The Jewish Leaderships in Slovakia and Hungary During the Holocaust Era

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The Price of Silence

By

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FOREWORD:
A PERSONAL NOTE

My name is Ruth. My friends call me Ruthi. My late parents and husband also called me Ruthika. That was also the name of one of my mother's cousins. Because she was a twin, Ruthika was sent in 1944 to Dr. Josef Mengele's notorious twins block in the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp. Dr. Mengele was responsible for the selection of the prisoners, deciding whether they would live or die in the camp, and for human experiments, including "medical" experiments on twins. When the Red Army liberated Auschwitz on January 27, 1945, Ruthika was very ill. She died shortly after the liberation. She was ten years old. Ruthika's mother, who returned from the camp with her surviving daughter, asked my mother, who had gotten married a short time after the war and was expecting a baby, that if she had a girl to name her Ruth. And that is what happened. I am clearly a member of the Second Generation of the Holocaust.

My father, Arthur Goldberger, was born in Slovakia. When two of his sisters married men from the area known as Transylvania in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it was proposed that the whole family move from Slovakia to Transylvania. The family, which at that time consisted of a father, mother, three sons and two young daughters, first moved to a small town called Gyalu, and later to the city of Cluj (Cluj in Romanian, Kolozsvár in Hungarian), which after World War I had become part of Romania. It should be noted that another daughter of the family had left Europe for the United States with her mother's sister before the family moved to Transylvania. My father's large family led a traditional, middle-class Jewish life in their new home. Over the years, my father became a dentist.

When World War II broke out, Transylvania was annexed to Hungary. My father, his two brothers, his brothers-in-law and their adult sons were drafted into the "Labor Service" and sent as part of an auxiliary force to aid the Hungarian army, which was fighting together with the Germans against the Soviet Union's Red Army.

My mother, Klara (Hadassah) Salamon, was born in Cluj. Her father had matriculated from high school and had rabbinical ordination which was, at

that time, an achievement that very few young people could boast of. He ran the largest wholesale food store in the city, which had been owned by the Leb brothers for many years, and was also the sexton of the Beit Abraham synagogue in the city. The family was well off. My grandfather was an observant Jew and a theater and opera enthusiast.

In May and June 1944, not long after the German army invaded Hungary on March 19, 1944, all the members of both my parents' families were sent to Auschwitz. Some 48 years later, in 1991, together with my mother, I filled in about 50 of Yad Vashem's "Pages of Testimony" in their memory. On the pages, we recorded the names of my father's and mother's family members who perished in the Holocaust. By this time, my father was no longer alive and we did not know the names of all the children in his family. Among the family members whose names we recorded on the Pages of Testimony were my paternal grandmother, my maternal grandfather, all my father's sisters and brothers and my mother's brother. Of the two large families, only a handful survived the Holocaust.

Like most Holocaust survivors, my father did not talk much about the hardship and suffering he experienced during the war doing harsh forced labor. I recall my mother, on the other hand, speaking about her experiences during the Holocaust for as long as I can remember. She spoke about Auschwitz, where she remained until late October 1944, when she was then sent together with her mother to Germany to a small town named Klein Schönau near the city of Zittau to work in a factory assembling spare parts for airplanes. I heard many stories about what she went through in the extermination camp: the selections, the hunger, the sanitary conditions, the numerous and prolonged roll calls in the camp, as well as how the Jewish block commander treated them. She had been in the camp since 1942, as one of the first female prisoners to arrive from Slovakia. Since she spoke Hungarian, she explained to the new prisoners of Block 17 in camp C: "You entered here through the gate, you will leave through the chimneys."

The Holocaust deeply impacted my childhood and that of my brother Tomi. My father always worried about our safety, to the point of acute anxiety. He was afraid something might happen to me while going ice-skating with my girlfriends. He feared that my brother would hurt himself playing soccer with his classmates. When I wanted to learn to play a musical instrument, he insisted that I should learn an instrument one could carry, like an accordion, rather than a piano, because one couldn't take a piano on one's back if war suddenly broke out. I always felt that I had to compensate my parents for their many losses and the suffering they had experienced in the

Holocaust. Therefore, I tried to bring them joy and among other things, I felt it was my duty to be an outstanding student.

From time to time, I heard the name Kasztner spoken in our home. My parents spoke of him as someone who had abandoned the Jews of Cluj, the city where he was born, and that he, who had had an opportunity to save some of the city's Jews, chose to save the richest among them. They also mentioned some other names of the city's leaders, who had either rejected the offer or were saved on the "Kasztner Train." My maternal grandfather was apparently offered the opportunity to be among one of those selected for the "Kasztner Train," together with his wife and two children (one of the Leb brothers, the owners of the wholesale store that my grandfather managed, was among those who decided who will be on the list of candidates for the train). My grandfather was unwilling to leave his elderly parents, his sister and her family behind. He perished in the Mauthausen concentration camp at the age of 46. His 19-year-old son did not survive the Holocaust either.

When I was young, I read numerous stories and books about the Holocaust. From my mother's stories, I drew one major conclusion: The German Nazis could take from the Jews all their belongings and property, but they could never take from them their knowledge and memories. This conclusion has guided me throughout my life and made me want to learn, experience things and accumulate good memories.

When I was a year and a half old, my father decided to leave Romania and go back to life in Czechoslovakia. From the Slovakian branch of my father's family, only two female relatives survived. I grew up in Czechoslovakia until 1961, when my family immigrated to Israel. That was also the year the State of Israel brought the Nazi Adolf Eichmann to justice. My parents followed the trial with great interest.

