

The Foundation and Activities of the  
Hungarian Jewish Council,  
March 20 - July 7, 1944\*

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During my research in the last few years in the Budapest and provincial Hungarian archives, I have come across a number of documents on the Jewish Councils in Hungary. This paper will focus on only part of this research; it will describe how the Central Jewish Council was founded in Hungary after March 19, 1944, how Jewish councils were organized in the country, and how these councils then initiated contacts with the Hungarian authorities.

In his memoirs, Ernő Munkácsi, general secretary of the Neologue religious community in Pest, divided the activities of the Jewish Council into four periods:<sup>1</sup>

1. March 20 to approximately May 1, 1944;
2. May 1 (the foundation of Magyarországi Zsidók Szövetsége, the Association of Hungarian Jews) to approximately July 7, 1944 (the first proposed time for the deportation of the Jews of Budapest);
3. July 7 to October 15, 1944;
4. October 15, 1944 (the Arrow Cross takeover) to the liberation of Budapest Jews in January 1945.

This paper discusses the first two periods; that is, the history of those four months during which some 430,000 Hungarian citizens regarded as Jews - the complete Jewish population of Hungary, save the approximately 200,000 Jews in Budapest and Jewish men in labor service within the armed forces -

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<sup>1</sup>Ernő Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt? Adatok és okmányok a magyar zsidóság tragédiájához* (Budapest:Renaissance, 1947), p. 59.

were deported. With the exception of some 15,000, the Jews from the countryside were taken to Auschwitz.<sup>2</sup>

Along with the German army, Hermann Krumei and Dieter Wisliceny, two representatives of Department IVB4 of the RSHA (Reichssicherheitshauptamt - Reich Security Main Office) arrived in Budapest, followed a few days later by Adolf Eichmann, determined to put the "Final Solution" into effect in Hungary as well. The Eichmann Kommando, consisting of not more than 200 or 300 people,<sup>3</sup> obviously needed the active cooperation of the members of the Hungarian administration, police, and gendarmerie in the operation.

Regent Miklós Horthy remained in office. Thus, all the ministerial and state secretarial appointments bear his signature, and the local administration maintains the impression of continuity. At the same time, the regent gave the new government a free hand with regard to the decrees concerning Jews.<sup>4</sup>

The officers of Eichmann's Kommando did not want the Jews to panic. On the very first day of their arrival, on March 19, they appeared in the main office of the Pest Israelite congregation (12 Síp Street). The following day they issued the order to establish the Central Council of Hungarian Jews.<sup>5</sup> The leaders of

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<sup>2</sup> Between June 25 and 28, 1944, five trains (one from Szolnok, two from Debrecen, and two from Szeged) left Hungary for Auschwitz. Although this was their destination, they did not travel via Kassa (Kosice), but they were directed westward, toward Strasshof. Most of the passengers on these trains survived the deportation. For details, see Judit Molnár, "Embermentés vagy árulás? A Kasztner-akció szegedi vonatkozásai," in Judit Molnár, ed., *Csendőrök, hivatalnokok, zsidók. Válogatott tanulmányok a magyar holokauszt történetéből* (Szeged: Szegedi Zsidó Hitközség, 2000) pp. 183-197.

<sup>3</sup> Fülöp Freudiger, chairman of the Budapest Autonomous Orthodox Israelite Religious Community and later member of the Jewish Council claims in his memoirs that the Eichmann Kommando had only 150 members. [Freudiger Fülöp,] *Beszámoló a Magyarországon 1944. március 19. és augusztus 10. között lejátszódott eseményekről* [October 1944]. The text is published in Hungarian in Mária Schmidt, *Kollaboráció vagy kooperáció? A Budapesti Zsidó Tanács* (Budapest: Minerva, 1990), p. 285. For Freudiger's memoirs in English, see Randolph L. Brahm ed., *Hungarian Jewish Studies*, vol. 3 (New York: World Federation of Hungarian Jews, 1973), pp. 75-146.

<sup>4</sup> Journals of the Cabinet Meetings, Magyar Országos Levéltár (OL), K27; March 22, 1944.

<sup>5</sup> For the text of the "attendance sheet" containing the first orders of the Gestapo, see Ilona Benoschofsky and Elek Karsai eds., *Vádirat a náciizmus*

the congregation were to prepare reports on the structure, organizations, property, associations, etc. of the Jewish religious community. At the same time there were to be no disruptions in the usual order of religious services; the rabbis were to soothe their people.

Since the leaders of the Jewish community, when inquiring of the Hungarian authorities what to do, had received the answer, “Do whatever the Germans tell you,”<sup>6</sup> they established the Jewish Council, consisting of eight members, chaired by Samu Stern, president of the Neologue congregation of Pest.<sup>7</sup> Five members of the Council belonged to the Neologue; two to the orthodox congregations; one represented the Zionist organization:

Samu Stern, chairman (chairman of the National Bureau of the Jews of Hungary, chairman of the Jewish Community of Pest [Neologue])

Ernő Pető (vice-chairman of the Jewish Community of Pest [Neologue])

Ernő Boda (vice-chairman of the Jewish Community of Pest [Neologue])

Károly Wilhelm (principal of the Jewish Community of Pest [Neologue])

Samu Csobádi (chairman of the Jewish Community of Buda [Neologue])

Samu Kahan-Frankl (rabbi, Chairman of the Central Orthodox Jewish Bureau)

Fülöp Freudiger of Óbuda (chairman of the Autonomous Orthodox Jewish Community of Budapest)

Nison Kahan (principal of the Hungarian Zionist Association)

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*ellen. Dokumentumok a magyarországi zsidóüldözés történetéhez* vol. 1 (Budapest: MIOK, 1958), pp. 25-28. See also Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, pp. 14-17; Schmidt, *Kollaboráció*, pp. 255-256; Samu Stern, “Versenyfutás az idővel! (A Zsidó Tanács működése a német megszállás és nyilas uralom idején)” [1945] in Schmidt, *Kollaboráció*, pp. 57-60. For Stern’s memoirs in English, see Braham, *Hungarian Jewish Studies*, pp. 1-47. Additional material is available in the memoirs of Nison Kahan, in Judit Molnár, “A Zsidó Tanács megalakulása – cionista szemmel. Dr. Kahan Nison visszaemlékezése,” in *Holocaust Füzetek*, vol. 13 (1999) pp. 93-117.

<sup>6</sup> Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, p. 15. Munkácsi’s statements are corroborated by Nison Kahan; see Molnár, *A Zsidó Tanács megalakulása*, p. 111.

<sup>7</sup> See note 5.

One, of course, can ask the questions: Why did these respectable citizens undertake these roles? Why did they establish the Central Jewish Council? Why did they organize the national network? Why did they implement or cause other Jews to implement the orders of the German and/or Hungarian authorities?

Members of the Jewish Council admit that they were aware of the fate Eichmann's unit intended for them. As Samu Stern wrote in 1945, "...I knew what they had done in all the occupied countries of Central Europe, and I knew their operation was a long series of murders and looting."<sup>8</sup>

His deputy, Ernő Pető, also said in 1945: "We knew about the fate of the Jews abroad, in Poland and Slovakia."<sup>9</sup>

Their reactions were the same - it would have been selfish and cowardly, now that the danger was increasing, to think of their own safety instead of representing the common interest of the Jews, the community.<sup>10</sup> They relied on the proximity of the Red Army and believed the Jews would be able to avoid deportation until the liberation.<sup>11</sup> Stern trusted his personal connections, above all with the regent, whom he had known for twenty years.<sup>12</sup> According to Munkácsi, "...the leaders of the Jews... lulled themselves into the unfounded optimism that we would be the exceptions, the tiny island in the sea of the destruction of European Jews."<sup>13</sup>

Jenő Lévai also mentions "optimistic delusion" when judging the activities of the Jewish Council in his work written directly after World War II.<sup>14</sup> Apart from the assessment of Munkácsi and Lévai, the survivors returning from the deportations also accused the Jewish Council of doing nothing, despite the fact that they knew what was happening to the Jews in Europe, and of protecting first their own families and relatives. Moreover, in the Jewish

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<sup>8</sup> Schmidt, *Kollaboráció*, p. 59.

