

THURSDAY OCTOBER 14, 1999
AFTERNOON SESSION A 14:00-15:30

The Migration of Holocaust Survivors From Hungary and Romania

by
Tamás Stark

Integration or Emigration?

The Migration of the Holocaust Survivors from Hungary and Romania.
(A statistical survey.)

Since most of the books on the Holocaust end with the liberation, the fate of the survivors still remains unclear. The history of the remnant of the Jewish communities in the early post war period is still a chapter of the Holocaust because the life of the survivors, their fears and dilemmas were directly related to the experience of persecution.

Hungary and Romania are bound together by their common past. Before 1919 about half of the post-war Romanian territory belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Though in the interwar period the development of these countries followed different routes, due perhaps to the geopolitical heritage of an age old common past, the destinies of Hungary and Romania intertwined in World War II. In contrast with many other countries of East-Central Europe Romania and Hungary became satellites and military allies of Germany in the campaign against the Soviet Union while seemingly preserving their independence. Since about 25 percent of the European Jewry, excluding the Soviet Union, lived in Hungary and Romania before the Second World War, this region has a special significance in the history of the Holocaust. In order to understand the position and the dilemma of the survivors we have to go back to the roots of the so-called "Jewish question" in both countries.

The history of the Jewish people in Hungary in the last century was unique in the context of Jewish history in Eastern Europe. By the eve of the First World War most Hungarian Jews had adopted the Hungarian culture. In Hungary, Jews not only spoke Hungarian but also regarded them and were regarded by others as "Hungarians of Mosaic persuasion." The tolerant policy of the Christian Hungarian elite was deeply rooted in the multiethnic heritage of the Hungarian Kingdom. It was not only the Hungarian government's friendly attitude, however, which encouraged Jewish people to acculturate and assimilate. The rapid economic development at the second half of the last century was not less important. The economic upward mobility further hastened acculturation and assimilation. Although in the Eastern part of the country Orthodox Judaism and Hasidism were widespread, Hungarian Jewry was on its way to becoming a Jewry of the Western

type. Another consequence of assimilation was the emergence of Reform Judaism, which made only a very limited impression in Romania or in Russia.

Pre World War I Romania had a reputation for being, along with Russia, the most anti-Semitic country in Europe. Despite their presence in these territories for many centuries, Jews were always segregated from the rural society. Prior to 1914 only two thousand of the almost quarter million strong Jewish population were awarded Romanian citizenship. In contrast with Hungary, in Romania there was an old tradition of violent, popular anti-Semitism.

At the end of the First World War Romania found itself on the side of the victorious Entente powers and made large territorial gains. Hungary lost two thirds of its territories due to the Trianon peace treaty; the most important of which was Transylvania.

When the First World War came to an end Romania had hardly emerged from the age of the ghetto. The United Kingdom, France and Italy imposed a treaty of minority rights upon Romania which granted equal status to the country's different ethnic and religious groups. Although Jews received citizenship, they were virtually barred from the state administration and were also discriminated against in the universities.

In Romania the discrimination strengthened the unity of the Jewish communities. In the twenties a whole network of independent organizations was established. Jewish parties were formed and their representatives gained mandates in the parliament.

After the Hungarian defeat in the First World War the unwritten "contract" and the harmony between the Jewish elite and the Hungarian aristocracy was torn apart. The nationwide frustration over the territorial losses and the experience of Communist power in 1919 generated anti-Semitic feelings. A great many civil service refugees from the lost territories along with the rest of the Christian middle class were determined to carry out a change of guard in economy.

Unlike Romania, in Hungary the newly emerged anti-Semitism accelerated the process of assimilation especially in the capital. (In 1941 25% of the Budapest Jews belonged to Christian churches.) It is critical to note that despite the widespread anti-Semitism, the Hungarian governments established a "modus vivendi" with the Jewish community. However the once successful cooperation and symbiosis between the Jews and Gentiles came to an end in the late thirties with the introduction of the anti-Jewish laws.