Throughout my life, I knew that the Holocaust was a gravely traumatic event that had shaped my very existence. However, I knew next to nothing about how the events concerning the Jews of Slovakia and Transylvania, the regions my family came from, actually transpired. I knew nothing at all about the history of the Holocaust within these two places and how the Jewish leaderships in them had conducted themselves. Only after I retired from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem as an associate professor of social work did I decide to study and deepen my knowledge of the subject.

This book is the fruits of the research I immersed myself in for over four years. The book addresses the history of the Jews of Slovakia and Hungary during the Holocaust, the actions of the leaders of these two communities, the relations between the Jewish leaders in these two countries and the impact that had on the fate of Jews in them. I believe the insights I arrived at on these topics and about what happened are of value.

I dedicate this book to the memory of my mother's cousin Ruthika Rosenbaum, who perished in Auschwitz, and to the memory of my parents, Klara and Arthur Goldberger, who survived the Holocaust and carried with them the pain of the loss of their families all their lives.

The above photo of Ruthika Rosenbaum is taken from a film shot by photographers of the Red Army who liberated the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp on January 27, 1945.

My parents, Klara and Arthur Goldberger, married on February 10, 1946 .

The picture was taken in December 1945, in Cluj.

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No book sees the light of day without the support and assistance of the author's friends and associates.

This book too was made possible by people who shared my belief that the journey I set out on, in my quest for knowledge on the Jewish leaderships in Slovakia and Hungary, was meaningful. And for that, I give them my heartfelt thanks.

During the writing of this book, I was fortunate to receive help from knowledgeable employees of various archives who readily lent a hand. The historians I met in Slovakia and Hungary added not only supplemental sources but also shared personal knowledge. I am especially thankful to Dr. Monika Vrzgulová, Dr. Katarina Hradská and Prof. Eduard Nižňanský of Slovakia, and Dr. Zuzsana Toronyi and Dr. Tamás Kovács of Hungary. I am also indebted to the Israeli scholars Prof. Eli Reichental, Dr. Nadav Kaplan, Dr. Ayala Nedivi and Moshe Golan, whose comments greatly enriched my work. My book was also read by several of my friends who expressed an interest in the subject of my research, including Adv. Shmuel Kedem, Dr. Ilana Ziegler, Vera and Arye Shoham and Adina Regev. Their responses and comments were invaluable in ensuring the accuracy of my research. Special thanks are owed to those who assisted me with sources and testimonies, such as Dr. Channa Cune, Dr. Noga Duchovni, Moshe Elek and Adv. Pinchas Mendelowitz. I am also grateful to the editors of the book in Hebrew, Dr. Ilana Arbel and Kinneret Luriah.

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And finally, I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to my family, my late parents and late husband Yoram, who always encouraged and supported me in achieving my goals and aspirations. I am also immensely appreciative of my children, Orna Landau-Rosner and Ori Landau for their patience and willingness to allow me to share my experiences as I wrote this book.

INTRODUCTION

In the latter part of the 1970s, the scientific committee of Yad Vashem embarked on a Holocaust documentation and research project covering two cross-sections: one by subject and the other by country. The research reality at the time evinced a lack of comprehensive scholarship on the occurrences by country. Especially notable was the dearth of research on what had occurred in the countries of Eastern Europe, which after their liberation from the Nazi occupation by the Red Army, became satellites of the Soviet Union under communist regimes.[1] In Slovakia, for example, no research was conducted on the fate of Slovakian Jews during the communist period, as far as is known, with the exception of a dissertation written in 1961 by Ivan Kamenec. The study of the Holocaust in Slovakia, similar to other communist countries, was inconsistent with the regime's policy and the party's official historiography. This historiography refrained from uniquely referring to the Jewish victims of World War II, with the Jews being perceived as one part of the totality of victims of fascism. The pervading atmosphere and historiography in Slovakia, after the fall of the communist regime in 1989, also inclined towards not relating to the Jews as a distinct group singled out for persecution during World War II. At a time when the new regime repudiated the communist regime, Slovak society had no desire to deal with its past during the Holocaust.[2]

On the other hand, after the change in regime, quite a few municipalities saw fit to commemorate the name of the founder of the far-right Slovak People's Party, Andrej Hlinka—whose military wing had been a full partner to the deportation of Slovakian Jews to extermination—by naming a square, street or park after him.[3] Fifty years after the end of World War II, Martin Bútora and his wife Zora originated and led the project "Fate of those who survived the Holocaust in Slovakia," with the help of the Milan Šimečka Foundation. This was the first time since the end of the war that an ethnographic research project (a historic documentation by means of video interviews) that focused on the memories of Holocaust survivors was carried out in Slovakia.[4]

Hungary, also a formerly communist country, occupies a special place in the history of the Holocaust. This is because most of the Jews living

within its borders were exterminated after it was already clear that Nazi Germany was about to lose the war. Until Germany invaded Hungary on March 19, 1944, compared to other countries under Nazi German occupation, Hungary was a safe place for most of its Jewish citizens and a land of asylum for Jewish refugees that managed to flee from nearby countries, and even from Poland. As for the study of the Holocaust in Hungary, the most detailed descriptions and analyses of the country's historical policy towards the Jews during World War II were, for the most part, written by foreign historians rather than by Hungarians.[5] The Hungarian historians László Csősz and Ádám Gellért determined that, even after the fall of the communist regime in 1989, scholarship about the Holocaust published in the 1990s was mostly focused on the publication of archival documentation, with no discussion or analysis of the events of the period. They note that the first comprehensive account of the Holocaust of Hungary's Jews was published in 1981 by Randolph L. Braham, a Holocaust survivor from Transylvania with an education in political science, who remained the leading authority in the field for decades.[6]