<sup>9</sup> "Pető Ernő feljegyzése az Ügyvédi Kamara Igazgatóságához [1945]" in Schmidt, *Kollaboráció*, p. 324.

<sup>10</sup> Schmidt, *Kollaboráció*, pp. 60, 324-325.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 325.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>13</sup> Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Jenő Lévai, *Zsidósors Magyarországon* (Budapest: Magyar Téka, 1948), p. 73.

official paper, *Magyar Zsidók Lapja* (from April 27, 1944, *Magyarországi Zsidók Lapja*), they had called upon their followers to obey the decrees.

Most of the survivors knew nothing about the desperate negotiations of the council members with the Germans, about which no written documents were recorded, or about the frantic petitions and memoranda they had submitted to the Hungarian authorities. Prompted by the charges, the council members who remained in Hungary - Stern and Pető, quoted above - wrote their memoirs after the war. However, these need to be read with proper source criticism by historians, since the authors sought to represent their activities during the *Shoah* in a favorable light.<sup>15</sup>

The members of the Jewish Council were wrong to trust their connections. The new government, headed by Döme Sztójay, former ambassador to Berlin (1935-1944), discussed the “Jewish decrees” in a series of cabinet meetings.<sup>16</sup> For a long time they did not even speak to the Jewish Council,<sup>17</sup> and every day there were new demands by Eichmann’s unit. These demands were partly material in nature, concerning the appropriation of the furniture of villas confiscated from rich Jews – desks, chairs, waste-paper baskets, beer steins, cocktail shakers, rugs, jazz records (sic!) – and commandeering forced laborers. The daily demands can be precisely traced in the folder “daily demands” in the Archives of the Hungarian Jewish Museum.<sup>18</sup>

The other demands concerned the organization of the Jews in the country. On March 24, Stern telegraphed an invitation to the chairmen of the Jewish congregation districts (*községkerületek*) on behalf of the Central Council of

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<sup>15</sup> Stern, Pető, and Wilhelm were arrested and kept imprisoned under remand. Eventually, their cases were not tried by the people’s court. See Stern Samu és társai, Budapest Főváros Levéltára, Nü. 7367/1947, Zsidó Tanács – ügy, Történeti Hivatal, V-129 355/a.

<sup>16</sup> For most of the decrees, see Benoschofsky and E. Karsai, *Vádirat a náciizmus ellen*, vol. 1. It should be noted that, while negotiations were under way about the formation of the new government, the Gestapo continuously arrested and deported Hungarian politicians; among them, those who had been in contact with members of the Jewish Council until the German occupation.

<sup>17</sup> Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, p. 54; Schmidt, *Kollaboráció*, pp. 63., 257., 328.

<sup>18</sup> Papers of the Jewish Council, daily applications, Magyar Zsidó Múzeum és Levéltár (MZSML) H-1944. (My attention was called to the file by László Karsai.)

Hungarian Jews.<sup>19</sup> The agenda of the proposed meeting was to organize a National Committee beside the Central Council. Traveling on travel permits issued by the German authorities, the provincial leaders arrived at the meeting on March 28. Newly discovered documents in the Archives of the Hungarian Jewish Museum include the attendance sheet of the meeting in question, so now the names of all twenty-seven Jewish leaders who were present are known.<sup>20</sup>

At the meeting it was resolved that a unified national organization be established under the leadership of the Central Jewish Council in the capital.<sup>21</sup> Three days later, on March 31, Eichmann told Stern and his deputies that he would also include converts under the jurisdiction of the Central Council.<sup>22</sup>

After a long debate, in the first days of April, the Jewish Council adopted a foundation document,<sup>23</sup> which they submitted to Wisliceny on April 4.<sup>24</sup> According to the German version of this document, “the national affairs of the Hungarian Jews are run by a Central Council of eight members.”<sup>25</sup> In more important cases the Central Council would hear the opinion of the Great Council of Budapest, which would have twenty-five to twenty-seven members. In cases that concerned the entire Jewish population of the country, the opinion of the National Great Council should be solicited. However, the decisions of these councils were not binding for the Central Council. The membership of the National Great Council was to be made up of the twenty-five to twenty-seven members of the Great Council of Budapest, the

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<sup>19</sup> For the text of the invitation, see Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, pp. 20-21., and Lévai, *Zsidósors Magyarországon*, p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, p. 21; Munkácsi's list includes only twelve names. Attendance sheet, March 28, 1944, MZSML, H-1944, (J 5/3).

<sup>21</sup> Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, p. 22; see also Molnár, *A Zsidó Tanács megalakulása*, p. 103.

<sup>22</sup> Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, pp. 28-33.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>24</sup> Papers of the Jewish Council, MZSML, H-1944, (J 5/3); for a part of the Hungarian text of the plan, see Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, pp. 34-36.

<sup>25</sup> According to Nison Kahan, Samu Stern originally designated a Jewish Council of seven members, and Kahan was included as the eighth member because the Gestapo insisted on the participation of the Zionists. For details, see Molnár, “*A Zsidó Tanács megalakulása*”, pp. 98-99.

presidents of the ten district congregations, plus the presidents of the ten largest orthodox and two status quo congregations<sup>26</sup>.

The document does not contain reference to any of the above councils having Zionist or converted members. However, we know from other documents that one of the eight members of the Central Council represented the Zionist organization. The converts were not represented at all despite the fact that Eichmann and his group recognized the Jewish Council as the only representative body of the Hungarian Jews.

The councils in the plan, except the Central Council, existed in theory only. No document has yet been found that would prove that any of these councils actually functioned. We have data only about the above-mentioned National Council of March 28. Indeed, even the Central Council held no regular sessions.<sup>27</sup> A great number of meetings were held in the office of the chairman, often in the presence of others than the chief officials.<sup>28</sup>

The rest of the plan lists the departments of the Central Council one after the other, defining their respective responsibilities.

The Central Jewish Council had nine main departments and six sub-departments in the Residential Department:

1. Presidential Department
  - a) Department in charge of permanent contacts with the German and Hungarian authorities
  - b) Translation bureau
  - b) Department in charge of contacts with the other Jewish religious community districts and with the individual religious communities
  - d) Department in charge of placing public statements in the press
  - e) Statistical and demographic department

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<sup>26</sup> Status Quo: Hungarian congregations adhering neither to Neologism nor Orthodoxy after the split of Jewish communities in 1869 but remaining unattached as previously.

<sup>27</sup> Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> For details, see Molnár, *A Zsidó Tanács megalakulása*, p. 99.

