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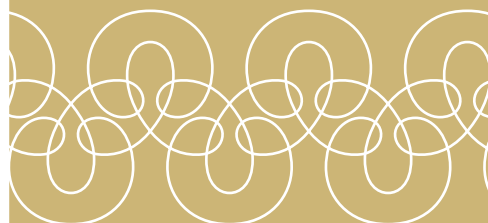
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The Holocaust in Hungary in Contexts. New Perspectives and Research Results

Ferenc Laczó

Special Editor of the Thematic Issue

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Regina Fritz

Inside the Ghetto: Everyday Life in Hungarian Ghettos¹

The first ghetto was established in Hungary on April 16, 1944, about one month after the German invasion of the country. Within eight weeks, the Hungarian gendarmerie and police, together with the German *Sondereinsatzkommando*, had detained more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews in over 170 ghettos. There were significant differences between the individual ghettos in Hungary with regard to housing, provisions, the ability to make contact with the “outside world,” the extent of violence, etc. The living conditions depended to a great extent on how the local administrations implemented the measures for ghettoization and how the non-Jewish population reacted to the creation of the ghettos. In addition, ghettoization in the annexed territories differed in many perspectives from ghettoization in the core of Hungary. It was not only more brutal, but also much less structured. The paper investigates the formal differences between the individual Hungarian ghettos and describes the widely differing situations experienced in them. On the basis of personal documents and the preserved estates of ghetto administrations, I offer a portrayal of daily life inside the ghettos in the capital and in cities and smaller towns in rural parts of Hungary.

Keywords: Hungary, Jews, persecution, ghetto, daily life, oral history, diary, DEGOB, 1944–45, Holocaust.

Introduction

On April 18, 1944, Olga and Ilona Iczkovits told their brother Elemér about their forced relocation to a ghetto.

According to official regulations, along with other Jews, we have to leave our homes maybe tomorrow, maybe the day after—we just don’t know yet. The tentative destination is Beregszász. We are allowed to bring one package weighing 50 kilos. All three of us are setting out on our way with strong spirits, hopeful and healthy. Should fate have it that we won’t meet again, we hope you may be truly happy.²

1 I especially thank the J. and O. Winter Fund, City University of New York for supporting my research for this essay. Parts of this essay were published in: Regina Fritz, “Divergierende Ghettoerfahrungen – Alltag in den ungarischen Ghettos,” in *Lebenswelt Ghetto. Alltag und soziales Umfeld während der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung*, ed. Imke Hansen et al. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013), 346–68.

2 Letter from Olga and Ilona Iczkovits to Elemér Iczkovits, April 18, 1944, Holocaust Memorial Center (HDKE) 2011.917.2.

Two days earlier, on April 16, 1944, about a month following the German occupation of Hungary and twelve days before the official government ruling on “ghettoization,” the first ghetto was established in the annexed region of Carpathian Ruthenia. By early June 1944, more than 400,000 Jews were concentrated in over 170 ghettos,³ so that, with the exception of Budapest, the ghettoization of Jews in Hungary was practically completed within a matter of weeks. From mid-June 1944 onwards, the Jews of Budapest were required to move into specific “yellow houses” in the vicinity of factories, rail stations, and other possible targets of allied air strikes. Only in November 1944, months after the majority of Hungarian Jews had been deported and murdered, were two closed-in ghettos established in Budapest, the “Large” Ghetto and the “International” Ghetto.⁴

Most ghettos outside the capital existed only briefly, as the ghetto residents were transported to special collection camps in the county capitals within a matter of weeks. After two weeks at most, the vast majority of them had been sent to the concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. In exceptional cases, Hungarian Jews were deported to the Austrian camp Strasshof/Nordbahn.⁵

Concentration and deportation was organized by deportation zones, which corresponded mainly to the gendarmerie districts. With some exceptions, the Jews living in the territories Hungary annexed between 1938 and 1941 were deported first. The Jews living in the core parts of the country (post-Trianon Hungary) followed. The deportations were supposed to be concluded with the Jews of Budapest, however, Regent Miklós Horthy put a stop to the deportations before the Jews of Budapest would have fallen victim to them. He did so in reaction to growing international pressure and also due to his realization that the war had been lost following the landing of Allied troops at Normandy

3 László Csósz talks about 350 ghettos and collection camps. Cf. László Csósz, *Tettesek, szemtanúk, áldozatok. A vérszékelyek Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok megyében* (PhD diss., University of Szeged, 2010), 74. Approximately 200 of them were intended as collecting points, such as synagogues or schools, and the Jewish people from smaller villages were meant to stay in them for several days prior to their transport to a larger ghetto.

4 The “Large” ghetto was surrounded by a wooden fence. Up to 70,000 people lived in it. In the “International” ghetto around 15,000 people were housed. Cf. Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide. The Holocaust in Hungary. Condensed Edition* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 189–93. About the ghettoization of Budapest see Tim Cole, *Holocaust City. The Making of a Jewish Ghetto* (London–New York: Routledge, 2003).

5 On the details of the events that followed, see Frojimovics–Kovács in this issue.

and the continuing advances of the Red Army.⁶ After Romania switched sides politically and militarily, Horthy installed a new government under Géza Lakatos, which secretly accepted an armistice agreement with the Soviet Union. Following the broadcast of this agreement on Hungarian radio, the German government forced Horthy and the Lakatos government to resign on October 15, 1944. Ferenc Szálasi, the leader of the Hungarian Arrow Cross party, took over the government and restarted the deportation of the Hungarian Jews. Between November 6 and December 1, 1944, over 76,000 Hungarian Jews were handed over to the German Empire. This number included forced laborers from Hungarian factories, labor servicemen from the Hungarian army, and Budapest Jews who had survived the first wave of deportations in the first half of 1944.⁷

Due to the fact that the rural ghettos of Hungary existed only for a matter of weeks, internal ghetto institutions and cultural life could not develop as distinctive aspects of ghetto life, as they had in other ghettos across Europe, especially in Poland.⁸ Although there was first evidence of administrative structures, religious life, organization of health and preventive care in the Hungarian case too, only the “Large” Ghetto of Budapest had a somewhat more developed administration.⁹ For historians wishing to analyze life and life worlds (*Lebenswelt*)¹⁰ in the Hungarian ghettos, the limited number of sources about the daily life inside them poses a serious challenge. Military operations also led to the destruction or loss of files. Because of this, everyday life in the Hungarian ghettos has rarely been made the subject of scholarly inquiry.¹¹

6 Pope Pius XII, President Roosevelt, and the Swedish king intervened during the Hungarian deportations.

7 Cf. Christian Gerlach and Götz Aly, *Das letzte Kapitel. Der Mord an den ungarischen Juden 1944–1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2004), 10 and 366f. Regarding the labor input of Hungarian Jews in the area of current-day Austria, see especially Eleonore Lappin-Eppel, *Ungarisch-jüdische Zwangsarbeiter und Zwangsarbeiterinnen in Österreich 1944/45. Arbeitseinsatz – Todesmärsche – Folgen* (Münster–Hamburg–Berlin–London: LIT, 2010) and Szabolcs Szita, *Verschleppt, verhungert, vernichtet. Die Deportation von ungarischen Juden auf das Gebiet des annektierten Österreich 1944–1945* (Vienna: Werner Eichbauer, 1999).

8 Tim Cole, “Multiple and Changing Experiences of Ghettoization. Budapest, 1944,” in *Life in the Ghettos During the Holocaust*, ed. Eric J. Sterling (New York: Syracuse, 2005), 146.

9 The ghetto of Budapest had a postal service, for instance.

10 Cf. *Lebenswelt Ghetto. Alltag und soziales Umfeld während der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung*, ed. Imke Hansen, Katrin Steffen, and Jochen Tauber (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013).

11 The works of Tim Cole represent an exception: Tim Cole, “Building and Breaching the Ghetto Boundary: A Brief History of the Ghetto Fence in Körmen, Hungary, 1944,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 23 (2009): 2, and Tim Cole, *Traces of the Holocaust. Journeying in and out of the Ghettos* (London–New York: Continuum, 2011). The scholarship on the Hungarian ghettos, which has grown considerably since the 1990s, has focused primarily on Hungary’s collaboration with the German occupiers. Cf. Csósz, “Tettesek, szemtanúk, áldozatok”; Judit Molnár, *Zsidósors 1944-ben az V. (szegedi) csendőrkörületben* (Budapest:

However, as stressed by historian Saul Friedländer, Jewish perceptions, actions, and reactions to persecution are an integral part of the history of National Socialism.¹² Accordingly, the study of everyday life in the Hungarian ghettos also constitutes a relevant scholarly subject. The following study aligns with the recent series of publications, which have increasingly explored Nazi ghettos from the perspectives of everyday life.¹³ The aim of these studies was to supplement historical research, which for a long time had focused on the perpetrator's perspective, with the victim's point of view. The "perceptions, agency, and reactions [...], in addition to the interactions [of the persecuted, note R.F.] with the rest of the population" thus became the central part of the analysis.¹⁴ These researches emphasize efforts made to regain a sense of normality in the chaos of everyday life in the ghetto. Endeavors to maintain friendships and family relationships, celebrate holidays, organize cultural, religious, and social institutions are also at the heart of these inquiries, as are internal conflicts in the ghetto or interactions with the outside world. The intention is not, as was in the past, to analyze ghetto history backwards, proceeding in our attempts to understand it from its outcome, i.e. by focusing on the subsequent annihilation of prisoners in the concentration and death camps, even if the context of persecution cannot be ignored. Instead, the studies consciously address the lives and activities of the persecuted and characterize the communities in the ghettos as heterogeneous societies.¹⁵ As noted by historians Imke Hansen, Katrin Steffen, and Jochen Tauber, "ghettos should not be seen only as places of persecution

Cserépfalvi, 1995); Judit Molnár, *Csendőrök, hivatalnokok, zsidók. Válogatott tanulmányok a magyar holokauszt történetéből* (Szeged: Szegedi Zsidó Hitközség, 2000); Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: Holocaust in Hungary*, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981). A good overview is provided in Randolph L. Braham, ed., *The Geographical Encyclopedia of the Holocaust in Hungary*, 3 vols. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013).

