THE OSTJUDEN

The Galicianer in the Hungarian Imagination

“...this greedy hatred of the Jews did not burst into flames all at once; its acrid smoke hung over Hungarian life already for decades.”

This candid assessment by Sándor Márai, one of the most astute observers of the Hungarian social and political scene in the 1930s and 1940s, well sums up the evolution of an image of the hated Galicianer, in the six decades leading up to World War II and the Holocaust. There is an old axiom that in order to be able to exclude socially, to expel, or to exterminate a group of people, a political culture needs to create an image of the “other.” While this image might be a caricature, it must convey all the presumed negative features a group has assigned to it.

The creation of such an image was a prerequisite for the 1941 Hungarian deportation to Galicia. Indeed, the idea of an imminent danger to “Hungariandom” by an unchecked wave of Jewish immigration from the East goes back to the middle and second half of the nineteenth century. During the following half century, this notion metamorphosed into the more concrete representation of a hated figure, the Galicianer, who must be expelled from the body of the nation.

The stereotype of the Galicianer is not a Hungarian invention. Indeed, it was a European phenomenon, across the continent. The Swiss philosopher and social observer Denis de Rougemont summed up this well as “the difference between the ‘liberal European’ type and the ‘vulgar arrogant’ Jew who, by implication, always emanated from Eastern Europe.” Ostjuden is a German label attached to such Jews, who tried to escape from the pogroms of Czarist Russia. But this label also applied to the Galicianers—Jews who were searching for economic salvation from the poverty of Galicia, an Austrian province at the time. The alarm over the mass movement of more than two million Jews from an economically and culturally backward corner of Eastern Europe permeated the intellectual body politics on both sides of the Atlantic. The largest wave of emigration from Galicia in the later part of the nineteenth century impacted mostly America. Bernard Wasserstein’s quip might hold true that to be called a
“Galitzianer was for long not much of a compliment . . . [and] denoted folksy backwardness and at times also a petty mercantile mentality and moral shiftiness.” However, in Central Europe at the turn of the century, and especially between the two world wars, this perception took a darker and more sinister tone. The quote supporting the chapter heading exemplifies this evolution from exclusion to extermination. It was based on virulent backlash against an alien population movement emanating from the Austrian province of Galicia—its destination Central and Western Europe, and America.

The appearance of the Galicianer in Hungary held a special Hungarian twist that was reflective of the country’s retarded social and industrial development. Hungary of the late nineteenth century was in a paradoxical position as it faced the stream of newly arriving Jews from across the Carpathian Mountains. This internal migration, from Austrian-controlled Galicia into Hungary—effectively from one province to the next—was powered by economic opportunism. It was different from other foreign influx at the time. These immigrants, the first Jewish wave from Galicia, willingly and wholeheartedly identified with Hungarian national aspirations, rapidly assimilating to Hungarian culture and language. Conversely, Hungarian society was in dire need of numerical superiority in a multinational empire, as well as a viable and robust middle class. Thus, Jews were a most welcome addition to the mélange of ethnicities in this multiethnic and multilingual country, but while they were obviously needed, the picture was infinitely more complex and paradoxical.

A rift within the fractious Jewish establishment, with palpable interdenominational tensions among the assimilated Neolog (reformed) and more traditional Orthodox Jews, also divided the community. The two main branches of Judaism, and corresponding communal organizations, were established in the late nineteenth century in Hungary along religious lines. Socially, the liberal and modernist Neologs were more inclined toward fully integrating into Hungarian society with less restrictive Jewish worship and intermarriage. They were largely the representative body of urban, assimilated middle- and upper-class Jews. This assimilated segment, from the perspective of cosmopolitan Budapest, viewed with a degree of ambivalence, bordering on disdain, the “backward” Jewish masses in the provinces.

**The Age of Convergence**

The relationship of the Hungarian population and the Jews started as an unprecedented success story in the second half of the nineteenth century, based on a common platform of Hungarian and Jewish aspirations. From an economic point of view, the decades preceding the Great War were an especially successful period in which Jews played a critical role. Although the war of independence fought against the Habsburg Empire in
1848–1849, in which the Jewish community fully identified with Hungarian national objectives, was unsuccessful, Hungary became a constitutional monarchy as a result of a comprehensive political accommodation in 1867 between Austria and Hungary. Consequently, the empire was renamed the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

In its new form, Hungary could reap the benefit of direct access to Western European culture, industry, and economic development. Jewry became the necessary agent for rapid industrialization, establishment of financial institutions, and educational reform. Along the way, the Jews transmuted into a key economic and cultural force—establishing a viable and strong middle class and a corresponding financial and industrial empire. Due to their high birth rate, which was above the national average, and the steady flow of emigration from the East, the number of Jews in Hungary proper increased exponentially.\(^6\)

Parallel to this Austro-Hungarian “accommodation” in 1867, a corresponding Hungarian-Jewish “compromise,” aptly labeled a “renaissance,” took place. The Hungarian government granted full emancipation to Jews with corresponding civil and political rights. It recognized them as Hungarians of the Jewish faith. From then on, the word “Jewish” was eliminated from official statistics and government publications.\(^7\) This was followed in 1895 by the “Law of Recepció,” which recognized the Jewish religion officially as one of the religions accepted in the state, and accorded rights enjoyed by the Catholic and Protestant churches. The ratification of this law was enacted despite vigorous objection from the Catholic Church. Many of these progressive policies were advanced by the Hungarian aristocratic ruling elite. In conjunction with the liberal spirit of the age, Hungarian politicians understood the crucial role Jews could play in the modernization of Hungary. In a socially, educationally, and economically backward country, which was divided into a thin aristocratic layer and a huge mass of inured peasantry, the role of a viable and functioning middle class was assigned to the Jews.

The ruling circles had a vested interest in granting Jewish emancipation and equality, for a rather practical reason. Because of the apparent demographic imbalance in this multinational empire, where Hungarians constituted less than half of the total population, the Jewish community, numbering close to a million people, became the tipping point for Hungarian domination. By accepting the rapidly expanding Jewish community as Hungarians, the Hungarian population acquired a slight majority, 51.4 percent, at the turn of the century. Again, an economic rationale, combined with national priorities, played a crucial role in this drive for Jewish emancipation.\(^8\)

Because of these farsighted policies, Jews rapidly acquired a leading role in the creation of financial institutions, the establishment of industry, and the setting up of an economic infrastructure for Hungary’s agricultural sector. One of the lesser-known contributions of this rapidly assimilating community was their advancement in secondary and higher education. The first generation of Jewish peddlers and traveling salesmen
was followed by offspring who gained university degrees in much larger numbers than would be indicated by their percentage in the general population.

The change was dramatic. While their representation in certain fields such as industry, finance, and trade by the end of the nineteenth century was remarkable, their number in the liberal professions was equally impressive. In the first decade of the new century, 45 percent of lawyers, close to 50 percent of doctors, and similar number of journalists belonged to the Jewish faith. Jews were considerably overrepresented in academia as well. Perhaps the best reflection of the quest for assimilation by the well-educated segment of the Jewish establishment was the change in the ratio of Hungarian-speaking Jews within ten years. The proportion of individuals whose mother tongue was Hungarian grew from 63.8 percent to 76.9 percent among those of the Jewish faith. Simultaneously, the percentage of those officially registered as German, but whose mother tongue was, in fact, Yiddish, dropped from 33.0 percent to 21.7 percent.