- f) Personnel Department
2. Financial Department
3. Social Department
4. Economic and Technical Department
5. Education and Culture Department
6. Department of Foreign (and if necessary, statistical and demographic) Affairs
7. Department of Religious Affairs
8. Housing and Travel Department
9. Department of Converts, which, if necessary, operates not as an independent department but as the sub-department of the Financial Department.<sup>29</sup>

These departments were already practically functioning at that time (early in April). This part of the document mentions the activities of the Zionists as well as the cases of converts. Department 6, responsible for foreign affairs, was to be involved with the activities “so far done in connection with immigration and with supporting the Palestine Foundation by the Zionist Organization and the Alliance Pro Palestine.” The document, however, does not say whether these organizations would go on running foreign affairs under the supervision of the Central Council.<sup>30</sup>

The other “obscure” part of the plan is Department 9, responsible for the affairs of converts. At the beginning of the document the definition is clear: the Jewish Council is the only representative of the Hungarian Jews. However, the definition of the responsibilities of Department 9 includes the conditional phrase: “As long as the converts are placed under the charge of the Central

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<sup>29</sup> Plan for the organization of the Hungarian Jews, April 4, 1944, Papers of the Jewish Council, MZSML, H-1944, J 5/3.

<sup>30</sup> With regard to the Jewish Council, Ottó Komoly, president of the Hungarian Zionist Association, wrote in his diary even on March 20, 1944 that “...news of the founding of Judenrat ... we [the Zionists – J.M.] will not go to the Judenrat.” According to his entry on April 10, his daughter Lea had volunteered to work for the information department of the Central Jewish Council. From April 14, Ottó Komoly himself was regularly on duty in the Information Office of the Jewish Council. The diary is in the Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), P 31/44.



Council, this department would deal with the converts.” This seems to indicate that the antagonism between Jews and converts existed even after the German occupation.<sup>31</sup>

The papers contain no trace of this first Jewish Council ever actually dealing with converted Jews. The idea of organizing Department 9 probably came from Eichmann. On March 31, Eichmann told Stern, that he would incorporate the converts into the Central Council,<sup>32</sup> adding: “The converted are the richest, collect larger sums from them!” The drafters of the plan were probably remembering these words when defining the responsibility of Department 9: “It is possible that these cases [those of the converts] will be dealt with not by a separate department but by a sub-group of the Financial Department.”

After the German authorities had accepted the plan, the Central Council sent a circular letter to the religious leaders in Hungary on April 6.<sup>33</sup> This was the first time that the Central Council of Hungarian Jews had directly informed the religious leaders in the country about the establishment and the powers of the Council.

On the same day Stern and his colleagues also informed the readers of the *Magyar Zsidók Lapja* of the establishment of the Council “at the instruction of and appointed by the Hungarian authorities.”<sup>34</sup> The above will have shown that this was not true. The Hungarian authorities played no role in the establishment of the first Council. The paper, blue-pencilled by the Germans, called upon - and during the following months went on calling upon - the Jewish population to keep calm, to be disciplined, and to execute orders unconditionally. It continued doing so even when the Jews were ordered to wear the yellow star, when the Jews had to move into ghettos, when the deportations started, and when the only Jews left were those in the labor

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<sup>31</sup> For details, see Viktor Karády, *Önazonosítás, sorsválasztás. A zsidó csoportazonosság történelmi alakváltozásai Magyarországon* (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2001), pp. 40-76, 199-241, 263-295; Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 85-128.

<sup>32</sup> Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>34</sup> Benoschofsky and E. Karsai, *Vádirat a náciizmus ellen*, vol. 1, p. 114.

battalions and in the capital. Yet they had been promised by “the relevant authorities” that the community would come to no harm.<sup>35</sup>

Randolph L. Braham correctly claims that the Jewish leaders had not informed the Jewish masses before the German occupation about what was transpiring in the neighboring countries, and, after the occupation, the leaders wanted to keep the masses calm through their official newspaper, telling them to obey and to execute orders. Braham believes that because of this, the Jewish population was made to live with a “false sense of security.”<sup>36</sup>

The question is, however, what else could the Jewish leaders have done against the authorities, against such a well-functioning machinery? Yehuda Bauer has aptly noted that the assumption that the Jews in Hungary wanted some kind of “briefing” in 1944 is indicative of complete ignorance of the situation.<sup>37</sup>

Two other questions can be raised in this connection: 1. How could the Jews have been “briefed” in 1944? 2. What would have been the consequences had the Jews indeed believed that the ultimate destiny of the deportation was Auschwitz?

As indicated above, the members of the Jewish Council themselves admitted that they had known what was happening to the Jews in the neighboring countries. In agreement with Munkácsi and Lévai, Braham also holds the leaders of the Hungarian Jews, besides the Nazis and their Hungarian accomplices, responsible for the murder of over half a million Hungarian Jews. Lévai and Braham both claim that the well-informed Jewish leaders ought to have informed their people of what was happening in the neighboring countries.<sup>38</sup>

It is questionable, however, whether the Jews in Hungary really needed warning. During the years before the German occupation of Hungary,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 115-117.

<sup>36</sup> Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide. The Holocaust in Hungary*, revised and enlarged edition. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 436, 442.

<sup>37</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980), p. 105.

<sup>38</sup> Lévai, *Zsidósors Magyarországon*, p. 81; Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, p. 453.

between 1938 and 1944, plenty of news and information was available from forced military laborers at home on leave, from Jewish refugees from Austria, Poland, and Slovakia - whose number is estimated around 10-15,000 - as well as from the radio broadcasts of neutral and antifascist countries.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, the *Magyar Zsidók Lapja*, like other newspapers in Hungary, was under military censorship and, obviously, could not report, for instance, the massacres perpetrated by the Einsatzgruppen in the Ukraine. However, whoever heard of these horrors from either the radio or from the refugees simply could not - or refused to - believe the inconceivable. A survivor deported from Pécs wrote, shocked even decades later, "I was unable to comprehend reality, it seemed too unreal to me." Then later, "What curse was it that inflicted complete blindness upon us?... As for myself, I can say that I failed completely."<sup>40</sup> Indeed, as late as the spring of 1944, locked up in ghettos and collecting camps, the Jews still did not believe the Zionist young people who illegally traveled to the provinces, trying to encourage the people doomed to deportation and elimination at least to escape.<sup>41</sup>

What was it that the Hungarian Jews and their leaders believed or trusted in? Until the spring of 1944, it might have given them some hope that the deportations were halted in Slovakia late in the autumn of 1942. The Romanian authorities stopped murdering the Jews in the territories under their occupation at the end of 1942, and refused to deliver the Jews of "Old Romania" to the Germans. Nor did Bulgaria surrender its "own" Jews. Last but not least, Horthy, too, refused to fulfill the German demands, referring to the "Jew-protecting" policies of Mussolini and Pétain. The members of the Jewish Council continued trusting the regent, who remained in place. Indeed, Horthy did not allow the Arrow Cross, who accused him of being a friend of the Jews, into power. At the same time, the Jewish Council completely lost its room for

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<sup>39</sup> For details, see Robert Rozett, *The Relationship between Rescue and Revolt: Jewish Rescue and Revolt in Slovakia and Hungary During the Holocaust*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1987, pp. 75-80. I wish to express my thanks to Dr. Robert Rozett for allowing me to use this source.

<sup>40</sup> László Károly, *Az út Auschwitz felé. Ifjúságom Magyarországon* (Budapest: Kapu Alapítvány, n.d.), pp. 122, 189-190.

<sup>41</sup> For details, see Asher Cohen, *The Halutz Resistance in Hungary 1942-1944* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 52-80.

maneuver vis-à-vis the Hungarian authorities in the first days of the occupation. The Gestapo arrested precisely those politicians, public figures, and aristocrats by the dozen that the leaders of the Jewish religious communities had been able to turn to with trust.<sup>42</sup> Thus, negotiating with the Germans seemed the only possibility for them during the first weeks.