Due to the difference between the historical backgrounds, the destiny of the Jewish communities and the schedule of the annihilation was different in Romania than in Hungary. By allowing mass murder in the eastern territories Marshall Antonescu followed the Nazi method of ethnic cleansing. After the shootings in Bucovina and Bessarabia the Jews still alive were deported from these territories to Transnistria in 1941

and 1942. Despite the preliminary preparations, however, Jews from the Old Kingdom and from Southern Transylvania were not deported.

While the deportations reached their climax in Romania and Slovakia in 1942, Hungary was still a shelter of Jewish refugees from Polish and Slovak territories. But at the time when the partial repatriation of deportees began in Romania in early 1944, as a consequence of the German occupation, Hungary became the scene of the final solution. Within two months the deportation from the countryside was completed. Under the short-lived Szálasi regime the tens of thousands of Jews were forced to march to the German-Hungarian border for fortification work. However, no time remained for a general deportation from Budapest.

If we intend to follow the fate of the survivors we have to start by determining the number of survivors. There are problems because we have to face the lack of information. In Hungary during the last months of the war the statistical service ceased operations. For this reason we are missing important statistics on the human losses and the war related migrations. Moreover the territorial exchanges make the fact-finding even more difficult.

My statistics on the survivors and their migration are based on both direct sources such as census figures, statistics and indirect sources such as reports of Jewish and state organizations.

In Hungarian territory the largest group of survivors was the remnant of the Jewish community in Budapest. Despite the partial deportation in November 1944 and the massacres committed against the inhabitants of the ghetto, about half of the once 250.000 members Jewish community survived the Holocaust. According to the reports of the International Red Cross and according to the amounts of the representatives of the neutral states who stationed in the capital during the battle, the Soviets liberated 120-140.000 Jews in Budapest.

The second group of survivors on Hungarian soil was the liberated forced laborers. Although they avoided deportation in summer of 1944, these unarmed labor units suffered heavy losses in the battles which in the Carpathian Mountains and in Transylvania. In the last months of the war due to the gradual disintegration of the Hungarian army more and more forced laborers succeeded in escaping to areas which was already controlled by the Soviet army. According to the reports of the Jewish Community of Budapest (Pesti Izraelita Hitközség) the number of the liberated forced laborers was 20.000, all in the countryside. These Jews became the nucleus of the reorganizing Jewish life in the countryside.

The third group of survivors was those who returned from the concentration camps. The first groups of survivors from those 230.000 persons who had been deported from the present day territory of Hungary returned as early as March 1945. However the reception and the registration of the returning deportees, soon became confused due to the lack of central control and coordination. The records of the National Relief Committee

for the Deportees, the Ministry of Public Welfare and the Repatriation Governmental Committee suggest that the total number of returned by the end of 1946 was around 80.000. If we add the number of returnees to those who were liberated in Hungary (140.000-160.000) ,we get the total of the survivals: 220-240.000

Both the Statistical Bureau of Budapest and the Central Statistical Bureau made efforts to count the survivors in late 1945. Since these organizations carried out the head counts just after the end of the hostilities when the majority of the survivors were still on their way to Hungary from the concentration camps, their results were only partial. However, the Hungarian Section of the World Jewish Congress carried out its own survey at the end of 1945 and early 1946. Careful and professional work by a large administrative staff indicated 165,000 survivors in all. (117.000 in Budapest, 48.000 in the countryside) This figure seems to contradict my evaluation. However, we have to consider the limitations of this census. Since the census was not based on a headcount in the countryside, the registration was not complete. Emotional reasons also limited the effectiveness of the postwar censuses. A significant proportion of the survivors chose not to register because of their past experiences and their fear of persecution. We also have to take into consideration that 165.000 represent, first of all, those survivors who were Jewish by religion. However due to the traditional trend of assimilation and to the accelerating number of conversions in the forties about 30-35 percent of the Jewish people belonged to Christian churches. Accordingly, the registered 165.000 survivors in reality represents at least 230.000 people; this is close to my estimation of 220 - 240.000 Jewish survivors.

