



SURVIVAL U N D E R DICTATORSHIPS

Life and Death in
Nazi and Communist
Regimes

LÁSZLÓ BORHI

 CEU PRESS

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“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

V I K T O R F R A N K L

A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t s

As a newly married couple we moved into our first home in a drab street in the 13th district of Budapest in 1994, exactly fifty years after the Arrow Cross took my grandfather and my uncle. Shortly after, I found out that by sheer chance we had moved into the street from where they had been deported. In fact, our house was facing what had been theirs. Every time I looked out of the window, I could see the gate through which they had been escorted out of by their armed guards for the journey to Buchenwald from where they would never return. Shortly after their taking the armed escort returned. This time they took my mother and grandmother who had been left behind. When they exited the building, they discovered that there were two lines of people. In one of them stood two nieces with their mother so they joined their line. At that point an Arrow Cross told them to step over into the other line. My grandmother protested that they wanted to be with their relatives. The Arrow Cross man persisted. This line is going to Germany. The other to the ghetto, he repeated. You want to be in that one.

Both survived the war. My mother and grandmother were never able to wrap their minds around the event that allowed them to survive. Who was this young man? Why did he help them? And why them of all others? They even fancied that he was a disguised Jew who had joined the Nazis to subvert their plans. We shall never know that man's identity and can only speculate regarding his motives. He had made a series of decisions. He joined the armed Arrow Cross group and volunteered or was pressed into escorting Jews. Whichever is the case, he did not shirk his duties. Then, in this unexpected, although not unprecedented act he showed a spark of humanity. Compassion was aroused in him perhaps by the sight of that little girl with long black hair and he made

the right, the good choice. It was not a heroic act. It did not require superhuman physical strength or great courage although he could have been punished for it. The safe thing would have been to do his “duty.” After all nobody was accountable for these lives, and there was no material or moral reward for saving them. This was an ordinary act of kindness albeit one that saved two lives. The victims needed presence of mind and quick decision making, trusting an intimidating person who was supposed to mean harm, for their survival. The history of even such a small episode can be quite complex. Were it not for that unknown person this book would not have been written. I was interested in the questions raised by his act. To what extent can our actions be explained or excused by circumstances, systems, or institutions? What about the pressures exerted by political power and our peers? Does room, no matter how small, remain to act freely according to our conscience even in the most restrictive, intimidating, and fear-inspiring political spaces?

Emotions aroused by family history and intellectual curiosity regarding living conditions in terroristic spaces inspired this project. How did people behave under extreme hardship and why did they make the choices and decisions they did? What were those conditions really like? How did the fate of a large number of ordinary people reflect on the system as a whole and what was the dynamic between the individual and the system? Did individuals shape the system? And what do the individual experiences of a large number tell us about the larger issues of the historical epoch? The prism I chose, the theme of survival, was one that I hoped would shed new light on the terroristic spaces created by the totalitarian regimes of the last century.

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

It was morning, a Sunday perhaps, I don't quite remember. My mother asked me to sit down beside her on the bed. We were alone. The room was dimly lit with the glow of the rising sun. "I have something to tell you," she said. I didn't know what to expect, but I had the vague sense that it was nothing good. "We're Jewish."

She blurted out this simple statement. I wasn't sure what it meant to be a Jew, and I wasn't sure I wanted to be one. Nevertheless, the revelation was meant to be a secret to be kept between me and her. From the part of my mother, this simple statement made in private carried a message that could have resonated with many other survivors whose lives had been destroyed or loved ones taken from by the century of aggression. Most of her family perished in concentration and death camps, and she wanted to make sure her descendants were spared from that fate while not forgetting who they were.¹ Her message was one of survival—biological and spiritual—and it is that notion around which this book will revolve.

Despite the library of books devoted to all angles of the Nazi, and later, Stalinist dictatorships, few have been devoted to survival. This is strange since this was the overwhelming imperative around which peoples' lives revolved in the lands controlled by versions of the National Socialist and Stalinist dictatorships. For most people it was about their own survival. Some, whose thoughts revolved around the survival of others, rose above the immediate, mundane concerns of their own life. Ordinary people could become criminals. Survival in

1 On public and private identities see Paul Betts, *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Betts stresses the role of silence and dissimulation in totalitarian dictatorships.

harsh conditions involved individual freedom and free will, good and evil, heroes and villains.² A proper understanding of survival is tightly linked to the conditions in which it took place in the terroristic spaces of the twentieth century. People under the harsh conditions imposed by repressive regimes developed skills and attitudes to cope, survive, and perhaps even thrive, but primarily perhaps, to stay alive.

This book is *not* intended as a systematic account of either the Holocaust or Stalinism, but rather as an account of the relationship between the individual and power through the prism of survival. I seek to understand the mechanism of repression and terror created by arbitrary, unbridled power through the experience of individuals, of average people through the example of three episodes: the deportation and murder of Hungarian Jews in Nazi death and work-camps; the terroristic reign of the Arrow Cross in Budapest; and, finally, the Hungarian experience of Stalinism under Mátyás Rákosi, as a history of terror experienced from below.³

In some sense, of course, the experience of Hungarians is distinct, and this book will attempt to clarify that distinction. On the other hand, it was part of the *universal* experience with lessons to be learned about the experience of the Holocaust, of National Socialism and Stalinism in general. The National Socialist and Stalinist sections are tied together on several levels, of which the notion of survival is the lynchpin. On one hand, both the National Socialists and the Stalinists defended their visions of the future from social groups posited to be implacable enemies of those visions, who needed to be destroyed if those visions of social perfection were to prevail. On the other, the social practices of National Socialism were passed down. Although Stalinism in Hungary was imposed by a foreign power, some of the “skills” of surviving it were rehearsed under the previous brief, but all the more profound, National Socialist experience.

Historians adopted legal terminology of collaboration and resistance to describe behavior under totalitarian rule or foreign occupation. This approach is problematic because it does not describe the gray zone in between. The notion of survival as a prism through which to see these events may allow us to tran-

2 On free will and scholarship on totalitarian regimes see: Gertrude Himmelfarb, *On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994). Importantly, Himmelfarb emphasizes the historian’s responsibility in discerning the unique in history and the role of the individual in shaping it.

3 Hiroaki Kuromiya’s important book reconstructs the history of Soviet terror in the 1930s on the basis of individual experience. Hiroaki Kuromiya, *The Voices of the Dead: Stalin’s Great Terror in the 1930s* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007). See the introduction to the book.

scend that gap and explore the murky waters of collaboration and resistance when the two cannot always be precisely separated.⁴

Robert Gildea has found the vision of resistance and collaboration to be an attractive one, “but too simple to make sense of the diverse and contradictory experience and the strategies they adopted.”⁵ Survival could be the bridge between resistance and collaboration, including the majority of people who stood on the sidelines,⁶ the common denominator between dictatorship by consent (becoming Nazi or communist) and the coercive (totalitarian) model. When resistance, either individual or collective (alliance formation), against the oppressive regime was not possible, or the price was too high to pay, climbing on the bandwagon along with the authorities was an option. In the case of Nazi Germany, for instance, people collaborated, or in milder forms, cooperated with the regime, not necessarily because they identified with the whole or parts of the system, but perhaps because this attitude gave them the greatest chance of surviving.⁷

I will use the term survival in a broad sense. The most basic form is self-preservation—life under extreme conditions⁸—but it can also mean the retention of normality, life as it was: economic status (like the ability to feed a family), social standing, and prestige (such as providing an education that was worthy of the family tradition). Discussing the French situation during World War II, the historian Richard Griffith observes that “people were usually more concerned

4 Robert Gildea, Olivier Wievorka and Anette Warring for instance point out that people rarely confronted the crystal clear option of collaboration or resistance with the occupying powers. Survival required finding the modes of accommodation, *modus vivendi* with the authorities. Robert Gildea, Olivier Wievorka, Anette Warring eds., *Surviving Hitler and Mussolini: Daily Life in Occupied Europe* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2006), 4. István Deák pointed out that resistance raised important moral dilemmas as the damage caused by resistance is sometimes larger than the benefit. István Deák, *Europe on Trial* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2015).

5 Robert Gildea, *Marianne in Chains: In search of the German Occupation of France 1940–1945* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2003), 414.

6 The indirect role of bystanders should not be underestimated. Jeffrey Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg concluded that “It is bystanders, who neither rescue or kill, that often set the tone of community expectation for or against violence independent of any state instigation.” Jeffrey S. Kopstein & Jason Wittenberg, *Intimate Violence: Anti-Jewish Pogroms on the Eve of the Holocaust* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), 2018.

7 Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2008). Fritzsche undertook to trace the process whereby the Germans became national socialists. Hans Ulrich Wehler went further in arguing that Germans supported Hitler’s rule unconditionally. Robert Gellately has argued that the Nazis were able to conquer public opinion to such an extent that they did not need terror to install their system. Wehler and Gellately are cited in Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Memory and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 89–90.

8 Terminology in Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in Death Camps* (Pocket Books, 1977), v.

about finding ways to live their lives without complications than about taking a political stance.... the majority were concerned with survival within their localities.” Resistance had less to do with political convictions than “with the necessities of the moment, with the need to survive...a desire to live life as it had been.”⁹ In other words, to cope with the situation the best they could. Survival could be individual and collaborative, heroic or accidental, a spontaneous act or a series of actions by design. In turn, the modes of survival are revealing as to the conditions in which that survival took place.

Both Nazism and Stalinism generated hatred towards the social groups from which they sought to defend themselves, and which they wanted to excise from the community. Their argument was simple but effective: *they hate us and want to destroy us, therefore we need to take them out before they do*. To hate the other, one must feel hated by that other. Ideologies of hatred justified aggression, which posed under the guise of self-defense.¹⁰ Nazi and Stalinist propagandists claimed that they were persecuting those who wanted to destroy the most stalwart members of the community. According to Nazi thinking, Jews corrupted the healthy German race.¹¹

Hungarian Arrow cross ideology had it that Jews had exploited the Hungarian race and menaced its survival into the future. Stalinists and their Hungarian followers argued that class aliens were impeding history’s march from capitalism to socialism, and from there to communism. First, the enemy needed to be constructed: malicious racial or social groups whose hatred of the righteous justified their destruction. The evils of Nazis and Stalinism were desired by villainous individuals, and were not due to faceless structures or long-term historical processes. In the same manner, acts of kindness were acts of everyday heroes. There is no doubt that a people’s propensity for inhumanity greases

9 Richard Griffith, *France’s Purveyors of Hatred: Aspects of the French Extreme Right and its Influence, 1918–1945* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 161–62.

10 According to Peter Holquist, Stalinist violence served the purpose of social sculpting, the construction of a pure and beautiful society. Peter Holquist, “State Violence as Technique: The Logic of Violence in Soviet Totalitarianism,” in *Stalinism – The Essential Readings*, ed. David L. Hoffmann (Malden, Ma.: Blackwell, 2003), 129–56. David L. Hoffmann asserted that Stalinist violence was a preemptive security measure aimed at specific groups. David L. Hoffmann, *The Stalinist Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 108.

11 The Nazis’ anti-Semitism was exterminationist not just because they were more evil than any other anti-Semites but because they had the means and the will to follow their first principle to its logical end. That meant not only the annihilation of the Jews but also of the teaching and testimony of Judaism that the Jews represent through their very presence in the world. The Jew is the evil that must be removed from the world, for the sake of the world for humanity. Jews were seen as a threat to the Aryan essence. See David Patterson, *Anti-Semitism and its Metaphysical Origins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 137, 146.

the machinery of terror and repression, and a variety of political systems exploit it as a means of control. Robert Conquest has remarked that “Just as Nazism provided an institutionalized outlet for the sadist, so Stalinist totalitarianism... encouraged the mean and the malicious.”¹² Perhaps this was even more than encouragement: these systems consciously unleashed what democracies try to hold in check: namely, aggression. Ordinary people made choices posterity sees as immoral, or even criminal, but future generations reach these conclusions because the coercive factors acting on those individuals are not always readily apparent to posterity.

Writing about Stalinist terror, the historians Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe observe that “the study of repression compels us to evaluate the human condition and the varying motivations for individual behavior ... it teaches us to be extremely mindful of leaping to moral judgements and induces necessary humility before the objects of our study—‘ordinary’ men and women often living under intolerable physical and psychological strain, of which we can have little, if any, real comprehension.”¹³ In light of the innumerable records of abysmal cruelty, physical and psychological, visited by one individual over another, acts that took lives or derailed them forever, these cautionary words were not always easy to pay attention to.

SECTION BY SECTION

The first section of the book deals with the experience of Hungarian Jews from the perspective of their survival narratives. They were the last and largest group of European Jews to be deported and gassed at Auschwitz-Birkenau. They were the least equipped to navigate the harsh waters of the camp system that degenerated into a vast mill of death in the final stages of the war. Their testimonies of the unique experiences of this last group casts new light on the history of Hungary’s Holocaust and on the victims’ experience of the Holocaust in general. The sources I use come from the over 3500 interviews conducted with 5000 Hungarian survivors by the National Committee for Attending Deportees [DEGOB] immediately after their return to Hungary. Although the interviews, which have been uploaded on the internet are transcripts of the original

12 Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin’s Purge of the 1930s* (New York: MacMillan, 1968), 279.

13 Kevin McDermott, Matthew Stibbe, *Stalinist Terror in Eastern Europe – Elite Purges and Mass Repression* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 2.

interviews recorded in shorthand, they are an invaluable repository of historical knowledge.¹⁴ They are an unadulterated testimony to the evil that the respondents experienced.

The interviewees were asked specific questions regarding their life prior to their time in the ghetto and transportation to the camp system, their experiences in the camps and, finally, their liberation. Many of the transcripts convey the individual character of the survivors. Some of the accounts are brief, matter of fact, and unrevealing. Others are lengthy and go far beyond a factual account of the events. Some accounts are bitter, others sarcastic, most radiate strong emotion towards the German, Hungarian and other perpetrators who killed their loved ones, and both tortured and degraded them. Some accounts are elevated, artistic in the expression of the torment they endured. None needed to comply with the editing needs of a publisher or any of the sensitivities of posterity. Most tried to make sense of what happened to them. The records show that, in the immediate aftermath of the traumatic events, the survivors were able to communicate their pain and suffering and the ordeals they had experienced. These records defy the notion that the survivors were unable to convey a sense of their sufferings. They were clearly able to speak to the outside world comprehensibly; that, for a long time, the world did not hear their voice is another matter.¹⁵

The records speak about the respondents' intimate thoughts and emotions throughout their ordeals, their grievances at the hands of their guards and peers, their memories of lost loved ones, and their experience of the beastly and humane. Christopher Browning's empirical work on the testimony of the Starachowice camp led him to challenge "from a strictly empirical standpoint, the traditional reluctance among Holocaust historians to use survivor testimony, which they perceive as unreliable."¹⁶ There is, one might add, no such thing as

14 Ferenc Laczó, *Hungarian Jews in the Age of Genocide: An Intellectual History* (Brill, 2016), 106, 123. György Csepeli and conducted a quantitative analysis of these records. The average age of the interviewees was 27 years, most who survived from Transcarpathia were women, most who survived from the capital city were males. The majority of survivors worked in industry mostly as artisans. The ratio of children and elderly people was low. György Csepeli and Gergő Prazsák, "Paths to Fatelessness," *Holocaust. Studii și Cercetării*, Volume VII, Issue 8, (2015): 81–95.

15 Jan Tomasz Gross has written that "People who perished had no voice, and those who survived were pushed into a realm of silence by the singular character of their experiences. The violence they endured destroyed their capacity for making contact with the outside world. Their experience was and remains inexpressible, because pain and physical violence destroy language and cause a reversion anterior to language." Jan Tomasz Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events on the Periphery of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

16 Christopher R. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave Labor Camp* (New York and London: W. Norton, 2010), 8.

an absolutely reliable historical document. No testimony is more reliable than that which reflects the immediate experiences of the victims of the camps with respect to the behavior of peers and perpetrators, their sense of solidarity, selfishness, survival and death, even if these might be less useful for numbers or the precise chronology of events.

Historians have traditionally been careful, even wary, of using survivor testimonies to reconstruct the Holocaust, on the grounds that they are unreliable as historical sources. Courts have acquitted accused war criminals on the grounds that survivors failed to recognize them many decades later, or have given conflicting accounts of the events in terms of numbers and chronology. More recently, however, such testimonies have begun to make important contributions to scholarship on the destruction of the Jews, in an effort to allow them to have a voice in the events. Elie Wiesel has argued that Holocaust testimony should be placed outside mainstream historical inquiry and instead interpreted in solely spiritual or religious terms. By contrast, the scholar Zoe Waxmann has written, historians seek to transform these ‘sacred’ testimonies into historical documents and sources of information.

Letters and diaries are the most pristine source of the events. They reflect the diversity of peoples’ experiences and they are all unique, but it is precisely for that reason that no general conclusions can be drawn from them. The difficulty for historians is that they do not necessarily want to focus on the minutiae of individual experience. Their primary concern, rather, is how to represent commonalities of experience—hence, the tendency to mine individual testimonies for data, rather than to focus on the idiosyncrasies of individual experience. “The problem with this approach is that stories that don’t conform to appropriate expectations are all too often ignored or confined to the margins or footnotes of history.” Testimony written after the war, on the other hand, was inevitably shaped by hindsight, forgetting, and the needs of the present. Unlike the testimonies of those who did not survive to experience liberation, survivors’ memories are subject to the constraints of memory and should not carry the expectation of pure, immediate experience.¹⁷

The DEGOB interviews may combine the “virtues” of the two types of sources: memoirs and diaries. These interviews, which captured survivors’ memories immediately after the events, provide the necessary quantity to allow for general-

17 Zoe Waxmann, “Transcending History? Methodological problems in Holocaust Testimony,” in *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, ed. Dan Stone (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012), 148.

izations, combined with the intimacy of the events and the freshness of memory. Survivors were not silent, and spoke to the outside world comprehensibly. Their accounts were not tainted by retrospective experience and perspective. Importantly, as Jan Tomasz Gross has argued, “as a number of detailed narratives exhibit concurring characteristics, we can make a leap toward a general understanding of the phenomena.”¹⁸

Saul Friedländer, for one, has no doubt that the history of the destruction of European Jewry at the level of individuals can be reconstructed from the perspective of the victims based on diaries, and other ego documents. “The victim’s voice, suddenly arising in the course of the narration of the events, by its eloquence or clumsiness, by the immediacy of the cry of terror... tear through the fabric of the ‘detached’ and ‘objective’ historical rendition.”¹⁹ In a similar vein, the Hungarian scholar Gábor Gyáni points out that the history of the Holocaust which „can be explained rationally but cannot be comprehended, not only allows but requires the human voice and experience which is to be placed on an equal footing with the historian if the scholar of the past narrates an event of the magnitude of the Holocaust.”²⁰

While the DEGOB archives are by and large unknown within international scholarship, their use in Hungarian scholarship is increasingly widespread. Szabolcs Szita has infused a bottom-up approach of the history of the Hungarians in Auschwitz-Birkenau with a political history of the deportations. Zoltán Vági and Gábor Kádár relied even more heavily on the DEGOB accounts in their comprehensive account of Hungarians in the German camp system, while Ferenc Laczó has focused on certain questions of camp life in Buchenwald as reflected in the interviews.²¹ The large number of testimonies Hungarian survivors provided as to their experiences immediately after the war are reliable sources that make a significant contribution to our understanding of the conditions of camp life and liberation and the conditions under which these individuals survived, including their alleged culpability for their own fate.

The large number of authentic first hand individual accounts of all facets of the Holocaust: of the mass murder by gassing and burning people alive, of the

18 Gross, *Golden Harvest*, 58.

19 Saul Friedländer, “An Integrated History of the Holocaust: Some Methodological Challenges,” in *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, ed. Dan Stone, 183–84.

20 Gábor Gyáni, “Előszó,” in *Magyarok Auschwitz-Birkenauban*, ed. Szabolcs Szita (Budapest: Noran-Libro, 2018), 13–18.

21 Szabolcs Szita, *Magyarok Auschwitz-Birkenauban*; Zoltán Vági and Gábor Kádár, *Táborok könyve: Magyarok a náci koncentrációs táborokban* (Budapest: Könyv és Kávét Kft., 2017); Ferenc Laczó, *Hungarian Jews in the Age of Genocide*.

horrendous death toll exacted by back breaking labor with not enough nourishment to sustain life (death through labor), of the beating, torture and death of countless people including infants, are essential parts of this book at a time when Holocaust denial, distortion and relativization is becoming part of mainstream scholarship.²²

Was it “the compliance of most victims that made the Final Solution possible,” as suggested by historian Konrad Jarausch?²³ Primo Levi, one of the most prominent of all survivors observed that “Among the questions that are put to us [survivors] there is one that is never absent: ‘Why did you not escape?’ ‘Why did you not rebel?’ Why did you not avoid capture beforehand?... These queries imply that the victims... might be somehow responsible for their own demise.”²⁴ In Bruno Bettelheim’s provocative formulation, the Jews went to their death “like lemmings.” Were the victims indeed responsible for their fate? What did they do and what could have they done to avoid the fate awaiting them? The answer may shed light on the social history of the Hungarian Holocaust and to our understanding of that historical event in general. In order for us to understand survival, we must clarify the relationship of the victims with the environment around them. The first section of the book will discuss the interaction between the victims and their environment from the time they were rounded up through their liberation. Hungarian Jews could expect little help from their neighbors. They were robbed and tortured and most of them had no inkling of the fate awaiting them, which explains the ease with which the deportations were carried out. Hungarian Jews experienced the camps as institutions of death and endless torture, where survival was dominated by individual effort more than solidarity. This is in contrast to the second part of the book, the Holocaust in Budapest in October 1944/ February 1945—the Arrow Cross reign of terror—where survival was a collaborative effort.

22 For instance, Mahmood Mamdani writes “America’s” narrative of the white protestant man “made ethnic genocide and ethnic cleansing thinkable in Germany and ethnic cleansing thinkable in Israel.” Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 28.

23 Konrad Jarausch, *Out of the Ashes: A New History of Europe in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 361.

24 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London: Sphere Books, 1989), 122. Raul Hilberg observed that Jews were not prone to “messengers” bringing news of mass killings. “The Jews of Sighet had not built an intelligence system and they did not try to make discoveries. The same omission applies to Jewish organizations and Allied governments outside the arena of destruction. They too had failed to focus their attention systematically on the dynamic of destruction, and they were equally unprepared for any revelation.” Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933–1945* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 218.

ARROW CROSS TERROR

The Arrow Cross reign of terror is not well known, even though it was part of the Hungarian Holocaust. Hungarian historians were traditionally interested in the political history of the Arrow Cross movement, and it is only more recently that scholars turned their attention to the Arrow Cross reign of terror in Budapest.²⁵ Nevertheless, this episode has still not taken its rightful place as one of the chapters in the destruction of European Jewry. It is the prism of survival that allows us to see the motivations of perpetrators clearly and to distinguish this episode as one motivated by eliminationist antisemitism, rather than random looting and killing.

Historians of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe have been increasingly focusing on the role of locals—policemen and civilians—in aiding and perpetrating the mass killing of Jews in Poland, Ukraine and elsewhere. Omer Bartov, for instance, has chosen as a case study the violence towards and killing of Jews by locals in a relatively small area around Buczacz in Ukraine. This was an impoverished multiethnic and multilingual region with a history on uneasy cohabitation among the various groups. The murders were carried out in the villages and forests surrounding them, and Bartov, who was inspired by his family's local history, was interested in the motivations of ordinary perpetrators, neighbors, and acquaintances in the light of survivor testimony. In Budapest, a cosmopolitan capital in Central Europe, several hundred armed members of the Arrow Cross Party murdered at least 3,600 people, most of them Jews. There were almost 200,000 Jews in Budapest at the time after the deportations, which all but wiped out the Jewish population in the Hungarian provinces.

Many more of Budapest's Jews would have been killed, but the perpetrators ran out of time, as the city was finally overtaken by the Red Army after the longest siege of any city outside of the Soviet Union during the war. As law and order in the city degenerated, aggression was unleashed. This chapter will be occupied with the mindset of the perpetrators of violence and murder on the one

25 Andrea Pető, *Láthatatlan elkövetők: Nők a magyarországi nyilasmozgalomban* (Budapest: Jaffa Kiadó, 2019). In English: Andrea Pető, *The Forgotten Massacre: Budapest in 1944* (Oldenburg: De Gruyter, 2021); Áron Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok pere 1967: Értelmezési lehetőségek* (Budapest: Századvég kiadó, 2014); Istvan Pal Adam, *Budapest Building Managers and the Holocaust in Hungary* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2016); Máté Rigó, "Hétköznapi emberek' és a holokauszt," in 1944/1945: *Társadalom a háborúban – folytonosság és változás Magyarországon*, eds. Zsombor Bódy and Sándor Horváth (Budapest: MTA BTK TTI, 2015); Gergely Kunt, *Kamasztükrök: A hosszú negyvenes évek társadalmi képzetei fiatalok naplóiban* (Budapest, Korall Kiadó, 2017); Gábor Tabajdi, "A Duna-parti gyilkosságok," *Rubicon* (2004/11): 32–39; Sári Reuveni, "Igaz emberek a vészorkorszakban Magyarországon," *Rubicon* 2004/11; Krisztián Ungváry, *Budapest ostroma* (Budapest: Corvina, 1998), 239–55.

hand, and rescue and survival on the other, in recognition of the fact that the two phenomena are inseparable.

What were the chances of survival? This question can be answered in the light of the goals of the Arrow Cross killers. These two questions are inseparable: Did they kill for pragmatic reasons, such as the consolidation of their power, or to enrich themselves by despoiling their victims? Were they guided by an ideology of hatred, namely national socialist delusions about a struggle for survival between Hungarians and Jews? How did they differentiate their victims? Was there any particular group of people in their crosshairs? Did they differentiate among those who fell into their hands? Who had the best chance to survive?

This, in turn, depended on the motivations of the perpetrators. Were they situational killers produced by the gradual collapse of law and order in the midst of the bloody siege of the city? Or was it the other way round: Did they exploit the power vacuum and chaos to achieve their racist ends, namely the liquidation of the remainder of Hungarian Jewry and anyone on their side? If the purpose of the Arrow Cross men was to annihilate the Jewish population of Budapest, what chances were there of surviving them? Most rescues in Hungary took place in the capital city, and it is the dilemmas of rescue and survival that this part of the book will discuss in the context in which the rescues took place. It was easy to be an anti-Semite in an abstract sense, but harder when the consequences, namely mutilated corpses, were evident for all to see.

The sources, court documents, and records of the police investigations of the crimes are included in the testimonies of the perpetrators as well as of the survivors, enabling us to reconstruct the events from both angles. The police and the courts were obviously tasked with the investigation and judgement of crimes and their perpetrators. Therefore, the focus is not on rescue and solidarity: the documents reflect the evil and the good only to a far lesser extent. Moreover, the postwar trials frequently lacked due process. Sometimes the defense was not allowed to call witnesses; therefore, there were cases which we cannot reconstruct with any degree of certainty.

Two trials took place later, in the 60s and 70s. These relied on several years of thorough police investigation. Even so, the records suffer from significant deficiencies: conflicting testimony due to fading memory, and the attempt of the defendants to exculpate themselves at the expense of others. The thoughts of the defendants were also recorded by police informants planted in prison cells where they were held prior the trial, a valuable source of their innermost thoughts. The trials were to some extent politicized—judgements were implicitly passed on the entire “Horthy era”—which adds an extra layer of obfusca-

tion to the records. Yet, as Hiroaki Kuromiya reminded us, employing particular care, the historian can reconstruct the truth behind the files.

STALINISM IN HUNGARY

Part three focuses on how average people coped with and survived a terroristic regime—Stalinism in Hungary. Did the masses of people lend their consent, conscious, and sometimes keen support to an ideologically grounded oppressive regime and keep it running because they identified with it, as some scholars of the consensual model suggest? Or was this a system in which people were only trying to survive? And if so, how was survival—in the physical, sociological and psychological sense—possible under a regime in which the scope of the enemy was so broadly defined?

Most accounts of Stalinist social systems focused on the totalitarian versus consensual/participatory model, i.e. the top-down, bottom-up dynamic of these political systems are of the Soviet or German variety, in fact the consensual model relies entirely on readings of Soviet and East German systems. The region hardly if ever figures in conceptual debates of the Stalinist system. This is hard to understand, as the Soviet model was duplicated lock stock and barrel in a host of countries in East Central Europe as they gradually fell under Moscow's sway in the aftermath of the war. Hungarian scholarship has focused on the economic and social transformation brought about by Stalinization, mainly the political history and machinery of terror during high Stalinism and the Rákosi years—named after the leader of the Hungarian Communist Party—in Hungary. There has, however, been no explicit discussion of the totalitarian debate, let alone the motive of survival. This segment of the book relies heavily on state security documents, investigations and military tribunals, and the trials of ordinary citizens caught up in the web of terror and repression.²⁶ The latter give voice to ordinary victims of state persecution whose lives were ruined and derailed. They also cast light on a segment of the social history of the years under the rule of Mátyás Rákosi, who, not without justification, called himself Stalin's best disciple.

I also hope to understand the mechanism of terror and repression. Of course, we are not hearing those people's own voices, as the state security services re-shaped their confessions to conform with their own image. The self-incriminating con-

²⁶ The historian Hiroaki Kuromiya's bottom-up approach used the interrogation records of Soviet citizens to reconstruct Stalinist terror. Kuromiya, *The Voices of the Dead*.

fessions were extracted by inflicting physical pain and psychological pressure. Still, with careful reading, the reality behind the lines, the way people tried to cope with or sometimes even to exploit the political system to their advantage, can be discerned. These documents may contribute to a better understanding of the distribution of coercion and consent.²⁷ Was there less fear and more accommodation than the top-down model would suggest? Those who emphasize broad social consent may not fully appreciate the impact of constraint on free will and decision-making.²⁸

It has been argued that Stalinist systems reshaped the social fabric in its own image, including culture and its alleged social base, including the working class as well.²⁹ Did most people become Stalinists in Hungary and lend the regime stability? Or is their behavior better described as coping in order to survive a regime that used terror as a tool of statecraft? In order to answer these questions, we will investigate the surveillance and punitive powers of the state and the defensive mechanisms at the disposal of the individual. Was there any legal recourse against the encroachments of state security? Were people justified in thinking they were under constant surveillance? It is not enough to know the number of paid or informal personnel at the disposal of the authorities. Their placement, which influenced the number of people each agent was able to monitor, was also significant. The totalitarian versus voluntary model also hinges on the magnitude of people who were arrested for political reasons. To clarify that we need to understand the definition of political crimes. This picture is not complete without identifying the groups which the state defined as hostile, and therefore to be eliminated, and, equally importantly, without understanding the motives of the Hungarian state—and Stalinist states in general—in wanting to eliminate a sizable segment of its own population.

Some recent scholarship has downplayed the role of ideology in terror and repression. By contrast, I will argue for its importance in shaping Stalinist policies. It is hoped that the Hungarian case will contribute to our understanding of the workings of Stalinist states in general. As in the previous two sections, I have used individual cases in the hope that, as is the case with pointillist images, the dots will represent the whole.

27 On the so-called consensual model see for example Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, eds., *Accusatory Practices: Denunciations in Modern European History, 1789–1989* (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

28 Jan Gross argued that “no one could count on guaranteed protection, not the secret police, not the army or any echelon of the secret police. Superiors and subordinates alike contributed to the perpetuation of the regime.” Gross, *Revolution from Abroad*, 231.

29 Mark Pittaway, *The Workers’ State Industrial Labor and the Making of Socialist Hungary, 1944–1958* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Pittsburgh University Press, 2012).

P a r t I

Hungarian Holocaust



Emil Kalmár (in the middle), a World War I veteran and his son Gyula were killed in Buchenwald. His wife (to his left) survived in the Budapest ghetto, his sister-in-law (to his right) perished in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Author's collection.

“Germany may have lost, but Hitler won the war against the Jews. We see the endless lines of our dead comrades, our impotence, we cannot understand how we survived. We are not even alive, we are dead, too.”

Jewish liberation sermon, DEGOB record number 1735

As a witness to the cruelty of the last century, Eugene Lyons put it, “there is no arithmetic to estimate human suffering.”¹ Words cannot describe with any degree of authenticity the misery inflicted by the totalitarian dictatorships of the twentieth century. Human wretches dragging themselves in the morning frost or under the scorching sun with no protective clothing in Hitler’s Europe, starved half to death on “nutrition” that does not merit the name, marching to and from back-breaking soulless forced work, have become hallmarks of the European history of the last century.

Neither can our experience of everyday reality enable us to comprehend what it meant to toil while being hit, whipped, punched, kicked, psychologically abused, degraded, and humiliated, with little or no sleep, and then being forced to stand for roll call for hours on end in the early morning, and then being marched barefoot to perform backbreaking work under constant surveillance, which regularly included beatings. Fear, terror, and intimidation for political and ideological purposes and for the gratification of sadistic personal inclinations became part of everyday life. The preservation of one’s life and soul in these conditions was the order of the day for tens of millions.

The personal memories, which can be viewed as testimonies for posterity, and to be shared by survivors, may bridge the gap between the often uncomprehending, often indifferent, attitudes of later generations and the experience of everyday hatred suffered by a persecuted individual.² I will be interested in

1 Eugene Lyons, *Assignment in Utopia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1937), 280.

2 The wide-scale European indifference and even hostility towards the survivors of Nazi death camps is documented in Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* (Picador, 2003), Chapter 17.

the struggle for survival, both in terms of strategies in which this can be discerned from the sources, and through spontaneous acts of self-preservation, whether individual or collective. Were these victims masters of their own fate, or do many feel, as does Peter Kenez, that “our lives did not belong to us: what happened depended on others or simply on fate.”³ Did human bonds survive in the midst of barbarism, or was the camp a Hobbesian world of anarchy and the unmitigated pursuit of self-interest?

Hungary’s Jews arrived in the Nazi camp system in the very last phase of the war, when conditions even in previously tolerable camps began to deteriorate drastically. Thus, the experiences of the Hungarian Jews who were deported and, for the most part, killed may provide important insights into the final, highly murderous, phase of the German camps. Was it possible to find “happiness,” a primordial sense of kinship, in the camps, as Imre Kertész suggests in his novel *Fateless*? Did victimhood create a community at least among the people deported from the same country? Or did camp life reflect pre-deportation cleavages in the form of political, class, financial, religious, and racial divides that survived in the camp and into life beyond it?

The main body of evidence used in this chapter to reconstruct individual experiences consists of interviews conducted by the National Committee for Attending Deportees (Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottság). The over 3,500 interviews (with 5,000 participants) that were conducted with survivors immediately after they returned to Hungary combine the immediacy of the events found in ego documents with large numbers of events that allow for generalizations. My intention is to give voice to these victims in shaping interpretations of a past that rightfully should be regarded as theirs. In contrast to the claim by Jan Tomasz Gross, these records show that the survivors were not “pushed into the realm of silence by the singular character of their experiences.” The “violence they endured” did not “destroy their capacity for making contact with the outside world.”⁴ I agree that “when one survivor’s account of an event or circumstance is repeated in exactly the same way by dozens of other survivors... then one can come to trust the validity of such reports.”⁵

3 Peter Kenez, *Varieties of Fear: Growing Up Jewish under Nazism and Communism* (iUniverse, 2001), 40.

4 Gross, *Golden Harvest*, 7.

5 Des Pres, *The Survivor*, vi. Or, as Gross put it, “As a number of detailed narratives exhibit concurring characteristics, we can make a leap toward a general understanding of the phenomenon.” Gross, *Golden Harvest*, 58.

GERMANY AND THE HUNGARIAN HOLOCAUST

On March 19, 1944, Wehrmacht and SS divisions brought an end to the relative peace that had prevailed in Hungary while much of the continent was experiencing the devastation of war. An American intelligence report asserted that, “At the time of the German occupation... [Hungary had] the largest [number of] and best treated Jews in Axis Europe. The Horthy regime hesitated in following the Nazi policy to its ultimate goal of deportation, starvation and extermination.” Prior to the German occupation, “persecuted Jews of neighboring Axis lands looked upon Hungary as a place of refuge.”⁶ The Mapai secretariat in Jerusalem made the following note: “German invasion: The process began of turning Hungary from a “paradise for Jews” into a land in which the Final Solution was put into action.”⁷ The term “paradise” was relative, of course. Hungary was only a “paradise” in comparison with parts of German-occupied Europe, where the Jews were murdered on the spot in masses or deported to German-run death camps. Nevertheless, young Jewish Zionist leader Rafi Benshalom, who arrived in Budapest from Slovakia in January 1944, was shocked: “For me, in Europe of 1944, this seemed like a fantasy... Jews seeking entertainment could still visit coffee houses, cinemas and theaters while the whole world lived in fear.”⁸

By then, numerous anti-Semitic measures, which discriminated against the country’s Jewish population on a racial basis, causing economic hardship and immense psychological trauma, had been introduced. By 1944, Jewish livelihood was severely constrained, and intermarriage between Jews and gentiles prohibited. Nevertheless, Jews were spared certain humiliating measures such as the obligation to wear a yellow star. All this changed after the moderate Kállay cabinet, which had been attempting to sign a separate peace with the Anglo-Americans since 1942, was forced to resign in the wake of the occupation, and Horthy appointed a new, pro-German administration under Döme Sztójay. “Treason had to be punished” Göbbels recorded in his diary on the March 4, “the Führer will invade the Kingdom of Hungary.” Ominously, Hitler added: “there are 700 thousand Jews in Hungary, we will not let them slip through our fingers.”⁹

6 “The Jews of Hungary”, 19 October 1944. R&A 2027. National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 226, Entry 191, Box 1.

7 Tuvia Friling, *Arrows in the Dark: David Ben Gurion, the Yishuv Leadership, and Rescue Attempts during the Holocaust* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), volume 2, 4.

8 Cited in Zoltán Vági, László Csósz and Gábor Kádár, *The Holocaust in Hungary: Evolution of Genocide* (Plymouth, UK: Alta Mira Press, 2013), xlvii.

9 “Im Zusammenhang mit der Finnischen Angelegenheit ist der Führer jetzt auch fest entschlossen, die die Ungarische Frage zu lösen. Die Ungarn üben Verrat am laufenden Band. Er wird

Allen Dulles, the OSS resident in Berne, learned that the Germans wanted to avoid the country's defection, the repetition of the Badoglio affair, and could not tolerate the presence of a "million Jews" behind the Germans army's back.¹⁰

Agents of the German security service [SD], the Gestapo, and the Sipo, numbering some 800 men, arrived in the Wehrmacht's wake with a list of names of people to be arrested because they were considered inimical to the interests of the Nazi occupiers. These included legitimists, liberals, Smallholders, Social Democrats, members of the Hungarian peerage, civil servants, and officials of the administration regarded as unreliable. Most of those arrested were sent to the concentration camps at Dachau or Mauthausen.

An operative unit called the *Sondereinsatzkommando* of the German Security Police of some 65 agents and headed by SS Obersturmbannführer Adolf Eichmann belonged under the supervision of SS Standartenführer Geschke. Their mission was the implementation of the Final Solution in Hungary, with the active assistance of the new Hungarian administration. Deportation was to be carried out in the most radical and quickest manner with a view to avoiding a "Warsaw Uprising."¹¹ For the leadership of the Jewish community, obedience seemed the best way to avoid calamity. The Jewish Council, which was established on April 19 (a month after the occupation), reacted to a new spate of anti-Semitic decrees by asking the Jewish population to remain calm and disciplined. In a similar vein, the *Judenrat* in Munkács (today Mukachevo, Ukraine) ordered the local community to follow its orders without question, adding that there was no cause for panic.¹² Despite the reassurances, the German invasion brought about a peak in suicide attempts among Hungarian Jews. Some took poison. A 74-year-old Jewish woman jumped under a tram, "presumably on purpose," the driver reported.¹³ Most Hungarian Jews lived with a false sense of security, unprepared for what was unfolding.

ihnen Dutzende Male nachgewiesen aber sie reagieren nicht auf unsere Proteste. [...] Der Verat muß bestraft werden. Infolgedessen will der Führer jetzt handeln. Er will die Ungarischen Regierung absetzen und verhaften, Horthy in Gewahrsam nehmen und versuchen, ein Regime Imrédy einzurichten." Elke Frölich, ed, *Die Tagebücher von Josef Göbbels*, Part II, vol. 11 (Munich, 1994), 394. On March 8 Göbbels recorded that "Die Ungarn würden lieber heute als morgen von uns abspringen, wenn sie das gefahrlos tun könnten. Aber der Führer wird ihr vor diese Absichten einen Riegel schieben." Ibid. 435. On March 13 Hitler noted that "Ungarn hat 700 000 Juden; wir wurden sorgen, dass sie uns nicht durch die Lappen gehen." Ibid. 462.

10 Allen Dulles Papers, Seeley Mudd Library Princeton. Secretary of State, Washington DC, 22 March 1944.

11 Szita, *Magyar sorsok Auschwitz-Birkenauban*, 80; 91–93.

12 Szabolcs Szita, *Gyógyíthatatlan sebek – magyarok az auschwitz-birkenai lágerbirodalomban* (Budapest, 2016), 61–62, 65.

13 Adam, *Budapest Building Managers and the Holocaust in Hungary*, 37.

A woman recalled that “there were troops from Nuremberg” in the town of Huszt (today Khust, Ukraine) who “constantly pillaged and looted.”¹⁴ P. I. came from an assimilated family, the male members of which “served the country in peace and war.” He worked in the war industry as a mining engineer. “They still took me, and I cannot understand why.”¹⁵ All of a sudden, history caught up with people who had hitherto been spared the horrors of the war. “One day we were eating lunch at home when Germans and gendarmes burst into the house.” They gave the family five minutes to pack up. The home was searched thoroughly. “The women were humiliated and searched in a way which I am unable to recount.” In Munkács (today Mukachevo, Ukraine), a little girl was screaming, “Daddy the SS are here.” The father, a tailor named Hónig, tried to hide, but in vain, as he was found and shot.¹⁶ Most people remembered a relatively tranquil and prosperous life, and they associated the big shift in their fates with the German occupation, which, in the words of the Jewish leaders in Palestine, brought new calamity. Újpest had been a democratic town before the Germans came in, a man stated, and Jews there had a relatively good life. “The population led the Germans to the houses of the prosperous Jews, where they robbed and even murdered.”¹⁷

“Right after the German invasion [of Ungvár (today Uzhhorod, Ukraine)] they took hostages and released them only after a payment of one million pengős in ransom money had been paid. The Germans promised that nothing would happen, but of course they lied... They took all the gold, silver, valuables. They occupied the most beautifully furnished houses and took us to the ghetto. When the Germans came, we spent many nights away from home we were too scared to stay at home, the Germans broke our windows.” As a man from Ungvár put it: “in April 1944, the Germans came. After that, the Jews were not left in peace in Ungvár.”¹⁸

When the Wehrmacht entered the southwestern town of Kaposvár, the inhabitants at first thought that they were just passing through. Jewish women

14 P. S. male, DEGOB, record number 28.

15 P. I. male, DEGOB, record number 1735.

16 K. M. female, DEGOB record number 2954; W. M. male, DEGOB record number 2930.

17 Dr. K. I. male. DEGOB, record number 3588.

18 Three males, DEGOB, record number 3497; W.S., W. E. females, DEGOB record number 2932; DEGOB record number 347; In Szerednye, where approximately 500 Jewish families lived, they were “mostly well-to-do merchants, artisans, etc.” W. S., woman, homemaker 1912 Szerednye, record number 2932; The 28 families in Kótaj ‘generally lived in prosperity.’ W. K. female, DEGOB record number 2940. Á. D. owned a small factory in Miskolc which brought a nice revenue and lived well with his wife and three children. Á. D., male Edelény 1915, DEGOB record number 2984; “We were prosperous people, my father traded with fruit.” H. E., female, 1929, 2949 record number]

even offered them pastries. The troops were decent enough, unlike the Gestapo men. They took everything, one woman recalled. First, they arrested her husband, who was denounced by a “Swabian.” Then, they took the jewels and the money. Even the pantry was looted. The Germans put up three officers in her home who “behaved in a vile manner, they cursed the Jews and issued threats.”¹⁹

W. M.’s parents owned a highly profitable fashion store in Munkács. Gestapo men stormed the store demanding money. When the owner refused, they shot him dead.²⁰ In Vienna, grand former capital of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and Budapest’s sister city, the invading German troops brought cheering crowds and outbursts of popular anti-Semitism. In Budapest, the Germans were met with resignation. A leaflet disseminated by the Hungarian Resistance Movement which called for the “liquidation of the Germans” fell on deaf ears.²¹

After his arrest on November 19, former prime minister Miklós Kállay, who was ousted after the German invasion, was taken to the infamous prison on Margit Boulevard. Where he was told that he would “never leave this building alive” and that this fate awaited his “whole family, his whole kind, the whole liberal Jewish hireling world of the lords.”²² In fact, for people on the radical right, the Germans brought new opportunities. Reverend Zoltán Éber hoped that there would “finally be a government that will stand by the Germans with full sincerity, a government which will solve the Jewish question in Hungary.”²³

Pro-German military circles seem to have trusted in German victory, fueling their confidence that the time had come for a National Socialist turn in Hungary. As one officer declared, the Germans have Achilleses without Achilles heels. Corporal Kálmán Mester thought that “the Russian was no longer that formidable an enemy.”²⁴ Thanks to the Germans, Miklós Horthy’s old regime could be cleared away. “Yes, it was the 12th hour,” Mrs. Gyözö Burták thought, “and with the help of our German friends the country awoke from its lethargy and the cleansing began on the 20-year-old rubbish dump [of the Horthy regime]. It is a great shame that we needed foreign doctors for the remedy, but we needed

19 Dr. S. E. female, DEGOB, record number 3543.

20 W. M. male, DEGOB, record number 2930.

21 Belpolitikai jelentés, October 1944. MNL OL, K149, 97. box, 651f2/1944. Sztójay Döme.

22 Miklós Kállay, *Magyarország miniszterelnöke voltam 1942-1944*, edited by László Antal and László Borhi, volume 2. (Budapest: Európa, 1991), 231.

23 Éber Zoltán levele Endre Lászlónak, Felsődabas, April 7, 1944. Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára hereafter cited as MNL OL, K-557, Endre László. I wish to thank Rudolf Paksa for bringing this set of documents to my attention.

24 Letter to László Endre, March 31, 1944. Illegible signature. MNL OL, K-557, Endre László. Kálmán Mester’s letter to László Endre, April 17, 1944. MNL OL, K-557.

it for the awakening.”²⁵ The appointment of the new pro-German government with a National Socialist agenda was met with great enthusiasm from the radical right. The opportunity to get rid of the “pro-Jewish” corrupt aristocratic regime, to exact revenge on personal enemies, and, mostly, to implement the radical solution of the “Jewish Question” in the struggle for a happier, more prosperous, and racially pure Hungary had arrived. It was this grass roots zeal that would make the task of dispossession, marginalization and, eventually, deportation so easy to carry out. There was work to be done. As the lead notary of the village of Kóka, László Nagy, put it, now “all *true* Hungarians are delighted that the Jews will get their deserved punishment for all their past sins.”²⁶

Almost immediately after the new German-sponsored puppet government was appointed, further degrading anti-Semitic measures were taken, ones that would sap psychological resistance and engender resignation to the Jews’ common fate. Jews and “elements suspected of Communist sympathies” were no longer allowed to listen to the radio. They were forced to turn in their wireless sets, and their telephones were disconnected. They were banned from using public baths. Measures were taken at the expense of Jews on behalf of gentile families whose homes had been bombed. Jews could be evicted from homes they had rented in fear of the bombing of Budapest. Some local leaders took the initiative of introducing measures against the Jews without waiting for orders from above. Béla Buocz, who acted as the police chief of the city of Szeged, issued decrees requiring Jews to turn in their radios and limit their shopping hours. He also banned them from public baths well before the government decrees to this effect were issued.²⁷

In early April, a decree was passed that obligated Jews to wear a yellow star. The provision was strictly enforced. For instance, a mother of four was taken into police custody for not displaying the sign visibly enough. This measure stirred a controversy, since the obligation to display the discriminatory sign was extended to categories of Jews who had been previously exempted from anti-Jewish measures. Because of pressure from the Christian denominations, Jews living in mixed marriages and their children were exempted and hence were not obligated to display the sign. This caused consternation in anti-Semitic circles. A letter from “workers and state employees” was sent to László Endre, the state secretary for Jewish affairs, in which the authors expressed their strong objec-

25 Özvegy Burták Gyözöné levele, April 24, 1944, MNL OL, K-557.

26 Unsigned memorandum, April 14, 1944. MNL OL, K-557.

27 Judit Molnár, *Zsidósors 1944-ben az 5. (szegedi) csendőrkörületben* (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1995), 45.

tion to the exemption. Endre, they wrote, was known for his uncompromising attitude.” But now, they alleged, he had “reached a slope regarding the Jewish question.” The matter was an issue of life or death: “In the death struggle why does the fate of the treasonous Jews hurt you?” They demanded that Endre “finish off this immoral race.”²⁸ Endre would soon oblige with the wish to do away with Jews. Hungarians who were helping Jews hide their belongings were also denounced, but the motive of profiting from Jewish commodities was only secondary to persecution on a racial basis. The time had come to get rid of members of the old regime, who, as a retired colonel put it, “betrayed the (Hungarian) race and cast the nation into the swamp of depravity.”

Radicals were discontented with the “results” of years of anti-Semitic legislation, and they felt that they were still marginalized socially and economically by Jews and their Hungarian (middle class and aristocratic) collaborators.²⁹ “The de-Jewification of the branches of industry and trade has not been carried out,” a merchant named Kalántay thundered. “There is not a single vendor of stationary products with no Jew behind it.”³⁰ Jews, Endre and his likeminded compatriots thought, were rapacious and unpatriotic parasites, whose racial traits would survive in their offspring even if one parent were Hungarian. The depth of prejudice is illustrated by the following measure. Jews, Endre decreed, were to be sold sugar, which was in short supply, only if it had been ascertained by an on-site survey that the Jew had not already hoarded sugar. Jews were even capable, Endre argued, of destroying the sugar they already possessed so that they could amass more, given “the well-known distance of Jewish individuals from the national community.” Jewish stereotypes included groveling and bribing for personal gain, since aloofness from the nation was coded in their blood, and they were treacherous.³¹ Anti-Semitic thinking held that a Jew could not be a good Hungarian, no matter what he had done for the country. As a retired colonel put it, even a seemingly useful Jew “is not a good Hungarian but a Jew who was able to mislead the authorities.”³²

Aside from “concern” for the nation and its prospering, as a secondary motive, financial gain motivated the Judeophobic zeal. The prospect of seizing the

28 Állami tisztviselők és munkások levele Endre Lászlónak (illegible signature), Alag-Dunakeszi, April 8, 1944. MNL OL, K-557, Endre László.

29 Many “racial protectionists” and other radical right-wingers switched from antisemitism to defending the nation from German imperialism.

30 Kalántay levele Endre Lászlónak, March 29, 1929. MNL OL, K-557.

31 Kis levele Endre Lászlónak, MNL OL, K-557. Dunakeszi munkások levele Endre Lászlónak, MNL OL, K-557.

32 Letter to László Endre, illegible signature [retired colonel], April 29, 1944. MNL OL, K-557.

property of others caused great excitement among gentiles. As Simon Kemény was consuming his breakfast in Belvárosi Kávéház, the air was filled with colorful Hungarian speech. Among the loud throng, one could hear the same word coming from all directions: “Jew.’ Jewish estate, Jewish horse Jewish bull, Jew, Jew, je, je, the air was literally echoing with the many je sounds. These gentlemen all had a stake in one way or another in the great redistribution, and if things had gotten this far, they wanted a part in the booty which the age and the law was going to give them.”³³ The daily *Szégedi Új Nemzedék* noted that “an exceptionally large numbers of claimants are going for the closed down Jewish stores.”³⁴

The official language or, in other words, the language of coercion, was adopted by people who were seeking exemption from the effects of the new anti-Semitic legislation. The German occupation provided economic opportunities for those who were inclined to take the belongings of others without compensation. Evidence suggests, however, that the main reason why radicals welcomed the invasion of their country by a foreign power was antisemitism, the opportunity the invaders afforded to get rid of the country’s “parasitic” and “treasonous” Jews as well as their alleged “supporters.” Physical survival would have been relatively easy were it just about despoiling the Jewish population. In fact, Jewish proprietors regularly transferred ownership of their property to trustworthy gentile caretakers. But it was also about much more than assets. Rather, at the core were discriminatory measures that paved the way to deportation and destruction. Getting exemption from the effect of the new antisemitic decrees motivated those who, against all odds, wrote petitions to Hungarian potentates. The wording of those letters reveals the mindset and argumentation strategy that they chose.

One strategy was to demonstrate proof of loyalty to the nation. The novelist Sándor Török claimed that he had served the “Hungarian cause” all his life and considered himself part of the Hungarian “sea.” Török turned to him for an exemption from having to wear the yellow star.³⁵ He built his case on a refutation of the general Judeophobic vision of Jews, shared by Endre, according to which Jews felt separate from the national community and thus not bound to it by fate. To some extent the rhetorical strategy used by Jews to exempt themselves from the effect of the punitive measures resembled those of their Gentile countrymen. They, too, formulated their messages in language that would express their devo-

33 Simon Kemény, *Napló 1942-1944* (Budapest: Magvető, 1987), 72-73.

34 Cited in Molnár, *Zsidósors 1944-ben az 5. (szégedi) csendőrkörületben*.

35 The writer Sándor Török’s letter to László Endre, 17 April 1944. MNL OL, K557-. Endre was not moved by the letter to change Török’s status but saw an opportunity to exploit him. In handwriting he wrote “This one into the Jewish Council?”

tion to the motherland and their past services to it. Ede Buzás' mother and sister were deported, even though the mother had been baptized and the sister was not affected by Jewish laws because she had been born to a Christian family. In justifying his plea to Bishop Ravasz for intervention on behalf of his family members, Buzás stressed his military service, his strong sense of Hungarian national feeling, and his devout Christianity.³⁶

One could refute the claim that Jews were parasites who did not contribute to the well-being of the nation. Mihály Schiffer's rhetorical strategy to seek exemption from the yellow star was built on an emphasis as to his merits and contributions to Hungary, his and his descendants' long-standing status as converted Catholics, and, finally, a reference to the example of Germany. Schiffer was born in 1867, the year of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise. Aside from his date of birth, the first piece of biographical data he thought necessary to mention was that he and his whole family had converted to Catholicism in 1913. In his letter to the prime minister, he listed his contributions: the roads, railroads, iconic buildings and industrial plants he had designed in Hungary and Transylvania (and he was careful not to suggest any distinction between Hungary and Transylvania, as to do so would have meant throwing into question his attachment to the idea of border revision and the unification of Hungary and all of Transylvania). Schiffer emphasized that he had refused to serve the communists in 1919 and that, in addition to subscribing to a large amount in war loans, he was operating a 50-bed hospital in Budapest at his own expense. His four daughters married men who were not simply Christians, but also not recent converts to Christianity, his granddaughters were all wedded to scions of the Hungarian peerage. In the closing paragraph of his letter, he made a point of stating "in support of his claim" that, allegedly, "the Führer and Chancellor of our great ally the German Reich grants an exemption in similar cases."³⁷

Seventy-seven-year-old Miksa Haas was facing eviction from his one-room apartment. He thought it best to distance himself from his Jewish origins. He was unable to find lodging in the houses designated for Jews, so he was seeking permission to remain at home. Haas stressed his "Hungarian upbringing" and that he had "lived a Christian life in a Christian house." He also emphasized his service to the country. He had served in the army, and after the war, emigrated to England. In 1914, he moved back to Hungary, leaving behind the graves (in

36 Buzás Ede levele Ravasz Lászlónak, MNL OL, K-557.

37 Schiffer Mihály levele Sztójay Dömének 6 April 1944. MNL OL, K-469. Sztójay Döme. His Christian relatives signed the petition in support.

a “Christian cemetery”) of his wife and son because he had not wished to live in an enemy state. He had also assisted other Hungarian nationals in returning home.³⁸ Common to both pleas was the denial of any link or even sense of common fate with the Jewish community. Whether this was genuine or emphasized only in order to increase the chances that their requests would be granted cannot be known. This omission of any sign of attachment to Jewish culture or belief contrasted with emphasis on the sense of belonging to the Hungarian nation and the services rendered to it. Thus, forgetting or rejecting one’s heritage was an important element of a survival strategy.

László Kőrösi chose a different path. Whereas Schiffer and Haas stressed their separateness from, but not opposition to, their ancient community, he contrasted the sincerity of his own conversion to that of the recently converted. He wrote his plea “on behalf of himself and all those who converted over 20 years ago, when it was not simply a matter of taking advantage of the circumstances, but rather religious conviction which guided our resolution.”³⁹ Did he anticipate worse measures to come and hope to be exempted from them, or did he simply seek to find a way for gentiles to see that he was not one of the Jews but one of “them”? It is hard to say. Leaders of the Jewish Councils also employed wording that reflected the official rhetoric. Róbert Papp pleaded for humane treatment of the Jews of Szeged on account of the fact that Jews had lived there for generations and the city had turned them into Hungarians. He recalled that prominent Jews had supported the counterrevolution in 1919. Similarly, the Jewish Council in Makó emphasized that they would be at the disposal of the authorities in enforcing ghettoization, and stressed that the town’s Jews were assimilated and patriotic.⁴⁰ None of the petitioners owned their own lives anymore, their pleas fell on deaf ears. Unless one was on the list of exemptions based on merit, one’s fate was determined by a numerically inferior but all the louder ultraradical elements.

Although antisemitic legislation went further than ever and restricted all aspects of the lives of subjects of the state who were construed as Jewish, some Hungarians clearly felt that this was not enough. Only two days after Hitler’s troops rolled in, Dr. Oszkár Baki, city councillor of the town of Újpest, felt the time had come for him to present his views on “Hungarian reconstruction” to the newly appointed National Socialist-minded state secretary of interior, László Endre. He blamed the “revolutions” [of 1918 and 1919] and the “recent regime”

38 Haas Miksa levele vitéz Endre László Magyar Királyi Belügy (sic) Államtitkár Úrhoz, 23 June 1944. MNL OL, K-557, Endre László.

39 Kőrösi László levele, April 27, 1944. MNL OL, K-557.

40 Molnár, *Zsidósors*, 127.

for undermining the “Hungarian national spirit” and the progress of “our Hungarian species.” Due to the influence of the Jews, freemasons, internationalist liberals, Social Democrats, communists, and feudal-bureaucratic-minded individuals, the “very foundations of national existence have come into question.” He implored Endre to “put the Jews into concentration camps until the Jewish question can be permanently solved [by resettlement outside of Hungary].” Dezső Diószegi volunteered to work sixteen hours a day as “the fire burning” in him “would only extinguish itself” if his services were placed into the service of the nation. It was “a race against time,” in which “we will lose everything unless we prevail.”⁴¹ A man who petitioned the state secretary for interior affairs for an appointment as an apprentice detective promised that “he would be loyal to his race/species and would give more children and soldiers to the Hungarian homeland.”⁴²

Some were clearly bothered by the very existence of Jews, understood as a racial category, and wanted to eradicate them from daily life. A person who called himself János Kis was highly offended that “Jews were still eating” at the dietetic restaurant [diétás étterem] that belonged to the Budapest town hall. His epistle was an insight into the obsessive mindset of anti-Semitism. Jews—how Kis identified them remains a mystery—made up seventy percent of the restaurant’s clients, Kis asserted, and due to the size of their wallets, they took “every good bite away from the Christians.” Sometimes even bread rolls were not available, since the “Jews arrived early.” In order to get preferential treatment, the wealthy Jews, merchants, agents, and officials “bribed” the dietary nurses with large tips, tips that modest Christians could not afford. As the author put it, “this was the racial trait of Jews.” In addition, they were either not wearing the yellow star when eating in the establishment or they wore it on their overcoats, which they left in the cloakroom when they went to dine, “as if they were Christians.” They “got real cozy here because they can eat well.” Kis demanded that Jews be banned from the establishment without delay, and anyone caught admitting or serving Jews should, in his assessment, be promptly fired.

Kis’ “recommendations” pale in comparison with the other grass roots advice offered to the authorities, advice that offers an insight into the mindset of racist hatred of Jews. The installation of the pro-Nazi Sztójay government encouraged such elements, along with their antisemitic activism. A person who iden-

41 “A magyar ellenállás és újjáépítés rendszerének, szervezetének terve.” Baki Oszkár feljegyzése, March 21, 1944. MNL OL K-557, Endre László. Diószegi Dezső levele Endre Lászlónak, 17 April 1944. MNL OL, K-557.

42 Váradi István főhadnagy levele Endre Lászlónak, April 14, 1944. MNL OL, K-557, Endre László.

tified himself with the pseudonym Dr. Spektator advocated “the sterilization of the criminal Jews” in order to curb the black market, which was “brought upon the poor Christian nation” by this “Godless” and “parasitic race.” Others couched their remarks in the garb of national self-defense, a trope that was particularly widespread in Hungary. A certain Miklós Vásárhelyi, allegedly a novelist, claimed that the Jews were “preparing for a Saint Bartholomew’s night,” and demanded the immediate closure of synagogues, which he referred to as the “stables called temples,” so that Jew would no longer be able to use their “secret radios.” Vásárhelyi deplored the role of the Catholic church for letting “scoundrel Jews” be baptized—this was happening in significant numbers—and demanded an investigation.⁴³ Others provided more specific advice.

Pál Csarnóy thought that the gendarmerie was overburdened with work, as the anti-Semitic measures were implemented. He expressed pleasure at the prospect of the solution of the Jewish question and suggested setting up local Jewish commandaturas, units tasked with dealing with the Jews on a part-time volunteer basis, comprised of “respected and reputed” individuals. Csarnóy’s dislikes were not directed at Jews alone, as evidenced by his reference to Italians as that “filthy digo lot.” What mattered was that Endre took his proposal seriously and asked how “this could be implemented.” He proposed using MOVE [a radical right-wing organization] rifle squadrons.⁴⁴ Some were concerned that Jews still had supporters among the gentile leaders. György Vidovich, who identified himself as a retired ministry official, volunteered to execute the decree regarding private apartments and the eviction of Jews from their homes. “Finally,” he wrote, “the implementation of decrees aimed at the solution of the Jewish question is in the right hands.”⁴⁵

Dr. Vitéz Béla Horváth was motivated by revenge when he offered his services for the “sake of my nation and my country” and for the “ruthless and consistent sidelining of anti-nation elements” and the execution of the right-wing turn in any institution in Budapest. Horváth was a 55-year-old reserve captain and a member of the Calvinist Church. He claimed that he had been sentenced to serve three years in prison by a revolutionary tribunal during the Bolshevik Dictatorship in 1919 for inciting against the communist regime and he had been

43 “Dr. Spektator” Endre Lászlónak, undated. MNL OL K-557, Endre László. Vásárhelyi Miklós levele Endre Lászlónak, undated, MNL OL, K-557.

44 Kis János levele Endre Lászlónak, 25 April 1944. Máté-Török Gyula levele, MNL OL, K-557, Endre László. Csarnóy Pál okleveles gazda, felügyelő levele Endre Lászlónak, 13 April 1943. MNL OL, K-557.

45 Vidovich György levele Endre Lászlónak, undated [1944]. MNL OL, K-557, Endre László.

severely beaten by two detectives named Schwartz and Taubner (both names sounded Jewish to people at the time). Yet his tribulations were not over. His path to promotion had been blocked by Budapest's allegedly "left-wing, pro-Jewish" notary-in-chief, Károly Szendy. Horváth's offer was not entirely altruistic: he asked for a promotion.

A person petitioned László Endre to expand the circle of Jews exempted from the new anti-Semitic decrees.⁴⁶ Others were hoping to extend restrictions even to gentiles who were living with a Jewish spouse.⁴⁷ State Secretary of Interior László Bakó would not deport exempted individuals such as "meritorious" Jews, individuals who lived in mixed marriages, or people defined by the law at the time as "half-Jews," while his colleague, Endre, insisted on deporting them. The targets of denunciations included people who were helping Jews overcome the difficulties caused by restrictions. There were complaints that peasants and "mournful" (*gyászmagyarok*) Hungarians were taking care of Jewish property, i.e. hiding it for them. Gentiles were running companies on behalf of their Jewish owners, and Hungarians were hiding Jewish belongings, including valuables.

"There is a tremendous amount of clothing and food with the Jews, which is proven by the fact that with the appearance of the Germans everything came to the surface. Unfortunately, this is hidden by the peasant population of the hamlets, who are in solidarity with the Jewry. Take steps immediately, including house searches of the Jews and prison for those who conceal them."⁴⁸ Peasants were supposed to be the "the pillar of the nation." "Now, Jews were frequenting peasant houses after dark, buying milk, butter, and eggs, at what price we do not know because there are no witnesses."⁴⁹ Average radicals were proposing measures that were even more stringent than the already very radical measures enacted against the Jewish population, and these individuals even volunteered their services to make these measures more effective. On the other hand, evidence suggests that the government's antisemitic measures divided the radical community, i. e. they were not universally popular, even in those circles.

While some people supported, and even initiated, measures against the Jews, others thought that the newly enacted anti-Semitic measures went too far. Had the authorities tried to defy the Germans, they might have counted on at least their tacit support. By the time of the German occupation, some of the country's radical writers, who had been part of the racial protectionist movement

46 Levél Endre Lászlónak, [illegible signature], 7 April 1944. Ibid.

47 Levél báró Feilitzsch Bertholdnak, undated. Ibid.

48 Dr. Nagy Andrásné levele Endre Lászlónak, 14 April 1944. MNL OL, K-557.

49 "A kistisztviselő" levele Endre Lászlónak, MNL OL, K-557.

or had represented one shade or another of anti-Semitic thought, had turned against the Germans and expressed sentiments regarding the Jews that went against their previously held beliefs. István Lendvai deplored National Socialism in his book *Christianity in the Shadow of the Swastika*, which was published in 1937. In 1944, the Arrow Cross incarcerated and probably executed Lendvai for his anti-German pieces published in the daily *Magyar Nemzet* during the war. The influential novelist Dezső Szabó, who had previously condemned the Jewish “hatred” and oppression of Hungarians turned his ire against German expansionism and its Hungarian champions: “The main thing [for them] is to shout against the Jews. Because that is the main task: to separate the Jews, endowed with a vigilant instinct for life, a worldwide network, and armed with large financial means from the side of the Hungarians so that Hungarians be left with no natural help against the oppressive German will.”⁵⁰ The radical right-wing thinker Jesuit Pater Bangha asserted that it was the duty of the Catholic Church to fight against racial anti-Semitism and protect the lives and property of the Jews even at the cost of opposing a large segment of the society.⁵¹ Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky had been at the forefront of the racial protection movement, but by 1943 he was an internationally recognized opponent of the Germans. The basis of these complaints was one of national survival: surrendering Hungary’s future to German aims and designs. Others objected on more practical bases.

Those who formulated the new legislation clearly did not concern themselves or take into consideration the sentiments of gentiles in mixed marriages. A man with two sons in the military, both of whom he insisted had been “born Christians,” and a converted wife “who was forced to go to church with a cross around her neck and a yellow star on her breast,” vented his outrage to the prime minister. “When the decree was formulated, did they realize that they would also humiliate several hundred thousand pure Hungarian Christians who will only feel profound hatred, and the country will not profit?”⁵² This new discriminatory measure caused an uproar within a wider social circle. The daily *Szegedi Új Nemzedék* noted that “the faint-hearted turn to the Israelites with honest guilt because the Jews are compelled to wear the yellow star.”⁵³ Introduction of the same measure had caused problems even in Berlin, although the initial

50 Dezső Szabó, *Az egész látóhatár*, volume I. (Budapest: Püski, 1991. Reprint), 520. Author’s translation.

51 János Gyurgyák, *A zsidókérdés Magyarországon* (Budapest: Osiris, 2001), 300.

52 Egy jó magyar tisztviselő levele Sztójay Dömének, unsigned, undated. MNL OL, K-469, X-198, Sztójay Döme.

53 Cited in Molnár, *Zsidósors 1944-ben az 5. (szegedi) csendőrkerületben*, 46.

sympathy soon gave way to apathy.⁵⁴ The obligation to wear the Star of David even evoked compassion, even the expansion of the circle of sympathy. A person who described himself as a member of the right-wing professional class reported a conversation with a group of university educated friends consisting of ten to twelve people. The topic of their discussion centered around the “unfortunate fact” that “Hungarian society received the long anticipated anti-Semitic measures with such antipathy, even though they had been attentively prepared.” Even those who approved of the exclusion of Jews from the country’s economic and cultural life responded to the new obligation among Jews to wear the yellow star “reluctantly.” The author had “stunning” experiences in this field. He had a good friend, a member of the right-wing Order of Valor (*Vitézi Rend*), an impeccably honest person who had never shopped in Jewish stores—although he rejected the beating of Jews—and had never had any Jewish friends, was now completely changed.

“Since the Jews have been wearing the yellow star, this man has approached his Jewish neighbors, to whom he had never even said hello before, shaken hands with them, and consoled them.” The author of the letter quoted his friend as having said that “Jews need to be beaten in competition, their wealth can be taken after the war, and they can be peacefully forced to leave the country, but they cannot be made martyrs.” “Even the robber,” this friend explained, “must be allowed to walk among fellow men without a sign of shame once he has done his sentence.” Even more striking was the example of another friend, who, after marrying an Austrian woman, became a rabid anti-Semite. This man then turned into a “combative philo-Semite” and even lured his wife to that side. The German woman ostentatiously walked down the street with acquaintances who were wearing the yellow star. A lawyer friend told him that judges, state employees, and officials in public offices were showing compassion for Jews publicly, almost ostentatiously. “Our society, which had been undoubtedly anti-Semitic, is has been showing friendship to Jews since 5 April.” The writer of the letter, who had claimed to be a racially pure Hungarian of noble descent and who had confided that he “instinctively detested Jews,” seemed to waiver in his prejudices. In seeking to explain the seeming “philosemitic turn,” he noted several examples: He had seen labor servicemen on the Russian front who were making the long trip home on foot in minus 40- or 50-degree weather rather than choosing the easy way into captivity. These men did not see those Jews who had seen action as completely alien. Those Jewish men “were treated like slaves, and

54 Cited in Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, 254.

I cannot even fathom why they returned.” Invoking the widespread stereotypical Hungarian self-image, the writer asserted that “we are a military people, and we do not wish to reject those who were on our side even if they were forced to do so,” particularly because most of those Jews had “perished.” “I had to raise my voice, as Hungarian society is demonstrating against the yellow star.”⁵⁵ Experience made a dent in what had been ingrained prejudice.

Finally, these letters reveal that some were concerned that the country was descending into barbarity and foreshadowed a national catastrophe. One letter penned to Endre by a self-described “racially pure Hungarian in hiding,” cited lines from a poem by the nineteenth-century poet Ferenc Kölcsey, who “could not find his home in his country.” Stunningly, for a person who may have been part of the racial movement, he referred to Jews as “part of the nation.” As an “old friend,” he wanted to call attention “to the terrible state of public affairs, the horrendous deviations, injustices, and crimes which are incompatible with the Hungarian character, and which will hurt the country.” “You may have wanted to help the country,” he wrote to the state secretary responsible for Jewish affairs “but instead you are digging its grave—if you live to see it! [...] You want to fight barbarism, but you are allowing the country to sink into the most complete barbarism because what is going on in the countryside is the fullest barbarity.”⁵⁶

Finally, on July 3, 1944, the leader of the Hungarian Catholic intelligentsia movement in Czechoslovakia, Lujza Esterházy, protested to Prime Minister Sztójay regarding the “neopagan” persecution of Jews on humanitarian grounds. “I hear with pronounced concern and pain the news coming from the other side of the border regarding the deportation of Jews from Hungary, because this measure is in stark contrast with everything prescribed by Divine law concerning treatment of our brethren... Let us not forget that the acts of inhuman violence have always been followed by national death in our history.” Both these writings were sent well before the deportations even began.

Rejection of Judeophobic persecution could easily translate into action. In fact, a whole group of household employees working for Jews were, according to Endre, “sabotaging” the decree that Jews were not allowed to keep non-Jewish household employees. A “large part of them, who were intimate with the head of the family or his son, received the measure with disapproval, claiming that they had “a better life with the Jews, pay, work, vacation.” Even so, some 30,000

⁵⁵ Letter to László Endre, (illegible signature) 17 April 1944. MNL OL, K-557, Endre László.

⁵⁶ Letter to László Endre, unsigned, 29 April 1944. MNL OL, K-557, Endre László. The letter is addressed to “My dear friend.”

maids parted company with their Jewish employers. It was said to be impossible to hire any maids in Budapest. Some Jewish families even sent their daughters to their employees' parents for protection and paid for their upkeep. These maids refused to serve other families. Endre therefore decreed that any maid who continued service for Jews after May would be drafted for public works. "Sensitive" reprisals would be implemented against any "Hungarian family" that received Jews in order to conceal them. Some of these maids were known to have illegally supplied food for their former employers in the ghetto, and went back to them after the war.⁵⁷ Tamás Bán recalled that his mother turned into a "respected" housemaid working for a family they knew. Annus Hercsu took him to her own place, where she was living with her brother. Tamás found his mother there. The Hercsu family gave refuge to both of them.⁵⁸ Brave as these acts were, action on a far larger social scale would have been needed to stop the impending tragedy, which had been brewing for years.

ANTECEDENTS

The Holocaust, as Saul Friedländer aptly put it, was "the most systematic and sustained of genocides,"⁵⁹ and it aimed at the extermination of Jews as individuals and at the elimination of any trace of Jewishness from politics, society, culture and history. The liquidation of the Jews of Europe represented a major goal of German policies. Christopher Browning defined the Nazi policy of *Endlösung* as a "systematic attempt to murder every last Jew within the German grasp."⁶⁰

The Holocaust in Hungary would be the last phase of the destruction of Jews in German-controlled Europe. Three days before deportations from Hungary began, Hitler told Slovakia's Jozef Tiso that "the degree of Judaization of Hungary was astonishing, over a million Jews lived in Hungary." On March 3, 1944, Goebbels recorded Hitler's statement that the occupation of Hungary

57 "A zsidók háztartási alkalmazotta" undated. MNL OL, K-557. Feljegyzés Csataj Lajos honvédelmi miniszternek, 15 May 1944. MNL OL, K-557.

58 *Óbudai múltidéző. P. Kis Mihály SDB -45-1944ben írt naplója és más visszaemlékezések*, edited by Erzsébet Lengyel (Budapest: Szalézi Szent Ferenc társasága, n.d.), 67-68.

59 Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, xiv-xix.

60 Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution*, 7-9. Götz Aly placed the extermination of Jews into a broader context: "the dynamic that developed out of resettlement policies was an essential factor in the decision to murder Jews... There was no voluntaristic decision in the systematic, industrialized murder of the European Jews." Götz Aly, *Final Solution: Nazi Population Policy and the Murder of the European Jews* (London: Hodder Arnold Publication, 1999), 4; 245.

would be followed by a rapid move against the country's aristocratic elites and against the Jews.⁶¹

Between 1938 and 1942, a series of anti-Jewish laws introduced increasingly stringent discriminatory measures. In 1941, about 20,000 Hungarian Jews and Jews in Hungary who allegedly did not have Hungarian citizenship (many of them actually did) were deported to Kamenets Podolsky, where they were murdered by local SS and Ukrainian units. On August 15, 1942, assistant foreign secretary Martin Luther informed the Hungarian ambassador in Berlin, Döme Sztójay, that the Jews of Europe would be resettled into the occupied territories of the east, where they would be put into ghettos and labor camps. Luther demanded the radicalization of Hungarian Jewish policies. Prime Minister Kállay rejected the German demands regarding the yellow star and the idea of sending Jews to ghettos or handing them over to Germany. He declared that he was willing to agree to the deportation of Hungarian Jews under the condition that the Jews relocated to the east would be allowed to live. The Hungarian ambassador conveyed his prime minister's "concerns" regarding "rumors" of the murder of Jews. On December 2, Sztójay delivered the Hungarian government's negative reply.⁶² The Führer, who was angered by the Kállay administration's attempts to reach a separate peace, saw the Hungarian premier in Klessheim on April 16–17, 1943. Hitler reprimanded Regent Horthy for his "soft" stance in Jewish affairs. Hitler declared that "Hungary's pro-Jewish attitude is incomprehensible," told the Regent that the Jews of Germany had already been cleared out, and the remainder of them would "soon disappear in the East." Horthy retorted that he "cannot kill them," but Hitler assured him that this would not be necessary. Hungary, "like the Slovaks, can put them into concentration camps." The next day, Ribbentrop declared that Jews should be "either exterminated or sent to concentration camps."⁶³

Hitler's invasion order cited Hungary's impending treason and the unacceptable presence there of "a million Jews." The Wehrmacht was accompanied by the chief of the Reich Main Security Office, Ernst Kaltenbrunner, Heinrich Himmler. The newly appointed, pro-German premier, Döme Sztójay, held talks with Kaltenbrunner on questions related to the "solution" of the "Jewish Ques-

61 Frölich, ed., *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, volume 11.

62 László Karsai, *Holokauszt* (Budapest: Pannonica Kiadó, 2001), 235.

63 Feljegyzés a Führer és a magyar kormányzó, Horthy tengernagy megbeszéléséről Klessheimben, April 16, 1943. In György Ránki, ed., *Hitler hatvannyolc tárgyalása 1939-1944* volume 2. (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1983), 67–98; Feljegyzés a Führer és a magyar kormányzó, Horthy tengernagy megbeszéléséről Klessheimben, April 17, 1943. Ibid. 101.

tion,” but no records survive of this crucial negotiation. In light of a statement made by a member of the cabinet, Béla Imrédy, at a Minister’s Council meeting, it is likely that a verbal agreement had been made at the Sztójay-Kaltenbrunner talks regarding the deportation of the Jews from Hungary.⁶⁴ On March 18, Hitler demanded of Horthy in Klessheim that they “should solve the Jewish question in Hungary.”⁶⁵ Horthy then renounced his constitutional right to preapprove Jewish legislation. The German demands for the introduction of the yellow star and the physical isolation of the Jews had already been accepted at a meeting of the new Hungarian ministers on March 22.

Less than a fortnight later, on the last day of March, interior minister Jaross approved the ghettoization plan that state secretary László Endre and Eichmann had worked out at previous meetings.⁶⁶ On April 7, the government issued a confidential decree on the ghettoization of Jews on the grounds that Hungary would be “cleansed of Jews in a short while.” The same day, a meeting took place with the participation of László Endre, two SS officers, and police and gendarmerie leaders to hammer out the details. The fateful decision regarding deportations may have taken place on April 22, at a meeting between Eichmann and Endre at which the parties reached an agreement regarding total, comprehensive deportation.⁶⁷ The technical details of the deportations were negotiated on May 4–5 in Vienna with the participation of the SD, the Hungarian gendarmes and German Railways.

Eichmann and the racial protectionist Endre were in charge of the Hungarian deportations. In early May, Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, visited Budapest and met the “most experienced manager of mass murder,” Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann had visited Auschwitz several times in the spring of 1944, and Höss had conducted trial selections in Hungary and had concluded that most Jews had to die and only 25 percent would be selected for labor. He was reappointed the commandant of Auschwitz on May 8, and he surrounded himself with a handful of close associates and killing experts. When Auschwitz was overwhelmed with Hungarian deportees, Höss asked Eichmann to slow down, but Eichmann pushed for even more transports. Höss did his best to accelerate the killing process, and trains now went inside Birkenau to a hastily

64 See Karsai, *Holokausz*, 238.

65 Sztójay’s testimony, 5 March 1946, in László Karsai and Judit Molnár, *A magyar Quisling-kormány: Sztójay Döme és társai a népbíróság előtt* (Budapest: 1956-os kht., 2004), 213.

66 Sztójay’s testimony, in Karsai and Molnár, *A magyar Quisling kormány*, 213–14.

67 See Braham, *The Destruction of Hungarian Jewry*, volume 1, 356. See also Zoltán Vági, László Csösz, Gábor Kádár, *The Holocaust in Hungary*, liii.

erected ramp.⁶⁸ There is no doubt that the “solution” of the Jewish question stood behind the German occupation. Most inhabitants had no way of knowing, and the relatively tranquil life they lived could not have prepared them for what was about to come.

Most people interviewed by DEGOB recounted a relatively peaceful and prosperous life. H. L.’s father owned a bakery in Munkács, which provided him with a very good income. S. N. also lived in the Munkács, where he owned a shop. He described it as a well-to-do place with merchants, doctors, manufacturers, and lawyers. E. B. was a woman 30 years of age who lived in the large city of Nagyvárad (today Oradea, Romania), which she had known as a place with mostly wealthy inhabitants, such as doctors and lawyers. She had had her own home and a savings of 100,000 pengős [roughly equal to 16,500 US dollars]. W. V. of Aknaszlatina supported a family of eight. A 40-year-old man from the Transcarpathian village of Tércső recounted that there were approximately 200 Jewish families who were farmers, agricultural laborers, and poor people with many children. There was no radio or newspaper in the village. M. S. owned a small house and a cart. The nine Jewish families in Csicsér (today Čičarovce, Slovakia), who were shopkeepers, laborers, and so forth, made a decent living. Beregszász (today Berehove, Ukraine) was remembered as an affluent place, where “very rich Jews, doctors, lawyers, merchants, and artisans lived.” A person who had lived in Kasza claimed that in the town, in which there had been 800 Jewish families, they had enjoyed “a sound financial situation.” H. H. recalled that the 6,000 Jewish families lived in relative affluence as merchants, industrial artisans, and landowners. S. H., a seamstress from Ungvár, had enjoyed “a normal middle-class life” provided by his father, a wine merchant. H. R. remembered that her mother had been a midwife and they had been “well-loved” in the village of Beregkövesd (today Kam’jans’ke, Ukraine). “We had no inkling of the danger threatening the Jews.”⁶⁹ Typically, people identified the “arrival of the Germans” with the dramatic shift for the worse in their fates: “when the Germans arrived, we had to wear a yellow star.” There were also incidences of suicide.⁷⁰

A rabbi reported that, before the war, life had been relatively good for Jews in Újpest, since there were many workers, most of whom were Social Democrats. Things took a turn for the worse when, in the election of 1939, Újpest

68 Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL – A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*, 458–60.

69 H. L. Female, DEGOB 2363; S. N. male, DEGOB record number 5; DEGOB, record number 14; H. S. male, DEGOB record number 289; H. H. male, DEGOB record number 1593; S. H. seamstress, DEGOB record number 2140; DEGOB record number 19.

70 Male, shoemaker, DEGOB, record number 363.

elected a member of the Arrow Cross to parliament. When the virulently anti-Semitic László Endre was appointed to serve as the county's deputy sheriff in 1942, people were attacked around the synagogue. The orthodox rabbi and his family fled to the capital.⁷¹ All others stayed. Despite the hardships, a general sense of security prevailed.

ROUNDING UP

The authorities rounded up and deported the Jews of the countryside with little or no resistance on the part of the victims or the local population. Lieutenant-colonel of the gendarmerie László Ferenczy reported that the authorities "were generally carrying out their tasks associated with the collection of the Jews and their valuables with the greatest degree of cooperation, taking the initiative and demonstrating flexibility."⁷² In fact, people watched with a measure of glee and contentment as their erstwhile neighbors were marched off, though sometimes they showed sadness and compassion. Some members of the community even took part in the physical abuse of the Jews at the side of the Germans and the Hungarian gendarmes. Nevertheless, their responses differed greatly from the responses of people in Polish and Ukrainian territory. There were no spontaneous pogroms, Hungarian peasants did not collectively attack, beat, torture, or murder Jews, nor did they deliver local Jews to the authorities in significant numbers, unlike the Polish, Ukrainian, and Lithuanian peasants.⁷³

Significantly, in cases when shelter was offered to Jews in Hungary, there were no known instances of the host murdering those had sheltered when the refugees ran out of funds. I have found only one account in which a family that provided refuge demanded a "small fortune" in return and, when their charges ran out of money, threw them out of the house.⁷⁴ Although Hungarian authorities usually treated the Jews with great brutality, they would not conduct executions resembling what their counterparts in the Polish "blue police" did. After the liquidation of the Polish ghettos and the launch of deportations to death camps, alongside the German units, Polish police youth from the construction service and local helpers began to weed out Jews in hiding. A Pole recorded in his diary that the "orgy of murder was not just the deed of the Germans and

71 K. L., male, rabbi, DEGOB record number 3588.

72 Zoltán Vági, László Csósz, Gábor Kádár, *The Holocaust in Hungary*, 106–107.

73 Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, 220.

74 G. A. woman. DEGOB, record number 3177.



Jews walking from the Kőszeg ghetto to the railway station on June 18, 1944. After their transfer to the Szombathely collection camp, the prisoners were deported to Auschwitz on July 4, 1944. Fortepan/200856.

their Latvian and Ukrainian helpers. It was clear that our dear policemen took part in the slaughter... but normal Poles took part as well.”⁷⁵

Each person to be relocated into the ghetto would be allowed to take enough food to last for at least two weeks and luggage weighing no more than 50 kilos. Most of the time, these relatively generous provisions were not maintained. Although there was no concrete provision for removing the people from the country, the information provided to local authorities regarding the execution of the decree indicated that the concentration into ghettos may have been only a temporary measure. Yet it is far from clear whether such a decision had actually been made. Readers of the *Szegedi Új Nemzedék* were informed that Jews were forced to wear the sign to separate them from the rest of society for a “very short time” until the Jewish question was permanently settled in Hungary and the other Christian countries. When expressing appreciation for the ghetto decree, a mayor asserted that the best solution was “out with the Jews,” but this “cannot be done now.”

The creeping introduction of the Final Solution impeded the formulation of any clear strategy to counter it. Some of those who understood the severity of what was happening sometimes chose to take their own lives. Only a few people

⁷⁵ Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 52–54.

took active steps to avoid the inevitable. Only in a very few places where they were able to count on the help of the local authorities or of their neighbors. Although the process of putting the Jews into enclosed spaces began after the Germans installed a pro-Nazi government, in many places there had already been widespread anti-Semitic sentiment. In Szeged, windows were broken, and bearded Jews were roughed up. Nevertheless, “living conditions” were tolerable, particularly for the well-to-do. All this changed after the German occupation, when it was no longer possible to go out.⁷⁶ S. J., a 50-year-old individual, was hiding with “gentile friends” before he was picked up after he left their apartment.⁷⁷ At the beginning of May 1944, German troops and *strange*, i. e. not local, policemen entered the town of Munkács. Bringing policemen and gendarmes from other localities to carry out the anti-Jewish measures ensured that it would be accomplished ruthlessly. Possibly to soothe nerves, the inmates of the ghetto were told that they were going to work.⁷⁸

“Great anxiety” overcame the Jewish population in Beregszász after the occupation. István Cserhalmi, the military commander of Beregszász, did his best to keep the Jews in the town, but the Gestapo took two rabbis, and a doctor committed suicide.⁷⁹ Very few officials tried to stop the authorities from rounding up Jews. Counsellor Endre Losonczy in Újvidék (today Novi Sad, Serbia) was one of these few. He informed the Jews of the plan to round them up. He was suspended from his job and the authorities launched legal proceedings against him. In Baja, the mayor did not support the idea of concentrating the Jews in one area, and in the same town, the local SS tried to help Jews by employing 119 people as German laborers. Hence, these people were not subject to deportation. Deputy Mayor Pál Beretzk in Hódmezővásárhely did his best to delay the establishment of the local ghetto.⁸⁰ In most places, however, the local authorities aided the deportation process.

The bishop of Csanád, Endre Hamvas, who did all he could to help the Jews, wrote that “the Jews who were being herded together make a painful impression... they were forced to leave their homes behind carrying their little sacks with great haste.”⁸¹ Perhaps we will never know the extent of whatever compassion, hostility, and indifference the Hungarian population felt towards Jews.

76 Three females, DEGOB, record number 82; F. T. female, record number 123.

77 S. J. male, DEGOB, record number 540.

78 DEGOB, record number 2.

79 S. N. male, DEGOB, record number 14.

80 Molnár, *Zsidósors*, 70, 120.

81 Cited in Molnár, *Zsidósors*, 62.

American intelligence received “Numerous reports of Hungarian assistance to fellow Jewish citizens. In the city of Nagyvárad (today Oradea, Romania) alone, 2004 Christians were prosecuted for having in their possession property entrusted to them by Jews.” There was no active resistance to anti-Semitic measures, but passive resistance included procuring “baptismal certificates, forged identity papers, concealing Jewish property to avoid confiscation, etc.”⁸²

People in the southwestern town of Pécs, where porcelain glazing was revolutionized in the early twentieth century, reacted to the plight of the Jews in a variety of ways. Some were curious, others were angry or sad and had tears in their eyes, and others reacted with hatred or indifference.⁸³ Atrocities were committed in other localities. Some of the locals in the village of Irhóc attacked the Jews and robbed them. In the working-class locality of Újpest the locals jeered and cursed at rabbis as the Jews were rounded up. Gendarmes had to intervene as people were preparing to hurl stones at the Jews.⁸⁴ A young apprentice from Kispest lamented that he had always suffered anti-Semitism, and as a Jew, he had been beaten in school. He claimed that Hungary was worse than even the worst of Germany. There was no water in the heating systems, people slept in the mud, and they went mad.⁸⁵

Anti-Semitism in the town of Kispest had been strong even before the German invasion according to a woman originally from Bögöte, a village in western Hungary. Jews were spat upon in disgust, their businesses were boycotted, and they were not given jobs. A young woman remembered a sign saying, “the Jew is the murderer of the Hungarian race.”⁸⁶ Elsewhere, gendarmes “cut crosses into the heads of women and men.”⁸⁷ When collecting the valuables which belonged to local Jews in Beregszász, a gendarme declared that “you will get a half hour you stinking Jew... and if I find a single penny [fillér] on anyone... I will shoot you like a dog.”⁸⁸

With the exception of “a few,” the inhabitants of Visk (today Vyshkovo, Ukraine) received the rounding up of the 130 Jewish families, two or three of them well-to-do, the rest artisans, without regret.⁸⁹ The Jews of Sátoraljaújhely

82 NARA, RG 226, Entry 191, Box 1, Research and Analysis 2027.

83 Karsai, *Holokauszt*, 234.

84 K. R. female, DEGOB, record number 174; R. H. female, DEGOB, record number 2961; K. L. male, DEGOB, record number 3588.

85 S. P. male, DEGOB, record number 636.

86 G. E. female, DEGOB, record number 3593.

87 H. E. female, DEGOB, record number 2949.

88 A. K. female (correctly Dávid Holländer), DEGOB, record number 22.

89 Three females, DEGOB, record number 47.

were forced to march through the town towards their destination at the railroad station. Györgyi Grünfeld did not experience even “benevolent indifference” from the onlookers.⁹⁰ Echoing this experience, a woman from Ungvár said that the “others were looking at our deportation with satisfaction.” They “let us know in loud voices that they believed in German victory.” Another witness, a student sixteen years of age, confirmed that the people of Ungvár were “overjoyed” at the Jews’ deportation.⁹¹

Material gain also played a role in the population’s response. In Felsővisó (today Vișeu de Sus, Romania), the locals welcomed antisemitic decrees in the hopes of laying their hands on some of the assets that had been taken from Jews.⁹² A baker named Julián Bumbák could not even wait until the owner of a house was deported. He moved into a house even before the owner, a merchant, had been forced to leave.⁹³ Memories of gentile attitudes were necessarily impressionistic. In Mátészalka, some people seemed to have felt sorry for the deportees, but most were happy.⁹⁴ On the other hand, in Várpalánka (today Palanok, Ukraine), the villagers “behaved considerately” with the exception of the local “Swabian” youth organization, “who were Hitlerites and behaved disgracefully towards us [Jews].”⁹⁵ A person deported from Munkács perceived that the gentiles “gloated over” the sad procession of Jews. In Técső (today Tyachiv, Ukraine), the locals behaved “wickedly.” The opposite seems to have been true in Rákoskeresztúr, a locality close to Budapest, where “the population generally looked at [the deportees] with pity.”⁹⁶ A seamstress who was taken for deportation from the former royal capital of Székesfehérvár recalled that, as they were walking to the brick factory in the pouring rain burdened with their large bundles, “the local population behaved with considerable sympathy towards the sad spectacle.”⁹⁷ There may not have been any discernible pattern, geographical or other, in the attitude of the gentiles. A man from Középpapsa (today Seredne Vodyane, Ukraine) had the impression that the majority of the people disapproved of the anti-Semitic measures.

90 G. G. and G. S. females, DEGOB, record number 51.

91 Three males, DEGOB, record number 87; Three males, DEGOB, record number 3497.

92 B. M. female, DEGOB, record number 71.

93 K. A. male, DEGOB, record number 91.

94 DEGOB, record number 98; A shoemaker recalled that the population of Mátészalka was anti-Semitic. DEGOB, record number 363.

95 H. R. female, DEGOB record number 99.

96 F. T. female, DEGOB, record number 123; W. E., female, W. B., female, W. F., female, DEGOB, record number 2958; K. M., male, Sóskút, merchant, DEGOB, record number 2946.

97 L. F. female, seamstress, DEGOB, record number 2788.

In many cases, however, the onlookers showed no sympathy. When the procession of deportees in Beregszász got under way, “the others were standing outside and rejoiced at our plight.”⁹⁸ A man who had been selected for labor service in Sopron recounted that as he was being taken away, many gentiles were crying.⁹⁹ On the other hand, a technician from Budapest shared the following recollection: “the Christian layer in Budapest looked on our tribulations with pleasure. I noticed this in them.”¹⁰⁰ Whether the locals welcomed the rounding up of their neighbors, expressed sorrow over it or remained indifferent, the victims’ prospect of escape was very meager.

When word went around in the synagogue that the gendarmes had arrived, many inhabitants in the village of Irhóc ran into the forest. They tried to buy time by spreading the rumor that there was an epidemic in the village. Eventually, when the locals warned them that if they were found hiding, they would be shot, they turned themselves in.¹⁰¹ In most places, people packed up and went to the area allocated to them without resistance. When B. J. And his family were taken from their house, their valuables were also seized. The “Christian” population took whatever was left of their possessions. A young man from Mircse (today Myrcha, Ukraine) saw the others in the village laughing at them as they were taken to Ungvár.¹⁰²

LIFE IN THE GHETTO

The physical isolation of the Jews was decided at a meeting held between Hungarian government officials and the German authorities on April 7, 1944.¹⁰³ Whether life in the enclosed space was tolerable depended on local conditions and individual actions. Physical and psychological degradation may in part explain the ease with which the deportations occurred. Even though in some places the ghetto residents experienced a bit of solidarity on the part of the gentiles, there was no concerted effort to escape and hide. This had to do with the severity with which they were guarded in most, although not all, localities,

98 K. H., male, Nyirpászonya, DEGOB, record number 373.

99 See Szita, *Gyógyíthatatlan sebek*, 148.

100 I. I. male, Male, DEGOB, 716 record number.

101 R. J. and R. H. females, DEGOB, record number 2961.

102 B. J. male, DEGOB, record number 69; S. A. male, DEGOB, record number 70.

103 On problems relating to Jewish ghettos in Hungary see Zoltán Vági, László Csösz, and Gábor Kádár, *The Holocaust in Hungary*, Chapter 3; on problems of space and power related to the ghetto Tim Cole, *Holocaust City* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), Chapters 2-3.

and also with the deception regarding their destiny. Self-delusion also impeded practical measures of survival. Some of the Jews of Hungary harbored illusions as to the power and willingness of the Allies to help. In the Nagyszöllős (today Vynohradiv, Ukraine) ghetto, “the view prevailed that as a reprisal many Christians were closed in isolated quarters of cities in America, and an exchange program would be started for the liberation of the Jews and the Christians in captivity.”¹⁰⁴ Life in the ghetto was experienced as utter humiliation. “Even the Gypsies came to loot,” one survivor recalled.¹⁰⁵ People were usually allowed to take whatever they wanted to the ghetto, except for valuables. Supplies were meager, and food rations were limited to a quarter of a liter of soup a day. The residents of the ghetto lived off what they had brought with them. In Munkács, the ghetto was overcrowded. There were sometimes three families in a single room. From the ghetto they were taken to the brick factory at a moment’s notice. Those who had no shoes went barefoot. When the Jews resisted, they were beaten. Then the Germans came and beat them on the pretext of “sabotage.” Allegedly, the Jews had burned their phylacteries, which was made of wool and which the Germans claimed they wanted to use.¹⁰⁶

Physical punishment was the order of the day, particularly for the wealthy. In Csicsér, a police captain beat Jews until they handed over their valuables. In most places the victims were robbed. A seamstress in the ghetto of Mátészalka recounted that every small item was taken, including clothing and bedsheets.¹⁰⁷ In Kassa (today Košice, Slovakia), residents of the ghetto, which was guarded by policemen outside and Jewish policemen inside, were allowed to go home to bring back whatever they could.¹⁰⁸ The gendarmes brutally beat those who were unable to work. Leaving the ghetto without authorization was severely punished. An elderly woman who was hard of hearing did not hear the guard’s warning when she stepped outside the boundary of the ghetto, and was shot.¹⁰⁹

The availability of food varied from place to place. Usually, the food provided was inadequate, since there were no provisions for people in the ghetto, but this was not always the case. Former residents of the ghetto of Munkács recounted that they did not know the meaning of hunger, as they were able to feed them-

104 W. I. male, DEGOB, record number 45.

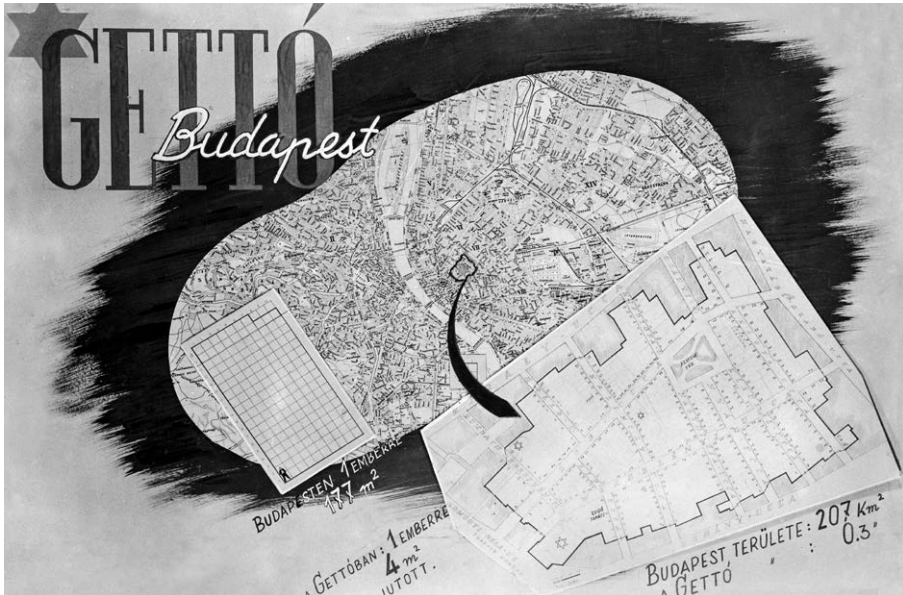
105 Four females, DEGOB, record number 102.