The circular letter of April 6 — as opposed to *Magyar Zsidók Lapja* — addressed to the provincial religious leaders does not mention whether the order came from the Hungarian or the German authorities. All it says is that by order of “higher authorities,” the Hungarian Jews are to be organized all over the country under the direction of the Central Council.<sup>43</sup> The documents are contradictory with regard to the establishment of provincial Jewish councils. One can feel the bewilderment of the religious leaders, on the one hand, and that of the leaders of the local administration, on the other. They were not sure who had what powers. Officially, the Central Jewish Council did not exist (though it appears from their correspondence that they already had their own stationery and rubber stamp<sup>44</sup>).

The government was issuing the “Jewish decrees” one after the other. These, however, did not aim at organizing the Jews but at restricting them. The yellow stars were to be worn from April 5.<sup>45</sup> Jews were not allowed to travel after April 7.<sup>46</sup> The confidential decree of April 7, of the Minister of the Interior, the so-called collection-camp decree (deportation decree, according to some historians<sup>47</sup>) was the first to refer to the existence of “the Central Jewish Council with headquarters in Budapest.”<sup>48</sup> According to the decree, all Jews, “without regard to gender and age, were to be transported to designated collection camps.”

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<sup>42</sup> For details, see László Karsai, *Holokauszt* (Budapest: Pannonica, 2001), pp. 262-270.

<sup>43</sup> Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Kecskemét Congregation – Letter from Ernő Pető to Kecskemét Congregation, MZSML, 1944 - K 8/2 - 175/1.

<sup>45</sup> Benoschofsky and E. Karsai, *Vádirat a nácizmus ellen*, vol. 1, pp. 78-79.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 128-129.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example Elek Karsai, ed., *Vádirat a nácizmus ellen. Dokumentumok a magyarországi zsidóüldözés történetéhez*, vol. 3 (Budapest: MIOK, 1967), p. VIII.

<sup>48</sup> For the text of decree No. 6163/1944. BM VII, see Benoschofsky and E. Karsai, *Vádirat a nácizmus ellen*, vol. 1, pp. 124-127.

The rounding up began in the northern and eastern parts of Hungary (gendarmerie districts VIII of Kassa, X of Marosvásárhely, and IX of Kolozsvár). This decree was received within a short time by all leaders responsible for administration and public safety. The official government decree, the so-called ghetto decree, appeared in the official *Budapesti Közlöny* three weeks later, on April 28.<sup>49</sup> Knowledge of the existence of the Jewish Council in the Ministry of Interior probably came from Eichmann, who regularly talked with the two under-secretaries of the Interior in charge of Jewish affairs.<sup>50</sup> The confidential decree of April 7, concerning the council contains the following:

I have compelled the Central Jewish Council with headquarters in Budapest to set up auxiliary temporary hospitals at Nyíregyháza, Ungvár, Munkács, and Máramarossziget with their own doctors and with their own equipment. These doctors will, at the same time, provide medical service for the collection camps as well.<sup>51</sup>

If this is true, then the Central Council probably knew at that time already that, in addition to discrimination and restriction, the Hungarian authorities would very soon begin gathering the Jews. The papers researched so far, however, contain no reference to the council actually being instructed to set up temporary hospitals. There is, however, a petition from Samu Stern to Minister of the Interior Andor Jaross on April 27, asking for a “health service to be

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 244-255.

<sup>50</sup> László Baký supervised, following his appointment on March 24, Departments VI of police, VIII of police penal, XVIII of national mobilization, and XX of gendarmerie affairs. László Endre was appointed under-secretary of the Interior by Minister of the Interior Andor Jaross on April 8. Endre was put in charge of Departments III of county and municipal, IV of urban, XXI of housing affairs, as well as of the Committee for rationalizing the administration. In addition, on May 13, Minister Jaross established a separate service within Sub-department XXI/b for “dealing with affairs in connection with the resettlement and moving into camps of the Jews and not falling into the jurisdiction of any other department, under the direct instructions of Under-Secretary dr. vitéz László Endre.” Ministerial Vice-secretary Zsigmond Molnár was appointed the head of the service.

<sup>51</sup> Benoschofsky and E. Karsai, *Vádirat a náciizmus ellen*, vol. 1, p. 126.

organized” for the tens of thousands living in inhuman crowded circumstances in the northeastern part of Hungary, and for the commissioners of the Jewish Council “to be allowed to go to the spot and assist in taking necessary measures in concern with the authorities and the local Jewish leaders.”<sup>52</sup>

Documents in the Archives of the Hungarian Jewish Museum indicate that the Jewish Council was informed on the very first days that collection camps were being set up in the Kassa Gendarmerie District in the middle of April.<sup>53</sup> Jews, drafted into forced-labor service, to whom traveling restrictions did not apply, were occasionally given leave by the military authorities. Arriving in Budapest, several of them informed the Jewish Council of the ghettoization taking place in Kárpátalja (northeastern Hungary). On April 19, the leaders of the Jewish Council immediately wrote a memorandum to Prime Minister Döme Sztójay,<sup>54</sup> “humbly” begging him to expeditiously investigate what was taking place there. They also applied for a personal audience. Two weeks earlier the Central Council had called upon the provincial religious communities to organize and lead the local Jewish councils. Officially, however, these did not exist for the Hungarian authorities. Therefore, the signatories of the memorandum did not use their council titles. Stern signed on behalf of the National Bureau of Hungarian Israelites; Kahan-Frankl on behalf of the Central Bureau of the Orthodox Israelite Denomination.

Thus, the first Jewish Council, as will have appeared from the above, came into being at the order of the German authorities. Thus far the research indicates that the Hungarian authorities acknowledged the establishment of this new Jewish organization with a complete lack of interest. There are no data concerning any previous consultation between the German and Hungarian authorities to “legalize” the operation of the Jewish Council with an

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<sup>52</sup> Letter from Stern to Jaross, YVA, O 15 H/75.

<sup>53</sup> László Karsai, *Magyarország, 1944 április – új dokumentumok a Holocaustról* (manuscript)

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. Independent of the above petition, Stern had submitted a petition to Sztójay on April 14, informing him that, by an oral order from the Gestapo, the Central Council of Hungarian Jews had come into being, because the Hungarian authorities had instructed them to meet the wishes of the Germans. At the same time, he asked Sztójay “to graciously receive our delegates at an audience,” so that they can report on how the instructions have hitherto been executed. There is no trace of any reply. YVA, O 15 H/75.

official government decree. Further research will have to elucidate why the Hungarian government began to deal with the Central Jewish Council and with the provincial Jewish councils, which functioned for a few weeks or a couple of months at most.<sup>55</sup>

It is a coincidence that Minister of the Interior Jaross submitted his proposal on “the establishment of a self-governing organization of the Hungarian Jews” to the meeting of the Council of Ministers on the same day (April 19).<sup>56</sup> The decree accepted by the government appeared in the *Budapesti Közlöny* on April 22.<sup>57</sup> In accordance with paragraph 1 of the decree, all those in Hungary who were obliged to wear the yellow star now belonged to the Association of the Jews [Magyarországi Zsidók Szövetsége]. The association would be supervised by the Minister of the Interior, who would appoint a provisional executive committee of nine. The above decree was meant to regulate in a “legal” form the functioning of the de facto existing Jewish Council. According to Interior Minister Jaross, an adequate corporate organ was needed to “reasonably and purposefully settle the Jewish question in Hungary.” The Jews also felt this need, Jaross argued, and “tried to fill this gap by voluntary unification.”<sup>58</sup>

This reasoning is only partly true. On March 20, the second day of the German occupation, Gestapo officers forced the leaders of the Israelite congregation of Pest to found the Jewish Council with a national network. On May 8, Under-secretary of the Interior László Endre informed provincial

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<sup>55</sup> The Yad Vashem Research Group, working in Hungary since 1995, regards as one of its main tasks, besides uncovering documents, examining the details of the cooperation between the German and Hungarian authorities on both the national and local levels. This cooperation was probably not without friction. One obvious example is the so-called Manfréd Weiss case. For that, in detail, see Elek Karsai and Miklós Szinai, “A Weiss Manfréd-vagyon német kézbe kerülésének története,” in *Századok*, vol. 4-5 (1961) pp. 680-719; Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági, *Aranyvonat* (Budapest: Osiris, 2001), pp. 155-168.

