

A Hungarian tragedy

By Bálint Magyar



His mother was hunted by the Nazis and many of his relatives were murdered in Auschwitz. Hungary's minister of education talks about his Jewish roots and about the responsibility his nation's political leaders, intellectuals and society bear to remember and retell the horrors of the Holocaust.

It was not the slamming shut of the freight car door nor the insults shouted by the gendarmes. It was not even the sobbing of the tortured. No, these were not the first sounds. Everything began with the carefully phrased words of the politicians, the journalists, the economists, the statisticians. Words that gained momentum like a snowball rolling down a hill. The beginning was found in thoughts that were not difficult to digest and provided an explanation for all the country's problems - "the harmful Jewish influence" and the "foreign parasites that are sucking out Hungary's very life-blood." The explanations were presented in articles, books, research studies, and speeches delivered at mass rallies.

My father

In other eras, other words were heard: "There is no religious community that has not produced heroic figures who have fought in our struggle for liberty and which has not produced victims of that struggle. However, you will find it very difficult to think of any religious community that could match the Jews in loyalty and in strenuous efforts on behalf of our national war. The declaration of equal rights is the necessary outcome of our birth as a nation. When we apply this principle to the members of the Mosaic faith, we are not only fulfilling our fundamental civic and human obligations; we are also awarding them the prize they deserve for their patriotism."

These were the words that my ancestor Bertalan Szemere, Hungary's second prime minister of the revolutionary government, used in the summer of 1849 to justify the need for granting equal rights to the Jews. In July of that year, the Hungarian legislature approved the extension of equal rights to Jews on the basis of purely moral reasons. The war of liberation was drawing to a close and the gesture did not provide either side with any substantial military or political advantage. The gesture was dictated by conscience and by the principle of human dignity alone. The equal rights granted to the Jews were not forgotten during the reconciliation with Austria in 1867, a reconciliation that served as the basis for a liberal policy.

For the next 50 years, Hungary made no distinction between its citizens on the basis of religious belief. Innocent Jews who had become victims of a blood libel were acquitted by a Hungarian court of law in 1883. In the late 19th century, the principles of tolerance and law and order were dominant in Hungary. However, prophets of racism soon appeared in the political arena, who laid the foundations for the ideological platform of the regime of Nicholas Horthy (the Hungarian Regent who collaborated with the Nazis). These prophets

used the words "traitors," "aliens" and "enemies" in their condemnation of the Jews, who were closely and permanently tied to Hungarian culture in thousands of ways and had enriched it with invaluable treasures.

My paternal grandfather, Elek Magyar, worked during the Horthy regime as the editor-in-chief of the daily Magyarország. Hungary's official policy-makers viewed the newspaper with great suspicion, and extremist right-wingers labeled it a "Jewish newspaper." Within a matter of months, a proposed bill, the Law for the Guaranteeing of Balance in Economic and Social Life, more widely known as "The First Jewish Law," was tabled in the Hungarian parliament. It was passed and was followed by a long list of laws that discriminated against the Jews.

Between 1927 and 1931, my father studied literature and art history in Budapest. Many years later, he showed me declarations issued by the rector of his university that banned violence directed against Jews. However, some people were not the least troubled by incidents of Jews being beaten. When journalists asked a distinguished professor, Pal Teleki, what he thought about the acts of anti-Jewish violence that had taken place on the campus of his university, he replied: "This din does not bother me. In any case, the students take examinations that test their knowledge of the sea and this din is aptly suited to that of the sea."

Teleki's name - he subsequently served twice as prime minister, occupying the same chair that my ancestor, Bertalan Szemere, had occupied - is associated with the Numerus Clausus Law that was passed in 1920 and put an end to equal rights in Hungary, as well as with "The Second Jewish Law" and with the preparation of the draft of "The Third Jewish Law." This latter prohibited sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews and banned intermarriages between Jews and Christians.

However, neither Teleki nor any law to protect racial purity could prevent my father from marrying the woman he loved. At the wedding ceremony, which took place in January 1944, there were Jewish witnesses and two Christian ones. My father was then secretary of the Opera House. Only after his death was I told how he brought food to his starving father-in-law in the Budapest Ghetto and conveyed forged baptismal documents to other members of his family.

