuted and died were neither foreigners nor statistics, but true Hungarian citizens. The final motivation was the belief that historians and Hungarians alike will come to terms with Hungary's role in the Holocaust only when the events of this dark period are fully documented, understood, and acknowledged.

Dr. Cole opened the symposium by introducing the principal questions currently confronting scholars of the Holocaust in Hungary. He analyzed the historiography previously employed in this research and discussed why it was used and how its origin has impacted the field.

The next two presentations focused on Hungary's societal and governmental attempts to confront the Holocaust between the end of World War II and the unsuccessful Hungarian revolution of 1956. Dr. Hanebrink discussed societal continuities and changes in antisemitic attitudes during this period, typifying it as a time of "cold indifference," with many non-Jewish Hungarians openly questioning whether Jewish Hungarians deserved a place in post-war Hungary. Professor Deák

examined governmental attitudes to the Holocaust as those were reflected in the immediate aftermath of World War II, and as exemplified by Hungarian war-crimes trials. He placed the trials within the larger context of the political instability that preceded World War II and discussed what this periodization reveals about Hungary's attempt to confront its own role in the Holocaust.

Professor Braham concluded the morning session by analyzing Hungary's unwillingness to confront its role in the Holocaust, and he assessed its active assault on the memory of the event. He discussed disturbing trends in Hungary: to cleanse its history of any responsibility in the Holocaust, and to rehabilitate its wartime leaders.

George Pick opened the afternoon session by relating his memories of the antisemitism that was still deeply ingrained in postwar Hungarian society. Jews were blamed for the disintegration of the prewar life and economy.

Dr. Albert Lichtmann discussed his encounters with antisemitism as a youth in Hungary and suggested that Hungary needs to construct a memorial museum in central Budapest and smaller memorials in other cities to show the truth without distortion.

Mrs. Eva Hevesi Ehrlich challenged the audience to consider how anyone—Jewish survivor or otherwise—could possibly come to terms with a tragedy of the scale of the Holocaust. In order for Hungary truly to confront its past, however, she argued for sustained education of Hungary's youth. Rabbi Laszlo Berkowits spoke to the importance of moral restitution and the redemptive powers such an act would have on both the survivor and Hungarian communities.

Charles Fenyvesi closed the symposium by reviewing and synthesizing the various theories and opinions expressed during the course of the day. He also described the world that was lost and the future that may be possible if Hungary does ever come to terms with its role in the Holocaust.

The articles contained in this occasional paper are not verbatim transcriptions of the talks. Some of the authors submitted revised versions of their presentations, incorporating additional information and footnotes, and all of the contributions were copyedited. Although the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum makes every reasonable effort to provide accurate information, the Museum cannot guarantee the

accuracy, reliability, currency, or completeness of the information contained in this set of presentations. The opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The Museum disclaims responsibility for any errors in the information provided and urges readers to take their own steps to obtain independent verification of the information provided.

Many people deserve thanks for the organization of this symposium and the production of this occasional paper. Dawn Barclift, Severin Hochberg, and Madeline Vadkerty of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies deserve our deepest gratitude for helping organize and moderate the symposium. We are grateful for the assistance of Ferenc Katona from the Museum archives, who provided extensive advice, and Linda Lazar, the Museum's manager of special events and conferences, who ensured that the event ran smoothly. Benton Arnovitz, Aleisa Fishman, and Anna Roe of the Center were instrumental in preparing and vetting these proceedings. Finally, and most important, the speakers deserve our greatest thanks for their excellent presentations. We also appreciate their subsequent participation in the editing of those presentations for publication in this occasional paper.

PART I

SCHOLARS' PRESENTATIONS

Hungary, the Holocaust, and Hungarians: Remembering Whose History?

Tim Cole

Coming face-to-face with the Holocaust in Hungary prompts the question ‘why?’. At one level it is the question of why ‘Jews’ were taken from villages, towns, and cities throughout Europe to carefully designed killing-centers.¹ At another level it is the deeper question of why such horror was perpetrated within the modern, ‘civilized’ world.

In the case of the Hungarian Holocaust, ‘why?’ is asked with particular intensity. This is in part due to the lateness of the killings. Hungary’s ‘Jews’ were not deported until late spring and early summer of 1944, near the time of the D-Day landings and when the final outcome of the war could have been in little doubt to many. It is also a result of the radical shift in the fortunes of ‘Jews’ in Hungary over a period of half a century.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Hungarian ‘Jewry’ experienced what historians have described as a ‘Golden Age.’ It was Hungary during this period that István Deák could describe in the following terms: “no other country in Europe had been as hospitable to Jewish immigration and assimilation, and no other country had won more enthusiastic support from its Jews than the Hungarian kingdom.”²

Raphael Patai reminds us in his history of Hungarian ‘Jews’: “the twenty-five years between the 1895 Law of Reception granting equality to the Jewish religion and the Numerus Clausus Law of 1920 were the only period in the millennial history of the Hungarian Jews when legally no distinction whatsoever existed between the Jewish and non-Jewish population of the country.”³

This ‘Golden Age’ turned into a nightmare in a matter of decades, however. Hungarian ‘Jews’ were among those targeted in the White Terror of 1919–20 that followed Béla Kun’s short-lived communist republic. As Randolph Braham has noted, Hungary instituted in 1920 “the first major anti-Jewish law in post-World War I

Europe.”⁴ Three additional so-called Anti-Jewish Laws were implemented in 1938, 1939, and 1941.

From 1941 to the period of mass deportations, however, ‘Jews’ in Hungary suffered more than simply the consequences of antisemitic legislation. Braham estimates that prior to the Nazi occupation, 63,000 Hungarian ‘Jews’ were killed from within the area of Hungary’s enlarged wartime borders. Approximately 20,000 of these were the so-called ‘alien Jews’—although it is clear from recent research that a significant number of these ‘Jews’ were indeed Hungarian ‘Jews’—who were expelled from the country in 1941 and murdered.⁵ A further 42,000 were military-age ‘Jewish’ males who were placed in special ‘labor battalions,’ where they frequently suffered poor conditions and physical abuse. Ironically, these ‘labor battalions’ afforded a relative measure of safety for ‘Jewish’ males after the occupation, keeping them away from the ghettoizations and deportations that were being implemented throughout the country.

The pace of persecution quickened with the Nazi occupation of Hungary on March 19, 1944. ‘Jews’ were required from early April to wear a yellow star on outer clothing. In László Gerend’s words, “the law painted all Jews yellow and cast them out of society.”⁶ ‘Jews’ were placed into ghettos from mid-April to mid-June. Finally, from mid-May to early-July, 437,000 ‘Jews’ from provincial Hungary were placed in cattle-cars by Hungarian gendarmes and deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where the majority were gassed on arrival. László Gerend, who was on one of the trains that left his hometown of Munkács, reflected: “the train was shunted to a siding for a while, but then it picked up speed, taking us away from the town where we were born, had played, and had worked. Only the graves of our fathers remained as reminders that Jews had once lived in that town.”⁷ All of Hungary outside Budapest was effectively made *judenfrei* within less than three months in 1944. Budapest’s ‘Jews’ were saved, temporarily at least, by Regent Horthy’s decision to halt the deportations, a decision that was largely the result of increasing pressure from outside Hungary.

After the Arrow Cross government came to power in October 1944, the capital’s ‘Jews’ were soon placed into a closed ghetto in the center of the city, and the

'Jews' under the protection of the neutral powers were placed into an 'International Ghetto' the following winter. Survivors speak of a state of near anarchy in Budapest during the winter of 1944–45, with hundreds of 'Jews' being rounded up and shot into the Danube by gangs of Arrow Cross youth, and thousands of other 'Jews' being driven west on foot in so-called 'death marches.' It was in this context that the rescue efforts of Raoul Wallenberg and others took place.

The 'Golden Age' for Hungarian 'Jews' was thus but a distant memory by the close of 1944, again prompting the question why such a radical shift in the fortunes of Hungarian 'Jews' occurred within such a relatively short time period. I will begin by reviewing the principle responses offered by historians of the Hungarian Holocaust, and then follow with an example drawn from my own work in the Budapest archives. I will conclude with some short reflections on the contemporary importance of the historiography of the Hungarian Holocaust.

THE QUESTION 'WHY?' AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

Broadly speaking, historians have accounted for the radical shift in the status of 'Jews' within Hungary in terms of two main, and in some ways linked, factors. They focus on domestic issues from the end of World War I onwards, and upon external concerns relating to the late 1930s and early 1940s in general and to 1944 in particular. While both are seen as significant within the historical consensus, there is a clear sense of historiographical debate between those who would stress one over the other of these factors as being more crucial. In some ways, these differences reflect differences in sources, as historiographical disputes so often do, and in the use of Hungarian or German sources in particular.

The first event that is identified as being crucial in more-or-less all historians' accounts is the impact of the post-World War I settlement on Hungary in general and on Hungarian 'Jews' in particular. Under the terms of the Trianon Treaty concluded after the war, Hungary's borders were radically redrawn. The country lost two-thirds of its former territory and three-fifths of its former population. It is impossible to overestimate the impact of this treaty upon interwar Hungarian politics and society.

Flags were flown at half-mast for the next eighteen years. “Nem, nem, soha” (“no, no, never”) came to dominate Hungarian discourse, and revision of the hated Trianon Treaty became a political staple.

This radical redrawing of Hungary’s borders also occasioned a considerable impact on the relationship between the ‘Jewish’ and ‘non-Jewish’ populations. Nationalism in the shrunken Hungary shifted in essence from being one of inclusion to being one of exclusion. As Vera Ranki said, the “‘Jews’ thus found themselves effectively ‘excluded’ from the nation.”⁸

Ethnic ‘Hungarians’ made up less than half of the population of Hungary prior to the 1920 Trianon Treaty. In the pre-treaty context of an inclusive nationalism engaged in a process of magyarization in the periphery, Hungarian-speaking ‘Jews’ were seen to be a part of the Hungarian nation. However, the ‘Jew’ became quite literally expendable after Trianon. Ethnic Hungarians made up approximately ninety percent of the population of Hungary in the interwar period. In the context of the later exclusive nationalism, ‘Jews’ found themselves cast as outsiders and as an increasingly vilified ‘other.’ The Hungarian ‘Jews’ who had effectively been accepted as the middle class during the modernizing period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century now were attacked as an alien and privileged socio-economic elite.

This attack appeared early in the interwar period, with the implementation of the so-called Numerus Clausus Law of September 1920. Although not explicitly mentioning the word Jew within the text of the bill, it was clear from the parliamentary debate prior to its adoption that the legislation aimed to counter what was perceived to be ‘Jewish’ over-representation within the universities and, by extension, the professions.⁹ That same discourse of ‘Jewish’ over-representation is echoed in the implementation of the so-called First and Second Anti-Jewish Laws of 1938 and 1939, which limited ‘Jewish’ involvement in public and economic life.¹⁰

The historical consensus now suggests, however, the need to look beyond these laws and domestic concerns in general to understand the increasing hostility toward the ‘Jews’ in Hungary. Additionally, historians have identified the impact of Nazi Germany on Hungary as important in understanding the radical shift in the status of Hungarian

‘Jews.’ More specifically, from Raul Hilberg’s ground-breaking *The Destruction of the European Jews* onwards, historians have noted the influence of Nazi Germany on Hungarian antisemitic legislation and politics. Hilberg suggested in 1961 that the changing pace of antisemitic legislation in Hungary needed to be understood in the context of the “debt” owed by Hungary to Germany for a series of territorial acquisitions that were aimed at the undoing of the hated Trianon Treaty. Thus he argued:

the earliest [anti-Jewish] law was drafted in 1938, when Hungary approached the Reich for help in the realization of Hungarian plans against Czechoslovakia. The second law was presented to Ribbentrop in 1939, at a moment when the Budapest government was pleading with the German Foreign Office for its support in the liberation of Hungarian minorities in Romania and Yugoslavia. A third sequence of measures was taken when Hungary joined Germany in the war against Russia.¹¹

In his definitive two-volume work on the Hungarian Holocaust, Braham argues in a vein similar to Hilberg. Braham states that both the 1938 and 1939 antisemitic legislation reflect “not only the anti-Semitic policies of the Hungarian governments of the period, but also Hungary’s symbolic gratitude to the Third Reich for the political and diplomatic assistance received in the reacquisition of these territories.”¹²

The shifts toward and away from Germany during this period are also seen in terms of the balance of power between the moderate right and the extreme right within Hungary in the late 1930s and early 1940s. It is clear that during the early 1940s Hungary came under increasing German diplomatic pressure to ‘solve the Jewish question.’ The consistent rejection of these demands during the course of Miklós Kállay’s premiership of 1942–44 was repeatedly noted in Berlin. For example, Goebbels wrote in his diary after the April 1943 meeting between Hitler and Hungarian Regent Miklós Horthy:

[t]he Jewish question is being solved least satisfactorily by the Hungarians. The Hungarian state is permeated with Jews, and the Führer did not succeed during his talks with Horthy in convincing the latter of the necessity of more stringent

measures....The Führer made every effort to win Horthy over to his standpoint but succeeded only partially.¹³

Moreover, toward the end of 1943 it came to the attention of Nazi Germany that Hungary was attempting to sue for peace with the Western Allies.¹⁴ Whether it was these attempts by Hungary to extricate itself from the war or a German desire to deal with Hungary's sizeable 'Jewish' population, or indeed some combination of these, that resulted in the German occupation of Hungary is a somewhat disputed point within the historiography.

John Conway sees the March 19, 1944 occupation as being "largely to prevent any defection by the Hungarian authorities from the Axis to the Allied side."¹⁵ Randolph Braham similarly concludes that "the evidence now available indicates that these military and geopolitical factors, rather than the unsolved Jewish question, were the determining elements underlying the occupation decision."¹⁶ István Deák, however, gives the 'Solution of the Jewish Question' a higher priority in motivating the occupation, writing that "the Final Solution of the Hungarian Jewish Question was the alpha and omega of the Germans' policy toward Hungary, one which they saw as closely tied to their other policy goal, the reactivation of Hungary's participation in the war."¹⁷

What Braham and Deák have in common, however, is that they place a strong emphasis—as do other historians—on the primacy of the German occupation of 1944 in determining the fate of Hungary's 'Jews.' This can be seen, for example, in Deák's assessment that it was only after the German invasion that "the road lay open for the extermination of the Jews,"¹⁸ and nowhere more clearly than in Braham's suggestion: "Ironically, it appears in retrospect that had Hungary remained a militarily passive but vocally loyal ally of the Third Reich instead of engaging in provocative, essentially fruitless, and perhaps even merely alibi-establishing diplomatic maneuvers, Hungarian Jews might have survived the war relatively unscathed."¹⁹

Such a statement, of course, is an exercise in counter-factual history. Unlike scientists, historians simply cannot withdraw one variable and see what might have

occurred. The statement is useful, however, to show Braham's clear stress on the German occupation in explaining the mass destruction of Hungarian 'Jews.'

Although in no way downplaying native collaboration (both Braham and Deák stress the active role played by Hungarians at both the national and local levels), the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" in Hungary is largely explained in terms of the dominance of German influence in the late 1930s and early 1940s. While the longer tradition of Hungarian antisemitism is seen as providing the context within which the Final Solution of the Jewish Question took place, the Holocaust is seen as essentially a German product. As Braham expresses it, "while the antisemitic policies and exclusionary legislative actions of the pre-1944 Hungarian governments made the draconian Holocaust-related measures more acceptable, the historical evidence indicated that it was the German occupation that sealed the fate of Hungarian Jewry."²⁰

Such an approach notably contrasts with the other strand of historiography, which lays more stress on longer-term domestic factors. This can most clearly be seen in Vera Ranki's recent work, in which she rejects Braham's suggestion that Hungary's 'Jews' might have survived if the Hungarian government had conducted itself with greater diplomatic astuteness. She counters "that Hungarian institutions participated fully in the deportation of the Jews, and...Hungarian society accommodated the 'Final Solution' *because* they were immersed in decades of state-sponsored and social antisemitism, and that this, together with antisemitic and extreme right-wing government policies *inevitably* led to the Holocaust in Hungary."²¹

Ranki admits that the German occupation was a "catalyst,"²² yet she continues to argue that "the ideological, historical, political and social developments, inevitably led to the Holocaust in Hungary."²³ With her repeated language of "inevitability," Vera Ranki's Hungarian Holocaust seems to be almost a Holocaust without the Germans.

Her work invites criticism in many ways. At a methodological level, her writing is essentially theoretical. Her grand statements therefore lack supporting evidence drawn from archival study. At a more specific level, her work reflects a tendency to ascribe monocausality that the complexity of historical reality simply does not easily

sustain. As György Ránki wrote, “to say that anti-Semitism automatically led to the Final Solution is a gross oversimplification.”²⁴

Where Vera Ranki’s work is important, however, is in drawing attention once again to the question of how Hungarian domestic developments of the 1920s and early 1930s link with the implementation of the Final Solution of the Jewish Question in 1944. Given the German documents that formed the basis of Hilberg’s and Braham’s influential writings on the Hungarian Holocaust, for example, perhaps there has been too much of a tendency to stress the question of Hungarian-German relations in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Those relations and the German occupation are crucially important—and Vera Ranki’s published work in effect ignores them—but perhaps domestic considerations should be stressed more than is done in much of the existing historiography.

The difficult question for historians of the Hungarian Holocaust is how to interpret the interaction of longer-term domestic influences and shorter-term external influences (i.e., the “Hungarian-ness” and the “German-ness” of the Holocaust). The weight that each factor warrants seems likely to be a continuing cause of debate.

HUNGARIAN-NESS AND GERMAN-NESS OF THE HUNGARIAN HOLOCAUST

Whether scholars place greater emphasis on the German occupation or on the longer-term developments in Hungarian antisemitism, they are united in acknowledging an important, if not vital, role played by Hungarians. This comparability is seen in Braham’s work, in Deák’s work, and in the following quotation from György Ránki, who stresses the importance of the German occupation: “...how can one dismiss the major role of the Hungarians? How can one ignore that ultimately Hungary was one of the countries where organized anti-Semitism became a part of government policy, where anti-Semitic laws appeared as a part of legislation...?”²⁵

Historians have long noted that Hungarian complicity was crucial to the rapid ghettoization and deportation of the country’s ‘Jews.’ Eichmann’s special commando numbered only 150-200, with the preparatory work being done by Hungarian national

and local officials. It was not simply the Interior Ministry officials, László Endre and László Bakó, who were involved in the implementation of the plan for the Final Solution but hundreds of local officials who oversaw the ghettoization and other policies, and hundreds perhaps thousands of gendarmes who oversaw the deportations.

A tendency to work primarily from the German sources may be reflected in an approach that lays greater stress on external rather than internal factors, characterizing power as emanating from the center, and portraying Hungarian officials as merely carrying out German orders. A number of historians who are examining Hungarian sources have discerned that the actions of Hungarian officials in 1944 were not limited to implementing German orders; these officials also willingly initiated and implemented antisemitic measures after the German occupation got underway. In a study of the Hungarian administration Elek Karsai concludes that “if any local administration deviated from the national directives, they were aimed at exceeding the target: either by implementing the government decrees ahead of schedule or by taking more severe and harsher measures than required. There are by far less instances of milder measures put in force.”²⁶ Bela Vago concludes that this initiative-taking by local officials was crucial to the success of the venture:

although the major catastrophe occurred only after the German occupation of the country...all that happened in the country after that day was perpetrated not only with Hungarian connivance, but mainly by Hungarians who zealously exploited the new opportunities, and partly took over the initiative for the de-Jewification and the deportation. This policy was supported by the majority of the Hungarian people. Without this willingness, collaboration and local initiatives, the German occupation itself could not have led to the destruction of Hungarian Jewry.²⁷

Perhaps most significant about such examples of local initiative, it becomes impossible to explain these simply in terms of Nazi influence. The whole strand of historiography that stresses the impact of German diplomatic pressure on Hungary thus becomes somewhat redundant when one seeks to explain such seemingly unilateral local actions.

Examinations focusing on the local level should take into account domestic developments from the 1920s onward, and consider the role of Hungarian antisemitism.

LOCAL INITIATIVE: EVIDENCE FROM THE BUDAPEST ARCHIVES

Demonstrating the importance of local initiative, here is an example from my own research in the Budapest city archives, where there is clear evidence of city officials taking the initiative in implementing antisemitic legislation in 1944. One incident in particular clearly illustrates the dangers of a historiography that overstates German influence.

Enacted on June 4, 1944, Hungarian national legislation restricted ‘Jews’ shopping privileges to two hours per day. Such restrictions were not unique to Hungary. Similar measures had been introduced across Nazi-occupied Europe. Earlier interpretations of the introduction of this legislation in Hungary saw it as a direct borrowing from Nazi practice (e.g., in the first edition of his work on the Hungarian Holocaust, Braham describes it as but one element of what he terms “the Nazi-inspired ‘legislative’ program of the quisling Sztójay government”²⁸). But this view does not encompass the entire reality of local initiative. This legislation should not be seen simply as a Nazi masterplan ‘imposed’ upon the locality but as a clear example of Hungarian initiative from the bottom up.

While the legislation regulating shopping hours was nationally promulgated on June 4, 1944, this issue had been a source of discussion by Budapest city officials for at least a few weeks. Tibor Keledy, the Lord Mayor, wrote to the Acting Mayor on May 11—prior to the implementation of ghettoization in the capital—suggesting that ‘Jews’ be forbidden from buying foodstuffs before 10:00 am. The Lord Mayor cited public unease that ‘Jews’ were buying unrationed foodstuffs when and where they wanted and that that was resulting in “the Hungarian public [having] a sense of being disadvantaged.”²⁹

The Acting Mayor, Dr. Bódy László, who had been elected Deputy Mayor in January 1939 and who was not on the extreme right of the governing party, wrote back five days later that he had investigated the matter. Bódy suggested that ‘Jews’ be

forbidden from buying foodstuffs before 11:00 am, as by that time unrationed foodstuffs, particularly fish, would be sold out.³⁰

As becomes clear from the correspondence between these two municipal officials, the intention behind the subsequent national legislation was to restrict the ability of 'Jews' to purchase unrationed foodstuffs and thus further to limit the already extremely limited 'Jewish' ration that had been introduced on May 1, 1944. That measure had allowed only pregnant 'Jewish' women and 'Jewish' children under the age of three to obtain milk and allowed no 'Jews' to buy butter, eggs, rice, poppy seeds, or paprika. The initiative of the Budapest city officials demonstrates an attempt to add to the list of foodstuffs denied 'Jews' those items that were not rationed at that time (e.g., fish and vegetables) and therefore harder to deny them. It is clear that an attritionist agenda motivated these municipal officials, who took the initiative to further reduce the city's 'Jews' to essentially starvation rations.

As Bódy reported to the Lord Mayor in his letter of May 16, however, city officials did not have the authority to enact such regulations without the authorization of the Interior Ministry. The Lord Mayor then wrote to the Interior Minister towards the end of May requesting just such authorization.³¹ By the time his letter arrived at the Interior Ministry, however, the question of 'Jewish' shopping hours already had been discussed at the June 1 meeting of the Council of Ministers. It was not raised by the Interior Minister but by the Minister of Trade and Transport Affairs. On June 4 the Council decided to restrict 'Jewish' shopping to two hours per day, the specific times to be chosen by municipal authorities. Implementation regulations were issued the following day in Budapest; these restricted 'Jewish' access to stores to the hours of 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. The speed with which this measure was adopted reflects a coincidence of initiatives from below and above.

Local initiative in the question of 'Jewish' access to stores was not limited to Budapest. However, the questions regarding legality asked by the Acting Mayor were ignored elsewhere: 'Jewish' shopping hours were restricted in Szeged as of May 8, in Gyôr as of May 13, and in Makó as of May 25. But shopping hour restrictions were not the only concern; Szeged took other actions without awaiting national legislation. Elek

Karsai notes that that city's deputy mayor ordered, on his own initiative, that the ghetto area be cut off from electricity and gas.³² Other examples of initiative-taking by Szeged city officials are given by Judit Molnár in her excellent local study of the implementation of the Holocaust in that district. She cites the decision to restrict 'Jewish' access to steam baths in the city, that edict given effect before the Interior Ministry got around to such a national restriction.³³

The issuing of legislation restricting 'Jewish' shopping hours in Budapest did not spell the end to the discussion of this subject, however. A letter from a self-styled "National-Socialist Housewife" to the Lord Mayor, which was passed on to Acting Mayor Bódy, led to a renewed investigation into the matter.³⁴ The woman complained that setting the hours for 'Jewish' shopping at 11:00 a.m. coincided with the arrival of supplies of vegetables at the markets. She therefore suggested that 'Jews' be permitted to shop only in the afternoons. Her claims were investigated by mayoral officials, who interviewed market owners and managers. The officials learned that vegetables were generally delivered by 8:00 or 9:00 a.m. The Acting Mayor thus concluded that there was no need to alter the existing scope of the regulation, as it was achieving its intended purpose.³⁵

The initial comments of the Lord Mayor about the demands of public opinion and the later letter from the "housewife" clearly demonstrate that municipal officials were sensitive to popular pressure over a 'solution of the Jewish question.' Rather than adopt an exclusively top-down, German-centered approach to interpretation of the implementation of antisemitic measures, there is thus a need for more exploration of implementation from the bottom up. This does not mean simply studying the actions of municipal officials in addition to those of national officials in the Interior Ministry. It also invites scholars to examine public opinion, a pursuit not made easier by difficulties associated with the sources.

CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

The role of ‘ordinary Hungarians’ is important, given the tendency during the communist period to exonerate the masses. Károly Balla noted such an inclination as early as 1946 in the context of a war crimes trial held in Cluj:

Please tell me where...the notion of “Hungarian people” ends, and where the “hordes of Hungarian Fascists” starts. This question torments me because here I fear a terrible mystification and here I suspect that I am going to be misled again, exactly as before, when we were driven into the ghetto by lies, then put into cattlecars and sent to the gas chambers. Let us not allow ourselves to be deceived again, and let us reject the illusions created by the tales we are being fed on. If we swallow these tales once more, we shall again pay a heavy price for doing so.³⁶

These were exceptions to the immediate postwar exculpatory trend. In his seminal 1948 study “The Jewish Question in Hungary After 1944” István Bibó did draw attention to the role of Hungarian society at large in the implementation of the logic of the Holocaust. Bibó bravely suggested “that the anti-Jewish legislative measures were supported, if not by a clearly visible majority, then at least by a force more massive than their opponents.”³⁷ What Bibó saw to be a “slippage” from the 1930s onwards resulted in the events of 1944, which Bibó interpreted as evidence of “the moral decline of Hungarian society.”³⁸ Bibó claims that the opportunities for upward mobility that ‘non-Jews’ seized in 1944 Hungary provided “an appalling picture of insatiable avarice, a hypocritical lack of scruples, or at best cold opportunism in a sizeable segment of this society that was profoundly shocking not only to the Jews involved, but also all decent Hungarians.”³⁹

This question of postwar remembrance of the Holocaust is of continuing relevance. History is a subject of interest not simply to historians; it has contemporary implications. Whether the Holocaust in Hungary is remembered as a part of or apart from Hungarian history has important implications for the *kind* of past Hungary remembers. I would like to be able to say that after the fall of communism, Hungary has come to terms with its Holocaust past, but I am not convinced that this is entirely

true. In the recent Hungarian News Agency-produced *Hungary: Essential Facts, Figures and Pictures*,⁴⁰ for example, the Hungarian Holocaust is presented as essentially the responsibility of Nazi Germany and the fascist Hungarian Nyilas Party: “Their [Jewish] full-fledged ostracism from the society-at-large...took on unprecedented vigor with the German invasion of Hungary on March 19, 1944....After October 15, 1944, following the Arrow-Cross takeover, persecution of the Jews also reached its peak.”⁴¹

Such distancing simply does not conform to the realities of both the pre-1944 period and the period March–October 1944, when the majority of Hungary’s ‘Jewish’ population was destroyed with the complicity and initiative of sizeable sections of the Hungarian administration and population.

Rather than cast the Hungarian Holocaust as essentially a German, or ‘fascist,’ product (i.e., something from outside), we must try to understand the complex interplay between long-term domestic factors and short-term external factors that provide the context of the events of 1944. Similarly, we should examine the interplay between Hungarian and German actors at a variety of levels in implementing the ‘Final Solution of the Jewish Question.’ Writing about the terrible complexity of the Hungarian Holocaust is a difficult task, and yet one that is of continuing importance.

In 1976 György Száraz asked and answered a question. His reflections are an appropriate way to close:

How should one write about 1944? With passion, which tears up the wounds, or with careful tactfulness? With the literati, or in objective, dry sentences? With the horror of the contemporary, with the guilt-feeling of the unwilling accomplice, or with the cool calmness of the innocents? In fact, all of us were involved....The onlookers, because they witnessed; the hangmen, because they were hangmen; the victims, because they were victims. All of us were involved in it: the survivors, the eyewitnesses, those who were born later and those who will be born, because all that happened then is indeed already Hungarian history.⁴²

Notes

¹ On my use of quotation marks to stress the constructed nature of the category ‘Jew,’ see Tim Cole, “Constructing the ‘Jew’, Writing the Holocaust: Hungary 1920-45,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 33, No. 3 (1999), pp. 19-27.