<sup>56</sup> Benoschofsky and Karsai, *Vádirat a náciizmus ellen*, vol. 1., pp. 190-191.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 191-194. Munkácsi erroneously dates the release of the decree to April 27; Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, p. 70.

<sup>58</sup> Benoschofsky and Karsai, *Vádirat a náciizmus ellen*, vol. 1, p. 190.

administration leaders of the make-up of the Provisional Executive Committee.<sup>59</sup>

Association of Hungarian Jews  
Provisional Executive Committee  
(Second Jewish Council)

1. Samu Stern
2. Károly Wilhelm
3. Ernő Pető
4. Samu Kahan-Frankl
5. Fülöp Freudiger
6. János Gábor (advocate of the Jewish Community of Pest [Neologue])
7. József Nagy (head physician)
8. Béla Berend (Chief Rabbi of Szigetvár)
9. Sándor Török (writer, journalist)

The government decree took the members of the council by surprise.<sup>60</sup> According to Munkácsi, who was also the secretary of the council, the Eichmann Kommando was not pleased with the decree because they thought “the Hungarian authorities wanted to trespass into their [the SS] jurisdiction.”<sup>61</sup> Munkácsi adds that “no similar move was made in other occupied countries, such as Italy, France, Yugoslavia, etc.”<sup>62</sup> This remark indicates that Munkácsi did not know the history of the Holocaust accurately enough. No Jewish Council was established in Italy, but France did have a Central Jewish Council, and Yugoslavia did not exist at that time - what did exist was an occupied Serbia and an “independent” Croatia.

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<sup>59</sup> Papers of Royal Hung. Police, Kiskunfélegyháza District, Bács-Kiskun Megyei Levéltár-Kiskunfélegyháza (BKML-Kf), 1506/1944. The decree appeared in *Budapesti Közlöny* on May 13. For its text, see Benoschofsky and Karsai, *Vádirat a náciizmus ellen*, vol. 1, pp. 196-197.

<sup>60</sup> Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, p. 71.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*



In any event, the decree served as a pretext for the Jewish Council to try to get in touch with the Hungarian authorities again. Lajos Argalás, deputy head of the Department of Legislation in the Ministry of Interior, received Munkácsi and two members of the Council, Pető and Kahan, on April 23.<sup>63</sup> According to Argalás, the purpose of the decree was, on the one hand, to establish a legal formula, and, on the other, to place the Jewish Council - or, henceforth, the Jewish Association - under the Hungarian authorities. At the same time, Munkácsi's question "whether the Germans' right to take measures ceased with the decree coming into force, did not get a definite answer from Argalás."<sup>64</sup>

A week later, on May 1, Lajos Blaskovich, head of the Associations Department in the Ministry of Interior summoned Munkácsi.<sup>65</sup> During these talks, Blaskovich enquired about the Jewish Council founded by the Germans. Later, they talked about the Provisional Executive Committee. Blaskovich insisted that one of the committee members should be a convert. Zoltán Bosnyák, director of the Hungarian Institute for Researching the Jewish Question, editor of the extremely antisemitic organ called *Harc* ["Struggle"], nominated the writer Sándor Török.<sup>66</sup> Blaskovich pressured the Executive

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 73. Since Munkácsi dates - from memory - the appearance of the decree on April 27, consequently, in his book, this meeting also is set at a later date.. Nison Kahan, while describing his talks with the Gestapo officers in detail in his memoirs, never says a word about meeting Argalás. Nor does Ernő Pető's memorandum contain any reference to the meeting above.

According to the (unfortunately unnumbered) document in the Yad Vashem Archives in Jerusalem, the "Temporary Board of the Association of Hungarian Jews" was made up of the members of the first Jewish Council plus Béla Berend. Berend's name was written on the list in the hand of Under-secretary of the Interior László Endre, and he also wrote on the back of the sheet, "tomorrow the 12<sup>th</sup> these [i.e., the members of the Jewish Council], Bosnyák, Argalás, Blask[ovich] in your office." YVA, O 15 H/75.

<sup>64</sup> Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, p. 73.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>66</sup> Török at that time was in the internment camp at Csepel. See Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, p. 72. According to Török, his friend Lajos Thury had appealed to Ferenc Rajniss on his behalf, who, in turn, asked for the mediation of Béla Imrédy, president of Magyar Megújulás Pártja [Party of Hungarian Renewal] to have Török appointed as a member of the board of the Association of Hungarian Jews. As a result of this support, Minister of the Interior Jaross appointed Török a member of the board, and the latter soon was released from internment. See Sándor Szenes, *Befejezetlen múlt*.

Committee into establishing a local provisional committee in every village or town with more than 10,000 inhabitants.<sup>67</sup> Thus the Hungarian authorities also expressed the desire, albeit only orally, that the Provisional Executive Committee should function with a national network. However, no document has been found so far to indicate that the local administration was informed by the Ministry of the Interior about that intention.

Munkácsi regarded May 1, the day of this talk, as the beginning of the second phase of the functioning of the Jewish Council. Five members of the first council continued as members. Significantly, Under-secretary of the Interior László Endre did not include the Zionist Kahan among these. However, Endre appointed Béla Berend, chief rabbi of Szigetvár, who regarded himself as a Zionist, as a member of the Executive Committee.<sup>68</sup> The members of the first council did not unanimously trust Berend on account of his relationship with Bosnyák.<sup>69</sup>

The statutory meeting was held on May 15. As Stern was ill and absent, the session was chaired by Samu Kahan-Frankl.<sup>70</sup> Berend was in the country,<sup>71</sup>

*Keresztények és zsidók, sorsok. Beszélgetések* (Budapest: Szerző, 1986), p. 190.

<sup>67</sup> Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, p. 75.

<sup>68</sup> According to Kahan, Berend said he was a revisionist, and he maintained connections with certain members of the executive committee; see Molnár, "A Zsidó Tanács megalakulása", p. 99.

<sup>69</sup> Schmidt, *Kollaboráció*, pp. 75, 326, *Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottság – protocols, MZSML, protocol 3647*, p. 9: "Before the arrival of Béla Berend, confidential documents had to be destroyed at the order of Stern, Pető, and Wilhelm because it was widely known that Berend had been put on the Jewish Council as a traitor." For Berend's activity in the Jewish Council, and for the story of his being tried before the People's Court and acquitted after World War II, see Krisztina Munkácsi, "Berend Béla főrabbi népbírósi pere," in *Századok*, vol. 6 (1996), pp. 1525-1552. For Kahan's opinion of Berend, see Molnár, "A Zsidó Tanács megalakulása", pp. 112-113.

<sup>70</sup> In 1945, Pető recalled that Kahan-Frankl had never been put on the Executive Committee because he had disappeared earlier; Schmidt, *Kollaboráció*, p. 326. It is a fact, however, that his name appears on the list of those appointed, and Munkácsi claims that he chaired the meeting on May 15.

