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The Tale of the Jew

The Codes of Post-World War Two Antisemitism in Hungary (1944–1946)

Abstract

This article focuses on the themes and tropes of the antisemitic imagination in the immediate post-World War Two period in Hungary. It argues that, during this period, the notion of the “Jew” represented a malleable identity that encapsulated qualities and modes of behaviour which industrial and agricultural workers attached to the definitions of their alleged enemies. The article first explores how debates of property restitution framed the struggle for material survival in the countryside as an essentially Christian-Jewish conflict and, hence, affirmed the idea of discernible “Jewish” interests and a “Jewish” social class. Second, it follows the perceptions of material conflicts and interprets the rumours against surviving Jewish communities which were accused of kidnapping Christian children to allegedly make sausages out of them, which was the most common form of antisemitic accusation during the immediate post-war months. Second, the article argues that these accusations framed by notions of food and nutrition were tales that metaphorically encapsulated popular perceptions of the Jews. The Jews in these stories acted as shortcuts to the broader social category of privileged and better-off groups. Third, the article highlights how the belief that Jews were wealthier than others had been crafted in the interwar period and particularly during the war. As the article points out, the politics of discrimination were stimulated by a desire to discover and acquire “Jewish wealth”, which was a central theme of the contemporary antisemitic imagination. Nonetheless, as the article argues, “Jewish wealth” was the product of ghettoisation and of institutionalised robbery, which garnered petty property from deported Jewish citizens together and, thus, rendered the previously only imaginary “Jewish treasures” visible.

Introduction

“We’re taking the black-marketer to the resort of Tapolca to show him to the Jews who are on holiday there.”¹ So recalled the lynchers at a police station a few weeks after they had beaten to death their victim, a mill owner in the northern Hungarian city of Miskolc, and seriously wounded another one, on 30 July 1946. Antisemitic vocabulary was an important part of the language of the workers’ riots which erupted in Hungary in the first two years after the end of World War Two and culminated in a sequence of anti-Jewish atrocities in the spring and summer of 1946. Factory Communist Party leaders reporting on the demonstration of 10 May 1946 in the large steel and machine factory in Diósgyőr, an industrial district of the city of Miskolc, were alarmed to hear antisemitic shouts from the crowd.² Three months later,

- 1 Indictment. The Case of Alfréd Dudás and Co. Budapest City Archives, BFL 4260/1946, 22. Lajos Varga’s confession. Miskolc, 22 August 1946. BFL 4260/1946, 512.
- 2 Report of the Hungarian Communist Party, Branch of Újdiósgyőr. Újdiósgyőr, 20 January 1946 and 28 May 1946. National Archives of Hungary County Archives of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, MNL BAZML X 5. 5. d. 63. f. 16. óe., 202.

workers at the ironworks explained their planned demonstration on 30 July as “going to Miskolc for two Jews”.³ For many, the two Miskolc mill owners, Sándor Rejtő and Ernő Jungreis, were really two “Jews”. According to his own testimony given at the police station, one of the workers asked his colleagues in the factory the day after the lynching “whether it was true that the two black-marketing Jews had been beaten to death”.⁴ It is clear that Rejtő and Jungreis were identified by their “Jewish” identity in the conversation. The narrator did not know the names of the victims: “some mill owners”, he recalled.⁵

The antisemitic language known and used by a large part of Hungarian society did not suddenly become a thing of the past after the war. It was noticeable among industrial workers in Budapest⁶ and in the countryside, and no less so among the peasants of the Southern Great Plain (*Alföld*). The Janus-faced policy of the Communist Party leadership, which hoped to give credibility to a class-warrior language and win votes among the radicalised industrial and agricultural workers by denouncing the “Jewish” capitalists, also gave space to antisemitic language. It lived on as well in the radical petit bourgeois language of the National Peasants’ Party and in the occasional anti-communist vocabulary of “Judeo-Bolshevism”.⁷

The reinvigoration of antisemitism was visible throughout Europe immediately after World War Two. Violence against surviving Jewish communities escalated in late 1945 and 1946 in Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary. Antisemitic rhetoric that had accompanied previous atrocities appeared elsewhere in the region, even in places where there had been no comparable series of violence, such as in Romania or Ukraine.⁸ There were also many visible signs of resurgent antisemitism in post-1945 Britain, France, and Austria. According to contemporary surveys, a third of French citizens did not believe that Jews could be good citizens of the Republic, and the Austrian authorities explicitly encouraged the emigration of Jews and were hostile to their claims for reparations.⁹ Whilst such antisemitic language had continuities with preceding periods, particularly the extreme anti-Jewish campaigns of the 1930s and 1940s, it also entailed new elements. This article, using empirical cases from Hungary, maps the transformations of antisemitic rhetoric in the immediate post-war years, focusing on the popular imagination detectable in the local press and legal cases. It explores how the category of “the Jews” helped industrial and agricultural workers make sense of the divisions in post-war society between the rich and the poor, workers and non-workers, or the privileged and the underprivileged. The article argues that, in the antisemitic language of the post-war period, and unlike the quintessential racist antisemitism before and during the war, Jews were a malleable category defined not necessarily by ethnic or religious roots, but were in many ways instead understood as a chosen social and political identity.

3 Zoltán Horváth’s confession. Miskolc, 12 August 1946. BFL 4260/1946, 312–313.

4 Lajos Tóth jr’s confession. Miskolc, 24 August 1946. BFL 4260/1946, 562.

5 András Hornyánszky’s confession. Miskolc, 24 August 1946. BFL 4260/1946, 561.

6 See the reports of the political police made in factories in Budapest. Records of the Political Department of the Hungarian State Police. ÁBTL 1.1.5. d. 10th district folder.

7 Éva Standeisky, *Antiszeizmusok* [Antisemitisms] (Budapest: Argumentum, 2007), 15–16, 35–38, 131–138; Viktor Karády, *Túlélők és újrakezdők. Fejezetek a magyar zsidóság szociológiájából 1945 után* [Survivors and New Beginners: Chapters in the Sociology of Hungarian Jews after 1945] (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő, 2002), 35–46; Róbert Szabó, *A kommunista párt és a zsidóság Magyarországon (1945–1956)* [The Communist Party and the Jews in Hungary (1945–1956)] (Budapest: Windsor, 1995), 117–122.

8 Péter Apor et al., “Post-World War II Anti-Semitic Pogroms in East and East Central Europe: Collective Violence and Popular Culture,” *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire* 26, no. 6 (2019): 913–927.

9 Robert S. Wistrich, “Anti-Semitism in Europe Since the Holocaust,” *The American Jewish Year Book* 93 (1993): 6–8.

The idea of who a Jew was, was constructed and understood within a set of social and political processes. In 1945 and 1946, the “Jew” as a social category helped to understand the political cleavages in local communities: the rapid rise of new and often dominant Communist organisations and their apparently privileged positions in controlling institutions and resources. Political divisions did not represent the most pressing concern for everyone and they were not the most important factor that spurred the antisemitic imagination. Jews appeared most frequently as part of a strange sequence of folkloric tales about Christian children kidnapped and processed into meat products. Such folk horror stories voiced the understanding of a deep social and cultural division between Jews and Christians. The notion that society was divided between Jews and Christians was largely the outcome of property restitution processes that involved deported Jewish individuals and communities which survived the Holocaust, and their neighbours not affected by anti-Jewish persecution. The disparate categories of Jews and Christians helped also to conceive the inequalities and imbalances of food supply and the emerging black market. The seamless identification of Jews with illegal wealth was also the direct consequence of antisemitic legislation and Nazi practice before and during the war. This was a practice that framed working class politics and interests in an antisemitic language and, thus, rendered Jews as a social category defined by the ignorance, abandonment, and betrayal of the interests and community of the working population. An idea of Jews was thus constructed as a way to signal enemies of given communities. Nonetheless, these hostile Jews were not to be recognised by immutable features endemic to religion or race. On the contrary, actually committed deeds that were perceived as endangering given communities could reveal who a hostile Jew was. Jews, therefore, represented an elastic social identity which was the outcome of particular positions actively taken in a variety of social conflicts.