² István Deák, “A Fatal Compromise? The Debate Over Collaboration and Resistance in Hungary,” *East European Politics and Societies* 9:2 (1995), p. 218.

³ Raphael Patai, *The Jews of Hungary: History, Culture, Psychology* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1996), p. 359.

⁴ Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 30.

⁵ Tamás Majsai, “A Körösmezei Zsidódeportálás 1941-ben,” *A Ráday-Gyűjtemény Évkönyve* IV-V (1984-1985); and Judit Fejes, “On the History of the Mass Deportations from Carpatho-Ruthenia in 1941” in Randolph L. Braham and Attila Pók, eds., *The Holocaust in Hungary: Fifty Years Later* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

⁶ László Gerend, “Expelled from Our Town” in Andrew Handler, ed., *The Holocaust in Hungary: An Anthology of Jewish Response* (Tuscaloosa: Alabama University Press, 1982) p. 92.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁸ Vera Ranki, *The Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion: Jews and Nationalism in Hungary* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1999), p. 2.

⁹ Cole, *op. cit.*, (1999), p. 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-24.

¹¹ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961), p. 511.

¹² Braham, *op. cit.*, (1994), p. 200.

¹³ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 249.

¹⁴ See Randolph L. Braham, ed., *The Destruction of Hungarian Jewry: A Documentary Account* (New York: Pro Arte for the World Federation of Hungarian Jews, 1963), vol. 1, document 110, pp. 254-95.

¹⁵ John S. Conway, “The Holocaust in Hungary: Recent Controversies and Reconsiderations” in Randolph L. Braham, ed., *The Tragedy of Hungarian Jewry: Essays, Documents, Depositions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 1.

¹⁶ Braham, op. cit., (1994), pp. 385-86.

¹⁷ István Deák, in “Genocide in Hungary: An Exchange,” *The New York Review of Books* (May 27, 1982), p. 55.

¹⁸ István Deák, “Could the Jews Have Survived?,” *The New York Review of Books* (February 4, 1982), p. 24.

¹⁹ Randolph L. Braham, “The Holocaust in Hungary: A Retrospective Analysis” in Randolph L. Braham with Scott Miller, eds., *The Nazis’ Last Victims: The Holocaust in Hungary* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), p. 36.

²⁰ Randolph L. Braham, “Foreword” in Vera Ranki, op. cit., (1999), p. xii.

²¹ Vera Ranki, op. cit., (1999), p. 2 [Emphasis mine].

²² Ibid., p. 136.

²³ Ibid., p. 209.

²⁴ Gyorgy Ránki, “The Germans and the Destruction of Hungarian Jewry” in Randolph L. Braham and Bela Vago, eds., *The Holocaust in Hungary: Forty Years Later* (New York: Social Science Monographs, 1985), p. 88.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 77.

²⁶ Elek Karsai, “Deportation and Administration in Hungary” in Braham and Vago, eds., op. cit., (1985), p. 109.

²⁷ Béla Vago, “The Hungarians and the Destruction of the Hungarian Jews” in Braham and Vago, eds., op. cit., (1985), p. 94.

²⁸ Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 509—although Braham omits this phrase from the 1994, expanded, edition.

²⁹ Budapest City Archives L. IV/1402b. 1944 (hereafter Bp. F. L.), Bp. Szék. FôPolg. 936/1944 (May 11, 1944).

³⁰ Bp. F. L., Bp. Szék. FôPolg. 121.600/1944 VIII (May 16, 1944).

³¹ Bp. F. L., Bp. Szék. FôPolg. 1067/1944 (May 27, 1944).

³² Elek Karsai, *op. cit.*, (1985), p. 117.

³³ Judit Molnár, *Zsidósors 1944-ben az V (Szegedi) Csendôrkerületben* (Budapest: Cserépfalvi Kiadó, 1995), p. 54.

³⁴ Bp. F. L., Bp. Szék. FôPolg., 001.184/1944 (June 12, 1944).

³⁵ Bp. F. L., Bp. Szék. FôPolg., 123.015/1944 VII (July 14, 1944).

³⁶ Cited in Vago, *op. cit.*, (1985), p. 102.

³⁷ István Bibó, “The Jewish Question in Hungary After 1944” in István Bibó, *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination: Selected Writings* (edited by Károly Nagy, translated by András Boros-Kazai) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 163.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁴⁰ Éva Molnár, ed., *Hungary: Essential Facts, Figures and Pictures* (Budapest: MTI Corporation, 1997).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴² Cited in Vago, *op. cit.*, (1985), pp. 93–94.

Continuities and Change in Hungarian Antisemitism, 1945–1948

Paul Hanebrink

In the January 1946 issue of *Commentary*, American journalist Hal Lehrman published an article entitled “Hungary: Liberation’s Bitter Fruit.”¹ In the piece, Lehrman attempted to describe his impressions of Jewish life in Hungary less than a year after the Soviet liberation of Budapest. Lehrman listed several examples of violent attacks on Jews. Often the targets were survivors who had tried to reclaim their stolen property and move back into confiscated homes, but Lehrman also found something else besides violent hostility. Among the leaders of the new regime and in society more generally, the American journalist discerned a pervasive attitude towards Hungarian Jews that he could describe only as “cold indifference.” Both the physical assaults and the subtler disregard for the particular experiences of Hungary’s Jews during the Holocaust seemed to him to bespeak a widespread doubt that Hungarian Jews could or should find a place within Hungary’s postwar society. In light of this attitude, Lehrman could only wonder what sort of future Jews might have in Hungary.

I too am interested in this sense of “cold indifference” that Lehrman felt. Indifference suggests a lingering belief that Jews did not belong in Hungary; a doubt born of fifty years of political antisemitism. In the years before 1944 the politics of dissimilation had turned on one question: could Hungary’s Jews find an accepted place within the Hungarian nation, or would Hungarian nationalists continue to exclude them or at best leave them marginal roles as strangers in their own land? In short, were Jewish Hungarians really Hungarian? Before the war, successive Hungarian governments had answered this question in the negative, and the history of their antisemitic legislation and sanctioned discrimination is well-known. Although legalized antisemitism disappeared after the Holocaust, the question remained, as Hal Lehrman’s impressions show. A familiar vision of the Hungarian nation as an ethnically exclusive and homogenous community persisted during the Coalition Years (1945–48), inspiring much that was planned for Hungary’s future and determining much that was remembered about its recent past. In all this, the particular experiences of Jewish

Hungarians as Jews had no place. Thus, one can discern in the hopes for a new Hungarian society the continuities in Hungarian antisemitism.

The continuities were largely discursive or ideological as opposed to social structural. Not only had the new Hungarian Republic formally repealed all of the antisemitic laws, it had also put many of the leading antisemitic politicians and intellectuals on trial. The old elite had little to support their political pretensions after radical land reform and a program of nationalization stripped them of their social status. Many left Hungary in 1945 or afterwards, and with them went a whole set of social relations that had elevated the image of a “gentlemanly” Christian nobility to a national ideal.² Many of the institutions that had reproduced political antisemitism, such as the university fraternities or the civil servants’ associations, also ceased to exist. Those institutions that represented continuity, foremost among them the Christian churches, began a public campaign of defense and exculpatory apologia.

The speedy rehabilitation of low-level Arrow Cross members and sympathizers, the so-called little-Arrow Cross men, somewhat complicates this picture of structural discontinuity. Communist party officials were often quite willing to forgive and forget in their efforts to develop a mass base of political support.³ Already in July of 1945, the Communist Party newspaper declared itself willing to give low-level Arrow Cross members a “chance at a new beginning.”⁴ A month later, József Darvas, a leader of the National Peasant Party and already secretly a member of the Communist Party, made a similar declaration, offering reconciliation to that class of fascists who had been misled by their “revolutionary desire” for land and bread.⁵ The Communist strategy was seemingly most successful among unskilled industrial workers, miners, and the poorest of Hungary’s agricultural workers, but we have neither more precise sociological profiles nor good estimates of how widespread a phenomenon this actually was. Even if the number is assumed to be large, however, it still must be said that any antisemitic continuity these former fascists represented was purely individual. The social institutions that had given rise to fascism, just as those that had fostered political antisemitism in Hungary more generally, had ceased to exist.

Widespread antisemitic sentiment persisted, however. A number of anti-Jewish attacks took place throughout the country during 1946, ranging from threats of violence

to destruction of property to pogroms such as the one in Kunmadaras.⁶ These are difficult to interpret, since they were spontaneous and depended on a variety of local factors. Concern that Jews would successfully regain their property was dominant in some cases. In these instances, the rioters often directed their anger toward the police and the People's Courts, which they assumed were staffed by and acting on behalf of Jews. Economic factors, such as the rampant inflation, were critical in other cases, and Jewish tradesmen inevitably became targets. Historians have found evidence of traditional peasant antisemitism in still other cases, which could still be easily activated by political pressure or economic grievances. This occasionally expressed itself in renewed charges of blood libel.

The Communist Party approached this discontent with ambiguous and contradictory policies. Party leaders did attempt to exploit antisemitic sentiment to consolidate its rule, especially in the first half of 1946.⁷ In several cases, it organized anti-capitalist demonstrations at which crowds reportedly shouted anti-Jewish slogans. Party leadership also attempted to mobilize popular opinion by denouncing black marketeers, and placards for this campaign sometimes featured caricatured images of Jews. Mobs took this as sanction for violence. Just one week after Party Leader Mátyás Rákosi gave an anti-black market speech in Miskolc, crowds there seized three men suspected of illegal trading. They lynched the two Jews and set the non-Jew free.

Party leaders soon realized, however, that they could not always control antisemitic discontent. They may also have recognized that popular hostility to Jews could easily turn on them, since the genealogies of many of the top Communist officials were widely known. They found a surer course in their handling of the Kunmadaras pogrom.⁸ In the aftermath of the violence, Communist ideologues pinned the blame on political rivals, claiming that the pogrom had been one more manifestation of the anti-democratic spirit that these parties fostered. Several men were identified as the instigators and were tried in court as fascists. The Party thus donned the mantle of anti-fascism, and their formal opposition to antisemitism—a kind of anti-antisemitism—became a central ideological element in the stabilization of their regime.

Even if antisemitism no longer had a political or structural foundation, its effects were still very real, as we know from personal testimonies. Certain tendencies in

defining Hungarians as an ethnic nation had clearly survived the multiple catastrophes of the war. During the interwar period, a broad spectrum of Hungary's political and intellectual elite had defined Hungarian national identity in opposition to Jews. In part, the "Jewish question" was understood as an economic problem, and nationalists saw the predominance of Jews in certain sectors of the economy as a barrier to their dreams of a new Christian middle class. For this reason, they advocated redistributing Jewish property in order to create "social equilibrium," as the title of the Jewish Law of 1938 put it. Many Jews wondered if this kind of economic antisemitism was not an element in the new regime's social policy, especially in critical matters such as land reform. The liberal Jewish writer Béla Zsolt raised this issue in his inimitable way.⁹ In an editorial in his own newspaper, he accused the organization that administered the land reform of "carrying out with almost 100-percent effectiveness the first unwritten Jewish law of the Hungarian democracy, according to which Jews in Hungary could not get land."¹⁰ The Communist Party newspaper and the accused officials protested vehemently, however, and Zsolt issued a very qualified retraction in the end.¹¹ Communist ideologues could rightly note that their measures were aimed at all bourgeois property owners, regardless of confessional or cultural background. Indeed, nationalization of property did ultimately transform patterns of property ownership, bringing Jewish prominence in particular sectors to an end and thereby robbing economic antisemitism of what might be called its "environmental support."¹²

Antisemitism in Hungary had always been much more than a purely economic argument, however, and it was to this that Zsolt referred. Already in the late nineteenth century many Hungarian intellectuals had begun to imagine Hungarian culture besieged by a cosmopolitan "Jewish" spirit of modernity. Although few of them embraced biological racism, they worried nonetheless about cultural purity and tried to find ways to defend "true" Hungarian culture from the influences of Jewish intellectuals as well as of other ethnic groups. László Németh was perhaps the best advocate for this kind of ethnic exclusivity. Németh articulated his belief that Hungary was a country colonized by both a Jewish cosmopolitanism and a German imperialism. He did so in prewar essays (e.g., *In Minority*), as well as in significant wartime public addresses (e.g., the gathering of populist intellectuals at Szárszó in 1943). To be Hungarian was therefore

to wrestle with this colonized condition. It was a fate one was “born into” and could not choose electively. The conditions under which Jews could share the burden of this uniquely Hungarian fate remained unclear.

Many Hungarian intellectuals, especially those in populist circles, shared Németh’s concern and hoped that the new Hungarian republic could be the frame in which a more authentic Hungarian culture would flourish. As Németh expressed it in a letter to Péter Veres in December 1945: “May the ‘liberation’ truly be the liberation of the Hungarian people (*magyar nép*).”¹³ To him, this was a new historical chance: “[W]e already failed once in 1918, since we...did not cause the revolution ourselves.” The reference was to the bourgeois-democratic and communist revolutions of 1918–19, both of which had been widely perceived throughout the interwar period as “Jewish” and thus foreign movements. In the most extreme cases, hopeful nationalists, among them certain members of the National Peasant Party, espoused ethnic purity. Péter Veres declared at a Party meeting that Hungary “had no need of foreigners, either Germans or Jews.” His colleague in the Party, Mihály Daró, added Gypsies to the list of undesirables.¹⁴ These statements were remarkably explicit, although most populist intellectuals declined to go so far. They pressed instead for social and economic reforms in the months after liberation, especially those that might lift Hungary’s peasantry out of its terrible poverty. Several nationalist intellectuals also experimented with alternative folk-schools in rural areas as a way of educating peasants. Many of the most prominent populist-nationalist intellectuals joined or remained close to the National Peasant Party, the political organization most insistent on land redistribution.

Communist Party leaders met with many of these nationalist intellectuals early on, since they coveted the populists’ moral authority and the legitimacy that accompanied them. After all, the populists were not only outspoken advocates of economic justice, they had also generally opposed Nazi rule, sometimes at great personal risk. Party leaders recognized the utility of this intellectual tradition and were often willing to guarantee leniency, and even protection, to certain nationalist intellectuals. Social Democrats pressed in early May 1945 for criminal proceedings against several nationalist writers whose writings they viewed as partly responsible for the antisemitic political climate of the pre-war and wartime years. In response to these

calls, the most widely respected populist writer, Gyula Illyés, met with top Communist Party leaders, who reassured him that they opposed the Social Democrats' demand for a trial.¹⁵ Indeed, József Révai, the Communists' chief cultural officer, defended the accused writers in a newspaper article published shortly thereafter.¹⁶ The Communist Party thus used the populist tradition tactically during the Coalition Years to attack its political rivals and to legitimate its own power. Even as the Party eliminated its opponents, it came to base its legitimacy at least in part on a pre-existing ethnic nationalism.

Not all visions of the Hungarian national community after 1945 depended on dreams of ethnic authenticity, however. Other figures downplayed the importance of rigid cultural distinctions, believing them to be the chief obstacle to a more humane reconstruction of Hungarian society. István Szabó, a journalist for the liberal paper *Hungarian Nation*, wrote in reaction to the pogrom in Kunmadaras: "We [i.e., Hungarian society] hated Jews as Jews, or we welcomed Jews as Jews, but we did not receive [them] as state citizens of Hungary." He pursued this argument theoretically: "that democracy is not credible, whose members proclaim that they would ensure the advantages of democracy only to those of their own type. A democracy strengthened on a racial basis [is] a *contradictio in adjecto*....Unfortunately, there are political groups here, which...would like a racially pure, homogenous democratic country...."¹⁷ Bourgeois liberals like Szabó tended to write for a small number of Budapest newspapers such as *Progress* or *Hungarian Nation*. The Communist Party also pursued these independent voices, and many of these liberals ultimately had to submit to the Party's monopoly in the public sphere or they had to flee.

In the years before the conclusive Communist takeover, however, these debates over Hungarian national identity—and specifically over how pluralist a society Hungary should be—raged unabated. The firestorm around the People's Educational Institute is exemplary.¹⁸ The Institute was founded in 1946 and supported by the Ministry of Culture. The objective of the Institute was to provide educational opportunities long denied the Hungarian peasantry, providing these advantages now through the organization of schools, libraries, and cooperatives. Several of the most important populist writers, including Gyula Illyés, László Németh, and Péter Veres,

were present at its creation and guided it through its two years of existence. Although one will search in vain for any explicit antisemitic references in its founding declaration, which was penned by Illyés, Hungary's Jewish intelligentsia nonetheless suspected it of promoting new social reforms in the service of an older, ethnically exclusive vision of Hungarian culture. In a stinging rebuke, Béla Zsolt accused the Institute of staffing itself with "old furniture" from the fascist past and linked it to other Ministry of Culture initiatives that evinced an open disregard for Jewish sensitivities. He later accused Illyés himself of having "failed to speak against...the mass-murdering lies" and thus having compromised his moral authority in the postwar era.¹⁹ Many others objected to any role that László Németh might play. Indeed, Németh was forced to take a less prominent position to escape the scathing criticism.²⁰ The populist writers, led by Illyés, vigorously rejected these accusations and in turn denounced their accusers as reactionaries. They also accused their urban liberal opponents of being overly sensitive and of wanting special privileges for Jews on the basis of their past suffering. Their criticism could be even harsher in private. Illyés, for example, had described Zsolt in his diaries as a Jewish "race defender."²¹ The issue was never settled and can at one level be considered yet another skirmish in the interminable feud between urban and populist intellectuals in Hungary. The stigma remained, however, since the populists as a group always seemed to imply that their reforms were undertaken in the name of a more truly authentic class of Hungarians.

More than a decade earlier, the Jewish writer Lajos Hatvany observed that this position left Hungary's Jews in a kind of cultural ghetto.²² His observation remained valid even after the war. The tradition of ethnic nationalism displaced Jewish experiences and concerns to a marginal place in the history of Hungary. Indeed, the search for a new and positive history of the Hungarian nation—what Gyula Illyés called in 1945 a "new historical, popular [*népies*] national self-consciousness"²³—inevitably externalized the Holocaust, leaving its connection to the rest of Hungarian history tenuous at best. Nationalist and populist writers could claim that they had never advocated expelling Jews from the Hungarian nation, but their visions of an authentic national culture were necessarily defined against other traditions, which they viewed as foreign, cosmopolitan, and inauthentic. Belief in an alien "Jewish spirit" remained an

essential symbolic tool for nationalists to employ in constructing a Hungarian identity in the midst of great political change. This belief is the legacy of over two decades of officially sanctioned dissimulation.

Some recent critics in Hungary have described this attitude as cultural antisemitism,²⁴ since it distinguishes between Hungarians and Jews on a cultural and not a political or social plane. I perceive it as ethnic nationalism,²⁵ since so many of its features easily can be mobilized to discriminate against Hungary's Roma minority as well. As I have described it, ethnic nationalist discourse persisted as an ideological element in Communist rule, even as the regime dismantled the social structure that had given rise to Hungarian antisemitism. Ethnic nationalism outlived the Communists, however, who had been so eager to make use of it. Indeed, László Németh's understanding of Hungarian identity as a colonized condition is infinitely fungible. If it once represented opposition to Nazi German hegemony, it can now stand in as resistance both to Communist dictatorship and the encroaching culture of the West. Thus, antisemitism lives on as an argument about national culture and as a belief that Jewish inclusion is somehow not compatible with a vigorous national identity. In his controversial 1990 article, "Moon by Daylight," the writer Sándor Csoóri revived the old fears of a culture under siege when he wondered if a liberal Hungarian Jewry did not in fact want to force a certain "style" or "mentality" on Hungarians, a "mentality" that was cosmopolitan and so at odds with essential national traditions. The doubts he raised can still be heard in Hungarian public discourse today.

Notes

¹ Hal Lehrman, “Hungary: Liberation’s Bitter Fruit,” *Commentary* 1:3 (January 1946), pp. 28–33.

² See Viktor Karády’s essay in *Zsidóság az 1945 utáni Magyarországon* (Paris, 1984).

³ See the discussion in Róbert Gyôri Szabó, *A kommunista párt és a zsidóság* (Budapest, 1997), pp. 101–3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ See studies of Eva Ständeisky “Antiszemita megmozdulások Magyarországon a koalíciós idôszakban,” *Századok* 126:2 (1992), pp. 284–308; the many essays of János Pelle on instances of postwar anti-Jewish attacks; and Szabó, pp. 147–78.

⁷ Szabó, pp. 151ff.

⁸ Péter Apor, “A népi demokrácia építése: Kunmadaras, 1946” *Századok* 132:3 (1998), pp. 601–32.

⁹ cited in Peter Kende, *Röpirat a zsidókérdésről* (Budapest, 1989), pp. 66–7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² On this, see Herbert A. Strauss, “Der Holocaust als Epochenscheide der Antisemitismusgeschichte: Historische Diskontinuitäten” in Bergmann/Erb, eds., *Antisemitismus in der politischen Kultur nach 1945* (1990), pp. 38–56.

¹³ László Németh to Péter Veres, December, 1945, in *Németh László élete levelekben: 1914–1948* (Budapest, 1983), pp. 501–10.

¹⁴ Szabó, p. 142.

¹⁵ Entry of May 9, 1945, Gyula Illyés, *Naplójegyzetek: 1929–1945* (Budapest, 1986). Gyula Borbándi also describes the affair in *Der ungarische Populismus* (Mainz, 1976), p. 261.

¹⁶ One of the accused writers, Lőrinc Szabó, mentioned this article and his gratitude for it in his diaries. See Lőrinc Szabó, *Napló, levelek, cikkek* (Budapest, 1974), p. 297.

¹⁷ Reprinted in excerpted form in László Karsai, *Befogadók: Írások az antiszemitizmus ellen 1882–1993* (Budapest, 1993).

¹⁸ See documents in István Harsányi, ed., *A magyar népi művelődési intézet: 1946–1948* (Budapest, 1988).

¹⁹ Reprinted in *A népi-urbánus vita dokumentumai; 1932–1947* (Budapest, 1990).

²⁰ László Németh to Gyula Illyés, October 12, 1946, Németh letters.

²¹ Undated entry from August, 1945, Gyula Illyés, *Naplójegyzetek. 1929–1945*, volume 1 (Budapest, 1986), p. 380.

²² Lajos Hatvany, “Nyilt levél Németh Lászlóhoz,” *Századunk* 4 (1934).

²³ Gyula Illyés, “Forradalmi magyarság,” *Szabad Szó* (August 22, 1945). My thanks to Dr. Árpád von Klimó for sharing this with me.

²⁴ Tamás Ungvári, “A parvenü és a pária: A kulturális antiszemitizmus arcai,” *Világosság* 32:7/8 (1991), pp. 492–508.

²⁵ Gabor Berenyi, “Antisemitismus in Ungarn: Vermessung eines kulturellen Phänomens” in Peter Bettelheim et al., eds., *Antisemitismus in Osteuropa: Aspekte einer historischen Kontinuität* (Vienna, 1992), pp. 105–14.

**Retribution or Revenge:
War-Crimes Trials in Post-World War II Hungary**

István Deák

Hungary had a most turbulent history between the end of orderly rule in the last years of World War I and the beginnings of consolidation under Communist Party Secretary János Kádár in the early 1960s. Wars and revolutions alternated with counter-revolutions throughout those fifty-odd years. As a result, politically committed Hungarians could not avoid imprisonment at one point or another, unless they were very, very clever. It did little good to be neutral, since even the most cautious individual could fall victim to one or more purges. The upheavals, counter-upheavals, and political trials amounted to a many-sided, ever-changing civil war. A large part of the old social and political elite was purged in the course of this conflict and replaced by a new elite that, in turn, purged and re-purged itself. The conflicts also allowed Hungary's leaders to rid the country of its two major minorities: the Jewish and German populations. What took place in Hungary was therefore a nearly classic case of domestic struggle for power and of ethnic cleansing. One of the main instruments for changing the relations between classes and ethnic groups was the political justice system.

From the viewpoint of political justice, there were three dramatic periods in recent Hungarian history: (1) the two revolutions of 1918–1919 and the subsequent counter-revolution; (2) the upheavals of 1944–1945; and (3) the revolution of 1956. I am going to concentrate in this article on the last year of World War II and the subsequent retribution. A very brief summary of the preceding events is still necessary, however, especially the Democratic and Bolshevik experiments of 1918–1919, in which idealists attempted to change society in a few weeks, and the reaction to these experiments, which was a bloody counter-revolution (i.e., the White Terror) led by Admiral Miklós Horthy. Both sides engaged in political retribution during these periods. It is important to note, however, that most of the victims of the counter-

revolution were Jews, who were arrested and tortured not because of what they had done but because of what they happened to be. Pogroms and lynchings were more destructive during the period of the White Terror than were the judicial procedures. The counter-revolutionary courts acted on the basis of existing laws, except that the proceedings were accelerated. The defendants had their say in court and, to a large degree, legality was preserved. The courts dealt with only a limited number of left-wing revolutionaries, however. Many more people were killed or tortured by White Terrorists.

For the purposes of this article, however, what is most important about these events is the memory of them. On the one hand, the Horthy regime found its main legitimization in keeping alive and even exaggerating the memory of the Red Terror. Antisemitism, anti-Bolshevism, and the fight against “Judeo-Bolshevism” became the alpha and omega of counter-revolutionary ideology. On the other hand, the Hungarian left-wing, especially the exiled Communists, never forgot the days of White Terror. In many ways, what occurred after 1945 was revenge directed not only at the former right-wingers but also at the fellow Party-members whom the Communist leader Mátyás Rákosi and friends suspected of having been Horthy agents.

Interwar Hungary was thus a rightist, counter-revolutionary, antisemitic country, but the governing counter-revolutionary party was divided between an aristocratic, socially conservative, politically liberal, and generally only mildly antisemitic Old Right and a radical—sometimes even socially radical—and wildly antisemitic New Right. The common grounds between the Old and New Rights were antisemitism, territorial revisionism, and hatred for socialism and Bolshevism. The consequence of this strange political setup was the confusing, contradictory, and dramatic events that took place in Hungary during World War II. The country entered the war in June 1941 on the side of the Germans and officially fought on their side to the bitter end. In reality, Hungary was able to limit its manpower and material contribution to the German war effort most of the time. Hungary was an ally of Germany but imprisoned many of its domestic local Nazis. Hungary’s parliament also

remained active, with Social Democrats sitting in the parliament until March 1944 when the German army occupied the country.

Even before 1944, however, the Hungarian leadership adopted a series of anti-Judaic laws and caused the death of thousands of Jews in forced labor companies, through local acts of terror, and by deporting 15,000 Jews to German-controlled Galicia. About 825,000 people whom the law regarded as Jews were still alive on March 19, 1944, when the German army marched into Hungary; this was the highest concentration of Jewish survivors in Europe. The German invasion changed this situation, however, through mass mobilization, total war, and deportations. The deportations were organized and executed by the Hungarian authorities, and they met with, if not necessarily the approval, then at least the indifference of a very large part of the population.

The struggle between the Old Right and New Right was still not over even then. The Old Right re-asserted itself in the summer of 1944 but lost again in October. It was this conservative re-assertion that was partly responsible for the survival of about forty percent of those whom the anti-Jewish laws regarded as Jews. No less important, the Soviet Red Army was in eastern Hungary by October 1944. The last German soldiers left the country less than half a year later on April 4, 1945.¹

Hungary fell into ruins in 1944–1945. The Red Army created a coalition of minuscule, anti-fascist parties in this prostrated country and ordered them to organize a government and national assembly.² One of the smallest but most active, aggressive, and politically astute parties within the coalition was the hitherto illegal Communist Party. The anti-fascist coalition that was formed proceeded to engage in purges. Retribution took many forms in post-World War II Hungary, as it had in all the other countries that once had been a part of Hitler's Europe. Some of those accused of collaboration, treason, and/or war crimes were tried in judiciary courts. Some were put into concentration camps. Some were expelled from the country. Finally, a large number of people were fired from their jobs, evicted from their homes, deprived of their pensions, or deprived of their civic rights. Some of these people undoubtedly

would be acquitted by the courts of any democratic country today. Others amply deserved their punishment.³

As in the rest of Europe, the purges in Hungary served many purposes beyond simply punishing those who were held responsible for the nation's wartime humiliation and suffering. The purges were primarily designed to legitimize the power of the new rulers, to reduce to impotence those groups that might stand in the way of postwar reconstruction and the reorganization of society, and to help in the redistribution of wealth. In Hungary, as elsewhere, the judicial part of retribution was handled by the so-called People's Courts, which had been created for the occasion.

PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION AFFECTED BY PURGES

Let us first consider the numbers. How many people were affected by the purges in Hungary?⁴ According to official figures, 322 people had been sentenced to death by the People's Courts in Hungary up through March 1, 1948, 146 of whom were actually executed. The great majority of these people supposedly were tried for crimes committed during the Nazi period and not during the Soviet occupation. The list of those hanged and of those shot by firing squad included four former prime ministers, one former deputy prime minister, nine other former cabinet members, and a large number of generals and high-ranking civil servants. In addition, the Hungarian People's Courts investigated over 90,000 cases between February 3, 1945, and April 1, 1950, and tried nearly 60,000 people charged with treason, war crimes, or crimes against humanity. Of these, 26,000 were found guilty. Furthermore, roughly 40,000 Hungarian citizens were held between 1945 and 1949, mostly without charges, in concentration camps, which were officially termed internment camps. Two hundred thousand or more Hungarian Germans were expelled from the country under the principle of collective guilt. The de-Nazification commissions dismissed at least 62,000 public servants.⁵ Altogether, between 300,000 and 400,000 Hungarian citizens, or well in excess of three percent of the country's total population, suffered some kind of punishment during the postwar purges. Since those involved were mainly adult males, this means that about one in ten adult male Hungarian citizens was subjected to a punitive measure. The high

number and large proportion of those purged are all the more remarkable if we consider that the majority of those likely to be charged for war crimes had left Hungary with the retreating German army in 1944–1945 and could not be tried at home. Exceptions to this rule included the 390 higher political and military leaders whom the American CIC handed over to the Hungarian authorities in October 1945,⁶ and the accused war criminals who voluntarily returned to Hungary.

Thousands of Hungarian citizens, who were rightly or wrongly accused of war crimes, were dealt with, most often summarily, in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Czechoslovakia. The trouble with the statistical data for Hungary, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, is that the prosecution of war criminals and collaborators almost imperceptibly merged into the persecution of anti-fascists, democrats, Social Democrats, and even Communists. Many of the victims of the People's Courts were Jews, especially Jewish Communists, who were hounded to death by the mainly Jewish leadership of Stalinist Hungary.

Tragically, one of the organizers of the political purges, the Communist Minister of Interior László Rajk, was himself sentenced to death in September 1949 by a People's Court. His judge was the same Péter Jankó who in 1946 had presided over the trial of the Hungarian Arrow Cross Führer, Ferenc Szálasi. The difference between the two trials was that in 1946 Ferenc Szálasi was allowed to defend himself and refused to confess to any wrongdoing, whereas in 1949 László Rajk confessed to the vilest possible crimes and begged to be hanged. While Szálasi had not been tortured in prison, Rajk was. It is a small wonder then that Judge Jankó committed suicide when the rehabilitation of the Rajk group was begun in 1955 by the same Communist regime that had had him executed.⁷

All in all, Hungary's was a substantial purge, although not necessarily the most rigorous. A comparison between Hungary and the Netherlands reveals that whereas only about three percent of the population in Hungary was affected by the purges, a large number of whom were sent to live in Germany, the Netherlands investigated as Nazi collaborators a total of nearly 452,000 people, or five percent of the population. Of the latter, about 201,000 were actually tried. Moreover, nearly 100,000 Dutch men

and women were held in prison on charges of war crimes and collaboration in December 1945.⁸

ASSESSMENT OF POSTWAR RETRIBUTION

Let me now at least touch upon questions such as (1) how the Hungarian retribution began and how it unfolded, (2) whether international standards of legality and fairness were respected, and (3) what the new anti-fascist regime hoped to accomplish by mounting these trials and what it actually achieved.

Postwar retribution was a firm goal of the anti-Nazi world alliance, which was enunciated on multiple occasions. The Allies made it clear that Germany's former allies would be required to assist in the arrest, handing over, or trial and sentencing of their own war criminals. This demand was incorporated as Article 14 in the January 20, 1945, armistice agreement between the Allies and Hungary. The creation of People's Courts accordingly became Law VII, 1945, of the new democratic Hungarian state. The People's Courts already had been in operation for some time, however, when the law was published on September 16, 1945.

As did similar courts in other European countries, the People's Courts in Hungary found themselves in an ambivalent situation. On the one side was the desire of the Allied Powers for war criminals to be tried in a way that would contribute to the restoration of law and order. Not even the Soviet Union favored the exercise of summary justice in Hungary. On the other side stood the desire of the anti-fascist parties and the Soviet leadership to eliminate the old social, political, and economic elite. Hungary proved to be an ideal place for realizing the latter goal because the majority of representatives of the old order had fled to the West, were in Soviet POW camps, or had been thoroughly discredited and terrified. All this facilitated the creation of a new elite.

The trouble was that by no means all Hungarians were enthusiastic about the recent changes. It seems clear that the majority of the population did not feel that the old regime had committed monstrous crimes against the people. Instead, they greatly resented the brutal Soviet occupation. Because so many Hungarians were not in a

revolutionary mood, the new leadership felt it necessary to create one. The first step in this direction was to persuade the population that they had been victimized by their former rulers. The most effective instrument for this appeared to be the People's Courts. Typically, the Social Democratic Minister of Justice, István Ries, insisted in 1945 on the need to both observe strict legal procedure and exercise revolutionary political justice. Ries, who was later to die under torture at the hands of the Communist police, demanded that the people's judges not behave like professional judges but that they unmask twenty-five years of Hungarian fascism; defend the interests of the new, democratic people's Hungary; and assist in the building of a new people's state. Accordingly, every indictment stated that those being tried represented a discredited regime that had illegally attained power through a counter-revolution in 1919 and whose criminal activities had inevitably led to an alliance with Germany, to war, and to the country's devastation. These stipulations did not, however, prevent the courts from distinguishing between various forms of counter-revolutionary illegality. Service in the Horthy regime was not considered a crime by itself, while service in the post-Horthy Arrow Cross regime was. Thus, members of Szálasi's Arrow Cross government were found guilty and often sentenced to death for the crime of having rebelled against Regent Horthy's illegal government.

The People's Courts were made up of delegated representatives of the anti-fascist coalition. Only the presiding judge was always a professional, selected from the meager list of those lawyers and judges who had not completely compromised themselves under the old regime. The presiding judge had no right to vote, however. Being able to vote actually did not matter very much, since the guidelines for sentencing had already been established—often after much internal wrangling—by the anti-fascist coalition. Lawyers for the defense could be chosen by the defendants but only from an approved list. All these practices did not differ in any significant way from those adopted after the war in countries such as France, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway.

The revolutionary character of the courts was established at the very outset when the People's Court sentenced to death and hanged two non-commissioned

officers on February 4, 1945, in a public square in the center of Budapest. They had been charged with an autumn 1942 massacre, committed on the Eastern front, of over 100 members of a punitive labor company that consisted of Jews, Communists, and suspected Communists. What is so dramatic about this trial, besides its revolutionary scenery, is that it occurred when parts of Budapest were still in German hands and that the Court rejected the defendants' claim of "superior orders." The same crucial stand was taken later by the Nuremberg Court.

When it came to the main trials directed at former members of the government and at other political and military leaders, the dignity of the proceedings was neither more nor less observed than, for instance, at the trials of Marshal Pétain and former Prime Minister Laval in France. First, the defendants were not tortured. Second, they were fed no worse than the semi-starving population of Budapest. Third, they were given some time to prepare their defense. Fourth, they all had their say in courts. The Arrow Cross Führer Ferenc Szálasi not only showed no repentance but argued, hour after tedious hour, the justice of his cause. As the Budapest historian László Karsai has pointed out in his writings, former Prime Minister László Bárdossy was allowed, although probably for lack of vigilance on the part of the presiding judge, to justify Hungary's April 1941 military occupation of parts of Yugoslavia that once had belonged to Hungary, and to do so by alluding to the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland in 1939. In both cases, the interventionists' excuse was that because Poland and Yugoslavia had ceased to exist, it was necessary to intervene to protect fellow nationals.⁹

In neither Hungary nor the rest of Europe did the courts accept the defense's claim of *nullum crimen et nulla poena sine lege*: there can be no crime and hence no punishment without a pre-existing law. Although Bárdossy's entry into the war against the Soviet Union in 1941 without parliament's consent was not legally a crime when the act took place, the court ruled that it was now to be considered a crime. The defense had to accept the reality of a new, retroactive criminal law, as it had to be accepted at Nuremberg where the international court rejected the defense's claim that conspiracy to

commit aggression had never been considered a punishable act by either German or international law.

The Hungarian court—as well as any other court in Europe—also did not accept the defense of *tu quoque*, which is the claim that those sitting in judgment had committed the same acts as the defendant. Thus, for instance, the People’s Court condemned the taking and shooting of hostages in connection with the massacres the Hungarian army perpetrated in northern Yugoslavia in January 1942. Yet, in some Hungarian cities in 1944–1945, the inhabitants could read warnings posted by the Soviet Red Army Command that ten Hungarian civilians would be shot for the killing, or even the wounding, of a single Soviet soldier.¹⁰ The generally dignified proceedings were darkened by the contemptuous attitude of some of the judges and their overly harsh way of trying to make the defendant own up to his crimes. This is the European practice, however, which would be inconceivable in a British or American court.

There was also the problem of the unruliness of the trial audience, which to a large part consisted of Jewish survivors. It was obviously not easy for the audience to watch things such as when the lawyer for László Endre, one of the chief organizers of the deportation, stood up in court and insisted on the defendant’s constitutional rights. More disturbing was the prejudice and vulgarity of the contemporary press. The papers of the period often used the same bombastic and hysterical language that had characterized the usage of their antisemitic, far-right predecessors. During the trials, the newspapers regularly referred to the German or, in the case of Szálasi, the alleged Armenian origin of the defendant. The press called the defendants’ names such as vermin, jackal, and butcher. It also speculated on the defendants’ sexual preferences and depicted the accused as corrupt and stupid psychopaths. In reality, as the historian László Karsai has pointed out, many of the defendants were intelligent and educated individuals, which increased their moral and criminal responsibility rather than diminished it.¹¹ “The raging beast on a stretcher” (*a fenevad hordágyon*) was a typical caption under the photograph of an accused war criminal who arrived in Budapest too ill to stand on his feet. It must be noted, however, that the style of Hungarian

newspapers did not differ in any significant way from the style adopted, for instance, by the French or Danish press at the time.

No doubt, the methods and behavior of the People's Courts would be unacceptable in Hungary today. We must remember, however, that the country was in ruins and that a million or more people—soldiers, Jews, and other Hungarians—were dead. It must also be remembered that thousands upon thousands of Hungarians had committed atrocious crimes against their fellow citizens. Now a select number of them had to pay for these crimes, if for no other reason than to lift the responsibility off the shoulders of the other Hungarians. Ultimately, someone also had to pay for Hungary's having lost a war for a second time in thirty years.

Two questions remain. First, whether those who had set up the People's Courts and directed the purges achieved their purpose. Second, whether the purges helped to make people in Hungary regret the crimes committed against their Jewish fellow-citizens. In both cases my reply must be more negative than positive. The initiator and planner of the process was the Communist Party. It definitely achieved its goal of reducing to impotence the few remaining members of the old ruling elite, but then the machine of the People's Courts ran away with the Communists and destroyed in the process not only the Hungarian "Nazis" and collaborators but also the Communists' democratic allies and, finally, even a large part of the Communist elite. The result was the inability of the public to differentiate between war criminals and victims of Stalinism. Even today, after at least one of the executed war criminals, General Gusztáv Jány, had been judicially rehabilitated, few people in the country care to know what the war-crimes trials were about and whether they served the cause of justice. There is also little evidence that the trials caused the Hungarian people to feel contrite for what had been done to the Jews. As we know, the issue was mostly swept under the rug under Communist rule, and the people were generally happy to forget what the Party leadership wanted them to forget. Only in the 1970s were some changes noticeable, mostly in literature. The kind of soul-searching that characterized West Germany has never taken place in Hungary, however. On the other hand, there can be little doubt that the great majority of the Hungarian public is not antisemitic today.

What then did the post-World War II trials—or, in fact, all of the political trials held in 1919–1920, 1945–1948, and in revenging the 1956 revolution—achieve? In one sentence, they helped to transform society by creating new elites. Whether the new elites were any better than their predecessors is another question.

Notes

¹ From among the many writings on interwar and World War II Hungary, see especially Peter F. Sugar, gen. ed., *A History of Hungary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), chaps. XVI-XIX. Also, Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*, 2 vols., (Revised and enlarged edition; New York: Social Science Monographs, dist. by Columbia University Press, 1994); Mario D. Fenyo, *Hitler, Horthy and Hungary: German-Hungarian Relations, 1941–1944* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972); Peter Gosztonyi, *Der Kampf um Budapest 1944–1945* (Munich, Schnell & Steiner, 1964); Gyula Juhász, *Hungarian Foreign Policy, 1919–1945* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1979); C.A. Macartney, *October Fifteenth: A History of Modern Hungary, 1929–1945*, 2 vols. (2nd ed., Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1961); Jenő Czebe and Tibor Pethő, *Hungary in World War II: A Military History of the War Years* (Budapest: New Hungary, 1946); Thomas Sakmyster, *Hungary's Admiral on Horseback: Miklós Horthy, 1918–1944* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, dist. by Columbia University Press, 1994); Rudolf L. Tokes, *Béla Kun and the Hungarian Soviet Republic* (New York: Praeger, 1967); and István Deák, “A Fatal Compromise? The Debate over Collaboration and Resistance in Hungary,” in István Deák, Jan T. Gross, and Tony Judt, eds., *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 39-73.

² On immediate post-World War II Hungary, see especially Charles Gati, *Hungary and the Soviet Bloc* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986), and Sugar, *A History of Hungary*, chap. XX.

³ Retribution in Hungary was, for a long time, much neglected by historiography. Recently, however, scores of younger historians have begun to unearth documents and to publish books and essays on the subject. Their investigation of postwar retribution is often related to the study of the Holocaust. Some of the most productive Hungarian historians of the subject are László Karsai, Tibor Lukács, Judit Molnár, Péter Sipos, Tamás Stark, László Varga, and Tibor Zinner. Those outside Hungary who are working on the subject include Randolph L. Braham and István Deák (New York) and Margit Szöllösi-Janze (Munich).

Some of the best works on postwar retribution in Hungary are László Karsai, “The People’s Courts and Revolutionary Justice in Hungary, 1945–46,” in Deák, Gross, and Tony Judt, *The Politics of Retribution in Europe*, pp. 233-51; Tibor Lukács, *A magyar népbíróági jog és a népbíróágok 1945–1950* [Statutes regarding the people’s courts in Hungary and the people’s courts] (Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1979); Margit Szöllösi-Janze, “‘Pfeilkreuzler, Landesverräter and andere Volksfeinde!’: Generalabrechnung in Ungarn,” in Klaus-Dietmar Henke and Hans Woller, eds., *Politische Säuberung in Europa: Die Abrechnung mit Faschismus und Kollaboration nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991), pp. 311-57; and Tibor Zinner, “Háborus bünösök perei. Internálások,

kitelπίtések és igazoló eljárások 1945–1949” [The trials of war criminals. Internments, resettlements, and screening processes 1945–1949], *Történelmi Szemle* (Budapest), XXIII, 1985/1, pp. 118-37.

The records of two of the most important trials are reprinted in Elek Karsai and László Karsai, eds., *A Szálasi per* [The trial of (the Arrow Cross leader Ferenc) Szálasi] (Budapest: Reform, 1988); and László Karsai and Judit Molnár, eds., *Az Endre-Baky-Jaross per* [The trial of Endre-Baky-Jaross] (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1994). László Endre, László Baky, and Andor Jaross were the principal organizers of the deportation of the Hungarian Jews from outside of Budapest to Auschwitz. They were hanged in 1946. See also the memoirs of Ákos Major, one of the most important people’s judges: *Népbíraskodás—forradalmi törvényesség* [People’s jurisdiction—revolutionary legality], ed. by Tibor Zinner (Budapest: Minerva, 1988).

In the following analysis most of my information is based on the sources cited above, my own researches, and personal communications by László Karsai.

Please note that sources in Hungarian will be listed in these notes only when no publication in a Western language is available.

⁴ No two statistics agree on the number of those purged in Hungary. My data are a combination of statistics contained in Sándor Balogh and Sándor Jakab, *The History of Hungary After the Second World War, 1944–1980* (Budapest: Corvina, 1986), p. 19, and Zinner in *Történelmi Szemle*, XXIII, 1985/1, p. 125. See also, Major, *Népbíraskodás*, pp. 158-59.

⁵ The expropriation and expulsion of the Hungarian Germans is discussed by Szöllösi-Janze in Henke and Woller, *Politische Säuberung in Europa*, pp. 345-54, and by Ágnes Tóth, *Telepítések Magyarországon 1945 és 1948 között* [Population displacements in Hungary between 1945 and 1948] (Kecskemét: Bács-kiskun Megyei Önkormányzat Levéltára, 1993).

There is no agreement on the precise number of those who were dismissed from their jobs. Szöllösi-Janze mentions the figure of 60,000. László Karsai maintains, in a recent paper, that 103,000 public servants and about the same number of private employees were dismissed for political reasons. László Karsai, “Crime and Punishment: People’s Courts, Revolutionary Lawfulness, and the Hungarian Holocaust,” unpubl. manuscript, 1999, p. 9.

⁶ Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, p. 1340.

⁷ On László Rajk and his show trial in 1949, see George H. Hodos, *Show trials: Stalinist Purges in Eastern Europe, 1948–1954* (New York: Praeger, 1987), and Erzsébet Strassenreiter and Péter Sipos, *Rajk László* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1974).

⁸ On the very complex Dutch situation, see Peter Romijn and Gerhard Hirschfeld, “Die Ahndung der Kollaboration in Niederlanden,” in Henke and Woller, *Politische Säuberung in Europa*, pp. 281-310. The most comprehensive statistics are on p. 294.

⁹ Trial records cited in László Jaszovszky, ed., *Bűnös volt-e Bárdossy László?* [Was László Bárdossy guilty?] (Budapest: Püski, n.d.), p.68.

¹⁰ The text of one of these announcements is reproduced in Elek Karsai and Magda M. Somlyai, eds., *A felszabadulás krónikája, 1944 ősze–1945 tavasza* [The chronicle of liberation, fall 1944–spring 1945], Budapest: Kossuth, 1970), p. 50. The announcement, posted in the city of Csongrád, also conveys the threat that the Soviets would burn down any house from which such a shot was fired.

¹¹ László Karsai in Deák, Gross, and Judt, *The Politics of Retribution in Europe*, p. 235.

**Assault on Historical Memory:
Hungarian Nationalists and the Holocaust**

Randolph L. Braham

Perhaps no other event in world history has been as thoroughly documented as the Holocaust, the destruction of approximately six million European Jews during the Nazi era. This vast documentation notwithstanding, however, the authenticity of no other event has ever been so consistently questioned as that of the Holocaust. The campaign to distort, denigrate, and actually deny the Holocaust was launched soon after the end of World War II by extremist antisemitic elements of the Right. Spearheaded in the Western world by politically and ideologically motivated neo-Nazis, many of whom came to be identified as “historical revisionists,” the campaign gained ground after 1948 in the Communist world as well. Unlike what happened in the West, however, the campaign in the Soviet camp was waged under strict state controls, so that its intensity varied with the changing political interests of the Soviet Union and its satellites.

Following the dissolution of the Communist regimes and the disintegration of the Soviet bloc in 1989, the assault against the historical memory of the Holocaust became quite similar to that being pursued by neo-Nazis and others in the Western world. The hotbed of antisemitism during much of the twentieth century, East-Central Europe—the area in which four-fifths of the nearly six million victims of the Holocaust had lived before the war—was fertile soil for the quick and effective penetration of “historical revisionism.”

Historical revisionism, which in many of its adherents represents a new and potentially virulent strain of antisemitism, has infected the xenophobic nationalist stratum of Hungarian society as well.¹ Ironically, this new strain came to the fore following the liberalization measures that the first democratically elected government adopted after the systemic change of 1989. The political stresses and socioeconomic dislocations engendered by the new administration’s privatization and marketization measures enabled the xenophobic nationalist-populist elements to revive both “the

Jewish question” and antisemitism as convenient instruments of domestic politics. They have revived and skillfully exploited a favorite technique of the Horthy era: scapegoating. They clearly are resolved to direct against the Jews the anger of people suffering from the ravages of unemployment, inflation, and general impoverishment, blaming the Jews for the current and past ills of the country.

While the number of xenophobic champions of antisemitism—like that of Hungarian neo-Nazis actually denying the Holocaust—is relatively small, the camp of those distorting and denigrating the catastrophe of the Jews is fairly large and—judging by recent developments—growing. With their political power and influence, members of this camp represent a potentially greater danger not only to the integrity of the historical record of the Holocaust but also and above all to the newly established democratic system. Unlike the Holocaust deniers, who are a fringe-group of “historical charlatans” and bound to end up in the dung-heap of history, the history cleansers who denigrate and distort the Holocaust are often “respectable” public figures (e.g., intellectuals, members of parliament, influential governmental and party figures, and high-ranking army officers).²

The rhetoric and tactics of these respectable individuals vary in terms of their particular political-ideological group interests and personal ambitions. They appear united only by their manifest resolve to “explain” and justify Hungary’s linkage to Nazi Germany, bring about the rehabilitation of the Horthy regime, and above all absolve the country of any responsibility for the destruction of approximately 550,000 of its citizens of the Jewish faith or heritage. In other words, they show every evidence that they are determined to cleanse Hungary’s historical record of the Nazi era.

The drive to whitewash the record of this era in general and of the Holocaust in particular uses a variety of approaches. Some of the history cleansers are forthright, brazenly revealing their chauvinistic-nationalist positions by questioning the authenticity of the personal and historical accounts of the Holocaust. They go so far as to identify all those involved in Holocaust studies or remembrance ceremonies as traitors bent on branding the Hungarian people as Fascists.³ Others are more astute, using mitigating historical and socioeconomic arguments to justify the policies that the

successive Hungarian governments pursued during the Horthy era. Toward this end, many of them try to deflect attention from the Holocaust by focusing on the “positive” experiences of the Jews since their emancipation in 1867 and on the rescue activities of Christian Hungarians during the German occupation, including Horthy’s halting of the deportations in early July 1944. Still others, the “moderates,” are among the most sophisticated. Impelled by political expediency, many of these camouflage the pursuit of the same objectives by deploring the tragedy of the Jews and loudly proclaiming their commitment to the struggle against contemporary antisemitism. The differences in tactics notwithstanding, they appear equally resolved to bring about the rehabilitation of the Horthy regime and cleanse the historical record of the Nazi era by denigrating or distorting the crucial facts of the Holocaust in Hungary: *the active and often enthusiastic involvement of Hungary’s wartime governmental and law enforcement authorities in the humiliation, expropriation, and subsequent destruction of the Jews.*

THE FACTS UNDER SIEGE

The Jews of Hungary numbered more than 700,000 and were the last relatively intact Jewish community. Having survived throughout most of the war, on the eve of Allied victory they were destroyed with the connivance of their own government. An ally of Nazi Germany starting in early 1938, Hungary instituted a series of increasingly severe anti-Jewish measures that not only curtailed the basic civil and socioeconomic rights of the Jews but also claimed approximately 64,000 Jewish lives by early 1944.⁴ Nevertheless, the bulk of Hungarian Jewry survived the first four and a half years of the war thanks to the physical protection of the conservative-aristocratic government. After the German occupation of March 19, 1944, however, it was this Jewish community that was subjected to the most concentrated and brutal destruction process of the Nazis’ efforts to bring about the Final Solution. This murderous process was launched almost immediately after the beginning of the occupation—at a time when the leaders of the world, including those of Hungary, were already familiar with the realities of Auschwitz, and even most Nazis must have realized that the Axis would lose the war. It was precisely because of this prospect that the Germans and their Hungarian

accomplices decided to win at least the war against the Jews. Time was clearly of the essence. The Red Army was fast approaching Romania, and the Western Allies were expected to launch their invasion of Europe soon.

The Nazis' machinery of destruction was already well oiled by 1944. With experience gained through the mass murder of Jews from all over German-dominated Europe, the Nazis were ready and well prepared for a lightning operation in Hungary. Toward this end, they updated the death factories in Auschwitz. They extended the rail lines to Birkenau to the immediate vicinity of the gas chambers and, above all, acquired the wholehearted support of the Hungarian government of Döme Sztójay for the implementation of the Final Solution. Without the unequivocal support of the new, constitutionally appointed government that enjoyed the blessing of Miklós Horthy, who was Hungary's highly respected head of state, the Nazis—as the cases of Bulgaria and Romania had clearly shown⁵—would have been severely hampered if not helpless. The SS commandos were, in fact, amazed at the enthusiasm with which their Hungarian counterparts were ready to “solve” the Jewish question. The new government placed the instruments of state power at the disposal of the Hungarian and German Nazis bent on the swiftest possible implementation of the Final Solution. With Horthy still at the helm and providing the symbol of national sovereignty, the Hungarian police, gendarmerie, and civil service collaborated with the SS in the anti-Jewish drive with a routine and efficiency that impressed even the Germans. Within less than two months (i.e., from late March to mid-May, 1944), the Hungarian authorities acted in conjunction with their Nazi “advisors” to complete the first phase of the anti-Jewish drive. The Jews were isolated, marked, robbed of their possessions, and placed into ghettos. During the next two months, they were subjected to the most barbaric and speedy deportation and extermination program of the war. It was so massive and so swift that the crematoria in Auschwitz-Birkenau, updated as they were, could not cope. Special ditches had to be dug to burn the thousands of victims the crematoria could not handle. When Winston Churchill was informed about this catastrophe, he referred to it as “probably the greatest and most horrible crime ever committed in the history of the world.”⁶

The magnitude of the crime committed by the Nazis and their Hungarian accomplices is dramatically illustrated by the following comparative statistical data. Three transports arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau with close to 12,000 Jews from Northern Transylvania on June 6, 1944. Better known as D-Day, this was one of the most magnificent days in the annals of military history, when the greatest multinational armada ever assembled under one command stormed the beaches of Normandy. By the end of that day, the number of invading Allied troops killed was about half that of the Hungarian Jews. While the Allies' killed-in-action figures declined dramatically after the toehold had been gained on Normandy later that day, the Hungarian Jews continued to be murdered at almost the same high rate day after day until July 9, continuing the awesome daily massacre rate that began on May 16. In the end, the wartime losses of Hungarian Jewry significantly exceeded those incurred by the military forces of the United States in all theaters of war, just as they also significantly exceeded the combined military and civilian war deaths of the British, a nation that bore much of the German military onslaught. These comparisons are cited not to minimize the sacrifices or diminish the heroism of the Western Allies but simply to underscore the magnitude of the Holocaust in Hungary.

THE ASSAULT ON MEMORY

The Hungarian chapter of the Holocaust of European Jewry constitutes not only the greatest tragedy in the history of Hungarian Jewry but also the darkest chapter in the history of Hungary. Never before in the history of the Hungarian nation were so many people expropriated and murdered in so short a time as in 1944. Most of the hundreds of thousands of victims were Hungarian citizens who had proudly considered themselves to be "Magyars of the Jewish faith." To the chagrin of the other ethnic-national minorities of Hungary, most Jews were patriotic and had been firmly committed to the Magyar cause since 1848. They were the forerunners of Hungary's modernization and champions of the Hungarian language and culture even in the territories Hungary lost in 1918. At the end, however, they fared less well than the other

ethnic and national groups. They were destroyed with the connivance of the regime they had so eagerly supported and implicitly trusted.

The details of this apocalyptic chapter in the history of Hungary have not yet sunk into the national consciousness of the Hungarian people. The reasons are many and complex. The wartime history of Hungary, including the Holocaust, has been manipulated by the successive regimes to serve their particular political interests. During the immediate postwar period, the needs and interests of the survivors came into conflict with the political aspirations of the various parties. It is one of the ironies of history that, at the end, the surviving remnant of Hungarian Jewry suffered most at the hands of the very political party that many of them trusted as their genuine supporter and which, like the Jews, had been a main target of the Nazis and of the Horthy regime: the Communist Party. During the ideological euphoria of the immediate postwar era, many of the victimized Jews placed their faith in the party, believing that it was the only one that was genuinely free of any stain of Fascism. They also considered it reliable for the advancement of their legitimate interests, including the roundup and prosecution of war criminals, the effectuation of an equitable restitution and reparation program, and the building of a just and egalitarian society. They were soon awakened to the political realities of the postwar power struggle. Small and generally mistrusted by the ethnic majority, the Communist Party had no scruples about sacrificing the interests of the survivors in order to build a popular base for the acquisition of state power. Driven by political expediency, the party leadership, which included a proportionately large number of Communists of Jewish origin, urged the survivors to forget about their past suffering, abandon their demands for restitution, and subordinate their special needs to the building of the new socialist society. With the exception of the diehards who remained loyal to their ideology and newly acquired power, the survivors soon discovered that it was the Communist Party's search for mass support that was in fact largely behind the antisemitic agitation and the many "spontaneous" anti-Jewish outbursts and pogroms that occurred during the immediate postwar period.⁷

During the Stalinist era, the Holocaust was virtually sunk into the Orwellian black hole of history. The Jewish martyrs were subsumed as part of the losses incurred

by the population at large. The survivors themselves were subjected to many inequities. Many of them found themselves persecuted on both social and religious-political grounds. They were either identified as members of “the exploiting bourgeoisie” or accused of the sins of Zionism and cosmopolitanism. The former were deported to concentration camps for “re-education.” The latter were either jailed or deprived of a livelihood. In the course of time even the Communist Party itself was purged of its Jewish component to make it more attractive to the ethnic majority.⁸

During the National Communist era that followed the Uprising of 1956, the Jewish question and the issue of antisemitism, while persistent at the popular level, were kept under control by the government. Consistent with the policies of the previous governments, public awareness of the Holocaust continued to remain low even though Hungary—unlike the other Soviet bloc countries—witnessed the appearance of several important documentary and historical publications on the tragedy of Hungarian Jewry.⁹

Since the triumph of democracy in 1989, the Holocaust has emerged as an “embarrassing” topic for the various governments that succeeded the Communist regime. Driven largely by domestic and international political considerations, the elected national leaders of the new democratic society have publicly acknowledged the wartime tragedy of the Jews and committed themselves, especially during the Holocaust remembrance periods, to combat the scourge of antisemitism. With a few exceptions, however, they have so far failed to come to grips with Hungary’s wartime record. They have failed to confront the Holocaust openly and honestly, let alone publicly assume national responsibility or apologize for it.

