

ISTVAN DEAK is Professor of History at Columbia University and the author of *The Lawful Revolution: Louis Kossuth and the Hungarians, 1848-1939* and *Weimar Germany's Left-Wing Intellectuals*.

characters of victim and avenger in one. That is the accomplishment of "The Applicant." Again, in "Lady Lazarus," deservedly the best known of Sylvia Plath's poems, the two roles are united. Here the victimized speaker shows her rage at first only by her tone. But at last

she drops the disguise of passive sufferer and turns into nemesis. The doctors who have revived her are persecutors, Nazis, even Lucifer. Now, therefore, the tyrant, the social order, the male state that tortured the victims of the Holocaust, are themselves savagely

threatened.

The poet becomes her own prosthesis. Instead of imagining an Other on whom to smear the hostilities and inadequacies of her inner nature, she will die as the outer, beguiling social person and be reborn as the vengeful "true" self. The

role of martyr gives way to that of assassin. Like a phoenix, the speaker will come back:

*Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.*

Could the Hungarian Jews Have Survived?

The Politics of Genocide:

The Holocaust in Hungary

by Randolph L. Braham.

Columbia University Press,
1,269 pp., \$80.00 (two volumes)

Istvan Deak

Statistics on the "Final Solution" in Hungary are contradictory and bewildering. Some refer only to the half-million Jews and "Christian Jews" living in the truncated Hungary created by the peace treaties of 1918. Others add to this the 400,000-odd Jews and converts in the lands Hungary recovered from her neighbors with German help between 1938 and 1941. These are sometimes counted as Hungarian Jews, sometimes as Czech, Romanian, and Yugoslav Jews. The bitter fact is that, of the 900,000 people in Hungary in 1941 whom the law regarded as Jews, almost two-thirds did not survive the war.

Professor Braham, a political scientist at City College in New York, gives a convincing and relentless account of this tragedy, devoting equal attention to the historical background and the day-to-day progress of genocide. He makes a careful analysis of the policies of the German and Hungarian authorities, of the bad or not-so-bad behavior of the Gentile public, of the subservience and dedication of the Jewish Council, of the curious and hotly debated activity of the Zionists, of the hostility, indifference, helpless passivity, or generous support of the various Christian churches, of the courage of individual "good Samaritans" and the cruelty, cowardice, and rapaciousness of the many thugs.

The conduct of several Axis countries such as Italy, Bulgaria, and even Romania was, he shows, more humanitarian than that of some neutral and Allied powers. The Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, recently awarded honorary US citizenship for "having saved 100,000 Jewish lives" (even 10,000 would be an optimistic figure) also gets his due as an honorable and brave but by no means unique member of the "brotherhood of the Righteous." Braham concludes with an account both of postwar restitution, a pitiful failure in Hungary, and of postwar retribution, an equally pitiful failure in West Germany. Admittedly, some of what is said in thirty-two long chapters is repetitious, and the plethora of names and places may discourage some readers. Still, this is an extremely important book.

What Braham does not fully describe, and what still lacks adequate documentation, is the true extent of Hungarian anti-Semitism. What were the social origins, professions, and motives of the anti-Semites?