106 Testimony of eight women from Munkács, DEGOB, record number 1; testimony of three women and one man, DEGOB, record number 14. Religious accessories were also taken away in Beregszász. H. L. female, DEGOB, record number 601.

107 S. I. male, DEGOB, record number 9; M. L. male, DEGOB, record number 54.

108 W. V. male, DEGOB, record number 3.

109 S. E. and H. R. females, DEGOB, record number 46.



Map of the Budapest ghetto, 1945. Fortepan/Album011

selves from the copious amount of food they took with them.¹¹⁰ The brick factory in Budakalász was so dismal that it prefigured the hellish places that were to come: “corpses with their eyes popping out, filth everywhere, wailing children, distressed mothers... the huddled families were the embodiments of fear.” A young SS man was whipping them all the while. Conditions were harsh and inmates were robbed of their valuables and beaten in the process.¹¹¹ Possessions were not the only things taken from them. The authorities ridiculed and caricatured the Jewish religious faith. In Munkács, according to one deportee, the gendarmes brought “filthy Gypsies in tatters and dressed them up in the Jews’ clothes. A policeman donned a prayer shawl and shouted, ‘this is how you [Jews] conquered the world.’” Then, on a Saturday, the gendarmes started shooting in the synagogue and killed one man.¹¹² “What hurt me most was when they took my Star of David, the worst day of my life was when a Hungarian soldier took my prayer book. He kicked it and it fell into pieces,” one woman recalled.¹¹³

110 G. P. female, DEGOB, record number 50.

111 Five females, DEGOB, record number 63; F. H. male, DEGOB, record number 96.

112 W. M. male, DEGOB record number 1048; Another account of what may have been the same event offers a different narrative. A probationary policeman held up a tallis and said, “You see stinking Jews, you could have sent this to a textile factory, but you chose to burn it.” H. M., male Munkács, merchant, DEGOB, record number 1853.

113 G. E. female, DEGOB, record number 3593.

Even the appearance of the gendarmes inspired fear. “Above all, I remember being fearful. The police and the gendarmes wore terrifying uniforms with rooster plumes in their hats. I would literally shiver when I saw them coming,” Eva Shainblum recalled decades later. She recounted how the gendarmes stripped the Jews of their valuables, humiliating and beating them in the process.¹¹⁴ “In Nyíregyháza, the Hungarian gendarmes behaved dreadfully, “perhaps even worse than the Germans.” There were many suicides due to the maltreatment. There were many deaths and suicides in Nagyszöllős and the living were driven to the train station “like animals.”¹¹⁵ Body searches for hidden valuables may have been the most demeaning experience of all, particularly for women. Edit Jungreis recalled her ordeal: “detectives and policemen had us to strip naked, and they examined us for valuables. The officers laughed as they goaded the people performing the search on. They treated us in the most coarse and vulgar manner, and although later in Auschwitz we would get used to standing naked in front of men, here it was still very new and humiliating.”¹¹⁶ The experience prefigured what was to come at their destination.

There were exceptions to the rule. Some people exhibited decent behavior even in the worst of times. The ghetto in the picturesque village of Szentendre was not even guarded, and its inhabitants had a “relatively good life.”¹¹⁷ In the town of Esztergom, the seat of the archbishopric of Hungary, Jews were put up in nice houses in the downtown area, and they were allowed to take almost all their furniture with them.¹¹⁸ The gentile population sent food into the ghetto in Ungvár, but this did little to alleviate the lot of the residents. Nevertheless, there was little water, and the two latrines were insufficient. There were signs, large and small, of compassion and willingness to help, though it came with risk. Samu Stern, the head of the Jewish Council, observed that well-meaning Christians had to hide their compassion at the sight of deportations, “because the gendarmes attacked them with rifle butts. A peasant woman was deported because she brought food for the deported.”¹¹⁹ Someone deported from Kaposvár reaffirmed that the Christian population “was intimidated,” although the more courageous people brought food from time to time. Some gentile friends were able to get permission for the Jews to leave the ghetto.¹²⁰ Initially, the ghetto in

114 Eva Shainblum, *The Last Time*. The Azrieli Series of Holocaust Survivor Memoirs, 2016, 71.

115 R. J. and D. T. females, DEGOB, record number 115; G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 90.

116 Five females, DEGOB, record number 2591.

117 V. M., female. DEGOB, record number 3591.

118 S. C. female, DEGOB, record number 241.

119 S. S. male, DEGOB, record number 3627.

120 Dr. Sz. E. female, DEGOB, record number 3543.

Kaposvár was not closed, and people passing through the main road through the ghetto regularly brought food parcels and “left behind” packages and handbags.¹²¹ A woman’s recollection confirmed that wanton brutality could trigger compassion for the victims. Her neighbors “hated” the Jews but their attitude changed when they saw how cruelly the Jews were treated.¹²²

Financial means offered opportunities out of the terrible predicament, but, due to sheer malice, did not automatically guarantee survival. The authorities offered to help Jews in exchange for money, but they “did nothing” in Ungvár. In other places, wealthy people were better off. Jews who gave money to the authorities received “preferential treatment.”¹²³ In Nagyszöllős, a man named W. I. bribed the gendarmes. He and four others escaped from the ghetto. They were apprehended by local Swabians, who beat them and handed them over to the police. In Ungvár, the police accepted bribes and allowed people to go shopping.¹²⁴

Often, the locals showed hostility. In Mátészalka, people threw rocks through the windows of houses and buildings where Jews lived.¹²⁵ Local people broke windows and burglarized the relatively affluent Jewish homes in a Subcarpathian village. “We had everything,” the daughter of a local shoemaker recalled, “a house, land, and a cow.” Like many others, she suddenly lost everything.¹²⁶ In Ungvár, a woman observed that the gentile population gloated as the Jews were rounded up and could hardly wait to take their belongings. G. E. had bitter memories, and not only of the gentiles and local gendarmes who beat him for leaving the ghetto to get food. He resented the local Jewish Council as well, which he felt “did not care about anything.”

From a moral standpoint, it is arguable whether helping others for money can be regarded as an act of kindness. There is no doubt that from the standpoint of a victim, such an act can mean the difference between life and death. It was impossible to escape from the ghetto without active help from outside. The positive side of helping in return for financial compensation is negated by the fact that many people accepted money and still did not save the people who had put their lives in their hands. In Sátoraljaújhely, a Jewish person promised to give a Christian her jewels in return for getting her and her mother out of the ghetto. The woman took them to her own home and her husband went to

121 Karsai, *Holokauszt*, 241.

122 G. F. female, DEGOB, record number 483.

123 Ten women, DEGOB, record number 6; Three females and a male, DEGOB, record number 14; B. M. male, DEGOB record number 30; H. A. male, DEGOB, record number 3651.

124 W. I. male, DEGOB, record number 45; S. E. and H. R. females, DEGOB, record number 46.

125 DEGOB, record number 83.

126 J. M. female and J. S. Female. DEGOB, record number 161.

Budapest to get fake Christian documents for them. We do not know whether she received the promised valuables, but she and her husband took the task (and moral obligation) of saving lives seriously. As often happened, these selfless people's efforts to save lives were foiled by the malice of others: somebody denounced them, and both mother and daughter were deported.¹²⁷ Even under these harsh conditions, rescue was possible, and some audacious individuals attempted it. The mayor of Baja, Sándor Bernhardt, incurred great personal risk and saved 44 women from deportation under the spurious pretext of needing them in the military hospital. In Csorna, Kálmán Dreisziger and his wife drove the Weiner family of four to Budapest. When the authorities investigated the affair, the Dreisziger family was threatened and physically abused.¹²⁸

Since some of the ghettos were apparently loosely guarded, people were able to make arrangements to flee. The strategy, which would also work quite well in Budapest due to small networks willing to help, was to acquire papers confirming Gentile descent. Quite a few people managed to escape from the ghetto of Munkács, and several others were able to do so from Ungvár, even though anyone caught crossing the ghetto boundary was shot. A man named Roth was able to procure a fake document calling him up into the Royal Hungarian Army.¹²⁹ A merchant from Budapest claimed that 20 people got away before deportation.¹³⁰ This would suggest that those who fled might have been aware of what was awaiting them in spite of the attempts to deceive them, and may have known locals who were willing to help them. In Nagyvárad, quite a few people managed to flee the ghetto, but E. B. recalled that many people committed suicide, including an entire family, again suggesting that they may have been aware of the dire fate that lay ahead.¹³¹ Christian friends procured false documents or provided safe haven for the Jews who managed to escape from the ghetto. A maid allowed the writer György Sárközi's son to hide in her parents' home. Péter Kohn was adopted with the help of fake papers provided by the head of the orphanage in Szabadka (today Subotica, Serbia). A printer and his wife adopted a four-month-old baby from the ghetto in the same town in Vajdaság (Voivodina) region. Olga Braun's survival was a collaborative effort. Jolán Roziman smuggled her out of the ghetto in Losonc (today Lučenec, Slova-

127 K. E. female, DEGOB, record number 1746.

128 Szita, *Gyógyíthatatlan sebek*, 59–60.

129 F. T. female, DEGOB, record number 123.

130 É. B. DEGOB, record number 323. According to one person's testimony, one family got away from Sátoraljújhely. Ibid. G. G. and G. S. females, record number 51.

131 S. N. DEGOB, record number 2; E. B. DEGOB, record number 5.

kia), Irén Scherich hid her in her apartment for a week, and eventually a railway worker smuggled Olga across the Slovak border. Zionist activists from Budapest warned Jews in the countryside about the looming danger and provided papers and money for their escape. As in Poland and other places, the reprisals taken against people who provided refuge or help for Jews could be terrible. A little girl who was being hidden by a family in the countryside was denounced by a local person to the Arrow Cross. The entire family and the girl were publicly executed.¹³²

Not every opportunity was exploited. A woman from Beregkövesd remembered that many people escaped, but many remained “apathetic” and wished to “share the common Jewish fate.”¹³³ Beside the religious motivation to stay put and await the fate to which God had sentenced them (at least according to some), people were also hesitant to try to escape simply because most Jews had no inkling of the existence of death camps, and hoped that their fates would improve. A man from Csicsér remembered that he had had a chance to leave, but he did not want to part from his parents, and the situation had not seemed too desperate. He only found out at the railway station in Kassa that his parents were being taken out of the country.¹³⁴ A young woman said that escape would have been possible, but “we did not want to leave our parents.”¹³⁵ Escape was a gamble, the future was unpredictable, and it was hard to make the decision to jump into the unknown.

In retrospect, it is hard to say how easy or hard it was to escape. A family bribed a policeman to help them get out. He took the money and never returned. “Motivated by the terrible fear of deportation,” they managed to sneak out. Their child began to wail, and the gendarmes guarding the place shot the mother who was holding the child. The father and the child were taken back. The father tried to commit suicide, but failed. Both he and the child were deported to Auschwitz, where they were killed.¹³⁶ Some survivors said that escape was possible in Kassa. W. V., who was taken to the brick factory there, did not attempt to escape even though there was “ample opportunity” to do so. The survivors were told that they would be taken to work in western Hungary, and “many believed them.” In other cases, the authorities informed the Jews that

132 Szita, *Gyógyíthatatlan sebek*, 91–92.

133 H. R. female, DEGOB, record number 19.

134 S. I. male, DEGOB, record number 9.

135 H. L. female, DEGOB, record number 601.

136 V. R. female, J. J. female, J. E. female, K. E. female, DEGOB, record number 2591.

they would be going to Germany, but only to work. Considering the stark conditions in the ghetto, even this did not sound like a sufficiently dire prospect.¹³⁷

Whatever choices individuals were forced to make at the time were constrained by incomplete information and intangibles, such as family ties. When the Jews in the Nagyszöllős ghetto were told by the authorities that they that they would be given work in Budapest, they “believed them.” “If we had not believed this,” asserted a woman from Munkács, “many of the single men and women would have escaped.”¹³⁸ F. J. had escaped from the ghetto, but he returned when he found out that there was ample food and “life was normal.” An explanation for F. J.’s unusual behavior may be that the Jews were told that the ghetto would be permanent and, thus, they would be remaining in Ungvár.¹³⁹ In Huszt, the gendarmes told the Jews that they would work in Transdanubia. Apparently, the Jews believed them, although nobody was certain, and some people still tried, and managed, to escape.¹⁴⁰ In hindsight, it is easy to wonder why people persecuted by ruthless authorities did not run for their lives and instead went to their deaths like “lemmings,” as the psychologist Bruno Bettelheim once put it.¹⁴¹ When people were not sure that their lives were subject to a clear and present risk, fleeing from armed guards was a difficult decision to make.

Escape from ghettos could end badly. A woman from Visk named Zseni Einhorn was caught and beaten so severely that she had to be taken to hospital, as was Emil Blumstein, who tried to get away from the ghetto in Munkács.¹⁴² Some people may have guessed that they would be deported. Not all tried to escape. V. M., for instance, knew that she would be deported and decided that it was best to make the most of the time she had left, therefore they did not “put anything aside.” She hoped to escape from the ghetto in Szentendre, but no one actually did,¹⁴³ perhaps because the conditions there were not intolerable.

National law enforcement agencies usually lived up to German expectations in their efficiency and brutality. Most local officials collaborated. The political philosopher István Bibó pointed out that “only a very few people regarded the

137 DEGOB, record number 3; DEGOB, record number 601, DEGOB, record number 46.

138 S. A. and L. E. males, DEGOB, record number 53; S. R. and K. H. females, DEGOB, record number 105.

139 F. S. male, DEGOB, record number 74.

140 D. M. female, DEGOB, record number 78.

141 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1960), 300.

142 Z. I. female; F. Z. female; F. H. female, DEGOB, record number 47; DEGOB, record number 50.

143 V. M. female, DEGOB, record number 3591.

[Hungarian] state as a group of gangsters and their decrees as a piece of paper and disobedience to them... as a moral obligation."¹⁴⁴ This was more than a matter of obedience, however. The uniformed individuals who were in charge of the ghettos mostly identified with the goals of their superiors without reservation. Jews in the ghetto were open prey to the sadistic proclivities of whoever was put in charge of them. The gendarmerie was under the joint control of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense, and the men received military training. They were professionals whose brutal actions were driven by conviction, and not the circumstances. In one of the ghettos, the gendarmes "beat anyone who failed to salute them half to death." In some cases, people who tried to leave the ghetto were bludgeoned to death, and Hungarian gendarmes and SS men entered the ghetto in Kassa and whipped women. In Csicsér "one out of four gendarmes behaved decently," and most were brutal. The police, on the other hand, were more decent. They gave the Jews some money and *pálinka* (fruit brandy), and they even let them go shopping without wearing the yellow star.¹⁴⁵

It was dangerous to be identified as a religious person. "When they (the gendarmes) saw a bearded Jew, they immediately bullied and beat him."¹⁴⁶ Although wealth could sometimes be used to bribe officials for better treatment, money made life in the ghetto more brutal and more perilous as individuals of means were tortured to surrender their valuables. In Ungvár, SS men beat the feet of wealthy Jews; a man named Friedmann was beaten to death. Two German SS men beat people "as hard as they could" in the ghetto of Mátészalka. Hungarians and Germans alike were interested in robbing the Jews and venting their disdain for them in the most sadistic manner. Hungarian army personnel committed atrocities in the ghetto as well. In Huszt they beat a merchant named Winkler with planks until he was half-dead. Then, they shot him and took his valuables. The police and the gendarmerie showed no understanding or humanity at all.¹⁴⁷ A medical doctor experienced hunger, humiliation, and torture in the ghetto in the Transylvanian city of Szamosudvarhely (today Someș-Odorhei, Romania). The authorities set up a torture room where Jews were extorted for their valuables and money.¹⁴⁸ Although Jews were often the victims of theft (and torture)

144 István Bibó cited in Molnár, *Zsidósors*, 120.

145 DEGOB, record number 483; DEGOB, record number 489.

146 DEGOB, record number 74; DEGOB, record number 79 record number; DEGOB, record number 2912.

147 H. M. female, H. L. female, DEGOB, record number 2912.

148 Dr. Sz. J. male, DEGOB, record number 2593.

by the authorities, demonstrations of disdain towards the victims were equally common and significant. In Kaposvár, for instance, the gendarmes took everything, even food. Yet they showed little regard for the things they looted. The gendarmes “treated the jewels they took in the coarsest manner, they kicked them with their muddy boots... and trampled into the mud whatever they dropped.” A number of local civilians watched the scene and bellowed. The shows of violence were unrestrained. All this had a paralyzing effect on the victims. A group of detectives beat Jews almost to death, and interrogated the wealthy in a “torture chamber.” “For my part, I have never felt such panic,” a woman recalled, “since I was scared when it would be my turn.” Women who called themselves “midwives” “reached into our bodies and pulled our rings off.”¹⁴⁹ In Zalaegerszeg, Jenő Mándi went insane when he was forced to watch his daughter’s interrogation. A gendarme named Béla Horváth and his men beat their victims in their search for “treasure.” Dr. Koreign poisoned himself.¹⁵⁰

The choices civil servants or policemen could make were no doubt constrained, but it was possible to defy the system. The notary of a village in eastern Hungary “always tried to help the Jews.” In 1941, he arranged for a Jewish man to get his license to practice the trade back. “He expressed his great sorrow when the Jews were taken to the ghetto, but there was nothing he could do.”¹⁵¹ His anti-Semitic counterpart in Huszt, on the other hand, was remembered as having advocated for the deportations.¹⁵² The judge in Pasztej, a man named Péter Gergényi, bludgeoned Jews on their way to the ghetto. He refused to procure medicine for a sick woman, and when she died, he would not even allow the woman’s daughter to notify her brother, who was in a labor battalion.¹⁵³ On the other hand, a man deported from Újpest asserted that some of the policemen were quite decent. They delivered letters sent to Jews, even though doing so was prohibited.

SS men and gendarmes usually acted with cruelty, and there were only a few exceptions. A man who was taken to the ghetto in Mátészalka remembered that “the gendarmes smuggled food into the ghetto for us.” In Kaposvár, some of the gendarmes behaved “brutally,” but there were some who helped smuggle food and letters.¹⁵⁴ Elsewhere, the gendarmes forced the Jews to crawl in the mud, and

149 Dr. Sz. E. female, DEGOB, record number 3543.

150 Szita, *Gyógyithatalan sebek*, 149.

151 G. M. male, DEGOB, record number 79.

152 B. S. male, DEGOB, record number 28; S. M. male, DEGOB, record number 38.

153 K. R. and K. S. females, DEGOB, record number 126.

154 Dr. Sz. E. female, DEGOB, record number 3543.

they hit them in the head with rifle butts. Gendarmes robbed and brutalized their victims. One of them, a man named Nagy, “behaved humanely,” though. There was a notable difference between the attitude of the gendarmes and the police. S. I. also recalled that the policemen behaved “very decently” in the ghetto. A woman from Nagybereg (today Velyki Berehi, Ukraine), where members of the gendarmerie called them “stinking Jews” and robbed them, said that police behaved very differently. They permitted food supplies to be brought into the ghetto and, more importantly, allowed people to escape.¹⁵⁵

The men in uniform often committed atrocities when they were stealing Jewish belongings, but the acts of cruelty often had not only, and perhaps not even mainly, to do with sheer material gain. Instead, they reflected a vicious form of Judeophobia. Gendarmes in the town of Beregszász “came up with unspeakable brutalities, things that even the wildest horror novels did not write about... a neighbor was pushing her disabled daughter on a cart and did not want to part with her. Both were shot dead.”¹⁵⁶ In Munkács people were made to crawl on bricks while being hit and cursed at by the gendarmes and the SS. “The Germans, who were so proud of their culture, had even more such amusements up their sleeves. For instance, every day they selected 20 or 30 Jews, “tied [them] up, and forced them to sing Jewish songs while they beat them to the song’s rhythm until [the Jews] collapsed, several of them dead.” They took the food off the stove and threw it at the women. In other places, gendarmes forced men to perform “sports” in their synagogue.¹⁵⁷

Decent individuals were able to use the power they wielded for good even in the worst of times, and survival sometimes came from the most unexpected quarters. L. J. had served in the labor service as a Jew. After he was discharged, he lived in Budapest with fake documents. One day, an Arrow Cross patrol took him and a companion to the Budapest VII District police station. They were lucky to have been taken to the police rather than an Arrow Cross building. A detective named Cseh discovered that L. J.’s papers were false. The consequences could have been deadly. Unexpectedly, Cseh told L. J. to go to the restroom and destroy his documents, since otherwise he could be court martialed for having falsified identity papers. Cseh even gave him bread and cigarettes. More importantly he filled out the investigation record for a lesser crime, forgery. His case was taken over by inspector-in-chief Hubay at the Budapest police

155 S. I. male, DEGOB, record number 9; A. K. female (Holländer Dávid male), DEGOB, record number 22.

156 H. L. female, DEGOB, record number 2960.

157 R. J. and R. H. females, DEGOB, record number 2961; W. M. male, DEGOB, record number 2930.

headquarters. After the interrogation, Hubay declared, "I am not interested in your guilt. I know you are innocent like the rest, and everyone saves his life the best way he can." He sent L. J. to an internment camp, "since otherwise he would have been deported from the ghetto."¹⁵⁸

No instructions were handed down for cruel behavior towards the people crammed into the ghettos and there was no penalty for kindness. Whether their life was a living hell or tolerable depended on the individuals: local potentates, the military, and policemen, both German and Hungarian, who were in charge. As the examples show, they all could have been less brutal and more compassionate towards their charges than they usually were. The usual excuse, obedience to orders, did not explain their disposition. They were driven by hatred, identification with the purposes of their superiors, and lust for the spoils. The compassionate minority deserve the recognition of posterity.

It is one thing to brutalize and pack people into livestock cars, which then take them to workcamps, and quite another to knowingly send them to their deaths. The question arises whether the gendarmes were consciously deceiving the Jews, or did they sincerely believe that the Jews would be sent to workcamps? It is not possible to provide a categorical answer to this question. Very few people in Hungary knew the details involved with the closely held secret of the Germans, namely the decision to implement the Final Solution and the creation and operation of extermination camps with gas chambers and crematoria. It is inconceivable that the Hungarian gendarmerie had specific information about German death camps. It is not at all impossible that some of the rank-and-file thought that the Jews would be taken to work in labor camps, an activity which, according to anti-Semitic stereotypes, they had shunned. But it is also likely that many did know that the Jews would be deported from Hungary and that they would never return. This is revealed in a postcard that a gendarmerie sergeant named András Enyedi sent to László Endre on April 18, 1944. After presenting his credentials as a veteran right-wing fighter and Jew hater, Enyedi wrote, "today we are setting out [on a road] where we will achieve a more beautiful, better *Jewless* Greater Hungary"¹⁵⁹ The message was sent on an open postcard, so Enyedi was obviously unconcerned that this language would get him into trouble. After all, his message was now official policy in Hungary.

¹⁵⁸ L. J. male, DEGOB, record number 36.

¹⁵⁹ Enyedi András Endre Lászlónak [tábori levelezőlap] MNL OL, K-557, Endre László.

JOURNEY BY LIVESTOCK CARS

Despite claims to the contrary, the journey in the carriages of death began the process of depriving the deportees of their humanity, pitting one against the other in a struggle to live. Discussions of the Holocaust in which there are frequent references to numbers in the hundreds of thousands and millions can make it difficult for us to see the victims as living, breathing individuals. Yet the murder of each individual in a political system that kills is tragic in its own right. A matter-of-fact statement made by three sisters who came back reveals the enormity of the tragedies. They—eight siblings in total, husbands, and children—were herded together for the deportations along with their father. The immediate family numbered 33 people. Only very few survived. Many hundreds of testimonies affirm that, due to the cruelty of the officers in charge, the lethargy of the brutalized people of all ages crammed into the cattle cars, and their general ignorance regarding their destination, escape from the deportation trains was close to impossible. Some nonetheless attempted it in the spur of the moment. There was at least one successful attempt to escape from a closed livestock car. Fourteen men jumped out of a car bound for Auschwitz. The windows were secured only with wire. They were able to unfasten it, and, when the train slowed down at a curve, jumped out of the window. The SS shot at them and hit two of them, but the others got away.

Some deportees began to suspect that they were being taken to their deaths when they reached the Hungarian-Slovak border at Komárom. Many tried to escape, some by jumping into the Danube, but they were all shot dead.¹⁶⁰ Escape was usually a spontaneous act of desperation, not of design; sometimes individual, at times collaborative. It could also be selfish. The purpose was sheer physical survival. For the most part, people were selfish with their life-saving gasp of air or gulp of water, a tiny spot to lay down, a bite of food at the expense of someone else who was equally miserable; they were left with no other choice.

It is estimated that 6,000–7,000 people died on their way from Hungary to Auschwitz.¹⁶¹ Sometimes, a whole family, including grandparents, parents, and siblings, was packed into the same car; on one occasion, 35 members of one family.¹⁶² For the most vicious of Hungary's pro-German anti-Semites, proactive compliance with the German security establishment's desire to deport Jews became

160 DEGOB, record number 3587; DEGOB, record number 3553.

161 Karsai, *Holokauszt*, 247.

162 W. E., W. B., and W. F. females, DEGOB, record number 2958; H. L. and H. I., DEGOB, record number 2960.

an obsession. Gendarmerie captain Márton Zöldy was involved in the operations that resulted in the massacre of several thousand civilians in Újvidék in 1941. He was court martialed for his crimes in Budapest in 1943, but he escaped to Germany. In the wake of the German invasion, he returned to Hungary in the uniform of the SS and kidnapped a labor service battalion.¹⁶³ He herded them into the ghetto in Hatvan and, despite the Ministry of Defense's intervention to free them, he had them herded into the livestock cars bound for Auschwitz.

By the time they boarded the trains, people were already in a deplorable condition. One day before they were sent to the camp, the Jews from the Técső ghetto spent the night in a cellar flooded with mud and sewage. Several of them "lost their mind." A woman gave birth, but she was not spared either. The deported persons suffered thirst, hunger, heat, and terrible hygienic conditions. Even animals were treated better.¹⁶⁴ At least one person felt that conditions were so bad that people did not think that they could get any worse. This and the fact that they were told that they were being taken to workcamps in Hungary may have persuaded them not to put up resistance.¹⁶⁵

The final days before the trains departed were appalling. There were many suicides in Székesfehérvár. In Munkács, conditions were so bad that a person remembered that people were relieved when they were crammed into the livestock cars.¹⁶⁶ Jews from Újpest were first taken by train to Budakalász. When they were driven off the train, gendarmes and SS men went on a rampage and showered them with blows. They were forced to fend for themselves and were not given water or proper sanitation. When they were handed over to the Germans in Kassa, some felt that even the SS treated them better than the Hungarian authorities.¹⁶⁷ The 20,000 gendarmes and the Germans and policemen who took part in the operation usually were brutal when forcing the Jews to board the train cars which would take them to the camps. The police took everything. They reached into every cavity of the body to search for hidden valuables.¹⁶⁸ In Ungvár, an elderly man collapsed as a result of his beatings and died. A man was hit in the head for asking to travel with his wife. People who tried to look out of the boxcar were shot.¹⁶⁹

163 E. S. male, DEGOB, record number 1808.

164 G. F. female, DEGOB, record number 483; L. G. female, DEGOB, record number 92; DEGOB, record number 105.

165 H. B., S. S. and S. B. females, DEGOB, record number 14.

166 L. F. female, DEGOB, record number 2788; H. B. male, DEGOB, record number 2955.

167 Dr. K. I. male, DEGOB, record number 3588.

168 DEGOB, record number 1; Ten women, DEGOB, record number 3.

169 DEGOB, record number 46; DEGOB, record number 2946; DEGOB, record number 30.

S. N. recalled that, while beating them, the gendarmes kept saying “faster, faster stinking Jews, you will not be coming back.”¹⁷⁰ This would imply that the gendarmes had some knowledge of where they people were being taken, and why. In other places, however, the deportees received more encouraging information. A merchant from Budapest was heartened by the speech given by a gendarme lieutenant, who declared, “you are going to Germany... if you work assiduously, you will be given food.”¹⁷¹ The now browbeaten Jews were carrying heavy luggage as they were herded towards the livestock cars. Those who were unable to move quickly enough with their heavy bags were kicked and forced to leave their luggage behind, so they boarded the boxcars with nothing. A former deportee claimed that the regulations of the state railway regarding feeding and water for transported livestock were not observed for human beings.¹⁷²

Even air was in short supply in the journey towards the death camps. In the struggle for survival, there was no room for solidarity despite some accounts to the contrary. A 19-year-old boy who was lucky enough to find a place beside a small window was repeatedly beaten by fellow passengers before he was pushed aside. About 20 members of the Starahowice Jewish Council and the Jewish Police were strangled by a group of inmates in a life and death struggle for air.¹⁷³ Food and water were inadequate. In each livestock car, there was one bucket of water and one bucket for waste for as many as 74 people.¹⁷⁴ In the Polish station of Slovensko, people inside the car were told to “croak of thirst.” Some cars were even more crowded. Szerén Mermelstein traveled in a boxcar with 120 others with no water at all. Out of the 3,500 people in her transport, 26 died, mainly of thirst.

One man recalled that they were allowed to get water and exit the car at the first stop, but this was a rare exception: “We were not allowed to look out, they shot into the car if someone did.” When the train reached the city of Kassa, the gendarmes “took everything” before handing them over to the Germans. A German commander warned a transport that, if there were any attempt to escape, he would first shoot the car commander and then everybody else in the carriage.¹⁷⁵ The guards missed no opportunity to fill their pock-

170 DEGOB, record number 2.

171 DEGOB, record number 3587

172 DEGOB, record number 2140; DEGOB, record number 3618.

173 Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*.

174 S. N. male, DEGOB, record number 2; W. V. male, DEGOB, record number 3; E. B. female, DEGOB, record number 5.

175 S. I. male, DEGOB, record number 9; Ten women from the Munkács ghetto, DEGOB, record number 1; A. K. female (Dávid Holländer) DEGOB, record number 22.

ets at the expense of the desperate deportees. Every time the train stopped, Eva Shainblum recounted, “the Germans entered and shouted that people better give up everything they had or they’ll shoot us inside.”¹⁷⁶ The carriages were the dominions of death. The “filth and dirt” in the boxcars during the five-day trip to Auschwitz was “unimaginable.” People made the journey in the presence of decomposing corpses.¹⁷⁷ The “terrible” journey took three to as much as five days. M. H. from Szatmárnémeti remembered the SS telling them that, “if you work, you live, if you don’t, you die.” The man threatened to kill anyone who tried to escape. Nevertheless, two Jews managed to jump out of the boxcar and got away. After that, the SS constantly shot at the train.¹⁷⁸

The excessive number of people packed in the cars made the journey unbearable. Because of the lack of space, people went into a frenzy.¹⁷⁹ A man deported from Szeklence (today Sokyrnytsia, Ukraine) stated that 110 human beings had been crammed into each carriage with no food or water whatsoever. They were given water only when they reached the station at Kassa, but nothing else until they reached Auschwitz.¹⁸⁰ Those who sat down in the car because they were unable to stand anymore were at risk of getting trampled to death. Under such conditions, it was hard for people to preserve their sanity.

“Some people began to lose their tempers, and they got disoriented and tried to jump out of the carriage.” Of all the hardships of the journey, which could take as long as eleven days, thirst appears to have been the most unbearable. Thirst led the people in the cars to “bang wildly at the door.” People went crazy from thirst and fear. The living traveled alongside the corpses of those who had died, and many of the living were either losing their mind or were themselves dying because of the appalling conditions.¹⁸¹ By some accounts, of all the horrors of the seemingly endless journey, the lack of drinking water caused the greatest suffering. One survivor offered the following recollection of a journey to Auschwitz which lasted eight days: “In the awful heat, people took off their clothing and stood by the barred window with no clothes on, with parched lips, and in their anguish, they could not restrain themselves any longer and shouted for water. Then the Germans beat the whole group with rifle butts and sealed the window where air had come in. We were suffocating, and we felt that if it

176 Shainblum, *The Last Time*, 74.

177 R. E. male, DEGOB, record number 8; S. T. male, DEGOB, record number 2945.

178 M. H. male, record number 40.

179 É. B. male, DEGOB, record number 323.

180 DEGOB, record number 73.

181 N. S. male, DEGOB, record number 1048; H. H. male, DEGOB, record number 1593; Dr. Sz. E. female, DEGOB, record number 3543.

went on like this, we would all die.”¹⁸² Civilians behaved more decently, showing that compassion and the willingness to help were not completely dead. Jenő Reich threw a postcard out of his car to let his parents know that he was being taken to Germany. A stranger found the postcard and mailed it to the addressee.¹⁸³

WHAT DID THEY KNOW?

Aside from the generally hostile conditions, the unpredictability of the situation may have been the greatest obstacle to active efforts at survival. Uncertainty regarding the future, and expectations that things would turn out well, oiled the machinery of deportation and the aspiration of the killers that they could avoid another “Warsaw”. It is one thing to expect hardship and widespread death, warned Saul Friedländer, to anticipate imminent death is quiet another. We must avoid reading history backwards and expect people to expect events that were beyond their imagination.

The people who were herded together into the closed spaces were told that they would be taken away to work nearby or in other parts of the country. Whether the average gendarme knew about the fate that awaited the Jews and lied to them on purpose or whether they acted in good faith cannot be known with any degree of certainty. Be that as it may, this fiction was sufficient to calm anxieties. In Técső, the gendarmes encouraged the Jews by telling them that they could remain and work locally.¹⁸⁴ Family bonds also mattered. “For this reason, [the prospect of work],” M. S. did not think that “it was worthwhile to escape because I hoped I could stay with my wife and children.” The Jews of the village of Szolyva (today Svalyava, Ukraine) were told that they were going to work in Hortobágy in eastern Hungary. In the Carpathian town of Beregszász, it was rumored that they would be picking apricots in the tranquil agricultural town of Kecskemét.¹⁸⁵ The Germans and the gendarmes told the Jews in Nagyszöllős that they were going to work in Budapest.¹⁸⁶ A factory worker from Kassa recounted that in the ghetto “they were encouraged that they would be doing earth work in the western part of country. We were allowed to go home and collect what

182 F. G. female, DEGOB, record number 3491.

183 Szita, *Gyógyíthatatlan sebek*, 154.

184 M. S. male, DEGOB, record number 4.

185 Testimony by ten women, DEGOB, record number 7; S. S., S. H. and S. B. females, DEGOB, record number 14.

186 DEGOB, record number 53; DEGOB, record number 104.

we needed. On such occasions we could have gotten away. I wanted to escape, and my mother would have let me, but the neighbors talked us out of it saying who knows what would happen to us, shall we see each other again let's stay together for as long as possible. People escaped nevertheless, some succeeded others were apprehended."¹⁸⁷ If the mother had had any inkling of what was about to happen it was inconceivable that she would have listened to her neighbors. Fatal uncertainty characterized the women deported from Kassa who discovered too late that they would be taken out of the country. Even then, they had no idea for what purpose: "a terrible fear gripped all of us. The gendarmes continued to say that they were taking us to the vicinity, where we shall work, the elderly and the children will be taken care of. They had already taken two transports and we still did not know what will become of us. Then it was their turn, they were overtaken with panic, everybody thought about how to flee."¹⁸⁸ K. I. from the town of Újpest condemned his rabbi for fleeing to Budapest with his family. "Now we know," he confessed after the war "that we should have followed his example because they all stayed alive." Only when they were forced into the wagon did the gendarme say: "now we will take you to a place from where there is no return." Even then, he hoped that "the Good Lord" would save him.¹⁸⁹ A woman deported from Sárvár recalled that, when the Germans took charge of the train at Kassa, an officer promised hot food and a shower after arrival. "Keep your clothes," he said, "and then you will work." They believed what he said.¹⁹⁰ Similarly, a person from Nagyszöllös heard a German say that they would be working for pay and food. His words reflected the uncertainty of their situation: "we somewhat bought what he said because we did not count on what would happen later."¹⁹¹

Randolph Braham described the Jewish leadership's failure to alert their fellow countrymen or even Regent Horthy to the imminent danger as a "conspiracy of silence."¹⁹² This dereliction of leadership would have fateful consequences. Rumor-based information on the camps in Poland was out there. A woman was warned by a Slovak uncle that they would be taken to Auschwitz. The vast ma-

187 W. V. male, DEGOB, record number 3.

188 V. R., J. J. female, J. E., K. E. females. DEGOB, record number 2591. A similar uncertainty characterized a man from Miskolc who admitted that "We had no idea where we were being taken. All we knew was that we would be going to Germany to work." L. L. DEGOB, record number 258.

189 Dr. K. I., male, DEGOB record number 3588.

190 F. G. female. DEGOB record number 3491.

191 G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 90. According to a woman from Munkács, „Noone knew anything for sure.” DEGOB, record number 50.

192 Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), Chapter 23.

majority, however, never heard about it.¹⁹³ In the spring of 1944, Budapest was among the safest place for Jews in German-occupied Europe. A woman whose brother had already been deported from Slovakia returned from Budapest to Ungvár—where the deportations began—to be together with her parents. She was promptly deported.¹⁹⁴ Surely, she would have had her parents join her in the Hungarian capital had she had any inkling of what awaited them. Braham argued that Jewish leaders did not inform the country's Christian leaders, or the Jewish masses, of what they knew about the Final Solution, so the Jews had a false sense of security. Braham may not even have known that, in November 1943, leaders of the Jewish Rescue Committee Rezső Kasztner and Shmuel Springmann met Oskar Schindler in the lavish Hotel Hungaria in Budapest. Kasztner and Springmann wanted to know why the Germans were murdering Jews. The question itself suggested they had already known about the German policy of mass murder. Schindler claimed that there were around 500,000 Jews left alive in Poland. Kasztner and Springmann inquired whether there was a universal order to kill all the Jews. They were told that no such order existed, but a "higher authority" must have given the SS orders to destroy "dangerous or useless Jews." Somebody from above "ordered annihilation," although Schindler doubted their goal was "total annihilation." Pressed further, Schindler admitted that, according to figures he had obtained from the SS, 4 to 4.5 million Jews had already been murdered, although he thought these figures were exaggerated. But he claimed that 90 percent of the Jewish children in the General Government had been "shot or gassed." The Germans, he said, had "perfected a scientific system there in order to avoid more Katyns."¹⁹⁵ This episode gives meaning to the statements made by the head of the Jewish Council in Budapest, Samu Stern, immediately after the war. In a detailed account given in 1945 of the 1944 events, the former president of the Jewish Council affirmed that the Israelite leadership of Hungary had a clear picture of what was going on. The account is worth citing at length:

I knew everything about their [the Germans'] deeds in all the states of Central Europe, and I knew their activities consisted of a series of murders and robberies. I knew they disliked instilling fear or making people afraid, that they worked calmly in the greatest secrecy, that the unsuspecting victims

193 DEGOB, record number 123.

194 DEGOB, record number 2140.

195 *Bekentnisse des Herrn X, the Schindler "koffer"*, Bundesarchiv, Koblenz. Cited in David Crowe, *Oskar Schindler* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2004), 299–306.

had no inkling of what was awaiting them, even when they were on their way to their deaths in the boxcars.

Stern knew more than mere generalities about the German killing program, as is revealed by the further part of his statement. He understood the murders were taking place on a mass scale and on a tight schedule: “The Regent [Horthy] would have to be used to make it possible for the Hungarian Jewry to escape, the Regent, whom I had known and bombarded with requests on Jewish matters for 20 years.” Stern knew what was at stake: “I had to forestall the *destruction* of the whole of Hungarian Jewry with tactical steps” [emphasis mine – L. B.].¹⁹⁶ There is no record that the information gleaned from Schindler or available to Stern was ever shared with Horthy or the Jewish community in Hungary.

Jews and their Hungarian compatriots, who were never exposed to the realities of German anti-Semitic policies around Europe, could have received credible information via the BBC, which had a large audience in the country. However, the station seems to have been silent on this matter. Even at the end of June, when deportations were at full swing and the Vrba-Wetzler report had reached the highest echelons of British and American leadership, the Political Warfare Executive instructed the BBC Hungarian service “not to use unconfirmed reports of the killing of Hungarian Jews, but state generally that we know deportation to Poland continues.”¹⁹⁷

People were thus living in an information vacuum and were too detached from reality to respond to the threats facing them. The Jewish inhabitants of the ghetto of Nagyszöllős in Transcarpathia believed that an exchange program was underway according to which Jews would be traded for Christians.¹⁹⁸ Needless to say, such rumors were not helpful, as they discouraged Jews from trying to put up any form of resistance or trying to escape. Somewhat more realistically, people in the Ungvár ghetto, in their desperation, placed their hope in Russian liberation, but this belief was hardly helpful from the perspective of survival. In Sátoraljaújhely, the atmosphere was “confident,” since they believed the Russians to be at Kőrösmező (today Yasinia, Ukraine), and this offered hope that the anti-Semitic acts would end soon.¹⁹⁹ Uncertainty diminished people’s willingness to es-

196 Samu Stern, DEGOB, record number 3627. See also in Stern’s memoir published in Mária Schmidt ed., *Kollaboráció vagy kooperáció – A Budapesti Zsidó Tanács* (Budapest: Minerva, 1990), 60.

197 For the quote see Michael Fleming, *Auschwitz, the Allies and the Censorship of the Holocaust* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 236–39.

198 DEGOB, record number 45.

199 DEGOB, record number 46; DEGOB, record number 51.

cape. Two women only realized that they would not be working when they were forced into the wagon. "If they had not thought so, many of the single men and women would have escaped."²⁰⁰ A young man's parents would not let him get away from the ghetto so that they would stay together. His explanation of the events is revealing: "if they had known how short our life together, they most certainly would have let me."²⁰¹ "Terrible fear gripped everyone."²⁰² They had no idea what the future would bring.

Those who fled from the ghetto were not among those who were questioned after the war. Therefore, we cannot know what prompted them to do so. Some were more suspicious than others. A portion of the survivors from Munkács did not doubt what they were told. Others did not believe that their destination would be the Hungarian plain. They observed that even people who were infirm or unable to walk were taken away from the local hospital.²⁰³ Despite the silence of their leaders and the international community, some members of the Jewish community were better informed, possibly from hearsay. A woman interviewed in 1945, "counted on the deportation based on the Polish example."²⁰⁴ Paul Shainblum was determined to flee from the ghetto in Nagyvárad. He begged his father to give him permission to go somewhere safer. Paul told his father that they were in immense danger and that news from other parts of Europe predicted what was to come.²⁰⁵ This story is interesting for several reasons. For one, it indicates that more widespread and credible news regarding the ongoing extermination of Jews would have led to more general attempts at self-rescue. Second, unsubstantiated stories regarding mass murder may have been floating around, but they were not concrete enough for most members of the community to give them any credence. Information that was hard to believe did not greatly alter responses.

Several people attested of having been told they would not be coming back, but even they did not suspect the fate awaiting them. As the Jews were leaving Szeklence, a lieutenant warned them to „say farewell to Hungary as they would

200 S. R. female, K. H. female. DEGOB, record number 105.

201 F. P. male. DEGOB, record number 86.

202 DEGOB, record number 2591.

203 H. D., M. S., H. A., S. I., S. G., S. S., S. Á., S. R., H. E., all female. DEGOB, record number 7. A woman from the town of Rahó also got suspicious because she saw disabled people being rounded up. This made the work story hard to believe. L. F. Female. DEGOB, record number 2788. It was not until they saw the SS in Kassa that a merchant realized that their destination was not in Hortobágy. DEGOB, record number 91. See also DEGOB, record number 3.

204 DEGOB, record number 3593.

205 Shainblum, *The Last Time*, 70.

never see it again.”²⁰⁶ Similar information was provided in other parts of the country as well. A gendarmerie officer in Újpest informed the assembled Jews that they were going somewhere from where there was no return.²⁰⁷ Optimism nonetheless prevailed. Jews in Debrecen were waiting to see what their fate would be for two weeks, until they finally asked what would happen to them. “A policeman told us fair and square that we were going to be killed.” The woman who reported this statement claimed that she had heard about gassings on the radio. Despite having heard these rumors and the dire prediction of the Hungarian policeman, she believed the German officer who told them that they would work and receive hot food. A young housewife from Marosvásárhely (today Târgu Mureș, Romania) admitted that they went to the shower or gas chamber “unwittingly.”²⁰⁸ The truth about Auschwitz was incomprehensible. A young man, who was heading home from labor service when he was rounded up for deportation pondered his fate along the following lines: either he would be shot in Poland, killed in Germany, or work in Germany, the latter being the most “optimistic version.” A speech by a German officer persuaded him of this option.²⁰⁹ For others, the realization that something awful was about to happen came too late. A man recalled that “we realized where we were going” only when they reached the Polish station of Slovensko. A merchant named K. A. admitted that it was only when they saw the SS in Kassa that they realized what their destination would be.²¹⁰

“The Jews of Ungvár did not expect to be deported. We knew neither about Auschwitz nor about Birkenau.”²¹¹ Similar statements were made by many of the survivors from Ungvár, and this confirms that most of the Jews of the city knew nothing about what awaited them. When they reached Kassa and the boxcars in which they were traveling were unlocked, their SS guards reassured them that they would be working for money. A high school student from Ungvár claimed that they had “no idea where they were being taken.” The same was reported by a survivor from Munkács.²¹² A person deported from the Miskolc ghetto asserted that “we had no idea where we were being taken. We were only guessing that it was to Germany to work.”²¹³

206 DEGOB, record number 87.

207 DEGOB, record number 3588.

208 F. G. female. DEGOB, record number 3491; DEGOB, record number 3490.

209 G. E. male. DEGOB, record number 3587.

210 DEGOB, record number 3; DEGOB, record number 7; DEGOB, record number 91.

211 Male, DEGOB, record number 3497.

212 DEGOB, record number 30; DEGOB, record number 50; DEGOB, record number 87; DEGOB, record number 90; L. L. male, DEGOB, record number 258.

213 L. L. male. DEGOB, record number 258.

It is safe to say that responses to impending deportation were unpredictable. Based on similar sets of information (or the lack of it) people reacted in very different ways. A few committed suicide, others lost their sanity. Some people tried to escape either as an individual effort or in response to an offer of help. The vast majority, despite all their premonitions, stayed put and waited passively for an outcome that would allow them to live.²¹⁴

Deception worked well and greased the machinery of deportation. A woman from Ungvár remembered being told that “they were being evacuated within the country because the Russians are coming,” and that “nobody will get hurt.” Thus, she claimed, even the “last transport did not know where they were being taken.”²¹⁵ The Germans deceived their victims to the very end. Jews arriving in the camps were told to send postcards [Waldsee cards] to their relatives stating that they were doing well and had been given work.²¹⁶

The Jews hoped for the best even when there was little reason to do so. They were not left with many choices. Konrad Jarausch makes the following claim: “In spite of instances of heroic resistance, it was the compliance of most victims that made the final solution possible. The majority of Jews failed to fight against their impending destruction because they hoped to survive by following orders, while they were certain to die if they did not.”²¹⁷

The evidence presented by Hungarian survivors puts this fairytale to rest. The victims did not want to “comply.” To claim that someone has complied is to suggest that this person had a choice, which, in that case, may shift some of the blame for the crime onto the victim. The fate, immediate death, which the Nazis intended for them was incomprehensible even for those who doubted the lies that were fed to them. Only reading history in reverse could lead anyone to think that based on rumors and statements that one would not return someone should have known that they would be delivered to gas chambers and crematoria. Rumors and reports of mass murders perpetrated on the eastern front were milling around as troops from the eastern front were returning in 1943. Reports of gassing stretched one’s credibility. The Jewish novelist Simon Kemény noted in his diary that a reserve first lieutenant who had just returned from the Soviet front reported to his doctor that, in Ukraine, the Germans had dug a huge ditch

214 Csepeli and Prazsák have shown that there were 137 self-rescue attempts while 128 people tried to help Jews in the ghetto period. People recalled 19 cases of aid received from non-Jews and 123 remembered some kind of self-rescue during the deportations. György Csepeli and Gergő Prazsák, *Paths to Fatelessness*.

215 DEGOB, record number 86; DEGOB, record number 87.

216 Karsai, *Holokausz*.

217 Konrad Jarausch, *Out of the Ashes*, 361.

as large as “József Square” and filled it with corpses of executed Jews. Naked men, women, and children were strewn on top of one another. [They] were set on fire, and “the Satanic act of mass murder turned to smoke and ash.”

But it was hard to lend credence to reports of systematic brutality on such a grand scale. “Radio propaganda is beginning to go too far,” Kemény noted in his diary. He continued:

Thomas Mann is informing us from America that the Germans have taken 400 Dutch Jewish men to a German town and tried out a new poisonous gas on them. The gas is so effective that all of them died on the spot. I do not think that this is true, and Thomas Mann was fooled. Is this great man so gullible?²¹⁸

When a Slovak veteran told a newly arrived Hungarian that her relatives were being cremated, she “did not want to believe them.”²¹⁹ A young woman was told before her deportation that “The Germans kill all Jews with gas.’ She, who saw the gas chambers with her own eyes understood that her experience was incomprehensible: “There is no wonder that sane, well-intentioned people who hear of such things say that all this is the figment of my tortured imagination.”²²⁰

The majority of Hungarian Jews had not resigned themselves to their fate, and they certainly did not lack courage. Although many of the deported had little or no idea what would happen next, they looked to the future “with fear.”²²¹ The reality they encountered was fit for the most tortured imagination.

DISEMBARKMENT

Right from the outset it became clear to the new arrivals that, if they wanted to live, with a few exceptions the solidarity and support they could expect on the part of their fellow inmates, who had already gone through the dehumanizing process of the camps, was limited. The SS and inmates began to beat the new arrivals even before they got out of the cars.²²² As they were herded off

218 Simon Kemény, *Napló*, 19–20, 37.

219 H. R. female, DEGOB, record number 99.

220 G. A. female. DEGOB, record number 3177. Cited by Ferenc Laczó, *Hungarian Jews in the Age of Genocide*, 126.

221 Five females, DEGOB, record number 2591.

222 J. M., J. S. females, DEGOB, record number 161.



Arrival of a deportation train at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, 1944. Fortepan /Lili Jacob.

the train, Polish prisoners greeted the new arrivals at Auschwitz by saying “you will all end up in the crematorium” while music was being played around them. Unceremoniously, they threw them out of the cars. Györgyi Grünfeld from Sátoraljaújhely could not forget the words that greeted her and her siblings when they arrived in Auschwitz on 28 May 1944: “You came through the gate and you will pass through the chimney.” You are lucky, said a Pole to another man, that “the Germans need workers, otherwise you would die.”²²³ P. I., a highly perceptive observer of events from Budapest, remembered the moments when they were forced to disembark from the carriages. Brutalized men, dressed in striped uniforms, urged them with shouts of “*los, los.*” “Later, we learned who these forceful men were. These frenzied men were Polish Jews, rendered beast-like by struggling through five years of KZ.”²²⁴ His observation revealed a harsh

223 G. G., G. S. females, DEGOB, record number 51; DEGOB, record number 90; K. B. male, DEGOB, record number 347.

224 P. I. DEGOB, record number 1735.

reality—camp veterans resented the newcomers: “We are not sorry for you, we have been living here for two years while you still enjoyed a good life.”²²⁵

People were crying, and women were pleading with the SS not to separate them from their children. In response, they were beaten. In some cases, the stripe-clothed prisoners tried to take the children away, but their mothers protested without realizing that, by doing so, they were almost certainly sentencing their children to death in the gas chambers.²²⁶ T. J. was a young man of 18 from Kispeszt. He wanted to hide with fake documents, but his father wouldn’t let him, as he “wanted to keep the family together.” He ended up on the last transport to Auschwitz before Horthy suspended the deportations. When he arrived in Auschwitz, the Poles warned him to say he was older.²²⁷ Well-meaning advice could backfire. A woman in her early 40s was told to claim that she was 50 and as a result she was grouped with the elderly and sick who were slated for death.²²⁸

While, in the general camp, veterans were callous, even hostile, to the newcomers, occasionally older prisoners tried to help. Polish Jews shouted to the new arrivals to hand over their infants to the elderly, adding that they would see their children again on Sunday. A woman was getting off the boxcar when a Polish prisoner advised her to give her child to her mother.²²⁹ M. S. gave her child to her mother-in-law at the advice of a Polish boy. The child survived.²³⁰ A 13-year-old-boy stayed alive because, while a Polish kapo told them that they were going to the crematorium, a Polish Jew warned him to stay with his father and say that he was 18. He knew what the vast majority of those who arrived did not: that this was the only way for the mothers to survive. They lied about the Sunday meeting, and looking at this act of deception superficially, assuming that it could be construed as collaboration with the camp authorities. The lie prevented deaths. There was continued uncertainty about the future. The sight of Polish prisoners gave some hope to a man who had just arrived. The Poles had been sent to the camp much sooner and were left alive. He told his father that in Germany one had to work to stay alive.²³¹ In the first minutes after arrival, it became clear that life was cheaper even then it was in

225 K. R. female, DEGOB, record number 174.

226 M. L. male, DEGOB, record number 54; Five females, DEGOB, record number 63.

227 T. J. male, DEGOB, record number 478.

228 F. T. female, DEGOB, record number 123.

229 Four females, DEGOB, record number 14.

230 H. E., DEGOB, record number 2949; R. R., R. B. female, DEGOB, record number 2959; DEGOB, record number 76.

231 Dr. K. I. male, DEGOB, record number 3588.

the ghetto. Terrible memories of the first moments of wanton cruelty were etched into the minds of those who survived, as in the scene when an SS man shot Lajos Kaufer, an industrialist from Újpest, as he was helping his mother-in-law disembark from the car.²³² Even this would not prepare the prisoners for what was about to unfold.

THE FIRST HOURS

Survival testimonies suggest that the victims were able to relate their traumatic experience in anatomical detail to the outside world even shortly after the events. The ability to feel compassion towards the suffering of the other was not lost either.

I was holding Mom's hand, then she was sent to the left and I was sent to the right. I don't know where they are... I continued on my way in an unspeakable psychological state. I did not care about anything. When they took us to the bath I did not want to go in because we saw the huge flames and we were afraid that we would be taken there, too. Too many people arrived, she learned later, and the crematoria could not handle them, so they dug large ditches and often the girls had to shove the dead in, and sometimes somebody had to bury their own parents... It sometimes happened that people got to the chimney half-burned because they did not release enough gas into the chamber and the poor people came to life when they got to the crematorium and endured all the suffering of death by fire. We also heard terrible screams, and I think these sounds will haunt me for the rest of my life. They were unimaginably heart-wrenching sounds.

At the sight of the grey, skeletal figures, someone thought that they had arrived at a lunatic asylum.²³³ People were lost in the vortex of inhumanity. Eva Shainblum could not comprehend what was happening around them. "Who were the strange, emaciated people we had seen when we were taken from the train? Were they Jewish prisoners of war? Why were they gathering around the platform, staring at us from behind the fence?"²³⁴ There was a terrible smell in the

²³² H. J. female, DEGOB, record number 3542.

²³³ Szita, *Gyógyíthatatlan sebek*, 96.

²³⁴ Shainblum, *The Last time*, 75.

air, and a woman named Zsuzsanna had no idea what it was. “As we got closer to the camp, Birkenau, I started to scream because I saw human body parts burning in an open fire. One woman... told me I was imagining things, but I am sure she knew very well.”²³⁵ The shock of arrival was overwhelming, even though the guards often tried to show restraint to avoid mass panic.²³⁶ Ten women who were deported from Munkács were greeted by an apocalyptic sight. “All of a sudden we felt suffocating smoke, and we saw a large fire from a distance. We were driven towards the fire, and we thought that we were going to be burned. Some began to sob, and a terrible fear engulfed us. Some tore their clothes off so that they would burn more quickly.” There was a very clear dividing line between the veterans and the newcomers.

For veterans the transports of Hungarians brought prosperity. There was goose fat, canned food, fruit, shoes, clothing, and underwear, feather blankets, and plum brandy. “What did it matter that the crematoria were bellowing smoke and that the ditches filled with corpses were sizzling with human fat in the fire? The camp had enough to eat.”²³⁷ This was not true for the newly arrived, who recounted that they got no food in Auschwitz for two days where they lived in “dread and fear”—with good reason.²³⁸

Most Hungarian Jews were selected to die upon arrival. In 1945, Mengele’s collaborator, Miklós Nyiszli, estimated that 78–80 percent of the Hungarian transports were sent to the left to die.²³⁹ Prisoners and SS personnel were awaiting the arrivals as they disembarked. Some survivors were left with the impression that the selection was unsystematic and depended on people’s moods. Szeréna Mermelstein calculated that of the 3,500 people in their transport, only 250 were selected to work and the rest were gassed.²⁴⁰

Only a small number of Jews arriving in Auschwitz were certain they were going to die. Reality only dawned on some of the victims when they were confronted with the selection process. M. H., a war veteran who had been wounded in Serbia and had survived labor service on the Soviet front, bade farewell to his wife before going to the showers. “By then she was consoling me because I saw the situation and I was distressed. I never saw my wife and family again.” A man from Bilke named M. L. was lucky because he and his sixteen [!] sib-

235 Zsuzsanna Fisher Spiro, *In Fragile Moments*. The Azreali Series of Holocaust Survivor Memoirs, 2016. 11.

236 Wachsmann, *KL*, 310.

237 Szita, *Gyógyíthatatlan sebek*, 97.

238 Ten females, DEGOB, record number 1; Ten females, DEGOB, record number 6.

239 N. M. male, DEGOB, record number 3632.

240 Ten females from Szolyva, DEGOB, record number 7.

lings were selected to work.²⁴¹ This was a rare exception, as the young, the elderly, mothers with young children, the sick, and the disabled were immediately sent to die. Three women from Visk remembered that Josef Mengele was whistling and singing during selection. It amused him to see how afraid his victims were of him. Once, he gave chocolates and challah to some children before sending them to the crematorium. For several women, the sight that greeted them in Auschwitz was “like a terrible theater.” They saw “emaciated, horrible looking girls in tatters standing for Appel” a “large fire,” in which they could not tell what was burning.²⁴² Women were shaved and forced to stand in front of the men completely naked. “We wanted to keep our shirts on, we were ashamed, they slapped us in the face,” one woman recalled.²⁴³ The experience was humiliating even for those who were lucky enough to live. The shower was awfully cold, and as one survivor recalled, “we were all crying and afraid.”²⁴⁴ After eight days with no water, F. G. did not mind whether the water coming from the shower was hot or cold. They gulped it even though the guards screamed at them not to drink it because the water was contaminated. They did not care. By then the women had been shaved. F. G. and her sister-in-law could not recognize each other.²⁴⁵

A sardonic observer, the aforementioned P. I., noted the rapid process of dehumanization:

the family, the children, the baby, the paralyzed, the elderly just go in one direction and a friendly gentleman, the stalwart of the *Herrenvolk*, waved to the left with a friendly smile... Yes, we are in the West in high-tech Germany... We reach the barracks where bodies of humans or beings hovering between animal and human in striped uniform are laying on impeccable concrete... the Germans are not joking they do not hesitate to sink us below the level of animals... guards, Gypsies, are training us with sticks.²⁴⁶

In the extreme circumstances in which they suddenly found themselves, which went beyond anything they had experienced thus far, people lost their

241 M. H. male, DEGOB, record number 40; M. L. male, DEGOB, record number 54.

242 S. R., S. J., S. H., females from Szerednye, DEGOB, record number 82.

243 Five females, DEGOB, record number 63; DEGOB, record number 161.

244 I. M. female, DEGOB, record number 103.

245 F. G. female, DEGOB, record number 3491.

246 DEGOB, record number 1735.

sense of reality. A *Lagerältester* by the name of Weisz told them to surrender their valuables, otherwise he would find them with his portable X-ray machine, which he said could see right through them. Since the disoriented Jews believed that Weisz possessed a contraption that had not even yet been invented, they handed over their hidden valuables.²⁴⁷ Such scams notwithstanding, money or valuables could occasionally buy freedom in the ghettos and it was rational to assume that they could help one to survive, wherever the final destination would be.

After arrival in Birkenau, a man was relieved of two Omega wrist watches, 13,000 pengő, and 90 British pounds.²⁴⁸ There is not a single account of any of the Hungarians being able to change their fortune with the help of valuables brought with them. In one sense, the camps brought equality. Rich and poor had the same chance of surviving. This was a time of existential uncertainty. G. F. was told to undress. Once she was naked, she was told that she and her companions would be gassed. For eight days they waited to be killed. Then, unexpectedly, their fate took a lucky turn. Labor was needed in Fallersleben. When they made a mistake, the female overseer beat their hands until they were swollen. But she lived.²⁴⁹

For the first few days, the guards did not feed the new arrivals. Romas brought food for the starving inmates in one of the barracks. It was impossible to sleep on the narrow plank. G. E. remembered being beaten “all the time.” In Auschwitz, the first day was so bad that people thought they would rather die. Dressed in tatters, people very quickly “lost their human form.”²⁵⁰ No rest and the constant struggle for sleep and other bare essentials were part of the cruelest forms of torture that were experienced from the moment of entry into the camp. There was no space in the barracks, so people fought over a place to sit through the night because it was impossible to lie down. They fought over the covers, too. Space was so tight in the quarters that the prisoners were not able to stretch their feet. At the sound of wailing and screaming during the night, the kapos rushed in and beat the prisoners to death.²⁵¹

247 DEGOB, record number 478. A merchant from Budapest recalled that an Austrian prisoner implored him to hand over his valuables because the “x ray floor shows everything.” G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 3587.

248 É. B. male, DEGOB, record number 323.

249 G. F. female, DEGOB, record number 483.

250 K. A. male, DEGOB, record number 91; J. M. and S. J. females, DEGOB, record number 161; Dr. Sz. E. female, DEGOB, record number 3543; B. A. male, DEGOB, record number 3531.

251 DEGOB, record number 3491; Zoltán Vági and Gábor Kádár, *Táborok könyve: Magyarok a koncentrációs táborokban* (Budapest: Könyv & Kávé, 2017), 447.

WHAT DID THEY SEE?

“I saw the crematoria, and I could frequently smell the burning bones, but we were told that they were burning old clothes,” one survivor recalled.” That people were being gassed and burned in the middle of Europe was very hard to believe. “They could tell us in Auschwitz that there was a crematorium. We did not want to believe that something like this could be true. Our education, our whole being thought this was impossible.” When they were taken to the shower, a woman claimed that she saw a building with a sign saying “bath to kill Jews.” She did not know whether these so-called baths were the gas chambers.²⁵² Holocaust denial and distortion rests in part on the statement that the crematoria did not exist. Hundreds of witness testimonies confirm the reality of them as well as how those people made sense of a phenomenon that stretched the limits of the most tortured imagination.

A 19-year-old woman, G. P., saw flames and smoke, but it was not until later that she found out that these flames had come from the crematoria. Similarly, a medical doctor deported from Transylvania asserted that he had not actually seen the crematoria, but could “constantly feel the distinctive smell of burning flesh, and they saw the chimney burn day and night.”²⁵³ The Hungarian Jews would often see bodies haphazardly thrown on carts and being hauled towards the crematoria. Not only did they see the flames emanating from the chimney, they also “heard screaming and smelled the scent of burning bones and flesh.”²⁵⁴ That such things could exist was difficult to conceive. A woman saw an “enormous fire” when she had arrived in Auschwitz. She did not know what to make of it, and she tried to rationalize the sight as something that was being staged to make an impression on the new arrivals.²⁵⁵ The thought that this could be the result of burning human corpses had not occurred to her, even in the camp. She was not the only one who tried to find a rational explanation for the burning fire. A doctor asserted that she had not known of the gas chambers, but when she heard about them, did not believe what she was told anyway. “We constantly saw the fire, but we thought that it was a signal to avoid bombing

252 G. P. female, DEGOB record number 50, S. P. male, DEGOB, record number 636; K. H. female, DEGOB, record number 2950; S. L. female, DEGOB, record number 3490.

253 Ferenc Laczó pointed out that a relatively small number of the people interviewed by DEGOB testified to having seen the gas chambers and crematoria.

254 G. P. female, DEGOB, record number 50; W. S. and W. E. females, DEGOB, record number 2932; Dr. Sz. J. male, DEGOB, record number 2593.

255 Dr. K. E. female, DEGOB, record number 1746.

or that they were burning garbage.”²⁵⁶ The terrible truth would emerge soon. Camp veterans used the information to flaunt their disdain for and intimidate the Jews from Hungary. “On our first day,” Eva Shainblum recalled, “the Blockältester had cruelly said, ‘See the chimney smoking there? That could be your parents burning.’ We laughed at her, not wanting to believe it. Surely, she was making it up. Then, later, we found out she was right.”²⁵⁷ Those who were taken in the direction of the crematoria from the lager already knew where they were going. They cried and wailed while the SS beat them.²⁵⁸

Convincing first-hand evidence of the gas chambers emerges from the Hungarian recollections. A textile merchant from Ungvár had spoken to men who worked in the crematoria. They had told him that the gas chambers looked like a shower, except that instead of water, the showers released gas.²⁵⁹ The aforementioned ten women from Munkács offered firsthand testimony that, at the peak of extermination in 1944—the rapid destruction of the Jews from Hungary—the “crematoria could no longer process the large number of people. The bodies were dumped into large ditches lined with timber, then new layers of timber and bodies were added until the ditch was full. Then it was set on fire. This was the fire that we saw.”²⁶⁰

Survivors also had a sense of the extermination process. When interviewed, S. N. recounted that gas was coming from the showers and that after the “shower room” the corpses were cremated. M.S. told his interrogators in 1945 that to the best of his knowledge the children the elderly and the infirm were “killed with gas.” Three women, deported from Budapest and Nagyszöllös, were also struck with the mesmerizing sight of fire which was “like a terrible theater. We saw thin women standing in roll call who no longer resembled humans. We saw a large fire, but we did not know what it meant.” Black and white photographs left behind for posterity convey only a shadow of the people awaiting death. Hungarian recollections remind us of those human beings as they were. The crematoria “burned day and night... we could smell the stench of burning flesh... we heard the screams and crying.” An 18-year-old-girl saw the flames of death all the time. They were “constantly afraid of being taken to be burned.” Sometimes camp veterans disclosed to the new ar-

256 Dr. Sz. E. female, DEGOB, record number 3543.

257 Shainblum, *The Last Time*, 77.

258 Five labor servicemen, DEGOB, record number 1740.

259 S. N. male, DEGOB, record number 2.

260 Ten females from Munkács, DEGOB, record number 1.

rivals that the people who were sent to the left “would be poisoned by gas and then cremated in a furnace.”²⁶¹

Szerén Mermelstein and other women who had been deported from Szo-lyva knew a member of the Sonderkommando charged with throwing the corpses into the crematorium. Mermelstein recounted that, a few days before his death, Dr. Zoltán Péter, a doctor from Munkács who served in one of these special units, pleaded: “tell the world I have burned only those already doomed to die.” This was not true, reflected Mermelstein, as children, elderly people, and healthy youngsters were also burned. Members of the special squad, the ones whose duty it was to dispose of the dead after extracting their gold teeth, lived under exceptional conditions, and were hated by the other Jews. Members of the Sonderkommando were forced to choose between life and death. Some were indifferent, while others suffered from what they had been forced to do and escaped into drink. They were haunted by the bodies, blood, and screams and their sense of guilt.²⁶²

A survivor Sonderkommando member, István Popper, described himself as a “gas worker,” an executioners’ aid. In the first few days of his work in the crematorium, he passed out. Later, he grew accustomed to his grisly duties. “We grew so animal-like,” Popper recounted, that “we did our job as if we were working at a construction site.” Cremations went on “day and night.”²⁶³ F. S. recounted his harrowing experience as member of a Sonderkommando charged with burning corpses in pits: “There were days when 300 were burned. I burned a baby, Joel Landau, myself. I threw him into the fire, but I did not want to watch his corpse burn.... The stench was horrendous. Every day, a different person went down into the crematorium to clear out the ash. We had to clear the ashes of brothers and friends.” People went through intense physical and psychological anguish before they perished in the gas. Even in this dire situation, one could choose humanity over life. The son of a rabbi from Transylvania refused to help the Germans dispose of the bodies of their victims and ran into the electric fence whereupon the SS shot him.²⁶⁴ This was the exception, not the rule. Most people chose to live even if that life was ephemeral. To live another day was the best one could hope for. Getting out of hell alive was an incremental

261 K. A. male, DEGOB, record number 91; I. M. female, DEGOB, record number 103; Dr. Sz. J. male, DEGOB, record number 2593, five females from the Ravensbrück camp, DEGOB record number 63.

262 Wachsmann, *KL*, 352.

263 G. A. female, DEGOB, record number 3177.

264 R. B. female, DEGOB, record number 182.

process, another day of life could lead to one more, and so on. It was less a strategic than a spontaneous, spur of the moment, affair.

G. E. narrowly escaped gassing. To do so, he joined the perpetrators, becoming victim and victimizer in one person. He was about to be thrown onto a truck with hundreds of others. In order to save himself, he blurted out that he had been sent to help with the loading. He gave a graphic account of what happened next: “[W]e dumped the people and I had to watch my friends and relatives being taken, getting undressed, being given soap and towels, and we ushered the 2,000 people into the gas chamber.” They entered unsuspectingly, and he could hear “the wailing and screaming as the gas tortured them. Mothers were forced to see their children perish.” There was no mourning for the dead, no remorse, and no farewell. “We dumped the mountains of corpses onto a trolley, throwing them as if we were shoveling coal, and took them to the crematorium.” To survive, he was forced to become an accomplice to the horrors. “Driving, beating, and escorting the people was what I had to do.” The “work” bordered on madness.²⁶⁵ But he survived.

Recollections recorded shortly after liberation reveal that it was not impossible for deportees to be oblivious to the mass murder which had been taking place around them. A man, S. I., was separated from his family upon arrival in Auschwitz. When he returned to Hungary in 1945, he still asserted that he “did not know what had happened to them.” Two men from Munkács who had been separated from their family upon selection professed not to know what had happened to them when they were interviewed immediately after their return.²⁶⁶ A woman who returned from deportation claimed that she had had “no experience with crematoria.”²⁶⁷ Apparently, some of the survivors either did not know about the mass gassings or simply did not want to face reality. A teenage boy, who “fared well” under a Jewish kapo, claimed that he “saw nothing of the horrors.”²⁶⁸ The vast majority of returnees had no doubt about the function of the camps or the scale of the killing. In fact, some of them were convinced that even the general population around the camp had known about the crematoria.²⁶⁹

265 DEGOB, record number 90.

266 S. I. male, DEGOB, record number 9; M. S. and B. S. males, DEGOB, record number 48.

267 Three females and a male, DEGOB, record number 14; Three females from Visk, DEGOB, record number 47.

268 I. V. and V. I. females, DEGOB, record number 448; G. C., male, DEGOB, record number 489.

269 S. J. male, DEGOB, record number 540.

CAMP LIFE

The Hungarian experience represents the final, and perhaps most deadly, phase in the history of the camps. Perceptions of the outside world were determined by the observer's state of mind. The forest, which was dark and foreboding before liberation, was magical and picturesque after liberation.²⁷⁰ For now, "[e]verything was grey, no greenery, no grass, no birds."²⁷¹ By late 1944 and early 1945, conditions had become unbearable and deadly, even in camps that had not initially been designed as extermination camps. Incoming Jews were told in no uncertain terms that they had no hope: they "came through the gate and could exit only through the chimney."²⁷² They had few choices if they wanted to stay alive. When a man who was overweight complained that the striped pair of slacks he had been given was too small, the block leader told him, "you either lose weight or go to the crematorium." A doctor from Slovakia gave the new arrivals from Hungary a dire warning: "there is hardly any chance to clean yourselves, food will be scarce and will contain no nutrition or vitamins, water is not potable, work will be hard and lasts 16–18 hours with no rest. There are no doctors and no medication."²⁷³

Life in the camp was almost a contradiction in that being one of the few who had survived the deportations was only a phase on the tortuous journey to inevitable death. Death came in many forms, between the two extremes of death by fire and death by freezing. In Mauthausen, a group of 1,000 prisoners was hosed down with ice cold water until they collapsed, frozen. Their bodies were then taken to be burnt in the crematorium. This terrible symmetry caused painful injuries. After suffering the summer heat during the deportations, a man lost his toes to frostbite during the relentless winter of Buchenwald.²⁷⁴ Sometimes, the victims "got to chimney half burned," because the gas released in the chamber had not killed all of the victims. Some of them had awoken when they were put in the crematorium and then burned to death.²⁷⁵ After arrival "I was separated from my husband, parents, little brother, and my child. Three times, the child screamed after me 'Mom.'" She wanted to go get him, but the SS warned that they would shoot her.²⁷⁶

270 Heléna Huhák, "A koncentrációs tábor mint tértapasztalat: Bergen Belsen 1944–1945," *Századok*, vol. 153, no. 4 (2019): 651.

271 Zsuzsanna Fischer Spiro, *In Fragile Moments*, 11.

272 F. S. female, DEGOB, record number 2956.

273 H. M. male, DEGOB, record number 1853; G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 3587.

274 K. Z. male, DEGOB, record number 728.

275 R. É. and K. F. Females, DEGOB, record number 996.

276 G. F. females, DEGOB, record number 483.



Male prisoners deemed fit for work, shaved bald and stripped to shirt and trousers, in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, 1944. Fortepan /Lili Jacob

Posterity remembers the bloody dictatorships of the twentieth century for the countless lives they took and for the physical abuse they wrought upon their victims. Less ink is spilled on the irreparable psychological damage, which, more than anything else, forever ruined the lives of the survivors. Despite the rapid dehumanizing process of the concentration camps, the capacity for compassion could not be taken away. As one man remembered, “The screams and despair of the separated family members [in Auschwitz] were heart wrenching.” Separation from loved ones left a scar that never went away. A woman named D. M. recounted that she had been separated from her husband, her little brother and son-in-law. Afterwards, she saw them for a moment, but they were taken away, and she never discovered what happened to them.²⁷⁷

After selection, E. B. was given a hot bath and then forced to stand outside in the cold at night. Many people died in the process, meaning that, in the eyes of the camp leadership, murder of the people at their mercy trumped the value of the potential labor that could be extracted from these people.²⁷⁸ Barracks con-

²⁷⁷ D. M. female, DEGOB, record number 78.

²⁷⁸ E. B. DEGOB, record number 5.



Female prisoners deemed fit for work, shaved bald and wearing a uniform, in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, 1944. Fortepan /Lili Jacob

tained as many as 2,800 people. S. S. spent the first week in Auschwitz sharing a barrack with 1,100 others. There was no food the first day. His lot improved when he was transferred to another barrack, where the block elder was a Jew. It was raining constantly, and “we were terribly cold in our light clothing,” one of the survivors recalled.

Psychological suffering was equally bad. “We lived in constant fear,” she added.²⁷⁹ O. O. and S. R., two girls 16 and 18 years of age, were allowed to live. They were separated from their parents, de-loused, shaved, and put up in barracks together with 1,300 others. Like so many before them, they ceased to exist as individuals. Their clothes were taken, and they were given a long, striped dress and wooden clogs. The next day, they were given coffee and sausages. There was no work for three weeks, but there were endless roll calls and beatings meted out by the female guards.²⁸⁰ Every day, acts such as cleaning and sleeping formed part of the torture, as did the morning roll calls. Sleep gave no respite from

279 Ten females from Szolyva, DEGOB, record number 7; S. A. and L. I. males, DEGOB, record number 53; Three females and a male, DEGOB, record number 14.

280 Three females from Beregszász, DEGOB, record number 109.

the life which was a continuum of ordeals. There were three people for each bunk. “[W]e almost went crazy, as our sides went numb, but we couldn’t turn over.”²⁸¹ Cramped sleeping conditions pitted the inmates against one another. The “Don’t kick” and “take your foot off me” kinds of arguments prompted the SS to pour water on the people trying to sleep and chase them outside. “We had no place to sleep in Auschwitz, and many people went crazy because they were unable to rest.”²⁸²

In Ravensbrück, there was no place to lay down for a group of women for a fortnight. Later, they were given a spot to sleep near a toilet bucket in the filth that overflowed from it. Many of them “lost their minds in the ordeal”—there was insufficient sanitation for the incontinent women. Tight space, stifling air, and the constant din made it hard to sleep in Dachau.²⁸³

Physical degradation eroded compassion and solidarity, lessening the chances of emerging alive. Constant diarrhea induced by poor sanitation, lack of medical aid, and filthy food forced the prisoners to be constantly concerned with their excrement and robbed them of their dignity. In addition, the sight of people covered in their own feces made them appear less than human, thereby eliciting revulsion on the part of their peers. How could they then count on their solidarity and help? Not allowing prisoners to dispose of their waste properly further atomized camp society. At the whim of the female overseers, who constantly beat the women under their oversight, the prisoners could be barred from the latrines even though they were all suffering from diarrhea. They were beaten when they soiled themselves. Physical agony added to great embarrassment and psychological suffering.²⁸⁴ People were hard pressed to provide for their basic sanitation needs.

According to Szidonia Welber, lack of sanitation was one of the greatest hardships. There were 500 taps for 30,000 or 40,000 people, she recalled. As people were pushing their way to get to the water outlet, a girl was trampled to death. Jews were not dirty because they were filthy by nature, as claimed in the Nazi propaganda. Filth was imposed on them by the conditions in the camps. Sometimes, the water spigots were closed. “I suffered terribly from the lack of sanitation. I loved cleanliness,” a woman from Beregkövesd remembered.²⁸⁵ In Ravensbrück, prisoners were not allowed to relieve themselves, even though they

281 Females from Munkács and Szolyva, DEGOB record number 1 and 7.

282 J. M. and J. S. females, DEGOB, record number 161; S. H. females, DEGOB, record number 2140.

283 B. K. and B. Z. females, DEGOB, record number 2602; L. K. male, DEGOB, record number 34.

284 S. L. male, DEGOB, record number 20.

285 Ten females from Munkács, DEGOB, record number 1; H. R. female, DEGOB, record number 19.

had diarrhea and were denied a bath, which was the prerogative of the German prisoners.²⁸⁶ Some memoirs suggest that the violation of dignity by the lack of cleanliness induced an effort to endure.²⁸⁷ Among the many recollections I have reviewed, I have found no evidence of this sentiment

The statement that “most prisoners disliked roll call, but the feeling was not universal” was made on the basis of experience in Ravensbrück.²⁸⁸ This was an understatement vis à vis the experience of the Hungarians. In other words, the practice of having camp inmates line up in the morning for a sort of roll call, “belonged to the horrors of the camp.” The “most profound memory” was to “stand stark naked under the blazing sun and hold bricks towards the sky.”²⁸⁹ Roll call could last from 3 a.m. to as long as 10 a.m. Mornings were dark and cold, and only the “fearful fire of the crematoria gave light.”²⁹⁰ Those who crouched in the rain or stepped out of line were beaten. Sometimes, people would pass out. The guards would pour water on them, beat them up, and force them to continue standing. People who looked sick got sent to the gas chamber, the prisoners pinched themselves so as not to look sick.²⁹¹ “We had to stand in rain and snow with heads bald and uncovered in freezing cold, weakened by starvation.” The whole procedure “was terrible torture and suffering.” In Melk, the morning roll call lasted from 3:30 to 7 a.m., but there was another roll call at night which could take another four hours. In the meantime, the kapos and block leaders struck inmates with rubber truncheons. Once, a whole block spent all night standing.²⁹² Failure to appear for roll call was punishable by death. While waiting, the rest of the inmates were forced to kneel, holding a stone in the air.²⁹³ When a person passed out, the guards denied water, saying they headed for the crematorium anyway. The roll call “in the early morning and at night served... the purpose of systematically liquidating us.”²⁹⁴ Roll calls were not meant to ensure order and discipline. They were, rather, part of the killing process, and gratified the sadistic proclivities of the camp personnel.

Surviving the roll call required stamina and determination; surviving selection was a function of determination and individual initiative. The most terrify-

286 DEGOB, record number 7. For conditions in Ravensbrück see Jack G. Morrison, *Ravensbrück – Everyday Life in a Women’s Concentration Camp* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000), 174–77.

287 See about this Des Pres, *The Survivor*, 70.

288 Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 111.

289 K. R. and K. S. females, DEGOB, record number 126; H. J. female, DEGOB, record number 3542.

290 Six females from Beregszász, DEGOB, record number 18.

291 DEGOB, record number 1.

292 M. H. male, DEGOB, record number 40; S. S., male, DEGOB, record number 13.

293 Three females, DEGOB, record number 82.

294 J. M. and J. S. females, DEGOB, record number 161; É. B. male, DEGOB, record number 323.

ing aspect of camp life was the constant selection of prisoners deemed unfit for work and therefore slated to die, a threat and very real possibility which hung over the wretched people like the sword of Damocles. If someone was selected to work, this did not mean that he or she was exempted from gassing. A resolve that was strong and the willpower to look healthy and human were required to pass the deadly examination.

In Birkenau, Mengele conducted selections every four weeks. Sometimes, he checked knees or made the women jump over a ditch to see if they were suitable for work. The largest selections were made on Jewish holidays. Most people knew the fate that awaited them. A homemaker from Técső asserted that Mengele conducted a selection daily by pointing a baton at those who were incapable of work and were thus slated to die. Mengele always appeared suddenly, without forewarning. His arrival was “accompanied by terrible fear, screaming, and shouting. People tried to hide under the bed or wherever they could in their terror.”²⁹⁵ A wave of fear swept through the camp when the selection committee approached. S. R. remembered three or four selections a week, “so we were constantly trembling and tried to hide from him.” “We were terrified of Dr. Mengele, we saw him several times a day... Sometimes he came for selection in the night.”²⁹⁶

Mengele was obsessed with the Nazi quest for racial and bodily perfection. Even the slightest flaw on the body, such as acne, was enough for someone to be slated for gassing.²⁹⁷ The fear of Mengele’s coming amplified the will to live. “They constantly kept coming to ask who was sick, and we knew that anyone deemed ill would immediately be sent to the gas... I pricked my face well so that Mengele would think I was fit for work.”²⁹⁸ The writer Ernő Szép expressed a common sentiment when he said, “I wouldn’t swallow poison even to avoid being tossed into the gas chamber.”²⁹⁹ Every minute, life decisions needed to be made. Secretly, “Jewish doctors poisoned the newborns so that the mothers could live.”³⁰⁰

The Hungarian Jews were abused by their superiors and, more surprisingly, even by their fellow prisoners, whether they were healthy or ill, for whatever they did or did not do. Policing the prisoners was one thing, but the camp staff, both men and women, went way beyond that in maximizing the number of

295 DEGOB, record number 14; S. R. female, DEGOB, record number 112.

296 S. R. female, DEGOB, record number 56.

297 Four females, DEGOB, record number 102.

298 K. M. female, DEGOB, record number 2954.

299 Ernő Szép, *The Smell of Humans: A Memoir of the Holocaust in Hungary* (Budapest: CEU Press, 1994), 27.

300 DEGOB, record number 7.

people they murdered. The “Aryan” German kapo in the kitchen of the camp in Gleiwitz was decent, but the Sonderkommando who worked outside was constantly tormented by a *Lagerführer* named Maul. Maul “found it hard to swallow seeing a healthy Jew, and the more he sent to the crematorium, the happier he was.” His methods varied. Sometimes, he would have Jews shot by SS guards under the pretext that they were trying to escape. Sometimes, he would unleash his dog to tear prisoners apart or would tie healthy people to a bench and have them beaten until they passed out.³⁰¹ Camp staff were allowed to give vent to their sadistic desires without reprisal. In Auschwitz, one of the cooks was a sadistic monster who would deny inmates supper if he was in a bad mood. He served extra food to Jewish women who beat their fellow female Jewish prisoners at their “most sensitive places” at his command.³⁰² Especially the chief female warden liked to torture the girls when they were on their way to work.³⁰³

One would think that getting transferred to another camp from Auschwitz would be a lucky turn of events. This was often the case, but prisoners could end up in one of the many other camps where the conditions were just as bad. H. Á. was first sent to Buchenwald and from there to the notorious workcamp of Mittelbau-Dora. He described it as a “death camp” where only 80 people survived of the 1,500 that arrived. Labor was extremely hard and physical abuse was constant.³⁰⁴ The inmates rose at 3 a.m., and roll call was ordered in the presence of SS men and their dogs, which were unleashed on anyone who stepped out of line. SS men and Polish kapos oversaw the work, where beatings were constant. Two survivors thought that only 250 people out of the 1,000 in their transport managed to stay alive.³⁰⁵ Due to the terrible conditions, more than one third of the prisoners perished. Sleeping quarters were located in tunnels. Wooden bunks were four-tiers high. Matrasses were lice ridden. The air was filled with the stench of urine, excrement, vomit, and rotting corpses. Prisoners lost any sense of day and night.³⁰⁶

This experience was not unique. Ehrlich, a part of the Mittelbau-Dora camp complex, was just as bad. Vilmos Jakubovics arrived with 30 others from his town, but he was the only one to see the end of the war.³⁰⁷ Water was turned off for weeks. There was no chance for prisoners to clean themselves or their

301 M. S. and B. S. males, DEGOB, record number 48.

302 Five females from the Ravensbrück camp, DEGOB, record number 63.

303 F. G. female, DEGOB, record number 3491.

304 G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 93.

305 Three males, DEGOB, record number 87.

306 Wachsmann, *KL*, 446.

307 Wachsmann, *KL*, 473.

clothes. They got some soup, bread, and rotten potatoes. They rose at 3 a.m. and stood for roll call until 6. The workday lasted twelve hours with a one-hour break. Prisoners were also forced to run five kilometers to work and then back again in wooden shoes tied to their feet with wire. He claimed that 150–200 people died daily. People who had reported sick were killed.³⁰⁸

In contrast, a medical doctor, Sz. J., described the camp at Bunslau as “the best in Germany.” The workdays lasted only eight hours, and Sunday was set aside for rest, and physical abuse was banned. To his misfortune, he was transferred to Mittelbau-Dora. After they arrived in Mittelbau-Dora, he and his fellow prisoners were constantly beaten. After “two days in this hell,” Sz. J. was taken to Bergen-Belsen, which was inundated with corpses and lice. They were liberated a few days later. “Otherwise, I would not have survived.” Prisoners were charged with carrying the decomposing dead to their mass graves. Many of these deaths were caused by torture, and not the awful conditions themselves. Almost all the corpses had suffered terrible trauma. They had had their eyes gauged out and their skulls broken, and, in some cases, broken bones broke the flesh and stuck out.³⁰⁹

Buchenwald, which was the largest camp complex after Auschwitz was evacuated, may have been no better. The zoo animals there got preferential treatment: meat, jam, milk and honey, as well as the meat meant for the prisoners.³¹⁰ The prisoners “got beatings instead of food. There were mountains of corpses from hunger and suffering.” The sick were given lethal injections to induce heart failure. The crematoria “worked day and night.” According to an eyewitness, the infirm were taken into a large hall, told to stand next to the wall, and their height was measured. A doctor reported the person’s height, and the next moment he or she was shot in the head through a hole in the wall. Then the corpses were disposed of through a trap door.³¹¹ A 14-year-old boy from Szege, Dov Landau, summed up the components of terror: he felt “terrible hunger, a perpetual sense of fear, the smoke and smell of the crematoria, heaps of

308 V. Á and V. Á. males, cousins, DEGOB, record number 83; G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 90.

309 G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 93; Dr. Sz. J. male, DEGOB, record number 2593. Treatment may have been relatively good because the kapos were Jews. DEGOB, record number 95. This person recalled doing hard work and being given awful food.

310 Vági and Kádár, *Táborok könyve*, 122–23.

311 M. I. male, DEGOB, record number 177; B. V. male, DEGOB, record number 226. Two doctors asserted that the majority of the infirm were murdered by lethal injection in the Krankenrevier of the camp in Gross Rosen. Dr. N. Gy, male, Dr. G. S. male, DEGOB, record number 324 and 3587. Murder by injection was confirmed also by K. E. male, DEGOB, record number 327.

half-dead Jewish skeletons piled up in wagons, the corpses of Gypsies who had been beaten to death piled up in a mound.”³¹²

One person who was transferred to Bremen was overjoyed at having been treated as a human being and stressed the survival of human bonds. He was given a separate bed with covers and warm food. “This was my most beautiful camp memory if this is the appropriate word to use. There was a French captive who gave us a package every day.”³¹³ Most descriptions of the camp personnel are unidimensional. This is not surprising, since the authorities appeared to the inmates only in their roles as human brutes. Perceptive prisoners saw their human side. Eyewitness accounts reveal that evil can take many shapes. A woman in her mid-40s recounted that in Berlin there was a lager hierarchy, with the *Chef* and some good-looking SS men “who tried to appeal to the women, sometimes successfully.” The *Lagerführer* was a “charming dandy,” “handsome and well-dressed,” but at times he could be a “raving madman”. “After all, he wasn’t a monster.” The females were much worse. The *Aufseherin* was a beautiful young woman who treated people with brutality and disdain. She hit and kicked them. A woman remembered as Raschke was one of the “savage animals” capable of beating people to death.³¹⁴

Hard as it may have been to endure, the bodily part of suffering may not have been as difficult as the psychological. Prisoners were devastated by the sight of the bodies of their fellow inmates being carried out of the so-called *Krankenrevier* and piled into mounds. First, the dead were stacked. Then came those who had a little life left in them. They and their observers knew their fate. They reconciled themselves to it. The barely living were driven naked to the top of the pile of corpses.³¹⁵

NUTRITION: BARELY ENOUGH TO DIE

In Auschwitz “food was so bad we threw it up immediately.” The calorie gap between the often inedible, low-calorie nourishment and the energy invested in hard physical labor led to high mortality. The meal the prisoners were provided with was, according to their recollections, some kind of grass, filthy, full

312 Cited in Szabolcs Szita, *Trading in Lives: Operations of the Jewish Relief and Rescue Committee in Budapest, 1944–1945* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2005), 122.

313 DEGOB, record number 2590.

314 Dr. Sz. E. female, DEGOB, record number 3543.

315 F. G. female, DEGOB, record number 3491.

of sand and pebbles. “The plate was rusty and filthy, and the food emanated such a stench that we were unable to put it in our mouths.” The “food,” which could be sauce made from nettle with rotting, maggoty pearl barley, was served in filthy bowls which “we had to eat with our bare hands like animals.” The prisoners heard that lunch contained slow-killing poison, but some people were unable to fight their hunger and ate it nonetheless.³¹⁶ After the abysmal fare in Auschwitz, the workcamp in Hertine brought much needed, albeit short-lived, relief. The prisoners got bread, salami, and margarine for the transfer. In the camp, they slept in their own beds and were given salted potatoes and coffee, which made the place seem like “heaven.” Then came a rude awakening: the supervisor woman lined them up and slapped their faces.³¹⁷

There was a gaping chasm between the food given to the prisoners, which was barely fit for human consumption, and the luxurious conditions of the lager’s masters. In Dachau, prisoners found that the pantry belonging to the German troops contained “the largest abundance of the most delicious food.” The fare in Birkenau was equally repugnant. The soup was full of moldy bread, matchsticks, and bits of paper. Six people were given one piece of bread every day.

Even the miserable mealtime was no respite from abuse. Prisoners had to fight for their food and drink, and withstand punishment. Thirst, hunger and physical punishment forced the inmates to shed their humanity at mealtime. In the Auschwitz workcamp, two Polish kapos armed with a whip and a club respectively hit the prisoners running past them with their plates. If the prisoners spilled their food, they were given extra punishment.³¹⁸ Thirst was as harrowing as hunger. “Since I could speak German, I was placed by the water outlet under the condition that I beat the others. I could never do that, but I shouted my head off. I was unable to bear what my comrades who lost control of themselves were doing in this terrible situation. They dipped the buckets used as a toilet in the tank that they also used for drinking. If we dared go towards the puddle for water, they [the guards] used their machine guns on us. The top of the puddle was clean, only the bottom was muddy. Either the machine gun or the infected water claimed victims.”³¹⁹

316 S. G. female, S. R. female, DEGOB, record number 2915, DEGOB, record number 2949; G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 3587; F. G. female, DEGOB, record number 3491.

317 Ten females from Munkács, DEGOB, record number 1.

318 M. S. male, DEGOB, record number 4; DEGOB, record number 7; G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 3587.

319 F. G. female, DEGOB, record number 3491.

Hunger led a desperate, selfish struggle for survival. An 18-year-old seamstress from a small village confessed that “we were completely bereft of our humanity, suffering brought out the worst from us. The Germans really knew how to do this, they slowly killed our spirit and developed the human beasts. We did not aid each other we were all saving our own life. How strong the will to live was in us, in those who saw the smoking crematoria.”³²⁰

According to Nicholas Wachsmann, even in the warped world of the Lager, “There were some unwritten rules. Under the prisoners’ informal code, the theft of bread belonging to someone else was a sin.”³²¹ This was not what the Hungarians experienced. Rules, particularly unwritten ones, were made to be broken, and they *were* broken by the famished inmates of the camp world. Hunger too, was useful in social atomization; it pitted one famished prisoner against the other. Jews in particular were fair game for everyone else. Stealing food from others was a prerequisite for survival. There was no solidarity, only the selfish desire to live to see the next day.

Szerén Marmelstein and her ten comrades who got out of Birkenau alive admitted having taken the food from transports of people who were destined for death. This is confirmed by another former inmate, who claimed that there was “no human emotion left in us,” and “we used our minds solely for the purpose of figuring out how to steal one more decagram of bread.”³²² In Geisling, German kapos “stole the food” from the Jewish inmates.³²³ The same was recorded in Oranienburg, Sachsenhausen, and Ravensbrück, the Poles stole the rations from their fellow Jewish prisoners.³²⁴ This phenomenon was widespread. In the workcamp at Rhemsdorf, “the Christian *Vorarbeiter*s and the Roma *Lagerältester* stole most of the food from” the Jews. A merchant from Budapest reported that in Auschwitz, the camp elders, the clerk, and prisoners in higher positions stole everything including food.”³²⁵ There was no code that was not transgressed. Olga Weiss was cold in the winter. She offered food for a jumper to the Roma prisoners, who took her bread and ran away with it.³²⁶ Theft of food was a prerequisite for staying alive and everybody did it irrespective of national origin. It was severely punished but no one could put a stop to it.

320 S. G. female, DEGOB, record number 576.

321 Wachsmann, *KL*, 498.

322 Ten females from Szolyva, DEGOB, record number 7; F. S. male, DEGOB, record number 74.

323 G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 298.

324 K. M. male, DEGOB, record number 391; N. J. female, DEGOB, record number 1747; Dr. Sz. E. female, DEGOB, record number 3543.

325 Dr. K. I. male, DEGOB, record number 3588; G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 3587.

326 Vági and Kádár, *Táborok könyve*, 479.

A Polish boy was hung for looting bread in Sachsenhausen. He was left on the gallows for hours with the inscription “plunderer.”³²⁷ Food theft was also a “general custom” in Dornau, where the *Zugführer* shot a boy for the crime.³²⁸ Death by shooting was an acceptable risk if one was trying to avoid starvation. A chef was a master of life and death. In Bergen-Belsen, a boy crept into the kitchen and stole a carrot. The chef saw him and slapped him in the face, drawing blood. The boy fell on his knee and begged for his life, but the cook shot him nonetheless.³²⁹ M. L. was starving in Bergen-Belsen, where there was no food or water. Starvation led to theft, he was beaten to “half-death” for taking four carrots. Famine became so intolerable that “one of our comrades dissected the corpse of another comrade and started to consume his liver.”

People ate whatever they could to stay alive. In Ebensee, people “lived like animals,” feeding on grass. They “fell like flies.”³³⁰ One survivor summed up the effect of famine: people could get used to the torture, “but we could not stand hunger. It is like cutting into living flesh, to lose all human dignity, to lose sensibility to family and love... to eat anything regardless of the price.”³³¹ Death through famine and labor was interrelated. People worked hard to avoid punishment and reprisal and the harder they worked the larger their calorie needs became. This was a deadly equation because they had no chance to satisfy it.

DEATH BY LABOR

The formula death through labor is attributed to the tradeoff between the Nazi desire to liquidate European Jewry and the growing thirst for labor for the German war effort. However, this dubious invention can be attributed to the Soviet Union, where camp authorities used nutrition to extract maximal effort from the prisoners and to get rid of the part of the GULAG population that was unfit for labor, the result being an immense number of deaths and the decimation of those who were strong enough for hard physical work.³³² Jews were brought to the Nazi camps, however, first and foremost to be killed, even if this meant

327 H. M. male, DEGOB, record number 1853.

328 Dr. Sz. J. male, DEGOB, record number 2593.

329 K. E. female, DEGOB, record number 1746.

330 M. L. male, DEGOB, record number 54; L. G. female, DEGOB, record number 92; F. H. male, DEGOB, record number 96.

331 Cited in Szita, *Gyógyíthatatlan sebek*, 176.

332 See about this Golfo Alexopoulos, *Illness and Inhumanity in Stalin's Gulag* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017).

murdering someone who could have been valuable as a source of labor.³³³ Germans internalized the idea of the final solution as biological annihilation. In the words of an SS guard to a victim he had just struck, “you are a filthy Jew and for this reason we have sentenced you all to die.”³³⁴

German scholar Jens-Christian Wagner has argued that “The program of economic exploitation of the camp workforce and extermination were, at least potentially, contradictory... this contradiction was limited solely to the question of how quickly the prisoner died. In the eyes of the SS, forced labor never really meant salvation but only a deferral of the process of extermination.”³³⁵ In fact, deadly torture and work became intertwined and, in many instances, the former enjoyed primacy over the latter. Magda Schwartz performed forced labor in Plaszow, and the work had no “rhyme or reason.” The prisoners were forced to carry bricks up and down a mountain all day. The whole procedure had one purpose only: “to torture us.” Apart from this, it was “unproductive and senseless.” Later, some inmates were given real work, but initially camps struggled to find sensible employment for the large numbers of Hungarian Jews brought to them. For Fanni Stern, the workday started at 3 a.m. and lasted up to 14 hours a day. She suffered “indescribably” under the harsh conditions. Her clothing was tattered and sparse, her shoes were bad, and she had to work with her head uncovered, even in torrential rain, in a situation in which the workers were not allowed to walk, only to run.³³⁶

Death through labor could come with pain. “Work was torture,” and often prisoners were given tasks which were senseless, such as carrying stones from one place to another. In fact, in most places, torture came before work. Mortality was very high. In one camp, which “employed” 600 Hungarian Jews, only 250 were alive in February 1945. Even though Flossenburg functioned as a work-camp, for some prisoners there was no work, only physical punishment. The block leader killed several people a day with his bare hands. Others stood outside in the cold endlessly while being beaten mercilessly. No one got a bite of food without having endured some kind of torture or harm.³³⁷

333 Randolph Braham has pointed out that Germany was in bad need of the labor that could have been (an in some cases was provided) by Hungarian Jews in the spring of 1944.