The assimilation was especially significant among the urban, Neolog Jewry with a strong anchor in Western culture and thought. Reflecting a cultural drive of “Magyarization,” many of these same Jews dropped their German family names, adopting Hungarian ones. Conversion to Christianity also gained momentum. As a sign of full assimilation, those who changed their religion could pursue careers in public administration as well as in the military. Numerous Jews directing industrial companies and financial institutions were awarded nobility for their contribution to Hungary. Intertwined with this wave of conversion, intermarriages with the nobility, especially by the Jewish “financial aristocracy” and industry leaders, also became prevalent.

On the other hand, members of the Orthodox and Hasidic Jewish communities, living mainly in the northern and eastern parts of the country, insisted on their distinctive clothing and customs. They interacted with the surrounding population mainly in business or official matters. They retained Yiddish as their spoken language within the family and religious institutions. The observation of Eleanor Perényi, the daughter of an American diplomat who married into one of the leading families of local nobility in Carpathian Ruthenia in the late 1930s, is instructive regarding the social situation of the Jews. Although they were the ultimate middle class in Carpathian Ruthenia, “the Jews were isolated in the community, partly from discrimination, but partly, too, because they kept their character so strongly.” Yet the same observer also noted that these “Jews were pro-Hungarian,” and even these socially and culturally isolated Jewish communities maintained a staunchly nationalistic orientation. They communicated in Hungarian in public discourse and enrolled their children in Hungarian schools in much higher numbers than did their non-Hungarian neighbors.

Not everyone viewed these developments as positive or welcome. By the later years of the nineteenth century, rapid modernization and corresponding economic
prosperity could not hide a simmering social tension within society. These tensions were partly due to rapid industrialization and a correspondingly lopsided distribution in the workforce that was based on religious affiliation. This social phenomenon was not particularly Hungarian, for it was noticeable across Central and Western Europe, yet the rapidly deepening division between the robust Jewish and fledgling Christian middle classes in Hungary was much more concrete and visible.

As social observers of the Hungarian scene opined, a collision course, if not an open conflict, between the two middle classes was only a matter of time. At the turn of the century, the Catholic People’s Party became the main proponent of anti-Semitism. Its rationale for anti-Jewish sentiments was based on the notion that Jews were the promoters of anti-Christian and destructive ideas embedded in liberalism and socialism. Jewish intellectuals and their allegedly harmful influence were a particular target for unrestricted attack. Those in aristocratic circles, who intermarried in growing numbers with the Jewish upper bourgeois, glossed over these emerging fault lines—partly for the national economic interest and partly because of the Jewish community’s wholehearted identification with Hungarian national aspirations. Nevertheless, this emerging division and simmering resentment carried the seeds of a potential social conflict, rapidly evolving into a racial conflict, which came into full force during and after World War I.

**CRACKS IN THE EDIFICE: CREATING THE IMAGE OF THE “OTHER”**

While there were pockets in the periphery where religious and Yiddish life was more entrenched, those emigrants who settled in Hungary during the second half of the nineteenth century had become well integrated into Hungarian society by the outbreak of the war. Thus, the subsequent appearance of the Eastern Jew with the traditional kaf-tan, sidelock, and beard, mainly in the margin of the country but also in the capital, was not a sign welcomed either by the well-to-do Jewish establishment or by the escalating voices of anti-Semitic circles. By the outbreak of the war, anti-Semitic sentiments became more vocal and organized, but the animosity toward the Easterners came into full force during the war years because of a second wave of Galicianers, a steady influx of legitimate war refugees from Galicia and later Transylvania. Thus, the concern that these newcomers were “conquering the country,” reinforced repeatedly by anti-Semitic intellectuals, exploded during and after World War I. By the late 1930s, this idea evolved into a permanent subject within the general political discourse.

In reality, Jewry in Hungary was never a uniform or united community—either religiously or socioeconomically. It was composed of three large groups, divided by history, economy, and culture. The Jews of the northwestern districts (Oberland),
of Austrian and Moravian origin, spoke German or a western dialect of Yiddish; the Jews of the northeastern districts (Unterland), mostly of Galician origin, spoke an eastern dialect of Yiddish; and of the Jews of central Hungary, the overwhelming majority spoke Hungarian. This last group settled in this region as early as the seventeenth century.

The bulk of the Galicianers arrived in Hungary at the end of the nineteenth century, as a first wave, settling down mainly in the northeastern and eastern provinces of the country. The Jews of Old Hungary were less religious and more assimilated. Equally important was the socioeconomic demarcation between the two groups. While the rich Jewish bourgeois and middle class were concentrated in Budapest and other major towns, a large segment of Jews, and especially the Galicianers, led their lives mostly along religious lines in the provinces. These could be identified, an observer noted in 1942, as “mostly proletarian small Jews in their masses.” This was the area where Jews engaged in agriculture, plus, there was a narrower but “economically more elevated stratum above them: the group of innkeepers, tenants and salesmen.”

Thus, an intercommunal rift within the Jewish establishment was based both on the socioeconomic level and religious orientation, and was also evident in the territorial distribution of Hungarian Jewry. Jews living in bigger towns mostly belonged to the reformist trend, or Neolog branch of Judaism. They made concerted efforts to assimilate and integrate fully into Hungarian society. However, on the periphery, orthodox communities, intermingled with various Hasidic “dynasties,” were much more traditional in observing religious tenets and constituted the majority. A marked resentment by those assimilated Jewish communities with a Western cultural orientation against these already existed in the nineteenth century, but it was a European problem, not a particularly Hungarian one. The socially integrated Jews felt a sense of embarrassment about their backward coreligionists; they also felt threatened by looming competition from these newcomers. Gustav Landauer summed up this concern about the impact of Eastern Jewish immigration on the already-assimilated community: “their own assimilation has not stabilized enough yet, so that another influx [of Jews] would be warranted.” Although he was speaking specifically about the situation in the German culture sphere, it could be applied equally to the well-established and well-integrated Hungarian Jewish establishment. As was the case in the neighboring countries, the ambivalence and insecurity on the part of the well-assimilated and culturally integrated Jews toward their East European coreligionists reflected a marked unease about Hungarian society’s perception of the Jews in general. The stereotypes that Hungarian Jews themselves created about East European Jews reflected their own evolving self-perception and conflicting national identity. Just as in Germany, the Hungarian Jewish resentment of the Ostjuden reflected the insecurity of a group that had only recently gained membership in the national community.
This Jewish insecurity was fueled and reinforced by politically charged anti-Semitism that emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Societal division, as the Dreyfus Affair elicited in France, could not arise in Hungary. Nevertheless, it was at this time that the first cracks began to appear in harmonious coexistence, which gradually turned into deep faults by 1918. Instead of framing or limiting anti-Semitism as a purely political discourse, as was the case in France and Germany, in Hungary it assumed more national-religious and economic overtones.