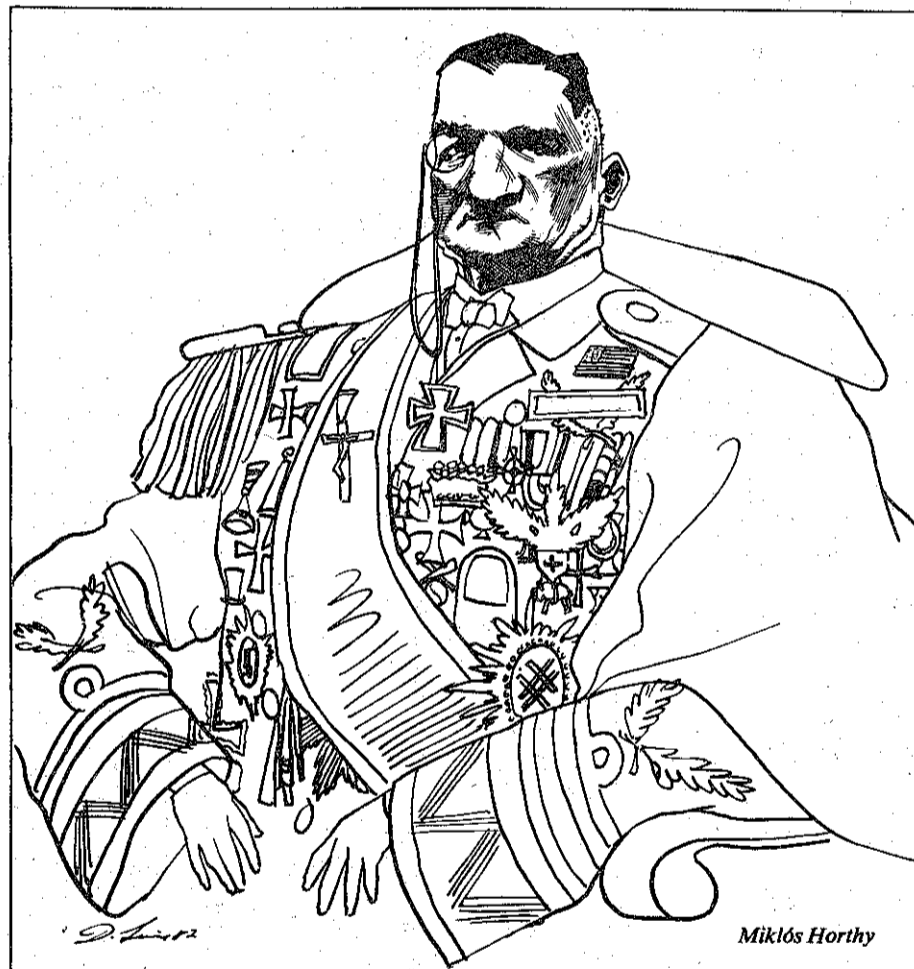
To understand anti-Semitism in Hungary, we must go back to the golden age of Hungarian Jewry, the half-century of near harmony extending from the emancipation of the Jews in 1867 to the outbreak of the First World War. In ex-

change for embracing the political ideas of the ruling nobility, the Jews were allowed to flourish. Their subsequent phenomenal success in education, science, the arts, culture, and business surpassed that of the German Jews; in fact, they became as assimilated to Hungarian culture as the German Jews were to German culture.

The secret of this relatively easy triumph lay in Hungary's outmoded social structure, but even more in the fact that the assimilated and patriotic Jews helped to tip the ethnic balance in favor of Hungarians in multinational Hungary. The jingoistic Budapest Jewish

the Slovak peasants or the Budapest industrial workers before 1914 would have helped the Jews in 1944. And even if a combined opposition of Jews, Slavs, and proletarians could have put an end to the aristocratic-gentry system of old Hungary—a system which had liberated the Jews—there is little guarantee that the new, more egalitarian regime would have been kinder to the Jews in 1944 than Admiral Horthy's conservative regime proved to be.

Many factors determined the fate of the Jews in Hitler's Europe, but the least important factor of all was the



press was a prominent advocate of the Hungarian cause against the Habsburgs and the Slavs. In many a town inhabited principally by Slovaks, Romanians, or Germans, the Jewish shopkeeper, innkeeper, tenant farmer, or rabbinical teacher was the sole agent of Hungarian culture and Hungarian national sentiments. Small wonder, then, that in the eyes of the other nationalities the Jews became identified with Hungarian interests, as they had long been identified by the peasants with the interests of the landowning nobility.