334 E. S. male, DEGOB, record number 1808.

335 Jens-Christian Wagner, “Work and Extermination in the Concentration Camps,” in Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann, eds., *The Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 127–48.

336 Vági and Kádár, *Táborok könyve*, 456.

337 H. S. male, DEGOB, record number 2137.

Ravensbrück prisoners were woken up at 3 a.m. They then stood for roll call, walked to work, which took three hours, toiled in the quarry until 6 p.m., and walked back again.³³⁸ The six-hour roll call and walk in advance of the work were hardly conducive to productive work in the subsequent shift in the coal mine. A carpenter worked in a coal mine where several people were beaten to death. Only five out of 100 people in his transport survived the ordeal. This is hardly surprising, as the daily menu consisted of 250 grams of bread and one liter of soup.³³⁹ In Wolfsburg, work was hard, there was very little to eat, and the quarters were cramped. There was no rest even after work. The laborers, who were at the complete mercy of their guards, were forced to perform gymnastic exercises, such as squats, jumping and rolls.³⁴⁰ Forced laborers in Cracow carried heavy wooden beams and if they stopped the guards unleashed their dogs on them. “We were so scared we did not even dare to look back.”³⁴¹ The weak and hungry prisoners who usually suffered from the wounds their guards, kapos, and other superiors had inflicted on them, were unfit for work. A man got a huge kick in the shin during roll call. He clenched his fists and went to work anyway because he knew that going to the infirmary meant inevitable death.³⁴² So did the woman, whose hand was beaten blue and swollen in retaliation if she hammered the mine the wrong way.³⁴³

Getting to work was an ordeal.³⁴⁴ An *Aufseherin* forced a group of prisoners to cross the rails as the train was approaching, five of them were hit and perished.³⁴⁵ People setting out to work in the chemical factory named Brabak were forced to walk through broken glass barefoot. The same experience was recorded by a survivor from Auschwitz. If this were not enough, they were bludgeoned with rubber truncheons along the way.³⁴⁶ Work performance may not have been the priority in Berga an der Elster, where the prisoners tied a blanket around themselves to protect themselves from the morning cold. If they were caught doing so, the kapos would beat them “literally half to death.” The workers had no underwear or winter coats, and they were “falling like flies.”³⁴⁷ The trip back from

338 B. M. male, DEGOB, record number 30; B. J. male, DEGOB, record number 69.

339 M. L. male, DEGOB, record number 54.

340 F. P. male, DEGOB, record number 86.

341 S. R. and K. H. males, DEGOB, record number 105.

342 M. P. male, DEGOB, record number 3269.

343 F. S. female, DEGOB, record number 483.

344 It was described as “torture.” H. Á. male DEGOB, record number 80.

345 S. R. female, DEGOB, record number 112.

346 V. A., male, V. A. male [cousins] DEGOB, record number 83; S. C. male, DEGOB, record number 363.

347 S. M. male, DEGOB, record number 3553.



Lunch distribution for forced labor servicemen, 1944. Fortepan/Schächter László

work could be equally arduous. In Javosno, after the prisoners had been forced to work through the day carrying 160-pound iron rods for twelve hours and had endured the constant bludgeoning which the Polish kapos had been meting out, the SS unleashed their dogs on them while they were walking home.³⁴⁸

A man from Budapest in his early 30s was transferred to the Auschwitz work-camp. He was put on the Bauhof Kommando, which comprised 500 workers. Including the oberkapos, kapos, unterkapos, and vorarbeiters he counted 90 superiors, “each armed with sticks and other instruments of torture.” They set off for work to the sound of music, and they greeted the SS guard by taking off their hats. No work could be finished, “because the point was to perform incredibly hard physical labor without any purpose.” One worker sometimes carried 120–130 cement bags weighing 50 kilos each daily. In the summer heat, the flying cement powder burnt into people’s skin, which peeled off like plaster.³⁴⁹ Their quarters in Auschwitz, two-story buildings with windows, were clean and had washrooms and toilets downstairs. The buildings were connected by sidewalks

348 H. M. male, DEGOB, record number 1853.

349 S. C. male, DEGOB, record number 3587.

with small plots of flowers between them but the electrified fence reminded the victims of the stark reality of their situation. On Sundays, prisoners were allowed to speak to one another in their free time. Usual topics of discussion included work, family, and beatings suffered at the hands of the overseers.

The prisoners were physically abused even when they worked in civilian projects. In most cases, the beating was meted out by kapos and SS guards, and even the civilians. In Bochum Werke, A. G. thought the civilian “masters” beat them more brutally than the SS. Laborers in Melk were constantly struck with dogwhips, rubber tubes, and planks while working.³⁵⁰ Injury or illness was no cause to skip work. M. H., a 26-year-old baker from Nagykaroly (today Carei, Romania) recounted that after he got out of the hospital, where he was “treated” for an infection on his foot caused by a rusty nail, they went to work in only wooden shoes, which caused his feet to freeze. Sometimes, they would be woken up in the middle of the night to be shaved and then woken again at 4 a.m. The work done by the prisoners was often not valuable enough to keep the laborers nourished. In Ebensee, prisoners toiled in a quarry, but they were not fed and were reduced to eating grass. People were fatally weakened by starvation. M. H., who had witnessed kapos beating their underlings to death with their bare hands, watched as two brothers made conversation, and then one of them suddenly died.³⁵¹ The brutal regimen of the camp system was in effect at workplaces. A 50-year-old cobbler was terrified of going to work as “there was a Gypsy among the kapos and woe to the one he got hold of. Not a single day passed that he did not beat somebody to death.”³⁵²

Conditions were sometimes better for prisoners working for the war industry. Women transferred from Ravensbrück, where they had been abused and starved, were given better food in the Messerschmidt plant in Burgau. Even the civilians brought them food, although it was too late to save many of them.³⁵³ Skilled work was no guarantee for survival. S. A. worked in an aircraft plant, but his lot was “terrible.” They toiled for twelve hours a day and many people starved to death.³⁵⁴ In Neustadt, the SS guards were elderly men who treated the workers decently. The workers were given proper food and their quarters had central heating and bathrooms. Conditions varied, reflecting the reality that at

350 G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 1808; P. E. female, DEGOB, record number 31; M. H. male, DEGOB, record number 40.

351 M. H. male, DEGOB, record number 40.

352 S. W. male, DEGOB, record number 62.

353 B. K. and B. Z. females, DEGOB, record number 2602.

354 M. L. male, DEGOB, record number 54.

least to some extent they were dispositional. Workers, including Jewish workers, reportedly had central heating and separate beds in their quarters in Teplitz, where they were employed in a bomb factory.³⁵⁵ Conditions for a skilled mechanic in Fallersleben, on the other hand, were almost ideal. He was working on the German rocket, V-1, and the prisoners sometimes knew more than their overseers. Their expertise was acknowledged with coffee, warm food, clean beds, and covers. "We had it so good we thought we were in America."

But their luck soon ran out. They were transferred to Mittelbau-Dora, where the Germans did not know he was Jewish, but his expertise was appreciated.³⁵⁶ One individual could make all the difference. In Weisswasser, the plant owner selected the women he wanted to work for him. "He was a very good man." He needed 300 women "with beautiful hands and good eyes" to work as seamstresses. The man made sure to keep the siblings together, even when one of them was unsuitable for the job. They lived in decent barracks and were treated as human beings, with plates and cutlery to use when they ate and normal beds to sleep on. Even in a relatively decent place such as this, there was hunger: the women collected rotten carrots from the garbage dump.³⁵⁷

It is argued that more women survived than men. This was not true for the Hungarians. Most prisoners were employed in hard physical labor, and the employers drew no distinction between males and females. This in part explains that female mortality among the Hungarian Jews was as high, perhaps even higher, than the male. Women were forced to carry bags of cement and "worked like the strongest animals." Five hundred women from Hungary perished in a bomb factory due to the hardships and lack of food.³⁵⁸ Three high-school students worked in an arms factory in Geisling. They were strong and did "men's work," hauling iron all day.³⁵⁹ A woman, an electrician by profession, identified as B. B., worked in a coalmine with a shovel weighing 30 pounds and then in a Sonderkommando, burning corpses.³⁶⁰

The labor force was expendable for I. G. Farben, where the slave laborers dealt with the production of Buna, an artificial fuel. The workday consisted of twelve hours of excruciating toil, without a moment of rest. Coal dust and poisonous fumes made the air hard to inhale, and the heat was unbearable. The

355 K. M. female, DEGOB, record number 42; S. H. and H. R. females, DEGOB, record number 46; S. R. female, H. E. female, DEGOB, record number 51.

356 J. H. male, DEGOB, record number 81.

357 S. H. female, DEGOB, record number 2140.

358 R. J. and D. T. females, DEGOB, record number 115.

359 H. R., H. S., H. H. all female. DEGOB, record number 769.

360 R. B. female, DEGOB, record number 182.

company banned roll call, which would have made it harder to work. Despite the hard labor, the food that was provided was hardly adequate. It consisted of 250 grams of bread, one liter of soup with no fat or salt, 20 grams of Wurst, and the same amount of margarine a day. A low-calorie diet like that would lead to inevitable death in time. Diarrhea killed many of the inmates in a matter of two or three days. Rest was almost impossible at night, as the barracks were not large enough to hold all the men. Kapos beat them to cram them into the tight space, and some of them died in the process. They tried to break out, but they were all killed.³⁶¹

Laborers were expendable, their supply being seemingly endless. Several people never even made it to the coal mine in Jassovicz in Upper Silesia. Although it took only 20 minutes of grueling walking to get to the work site, anyone unable to keep up the pace was shot dead. The local Germans spat on the corpses. H. V. weighed only 40 kilos and was unable to use the 25-kilo chisel in the mine. A Polish overseer who had a Hungarian wife took pity on him and sent him to help pack corpses of deceased workers stored in an underground hall. There were already 10 bodies, and the “supply” was constantly replenished. The work was unbearable, and when his fellow worker could not take it anymore, the SS shot him. Initially, they tried to pack the corpses neatly, but the SS had no patience for sentimentality, and they told H. V. and his coworker to throw them one on top of the other.³⁶²

Jewish labor in German projects was but a prelude to a humiliating death for the amusement of the aggressors. In Gross Rosen, prisoners were forced to walk on a plank with a cement bag on their backs. Some of them fell to their deaths. Beatings which sometimes lasted for hours were combined with excruciating work in the Langenstein camp. Fifty-kilo bags were carried down a ramp for ten hours a day, the motto being “if the bag was *caput* so was the person.” Many young teenagers collapsed under the heavy load.³⁶³ In the dark underground caverns of Dora “physical exercise” was combined with abuse. While their guards were constantly beating the prisoners with rods “as thick as a human arm,” the inmates were forced to carry planks to the construction site on a run. Their wooden clogs came off, but the prisoners were never allowed to stop. Some passed out and some died, but those who did not “cried and asked to be killed.”

361 F. L. male, student, DEGOB, record number 196.

362 H. V. male, DEGOB, record number 237.

363 N. J. male, DEGOB record number 653; R. V. male, DEGOB, record number 952.

The guards took great delight in humiliating the prisoners. This was the priority in Muhldorf, where the workers were forced to jog with cement bags on their backs for twelve hours a day without stopping. In Allach, the amusement was heightened by the fact that the prisoners had to carry the bags of cement on a narrow plank next to an electrified wire. By the time they got home, they hardly recognized one another. Those who succumbed to illness were sent to the gas chambers. The guards murdered those who could not take it anymore.³⁶⁴ In a few days, the SS announced that there would be no more beatings, because they were satisfied with the Jews' work. A few days later, new work was assigned, and the guards again began abusing the prisoners. The SS unleashed their German shepherds, who tore chunks of flesh from the inmates' bodies. The regimen was followed by a three-hour roll call, and anyone who tried to sit down was beaten. Some prisoners volunteered to clean and were subjected to 50 strikes with rubber truncheons after a day's work. The general feeling was "that there is no God in the sky."³⁶⁵ Death through labor gained meaning in Melk, where those who did not meet the daily work quota were beaten to death.³⁶⁶ If truth be told, civilians also partook in murder. In the Hermann Goering Werke, "the German Meisters took part in the beatings to death alongside the SS."³⁶⁷

Any attempts to provide workers with protection were prohibited and punished. In the bitter cold of minus 20 degrees, the women clandestinely tied blankets around their bodies underneath their meager clothing. Even GULAG prisoners, who were given special boots for the winter, were better equipped to withstand the cold than the prisoners in the Nazi camps. If prisoners were discovered to have taken such measures, they were beaten.³⁶⁸ Nor was any pity was shown for the infirm or the elderly.

The commandant of the workcamp in Wusterigdorf was particularly cruel to these categories of prisoners, and insisted he had the right to determine who qualified as sick, even though he had no medical training.³⁶⁹ As in every phase of persecution, inhuman conditions at the workplace were not inevitable. Civilian workers at the Argus plant were very good to their concentration camp workmates, smuggling in food for them on a regular basis. They even brought newspapers. According to one survivor, it was first and foremost the communist

364 N. J. male, DEGOB, record number 22; R. V. male, DEGOB record number 952.

365 DEGOB, record number 22; L. K. male, DEGOB record number 34; D. W. male DEGOB record number 2952.

366 F. M. male, DEGOB, record number 2957.

367 W. P. male, DEGOB, record number 2019.

368 Five females, DEGOB, record number 2591.

369 Dr. Sz. J. male, DEGOB, record number 2593.

prisoners who treated the Jews comparatively well, but “even the Nazi workers treated us decently.” Soon, the prisoners were no longer needed, as the factory went out of business. They were taken over by the SS to dig trenches, and under the SS, they suffered beatings, torture, and murder.³⁷⁰ Human decency survived even in the hostile atmosphere of the SS. A person who worked as a blacksmith in France remembered an SS man fondly called “our Dad,” who purchased bread for them at his own expense.³⁷¹

VICTIM BEHAVIOR, HUMANITY

What predominated in camp life: the law of the jungle or solidarity and compassion? Hungarians in the camp system did not find networks of solidarity based on politics or nationality, which made their life even more difficult. Some survivors asserted that “they lived like animals,” caring about nothing. People who stampeded to reach the few water taps that were available to them crushed a girl to death.³⁷² Under the constant shadow of death, it was difficult to preserve spiritual sanity. At least as many accounts of extreme, dehumanizing psychological and physical hardship emanated from labor camps as from the most feared lager of all, Auschwitz-Birkenau. A very high number of testimonies bear witness to the extinction of bonds among humans. In Ebensee, some of the inmates ate their fellow humans. Incidents of cannibalism were not isolated. Among the “mountains of corpses” in the subcamp of Wöbbelin, which had become a death camp towards the end of the war, starving people were consuming the dead.³⁷³ In Allach, famished prisoners roasted and devoured human body parts and ate cats.³⁷⁴ An inmate dissected the corpse of a former comrade and ate her liver in Bergen-Belsen. This was interpreted as an act of insanity, although it could also be seen as a rational act of desperation to survive, as the liver is a primary source of nutrition. Prisoners in Gusen cooked and ate human flesh.³⁷⁵ This episode corroborates the findings of the historian Keith Lowe, who found evidence of the regular theft of corpses’ livers, which a doctor had personally seen people eating. Dr. Leo, a former

370 Dr. Sz. E. female, DEGOB, record number 3543.

371 F. S. male, DEGOB, record number 3011.

372 Ten females, DEGOB, record number 1.

373 Vági and Kádár, *Táborok könyve*, 446.

374 M. H. male, DEGOB, record number 40; M. S. and B. S. males, DEGOB, record number 48.

375 M. L. male, DEGOB, record number 54; H. J. male, H. J. male, DEGOB, record number 1000.

camp doctor, reported 300 cases of cannibalism.³⁷⁶ In the same camp, a boy was seen kneeling as punishment for eating parts of a corpse. A human ear was protruding from his mouth. In the meantime, a female SS guard beat a man unconscious for having tried to steal food.³⁷⁷

These acts were perhaps as last-ditch efforts to stay alive. There was no “food” so repugnant that it would not be consumed. A group of women who were forced to walk 25 or 30 kilometers on a diet of three potatoes a day ate a horse that had been dead for days without bothering to cook the meat.³⁷⁸ Famine was so bad among forced laborers in Estonia that a woman was shot for stealing a single potato. Estonian troops kept the prisoners alive by smuggling in food.³⁷⁹ Such extreme hardship destroyed human relations. As one survivor recalled, “Friendship? It did not even cross our minds. We did not feel anything at all, we did not think. We became jealous, self-centered wild animals. There was no human emotion or thought in us.”³⁸⁰ A female doctor from Pécs described this experience in similar words: “We became so famished, miserable, and selfish that we gave few signs of comradely care.” The prisoners quarreled a lot and were angry.³⁸¹ Humans were reduced to a single-minded obsession to survive at any cost. People who were surviving on grass in a plant in Leipzig were “overwhelmed by one desire, to eat their fill of bread once more.”³⁸² Similar sentiments were described by a teenager who, at the age of seventeen, had already witnessed unspeakable cruelties in Auschwitz, including seeing people burned alive, before having been taken to Breslau: “We descended into the state of animals. I cared about nothing but the daily ration, and we were happy when we were able to slump back on our filthy bedding.”³⁸³ Unimaginable hardship made inmates insensitive to the sufferings of others. Hangings for petty “crimes,” such as talking to other prisoners, were regular occurrences, but they elicited no compassion from fellow prisoners. “We were so utterly devoid of our humanity that when we saw the gallows, we did not think of the condemned, but rather that roll call would last an extra half hour.”³⁸⁴

376 Lowe, *Savage Continent*, 85.

377 J. M. and S. M. females, DEGOB, record number 161.

378 A. G. female, M. F. female, DEGOB, record number 2913.

379 S. S. female, DEGOB, record number 2953.

380 F. S. male, DEGOB, record number 74.

381 Dr. Sz.. E. female, DEGOB, record number 3543.

382 S. R. female, DEGOB, record number 112.

383 DEGOB, record number 126.

384 G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 3587.

Life was a struggle for survival. Passing out food was difficult, because there were so many people that brawls erupted among the prisoners. This gave the SS a reason to step in and bludgeon them.³⁸⁵ Some people tried to preserve their dignity by preserving their habits, although sometimes people became “caricatures of themselves.” Continuing to live at all costs, at the expense of others if needed, was all that mattered. “We did not help each other, people were saving their own life.”³⁸⁶ At the beginning of October, the SS began to select the weak in Auschwitz. If a prisoner had good ties to a kapo, in return for cigarettes, honey, or cash, he or she could be removed from the list and another, strong, healthy person was signed up and gassed instead.³⁸⁷

There was little place for humane feelings, and whatever remained, the SS sought to destroy. Ultimate success, the full extirpation of human emotion, eluded them. Selfish self-preservation lived side by side with selflessness. At the sight of the fatigued expression on a prisoner’s face after a long march and hard work, a German soldier took pity on the man and gave him a slice of bread. This was too much for an SS guard, who called the soldier a communist and shot him for an act of kindness. While the irredeemable loss and the hardship suffered in camp life aroused a lust for revenge, the inner light of compassion for fellow human beings was not extinguished in others. Zsuzsanna Fisher’s cousin, Anna, gave her a piece of her bread to keep her alive. When Zsuzsanna was no longer eating, she slapped her in the face. Anna took care of her and her sisters with “selfless love.”³⁸⁸

The circle of empathy and readiness to help others to live extended to strangers. A woman saw children being taken towards the crematorium. “They were healthy and beautiful. My heart ached for them... I thought of my little brothers, who were no longer alive, and now the same fate awaits these children.” A young rabbi from Auschwitz looked after a child entrusted to him by the boy’s mother, and he made sure the child was not separated from him. In Ebensee, some starving people were unable to scale the stairs to the quarry. Others carried them on their shoulders.³⁸⁹ In spite of their ordeal and disappointment in their fellow humans, some prisoners did not lose faith. When finding some water underground that he could drink during a death march, a man re-

385 S. P. male, DEGOB, record number 370.

386 S. G. female. DEGOB, record number 576.

387 DEGOB, record number 3587.

388 Zsuzsanna Fisher Spiro, *In Fragile Moments*, 14.

389 S. E. female, DEGOB, record number 1780; Dr. K. I. male, DEGOB, record number 3588.

marked “Good God made a miracle.”³⁹⁰ Robert Rozett observes: “The fact that humane behavior was possible makes the generally cruel and frequently murderous behavior all the more heinous.”³⁹¹

GUARDS, KAPOS, FELLOW PRISONERS, AND CIVILIANS

A handful of SS guards refused to commit acts of cruelty, but few followed their lead, even though there was little risk of punishment. “Nazi killers were untroubled by their actions, as they believed them necessary.” Jews were seen as an existential threat, and killing children was seen as necessary, since, if they were allowed to grow up, they would be “determined avengers.”³⁹² I would attribute the Nazi quest to kill Jewish children to the desire to annihilate the potential of that population to regenerate.

“Her stature reached almost mythical proportions in the prisoners’ eyes. She was a beautiful, but hyena faced woman who took her victims by the droves. It was even rumored that she was Himmler’s wife.”³⁹³ Recollections collected after the war affirm that female prisoners suffered equally harsh and extreme abuse at the hands of their guards as their male counterparts. In addition, female functionaries habitually carried out atrocities and enjoyed the suffering of their charges no less than their male colleagues.³⁹⁴ This is the other reason beside hard labor why female mortality among the large number of Hungarian Jews was as high as the male. Women were no better than men. In many accounts they compare unfavorably to men. A woman, F. G., was caught wearing a vest to protect her from the night cold. Susanka, a Slovak *Aufseherin* who knew Hungarian, tore off her clothing, which left her chest bare. Susanka started to slap her and made her kneel half naked, flogging and slapping her. At this point, a Dutch overseer came over. She was even worse than Susanka. She asked no questions and joined in the flogging. Later, F. G. was transferred to Allendorf, where she worked in a factory making grenades and bombs. The

390 S. N. male., DEGOB, record number 2.

391 Rozett, *Conscripted Slaves*, 158–60.

392 Wachsmann, *KL*, 368–70.

393 Three females, DEGOB, record number 2958.

394 Nikolaus Wachsmann has written that female inmates were “often guarded by females who acted harshly and unpredictably [but] they committed relatively few excesses against female inmates; murderous violence remained an exception... Female prisoners experienced less extreme abuse from fellow inmates and officials.” Wachsmann, *KL*, 477. By contrast, in the DEGOB interviews women recalled extreme violence committed against women.

women got ample, tasty food and slept in comfortable quarters. Their SS guards, a younger man and an older, kindly looking *Hauptscharführer*, were decent and benevolent. The younger man even organized performances to entertain them. “It was only their female overseers who continued to torture the women. Their behavior stood in stark contrast to the male SS guards.” In Geisling, the male “meisters” behaved decently towards the women but the *lagerführerin* “was incredibly cruel” to them.³⁹⁵

Such accounts were not isolated. Szidonia Welber thought that the female guards were “veritable devils” who would beat prisoners until blood was gushing from their faces. This would usually happen after the second blow, but the SS women would not stop.³⁹⁶ Another SS female behaved “like the devil.” She beat her victims until blood was oozing from their noses, and she would “never stop short of that.” A woman recalled female SS “beating and torturing” and unleashing dogs on the prisoners.³⁹⁷ Sadism fueled by racial hatred motivated the following incident. A woman in her fifties would not part from her mother at selection. A female SS started beating her, but the woman struck back. At that the guard tied a dog leash around her neck and dragged her on the ground.³⁹⁸ “The horrific shrieks of the woman were unforgettable.”

People feel each other’s pain—hurting someone else will be felt as hurting oneself. Sadism is more thinkable when victims are demonized or dehumanized beings that lie outside one’s circle of empathy.³⁹⁹ This is what happened in the camps. In addition, males abused women whenever they laid their hands on them. A woman from Aknasugatag (today Ocna Şugatag, Romania) experienced unspeakable brutality at the hands of a Polish kapo in Landeshut, who decided she wanted to kill her for no apparent reason, towards the very end of the war. The brute hit her and threw her to the ground and kicked her wherever she could, breaking her ribs. In the same locality, the drunken camp elder shot four or five people every day for fun.⁴⁰⁰

As the Allies were drawing closer, it would have made sense for the vamp personnel to improve the treatment of the prisoners in order to save their own skins. This was not the case. Killing and torturing their charges, the Jews in

395 DEGOB, record number 769.

396 DEGOB, record number 1.

397 DEGOB, record number 1. K. M. female, DEGOB, record number 42. Female guards in Neubrandenburg “were especially brutal.” Kádár and Vági, *Táborok könyve*, 47.

398 S. B. female. DEGOB, record number 5.

399 Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011), 552.

400 R. B. female, DEGOB, record number 182.

particular, enjoyed primacy over self-preservation. Kapos behaved atrociously even where the “system” allowed decent treatment of the victims. In Allach, “the German kapos were worse than the SS,” they were “not allowed to hit the inmates but could not care less about the stricture.”⁴⁰¹ Extreme cruelty was at least in part the fault of the individuals involved. The excuse for their behavior was that they were also under pressure. But “they beat the prisoners with terrible cruelty” and vented their racism by cursing the Jews. Szerén Mermelstein concluded that “our common misfortune did not bring human closer to human. The captive Germans hated us just as much as the free ones did.”⁴⁰² A German block leader in Buchenwald spoke for many when he declared, “You filthy miserable Jews, do you think that even if Germany lost the war, they would not have the power to destroy you? You will not get out of here alive.”⁴⁰³ Captors and prisoners shared the same goal: annihilation of the Jews.

Solidarity had no meaning to a block leader who was a German political prisoner. “He beat the Jewish prisoners relentlessly for no reason at all.” P. I. encountered a political Blockältester, “more right-wing than Hitler, who demanded constant reports from the parts around the crematoria.”⁴⁰⁴ Atrocities were committed for amusement. In Hildesheim, a Scharführer normal or italics? caught a 14-year-old boy stealing a can of food. He put his revolver against the boy’s temple. The boy started begging so the man put his gun away, only for him to take it out and train it on the boy’s head again. He did this several times. “Every time, it was terrible to hear the fear of death in the boy’s voice, he was almost howling, wailing in fear... When the German had enough of the amusement... he shot him in the head.”⁴⁰⁵

A survivor of Auschwitz tried to put himself in the kapos’ shoes and explained their behavior as a consequence of their psychological makeup and the constraints under which they had been put under the circumstances. The prisoners, he thought, were an “unruly mass”, and order could only be maintained with ruthlessness.⁴⁰⁶ This hardly explains why so many of them enjoyed beating people to death. Although kapos were under great duress to comply with their superiors’ wishes and execute their commands, it was not uncommon for them to internalize the Nazi viewpoint. Fellow prisoners tended to think

401 H. R., H. S. H. H. females, DEGOB, record number 769.

402 Ten females from Szolyva, DEGOB, record number 7.

403 G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 3587.

404 N. S. male, DEGOB, record number 73; P. I. male, DEGOB, record number 1735.

405 F. P. male, DEGOB, record number 86.

406 Dr. Sz. E. female, DEGOB, record number 3543.

that their kapos had been recruited from the ranks of “murderers, declassified elements, and sadists” who had lost all sense of human decency and who, if forced to choose between death and having to kill, would choose to kill without hesitation.⁴⁰⁷ One kapo, for instance, had been convicted of killing his wife and mother before he arrived in the camp. Old habits changed slowly, and in the camp, “his passion was to beat people to death.”⁴⁰⁸ In the course of a selection in Auschwitz, a Polish kapo commented with approval that, “this is how they need to be treated, they deserve it, the stinking Jews.”⁴⁰⁹ Willy, a *Reichdeutsch*, hated the Jews and made no secret of it. He spoke of them in dehumanizing terms, calling them “Jewish dogs,” “damned dogs,” “shit sacks,” and the like.⁴¹⁰ Jews were frequently tortured to death by kapos, even though none of the thousands of memoirs in the DEGOB archive contains any mention of anyone getting punished for decency.

A Jewish woman who worked in a factory found that, at the workplace, “we were among friends, in the lager, we were among enemies.” It was nothing less than “salvation to go from the lager to the factory.”⁴¹¹ Civilians behaved in an exemplary manner in Bromberg. They brought packages to the forced laborers as they were working. An older man, one survivor remembered, “brought me a package every day.” Even the Lagerführer “was a good man,” which could not be said about the SS women.⁴¹² Thus, *how* a labor camp was run was at least to some extent a matter of the decisions made by the people involved. The Lagerführer in Gelsenkirchen was remembered as “an upright man who liked us and treated us well,” and the same was said of the man in charge of an establishment in Lübeck.⁴¹³

With some goodwill, it was possible to alleviate suffering. A camp commander in Stutthof took pity on a woman and put her into the same transport with her “enfeebled” little sister so that they could remain together. They were lucky with the next camp as well, where the commander cared for them and got them clothing and they had heated quarters after work. A woman from Szabad Újszántó recounted that the block leaders were very strict and sometimes hit them, but otherwise tried to help them. When the Germans demanded that those with

407 Oliver Lustig’s lager vocabulary is cited in Szita, *Gyógyíthatatlan sebek*, 202.

408 W. M. male, DEGOB, record number 2930.

409 M. I. male, DEGOB, record number 177.

410 Szita, *Gyógyíthatatlan sebek*, 100.

411 L. S. male, DEGOB, record number 2543.

412 S. S. female, DEGOB, record number 2953.

413 DEGOB, record number 2954; R. R. female, record number 2959. “The Lagerführer was very good to us.”

diarrhea or those who simply were sick report to them, the block leaders deliberately mistranslated the request so that nobody reported.⁴¹⁴

Accounts of the behavior of kapos and other prisoner functionaries abound with instances of superfluous brutality and murder, and not just in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Nikolaus Wachsmann's explanation is situational: "Once the other inmates saw them as the willing tools of the SS, they felt that they had little choice but to redouble their abuses, lest they lose the life-saving protection of the SS."⁴¹⁵ Numerous first-hand accounts make it clear, that they indeed had choices. Two women from Ilosva (today Irsava, Ukraine) asserted that in the camp, where the Lagerführer had people tortured to death and took pleasure out of shipping people to the crematorium, "a German Aryan kapo would not lay a finger on anyone." Standing for a roll call was an arduous experience that one will "never forget." "They left us standing in terrible pouring rain as we came out of the bath," but a kapo took pity on us" and handed out blankets and even made sure that they were fed.⁴¹⁶

The prisoner potentates did not have to kill; they were in a position to save lives as well. In Auschwitz a woman stepped out of line and the *Aufseherin* hit her. She started running. A kapo tried to persuade her to join the line and stroked her face.⁴¹⁷ This was not an isolated incident. The Kun brothers were not twins, but a kapo told them to say that they were, and he told them to provide only the birth data of one of them when their data was recorded. Prisoners in command positions did have latitude in the way they behaved towards others. A young student was selected as the personal servant of a kapo in Auschwitz's Kanada camp. His task was to sort packages left behind by the selected arrivals. The kapo grew fond of him, and smuggled him into a group going to Kaufering, where "life was good" and there was "plenty of food."⁴¹⁸

As a Hungarian account observed, kindness was a matter of personal character. G. E. worked in several Auschwitz kommandos, and most of his superiors behaved like sadistic torturers. Yet there was one kapo, a former officer in the Polish army, who was "such an upright honest person the likes of which I had not met in the year I spent in the lagers. He did not distinguish one religion from another - obviously meaning that he was not anti-Semitic - and he hated

414 H. L., H. I. females, DEGOB, record number 2960; P. E. male, DEGOB, record number 31.

415 Wachsmann, *KL*, 518.

416 M. S., B. S. males, DEGOB, record number 48; DEGOB, record number 2959.

417 T. S., T. R., T. P., W. P., S. I., T. D. females, DEGOB record number 16.

418 S. B. male, student, Nemesvid, DEGOB record number 2982.

the Germans.” This man did not hit or abuse his underlings, and he made their lives as tolerable as possible.

Kindness was an exception, not the rule. In Allach, a kapo called Knoll, who spent eleven years in the camp system “murdered loads of Jews.”⁴¹⁹ Nationality and ethnicity played no role in the personal disposition of prisoners who were put in charge of their peers. In Mauthausen, for instance, Spaniards tormented their fellow inmates. Physical weakness apparently only whetted the appetite of sadistic individuals to mete out punishment. The Strafkommando kapo in Leipzig had been sent to the camp for murder and robbery. “He hunted for the weak.” He enjoyed killing, as he spent two days on his victims until they died from being hit with bare fists and rubber truncheons. One survivor claimed that “[this man] beat 20 or 25 of my Jewish comrades to death.” His brutality earned the respect of the lager’s officials. An SS Sturmführer would ask him “how many Jews have you beaten to death, old chap?”⁴²⁰ In these circles, killing was nothing to be ashamed of. K. E.’s experience was especially troubling. He worked in a porcelain and denture factory and was fully satisfied with the treatment he was given. “Only the Polish-Jew supervisors were really bad, they ruthlessly beat us if we were not ready on time.” This stood in stark contrast to the behavior of the Germans, who allegedly treated them well and left their food behind.⁴²¹

Personal reasons explained some acts of cruelty. Ruthless *lagerältesters* cited bitterness as the cause of their brutal acts, since their suffering had begun many years earlier. They paid with evil for evil. One of them committed his malicious acts because his son had been executed in Theresienstadt. Sometimes, it was possible to explain cruelty with reference to personal suffering. A kapo who had been decent to the prisoners took to drinking and became sadistic after having received a letter from his wife according to which she had had to flee the Soviets.⁴²² Others were “drunken with power” as they realized that “now they stood above us, and they felt good sending thousands to their deaths.” “Well-dressed female block leaders were laughing as they sat in well-heated rooms while we were freezing outside.” Yet it was possible to overcome bitterness, jealousy, and the addictive spell of power.⁴²³

In most cases survival was an outcome of small, spontaneous steps. Occasionally, survival resulted from strategy. Positions of power gave people a chance, not

419 F. I. male, DEGOB, record number 2034.

420 M. H. male, DEGOB, record number 40.

421 K. E. male, DEGOB, record number 49.

422 G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 3587.

423 K. A. female, DEGOB, record number 3544.

just to stay alive, but to thrive and even protect loved ones. A young girl named Kató Klein fell under the spell of her captors and protected her younger sisters, who also came to identify with the German camp authorities. Klein was employed as an interpreter and her older sibling, Juci, worked in the kitchen. Kató developed excellent contacts with the German authorities and was promoted to *lagerältester* after a week. Initially, she was strict but decent. Soon, “she came under the spell of the Germans to such an extent that she turned into a real fury.” She gave her fellow prisoners the impression that her cruelty went further even than the level demanded by the Germans. She used their methods and their language in dealing with the others. She hit and flogged her fellow prisoners. “She came to believe in German victory and became our enemy.” Klein “denounced me” for a petty crime and promised to take care of the “stinking pig.” The person in question was sentenced to death, but a well-meaning female guard saved her life. Klein managed to elevate her two younger sisters of twelve and thirteen years of age to positions of power, and her younger sisters behaved in a similar manner. Apparently, they were suffering from what was later identified as the Stockholm syndrome, i.e. the tendency of captives to identify with their captors. “When we parted with the German overseers, Kató and the girls sobbed and kissed them all over.” In contrast, in the same camp, a girl from Budapest, Magda Altmann, who filled the same position as Klein, used her good relationship with the camp leadership for the benefit of the others.⁴²⁴

Enjoyment of power, and not coercion, may have motivated the Polish woman who walked around sporting a whip she used to beat her underlings. At night, she would pour buckets of cold water on the women so that they could not sleep.⁴²⁵ Suffering did not evoke sympathy. On the contrary, the vulnerability of those weakened by starvation and cold invited more cruelty. In Fallerleben, ventilators were turned on in the winter cold. “Laughing, they [the civilians] asked: ‘Do you know what an egg is? Do you know soft white bread?’” They watched the Germans eat their apples. Work, the Germans told them, because “the crematoria are still running, and they can swallow a lot of people.”⁴²⁶

In the absurd world of the camps, there was no rule for anything. Most Jews recounted that they had been maltreated by their fellow prisoners, as in Oranienburg, where Poles beat them worse than the SS and even stole their food.⁴²⁷ There were exceptions. A boy who was sent to the “Russian bloc” in Buchenwald

424 Dr. Sz. E. female, DEGOB, record number 3543.

425 A. G., M. F. females, DEGOB, record number 2913.

426 G. F. female, DEGOB, record number 483.

427 G. T. male. DEGOB, record number 65.

got food from the Ukrainian boys there. They saw the Jews starving and got them food. The Serbs were able to receive American parcels, and they shared what they received with Jewish workers.⁴²⁸

M. S. worked as an agricultural laborer in the vicinity of Warsaw. Although they suffered from physical atrocities inflicted by the guards, their plight was alleviated by the fact that the locals gave them food. In Melk, Russian laborers gave the Jews some leftover food.⁴²⁹ Györgyi Grünfeld had similar memories of Teplitz, where prisoners of all nationalities risked their lives to help. She attested that they behaved in an “exemplary” manner and brought them food, even though this meant risking their own lives. In the Siemens workcamp, fellow prisoners were so decent that the Jews felt human again. The Czechs in particular were kind. They got food from the kitchen and treated the children to pastries and pudding, and they even organized a raffle for them. “Their love was moving.”⁴³⁰ English prisoners who were doing construction work in Monowitz shared their civilians’ food tickets with their Jewish comrades.⁴³¹ On the other hand, in Theresienstadt a woman saw “animal-like” people. In the filthy and disease-ridden camp of Ravensbrück, the others refused to share their Red Cross packages with the Jews.⁴³²

Many survivors stressed the lack of overall solidarity among inmates and their *sauve qui peut* attitude. In Theresienstadt, even among some of the younger inmates, certain prisoners kept feeling superior to the others, and they showed it. A Jewish woman from Germany felt that the “Czechs looked down on us because we spoke the enemy’s language. Besides, they really were the elite because they were in their home country.” A shared fate did not create bonds among the inmates. In fact, hatreds and National Socialist thinking persisted even among those who were victims of the Nazi system themselves. When a Jewish prisoner asked German women in Auschwitz what was happening in the crematorium, she was told that “we are burning litter.”⁴³³ German prisoners’ loyalty often lay with the camp authorities, and not with fellow inmates. To paraphrase Peter Gay, National Socialism was an immensely serviceable alibi for aggression.⁴³⁴

428 Three males, DEGOB, record number 3497; Ten females, DEGOB, record number 1.

429 M. S. male, DEGOB, record number 4; Five females, DEGOB, record number 63; R. E. male, DEGOB, record number 8.

430 G. G. and G. S. females, DEGOB, record number 51; DEGOB, record number 63.

431 G. P. male, DEGOB, record number 335.

432 R. J. and D. T. females, DEGOB, record number 115.

433 S. R., S. J. and S. H. females, DEGOB, record number 82.

434 Peter Gay, *The Cultivation of Hatred: The Bourgeois Experience, Victoria to Freud* (W. W. Norton, 1993), 68. Gay made this argument about racism.

Beating prisoners to death was most of the time not a strategy of survival for kapos who were afraid for their own lives, nor was it prompted purely by the need to obey the orders of superiors. For an 18-year-old student from Munkács, it appeared that “they [the kapos] beat us without cause, just for the sake of murdering and exterminating Jews.”⁴³⁵

Jewish prisoners felt that they were at the bottom of the social ladder.⁴³⁶ Jews were the targets of the SS rampage in Płaszów, a camp run by the sadistic Amon Leopold Göth.⁴³⁷ Dogs were trained to attack and dismember inmates at the command “Jud” in Buchenwald. In Ehrlich, a Roma kapo “beat the Jews hard.”⁴³⁸ Jewish complaints regarding the attitude of Roma inmates were remarkably frequent and indicate that, at least as far as the perceptions of these Jews were concerned, the Roma regarded the Jews as their inferiors. A merchant from Budapest, for instance, recalled that in Auschwitz they had been overseen by Roma from Germany whose “preoccupation was beating us.” They made the lives of Jews hell: “we were unable to visit the toilet because if the Gypsy saw us, he beat us up and down, and sometimes the blow would be deadly.”⁴³⁹ Roma not only beat their fellow Jewish inmates, but also took their food in Mittelbau-Dora, which was literally a death sentence.⁴⁴⁰ Jews were targeted by other nationalities as well. In Ebensee, the Jews were maltreated by Ukrainian kapos. Their lives were so hard that only two people, “myself and Rabbi Grunwald, stayed alive in [their] brigade.”⁴⁴¹

There was certainly no show of compassion for the fellow Jewish inmates in the women’s camp of Ravensbrück. “[W]e shared the block with Gypsy and Aryan prisoners who were happy that they finally got a chance to hit somebody. Jews were suitable subjects for this. Even though they were prisoners too, they lorded over their Jewish counterparts from far above.” Conditions in the tent were abysmal, with 3,500 people crammed together. The guards would lock all doors, and the “people were killing one another and going mad.” In addition to beating the Jews, the other inmates took their food, so Jewish prisoners were often forced to go to work without having eaten. “Christian prisoners” in Buchenwald were reminded to hit and kick their Jewish fellows.⁴⁴²

435 D. W. male, DEGOB, record number 2952.

436 S. I. male, DEGOB, record number 9.

437 Vági and Kádár, *Táborok könyve*, 459.

438 K. E. male, DEGOB, record number 327.

439 G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 3587.

440 Dávid Holländer, DEGOB, record number 22.

441 S. W. male, DEGOB, record number 62.

442 G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 3587.

It wasn't just that gentiles were insensitive towards the Jewish inmates, they also picked on them. Non-Jewish prisoners who had no position of power and thus had nothing to lose by leaving the Jews in peace would terrorize them anyway. Jews felt that "anti-Semitism was so strong among the inmates in Gross Rosen that the Christian prisoners constantly beat the Jewish ones. We did not have a moment of rest. Either the Blockältester or the Aryans were hitting us." The camp itself was divided into two parts. The section in which the Christian prisoners were held was clean and had heated rooms, a washroom, and a kitchen. The other part of the camp, which mostly housed Jews, was overcrowded with unfinished barracks. Every day, about 35 corpses were thrown out. Their clothes were removed, but the dead bodies were left there for days.⁴⁴³ Racism in the camp was alive and well.

On the other hand, Jews from Nagyvárad found themselves in a privileged position in Allach, where they were able to get extra food. In fact, there was a social ladder among the Jews. Jewish OD personnel could be as cruel as their peers of other nationalities. Oskar Schindler claimed that Jewish OD men in camps "walk around elegantly dressed, almost like the people from the SS. They beat their brethren with a devotion I could not have imagined." He recounted a story he had heard about a woman's camp in Lemberg in which a female Jewish camp leader bashed in "50 to 60 skulls a week with a piece of wood."⁴⁴⁴ Anyone who met the "fat Hungarian-speaking Jew" named Weiss remembered him with disgust. This "scoundrel, a Jewish traitor" robbed his own kind of whatever valuables they had.⁴⁴⁵ The newly-arrived Hungarian transports brought tensions between camp veterans and the new prisoners to the surface. The new arrivals often caused disappointment. They were not strong enough for the complicated and difficult struggle for survival. They were targets of a lust for revenge among the older privileged prisoners, male and female alike, who humiliated and exploited them.⁴⁴⁶ Hungarian Jews were by and large seen as dehumanized enemies, not only by the camp authorities, but by their fellow inmates as well. They were at the bottom of the social ladder and could hardly see themselves in human form anymore.

Shortly after their arrival, the prisoners began to see themselves as no longer resembling humans. "We looked like animals, the Germans succeeded in depriving us of our human appearance.... We ate the terrible concoction they called lunch with no cutlery or plates. After we learned of the fate that awaited

443 G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 3587.

444 Crowe, *Oskar Schindler*, 307.

445 Szita, *Gyógyíthatatlan sebek*, 100.

446 Szita, *Gyógyíthatatlan sebek*, 98.

us, we felt terrible sadness for our families.”⁴⁴⁷ A man heard his name called in Birkenau. He wanted to go up to the woman who had waved to him, but he did not recognize her at first. She turned out to be his sister. “I was paralyzed. The sight stunned me so much that I was unable to go towards her. The poor thing was shorn bald.”⁴⁴⁸ Inmates “were a terrible sight... Women were shorn completely bald, and their bodies were covered in impossible rags.” Encounters with the opposite sex caused pity and horror. The gaunt and bald figures were signs of dehumanization and desexualization.⁴⁴⁹ Women were particularly humiliated. They were taken to the baths barefoot, with trained dogs escorting them. Sometimes they waited for hours in their rags until they got in. The showers were monitored by SS men. Male prisoners took pity on the women and tried to give them food, soap, and combs.⁴⁵⁰

RESISTANCE

“Most prisoners were too exhausted to contemplate fundamental opposition to the SS.” Direct challenges to the SS were madness. To defy them meant disaster.⁴⁵¹ There were, however, instances of resistance, particularly on a smaller, individual level, born at the spur of the moment. A woman resisted a female SS guard who wanted to take her daughter. When the guard began to hit her, she fought back. A young woman born in Ungvár named K. N. grew tired of the sadism of her female kapo, who had a habit of kicking whoever could not stand straight. Once, she took water without permission and the kapo struck her with her stick. “I took the stick out of her hand. I beat her.” A Polish guard watched the whole affair but did nothing. Her fellow prisoners saw K. N. as a hero. As punishment, she was forced to kneel for three hours while holding a brick.⁴⁵²

Facing mortal threat, some prisoners, including Jews, nonetheless showed defiance. Szeréna Mermelstein remembered that 1,500 boys were rounded up and taken to the crematorium. One boy managed to break out of the door. Because of his bold act, he saved 50 others from death, because Mengele saw what he had done and took 50 boys from the group slated to die.⁴⁵³ Communists in

447 K. M. female, DEGOB, record number 2954.

448 H. B. male, DEGOB, record number 2955.

449 Wachsmann, *KL*, 355.

450 G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 3587.

451 Wachsmann, *KL*, 527; 530.

452 E. B. female, DEGOB, record number 5; K. R. female, DEGOB, record number 174.

453 Ten females, DEGOB, record number 7.

Birkenau organized an uprising. They allegedly received arms from Wehrmacht troops in return for gold acquired by workers in Brezinka. They were caught and sent to other camps. Later, a prisoner tried to blow up the crematoria. A section leader discovered the plan and shot him.

Defiance was not limited to men. A woman around 50 years of age did not want to part with her daughter. The female SS guard started hitting the woman, but she fought back. The SS woman dragged her around with a dog leash around her neck. "The woman's wailing was unforgettable." Eventually she was shot.⁴⁵⁴ Another woman, who struck her female guards (who were stealing food and who hit her), did not suffer repercussions and survived. In Buchenwald, when an SS man was murdered, 60 people were killed in reprisal.⁴⁵⁵ Some prisoners were desperate enough to take on their guards and would-be killers with their bare hands. A man wrestled the gun from an SS guard and shot at the guards outside the gas chamber.⁴⁵⁶ A young woman defied the order to undress given by a terrifying SS Rapportführer named Schillinger in Bergen-Belsen. When Schillinger shouted at her, she began to take off her clothing slowly, with erotic movements. As Schillinger approached the woman, she threw her shoes in his face, seized his weapon, and shot him in the abdomen, and another guard in his feet. In the ensuing chaos, the women attacked the SS and tore off one guard's nose. The Germans fled the dressing room, and the SS returned in force. The participants in the revolt were executed one by one. Schillinger, however, died of his wound.

Could these desperate acts of defiance have been committed in the hope of individual survival? It is hardly likely. Rather, they signaled that the inner core of the victims was still intact and gave inspiration for the rest to hold out. Individual acts served the collective and demonstrated a forlorn will to survive.

SURVIVAL

George Gabori, who survived the camps of both totalitarian regimes, has written that the hope of liberation helped him stay alive in the Nazi workcamp. Aside from physical stamina, psychological factors were crucial in the struggle to stay alive. Hope may have made a difference if focused on more than sheer

454 E. B. female, DEGOB, record number 5.

455 P. E. female, DEGOB, record number 31; B. M. male, DEGOB, record number 30.

456 Wachsmann, *KL*, 537.

liberation. “We endured everything in the *hope* that this hell on earth would someday end and perhaps we would see our family again.” When they found out that this would not happen, “we lost our desire to live, we became completely indifferent, we lived like animals, we no longer cried or hoped, it no longer mattered what happened to us.”⁴⁵⁷ Hope was difficult to sustain, however. R. E. was afraid that by the time he went home, “he would find none of his relatives there.”⁴⁵⁸ “We had no hope the war would end,” a homemaker from Kaposvár recalled, “we only prayed that we would survive until the end of the winter.”⁴⁵⁹ Although work was excruciatingly hard and often accompanied by sadistic torture, the lack of work could be damaging as well. In Flossenburg, nobody worked, since “they were just waiting to die.”⁴⁶⁰ A 19-year-old seamstress emphasized another psychological factor, the *will* to live despite the smoking crematorium.⁴⁶¹ This was crucial when critical decisions had to be made in a nick of time. Such situations included refusal to obey orders directed at Jews, like managing to avoid potentially lethal work orders. A leather trader from Budapest refused to comply when Jews were ordered to line up for evacuation.⁴⁶² Similarly, a teenager from Subcarpathia demonstrated presence of mind when he managed to go over to the Russian prisoners and was transported to Theresienstadt with them.⁴⁶³ Alertness, the ability to respond to life threatening situations quickly saved lives: a man whose barrack in Auschwitz was about to be gassed pretended that he was there to load the bodies into the crematoria. He ended up working in a kitchen in Gross Rosen, where he gave food to others. His survival there was collaborative: two boys returned the favor by smuggling him out of the *revier* where he was expecting to die.⁴⁶⁴

Mind prevailed over body. S. L. survived because despite the hardships, he “did not care about his body.” Instead, he thought of his family and “the problems faced by the Jewry.” Spiritual strength helped. When a group of prisoners set out on foot from Gelsenkirchen, an SS woman said that there were orders to kill them in a forest. Terrible panic erupted, and many people attempted suicide. “I started to speak to my comrades... I was able to calm them, because my

457 Ten females, DEGOB, record number 1.

458 S. I. male, DEGOB, record number 9.

459 K. A. female, DEGOB, record number 3544.

460 E. M. male, DEGOB, record number 675.

461 DEGOB, record number 576.

462 É. B. Male. DEGOB, record number 323.

463 H. Z. male. DEGOB, record number 1163. Another person saved himself by posing as a Yugoslav.

See Laczó, *Hungarian Jews in the Age of Genocide*, 116.

464 G. E. male. DEGOB, record number 571.

faith was very strong, and I was able to instill hope in them.” Others observed religious rules even when this seemingly reduced their chances of survival. A woman recalled that when they were given hot food upon arrival in a camp, they “did not eat it, as it was a day of fasting, and we fasted.”⁴⁶⁵

Staying alive depended on strong will and the kindness and active help of others, or selfishness if needed. There was no rule, each situation was individual. Julius Modritsch delivered bread to the camp, treated Jews well, and helped people survive by employing 1,300 people in his factory. In Untermarckt, an SS man saved two sisters, Sara and Frida Moskovitz. As the Russians were approaching, the two girls were listed as incapable of work. There was “a Hungarian-speaking soldier who felt very sorry for us and was hiding us. The last day we were selected and we ran to the soldier and begged him, weeping, to save us. We reminded him that we were still young, and we wanted to live.” The man was able to arrange with an SS officer to transfer them to the healthy group. The girls did not resign themselves to their fates, and their will to live led them to ask for help. They survived due to their own effort and the good will that came from unexpected quarters.

Despite the brutal and inhuman atmosphere, camp personnel could save people rather than torture and kill them if they chose to do so. When Lilly Eisler collapsed of fatigue while digging trenches, an SS guard helped her dig instead of shooting her.⁴⁶⁶ The Berger girls from Munkács did not give up on their sister and they were able to smuggle her out through the hospital window when Mengele selected her for gassing.

Sometimes all it took to save a life was to care about the lives of others. In conditions under which life was cheap, caring remained difficult, but not impossible. In Auschwitz, there was “a very kind-hearted” nurse who said that the very weak were underdeveloped children. He taught them how to tell Mengele that they were not yet fourteen years of age.⁴⁶⁷ Sometimes even the reactions of the perpetrators could be unpredictable. When a group from eastern Hungary arrived in Birkenau, the women were told to hand over their children, and sometimes young women were sent with the elderly. The unidentified doctor who was making the selection claimed that the road would be long, and those who could not make it should sit in the car with the elderly. “I wanted to get in, but the doctor looked at me and told me to go on foot.” The doctor saved this woman

465 S. L. male, DEGOB, record number 114; K. M. female, DEGOB, record number 2954; K. H. female and E. M. male, DEGOB, record number 2950.

466 Vági and Kádár, *Táborok könyve*, 479–500.

467 K. A. female, DEGOB, record number 3544.

from the gas chamber.⁴⁶⁸ For T. J., a man of small physical stature, “salvation came in the face of a Pole.” In September, workers shorter than 160 centimeters were sent “to the gas.” He was shorter, and so he was told to stand in that line. The Pole went up to him and shoved him into the other line for taller people.⁴⁶⁹

By contrast, survival often demanded callous cruelty towards fellow victims. J. Sari was put in charge of making sure that the people selected by Mengele for death did not escape the barracks. One day, a young girl was selected. Her mother begged Sari to let her daughter out. The young girl fell to her knees begging to be released. “I could not help her. I was 20 years old, and I wanted to live.” In Płaszów, women saved themselves by offering their bodies to Polish prisoners who were in charge of food distribution. In return, they got enough food to survive. People escaped death sometimes simply by chance or an inexplicable turn of events. Leslie Meisels, a boy of just 17 from Nádudvar who found himself thrown from an “idyllic childhood” into a nightmare, was summoned by the SS to clean the latrine. The leader of the barrack said to the SS that Meisels had an important job, slicing bread rations, and he asked the SS to take somebody else. Instead of hitting the man who tried to speak, the guard took someone else. That young man was never seen again. Meisels believed that “unforeseeable and unexplainable miracles were the only reason that [he] managed to survive.”⁴⁷⁰

Legendary German order broke down in the last, chaotic weeks of the war, and no authority restrained the murderous rampages of those who, for whatever reason, felt like massacring prisoners. In some spots, due process did survive. Eleven women were captured after trying escape their death march. They were taken to a wooded area, where they “awaited death.” Their female guards gloated and jeered as they looked forward to the killing. Unusually, the SS wanted to have the permission of the local city council. They failed to receive it, and the execution was cancelled. Although the women’s ordeal continued, they survived.⁴⁷¹ Even in this situation, people in positions of power could have made the right decision. Members of a similar group from Dachau “owed their lives” to a “very good German” who always led the group in the hope of falling into American captivity as rapidly as possible.⁴⁷²

468 Three females and a male, DEGOB, record number 14.

469 T. J. male, DEGOB, record number 478.

470 Leslie Meisels, *Suddenly the Shadows Fell* (The Asrieli Series of Holocaust Survivor Memoirs, 2014), 43.

471 S. H. female, DEGOB, record number 2140.

472 W. E. male, DEGOB, record number 2636.

In a few cases spiritual survival trumped the physical, as in the case of the rabbi's son who chose death over burning his fellow prisoners. A rabbi's wife refused to kneel at roll call. She was beaten to do so: "Will you kneel?" She did not and died of the torture.⁴⁷³

TRANSFER, EVACUATION

The Germans were eager not to leave anyone alive in the camps. Were they concerned about leaving witnesses to their crimes? Did they hope to go as far towards the completion of their quest to annihilate the Jews as they could? What was the attitude of local civilians towards the wretched people's march from the camps? Did they feel sorry for them, or see them as enemies to be annihilated? How do those attitudes square with the frequently made claim that most Germans had nothing to do with the Holocaust? And how did all this impact the chances for survival when liberation was around the corner?

Himmler's order to leave no living prisoners in enemy hands was the main cause of the panicky and murderous evacuation that sealed the fate of hundreds of thousands of prisoners. There was no explicit order to murder them, and the interpretation of the order was left to the officers escorting them. Daniel Blatman writes that the population of murderers included loyal Nazis, opportunists, and those who only wanted to get home safely before the Third Reich crumbled ordinary civilians who stumbled into a situation beyond their wildest dreams. Probably they had been exposed to political indoctrination and incessant waves of antisemitic and racist slogans and propaganda. They were products of a system that transformed many of them into Nazis, even if they did not define themselves as such. Once prisoners became a burden, they were slaughtered mercilessly. Such murders could not have taken place without broad social support being given to the killing.⁴⁷⁴ During the subsequent marches, 250,000 people died. By then, most were human corpses, barely alive, let alone able to walk. These scenes were chaotic, with guards screaming, kicking and hitting the inmates.⁴⁷⁵

Prisoners were moved around from camp to camp with no apparent rhyme or reason. B. M. and his father were transferred from Auschwitz to work in a coal

473 DEGOB, record number 16.

474 Daniel Blatman, "The Death Marches and the Final Phase of Nazi Genocide," in Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann eds., *The Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 167–85.

475 See e. g. K. A. female, DEGOB, record number 3544.

mine. From there, they were transferred yet again to Buchenwald. M. H. was transferred to Mauthausen, fortunately along with his younger brother. Hungarian and Romanian SS of Swabian descent “broke a few rifle butts on them.” From there, they were taken to Melk. This time, the SS used iron-tipped sticks to beat them.⁴⁷⁶ When SS troops served as the escorts, the journey was invariably horrible, even deadly. German army personnel usually behaved better. In one instance, elderly Wehrmacht men even tried to calm and comfort their prisoners. Their Lagerführer in Bremen also turned out to be a decent older Wehrmacht officer who took them to work by car.⁴⁷⁷ Again, this suggests that there was no excuse for brutality and murder. Those who wanted to behave decently under the circumstances could, and did, but even on the verge of defeat this decency was not the rule. An elderly *Hauptscharführer*, who had treated his charges decently in Allensdorf procrastinated with the evacuation for as long as possible. When the evacuation finally did take place, he verbally encouraged the women under his command to endure, and allowed them to rest when they were unable to continue the march. When a group of women refused, he let them go.⁴⁷⁸

Even before the camps were about to be liberated, the camp authorities refused to set their prisoners free. SS leaders believed that they had to protect the German people from released inmates, as false rumors were spreading of Buchenwald inmates on a rampage. Due to such rumors, in numerous German towns and villages, fugitives were murdered with the help of the local population, sometimes leading to a bloodbath.⁴⁷⁹ Even solitary fugitives were shot, literally on the threshold of liberation, which may lead to the conclusion that security from former prisoners may have not been the only motive for the SS and civilians murdering them. H. S. was marched from Flossenburg to Buchenwald and back to Flossenburg, and then to Zeitz and further on. His group was decimated by harsh treatment, malnutrition, and Allied air raids.⁴⁸⁰ In Zeitz, Jews were called to the roll call area on March 29, and the SS tried to execute them. Rather than let this happen, they ran away, and the SS shot at them.⁴⁸¹ Camps were evacuated on foot, and the human loss was huge. A young man from Mátészalka claimed that, out of 1,700 people, only 150 survived the evacuation during the march, which took six weeks.⁴⁸²

476 B. M. male, DEGOB, record number 30; M. H. male, DEGOB, record number 40.

477 K. H. and E. M. male, DEGOB, record number 2950.

478 DEGOB, record number 3941.

479 Wachsmann, *KL*, 580.

480 H. S. male, DEGOB, record number 2137.

481 K. H. and K. G. males, DEGOB, record number 373.

482 S. C. male, DEGOB, record number 363.

Historians found a rational excuse for the killings: survival of the guards. The shootings of prisoners who could not keep pace with the guards has been explained as a consequence of the guards' desire to stay ahead of the Red Army.⁴⁸³ This utilitarian view is unconvincing. A sixteen-year-old girl got some bread from civilians. A guard saw it and shot her. A man recounted that on their way to Mühldorf, they were reduced to drinking their own urine. Those who tried to quench their thirst from a river were shot.⁴⁸⁴ Apparently that was a more expedient solution than giving them water. Time was not of the essence when killing was fun. A *Scharführer* caught a boy who was trying to hide a can of food under his coat. He trained his pistol at the boy's temple. "Whining" in fear, the boy begged for mercy and the SS soldier removed the gun, only to place it at his temple again. This game continued for a while, until the SS finally shot the boy.⁴⁸⁵ Female guards could hardly wait to execute prisoners, an opportunity that was eventually denied them.⁴⁸⁶

The Germans could just as well have let these prisoners live, but many were dedicated to killing them. A man evacuated from Auschwitz saw the road covered with female corpses, remnants of a column of women who had been forced to march ahead of them.⁴⁸⁷ A chemical engineer who had survived labor service and been deported to Buchenwald was going to be "evacuated" from Buchenwald before the Americans got there. He refused to leave, and although he was almost bludgeoned to death, he survived. Treatment during the march was "so inhuman that even an animal could not have taken it, only a human. I do not know how I survived. I exerted all my strength and tried to stay ahead."⁴⁸⁸ Gasings in Brezinska ceased at the beginning of November, but this did not mean that prisoners would stay alive. The inmates were escorted to Leslau on foot on January 16. The transport was accompanied by SS guards and dogs. A little girl asked for a rest and was immediately shot dead. Even when defeat was imminent, the killing and torture continued. Bombing strengthened the resolve of the Germans to resist. In places which had been bombed, the prisoners were beaten and kicked in revenge. They were told that Germany would not lose the war, and if it did, "we would not live to see it."⁴⁸⁹ People slept outside in rain and

483 Wachsmann, *KL*, 560.

484 R. E., R. H., R. S., E. L. all females. DEGOB, record number 113. B. J. male. DEGOB, record number 69.

485 F. P. male. DEGOB, record number 86.

486 DEGOB, record number 2140.

487 B. V. DEGOB, record number 226; F. K. male, DEGOB, record number 554.

488 DEGOB, record number 19.

489 DEGOB, record number 7.

freezing cold, hungry, with hardly any clothing, as most of it had been confiscated. They cooked whatever they found in the forest. The ideology instilled under the Hitler regime was alive and well. The sight of the ragged company marching aimlessly seldom elicited compassion or pity. A man recalled that he had tried to escape, but “the population was completely insensitive.” Civilian guards shot the weak on the road to Theresienstadt.⁴⁹⁰

Sometimes even the German surrender did not bring freedom for Jews. S. I. was in Nordhausen under harsh conditions and sickness caused by malnutrition. When the city was bombed, the inmates scattered all over the place. He ran to the nearest town, where the white flag was flying on the steeple. A German civilian in an armband captured him and handed him over to the police. He was held in jail for three more days before he was released.⁴⁹¹ The killing spree continued even when the situation was hopeless. People still under the influence of the Nazi ideology were determined that the war against the Jews, at least, would be won. Prisoners in Norlager fled into the forest. The Hitlerjugend organized a bloodbath, even though the British were approaching.⁴⁹²

Survivors recount their ordeal in fine detail. Simon Heller worked for the Wehrmacht before being forced to march for three weeks, 35 kilometers a day, while an Unterscharführer shot stragglers. A roll call was held in Friedland, where several people froze to death. From there, the journey continued for days with no food. Eventually the group was reduced to fighting for soup. Finally, the prisoners were put into livestock cars, but only 2,000 out of 4,300 people were still alive.⁴⁹³ Prisoners driven off from Breslau were forced to walk almost at the speed of running for four days and nights. Another transport, with people who were suffering from wounds from the freezing temperatures, joined them. They were on a cart, and the healthy prisoners were forced to haul them off, with the German commander’s luggage. Those who could not keep up in the blizzard were shot and shoved into a ditch with a spade. The guards stopped to eat in a village, while the prisoners were left in the snow. “We shouted to God not to let us suffer so much,” one survivor recalled.⁴⁹⁴

A great deal depended on the guards. A group heading towards the Ruhr region was escorted by Wehrmacht men, who gave them ample food.⁴⁹⁵ In com-

490 Dr. K. I. male, DEGOB, record number 3588.

491 S. I. male, DEGOB, record number 9.

492 B. M. male, DEGOB, record number 30.

493 K. A. male, DEGOB, record number 91.

494 L. J. female, DEGOB, record number 104.

495 E. E. male, DEGOB, record number 3046.

parison with the SS, the German army received praise: “They were good to us and did not hit without reason,” one survivor recalled.⁴⁹⁶ The evacuees were almost never given water, and were forced to quench their thirst from filthy puddles, which simultaneously was severely punished. Occasionally, the locals showed compassion and brought them water.⁴⁹⁷

Strangers were not always so sympathetic. A woman and ten companions managed to escape their deadly transport. She asked a stranger for directions to the nearest town, but the German woman “pointed in the opposite direction out of malice.” Her directions led back to the transport.⁴⁹⁸ This was no longer bystander society, people openly took sides, many on that of the SS. There was no longer play acting; with the liberators literally around the corner, average citizens could show their true colors. While the SS was carrying out orders, civilians might have foiled them in the last hours of the war and the Third Reich. Most, however, did not. The masks were off.⁴⁹⁹

Evacuation by train was no better than having to march on foot. Prisoners taken to Gleiwitz were forced to march in front of the SS at a jog. Those who looked weak were beaten to death with rifle butts rather than being left behind and perhaps allowed to survive. Afterwards, 150–200 people were crammed into a car. There was not even room to stand. The cars were open in the freezing cold, and the journey lasted ten days. Initially, the dead were collected in separate carriages. Later, the others just tossed the corpses of people who had frozen to death to the ground, sometimes even those who had not yet died. Then, at least, there was more room to stand. When the prisoners demanded water, the SS filled the car with water and they all “froze to death.”⁵⁰⁰

In at least one instance, the victims fought back. Edit Jungreis and four other women recounted that the SS, who were not allowed to shoot in principle, crammed the prisoners into livestock cars in the hope that they would be hit and killed by a bomb. When this did not happen, in his anger, the Lagerführer ordered his men to fire a salvo at the women. Fortunately, this time, the SS men did not heed the order, and they fired their shots into the air. A fight broke out between the enraged girls and the SS. The women were forced back into the cars, but they broke out and ran into the forest.⁵⁰¹

496 E. M. male, DEGOB, kkv. 675.

497 Dr. Sz. J. male, DEGOB, record number 2593.

498 S. H. female, DEGOB, record number 2140.

499 For a discussion on putting on multiple faces for public consumption and how ordinary Germans gradually became accomplices in Nazi crimes see Mary Fulbrook, *Private Lives, Public Faces*.

500 F. S. male, DEGOB, record number 74.

501 Five females, DEGOB, record number 2591.

Survival was not just due to desperate acts of defiance. It was reported that, in Ohrdruf, French prisoners burned the identity documents of all the prisoners, lest the Jews be found and executed.⁵⁰² A 46-year-old man named H. E. from Huszt suffered a heart failure and collapsed. He owed his life to József Weisz, who revived him and carried him onward.⁵⁰³ Human bonds and self-sacrifice were not dead. An 18-year-old boy was forced to march with his father whom he wanted to save with a great effort. Those who could not keep pace were pulled by their necks with a belt until they died. “I did not want my dad to be pulled like that. I cried and begged for him not to be treated like this. They offered to shoot him out of mercy... Somehow, they spared him, and he continued. Just before Flossenbürg, I put him on my back... The Germans told me not to torture myself... They took him 20 steps and shot him... They let me stay by his corpse for five minutes.” Such scenes were not unique. N. J. had worked in Koditz, where even the local population was outraged by the treatment of the prisoners. While fleeing from the advancing American troops, *Oberscharführer* Ziske shot those who were unable to keep up in the back of the head. A Polish boy begged him to spare his life, and he put his hand on Ziske’s revolver. “This outraged the brute, so he pinned [the boy] with his knee, put his revolver on the back of his head, and pulled the trigger.”⁵⁰⁴ Shooting the victims was a source of self-satisfaction.

The guards made fun of the plight of the prisoners. On one occasion, they threw a few loaves of bread to the starving prisoners and enjoyed the deadly fight that erupted over the bread. Prisoners, too, were losing the last vestiges of their humanity. In a livestock car crammed with weak people who could barely even stand, they kicked, hit, and shoved one another. A regular German prisoner was put in charge. He was suffering from “ceasaromania, and he constantly beat the sick and feeble people.”⁵⁰⁵ Prisoners evacuated from the camp of Mittelbau-Dora were driven into a forest, where they were all gunned down. A man was hit in the leg and survived by pretending to be dead. He asserted that there had been 1,200 people at the execution, including Ukrainians, Belgians, Frenchmen, and members of other nationalities.⁵⁰⁶

David Hollander described his ordeals in graphic detail. After days of marching with almost no food, living on water boiled with salt that was passed off as

502 C. G. male, DEGOB, record number 326.

503 F. S. male, DEGOB, record number 74; H. E. male, DEGOB, record number 604.

504 N. S. male, DEGOB record number 73; N. J. male, DEGOB, record number 653.

505 G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 3587.

506 N. I. male, DEGOB, record number 1026.

soup, people began to sway left and right and fall behind. “Comradely love existed in us,” Hollander claimed, and “we tried to take the fallen person on our shoulders, but we were weak. The SS ordered us to remove his boots and advance 20 meters ahead. Then we heard a gunshot.” The SS shot him in the head and left the corpse and the boots behind. This kind of shooting occurred every day, and in the end, only 440 of the original 1,900 prisoners survived.⁵⁰⁷

The homicides were needless from the perspective of victory or even personal security, and they were obviously carried out for the pleasure of killing. The SS shot a boy standing in the water. As his blood turned the water red, the shooters ran up and trod on the child, who was still alive, until he drowned in the water. The prisoners posed no danger to the guards. They were exhausted, unarmed, and powerless. The boy was obviously going to die; the intimate and ruthless manner of finishing him off suggested that his killers took gratification in the act. Robbery was not a primary motive. A man offered his gold teeth in exchange for mercy, but the guards still murdered him – despite losing time in the process.⁵⁰⁸ What drove them to commit these acts when the war was clearly over, or at least ending? Perhaps it was loyalty to a lost cause of exterminating their enemy.

Murders were committed up until the very last moment. The Germans were planning to evacuate the inmates to south Tirol and kill them there.⁵⁰⁹ Even patients suffering typhoid were rounded up for evacuation in Landsberg, though they were unable to walk. Even though the war was over, the SS tried to dump them on trucks. In the end, they were left in the yard, lying among the heaps of corpses. The guards left in style, running over the dead and dying.⁵¹⁰ Even in the midst of the chaos and the killing frenzy, it remained possible to act decently. A Lagerführer normal or italics? named Wolff, who presided over evacuated prisoners doing forced labor in the last minutes of the war, realized that his female “workers” were unable to work anymore. He had meat soup prepared for them and, in general, “treated them very decently.”

By the time their journey had ended, the forced laborers were human wrecks. A medical doctor from Pécs, who had survived Auschwitz and Ravensbrück, found the evacuation march equally harrowing. “We were lice-ridden, and this was the most terrible thing... an apocalyptic experience.”⁵¹¹ Local civil-

507 Dávid Holländer, DEGOB, record number 22.

508 G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 90.

509 E. E. male, DEGOB, record number 3046.

510 B. K. and B. Z. females, DEGOB, record number 2602.

511 Dr. Sz. E. female, DEGOB, record number 3543.

ians also participated in the last-minute killing sprees. A trainload of prisoners stopped in Munich. They had been told that they would be taken to Tirol, where they would be massacred. They got out of the train. Somebody said that “there is peace.” In a few minutes, a group of *Volkstum* boys arrived, all around fifteen years of age, and, according to a survivor, murdered several hundred people.⁵¹² In fact, the life of the evacuees was worthless. Somewhere between Gleiwitz and Dornhau, a *Scharführer* told the SS guards to kill anyone they wanted to kill outside of the town, because he could not find space for his prisoners in any camp.⁵¹³ By that time, the SS guards and the approaching Red Army troops were exchanging fire, so it would have made sense to flee—and in some places the SS did just that—and leave the prisoners behind. But killing the prisoners seemed more important to the people who committed these acts than saving their own skins. No one can say what kept the desire to kill alive, even when the war was literally over. Five people evacuated from Dachau managed to escape from their transport. The locals showed the way to a village where they would be safe. Two SS caught them and began to drive them towards the village. One of them winked at the other, indicating to the men that they would be shot immediately. Before crossing a bridge, however, four Austrian child soldiers stopped them from crossing the bridge, which they said would be blown up. “They saved our lives.”⁵¹⁴

In Unterlüss, a locality in Lower Saxony, local civilians thwarted the liberation of prisoners. One morning, the prisoners discovered that their German guards had disappeared during the night as the Allied troops were closing in. The German cook, a civilian, came to tell the prisoners that they were free. After the prisoners had enjoyed a few hours of liberty, “the good citizens of Unterlüss,” with guns on their shoulders, surrounded the camp and lined up the prisoners to take them away. Before this could happen, the cook distributed the potatoes he had in the cellar. The armed civilians then forced the prisoners onto trucks and drove them to Bergen-Belsen, an “open air repository of rotting corpses,” where they “delivered them to the Nazi executioners.” All but 200 of the 900 prisoners delivered from Unterlüss were murdered.⁵¹⁵ There was no rational reason—security or other—for the mass killings that took place, some-

512 S. H. male, DEGOB, record number 2917.

513 W. M. male, DEGOB, record number 2930. The story was related by a merchant deported from Munkács.

514 S. M. male, DEGOB, record number 3553.

515 Egon Balas, *Will to Freedom: A Perilous Journey Through Fascism and Communism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

times just moments before liberation. They were committed by convinced Nazis in uniform, and even civilians. It is telling that out of the many Hungarians who told their story not one was saved by locals.

LIBERATION

People reacted to momentous events unpredictably. Sonderkommando member Filep Miller experienced his liberation as “incredibly a complete anticlimax. The moment on which all my secret wishes had been concentrated for three years evoked neither gladness, nor... any other feelings in me.”⁵¹⁶ The liberated prisoners hardly resembled human beings for those who saw them.⁵¹⁷ They were “strange, bald beings dressed in strange clothes, weighing 30 or 40 kilos, covered all over with rat and lice bites, covered with abscesses,” or beings clad in filthy rags who “looked like scarecrows.” The captives suffered irreparable physical and psychological injuries.

Before the British arrived, an SS man alerted the inmates that there were two wagons full of poisoned bread which had been set aside for them.⁵¹⁸ In Leipzig, the Russian cook refused to serve the last supper before liberation because the food was poisoned.⁵¹⁹ Even though not all inmates experienced liberation as an exhilarating moment, there were others who felt joy, perhaps even euphoria. One concentration camp prisoner recalled that, “[i]t was such a joyous moment when the first American truck entered the lager that I will never forget.” A group of women smothered the first American private they saw with kisses and waved to the American tanks with tears of joy in their eyes. A 45-year-old woman who had been deported from Temesvár (today Timișoara, Romania) recalled a spectacular if possibly exaggerated scene in Auschwitz: “ten Russians dressed in white appeared in front of the bloc; 15,000 women rushed out and kissed them all over.”⁵²⁰ After the starvation they had endured, it was especially memorable for the newly liberated men and women that American troops handed out cigarettes, chocolates, and other delicacies. They also put people up

516 Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, 652.

517 For such encounters see Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, chapters 2, 3.

518 S. I. female, DEGOB, record number 470. The poisoned bread story is corroborated by another survivor account in DEGOB, record number 1048.

519 S. R. female, DEGOB, record number 112.

520 T. G. female, DEGOB, record number 3045.

in the village houses so that they could better look after them. “The Americans were people of heart, they... tried to make us forget our sufferings.”

Hungarian accounts of the first encounter with the liberators affirm that they were reluctant to believe their own eyes. U.S. troops found it hard to accept what they were told about the genocidal campaign and the attempt by the Nazis to carry out mass extermination. “The first American who came to see us,” a homemaker from Marosvásárhely recounted, “happened to be Jewish, and he started to cry.” He gave the Jewish women everything they needed, not just food, but prayer books as well. Yet the Americans would not give credence to the prisoners’ stories. “They came to see us every day, listened to our stories, consoled us that we would find our families. We told them about the rest of the camps and our suffering. They told us that this was not so and not even true, everybody survived and is alive.” The horrors and enormous losses of the camps were difficult to comprehend, even as eyewitnesses.⁵²¹

Nothing, not even their combat experiences, could prepare the troops for what they found in the camps. For soldiers in the Soviet army, many of whom had lost their families in the war, the first glimpses of the horrors of the camps they had liberated stoked their hatred of the Nazis even further.⁵²² American troops were equally stunned at the hellish conditions. “We could smell the stench of the Wobbelin camp even before we saw it,” commander of the 87th parachute division James M. Gavin remembered. There were corpses everywhere. The prisoners had lost hope and all sense of humanity. “The dead and the dying were all around us, nobody noticed or cared.”⁵²³

Bergen-Belsen, which had not been originally built as a death camp, operated as one in the last week of the war, as it became a dumping ground for exhausted, malnourished prisoners evacuated from other camps who had arrived there after horrendous suffering. Prisoners were not fed, and typhoid and lice ravaged the camp. The “hunger and the filth were horrendous.” The British liberators found “skeletons” “in a state of madness,” who were “closer to the dead than the living.” People were figuratively eaten alive by the lice, which were rampant because there was no water for sanitation. Corpses were sent to the crematoria by the cartload every day.⁵²⁴ As a man taken to Auschwitz with seven siblings put it, “we were skeletons with scary heads.” The camp was liberated by

521 S. L. female, DEGOB, record number 3490.

522 Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 39.

523 Vági and Kádár, *Táborok könyve*, 449; 447.

524 F. P. male, DEGOB, record number 86; L. J. female, DEGOB, record number 104; K. R. and S. K. females, DEGOB, record number 126; S. I. female, DEGOB, record number 470.

British troops after a truce with the guards. The drawback of this arrangement was that, even after liberation, the guards and capos continued to torment, even kill, the inmates as if nothing had happened, affirming that their behavior was dispositional. Major Ben Barnett was astounded by the sight: “The things I saw completely defy description. There are no words in the English language which can give true expression of the ghastly horror of this camp.”⁵²⁵

In some cases, the liberators arrived literally at the last moment. In Tirol, a group of people were about to be shot when the British rescued them. When the Americans arrived, a young woman remembered, “we were half mad.”⁵²⁶ Liberation in Weimar did not come a moment too soon, as the SS was getting ready to shoot the prisoners.⁵²⁷

When Szerén Mermelstein saw the white flag raised by the Germans, she “wept like a shower,” and “sobbing... I was kissing the [flag] post.”⁵²⁸ American troops liberated H. R.: “They were very gentle, and they comforted us, and this was even better than the food, as nobody has spoken to us in a human voice for a year.” They were “allowed to take a bath, and this was already like paradise. It appeared to me as though they had come from the sky to return me to life.” M. H., a baker from Nagykaroly (today Carei, Romania), was liberated on May 6. They were crying as they cheered their American liberators.⁵²⁹ Prisoners may have behaved like beasts in the warped world of Nazi camps, but they did not lose the capacity to be human forever. In Buchenwald, a report received by the OSS stated that 21,000 inmates “cheered at the sight of American uniforms and rushed out to shake hands.” American troops addressed the inmates on loudspeakers. As one survivor recalled, “it was an incredible experience... The rebirth of humanity in a bestial surrounding.”⁵³⁰ A 14-year-old-boy was taken to a *Kinderheim* after liberation, “where I could feel myself a child once again.” The experience of finally getting ample food was memorable in and of itself. Hungarian troops took over a contingent of Hungarian Jews liberated from Bergen. “They treated us well and gave us ample food and even let us get more from the kitchen.”⁵³¹

The failings of the liberators in saving lives are documented, but the Hungarian Jews remembered them as saviors. S. L. was lying in the *revier*, naked and

525 Ben Shephard, *After Daybreak: The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), 38.

526 K. Z. female, DEGOB, record number 125; DEGOB, record number 489.

527 F. K. male, DEGOB, record number 554.

528 DEGOB, record number 7.

529 H. R. female, DEGOB record number 19; M. H. male, DEGOB, record number 40.

530 NARA, RG 226, Entry 191, Box 1.

531 J. H. male, DEGOB, record number 81.

lice ridden on a mattress with rainwater pouring in after having contracted typhus. The Americans saved him from certain death.⁵³² Women liberated in the Siemens camp had fond memories of their liberators. The Russian commander gave them “everything,” including two liters of milk every day. Later they encountered former French and Belgian prisoners of war who behaved “unforgettably” and brought them every imaginable goodie.⁵³³

Not all prisoners cherished memories of their liberation at the hands of the Soviets. The generally generous behavior of Red Army troops was marred by recurrent cases of rape.⁵³⁴ For some, freedom did not mean survival.⁵³⁵ In Bergen-Belsen alone, 14 thousand people died after liberation. It has been argued that mishandling of the medicine of liberating camps “reflected allied ignorance and failure to plan, which in turn mirrored the democracies’ lack of concern for the fate of the Jews.”⁵³⁶ The Hungarian survivors attributed it to ignorance rather than intentionality.

The ample food provided after a long period of starvation did in fact cause large scale death. When they liberated Allach, the Americans were stunned by the sight of the pyramids of corpses and the people who resembled living skeletons and who could barely walk. Curiously, they were unprepared to provide proper nourishment for inmates who had gone without food for so long. They put bacon in the soup and offered copious amounts of margarine and other greasy food, as a result of which perhaps “hundreds” of the liberated died of diarrhea.⁵³⁷ Unfortunately, the liberators did not always manage to save the lives of the people they were liberating, despite their best efforts. The British too, a doctor from Szamosudvarhely recalled, wanted to treat the skeleton-like people they found in Bergen-Belsen, which was by then “worse than Auschwitz,” well, and they gave them “greasy food.” This only increased the incidences of death. Even worse, the prisoners were held in the camp for four more weeks before they were allowed to leave. An epidemic of typhoid broke out, which claimed even more lives. The blocs were not separated, thus the infected communicated the disease to others in the camp. The sick were left among the healthy.⁵³⁸

532 S. L. male, DEGOB, record number 114.

533 Five females, DEGOB, record number 63.

534 See Stone, *The Liberation of Camps*, 53.

535 As many as 10,000 of the surviving almost 60,000 may have died in the first week after liberation in Belsen.

536 Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 5.

537 S. W. male, DEGOB, record number 62; G. E. male, DEGOB, record number 3587.

538 Dr. Sz. J. male, DEGOB, record number 2593.

Even after the degradation and humiliation they had experienced, the former prisoners were able to appreciate kindness. A woman emphasized that, in Bohemia, the population was “very good to them.”⁵³⁹ Civilians in Chemnitz behaved in an “exemplary manner.” They gave the former concentration camp prisoners food and money. A Hungarian captain who led the transit camp’s kitchen gave the prisoners “as much as was possible to give in a camp.” He provided order, cleanliness, and knives and forks. For former inmates, the latter had special significance in the restoration of their self-respect as human beings. In an unnamed German town, the mayor and the locals took care of the former prisoners, putting them up with families who looked after them like their own.⁵⁴⁰

Survivors usually remembered the first troops that entered their camps, Russian, American and British, with profound gratitude. They experienced their liberation as the restoration of their humanity and a sign that their lives counted. Even some former Axis troops behaved well. In Belsen, a Hungarian contingent did everything they could for the camp’s former Jewish-Hungarian inmates. Lieutenant Altorjay set up an infirmary for them and put a Jewish doctor in charge.⁵⁴¹ Nothing in this history was black and white. The memory of the liberators was not always flattering. In K. R.’s experience, “The British were on the side of the Germans. They tended to take their side in everything, and in general they trusted the Germans more than us, Jews.”⁵⁴² Others encountered disinterest towards their accounts of their ordeal: “The American Jewish boys were just chewing their gum and could hardly wait for us to end our story which they found boring.”⁵⁴³ This foreshadowed what was to come: there were awful memories to share, but no one to listen.

As the war was coming to a close, revenge was the order of the day. Camp survivors were thinking of taking revenge. When American troops took Buchenwald, they reported that the “inmates wanted to know where the Germans were. They wanted to kill.”⁵⁴⁴ Polish partisans who had liberated a workcamp delivered their former tormentors, SS personnel, to the female prisoners of the camp to do whatever they wanted with them. Cecilia Goldsamt recounted that there were 400 French and 700 Hungarian prisoners there. “We beat four SS women and one SS man to death,” she boasted.⁵⁴⁵ In Bergen-Belsen, the bru-

539 M. S. female, DEGOB, record number 76.

540 T. G. female, DEGOB, record number 3045; K. L. male, DEGOB, record number 2985.

541 DEGOB, record number 2593.

542 K. R. male, DEGOB, record number 354.

543 H. R., H. S., H. H. females, DEGOB, 769.

544 NARA, RG 226, Entry 191, Box 1 (Buchenwald).

545 G. C. and J. M. females, DEGOB, record number 588.

talized Russians and partisans “went beserk” and beat the kapos to death, “cutting their arms and limbs off.” “All of us,” three men who survived this camp remembered, “wanted to exact revenge.”⁵⁴⁶

The camp experience had a brutalizing effect on the inmates. In Chomutov, a former prisoner recognized a Hungarian she thought had volunteered to serve in the SS. After she subjected him to a beating, he admitted that she was correct. “We took him to the garrison, and I watched him being tortured... for a while and then lost my nerve... He was executed the next day.”⁵⁴⁷ Prisoners cooperated with American troops to catch fleeing SS men in Buchenwald. Then, the Americans forced the locals to visit the camp. These civilians claimed that they knew nothing; “this was not true,” one survivor claimed, as the SS had paid regular visits to the town.⁵⁴⁸ A Polish boy prepared to take revenge. At the age of 16, he had been arrested for smuggling Jews across the Polish-Hungarian frontier. He had been sent to the camp in Jaworzno. After liberation, he took charge of the camp containing 400 German prisoners of war. He asked three Jewish friends to stay and help him “take revenge for all the suffering.” “Boys,” he told them, “I have spent five years in the Lager, and during these five years, the Germans gave me a thorough lesson in how to deal with prisoners.”⁵⁴⁹ When a group of Germans slated for internment was taken into the gendarmerie garrison in Budapest, a Jewish guard told them that the Germans should count on revenge. “I will never forget how they tormented and sadistically tortured us, Jews. And now the law of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth is in effect.”⁵⁵⁰

Appalled by the horrendous crimes that were revealed as they entered the camps, the liberators sometimes allowed emotions to run their course. In Bergen-Belsen, the British questioned the inmates as to who had maltreated them, and they allowed the inmates to do whatever they wanted with these people. An estimated 150 kapos were hanged in the camp.⁵⁵¹ After having liberated Dachau, American troops shot most of the SS on the spot. After taking the camp in Schlesiensee, the Russians took some people to be bandaged and treated at a private

546 Three males, DEGOB, record number 87; S. E. female, DEGOB record number 1780. These recollections were confirmed by other research. In Bergen-Belsen the strong Polish and Russian prisoners hunted down kapos and block leaders and threw them out of the window. Around a 150 people died in such a way. Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 39. Vági and Kádár, *Táborok könyve*, 178.

547 K. R. female, DEGOB, record number 174.

548 K. E. male, DEGOB, record number 327.

549 H. B. male, DEGOB, record number 2955.

550 Réka Marchut, *Töréspontok: A Budapest környéki németiség második világháborút követő felelősségrevonása és annak következményei (1928–1948)* (Budapest: MTA Társadalomtudományi Kutatóközpont, 2014), 172.

551 DEGOB, record number 1780; Vági and Kádár, *Táborok könyve*.

clinic owned by a man named Dr. Bruchs. Two days later, they took Bruchs and executed him “because he had been a Nazi.”⁵⁵²

American troops were unable to restrain themselves when they found the corpses of almost 1,000 prisoners shot dead by the SS in the forest of Neuburg. The Americans “mercilessly” shot SS guards who tried to flee.⁵⁵³ There was no grand design behind the sporadic acts of Allied retorsion. The sentiments of a British photographer may encapsulate what many troops and their officers felt when they were confronted with the horrors of the camps: “It must be seen to be believed. I am now convinced that the Nazis are not human beings, but vermin that must be exterminated.”⁵⁵⁴

In endings reminiscent of fairytales, at the hour of reckoning, decent guards were rewarded. When the Americans entered the camp in Salzwedel, the SS stood with their hands in the air. There stood a camp leader, who was “always very good” to the inmates. “We wanted to reward his behavior, and we all signed a declaration that he had never hurt us, and he had always tried, within the range of the possibilities, to be kind unto us.”⁵⁵⁵ The sense of freedom was more uplifting than revenge. “20,000 people lined up in Weimar. Suddenly the *International* sounded... We cried.”⁵⁵⁶

Freedom raised spirits, and the dehumanized former concentration camp prisoners regained their assertiveness. Most, if not all, wanted to live, and were no longer afraid. After surviving a death march, a group of prisoners went into a German bakery and asked for bread. The bakery demanded their food tickets. David Hollander told them: “The *Fraulein* would need to wait a long time for the tickets to arrive from Hungary but I cannot be hungry that long so if you give me bread for money I will pay but if not, we will storm the bakery and take all the bread.”⁵⁵⁷

Liberation brought an end to one epoch and a beginning to a new one, which survivors found difficult to face. In the words of Dan Stone, “On the day of liberation there was certainly happiness but a fear of the future and the sense of profound loss prevailed.”⁵⁵⁸ Not only profound loss, but a strategy to rebuild, if possible, the shattered lives needed to be charted. Survivors told their interrogators,

552 K. A. female, DEGOB, record number 3544.

553 B. A. female DEGOB, record number 3531.

554 Cited in Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 85.

555 W. E., W. F., W. B. all women, DEGOB, record number 2958.

556 F. K. male, DEGOB, record number 554.

557 Dávid Holländer, DEGOB, record number 22.

558 Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 92.

“It is our aim now to return to our homes, where we will really feel German barbarism, which in Auschwitz snatched from us our dear parents and siblings.”⁵⁵⁹

The horrors of the persecution they had suffered as Jews had a long-lasting impact on the survivors. They sought, and often served, justice at the People’s Tribunals, but, despite the large number of cases tried, the failings of the often politically motivated proceedings left them disappointed. At the same time, their involvement gave the impression of a “Jewish revenge.” Postwar Jewish identity was forged by the shared experience of persecution, which elicited a general resentment and suspicion of the outside world, anxiety, a collective feeling of loneliness, and a desire to be free of the burden of Jewish identity. They lost the sense of belonging to the Jewish community, though others thought of them as Jews. Many felt that others forced them to see themselves as Jews.⁵⁶⁰

Some survivors saw little reason to continue living in the light of having lost their loved ones. “We thought we would be executed in Auschwitz, but something much worse happened to us, because if they had shot us, then... we would not have to bear pain that a whole life is not enough to endure.”⁵⁶¹ The feeling of emptiness and despair, of being all alone in the world, was conveyed by the following statement made by a schoolboy of fifteen: “I came home, I am all alone and I have no hope.”⁵⁶² For many, liberation brought little hope and few prospects. Their goals were limited. One man “just wanted to go home.” A high school student asserted that after his liberation he would go home, “but if he does not find anyone he would try to emigrate.” Four women who were deported from Nagszöllös wanted nothing but to leave.⁵⁶³

Dreams were modest. A boy of 18 hoped to graduate from high school. A 14-year-old-boy “had nobody left” after liberation. Like so many others, he wanted to go to Palestine, if for nothing else, to avoid having to live among the people that drove them away. The losses these individuals suffered are impossible to fathom. A young woman, barely older than 20, lost her parents and eleven [!] siblings in Auschwitz.⁵⁶⁴ When whole families were wiped out, the sole survivor found it hard to endure life. A family man from Nyírbátor who had lost his wife and five children, had “nothing and nobody left,” and it was “not easy to continue with life.” He confessed that it would take a long time to figure out

559 Z. I., F. Z., F. H., all females, DEGOB, record number 47.

560 Barna and Pető, *Political Justice in Budapest after World War II*.

561 H. L. and H. I. females, DEGOB, record number 2690.

562 L. H. male, Munkács, DEGOB, record number 2911.

563 H. H. male, DEGOB, record number 1593. B. M. male, DEGOB, record number 30; Five females, DEGOB, record number 63.

564 G. M. male, DEGOB, record number 79; K. P. female, DEGOB, record number 1674.

how to go on with life, and in the meantime, he was “searching and looking after somebody from my family, although I fear that I am fooling myself and in reality I have nobody left.”⁵⁶⁵ A rabbi who survived the ordeal of Auschwitz, forced labor, evacuation, and a deadly typhoid epidemic in Theresienstadt be-moaned that, of the 5,000 Jews who labored in Rhemsdorf, only 800 had survived. Nine members of his immediate family had been killed, and he found no consolation at home. Initially, the locals “hid their emotions, but now they are constantly showing that they hate the Jews.” People returning from the camps could not get their homes and possessions back.⁵⁶⁶ Hostility was widespread, although not ubiquitous, not only in Hungary, but all over Europe. Naomi Samson and her mother were shocked to discover that the few surviving Jews in the area needed to be guarded by Soviet soldiers for fear of local gentile Poles attacking them.⁵⁶⁷

Another strategy of survival was to turn a page, forget the past, and try to live a normal life the way it used to be as far as possible. One man who had lost his mother in Auschwitz and had no relatives left in the country looked to the future with optimism. “I am young, and life is ahead of me,” he asserted, “my every desire is to establish a family.” A student, whose six siblings and mother had been gassed in Auschwitz (only his father had survived) hoped to attend a seminar to learn to be a rabbi despite having suffered humiliation as a Jew.⁵⁶⁸ A mother returned to Budapest after exceptional hardships. She had been a leader type in the camps, and this had helped her survive. She had also been exceptionally lucky, as her whole family survived. She had nothing but the clothes she received as American aid. She told her interviewers, “I am at home. I want to live I want to turn a new page. When my child is older, I want to emigrate.”⁵⁶⁹

Young people found new meaning in their new lives, but this was probably not possible for those who were nearing the ends of their lives, and, by a weird twist of fate, had lost everything they had had before the Germans came, including beautifully furnished homes, workshops, spouses, children, and grandchildren. When asked about his plans for the future, a man replied, “what plans could a sick, old man who has lost his family have?”⁵⁷⁰ Home had meaning even for those whom the motherland had cast away as refuse. Júlia Bauer felt like go-

⁵⁶⁵ F. M. male, DEGOB, record number 2957.

⁵⁶⁶ Dr. K. I. male, DEGOB, record number 3588.

⁵⁶⁷ Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 63.

⁵⁶⁸ B. A. male, DEGOB, record number 3531; W. E. male, DEGOB, record number 2636.

⁵⁶⁹ F. G. female, DEGOB, record number 3491.

⁵⁷⁰ F. S. male, DEGOB, record number 3011.

ing “home, yes home, no matter how nastily they drove me away, I long to be home with every drop of my blood.”

Patients who were seriously ill or who had lost a limb or were suffering from tuberculosis or who had even gone blind were escaping from their hospital beds because they were homesick and wanted to go home, even if many of the deported felt resentment for the yellow star, the looting of their property, the gas chambers, and the acts of inhumane cruelty.⁵⁷¹ A 42-year-old man saved the rabbi’s words for posterity: “Germany may have lost the war, but Hitler won it against the Jews. We see the endless lines of our dead comrades, our impotence, we cannot understand how we survived. We are not even alive, we are dead, too.’ I feel he is right.”⁵⁷²

For many survivors of Nazi camps, liberation did not bring freedom or the end of their misery. In the women’s camp of Ravensbrück, women were raped by the liberating Russians. A group of Jews liberated by the British in Bergen-Belsen were later interned by the Russians for a month in a school building overseen by armed guards.⁵⁷³ Margit Brennersz found herself “alone in the world,” as her five brothers and parents had been deported from Beregszász. She had one brother left, who had been serving in a labor battalion and had managed to escape the Germans only to be taken captive by the Soviet “liberators.” Zsuzsanna Mellár was captured by the 43rd Soviet Army on her way from Esztergom to Budapest. She had fake documents to evade the Arrow Cross, who had executed her sister and nine-year-old nephew in 1944. Zsuzsanna was deported to Arkhangelsk.⁵⁷⁴ As many as ten thousand Hungarian survivors of Nazi persecution shared her fate.

If one was to sum up survival in Nazi camps in the experience of the Hungarian survivors, it was individual/collaborative. Memoirs and scholarly works tend to emphasize the Hobbesian nature of the camp world and to a certain extent that was true. No other group of sources is as plain as this one regarding the loss of human sentiment. Survival was often a zero-sum game, particularly for the Hungarians, who found themselves at the very bottom of the camp hierarchy as Jews and latecomers. Psychological factors played a crucial role in one’s ability to stay alive: the retention of hope in eventual liberation was one fac-

571 Cited in Szita, *Gyógyíthatatlan sebek*, 190.

572 P. I. male, DEGOB, record number 1735.

573 Dr. Sz. J. male, DEGOB, record number 2593.

574 Brennersz Margit kérelme volt munkaszolgálatos öccse szabadon bocsátása ügyében, 9 May 1945. Stark Tamás, “...Akkor aszt monták kicsi robot,” Document 110. 243. Meller Simon levele leánya felkutatása ügyében, 17 May 1946. Document 223. 390–91.

tor, and a powerful will to see another day to rejoin loved ones the other. The law of the jungle thesis should not be overstressed. Despite the physical and psychological continuous abuse suffered on the part of the camp authorities and other prisoners as well as the constant threat of gassing and other forms of death, compassion and solidarity among the victims did survive. Occasionally even guards and kapos showed compassion and helped the victims see another day. There was no excuses for the barbarous behavior of the kapos, even if some historians came up with them. A kapo, a former officer of the Polish army, never hit a prisoner. His honest and upright attitude was remembered with affection. None were ever punished for decency and the many, men and women alike, motivated by racial hatred, often overstepped their policing obligations to satisfy their sadistic desires. In fact, as a survivor summed it up, the kapos hit the Jews so as to exterminate them.

