Hachsharot in Hungary After the Holocaust: Lives and Stories Behind Facts

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Abstract

The primary aim of our study is to explore the post-Holocaust history of the hachsharot in Hungary through the eyes of their members. Our study is based on a structured analysis of one hundred and one interviews from the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive. The immediate post-war years saw an unprecedented growth of the Zionist movement in Hungary. During this short period, the hachsharot played a vital role in the lives of those who, unlike most Jews, chose dissimilation. In our study, we explore the interviewees' family backgrounds and their prewar connection to Zionism. We explore in detail their time in the Zionist movement and the hachsharot. However, we do not focus only on the facts, but put special emphasis on personal experiences and feelings. Finally, we also address how the identities of our interviewees changed and how these experiences shaped their first decades after their lives in the hachsharot.

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Introduction

The second half of the nineteenth century was marked by the strong emancipation and assimilation of a great part of Hungarian Jewry. The liberal nobility, which monopolized political power, supported the more assimilated or assimilating stratum of the Jewish population in the economic modernization of Hungary and protected them from antisemitic attacks. The Jews returned the "favor" with loyalty and efficient assimilation. In fact, the assimilated Jews were also needed as a kind of "ethnic favor ally" because, without them, Hungarians were not in the majority in the multi-ethnic country.[1] Viktor Karády[2] refer to this compromise between the liberal nobility and the Jews by the term "assimilationist social contract."[3] However, it was assimilation not only by objective measures (for example, between 1880 and 1910, the proportion of Hungarian native speaking Jews rose from 59 to 77 percent). Many Jews had intense contact with the majority society and had a strong Hungarian national identity.[4] This high degree of

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[1] András Kovács, "Az asszimilációs dilemma," *Világosság* 30, no. 8-9 (1988): 605-612; 606.; Éva Kovács, "Asszimilációs és diszkriminatív tendenciák a magyar társadalomtörténetben (1867–1939)," in *A zsidókérdésről*, eds. Balázs Fűzfa and Gábor Szabó (Szombathely: Németh László Szakkollégium, 1989), 29-37.

[2] Viktor Karády, *The Jews of Europe in the Modern Era: A Socio-historical Outline* (Budapest: Central University Press, 2004), 170-171.

[3] Gábor Gyáni pointed out some controversial points of this theory. For more see: Gábor Gyáni, "Polgárosodás mint zsidó identitás," *BUKSZ* 9, no. 3 (1997): 266-278.

[4] Viktor Karády, "Egyenlőtlen elmagyarosodás, avagy hogyan vált Magyarország magyar nyelvű országgá?," in *Zsidóság, modernizáció, polgárosodás*, ed. Viktor Karády (Budapest: Cserépfalvi Kiadó, 1997), 151-195.

assimilation and the strong national feeling played a significant role in the history of Hungarian Jewry and the development of Zionism.

Zionism found it extremely difficult to take root in Hungary, a country with predominantly assimilated Jews. As Miksa Szabolcsi, the founder of Hungarian Jewish journalism, said when he met Herzl in 1903, "Zionism will suffer a shipwreck in the rock-solid patriotism of Hungarian Jews."[5] Or, as Herzl resignedly wrote in a letter to Ernő Mezei, a Jewish journalist and Hungarian MP, "Hungarian Zionism can be primarily red-white-green."[6] The first congress of the Hungarian Zionist associations was held in Bratislava in 1903. However, mainly due to opposition from the Jewish religious leadership, the Zionist movement could only officially begin to function in 1927. The unpopularity of Zionism in Hungary was also reflected in the low number of members. It never exceeded four to five thousand until 1938, comprising about one percent of the Jews in Hungary.

World War I and especially the Treaty of Trianon[7] ended the reasonably peaceful time for Hungarian Jews. As a result of the treaty, Hungary became an ethnically homogeneous country. Thus the assimilated and acculturated Jews were no longer needed. The *numerus clausus* law[8] introduced in 1920 signaled the changing attitude of the power towards the Jews and clearly marked the dissolution of the assimilationist social contract.[9] The 1930s witnessed the country's apparent shift to the right. People with openly antisemitic political views gained power. The increasingly right-wing regime introduced open anti-Jewish legislation in the late

[5] János Gyurgyák, *A zsidókérdés Magyarországon. Politikai eszmetörténet* (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2001), 240.

[6] Gábor Schweitzer, "Miért nem kellett Herzl a magyar zsidóknak? A politikai cionizmus kezdtei és a magyarországi zsidó közvélemény," *Budapesti Negyed* 4, no. 2 (1994): 42-55; 55. (Red, white, green are the colors of the Hungarian flag).

[7] The 1920 Treaty of Trianon formally ended World War I between Hungary and the Allied powers. The treaty resulted in Hungary losing two-thirds of its territory and almost two-thirds of its population.

[8] The law stated that the nationalities and races (*népfajok*) of Hungary could only take part in higher education according to their numerical proportion. Although the law applied to all such groups, it was prejudicial only for the Jews.

[9] Mária M. Kovács, *Törvénytől sújtva* (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2012).

1930s. At the same time, the Germans were returning territories lost in the Treaty of Trianon to Hungary.[10]

These events also had a significant impact on the Zionist movement. The adoption of the anti-Jewish laws pushed to Zionism people who previously had nothing to do with the movement and even people who did not have a strong Jewish (national) identity. It also forced the Jewish religious community leaders, who had opposed Zionism from the beginning, to start cooperating with the movement.[11]

The systematic mass-deportation of Hungarian Jews started in March 1944, after the German occupation of Hungary.[12] It was carried out with the active and enthusiastic involvement of the Hungarian authorities. After the public identification and stigmatization (Yellow Stars), concentration, and segregation (ghettoization), between May 15 and July 9, 1944, some 430,000 Jews were deported from the countryside[13], most of whom were killed. In total, approximately two-thirds of Hungarian Jewry was destroyed. By the end of 1945, 190,000 Jews were living in Hungary.[14] The survivors of the Hungarian Holocaust were mostly Jews from Budapest (119,000 persons), as the deportation was halted at the beginning of July 1944. On the contrary, provincial Jewry almost ceased to exist.[15]

Surviving Hungarian Jews could choose between two possible paths: dissimilation or assimilation. Dissimilation could take several forms. It could mean affirming a previously suppressed Jewish national identity by joining the Zionist movement and could also mean emigration. The first few years after the Holocaust were marked by an unprecedented strengthening of the Zionist movement in Hungary.

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[10] Randolph L. Braham, *A népírtás politikája. A Holocaust Magyarországon* (Budapest: Belvárosi Könyvkiadó, 1997), 1247.

[11] Attila Novák, *Átmenetben. A cionista mozgalom négy éve Magyarországon (1945–1948)* (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő Kiadó, 2000), 18.

[12] It should be noted that the first deportation of so-called "alien" Jews from Hungary was that of 1941 to Kamenets-Podolsk. Those Jews were mainly of Polish origin. However, those Hungarian Jews were also in danger who could not prove their Hungarian citizenship. For more see: Braham, *A népírtás politikája*, 197-205.

[13] The area of Budapest was smaller then. Many places that are now part of Budapest were small settlements from which Jews were also deported.

[14] About a quarter of these people were no longer members of the Jewish denomination.

[15] Braham, *A népírtás politikája.*

In addition, in 1946, at least 100,000 Hungarian Jews were expected to emigrate.[16] However, dissimilation was totally contrary to the decades-long practice of *en masse* assimilation. Furthermore, the historical, political, and social environment also favored further assimilation.

A decline quickly followed the rise in Zionist membership, and the number of those who eventually left Hungary was also significantly lower than expected. Between 1946 and 1949, only approximately 15,000 Hungarian Jews made *aliyah*, and about the same number settled in other countries.[17] This was only partly due to the steady and rapid growth of communist power and the fact that the communist takeover swept away the Zionist movement. The return of surviving Hungarian Jews to the old patterns also played a significant role. They continued to assimilate in line with the communists' expectations and rejected any form of secession from the Hungarian nation. However, it is also worth noting that for many, when they realized the real nature of the Communist regime, it was too late to leave the country as borders were gradually closed down.