Jewish Communities in Hungary in 1945 and 1946

By the end of World War Two, more than half of the roughly 480,000-strong Hungarian Jewish community (the figures apply to the territory of the post-1945 Hungarian state) had been killed. The figures represented a more dramatic loss in the provinces where, unlike in the capital, Jewish residents almost without exception had been deported to concentration camps by June 1944. Only approximately one quarter of the Jewish population outside of Budapest survived the Holocaust. Most of the approximately 80,000 to 85,000 Holocaust survivors, including former inmates of concentration camps and those who survived military labour service, returned to Hungary by the end of December 1945. They, together with the roughly 120,000 survivors preponderantly in the Budapest ghetto, formed the Jewish community of post-1945 Hungary.¹⁰

The post-Holocaust Jewish community of Hungary represented an extremely urbanised population that lived mostly in Budapest and its surroundings.¹¹ It was a community of poverty: during the war, Jewish citizens had been deprived of their

10 Tamás Stark, *Zsidóság a vészidőszakban és a felszabadulás után 1939–1955* [Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust and after the Second World War, 1939–1949] (Budapest: MTA TTI, 1995), 41–54.

11 Viktor Karády, “Szociológiai kísérlet a magyar zsidóság 1945 és 1956 közötti helyzetének elemzésére” [A Sociological Attempt to Assess the Conditions of Hungarian Jewry between 1945 and 1956], in *Zsidóság az 1945 utáni Magyarországon* [Jews in Hungary after 1945], eds. Viktor Karády et al. (Paris: Magyar Füzetek, 1984), 61–71.

property and, thus, often of their means of living. Survivors, who returned with barely anything, often had difficulties in finding shelter, food, or jobs. The Jews of Hungary in 1945 were also a severely traumatised community: whilst in the capital there were no families without a member lost, in the provinces there were no families that survived intact. A particularly painful loss for the dismembered families was the missing generation of children who perished in the Holocaust in larger numbers than other generational cohorts. Many of the surviving children were orphans who suffered from grave psychological traumas of loss, including regression and the inability to feel pleasure. The inability of equally traumatised adults to provide emotional support exacerbated the sense of alienation of these children and hampered their chances for smooth social integration.¹² In 1945 and 1946, therefore, the most pressing issue of the Jewish community in the country was to provide support and care for the survivors. The assistance of the American Joint Distribution Committee was critical for the surviving Jewish community of Hungary. The Joint operated a network of homes for children and the elderly and regularly distributed aid in money and in kind from early 1945 onwards. In addition, from March 1945, the Israelite Congregation of Pest (*Pesti Izraelita Hitközség*) and the National Office of the Israelites of Hungary (*Magyar Izraeliták Országos Irodája*) appealed to the new Hungarian government to help organise the transportation and medical treatment of the deportees and to act rapidly with the restitution of rights and property.

The post-World War Two Hungarian government was a coalition of the centrist Smallholders' Party and a bloc of the political left consisting of the Communist, Social Democratic, and National Peasant parties. Although the majority of voters supported the Smallholders from which, hence, came the prime minister, the Communists enjoyed the backing of the Soviet military command and were able to secure critical positions in the government, including by controlling the Ministry of Interior and political police. The new government was unanimous in publicly condemning antisemitism and in restoring citizenship and property rights for the victims of the Holocaust. Nonetheless, the government was unable to remedy quickly the hardships of general privation and the specific troubles related to confiscated Jewish property. The Hungarian economy was in a miserable state in 1944 and 1945. Most of the means of production, such as machines and work stock, had been looted by the retreating German troops or destroyed in fighting. Important parts of the transportation infrastructure, such as railways, roads, and bridges, were in ruins, and most of them were unusable. Practically, neither capital nor credit was available.¹³

Surviving Jewish citizens began to rebuild community life in a range of areas. The reopening of schools and the establishment of new religious ones were often given priority. Schools, and especially religious ones, were seen as the institutions for the reinvigoration of cultural traditions, which many Jewish citizens hoped to return to following their homecoming. The preservation and teaching of cultural traditions were reckoned as the means of keeping Jewish communities alive. Specific Jewish

12 Viktória Bányai and Eszter Gombocz, "A traumafeldolgozás útjain. Holokauszt-túlélő gyerekek Magyarországon, 1945–49" [Working Off Trauma: Holocaust Survivor Children in Hungary], *Regio* 24, no. 2 (2016): 31–48.

13 Zoltán Kaposi, *Magyarország gazdaságtörténete 1700–2000* [An Economic History of Hungary 1700–2000] (Budapest and Pécs: Dialóg Campus, 2002), 324; Iván Pető and Sándor Szakács, *A hazai gazdaság négy évtizedének története 1945–1985* [A History of Four Decades of Hungarian Economy 1945–1985]. Vol 1: Az újjáépítés és a tervutasításos irányítás időszaka 1945–1968 [The Period of Reconstruction and Command Economy 1945–1968] (Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1985), 19; Iván T. Berend, *A szocialista gazdaság története Magyarországon 1945–1968* [The History of Socialist Economy in Hungary 1945–1968] (Budapest: Kossuth, 1976), 11.

children's homes for orphans were founded after 1945, and bringing surviving Jewish children who had been hidden by Christian families back to Jewish families and institutions was attempted. The sense of a need for shoring up the pillars of Jewish identity was conducive to the strengthening of cultural and in some cases political nationalism. The young generation especially was prone to Zionism, and Zionist movements and organisations enjoyed growing membership after 1945.¹⁴ In some cases, nationalism entailed the severing of ties with Hungary and the search for a new homeland in Palestine. Nevertheless, emigration remained low profile: up to March 1946, only 5,000 to 6,000 Jewish persons left Hungary for the Middle East.¹⁵ A more typical route in an attempt to leave the Holocaust behind was the increasing politicisation of Jewish citizens after 1945. Holocaust survivors played a particularly prominent role in the tiny urbanite liberal parties, the Hungarian Radical Party (*Magyar Radikális Párt*) and the Civic Democratic Party (*Polgári Demokrata Párt*). More importantly, however, Jews, unlike before World War Two, chose in great numbers membership in leftist political organisations, the Social Democratic and the Communist Parties, where they often represented the most active groups.

Antisemitism and Political Anxieties

On the night of 29 August 1945, political investigators saw homemade posters reproduced by hand printing in five locations in the city of Szeged, including on a building adjacent to the political police station. The latter banner read: "Brother, do you know that behind democracy lies the Jew?"¹⁶ In late September, the police station received reports of a large number of antisemitic leaflets. These leaflets were, as the mood reports stressed, clearly pro-German, anti-Soviet, and anti-communist in tone. They praised Hitler and the death camps and blamed the financial policies of the "Jews" for the runaway prices. According to the political police, these leaflets directly linked Jews and communists ("Intellectuals! The Communists are putting Jews in the top jobs instead of Hungarians!") and Jews and the Soviets ("The Communists and Jews have sold our country to the Russian bandits!").¹⁷ Some reports linked the growing antisemitism to an alleged "Jewish revenge". The police captain of Szolnok reported in late 1945 that "antisemitism has been rife lately. Certain Jewish elements and groups are desperate to get revenge for past injuries to their fellow Jews. They are not afraid to use unjust and, in many cases, brutal means."¹⁸

As soon as the war was coming to an end, many in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland, Romania, and Hungary, began to fear an alleged Jewish revenge. Such anxieties implied more than the concerns of those who had acquired Jewish property or were implicated in crimes. These anxieties implied even more than the general fear among societies that returning Jews, who many non-Jews feared considered national societies collectively responsible for the Jews' fate in the Holocaust, now sought to violently settle scores. In Poland, Romania, and Hungary, many feared that the advance of the Soviet Red Army forebode the imposition of communism, which many

14 Attila Novák, *Átmenetben: A cionista mozgalom négy éve Magyarországon (1945–1948)* [In Transition: Four Years of the Zionist Movement in Hungary (1945–1948)] (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 2000), 46.

15 Kinga Frojimovics, "A Bricha kezdetei Magyarországon (1945 nyara–1946 márciusa)" [The Beginnings of Bricha in Hungary (Summer 1945–March 1946)], *Korunk* 26, no. 5 (2015): 63–65.