Because the massacres and deportations took place in Bessarabia and in Bucovina, territories which Romania lost after the war, it is relatively easy to determine the dimension of the Jewish population in Romania after the end of hostilities. In September 1944 International and Romanian Jewish institutions estimated that the Jewish population in the rump of Romania amounted to about 300.000. This figure is based on the census of the Central Office of the Jews of Romania held in 1942. In 1942, 293.000 Jews were counted in the territory of the Old Kingdom and in Southern Transylvania, (Actually the census covered the present day territory of Romania except Northern Transylvania) Since about 7.000 Jews remained in Northern Transylvania and some thousands deportees returned from Transnistria, in September 1944 the Jewish population increased to 300.000.

In the post-war period, as well as during the war Romanian Jewry were in a state of constant movement. Remnants of the once populous Jewish communities in Bessarabia and Bucovina moved to the present day territory of Romania from Transnistria, to where they had been deported from their homeland in 1941 and 1942.

According to the records of the Romanian Section of the World Jewish Congress 29,000 survivors returned from the former Bessarabia in 1945. The same year 22,000 Jews were repatriated from Bucovina, territory which was attached to the Soviet Union after the war. Altogether about 60,000 Jews moved to Romania from the Eastern

territories (Northern Bucovina, Bessarabia, and Transnistria) This total of about 60,000 survivors represents in fact what remained of the once 300,000 Jews of Bessarabia and Bucovina. 35,000 Transylvanian survivors returned to their homeland from German concentration camps. Consequently, at the end of 1945 the Jewish population in Romania increased to 400,000 due to the migration from the Eastern territories and the return of the survivors of the deportees from N. Transylvania. The census of the Romanian Section of the World Jewish Congress, which was held in early 1947, corroborates this number. In 1947, 428,000 Jews were registered in Romania. This number corroborates with our estimate if we accept the figure of 28,000 as accounting for natural increase and the new refugees.

After the end of the Second World War Jewish survivors felt truly liberated. Anti-Jewish regulations were outlawed after the end of the hostilities. Special committees were formed to investigate war crimes and crimes against humanity. As a result of war crime trials tens of thousands of former Nazi activists were found guilty and sentenced to imprisonment. Committees were formed to investigate the background of civil servants. Government decrees mandated the return of the confiscated Jewish properties. Problems arose however in carrying out these decrees. Housing shortage and other material losses caused by the war presented special difficulties. Most of the former Jewish properties were not returned. The governments did not want to fuel anti-Semitism by the expulsion of the refugees from their newly obtained homes even though those homes were confiscated Jewish properties.

After the World War II, the difficulties the Hungarian and the Romanian Jewish community had to face were very similar. Despite the purification (of official government policy) the world has never been the same as before the Holocaust. The survivors faced the dilemma of choosing between their re-integration to the society or their emigration. Their decisions were determined by the desire to liberate themselves from the depressing burden of the so-called Jewish question. Four different solutions total assimilation, Communism, Zionism, and American type civil society- equally offered possible ways out.

In Hungary, conversion to Christianity, mixed marriage, and *Magyarization* of Jewish names were the traditional methods of assimilation. The Hungarian-French scholar, Professor Victor Karady pointed out in his recent study that despite the Holocaust experience, this trend continued in the post-war period Hungary. As a consequence of this trend the number of Jews with religious affiliation dramatically decreased through the fifties and the sixties, while the number of those with Jewish background increased due to the mixed marriage. For this reason it is almost impossible to estimate the number of the ethnically Jewish population in present-day Hungary.

The communists promised the solution of the "Jewish question" by eliminating the ideological and economic basis of anti-Semitism. They declared that in their society there would not be any platform for prejudices or racial hatred. The Zionists offered a

new community for people who considered themselves Jewish nationals as part of the Jewish state.

Emigration to the West was the fourth way to get rid of the burden of the past. This solution especially attracted those who were looking for better environment for the realization of their assimilation strategy.