No documents, indeed, have been recovered concerning his activities after that.

<sup>71</sup> Berend himself writes that he got to Budapest on May 18; see "Az antiszemitizmus cionizálása: eredmények és következmények" in Schmidt, *Kollaboráció*, p. 349. Ottó Komoly met him first on May 20; see Ottó Komoly's Diary, YVA, P 31/44. Gendarme Lt.-Colonel László Ferenczy, liaison officer of

Török was still interned. In addition to the six members of the Executive Committee, the omitted members of the former council were also invited in a non-voting capacity.<sup>72</sup> The articles of association were drawn up by May 22, but they were not approved by the Ministry of Interior.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, it was the Provisional Executive Committee that functioned instead of the Association of the Jews of Hungary till the end. The signature on the contemporary documents said either Central Council of Hungarian Jews, or the Provisional Executive Committee of the Association of the Jews of Hungary. The provincial religious leaders addressed their communications to the Central Jewish Council. Leaders of the local administration also mention the foundation of Jewish councils.

As mentioned above, the documents concerning the foundation of provincial Jewish councils are contradictory. The call from the Central Council to organize councils came on April 6. The papers uncovered so far indicate that in some places the local organizations were set up by the Central Jewish Council itself. In other places, more often than not, the leaders representing the interests of the Jews were appointed by local administrative authorities. In some places the Jewish council was never organized.

The magistracy of the congregation in Kecskemét received the instruction not only from the Central Council but from Róbert Pap, chairman of Congregation

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the gendarmerie with the German security police, said at the People's Prosecution in 1946, that he had met Berend first on May 30, at Munkács, in the police holding cell; see Schmidt, *Kollaboráció*, p. 357. It could not be proved that Berend had forged documents, and he produced the card of the Jewish Council, so he was released. At the same time, in his original report dated June 8, Ferenczy writes that he had Berend and his wife transported to Munkács from the reception camp at Sátoraljaújhely for interrogation. The Berends had wanted to have their relatives released; at the time they were still at Sátoraljaújhely. After the interrogation they were handed over to Eichmann; see László Karsai and Judit Molnár, eds., *Az Endre—Baky—Jaross per* (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1994), p. 514. According to Kahan, it was the Jewish Council that intervened with the Germans for the Berends; see Molnár, "A Zsidó Tanács megalakulása", p. 113. Komoly met Berend the second time in Budapest on June 8; see Ottó Komoly's Diary, YVA, P 31/44.

<sup>72</sup> Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, p. 75.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. This is confirmed by the report of Endre dated June 16. For the text, see E. Karsai, *Vádirat a náciizmus ellen*, vol. 3., pp. 38-39.

District XXII, as well.<sup>74</sup> Róbert Pap was present at the meeting on March 28. Pap asked the magistracy “*most urgently*” (Pap’s emphasis) to execute the instructions of the Central Council.<sup>75</sup> The secretary-general (Gyula Virányi) of the Kecskemét congregation probably had not received either of the instructions by April 8, for on this day he wrote a desperate letter to the National Bureau of Hungarian Israelites (not as yet to the Central Council) informing them that the chairman of the congregation (Lajos Vajda) had been deported from Kecskemét. The letter does not say whether the German or the Hungarian authorities were responsible.<sup>76</sup> On April 12, in a letter to the Central Council, the notary of the congregation repeated the request of the Secretary General, asking them to do everything they can to have the chairman freed. It is not known whether the Central Council took steps on behalf of the chairman.<sup>77</sup> We do know, however, that, on April 17, the seventy-one-year-old Secretary General was also arrested and interned.<sup>78</sup>

After all this, on April 21, Ernő Boda, a member of the Central Council, informed Dezső Schönberger, deputy chairman of the Kecskemét congregation, that he had been appointed leader of the Jewish Council of

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<sup>74</sup> Letter from Róbert Pap to Kecskemét Congregation, MZSML, K 8/2 – 149/12.

<sup>75</sup> Papers of the Jewish Council, MZSML, H-1944, (J 5/3).

<sup>76</sup> Letter from Gyula Virányi to MIOI, MZSML, K 8/2 – 149/13. The arrest was probably made by the Hungarian authorities. László Bakó, in his decree 5999/1944. VII.res. BM of March 31, had instructed the security forces in the countryside to take into custody persons suspected of being Communists and leftists who might jeopardize the security of the state and the public. Jews were arrested in great numbers on the basis of this decree. See, for example, the arrests in Szeged in Judit Molnár, *Zsidósors 1944-ben az V. (szegedi) csendőrkerületben* (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1995), pp. 56-57. Lajos Vajda, incidentally, was also the vice-chairman of the Israelite Congregation District XXII, and, thus, the deputy of Róbert Pap.

<sup>77</sup> On June 10, Chairman Lajos Vajda was certainly at a “place unknown.” His wife would get a pension from her husband’s work only if she could prove that her husband, the retired director of the Hungarian General Credit Bank, was alive. It was in this respect that the Jewish Council of Kecskemét asked the Provisional Executive Committee of the Association of Hungarian Jews for help; MZSML, K 8/2 - 183.

<sup>78</sup> MZSML, 8/2 - 181. The Central Jewish Committee of Kecskemét asked Samu Stern, on May 21, to take steps on behalf of Gyula Virányi, who was in a poor state of health. Virányi “was first at Topolya, then at Szabadka, and he is now at Baja in the internment camp on Vaskúti road.”

Kecskemét.<sup>79</sup> Referring to the German authorities, he told Schönberger that he would, “under pain of responsibility,” have to see that the instructions from the Central Council were obeyed. At the same time, representing Jewish interests was also Schönberger’s responsibility. Finally, he reminded Schönberger that he would “have to present the present document to the local authorities and ask for a personal certificate of exemption for himself.”

A week later, on April 28, the Central Council was requesting information by telegram about the situation in Kecskemét.<sup>80</sup> According to the reply (May 1), three weeks earlier, i.e., immediately upon receiving the first instruction of the Central Council, the local Jewish leaders had already offered the mayor their cooperation to solve moving and other problems.<sup>81</sup> Having received the letter of commission dated April 21, Schönberger again reported to the mayor. At the first occasion, the mayor of Kecskemét did not even think talks with the local Jewish leaders were necessary. The second time he replied that he would call upon the leaders of the congregation early in May. These and the later documents continuously display a clearly perceptible uncertainty. The leaders of the congregation kept turning to the Central Council and/or Róbert Pap, chairman of Congregation District XXII, for information. The leaders of the local administration had no doubt whatsoever that the orders of the Hungarian government had to be executed. At the same time, they tended to instruct the local Jewish leaders rather than negotiate with them. If it were about exemption or favors, they expected the Ministry of the Interior to provide instructions.

On May 10, the leaders of the Kecskemét congregation requested Róbert Pap, chairman of the Congregation District residing in Szeged, by letter, to give them detailed information on “the operation of the Central Council [founded there], on the circumstances of its foundation, on who had appointed the council, what the exemption of the members of the personnel of the bureau meant, whether the personnel of the Chevrah Kaddishah were entitled

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<sup>79</sup> Jews 1944, papers handled separately, BKML, IV. 1928. A file from the 1944 papers of the mayor of Kecskemét handled separately: for the document, see also MZSML, K 8/2 - 47.

