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**A POST-MORTEM OF THE  
HOLOCAUST IN HUNGARY**  
A Probing Interpretation of the Causes

Monna and Otto Weinmann Lecture Series  
June 20, 2012

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THE MONNA AND OTTO WEINMANN ANNUAL LECTURE focuses on Holocaust survivors who came to America, and on their families. Born in Poland and raised in Austria, Monna Steinbach Weinmann (1906–1991) fled to England from Vienna in the autumn of 1938. Otto Weinmann (1903–1993) was born in Vienna and raised in Czechoslovakia. He served in the Czech, French, and British armies, was injured in the D-Day invasion at Normandy, and received the *Croix de Guerre* for his valiant contributions during the war. Monna Steinbach and Otto Weinmann married in London in 1941 and immigrated to the United States in 1948. Funding for this program is made possible by a generous grant from their daughter Janice Weinmann Shorestein. The Monna and Otto Weinmann Annual Lecture is organized by the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.



The destruction of Hungarian Jewry in 1944 constitutes one of the most controversial chapters in the history of the Holocaust. These particular events, arguably, need not have occurred. By the time the Jews of Hungary were subjected to the Final Solution, the leaders of the world, including the national and Jewish leaders of Hungary, were fully aware of the realities of Auschwitz. It was by then also generally believed that the Third Reich would lose the war: Italy had successfully extricated itself from the Axis alliance in the summer of 1943; the Red Army, having liberated almost all the territory of the Soviet Union, was fast approaching the Romanian border; and the Western Allies, following their military successes in Northern Africa, the Pacific, and in Italy, were completing their plans for D-Day. These military realities also were recognized by many among the Nazis themselves. Precisely because of this recognition these Nazis became more determined than ever to win at least what they claimed was their parallel war against the Jews.

The Jews of Hungary survived the first four and a half years of the Second World War relatively intact and almost oblivious to what was happening to the other Jewish communities in Nazi-dominated Europe. By early 1944 they—patriotic citizens who had identified themselves with the cause of the Magyars since the anti-Habsburg Revolution of 1848–49—had become convinced that under the protection of the conservative-aristocratic leadership of Hungary they would emerge from the war relatively unscathed.

These convictions were largely shattered following the beginning of the German occupation of Hungary, on March 19, 1944. It is a tragic irony of history that this large and generally self-confident Jewish community was subjected to the swiftest and particularly barbaric process of destruction on the eve of Allied victory. In contrast to Poland, for example, where the Nazis took five years to accomplish their murderous designs, in Hungary they and their Hungarian accomplices required less than four months.

The Hungarian chapter of the Holocaust is a historical puzzle that has perplexed many scholars and laypersons since the end of the Second World War. How and why was the destruction of Hungarian Jewry possible on the eve of Allied victory? Let us look first at the historical antecedents and at the processes of destruction. Then we'll attempt to solve the historical puzzle by identifying and analyzing four of its several parts.

### **The Historical Antecedents and Processes of Destruction**

Hungary was the first country to adopt an anti-Jewish law in post-World War I Europe. For many of the Jews, the adoption of the so-called *Numerus Clausus* Law of 1920 was a wake-up call, undermining their deeply held belief—in retrospect an illusionary one—that a veritable Magyar-Jewish symbiosis had developed during the lifespan of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867–1918). Their belief was further undermined by the pogrom-like terror that was unleashed by the counterrevolutionaries in the early 1920s and by the anti-Jewish domestic and pro-Nazi foreign policies that Hungary began to pursue in 1935. During the interwar period Hungarian society was preoccupied with the urgent need to solve two basic issues: revisionism and the “Jewish question.” The successive Hungarian governments dedicated themselves to undoing the “punitive” consequences of the Trianon Treaty (1920).<sup>1</sup> Toward this end, they aligned Hungary’s revisionist foreign policy with that of Nazi Germany, which, beginning in 1933, committed itself to the dismantling of the European order that was based on the Versailles Treaty of 1919. Hungary’s alignment with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy proved highly successful: between 1938 and 1941 it led to the reacquisition of large chunks of territory from Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia. In pursuing its revisionist ambitions with the aid of the Axis alliance, Hungary felt compelled to “solve” its own Jewish question. Almost concurrently with each territorial reacquisition, Hungary adopted a series of increasingly severe anti-Jewish laws and a large number of decrees implementing them. By the time Hungary joined the other

Axis powers in declaring war against the Soviet Union, on June 27, 1941, and against the Western Allies six months later, most of the Hungarian Jews already had been impoverished and deprived of their basic rights. Many thousands of Jewish men of military age were drafted into labor service; approximately 18,000 so-called “alien” Jews were rounded up and deported to near Kamenets-Podolsk, where most of them were murdered in late August 1941. By the time the Germans occupied Hungary, Hungarian Jewry had suffered approximately 60,000 casualties: in addition to the 18,000 “alien” Jews, approximately a thousand Jews had been murdered by Hungarian soldiers and gendarmes in and around Újvidék (Novi Sad) in January-February 1942, and approximately 42,000 labor servicemen had died or were murdered, most of them along the Soviet fronts in the Ukraine.

Nevertheless, most of Hungarian Jewry survived under the relative protection of the successive Hungarian governments. Most of the conservative-aristocratic members of these governments were “civilized anti-Semites,” who abhorred Nazism and their local followers—the *Nyilas*—even more than they hated the Jews. While they were eager to diminish and eventually eliminate the influence of the Jews in the Hungarian economy and culture, they consistently rejected the Nazis’ demands to mark, expropriate, and deport them.