Unlike Hungary, in Romania, where there was a long tradition that Jewish political parties represented the interests of the Jewish community, these different strategies even found expression on a political level. The newly emerged Jewish Democratic Committee represented the Communist platform. Two main organized opposition forces faced the Jewish Democratic Committee, the Union of Romanian Jews and the Jewish Party. These forces were traditionally divided over the question of assimilation versus Zionism. The later represented the Zionist platform. (Assimilation has a different meaning in Romanian circumstances than in Hungary. Assimilation means integration in Romania while in Hungary the meaning of assimilation is close to homogenization through conversion or atheism.)

It is important to emphasize, however, that the above four strategies:, total assimilation, Communism, Zionism, and emigration to the West, were not radically separated from each other in everyday life .There were thousands of survivors who lived in mixed marriage, and Magyarized their names while joining the Communist party. Despite the different ideological backgrounds, there was not a sharp split between the Zionist and the Communist movement. As a highly confidential report of the Registration Department of the Communist party revealed, in 1948, in Hungary, out of 37,000 Zionist activists 12,000 were simultaneously members of the Communist party. The spiritual and emotional links between the Zionists and the Communists remained intact in the minds of a significant proportion of Jewish people even during the heydays of Stalinist Communism in the early fifties. It is not surprising that after 1949 when Zionist organizations were outlawed, many former Zionists joined the Communist party. It is not surprising either, that after the temporary collapse of the dictatorship in Hungary in the fall of 1956, thousands of party members left for Israel.

In Romania the link between the two movements was even institutionalized since the Jewish Democratic Committee was a coalition of Communist, Social Democrats, and left wing Zionists. In June 2, 1947 at a Jewish mass meeting the secretary of the Romanian Jewish Democratic Committee presented emigration to the Western countries as an attractive alternative for both assimilated Jews and for Zionists In weighing practical consideration, however, the question of alternatives for the vast majority of Hungarian and Romanian Jews was simplified to the dilemma of whether to leave or not to leave. (I mean by this dilemma, that the Jews had to decide if they would leave their homeland for another country or remain in Hungary and in Romania in the hope of a better future) Their decisions were influenced by the general state of the country they lived.

The remnant of these communities was in need of material and financial assistance. The survivors suffered from lack of food and clothes. In November 1945 a representative of the American Joint Distribution Committee wrote to the center in New York that 90,000 Hungarian Jews needed food aid; 30,000 survivors received financial assistance. The next year, in 1946 about the half of the Hungarian Jewish community depended directly on the aid of the AJDC. Economic conditions were especially miserable in Romania. The refugees from Bucovina and from Bessarabia suffered the most. Although they arrived from former Romanian territories the Romanian Ministry of Justice did not grant them Romanian citizenship until late 1946. Most of these homeless and stateless repatriates were concentrated in Bucharest and in Jassy, but the plundered cities could offer little to the newcomers. According to a report of the AJDC dated from the fall of 1946, 200,000 Jews were starving because of drought. In 1947 when the Romanian economy collapsed the situation became even worse,

The occupational structure of the Hungarian Jews was not to their advantage in the post-war world. In 1946, the survey of the Statistical Department of the Hungarian Section of the WJC showed that the 45 percent of the Jewish employees were independent businessmen in industry and commerce or belonged to the liberal professions. In Romania 40 percent of the Jewish employees was engaged in the private sector. This relatively high engagement in the private sector in both countries did not fit within the Communist utopia. The classic Jewish role as a dominant portion of the middle class group was over. Between 1945 and 1947 through financial crisis -inflation and currency devaluation- the Communists influenced governments squeezed out the private businesses, traders and even shopkeepers. The nationalization of the private sector proclaimed in 1948 was the last stage of that process. Although state administration and armed forces, fields which had been virtually barred from Jews in the interwar period, opened for them, many among the Jewish community found themselves eliminated from their traditional occupation. The post-war economic recession and later the nationalization of the private sector inevitably increased the desire to leave.

Beside the economic factors I have to mention the emotional ones. Dr. Erno Marton, the well-known Hungarian-Romanian (actually Transylvanian) Zionist activist probably expressed the feelings of many survivors when he wrote the followings:

"Jewish people cannot remain in the places where once they were happy, but where now they can see in their neighbors the murderers of their families".