12 Cf. Saul Friedländer, "An Integrated History of the Holocaust. A Reassessment," in *Konstellationen. Über Geschichte, Erfahrung und Erkenntnis*, ed. Nicolas Berg, Omar Kamil, Markus Kirchhoff, and Susanne Zepp (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 2011).

13 Relevant studies are available for Theresienstadt and the Polish ghettos. See, for example, Anna Hájková, "The Prisoner Society in Terezín Ghetto, 1941–1945" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2013). See also Andrea Löw, *Juden im Getto Litzymanstadt. Lebensbedingungen, Selbstwahrnehmung, Verhalten* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006) as well as the anthology *Lebenswelt Ghetto*, ed. Hansen, Steffen, and Tauber.

14 Doris L. Bergen, Anna Hájková, and Andrea Löw, "Warum eine Alltagsgeschichte des Holocaust?," in *Alltag im Holocaust. Jüdisches Leben im Großdeutschen Reich 1941–1945*, ed. Andrea Löw, Doris L. Bergen, and Anna Hájková (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2013), 3.

15 Cf. Hansen, Steffen, and Tauber, "Fremd- und Selbstbestimmung."

and murder, but also as places of life, albeit restricted, and moreover, as a coming together of different worlds.”¹⁶

The few surviving diaries and pieces of correspondences from the Hungarian ghettos are uniquely valuable sources that help document events and daily life during the period of persecution in the involuntarily ghettoized community.¹⁷ In addition to the documents produced by the organs of local administration, the daily reports from the various ghettos that were published by Hungarian historians Judit Molnár and Kinga Frojimovics¹⁸ and the reports from the “Large” Ghetto in Budapest also provide insights into everyday life in Hungarian ghettos. The small amount of source material from the time period can be supplemented with recollections recorded after 1945. The perspectives of those inside the Hungarian ghettos have been articulated not only in interviews recorded decades after the events,¹⁹ but also immediately after the war. One of the most valuable early postwar collections is that of the *National Relief Committee for Deportees* (DEGOB). Recorded between March 1945 and June 1946, the files in this collection document the personal stories of about 5,000 survivors.²⁰ Although the project’s focus was documentation from the post-deportation

16 Imke Hansen, Katrin Steffen, and Jochen Tauber, “Fremd- und Selbstbestimmung im Kontext von nationalsozialistischer Verfolgung und Ghettoalltag,” in *Lebenswelt Ghetto. Alltag und soziales Umfeld während der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung*, ed. Imke Hansen, Katrin Steffen, and Jochen Tauber (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013), 9.

17 Cf. the diaries of Éva Heyman and Erzsébet Fóti.

18 They were published in: *Gettómagyarország 1944. A Központi Zsidó Tanács iratai*, ed. Judit Molnár, and Kinga Frojimovics (Budapest: Magyar Zsidó Levéltár, 2002).

19 The different interview projects with Hungarian survivors are summarized in Éva Kovács, András Lénárt, and Lujza Anna, “Oral History Collections on the Holocaust in Hungary,” *S.I.M.O.N.*, October 14, 2014, accessed October 16, 2015, <http://simon.vwi.ac.at/index.php/working-papers/43-kovacs-eva-lenart-andras-szasz-anna-lujza>.

20 For the history of DEGOB, see Rita Horváth, “A Magyarországi Zsidó Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottság (DEGOB) története,” *MAKOR* 1 (1997). See also Rita Horváth, “Jews in Hungary after the Holocaust. The National Relief Committee for Deportees, 1945–1950,” *The Journal of Israeli History* 19 (1998): 2; Rita Horváth, “A Jewish Historical Commission in Budapest: The Place of the National Relief Committee for Deportees in Hungary [DEGOB] Among the Other Large-Scale Historical-Memorial Projects of She’erit Hapletah After the Holocaust (1945–1948),” in *Holocaust Historiography in Context. Emergence, Challenges, Polemics & Achievements*, ed. David Bankier and Dan Michmann (Jerusalem: Berghahn, 2008) and Gábor Murányi, “‘Hallottam, amikor azt válaszolta: Alles ins Gas! A Deportáltakat Gondozó Bizottság jegyzőkönyvei 1945-ből,” *Phralipe* 11–12 (1990). Cf. also Ferenc Laczó, “‘I could hardly wait to get out of this camp even though I knew it would only get worse until liberation came.’ On Hungarian Jewish Accounts of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp 1945–46,” *Hungarian Historical Review* 3 (2013). The DEGOB protocols are available in the Hungarian Jewish Archive in Budapest. Most of them are available online at www.degob.hu.

period and the experiences in the National Socialist camp system, in almost every protocol survivors also spoke about the ghettoization process and everyday life in the Hungarian ghettos.²¹

Drawing on these sources, in this essay I investigate the diversity of the ghettos and analyze the differences in ghetto experiences. To what extent could the Jewish inhabitants of the ghettos influence and give structure to their daily life? Was it possible to adhere to religious commandments or arrange forms and patterns of cultural life? What influence did internal or “imported” conflicts have on the life of the ghetto inhabitants? How was violence exercised and experienced in the different ghettos, particularly by the Hungarian gendarmerie? How did the living conditions change over the course of the weeks? And, last but not least, how did the ability or the inability to make contact with the “outside world” influence ghetto life?

“It’s impossible to get used to this life.” On the Diversity of the Ghettos

Edmund Veesenmayer, Hitler’s personal plenipotentiary in Hungary, sent a telegram to the German Foreign Office on April 23, 1944:

The ghettoization work began on April 16 in the Carpathian region. 150,000 Jews have been seized. It’s expected that this action will be completed by the end of next week. An estimated 300,000 Jews. Subsequently, similar operations in Transylvania and further border provinces near Romania are being planned. Still a further 250,000 to 300,000 Jews to capture. Then, those counties adjacent to Serbia and Croatia, and, finally, the inland ghettoization, finishing up in Budapest.²²

Over the course of the following weeks, Veesenmayer regularly reported to the Foreign Office on the gradual ghettoization and the deportations, that followed. In a bureaucratic style, he relayed the number of captured persons and noted “incidents,” such as escape attempts or suicides. Because they don’t contain any information about daily life or living conditions, these reports shed no light on the many disparities among ghettos established in Hungary during the spring and summer of 1944. However, the ghettoization in the annexed territories differed

21 After all, one of the missions of the DEGOB was to document Jewish life before the destruction of Jewish communities in Hungary.

22 Telegram of Edmund Veesenmayer from April 23, 1944, Political Archive of the Foreign Office, R 29793.

from that in the core of the country because it was carried out in a more ferocious and less organized manner. This becomes apparent when the documents from regional administrations are considered, alongside egodocuments.

In many villages of the annexed territories, the authorities skipped a “multiphase ghettoization” altogether. Instead, the Jewish inhabitants were quickly gathered in collection camps in which, because of their provisional nature, conditions were especially dreadful. On the other hand, in the country’s core, where the ghettoization happened at a later time after the authorities had become more familiar with the procedure, the Jews living in the larger cities were moved to designated areas, which were usually isolated from the rest of the city. Jews from the villages and small towns were temporarily housed in synagogues and other Jewish community institutions in their hometowns. Later, the Hungarian and German authorities moved them to ghettos of nearby larger cities. One or two weeks before deportation, the Jews were finally concentrated in collection camps.

In the case of Hungary, the location of ghettoization and the conditions in each ghetto depended mostly on decisions made by regional administrators.²³ Prior to the establishment of the ghettos, there were administrative consultations regarding questions of location, supply, and equipment. The few surviving minutes taken at such meetings document the broad scope of action the local decision-makers had on questions concerning ghettoization. Thus, a note written by the Debrecen Council demonstrates vividly the radicalizing or deradicalizing affect that the local authorities could have on the centrally regulated ghettoization measures.²⁴ On May 8, 1944, a confrontation between Mayor Sándor Kölcsey and prefect Lajos Bessenyei erupted over the implementation of the individual

23 The process of ghettoization also differed in other countries from place to place. Martin Dean notes: “Since detailed arrangements were left to the local authorities, the process of establishing ghettos was extremely decentralized and drawn out over more than two years.” He concludes: “The process of ghetto establishment varied considerably from region to region and was not the result of a series of coordinated orders issued in Berlin.” Martin Dean, “Regional Patterns of Ghettoization in the Annexed and Occupied Territories of the Third Reich,” in *Lebenswelt Ghetto. Alltag und soziales Umfeld während der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung*, ed. Imke Hansen, Katrin Steffen, and Jochen Tauber (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013), 37, 49. It is worth mentioning that these ghettos were established in the annexed or occupied territories by the German administration. Hungary, on the other hand, could keep a high level of autonomy even after German occupation, thus the decision-making rested with the Hungarian administration. Cf. Gerlach, Aly, *Das letzte Kapitel*, 13.