As the tide of the war began to change in favor of the Allies in early 1943, the Jews of Hungary became increasingly convinced that they would survive the war. In contrast to the knowledge of their own Jewish community’s leaders and the national leaders of Hungary, the Jewish masses had no inkling about Auschwitz and were almost oblivious to what happened elsewhere in Nazi-dominated Europe.

Their conviction and sense of optimism were shattered almost immediately after the beginning of the German occupation. Most Jews could not possibly know that the occupation was largely due to Germany’s resolve to protect its military and strategic interests by preventing Hungary from following Italy’s example and extricating itself from the Axis alliance.

With the occupation, the Jews were trapped; they were abandoned by the Hungarians upon whom they had counted for their survival. The new Hungarian government, constitutionally appointed by Miklós Horthy, the Regent who continued as head of state, outdid even the Nazis in its eagerness to bring about the “solution of the Jewish question” in the shortest possible time. It placed the instruments of state power—the police, gendarmerie, and civil service—at the disposal of those in charge of the Final Solution. With most of the Hungarians passive or intoxicated by decades of



antisemitic propaganda, the relatively few members of the so-called Eichmann-*Sonderkommando*, acting mostly as advisors, succeeded with the enthusiastic help of their Hungarian accomplices in implementing the Final Solution program at lightning speed. Within the first 45 days of the occupation the Jews of Hungary were isolated, marked, and expropriated. In the provinces they first were placed into local ghettos and then concentrated in entrainment centers. Between May 15 and July 8, 1944, approximately 440,000 Jews were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 147 freight trains. By July 9, when Raoul Wallenberg arrived on his rescue mission, all of Hungary (with the notable exception of Budapest) already was *judenrein*.

The bibliography relating to the antecedents and the processes of destruction of Hungarian Jewry is one of the richest in Holocaust studies.<sup>2</sup> The question as to *why* it was possible for the Nazis and their Hungarian accomplices to destroy the large and relatively intact Jewish community on the eve of Allied victory—the historical puzzle noted above—has not yet been adequately answered. Here are the four parts of that puzzle that we'll analyze to try to solve it: the attitudes and policies of the Jewish leaders, the calculations and policies of Hungary after World War I, the military and racial policy considerations of the Germans, and the relationship between the Jewish leaders of Slovakia and Hungary before and after the beginning of the occupation.

### **The Attitudes and Policies of the Jewish Leaders**

Throughout most of the Second World War the Hungarian Jews based their hopes for survival on the conservative-aristocratic national leaders of Hungary. Their wartime trust in the Hungarians can be traced to the attitudes and perceptions they had formed during the so-called “Golden Era,” which coincided with the lifespan of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867–1918). During this period, the Jews of Hungary became increasingly patriotic and—to the chagrin of the other nationalities living in the Kingdom—they proudly identified themselves with the cause of the Magyars. They were among the most ardent supporters of the Hungarian Revolution against the Habsburgs in 1848–49, having assumed a disproportionate share of the military and economic burdens of the Revolution that held out the promise of their emancipation. According to Lajos Kossuth, the enlightened leader of the Revolution, approximately 20,000 (11.1%) of his army of 180,000 were Jewish—at a time when the Jews, numbering 340,000, were but 3.7 percent of the total population of 9.2 million. Mór Jókai, one of Hungary's most celebrated authors, also praised the Jews' contribution to

the cause. According to Jókai, “no ethnic-national group contributed as much in terms of their lives and wealth to the Hungarian struggle of independence as the Jews did.”

After the Revolution was crushed in 1849, the Hungarians as well as the Jews were severely penalized by the victorious Habsburgs. Partially as a reward for their pro-Magyar stance, the Jews of Hungary were emancipated concurrently with the establishment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1867. Most of the Hungarian leaders of the Revolution were nationalist statesmen who were not fully guided by the principles of pluralism and tolerance. Accepting the preference of those Hungarian leaders, many of the Jews—especially those living in Budapest and in the western part of the country—assimilated, gradually acculturated, and some even converted to Christianity. In the course of time, many of them magyarized their names and referred to themselves as “Magyars of the Israelite faith.” They had come to believe that a genuine symbiosis had been forged between them and the Magyars.

With newly acquired access to the institutions of higher learning and the opening of many economic and cultural opportunities, Jews soon came to play a leading role in the modernization of Hungary. Many took full advantage of the legislative and administrative support of the aristocratic-conservative elements of the country, who were themselves beneficiaries of the modernization process. Within a generation or two, Jews achieved leading, if not dominant, positions in business, banking, industry, and the professions. They also distinguished themselves in the fields of science, culture, and the arts. Jews also played an important role in Hungary’s political life by providing the slim majority the Magyars needed to rule over the co-inhabiting nationalities.

Motivated not only by gratitude but also by conviction, many Jews became almost chauvinistic in their patriotism. According to Paul Ignatus, a noted Hungarian writer, “the Jews became ... more fervently Magyar than the Magyars themselves.” Under the euphoric conditions of this era, few Hungarian Jews envisioned the possibility of a disaster looming in the future.

There was one notable exception: the Budapest-born Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism. Herzl shared with his Hungarian parliamentary friend, Ernő Mezei, his misgivings about a possible ominous future for Hungarian Jewry. In a 1903 letter, Herzl wrote: “The hand of fate shall also seize Hungarian Jewry. And the later this occurs, and the stronger this Jewry becomes, the more cruel and hard shall be the blow, which shall be delivered with greater savagery. There is no escape.”