Undoubtedly, there was no community of fate in the camps. Solidarity and compassion, which brightened a somewhat dim picture, were isolated occurrences rather than the rule. Those who remained decent deserve immense credit, just as the barbarous deserve unmitigated reprobation. Neither cruelty nor kindness in the camp were monopolized by any national or ethnic group. Imre Kertész's deeply moving memory of primordial kinship, "happiness" in the wasteland of the camps, was, in the light of the large body of evidence, more of an illusion in order to give meaning to suffering than a reality.

If the victims who wanted to get out alive from the camps were mainly on their own, the opposite was true in yet another terroristic space of the Holocaust, Budapest, under Arrow Cross rule between October 1944 and February 1945. It is to that chapter of the Holocaust that we now turn.

P a r t II

Arrow Cross Terror



The pavilion of the far-right newspaper *Pesti Újság* at the Budapest International Fair, 1941. Fortepan/Album002

"You will die now, sons of Juda."

Arrow Cross activist Dénes Bokor before his execution

"Hatred filled the hearts and souls of men."

Mihály P. Kiss

On a fateful October day, the radical followers of Ferenc Szálasi and his radical right-wing party, the Arrow Cross, gathered in an upscale part of Buda, the leafy, residential side of the capital city. They no longer needed to fear the truncheons of Regent Horthy's police, the leader of whom had called them the scum of society. The mobilizing tune of the Arrow Cross March sounded on the record player, and the assembled Greenshirts sang along. The time for action had come. Guns were passed out, inaugurating a reign of terror that permeated the lives of all, including people who were not the primary targets of the Arrow Cross wrath. Their short-lived reign raised the main issues of this volume: forms of survival in the midst of barbarity. It was within that microcosm that we are able to investigate the killers and their victims, issues of collaboration, and both resistance and solidarity through the anatomy of atrocities.

A short while earlier, 17-year-old Gyuszi threw his little sister Veronika up in the air in joy. He thought the "war was over," and so, he hoped, was the persecution of Jews.¹ Lilla Ecséri was "overjoyed" when she and others in her company heard of the ceasefire, but one day later, she noted in her diary that "after rejoicing yesterday, now there is terrible panic through the entire building."² A young man named Sándor Reichnitz broke the news of Regent Horthy's announcement that Hungary was withdrawing from the war to his fiancée. "All persecution is over," he said. Dezső Németh overheard the statement. Sensing the opportunity for his party finally to seize power, he shouted "Just wait, you

1 Personally related to author.

2 Cited in Zoltán Vági, László Csósz and Gábor Kádár, *The Holocaust in Hungary*, 172–73.

filthy Jew, and see what kind of world will come in a few hours.”³ The takeover of the national socialists came suddenly and unexpectedly. The city’s inhabitants were unprepared for what was to come.

Horthy and his kind were never meant to take over. Hitler had not wanted to see Szálasi and his party in power until the elderly and inept regent, Miklós Horthy, botched an attempt to surrender to Stalin. The Germans deposed Horthy, who, albeit reluctantly, relinquished power to the radical leader, who immediately gave himself the title *nemzetvezető*, or “leader of the nation.”

The Arrow Cross reign of terror in Budapest has been left outside the international and, until quite recently, even the Hungarian, history of the Holocaust. This is inexplicable, as, since the east European archival revolution, historians turned their focus on the mass killings in the small localities of eastern and central Europe. Surviving the siege was central to the thoughts of over a million inhabitants. This section will explore the experience of the target groups of the Hungarian Nazis in the final phase of the Holocaust in Hungary.

The present chapter will explore the final episode of the Hungarian Holocaust. Around 200,000 Jews resided in Budapest when the city was encircled by the Soviets and one of the bloodiest sieges in the history of the war began. By some estimates, 3,500 to 8,000 people, the vast majority of them Jews, were brutally murdered by Arrow Cross men. We may never know the precise number. The Arrow Cross used modern firearms at close range, sometimes truncheons, and sometimes their bare hands. These killings were highly personal. This chapter will therefore explore the causes of Arrow Cross terror and the motives of the perpetrators by attempting to reconstruct their mindset through their personal lives, the conditions under which they carried out the atrocities, the external constraints on them, and their beliefs and attitudes. The motives of the perpetrators had a direct impact on the victims’ chances of survival through their own efforts and the efforts of those who tried to save them. The latter often became victims themselves. In turn, the way in which the victims were able to survive provides an insight into the motivations and mindset of their persecutors.

The roles of perpetrators, victims, and rescuers in these events have been widely discussed. While working on this chapter, I found that these roles are not always easily distinguishable. Some people were denounced for having collaborated with the Nazis and having participated in the atrocities; other witnesses

3 Reichnitz Sándor vallomása, Lévai és társai, Állambiztonsági és Történeti Levéltár (State Security Archive, hereafter cited as ÁBTTL), V-121588/b.

claimed that the individual in question had actually saved them. This chapter will also focus on the motivations of the rescuers, the people who chose to be decent and incurred the considerable risk associated with such behavior. Were their acts altruistic or did they demand money or other favors in return for their kindness? Could decency survive in the midst of anarchy and bloodshed in circumstances where to stay alive frequently demanded that someone else die?

One is tempted to regard the perpetrators of atrocious crimes as victims, at least to some extent, of the horrendous times in which they lived, i.e. the products of aggressively disseminated ideologies of hatred that infected them. This was the verdict of a West German court over a former SS corporal, Paul Thomanek, which pronounced that Thomanek was “a victim of the time.”⁴ This was a denial of individual responsibility, a *carte blanche* for crimes within dictatorial regimes. But then one is reminded that there were others, less aggressive and not so vocal, who rejected these ideologies, and some who even actively assisted victims of persecution. These people were workers in industry and agriculture, maids, housekeepers, intellectuals, and members of the upper classes. We know little about them, and they may have had little else in common apart from their sense of humanity. We know more about the individuals who carried out the killing and committed acts of torture, plunder, and other crimes. Some may have been driven by ideological zeal, but not necessarily. In fact, there is evidence of tension between party veterans and neophytes who signed up after the Hungarist takeover in search of wealth, entertainment, or, quite simply, gratification of their desires.⁵ The political scientist Kieran Mitton suggests that “where violence is to such an extreme that it is called atrocity, it may appear to defy description and exceed the limits of our understanding.” Such acts can be understood as evil.⁶

The citizens of the besieged city were faced with impossible choices. Literally from one day to the next, they were forced to run for shelter from the heavy fighting and bombing of their city. Besides having to fear for their lives, they found themselves in a situation in which neighbors, friends, and strangers living across the road were seeking shelter or refuge because they were facing death at the hands of their determined National Socialist persecutors. The city, by then, had descended into chaos. The police force was falling apart and was itself on occasion terrorized by the more determined, more powerful men of the Hun-

4 Omer Bartov, *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczacz* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 196.

5 Hungarism was the ideology of Szálasi’s movement.

6 Kieran Mitton, *Rebels in a Rotten State: Understanding Atrocity in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.

garist movement. The Arrow Cross openly proclaimed that anyone who tried to help the targets of their persecution (Jews, their helpers, deserters, and members of the old elite) in any way would be “exterminated.”

Human virtues like solidarity, honesty, sincerity, loyalty, and selflessness could survive, if not triumph, in the worst of times. The mass murders in Budapest, which involved mainly Jews but also Hungarians of gentile descent, did not have to happen. It was not ordered from above, neither by the Germans nor by the highest echelons of the Arrow Cross. The decisions were made by individuals frequently of modest social standing, drunken with power, blinded by ideologically motivated hatred and the lust for loot, even peer pressure.

The events will be reconstructed mostly on the basis of testimony provided immediately after the war or later, in the 1960s and early 1970s, along with the records of police investigations and trials. These records allow us to see the events through the eyes of both those who committed the crimes and those who suffered from them. With some exceptions, the postwar trials failed to explore whether the defendant was truly guilty and need to be understood within the framework of the Communist Party’s ongoing political struggle for power and the attempt to put the previous “regime” on trial. It is important to note, however, that not all trials were shams. The trials of the Arrow Cross of Zugló in 1965 and the Murderers of Buda in 1971 were held under conditions of “consolidated socialism.” Here, in my view, the establishment of justice took center stage. If these trials had political motivations at all, they were not the focus of the proceedings. Arrow Cross men were eager to implicate one another to get off the hook. Once complicity could no longer plausibly be denied, an “honest confession” was the best strategy for reducing the sentence. Unlike in West Germany, where the perpetrators tried to deny National Socialism as a motivation for their crimes, in communist Hungary this was not necessary, since ideology was regarded merely as a function of one’s economic condition. Moreover, a person led astray by bad ideology could always be reeducated and led to the “right path.” Therefore, there was no point in *not* confessing to anti-Semitic hatred. In economically backward, ethnically and religiously divided, parts of Eastern Europe, local citizens carried out mass murders of their neighbors, mainly Jews, in impoverished villages and the forests that surrounded them.⁷ In Hungary, the atrocities took place in the country’s westernized prosperous capital, Budapest.

7 On the historical setting of World War II killings see Alexander Prusin, *Nationalizing the Borderland: War, Ethnicity and anti-Jewish Violence in east Galicia, 1914–1920* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005).

TERRORIST SPACES

In the midst of door to door fighting and constant bombing, Budapest descended into chaos and became a zone of murder and mayhem. In the words of the verdict pronounced in the final trial of Arrow Cross killers in 1971, “[b]efore killing their captives, they profoundly humiliated them in their self-esteem and human dignity, and they trod on the honor of girls and women... inflicted on them such physical and psychological torment and suffering that went far beyond even the usual torment and suffering that accompanies the extinction of life... Death was almost a redemption.”⁸

Party activists were not acting on orders from the top leadership. The party leader, Ferenc Szálasi, to whom they all swore allegiance, warned on October 31 that anyone committing “excesses” would “pay with their lives.” The Arrow Cross head of party construction, József Gera, issued a press release asserting that the party had not “instructed anyone to loot or to commit atrocities.” Any “scoundrel who abuses official power... will be shot in the head.”⁹ Although Szálasi left Budapest on December 10, his authority among the party faithful might have been sufficient to halt the massacre, had he made a sincere effort to do so. The following episode shows that, even amidst lawless conditions, the party leader’s orders held some sway. A man named Károly Müller was taken to the party headquarters at Andrassy Avenue 60, which served as a site for torture and execution, on Christmas day. Müller, who was Jewish, held a medal of valor from the First World War. As someone with such a decoration, he counted as a privileged Jew, a category on Szálasi’s list of exemptions. Even though the party militia arrested him, and the notorious and sadistic Pater Kun beat him, he was released. The seven other people who were taken in together with Müller, including women and children, were murdered.¹⁰ There remained few if any safe places for the Jews of Budapest. These included the “safe houses” under the protection of neutral embassies, at least for a while (before they, too, began to be attacked by the Arrow Cross), and, paradoxically, the large Budapest ghetto. The Arrow Cross respected nothing, not even places of worship.

Fear was remembered by those who lived through it for the rest of their lives.¹¹ By many accounts, the Hungarian capital was a space ruled by terror on an ev-

8 Brunner Oszkár és társai. A Fővárosi Bíróság ítélete, 1971. ÁBTL, O-14/761.

9 Karsai, *Szálasi Ferenc*, 350, 363.

10 Müller Károly vallomása, 4 March 1948. Nidosi Imre, Volume 2, Bokor Dénes és társai, ÁBTL, V-135335/1.

11 Kenez, *Varieties of Fear*.



After the Arrow Cross takeover: Arrow Cross activists put up a poster. Second from the left is András Kun, a former Minorite priest. Budapest, 1944. Fortepan/155598

eryday basis, and this allegedly conditioned the behavior of the actors caught in its sway. A housekeeper, Mrs. István Tasnády, recalled a rabid member of the Arrow Cross, István Kémenczy, parading in his movement's uniform and continuously calling her a hireling of the Jews. Kémenczy's whole family had a reputation of supporting the Arrow Cross, and even the children in their family used viciously anti-Semitic language. They were feared by the entire neighborhood.¹² Ferenc Dobos served as a building commander, and was the "dreaded terror of the building." He and his likeminded spouse liked to denounce any "árja párja," meaning the Jewish partner in mixed marriages.

The same apartment block was inhabited by a man named Ottó Bumford, a person described as a brute who went out to "pillage and murder every night." It was possible to escape the fighting and bombing by crouching in the air shelter, but the block's embattled inhabitants were unable to evade the psychological terror inflicted on them by their neighbors.¹³ Mrs. Mocsáry was also in the habit of "terrorizing the inhabitants of the building." Perhaps as a vague allu-

12 Tasnády Istvánné vallomása, 1945. Bokor Sándor es társai, V-135325/2.

13 Bejelentés az Államvédelmi Hatóságnak, 1948. Bokor Sándor és társai, ÁBTL, V-135335/2.

sion to the ancient accusation of blood libel, but definitely attesting to the rapid collapse of all norms of civilization, she screamed “I want to drink Jewish blood” and threatened to have the Jews deported. Her husband calmed her down by the time a policeman, summoned by the trembling tenants, arrived. “She is the worst anti-Semite of us all,” an Arrow Cross member once said. “She likes to watch and take part in beatings more than the men.” The Stein family, which included a daughter married to a gentile, was so afraid of her that they moved to another building.¹⁴ The son of a housekeeper at Podmaniczky Street 29 cut dozens of Arrow Cross symbols out of paper and spread them through the entire courtyard. A ten-year-old boy threatened a Jewish boy by telling him that the Arrow Cross might take him in a chest to Nazi Germany.¹⁵ A housekeeper named Gyula Tóth used anti-Semitic speeches and threats to silence those who were talking loudly in the common areas of a Yellow Star building: “This is not a synagogue, you dirty people,” he snapped when two Jewish individuals conversed in his proximity.¹⁶

The death marches during the cold winter of 1944–1945 proceeded past the emblematic sites of Hungary’s path to modernity and the country’s gradual Westernization in the optimistic nineteenth century. Past Krisztina Boulevard, a quaint, quintessential middle-class district, the marchers turned a corner shuffling past the baroque Krisztina Church, where Count István Széchenyi, whom Lajos Kossuth, the revolutionary leader of 1848, had called the “Greatest Hungarian,” had sworn devotion to his bride, Countess Crescentia Seylern. Their *via dolorosa* then took them past the tunnel under Castle Hill, constructed by the count better to connect commercial Pest with upper class Buda. Their last *statio* was across the Chain Bridge, guarded by the two lions. The bridge was the most symbolic of the great Count’s attempts to modernize his country physically and intellectually. Not only was it the first physical connection between the separated cities of Pest and Buda, but it was also the first place in which the country’s privileged aristocracy was forced to pay a tax, uniting them with the masses, forging the underprivileged and privileged classes into one nation and leading it from backwardness to modern civilization. During the siege of Budapest, this civilized past was left behind.

14 By another account, she screamed that she would “bathe in Jewish blood.” Bringer Ernőné vallomása, undated, ÁBTLL, V-135335; Austerlitz Endréné vallomása, undated, *ibid*; Preisz Gézáné vallomása, 14 June 1945, *ibid*.

15 Adam, *Budapest Building Managers and the Holocaust in Hungary*, 83.

16 Adam, *Budapest Building Managers and the Holocaust in Hungary*, 85.

NUMBERS

By the time Budapest was liberated, the city had been reduced to rubble. The air was filled with the foul stench of death, urine, and feces. The streets were littered with the decomposing bodies of the dead, victims of the relentless war and Allied bombing raids, and targeted murder. It is small wonder that nobody made an effort to count the dead, nor would it have been possible to arrive at a precise figure. Since no reliable records were left behind, it is impossible to estimate the number of people who were murdered, let alone how many men, women, and children were beaten, tortured, and robbed during the Arrow Cross gangs' reign of terror. Most of them were Jews, but there were also large numbers of others: alleged and real deserters, individuals of wealth and high social standing, Christians who had helped Jewish victims of the terror, or simply people who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Figures need to be pieced together from contemporary estimates given by witnesses and survivors. What we can say with some degree of certainty is that a relatively small number of perpetrators victimized a large number of people. The historian Gábor Tabajdi estimated that four thousand people were involved in the Arrow Cross armed militia, although only a small fraction of them were active in „unmasking internal enemies.”

One of the most infamous and murderous of the Arrow Cross party organizations in 1944, the XIV District, numbered around 100 members, but only some of them took part in the atrocities. Indicative of the magnitude of the killings is that on one occasion alone, 450 individuals were taken from a protected house in early January of 1945 and escorted to the Danube River to be murdered in groups of 50–70.¹⁷ According to one estimate, 600–800 people were taken to the Városmajor Street headquarters of the XII District Arrow Cross alone.¹⁸ In 1946, the police estimated that 100 armed party servicemen of the XIV District party organization murdered as many as 1,000 to 1,200 people. Two decades after the events, a former member of the group, György Bükkös, claimed that there were only 50 armed personnel organized into three groups. A man who spent 40 days working in the kitchen in the Arrow Cross house of the IInd district thought that 300 people had been murdered.¹⁹

17 Budai Gyilkosok, Fehérhegyi Katalin kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 31 March 1945. ÁBTL, O-14761.

18 Vidra Mihály kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 1971. ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971.

19 Kröszl Vilmos és társai, Volume 1, ÁBTL, V-153.693/1. Bükkös György kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 7 March 1966. ÁBTL, V-153.693/2; Bükkös György kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 3 June 1966. Ibid; Wertheimer Zsigmond vallomása, Bokor és társai, ÁBTL, V-135335.

The relatively small number of armed men does not mean that it was easy to escape from their captivity: they always made sure that there were not more than three or four prisoners for each armed and reliable guard. Desperation caused by the heightened measures against Jews caused many to take their own lives. In 1945, a doctor who had worked in the Jewish hospital in the ghetto at Wesselényi Street claimed that 260 people who had tried to commit suicide were taken to his hospital, of whom 50 died. Many of the injured died later. The same doctor told the committee in charge of caring for the deported that Wesselényi hospital alone treated 300 Jews wounded by Arrow Cross bullets, and 50 did not survive.²⁰ The doctor was under no pressure to inflate his numbers, but he still may have overstated the figures. It should not be doubted, however, that suicides did occur, and people who sometimes did not immediately die of their gunshot wounds did so later. Their numbers add to the death toll demanded by the reign of terror, even if those numbers cannot be quantified with any degree of precision. An eyewitness recorded that, day by day, the corpses of the executed lay scattered in the street by the dozens. Sometimes a well-meaning individual would drag them to the curb or cover the faces with a newspaper.²¹

There were also countless smaller raids, which makes the final tally impossible to count. One witness remembered that 8–10 armed men raided the cellar of a house at Somogyi Béla Street and took a certain Nemes and his wife, along with István Tarnai, István Farkas, and István Grósz. Tarnai and Grósz were later released. They told the witness that the Arrow Cross had executed the others “after horrendous torture.” In the second half of November, 60 people were rounded up in a high school building in Abonyi Street, tortured, and murdered. The XIVth District party militia was involved in massacring the five members of the Fehér family. The list of similar atrocities is a long one.²² The standard estimate for the number of murders committed by the Arrow Cross in Budapest is 3,500, which, as the chapter will show, may well not be an exaggeration.

There is no estimate of how many people in the besieged city helped others or condemned the followers of the ideology of hatred. The Yad Vashem institute has recognized 900 Righteous gentiles in Hungary, some of whom will appear in this chapter. There will be other rescuers in the chapter who have not been recognized, which means that there were more, maybe many more,

20 DEGOB, record number 3623.

21 Mihály P. Kiss's diary in Erzsébet Lengyel ed., *Óbudai múltidéző. P. Kiss Mihály SDB 1944-1945-ben írt naplója és más visszaemlékezések* (Budapest, n.d.), 25.

22 Budai Gyilkosok, Riemer Oszkárné tanúvallomási jegyzőkönyve, 1945. ÁBTL, O-14761 Kröszl Vilmos és társai, Volume 1. ÁBTL, V-153693/1.

than 900. The vast majority of rescue efforts in Hungary occurred in Budapest. Documents mention rescue only in passing, and they suggest that there may have been significant popular opposition to anti-Jewish terror. Resistance to the armed squadrons in the besieged capital was sporadic and was met with instant and brutal retribution. One night, a small detachment led by a police first lieutenant attacked the three guards posted in front of one of the deadly places of torture operating as Arrow Cross headquarters, Andrásy Avenue 47. They managed to kill one of the guards on the spot and wound another, who died later. Two attackers managed to flee, but the officer was captured. The housekeeper at Andrásy Avenue 47 recalled that the first lieutenant was tortured and beaten to death so brutally “that even his brain fell out.”²³ Nor do we have any idea how many people denounced others to the authorities, but, based on recollections, their number must have been high. These were communal denunciations, meaning that people reported on neighbors, co-workers and others they knew personally.

Denunciations played a major role in the “success” of the Arrow Cross in identifying and hunting down their victims. József Máté, a member of the Budapest XII District detachment, remembered that they caught their victims on the basis of denunciations received in the neighborhood.²⁴ His testimony, however, also suggested that a wide circle of people tried to assist those who were in danger. Jews were not the only victims of malicious denunciation. An Arrow Cross patrol abducted Gyula Merlin, an 18-year-old boy, on the grounds that his papers were not proper, even though his military documents were in order. It was suspected that he was denounced by a rabid Arrow Cross neighbor, Gyula Regensburger, because Merlin failed to enlist in the Hungarist Legion. Merlin was taken to be shot, and his parents never heard from him again.²⁵

RESCUE AND BETRAYAL

There were two ways to survive. One, where such survival was actively sought, such as by seeking out and hiding with individuals willing to provide refuge. The other, by spontaneous action, carried out at the spur of the moment upon realizing that desperate and risky action was needed to avoid death. There was

23 Piski János tanúvallomása, 1971. ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971.

24 Máté József tanúvallomása, 1971. ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a 1971/3589.

25 Nidosi Imre, Volume 2, Bokor Dénes és társai, ÁBTL, V-135335/1.

a category that defies explanation, where salvation came from the most unexpected quarters in the most unexpected way. Rózsi Kubitsek's escape from death, for instance, was almost miraculous: she and her mother were about to be shot into the Danube when one of the Arrow Cross men got fed up and decided to "stop this whole thing."²⁶ The question of whether one would live or die depended on tiny details, including whether one was lucky enough to find a few strangers who would offer help at the right moment.

Often, escape from death was made possible by a combination of chance and the efforts of strangers. Géza Preisz, a Roman Catholic office worker was taken into custody on a January day and was taken down to 60 Andrásy Avenue. He found himself in the "interrogation and torture room," where a tall man with his hair combed back was torturing people. The man escorted Preisz to the Danube, but, instead of shooting him himself, assigned a soldier to kill him, as "he had had enough [of killing]" the day before. This gave Preisz a chance to escape. István Lehner was about to be executed by the river, but he jumped into the ice-cold water and managed to swim to the embankment. As he reached the shore, a policeman on duty picked him up and gave him his frock in the freezing cold. He then escorted Lehner to the police station, and from there an ambulance took him to a hospital, where he had an acquaintance. He eventually ended up in a sanatorium, where he took refuge until the end of the fighting in Budapest.

Several families were hiding in the building on Andrásy Avenue right next to Arrow Cross headquarters in the so-called *Hűség Háza*, or House of Loyalty. The Arrow Cross received an anonymous tip. József Ráki, who took part in the raid of the house, recounted that he met a stocky 40 or 50-year-old "man who looked Jewish" in the house, who proudly showed him a writing given to him by the "command of the House of Loyalty." Later, Ráki saw the man visiting the head of the Arrow Cross "reprisal unit," Ferenc Megadja.²⁷ Mária Nádi was hiding in the building in the home of her friend, Menyhért Gáspár, and his spouse. Gáspár's extended family, including his daughter, her fiancé, and four other families, and the landlord, Pál Glück, who denounced them lived in the same building.

On January 4, 1945, eight or ten men broke into the house and abducted Nádi and three families, including the Gáspár couple. After the Soviet liberation of the capital, Nádi learned that their landlord, Pál Glück, whom the Arrow Cross had taken in a few days earlier, had denounced them in return for

²⁶ Borszéki Ferenc és társai, tárgyalás, 31 August 1949. ÁBTL, B-121588/b.

²⁷ Ráki József kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 23 April 1971. ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a. 1971/3589.

his release.²⁸ As the group entered the building on Andrásy Avenue, a hellish scene awaited them. Several servicemen, Ráky, the Brunners, a man known as the Stammering Molnár, and a person named Magyar were in the process of forcing two girls to perform sexual acts, while a third young woman was lying dead on the floor. Her body was thrown into the narrow atrium that was used primarily for ventilation.

István Kamasz was a Roman Catholic in his mid-50s who made his living by peddling junk. He was accused of having taken part in the Klein family's abduction. Kamasz, who had served in the radical right-wing movement since 1941, told the court that he had joined the party because they had promised to give him a disability pension. He denied having denounced the Kleins, and he retracted the statement he had made to the police, which he claimed he had made only because they had tortured him physically. According to Klein, an Arrow Cross man by the name of Hradeczky had taken them from their apartment, but had not abused them, neither physically nor verbally. He had also, however, refused to let them go, even in exchange for money. Klein's wife remembered Hradeczky saying that he was acting on orders, but this was denied by her husband.

The Kleins' survival itself was miraculous. Their escorts handed them over to the party militia, which established their "Jewish descent" through what they called "biological screening," which meant an examination of Jenő Klein's genitals. They were then taken away and shot several times. Jenő was shot in the head and pelvis. He was alive when they repeatedly shot him in the hand and arm. He told the court that, after he was left to die, he was taken to "a military hospital, where he was given first aid and treatment," and remained there until the Russians arrived. His wife was shot in the ear and the neck, and collapsed. She too was left for dead, but managed to get home, "where she survived with the help of a Christian man." Originally, the Kleins had been given refuge by a 57-year-old married homemaker, Mrs. Gábor Szijj, whose story differed from the account given by the defendant. According to her, Hradeczky had fallen in love with Kamasz's daughter, and Kamasz had promised to give his daughter to Hradeczky in marriage if he joined the Arrow Cross, which he had done, even though his parents had argued with him about doing so. Hradeczky had known that the Kleins were hiding in Szijj's apartment, but had not made an issue of it. When Kamasz discovered a Jewish boy who was also hiding in the house, Hra-

28 Halász Lajos tanúvallomása, 1971, Brunner Oszkár, ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971.

deczky let the boy go. Nevertheless, Hradeczky was sentenced to a minimum of ten years of forced labor.²⁹

A report prepared by the political division of the police in the fall of 1944 asserted that Jews were hiding in large numbers in Budapest. They purchased documents showing their “Aryan” descent from Christians and were laying low in rented apartments under false names. Others were concealing their “Jewishness” by wearing army uniforms.³⁰ People helped friends, relatives, neighbors, and even strangers hide, despite the fact that helping Jews and others persecuted by the Arrow Cross was punishable with death, as was resisting orders.³¹

Imre Nidosy, a former chiropodist in the Gellért Baths and the Arrow Cross official “in charge” of the defense of Pest, allegedly ordered three officers to blow up the Horthy Miklós Bridge, although it was not within his competence to issue such an order. They refused to carry out the senseless order. The survivor, Lajos Radóczy, recounted as a witness in a 1948 trial that his two comrades were apprehended and publicly shot in the head in Apponyi Square. Radóczy was lucky. While he and many Jews were awaiting execution in the Városház Street Arrow Cross premises, the building was struck by a bomb, which allowed him and some others to escape.³²

Even small acts of kindness were punished. Mrs. Péter Kiss collected letters to forward from Jewish women whom the Arrow Cross had assembled. The person who was guarding the group found out, and forced Mrs. Kiss to swallow the 23 letters one by one, and then beat her. A woman who owned a small grocery store served Jews even in hours when they were not allowed to shop. She was warned that, if she continued, she would “hang from a tree.”³³

Many of these rescue efforts were small scale enterprises which provided help for only a few people, while other efforts involved a dozen, or even several hundred, individuals. In retrospect, coming to the aid of those who were endangered by persecution seems a matter of course, but the risks of resisting were enormously high. As this chapter will show, at the time the Arrow Cross were masters of life and death. They could send their victims to the ghetto or even release them in return for ransom, or because it turned out that that the

29 Hradeczky József és társai, 10 April 1945. Budapest Fővárosi Levéltár (Budapest City Archive, hereafter cited as BFL), NB. III. 147/1945.

30 Hangulatjelentés, MNL OL, BM reservált iratok, K-149, 651f.2/1944-sz.n. 13.

31 Lengyel, ed., Óbudai *múltidéző*, 10.

32 Lajos Radóczy's testimony, 1948. Bokor Dénes és társai, ÁBTL, V-135335/1.

33 ÁBTL, ÁBTL, V-135335/1. 195-196. Testimonies by Ágoston Máday, László Máday, Anna Kántor, Gyula Horváth, Mrs. Emil Sáfár, Mrs. József Surányi.

person in question was not Jewish or not guilty. They could also simply murder them if they pleased, and, more often than not, there was no one to stop them.

Not that the city landscape was conducive to finding refuge. Laying low in Budapest was unusually difficult, given the architectural design of houses characteristic of Central Europe. Most of the multi-story houses were built with open corridors [*körfolyosó*] running around each level with an open courtyard. The flats opened off these corridors, giving neighbors an opportunity to chat and socialize, but limiting their privacy. Standing in the courtyard, the housekeeper was able to see and hear what was being said and done in the public spaces of the house, as could anybody else who cared to look around. It was hard to smuggle anybody who did not belong there in or out. Many homes did not have toilets, and tenants used shared facilities opening off the external corridor, making anyone who used them easily noticeable to the neighbors. In addition, homes tended to be small, with a kitchen and two moderate sized rooms. Other forms of help included the manufacture and distribution of false documents.

The circle of Christians in Budapest who helped Jews go into hiding may have been far wider than has been recognized, even though a person who did this risked his or her life and the lives of his or her loved ones and family members. Legal proceedings and other documents suggest that different forms of assistance were widespread. Even “small” acts of compassion and kindness could save lives or at least make life a little more tolerable. The acts of a tram driver named János Udvary were memorable enough for the inhabitants of a former Yellow Star building (in 1944, buildings in Budapest in which Jews already lived or which were used as places where Jews would be compelled to live were marked with a yellow star) to prompt them collectively to petition for Udvary’s release from Russian captivity.³⁴ Udvary had stridently deplored the Arrow Cross and had proclaimed to anyone willing to listen that the German invasion would bring annihilation to the country. He and his family had looked after Jewish valuables and returned all of them after the war. Hours for Jews to do their shopping were limited, and he and his wife always stood ready to make purchases for them. When it became dangerous for Jews to leave the building, the Udvary family did all their shopping. For this reason, the Arrow Cross district leader threatened the Udvary family on multiple occasions.³⁵

34 For a history of the segregation of Jews in Budapest in 1944 see Tim Cole, *Holocaust City*.

35 A Budapest, Visegrádi utca 3. szám lakóinak kérelme a szovjet parancsnoksághoz, 10 May 1945. Stark Tamás, “...Akkor azt mondták kicsi robot,” Document 113, 246–47.

Gusztáv Tavaszi, a 60-year-old carter was accosted by three Arrow Cross men who threatened to kill him and his family unless Tavaszi told them how he had gotten protective passes for the Jews he was helping. The Arrow Cross man standing behind Tavaszi was already hitting him.³⁶ Rozália Leichter, who survived a deadly march to the ghetto, was able to escape with the help of an unnamed friend, and spent the rest of the siege hiding out with forged documents.³⁷ Concealing people went hand in hand with the large number of denunciations, which, as Vilmos Kröszl (a sadistic killer who will come up later in this chapter) recounted, came both orally and in writing. Sometimes National Socialists were on the receiving end in the period when they were being suppressed by the government. An officer named Bálint Tóth was reported to the authorities for having used the Arrow Cross salute to greet his students at the military academy, the Ludovika, where expressions of political attachment were banned.³⁸

Along with her husband and daughter, Mrs. Mátyás Stern, who was in her mid-40s in 1944, spent a month and a half hiding in the apartment of her housekeeper. The housekeeper, who was named Kolláth, was described as having “exhibited an upright and humane attitude.” Kolláth opened the wall of his home to a connected warehouse, which served as their hiding place. On December 5, 1944, the family was forced to leave, as Kolláth had found out that the aforementioned Dobos had denounced him for concealing Jews. As military and political fortunes changed, Mrs. Stern reported Dobos and his wife to the newly established police.³⁹

Márton Weinberger was a Social Democrat who owned a printing press. In 1945, Weinberger was arrested by the Soviet-established political police and accused of distributing fake party documents. In the course of his interrogation, he was hit repeatedly with a truncheon. He was then moved to the infamous Andrassy Avenue 60, which had just been vacated by the Arrow Cross and was now serving as headquarters of the Communist Gestapo. Weinberger had allegedly provided Ernő Zuna, whom he had met in 1944, with documents to avoid Russian deportation. They changed flats: Weinberger moved into Zuna’s home,

36 Tavaszi Gusztáv vallomása, Lévai és társai, ÁBTTL, V-121588/b.

37 Radó Sándorné Leichter Rozália vallomása, 1971. ÁBTTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/a.

38 Tóth Bálint, Népbíróság Országos Tanácsa, ítélet, 1948. ÁBTTL, O-14937/1948.

39 Tanúvallomási jegyzőkönyv, Stern Mátyásné, 11 February 1946. ÁBTTL, Bokor Sándor és társai, V-135335/2; Bejelentés, Államvédelmi Osztály, 1948, ÁBTTL, O-14937/1948.

which was in a block designated as a “Jewish house.” Weinberger recounted that Zuna “hid and fed Jews in the most difficult days of Jewish persecution.”⁴⁰

Dezső Szilágyi was trying to save a larger number of people, including his Jewish fiancée, Róza Blum. He apparently had no help, but acted alone, at his own initiative. In a complicated operation, he hid Róza at the residence of a Jewish man named Lázár Schuller, whose daughter was arrested and shot, although she survived—this episode will be featured later on in this section. Szilágyi also found refuge for the Rechlitz family in an apartment which belonged to a certain Lajos Somogyi. In addition, Szilágyi reported a woman named Gizella Nagy as his wife and supplied her with fake documents. As it happens, two Arrow Cross sympathizers who worked for Szilágyi denounced him. Szilágyi was arrested, along with the people he was trying to protect, except for his fiancée, whom he was able to move to his brother’s residence before she was discovered.⁴¹

Mrs. Károly Földváry, neé Rózsa Gehler, was arrested for running a similar rescue operation. She and some friends tried to help several people, including the two Klein sisters, Aliz and Magda, for whom she found refuge at the home of a friend on Kinizsi Street. She hid Emil Mandl and his six-year-old daughter in her own apartment. One January day, Arrow Cross men stormed her abode, taking the Mandls, Rózsa, and her maid with them. The Klein girls insisted that they were gentiles, but were unable to recite a Catholic prayer. “You are Jews and you will go where you belong,” they were told. In all likelihood, they were murdered. Well after the war had ended, Rózsa saw the Klein girls’ parents. They believed that their daughters were living abroad. The Mandl girl was let go, and later, for an exorbitant sum, her father was released as well. But the war was cruel. Emil Mandl was killed by a stray bullet. Rózsa Gehler was subjected to a different ordeal. She was forced to watch people being tortured and threatened with the fact that she would suffer the same. She heard the wails and cries of the victims and was forced to watch while one torturer broke a woman’s leg.⁴²

Mihály Stagli, a bank employee, was denounced for hiding Jews in his home. The Arrow Cross broke into his apartment in early January. Stagli recounted that he and the Jews he had been helping hide were interrogated, and his interrogators threatened to kill him. Eventually, Armand Perényi and Mrs. Jenő Vida, both prominent members of the assimilated Jewish upper class, were taken away.

40 Jelentés a Budapest Főkapitányság Politikai Rendészeti Osztályának, 1945. ÁBTLL, V-88229, A szociáldemokrata párt terézvárosi szervezetének feljelentése, 1945. ÁBTLL, O-14937/1948.

41 Feljelentés, 1946. Bokor Dezső és társai, ÁBTLL, V-135335.

42 Földváry Károlyné Gehler Rózsa vallomása, 1967. Brunner Oszkár, ÁBTLL, O-14/761.

The former was shot and killed, the latter was shot but survived.⁴³ The others who were staying in Stagli's home must have had the necessary forged papers indicating that they were Christian. Otherwise, the Nazis would have taken them. Large numbers of people survived by using forged documents providing them with false identities. Several people were hiding out in a building in the working-class area of Nagyatádi Street. All the inhabitants were taken by the Arrow Cross and executed, except for a man by the name of Gutman, who was hidden by the housekeeper, and one other man, who managed to find a hiding place somewhere in the building.⁴⁴ Housekeepers had a reputation for making denunciations, but the historical record shows that this was a one-sided picture.

Some acts of resistance to the Arrow Cross were spontaneous and required courage. A tram driver saved many lives when he refused to heed an order to drive his vehicle over 20 to 25 disabled children who had been lined up on the tracks.⁴⁵ In retrospect, the driver's decision hardly seems heroic, but at the time, he was clearly risking his life by defying the order to perpetrate the horrific act. Lajos Halász, his wife, and their seven-year-old daughter were arrested because Halász, as the building commander, was providing refuge for Jews. Because they were Christian, they were taken to a separate room.⁴⁶ Mrs. József Marton, neé Rózsa Schuler was "staying," according to the euphemistically worded court testimony, in the flat belonging to the housekeeper, József Benkő, at 3/a Szomolányi Street. Benkő's wife, children, and sister-in-law were also living there. Schuler told the court that when the Arrow Cross caught her in a raid, Benkő was also taken in and beaten up. Fortunately, her papers were found to be authentic and she was released.⁴⁷

Rescue could be an individual or collaborative effort. A husband and wife were being hidden by Gyula Benkei, who was the director of Hungary's leading department store, Corvin. When Benkei found out that the Arrow Cross was preparing to raid the hideout (the store's bomb shelter), he alerted the couple and sent them to the convent run by Margit Slachta. Slachta, who headed the religious organization called "Szociális Testvérek," (Sisters of Social Service) used her house to provide safe haven for the persecuted. The novelist Jenő Heltai recalled that, when the Arrow Cross raided the house, they assembled everybody in the dining hall, where the interrogations took place. They cursed Slachta in

43 Stagli Mihály levele a rendőrségnek, undated [April 1945]. ÁBTL, V-135335/1.

44 Preizer Pál tanú vallomása, 14 January 1945. ÁBTL, V-135335.

45 Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok pere 1967*, 221.

46 Brunner Oszkár, ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a.

47 Lévai és társai, ÁBTL, V-121588/b.

the vilest manner and even hit her with a rubber truncheon. She did not seem to care a single bit.⁴⁸ Slachta actively opposed the next round of persecutions and withstood the reprisals with similar equanimity. Slachta's was not the only religious order that assisted Jews in the time of need. A convent belonging to the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary at 19 Hermina Road took in 120 children and 30 adults. On December 10, an Arrow Cross unit raided the sanctuary, and only a few of them managed to escape. The convent of the Society of the Sacred Heart provided refuge for 200 women and children, who survived the war despite several raids. Under the auspices of the Red Cross, Lipót Nemes hid labor servicemen (Jews and others who were enlisted but not allowed to bear arms) and 140 children in an apprentice home on Bácskai Street.⁴⁹

Sporadically, individual police members tried to help. A detective named Jenő Bottyán rescued Jenő Lengyel and seventeen others from an Arrow Cross cellar with fake documents. Unfortunately, the people he saved were recaptured later.⁵⁰

Ferenc Szobor was staying in the cellar of a building on Semmelweis Street because of the constant air raids. Arrow Cross men raided the building and began to beat him so that blood was coming out of both his ears. The elderly man withstood the torture and refused to inform on anyone, even though he knew that Jews were hiding in the building. In the end, he died of his injuries.

Paradoxically, only suspicious looking Christians were abducted from the Semmelweis Street house. The Jews who were hiding there were not found, due to the bravery of Szobor and the others, who did not give them up despite the threat to their own lives. Sometimes individual character was not enough. József Szabó was almost 60 years of age when he served as the house commander of the Gül Baba Hotel, which provided refuge to a number of persecuted individuals. When two, and by another account eight, armed Arrow Cross youngsters barged in looking for Jews, Szabó told them there weren't any in the building and the boys left. After a while, they returned and took eleven people, three of whom did not return.

The Arrow Cross regularly court-martialed and executed people who were caught helping those in need in order to intimidate potential helpers. They hung placards on the necks of the corpses saying, "This will be the fate of each cowardly deserter, each Jew in hiding, or anybody who tries to help Jews hide."⁵¹

48 Jenő Heltai is cited in Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok pere*, 199.

49 See Szabolcs Szita, *Végvátrak Zuglóban: felejtethetlen történet 1944–45-ből* (Budapest: Papcsák Ügyvédi Iroda, 2010); Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok pere*, 202.

50 Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok pere*, 203. Testimony by Jenő Lengyel.

51 Nidosi Imre, Volume 2, Bokor Dénes és társai, V-153693.

Mrs. Hugó Gottsegen's Jewish husband had protective passes, which she had concealed. When they took her husband, she was "beaten like a dog," but she tried to rescue her spouse from the brick factory to which he had been taken. Clearly, there were many other people who tried to, or did, provide help for those in need, but no historical record of their bravery has survived. Concealing an individual required daring and inventiveness. Dániel Mokka and his wife were hiding deserters under the flooring of their home. They were all apprehended, and Mokka was beaten. He and his wife spent over a week in captivity. Ferenc Falus, a stoker, helped cover up for 300 people who were trying to weather the storm in a maternity home, though he was interrogated by the Arrow Cross.⁵²

Concealing one's identity or finding a safe place to hide was not an easy affair in a city in which anyone seeking to remain hidden had to be let into private spaces, often the rather small private residencies of families who sought to help them, in plain sight of hostile elements who were interested in catching them. Mátyás Fröhlich lived in a block of flats at 4 Semmelweis Street. Every house had a cellar, which was divided into compartments, each belonging to one of the flats in the house. In addition, there was a separate space in each cellar for coal that was used for heating in the winter. From his own compartment, Fröhlich opened the wall to the coal cellar, where he hid and fed 50 Jews. In order to feed so many people in a city that was already suffering from food shortages, he must have had the assistance of others. He paid for his heroism with his life. When the Arrow Cross raided the house (most probably on the basis of a denunciation), they threw a grenade into the cellar. Fröhlich was injured, and together with his wife and daughter, abducted, along with the people he had been seeking to protect. According to an investigation in 1945, they were all executed, save for Tamás Vida, who was bailed out for a large sum of money by Dr. Zubriczky, a friend who lived in the same house.⁵³

There were attempts to save lives even in Zugló, where the local party organ hunted down designated "enemies" of the regime with particular zeal. Ignác Dénes was captured and severely beaten for hiding a man named Goldstein, who was in a very weak condition, in his home. Dénes's wife was also seized, but she was released when somebody intervened on her behalf while they were on their way to the Arrow Cross headquarters. Dénes was released a week later because his wife begged his captors to let him go. László Szelepcsényi ominously

52 Borszéki és társai, 1949. ÁBTL, V-121588/b.

53 Hidegkuti ügynök jelentése, 1945. Brunner Oszkár és társai, O-14/761.

warned them that if they talked about their experience, they would be taken to “swim.”⁵⁴ A retired colonel named Ágoston Máday provided food for Jews hiding out in the synagogue on Thököly Road, not far from the Nazi headquarters. A female housekeeper denounced him, and he was taken in. Máday saved himself by claiming that he had served as Szálasi’s comrade. Anna Kántor found a hiding place and gave fake papers to her friend. Occasionally personal strings could be pulled with the authorities to avoid capture. Gyula Horváth, who had known one of the leading members of the Zuglói Arrow Cross detachment, Vilmos Kröszl, as a personal acquaintance, provided a deserter, his wife and a Jewish couple with refuge in his home.

An Arrow Cross man named Tibor Szbellédi served in the Arrow Cross party as did his father, who had been a member of the party from early on. Both his parents were housekeepers. The younger Szbellédi concealed his Jewish finacée named Aranka, and the two of them spent Christmas Eve together. “She knew I was an Arrow Cross man. I once visited her in my uniform. She lived with relatives who because of their [racial] origin also lived there with false papers... I just wanted to celebrate with her, so I went there.”⁵⁵

Help could come from unexpected quarters, and anyone who provided help risked paying a high price. A man accused of war crimes and convicted in 1949 claimed that other Arrow Cross men shot his mother on January 15 for hiding a Jew.⁵⁶ Arrow Cross men beat a young comrade to death for allegedly having rescued Jews. In his testimony, a man named Halász stated that an Arrow Cross man by the name of Magyar saved him and several others awaiting execution in the building at Andrásy Avenue 60. During the rampage in the Maros Street Hospital, an Arrow Cross activist named Lajos Sógor stood up to the others and saved two women and some children from being murdered.

There were other instances of Arrow Cross members acting as rescuers. F. T. was a former world champion athlete. As a doctor in a labor service unit, he helped the elderly and frail by issuing certificates for them indicating that they were ill so that they would be exempted from work, “even though I was playing with my life.” He and the people for whom he was providing protection, however, were eventually discovered. One of the Arrow Cross men, who himself had once been a football player, recognized F. T. As F. T. recounted, “I owed my life to the fact that the Arrow Cross boss had played for [the soccer club] Kispest,

54 Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok*, 194.

55 Kihallgatási jegyzőkönyv, Szbellédi Tibor, ÁBTL, V-153693/7.

56 Janura Lajos vallomása, Borszéki Ferenc és társai, tárgyalás, August 31 1949.



Queuing in front of the “Glass House,” the Swiss Embassy’s Emigration Department for Representing Foreign Interest. Budapest, 1944. Photo by Carl Lutz. Fortepan/Archiv für Zeitgeschichte ETH Zürich, Agnes Hirschi.

respected my history as a sportsman, and therefore saved all the infirm from being shot in the head as well.”⁵⁷

Pál Szalai sent a police unit to the Budapest ghetto to protect the inmates from the atrocities being committed by members of his own party and by Germans. He played an instrumental role in saving the ghetto, which housed roughly 100,000 people, from its planned destruction by the Arrow Cross militia. As one of the witnesses who testified on his behalf put it: “All the Jews left alive in Budapest owe their lives to him.” His motivation was clear: the movement he had believed in had moved away from the ideal of social equality and towards racially motivated persecution, which he thought was wrong. He refused any compensation for what he had done. Ferenc Perjés was accused of desertion, a crime punishable by instant execution. Szalai supplied Perjés with fake documents and ordered him to protect the ghetto from Arrow Cross incursions with 100 policemen. Szalai told Perjés that he wanted to atone for the mistake he had made by joining the Hungarists. On January 8, armed party servicemen rounded up the inhabitants of a protected building on Üllői Avenue 2–4 and

⁵⁷ F. T. and Dr. R. L. males, DEGOB, record number 395.

took them to the Arrow Cross building on Ferenc Boulevard. Károly Szabó, an aide to the Swedish rescue hero Raoul Wallenberg, recounted that Wallenberg had turned to Szalai for help, and Szalai had dispatched two carloads of policemen and thwarted the executions, despite protests by Budapest Arrow Cross commander Imre Nidosi.⁵⁸

The staff at the Wesselényi Hospital, located in the Budapest ghetto, provided asylum and treatment for wounded Arrow Cross men, as well as a former Arrow Cross man who was not even injured. The uninjured Arrow Cross man who found refuge in the hospital had, in 1919, been a member of the infamous Prónay detachment, which had hunted down Jews and communists in revenge for atrocities committed by the short-lived communist government of Béla Kun. The hospital's Jewish staff remembered that, when an Arrow Cross detail attempted to take them to Andrásy Avenue 60 by force, they drove them off. "The Arrow Cross men [under their care] begged for us, they treated us as if we were their father, Surányi threatened to shoot the intruders." There was a Hungarian artillery unit next to the hospital. The hospital staff befriended the men, and they defended the hospital until liberation of the city by the Soviet forces.⁵⁹

THE COMPLEXITY OF RESCUE: THE SISTERS OF DIVINE LOVE

Occasionally we have sufficient documentation of an in-depth rescue and survival. The perspective of survival allows us to look beyond the usual categories of collaboration and resistance. The postwar plight of the Sisters of Divine Love in Budapest highlighted the complex relationship between rescued and rescuer, as well as the motives and constraints of deliverance in dangerous times.⁶⁰ In 1944, finding loved ones refuge in religious and other institutions such as hospitals was a strategy of survival. As the following episode will show, there was also a need for quick adaptation to abrupt changes in the external environment. Strategy was not enough; tactical decisions needed to be made both by the ones providing refuge and those deriving a benefit from it. The fate of the children and the nuns became intertwined. What were their dilemmas and how did they resolve them? Like a drop in the ocean, their story reflects the hardship of preserving decency in times of inhumanity.

⁵⁸ Szabó Károly tanúvallomása, 1948. Bokor Dénes és társai, ÁBTL, V-153693/1.

⁵⁹ DEGOB, record number 3623.

⁶⁰ I wish to thank Professor László Karsai for bringing this collection to my attention.

In the perilous months of late 1944, the convent provided refuge to at least 65 people or, according to another account, several hundred, mostly women and children. Many, if not most, were Jews. Some although not all of them had been taken in at the request of the Swedish Red Cross, while other Jewish refugees were given refuge at the recommendation of Christians who were trying to save them. On a December night, armed Arrow Cross men raided the establishment and carried off 27 Jewish children and adults, most of whom they executed. Only a single child and an adult escaped, and partisans freed four more. Ignác Kosztelitz, the father of one of the kidnapped children, denounced a number of the sisters, claiming that they were responsible for the tragic fate of the children due to “criminal negligence.” Kosztelitz indicated that his daughter possessed documentation to prove that she had been born Christian. He also claimed that because Arrow Cross personnel had had a record of attacking convents and abducting the people they were hiding, the sisters had agreed that, if Arrow Cross or other uniformed men were to appear at the locked gate, the porter would give a signal by ringing a warning bell. This would give the Jews a chance to flee into the sprawling garden of the convent, which had several exits. Kosztelitz contended that he had visited the convent on December 17 to pick up his daughter, who was hiding under a false identity, and two other girls, Marika and Rózi Rotschild. Sister Medárda (Mária Kelemen) had talked him out of removing the girls from the convent, claiming that there was “no danger” and that they would protect the children even “at the cost of their own lives.”

On the same day, two sisters, Amáta (Róza Horváth) and Arzénia (Anna Antal), set out for the Arrow Cross house in Újpest to free Antal’s brother, Father János Antal,⁶¹ who was being held there for having offered refuge in his convent to Jews and others threatened by the Arrow Cross. The Arrow Cross agreed to release the father with the proviso that the sisters would hand over the gold a sister in their custody, Anna Balogh, had hidden on the convent grounds. Kosztelitz suspected that the sisters had disclosed the presence of Jews in the convent to the Arrow Cross. This would explain why the Arrow Cross men took a truck to the convent, rather than a sedan. In addition, it made no sense to dig for gold in the dark. Kosztelitz claimed that the sisters “made an unforgiveable mistake” by going to the Arrow Cross house, knowing that there were Jews in the convent.

The two women then accompanied the Arrow Cross men to the convent. The men were a few steps behind them when they rang the bell at the gate. The

61 The Yad Vashem Institute has recognized Father János Antal as a Righteous Gentile.

porter, who was unable to see that there was somebody behind the sisters, had opened the gate. Therefore, the two sisters had “committed a sin,” because they rang the doorbell themselves, thus giving the porter no possibility of seeing the thugs behind them, and therefore no chance to ring the alarm bell. This deprived those inside of any chance to hide. Furthermore, the superior, Irén Szabó, had negotiated with the intruders for an hour and a half, but, in the meantime, no one had warned the sleeping Jews to flee. Neither had anyone in the convent, Kosztelitz charged, attempted to call the police, who, he believed, were usually able to stop smaller groups of thugs from committing atrocities.

In reality, sometimes the police released Jews apprehended by the Arrow Cross, but most of the time, they were powerless, even if they tried to help, as the Arrow Cross men were more determined and better armed. Finally, after the children had been roused from their sleep and the intruders had pointed at Kosztelitz’s daughter, the sisters had failed to show them her Christian documents. Irén Szabó allowed the children to be taken away without putting up any resistance, and even without providing them with food. Not a single sister, the grieving father claimed, had attempted to save a single person.

As a consequence of the letter, a hearing was held to clarify whether disciplinary action against any of the sisters should be initiated. The superior, Irén Szabó, gave a somewhat contradictory statement. She recounted that, when the men had entered the building, they had been looking for her and had demanded the valuables. When they had gotten what they wanted, they had demanded the list of Jews in the convent, which she had refused to hand over. The Arrow Cross detachment leader told Szabó that, in that case, they would take armed reprisal on the convent. Asked why she had not presented Mária Kosztelitz alias Mária Réder’s documents, she answered that she was unaware that Kosztelitz was hiding under the name Réder, and that she had not had time to look at her papers. She added that she had been so nervous that she had not thought of doing so. The Arrow Cross men, she asserted, were looking at faces, not documents. The others would have given her away when they were interrogated.

“I tried in every way to save the children, but it was useless,” she claimed. Her plea was not entirely in vain, however: the intruders did agree to leave behind children who were under the age of four. The next morning, she went to the Arrow Cross house to find the children, but was told that they were no longer there.

Sister Arzénia asserted that the purpose of her visit to the Arrow Cross was the release of her brother. By then, a fellow sister, who was also being held there, had disclosed to her captors that she had hidden valuables in the convent garden. At 8 p.m., Arrow Cross men had accompanied her to the convent. The

final stretch of the trip was made on foot. When they got there, the men inquired whether there had been Jews in the convent. She told them that there had been, under the protection of the Swedish Red Cross. "I did not think that they would take them away. This is why we rang the bell without thinking of the alarm." Subsequently, they had taken the Arrow Cross men to the place where the valuables had been hidden and retrieved them. She asserted that her superior "pleaded until the very end to keep the children." Manstella Meskó opined that escape or rescue "was out of the question," since the leader of the detachment, Klem, threatened to take her "if anything happened." They tried to make phone calls but were unable to get connected. Klem was "coarse" with the staff but "expressed goodwill to the children to an extent that they [the children] kept asking when they were leaving." This led Meskó to think that the children "would soon return from interrogation." Since Kosztelitz did not implicate the other nurses, their version of the events was not part of the hearing.

Kosztelitz spelled out his position in a separate hearing. In addition to the information he had already provided, he claimed that the nurses had promised a certain Mrs. Szily, who was also hiding in the convent, that, if the house were raided, they would hide the children under the altar. The father now accused the superior of complicity in murder. In spite of the fact that Szabó had had both the time and the occasion to hide the children below the altar (and did not do so), he argued, "the murder of the children can be attributed to Irén Szabó." He also claimed that, after the event, Szabó had told him and a certain Mrs. Bechtler, whose daughter had also been in the care of the sisters, that if she had known that these children were being taken to their deaths, she would have saved them. Thus, Kosztelitz asserted, "it was obvious that she could have found a way to do so unless she had another reason to send them to their deaths." Immediately after the events, Szabó admitted that she had made a mistake by not pointing out to the Arrow Cross that Kosztelitz's daughter had Christian papers. The confession came after the superior discovered the tragic outcome, which obviously caused her a great deal of anguish. It was a natural reaction to soul searching. Yet, to the father, it sounded like an admission of complicity. József Bánk, who presided over the hearing, attributed the denunciation to the extreme grief the father felt at the loss of his daughter. He concluded that the sisters had had no other choice but to submit to aggression.

Kosztelitz took his attorney and a journalist to the hearing, but they were not admitted. In a letter to Archbishop József Mindszenty, Kosztelitz demanded a public hearing on the grounds that the sisters had "committed a crime against the people that is punishable by death." "In their sinful negligence," he argued,

“they aided the Arrow Cross in the abduction of 27 people,” a conclusion reached in an unspecified “private investigation.” Mindszenty ordered a public hearing to find out whether the sisters were intentionally complicit in any way in the murders and whether they could have saved the children.

In the new hearing, the participants clarified the events in greater detail. Superior Irén Szabó asserted that there had been no specific arrangement regarding a bell to be used as an alarm. When the intruders had demanded the list of Jews, she had refused to hand it over. The men had reacted by saying that they would bring “a whole company up in an hour.” She had pleaded with them to spare at least those who were four years old or younger. In the meantime, the sisters had tried to reach the Swedish Legation by phone, but they had only gotten through to the papal nuncio’s mission. The superior explained that they had not called the police, as they already had a bad reputation among the police for helping Jews hide. Possibly as a last resort, she had taken the Jews to the chapel in the hope the intruders would accept it as an asylum. She had reminded them that places of worship had been accepted as a refuge even in ancient times. Since Klima had not responded, Szabó said something Klima had found highly offensive: “The Jews will become as good a Hungarians as the Swabs.” Since “he was German,” Klima had taken offense at the remark. Sister Amáta Horváth corroborated Superior Irén Szabó’s account of the church episode, as well as her contention concerning her statement to Klima regarding the national consciousness of Jews and Swabs.

Szabó rejected the allegation that anyone from the convent had colluded with the perpetrators: “Our destiny, our profession our moral attitude protests in the most definite manner against [the allegation] that the soul of any member of our order was touched by intentional persecution and the handing over of Jews.” Ultimately, she contended that they had been incapable of resisting force. Sister Arzéna Antal had similar feelings, stating that it was “impossible even to assume that a nun collaborated” in the murders.

Originally, the sisters accepted only children and a handful of adults if they possessed birth certificates indicating they had been born into Christian families. Later, they had admitted people without such documentation, even though this constituted a danger for the rest of the refugees. Asked why she had not used Mária Réder’s Christian documentation to save her, Szabó changed her previous testimony and asserted she had not even been present when the Arrow Cross checked the children’s identities. She claimed that they did not check papers to establish who was Jewish. Finally, she added that Mária was recorded as a Jew and that they had not thought of presenting her papers. As if defend-

ing her actions, she indicated that they had offered “refuge and not protection.” Medárda Kelemen also denied stating that she would “not let the children be taken away.” They did not warn the sleeping people of the intrusion because they were “afraid of the Arrow Cross’ revenge.”

The attackers had posted a guard to prevent escape. She denied the allegation that she had allowed the people to be abducted to save food. If this had been the aim, they could have just discharged them. Sister Amata called it “wicked” to assume that they had surrendered the Jews on purpose. The very young and the elderly remained in the convent even after the abduction, and Amáta claimed that “there was still a Jewish boy in the building.” Thus, she implied that the convent did not want to get rid of their Jewish charges.

In retrospect, the superior thought that perhaps she could have been more “inventive” had she known the children were being taken to be murdered. Still, she had managed to convince the attackers to leave a five-year-old behind, together with the even younger children. To prove that she had been concerned about the fate of her protégés, Szabó recounted that the Swedish Red Cross had asked her to see the Arrow Cross house in Újpest the day after the Arrow Cross had abducted the children in order to find out what had happened to them. Sister Amáta claimed she had had no knowledge of an arrangement regarding a warning signal. Her account underscored the claim that the porter had not been given any opportunity to sound the alarm at the sight of the sisters at the gate. When they had rung the bell, Amáta recounted, the porter was relieved to see them: “I thought it was the Arrow Cross,” he said. The sisters had hushed him up, as there had indeed been Arrow Cross men standing behind them. Amáta thought that the intruders wanted the valuables, and had not imagined they would take the Jews. In order to protect the Jews, she claimed that one of them was her aunt. Her companion when the convent was raided was sister Arzéna Antal.

Antal was also convinced that the Arrow Cross wanted the valuables. In fact, they had promised to leave as soon as they had gotten hold of them. Reflecting on the charge that she should not have risked going to the Arrow Cross headquarters knowing that there were endangered people in the convent, she asserted that “if I had known that I could free my brother, János Antal only at the expense of sacrificing the Jews or just a single one of them, I would rather have left my brother to perish.” She was afraid the intruders would harm the superior, as she had heard how brutally they treated people. She admitted that they had not woken the sleepers, as they had had no authorization to do so. There was a lot of confusion. For instance, initially the superior had not told

Antal that the Arrow Cross were asking about Jews “because she did not think it was important.” She claimed that Kosztelitz had not made an explicit statement that he wanted to take his daughter out of the asylum. Otherwise, they would have let him do so.

Once the armed men were there, she saw no way to save the people they wanted to take. Medárda Kelemen contradicted this statement. One girl had produced Christian documents and since her face revealed “Slavic features” had been left behind. A Christian birth certificate was not accepted as proof in and of itself. Manstella Meskó remembered the story differently. According to her account, Klima hesitated as he looked at her face. The Arrow Cross had inspected faces from the side to establish Jewish identity. This particular girl had Christian features. Klima said he would return to her later, but he had forgotten. Father Aladár Varga had saved Mrs. Szily by claiming that she was a member of the Red Cross. Mrs. Szily, who was present at the hearing, corroborated Varga’s story.

Kelemen admitted that not only had she lacked the courage to defy the aggressors, but that not telling the truth was contrary to her principles. When they had picked someone out as a Jew “I had no strength to say no.” “To say that somebody was Christian who was not would be in full conflict with the obligation to tell the truth which had become part of my character in my life as a nun... I did not show the baptism letter because according to my conviction and experience it was not enough.” Remaining faithful to her principles overrode fighting for somebody’s life when it required lying.

Others in the convent had not shared Kelemen’s qualms about telling the truth in any situation, as they readily accepted fake documents as proof of Christian birth. Principles mattered for Kelemen, thus we have reason believe she meant it when she said it was impossible for her to believe anyone in the convent would intentionally have assisted the abduction. Manstella Meskó testified that two girls, the Lengyel sisters, had been allowed to go to the corridor so that they could escape, but had been caught. Otherwise, she reiterated that Klimó had been gentle with the children, exhorting them to be good “because everyone loves good children.”

The parents of the children who were given refuge in the convent were also called on to testify. One witness, Mrs. Tibor Neufeld, was excluded since she proclaimed that she was hostile to the nuns, who “should be hung.” Mrs. István Bachler, who lost two daughters in the convent, recalled that the nuns had promised to dress her daughters up, one as a novice, the other as a maid. Sister Loyola Jánoshegyi asserted that these requests had been denied because they had wished to offer the same degree of protection for all. Mrs. Vilmos Banulli

recounted that her daughter was born a Catholic and had her certificate in the convent. She added that the girls were had been treated with “love” and their custodians had pledged to protect them, even at the cost of their own lives. Mrs. Szily remembered an arrangement regarding a warning, but remembered it differently from Kosztelitz: the porter was supposed to use a phone.

Szily put Kosztelitz’s story in a different context. Kosztelitz had asked Szily whether she would leave her daughter in the convent. She had answered by saying she was unable to give advice, but that she would stay there, as “the situation gave no reason for alarm.” The superior questioned the elements of Szily’s testimony and stated that it was impossible to hide anyone under the altar, as it was solid. She affirmed that they had rejected the idea of dressing the girls up as nuns. In light of sister Kelemen’s statement regarding her reticence to lie due to her Christian faith, it is reasonable to assume that the falsification of identity may have impeded hiding non-Christians as members of the order. On the other hand, Christian belief also served to motivate the desire to help. Sándor Újhelyi recommended two Jewish individuals be given refuge. The convent accepted them due to their “obligation as Christians,” and asked Újhelyi to find Christian documents for them.

Fear was a factor. The discovery of Jews concealed as nuns could have brought the wrath of the Arrow Cross down on the convent and endangered the lives of the nuns. Father Varga contended that, while he had been helping the Arrow Cross men dig for the valuables, they had threatened him: the convent was already committing a crime by hiding money and people, and, if they were caught providing refuge for Jews, their Arrow Cross superiors would unleash a company of troops on them. Varga had concluded that they were beyond help. He had tried to convince one of the men to let the Jews go. “In that case the others would shoot me,” the man had replied. Nevertheless, they had been able to save small children and the elderly.

Varga testified that the Arrow Cross had wanted both money and Jews from the outset, thus contradicting the sisters’ claim that initially the intruders had said nothing about the Jews. This does not necessarily mean that the sisters had not told the truth. It may well be that the Arrow Cross men were trying to avoid panic by not disclosing the truth to the sisters before they got into the building. Varga also contradicted Kosztelitz as to his contention that calling the police had not been an option, since the police shared the same anti-Semitic prejudices as the Arrow Cross. This might have been true locally; nevertheless, Kosztelitz was correct in asserting that in many parts of the city the police had attempted to rein in the Arrow Cross gangs, although with little success.

While the parents of the children who perished were hostile, survivors had a different perspective. In a letter addressed to the Committee, Mrs. Gábor Blumenthal expressed “eternal gratitude to those who saved my life, for the loving welcome and the careful treatment.” Margit Rosenfeld attested that the sisters had done everything they could have done for them: “They were considerate, thoughtful, self-abnegating and behaved according to the spirit of the Church in every manner.” At first, she, her mother, and her daughter had been hiding in the order’s convent in Nyergesújfalu, where the sisters had always treated her “with sacrifice and with love.” The superior had brought them to Budapest as—for an unspecified reason, possibly denunciation—she had felt that they were at risk in Nyergesújfalu. The sisters also took care of their valuables and returned them after the war. Margit had not disclosed to the others who had already found refuge in the convent that the two women had been Jewish, possibly in order to avoid panic. This was strange, since most of them had in fact gone there because they were Jews.

Rosenfeld had a different perspective on the tragic events of December 17 than that of Kosztelitz and the other parents who had lost their children: “I was always aware that the sisters were unable to put up adequate resistance because in case of danger even a parent thinks first and foremost of herself and only secondly of her children.” Eventually she had taken her daughter out of the convent, as she had been sure that the sisters would not be able to protect her if the Arrow Cross were to come. This puts Kosztelitz’s position regarding his daughter in a different light. It was up to the individual to determine whether his or her child was safe with the nuns or not.

Mrs. Vilmos Kertész, who had been taken in the convent together with her mother, described the sisters in the same terms: self-abnegation and love. The use of such words may reflect a desire to describe them as ideal types of ecclesiastic self-sacrifice. She “owed boundless gratitude and love to the sisters” for having saved her. Eventually she had left the convent, as the superior had warned her that the situation was “dangerous for her,” although she never clarified what she meant by dangerous. It is possible to assume that the Superior was becoming more concerned about the possibility of an Arrow Cross attack on the convent. In this case, it is unclear why she had not disclosed this information to the others.

Curiously, Kertész had been warned to leave the convent because someone had denounced her, but nothing more was said of this in the testimony. She was not the only one to be warned that their situation in the convent was becoming precarious. Maria Fischl testified that the superior had given her, the

Lengyel girls, and another girl named Mezei notice that they were in danger and that she would not be able to protect them. Unfortunately, none of the accounts make clear why these specific people were given a warning while others were not, nor did the testimony that was given indicate whether the superior might have received information concerning an impending Arrow Cross raid on her establishment.

During the raid, Kertész's mother was saved by her fake documents. Since the Arrow Cross inspected facial features and considered themselves able to pick out Jews with a high degree of certainty, she had been incredibly lucky. Kertész indicated the nuns were paid a "minimal amount of money." She found it important to mention that her valuables had also been hidden in the convent and she had gotten everything back as it was after the war. Mrs. Antal Nagel recalled that her identity had not been checked. Nevertheless, she lamented that there had been no chance to flee. The Lengyel sisters, who had tried, had been caught and brought back. The documents do not reveal whether they had survived the ordeal. Margit Neubauer showed up to testify voluntarily. She had not been at the convent on December 17, but had resided there before and after the fateful night, together with "200-300" others. The nuns had not taken any money, and when there had not been enough food, they had gone hungry with the others.

Two competing versions emerged concerning the Sisters of Divine Love rescue effort. One was bluntly expressed by the mother of a girl who had been abducted and murdered: "I detest the nuns and they should be hung." In other words, the nuns, or at least some of them, should be held accountable for the deaths of the children. The other narrative was an almost saint-like portrayal of the nuns' efforts. András Eilinger's wife and daughter were in the convent. He had lost his wife, but, as he put it in his letter addressed to the Committee, he "could not blame the sisters because they had welcomed both of them with love and exposed themselves to danger. I owe great gratitude to them which I will not forget." Thus, ultimately, this particular rescue effort was judged very differently, depending on whether the loved ones of the person in question survived.

Eventually, the Ecclesiastical Committee found Medárda Kelemen guilty of negligence for not showing Mária Réder's documents that proved she was Christian to the Arrow Cross. This was the nun who claimed she had been reluctant to lie, even to save a life. The rest of the nuns were acquitted. Klesztentz appealed the verdict for Arzéna Antal, Amáta Horváth, and Irén Szabó. Sister Kelemen also appealed the verdict. The Committee found that "not everyone possesses presence of mind. The Jews surrendered with no attempt to escape...

and similarly Medárda Kelemen broke spiritually who had no presence of mind to say Christian.”⁶²

Presence of mind was certainly a key issue, but important questions remained unanswered. How did the superior know that specific Jews were in danger? Did she know of an imminent attack? How and when did the Arrow Cross find out that Jews were being hidden in the convent? Loyola Jánoshegyi revealed that the superior was quite aware that the convent might be made an Arrow Cross target, and she did have a plan: she thought that, by taking the Jews to the chapel, she could save them. Survivors spoke of self-sacrificing nuns. Some of the nuns even showed presence of mind. The Lengyel girls had been prompted to flee, and one woman had been left behind because a nun claimed that she looked Christian. Had the nuns promised to sacrifice their lives to save the children? The evidence is contradictory. They cared for the people under their protection, went short of food, and risked persecution to rescue people for little or no financial compensation, but they were not ready to risk dying for them. Perhaps they would have accepted this risk as well had they known that the Jews would be murdered, but there are too many ifs: Did the nuns really not suspect that people taken by the Arrow Cross would be killed, and would they really have put their lives at risk had they known this?

Were the Sisters of Divine Love complicit in murder? Szabó had gone into the proverbial lion’s den, an Arrow Cross house, after the abducted children. This required courage. Perhaps Sister Antal revealed that the sisters were hiding Jews to the Arrow Cross when she tried to get them to release her brother from custody, but we have no evidence of that fact, other than Kosztelitz’s claim that she had done so. In fact, none of the evidence provided by the witnesses proves credibly that the sisters had been intentionally complicit in the abduction, and, understandably, they vehemently denied the charge. The sisters claimed that this would have been incompatible with their sense of Christian duty, which led them to fulfill their sense of mission, providing refuge to fellow human beings who had been persecuted for their race.

In the case of Medárda Kelemen, the ethos of her order, or at least the way she interpreted it (the moral value placed on telling the truth) led her to miss an opportunity to save Mária Réder. Clearly, she made the wrong decision under circumstances that few people are prepared to handle. Was there a trace of anti-Semitism behind her decision? This is not impossible, but I do not think it is likely. If that had been the case, she had plenty of opportunity to denounce

62 Isteni Szeretet Nővérei. Primási Levéltár, Esztergom, 3442/1946.

the Jews with impunity. The other sisters could have come to Réder's aid, and they failed to do so. The little girl's death was due to a collective failure, but not a conspiracy. Father Varga did save a woman, and Irén Szabó convinced the attackers to spare the youngest and oldest people under the convent's care. Her plan to save the Jews in a sanctuary failed because her opponents had no regard for humanity or tradition. In the final analysis, the sisters, who, despite their failings, acted selflessly and compassionately, managed to save at least 37 people and possibly many more. In the turbulent postwar years, their only reward were the testimonies expressing eternal gratitude and, of course, their knowledge that they had acted according to their conscience and in the spirit of the Church. Yet they needed to contend, possibly for the rest of their lives, with failure, as well as with the anger of those who thought they had failed them.

Perhaps the actions of the sisters are not best understood within the collaboration-resistance paradigm, but rather through the prism of how each of them interpreted their faith and, thereby, their obligations to God, the Church, and their brethren. Kelemen's position concerning the moral imperative not to lie was clearly not shared by her associates. The question remains how hard they tried to save the children. Whether they could have been braver and thrust themselves at the attackers is not for the historian to decide. The other events which were taking place at the time in the city suggest that such a brave act would not have helped, given the determination and aggressiveness of the attackers.

THE POWER OF HOUSEKEEPERS

Due to their position in space and the powers vested on them, housekeepers (also translated as building managers) played an important role in determining who got arrested and who survived. Housekeepers had a poor reputation due to their perceived role in the high number of denunciations. The historical records, however, show that reality was far more complex. Their history is worthy of scrutiny, as on occasion it was up to them whether someone would live or die. Yet, the right choice was fraught with danger: actively helping save others or anti-Nazi resistance could lead to their own demise. For instance, a housekeeper accused of aiding a group of anti-Nazi fighters was murdered together with his wife and guests, as well as the Jews hiding in the building under his care. The role the housekeepers played in 1944 was, at best, ambivalent. Historian Andrea Pető has shown that a housekeeper family in Csengery Street 64 "robbed and misled" the inhabitants of the tenement, but, at the same time, a few

people owed their lives to them. In exchange for a hefty sum, they hid several people or “failed to notice” that a certain ID was fake.⁶³

The management of the buildings in the Central European metropolis promised upward social mobility and modest prosperity in return for hard work around the clock. Yet it also meant increasing responsibility for maintaining order in the building and monitoring the inhabitants and visitors to the building. Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to say that these people, who often had come from a humble, frequently rural, social backgrounds, were given quasi-police authority.⁶⁴ After the German invasion and the consequent intensification of anti-Semitic persecution, their role was enhanced, and in fact, in some situations, they wielded power over life and death.

It was the housekeeper’s duty to register new tenants in the building. When two Jewish women moved into a new building, the building superintendent János Monostori told them that their identity papers were fake. Monostori threatened to inform the Arrow Cross, and the two women were forced to find a new refuge. They posed a danger to Monostori, who could have been arrested for harboring Jews. After October 15, anyone who assisted escapees could be sentenced to death.⁶⁵

On the other hand, records reveal some housekeepers used their positions to rescue Jews who were in danger. A relatively well-known example of this is the investor George Soros’ father, who procured fake Christian papers with the help of the housekeeper of an inner-city block of flats with whom he worked as a lawyer. Mr. and Mrs. Pusztai were awarded the Hungarian version of the Righteous among Gentiles award for having saved their Jewish tenants during the war. Mrs. Pusztai was summoned to the Arrow Cross headquarters at Szent István Boulevard 2 because of her failure to report Jews. She took her three children to the interrogation, managed to evoke some sympathy, and was released.⁶⁶

As required by law, housekeepers frequently reported Jews and others in hiding. Ibolya Hauszmann was a Hungarian Jew who almost survived. She was picked up with other Jews at Király Street. A member of the Arrow Cross squad named József Rédl took a liking to Ibolya and wanted to let her go. However, the housekeeper and a pastry cook denounced her as a Jew to another Arrow Cross man named Bakonvölgyi. The latter handed her over to a detective, who

63 Pető, *Láthatatlan elkövetők*. Pető aptly noted that housekeepers “privatized for themselves the functions of the state.”

64 Adam, *Budapest Building Managers and the Holocaust*, Chapters 1 and 2.

65 Adam, *Budapest Building Managers and the Holocaust*, 73–74.

66 Adam, *Budapest Building Managers and the Holocaust*, 74.

executed her. A member of the Arrow Cross militia named Antal Szőke remembered that his female housekeeper accosted him and said that two Jewish women were hiding in the opposite building and should be taken away.⁶⁷

The XIV District was flooded with denunciations, for instance, of people hiding in a convent in Hermina Avenue. Malicious denunciations were made by all kinds of people, both before and after the war. It is possible that even Jews denounced Jews in 1944 as a life-saving measure: a serviceman named Vilmos Szloboda claimed that people hiding in the so-called Schlachta House, a sanctuary provided by the Catholic nun, Margit Schlachta, were denounced by a person wearing a yellow star, who was released because he was “working for us.”⁶⁸

On Váci Avenue, two young men were picked up because of a housekeeper’s malicious denunciation. They were later released. Another housekeeper reported a person who refused to go down to the air raid shelter. It would be impossible to locate even an approximate number of people who denounced others in the fateful months of the siege of Budapest. Denunciation was a mass phenomenon in 1944–1945. Many more could have survived in hiding with friends and strangers had this not been a practice. Many more people would have survived hiding in private apartments or religious institutions had not malicious neighbors or housekeepers denounced them. With a few exceptions, where we can discern the motives from carefully reconstructed events, we will never know what kind of people denounced others and why. This does not mean that, on the basis of those cases, and with careful source analysis, we cannot say anything meaningful about this phenomenon. Denunciation was a practice, and the motives were nuanced. During the war, Jews were the main, but not the only, targets.

Literally anyone could become the focus of malicious rumors or denunciations. For instance, an elementary school teacher by the name of Árpád Hadnagy denounced Reverend Zoltán Éber, the local president of Magyar Élet Pártja (Party of Hungarian Life) for calling László Endre a “supporter of Jews,” a casual remark made during a conversation. Éber was highly concerned, and he addressed two lengthy letters to Endre explaining himself and assuring him of his unwavering anti-Semitism.⁶⁹

Denunciations were sometimes made for a good cause or to punish crimes. Most Arrow Cross criminals were caught after somebody reported having seen them to the authorities. In 14 Király Street, in Budapest’s Jewish district,

67 Szőke Zoltán kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 22 April 1966. ÁBTL, V-153693/6/467.

68 Máthé, *A zugszói nyilasok pere*, 145.

69 Éber Zoltán plébános levele Endre Lászlónak, 7 April 1944. MNL OL, K-557, Endre László.

the house commander reported two members of the radical right-wing party for requisitioning Jewish apartments for Germans. A detective showed up and slapped them.⁷⁰

In some cases, such as that of the housekeeper at 47 Andrásy Avenue, denunciation was a strategy of survival: He was let go in return for giving up the people hiding in the building. The cost was high: both the people hiding out and the persons hiding them were tortured and murdered. The vindictive woman who reported Oszkár Brunner may have been driven by sheer jealousy. A nun at the Sisters of Divine Love told the Arrow Cross about the Jews hiding in her establishment in an effort to rescue her brother, who was being held for hiding Jews. After the war, victims of the Nazis reported their former tormentors to the political police to serve justice and rectify the wrongs they had suffered, that is, in revenge. Both the communist and the short-lived Nazi regime passed legislation that mandated denunciation and quite a few denunciations seem to have been made in order to abide by the law.

Many of the records we have concerning these chaotic times make it impossible for us, in retrospect, to create a clear categorization of people as rescuers or perpetrators. Andrea Pető has shown that a couple who served as the building managers of a house on Csengery street despoiled and misled numerous inhabitants of the building. When armed men attacked the building, some of the tenants owed their lives to those managers.⁷¹ A historically “accurate” appraisal of the record of Hungarian housekeepers may never be possible. They were subjected to a process of political vetting in 1945, in which their participation in events was examined under scrutiny. The testimonies were made in politically and socially tumultuous times and, hence, as historian Máté Rigó has argued, are unsuitable for the reconstruction of the events, even though only a few months had passed since the events themselves had taken place.⁷² In 1945, a group of people denounced a housekeeper named Mrs. Dobozi for personal enrichment at the expense of Jews living in the building under her supervision. Strangely enough, however, another group of tenants claimed that the woman had saved their lives while risking her own, and her effort to do so had been, in their assessment, altruistic.

One day, Mrs. Dobozi, who lorded over a typical Budapest tenement with external corridors that enabled her to see and control what happened in the

70 Boros Sándorné vallomása, undated, ÁBTL, 3.1.9. Lőcsei Géza és társai, V-60646.

71 Pető, *Láthatatlan elkövetők*, 11–26.

72 Rigó, “Hétköznapi emberek” és a Holokauszt, 102.

building, began to scream that the Arrow Cross had arrived. She demanded diamonds and gold in order to save the Jews. It later turned out, her accusers asserted, that there had been no hostile elements in the building that evening. By contrast, one man claimed that the housekeeper, “driven fully by humanitarian sentiment, smuggled my father-in-law and mother-in-law out of the building.”⁷³ The scenario described in the first account was unrealistic, as the tenants must have guessed that, if the housekeeper was screaming about the Arrow Cross, her cries could not have been true. In a building like that, anyone standing in the courtyard would have been able to hear literally anything being said in the open spaces of the building, let alone shouting. Mrs. Dobozy did not deny that she increased her wealth tenfold between 1937 and 1945, and this leaves open the possibility that this was at the expense of the Jews. That, however, is somewhat contradicted by the accusers themselves. Mrs. Weiner, who was unemployed due to the anti-Semitic laws, borrowed a sum of 1,000 pengős, enough for six months, from the housekeeper for rent. Mrs. Kő also took a “smaller” loan from her. If the housekeeper was able to lend over 1,000 pengős when 200 pengős a month was considered decent pay, this must have meant that she had substantial disposable cash which she had made prior to the physical persecution of Jews.

Rigó has argued that gentile housekeepers found themselves in a conflict of interest with the inhabitants of the so-called Yellow Star houses. Yet this may not have been a zero-sum game after all, as bribes could in fact buy help or at least freedom from denunciation. Mrs. Dobozy, together with her husband, was also denounced for “terrorizing” the building and for hitting children with a stick. However, this may not have had anything to do with race: the childless housekeeper may have been irritated by the kids who had nowhere else to play. Many more rushed to the beleaguered housekeeper’s help.

Izsák Schmertzmann, the building’s owner, was able to say “nothing but good” about her. Mrs. Dobozy hid and nourished his wife and child, putting her own life in danger. Géza Steiner’s testimony contradicted the claims made by the accusers. He contended that Mrs. Dobozy had saved his parents from the Arrow Cross “at the risk of her own life.” Subsequently, 45 people, including members of the Schmertzmann family, signed a declaration according to which Mrs. Dobozy had saved not only their valuables, but also their lives, and she had “put own life in danger.” “As far as we know, she was denounced for hiding Jews, but she continued to support the tenants and exhibited the most far-reaching

73 Rigó, “Hétköznapi emberek” és a Holokauszt, 100.



Entrance of a yellow star building, Budapest, 1944. Fortepan/Lissák Tivadar

goodwill and understanding.”⁷⁴ Thus, the overwhelming evidence suggested that, despite her possible failings, she did in fact rescue people.

The case of another woman, Mrs. Kőrös, who oversaw a building in Hársfa Street, was more enigmatic. She was also reported for having persecuted Jewish tenants, and was also recognized as having hidden Jews and others hounded by the Arrow Cross. A group of Jews and gentiles, including the assistant housekeeper (who was known to harbor animosity towards Mrs. Kőrös) and a communist functionary (who had known her as an anti-Semite), claimed that she had stolen belongings from a Jewish home, denounced people in hiding, to the police, spread malicious rumors about Russian atrocities, and prayed for the Germans to return. In addition, she was said to have hampered the efforts of returning Jews to reclaim their homes. For unknown reasons, a group of her accusers,

74 Rigó, “Hétköznapi emberek” és a Holokauszt, 108–109.

including the prominent actress Hilda Gobbi (a staunch communist), changed their story and began to support the Jews who defended her. A group of seven women claimed that, not only did she and her husband discipline people for not displaying the yellow star, but she also surrendered a man to the Arrow Cross.

Gobbi, on the other hand, contended that Kőrös had hidden her, and had not denounced her to the authorities. Eight other people claimed that Mrs. Dobozy had not let anyone fleeing the Arrow Cross into the house because she would have jeopardized the lives of those already hiding in the block of apartments, which included three left-wing officers and ten Jewish families.⁷⁵ Mrs. Dobozy got off with a light sentence. The judge declared that the testimony was biased. Revenge and animosity were given free reign in tumultuous times. The weight of the evidence suggests that Mrs. Dobozy had helped people hide from the Arrow Cross, although this was compatible with erratic behavior. The full truth, however, will never be known. Malice may have played as important a role as personal grudges and real and imagined slights. The persecution of Jews propelled building commanders and housekeepers into positions of power. Some of them abused this authority, others used it to help, yet others did both. There is no doubt that these individuals were able to make decisions that meant the difference between life and death.

TORN IDENTITIES

Survival is the prism that allows us to make sense of the enigmatic case of Oszkár Brunner, a successful entrepreneur who was victim, perpetrator and rescuer within the same person. If we are to believe his version of events, he took the notion of strategy to survive to the extreme: He may even have joined the Arrow Cross and murdered in order to protect himself and his family. Brunner was tried and sentenced in 1971, in the last and all but forgotten trial of Arrow Cross criminals in Hungary. He and his associates were convicted of robbing, torturing, and murdering civilians during the Soviet siege of Budapest in 1944–1945. His father had owned a grocery store, and his mother had been a homemaker. The elder Brunner went bankrupt in 1933 in the midst of the great depression, and died shortly thereafter, in 1936. This may explain the younger Brunner's orientation towards anti-capitalist ideologies preaching social justice. Brunner had finished four years of higher elementary [civic] school and

75 Rigó, "Hétköznapi emberek" és a Holokauszt, 111–12.

initially had worked as a photographer. With the outbreak of the war, Brunner was drafted into the army and took part in the occupation of Northern Transylvania following the Second Vienna Award in 1940, but was lucky enough to avoid being sent the eastern front. He then opened a highly successful locksmith's workshop.

Brunner had never been part of any right-wing movement. In fact, at a time when many workers belonged to the radical right, he joined the Social Democrats in 1942 at the behest of a Jewish employee.⁷⁶ His personal history becomes murky from that point on. Witness testimonies depict Brunner as a rescuer, victim, and perpetrator of crimes all in one. Historical records are often fraught with contradictions that are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile. Defendants had very little motivation, to say the least, to remember their crimes in any detail. Numerous reports by informants who were put into the same cells as these men reveal that they were bent on denying what they had done until they were presented with irrefutable evidence, or else they tried to implicate their fellow prisoners. Obviously not all atrocities can be reconstructed with full precision, and we cannot know with complete certainty which party serviceman participated in which crimes. Brunner's story will be reconstructed on the basis of his confessions, the testimony given by witnesses (friendly and hostile), the testimony given by people who allegedly owed their lives to him, and also by people whose lives he ruined, court records, and police investigations conducted immediately after the events and fifteen years later. Brunner was acquitted by the People's Tribunal in 1947 and retried in the last grand trial of the Nazis in Budapest. These records offer insights into the warped world of one of the most violent Arrow Cross groups that operated in Budapest and provide portraits of the kinds of the people who perpetrated monstrous crimes in the midst of general turmoil, carnage, and chaos.

Following his arrest shortly after the fighting ended, Brunner penned a self-confession in which he recounted his version of the events. Much of what he had to say was confirmed by the testimony of victims. He recounted that he had employed Jews in his workshop, that they had been denounced, and that he had been "beaten beyond recognition" when interrogated about the whereabouts of Jews. He claimed that his company had manufactured false documents for the persecuted, the scope of which remained unknown to the Arrow Cross. Brunner himself never specified the number of forged documents his company had prepared for Jews. He described how he and Magdolna Unger,

⁷⁶ Mária Bali's testimony, 1971. Brunner Oszkár és társai. ÁBTL, XXV/4.

a Jewish employee with whom he had had a romantic relationship and who became his second wife, had been tortured after an Arrow Cross man named Hoffmann found “things” (likely related to the alleged forging of documents, such as falsified open orders and fake IDs) in her handbag.

As an explanation for having joined the Arrow Cross militia, Brunner claimed that he had been threatened and told that he would be killed if he refused, and that, if anyone tried to escape, his family members would suffer. He did not want to put his half-Jewish daughter in possible mortal danger.⁷⁷ When he was interrogated, Brunner admitted to having inflicted serious bodily harm on individuals and to having taken part in escorting groups comprised mostly of Jews, but also others, such as priests, suspected deserters, and other individuals the Arrow Cross had targeted, to Arrow Cross buildings. He insisted, however, that he had done so under duress: “I was a hostage in the House of Loyalty to my Jewish wife, who was hiding.”

Iлона Schwartz was interrogated in 1945, soon after the fighting had ended. She had nothing but good things to say about Oszkár Brunner. She had known Brunner, who had been aware that her family was Jewish, since 1940. When Iлона’s younger sister Lili had shown up at the Brunner factory in Csáky Street with false Christian papers, Brunner had “readily employed her.” Schwartz had known Brunner as a leftist, and she also testified that he had been taken away by the Arrow Cross.⁷⁸ Mrs. József Somogyi, née Matild Resi affirmed that the accused had hired her in full knowledge of the fact that she was Jewish. “I was there with false documents, there was no need to worry about the Arrow Cross.” Viktor Markstein, who had also worked in the Brunner establishment, similarly stated that he had come to know Brunner as “a very honest person” with left-wing views, who behaved “honestly” with the workers. He was “certain” that Brunner had not been in the service of the Arrow Cross. Eszter Vajda, who had met Brunner in 1941, added that he had helped leftists financially and with personal goodwill. In her assessment, he was an honest, democratic man. She recounted that Brunner had come to her apartment sometime in December of 1944 and told her that he had been forced to join the Arrow Cross.

Brunner was not the only person who employed Jews as a way of providing them with refuge. Lajos Dimény ran a locksmith workshop. Dimény was permitted to employ Jewish labor service personnel as well as very young and elderly Jews. Eventually, eight or ten Jews from the area and four or five others

77 Brunner Oszkár önvallomása, 1945. Brunner Oszkár és társai, ÁBTL, O-141/761.

78 Brunner Oszkár és társai, Schwartz Iлона tanúvallomása, 10 April 1945. ÁBTL, V88229.

were working in the workshop, the latter illegally.⁷⁹ Sándor Sima owned a similar, larger establishment, which was designated a war plant. This meant that people who worked there were exempted from military service. After the Arrow Cross takeover, Sima employed 60 labor service personnel and 30 other Jews. He even paid a ransom of 30,000 pengő, a fortune at the time, to the Arrow Cross on behalf of a couple with the last name Markovits, who were executed nonetheless.⁸⁰

Viktor Teichman was also employed by Brunner. On the basis of conversations with his employer, Teichman concluded that Brunner “strongly disliked fascism,” so he asked him to give two Jewish women jobs, and Brunner “gladly took [both of them] into the factory.” In fact, according to Teichmann, Brunner “would readily help anybody, particularly those who were put into a difficult situation by the fascist political system, with great dedication.”

Teichman recounted that he and Brunner had been taken from the factory to the Arrow Cross building, where they both had been roughed up. Teichman had been released, but Brunner was kept in custody.⁸¹ Another witness contended that Brunner had provided “personal and financial support” to victims of the regime and had “sought to improve their lot.” News of his good deeds spread like wildfire. This witness attributed Brunner’s arrest to charges that he had been an “antifascist” and had helped Jews. The Arrow Cross had taken Mrs. Jenő Goldsamt to the brick factory, a collection point preceding deportation, but she had managed to escape. She had been taken in by Brunner, whom she had known for several years, and who had already supported her financially when her husband had been drafted into the labor service. In fact, she claimed that Brunner had provided a great deal of support for Jews and had helped whomever he could, adding “he is an antifascist and supports left-wing people.” She learned from a third-party source that Brunner had been beaten, had had his possessions taken, and had been told that he would be killed if he did not join the Arrow Cross.⁸² Her story was corroborated by Mrs. György Naszódi, neé Rózsa Grünwald, who worked in Brunner’s plant as a printer and who had been

79 Testimony by formerly persecuted Ilona Tóth, Mrs. Lajos Dimény, József Halász. Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok*, 194.

80 Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok*, 195. Testimony by Sándor Sima.

81 Brunner Oszkár és társai, Markstein Viktor vallomása, 10 April 1945, ÁBTL, V-88229, Teichmann Viktor vallomása, 13 April 1945, *ibid.* Vajda Eszter vallomása, 10 April 1945, ÁBTL, V-88229; Somogyi Józsefné vallomása, 10 April 1945, *ibid.*

82 Kővári Ernőné vallomása, 10 April 1945, ÁBTL, V-88229, Goldsamt Jenőné vallomása, 10 April 1945, *ibid.*

dragged off to the Arrow Cross headquarters in Városmajor Street, where she saw Brunner, “who had been beaten terribly.”⁸³

Róza Grünstein confirmed that employees of Jewish descent had worked for Brunner, who also had barred a worker from coming to work because he had been wearing an Arrow Cross uniform.⁸⁴ Brunner claimed that he had used his connection to a police officer in Kresz Géza Street to acquire pre-stamped registration slips for the people for whom he sought to provide protection, all in all fifteen of them, and which had enabled those who had gotten them to hide. Occasionally, he had also helped Jews find places of refuge. For instance, he put up a certain Róza Blum, whom he employed despite the fact that she was hiding with false documents in her father-in-law Lázár Schuller’s home.

By some accounts, Brunner signed up with the Arrow Cross in order to save his factory from confiscation. Mrs. Vince Láng, a former worker in the XII District Arrow Cross building, testified that Brunner had joined the party to save his factory, which would have been confiscated because his wife was Jewish. She had heard from Arrow Cross men and women working at the party house kitchen that both Brunner brothers “had taken part in executions.”⁸⁵ In 1971, when the XII District group was investigated, Oszkár’s brother Tivadar, who was also under arrest for war crimes, gave a different version of how Oszkár had joined the Arrow Cross militia. Oszkár told him that when the sadistic leader of the group had discovered that he was a gentile, he himself had offered to join them, and that he had agreed in part for reasons of personal safety, and in part because he had hoped to save his factory. He joined also in the hope of avoiding punishment for having hired Jews.⁸⁶

According to this account, Brunner was motivated by fear of persecution and perhaps even cowardice, but not by hatred or ideological conviction. József Ráki, Brunner’s erstwhile comrade, testified that Brunner had spent five or six days in captivity, and, in his first days as a party serviceman, had worn sunglasses to conceal injuries suffered at the hands of the men whose movement he had just joined. He also asserted that, while the Arrow Cross would often round up and force people to fight the Russians, one could only join their ranks on a voluntary basis, since they wanted “reliable men.” Ráki’s testimony revealed dynamic aspects within the Brunner establishment which, until then, had remained un-

83 Naszódi Györgyné kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 30 April 1971. BFL, 3589 III. 2680 box.

84 Grünstein Róza tanúkihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, undated [1945]. BFL, 3589 III. 2680 box, VI.

85 Kreutz Ferenc, Láng Vincéné vallomása, ÁBTL XXV. 4/a, 3589/1971, Láng Vincéné kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 30 April 1971. BFL, 3589 III. 2680 box.

86 Brunner Tivadar kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 8 March 1971. ÁBTL, XXV. 4/a, 3589/1971.

mentioned. Brunner's Jewish wife had also been abducted, as had his Jewish mistress, who worked in his workshop. His wife allegedly had been aware of what was going on between her husband and his employee. According to Ráki, Brunner claimed that the two women complemented each other well: his wife was a good businesswoman, his secretary as a good girlfriend.⁸⁷ In this case mundane reasons led to lofty outcomes.

A construction worker named József Békesi testified that Brunner was a good Hungarian who had rejected the declaration of war on the USSR as well as Szálasi and his movement. According to Békesi, Brunner had said, "I will never accept this horde and will not obey their command." "After Christmas, he came to my flat. His face was ashen gray, ghostlike, and his speech was slurred. Brunner recounted that he had seen a man being shot who was trying to change. They threatened to kill his mother and child."⁸⁸

In a fortuitous turn for Brunner and those who wanted to see him acquitted, an investigator from the political police took his side. An officer named Baltay asserted that Brunner had provided sanctuary for many Jews and, significantly by that time, communists. Several members of the local Communist Party organization would be willing to "vouch for him," the investigator claimed. Nor did Baltay's efforts stop there. He also investigated the person who denounced Brunner. In an odd twist of events, Baltay had the person taken into custody, arguing that the person was a "fascist-minded vile Jew."⁸⁹ Finally, 28 people, all of them Jewish, signed a petition testifying that Brunner's plant had been an asylum for Jews, for people who had been persecuted because of their political convictions, and for deserters, and that they owed their lives to him. The petition also noted that Brunner had provided financial support for his Jewish employees. Later, a witness claimed that Brunner's female companion had solicited the extenuating testimonies. Given the large number of signatories and the fact that the people who signed the petition lived in various parts of the city, this does not seem likely, or at least not for all the people who signed on Brunner's behalf. It is even less likely that people who had just been liberated from National Socialist persecution would sign a false petition on behalf of an Arrow Cross killer, even if asked to do so.⁹⁰

87 Brunner Tivadar kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, Ráki József vallomása, undated [1971]. Ibid.

88 Jegyzőkönyv Békesi József vallomásáról, 1945. ÁBTL, V-88229.

89 Magyar Államrendőrség Budapesti Főkapitánysága, Baltay László jelentése, 1945. ÁBTL, V-88229.

90 ÁBTL V-88229, pp. 16-17. The witnesses, most of whom may have been Jewish, lived in a variety of streets in the Vth and VIth Districts.

Nevertheless, Brunner was indicted for having tortured Géza Preisz, and for having escorted Jews and other victims captured by the Arrow Cross. Preisz had reported Brunner to the police, and others had also come forward. Lajos Frenkel had been held prisoner for three days before he had been driven to the Danube River to be executed. He had managed to escape and tell his story. He claimed that Brunner, who had constantly been present in the torture room, had beaten and cursed him. "I got 150 strikes," he said in his testimony, but "I was strong, I could take it." According to his account, Brunner was a brutal man who "had beaten people sadistically."⁹¹ Despite this evidence, even the people's prosecutor, András Szűcs, had asserted that Brunner was an honest man who had tried to help his fellow humans, and whose "tragic role" was due to fear for his family. The prosecution faced the problem that Oszkár was easy to confuse with his sibling, Tivadar, who had also been active in the Arrow Cross and the atrocities that the party members committed. When survivors recalled the atrocities, they had a hard time saying whether it was Oszkár or his brother who had committed them. Brunner was acquitted after the court heard evidence by both witnesses for the prosecution and for the defense. This is important to stress, because often the People's Tribunals did not admit witnesses for the defense.

In 1952, the Brunner case was reexamined, even though by then any interest in prosecuting the former Arrow Cross for crimes committed during the war had evaporated. This was likely because a witness denounced Brunner and told investigators that Brunner had been in the Arrow Cross building all the time and had been present when people had been brought in and beaten.⁹² Even in the aftermath of the war, some witness accounts punched holes in the Brunner narrative. One person overheard a conversation between Oszkár and his brother, Tivadar, who allegedly told Oszkár not to hesitate to kill Jews. The party members, Tivadar claimed, were already becoming suspicious, and "I had to protect you." Oszkár retorted that he had already killed two people that night and, thus, had proven himself.⁹³ The account lacked credibility, as his comrades would have known about Brunner's feat and would not have criticized him for failing to kill. Nevertheless, an investigation, which dragged on for over a decade in fits and starts, was launched.