24 Hajdú-Bihar County Archives, Debrecen, IV.B. 1406.b., box 365, 21.838/1944. See also László Csósz, and Regina Fritz, “Ein Protokoll,” *S.I.M.O.N.*, accessed October 16, 2015, <http://simon.vwi.ac.at/images/Documents/Events/Nur1Quelle/Nur1Quelle.pdf>.

steps of ghettoization in Debrecen. The former took a more moderate position. Kölcsey was firmly against barricading the ghettos and also insisted that the Jews should be allowed to bring along all necessary items. What's significant here is that Kölcsey substantiated his viewpoint with aesthetic and pragmatic argumentation, and not with any kind of philanthropic reasoning: "We have more practical solutions here and can close off the streets. He [Kölcsey, note R.F.] is averse to using wooden planks, first of all, because they are ugly [...]. Secondly, the planks might be useful for national defense." Finally, the Jewish population in Debrecen ended up being housed in a ghetto located in the city center instead of the barracks built specifically for them outside the city (as first proposed); the lack of building materials was cited as the reason.

While ghettoization in Debrecen was carried out in accordance with the decision of the city authorities, due to protests by the local non-Jewish population, similar plans made for other cities often failed. On the one hand, some protesters laid claims to the homes of Jews, which were often located on projected ghetto premises. On the other, some gentiles complained that they would have to vacate their houses or apartments, which were in the area designated for the ghetto.²⁵ These grievances often led to implementing more radical ghettoization plans than originally intended. Therefore, the area initially planned for many ghettos was further reduced, or the ghetto was set up on the fringe of residential areas, in warehouse-like conditions located in either abandoned factories or commercial buildings.²⁶ However, in some places, such as Hódmezővásárhely, the Jews were actually allowed to stay in their own homes until deportation. In Budapest, the authorities at first decided that the Jewish population would be housed in houses marked with a yellow star throughout the entire urban area. The authorities rejected building a closed-in ghetto up until November 1944, as they had come to believe rumors, which had also been spread by the Budapest Jewish Council,²⁷ that only non-Jewish neighborhoods would be bombed.

Overall, Hungarian historian László Csősz has distinguished five types of ghetto:

1. Complete resettlement. Accommodation outside residential areas in warehouse-like conditions in factories or farm buildings;
2. Separate residential neighborhoods, usually in former Jewish quarters;

25 Cf. Csősz, "Tettesek, szentánúk, áldozatok," 42 and 92.

26 Ibid., 79.

27 Cf. statement of the Budapest Jewish Council Chairman Samu Stern, DEGOB 3627.

3. Accommodation in individual buildings, not necessarily joined, marked with a yellow star;

4. Rejection of the establishment of a closed-in ghetto.²⁸

Csősz characterizes Model 5, for instance the ghettos in Kassa, Ungvár, and Munkács as a combination of the first and second models. In these cities, local Jews were housed in a closed-off district within the city, while Jewish people from the surrounding region had to move to a collection camp, usually located on the outskirts of the city. However, there were also several other cases in which the Jewish population was divided into various groups. For example, in the Beregszász ghetto, Jews over 60 years of age were housed separately.²⁹ In Bonyhád, there were separate ghettos for Orthodox Jews and Neolog Jews.³⁰ Furthermore, in some ghettos the Jews who had converted to Christianity were housed separately, which occasionally also meant that they had somewhat better living conditions.³¹

The filth, lack of toilets and washing facilities, problems with supplies, loss of private space, confinement, harassment by the police, and uncertainty about the future were all deeply imprinted on the memories of most survivors. These factors affected people differently in the different ghettos. In particular, the type of housing seems to have had a key impact on experiences of the ghettos. Survivors from Kassa who were housed in the local brick factory recalled their experiences thus:

The wind was blowing terribly, it was cold, and the brick factory didn't even have walls. The first days were miserable. There was no toilet. There was no water. There was not even space to unload our baggage or take a moment's pause, so we just got to work. We built walls, but we slept on the ground. Whoever could manage to get hold of some straw did so.³²

28 Cf. Csősz, "Tettesek, szemtanúk, áldozatok," 75.

29 See the daily report from the Beregszász ghetto from May 1, 1944, reprinted: *Gettómagyarország*, ed. Molnár and Frojimovics, 57. It states: "The people of Beregszász are in the barrel factory near Reisman and Neufeld; the people from the province are in the brickyards of Kont and Vály. The 60 years of age and older are living in a separate street."

30 Csősz, "Tettesek, szemtanúk, áldozatok," 148.

31 The reason for separation differed from ghetto to ghetto. In some cases the Catholic Church intervened in support of the separation of the converted Jews.

32 Protocol with Ms. V.R., Ms. J.J., Ms. J.E., Ms. K.P. and Ms. K.E., taken on August 2, 1946, DEGOB 2591.

Those forced to move into houses designated for Jews within city perimeters lived under relatively better conditions. Although an average of 6 to 7 people had to share a single room, the survivors from Kassa accentuated the differences: “Life was better here, because they were able to live in apartments and move about more freely. Once in a while, a person might even have a minute alone to himself; he didn’t always have to think, eat, drink, or sleep collectively.”³³ The dense concentration of people in a paltry space was a common characteristic of ghettos in the annexed territories. The lack of space was the most extreme in these ghettos, with an average of 1m² per person. In a large portion of the heartland (meaning Trianon Hungary) the proposed standard was 4m² per person, although in many ghettos people in the end only had half that space.³⁴ On May 19, 1944, a Jewish woman wrote a letter to her sister, describing the situation in the Miskolc ghetto:

As I mentioned, we sleep seven people to a small room. The seven beds take up so much of the space in the room that we are hardly able to move about. You can imagine how much daily life is compromised for my dear Irén, for whom her beloved home was everything. It’s impossible to get used to this life. It feels like prison.³⁵

The internments were led by the Hungarian police and gendarmerie, representatives of the *Sondereinsatzkommando* functioned under the leadership of Adolf Eichmann as a “consulting institution.”³⁶ The Jews of the individual counties usually had 3–12 days to relocate to the designated areas. In some places, however, they were only given a mere matter of hours for this purpose. For instance, in Munkács the officials decided on a strict limit of 10 hours. The procedures began in Munkács at 4:30 AM. The gendarmerie chased the local Jews from their beds and beat them up on the way to the ghetto.³⁷

Most ghettos had a prescribed limitation on how much luggage could be brought along. In practice there were differences between the individual ghettos, as was true with regards to whether a ghetto was open or completely isolated.

33 Ibid.

34 Csósz, “Tettesek, szemtanúk, áldozatok,” 79.

35 Letter from May 19, 1944, Hungarian Jewish Archives D 6/2.

36 Szita, *Verschleppt, verhungert, vernichtet*, 21. The *Sondereinsatzkommando*, made up of around 150–200 men, was in charge of deporting Hungarian Jews. Zoltán Vági claims this number also included secretaries and chauffeurs. Cf. Zoltán Vági, “Endre László politikai pályája 1919–1945” (PhD diss., Eötvös Loránd University Budapest, 2003), 150 f.

37 See the protocol with Ms. N.J., recorded on July 16, 1945, DEGOB 1533.

In some ghettos, especially those in the annexed territories, the ghetto residents possessed only the garments they wore on their bodies. In other ghettos, the Jews were allowed to bring along as many belongings as they were able to carry into the ghetto. This was the case in Debrecen,³⁸ for example, where the county prefect at first rejected such a proposal from the mayor, maintaining that it would amount to “sanatorium accommodation.”³⁹ In some villages Jews were even allowed to bring furniture into the ghetto.⁴⁰ In general, however, only 50 kg worth of luggage was permitted.

As a consequence of the hasty creation of the ghettos, many areas of daily life were only provisionally organized. The living conditions were especially atrocious in the ghettos and collection camps in the annexed territories, where the percentage of destitute Jews was higher than in the core parts of the country and the transitional character of the ghettos and camps was the most blatantly obvious. In some cases, the Jews in these ghettos had to live out in the open, and the severe lack of water made the situation arduous. In a letter to Bishop László Ravasz dated May 5, 1944, the notary public in Marosvásárhely bemoaned the conditions in which the Jewish residents were housed next to an abandoned brick factory:

There were only three or four rooms available, full of shattered windows, and there was little more than a few open sheds. This means the huge group [of Jews, note R.F.] is forced to camp outside, exposed to the elements. They are not even provided with basic sanitary facilities. There is a lack of toilets and drinkable water, and the food supply does not work yet. Infants, small children, and the aged are left out in the windy, cold nights with no roof over their heads (completely unprotected).⁴¹

In the Munkács ghetto there were no bathing facilities either, and the inhabitants had to wash themselves in a nearby swamp.⁴² Moreover, many ghettos had an inadequate supply of food and medication. Although most

38 See the protocol with Ms. L.S. from November 3, 1945, DEGOB 3490.

39 Hajdú-Bihar Country Archives, Debrecen, IV.B. 1406.b., box 365, 21.838/1944.

40 Hence, the Jewish families of Celldömölk were each allowed to take along a wardrobe and a table into the Jánosháza ghetto. Residents of the Keszthely ghetto were allowed to bring beds and chairs. See the daily report from Celldömölk from May 17, 1944 and in Keszthely, reprinted in: *Gettómagyarország*, ed. Molnár and Frojimovics, 61 and 87.