Clearly, the ardent champions of assimilation and magyarization failed to see or minimized the anti-Jewish manifestations about which Herzl must have been concerned. It was during the Golden Era, for example, that the notorious Tiszaeszlár ritual murder case (1882–83) took place, as did the antisemitic agitations by politically and ideologically motivated politicians and clerical forces.<sup>3</sup>

After the end of the First World War and the consequent disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Hungarian Jewry began to feel the blows Herzl had foretold. The postwar revolutions virtually destroyed the euphoria felt by many, mostly unassimilated, Jews. Hungary became the first country in postwar Europe to adopt an anti-Jewish law. In retrospect, this so-called *Numerus Clausus Law* (1920), which limited access to higher education by Jewish students, was but the first of the many increasingly severe anti-Jewish measures adopted during the interwar period and that paved the way to the Holocaust. The many socioeconomic problems that arose following the losses incurred by Hungary under the Treaty of Trianon (1920), coupled with those caused by the Great Depression, fueled the flames of antisemitism during the 1930s. As in Nazi Germany, the Jews were used as convenient scapegoats.

Despite the many anti-Jewish measures adopted by the consecutive Hungarian governments during the 1930s, the loyalty of the Jews to the Hungarian state remained basically unchanged. Like the Magyars, most Jews also lamented the losses Hungary had to endure under the terms of the Trianon Treaty. In the territories acquired by the successor states—Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia—the Jews, to the dismay of the respective governments, by and large continued to cling to their Hungarian language and culture. Notwithstanding the many anti-Jewish incidents that took place in the early 1920s, and the pro-Reich policies the successive Hungarian governments had pursued after 1935, Jews continued to cling to the perceptions they had formed during the Golden Era. They continued to believe that the leaders of Hungary, their pro-German foreign and domestic policies notwithstanding, would continue to protect the basic interests of their fellow “Magyars of the Israelite faith.” Even after the adoption of major anti-Jewish laws beginning in May 1938, most of the Jews remained steadfast in their views. Many among their leaders even rationalized the “need” for the adoption of some anti-Jewish measures as reflections of the “spirit of the times”—prudent measures designed to appease the Right extremists at home and the Nazis abroad. Hungarian Jews continued to feel secure under the protection of the successive conservative-aristocratic governments, whose members had hated the Nazis and feared the local extremists almost as much as the Jews did. Many among these governmental

figures had close and lucrative relations with Jewish bankers, business magnates, and industrialists. While most Jews suffered under the impact of the anti-Jewish laws, many among the economic moguls—most of them converts to Christianity and with close social and personal ties to the Magyar conservative-aristocratic elite—continued to prosper during the war.

Despite the many draconian anti-Jewish measures, including the adoption of a military-related labor service system and Nuremberg-type racial legislation, the Jews of Hungary felt relatively secure during the first four and a half years of the Second World War. While they suffered approximately 60,000 casualties during this period, they continued to convince themselves that they would survive the war, albeit economically much worse off. Hungary, they rationalized, was after all a member of the Axis alliance; what happened in antisemitic Poland and elsewhere in Nazi-dominated Europe could not possibly happen in civilized and chivalrous Hungary; the Hungarians would never forget the great contributions their fellow citizens of the Jewish faith had made to the advancement of the political interests and the modernization of the nation; and, finally, the war itself was bound to end soon with the victory of the Allies.

While the Final Solution was in full swing in Nazi-dominated Europe, the Jewish leaders continued their rationalizations, insisting that Hungarian Jewry was “fully amalgamated with the Hungarian nation in language, spirit, culture, and feeling.” “Hungarian Jewry,” they argued, “is Hungarian, and it is understood that in its heart and soul it forms an integral part of the Hungarian nation.”<sup>4</sup>

The rationalizations of the Jewish leaders had some basis in fact until the German occupation of Hungary on March 19, 1944. Hungary was the only country in Nazi-dominated Europe that still had a relatively intact large Jewish community. Its Jewish population numbered nearly 800,000, including the approximately 100,000 converts to Christianity and other Christians who were identified as Jews under the racial laws then in effect. The many anti-Jewish laws and decrees notwithstanding, the Jews felt physically secure under the protection of the conservative-aristocratic government that ruled the country. “Civilized antisemites” that they were, the members of this government adopted a series of measures calculated to drastically curtail the influence of the Jews in the economic and cultural life of Hungary, but consistently rejected the Nazis’ demands to subject them to a Final Solution program.

In contrast to the top national and Jewish leaders of Hungary, the masses—Christian and Jewish alike—had no awareness of the realities of the Final Solution in Nazi-dominated Europe. The Jews of Hungary were, of course, familiar with the

suffering endured by the labor servicemen deployed in the Ukraine and in Serbia as well as with the plight of the thousands of “alien” Jews who were rounded up and deported in the summer of 1941. Many of them heard horrific accounts of persecution and of the horrible conditions in ghettos—accounts by Polish, Slovak, and other refugees who had found haven in Hungary. But few, if any, had actual information of the realities of the Final Solution. Virtually none among the Jews ever heard of Auschwitz or of the other death and concentration camps that were operated by the Nazis in occupied Poland.<sup>5</sup>

The optimism of the Jews was reinforced during the seven months prior to the German occupation, when Hungary was secretly searching for an “honorable” way out of the Axis alliance. Although the anti-Jewish laws still were in effect, they were less rigorously enforced, considerably easing the lot of many Jews. To the dismay of the Nazis and the domestic extremists, in mid-December 1943 the Hungarian government also put on trial 15 top military and gendarmerie officers for war crimes they had committed against Serbs and Jews in and around Újvidék in early 1942. The Jews were aware of these positive developments and their leaders—Orthodox, Neolog, and Zionist—became further convinced that their communities would survive the war under the protective umbrella of the Hungarian government. The political and military developments of this period reinforced in these leaders the attitudes and perceptions they had acquired during the Golden Era.