This concentrated on multiple fronts, targeting Jewish domination in the economic and cultural sphere by political and social movements. The Jews became scapegoats because “they filled the positions which the gentry considered beneath their rank.” Moreover, since they formed the engine of capitalist development, it was easy to assign all the faults of capitalism to them. As a newly evolving political philosophy, anti-Semitism revolved around the social teachings of the church. As it was noted, anti-Semitic individuals belonging to the Catholic People’s Party, founded in 1894, were especially active. Young priests, among others, formulated their critique of the existing political and economic system, the evils and vices of which they assigned mostly to the Jews. The leading ideologue of this movement was Ottokár Prohászka, a theologian and Catholic bishop, who would become one of the intellectual leaders of Hungary after World War I. He cogently framed this philosophy in 1893: “the Jewish immorality, the lack of conscience, the distorted spiritual values, which has only perverted notions of what is good, beautiful, and moral . . . sees Christians as the enemy.” Elsewhere, he openly noted, “We do not perceive anti-Semitism as a racial or religious reaction, but as a social, business-related one.” Thus, in his criticism of the Jews, he counterposed capitalism, in which utility and profit-making are the goals, with Christian values.

Prohászka’s views became progressively radicalized during and after the war, but individuals from clerical circles were not alone in decrying Jewish influence in industry, finance, and the free professions. They were joined by a small but influential group of intellectuals who called themselves “civil radicals.” In the name of “progress,” they became vocal critics of the liberal capitalist system from the opposite direction of the clerics, considering it conservative, nationalist, and oppressive. In an inherent contradiction, these intellectual circles attacked the Jewish “bourgeoisie” with special venom because they saw this broad group as exemplifying “liberal capitalism” and its support of the “ruling feudal class.”

The fact that this intellectual cadre included Jews like Oszkár Jássz, a firebrand with a Jewish background, is an interesting twist of Jewish and Hungarian history. Jássz wrote in 1912 that “It is without exaggeration to state that the power of Jewish usury—whose representatives we should be looking for not only in village saloons, but especially and mostly in the big and prestigious banks of Budapest—had never been so overwhelming
in the country; the most fanatic followers of István Tisza [the prime minister] should be looked for not only in the financially ruined members of the country gentry, but also among the Jews craving for honours and nobility.” By 1917, Jászi’s views and those of his followers became radicalized to the extent that he could assign all societal ills that encompassed “usury,” “unfair competition,” “internationalism and cosmopolitanism,” “financial capitalism,” and “cultural liberalism,” or “coffee-house culture” to Jews.

This political philosophy, coming from a respected clergyman, reflected a reality in which the traditional negative image of the Jew of “blood libels” underwent a process of “secularization” by becoming a figure responsible for all negative aspects of modernity. The complexity of these arguments was compounded by a desire to differentiate between the Galicianers and the assimilated community. The radical personalities around Jászi made this distinction between the two groups by claiming that those who fully embraced Hungarian culture should not “be considered parasites,” while those who adhered to “their ancient ways” represent the true “parasites.” There were clear differences with obviously discordant views within these philosophical circles. Nevertheless, the emerging voices of discontent remained on the intellectual and sometimes the parliamentary level, without exerting discernible influence on the public discourse.

Nonetheless, the questions about the authenticity of the “Hungarianness” of the Jews, which was composed of diverse groups and still on its way to full assimilation, was challenged, again and again. This is the period, in the early years of the 1910s, when the full-blown figure of the Galicianer enters the Hungarian national consciousness. The relationship of Jews and non-Jews was still harmonious, but the fragility of their coexistence was increasingly evident. A major and extraordinary catastrophe was needed to launch the dissemination and institutionalization of anti-Semitism and its prime representation in the figure of the Galicianer. This catastrophe was World War I.

A CONVENIENT SCAPEGOAT:
GOOD JEWS AND BAD JEWS

Historians have often proposed that just as World War I gave revolutionaries their chance, it also spawned the seeds of counterrevolutions that led, in turn, to World War II. As an unmitigated disaster for the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the defeat in World War I signaled a watershed moment in Hungarian–Jewish relations. At the conclusion of the hostilities, Hungary was on its knees, impacted by rampant inflation and poverty, coupled by the trauma of the collapse of greater Hungary.

The defeat precipitated three corollary national traumas in which Jews were placed in the center. First, the radical right—intellectuals and parliamentarians—jointly tried to justify the hardship at home and the defeats on the battlefields by creating a mythical
yet insidious internal enemy, the Jews. Just as in Germany, “the stab-in-the-back” myth was a convenient explanation. The second consequence was equally traumatic when the war was followed in Hungary by a short-lived but brutal experiment with a communist dictatorship. It was conveniently labeled the Red Terror, in which Jews played a significant role. Finally, this was followed by a counterrevolution, the White Terror. It exacted a bloody revenge in which Jews, as the assumed fomenters of the Red Terror, became the primary victims.

However, the ultimate and most dramatic consequence of the war was the dismemberment of the country by the Treaty of Trianon. The treaty was the peace agreement signed in 1920 to formally end World War I between the Allies and Hungary, the latter being one of the successor states to the monarchy. Robert Gerwarth noted the whiplash effect that the treaty had on the defeated Hungary. It regulated the status of an independent Hungarian state and defined its borders. It left Hungary with only 28 percent of the territory that had constituted the prewar Kingdom of Hungary. Its population was 7.6 million, only 36 percent of the prewar kingdom’s population of 20.9 million. One of the most unfortunate side effects of this treaty was an introspective search for a scapegoat by a tired and dispirited country.24

British author Antony Julius captured the essence of anti-Semitism, and the parallel creation of a scapegoat, when he defined it as “a way imagining Jews, a pernicious, elaborate fiction, and not just a series of theorem about the Jewish people.” During the war, leaders of Hungarian Jewry forcefully showcased Jewish patriotism and full identification with the Hungarian nation. The Jewish press, led by the premier news organ of the community (Equality), made every effort to reassure the public that Jews, along with Catholics and Protestants, were in a common front against the hated Czarist Russia and its virulent anti-Semitism. Fiery editorials showcased news about Czarist atrocities by the advancing Russian troops in parallel with Hungarian Jewish heroism on the battlefield. The leaders of the community wanted to preempt any accusation that the Jews were trying to evade military service, and that when they were sent to the front, they were bad soldiers.

By the second year of the war, however, the hopes for a rapid victory evaporated and the economic burden of the conflict increasingly impacted Hungarian society. Mirroring a deep-seated frustration and resentment, public life became a breeding ground for unsubstantiated rumors and open allegations. These revolved around Jewish financial, commercial, and industrial domination, in parallel with their political influence, which gave them unfettered access to military contracts as primary suppliers of the army. The charge of war profiteering from these contracts, coupled with a growing shortage of commodities and money supply, became a catchword not only for radical intellectual circles, as it was before the war, but across the political spectrum and the public at large. Perhaps the most often repeated accusation was that Jews shirked
military service, or if they were drafted, they benefited from clerical assignments far from the dangers of the front line.  

