

The Christian Churches of Hungary and the Holocaust

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In Hungary, as elsewhere in Europe, the Nazi onslaught against the Jews took place in a climate of opinion that had been conditioned by centuries of Christian hostility to the Jews and Judaism. The Christian churches were involved in laying the groundwork for the public acceptance of the ever-harsher measures adopted against the Jews, including those relating to the “Final Solution.” Both before and during the Nazi era, the three major Christian denominations in Hungary—the Catholic, Reformed (Calvinist), and Evangelical (Lutheran)—espoused venomous anti-Judaism and antisemitism, portraying the Jews as a people who had betrayed God and had become forever cursed for the crucifixion of Jesus.

Dedicated to the protection of their institutional interests, the Christian churches emerged as major pillars of Hungary’s reactionary regimes. They shared with the ultra-conservatives and the Right radicals their opposition to modernization, liberalism, Communism, and freemasonry—movements that had within their ranks a relatively large number of secular Jewish intellectuals. They were also in the forefront of the chauvinistic-reactionary campaigns that aimed to preserve Hungary’s antiquated semi-feudalistic socioeconomic order and to safeguard the purity of the national-Christian spirit. In pursuit of these objectives, the church leaders rationalized their role as a mandate to counter “radical” leftist ideas and movements and to defend the nation from the “harmful” economic and cultural influence of the Jews. They championed these causes, which often involved the subjection of the Jews to an institutionalized policy of humiliation and discrimination, with fervor until the end of the Nazi era.

The Pre-World War I Period

The groundwork for the Christian churches’ alignment with the anti-Jewish policies of the successive counterrevolutionary governments of the Nazi period was apparently laid during the so-called Golden Era of Hungarian

Jewry.¹ The leaders of the Christian churches were as opposed to the emancipation of the Jews in 1867 as they were to granting equal status to the Jewish religion in 1895.² During Hungary's reformist-liberal era, church representatives were among those who kept the flame of antisemitism alive. They played an influential role in the Antisemitic Party that was formed in 1875,³ and were in the forefront of the anti-Jewish agitation that surrounded the notorious Tiszaeszlár blood libel case of 1882-83.⁴

A major vehicle of organized clerical antisemitism, after 1895, was the Catholic People's Party.⁵ Supported by the Church, the pro-Habsburg aristocracy, and the large landowners, this clerical-conservative party aimed primarily at combating the "destructive and anti-Christian" ideas associated with "Jewish" liberalism and socialism.⁶ The Christian churches were part of the political coalition that consistently opposed the reformist policies of the "liberal" government, especially those pertaining to the Jews.

Hungary's feudal tradition led the ruling "liberal" regime to encourage the Jews to engage in business and industry. Under a subsequent "social contract," the Jews, who prided themselves as "Magyars of the Israelite faith," also provided the slim political majority that the Hungarians needed to rule in the multinational kingdom.

Taking advantage of their emancipation, Jews played a major role in the modernization of the country, achieving leading positions in industry, commerce, and the independent professions. The churches' anti-Jewish

¹ The "Golden Era" refers to the period of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867-1918), when a cordial, almost symbiotic relationship existed between the ruling conservative-aristocratic elements and the Jewish economic elite, especially those engaged in banking, industry, and commerce. For some details, see Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide. The Holocaust in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 1-12.

² Moshe Y. Herczl, *Christianity and the Holocaust of Hungarian Jewry* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), pp. 18-19.

³ The founder of the party was Gyözö Istóczy, a member of the Hungarian parliament. By 1884, the party had sixteen representatives in parliament, including Géza Onódy, a notorious Jew-baiter.

⁴ The antisemitic hysteria surrounding the Tiszaeszlár blood-libel case was whipped up by a local Catholic priest by the name of József Adamovics; Herczl, *Christianity and the Holocaust*, pp. 8-17.

⁵ The party was led for many years by Count Nándor Zichy, who later became a prominent figure of the so-called Vienna counterrevolutionary group of the Hungarian Right.

⁶ Herczl, *Christianity and the Holocaust*, pp. 20-22. For further details on pre-World War I antisemitism in Hungary, see Nathaniel Katzburg, *Antisemitism in Hungary, 1867-1914* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1969), and Judit Kubinszky, *Politikai antiszemitizmus Magyarországon, 1875-1890* (Budapest: Kossuth, 1976).

militancy was expressed in political-governmental forums, the pulpits, in parochial educational institutions, and the clerical press.⁷ One of the champions of a virulently antisemitic form of Catholicism was Béla Bangha (1880-1940), the “Hungarian Savonarola.” This Jesuit dignitary was among those who crystallized the Catholic Church’s ideological struggle against Judaism and socialism, which he identified as the two major opponents of the Church.⁸ In a book published in 1920, this apostle of Christianity expressed the wish to see a Hungarian countryside free of Jews.⁹

The 1918-1944 Period

The Christian churches’ attitude toward the Jews took a turn for the worse after the disaster that befell Hungary at the end of World War I. Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory, one-third of its Magyar people and three-fifths of its total population under the terms of the Trianon Treaty of 1920, the churches’ anti-Jewish posture also dovetailed with the antisemitic policies of the rightist radicals. Like the latter, they were guided by the proto-fascist ideology of the counterrevolutionaries, which basically was an amalgam of antisemitism, revisionism, chauvinistic nationalism, and virulent anti-Communism. On the clerical side, one of the most fervent champions of this ideology was Catholic Bishop István Zadravetz, the country’s chief military chaplain.¹⁰

Like their counterparts in Germany, the bishop and the Hungarian Right radicals advanced the idea that the Jews and their worldwide conspiracy were primarily responsible for Hungary’s debacle. This antisemitic proposition was also promoted by Church figures in parliament, and their press outlets. For example, Father Gyula Zakany claimed in his December 3, 1919 speech

⁷ The Alkotmány (“Constitution”), the Catholic People’s Party daily founded in 1896, was the first highly regarded antisemitic journal in the country. Edited by priests, it reflected a militant Catholicism which often found expression in rampant antisemitism. The same objective was pursued by Egyházi Közlöny (“Ecclesiastical Gazette”).

⁸ Robert Major, “The Churches and the Jews in Hungary,” *Continuum* (Autumn 1966), p. 373.

⁹ Béla Bangha, *Magyarország újjáépítése és a kereszténység* (Budapest: Szt. István Társulat, 1920), p. 161, as quoted by György Kis, *Megjelölve Krisztus keresztjével és Dávid csillagával* (Budapest: Szerzői Kiadás, 1987), p. 245.

¹⁰ In addition to his clerical responsibilities, Bishop Zadravetz also headed the Anti-Bolshevik Committee, one of the many antisemitic counterrevolutionary organizations that were formed after the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918. For details on Zadravetz’s political-ideological views, see Páter Zadravetz titkos naplója (“The Secret Diary of Pater Zadravetz”) (Budapest: Kossuth, 1967).

(similar to the Nazis' "stab-in-the-back" theme) that it was the Jews' fault that Hungary's territorial integrity had been destroyed.¹¹ Throughout the counterrevolutionary era, a large number of Christian ecclesiastical journals and periodicals, along with many Christian lay and Church figures, advanced the cause of National Socialism, including the hatred of the Jews.¹²

One of the central figures of clerical antisemitism during this period was Ottokár Prohászka, the Bishop of Székesfehérvár. Identified as the apostle of Hungarian Catholic intellectuals, Prohászka's spiritual leadership and sophisticated anti-Judaism exerted a profound influence on public opinion for several decades.¹³ His zoological imagery and scornful comments about the Jews often paralleled those made by the Nazis. On July 29, 1919, for example, he wrote, among other things:

In our case it is important to note that the Jews are eating us up and we have to defend ourselves against this bedbug epidemic. It is absolutely true that there are good Jews, but Jewry is foreign, a foreign power that suppresses Christianity, conquers and exploits us ... Here we are dealing with the rampage of a cunning, faithless, and immoral race, a bedbug invasion, a rat campaign. There is only one question: How do we defend ourselves?¹⁴

The Christian church leaders' anti-Jewish political activism gained momentum after the Nazis' acquisition of power in Germany. They were as impressed with Hitler's early successes in challenging the Versailles treaties and the League of Nations as were the rightist radicals in general. In fact, they emerged as the most vocal supporters of the revisionist policies of the successive Hungarian governments. Jointly with the radicals on the Right, they identified revisionism—the policy aimed at rectifying the "injustices of

¹¹ He evoked the same theme before gatherings of the Awakening Magyars (Ébredő Magyarok), one of the many ultra-chauvinistic anti-Jewish organizations that flourished during the period. See also Major, "The Churches and the Jews in Hungary," pp. 374-375.

¹² Among the most important of these were *Nemzeti Újság* ("National Journal"), *Új Nemzedék* ("New Generation"), *Egyházi Lapok* ("Ecclesiastical Journals"), and *Magyar Kultúra* ("Hungarian Culture"). For excerpts from these periodicals, see Major, *ibid.*, and Kis, *Megjelölve Krisztus*.