After the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and the trials in West Germany, there was a renewed interest behind the Iron Curtain in prosecuting former fascists

91 Frenkel Lajos vallomása, 1945. Brunner Oszkár, ÁBTL, V-103809.

92 Mónus Illésné vallomása, 2 December 1952. ÁBTL, Brunner Oszkár és társai, V88229.

93 Vallomás, undated. ÁBTL, Brunner Oszkár és társai, ÁBTL, O-14/761.

so as to comply with the anti-Nazi image Soviet and East European communist states had crafted of themselves. Some new evidence emerged from renewed investigations, offering an opportunity to reckon with the fascist past and also to strike a blow at some real, but for the most part imagined or constructed, enemies of the Communist state. In 1966, a former party typist named Katalin Fehérhegyi testified that Oszkár had taken part in executions on the shore of the Danube River. Mária Nádi, a survivor, claimed that Oszkár had shot a deserter and had bragged to his brother about having killed several Jews. In 1968, the authorities concluded that in several cases the charges were unsustainable. No new data had surfaced to contradict the interpretation that Brunner had acted under duress. Moreover, the two witnesses who testified against Oszkár Brunner, Fehérhegyi and Nádi, were confusing the acts of different people.

At that point, it looked as though the proceedings would be terminated due to the lack of evidence. Then, more and more witnesses who claimed that both brothers had taken part in atrocities surfaced. Mrs. Vince Láng recalled that the brothers had escorted and executed civilians.⁹⁴ Mária Nádi, who spent several weeks in Andrásy Avenue 60 as a captive, claimed that Oszkár had taken part in forcing females to engage in sexual intercourse.⁹⁵ József Máté, an otherwise not too reliable former member of the Arrow Cross, recounted that Brunner had denounced his own wife and had even wanted her to be executed. Fellow party members knew perfectly well, Máté contended, that Brunner had turned in his wife to get hold of her assets and be able to move in with his lover.

Máté described both Brunner brothers as keen and tireless in their “service.” He claimed to have heard from party leader Dénes Bokor, an Arrow Cross leader notorious for his cruelty, that Brunner had only been made to look as if he had been beaten so that the fact that he had denounced his own wife would remain hidden from his relatives.⁹⁶ Máté’s testimony does not explain why Brunner was severely beaten and tortured when he was taken in (several witnesses testified that they had seen real injury to his face), and it doesn’t square with the bulk of the accounts regarding the circumstances and Brunner’s motivations.

Be that as it may, the court that convicted Brunner in 1971 accepted as an established fact that he was beaten. According to court documents, armed men took him and eight or nine others on December 12, 1944. His head had been smashed against the wall repeatedly until his nose was broken. Then he was

94 Kreutz Ferenc, Láng Vincéné vallomása, ÁBTL XXV. 4/a, 3589/1971.

95 Nádi Mária vallomása, 1966. Brunner Oszkár és társai, ÁBTL, V761/14-.

96 Máté József kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 1971. ÁBTL, XXV. 4/a 1971/3589.

pushed into the room, where he was beaten severely by his future comrades. He was being struck with truncheons and fists as the Arrow Cross men tried to get him to reveal the location of hidden gold and Jews for whom he was also providing refuge, as well as his Jewish associate. Magdolna Unger and Brunner's wife were soon captured, and all three were tortured.

During the investigation, which took place more than two decades after the events, Brunner initially tried to minimize his role. According to his account, he had joined the Arrow Cross because he had seen someone getting shot for having refused to do so, and he had been forced to wear the Arrow Cross armband and carry a weapon. Later, he asserted that he had joined up because he had been afraid for his daughter. After their capture, Brunner, his first wife Klára, and his lover at the time (and as noted earlier, afterwards his second wife) Magdolna Unger had been forced to strip and perform "perverted sexual acts" while being beaten by Arrow Cross men. Father Kun, a sadistic leader of the notorious XII District Arrow Cross, had hit Brunner's genitals with a stick, shouting "aren't you ashamed of yourself?" Following this account of his alleged suffering and humiliation, Brunner told the investigators that he had been present at Andrassy Avenue 60 as a prisoner, and implicated several men who had taken part in killings.

Tivadar, Brunner's sibling but no longer animated by brotherly love, contended that Oszkár had taken part in atrocities and that they had both participated in the humiliation of prisoners. Oszkár, the older sibling, dismissed this statement as a lie. Some of the testimony used against him came from 1945. József Rédl, an Arrow Cross man who had been executed, had implicated him in taking prisoners from Andrassy Avenue 62 and executing them. As mentioned earlier, Géza Preisz had testified in 1945 that a man "with his hair combed back" and his comrades had beaten him. Two witnesses, Miksa Grünspan and Mária Nádi, told investigators that Brunner had been one of the people who had tortured a young man named Dezső Mandl, resulting in Mandl's death. Nádi and a former Arrow Cross man named Hugó Bottlik claimed that Brunner had also taken part in the beating and execution of a soldier who was accused of having deserted his unit. József Konradek, who had served in a labor service battalion, accused Brunner of having robbed people of their possessions and even of having shot somebody. As noted earlier, Mrs. Vince Láng claimed to have seen him taking people to the Danube from Andrassy Avenue 47 to be shot. Magdolna Unger, who was married to Brunner at the time of his arrest, remembered him telling her in 1945 that he had been forced to escort people to the Arrow Cross building. Mrs. Bertalan Székely asserted that Brunner had been in the room

where other people were being beaten, and that he had told her to beg for her husband's life and told her that if she failed to do so, he would be taken to the Danube and murdered. Four years earlier, she had given a somewhat different account of the same story, which had painted Brunner in a more favorable light. According to her earlier account, when the Arrow Cross detachment arrived, an Arrow Cross man told her that he had a Jewish wife and that he had been forced to join the Arrow Cross. This person, who may have been Brunner, warned Mrs. Bertalan that she had to do everything to stop her husband from being taken, since otherwise "he would not return."⁹⁷

József Réder, who was executed in 1946, told police that all Jews and deserters found in the building at 4 Semmelweis Street had been taken into the street, and that an injured soldier had begged for his life, but Brunner had shot him. He did not specify which Brunner it was. Oszkár insisted that it could not have been him, as Réder mentioned a person wearing a uniform and he claimed to have been wearing civilian clothes. Tivadar, on the other hand, pointed a finger at his brother. A confession by Antal Hárer was similarly enigmatic. He claimed that three men had shown up at their shelter and taken several people, including his wife and son. Hárer had also claimed that Brunner had hit his sick wife in the face. At the same time, he said that the third Arrow Cross man was Brunner "I think."

Hárer, a composer born in 1923, was not a very reliable witness. In other testimony given in the Oszkár Brunner case, he recounted a slightly different story. According to this account, he was confident that Oszkár Brunner had been present for the raid of the Semmelweis Street building and that he and an infamous female member of the militia, Piroska Dely, had been the most brutal. Dely was one of the few notorious females who had taken part in armed robberies and mass killings, and this statement would confirm a description of her, given by a survivor, according to which she was "not a woman, but a murderous beast clad in human skin..."⁹⁸ Whereas, according to Hárer's first account, the Arrow Cross men had abducted his Jewish wife, this time he alleged that it was his mother who had been taken, while his Christian father looked on helplessly. Jenő Rabati, one of the victims abducted from the Semmelweis Street building, stated that Brunner had taken part in a raid which resulted in the deaths of two people, a charge the accused flatly denied. He claimed that Rabati had mistaken

97 Székely Béláné Schwanner Ezsébet vallomása, ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a. 3589/1971, Székely Béláné vallomása, 2 November 1967. Brunner Oszkár és társai, ÁBTL O-14/761.

98 On Piroska Dely see Pető, *Láthatatlan elkövetők*.

him for somebody else, since he had never had a leather coat and thus did not fit the description given by Rabati.⁹⁹ Rabati recognized and identified Oszkár Brunner from a photograph.

The picture about this highly enigmatic man was hard to clarify. The testimony that was given by the various witnesses (or people who claimed to be witnesses) only further muddied the waters about his record. Jenő Farkas claimed that both Brunner brothers had raped women, but he only recognized the younger brother, Tivadar.

Other witnesses claimed that they recognized Oszkár. Mrs. József Kovács recalled Brunner showing up in their cellar and demanding that her husband come with him to be interrogated. Brunner had allegedly threatened to shoot everyone if József Kovács did not come forward. When Kovács returned, he had been beaten so badly that “half his face was almost hanging off.”¹⁰⁰ Ákos Lőcs, who was arrested as a deserter, also recalled having seen Oszkár Brunner in the company of Arrow Cross killers Megadja and district leader Dénes Bokor. Initially, Lőcs was about to be drafted into the Hungarist Legion to fight the Red Army, but he ultimately ended up in Arrow Cross headquarters on Városház Street, where his duty was to forward the reports, which included the number of people arrested and sent to fight in the Hungarist Legion unarmed, to the Arrow Cross commander of Budapest, Nidosy. Lőcs claimed that the fates of those who were captured were not recorded, though everyone knew perfectly well what had befallen them. According to Lőcs, party leader Szálasi promoted Brunner and others for their heroic defense of the capital. Lőcs claimed that the people who had been promoted did most of the killing, and said that Brunner had been one of the killers. When confronted, Lőcs failed to recognize Brunner, although he was able to recall his clothing.¹⁰¹

Mária Bali had worked in the defendant’s factory, and she remembered the fateful day of the raid vividly. She had been on her way to work when a coworker, Miksa Róth, had come running out. “Marianne, the Arrow Cross is here,” he had shouted. It was too late, however. She was seized along with some of her coworkers, including Brunner’s father-in-law. What followed was harrowing: her ribs were broken, and her feet were beaten with a rod. In the meantime, a postman was brought in for having joked about exchanging pengős [Hungarian currency at the time] for rubles. Eventually, she was released in exchange for

99 Kihallgatási jegyzőkönyv, Brunner Oszkár 17 May 1971. ÁBTL, XXV/a 3589/1971.

100 Kovács Józsefné tanúvallomása, 1971 Brunner Oszkár, ÁBTL, XXV/a 3589/1971.

101 Lőcs Ákos tanúvallomása, 1971 Brunner Oszkár, ÁBTL, XXV/a 3589/1971.

her promise to denounce Jews left in hiding. In the meantime, she saw Brunner, “whose head was twice its normal size.” In her testimony, she claimed to have known Brunner “as a decent man. I cannot imagine he joined the Arrow Cross. He had only one weakness, women. He had liaisons with many women.” In light of her statement, it cannot be ruled out that Bali herself had fallen under Brunner’s charm.

Mrs. József Békefi recounted that Brunner had shown up in her apartment after Christmas in 1944. He had been wearing an overcoat with an Arrow Cross armband, and he was carrying a rifle. Brunner claimed that he had been beaten, but she could not recall any sign of a beating on his face. He recounted that the Arrow Cross had forced him to join their ranks and he had done so for fear of his life. The Arrow Cross men had not trusted him, however, and he had not even a working rifle. Mrs. Békefi added that, in 1945, her husband had told police that he had seen the bruises on Brunner’s body, but she claimed that her husband had exaggerated because he was fond of Brunner.

Magdolna Unger, as noted earlier, had had an intimate relationship with the defendant before they married after the war. She had worked for Brunner since 1940, after having been in hiding in various parts of the country with fake documents. After the Szálasi putsch, she no longer went to work because “Jews were being hidden there.” A whole detachment, counting maybe about ten people, had burst into her apartment, including a woman named Zsuzsa Burunyi, who Unger thought had denounced them. She found Brunner in the Arrow Cross building. He had been beaten so badly that she had barely recognized him. In a graphic account, Unger described the humiliation she had suffered at the hands of the Arrow Cross 25 years after the events.

She, Brunner, and his wife had been told to undress with roughly 30 people watching. The couple had then been beaten until they were bleeding. The Arrow Cross men were seemingly aware of the intimate relationship between Unger and Brunner, since they insisted that they show Brunner’s wife, Schuller, “what they had been doing together.” She was then forced to “pleasure Brunner in an unnatural way” while Schuller looked on. In the meantime, the audience was laughing and cheering as they watched, while Arrow Cross men beat Brunner and Unger with whips and rubber truncheons. Later, she was escorted to the ghetto. Brunner’s wife, Klára, was taken to be executed. She allegedly had found the psychological pain harder to bear than the physical one: the coarse, jeering laughter of the riff-raff was even “more terrible.” It had gotten so out of hand that Ferenc Megadja, who as earlier noted was notorious for his cruelty, had put an end to it. Three women and her uncle, Lázár Schuller—he was

hiding other Jews in his home—who had been taken from the Brunner premises, did not survive their physical punishment. On Christmas Eve, the Arrow Cross began to take their prisoners, two at a time, to be executed. She was the last to be taken. A policeman wearing an Arrow Cross armband and an Arrow Cross man had led her to a ditch. One of them shot her from behind with a rifle. The bullet hit her neck and shattered her jaw. Klára fell into the ditch without losing consciousness. She managed to crawl out and climbed over the fence. Survival thus came in the forms of pure luck and a stranger who picked her up and took her to the hospital in Maros Street. After the war, her husband told her that he had joined the Arrow Cross because he was afraid and also because they had promised “great wealth” if they were victorious. This would bring the element of material gain, which would be consistent with his love of a good life, into his behavior.¹⁰²

Unger tried to explain why Brunner [who was by then her husband] had joined the Arrow Cross in 1944. In 1945, Brunner had told her that he had been threatened and told that, unless he joined the Arrow Cross, they would execute his mother and daughter. His fear was legitimate, since a certain Katalin Koltai’s mother had been executed because Koltai had fled from the Arrow Cross. In her 1971 testimony, Unger changed her 1945 account on one important point: In 1945, she had claimed that she had personally overheard Brunner being threatened. When confronted with the discrepancy, Unger said that her memory of the events had been more precise in 1945.¹⁰³

Another witness, Mrs. László Darázs, née Alice Leitzinger, confirmed that Jews had been employed in the Brunner plant, though she herself did not think that this had been a “deliberate effort to save lives” although she failed to explain her skepticism. Nevertheless, her testimony was in stark contrast with the testimonials given in 1945, according to which Brunner had given people jobs in the workshop as part of a deliberate effort to protect them.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, Mrs. Jenő Havasi, née Matild Dikmann, one of the people who had been given employment in the Brunner establishment, testified that she had assumed that Brunner may have known that they were Jewish.¹⁰⁵

The question was not whether Brunner had been brutally beaten, but whether he had been a willing or unwilling accomplice in the atrocities. The former party

102 Brunner Oszkárné, Schuller Klára vallomása, 4 September 1945. Brunner Oszkár és társai, ÁBTL, V-135335/2/188.

103 Unger Magdolna tanúvallomása, 1971, Brunner Oszkár, ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971.

104 Darázs Lászlóné vallomása, Brunner Oszkár, ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971.

105 Havas Jenőné tanúvallomása, 1971 Brunner Oszkár, ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971.

typist Katalin Fehérhegyi's father had been a party activist who had taken Katalin as a young child to the party building. Fehérhegyi averred that, although Oszkár had been beaten, he had joined the party service of his own accord and had taken part in raids and beatings. She claimed that both he and his brother had been promoted due to their outstanding service to the party, although she stopped short of claiming that Brunner had participated in executions. After the war, Fehérhegyi was interred, and spent a long spell in an internment camp in Kistarcsa. She was identified as a person who was open to communist reeducation. Understandably, she may have wanted to be careful about what she told the authorities in 1971.

József Kovács, a locksmith who had been 31 years old when this story unfolded, had known Oszkár since his childhood and had worked for him since 1943. He recalled that Brunner had employed only four males and the rest of his workers had all been women. He had known of Brunner's liaisons and claimed that Brunner's wife, Klára, had been aware of his affair with Magdolna Unger. Kovács was taken down to Városmajor Street, where he saw all kinds of prisoners, priests, and even generals. He had been beaten, but then shooting had erupted and he had been able to escape in the ensuing chaos. Magdolna Unger, Brunner's second wife, had approached him in 1945 and asked him to say nothing but positive things about Brunner. If this testimony were true, it would have cast serious doubts on Unger's confession.

Kovács himself, however, seems to have been somewhat unreliable. In a second interrogation he told the police that, contrary to his previous claim, he was not taken away in Brunner's automobile, and that Brunner was not even present when he had been arrested. Brunner's first spouse, Klára Schuller, had every reason to be resentful. He had cheated on her and joined the men who had almost killed her and who had murdered her uncle. She had met Brunner in 1930, but they only married six years later. Her father owned a grocery store which brought in a considerable income. It is not inconceivable that there was a hidden financial motive behind the marriage, as Brunner needed capital to launch his company from scratch.

Schuller remembered that Brunner showed no interest in politics and, more importantly, expressed no anti-Semitic sentiments. In fact, through his business activities, he built a wide network of contacts in the Jewish community. This and "perhaps some measure of humanitarian concern," according to Klára, explained why he had begun to employ a large number of persecuted Jews in 1944, including two girls who had escaped deportation and their relatives, whom Brunner had allowed to take refuge on the factory premises. She did not di-

voiced her husband despite his extramarital affairs because he provided security for her and their daughter.

Schuller asserted that her husband had been accused of hiding Jews and of having purchased a large amount of food from a Jewish retailer who had liquidated his store. A friend had told her after the war that he had offered to give Brunner and his daughter refuge and had exhorted him not to “assume this dirty role,” but Brunner had not taken advantage of the offer.¹⁰⁶

After Oszkár Brunner’s conviction in 1971, his second wife Magdolna Unger sued for clemency on his behalf. In her appeal, she gave her account of the events which had transpired a quarter of a century earlier. Two women who had given testimony as witnesses in her husband’s trial had denounced Brunner and his associates in 1944, she claimed. Four of the eight Arrow Cross men who had abducted them had been executed in 1947. Six of the people they had captured had been murdered. She reaffirmed that her husband had acted out of fear when he joined his former tormentors. According to her, “[it was] woe to anyone who rejected [district leader] Bokor’s offer.” She argued that her husband was a “good man, whose tragic role in those few days stemmed from his attempt to help his fellow human beings in the age of horrors.” She noted that one witness in Brunner’s trial had thanked Brunner for his life. Had Brunner disobeyed the Arrow Cross, he would have put the lives of his mother and child in danger. Unger drew a parallel with a case which cannot be verified. Brunner’s Jewish wife believed in his innocence without wavering.

A report dated March 12, 1971 stated that Oszkár Brunner’s participation in mass killings, escorts, and the assembling of groups slated for execution could not be proven beyond doubt. Mrs. Vince Láng’s testimony was “exaggerated.” Another witness specified a date for Brunner’s activity when he was not yet in the party building. Mária Nádi gave different accounts regarding the beating of Dezső Mandl each time she was asked. Eventually, Brunner was charged with, and sentenced for, participation in mass killing on the basis of the testimony of József Ráki. Witness Andor Kecskeméti saw Oszkár Brunner depart with a group of prisoners on the fateful night of December 31, although the witness never saw him among the Arrow Cross again. Was he a war criminal, a rescue angel or some of both? We may never know for sure.

106 Schuller [Surányi] Klára tanúvallomása, 1971, Brunner Oszkár, ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971.

EXECUTION, TORTURE, ROBBERY

Brunner was not released. His case was reviewed in 1972. The prison authorities reported that he was polite, industrious, and quiet, and that he fit into the prison community, but made no friends. Brunner acknowledged the crimes he had committed without specifying what they were. He still insisted that he had acted out of fear for his family. There is a chance that some of the acts attributed to Oszkár were actually carried out by his brother, Tivadar. Klára Schuller described her brother-in-law as someone who was dishonest, irresponsible, and a fraud who harbored strong anti-Semitic sentiments. He held a baccalaureate from a commercial high school and worked as a tool mechanic apprentice at Oszkár's workshop. The younger Brunner entered the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party in 1961. He was becoming a perfect fit in the communist system, and, by the time he was arrested, had become a model citizen, twice given awards as an "outstanding worker" and also an "outstanding superintendent," receiving cash awards for work.

Tivadar's investigation left behind documentation that allows us to reconstruct the world of the Arrow Cross in anatomical detail. The Hungarist takeover had found Tivadar Brunner in the army. In the initial phase of the investigation in 1971, Brunner claimed that he had learned of the arrest of his brother and aunt, and so had asked for leave and gone home. The older Brunner talked his brother into joining them. It is important to emphasize that apparently neither of the Brunner brothers had been members of any right-wing organization. Nevertheless, Tivadar joined immediately, and with apparent zeal. He admitted to having escorted 20 people to the Danube for execution between December 30 and January 2, 1945. Five armed men escorted the 20 victims, making it almost impossible for them to escape. When they reached the river, they were lined up, and the men behind them opened fire. Brunner claimed that since he had a small-shot rifle, he had not taken part in the shooting.

Tivadar's participation must have pleased his masters, because they transferred him to the notorious House of Loyalty on Andrásy Avenue, where he was appointed head of the praetorian guard. This was a significant promotion. He was given a machine gun and a pistol, and donned the movement's armband. On January 10, Tivadar received orders to contribute to the gruesome execution of a private named Imre Farkas, who was allegedly caught looting. Every Arrow Cross in the building was compelled to view the execution. Farkas was so badly beaten that he was unable to stand. Brunner's henchmen were forced to put him in an armchair for the shooting. Oszkár Brunner, who took part in the

beating, was so inebriated that he vomited all over himself. The execution was ordered by Bokor. If one believes Brunner, he and his sibling protested because they found the execution “disgusting,” but they did not dare defy the order.¹⁰⁷

On December 27, Tivadar and his newly found comrades rounded up a Jewish man of around 60 years of age who was denounced by a Swabian man wearing a German uniform. Four days later, district leader Bokor ordered them to search each apartment of a house on Nagyatádi Street, where they arrested and dragged off 60 people who “were protesting, weeping, and shrieking.” In Andrásy Avenue 47, Tivadar Brunner recalled, “we bludgeoned them with our hands, fists, and truncheons for no reason at all, and we humiliated them in every way possible,” forcing them to sing military songs and folk tunes. When they had finished, armed personnel took them to the Danube in pairs with their hands bound together to stop them from running away.

Armed men were deployed on either side of the procession. The number of escorts was never much smaller than those of the escorted. Upon arrival, eight or ten Arrow Cross men lined them up and opened fire from a distance of four or five steps. A survivor named Andor Kecskeméti remembered that, in the meantime, a shell exploded nearby, prompting the group leader, Bokor, to remark “your brothers [meaning the Russians] are coming, but you will not live to see it.” There was never any mercy for anyone selected to die. When a person wanted to save his life by denouncing a resistance group, an Arrow Cross man named József Mónus shot him nonetheless.

On January 1, the men returned to the building and carried off 50 women. They removed their upper clothing and had them kneel in their underwear. Brunner attested that he took advantage of the situation and grabbed their breasts, but otherwise he did not feel he had been cruel to them. In the freezing winter cold, the prisoners were led down Andrásy Avenue, a fancy street lined with fashionable shops and restaurants. It was pitch dark, so the fact that they had nothing on but their undergarments may not have been obvious to any onlookers who might have happened to see them. When they reached their destination, the women were shot with machine guns. Brunner claimed to have killed six of them.

Brunner tried to conceal his part in murdering women “because I myself think it was a brutal atrocity... it was a very serious criminal act.” In the same roundup, the Arrow Cross also collected military age Christian men whom

¹⁰⁷ Brunner Tivadar kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 3 May 1971. ÁBTL, XXV 4/a, 3589/1971; Nádi Mária vallomása, 1971, *ibid*.

they handed over to the military authorities.¹⁰⁸ Transports to the Danube became routine. Kálmán Baráth described one of them in vivid detail. Fourteen men and women were taken to the river on 10 January. “Weeping, crying, raving, they begged us to spare their lives.” Those who were still alive after the first salvo “we did away with again.”

Brunner’s testimony revealed the group dynamic of the atrocities. Every serviceman had to participate in the killings. Nobody was permitted to shirk this task. Even if there was a single serviceman who did not want to take part in the “dirty work,” there was no one who dared stay out of the killings. District leader Bokor wanted to involve everyone in the killings and to “compromise” us “to be able to count on us in every respect.” “Every escort had to kill somebody,” another perpetrator confirmed, “as the Arrow Cross put pressure on one another to become accomplices.”¹⁰⁹

Mária Nádi, a former worker in an Arrow Cross building, recalled hearing a conversation in which Tivadar Brunner told his brother that he would assign him for execution because “I have already taken part in a ‘swimming’ [meaning shooting into the river] personally.”¹¹⁰ Máté remembered that each escort had to kill somebody because their leaders wanted everyone to take part in the killings. In these difficult times, he recalled, it “became necessary for us to demand a test of allegiance,” which meant that each of them needed to shoot someone.¹¹¹

László Megadja asserted that, as a deserter he was threatened by his brother Ferenc, Pater Kun, and Bokor, who dragged him along. For some, fear may also have played a role in coercing participation. For instance, Vilmos Kröszl remembered that the “party members were terrified of László Szelepcsényi.”¹¹² According to a former comrade, this physically powerful and aggressive man may have masterminded the killings.¹¹³ Nidosi, one of the Arrow Cross leaders in the capital decreed in late 1944 that the party service had the right to kill their captives on the spot, otherwise they would be held responsible as accomplices in crime.¹¹⁴ In sum, at least some of the killers were coerced by their peers. Military discipline prevailed, a former Arrow Cross stated, and nobody ever defied an order to execute a victim, since this would have meant being sent to the front.

108 Brunner Tivadar kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 8 March 1972. ÁBTL, XXV 4/a, 3589/1971; Brunner Tivadar kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 2 April 1971, *ibid.*

109 Brunner Tivadar kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 8 April 1971. ÁBTL XXV. 4/a, 3589/1971.

110 Brunner Tivadar kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 3 May 1971. *Ibid.*

111 Ráki József kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 8 May 1971, Máté József vallomása. *Ibid.*

112 Kröszl Vilmos kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 7 March 1965. Kröszl Vilmos es társai, ÁBTL, V-153693/3.

113 Erős vallomása, ÁBTL, V-153693/3.

114 Erős vallomása, ÁBTL, V-153693/3.

One would assume that, as the enemy came closer and closer, Arrow Cross men would be preoccupied with surviving the siege and the subsequent regime change. Some of them did make a run for it, together with the city's German and Hungarian defenders. Many behaved in a manner which in retrospect does not seem logical, and stayed behind to loot and murder. Kálmán Baráth revealed that, as the Soviets were closing in, Arrow Cross men were trying to execute their enemies as quickly as possible.¹¹⁵ The inverse correlation between the likelihood of victory and the intensity of brutality was a phenomenon also recorded in the case of sadistic killers on the eastern front.¹¹⁶ Brunner affirmed that the mood was highly despondent because the Soviet ring was closing around the city. Party leaders attempted to raise spirits by spreading the rumor that the Germans, who were about to relieve them, were closing in, and their "wonder weapon" would turn the war around. The rank and file were "inspired by promises of substantial remuneration." Tivadar claimed that he and his brother stayed in the party service of their own free will, although they could have quit anytime: "it was not our intention to leave the Arrow Cross... we signed up because it was in our interests."¹¹⁷

The claim that Brunner wanted to relieve his conscience must be treated with skepticism. He "could not remember" having been in charge of the external and internal guard of the party headquarters, and he only admitted that he had indeed played this role when his former henchmen refreshed his memory. When caught, the former "brothers" sought to minimize their sentence at the expense of each other. In view of the fact that Tivadar Brunner had divulged his role in executions, it was curious that he denied having commanded the guards.

A possible reason may lie in an important but neglected aspect of the atrocities: sadistic torture. The defendant could plausibly deny his role in the tortures, which took place in the dark cellars of the party buildings. Only the guards had access to the underground compartments and their prisoners. This was no coincidence, as many rank-and file Arrow Cross were thus denied access to booty. Beside the sadistic and erotic thrill of the degrading physical punishment inflicted on the victims, the main motivation for torture was to extract information concerning where they had hidden their valuables. Sometimes, prisoners

115 Baráth Kálmán kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 3 June 1966. ÁBTL, V-135693/4. Baráth Kálmán önvallomása, *ibid.*

116 See Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 131.

117 Brunner Tivadar kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 8 April 1971. ÁBTL, V-135693/4.

were released for large sums of money. Thus, as Tivadar Brunner's true role in the hierarchy of terror had been established, his role in torturing victims could also be brought to light. There were many reasons to be part of the guard. Some were old party activists. Others had been rounded up and were about to be conscripted into the Arrow Cross military unit, the Hungarist Legion, and they chose guard service to avoid fighting the Soviets. Some were "coerced" to join. They were all told that they would not be sent to the front.

The Brunners were not the only outsiders who joined the Arrow Cross in the brief hour of their rise to power. Mihály Vidra joined the party in 1938 and was promoted to district leader in 1941. He recalled that, when the party came to power in 1944, large numbers of non-party members or people who were members but had not attended party meetings regularly suddenly showed up to "get into a good position." Vidra was "disgusted" by the atrocities, which included the killing of several hundred people in Andrassy Avenue 47, and therefore chose to go to the front. Vidra also claimed to have alerted the Arrow Cross Court to investigate the tortures, but to no avail.

Everyone had to take part in the killings. Otherwise, they would be suspect for "not doing everything for the cause and for disloyalty to their oath."¹¹⁸ Vidra was one of the more idealistic members of the Arrow Cross who found their party's direction disagreeable. Sometimes he tried to make sure that the captured Jews would be taken to the ghetto, but when he was not there, Vidra claimed, these people were "shot by the Danube."

On January 10, an armed detachment of four men dressed in leather coats wearing the party's red and green armbands descended on a house on Károly Boulevard. Many people were hiding there with the assistance of air raid shelter commander György Jerkovity, who was described as "a decent man." Mrs. Tibor Schlefka could still recall people shouting, "rotten Jews, you will all croak you won't get away with it this time."

Accounts of what happened next differ. There were 60 or 80 people in the bomb shelter. The men were forced to show their genitals for inspection. A couple by the family name Nemes had papers of exemption. They were torn up. They and a young man named Isti were executed in the courtyard, and an estimated six or maybe ten others, including an army officer, were taken away. Only one man, a journalist named István Ternai, returned. He had been "horribly beaten." Tivadar Brunner denied having executed anyone on the spot, but he admitted

¹¹⁸ Vidra Mihály kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 1971.

that there “may have been torture.”¹¹⁹ A survivor remembered him, though; he had been wearing a leather coat and had had a machine gun around his neck. This survivor had watched as three rounds of executions were held (eight people executed each time), and he claimed that Tivadar Brunner had been one of the executioners. Mrs. Schlefka also remembered Brunner and the others because they returned later and told the survivors that they were lucky because the front had gotten too close for them to be executed, and the people they had taken had not survived.¹²⁰

As the Soviets were closing in, the building was rapidly evacuated, but not before the 40, 50, or, by another account, 60 people held in the cellars were executed. A witness whose father had been a member of the party testified that Tivadar Brunner had taken part in escorting and killing these people. Just before the evacuation, Oszkár Brunner alerted Mária Nádi, a woman who was forced to do the house cleaning, to hide, as nobody would be left alive.

They did not go far. The group’s new address was in the vicinity, 14 Városház Street, as personal survival was overridden by their ideological zeal to destroy their enemies and lay hands on their assets. Many people were being held there, including priests, a police lieutenant and even infants. “We brought in the general,” an Arrow Cross man laughed. The captives were stripped almost naked before they were taken to be shot. Jenő Rabati was greeted by a surrealistic scene in the cellar. It was full of “stripped corpses thrown one over the other.” Drunken Arrow Cross were forcing naked prisoners, who were standing against the wall, to sing military songs.¹²¹

Humiliation with a combination of singing and beating was standard procedure. In 1971, the aforementioned Andor Kecskeméti, who by then was 55 years old, recalled that the Arrow Cross had taken him and a group of 50 or 60 people to Andrassy Avenue 47.¹²² Kecskeméti had previously escaped from labor service. Upon arrival, they were stripped of their belongings and tortured by a powerful man and a woman, who was “one of the most sadistic of them all.” An Arrow Cross man named Szabó broke his finger. Tivadar Brunner asked for a performance and told him “in a friendly voice” to sing and recite poetry. When this was over, he demanded that the captives ask for a “Hungarist punch,” which he

119 Brunner Tivadar kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 26 April 1971. Testimonies of György Jerkovity, Tiborné Schlifka. Ibid.

120 Brunner Tivadar kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 7 May 1971. Ibid.

121 Brunner Tivadar kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 18 May 1971. Testimonies by Mária Nádi, József Kovács, Jenő Rabati. Ibid.

122 Ráki József kihallgatása, 23 April 1971. ÁBTL.

then delivered “upon request,” and the victims were brutally beaten. The same method was repeated by the Arrow Cross woman. Kecskeméti and the others were then escorted to the Danube. While walking to their final destinations they were constantly struck with rifle butts. Upon arrival, Bokor announced, “you will die now sons of Juda.” They were forced to kneel facing the river, and they were shot from behind. Kecskeméti was able to hold on to a sewage pipe after he fell into the freezing water, and he survived.¹²³

The best, although still slim, chance of escaping came before the prisoners reached the execution site. It was a desperate act to try to run, and only people who knew that they were already doomed would try. This was the case for István Má dai, who jumped off a moving car in the dark because he knew that the Arrow Cross men were taking him to the Danube to murder him.¹²⁴ Once they reached the river, he knew he would have little chance of survival. Armed guards were posted to secure the execution site, so that “they could finish off the victims unperturbed,” allegedly because sometimes they people committing the executions were shot at.¹²⁵

The circumstances of his escape were deeply etched into István Lehner’s memory. Importantly, he testified that all the Arrow Cross men had taken part in the shooting. There was no chance of escape, as they had used automatic weapons and had fired from both sides, while the victims were kneeling. The executioners deliberately created conditions in which they all became accomplices. “I was not even aware of what was happening to me, I was in such mental state... All of a sudden, I heard a clap, and I regained consciousness in the water. Lehner had not been hit, and since the rope which had bound him to another person had been broken, he had managed to swim to a bridgehead and climb out.”

“A horrible psychological atmosphere prevailed in the party building, which exerted a very bad influence on all well-meaning people,” remembered a woman, who was there because her father was a party activist.¹²⁶ Arrow Cross buildings were being used as torture chambers. Most of the evidence concerning the ways in which these buildings were used comes from postwar trials, so some historians approach it with a measure of skepticism. A record which dates from the time of the atrocities confirms the stories told after the war. Mrs. Miklós Berend reported her arrest, torture, and humiliation to the authorities in the hope of recovering her husband. She and her husband had been apprehended

123 Kecskeméti Andor kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 12 May 1971. BFL, 3589 III. 2680 box.

124 Má dai István kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 1971. ÁBTL, XXV 4/a, 3589/1971.

125 Ráki József kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 9 April 1971. ÁBTL, XXV 4/a, 3589/1971.

126 Kreutz Ferenc, Láng Vincéné v allomása, ÁBTL, XXV. 4/a, 3589/1971.

and charged with organizing a communist conspiracy, even though her father-in-law had been shot by the Bolsheviks in 1919 and his name appeared on the statue of martyrs. Mr. Berend was accused of being a Jew, although he had only one Jewish grandparent, while Mrs. Berend was a “100 percent Aryan.”

What followed was the worst nightmare. The head of the Zugló group, László Szelepcsényi, slapped Mrs. Berend and kicked her in the belly with his knee, even though she was visibly pregnant. Another man escorted her to the cellar and forced her to undress. Szelepcsényi announced that he would “spare” Mrs. Berend, but at a price. He warned her that the people they shot were usually taken to be murdered in their lingerie. Then, he raped her. Berend contemplated suicide, but she was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a host of captives. She was released after promising that their “liaison would continue.”¹²⁷

Hugó Bottlik recalled that he had often heard the shrieks and pleas for mercy of the inmates of Andrásy Avenue 60, from where people were taken to be executed. After a transport left the building, the staircase was covered with feces and urine. István Landeszmán was carried off with his wife and children. He was hiding at the apartment of his friend, György Bibó, together with his wife. His tormentor demanded to know the “name of the first Hungarian.” When Landeszmán said Szálasi, Sándor Bokor screamed “you stinking Jew, how dare you take this name on your lips.” He then broke Landeszmán’s arm. Gyula Frisch’s fingernails were torn off, and his skull was broken in nine places after he was beaten with an iron rod and rifle butt and kicked with boots. A doctor named Mankovits, who tried to treat the director’s injury, was beaten to death. An infant’s head was smashed against the wall in the party building in Városház Street.

Raoul Wallenberg’s Hungarian aid, Károly Müller, was captured. Bokor stabbed him in the hand for being Wallenberg’s right-hand man. A Christian rescuer, who had also been arrested, observed that two naked women were left on a balcony, and they froze to death in the December cold. Missionaries and explorers, the historian Peter Gay observed, mixed sexual excitement with sheer aggressiveness and even sadism.¹²⁸ Arrow Cross men in Budapest did very much the same thing. Violence was often fused with sexual abuse.

The following examples will illustrate that violence at times served no rational purpose. The acts in question went beyond the need to repress, purge, rob,

127 Berend Miklósné levele a belügyminisztériumnak, undated. MNL OL, K-149, BM reservált iratok, box 95, f2/1944-1-19121.

128 Peter Gay, *The Cultivation of Hatred*, 86.

or even kill the victims; rather, they were designed to divest them of their dignity. The circumstances under which they were committed suggest that these atrocities were not carried out due to peer pressure alone. In fact, as the following episodes illustrate, the sadistic acts were sources of pride. Their perpetrators had not been “brutalized” in war. Poor education and economic backwardness fail to explain why such unprecedented events could take place in one of Central Europe’s metropolises. The victims were defenseless and weak, and this may have further fanned brutality on the part of their tormentors. The fact that the victims were urinated on suggests that the killers no longer regarded them as human beings, or at least wanted to humiliate them. I have documented a large number of these atrocities to show that such acts could and did occur in large numbers in an urban environment. Most, but by no means all, of those who were tortured and brutally murdered were Jews.

A Jewish man was forced to perform sexual intercourse with a woman who had just been beaten to death. Lajos Hajgató used his fingernails to tear off a naked woman’s breasts and tear out her hair.¹²⁹ Mária Mádi watched while men exhausted by the act of torture forced women to fornicate with one another. Dénes Bokor stuck a freshly opened champagne bottle into his female victims’ vaginas.¹³⁰ A man was dragged from his home with his wife and mother. They were pushed into a room full of people who had been severely abused. These people included an Arrow Cross man who had been accused of helping Jews. They had been roughed up so badly that some had pieces of flesh missing from their bodies. The elderly woman was beaten so badly that her eyes froze in their sockets and her jaw was broken so that it hung from her face.¹³¹ A former Arrow Cross man named János Erős confided to a prison snitch that he had seen a prisoner have his eyes poked out, and he had seen naked prisoners be forced to perform sexual acts. Mrs. Gyula Szemerei fainted after having witnessed people being bashed with naked fists, kicked, and whipped until the walls were covered in blood.¹³²

Physical abuse became an end in itself. A hunchback named Gelencsér took pleasure in killing and shot anyone who survived an execution in the head from close range. József Hollai claimed that it had not mattered what people said during an interrogation, they were hit nonetheless. Hitting was “done by hand,

129 Brunner Oszkár, ÁBTL, XXV/4.

130 Mádi Mária vallomása, Bokor Sándor és társai, ÁBTL, V-135335, volume 2.

131 Bokor Sándor és társai, ÁBTL, V-135335.

132 Borszéki és társai, ÁBTL, V-121588/b.

whip, everyone had his specialty. Erős liked to bang people's heads against the wall until they collapsed."¹³³

Dénes Bokor joined the Arrow Cross movement in 1939. In the summer of 1944, Horthy interned radicals and Bokor was one of them. He was apprehended and interned because the police found propaganda leaflets in his apartment. When he was arrested in 1945, Bokor said that he had behaved "as decently as possible" and that he was quite ready to betray his former "brothers" to save himself. He offered his services to the new, communist-dominated political police, which were tasked with apprehending war criminals and "rounding up" the organizers and "main criminals" of the Arrow Cross movement. Revealing that he was close to the leaders who had presided over mass atrocities, Bokor offered to lead the police to their hideouts. He contended that these men had "misled me and made me miserable, and I would be most happy to see them punished."

As time passed, Bokor rescinded his assertion of innocence. Soon, he admitted having been appointed Head of De-Jewification. This was not a task he had taken lightly. He had even had Jewish patients in Szent János Hospital rounded up and "badly beaten." They had then either been taken to a brick factory or to the Danube River, where they had been shot. He had known of the execution of 500-600 people, and admitted to having murdered around 60 individuals, including ten on Christmas Eve. He personally took the life of a sergeant, as well as a communist couple whom he and his associates had beaten to death on Márvány Street. Bokor stated that his actions were motivated by his belief in the National Socialist ideology.¹³⁴

The significant number of testimonies regarding atrocities leave little doubt that they actually happened. Jenő Farkas was thrashed with rods and thrown into the cellar in the House of Loyalty at 60 Andrassy Avenue, where he witnessed people wallowing in their own feces. Six of them were girls who were forced to perform oral sex. One of them fought back and was shot dead. People did not resist even when they were going to be shot, Farkas recalled, as "execution and death were a desired occurrence."

The feeling of self-worth, a necessary condition of survival, was shattered. Those who soiled themselves when they were being tortured were forced to eat and drink their excrement. Prisoners were forced to perform perverse sexual acts and lick the blood they spilled on the walls of the dungeons where they

133 Hollai József vallomása, 4 May 1966. Kröszl Vilmos és társai, V-153693/4, Baráth Kálmán vallomása, 3 June 1966. *Ibid.*

134 Bokor Dénes vallomása, 1 March 1945, 2 April 1945. Bokor Dénes és társai, ÁBTL, V-135335.

were kept. Females searched females for hidden valuables. Women competed with their male comrades in brutality. The victims “suffered a lot” because the people torturing them “reached high up into their sexual organs.”¹³⁵

András Kun, the priest, was among the most sadistic Arrow Cross men mentioned in the sources. According to one characterization, while Bokor tortured with deliberation, Kun thrust himself on his victims with “raging anger.” Even some of the party militiamen thought that he might not be normal. Katalin Fehérhegyi, who worked in his Arrow Cross building as a clerk, accused Kun of participating in the raid of a building in Paulay Ede Street which allegedly resulted in the death of 700 Jews, a figure that was highly inflated.¹³⁶ Even the Arrow Cross “court,” *Nemzeti Számonkérő Szék*, grew frustrated with Kun’s brutality and condemned him to death, which sentence party leader Szálasi commuted to fifteen years. When interrogated in 1945, Kun admitted to having murdered “countless” people and to having violated young women with a truncheon. Once, he recounted, “I nailed the sexual organ of a young Arrow Cross comrade to the table because he was intentionally helping Jews.” Kun changed his account in his testimony in court, in which he denied any part in killings or “perverted acts,” though he admitted that he had inflicted harsh punishment using a stick. Reflecting on his record, he suggested that “I renounced not only the priest but also the human in myself.” Kun later retracted his confession and claimed that he had made it only because he had been subjected to physical violence. His main driving force was ideological zeal: “Let us not be cold hearted to our enemies... Carry it out with a brave heart... by killing ... if needed, all our enemies.”¹³⁷

In 1948, László Megadja, who was widely recognized as being one of the most sadistic torturers, admitted that large numbers of people had been brought in and forced to perform “immoral acts” in the *Loyalty House*. Sándor Bokor had forced three Jewish women to “kiss his genitals.” He had beaten one of them almost to death, and then forced Jewish labor service men to rape the dying woman.

Similar events transpired every day. István Lehner watched as Tivadar Brunner took out his penis and said to a woman, “this is Stalin, kiss it.” The episode confirms that Hungarian national Socialists identified Jews with Bolshevism. Struggle against one was struggle against the other.¹³⁸ A former comrade con-

135 Bognár Rózsi gyanúsított tanúvallomása, Lócsei Géza és társai, ÁBTL, 3.1.9 V-60646.

136 Fehérhegyi Katalin vallomása, 1945. Kun András, ÁBTL, V-119575. Dunkel Károly vallomása, 1945, *ibid.*

137 Kun András, ÁBTL, V-119575.

138 Ráki József kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 8 May 1971, Megadja László vallomása, 1948. ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971, Lehner István kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve. *Ibid.*; For Megadja see also ÁBTL, O-14/761.

tended that Megadja had behaved like an animal. Once Megadja had punched a soldier in the stomach with his machine gun as hard as he could while his face turned “animal like.”¹³⁹ Béla Müller was being tortured by the “Hungarian Gestapo” before he was handed over to the XII District Arrow Cross. He remembered scenes of horror, including people being beaten with a dog whip and machine gun butt in plain sight of others. Women were made to undress so that the Arrow Cross sadists could whip their naked breasts. In the hellish, nightmare-like scene, the torturers screamed at their victims that they would “croak” and cursed their victims’ mothers.¹⁴⁰

Tibor Marczell was arrested along with his daughter. The only conceivable reason he could find for his arrest was that his mother’s maiden name was Schwartz. He was beaten with fists and truncheons, and anyone who entered the place of torture kicked him. Marczell tried to jump out of the window, but was caught. Bokor cut his naked back with a razor blade and applied iodine to it, while trying to find out where the rest of his family was. Together with 170 others, he was marched to the Danube. The killing site was right in front of the Ritz Palace. Marczell had an opportunity to escape, because the Arrow Cross men began shooting their victims at the other end of the row, so he jumped into the river. After emerging from the water, he made his way, naked, to the Swiss embassy. In the meantime, his daughter was subjected to “racial biological” screening and was pronounced Christian.

As it so happened, Marczell was not the only survivor of the incident near the Ritz. After a severe beating for being in possession of stolen Christian papers, Simon Kornitzer was stripped of his clothes and told that he would be taken to the ghetto. By then, he had been forced to watch his mother stripped naked and then to watch three grown men bludgeon her and jump on her stomach. He, too, was beaten. When they reached Chain Bridge, he realized what was coming as the escorts readied their weapons. He loosened the strap that bound him to his companion. One of the gunmen told them to sit down facing the river. The Arrow Cross leader announced their execution. Before the shots were fired, Kornitzer jumped into the dark. Later, he claimed that one of the others had alerted him, meaning that he owed his life to somebody else.¹⁴¹ Clearly, when uncertain as to whether a victim was Jewish or Christian, the Arrow Cross preferred to treat them as Jewish, lest they let anyone off the hook.

139 Halák József kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 13 March 1971. ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971.

140 Medgyes Béla vallomása, 1971. ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971.

141 Marczell Tibor kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve. ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971. Kornitzer Simon vallomása, 1945. Kun András, ÁBTL, V-119575.

Mrs. László Németh was housekeeper in a villa on a tranquil, upscale street on the Buda side of the city. One is still struck by the beauty of the mansion, and few people know that it was once the scene of the most atrocious crimes. It was built by a wealthy industrialist in 1940. Part of the building consisted of private apartments, and the first floor was used by the Italian consulate. The caretaker, Mrs. Németh, was making pasta for her children when 20 or 30 armed men raided the building and broke into the homes. She was terrified. The men threatened to kill her unless she did as they said. She witnessed unspeakable crimes, the “brutal torture of hundreds of prisoners.” Three ditches were dug in the garden of the villa. The Arrow Cross men took the naked and tortured prisoners outside, shot them, and let their bodies fall into the ditches. Others were taken to a nearby park on Királyhágó Square and shot into the pool there. The executions took place during the day. A thin layer of earth was thrown over the bodies. The Arrow Cross made an effort to cover up the traces of their atrocities. Otherwise, the building was littered with the nude bodies of dead women and men.¹⁴²

The Hungarists presented themselves as uncorrupted idealists ready to die for their ideology and for the country. Often the opposite was true. Bertalan Légrády deserted his unit, and his brother-in-law signed him up to serve in the party so that he could avoid service on the front.¹⁴³ Even so, the Arrow Cross hunted relentlessly for people who allegedly had shirked military service. In January, a company of the Hungarian army was quartered on Krisztina Boulevard in Buda. A detachment of Arrow Cross men descended on them. Screaming, they looked for the commander of the treasonous company, who they alleged was hiding in civilian clothes. This was a special labor company. They found Lajos Ákossy, and beat him with truncheons. Then, Father András Kun and József Pokorny shot and killed captain Ákossy while six others executed lance sergeant Juhász Rezső in full view of civilians. Juhász did not die immediately. Kun exhorted his comrades to finish him off and “crush his skull.” Juhász and Ákossy were wearing their uniforms. Witnesses were able to recall the event in detail.¹⁴⁴

Culprits tend to attribute their deeds to orders from above, which they could only defy by risking their own lives or their wellbeing. Although this is not altogether implausible, the following case will show that on occasion people were murdered *despite* orders to the contrary.

142 Németh Lászlóné kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 1971. ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971.

143 Légrády Bertalan tanúkihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971.

144 Oblath Imre vallomása. ÁBTL, V-135335/1, Bernáth József vallomása, 1945. Kun András, ÁBTL, V-119575. The testimonies are in agreement even in the detail of how many pistol shots were fired at Ákossy.



The corpses of Jews lie in the courtyard of the Dohány Street Synagogue, Budapest, 1945. Fortepan/200869



Transporting naked corpses from the Pest ghetto via tram tracks to the Forensic Medical Institute, Budapest, 1945.
Photo by László Karossa. Fortepan/200921

An Arrow Cross man testified that, a few days before Christmas 1944, around 40 prisoners were rounded up in Irányi Street and transferred from an Arrow Cross building in Pest to the XII District. District leader Mihály Vidra, a barber by profession, ordered his men to take them to the ghetto. When the detachment returned, Vidra learned that his men had disobeyed the order and had executed the prisoners.¹⁴⁵ In his 1971 testimony, Vidra claimed that all of the party servicemen participated in the execution, and “one outdid the other in bragging about the bloodshed”.¹⁴⁶ A young Arrow Cross man roughly 20 years of age complained after a killing spree which he had clearly enjoyed, “Bloody Jews, I shot so much at them, and they didn’t want to die.”¹⁴⁷ On another occasion, the murder squad ran out of ammunition and the victims were “beaten to death with slabs of stone.”¹⁴⁸ For these men, killing was not a psychological burden, but a source of pride, from which they derived a sense of accomplishment, pleasure and prestige.

Miklós Tuboly, for instance, reprimanded his superior for not having had sent him to murder for “four days” and blamed him for dispatching his favorites on the killing sprees. The killers often referred to higher orders or decrees in their confessions, but many of them needed no command or coercion to kill. Party members who did not wish to become criminals were sometimes able to stay out. Some, likely those who bought into the messages of the ideology such as Sándor Korodi, the VII District leader, did not assist in atrocities at all. Others, like József Bali, who liked to shave the victims’ pubic hair before raping them and who extracted their teeth for gold, did so out of sadism and greed. This type of person needed no external coercion and seems to have enjoyed committing acts of cruelty. For them, the end, the construction of a “racially pure” Hungarian state, justified the murder of “harmful” elements. Sándor Orosz and eight other comrades liked to “boast” that they would go to the Danube to kill, as “Jews were undesirable elements in the Hungarist state.”

Exacting revenge for losses provided an additional incentive for cruelty. Two prominent Arrow Cross men, Gyula Michalik and Károly Wirth, were killed in two separate incidents. After Michalik’s death, the XII District men massacred almost all the people whom they had been holding in captivity. When Wirth died, the party leaders ordered the further intensification of the torture of

145 Timár József kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 28 April 1971, Máté József tanúvallomása. ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a 3589/1971.

146 Ráki József kihallgatása, 7 May 1971, Vidra Mihály vallomása. ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 1971/3589.

147 Pillis Józsefné, Engler Mária vallomása, 1971. ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971.

148 Piski János vallomása, 1971. ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a 3589/1971.

Jews.¹⁴⁹ Members of the Zugló group headed by László Szelepcsényi proceeded to torture their prisoners, who had just been taken in. Then, they shot them in the head. At night, they tied a sign around the neck of each of the bodies which read “this is for the explosion.” The *nyilas* dumped the ten to 60 cadavers all around Tisza Kálmán Square.¹⁵⁰ On this occasion, revenge was the immediate motive, but the victims were all Jews, even though there was no proof that the attack had been carried out by Jews. The younger Michalik made his peace with the communist regime, so much so that the communist authorities decorated him with the medal for Workers-Peasants Power for his—from their perspective positive—role in the Revolution of 1956.¹⁵¹

WHAT MOTIVATED THEM?

Why were there so many victims when the top leadership of the Arrow Cross did not order or even condone the plunder and carnage? What may have motivated the seemingly irrational, unbridled sadism of their acts? The answer has to do with the motivation of individuals who took part in the atrocities. According to the testimony of the aforementioned Mrs. Tibor Schlefka, one of the Brunner brothers took a handful of jewels from his pocket and told a Jewish woman he was not going to kill her because he had no time, adding “I have just done in the owners of these.”¹⁵²

Andrea Pető has analyzed a raid which was presumably carried out with the participation of German SS and Arrow Cross men, and which was likely instigated, and perhaps even led by, Piroska Dely. The men and the one woman attacked a tenement allocated to Jews and whose inhabitants were presumably wealthy. They took valuables and, in the process, also killed at least eighteen individuals. The attackers did not harm the residents of the homes in which there was plenty of booty to steal. Pető suggests that they murdered the residents of flats who were less wealthy and therefore had less to steal. In other words, they murdered their victims as a kind of punishment because they felt they had been disappointed.¹⁵³

149 Baráth Kálmán vallomása, 3 June 1966.

150 Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok pere*, 154–55. Bükkös testified that 60 people were killed on that occasion. In his confession, he claimed that the number of victims was ten.

151 Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok pere*, 80.

152 Schlefka Tiborné vallomása, 1971. ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a 3589/1971.

153 Pető, *Láthatatlan elkövetők*.

It is sometimes assumed that material gain, which was often regarded as a “redistribution of wealth” (but which was simple robbery), was the main motive behind persecution and murder. This would lend a rational purpose to the violence, but many of the atrocities committed by the aggressors seem consequences simply of an intent to inflict suffering, which went far beyond what was necessary to rob the victims. Some leaders felt that party members were exploiting the party for personal gain. József Máté joined the party at the age of 16, lured by the promise of a National Socialist state and the “total liquidation of all Jews in Hungary.” According to his account, alongside ideological zealots like himself, many people who had not been members of the movement earlier had signed up for material gain. They had wanted to show that they could be trusted, so they “committed worse atrocities than old party members.” Some made a fortune and quit after only a few days.

István Csávás entered the movement in 1938, “not out of conviction” (at least according to his account), but to provide for himself. He demanded a bribe from a woman to take her husband to the ghetto.¹⁵⁴ Vilmos Kröszl “selected” all kinds of clothing, including silk underwear which Arrow Cross men had taken from Jews, as Christmas presents for his girlfriend. Someone had even remarked on what “a beautiful Christmas they were having, the Missus got beautiful presents from Vilmos.”¹⁵⁵ One of his men János Erős, recounted that his brother, who had been a member of the VIII District Arrow Cross, had collected loads of Jewish items.

Not that Erős had any objection to looting. He had taken fur coats, rings, watches, jewels, and even shoes. His wife took a great deal of the plundered belongings on the so-called Arrow Cross train to Germany. Other items were lost after the war or Erős sold them. Decades after the war, Erős’ wife had worn rings that had been stolen, and his granddaughter owned a stolen watch.¹⁵⁶

Jews were not the only people who suffered blatant and often petty theft. A man named Müller stole literally everything that could be moved from the Salesian Institute, even the director’s pocket watch, alarm clock, and night clothes not to mention the institution’s cash.¹⁵⁷ Pál Glück was a landowner from in Transylvania, who was arrested because he was caught with an ID from the Communist Party of Romania and a flyer ridiculing Szálasi. Paradoxically, the building superintendent saved him by disclosing to the Arrow Cross that

154 Tanúkihallgatási jegyzőkönyv, Csávás István, September 1947. Bokor és társai, ÁBTL, V-135335.

155 László Jenő fogdaügynöki jelentése, 11 March 1966. ÁBTL, V-153693/1.

156 Molnár Sándor fogdaügynöki jelentése, 21 June 1966, op. cit.

157 Lengyel, ed., *Óbudai múltidéző*, 26.

Glück possessed valuable jewels and 10 million pengős in cash. Even so, one of the Megadja brothers wanted to execute him, but an Arrow Cross man named Budaházy let him go.¹⁵⁸

István Kémenczy and his Arrow Cross mother returned home “covered in blood, with luggage filled with jewelry every night.”¹⁵⁹ A member of the XIV District murder squad named Hollós claimed that “we have hit the jackpot. We brought in a chap from downtown. He had 40,000 pengős in his luggage.”¹⁶⁰ One of the orchestrators of the killings was a German man named Kurt Rettmann who spoke broken Hungarian. Rettman was the intermediary for the main district to the district party organizations and militias. He ordered that Jews in hiding be rounded up and that their money be confiscated. The people captured “had to be made to disappear.” The idea, as aforementioned Arrow Cross man Kálmán Baráth put it, was to kill the wealthy Jews as quickly as possible so as to cover up where all that jewelry had come from.

The motive of material gain was the main emphasis in the sentence handed down by the People’s Tribunal to a dozen or so defendants in 1948, the year in which the Iron Curtain fell.¹⁶¹ Communist ideology emphasized the primacy of the “material base” over ideas and beliefs, the latter being a function of the former. In the Court’s view, “The mainspring of their more serious wicked deeds was robbery, and the preponderant part of the heavy beatings were intended to reveal the places where the valuables were hidden.” This interpretation tended to diminish the weight of National Socialist crimes by implying that the victims had been wealthy people who had hidden their belongings, i.e. had they not done so, they might not have been tortured. This was a subtle distortion of history, which helped the regime craft a narrative based on the notion of class conflict in which the victims, in the end, had been rich capitalists. The verdict further simplified and distorted the picture by claiming that the perpetrators had been “the Hungarian executioners and servants of raging Hitlerism. The motivation behind the more serious evils was robbery and the graver part of the atrocities was carried out in order to reveal where the valuables were hidden.” The identity of the victims became blurred and anonymous under the all-embracing title “victims of Nazism.” The victims would remain unnamed and unidentified for many decades to come.

158 Glück Pál vallomása, ÁBTL, Budai gyilkosok, 1967. O-14/761.

159 Stern Mátyásné vallomása, 11 January 1946. Bokor Sándor és társai, ÁBTL, V-135335, volume 2.

160 Kröszl Vilmos kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 7 March 1965. Kröszl Vilmos és társai, ÁBTL, V-153.693/1.

161 Brunner Oszkár, ÁBTL, XXV 4/a, 3589/1971. Verdict by the People’s Tribunal.

In 1971, the verdict pronounced on the remaining XII District killers mentioned killers “who did not deserve to be recognized as humans,” rather than “Hungarian servants of Hitlerism,” but the identity of the “defenseless victims” nonetheless remained unmentioned.¹⁶² The main goal, the court argued, was to “round up deserters, people because of their left-wing conviction,” and their “war [sic] and religious affiliation.”¹⁶³ The main motive of their crimes, thus, was acknowledged as having been of an ideological, and not a material, nature. The sheer brutality of their behavior, and the ways in which they humiliated their victims, cast doubt on the claim that personal enrichment had been the primary motive.

An interpretation which rests on economic motives fails to explain why Jews, including children and individuals who were not wealthy, were the main targets of the Arrow Cross.¹⁶⁴ The people who committed these crimes readily admitted that they had been motivated by racial hatred. Many years after the events, József Hollai put it succinctly: “I was present almost everywhere. I saw and did things, but not for the money, not out of a desire to get rich, but out of conviction.” “There was a war, Jews were the enemy and the enemy is always destroyed.” “I am only sorry that we did not start earlier the liquidation of the Galicianers (a term used to refer to Jews) sooner, then there would be even less of them, but their turn will come [again].” Hollai saw himself as a martyr who was glad to give his life for the cause, but others, he hoped, would take revenge.¹⁶⁵

Vilmos Kröszl showed up at the XIV District party building shortly after October 15, the day of Szálasi’s rise to power. He had been recruited by district leader László Szelepcsényi. His motivation was not financial: his automobile repair shop was profitable. Kröszl bragged that he had enough money and “could pick and choose women.” Rather, Kröszl wanted Szelepcsényi to exempt him from military service. Szelepcsényi told him that this would be possible if he enrolled for party service. As a newcomer, he had to prove to his comrades that he was a reliable and “active” comrade.

A leader of the XIV District (Zuglói) party organization told investigators in 1966 that “the main task was the Jewish question.” National Socialists justified their war against Jews, in security terms, as *preemption*. A police secretary from

162 Bírósági indoklás, 1971. ÁBTL XXV/4, 3589/1971.

163 Brunner Oszkár és társai, ítélet, 1971. ÁBTL, O-14/761.

164 The historian of the Zuglói trial, Áron Máthé, argues that Jews were *initially* the main targets of terror. Máthé, *A zuglói nyilások pere*, 206.

165 Gyáli fogdaügynöki jelentése, 12 July 1966. ÁBTL, V-153693/4. Gyáli fogdaügynöki jelentése, 21 July 1966, *ibid.* Gyáli fogdaügynöki jelentése, 26 July 1966. *Ibid.* Gyáli fogdaügynöki jelentése, 1 August 1966, *ibid.*

Vienna explained to his wife that he was “aiming calmly at the many women and children and infants, with whom these hordes [the Jews] would do the same, if not ten times worse... Let’s get rid of this scum that tossed Europe into war and is still agitating in America... I am actually looking forward to returning home, then it will be the turn for our own Jews.”¹⁶⁶

Similarly, Vilmos Kröszi saw the struggle against Jews as a matter of life and death: “If we had not killed the Jews,” he claimed, “they would have killed us.” He expressed his belief in racial hierarchy. He considered himself Germanic, a race which in his eyes stood above the other races of Europe, such as Slavs. Jews, he believed could not even be described as human. They were more like dogs who “creeped and crawled” in all circumstances and groveled to get what they wanted. He did not support all the methods used by the Arrow Cross, though, or so he claimed. “I could not understand,” he noted “how people could kill two-year-old to six-year-old infants. It was one thing to murder adults, other people killed adults too, but children?”¹⁶⁷ In fact, some Arrow Cross groups specifically targeted Jewish children. Their Jewishness was established by “biological screening.” As discussed earlier in this chapter, Jewish girls were identified through facial profiling, i.e. by the alleged shapes of their noses, boys by whether they were circumcised.

The elimination of Jews was presented as self-preservation, a necessary measure of survival in a racial war. In the vast expanses of the east, female educators instilled the notion in local ethnic Germans that the Jews had set out to destroy the German people and the war was being waged against them.¹⁶⁸ Dénes Bokor asserted that he had committed his deeds “as a convinced Arrow Cross, material matters never interested me, I internalized Arrow Cross ideology, which I espouse to this day.”¹⁶⁹

An Arrow Cross man “by conviction” named Jenő Hernádi thought the persecution of Jews was “inhuman,” but “over the course of centuries, Jews have won for themselves the hatred of other peoples... Orthodox Jews are only exploiters of humanity.”¹⁷⁰ “I have no guilty conscience for what I have done,” he

166 Browning, *Final Solution*, 298.

167 Kröszi Vilmos és társai, V-153693/1., László Jenő fogdaügnöi jelentése, 24 March 1966. Ibid. László Jenő fogdaügnöki vallomása, 21 April 1966. Ibid. László Jenő fogdaügnöki jelentése, 4 May 1966. Ibid. László Jenő fogdaügnöki jelentése, 19 May 1966, *ibid.*

168 Lower, *Hitler’s Furies*, 113.

169 Bokor Dénes vallomása, 2 April 1945. Bokor Dénes és társai, ÁBTL, V-135335.

170 Fogdaügnöki jelentés, Hernádi Jenő ÁBTL, V-154693/7; Fogdaügnöki jelentés, Pataki Ferenc, *ibid.*

said, “we should have finished off the Jewry then.”¹⁷¹ On at least one occasion, there was a direct link between anti-Semitic incitement and murder. On the inauguration of the party building in the neighborhood known as Zugló, state secretary Dr. Béla Kerekes implored his violent audience “to throw them (the Jews) into annihilation.” The men, who after the ceremonial speech consumed copious quantities of alcohol, needed little encouragement. They took eleven recently apprehended people to Rákos Creek, where they shot them in the back of the head at close range. Only one man survived.¹⁷²

Even though gentiles would sometimes be rounded up along with Jews, unless they were accused of helping Jews they would be released, albeit after having endured physical punishment. József Dorozsmai Derkovits liked to spend time at his older brother’s place in Madách Square, where a Jewish man named Sándor Waldmann was being hidden. When Derkovits was visiting, some Arrow Cross men showed up and nabbed Waldmann. Other inhabitants of the building were also dragged from their apartments or from the cellar. Derkovits recounted that the non-Jews were released. Waldmann, on the other hand, was murdered.¹⁷³

The case of Matild Dikman suggests that people were targeted *primarily* because of their perceived racial origin. When she and her sister were abducted and taken to the infamous headquarters of the XII District Arrow Cross, they were able to produce first-rate false documents “proving” their Christian origin. The Arrow Cross, unable to confirm that they were Jews, released them.¹⁷⁴ Rózsa Schuler was taken from her refuge at a housekeeper’s home as a Jew, but was set free when her captors established that her papers were “genuine.”

Even communists, then the chief political targets of the radical right, may have had a better chance of survival than Jews, as the following example will illustrate. A man named József Ács was denounced as a communist. Since several witnesses testified that this was true, he, his wife, and his nine-year-old daughter were taken to Andrassy Avenue 47, where he was beaten. An Arrow Cross man named Szabó came to his defense, arguing that it was doubtful that Ács was in fact a communist, and that he was a gentile. Szabó’s intervention was successful and Ács was sent to the front.¹⁷⁵

171 Fogdaügynöki jelentés, Pataki Ferenc, 1966. ÁBTL, V-153693/7.

172 Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok pere*, 148.

173 Dorozsmai Derkovits József vallomása, 1971, Brunner Oszkár, ÁBTL, O-14/761.

174 Havas Jenőné Dikman Matild tanuvallomása, 1971, Brunner Oszkár, ÁBTL, O-14/761.

175 Feljelentés, Ács József, 1945. Ibid.

Even one of the cruelest Arrow Cross men of all, the aforementioned Priest András Kun, spared a woman who described herself as Christian from execution. Mrs. Jenő Stern was slated for execution together with the other patients of the Maros Street hospital. She told an Arrow Cross man that she was a gentile when Father Kun had happened to be passing by. Kun overheard her and told the gunman “you may not kill her because she is Christian.” With that, Stern was let go.¹⁷⁶ The Arrow Cross would beat, rob, and even torture non-Jews, but they would sometimes release them if they found proof of gentile descent. A gentile wife helped save József Bayer, who was released after several days in captivity with the help of a party serviceman named Vilmos Szloboda. Bayer’s story reveals the chaotic conditions: He was the housekeeper in the Zugló Arrow Cross building until the Arrow Cross discovered, to their horror, that he was Jewish. Jews were not invariably killed either.¹⁷⁷

Jews were killed even if they had relatives in the party service. The stepbrother and stepmother of an Arrow Cross district leader named Nagyiványi were beaten by his own comrades. When Nagyiványi asked about their crime he was told that they were “pimps who did not deserve air.” The crime was that they were Jewish.¹⁷⁸ The perpetrators treated their victims like waste. They inflicted the sadistic atrocities on people they did not regard as humans. A group leader named Elek Nagy “bragged loudly about killing the prisoners by Rákóc Creek.” The leader of the XIII District demanded to know why the Arrow Cross authorities from the XIV District were taking their prisoners for execution to his territory. “Look what you have done again tonight. You hoard your cadavers to the garbage pit. Get rid of your own cadavers... if you come to our territory, we will open fire on you.”¹⁷⁹

Baráth explained that their goal had been “to kill as many enemies as possible before the Soviets arrived.”¹⁸⁰ The power of propaganda to incite hate against a specific group of people overcame positive personal experiences. László Mészáros told his cellmate, a clandestine prison informer, that he was guilty of fourteen murders: “I had no reason to hate Jews,” Mészáros explained, “they never hurt me, in fact they supported my parents.”¹⁸¹ Hatred was a key factor

176 Kun András, 1945. ÁBTL, V-11975.

177 Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok pere*, 138–40.

178 Lévai és társai, Kibuska Ferenc vallomása, ÁBTL V-121588/b.

179 Kröszl Vilmos kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 7 March 1965. Kröszl Vilmos és társai, 7 March 1965. ÁBTL, V-153693/1.

180 Baráth Kálmán vallomása, 3 June 1966. ÁBTL, V-153693/4.

181 Fogdaügynöki jelentés, Mészáros László, 12 May 1966. ÁBTL, V-153693/6.

in the unforgiving nature of persecution and the low rate at which capture could be survived.

Pál Vönház provided a straightforward and seemingly sincere account of his wartime activities. He described in his testimony how he and his comrades drank so much alcohol that they were incapable of judging the consequences of their actions. This and the “shared *hatred* the party service had for the persecuted [Jews] motivated us to regard... the captives as our common enemy and to treat them accordingly.”¹⁸² Some men expressed a desire to commit murders. Miklós Tuboly, convicted for his role in the atrocities, was heard reprimanding district de-Jewification leader Bokor for having shown favoritism and having failed to appoint him to take part in “swimming,” which meant shooting Jews and other victims on the banks of the Danube so that their bodies fell into the river. Killing came to be regarded as a privilege, at least by some.¹⁸³ It is clear from the context that the word “swimming” was not used as a euphemism to disguise the act of killing. Rather, it was used in a mocking way to capture the insignificance of the people who were sent to their deaths.

Mrs. Vince Láng and her sisters spent time in the XII District Arrow Cross building because their father worked for the party’s economic department. She confirmed that the Arrow Cross sometimes did not conceal the executions even from their own children, who were in the building. “Many times, they said almost in a bragging manner that ‘we took the filthy Jews swimming.’ In me, as I was a 16-year-old girl, Arrow Cross service left a life-long scar and lives in my memory to this day.” She remembered that every party serviceman participated in the murders. “One tried to trump the other by boasting about their atrocities.” Some of the men, including Tuboly, one of the Megadja brothers, and Brunner, allegedly bragged about the number of prisoners they had killed.¹⁸⁴

Some defendants blamed their crimes on the “times” in which they lived, as if there existed an autonomous category of “times” independent of the people that acted in them. This impalpable, external condition (the alleged spirit of the age) was also cited as an explanatory factor by Zoltán Eőry, a participant in the murder of children under the protection of the Salesian order. Eőry claimed that this “spirit,” along with fear and material needs, had been one of the reasons why he had joined the radical movement.¹⁸⁵ Eőry discussed the murder of

182 Vönház Pál kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971. [Emphasis by the author.]

183 ítélet, 1948. Bokor Sándor és társai, ÁBTL, V-135335.

184 Kreutz Ferenc, Láng Vincéné vallomása, ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971.

185 Lévai Rudolf és társai, ÁBTL, V121588-/a.

the Jewish children in remorseless language, which suggested that the victims were little more than lifeless objects.¹⁸⁶

Tivadar Brunner explained his motives at great length during the investigation into his role, an investigation which took place fifteen years after the events. His testimony was given as part of an effort to minimize his sentence. He claimed to have fallen under the spell of the all-pervasive “poisonous conditions” created by Arrow Cross propaganda, and alleged that he had felt deep regret and contrition for his crimes: “I tried to rectify the sins I have committed somewhat,” he told the investigator, with “the work I have done [under communism].” He blamed the spirit of the age for his actions, a clever defense in a communist state where the official ideology portrayed individuals as innocent victims of the “fascist” ruling class.

Tivadar Brunner nevertheless “took responsibility” for “serving brutality, which... resulted in the terrible demise of many innocent people.” In a self-confession penned at the request of the authorities, Brunner further elaborated on what had brought him to commit his heinous crimes. He claimed to have been unaware of the criminal acts involving the Arrow Cross prior to joining them, which, given the fact that he had not been previously involved in radical activities, was a plausible statement. “By the time I realized, I was so deeply engulfed [in the atrocities] that I could not free myself from them, even though I wanted to.” Brunner also asserted that the more senior Arrow Cross had tended “to push the younger forward to do the dirty work, the executions.”

What was, in the end, the milieu in which the atrocities were perpetrated? The role of extraneous forces and the lack of agency was cited by József Hollós, who blamed the general environment of barbarity generated by the fighting, the breakdown of morality, and the come-what-may attitude prevailing among his comrades for the atrocities they committed.

The Jewish laws, the terrorist deeds committed under the Arrow Cross reign, the strict decrees relating to deserters, the siege, the constant bombing, explosions and artillery, the contempt for human life... They talked about the German wonder weapon, the Germans army that could relieve us at any time, but we acted as if we knew that we were living our final days. I was unable to distinguish good from bad, and I had no courage to break with them. I drifted with them into sin and committed crimes.

¹⁸⁶ Male and female Nazi killers and their local associates in Poland and Ukraine were widely known to have murdered children despite the fact that they had children of their own. See Lower, *Hitler's Furies* and Bartov, *Anatomy of a Genocide*.

Paradoxically, at least according to these narratives, impending defeat fueled the lust to kill. Everyone wanted to prove their fealty to the nation and to the movement, while at the same time, Hollós added, people also indulged their individual proclivities. After an orgy that took place on Christmas Eve, district leader Szelepcsényi ordered each Arrow Cross man to kill one individual as proof of his devotion to the party.

Joining the party gave Kálmán Baráth and men like him a sense of mission and belonging. “We believed what the Arrow Cross brothers told us regarding the Jews as our enemies,” otherwise “we would not have been brothers in front of our brothers.”¹⁸⁷ Killing had become a banal act. Antal Szőke, a watchmaker, was persuaded to join the Arrow Cross movement by a friend. His testimony revealed the Arrow Cross’s intention of eradicating Jews and their cultural heritage in Hungary. Szőke admitted to having witnessed and committed “horrible crimes.” “We were ordered to take three men to the synagogue and kill them. I was told to destroy the books we found there,” he recalled. Kálmán Baráth also recounted this episode. “We pushed two men into the room, but the third, who was in good shape, resisted. It took several men to subdue him, and eventually they managed to push him into the room. All three were mowed down. Szőke tore the books up.”

Szőke monotonously listed the incidences of violence in which he had taken part. When a deaf and dumb boy named Leó saw the armed detail, he had started to run. He did not hear the Arrow Cross command to stop and continued running. They gunned him down. One man egged the other on to shoot, almost jokingly. Three militiamen were beating two Jews on Thököly Avenue when one of them cried out, “don’t just fool around brother Vigh, shoot.”¹⁸⁸ Before one act of murder in which he participated, Hollai was given a gun with the words “it is time for you do something,” or “don’t just stare, shoot.”¹⁸⁹ Szőke had not been a party veteran. He signed up for service at the end of October. In 1966, he expressed regret for having gotten embroiled in the events, which he called a serious mistake. In his own estimation, his difficult childhood and his parents’ divorce were partly to blame. Propaganda led him to think he could help win the war and establish the Hungarist state.

In some cases defendants claimed to have experienced psychological anguish as a consequence of the acts they committed, and cast themselves as survivors of the events. László Kálmán admitted to killing 20 people “who never hurt

187 Baráth Kálmán önvallomása, ÁBTL, V-135693/4.

188 Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok pere*, 153.

189 Kihallgatás, Hollai József, 16 March 1966. ÁBTL, Kröszl Vilmos és társai, V-135693/4.

him.” “I saw and heard those miserable people, women who were, in their terror, wailing and begging for their lives. I was suffocated by crying and I started to tremble.” After the murders had been committed, “I could no longer restrain myself. I was shivering and started crying... I went home. I cried all night.”¹⁹⁰ Coercion was also a factor. His Arrow Cross peers had threatened Kálmán with execution if he failed to report for “duty.” When he showed up at party headquarters, the district leader screamed that he would be “stood against the wall and would get in no time since there was a war on... The only way for me was to continue to serve the party.”

Kálmán eventually hid in the cellar of the telephone factory to evade his comrades. The sincerity of his self-confession is somewhat diminished by the statement made by his former wife, who claimed that Kálmán had loved her, but he had loved his Arrow Cross friends even more. However, he expressed remorse for beating and killing people. “I tried to break with the past and lived for my family... I took part in socialist construction and raised my children in the socialist spirit.” Long after the events, Vilmos Kröszl claimed in a conversation with a clandestine prison informer that, had he not carried out the commands given by the representatives of the government at the time, they would have gotten him.¹⁹¹

Terror within the party service may have been a factor that contributed to people’s willingness to commit atrocities. However, several witnesses contended that Kröszl had terrorized fellow party members.¹⁹² A man named Menyhért Szabó, who escorted men in the labor service battalion, claimed that he had done so only because “I was not able to extricate myself from my position without exposing my health or my life to danger.”¹⁹³ Not many people used this defense. It is plausible, although impossible to corroborate, that fear of reprisals from men higher up in the hierarchy was a factor in some of the crimes. János Erős was in his mid-40s when his party finally came to power; he made no secret of the fact that taking the lives of others was, in his view, the natural business of the National Socialists.

Membership in the National Socialist movement was a family affair. Both of János’s brothers were party activists. János joined in 1942 at the behest of

190 Kálmán László önvallomása, 17 June 1966. ÁBTL, V-153693/6.

191 László Jenő fogdaügynöki jelentése, 19 March 1966. ÁBTL, V-153693/1.

192 Máthé, *A zuglóói nyilasok pere*, 208–209. Testimonies of József Kovács and József Krauth. When József Krauth took his time lining up behind a victim to shoot, Alajos Sándor berated him: “Are you sorry for him? You can stand among them, you look like a kike anyway.”

193 Borszéki és társai, ÁBTL, V-121588/b.

a friend. He confessed to the police of having been part of the murder of 45 to 50 people so as “to ease his conscience.” He escorted fifteen people separated on gender lines. They reached Rákos Creek, where he had told the captives to lay down. He had shot a man in the back of the head at close range “so that he did not suffer.” “A terrible feeling overcame me. My wife saw that I was disturbed. I did not tell her I had committed my first execution.” He felt that his “whole life was broken,” and that he had no desire to return to the party building, but fellow Arrow Cross man, Vilmos Szloboda allegedly had threatened to kill him.

District leaders Szloboda and Szelepcsényi ordered the killing of individuals in their custody in the Jewish house of prayer nearby in small groups so as to avoid being seen. The captives were killed one by one. Erős claimed that, on this occasion, he had taken part in the killing of eighteen or nineteen people, although in the privacy of his cell, he spoke of even more, 25 to 30. There was a war on, Erős argued, and “the enemy had to be met with arms.” Erős candidly admitted that they were not forced to kill. “As an Arrow Cross party serviceman, I thought that this [murder] was natural and correct. The truth is I did not want to be outstripped by my colleagues.”¹⁹⁴ Yet his testimony suggests that escorting prisoners to execution sites may not always have been voluntary. On November 1, when twelve people had been escorted to be shot, the leaders of the district, Vígh, Tallós, and Hollós, had threatened to “shoot us to pieces if we did not obey.”¹⁹⁵

Violence was a source of amusement in the midst of death and carnage. An Arrow Cross boxer selected a prisoner for a bout and struck him with devastating blows. Then, the Arrow Cross men forced the prisoners to fight one another.¹⁹⁶ Erős recounted a celebration that was held in the party building on Christmas Eve and which ended in a bloody massacre. The event began peacefully enough, with party men and their female companions enjoying a hearty Christmas meal and drinking copious amounts of alcohol. As the evening wore on, the women left, but the inebriated men stayed behind. Three women were brought from the cellar and forced to dance. According to testimony by those present, the women were given wine and Szelepcsényi began hitting their breasts with a stick. As events rapidly spiraled out of control, Vilmos Szloboda and two others raped the women. The two girls and nine others were then put on a truck, taken to the city park, and shot in the back of the head by several

194 Molnár Sándor fogdaügynöki jelentése, 11 May 1966. ÁBTL, V-153693/1.

195 Erős János kihallgatása, 5 April 1966, 11 May 1966, 12 June 1966. ÁBTL, V-153693/3.

196 Bükkös György önvallomása, Krószl Vilmos és társai, volume 2. ÁBTL, V-153693/2.

party militiamen. Erős, who had been present at the events, made the following claim: “I had a very bad feeling after the execution. I was a religious man, and it had a profound effect on me that such inhumanity was being committed on this holy night and that I had gotten embroiled in this terrible situation.”

Erős also recounted how a little boy of six or seven had screamed, “don’t just shoot my mother and father, shoot me too!” A man and a woman were already lying on the ground, dead. The boy had been crying and tugging at his mother’s dress. Szloboda had shouted at Erős to kill the child. Erős allegedly had replied that he did not have a gun. “In that case,” Szloboda had said, “strangle him.” Erős had done so, but it had taken him two minutes to overcome the boy. Erős claimed that he had then been overwhelmed by a terrible feeling and had run upstairs. Baráth, Hollós, and Szloboda laughed. Erős explained that the children had been killed for a practical reason: if they were scared, they would “tell everything more honestly than their parents.”¹⁹⁷ Murdering the offspring of the enemy may also have symbolized the final extermination of the enemy race. If Erős was sincere, he remained an unrepentant National Socialist. He took part in “spiritualist” sessions, where the people present conjured the spirit of Ferenc Szálasi, who exhorted Erős to persevere because his tribulations would not last long.¹⁹⁸

Jews were the main, but not the sole, targets of the homicidal rampages. Gentiles were also arrested and, on occasion, even murdered for having helped Jews, because they were misidentified as Jews, or because they were leftwingers, deserters or members of the upper classes, or simply because they were people to be robbed. Five individuals who, according to the testimony given by Bükös, “did not look Jewish” were arrested in the Homeros movie theater. Bükös had assumed they “must have money and gold.” Along the way, several other people were pulled into the line as the people who had been apprehended were taken to be shot.¹⁹⁹ Enemies of the movement were also not shown mercy. A group of anti-fascist resistance fighters was caught by the XII District squad. Bokor forced a group up prisoners whose hands had been tied up to kneel on the ground and chant “we are bidding farewell to the motherland because we have no right to be there.”

Intraparty rivalries in this milieu of violence were also cause for brutality and murder. István Kéménczy got into an argument with three other members

197 Molnár Sándor fogdaügynöki jelentése, 9 May 1966. ÁBTL, V-153693/1. See also Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok pere*, 132. According to Máthé, both Erős and Lajos Németh strangled a child each.

198 Molnár Sándor fogdaügynöki jelentése, 1 June 1966. ÁBTL, V-153693/3.

199 Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok pere*, 207.

of the party, a man named Rehák and two men known as the Terray brothers, all members of the party, who tried to persuade him to surrender the district to the Soviets. According to one account, he got them drunk and then shot them and took their belongings. The corpses were put on public display for seven days. The party would not allow them to be buried because the victims had been declared traitors.²⁰⁰

Even relatively minor infractions or acts could get one killed, even if one was a gentile. A man named Ács witnessed a Hungarian soldier being shot dead for telling Arrow Cross men that “you won’t be such big men for long.”²⁰¹ Violence was used to mobilize for war. When a general mobilization order was issued in late 1944, one of the Arrow Cross groups decided to massacre their prisoners so as to “raise our fighting spirit.”²⁰² The 30 most “reliable, most belligerent” men were not drafted. Instead, they were left to continue committing acts of violence, including murder, against civilians.

Anti-Semitism was sometimes fused with class resentment. Katalin Fehérhegyi’s grandparents and uncles had been part of the working-class movement, her father a house painter her mother a cleaning woman. The father, a brutish alcoholic who had abused his wife, joined the Arrow Cross out of conviction and financial need. He had been a “nobody,” but among the Arrow Cross, he “became somebody.” Her mother had joined the party the same year, in 1938. Their parents took Katalin and her brother to the party headquarters, where they took part in tea afternoons, and Katalin was able to practice her typing skills. At last the father had a permanent job, and the mother found employment in the kitchen. After the war, the younger brother became a printer and joined the Hungarian Workers Party. Social mobility and the desire to earn social prestige motivated the family.²⁰³

Rózi Bognár testified that, after the Germans occupied Hungary in 1944, she felt “hatred of the Jews” awaken in her. As a poor girl who had dropped out of elementary school, she felt that both she and her mother were treated with disdain. Her mother reacted very differently. Bognár’s mother brought food for the Jews in the building in which they lived, for which her daughter reprimanded

200 Csiszár Gábor vallomása, 8 January 1945. Bokor Sándor és társai, ÁBTL, V-135335/2; Nagy László vallomása, *ibid.*

201 Feljelentés, Ács József, 1945. ÁBTL, Bokor Sándor és társai, ÁBTL, V-14335/2.

202 Bükkös György kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 2 June 1966. Kröszl Vilmos és társai, volume 2, *op. cit.*; Bükkös György kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 3 June 1966, *ibid.* Nyomozási jegyzőkönyv, 9 June 1946. *Ibid.*

203 Vádirat, Fehérhegyi Katalin, ÁBTL V-106591, környezettanulmány, Fehérhegyi Katalin, *ibid.* Önletrajz, Fehérhegyi Katalin, *ibid.*

her. When her mother asked Bognár to bring some bread for one of the Jewish inhabitants, the girl screamed, "Jews should die of starvation."

The German invasion had an empowering effect on Rózsi. From then on, she wore a "V" sign on her clothes and gave the Jews a good dressing down. Perhaps resentment for real or imagined slights was the chief motivating factor for her acts. She claimed to have rendered services to Jews who had not been good to her. She lived in a yellow star house, which afforded ample opportunity to show her hatred towards her enemies. Rózsi's boyfriend loved the Germans, and he persuaded her to enter the Waffen SS. Then, they both joined the Arrow Cross so that they would not have to fight in the SS. She enjoyed her newfound power, and beat two Jewish women. Together with three others, Sándor Grósz, Sándor Berta, and Lajos Piroška, Rózsi killed eight or nine Jews. Reflecting crude anti-Semitic (and anti-capitalist) propaganda, they put cigars into the corpses' mouths and sat them up in a shop window. One of them, József Flack, boasted that he had beaten three people to death with a hammer. Rózsi identified Jews with capitalism. It was not unusual for the perpetrators of the atrocities of 1944 to assert that they had joined the party militia because of their hatred of capitalism. György Bükkös claimed the party propagated the fight against "large capital and capitalism, so I thought my place was there."²⁰⁴

The Arrow Cross rampage had an undertone of revenge and rebellion against the old regime and its representatives. A lawyer named Dr. Morelli and his son were beaten "beyond recognition" for hiding Jewish valuables. Their crime in the eyes of the Arrow Cross was augmented by their high social standing. They were released only upon the intervention of a member of parliament and a member of the Arrow Cross. Dr. Imre Marosvölgyi was a member of a police detachment responsible for protecting the Budapest police captain. When the detachment ran into a squadron of well-armed Arrow Cross men, the Arrow Cross force disarmed them. From there, they were escorted to the Arrow Cross building on Németsvölgyi Avenue, Buda. On their way, the group was forced to stop at a park in Királyhágó Square and observe the execution of roughly fifteen scantily dressed men and women. As Marosvölgyi observed, the desired psychological effect was intimidation. József Ráki, who had been one of their escorts, had drawn a pistol and summarily shot the victims in the back of the head at close range. After they had arrived at their destination, the policemen, who were still in a state of shock, were taken to the "reprisal room." The building was littered with naked corpses. Ráki punched Marosvölgyi and another po-

204 Bükkös is cited in Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok pere*, 90.

liceman, and they were all lined up against the wall. Anyone who budged was struck with the butt of a rifle.

Marosvölgyi was taken to district leader Bokor, who was dressed in the uniform of a Hungarian army major. “You see, you pimp Marosvölgyi,” Bokor allegedly said to him, “you didn’t think you would see your baker’s apprentice in a major’s uniform, did you?” Ráki then punched Marosvölgyi in the face and tore the insignia off his clothing: “You scoundrel,” he said, “you are unworthy of this rank and you’ll get what you deserve. Where is the truncheon you hit us with?” Then they started to hit, kick and beat Marosvölgyi with rifles. While he was being beaten, a naked woman tied to a table was being tortured.²⁰⁵

WHO WERE THEY?

Virulent anti-Semitism, National Socialist ideology, anti-capitalism, resentment of the old regime, peer pressure, the sense of solidarity, ambition, social mobility, looting, material gain, the desire to shirk military service, and a mixture of some or all of these were used as explanations for joining the ranks of the Arrow Cross armed party service. Survivors and sometimes even former comrades tended to remember their tormentors and colleagues as larger-than-life monsters. A man named Dora, for instance, was remembered as “a terrifying figure.” The perpetrators wanted to be seen as such. The individual who abducted the inhabitants of 15 Tavaszi Street declared, “I am the dealer of death.”²⁰⁶

Siblings took their brothers and sisters, fathers their sons, and sometimes even their wives and daughters into the ranks of the party. György Gaál took his 14-year-old son to become a killer. One person, János Illés, claimed that he did not enter the party of his own accord. Rather, he was put under pressure by the leadership at his workplace, the ship factory. He even helped the authorities apprehend one of the district leaders, János Traum. Illés was one of the few who accepted some responsibility for what he had done. “I feel partly guilty because I was a member of a party that threatened the freedom of the people.”²⁰⁷

Historians Ildikó Barna and Andrea Pető found that 18 percent of trials dealing with crimes committed during the war involved women. Most women tried for war crimes belonged to the 30- to 49-year-old cohort. Most of them did not

205 Dr. Marosvölgyi Imre kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 13 May 1971. ÁBTL, XXV 4/a 3589/1971.

206 Borszéki és társai, ÁBTL, V-121588/b.

207 Borszéki, ÁBTL, V-121588/b.

join the party because they were hot-headed or pressured to do so by family members. Neither did most of them come from the lower classes. Instead, they belonged to the middle class. Barna and Pető found that most men and women who robbed and murdered were well integrated into society. Women born in small towns were overrepresented. When they moved to the capital city, they were torn out of their accustomed social environments and networks, and this may have eased their way among the sympathizers of radical movements. Men and women tried for Arrow Cross crimes were more highly educated than the national average, meaning that it was not the most poorly educated who were anti-Semitic.²⁰⁸

The reign of the Arrow Cross was not the rule of the riffraff. Only a minority of the women tried for acts committed in wartime were members of a party or organizations such as the Arrow Cross or Volksbund, while a little over half of the men were members of one of the radical right-wing parties or organizations. More women than men were partially or fully acquitted of the misdeeds of which they were accused. This, interestingly enough, may not have been because their crimes were smaller.²⁰⁹

Little is known about the previous lives of the hundreds of men and sometimes women who terrorized the people around them in 1944. What little we do know suggests that they were undistinguished in any sense of the word, usually of working-class, petit bourgeois, or poor farming stock. A typical member of the XIII District group named Hentes-Vigh was a hairdresser with five years of elementary school. His comrade, András Mulató, had even less schooling and worked as an agricultural laborer. Some of them had been exposed to the Hungarian variety of National Socialist ideology.

Among the many motives behind the cruel acts committed in the dark months of 1944 were fanatical, almost messianic beliefs. In 1942, Bálint Tóth, who held the distinguished post of district leader in the Arrow Cross party, was a fanatical supporter of Hitler's Germany and Szálasi. Even many years after the war, he claimed that his suffering would not be in vain because his "Hungarist brothers would avenge him."²¹⁰ Hugó Bottlik's sense of justice was offended because there were only two gentile employees at the firm where he was employed as an office worker. In his own words, "I felt it on my own skin that Jewish em-

208 The perpetrators in the cases I reviewed were poorly educated at the time they committed their crimes.

209 Ildikó Barna and Andrea Pető, *Political Justice in Budapest after World War II* (Budapest - New York: CEU Press, 2015).

210 Tóth Bálint, NOT ítélet; Németh fedőnevű ügynök jelentése, 8 April 1960. Ibid. The police agent who sent the report was a former Arrow Cross member.

ployees closed all avenues to gentiles who wanted to make it in commerce. This mentality set my latent anti-Semitism on fire.”²¹¹

A woman, who was hiding with a false ID got into a situation in which she was forced to drink with Arrow Cross men. After they had each had several drinks, their tongues loosened. One of her companions declared that it did not matter that the Russians were close because they would “not be here for long.” They were “good Arrow Cross and will tie a red tie instead of the green shirt and will be good communists until the relieving army comes.”²¹² The Red Army was in Budapest when the Vigh brothers were planning their future after the Nazis’ final victory.

Dezső Tátrai, a hairdresser born in Sátoraljaújhely, entered the National Socialist movement “out of conviction” at the age of 38 in 1939. József Ráki, the tram driver discussed earlier, on the other hand, joined the party service to avoid the front. He was recruited through informal ties.²¹³ Ráki was a staunch believer in German victory, and he hoped that his actions would be counted to his credit in the “new world.” When this failed to happen, he adjusted to the realities of Soviet victory. He joined the Soviet-Hungarian Society and the Hungarian Workers Party, as well as a communist agricultural union. He rectified his National Socialist personal history by enrolling in a Stalinist propaganda training course.²¹⁴

Antal Hellinger, a 42-year-old tram conductor, was persuaded to enter the party by a colleague in the Budapest Transport Company in 1943. He described himself as “a simple, keen, but gray member.” He failed to remember how many people were killed out of the 70 or 80 they drove to the Danube. Miklós Tuboly started frequenting the party’s youth organization at the age of 18 in 1944. He was recruited into the militia by his father and his younger brother, Ernő, in what they had told him was a matter of “national interest.” Participation in atrocities became a family enterprise, done without coercion. In fact, Ernő’s testimony reveals strong belief in National Socialist tenets and the importance the family attached to getting as many Jews as possible. Ernő outdid his father in fervor. Tuboly senior was about to let a man go who produced gentile papers at an inspection, but Ernő insisted that “all of these people” were Jewish. He ad-

211 Bottlik Hugó vallomása, 1945. Brunner Oszkár és társai, ÁBTL, O-14/761.

212 Riemer Oszkárné Wallner Irén vallomása, 26 October 1967. Brunner Oszkár és társai, ÁBTL, O-14/761.

213 Ráki József kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 6 April 1971. *Ibid.*

214 Brunner Oszkár és társai, Ráki József környezettanulmánya, 14 February 1967. ÁBTL, O-14/761.

mitted to killing an astonishing 150 people (an obvious exaggeration), which would make the 16-year-old one of the least known but most prolific killers.²¹⁵

The violent men in the Arrow Cross militias responsible for the atrocities in Budapest had very little education, mostly four or five years of elementary school followed by indoctrination in Arrow Cross ideology.²¹⁶ Pál Vönház was a married 19-year-old woman in 1944. After the war, he led a relatively normal life. He had a daughter, and he was even decorated as an outstanding worker in communist Hungary. Vönház remained attracted to uniforms. He served in his company's security detail. Apart from one infraction, when he severely beat a fellow worker, nothing he did after the war even remotely suggested that he had ever committed acts of brutality.

A neighbor, a veteran party member, took Vönház to the Christmas Eve party. He was given a pistol to use against Jews and communists who "disliked" the political system. At the beginning of the investigation against him, Vönház tried to deny having committed the atrocities, but eventually he admitted to having beaten men and women indiscriminately with a bullwhip in a "ruthless and brutal fashion." The party members regularly consumed copious amounts of alcohol. This and "hatred" led them to "regard the victims as their personal enemies and to treat them accordingly."²¹⁷

On January 10, gendarmes brought 25 or 30 Jewish labor servicemen into the House of Loyalty. They were held captive in the cellar for three or four days in inhuman conditions with no food or water. The Arrow Cross beat and tortured them. Later, they were taken upstairs to a room where drunken party activists were waiting for them. Mihály Magyar ordered them to undress. In the next room, the beating was resumed with truncheons and planks until they were unconscious. The Arrow Cross had sprinkled them with champagne to bring them around. Finally, the macabre scene came to an end when the victims were murdered with machine guns and pistols.

Vönház recalled that he had shot two of the victims. He contended that he could not have executed more, "because the others finished off the rest with machine guns." In the course of his interrogation, Vönház expressed regret for what he had done. He blamed his actions on German and National Socialist

215 Jegyzőkönyv, Tuboly Ernő kihallgatása, 13 April 1945. Brunner Oszkár és társai, ÁBTL, V-135335/2/188.

216 Gáncsos Zoltán, Tátrai Dezső, Hellinger Antal, Tuboly Miklós, Czigány Ferenc kihallgatási jegyzőkönyvei, 1948. Bokor Sándor és társai, ÁBTL, V-135335; Ítélet, 1948, *ibid.* Of the XII District men convicted in 1948, György Gaál had six, Dezső Tátrai four, Lajos Hajgató four, Antal Hellinger five, Gáncsos five years of elementary education, two others had 4 *polgári* respectively. 217 Vönház Pál kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve. ÁBTL, XXV. 4/a, 3589/1971.

propaganda and Arrow Cross boss Károly Dunkel's alleged threat to kill him and his mother if he quit. Dunkel had already been executed and could neither deny nor corroborate the claim. The prison psychiatrist diagnosed Vönház as an alcoholic who had started drinking during his Arrow Cross days. He was impulsive, and this impulsiveness was manifested by "verbal aggression." He recounted to the psychiatrist that some of the victims were silent, while others had wept or begged him not to hurt them. He claimed to have felt sorry for them, but he had been afraid of Dunkel, whom he described as a "brutal man." He did not remember the number of people he murdered, and he may have raped some of the women.

The psychiatrist noted that Vönház sometimes wept when asked about his activities. His demeanor was orderly and calm and his answers intelligent and apt. He revealed no sign of delusions. Although he did not have a "brutal nature," he still had "carried out violent acts," and claimed to have a guilty conscience. The once fear-inspiring man went through a notable physical demise. By his mid-40s, he was overweight and had lost all his teeth. Otherwise, he showed no sign of mental deformation that would explain his atrocious record. His repentance might have been sincere. In the 1971 verdict, the court noted that Vönház had given a fully revealing and honest admission of his crimes.²¹⁸

The father of Lajos Németh, who was mentioned earlier as an example of an Arrow Cross man who, his membership in the movement notwithstanding, had helped people escape the wrath of some of the other Arrow Cross henchmen, had been a blacksmith, and his mother was a homemaker who was raising seven children. After completing the aforementioned so-called *polgári* post-elementary school, he became a locksmith's apprentice and joined the Arrow Cross in 1939. His decision to be a part of the radical right-wing party was motivated in part by the hope that "things would change for the better." He recalled having "liked and internalized their propaganda." At this point he still could have made the choice to stay out of the atrocities as many other, more decent, party members did. In justifying his part in the atrocities, Németh claimed that the rounding up of Jews and left-wingers had been an obligation under a government decree. This may have been true, but they were obligated only to take the Jews to the ghetto, not to kill and rob them.