### **The Calculations and Policies of Hungary after World War I**

The protective umbrella upon which the Jewish leaders relied for survival collapsed immediately after the beginning of the “unexpected” German occupation of Hungary on March 19, 1944. The occupation shattered these hopes—in retrospect the illusions and rationalizations—of the Jews as well as the political and military calculations of the conservative-aristocratic leaders upon whom they had depended for survival.

The chain of events that led to the German occupation was triggered by the unrealistic maneuverings of the conservative-aristocratic government during the second half of 1943, when it concluded that the Axis would lose the war. Hungary embraced the Third Reich in the mid-1930s and joined it in the war against the Allies in June 1941, when the Axis appeared invincible. It did so largely in order to erase the dire consequences of the Trianon Treaty and—because the Romanians, the Slovaks, and the

Croats, Hungary's traditional enemies, now were its allies in the war against the Soviet Union—to retain the territories it had acquired between 1938 and 1941.

Hungary's decision to enter the war was the culmination of the revisionist policies the Horthy-led counterrevolutionary regime had pursued in tandem with the Third Reich, which was committed to destroying the world order based on the Peace Treaty of Versailles. The synchronization of Hungary's foreign policies with those of the Third Reich was solidified in 1935, when Gyula Gömbös, an ardent Germanophile, became prime minister. With the increase in the economic and political penetration of Hungary by the Reich, the power of the Right extremists grew rapidly. The virulently antisemitic campaign that was fueled by the many Nazi-financed extremist political parties and movements prepared the ground for the adoption of ever harsher measures against the Jews. In the public dialogue of the period, the "solution of the Jewish question" soon acquired the same importance as the issue of revisionism. The two issues became intertwined to such an extent that the political elite, like the masses at large, came to be convinced that the success of their revisionist ambitions depended on the speedy solution of the Jewish question.

Hungary's revisionist foreign policy yielded its first positive result soon after the September 1938 signing of the Munich Pact, which led to the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. With the aid of the Reich, in early November Hungary reacquired the Upper Province (*Felvidék*) and, in March 1939, Carpatho-Ruthenia (*Kárpátalja*) from Czechoslovakia. In August–September 1940, it acquired Northern Transylvania from Romania, and in April 1941 the Bácska area from Yugoslavia. It was largely to preserve the newly acquired territories that Hungary joined Nazi Germany in its war, first against the Soviet Union in late June 1941 and then against the Western Allies at the end of the year. Convinced at the time that the Axis would ultimately win, Hungary had hoped that it would be enabled to reacquire the other territories it had lost under the Trianon Treaty.

The euphoric hopes of the Hungarians would soon fade. The military debacles of 1943 made it increasingly clear that the Axis would lose the war. The Hungarian Second Army suffered a crushing defeat at Voronezh, followed shortly by the disaster met by the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad in early 1943. That summer Italy—the Fascist ally to which the Hungarian leadership felt politically and ideologically closer than they did to Nazi Germany—extricated itself from the Axis alliance, though it did lead to German "occupation" of that Italian territory the Allies had not yet conquered.

During the second half of 1943, therefore, Hungary became increasingly eager to at least partially follow the example of Italy but by finding an “honorable” way to extricate itself from the Axis without sacrificing its basic interests. Ignoring the geographic location of their country and its strategic importance for the Germans, the conservative-aristocratic leaders developed a “secret” plan that proved fundamentally quixotic—their scheme was to surrender to the Western Allies exclusively. They feared the Soviets against whom they had launched an aggressive war, and they abhorred Bolshevism even more than they disliked Nazism. With little regard for the military realities that fused together the Allies, the Hungarians rationalized that the Western Allies, who also were anti-Bolshevik, would open the long-awaited second front by invading Nazi-dominated Europe through the Balkans. By moving northward toward the Baltic States, they rationalized, the Western Allies not only would crush the Nazis, but also would prevent the western penetration of Bolshevism. Under these circumstances, they falsely believed, they could surrender exclusively to the Western Allies. In gratitude for their surrender, they secretly hoped, the Western democracies might even allow Hungary to retain the territories it had gained with the aid of the Nazis and perhaps even concur with the perpetuation of the antiquated but fiercely anti-communist regime. Toward this end, Hungarian emissaries established contact with representatives of the Western Allies in Turkey and Italy.

However, the Germans, through their many spies and informers, were well aware of the Hungarians’ plans. While these “secret” negotiations were going on in late 1943 and early 1944, the Hungarian government, led by Miklós Kállay, eased the severity of the anti-Jewish drive and adopted a series of political and military measures that clearly irritated the Germans. In addition to putting on trial top pro-German military and gendarmerie officers, the Hungarians also sought the withdrawal of the remnant of the Hungarian Second Army “for the defense of Hungary along the Carpathians.”