¹³ During his entire tenure as Bishop of Székesfehérvár (1906-1927), Bishop Prohászka was at the forefront of the antisemitic drive in Hungary. He was of German background, the son of an officer in the Sudetenland. A prolific author, his writings, including his sermons and speeches, were posthumously published in twenty-five volumes; Kis, *Megjelölve Krisztus*, pp. 246-254.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 248-249; see also Herczl, *Christianity and the Holocaust*, pp. 21-22.

Trianon” in conjunction with the Third Reich—and the Jewish question as the two major issues that required urgent solutions.

Though the church leaders were fully aware of the dangers represented by Nazism to the Christian churches and organized religion, they adopted an increasingly pro-German chauvinistic nationalist posture. They provided fertile ground for antisemitic propaganda by condoning and frequently applauding the Right radicals’ equation of Jews with Bolshevism and of National Socialism with Christianity. They followed the implementation of the Nazi program in Germany with interest, aspiring to its possible emulation in Hungary as well. Some of them went as far as to berate those of their colleagues in Germany who failed to embrace it publicly.

For example, Gyula Czapik, the Archbishop of Eger and the second-highest dignitary of the Catholic Church in Hungary, deplored “the fatal error” the German Catholic Church was making by not identifying itself with National Socialism.¹⁵ For Bishop László Ravasz, the leading dignitary of the Reformed Church, the German quest for power was motivated by ethical and religious principles.¹⁶ József Grösz, the Archbishop of Kalocsa, argued that the Arrow Cross, the emblem of the Hungarian Nazis, was compatible with Christ’s Cross, the emblem of the Hungarian Nazis, was compatible with Christ’s Cross. Bishop Zoltán Turóczy, one of the leading figures of the Evangelical Church, argued that “true Christianity is not pacifist but militarist, in the spirit of world-conquering totalitarian powers.” István Hász, the chaplain of the armed forces, expressed his concurrence with National-Socialist ideas, arguing that: “...against the Jews, the destroyers of the country, any offense is permissible.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Bishop Czapik’s concern was clearly exaggerated. Many German Catholic leaders became as enthusiastic about the National Socialists as he was; see Randolph L. Braham, “Remembering and Forgetting. The Vatican, the German Catholic Hierarchy, and the Holocaust,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1999), pp. 222-251.

¹⁶ This was in accord with Ravasz’s antisemitic views, as they were voiced from 1917. He articulated his antisemitic views, identifying the Jews as a race, in his contribution to a symposium titled “A zsidókérdés Magyarországon,” *Husadik Század*, Budapest, 1917, pp. 126-129. Bishop Ravasz reportedly was also a member of the special committee that engineered the 1919 election of Miklós Horthy as Regent (head of state) and remained his loyal supporter to the end. Details about Bishop Ravasz’s antisemitic views were provided by Reverend József Éliás in his seventy-page letter addressed to Dr. László Juhász in Munich in December 1986 (copy in possession of the author). Reverend Éliás played a leading role in rescuing Jews during the Holocaust.

¹⁷ Major, “The Churches and the Jews in Hungary,” pp. 375-376.

Many lower-ranking clergymen, emboldened by the public position taken by their leaders, had no qualms about spreading the anti-Jewish poison among the Hungarian masses. As a result, the Hungarian Christian population at large became increasingly ready to accept the ever-harsher measures against the Jews as both necessary and morally right. The impact of the clerics' antisemitic propaganda was reinforced by the promises of social reform on the part of the ultra-rightists at home and the successes of the Nazis abroad.

Christian church leaders were among the most enthusiastic supporters of the program announced by the government of Prime Minister Kálmán Darányi on March 5, 1938. It called for a massive rearmament program in preparation for the struggle against Bolshevism, and, keeping with the Nazi spirit sweeping Europe at the time, for the "solution" of the Jewish question. The announcement of the program, designed to find favor with Nazi Germany and the rightists at home, marked the beginning of the end of the once-flourishing Jewish community of Hungary. The announcement was followed two months later by the adoption of the First Anti-Jewish Law, which restricted the proportion of Jews in certain sectors of the country's economy and cultural life.¹⁸ The anti-Jewish drive coincided with Hitler's annexation of Austria (the Anschluss), which made the Third Reich an immediate neighbor of Hungary.

Constituting a major bulwark of the counterrevolutionary regime, the Christian church leaders were among the most vocal supporters of the government's determination to "solve" the Jewish question. As ex officio members of the Upper House, they argued vigorously for the adoption of the anti-Jewish law, demanding only minor adjustments in support of the converts. Speaking on behalf of the Reformed Church, László Ravasz, for example, emphasized that the Jews did not constitute a religion but a distinct race; the law would not only assure the peace, tranquility, and security of the nation, but, in the long run, would also serve the best interests of those opposing it. Sándor Raffay, the head of the Evangelical Church, declaring his full support of the law, cynically noted that it "could have been avoided if only the Jews

¹⁸ The First Anti-Jewish Law (Law No. XV:1938) went into effect on May 29, 1938, setting a 20 percent ceiling on the proportion of Jews in the professions and in financial, commercial, and industrial enterprises employing more than ten persons.

had mended their ways and changed their attitude earlier.” In a similar vein, that Jusztinián Cardinal Serédi, the Prince Primate of Hungary, spoke in support of the legislation.¹⁹

A year later, in the midst of the euphoria associated with Hungary’s involvement in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia,²⁰ the leaders of the Christian churches also supported the adoption of the Second Anti-Jewish Law—albeit with somewhat less enthusiasm.²¹ While they had had no compunction about supporting the First Anti-Jewish Law—which allegedly even some Hungarian Jewish leaders supported as a means of “taking the wind out of the Nyilas [Arrow Cross] sails”—some took exception to a few provisions in the Second Anti-Jewish Law of 1939.²²

Specifically, they objected to some openly racial aspects of the bill, which potentially affected even some Magyars, including members of the conservative-aristocratic elite. To counteract the government’s possible negative reaction to these objections, the church leaders felt compelled to justify the adoption of the law by emphasizing the “threat” that the cultural, political, and economic power of the Jews represented for the national interests of Christian Hungary.²³ The church leaders basically advanced the same arguments in favor of Law No. II of 1939 and all its corollary decrees, which led to the establishment and gradual expansion of the blatantly discriminatory labor-service system.²⁴

The leaders of the Christian churches did, however, oppose the Third Anti-Jewish Law, which was enacted shortly after Hungary’s entry into the war

¹⁹ For details on the Christian leaders’ position on the First Anti-Jewish Law and on the law’s provisions and impact, see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 125-130.

²⁰ In November 1938, Hungary acquired the Upper Province (Felvidék), and, in March 1939, the area of Carpatho-Ruthenia (Kárpátalja) from Czechoslovakia.

²¹ Enacted into law on May 4, 1939, the Second Anti-Jewish Law (Law No. IV:1939) restricted to 6 percent the proportion of Jews in the enterprises cited in note 17, and provided a detailed and complicated religious and “racial” definition of who was a Jew. For details on the Second Anti-Jewish Law and its implications, see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 151-160.

²² For the text of the Church leaders’ parliamentary speeches on the anti-Jewish laws, see Henrik Fisch, ed., *Keresztény egyházak felsőházi beszédei a zsidókérdésben* (Budapest: The Editor, 1947), pp. 41-63.

²³ See, for example, the self-serving Pro Memoria written by Bishop László Ravasz in late December 1944 or early 1945 (a copy of the manuscript is in the author’s possession); see also Cardinal Serédi’s 1944 notes in “Serédi Jusztinián feljegyzései 1944 végén,” with an introduction by Sándor Szenes, in *Kritika*, no. 8 (1983), pp. 28-33.

²⁴ For details on the labor-service system, see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 294-380. The national-security provisions of Law II were invoked, in 1944, to justify the measures adopted in connection with the “final solution.”

against the Soviet Union in June 1941. This was largely because its racist provisions directly affected many of their parishioners (both converts and Christian-born). As a result of their pressure and influence in the Upper House, the law was amended to empower the minister of Justice to waive the rules under exceptional conditions. Under the compromise solution, many Hungarians who were potentially affected, including several members of the governmental and political elite, were spared from being classified as Jews.²⁵ Clearly, the Christian leaders' opposition to the law arose from their desire to protect their respective churches' institutional interests and not out of any pro-Jewish sentiment.

The Holocaust Era

The preoccupation with the special interests of converts and Christians of Jewish origin was characteristic of most church leaders' reaction to the anti-Jewish drive throughout the war, including the Holocaust era.²⁶ The record of their reaction to the "final solution" in Hungary, which was launched immediately after the German occupation on March 19, 1944, is mixed at best. Although they clearly abhorred the methods employed by the Nazis and their Hungarian hirelings and visibly sympathized with the suffering Jews, they undertook no effective measures to counteract the perpetrators' designs. Their actions may be classified—generously—as “too little, too late.”

The government of Döme Sztójay, which was constitutionally appointed by Horthy on March 22, began the “solution” of the Jewish question by issuing an avalanche of decrees, thus laying the ground for the Jews' isolation, expropriation, and ghettoization.²⁷ Already aware of the scope of the Nazis' anti-Jewish program, the leaders of Hungarian Jewry approached church

²⁵ On the Third Anti-Jewish Law, see *ibid.*, pp. 200-201. For references to the various anti-Jewish laws and their implications, consult Randolph L. Braham, *The Hungarian Jewish Catastrophe. A Selected and Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 54-69.