41 Ráday Archives, A-1-c Elnöki iratok 1944.

42 See the protocol with Ms. N.J., recorded on July 16, 1945, DEGOB 1533.

ghettos had a communal kitchen, there was very little in the way of food or ingredients on hand. Many people were reliant on the food rations they had brought along. One survivor of the Huszt ghetto concluded that “[t]here was, indeed, a communal kitchen in the ghetto, but whoever relied on that could just go ahead and starve.”⁴³ The Orthodox Jews in the Carpathian-Ukraine and in northeastern Hungary were hit especially hard by the supply problem. The Hungarian authorities began rounding up Jews in this region on April 16, 1944, the final day of Pesach. Because the religious Jews were minding the Jewish laws of not storing any leavened foods at this time, the Orthodox Jews, as a result, had no bread rations to take with them to the ghetto. This had massive consequences for the food situation in these ghettos.

Most ghettos were fenced in and put under outside surveillance by policemen or the gendarmerie.⁴⁴ Ghetto life was organized by a local Jewish Council.⁴⁵ In addition, numerous ghettos had a ghetto police. Ghetto residents relied not only on the institutional structures provided.⁴⁶ They also organized aspects of communal and daily life on their own. In her journal, Éva Heyman described the Nagyvárád ghetto thus:

We chose Marica’s mother, Aunt Klári Kecskeméti, to be in charge of the inhabitants of our room. Everybody has to obey her. In the dark she gave a speech, and even though I was almost asleep, I understood that we all have to take care that everything is kept clean, because that is very important, and that we all have to think of one another, since all the people in the room are relatives and friends.⁴⁷

43 See the protocol with Ms. F.B. w.Y. (most likely in the summer of 1945), DEGOB 2800.

44 The gendarmerie was responsible for maintaining civil order outside the cities, whereas the police was in charge in the cities.

45 About the Hungarian Jewish Council see a.o. Judit Molnár, “The Foundation and Activities of the Hungarian Jewish Council, March 20 – July 7, 1944” *Yad Vashem Studies* 30 (2002), accessed October 15, 2015, http://www1.yadvashem.org/download/about_holocaust/studies/molnar.PDF and *Gettómagyarország*, ed. Molnár and Frojimovics.

46 See the camp order in the Kassa collection camp from April 24, 1944, Nógrád Country Archives XV. 24. 9.

47 Diary entry from May 5, 1944 in: Éva Heyman, *The Diary of Éva Heyman* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1974), 89. Please note if using this source that the original diary is not available, so the extent to which Éva’s mother intervened editorially in the diary’s publication is unclear.

House Commanders, in charge of orderliness, cleanliness, and discipline, were elected in many other ghettos too.⁴⁸ Understandably, the internal administrative structure was most developed in the “Large” Ghetto in Budapest, which existed for seven weeks (the longest time among Hungarian ghettos). The ghetto was divided into ten districts, each of which was headed by a district leader who in turn was supported by a deputy. They were appointed by the Jewish Council and they were responsible for providing ghetto residents with food, organizing the fire response unit, leading a registration system, holding judicial powers, and being responsible for children who were living without their parents in the ghetto. Additionally, there was a Postal Service, which, because of organizational challenges, was able to process very few letters. Within each district, every building had a “building commander.” Apartments had an “apartment commander.” Order in the “Large” Ghetto was upheld by a ghetto police, the most important task of which was to prevent the theft of food and heating material.⁴⁹

In general, the Hungarian ghetto inhabitants were mostly children, adolescents, older people, sick people, and women, because most Jewish men had been called to serve in the Hungarian labor service before and during the process of ghettoization.⁵⁰ According to a report from Kisvárdá, “55 percent of the people currently in the ghetto are women over 40 years old. The rest are children and elderly people; young men are not to be found at home, or only to a very minor extent.”⁵¹

In the cramped quarters of the ghetto, social and religious tensions flared up between rich and poor, young and old, and religious and secular Jews. Despite numerous difficulties, efforts were still made to follow religious commandments and maintain religious customs. Religious issues were crucial, especially in the ghettos in the annexed territories, where the number of strictly traditional, Orthodox Jews was relatively high. However, even in the core parts of the country conflicts erupted between Orthodox Jews and Neolog Jews, as well as between those who had converted to Christianity but were regarded by the authorities as Jews according to the anti-Jewish laws. A survivor of the Szolnok

48 See the daily report from the Kisvárdá ghetto from May 8, 1944, reprinted in: *Gettómagyarország*, ed. Molnár and Frojimovics, 91.

49 Cf. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, vol. 2, 856–58.

50 Thus, when deportations commenced, labor service, which had already claimed the lives of many men before the German occupation, in some instances became a lifesaver.

51 Report from Kisvárdá on May 8, 1944, MZSL D 8/1.

ghetto recalled an example of such a conflict on his first Shabbat in the ghetto, where attempts were made to organize the event in a former outdoor kitchen, but the required separation of men and women was not feasible. The conservative community argued that people should try to make the best out of the situation and pray together, but the ultra-Orthodox men left the room on the grounds that Jewish commandments were absolute and must be obeyed regardless of the circumstances.⁵²

Even cooking together could lead to disagreements. A Debrecen ghetto survivor recalled how the ultra-Orthodox families would not cook in the communal kitchens because they were not kosher.⁵³ Consequently, some ghettos arranged their own kosher kitchens.⁵⁴ The differences were often exacerbated in the ghettos when high-profile Jews (members of the Jewish Council, doctors, or pharmacists) received better accommodations or were housed in a separate ghetto.

*“The ghetto became the police’s favorite activity.” *Suffering Violence in the Ghetto**

Not only were the general conditions in the ghettos and collection camps in the first ghettoization zones often more disastrous than in parts of post-Trianon Hungary, in many instances, the police also treated the ghettoized population more callously. After the war, a survivor from the Mátészalka ghetto remembered: “They punched one fellow, because his yellow star wasn’t sewn on properly, and they beat another, because he had his hands in his pockets. They found mistakes all the time.”⁵⁵ Often, the men and, eventually, women too were given meaningless work simply to keep them busy. In one instance, they had to dig pits and later fill them back in.

Beatings were a daily routine in the Munkács ghetto, too:

The ghetto became the police’s favorite activity. They entered whenever they felt like it and roughed us up. Sometimes, they would take us to

52 Cited in: Agnes Kadar, “Historical Position of the Hungarian Jewry and Untold Ghetto Accounts,” in *Life in the Ghettos during the Holocaust*, ed. Eric J. Sterling (New York: Syracuse, 2005), 50.

53 Cf. *Ibid.*, 55.

54 See, for example, the Szarvas und Tiszafüred ghettos, Daily report from the Szarvas ghetto on May 23, 1944 and from the Tiszafüred ghetto on May 14, 1944, reprinted in: *Gettómagyarország*, ed. Molnár and Frojimovics, 128 and 139.

55 See the protocol with Ms. R.N., taken on July 14, 1945, DEGOB 1781.

the river and force us to get in, to make a header. Obviously, it was no big deal for the young lads, but they made the old and sick people do the same thing.⁵⁶

Orthodox Jews, who notably stood out in the crowd because of their appearance, seem to have suffered an especially high number of acts of violence. For instance, there were countless attacks on strictly religious Jews in the Munkács ghetto. One survivor reported that Orthodox men were repeatedly abused on their way home after evening prayer.⁵⁷ Many survivors remembered what was called “Black Saturday” in the Munkács ghetto. As the ghetto’s Orthodox men made their way to the synagogue early in the morning, they were intercepted by Germans, who took 200 of them off to work. The men were forced to remove doors from houses, carry out all of the objects that were in the synagogue, and then wash the floor of the synagogue with the tallit. The Germans severely abused them the whole time.⁵⁸ A female eyewitness remembered: “On this day, they gathered all the Jewish men and boys, took them to the synagogue, and had them disassemble all the seating and furniture with their bare hands—without any tools. And they were forced to chant Jewish prayers at the same time.”⁵⁹ The degree of the cruelty of the gendarmes and the police often depended on whether they had had any social relationships with Jews before ghettoization. The local policeman and gendarmes who knew some of the Jews tended to help out or behave more neutrally. Commando units from other localities carried out their tasks with more merciless severity.⁶⁰

Many survivors vividly recalled the vicious interrogations conducted by the gendarmes and the acts of torture that were used in order to gain information about hidden valuables. Jews who were considered wealthy were interrogated with exceptional violence, as noted in a Salgótarján ghetto report received by the Jewish Council in June 1944:

It has been reported that during the night of May 31 in the Salgótarján community, several affluent Jews were investigated in the main school building. Their inspection began with the most abominable savageries.