16 I. K., Mood Report. Szeged, 31 August 1945. ÁBTL 1.1.3. d. folder 22, 68, 73.

17 I. K., Mood Report. Szeged, 30 September 1945. ÁBTL 1.1.3. d. folder 22, 85–88.

18 Lajos Polónyi Szűcs, Situation Report. Szolnok, 22 August 1945. Records of the Political Department of the Hungarian State Police Department of Szolnok County. ÁBTL 1.1.3. d. folder 19, 34.

simply associated with “Jewish rule”. The spectacular rise of previously unknown communist political leaders of Jewish background, such as the leader of the Polish secret police Jakub Berman, Romanian foreign minister Ana Pauker, or the Hungarian secretary general Mátyás Rákosi, into prominent positions in the political life of the nation affirmed fears of Judeo-Bolshevism. In these countries, public propaganda before and during the war was saturated with images of a “Jewish world conspiracy” that secretly advanced communist parties and instructed them to wage a war for global domination.¹⁹ The reinvigoration of such myths of “Jewish communism” helped make sense of the unpredictability and uncertainty of the forthcoming political changes, the political and social inequalities, and the anticipated Jewish privileges that these changes inferred.

The parties of the political left, and especially the Communists, who had been illegal in the interwar period, had obtained antifascist credentials, which clearly appealed to surviving Jews after 1945. The Communists, who had difficulties in recruiting in 1945, were also willing to accept Jews, who provided a cohort of unquestionably trustful antifascist cadres. For some of the survivors, and particularly for those who joined the political police, this proffered the opportunity to actively engage in the hunting down of war criminals and perpetrators of the Hungarian Holocaust and, sometimes, to revenge their own suffering. Nonetheless, on a broader level, membership in the Communist Party offered the chance to wield political power, engage in the construction of a new world free of antisemitism and ethnic discrimination, and replace a former cultural Jewish identity with a non-Jewish and de-ethnicised political one.²⁰

In this context, Communist politicians had to balance very carefully between the struggle to contain antisemitism and the effort to refute accusations that they were privileging Jews and, thus, to confute implications of Judeo-Bolshevism. The Communists in Szeged became concerned about the antisemitic atmosphere in the city’s factories.²¹ They reported that “antisemitism could not yet be eradicated here”.²² Communist Party activists also demanded the removal of the yellow stars still visible on the walls of the former Szeged ghetto.²³ At the same time, “communists of Jewish origin” working in the Szeged party organisation issued a memorandum condemning Zionism as a fascist movement for, in their view, emphasising Jewish separatism.²⁴ This was also referred to by the Communist Party member from Szeged who proposed to the party the recall of a Communist of Jewish origin who had been nominated for membership of the People’s Court. In a letter to the party organisation, he explained that, although he personally was not antisemitic, the people of Szeged were, and in this situation they would see the revenge of the Jewish People’s Court in the sentences handed down to Christian workers.²⁵

19 Paul Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism* (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 166–182.

20 Karády, “Szociológiai,” 110–153.

21 Minutes of the meeting of the Hungarian Communist Party Greater Szeged Commission. 22 May 1946. MNL CSML Szeged XXXIII. 3. 25. f. 7. őe., 6.

22 HCP Szeged branch Department of Organization: Report to the HCP CC Department of Organization. 25 June 1946. MNL CSML Szeged XXXIII. 3. 25. f. 22. őe., 29.

23 HCP Szeged branch Department of Public Administration: Proposal. 23 June 1945. MNL CSML Szeged XXXIII. 3. 25. f. 69. őe., 4.

24 Memorandum. Szeged, 30 June 1945. MNL CSML Szeged XXXIII 3. 25. f. 67. őe., 15.

25 József Pajzicz. Letter. Szeged, 28 February 1945. MNL CSML Szeged XXXIII 3. 25. f. 67. őe.

Property Relations and Social Categories

Whilst the language of Judeo-Bolshevism described the alleged Jewish privileges in an outright political terminology, it was also a shortcut to voice broader social and cultural concerns of alleged Jewish domination. Even if its political vocabulary did not necessarily make sense to everyone, its broader implications that Jews were in some ways protected and privileged by the new political regime meant a reasonable experience for many in their daily lives. Material factors, particularly housing, were almost as important to beget a social division framed as a Jewish-non-Jewish opposition. Holocaust survivors all over Europe often discovered that their homes or business offices had been taken by someone else. Jewish property had been confiscated during the war with the help of the state and its institutions. In Poland, occupied by the Wehrmacht in 1939, confiscation was carried out by the Nazi authorities. In the German puppet state of independent Slovakia, the national government initiated the “Aryanisation” of property in 1939. Nevertheless, the beneficiaries of Aryanisation were often those local residents who occupied the businesses and houses of their former neighbours. Following the deportation of Jewish citizens, these same neighbours often simply looted or moved into these houses. By acquiring former Jewish property, most of the new owners significantly improved their material conditions and social status. Therefore, they were adamant in safeguarding such acquisitions and viewed the return of survivors with anxiety and fear.²⁶ Recrudescant antisemitism and the scarcity of housing were interlinked in Western Europe, too. In France, returning Holocaust survivors often found themselves competing for their former apartments with other groups in need, such as victims of bombing raids or prisoners of war. In some cases, former Jewish residents were received by a demonstrating crowd shouting antisemitic cries.²⁷

Nonetheless, as the Hungarian and Soviet cases evidence, conflicts over property and housing implied more than Jewish-non-Jewish competition and confrontation. In the Soviet Union, the serious damages to housing caused by bombings and artillery fire, which the massive evacuation of populations exacerbated, became conducive to a desperate competition for dwelling among various social groups, including the Soviet authorities, too.²⁸ In Hungary, due to the severe destruction of the housing stock, one of the most important social conflicts in the years following the war was housing, with people and groups from different backgrounds competing with each other, often using and abusing the authorities to redistribute housing.²⁹ As the Hungarian case illustrates, despite the complexity of housing conflicts, both the understanding of the authorities and of the local populations quickly relegated them to a Jewish-Christian confrontation.

Property restitution was one of the important issues in which Jewish survivors found themselves confronted with open hostility and often palpable antisemitic

26 Anna Cichopek-Gajraj, *Beyond Violence: Jewish Survivors in Poland and Slovakia 1944–1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 63–64.

27 Shannon L. Fogg, *Stealing Home: Looting, Restitution, and Reconstructing Jewish Lives in France, 1942–1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 62–71.

28 Tamás Kende, “Anti-Semitism and Inner Fronts in the USSR during World War II,” *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire* 26, no. 6 (2019): 968, 972.

29 Ágnes Nagy, *Harc a lakáshivatalban: politikai átalakulás és mindennapi érdekérvényesítés a fővárosban, 1945–1953* [Struggle in the Residence Office: Political Transformation and Everyday Lobbying in the Capital, 1945–1953] (Budapest: Korall Társadalomtörténeti Egyesület, 2013), 88–131, 142–195.

hatred.³⁰ In the village of Körösladány, Jewish citizens complained about the illegal and cynical attitude of local residents who auctioned off former Jewish property a few months after the Wehrmacht and the local pro-Nazi administration had left the settlement. Moreover, as they pointed out in their letter of January 1945, the local authorities had systematically refused to provide official assistance in the Jewish citizens' property disputes. The surviving Jewish citizens were bitter about the perceived public mood in the town: "[s]o far, we have been met with little support in this regard, but a lot of coldness, cant, and in many cases outright hostility".³¹

In Békéscsaba, the county seat, Adél Grósz, who was returning home to ask for the return of her brother's furniture, was refused with similar cynicism by the owner of the objects. One of the main organisers of working-class politics in Békéscsaba, Péter Kurunczi, who had originally been a cabinet maker and had become a member of the National Assembly as a member of the Social Democratic Party, claimed that he would only discuss the issue with the actual owner of the furniture, Adél's sister, Borbála Grósz, who had not yet returned home. Kurunczi, however, probably put the furniture up for sale shortly after the owners were deported.³² Yet, the failure to make reparations was not always due to malice. For Jewish citizens – as reported, for example, by the Szarvas municipal magistrate – there were regular difficulties in withdrawing their savings deposits, due to the lack of documents that had been confiscated from them during the deportations.³³ In other cases, such as in Gyoma in Békés County, refugees from the capital who also needed the support of the authorities were accommodated in the homes of many Jewish citizens.³⁴

The various local authorities were not united in their approach to the issue of property reparations for deported Jewish citizens. The success of reparations depended to a large extent on the local social embeddedness of each Jewish community, the lobbying capacity of the returnees, or other locally varying circumstances, such as the availability of housing and the number of needy persons. In many cases, the county authorities and local administrations made considerable efforts to provide justice to deported Jewish citizens and to restore property rights. In early 1945, the prefect of Békés County regularly instructed local administrative authorities to take measures to assist returning Jewish citizens, in particular to help them obtain access to their former properties. Various appeals to the population for the restitution or communal preservation of the property of Jewish citizens, and for the establishment of "Jewish councils" to control and manage restitution, were all part of these measures.³⁵ The council of Körösladány authorised the setting up of a "Jewish council" and assisted the survivors to go to collect their belongings, accompanied by a uniformed policeman and a member of the municipal council.³⁶ Nonetheless, even if

30 Borbála Klacsmann, "Abandoned, Confiscated, Stolen Properties: Jewish-Gentile Relations in Hungary as Reflected by Restitution Letters," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 23, no. 1–2 (2017): 133–148.