There is much scholarship on Hungarian Jews specifically in the immediate postwar period. Its topics include early testimonies and memoirs of Holocaust survivors,[18] Zionism,[19] activities of the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) in Hungary,[20] the operations of the People's Tribunals,[21] Hungarian Jewish

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[16] Arieh J. Kochavi, *Post-Holocaust Politics: Britain, the United States and Jewish Refugees (1945–1948)*, (Chapel Hill - London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 194.

[17] Viktor Karády, "Szociológiai kísérlet a magyar zsidóság 1945 és 1956 közötti helyzetének elemzésére," in *Zsidóság az 1945 utáni Magyarországon*, eds. Viktor Karády, András Kovács, Iván Sanders, and Péter Várady (Párizs: Magyar Füzetek, 1984), 37-180; 99; András Erdei, "A magyarországi zsidóság migrációja (1945–1955)," *Beszélő* 9, no. 4 (2004): 69-78.

[18] For example: Rita Horváth, "Jews in Hungary after the Holocaust: The national relief committee for deportees, 1945–1950," *Journal of Israeli History* 19, no. 2 (1998): 69-91; Ferenc Laczó, *Hungarian Jews in the Age of Genocide: An Intellectual History, 1929–1948* (Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2016), 99-133.

[19] The most extensive work on the topic is Novák, *Átmenetben.*

[20] Kinga Frojimovics, "JDC Activity in Hungary, 1945–1953" in *The JDC at 100: A Century of Humanism*, eds. Avinoam Patt, Atina Grossmann, Linda G. Levi, and Maud S. Mandel (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019), 421-438; Viktória Bányai, "The Impact of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's Aid Strategy on Lives of Jewish Families in Hungary, 1945–1949" in *Jewish and Romani: Families in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, eds. Eliyana R. Adler and Kateřina Čapková (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 115-127.

[21] For example, Ildikó Barna and Andrea Pető, *Political Justice in Budapest after WWII* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015).

Displaced Persons,[22] and resurgent antisemitism.[23] Yet, none of these works explicitly addresses the *hachsharot*, especially not through the eyes of their members. The present study is based on a structured analysis of one hundred and one testimonies from the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive (VHA). The use of oral testimonies and the sociological approach we adopt shed new light on Hungarian Jews who chose to join the hachsharot. The members' voices are functional to understand the organization and daily life in the hachsharot and go behind the Zionist narrative and uncover the most overlooked aspects: personal motivations and what the hachsharot meant to the participants.

Analytical Approach

We decided to limit our research to those interviewees who were born in what is today Hungary[24] and were in hachsharah or organized hachsharah there after the Holocaust.[25] Moreover, we included only those who not only mentioned this fact but provided substantial information about it. First, we used the "hakhshara"[26] index term in the VHA filtering for the place of birth, and then we manually selected all those interviewees meeting the above criteria. It resulted in 101 testimonies: eighty-seven of them in Hebrew, nine in English, and five in Hungarian.[27] Given the research topic, it is understandable that the proportion

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[22] See among others, Ildikó Barna, "Hungarian Jewish Holocaust Survivors Registered in Displaced Persons Camps in Apulia: An Analysis Based on the Holdings of the Arolsen (International Tracing Service) Digital Archive" in *Beyond Camps and Forced Labour*, eds. Suzanne Bardgett, Christine Schmidt, and Dan Stone (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 165-184; 167-169.; András Szécsényi, "Hillersleben: Spatial Experiences of a Hungarian Jew in a German DP Camp, 1945," *The Hungarian Historical Review* 9, no. 3 (2020): 470-490.

[23] For example, Andrea Pető, "About the Narratives of a Blood Libel in Post-Shoah Hungary" in *Comparative Central European Holocaust Studies,* eds. Louise Olfa Vasvári and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2009), 40-49; Péter Apor, Tamás Kende, Michala Lônčíková, and Valentin Săndulescu, "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.

[24] Even the oldest hachsharah members were in their early 20s in the years after 1945. Therefore, they were born after 1920, i.e., after the Treaty of Trianon.

[25] There were some interviewees who participated in the Zionist movement during the war as well.

[26] The VHA uses this spelling.

[27] There were some interviews in other languages, but these were excluded from the analysis.

of interviews conducted in Hebrew was extremely high. While in the VHA archive only about one-fifth of the interviewees born in present-day Hungary gave interviews in Hebrew, the proportion of such interviewees in the group we studied was more than 85 percent. All but one of the interviewees living in Israel was interviewed in Hebrew; one spoke Hungarian. In addition, one interviewee gave the interview in Hebrew but lived in Canada. Five of the nine English-speaking interviewees lived in the United States, three in Australia and one in Canada. In addition to the Hungarian-speaking interviewee above, three of the other Hungarian-speaking interviewees lived in Hungary and one in the United States.
Gender-wise 56 percent of the interviewees (57 persons) under research were male, and 44 percent were female (44 persons). In accordance with the VHA interview methodology, a pre-interview questionnaire was completed before the interview, which, among others, included questions about the interviewee's date of birth and prewar religious identity. The interviewees were born between 1920 and 1935. However, they are not evenly distributed, as those born between 1925 and 1929 account for almost two-thirds of the interviewees (65 persons). This is understandable as young people joined the hachsharot at 17-18, and the oldest hachsharah members were 22-23 years old. Regarding religious background, 51 percent of the interviewees had an Orthodox (52 persons), while 41 percent had a Neolog family background (41 persons). Two interviewees said their families were Hasidic, and six chose the "non-observant/non-practicing" category.[28]
After the selection of interviews, we carried out a structured analysis. First, we recorded the primary demographic characteristics of the interviewees (gender, date, and place of birth), and we added the prewar and postwar religious identity given by the interviewee. In the structured analysis, we explored the following topics:

- Relevant prewar experiences: we examined the survivors' relationship with Zionism, if any. We also checked whether they had been in hachsharah before the war.

[28] In the original responses, interviewees also used the categories "traditional Judaism" (20 persons), "Judaism" (13 persons), "liberal Judaism" (3 persons), and "conservative Judaism" (1 person). Furthermore, there were two persons who did not answer the question. In these cases, we used the interviews to decide which of the above categories the interviewee belonged to.

- Postwar Zionism: here, we looked at how the survivors came into contact with the Zionist movement, which organization they joined, what were their motivations and feelings.
- Postwar hachsharah experience: we approached this topic from several angles. In addition to the time and place of the hachsharah, we recorded the information on the hachsharah provided by the interviewee (the number of members, organizational issues, working duties, activities, etc.) However, we were also interested in more personal information such as their motivations for joining, feelings about the hachsharah, personal connections, the impact of the hachsharah on their identity.
- Migration history: we recorded the country where the interview was conducted, whether the interviewee eventually made aliyah, if not, what the reasons were, if so, whether they stayed in Israel and if not, what the reasons were to leave Israel.
- Post-hachsharah life: we looked at how the interviewee's life evolved in the first years or decades after their Zionist and hachsharah experience.

This systematic analysis allowed the identification of distinct patterns that were very frequent. Our analysis focuses on these more general patterns rather than on specific characteristics.

Implications of the Data

In this chapter, we would like to discuss the potentials and the limitations of the data used, namely, what we can and cannot conclude from the analysis. Although the Visual History Archive contains interviews with more than 54,000 Holocaust survivors, including nearly 3,500 Hungarian-born ones, the selection of interviewees cannot be considered random. For this reason, our results cannot be generalized for any larger population. However, the presence of many typical scenarios common to many interviewees suggests that these patterns existed and are worth analyzing. Furthermore, it is also essential that these scenarios coincide with the findings of scholarly literature.

It is important to remember that these interviews are based on retrospection, as they were conducted some fifty years after the events, and they are not about

historical authenticity. As Éva Kovács argues, "testimony is primarily not a historical source, but a present construction of the past, even if the narrators are entangled in history."[29]

The next aspect to consider is the way the interviews were conducted. The VHA interview protocol was based on the semi-structured interview method, designed to ensure that the interviews were conducted within a standardized framework. Therefore, the interviewers were provided with a guide consisting of questions to discuss with the interviewee. However, interviewees had the opportunity to elaborate more on some topics or even bring up new ones. This interview methodology was intended to encourage the interviewees to narrate their lives in chronological order in their own words.