To defend their national interests, the Germans decided not to allow Hungary to follow the example of Italy. Such a step, in their assessment, not only would deprive the Reich of the economic and military resources of Hungary, but also would interfere with the free flow of Romanian oil on which the German war machine depended, and would cut off, if needed, a vital escape route for German forces deployed in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. While the decision to occupy Hungary was based primarily on military-strategic considerations, the Nazis never lost sight of the “unsolved” Jewish question in the country.

Hitler completed his plans for the occupation of Hungary in February 1944. He presented the Hungarian leaders with a *fait accompli* at a meeting in Schloss Klessheim on March 17–18. Fearing the possible involvement of Romanian, Slovak, and Serbian forces in the occupation of Hungary—and thereby the possible loss of the territories acquired between 1938 and 1941—as Hitler had threatened in case of non-compliance, Miklós Horthy and the members of his delegation accepted the German terms. Fearful of Bolshevism, they decided against resisting the occupation, even though such a move might have enabled Hungary to retain its territorial integrity after the anticipated Allied victory. Horthy, as he later revealed, also agreed to the delivery of 300,000 Jewish “workers” to the Reich.

While the German occupation of Hungary of March 19 proved disastrous for most of the anti-Nazi conservative-aristocratic leaders, it proved fatal for most of the Jews. “In retrospect,” to quote from an earlier study, “it appears that had Hungary continued to remain a militarily passive but politically vocal ally of the Third Reich instead of provocatively engaging in essentially fruitless, if not merely alibi establishing, diplomatic maneuvers, the Jews of Hungary might possibly have survived the war relatively unscathed.”<sup>6</sup>

### **The Military and Racial Considerations of the Germans**

In contrast to the Hungarians, the Germans—realistic and in possession of overwhelming power—did not vacillate in protecting their political and military interests. While the determining factor underlying their decision to occupy Hungary was military, the planned “solution” of the Jewish question also played a crucial part. At first the Germans were not absolutely sure that the new government they planned to install in replacement of the “pro-Jewish” Kállay government would be ready to implement a Final Solution program. Some among the Nazis feared that, given the fragile military and international situation at the time, Horthy and his new pro-German Hungarian government might decide to emulate Marshal Ion Antonescu, the Romanian dictator, in dealing with the Jewish question and consider it a domestic issue. These Nazis were aware that while Antonescu was responsible for the death of approximately 300,000 Romanian and Ukrainian Jews in 1940–43, he nevertheless eventually decided not fully to embrace the Final Solution, thereby “saving” most of the Jews of Old Romania and Southern Transylvania. That the increasing prospect of an Allied victory and Soviet occupation figured in Antonescu’s calculations is not in serious doubt.



The hundred-member *Eichmann-Sonderkommando* arrived in Hungary with contingency plans. To their pleasant surprise, members of the newly established government of Döme Sztójay—all constitutionally appointed by Horthy—outdid the SS in their eagerness to “solve” the Jewish question. Aware of the fast-approaching Soviet forces, the new government placed the instruments of state power—the police, gendarmerie, and civil service—at the disposal of the Germans and Hungarians in charge of the Final Solution. Since time was of the essence, the Nazis and their Hungarian accomplices acted swiftly and decisively. Resolved to implement the Final Solution before the arrival of the Red Army, they subjected the Jews not only to the fastest but also the most barbaric process of destruction in the history of the Holocaust.

The German occupation of Hungary caught the Jews as well as most Hungarians by surprise. Stunned and bewildered, the Jews suddenly realized that all their assumptions and calculations were about to go awry. At first, they continued to hope against hope that the new Hungarian government, which included many members of the previous conservative governments, would consider the Jewish question a domestic issue and prevent the Nazis from implementing their plans. They also found solace in the fact that Horthy had resolved to continue as head of state without knowing, of course, that the Regent not only had committed Hungary to the delivery of 300,000 Jewish “workers” to Germany but also had decided not to become involved in Jewish matters. But even if the Nazis were adamant, the Jews rationalized, the Hungarians would resist because of the essential role the Jews were playing in the economy—an economy that was in the service of both the German and the Hungarian war effort. Finally, the Jews also tended to believe that, given the “imminent and inevitable” victory of the Allies, the new Hungarian leaders would not expose themselves to possible criminal prosecution for war crimes after the war.

These assumptions and rationalizations dissipated almost immediately after the Jewish leaders approached the heads of various governmental agencies only to be told in unequivocal terms that the handling of the Jewish question had become the exclusive responsibility of the Germans. Despite these ominous developments some top Jewish leaders continued to cling to their patriotic posture in advising the community. In April 1944, when the Jews of Hungary already were subjected to many draconic anti-Jewish measures, including the wearing of the Yellow Star of David, Dr. Ferenc Hevesi, the Neolog Chief Rabbi, urged the Jews “to pray to God for yourself, your family, your children, but primarily and above all for your Hungarian Homeland! Love of Homeland, fulfillment of duty, and prayer should be your guiding light.”<sup>7</sup> This

obsequious appeal to patriotism also was heard while Jews were already in ghettos. In the ghetto of Szeged, for example, in a sermon read just before the deportations started, the Rabbi of Mohács stated: "In spite of all persecution, we must love our country, as it is not the country that has repudiated us, but wicked men."<sup>8</sup> These messages by the rabbis had no influence on the Hungarians. They also left many of the lay leaders of Hungarian Jewry, especially the Zionists, unmoved. In their desperate effort to save the community after the Hungarians had abandoned them, they felt they had no alternative but to negotiate with the SS representatives in Hungary.