After the war, Németh claimed to have discovered that communism was superior to National Socialism, and he had joined the Communist Party as a "privileged working-class cadre." Németh had an interest in feigning or expressing

218 Brunner Oszkár és társai, A Fővárosi Bíróság ítélete, 1971. ÁBTL, O-14/761.

genuine regret to get a lighter sentence. He was a ruthless person, accused by a former comrade of having strangled a child. József Tallós was not someone to shy away from brutality, but even he was said to have been outraged “by Németh’s brutish act.”²¹⁹ “Yet, there were others” who did not make such a compromise, even when it would have furthered their own self-interest. Németh expressed a flash of humanity even while acting on behalf of the Arrow Cross when he helped an elderly couple escape when asked to do so by a party comrade. He contended that he “wanted to rectify my sins through work” and was raising his children “in the spirit of socialism.”

Ferenc Kreutz’s career took him from the radical right to the far left. After the war, he traded the Arrow Cross squad for the paramilitary “R gárda” of the Social Democrats. After the fusion of the two left wing parties, he joined the monolithic Hungarian Workers Party. When the police conducted Kreutz’s background check prior to his arrest in the 1960s, he had an impeccable record in the workplace. He had only one run-in with the law: a drunken brawl, after which he worked “flawlessly.” At the time of his arrest, Kreutz possessed a five-volume German language history of the world as well as works by classic Hungarian and international authors. His material possessions (for instance, his refrigerator and washing machine) reveal that he was one of the beneficiaries of Goulash Communism’s relative prosperity.

Kreutz’s personal history departed from most ordinary Hungarists. His father had been a diplomat, and Kreutz had been raised in Helsinki. His parents had sent him back to Hungary at an early age and had put him up in a boys’ boarding school. Later, he had attended a school of commerce. He did not join the Arrow Cross until a day after the Szálasi coup, at the behest of a friend’s father. National Socialist propaganda convinced him that German victory would bring about a “splendid future.” As a matter of course, the Jews were the obstacle. They “will have to be liquidated and then a new life will be created.” He became part of the young Hungarist organization where life was easy: listening to political briefings and having fun in the youth club. When the party division moved to a new location, “everything changed, this was no longer the party I had known in Győri Street.” There was a small measure of coercion involved in his “service.” His party mentor, János Fehérhegyi, grew dissatisfied with Kreutz’s attitude and warned him that it was his “patriotic duty” to work for the party service. He also told him that if he did not do so, he would be shot for treason. Dénes Bokor added that he would hand him over to the “German SS.”

219 Hollai József vallomása, 4 May 1966. ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971.

On November 15, Kreutz and seven others escorted a group of 80 people to the brick factory in Óbuda and handed them over to the military commander there. An elderly man stepped out of the line, and, in accordance with the standing order, Kreutz shot him. In his confession, Kreutz admitted that he had used his weapon “prematurely,” and when he realized he had shot a human being, he had become depressed. Three days later, he helped escort a group of about 25. Kreutz remembered the route precisely. Did he knowingly take people to their deaths? If what he said was true, he had found out that the goal was execution after they had already set out. Bokor and Fehérhegyi were the leaders. When they reached the Danube, the victims were lined up along the river. The executioners stood three or four steps behind them and fired. Six people remained standing after the first salvo, so they fired again. There was no mercy. Kreutz described what had transpired a “terrible event.” Nobody refused to shoot in fear that they would be executed themselves. Kreutz blamed party veterans, Bokor in particular, for driving the young into such a “horrendous crime.” In his case it was plausible that he was engulfed in events that spiraled beyond his original intent when he joined the party service.

He contended that “all those horrendous events into which those soulless scoundrels drove me have stayed with me throughout my life and have made my life bitter.”²²⁰ Kreutz may have been one of the few perpetrators who turned his life around. Court documents noted that when he appeared in court he demonstrated “a very honest and heartfelt remorse, and he even felt that his trial was morally correct and just.”²²¹ József Timár, a butcher by profession, was described by a former Arrow Cross man as having been “extremely cruel” to the Jews and of having participated in a large number of executions. Timár would become a model citizen under the Stalinist regime. He was the father of two children, a Stakhanovite [a term used in Soviet labor competition], and a model smelter. He even joined the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party until he was expelled for his Nazi past. Born to a family of poor peasants, he finished six years of elementary school and opened a butcher’s shop in a middle-class part of Budapest. His business went bankrupt in 1931 in the great depression, and he found employment as a smelter in the working-class district of Csepel. Timár joined the Hungarist movement partly for practical reasons in 1939. Apparently, he was able to retrieve his business, and as he put it, “it was easier to get the raw materials I needed in the Swabian villages with the prestige I acquired as an Arrow

220 Kreutz Ferenc vallomása, 1971. ÁBTLL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971.

221 Brunner Oszkár és társai, A Fővárosi Bíróság ítélete, op. cit.

Cross.” Timár did not deny that he was “dedicated to Arrow Cross, fascist ideas, which nurtured in me the vision of the oft-promised victory.” As a butcher, he was in charge of supplying his comrades with meat, which he did so by confiscating it from the peasants who were bringing it to sell in the famished capital.²²² Curiously, the habit of selling ill-gotten meat stayed with him: in the 1960s, he was investigated for selling illegally slaughtered pork.

Despite the hardship, his choice to sign up with the killers was due to a conscious decision dictated by rational calculation: self-preservation. By his own admission he joined the armed party service to avoid having to fight on the front, “even if it meant executing people.” His appearance was intimidating: black boots, black knee breeches, fatigue jacket, an Arrow Cross hat, and an armband. He took part in the torture and beating of civilians in order to track down even more Jews, communists, and deserters.²²³ In response to a denunciation, he participated in a raid on two buildings on the Buda side of the city, and rounded up a dozen or so Jews, who were taken to the party building on Városmajor Street. On December 16, they took in another 25 people, including three women from the same location. This was no mechanical murder. While shooting, the perpetrators screamed at the victims, “Stinking scum Jews you will die!” A woman ran up to Timár and pleaded for mercy. Someone shot at her but accidentally hit Timár in the leg. This did not stop him from firing at a prisoner who jumped into the river. After the execution, Timár was taken to hospital, where he lied about the circumstances in which he was wounded. This suggests that he was able to distinguish right from wrong, or perhaps he suspected that the hospital staff did not share his National Socialist worldview and alert the police. In fact, he never admitted the truth about his war record to his family because, as he put it, “I was ashamed that I had taken part in the execution of innocent people.”²²⁴ By the time he was arrested, the once-feared man had become overweight, and his teeth had all disappeared.

Mihály Halák, who was also known as the Hunchback, was known to be one of the cruelest of them all, and obsessed with Jews. He offered a grotesque sight. His gown was longer than his body and was constantly grazing the ground. He was one of the most active individuals in rounding up, torturing, and murdering Jews.²²⁵ After the war, he worked alternately as a night watchman, mailman and unskilled worker. He was described as a taciturn, reticent, disciplined and

222 Timár József, *összefoglaló jegyzőkönyv*, 26 May 1971. ÁBTL, XXV. 4/a, 3589/1971.

223 Timár József *kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve*, 5 April 1971. *Ibid.*

224 Timár József *kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve*, 7 April 1971. *Ibid.*

225 Kreutz Ferenc, *Láng Vincéné vallomása*, 1971. ÁBTL, XXV. 4/a, 3589/1971.

“politically passive” person who got on well with his colleagues and sang in the company choir. As a boy, he was crippled by an illness and his mother committed suicide. Halák’s fortunes declined further when his father’s restaurant went bankrupt and he began working menial jobs at the age of 14. His brother was a fervent communist. In 1944, Halák joined the other political extreme, the Arrow Cross. This was because the move helped him to avoid fighting in the war, and because they provided him with food and shelter when his home had been destroyed. In 1945, he turned himself in to the police and spent eight months in custody. When he was rearrested, Halák attempted to deny his part in the atrocities, even though several eyewitnesses confirmed that he had been present for the executions. Witness testimony confirmed that he was a ruthless, methodical killer. István Lehner saw Halák brutally torture Dr. Bíró, an art historian, and his son. Bíró begged Halák to shoot him and not to torture him anymore. “This will not happen you stinking Jew,” Halák retorted, “a bullet costs 20 *fillérs*, you will be beaten to death.” He announced that the prisoners would be taken to the “splashing ghetto.” On the way, István Lehner, who had a high temperature, put some snow in his mouth but Halák screamed at him to “spit it out you SOB.” When they reached the river, the Arrow Cross men forced their victims to kneel. They then shot them, three at a time, from a range of a couple of steps. After his arrest Halák, underwent psychiatric evaluation. His speech was evaluated as intelligent, logical, coherent, and showing no sign of mental illness.²²⁶

Vilmos Kröszl, one of the most infamous of the Arrow Cross killers, was born in 1911. For Kröszl, described by a former comrade as a “robber, executioner, pervert, wolf in the wolf pack,”²²⁷ the extermination of the Jews was an end in itself. His father was a grocer with eight children; Kröszl himself had three. He got through five grades in elementary school, studied to be a baker’s apprentice, and eventually found employment as an unskilled laborer. He joined the ranks of the party on the day Szálasi was sworn in as *nemzetvezető* so as to shirk military service. After Kurt Rettmann tasked him with forming the XIV District Arrow Cross organization, he rapidly became district leader, but soon turned this position over to György Bükkös. After the war, each accused the other of having committed violent crimes.²²⁸ The historical records suggest that Kröszl was cruel even by the standards of his fellow killers, who had given his comrades a “master class” in the skill of torturing. His status in the party orga-

226 Halák Mihály kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 3 March 1971, March 1971, and 13 March 1971. ÁBTL, XXV, 4/a, 3589/1971.

227 László Jenő fogdaügnöki jelentése, 25 February 1966. ÁBTL, V-153693/1.

228 Kröszl Vilmos kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 22 February 1966, op. cit.

nization endowed him with power: “Even God did not dare check their documents,” and, as a militia member, he was even entitled to check soldiers. He also had an unlimited cashflow and scores of good-looking women in the party. Kröszl offered to release his victims in return for sex, but most of the time, he did not honor his promise.

Vilmos Kröszl’s long record of brutality included murders in a Jewish house of prayer. He and his cohorts picked up 550 Jews near Szilágyi Street, took them to the river, and handed them over to other Arrow Cross men, who murdered 130 of them. Kröszl and his men escorted 1,000 people to Teleki Square, 150-200 of whom were killed on the way. At the beginning of November, he took part in the arrest and execution of eleven people, followed by the shooting of eight others by Rákos Creek, with just one survivor. Then, 200 people were taken to the ghetto several were shot. Twelve of the 20 Jews taken from the synagogue on Thököly Avenue were murdered. The Fehér family of five was executed, as was a man named Lajos Sibermann. In December, 25 people were taken from the Institute of Disabled Children. Some were executed, and one person was thrown out the window. Even if participation in the executions caused psychological hardship, one could get used to it. “It was hard for me to get rid of the psychological state I was in after the first killing,” Bükkös asserted, “one execution came after the other for me.” Eventually, he admitted to the murder of 20 people, and was tasked with exploiting the killings for propaganda purposes. He did not escape, even though it was apparent to him that the bloodshed was pointless.

If one believes the prison informant, Kröszl greeted him with a Hitler salute and the former Arrow Cross greeting “*kitartás*” [persistence] every morning and night. He started to reveal more and more of his innermost thoughts: “I don’t want to say that I did not beat Jews or that we did not shoot Jews. But believe me, not enough. If I had had any inkling I would end up here, I would have finished off every Jew at the time and there would be fewer witnesses against me.”

Kálmán Baráth’s choices reflected the destitute and troubled background from which he came.²²⁹ He had nine siblings. His father had been a blacksmith who had found employment as a road sweeper. The father was an alcoholic and constantly abused his family. Eventually, he was committed to a mental institution for six months. After his father’s release, Baráth’s mother attempted suicide, and as a consequence of the harm she caused herself, she was fed through a rubber tube for the rest of her life. The children were sent to an asylum because of

229 For brief biographies of the defendants of the Zugló Arrow Cross see Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok pere*, 75–82.

their father's violent behavior. Kálmán claimed that he joined the Arrow Cross "finally to get a decent job" at his father's behest in 1941. Initially, his activities, such as excursions with other party youth, were innocent enough, but his father soon forced him to attend party meetings held for adults as well. The Arrow Cross promised to "lift them up." After the events, Kálmán Baráth "discovered that they exploited our ignorance and misery to mislead us...and dragged us into illegal murders."

Baráth blamed the direction his life had taken on his cruel upbringing and his father's influence. Essentially, he argued that he was unable to shape his own life. "My father foisted the filthy ideology on me." In his confession, which he wrote in captivity, Baráth condemned himself for his participation in the horrible crimes. "I attempted to fit into the new society with a guilty conscience and remorse." Nevertheless, his testimonies revealed that he shared the goal of killing as many Jews as possible and, though he had a difficult fate which may explain his decision to join a messianic party, he never explored the possibility of not taking part in the murders.

Traits of mental illness inherited in the family may have also influenced the actions of Lajos Janura, who, due to such issues, may have been the only one not in full command of his actions. He was a member of the squad responsible for the killing of the children hiding in the Salesian Szt. Alajos Institute. Janura's father died in the mental care department of Szent István hospital in 1937. Janura's mother was also institutionalized and treated for mental health problems in the hospital's "closed" ward. Janura was subjected to psychiatric evaluation prior to his trial. He was found to be mentally disturbed, although the nature of his problem was unspecified. The psychiatrist testified that his patient was unable to withstand pressure from his superiors, even though "he obviously disagreed with them," nonetheless, their orders "had to be fulfilled." Initially, Janura was "attracted by socialist ideology," and, in fact, he shot an Arrow Cross man and denounced two others. He allegedly released several Jews whom he caught hiding in Pálvölgyi cave in Budapest.²³⁰

György Bükkös was born in 1911 to a family of Swabian descent. Kröszl called him an executioner, a typical criminal.²³¹ He joined the Hungarists in 1939, when the movement reached the height of its popularity. In 1943, he was promoted to deputy chief of propaganda in District XIV. Bükkös recalled the elation he felt when Szálasi was sworn in and greeted with endless shouts of

²³⁰ Lévai Rudolf és társai, ÁBTL, V121588/a.

²³¹ László Jenő fogdaügynöki jelentése, 3 March 1966. ÁBTL, V1/153963.



András Kun (left) former Minorite priest, commander of an Arrow Cross death squad, prosecuted for war crimes by a Hungarian People's Tribunal. On the right is Gábor Péter, head of the Budapest department of State Security Division. 1945. Fortepan/155595.

hurrah. “The time has come, the idea has risen to power, idealistic notions can be put into practice. I was an idealist,” he asserted, “and I believed in the justice and purity of the idea.”

In the confines of his prison cell, Bükkös asserted that he tried to do good wherever he could in the spirit of his “oath, with loyalty and perseverance...I felt myself a Hungarian, and I had no inkling that the idea would collapse in me when the balance tilted to raw violence and terror.” In prison, while awaiting his turn to be interrogated, he showed his side as a caring family man: “What will happen to my daughters,” he wondered aloud, “perhaps God will help them.” When the informant asked him whether he believed in God, Bükkös replied that he had found God and had attended church with his “poor wife,” who had died of cancer. The informant observed that “visibly he is showing signs of remorse.”²³²

It was not possible to establish how many people Bükkös murdered, although there was no doubt that he participated in killings. He claimed that he was not a born murderer, and he alleged that the first time he took the lives of others “was the most horrific day of his life.” Still, he did not deny that kill-

²³² Bálint Endre fogdaügynöki jelentése Bükkös Györggyel folytatott beszélgetéséről, undated. ÁBTL, V-üz/153693; Bálint Endre fogdaügynöki jelentése Bükkös Györggyel folytatott beszélgetéséről, 25 February 1966. Ibid.

ing was a conscious, deliberate choice that stemmed from his ideological conviction. He found consolation in the thought that “had they [the Arrow Cross] not killed their prisoners, who they regarded as the enemy, they [their prisoners] would have killed them.” This statement contradicts Bükkös’ claim that he condemned the debasement of the original Arrow Cross idea into violence. Further explaining the psychology of murder, he claimed that, because of his position and the “general sentiment” prevailing in the group, he would not have been able to shirk the duty to murder anyway. His initiation was a killing spree, and when the murders were committed, “so much blood was flowing that it clogged the drain.”

Bükkös’ informant reported that he had “found God in prison” and seemingly regretted what he had done. After his release in 1956, Bükkös cooperated with the “socialist” system. He was praised for his “impeccable” expertise as a technical supervisor and his attitude towards his coworkers. Due to his professionalism and good work, he was considered a “useful member of the collective.” He did volunteer work and most paradoxically, was considered a “role model.”

ANNIHILATION

Economic gain does not explain National Socialist crimes. Hungarian Nazis, similarly to their ideological brethren across the continent, attacked even the most defenseless people, patients in hospitals and children, as their bitter enemies, who had to be eliminated for the triumph of the cause in situations where there was nothing material to gain. In this process, the most committed killers spared no one who stood in their way. The infamous massacre of the inmates and staff of the Jewish hospital in Maros Street was prompted mainly by racially motivated hatred, while looting was a secondary motivation.

Murderous attacks on hospitals, which were regarded as safe havens for people in hiding, were not unheard of at all. When the Arrow Cross rounded up the Jewish inhabitants of the building at Király Street 36, Mrs. Veronika Pál Schönwald, who was in an advanced stage of pregnancy, and her mother managed to escape to the Maros Street hospital, where her uncle was a doctor. Most of the medical staff and nurses were Jewish, although there were some Christians as well. Veronika’s mother was not admitted, so she returned to the ghetto. On December 5, she gave birth and remained in the care of the hospital. On January 12, armed men in uniform from the MÁVAG factory broke into the hospital building. The attack did not come out of nowhere, as the staff had been ab-

ducted once before, but then, inexplicably, they were suddenly released. Veronika suspected that one of the nurses employed in the hospital who frequented the Arrow Cross building in the XII District may have denounced them.

The men were dressed in boots and leather coats, and, by one account, were all inebriated. They grabbed the infirm by their arms and legs and dragged them to an assembly point from their beds. The attackers, led by József Pokorny, was said to have shot 80 people the first day. Those who could not be removed from of their beds were shot dead on the spot. One of the attackers, clad in an SS uniform, was only twelve years old. Accompanying his father, he removed a ring by cutting off a patient's finger, an act which indicates how even a child could be corrupted by the cruel acts committed by the adults around him. Mrs. Mátyás Stern, a survivor mentioned earlier, overheard one of the attackers declaring "all of them have to be murdered." This would suggest that the killing spree in the hospital was premeditated.

Patients and the staff were forced to undress and hand over their clothing and jewels to the attackers. Veronika stood there in her gown with her infant in her arms. A young man bearing a weapon demanded that she go with him. One of the men, identified as Jenő Szabó, took Veronika, who was still clinging to her child to the basement. She recalled every small detail of her harrowing experience. Szabó pushed a door open. There were nurses crouching in the room behind the door who were instructed to go upstairs. When the room was empty, Szabó raped her. Szabó spared some of the victims, however. The sources offer no clear indication why.

Veronika was told to return to the hall where the naked people were forced to walk in front of a row of armed Arrow Cross men into the yard. A woman screamed hysterically that she was Christian, and the female cook, who really was a gentile, was also there. Suddenly, an Arrow Cross district leader, an architect by profession named Lajos Sógor, instructed the women who were bearing small children to return to the building. "Sógor behaved decently with me," Veronika recalled. In the meantime, "terrible wailing" intermingled with the sound of gunfire. She remembered that the hospital director, Dr. Janó, his wife, her uncle and his wife, a gynecologist named Weinberger, his wife, and the head nurse were murdered.

Another survivor, Mrs. László Tamás, née Jolán Warum, was a nurse. The attackers locked her in the cellar on the day of the attack. The next day, she and five others were taken to the headquarters on Németvölgyi Avenue, where she was kept locked up alongside the son of an Arrow Cross man and the wife of another. She saw many escaped Hungarian soldiers, six of whom were shot. Jo-

lán claimed that her husband was fighting on the front, and so she got away with a few slaps in the face, while her fellow nurse was tortured.

After ten days of confinement, Pokorny ordered the execution of the captives. Escape was impossible because they were escorted to an empty space by a dozen armed men. When they arrived at the site, the prisoners were ordered to kneel and were shot from behind. Jolán fell to the ground before the shots were fired. One of the murderers said that she was still moving. Another stepped up and stood directly above her. The difference between life and death was sometimes a miracle. Instead of executing her point blank, the man fired several shots into ground and left her there. He clearly wanted to spare her.

The behavior of the people who committed the murders suggested that killing was not an ordeal for them. Jolán heard these men laughing as they left. After the hospital was cleared of its patients, the Arrow Cross moved on, even though the corpses had not yet been buried. Lajos Sógor refused to go into the garden because he “abhorred the dead.” Katalin Neumann, Mrs. Artúr Palotai, was the hospital’s financial officer. She remembered that the institution had already come under attack in October, but an elderly Arrow Cross man, possibly Sógor, had convinced the others to leave hospitals alone and take people from residential buildings, so she was released.

The second raid came in November, but the inmates were lucky again. An unknown Arrow Cross man, likely Pál Szalai, showed up in a car with Red Cross insignia, and negotiated their release. The Nazis returned in force, 25 or 30 of them, with the intention of murdering the patients. “They don’t even deserve a bullet,” one of them said. What should happen to the children?, another asked. They are staying, retorted a third, who was Sógor.

Neither did other institutions of healing survive as safe havens. The Jewish hospital on Városmajor Street was raided on January 15, even though it was officially under the protection of the Red Cross. Those who were unable to prove that they were Christians were put in front of a firing squad in the yard and shot. Miklós Tuboly killed those who were unable to get out of bed. Revealingly as concerns the motive for this brutality, Christian patients were told to leave, and the building was set on fire.

Members of the III District Arrow Cross party organization were involved in the execution of children hiding in the Salesian convent of Szent Alajos and of people hiding or being treated in hospitals. The murder of children can hardly be explained by the reasons given for some of the other killings: sexual exploitation, the gratification of sadistic desire, social rebellion, financial gain, social advancement or even the belief that the war could be still won. Only one possi-

ble explanation offers itself as the primary motive for this: to finish off the enemy for good. Children, so the National Socialist argument went, would grow into vindictive adults, so it was seen as essential to kill them first.

Harsh political conditions brought out the best and the worst. The monks of the Salesian St. Alajos Institute in Budapest suffered physical abuse for hiding Jewish children in their convent. The establishment was led by father Mihály P. Kiss, who had made the home an educational center, complete with a theater, library, and cinema projector. His establishment was on Bécsi Road, where Jews were being driven to the brick factory, a concentration point before deportation.

Endre Pintér, a young medical doctor, pushed dozens of people into the chapel when their doomed procession was halted in front of the gate. He might have saved many lives had the Salesians' haven been located literally next door to the district Arrow Cross building. P. Kiss and Pintér appeared there several times for interrogation; their lives were possibly saved by the fact that Pintér's father knew the local Arrow Cross commander, who was his neighbor. Helping those in need was the overriding principle for Kiss and Pintér, irrespective of who these people were.²³³

This episode shows that, where aggression was premeditated, rescue and survival resulted from quick decisions made at the spur of the moment. On December 15, the Arrow Cross showed up in the Szent Alajos building looking for hidden Jews. When the aforementioned Mihály P. Kiss was informed, he found the caretaker, Béla Lelkes, being beaten by a man named Müller. Müller had probably joined the Arrow Cross for financial reasons, as suggested by the fact that he looted the convent before he and his men left. The intruders were specifically hunting for Jews.

Whenever anyone entered the institute, the Arrow Cross treated them as suspects, beat them, and demanded to know whether they were Jewish. Mrs. Kalmár, Mrs. Károly Ádám, who was seeking refuge in the building, Pater Kiss, and Béla Lelkes were escorted to the Arrow Cross building. Several other victims were awaiting their fate in the anteroom. They aroused "the greatest pity" in Kiss, as they bore the marks of interrogation on their faces. Some Arrow Cross wives had also been incarcerated for stealing Jewish property, such as fur coats, from which they had forgotten to remove the yellow star.²³⁴

Suddenly, Károly Ádám, an old acquaintance of Pater Kiss, appeared. His wife had been given refuge in the institute. He was wearing the uniform of a first

²³³ Lengyel, ed., *Óbudai múltidéző*, 35.

²³⁴ Lengyel, ed., *Óbudai múltidéző*, 17-18.

lieutenant, and demanded to see the district leader, as his wife had been taken into custody in the Salesian institute. Even in the tense situation, *Ádám*, who was hardly able recognize Kiss, inquired as to how he could help. A few minutes after entering the party leader's room, he emerged with his Jewish wife, *Franciska*, who was released at his insistence. Due to *Ádám's* intervention, a detachment sent by the city command appeared within an hour and demanded to know why the Salesians were being held. They warned the Arrow Cross not to harm *P. Kiss*, and left. Still, *Kiss* was summoned for interrogation, along with *Lelkes*. *Lelkes* was accused of hiding with fake Christian papers and was brutally beaten to make him admit that he was a Jew and disclose who had given him the papers. Blood was gushing from his mouth and nose. Eventually he was released, but *P. Kiss* never heard from him again.

Then, it was *Kiss's* turn. *Müller* asserted that the Salesian building could be regarded as a "Jewish children's home," and he demanded to know how many people were being given religious education in an effort to discover whether conversion was being promoted in the convent. *Müller* and his men soon returned to the Institute. *Müller* made the male children undress so that he could see whether they had been circumcised. He beat and threatened those who resisted, but this time, he and his men left without doing anything else. By Christmas, the Russians were closing in, and they were not far from the Salesian building. The intendants and the children, as if oblivious to the reality of the siege, spent the second day of Christmas playing and singing. It seems that *Kiss* was out of the building when the Arrow Cross men broke in, shortly after midnight. The intruders woke the caretaker and then the Jewish children from their sleep. The caretaker and other members of the order wanted to escort the children, but the Arrow Cross threatened that they would be risking their lives if they did so.

Thirteen children were taken from the institute; the youngest were six years old. The adults who were hiding in the convent had already been abducted by December 11. It was pitch dark when they were driven towards the Danube. The Arrow Cross picked up two more people at the *Árpád* grammar school. When they arrived at *Margit* Bridge, the men cordoned off the area. They proceeded with the execution by lining the victims up three at a time. "Let's get this done quickly," *Janura* said.

The sole survivor, *András Borhi*, looked behind himself and saw the winter coats being taken off three boys. Since he had already made up his mind to act, he jumped into the river and swam to the middle under water (this contention may have been an exaggeration, given the width of the Danube). The Arrow Cross men shot at him, but missed, and he reached the shore on the other side.

Borhi's second account of his escape differs from the first version, which suggests that he had known he and the others were going to be murdered. According to his second version of events, only at the last moment, when the two adults were lined up, did he hear two shots. "Then, three of the children were led there." Borhi stated that "we were not allowed to look back, I heard the boy named Kallós cry." This statement suggests that the boys awaiting execution were lined up with their backs to the Danube; otherwise, it would have made no sense to forbid them to look back. Perhaps this was an effort on the part of the killers to avoid panic.

The victims were told to take off their overcoats. Showing a great deal of composure, Borhi asked a guard: "Is there mercy?" The answer was a resounding "No!" This prompted him to jump, a decision which, according to this account, appears not as a premeditated act, but rather as a response to circumstances. The fifteen victims, two adults and the rest children, were escorted by eight or nine men. After reaching the shore, Borhi knocked at the door of a "palace," but was denied entry. He tried another building, and was let in. The strange boy was put into a bed, given a hot drink, and then "all the blankets were put on him." In what turned out to be a collective effort to save the boy, a policeman took him to hospital. As he was unable to return to the Salesians, his uncle, the aforementioned Károly Ádám, took care of him.

One of the defendants of the group's 1948 trial, Péter Hossó, who was not charged with the Szent Alajos killings, told the court that "all of those sitting on the bench of the accused were not humans but animals who extinguished people's lives with depraved brutality, the court cannot pass a sentence too severe than what they all deserve." Hossó was charged with ordering a killing on upscale Pozsonyi Avenue in the Jewish district, which only Mrs. Ödön Nemes survived. Janura, who was also charged with abducting and executing people from a maternity home as well as a sanatorium and with other atrocities, told the court that the attack on Szent Alajos convent was premeditated. The children, he alleged, had been rounded up according to a list. This "mission" had been a secret, so the list had been typed up by the district leader.

The killers were unrepentant. Antal Oszfolk, who was sentenced to death for his role in the raid, liked to boast about killing people, including the Szent Alajos children: "If everyone had treated the Jews the way I did, none would be alive by now," adding "If I could be free again, I would do a much more thorough job."²³⁵

235 Török Zoltán vallomása. ÁBTL, V121588.

ESCAPE

There are accounts of victims putting up resistance. When they were in a position to do so, Jews tried to help other Jews. A doctor named Raymann and his wife Katalin helped people hide in Szent Rókus Hospital. Both were robbed and beaten, and Raymann was murdered by the Arrow Cross, but Katalin was released. József Breyer, the housekeeper in the Arrow Cross building at 80 Thököly Avenue, was a privileged Jew, exempted from ant-Semitic legislation. He and his gentile wife brazenly offered refuge to two women in their small keeper's flat. Mrs. Breyer lent them her brother's papers in case they needed them. They helped the family of the former owner of the building move into an apartment on the second floor, and Mrs. Breyer supplied them with false papers she had gotten from a worker at the Danuvia parts and machinery factory by telling a lie. The Breyer couple's daughter stole fuel for the family from the Arrow Cross. But daring was not quite enough. Survival hinged on the willingness of others to help. A neighbor suspected that their cover story was false (they claimed to have left their home in a village called Lajosmizse, having fled from the Russians), but turned a blind eye. A woman named Margit Weisz noted in her diary that Mr. S., the neighbor, "suspected something, but I was not afraid of him."²³⁶

One form of resistance was simply to hide, i.e. to take any steps one could to save one's life without interfering in the fate of others. Any active form of opposition or resistance to the killers was suicidal. It might seem surprising, given what we know today, but many of the people who were murdered on the banks of the Danube had no idea what awaited them, even in their final hours, when they were being marched to the river. Often, they were told that they were being taken to the ghetto. How did people come to realize that they were being taken to be killed? Simon Kornitzer realized what was about to befall him when he and the others with whom he was being taken reached the Chain Bridge and the guards began to ready their weapons. However, less than a year after the traumatic event, he asserted that one of the other prisoners had informed him of what was about to happen. Although contradictory, each of the two explanations he gave reveals that only some of the victims were aware of the fate awaiting them. Also as noted earlier, the sole survivor of the thirteen children who were abducted from the Salesian building provided two contradictory accounts of events. First, he claimed that he had learned of the

²³⁶ Máthé, *A zugszói nyilasok pere*, 198–99. Testimony by Mrs. Lóránt Rotter, Margit Weisz.

intention of the Arrow Cross men only on the spot, but, according to another account he gave, his decision to jump into the water had been premeditated, as he had figured out what was going to happen as the group approached the river. Deception was successful, as illustrated by the fact that most of the victims did not try to get away.

Whatever the persecuted people knew about the intentions of the Arrow Cross, escape was virtually impossible, and for very simple reasons. Due to their national socialist fanaticism, the perpetrators would not take bribes and would very seldom show mercy. I found only a couple of such cases. The Arrow Cross men were well-armed. The guard/prisoner ratio, furthermore, was sometimes as high as one armed guard for two prisoners, and the guards had orders to shoot if anyone stepped out of the line. The death marches took place on dark winter days, so that a passersby would not see the massacres. Thus, fewer people could be counted on for help.²³⁷ In Simon Kornitzer's case there had been 26 gunmen for 52 people.²³⁸

In addition, peoples' hands were tied together in each row of prisoners. Thus, only someone who was physically fit and only someone who knew that he or she had no other chance of survival had any hope of escape if he or she tried to make a run for it. It is also worth keeping in mind that many of the victims were small children or ailing elderly. Escape made sense in the situations which had led to the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto, when the victims knew that death awaited them. Most people were not aware that such killings were taking place, so they were not in a position to plan, or even think about, escape. Frigyes Doktor testified that the Arrow Cross had taken 30 people from the Alice Weiss maternity home, and only one of them had returned. When the person who returned "told us about the executions on the Danube, we did not want to believe it."²³⁹ Deception worked extremely well.

Even so, in almost every group, at least one, and sometimes several, people tried to exploit their guards' momentary lapse of attention by running away, or, if they had already reached the riverbank, by jumping into the water before the shots were fired. Ágoston Pártos ran away when a patrol demanded his papers. Germans caught him and returned him to his pursuers. According to Pártos, they had not shot him because they had not wanted to put holes in his leather coat. He was taken down to 47 Andrásy Avenue, where he saw

237 Kálmán László vallomása, ÁBTL, V-153693/6.

238 Kornitzer Simon vallomása, 19 September 1945. Kun András, ÁBTL, V-119575.

239 Borszéki és társai, ÁBTL, V-121588/b.

the family, the wife and daughter of Jenő Nagy, the executed leader of the underground resistance movement. Pártos was forced to kneel, and his head was beaten to pulp. His hands were tied to the hands of others who were being taken for execution, but on the way to the river, he had managed to cut the rope with a razor blade he had been able to keep in hiding. He and another man managed to run away.²⁴⁰

Imre Földeák, who had been hiding with papers provided by his gentile wife, pretended to be dead, and, although he was rolled into the river, survived.²⁴¹ In an anonymous denunciation submitted to the police after the war, a man described his ordeal at the hands of the Arrow Cross. He and his group were driven to the river by fifteen armed guards. As they approached, he heard the screaming of women being shot and the thunder of the firearms. He and two others ran away, as “there was nothing to lose.”²⁴² He took refuge in a block of flats, where a relative was already hiding. One woman jumped into the river before the shots rang out. She made it to shore and shouted for help, but she was shot.²⁴³ Mrs. Ödön Nemes tried to bribe her captors, and when that didn’t work, she jumped into the Danube. After swimming ashore, she put on clothing she had taken from a corpse and hid in a building. The inhabitants of the building begged her to leave because she was putting them in danger.²⁴⁴

Sometimes pleading for one’s life helped. A man assigned to a group slated for execution begged for his life and was sent to work in the kitchen. A man named András Erényi was staying in the Alice Weiss maternity home when the Arrow Cross raid began. After he had been beaten, he managed to bribe one of the Arrow Cross men. Fortunately, the man released him.²⁴⁵ György Burger was hiding in Gül Baba hotel. Somebody betrayed them to the authorities, but people who were firm when their identity papers were checked sometimes got away with it.

People who managed to flee from their executioners needed help to survive. Sándor Ferencz remembered a woman who had managed to jump into the river, although the others with her, including her daughter, had been shot. When she swam ashore, a policeman picked her up and took her home. As noted earlier, when András Borhi swam ashore, he was given refuge by strangers. Later, the police took him to one of the hospitals, and, eventually, with his uncle’s help,

240 Lehner István kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, ÁBTL, XXV. 4/a, 3589/1971, Pártos Ágoston kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, *ibid*.

241 Földeák Imréné vallomása, 1945. Bokor Sándor és társai, volume 2.

242 Feljelentés, undated. Bokor Sándor és társai, ÁBTL, V-135335.

243 Vallomás, Bokor Sándor és társai. ÁBTL, V-135335.

244 Borszéki és társai, ÁBTL, V-121588/b.

245 Borszéki és társai, V-121588/b.

he ended up under the care of the Red Cross. László Szamosi also managed to jump into the river before the shots were fired. He made it to the shore near Margit Bridge, where a warehouse guard dried his clothes and gave him a coat.²⁴⁶

Bribery did not always work, however. A widow named Friderika Weinberger and her daughter-in-law tried to “promise something” to their captors, but theirs was a “hopeless” endeavor.²⁴⁷ On some occasions, the victims fought back against their would-be executioners. Murders were committed in the Thököly Avenue synagogue on several occasions. Once, the Arrow Cross men were “interrogating” (torturing) five men. A scuffle broke out when the “prisoners had enough of the verbal abuse and beatings and turned against us and put up resistance.”²⁴⁸ One of the prisoners, a man named László Friedrich, escaped by pretending he was one of the Arrow Cross men. After he was found with Christian papers, he was drafted into the Hungarist Legion, where he continued to serve although he claimed not to have taken part in any murders. A Jewish housekeeper stayed and continued to exercise his function in a building designated as an Arrow Cross building until he was denounced.²⁴⁹

SURVIVAL OF HUMANITY

In the midst of this anarchy and carnage, and the gradual atomization of society manifest in the flood of denunciations, solidarity among human beings still sometimes survived. A woman was hiding with fake documents. She was denounced. The Arrow Cross picked her up, and her husband went with her: “I did not want to leave my wife, so I went with her.” Almost miraculously, they were both released after an interrogation.

Hugó Gottsegen’s Jewish wife was concealing protective passes. She was abducted with her husband and “beaten like a dog.” Nevertheless, she tried to rescue her husband from the brick factory where he had been taken. Two Arrow Cross men, Ferenc Borszéki and Frigyes Eöry, apprehended Imre Gutthard and his wife despite the fact that anti-Semitic decrees did not apply to them. When her husband failed to return, Mrs. Gutthard decided to “go to the party.” She

246 Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok pere*, 196.

247 Máthé, *A zuglói nyilasok pere*, 196.

248 Bükkös György kihallgatási jegyzőkönyve, 2 June 1966. Kröszl Vilmos és társai, ÁBTL, V-153693/2, volume 2.

249 Hollai József vallomása, 4 May 1966. ÁBTL, V-153693/4.



Red Army soldiers on József Boulevard in Budapest, 1945. Fortepan/Vörös Hadsereg

begged János Traum to let him go. They allowed her to talk to her husband, but that was the last time she saw him.²⁵⁰

Political systems are comprised of individuals who seek to assert their interests. Arrow Cross men saved Jewish doctors and nurses in gratitude for the medical services these people had provided for them. Actions, good and bad, make a difference, even under the harshest conditions and the most repressive regimes. Marital bonds usually inspired heroic acts on the part of a husband or wife to save his or her spouse. A woman named Judit Bátor was mass raped by a dozen Arrow Cross men even though she was pregnant. She was the daughter of a Jewish woman and a non-Jewish man, her mother was a so-called “Aryan’s bride” who did not fall under the anti-Semitic legislation. Judit had been baptized at birth. The father was hiding as a deserter, which was punishable by death. Despite the fact that he was putting his life at risk, he showed up at the Arrow Cross building in his army uniform and was able to persuade one of the men to release his family.²⁵¹

The bond of marriage usually withstood the test of hard times. Károly Ádám risked his life when he barged into the III District Arrow Cross building to free

²⁵⁰ Borszéki és társai, ÁBTL, V-121588/b; Lévai és társai, *ibid.*

²⁵¹ BFL, Budapesti Népbíróság, NB. IV. 104. 1945/4.

his Jewish wife from the men who, in all likelihood, would have killed her. But having a Jewish person as a spouse could be a burden in itself. Mrs. Gyula Tolmár revealed in a letter she wrote on behalf of her astronomer husband, who had been deported by the Red Army in 1945: "He married me even though I was Jewish and thereby accepted the serious disadvantages and the outcast status that came with this. He never blamed me for these consequences... [He] saved my parents by using the documents which had belonged to his own parents."²⁵²

BETWEEN POLITICAL EXTREMES

Both the Arrow Cross and the communists offered their followers a better life and a more just society in case their ideologies triumphed, albeit both at the expense of others. György Kapus was a Social Democratic worker who joined far right movements in the early 1930s, suggesting that he was attracted to radical programs calling for the rectification of social inequalities. Similarly, István Péntek, an important ideologist of the Hungarist movement, started his career as a member of the Communist Party. Ödön Málnási, also a Hungarist theorist, worked in the international Communist movement before entering the social democratic party and, finally, Szálasi's movement. Zoltán Bosnyák, an expert on the "Jewish question," traveled in the other direction and offered his services to the Communist Party after the war.

Neither was this trend limited to political and ideological leaders. Lajos Janura, executed for the murder of twelve children (among other crimes), had been a Communist printer before joining the ranks of the radical right.²⁵³ Both movements vied for the support of the same social class, the industrial proletariat, which, according to the Marxist-Leninist dogma was the backbone of the communist movement. "Uncle Ambrus," for instance, had not heard of this rule. He was a steel worker and a veteran member of the Hungarist movement. As such, he took part in escorting Jews and collecting plunder. Many of the killers who were not executed by the communist authorities made an effort to blend into the political system they had professed to despise. If they were from working-class backgrounds, they were welcome. The careers of many of the Arrow Cross men, including Alajos Sándor and József Hollai, attested to that. Neither was it unusual for workers to vacillate between the radical right and the social dem-

²⁵² Stark, "...*Akkor azt mondák kicsi robot,*" Document 74, 194.

²⁵³ Borszéki Ferenc és társai, *Budapesti Népművelés*, Janura Lajos vallomása, 1949. ÁBTL, V-121588/b. Vádirat, V-121588. Janura allegedly served in the SS which he deserted.

ocratic movement. At one point, Szálasi wished to join the Social Democratic Party. Arrow cross workers in Baranya County carried the insignia of both parties in their pockets and bragged that they would display whichever was more popular at the time.²⁵⁴

József Hollai was born in a working-class family. He worked as an orthopedic shoemaker, and he was a National Socialist by conviction. He clung to the National Socialist doctrine until the very end in the hope that his party's social ideas could be put into practice. It was this same devotion to the social idea that attracted him to the Communist Party, of which he was a member until 1956. He expressed no regret for his deeds, which he attributed to the orders of the legal government. "So what, we beat and killed some Jews, it was necessary at the time." They had struggled, he claimed, for a "brighter future," and their movement had failed for the time being, he said, but not for good. Only the Hungarists could "change the fate of the Hungarian nation from Jewish and communist rule," Hollai mused in 1966. In his fantasy world, he was convinced that an Arrow Cross government existed in Germany, financed by the West German government and "American capital."²⁵⁵ Membership in the postwar communist movement was also redemption, or at least so some former Arrow Cross men claimed (though this claim obviously may have been disingenuous at best). In his clemency plea, József Hentes-Vigh explained his conversion as part of an effort "to rectify my terrible crimes by becoming a diligent, active, enthusiastic member of the Hungarian Workers Party."²⁵⁶

The Hungarian Communist Party's need for former Arrow Cross men to be part of the rank and file did not go unmet. Ferenc Pataki, a member of the Arrow Cross mentioned earlier in this chapter, joined the Communist trade union after returning from Soviet captivity. He was awarded the "outstanding worker" medal six times. He was known as a "partisan of the people's democracy," and, even though he was not a card-carrying member of the party, educated himself. "I attend [Communist] party seminars," he claimed. Sitting in his prison cell two decades after the events, Pataki told his cellmate that the Jews, who exact ruthless revenge on them, would not escape his wrath: "If I will be a deputy [sic] again, not a single Jew will escape my machine gun."²⁵⁷

²⁵⁴ Cited from a report by the *főispán* of Baranya County in 1938. See Máthé, *A zuglóti nyilasok pere*, 92.

²⁵⁵ Hollai József kihallgatása, 16 March 1966, op. cit, Gyáli fogdaügynöki jelentése, 7 July 1966. ÁBTL, V-153693/4, Gyáli fogdaügynöki jelentése, 8 July 1966.

²⁵⁶ Borszéki és társai, ÁBTL, V-121588.

²⁵⁷ Információ Pataki Ferencről, Földmunkát Gépesítő Vállalat, 1966. V-153693/7. Fogdaügynöki jelentés, 1966, ibid.

The most radical Arrow Cross members such as Pataki prevailed when the movement came to power in October 1944. They wanted to finish off the remnants of the Hungarian Jewish community in Budapest in defense of the Hungarian nation, the confines of which they did not extend to the country's well assimilated Jewish citizens. The faint-hearted, the idealists, were brushed aside. The perpetrators saw their mission as a struggle for survival. Therefore, the majority of their victims were Jewish. The Nazi element was joined by opportunistic plunderers, but material gain was only secondary to the goal of annihilation, which, tellingly, included children, hospital patients and disabled individuals, from whom no material benefit could be extracted.

The intimidating violent Nazi element forced fellow party members to take part in the atrocities and killings. Fear was a factor in the killings, as was peer pressure and demonstration of loyalty to the cause. Killing Jews was something to brag about in party circles; the monstrous atrocities and murders were for the most radical elements a source of amusement. Some admitted that they were psychologically devastated by the acts they committed, although eventually they got used to them. The ideological zeal of the perpetrators sealed the fate of their victims.

Due to the Arrow Cross's dedication to annihilating their enemies, survival after capture was very difficult. In fact, lack of mercy for the Jews was the best indicator of the ultimate aims of the perpetrators. Deception worked well, most victims did not suspect they were slated to die until they reached the site of execution. In most instances the perpetrators made sure that all those they shot were really dead. But even if the victims had suspected their fate, it was extremely hard to escape. First, they were severely beaten, tortured and dehumanized before they were taken to be killed. Most of them simply did not have the physical strength to resist. Many were small children and elderly people. They were faced with the threat that anyone who tried to escape would be shot, and this resolve was demonstrated when needed. The hands of the victims were tied together and the armed guard to victim ratio was high.

Even so, some people bravely attempted to flee, once it was clear to them that this was their only option to survive. Their escape was an individual, their survival a collective, effort. People who jumped into the river and evaded their persecutors' bullets needed clothing and shelter, which they often got from strangers. Most rescues in Hungary took place in Budapest and took a variety of forms. Shelter was provided in homes; the attic or coal cellars of buildings sometimes in ingeniously concealed spaces. Some individuals found shelter for victims with friends or relatives, beside offering their own place. Help included distri-

bution of fake documents or hiring people in danger at workshops or factories. Beside the large number of denunciations many people from a variety of backgrounds extended their circle of empathy to their Jewish fellow citizens. Despite the efforts of the Arrow Cross to conceal their activities, the signs of their atrocities became more and more apparent. The disastrous consequences of an ideology of hatred prompted people to help those in mortal danger, while putting their own safety at risk.

P a r t III

Stalinism in Hungary



Decoration on the occasion of Stalin's 70th birthday at National Car Repair Company No. 2, 1949., Fortepan/Magyar Rendőr

“Where there is tyranny/It’s tyranny that rules”

Gyula Illyés, *One Sentence on Tyranny*

“Never will you make / the individual prevail against his age. /

An age is a current that sweeps and swamps: /

a man may swim with it but never master it.”

Imre Madách, *The Tragedy of Man*

“...in the official lists, the term ‘class alien’ was always next to

my name, a term which hardly differed from the previous

regime’s term, ‘people alien’...”

György Konrád, *A Feast in the Garden*

SOVIET OCCUPATION, DEPORTATION

The Soviet invasion of Hungary began just as the German occupation did: with the rounding up of “enemy” elements (in this case, people who allegedly were friendly with the West). The new era ushered in another round of deportations of civilians. The Soviet Union did not distinguish between civilians and uniformed combatants of enemy states invaded by the Red Army. Therefore, the occupation forces targeted civilians to fulfill a quota of POWs designated to work in special camps established to utilize the work force of prisoners of war in the Soviet Union.

The German minority was targeted in particular. When “several hundred” [in fact 189] people were deported from the village of Nagymaros, the local organization of the Communist Party complained that the Russian military command established German ethnicity by way of “name analysis.”¹ The fate of German minorities underscores the Soviet propensity to target ethnic minorities for reprisal.² In Gyula, the Russians made a list of individuals with German-sounding names, which included some Jews as well. All people who were of German descent were eligible to be deported for forced labor. Over 150 Germans were

1 A Magyar Kommunista Párt nagymarosi szervezetének kérelme Dálnoki Miklós Béla miniszterelnökhöz több száz elhurcolt és a község megsegítése ügyében. 29 January 1945. Tamás Stark, “... Akkor azt mondták kicsi robot,” Document 15, 105–107.

2 See Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands*.

taken from Gyoma, most of whose families had lived there for 200 years. The others had Hungarian fathers or mothers.³

On the whole, Germans in Hungary mostly remained loyal to the Hungarian homeland. Some young men joined the Hungarian army voluntarily rather than join the SS.⁴ In order to provide housing for Hungarians fleeing from territories which had been captured by Tito's forces, authorities instructed German families to move into shared housing. Germans in Nagykovácsi were directed to move out of their homes "in ten minutes" because the state had confiscated their houses and given them to the settlers. Reverend Greszl recorded that the police were behaving in the most brutal manner and uttering curses such as "filthy people" and "stinking Swabians" at the wailing people they were driving from their homes. The police were shouting, bludgeoning people with truncheons, and throwing old and sick people out of their beds. These measures were applauded by the left-wing press. Jewelry was taken because the person from whom it was being taken allegedly would "not need it anymore."⁵

Jews were also among the deported, including labor servicemen and former prisoners of Nazi deathcamps. Twenty-two-year-old Tamás Bárdi, for example, and 480 other Jewish men and women, including people who were infirm, whom the Red Army had "liberated" in Auschwitz, were deported to the Soviet Union.⁶ It was estimated that 25-30,000 Hungarians of Jewish origin fell into Soviet captivity, including labor servicemen on the eastern front and civilians deported to the Soviet Union.⁷ Civilians were rounded up randomly at busy crossroads or from buildings surrounded for that purpose by soldiers in the Red Army. When a mother tried to stop the Soviet patrol from seizing her son, she was beaten, while her daughter, who was also with them, suffered a heart attack from fright.⁸

Ethnic Hungarian civilians were slated for deportation in the Carpatho-Ukraine and Slovakia, as were Germans in the western strip of Transylvania. Many people tried to hide with relatives or in their own homes. If the neces-

3 Gyulai lakosok kérelme német nevű elhurcolt hozzátartozóik szabadon bocsátása érdekében, 22 May 1945. In Stark, "..."*Akkor aszt mondták kicsi robot,*" Document 138, 275-78; Document, 36, 90. Ibid.

4 See about this Réka Marchut, *Töréspontok*, 73-105.

5 Marchut, *Töréspontok*, 163.

6 Stark, "..."*Akkor aszt mondták kicsi robot,*" 59; Document 178, 322. Az Országos Zsidó Segítő Bizottság kérelme, 2 December 1945. Ibid. Document 240. 412-413.

7 Stark, "..."*Akkor aszt mondták kicsi robot,*" 56. Stark refers to documentation from the National Council of Hungarian Jews and the Hungarian government.

8 Novákovits Mihályné kérelme fia és öccse szabadon bocsátása ügyében, 3 June 1945. Document 157, 295-98. Ibid.

sary quotas were not met, Soviet authorities took people below or above the age limit. The oldest person deported may have been 76 years old. Soviet counter-intelligence [Smersh] units rounded up “war criminals,” yet their victims were often conservative, pro-British officers and politicians, members of the clergy, former members of parliament, and mainly youngsters who had been pressed into units to fight alongside the Germans. According to somewhat contradictory Soviet figures, between 521,000 and 546,000 Hungarian POWs were held in Soviet camps, and close to 33,000 people from Hungary were interned in the Soviet Union. The figure for captured soldiers and civilians may be higher, as not all prisoners were registered in the camps and the Soviet figures did not include those who died in transit.

Soviet troops rounded up youngsters in Dombóvár, where boys had been hiding in the vineyards from the Arrow Cross men, who wanted to force them to fight the Russians. The children were taken without any kind of background check or interrogation. Parents who were petitioning the Soviet authorities for their children’s release used the kind of language they mistakenly thought the communist Russians would appreciate: the children, they claimed, were students and industrial workers. Three hundred women signed a petition on behalf of their husbands, who had been allegedly taken only to do a few hours of work, but who had never returned. The women contended in their petition that all the men were “people with leftist sympathies who wished to participate in Hungary’s reconstruction.”⁹

The Communist Party chief in Gáva thought that his veteran Bolshevik status would mellow the Soviets. He asked the “Russian brothers” not only to release his captive daughter but also “not to allow our homeland to be chopped up again.” Mrs. Rezső Binder explained that her husband, nabbed from the industrial town of Csepel, was an “organized [trade union] worker,” and asked the government to take action on his behalf, as “Hungarian blood is expensive.”¹⁰ Nationalism and internationalism mingled in her rhetoric, as the ancient regime was gradually displaced by the new.

The bishop of Szatmár, János Scheffler, claimed that the Soviets targeted Catholics more than other religions, and that many suspected “returning Jews” of

9 Dombóvári szülők kérelme a szovjet parancsnoksághoz gyermekeik hazabocsátása ügyében 15 January 1945. Document 6. 93. 300 budapesti asszony kérelme, 26 April 1945. Document 87, 213.
10 Pisták István, a gávai kommunista párt vezetőjének kérelme, 13 March 1945. Stark, “...Akkor aszt mondták kicsi robot,” Document 56. 171–72. Ifj. Binder Rezsőné kérelme, 6 May 1945. Document 101. 234–35.

assisting deportations.¹¹ In some places, the Russians released the disabled and sick as well as people under 16 and over 52, i.e. those who were obviously unfit for work. This distinguished Soviet from German deportations. The German and Hungarian Nazis deported and murdered even babies and infants, revealing that the primary motive was murder and the extinction of a whole group of people. It is also true, however, that the Red Army did seize pregnant women.¹²

Husbands and wives were taken, and children who were left behind remained without any source of care or food. The sick and elderly were picked up, however, and taken to camps, though later they were sometimes released. Soviet troops seized Dr. Zsigmond Nagy, aged 78, who had had a stroke, was suffering from diabetes and a heart condition, and could hardly walk. There was little, if any, rhyme or reason behind the groups selected for deportation. Three “weak and sickly” girls, who were planning to work for the Russians as nurses, were abducted from Gáva. Sometimes only the children were deported, including all three of Mrs. Sándor Furmann’s children.¹³

Budapest was a dangerous city both for men and women. Groups that could potentially threaten the communist seizure of power were rounded up and deported. Zoltán Mikó, who headed an anti-German military group, was arrested and executed in the Soviet Union. A group of 76 leftist apprentices and university students who joined Mikó and assisted Soviet units by providing them with intelligence regarding German troop movements were deported, even though they had a certificate from a Soviet reconnaissance command regarding their activities. György Kertész fell into Soviet captivity with his unit of Jewish labor servicemen in 1944. He applied for partisan school and was slated for parachute action, but he was sent to a prison camp.¹⁴

Andor Ludwig was a university student of economics when he was seized in Érd, along with 350 other civilians. In his plea for the boy’s release, the father asserted that Andor had never succumbed to barbarity, despite the fascistic education he had been given, and had demonstrated his humanity by helping people persecuted by the previous regime. Ludwig Sr., a postmaster, experienced

11 Scheffler János szatmári püspök levele Angelo Rotta budapesti apostolic nunciushoz a Szatmár megyei elhurcoltak hívei ügyében, 25 January 1945. Document 9. Stark Tamás, “*...Akkor aszt mondták kicsi robot.*” 98.

12 Stark, “*...Akkor aszt mondták kicsi robot.*” 136.

13 A Vörös Hadsereg által elszállított Nagy Zsigmond adatlapja. Document 55. 170; Pisták István kérelme Gyöngyösi Jánoshoz, 13 March 1945. Document 56. 171. Furmann Sándorné kérelme, 25 March 1945. Ibid. Document 64. 184.

14 Csohány Endre hadnagy és Nagy Károly zászlós levele, Document 26. 129. Sebők Károlyné kérelme, 7 May 1945. Document 103. Kertész Györgyné levele, 30 April 1945. Document 93. In Stark, “*...Akkor aszt mondták kicsi robot.*” 236–37; 219–20.

his son's fate as a *justizmord*. "It would be a tragic irony of fate if my son would have to share the well-deserved fate of those whom he considered the greatest enemies of our country and of humanity, and if he were to be struck down by the fist of the new world for which he longed so much."

Mrs. István Polgár, writing on behalf of 100 women for the liberation of their "completely disabled" husbands from the POW camp in Cegléd, felt that the wrong people had been seized. Mrs. Lajos Tokodi's sense of justice was deeply hurt when the Soviets deported her son, who had just returned from Jewish labor service, and a university student, György Hangody, who had risked his life saving her and her family from deportation to Auschwitz. "Where is the justice when Jews and their saviors are punished and suffering? The English radio had asked the Hungarians to save the Jews, and those who did so should also be saved from the terrible slavery." Soviet authorities did not distinguish between male and female forced laborers. For instance, they deported a husband and his 18-year-old daughter, while the mother and a 14-year-old son were released.¹⁵ Their situation was desperate, as nobody knew how long they would be held. Relatives were not given any information regarding where the prisoners were taken or why. Zoltán Kazai was on his way to an unknown destination in a Soviet livestock car when he wrote his family a letter delivered by strangers: "We are going out of the country, all of us, the sick and the elderly. I do not know when we will come back."¹⁶

In the freezing cold, civilians were driven to their deportation sites on foot in scant clothing, and brutalized by sadistic guards. They were put into cars that were locked from the outside. There were no rations except for a bucketful of water a day for over 30 people in a car. Conditions in assembly camps were dire. People were filthy and infested with lice due to the lack of sanitation, and were dying in large numbers from illness and malnutrition.¹⁷ Prisoners who died from illness, malnutrition, and maltreatment were buried in unmarked mass graves in the camp yards, and the camp authorities would not even disclose the names of the deceased. If the prisoners, many of them innocently en-

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- 15 Schmidt Jánosné kérelme a Donyec medencébe hurcolt férje és lánya szabadon bocsátása ügyében, undated. Ibid. Document 173. Stark, "..." *Akkor azt mondták kicsi robot,*" 319.
- 16 Ludwig Andor postafelügyelő kérelme, 29 April 1945. Ibid. Document 92. 218. Polgár Istvánné levele több száz asszony nevében, 4 May 1945. Ibid. Document 98. 231. Almáskamrási asszonyok levele elhurcolt lakosok ügyében, June 1945. Document 162. 306-307. Tokodi Lajosné levele a fogságba került zsidó munkaszolgálatos század ügyében, 27 June 1945. Ibid. Document 172. 318-319. Kazai József távirata Budapestről elhurcolt fia szabadon bocsátása ügyében. 30 May 1945. Ibid. Document 153. 292-293.
- 17 Szatmárnémeti lakosok levelei Gyöngyösi János külügyminiszterhez, 14 February 1945. Document 35. Ibid. 144-145.

slaved, were desperate, so were their relatives at home. They often had no idea whether their children, wives, or husbands were dead or alive.¹⁸

Food was scarce, and prisoners who collapsed of fatigue or malnutrition were shot on the roadside. When locals tried to feed them, Soviet guards drove them off and threatened to shoot them. Those who were unable to keep pace, mainly the sick and elderly, were summarily executed. A corporal fell out of the line and into a ditch. His companions beckoned him to stand up, but the corporal signaled that he was wounded. As a guard raised his machine gun, the corporal pleaded with him to show mercy, since he had four children. "You could walk in Ukraine, but you cannot walk here," the guard had replied, and he shot and killed the man.¹⁹ There may not have been much ideology behind the Soviets' cruelty. Rather, they killed the ailing, and thus useless, prisoners for pragmatic reasons. Those shot on the roadside were replaced with other, healthier men, randomly rounded up to fulfill the numerical quota of forced slave laborers. Soviet troops, as the writer Sándor Márai asserted, brought liberty, but did not bring freedom.

NEW DICTATORSHIP, OLD HABITS

The following episode bridges the gap between the national socialist and the communist segments of this book, the fundamental role human malice played under dictatorial regimes. The skills of survival and success acquired during the first could also be exploited during the second. Under the German occupation, two sisters quarreled about their paternal heritage in a provincial town. One of them, Mrs. M., was able to arrange for German troops to loot her sibling's building and take what she thought rightfully belonged to her. In retaliation, Mrs. L. denounced her sister's daughter, who was defined as a Jew by the laws at the time, as a Jew through her father to the Gestapo. According to the denunciation, the M. family was hiding Jews (this was true) and was also operating a secret radio station in their house. Listening to western broadcasts, was a punishable act during the war, and people could be denounced for having done so.²⁰

The Gestapo took Mrs. M. and her daughter into custody, but later released them at the intervention of a German officer, who was an acquaintance of Mrs.

18 Kovács Klára kérvénye a vissza nem tért foglyok ügyében, *Ibid.* 12 July 1946. Document 229, *Ibid.* 397.

19 Zalán Bognár, *Magyarok hadifogságban Magyarországon: Hadifogoly-gyűjtőtáborok, 1944–1945* (Budapest: Argumentum, 2010), 70.

20 Horváth János levele a *Magyar Futárnak*, 25 April 1944. MNL OL, K-557, Endre László.

M. Mrs. L. did not give up, and unleashed her friend, an officer of the Hungarian army, on her sister. The officer and his men took Mrs. M., her daughter, and her Jewish husband into custody, possibly with the intention of shooting them. While they were being escorted to an uncertain destination, the group ran into a German convoy, a member of which convinced the officer and his men to release the family.

The next round in the family feud occurred under communist rule. Mrs. L. denounced her sister to the political police in an effort to get her sent to an internment camp. From then on, both parties sought to use the People's Tribunal, which was tasked with dealing with war crimes, to exact revenge on the other. Finally, at Mrs. M.'s behest, Mrs. L. and her officer friend were tried in 1950 for war crimes. Unusually for a Stalinist court, the judge took the matter seriously, and on the basis of witness testimony, acquitted the defendants. In the verdict, the judge admonished the parties, stating that they were all adept at "exploiting the levers of power."²¹

The communist party state dictatorship, gradually established between 1945 and 1948 on the basis of the Stalinist model, was able to build on reflexes of survival and accommodation acquired in the previous regime. The practice of depriving politically underprivileged groups of their dwellings and handing them out to members of the privileged classes, for instance, was begun during the war and was widely used as a political and economic tool under communism.

In wartime, the central allocation of homes demanded a bottom-up initiative. The practice of allocation was tied to a specific dwelling, and the dwelling had to be discovered by the person who intended to take it from the owner. Thus, the prospective owner had to denounce the current owner to the authorities for living in a home he or she allegedly did not deserve. It was only after the war that the system was reinterpreted on the basis of the new ideology: the Jewish-Christian paradigm was replaced by a class distinction, the former exploiter-exploited paradigm. Hence, as the historian Ágnes Nagy put it, this practice laid the foundations for a system of mutual accusations and monitoring, and it perpetuated the system of denunciation. An Arrow Cross periodical propagated the idea of the redistribution of flats, and the communist daily continued this discourse, except that the labels attached to the positive and negative actors were reversed.²²

21 MNL OL, XX-5-B, box 50, 6881/1950

22 Ágnes Nagy, "Kinek a lakását lehet kiigényelni," in Zsombor Bódy and Sándor Horváth, eds., *Társadalom a háborúban: Folytonosság és változás Magyarországon* (Budapest: MTA BTK TTI, 2015), 121–29.

History is not transparent. It is accessible through the present, which defines the questions we ask of the past. In the view of some scholars, history cannot be reconstructed; it has even been argued historians construct the past.²³ Although this is perhaps an overtly skeptical approach to history as a profession, Ranke's ideal of writing history "as it was" may be an illusion. Documents and other traces of history are interpreted, and interpretation may be a captive of the historian's biases, prejudices, and preconceptions, not to mention training. The language of documents and the images of the past need to be unlocked, and both language and image may conceal as much of the past as they reveal. Records left by the totalitarian regimes are even more opaque than most historical records. They are couched in the crass ideological language of the day, in which words lose their everyday meanings. Documents left behind by Stalinist regimes were designed to obfuscate rather than clarify. Even more difficult to reconstruct is the closed and, some may say, warped universe of totalitarian regimes, which developed attitudes, reflexes, and responses specific to that closed universe, access to which is no longer directly possible. Some categories of history are hard to access: the manifold motivations for human behavior, including emotions such as fear, an ever-present phenomenon under harsh political regimes.

Stalinist political systems were built on deception, on "truths" recognized as untrue by most citizens. Party propaganda proclaimed national unity, though society was anything but unified, and spoke of artistic freedom "for the first time in history" when all artistic expression, save for the official dogma of socialist realism, was banned. The Party deceived even its own leaders. László Rajk, who had served as Hungary's Minister of Interior, agreed to confess to the absurd charge of having spied on behalf of Allen Dulles, a person he had likely never even heard of previously. He had been led to believe by his own party comrades that he would be sentenced, but then would immediately be released after the verdict was read. His trial blurred the line between fiction and non-fiction: all participants, the judge, the prosecutor, and defendants recited scripted lines, and the verdict and the sentences had been ready even before the trial had begun. Only the verdict was real: Rajk was executed in 1949.²⁴ Communism promised

23 See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination of Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975). The statement on the constructed nature of history has been walked back. Frank Ankersmit stated that postmodernism and narrativism "must be amended in such a way that the historians' intuitive ability to represent a past reality in and by his narrative is respected." Ankersmit cited in Dan Stone ed., *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, 7.

24 See György Hódos, *Tettesek és áldozatok: Koncepciók perek Magyarországon és Kelet-Közép Európában* (Budapest: Noran, 2005).

to liberate humanity from oppression, but arguably it was one of the most repressive political systems in history.

The socialist revolution would displace capitalism and lead all people, sooner or later, to an ideal, final, and most advanced form of human development, communism.²⁵ Since communists claimed to represent all the progressive forces of society, no other political movement was necessary. According to this logic, their monopoly of power was justified. In fact, the vast majority of citizens were left without any sort of political representation. There was no middle ground in communist thinking: to quote the Hungarian Stalinist politician Mátyás Rákosi, one was either with them or against them. The Party was infallible and, hence, it knew what was best for the people, in violation of the basic principle of democracy.²⁶

Communists claimed to know the absolute truth, and communist doctrine was allegedly the only philosophy able to represent reality, or social and economic “processes.” All rival worldviews and philosophies were superfluous. It was also an ideology that recognized no change. The dogma was eternal, no new insight or scientific progress could change its tenets. And, as Peter Kenez remarked, people were unchanging as well. No matter how hard one tried, if born in the enemy status, this could never be rectified. Non-communist ideas were either rendered obsolete by the higher knowledge of communism or were branded as harmful lies and distortions that served to conceal the truth from the masses and, thereby, to subvert human progress. Therefore, those notions and the people who disseminated them had to be eradicated. Followers of rival philosophies or political currents were judged by one criterion only: whether they were willing to concede that Marxism-Leninism was the only guide to truth. Social Democrats were judged as close enough to be reeducated, but conservatives, for instances, were irredeemable. Non-believers were not only redundant members of society, but were labeled hostile and harmful elements who needed to be cleansed.

Marxist-Leninist theory claimed to have discovered the laws of the economy, so communism would allegedly be able to solve all the economic ills of human society: exploitation, poverty, unemployment, and economic cycles. Market forces would be replaced by “full information” on the economy, which would allow communist planners to balance supply and demand. But, instead

25 For a critical contemporary evaluation of communist doctrine see James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution: What is happening in the World?* (New York: John Day Co., 1941).

26 On the principle of intrinsic equality, the notion that each adult is capable of making the best decision on his or her own fate, see Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 75.

of the abundance promised for an egalitarian society, the reality of state-controlled planned economies was constant shortage and the reproduction of poverty on a massive scale, concealed by a barrage of propaganda concerning poverty in the capitalist world and capitalist exploitation versus communist plenty.

Although the doctrine held out the promise of a “withering away” of the state and its punitive organs, which were allegedly the products of the class-based societies that had preceded socialism in the progress of human history, in reality, the size of the state and its repressive organs grew to unprecedented dimensions. Organs of state security were tasked with the constant surveillance of society. This is sometimes called the secret police, although it was anything but secret, since a secret existence would have defeated the purpose—the impression that one was watched constantly by members of the police. The other, interrelated purpose of state security was to uphold the political system and the total control of society at all costs and at the price of constant and intensifying terror and intimidation. The flexible group of class aliens, who were to be annihilated for the sake of “progress to communism,” were the chief, although not the sole, focus of monitoring and observation, and were used as convenient scapegoats to explain the shortcomings that plagued the country.

In order to understand the mechanism of repression, it is important know how the political leadership constructed the enemy in an epoch when the construction of that image was the core element of dictatorships.²⁷ The groups of alleged enemies were deliberately not properly defined and broad social circles felt insecure. Instead, terror was made unpredictable by a consciously vague definition of the groups of enemies. As György Springer aptly put it, “nobody was ever safe because they always chose a different group as the enemy.”²⁸ A college student felt that “the political police could come for us any moment.”²⁹ It is important to note that postwar Stalinist terror in the eastern half of the continent left few people completely untouched.³⁰ Even collaborators could easily become victims in a new wave of repression. Stalinism and its regional variations sought to “fashion the soul,” as Jochen Hellbeck puts it. The innermost thoughts mattered: “The Bolsheviks regarded the proletarian consciousness as the chief criterion in an individual’s claim to membership in Soviet society.”³¹

27 I wish to thank Gábor Gyáni for drawing my attention to this important perspective.

28 Barna Szász, “Az 1956-os magyar aki elmenekült és úrsebességre kapcsolt” *Index*, 23 October 2018. https://index.hu/techtud/tortenelem/2018/10/23/springer_gyorgy_george_urrepules_budapest_stanford_1956_oktober_23/.

29 Peter Kenez, *Varieties of Fear*, 82.

30 McDermott and Stibbe, eds., *Stalinist Terror in Eastern Europe*, 1.

31 Hellbeck, *Fashioning the Stalinist Thought*, 83.

I do not think, however, that Stalinist terror was a continuation of “cataclysmic ideological, social and ethnic conflicts and tensions that wrecked the region between 1939 and 1945, and even, arguably before,” as has been suggested by some historians.³² This suggests that the region was plagued by such conflict that terror after the war was unavoidable. I fail to discern such inevitability in a region that was historically and culturally so diverse. Rather, I believe that terror, which was rather homogenous throughout the entire region under the Soviet Union’s sway, may have stemmed from the very essence of the Stalinist system, in which the machinery of mass repression *justified* itself by postulating a potent and ubiquitous enemy that needed to be eliminated.³³

Neither do I think that everything about a Stalinist state was “coded” in the system. Individuals, human agency if you will, made a lot of difference. The political system constructed by Mátyás Rákosi in Hungary is a case in point. Rákosi, who managed to eschew all human traits within himself, lorded over a regime that was more terroristic than its cousins around the Soviet bloc. He revealed his sadistic proclivity when ordering his underlings in the dungeons of the political police to „crush the bones” of his political opponents, the otherwise also sadistic Szűcs brothers. In 1951 alone, 362,000 people were taken to court, and, in addition, police investigations involved another 500,000 in the same year in a country of little over nine million.³⁴ Even the Soviet ambassador complained about his ruthless terror, which was faithfully carried out by the sadistic leader of the political police, Gábor Péter. An annual 6,000 cases were tried by secret military tribunals, four times as many as in the coalition period, where the number of such trials was already very high.

For the Stalinist state, the ever-present enemies confirmed that state’s very existence. In fact, the Stalinist notion of an ever-intensifying class struggle, which predicted that the fervor and power of the enemy’s “resistance” was in an inverse relationship to the numbers of the enemy, predicted a constantly intensifying spiral of terror. The war years and National Socialism may have accustomed the local populations to killing and persecution and may have con-

32 Hellbeck, *Fashioning the Stalinist Thought*, 2.

33 Peter Holquist has argued that the Stalinist use of violence, like the National Socialist use of violence, “is better understood as a fundamentally aesthetic project to sculpt and idealized image of the politico-social body, rather than a narrowly understood medico-prophylactic pursuit.” Peter Holquist, “State Violence as Technique,” 155.

34 Soprovoditelnoe pismo E. D. Kiseleva A. Ia. Vishinskomu k spravke o podpolnoi deyatelnosti vrazhdebnykh elementov v Vengrii i o borbe s nimi 25 December 1952. Galina P. Murashko ed., *Vostochnaia Evropa v Dokumentakh Rossiiskikh Arkhivov* (Novosibirsk: Sibirski Khronograph, 1998), Volume II, 853-854. Document 309.

tributed to the emergence of attitudes and behaviors necessary for a dictatorial regime to survive.

The redistribution of other, “non-deserving” people’s assets to “deserving” people was built on a non-meritocratic attitude of entitlement and a false sense of justice. Previously, “oppressed” gentiles felt entitled to seek the redistribution of confiscated Jewish property to them because they were told that they were entitled to it. This kind of legitimized looting was a conditioned behavior that was highly useful under Stalinism as well, and came hand in hand with encouraging people to denounce others in their own material interest, with no regard for the consequences of such behavior on the person they informed upon. Denunciation was also a matter of personal security and, again, engaging in this behavior was essential to surviving in the Soviet world. In fact, Stalinist regimes nurtured the opposite of virtue: shortcuts as opposed to hard work; mendacity as opposed to honesty, disloyalty [with the exception of loyalty to the party and the cause] as opposed to devotion. The more willing people were to set aside these virtues and espouse the vices, the better their chances of succeeding.

Certain traits, however, still had to be acquired to survive and even do well under the radical left-wing regime. Constant dissimulation, play acting, and accommodation to expected behavioral norms became a way of life, as did hiding of one’s true beliefs and even identity (party members, for instance, were required constantly to “update,” i.e. to doctor their autobiographies to reflect the most current ideological or political trend). So as to survive, “in the course of their day-to-day lives, [people] learned to adjust to [the] state—in some cases just to survive, in other cases to resist pressures, in others to integrate their existence more fully with the requirements of the regime.”³⁵ The question can be put another way: whether the imperative of survival or an accommodation to the regime due to the internalization of its requirements was dominant? When a physics teacher, an upstanding conservative and Hungarian nationalist was talking about the ‘glorious Red Army’ his voice “turned mechanical and his students knew he was reciting a memorized text” his student understood that he was trying to keep his livelihood.³⁶

Total terror was meant to provide absolute security for the party state. To paraphrase Henry Kissinger, absolute security for the state meant absolute in-

35 Peter Corner, *Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes: Fascism, Nazism, Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4. For similar behavior in Hitler’s Germany see Elizabeth Harvey et al., eds., *Private Life and Privacy in Nazi Germany* (Institut für Zeitgeschichte – Cambridge University Press, 2019).

36 Kenez, *Varieties of Fear*, 83.



The party elite watches the May Day parade on Heroes Square, Budapest, 1947.
From the left: Mátyás Rákosi, Árpád Szakasits, László Rajk, and György Marosán. Fortepan/Berkó Pál

security for the individual. Defenselessness against the abuses of the state apparatus—and here I mean not only the apparatus of terror but all state agencies including local governments, school authorities etc.—was the most important trait of the Stalinist system. It is not that everyone could become a victim of abuse of power, but that there was no mechanism with which to rectify abuses. I also do not think that top level apparatchiks and the average citizen should be grouped together. True, even the most powerful [with the exception of the party leader] could become a victim, but only because they were part of an ongoing power struggle. In that sense at least they were “guilty” while the vast majority, totally excluded from wielding political power, were innocent.

This section strives to reveal the mechanisms of direct and indirect coercion and its effect on individuals. My goal is to understand how coercion affected the private sphere and whether the model that purports to provide an alternative to the totalitarian model, the so-called “participatory model,” stands up to the historical evidence. Is there a middle ground that would concede a broader circle of participation in operating the Stalinist state while conceding that much of the cooperation and collaboration was extracted by conditions created by a state that at least aimed at the “total control of society”?

A NEW ELITE

Although the new regime that rose to power between 1945 and 1948 mainly due to Soviet intervention promised a total break with the past and past abuses of power, the new elite did not break completely with that past. High-level functionaries of the party, the military, and the security establishment lived in carved out spaces and avoided contact with the masses they were supposed to represent. As in life, the space occupied by the party elite was segregated from the rest of society in death. Leading communists were interred in special plots in the Workers' Movement Pantheon of Kerepesi Cemetery. The health of cadres was looked after in elite institutions of healing. The new elite moved into the mansions and upper-class homes that had belonged to members of the old elite who had been killed, deported, or displaced, and even moved into the former dwellings of Jews who had been killed in camps and members of the former middle and upper classes who had been deported to the countryside by the new regime. This took the form of organized robbery: aside from a few belongings, all else was confiscated. Artworks and valuables were taken over by a state-owned pawn company on the basis of a list compiled by experts from the Museum of Fine Arts.³⁷ Every state-owned organ, no matter how innocuous, was used as an instrument of power.

High-level functionaries collected their furnishings, usually reflecting the taste of the ancient regime, from the belongings of the dispossessed ruling classes. The centralized state considered it moral to take other people's money, property, and valuables in the name of revolutionary justice. They did not pay; the loot came from warehouses under state control and made up of unclaimed belongings left behind by the dead, often victims of the Holocaust. Their homes were embodiments of their newly found power, and they were overawed by their underlings.³⁸ The regime wanted to overhaul not only the political class, but also the elite of its social base, the working class, as well. Mark Pittaway argued that the Rákosi regime aimed at the replacement of "the established cultures of the industrial workers, especially those that rested on pre-socialist notions of skill," thereby challenging hierarchies of skill and among the different generations.³⁹

The vanguard of the revolutionary movement needed to show that the workers benefited from their rule. Yet the party's power rested on the country's armed

37 Mária Palasik, "A budapesti kitelepítések politikai háttere," *Századok*, 149. 2015/6. 1363–95.

38 György Majtényi, *K vonal. Uralmi elit és luxus a szocializmusban* (Budapest: Nyitott könyvműhely, 2010), 154–57.

39 Pittaway, *The Workers' State Industrial Labor and the Making of Socialist Hungary*, 146–47.

elites. The distribution of the newly built “luxury” homes reflected this hierarchy. Only ten percent of the homes went to workers. The rest were allocated to policemen and army officers.⁴⁰

LIFE UNDER REPRESSION

Just as the new elite mimicked the lifestyle of the old, so did the new industrial working class preserve the ways of the prerevolutionary past. The newly founded industrial city Sztálinváros or “Stalin-city,” as Sándor Horváth pointed out, was supposed to be the most “socialist city,” “built according to utopian objectives, its spatial structure, architecture could be understood as an embodiment of Stalinist policies.” Yet the designers of the gigantic roads and squares hardly envisioned people brawling and chopping wood in public spaces, the sound of roosters crowing and hens clucking emanating from open windows in the early hours of the morning, or the sight of pigs being slaughtered in front of one of the buildings.⁴¹ Apparently, the people who had moved there from their “retrograde” environment in the countryside found it hard to adjust to the regime’s expectations and the regime’s vision of a modern, progressive lifestyle.

The rapid and thorough eradication of diversity in politics, the economy, and all walks of life had an immediate and profound impact on an impalpable aspect of life we call quality. A roving business traveler ventured behind the Iron Curtain at the peak of the Stalinist system in 1952. He found that “Prague looked sadder than during [his] last visit in 1943 during the height of the terror regime of Nazi occupation.” “Budapest, too, has changed. The once gay town has lost its former splendor and gayety. The people in the streets go about their business with an air of resigned boredom... In general men and women were very shabbily dressed.”⁴²

This was a pattern behind the iron curtain. A former workcamp prisoner observed that “happy smiles have vanished from people’s faces, fear had replaced good humor, laughter, and the happy international atmosphere in the formerly upper-class spa town of Karlovy Vary.”⁴³ In the otherwise prosperous

40 Pittaway, *The Workers’ State Industrial Labor and the Making of Socialist Hungary*, 78, 273.

41 Sándor Horváth, *Stalinism Reloaded: Everyday Life in Stalin-City, Hungary* (Bloomington Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017).

42 Visiting Foreign Businessman Compares Prague and Budapest. 1952. Open Society Archives, hereafter cited as OSA, 300-30-2:135. Czechoslovakia.

43 “Christmas Atmosphere in Karlovy Vary.” 1952. OSA, 300-30-2:135.

and elegant Prague, life became drab. People were wearing identical clothing, and many stores were closed. Long before daybreak, people began lining up in front of the stores.⁴⁴

The novelist Péter Esterházy used the notion of “diverted life” in connection with the radical left-wing dictatorship.⁴⁵ This experience was common to people living under communist rule. Heads of families deported to the Soviet Union from Poland were separated, causing great emotional trauma. “A wail ran through the car. They were taking both my dad and brother, to this day I don’t know what happened to them.”⁴⁶ From one moment to the next, people’s lives were derailed and would never be the same again. In addition to the people who were murdered, interned, or sent to forced labor camps, millions of lives were also irreparably damaged by state repression in communist states. The children of a party member convicted for treason lived in severe poverty.

A middle-class woman’s business was nationalized and she all but lost her livelihood. She was luckier than many others and was allowed to stay in her apartment, “but [it was] terribly overcrowded.” She was a “bourgeois element,” so the state moved several other families into her apartment, and she had no right to keep more than one room for her family obviously depriving her of the intimacy of family life. Life in the shared apartment revealed the polarity of public posturing and private beliefs. There was a stage director, a staunch communist who spoke eagerly of the West with his son. The show of public commitment to the Soviet principles alongside private appreciation of the West was not an uncommon phenomenon. Finally, a company director lived in the domicile who told her he could have her thrown out. “In his room there are the dearest items of our former happy home, our library, china, porcelain, curtains.” Her son attended school, got “propaganda” stuff (the instruction of literature and history served to legitimize the regime as an inevitable product of history and progress), but the mother used the family library to compensate for the “propaganda” taught at school.⁴⁷ Traditional values would therefore live on in the semi-privacy of the family home. The capacity for thought was constrained, but not destroyed. The home schooling served the purpose of survival in the sense of passing down knowledge and the values of the past to the next generation.

44 OSA, 300-30-161 (Czechoslovakia), 44-year-old German repatriate who spent nine years in Czech captivity.

45 Péter Esterházy, *Harmonia caelestis* (Budapest: Magvető, 2016), 545. (My translation from the Hungarian.)

46 See Katherine R. Jolluck, *Exile and Identity: Polish Women in the Soviet Union in World War II* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), 102.

47 “Hungary, Every Day Life in a middle Class Family.” OSA, 300-30-2:135, Czechoslovakia.

One imagines totalitarian dictatorships as highly repressive systems in which ordinary people are helpless victims who can disappear with no trace. Only Soviet-type political orders artificially elevated the number of people they could persecute.⁴⁸ Mátyás Rákosi's political system was interested in having a constant supply of enemies to be eliminated in order to retain the semblance of a regime under constant siege. While the Nazis wanted to annihilate their enemies, the Hungarian communists wanted to eat their cake and have it too. Few other political systems indoctrinated its citizens to hate so many others more than this one, and it stoked the flames of hatred by claiming that the "enemy" hated communists and their sympathizers enough to justify hunting them down. Class and other enemies of the state were to be eliminated, and the traces of their existence obliterated as well. Prisoners who died in captivity were not given a decent burial, their deaths were not registered.⁴⁹ This practice may indicate anxiety on the part of the authorities, as if they were afraid that the ghosts of their past would return to haunt them. Fear, then, was all pervasive: the state and its subjects were both afraid.

Existential fear was one of the essential building blocks of totalitarian power.⁵⁰ Writing about the "valuta tortures" of the 1930s, the American journalist Eugene Lyons astutely observed that the whole system was based on degradation and the erasure of human dignity and self-respect, "calculated to reduce the strongest men and women to the level of slobbering fear."⁵¹ "What is so hard to convey about the feelings of Soviet citizens," Robert Conquest has written, "is... the long-drawn-out sweat of fear, night after night, that the moment of arrest might arrive before the next dawn."⁵² Confessions extracted by torture instilled fear and compliance, as well as a steady flow of "enemies," into the arms of the institutions of terror. In the popular imagination, physical punishment was ubiquitous. A student at the Technical University in Budapest who made his way to Austria in 1952 thought that, in the room occupied by the party first

48 In the Nazi state the enemy status was not extended to the ranks of the Volksgemeinschaft therefore the categories safe from repression seems to have been constant.

49 A memorandum by prosecutor Bakos in November 1953 instructed the national commander of prisons to bury those deceased in the captivity of the state security police legally, that they should be entered into the death registry and that the relatives of the deceased be notified of the death. Bakos Pál ov. ügyész feljegyzése az Országos Börtönügyi Parancsnokságnak, 6 November 1953. See Zudar és társai, Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára hereafter cited as MNL OL [Hungarian National Archives], box XIX-10-K 4.

50 Existential psychology holds that the fear of death is the most profound experience of the human psyche. See Irvin D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

51 Lyons, *Assignment in Utopia*, 459.

52 Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 278.

secretary of Budapest, István Kovács, “behind the wooden paneling there was a regular torture chamber, a chair with a rubber band in which one could be chained down.”⁵³

Torture chambers were not necessarily a mere figment of people’s imagination. Forms of torture included breaking fingers, tearing off fingernails, and being forced to stand still for days with no food or drink. Psychological terror complemented physical brutality. Prison inmates were not allowed to read, write, receive, or send letters, which was also the standard practice in the Soviet Gulag. Communication with other prisoners was not permitted. The only sound one man heard was the “inarticulate scream of another inmate.”

Stalinist terror involved a large proportion of the population; it was also arbitrary, random, and unpredictable. Persecution instilled fear of the authorities, and many people were afraid under Stalin and his Eastern European clones. In sum, Stalinist terror was indiscriminate and socially inclusive. A vast number of enemies required a large number of collaborators, formal and informal, to catch them.⁵⁴ The sheer scope of monitoring, repression, and cleansing thus broadened the scope of social participation in running the dictatorial political system. Yet, this participation was not necessarily voluntary.

In the Hungarian version of the Soviet political system, the scope of intimidation and terror was constantly broadened, and targeted the majority of society. Therein may lie the secret of the stability of one as opposed to the other: Hitler’s Germany elicited minimal social opposition, while Stalinism struggled with large-scale opposition and upheaval. In addition, Nazism relied on the oldest hatred, anti-Semitism, while Marxist dictatorships postulated a less “popular” enemy by designating social classes as the enemy. It was the same group the Nazis persecuted, the Jews, whose targeting may have met with some approval in a Stalinist society.⁵⁵

I must note, that these political systems were reliant on external source of power to sustain them. To take Hungary, in 1956, the regime, its state security and its local apparatus collapsed in a matter of days. The reason is not that the Party did not have power. Once people lost their fear, they turned against the

53 OSA, 300-40-4, Box 8.

54 In East Germany, there was one informer for every 6.5 citizens. This number included secret informers, peaking at around 600,000 of them, in addition to roughly 500,000 unofficial collaborators. There were also part-time informers. Paul Betts, *Within Walls*, 45-49.

55 The many outbursts reported by state security agencies in connection with the Slansky trial included “All Jews should be shot” and “Hitler shot many of them but not enough.” See Kevin McDermott, “Stalinist Terror in Czechoslovakia: Origins, Processes, Responses,” in Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe, eds., *Stalinist Terror in Eastern Europe*, 110.

system without regard for the consequences. There remained no one to defend the regime except for Soviet troops. There was not a single social layer or group that remained by its side, not even the majority of the working class.

Stalinist systems were never satisfied with their number of enemies and sought to broaden their social scope artificially. The machinery of terror, which sustained the political system, required self-justification by postulating the omnipresence of internal and external foes, as well as undesirable elements. Enemy groups were constantly altered to justify the exercise of terror; a farmer classified as a “middle peasant” could, from one day to the next, become a kulak, or a reliable party member could be turned, literally overnight, into an enemy who had wormed his way into the ranks of the party to subvert it by deception. Jews could suddenly be transformed from an indifferent social layer to a hostile bourgeois, cosmopolitan group to be eliminated. In an anti-Semitic rant, party leader Rákosi declared that Zionism was the center of espionage. Zionists, he claimed, had infiltrated the party, and the head of the Israelite Church had “turned out to be” a “former spy of the Gestapo.”⁵⁶

TERROR FROM BELOW

A historian has suggested that “the state’s repressive powers were dependent on the actions of individual citizens... This was... a world based on private bargains in exchange for cooperation and complicity.”⁵⁷ I would put this somewhat differently, with more emphasis on the coercive nature of these so called “private bargains.” The constantly broadening circle of enemies required a constantly growing number of informants to unmask them. In the extreme conditions of the regime, people play-acted and wore masks to make themselves appear acceptable for the regime, which was presumed to have eyes and ears all over the place. On the other hand, according to its own sense of insecurity, the state assumed that its enemies, believed to be everywhere, were wearing camouflage to conceal their true identity, hence the obsession to “unmask.” Therefore “grass roots” collaboration to “uncover” the hidden enemy was extracted from the top. Mainly people with a questionable social background were *entrapped* into becoming the regime’s accomplices. Denunciation was mandated by law. The recruits would join because they were legitimately afraid that, because of their shady

⁵⁶ Rákosi hozzászólása az MDP PB ülésén, 11 February 1953. MNL OL, 276 f., 65 cs., 30 őe.

⁵⁷ Paul Betts, *Within Walls*, 49.

backgrounds, a refusal to sign up would have adverse consequences. Some people, on the other hand, were able to exploit even the centralized, terrorist nature of the repressive regime.

A shady past in the turbulent and terroristic period of East European history enhanced vulnerability to malicious reporting by people who were forced, or were willing, to resort to such methods. According to the totalitarian model, denunciation was a form of total control. It was the product of a climate of mutual suspicion encouraged by totalitarian regimes and a response to their insistence on ideological orthodoxy, conformity, and the exclusion of so-called alien elements. Denunciation functioned as surveillance, which was used to discipline the citizens. The citizens' model focuses on what people could achieve through denunciation. In fact, by soliciting and acting on denunciations, the state put its punitive powers at their subjects' disposal.⁵⁸ Thus, it is argued, totalitarian systems seem to have been less terroristic, less exclusive, and less oppressive than was perhaps sometimes imagined, and citizens had more power and agency than historians may have previously assumed. In fact, a sizeable segment of society seems to have taken part in making the system work.

If this were true, people were more than victims. The greater the degree of control authoritarianism attempted to exercise over the population, the greater the degree of participation from the population was required. Police states were not simply imposed from above by ruthless dictators. In contrast, Sheila Fitzpatrick has found that freely offered denunciations may not have been a typical starting point for Soviet secret police investigations; in the Great Purge, many denunciations were written by communists out of fear or to be on the safe side, rather as the product of some real sense of duty, outrage, or malice.⁵⁹

Studies of denunciations usually refer to the act as morally reprehensible. Denunciations made to the authorities by members of the citizenry assisted repressive political systems in their efforts to monitor and control their subjects. When evaluating these acts, it is important to establish whether the person was aware of the potential consequences of alerting the authorities. In some political systems, informers may have been generally aware that their victim could be exposed to danger. The judgement of such actions may also be a function of the particular conditions in which they take place.

58 Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Signals from Below: Soviet Letters of Denunciation in the 1930s," in Fitzpatrick and Gellately, *Accusatory Practices: Denunciation in Modern European History*, 85–120.

59 Gellately, *Denunciations in the Twentieth Century*, Fitzpatrick, "Signals from Below."

In 1945, the Red Army occupied Hungary and backed the local Communist Party in the establishment of a single party state. The vast majority of the people may have regarded the Soviets as invaders and communism as a repressive and undesirable political system. At first sight, informing the communist authorities would appear morally reprehensible. Károly Müller was seized by Arrow Cross militiamen in 1944. He was apprehended because he had been denounced for having provided help and refuge for Jews. After the war, he took revenge and denounced his denouncer, a former Arrow Cross district leader named Bányász. Although he may have brought danger on Bányász, his act can be seen as helping to serve justice, although many of the proceedings against accused war criminals were anything but fair.

Some studies of repressive systems have suggested, albeit based on partial data, that more people “assisted,” benefited from, and participated in the running of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century than previously believed. The question is whether this made those political systems less coercive, less totalitarian, and more consensual—and hence more “democratic”—than was previously assumed. Was there *less* fear and repression and *more* consensual, popular support in sustaining Hitler’s Germany and the Stalinist political systems than the totalitarian model suggests? What sustained the dictatorial regimes that governed in the name of the people but relied on mass terror to extract compliance and maintain stability?

The historian Sándor Horváth has asserted that “ordinary people were able to exert significant agency, since, without their participation, Stalinism would not have worked.” Therefore, “To understand these mutual influences, we have to shift the focus from what the party mandated or prohibited to what the Stalinist policies made possible, and how the acts of ordinary people shaped these policies.” Hence, there was the “experience of being free on an everyday level,” while at the same time “accommodating to Stalinist policies.”⁶⁰ The question would then revolve around the scope of freedom provided by a Stalinist system as opposed to non-repressive political orders, and around the balance between agency and coercion.

Totalitarian regimes defied an easy distribution of roles. The novelist Péter Esterházy offered the following explanation: “This is dictatorship: inevitable threat and inevitable fear... everyone threatens, everyone is afraid, while there is an executioner and a victim and the two cannot be distinguished from one

60 Horváth, *Stalinism Reloaded*, 4–6.

another.”⁶¹ Even apparently spontaneous acts were mostly coerced. For instance, when there were not enough homes to go around and this scarce commodity was allocated by the state and simultaneously that same state targeted a group of people for hatred and repression, it stood to reason that those who had no home of their own would seek to satisfy their need at the expense of the oppressed group because they were left with few viable choices.

It helped if one lacked all principles. Pál Szvatkó was penning anti-American and anti-British articles on the war. He was a ruthless representative of the German position, and his presentation of the war always suggested that no one but the Germans could win. Szvatkó, the writer Simon Kemény noted in his diary, bet on two horses. Publicly, he was fanatically pro-German, and he got paid well for it. Clandestinely, he told his Jewish acquaintances that he did not believe the things he published every day. The Germans had already lost the war, and the British had won. “He was only a victim who was forced to write his pro-German articles.”⁶² That is, if he wanted to keep his job.

For the balance between state coercion and individual initiative in upholding centralized rule, we must consider not only the scope of repression, but also how the high-pressure political environment may have altered the *behavior* of individuals as opposed to low-pressure non-coercive political systems, that is to say the *two-way dynamic* between repression and participation. Both Hitler’s and Stalin’s regimes [and their regional variants] emphasized public interest above private, allegiance to the party-state, and ideas over loyalty to kin and family. Mrs. Béla Nádas was tried as an alleged part of a group of spies and conspirators purportedly working for the American Counter Intelligence Corps. She was sentenced to life because “she placed the ill-conceived love for her younger brother above her homeland, the loyalty and unselfishness obligatory for each citizen.”⁶³ No private sphere was supposed to exist as a separate entity from the political, at least in theory.

The notion that grassroots actors may have sustained these regimes raises the question of whether the choices available to individuals were less limited than we have previously imagined, and whether there was perhaps more freedom in these political systems than we have previously tended to assume. Was individual participation in running terroristic dictatorships a result of a general “human condition,” or did tyrannical regimes alter individuals’ behaviors? Is it

61 Esterházy, *Harmonia caelestis*, 590.

62 Kemény, *Napló*, 107.

63 Jelencsics Géza és társai, ÁBTL, A-2127/8.

always possible to separate victims from participants, wrongdoers, and bystanders? Or were people forced to appear in some or all of these roles? Did individuals living under harsh conditions shape the regime they lived in? Or did the conditions mold the participants, against their will? A critical appraisal of the notion of participatory dictatorship sheds light on the nature of centralized oppressive regimes, the role of coercion and terror, traditions and human nature, in shaping the attitudes, behaviors, strategies, and life experiences of ordinary individuals whose goal was to survive the extreme conditions created by the political systems and the people that acted in its terroristic space.

It may be assumed that people need to adapt to the political and historical environment in which they find themselves. Those who grow up and live under harsh dictatorial rule have markedly different life experiences than those who live in democracies. They develop skills which allow them to survive, perhaps even to thrive, in a rule that may not be useful or work in democracies. It is reasonable to expect that people who were raised in the milieu of an oppressive, centralized dictatorship developed different traits than those who grew up in political regimes that did not rely on coercion as the main cement of society. Classifications of political systems tend to concentrate on institutional structures, legal frameworks, and methods used by rulers to wield power. It is harder to measure and classify the depth and breadth of political control and intervention in personal spheres.

In order better to understand the predicament of the individual and the individual's contribution to the operation of totalitarian dictatorships, one must first understand the scope of control, coercion, and persecution in totalitarian states. Although the meaning of control and persecution are clear, the terms cooperation and coercion may be more complex. Some scholars have found that there was less coercion and more cooperation than previously believed. Appearances may be misleading, and much, although by no means all, of the citizens', or more precisely, subjects', cooperation with these regimes may have been coerced. There were indirect forms of coercion that may not always be palpable and are not easily discernible within the paper trails of the past, so they must be sought in *traces* of history. On the other hand, the interpretation of resistance is also problematic, as motives are hidden, rather than revealed, by the sources. The language people use in official communication may be indicative of the pressures they are subjected to from above.

At certain junctures, people felt compelled to change their foreign-sounding names to Hungarian-sounding names. In 1945, with the regime change, some people took up the family name of a prominent communist, László Rajk. In

1948, however, Rajk was arrested, sentenced, executed, and disgraced as an enemy of the people. Many others who were associated with him were also executed. Therefore, those who bore his name tried to get rid of it. As one of them explained, “The identity of my name with one of the basest enemies of the people is a burden to me and causes problems with my activities as a journalist.”⁶⁴

It is with that proviso that this chapter will explore the concept of participatory or voluntary dictatorship, a term which refers to the notion that compliance with the regime was consensual for a large segment of society. I examine important components of existence under tyrannical rule: terror, repression, resistance, cooperation, and perhaps most importantly, collaboration.

COLLABORATION, RESISTANCE

“Better to be base than stupid. This Kenderesi was not a stupid man. He came up with the idea of posting my father with the policemen to check the peasant households. To check the compulsory deliveries. That is, my father ‘swept the attic.’ They told him there was always a cell set aside in the prison in Hatvan. ‘It’s waiting for you, count. Keep it in mind while you sweep.’”⁶⁵ The regime was cunning in its ploys to include “accomplices” from as many social layers as possible.

Mrs. Csizmazia lived in a small village in western Hungary. In 1952, she denounced fellow villagers to the State Security Authority for murdering Soviet officers. Her report led to an investigation as a result of which seven people were executed. The security services solicited denunciations by offering substantial rewards: shoes, clothing, and food, as well as a state decoration. Mrs. Csizmazia was highly pleased with her reward and made it known that she would continue reporting to the authorities.⁶⁶ We could say that this was a typical case of social participation in repression: the “investigation” was sparked by an ordinary citizen.

But one must also take into account the conditions in which individuals had to survive. In this respect, the woman’s confession was extracted by the exigencies of her times, the drastic shortage of consumer goods produced by Stalinist economies. Like millions of others, she could have chosen to endure hardship imposed by the system of government, which offered rewards for those who

64 István Kozma, “Családnév-változtatás és történelem, 1894–1956,” *Századok*, 1997/2.

65 Esterházy, *Harmonia caelestis*, 606. (My translation from the Hungarian.)

66 Rolf Müller, *Politikai rendőrség a Rákosi korszakban* (Budapest: Jaffa Kiadó, 2012), 193–95.

were willing to cause trouble for others for personal gain. It is a historical “fact” that she made a denunciation, but the interpretation of this “fact” is complex.