The level and toxicity of the polemics increased exponentially as the war dragged on. The persuasive assessment of Péter Bihari that by “1916–1918, the Jewish Question penetrated every pore of Hungarian society” well describes the atmosphere of the later war years. But, perhaps the most toxic element within these charges was the appearance of the second wave of refugees flooding Budapest, directly from Galicia, starting in 1914. These were the authentic Galicianers in language, attire, and religious orthodoxy. At first, the presence of the bearded masses with sidelocks and kaftans in Budapest sparked more curiosity than enmity; it presented to cosmopolitan Budapest an interesting spectacle. From late autumn 1914, however, accusations began to emerge, without distinguishing between the rich or the homeless Jews among them, about their increased burden to society. Their appearance reinforced the old, negative images of trading and peddling Jews, or in the common parlance the “Khazars,” a term that rapidly became interchangeable with “Galicianers.” Correspondingly, the Khazar was depicted as an alien creature, “with shifty eyes red beard, and alien costume.” A Hungarian historian’s comment that the “appearance of these refugees in Hungary made a disastrous impact” is an apt description of the contemporary public perception. If a Jewish refugee was poor, he was called a “parasite,” and if he was rich, he was labeled a “usurer.” When inflation spiraled out of control, Galician Jews became “profiteers,” and later they were blamed for the shortage of commodities.

Because of Russian victories at the outset of hostilities, Jewish masses occupying both Galicia and Bukovina fled across the Carpathian Mountains. They were Austrian citizens, so many of them were able to reach Vienna, Moravia, Bohemia, and Hungary. While accurate estimates are hard to find, contemporary reports placed the number of Galician refugees in Hungary in the autumn of 1914 at around 15,000 to 25,000 people. In the hope of a rapid victory in the war, Hungarian Jewish organizations extended support to the new arrivals. Yet, the already assimilated community viewed them with some derision and condescension. There was a real concern that these Galicianers—in their torn clothes and with their strange, “backward,” and “superstitious” lifestyle—would be associated with the well-integrated and cosmopolitan Jews of Budapest. This concern was somewhat justified, for these newcomers became the tangible incarnation of an image that lurked in the recesses of the Hungarian imagination even before the military conflict. Besides their outward appearance, these people did not speak Hungarian, they did not identify with Hungarian national aspirations, and they did not serve in the armed forces.

While Austria refused to underwrite the support of the refugees trapped in Hungary, and the Hungarian government did not consider it their problem, a temporary resettlement was implemented. The government called upon the refugees of
Austrian nationality, not all of them Jewish, to report to designated collection points from which special trains transported them to Czech territory in the second half of April 1915. Although the transports reduced the number of emigrants in the Hungarian capital, this action did not solve the issue of the Galician war refugees, for many of them preferred to remain legally in the country. These were escapees who had found a job in Hungary when the country struggled with labor shortages during the war. Two additional groups could also stay in Hungary legitimately: wealthy refugees who did not depend on others’ financial support, and rabbis and teachers who were supported by the Jewish community of Pest after the state benefit was no longer provided.

This resettlement of refugees had a calming effect, however temporary, on the public discourse in 1915. However, the polemics were reignited as a consequence of a renewed Russian military campaign, the Brusilov Offensive, and the Romanian invasion in Transylvania a year later, when a new wave of refugees, both Jews and non-Jews, streamed across the Carpathian Mountains from Galicia and Transylvania. This new flare-up had far-reaching consequences not only for the new refugees themselves, but also for the original emigrants from the nineteenth century and their descendants. An evolution took hold of the public imagination as an increasing number of people became labeled as Galicianers, linking the notion of the usurer and profiteer not only with the newly arrived refugees, but also with those whose ancestors had arrived from the East in the nineteenth century. By that time, thousands of them had been born in Hungary, becoming respected citizens and productive members of the middle class. Thus, the idea of a continuous “Galician influx” became the central theme of Eastern European and Hungarian anti-Semitism.

While in the first two years of the war the intellectual conversation concentrated on “kaftan-wearing profiteers,” as the military tide turned against Austria and Hungary, the public debate also lurched toward more ominous tones in which a general “Jewish Question” emerged. The influx of the Galicianers became a component in this newly framed and expanded blame game for the military reverses and the economic hardship on the home front. Before the war, racist anti-Semitism was confined to the fringe of radical politics. By the third year of the armed conflict, however, it had entered into the mainstream. Parliamentary debates became increasingly contentious and vitriolic, with Jews described as “profiteers,” “wheeler-dealers,” and “shirkers.” The daily press reflected this trend with articles that expanded the issue of the Galicianers within the context of the overall “Jewish Question.”

By 1917, the contours of a differentiation between “good Jews” and “bad Jews” emerged in which the former signified the culturally assimilated true “Hungarian” Jews, while the latter were the traditional (i.e., Orthodox or Hasidic) Jews. The specter of a failed process of assimilation due to the recurrent waves of immigrants from Galicia and, to a lesser extent, from Bukovina, consumed the public imagination. A riveting
book, aptly titled and published in 1917 queried leading intellectuals and clerics about their views pertaining to the question. The majority, among them Jászi, spoke of deep pessimism about the potential of integration of the Jewish masses, the Galicianers, into the mainstream. One respondent squarely placed the problem in economic focus by suggesting that “the incarnation of the capitalist worldview is also Jewish.” The majority implied that the assimilated segment had been overwhelmed by the influx of the eastern elements. A political commentator went as far as claiming that there were good Jews [the Galicianers], and a third group, which conformed outwardly to Christian values practiced in Hungary and Europe. This is the first time that a clear delineation emerged between the Galicianers as a race and the assimilated segment as a religion.  

Another influential thinker and law professor from Nagyvárad (Oradea, Romania), Péter Ágoston, interjected an additional element into this intellectual debate by assigning guilt for “dual loyalty” on the part of the assimilated community, since they supported their coreligionists against the interests of the Hungarian nation. As an antidote, he proposed “sealing the borders against immigration and expulsion of alien Jews from the country.” That this clamor for expulsion reached Parliament should not come as a surprise. Several representatives openly advocated that while the war was raging, “they can still be expelled on the basis of an extraordinary legislation and perhaps such a new act can be submitted to the Parliament.” Otherwise, this unassimilable multitude “will lead to both social and national catastrophe.”  

To the credit of the governmental authorities, they made every effort to contain anti-Semitic agitation, both in Parliament and on the streets. From genuine concern that such agitation would be divisive in the face of the military threat, the long-serving prime minister István Tisza called for national unity by forcefully denouncing anti-Jewish voices during the debates in Parliament. His main concern was that racial exploitation of religious divisions during the war could impact society’s cohesion. Simultaneously, he banned newspapers that promoted the anti-Semitic agenda.  