Nevertheless, and this is also evident from the VHA interviews, the interviewer had a significant role in how much emphasis they placed on a topic, what they specifically asked about, how much they encouraged the interviewee to report in detail on a specific topic.[30] It follows, therefore, that it is not possible to determine from the interviews how important a life event was in the interviewee's life, for example, by how much they talk about it. It is also worth noting that most interviewees did not give their testimonies in their native languages. There are several interviews where it is clear that the interviewees were limited by their language proficiency.

Zionism and *Hachsharot* in the Interwar Period

In Hungary, except for a brief period after the First World War, the relationship between the Zionist movement and the representatives of the Jewish religion was characterized by continuous opposition until the Second World War. This was true for both the Neolog and the Orthodox communities,[31] even if their reasons

[29] Éva Kovács, "'Post-testimony: A tanúságtétel helye a soá történeti elbeszélésében," *Socio.hu* 8, no. 3 (2018): 107-119; 109. Quotes from Hungarian publications have been translated into English by the authors.

[30] For a description and critical analysis of the VHA methodology, see Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015), 112-150.

[31] The formal recognition of the Jewish religion required the establishment of a national organization of the organizationally dispersed Jewish communities. In 1868, the Jewish Congress'

differed.[32] The leadership of Neology "saw Zionists as the violators of the traditional assimilationist 'contract,' a threat to the rights that had already been won, to Judaism as a denomination, to those who had moved from a religious to a national basis, and thus cast doubt on the Hungarian identity of the Jews."[33] At the same time, the representatives of Orthodoxy stressed the supremacy of religion. They argued that "no artificial movement can change the destiny which the Almighty has destined for Israel."[34]

Several of our interviewees who were from a Neolog or non-observant background reported the great extent of assimilation and the importance of Hungarian national identity. For example, Paul Szenes,[35] from a Neolog family, said that he heard from his father several times that first they were Hungarians, then they were Jews, and that they were part of the Hungarian nation. In the case of Yeshayahu Kovetz,[36] he had a non-religious family but went to a Jewish school, where pupils were taught that they were Jewish by religion but Hungarians by nationality. Another telling example is that of Zeev Kohn. He came from a Neolog family and got the following explanation when he asked his father what Zionism was. "Zionists are those Hungarian Jews who are not good people, who want to leave Hungary."[37]

Many of our interviewees talked about their parents or religious community being anti-Zionist. In many cases, parents also used religious principles, as in the case of Yosef Klein,[38] who grew up in an Orthodox family where it was forbidden to talk

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call for its formation was unsuccessful, leading to a unique sectarian schism and the creation of three separate groups: the progressive Neologs, the strictly traditionalist Orthodox, and the smallest one, the Status Quo Ante Jews, see Karády, *The Jews of Europe in the Modern Era*, 165-166.

[32] Géza Komoróczy, *A zsidók története Magyarországon II. 1849-től a jelenkorig* (Pozsony: Kalligram, 2012), 289-295.

[33] Novák, *Átmenetben*, 15.

[34] Gabor Schweitzer, "Miért nem kellett Herzl a magyar zsidóknak?," *Zsidó Híradó* 50 (1897), 50.

[35] Paul Szenes, interview by Tzippi Shamayah, October 18, 1996, interview 21302, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Moshav Ben Amani, Northern, Israel, segment 17.

[36] Yeshayahu Kovetz, interview by Sara El-Ram, August 30, 1996, interview 19337, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Givataym, Tel Aviv, Israel, segments 7-8.

[37] Zeev Kohn, interview by Eva Bandel, October 21, 1996, interview 21815, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Kibbutz Geva, Northern, Israel, segment 25. Quotes from interviews recorded in Hebrew and Hungarian have been translated into English by the authors.

[38] Joseph Klein, interview by Ronit Gabai, August 13, 1997, interview 31980, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Kiryat Gat, Southern, Israel, segment 15.

about Zionism, as Jews will return to Eretz Israel only when the Messiah comes. In other cases, parents feared that their children would make aliyah and therefore opposed membership in the movement. In the life of one of our interviewees, the parents' extreme anti-Zionism, more precisely the father's, led to tragic events. As a child, Yitzhak Segal lived in Gyöngyös,[39] a town in northern Hungary, where one of the Neolog rabbis was a Zionist. Yitzhak admired him and heard about the movement from him. In 1938, Yitzhak's younger brother, who became a Zionist, wanted to leave for Palestine, which his father forbade, but he went anyway. His father reported it to the gendarmerie, who first imprisoned his brother and later sent him to forced labor, where he died.

Consistent with the low popularity of Zionism, most of our interviewees had little or no contact with Zionism before the war. For many, Zionism meant people who raised money for Palestine. Some interviewees mentioned that they were only familiar with the so-called blue box of the Keren Kayemet.[40] As Steven Feldheim summed up so well in his interview: "For us, Zionism was just a mystic word which means that we should collect money for people that want to go to Israel to buy land. That's all we know about, and that's all our older generation wants us to know."[41] Also interesting was Hava Blass' recollection, who said that in school, her antisemitic classmates told her to go to Palestine. Therefore, for her, Palestine was a curse word. "It was something like go to hell!".[42]

Due to the constant opposition of the official representatives of the Jewish community, the National Office of Hungarian Israelites (*Magyarországi Izraeliták Országos Irodája*), the Hungarian Zionist Association could start its legal operations only in 1927. Left-wing Zionists made up about one-third of organized Zionists during the interwar period. There were equally large groups of Klal

[39] Yitzhak Segal, interview by Varda Zeelig, November 23, 1997, interview 37512, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Givataym, Tel Aviv, Israel, segments 41-43 and 46-48.

[40] Its full name is Keren Kayemet LeYisrael, which is the Jewish National Fund founded in 1901 to buy and develop land in Palestine.

[41] Steven Feldheim, interview by Irit Kave, December 10, 1996, interview 24487, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, segments 9-10.

[42] Hava Blass, interview by Teuma Beeri, November 8, 1996, interview 22713, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Kibbutz Yagur, Haifa, Israel, segment 8.

(General) Zionists from the center and religious Zionists from the right. The influence of the revisionist Betar movement was much smaller.[43]
The various Zionist groups all operated hachsharot in the interwar period. However, the number of their members did not exceed a few hundred. The movements' central hachsharot were located in Budapest, and hachsharot operated in bigger cities. There were some hachsharot in the countryside, but they were not permanent.[44] These institutions' primary aim was to prepare young Jews, the *halutzim,* both physically and ideologically for aliyah and life in Palestine. Initially, Zionism did not include the objective of the restratification of Jews, i.e., to direct many more Jews to agricultural and manual work and reduce their share in intellectual occupations. This objective was first linked by left-wing Zionism to the creation of the Jewish national home, but was later taken up by other Zionist groups as well. In the latter case, this was not dictated primarily by ideological convictions, but by the reality that the new country would need these so-called productive workers in far greater numbers than were available.[45] In Hungary, the Palestine Office distributed the certificates issued by the Jewish Agency, and they also supervised the hachsharot. To obtain a certificate, one had to participate in a hachsharah, usually at least for two years. There were both industrial and agricultural hachsharot,[46] where young Jews could go from the ages of 17-18. In the cities and during the winter hachsharot members worked in various factories, but they lived together. In the evenings, they had common activities: listening to lectures, participating in discussion evenings, learning Hebrew, dancing Israeli folk dances, the hora, etc. In the agricultural hachsharot during the summer, members usually worked on the land of a Jewish landowner. In the hachsharot, members had no private property, and the money they earned was used collectively. In addition to hachsharot, Zionist youth organized summer camps, the so-called *moshavot.*[47]

[43] Novák, *Átmenetben*, 14-17.
[44] Attila Novák, "Cionisták, baloldaliak, államrezon: Cionizmus és államhatalom a 30-as évek Magyarországán," *Századok* 130, no. 6 (1996): 1341-1392.
[45] Novák, *Átmenetben*, 129-130.
[46] In Hungary, urban and industrial hachsharot were also called *plugot*. However, the terminology was not consistent. In this paper, we only use the term hachsharah.
[47] Novák, "Cionisták, baloldaliak, államrezon," 1341-1392.