The historical memory of the Holocaust is clearly under siege. Given the political climate of the post-1989 era, including the absence of unambiguous and unequivocal moral guidance on the Holocaust, the history cleansers appear to have been given the green light to “safeguard the national honor of Hungary” by absolving it of any responsibility for the catastrophe that befell Hungarian Jewry. Under control during the Communist era, the controversy over the Jewish question in general and the Holocaust in particular surfaced almost immediately after the systemic change. It became particularly venomous following the publication of a statement by Sándor

Csoóri, one of Hungary's most celebrated writers, claiming, among other things, that "liberal Hungarian Jewry wanted to 'assimilate' the Magyars in style and thought." The implicit claim that the surviving remnant of Hungarian Jewry was a threat to the Christian Magyars was reminiscent of the anti-Jewish campaign of the Horthy era.¹⁰

The history cleansers of the post-Communist era appear to have been encouraged, indirectly at least, by some of the judicial decisions and governmental policies that impacted negatively on the historical memory of the Holocaust and the interests of the Jewish community. These included:

- Judicial revision of the People's Tribunals Act and the subsequent reversal of verdicts in many war-crimes cases;
- Inequitable and demeaning handling of restitution and reparation;
- Difficulties relating to the acquisition and transfer of archival materials; and
- Plans for a new exhibition at the Hungarian pavilion in Auschwitz.

The historical memory of many of the survivors was jolted early in 1994, when the Constitutional Court (*Alkotmánybíróság*) that was established in late 1989 nullified many provisions of the People's Tribunals Act (Law No. VII of 1945), reversing the conviction of many individuals involved in the Final Solution.¹¹ Arguing that the wartime activities of the convicted individuals were not deemed criminally punishable at the time of their commission, the court enabled the rehabilitation of many of those who were involved in the roundup, expropriation, ghettoization, and deportation of the Jews.

Another setback endured by the survivors related to the inequitable handling of the issue of restitution and reparation.¹² The successive Hungarian governments since 1945 have failed to come to grips with this issue. Citing a variety of domestic economic and political factors, they handled this matter in a dilatory manner while the rightful owners of the properties expropriated by the Hungarian state in 1944 were gradually dying out. While the various Communist regimes ignored the issue almost altogether, citing the requirements of socialist construction, the post-Communist regimes became preoccupied with compensating the victims of Communism. The overshadowing of the

Holocaust by a politically guided preoccupation with the horrors of the Communist era has led, among other things, to giving priority to the compensation of the victims of Communism over those of Nazism. To add insult to injury, an indeterminate number of the Christian victims who were compensated for properties nationalized by the Communist regime had, in fact, “legally” or fraudulently acquired them from Jews during the Nazi era. Compounding this virtual obscenity, the government of Viktor Orbán sought in late 1998 to ease the collective conscience of the nation by offering to compensate survivors by paying approximately \$150 for each member of their particular immediate families, assuming that they can prove that their loved ones were in fact victims of the Holocaust.¹³

From the point of view of scholarship, perhaps the greatest challenge to the preservation and perpetuation of the historical memory of the Holocaust was provided by the many judicial acts and governmental regulations that virtually prohibited the acquisition of pertinent archival materials and their transfer abroad. The “personal data protection” provisions of various legislative acts and judicial decisions, presumably designed to protect public officials who had formerly been associated with either the Nazi-collaborationist or the Communist regime, impose considerable restrictions on the activities of scholars, especially foreign nationals.¹⁴

The frustration over the failure to acquire Holocaust-related documentation from Hungary has been felt not only by individual scholars but also by world renowned archival and research centers such as Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Miles Lerman, then chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, expressed this frustration in a letter addressed to Prime Minister Orbán on June 17, 1999. Among other things, he stated: “After several rounds of discussions with Hungarian officials and archivists and a series of unfortunate experiences, we have reached the regrettable conclusion that Hungary has failed to cooperate with the Museum in its efforts and stands nearly alone among countries in Europe in its failing to make available its records on the Holocaust.”¹⁵

The most scandalous assault on historical memory was launched in 1999, however, in connection with a plan initiated by several governmental agencies to

“update” the Holocaust-related exhibit in the Hungarian pavilion in Auschwitz. The original plan called for merely reconstructing the exhibit, which had originally been built by and allegedly reflected the position of the Communists. However, the experts in the Ministry of Culture subsequently decided to shelve the reconstruction plan altogether and create a new exhibit that was to open with appropriate pomp and circumstance by Prime Minister Orbán on May 9, 2000. The Ministry entrusted the planning and creation of the new exhibit to the Hungarian National Museum. The head of the Museum, Tibor Kovács, apparently had no problem in finding the “right person” for the job: István Ihász, the chief of the Museum’s Contemporary History Division. An unabashed rightist, Ihász had already established his nationalist credentials as the creator of the Museum’s highly controversial “Twentieth Century Hungary” exhibit, which is still one of the Museum’s most popular exhibits. In my assessment and that of many other scholars, it virtually glorifies the Horthy era and denigrates the tragedy of Hungarian Jewry.

Ihász began working on the new assignment in December 1998, preparing a script and collecting the visual and archival materials he wanted to use in the new pavilion. He pursued his task with the assistance of a committee of three experts: Mária Schmidt, a chief counselor to the prime minister; Tamás Stark, an associate of the Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences; and József Schweitzer, the Chief Rabbi of Hungary. The first draft of the script was finished early in the spring of 1998. Following the experts’ input during several consultations, a second draft—dated April 9, 1999, and bearing the names of the three experts—was forwarded to the Ministry of Culture early in June. Apparently convinced that the main purpose of the script was informational rather than educational, Ihász reportedly recommended that no further experts be consulted. The Ministry, however, followed a more cautious approach and forwarded the script for evaluation to three well-known historians and museum specialists, including the head of the Jewish Museum of Budapest, who decided to involve two other experts.¹⁶ The reaction of all five experts was prompt and virtually unanimous. They individually concluded that the script (a) basically falsified the history of the Jews in Hungary in general and the Holocaust era in particular and (b)

appeared to have a political objective: the rehabilitation of the Horthy era by transferring virtually all responsibility for whatever crimes were committed in Hungary almost exclusively to the Germans.¹⁷ The planned exhibit also attempted to portray a virtual symbiosis of Hungarian and Jewish life since the emancipation of the Jews in 1867, downplaying the many anti-Jewish acts and manifestations as mere aberrations in the otherwise enlightened history of Hungary.¹⁸ It focused attention on the positive aspects of Jewish life in the country, emphasizing the flourishing of the Jewish community between 1867 and 1944, the rescue activities of those identified as Righteous Among the Nations, and Horthy's saving of the Jews of Budapest. The Ministry of Culture decided to shelve the plan in early September 1999 when *Népszabadság* (People's Freedom), which is Hungary's most influential daily newspaper, revealed the Jewish community's unhappiness with it, provoking a national debate about the scandal.¹⁹ It should be said that Tamás Stark denied seeing that version of the document before it was submitted. Stark, for one, has himself criticized that version, and the rabbi withdrew from the committee.

Dedicated to rewriting their country's history so that "conservative Hungarians could once again be proud of their past," the history cleansers have intensified their drive in recent years to bring about the rehabilitation of the Horthy era by whitewashing the Holocaust. The techniques employed by them are almost identical with those used by their counterparts elsewhere in former Nazi-dominated Europe.

The most frequently and effectively used technique is that of "denationalization," which constitutes absolving the nation of any guilt by transferring responsibility for the Holocaust exclusively to the Germans. The history cleansers who are championing this approach give no credence to the evidence that the Germans would have been largely helpless without the full and wholehearted cooperation of the Hungarians.²⁰ The few among them who admit that the anti-Jewish excesses were in fact also committed by some Hungarians, consider the tragedy of Jewry as an aberration in Hungarian history and blame almost exclusively the *Nyilas*, the Right radicals whom the Horthyite aristocratic-conservative regime had feared even more than they did the Jews. By blaming the *Nyilas* alone, these cleansers apparently aim not

only to protect the historical integrity of the Horthy era but also to bring about the rehabilitation of the Regent, a process that actually began with the reburial of his remains in early September 1993.²¹ The Horthy apologists overlook the historical evidence that the liquidation of Hungarian Jewry took place with the consent and cooperation of a stable, non-*Nyilas* government that was formally and constitutionally appointed by the Regent while he was still head of state. While Hitler and his cohorts sympathized with the ideological purity of the Arrow Cross (*Nyilas*) Party, they clearly preferred the stability and support of the Horthy-appointed government, which was a “legitimate” body that was dedicated not only to the continuation of the war but to the “solution” of the Jewish question as well. They decided to embrace the *Nyilas* only on October 15, 1944, when Horthy announced Hungary’s withdrawal from the Axis and asked for an armistice.

In their drive to deflect attention from the Hungarians’ responsibility for the tragedy of the Jews, many history cleansers also resort to a variety of disingenuous explanations. Some go so far as to identify the Jews themselves as primarily responsible for their own tragic fate. The most disgusting among the cleansers claim that the Holocaust was in fact intentionally brought about by rich Jews who had supported Hitler.²² Others, deflecting attention from their own involvement in the anti-Jewish drive, blame the Jewish Councils for the suffering the Jews endured in the ghettos.²³

Another favorite history-cleansing technique is that of “generalization.” This approach is used by those claiming that the tragedy of the Jews was part and parcel of the general catastrophic consequences of a war in which many others suffered as well. Some even find a linkage between the tragedy of the Jews and the trauma endured by Hungary at Trianon.²⁴ Others, who are eager to disclaim Hungary’s 1936–1945 pro-German stance, argue that the country was in fact Nazi Germany’s last victim rather than its last ally. In this revised version of history, the Hungarian people also are identified as victims themselves who suffered as much, if not more, than the Jews.

Insisting on the commonality of suffering, many history cleansers have dedicated themselves to the preservation of “collective” historical memory. They

generalize the Holocaust by amalgamating the losses of Jewry with those incurred by the military forces and civilian population during the war. Thus the many memorial plaques, monuments, and books dedicated to communal casualties transmogrify Holocaust victims into war casualties. The equation of the martyrdom of armed soldiers, who died as heroes in the service of their country, and of Christian civilians, who were killed in the wake of the hostilities, with that of the Jews, who were murdered irrespective of their age or sex, is often politically motivated. This approach enables history cleansers to demonstrate that the combined military-civilian casualties incurred during the Holocaust by the Christian population far exceeded those suffered by the Jews.²⁵

Still another technique frequently employed by history cleansers is that of “trivialization and relativization.” Denying the uniqueness of the Holocaust, the destruction of the Jews is viewed as just another chapter in the long history of man’s inhumanity to man. The apparent main objective of this group of cleansers is to safeguard Hungary’s honor by demonstrating not only that the Holocaust, to the extent that it took place, was in fact preceded by other examples of mass murder (e.g., the massacre of Indians in the Americas and the genocide of the Armenians by the Turks), but also and above all that the destruction of the Jews was dwarfed in scope and magnitude by the atrocities committed by Communist regimes the world over. In this context, many in this group also argue that the Jewish suffering, like that of many other ethnic-national groups, was war-related.²⁶

The nationalists dedicated to the cleansing of the Horthy era have found a new and effective ally in recent years in the person of Mária Schmidt, one of Prime Minister Orbán’s chief advisors and a rising young scholar in Holocaust studies during the Communist era. Following the systemic change of 1989, her original academic ambition appears to have shifted to a preoccupation with anti-Communism, which is a somewhat politically risky undertaking in a country in which Communism has been claimed by sundry antisemites since 1919 to be Jewish in origin and character. Like many other nationalists, she apparently concluded that by unmasking the crimes of the Soviet-dominated Communist regimes in general and those perpetrated by the

Hungarian Communists in particular, she would not only help mitigate the impact of the Holocaust but also contribute to the defense of the domestic and foreign policies of Horthy's Hungary. Whatever her motivations, she emerged as a vociferous advocate of the idea that the same yardsticks must be used in the assessment of the Nazi and Communist-type totalitarian regimes and of the crimes perpetrated by them.²⁷ By mechanically applying this methodology, Schmidt, like her apparent ideological counterparts, overlooks the many historical, socioeconomic, and moral factors that differentiate these regimes, concluding that in terms of numbers the crimes committed by the Communists the world over far exceeded those perpetrated by the Nazis.²⁸ Among the crimes and injustices committed by the Communists, she also includes many of the verdicts of the People's Courts of the immediate postwar period.²⁹

Ms. Schmidt caused a considerable political uproar in early November 1999 when she spoke extensively before a largely rightist group on an accustomed theme: the supposed use of two yardsticks in the evaluation of Nazi and Communist crimes. She expressed profound disappointment that only the Holocaust of the Jews was being recalled in connection with World War II. In her view, the idea that the Holocaust was unique and indisputable was being advanced and propagated by a segment of the intelligentsia who dominated the mass media, whereas, in fact, "the Holocaust, the extermination or rescue of the Jews represented but a secondary, marginal point of view not among the war aims of either belligerent."³⁰ The reaction of the Jewish community leaders and many intellectuals was immediate and caustic. In a press release, the Jewish leaders characterized Ms. Schmidt as "the best Hungarian student of Jean-Marie Le Pen," the French far-right leader who referred to the Holocaust as a "detail" of history.³¹ Others questioned her historical analysis and intellectual integrity.³² Still others expressed disapproval of her activities as head of the newly established and financially well-endowed Twentieth Century Institute.³³ The numerous protests and criticisms notwithstanding, she continues to play an influential role because of the support she receives from various nationalists and, above all, because she continues to enjoy the confidence and support of the prime minister.³⁴

Yet other elements among the Hungarian history cleansers have taken the anti-Communist crusade a step further. Counterbalancing the accounts of the Holocaust, they emphasize almost exclusively the crimes perpetrated by the Communists. Identifying Communism and Bolshevism as Jewish in origin and character, these cleansers insist that the wartime suffering of the Jews was matched, if not actually exceeded, by the pain the Jews supposedly inflicted upon the citizenry during the Communist era.³⁵ This was particularly the case during the Stalinist period when, in their view, “the Jews” exploited their power to avenge the suffering they had endured during the Holocaust. In parliamentary debates and other public forums, even “moderate” politicians occasionally feel compelled to remind their compatriots of the Jewish factor during the Soviet era by selectively identifying former Communist leaders by their original Jewish names.³⁶

Another ploy in this context is the tendency to equate Auschwitz with the Gulag, “balancing” the suffering of the Jews with that endured by Hungarian POWs and other political prisoners in Soviet camps. Borrowing a page from their counterparts elsewhere, some Hungarian revisionists claim that Auschwitz was modeled on the Gulag. In so doing, these people at best reveal their ignorance about the fundamental differences in the operation and objectives of the Nazi death camps and the Soviet penal establishments.³⁷

IN STEP WITH ORWELL

Much of the reinterpretation of the Nazi era and the whitewashing of the Holocaust are clearly designed to help bring about the rehabilitation of the Horthy regime. Dedicated to building a future society to their own liking, sundry nationalists, less than fully responsible rightists, and neo-Fascists have decided to rewrite the past in an Orwellian fashion in order to provide the historical continuity that they require for this purpose. Part and parcel of this objective is the reintroduction of national symbols³⁸ and the revitalization of traditional, national-Christian values. The need to return to these values was recently articulated by Ibolya Dávid, the Minister of Justice in the Orbán government and head of the Hungarian Democratic Forum Party. Early in November

1999, she declared, among other things, that the “experience of the post-Communist era revealed a great societal need for the representation of Christian-conservative values based on national traditions.”³⁹

The pursuit of these values gathered momentum following the elections of May 1998, which brought to power a basically nationalist, right-of-center coalition government under the leadership of Orbán. Enjoying only a very narrow parliamentary majority, Orbán has given a virtually free hand to the widely perceived antisemitic and Holocaust-denigrating István Csurka, leader of the ultra-right Hungarian Justice and Life Party, whose support he covets.⁴⁰ While reportedly not an antisemite himself, it appears that political expediency has compelled Orbán to condone the activities of the ultra-right and to encourage, if not actually support, those dedicated to cleansing Hungary’s wartime history. During the first two years of the Orbán administration, the reintroduction of national symbols has been coupled with other measures manifestly designed gradually to bring about the rehabilitation of the Horthy era. In connection with the Holocaust, history cleansers have been indirectly encouraged to “re-evaluate” the state agencies that were involved in the Final Solution and focus on the “positive” contribution of Hungarians to the rescue of Jews.

As part of their re-evaluation drive, history cleansers have expended considerable effort to bring about the absolution of the gendarmerie, which played a crucial role in the roundup and deportation of the Jews, by placing all responsibility onto the Germans. Toward this end, they have among other things produced a “documentary” that was first shown on Hungarian television in early December 1998.⁴¹ The effect of the video was to help bring about the exoneration of the gendarmerie by deflecting attention from the barbaric manner in which that force implemented its role in the Final Solution. The “historians” featured in the presentation advanced a variety of propagandistic arguments. The moderator, Sándor Szakály, who also performed a function in the production of the program, argued that there had been no need for the gendarmerie to use force because the Jews—law-abiding citizens that they were—carried out the anti-Jewish measures of their own volition. Another expert in security affairs tried to persuade viewers that the gendarmes were, in fact, engaged in a form of

resistance by carrying out the anti-Jewish measures “humanely.” All of them appeared to conclude that the gendarmes were guided by the Christian spirit and were highly appreciated by the people they served for the preservation of law and order. The gendarmes who were interviewed for the documentary—all of whom were veterans of the anti-Jewish drive—offered a variety of extenuating “explanations” for their own involvement.⁴² Less than a year later, the television presentation was followed by another move toward the eventual rehabilitation of the gendarmerie. In the courtyard of the Institute of War History and Museum, which is headed by Szakály, Zsolt Lányi, head of the armed services committee of parliament, unveiled a plaque honoring the gendarmes who died during the two world wars.

Concurrently with the re-evaluation of the gendarmerie and other state agencies, many history cleansers have also concentrated on portraying the generosity with which Hungary had treated its Jewish subjects since 1867, largely overlooking the many antisemitic legal and physical measures that were taken against them during all these years. As to the Holocaust, they have been focusing almost exclusively on the “positive” record of the wartime era, highlighting:

1. The rescue of the Jews of Budapest;
2. The protection provided by the military labor service system after the German occupation;
3. The rescue activities of the relatively few non-Jews who were recognized by the appellation of Righteous Among the Nations.

The survival of most of the Jews of Budapest is attributed to Horthy’s halting of the deportations on July 7, 1944.⁴³ While this may largely be true, history cleansers fail to identify the political and military factors that induced the Regent to act at a time when all of Hungary, with the notable exception of the capital, had already been made *judenrein*. They also fail to acknowledge the Regent’s own responsibility for the liquidation of the provincial Jewish communities. He did so by consenting, during his March 18, 1944 meeting with Hitler, to the delivery of hundreds of thousands of Jews “for labor in Germany,” and by his decision not to be involved in Jewish matters during the first four months of the German occupation.⁴⁴ The argument advanced by some top

Nazis after the war (i.e., that a head of state who demonstrated his ability to halt the deportations at a particular time could have prevented their initiation in the first place, had he really wanted to) is not totally without merit.⁴⁵ Horthy's champions also overlook the fact that credit for the rescuing of the Jews of Budapest is also claimed by or attributed to many others, including the commander of the troops that foiled an anti-Horthy coup early in July 1944.⁴⁶

It is true that the Jewish labor servicemen were, with a few exceptions, exempted from the ghettoization and deportation measures and enjoyed the protection of the armed forces, which continued to exercise exclusive jurisdiction over the labor service system even after the German occupation. The historical record demonstrates that insightful military commanders recruited Jews from within the ghettos on many occasions in order to save those individuals from deportation and almost certain death. However, the history of the labor service system is far from spotless. The history cleansers fail to reveal the basically discriminatory nature of the system and the horrors to which many of the labor servicemen were subjected along the Soviet front lines, in the copper mines of Serbia, and during the *Nyilas* era. A few well-known historians, the effect of whose work tends to minimize the losses of Hungarian Jewry, early in 1992 proposed to the Hungarian public that the labor service system was quite equitable, that the treatment of the Jewish labor servicemen was tolerable, and that their losses were far fewer than generally claimed.⁴⁷

One of the major means by which many history cleansers aim to unburden the national conscience is by focusing on the rescue activities of the relatively small number of Hungarians recognized as Righteous Among the Nations. They appear to be heeding the admonition of former Prime Minister József Antall, who was of the opinion that if discussions on the Holocaust must take place at all, attention should be focused on the rescuers rather than the perpetrators.⁴⁸ By doing this they deflect attention from both the horrendous suffering of the Jews and the large number of Hungarian perpetrators. The magnificent humanitarian activities of the Righteous—few as they relatively were—clearly must be remembered and highlighted as exemplary acts to be emulated, but unidimensional, politically oriented accounts of activities of the

Righteous play into the hands of those who distort history. In the absence of the historical context in which these few Righteous operated, namely the Final Solution in all its complexity, the world at large will inevitably conclude that the practitioners of righteous conduct were the dominant elements of the Holocaust era.⁴⁹ A relevant example is based on a personal experience that I had in Budapest in September 1997. I found that all of the graduating students of the Jewish High School were acquainted with the wartime activities of Raoul Wallenberg, but none of them had any recollection of ever having heard or read anything about László Endre or László Baky. Since these students were completely unaware of the key role that these high-ranking Hungarian officials had played in the destruction of the Jews, one can assume that the same students were basically ignorant of the Holocaust in general. If this is the case with students graduating from the Jewish High School in Budapest, one can surmise the level of Holocaust awareness on the part of Christian students in the capital, let alone in the countryside.⁵⁰

The gradual escalation of the activities of historical revisionists and of “respectable” history cleansers leads one to suppose that they have indirectly been encouraged by myopic governmental policies that tolerate the abuse of civil liberties. Despite its very brief tradition of civil liberties, Hungary permits among other things the dissemination of hate literature⁵¹ and the denial and denigration of the Holocaust, acts that are deemed illegal and severely punished in France and many other countries with a much longer record of liberal democracy.⁵² Although the many Right radical and neo-Nazi skinhead groups are still relatively weak in terms of membership and following, their actual and potential threat to the fledgling Hungarian democracy must not be underestimated.⁵³ As the many acts of violence and antisemitic outbursts of the past few years clearly indicate,⁵⁴ they represent a potentially grave danger not only to Jews, Gypsies, and other minorities but also to the survival of the new democratic system of government.

Ultra-nationalists seem to have been encouraged in history cleansing activities by the attitude of some of the highest-ranking officials. A few among these have not only expressed sympathy for the objective pursued by many of the cleansers but have

also occasionally engaged in such practices themselves.⁵⁵ This is to a large extent due to the failure of the top leaders of the Hungarian state and government to provide clear and unambiguous guidance with regard to the Holocaust in Hungary. Regretfully, with the exception of expressions of sorrow and resolve to combat the scourge of antisemitism, especially during Holocaust remembrance periods, the top official leaders of Hungary, unlike those of France, Germany, and several other countries,⁵⁶ have so far failed to publicly and unequivocally acknowledge their country's responsibility, let alone apologize, for the destruction of approximately 550,000 of its citizens of the Jewish faith or heritage.⁵⁷ A formal statement to this effect would not only undercut the legitimacy of the history cleansers and Holocaust deniers but possibly also lead to the catharsis and reconciliation people of good will so deeply desire.

History is a formidable weapon. It is particularly corruptive and dangerous in the hands of chauvinistic nationalists bent on shaping history. Unless the historical revisionists and the history cleansers are unmasked and counteracted, the record of the Holocaust will inevitably be tarnished, if not partially obliterated. One must protect the integrity of this record in order that the world—the current and future generations—might learn its lessons.

Notes

¹ This study is limited to the identification of some of the approaches used in cleansing the historical record of Hungary during the Nazi era by denigrating, distorting, and, in some cases, denying the Holocaust. It does not aim at an overview of the various factions of the Right in contemporary Hungary.

² One cannot, of course, determine how many of these “respectable” individuals also engage in Holocaust denial “secretly” for ideological or pecuniary reasons. Gábor Bencsik, the General Secretary of the Association of Hungarian Journalists (*Magyar Újságírók Szövetsége*), for example, reportedly was caught in August 1998 selling Holocaust-denying videotapes stored together with much other Nazi-related literature in the second-hand bookshop of his brother András, the editor-in-chief of *Hungarian Democrat* (*Magyar Demokrata*). Under pressure, Gábor relinquished his position in the Association.

³ László Karsai, “A Shoah a magyar sajtóban, 1989-1991” (The Shoah in the Hungarian Press, 1989-1991) in *Zsidóság, identitás, történelem* (Jewry, Identity, History), Mária Kovács, Yitzhak M. Kashti, and Ferenc Erös, eds. (Budapest: T-Twins, 1992), pp. 68-69.

History cleansers characterize the yearly Holocaust commemorative events as propaganda against the Christian Hungarians.

⁴ Approximately 40,000 to 45,000 of these were labor servicemen; 17,000 to 18,000 so-called “alien” Jews who were deported in the summer of 1941 and murdered near Kamenets-Podolsk; and the remainder victims of the massacres in and around Újvidék early in 1942.

⁵ Although members of the Axis alliance, Bulgaria and Romania, after having “solved” some aspects of the Jewish question on their own, resisted the pressure by Nazi Germany to implement the Final Solution. In a different context, this was largely also the case with France and Slovakia.

⁶ For details, consult Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 2 vols. (Cited hereafter as Braham, *Politics*).

⁷ For details see Róbert Szabó Györi, *A kommunista párt és a zsidóság* (The Communist Party and Jewry) (Budapest: Windsor Kiadó, 1997), 350 pp.

⁸ *Ibid.* See especially, pp. 179-283.

⁹ Among the most important of these publications are the three-volume *Vádirat a náciizmus ellen* (Indictment of Nazism) by Elek Karsai and Ilona Benoschofsky, (1960-1967); Karsai’s two-volume “*Fegyvertelen álltak az aknamezőkön...*” (They Stood

Unarmed in the Mine Fields...; 1962); Mária Ember's *Hajtűkanyar* (Hairpin Bend; 1974); György Száraz's *Egy előítélet nyomában* (In the Footsteps of a Prejudice; 1976); and István Nemeskürty's *Requiem egy hadseregért* (Requiem for an Army; 1972).

¹⁰ Csoóri's diatribe was part of his autobiographical series *Nappali Hold* (Daytime Moon), published in *Hitel* (Credit), Budapest, September 5, 1990, p. 6. Like others, Csoóri singles out a few noted writers and poets, including Antal Szerb, Miklós Radnóti, and György Konrád, as "good Hungarians." The contrasting of a few "prominent" Jews with the rest of Jewry was also the technique used by Bishop Ottokár Prohászka, the notorious Catholic Jew-baiter, and Miklós Horthy, the former Hungarian head of state.

¹¹ See Decision No. 2/1994.(I.14) AB, which was adopted on January 11, 1994, in *Az Alkotmánybíróság határozatai* (Decisions of the Constitutional Court), Budapest, No.1, 1994, pp. 9-20.

¹² For some details, see Péter Feldmajer, "Az osztogató igazságtalanság elve és gyakorlata" (The Principle and Practice of the Injustice of Distribution), *Új Élet* (New Life), Budapest, January 15, 1999.

¹³ The reparation offer was based on Law XXIX of 1997. The survivors who availed themselves of this obscene offer discovered, after considerable time-consuming paper work, that even this amount was to be obtained in forints and spent in Hungary.

¹⁴ For example, see the ruling by the Hungarian Constitutional Court of June 30, 1995, and Decree No. 118/1998 of the Council of Ministers. To cite just one example of the difficulties, access to the archives of the National Central Alien Control Office (KEOKH), which was the agency that was responsible for the roundup and deportation of nearly 18,000 "alien" Jews in the summer of 1941, most of whom were slaughtered near Kamenets-Podolsk, was blocked for ninety years. László Varga, "A Holocaust és a rendszerváltás Magyarországon" (The Holocaust and the Systemic Change in Hungary) in *Adalékok a magyarországi zsidóság történetéhez* (Contributions to the History of Hungarian Jewry). Randolph L. Braham, ed., (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, forthcoming).