In spite of such injunctions, though, the “Jewish Question” became a central topic of discussion in the mainstream media. The Catholic press represented the media’s preoccupation with this topic in declaring that the “Jewish Question has become one of the most pivotal problems and central challenge for the future of Hungary.” We can quote again Prohászka’s words in declaring that “As we are getting closer to the front lines, the more numerous are the Christians while the Jews are remaining far back in the hinterland. The Christians are sacrificed while the Jews are saving their hides for the future benefits of Hungarian culture.”  

While the regular citizenry vociferously questioned the Jewish commitment to the war, the rampant corruption, and the presence of the Galicianers in Hungary, the government of Tisza and subsequent premiers appointed several Jewish politicians to high-level governmental positions. The significance of these appointments cannot be...
understated, for it served as a psychological reaffirmation of their acceptance, integration, and assimilation at a time when the loyalty of the Jews and their belonging to the Hungarian nation was increasingly questioned.\textsuperscript{16}

Successive governments followed in Tisza’s footsteps in decrying anti-Semitism, yet they reminded the Jewish community not to express solidarity or extend support to the emigrants. A month before the military collapse, Sándor Wekerle, one of the last prime ministers, informed Parliament that the “repatriation of the Galicianers is under way, within the confines of the law.”\textsuperscript{37} These cautiously formulated words aimed to assuage the concerns of the representatives. Parallel with this announcement, though, raids by law enforcement agencies were launched across the country, and especially in northern Transylvania and Carpathian Ruthenia, for ferreting out and identifying Galicianers. These raids did not spare even towns close to the Hungarian capital. Contrary to the promise of the prime minister of adherence to the legal code, the raids were accompanied by beatings, abuse, and plunder.\textsuperscript{18} This dramatic change in the atmosphere toward the Jews in the summer and fall of 1918 accurately reflected a change in popular public sentiment on the street level.

As the war reached its final moments, frustrated people in the heartland and the masses of returning soldiers from the front needed an explanation for the military defeat. The Jews, and specifically the Galicianers, became the convenient scapegoats. The liberal era, which had started with the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, and which can be characterized as a mutually beneficial partnership between Hungary’s ruling elite and its Jewish minority, came to an inglorious end. Perhaps the most cogent argument from this era belongs to a contemporary witness who dryly observed that “When the Jew-haters talk or write about Galicianers, they do not just mean those few hundreds of Galician refugees who are stuck here, but in fact the children and grandchildren of yesterday’s Galicianers, i.e. the entire Jewish community of Hungary as it is, fathers and sons included.”\textsuperscript{39}

The conclusion of World War I created a complex and troubled world. The consequent treaties, as Kershaw pointedly noted, were “to reward support for the Entente [the winning powers] during the war and to punish the vanquished enemies.”\textsuperscript{40} Perhaps no country lost as much territory and population as Hungary. While 72 percent of its territory was transferred to newly created states, more than three million Hungarians ended up in the newly created Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania. Among these Hungarians, there were more than three hundred thousand Jews.

A country does not necessarily need an ethnic or religious scapegoat to explain national misfortunes, but it sure helps. Like all nations losing a war, Hungary needed to find an explanation. Just like Germany, where Hitler honed to perfection an excuse for German defeat, Hungary identified the Jews as the main culprit for the loss. But the accusation started much earlier, as the year that followed the end of the war was a
tumultuous one in the newly independent Hungarian Republic. It declared independence on November 16, 1918, severing its partnership with the Habsburg royal house. However, there were no major celebrations and no corresponding declarations. A political vacuum became palpable. The new regime was beset by labor unrest, a disorganized mass of frustrated, dissatisfied soldiers returning from the battlefields, a dispirited middle class, and, more importantly, a rapidly shrinking country. While the government, under the leadership of a liberal aristocrat Count Mihály Károlyi, implemented reforms, the loss of the major industrial base around the outlying provinces, as a consequence of dismemberment of the country by the winning powers, robbed Hungary of its economic vitality and power.³¹

Károlyi faced an unwinnable situation in holding together a country teetering on economic collapse. Beyond the economic despair, the psychological trauma of losing large swaths of the country paralyzed society. His short-lived and ineffectual government, cobbled together with the participation of social democrats and civil radicals, could not cope with the challenges both from within and without.

Abandoned by the victorious powers, the ability to govern slipped rapidly out of Károlyi’s grasp toward the radical left, which seized the opportunity to assume full control on March 21, 1919, establishing the Hungarian Soviet Republic. The small but well-organized communist party, under the leadership of Béla Kun, instituted a sweeping restructuring of Hungarian society. This included the purging of aristocrats, bankers, factory owners, and even small businessmen, commonly labeled as the “exploiters of the people.” The Jews, being the middle and upper middle class, were the most affected in the corresponding nationalization drive. Concomitantly with the expropriation of wealth, the new regime instituted a reign of fear, hence the moniker “Red Terror,” aimed at the “class enemies” of the people. This “Red Terror” was often identified in the following decades as “Jewish Terror.” Conversely, the label “bourgeois” was also equated with being Jewish.

The Jewish presence in both the Károlyi government and in the upper ranks of the communist dictatorship was conspicuous. It was especially overwhelming in the latter. These Jews represented the new political elite, which came from the ranks of social democrats and other politically left-oriented movements. In the ranks of the social democrats, the highly educated Jewish intellectuals were in the majority. In both cases, though, these leaders had left the fold of the Jewish religion or community either through conversion or by subscribing to communist ideology. Kun’s admission that although he was born Jewish, he rapidly converted to being a “socialist and communist,” was an apt description for the entire leadership. Not surprisingly, almost all these leaders, divorced from their Jewish roots, bore Hungarian family names. Conversely, very few came, as it was later falsely touted by right-wing circles, from “Galicianer” background.⁴¹ In fact, communist elite troops, the Red Guards, followed the order
of the People’s Commissar for the removal of thousands of Galician Jews to Poland. Although the communist revolution was short-lived, it stamped its mark on a cross section of society. The Red Terror did not differentiate between a Hungarian aristocrat, a Jewish industrialist, or a small shopkeeper. Their wealth was confiscated, and they were indiscriminately persecuted or sometimes executed.

The first Hungarian proletarian dictatorship was finally toppled by the victorious alliance (Triple Entente) via the intervention of Romanian troops. The National Army, gathered in the southern town of Szeged and led by Miklós Horthy, a naval admiral in World War I, launched a parallel attack with the aim to clear the country of communist forces. Realizing the failure of the communist experiment, on August 1, Kun resigned and fled the country along with several other communist leaders.

Within six months, after consolidating his grip on a territorially truncated, dispirited, and economically devastated country, Horthy was elected officially as “Regent of the Kingdom of Hungary” by Parliament on March 1, 1920. His condition of almost absolute power was granted by this legislative body; however, the emergence of Horthy as the de facto leader of Hungary did not stop a wave of murderous retribution, commonly branded as the “White Terror,” which swept through the country. The indiscriminate extrajudicial killings by paramilitary units, loosely aligned but outside the control of the national army, and atrocities perpetrated by them, dwarfed anything the Red Terror had inflicted during its three-month siege. The torture and killings encompassed a cross section of society, from communist party functionaries to shopkeepers, and from lawyers to major landowners. Now “Jew” and “communist” became interchangeable, exacting a horrendous toll on the Jewish community.