Whether such activity caused harm to the Jews in the long run is open to debate. Braham and others suggest that the Jews should have abandoned the theoretically liberal, but in effect conservative, government of pre-1914 Hungary for bourgeois-radical or socialist opposition to that government. Yet capitalists and aspiring capitalists do not normally become radicals or socialists, and it is hard to see how attempts to win over

democratic or undemocratic character of the countries where they lived. It is a crucial element in the Hungarian Jewish story—and Professor Braham emphasizes this repeatedly—that the Jews' only protectors against attacks from radical politicians and their followers were conservative aristocrats, themselves often anti-Semitic and unquestionably antidemocratic, antiliberal, and antisocialist. When, as a result of the German invasion of March 1944, the conservative aristocratic establishment temporarily lost its political influence, the road lay open for the extermination of the Jews. In any case, no large Jewish defection from the conservative camp occurred either before or after the First World War. This was partly because members of the Hungarian nobility knew how to reward their friends. Upon the recommendation of the royal Hungarian government, Francis Joseph and his successor Charles created twenty-eight Hungarian Jewish baronetcies and

ennobled 346 Jewish families.¹

A few Jews did go into opposition, and some even attempted revolution. This may very well have done harm to Jewry as a whole without greatly benefiting anyone. Most of the leaders of the bourgeois-radical and social democratic parties were Jews, as were almost all of the People's Commissars of the Hungarian Soviet republic set up under the leadership of Béla Kun in 1919. Not one of these progressive politicians ever publicly acknowledged his Jewishness, and they were repudiated by all but a few Jews. Still, the Gentile public saw them as Jewish leaders. Thus in post-1918 Hungary, when all the half-hidden anti-Semitism of the preceding age burst into the open, the Jews not only were identified with capitalism, modernism, urbanism, immorality, sexuality, and anticlericalism but also became symbols of the lost war, the "stab in the back," the lost territories, radicalism, socialism, and Bolshevism. As for the Jews' earlier support of Hungarian nationalism, this was no longer of any consequence, since Hungary, after the Versailles settlement, had ceased to be a multinational state. But, in view of the sufferings caused by the war, perhaps all of these associations and identifications would have been made in any case, even if Georg Lukács and his fellow Jewish intellectuals had not attempted to create their communist utopia in Budapest in 1919.

The counterrevolutionary regime of Admiral Miklós Horthy, which took power in November 1919, began by killing several hundred Jews and by introducing the first anti-Jewish law in modern European history. The law reduced the proportion of Jewish students at the universities to 6 percent, the approximate proportion of Jews in the general population. This was a harsh measure, since Jewish students were a majority in some faculties, but the law was quietly forgotten during the 1920s as Hungarian life became more stable under Prime Minister Count István Bethlen.

Thus, by the late 1920s, Jews were again what they had been before the war: a highly urbanized element whose vast middle class did much of the work of running Hungary's economy, supplying its professional services, and carrying on its press and cultural activities. Jews made up nearly one-fourth of the population of Budapest; they accounted for half or well over half of the country's doctors, lawyers, journalists, bankers and bank clerks, industrialists, bookkeepers, printers, goldsmiths, businessmen, and shopkeepers. But only 1.6 percent of Hungary's civil servants and judges and 0.33 percent of its agriculturalists were Jews. There were no longer any Jewish cabinet ministers or generals (only a few converts) and far fewer

¹See William McCagg, *Jewish Nobles and Geniuses in Modern Hungary* (*East European Quarterly*, distributed by Columbia University Press, 1972), pp. 21-22.

parliamentary deputies, judges, and university professors. And while a handful of interrelated Jewish families owned almost all of the great mines and industry, "the proportion of poor among the Jews," Braham writes, "was higher than for the population at large." Still, the poor Jews unconditionally accepted the leadership of the rich, and the rich Jews remained unconditionally loyal to the government.