The first to document the history of Hungary's Jews a short time after the end of World War II was the Jewish journalist and Holocaust survivor Jenő Lévai. His book was published in 1948.[7] According to the Hungarian historian Ferenz Laczó, the issues Lévai raised continue to occupy historians to this day.[8] It is noteworthy that the Holocaust Memorial Center opened in Budapest only in 2005.

The objective of this comparative historical study is to answer the following question: What was the nature of the relationship between the Jewish leaderships in Slovakia and Hungary during the Holocaust, and how did this relationship impact the fate of these two communities.

In order to answer this central question, this study will explore how the Jewish leaderships—both appointed and otherwise—operated, and will discuss the following questions: What did the various Jewish leaderships of Slovakia and Hungary know about the "Final Solution"? Or about the fate of the Jews in other countries and of those deported to Poland? And what did the Jewish masses in these countries know about what was happening to the other Jewish communities at different points in time during World War II? This study will also investigate the question of with whom the Jewish leaderships shared the information they had been given regarding what would happen to members of their communities following deportation to Poland. And, moreover, why did they not share this information with the Jewish people? The study will also address the question

of whether the community leaders in these two countries exploited what they knew about the "Final Solution" for their own benefit, in order to save themselves, their families and associates.

This study is based on archival material found in Israel, Slovakia, Hungary, the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as on memoirs and extensive academic research written on the subject. The study also contains two chapters that are case studies. The first case study offers several insights into the situation of the Jews of Slovakia from the mid-19th century until the end of World War II. The chapter recounts the history of the Jews of Diószeg, a small town in Slovakia annexed to Hungary in 1939, from where the Jews were deported to Auschwitz in the fall of 1944. I decided to engage in this case study out of personal interest––I was raised in Diószeg after World War II and did not know what had happened to its Jews during the Holocaust. The second case study focuses on Dr. Rudolf Kasztner and his actions during the Holocaust, especially with regard to his relations with the local Jewish leadership in Cluj, the city in Romania where he was born. I chose this case study out of personal interest too: My parents experienced the Holocaust in Cluj, and I had little in-depth knowledge about the events associated with Dr. Kasztner.

This comparative study of the history of two Jewish communities in Central Europe during the Holocaust reveals that although the Jews of Slovakia and Hungary expected to receive reliable information from their leaders regarding how to behave, they were deported to the extermination camps without knowing where the journey would take them. This was the case despite the fact that their leaders knew in the spring of 1944 what awaited them. The Jewish leaders in both countries kept silent in order not to "create panic," and did not warn the Jews of the impending disaster. Estimates have it that 83% of Slovakia's Jews and 65% of Hungary's Jews perished in the Holocaust. Almost all the Jewish leaders in these two countries survived the Holocaust. The study further shows that Dr. Kasztner was not really a hero. Although he saved 1,684 Jews on the "Kasztner train", not only did he not share the information in his possession regarding the final destination of the deportees to Auschwitz, but he also disseminated false information in the town where he was born. His desire to help German war criminals by giving favorable character evidence about them at the Nuremberg trials remains a mystery to this day.

CHAPTER 1

FROM CIVIL EQUALITY TO NATIONALISM AND ANTISEMITISM

The situation of the Jews in the Austro-Hungarian Empire before World War I

Hungary became part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1867. After the dissolution of the monarchy following World War I on October 28, 1918, Czechoslovakia (which also included Slovakia) was created, and on November 16, 1918, the Hungarian Republic was established. From 1867 onwards, the Jews in this region enjoyed social equality, which had allowed them access to education and to engage in the economy, culture and politics. Until the early 20th century, the Jewish communities in Slovakia and Hungary shared a common history. The Jewish community that lived in the area later called Slovakia enjoyed close relations with the Jewish communities in Hungary.

The Hungarian aristocracy that ruled Hungary after 1867 sought to modernize and rapidly develop the country's economy. The Hungarian parliament gave the Jews full civil rights under the understanding that economic knowhow and commercial ties with foreign countries would be needed to build a modern capitalist economy. The received wisdom was that Jews had such ties.[9] And indeed, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Hungary developed a tolerant attitude towards its Jews and encouraged them to become involved in business and industry. The Jews took advantage of the opportunities extended to them, not only in industrial entrepreneurship, commerce and banking, but also in education. Within a short time, Jews filled central roles in the fields of law, medicine, literature and art.