31 The letter of survivor labour servicemen to the Prefect of Békés county, Körösladány, 14 January 1945. Archives of Békés County. Records of the Prefect. BéML IV. B. 407. b. 481/1945.

32 Minutes. Békéscsaba, 25 September 1945. Complaints dedicated to the Békés county branch of the Hungarian Communist Party. MNL BéML XXXV 20. f. 13. óe., 90.

33 Returning Jews of Szarvas Have No Access to Their Money. Szarvas, 2 March 1945. K. Cseh, ed., *A Békés megyei zsidóság történetének levéltári forrásai. Dokumentumok a Békés Megyei Levéltárból* [Archival Sources for the History of the Jews of Békés County: Documents from the Archives of Békés County] (Gyula: Békés Megyei Levéltár, 2002), 433–434.

34 Jewish Department Sets Up in Gyoma. Gyoma, 22 January 1945. K. Cseh, *A Békés*, 432.

35 Letter of the Sub-Prefect of Békés County to the Village Council. Körösladány. N. d. BéML IV. B. 407. b.

36 Letter of the Village Council of Körösladány to the Sub-Prefect of Békés County. Körösladány, 8 February 1945. BéML IV. B. 407. b.

the local authorities hoped to restore rights – and thus order – their actions themselves contributed to the conflicts between “Jews” and “Hungarians”, as these legal and police measures portrayed “Jewish claimants” and “Jewish property” on the one hand, and “Christian” owners on the other. In this way, the serious conflicts of interest surrounding furniture, houses, and land could be seen as an essentially “Jewish-Christian” confrontation.

Anti-Jewish Folklore and the Transformation of Blood Libel

In local communities, the Jewish survivors were often relegated to one of the two parties in a much more complicated, but in many ways rational, system of social competition for material property. The antisemitic imagination, however, also feared that in the new sociopolitical circumstances of 1945 and 1946, the “Jew” was able to grow into a more profound irrational source of danger menacing the body and souls of others. The bizarre stories about the Jews that began to emerge in the Hungarian countryside in the spring of 1946 captured the experiences of unequal access to food by often alluding to conventional tropes of antisemitic folklore, such as ritual murder and the cannibal Jew. The urban and rural working classes especially understood social cleavages in terms of such folklore. In April, a man was arrested in the town of Baja in southern Hungary for telling in company that

in Budapest, an unknown individual had given a letter to a little girl, asking her to take it to the house he had indicated, and had handed her one million pengős. The letter contained the following text: ‘Here I send you the veal’. The girl did not take the letter up to the marked house, but took it to her mother, who was suspicious of the letter. She opened it and took it to the police, who advised her to take the letter to the house indicated, whilst police officers would watch the house. When the child did not return after a certain time, the police entered the flat and found the girl in the bathroom with her neck cut. The owners of the apartment where the little girl was found were Jewish.³⁷

The strange tale – some versions of which included the child lying upside down in the bathtub – was circulated throughout the town in May.³⁸ At the beginning of May, the story, which had been heard in stairwells, during soccer games, and in shops, was expanded with new gruesome details: “[f]inally, they found her in a bathroom with her neck cut, her blood spilled, her neck cut with a ritual knife. Only Jews could have done this because they needed the girl’s blood for Passover rituals.”³⁹

The tale of the Jews who were allegedly kidnapping children was not specific to Baja. From the end of May 1946 onwards, the authorities ran into similar stories from time to time. Sometime between 18 and 20 May, an official from the town of Szentes told the municipal tax office what he had heard in the days before: “[t]here is a doctor here in town who came from Budapest, and he told me what happened to his little son”. The boy also went home with a letter from a stranger saying “[t]he goods have been bought”. According to this official, the police who raided the ad-

37 György Illés’s confession. Baja, 25 May 1946. Records of the Szeged People’s Court. The Case of Antal Hangya and Five Co. MNL CSML XXV 8. 39. d. Nb. 769/1946, 7.

38 Antal Hangya’s confession. Baja, 29 May 1946. Records of the Szeged People’s Court. The Case of Antal Hangya and Five Co. MNL CSML XXV 8. 39. d. Nb. 769/1946, 8.

39 Ernő Réti’s confession. Public hearing. Baja, 14 September 1946. Records of the Szeged People’s Court. The Case of Antal Hangya and Five Co. MNL CSML XXV 8. 39. d. Nb. 769/1946, 17.

dress provided found that “a Jewish company was processing the children who were sent there for salami. They defended themselves by saying that Christians did the same to Jews.”⁴⁰

One week earlier, an “old Jew”, the fifty-year-old Lajos Molnár, who had entered building 5/B., was beaten up on Illatos Street in Budapest, because the residents of the block considered him to be a child kidnapper.⁴¹ In the weeks before the fight, the residents of the building and the neighbourhood often spoke of Jews kidnapping children and turning them into sausages. After the war, the inhabitants of the three-block workers’ housing estate, or “The Mess”, as the area was popularly called, were easily mobilised as they were left in a more vulnerable and destitute situation than ever before. The housing estate had been built in the late 1930s on no-man’s land, and its residents lived in uncomfortable small flats and in a tight-knit community.⁴² “The children living in the house were always wandering around, stealing and there were many misfortunes”, testified one of the residents during the post-lynching trial.⁴³ The antisemitic language that was commonplace among the workers in the capital was also evident on Illatos Street: “[l]ook, they’re taking the Jew there, they beat him up because he lures the children and makes sausages out of them,” was how one resident was greeted when he returned home on the day of the fight.⁴⁴

Reading the rural press from the early summer of 1946, it would seem that eastern Hungary was flooded either with Jewish child murderers or with a mass of lunatics feeding on fantasies. By the beginning of June, journalists were no longer reporting isolated incidents, but a worrying spread of rumours. In Csanádpalota, there were stories about a Jewish doctor inoculating children with poison, in Debrecen about a child’s head being cut off in Jenő Friedländer’s cellar, in Tiszaladány about a child’s nail found in a sausage, and in Mezőkovácsháza again about Jews luring children into secret cellars and murdering them there.⁴⁵ In 1946, the People’s Court in Debrecen heard fourteen cases of circulators of rumours about ritual murders, the poisoning of children, and cannibal Jews, which were proliferating in the settlements of eastern Hungary.⁴⁶

The recurring elements – the letter received from a stranger, the processing into meat products, or even the motifs of the figures in the story, like the bearded Jew – suggest that these stories were not so much colourful, fabulous transcriptions of real events that had happened, but rather genuine tales: tales about Jews. These stories – the tales of the kosher butcher, the “butcher” – appeared as early as the second half of the nineteenth century and were about Jews coming out of the ghetto, with strange cloths and strange habits, taking the blood of virgins for matzah on Passover.⁴⁷ The

40 Minutes of Witness Confession. Szentes, Records of the Szeged People’s Court. The Criminal Case of Sándor Győri. MNL CSML XXV 8. 40. d. Nb. 817/1946.

41 Andrea Pető, “Népbíróság és vérvád az 1945 utáni Budapestben” [People’s Court and Blood Libel in Budapest after 1945], *Múltunk* 51, no. 1 (2006): 46–49.