The Great Depression and the rise of European fascism weakened the political power of the conservative establishment. Count Bethlen's place as prime minister was taken by Gyula Gömbös, an *arri-viste* politician whose racism was tempered only by his enlightened self-interest. Henceforth, the rift grew larger between the "conservative right" and the "radical right." The former was composed mainly of aristocrats (some of whom remained staunch Habsburg loyalists), as well as older civil servants, officers, and church leaders. The radical right consisted mostly of younger people, ranging from a Habsburg archduke to common criminals and drifters. The dichotomy, "conservative right"- "radical right," cut across political parties. The Government Party, in power between 1919 and 1944, included both old conservatives and young radical rightists, but some conservatives found themselves in moderate left-wing parties, and an ever increasing number of radicals assembled in Nazi-style parties formed in opposition to the Government Party. The radicals themselves were split in many groups: the "civilized" radicals, mainly officers, civil servants, and other middle-class people remained in the Government Party; lower-middle-class, working-class, and *Lumpen* elements provided recruits to the Nazi-style opposition parties.

During the 1930s the Hungarian government relied more and more on Germany for economic recovery and for help in the reconquest of its lost territories. Except for Czechoslovakia, all of Eastern and Southeastern Europe was moving into the German orbit, and Hungary was neither the fastest nor the slowest in doing so. Hungary's political cooperation with the Third Reich and its willingness to adopt anti-Jewish measures turned both on the domestic struggle between the conservative right and the radical right and on how Horthy and his cabinet interpreted the international situation. Their goal, which led them to make an alliance with Hitler and declare war on the USSR in 1941, was to recover Greater Hungary with German help, but to do so without complete subjection to Germany—a difficult task indeed.

By the spring of 1944 Hungary had gone through several shifts in policy toward the Jews. The three principal anti-Jewish laws adopted by the government are seen by Braham both as an expression of severe official anti-Semitism and as an attempt to satisfy the Germans and the right-wing domestic radicals without physically harming the Jews. All in all, the laws hit lower-middle-class Jews far harder than the very poor or the very rich. The white-collar workers were the ones who lost their jobs, not the professionals or employers. Between 1941 and 1943 about 63,000 Hungarian Jews were killed, including 42,000 labor servicemen on the Russian front, 20,000 "aliens" expelled to the Ukraine and massacred there by the surprised and greatly irritated Germans, and 1,000 murdered in a "search-

and-destroy" operation in Hungarian-occupied northern Yugoslavia.

But over 800,000 Hungarian Jews, as well as thousands of refugees from Poland, Austria, and Slovakia, were still alive in the spring of 1944, and many were thriving, thanks in part to the abundant profits of the war industries. By this time, the Hungarian government was desperate to get out of the war. Prime Minister Miklós Kállay was doing his best to curry favor with the Allies in any way possible, including protection of the Jews. He and Horthy were prepared to surrender to the Western powers, but there were no Allied forces in the vicinity to whom they could do so.

On March 19, 1944, German troops entered Hungary to prevent its defection to the Allies and, as an official Nazi directive put it, to "solve the Jewish question." According to Braham, if Hungary had "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." This is an interesting proposition, and it was advocated at that time by the Jewish leaders themselves, but it seems rather incongruous today to reproach the Horthy regime both for being pro-German and for trying to leave the German alliance.

On March 19, 1944, the Hungarians could have resisted the weak German invasion forces, but the Hungarian military was highly Nazified, and the right-wing faction among the political leaders quickly asserted itself against the hesitant regent. While socialists, liberals, and anti-German conservatives were put in jail or went into hiding, a new government appointed by Horthy but selected by the Germans from among the right wing of the Government Party mobilized Hungary's economic resources and its working population. Even more enthusiastically, the cabinet of Prime Minister General Döme Sztójay took drastic measures against the Jews. Not only the government but many people, too, acted as if awakening from a dream: now there were to be no uncertainties, only decisive and concerted action.