56 See the protocol with Mr. M.J., taken on August 7, 1945, DEGOB 2234.

57 See the protocol with Ms. F.T., taken on June 22, 1945, DEGOB 123.

58 See the protocol with Ms. B.B. und Ms. B.J., taken on July 13, 1945, DEGOB 1459; as well as the protocol with Ms. N.J., taken on July 16, 1945, DEGOB 1533.

59 Protocol with Ms. N.J., taken on July 16, 1945, DEGOB 1533.

60 Csósz, “Tettesek, szemtanúk, áldozatok,” 101.

50 gendarmes from other communities questioned men and women. They broke their bones, forced them to take off their shoes, punched them on their barefoot soles, and pierced them with needles, all to extort confessions whether they'd concealed any assets with certain Christians.⁶¹

Women were subjected to humiliating strip searches in the course of which midwives probed all bodily cavities in search of cached goods. The procedure was traumatizing for many women: "Personally, I have never felt such panic as I did in those artillery barracks. I was always afraid there before hand and knew it was my turn to be brought into the torture chamber."⁶² Several people actually died as a result of the brutal interrogations.⁶³ The surge in brutal treatment made daily life in the ghettos significantly more burdensome.

There were also raids in the course of which the few possessions of the ghetto residents were looted by gendarmes, police officers, or other non-Jews. In a unique way, the diary of 13-year-old Éva Heyman illustrates the increasing decline of living conditions in the ghetto. The quiet optimism expressed in her first journal entry⁶⁴ was soon replaced with fear and despair concerning the situation:

I have no idea how things are going to be now. Every time I think: This is the end, things couldn't possibly be worse, and then I find out that it's always possible for everything to get worse, and even much much worse. Until now we had food, and now there won't be anything to eat. At least we were able to walk around inside the Ghetto, and now we won't be able to leave our house. Every child could wash up in warm water in the bathtub, and now they've taken the wood from the basement, and we won't be able to heat water to wash in any more. (...) Until now Mariska [the family's gentile housekeeper, note R.F.], was even able to come to us and we always had food, and now I really don't know what we're going to eat.⁶⁵

61 Report from the Salgótarján ghetto from June 12, 1944, Hungarian Jewish Archives D 8/1.

62 See the protocol with Ms. SZ.E., taken on November 15, 1945, DEGOB 3543.

63 See, for instance, the protocol with Ms. K.M. and Ms. H.J., taken on July 20, 1945, DEGOB 1743: "The wealthier people were summoned daily by the police. They were interrogated by means of beating and torture to confess where they'd hidden any assets. Several died as a result of these interrogations [...]"

64 "I cuddled up with Marica and the two of us—believe or not, dear diary—were happy. Strange as it seems, everybody belonging to us was here together with us, everybody in the world whom we loved." Diary entry from May 5, 1944, Heyman, *The Diary of Éva Heyman*, 88 f.

65 Diary entry from May 10, 1944, *ibid.*, 90 f.

As portrayed in this diary, many factors contributed to the worsening of the general situation in the ghetto. In many places, the already difficult living conditions in the ghetto deteriorated further, particularly as a consequence of the ongoing raids by the gendarmes. In the Kassa ghetto, for example, according to a survivor's report she was to bring with her two pieces of clothing, a pair of shoes, two weeks' worth of groceries, two blankets, and two pillows.⁶⁶ Most of these items, however, were taken by gendarmes in the course of "house searches," after which only a few articles of clothing were left for the ghetto inhabitants.⁶⁷ Even in the Kaposvár ghetto, where the Jews were permitted to bring an unlimited amount of their property with them, there was a rampage that began on June 5, 1944. Over the course of several days, a group of about 25 men captured furniture, carpets, clothing, and other assets.⁶⁸

The rising number of people being sent into the ghetto aggravated the situation further, leading to overcrowding. In some towns, the ghetto area was even reduced after the authorities or individuals laid claim to buildings located in the ghetto areas.⁶⁹ Furthermore, permission to leave the ghettos was increasingly restricted in many cases. Reports sent from the Gyöngyös ghetto are, therefore, typical of many ghettos:

After the first two weeks, the situation in the ghetto has deteriorated drastically. Unless the errand is absolutely justified, exiting the ghetto has been banned completely. They have taken away all money over 50 Pengő from everyone's money supply. They have taken away all extra clothes and underwear. There is undeniably a shortage of food.⁷⁰

The approximately 70,000 residents of the "Large" Ghetto in Budapest, established in November 1944, were not spared violent assaults either. Reports sent to the Budapest Jewish Council describe single acts of repeated violence being carried out. For example, the Council received reports on December 16 from several House Commanders:

66 See the protocol with Ms. F.M. und Ms. F.B., taken on June 22, 1945, DEGOB 84.

67 Ibid.

68 See the protocol with Ms. SZ.E., taken on November 15, 1945, DEGOB 3543.

69 See, for example, the Bajna ghetto, where the hospital and nursing home were reintegrated from the ghetto, as desired by the German military. See the daily report from the Baja ghetto from May 25, 1944, reprinted in: *Gettómagyarország*, ed. Molnár and Frojimovics, 51.

70 Daily report from May 31, 1944 from the Gyöngyös ghetto, reprinted in: *Gettómagyarország*, ed. Molnár and Frojimovics, 74.

Several apartments in the building at 10 Rumbach Street were robbed on the night of November 13, and three armed men stole cash (3,500 Pengő), etc. and have taken wedding rings. The same robbers struck again the night of November 15 and stole money and other valuables from other apartments. [...] The night of the 15th, the apartment at 11 Kazinczy Street, first floor, door one, was robbed of money and clothes by two thugs. [...] On the 16th, several members of the Arrow Cross showed up in uniform at 30 Klauzal Street and seized money, medicine, and clothing.⁷¹

In addition to the numerous raids, there were incidents of sexual assault, abductions, and arbitrary shootings of Jews in Budapest. Thousands were shot while outside the ghetto⁷² or massacred in attacks on Jewish hospitals located on the ghetto's periphery by members of the Arrow Cross,⁷³ many of whom were no more than 15 years of age.⁷⁴

Jews who considered themselves successfully assimilated into Hungarian society experienced the harsh treatment in the ghettos as a profound identity crisis. Many well-assimilated Hungarian Jews lived in post-Trianon Hungary, and they had been confident for a long time that the conservative-aristocratic leadership of Hungary would protect them from expulsion or mistreatment.⁷⁵ They were proven wrong by the willing collaboration of the Hungarian authorities, the brutality of the gendarmerie, and the widespread apathy of the population concerning the subsequent deportations: "The local Christian population looked on with laughter at our disparagement, and even today, I cannot forget that," summed up one survivor after the war.⁷⁶

Thus, persecution signified a rupture of national identity for many. Especially affected were members of the middle class, often converts who possessed little to no Jewish identity and believed themselves to have successfully integrated into

71 Report from December 16, 1944, HDKE, 2011.398.10.

72 The Hungarian historian Krisztián Ungváry mentions 2,600-3,600 people shot along the banks of the Danube River. Cf. Krisztián Ungváry, *The Siege of Budapest: One Hundred Days in World War II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 290.

73 Cf. the massacres in the hospitals in the Maros street and in the Városmajor street. Regina Fritz, "Gewalterfahrung verarbeiten: Kontextbezogene Berichte von Budapester Juden über Pfeilkreuzlermassaker," in *Krieg, Erinnerung, Geschichtswissenschaft*, ed. Siegfried Mattl, Gerhard Botz, Stefan Karner, and Helmut Konrad (Vienna: Böhlau, 2009).

74 See Gerlach and Aly, *Das letzte Kapitel*, 369.

75 Randolph L. Braham, "Rettungsaktionen: Mythos und Realität," in *Ungarn und der Holocaust. Kollaboration, Rettung und Trauma*, ed. Brigitte Mihok (Berlin: Metropol, 2005), 17 f.

76 Protocol with Mr. G.E., taken on June 23, 1945, DEGOB 90.

Hungarian society. Again and again, survivors recalled comrades who assumed that they had somehow been imprisoned by mistake and refused to accept the fact that in the eyes of the state they were Jewish. Ibolya G., who had been raised in the Christian faith, consulted a priest in a desperate letter from May 1944: “Frankly, I could never have imagined that something like this could happen. I still can’t comprehend it, but if that’s just the way it is, why does it concern me, even though I’ve never had anything to do with Jews?”⁷⁷

A “Closed Society”? Relations with the “Outside World”

Although the living conditions declined in many ghettos, there were also ghettos in which the situation improved with progressive strides for a certain time. This was the case primarily in ghettos in which the initial situation was especially appalling. In some such cases, the ghetto administration was able to devise institutions which regulated supplies. But other factors could also lead to improvements in some ghettos, especially if there were possibilities to be in contact with the outside world. Although most ghettos were fenced in, not all of them were hermetically sealed. In many ghettos, residents were permitted to leave at certain times. In some ghettos younger men and women were even assigned work, such as in the Tab ghetto:

Everyone 50 years of age or younger had to work. We were assigned to agricultural or construction work. We even built the Levente Home.⁷⁸ [...] We were put up at jobs in the various pastures nearby. We worked from Monday morning until Saturday evening, and on Saturday we returned home by car in the evening. The work was hard, but we were not so badly off. The supplies were generally very good in the farm yards.⁷⁹

The same sentiment was echoed by the notary in the Tab ghetto, Endre Kovács, who made the following observations after the city’s liberation by the Soviet army:

77 Letter from Ibolya G. to the priest Dr. Sándor N., from May 10, 1944, Ráday Archive, A-1-b Püspöki iratok 1944.

78 A document from June 22, 1944 also refers to the construction of the Levente Home: “they [the Jews, note R.F.] are employed in small groups, mainly to build the Levente Home in Tab,” Somogy County Archive, Tab 8285/1944, cited in Sándor Bősze, “Zsidósors Tabon 1944-ben,” in *Tabi Kikötő* (Tab: Tabi Polgármesteri Hivatal, 2000).