²⁶ While the converts were clearly more privileged than the Jews who clung to their faith, they also suffered tremendously under the impact of the racial laws. Most of the Christians, including the clergymen, viewed the Jewish question from a racial rather than a religious perspective. As a result the converts were often shunned and mocked by the Aryans and despised by the faithful Jews. For some details on the issue of converts and conversions during the Nazi era, see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 895-900.

²⁷ For details on the composition of the Sztójay government and its first anti-Jewish measures, see *ibid.*, chaps. 13 and 15, respectively.

leaders for help. Over and above the vast influence the church leaders exercised in the nation, the Jewish leaders took this step because many of the traditional supporters of Jewry, including members of the anti-Nazi conservative-aristocratic elite, were themselves under arrest. To the Jewish leaders' disappointment, however, the church leaders, realizing that the Sztójay government was using the Third Anti-Jewish Law as a basis for the anti-Jewish drive, reacted primarily by expressing their concern for the converts.

In retrospect, it seems that the activities of the Christian church dignitaries throughout the "final solution" era—meager and covert as they were—were presumably motivated not so much by the desire to save Jewish lives, but by the need to ease their individual consciences. They also sought to justify themselves before history, their subordinates, and perhaps even their parishioners.

Although they were aware of the Nazis' war against the Jews in German-dominated Europe,²⁸ these leaders made no reference to it in their sermons nor shared their knowledge with the lower clergy.²⁹ After the occupation, they, alongside their parishioners, witnessed the enactment of ever harsher antisemitic measures, culminating in the ghettoization and deportation of the Jews. Like their subordinates throughout the country, they presumably knew that the Hungarian gendarmerie, police, and civil service—agencies of state power that were composed almost exclusively of members of their own congregations—were routinely and often brutally implementing the isolation, expropriation, ghettoization, concentration, and deportation of the Jews. Moreover, they were systematically kept abreast of the horrors of the anti-Jewish drive in the countryside by the regional bishops.³⁰

²⁸ *Ibid.*, chapter 23, esp. pp. 827-828.

²⁹ According to Reverend György Kis, "99.9 percent of the clergy were unaware of the death camps in the summer of 1944." See Sándor Szenes's interview with Reverend Kis in *Bejezetlen múlt. Keresztények és zsidók, sorsok* (Budapest: The Author, 1986), p. 269. The record also shows that, although the leaders of the Christian churches received hand-delivered copies of the Auschwitz Protocols, based on the accounts of the two Slovak Jewish escapees from Auschwitz on April 7, 1944, early in May 1944, none of them mentions the Protocols in their writings.

³⁰ On May 11, 1944, for example, Endre Hamvas, the Bishop of Csanád, informed Jusztinián Cardinal Serédi about the horrors endured by the Jews of Magyarkanizsa, Zenta, Zombor, and the other communities relocated to Szeged earlier that month. Bishop Hamvas emphasized that horrible as the condition of these Jews were—many of them were held in the

The Christian church leaders nevertheless failed to speak out in public against the violation of the most fundamental values of human rights. They not only failed to heed the pleas of the Jewish leaders, but also virtually ignored the requests of some of the bishops to take a stand and arouse public opinion against the injustices being committed against the Jews.

To the extent that they intervened on behalf of Jews, the church leaders of Hungary relied almost exclusively on discreet private approaches to individual members of the government. The focus of their intervention, usually through the submission of memoranda, was almost always the protection of the interests of the converts and of the Christians of Jewish origin. In connection with the non-converted Jews, their plea was usually limited to the alleviation of the *means* the authorities used in the “solution” of the Jewish question.

The arguments advanced by Cardinal Serédi were basically the same as those used by the representatives of the Protestant denominations. Cardinal Serédi first approached the prime minister toward the end of March 1944, taking with him a memorandum prepared by the Holy Cross Society (Szent Kereszt Egyesület), the association of Jews who had converted to Catholicism. The cardinal, echoing the views of the Society, expressed great consternation over the plans to make wearing the yellow star compulsory even for converts—some of whom were priests and nuns, or active members of the church. He reminded Sztójay that the Star of David was a symbol of religion and not of the Jewish race and, consequently, if Christians wore it, it would be a contradiction. Like the other Church leaders, the cardinal was presumably also concerned about the impact the converts wearing Stars might have on the Aryan parishioners during services.

A week after the beginning of the ghettoization in Carpatho-Ruthenia and northeastern Hungary on April 16, Cardinal Serédi, having been informed of the cruelties perpetrated against the Jews, submitted a memorandum to Sztójay in the name of his fellow bishops, protesting the violations of human rights. Once again he entered a special plea on behalf of converts, arguing that they should be separated from the Jews since they had themselves

pig pens of the local sausage factory—the situation of those in Kassa and Nyíregyháza was reportedly even worse; Braham, *Politics*, p. 1178.

already done so by virtue of their conversion. He summarized the Catholic Church's position by demanding:

The exemption of Christians from the measures enacted against Jews.

The removal of converts from the jurisdiction of the Jewish Council.

The exemption of converts from wearing the Star of David.

Permission for priests falling under the jurisdiction of anti-Jewish laws to have non-Jewish servants.

Recognition by the government that the confiscation of Jewish property often affected children who were no longer Jewish.³¹

The cardinal's almost exclusive preoccupation with the needs and interests of the converts continued even after the first deportation trains left for Auschwitz from the Kistarcsa internment camp on April 30, 1944, and the systematic ghettoization of the Jews of Northern Transylvania began on May 3. A week later, he urged Sztójay that, within the ghettos, the converts be separated from the Jews and enabled to carry out their religious practices. The cardinal expressed particular concern that many Christians had been inconvenienced as a result of the forced relocations from the designated ghetto areas.

Two days after the beginning of the mass deportations on May 15, the cardinal urged the prime minister to see to it that the deportees did not lose their lives without due process. Presumably to ease his conscience, he issued a circular to the bishops summarizing the Church's activities and achievements on behalf of the converts. He rationalized his failure to speak out against the measures adopted by the government by claiming that such a move might have induced the government to rescind its concessions or have given it an excuse to impose additional restrictions on Catholics or Catholic institutions.³²

³¹ Jenő Lévai, *Zsidósors Magyarországon* (Budapest: Magyar Téka, 1948), pp. 12-24.

³² Ibid., pp. 125-127; See also Jenő Lévai, *L'église ne s'est pas tue. Le dossier Hongrois, 1940-1945* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), pp. 85-93. For the complete text of the circular, see Elek Karsai, ed., *Vádirat a náciizmus ellen (Budapest: A Magyar Izraeliták Országos Képviselete, 1960)*, Vol. 2, pp. 53-61.

The reaction of the Protestant churches to the anti-Jewish measures was fundamentally the same.³³ In fact, in most cases, the attitude and actions of the leaders of the two Protestant church associations—the Universal Convent of the Reformed Church of Hungary (A Magyarországi Református Egyház Egyetemes Konventje) and the Directorate of the Universal Evangelical Church of Hungary (A Magyarországi Evangélikus Egyházegyetem Elnöksége)—paralleled those of Cardinal Serédi.³⁴ Although they, too, agonized over the plight of the Jews, especially over the *manner* in which the Jewish question was being solved, their primary concern was also almost exclusively for the welfare of the converts. They, too, generally expressed their concern discreetly, appealing individually or collectively to the local or central leaders of the government for the redress of injustices and the alleviation, if not termination, of the anti-Jewish measures.

On April 3, Bishop László Ravasz approached both Andor Jaross, the minister of the Interior, and Gyula Ambrózy, head of Horthy's Cabinet Office, protesting the anti-Jewish measures and asking for exemptions from wearing the yellow star. He was particularly interested in exemptions for all officials and employees of the Protestant churches, including teachers, cantors, deacons, and church wardens. He also pleaded for the establishment of separate "Christian Jewish Council." He addressed a similar appeal to Sztójay on April 6.³⁵

On April 12, Bishop Ravasz visited both Horthy and András Tasnádi Nagy, the president of the Lower House of the Parliament. He contacted the latter to repeat the requests previously addressed to Jaross and Sztójay and to ask for

³³ For an overview of the Protestant churches' attitude during the Horthy era, see István Kónya, *A magyar Református egyház felső vezetésének politikai ideológiája a Horthy korszakban* ("The Political Ideology of the Higher Leadership of the Protestant Churches During the Horthy Era") (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1967), 243 pp.

³⁴ The nine leading figures of the Protestant churches were László Ravasz, bishop of the Reformed Church District Along the Danube; János Vásárhelyi, bishop of the Reformed Church District in Transylvania; Imre Révész, bishop of the Reformed Church District in Tiszántul; Andor Enyedy, bishop of the Reformed Church District in the Tiszáninnení ("Cis Tisza") Area; Elemér Györy, bishop of the Reformed Church District in Transdanubia; Béla Kapi, bishop of the Evangelical Church District in Transdanubia; Sándor Raffay, bishop of the Evangelical Church in the Bányai (Mining) District; Zoltán Turóczi, bishop of the Evangelical Church in the Tisza District; and Dezső Kuthy, bishop of the Evangelical Church District in the Cisdanubian Area. For further details on the antecedents of the joint approach and for the text of the appeal, see Bishop Ravasz's Pro Memoria, pp. 13-15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

certain exemptions for Jews, especially scientists, artists, and soldiers. He used the meeting with Horthy to urge him not to take any position in connection with the Jewish question that might “shift responsibility for the coming cruelties on his unsullied name.”