42 Péter Ambrus, *A Dzsumbuj. Egy telep élete* [The Jumbuj: Life of a Colony] (Budapest: Magvető, 1988), 7–23, 37–47.

43 Mária Kiss’s (Mrs. József Szombati) confession. Minutes of the trial at the People’s Court. 7 February 1947. The Case of József Hanksz and Co. BFL XXV. 1. a. 1946–4479, 134.

44 Mrs. Vilmos Zsolnai’s confession. Minutes of the trial at the People’s Court. 21 May 1948. BFL XXV. 1. a. 1946–4479, 150.

45 Magyar Alföld, 4 June 1946, 2.

46 László Csász, “Tettesek, szemtanúk, áldozatok. A vészidőszak Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok megyében” [Perpetrators, Witnesses, Victims: The Shoah in Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County] (PhD diss., University of Szeged, 2010), 159.

47 Helmut Walser Smith, *The Butcher’s Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002), 62–64; György Kövér, *A tiszaezlári dráma. Társadalomtörténeti látások* [The Drama of Tiszaezlár: Perspectives in Social History] (Budapest, Osiris, 2011), 358–360, 378–379.

tales of ritual killings at the end of the nineteenth century articulated the social experience of Jews who lived on the periphery of peasant communities or brought new, uncertain elements into the traditional patriarchal system of hierarchies.⁴⁸ Local populations all over post-World War Two central and eastern Europe often accused their Jewish neighbours of kidnapping and murdering Christian children. In many cases, the rumours of the child murderer Jews provided the pretext for violent revolts. For example, in Poland, there were pogroms in Rzeszów, Kielce, and Cracow in the summer of 1946. In Slovakia, atrocities in Topolčany in the autumn of 1945 were committed by rioters who were infuriated by stories about missing children found dead in Jewish apartments or in synagogues.⁴⁹ In some cases, particularly in reoccupied Soviet territories, the accusations of ritual murder were completed with the element of processing children's bodies into sausages or meat pies. In the summer of 1945 in Lvov, which had been captured by the Soviets in July 1944, crowds gathered and insulted a few Jewish passers-by whilst accusing them of murdering Christian children and selling their meat at the market.⁵⁰

In Hungary, the antisemitic imagination and the adjacent crowd violence were dominated by the materialist images of "children's salami", while accusations of ritual murder were barely recorded. In the absence of such direct linkages, the tales of Jews murdering children are difficult to characterise as a simple recrudescence of traditional folk blood libel stories. The post-1945 tales of "children's sausages" were stories woven from the particular circumstances of the post-war world: the severe shortage of food and the grave concerns for survival. The Hungarian case suggests that the extremes of the chances for accessing food in the immediate post-World War Two years were more important in feeding the antisemitic categorisation of Jews. This connection is affirmed further through an understanding of the black market in the immediate post-1945 period.

The Black Market and Unjust Privileges

The fear of being deprived of food and, thus, of the chance for bare survival, which the tales of the cannibal Jew rendered tangible, were reified in the experiences of the black market in 1945 and 1946. The association of the Jews with the black market, which for many made sense of the extreme uneven access to goods, was one of the most powerful components of the antisemitic imagination all over central and eastern Europe in that period. In Slovakia, Jews were seen as the most typical of actors in the black market, and often as the monopolisers of specific areas of illicit commerce, such as textiles.⁵¹ In Romania, police reports regularly noted the common belief that Jews were preponderant among the actors in the black market. The Romanian Communist Party also reiterated similar complaints about the alleged links between Jews and speculation.⁵²

48 Eugene M. Avrutin, *The Velizh Affair: Blood Libel in A Russian Town* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 34–56.

49 Cichopek-Gajraj, *Beyond Violence*, 115–116, 118.

50 Elissa Bemporad, *Legacy of Blood: Jews, Pogroms, and Ritual Murder in the Lands of the Soviets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 130–131, 134.

51 Michala Lónčíková, "Atrocities in the Borderland: Anti-Semitic Violence in Eastern Slovakia (1945–1946)," *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 26, no. 6 (2019): 933.

52 Valentin Săndulescu, "Like Coals under Ashes, Ready to Scorch the Earth Once More: Notes Regarding Anti-Jewish Attitudes in Romania (1944–1947)," *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 26, no. 6 (2019): 984–985.

Similarly in Hungary, the political police associated the antisemitism generally found in political parties with the fact that their membership considered it scandalous that a part of the Jewish population, as they saw it, did not participate in the post-war reconstruction and productive work. Instead, police reports stressed, Jews were speculating and black-marketing and living off of the workers.⁵³ Many of the workers in the Diósgyőr ironworks saw a close connection between the black market and the “Jews”:

[t]here is a dangerous antisemitic wave spreading among the destitute. Even the workers’ parties are unable to quell this dangerous mood. There are few goods in the shops and too many shop assistants are making a living out of it – more than productive workers. This is no secret to the people. Speculation and bargaining have always been the profession of the Jews, and all the condemnation of the outrages in this field falls back upon them.⁵⁴

In the immediate post-World War Two period, prejudices about speculation and Jews obtained a new meaning, too. Antisemitic stories identified “Jews” as a privileged group that received more help from the authorities and politicians. “There is no freedom of the press, the Jews can write everything”, a student at a rally in Szeged in October 1945 exclaimed.⁵⁵ In May 1946, a guest at a swimming pool in Szeged compared the fate of death camp survivors with that of prisoners of war: “[t]oday’s system is very one-sided, because it only looks after the interests of the Jews, because if a Jew comes home from deportation, he has everything, he is helped with money, with everything, so that he immediately opens a shop in the town, and if a Christian soldier comes home, they are not taken into consideration”.⁵⁶ Many read, in fact, the alleged Jewish involvement in speculation and black-marketing as evidence that Jews were unjustly privileged by the new social and political order.

The notion of an intimate relationship between “Jews” and the black market was affirmed in several places and political fora. As early as May 1945, Sándor Nógrádi, a Central Committee member of the Communist Party and party secretary of the northeastern region, had already alluded to this when he made a speech condemning the black market at a party meeting in Diósgyőr, in which he stated that “no one of any race or creed in this country has the right to speculate on the hunger of the workers”. Nógrádi was careful to avoid getting into manifest antisemitic arguments and was quick to distinguish between “good” and “bad” Jews: the Jewish bigwig had no place in the new society, but the Jewish proletariat was supported by the new government, he explained.⁵⁷ Yet, the Communist politician indulged in some very strange reasoning. Whilst he did not claim that all Jews were in fact black-marketers, he did claim that the conditions offered by their “racial” or “religious” background allowed “Jews” to become black-marketers, that is, that they could all potentially become black-marketers. Names regularly published in articles in local left-wing newspapers about arrested black-marketers – such as the Miskolc produce merchant Samuel Weilmann, who bought illegally from the oil mill in Mezőnyárad,⁵⁸ the

53 Major General Ferenc Diczfalussy, Report. 25 February 1946. ÁBTL 1.1.4. d. folder 3, 7.

54 Police Lieutenant Colonel Ferenc Kiss, Head of the Department of Political Investigations, Mood Report. Miskolc, 14 November 1945. Political Department of the Hungarian State Police Department, ÁBTL 1.1.3. d. folder 19, Csanád, Borsod, Szabolcs. 5.

55 Géza Helmly’s confession. Szeged, 13 October 1945. Records of the Szeged People’s Court. The Criminal Case of Lajos Katona. MNL CSML XXV 8. 49. d. Nb. 115/1947, 13.

56 Etel Ördögh: Denunciation. Szeged, 20 May 1946. Records of the Szeged People’s Court. The Criminal Case of Mihály Sulyok. MNL CSML XXV 8. 45. d. Nb. 1033/1946. 3800/1946, 4.

57 Gábor Vajda, “Az árdrágítók ellen” [Against Sharks], *Szabad Magyarország*, 15 May 1945, 1.

58 *Szabad Magyarország*, 30 October 1945, 3.

trader Glattstein, who illegally acquired and stored public supply flour from the Mezőcsát mill,⁵⁹ or Simon Rosner and Izidor Wieder, who sold millions of kilos of poultry without a licence⁶⁰ – were tangible characters in the stories about the “black-marketer Jew”.