From 1933 onward, the Zionist movement in Hungary was subject to constant harassment by the authorities. Their attention was then mainly focused on the Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza'ir, who were identified with the Communists, a political ideology severely persecuted by the regime. The Hungarian Zionist Association responded by excluding Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza'ir from its ranks. This move, however, put the Association in a paradoxical situation, since it was precisely the strongest branch of Zionism both in the world and Hungary that was left out. In 1936, the anti-Zionist campaign went into full gear. Hachsharot were subjected to constant police harassment, and their members were repeatedly brought before the police. By this time, however the authorities' repressive activities extended not only to left-wing Zionists but to the entire movement. The police proceedings made young people reluctant to participate in hachsharot. Moreover, several movements ended up closing their hachsharot.[48]

The Zionist Movement in Hungary During and After the Holocaust

> Zionism offered a very different pattern and strategy of identification than official Hungarian Jewry, which promoted the traditional Hungarian-Jewish symbiosis. However, this pattern of identification could not come into being until the very situation for which it was born was not given, as its most important precondition, i.e. legalised discrimination, was not yet present.[49]

The start of the openly anti-Jewish legislation in 1938 marked the beginning of this period, and the strengthening of the Zionist movement in Hungary began. Moreover, young Jews socialized in much more active and well-organized Zionist groups from the annexed territories were brought into the country. These Zionists played a considerable role in the rise of the Hungarian Zionist movement.[50] In

[48] Ibid.; Attila Novák, "A chance not taken: Zionist-Hungarian diplomatic co-operation in the second half of the 1930s" in *Jewish Studies at the CEU II. 1999–2001*, eds. András Kovács and Eszter Andor (Budapest: Central European University, 2002), 327-353.

[49] Novák, *Átmenetben*, 18.

[50] Novák, "Cionisták, baloldaliak, államrezon," 1341-1392.; Braham, *A népírtás politikája*, 1012-1121.

this period, the number of members increased: while in 1937 only about 7,300 *shekels* (certificates of membership) were sold, in 1939 the figure was about 28,000.[51]

Most Hungarian Jews, however, even after seeing the increasing anti-Jewish legislation and the reports of Jewish refugees, mainly from Poland, did not believe that what finally happened could happen to them. [52] There were sharp generational differences behind the perceptions of the situation. Many young people saw the lie of the "assimilationist contract" mentioned earlier, i.e., that it did not matter how much they assimilated or how much they felt Hungarian, Hungarian society did not accept them. At the same time, the older generation typically still believed in it. Steven Feldheim described this process very eloquently when he said:

> We were introduced to being Hungarian, and Jewishness was only a sort of second thought. It was just a religion. But the tragic part of it is as I grew up, the system always reminded me. First, that I'm not a pure Hungarian, but I'm a Hungarian Jew. And then, later on, they called me Jewish Hungarian, and by 1941-42 I was not Hungarian, only a Jew.[53]

Anah Klayn[54], who came from a non-religious family, illustrated the generational differences very well when she talked about the period from the early 1940s onward. She was fourteen at the time. She explained that her grandparents' generation still had a very strong religious background, and that Judaism meant a lot to them. For her parents' generation Judaism was less important, but being Hungarian was on the contrary very significant. By the 1940s, her own generation no longer felt that they were getting anything from Hungary and the Hungarians.

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[51] Karády, "Szociológiai kísérlet a magyar zsidóság 1945 és 1956 közötti helyzetének elemzésére," 93. It is important, to note that by 1939 Hungary had already annexed certain territories, which in itself increased the membership of the Zionist movement. However, even taking this into account, the number of shekels sold in 1939 showed a sharp increase.

[52] Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), 13-14 and 29.

[53] Feldheim, interview 24487, segments 8-9.

[54] Anah Klayn, interview by Yitzchak Hadas, October 20, 1996, interview 21798, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Kfar Sava, Central, Israel, segments 14-19.

This led Anah to join the Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza'ir during the war, where she became a very active member.

Judit Charody's testimony also illustrates the realization that Jews were not considered part of Hungarian society and the generation gap that existed between the youth and their parents. In her interview, Judit mentions that Jewish scouts were excluded from the Scouting movement in 1941. She says tellingly, "That's when we took the regent's[55] photo off from the wall."[56] That is also when she joined the Hanoar Hatzioni, as one of her friends had already become a member. She also tells us that later she met some Polish refugees in Hanoar Hatzioni, and they told them all the things they went through.

> We believed them, but our parents didn't believe them. They all said – my mother, my father said, maybe it happened in Poland. It never will happen in Hungary. When, later on, it started to happen in Hungary, in the countryside, then my parents and most of the other children's parents said, maybe it happens in the countryside, but it will never, ever happen in Budapest.[57]

And later she said, "when my parents saw every day what was happening, they realized that we were right from the start."[58]

Zionists, especially the halutzim*,* were heavily involved in the rescue and resistance movement during the Holocaust.[59] This is not only significant in that they saved many lives but also, as we shall see, in the postwar history of the Zionist movement.

> There is no point in comparing the activity of the Halutz movements in Hungary with those in Eastern Europe. There was no expectation whatever, not even on the part of the youth groups themselves, that the

[55] Miklós Horthy served as a regent in Hungary in the interwar period.

[56] Judit Charody, interview by Daniel Feiler, August 14, 1995, interview 4455, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Northbridge, New South Wales, Australia, segment 24.

[57] Ibid., segment 18.

[58] Ibid., segment 43.

[59] Braham, *A népírtás politikája*, 1088-1101; Peretz Revesz, *Standing Up to Evil: A Zionist's Underground Rescue Activities in Hungary* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2019).

> Halutz movements would become one of the principal elements in the life of Hungarian Jewry. Their ideas and their social composition made them completely alien to the character of Hungarian Jews.[60]

As discussed earlier the weakness of the Halutz movement and the annihilation of Jews at an unprecedented pace (deportation was executed within two and a half months!) narrowed down the activities of the Hungarian Zionist youth groups. Thus the Zionist youth were mainly engaged in producing and distributing false papers and the transfer of Jews, primarily family members and associates, to Romania, Slovakia, and Yugoslavia.[61]

As mentioned before, the losses of Hungarian Jewry were enormous in the Holocaust. Yet, a relatively large number of mainly assimilated Jews survived the horrors. The period between 1945 and 1948 was marked by the advance and strengthening of the Zionist movement in Hungary. Four parties dominated the Zionist scene: the radical left-wing Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza'ir, the religious Mizrachi, the politically centrist Klal Zionists (General Zionists), and the social-democrat Ichud Mapai.[62] These parties had their own youth organizations. The Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza'ir had its youth movement under the same name, the Mizrachi had the Bnei Akiva, the Klal Zionists had the Hanoar Hatzioni,[63] and the Ichud Mapai had the (Gordonia) Maccabi Hatzair and the Dror Habonim.[64]

The membership of the Zionist movement grew significantly.[65] However, according to András Kovács, this alone would not have been enough for Zionism to become the leading force in autonomous Jewish politics that emerged after the war. In addition to the shock of the Holocaust, the disappointment at the prospect of assimilation, and the Hungarian state's refusal to accept responsibility for the

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[60] Asher Cohen, *The Halutz resistance in Hungary 1942-1944* (Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs, 1986), 63.

[61] Ibid., 1070-1075.

[62] The right-wing revisionist Betar had very few members in Hungary and the group was completely marginalized. Novák, *Átmenetben*, 45.

[63] From 1946 it also included Haoved Hatzioni, mentioned by some of our interviewees.

[64] Novák, *Átmenetben*, 29.

[65] The support for the Zionist movement in Hungary can be party captured by the number of shekel purchases. In 1946, the number of shekels sold was 95,000. Between September 1947 and September 1948, it was still somewhat more than 68,000 although by that time many Jews have already emigrated. Ibid., 26 and 95.