¹⁵ A similar letter was addressed on the same date by Wesley A. Fisher, the Museum's Director of International Programs, to Peter F. Tufo, the American Ambassador in Budapest.

¹⁶ These were Szabolcs Szita, the chief historian of the Hungarian Auschwitz Foundation of Budapest; Ilona Radnóti, the historian associated with the Janus Pannonius Museum of Pécs; and Róbert Turán, the head of the Jewish Museum of Budapest. Shocked after its first reading, Turán decided to forward copies of the draft to László Karsai, a leading expert on the Holocaust, and Emil Horn, an expert with many museum exhibits to his credit, for their reaction and input.

¹⁷ In connection with the pre-Holocaust era, for example, the planned exhibit failed to deal with various aspects of the anti-Jewish drive, including the antisemitic manifestations of the pre-World War I era; the agitation of the so-called Patriotic Associations; the pogroms by the counterrevolutionary forces during the White Terror; the enactment of ever harsher anti-Jewish laws; the shared responsibility of the Christian churches for reinforcing the climate of antisemitism by approving the adoption of virtually all anti-Jewish measures; the inequities of the forced labor service system; the deportation and subsequent murder of close to 18,000 “alien” Jews in the summer of 1941; and the mass murder of Jews during the so-called Délvidék raids early in 1942.

¹⁸ Almost three weeks after these reports were forwarded to the leadership of the Jewish community, the Chief Rabbi decided to resign from Ihász’s committee. Stark, reportedly upset that his name appeared on the second draft of the script without his authorization, informed Mária Schmidt about his displeasure. Only Schmidt is reported to have expressed her basic satisfaction with the unfortunate script. Ihász, on his part, must have felt vindicated. He received a prestigious state award on August 20, a national holiday, on the recommendation of the prime minister’s office.

¹⁹ For some details, see Randolph L. Braham, “Dishonoring the Victims of the Holocaust.” *Menóra*, Toronto, Nov. 5, 1999. At the request of the Ministry of Culture, another script was prepared with the cooperation of Szabolcs Szita, one of the main critics of the original text. *Népszabadság* (People’s Freedom), June 7, 2000. It was made public in late September 2000; while better than the first it too suffers from many shortcomings.

²⁰ For details, consult Braham, *Politics*, passim.

²¹ The remains of the Regent were brought back from Portugal, together with those of his wife and youngest son, and re-interred in their home town of Kenderes on September 4, 1993. Among the tens of thousands of Hungarians attending the reburial were four leading members of the Antall government. Randolph L. Braham, “The Reinterment and Political Rehabilitation of Miklós Horthy,” in *Slavic Almanach* Vol. II. Henrietta Mondry and Paul Schweiger, eds. (Johannesburg: University of the Witwaterstand, 1993), pp. 137-40.

²² This view is espoused by, among others, Aron Mónus. See his epilogue to the 1996 Hungarian edition of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (*Harcom*. Hódmezővásárhely: Interseas Editions, p. 366). He reiterated the same views in *Új Magyarország* (New Hungary), Budapest, August 13, 1994, p. 5. See László Karsai, “The Radical Right in Hungary,” a paper read at a conference in Seattle on March 23, 1996.

²³ This view has been expressed by, among others, István Jáni, who is the former gendarmerie captain in charge of a unit guarding the ghetto of Szombathely. His views were aired on a TV program that many viewers perceived as designed to whitewash the anti-Jewish activities of the gendarmerie. Titled *Híven, becsülettel, vitézül* (Faithfully, With Honor, With Bravery), which was the logo of the former gendarmerie, the documentary was aired on the Duna TV-station of Budapest on December 6, 1998. For additional details about this documentary, see note 42.

²⁴ This view was aired by then Foreign Minister Géza Jeszenszky on April 5, 1994, during the opening session of the International Scholars' Conference in Budapest on "The Holocaust in Hungary: Fifty Years Later." His comments caused a scandal in the hall as well as in the press. For example, see "Holocaust-konferencia: kitapsolták a külügyminisztert" (Holocaust Conference: Foreign Minister Applauded Down) in *Népszabadság* (People's Freedom), Budapest, April 6, 1994; "Az igazság megismeréséért, a lelkek megbékéléséért" (To Know the Truth and Give Peace to the Spirit) in *Esti Hirlap*, Budapest, April 6, 1994, p. 3; "Holocaust-tanácskozás Budapesten, Jeszenszky—kitapsolt párhuzam" (Holocaust Discussion in Budapest, Jeszenszky—Parallelism Applauded Down), by Éva V. Bálint and Éva Cseh in *Magyar Hirlap*, Budapest, April 6, 1994; "Holocaust-konferencia Budapesten, Jeszenszky Géza beszédét félbeszakították" (Holocaust Conference Budapest, Géza Jeszenszky's Speech Interrupted), by Sára Szeli in *Pesti Hirlap*, Budapest, April 6, 1994.

²⁵ Many communities in Hungary have erected plaques and monuments honoring the local martyrs of the war, listing them alphabetically irrespective of the circumstances of their death. The same approach is followed in many memorial books. For example, see *Somogy megye a II. világháborúban* (Somogy County in the Second World War), Péter Szabó and Ferenc Szily, eds. (Kaposvár: A Somogy Megye Levéltár kiadása, 1993), 539 pp. Pages 179-536 of the book, for which Sándor Szakály wrote the introduction and served as editorial consultant, contain the listing of the wartime casualties by communities. With this approach, which amalgamates Jewish and non-Jewish civilians into a single category, the number of Christian casualties is almost three times as high as that of the Jews killed during the Holocaust: Soldiers, 5,916; civilians, 4,498; Jews, 3,539.

²⁶ Champions of this group argue, among other things, that the suffering of the Jews was due to the fact that they had sided with the Allies and actually participated in revolts in many ghettos and concentration camps. For example, see "Összehasonlító véralgebra és a holocaust" (Comparative Blood Algebra and the Holocaust) by István Lovas in *Népszabadság* (People's Freedom), Budapest, March 5, 1999, p. 10. I perceive Mr. Lovas' intent in an apparent selective use of dubious sources, and his "analysis" of the Wannsee Conference hardly reflects favorably upon his knowledge or capacities. One is perplexed not so much by the views of the author, widely identified as a "Rightist-nationalist-conservative" publicist, as with the explanations offered by Pál Eötvös, the editor-in-chief of one of Hungary's most popular and respected dailies,

Népszabadság, for publishing a piece that, according to his own assessment, would be liable to criminal prosecution in several other countries. Ibid. He apparently fails to recognize that not only the denial of the Holocaust but even more its denigration and distortion—a practice engaged in by many “respectable” nationalist history cleansers—are among the primary sources and components of contemporary antisemitism in Hungary.

Lovas’ views were rejected by many reputable Hungarian scholars and intellectuals. See “Vita a vérről és a holocaustról” (Debate About Blood and the Holocaust), *Hetek* (Weeks) 4:10 (March 1999).

For a fully documented scholarly treatment of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, see Steven T. Katz, *The Holocaust and Mass Death Before the Modern Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). (*The Holocaust in Historical Context*, Vol. I.)

²⁷ At the London conference on the Holocaust on April 17-18, 1994, for example, Mária Schmidt was virtually shouted down by members of the audience when she tried to “prove” that the postwar Communist regime in Hungary was more oppressive than the pro-Nazi Sztójay government. Found unsuitable, the paper was excluded from the volume dealing with the conference (*Genocide and Rescue: The Holocaust in Hungary, 1944*, David Cesarani, ed. (Oxford: Berg, 1997)). It appears that many ideas similar to those in the Schmidt paper were later used by István Ihász in the script for the planned Auschwitz exhibit (see above).

²⁸ Supporters of this argument rely for documentation on *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* by Stéphane Courteois, et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 858 pp. In a controversial speech (see below), Ms. Schmidt emphasized that while the Communist regimes were responsible for close to 100 million victims, the Nazis killed only about 25 million. In this context, see also some of her essays in her *Diktatúrák ördögszekerén* (In the Devil’s Cauldron of Dictatorships) (Budapest: Magvető, 1998), 289 pp.

²⁹ In recent years, she emerged as a crusader for the rehabilitation of former Prime Minister László Bárdossy, who was executed for war crimes in 1946. For example, see her “Az első kirakatper” (The First Show Trial), Ibid., pp. 217-30. The article was first read as a paper at the Vienna Conference of November 2-5, 1995, held under the sponsorship of the *Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen*. This writer took pains to remind her and the audience that the former prime minister was not only the statesman she basically portrayed him to be but also the man during whose relatively brief tenure as head of government (April 4, 1941–March 7, 1942), Hungary among other things declared war first on the Soviet Union and then the Western Allies; adopted the Nuremberg-type Third anti-Jewish Law; aggravated the status of the Jewish labor servicemen; rounded up close to 18,000 so-called “alien” Jews, who were deported and subsequently murdered near Kamenets-Podolsk; and massacred more than 3,300 men, women, and children in and around Újvidék. György Dancsecs, a top-ranking leader of István Csurka’s neo-Fascist Hungarian Justice and Life Party

(*Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja*–MIÉP) in Budapest, launched an initiative in late October 1999, for the re-trial and possible rehabilitation of the former prime minister. *Népszabadság*, October 22, 1999. A month later, the initiative for the judicial rehabilitation of Bárdossy was publicly endorsed by Csurka himself. Michael Shafir, “Radical Politics in East-Central Europe.” *RFE/RL East European Perspectives* 2:2 (January 26, 2000), p. 6.

³⁰ Ms. Schmidt’s talk was given under the auspices of the Eckhardt Tibor Political Academy (*Eckhardt Tibor Politikai Akadémia*) at the headquarters of the Independent Smallholders’ Party (*Független Kisgazdapárt*). For text, see Mária Schmidt, “Holokausztok a huszadik században” (Holocausts in the Twentieth Century), *Magyar Hírlap* (Hungarian Journal), Budapest, November 13, 1999.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² For example, see Tamás Gáspár Miklós, “Sírrablok és halottgyalázók” (Grave Robbers and Vilifiers of the Dead), *Ibid.*, November 16, 1999, and Sándor Kopátsy. “Holocaust csak egy volt” (There Was Only One Holocaust), *Ibid.*, November 23, 1999.

³³ In this capacity and with a huge budget at her disposal, Ms. Schmidt reportedly has the power to determine which historians and projects will receive state funding. According to a published report, “she also backs the unrestricted publication and distribution of *Mein Kampf*, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and other antisemitic tracts, which are selling well in many Budapest bookstores in new Hungarian editions.” Michael J. Jordan, “Hungary Whitewashes Its Murky Past,” *Jerusalem Report* 10:23 (March 13, 2000), pp. 30-31.

According to many reports, Schmidt has also been exerting considerable influence on shaping media policy. Some details about her role in this area were revealed in the March 2, 2000 judgment of the *Pesti Központi Kerületi Bíróság* (Central Regional Court of Pest) in a libel case she initiated—and lost—against the *Magyar Hírlap*. For the text of the judgment, see *Magyar Hírlap*, April 6, 2000.

³⁴ See “Orbán bizik Schmidt Máriában” (Orbán Has Confidence in Mária Schmidt), *Népszabadság*, November 17, 1999. Among the nationalist-rightist organizations that expressed support of Schmidt’s activities is the *Történelmi Igazságtétel Bizottság* (Committee for Historical Justice). See *ibid.*

³⁵ Antisemites and ultra-nationalists continuously emphasize that most of the leaders of the short-lived proletarian dictatorship of 1919 were “Jews,” overlooking the fact that these Communists of Jewish origin were in reality “magyarized internationalists” whose class-oriented social and economic policies hurt the Jewish community even more than the Christian society. Of course, these antisemites also always fail to note

that the counterrevolutionary forces that succeeded the proletarian dictatorship killed many more human beings—Jews and non-Jews alike—than the Communists.

As to the postwar Communist era, they fail to note that the Communist Party of Hungary had more than 800,000 members in the late 1980s, among whom the percentage of Jews was relatively small (the total Hungarian Jewish population was only around 80,000). Moreover, the top leadership of the Party, like its membership in general, consisted overwhelmingly of ethnic Hungarians, the Jews having been largely purged in the wake of the anti-Zionist and anti-cosmopolitan campaign that began in the Stalinist era

³⁶ A notorious example of this was the comment by G. Nagyné Maczó Ágnes, a representative of the Smallholder's Party and one of the vice presidents of the Hungarian Parliament. During a speech on March 17, 1997, the former member of the right-of-center Hungarian Democratic Forum reminded Imre Szekeres, the leader of the Hungarian Socialist Party faction, that his predecessor was "the Hungarian-hating Manó Roth," which was a clear reference to Mátyás Rákosi, the Stalinist leader of Jewish origin. Ignoring the fact that Rákosi was perhaps an even greater Jew-hater, the parliamentary vice president clearly did not even know that Rákosi's original name was Rosenfeld. For some details on this incident, see Péter Regös, "Zsidózó '56-os vendég" (An Antisemitic Guest of the '56 [Generation]), *Menóra*, October 3-10, 1997.

³⁷ Horrible and murderous as the Gulags were, the inmates were overwhelmingly political and performed tasks deemed useful by the Soviet state. These history cleansers ignore the fact that, unlike the Jews deported to Auschwitz, the Gulag inmates, identified as "enemies of the people," were allowed to receive mail, food packages, medical care, and occasionally visits during the period of their incarceration. While millions of Gulag inmates died or were killed during the seventy-year history of the Soviet Union, their entire families were not automatically subjected to genocidal treatment as the Jews were during the Holocaust.

For a balanced overview of the basic differences between Auschwitz and the Gulag, see Steven T. Katz, *The Holocaust and Comparative History* (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1993), pp. 18-25. (Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture 37).

³⁸ Early in 2000, the Orbán government restored the Royal Crown of St. Stephen as the symbol of the Hungarian state. Overlooking the inherent contradiction between the symbol of a royal crown and Hungary's current democratic, republican form of government, Zsolt Lányi, vice president of the Independent Smallholders' Party and chairman of Parliament's armed services committee, for example, declared that the Crown represented "the embodiment of Christian Hungary." The Orbán government also revived the Corvin Prize, the state award introduced by Horthy in 1930. Some nationalists have also called for the restoration of noble titles and knighthood rituals, the honoring of those who fought for the Fascist cause as "heroes," and the renaming a street in Budapest for Horthy. Alex Bandy, "Hungary Revives Nationalist Symbols," *The Associated Press*, December 14, 1999, and Zoltán Vajda, "Horthyról mégsem

neveznek el utat” (There Will Be No Road Named for Horthy), *Magyar Hirlap*, March 17, 2000.

Prime Minister Orbán’s nationalist orientation is also reflected by the government’s packing of the state-run broadcasters’ boards with rightist elements, including Péter Csermely, the former editor of *Demokrata*, the right-radical weekly. In contrast to the other NATO heads of government, Orbán also found it necessary to attend the funeral of Franjo Tudjman, the controversial President of Croatia, and failed to take a public stand in connection with the inclusion of Joerg Haider’s Freedom Party in Austria’s coalition government early in February 2000.

³⁹ “Antallra emlékezett az MDF: Dávid Ibolya pártelnök s demokrata fórum integráló szerepéről” (The MDF Memorialized Antall: Ibolya Dávid, the Party President, on the Integrating Role of the Democratic Forum). *Népszabadság*, November 1, 1999. The Minister has also rejected the Jewish leaders’ plea to initiate legislation making Holocaust-denial punishable.

⁴⁰ Orbán’s FIDESZ Hungarian Civic Party and his coalition partners (i.e., the right-wing rural-based Smallholders’ Party led by József Torgyán and the Hungarian Democratic Forum led by Ibolya Dávid) control only 213 seats (55 percent) of the total 386 seats in Parliament. For some details on antisemitic incidents since the inauguration of the Orbán government, see Marta S. Halpert, “Hungary: A Growing Tolerance for Anti-Semitism,” *ADL International Notes*, New York, December 1999.

⁴¹ Titled *Hiven, becsülettel, vitézül* (Faithfully, With Honor, Bravely), the logo of the gendarmerie, the documentary featured a few experts on national security, including Sándor Szakály and József Parádi, who were also involved in its production.

⁴² Among those featured in the film were Captain István Jáni, the former commander of the gendarmes in the ghetto of Szombathely; First Lieutenant László Radnay and First Lieutenant Mihály Gerencséry, who were convicted for their involvement in the Újvidék massacres in early 1942; First Lieutenant Pál Bugarin-Horvath, who was involved in the ghettoization of Jews in Matészalka; and Sergeant József Szendi, who was deported from the United States for hiding his background and involvement in the anti-Jewish drive. See also note 23.

⁴³ Sándor Püski, a publisher and bookdealer identified with pro-Rightist activities, went even further, claiming that the Horthy regime entered World War II to save the Hungarian Jews and could not end the alliance with Hitler for the same reason. For some details on this bizarre position, see Ivan Berend, “Jobbra át [Right Face]: Right-Wing Trends in Post-Communist Hungary” in *Democracy and Right-Wing Politics in Eastern Europe in the 1990s*, Joseph Held, ed. (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1993), pp. 127-28.

⁴⁴ Braham, *Politics*, pp. 393, 397-401.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 1063-64.

⁴⁶ While mythmakers operating at opposite ends of the political spectrum also claim credit for Heinrich Himmler and Raoul Wallenberg, very few find it politically fashionable to acknowledge the decisive role that the Red Army played in the liberation of the Jews. The chief spokesman for Himmler's alleged role in rescuing the Jews of Budapest is *SS-Sturmbannführer* Wilhelm Höttl (Walter Hagen), former Head of the Intelligence Service of the Security Service in Vienna (which covered Hungary). See his interview in Péter Bokor's *Végjáték a Duna mentén* (End Game Along the Danube) (Budapest: RTV-Minerva-Kossuth, 1982) p. 192. See also Braham, *Politics*, p. 939, note 152.

Wallenberg's transformation from an authentic hero of the Holocaust, the savior of some 4,000 to 7,000 Jews, into a myth took place during the Cold War. Numerous writers and politicians identify Wallenberg, who was killed by the Soviets, as the "savior of 100,000" if not all of the Jews of Budapest.

⁴⁷ Tamás Stark, Péter Szabó, and Sándor Szakály, "Második világháború: A magyar munkaszolgálat" (The Second World War: The Hungarian Labor Service), *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation), Budapest, February 20, 1992 and February 28, 1992. See also Randolph L. Braham, "Nyugtalanító gyakorlatok Magyarországon a Holocausttal kapcsolatban" (Disturbing Research Practices on the Holocaust in Hungary), *Menóra*, May 29, 1992, pp. 3-4.

⁴⁸ See László Karsai's piece cited in note 22.

⁴⁹ See also Rabbi Marvin Hier, "Remembrance Needs to Emphasize Villains, not Heroes," *Martyrdom and Resistance*, New York, March-April 1995, p. 12.

⁵⁰ On January 18, 2000, the fifty-fifth anniversary of the liberation of the Budapest Ghetto, Minister of Education Zoltán Pokorni announced a plan to make Holocaust awareness part of the high school curriculum. He also stated that April 16, the day the ghettoization started in 1944, would be designated as a day of remembrance.

⁵¹ In addition to permitting the publication of such venomously antisemitic, Holocaust-denying periodicals as *Hunnia* and *Szent Korona*, the Hungarian authorities also consented to the reissuing of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (see note 22) and the notorious forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, works that were effectively exploited by the Nazis and their Hungarian hirelings in the drive against the Jews. Virulently antisemitic publications are available for sale even at the headquarters of the *Magyarok Világszövetsége* (World Federation of Hungarians) in Budapest.

⁵² Following are just a few examples. In late May 1999, a Munich court convicted the French far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen of inciting racial hatred by referring to the

Holocaust as “a detail in the history of World War II” during a 1997 press conference in Munich. On December 9, 1998, a Dutch court banned all publications that cast doubt on the authenticity of Anne Frank’s diary. In Spain, in November 1998, Pedro Varela was condemned by a Barcelona court to five-years imprisonment for propagating the idea that Auschwitz was a lie. This conviction was suspended by a higher court in April 1999, with the matter to go next to the Constitutional Tribunal. See also note 39.

⁵³ In the late 1990s, the popularity of extremist parties such as the Hungarian Justice and Life Party of István Csurka, and the Hungarian League for the People’s Welfare (*Magyar Népjóléti Szövetség*), led by Albert Szabó, appears to have grown. In February 1999, some of their followers, enjoying the protection of the Hungarian police, gathered in the Buda Fort area together with skinhead and neo-Nazi elements from abroad to commemorate the SS and their Hungarian allies who had fallen in the defense of the fort. For some details, see Tamás Barabás, “A Sieg Heil - szabad” (The Sieg Heil Is Permitted), *Új Élet*, March 15, 1999. See also Karl Pfeifer, “Nyilt levél Orbán Viktor miniszterelnök úrnak” (Open Letter to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán), *Hetek* 3:10 (March 1999).

⁵⁴ For example, see “Szaporodnak az antiszemita megnyilvánulások” (The Antisemitic Manifestations Are Multiplying), *Hetek* 3:11 (March 1999). See also Halpert’s piece cited in note 40.

⁵⁵ For example, István Stumpf, a top-ranking minister in the Orbán government, misled his audience at the January 2000 summit conference on the Holocaust in Stockholm about how Hungary was confronting the Holocaust. He did so by failing to address the anti-Jewish historical record of the 1938-1945 period. For the text of his talk, see *Új Kelet* (New East), Tel Aviv, February 4, 2000.

⁵⁶ Germany had already come to terms with the Holocaust in the era of Konrad Adenauer. Addressing the Knesset in February 2000, President Johannes Rau asked for forgiveness for the Holocaust. On July 16, 1995, two months after taking office, President Jacques Chirac publicly recognized France’s responsibility for deporting some 70,000 Jews to Nazi death camps during the German occupation in World War II. On August 21, 1997, Croatia apologized to the Jews for the crimes committed by the Ustashi regime during the Nazi era. Japan formally extended apologies to Korea on October 8, 1998 and November 26, 1998 and to China on November 28, 1998 for crimes committed by the Japanese occupation forces.

⁵⁷ A few Hungarian politicians have spoken eloquently about the need honestly to confront the past, but they have done so without admitting the crucial role the various Hungarian governments played in the destruction of the Jews. On January 31, 2000, for example, Imre Mécs used the platform of the Hungarian parliament to plead for an honest confrontation of the past and for the assumption of responsibility for the catastrophe that befell Jewry. An even more forceful position was taken by the

Hungarian ecclesiastical leaders. In a joint declaration issued in late November 1994, the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Ecumenical Council of the Churches of Hungary (*A Magyar Katolikus Püspöki Konferencia és a Magyarországi Egyházak Okumenikus Tanácsa*) acknowledged that responsibility must be borne by those Christians who, for a variety of reasons, remained silent during the tragedy that engulfed Jewry. The declaration was published in periodicals including *Magyar Hírlap* (Hungarian Journal), November 30, 1994. Eloquent as the statement was, it failed to acknowledge the role the Christian churches themselves had played in laying the ground for the tragedy.

By far the most honest expression of sorrow was that of former Prime Minister Gyula Horn. In a July 3, 1994 letter to László Keller, an advisor on Eastern Europe to the World Jewish Congress, Horn expressed the need not only to confront the past but also “to apologize for the destruction of 600,000 of our fellow citizens.” The letter was reproduced in several places including *Új Kelet* (New East), Tel Aviv, July 8, 1994. Gratifying as this letter was, however, it failed to achieve the desired impact, primarily because—as a ruling of a Budapest District Court (*A Pesti Központi Kerületi Bíróság*, 29. P.92. 750/1884/13) so aptly indicated—the then prime minister-elect merely expressed his personal views. Perhaps the time will come when the leaders of the Hungarian state or government will give Horn's words the public resonance they deserve in the name of the nation.

PART II

SURVIVORS' PRESENTATIONS

A Survivor's Perspective
of Hungary's Confrontation with Its Past

George S. Pick

It was January 18, 1945, when my skeletal parents and I left the liberated ghetto of Budapest. We staggered slowly toward the home from which we were evicted in June 1944. When we finally reached our destination, we went straight to the bomb shelter where the occupants of the apartment building were living. They stared at us as if we were ghosts. We could see their fear that we would denounce them to the Russian occupation troops, and their hate because we had the audacity to survive. Some stares were neutral and disinterested. None asked where we had been in the past seven months or what had happened to us. Cold hostility greeted us.

We were yearning to find continuity with the prewar past, to block the memory of our suffering and close brushes with death, and to start a normal life again as if the year 1944 had never happened. We were searching for connections and hoping that the nightmare was only temporary and that all our friends and relatives were still alive.

Our hope that our extended family had survived the devastation faded by the winter of 1945. By 1946 the extent of the destruction of our family was fully apparent. We lost 161 family members. Our family's losses were typical of those suffered by most Jewish families in Hungary.

A giant step in the direction of normalization in my life occurred on March 12, 1945, when the schools opened in Budapest and my parents enrolled me in that legendary and unique institution, the Jewish Boy's High School of Budapest. From the beginning of its existence, that school represented the gold standard of academic education in the entire country.

The Jewish High School provided a home-away-from-home atmosphere. The principal and teachers, who at times substituted for the parents who had perished, not only discharged their educational responsibilities but nurtured the often-fragile psyches

of the child survivors of the Holocaust. The school as a whole, even after the war years, maintained high standards.

In our desire to become “normal,” we followed an unwritten and unspoken rule: nobody mentioned his Holocaust experiences—not the teachers, not the students. Although the Jewish High School was a haven of academic studies, intellectual enlightenment, and relative social isolation, we were well aware of the social and political ferment in Hungary.

After the war, just as before, Hungarian society at all strata was deeply imbued with antisemitism. The “Jewish Question” transcended both political systems. The old system promoted it, while the new emerging ideology, at least on paper, outlawed antisemitism.¹ The “Jewish Question” was characterized as two-sided. It was a problem of adaptation of Jewry into the body of the nation, and a problem of Jewish identity.² These issues never have been addressed or solved in a satisfactory manner. In the following discussion, I will try to illustrate the development of this unresolved “Question,” drawing on historical examples and personal experiences.

By mid-1945, the pervasive emotions of Hungarian society over the collapse of the old way of life and the unfulfilled promises of irredentism, antisemitism, and anti-bolshevism had provoked sharp responses. The targets were the “insolent Jews,” who somehow had managed to escape their just punishment, fabricate stories of their families’ fate, and had the audacity to return and try to reclaim their personal possessions, which had been confiscated and distributed among those who wanted them. It was these same “insolent Jews” who were needlessly rekindling the flames of mistrust and animosity by pressing charges against their wartime tormentors and having them arrested. Thus, instead of dealing decisively with the perpetrators of disorderly conduct, the political leaders either hesitated or inflamed an already combustible condition.³

This situation was particularly true of the leaders of the National Peasant Party, who used anti-Jewish agitation among the peasants during their voting campaign in 1945. The populist writer and leader of the Peasant party, József Darvas, who was also Minister of Reconstruction, attacked the Jews in an article in the spring of 1945,

stating: “Nobody can shirk from work and sacrifice...not even those who point to their past sufferings....Why do they [the Jews] want to use the cloak of their phony martyrdom as an excuse for idleness?...In the past year a strange “slave labor mentality” has developed here: they [the Jews] learned to see the world as consisting of either slave laborers or guards. Now that the world has changed they want to be the guards.”⁴ This article shocked the Jewish community.

Peter Veres, a co-leader of the Peasant Party and responsible for land reform, declared that Hungary must be liberated from all foreigners: Germans as well as Jews. He made sure that the lists of owners were *judenfrei*.

The difficult postwar economic situation demanded scapegoats. The Communist Party consequently initiated an intense campaign against the black marketeers, who were portrayed on large posters that blanketed the city as hooked-nosed, ugly Jews. The population therefore easily equated the black marketeers with the Jews. In December 1945, the employees of one large factory demanded the dismissal of all Jewish workers.

In northern Hungary confrontations between returning Jews and returning former Arrow Cross men raged unchecked from the fall of 1945 to the summer of 1946. In the first six months of 1946, violent attacks on Jews or Jewish property occurred in twenty-three cities and towns.⁵ The medieval blood-libel stories were even resurrected in some places.⁶ On May 21, 1946, in Kúnmadaras, antisemites spread the rumor that the returning Jews were murdering Christian children. Two Jews were killed and eighteen wounded in the attacks thus instigated.⁷ Violent demonstrations broke out in Miskolc between July 30 and August 1, 1946, on the instigation of Communist-led miners against black marketeers. This degenerated into antisemitic attacks, and two Jews—one of whom was a police lieutenant who was trying to restore order—were murdered.⁸

The new antisemitism that surfaced in Hungary after World War II was paradoxically aggravated by the leadership composition of the Communist Party structure. Jews and former Jews first rose to the top echelon of the Party and then in the government that controlled the country. Rákosi and his henchmen were ruthless in their efforts to destroy the middle class and believed that they could counterbalance the

“Jewishness” of the government by persecuting large masses of Jews and accusing them of being “rootless cosmopolitans” or “unreliable” elements. The political leadership wanted to demonstrate its anti-Jewish attitudes. In well-publicized actions in September 1948, several owners of Jewish companies were taken into custody and accused of sabotage.⁹

It was not hard to find Jewish scapegoats in “the class struggle.” The members of the former “exploiting class” were “relocated” (deported) from Budapest beginning in June 1951. Of those who were relocated, Jews comprised thirty percent, or approximately 25,000 people.¹⁰ This dichotomy never sank into the consciousness of the majority of society. Most people still regard the years between 1948 and 1956 as a period of Jewish political domination, despite the fact that the vast majority of the members of the Jewish community, as well as its institutions, suffered greatly.