Left-wing politicians wrestling with the issue in the months after the war made very similar claims. On the one hand, they sought categorically to reject that black-marketing was “an issue of denomination” and to affirm to their readers that speculation – contrary to public opinion, which “blames our fellow Jews” for it – was not a Jewish specificity. On the other hand, they nevertheless, considered black market activity to be a specifically “Jewish” crime arising from the specific “Jewish” situation – the experience of the death camps. “[The] returnees should mourn like the others whose relatives were destroyed by fascism, loss will not be an excuse if they do not go to work but go black-marketing”, is what the Communist Party’s daily newspaper prescribed for the survivors.⁶¹ The Communists did not promise to be lenient in this case: “[h]owever, if there are those who see a greater opportunity in the black market, who want to trade [...] or [...] join a political party to [...] fill their greed [...]”, their party organisations would take harsh action against such people, they promised in a pamphlet.⁶²

The relationship of the Communists towards Jews was extremely intricate. The national leadership and the Budapest organisations, in which persons of Jewish background were prominent and Jews were also among the membership, carefully balanced between cutting short of political antisemitism and eschewing the image of privileging Jewish interests. These leaders routinely and harshly condemned antisemitism as the legacy of the Nazi and the bourgeois past, whilst making the same accusations against richer Jewish businessmen, often replicating pre-World War Two tropes of parasitic Jewish capital, even though inadvertently. The situation was different in the countryside. Whilst the connection between Jews and communists was ubiquitous in Budapest, it was nevertheless much less spectacular in the countryside. In the provinces and particularly in southern Hungary, local Communist cadres were recruited from poorer peasants and wage labourers with no Jewish background. In the provinces, where Jewish citizens had traditionally been shopkeepers and members of the liberal professions, returning Holocaust survivors started to work in commerce and public administration after the war and were reluctant to join political parties. Local Communist leaderships, who encountered Jewish individuals in shops and offices, but not in their political organisations, therefore had little reservation to allude to conventional antisemitic language in their rhetoric.

The Wealth of the Jews

The “Jew” who was wealthier than others and had made his (very rarely her) fortune out of illegal speculation had been a conventional trope of antisemitic folklore and political culture since the nineteenth century. In Hungary, the search for the treasures of the “Jews” began to become a tangible social and political programme at the end of that century. From the increasingly strong identification of successful entrepreneur-

⁵⁹ *Felvidéki Népszava*, 5 January 1946, 3.

⁶⁰ *Viharsarok*, 23 February 1946, 3.

⁶¹ József Fülöp, “Piros Pünkösöd” [Purple Pentecost], *Szabad Magyarország*, 21 May 1945, 1.

⁶² PIL 283/10/212, 70.

ship and business acumen with the “Jewish character”,⁶³ the assumption soon followed that because of these successes “Jews” must be richer than non-Jews, and that there must be “Jewish wealth” somewhere. In order to find this “Jewish wealth”, a serious-looking armoury of expertise was occasionally deployed between the two world wars. Economists and statisticians such as Mátyás Matolcsy or Alajos Kovács – although they did not have, because they could not have, any figures – sought in their journalistic work to act as the expert authorities who could plausibly ascertain the total national wealth that this supposed “Jewish” wealth might represent.⁶⁴

The imaginary world of the hidden treasures of the “Jews” created a particular vision of society. In the search for the treasures of the “Jews”, the political elite quickly forgot the inherently multicultural, multiethnic, and multiconfessional nature of social hierarchies and the order of exploitation, and it created an imaginary world that ethnicised the adverse consequences of “capitalism”, the severe inequalities, and the fact of social subordination. It became a favourite pastime of the local press to line up evidence of the connection between “Jews” and non-productive activity. In February 1939, the *Szentesi Napló* (Szentes Journal) newspaper reported that the Merchants’ Association had elected an entirely “Jewish” board, as a result of which non-Jewish members had left the association.⁶⁵ A theoretical distinction was also made, as was reflected in the pro-government newspaper of Békés county when it summed up the difference between “Jewish” and “non-Jewish” exploitation in November 1939:

our industry is the ideal vocation of life, pouring the soul into lifeless matter, theirs is the industry of throwing a poor product on the market; our industry is the patriarchal relationship between worker and employer, theirs is the industry of soul-sucking and exploiting; our trade is the quick delivery of good products, theirs is the trade of making bad articles appear good.⁶⁶

This social imaginary was particularly strong among the rural political public of the 1930s. In the second half of the 1930s, vibrant antisemitic propaganda was already developing in the county town of Békéscsaba. At the end of 1936, the Hungarian pro-Nazi Arrow Cross activists published a local newspaper called *Ököl* (Fist). On 28 February 1937, at a public meeting, they spoke of the enriching, speculating Jews who were not doing productive work, and local National Socialist speakers said that this was a direct consequence of the continuing impoverishment of working Hungarians.⁶⁷ In keeping with its mission, their paper exposed the Jewish butcher Antal Farkas of Békéscsaba, who went from baker to capitalist through trading and speculation,⁶⁸ or the Talmudic Jew Mihály Weisz, a butcher – the “prince of the butchers” of Békéscsaba – and a large farmer who rented hundreds of acres, owned horses, sheep, and cattle, and who allegedly fleeced the capital-poor farmers.⁶⁹

63 Miklós Szabó, *Az újkonzervativizmus és a jobboldali radikalizmus története (1867–1918)* [A History of New Conservatism and Right-wing Radicalism (1867–1918)] (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2003), 270; Paul A Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary: Religion, Nationalism, and Antisemitism, 1890–1944* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 30–31.

64 Dániel Bolgár, “Mitoszok a zsidó jólétről. A Horthy-kori statisztikáktól a mai magyar történetírásig” [Myths of Jewish Wealth: From Interwar Statistics to Contemporary Hungarian Historiography], *Múltunk* 60, no. 4 (2015): 132–137.

65 “Teljesen zsidó elnökséget választott a Kereskedők Egylete” [Association of Traders Elect Total Jewish Board], *Szentesi Napló*, 1 February 1939, 3.

66 *Békésmegyei Hírlap*, 23 November 1938, 2.

67 Gábor Tóth, *Ellenzéki politikai mozgalmak a Tiszántúlon a harmincas években 1929–1939* [Political Opposition Movements in Eastern Hungary in the 1930s 1929–1939] (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1982), 280–281. Report of the Police Captain of Békéscsaba to the Minister of Interior. 28 February 1937. MNL BcML 1937-6-5842.

68 *Békés*, 15 January 1939, 5.

69 *Békés*, 22 January 1939, 4.

This language, which portrayed “Jews” as a threat to others, dominated not only radical right-wing opposition propaganda, but also the pro-government press, from the end of the decade. In May 1939, Sándor Füsti Molnár of Szentes, who considered the poverty of the lower classes to be a major problem, stated in columns in the city newspaper that the reason for this was the “great wealth of the plutocrats”.⁷⁰ By August, the regional press was already reporting on decisive government measures against currency traders. This sort of speculation appeared in the newspapers as a peculiarly “Jewish” crime. According to the articles, the “currency traders”, that is the “Jews”, “alien to Hungary”, were “taking out the capital”, and the main aim of the measures was therefore “to prevent Hungary from falling victim to the greed of Jewish capital” and “to control the nation-killing currency trading”.⁷¹

However visible the occasional prosperity of wealthy Jewish families was in local communities, in reality the “rich Jew” and “Jewish wealth” were the product of an antisemitic imagination and of Nazi practice. Jewish wealth was only to be seen as a consequence of herding Jewish individuals into the ghettos and of their deportation. From April 1944, persons classified as Jews were obliged to declare their wealth. The purpose of this provision was to prevent them from hiding their property, which the Hungarian government intended to use for war purposes, before the deportation of their legal owners. Before the ghettoisation in the countryside, which mostly started in May, the hunt for hidden assets began. The police and the local population often played off against each other to gain an advantage in the race for treasure.⁷² The “Jewish fortune” was the result of this particular treasure hunt: the hidden and found property, when collected and stacked, seemed to be a veritable treasure trove.