These atrocities did not escape the attention of the victorious powers, which dispatched a military delegation to investigate this wholesale slaughter. They also caught the attention of the ruling circles around Horthy, which demanded stability and a focus on reconstruction. Finally, by 1921, the situation in Hungary calmed down enough to implement a “national conservative” government that provided political stability during the interwar years by rejecting political extremes of both the left and the right. It identified itself as Christian, mainly based on the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. Its national mission was to rectify the injustice of the Treaty of Trianon by territorial revision. How much the new regime practiced the “Christian values” that it vocally professed during the interwar years is an open question, for often the term “Christian” simply meant “non-Jewish.”

Attempts to rebuild the country were hindered by the loss of major industries and a population base with corresponding markets located in the lost provinces. The added influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees from these territories, mainly from the ranks of aristocracy, county administrators, and the professional class, tested the capacity of the country to absorb these new arrivals. It also hindered the ability of the country’s leading
elite to restart the economy as well as introduce badly needed social reforms. In addition to the burden of caring for the Hungarian victims of the war—invalids, orphans, and widows—the state had to tend to the needs of the refugees streaming across the borders.

One of the rallying points in this national emergency was finding and assigning blame for this turn of events. While anti-Semitic sentiments could have had palliative psychological effects as they provided an immediate explanation, they could not, in the long run, resolve the complex demographic and economic malaise facing Hungarian society. It was a political balancing act. However anti-Semitic the political leadership may have been or seemed to be during the interwar years, it had to reconcile itself to the notion that the Jewish community was crucial for the reconstruction of a badly fractured country. Valdemar Langlet, a Swedish observer of Hungary during the 1930s, provided a candid yet unsparing picture in which aristocrats controlled the reins of power by privilege, while Jews, many of them converts, held the industrial and financial power by hard work. He also quoted a rather sobering statistics that “85 percent of the vast estates which were left to Hungary after the Peace Treaty [Trianon] now belong to Jews,” and, conversely, these estates “yield both better crops and larger income than when they were in the Magnates’ [aristocrats’] hands.” He was rather surprised and gratified by the assessment of a Hungarian aristocrat who, “anti-Semite himself, nevertheless maintained that Hungary could not exist without Jews . . . they are a necessary evil and their commercial talents are an indispensable factor of the life of the country. They may be [an] ulcer on society, but the ulcer cannot be removed without endangering the patient’s life.”

Thus, Hungarian society had to reconcile itself with recognition that while a “Jewish Question” might not be immediately solvable, it could be managed. The solution that emerged immediately after the ruins of World War I, reflecting the intellectual trends during the war, was to divide the community into “good” and “bad” Jews. It should not come as a surprise that the “good” Jews comprised the bankers, landowners, and industrialists, while the “bad” Jews were those in the provinces who remained religious. During his American lecture tour in 1921, Count Pál Teleki, who served as prime minister in several governments, reassured his audience that he was not against “the Jewish religion or Jews.” Rather, his animus was anti-Galicianer. He addressed this by drawing an unmistakably sharp line between the assimilated Jews and the Galicianers: “It is much more a question of immigration, and antagonism towards a certain group of foreigners who turned against the nation . . . Bolshevism in Hungary was led and directed by these foreigners. Of course, there were Jews of older Hungarian origin, just as there were Hungarians taking part in the Bolshevist movement, but the hatred of the people was aroused by the Galicianers.”

This ideological line, coming directly from one of the leading Hungarian politicians of the interwar years, reflected and permeated the intellectual fabric of the governing
elite across the political spectrum. It conveyed the notion that assimilation as a social and psychological experiment had stalled, if not outright failed, and those who succeeded in conforming to Hungarian culture and political aspirations remained in the minority. The “eastern Jews,” those who emigrated from Galicia to the border region, the Galicianers, constituted the majority. They remained unassimilable and therefore needed to be excised, sooner or later, from the body of the nation.

Equally ominous, this ideology signified a shifting political discourse from religiously communal toward a racial definition of a large segment of the Jewish community. This racial definition, coupled with a notion of failed assimilation, emerged most clearly, again, in the influential voice of Bishop Ottokár Prohászka in the early years of the 1920s. For him there could not have been a differentiation between the old and new Jews; the assimilation of the established Jewish community was superficial and not sincere, and emotionally unrelated to the Hungarian state and society. Thus, they remained a foreign entity: “How can we assimilate and mix together the alien Jew with the Hungarian while erasing the anthropological and racial differences? [The Jew] was alien and remains alien. He spoke Hungarian, but he was feeling Jewish. He lived in Hungary but stuck in his Jewish existence. They created a community within the community.”

For Prohászka there was no compromise Teleki, a savvy politician and an avowed “anglophile,” differed in that he harbored a large degree of class-based anti-Semitism. However, as a pragmatist, he understood that economic realities of contemporary Hungary dictated political expediencies when the country was in dire need of the wealthy segment of the Jewish community—many of them with a title of nobility, intermarried with the aristocracy, and in control of the banking system as well as industrial production. He, and a whole cadre of politicians during the 1920s and 1930s, proscribed to this notion of duality within the Jewish community. While Horthy openly professed himself an anti-Semite in 1920, he recognized the value of the Jewish contribution to Hungary by the 1930s: “the Jews contributed singlehandedly more to the economy of Hungary than all the people on the extreme right combined.”

Consequently, an irreparable schism developed within Hungarian society and within the Jewish community, which divided Hungarian Jewry not only along lines of religious orthodoxy, but also along educational and economic lines. The assimilated segment was made up of moderately religious, if not already converted, highly educated Jews representing middle- and upper-class values. They were factory owners and bank executives whose elimination would have imperiled the economic foundation of the Hungarian state. The other group, the Galicianers, included those who presumably had failed to identify with Hungarian nationalist objectives. The allegation that during the revolutions of 1918–1919 the Jews were behind the communist dictatorship and temporarily seized political and economic power was tempered by assigning the blame
exclusively to the Galicianers. One of the leading figures in Hungarian politics during the 1920s, considered a moderate at the time, summed up this perception in a parliamentary speech: “The respect that we feel toward the old and patriotic Jewry cannot stop us stating that the first and second-generation immigrant Galician Jews brought to us a proletarian dictatorship.”

Contemporary scholarly and popular literature was not immune to this fixation. One of the most venerated Hungarian historians between the two world wars, Gyula Szekfű’s views are especially representative. Writing in the mid 1930s, he openly placed the blame on the doorstep of Hungarian Jewry for their failed assimilation and, consequently, for the communist dictatorship. In his view, the influx of the Galicianers subverted not only the assimilation process, but drove a wedge between Hungarians and assimilated Hungarian Jews who “held out their hands to their racial relatives in the name of brotherhood . . . and letting their love for their kind flow freely, they surrendered themselves and their higher culture to the strangers flooding in.”