Jew's suffering, a combination of specific circumstances was needed. On the one hand, Jewish public opinion felt that the former leadership of the Jewish community was inadequate to represent the interests of the Jewish people: community leaders were compromised by suspicions of collaboration. In contrast, Zionist groups were actively involved in the rescue and resistance. It was also important that the main Zionist groups operating in Hungary were connected predominantly to the political left. In the eyes of the Jews, left-wing political parties represented the idea of anti-fascism. It was also already clear that these parties would play a significant role in the new political system that was being established. The popularity of Zionism was boosted by the fact that the dream of the State of Israel was within reach and for some time was supported by the Soviet Union. Finally, many international Zionist organizations, which were still operating freely, provided practical support. Some international Jewish organizations, primarily the JDC, provided significant financial support to strengthen the movement in Hungary.[66]

Hachsharot After the Holocaust

After the Holocaust, among the aims of hachsharot created by all Zionist movements was still the restratification and productivization of Hungarian Jews. On the one hand, many believed that antisemitism was partly due to the Jewish population's unbalanced occupational structure and that without changing this, the "Jewish question" would be reignited. In addition, all Zionist groups wanted to prepare their members for aliyah and the life awaiting them in Palestine.[67]
The objectives of restratification and productivization were taken very seriously in the Hungarian Zionist movement, especially the left-wing movements. For

[66] András Kovács, "Hungarian Jewish Politics from the End of the Second World War until the Collapse of Communism" in *Jews and the State: Dangerous Alliances and he Perils of Privilege*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 124-156; 129-131.
[67] We use the term "Palestine" because as will see that the hachsharot in Hungary had almost disappeared by the time the State of Israel was proclaimed. For more on restratification and productivization see Ferenc A. Szabó. "Pusztulás és újjászületés," *Valóság* 31, no. 11 (1988): 60-72; 66.

example, they explicitly opposed further education. Kathleen Zahavi, a member of Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza'ir, had such an experience.

> I started the college. [...] But, the Zionist organization had one issue, that was the main concern, that nobody learns anything. [...] Because if you had any profession, then you wouldn't go to the kibbutz, and you don't want to work outside in the fields and so and so. [...] They forced me to stop going to college. Actually, forcing not physically but mentally. You know, if you want to be with us, you have to follow our policy which was not to have any profession.[68]

In our sample there are eight people who were not only participants in the hachsharot but also organizers. Only two of them had had active roles previously in the Halutz Resistance movement.[69] We would like to highlight the stories of the two organizers. Shmuel Santo[70] and his wife Hedva were asked to organize a Dror Habonim hachsharah. They looked for abandoned places and organized a hachsharah in Budapest and another in the countryside. The other case is that of Yitzhak Segal,[71] who talked about the pogroms of 1946 in North-Eastern Hungary.[72] He said that the Zionist organizations decided not to be silent and organized a hachsharah as a response in Center, a village in that very region.
The leaders of the hachsharot were the *madrichim*, who were usually older. Some of them were locals, but especially in smaller settlements, it also happened that someone from the city was sent there. Here too, Hungarians from across the border played an important role. Our interviewees talked mainly about

[68] Kathleen Zahavi, interview by Simon Zelcovitch, November 18, 1996, interview 22898, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, North York, Ontario, Canada, segments 124-125.
[69] Yet it is important to note that many organizers were Hungarian speaking "refugees" from Slovakia or the Transcarpathian region who had to go underground before March 1944 and lived in Budapest with false papers. The main reason for their active participation was that they had more experience in resistance, organizing groups and had a much firmer Zionist background. As mentioned earlier, these people are outside the scope of our analyses.
[70] Shmuel Santo, interview by Mira Nov, January 21, 1997, interview 26379, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Rishon Litzion, Central, Israel, segments 53-56.
[71] Segal, interview 37512, segments 161-162.
[72] Apor, Kende, Lônčíková, and Săndulescu, "Post-World War II anti-Semitic pogroms in East and East Central Europe: collective violence and popular culture," 913-927.

Hungarian-speaking Jews from Czechoslovakia who had a lot of experience, which they shared. Several of our interviewees were sent to madrich training camps. Besides learning how to care for children, they also learned about Eretz Israel and Zionism. However, it seems that not all leaders were sent to special camps. Several of our interviewees reported that although they were admitted to the hachsharah as simple members, they excelled there and were therefore made leaders. Such "promotion" may have taken place also when the leader of the hachsharah made aliyah.

Zionists' Recruiting Techniques and Participants' Motivations to join the *Hachsharot*

It is already clear from what we have described that mainly young people participated in the Zionist movement in Hungary. After the war, the movement's members were primarily those who had lost all or part of their families in the Holocaust.

Many children were being cared for in various children's homes run by the JDC: 2,900 children in May 1946, and about 1,650 a year later.[73] There were several types of children's homes in Hungary: day-care and boarding homes *(maon)* for children up to about 14 years of age, and the so-called middle *(mittel)* hachsharot (MiHa) for 15-17-year-olds. Many of these institutions were run by Zionists and financed mainly by the JDC.[74] Some of the interviewees we studied were in a MiHa first and later became hachsharah members.

Several of our interviewees reported working as leaders (*madrichim*) or staff in such children's homes. One of the parents' criticisms about these homes was precisely that they were taking in Zionist teenagers as staff, who had no pedagogical knowledge. In addition, surviving parents often felt that they were being wholly separated from their children as the Zionists feared that young people would not make aliyah while under the influence of their parents.[75]

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[73] Bányai, "The Impact of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's Aid Strategy on Lives of Jewish Families in Hungary, 1945–1949," 115-127; Novák, *Átmenetben*, 118.

[74] Ibid., 118-120.

[75] Bányai, "The Impact of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's Aid Strategy on Lives of Jewish Families in Hungary, 1945–1949," 115-127; 120.

Another important place for organized recruitment was the winter and especially the summer camps (*moshavot*). Several Zionist organizations held such camps, often advertised as free holidays, but in fact, recruitment took place.[76] One of the biggest and best-known of these camps was on the southern shore of Lake Balaton, in Balatonboglár, which several of our interviewees mentioned.

In addition to these organized ways of recruitment, several of our interviewees reported that they looked for orphans in cities and smaller towns who could be potential members of the movement. For example, Binyamin Shavit[77] was a member of the Maccabi Hatzair's leadership until 1948. He looked for Jewish youth (and their parents) ready to join their hachsharah and make aliyah. Interestingly, he was also charged with finding those, especially non-Jews in the border villages (mainly with Slovakia), who were able and willing to help the Zionists in illegal emigration.

Most of our interviewees joined a hachsharah soon after the liberation. Over 40 percent of our interviewees (44 persons) had joined already in 1945, and a further 35 percent (35 persons) did so in 1946. We already mentioned that the proportion of Budapest Jews among the survivors was very high. However, 80 percent of our interviewees were from the countryside. Indeed, many of our interviewees returned from concentration camps or forced labor and realized that their family members had been killed. Some survivors went back to their former residence and tried to start a new life. However, when they saw that this was not possible, either for objective or emotional reasons, they joined one of the hachsharot, mainly to make aliyah as soon as possible. As Chaya Kővári said in her testimony, "I didn't want to continue living among the murderers [...] I wanted to go to our country."[78]

Although the Zionist organizations tried to establish permanent hachsharot, this did not happen. Our interviewees alone mentioned more than sixty different locations. Looking at their spatial distribution, except for Budapest and its suburbs, there were significantly more hachsharot in Eastern Hungary, formerly

[76] Novák, *Átmenetben*, 122.

[77] Binyamin Shavit, interview by Mira Schacham Golan, May 24, 1998, interview 41593, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Mosav Rispon, Central, Israel, segments 54-59 and 63-69.

[78] Chaya Kővári, interview by Sylvia Ben Simon, January 18, 1998, interview 39251, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Kiryat Yam, Haifa, Israel, segments 117-118.

home to large Jewish communities, than in the western part of the country.[79] Hachsharot were established in many different places. Sometimes Zionists received or occupied a building or a farm. Sometimes they rented them. Several hachsharot were founded on farms formerly maintained by MIKÉFE (Hungarian Israelite Association of Crafts and Agriculture).[80] But there were also cases where they operated in properties abandoned by Jews, whose owners did not return, or in mansions of former barons and counts.