79 Protocol with S.R., taken on July 27, 1945, DEGOB 2830.

After the ghetto's establishment, I asked permission from the county notary Nádasdy if they [the Jewish ghetto inhabitants, note R.F.] might be used in the fieldwork. I received the directive that yes, under observation, this would be okay, because there was a shortage of workers, and manpower was necessary. In response, I assigned the Tab landowner Zénó Welscherscheimb, landowner Gusztáv Götzen, and other landowning Jews, including myself, to agricultural work [...].⁸⁰

As demonstrated by this statement, ghetto inhabitants were exploited for labor due to the general scarcity of workers during the war. Many mayors and officials, therefore, believed that closing the ghettos completely was problematic, because the war economy would thereby lose a valuable workforce. Most people in the ghettos were apparently sent to do agricultural work. Some of them worked for the military⁸¹ or were kept busy in mines. The working conditions in the individual workplaces varied greatly. In some places, workers were treated well and taken care of, while in other places, workers were regularly mistreated and beaten. Getting an opportunity to work outside the ghetto thus had its dangers and advantages. For example, it was a means of smuggling food into the ghetto and thereby improving one's own circumstances.⁸² Occasionally, survivors could even recall that workers were paid in cash, such as in the Pécs ghetto, where workers were assigned to forestry tasks. They received 4.60 Pengő per day, while the women who worked in the garden nursery got 3.60 Pengő.⁸³ Money on the other hand could be used to purchase groceries at a public market.

Work could also give some moral support and help people win back a sense of dignity. Many people felt that the hours of idle waiting were especially excruciating because they tended to make a person feel completely useless. A survivor from the Budapest ghetto recounted: "I didn't want just to vegetate there [in the ghetto, remark R.F.] and stare at all the indignity, so I volunteered for kitchen work, because they said young people can join in, as there were

80 Protocol of district notary Endre Kovács from September 6, 1944 regarding the complaint filed against him, Somogy County Archives, Tab 7447/1944, cited by Bősze, "Zsidósors Tabon."

81 This is how the Jewish men of Huszt were put to work building a highway and fortification. In Szécsény, except for those under 14 years of age and the elderly, all others were forced to work in a military depot. See the daily report from the Huszt ghetto on May 3, 1944 and from the Szécsény ghetto from May 19, 1944, reprinted in: *Géttómagyarország*, ed. Molnár and Frojimovics, 80 and 134.

82 For instance, opportunities to work outside the ghetto improved the situation in the Kassa ghetto. See the daily report from the Kassa ghetto from May 9, 1944, reprinted in: *Géttómagyarország*, ed. Molnár and Frojimovics, 84.

83 See the daily report from the Pécs ghetto from May 26, 1944, reprinted in: *Géttómagyarország*, ed. Molnár and Frojimovics, 119.

already enough older folks. I signed myself up right away, and I was so glad to be able to work from morning until afternoon [...].”⁸⁴ Some people hoped that by working, they would draw attention to their own economic usefulness, and some believed they might, in this way, escape deportation.

It is noteworthy that in some places Jews were allowed to continue practicing their original professions, indicating the urgent need for their expertise. This was most evident in the medical profession. Specifically, city governments consented to allowing many Jewish doctors and pharmacists to continue practicing, as British historian Tim Cole illustrated with an example in the Körmend ghetto.⁸⁵ The Jewish doctor there was allowed to leave the ghetto each day to visit his patients, despite the fact that Jews had been officially prohibited from treating non-Jewish patients. Nonetheless, due to the insufficient number of non-Jewish professionals, the latter regulation was often disregarded. After all, Jewish doctors made up the majority of the medical profession in Hungary.

There were other examples of professional continuities too. In Körmend, for instance, a plumber and an electrician were allowed to keep pursuing their professions.⁸⁶ In the city of Békéscsaba, even the bank manager left the ghetto on a daily basis to keep doing his work.⁸⁷ A letter from the Miskolc ghetto refers to a parallel situation: “I have approval to go to the studio every day as long as I am able to carry out my trade. For my lunch, I send someone to the ghetto, and I only go back home to the ghetto in the evening.”⁸⁸

Leaving the ghetto was a privilege also granted to members of the Jewish Council. Furthermore, in many ghettos people were named who exited the ghetto daily at officially regulated times to purchase food at the public market. Therefore, the conclusion drawn by Christoph Dieckmann and Babette Quinkert applied in the case of Hungary. According to Dieckmann and Quinkert, “a hermeneutical sealing off and sweeping surveillance [...] [of the ghetto, note R.F.] were not the rule.”⁸⁹ The “openness” of many ghettos resulted in numerous encounters

84 Interview with Lóránt Istvánné, February–March 2004, Interviewer: Anna Földvári, accessed October 16, 2015, <http://www.centropa.hu/object.93cd65e0-af5c-4ec1-b641-1141de5fca23.ivy?full=true>.

85 In some villages, doctors and pharmacists were even allowed to stay in their own homes and didn't have to move into the ghetto, like in Kaposvár. See the daily report from the Ghetto Kaposvár from May 14, 1944, reprinted in: *Géttómagyarország*, ed. Molnár and Frojimovics, 85.

86 See Cole, “Building and Breaching the Ghetto Boundary.”

87 See the protocol with Ms. E.K., taken on September 14, 1945, DEGOB 3216.

88 Letter from May 19, 1944, Hungarian Jewish Archives D 6/2.

89 Christoph Dieckmann, Babette Quinkert, “Einleitung,” in *Im Ghetto 1939–1945. Neue Forschungen zu Alltag und Umfeld*, ed. Christoph Dieckmann and Babette Quinkert (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009), 15.

between Jews and non-Jews which continued to take place even following the establishment of the ghettos. Accordingly, the Jewish involuntary community in the Hungarian ghettos cannot be considered an entirely closed society.

Jews and non-Jews continued to come into contact after the ghettoization of the former also because in some ghettos the local non-Jewish population was permitted to continue living in homes within ghetto boundaries. Furthermore, in many ghettos residents were allowed to receive letters and packages, and non-Jewish workers continued to have access to and come into the ghetto. Such workers included debt collectors, chimney sweeps, plumbers, construction workers, and those responsible for reading gas, water, and electricity meters.⁹⁰

In a few cases, non-Jewish acquaintances were allowed to enter the ghetto, such as in Jászberény and Sepsiszentgyörgy.⁹¹ Thus, many Hungarian ghettos were unusually permeable and offered time and time again possibilities for interactions between Jews and non-Jews, as well as the chance to smuggle food into the ghettos. In many ghettos, non-Jewish sellers offered their wares to ghetto dwellers in front of the ghetto gate up until May and June of 1944, when regulations were tightened to restrict such exchange.⁹²

Though there was a chance in many ghettos to maintain contact with the non-Jewish population, it was not always possible to take advantage of these opportunities. Ultimately, the non-Jewish population was not always friendly to the involuntary community of ghettoized Jews, nor were they always willing to help.

In fact, a segment of the Hungarian population benefited from ghettoization, as demonstrated by historians Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági.⁹³ The economic

90 See the ghetto order from the Szombathely ghetto from May 16, 1944, reprinted in: *Források a szombathelyi gettó történetéhez. 1944. április 15. – 1944. július 30.*, comp. László Mayer (Szombathely: Vas Megyei Levéltár, 1994), 34.

91 For the former, see Csósz, “Tettesek, szemtanúk, áldozatok,” 88. For the latter, see the daily report from the Sepsiszentgyörgy ghetto from May 31, 1944, reprinted in: *Gettómagyarország*, ed. Molnár and Frojimovics, 125.

92 There were, however, counterexamples. In the Szolnok ghetto, the chief of police forbade visits and the sending or receiving of letters. In the Aknaszlatina ghetto, going out into the street or leaving one’s courtyard was prohibited. Contact with the “outside world” gradually became restricted over time in most of the ghettos. Also, the number of people allowed to leave or enter the ghetto decreased. E.g. stricter ghetto regulations adopted on June 1, 1944 forbade anyone from leaving the Szombathely ghetto. Even people who previously had been allowed to visit public markets to purchase food were no longer allowed out. Cf. the ghetto regulation for the Szombathely ghetto from June 1, 1944, reprinted in: *Források a szombathelyi gettó történetéhez*, 52.