In 1910, the Jews of Hungary represented 64% of all those engaged in commerce and banking, 61% of all lawyers, 59% of medical personnel, 52% of employers in industry and 40% of all journalists. According to the

population census of that year, the Jews in Hungary represented 6.2% of the population.[10]

The involvement of the Jews in all areas of life in Hungry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including in its political life, caused them to strongly identify with the Hungarian nation. They were Hungarian patriots. However, despite their extensive exposure to general Hungarian culture and their efforts to assimilate culturally, Hungarian Jews could never be fully integrated into their country's civil society, in which Christianity continued to constitute a major element of its national identity.[11]

The Jews in Hungary after World War I

Following the Treaty of Trianon, signed after World War I in 1920, Hungary lost about two-thirds of its pre-war territory and one-third of its population: the region of Transylvania was transferred to Romania; Slovakia and Karpatorus were annexed to Czechoslovakia; Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia, the western part of the Banat province and the Vojvodina region were annexed to the region that would become Yugoslavia; and Burgenland was annexed to Austria.[12] This loss, which the Hungarians perceived as a national disaster, along with the short-lived rule of Béla Kun at the head of the communist party in 1919, led to the establishment of nationalist Christian Hungarian organizations that aimed to restore to Hungary the territories that had been taken from it and "take care of the Jewish question."[13]

In the now truncated Hungary, the Jews had become a minority whom the antisemites blamed for all the misfortunes that had befallen their country. Christian-Jewish relations in Hungary were also adversely affected by the presence of indigent Jews, who mainly lived in eastern Hungary, spoke Yiddish and opposed assimilation. Unlike the assimilationist, city-dwelling, educated and liberal Jews, this segment of the Jewish population, referred to as "eastern" or "Galician," was perceived as a "biological and ideological race" that could pose a threat to the Christian Hungarians.[14]

As early as August 1, 1919, after the overthrow of Béla Kun's communist government, systematic terrorist operations were launched against the Jews in Hungary, perpetrated mostly in the periphery by special units of the National Army. The new government took an ambivalent position towards these terror operations. Not only did the new ruler, Regent Miklós Horthy, not hold the army officers in check, he justified their actions in

retrospect. The new government established after the short-lived communist rule considered intellectuals, and especially the Jews among them, to be one of the main causes of the collapse of the old regime. The sentiment among the antisemitic student circles and Christian-conservative intelligentsia was that the participation of Jews in the country's intellectual life and liberal professions should be restricted.[15]

These developments led to Hungary becoming the first country in Europe to enact an anti-Jewish law: On September 21, 1920, it established a *numerus clausus* for Jewish students in the universities.This meant that only 6% of all students admitted to universities could be Jews.[16] Despite this, because of the policy allowing Jewish participation in the economy, the Jews of Hungary considered themselves an integral part of the Hungarian nation and they continued to support the government, which had granted them equal civil rights. It is noteworthy that, according to a calculation made in 1938, although Jews constituted only 6% of the total Hungarian population, about a quarter of Hungary's national wealth was owned by Jews.[17]

The Jews in Slovakia after World War I

Since 1867, in the wake of the political arrangement that created the Austro-Hungarian Empire and granted equal rights to Jews in Hungary, most of the Jews living in the Slovak region felt more comfortable assimilating into the Hungarian nation than into the Slovakian minority, which was fighting for its own separate national identity.[18] They preferred to integrate into the Hungarian nation mainly because of the economic, cultural and social opportunities it offered them. The establishment of the independent Czechoslovakian Republic in 1918 did not fundamentally alter this situation, in view of the fact that the majority of Slovak Jews considered themselves linguistically and culturally Hungarian rather than Slovak.[19] Especially fascinating in this context is a remark by the Slovak historian Eduard Nižňanský, who notes that in scholarly and popular literature on the Jews in Slovakia during this period, they referred to "Jews in Slovakia" or the "Jewish community of Slovakia," rather than to Slovak Jews, since only a minority of Jews considered themselves Slovaks by nationality.[20]

The Jews of Slovakia and Hungary: Religious streams

The Jewish communities of Hungary were split by a schism in 1868. The two main streams in Hungarian Jewry, the Orthodox and the Neolog, were unable to arrive at any organizational cooperation, including in areas of religion, society or assistance to the needy.[21] The Neologs, who lived mostly in the cities, especially Budapest, represented 65% of Hungary's Jewish population. Most belonged to the Hungarian middle class, who were strongly influenced by their counterparts in neighboring countries to the west, and were interested in a modern rabbinate. They wanted rabbis who were, first and foremost, spiritual leaders and not necessarily arbiters of Jewish law. In this community, the observance of the religious commandments was considered an individual matter. In the synagogue, the prayer services were held in Hebrew, but the rabbi's sermon was delivered in Hungarian. Although their congregations were indeed small in number, the number of members in each was relatively large because, as noted above, most were concentrated in the capital city of Budapest. Orthodox Jewry in Hungary consisted of two groups: the western group, situated mainly in the western and northwestern parts of the country and in its capital, and the poorer eastern Hassidic group, which resided in the northern and northeastern agricultural regions of the country. Both groups were strictly observant, but unlike the eastern group, the western one did not oppose allowing its members a general education. Budapest's Orthodox community tended to maintain a very strict religious lifestyle, and consequently had few members.[22] In addition to the two main streams of the Jewish faith, Hungary also had a third, which represented about 5% of its Jews. In religious-ideological terms, this stream, known as Status Quo Ante, was located somewhere in the middle between the much larger Neologist and Orthodox streams. The Status Quo Ante movement did not consider itself part of Reform Judaism.[23]

The most important organization in the Neolog community in Hungary was the National Hungarian Jewish Bureau (Magyar Izraeliták Országos Irodája), headed by a president elected by the district presidents of the congregations. In accordance with the regulations of the Hungarian Jewish Congress of 1869, the National Bureau was a purely administrative body, whose role was to convey the government's instructions to the district presidents and maintain communication between them and the authorities. From 1932 onwards, the National Bureau was headed by Samuel (Samu) Stern, who was also the head of the Pest Neolog community. As noted, the Orthodox Jews resided mainly in the provinces and rural settlements. They were led by the Central Bureau of the Autonomous Jewish Orthodox

