



Jewish Life in Hungary

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The Jewish Community

Jews lived in the territory of Hungary already in the time of the Roman Empire. When the Christian Hungarian state was founded in 1000 AD it was from the very beginning ethnically and culturally diverse. The rulers welcomed the few Jewish immigrants, who came mainly from Western Europe and represented a more sophisticated urban culture.

During the middle Ages, European Christian anti-Judaism led, among other things, to the crusades. These sentiments could be felt in the Hungarian Kingdom in the 11-13th centuries where anti-Jewish resolutions were published at the time. A new chapter in the Jewish history of Hungary came after the Mongol invasion in 1241-42. The country lay in ruins and the king needed the Jews in the re-building of the economy. For this reason he gave them certain privileges in 1251. This in turn meant a rise in the number of communities. Compared to the troubled conditions of Western and Central Europe, the Hungarian state could provide more attractive opportunities for Jews.

During the 14th and 15th centuries various dynasties ruled Hungary. The economic growth of the time resulted in the development of cities where the majority of the Jewish population lived, working in trade, handicrafts and finances. Sometimes they were seen as competitors and subjected to pogroms and violent attacks. Sometimes Jews were invited to hold high positions in the society, thus representing the interests of the Jews on the highest level. The total Jewish population at the time amounted to approximately 2 500 – 4 000.

Then came a period of war with the Ottoman Turks, which left the country exhausted and affected the life of the Jews badly. Parts of Hungary came under Ottoman rule. As the Ottoman Empire practiced religious tolerance on the occupied lands, they considered Jews as worthy citizens of the empire. Therefore it is easy to understand how a flourishing Jewish community evolved in the Ottoman-occupied Buda, a part of today's Budapest.

Steps Towards Social Integration

New wars at the end of the 17th century meant that the Turks were driven out and that Hungary was captured by the Hapsburgs, supporters of the counter-reformation. During their reign religious intolerance increased and Jewish existence literally ceased.

However, soon immigration from the West slowly started again. In the second half of the century, the spread of the ideas of the enlightenment, among other things, claimed equality before law and made it a Europe-wide accepted principle. The enlightenment gradually contributed to the end of the isolation of the Jewish communities, finally bringing about the very first steps towards social integration.



King Bela IV 1235–1270 gave Jews legal rights and welcomed Jewish immigration.

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Between 1772 and 1795 Poland was partitioned and a large part of the former Polish land came under the Hapsburg Empire. This made the wandering within the empire easier for the Jews, so by the end of the 18th century, Jewish immigration from the southern part of Poland, called Galicia, became the most significant one. Hungary became an attractive destination with many opportunities for work in the civil professions.

Nationalism and Antisemitism

The evolving nationalism in the second half of the 19th century brought new challenges both for the Hungarian liberals and for the many Jews now living in Hungary. The Hungarian liberals wanted to emancipate the Jews together with achieving social equality. They expected the religious Jewish community to assimilate and abandon their customs, their language and ethnicity. A noticeable part of the Jewish community accepted the initiative of the liberals and became an active contributor to a quick process of integration and assimilation. In the revolution of 1848-49 that was fought against the Hapsburg rule, a large number of Jews took part on the Hungarian side. This contributed to the fact that the Hungarian government declared the Jews' equality before the law in 1849. However, the revolution was suppressed with Russian help and the victors heavily fined the Jews, but this did not weaken the forming social alliance.



Passover Seder for members of the MIKEFE Association, founded in 1842 to attract young people to productive trades, Hungary, 1860.

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1867 brings a new turn: the Austro-Hungarian Compromise created the dualist state, the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Hungarian parliament was among the first to enact its law to emancipate the Jews. The rapid economic development provided an exceptional site for the quickly assimilating Jewry.

Two important ideologies affected the Jews of Hungary in the 19th century. One, political antisemitism, which made anti-Judaism into a political program, it gathered followers mainly during the financial crisis in the second half of the century. Its first appearance was the formation of an Antisemitic Party, which managed to make its way to the parliament. Another important event was an accusation of blood libel (ritual murder) in a small town called Tiszaeszlár, where a young girl disappeared and the Jews were accused of killing her. No substantial evidence was found and eventually the accused were acquitted, but only after a series of pogroms and violence against the Jews. Although antisemitism was doubtlessly present in Hungary, this time anti-Judaism was no dominant ideology; people were much more interested in issues like social inequality, suffrage and real problems about ethnic matters.

The other ideology was Zionism, which can be perceived as an answer to the appearance of the political antisemitism.

The Conditions of the Jews Change

The collapse of the dualist state and the historical Hungary at the end of the First World War, as well as the forced Trianon Peace Treaty (1920) which resulted in the fact that almost one-third of ethnic Hungarians found themselves in hostile succession states, caused serious social trauma which radically changed the conditions of the Jews in the new country which lost two-thirds of its original territories. The new regime hallmarked by Miklós Horthy made antisemitism a vital element and fundament of its politics especially at the beginning and at the end of its reign.

Jewish politicians were participating in both governments after the collapse – in the first republican one searching for way out and in the second Soviet like Bolshevik-type one, as well. This fact was used by the new power to shift responsibility for losing the war, for the collapse of the country and the trauma of the Trianon Peace Treaty onto the entire Jewish community. It was topped by the peculiarity of the Hungarian social development - mentioned earlier - that could easily put the Jews on political target. It was ideologically stated that Jewish presence and assimilation was a harmful social process from a Hungarian point of view. Scapegoating was facilitated by the true tensions accumulated in the society: mostly by the intellectual middle-class immigrated from the succession states which led to a significant intellectual unemployment in the country. Politics abused the susceptibility for antisemitism of these classes to build its mass base.