The "Final Solution" in Hungary was initiated by Lieutenant-Colonel Eichmann's 200-odd transportation specialists, but most of the planning and execution was done by Hungarians. Horthy acted like a thoroughly intimidated man and retired into passivity; the Sztójay cabinet adopted a seemingly endless series of measures to humiliate, punish, isolate, and deport the Jews. This was probably the smoothest administrative operation in Holocaust history. During a few weeks 450,000 Jews were transported from the provinces to Auschwitz, where nearly all were gassed. This operation was carried out primarily by the SS, the German police, Hungarian officials, and between 3,000 and 5,000 thieving, torturing, murdering Hungarian gendarmes. Hungarian policemen, railwaymen, and many civilians also willingly took part. Only a handful of officials decided to resign, and no harm came to them. The German demands could have been rejected or sabotaged, as they were in Romania and Bulgaria. Faced by a refusal of Hungarians to cooperate—Braham points out—the Germans would have been quite helpless. But no refusal took place because

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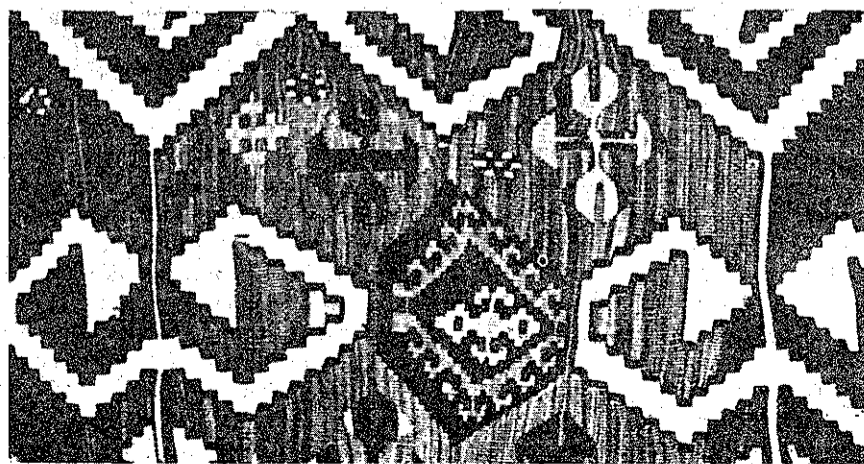
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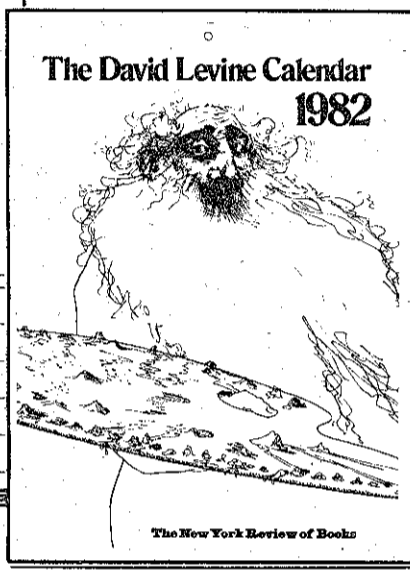
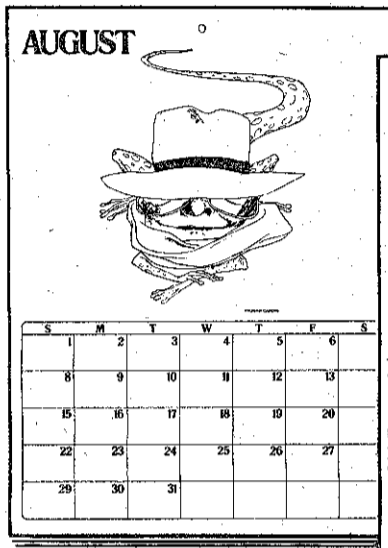
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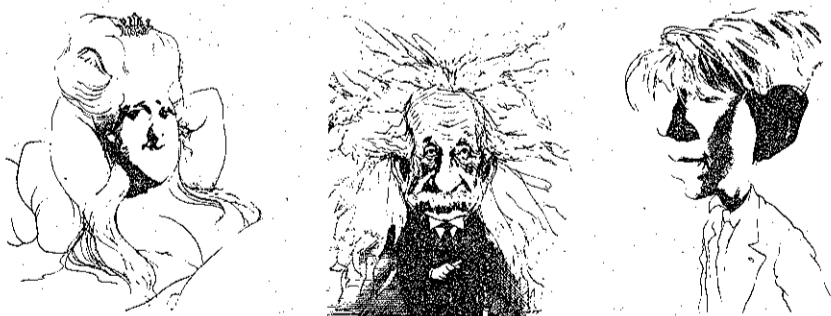