Communities in Hungary (Magyarországi Autonóm Orthodox Izraelita Hitfelekezet Központi Irodája), which held a dominant position in the leadership of communities on a national level. The Central Orthodox Bureau was headed by Abraham Frankl, followed by his son-in-law Samuel Kahan-Frankl, who held this position until 1944. Another prominent functionary was Pinchas (Philip) Freudiger.[24]

Unlike the tendency towards division in the Jewish communities in Hungary and the willingness of many of Budapest's Jews, most of whom were Neologs, to allow religious reforms, the Jewish community in Slovakia was more religiously homogeneous: 75% of the Jews belonged to the Orthodox stream. The Neologist and Status Quo Ante communities in Slovakia formed a joint organization in 1926, and from 1928 on, they were known as the Jeshurun Union of Jewish Communities.[25]

The idea of Zionism was emphatically rejected in both countries, both by the Orthodox and the Neolog communities. The Orthodox refused to cooperate with the Zionists because they considered them "freethinkers." Moreover, the Orthodox and Neolog communities rejected Zionism as an idea aimed at promoting the nationalist aspect of Judaism.[26] Throughout all the years of the existence of the Zionist movement in Slovakia, only 10%-15% of the Jews paid the "Shekel" dues that gave them the right to vote and elect representatives to the Zionist Congress.[27] In Hungary, in the years between the world wars, its Zionist movement was among the smallest in Europe, and its influence on Hungarian Jewry was minimal.[28] According to the Zionist Executive of the 20th Zionist Congress in 1937, the various Zionist organizations in Hungary had approximately 3,600 members in all,[29] a negligible proportion of the total Jewish population in the country. From this, it can be seen that although the absolute number of Zionists in Slovakia was small, it was still greater than the number of Zionists in Hungary.

In the period between the two world wars, the relations between the Orthodox and Neolog communities and between these communities and the members of the Zionist movements—in each of the two countries—were mostly fraught with tension. On the other hand, there were close ties between the Orthodox communities in Hungary and Slovakia, and between the members of the Zionist movements in both countries.

The history of the Jews of Slovakia and Hungary during the Holocaust

According to the results of a census conducted in 1930, there were 136,737 Jews living in Slovakia at the time. Due to the loss of territories in southern Slovakia following the First Vienna Award treaty signed on November 2, 1938, their number decreased to about 91,000.[30] In wake of the changes to the borders and the annexation of territories (from Slovakia and Romania) to Hungary on the eve of the Holocaust, the Jewish population of Hungary numbered approximately 825,000 (including about 100,000 Jews who had converted to Christianity).

Despite the many similarities between the Jewish communities of Slovakia and Hungary, including family, religious, economic and cultural ties, they experienced the events of World War II quite differently. The essential difference between the two countries was that close to 58,000 Jews in Slovakia (65% of the total population), a country established under German patronage, had already been deported to the extermination camps in Poland by 1942, while the deportation of Hungarian Jewry to the extermination camps occurred only in 1944. It is estimated that in the two deportation waves of the Jews of Slovakia (the second wave came in autumn 1944 in which about 11,500 Jews were deported), 83% of Slovakia's Jews (about 70,000 people) perished in the Holocaust.[31] The number of Hungarian Jews who perished by the end of the war was 565,000 (68%).[32]

Because Slovakia shared a border with both Poland and Hungary, during the Holocaust, it served as a transit country for Jewish refugees fleeing southwards. Jewish refugees and activists in Slovakia became a source of information for the Jews of Hungary about what was happening to the Jews of Poland and Slovakia at that time. It was on this background that working relationships were formed between the leaderships of the two neighboring communities. Evidence of the ties between the Jewish leaderships of the two communities can be established in part based on the reports from Slovakia to Hungary regarding the extermination of the Jews of Europe during the war, including indications of the possibility that the deportation and extermination policy would be carried out in Hungary as well.[33]

Jewish leadership in the German-occupied territories in the historiography

The first directive regarding the establishment of Jewish councils in the German-occupied territories during World War II was included as part of the "Schnellbrief" concerning "the Jewish problem in the occupied territories," dispatched by Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the Gestapo and the SD (Sicherheitsdienst), to the commanders of the SS death squads (Einsatzgruppen) which began its operations as early as September 1939 in the occupied territories of Poland. In accordance with this letter, Jewish councils made up of influential Jews and rabbis were to be established in the occupied territories.[34] These Jewish councils were to be responsible for ensuring that the Germans' demands of the Jews in the occupied territory were carried out in full. Because these councils were appointed by an external source of power rather than elected by the members of the community, they were denied unfettered discretion in their decisions and the ability to fully represent the interests of their community.