### **The Impact of the Jewish Leaders of Slovakia**

The leaders of Hungarian Jewry had a long history of close relationship with the Jewish leaders of Slovakia, many of whom—like many of the Jews of the country—were Hungarian-speaking. The relationship was especially close between the leaders of the Zionist-oriented Relief and Rescue Committee of Budapest (*Vaadah*)<sup>9</sup> and the so-called Working Group (*Pracovná Skupina*) of Bratislava, which operated within the framework of the Jewish Council.<sup>10</sup> Contacts between the two organizations became especially close after early 1943, when the *Vaadah* emerged as a major vehicle for the rescue and support of refugees fleeing persecution in Nazi-dominated Europe. Most of the refugees finding haven in Hungary were from Poland and Slovakia. By the time the *Vaadah* was established the Slovakian puppet government, acting in close cooperation with Dieter Wisliceny, the Nazis' expert on the solution of the Jewish question, had deported approximately 60,000 or two thirds of Slovakia's original Jewish population of 88,000.

The Jews of Slovakia were the first to be deported to Auschwitz after the death camp began its operations in March 1942. The deportations were halted in June 1942 for many reasons, including the Slovak national leaders' request to visit the new "Jewish settlements in the East," which, if granted, would have exposed the realities of the "final solution." Other basic reasons included Jews' successful bribing of local Hlinka leaders; remaining Jews' receipt of "protective letters" certifying that they were essential to the nation's economy, and pressure from the Catholic Church and the Vatican.

The leaders of the Jewish community of Slovakia were under the impression, falsely in retrospect, that it was their bribing of Wisliceny that had halted the deportations in 1942. These leaders, especially Rabbi Michael Dov Weissmandel, one

of the leading figures of the Working Group, had convinced themselves that by bribing the SS they could save Jewish lives.<sup>11</sup>

Emboldened by their presumed success in halting the deportations, the leaders of Slovak Jewry again contacted Wisliceny, using the informer Karel Hochberg as an intermediary, in October 1942. They offered a grandiose “Europa Plan” under which the SS would suspend the deportations of Jews to occupied Poland from all over Europe in exchange for the payment of two million dollars.<sup>12</sup> These Jewish leaders operated on the mistaken assumption that bribing the top officers of the *Sonderkommando* would prevent, or at least delay, the Nazis’ anti-Jewish drive. They did not—and perhaps could not—realize that these SS officers operated under the command of the Reich Security Main Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*—RSHA), Heinrich Himmler’s agency in Berlin, and that their independent decision-making power with regard to excluding Jews from the “final solution” was in fact limited.<sup>13</sup> Operating under the guidelines of the RSHA, Wisliceny cunningly played along with the suggestions of the Jewish leaders, laying his hands on Jewish-owned wealth and arousing false hopes in the Jews and lulling them into submission while he and his associates continued to implement the Final Solution in Nazi-dominated Europe.

The Hungarian Jewish leaders were kept abreast of the Slovak Jewish leaders’ “successful” negotiations with the SS.<sup>14</sup> They also received periodic reports about the Nazis’ anti-Jewish drive in Europe, especially in Poland and Slovakia. These reports reinforced the communications they had received from other sources, including the many national and international Jewish organizations in Palestine, Switzerland, and Turkey—all enhancing their awareness of the realities of the Final Solution.<sup>15</sup> By the time they received copies of the Auschwitz Reports at the end of April or sometime in May 1944, they already were familiar with the Nazis’ war against the Jews; the reports provided them with additional specific details about the operations of the death camp.<sup>16</sup> By that time, however, most of the Jews of Hungary were already in ghettos and many of them already had been deported to Auschwitz.

As elsewhere in Nazi-dominated Europe, the Jews of German-occupied Hungary were helpless and defenseless. Rebuffed by the Hungarians upon whom they had counted for support, the leaders of Hungarian Jewry felt compelled to deal with the SS. As in Slovakia, Wisliceny, at least at first, played the leading role in the negotiations between the SS and the Hungarian Jewish leaders. A few days after the beginning of the occupation of Hungary, he handed Fülöp Freudiger, the head of the Orthodox Jewish Community, a letter of recommendation from Rabbi Michael Dov

Weissmandel, one of the architects of the Europa Plan. The rabbi identified Wisliceny as a venal SS officer with whom the Jewish leaders could do business and as a “reliable” negotiating partner.<sup>17</sup> While Freudiger continued to maintain contact with Wisliceny until his own escape to Romania in August 1944, the negotiations with the SS soon were taken over by Rezső (Rudolph) Kasztner and other leaders of the Zionist-oriented *Vaadah*.<sup>18</sup> In his capacity as the de facto head of the *Vaadah*, Kasztner was perhaps the most informed about the Nazis’ campaign against the Jews. Appearing as a witness for the prosecution in Veessenmayer’s trial (the Ministries Trial) on March 19, 1948, he stated: “I was, I think, one of the most informed in Hungary about the situation of the Jews at the time.... We had, as early as 1942, a complete picture of what had happened in the east to the Jews deported to Auschwitz and the other concentration camps.”<sup>19</sup>

Samu Stern, the head of the Neolog Jewish community of Pest and later president of the Central Jewish Council, also admitted awareness of the Nazis’ onslaught against the Jews. In his memoirs, he stated, among other things: “I knew what they had done in all German-occupied states of Europe.... And the others knew as much as I did when they joined the Council as members.”<sup>20</sup>

The SS preferred to deal with the Zionists rather than the leaders of the Neolog and Orthodox communities, many of whom continued to pin their hopes on the Hungarians. The Nazis worked on the assumption that the Zionist leaders had many international connections that could be exploited not only for the acquisition of foreign currency and war-related materials, but also for the advancement of the Reich’s political interests abroad, including a possible rupture in the US-British-Soviet alliance.