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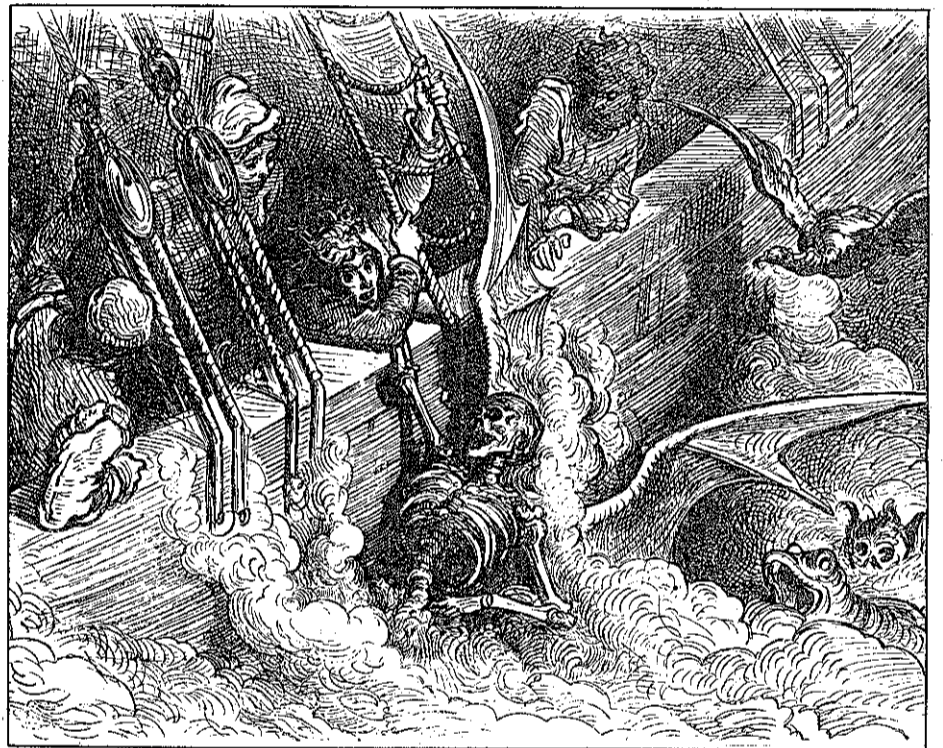
too many Hungarians wanted to see the Jews driven out of the country.

The higher Hungarian civil service and the Jewish leaders knew very well what the deportations were really about, yet they failed to tell the truth to the lower-level officials or to the population, whether Gentile or Jewish. Why this information was withheld from the public, especially by the Jewish Council that had been created by the SS, remains unclear. The only sensible explanation for the behavior of the Jewish Council is that by refusing to spread panic among the Jewish population, its leaders hoped to ensure prompt obedience to the German-Hungarian measures and thus secure more humane treatment at least for those who had not yet been deported.

This hinged, however, on whether the leaders of the conservative aristocracy could reassert themselves. Such an eventuality was not completely out of the question; for Bethlen and his friends did indeed regain the ear of Horthy. Supported by protests pouring in from the Allies, neutral powers, and the Vatican, they proceeded gradually to undermine the dominant position of the radical

the Jews to the reality of the situation. That would have saved the most lives. But from the evidence in Braham's book, no Hungarian Jews showed the slightest inclination to take such extreme measures.