My mother

My maternal grandmother Roza Klein lived with her family in Kolozsvár (Cluj). As Hungarian Jews, the Kleins felt very much out of place in this city, after it was transferred to Romanian control. In 1928, they moved to Budapest. Roza married Dezso Schwarz, who served in the Hungarian army in World War I. Three children were born to the couple: Eta, Olga, my mother and Albert.

For the past 20 years, I never go anywhere without a photograph of my mother, which dates back to the summer of 1944. In the picture you can see a young girl with blonde hair. She is smiling and is wearing a light raincoat bearing the yellow badge that the Nazis forced all Jews to wear. In the fifth year of the most massive war in human history, the Hungarian government declared that my mother, then enrolled in a high school on Mester Street, was an enemy of the people. The government considered her deportation to be a political-strategic objective of the greatest urgency.

During the regime of the Arrow Cross, a fascist party that headed the coalition during the days of Nazi rule in Hungary, my mother had two narrow brushes with death. On October 16, 1944, Arrow Cross soldiers led her and other members of her family to a basement, carried out a body search on them and confiscated all of their valuable possessions. They were removed later that night from their home by a group of SS and Arrow Cross soldiers. Hundreds of persons were forced to stand in groups of five after having handed over their personal effects.

"You won't be needing them," the Germans and the Hungarian fascists informed them before ordering them to march toward the bank of the Danube River. Before the large group of people reached the river bank, a foreign diplomat, whose identity remains a mystery to this very day, suddenly appeared and rescued the would-be victims from their executioners. A short while later, my mother and her entire family were taken to a brick factory in Obuda. Allied bombings prevented the deportation of the Jews by railroad car and they were thus forced to march to the Austrian border.

The lives of my mother and her family were saved, thanks to "protection letters" that my mother's brother, Albert, managed to obtain. My grandfather escaped from the brick factory and my mother was hidden by her former homeroom teacher. They subsequently found shelter in a two-room apartment, together with 27 persons who were in the same plight, but soon fell into the hands of Arrow Cross soldiers. My mother, my grandmother and my aunt were brought to the execution site on the banks of the Danube; however, a Russian air attack forced the Arrow Cross soldiers to scatter. My mother and her friends were saved.

The fate of my relatives who lived in provincial towns was vastly different. Like all the other Jews living in such towns (whose populations numbered about half a million), they fell victim to the fastest deportation campaign in the history of the Holocaust.

Adolf Eichmann came to Hungary to deport its 800,000 Jews. Since his unit had only 150 members, he had no prospects of attaining his goal without the collaboration of the official institutions of the Hungarian regime, the police and the gendarmerie. On arriving in Budapest, Eichmann could rely on the loyalty of the two directors- general of the Hungarian interior ministry, Laszlo Endre and Laszlo Baky, who had been appointed to their posts after the start of the German occupation (with Horthy's approval).

The final stages in the preparation of the plan to "cleanse Hungary of its Jews" were quickly completed. Make no mistake: The Hungarian government only issued the instructions. The implementation was in the hands of notary publics, railroad employees, police officers and jurists - a total of some 200,000 people. These were individuals who had already been poisoned by words and who, since 1938, had translated into concrete actions the continuous flow of anti-Jewish legislation that the Hungarian parliament passed and that had become increasingly more stringent. Well before 1944, they had grown accustomed to the idea that Jews were second-class citizens and that the various Hungarian governments had denied them all their rights.

The deportation did not start with the freight cars. Quite the contrary: The trains in Hungary were only the second-to-last station along the road to deportation. The first step was the consent that was given to the idea that human beings could be segregated by race. The pace of work displayed by the Hungarian authorities astounded even the Germans. The ghettoization

began on April 16 and, within a matter of only a few weeks, hundreds of thousands of people were crowded into closed neighborhoods, and into brick factories and flour mills.

The worst of all was yet to come. In the second half of June, my relatives from Hungary's provincial towns were gathered together with other candidates for deportation at the collection point at the tobacco factory in Bekescsaba. There - as in most of the Hungarian ghettos and collection camps - under horrifying conditions of starvation, beatings with the rifle butts of gendarmes, and body searches that penetrated every orifice, the fate of deportation awaited my relatives. On June 26, they were placed on freight cars together with 3,100 others who shared their fate. They were in the freight car for several days. Hungry, thirsty and forced to stand in the crowded car, they heard the sobbing of those who had become insane and the rattling in the throats of the dying. The heat was unbearable and so was the stench. Thus, when they arrived at Birkenau and the freight car door was opened, they almost felt as if they had been redeemed.