The most common motivation for joining a hachsharah was the desire to make aliyah. Some of our interviewees were already Zionists during the war, and after the Holocaust, they rejoined the movement. However, most of the interviewees joined after the war, often invited by family members, friends, and acquaintances who were already Zionists. Many interviewees also reported various emotional motivations. For example, it was important for them to belong somewhere or to someone after the loss of their families. As Esther Magda Ungar said, "I wanted people surrounding me whom I could love."[81] Some former Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza'ir and Bnei Akiva members reported joining the organization specifically because of its ideology.

Our interviewees have almost exclusively positive memories of the hachsharot. Many remember it as "[o]ne of the happiest years of [their] life."[82] Nili Kochva felt that she "was already in Israel, among Jews. It was a small Eretz Israel."[83] Those who had lost their families, and there were many of them, mainly emphasized a sense of togetherness and belonging. For example, Irene Adler said

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[79] For example: Debrecen, Encs, Elek, Makó, Miskolc, Nyíregyháza, Ózd, Sátoraljaújhely, Szeged.

[80] The Hungarian Israelite Association of Crafts and Agriculture (MIKÉFE, Magyar Izraelita Kézmű és Földművelésügyi Egyesület) was founded in 1942, primarily as an advocacy organization as the guilds did not admit Jews as members. Later, training in agriculture and gardening began. The association also had a boarding house, which, according to recollections, was run according to the principles of the early kibbutzim. László Harsányi, "A magyarországi zsidó egyesületek fél évszázada," *Aetas* 31, no. 2 (2016): 32-51; 44.

[81] Esther Magda Ungar, interview by Sari Gal, June 24, 1998, interview 42442, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Kibbutz Nir Galim, D.N.Evtah, Central, Israel, segment 155.

[82] Yaakov Barzilay, interview by Tali Nativ-Ironi, September 15, 1995, interview 6870, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Raanana, Central, Israel, segment 105.

[83] Nili Kochva, interview by Orna Bahat, October 29, 1998, interview 47710, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Moshav Nehalim, Central, Israel, segment 141.

that "I didn't feel this loneliness. I felt that I belonged someplace."[84] Many people felt that the hachsharot were their new family and expressed this explicitly. Several interviewees mentioned that it was nice to be around people who had experienced the same or similar things. In many of the recollections, we witnessed new human bonds being built. Many found their future husbands and wives in the hachsharah. Many also married there. Hava Blass[85] recounted that eight couples married at the same time when they married, and they used the very same ring. Besides marriages, several people reported that they had made lifelong friendships in the hachsharah.

Life in the *Hachsharot*

All Zionist organizations had hachsharot, both industrial and agricultural. We mentioned earlier that in the interwar period, the condition for aliyah was two years of hachsharah. After the Holocaust, this was not taken so seriously. Immediately after the war, making aliyah still required some time spent in a hachsharah. However, when the political changes made it clear that the Zionists, in fact, rescued those who wanted to leave Hungary, it was no longer required.[86] The interview with Adel Taub[87] illustrates the existence and loosening of this condition very well. Adel was in a Bnei Akiva hachsharah in Budapest for three weeks, where she met her future husband, who had been in the hachsharah already for two years and was a leader *(madrich)* there. Her future husband went to the center of Mizrachi and told them that he had a "serious *bachura*"[88] and wanted to take her with him to Palestine. They got permission and made aliyah together.

[84] Irene Adler, interview by Rita Lowenstein, May 30, 1995, interview 2896, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Bronx, New York, USA, segment 129.

[85] Blass, interview 22713, segment 61.

[86] After the foundation of Israel, the country adopted an open immigration policy. For more on this see Aviva Halamish, "Zionist Immigration Policy Put to the Test: Historical Analysis of Israel's immigration policy 1948–1951," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 7, no. 2 (2008): 119-134.

[87] Adel Taub, interview by Dan Danieli, May 5, 1998, interview 42036, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, New York, New York, USA, segment 100.

[88] The name for a girlfriend in the Zionist movement.

The size of the hachsharot varied greatly: some had 15-20 members, but there were also much larger ones with up to seventy members. As mentioned before, in all the hachsharot members shared everything; there was no private property. Some interviewees reported that they even shared their clothes. All the salaries were collected, and money was spent together. Life in the hachsharot, in many regards, reproduced the lifestyle of the kibbutzim in Palestine. However, the ideologies of the movements running the hachsharot shaped the participants' daily lives differently. In the hachsharot, boys and girls lived together. However, the rules for boy-girl relationships in religious hachsharot were stricter. For example, there were hachsharot where boys and girls could sleep together even before marriage, whereas in the Mizrachi hachsharot, this was entirely out of the question. As one of our interviewees said, "there was no hanky-panky in those days."[89] In the case of Adel Taub, before joining a religious hachsharah she had come into contact with Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza'ir and Haoved Hatzioni and was horrified to see "how the girls and boys behaved."[90]

During the day, hachsharah members did some "productive" work, and in the evening, they studied together, which in practice served as their "ideological" preparation. In each hachsharah, they learned about Zionism, Palestine, sang Zionist songs, danced the hora. However, the extent of Hebrew study varied greatly. There were places where regular Hebrew classes were held and places where hardly any Hebrew was taught. Some interviewees explicitly pointed out in their testimony that they missed proper Hebrew language instruction. Consequently, many people after aliyah struggled with language difficulties.[91] There were also differences in what they learned. In Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza'ir hachsharot, the topics included Socialism, Marxism, and Leninism as well. In the religious hachsharot, they learned about the Torah, and besides Modern Hebrew, some Biblical Hebrew was also taught. Our interviewees' accounts clearly showed that learning was not a one-way process, but an essential part of it was reflecting on and discussing what had been learned.

[89] Edward, Adler, interview by Rosalie Franks, November 6,1995, interview 8772, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Providence, Rhode Island, USA, segment 88.

[90] Taub, interview 42036, segment 99.

[91] Novák, *Átmenetben*, 129.

In industrial hachsharot, members learned and worked in a wide range of trades. There were industrial hachsharot, where members worked and lived in the same building. However, there were other types of industrial hachsharot where members worked in different places during the day and went back to the hachsharah in the evening. An essential part of the hachsharah was living together. One of our interviewees reported that she initially went to the hachsharah every day but slept at her sister's house. She was told that if she did not sleep there, it was not a hachsharah.[92]

In the agricultural hachsharot, several types of agricultural work were carried out. There were places where only crops were grown, but animals were also kept in others. Industrial and agricultural hachsharot were often separated by season. Several groups lived in the city in winter, engaged in industrial work, and then maintained agricultural hachsharot from early spring to late autumn. The division of labor between boys and girls often followed very conservative patterns. In most places, girls cooked, did the laundry, cleaned the house, while boys worked in the fields or the workshops and factories.

In addition to the industrial and agricultural training courses mentioned above, there was also physical training in some places. For example, Michael Ofri[93] from Hanoar Hatzioni reported that a group learned boxing and judo from "highly respected" Israeli *shlichim*. Some even received regular military training. Mordechay Frankel,[94] a member of Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza'ir, recounted that in 1946, shlichim from the Haganah came to establish a military hachsharah,[95] a three-month seminar for *madrichim* under the guidance of the Haganah.

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[92] Taub, interview 42036, segment 99.

[93] Michael Ofri, interview by Naaman Belkind, February 26, 1997, interview 26521, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel, segment 127.

[94] Mordechay Frankel, interview by Teuma Beeri, May 4, 1997, interview 31063, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Kiryat Tivon, Northern, Israel, segments 143-144.

[95] The Haganah was the main Jewish paramilitary organization in Mandatory Palestine between 1920 and 1948.