Bishop Ravasz visited Horthy again on April 28. The day before, Ravasz had received Zsigmond Perényi, the president of the Upper House, who informed him about the measures that had already been taken against the Jews of Carpatho-Ruthenia and northeastern Hungary.³⁶ Briefed by Samu Kahan-Frankl and Imre Reiner, two leading figures of the Jewish Council, Perényi emphasized that the ghettoization of the Jews was but the prelude to their deportation and that their fate would be similar to that of the Polish and Slovak Jews.³⁷ It was during this fateful meeting that Horthy revealed to Bishop Ravasz his consent to the delivery of a few hundred thousand Jewish workers to Germany in order “to conserve Hungarian workers.”³⁸

On May 9, the Bishop visited Sztójay in the company of Miklós Mester, the former state secretary in the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Education under Imrédy who turned against the Germans and the Nyilas in the summer of 1944. He sent another appeal to the prime minister on May 19, in which he protested against the measures taken against the Jews. He stated, *inter alia*: “We see signs indicating that in addition to the separation, deportation beyond the country's border might also be in preparation.”³⁹ This was four days after the deportations were already in full swing.

The failure of the Christian church leaders to take a firm stand and publicly condemn the injustice and inhumanity associated with the expropriation, ghettoization, and deportation of the Jews undoubtedly encouraged Sztójay

³⁶ The mostly Orthodox Jews of Carpatho-Ruthenia and northeastern Hungary were placed into ghettos beginning on April 16 (the first day of Passover), almost two weeks before the ghettoization decree was issued.

³⁷ Reverend József Éliás asserts that the primary reason Perényi approached Ravasz to intervene with Horthy was precisely because of the bishop's long and intimate political association with the regent; see his letter to Dr. László Juhász cited above (n. 16).

³⁸ Ravasz, *Pro Memoria*, pp. 5, 12. Reference is to the agreement reached by Horthy and Hitler at Schloss Klessheim on March 18, 1944, under which the Hungarian head of state consented to the delivery of hundreds of thousands of “Jewish workers” to Germany. For details, see Brahm, *Politics*, pp. 397-401; see also Albert Bereczky, *Hungarian Protestantism and the Persecution of the Jews* (Budapest: Sylvester, n.d.), pp. 14-18. Rev. Bereczky's booklet is based largely on Bishop Ravasz's *Pro Memoria*.

³⁹ For the text of the letters exchanged by Bishop Ravasz and Prime Minister Sztójay, see Ravasz's *Pro Memoria*, pp. 5-7.

and his government to proceed with the “final solution” at full speed. However, to appease the church leaders, Sztójay made some meaningful concessions on the issue of the converts.

As if in gratitude for not having raised the graver issues relating to the “final solution,” the prime minister assured Cardinal Serédi (May 3) that the government had already exempted priests of Jewish origin and asserted that it would do everything possible to insure the economic interests of Christians whose parents were affected by the anti-Jewish laws. As to the yellow star, he emphasized that it was not construed as a symbol of the Jewish religion, but “as a convenient means for the necessary identification from the administrative point of view of those of the Jewish race.” He added that he would not object to the converts wearing a cross as well.⁴⁰ In a private letter (dated June 19), Sztójay again tried to disarm the cardinal by informing him that the five demands that he had expressed in his April memorandum had for all intents and purposes been accepted and carried out by the government.⁴¹

It was basically in the same vein that Sztójay responded to Bishop Ravasz's appeals. In a letter dated May 10, the prime minister emphasized that the Jewish question was being solved not on religious but on racial grounds.⁴²

The failure of the top church leaders to take a public stand in defense of the Jews had a negative influence on most of the bishops and clergy at large. Their passive stance emboldened the Jews' enemies as much as it discouraged potential rescuers. The few bishops who dared to broach the Jewish persecutions in their sermons could not stem the tide, for their messages reached only limited, local audiences. Lacking encouragement from the upper levels of the hierarchy, the junior members of the clergy generally failed to become actively involved in protesting the measures that were taken against the Jews in the countryside.

⁴⁰ Lévai, *Zsidósors*, pp. 124-125.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 186-187.

⁴² On the basis of Sztójay's communication, some bishops instructed the ministers in their diocese to carry out their responsibilities to the converts. Specifically, they were asked to go into the ghettos to serve the spiritual needs of their congregants and advise them that they could wear a white cross next to the Star of David; Karsai, ed., *Vádirat*, 3: 130-133.

When the deportations were at their peak in the northeastern parts of the country (May-June, 1944), the Prince Primate was subjected to great pressure from all sides. Some bishops and the papal nuncio urged him to speak up; members of the government advised him to stay the course. Bishop Apor contacted the cardinal on several occasions, imploring him to issue a pastoral letter covering the religious and moral implications of the situation in a language understandable to the people, or give the bishops a free hand to inform and guide their parishioners. Angelo Rotta, the papal nuncio, approached Cardinal Serédi a number of times, inquiring why he and the bishops of the Catholic Church were not taking a more resolute stand against the government.

Apparently annoyed by the nuncio's interventions, the cardinal felt compelled to defend his position by invoking the censorship system then in effect and arguing that a public disclosure might in fact be counterproductive. He also exploited the occasion to lecture the nuncio about his own failures, questioning the utility of the Apostolic Nunciature in Budapest, which, he claimed, "does nothing and nobody knows if it ever did anything; and it is deceitful for the Apostolic Holy See to maintain diplomatic relations with that German government which carries out the atrocities."⁴³

The cardinal's annoyance with the nuncio clearly reflected his frustrations over the silence of Pope Pius XII on the "final solution." At a meeting discussing the need for possible joint action by the Christian churches, the cardinal reportedly threw his skullcap to the floor in anger, declaring: "If His Holiness the Pope does nothing against Hitler, what can I do in my narrower jurisdiction? Damn it."⁴⁴ The cardinal's frustration over the pope's attitude seems to have been fully justified.⁴⁵

Aware of the cardinal's predicament, the prime minister assigned some of his ministers to further "enlighten" the Prince Primate about the government's anti-Jewish policies.⁴⁶ In his discussions with the government's emissaries,

⁴³ Lévai, *Zsidósors*, pp. 183-184.

⁴⁴ Berczky, *Hungarian Protestantism*, pp. 19-20.

⁴⁵ For details on the wartime silence of Pope Pius XII in general and on his attitude toward the plight of the Jews of Hungary in particular, see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 1212-1225.

⁴⁶ On June 2, for example, Cardinal Serédi was visited by István Antal, the minister of Justice and of Religious Affairs and Education; on June 7, he was seen by Lajos Huszovszky, a ministerial secretary in the Council of Ministers; on June 8, Béla Imrédy called on him; finally,

the cardinal deplored the harsh measures that had already been adopted against the Jews and argued that the Jews ought to have been “militarized” and employed in the country or perhaps sent to neutral countries instead of being deported.

In late June, when the realities of Auschwitz were being publicized in Switzerland and Sweden, and some world leaders, including President Roosevelt, the king of Sweden, and Pope Pius XII, were urging Horthy to put an end to the deportations, the Prince Primate and the entire Catholic hierarchy were besieged with requests for them to arouse public opinion by issuing a joint public declaration. On June 27, the nuncio conveyed the pope’s desire that the “Hungarian bishops take a public stand in defense of Christian principles and in support of those compatriots that were unjustly affected by the racial laws, and especially on behalf of the Christians.” By that time the cardinal was in fact working on a pastoral letter to be read in all churches during Sunday services.⁴⁷

It was around this time that Bishop Ravasz was also toying with the idea of issuing a pastoral letter in the name of the Reformed Church. His decision was presumably motivated by his own frustrations over the failure of the “private” interventions with the Sztójay government to yield any results. He and some of his fellow bishops approached Cardinal Serédi some time in May to undertake, along the example of the Dutch and Danish Christian churches, a joint campaign to thwart the government’s anti-Jewish measures.⁴⁸

Bishop Ravasz first approached Cardinal Serédi on June 15, via a letter that was taken to Esztergom, the Prince Primate’s See, by Rev. János Cavallier. Bishop Ravasz raised the right question, but also offered an unfortunate loophole at a time when four transports with 10-12,000 Jews were

on June 17 István Bárczy invited him and the Catholic bishops to a government luncheon, ostensibly to clarify all the issues raised by the Church.

⁴⁷ His draft was prepared with the aid of János Drahos, his deputy. The final text, dated June 29, 1944, was adopted after consultation with Bishops Apor and Czapik. For the English-language version of the pastoral letter, see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 1179-1182.