The Israeli historian Dan Michman maintains that it is difficult to say that these councils played a real leadership role.[35] Although most studies dealing with the Jewish leaders appointed by the Germans refer to them using the German term "Judenrat," Michman prefers to call these appointed bodies "headships." Michman distinguishes between a "local headship" (the term preferred by the experts on Jewish affairs in the SD), and a "national headship." These "local headships," whose unofficial status made it more dependent on the SD experts, were appointed in Poland, the Baltic countries, the occupied territories of the Soviet Union and in Holland. "National headships" were appointed in the countries where the SD's power was more limited in relation to the local German civil administration, such as Germany, Belgium, France and Slovakia. Michman does not state this, but it can be said that the appointed body for the Jews in Hungary was similar to the one in Slovakia. These appointed bodies, whose role was to serve as a conduit to convey the Germans' orders to the members of the Jewish community, were also responsible for managing the community's day-to-day affairs, such as dealing with employment, housing, welfare, education and religion. As noted, these organizations were appointed in both Slovakia and Hungary. In Slovakia, a national organization was appointed known as Ústredňa Židov—ÚŽ (the Jewish Center), while in Hungary, a national organization known as Zsidó Tanács (the Jewish Council) was established.

In his research on the Jewish councils in Poland, Isaiah Trunk distinguished between two different ways such councils worked with the Germans. The first was cooperation, which meant having day-to-day contact with the Germans regarding subjects such as food, children's education and organizing work for the benefit of the community. The other method of working with the Germans was collaboration, which emerged from personal motives on the part of Jewish leaders, either out of concern for their own benefit or to save themselves, or because of their lust for honor and power. It should be noted that in some communities, accepted leaders who initially led the community were replaced by people from the fringes of society and were willing to help the Germans, even if their activities clearly were to the detriment of their community.[36]

The *Encyclopedia Judaica* describes four behavioral patterns on the part of the Jewish leadership appointed by the Germans in the occupied countries:

1. Limited cooperation—even in the economic and material spheres;
2. Willingness to acquiesce to Nazi demands when it was merely a question of expropriating Jewish property, but vehement opposition to the handing over of Jews;
3. Agreement to collaborate with the Germans in deporting some of the community's Jews to the extermination camps in the hope that the others would be saved;
4. Complete submission to Nazi demands in order to safeguard the narrow interests of those concerned.[37]

According to the Israeli historian Aharon Weiss, most of the members of the Jewish leadership who had come from the ranks of the community's veteran leadership chose to act in accordance with the first two leadership patterns. The second two patterns were pursued by relatively few Judenrat leaders, by those with no communal background or past association with the community, and these actions occured mostly at the final stages of the war.[38]

Trunk arrived at his insights regarding the Jewish councils based on research encompassing 405 localities in Poland, the Baltic countries and the occupied territories in the Soviet Union that had active Jewish councils.[39] In his research, which dealt with the characteristics and history of the Jewish councils during the Holocaust, Trunk largely based his work on German documentation, but also on information obtained following the distribution of a questionnaire among ghetto survivors to investigate the

social background and behavior of the members of the councils and the Jewish policemen in the ghetto.

In his introduction to Trunk's book, the American-Jewish legal scholar Jacob Robinson wrote that the first question to be discussed in the context of the Jewish councils was the attitude of the Jewish communal leaders on the question of joining the German-appointed Jewish councils. Some leaders took the view that they must not agree to participate in leadership appointed by the Germans. There were others, on the other hand, who took no issue with joining this leadership, and also believed that in hard times, they were bound to lead the community. The proponents of the "noncooperation" view believed that, under the circumstances, and from the viewpoint of Jewish survival, a "leaderless" Jewry would have been the lesser evil. The Jewish leaders who took the view that it was necessary to cooperate with the Germans considered the existence of an appointed Jewish council proof of the continued existence of Jewish organization, and they felt a sense of responsibility for the shared fate of the Jews even after the occupation.[40]

In the early years after the war, Raul Hilberg, a Jewish American historian, maintained that the cooperation of the Jewish leadership with the Germans aided the Nazis in carrying out their "Final Solution". In his view, any action that did not encourage physical resistance to extermination plans ultimately worked to the advantage of the Germans, even when the leadership established hospitals, for example. As long as the activities of the Jews benefited the Germans, such as the workshops established in the concentration camps, the Jews were allowed to live. As soon as the Jews were no longer perceived as useful, or when it was decided that they should be consigned to extermination, they were sent to their deaths. According to Hilberg, who based himself on an in-depth study of German documentation, the Jewish organizations became a machine of self-destruction.[41]

A similar but even more extreme approach than that of Hilberg in regard to the role played by Jewish leadership in the extermination process is attributed to the German-Jewish-American philosopher, Hannah Arendt. Arendt viewed the Jewish leaderships in the various countries as no less than collaborators with the Germans. In her view, without the Jewish leadership there would indeed have been considerable distress and chaos among the Jews, but it is doubtful whether the number of losses of life would have been as high as 4.5-6 million Jews.[42] In her view, when bitter disagreements emerged in the Jewish establishment regarding the

performance of the Jewish councils, vocal participants justified the functionaries by citing all the commendable services that they rendered before and during the war, as if there were no differences between helping Jews to emigrate and helping the Nazis to deport them to their deaths.

A similar position to that of Arendt was expressed by Nachman Blumental, a Yad Vashem researcher, in an article published as early as 1953 in the *Encyclopedia of the Diasporas*.[43] In retrospect, he wrote, it can be stated with certainty that without the help of the Jewish councils, the Germans would not have been able to carry out their extermination policy against the Jews, at least not on the scale that they did, certainly not without significant losses on their side.