Another emotional factor was that of Jewish self-esteem, which increased due to the activity of the Zionist movement. All these factors; economic and emotional ones contributed to the solution of the great dilemma- to leave or not to leave.

Only statistics can tell how people solved that dilemma. It is very difficult to follow the movement of emigrants and to determine their number. Half of Europe was on the move in the mid-forties.

In the case of Hungary I tried to capture the population movement of the survivors in three ways. I collected statistics on those who left Hungary. Since Palestine and the USA were closed the vast majority of the Hungarian Jewish refugees found temporal shelter in displaced persons (DP) camps in the Western zones of Germany. So I tried to estimate the number of those Jewish DPs who left Hungary. Finally I studied the statistics of the countries of destination.

Unfortunately there are no official Hungarian figures on the emigration. However the records of the State Security Office indicate that in the period between 1945 and 1949 altogether, legally and illegally about 40.000 Jews left Hungary. In May 1948 the iron curtain fell and only a semi-legal path through Slovakia to Vienna remained open, and then only until June 1949. By the fall of 1949 the physical isolation of the country was complete. Between 1949 and 1956 fewer than 2.000 Jews received permission to leave under the Hungarian Israeli emigration agreement which was concluded in 1949.

Regarding the DP population we have no figures from the early months. Originally Jews were actually registered according to their country of origin. This practice was changed only in 1946 due to intervention of President Truman. I succeeded finding only one source on the number of, the Jewish DPs of Hungarian origin. This is survey of the International Refugee Organization dated in September 1947. About 14,000 Hungarian Jews were registered by IRO officials. As to the grand total for the whole post-war period we can rely only on the scientific literature. The numbers that the few scholars who deal with the issue give ranges between 40 and 50 thousand, a total that corroborates our estimate based of the Hungarian sources.

The third stage of the migratory movement was the search for harbor somewhere in the Western Hemisphere or Israel.

Canada registered 2,000 Jewish immigrants from Hungary. Concerning the number of those who settled in the USA 10,000 is a reasonable estimation. According to the statistics of the Australian Immigration Office 2,237 Hungarian Jews received landing permit in the period between November 1945 and December 1949. The Federation of Australian Welfare Societies put the number of Hungarian Jews at 3 thousand. Thousands of Hungarian Holocaust survivors settled in Latin America and also in Europe.

It is not easy to estimate the number of those Hungarian Jews whose primary target for emigration was not yet a country only a territory with an uncertain future, namely Palestine. No comprehensive statistics on immigrants exists from the time before the founding of the State of Israel, as it could not. The legal arrivals were registered already during the British mandate, but the actual number of immigrants cannot be determined. There were those who arrived with temporary residence permits while others came as tourists. Many by-passed legal entry and came ashore, clandestinely, outsmarting the British guards. The Jewish Agency, which organized the reception of the new immigrants and established their residence, had in theory been registering all arrivals since 1919. These records covered the emigrants' place of birth, age, citizenship, and

family status. But many arrivals never got into touch with the offices in Tel Aviv, Haifa or Jerusalem. Although the missing data was filled in with the census conducted in the founding year (1948), the number of emigrants from Hungary remained uncertain. What makes this statistical problem even more complex is that the number of immigrants from Hungary does not coincide with the number of the Hungarian speaking Israelis.

Vastly contradictory figures have been published about the Hungarian speaking Israelis, or more precisely, Israelis who immigrated from Hungarian-speaking territories. The complexity of the subject is well reflected in the debate that followed the closing down of the Hungarian-language broadcast “Kol Israel” (The Voice of Israel) in 1961. The radio management proclaimed it unnecessary to support an independent program for a language group of barely over 20 thousand constituents. The ensuing controversy initiated by the Hungarians became heated when Prime Minister Ben Gurion approved the radio’s decision in the Knesset. The World Federation of Hungarian Jews, founded in 1951, objected in the name of 125 thousand Hungarian-speaking Israelis. The Hungarian faction of the Religious National Party, countless Knesset members, and the Organization of Hungarian Immigrants (Hitachdut Olej Hungaria) spoke already of a community of 200 thousand. The letters-of-readers column of the established Tel Aviv paper *Új Kelet* [New East] contains even higher numbers. Eugéne Csocsán de Várallja, a statistician living in England, set the number of Hungarian speakers at 200 thousand, a figure he derived from the *New East*’s 20 thousand circulation in 1960(

As an outcome of the protests the Hungarian radio program was launched anew. As far as the potential number of listeners is concerned, however, the estimates continued to move between a wide range.