Richard Overy has argued that the dictatorship in the Soviet Union enjoyed a large measure of popular support.⁶⁷ It is another matter as to how one can arrive at such a conclusion when citizens of that state had no measurable way to express displeasure with their political system. On the other hand, a Hungarian escapee testified that the population in Hungary “sympathizes with things the regime despises.”⁶⁸ His statement is illustrated by an incident in the countryside. A “middle-peasant” hid 250 kilograms of wheat so that he would not have to surrender it to the state. When the inspection committee called him to account, he told them that he would rather “beat them to death.” The person’s confrontation with the authorities caused satisfaction among the villagers, as the person in question “always tried to evade government decrees.”⁶⁹ The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 caused great excitement among prisoners in Czechoslovakia. They “gulped down every word” and “indulged in lively discussion.” “Freedom seemed to be within reach,” and there was “disappointment over the fateful end and fury against a wavering West.”⁷⁰

The assumption that totalitarian systems enjoyed wide popular support rests mainly on evidence gleaned from letters of denunciation. Soviet officials, who were in a good position to judge the popularity of “socialism,” had a different opinion. In 1953, after the East German uprising, a Soviet official wrote, “what was surprising for the Moscow leadership was the overwhelming, widespread, and explosive nature of discontent.”⁷¹ A middle-aged Jewish man who had been “ruined by the Germans and the Arrow Cross first,” asserted that she could “not conceive a political system worse than Communism.”⁷² Popular expectations regarding liberation from the communist yoke were widespread. A man who had lived in Budapest claimed that the only thing he held against Radio Free Europe was that their “promise regarding liberation” would not be fulfilled anytime soon.⁷³

67 Richard Overy, *Dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 2004). The evidence was gleaned from a book written by the journalist, Eugene Lyons in 1937.

68 Karl Brown, *Regulating Bodies: Everyday Day Crime and Popular Resistance in Communist Hungary, 1948–1956*. Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation. The University of Texas at Austin, 2007. 77.

69 Jelentés Sebestyén László főosztályvezető részére, Belügyminisztérium IV/6 Bűnügyi Osztály, 14 August 1952. MNL OL, XIX-B-1-j, box 8, 223.

70 Former prisoner of German origin. OSA, 300-30-2/139.

71 Cited by Mark Kramer, “The Post Stalin Succession Struggle and the Upheavals in Eastern Europe,” part 2, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, volume 1, number 2 (1999): 4.

72 Interview with a 38-year-old man, 1955 OSA 400-40-4, Box 8.

73 OSA, 311-41-4, Box 8.

A bookkeeper from Bohemia described communism as “organized robbery” and thought that the sooner a Soviet-American war came, “the better.”⁷⁴ A student who was not allowed to continue his studies because of an illegal leaflet claimed that, during the Korean War, hopes were high that war would break out between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., and this had a stimulating effect on opposition in Czechoslovakia.⁷⁵ Freedom, as a 16-year-old carpenter’s apprentice put it, could “happen only in war.”⁷⁶

Some of the comments reveal desperation. A 34-year-old glazier asserted that people were happy for those who managed to escape, and they lived the rest live their lives in the hope that “liberation would come soon.”⁷⁷ In fact, as a tractor driver put it, “millions of people are awaiting the liberating armies of the West.”⁷⁸ In the wake of the uprising in Berlin, “many were hoping that the hour of freedom was not far away.”⁷⁹ A former merchant was convinced that “it is only a matter of weeks until the West crushes the communists.”⁸⁰ This attitude was the same all over the Soviet bloc. Simon Orenstein attested that prison authorities liked to spread rumors of impending American liberation, and prisoners wanted to believe these stories. Rumors gave prisoners a new lease on life.⁸¹ A medical student from the Slovak town of Nitra opined that people would risk their possessions, and even their lives, to be able to live as free citizens again. At least half the anti-Communists, he believed, thought that only war could bring an end to the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”⁸²

A young Jewish girl told her interlocutors in Vienna that life in Hungary was so exploitative, and people were so impoverished, that there was not a single social layer or class that was satisfied with the results of Communism.⁸³ Embarrassing situations revealing worker dissatisfaction abounded. Locals stormed a warehouse in Cegléd because they thought that American children’s clothing were being put on sale. They shattered the windows so that the party secretary was forced to suspend the sale, as it “occasioned hostile propaganda and agitation.”⁸⁴ Grumbling reached the working class. At a meeting organized at

74 “Communism is organized Robbery.” OSA, Czechoslovakia, 300-30-2:152.

75 “The Political Opposition against Communism.” 7 September 1954. Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 Tractor Driver, 1953. Ibid.

79 29-year-old truck driver. Ibid.

80 Former textile merchant and wife. Ibid.

81 OSA 300-30-2/39.

82 Medical student from Nitra, 1953. OSA, 300-30-2:152, Czechoslovakia.

83 Young Jewish Girl’s Comments. OSA, 300-40-4, Box 8.

84 Kis Károly jelentése Rákosi Mátyásnak, 5 April 1955. MNL OL, M KS, 276 f., 65. cs., 283. őe.

the Budapest Electric Works, a worker compared the capitalist firms of the “old world” favorably to the state-owned company. His remarks were met with loud applause and approval.⁸⁵ In fact, the labor competition and the unpopular piece-wage system undermined the communists’ popularity even in locations where they had enjoyed workers’ support at the time of the communist takeover, forcing the state to amplify repressive measures.⁸⁶

Hatred of and anger aimed at the regime was not unknown to the authorities. State security officials learned of an itinerant paper merchant who kept repeating that “after the election, the Americans and the British will occupy Hungary and exterminate the communists to the last man.” When this report was issued in 1953, communist regimes were facing massive unrest in the GDR, Czechoslovakia, and even Bulgaria. The pressure of politics on individuals living in dictatorships was strong: they faced choices that most people do not encounter in democracies. As George F. Kennan observed, communism (and one might add, Nazism) exploited “the evil rather than the good in the human race.”⁸⁷

In 1957, an escapee from Hungary explained, “One could succeed in proportion to one’s ability to make oneself useful to the system. And the latter used mainly the base capabilities of human beings. It taught everybody to lie, to spy, and to slander.”⁸⁸ In 1950, a man and his wife sold their belongings to pay smugglers for whisking them out of the country. The person they paid double-crossed them, and they were lucky to make it home without getting caught. By then the neighbors, who resented the fact that the couple had returned, took everything they had.

People often found themselves in situations where acting in accordance with their moral convictions forced a choice between obeying or breaking the law. Respect for the law in democracies is a value and practice that serves as the glue of society. Under National Socialist or communist rule, obeying the law may not always have been a virtue. Citizens who break the law may be more virtuous than those who obey laws requiring denunciation and persecution. Breaking these laws, however, would have served them better. Under the Stalinist system, it turned out that right and wrong were relative terms depending on the

85 Confidential source, 1953. OSA, 300-30-2:52.

86 Pittaway, *The Workers’ State Industrial Labor and the making of Socialist Hungary*, 119.

87 Cited by John Lewis Gaddis, “George F. Kennan and the Strategy of Containment,” in Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 146–200.

88 Cited in Brown, *Regulating Bodies*, 5.

political situation. What was virtuous and morally correct one day may have been morally reprehensible, even legally punishable, the next. The noted scholar, Domokos Kosáry boasted that he had hidden a British parachutist during the war. After 1945, however, this was seen as (or defined as) wrong, and Kosáry got into trouble, as the heroic act was taken as proof of his anti-Soviet stance.

Ignác Lázár was a railroad employee who broke the law regarding illegal border crossing by helping a man cross the Romanian-Hungarian border. He risked spending several years behind bars. In court, he justified his “crime” by stating that he “took pity on the poor miserable man, also a railway worker and a Hungarian and that’s why he helped him.”⁸⁹ People who accepted moral condemnation and punishment to adhere to more general values and who helped *others* were perhaps not necessarily an exception, although it would be hard to estimate their number. A distinction thus needs to be made regarding resistance, the rejection of a political system or a part of it. Some would regard any action that was against totalitarian law as an act of defiance of, and resistance against, the regime. Operating in the black economy could thus qualify as resistance because it was illegal, but it did not necessarily signify rejection of the system, only the will to survive by circumventing its provisions.

Helping another person is necessarily a definition of resistance, as it constitutes an act beyond self-preservation and thereby must necessarily mean the rejection of a part or the whole of the system. Reliance on contemporaries to determine what constituted resistance to the conditions in which they lived may be a good option. Referring to Stalinist Czechoslovakia, Radio Free Europe analysts asserted that “under the present circumstances in the communist dominated countries all these ridiculous and petty actions can be qualified as activity against the state and the risk connected to scribbling mocking commentaries in daily papers in a café is far greater than stealing a car in the West.” Resistance included attending political meetings to turn them into comedy.

We may never know why some people in the same village, national, and ethnic community picked up an axe while others opened a cellar or an attic or another hideout in their homes to save the person their neighbors were trying to kill. It is easier to discern the motive of the killer than the rescuer. People committed acts of murder for an array of reasons, including material and financial gain, racial and anti-Semitic beliefs, general brutality, and revenge. Rescuers rarely left a trace of their motives. These motives included material gain, religious belief, emotional attachment, and I would safely use

89 MNL OL, XX-5-B, box 23, 3/23/1950.

a non-technical term, *doing good*. Even in the darkest times, *one* option was left open: not to join the haters, the choice between doing good and evil. Do individuals create the historical conditions or do invisible historical forces shape the individual?⁹⁰

It is often hard to discern the difference between collaborators and resisters, victims and perpetrators. The roles are sometimes mixed, and roles often change. As a witness in a 1949 trial explained, “I am in a very difficult situation, I have to defend an Arrow Cross man... this young man saved me... he helped everyone... When I tried to thank him, he refused and said he had done his duty.” The person in question had been a high-ranking functionary of the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party named Pál Szalai. He had disseminated national socialist ideas and had helped build a powerful, popular national socialist movement. When his party eventually came to power in October 1944, he used his high office to save and rescue Jews.⁹¹

SELF-POLICING OR “TOTAL CONTROL”?

People governed by terroristic regimes inflicted terror on their peers themselves. German citizens sent countless letters to National Socialist authorities to get some action from the state or express love for Nazism and Hitler; denunciations were often sent to the Gestapo, and if this is true, the Nazi police state may not have been merely imposed on society from above. Denunciations helped the Gestapo, which in fact “could hardly have operated with such success had it been denied the participation of the German population as occasional voluntary denouncers.” The state’s formidable punitive powers were put to the disposal of its individual citizens. Private enemies could be denounced, and the state could take care of the alleged “problem.”⁹² “It seems,” Robert Gellately has written, “that self-interest fueled the self-policing system.” Denouncers offered tips in order to get rid of enemies, rivals, and competitors, and this occurred within neighborhoods, homes, and even families.⁹³ In Russia and later the So-

90 Steven Pinker attributes an individual’s propensity to harm someone and the ability to resist internal impulses for aggression to differences of people’s cerebral structure. Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, 482–570.

91 Adam, *Budapest Building Managers and the Holocaust in Hungary*, 83; Krisztián Ungváry, *Az ostromlott Budapest két titka* (Budapest: Kossuth, 2016).

92 Fitzpatrick and Gellately, eds., *Accusatory Practices and Denunciation in Modern European History*.

93 Gellately, *Denunciations in the Twentieth Century*.

viet Union, denunciation served as a means of social control over the behavior of the local authorities.⁹⁴

Richard Evans has offered a prudent critique of the self-policing model. To speak of self-policing society, he argues, “understates the element of top-down terror.” It was the Gestapo’s active pursuit of deviance and dissent that gave denunciation meaning, and it was the secret police and the agencies it empowered that kept Germans under surveillance. The Reich openly proclaimed the vastness of the Gestapo’s ambition as an instrument of terror, fostering the belief that agents were everywhere and knew everything that was going on.⁹⁵

Denunciation as a social practice in the harsh European systems of the twentieth century has to be put in proper perspective. The Stalinist state waged war on most of the population, although the focus groups of attack could change from time to time. The Great Terror in the Soviet Union was directed in roughly equal proportion against diverse “enemies of the state” and different national minorities.⁹⁶ The enemy was invested with diabolical qualities, and their liquidation served as a convenient alibi for aggression. A “them or us” mentality (either we destroy the enemy or the enemy will destroy us) dominated Nazi thinking regarding the Jews and Stalinist thinking regarding class enemies. A Soviet advisor in Czechoslovakia named Likachev contended that, “either we twist their necks or they twist ours.”⁹⁷ His statement confirms that state violence served to protect the communist state from its real and imagined foes. The military rhetoric suggested that state violence was directed at protecting the communist state from its real and perceived enemies.

If Hitler had had his way, Germany would have rid itself of its “enemies” by deporting or killing them all. In Stalinist systems, where the constant intensification of terror was enshrined as a law, the supply of enemies was unending.⁹⁸ The enemy’s hatred had to be met with the appropriate measures. In 1953, a Hungarian judge explained his verdict with the following words: “The criminal case just tried is another proof that we are constructing socialism in the midst of the hatred and resistance of the last remnants of the *shattered* exploiting classes.” [emphasis by the author] The enemy had to contend with serious repercussions

94 Vladimir Kozlov, “Denunciation and its Function in Soviet Governance,” in Fitzpatrick and Gelately, eds., *Accusatory Practices and Denunciation in Modern European History*, 121–52.

95 Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, 115.

96 Snyder, *Bloodlands*, Chapters 2 and 3; Oleg Khlevniuk, *Stalin: A New Biography of a Dictator* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2015), Chapter 5.

97 Cited in Petr Blažek and Pavel Žáček, “Czechoslovakia,” in Krzysztof Persak and Łukasz Kamiński, eds., *A Handbook of the Communist Security Apparatus* (Warsaw, 2005), 87–162.

98 See Khlevniuk, *Stalin*.

though: "we are able to unmask and crush those who lift a finger against our homeland." The function of law was to protect the social and political system. In Stalinist systems, the crime committed was not the only yardstick in sentencing. The concept of deterrence was equally important. In a 1952 case against alleged conspirators and traitors, the Supreme Court asserted that "The *protection* of the working people demands that this defendant (László Gazdag) ... receive capital punishment because this will be suitable effectively to deter hostile elements from committing crimes against the state."⁹⁹

Hungary was living under constant siege, under attack by domestic and external foes. It was this that concerned the Hungarian state security authorities most. "International events," a judge proclaimed, were "constantly proving that the aggressive activities of the imperialist powers were multiplying day-by-day and were preparing for their aggressive war against the peace camp with increasing intensity."¹⁰⁰ If deterrence was an important function of law, so was "segregation" of the enemies of the political system from the rest of society. Béla Balogh was under arrest for participation in an organization called Independence Bloc of Hungarian Resistance. Purging undesirables was also a focal point of police activity. The case officer in the political police, the ÁVH, noted on the margin of Balogh's personal file that "the above-named is an inveterate enemy of the democratic system. He cannot be educated even in the long term. He needs to be completely taken out of society."¹⁰¹

The doctrine of the constant intensification of class struggle "predicted" that the more enemies were destroyed the more intense their opposition became, which in turn required the intensification of the combat against them. As a judge put it,

the current trial is proof that we are constructing socialism in the midst of the hatred and resistance of the remnants of the former ruling classes. The former 'levente' educator, teacher-principal, the children of the Horthyite lieutenant, the former priest apprentice and the lieutenant of the heart guard prove again and again that the enemy observes our progress to socialism with increasing anger and is picking more and more methods to attack.¹⁰²

99 Jelencsics Géza és társai, 23 July 1955. ÁBTL, A12178-. Emphasis by the author.

100 Nádas Béla és társai, op. cit.

101 Flossmann Győző és társai, Magyar Ellenállók Függetlenségi Frontja, 3 March 1952. ÁBTL, -1052/50986, V73303-. The same statement was added to the files of two other defendants. Eleven people were charged.

102 Zudar és társai, MNL OL, XIX-10-K, box 4.

The belligerent language highlighted the broad social scope of the definition of the enemy, which, as in the Arrow Cross regime, included the offspring. This was no “social sculpting” but a war of “self-defense”—survival—against an implacable and irredeemable enemy in which there was no mercy. The war of annihilation was only a reaction to the hatred shown by the enemy.

The root cause of the war the Hungarian communist state waged on its society lay in ideology, the thesis that the resistance of hostile conservative elements had to be overcome on the road leading to communism. József Révai, the Hungarian Communist Party’s chief ideologist, explained that the enemy included “Zionists and Hungarian bourgeois nationalist as well as the remnants of capitalists, kulaks, and cosmopolitans.” These categories were vaguely defined and therefore flexible enough to include wide circles of society. To make things worse, on a higher level of development, class struggle would “inevitably” become more intense. “Political consolidation and the increase of class struggle were not contradictory conditions, as the enemy weakens its resistance grows simultaneously.” As another functionary, the historian Erzsébet Andics, put it, “on the higher stage of development, class struggle intensifies and this was *inescapable*.”¹⁰³ Even in 1953, a party secretary estimated that there were still 500,000 hostile elements left in the country.¹⁰⁴ In Poland, there were six million names on the list of suspicious and hostile elements.

There was one secret policeman for every 10,000 inhabitants of Hitler’s Germany and one for 500 in the Soviet Union. After the coup in Czechoslovakia, in reaction to the mass resistance to the new regime, the authorities registered 200,000 people, between 1951 and 1958 the security service, StB, kept 125,000 people under active surveillance. In 1955, the Czechoslovak state security, which had authority over a population of 12.5 million, employed the services of almost 38,000 informants of various categories. In 1990, 260,000 citizens of the country who had been victims of political crimes were rehabilitated. Czechoslovak penal institutions incarcerated 32,638 political prisoners in 1950, and 240 people were executed between 1948 and 1960.¹⁰⁵ Forcing citizens to work as informants for state security was a top priority in Czechoslovakia. The deputy head of the Association of the Disabled resigned because many members of the asso-

103 Révai feljegyzése Rákosinak, MNL OL, 265. F. 65. cs. 16. őe; Elméleti feladataink és a pártoktatás, Révai és Andics hozzászólása, MNL OL, 265. F. 53. cs. 10. őe. Emphasis by the author.

104 Zapis besedi s Bíró, in Galina P. Murashko ed., *Vostochnaia Evropa v Dokumentakh Rossiskikh Arkhivov*, vol 2., 866–71.

105 Blažek and Žáček, *Czechoslovakia*.

ciation, particularly those licensed to sell newspapers and cigarettes, were forced to act as police informants.¹⁰⁶

In Romania, the General Directorate of People's Security was tasked with "the defense of democratic conquests and to ensure the security of the Romanian People's Republic against the plotting of external and internal enemies." Opposition to the communist regime was a criminal offense, according to a law passed in 1949. The death penalty for treason and economic sabotage was introduced in 1949, and a decree was promulgated to punish acts "considered dangerous to society" even if these acts were "not specifically provided for in the law as crimes." In 1948, the Securitate employed the services of 42,187 informers, and in 1951, 417,916 Romanians were kept under watch. In addition, two years prior to Stalin's death, security troops were employed, 64,000 of them including the officers, to maintain public order in major industrial centers and quell any resistance to government measures. Resistance to collectivization alone led to the arrest of 80,000 peasants. According to some accounts, between 1949 and 1960, 134,150 political trials took place involving at least 549,400 accused.¹⁰⁷

An even higher number, over 45,000 informants, reported to the Hungarian State Security Authority in 1953 in a variety of arrangements: informants and their handlers, or as "social contacts" with no formal ties to the authorities. This did not include people "provisionally" recruited by the police for individual affairs under investigation. As the country's population was just over 9 million, this was a higher per capita ratio than in either the USSR or Hitler's Germany. The armada of informants kept 1,149,659 people under observation, which is roughly one out of every eight Hungarians.

During the domestic thaw following Stalin's death in 1953, 666,728 files were "erased" because they were collected "unlawfully." On the other hand, the political police's "observation potential" increased by 44 per cent in 1954. State censors opened almost 30,000 letters annually, and, in 1955, close to 43,000 reports were filed on recorded conversations.¹⁰⁸ The figures suggest that people had every reason to think that they were observed all the time, which justified their reluctance to speak in public. In Hungary, an estimated 500 people were executed for so called political crimes. The East German's state's surveillance of its citizens was more even more amplified. The communist state employed

106 "Deputy Head of Association of Disabled Arrested." OSA, 300-20-2:52.

107 Denis Deletant, "Romania," in *Handbook of the Communist Security Apparatus*, 291, 305, 317.

108 Erzsébet Kajári, "Bevezető a Belügyminisztérium Kollégiuma 1953-1956 közötti iratainak tanulmányozásához," in György Gyarmati, Katalin Varga, eds., *A Belügyminisztérium Kollégiumának ülései 1953-1956*, volume 1 (Budapest, 2001), 24-27.

eight times as many informants per capita than its National Socialist predecessor, which had 40,000 informers for 80 million people. One in 50 citizens in the GDR worked for the Stasi in some capacity or another, which is higher even as a percentage of the population than the number of informants who were active in the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁹

The number of state security personnel employed to monitor and control the population does not tell the full story. The fear of being denounced may have been more widespread than many historians realize. It was not the real number of undercover police that mattered, but the perception, or even conviction, that they were everywhere, permeating the fabric of society. Hannah Arendt has observed that both National Socialist and Stalinist systems developed “a system of ubiquitous spying where everybody may be a police agent” and “where each individual *feels* himself under constant surveillance.”

Political matters were not discussed in any circle unless one could be absolutely sure that all the participants of the discussion were totally reliable.¹¹⁰ State invasion into private life was profound. In the Soviet system of the 1930s, “the family became an institution to serve the state rather than a separate sphere safe from state intervention.”¹¹¹ The historian Richard Evans has aptly said that it was the unpredictability, and not the frequency, of denunciation that mattered. Vladimir Timofeev, the son of a repressed father, recalled that his mother “avoided serious conversations, she was afraid.”¹¹² An escapee from Czechoslovakia recounted that, if a stranger entered the coffeehouse he frequented, he was treated the same as known members of the police, “since it was well-known that the police sometimes uses agents who are not known to anybody.”¹¹³

On the Prague express to the ancient spa town of Karlovy Vary “people avoided conversation with strangers; only well-acquainted persons talked at soft voice.”¹¹⁴ The porter in an upscale Prague hotel told a businessman to be careful, as he was under “invisible” security control all the time. Later, this person learned that the agent who had been shadowing him was the porter him-

109 Figures cited in Marcus Jacob and Marcel Tyrell, *The Legacy of Surveillance: The Explanation of Social Capital Erosion and the Persistent Economic Disparity between East and West Germany* http://conference.iza.org/conference_files/DivLMI2010/jacob_m6188.pdf 2010, 6.

110 On the “walls have ears, watch your tongue” culture in the Soviet Union see Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

111 Hoffmann, *The Stalinist Era*, 99.

112 Cited in Frierson, *Silence was Salvation*, 247.

113 “Communist Control of Social Life Hampers even Entertainment.” 1954. OSA, 300-40-4. Box 8.

114 “Christmas Atmosphere in Karlovy Vary.” OSA, 300-30-2:135. Czechoslovakia.

self, who had been an official of state security.¹¹⁵ The culture of silence, as József Ö. Kovács put it, was established by a decree according to which any utterance made in the presence of two or more people was regarded as “gossip” and as “disdain” for the democratic order and its institutions.¹¹⁶

The placement of informants was at least as important as their numbers in making citizens feel that they were being watched. The dictatorship of the proletariat was officially established in 1948 in Hungary. A woman attended a meeting where the party bigwigs, Rákosi, Ernő Gerő, and Zoltán Vas all took part. Gerő gave a particularly harsh speech in which he called for the “destruction one way or another” of the former ruling classes, landowners, industrialists, officers, and kulaks. The woman was so outraged at the hateful tone that she showed her record of the meeting to a friend employed at the American Legation. A few days later, shortly after midnight, she heard loud banging on the door. There followed a string of interrogations and torture aimed at implicating her in a conspiracy to overthrow the regime. In a four-day trial, she was sentenced to death, which was commuted to prison for life.¹¹⁷ Not talking about political matters to anyone with the possible exception of family members and highly trusted friends was a skill people had not yet acquired in 1948.

In Czechoslovakia, a network of agents was set up to ferret out information from inhabitants of border villages, communists, and people susceptible to blackmail to assist border guards.¹¹⁸ Internal documents on the formation of the Hungarian political police reveal that not only did they try to put informers everywhere so that “there would be a reliable informant even in the smallest hamlet,” but that they would also be strategically placed. Workers who met large numbers of strangers by virtue of their occupation, such as housekeepers, hairdressers, hotel staff, waiters, and former gendarmes who knew everyone in their village, were likely to be recruited.¹¹⁹ The hospital designated for party and state cadres employed 26 agents in various capacities. A decree revealed the scope of surveillance in the countryside, according to which the so-called “T network” available to *each* police station was to be deployed to monitor the threshing of grain. In fact, they had enough informers to make sure

115 “A Visiting Foreign Businessman Compares Prague to Budapest.” 1952. OSA, 300-30-2:135. Czechoslovakia.

116 József Ö. Kovács, *A paraszti társadalom felszámolása a kommunista diktatúrában – a vidéki Magyarország politikai társadalomtörténete, 1945-1965* (Budapest: Korall, 2012), 77.

117 OSA, 300-40-4, Hungary. “With Anna Kéthly in Jail,” Report XIII-1381/A. 1 February 1957.

118 “Intricate set of Informants Said to be in Making to Assist Borderguards.” OSA, 300-30-2-22.

119 Müller, *A politika rendőrség a Rákosi korszakban*, 156–58.

that “at each threshing machine the recruited T individual should regularly inform the police stations.”¹²⁰

Signing up to work for the StB was not supposed to be voluntary on the part of the recruits. A Czechoslovak security agent who had worked as a recruiter before defecting stated that the officer must be able to direct and control the enlisted individual. Unless he was an ardent communist, the prospective informant should be terrified, and, to enhance his terror, the officer should reveal that he knew all details of the victim’s life. The following bargain was offered: “We can deprive you of your job, and have you arrested. Your family and children will be made to suffer.” If the informant accomplishes the first tasks to satisfaction, friendly relations can be established between informer and taskmaster, they can drink beer or wine together, and money can be given.¹²¹

Ferenc Albrecht was a lawyer born to a middle-class family with land and a house in Transylvania and thus qualified as a class alien. The ÁVH recruited him in 1949 to “monitor his group of friends.” Although several of these friends were planning to flee the country, Albrecht refused to turn them in. As he was deemed highly dangerous to society and an enemy of the people’s democracy, he was given three years for his crime of “neglecting the obligation to report.”¹²²

Mrs. Pál Bertók worked for the Zionist Youth movement between 1944 and 1949 and was in charge of organizing Jewish emigration. This activity gave the ÁVH the occasion to force her to “penetrate the Zionist movement.” She was arrested at the peak of the Soviet-inspired anti-Zionist witch hunt in 1952 for the crime of furnishing the authorities with “falsified” reports.¹²³ As in other, similar cases, the spouse was also targeted: her husband was interned for trying to flee Hungary.

A university student and Catholic activist with a working-class background was an example of state penetration into religious organizations. Ervin Kaas headed the Catholic Student Union branch of the community organization of the Catholic Church, *Actio Catholica*. The Union was in charge of the Catholic university and of college students. Despite Communist attempts to control student organizations, candidates of the Union were elected into the executive organ of the National Union of University and College Students [*Mefesz*].

120 A Belügyminisztérium a Budapest Rendőrkapitányság vezetőjéhez és az összes megyei rendőrkapitányság vezetőjéhez, feketecseplések ellenőrzése, 1 August 1951. MNL OL, XIX-B-1-j, box 25, 00611.

121 “Intricate Net of Informants Said to be in Making to Assist Borderguards.”

122 Albrecht Ferenc, ld. Zudar és társai, MNL OL, XIX-10-K box 4.

123 Bertók Pálné, Zudar és társai, MNL OL, XIX-10-K box 4.

When the Catholic Student Union was disbanded by Minister of Interior Rajk in 1946, Kaas was put in charge of the newly established College Committee. A year later, he attempted to join forces with Social Democrats to stop the radical left wing from seizing the leadership of Mefesz at the faculty of arts, but he failed. In 1948, for unknown reasons, Kaas visited the law office of a defense attorney named György Bárándy. There, he met a smuggler named Recsko Marko, whom he asked to smuggle a female friend out of the country. The affair may have been a setup, as Recsko and Kaas’ friend was apprehended at the border. He and other Catholic youth leaders were arrested and interned.

In many cases, recruitment occurred under heavy duress: Kaas, who faced years in jail for his escape attempt, was then “recruited” and tasked with reporting on Actio Catholica. Kaas’ demise was caused by the fact that he was denounced for revealing his clandestine ties with state security to university chaplain and general secretary of the College Committee, the Greek Catholic Imre Timkó.

It is likely that this person denounced Kaas to the ÁVH. Kaas in fact may have been surrounded by a web of secret agents. In his statement, Kaas incriminated himself for having incited against the political system and having attempted to smuggle people across the border due to his “hostility” to communism. Helping someone cross the border had not even been a criminal offense when he committed it. The smuggler Recsko was also tried in the case. He was defended by György Bárándy and was, miraculously, acquitted. This suggests the defense attorney and perhaps even his client may have been state security operatives. Kaas was sent to the secret labor camp in Recsk, but he was not tried until November 1953, when a military tribunal sentenced him to five years and confiscated his assets.¹²⁴

There is every reason to assume that people could legitimately feel that their activities were under constant control. No political system is omnipresent through agents alone. Rather, the perception of continuous surveillance and threat may be enough to extract the expected behavior, which I would refer to as *externally enforced obedience*. This, as John Connelly has shown, resulted in anticipatory compliance, which gave Nazism—and one may add Stalinism—“its tenacity and radicalism.”¹²⁵

124 Kaas Ervin, Budapesti Hadbírószág, 10 November 1953, ld. Zudar és társai, MNL OL, XIX-10-K 4 box. On the activities of Haas as student leader see Mészáros István, “Végállomás – Recsk, a katolikus egyetemi ifjúsági mozgalom történetéből (1945-1948),” *Valóság* (2013): 1–6.

125 John Connelly, “The Uses of Volksgemeinschaft: Letters to the NSDAP Kreisleitung, Eisenach, 1939–1940,” in Fitzpatrick and Gellately, eds., *Accusatory Practices and Denunciation in Modern European History*, 153–84.

In order to understand the role of the state security service in a Stalinist political system, it is necessary to clarify its purpose. A resolution passed by the Hungarian Workers' Party in 1950 asserted that "The State Security Authority is one of the most important organs of the *protection* of the dictatorship of the proletariat." [Emphasis by the author.] Similar clarifications about the role of state security were made in the other Communist states as well. As a top secret publication on the history of state security organs put it, "The State Security Authority was put in charge of the *total control* of every organ of the society with clandestine methods."¹²⁶

Surveillance of the population exceeded the level suggested by the number of official informants. In other words, records regarding the number of snitches employed by the state security services are a poor guide to how many people were actually active in reporting on and monitoring the population. János Jesztl, for instance, was a construction manager in the town of Veszprém. He denounced a person named Szabó for running a conspiracy ring numbering six people. A report by an officer of the state security confirmed that Jesztl reported Szabó to an informant named "Farkas," who was working for the military intelligence. Jesztl, however, did not disclose this information unknowingly: "Jesztl had been aware that 'Farkas' was working for some kind of intelligence agency." The purpose of Jesztl's statement was for it to be "reported to the services."¹²⁷ Hence, it is likely that Jesztl also was in the service of state security in an unofficial capacity.

Foreign diplomatic missions were watched, and security agents were able to records the names of people who entered them. Although the State Security Agency's resources may not have been endless, they were nevertheless formidable, enabling it to pursue even the pettiest cases if the perceived interest of the state was involved. State security planted two "undercover" agents in a department store in the mining town of Tatabánya to catch shoppers who were regularly buying too much linen, which was in short supply due to the emphasis on machine construction. The local branch of the security police launched a whole operation to catch the malefactors. The agents were "organized" into the "network" on a provisional basis. In fact, one of them was a saleswoman, the other head of the linen department. Two further provisional agents, both salespersons and family members of the suspected hoarders, were recruited in

¹²⁶ Az állam biztonsága ellen kifejtett tevékenység és az ellene folytatott harc 1948-1958, ÁBTLL, A-1364-1. Emphasis by the author. personell,"

¹²⁷ Harsányi Ignác jelentése a Farkas nevű ügynökről, 8 October 1951. ÁBTLL,37-5079/952, V-111252/1.

another store in the town. In other words, 16 agents were mobilized (in addition to the head of the investigation) to uncover a manufactured crime involving a few dozen yards of linen.¹²⁸

Mátyás Őze was recruited in 1951 and entrusted with the task of "monitoring" certain individuals. He took his assignment seriously and the ÁVH sometimes even thought that he "reported more than actually happened." Őze may not have joined the services of his own free will. He was likely blackmailed, as he had already been sentenced for embezzlement, hiding weapons, and passport crimes. Moreover, he was a "social alien." His father was a miller, and he himself a merchant. At one point, Őze decided to leave the country illegally and to take his fiancée with him. He told a friend, István Máté, who also had a criminal record, about his plans, and Máté decided to join him, as he felt he had "no future in the country." Inexplicably, Őze denounced his partner, who was arrested and sentenced to four years and six months. Őze did not get away with his transgressions, however. It turned out that he had disclosed to Máté that he was an informant of state security, and he was therefore sentenced to three years and the full confiscation of his property after having spent almost three years under "preliminary arrest."¹²⁹

If it is true that Stalinist regimes made denunciation an obligation as we all as a virtue; snitching was as much an extracted as a voluntary phenomenon. Once caught up in the spider's web, it was difficult to get out. In the early 1950s, Hungarian authorities wanted to lure the nuclear physicist Edward Teller back to Hungary, and wanted to use his sister in Budapest as bait. After several days of detention and possibly physical abuse, Emma, Teller's sister, was coerced into agreeing to work on the project on behalf of the state security. Even though she produced no useful information, the authorities would not leave her alone. They planned to force her to marry an agent, who would be released from the country in the hope that Emma would convince her brother to return.¹³⁰

Information gathered from informants was the lifeline of paranoid regimes. State security services routinely recruited prison and camp inmates in return for release. For the people who were blackmailed to join the service, signing up was the only avenue to escape a very uncertain and bleak fate. G. was sent to an internment camp for sabotage in 1952, where he was recruited and employed as a cell informant. This may have been a welcome opportunity to get

128 MNL OL, XIX-b-1-j, box 33.

129 MNL OL, XIX-10-K, box 4.

130 See Hargittai, *Judging Edward Teller*, 56–57.

out of a hopeless situation, as internees did not know when, if ever, their sentence would expire. At first sight, this is purely a coerced situation in which the victim had little to lose and everything to win. However, G. was never left alone. In 1956, his files were destroyed, but he was contacted again a year later, and in the early 1970s was forced to collect information on his daughter and son-in-law. It is another matter that as far as one can tell from written evidence, he may have done so with zeal.¹³¹

János Horváth, a young man from a working-class background was living in Austria after the war. In 1948, he entered Hungary illegally, apparently because he wished to smuggle bacon, whether for his own consumption or to resell we do not know. Be that as it may, his life would change forever. He was taken into custody and recruited by the military intelligence. Horváth then faced a stark choice: either to spend several years behind bars or agree to work for the ÁVH. Predictably, he chose the latter. He was entrusted to deliver letters sent by Hungarian state security services to Austrian addresses. Using his expertise in crossing the border, he smuggled five people into Austria as a side job for the meager amount of 420 forints [approximately 40 dollars].

Horváth paid a high price for this small amount of money. He was interned in 1949, and languished in prison until 1953, when he was finally tried and sentenced to five years for aiding illegal border crossing. This was an unusually harsh sentence, even by the standards of day, and he may have been given such a long sentence because he was an official agent of the ÁVH. For class enemies, even performing services for the state security authorities did not guarantee freedom. The following self-implicating testimony of a “class enemy” illustrates this point:

As a former wholesaler, I am hostile toward the Hungarian People’s Republic and therefore I decided to collect confidential material constituting state security secrets against the Hungarian People’s Republic and to hand it over to the western spy agency. In order to carry this out, I decided... to offer my services to the ÁVH so that I can pursue my escape and the collection of materials undisturbed. Thereby, I wanted to mislead the ÁVH... and to reveal its methods to Western spy agencies.¹³²

László Botka’s case offers a kind of anatomy of the prevailing justice system. He served as an aviator in the war and returned from the “West” in 1946. Anyone returning from western captivity was automatically treated as a potential

131 ÁBTL III-1-B, “Florence”.

132 Jegyzőkönyv, 15 October 1952. MNL OL, XIX-10-K, box 4.

enemy and was therefore susceptible to blackmail. This would explain his being pressed into service among the ranks of the security police. Botka was given assignments in France. He got careless and began telling people about the work he did for state security. He travelled abroad with a former air force comrade named László Begdison. Botka told Begdison, who, in turn, also revealed that he, too, was working for them, that he was an ÁVH agent. Nevertheless, Begdison turned Botka in for "disclosing his relationship with the state security service to unauthorized personell," possibly as a preemptive measure to save his own skin. Botka was sent to an internment camp in 1948, but was not tried until 1953. Then, a military tribunal sentenced him to six years for treason, minus the five he had already spent in internment. The family was not even told where he was being held.¹³³

Others volunteered to work for the authorities, lending credence to the argument that there was an element of collaboration in running the communist system, although it must be stressed that the environment created by the political system induced people into amoral collaboration. An escapee from Czechoslovakia likened the situation to the German occupation. Propaganda had "permeated the whole national life." "Like during the occupation, there is in Czechoslovakia a certain number of people" who collaborate, "who have various advantages in exchange for a fanatic furthering of the communist cause."¹³⁴

Recruiters were on a constant lookout for vulnerability to entrap potential agents and force them to work for the agency. László Kállai was a university student who fled to Yugoslavia in 1948, where he joined the security service, UDB. UDB and the Hungarian services were literally at war after Tito's ouster from the Soviet camp in 1948. For a while, Kállai worked as a double agent, until, on a mission in Vienna, he disclosed his links to Hungarian military intelligence to the local UDB and CIC representatives. He was recruited, allegedly by the Americans and the French. He was then sent to Hungary, where he was apprehended in 1951 and condemned to 14 years and full confiscation of his wealth.¹³⁵

The regime's extreme obsession with secrecy also caused the downfall of István Marinkai. He was caught trying to smuggle three people into Hungary for the grand total of five dollars. After his interrogation, he was drafted into the military intelligence service for secret missions abroad. In 1950, he was captured by U.S. authorities. Marinkai escaped and gave himself up to the Soviet *komman-*

133 Budapesti Hadbírószág, Botka László, MNL OL, XIX-10-k, 003001/1953.

134 "Sovietization of Czechoslovakia Reported to be Tense." OSA, 300-30-2:156, Czechoslovakia.

135 Kállai László, Budapest Hadbírószág, November 3 1953. Zudar és társai, MNL OL, XIX-10-K box



Collection of grain, Polgárdi, 1950. Fortepan/Magyar Rendőr.

datura in Austria, who handed him over to the Hungarian authorities. In the meantime, his employer was amalgamated into the ÁVH. He sought in vain to get a new assignment, appealing to both the Rákosi secretariat and the Ministry of Defense, where he disclosed his clandestine ties with the intelligence services. This brought about his downfall. Marinkai was interned for high treason, and spent three years awaiting trial. In 1953, he was sentenced to five years and the confiscation of his property.¹³⁶

Róbert Müller's demise was, if possible, even more absurd. His life was adventurous enough. In 1942, he had been drafted into the Wehrmacht as a German citizen. He was tried for war crimes but was acquitted and drafted by the military intelligence. He was ordered to infiltrate western intelligence ser-

¹³⁶ Marinkai István, Budapesti Hadbírószág, 30 October 1953. Zudar és társai, MNL OL, XIX-10-K box 4.

vices, which he did, apparently too well. He contacted the American Counter Intelligence Corps, which sent him to Hungary in 1950. Upon his return, he was apprehended at the border. Müller tried to contact his Hungarian employer to clarify his situation to the ÁVH. To his misfortune, the phone number no longer worked, as Katpol, the security branch of the Ministry of Defense, his employer, had recently amalgamated into the State Security Agency. Thus Müller, who had been instructed that he was not allowed to reveal his real identity even to the ÁVH, was unable to prove to his captors that he had been working on behalf of the Hungarian intelligence. He was interned in 1950, and for some reason his family lost track of him two years later. The ÁVH admitted that Müller had not been able to prove his affiliation with the Katpol because the phone number did not work. Therefore, the Supreme Military Tribunal overturned his verdict in 1954, but he was still not released. In fact, he was tried at the end of 1955 and sentenced to five years for treason even though the sentence was regarded as having been already served, as he had spent five years in custody.¹³⁷

Denunciation was a legal obligation that was extracted by states who defined security in a very broad sense to thwart anti-state activity before it took place. Even crimes that *were about to* happen were supposed to be reported, and failure to do so was a criminal offense, absurdly enough, even if the defendant did not know the intent of the person he was supposed to denounce. This was self-policing, but not *voluntarily* policing. A judge named Ferenc Andó sentenced four people who had "illegal business contacts" [purchasing nylon stockings] with a person of whose alleged spying they knew nothing. According to Andó,

"actually none of them were told that Fazekas was an imperialist spy. But purely the things they did know about him [the alleged spy] in the present international situation with the obligatory political vigilance binding all Hungarian citizens, they could have been expected to conclude that Fazekas was spying. Today, when the sharpening of the class struggle and the ever increasing aggresso [sic] activities of the imperialists were proven by various forms of subversive activities camouflaged cunningly, [the law] which regulates reporting obligations of imperialist activities can be interpreted according to the demands of increased vigilance only."¹³⁸

137 Müller Róbert, Budapesti helyőrség katonai bírósága, 15 December 1955, Zudar és társai, MNL OL, XIX-10-K box 4.

138 Szabó István és társai, ÁBTLL, 10-51048-952, V-93057, 1951.

In addition, the category of spying was interpreted rather flexibly and in a broad sense, so that such activity included any conversation or correspondence with a national of a western state.

László Gazdag was sentenced to death for “informing the enemy” of the construction of a power station and a chemical plant (both of which were public knowledge), as well as for divulging the publicly known fact that there were Soviet troops stationed in Budapest. Finally, he was also sentenced for telling “anti-democracy” jokes.¹³⁹ Failure to report was an unforgivable sin. In the case of a man named Gyula Huszár, the court ruled that, by failing to denounce activities that came to his knowledge, the defendant revealed “indifference stemming from the lack of political self-consciousness and the criminal and gross neglect of political vigilance, which harmed the interest of the working people.”¹⁴⁰

THE SCOPE OF REPRESSION

People could never know what they would be punished for and why. The function of law in the traditional sense, namely, to curb the powers of the state over the individual, disappeared. In Hungary, abiding by the formalities required by law concealed lawlessness. The charges leveled against the defendants in the political trials were so extreme and so absurd that it was impossible to discern even the slightest degree of rationality behind them. Trials were held to lend a semblance of legality to legal procedures that often had nothing to do with justice.

The regime achieved a quintessentially arbitrary rule wherein people’s lives were governed by top secret decrees they could not even know about. Two men, János Benedek and Ferenc Benedek, walked into a store and bought 24 kilograms of lard each. Even though they were denounced, the police failed to launch an investigation because the sale of lard was not restricted by law. This seemingly insignificant matter reached the upper echelons of the Ministry of Interior Trade. Referring to a highly confidential decree and a top secret “verbal instruction,” of which the accused obviously had no way of knowing, they demanded “urgent action” from the Ministry of Interior.¹⁴¹

The consequences were even more severe for a soccer star who was part of the Hungarian national eleven. He played for the side that was owned by the

139 Jelencsics Géza és társai, ÁBTL, A8/2127-.

140 Nádas Béla és társai, op. cit.

141 A Belkereskedelmi Minisztérium titkárságának feljegyzése a Belügyminisztérium részére, 7 November 1952. MNL OL, XIX-b-1-q, box 29, 088/1952.

Ministry of Interior, which automatically made him part of the police force. He decided to defect with his girlfriend for two reasons. One, he was married with two small children, and he received an offer to play for the Italian side AC Milan. Secondly, he had found a new partner but would not divorce. Private matters and totalitarian politics collided in what was a tragic ending. They found a person who was willing to smuggle them across the border. This person turned out to be a provocateur and, instead of taking them to the border, turned them over to the border guards. Worse still, before the border guards showed up, the state security agent asked the soccer player to hold his weapon, which was then fabricated as an armed attempt to cross the border. Both he and his female partner were tortured and he was sentenced to death on the basis of a decree that was never made public. According to the military tribunal that tried him in secret, he should have known about the decree from a presentation given as part of his police training. He was sentenced to death and executed even though defense secretary Mihály Farkas intervened on his behalf. The higher military tribunal rejected his appeal for clemency. There was no rational reason to execute the thirty-year-old, who died with his family photo held in his hand. He held no state secrets, had no previous conviction, and was not active against the state. Neither was he a class alien which would have “justified” his purge. Nor could his case be read as a warning to society as a measure of social control, as he was tried and executed in secret. The sentence was a redundant act of cruelty, wherein the judge could in the very least have spared his life had he chosen to do so.

Unpredictability, then, was an integral part of the Stalinist system, not only in the sense that there was a broad array of ordinary activities and acts never even committed that were nonetheless punishable, but also in terms of the groups of people to be persecuted. The high, even absurd, level of secrecy enhanced the arbitrary nature of power. Arbitrariness also governed the judicial system. The People’s Tribunal meted out sentences of forced labor so that only the minimum time span of the confinement was established in the sentence, but not the full duration.¹⁴² Internees had no way of knowing when they would be set free, as their sentences could be extended indefinitely without any formal legal procedure.

Even the dead seemed to pose a threat. Márton Stella’s son Lajos Stella died in prison in 1956. The younger Stella was interned in 1953 for allegedly participating in a conspiracy designed to overthrow the people’s democracy. Ab-

¹⁴² Hradeczky József és társai, 10 April 1945. BFL, NB. III. 147/1945.

surdly enough, Stella joined the plot as an agent of the political police, but he revealed this fact to the plot's ringleader. After his death in 1956, he was buried in the prison yard. His father petitioned the authorities to release his bodily remains so that he could fulfill his deceased wife's last wish, to be buried beside her son. The elder Stella was eventually granted his wish, but by the time the earthly remains of his boy were released, he too had passed away. Lajos' brother asked for the remains of the deceased so that he could bury him alongside the parents. The Chief Prosecutor's office informed him that his wish could not be granted. No explanation was given, as the decree which prohibited the release of the corpse could "not be disclosed."¹⁴³

Imre Nagy, who had been legally appointed prime minister in the revolutionary days of 1956 was executed with his associates in 1958. They were all buried in an unmarked grave, their hands tied behind their backs, facing down, as if their executioners were afraid that they would rise from their grave.

Stalinism may have been the only political system that wanted even more enemies than it actually had. In fact, these political systems manufactured their opponents. The automatic extension of guilt to family members broadened the scope of persecuted "enemies." According to a Soviet decree of August 15, 1937 issued by the Commissariat of Internal Affairs, the wives of "traitors" and their children over 15 [could] be arrested.¹⁴⁴ The Soviet criminal code called for the punishment of a family member of a traitor to the so-called fatherland.¹⁴⁵ This rule was adopted in Hungary as well.

In June 1952, the authorities indicted István L. Szabó, the stepfather of László Csörgő, a border guard, who had committed "treason [defection] to Yugoslavia." Szabó's indictment asserted that, until his arrest, he had had no knowledge of his adopted son's intentions. Nevertheless, "in line with paragraph 3 of decree 26/1950, the defendant's act [he was not accused of anything] is dangerous to society as his close relative has become the servant of the treasonous Titoist gangs and by virtue of this, his person can be used for subversion against the People's Republic."¹⁴⁶ This case highlights yet another way in which the circle of repression was widened: family members were arrested for crimes committed by their kin. As Stalin explained in a toast in 1937, "And we shall destroy every such enemy, even if he is an old Bolshevik. We will destroy his entire clan, his family."

143 Stella Márton kérése a Büntetésvégrehajtó Osztálynak, 8 April 1956. MNL OL, XIX-10-K, box 4.

144 Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag*, 169.

145 Jolluck, *Exile and Identity*, 22–25.

146 Vádirat [signed by Miklós Béres ÁVH major], June 30, 1952. L. Szabó István, June 30 1952. ÁBTL, 10-51048/952, V-93057.

Seeking non-existent enemies was an important practice of communist statecraft. It justified a constant state of terror as the means of extracting compliance and also justified the institutional pillar of the system, the security apparatus. Provocation, the Czechoslovak state security opined, was the only correct way to uncover and convict their enemies.¹⁴⁷ The scope of repression was heightened to an absurd level by a paranoid fear and vilification of the West. A certain Vladimir Krivohlavy was sentenced to life in 1954 as “an agent of the American espionage service.” He allegedly had been “sent in a balloon.” Two employees of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Industry were tried and sentenced for economic, political, and military espionage on behalf of the U.S. in 1951.¹⁴⁸

“Enemies of the state” “wormed their way” into even the most unlikely places, such as Soviet-Hungarian companies, which, according to a report to the communist party’s political committee, had become the “reservoirs of hostile elements.” These “shady” figures, former “Horthyite officers” and their *offspring* as well as former landowners occupied high positions around the Soviet comrades and created an anti-Soviet atmosphere. It was alleged that interpreters of “bourgeois origin” deliberately mistranslated in order to stir conflict.¹⁴⁹ In February 1950, the Political Committee of the Hungarian communist party declared war “in the spirit of communist vigilance against hostile elements and agents that had infiltrated or were planted into the ranks of the State Security Authority.”¹⁵⁰

George Schöpflin has presciently observed that Stalinism was an ideology of perfection. If a solution were to fail, failure could be attributed to antagonists. Consequently, there was no place for error. There were no accidents or honest mistakes.¹⁵¹ In January 1951, two officers who had previously served in Horthy’s army—which rendered them undesirable elements in the communist state—were executed in a medical doctors’ “plot” of food poisoning, which, according to their constructed trial, was a conscious act of sabotage and a conspiracy to overthrow democracy when “the international situation was becoming acute.”¹⁵² Members of the management of the Hungarian-American Oil Company were tried for “deliberately misplacing experimental oil rigs where there was no hope of finding oil.”

147 Cited in Blažek and Žáček, *Czechoslovakia*.

148 OSA 300-30-2/39 (Czechoslovakia).

149 MNL OL, M-KS, 276. F. 53. Cs. 146. őe.

150 *Az állam biztonsága ellen kifejtett ellenséges tevékenység és az ellene folytatott harc*, ÁBTL, A1-1364.

151 George Schöpflin, *Politics in Eastern Europe* (Oxford, UK, Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1993).

152 Ildikó Zsitnyáni, “A hazáért mindhalálig – a magyar tisztikar ellen irányuló perek,” in Imre Okváth, ed., *Katonai perek, 1945-1958* (Budapest, 2001), 163-72.

István Timár, the high-ranking ÁVH officer who conducted the interrogation, understood that the process was directed at a political goal: to justify the nationalization of the company. Ironically, one of the defendants, geologist Simon Papp, was forced to help the newly created Hungarian-Soviet Oil Company discover new oil fields from his prison cell. When the crash program to produce coal for the super-industrialization project failed to deliver a sufficient amount, an academic debate regarding the best means of increasing production while not ruining the country's coal reserve was turned into a political witch hunt. A group of mine engineers were arrested and tortured to extract confessions according to which they had deliberately wrecked and sabotaged production. Authorities concocted a conspiracy with "agents" of foreign powers around both cases.¹⁵³ Hungary passed a law in 1946 on the defense of the economic order and another in 1950 on the protection of the planned economy. Any infringement of either was punishable by five to ten years and in extreme cases by death. Both penalized all acts considered by the authorities to be detrimental to the economy as conscious acts designed to undermine the economic system. A directive proclaimed that when kulaks reneged on their obligation to deliver their produce to the state, this was not due to some natural catastrophe, but to the kulaks' propensity to shirk their obligations and cause damage. Only "a tiny percentage" of such cases before the court was supposed to conclude that the failure to deliver was not due to a conscious act.¹⁵⁴

The regimes' sense of insecurity was frequently behind the large-scale oppression behind Iron Curtain. Similarly, Romania enacted a law in 1950 which imposed the death penalty for crimes including "negligence" by workers "which led to public disaster," as well as "theft, destruction of military equipment, plotting against the state, and economic sabotage."¹⁵⁵ A perhaps extreme illustration of this attitude was an incident that took place in Czechoslovakia. A miner's hand was torn off in a conveyor belt accident. His injury was considered an act of sabotage, and he was sent to prison.¹⁵⁶ According to a Czechoslovak news brief, kulaks were dangerous outside the collective farm and even more dangerous inside, when they succeeded in becoming members of the cooperative. Thus, for instance, "four kulaks were responsible for the spoiling of sev-

153 For details see László Borhi, *Hungary in the Cold War: Between the United States and the Soviet Union, 1945-1956* (Budapest - New York: CEU Press, 2004), 74-83; Ildikó Cserényi-Zsitnyányi, *Kibányászott "Lignitbűnök" - a Rákosi-korszak bányamérnökperének anatómiája* (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2013).

154 Tóth Judit, *A padlássöprések kora - a beszolgáltatás Pest megyében* (Budapest: Pest megye monográfia közalapítvány, 2011), 138-39.

155 Deletant, *Romania*, 291.

156 "Life in CSR as Seen by Czech Miner." OSA, 300-30-2:152.

eral car-loads of hay and other food.” They allegedly disrupted morale, worked little, and collected crops for personal use.¹⁵⁷

Militarization also reached the countryside. Although the collection of crops was a national security interest, the available machinery was subpar, and the individuals who handled the machines were forced to take the blame when they broke down. A party secretary of a machine station was charged with “negligent repair.” He was not taken into custody because there was a shortage of technical experts. A piece of iron got caught up in a thresher used in a kulak household and ruined it. The kulak was arrested for conscious sabotage.¹⁵⁸

Sabotage trials put on display the most serious infringement by Stalinist systems of democratic and human rights, including the presumption of guilt, which led to millions of deaths in the homeland of communism and many thousands in Eastern Europe. This went further even than placing the burden of proof of innocence on the accused. In this political system, innocence could not be proven, as the verdicts were decided before the trials began. The trial itself was mere show, as there was no defense except in name and the defendants recited scripted testimonies extracted by torture. In László Rajk’s infamous demonstration trial, Minister of Defense Mihály Farkas wanted every defendant put to death, but party boss Rákosi spared some of them because they were needed to implicate others in future trials.¹⁵⁹

The fact that “offspring” were counted as natural enemies showed that class-based persecution interpreted class status (such as kulak, bourgeois, and so forth) as an *inherited* trait, much as race was in National Socialist ideology. In other words, the status of class enemy was externally constructed, not contingent on the disposition or acts of an individual. One could be the most ardent Stalinist and work in a factory and still be construed as an enemy by virtue of birth, and as someone who had deliberately pretended to be friendly to communism so as to be able to subvert it from within. In the words of Richard Overy, “Those who had been exploiters or children of former exploiters were regarded as victims of social disease, which could not be allowed to contaminate the healthy state.”¹⁶⁰ Thus, in a Soviet system, social aliens were irredeemable. As interior minister Házi put it, „No matter how the economic status of the kulak changes a kulak

157 “Regime Response to Western Broadcasts – The Kulaks Remain Enemies of the Collectives.” Based on 30 minute program “From our Regions.” 1953; “Three Farmers of Brno Region Sentenced for Sabotage.” Based on Brno paper “Rovnost.” 1955. OSA, 300-30-2:12. Czechoslovakia.

158 Jelentés Sebestyénnek, MNL OL, XIX-B-14 box 3.

159 Dokladnye zapiski Zabolzhskogo in Galina Murashko, ed, *Vostochnaia Evropa v Dokumentakh Rossiiskikh Arkhivov*, volume 2, 1998. 231–34.

160 Overy, *The Dictators*, 253.

remains a kulak. This is a key matter from the perspective of class struggle because if we are not careful the kulak will worm his way among the workers.”¹⁶¹

Sheila Fitzpatrick has noted that social aliens were objects of stigmatization, much like *Gemeinschaftsfremde* in Germany. In 1938, a group of peasants who denounced a kolkhoz chairman recalled that the chairman’s father had exploited peasants. Therefore, in Stalinist practice, one could be born a “class enemy” if one had a parent classified as an enemy of the people. Class thus became almost a *biological* category, one that stuck on the individual from the date of birth, just like an ethnic marker. One’s class status did not depend on current occupation, but on the social class of origin. Even if someone entered the party as a worker, he or she could be considered a hostile element by virtue of birth. Verdicts in political trials reflected this reality. When a woman was being sentenced for alleged espionage, the judge stated that she had been born to a working family, hence “by virtue of her class origin, she could not be an enemy of the people’s democracy.”¹⁶² In other cases, if a defendant had a different “class situation,” it led to a harsher sentence.

In Bolshevik ideology, the village represented backwardness and thus took center stage in the struggle against enemies. The Hungarian Workers’ Party rejected the notion that the countryside could go through a peaceful transformation to communism. The kulak was an enemy, even if he offered his land or livestock to the state, because this allegedly was done to camouflage malicious intent in order “to disarm the Party regarding the difficulties of socialist construction.” Wealthy peasants were to be annihilated as a social class on a “once a kulak always a kulak” basis.¹⁶³ The conditions of annihilation had not yet matured by 1951, but the struggle against kulaks was to be stepped up and extended to individuals whose land had not reached the “kulak limit,” but who were making a living out of “exploitation” rather than off their own or their family’s labor. They were not allowed to enter the collectives, and the size of the plot that qualified a farmer as a kulak was to be lowered, meaning that the party artificially increased the number of people to be repressed.¹⁶⁴ Due to a policy of collective responsibility, if a kulak was alleged to have committed a crime, all the kulaks of the village were held accountable. A party report sent from northern

161 Házi Árpád feljegyzése Beér elvtársnak, é.n. (1951). MNL OL, XIX-B-1-q. box 20, 0634/1951.

162 Mühlbacher Klára, Budapesti hadbíróóság, 3 November 1953, ld. Zudar és társai, MNL OL, XIX-10K, box 4.

163 See about this József Ö. Kovács, *A paraszti társadalom felszámolása a kommunista diktatúrában*, 89.

164 “AZ MDP Politikai Bizottságának határozata a kulákok elleni harcról, 6 September 1951,” in *Magyar Történelmi Szövegyűjtemény*, Volume II. Edited by Ignác Romsics (Budapest: Osiris, 2000), 51–54.

Hungary stressed that the political climate was such “that many people called democracy a reign of terror.”¹⁶⁵

Verdicts in criminal cases were class based and served political ends, including the liquidation of certain social classes. As Minister of Justice Erik Molnár put it, the task of a judge was a political one. Courts were active participants in the class struggle, and the verdicts were directed against “the class enemy.” In order to pass the “correct” verdict, the authorities had to assess an individual’s class position. In the case of one sentence, the defendant, a former gendarme, did not qualify as a kulak. Instead, in his infinite wisdom, the judge declared that the defendant’s cow, whose milk the gendarme had failed to deliver in the expected quantity, was a kulak, the reason being that the animal was fed with “kulak fodder” and its milk was consumed in a “kulak household.”

Sentences against wealthy farmers served as a means of reprisal, while verdicts pronounced against “working peasants” were supposed to be educational. Sentences meted out against class enemies in the countryside often meant the confiscation of their assets, meaning their land. For example, a 74-year-old man’s land was confiscated partly because he had used his farm for “criminal purposes” and also because he was no longer able to cultivate his land.¹⁶⁶

Mrs. Lajos F. Kiss was charged with spreading false rumors. The report of her activity stressed that she had nine yokes [which would qualify her as a working peasant] and was of “kulak origin.”¹⁶⁷ Hence, descendants bore their stigma even if they had, in course of their lifetime, become members of the working class. Theirs was not the stigma of the color of their skin or the shape of their skulls or the curvature of their nose, but their family history, and this was not a history they could shed. Thus, peasants, who by virtue of the size of their plot would otherwise qualify as “working peasants,” and hence would not be subject to persecution, still qualified as kulaks, a social class to be “liquidated,” if their parents were, or had been, kulaks. The issue here was the protection of healthy social elements: “even if there is any change regarding the wealth status of a kulak, even if he loses all his wealth, he does not cease to be a kulak. This is a decisive issue regarding the class struggle because if we are not careful, he will worm his way into the ranks of the workers with great ease.”¹⁶⁸

165 Ö. Kovács, *A paraszti társadalom felszámolása a kommunista diktatúrában*, 108.

166 Minister of Justice Erik Molnár and president of the Pest County Court Károly Zalka are cited in Tóth, *A padlássőprések kora*, 125, 127–35, 144.

167 MNL OL, XIX-B-14, box 3, sz. n./52.

168 Házi elvtárs Beér elvtársnak XIX-B-1-q, box 20, 0634/1951, 229/1951.

These principles were put into practice. Lajos Nyitrai was a county party secretary who was accused of abusing his power by intervening on behalf of a certain colonel Bercsényi so that he could stay in his “castle,” which should have been surrendered to the local state cooperative. His indictment indicated that Nyitrai had been reserve a lieutenant and a sub county-lieutenant before the war, but “was sufficiently well versed politically and was aware enough of the laws of class struggle to be aware that by virtue of his past and class position he was unsuited to do his job.” Nevertheless, he infiltrated working people. Nyitrai was sentenced to 2.5 years in jail because “his dangerousness was heightened by his status as a kulak, which prompted him to aid the “class enemy.” The accused was listed as “having no possessions,” so his kulak status referred to his inherited social position.¹⁶⁹

Between 1948 and 1953, state security opened over 500 case files for conspiracies to overthrow the People’s Republic. In the officially generated war hysteria of the early 1950s, the political police investigated 924 cases of espionage. In 1954 alone, the authorities arrested 71 “spies,” 209 “conspirators,” 51 industrial and agricultural saboteurs, and fourteen people for “terrorist acts.”¹⁷⁰ The large number is not surprising, given the broad interpretation of the crime. According to a ruling of the Supreme Court, conspiracy was considered to have been committed even if the preparations were not adequate to achieve the desired result but were only directed at it.¹⁷¹

The number of files does not reveal the real number of people persecuted for allegedly seeking to overthrow the political system, as family members were often tried separately and their trials would not show up in statistics regarding conspiracies. Franciska Fuisz’s husband, Imre Németh, was arrested and sentenced in 1952 for membership in an “illegal organization,” for which he was sentenced to eight years. After his conviction, the ÁVH recruited him. Németh “undertook” to help the authorities and apprehend his brother, who was also implicated in the plot. He was supposed to contact his sibling and lure him home. In fact, the goal was to implicate other members of the family. When Németh’s brother János Medgyesi did in fact return, he and Németh’s wife Franciska were arrested. Fuisz was accused of hiding Medgyesi and showing him a weapon

169 Egri járási bíróság, 17 December 1952. MNL OL, XIX-b-1-q, 0050/1953.

170 Kajári Erzsébet, *Az egységesített BM államvédelmi tevékenysége*, in Gyarmati György ed., *Államvédelem a Rákosi korszakban 1956-1953: tanulmányok és dokumentumok a politikai rendőrség második világháború utáni tevékenységéről* Budapest: Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára, 2000. 169-170.

171 MNL OL, XIX-10-K, box 4, Zudar és társai, op. cit.

her husband had allegedly hidden in their barn in 1945, making it possible for Megyesi “to use [the weapon] against the Hungarian People.” The court argued that Fuisz, who was of poor peasant stock, was not hostile by virtue of her origin, but was contaminated by her hostile environment and therefore had become hostile herself.¹⁷²

Ágnes Halász was born to a family that was part of the intelligentsia. Even though her profession (she was a schoolteacher) was innocent enough, she was a perfect target: her father had been a police captain in the “Horthy era,” and her uncle lived in London. For this reason, she was recruited into the ÁVH in 1951 and was given “top secret” tasks. As in many similar cases, her relationship with the apparatus of terror did not work out well, as she told her parents and a colleague about her clandestine affiliation, which means that at least one of those three people was also involved with the state security. She did not go through the necessary personal transformation to be a healthy member of society. It was alleged that Halász was always making anti-Soviet remarks, regularly listened to the broadcasts of “imperialist radio stations,” and shared what she had heard on the radio to others. In her self-incriminating confession, Halász claimed that “I felt guilty already by virtue of my hostile attitude. I received bourgeois and religious education and therefore I am against the Soviet Union and the people’s democracy.” Her class position was considered an aggravating factor, and she was sentenced to five years and the full confiscation of her assets.¹⁷³

Margit Nemes, who had born to the title of Countess Mrs. Károly Khuen Héderváry, had already lost her social position and wealth by the time she was entrapped by the ÁVH. Her husband, a former aristocrat who had owned 4,500 holds of land, was making a living as a translator. Margit had studied as a designer in Paris and had opened a fashion salon in downtown Budapest; one of her siblings had been deported to the countryside. At the time of her arrest, she was working in a popular restaurant in Budapest. In 1951, the authorities forced her to “monitor” “foreigners” frequenting the place. She committed high treason by disclosing her link to the ÁVH to her spouse and two other people, including a man the ÁVH claimed she had had an affair with. This, according to her indictment, allowed the enemy to find out about the ÁVH’s “methods” – namely that public places were being watched.¹⁷⁴

172 Németh Imréné, Budapesti Hadbírószág 11 January 1954, ld Zudar és társai, MNL OL, XIX-10-K, box 4.

173 Halász Ágnes, budapesti hadbírószág, 3 November 1953 ld. Zudar és társai, MNL OL, XIX-10-K, box 4.

174 Gróf Héderváry Khuen Károlyné, ld. Zudar és társai, MNL OL, XIX-10-K, box 4..

The scope of repression was immeasurably broadened as everyday life was criminalized. An historian has written that “by criminalizing a broad range of activities and behaviors, the party-state essentially set itself in opposition to a wide segment of society.”¹⁷⁵ “My life in Hungary was simple,” the engineer György Springer recalled, “but if I stopped in front of the American Legation to look at photos, I was in trouble.”¹⁷⁶ Activities normal in democratic societies, such as shopping, listening to the radio, reading books, and the like were deemed criminal offenses. While taking a stroll with his parents, a little boy began to sing and speak about things he had overheard from a “Western” radio broadcast. “We were lucky nobody heard him. He could have easily got us into trouble with his thoughtless statements.”¹⁷⁷ When a person who was part of a group of friends “disappeared,” the others thought the problem was not that he had been listening to the foreign radio broadcasts, but that he had spoken about them.¹⁷⁸ Under some circumstances, simply tuning in was also a punishable offense. A metal worker and his friend were sentenced to eight and ten months respectively for listening to RFE during a military exercise in the army.¹⁷⁹

In addition, relatively small violations of the law were endowed with political significance. For instance, stealing was considered a subversive act designed to undermine the people’s democracy. Political authority was protected even from verbal abuse. In 1947, an individual was placed under “police supervision” (i.e. sent to an internment camp) for “utterances against democracy.” This person had been telling jokes about communist party leader Rákosi.¹⁸⁰ A laborer in Czechoslovakia openly criticized the practices of the state security service and likened them to the methods used by the Gestapo. He was sentenced to serve three years in the uranium mine in Jachymov for this crime.¹⁸¹ It is hard to say how many people were sentenced for *lése majesté*, an offense that would have been hard to catch without the omnipresence of agents or the willing denunciation of strangers.

Similarly to the Soviet Union, where the principle was first adopted, chatter and conversation could lead to criminal prosecution. A farcical conversation concerning Stalin’s death led to a conviction. A man by the name of János Szekeres

175 Brown, *Regulating Bodies*.

176 Barna Szász, “Az 56-os magyar,” https://index.hu/techtud/tortenelem/2018/10/23/springer_gyorgy_george_urrepules_budapest_stanford_1956_oktober_23/.

177 Ex-merchant’s listening habits, 1954, OSA 400-40-4.

178 38-year-old man, 1955. OSA 400-40-4.

179 Metalworker from Budapest, 1955. OSA 400-40-4.

180 ÁBTL III/C V-78019.

181 OSA, 300-30-161 (Czechoslovakia) item 11931/53.

was making small talk with someone named Kiss. Kiss allegedly asked whether “comrade Szekeres had heard that comrade Stalin is going to die?” Szekeres answered that he had heard rumors, but that he didn’t believe them. Kiss then remarked that perhaps Szekeres had lit a cigar because “he was glad to hear of this possibility.” What was said after that statement was disputed, but Szekeres was accused of claiming that he had in fact lit his cigar because he was glad to hear of this prospect (the death of Stalin) and that he would “bite through the county party secretary’s neck” if there were to be a regime change. The police investigation was not terribly thorough, as the provocateur, Kiss wasn’t even interrogated, but Szekeres was sentenced to five years in prison. Szekeres appealed the verdict, but he was not informed about either the time or the venue of his appeal trial.¹⁸²

A man joined the agricultural collective in Czechoslovakia to avoid imprisonment. However, he soon became disenchanted, and demanded the return of his property. He quarreled with his boss in the cooperative, and in the heat of the argument, told him that they were the “the same gangsters as [communist leader Klement] Gottwald.” This utterance was politicized as an attempt to overthrow the regime, as there was allegedly a danger that, due to his activities, the population might revolt against local officials and the collective farm.¹⁸³ While in a kingdom, the sovereign is sacrosanct and may not be subjected to criticism or slander, under communism the regime, the political *system* itself, was protected. A farmer named Sedlacek complained in an inn that, “the Germans did not take the rubber cover of our cars and neither did the Americans, but the communists confiscated them.” Somebody denounced him, and Stepanek was allegedly sentenced to three years.¹⁸⁴

János Makkai was serving as a sergeant in the security police when he was drafted to fulfill his mandatory military service. He came from a fairly neutral social class, the *petit bourgeoisie*. He joined the Communist Party in 1948, although later he began singing in a church choir. He was befriended by a Catholic priest, and converted to Catholicism. While performing his military service, he kept in touch with the priest and wrote about life in the service, including the sleeping quarters and the general atmosphere. He asked for a bible and took fellow ÁVH men to the church. All this earned him four years in jail, meted out by a military tribunal for the violation of military secrets.¹⁸⁵

182 Szekeres János ügye, perorvoslati kérelem. See Zudar és társai, MNL OL, XIX-10-K, box 4.

183 “Results of Resignation from a Collective Farm,” 1954. OSA, 300-30-2:16, Czechoslovakia.

184 OSA, 300-30-2:4. Czechoslovakia.

185 Makkai János államvédelmi őrmester, 16 November 1953. Zudar és társai. MNL OL, XIX-10-K, box 4.

Communist states followed the Nazi German pattern regarding the use of radios. The Nazis controlled radio production, and every third receiver owned in Germany was a People's Receiver with a limited range, meaning that people were unable to tune in to foreign broadcasts.¹⁸⁶ The same was true to filter out ideological subversion behind the Iron Curtain. People tuned in to listen to Western stations, even though this was prohibited. Władysław Dub, a village leader in Poland, kept a community radio at home, where villagers listened to Radio Free Europe, the BBC, and Voice of America. His act was immediately politicized beyond its significance, and he was accused of "spreading false information that could inflict fundamental damage to the interests of the Polish state." Dub was sentenced to 24 months of forced labor.

Jerzy Stepacenko set a radio to RFE in a waiting room at a railway station where 40 people listened to a program that "maligned the USSR and the countries of democracy." Even after the program was over, he failed to turn off the radio until he was taken in. Stepacenko got away with 18 months behind bars. Listening to foreign radio stations was considered "counterrevolutionary" in Poland, instigated by foreign agents. Even commenting on news heard on western radio and talking about it to others was a criminal act.¹⁸⁷ The Soviet state criminalized standing in line for foodstuffs during the famine of 1933. People were sent to prison for hoarding in the 1950s. Buying too much bread or lard could result in jail sentences lasting up to eight years. Yet such acts as hoarding food may not have been designed to subvert the communist state, but rather as a desperate act to circumvent shortage, an inherent flaw and even a state of being under the dictatorial economic system.

Ferenc Jancsik of Balassagyarmat was found guilty of the criminal offense of "withholding commodities." Jancsik, a confectioner, had allegedly been a member of the Arrow Cross Party. After the communist takeover in 1947, he joined the Hungarian Workers Party. In the course of a membership revision, Jancsik was labeled a "class alien and exploiter," and was ousted from the party. His radical right-wing past would not have mattered if he had not been a class alien. State security prepared a "study of environment" (a sort of a character) study, which depicted Jancsik in Dickensian terms using the crass language of class struggle. He allegedly had attempted to "accumulate wealth" after the "liberation," provided housing for the assistants in his shop in the cellar, where one of them

¹⁸⁶ Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, 136.

¹⁸⁷ Paweł Machcewicz, *Poland's War on Radio Free Europe, 1950–1989* (Washington, D.C., Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 52–53.

“contracted pulmonary disease.” Jancsik was allegedly so tight-fisted that he had no friends, so that he would not have to spend any money on them. “The workers did not like him,” as “he behaved like a landlord, his daughter owned a German shepherd.” Such social tension, of course, may have been real. The charges were completed by with the statement that Jancsik “hated the people’s democracy, agitated against the Soviet Union, and insulted democracy.”

Everyday items, which were available only in short supply, included paprika (a staple spice in Hungarian cuisine), soap, pepper, coffee, and linen. In addition, Jancsik purchased raw materials for his cakes, which was not easy to do, as crystal sugar and cocoa powder were often unavailable. Hence, he purchased partly from private individuals, allegedly in excess of the immediate needs of the business. According to the absurd indictment, Jancsik, who made his living by making and selling pastries, “only bought them in order to deprive the workers and hoard them for himself.” Thus, his activity, which was designed to keep his business and livelihood afloat, qualified as sabotage, and Jancsik was sentenced to two years in prison and a fine of 6,000 forints, roughly a six-month income.¹⁸⁸

This affair highlighted the lethal combination of the economy of shortage and the terroristic repression of alleged class aliens. The economy’s concentration on heavy industry, the removal of market forces, and the lack of any incentive to work resulted in chronic inability to satisfy consumer demand, resulting in the need for drastic measures, including the criminalization of consumers in order to curb demand. These measures in turn could be used to further intensify pressure on hostile social groups.

János Fráter was driven into criminality and exploited his social network to survive in the black-market economy after the state had deprived him of his livelihood. He was a knifemaker and grinder, whose license to sell utensils to barber shops was taken away. Fráter was also obligated to “offer” his inventory, equipment, and other immovables from his workshop to the state. According to the investigation, he hid many of these objects and continued to trade his products illegally. He built a whole network: three “former wholesalers,” incidentally all with Jewish sounding names, were part of the ring that sold the items. In addition, Fráter “bribed” two other people who helped him “acquire” goods from state retail, which he also sold illegally. Five people, including his siblings, helped him hide the illegal commodities, which Fráter sold “above the retail price.” In addition, the investigation revealed that Fráter had been involved in purchasing gold since 1929 and had been in collusion with a watchmaker and his brother. It was

¹⁸⁸ MNL OL, XIX-B-j, box 33.

illegal to keep gold or foreign currency for longer than three days, after which it had to be “offered” to the National Bank for purchase. According to the indictment “profiteering” was not his only motive. It became “apparent” from the investigation that the fact that Fráter was hiding this merchandise “expressed the defendant’s conviction that our social system will change, and they were saving the hidden gold and currency for those times.” An economic crime was thus politicized based on the presumption that the defendants were preparing for a regime change.¹⁸⁹ An insecure state was seeking absolute security.

The case of Gyula Lampl and his spouse characterized the fate of countless people, whose lives took a plunge as a result of the Soviet experiment. Lampl had held a decent position in the Hungarian middle-class as a bank employee. After the Communist takeover, he lost his job despite signing up into the Communist Party. As of 1950 he was living in his wife’s *villa* [mansion] in an upscale neighborhood of Budapest, which no longer reflected the couple’s social and economic status. Lampl got by on a pension of 142 forints [approximately 14 dollars], and he tried to scrape together enough to make ends meet by working occasional jobs. The couple also rented out some of the *villa*’s rooms, an obvious humiliation for people who previously had lived in comfort, perhaps even in luxury. Economic decline left their lives in turmoil. Lampl was arrested and tried for “incitement” against Jews and Communists. By then, his wife had succumbed to alcoholism and was leading a “depraved lifestyle.” He was arrested and sentenced for reportedly stating that he would “exterminate the f...ing communists and Jews.” Judge Vilmos Olti, who had successfully made the transition from the far right to the far left, blamed Lampl’s social conditions and class origin: “the defendant lost his job and could hardly make ends meet from his meager pension. These conditions, also by virtue of his earlier class position, motivated the politically uneducated defendant’s hatred of our democracy.”¹⁹⁰

Borders were essentially closed. This Stalinist practice made an oversized prison out of the Soviet-occupied lands. Thus, “escape” was literally the only way to leave a people’s democracy, which was a criminal offense. Sentences for this act were disproportionately high, and the fact that people attempted it despite the risks involved attests to their desperation in the new political system.¹⁹¹ The possibility of ridding society of unhealthy elements by allowing them to go abroad was not an option. In Czechoslovakia, the Ministry of Interior ensnared

189 Fráter János és társai, MNL OL, XIX-B-14, sz. n. 1954.

190 Lampl J. Gyula, MNL OL, XIX-5-b, box 25, 3510/1950.

191 A 62 year-old Czech who managed to flee over the Curtain had received ten years for illegal border crossing. OSA, 300-30-2:158.

members of the “former ruling classes” by using provocateurs who offered to acquire the documentation which would allow them to leave the country legally.¹⁹² While apprehending defectors was a triumph of policing, a successful escape empowered those who were left behind. “Those who managed to make it across the Iron Curtain... gave strength and hope to the people... [that the defectors] outsmarted the raging political police.”¹⁹³

István Rupp was tried in 1952 for illegal border crossing. His sister lived in Vienna and apparently was a member of the Viennese Opera. She asked Rupp to join her and live in the Austrian capital. According to court documents, an “unknown person” appeared in Rupp’s home and offered to get him a passport. Although Rupp rejected the offer, the person returned. Eventually, after some vacillation, Rupp and another person living with him apparently gave in. Prior to the delivery of the passport, they were arrested and accused of having made preparations to leave the country. There is little doubt that the state security was reading Rupp’s mail and the person offering the passport was a provocateur. It was clear to the judge that Rupp and his companion never left their home for the journey for which they made preparations. He was what György Faludy called a “bathtub absconder,” a person caught crossing the border illegally while sitting in his bathtub.¹⁹⁴ However, according to the verdict, “illegal border crossing begins when somebody leaves their home with the intention of leaving the country.” The widespread practice of punishing “preparatory activities” for border crossing was not prescribed by the penal code. Nevertheless, Rupp was sentenced to four years in prison for allegedly intending to go to Vienna.¹⁹⁵

Courts were inundated with cases related to border crossing. In 1955, 1,102 people were convicted for attempting or planning to cross the border.¹⁹⁶ Aiding and abetting somebody in escaping through the border was a crime itself, whether “the perpetrator was able to carry the act or not.”¹⁹⁷ Three out of four of them had only been planning their escape. Many of them got off the hook by agreeing to work for the state security services. Crossing the border illegally could be highly dangerous, as Hungary was separated from Austria by a minefield and barbed wire, which was not supposed to keep people out, as is usually the case with physical barriers on borders, but to keep people in. The country

192 Igor Lukeš, “KAMEN: A Cold War Dangle Operation with an American Dimension, 1948-1952,” *Studies in Intelligence*, Volume 55, Number 1 (2011): 1-12.

193 Volt textilkereskedő és férje, OSA-400-40-4, Box 8. Hungary.

194 George Faludy, *My Happy Days in Hell*, (William Morrow and Co. Inc. 1962.)

195 MNL OL, XIX-10-k, box 4. 003094.

196 Brown, *Regulating Bodies*, 88.

197 A fővárosi törvényszék ítélete. MNL OL, XIX-5-b, box 23 7324/1950.

unilaterally created a wide strip of no-man's land on the Western border, which was heavily patrolled by the border guards, a branch of the State Security Service. Many were caught, and some were blown up while crossing.

It required lengthy planning and a lot of courage to go across the border illegally. György Farkas seemed to be a reliable pillar of the communist regime until he and his cohorts were made out to be dangerous criminals for discussing their flight to Yugoslavia. Farkas was a party member of working-class origins. He had served in the police, and later, became a criminal judge. Nonetheless he and his wife were preparing to jump the fence. They were not about to go alone, and discussed their plans with a middle-aged couple named Sziklai, a spinster, and a lieutenant of the political police, József Winkler, who had told Farkas that he was planning to commit suicide if he were unable to escape the country. But Winkler was insincere and reported everything to the police from the beginning. After several meetings, the Sziklais and the elderly spinster opted out of the scheme. The Farkas couple sold their home and radio, but cancelled their plan at the last minute and informed Winkler of their decision. Even so, they were arrested the next day. Their class origin was held against all the defendants, as it was in itself considered proof that they were "reactionaries." All the participants in the defection scheme were charged with preparation for high treason. The 43-year-old Farkas was sentenced to seven years in prison and the state took everything they owned. The other four defendants were also sent to prison and their belongings were confiscated as well. The lives of six people (the Farkas family had a child) were shattered, though they had done little more than make empty talk. The military tribunal "applied a sentence meant to protect the working people in light of the danger [the defendants'] person and acts posed to society," particularly because "fleeing to Titoist Yugoslavia constituted a grave attack on the interests of the Hungarian People's Republic."¹⁹⁸

Smugglers would be paid to take people to the other side, but it is likely that many of these people were already agents of the state security. Levente Wein was caught trying to cross the border with his family and he was turned in by the security service.¹⁹⁹ From then on, he offered his smuggling services for the sole purpose of turning his unwitting clients over to the police. Escapees, often instigated by provocateurs, provided a pool of informants. A small group of people tried to cross the Austrian border illegally in 1956. One of them was a for-

¹⁹⁸ Budapesti hadbírószág nyilvánosság kizárásával tartott tárgyalása, 20 April 1953. MNL OL, XIX-B-1-j, box 33, 16600481/53.

¹⁹⁹ Wein was described by the state security services as a "Communist agent." Jelencsics Géza és társai, ÁBTL, A-2127/8.

mer Jewish labor serviceman called Imre Kárpáti. His persecution spanned time and place. The ÁVH carefully recorded his prewar Jewish name, Kohn. Another man, Landau “spoke Jewish” (sic). According to a memorandum on the case prepared by the police, the five arrested men were “intimidated and abused” during their interrogation. They were sentenced to prison, Kárpáti and Landau got three years each, the rest between 1,5 and two years. One of them, the ÁVH records “offered his services” to the state security in return for his release.²⁰⁰

On the other hand, the historian Karl Brown found that, in some places, the barbed wire and minefields were not intact; the border guards either did not really care or had been bribed to turn a blind eye to illegal border crossings. Some refugees claimed that it was as easy to cross the border as it was to cross the road, and even make it to the other side with small children. Experiences could be very different, but there is no doubt that many people were caught and punished for this act, as the definition of complicity in it was defined rather broadly.

For most people, in fact, defection, that desperate strategy of survival, may have been difficult and fraught with danger. Borders were so real and formidable that innumerable people in the oppressed countries thought of trying to flee to the West “only in their wildest dreams,” a contemporary observer remarked.²⁰¹ State security archives contain documentary evidence of large numbers of people who failed to make it across. A person who participated in the planning phase by bringing together potential absconders with “helpers” or putting them in touch with others who were planning the same were considered to have committed a crime even if the illegal defection did not take place.

Often, attempts were foiled. In the spring of 1952, a former border guard sergeant was apprehended as he was trying to smuggle a family with three children to the other side. Seven others were caught in July, and three more were taken off the train heading to the western part of the country before they even had a chance to reach the border. There was also the possibility that escape attempts could be politicized. Ferenc Kopcsándi, a poor peasant, had been a member of the Arrow Cross, but in 1945 he entered the Communist Party. Apparently, the new political system failed to live up to his expectations, and Kopcsándi was caught making his way across the border. He was accused of spying and was held and interrogated in an ÁVH prison for a month. In the end, he got away with a six-month sentence, as he prudently claimed that he was escaping a family feud.²⁰²

200 Tiltott határátlépés. MNL OL XX-5-b sz. n. 2975/1950.

201 “Recent Trip to Czechoslovakia.” OSA, 300-30-2-22, Czechoslovakia.

202 Dramatic Escape across the Danube, 1955. OSA 400-40-4, Box 7. Failed Escape Attempts, 1952, *ibid*; Ordeal of an Unsuccessful Fugitive, 1955, *ibid*.

Fugitives from Czechoslovakia had similar experiences. Escapees to Austria crawled through barbed wire fences, went for days without food, and swam through rivers to avoid patrols and mines. Out of two Poles attempting to reach Austria through their southern neighbor, one was captured by the border patrol and sentenced to five years in prison. A person attempted to get across the border three times between 1954 and 1956 until he succeeded, having spent time behind bars after the two failed attempts. Eventually, he got lucky, as the wire running through his sector was not electrified.²⁰³

The Stalinist economies of Eastern Europe began to fail shortly after the communist takeovers, leading to severe shortages of commodities. This was due in part to the inherent flaws of the central command system and in part to the militarization of the economies, which were preparing for a world war. Collectivization was meant to finance heavy industrialization by transferring wealth from the countryside. In addition, it served to break the backbone of independent farmers and the eventual destruction of the “kulaks” as a social class. Compulsory delivery, the obligation to surrender produce at rock bottom prices set by the state, was introduced, and this reduced the peasants’ will to produce. Collectivization and the concentration of heavy industry caused food shortages, which led to heightened peasant resistance, which in turn intensified repressive measures in the countryside, making the original problem, the shortage of food, even worse. Nevertheless, food shortage was a welcome opportunity to justify the persecution of a “hostile” social class.

Peasants were prohibited from slaughtering their livestock without permission. Slaughtering pigs was a long-standing social ritual in Hungary, and this ritual could be interpreted as the survival of old customs and a form of resistance against the regime. It was also an attempt to alleviate the shortage of meat. Courts were flooded with cases of “black-market slaughter.” Criminal proceedings launched under this pretext offer insights into the number of people repressed under Rákosi’s rule. In January 1952 alone, criminal proceedings were initiated against 2,634 people for this illegal activity. The social breakdown of the perpetrators reveals the broad social scope of repression in the countryside. The statistics reveal that 717 of them were “poor peasants,” a social group supposed to be in “alliance” with the working class, and 497 “middle peasants.” Even this was not enough, as further measures were ordered to prosecute even more cases of illegal slaughter because of the “severity of the supply situation.”

203 OSA 300-30-2:24. “Two young Czechs,” “Two Poles tell of Escape to Czechoslovakia,” “My way to the West.”



Oath taking ceremony of ÁVH officers April 25, 1949. Fortepan/Bauer Sándor

Rewards were offered for those who denounced alleged culprits, although the efficacy of this tool was mitigated by the fact that collecting a reward required going through a long, cumbersome bureaucratic process. Severe punishment was envisioned, particularly for killing calves and cattle, the perpetrators of which would be sent to jail automatically, although “social and class conditions” were to be taken into account in meting out the sentences. In spite of an inundation of decrees aimed at curbing illegal slaughter, the number of animals killed illegally was on the rise. This suggested that “control was very lax.” Therefore, the Ministry of Interior, aiming to increase the number of denunciations, instructed local councils to “mobilize wide masses” to curb black-market slaughter. State control of local authorities was tightened: the local council was mandated to maintain continuous control over activities designed to cut illegal slaughter. Statistics regarding repressive measures against black-market slaughter reveal that all social strata of the peasantry were repressed. In fact, more, “poor” peasants were prosecuted than “middle” peasants or kulaks.²⁰⁴ In some places,

204 A Begyűjtési Minisztérium feljegyzése a feketevágások kezeléséről, 14 February 1952; A Belügyminisztérium leirata a Megyei Tanács VB elnökének a feketevágások szigorú ellenőrzéséről, 14 April 1951, Kovács Imre élelmezési miniszter-helyettes feljegyzése Vargha András miniszter-helyettesnek, 29 April 1951, a belügyminisztérium leirata a Tanács VB-k elnökeinek, 22 May 1952. MNL OL, XIX-B-1-q, box 20, 0652/3, 0673/1051.

security policemen were privy to, or even participants in, black-market slaughter. Even so, the very large number of people arrested for the crime attests at least as much to the repressive nature of the system and the regime's ability to clamp down on "subversive acts" as to the survival of customs and social cohesion in a totalitarian state.

The immense number of people arrested and sentenced for treason and conspiracy highlighted the broad social group the government identified as the enemy. These people represented virtually all social layers, revealing the inclusiveness of Stalinist terror. Hundreds of such cases were tried in Hungary alone, and each case, most of which were tried in secret by military tribunals, involved a large number of defendants from a variety of social classes. Most of these proceedings were manufactured in the war hysteria generated by Stalin's preparation for war against the "imperialists." A 21-year-old air force lieutenant named Tibor Dodonka was sentenced to death for having supplied his uncle, an alleged spy, with information about a military airfield. Even his interrogator, who may have used physical force to extract a confession, reported that Dodonka was telling the truth in denying the charge. A political police report revealed that the lieutenant was forced to sign a scripted testimony. Dodonka disappeared. Two years after his arrest, his father sent a letter to party leader Rákosi asking him to reveal what had happened to his son. Rákosi scribbled on the margin that no reply should be made to the letter.

In Soviet-type systems, the police routinely disposed of people without leaving a trace, removing them from space and time. Even "preparation for illegal activity" counted as a crime, significantly broadening the circle of individuals placed under repression. A conspiracy allegedly orchestrated from Budapest but branching out into other towns aimed at the establishment of an unspecified political party. Each new member was supposed to bring in a new member from their family or social network, however they may have failed to produce even a party program, let alone any other paraphernalia associated with a political party. The group was probably a loose network of individuals, many of whom had never seen one another. Membership in the "party" was signified by a postcard sent by one of the organizers. The organizers seemed to be hoping for a "peaceful regime change" to be brought about by an arrangement among the "great powers," in which case they would have developed their political "movement" into a Christian Democratic Party. After the imagined arrangement, the Soviet troops would depart, leading to the collapse of the regime. In the myriad of similar cases, which left a large paper trail, this seemed to be an insignificant affair. Yet seven people were arrested in Szolnok, and three in Bu-

dapest; the plot allegedly had 60 [!] members in Debrecen. Although literally no action was taken and the “plot,” which seems to have been little more than talk, posed no apparent danger, state security clamped down on dozens of people. The fact that a single person sent postcards to “members” pointed to state security provocation.²⁰⁵

THE TOP-DOWN, BOTTOM-UP DYNAMIC OF DICTATORIAL RULE

Victims of persecution had sometimes been persecutors themselves, or had participated in the construction of oppressive police states. Béla Szász was known as the quintessential victim of Stalinist persecution. His reputation was founded on his memoirs, first published in English, which described the inner workings of the machinery of terror. Szász was arrested as part of Soviet-occupied Eastern Europe’s largest show-trial to date at the time, in 1949. He recounted the story of his brutal interrogation and torture and how he refused to cave in and testify against the main defendant in the trial. His was a story of survival, martyrdom and heroism and his opus became one of the classic memoirs on Stalinist terror.²⁰⁶ Only recently was evidence uncovered that Szász had worked for the political police and helped ensnare an active opponent of the communists, who would end up in the gallows. Szász was a young idealist, a captive of his ideology of perfection, who brought down an enemy to his cause on the basis of fabricated evidence.

The historian Denis Deletant emphasized that “reliance on terror was an instrument of political power.”²⁰⁷ Authorities sought deliberately to cause fear and disorientation; compliance was extracted through intimidation and terror, sometimes through promises of progress and the offer of a sense of belonging and power.²⁰⁸ How many people “participated” in dictatorship because they were blackmailed or otherwise terrorized to do so and how many complied with the expectations of the regime willingly for personal gain? And how many collaborated for personal gain because the political system offered no other, decent means to gratify their desires?

205 MNL OL, XIX-10-k, box 4, 003064/1953.

206 Béla Szász, *Volunteers for the Gallows* (New York: Norton, 1972).

207 Dennis Deletant, “Political Purges and Mass Repression in Romania, 1948–1955,” in McDermott and Stibbe, eds., *Stalinist Terror in Eastern Europe*, 141.

208 Eric Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

An Orthodox Jewish high school teacher whose wife and daughter had been deported lamented that the communists “have established a regime of oppression... terror and fear are reigning... complete oppression has been institutionalized.”²⁰⁹ National Socialist and Stalinist dictatorships, it was argued, “depended on creating a strong sense of identity between the population and the aspirations of the regime by acting as though these ambitions represented popular interests and reflected popular prejudices[.]”²¹⁰ If this were so, it would be hard to explain the broad reliance on repression and state terror wielded against broad swathes of society. In fact, it can be argued that communist terror was meant to serve as the cement for societies in which no natural consensus existed between the rulers and large segments of the ruled. In the non-meritocratic systems, some could be weaned over by playing on human vice, jealousy, greed, revenge, the lust for power, and wealth. Letters of denunciation say little about popular support for the regime, in which the legal expression of displeasure was not possible. In highly centralized one-party states, most individuals had no political representation in either local government or in parliament, therefore they were left with no other way to redress their social grievances than to seek the intervention of higher authorities.

The notion of the omnipotence of the socialist state in molding society and the breakdown of existing relationships has been challenged. Violence was not exerted simply by a centrally organized reign of terror, but could be unleashed even by villagers, who profited from the general chaos to settle scores. Katherine Verdery concluded in her study on collectivization in Romania that the policies of creating a kulak class which were “intended to promote class struggle gave way to expressions of community solidarity.” She argues that kulak status was a result of negotiation, not imposition.²¹¹ In the village of Tiszakécske, the “arbitrary actions” of the local authorities led the “working peasants to side with the kulaks” and “welded the population into *unity* irrespectively of class.”²¹² Sheila Fitzpatrick has suggested that atomization may not have succeeded in the Soviet Union, where family bonds were strengthened rather than weakened, as

209 68-year-old high school teacher, OSA 400-40-4, Box 8.

210 Overy, *The Dictators*, 305.

211 Constantin Iordachi and Dorin Dobrinu, “Introduction,” in *Transforming Peasants, Property and Power: The Collectivization of Agriculture in Romania, 1949–1962*, edited by Constantin Iordachi and Dorin Dobrinu (Budapest – New York: Central European University Press, 2009) 1–24; Katherine Verdery, “Exploiters Old and New: Making and Unmaking Rich Peasants in Aurel Vlaicu,” in *ibid.*, 307–28.

212 Valamennyi tanács elnökének, MNL OL, XIX-B-1-q, box 29, 0714/951.I/5.

attested by letters written to the authorities on behalf of spouses who were arrested during the purges.

On the other hand, the success of the Soviet state's campaign against the family as a bourgeois institution may have been one of the factors in a dramatic rise in divorces and orphaned children, many of whom lived in the streets of large cities and became involved in criminal activity. Polish women deported to the Soviet Union were appalled by the decline of moral standards and the decline of family values and bonds.²¹³ Simon Orenstein, who was sentenced in the Slansky trial in 1952, was pleasantly surprised by the sympathy and help offered by fellow prisoners, who always gave him share of their extra food although Orenstein could not contribute.²¹⁴ A former prisoner in Czechoslovakia attested that the population often gave them cigarettes and food, even though they put themselves at risk of corporal punishment by doing so.²¹⁵

Communism was an ideology of the collective under which the aspirations of the individual were subordinated to the good of the community. While this ideal may have been close to the collectivist traditions of rural Russia, it was foreign to the traditions of individualism in Central Europe. Propaganda emphasized the collective, but politics instilled mistrust and paranoia in people, leaving them with a sense of isolation. It was logical for the state to strive for social atomization, the sense that there was nobody to count or rely on. In conditions under which the majority of the society, even the beneficiaries of the "rule of the proletariat," opposed the political system (as shown by the Hungarian revolution in 1956),²¹⁶ isolated individuals were easier targets for the instruments of power than groups of people in a political system that regarded members of society as targets to be suppressed and even to be annihilated. A defector described the situation presciently: "the system is able to pit people against each other, to intimidate them and to destroy every community that could bring people closer together." Public spaces were manipulated for this purpose: "This is why they took the tavern table" and replaced them with stands so that people "should not desire to find out what another person was thinking."²¹⁷

213 Jolluck, *Exile and Identity*.

214 Simon Orenstein. OSA 300-30-2/139.

215 Concentration and Forced Labor Camps in Czechoslovakia. OSA, 300-30-2:157.

216 See about this Gábor Gyáni, "A forradalom társadalomtörténeti paradoxonja," in Gábor Gyáni, János Rainer M. eds., *Ezerkilencszázötvenhat az újabb történeti irodalomban* (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 2007), 27–39. Gyáni has argued that despite the circular mobility of the Stalinist system, the majority of the social strata that was supposed to benefit from it turned against the system in 1956.

217 Tractor Driver, 1953. OSA, 400-40-4, Box 8.

People's behavior is shaped by their prior experiences and how they interpret these experiences. Examining the case of "the world's most pervasive and intrusive surveillance apparatus," the GDR, Marcus Jacob and Marcell Tyrell posited that this experience "resulted in a strong and lingering mistrust of members of society... in post-communist East Germany," which adversely affected their willingness to cooperate with other members of the society.²¹⁸

Real and imagined opponents of the political system were hunted down like enemy forces on the battlefield. Government sponsored working-class solidarity was a ritual which had no bearing on reality. Groups of friends who gathered in pubs to vent their frustrations with the political system were broken up by provocateurs and informants planted in their midst. Their conversations may have been hostile towards the regime, but the authorities blew them out of proportion and transformed them into alleged plots and conspiracies. The lack of legal protection against the state and the fear of the consequences of arrest led many to commit desperate acts. Minister of Interior Sándor Zöld got wind of his impending arrest, killed his wife, children and mother-in-law, and committed suicide. Murdering the members of his family was a desperate measure perhaps intended to protect them from something worse than death; his suicide was also an act of defiance that deprived the state security of the opportunity to extract the names of other alleged "enemies."

A widow committed suicide by her husband's grave when her newlywed daughter and her son-in-law were picked up by state security. She offered her sacrifice in the misguided hope the couple would be released. In other words, she perhaps hoped to give her life in exchange for theirs. Her martyrdom was in vain, as the couple was sentenced for putting up an alleged "enemy of the people" in their home. Fear was instilled consciously as a means to extract compliance. It became a tool of statecraft. While conspirators were tried in secret, prominent political crimes, such as the proceedings against Rajk, military and ecclesiastical leaders, social democrats, and their punishment were well publicized as a deterrent.