93 Cf. primarily Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági, *Self-financing Genocide: The Gold Train, the Becher Case and the Wealth of Hungarian Jews* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004) as well as Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági, *Hullarablás. A magyar zsidók gazdasági megsemmisítése* (Budapest: Jaffa, 2005).

marginalization and subsequent deportation of 5 to 6 percent of the population facilitated the division of 20–25 percent of the entire population’s assets.⁹⁴ The Hungarian government was keen to take advantage (i.e. possession) of “Jewish wealth” to stabilize the Hungarian economy.⁹⁵ Meanwhile, by means of break-ins, the occupation of apartments, or other methods, substantial parts of the population grabbed assets. The failure of carefully planned government organization structures led to a chaotic rush by people in local administrations, members of the organs of German occupation, and private individuals to fill their own pockets.⁹⁶ As illustrated above, exploitation continued in the ghettos as well. Some individuals even tried using official channels to obtain Jewish assets. On May 30, 1944, the newspaper *Dunántúli Hétfő* reported:

What an unbelievable commotion at the housing office, and how much they’ve disturbed the housing department officials in their work with all these personal appointments and telephone queries! Everyone wanted to get their apartment at the same time. They had their eyes on a certain apartment and a few days’ delay was already a ‘scandal’ in one applicant’s opinion.⁹⁷

Generally, the “Jewish properties” were first handed over to people whose homes were located within the ghetto boundaries. To appease the complaints regarding evictions, the authorities promised these people bigger and better apartments. Countless apartments were also given to military personnel, police, and administrative officials. Thus, ghettoization and deportation provided material benefits to a segment of the Hungarian gentile population.⁹⁸ A survivor commented:

94 Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági, “Theorie und Praxis. Die ökonomische Vernichtung der ungarischen Juden,” in *Ungarn und der Holocaust. Kollaboration, Rettung und Trauma*, ed. Brigitte Mihok (Berlin: Metropol, 2005), 56. About the problems regarding the contemporary statistics and the handling of them see the discussion between Dániel Bolgár and Krisztián Ungváry. Cf. also Dániel Bolgár, *Asszimiláció és integráció a modern Magyarországon* (PhD diss., Eötvös Loránd University, 2014).

95 See also Anders Blomqvist in this issue.

96 See Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági, “Racionális’ népirtás Magyarországon,” *Budapesti Könyvszemle* 2 (2003).

97 *Források a szombathelyi gettó történetéhez*, 51.

98 Cf. Tim Cole, “Ebenen der ‘Kollaboration.’ Ungarn 1944,” in *Kooperation und Verbrechen. Formen der ‘Kollaboration’ im östlichen Europa 1939–1945*, ed. Christoph Dieckmann, Barbette Quinkert, and Tatjana Tönsmeier (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003), 73. See also Tim Cole, “Writing ‘Bystanders’ into Holocaust History in More Active Ways: ‘Non-Jewish’ Engagement with Ghettoisation, Hungary 1944,” *Holocaust Studies* 11 (2005): 1.

The non-Jewish people responded with glee to every decree passed, because they were getting closer to their goal: appropriating Jewish assets. One example was the master baker named J.B. I had not even walked through the door frame when he showed up immediately and moved into my house right before my very eyes.⁹⁹

Humiliation, theft, and active collaboration were everyday practice. Nevertheless, indifference seems to have been the most widespread reaction to ghettoization. Survivors of the Munkács ghetto reported: “We didn’t notice that the Christians behaved especially hostilely towards us. You could even say they were indifferent and couldn’t be bothered to notice us.”¹⁰⁰

Individual gentiles sometimes reacted empathetically and offered their help (especially to friends and acquaintances). There were constant reports in the press at the time according to which non-Jewish people were smuggling food into the ghettos. Correspondingly, survivors also testified, for instance in the Ungvár ghetto, about how non-Jews brought bread and milk into the ghetto.¹⁰¹ Occasionally, there were also efforts to hide Jews, but these attempts were mostly to save friends or relatives, and when discovered by the authorities, such acts were severely punished.

Although the possibility to profit from the deportations increased the general acceptance of the radical anti-Jewish policies, as soon as the predicted economic upswing failed to materialize, there was quick social disappointment. In fact, conditions deteriorated in some sectors, such as in the case of healthcare or the procurement of general supplies, because so many doctors, pharmacists, producers, and consumers had been deported. The ever heavier allied bombing also made it more and more obvious to people that the war had been lost. Thus, many gentiles witnessed the radicalization of persecution with unease.¹⁰² Edmund Veessenmayer reported to the Foreign Office already before ghettoisation:

Although the Hungarian authorities are diligently trying to be convincing, the people do not completely agree with how the Jews are treated by the Germans, it must be noted on the part of the Einsatzkommando that the action taken against the affluent Jews repeatedly triggers many remarks of approval from the Hungarians. There is, however, no understanding from the population for the sporadically occurring

99 Protocol with Mr. K.A., taken on June 22, 1945, DEGOB 91.

100 Protocol with Ms. S.O., Ms. S.H. and Ms. J.H., taken on June 24, 1945, DEGOB 132.

101 See the protocol with Ms. G.R., taken on August 6, 1945, DEGOB 3313.

102 See Csósz, “Tettesek, szenttanúk, áldozatok,” 127.

public mistreatment of Jews or the unauthorized clearing out of Jewish shops by members of German military organizations. In these instances, they [the general public] exhibit immediate compassion for the *poor* Jews [italics in original, note R.F.]¹⁰³

The Arrow Cross's public acts of violence in the Hungarian capital in October 1944, including the shooting of Jews along the banks of the Danube River, eventually led more people to contribute to relief actions.¹⁰⁴

Escape, Religious Conversion, Suicide

To avoid deportation, some Jewish men and women decided to flee, convert, or commit suicide. The overall number of people who escaped was quite low, even though every opportunity to leave the ghetto amounted to a chance to escape. Many people mentioned contemplating escape in their recollections, but they eventually decided against it, often out of consideration for their families. There are numerous claims in the DEGOB protocols resembling the following excerpt: "Several people had fled the ghetto, and I, too, wanted to escape, but out of consideration for my parents, I distanced myself from that plan."¹⁰⁵

Those living along the Romanian–Hungarian border were most likely to attempt to escape, taking advantage of the chance to flee into Romania, but many such attempts failed partially due to lack of support from the non-Jewish population. Many Jews who tried to escape or hide were denounced by gentiles and arrested: "Many tried to hide out in the bunkers in the mountains, and if they were not driven out again by hunger, then they were exposed immediately by the Christians."¹⁰⁶

When faced with ghettoization, M.L., a 19-year-old mechanic living in Uglya, tried to hide in a nearby forest:

103 Political Archive of the Foreign Office R 29793.

104 Randolph L. Braham estimates the number of converted Jews in Budapest at 25,000. Cf. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide. The Holocaust in Hungary. Condensed Edition*, 252.

105 See the protocol with Ms. E.K., taken on September 14, 1945, DEGOB 3216. See also Mr. S.Á.'s story: "I don't know of any escape, although there were opportunities, especially for those who worked in the city. I also considered fleeing, but my mother begged me to stay." Recorded on June 25, 1945, DEGOB 139.

106 Protocol with Ms. S.R., Ms. L.S., Ms. L.M., Ms. L.M., Ms. A.L., Ms. A.T., Ms. A.S. and Ms. A.R., taken on June 21, 1945, DEGOB 129.

I managed to conceal myself for a considerable length of time, but ultimately, the Swabian farmer K.J. discovered and then betrayed me. The police soon came to fetch me and take me to the Nyíregyháza collection camp, where I stayed for 2 1/2 weeks. Afterwards, they loaded me into a train and sent me to Auschwitz.¹⁰⁷

Some Jews also tried hiding somewhere in the ghetto to avoid deportation. In the ghettos of Nagyvárad, Kassa, and Munkács, authorities discovered people who were still in hiding in the ghetto two weeks after the deportations,¹⁰⁸ as mentioned in a related telegram from Edmund Veessenmayer:

According to a report from the Cluj/Klausenburg KDS, 28 Polish Jews hiding in burrows in the woods of Tiszabogdany were arrested by the Hungarian gendarmerie. 2 of the Jews had guns with them. Furthermore, 15 Jews were discovered in a basement in the former ghetto of Grosswardein, where they had immured themselves. In the Munkács ghetto, 11 Jews who'd cached securities and gold items totaling a value of 150,000 Pengő were also arrested. Recently, in Kaschau, 30 to 40 Jews who had also tried to hide were arrested and will join the next transport.¹⁰⁹

Several Jews tried to save their families and themselves by using false papers and making bribes. Many considered traveling to Budapest and going undercover in the big city, but these efforts were complicated by regulations denying Jews an official license to travel.¹¹⁰

Convinced it would spare them from being deported, many Jews chose to convert. Hopelessness and disillusionment drove many people to take their own lives. For instance, the Székesfehérvár ghetto announced that there had been several suicides, mostly among people who had converted from Judaism decades earlier.¹¹¹ Likewise, the landowner S.G., who had joined the Reformed Church in 1920, shot herself on the day she was ordered into the Tab ghetto.¹¹²

107 Protocol with Mr. M.L., taken on July 7, 1945, DEGOB 844.

108 See Csősz, "Tettesek, szemtanúk, áldozatok," 142.

109 Telegram from Veessenmayer to Karl Ritter from July 20, 1944, Nürnberg State Archives, NG-5613.

110 Some traveled from the capital to their hometowns in the province so as not to be separated from their families by the ghettoization policies.