In one chest there was only silver. The huge chest was piled high with silverware. They found in the chest about 400 pieces of silverware, silver trays and clasps, monogrammed. The other chest was also opened at the police station and the most expensive items of clothing were found. Persian furs, silver furs, fur capes, tablecloths by the dozen, bed linen, quilts, towels, unused underwear, women’s lingerie, handkerchiefs, etc. When the valuables hidden in the trunks were unloaded in one of the police rooms, the whole room was filled.⁷³

The main characteristic of “Jewish wealth” derived from speculation was precisely that it was thought to be a secret treasure, and therefore hidden. What “hidden secrets do the depths of the ghetto reveal”? This question captured the imagination of the authorities who raided the Gyula ghetto in May 1944. Seek and ye shall find: soon, the local newspaper was able to report on the “densely packed dugouts”. And, if the treasure actually found did not correspond to the antisemitic imagination’s vision of “Jewish wealth”, they imagined that the rest must have been hidden. According to the local press, the 10,000 pengős in cash found in the ghetto was so little that the author of the article believed that there must have surely been more, and suspected secret stashes.⁷⁴ It was as if the town of Békés had the good fortune to have its tales about “Jews” come true. In the town, at the request of the local gendarmerie, the “disappeared” Jews confessed where they had hidden their boxes. “When the boxes were opened, a treasure trove of tales of The Thousand and One Nights [sic!]

70 Sándor Füsti Molnár, “A szociális kérdés és a szociálpolitika” [The Social Question and Welfare Politics], *Szentesi Napló*, 7 May 1939, 7.

71 “Lesújt a kormány a valutásokra” [Government Clamp Down on Speculators], *Szentesi Napló*, 8 August 1939, 1.

72 *Békési Újság*, 1 July 1944, 1; *Békési Újság*, 8 July 1944, 1; *Békési Újság*, 15 July 1944, 1–2.

73 *Szentesi Napló*, 10 May 1944, 3.

74 *Békésmegyei Hírlap*, 27 May 1944, 1.

was revealed. Platinum rings studded with brilliant stones, gold rings set with diamonds, magnificent earrings, heavy gold brooches and necklaces, gold watches and similar treasures dazzled the men of the authorities.”⁷⁵

Antisemitic agitation tended to associate the “Jew” with (illegal) wealth, and the “Jew” was thought to be found and identified precisely through the discovery of secret wealth. In June 1944, the Miskolc daily *Magyar Élet* (Hungarian Life) reported on its front page that “the Miskolc Jewish property-hiding front has been exposed”. The editorial, which took a long time to enumerate the property and exact locations of the “Jewish” citizens, sought to expose the unbreakable link between the wealth of the “Jews” and crime. “One’s eyes are almost dazzled by the glitter of dazzling jewels before the treasures collected in the chests. It was this horrific hoarded treasure that gave the Jews their supremacy and power.”⁷⁶ The gold of the Jews was like the cursed treasure of the Nibelungs, to every piece of which sin clings, devouring all who touch it. The paper condemned those who demanded a share of the confiscated property of the Jews: “[t]rue, the gold and treasures were offered to them, the temptation was great, but did they not feel that it was not theirs to give to any of them? Didn’t they feel that all this gold, all this wealth, which could only have been cobbled together in such a short time by a series of criminal manipulations, was not theirs.”⁷⁷

It was not only the intensity of antisemitic propaganda in the local political public sphere that was remarkable. Until the end of 1944, the mainstream pro-government press did not necessarily openly incite social action against the “Jews”, but it did make strong statements about the social changes that would result from the discovery of “Jewish property”. In a speech at the Szentes Law Court in May 1944, János Maros, known as “Dr. Councillor-Priest”, called the ghettoisation and subsequent deportation a “moment of liberation from danger”, but also considered it a momentous event that “liberated the Hungarian working masses”.⁷⁸ In this particular social imaginary, the “Jews” were “obstacles”, factors that impeded the growth and development of others, and who had to be “eliminated” in order for the others to prosper.⁷⁹ The Jewish laws would bring with them a new world, proclaimed the pro-government press in the countryside. In this new world, “the only measure of value is work, the era of the Silberpfessig Judels and Josuas robber barons is over”.⁸⁰ Indeed, as if the only effective weapon against the flood of dangerous “Jewish” traits – speculation, the lure of easy profits – and the “Jews” who embodied them, was “work”. According to the pro-government press, the solution to the growing black market in a country at war was to conscript the intriguing “Jews” into military labour service, and the only antidote to the speculation created by the “Jews roaming the farms” was the labour camp.⁸¹

75 “1 000 000 pengő értékű zsidóvagyonot kutatott fel eddig a békési csendőrség” [Békés County Police Find Jewish Asset of 1 m pengős], *Békési Újság*, 8 July 1944, 1.

76 “Leleplezték a miskolci zsidóvagyon-rejtegetők frontját” [Front of Jewish Asset Concealers Revealed], *Magyar Élet*, 11 June 1944, 1.

77 “A megütközés” [The Clash], *Magyar Élet*, 13 June 1944, 4.

78 *Szentesi Napló*, 5 May 1944, 3–4.

79 *Békésmegyei Hírlap*, 8 February 1939, 3.

80 “Vita” [Debate], *Békésmegyei Hírlap*, 15 February 1939, 1.

81 “A keresztény politikáról” [On Christian Politics], *Békésmegyei Hírlap*, 25 October 1942, 1.

Working Class Politics and the Malleable Jew

The antisemitic social imaginary created a political language in which antisemitic politics became a workers' political issue – or more precisely, political antisemitism became a political issue for the “working class”. This political language, by defining “Jews” as non-workers, as the antithesis of and a threat to those who do the work, made “Jews” the enemy of “workers” and turned action against “Jews” into an interest of the “workers”. The rural press of the 1930s and 1940s was fond of referring to “Jews dominating the posts of chief executive, engineer, doctor”. The “Jews” were therefore “not workers” but were “exploiting the Christian Hungarian worker”.⁸² In fact, in rural Hungary during the war, hardly any language other than an antisemitic one was used to define a workers' policy. This language dominated the local press, both in its pro-government and radical varieties, and there was practically no other kind of public countercultural language. In Hungary, for years, state policies targeting workers could only be discussed in antisemitic language.

From 1939 onwards, local public debates made a serious effort to create a group of “Jews” that could be distinguished from “Hungarians”. The local press also sought to support these claims in theory. At the beginning of January, the *Felsőmagyarországi Reggeli Hírlap* (Upper Hungary Morning News) quoted Prime Minister Béla Imrédy, who said that the Jewish question existed because Jews were unable to become Hungarians.⁸³ In those years, the legislature and the local administrations did their best to make sure that this was the case. The local press reported regularly and in detail on the succession of “Jewish decrees”⁸⁴ that desperately sought to answer the question of who was a Jew. However, these decrees apparently demonstrated that such a distinction was quite possible to make. The removal of “Jewish” lawyers from the bar, the prohibition on “Jews” having “Christian” employees,⁸⁵ the compulsory wearing of the yellow star,⁸⁶ the restriction on the travel of “Jews”,⁸⁷ the obligation to register “Jewish” radio receivers,⁸⁸ and finally the declaration on and seizure of the property of “Jews”,⁸⁹ all of this suggested that the distinction between “Jew” and “Hungarian” was important and indeed possible to make.⁹⁰

The “Jews” were mostly created by antisemitic imagination and politics. In Miskolc in 1941, the proportion of those who identified themselves as Jews increased markedly compared to 1930, which was closely linked to the fact that the registration of “Israelite” origin was now compulsory for those of Christian religion.⁹¹ Neither of

82 “Akiknek a hátán a korbács csattog” [Whose Back the Whip Flogs], *Békés*, 12 April 1938, 1.

83 Márton Stern, President of the Szeged Israelite Community, Letter to Dr György Pálffy, Prefect of the City of Szeged, 11 March 1946. MNL CSML Szeged XXI.501. a. 1. d.

84 *Békésmegyei Hírlap*, 25 December 1938, 1; *Békésmegyei Hírlap*, 6 January 1939, 1; *Felsőmagyarországi Reggeli Hírlap*, 5, 6, 12, 15, 17, 24 January 1939; *Szentesi Napló*, 5 February 1939, 3. On the press coverage in Szeged, see Judit Molnár, *Zsidósors 1944-ben az V. (szegedi) csendőrkörületben* [Jewish Fate in 1944 in the 5th (Szeged) Gendarmerie District] (Budapest: Cserépfalvi, 1995), 46–47, 54–56.