⁴⁸ The need for possible joint action by the Christian churches was raised with Bishop Ravasz by József Cavallier, the head of the Holy Cross Society, as early as May 3. A meeting toward this end was actually held in the cardinal’s office in the Royal Palace through the good offices of Cavallier, but it yielded no positive results. In addition to Cavallier, the meeting was attended by Father József Jánosi and by Sándor Török, the representative of the converts on the Jewish Council; Bereczky, *Hungarian Protestantism*, pp. 19-20; see also Bishop Ravasz’s *Pro Memoria*, p. 13.

being taken daily to Auschwitz. He asked: "When will the Christian churches deem the time ripe to voice their solemn declaration in protest before the country and the world, against the inhumane methods currently being used in the handling of the Jewish question?"

Although the mass deportations were fully underway, Bishop Ravasz suggested that, before such a public stand was taken, a delegation of churches should hand the government leaders "a final earnest warning."⁴⁹ The bishop was apparently still more concerned with the possible breach in church-state relations than with the plight of the Jews.

Cavallier took a copy of Bishop Ravasz's proposed protest memorandum to Serédi, but the cardinal did not find it possible to cooperate.⁵⁰ The Protestant church leaders consequently decided to forward the memorandum without him. The text was not finalized until June 20, because it had to have the approval and signature of the nine bishops. The memorandum, handed to Sztójay on June 23, by a delegation composed of Bishops Ravasz and Kapi accompanied by Jenő Balogh and Baron Albert Radvánszky, the lay leaders of the Reformed and Evangelical churches, conveyed the church leaders' dismay over the manner in which the Jewish question was being solved. While they implored the prime minister to put an end to the atrocities, they emphasized that, for the time being at least, they would not bring this issue to public attention in order not to aggravate his political difficulties.⁵¹

Sztójay told the church representatives that the accounts of Jews being tortured were exaggerated. He referred to the assurances given to the Council of Ministers on June 16, by László Endre, the chief architect of the "final solution," to the effect that the converts were being separated from the Jews, that they were adequately represented within the Jewish Council by the noted writer Sándor Török, and that the administrative and security organs of the state had been instructed to deal humanely with the Jews. Sztójay also repeated the standard lie that the Jews were merely being taken to Germany

⁴⁹ Bereczky, *Hungarian Protestantism*, pp. 19-20; see also Bishop Ravasz's *Pro Memoria*, p. 13.

⁵⁰ Lévai, *Zsidósors*, pp. 197-198.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 198-200; see also Karsai, ed., *Vádirat*, 3:6-8; Bereczky, *Hungarian Protestantism*, pp. 22-24; and Bishop Ravasz's *Pro Memoria*, pp. 13-15.

to work, and the families were sent along to spare them unnecessary worry about their loved ones.

While it is not clear if he was taken in by these reassurances, Bishop Ravasz clearly was not in the mood to listen to the pleas and suggestions advanced by Rev. József Éliás, the leader of the Good Shepherd Committee (Jó Pásztor Bizottság), his church's agency in charge of converts. In a June 1944 letter addressed to all the bishops of the Protestant churches, Éliás proposed that a delegation of the heads or representatives of the Christian churches should go to Sztójay and announce that, unless the government halted the deportations, the anti-Jewish measures would be publicly condemned through pastoral letters to be read in all the churches. If this demand were left unheeded, he proposed that the church leaders should close all the churches, refuse to administer the sacraments to those who were involved in the deportations and to their families, and keep the church bells silent while the deportations lasted.⁵²

To assuage the parishioners of the Evangelical Church, a copy of Endre's note was also forwarded to Bishop Raffay on July 4.⁵³ Probably frustrated by the failure of the delegation to get substantive concessions from Sztójay, on June 27, Raffay contacted Cardinal Serédi on his own, suggesting that the three well-established churches of Hungary submit a joint protest to either Horthy or Sztójay. Once again, the subject was "the shameful failure of the churches to protect their faithful" and the fact that the converts were concentrated together with Jews in camps and ghettos operating under the jurisdiction of Jewish Councils.⁵⁴ And once again, the cardinal rejected the appeal, arguing that he was largely achieving his goals without such an approach; moreover, the churches could not expose themselves to the possibility of failure.⁵⁵

In the meantime, the Prince Primate's pastoral letter, which had been mailed to all the parishes, was also brought to the attention of István Antal, the minister of Religious Affairs and Education. He promptly stopped its

⁵² See Szenes's interview with Rev. József Éliás in his *Befejezetlen múlt*, p. 68.

⁵³ Karsai, ed., *Vádirat*, 3:38-39.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

⁵⁵ Cardinal Serédi responded on July 8, and included a copy of his planned pastoral letter of June 29; *ibid.*, pp., 111-112.

distribution; however, some of the archdioceses, including those of Eger and Kalocsa, had already received it, and it was reportedly read in some of the churches in these dioceses.

Following a resolution of the Council of Ministers, Antal visited Serédi on July 6, in Gerecse, the cardinal's summer residence. Although he once again condemned the government's actions, the cardinal—especially after he was warned about the consequences of a possible Nyílas assumption of power—expressed a readiness to withdraw the pastoral letter. This, however, was on the condition that the prime minister inform him officially that he had accepted the demands outlined in his earlier memoranda—specifically, that Christians were exempted from the anti-Jewish measures and the government was doing everything in its power to bring about the return of Christian deportees. Then the Church authorities could inform the parishioners that they were conducting negotiations with the government on the Jewish question and had already achieved certain concessions.

Antal immediately accepted these terms, and, on July 7, the day Horthy stopped the deportations, Cardinal Serédi telegraphed all the parish heads to refrain from reading the pastoral letter. The following day some of the leading members of the government—among them Sztójay, Antal, Imrédy, and Kunder—appeared in Gerecse in an effort to solve the outstanding issues still plaguing church-state relations. Sztójay brought along a letter he had written the day before to summarize the government's position and actions in response to the Church's demands.⁵⁶

Sztójay's assurances must have assuaged the cardinal, for he agreed to a compromise formula under which, on July 8 and 9, the state radio was to broadcast to all parishes the cardinal's communication that the pastoral letter was designed only for the information of the priests and church officials, and was not to be read before the parishioners. Instead, the following note would be read:

Jusztinián Cardinal Serédi... informs the Catholic faithful in his name and in the name of the Council of Bishops that he has repeatedly approached the

⁵⁶ For the text, see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 1182-1183.

Royal Hungarian government in connection with the decrees relating to the Jews and especially the converts and is continuing his negotiations in this respect.⁵⁷

Anticipating criticism for his apparent surrender to the government, the cardinal addressed a confidential letter to the bishops on July 9, explaining the reasons for his actions. In it he reviewed his activities since May 17, the date of his first communication to them, emphasizing his efforts to bring about the suspension of the deportations. He set forth his reasons for the preparation and eventual rescinding of the pastoral letter. He concluded with his belief that the faithful would realize, through the radio announcement and the brief text read from the pulpits, that the Church had done its duty and that the secret negotiations had yielded results that would have been impossible to achieve through an open conflict with the government.⁵⁸

The short note was read in all the Catholic churches of Hungary on July 16, by which time all of Hungary (with the notable exception of Budapest) was already *Judenrein*.

Perhaps it was just as well that the pastoral letter was not read. Even in this document designed to help the Jews, the cardinal felt it necessary to state that there was no doubt that one part of Jewry “had a guilty subversive influence on the Hungarian economic, social and moral life... [while] the others did not stand up against their co-religionists in this respect.” Rev. György Kis made the following poignant observation in this connection:

“Thus in June 1944, after the provincial Jews and many tens of thousands of Jewish-Christians had been taken out of the country - physically and spiritually tormented, humiliated, robbed, and pressed into cattle cars - and by the time the Pastoral letter appeared most of them were already killed, Prince Primate Serédi divides Hungarian Jewry into two parts. One part is guilty because it exercised a destructive influence on Hungarian life in every respect, the other, on the other hand, sinned with its silence because “it did not stand up against

⁵⁷ The text was brought to the attention of the bishops and priests together with the instruction that the pastoral letter not be read on July 10; Karsai, ed., *Vádirat*, 3:128-129.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:115-121.

their co-religionists.” What is the logical consequence of this? That both parts, that is all of Jewry, are to be condemned. The Nyilas and the Hitlerites were thinking along the same lines! Accordingly, is it possible that the country’s Prince Primate and the corps of bishops would be differentiated from the Nyilas only with respect to the means used for the solution of the Jewish question?”⁵⁹

The fate of the pastoral letter proposed by the leaders of the Reformed Church paralleled that of the Catholic Church. The first draft, which was drawn up by Bishop Ravasz, was supposed to have been read in all Calvinist churches on July 2.⁶⁰ Several bishops and their local church councils insisted that the letter also include a reference to the “inhumane bombings” inflicted upon Hungary. A new letter incorporating this reference was scheduled to be read on July 9.