There were many anomalies. The government's anti-Jewish measures were not gradual but simultaneous, and thus while plans were being readied for immediate extermination of the Jews, the cabinet, as Braham and other historians point out, was fanatically drafting detailed measures to deprive them of the right to employ Christian domestics, to appear on the stage, to own race horses or cars, to use public or private telephones, to eat in most restaurants, to obtain a tobacco franchise, to wear military or school uniforms, to use most public baths, to own or run a pharmacy, to buy or use a gun or explosives of any kind, to buy pork fat (vegetable oil was permitted), or to buy pork or veal (beef was permitted). On the other hand, the minister of agriculture ruled that it was not expressly forbidden for a Jew to own a dog, and the Council of Ministers rejected the recommendation of the minister of finance that Jews be



right in the government. At their prompting, the regent finally forbade further deportations on July 7, 1944. Thereafter, except for a few thousand Jews smuggled with great difficulty out of the country and straight into the gas chambers by the outraged Eichmann, no more deportations took place as long as Horthy remained regent.

From the point of view of the provincial Jews, the legalistic approach of the Jewish Council had been a complete failure, but not from the point of view of the 200,000 Budapest Jews who had thus escaped deportation. All in all, no single approach was either a complete success or a complete failure. The Zionist argument, promoted particularly by Rudolph Kaszner, who was later assassinated in Israel, was that the international Jewish organizations should accept the SS "Europa Plan" for the removal of the Jews from Europe, and then simply buy the Jews from the Germans. Such payments did save a few thousand Jews, who were sent by the SS to Switzerland; but of course the SS did not send the others. If the Jewish Council members had collectively resigned or committed suicide after declaring that all the deported Jews were being killed, they would have created a situation of anarchy which would have awakened

forbidden to buy tobacco products.²

Members of Catholic contemplative religious orders were obliged to wear the Star of David if they had at least three Jewish grandparents (unless they were ordained priests), but the Zionist leaders and Jewish Council members did not have to wear the star, which, incidentally, meant they were exempted from most other anti-Jewish measures as well. The Jewish Council ordered mass production of the yellow star of the prescribed canary color and at the prescribed price, and incessantly warned the Jews against hiding or not wearing their badges. Messengers from the Jewish Council came to be feared no less than the Gestapo; but the Jewish leaders also did what they could to mitigate suffering.

By the end of the summer of 1944, Hungary had again undergone one of her periodic shifts from a radical-right government to a conservative-right government. The new cabinet under General Géza Lakatos wanted to surrender hon-

²See Ilona Benoschovsky and Elek Karsai, eds., *Vádirat a náciizmus ellen: Dokumentumok a magyarországi zsidóüldözések történetéhez* (*List of Charges against Nazism: Documents on the History of Jewish Persecution in Hungary*) (Magyar Izraeliták Országos Képviselőlete, Budapest, 1958-1967), 3 volumes.

orably to the Allies. As for the Jews, many were still alive, if not free, in the so-called Yellow Star buildings of Budapest,³ or in the labor service battalions. The latter, too, were an anomaly: the army, notwithstanding its notoriously anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi officers, proved to be a safe haven for all Jewish men between eighteen and forty-eight, even for men from the *judenfrei* provinces. Against all of this the Germans were quite powerless.

On October 15, Horthy botched an attempt to conclude an armistice with Stalin, whose armies had by then deeply penetrated Hungarian territory. On the same day, the SS and Hungarian general staff officers carried out a *Putsch*, arrested Horthy and his loyal commanders, and forced the regent to appoint Ferenc Szálasi, the mad leader of the radical right-wing Arrow Cross Party, as his successor. At that time, according to Professor Braham, there were about 150,000 Jews in the labor service companies, and the same number in Budapest. Some of these were living in Yellow Star buildings or in buildings protected by the Swiss, Portuguese, or Spanish, or by the Vatican. Others were in hiding or had exemption from the anti-Jewish laws.

Now Eichmann returned and began organizing new deportations, this time to the Austrian border. This was the period when Wallenberg, the Swiss diplomat Charles Lutz (also a US protégé), and other diplomats, as well as Zionists and other Jews disguised as diplomats, behaved so heroically, handing out genuine and fake passports or letters of protection, rescuing their "citizens" from the death marches on the Budapest-Vienna highway, and continually dangling the possibility of diplomatic recognition before the glazed eyes of the Arrow Cross butchers. A ghetto in Budapest was defended—ironically—by an Arrow Cross police officer against Arrow Cross and SS terror squads. There was also a two-month Soviet siege of Budapest, during which thousands of civilians and soldiers were killed, and many Jews in the ghetto were starved to death. Some 70,000 survived there; others returned from labor service or the German camps. Many of the Hungarians who killed Jews were subsequently hanged, but the satisfaction over justice being done quickly soured when the communist political police, led by Jewish officers returned from Moscow or from labor service, began arresting, torturing, and murdering suspected enemies of the new regime, whether conservative, democratic, socialist, or communist, Gentile or Jewish.