<sup>80</sup> Letter from Kecskemét to Central Jewish Council, MZSML, K 8/2 - 25.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

to exemption, whether the exemption had been granted by the Hungarian or German authorities...<sup>82</sup>

On the same day, Schönberger, the chairman deputed by the Central Council, asked the mayor to appoint the Jewish Council with about six members.<sup>83</sup> Schönberger sent a list of thirteen names for the mayor to choose from when appointing the members of the council. He also requested a personal audience. The mayor, acknowledging the appointment of Schönberger as chairman, appointed the other five members of the council.<sup>84</sup> He refused, however, to sign the certificates of exemption prepared by the Kecskemét Jewish Council before consulting the Ministry of the Interior for instructions and/or information concerning the exemptions.<sup>85</sup> As it turns out from Róbert Pap's May 12 letter (now as the chairman of the Central Council of the Jews in Szeged), the council in Szeged had been appointed not by the mayor but by the deputy chief of police.<sup>86</sup> The members of the council were granted no exemption whatsoever.

The Central Council of Hungarian Jews very probably sent letters of appointment to other places as well during April; however, further research is necessary to confirm this assumption. The establishment of the provincial Jewish councils was registered among the ghetto resolutions by most of the leaders of local administrations. There were, on the other hand, places where the Jewish Council had been appointed earlier. In Csongrád, György Kalmár, chief rabbi and "by appointment of the authorities" chairman of the Jewish Council, reported, on April 27, to the mayor and the chief of police that he had formed a council.<sup>87</sup> There were places where the Jewish Council was never

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<sup>82</sup> Letter from Kecskemét to Róbert Pap, MZSML, K 8/2 - 16.

<sup>83</sup> Letter from Dezső Schönberger to Béla Liszka, MZSML, K 8/2 - 27.

<sup>84</sup> Letter from Kecskemét to Central Jewish Council, MZSML, K 8/2 - 29. The members of the Central Jewish Council of Kecskemét were: Károly Adorján, Miksa Gerő, Lajos Gratzer, Mihály Kecskeméti, and István Maskó.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. The Kecskemét Jewish Council informed the Central Council about all that on May 17.

<sup>86</sup> Letter from Róbert Pap to Kecskemét Congregation, MZSML, K 8/2 - 46.

<sup>87</sup> Csongrád Congregation 1940-44, MZSML, 289 (26/1944), 290 (27/1944). The members of the Csongrád Jewish Council were: István Faragó, chairman of the congregation; István Fehér, vice-chairman of the congregation; Jenő Reichlinger, chairman of the congregation society; Dr. Sándor Vida, former chairman of the congregation; Dr. Lajos Ság; Jenő Strasser; and Artur Váradi.

officially established. At the same time, the leaders of the local administration summoned the leaders of the congregations to the talks concerning the establishment of ghettos. In Makó, for example, the mayor appointed the chairmen of the orthodox and Neologue congregations the administrative leaders of the same congregations as of May 17.<sup>88</sup> He did not create a Jewish council. At the same time he instructed the two leaders to promptly execute all his orders “whether orally or in writing” concerning the deportation.

At Kiskunfélegyháza, on May 17, the mayor had a special resolution passed at the suggestion of the congregational leaders to put on record who were the members of the Jewish council “responsible for running the affairs of the Jews as a result of their separation as ordered.”<sup>89</sup> One of the members of the Jewish Council at Kiskunfélegyháza fell sick early in June and moved from the town, and the chairman of the council asked the mayor to appoint a new member.<sup>90</sup>

This document indicates that travel permits were being issued, albeit within very narrow limits, by local authorities in spite of the April 7 decree that restricted the Jews’ movements. This was made possible by a decree of the Ministry of the Interior on April 19, which said, “If there are serious reasons worthy of consideration, travel permits may be issued for multiple trips for a definite period of time.”<sup>91</sup> The travel permits issued by the police were temporary, that is, having returned to the place of one’s permanent residence, the permit had to be handed in to the police.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, the local authorities received innumerable petitions also for permission to move permanently to relatives in Budapest or in other towns.<sup>93</sup> These petitions were

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<sup>88</sup> Papers of the Mayor of Makó, Csongrád Megyei Levéltár (CSML) - Makó, 11.474/1944, 11.475/1944; Neologism: The Hungarian branch of Reform Judaism. Many aligned themselves with the movement in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> cent., when Hungarian Jewish communities had to declare their religious orientation.

<sup>89</sup> Papers of the Mayor of Kiskunfélegyháza, BKML-Kf, 13.000/1944, Papers of the Hung. Royal Police Kiskunfélegyháza District Police Station, BKML-Kf, 1535/1944.

<sup>90</sup> Papers of the Mayor of Kiskunfélegyháza, BKML-Kf, 13.000/1944.

<sup>91</sup> Papers of the Chief Constable of the Kalocsa District, BKML, 2686/1944.

<sup>92</sup> Papers of the Hungarian Royal Police Kiskunfélegyháza District Police Station, BKML, 1420/1944.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

often supported by letters of the local Jewish councils, indeed, by letters from the Central Council of Hungarian Jews, in which the leaders in Síp Street confirmed that they “saw no reason to prevent” traveling to Budapest if the authorities would issue a permit to move there.<sup>94</sup>

The members of the Central Jewish Council were probably perfectly aware that they were facing a faultlessly functioning machinery. With limited room for maneuver against the administrative authorities, gendarmes, policemen, and Eichmann’s detachment, the applicants were completely at the mercy of the former, and getting or not getting the permit to move often turned on the benevolence or malevolence of the local leaders. Unfortunately, the documents so far discovered do not reveal the decisions made by the authorities.

József Sági, sub-prefect [*alispán*] of Pest County, decided that local magistrates and gendarmerie stations could not issue permits to move to Budapest.<sup>95</sup> On May 31, the provincial district police stations were informed by the provincial headquarters that “the Minister of the Interior has forbidden, effective immediately, the issuing of travel certificates to Jews in the collection camps.”<sup>96</sup> The prohibition notwithstanding, petitions to travel and/or move to Budapest continued being sent to the Jewish councils. The councils went on supporting these petitions and requesting the approval of the local administrative leaders.<sup>97</sup>

In any case, through the business of the travel permits, the Central Jewish Council in the capital knew practically everything about what was happening to their provincial co-religionists. The documents, however, do not make it similarly easy to trace whether there was any communication or exchange of information among the leaders of provincial ghettos and the collection camps. Since travel permits could be applied for and/or granted not only to Budapest, the provincial Jewish councils were possibly informed about the activities of one another.

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<sup>94</sup> OL, Microfilm Archives, Series I, box 66, title 149, serial 321.

<sup>95</sup> Papers of the Chief Constable of the Kalocsa District, BKML, 3191/1944.

<sup>96</sup> Papers of the Hungarian Royal Police Kiskunfélegyháza District Police Station, BKML, 1251/1944.

<sup>97</sup> Proposals of Central Council of Kecskemét Jews, MZSML, K 8/2 - 62, 63, 64.