Hungarian diplomatic sources also cite relatively high numbers.

“If ... we take into consideration the fact that Hungarian-speakers make up around 30 percent of the aliyah from Romania, around 50-55 percent from Czechoslovakia, and again 30 percent from Yugoslavia, then the number of Hungarian speakers living in Israel surpasses 100 thousand,”

wrote István Romhányi, an executive at the Hungarian embassy in Tel Aviv, five years later.

The only apparently reliable source, the immigration statistics, in itself unfortunately does not shed any more light on the subject. According to the data adjusted after the 1948 census the following can be said about immigrants from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Romania between 1919 and 1961.

Hence in the decade after the Holocaust, in the period between 1946 and 1955 some 17 thousand people emigrated from Hungary to Palestine and Israel. Taking into consideration the estimated number of Hungarian Holocaust survivors who settled in North and South America, Australia and in the other parts of the Western hemisphere the grand total of the emigrants from Hungary must be around 40,000. This figure

corroborates my earlier estimates on the number of Jews who left Hungary and also the number of Hungarian Jewish displaced persons. There is no notable difference among the final figures of different sources.

As to the number of Hungarian speaking Israelis in the early sixties, one hundred thousand must be a reasonable estimate. There is no contradiction between the Israeli statistical figures and the numbers released by different Hungarian-Jewish organizations. Around 50 percent of Hungarian speaking Jews came from the neighboring countries mostly from Transylvania-Romania.

It is almost impossible to give a detailed numerical picture on the exodus of Jews from Romanian territories. The repatriates from Bucovina and from Bessarabia were among the first who left Romania for Palestine in early 1945. Only about 19 thousand people fled to Western Europe through Hungary and Austria. However neither the IRO nor UNNRA statistics mention Romanian Jews among the Jewish DPs in the West German camps. According to Israeli statistics in the period between 1946 and 1955 125.000 Jews arrived from Romania. Out of 125.000 new immigrants at least 25.000 arrived from Transylvania, where the Jews spoke Hungarian and Yiddish. However, 125.000 is only the bottom figure. A report of the World Jewish Congress gave the top figure of 150.000 new arrivals from Romania by 1950.

In the fall of 1951 emigration was reduced to some hundreds people by year due to the governments pressure .A new wave of emigration started, however, in the early sixties when the majority of Jewish population left Romania.

Although there are no perfect statistics on the dimension of the postwar migration, we are in a position to compare the preferences of the Romanian and the Hungarian Holocaust survivors.

Romanian Jewry, deeply influenced since its early days by Zionism and Orthodoxy preferred emigration to integration although the Romanian government often blocked the ways of emigration; until the mid-fifties, about 45% of the survivors left the country. This massive process continued through the sixties and the seventies until the almost total disappearance of Jewish life in Romania.

In the postwar Hungary the majority of the survivors continued the tradition of assimilation which was forcedly suspended during the years of the Holocaust. Those who elected to stay built their new life on the new opportunities, which opened for them in the bureaucracy and in other fields of occupations which were closed earlier for them.

The direction of emigration, the preference of emigrants were also rooted the tradition. The mostly religious and Zionists Romanian Jews settled in Israel, while the more assimilated Hungarian Jews orientated - especially in 1956/57 - toward the Promised Lands of the West: the USA and Canada.

The emigrants found new homes and contributed to the building up the state of Israel while the whole East-Central European region suffered an irreplaceable loss by losing large percentages of its Jewish population.

.