Several youth organizations were formed during 1946–47 as arms of the fledgling Communist Party. The local headquarters of one organization was not far from where I lived. I decided to attend one of their meetings. As soon as I entered, I was confronted by a tall, sixteen-year-old boy who approached me threateningly and said, “Hey, this organization is for working kids. You look like a Jew. You don’t belong here.” Suddenly the entire group became hostile and chased me out of the building and down the street yelling, “You stinking Jew. If we see you around here, we will make mincemeat out of you.” This was my first encounter with the postwar “proletariat.”

I felt kinship after this incident with only the members of the small world in the Jewish High School. We developed ties of friendship with one another and built up a defensive circle within which we were comfortable. The steadily declining number of students and teachers notwithstanding, the Jewish High School remained an emotional stronghold for those of us who stayed loyal to it.

Going from the personal to the wider world, there was one attempt to face up to the complexities of the Jewish Question. In 1948 István Bibó expressed his concern that the intellectual leadership would miss the historic opportunity honestly to face up to the causes and roots of antisemitism.¹¹ His work should have caused a great deal of

debate, perhaps leading to a healthier attitude of society toward the Jewish community. Alas, this did not happen. He was too late. The Communist takeover of the government stifled this kind of debate in Hungary for the next thirty years.

The coalition government of 1946–47 showed an unwillingness to settle the restitution issues and property returns for both claimed and abandoned property. Both local and national officials rejected complete restitution on the basis of two arguments: that the country's poor fiscal condition made this impossible, and that too many people would be affected by a law that would force them to return Jewish property.¹² A person thus could not demand the return of any personal effects (e.g., cooking utensils, clothing, household items) if that property had been conferred upon its recipients by (Nazi allied) court decisions.¹³ On March 18, 1946, the Minister of Welfare finally announced that those who had suffered personal loss due to racial persecution would not be eligible for welfare payments, this due to the government's lack of money.¹⁴ Although capable, this and subsequent governments were singularly unwilling to provide even moral restitution.

The word "Jew" became virtually taboo after the Communist takeover, and all talk and action of either moral or material compensation ceased. On the other hand, the Jewish hospital that had been newly refurbished with money provided by the Joint Distribution Committee was nationalized in 1948.¹⁵

For its part, the intimidated leadership of the Jewish community signed a Faustian bargain with the government on December 7, 1948, in the form of a Concordat. The leadership completely surrendered its interest and needs in the arena of religious life and international relationships.¹⁶ *New Life*, the official newspaper of the Jewish community, became a tool of the Communists.

Returning to my personal experience, I graduated from high school in 1952. Our graduating class had thirteen students. Eleven of us were admitted to universities, I by the Technical University of Budapest. The university experience came as a great culture shock to us after the nurturing atmosphere of the Jewish High School. Overt hostility and covert antisemitism greeted us. We were known to be Jewish, and we were looked upon with additional suspicion and distrust because we came from the

“bourgeois middle class.” We instinctively pulled together but could not help but feel unwelcome. I remember the antisemitic remarks made by one of my fellow students, a former metal worker. He asked if I knew of any available Jewish girls, saying that he had heard “that they are all sluts and great in bed; I would like to try one.” Another said, “You people are all cosmopolitans and really don’t give a damn about our Hungarian society and the People’s Republic, do you?”

A decade after the end of World War II, political and social tremors in Hungary grew into a quake that shook not only the country but also the entire Communist world. The stirrings of the disaffected groups spread from an initially apolitical literary club to an armed revolution against the discredited regime and its leaders.¹⁷ Beyond the political debates and bursts of gunfire, the voices in the provinces began to sound an age-old hatred. These voices were the harbingers of a new devastation to the remnant of Jewry. The fear of this possibility was enough for many to choose an exodus from the country. It turned out, in fact, that the measure of antisemitic voices was insignificantly small during the Hungarian revolution.

After the revolution was suppressed, the leading article of the April 1957 issue of *New Life* tried to justify why 20,000 Jews (25 percent of the entire Jewish population) had left the country. It attributed the causes to alleged atrocities in the countryside and cited incidents involving Jewish victims. It was very questionable in most cases whether they were purposefully anti-Jewish incidents or merely random robberies or beatings.¹⁸ A more likely explanation for the huge exodus was that a historic opportunity had opened for many to fulfill the old quest of a life of freedom and for opportunities that were not available in Hungary. Jews comprised ten to twelve percent of the total Hungarian emigration. Ten of the thirteen former pupils from my class of 1952 left Hungary.

Examination of antisemitism and the Jewish Question was almost completely hushed up and officially ignored in Hungary between 1956 and 1976. After twenty years of silence, the first substantial publication about antisemitism and its concomitant issues was György Száraz’s 1976 study. The author outlined the history of antisemitism in Hungary and investigated the transition from “jovial” antisemitism to the murderous.

Although his answer was inconclusive, what was important was that he raised the question and admitted that antisemitism influenced even the working-class movements.¹⁹ There was no significant public or even academic debate, however, and the opportunity to provide clarification was missed once again.

In his 1984 essay, Péter Várdy complained that Hungarian historiography had not addressed the issue of the persecution of Hungarian Jews; he attributed this to the fact that the responsibility of Hungarian society during the final phases of persecution had not been clarified.²⁰ The author stated that the question of society's responsibility had been impossible to address because virtually everybody was compromised. Consequently, the responsibility for what had happened could not be ascribed only to the war criminals but was the burden of the entire society.²¹

Coinciding with Száraz's study, in Budapest Dr. András Zakar wrote another book about the Jewish Question, although he published it in Switzerland. I purchased this book in Budapest in 1995. According to Zakar, it was the Jewish leadership who persuaded Admiral Horthy toward friendship and alliance with Hitler. Just one quotation will suffice: "In March 19, 1944, Miklós Horthy sacrificed the freedom and sovereignty of Hungary so he could save the Jews."²²

Dr. Péter Kende argued in 1989 that anti-Jewish discrimination existed on three levels in Hungary. The first was the "spontaneous" antisemitism that resulted from long-term historical and cultural anti-Jewish sentiments. The second level was the "intellectual" antisemitism that introduced itself with "I am not an antisemite but...." The third was the political antisemitism pursued by one or more parties inside or outside the government.²³ A contemporary example of this last form of antisemitism is the MIÉP, which is the radical rightist opposition party.

When the country reached the post-Communist period, what was once taboo became permissible again. The populist writer Sándor Csóori voiced concern about reverse assimilation. He wrote, "the liberal Hungarian Jewry want to assimilate the Hungarian society both in style and ideology."²⁴

Another populist writer and politician, István Csurka, declared that the Christian middle class must govern Hungary. This idea, according to Csurka, "was criticized by

the Jews and their international allies, the American body politic, which continuously check on the status of the Hungarian Jews.” He continued, “In Hungarian society the Hungarian interest is primary and special-interest groups cannot be pushed ahead of this primary interest even if they are supported by the most powerful country in the world.”²⁵

Returning to my personal experiences, I visited Hungary in 1994 for the first time after an absence of thirty-eight years. Walking through the underground tunnels in Budapest’s Eastern Railway Station, I was followed, harassed, called a dirty old Jew, and someone spat in my face. I was shocked that this level of antisemitism still existed in Hungary.

A two-volume book was published in 1995 under the title *The Jewish Budapest*.²⁶ This book was immediately attacked in the rightist press, where it was argued that there was always Jewish money for a deluxe publication about the Jews.

It is instructive to summarize a sociological research study on antisemitism. During 1991–1993, András Kovács conducted a representative, nationwide sample of 1,000 university students who represented the intellectual elite of the next generation. The survey showed that 75 percent of the students regarded Jews in Hungary as a separate group and that the majority, 52 percent, were openly antisemitic.²⁷ If the intellectual elite is antisemitic, what can be expected from the rest of Hungarian society? More important, is there any legal power that holds back the tide of antisemitism in Hungary? The answer is no. Hungary has no laws as do Germany, Austria, France, and other European countries that outlaw neo-Nazi demonstrations, antisemitic literature, and antisemitic organizations.

Following are just two examples of the results of this lack of legal protection. First, the Metropolitan Court of Budapest acquitted six members of the World Nationalist People’s Power Party on March 4, 1996. They had been charged with publicly declaring their ideological kinship with the executed head of the Arrow Cross, Ferenc Szálasi; denying the reality of the Holocaust; and demanding the ghettoization and deportation of “unwanted minorities, especially Jews and Gypsies.” The ruling of the court was that such statements were expressions of personal opinion rather than

inflammatory public incitement.²⁸ Second, Hungarian, German, and Slovakian youths came to Budapest in February 1999 to commemorate the former SS defenders of the Castle Hill of Budapest. Despite warnings by German authorities that German neo-Nazi groups were planning to attend the event, the Hungarian border police waved them into the country. These groups used the Nazi salute as they marched as a group, goose-stepping on the streets of the Castle. Some of the participants stated during an interview that the Holocaust was a Jewish hoax and that Hungary is an Aryan nation. What they did was perfectly legal in Hungary.²⁹

The antisemitic manifestations in recent Hungarian politics are illustrated by the following example. There has been an ongoing parliamentary debate on the question of restitution. A bill surfaced in Parliament in 1992, proposing that each Hungarian survivor of the Holocaust should receive an equivalent of \$10,000. A new parliamentary bill in 1996 proposed to reduce the original restitution amount to the equivalent of \$2,000. Finally, a law passed in 1998 reduced the restitution to \$150 for those who could prove that their closest relatives were murdered on the basis of race (i.e., Jews). Those who were sentenced to death by the Hungarian judicial system (Nazis, Communist victims), however, were entitled to a much larger compensation.

The Jewish reaction was immediate and bitter. Peter Feldmajer, President of the Hungarian Federation of Jewish Communities, concluded in an open letter to the Prime Minister that “the Hungarian Republic...does not face and take responsibility for the past, it does not help to close this past; on the contrary, it reopens the wounds and causes more pain to the relatives of those who were murdered, and at the same time expels them from the body of the nation.”³⁰ The Chief Rabbi of Hungary voiced outrage in an open letter to the Speaker of Parliament, sent the money back, and called it an “insulting and discriminatory act.”³¹ Professor Randolph Braham called the government’s action “unjust and insulting” and sent back both his and his sister’s restitution.³²

Coming to terms with the Holocaust in Hungary is an open and festering problem. Hungarian society has an unfulfilled moral obligation to face up to and acknowledge its culpability in the Holocaust. The government has a similar obligation

to make sure that those few old and mostly poverty-stricken survivors can live out their lives in dignity and safety in the land that they always considered their country, even if so many of their fellow countrymen—even now—consider them “aliens.” The survivors feel deeply frustrated by the neglect of their grievances and fearful of the resurgence of antisemitism.

I agree with Professor István Deák’s pessimistic assessment of the future of the Jewish community in Hungary, when he states, “In all likelihood more Jews will leave Hungary in the near future, in large part for economic reasons. Those who stay behind...will continue the process of integration....the end result will be the disappearance of the Jewish minority in Hungary.”³³

Notes

¹ Andrew Handler, “Where Familiarity with Jews Breeds Contempt” in A. Handler and S.V. Meschel, eds., *Red Star, Blue Star* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1997), p. 13.

² L. Ferenc Lendvai, “Bevezetés: Gondolatok a zsidókérdésről” (Introduction: Thoughts about the Jewish question) in L. Ferenc Lendvai, et al., eds., *Hét évtized a hazai zsidóság életében* (Seven decades in the life of native Jewry) (Budapest: MTA Filozófiai Intezet Kiadása, 1990), vol. 1, pp. 20-21.

³ Handler, pp. 18-19.

⁴ József Darvas, “Őszinte szót a zsidó kérdésben” (Let’s have a frank word about the Jewish question), *Szabad Nép* (Free People—the official daily of the Hungarian Communist—and later the Workers-Party), March 25, 1945, p. 3.

⁵ László Csorba, “Izraelita felekezeti élet magyarországon a véskorzaktól a nyolcvanas évekig (1945-1983)” (Jewish denominational life in Hungary from the Holocaust until the eighties (1945-1983)) in *Hét évtized a hazai zsidóság életében* (Seven decades in the life of native Jewry), 1990, vol. 2, p. 81.

⁶ Péter Kende, *Röpirat a zsidókérdésről* (Pamphlet about the Jewish question) (Budapest: Magvető, 1989), p. 74.

⁷ Kende, p. 74.

⁸ Kende, pp. 75-76.

⁹ Kende, pp. 93-94.

¹⁰ András Kovács, “Zsidókérdés a mai magyar társadalomban” (The Jewish question in today’s Hungarian society) in *Zsidóság az 1945 utáni Magyarországon* (Jewry in Hungary after 1945) (Paris: Magyar Füzetek, 1984), p. 14.

¹¹ István Bibó, “Zsidókérdés Magyarországon 1944 után” (The Jewish question in Hungary after 1944) *Válasz* (Response), Oct.–Nov., 1948.

¹² Csorba, p. 77.

¹³ Csorba, p. 78.

¹⁴ Csorba, p. 79.

¹⁵ Péter Várdy, “Befejezetlen múlt—mai magyar zsidó valóság” (Past imperfect—Hungarian Jewish reality today) in Ferenc Mislivetz and Róbert Simon, eds., *Zsidókérdés Kelet-és Közép-európában* (The Jewish question in Eastern and Central Europe) (Budapest: ELTE, 1985), p. 477.

¹⁶ Várdy, p. 462.

¹⁷ Handler, p. 34.

¹⁸ Csorba, p. 139; Kende, pp. 147-49.

¹⁹ György Száraz, “Egy előítélet nyomában” (On the trail of a prejudice), *Valóság* (Reality), August, 1975. Published as a book of the same title in 1976.

²⁰ Várdy, p. 460.

²¹ Ibid.

²² András Zakar, *Elhallgatott fejezetek Magyarország történetéből* (Untold chapters from Hungarian history) ([Switzerland]: Duna Könyvkiadó Vállalat, 1976), p. 74.

²³ Kende, p. 198.

²⁴ Sándor Csoóri, “Nappali hold” (Moon in daylight), *Hitel* (Credit), Sept. 1990.

²⁵ István Csurka, “Válasz Elek Istvánnak” (Answer to István Elek), *Magyar Fórum* (Hungarian Forum), March 14, 1991.

²⁶ Géza Komoróczy, ed., *A Zsidó Budapest: Emlékek, szertartások, történelem* (Jewish Budapest: monuments, rites, history) (Budapest: MTA Judaisztikai Kutatócsoport, 1995).

²⁷ András Kovács, “Jews and Hungarians: Group Stereotypes Among Hungarian University Students,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 23:2 (1994).

²⁸ Handler, p. 15.

²⁹ Tamás Barabás, “A Sieg-Heil—Szabad!” (The sieg-heil—permitted!), *Új Élet* (New Life), March 15, 1999.

³⁰ Péter Feldmajer, “Az osztogató igazságtalanság elve és gyakorlata” (The dispensing injustice its theory and practice), *Új Élet*, January 15, 1999.

³¹ “Schweitzer József visszaküldte” (Joseph Schweitzer returned it: Joseph Schweitzer’s open letter to the president of the Hungarian parliament), *Új Élet*, March 1, 1999.

³² “Randolph L. Braham Professzor is visszaküldte a 30 ezer forintos kárpótlást” (Professor Randolph L. Braham also returned the 30 thousand forint restitution), *Új Élet*, March 1, 1999.

³³ István Deák, “Antisemitism and the Treatment of the Holocaust in Hungary” in Randolph L. Braham, ed., *Antisemitism and the Treatment of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Eastern Europe: The Tragedy of Romanian Jewry* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1994), p. 122.

The Holocaust in Hungary: Confrontation with the Past

Albert L. Lichtmann, M.D.

The Holocaust was one of the largest-scale and most heinous crimes against a people, against humanity. To give you my view of the Holocaust in Hungary, I must first describe some of my own experiences, since these contribute to the formation of my perspective.

Jews were living on that land long before Hungary was established. They lived there during Roman times. I am sorry to say, however, that the earliest historical documents pointing to Jews living in Hungary were already anti-Jewish laws and regulations. In 1092 St. Laszlo, King of Hungary, forbade Jewish men to marry Christian women. In 1100 King Kalman prohibited them from owning land and being farmers, forcing them to be merchants and moneylenders. Restrictions on Jews went on for centuries. King Lajos expelled them in 1360, but called them back five years later. Jews were massacred at various times. They were granted limited rights at other times. They were emancipated in the late nineteenth century, at which time they numbered approximately 542,000. At that time a strong movement for total assimilation started among many Jews. No other minority was adapting to the Hungarian language and culture as eagerly as most Jews. They were gaining importance in the economic, cultural, and also political life of the country. Jewish life was thriving, and it truly was a golden age. A couple of decades later, however, a strong antisemitic movement started. Shortly after the turn of the century, Hungary was the first country in Europe to legislate anti-Jewish restrictions. The Numerus Clausus was enacted in 1920, limiting Jewish students to five percent of higher education admissions. The situation for the Jewish community worsened thereafter. Additional laws and regulations, ever more restrictive, were enacted year after year, and life became increasingly difficult.

I experienced antisemitism early in life. The Jewish children had to leave the classroom during religious education in my elementary school. There were only three non-Christians out of thirty students. When we returned to class, we were repeatedly

told that the reason we were asked to leave was because the Jews had killed Jesus. This was very confusing, disturbing, and uncomfortable for me.

My father sent me to the Budapest Jewish High School at the age of ten. He sent me there to shelter me from antisemitic experiences as much as possible, and to provide Jewish religious education. I loved that school. It was a home away from home. Our teachers were excellent, and our school was among the best in the city in academic competitions and sport activities. This ended soon, however. Jewish students were not permitted to participate and compete with non-Jewish schools in either academics or sports. We organized our own sports club and still produced Olympic-quality gymnasts.

A different world existed outside school. Everywhere I looked—buildings, lampposts, fences—I could see antisemitic stickers, slogans, ugly pictures of Jews, and threats of all kinds: “Hitler is coming to finish you Jews!” and “Szalasi is coming.” Szalasi was the most feared leader of the Arrow Cross Party. The anti-Jewish laws were also making our mere existence more and more difficult. My father was deprived of his permit to continue to work, and we were without any income. While walking to school, I was often intimidated and beaten by gangs for being Jewish. I still remember hearing Hitler’s speech on the radio. He was shouting that the “International Jews” must be annihilated. I was trembling and frightened. Despite all of that, we still tried to have a good time in our own circles. We still rooted for our favorite soccer team and took pride in Hungary’s achievements in the Olympics. Jews in Budapest did not believe that any major catastrophe would happen to us. Only limited information was reaching us about deportation of Jews from the provinces and other countries. We hoped to gain time and that the war would soon be over. Despite all the restrictions, we were still better off than the Jews of many other countries.

After the Germans occupied Hungary on March 19, 1944, more pressure was applied on the Hungarian government for preparation for the Final Solution of the Jewish Question. We soon were concentrated in designated buildings, which were marked with large yellow stars on the entrance. A curfew was established. We could go onto the streets only between 11:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. to try to get some food, which often was sold at highly inflated prices since everybody was trying to get food at the

same time. We had to wear a four-inch, yellow star on our chest when on the street. In front of my eyes, a policeman slapped and beat my father because we were on the street three minutes early, according to his watch.

We also could not attend school any longer. I was recruited to work as a runner/courier at the Jewish Council. That job came with the advantage of a permit to move freely in the city, despite the curfew. My most memorable mission was delivering an envelope to the headquarters of the feared Arrow Cross Party and addressing a high official there. The Arrow Cross Party building was known for the interrogation and torture of Jews. I was escorted to a meeting room with 100 or so uniformed party members. I was frightened when I handed over the envelope. They anxiously awaited my return at the Jewish Council. My high-school Latin teacher was in charge of the courier service. He asked me how my mission went. I replied that the envelope was delivered and that the party member took the keys from the envelope and shook my hand after reading the letter. When I told my teacher about the handshake, he told me to wash my hands fast. The keys in the envelope were to a fine Jewish home. The home was given to them in hopes of gaining some favors.

All Jewish men between the ages of sixteen and sixty were marched away from the Jewish star-marked buildings a few days later. They were permitted to carry only a bag of necessities. We were taken to dig trenches around Budapest. We were given minimal food, water, and sanitation and hygiene facilities. I became separated from my father a week later and was herded away on a death march to the Austrian border. My friend Tamas Stern and I always stayed together to help each other. We were shoved into cattle cars after nine days on foot. The train traveled a bit, but the cattle cars' doors were opened after two days, and we were back at the Hungarian-Austrian border. I was incarcerated in a forced-labor camp at Harka and Lichtenwort. What I remember most was the total dehumanization and humiliation. The language was always abusive. The guards called us dirty, no good, lazy Jews. We were constantly brutalized and worked under the watchful eyes of the guards, who killed people who did not work fast enough. We were terrorized.

It was a bitter winter. Our clothes were only torn rags, and our shoes were worn out. We received a minimal amount of food. Skin and bones, we were infested with lice, and many of us had typhoid fever. I was there for six months, while the Russian forces were getting closer. I could not have lasted much longer. The camp was evacuated hurriedly. The Jewish “camp commander” warned me that the Germans had given orders to take everybody. Those who could not march would be executed, and no one still breathing would be left behind. I was in no condition to march again, and I decided to try hiding. I was one of the youngest in the camp. The Yupo, who was the Jewish commander, felt sorry for me; he broke a piece of bread from his side pack and left me to my fate. The others were herded away to Mauthausen and Gunzkirchen concentration camps. People died like flies on the way. Those who could not keep up were shot by the SS. Only a very few survived.

The advancing Russian forces liberated me. I made my way back to Budapest in about ten days. I was eager to find out what had happened to my parents. I found my father. He had survived in the Budapest Ghetto. I was among the first ones who returned. In the following weeks, others arrived from different camps, and the whole magnitude of the systematic destruction of European Jews started to unfold. Communications were very limited, since the war had not yet ended. We had no news for another five months about my mother. Our hopes were dimming with every day. A letter then came in my mother’s handwriting. She wrote it to a former Christian neighbor of ours, asking them if they knew anything about my father and me. My mother was in Sweden. The Red Cross had taken her there in extremely rundown condition from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. It took a while before she was able to return to us. The three of us were finally united again. I was so lucky. Both of my parents survived. The rest of our family was not so fortunate.

There were approximately 762,000 Jews (racially defined) living in Hungary at the time of the German occupation, about five percent of the total population. Approximately 231,000 lived in Budapest, of whom about 119,000 were liberated. Roughly 20,000 returned to Budapest from deportation and labor camps, and about

40,000 Jews, originally from the provinces, returned from similar deportation.¹ How does one come to terms with the systematic elimination of a people?

Shortly after I came back, the parents of my friend Tamas Stern got news of my return. They came to visit me and inquired about their son. How do you tell the parents of a friend that their son would not return? He and I were together and helped each other until the very end, which is when he died. I will never forget their faces as they stood in front of me, devastated. I met them many times thereafter on the streets of our neighborhood. They kept asking me over and over again whether I was sure that he was dead. How were his last days? I was feeling guilty that I survived and he did not. There is a major Holocaust memorial in the Budapest cemetery, and many other memorials and actual graveyards of bodies exhumed from Harka, the camp I survived. I always visit the Jewish cemetery on my trips to Budapest. At the Harka memorial my friend's name appears on a plaque. On every visit I stand before it and with tears in my eyes I recite the Kaddish. We could be still best friends....

My health improved after a while, and I went back to school. We could not account for half of my class, and I was the only one of that group who returned from the camps. I was skin and bones, and I looked terrible. Amazingly, my teachers never asked about what happened to me or how I survived? In our German language class, my teacher could not comprehend why I did not want to speak that language.

There is a traditional ceremony at the graduation from high school. The whole school assembles—the teachers, the students of every class, and their guests. The valedictorian gives a speech. What happened on my graduation day was totally unexpected and unusual; something that probably never happened in any school's history. The headmaster of the school did not permit the delivery of the speech because it dealt with the Holocaust. He blamed the Jewish leaders of the country as well as the policies of our school for leading us into the hands of our murderers. Since our voice could not be heard, we canceled the graduation ceremony in defiance.

The whole country suffered a great deal during the war, but the Jewish losses were devastating. Antisemitism also did not stop after the war. People all over the county had gotten hold of large amounts of Jewish property illegally: factories,

businesses, land, homes, art, jewelry, and furnishings. Jews had handed some of it to presumed friends for safekeeping. Many such recipients expected that no Jews would return, and hence there was a subsequent reluctance to return the property. In some locations in the provinces the reluctance to return these goods escalated to pogroms. I am specifically referring to the pogroms in the cities of Kunmadaras and Miskolc. It was precipitated by Jewish requests for restitution and demands to bring Nazi collaborators to trial. Most of the material losses are unrecovered, even now after so many years, because no immediate family members survived to claim them. Token restitution has been the rule where there has been any at all. Trials of some war criminals were initiated after the war, as were trials of some of the most eager Hungarian collaborators in annihilating the Jews of Europe. Many of them slipped away from justice, however, and the trials occasioned the display of even more antisemitism. Sympathizers felt sorry for the defendants, and blamed the Jews for wishing revenge in attempting to bring them to justice.

New varieties of antisemitism then started. To many Jews and anti-Nazis, Russia was initially perceived as the liberator. For others, it was ascribed the role of oppressor. The establishment of the Communist regime was devastating for the country and for much of the Jewish community. A fair number of Jews were in highly visible, major positions in the government and the Communist Party. Many Jews believed that Communism was the antidote against Nazism and antisemitism. The irony of it was that the Communist Party blamed the Jews for being capitalist bourgeois and believed that they could not be trusted. Antisemitism had been a family and religious tradition for many in Hungary, and now they had a new reason to hate: they equated anti-Communism with antisemitism, and embraced them simultaneously. We had enemies on both sides. Some Jews again hid their Jewish identity. Their children received no Jewish education. Hungary subscribed to the Moscow-dictated, anti-Zionist and anti-Israel party line. Two of my classmates were jailed for alleged Zionist activities.

My father lost his business again. This time it was the Communist government that expropriated it. We had no income again and were afraid that we might be sent to a penal camp for being “bourgeois capitalists.” Once again it was not easy to be Jewish in

Hungary. During the 1956 uprising against communist rule, antisemitism resurfaced. That is what gave me the final impetus to leave Hungary.

Has Hungary come to terms with the Holocaust? There has been some discussion on the national government level, but never a true admission without reservation about what was committed against the Jews of Hungary. What little has been done by the government was politically motivated to appease the Western countries and to minimize criticism. At other times, the gestures made were for political advantages in election rivalry. In looking at whether Hungary has come to terms with the Holocaust, there are two categories of issues. The first is financial: restoration of or compensation for Jewish properties illegally taken. The second is moral, which is the more important and really the key in shaping the future for Jews as well as for the other minorities living in Hungary.

Regarding the financial issues, the return of properties to the rightful owners in the immediate postwar period was dragged out until the Communist nationalization took away all properties and businesses regardless of whether they were previously owned by Jews or non-Jews. What is being done in reparations in the post-Communist era is too little and often too late. It is being dragged out again, in this case until most of the survivors are very old or dying before they are offered any compensation. For those few who could prove in some way the loss of an immediate family member, 30,000 HF is the amount being offered by the Hungarian government. It is an insult. Only token amounts of money are also being offered for businesses, properties, houses, apartment buildings, land, and so forth. Seldom is the actual property returned. What is given back is only a small fraction of what was taken away, and, in most instances, no one has survived to claim it.

Regarding the moral issues: post-Communist Hungary has made some advances toward establishing democracy. Hungary was a major partner of Germany in the events of the Holocaust. There were also decent Hungarians who helped Jews avoid deportations, hiding them and thereby saving Jewish lives. Neither the church nor the government leaders have done enough, however, to reconcile and come to terms with Hungary's involvement in the Holocaust.

There are a number of things that could be done. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is a great example of the sort of effort Hungary should itself undertake. Hungarians, with government support, should teach the truth about the Holocaust; let the Hungarian population, and especially the next generation, learn the undistorted facts; and come to grips with the past. The Hungarian nation should admit responsibility for its deeds, and not only in some speeches and articles that are heard and read by only a minority of the people. Those few and already forgotten speeches by government officials, politicians, and church leaders are insufficient for Hungary to come to terms with the Holocaust.