Antal learned of the Protestant church leaders' intentions and disarmed them by the same technique he had used earlier with the cardinal. At a meeting in Ravasz's home in Leányfalu on July 11,⁶¹ Antal gave the same assurances concerning the special treatment of the converts and the more humane treatment of the Jews. The church leaders yielded, rationalizing that an open break with the government might bring the Nyilas into power, which would be disastrous not only for the churches and the country but also for the Jews of Budapest. The formula of agreement was identical to the one reached with the cardinal. On July 12, the ministers of the Protestant churches were instructed to read the following text to their parishioners during the Sunday morning services on July 16:

“The Bishops of the Reformed Church of Hungary and the Evangelical Church of Hungary wish to inform the congregations that in connection with the Jewish question, and particularly the baptized Jews, they have repeatedly

⁵⁹ See Szenes's interview with Rev. György Kis in his *Befejezetlen múlt*, p. 283.

⁶⁰ For the abbreviated English-language version, see Braham, *Politics*, pp. 1188-1189.

⁶¹ The meeting was also attended by Mester, Bishops Kapi and Révész, Reverend Albert Bereczky, and Szabolcs Lőrinczy.

taken steps with the appropriate government officials and will continue to do so.”⁶²

The efforts of the church leaders yielded some positive results. They secured exemptions for church officials of Jewish background as well as for persons in mixed marriages. They also achieved a more lenient treatment of converts. The defense of their interests was undertaken by a special council, the Association of the Christian Jews of Hungary (A Magyarországi Keresztény Zsidók Szövetsége), which was established on July 14. Concurrently, a campaign was launched to register those who had converted before August 1, 1941.⁶³ This move, coupled with the leaking of Sztójay's July 7 assurances to the cardinal that converts would be exempted in case the deportations were resumed, caused many Jews to convert—to the dismay of both Orthodox Jews and the Nyilas.

The church leaders undoubtedly contributed to Horthy's decision to halt the deportations. Nevertheless, their almost exclusive reliance on covert negotiations and their failure to offer clear-cut guidance to their subordinates and the Christian masses also contributed to the climate that made the unhindered implementation of the “final solution” possible.

In light of this basically dismal record, one can only wonder about the naiveté of Chief Rabbi Isaac Herzog of Palestine, who was trying to obtain an audience with Pope Pius XII to plead for the Vatican's intervention on behalf of the Hungarian Jews. Unsuccessful in this attempt, the chief rabbi was invited to meet instead with Monsignor Hughes, the apostolic delegate to Cairo. During their meeting, on September 5, 1944, the chief rabbi suggested that the situation might be improved, “If Hungarian Bishops were to go into the camps and announce publicly that, if the deportation of Jews went on, they [the bishops] would go and die with them.”⁶⁴

⁶² Bereczky, *Hungarian Protestantism*, p. 28; see also Karsai, ed., *Vádirat*, 3:153-155.

⁶³ The registration of converts between July 12 and 17 was announced on posters issued by Ákos Doroghi Farkas, the mayor of Budapest. The church leaders were eager to advance the conversion date to March 22, 1944, which caused some difficulties between the churches and the authorities; Karsai, ed., *Vádirat*, 3:49-52, 60-61, 155-158.

⁶⁴ Saul Friedländer, *Pius XII and the Third Reich* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 233.

Clearly, the good chief rabbi was not accurately informed about the background and record of the Christian church leaders in Hungary.

In contrast to the top church leaders, several of the regional bishops took a more active role on behalf of the persecuted Jews in the area of their dioceses. They did everything in their power to induce the local authorities to alleviate the plight of the Jews. Occasionally, they also contacted the central leaders of the Hungarian government. Although most of these interventions were personal and private, three of the bishops raised the issue of ghettoization and deportation publicly. For example, during his Whitsunday sermon, Bishop Apor declared:

“He who denies the fundamental laws of Christianity about love and asserts that there are people and groups and races one is permitted to hate, and advocates that there are men whom one may torture, be they either Negroes or Jews, no matter how much he may boast of being Christian is in fact a pagan and clearly guilty.... And all those who approve such tortures and participate in their commission commit a serious crime and will not receive absolution until they make amends for their sin.”⁶⁵

At the ordination ceremony for new priests in the Szeged cathedral on June 25, when the Jews of the district were being deported, Bishop Endre Hamvas of Csanád spoke out “to proclaim the truth”:

“In the name of Christianity, hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people are deprived of their property and homes and are deported because of their race, which they are unable to do anything about, so that a flood of suffering descends upon them exposing their health and lives to uncertainty and denying their human dignity.”⁶⁶

Perhaps the most courageous public stand was taken by Bishop Áron Marton, whose diocese covered all of Transylvania, although his bishopric had its seat in Alba Iulia (Gyulafehérvár), the Romanian-held part of the region.

⁶⁵ Jenő Lévai, *Szürke könyv magyar zsidók megmentéséről* (Budapest: Officina, n.d.), p. 79. bodily searches for valuables; Archives of the Prince Primate (Primási Levéltár), Esztergom.

Speaking in St. Michael's Church of Kolozsvár (Cluj), on May 18, when the Jews of the surrounding area were still in the local ghetto, he movingly condemned the measures adopted against the Jews. This was in stark contrast to his Protestant counterparts in the area, who kept silent.

"The fundamental premise of our belief, the command to love one's fellow man, still holds, and its open acceptance and practice is even more of a duty today than in former times... He who sins against his fellow man endangers one of the great achievements of the 2000-year work of Christianity - the idea of the brotherhood of man.... And finally, my brothers, our last, nonnegotiable treasure compels us to this stand: our people's honor. The people everywhere long for an order built on justice, on laws that are applied equally to all, and on love toward all ... I have been informed that my parishioners ... have followed with great concern the measures that have lately been carried out against the Jews ... In the defense of truth and the service of love, persecution and imprisonment are a mark not of shame but of honor."⁶⁷

Bishop Marton's stand was not well received by the Hungarian authorities. Rebuked by Jaross, he returned to Alba Iulia at the end of May a *persona non grata*; he did not reenter Northern Transylvania until after the war.⁶⁸

Source materials relating to the attitude and reactions of lower-ranking clergymen are scanty. A number of priests and ministers took an active part in the weak Hungarian resistance movement and did their best to help the persecuted, especially in Budapest. Foremost among these were Rev. Albert Bereczky of the Reformed Church and Monsignor Béla Varga of the Roman Catholic Church.⁶⁹ The overwhelming majority of the clergy, however, in the absence of guidance and encouragement from their superiors, reflected the passivity of the population at large.

⁶⁷ Braham, *Politics*, p. 1192.

⁶⁸ Béla Vago, "The Destruction of the Jews of Transylvania," in Randolph L. Braham, ed, *Hungarian Jews*, 1966 1:192-193.

⁶⁹ A leader of the Smallholders' Party, Monsignor Varga served as the president of the Hungarian Parliament after the war. Following the virtual Communist takeover in 1947, he settled in New York, where he played a leading role in Hungarian exile Politics.

Some occasionally expressed dismay over the *manner* in which the Jews were being treated in their communities, usually showing special concern for the welfare of the converts. Their attitude is illustrated by the June 30 appeal of Father Elek Oberndorf of the Evangelical Church in Mohács on behalf of three converted women.

“I know that Jewry was a foreign element in the nation's body, which had to be removed. It is not against this, but against the manner of its implementation that every Hungarian of good will has objections. I now restrict my complaints exclusively to my Protestant brethren of the Jewish race who were entrusted to me by God....[I] never was a friend of the Jews, but was a friend and brother of those with whom [I] had become united in Christ.”⁷⁰

The Arrow Cross Era

Following the rapid advance of the Soviet forces toward the borders of Hungary, the Horthy group decided to sue for an armistice. The attempt, inadequately prepared, failed on October 15, 1944.

Having acquired power with the aid of the Germans, the Arrow Cross Party, the nemesis of the conservative-aristocratic regime, put an end to the Horthy era and unleashed a reign of terror against the Jews of Budapest. Hungary continued the war against the Allies as Nazi Germany's last satellite.

During this period, the church leaders resumed their pleas on behalf of the Jews. However, they continued to rely on traditional tactics, even though the social order they so faithfully supported had been destroyed. The papal nuncio again took the initiative in warning Ferenc Szálasi, Hungary's new ruler, against resuming draconic measures against the Jews. Cardinal Serédi and Bishop Ravasz also contacted Szálasi on several occasions, both personally and in writing. The cardinal viewed the Hungarian Nazi leader as

⁷⁰ Rev. Oberndorf's appeal was addressed to Albert Radvánszky, the superintendent of the Evangelical Church; Karsai, ed., *Vádirat*, 3:19-22.

somewhat “possessed,” but he “never doubted his devotion to Catholicism and his good intentions.”⁷¹

While the Christian leaders raised the Jewish question, their primary concern was the worsening military situation. They demanded, among other things, that Budapest be declared an open city. Early in November, when tens of thousands of Budapest Jews (mostly women) were being driven toward the border with the Reich, the church leaders lodged several protests. They demanded the safeguarding of the Jews’ lives and reminded Szálasi about the Sztójay government's assurances concerning the suspension of the deportations.

Szálasi's response was delivered by Deputy Prime Minister Jenő Szöllösi on November 24. The church leaders were reassured about the status of the capital (Hitler allegedly convinced Szálasi that the bridges and public works of Budapest would not be destroyed). They were also informed that the Jews would be separated and the labor servicemen (including at this time all able-bodied Jewish men and women) would be transferred closer to the German border “in order to prevent their vengeance against Hungarians in case of a Russian occupation.”