85 *Felsőmagyarországi Reggeli Hírlap*, 21 March 1944, 1.

86 *Felsőmagyarországi Reggeli Hírlap*, 5 April 1944, 2.

87 *Felsőmagyarországi Reggeli Hírlap*, 6 April 1944, 2.

88 *Felsőmagyarországi Reggeli Hírlap*, 7 April 1944, 2.

89 *Felsőmagyarországi Reggeli Hírlap*, 16 April 1944, 2.

90 That the “Hungarian” and the “Jew”, notwithstanding if their base was the pseudo-genetical concept of “race” or the pseudo-cultural notion of “spirit” or “civilisation”, represent two different, precisely definable qualities that prescribe group and personal identities, seemed obvious for significant groups of interwar Hungarian society. Hanebrink, *In Defense*, 168–189.

91 Tamás Csiki, *Városi zsidóság Északkelet- és Kelet-Magyarországon. A miskolci, a kassai, a nagyvárad, a szatmárnémeti és a sátoraljaújhelyi zsidóság gazdaság- és társadalomtörténetének összehasonlító vizsgálata 1848–1944* [Urban Jews in Northeastern and Eastern Hungary: The Comparative Economic and Social History of Jews in Miskolc, Kassa (Kosice), Nagyvárád (Oradea), Szatmárnémeti Satu Mare) and Sátoraljaújhely] (Budapest: Osiris, 1999), 56.

the two victims of the lynch in Miskolc, Sándor Rejtő and Ernő Jungreis, were committed members of the Miskolc religious community or of Jewish public and social life. Neither of them, for example, appears in the minutes of the Chevra Kadisha religious aid association in Miskolc in 1945 and 1946.⁹² Jungreis was, according to his death certificate, a member of the Calvinist church.⁹³ However, the Holocaust irrevocably made Rejtő, Jungreis, and their families “Jewish”. Rejtő’s father, Mór Rothmann, spent eight months in forced labour on the Eastern front.⁹⁴ Ernő Jungreis’s parents and his first wife’s daughter Anna, born in 1934, were deported and murdered.⁹⁵ Rejtő was a labour serviceman in Ukraine for four years. He knew that his nephew returned from Auschwitz.⁹⁶

Two days after lynching the two mill owners, the workers of the Miskolc-Diósgyőr machine factory marched on the city police headquarters with the intention of releasing fellow workers whom the police had arrested after the atrocities. One of the victims of the attack, Artúr Fogarasi, who was beaten to death with a pickaxe, was of Jewish origin: he was born in 1912 in Kassa (Košice), with the surname Fränkel. Many of the attackers saw him as “the Jewish police officer” and the attack on the police as a way of freeing the workers “from the clutches of the Jews who tortured them”.⁹⁷ “Jew” in these stories did not necessarily allude to an ethnic group. Fogarasi came from the working class of the Diósgyőr steel factory: he lived in a street called Testvériség (Brotherhood) in the factory workers’ colony.⁹⁸ He left his community to take a job in the police: he was recommended by the Communist Party to become a detective in the political police in the summer of 1945.⁹⁹

In the eyes of many, the “Jew” Fogarasi was the person who made deals with the “Jewish” black marketers, defended the interests of the “Jews”, betrayed his true identity with the workers who were rightfully fighting the “Jews”, and turned the workers’ police into a “Jewish” police. As one participant noted, the “gendarmerie was chased away and now the ‘democratic police’ were torturing the workers”.¹⁰⁰ Contrary to Nazi racism, being “Jewish” in post-World War Two working class culture was not an immutable trait imposed by descent. In this cultural system, anyone could become a “Jew”: a “Jew” became a “Jew” by virtue of his or her actions. For the protesters, “Jews” embodied those on the other side of the social fault line, the enemies of the workers, those who lived off the labour of others rather than their own work, the police, and the rich who tortured them.

92 Minutes of the Miskolc Chevra Kadisa Holy Society from February 1945. MILEV L1 E1 23 X-62 Miskolc.

93 The inheritance case of widow Mrs. Ernő Jungreis. Records of the District Court of Miskolc. Cases. MNL BAZML VII. 6 b. PK 25576/1946: Autopsy Report, 622/1946.

94 Request for Licence of Mór Rothmann. Miskolc, 24 June 1945. Records of the Chamber of Trade and Industry of Miskolc. MNL BAZML IX 701. 663. d. 1945/50484.

95 The inheritance case of widow Mrs. Ernő Jungreis. Records of the District Court of Miskolc. Cases. MNL BAZML VII. 6 b. PK 25576/1946: Autopsy Report, 622/1946. Registry of Inheritance. Miskolc, 6 September 1946. 157/1946. Letter of Mrs. Ernő Jungreis to the Chancery Office. 24576/1946.

96 “A miskolci Rejtő elmondja, hogyan menekült meg a lincseléstől” [Rejtő from Miskolc Tells How He Sawed from Lynching], *Haladás*, 8 August 1946, 3.

97 Henrik Klein’s confession. Miskolc, 21 August 1946. Mrs Bertalan Szűcs Ilona Kővári’s confession. Miskolc, 24 August 1946. BFL 4260/1946, 482 and 547. People’s Prosecutors Imre Noszkó and Ervin Zaboretzky, Indictment. 28 September 1946. People’s Prosecution 10801/1946. BFL 4260/1946, 26, 33 and 40.

98 Certification of the National Committee of Miskolc. Miskolc, 24 July 1945. MNL BAZML XVII 2. 5967/1945.

99 Certification issued by the Hungarian Communist Party to the National Committee of Miskolc. Miskolc, 8 August 1945. MNL BAZML XVII 2. 4730/1945.

100 Ferenc Reményi’s confession. Miskolc, 16 August 1946. BFL 4260/1946, 403.

Conclusions

Antisemitism did not disappear after the horrors of the Holocaust because the circumstances of the immediate post-World War Two years produced sufficient ammunition to sustain many of the conventional themes and tropes of the anti-Jewish imagination. The spectacular rise of the political left reinvigorated elements of the Judeo-Bolshevik myth. Issues of property restitution helped to create an understanding of local social divisions in terms of an alleged Jewish-Christian confrontation. The food crisis and the adjacent fears of hunger reproduced the horrific figure of folk tales, the cannibal Jew. The experiences of the anomalies of the black market were conducive to sustaining the Nazi myth of the criminal treasure-hiding Jew.

These continuities notwithstanding, the distinct feature of antisemitism in 1945 and 1946 was the massive politicisation of the figure of the Jew. The new political elite of the period, particularly the Communist and Social Democratic leaderships, effectively instrumentalised the antisemitic language of working-class politics that had started to emerge in the second half of the 1930s. Unlike the right-wing elite of the 1930s, left-wing politics of the post-war years broached the category of the Jews to allude to a set of political behaviours instead of to define an ethnic or cultural-religious group. In the antisemitic languages of the interwar period, a Jewish ethnic or cultural-religious background made someone by implication a conundrum of the “Jewish” qualities of scrounging, impurity, parasitism, and the greed for domination.

The political languages of the immediate post-World War Two years, in contrast, opened up ways for individuals of Jewish origin to dispose of these stigmatic qualities if they demonstrated conformity to the politically declared values of work and workers. In some ways, Jews were able to jettison the burden of ethnic or cultural-religious origin, whilst, if they still behaved like “Jews” normally did, their deeds inferred and prescribed a specific political identity for them. In many ways, the politicised definition of “Jewishness” affirmed the expectations of agricultural and industrial workers in local communities. The antisemitic imagination of poor peasants, day labourers, and factory workers reckoned Jews as persons threatening the community of workers and often included individuals with no Jewish ethnic or cultural-religious background among the targets of their “anti-Jewish” revolts. “Jews”, in this respect, represented a political category allusive of the counterpart of work and workers, and were identified as a threat to and the enemy of these. The notion of the “Jew” effectively linked ideas about economic deficits, social fault lines, and the meaning of political action, and talking about “Jews” became inseparable from statements about the state of society.

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