The first meeting between the Zionists and the SS took place on April 5, the day the Jews first were required to wear the Yellow Star. Relying on the well-meant but in retrospect fatal advice of the Slovak Jewish leaders, the Zionist leaders of Hungary began the negotiations by raising the question of the possible rescue of Hungarian Jewry on the basis of the Europa Plan. The SS agreed to the negotiations without hesitation, inducing the Zionists to deliver large amounts of cash and valuables in return for the promise to help which the Nazis never intended to keep.<sup>21</sup>

Although aware of the realities of the Final Solution program and of the tactics and strategies the SS had employed elsewhere in their war against the Jews, the Hungarian Jewish negotiators had a basic strategy of their own: they tried to safeguard the interests of the Jewish community by winning a desperate race with time. With an

eye on the military victories of the Allies, and especially the rapid advance of the Red Army, they hoped that they could win this race by bribery and by dragging out the negotiations with the SS as long as possible. Each day that passed while the Jews still were in their homes, even though marked, isolated, and impoverished, was a gain in that race.

The SS negotiators were fully aware of this tactic and played along. Their basic bargaining objectives were as clear as they were ruthless. By negotiating with the Hungarian Jewish leaders and freeing a limited number of Jews, they would pocket a large amount of cash and valuables and lull the Jewish masses into submission, distracting their attention from the possibility of resistance. The SS had all the trump cards and continued to “negotiate” while proceeding with the implementation of the Final Solution according to their own well-planned schedule, part of a master plan they worked out in cooperation with their Hungarian accomplices.

The master plan called for the implementation of the Final Solution in Hungary in two distinct phases, each of which turned out to last for 54 days. During the first phase, lasting from the March 22 appointment of the Sztójay government until May 15, the victims were subjected to an avalanche of anti-Jewish laws and decrees. They were totally isolated; they were deprived of their right to travel and to own or use any means of transportation and communication, including bicycles, cars, radios, and telephones; they were forced to wear the Yellow Star and robbed of the remnant of their property. Then they were rounded up, placed into ghettos, and concentrated in entrainment centers. Few, if any, of the Jews had any inkling of the ultimate fate that was awaiting them.

During the second phase, lasting from May 15 through July 9, approximately 440,000 of the Jews of Hungary were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where most of them were murdered soon after their arrival. By July 9, when Horthy’s decision three days earlier to halt the deportations took effect and Raoul Wallenberg arrived on his rescue mission—as indicated earlier—all of Hungary (with the notable exception of Budapest) had become *judenrein*.

It was in late April or early May 1944 that the Zionist negotiators realized that their negotiating tactics had failed. The advance of the Red Army had stalled; the SS “renege” on their promises—promises that, under the desperate conditions in which they found themselves, the Jewish negotiators failed to realize that the SS could not and never intended to keep. They complained to their SS negotiating partners, who were eager to maintain “good relations” with the Jewish leaders to assure that their own

objectives—the continued acquisition of Jewish wealth and the maintenance of a calm, revolt-free climate that was required for the smooth implementation of the deportations—were met. To soothe the anger of the disappointed Zionists, the SS offered them two distinct but interrelated consolation prizes: a conditional plan to save over a million European Jews; and a more concrete plan for the rescue of a limited number of Hungarian Jews. The first came to be known as the “blood for trucks” offer;<sup>22</sup> the second as the SS-Kasztner deal.<sup>23</sup> While the two plans were being “seriously considered” by the Jewish leaders, the Nazis and their Hungarian accomplices continued to deport approximately 12,000 Jews daily. The former plan turned out to be primarily a Nazi attempt to try to split the Allies; the second ended up in the rescue of 1,684 Jews. The negotiations relating to the rescue of these relatively few Jews in the so-called Kasztner-transport emerged as one of the most controversial issues in the history of the Holocaust.<sup>24</sup>

When the Second World War ended in Europe on May 8, 1945, the four historical *dramatis personae* discussed in this study—the Third Reich, Hungary, and the Jews of Hungary and of Slovakia—all lost. The Third Reich, trumpeted to last for a thousand years, was crushed. Hungary was forced to give up the territories it had gained with the aid of the Nazis and once again was restricted to the boundaries set at Trianon. And the histories of both countries have forever been marred by the indelible, shameful chapter on the Holocaust.

The Jews of Hungary suffered approximately 560,000 (70%) casualties, those of Slovakia approximately 70,000 (87%). Many among the surviving Jews in these countries eventually emigrated to the newly established State of Israel—the one positive development in the otherwise tragic history of European Jewry during the Nazi era.

After the war, unlike the Federal Republic of Germany and several other states, Hungary failed to come to grips with its past. It failed to assume responsibility—let alone apologize—for its involvement in the murder of nearly 600,000 citizens of the Jewish faith. During the communist era, the issue of the Holocaust and the Jewish question in general was sunk in the Orwellian black hole of history. Since the establishment of a democratic system in 1989, the successive Hungarian governments have been engaged in a history-cleansing campaign calculated to bring about the rehabilitation of the Horthy era by pinning exclusive responsibility for the Holocaust on the Germans and a few “misguided” Hungarian pro-Nazis, the so-called *Nyilas*.