They could build major and lasting memorials to the Holocaust in that country and build a museum in Budapest. The museum should be in a section of the city where it would be visible and could be visited easily. Students could visit it from every school in the country during the course of their education and see what happened and what can happen again if people let hatred rule. A memorial should be placed in the town hall of every city from which Hungarians of the Jewish faith were sent away to be murdered. I emphasize Hungarians of Jewish faith, because they were good citizens and loved their country. What was lost cannot be replaced, but at least the truth should be known. The facts should be undistorted, and the blame should not be placed on others.

Hungarian Jewish youth are manifesting a growing awareness about their religion. Many of them who were brought up without religion are now proud to be Jewish. The Budapest Jewish High School never closed its doors, and the number of students attending that school is growing. Three years ago, I visited the construction site of the new building at its new location.

I would like to close by quoting from a May 10, 1989, Hungarian Parliament speech by Mátyás Szűrös, the head of that body: "Their future should not be infected or endangered by silenced sins, by unpaid debts. The past must be admitted, there can be no absolution!"² These were eloquent words. There are new signs of antisemitism, however, and voiced by rightist politicians and influential writers. Those of us who witnessed and survived the Holocaust should speak about the dangers of antisemitism. We owe that to our martyrs. We are getting old. Our numbers are fewer and fewer each

year. The truth about the Holocaust should be taught in schools, churches, and other places to make sure that this never happens again. Never against Jews or any other people, and not in Hungary or anywhere else.

Notes

¹ Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*, vol. 2 (New York: The Rosenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies, Graduate Center/ The City University of New York, and Boulder: Social Science Monographs, 1994), pp. 1296-98.

² Braham, pp. 1357, 1359.

Coming to Terms with the Holocaust in Hungary

Eva Hevesi Ehrlich

Nobody in either Hungary or elsewhere would think that anyone could come to terms with the Holocaust. The Holocaust was the greatest tragedy and crime not only of the century but also of all history. I will speak of Hungary's situation as well as of the survivors. In 1946 the then democratic parliament of Hungary passed a resolution to condemn the perpetrators of the Holocaust and to make up for the crimes committed in the past. A similar resolution was passed in the summer of 1990. Various attempts at some restitution also were made. Between these dates the Communist government did very little, if anything, to keep alive the memory of the Holocaust. We have to note that all forms of religion were restricted and all forms of Jewish life were suppressed during the years of Communism. To understand the impact of the Holocaust and the reactions thereafter from the survivors as well as the Hungarian public, however, we have to look first into Hungary's history.

PRE-HOLOCAUST HUNGARY

Throughout its history, Hungary always played an important role in Jewish life, for better or worse. From the second part of the eighteenth century, Hungary provided a safe haven for the Jews persecuted in other parts of Europe, especially for those from the East. Jews thrived and prospered in Hungary, and, in return, they were instrumental in modernizing, building, and bringing prosperity to that near feudal country. Jews were finally *de facto* and *de jure* emancipated in the late nineteenth century, at the same time as the African-American slaves were only *de jure* emancipated here in the United States.

Jewish life thrived. Their numbers increased. They profited from their endeavors. They prospered and established religious, social, and humanitarian institutions. Most of them socially assimilated, except for their religious beliefs. They

truly considered themselves *ethnic Hungarians*, who practiced the Jewish (Israelite) religion. Only a few joined Theodor Herzl's Zionist movement. Most believed that they belonged to their precious land of Hungary.

Jews became an integral part of Hungary's multicultural world at the beginning of the twentieth century. Everything seemed to change, however, when Hungary was deprived of a substantial part of its territory and population after World War I. Compare and imagine if today, should Israel lose a war, it were to shrink to half its size. These historic Hungarian losses brought about a national trauma that affected every person—Jew and Gentile alike. I would like to ask you at this time to bear with me for a moment. Forget what happened to Jews later in the century. Open yourselves and try to understand the Hungarian national psyche of the interwar period. First, the once independent and self-sustaining economy of Hungary became dependent on the more powerful countries of the West. Second, public sentiment, including that of Jews, demanded that the respective Hungarian governments do everything possible to regain the lost territories. These two factors strongly influenced these governments' foreign policy. Germany took advantage of the situation and rushed to "help out." It made Hungary dependent on the German economy and, later in the Nazi years, promised to restore Hungary's old borders. These measures brought about Hungary's alliance with its powerful neighbor. Third, these troubled times evoked the need for a scapegoat. The Jews were a minority—a religious and ethnic "other"—easy to blame for all misfortunes. There were periods of time when Hungarian Jews were considered second-class citizens, and laws (e.g., Numerus Clausus; Numerus Nullus) were enacted that deprived them of certain rights and privileges. For example, such laws were implemented after the short-lived communist rule of Bela Kun after World War I. Again, who else to blame but the Jew?

Do not misunderstand me. As a survivor, it is far from my intention to defend the Hungarian government of the 1930s and 1940s, but neither can I condemn a whole nation collectively. The state, however, must bear responsibility. It was not only the Hungarian government during the Holocaust but also certain individuals who carried out their own and Hitler's desires, often with more vigor and enthusiasm than did the

Nazis themselves. Gendarmes, policemen, and the Arrow Cross all worked diligently to annihilate the Jewish “race.” Shamefully, there were even some Jewish collaborators and informants. There were other Hungarians, however, who helped out of the goodness of their hearts—humanitarians and “righteous gentiles”—but unfortunately they could save only a few.

Antisemitism existed all over Europe and also throughout the United States prior to the Holocaust. For example, it could be found in this country’s universities, State Department, corporations, country clubs, restrictive housing practices, and the like. It still exists. Today, however, we have learned more about tolerance and the consequences of social intolerance, these lessons taken from the horrible experiences of the Holocaust.

Since Hungary’s adoption of democracy, as I hear from my friends living there, Jewish life has become more open. Most Jews no longer want to hide their heritage. There are renewed organizations and institutions, and more interest in religious life. I strongly believe that democratic forms of government and democratic education are the only guarantees to limit the activities of the far right; these work to prevent another Holocaust from ever happening again. This does not mean that there is no antisemitism, however. The tragedy did not end with this era of horror.

POST-HOLOCAUST HUNGARY: THE SURVIVORS

Let us now talk about some survivors. Let us think of the father, Sigmund Rosenberg, whose wife and two beautiful daughters were shot on the spot when Arrow Cross men discovered them in their hiding place. Think of the child, Agnes Salgo, who returned to her hometown from Auschwitz only to find that her whole family had perished and her home had been destroyed. Think of the journalist, Zoltan Klar, whose Christian wife accompanied him to the concentration camp and, although both survived and immigrated to the United States, her life ended in a mental institution as a direct result of her wartime experiences. Think of the idealist, Rudolph Kastner, considered by some a collaborator, who actually managed to transport over a thousand people to safety in

Switzerland and was later well known in Israeli political circles, only to be killed by a fanatic.

Think of the famous rabbi, Ferenc Hevesi, who was a spiritual leader of his flock and a Hungarian patriot. Godfearing yet fearless, he faced an assassin's bullet in the 1930s and disarmed the assailant to save his congregants' lives in the synagogue. He was summoned time after time to Eichmann's headquarters in the summer of 1944 but refused to cooperate, never knowing whether he would ever be able to return home. Upon the takeover of the government by the Arrow Cross on October 15, 1944, this well-known and well-respected man had to go into hiding. He knocked on doors. He hid in a sanatorium. He hid in woodsheds in the bitter winter cold, until he finally found shelter in an apartment building supervised by a retired Army colonel. The rabbi survived only to find that the number of his congregants had shrunk to a fraction, and that each of these had someone to mourn. He stood up publicly for democracy and against totalitarianism and oppression. He traveled to England and America, lecturing, trying to make the West aware of the desperate situation of Hungarian Jews. He could never return to his beloved homeland, since he was tried and convicted of treason by the then already Communist government. He never blamed the land for the past, however, only the people. He passed away in Hawaii at the age of 53—alone and forlorn—with no friends or family at his side.

Think of the young woman, Eva Hevesi, who upon the Nazi occupation of Hungary is not allowed to continue her studies at the university, who has to leave her comfortable home to share a room with several others, who goes into hiding on October 15, 1944, and by the grace of God miraculously survives. In the meantime she experiences the horrors of war. She sees an American paratrooper's body lying on the street. His skull crushed. His brain splattered on the pavement. She sees humans reduced to hungry animals fighting over the carcass of a dead horse. Upon the Russian occupation of the city of Pest, she immediately learns that her fiancé had been taken from a Swedish protected house and machine-gunned into the Danube. One of her grandmothers starved to death. Her other grandmother—still alive but her body full of bleeding sores and infested with lice—dies in the same room with her. Fifty-five of her

close relatives perish. She escapes being raped by a Russian soldier because her allergic reaction to a diphtheria serum causes her to look repulsive. Very shortly after the Russians arrive, she goes to the synagogue to pray. There in the courtyard she encounters mountains of twisted, tortured, frozen bodies; the people who perished in the ghetto. She comes to America. She leads a normal, fulfilled life, but the memories linger on. Never will she forget what happened to her and to the thousands of others during those trying times.

Now may I ask you: how can we ever be expected to come to terms with the Holocaust? It is an ongoing task, and it is our duty to keep the memory of this tragedy alive. We can do this in three ways. First, by educating our children to be understanding—tolerant—and to do good and not evil. We must also reappraise our moral values in our homes, schools, and religious organizations. Second, by supporting the state of Israel, which is our stronghold among the nations of the world. Third, by handing down the history of the Holocaust to future generations.

My firm belief is that monetary compensation cannot substitute for the lives lost and all the human suffering. There should be a “Moral Restitution” coming from those who harmed us. Only when such a moral restitution is offered to us, can Hungary and the survivors eventually engage in a meaningful dialogue on the subject and find common ground to prevent another Holocaust from happening.

The Power of Redemption

Rabbi Laszlo Berkowits

The three preceding presenters were from Budapest. I came from a different part of Hungary. I am just a country boy. I was born in Derecske, a small town near Debrecen. It was an agricultural community of about 15,000 inhabitants, about 400 of whom were Jews. Growing up in an intimate township like that within the framework of an extended family was a wonderful way to have a childhood. I was surrounded by uncles, aunts, and cousins within the context of a loving family and in a Jewish community where everybody knew everybody else. While we did not live in a ghetto—Jews lived in all parts of the township—there were Jewish neighborhoods near the synagogue. I thought that Jews had lived in that town forever, because there were many elderly people there. I used to like to ask them about what life was like when they were children. One man in particular was about eighty-four years old. I called him Israelbacsí. I used to ask him stories when I went to the synagogue in the winter. He would sit at the fireplace, smoking his pipe after services, and tell me stories. It came as a great surprise to me when, at a special program at the Hungarian Embassy here in Washington, I chanced upon the Hungarian-Jewish encyclopedia. It listed the names of the various communities, and I very excitedly looked up Derecske. History was not taught to those of us brought up in such Orthodox households, so I did not know about the origin of my community. I found out that Jews were not actually allowed in Derecske until as late as 1852. Surprisingly and tragically, that community was destroyed less than a hundred years after it began.

I shall be describing events from the perspective of a teenager, because I spent my first sixteen years in Hungary. I was sixteen-and-a-half when I was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau from a suburb of Budapest in the summer of 1944. I was in Budapest at fifteen because my father could no longer support our family. My sisters and I thus went to the capital, where they became nannies and I found a job raising flowers. I was a botanist apprentice at the Central Jewish Cemetery in Budapest, which

was like a mini Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia, it was so beautifully kept. Six hundred people worked there, raising flowers and taking care of the facility. It was an absolutely first-class operation. As a botanist apprentice, I raised begonias, petunias, geraniums, and whatever other flowers were needed to decorate the place. It was a very difficult life, of course, being so far away from home. I sent some money back to support my mother and my younger brother and sister. I hoped, as everyone did, for the war to end soon.

In March 1944, the city was occupied by the Germans; the country was occupied; and yellow stars were worn. I bought two newspapers when the Allies landed on D-Day. I was thrilled that I would be liberated soon, but it was not to happen that way. In the first week of July, there was an air raid on some part of Budapest. There were some Jewish victims of *munka szolgàlat* system (forced labor service), and among these was a young man. I was invited to assist in his funeral, and I relate this story to illustrate in dramatic fashion what the Holocaust was about as I experienced it. The only people who attended his funeral were his very young, very beautiful, very pregnant wife, and her parents. At the conclusion of the funeral the four of us were surrounded by Hungarian gendarmes and taken to a military barracks. This was about July 7 or July 8. After an overnight stay in the barracks, we were transported by some kind of ship across the Danube to an abandoned brick factory in Buda. We stayed there for several days under terribly dehumanizing conditions, and then we were put aboard a freight train and shipped out of the country.

We arrived at a strange, unthinkable, and unimaginable place. Remember, I had been walking as a proud-to-be-free youngster on the streets of Budapest, with newspapers, only eight days earlier. Suddenly, I was disembarking from this freight train and seeing something unbelievable. As far as the eye could see, there was row after row of long barracks surrounded by high wire. I had just come from a relatively beautiful city, and being transported so suddenly into this place was a profound shock. I saw strange people and heard foreign languages. People in striped clothes were speaking German, Polish, and all kinds of unfamiliar languages. I spoke only

Hungarian, with a smattering of Yiddish. I had never been outside my own country. This was absolutely foreign to me.

They lined us up, separating the men from the women. After a while, I wound up in a place where they took my clothes and cut my hair. I took a shower. By eleven o'clock that night I was in barrack 11 in Camp E. It was a Gypsy camp, but one side was filled with Hungarian Jewish teenagers who had arrived earlier from the countryside.

The daily routine was upheld every morning and night: Appel (counting the prisoners). The first morning after my arrival, I was standing in the front row of a column of five, and I looked across and saw five of my schoolmates from Derecske. They had arrived about four or five weeks earlier. I said, "Oh my God, am I glad to see you!" What a strange thing to say! Then I asked, "Where is everybody else? Where are your parents?" They said, "On the other side." I said, "Where are the little kids?" They said, "On the other side." There was in fact an equally large camp on the other side of the fence, but you must be the judge of whether we were so gullible or just wanted to believe the best. We were hoping that it was true. We did see some children on the other side from time to time.

The daily routine continued in the meantime. Standing for four to five hours in the morning and three hours at night to count the prisoners. It was a form of torture, and God forbid someone should be missing. The numbers had to be precise. The food was not what we were used to, of course. The bread looked like Kommissbrot bread. It was a brick-like something. In the morning we got some ersatz coffee and a piece of bread. At noon there was a soup, which was not too bad but was never enough. We were constantly hungry and constantly afraid. The best part of the day was when we went to sleep. The worst part was waking up. But we were sixteen-year-olds; these were youngsters with whom I used to go to school.

I looked around, and at the end of the railroad tracks I saw two buildings with very big chimneys. They were always smoking. I thought it was the bakery. I did not know what that place was. Late in the summer, a transport of Jews came from Lodz, Poland. The Nazis had liquidated a very large, very famous ghetto there, and one of the

Polish Jews asked me, “Boy, do you know what that place is over there with that big chimney?” I said that I thought it must be the bakery. He said, “You Hungarians are stupid.” He spoke in Yiddish, and I understood enough. “You know what that is?” he said, “That is a crematorium. That is where they burn people.” I had never heard of a crematorium in my entire life, and I had never heard anyone speak of burning people. I went back to my friends and said, “Listen, don’t talk to these Polish people. They are so depressing.” Can you believe that? A friend of mine, whose name is Sam Gluck and who now lives in New York, worked in Camp D, which was parallel to ours. He worked on the railroad ramp. I said, “I am going to ask Sam if it is true.” At sunset, I went to the wire that separated Camps E and D—Sam used to give us some extra food because he worked in the railroad station—and said, “Sam, these Polish Jews are talking about something terrible. Is it true?” He hemmed and hawed. He did not know how to tell me. Finally, he nodded his head. I asked, “You mean your mother and your little brothers are gone?” He said, “Yes.” I replied, “But my mother and my little brother and sister came with you.” He said, “Yes.” I kept proceeding with my uncles and aunts and his uncles and aunts. He just kept saying, “Yes...yes...yes.” I said, “Our teacher?” He said, “Yes.” All of our parents’ and grandparents’ generation and all of the youngsters who were under the age of thirteen or fourteen were gone. By that time, I was so numb from this exchange that I did not cry. I just kept repeating, “oh...gone.” Sam finally said, “Listen, there is one great danger to you and the boys. You tell the boys that the greatest danger is the periodic selection. They will come during the evening when the prisoners are counted and see who is getting ill and who is losing weight. They will take them out.” There were these types of selections, but fortunately—for some reason or other—I did not get sick or lose too much weight, so I escaped these periodic selections.

There was one great selection at our camp on either Erev Yom Kippur or Yom Kippur 1944—they always preferred to pick some Jewish holidays. There were about 15,000 teenagers at the camp by this time, some from Poland and some from Hungary. They said they needed 5,000 potato pickers and took us to the end of the camp where there was a soccer field. They nailed a piece of lumber horizontally to the vertical goal

post. You had to be that tall, stripped to the waist, and you had to be strong. I flunked, and my little friend, who resembled Mickey Rooney and whose name was Laszlo Margitai of the Margareten family of New York, flunked too. He would not take no for an answer, however. He said, “We have got to do something or this is the end for us.” The problem was that the strong boys were lined up in columns of five, and the weaker boys were across the street from them. The road was being patrolled by a young SS man with a submachine gun. Laszlo said to me, “We have to somehow sneak straight across to the column of the strong boys.” So, we stood there and watched this guy go back and forth. At one point, he bent over to tie his shoes, and we snuck across into the column of the strong boys. The boys were angry because we were endangering them, but they finally calmed down. We hid in the middle of the column. I relate this story because people sometimes ask about resistance: “Did you offer any resistance?” The only resistance that we could offer was to live another day and hope that the Nazis’ world would come to an end. I think this episode—Laszlo and I sneaking across that street—was our supreme act of resistance.

We escaped death that day, but two of my friends did not. Among them was a boy with whom I used to walk to school everyday in Derecske—summer and winter. All I could think of was how his mother always used to worry about him catching cold going to school, and here he was going to the gas chamber. I then fully realized what this place was all about. I started thinking about that pregnant young woman who went to her husband’s funeral with her parents. I said, “Oh my God, she went to her own funeral!” That is the Holocaust. That was Auschwitz-Birkenau in the summer of 1944.

I had an intuitive feeling that if I did not get sick and if they did not shoot me, I would survive. I kept remembering what I had told my friends after the Polish people had told me the truth: “This is very depressing.” We asked each other, “When do we tell of what happened here?” So every time I speak to people, especially young people in high schools, I am always concerned about telling the truth in a way that is not depressing, that might even be somehow liberating.

In November 1944, news spread that a transport was being assembled to take prisoners to Germany to work. They wanted auto mechanics. I looked at Laszlo, and

Laszlo looked at me, and we said, “We are auto mechanics, aren’t we?” I had not sat in an auto in my entire life. I sat in a horse-drawn buggy, but never in a car. We signed up as auto mechanics and arrived in Braunschweig, Germany, about two weeks later with frostbitten toes. We began working in the Bussing Nag factory, helping some old German mechanics fix trucks. We were in Braunschweig throughout the winter. We worked six days a week, getting up early in the morning and marching to work. I especially remember one of these dawns when I was marching to work. I thought, “Will I ever walk on the sidewalk again by myself without a soldier with a rifle on his shoulder?” I once told this story to a member of my congregation, a photographer. She gave me a gift, a photograph of a sidewalk with beautiful trees and flowers, and she called it “Larry’s Freedom Street.”

In Braunschweig in the winter of ’45, the Allies were constantly approaching from the west and the Russians from the east. The Germans kept pushing us farther inside the country. We marched from Braunschweig to another camp and then from there to Ravensbrück. After we had spent a couple of weeks there they separated us and put us onto a train. The story was that they were going to take us to Denmark and let us go free. That did not happen, because they said the bridges were bombed. They dumped us in the middle of a forest in a God-forsaken camp called Woebbelin, which was then filled with some Russian and French POWs who were half insane from hunger. Fortunately, we were not there long. On May 1, 1945, they loaded us again into an open, coal-car train for an overnight stay. I have no idea what their plan was. Perhaps they had an airplane with a machine gun and were planning on killing us all. Nothing happened by morning, however, and we were told to return to camp. I was exhausted. I lay down on the ground and went to sleep.

My friend Laszlo woke me up at about 9:30 that morning and said “The SS have run away, and there is food out there. Let’s go and cook some potatoes.” I said, “I’m very tired. Let me sleep some more.” He said, “No, no, you have to get up...get up...get up. It is over.” I got up and went with him. We found some potatoes. Within an hour and a half, as far as you could see, people had found helmets, made fires, and were

cooking potatoes—like a cookout. As dangerous as it had been the day before, nobody—but nobody—said a mean word to anyone else.

An American jeep soon showed up. They were members of the 82nd Airborne Division. They were on patrol and found us by accident, as they told us later. By 4:00 p.m., a whole company had arrived. They gave us chocolates and everything else. I had a torn coat full of chocolates. I could not walk because it was so heavy. Guys cried and laughed, and we stayed there for about two days. I want to share with you one incident that was remarkable. Rabbi Meisels and his son were with us in Braunschweig. He was the *Dayan* of Vac—a *Dayan* is like a dean, a rabbi. I think we must have been cooking close to sunset on a Friday afternoon. He walked over to us—this man who had lost his wife and ten children—and do you know what his concern was? He said, “Children, it’s not allowed. It’s almost Shabbes.” Can you imagine that? That is the true essence of being Jewish. Some things are not allowed. I never forgot that. He had immediately reverted to his full humanity.

A day or two later we were taken to a hospital, which was actually a converted high school. We could not eat normal food. They had to restore our capacity to eat normally. It took about three weeks to do so, after which news came that the Swedish Red Cross would like to take Jewish orphans to Sweden. My friends—Arthur Rubin from Derecske and Laszlo Margitai—and I had a conference. We wanted to return to Hungary in order to see who had survived, and also for the satisfaction of showing that we had survived against these tremendous odds. It was very important to go back, but then the Swedish invitation was very tempting. In the end, we decided to go to Sweden because we thought we could always return to Hungary. We never did.

I want to conclude with our arrival in Sweden. It was a gorgeous summer morning. The Swedish Red Cross and their people showed such love and care. It was a total revelation to me and a tremendous lesson. These were not Jewish people. I was still the same Jewish boy, although I was seventeen-and-a-half—probably going on fourteen. They embraced and welcomed us. It was like being born and knowing it. Is such a thing possible? There were intact houses with flowers in the window, old people sitting in the park, and children riding bicycles. It was Eden. In case you are wondering

how one becomes restored or how the first steps of restoration take place, it took place for me there.

The theme of this symposium was confronting the Holocaust in Hungary. The question is for whom? Is it for the survivors or for the Hungarian nation? I agree with Professor Braham that collective guilt is a very difficult problem. I also, perhaps naively, believe that this question is even more important in the light of what happened in Hungary, where people like the Hungarian Jews—people who were good citizens and loved being Hungarian, who were patriots and contributed greatly to the Hungarian economy, arts and literature, music, and philosophy—were suddenly taken away from the countryside. I think that if a nation is to regain its health, its true dignity, and its true essence of what it thinks of itself in the highest terms, the Holocaust in Hungary must be confronted by all the elements of the country: the literati, the church, and the academics. I also believe that the truth can be redemptive where nothing else can. It may be painful. It can be very painful, because the Shoah was an unbelievably horrendous event that is almost impossible to describe. It was an unspeakable phenomenon. No matter how hard you try to describe the Shoah, the Holocaust, the essence of its terror and pain escapes you. You cannot describe it. You can point to it. But I am a rabbi, and, as a rabbi, I believe in human redemption and the sanctity of human life. Any nation worthy of its dignity owes it to itself to heal itself and recover its lost honor. I think that is the greatest contribution that we survivors can make, by helping people confront the truth, because it is the only way to ultimate redemption.

The World that Was Lost

Charles Fenyvesi

After six decades, the Holocaust is an indispensable component of Western intellectual inquiry. That interest is not limited to intellectuals, however, just as it is not limited to Jews. I submit as evidence the amazing success of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. When this museum opened its gates in April 1993, not even its most fervent promoters would have projected twelve million visitors by April 1999. Visitors who spend hours in this museum and are deeply affected include American high school students and Japanese tourists, Roman Catholic nuns and the Dalai Lama, Americans from small towns in every part of the country and foreign dignitaries from virtually every member state of the UN. It goes without saying that most of the visitors are not Jewish.

We Jews keep talking and writing about the Holocaust, and not just my generation, who were children at the time. We are joined by our children in many—perhaps most—cases. I expect our grandchildren will do likewise.

Whoever you are, Gentile or Jew, atheist or believer, mystic or hedonist, if you are interested in understanding humankind and the world in which we live, you can skim the history of World War I and the Vietnam War, you may not read a single book on Keynesian economics and the welfare state, but you cannot ignore the monstrous presence of the Holocaust.

This focus on the Holocaust was not always there. For at least two but perhaps even three decades following the end of World War II, the principal priorities of world Jewry had to do with the needs of postwar reconstruction, the healing of wounds, and, of course, Israel's miraculous rebirth.

The Holocaust is proving itself as the past that will not let us go, however. It keeps us awake at night and invades our dreams. I use the first person plural here in a way that is broadly inclusive. Our responses are not always similar, however. As an example, I will recite a poem about visiting a cemetery where victims of World War II

lie buried. The poet is Czeslaw Milosz, a Polish Catholic émigré and Nobel Prize-winner. At age eighty, a few years ago, Milosz wrote:

They used to pour on graves millet or poppy seeds
To feed the dead who would come disguised as birds.
I put this book here for you, who once lived
So that you should visit us no more.

My heart pounded in protest when I read the poem, although I thought it beautiful. Its message of telling the dead to stay put and not bother the living—creating a distance between the living and the dead—was a wisdom that I found alien. I felt the overwhelming need to answer every line of his, not once but twice. Here is my response:

I place a stone - not millet, nor poppy seeds - on each grave I visit .
We Jews don't believe, alas, that the dead come back disguised as birds, waiting
to be fed.
But what to do when the dead have no graves?
The wind scattered their ashes long ago, or deep waters cradle their bones.
I think of them when digging flowerbeds.
I see their shadows when willow branches sway.
Each time wild geese fly overhead I look up and listen.

Being shackled to our memories has a special meaning for those of us Jews born in Hungary, which has a national culture that lives on memories and is beholden to the many tragedies of its history. One of the lessons that we may take home from the presentations by the historians in this symposium is that any study of the Holocaust in Hungary is inseparable from the history of the decades that preceded it. Nor can we understand the half century in Hungary that followed the Holocaust without studying the various Hungarian responses to the massacre of close to 600,000 Hungarian-born Jews.

What Paul Hanebrink's thoughtful lecture on the populist peasant movement made clear is that at least part of Hungarian peasantry was alienated from Hungarian Jewry. His thesis is that the peasant movement, which after World War I developed an

important nationalist definition of Hungarian identity, excluded Jews, just as it excluded ethnic Germans and—on occasion—Gypsies. Hanebrink might have added to the list the country's traditional ruling classes, the aristocracy, and the gentry as well. In brief, the movement considered the injustices and grievances suffered by the peasantry for too many generations so egregious that it dismissed the idea of a partnership with any other segment of society.

Similarly, Professor István Deák's incisive, elegant presentation on the postwar trials of war criminals explained that the Communist Party was determined to transform Hungarian society and pursued its own political agenda in organizing the trials. That agenda had little to do with the need to punish those guilty of genocide. The Communists were determined to smear the conservative right and center with the indelible stain of Nazism, and their propaganda was—to some extent—able to blur the critical differences, thus reducing a complex society to a crude Leninist dogma: “those who are not with us are against us”; reds versus whites, with no force in between, *tertium non datur*. In their drive for supreme power, the Communists followed a cunning strategy of both exploiting the Holocaust and ignoring it, demonizing everyone to the right of them as Nazis or at least Nazi-sympathizers, condemning the victims of the Holocaust as bourgeois, and at the same time inviting Jews to join the Party as the guarantor of anti-antisemitism.

On the other hand, Professor Randolph Brahm, who believes in writing history *cum ira et studio*, focused on the assault, perpetrated by the far right, on the facts and the importance of the Holocaust. His contention is that in the past few years even the Hungarian political center has not done enough to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive and to protect it from falsification and trivialization.

I read Dr. Tim Cole's thought-provoking presentation after I drafted mine. Nevertheless I will repeat part of his theme and dwell on his question: Remembering Whose History? Or, to put it in another way: Who Remembers What?

When analyzing the memories of Gentile and Jew in Hungary, we face competing tragedies and conflicting grievances. On one hand, we Hungarian Jews lost two-thirds of our people, including entire communities in the provinces. On the other

hand, Hungary lost a war—yet another war—and it failed to regain the territories it had lost in World War I. Apart from the human and material losses, Hungary also lost its independence and acquired a brutal new master: the Soviet Union.

We walk across minefields when we talk about the two tragedies, as both communities are still in a state of mourning. Comparing the two bereaved parties at times sounds unseemly, yet such a comparison is the subtext—usually in a we-versus-they configuration—of who suffered more, whose wound is deeper, and who is insensitive to the other’s pain. This is not an argument that I would care to engage in, much less win.