111 See the protocol with Ms. L.F., w.Y. (probably summer of 1945), taken on June 24, 1945, DEGOB 2788.

112 Report from the Balatonboglár gendarmerie about the suicide of S.G., July 5, 1944, Somogy County Archive, 4002/1944, cited by Bősz, "Zsidósors Tabon."

Inhabitants in some ghettos tried to find a way to delay their deportation or even stop it altogether.¹¹³ People who had survived the Aknaszlatina ghetto reported: “We wanted to trigger a typhus epidemic so they wouldn’t be able to take us away. We did this by drinking black coffee with salt, which made us feverish. This is how we managed to defer our deportation for two weeks.”¹¹⁴ The Aknaszlatina ghetto inhabitants were only able to delay their deportation, but in the end could not prevent it. On May 20 and 23, 1944, they were sent to the Birkenau camp.¹¹⁵

The Dissolution of the Ghettos

On May 30, 1944 Éva Heyman noted in her diary:

The people of Block One were taken away yesterday. All of them had to be in their houses in the afternoon. We’ve been locked up in here a long time, but now even those with special passes aren’t allowed to go out any more. We even know already that we can take along one knapsack for every two persons. It is forbidden to put in it more than one change of underwear; no bedding. Rumor has it that food is allowed, but who has any food left? The gendarmes took everybody’s food away when they took ours. It is so quiet you can hear a fly buzz. Nobody cries [...] Dear diary, everybody says we’re going to stay in Hungary; the Jews from all over the country are being brought to the Lake Balaton area and we are going to work there. But I don’t believe it. That train-wagon is probably awful, and now nobody says that we’re being taken away, but that they are deporting us.¹¹⁶

Éva Heyman’s diary ends with this entry. On June 3, she was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where she was murdered on October 17.

The collections camp, where the Jewish population from the ghettos outside the capital was resettled, was the last stop before deportation from Hungary:

113 See as example the story of survivors from the Munkács ghetto: “In general, there was a confident assumption that the Russians were already in Kőrösmező. We didn’t believe that they would be able to take us out of the country.” Protocol with Ms. S.O., Ms. S.H. and Ms. J.H., taken on June 24, 1945, DEGOB 132.

114 Protocol with Ms. S.R., Ms. L.S., Ms. L.M., Ms. L.M., Ms. A.L., Ms. A.T., Ms. A.S. and Ms. A.R., taken on June 21, 1945, DEGOB 129.

115 See Braham, ed., *The Geographical Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*.

116 Diary entry from May 30, 1944, in Heyman, *The Diary of Éva Heyman*, 103.

We had been in the ghetto for four weeks. One morning at 7 o'clock, the police rammed in the doors with the butts of their rifles, stormed in the homes, and chased everyone outside. After forcing the people out and literally tearing adults and children from their beds, they beat them like horses. This was the most horrible part of the whole deportation. The Germans struck the same way, going house to house, and together with the gendarmerie, they drove us all to the marketplace, where we stood in rows of five. Then, we made our way to the brickyard.¹¹⁷

The mass deportations in Hungary began on May 14, 1944.¹¹⁸ By early July 1944, 437,400 people had been deported. The Budapest Rescue Committee bought the freedom of approximately 1,700 prisoners who were subsequently transported to Switzerland. 18,000 Hungarian Jews were sent to the Vienna region to do forced labor. However, the majority of the deportees (about 320,000) were killed in gas chambers shortly after their arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau, for instance Olga and Ilona Iczkovics, whom I cited at the beginning of this essay. Before their departure from the Beregszász ghetto, they had hidden their handwritten letter to their brother Elemér with a request for whoever discovered it to forward it to Elemér. As a gesture of gratitude, they had enclosed an earring and a ring. "Dear Stranger," they wrote in an accompanying note, "I beg you, please do not tear up this letter for my brother Elemér Ickovics (he is now on the Eastern front, and his camp number is K673). Instead, please make sure this letter together with the two notes get to him once he's come back home. Otherwise, please return the letter to its hiding place, keeping the earring and ring for yourself."¹¹⁹ Elemér probably never received the letter from his sisters. He never returned from the labor service, and a central database of Shoah victims categorizes him as disappeared. 28-year-old Olga and 26-year-old Ilona, together with their 49-year-old mother, Etel, never returned from deportation either. They are considered missing since their arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau on June 1, 1944. They were most likely selected immediately for murder in one of the gas chambers upon their arrival or died within a few days or months from malnutrition or disease.

After the deportations in the spring and summer of 1944, the only ghetto remaining on Hungarian territory was in Budapest, where the Jewish population

117 Protocol with Ms. B.B. and Ms. B.J., taken on July 13, 1945, DEGOB 1459.

118 The first transports departed on April 29 from the Kistarcsa camp and on April 30 from Topolya to Auschwitz.

119 HDKE 2011.917.1.

lived in yellow houses and later in the “Large” or “International” Ghetto. The “Large” Ghetto was liberated by Soviet troops on January 17 and 18, 1945. The conditions in the ghetto had already deteriorated drastically a few days earlier as a result of Soviet troops having surrounded the city. The journal of Erzsébet Fóti offers a moving description of this. On January 14, 1945, she was transferred from a protected house into the ghetto. Two days later she wrote:

Today I got a slice of bread and a little jam. We had a horrible night because of the heavy bombing, such as we’ve never experienced before. The windows in every room were broken, and we were all lying on the ground. My hair is lice-infested. There’s no water. We each receive a milk bottle full of water each day, and that is supposed to be enough, and for washing, too!

The next day, she continued: “Today a fight broke out in the street nearby. There are fights again on Wesselényi Street. Many people have been shot. There is nothing to eat. I am going crazy with hunger. Hungry. Hungry. I’m cold. I can’t write anymore, nor can I even feel my fingers.”¹²⁰

Conclusion

As Tim Cole remarked in one of his essays, “Although the ghettoization of Hungarian Jews in 1944 can be seen as the implementation of policies of ‘concentration,’ there are significant differences in experiences of ghettoization *between* Hungary and other nations in East Central Europe as well as *within* Hungary and *within* individual cities in Hungary.”¹²¹ With particular clarity, the survivors’ recollections and contemporary reports portray the divergent situations in the Hungarian ghettos. The situation in each ghetto depended on a variety of factors, such as the type and place of accommodation, the amount of food rations brought along and the behavior of the police. The living conditions not only varied from ghetto to ghetto, but also in one and the same ghetto the situation could deteriorate or improve by and by.

The Hungarian administration not only had a significant impact on the living conditions, but could even prevent ghettoization in some places, such as in Hódmezővásárhely. But instead of trying to deescalate the situation, many mayors

120 HDKE 2011.50.1.

121 Cole, “Multiple and Changing Experiences of Ghettoization,” 146.

and prefects endorsed more extreme policies. Officials, gendarmes and police who acted more mildly were repeatedly denounced and often suspended.¹²² For instance, prefect Lajos Bessenyei demanded that the more moderate mayor of Debrecen, Sándor Kölcsey, resign after the May 8, 1944 meeting concerning the ghettoization of the local Jewish population. In a confidential letter to Kölcsey, the prefect told him that his resignation would be initiated “for fundamental reasons which must not be ignored,” but Kölcsey would be allowed to resign voluntarily. A few days later, the local press reported on Kölcsey’s decision to retire.¹²³

Overall, in most cases the living conditions in the ghettos in the annexed territories were strikingly worse than the condition in the ghettos in the heartland. In these parts of the country, which were less developed than the territories in Trianon Hungary, the administration and the gendarmerie both carried out policies in a much more extreme manner. Because these ghettos were the first to be established, they were more significantly affected by the chaos and lack of structure.

The opportunity to interact with the “outside world” could significantly improve living conditions. It is worth noting that the establishment of the ghettos did not mean an interruption in economic and social relations between Jews and non-Jews. Interaction with the “outside world” remained very much possible. It is thus necessary to revise the notion of the ghetto as an area of complete isolation. Ghettos did not amount to parallel societies. Moreover, in some cases, professional continuities were apparent even post-ghettoization. Thus, the Hungarian government’s intention to exclude Jews from the Hungarian economy was not fully realized until the deportations. Although the Holocaust in Hungary was motivated not only ideologically but also economically, the concept of “work” provides a perfect example of the clash between anti-Semitic ideology and economic pragmatism. It is precisely this contradiction that may have influenced a substantial number of Hungarian Jews to doubt the threat of deportation. There were rumors in many ghettos that ghetto residents would be sent to do agricultural labor. Names of different towns circulated as possible destinations which without exception were within Hungary.

122 See Csősz, “Tettesek, szemtanúk, áldozatok,” 97f. and 121f.

123 Cf. Csősz and Fritz, “Ein Protokoll.” See also Zoltán Vági, László Csősz, and Gábor Kádár, *The Holocaust in Hungary. Evolution of a Genocide* (Washington D.C.: AltaMira Press, 2013), 85–87.

Overall, the living conditions people endured in the weeks immediately prior to their deportation sometimes made the difference between life and death when they arrived at the railway platforms of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

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