The debate over what could have been done to save more lives will go on for a long time to come. Braham is right in arguing that the Jewish leaders who "knew it all" should have taken some precautionary measures. Unfortunately, as he shows, they were too divided among themselves, too aloof in viewing

³In order to avoid a concentration of the Jewish population in a single area, the Jews in Budapest were scattered in special Yellow Star buildings. The Hungarian authorities believed that such a dispersion would prevent the Allies from bombing the capital city.

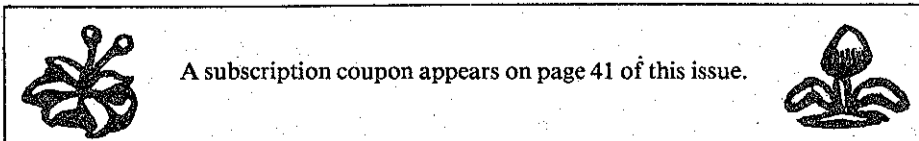
the tragedy of others, and too blindly convinced of the good will of all Hungarians.

One must also agree with Lucjan Dobroszycki of the YIVO Institute in New York that throughout occupied Europe neither the behavior of the Jewish leaders nor the national political system was decisive for the fate of most Jews. The most important factors determining Jewish death or survival—Dobroszycki points out—were (1) geography and topography, (2) relations between Jews and non-Jews, and (3) "the status of a given country in the German scheme for occupied Europe."⁴ When, as in the case of Denmark or Croatia, Jews could escape to a hospitable country nearby—i.e., to Sweden or to Italy—or where they could take refuge in the forests, as in Byelorussia, many Jews managed to survive. A friendly Gentile population was, of course, also an important factor, as was the case in Budapest—though only during the last weeks of the war.

But the status of a country in Hitler's Europe was decisive. If the Jewish leaders had any remaining room for maneuver, as in Vichy France, it was because of the special status of the country in question. The confrontation between Germans and Jews, as Dobroszycki explains, took place in three different ways: (1) by direct action, as in the case of the Einsatzgruppen in Russia, where the Germans killed Jews immediately; (2) by action through the Jewish Councils, which meant delayed extermination; and (3) by the intermediary action of national governments. "Only in the third setting could the Jewish elites attempt to influence events. Only in that setting could—and often did—cooperation between Jewish organizations and non-German local governments frustrate German plans."⁵ Hungary's status shifted back and forth. Because it started with the third of the three situations, no direct German intervention took place before the invasion of March 19, 1944; then, between April and July, came the second situation, when German action through the Jewish Council caused the Jews in the provinces to be put in ghettos, deported, and exterminated. Between July and October, an assertive Hungarian regime took back control of Jewish affairs and did much to save lives; but, finally, following Horthy's attempt at an armistice on October 15, Eichmann returned to deal directly with the Jewish Council. This meant the death of many thousand more Jews. Thus, there was a direct connection between the two Hungarian attempts to surrender to the Allies and the two waves of extermination. For a national regime to exist in Hitler's Europe, that regime had to collaborate with the Third Reich's war effort. The frightening conclusion we must draw is that for the Jews in a given country to have had a chance of survival, that country had to be loyal to the Germans. □

⁴Lucjan Dobroszycki, "Jewish Elites Under German Rule," in Henry Friedlander and Sybil Milton, eds., *The Holocaust: Ideology, Bureaucracy, and Genocide—The San Jose Papers* (Kraus International Publications, Millwood, New York, 1980), pp. 226-227.


⁵Ibid., p. 229.



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