The campaign has acquired an ominous tone since the elections in 2010, when a new government—with an absolute majority in a parliament that also includes many representatives of an openly neo-Fascist party—embarked on the reshaping of Hungary along the national-Christian principles that characterized the Horthy era. In this political and cultural climate, antisemitism has again emerged as a major scourge poisoning the social fabric. Concurrent with the dedication of new statues and the unveiling of plaques honoring Horthy and other officials of the counterrevolutionary era one sees the desecration of Holocaust-related monuments and the manifestation of increasingly brazen anti-Jewish acts reminiscent of the antisemitic hysteria of the prewar era. One is bound to conclude that many Hungarians had failed to heed the warning by George Santayana: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Under the terms of the Treaty of Trianon, Hungary had lost two-thirds of its historic territory, one-third of its Magyar people, and three-fifths of its total population. For some details, see Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 23–28. (Cited hereafter as Braham, *Politics*.)

<sup>2</sup> *The Bibliography of the Holocaust in Hungary*. Randolph L. Braham, comp. and ed. (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 2011; distrib. by Columbia University Press).

<sup>3</sup> For some details on the “Golden Era” of Hungarian Jewry, see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 2–12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 806–849.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 230–262.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> The Relief and Rescue Committee of Budapest was established in early 1943 under the leadership of Ottó Komoly, its nominal head, and Rezső Kasztner, its real head. For details on the Committee’s activities, see *ibid.*, pp. 1069–1073.

<sup>10</sup> On the tragedy of the Jews of Slovakia and the activities of the Working Group, see *ibid.*, pp. 1048–1053, 1073–1075.

<sup>11</sup> According to currently available evidence, Rabbi Michael Dov Weissmandel did not contact Wisliceny until the early summer of 1942, that is, when the first phase of the deportations already had been completed. Even this contact was indirect: he had approached and dealt with Wisliceny only through Karel Hochberg, a Jewish traitor who worked for the SS. Wisliceny played along and took two payments of \$25,000 for his “services.” For some details on this and other aspects of the tragedy that befell the Jews of Slovakia, see Yehuda Bauer, *Jews for Sale? Negotiations Between Jews and Nazis, 1933-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), chapters 5 and 6, and Braham, *Politics*, pp. 1048–1053.

<sup>12</sup> For some details on the “Europa Plan,” see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 1074–1076.

<sup>13</sup> The SS, including members of the Eichmann-*Sonderkommando*, were authorized to barter individual or small groups of Jews in accord with a directive given by Hitler to Himmler. A memo by Himmler, dated December 10, 1942, reads as follows: “I have asked the Führer with regard to letting Jews go in return for ransom. He gave me full powers to approve cases like that, if they really bring in foreign currency in appreciable quantities from abroad.” Bauer, *Jews for Sale?*, p. 103. Himmler’s own instructions were: “Take whatever you can from the Jews. Promise them whatever you want. What we will keep is another matter.” *Ibid.*, p. 167.



<sup>14</sup> Gisi Fleischmann, one of the top leaders of the Working Group, was among those who complained bitterly about the failure of the official leaders of Hungarian Jewry to heed their pleas for financial support for the advancement of what they believed were serious rescue plans. Braham, *Politics*, p. 816.

<sup>15</sup> For details, see *ibid.*, pp. 806–849.

<sup>16</sup> The reports were based on the accounts by Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, two Slovakian Jews who miraculously had escaped from Auschwitz on April 7, 1944. For the text of the reports see Rudolf Vrba, *I Escaped from Auschwitz* (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 2002), pp. 327–363. For further details, see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 824–832. See also *The Auschwitz Reports and the Holocaust in Hungary*. Randolph L. Braham and William J. vanden Heuvel, eds. (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs 2011; distrib. by Columbia University Press).

<sup>17</sup> According to some sources, Wisliceny forced Rabbi Weissmandel to give him the “recommendation letter.” Wisliceny demonstrated his “power to deliver” to Freudiger by freeing his brother; he had been among the first influential Jews in Budapest to be arrested by the Gestapo immediately after the beginning of the occupation.

<sup>18</sup> During his May 17, 1945 debriefing by the FBI, Kasztner provided a succinct description of the “SS organization in Hungary responsible for Jewish persecution.” He claimed that “with the exception of von Wisliceny who accepted bribes ... all these SS men were completely incorruptible”; FBI Intelligence Report.

<sup>19</sup> Braham, *Politics*, p. 822. Edmund Veessenmayer was the Führer’s plenipotentiary in Hungary during the occupation.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 820.

<sup>21</sup> Following up on the Europa Plan offer made by the Slovak Jewish leaders, Wisliceny demanded a total of \$2,000,000, insisting that \$200,000 be paid immediately in Hungarian pengő as “proof of the Zionists’ goodwill and financial liquidity.” The first installment of three million pengő was delivered shortly thereafter to Hermann Krumej and Otto Hunsche, two leading figures of the Eichmann-*Sonderkommando*. The second installment of 2.5 million pengő was delivered to the same officers on April 21, while the ghettoization in Carpatho-Ruthenia and northeastern Hungary already was in full swing; Braham, *Politics*, pp. 1076–1077.

<sup>22</sup> For details, see *ibid.*, pp. 1078–1088.

<sup>23</sup> For details, see *ibid.*, pp. 1088–1104.

<sup>24</sup> For details, see *ibid.*, pp. 1104–1112.

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