Dissatisfied with the reply, Bishop Ravasz approached Cardinal Serédi on November 26, suggesting that a delegation of leaders of the three churches visit Szálasi. The cardinal, who was already quite ill at the time, rejected the idea as useless. Earlier, the cardinal had given a similar reply to the leaders of the Jewish Council who, in a November 14 telegram, had appealed for his intervention because Jews were being rounded up and deported without regard to sex or state of health and in violation of existing decrees.

When they saw that the cardinal was reluctant to cooperate, the bishops of the Reformed and Evangelical churches submitted a memorandum of their own to Szálasi. Dated December 1, the document proclaimed that the treatment accorded the Jews “mocks God’s eternal laws which prescribe

⁷¹ The cardinal recorded this observation in his diary following his meeting with Szálasi on October 22, 1944, more than three months after the Hungarian countryside had become *Judenrein*; Kis, *Megjelölve Krisztus keresztyével*, p. 173.

humane treatment even of one's enemies and brings God's anger on the head of the nation."⁷²

While the church leaders tried to alleviate the Jews' situation through direct appeals to the Nyilas leaders, some clergymen took an active role in trying to save Jewish lives. By far the most active among these were those associated with various monasteries, orders, and convents,⁷³ and, above all, the ecclesiastical institutions devoted to the protection of the special interests of converts: the Holy Cross Society and the Good Shepherd Committee.

The Holy Cross Society was the major institution devoted to the protection and advancement of the interests of Jews who had converted to Catholicism. It began operating on October 3, 1939, under the leadership of Rev. Cavallier and Rev. József Jánosi.⁷⁴ The organization at first devoted its attention to supporting refugees who began entering the country after the outbreak of World War II. It also aided those affected by the anti-Jewish laws, cooperating in this regard with the major Jewish welfare organizations.

After the German occupation, the Society was not only heavily involved in protecting converts from the anti-Jewish measures, but also active in providing aid and comfort to the many refugees in the country, irrespective of their religious background. Working closely with the Catholic hierarchy and the papal nuncio, the Society was a primary force in the establishment of the Association of the Christian Jews of Hungary and a champion of human rights. Its activities effectively ceased late in November 1944, following a number of Nyilas raids on its offices. On November 17, Cavallier himself was shot and wounded and taken away by the Nyilas together with approximately 150 Jews who were applying for papal protective passes. Thereafter, the Society's activities were to a large extent absorbed by the Good Shepherd Committee.

⁷² Bereczky, *Hungarian Protestantism*, pp. 34-37; Lévai, *Zsidósors*, pp. 319-321; see also Gabriel Adriányi, *Fünfzig Jahre ungarischer Kirchengeschichte, 1895-1945* (Mainz: v. Hase & Kochler, 1974), pp. 106-116.

⁷³ Among these were Collegium Marianum, Collegium Theresianum, the Lazarist Fathers (*Lazarista Atyák*), the Sisters of Mercy (*Irgalmas Nővérek*), Sophianum Institute (*Sophianum Intézet*), and the Scottish Mission (*Skót Misszió*); Braham, *Politics*, p. 1123.

⁷⁴ For some details on the Holy Cross Society, see *ibid.*, p. 1196.

The Good Shepherd Committee was the major association of Jews converted to Protestantism.⁷⁵ It was established on October 20, 1942, under the direction of Rev. Gyula Muraközy and the sponsorship of the Universal Convent of the Reformed Church of Hungary. The Committee's leadership was entrusted to Rev. József Éliás, himself of Jewish background. The Evangelical Church affiliated itself with the Committee in May 1944, when Bishop Raffay appointed Rev. Gábor Sztehló as its representative in charge of the children of labor servicemen and converts. Before the occupation, the Committee paid special attention to the physical and spiritual needs of converts who were affected by the various anti-Jewish laws, including those in labor service. It also helped Jewish and non-Jewish refugees alike by providing assistance for those interned in various camps within Hungary.

After the occupation, the Committee began cooperating with the representatives of the various Protestant denominations in order to ease the plight of the Jews in general and of the converts in particular. Toward this end it worked closely with the Holy Cross Society and the Jewish Council. While it cooperated with the Council, the Committee leadership, presumably in an attempt to provide better protection for the converts and for Christians of Jewish origin, was eager to remove the converts from the Council's jurisdiction. During the Sztójay era, the Committee arranged for conversions—whether genuine or merely pro forma—and distributed protective passes issued by neutral state legations. Éliás was also active in bringing about the establishment of the Association of the Christian Jews of Hungary.⁷⁶

The Committee's work became especially important during the Nyilas era, when it included sheltering approximately 1,500 children in thirty-two homes.⁷⁷ Shortly before the Arrow Cross coup, Éliás and Sztehló took measures to help protect the children's homes against wanton attacks by Nyilas gangs. The

⁷⁵ The official name of the Committee was "The Good Shepherd Missionary Subcommittee of the Universal Convent of the Reformed Church of Hungary" (A Magyarországi Református Egyház Egyetemes Konventje Jó Pásztor Missziói Albizottsága). It was popularly known simply as either the "Good Shepherd Committee" or the "Good Shepherd Mission."

⁷⁶ Toward this end he worked closely with Sándor Török, who represented the converts on the Jewish Council; Ernő Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt? Adatok és okmányok a magyar zsidóság tragédiájához* (Budapest: Renaissance, 1947), pp. 151-155. For Török's account, see YIVO archives, file 768/3643. For further details on Reverend Éliás's activities, see his interview with Sándor Szenes in the latter's *Befejezetlen múlt*.

⁷⁷ Most of these were children of converts and Christian orphans. The protection of Jewish children was also the responsibility of Section A of the International Red Cross.

feeding, housing, and protection of the children were assured through the cooperation of the International Red Cross, which established a special department (Section B) for this purpose.⁷⁸ Since Rev. Éliás had to go into hiding almost immediately after the Nyilas coup, having been blacklisted by the Nyilas for his philanthropic and political activities, responsibility for the protection of the children fell almost exclusively on Rev. Sztehló. He carried out his tasks with great courage and skill. Although some of the homes were subjected to Nyilas and police raids, remarkably no harm befell any of the children entrusted to his care.

Following the establishment of the Budapest ghetto early in December, the Committee served the spiritual needs of converts, providing solace and comfort for many Jews as well.

In contrast to the minority that tried to help and the majority who were passive, a few clergymen actually sided with the Nyilas. They offered them spiritual—and, occasionally, even physical—support in the implementation of anti Jewish measures. For example, Dean Ignác László of Gyergyószentmiklós, a member of the Upper House, advocated the physical annihilation of the Jewish people.⁷⁹ Another example is that of Father András Kun, a Minorite monk who was reportedly at odds with the church hierarchy. Wearing a gun and a Nyilas armband, he was involved in the torture-filled investigation of 300 protected Jews in the Budapest Nyilas headquarters at 14 Városház Street. Approximately 200 of these Jews were subsequently shot along the banks of the Danube. Kun was also involved in the January 11, 1945, massacre of the patients and staff of the Jewish Hospital on Maros Street, where he reportedly ordered the Nyilas to fire “in the holy name of Christ.”⁸⁰

The Postwar Reaction

⁷⁸For the organizational structure of Section B, including a listing of the homes and the number of children placed in them, see Friedrich Born, *Bericht an das Internationale Komitee vom Roten Kreuz in Genf* (Geneva, June 1945), p. 56.

⁷⁹László was tried after the war by a Romanian People's Tribunal in Cluj and condemned to ten years' imprisonment; Vago, “*The Destruction of the Jews of Transylvania*,” pp. 193, 219.

⁸⁰Jenő Lévai, *Fekete könyv a magyar zsidók szenvedéseiről* (Budapest: Officina, 1946), pp. 254, 258. Found guilty of war crimes, Father Kun was executed after the war.

The scope and scale of the “final solution” in Hungary were revealed in all their gruesome details in the many national and international war-crimes’ trials and the large number of personal narratives and memoirs by survivors and Christians alike. Clearly, the Holocaust denoted not only the greatest tragedy in Jewish history, but also the darkest chapter in the history of Hungary.

The main issue that concerned both scholars and laypersons during the immediate postwar period was the issue of responsibility. The conclusion that the Christian Hungarians had to share in the responsibility for the tragedy that had been experienced by their fellow citizens of the Jewish faith was both general and documented.

The leaders of the Christian churches became particularly sensitive to the accusation that they had not only supported the major anti-Jewish laws of the pre-occupation era, but also had failed to take meaningful measures to help the Jews during the period of the “final solution.” It was largely in an attempt to improve this negative image that the first accounts of the wartime role of the churches were published after the war. The impetus and guidelines were provided by the heads of the Catholic and Protestant churches.⁸¹

The debate on the issue of responsibility was partially sparked by a resolution offered by Bishop Ravasz shortly after the pogrom in Kunmadaras in May 1946, and adopted unanimously by the Reformed Church.⁸²

“The Council of the Convent of the Hungarian Reformed Church ... confesses with deep humility the sin by which it offended God’s majesty ... by not

⁸¹ A circular (No. 3480/1945) calling for the preparation of a book in several languages to document the “positive” role of the Catholic Church was issued over the signature of József Cardinal Mindszenty, the Prince Primate of Hungary, on November 3, 1945. Bishop Ravasz, the head of the Reformed Church, was motivated by similar concerns when he “encouraged” Rev. Albert Bereczky to write his *Hungarian Protestantism and the Persecution of the Jews*.