The testimonies of the members of the Central Jewish Council were conflicting with respect to the issue of having kept in contact with the provincial Jews. According to Pető, there was news about Jewish refugees, but “it was not possible to communicate with Jews in the countryside.”<sup>98</sup> Stern also mentioned news received from the country, but does not say how or through whom the news came.<sup>99</sup> Later he wrote that many managed to get to Budapest with travel permits.<sup>100</sup> Munkácsi provides much more information. He says that, already in April, “reports of menacing events arrived from the country by the hour.”<sup>101</sup> Some people came on travel permits; others escaped to the capital from the country. Those who reported to the Central Council were asked to make a statement. A number of these statements and/or the situation reports based on these statements can be found in the Archives of the Hungarian Jewish Museum.<sup>102</sup> The provincial department of the Central Council continuously kept track of the events in the country on file cards based on these reports.<sup>103</sup>

The documents also reveal, as has been illustrated above, that the Central Council corresponded with some of the provincial councils. Munkácsi mentions that young Zionists traveled around the country with false papers carrying news.<sup>104</sup> Informed about the events in the provinces, the Central Council sent memoranda to the minister of the Interior, the prime minister, and the regent. Their entreaties, however, fell upon deaf ears. Members of the provincial councils were completely unaware of these memoranda, as well as of the talks of the Central Council with the authorities. What they could read in

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<sup>98</sup> Schmidt, *Kollaboráció*, p. 329.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>101</sup> Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, pp. 65, 82.

<sup>102</sup> Papers of the National Bureau of the Jews of Hungary, MZSML, 1944.

<sup>103</sup> Papers of the Jewish Council, MZSML, H-1944, 6/1.

<sup>104</sup> Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt*, p. 82. The report of the provincial department, which has survived from the period after the events in August, falling outside the scope of the present discussion, confirms the claims of Munkácsi. During August, information was gathered at forty places in fifty-two cases concerning the whereabouts of the deportees “through agents sent to the spot”; Papers of the Jewish Council, MZSML, H-1944. However, the young Zionists did not succeed in persuading the Jews; see Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust. The Fate of European Jewry, 1932-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 642-643.

the *Magyarországi Zsidók Lapja* was that the Central Council was doing its best for the Jews, and the best they in the country could do was to obey the instructions of the authorities.

Ironically, the Jews could learn much more about their approaching fate from right-wing newspapers than from their own official paper. For instance, *Makói Újság*, as early May 9, informed its readers that “the ghetto will be closed and the Jewish question will be finally solved through deportation.”

What did the provincial councils do under such circumstances? On the one hand, they executed the orders they were continuously receiving, and, on the other, they besieged the local authorities with petitions and pleas. They tried to convince the leaders of the administration that the Jews were not enemies of Hungary since they had long before become Hungarians themselves. On a local level they were doing practically the same as the Central Council was doing in the capital. The Central Council of Szeged Jews emphatically told Jews in the local press “to immediately move into the designated apartments.”<sup>105</sup> The Central Council of Kecskemét Jews sternly reminded the Jewish population that “neither sickness nor the Sabbath could be used as an excuse for failing to move” into the ghetto.<sup>106</sup> Róbert Pap, at the same time, filled several pages of a letter to the prefect trying to prove how the Jews, who had been living in Szeged for generations, thought of the town as their own.<sup>107</sup> The leaders of the congregation in Makó wrote similarly to the sub-prefect that the Jews of Makó had always been loyal “to their beloved Homeland.”<sup>108</sup> None of the letters contain concrete requests. All they were asking of the authorities was fairness and humanity. The chairman of the Jewish Council of Kecskemét did not wish to emphasize “in the last minute of the 24<sup>th</sup> hour” how patriotic the Jews of Kecskemét were.<sup>109</sup> Instead, he wished to point out that placing crowds in the proposed collection camp, i.e., the warehouses of the sulphate factory, would have disastrous consequences. Nor did Schönberger speak up

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<sup>105</sup> *Szegedi Új Nemzedék*, May 27, 1944, p. 7.

<sup>106</sup> Jews 1944, papers handled separately, BKML, IV. 1928.

<sup>107</sup> Papers of the Szeged Prefect, CSML, 847/1944; for details, see Molnár, *Zsidósors 1944-ben*, pp. 124-125.

<sup>108</sup> Papers of the Csanád Sub-Prefect, CSML, 7979/1944.

<sup>109</sup> Jews 1944, papers of the Mayor of Kecskemét - handled separately, BKML, IV. 1928.

against moving the Jews together, but he took exception to the manner and the speed of the moves. That is, like the Central Council of Hungarian Jews, Schönberger also accepted that there was nothing he could do against the orders, but that he might perhaps influence the circumstances of their execution. His petition, however, was turned down.

Up to this day, one of the greatest debates in the literature on the Holocaust has focused on the foundation of the Jewish councils, their activities, and their cooperation with the German and Hungarian authorities. It is a fact that the Jewish Council was ready to cooperate with the authorities. This does not mean, however, that they wished to help only their own relatives and friends. They tried, within narrow limits, with petitions to the authorities, to improve the conditions of the Jews.

The chairmen of the provincial councils tried to shake up the provincial authorities - alas, without success. Tens of thousands of civil servants, engineers, railway men, gendarmes, and policemen obeyed and executed the orders of Sztójay's government. Wherever the odd local leader committed an act of humanity, it was not in response to the appeals of the Jewish council, but in response to his own conscience. The majority of officials obeyed and executed the official and confidential orders precisely, quickly, and in a concerted manner.

Thus, the fate of the Hungarian Jews turned not upon the Jewish Councils - although sometimes they were in a position to slow down the execution of the orders. The fate of the Jews was in the hands of the government appointed by Regent Horthy and its local executive organs, which had as advisors - and not as their superiors - members of Eichmann's Kommando.

The Central Jewish Council functioned in Hungary from March 20, 1944 to January 21, 1945. The councils organized in the provincial towns lasted for only for a few weeks or a couple of months. These councils were usually docile, obedient, and cooperative. Of course, further archival research is necessary in that field, too. Based on the above, it would seem that the basis for comparison should not be the Jewish Councils in Warsaw or Łódź, but perhaps the councils in the Baltic states or in Belorussia.

Béla Vágó assesses the work of the Jewish Council of Romania in a positive way, but sharply condemns the one in Hungary.<sup>110</sup> His view is difficult to accept. Antonescu changed his policy concerning the Jews not as a result of the activity of the Jewish Council. We also know for sure that the Hungarian Jewish Council, just like its counterparts in Holland or in Slovakia, was rather unpopular.<sup>111</sup> This is well exemplified by a political joke told far and wide both in Theresienstadt and in Budapest: There is this Jew woken at night by a loud banging on the door. “Who’s there?” he asks, terrified. “The Gestapo,” goes the answer. “Thank God,” he sighs with relief. “For a moment I thought it was the Jewish Council.”<sup>112</sup>

In her well-known book, Hannah Arendt accuses the members of the Central Jewish Council of actually enjoying their power.<sup>113</sup> These and similar charges are no longer regarded as substantiated by current Hungarian Holocaust historiography. The members of the Jewish Council were criticized after the war; indeed, there were attempts to try them in court. The time has probably come, if not for judgment, then for a more discriminating assessment. This paper is meant as such an attempt.

**Source: *Yad Vashem Studies*, XXX, Jerusalem 2002, pp. 93-124.**

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<sup>110</sup> Béla Vágó, *Jewish Leadership Groups in Hungary and Romania during the Holocaust* (New York: International Scholars Conference on the Holocaust – A Generation After, 1975), p. 35; YIVO, 9/74.358 – manuscript.

<sup>111</sup> See Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*. 3 vols. (London, New York: Holmes and Meier 1985), pp. 574-583, 726-730; Joseph Michman, “The Controversial Stand of the Joodse Raad in Holland — Lodewijk E. Visser’s Struggle,” *Yad Vashem Studies*, X (1974), pp. 9-68.

<sup>112</sup> See Ilona Benoschofsky and Elek Karsai, *Vádirat a náciizmus ellen. Dokumentumok a magyarországi zsidóüldözés történetéhez*, vol. 2 (Budapest: MIOK, 1960), p. 43.

<sup>113</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 118.