The Israeli historian Yehuda Bauer rejected Hilberg's analysis as deficient, arguing that it is impossible to establish that there was any uniformity in the responses of Jewish leaderships to the Germans' demands. In Bauer's view, while it is true that the Jewish leaderships failed to save most of the Jews, in a historical analysis, it is not enough to relate only to the results, but one must ask what the leaders' intentions were and what they did do to save the communities they led.[44]

Hilberg's work, which is today considered very valuable to understand the Holocaust, was received at the time of writing with hostility by Holocaust researchers claiming that Hilberg trivialized the suffering Jews endured under Nazism. Not only was Yad Vashem unwilling to publish his research, but for two decades he was denied access to archives.[45]

Trunk was of the view that the entire phenomenon of Jewish councils cannot be analyzed in general terms, but must rather be viewed through the prism of the local conditions and the people as individuals: "In the final analysis, we deal here with people of diverse socio-psychological backgrounds, variously reacting to similar situations."[46] Weiss, who supported a criterion whereby anyone who handed over Jews to the Germans was crossing a red line in moral terms, investigated the behavior of 146 Judenrat heads first appointed. He found that 107 of them did not cross this line.[47] The Israeli historian Israel Gutman also rejected the portrayals offered by Arendt, Blumental and other Holocaust scholars in Israel. Gutman considered their views simplistic, arguing that they did not stand the test of critical analysis. He refused to accept the hypothesis that the number of victims would have been lower if not for the actions and decisions of the Jewish leadership.[48]

In my view, the complete submission of the Jews to the German demands, which came about through the mediation of the Jewish leadership, is quite different from obeying these demands without the seal of approval of the Jewish leadership. Even the example that Gutman offers regarding the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which was completely suppressed, does not appear especially compelling. Throughout the uprising, Jews were smuggled out of the ghetto and saved. It should also not be forgotten, as Gutman himself states, that the Germans were forced to use regular forces to liquidate the ghetto. Nevertheless, there may be room to accept Gutman's distinction regarding the role of the Jewish councils before and during the period of the extermination of the Jews. In the years preceding the extermination, the councils played a vital role in the life of the community. Gutman determines, "It is clear that from the perspective of the Judenraten, the transition from activities that focused on ghetto life—even if they were sometimes forced to confiscate Jewish property or send Jews to labor camps—to participation in deportations to death camps constituted the crossing of a red line." Weiss, Michman and Berenbaum are of the view that the decisive test of the courage and character of the ghetto leaders came when they were required to provide lists of those to be deported to the extermination camps.[49]

In this context, according to Jacob Robinson, three questions arise:

1. Should the members of the Jewish councils have revealed to the people what they knew of the impending disaster?
2. Should Jews have lent a hand, however reluctantly, to the selection of Jews for deportation, which was equivalent to death?
3. Should the Jews have "voluntarily" offered some victims to the Moloch at the price of rescuing others, which would mean nothing other than the assumption to decide "Who shall live and who shall die?"[50]

As for the first question, Robinson says that it is debatable whether Jews in Eastern Europe depended on the councils for their information on the impending disaster. As for the other two questions, Trunk found in his research that in some councils, an extremely bitter conflict arose between two opposing views. On the one hand, was the approach whereby the choice of who should live and who should die should be left to the Germans, and on the other, the view that the Jews themselves should take upon themselves the requirement to do it, and that it should be done not on a mechanically egalitarian basis, but on a discriminatory qualitative basis,

out of the belief that the best elements of the community must be preserved for its future rehabilitation.

Ultimately, the Jewish councils were required to make fateful decisions regarding the life and death of human beings. According to Trunk, some heads of Jewish councils in the larger ghettos felt they could justify their cooperation with the German authorities. In contrast, there were some cases of council members, including council heads, who resisted that "temptation" and ended their own lives or went to the gas chambers together with their families and community members. There were also those that chose the extremely perilous path of resistance.[51]

In Vilna, Jacob Gens, the head of the Jewish council, followed the German orders in the hope that delivery of the few would rescue the majority. In Lodz, Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski believed that it was his duty to protect the remaining Jews. When the head of the Warsaw ghetto, Adam Czerniaków, was ordered to organize the deportation of the children from the ghetto, he took cyanide. The last Jewish council head in the Minsk ghetto was Moshe Yaffe. On July 28, 1943, some 25,000 Jews had gathered in the ghetto square and the Germans ordered Yaffe to allay their fears before deportation. However, instead of calming them down, he called out to them to flee for their lives and hide. He was shot on the spot.[52] Robinson notes that in Theresienstadt (Terezin), Rabbi Leo Baeck followed a policy of keeping the truth from those in the camp designated to be deported to Auschwitz because he believed that nothing could be done to change the tragic course of events. In his best judgment, it was preferable not to let the victims know the truth of what was going to happen and thus spare them the agony and ultimate desperation that comes from the knowledge that the end is near and there is absolutely no way out.[53]

In an article published in 1965, Israeli philosopher and Holocaust scholar Zvie A. Bar-On analyzed the activities of the Jewish council in the Kovno ghetto, in the context of three events in the life of the ghetto.[54] Bar-On took the view that the very appointment of the council gave the leadership authority over the activities of the ghetto in various areas, including a degree of maneuverability vis-à-vis the Germans. When the commissioner for Jewish affairs in the Gestapo demanded that the Jewish council take an active role in preparations for an *Aktion*, the members of the leadership debated how they should proceed. They kept the knowledge of the impending *Aktion* secret for the next 24 hours. After receiving the opinion of the rabbi of the community, they decided to follow the Gestapo's orders

and hang notices in the street regarding the requirement of all residents to report to the central square. Bar-On notes that neither the members of the Jewish council nor their families were harmed in this *Aktion*. However, he writes, the members of the Judenrat who participated in the meeting with the Gestapo officer could not have known with any certainty that no harm would come to them or their families. Against this backdrop, Bar-On poses the question: Did the Judenrat make proper use of its privileged status, a status that was manifested in advance knowledge of what was going to happen? Did the members of the Judenrat, with their priveledged status, act responsibly towards the community as a whole and to individual members in keeping secret the fateful information that came into their possession?