The “positive” role of Prince Primate Serédi and of the Catholic Church in general were highlighted in Antal Meszlényi, ed., *A magyar katolikus egyház és az emberi jogok védelme* (Budapest: A Szent István Társulat, 1947). For a favorable view of the Christian churches in general, see László T. László, “Az egyházak szerepe a zsidómentésben Magyarországon. I. A zsidó törvények” *Katolikus Szemle*, vol. 31, no. 2 (1979), pp. 139-163, as well as his “Az egyházak szerepe a zsidómentésben Magyarországon. II. A budapesti zsidóság megmenekülése,” *ibid*, no. 3 (1979), pp. 217-235. See also his apologetic “The Role of the Christian Churches in the Rescue of the Budapest Jews,” *Hungarian Studies Review*, vol. 11, no. 1 (Spring 1984), pp. 23-42.

⁸² The pogrom, which claimed a number of victims, was sparked by antisemitic elements, who, resentful of the survivors’ demands for restitution, incited the local population by spreading the rumor that the returning Jews were murdering Christian children.

fulfilling faithfully the prophetic mission received from Him. It failed to warn the people and their superiors when both entered on a path which went against God's laws, and it failed to step bravely forward to defend those who were innocently persecuted.”⁸³

Bishop Ravasz, however, rejected the resolution passed by the Free Council of Nyíregyháza (A Nyíregyházi Szabad Tanács), a group of progressive clergymen and laymen, acknowledging the Church's partial responsibility for the Jews' tragedy. Prepared by Rev. Albert Bereczky, the resolution also expressed the need for the Church to express its penitence by extending proper apologies to the Jewish survivors. As it was publicized as a resolution passed by the Church, Bishop Ravasz felt compelled to rebut it. Appearing before a convention of the National Reformed Clergymen's Association (Országos Református Lelkészegyesület), he declared—reportedly to thunderous applause—that the Reformed Church had no reason whatsoever to apologize to Hungarian Jewry for what had happened.⁸⁴

The Vatican's landmark *Nostra Aetate* declaration of 1965 has so far failed to fully achieve its objectives in Hungary.⁸⁵ In contrast to the West, where Christian-Jewish relations have fundamentally changed for the better, in Hungary they remained generally strained. The Holocaust and especially the Communist era, which is still viewed by many Hungarians as Jewish-dominated, continue to cast their shadow over these relations. Before the systemic change of 1989, the recommendations of the Vatican were basically ignored, if not actively discouraged. After the collapse of the Communist regime, a few essentially unsuccessful attempts were made to advance the cause of reconciliation. The initiatives by various clergymen for the promotion of “biblical and theological studies and brotherly dialogues” encountered the

Egyetemes Konventje Jó Pásztor Missziói Albizottsága). It was popularly known simply as either the “Good Shepherd Committee” or the “Good Shepherd Mission.”

⁸³Toward this end he worked closely with Sándor Török, who represented the converts on the Jewish Council; Ernő Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt? Adatok és okmányok a magyar zsidóság tragédiájához* (Budapest: Renaissance, 1947), pp. 151-155. For Török's account, see YIVO archives, file 768/3643. For further details on Reverend Éliás's activities, see his interview with Sándor Szenes in the latter's *Befejezetlen múlt*.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵For some details on *Nostra Aetate* and the Second Vatican Council, see Braham, *Remembering and Forgetting*, pp. 222-223.

same political realities that confronted the Christian-Jewish Society (Keresztény-Magyar Társaság),⁸⁶ which pursued similar objectives: the rise of nationalism and the increasing reluctance of Hungarian political and ecclesiastical leaders to honestly confront the Holocaust. These leaders' calls for reconciliation have consistently echoed the position of Bishop Ravasz. Using a variety of historical and political arguments, they reject the need for an apology, easing their consciences by expressions of sorrow over the tragedy that befell the Jews.

Such an expression of sorrow was, for example, incorporated in the statement the Synod of the Reformed Church issued on June 12, 1990, admitting that the Church "proved to be weak in faith and action" during the war. While overlooking Hungary's role in the Final Solution, the statement declared that the Church would "have to proclaim again and again responsibility and repentance."⁸⁷

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Holocaust in Hungary, the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Ecumenical Council of the Churches of Hungary (A Magyar Katolikus Püspöki Konferencia és a Magyarországi Egyházak Okumenikus Tanácsa) issued a joint declaration stating, among other things:

"[We] commemorate in piety the tragic events of fifty years ago, when Jews living in Hungary were dragged off to concentration camps and slaughtered in cold blood. We consider it as the greatest shame of our twentieth century that hundreds of thousands of lives were extinguished merely because of their origin... On the occasion of the anniversary we have to state that not only the perpetrators of this insane crime are responsible for it but all those who, although they declared themselves members of the churches, through fear, cowardice, or opportunism, failed to raise their voices against the mass humiliation, deportation, and murder of their Jewish neighbors. Before God

⁸⁶ The Society was established in 1991 but virtually ceased to exist in 1993, when the Christian and Jewish leaders reacted differently to the political activities of István Csurka, one of Hungary's leading antisemites

⁸⁷ Braham, *Politics*, p. 1358.

we now ask forgiveness for this failure committed in the time of disaster fifty years ago.”⁸⁸

Although it represents a great step forward in coming to terms with the Holocaust, the joint declaration failed to specifically identify the responsibility of the Christian churches for the antisemitic climate that prevailed during the long history of Hungary in general and the 1919-1945 period in particular. With respect to the Holocaust, the Christian churches of Hungary appear to have adopted the ideas and doctrinal positions of Pope John Paul II by placing blame exclusively on “the errors and failures of the sons and daughters” of the churches.

The Pope’s position on the Holocaust was crystallized in the landmark ‘We Remember’ document the Vatican issued on March 16, 1998.⁸⁹ It was generally well received in Hungary by both Christians and Jews, although many among the latter deplored the absence of an outright apology to the victims. However, it brought the issue to the fore, engendering a vast debate over the many historical and political ramifications of the Holocaust in Hungary, including the responsibility of the Christian churches.⁹⁰

The debate over the Christian churches’ responsibility for the Holocaust and their failure to apologize was rekindled in the wake of the Vatican’s Jubilee celebrations that began with the Day of Pardon observance on March 12, 2000. Pope John Paul II and the Roman Curia acknowledged the sins of the Catholic past and asked for “forgiveness from the Lord for the sins, past and present, of the sons and daughters of the Church.” It was the same theme that the Pope promoted during his historic official visit to the Holy Land later that month. The exculpation of the Church by transferring all its responsibility for the persecution of the Jews on some of its members, and the request for forgiveness from the Lord rather than the Jews, appear to have provided

⁸⁸ *Catholics Remember the Holocaust* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), pp. 7-8.

⁸⁹ For the text and analysis of the *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* document, see Braham, *Remembering and Forgetting*.

⁹⁰ By far the most important of these debates took place at a scholarly conference held in Pannonhalma in November 1998. For the proceedings of the conference, see Gábor Hamp, Özséb Horányi, and László Rábai, eds., *Magyar menfontolások a Soáról* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2000), 346 p.

influential Hungarian Catholics with new arguments against apologizing for the Holocaust in Hungary. According to the official position of the Hungarian Catholic episcopate expressed by András Veres, the secretary of the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference, there was no need for separate appeals for forgiveness because the Pope spoke for all Catholics.⁹¹ Others rationalize the failure by the Church to apologize to the victims by arguing that as a result of the oppression endured during the 40-year Communist rule, it still lacks the inner strength and security for the expression of such an apology. This rationalization is deplored by many theologians as well as laypersons. Some dismiss the various political, historical, social, and theological arguments advanced in justification of the Hungarian Catholic Church's position on this issue as both unfounded and deplorable. Still others believe that its silence, like that of the other Christian denominations, is largely due to its involvement in domestic politics as one of Europe's most conservative ecclesiastical institutions.⁹²

The position of the Church leaders appears to reflect the attitude of the top leadership of the Hungarian state and government. They, too, have so far failed to confront the Holocaust openly and honestly, let alone publicly assume national responsibility for it. As long as the position of the ecclesiastical and national leaders of Hungary remains unchanged, the noble ideas advanced by the Vatican for Christian-Jewish reconciliation will have virtually no chance of becoming reality.

Source: *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. 29, Jerusalem, 2001. pp 241 - 280

⁹¹ A magyar püspökök nem kérnek bocsánatot. Néma visszhangok, *Hetek*, Budapest (Apr. 1, 2000):.

⁹² These views were crystallized, among others, by János Wildmann, the editor in chief of *Egyházforum* (Church Forum), a Catholic periodical, and György Gábor, an associate of the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Science. Ibid.