Aggravating this discord is the unpleasant fact that in 1945 a portion of Hungary’s Communist Party consisted of people whose parents were Jewish. The five leaders responsible for the disaster of the Stalinist transformation of Hungarian society were of Jewish origin, and many of their underlings—especially those who joined the secret police after returning from the camps or the labor battalions—did not make a secret of their desire to avenge those killed in the Holocaust.

I wish I could simply say that these people abandoned the faith of Moses and swore allegiance to Marx, Lenin, and Stalin, and, since they were converts, the Jewish community had nothing to do with them, just as they would have nothing to do with the Jewish community. Conversion—*shmad* in Yiddish—means the denial of our faith. Unfortunately, these apostates were and are perceived as Jews in a small country where genealogical charts are in the public domain. Moreover, some of these converts to Communism and their children, who joined the Party in the 1970s or later, nowadays claim to be Jews.

Jewish tradition recognizes the act of *tsuvah*, usually translated as “turn.” People are encouraged to mend their ways, even to return to the faith they left. But the person engaged in the exercise of *tsuvah* needs to do something prior to his or her reacceptance into the community: the *kehila*. The *kehila* requires actions such as, for starters, explaining how and why he or she has gone astray, and one should give an accounting—a *cheshbon ha’nefesh* customary before Yom Kippur. Neither calling attention to one’s Jewish origins is sufficient nor is the reference to parents or

grandparents killed in the Holocaust. I ask you: Do we have to accept second-generation Party members as one of us, or *unsere*, as they say in Budapest, or *shelanu*, as my Israeli cousins say? Are they not to be questioned about their Communist past, which on occasion happens to be especially nasty? Is that past to be forgotten, erased, and forgiven? Yet another question is whether we need them and their Stalinist school of paranoia to defend us against what they define as the common enemy, the nationalist right? Or to paraphrase Samuel Johnson, is a united front against antisemitism the last refuge of scoundrels?

An important part of our confrontation with memory in this symposium is to learn how different our experiences have been. Dr. Albert Lichtmann testified how, even in the Budapest Jewish High School he attended, he and his friends who returned from the camps could not find anyone to hear them out.

I have a different story to report. I remember the spring of 1945 in Budapest, when my parents and relatives listened for hours and hours to the stories told by members of our extended family who returned from the camps and labor battalions. They finished telling their stories well past midnight, holding back the most gruesome details until after my parents sent me to bed in an adjacent room with the door tightly shut. I could still hear nearly every word, however. Fighting sleep, I kept up with the narrative about a loaf of bread stolen or a cache of a fistful of potato peels found by Kati or Gizel, Chibi or Ági. I loved each of them wholly and unconditionally as “our blood,” the proud plural possessive cherished within my extended family—then as now. Images from their deportation imprinted on my retina. Their phrases stayed with me like lines from a poem memorized in school. In my dreams I accompanied them. I still do at times; me as a child once again, and they as young as they were *then*, which was in their early twenties. When I woke, the skeletal figures of prisoners who had slipped in and out of my dream seemed as real as my parents who urged me to hurry up for school, but on the street the morning crowds were as insubstantial as puffs of smoke. The part of the dream that stayed and still stays with me was the reassuring grip of a relative’s hand—a bond stronger than death.

In my family, everyone had a chance to tell his or her stories. Most of them spoke again and again, and others quoted them again and again. In the years to come, however, members of my family too went through stages, with some of them switching back and forth between the Jewish obligation to remember and the oh-so human inclination to forget what is painful. Yes, we are a people of memory, and, as our liturgy reminds us, our God is the God of our Fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and our mothers, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel, who lived some 4000 years ago. We are also a people of resourceful survivors, however, determined not just to live and make do but to live life to its fullest. Our survival skills include a love of comfort and a readiness to bend with changed circumstances.

I had the good fortune to be born into an extended family. I was raised in an environment where a third cousin was a close relative, and I was delighted to share my room with a succession of relatives who stayed with us for weeks, even months, after they returned from the camps and the labor battalions. My mother, Anna, always kept close tabs on relatives, who included four brothers, two sisters, and some forty first cousins. When I learned to read and write in the fall of 1945, I prevailed on her to make a list of those family members who were killed in the Holocaust. We were in the kitchen. She was making dinner, and I used a school notebook to jot down the names. We got as far as seventy, and by that time my mother was crying uncontrollably. She ran to the bathroom to wash her face. My tears smudged my notebook. We stopped and never finished the list. Years later, I learned the talmudic rule against counting people, and I am grateful to our ancestors for that wisdom.

In the 1990s, the pendulum swung again. Our American culture turned against denial as intellectually and emotionally dishonest and ultimately self-defeating. A similar mood-shift occurred on the other side of the Atlantic. In Hungary, too, denial has become a source of embarrassment, even contempt. A new generation who were not raised as Jews has been discovering their Jewishness, often shaming their parents and uncles and aunts in the process. Inevitably, the Holocaust is the center of vision for this new generation born since the war, even though this generation is more often than

not without any memory of the Holocaust that would have been passed down by family members who survived it.

My instinctive reaction is that it is sad to be deprived of the vivid memories of parents and grandparents, uncles and aunts who raised us, with whom our contact is or should be most intimate. Growing up without being told the life stories of those closest to us is comparable to being orphans.

In some cases, however, those long-repressed memories prove all the more potent when they amount to a semi-biblical revelation in the triumphant genre of I-am-who-I-am. It is liberation that comes after a long hiatus of tense silence, which shocks some young people as regrettable, even shameful. Some of them turn angrily against the practitioners of that silence.

There are now plenty of Hungarian Jews who discovered their Jewishness as adults, sometimes under dramatic circumstances such as finding in a cupboard—wrapped in an old newspaper—a tattered Hebrew prayerbook with a grandparent's name in it, or hearing a deathbed confession from a parent or a distant relative. This is the stuff of nineteenth-century romantic literature, so beloved in Hungary. There is now a generation of Hungarian Jews who lived through the kind of soul-shaking disclosures that recall similar ones in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist*.

I am glad that these young Hungarian Jews now seek out the dwindling number of relatives and friends who can remember the roundups and the deportations. I am glad that they are reading books on the subject. This is how it should be. To me, the unwritten commandment that shores up the Ten Commandments is "*Lo tishkach*," do not forget. Although parts of us die with the dying, we survive by summoning the dead. If we forget them, we are smoke from a fire that did not burn.

I agree with Eva Hevesi-Ehrlich who told us that we *cannot* come to terms with the Holocaust. In this instance, the therapeutic exercise of "coming to terms with," as much a part of our American culture as PTA and third-party arbitration, is inappropriate. We can come to terms with the death of a parent, even the death of both parents, as such a loss is tragic yet natural. How can we come to terms, however, with

the mass murder of so many so close to us? The answer is that we cannot and need not and should not.

The scholars and the survivors who spoke at this symposium were eloquent in elucidating the differences that separated and separate Gentile and Jew in Hungary. I would like to take a few minutes to talk about the togetherness that preceded that separation and to plumb the depths of the disappointment felt by Hungarian Jews. No matter how close some Hungarian Jews might have felt to German culture, the German Nazis were foreigners and the horrors they perpetrated had their roots in an alien land, another world. On the other hand, the complicity of many Hungarians and the enthusiastic endorsement of Nazi ideology by a fraction of the nation hit Hungarian Jews loyal to Hungary as a betrayal. The wounds have not healed to this day, and it was at least partly because the betrayal was unexpected and undeserved.

Beginning in the first part of the nineteenth century, something in the Jewish spirit resonated with the solemn sustaining myths of Hungarian patriotism: a stubborn isolation of a God-given separate identity; a tragic vulnerability to the imperial ambitions of great powers that tried every means to expunge that identity; an irrepressible yearning for a return to the grandeur of ancient virtues; and a quixotic predilection to live in the alternative reality of a mythic past. By the end of the nineteenth century, many if not most Hungarian Jews came to agree with the swagger of the Latin dictum, minted at a time when high Latin was still an official language of the land: *Extra Hungariam non est vita; si est vita, non est ita*. The translation is: Outside Hungary there is no life; and if there is, it is not the same.

What made Jews, many of them wanderers from country to country only a few generations earlier, feel at home in Hungary, so much so that only the ultra-Orthodox continued to speak of *goles*, or exile, which is the classic definition of living outside the Holy Land. A fundamental fact was the prosperity and social acceptance achieved by the majority of Jews before the twentieth century. Was that a cause or an effect, however? Perhaps more important, at about the same time Jews also became aficionados of the romance of everyday life in a country where a bouquet of fragrant violets costs less than a mug of beer, and both are offered frequently and sometimes

with inimitable grace. Jews learned to shed tears along with the rest of the citizenry when listening to Gypsy songs that mourn the end of a summer or a betrayal by a lover. They embraced a national ethos that guaranteed that the most popular songs would be invariably sad, and the more sad the more popular.

Jews also joined the melancholy national cult of marking the passage of time with elaborate farewells, especially funerals. They enthusiastically adopted the thousand-and-one local customs, such as reaching a critical decision during a stroll under an alley of horse chestnut trees, which are fragrant when in bloom.

Of course, they came across antisemites, including some virulent specimens, but they found sympathy and assistance in a sizeable and influential liberal community whose members would argue freely and eloquently on subjects such as whether it is perennially Jewish or quintessentially Hungarian that an eminent scholar or a good poet commands more respect than a prime minister or a bank president, albeit that scholar or poet is expected to be as poor as a churchmouse. I still cannot decide whether it was evasive or assertive or perhaps crafty or all of the above that so many in my grandparents' generation chose to identify themselves as "one hundred percent Jewish and one hundred percent Hungarian."

An early Jewish triumph was the mastery of the daunting Hungarian language, a gift of shamanistic Asia yet declaimed in the borrowed cadences of judicious Latin. That odd mix lent itself to poems as melodious as Italian and as supple as French, the best of which the nation has cherished as if they comprised the Torah. The secrets of writing such poetry were unlocked by Jews, some of them grandchildren of refugees from pogroms in Poland and Russia who had crossed the Carpathian Mountains innocent of Hungarian, albeit often with entire tractates of the Talmud committed to memory.

With the passion of a collector, Hungary's Jews hoarded the kind words they received from Gentiles and bequeathed them to the succeeding generations, along with grandmother's candlesticks. For instance, the chief executive of my ancestral Szabolcs County—whose official title, "head steward," is older than the oldest walnut tree and has a connotation similar to "viceroy"—publicly embraced an Orthodox Jew like my

grandfather and intoned in that plangent theatrical voice of his: “You are such a good Hungarian.” He meant it, and the two of them were close friends—or so we, descendants and disciples, believe; just as we have been taught to believe; just as we want to believe. Regardless of the cynics’ snicker, we have no reason to question motives. My grandparents’ youth was Hungary’s halcyon time of faith in ethnic harmony, and evidence suggests that head-steward András Kállay—from one of Hungary’s leading families—was far more of a passionate believer than a calculating politician.

To explain the miracle of assimilation, sympathetic Gentile writers have employed sentimental metaphors, such as Jews drinking from a sorcerer’s potion containing the germs of the national infection of melancholy. One sip and a metamorphosis takes place; never again can the soul be at peace. A vernacular version claims that assimilation began with the celebrated local dish of stuffed cabbage, in which a cabbage leaf the shape of one’s palm usually swaddles bony, chewy, inferior beef rather than a better cut—and never the best. Yet the taste is all the more irresistible. At a turning point in the lives of many Hungarian Jews came a violation of the rabbinical ban on mixing meat and milk. Sour cream was allowed to seep into the sauce, and the seduction by the resulting superior flavor was instant. There seemed to be no way back to keeping the dietary laws that originated with Moses and were elaborated by the rabbis. The next experiment often involved pork sausage, another culinary icon of Hungary.

Throughout the land, sensitive Gentiles with thatchy, straw-colored hair and souls tantalized by the exotic kept falling in love with dark, curly-haired Jewish women whose laugh suggested the cooing of turtle doves. The romance seemed to have the signature of fate, and at the very least it was undoubtedly fashion, a puff from the warm breezes of the liberal *Zeitgeist*.

Early in this century, Hungary’s preeminent writer, the Roman Catholic Gyula Krúdy, described one of his literary alter-egos as living with a Jewish woman who would cook fish for him every Friday night and whose Hebrew blessings over wine and bread he memorized and recited along with her.

By the time World War I ended and the Habsburg monarchy crumbled after seven centuries, the descendants of cunning Jacob speckled the pedigrees of the country's so-called historic families, both the aristocracy and the intelligentsia. A new breed—known as “part-Jew”—emerged, famously ambitious, in some cases preposterously arrogant, and on occasion going to great lengths to conceal a Jewish ancestor. Nevertheless, the secret got out sooner or later. Hungary is one large village, and villagers naturally conspire in exposing a conceit and laugh the laugh of their lives when a lie is punctured.

Scholars faithful to the covenant of Abraham as well as others beholden to the Enlightenment or to a Christian tradition have often spoken of “the love affair” between Jew and Gentile in Hungary. (Zionists on the other hand have decried the bitter mystery of such a misplaced infatuation.) In one memorable poem, Ágnes Gergely, a prominent contemporary poet in Budapest and a rabbi's dutiful granddaughter, has declared her “hopeless love” for Hungary. The poem is a much-quoted favorite of Arpad Göncz's, a playwright once active in the anti-Nazi underground and the elected president of the republic from 1990 to 2000.

Nimble on their feet and cunning in their schemes, Hungarian Jews have been overachievers, not only as Magyar patriots and Hollywood movie moguls but as Olympic swordsmen, world-class mathematicians and nuclear physicists, as financiers and inventors, painters and poets, and, more recently, as Communist henchmen and anti-Communist dissidents. Although they tend to be compulsively verbal and ostentatiously multilingual, those who know or use Yiddish or Hebrew have been the exceptions. They can be conceited and chivalrous, contrary and compassionate. They can also be stubborn, irreverent, and off-the-wall. Tell them that you have a crazy, absurd idea, and you have their undivided attention.

When not assimilated, Hungarian Jews can be so ultra-observant that they will drink slivovitz only if no Gentile hand touched the plums at any stage of their progress from bud to bottle. Drink they will, however, in a quantity that amazes a Jew from another community accustomed to sobriety and moderation. Even in Jerusalem, they

will dance at weddings in the style of the Gentile peasants who once lived next door to their great-great-grandparents.

It is unlikely that Jewish leaders from any of the countries neighboring Hungary would have approved a public statement as passionately nationalistic as the one signed in 1939 by the heads of the organizations representing Hungary's observant Jewry, ranging from Orthodox and Hasidic to the equivalent of Reform:

No man-made law can deprive us of our Hungarian homeland, just as no man-made law can deprive us of our love for the one God. Just as though the thousands of years of misfortune we remained unswerved by fire, water, beheading and auto-da-fé, slavery on a galley ship and imprisonment in shackles, we will remain steadfast in our attachment to our Hungarian homeland, whose language is our language and whose history is our life. Just as our co-religionists preserved the old Spanish language and culture of their homeland through centuries of exile, we will keep waiting for the dawn of our vindication and Hungary's resurrection.¹

A cynical analyst may argue that the statement had an ulterior motive, and it was composed to help fight a proposed law, then being debated in parliament, that aimed "to limit Jewish gains in public and economic life."² The proposed limitation was drastic and Nazi-like, and its opponents believed that it had to be countered with strong protest while one could still raise one's voice in opposition. While there was still hope to keep the Nazis at bay.

When reading the statement in the original, however, I hear the cry of a spurned lover and recognize the heartfelt echoes of romantic poetry—Hungarian rather than Hebrew. I am moved rather than embarrassed by the piling up of historical misfortunes and by the coupling of precedent and prophecy when citing the Spanish Jewish tragedy. The statement's cadences suggest the lament of Hungarian Jewish melodies that fuse the tremolo of Galician synagogue chants with the amoroso of the Gypsy violin. I shudder, feeling the anguish of my people—a peculiar tribe within not one tribe but two, whose members find themselves Jewish among Hungarians and Hungarian among Jews.

Until the last part of World War II, the great majority of Hungarian Jews believed that they were sheltered from the mad winds that uprooted communities in the rest of Europe and that what happened elsewhere could not happen to them. “Hungary is different from other European countries,” they kept saying to foreigners, including fellow Jews, with the kind of serene self-assurance that—like the finest silverware—should be inherited from grandparents, if not from someone further back on the family tree. “And we, Hungarian Jews, too, are different from Jews elsewhere.” After all, they added with a smug little smile, where else in Europe does a Jewish industrialist, the textile magnate Leó Goldberger, play bridge with the head of state, Regent Horthy, every Thursday evening? Does anything more need to be said about the unique advantages enjoyed by Jews living under the protection of St. Stephen’s sacred crown? Also, did not that first Christian king of Hungary declare a thousand years ago that a nation is weak when consisting of only one tribe and speaking only one language? (Unfortunately, Stephen did not add “following one religion,” but, after all, he was forcefully baptizing his pagan nation and could not be expected to endorse religious diversity.) Was not Hungary for generations a safe haven for Jews fleeing Galicia and other eastern lands plagued by pogroms? Did not tens of thousands of Jews from surrounding countries crushed by Hitler find asylum in Hungary in the first five years of World War II?

In his monumental study of the Holocaust in Hungary, Professor Randolph Braham writes that while the Nazis systematically destroyed neighboring communities, “Hungarian Jews were developing a false sense of security.” He charges them with self-delusion, “constantly rationalizing that they would somehow survive the war, although under less favorable economic conditions.”³ Indeed, somewhere deep within their souls many Hungarian Jews expected that a noble Gentile, a true Hungarian hero, would eventually appear and come to their defense: a high school classmate or a cousin’s one-time lover now in a position of power would materialize and offer protection; or a complete stranger whose “heart is in the right place” would come to help. Whether self-confident or paralyzed with fear, or swinging back and forth between the two moods,

the great majority of Jews regarded themselves as forming an *inseparable* part of the Hungarian landscape. It seemed to them *unthinkable* that they could be uprooted.

Speaking from the second-story balcony of his Budapest hideout in January 1944, the venerable Belzer rebbe, Aharon ben Yissachar, reassured a crowd in Yiddish, “*Bleibt in shtilerkayt!*”, or stay quiet. The phrase was interpreted to mean that the country that gave the Galician rabbi asylum was safe for Jews. Later, after the rabbi had fled to Palestine and the rabidly Nazi Arrow Cross seized power in Budapest, there were wistful rumors among Orthodox Jews about saintly rabbis reaching the conclusion that God must have decided He could not watch any more the destruction of His people and that the Messiah was on the way.

The Jewish confidence in being at home in Hungary suggested the stretch of a poet’s rhyme rather than the chicanery of a bookkeeper cooking the books. The large majority of Jews living in Hungary were at home in a country whose language and civilization, plains and hills, dynasties and revolutions, were theirs from birth, and whose myths they subscribed to. They were loyal Hungarians. As “Nem tudhatom” (No way for me to know) by Miklos Radnoti says, Hungary is his “homeland ringed by flames,” and he grew from its soil “as a twig sprouts from a branch.”

That feeling of belonging was luminous, although the Nazis proved it a lie in the end. Even as a form of self-deception, the sense of belonging helped many Jews keep their self-respect or at least their sanity. Giving up such an illusion and dumping it on history’s trash heap would have conceded victory to the Nazis. It would have meant throwing away a most precious possession. It would have amounted to the ultimate treason of disowning one’s self. According to testimony well-known in Hungary, when a Hungarian soldier guarding Radnóti’s labor battalion demanded that he state his occupation, he answered: “Hungarian poet.” The guard screamed that Radnóti was “a stinking Jew—not a poet and certainly not a Hungarian.”

My aunt Clara recalls that when her Auschwitz-bound train stopped at the border and a Hungarian military officer formally announced to the deportees that after the train crossed into German territory they would no longer be under the protection of Hungarian law, nearly everyone on the train broke into tears. It did not matter that by

that time such a protection did not mean anything. The tears flowed freely over the solemn cutting of that last shred of belonging, however fictitious. The deportees mourned the end of the cherished illusion of having a country, a culture, and a legal system they could call their own. They mourned for the proud people they had once been.

Notes

¹ Jenő Lévai, *Black Book on the Martyrdom of Hungarian Jewry* (Budapest: Officina, 1946), pp. 39-40.

² Ibid.

³ Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 2 vols.

Appendix:

Biographies of Contributors

RABBI LASZLO BERKOWITS is Rabbi Emeritus at Temple Rodef Shalom in Falls Church, Virginia, where he served from his ordination in 1963 until his retirement as Senior Rabbi in July 1998. A native of Hungary, Rabbi Berkowits earned a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Cincinnati; and a Bachelor of Hebrew Letters degree, a Master of Hebrew Letters degree, and a Doctor of Divinity degree at the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio. Throughout his distinguished career in Falls Church, Rabbi Berkowits has focused his attention on religious, civic and humanitarian concerns. He is a member of the Virginia Advisory Committee to the US Commission on Civil Rights and serves on the DC Chapter of the American Jewish Committee. Rabbi Berkowits is a former member of the Executive Board of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and past president of the Mid-Atlantic Region of that organization. For 1995-96, he served as president of the McLean Clergy. He is a member of the board of the World Union for Progressive Judaism and a founding member of the Fairfax County Community Action Project and of the Board of the McLean Choral Arts Society. Rabbi Berkowits has served on the Board of the Health and Welfare Council of Falls Church and of Hospice of Northern Virginia and is a former member of the Superintendent's Community Advisory Council, Fairfax County School System. From 1965 to 1972, Rabbi Berkowits was Visiting Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at American University.

RANDOLPH L. BRAHAM is Distinguished Professor, Emeritus, of Political Science at City College and the Graduate Center for the City University of New York, where he currently serves as director of the Rosenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies. A specialist on comparative politics, he is a recognized authority on the Holocaust. Dr. Braham is the author of numerous articles, research notes, reviews, and books on the Holocaust, including his seminal work *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*. His

works have been used by courts of law in various countries, including Canada, Germany, Israel, and the United States, as source books in cases involving war crimes and restitution. Dr. Braham currently serves on the United States Holocaust Memorial Council's Academic Committee.

TIM COLE is on faculty at the University of Bristol, where he has taught twentieth century European social history since 1995. He did his undergraduate and postgraduate work at the University of Cambridge. In 1997, he was awarded his Ph.D. on the ghettoization of the Jewish community in Budapest in 1944. His research interests focus on the Hungarian Holocaust, geographies of the Holocaust, and contemporary representation of the Holocaust. For the academic year 1999-2000, he was the Pearl Resnick Fellow at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, working on geographies of ghettoization in Hungary.

ISTVÁN DEÁK is the Seth Low Professor, Emeritus, of History in the Department of History at Columbia University. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. from Columbia University. He was the chairman of the American Association for the Study of Hungarian History in 1980 and the Director of the Institute on East Central Europe at Columbia University between 1967 and 1980. His research concerns nineteenth and twentieth century Europe, specifically collaboration, resistance, and retribution in Europe during and after World War II. He is the author of numerous articles, research notes, reviews, and books, including *Weimar Germany's Left-Wing Intellectuals: A Political History of the Weltbühne and Its Circle*, *The Lawful Revolution: Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians, 1848-1849*, and *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848-1918*.

ROBERT M. EHRENREICH had been the director of the University Programs Division of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies since 1999. He was awarded an A.B. from Harvard University in 1982 and a D.Phil. from Oxford University in 1985. He was a postdoctoral fellow at the Smithsonian Institution from 1985 to 1987, a

visiting scholar at the University of Illinois, Urbana, in 1987, and a Senior Program Manager at the National Research Council between 1988 and 1998. Dr. Ehrenreich has published a monograph, two edited volumes, and over 25 articles on the impact of society on scientific and technological development and utilization, the conservation of historic and prehistoric sites and monuments, and the application of heterarchy to the study of complex societies.

EVA HEVESI EHRLICH was born in Budapest, Hungary, but resided with her family in the country town of Székesfehérvár until the age of six. The family returned to Budapest in 1930 when her father was offered a position as one of the associate rabbis at the Dohany Synagogue. She attended Budapest elementary and high schools and then went on to apply to Péter Pázmány University. Being Jewish, she was not accepted to medical school (pre-med. studies). She had to be satisfied to take courses in the arts and sciences department of the above university. She majored in psychology, philosophy, and pedagogy. She also took chemistry, physics, and history of art. She was forced to leave the university shortly after the Nazi occupation began. She survived the Holocaust in Budapest. She returned to her school after the war, received her certificate of completion in 1946, and then emigrated to the United States the following year. She has worked at the Library of Congress and in the fields of real estate and interior design. Mrs. Hevesi-Ehrlich has been a wife of fifty years, and is the mother of three and the grandmother of five. She currently resides in Maryland.

CHARLES FENYVESI is a *Washington Post* garden columnist and a freelance writer based in rural Maryland. His previous affiliations include senior writer, *U.S. News & World Report*; editor, the *Washington Jewish Week*; staff writer, the *Washington Post*; editor, *The National Jewish Monthly*; and associate editor, *Near East Report*. Mr. Fenyvesi has freelanced scores of opinion pieces, political analyses, personality profiles and reports in the *Washington Post*, the *New Republic*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *New York Times*. He is the author of three books: *Splendor in Exile*, *When the World Was Whole*, and *Trees for Shade and Shelter, for Memory and Magic*. A fourth book,

entitled *Five Angels in Hell*, is scheduled to be published by Syracuse University Press in 2001. Mr. Fenyvesi was born in Hungary in 1937 and emigrated to the United States after the Hungarian revolution of 1956. He received his B.A. from Harvard University in 1960 and an M.A. from Madras University, India, in 1962.

PAUL HANEBRINK received his Ph.D. in the Department of History at the University of Chicago and was a Fellow of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies between September and December, 1999. His dissertation is entitled *The Defense of Christian Hungary: Religion, Nationalism, and Antisemitism in Inter-War Hungary, 1919-1944*. Dr. Hanebrink has received many scholarships, including a Fulbright grant, the ACLS Pre-Dissertation Research Grant, an honorary Mellon Fellowship, and the Javits Fellowship.

ALBERT L. LICHTMANN was born in Budapest, Hungary. He attended a public elementary school for four years and then spent eight years at the Budapest Jewish High School. His education was interrupted at age sixteen, when he was taken to a forced-labor camp. He survived the war and returned to Budapest to finish high school. Upon graduation, he entered Peter Pazmany Medical University of Budapest, obtaining his license to practice medicine in 1953. He was a doctor in Hungary until the uprising in 1956, when he escaped to the United States. After becoming licensed to practice medicine in the United States, Dr. Lichtmann became a specialist in the field of anesthesiology. He has practiced at both Fairfax Hospital and Northern Virginia Doctors Hospital, where he was Chief of Anesthesiology for twenty-five years. Dr. Lichtmann retired in 1998, after thirty-six years in the field, and now resides in Northern Virginia.

GEORGE S. PICK was born in Budapest, Hungary, and spent his childhood there during the war. In 1956, Mr. Pick received a diploma in mechanical engineering from the Technical University of Budapest. He left Hungary during the revolution of that year and settled in the United States. He joined the faculty of Catholic University as an

instructor in 1957, earned a master's degree in mechanical engineering from that institution in 1962, and became an assistant professor of mechanical engineering there in 1963. In addition to teaching, he was a part-time consultant with the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center in 1962 and with the National Engineering Science Company in 1964, which he joined in 1965. He went to Naval Ship Research and Development Center in 1966 as an aerospace engineer, where his principal area of activity was high-speed gas dynamics. Between 1977 and 1988, Mr. Pick worked as an Engineering Manager in the Navy's High Energy Laser Program Office. He was Systems Engineering Manager in the NATO Seasparrow Project Office from 1988 to 1994. Mr. Pick retired from the government in January 1995 but continues to work as a private consultant. He has been a volunteer with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum since January 1993.

PAUL A. SHAPIRO is the Director of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies. He previously served as Staff Director for the Committee on Conscience of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. Prior to these assignments, Mr. Shapiro was involved for over a decade in the development of the Museum's archival collections on the Holocaust, during which time he undertook numerous archival research and acquisition missions to Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine. Before joining the Museum, Mr. Shapiro served as Chief of the Community Relations Division in the Office of International Visitors and as Executive Assistant to the Associate Director for Educational and Cultural Affairs at the United States Information Agency. Mr. Shapiro has degrees in government, international affairs, and history from Harvard University and Columbia University.

The Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum promotes the growth of the field of Holocaust studies, including the dissemination of scholarly output in the field. It also strives to facilitate the training of future generations of scholars specializing in the Holocaust.

Under the guidance of the Academic Committee of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, the Center provides a fertile atmosphere for scholarly discourse and debate through research and publication projects, conferences, fellowship and visiting scholar opportunities, and a network of cooperative programs with universities and other institutions in the United States and abroad.

In furtherance of this program the Center has established a series of working and occasional papers prepared by scholars in history, political science, philosophy, religion, sociology, literature, psychology, and other disciplines. Selected from Center-sponsored lectures and conferences, or the result of other activities related to the Center's mission, these publications are designed to make this research available in a timely fashion to other researchers and to the general public.



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