The subtext of dual loyalty, as well as the betrayal of Hungarian and European Christian culture along the way, is intimated in his pronouncements. The question as to how much his work influenced public perception, or how much it reflected it, is a moot point. In the Hungary of the 1930s, the Galicianer issue became more and more the political hobbyhorse not only of the extreme right, but also of the general public.

Simultaneously, the collective designation for the Galicianers became more flexible. Based on political pragmatism, it was inflated in subsequent decades from those who directly arrived from Galicia in 1914, to those whose ancestors originated from the east and their descendants. Thus, second- or even third-generation Hungarians were lumped into this category. Finally, the term encompassed almost everyone from the provinces, even those who might have lived in an area for many decades and professed full identification with Hungarian nationalist sentiments, but clung tenaciously to their religious or folk way of life.

The trappings of a functional parliamentary system could not slow the emergence of a virulent form of anti-Semitism both in the parliamentary debates and in the public discourse. During deliberations in the Hungarian Parliament in the 1920s, the distinctions became more and more blurred between Jews who had arrived after 1914 — the “real Galicianers” — and those who had lived there for a long time, but who, in the opinion of the ruling circles, had not sufficiently assimilated into the Hungarian population. In public life, this term evolved to encompass every Jew whose Hungarian affiliation was questioned. This attitude was also reflected by the fact that right-wing parliamentarians deliberately inflated the number of “eastern” Jews to an almost absurd extent.

Statistical data contradicted the claim for a large Galician influx. Yet, even a scientifically based counterargument could not change minds. Leading statistician Alajos
Kovács, who could not be accused with philo-Semitism, provided one in 1922. He stated that emigration from Hungary prior to World War I dramatically outpaced immigration from the East. His assessment was revisited almost a century later by Walter Pietsch, who reconfirmed Kovács’ findings.55

Recent regional studies place the number of eastern Jews who settled in Hungary or continued to other destinations between 60,000 and 70,000. However, many of these emigrants viewed Hungary and Austria as transit stations to their final destination, which was America. By some estimates, America absorbed more than two million Jews from Eastern Europe between 1881 and 1920, which included a quarter of a million from Galicia alone. Eastern Jews ending up in Western Europe also accounted for around 300,000.56

THE LEGISLATION OF HATE

The ruling circles understood the negative economic ramifications of the “Jewish Question.” Nevertheless, the radicalization of the political discourse after the war demanded anti-Jewish action. Count István Bethlen, a long-serving prime minister in the interwar years, staunchly believed that mindless anti-Semitism would be contrary to the interest of the country. He was perhaps the most eloquent in expressing the division in Hungarian society toward the Jewish community. On December 17, 1925, at the Parliament he stated: “Those Jews who identify themselves with Hungarians . . . I consider as Hungarians . . . On the other hand, I also have to say that there are some Jews in this country who have declared themselves a separate race by not adopting the interests of this nation in the past or present.”57 Not surprisingly, Bethlen considered the Galicianers among the latter: a separate race, and not a religious entity. Thus, the Galicianer, eastern Jew, or “alien” Jew, as was used interchangeably, continued to preoccupy the Hungarian public as economically harmful, politically subversive, and culturally unassimilable.

The failure of Jewish assimilation was especially emphasized. During a parliamentary debate, a representative expounded on the difference between the Jewish and German communities in Hungary by postulating that “Jewry is Hungarian-speaking but in mentality foreign, the German minority (Swabians) is foreign-speaking, but in spirit Hungarian.”58 As early as this dictum, it was recognized that a safety valve that could neutralize growing societal and economic pressures—especially among the younger Christian segment of society that had little prospect for advancement—had to be found.

To defuse the explosive situation within the country, the leadership, coming from the ranks of old-style aristocrats with a strong anchor in the prewar parliamentary
system, opted for a change through legislative means. With the influx of officials from the detached territories, an “over-production” of the educated class was the most immediate concern. Thus, the change that seemed the least disruptive economically and most expedient politically was to target the issue of an educational imbalance that tilted toward the Jews in higher education. Voices during the war had already addressed this educational disparity between Jews and Christians. Again, Bishop Prohászka’s intellectual influence was decisive. His was not the only voice to claim that while Christian university students heroically fought on the battlefield, Jews flocked to the universities to occupy the empty benches. His thinking aligned well with the nationalist-intellectual undercurrents that advocated the granting of preference to Christian youth who would reclaim Hungarian culture and economic vitality from Jewish domination. Perhaps not coincidentally, the universities were a hotbed of Hungarian nationalism and anti-Jewish movements, where Jewish students were exposed to taunting and beating. The premier student association was the Ébredő Magyarok Egyesülete (Association of Awakening Hungarians)—its flyer openly “declared war on the Jewish race.”

The implementation of anti-Jewish policies started with a legislative action on July 22, 1920, when the Hungarian Parliament began to debate Act XXV. The law passed with a great majority. The “numerus clausus,” as it became commonly known, did not mention Jews. By declaring, though, that “the proportion of members of the various ethnic and national groups in the total number of students should amount to the proportion of such ethnic and national groups in the total population,” the act clearly targeted Jewish students, because it effectively adjusted their enrollment to their percentage in the general population, which was 6 percent.

While the law could not reduce the endemic unemployment among the Christian intelligentsia and professional classes, it served as a psychological panacea for the government and the new political elite. The initiative was the brainchild of Count Pál Teleki, prime minister at the time. While he was cautious not to present it officially as anti-Galicianer legislation, his view about a “struggle for life and death” between “Christian Hungarians” and “Eastern Jews” did not leave much to one’s imagination. The significance lay in the fact that it gave the government an opportunity to limit access to certain religious-racial groups out of political considerations and expediencies. Thus, this law had an important role in presaging future anti-Semitic legislative actions, also the hallmark of Count Teleki, in the late 1930s, and the singling out of a specific group for deportation.

Almost parallel with the “numerus clausus,” and perhaps not coincidentally, laws were promulgated for the internment and expulsion of individuals who were viewed as a rather loosely defined threat to national security and economic prosperity. The two decrees that were enacted in succession in 1920 were broad in scope, without mentioning the Galicianers.
The first decree singled out Jews who fled to Hungary during and after the war. Subsequently, this hunt expanded to Jews on the eastern periphery of the truncated Hungary who had been living in the country for a long time. The rationale was wrapped in wide-ranging legalistic language indicating “dubious nationality,” “subverting the economic interest of Hungary,” and “posing danger to national security.” A subsequent decree (20,000/1920) was more specific in that it ordered the internment and expulsion of foreigners and, among them, those persons belonging “to the Jewish race” who had arrived in Hungary after January 1, 1914. This national paranoia extended to the political leadership, who believed that the influx of Jews fomented a general unrest that swept over the country in the early 1930s.

Corresponding with these parliamentary actions and interminable discussions about the Jews who “invaded” Hungary from the east, practical actions for ferreting out such undesirables were launched across Hungary by law enforcement agencies. Their mandate was to identify persons without proper residence permits as well as thwart illegal immigration from the east. Throughout this decade, periodic sweeps by police and the gendarmerie ranged from outright arrests to summons to police stations for a review of citizenship status. The target of these raids included houses of worship, public markets, and schools, and encompassed not only purported Galicianers, but also veterans of the Great War.