One of the first orders of the new era was the Numerus Clausus law of 1920, which favored the preferred Christian middle-classes, hindering Jews from entering higher education. The open antisemitism of the regime decreased in the second half of the 1920s, because the country had an essential need of contributions from the Jewish merchants in reorganizing the country. The consolidation in internal and foreign affairs strengthened the conservatism of the system, which mitigated the initial harsh antisemitism. Nevertheless, antisemitism was present throughout the whole period and it needed only little external motivation to surface.

The most important ideological base of the Horthy era was the refusal of the Trianon Peace Treaty. Initially the Fascist Italy was the only foreign supporter. The idea of revising the peace treaties ending World War I had a stronger and more dangerous supporter after 1933, after Hitler's rise to power: Nazi Germany, which connected antisemitism with Aryanism making it its key concept and which was openly preparing for a new war.

The Hungarian extreme-right movements in the era had a path similar to that of antisemitism. Originally Gyula Gömbös, one of the most influential representatives of the Aryan concept, belonged to the innermost elite, but later István Bethlen representing a more moderate conservatism and consolidation squeezed him out of power. The country's politics became more radical following the economical crisis, and Gyula Gömbös was appointed prime minister. He was the first one to officially and personally congratulate Hitler on his rise in power, shifting the Hungarian-German economical and political contacts to a higher level. In his internal politics he tried to set up an Italian-type right-wing regime, but this ambition was suppressed by the reigning circles.



Local customers in front of a Jewish grocery in Berzence, around 1930.

Extreme-right Ideologies Gain Strength

The even more radical extreme-right ideologies gained strength in the critical social and economical situation caused by the Great Depression. Several small, extremely antisemitic, far-right groups formed and Ferenc Szálasi, a retired military officer, made them into a more uniformed "Hungarist" movement. They chose the arrow-cross as their symbol so his party became known as the Arrow-Cross Party. The governments after Gömbös aimed to hinder the spread of the movement. Szálasi was several times prosecuted and imprisoned. His party was often disbanded but was always re-founded and reached the pinnacle of its popularity in 1939: it had some 250 000 members and 31 representatives in the parliament after the elections. During the preparations for the war and the initiation of the armament program the social tensions reduced in the country, which resulted in the apparent decrease of the influence of the Arrow-Cross Party. The German politics eventually reached for this last ally and put it in power only in the very last moment.

At that time the Hungarian foreign policy did not have real options. The country successfully modified the Trianon borders several times with the help of the German Empire. Thus most of the territories disclosed in 1920 were re-annexed. Almost parallel to these successes orders impairing the Jews (known as the 'Anti-Jewish laws') came out. The parallelism does not mean that these laws were forced out directly by the Germans. The already existing antisemitic components of the regime gained strength and the political groups representing them grew more and more dominant. This effect strengthened further after the outbreak of the war and during the total isolation from the Western powers.

Nonetheless, it may rightfully be assumed that without the later direct German effect, which became obvious by the 1944 occupation of the country, the physical annihilation of the Jews would not have been realized, but once the occupation occurred every condition was given for the genocide.

The controversial character of the situation is well marked by the fact that - except for the Jewish-declared males compelled to slave labor service, working in humiliating and inhuman conditions on the front - compared to other Nazi-occupied countries, in Hungary one of Europe's biggest Jewish community (counting hundreds of thousands of people) was living in relative safety considering their physical existence, although the discriminating laws made their lives significantly more difficult.

Deportation of the Jews

On March 19, 1944 the situation changed dramatically and radically. Hitler had had enough of the secret Hungarian peacemaking attempts following the German defeats and opted for a direct military occupation. Together with the army, Adolf Eichmann, the SS deportation-specialist, also arrived and with the help of the new, absolutely pro-German government, the preparation for the deportation of Hungarian Jews started. According to the already evolved scenario, the rural Jewry was deprived of its rights and possessions and was moved to the ghettos - with the assistance of the Hungarian administration, railways and gendarmerie. The process was surrounded by the indifference and sometimes active participation of the non-Jewish Hungarian population. Between May and July 1944 practically all the people declared Jewish on the grounds of the earlier made racial laws - considering their religion or ancestry - were deported almost half a million people. Most of them were sent straight to Auschwitz, where the majority was immediately killed.



Jews drafted into the Hungarian Labor Service System march to a work site. Szeged, Hungary, between 1940 and 1944.



Jewish women and children deported from Hungary, separated from the men, line up for selection. Auschwitz camp, Poland, May 1944.



Portrait of members of a Hungarian Jewish family. They were deported to and killed in Auschwitz soon after this photo was taken. Kapuvar, Hungary, June 8, 1944.

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At the beginning of July 1944 when Horthy stopped the deportations, only the approximately hundred-thousand Jews in Budapest remained in the country. As an answer to the last desperate deserting attempt, the Germans raised their last ally, the Arrow-Cross Party to power under the lead of Ferenc Szálasi.

Adolf Eichmann started the preparations for the deportation of the Jews of Budapest. By this time a rescue action with a wide cooperation of mainly embassies of neutral countries evolved. The work of Raoul Wallenberg, Carl Lutz, Angelo Rotta, Giorgio Perlasca (and many others) saved thousands of lives. As the Soviet army blockaded Budapest, arrow-cross commandos committed spontaneous mass murders within the city: they shepherded thousands to the bank of the Danube where they shot the lined-up people into the river. The Budapest ghetto was liberated on January 18, so the total annihilation of the Budapest Jewry could not be successful: the majority escaped.

The defeated Hungary ended up under the influence of the Soviet Union, hence, traumas were suppressed, but not solved. Part of the Holocaust survivors who remained in Hungary abdicated fully from their identity but the later generations bear deep second and third generation traumas. Under the years of Stalinism cherishing Jewish traditions could go no further than the private and religious life.

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