In 1951, in order to halt the alarming number of illegal animal slaughters, Minister of Interior Árpád HÁZI decreed that violators should be tried immediately and that the verdicts be published by the press.²¹⁹ An escapee from the camp world of Czechoslovakia, opined that, "the regime of terror behind the Iron Curtain is based solely on fear. A father fears his son, a brother his broth-

²¹⁸ Jacob and Tyrell, *The Legacy of Surveillance*, 3-4.

²¹⁹ MNL OL, XIX-B-1-q, box 20, 0673/1951.

ers.” Orenstein pointed out an essential feature of Stalinist systems, namely that “in these countries, there are no normal relations between people as in the free world.” Moral values were left behind: “Decency and sincerity are not normal occurrences... If a man can spread terror around him, then he can also, to a certain degree, stop fearing others.”²²⁰

This could easily be seen as a Dickensian world. It is hard to find a more fitting description of the communist universe than the appraisal given by Mihály Szegedy-Maszák on *Oliver Twist*, which “is the terrifying image of an underworld where everybody watches the other, so there is no place for human bonds.”²²¹ This is not the sterile musing of posterity. As a contemporary put it, “the worst fault of the regime was the way it undermined mutual trust.”²²² Coping with a system that aimed at total control was an acquired behavior. A British woman was allowed to return to England after having lived in Czechoslovakia. It took her a long time before she raised her voice and spoke without involuntarily looking over her shoulder.²²³ A contemporary anecdote illustrated the point well: “Two passersby examine a car. One remarks: ‘what a beautiful Russian automobile.’ The other laughs: ‘but don’t you know it is American?’ ‘I certainly know it is American, but I don’t know who you are.’”²²⁴ George F. Kennan contended that “Communists will, as a rule, work toward destruction of all forms of personal independence... Their system can handle only individuals who have been brought into complete dependence on a higher power.”

A defected officer related that “Discipline in the Hungarian Army is characterized by blind obedience based on fear... They beat it into the head of every soldier to see an enemy in everyone.” People believed more or less everything they heard on the RFE airwaves, but they listened to it for a few minutes only because “one never knew if anyone was eavesdropping.” They did not discuss the programs either, “because people were afraid of one another.” Mistrust, paranoia, and fear instilled by the government was eating away at the fabric of society. No anti-Communist could be “absolutely certain that another person is not a communist agent,” just the same as no Communist functionary could be sure whether another member of the party “would remain faithful in case of danger.”²²⁵

220 OSA 300-30-161 (Czechoslovakia).

221 Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, *Kubla kán és Pickwick úr: romantika és realizmus az angol irodalomban* (Budapest: Magvető, 1982), 230.

222 Former prisoner of German origin. OSA, 300-30-2/139.

223 “British Woman’s Experiences as Housewife in Prague.” OSA 300-30-2:152.

224 “Spirit of Resistance in Czech Population.” OSA 300-30-2:152.

225 “The Political Opposition against Communism.” OSA 300-30-2 Item 7536/54.

Robert Gellately argues, that, unlike in the case of German self-policing under Hitler, it is impossible to regard Stalinist society, which was under surveillance by a large NKVD contingent and a rapidly growing network of informants, as self-policing in a similar sense, despite the prevalence of popular denunciations. The propensity to denounce depended on political and cultural traditions. And this leads to the next issue: the question of what was reported and why. This may have had to do with the top-down, bottom-up dynamic generated by the totalitarian state.

What someone reports makes a big difference. Even in a dictatorship, one can imagine a denunciation of corruption which can be conceived as cooperation in rooting out social anomaly.²²⁶ One may also give up a person in hiding, not because the person in question is avoiding the authorities for committing an act that cannot be universally accepted as a crime, but because that person is persecuted as a result of the worldview of a political system. It is one thing to report a real crime, such as corruption, to the authorities, and another to inform on a person persecuted by the state. Denunciations can also be distinguished from the perspective of the expected outcome. One can denounce someone in the expectation that the person will receive fair judgement and a punishment commensurate with his actions. One may also denounce others in full knowledge of the fact that the punishment is likely to be a form of harsh reprisal that is not at all deserved and not proportionate to the alleged crime, the latter being an act of collaboration.

In 1949, after the communist seizure of power, three historians raided the offices of their colleagues at the Institute of History in Budapest searching for illegal literature. They broke open offices and searched drawers in the middle of the night. The scholars they denounced lost their jobs, and their careers were cut in half. One professor was planning to mail books to Switzerland. His accuser, Károly Vigh told him he considered “the dissemination of the works of defected historians an *“anti-state”* action.²²⁷ This was a highly dangerous accusation, which could have had very serious consequences. It is impossible to ignore the ideological dimension of this case.

²²⁶ István Deák has differentiated between collaboration, cooperation and accommodation in dealing with foreign occupation. This is a descending order where collaboration is an unethical support rendered to foreign authorities. The same categorization may be usefully employed for individual strategies in repressive regimes. See Deák, *Europe on Trial: The Story of Collaboration, Resistance and Retribution during World War II*, Chapter 3.

²²⁷ ÁBTL, Kosáry, 10-30392/950.

Domokos Kosáry came from a bourgeois background, and had close ties to the prewar elite, a fact that was cleverly presented to the state security. In 1949, his Anglo-American orientation (“Kosáry *bragged* about hiding an English parachutist during the war”) was used against him as evidence of his anti-Soviet stance. It was reported that Kosáry’s attitude was “hostile to the people’s democracy.”

The entire affair in the Institute of History was part of the communist takeover of cultural and scientific institutions. The state security services had an official agent there, who was assisted by young communist zealots striving to take over the positions of power from their “bourgeois” peers. But it was Péter Hanák, one of the unofficial informants, who launched a full-scale security invasion of the institution. It was then that the political police instructed Hanák and his associates to break into the offices for “evidence” of hostile activity. The incident is revealing of the mechanisms of totalitarian life: the presence of agents, the abundance of voluntary social helpers, the role of ideological (in this case communist) conviction, careerism, and the interplay of top to bottom and bottom to top action, absolutism, and voluntary participation at one and the same time. Denunciations do not have to be baseless to be reprehensible: denouncing kulaks for hoarding food may have had some factual basis, but, in view of the “crime” committed, such a denunciation could still be considered malicious. It is this kind of *collaboration* which provides the bottom-up component of a dictatorial regime.

Well-connected people could and did profit from the persecution of others by abusing their power in a political system in which the victims had no legal recourse. Lower-level functionaries defied the central authorities, but not in a positive sense. Housing shortages were a well-known part of life in Soviet-type societies. In the town of Szolnok, the local council wanted to provide the workers of the local university with housing. According to the often-tried method used by the political police and the army to provide their cadres with homes, the municipal council compiled a list of “undesirable elements” to be evicted from their homes and moved to shared apartments. It turned out that the council compelled a far larger number of people to vacate their residences than they had originally gotten permission for, and a “large number” of people who were not involved with the university were given apartments in such a manner.

This also meant that in several cases more than two families were moved into the same dwelling. Since the operation was considered secret, good political connections were needed even to know, let alone take advantage, of it. Several council and party activists were involved in the scam. The victims were forced

out of their homes with threats of deportation to the countryside.²²⁸ The person who denounced the affair to the authorities did so with good intentions on behalf of victims. A local county secretary who tried to use his influence to *help* “class enemies” was condemned for “hindering the construction of socialism.” This person, who was listed as not owning any property, was sentenced as a kulak in order to portray the incident as an example of solidarity among the former exploiters and conceal what it really was: collaboration between the new and old ruling classes.

Does the individual swim with the tide or control it? The scholar Péter Nagy was the scion of a highly educated middle-class, in contemporary terminology, bourgeois family, although the other branch of the family came from modest origins. He joined the communist movement, entered the diplomatic service, and was sent to Cairo. There, he was tasked with monitoring the head of the diplomatic mission, who happened to be the Hungarian president’s son-in-law and a prominent member of the party that had won the election in 1945, which had been the major roadblock to communist victory. Nagy opened his superior’s mail and concluded that Csornoky was involved in treasonous activities as a sworn enemy of the Communist movement, and, mainly, that Csornoky was plotting to smuggle his father-in-law, Hungary’s President of the Republic, Zoltán Tildy, out of the country. Nagy denounced him to the security service, and Csornoky was recalled to Hungary, arrested, tried, and executed for high treason after the communist takeover. Péter Nagy later became a prominent intellectual and practitioner of literary criticism, when he was not penning reports during his capacity as a paid agent of state security. While he was under arrest, he was officially recruited into the ranks of the ÁVH on the basis of compromising material.

Decades later, Nagy claimed that he did not think the court was going to issue such a grave sentence, but he refused to express regret. His motivations, as revealed by his unpublished memoir and a lengthy interview, reveal multifarious motives. He disliked Csornoky, who owed his career to his marriage, for never taking him out, not even for coffee, and he deplored his superior’s alleged marital infidelity. Although his grievances reveal bourgeois attitudes, they made it acceptable for Nagy to deliver the president’s son-in-law into the arms of state security. “The bright picture [he] envisioned [of communism] never faded,” despite his later disappointments with the record of the political system, which he had hoped “would bring about paradise on earth.” Nagy considered Csor-

228 MNL OL, XIX-B-1-q box 29, 13-303/1952.

noky a traitor, not of the state, but of the communist movement, a crime for which, in Csornoky's assessment, he had to perish. Nagy considered the deadly result of his actions a product of the times: "Life was cheap then it was so easy for somebody to die." Ideology, not personal gain was the chief motivating factor for the young middle-class intellectual's betrayal of decency. There is little doubt that he knew that the outcome of the denunciation would have more serious consequences than the victim's "demotion," as treason was publicly known to be punishable by death.

"Determined, opportunistic and a scoundrel." This was Csornoky's take on Nagy.²²⁹ Nagy hoped to be an agent of history, and hoped to shape his times by denouncing a harmful individual and helping communism to victory. He later realized, of course that communism was helped to power by the Kremlin's power politics, and that his "contribution" to this victory was negligible. The doctrine he internalized by choice narrowed his vision and mobilized him as a young zealot to bring down the old social order and its values. He had agency, but within the narrow constraints of his times. He did have a choice and he made the wrong one. Nagy, like so many others, had some limited options, and, had he not wanted to make history, he could have made a more ethical choice. Of course, his future career might have suffered, but he perhaps might not be remembered as a scoundrel. Revealingly, Nagy reflected, self-servingly, on his experience with history: "shitty times, shitty people." He left an important question open: did the time make people "shitty," or the other way around?

Most choices were directly or *indirectly* coerced by the policies of the power center. Citizens informed on others for personal enrichment or merely for a chance to travel to the West, or because they were threatened, coerced, or even blackmailed into cooperation. They also were acting in a political system that did not grant the opportunity to travel freely or to get ahead in life without serving the system. A mechanic conspired to fool state inspectors into thinking he had repaired a broken tractor: the bad one was hidden, while another tractor station lent a good one for the inspection. The mechanic was working around a system in which spare parts were usually unavailable, and which politicized poor work as conscious subversion in an economic system that divested itself of incentives to produce quality work. His options were constrained by the conditions created by state socialism.

229 The passage is based on Ferenc Katona, "Tevőleges részese voltam – Nagy Péter akadémikus két emlékezete 1948-ra," *2000 Irodalmi és Társadalmi havilap*, 2014. No. 12.

Whether individuals volunteered or were blackmailed to “participate” in dictatorial rule by informing on others, there were systemic constraints on their actions. Once a person had made the commitment to work for the authorities, it was hard to break free. In both cases, once entrapped, the individual could not simply terminate the Mephistophelean deal. That was the privilege of the wielders of power.

Pathological behavior blossomed in the conditions of war and dictatorial rule. Following is the story of a type who would survive and serve any political regime. Zoltán Harangi worked for the Swedish Red Cross, which was involved in the large-scale rescue of Jews during the Second World War. Harangi clandestinely collaborated with the district Arrow Cross party service and denounced a hospital that had served as a Jewish hideout. The doctor in charge of the hospital took bribes from the people hiding there. Harangi also revealed to the Arrow Cross that there were labor servicemen hiding at the Swedish Red Cross, in full knowledge that he was exposing them to mortal danger. In both cases, he may have been motivated by easy access to the victims’ money and valuables. He had a falling out with the party thugs, who beat him to pulp. Nevertheless, Harangi continued his shady activities: he sold Swedish protective papers and had his clients taken away by the Gestapo. He blackmailed, robbed, and had a woman deported in 1944. After the war, the woman’s husband recognized Harangi, but didn’t dare report him to the authorities, as by then he was already in the service of the Soviet military intelligence. Even so, Harangi was tried, and despite his insanity plea, sentenced to forced labor. He got out of prison in the chaotic days of the 1956 revolution and joined one of the resistance groups, some members of which suspected that he was an informant. He was saved by one of his comrades. While pretending to be on the rebels’ side, he contacted the security services and gave them the names of the members of his armed group. He also falsely claimed that secret policemen had been killed in a hospital, an accusation that carried the death penalty for the accused.

When the revolution was over, Harangi became an official informant of state security and urged the arrest of his former comrades, again with full knowledge of the fact that they faced death. Just as in 1944, his actions led to the demise or incarceration of his victims, including the fighter who had saved him in 1956. This unholy record only endeared him to the state security. He continued to serve state security into the 1970s, when he filed reports on old Arrow Cross comrades and former cellmates. This was a story of mutual dependence: the police used his services with full knowledge of his shady past, which, in turn, made him the perfect informer, the kind who worked out of passion and

was also easy to blackmail. His 1949 verdict noted that he “showed no sign of regretting what he had done [during the war].”²³⁰

Unscrupulous political turncoats are highly useful to repressive regimes. A man reporting as late as the 1960s had been a member of the Arrow Cross party. Gy. F. had a similar career. He joined the Arrow Cross movement in 1944, but, by 1945, was already in the ranks of the newly established, political police. F.’s luck ran out when he was arrested and convicted for his activities in the National Socialist movement. He was released in 1951, and his shady past made him a good candidate for state security work. His handlers dispatched him to “work” at the MÁVAG factory, a bastion of socialist heavy industry, where they used him to provoke an “anti-state conspiracy.” It seems that F. lost his usefulness, however, because he was sentenced to life imprisonment, although he was soon released, only to be convicted again in 1960 as a common criminal.²³¹

There were so many denunciations (required, solicited, and coerced by the state) that they were beginning to cause problems. In one case against a group of people who were manufacturing false denunciations, the judge warned that “our authorities, state security agencies... receive baseless slanderous denunciations with the necessary caution... anonymous denunciations that serve as the basis for undermining [people’s] reputation must end.”²³² The ultimate paradox of the system of surveillance and informing was a conspiracy that involved the writing of fake denunciations, in which the denouncers were condemned and their victims released on the grounds that the incriminating letters were intended to mislead the authorities and subvert the people’s democracy. It was an illustration of the atmosphere of paranoia imposed by the state.

The indictment of the defendants can be read as an anatomy of the Stalinist political system, although obviously it was not meant to be: “[T]hey ruin their victims spiritually and psychologically, they intimidate their environment in order to make them insecure, distrustful, so that they never feel safe.” The ring-leader was a medical student who graduated from a Catholic high school. His actions seem to have been motivated by revenge. His targets were individuals who had previously courted his wife. His allegations, sent to the security police, sounded “realistic enough,” as they were couched in the language of class struggle. A doctor was “spreading false rumors regarding comrade Stalin’s death.

230 Vádirat, Lévai Rudolf és társai, ÁBTL, 121588; László Eörsi, “Az örök vamzer. *Beszélő*,” volume 17 number 1 (2012): 1-3, 51-57.

231 Gyula Belényi, *Az állam szorításában – az ipari munkásság társadalmi átalakulása Magyarországon, 1945-1965* (Budapest: Belvedere Meridionale, 2009), 160-161.

232 Zudar és társai, MNL OL, XIX-10-K, box 4.

Please put an end to this.” A “group of medical students was spreading the flu epidemic. Their instigator and mentor was the Hungarian Zionist Union. The members of this group are Jewish bourgeois and the people they have bribed, who have received substantial amounts of money.”

This “conspiracy” was made up of medical students; at least one of the participants may not have known that he had been “recruited” as a member. It is likely that they did manufacture denunciations, mostly against doctors and medical students, as well as against individuals who belonged to the persecuted social classes, in order to “ruin them.” A retired major who had served in the pre-war army was denounced for “spying and conspiracy.”

Thousands were arrested under similar charges, and many were executed. Once in their clutches, the authorities would need to widen the circle of defendants and make their case out to be conspiracy. It stretches the imagination to believe that a medical student would “instruct” another medical student to spread bacteria or viruses of contagious illnesses such as flu, dysentery, or typhoid. It is equally hard to believe that they would plot to detonate railways or set fire to the Lenin Institute. The people accused of writing these malicious letters paid dearly. As their deed was, according to the verdict, “motivated by the boundless hatred of the dictatorship of the proletariat” harsh sentences were meted out. Endre Zudar was sentenced to 14 years and the full confiscation of his wealth for “organizing and leading a conspiracy to overthrow the People’s Republic.” Five others were condemned to terms between five and ten years, and their belongings confiscated, ensuring that their families would become destitute.

Totalitarian systems have been seen as a form of “plebiscitary democracy,” a political system that employs mass mobilization to elicit acclaim and consent without enabling genuine political participation.²³³ The role of unofficial denunciations in the control the state exercised over its citizens may have been small. Hungarian and other East European sources indicate that tips regarding serious anti-state activity, treason, and conspiracy, which were seen or cast as the biggest threat to Communist states and which carried the most severe sentences, may not have come from ordinary citizens, or even from informal collaborators of the state security services. Many of these crimes may have been “revealed” and/or manufactured by professional agents and provocateurs. In 1954, Ottmár Faddi, a Franciscan monk, was sentenced for having “organized a counterrevolutionary plot” that was designed to “seize power, restore capital-

233 Tim Kirk, *Nazi Germany* (London: Palgrave, 2007).

ism, and establish a Catholic government with American assistance.” This was no small conspiracy as, according to a report prepared by the State Security Authority, there were 80 members of the plot and another “100 people were privy to it.” Twenty-seven people were taken into custody, five of whom were “treasonous agents of the security police.”

The documentation makes it clear that the “conspiracy” was betrayed by two members who were state security agents. Faddi and twelve others were given sentences from six years to life in prison by a military tribunal. The fact that none were sentenced to death reflects the relative thaw of the post-Stalin years. Faddi’s group and others with whom they allegedly were “in contact” were prominent politicians of the prewar era. That they were discussing regime change and perhaps even the establishment of political parties in the hope that the Americans would liberate the country is not entirely implausible. It is also clear that the “organization” was infiltrated by agents of state security who may have provoked the “conspiracy”—careless talk by careless men and women.²³⁴

In all likelihood the members of an “anti-democracy kulak conspiracy” headed by Ottó Hermann fell victim to a state security provocation as two agents were planted in their midst. An individual identified as O. H. was recruited with the specific purpose of gathering information on the activities of the vicar of Soltszentimre and the kulaks of that village.²³⁵ Nevertheless, at least some of conspiracies investigated by state security may have contained a kernel of truth. A group headed by Gedeon Ráth was linked to the British Embassy in Budapest. An ÁVH investigation concluded that the purpose of the group was “to acquire weapons, support the offensive of the occupation army, to attack and occupy military installations. In case of war the weapons would have been dropped by parachute.”²³⁶ This is interesting because the U.S. government supported subversive operations designed to establish resistance groups behind the Iron Curtain, which were to be put into action in case of a Soviet-American war. State security agents infiltrated these groups and promptly surrendered them. Anyone who took part in such activity paid a huge price and it must be stressed that no group in Hungary took any real action. The ÁVH blew them out of propor-

²³⁴ ÁBTL, Faddi Ottmár és társai, V54/51514-10.

²³⁵ Hermann Ottó és társai. ÁBTL, V-85216/1. In 1951 Ottó Hermann, Rókus Ujzászsy and József Ádám were sentenced to death. 17 defendants were classified as kulaks even though one of them only had 25 holds of land, well below the official kulak limit. Five others who were not classified as kulak had even less land. This suggests that the struggle against kulaks masked a war on the peasantry as a whole.

²³⁶ Ráth Gedeon és társai. ÁBTL, 52/50799-37.

tion. In 1956 these cases were quietly reviewed. Some defendants were released and the sentences of others reduced. This was too late, tragically, for those who had been executed.

The “participatory” model, which stresses forms of collaboration, does not explain the instability of the Stalinist political systems in Eastern Europe, most of whom faced existential crises soon after their inception and were only saved by military force. The very existence of the German Democratic Republic was threatened when, in the first three months of 1953, 122,000 people fled to Western Germany. Country-wide protests occurred in the GDR and Czechoslovakia. They were put down by the Soviet forces, and the Kremlin was forced to order a slowdown in the march towards Communism. There was no mass uprising against the National Socialist regime throughout the dozen years of its existence, while hundreds of thousands of Germans took to the streets to protest against the Stalinist regime. The Hungarian leadership was well aware that they needed the occupation forces to stay in power and it is for that reason that the Political Committee panicked when, in 1955, it looked as though the Soviets might need to pull out their troops due to the Austrian state treaty. Therefore, the Hungarians extended an invitation for them to stay and even requested that Soviet troops being withdrawn from the western neighbor be redeployed in Hungary.

One of the main sources of popular anger were the policies pursued in the countryside, collectivization. Peasants feared the Soviet system, as reported by a people’s educator in September 1947. “I have never seen people so afraid as the people in those villages and hamlets were of the kolkhoz. When I asked them what they feared most... it was 98 percent the kolkhoz, then religion and God.”²³⁷ The party state aimed to break down the existing social and kinship relations around which village life was organized. These relationships were to be replaced by the hierarchy of class struggle; from private owners and independent producers, peasants were to be transformed into lumpen proletariat on collective farms.²³⁸ The traditional village society was shattered.

Previously, the local elite had consisted of the wealthiest peasant families, as well as the priest, the teacher, and the notary, all of whom were locals. Now, the new elite, the party secretary, the president of the collective, and the head of the tractor station were mostly strangers who had been brought in from out-

237 Cited in Ö. Kovács, *A paraszti társadalom felszámolása a kommunista diktatúrában*, 88.

238 Iordachi and Dobrinicu, “Introduction,”; Verdery, “Exploiters Old and New.”

side the village, and the lower strata of village society also advanced to elite positions.²³⁹ Kulaks were singled out as the socialist regimes' chief targets.

In Hungary Rákosi borrowed Stalin's interpretation of the kulaks, that they were the "most implacable enemies of the construction of socialism," and planned their "liquidation."²⁴⁰ Collectivization and the compulsory delivery of products constituted some of the most repressive acts of Stalinist social and economic engineering. A foreign observer thought that the small farmers whose families have "toiled for centuries to turn their fields into blossoming gardens considered the inclusion of their hereditary homes" into the collective as "downright robbery."²⁴¹ Collectivization was resented because it threatened the livelihood of farmers and their families for the sake of industrialization and military buildup, and also because it left their farmlands in great disarray. Hence, for example, on the collective farm in Czechoslovakia, which allegedly was under the leadership of "a good communist," the meadows belonging to the kolkhoz had not been mowed, the grass from the previous year was still there, and the food for the cattle had not been purchased. The cows were badly looked after, had not been milked for two days, and were roaming the meadows in pain. Modern agricultural machines were left outside in the winter without any shelter and were unusable the following year.²⁴² Conditions were not right for sowing seeds, cultivating the animals, or reaping the harvest. It was reported from Czechoslovakia that "corridors and waiting rooms of governmental institutions were crowded with desperate, frightened, angry peasants who had been summoned."²⁴³

Terror can be described in terms of the torture, incarceration, and execution of "enemies." Repression against the peasantry included these methods, but, as in Ukraine, it included economic repression, such as depriving people of their livelihoods, serious food shortages, and even the threat of famine. The harvest had been good in Hungary the preceding year. Delivery norms were established at the same level in 1952, even though there had been a deep freeze and draught. Grain shortage required extraordinary methods, even by Stalinist standards. The Ministry of Justice decreed summary jurisdiction for illegal threshing in

239 Zsuzsanna Varga, "Ki a veszélyesebb ellenség a kulák vagy a kétlaki: Egy makacs nógrádi falu és a kollektivizálás," in Sándor Horváth and József Ö. Kovács eds., *Állami erőszak és kollektivizálás a kommunista diktatúrában* (Budapest: BTK TTI, 2015), 51-77.

240 "Megbeszélés, Rákosi, Gerő, Kiszeljov, 1951," in Magdolna Baráth, ed., *Szovjet diplomáciai jelentések Magyarországról* (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2002), 53.

241 "Foreign Woman's View on Czechoslovakia." OSA, 300-30-2:4.

242 "General Picture of a Czech Kolkhoz." 1952. OSA, 300-30-2:13. Czechoslovakia.

243 Persecution and Arrest of Peasants." 1951. OSA, 300-30-2:4. Czechoslovakia.

1951, as peasants were allegedly hiding income derived from this illegal activity “in barns, haystacks, and pits.” Trials of the culprits were to be held within 48 hours, and the tribunals were expected to hand down exemplary sentences, particularly if the inciter or perpetrator was a kulak, in order to drive down “black-market threshing.”²⁴⁴

Threshing was of utmost significance from the perspective of delivering agricultural produce to the state, so, beginning in 1948, politically reliable supervisors were appointed to monitor the process.²⁴⁵ In 1951 food shortage reached critical proportions as heavy industrialization was stepped up due to preparation for war. The solution to the problem was the intensification of terror, which entailed further pressure on the main enemy of the countryside, kulaks. Supervision of threshing had to be intensified in order to discover whether personnel involved in the process had “fallen under the influence of the kulaks.” All available informants were to be deployed to monitor threshing. These informants had to be in constant touch with the police. The persons unmasked had to be handed over immediately to the authorities, and then court martialed.²⁴⁶

Police lieutenant Mátyás Czakó found it hard to take a break from work, even while on holiday. His report, which reached party leader Rákosi, offers insights into the atmosphere prevailing in the countryside. His activism also reveals that the impetus to apply terror could emanate from the lower ranks of the police hierarchy. While vacationing in the scenic village of Tiszapüspök, Czakó found “a counterrevolutionary environment incited by the class enemy,” although he added that the “poor peasantry was also hostile.” The chief culprits were former policemen, kulaks, and the butcher. The latter was “terrorizing” the “pro-democracy” segment of the villagers and “intimidating the people.” He even convinced an inebriated person to trample on his party membership booklet. The former ruling elite, “higher clergy,” and gendarmes were clandestinely “evaluating the international situation.” The kulaks, the butcher, the horse-trader and the miller were involved in speculation, and one of them was making a good living and buying things such as a horse or motorcycle.

Former Arrow Cross members completed the social panoply of hostile elements. They were allegedly convincing the villagers to wear a cross as “Jesus also said that you should wear crosses.” Local leaders were turning a blind eye to this, as they were married to “former kulaks.” Hence, they were unable to resist the

244 Pócze Tibor belügyminiszter-helyettes a budapesti és vidéki rendőrkapitányságoknak a fekete cséplések fokozottabb ellenőrzéséről, 1951. augusztus 3. MNL OL, XIX-B-1-b, box 25, 00611.

245 Tóth, *A padlássöprések kora*, 110.

246 Feketecséplések fokozottabb ellenőrzése. MNL OL, XX-B-1-j, box 25, 00611.

wealthy farmers with sufficient rigor, in part simply because they were allegedly afraid that the kulaks would beat them in their own homes. The council secretary, for instance, was a “captain of the old army,” and his wife a rich peasant. All this, in the police lieutenant’s view, led to a relaxation of class struggle. The class enemy was also active in the cooperatives, where one could find former “Arrow Cross, declassified class aliens and Horthyite officers.”

Even his superiors felt that Czakó “severely magnified” the problems encountered in the village, perhaps because they were afraid of repercussions from above. This could explain why they suggested that the kulaks of that village should be “made to feel the power of the state even more, a couple of them [local kulaks] should be removed.” The “ÁVH would take the necessary measures in the shortest possible time.”²⁴⁷

In 1952, the food shortage became critical, generating great discontent and prompting people to “hoard” food, a criminal offense. The situation in the countryside was becoming acute. Peasants were refusing to sow grain. Conditions were so bad that the police tried to persuade a woman who was being held in custody for entering the country illegally “to encourage the folks to sow” after her release.²⁴⁸ Fourteen peasants were indicted for criminal offenses in just three days of August 1952. The administration was living in a siege mentality, under attack from outside and within. Especially disconcerting was the “fact” that the imperialists were using biological weapons to destroy crops. In a matter of only two days, criminal proceedings were underway against eight people who delivered weevilled grain as part of an “enemy attack.” The state felt itself under siege, and despair was spreading across the countryside. In Madócs, the rumor spread that the “British will be here in a month.” The source was “Radio Voice of Europe” [sic].

Legislation allowed the state to requisition produce and grain from peasants who had a backlog in delivery. A distinction was drawn between poor and “wealthy” peasants. In 1951, the authorities allowed people delinquent on their deliveries to retain seed grain and their head quota. In contrast, at the turn of 1952/1953 two-thirds of the peasants, 800,000 farmers did not even have their seed grain left. Requisitioners were instructed to conduct thorough house searches, including attics and cellars, often even beds were turned over in the search for hidden grain. The police were summoned in the village of Szabad-

247 Czakó Mátyás jelentése, December 1952, MNL OL, XIX-B-1-q, box 29, 064/1952.

248 György Ritter, “Elűzetve. Egy bakonyi német asszony emlékezete a háború borzalmairól,” in Bódy and Horváth, eds., *Társadalom a háborúban*, 65.

szállás because the threshers asked for the wheat that they had earned. In Tolna, 200 women and children “gathered” to stop the confiscation of wheat. A blacksmith from an agricultural cooperative “agitated” against requisitioning. He was handed over to the state prosecutor. Working peasants threatened not to fulfill their quotas at a meeting if they were left with no seed grain.

Seed grain was the last resort. Reports intended for the Ministry of Interior stressed that in most cases, requisitioning included the head quota and the seed grain. This did not stop law enforcement from “taking away those who spoke about it for spreading alarming rumor.” In response to the irrationally high delivery quotas, some peasants mixed sand into the grain they delivered. Others refused to perform the first ploughing after harvest.²⁴⁹ 1952 was a particularly bad year, possibly the worst. The Soviet bloc was preparing for war, and militarization of their economies was underway at full pace. If Stalin had not died when he did, in March 1953, it might have been the last year of peace. In Jaklovce in eastern Slovakia a commission took practically everything during threshing season, and the peasants were left without food or fodder for the winter. In a show of defiance, they proceeded to the district council with their families, declaring that they would stay there to avoid famine. After an investigation, some of their produce was returned to them.²⁵⁰

It seems that resistance, despite the terroristic methods applied and the limited means available to oppose the regime, was widespread. Local, grass roots resistance to the Stalinization of the countryside cut across class lines. A common front in many places among the “former ruling classes”—that is, the local elite—and the “exploited classes” revealed that rural social stratification defied simple ideological dogma. The traditional local communities had not quite been crushed. Defiance of the collectivization drive took a positive form in the Nedakonice area in Czechoslovakia. In 1950, the locals thwarted an attempt to plough their hedges as a prelude to collectivization. As a result, three ranking farmers were sent to jail. The villagers proceeded to cultivate the three farms and fulfilled the delivery quota.²⁵¹

In Orwellian fashion, a member of parliament held a lecture for 600-800 villagers of Esztár in which he claimed that the standard of living was on the rise. Local potentates were heckled, and the crowd wanted to capture the party secretary among shouts that the collective farm should be disbanded. When a po-

249 Jelentés Sebestyénnek, 1 August 1952.

250 Collectivization Drive in eastern Slovakia.” 1952. OSA, 300-30-2:4.

251 “Collectivization – Recent Escapee.” 1951. OSA, 300-30-2:4. Czechoslovakia.

lice force was sent in and used tear grenades to disperse the crowd, villagers chanted that the “people’s” regime was no different from the old: “in the old regime only the gendarmes treated people like this, now it is also the police.” In the village of Mindszent, the political police reported that 400–500 people attended a meeting where they emphasized that they would not comply with compulsory delivery. The protest was instigated by poor peasants, some of whom were members of the party. Similarly, in another locality, four people, including a man who had just received land, “agitated” against the same policy, and the “crowd” pledged not to comply.

Propagandists who had descended on the village were far removed from the reality of local life. Mostly women attended a meeting at which two kolkhoz members, one laborer, and a woman interrupted a propaganda lecture on the Korean War to protest “the exploitation of the peasantry.” A woman threatened to hang her child because she could not provide food. At that point two others interjected that “those who took the wheat should be hung, even if the person was a Communist.” A party functionary in Lovasberény, who was sent to lecture about the “Tito gang,” was interrupted with shouts that he would be better advised to talk about bread. The secretary of the local council may have agreed with the protestors, as he refused to intervene.

In Sándorfalva, a council member told an agitated crowd that the peasants had been “deceived,” because they were told that the head quota would be secured. According to the report, 300 people were gathered together and the party secretary was “stopped” by a coalition of classes that included a former “Horthyite” policeman, a former gendarme, and several farmers with small plots. Five of them were taken into custody by the political police. Elsewhere somebody shot at the party secretary, a “kulak” stabbed a party functionary, and a peasant woman attacked the party secretary with an axe and tried to hit him in the head. Before the policeman grabbed her, she was able to tear out the council president’s hair. It took 24 policemen to disperse a crowd of 800, which was demanding that the collectors leave their village. They were allegedly incited by the Catholic priest. Even the dry, bureaucratic report suggests that requisitioning was universally condemned as the local party secretary, “remained passive.”²⁵²

In Baranya County, a local council secretary, who ranked alongside the party secretary as a local potentate, went even further. He declared that “the working peasant will have no bread. The decree on requisitioning was not made by the

²⁵² Jelentés Sebestyén Lászlónak, 14 August 1952, MNL OL, XIX-B-1-j, box 8, 223; MNL OL, XIX-B-14, box 3, sz. n. 1952.

workers and he would not execute it.” Thus, class war rhetoric was turned upside down and used against the state. It was reported that requisitioning ground to a halt, and the party secretary, György Kiss, was taken into custody. Solidarity among the classes was not predicted by Marxist ideology. Yet in spite of the strident rhetoric, which blasted former exploiters and kulaks as leeches and bloodsuckers of the workers, it was not hard to find. In Vajta, a “28-yoke kulak” started a demonstration that was joined by the eight-yoke wife of a party member. The secretary of the local Soviet called the requisitioners “a gang of crooks,” and the 70-person march was disbanded by fourteen policemen.

In the village of Bikal, the president of the local council was caught in the act of illegal slaughter. In another locality, the council secretary declared that black-market slaughter was an “unnecessary harassment of the people.”²⁵³ Solidarity was sometimes self-serving and showed that it was not always possible to control local potentates. In the district of Szentlőrinc, the president of a council executive committee declared that, if the “working peasants” would not fulfill the delivery, he would not turn in the head quota or the seed grain. He was promptly investigated by state security.

In other cases, local law enforcement abused its powers. A policeman was exacting surplus deliveries on the pretext that the grain was wet. “Rapid action” was taken against him. The language of class struggle imposed from above did not resonate well with low level functionaries. In Fejér County, the local council did not “combat” the “hostile atmosphere” for the simple reason that their understanding of the agricultural crisis was not filtered through the prism of class struggle. It was not the internal enemy who was responsible for the shortage of grain, but natural phenomena, frost damage and drought, which reduced the harvest.

This conclusion seems natural enough, but it was not self-evident in the mental universe of Stalinism. A county party secretary opined that the failure of requisitioning was due to inadequate political preparedness, which resulted in “both right and left-wing deviation.”²⁵⁴ Another blamed the “deficiencies” in combatting the class enemy.²⁵⁵ In the village of Szőkéd, the head of the local council “disseminated the slanders of the enemy” and “sabotaged compulsory delivery” in his own village. The county secretaries of two other localities were

253 Feljegyzés a megyei tanács vb titkárának, 1 March 1951. MNL OL, XIX-B-1-q 0634.

254 A Tolna megyei Tanács VB titkár jelentése, begyűjtési lazaságok felszámolása, 9 November 1952, MNL OL, XIX-b-1-q, box 29, 0802/2/1952.

255 A Szabolcs-Szatmár megyei VB titkár jelentése, a begyűjtésben mutatkozó lazaságok felszámolása, 1952. november 9. MNL OL, XIX-B-1-q, box 29, 00250/1/1952,

sentenced to two years each for similar crimes. Such acts were not attributed to problems with the system, but rather to hostile machinations, “the enemy succeeded in wreaking havoc.” In fact, they were able to provoke “organized resistance in several villages.”²⁵⁶

Of course, not all functionaries showed solidarity with the people. One council secretary threatened to have state security apprehend everyone who failed to fulfill the quota. In spite of the fact that police, state, and party officials often condoned, and even took part in, the illegal slaughter of livestock, it remained a dangerous enterprise. In 1951 and 1952, thousands of peasants were arrested every month on charges of illegal livestock slaughter and sent to jail, leaving their families to fend for themselves. No doubt old habits played a role, but people must have been suffering dire need if they were willing to incur such risks. In order to curb the meat shortage, the presidents of the executive committee of the municipal councils were ordered to “supervise actions designed to combat black-market slaughter, the measures taken in reprisal, and the execution of the sentences.”²⁵⁷ Since clandestine slaughter was now a matter of life and death, it was impossible to curb despite the harsh measures.

The war on the peasantry, which extended to “working peasants” as well, penalized “hoarding” of food. Due to the militarization of the economy, even basic foodstuffs were in short supply in a country that had served as a breadbasket of Europe from at least the sixteenth century. The shortage was not altogether an unwelcome phenomenon for the political leadership, as it was used to justify the crushing of the peasantry. Two Marxist-Leninist ideological tenets spelled doom for the countryside: the exploitation of agricultural labor would lead communist economies to surpass capitalism, and the countryside was inherently conservative and was an obstacle to communist progress. Ferenc Reisz was sentenced to two years in prison and a fine for buying seven kilos of bread and 65 croissants. Károly Bod was sent to prison for three years for hoarding 139 kilos of flour and 20 kilos of sugar.²⁵⁸ A wealthy peasant was sentenced for “sabotage,” as he gave out the share of food to his harvester. In order to curb “hoarding,” the Ministry of Internal Trade issued strict guidelines to govern the distribution of basic foodstuffs. Flour could only be sold in areas inhabited by miners and where the baking of bread “could not be organized.” People who purchased over 10 kilograms of bread had to be reported to the police; shops

256 A Baranya megyei VB titkár jelentése, MNL OL, XIX-B-1-q, box 29, 00250/1/1952.

257 MNL OL, XIX-B-1-q, 0673/1951.

258 Feljegyzés a Belügyminisztérium számára, MNL OL, XIX-a1-2-ee, f tük, box 198, dossier 39.

were allowed to sell lard and sugar only in limited quantities.²⁵⁹ Since these quantities were not made public, people who wished to buy more had no way of knowing whether they were committing a criminal offense.

Katherine Verdery contended that there was an element of dialogue in the state-peasant relationship, in which the former attempted to negotiate its position in the power relations, albeit from an unequal position. In Fábiansebes-tyén, protestors talked about “the exploitation” of the peasants, thus turning the weapon of class struggle on its head and employing it against the communist state, thereby reversing their own position from “agitators” against the rule of the people to victims of oppression.

In some localities, instead of education, local authorities used threats by the police and the State Security Authority to extract compliance. While the police were sometimes indecisive and did nothing to forestall protests, and were also unable to remove the main instigators of protests, agents of the state security in Bucsa, with the help of the local communist party committee, were able to apprehend the organizer and thereby forestall a demonstration. The sixteen people who were taken into custody formed a “popular front,” albeit this time one that was directed against the state: one cooperative president, one district controller, four agricultural laborers, one working peasant, and nine kulaks. As a result of an “extraordinary” procedure, eleven families were expelled from the village. In general, many party and council members refused to comply with their delivery obligations.

Structural problems of the economy, lack of incentives to work, and perhaps even cautious efforts to sabotage production caused Stalinist economies to produce shoddy, often useless, products. Once a company only had to make sure that it produced enough of the commodity it was supposed to churn out; whether this product was of usable quality or not did not matter. The leadership attributed all this to sabotage alone, even though many factors were involved. A worker who fled Czechoslovakia explained that “the will to slow down work and hamper production is there.” On the other hand, “slowing production and damaging machines would cut” workers’ wages and “even land them in prison,” which was “an effective deterrent.”²⁶⁰

The destruction of traditional hierarchies, the lowering of wages, the neglect of expertise for the sake of party loyalty and for the elevation of a new,

259 A Belkereskedelmi Minisztérium utasítása a felvásárlások megakadályozására, 22 September 1952. MNL OL, XIX-b-1-q, 088/1952.

260 OSA, 300-30-161.

communist elite, and general disenchantment because of undelivered promises were taking their toll on production. The Soviet ambassador to Czechoslovakia reported in 1953 that industry had plunged into “near total chaos” since 1948. Hungary’s economic dictator complained in 1952, “What is happening in the area of quality is absolutely intolerable and untenable... in earlier years...there were not as many well-founded complaints against the commodities we produce.” All of the 140 tractors produced by the Red Star Factory for Romanian export in 1952 broke down by 1953, and only six could be repaired, because the plant did not make spare parts. Machine tools shipped to Argentina lost all their paint by the time they got there, and the electronic control compartment could not be opened because the screws had rusted on the way.²⁶¹ Ninety yokes were not harvested in Fejér County because *all* the harvesters were broken down. There was a district in which 60 percent of all machines were out of order.

Even elementary maintenance was missing: a tractor’s main bearing melted down because they neglected to put oil in it. Criminal proceedings were launched against a mechanic whose “negligence” caused a threshing machine’s bearing to break.²⁶² General decline due to a mixture of passive resistance and negligence was visible in the countryside. Historian Zsuzsanna Varga has argued that the regime was able to impose its will on agricultural producers, but “through the mostly invisible acts of resistance, they were also able to influence the practitioners of power.” People went to church and sent their children to religious studies. A party secretary reported in 1951 that the priest did so much damage with a single mass that an entire year of “people’s education” could not set it right.²⁶³

Hidden and individual resistance were the characteristic techniques of self-defense of villages in the 1950s. Peasants were struggling to survive and distributed the ownership of their land to family members to combat the unbearably high taxes and delivery quotas. They slaughtered their livestock illegally and hid their crops from the requisitioners.²⁶⁴ Crops did not meet expectations, peasants resisted delivery norms if they could, and even the delivered grain was being wasted. In the midst of the harvest, a Soviet tractor broke down because of

261 Külkereskedelmi vezetők értekezlete Gerő Ernónél 3 June 1952. MNL OL KS 276 f. 66 cs. 69 ő.e.

Külkereskedelmi elmaradások, 1952 undated, MNL OL XIX-A-2-ee, A/tük, box 6, dossier 8.

262 Jelentés Sebestyénnek, 1 August 1952. MNL OL, XIX-B-14 box 3, sz n/1952.

263 Varga, “Ki a veszélyesebb ellenség, a kulák vagy a kétlaki?,” 52, 67.

264 Gyöngyi Farkas, “Állami erőszak, kollektív önvédelem, Bököny 1961,” in Horváth and Ö. Kovács, *Állami erőszak a kommunista diktatúrában*, 80.

melting. The service personnel of the collective failed to repair it and left their workstation to get inebriated.

In Gödöllő, the director regularly showed up to work drunk. In another threshing station, a broken machine was put into service, but the head of the station declared he didn't care. A man was sentenced to three months in prison "for negligent repair of machinery, such as painting them over to make them look as though they had been mended." It was reported that a man who had absolutely no idea how to do so was sent to operate a threshing machine, and, when it broke down, was unable to repair it.

Black-marketeering, illegal slaughter, wheeling and dealing with a few dollars and goods of great scarcity to make ends meet, and fleeing across the border cannot be interpreted as acts of resistance in a society of serious scarcity: they were strategies of survival in hard times within the "camp-like" confines of the communist system. *Relative* freedom and *relative* strength (the power of the weak) exist in prisons and camps. The physically strong and socially well-connected terrorize other inmates and maximize their own wellbeing.

Yet all of this is done under the power umbrella of the prison authorities, who lay the basic rules of their existence. Theft in factories and collective farms may not only indicate social autonomy and resistance, but also a decline in behavioral norms caused by a non-meritocratic political system. The historian Oleg Khlevniuk observed that, in an age of terror, mean and mediocre people as well as scoundrels have a better chance of survival and promotion than ordinary, decent people.²⁶⁵ The widespread corruption in former communist countries may be rooted in this decline. Whenever one thinks of powers at the disposal of the subjects of communist systems, one must not forget that ultimately the individual was at the mercy of the repressive state.

People commonly engaged in a variety of illegal activities. These included listening to foreign radio, visiting the British Council library reading room in Budapest, collecting leaflets dropped by American hot air balloons, or cursing the political system. But these acts had potentially serious consequences. The exploitation of repressive policies for personal ends, such as evicting "enemies" from their homes to get hold of better apartments, may reveal the power of low-level functionaries to defy high level instructions and profit from their acts. At the same time, such acts also indicate the depth of state interference in social affairs.

If we take the records of the state security services seriously, armed conspiracies to overthrow the political system flourished. In some cases, it is easy to

265 Oleg Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag*, 171.

dismiss the charges as implausible at best. Pál Hadváry and his four “associates” were tried for treason in 1948. The state security authorities briefed the judge in charge of the case on how to conduct the trial. The colonel of state security who interrogated the defendants “recommended” two executions and three prison sentences; the two executions were carried out.²⁶⁶

Kálmán Horváth was accused of making preparations for a foreign invasion of Hungary, of blowing up industrial targets, and of arresting Communist leaders, as well as of spying on behalf of an émigré organization. He was allegedly taken into custody in a shootout. Some elements of the case, in which two of the twelve defendants were executed, were not altogether implausible. The case was reviewed in the summer of 1956, together with many other executions, and it was found that half the defendants were not guilty of the most serious crimes attributed to them.²⁶⁷ On the other hand, a man named Ferenc Alföldy wrote the U.S. Legation in Budapest a handwritten letter in which he requested explosives in the name of the Hungarian Peoples Party. His request indicated to the Legation officials that he was “not only a specialist in this field, but has a definite scheme for utilizing the particular material he asks for.”²⁶⁸

Fiction and reality cannot be separated in the literally hundreds of such cases that the early 1950s produced. Although they may have been in large part constructed or blown out of proportion by state security authorities in their zeal to destroy enemies of the state, they did attest to socially and geographically widespread discontent, perhaps even active resistance to the Communist system. Constructed spies, saboteurs, and wreckers were the scapegoats made responsible for the problems of the highly dysfunctional political system. However, hundreds of trials were held in secret and therefore could serve no useful political purpose. Czech historians Petr Blažek and Pavel Žaček write that many alleged cases in Czechoslovakia were instigated by the security forces themselves. In some cases, it is difficult to say to what extent the convicted people were truly active opponents of the regime and to what extent they were mere victims of fabricated trials.²⁶⁹

State security used provocateurs to entrap people in alleged conspiracies, and they planted evidence to prove their cases. Why did they create so many enemies? The participants in conspiracy trials were recruited from diverse social

266 Müller, *Politikai rendőrség a Rákosi korban*, 143.

267 Horváth Kálmán és társai, ÁBTL, V-11 790.

268 The American Legation in Budapest to the State Department, 2 February 1956. National Archives, Washington, D. C. RG 59, 764.00/3-1956.

269 Blažek and Žaček, *Czechoslovakia*.

layers, not exclusively from the former ruling classes, and they therefore did not fit well into the class struggle paradigm. Open show trials demonstrated the prevalence of state terror and the ubiquitous presence of the security apparatus. They were thus intended to serve in part as a deterrent.

Terror is not always rational. It may exist for its own sake, which could explain the large number of closed trials. Also, many cases contained a kernel of truth: people did make hostile comments. It is not possible in retrospect to distinguish between the comments of embittered, disappointed, angry men and women from real *and* capable intent to overthrow the political system.²⁷⁰ Torture and physical and psychological terror were used to extract confessions, which requires extra caution in dealing with these cases. Torture in Arrow Cross chambers was crude, brutal and sadistic; in communist systems it was all of the above in addition to calculated cruelty designed to break down the strongest of individuals. This included forms of torture such as being forced to stand in one spot for days and nights, protracted sleep deprivation, and threats made concerning the fates of one's family members. Professionals dispensed physical punishment, the aim being to inflict brutal pain without killing the patient. In Stalinist systems, self-incrimination was regarded as the ultimate proof of guilt. After all, why would anyone confess if he or she were not guilty?

Even so, the sources leave lingering shadows of doubt. Most likely, there were many conspirators who did plot to undermine and overthrow the political system in private conversations without, however, possessing any means of doing so. The widespread talk of regime change underscores how unpopular the regime was, and the personal risk people incurred if they spoke of their dissatisfaction.²⁷¹ The vast majority of people sentenced for crimes of treason and espionage may have been innocent. The question is how much agency did the "oppressed" have? If we decide to accept the interrogation records and verdicts at more or less face value, we arrive at a very different conclusion regarding the nature of Stalinist regimes and the way they functioned in a top-down, bottom-up manner.

Denis Deletant has asserted that police coercion and intrusion became a part of everyday life and a feature of existence that generated pervasive fear as a state

²⁷⁰ Kuromiya, *The Voices of the Dead*, 107.

²⁷¹ In Czechoslovakia an anti-communist group was arrested near Pribram in 1955. In the same year, 40 members of a group called "Orel" in Prešov were arrested and charged with anti-regime leaflet action. Four army officers were arrested as members of a resistance group; in Košice members of the so-called "White Legion" group were tried. In 1951, authorities detected an anti-communist resistance group in Klatovy.

of mind that revolutionized, not just society's structures, but also personal behavior.²⁷² It has been argued that "Scholars adhering to the totalitarian theory have understood the Bolshevik regime as a terror state that effectively subjugated society, to the extent that individuals were 'atomized' - deprived of the means to organize themselves independently and forced into silence."

"This viewpoint," Jochen Hellbeck adds, "has rightly been questioned for its inability to account for the striking stability of the Soviet system except through a policy of coercion and terror." Instead, Soviet rules of "social identification" were "appropriated and actively used by members of society." "Playing the identity game" granted individuals meaning, purpose, and power.²⁷³

This interpretation is equally problematic. The Soviet regimes, at least in Eastern Europe, were anything but stable, and they faced serious crises throughout their existence. Opposition to them came from all social layers. Furthermore, if individuals with "meaning, purpose, and power" upheld the regime, why was the use of an oversized and, in the case of the GDR and other communist states in Eastern Europe, an ever-increasing apparatus of repression necessary? Participation in a dictatorship may not be a good measure of its totality. The depth of the penetration of state power into society and the private sphere is a better yardstick. Individuals lived in constrained spaces and made constrained choices, in part because they were unable to see the world through any lens other than Communist doctrine. Their decisions and actions were shaped by the worldview of an all-embracing ideology of perfection that held claim to infallibility and absolute truth. In addition, people lived in a reference system that enforced negative behavior: "One could succeed in proportion to one's ability to make oneself useful to the system," a contemporary observed, "and the latter used mainly the base capabilities of human beings. It taught everybody to lie, to spy and to slander."

Politics penetrated the innermost individual sphere and elicited extreme forms of compliance. In times of fear, people redefine their identities in response to political challenges. A judge explained the aim of those who use of terror: "[T]hey ruin their victims spiritually and psychologically, they intimidate their environment in order to make them insecure, distrustful, so that they never feel safe." Accommodation was motivated in large measure not just,

272 Deletant, *Romania*, 286.

273 Hellbeck, *Fashioning the Stalinist Soul*, 78–79. In formulating his argument, Hellbeck refers to the work of Stephen Kotkin.

or perhaps not even, by the desire to identify with the regime, but the imperative of self-preservation, survival.²⁷⁴

It has been claimed that the success of the two cults, Hitler's and Stalin's, relied on the active and willing participation of millions who suspended their disbelief and endorsed and magnified the overblown personalities constructed by the authorities. "It was popular, enthusiastic endorsement that molded the cults into the grotesque forms they assumed." It is true that artists "vied with each other in giving expression to metaphorical superman."²⁷⁵ Whether this adulation was sincere is highly doubtful.

Stalinist rule in Eastern Europe was also built around the cult of personality. Yet the fate of the leaders there shows that the adulation they supposedly enjoyed was less than authentic. East German leader Walter Ulbricht was saved by Soviet forces in 1953 after only a few years of unilateral rule. The leaders of the Kremlin were inclined to fire him for his political failings, and Ulbricht was able to save his political career only because he was able to outmaneuver his party rival and the political winds in Moscow changed after Lavrentiy Beria's arrest.

The cult of Mátyás Rákosi and his personal hold on power in Hungary were unrivaled in the Eastern Bloc. On the basis of reports coming from the Soviet embassy in Budapest, which predicted imminent collapse due to the repressive nature of the regime, Rákosi was forced to relinquish his place as prime minister during "consultations" with the Soviet leadership in Moscow in the summer of 1953. Klement Gottwald's regime was also under threat because of mass unrest in Czechoslovakia, and he was saved only by his security apparatus. The gloomy fall of 1956 spelled the end of Stalinism in Hungary, all of which was engulfed by the revolution in a matter of days when literally all social groups, including the working class, turned against it. When events spiraled out of control, Moscow stepped in to save the day for communism in Hungary.

The exercise of power based on intimidation was fraught with an inherent contradiction. In order to obtain the obedience of a generally hostile population, communist leaderships attempted to assert "total control [over] every organ of the society with clandestine methods." This turned out to be counterproductive: instead of furthering consolidation, it led to significant social tension and ended up weakening and eventually undermining, that control. Soviet officials began to understand in the spring of 1953 that the heavy-handed policies

²⁷⁴ Pinker, *The Better Angels of our Nature*, 119.

²⁷⁵ Overy, *The Dictators*, 119.

of the East European dictatorships and the general rejection of the class struggle paradigm had led to widespread discontent and instability. The appropriate answer was not to further intensify controls and terror, but to relax them.²⁷⁶ It was in response to this recognition that the communist dictatorships allowed a more moderate form of control while keeping the apparatus of terror intact.

In Eastern Europe at least, the brunt of the state's efforts was dedicated to repressing the constantly growing number of real and frequently imagined enemies rather than at social sculpting. Communist ideology was not a justification for persecution but was, rather, the cause of it. A young girl who was forcibly removed from her home and resettled in the countryside with her family because of her father's crime could not grasp the logic of this. She was unaware that the discovery (i.e. creation, or even manufacture) of enemies by the state was the nature of the Stalinist system's method of justifying terror. Most of those who suffered resettlement, she noted in her diary, were middle-aged and elderly people who could not have harmed the system even if they had wanted to. "The others were well-meaning youngsters, who could have fit into the new social system well if they had not been reminded all the time that they had no rights. I cannot comprehend the wisdom in all this."²⁷⁷ The girl's insightful observation was echoed by a worker who had seen victims of the early years of the Gulag: the sick old men "who were completely disabled and harmless to the Soviet regime." A distinct feature of the organs and mechanisms of Soviet repression was that they affected ordinary citizens who had nothing to do with opposition groups.²⁷⁸

On balance, denunciations were the effect, not the cause, of broadly applied repression and state terror. In fact, the widespread denunciations of the Stalinist period became a symbol of the devastation wreaked on society within the Soviet Union. "The state encouraged denunciations and supported the unmaskers."²⁷⁹ The same can safely be argued of Hungary, except that Stalinist devastation was amplified by the period of radical right-wing terror that the country had experienced beforehand. Denunciations can be understood only against the backdrop of state coercion, and they also served self-preservation and socio-economic advancement. Perhaps the worst aspect of the legacy of communist regimes was

276 For the Soviet dilemma regarding the crisis in the GDR see Mark Kramer, "The Early Post-Stalin Succession Struggle and the Upheavals in East-Central Europe: Internal-External Linkages in Soviet Policy Making," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, parts 1-3, Volume 1, numbers 1-3.

277 Cited in Gergely Kunt, "Nem vagyok politikus csak egy buta csitri: Kitelepítés kamaszszemmel," in Horváth and Ó. Kovács, eds., *Allami erőszak és kollektivizálás a kommunista diktatúrában*, 213.

278 Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag*, 39; 90.

279 Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag*, 338.

that they fostered hatred and a mindset that upholds those hatreds even after those political systems are gone.

Social tensions and instability caused by the heavy-handed terror and control would not in themselves have been sufficient to bring the systems to their knees. Terror and control, it seems, can be ratcheted up to control unrest and aspirations towards more social autonomy without the system's self-destruction. It took the death of Stalin for communism in Europe to take a slightly different turn towards the system described by Václav Havel as the post-totalitarian state. Participation in the partisan movement of the Soviet Union was both coerced and spontaneous. In the mixture of coercion and voluntary participation, the engineering of human behavior may have been the more crucial factor. People may be "both victim and instrument of power."²⁸⁰

Victims of the state were not given proper funerals. In Stalinist and National Socialist systems, survivors were not allowed to pay their final respects, and the bodies of the victims were not honored with proper burials. In fact, as Eric Weitz put it, their bodies were violated even in death. If there was one thing more menacing to communist regimes than the multitude of current enemies, it was the memory of the past.²⁸¹ The intention, one can conclude, was at least in part to erase these bodies from the public record and from collective memory as momentos of the violence the regimes had committed. A system that claimed to be the most advanced form of historical progress had no regard for humanity and was mortified by the ghosts of the past. Bodily remains of political enemies were routinely mixed up in the morgue in a manner that one could say amounted to sacrilegious treatment, and often several bodies were thrown into the same grave.²⁸² People who were put in the labor camps were meant to be forgotten; not a trace of them was supposed to remain.

The behavior of individuals under Nazi terror and Stalinist despotism did not *fully* confirm Elinor Ostrom's assessment that "despotic or authoritarian policies deteriorate social capital by inducing individuals to be narrowly self-interested and wait for external inducements or sanctions before voluntarily contributing to collective action."²⁸³ Despite the external constraints imposed by the institutional and political system around them, some individuals acted virtuously.

280 Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," in John Keene, ed., *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in central-eastern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 36.

281 Weitz, *A Century of Genocide*, 203.

282 Testimony of a mortician's assistant, OSA, op. cit.

283 Cited in Jacob and Tyrell, *The Legacy of Surveillance*, 7.

C o n c l u s i o n

“Though lovers be lost love shall not”

Dylan Thomas

Throughout the dark decade discussed in this book, spanning from the year of the Holocaust in 1944 to the relaxation of terror after Stalin’s death in 1953, the life of ordinary people revolved around a single idea: how to survive from one day to the next. Remembering every deed, good and bad, guided the writing of this book. Behind every decision there was a human being who could be held accountable for their actions. Many, perhaps most, were guided by the desire to stay alive; there were some, perhaps the minority but still a sizable group of people, who exercised free will and freedom and elevated their actions above the mundane concern of preserving their lives.¹ Ideology took central stage in this history. Hungary’s German invasion was in large part motivated by the Nazi’s desire to annihilate the last large intact Jewish community on the continent. Hungarian anti-Semites seized on the opportunity to “solve” the “Jewish question” once and for all. Hungarian Jews encountered eliminationist anti-Semitism from the part of their peers in concentration camps and more often than not had to fend for themselves to survive. The most racially anti-Semitic men in the Arrow Cross movement, who saw it as their mission to complete the Hungarian Holocaust “in defense of the Hungarian nation” in what they saw as a mortal struggle for survival, gained the upper hand in Budapest. Similarly, the most radical elements of the Hungarian commu-

1 “One might also object when history from below itself becomes an exercise in condescension – when the historian denies to the ordinary people ideas, motives and interests over and above the everyday concerns of the ordinary concerns of their daily lives. For it is then not only the historian who is reduced to the level of the valet, who cannot see any heroic in history; it is also the people who are reduced to that level, who are denied any aspect of the heroic, any connection with ‘universal consciousness,’... any order of being that elevates them above the immediate, mundane, particular circumstances of their lives.” Gertrude Himmelfarb, *On Looking into the Abyss*, 39.

nist movement who seized the reins of power with Soviet assistance saw it as their duty to protect the communist state and annihilate its enemies to the last man. Neither system envisioned reconciliation or dialogue. Their relationship with the group of people they designated as their enemy was antagonistic; there could be just one solution to the problem they allegedly caused: annihilation.

THE HUNGARIAN HOLOCAUST

Hungary was, in the words of the historian and Holocaust survivor Peter Kenez, the “last island” for Jews in Europe until its invasion by the German army in March 1944. Then, the Germans and their Hungarian collaborators sent 437,000 people to their deaths in an operation that deported the most people in the shortest period of time in the history of the Holocaust. “What could I have done?” asked Regent Horthy rhetorically in American captivity. ‘What could we have done?’ was a question many ordinary Hungarians who stood on the sidelines could have asked had anyone inquired. In fact, the freedom to choose existed even in situations where choices seemed choiceless.

Unlike in Austria, the German invaders were not greeted by cheering crowds. Resignation more than jubilation was the prevailing mood in Hungary. Short of the collaboration of the Hungarian authorities and a small number of Hungarian eliminationist anti-Semites, they could not have accomplished their mission. The extension of the circle of empathy to Jews occurred occasionally, but was uncharacteristic. An anti-Semitic veteran realized that the Jewish forced laborers returned from the Russian front to their homeland because they were attached to it, which led him to question the newly introduced Judeophobic measures. There was also the anti-Semitic couple, who, to show their opposition to the decree imposing the obligation for Jews to wear the yellow star, began to show their ostentatious support of the Jews.

None of this translated into any mass resistance to deportations. Some, on the radical right saw an opportunity in the invasion to destroy what they called the ‘old liberal elite,’ which they perceived as a collusion of the conservative political elites and the Jews. They added the grass roots element to the “solution of the Jewish Question.” For some of them, even the eliminationist anti-Semite László Endre wasn’t radical enough. The Hungarian gendarmes, who were charged with the implementation of the deportation measures, aided by the German occupation forces, did not simply act on superior orders. Some of them may even have known the final purpose of the deportations; most

may have known that the people they were cramming into carriages designed to transport cattle would never return. Sometimes they were honest about it, sometimes they lied to their victims. These brutal men tortured their victims so that they surrendered their valuables. Robbery was only a derivative of their purposes; it was, however, an opportunity too good to let pass. They tore down and trampled on religious symbols, committed atrocities that went way far beyond the need to extract money and jewels, even killed defenseless old people and babies. Their dedication to the accomplishment of their mission, fueled by national socialist zeal, was one reason why it was so hard for people to escape and survive. The second reason was the conspiracy of silence regarding the purpose of deportations.

Saul Friedländer's formulation applied to the Hungarian victims: the lack of comprehension (of the final solution) contributed to the smoothness of the extermination process and to the so-called passivity of the victims. In terms of reactions and initiatives, expecting terrible hardship and even widespread death was one thing, expecting immediate murder, quite another.² A woman who immediately before had heard from a gendarme that they were being sent to die would then believe a German officer who assured them that they would be working in Germany. Most people had no inkling of the fate that awaited them, even when they arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau, and this affected their responses. The parents who would not let their son escape from the ghetto so that the family could stay together comes to mind. No parent would willingly send their child to the gas chamber for any reason. Some people did not need certainty and tried to flee from the horrors of ghetto life aided by friends or even strangers, but this was a tiny minority. Some people escaped to suicide.³ The Hungarians Jews were not responsible for their fate.

The mills of death had never worked as hard, work camps had never been as lethal, guards had never been crueler, inter-prisoner relations never more hostile than at the time of the Hungarian transports. "It was a Hobbesian life" Primo Levi said of the camps, "a continuous war of everyone against everyone." Hungarian memoirs of the Nazi camps published shortly after the war emphasized solidarity. The journalist György Parragi, who returned from Mauthausen, claimed that "the dangers of death made us respect the human being in each

2 Friedländer, *An Integrated History of the Holocaust*, 184.

3 The Hungarian experience resembles Christopher R. Browning's findings in the Wierzbnik ghetto: They knew it was not good but not how much it was not good. Browning, *Remembering Survival*, 71.

other irrespective of race dehumanization, nationality and class.”⁴ The truth is somewhere between these two conflicting statements.

Survival in the camp system can be characterized as *individual/collaborative*. The large number of testimonies recorded shortly after liberation suggest that the prevailing purpose in the camps was biological survival even at the expense of the other. As one survivor recalled, “Friendship? It did not even cross our minds. We became jealous, self-centered wild animals. There was no human emotion or thought in us.”⁵ A woman attributed her survival to selfishness induced by the conditions and the will to live: “We became inhuman, suffering brought out the worst in us. The Germans really knew how to do this, they destroyed our souls and made human beasts of us. We did not help each other, it was everyone for herself. How strong the will to live in us was....”⁶ The key to survival then, was not reliance on help, but on one’s own inner resources.

Hungarians could not count on the networks of solidarity that protected the inmates in the camp world. These networks of solidarity operated along national or political lines. The Hungarian deportees found no national network, and did not find a place in the political ones either.⁷ The vast majority of the Jews, farmers, artisans, small business owners, and manual workers were deported from the Hungarian countryside, where they had no political affiliation. Neither were they protected by solidarity groups of other nations. Hungarian Jewish testimony confirms that they were treated worse than any other group. Refusal to respond to lethal orders directed at Jews was a key element in survival; some even opted to acquire a different ethnic marker in the camp universe.⁸ It was easier to survive even as a Russian, or literally anyone else. We know this because some Hungarian Jews were able to survive by pretending not to be Jews. A teenager survived by going over to the Russians and was transported to Theresienstadt along with them.⁹

The biggest problem may not have been the lack of networks to support them, but the hostility on the part of their peers. Camp veterans, some Jews among them, regarded the newcomers with hostility. As the camp veterans saw it, they had not yet suffered enough. In Oranienburg, for instance, “the Polish prisoners were beating us harder than the SS and stole most of the food,” re-

4 Cited by Laczó, *Hungarian Jews in the Age of Genocide*, Chapter 6.

5 DEGOB, record number 74.

6 S. G. woman. DEGOB, record number 576.

7 In one exception a communist party member was aided by fellow communists in the camp.

8 See Laczó, *Hungarian Jews in the Age of Genocide*, 116.

9 H. Z. male, DEGOB, record number 1163.

membered a young lawyer from Budapest.¹⁰ There is no doubt that the newly arrived Jews from Hungary occupied the lowest ranks in the social hierarchy of the camp system. This is true even if some members of this group made private deals with the camp authorities.

Most deaths were caused by malnutrition and, conversely, nourishment was key to survival in camps where conditions became increasingly hellish as the war was coming to an end. Stealing bread was supposed to be a sin.¹¹ This was no longer the case when the Hungarians experienced camp life. As conditions deteriorated, stealing food from the other, choosing life over decency, prevailed. The theft of food by one starving inmate from another became a tool of survival. The widespread theft of food in the camps seems to confirm the prevalence of the laws of the jungle in the final phase of the war. This was only one side of the picture.

The very large number of cases reviewed confirm that the picture was murkier than the simple statement that the laws of the jungle prevailed in camp life. Solidarity did survive among the inmates.¹² It would be a mistake to see the camp world as a Hobbesian struggle for survival only; there was also room in it for angels. Compassion was not dead, older inmates found it in their heart to feel sorry for the children murdered in the camps.

Solidarity and selflessness among family members survived amidst the inhumanity. In Bergen Belsen, a father sent packages from the privileged part of the camp to his daughter, who in turn spared him of knowing about her terrible fate, sustaining his spirits and hence, his chance of surviving.¹³ There are numerous accounts of more privileged prisoners sharing their packages with the Hungarians. There were also quiet acts of heroism and compassion. A man who worked in the kitchen smuggled food to feed others; his life in turn was saved by two boys who smuggled him out of the *revier*, which was “certain death.” “The civilians hated the Jews,” four survivors recalled, but some gave them bread.¹⁴ Help was help even if it was not altruistic on every occasion. A Roma kapo helped a man get out of Auschwitz in return for a diamond ring.¹⁵ As the founder of the logotherapy method of psychoanalysis and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl has written, “The experience of camp life show that man

10 G. T. male. DEGOB, record number 65.

11 Wachsmann, *KL*, 498.

12 223 people mentioned that they experienced gestures of solidarity and intention to rescue people on behalf of others. György Csepeli and Gergő Prazsák, *Paths to Fatelessness*.

13 Huhák, “Koncentrációs tábor mint tértapasztalat.”

14 R. E., R. H., R. S., E. L., all women. DEGOB, record number 113.

15 F. I. male. DEGOB, record number 292.

does have a choice of action. There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome... Man *can* preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress.” [emphasis in the original]¹⁶

The Hungarian Jews reached the camp system during the deadliest phase of its existence and experienced the camps as death camps. The most difficult phenomenon to swallow psychologically was the wanton and unwarranted abuse and violence they encountered from some of their peers, which was as severe as the cruelties inflicted by the SS.

Camp inmates, whether German or other brought their prejudices, including anti-Semitism with them. In this sense, at least, the camps formed a continuum with the outside world. Unbridled violence was a huge factor in the high mortality in the camps, much of which was perpetrated by fellow prisoners. “The capo in Allach was called Knoll. He spent eleven years in the camp. He killed plenty of Jews” noted a man laconically.¹⁷ Cruelty meted out for self-gratification negatively impacted the chances of staying alive. Sadism was definitely not only situational, but very much dispositional, a matter of freely made choices. Historians have found excuses for the excesses committed by camp potentates recruited from the ranks of prisoners. Nikolaus Wachsmann explained that the difficult predicament of the kapos within the constraints of their relatively privileged position accounted for their atrocious behavior. As soon as the SS were dissatisfied with their efforts, they slept with the ordinary prisoners again. Once the other inmates saw them as the willing tools of the SS, they felt they had little choice but to redouble their efforts, lest they lose the life-saving protection of the SS.

My findings do not confirm this conclusion. The experience of a large number of Hungarians reveals that far too many killings and other atrocities were necessarily, not situational, in nature. Rather, they stemmed from a shared hatred of the Jews, whom they identified as an enemy that deserved no compassion. Shared suffering did not forge a community of fate. In that sense the camps were not a self-contained universe of evil, but very much a continuum with the outside world that had brought them to life.

Terror from below, inflicted by fellow prisoners contributed to the high mortality and the cruel regime prevalent in the camps. The group cohesion among

16 Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, Fourth Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.), 74.

17 F. I. male. DEGOB, record number 2034.

non-Jewish inmates was perhaps strengthened by anti-Semitism, and venting sadistic desires on the weakest group in the camp was a source of amusement as well. Raging sadism fueled by racial hatred motivated the tortures that could last for hours to please the men and women who perpetrated them. Oftentimes a sadist would brag about the number of intimate murders carried out by hand or by implements such as sticks, and about playing murderous games before the killing was completed. There is not a single account of any prison functionary having been punished or demoted for decent behavior.

The way in which the atrocities were committed reveals the mindset behind them. Situational explanations go only so far. The fact that kapos themselves were subjected to abuse or the prospect of abuse did not justify their behavior, which can only partially be explained by policing. The horrendous atrocities they committed—amply documented by a large number of authentic and credible accounts—were also motivated by the pursuit of racist aims, self-amusement, and the gratification of sadistic desires. That another way was possible is shown by the compassion and kindness of the minority.

The dispositional nature of sadistic behavior is confirmed by the fact that unfathomable cruelty was only one option. Decency was also possible for those who wanted to take that route. A woman remembered a kapo who stroked the face of a deranged woman to usher her back into a line. He was trying to save her life, failed, and was not punished for his decency. The SS man who took a woman's shovel and helped her dig a trench instead of summarily beating or shooting her (which was the rule) also comes to mind. Although such acts of kindness were by no means exceptional, the guiding principle was sadistic cruelty not justified by the circumstances in which they happened.

Hardly any of the brutalities recounted by the Hungarian survivors were carried out as disciplinary actions. Steven Pinker explains that one of the major inhibitors to violence and aggression is that people have a visceral revulsion to the screams and pains of fellow humans. This revulsion is suspended when dealing with mortal enemies. Pinker's conclusion is confirmed by the following account. A female survivor recalled that when a woman refused to part with her mother at selection, a female SS began hitting her. The woman hit back. At that, the SS wrapped her dog leash around the woman's neck and began dragging her around. "The woman's piercing shriek was unforgettably terrible" which did not bother the SS woman at all. The screaming woman was shot.¹⁸ Her fate suggests that our traditional understanding of female perpetrators and victims need to be revised.

18 S. B. woman. DEGOB, record number 5.

It has been assumed that more women than men survived the camp system. There may have been several reasons for this. One, their work was less physical than men's. Secondly, they were overseen by female guards who, despite some exceptions, were less sadistic than men. The experience of the Hungarian women does not support these assertions. Hungarian Jewish women died in equal numbers as men. It seems that the gender distribution of survivors among the 5 thousand people interviewed by DEGOB may have been even, or the survival rate could possibly even have favored men. This was because the variables used to explain the phenomenon, better behavior of female guards and lighter labor, were not true for the people deported from Hungary.

In some cases, the Hungarian women were selected to perform skilled labor—such as sewing—but this was also true for the men, some of whom worked on V-1 missiles. In most of the large number of cases I reviewed, no difference was made between the sexes, and females performed back-breaking labor, such as the young woman who was forced to carry incredibly heavy beams.¹⁹ Many women were given no meaningful work and were forced to work on construction sites and carry heavy items from one place to another with no rhyme or reason. They were tortured while going to, and severely beaten at, work, just like the men.²⁰ In fact, for most Hungarian Jews work was only a pretext for [slower] murder, given that the gas chambers were unable to keep pace with the incoming deportees.

Women, in addition, were subjected to the murderous regimen of the camps just like men—standing at roll call for hours and being abused in the meantime, the lack of sanitation and nourishment, and constant physical and psychological punishment. Diarrhea made no distinction between sexes either. Six women who returned from the camps named four women acquaintances whose death was caused by it.²¹ Most importantly, female kapos and guards were described to have been as bad, or even worse, than men, who—not just the most notorious ones—generally enjoyed torturing their charges. They too, lost their sensitivity to the suffering of others, including females; the aggressive circuits of their brain were activated by ideologically motivated hatred for a presumed enemy who was to be destroyed.

19 Five women from Nagyszöllős and Budapest for instance loaded railway tracks. DEGOB, record number 63.

20 A woman who was in Dora recalled that if they did not put enough earth into the wheelbarrow, the SS unleashed their German shepherds on them which tore out their flesh while the SS beat them with rubber cables. "We were gripped with such fear that we worked unconsciously." A. K. woman. DEGOB, record number 22.

21 Six females, DEGOB, record number 16.

Dóra Terkeltraub recalled that, as a woman was trying to run, a female SS hung her stick on her neck and dragged her. An SS man kicked and bound the woman and dragged her again with a belt. He dropped her and a Rapportführerin continued the torture. This went on for a while, until an SS finally shot her. Men and women took part in the “game” with equal pleasure.²² Female prisoners or women encountered as coworkers in factories were as cruel as the men. The Nazis’ purpose of the ultimate destruction of their enemies explains the mass killings of already half-dead prisoners who were “evacuated” so that they could not be liberated. The experience of Hungarian survivors revealed that the circle of aggressors extended to German civilians, who assisted in the murder of the inmates, sometimes even moments before the arrival of Allied troops.

Himmler’s order that no prisoner was to be liberated. According to Daniel Blatman, the population of murderers included loyal Nazis, opportunists, those who only wanted to get home safely before the Third Reich crumbled, and ordinary civilians who stumbled into a situation beyond their wildest dreams. They were products of a system that transformed many of them into Nazis. Once the prisoners became a burden, they slaughtered them mercilessly.²³ It was the latter, rather than unforeseen situations—trying to get home, or even survival—that explained the mass killings recounted by thousands of Hungarian survivors.²⁴

In fact, a very large number of the killings did not happen because of pragmatic reasons, but because of the continued compliance of the SS guard with the order in situations when it was not rational to do so. People were not only murdered in the death marches because they were too weak to walk, or lagged behind. They were shot for accepting bread from civilians, trying to survive by stealing potatoes from the fields, or quenching their thirst by drinking from the river.²⁵ SS men even had time to enjoy the killings and humiliated their victims before killing them.

Hungarian accounts reveal that civilians also took part in the atrocities in the very last days of the war. Civilian guards shot “the weak” on the way to There-

22 DEGOB, record number 16.

23 Daniel Blatman, “The Death Marches and the Final Phase of Nazi Genocide,” in Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann eds., *The Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 180.

24 Nikolaus Wachsmann suggested that the SS killed those prisoners who could not go fast enough to evade the allies.

25 R. E., R. H., R. S. and E. L. recalled that a 16-year-old child got some bread from a civilian. The Oberscharführer saw it and shot the child. DEGOB, record number 113. B. J. remembered that they were forced to drink their urine as those who drank from the river were shot. DEGOB, record number 69. Six women from Szolyva claimed that the SS shot people “mercilessly” for stealing raw potatoes. DEGOB, record number 68.

sienstadt.²⁶ A man who escaped from a convoy of the semi-dead was handed over to the police by civilians in a village where the white flag of surrender had been hoisted. Nor was this an isolated case.

The absence of rescue was also indicative of the mindset of the German population. There was not a single example of civilians helping evacuated prisoners escape or survive. While even German civilians became nazified and lost their humanity, the experience of the Hungarians who lived through their ordeal shows that they did not lose their humanity. Sons lifted their fathers on their back with their remaining strength. A woman kept the spirits of fellow women alive by giving them a pep talk. The helping hand extended to others through the death marches further complicated the image of the Hobbesian nature of survival. Ultimately, it was hope that sustained individuals under the hardship of the camps. It wasn't the physically fittest who survived, but the ones who saw a reason to live and believed that they could stay alive. Hope sustained the will to live, which in turn got the broken body going. The mind had the upper hand. Curiously, there is no trace of survivor's guilt. Mourning for the dead, yes, guilt no.

Staying alive for the Hungarian Jews was usually a matter of individual initiative or sheer luck, rather than cooperation with others. Mainly because of their anti-Semitic motivations, the Hungarian gendarmerie and non-Jews in the camps tended to cooperate with the SS in their destruction. The situation was quite different under the Arrow Cross reign of terror in Budapest. Here survival was *collaborative/individual*, that is, fueled by the willingness of one individual to help one or more people escape death.

The motive of survival in Budapest revealed the mindset and motivations of the killers. The widespread looting and robbery, as well as the broad circle of victims, led some historians to suggest that the atrocities were motivated by economic gain. A closer look at the circle of the victims and the nature of the atrocities leads us to a different conclusion. The rampage in Budapest was not decreed either by the Germans or the top leadership of the party. It resulted from the eliminationist ideological zeal of a grass roots movement. The most radical part of the Arrow Cross movement took over, pushing the more moderate elements aside. The rage of these men was not directed at random individuals, but at the Jewish community as a whole, while not sparing anyone, such as deserters, who helped the Jews or who, in their eyes, betrayed the homeland.

26 DEGOB, record number 3588.

Some Arrow Cross participated in the domestic hunt for victims and loot mainly to escape military service at the front. Paradoxically, when it came to doing away with the Jewish enemy, which included children, the elderly and hospital patients, they were willing to put their own life at risk. Thus, they gambled with their own physical survival for the perceived survival of their nation in what they saw as a mortal combat with an implacable enemy. Murder was cast as the self-defense of a community. Love for the nation went hand in glove with hatred of the Jews; the latter provided fuel for the former.

The rampage that transpired in the streets of the Hungarian capital confirmed Sigmund Freud's hypothesis that, whenever the institutions of civilization collapse, the passions and all forms of violence hitherto repressed by external constraints come to surface. Love and hate are two sides of the same coin: the unconditional love of the national community went hand in glove with the desire to annihilate the community that was thought to threaten its survival.²⁷

None of the people who committed the atrocities in the winter of 1944/1945 saw action in the eastern theater. They were not barbarized by war. The selection of their victims and how they treated them is revealing of their motives. They arrested Gentiles, those who belonged to the 'former ruling classes.' Most Gentiles would be robbed, perhaps beaten, in the process, and then released. Wealthy individuals were caught randomly rather than in a targeted fashion. The Arrow Cross also captured, and occasionally killed people who helped Jews in any way, and specifically hunted for deserters. They also looked for communists and social democrats, but those were not among their primary targets, and were much more likely to escape with their life than captured Jews.

Very few Jews were released once they were caught; even bribing the Arrow Cross would usually not work. Arrow Cross soldiers hunted for them with a very sharp eye and identified them by their facial features or, in the case of males, also with so called "biological screening." The killings were part of an effort to eliminate the Jewish community. There was also the hunt for Jewish children, an effort that could provide no rational benefit other than the biological annihilation of the next generation of a community. The case of the Sisters of Divine Love and the Salesian convent comes to mind, in which the girls were abducted after careful "biological" profiling.

Murderous raids directed at Jewish hospitals were also carried out. Only the Jewish patients were shot to death, those who could not stand in their bed; the rest of the patients were let go. These raids did not yield any material benefits

27 For an explanation of Freud's thesis see Gay, *Freud*, 547-50.

either and the patients posed no rational threat to anyone. The events in Budapest can be viewed as a systematic effort by the most radical members of the Arrow Cross to implement the annihilation of the Jewish community.

Most of the killers were dispositional rather than situational. Men like Vilmos Kröszl, András Kun or György Bükkös were guided by racial anti-Semitism and regarded the elimination of Jews as their obligation in order for the Hungarian nation to thrive. Jews, as one of them put it, did not even have the right to rest in Hungarian soil. Many years after the events in question, some of them even expressed remorse that they had not killed more of them. They bragged about the killings and used the term “took them swimming”—referring to the Danube River, which served as the grave for thousands of their victims—not to cover up their killings, but jokingly. They fully understood that their murderous mission to “save” their nation was not acceptable to the world outside their own ideologically based community. Therefore, they concealed their acts even in front of their family members, unless, of course, they too, were members of the movement.

The Arrow Cross killers were not “ordinary men” like Christopher R. Browning’s German “heroes” who could have been substituted by anyone else.²⁸ Those with strong ideological conviction enjoyed the killing. Peer pressure did not explain the actions of many of the Arrow Cross, who tortured, raped and murdered their victim with raging sadism. Some, like János Erős, tried to explain their actions by the terror and threats exerted by their brutal superiors and depicted their participation in the atrocities as acts of survival. It is very hard to say whether they were telling the truth or only trying to save their skins when facing their communist judges. Threats were issued to kill them unless they took their part in the shooting, and, they claimed, it was not possible to escape. We know that some did escape; what is more, some veteran members of the party refused to partake in the “actions.” Yet it is possible that motives such as the demonstration of party loyalty and fear influenced some members of the militias to go along. The men who were pressed into committing atrocities recalled extreme anguish experienced after the first murders, but soon got accustomed to killing.

The extent of the rage and sadism of the atrocities requires explanation. The way in which these acts were committed explains why their perpetrators com-

28 “Within virtually every social collective, the peer group exerts tremendous pressures on behavior and sets moral norms. If the men of the Reserve Police Battalion 101 became killers under such circumstances, which group of men cannot?” Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101* (HarperPerennial, 1998), 189.

mitted it. According to Steven Pinker, the perpetrators of violent acts and atrocities see their victims as an existential threat and, when the opportunity arises, want to eliminate them: “Perpetrators commonly analogize their victims to vermin and treat them with moralized disgust. Or they may see them as existential threats and treat them with hatred... a desire not to punish an adversary but to end its existence.”

In such instances, cognitive and emotional inhibitions that keep aggression in check are suspended. The sadism of the acts suggest that they caused pleasure and amusement to the perpetrators. This was because the built-in aversion to the pain and death cries of the other are disabled. The victims are not regarded as human beings and do not belong to the perpetrators’ emphatic circle. In such cases, another safety catch, anticipatory guilt, is also disabled. Evildoers, Pinker explains, always think they are acting morally. In our cases the basis of this conviction is provided by ideology. Only humans are capable of the calculation that leads to the kind of violence and aggression we saw in Budapest: that what we do, even at the expense of others, will lead to a better world. The Arrow Cross crimes confirm that ideology drove the worst things that people ever did to each other.²⁹ It was the delusion that the present and future of the community of Hungarians was threatened by an abstract entity, the community of Jews. This explains why some Arrow Cross men were willing to pardon an individual Jews based on acquaintance, but struggled against the community as a whole.³⁰ The question remains whether, despite the harsh conditions, the victims could have done more to escape death.

Deception oiled the machinery of deportation: the victims were led to believe that they were being taken to work in Hungary or elsewhere; they received postcards from deported loved ones saying that they were all right. Similarly, the victims in Budapest did not realize that they were slated for death until they reached the execution site. Jews were told that they were being taken to the ghetto—which, in fact, was supposed to be their destination, had the Arrow Cross observed the law. Right before the shots rang out, the executioners let them know that they had to die because they were Jewish. Even on the verge of defeat, the Nazis tried to shape history.

29 Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, 487–568.

30 When interviewed by a psychoanalyst prior to his conviction, Pater Kun stated that he knew that individual Jews were not responsible for Bolshevism. “I held the collective responsible and physically assaulted its members.” Rezső Szirmai, *Fasiszta lelkek – Pszichoanalitikus beszélgetések a háborús főbűnösökkel a börtönben* (Budapest: Pelikán Kiadó, 1993), 182.

Very few people tried, and even fewer managed, to escape from the execution site or on the way to it. They made a desperate attempt to flee when it finally dawned on them that they were going to be shot. This was difficult, as the psychologically and physically severely abused people were driven with little clothing under cover of darkness in the bitter winter cold. Their hands were tied together and there was at least one armed guard for every four prisoners. Larger number of people, an estimated 25,000, survived through collaborative efforts to save them. Even the survival of those who escaped from the firing squads required the assistance of several people. The Arrow Cross took utmost care to make sure everyone they slated for death was actually executed. They took their mission to destroy their enemies seriously.

Most of the Hungarian rescue efforts took place in Budapest. The Arrow Cross threatened anyone who came to the rescue of their victims with death. Even so, people from all social layers tried to help in one way or another. Besides making and distributing fake papers or providing safe haven in factories, convents and even garrisons, ordinary people opened their—often tiny—homes to friends, acquaintances and even strangers. Beside the high number of denunciations—some of which were motivated by such mundane emotions as jealousy—the number of rescue efforts was also very high. This *too* is a lesson of 1944. Many people were capable of extending their circle of empathy to strangers, including their Jewish compatriots. Zygmunt Bauman has written that, “The lesson of the Holocaust is the facility with which most people, put into a situation that does not contain a good choice... argue themselves away from moral duty... adopting instead the precepts of rational interest and self-preservation. In a system where rationality and ethics point in opposite directions, humanity is the main loser.” The second lesson, Bauman adds, “is that putting self-preservation above moral duty is in no way predetermined, inevitable or inescapable... It does not matter how many people choose moral duty over the rationality of self-preservation, what does matter is that someone did.”³¹

The lessons of Budapest do not fully confirm his argument. A large number of people in Budapest—not only some—made the right choices, and the vast majority did so altruistically.³² Rescue and survival were fraught with dilemmas. Deciding to do “the right thing” is easier said than done, and the history of the rescue mission of the Sisters of Divine Love was an example.

³¹ Zygmunt Bauman is cited in Deák, *Essays on Hitler's Europe*, 88.

³² I found one account where the host demanded money for refuge.

The sisters struggled with the consequences of the refuge they provided for children: The children's parents expected the Sisters to sacrifice their lives for them, which was further than the women, who did their best to save their charges, were willing to go. Despite their sacrifices, many of the children were murdered, and the Sisters were accused of complicity with the killers. This was not a fairy tale, and the happy ending—the reward for doing good—was often missing.

Two major issues linked the pre-1945 world to the postwar-era Hungary. The Hungarian version of the Stalinist system exploited habits acquired under the previous regime: how to cope with, and occasionally even exploit, the levers of power in a terrorist state. The case of the two sisters who alternately denounced each other to the authorities in the full knowledge that their denunciations could end with the death of their sibling is a case in point. People learned that government was an entity to be feared and survived or exploited to their own purposes.

The other element of continuity was ideological continuity, in the sense that like its predecessor, the communists, were convinced that their goal—the march to a communist utopia—was impeded by hostile groups that had to be eliminated. There was no middle ground, no fence sitting; one had to take sides and belong to one group or the other. Between 1944 and 1953 politics divided society into desirable and non-desirable elements, each picturing the other as a mortal threat. The Arrow Cross, working from an imported ideology infused with indigenous elements, pictured the Jews (and their “hirelings”) as a mortal threat to the future survival of the Hungarian nation. The communists, whose ideology was made from imported elements, imagined their enemies to pose an existential menace to the survival of the communist state. Their image of the enemy was broader and more flexible than that of their predecessors. Ultimately there remained not a single part of society that did not feel it was being persecuted. Ideologies of hatred had an inner logic: they swept through like a hurricane, leaving nothing intact before the steam ran out.

Neither the Nazis nor the Hungarian followers of Stalin held out the possibility of redemption for the enemy. It was either total victory or unconditional defeat. This is what made these systems dangerous. In his book on Stalinist terror, the historian Jörg Baberowski argued that “ideas do not kill” and blamed the Soviet genocide on the sadism and homicidal leadership of Joseph Stalin and his entourage.³³ Ideology took the center stage under both Nazi and the Soviet-type

33 Jörg Baberowski, *Scorched Earth: Stalin's Reign of Terror* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2016), 308.

systems in Hungary. In the 1950s, all Hungarian leaders talked about was their ideology, the prism through which they saw the world and their mission in it. Ideas were the source of aggression. In 1952, Ernő Gerő, second in command after party leader Mátyás Rákosi, announced to the Soviet ambassador to Hungary that kulaks would be liquidated as a social class. In fact, persecution was extended to the peasantry as a whole. This was motivated by two reasons, both ideological in nature. One, communist superindustrialization, second, the notion that the population in the countryside was retrograde and fought against progress for communism. The struggle against the countryside was marked by the confiscation of produce, including grain. In a strategy of survival, peasants tried to hide enough food to keep themselves alive. This was portrayed as „proof” of their hostility and subversion in order to justify the further intensification of repression. The ideologies that promised redemption to certain parts of humanity and destruction to the other were two sides of the same coin. Both the Nazis and the Stalinists—and their Hungarian equivalents—pursued the triumph of their ideologies on the wings of sadistic individuals. The Soviet system and its Hungarian version encouraged the basest instincts and unleashed aggressive instincts for the regimes survival. Hungarian leader Mátyás Rákosi ordered his henchmen in the state security service to “break the bones” of his rival. “We all pay lip service to the adage ‘ideas have consequences,’ but it is only in extremis that we take it seriously, when the ideas of Stalin or Hitler issue in the realities of gulags and death camps.”³⁴

Rákosi’s system was not as lethal as his role model’s in Moscow. Nevertheless, for the vast majority of the population life revolved around how to survive the political system economically, psychologically, and culturally, and, most importantly, how to stay out of penal institutions. The number of those executed for political reasons, who were beaten to death under interrogation, who committed suicide out of fear of arrest, or who died in labor camps was still sizable. Many more people, as many as 1,5 million in a country of only nine million people, were persecuted in one way or another, according to Soviet figures. Enemies of the state were sent to internment camps, forced labor camps, or received lengthy, often life-long, sentences in prison. These sentences frequently entailed the confiscation of all assets. Terror was wielded as a tool of statecraft, not for social sculpting, but for the annihilation of the regime’s enemies. Aggression was cast as self-defense: the protection of the revolutionary system from internal and external enemies, who even managed to “worm their way” into the

34 Himmelfarb, *On Looking into the Abyss*, xii.

highest echelons of the party. A judge argued that his military tribunal “applied a sentence meant to protect the working people in light of the danger [the defendant’s] person and acts posed to society.”³⁵ Absolute security for the regime meant absolute insecurity for the individual. The net was cast so wide in the definition of the enemy that literally anyone could fit into it.

While the enemy’s image of the Hungarian national socialists was constant, the identification of the ‘enemy’ was constantly expanded. Enemies of the dictatorship of the proletariat were identified on sociological and political bases, although the two often overlapped. Former social democrats were branded “class traitors.” Class enemies were individuals who belonged to the broadly interpreted former ruling classes by birth, not current status; the concept of former ruling class itself was flexibly interpreted, so, for instance, the regime constantly enlarged the category of kulaks.³⁶

The regime further expanded the ranks of the enemy by attributing hostile political intent to a whole range of ordinary activities, such as listening to the radio or criticizing the political system or purchasing items such as food, and criminalizing them. In addition, these classifications were wholly arbitrary; people had no way of knowing whether their social status or activities made them eligible for repression. Given the high number of informants—paid and informal—as well as their strategic placement, people could say that any infringement of the law could lead to their arrest with a high degree of certainty. Not to mention the fact that the denunciation of political crimes, and even the expectation that a person would in the future commit a political crime, was a legal obligation, and non-compliance punishable by severe jail terms.

One of the deadliest blows to personal security was the concept of the presumption of guilt. The many hundreds of thousands of guilty verdicts were due to the fact that the burden of proving innocence fell on the defendant, and in many cases a guilty verdict was based on coerced confessions of guilt. The stereotypical language of such confessions reveals their artificial nature. A defense was often not possible, as defendants before military tribunals were not allowed a defense attorney. The courts themselves were not independent either, and passed sentences on the basis of directives received from the state security

35 Budapesti hadbíróság nyilvánosság kizárásával tartott tárgyalása, 20 April 1953. MNL OL, XIX-B-1-j, box 33, 16600481/53.

36 See the Resolution of the Hungarian Workers Party on the Policy against “Kulaks”, 6 September 1951. “There are a high number of kulaks, whose plot is lower than the kulak threshold.” *Az MDP Politikai Bizottságának határozata a ‘kulákok’ elleni politikáról*. In Ignác Romsics, ed., *Ma-gyar történelmi szöveggyűjtemény, 1914–1999* (Budapest: Osiris, 2000), 51–54.

authority. The legal proceeding against the employees of the Hungarian-American Oil Company provides one example.

The circle of persecution was further broadened by the practice of penalizing crimes “about to be committed” based on the assumption that, due to the individual’s “hostile class status,” that individual could be presumed to commit a criminal offense. In addition, individuals who could be “expected” to suspect—not even know—that a class alien was about to commit a crime were also prosecuted if they failed to report to the authorities—things they could not even have known! One may conclude that denunciation was not indicative of popular approval of the political system, since it was mandated by law and failure to denounce was a crime in itself.

The effect of all this on society was the construction of a protective wall around the individual: constant fear of getting reported for anything one said led to paranoia and distrust of the other. Thoughts on anything that could have had political ramification were kept within, disclosed clandestinely only to the most trusted circle. Anyone who broke that rule could pay with their jobs, career, ultimately even life. Survival, whether physical or the continuation of life as it used be, was, by definition, *individual*. Collaborative action to circumvent the will of the omnipresent state would have invited risk. In the worst case, survival was self-centered and at risk of the other, as exemplified by the scholars who denounced their colleagues for reading bourgeois literature for the sake of promotion.

The function of the law was not to serve justice, but to “protect” the political system from its domestic, and, if needed, foreign detractors. Thereby individual insecurity was maximized. Sentencing was politicized. Verdicts in cases such as hoarding or black slaughter were formulated pursuant to the class origins of the defendants: “class aliens” were given harsher sentences for deterrence.

This brings us to the next point: the image of the enemy, which was the most decisive feature of the political system. Life revolved around it; those who were so classified needed to be constantly aware of how to survive the stigma, while those who were not, of how to avoid being recategorized as an enemy. Class enemies were portrayed as irreconcilable foes of the socialist political system, who would not rest until they effected a regime change. A diabolical aspect of communist ideology was that one’s role in society was not judged according to one’s actions, but rather membership in a social class, a class which was itself constructed by the authorities.

Thus, even the most loyal communists could find themselves within the group of the enemy if they came from the “wrong” social class. In addition, class status

was inherited. The children of enemies were also considered to be in the wrong social class, even if they happened to be factory workers—that is, at least on paper, members of the working class. In this case they only “wormed their way in” so as to subvert the political system, just as kulaks who offered their land to the cooperative were only trying to cleverly conceal their hostile intent. One can say that class status was an indelible stigma, just as race was in the Nazi system.

Love of the revolution and hatred for “conservative” elements were two sides of the same coin, the first could not exist without the second. “Hostile elements” were all but irredeemable: once malicious always malicious. As under the Arrow Cross, the children of enemy elements were in the crosshair of the communist state, what they rather flexibly termed as the former ruling classes were to be by crook or by hook eliminated once and for all. The most efficient manner in which to do so was the criminalization of regular activities and the attribution of hostile political intent to regular crime such as theft. The “hoarding” of consumer goods (purchasing more than the most immediate need), listening to foreign radio, writing letters to “capitalist” friends, meeting a Frenchman in a coffee house or reading “bourgeois” scholarship were reasons for arrest. Negligent workmanship, stealing from the cooperative were conscious acts of sabotage.

The machinery of repression was greased also by someone who wanted to survive the regime by resisting it. The person hungry for news of the outside world listened to BBC or RFE, the confectioner who used the black market to purchase sugar and chocolate rather than give up the business for nationalization, the historian who used “hostile” scholarship for self-improvement unintentionally justified the state security services and the intensification of repression. An argument can be made that the top-down and the bottom-up model of Stalinism in the Hungarian case are not mutually exclusive but mutually complementary. Survival as a concept is a bridge between the two narratives.

All of this should not serve as an excuse who unleashed their violent passions to profit from dictatorships, who were directly or indirectly responsible for the suffering of others. Even under the harshest conditions, a decent choice remained possible. Heroism was relational. A seemingly small gesture required considerable courage depending on when and where it happened. Like in the camps, it was hope that sustained the will to survive the Stalinist machinery of oppression. For some people hope was attached to liberation by foreign armies, for others that there was a better world on the other side of the Iron Curtain beckoning them to jump the fence.

If there was any cause for optimism regarding the dark decade, it was this: neither version of the totalitarian dictatorships was able to mold each individual

to their image. Not everyone can become and does become a willing accomplice to crime. The following will sum up what this book wanted to say: “Looking into the most fearsome abysses of modern times, the historian sees not beasts but faceless bureaucrats, not corpses but statistics, not willful acts of brutality and murder but the banal routine of everyday life, not gas chambers and gulags but military-industrial-geopolitical complexes.”³⁷ The events described in the book were not guided by invisible historical sources, or cogwheels in a machine. They were determined by people who were capable of unspeakable atrocities or selfless deeds of good. Human decency was a choice even in the hardest of times.

³⁷ Himmelfarb, *On Looking into the Abyss*, 17–18.

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