As always, most of the arrivals in that deportation were immediately sent to the gas chamber. I will never know whether my relatives were subjected to the selection process, and if so, where, when and under what circumstances they died. I have no one whom I can ask. No one came back.

My identity

After the war, my father became secretary of the National Theater, where he met my mother, who had given her name a Hungarian ring - Siklos - and had converted to Christianity, despite the vigorous protest of the members of the Jewish community. She was the only one in her family to take this course. Like many others, she wanted to forget. She never talked about her life during World War II and avoided anything that was "Jewish."

I was born in 1950 and was baptized as a Catholic in 1952. My father, who was a heretic, believed that I should be the one to decide on my identity when I became an adult. Had I been born a few years earlier, these considerations would not have interested in the slightest the collaborationist government that ruled Hungary. As [Nobel Prize for Literature laureate] Imre Kertesz puts it: "The legal authorities of my homeland would have handed me over to a foreign power, like merchandise placed in a sealed freight car, in accordance with international agreements, with the explicit purpose of killing me." Me - that is, someone who was Christian but who was not a believer, a half-Jew who was totally Hungarian and considered that this division was significant only as far as my family's history was concerned. In any case, this kind of division was not plausible, just as it is impossible to distinguish in a child's body the father's blood from the mother's.

Last winter I accompanied a group of Hungarian university students to the site of another Hungarian tragedy, Voronez, where in 1943, a battle took place in which the Hungarian army suffered a major defeat and tens of thousands of people were killed. I pondered the difference between Voronez and Auschwitz-Birkenau. In both cases, tens of thousands of Hungarians perished; however, the defeat on the banks of the Don River lives more vividly in the memories of Hungarian families. A possible reason might be that the individuals who perished in the battle of Voronez were the fathers, sons, husbands and brothers of people who later cherished their memory in their hearts. At Auschwitz-Birkenau, in contrast, entire families, entire communities were exterminated. In most cases, there was no one left to light a memorial candle for the victims.

We mourn over Voronez, we utter mourning chants over Auschwitz, but beyond mourning, there is an element of responsibility that is not easy to live with. It is difficult to comprehend how Hungary could have turned its back on hundreds of thousands of its citizens, how it could have humiliated them, robbed them of their possessions and sent them to their death. Although thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands, of courageous people risked their lives to save those who were being persecuted, it is still difficult to grasp the fact that most Hungarians passively watched the suffering of the Jews and that many of them even joyously seized control of their possessions.

It is difficult to understand that what happened was not the private operation of a small band of criminals, but that it was rather the climax of a lengthy process, and that the responsibility for what happened must be borne by Hungary's political leaders, its intellectuals and a significant segment of its society. It was not our sin, but we are obligated to confront it. There is no collective guilt here. Nor does it make any sense to talk in such terms. The descendants of people who lived 60 years ago cannot be held responsible for what happened then. However, personal responsibility indeed exists.

It is our responsibility to remember and to say in a loud, clear voice and in a comprehensible manner that the tragedy that took place in 1944 and 1945 was the result of the complicity, envy, cowardice, sinfulness and evil will of thousands of people. We cannot base our study of the lessons of the past on a refusal to remember and on new lies. We must therefore tell what happened in this country 60 years ago. We must tell future generations that, six decades ago, Hungarian citizens persecuted, humiliated and murdered other Hungarian citizens because of an evil and groundless ideology. This must be done so that words of a certain nature will never again be able to lead to the slamming of freight car doors.

An integral part of the foundation of our national memory must be the perception of the Holocaust as a Hungarian tragedy. The victims, who constituted approximately 10 percent of the total population - that is, well over half-a-million Jews and Gypsies - were murdered as Hungarian citizens. Every third victim in the largest death camp was deported from Hungary by the Hungarian authorities, in compliance with the explicit instructions of the Hungarian government, which collaborated with the Nazis.

Although there are no graves in Auschwitz-Birkenau, that is the largest Hungarian cemetery in history.

The author is the Hungarian minister of education. This article first appeared in Hungary's largest-circulation daily, Népszabadság. He would be happy to receive reactions from readers: magyarbalint52@gmail.com

May, 2004.