With regards to the discussion of the different approaches taken by the Jewish councils, it is important to recall the description of the Jewish Center in the memoirs of the man who headed this organization in Slovakia from December 1943 to September 1944, Dr. Oskar Jirmejahu Neumann. "The horrific diabolical evil of the Nazi extermination system was expressed here [in Slovakia] as everywhere, in a method that forced those condemned to extermination to actively participate in the execution of their sentence. The victim was given a 'sign,' and those looking at it from the side might receive the impression that the owner of the "sign" was the master of his fate, the one who decides in all his affairs, whereas this sign, the Jewish Center, was in fact no more than a tool of extermination."[55] In other words, in the book he wrote after World War II, Neumann concurred with Raul Hilberg and others who viewed the appointed Jewish leadership as a mechanism of self-destruction.

Neumann's memoirs were written in German and have been translated into Hebrew. At the annual International Conference on Holocaust Research held in 2004 at Yad Vashem, which focused on the development of Holocaust research over time, Hilberg raised a number of issues. He maintained, for example, that even in an age when the study of the Holocaust has become more advanced, an age when it is a given that the Holocaust was a complex event whose research requires a search for different contexts, some taboos remain.[56] Hilberg considered the subject of the Jewish councils to be a taboo of this kind, and offered, as an example, Neumann's memoirs, which no English-language publisher was willing to translate and publish. A further insight of Hilberg worth noting is what he says about Holocaust historians: "We also make judgments. We sometimes hide them. We praise some people and condemn others."[57]

In a study that focused on the perceptions of memory in the context of the Holocaust, the Israeli historian Orna Kenan investigated the attitude of the *Yishuv*, the Jewish community in Eretz Israel prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, and mainly of its leadership during the Holocaust, as expressed in the Israeli historiography from the mid-1980s onwards.[58] According to Kenan's analysis, there are two schools of thought in the research regarding this issue: The first, which is represented by the "old ideological guard," such as Dina Porat, Anita Shapira, Yoav Gelber and Yechiam Weitz, argue that the leadership of the *Yishuv* did the best it could under the circumstances. The second position is represented by a later group of researchers, who offer an interpretation of Jewish and Israeli history different from the one based on the Zionist paradigm. The scholars that take this approach, represented by historians such as Tom Segev, Idith Zertal and Hanna Yablonka, blame the *Yishuv*'s leadership for inadequate rescue efforts before and during World War II. According to this school of thought, the *Yishuv* leadership was interested in rescue only if it could bring the survivors to Eretz Israel.

From 1967 onwards, the emphasis in the historiography of the Holocaust shifted from heroism to the suffering of the Jews, with the Zionist ideology no longer necessarily being the central element in the interpretation of the Jewish Holocaust.[59] The explanation for the different approach of the later generation of Holocaust researchers apparently lies in the fact that this generation did not study under Yehuda Bauer and Israel Gutman, members of the Hashomer Hatza'ir Zionist youth movement. Bauer and Gutman were the predominant figures in the Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University; their presence drew numerous students to Holocaust studies, which focused on describing the Holocaust from a collectivist Zionist perspective. In light of the analysis by Kenan and others, the question arises whether this critical approach was investigated or applied over time also in relation to the Jewish leaderships in Slovakia and Hungary and the ways in which they operated during the Holocaust.

CHAPTER 2

THE JEWISH LEADERSHIPS IN SLOVAKIA AND HUNGARY IN THE YEARS 1938-1939

The "Jewish Question" and its manifestation in the anti-Jewish legislation

The years 1938-1939 did not bring good tidings to the Jews of Slovakia and Hungary. Germany, the largest country in continental Europe, had amassed considerable power in the 1930s and had begun to implement its antisemitic racist policy against the Jews. Following the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws on September 15, 1935, which formed the legal basis for the removal of Jews from all areas of life in Germany, German Jews were attacked in a series of pogroms between November 9 and 10, 1938, this would become known as *Kristallnacht*.[60] The Jews of Austria, which had been annexed to Germany on March 12, 1938, were subject to the same persecutions, and Jews in both countries tried to emigrate or at least flee to neighboring countries, including Slovakia. In addition to their desire to solve the "Jewish problem," the Germans also had plans to expand to other countries. Following the signing of the Munich Agreement on September 29, 1938, the Germans annexed the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia.[61] Despite the Munich Agreement, in March 1939, the Germans invaded the Czech part of the country on the way to establishing a Protectorate in Bohemia, Moravia and Czech Silesia. The Germans allowed the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia to establish an autonomous zone on October 6, 1938 and to declare itself an independent state on March 14, 1939 under German auspices. However, because Germany sought close ties with Hungary, part of southern Slovakia was annexed to Hungary in 1938, as was Karpatorus in 1939. And thus, because Hungary annexed territories and populations from other neighboring countries, as will be described in this chapter, Slovakia shrank both in territory and population in the years 1938-1939, while Hungary grew considerably in size.