The Role of the JDC in Financing the *Hachsharot*

The Joint Distribution Committee started its operations in Hungary in March 1945. "[The] JDC had a dual goal from the very beginning. It aimed to support the reintegration of the Jewish community in Hungary but as we can see from the aid distributed to the various Zionist organizations, it also tried to support those who wanted to emigrate."[96] The Jews of Hungary were the biggest recipients of JDC funds among the fifteen European countries supported by the organization.[97]
One of the objectives of the JDC was the productivization of Jews. Therefore, to reach this goal the JDC created the Work and Workshop Organization Department, that was operational from October 1, 1945. One of the department's aims was to employ Jews who could work in industrial and agricultural cooperatives. Within this framework, the JDC provided the primary financial support for the hachsharot in Hungary.[98] It is important to note, however, that the JDC, due to the growing hostility of the regime, as detailed later, constantly tried to present its support "as an attempt by the Joint to promote the integration of the local Jewish community, whose professional profile was perceived to be alien to the needs of the postwar economy and society of Hungary."[99]
In July 1946, the Joint Work and Workshop Organization Department organized an exhibition, which was very interesting also in this respect. The JDC described the event as the presentation of "the work done since the liberation in the field of the productivization of the Jews."[100] The fact that Sándor Rónai, Minister of Cooperatives and Trade, opened the exhibition, and the President of Hungary Zoltán Tildy and his wife visited it, clearly showed the event's significance. However, most notably for our topic, almost none of the many short news reports and longer newspaper articles mentioned Zionism or the fact that many of the workers of these cooperatives were people who wanted to make aliyah.[101] Yet one

[96] Frojimovics, "JDC Activity in Hungary: 1945–1953," 426.
[97] Ibid., 424.
[98] Novák, *Átmenetben*, 31; Szabó, "Pusztulás és újjászületés," 66.
[99] Kinga Frojimovics, "Different Interpretation of Reconstruction: The AJDC and the WJC in Hungary after the Holocaust" in *The Jews are Coming Back*, ed. David Bankier, (Jerusalem: Berghahn Books and Yad Vashem, 2005), 277-292; 285.
[100] This text appeared in several daily and weekly newspapers.
[101] One of the exceptions: "A dolgozó zsidók kiállítása," *Igazság*, August 3, 1946.

of the photos in the exhibition clearly showed Herzl's famous phrase in Hungarian: "If you want, it's not a fairy tale."[102]

In 1947, the Work and Workshop Organization Department produced a comprehensive and detailed report about agricultural and industrial hachsharot. There were 49 industrial hachsharot in Budapest and 23 in the countryside, with 1,869 halutzim in Budapest and 852 in the countryside. Agricultural hachsharot were operating in 32 places on 2,113 acres[103] with 1,538 halutzim. Even considering the uncertainty of the data for previous years, there is an apparent decline. The main reason for this was the continuous aliyah. However, in addition to that, many hachsharot faced supply shortages.[104] Another important aspect was that the new chairman of the JDC, Israel Gaynor Jacobson, who arrived in Hungary in September 1947, radically changed the JDC support strategy. He wanted to end the dependence of the Jewish masses on JDC subsidies and make them stand on their own feet.[105]

In the Crossfire of the Communists and the Road to the End

After the war, multi-party parliamentary democracy was formed in Hungary. However, already from November 1945 the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Welfare, which are critical to our subject, were under communist control.

The attitude of communists towards Zionism and the Zionist movement was influenced from the beginning by both ideological and "pragmatic" considerations. From as early as the spring and summer of 1945, the Communist Party was highly critical of Zionism and Zionists. This criticism, often characterized by extremely harsh rhetoric, constantly appeared in the Communist press. Zionists were accused of "increas[ing] their masses by terrorizing assimilated

[102] "Kiállítás – A Joint üzemeinek tevékenységét bemutató kiállítás," ID: MTI-FOTO-756329. Accessed September 15, 2022, https://archivum.mtva.hu/photobank/item/MTI-FOTO-OHFocE9yMo1VdWVZdTMvdjRxRys4QT09.

[103] It is the type of acre used in Hungary, which is 5,755 square-meter.

[104] Novák, *Átmenetben*, 134-136.

[105] Frojimovics, "Different Interpretation of Reconstruction," 289-290.

Jews who have Hungarian national feelings."[106] Moreover, they distract the Jews from the "joint work" as Hungarian Jews have "one duty, to participate in the productive work and the country's reconstruction with all their strength."[107] The *moshava* in Balatonboglár, mentioned earlier, was also a target of criticism: "In Balatonboglár, children and young people are being given Jewish nationalist training," which "could have unforeseeable and serious consequences" as young people "'trained' in this way will become useless to democracy for years, if not decades."[108]

In the spring of 1946, the Minister of National Welfare, Erik Molnár, formulated a clear and sharp criticism of Zionism. He argued that only the complete assimilation of Jewry could lead to the solution of the Jewish question. He argued that "the effort of Zionism to restore the diminished [Jewish] national consciousness of Hungarian Jewry goes against the direction of Hungarian social development and therefore a reactionary objective."[109]

The first open conflict between the JDC and the Communist Party occurred in July 1945. The Communists accused the JDC of openly supporting the Hungarian Zionist Association. In response, the JDC stated that it was utterly apolitical and supported all Jews, whether Zionist or not. The political control of the JDC became fully apparent when, in March 1946, the previously mentioned Minister of National Welfare, Erik Molnár, delegated the Ministerial Commissioner, Jenő Zeitinger, to the Joint Committee.[110] Zeitinger, in a report at the end of July 1947, among other things, also mentioned the hachsharot:

> It [the JDC] constantly promotes and keeps alive the separation of the Jews of Hungary from the Hungarians. It keeps thousands of young girls and men in 110 retraining camps[111] for the purpose of emigration to Palestine under reactionary leadership. Through its Work and Workshop Organization Department, it finances industrial cooperatives, maintains

[106] Ferenc Hajdu, "Mi történt, amíg távolt voltatok," *Néplap*, June 13, 1945. *Néplap* was the daily newspaper of the East Hungarian district of the Hungarian Communist Party.
[107] Ferenc Hajdu. "Mi történik amióta itthon vagytok," *Néplap*, July 29, 1945.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Erik Molnár, "Zsidókérdés Magyarországon," *Társadalmi Szemle* 1, no. 5 (1946): 326-334; 333.
[110] Frojimovics, "Different Interpretation of Reconstruction," 287.
[111] The report used this expression instead of training camp.

> factories and agricultural collectives, which form a festering sore in the life of democratic Hungary, both in Budapest and in the countryside.[112]

However, the pragmatic reasons mentioned earlier also played a significant role alongside ideological considerations. On the one hand, the JDC had taken a great burden off the Hungarian state by providing vast amounts of financial and material support. On the other hand, it provided Hungary with a considerable amount of hard currency, which it needed enormously. Moreover, the JDC had to use five percent of the funds to support non-Jewish, left-wing, mostly communist organizations.[113]

In the autumn of 1947, the Communist Party through electoral fraud won a majority of the vote followed by a rapid and ruthless complete takeover. After the election, the Zionists came under even greater pressure than before. The anti-Zionist and anti-cosmopolitan campaigns in the Soviet Union also played a role. The campaign against the Zionists, with the active involvement of the Neolog community, ended with the Zionist Association dissolving itself in March 1949.[114] After the 1947 election, the Communists removed and forced the JDC's leader, Frigyes Görög, to emigrate, and he was succeeded in the position by the American Israel Gaynor Jacobson. As mentioned earlier, Jacobson followed an utterly different aid strategy. Although successful in its aims, this strategy was highly counterproductive in the contemporary political situation. It contributed significantly to the integration of Jews into the communist dictatorship. Once this had been achieved, the JDC was no longer needed. Jacobson was arrested in December 1949, interrogated, and expelled from the country on espionage charges. The JDC continued to operate in Hungary for some time, although it had less and less control over the use of its aid. It finally ceased operations in Hungary in early 1953.[115]

Another crucial area for our topic, which the communists heavily influenced from the beginning, was emigration. Immediately after the war, the Ministry of the

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[112] László Svéd, "A magyar zsidóság és hatalom 1945–1955," *Múltunk* 5, no. 2-3 (1946): 248-298; 263.

[113] Frojimovics, "Different Interpretation of Reconstruction," 288; Svéd, "A magyar zsidóság és hatalom 1945–1955," 262-263.

[114] Kovács, "Hungarian Jewish Politics from the End of the Second World War until the Collapse of Communism," 131-135.

[115] Frojimovics, "Different Interpretation of Reconstruction," 290-291.

Interior turned a blind eye to border crossings organized by Zionists. However, the legal framework for emigration was constantly narrowed. After 1947 regulations became increasingly more severe. Finally, from 1949 borders were gradually closed, and in April 1950, a 15 km-long frontier strip was created, eliminating the possibility of even illegal border crossing.[116]

Identity Change and Life after the *Hachsharah*

The time spent in the Zionist movement and the hachsharot significantly changed the identity of its members. Margaret Schwartz said: the hachsharah "made me a very big Zionist. So, when I married my husband, I told him that the only country I'm willing to go to is Israel."[117] Unsurprisingly, Zionism and Israel became a priority for our interviewees. As Naomi Amsel said: "There is no other place for the Jews, only Eretz Israel."[118] Irene Adler reported that when the War of Independence broke out, she almost decided not to make aliyah. But then she said to herself: "I want to go to Israel, because of just the principle of it. I said, nobody can ever hurt me. We have to have someplace where we can go!".[119] Many of our interviewees mentioned how important it was for them to fight, to do something for the country. Michael Ofri summed up this feeling as follows: "A dream came true when I arrived in Israel. We did not want anything else, just to contribute."[120] As mentioned before, eighty-seven of our interviewees lived in Israel, six in the USA, three in Australia and Hungary, and two in Australia at the time of the interview. Only four of those not living in Israel did not make aliyah. Two of them stayed in Hungary, one emigrated to the USA and one to Australia. Ten interviewees eventually settled in another country after making aliyah, most of them in the second half of the 1950s or early 1960s. In most cases, they had a close

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[116] Barna, "Hungarian Jewish Holocaust Survivors Registered in Displaced Persons Camps in Apulia," 167-169.

[117] Margaret Schwartz, interview by Leonie Szabo, September 10, 1996, interview 19774, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Caulfield, Victoria, Australia, segment 46.

[118] Naomi Amsel, interview by Haya Goldberg, July 17, 1997, interview 32981, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Nir Galim, D.N. Evtah, Central, Israel, segment 174.

[119] Adler, interview 2896, segment 131.

[120] Ofri, interview 26521, segment 132.

family member, parent, or sibling living in the other country, which was the reason why they decided to leave Israel.

After arriving in Israel, almost all the interviewees were placed in a kibbutz after staying for a short while in so-called immigrant camps. There were three groups: (1) those who immediately felt it was not for them and left, who were not many; (2) those who stayed for a while but then started living independently; and (3) those who were still living in a kibbutz or *moshav* at the time of the interview. About one-third of the interviewees from Israel (30 persons) belonged to this third group. After arriving in Israel, the men joined the army and fought in the War of Independence. Women usually cleaned or worked in the kitchen. However, those girls who did not want to go to kibbutz had the opportunity to join the army. For example, Aviva Porat said: "Upon my arrival in Israel, I joined the army at the age of 16. [...] I was not that *olah chadasha*[121] working in the kitchen or cleaning that most of them were."[122]

Differences between the *sabras*[123] already living in the kibbutz and the immigrant survivors of the Holocaust were manifold. There were differences in age and family status: kibbutz members were generally older and had families. Moreover, there were also many differences in the financial situation and opportunities of the two groups. In the *kibutzim*, the redistribution of wealth could not take place with the arrival of new members, who had no possessions, and many felt that they were forced to make unwanted sacrifices because of the new members. The situation for newcomers was further complicated by language difficulties. But the most painful thing for newcomers was that many felt that, after the unimaginable ordeal of the Holocaust, they had arrived in a place where they were not welcome. Their expectation of finding the social atmosphere they longed for was not fulfilled in reality. Instead of a warm and friendly environment, a feeling of home and belonging, they encountered "boorish behavior" and "waves of bitterness against immigration from Hungary."[124] As the immigrant Itzhak Vaslo wrote in the Yagur journal on March 18, 1948: "I hope that these waves of bitterness against

[121] Meaning: new immigrant.

[122] Aviva Porat, interview by Moshe Granot, June 11, 1996, interview 16415, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Haifa, Haifa, Israel, segment 79.

[123] Jews who were born in Israel or Mandatory Palestine before May 1948.

[124] Hanna Yablonka, *Survivors of the Holocaust* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 178-185.

immigration from Hungary will abate and then we will experience once again that most important feeling to a Jew – in these days – *the feeling of home* [original emphasis]."[125]

Among our interviewees, there were several cases when groups left their initial kibbutz together to form a new one—the reasons for leaving varied. Yisrael Feld[126] felt that the sabras wanted to control them too much. Zeev Kohn[127] thought that the kibbutz members were too old for him. Shmuel Santo felt that he was looked down on by the kibbutz residents: "My Hebrew and accent ridiculed me; I suffered a lot there."[128] Tova Tishler said that her "[e]xpectations were very high, which didn't meet the reality."[129]

Another critical aspect of the encounter with Israeli society, with the sabras, was that survivors had lived through the Holocaust what the sabras not only did not experience but could not even imagine. For some interviewees being a survivor of the Holocaust was taboo: they did not want to talk about it, not even in the family. They tried to "overcome" what happened to them. Some survivors thought there was no point in telling what had happened to someone who was not there, and quite often, even the survivors themselves could not understand how it could have happened to them. Meir Lantos said the following: "After the Holocaust, we were in shock. We did not know what to tell. [...] There was no point talking about it."[130] However, some people did try to talk, but people did not believe them. Nili Kochva reported such an experience: "This is one of the most painful things, that they didn't really believe in our stories in Israel. They thought we were coloring the stories, adding some spice to them."[131]

Some were ashamed of themselves, and for many of them, the Eichmann trial in 1961 put an end to this shame. Yisrael Feld said the following: "I was ashamed of the leaders; I was ashamed of ourselves. And then I came to Israel and was enlisted

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125 Ibid., 178.

126 Yisrael Feld, interview by Nurit Zer, September 30, 1997, interview 35269, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Kibbutz Nir Galim, D.N. Evtah, Central, Israel, segment 228.

127 Kohn, interview 21815, segment 108.

128 Santo, interview 26379, segment 63.

129 Tova Tishler, interview by Yitzchak Hadas, August 27, 1996, interview 19391, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Kfar Saba, Central, Israel, segment 150.

130 Meir Lantos, interview by Eva Weintraub, October 8, 1997, interview 34381, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Ramat Aviv, Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv, Israel, segments 108-109.

131 Kochva, interview 47710, segment 147.

and got a weapon, and I saw that we defeated the Arabs in the war. So, I asked myself. Where were we then? How did we get into this situation that we were like sheep in a slaughterhouse? There was a general awakening after the Eichmann trial. Then it turned out how thoroughly planned it was and the whole mechanism."[132] Many then began to speak, as Esther-Magda Ungar did: "After the Eichmann trial, I heard many details that I did not know about. Then it was the first time I started to talk to my daughter about everything, about my family, the home, the Shabbats."[133]

Conclusion

After the Holocaust, the remaining Jews in Hungary faced a severe choice: stay in Hungary and continue assimilating or dissimilate and leave the country. The majority of the surviving Jews were already highly assimilated, and additional factors favored further assimilation. Therefore, the majority of Hungarian Jews opted for staying. Scholarly works on post-Holocaust Jewry, cited several times in this paper, have focused mainly on this majority.

This paper deals with the minority who chose dissimilation and, in most cases, eventually emigrated. The central aim of our study was to examine the under-researched topic of hachsharot operating in Hungary right after the Holocaust. Exploring the functioning of these institutions brings us closer to understanding the immediate postwar history of the Hungarian Zionist movement. However, we wanted to tell the stories of these institutions through their members' voices. Therefore, we conducted a systematic analysis of one-hundred-and-one interviews from the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Thus, our study contributes to the existing literature by making the hachsharot the main topic of its research, and moreover, by addressing it from a personal perspective. The use of oral testimonies has allowed us to explore the background to the hachsharah members' identity choices, their Zionist attachment, motivations, and the impact that the time spent in the hachsharot had on their later lives. We consider this

[132] Feld, interview 35269, segments 245-246.
[133] Ungar, interview 42442, segment 170.

paper a starting point. Many other aspects of the topic remain to be investigated. For example, hachsharot of Hungarian Jews in the neighboring countries, Hungarian Jewish hachsharah members' journey to Palestine or Israel, or Hungarian Jews in DP camps' hachsharot.

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Keywords: Hungary, Hachsharot, Zionism, Structured Analysis of Interviews, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive

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