The number of foreigners detained in these raids hovered around 1,000—which may testify to the fact that a major influx of foreigners into Hungary was nonexistent during the interwar years. Decree 20,000/1920 was more symbolic, a theoretical proposition rather than practical solution, because deportation of foreigners was not an option. While in 1919 there was a sizeable resettlement of Jews of foreign nationality from Hungary to Poland, by the 1920s neighboring countries refused to accept refugees.

THE ROAD TO GALICIA

The second half of the 1930s ushered in a sequence of interconnected political developments that dramatically changed the Hungarian national discourse regarding Jewry and Galicianers. The political upheaval that changed Europe dramatically, if not the world as a whole, was the emergence of Nazi Germany as the dominant power in Central and Eastern Europe. One of the immediate impacts of the ascending Nazi regime was the ideological reinforcement of radical right-wing movements across the continent. On the practical level, though, it also precipitated a demographic disaster, with thousands of refugees attempting to find safe haven. Hungary became one of their prime destinations. With its growing military might, Germany also assumed a prominent role as a power broker in the regional rivalries of Central and Eastern European countries. With
the support of Germany, Hungary benefited the most from the redrawing of the borders and reannexing some of the territories lost after the war. Finally, the German example of dealing with its own Jewish population also provided a blueprint for the countries of the region as a solution for their own “Jewish Question.”

These developments coincided with a changing political climate in Hungary, which transitioned from reflecting by and large the aristocratic elite to representing the middle and upper classes. While the government toned down its attacks toward assimilated Jewry, the venom toward the Galicianers increased. The views of Gyula Gőmbös, who served as prime minister between 1932 and 1936, and who is credited with the trend toward fascism in Hungary in the interwar period, is instructive of this evolution. In 1925 he openly labeled the segment of Jews as subversive “whose father had come here from Galicia or who has come from Galicia himself.” In his inaugural address as premier before the Parliament in 1932, he softened his tone, declaring “that part of the Jewish community which acknowledges a common fate with the nation, I wish to consider my brethren just as much as my Hungarian brethren. I know prominent Jewish men who pray as I do for the destiny of Hungarians.” Then, with a twist, he condemned “that part of the Jewish population which does not want to or is not able to integrate into the national social community.” As to what to do with this segment of the population, he did not shy away from advocating for the repatriation of the Galicianers.

Gőmbös died in 1936. Already during his premiership, the influence of Nazi Germany as the dominant ideological model for the countries in Central Europe dramatically changed the political landscape of the region. Central Europe saw the rise of radical right-wing racial politics. In Hungary, the national discourse about Jews in general and this dangerous minority of “alien” Jews among them turned shriller and more uncompromising. Just like across Europe, the image of the “alien” in Hungary evolved from national-religious discourse toward the politics of race. One only needs to look at the words of the head of the Hungarian Reformed Church, Bishop László Ravasz, during the deliberations for the impending First Jewish Law in 1938: “Judaism is not a religion. . . . Judaism is a race, with strong racial characteristics which prevent assimilation.”

This ominous evolution can be attributed equally to the political changes taking place in Central Europe at the time, and to the political radicalization within Hungary itself. Thus, the motivation and preoccupation with the “alien Jews” came from outside and from within Hungary itself. Again, Nazi Germany’s ideological influence cannot be denied. However, its racist policies on the practical level also had an immediate effect on neighboring countries. After Hitler’s ascendance to power in 1933, Germany became the dominant factor in the refugee crisis engulfing Europe. Its discriminatory policies had immediate effects in precipitating a continent-wide exodus of Jews from
Germany proper first, soon to be followed by Jews from Austria, the Czech protectorate, Slovakia, and even France and the Netherlands. Many of these so-called stateless Jews attempted to find asylum in Hungary. This influx from the West did not escape the attention of the radical right in Parliament, which conveniently labelled these Western refugees as “the new Galicianers who want to settle down in Hungary.”

Perhaps the weightiest factor in this national obsession with the “Jewish problem,” as a prime minister at the time termed it, was the increase in the number of Jews within the newly drawn borders of Hungary. The reannexation of some of the lost territories in the later years of the 1930s, and the corresponding increase in the total number of Jews, provided a convenient excuse for anti-Jewish legislation.

In successive political and military steps, Hungary regained control over provinces in Upper Hungary, Carpathian Ruthenia, northern Transylvania, and, finally, the southern tier of the country. While reconstituting the historical boundaries of Hungary added sizeable Slavic, Romanian, and Serbian minorities in the millions, Hungarian policymakers saw the most vexing issue to be the addition of a sizeable number of Jews residing in these regions. These Jews considered themselves staunch Hungarian patriots, yet carried the stigma of being political aliens and economically harmful. Though still only 6 percent of the general population, the government exploited this numerical increase in the Jewish population in pushing through their legislative agenda.

Concurrently with these demographic developments, we can see an ideological shift in the government toward the far right of the Hungarian political spectrum. This development was partly due to the efforts by the ruling circles to outflank the radical right, which was guided by Nazi ideology toward the Jews by adopting in milder form of their political goals. The ruling class also believed that some of the new anti-Jewish policies, cloaked in anti-Galicianer rhetoric, were necessary to mollify the Christian middle class. By the late 1930s, the overwhelming majority of the Hungarian political elite, along with the popular voice, wished for and even demanded an economic and cultural realignment toward Christian Hungary.

While no perceptible pressure by Nazi Germany was in evidence, it would be a mistake to discard its ideological imprint. It provided a model for the consequent introduction of three anti-Jewish legislations for purging Jews from the free professions, restricting their role in culture, and reducing their control and numbers in the economic and financial sphere. This legislative process started in the spring of 1938 and lasted until 1941. Within these three years, legislation evolved from a relatively mild realignment of Hungarian economy and property laws into a strict adherence to the numerical percentage of Jews in Hungarian society in the distribution of jobs and ownership.

This process was accompanied by a fateful evolution of the community from a religious entity to a racial one. The first Jewish law did not deal with this division. The second one, however, followed the German model in clearly defining Jewishness based
on parents and grandparents. Finally, by 1941, the Third Jewish Law culminated in the adoption of the Nazi definition of race defilement, which governed even private life and employment between Christians and Jews. As in 1920, the year the legislation was introduced, the fingerprints of Teleki could be seen in drafting and introducing for parliamentary approval all three of these legislative actions. The justification for these anti-Jewish measures, commonly labeled as the “Jewish Laws,” harkened back to the “insidious influence” of the Galicianers.

Echoes of the Galicianer image ran through the parliamentary debates, or rather, the one-sided justification for this legislative process. The minister of religion and education launched the first salvo: “Jews . . . live a separate, peculiar life, with a separate, peculiar ideology; and they are considered as aliens by the Hungarians.” What is notable in his speech is how much this statement dispenses with a nuanced approach toward the “good Jew” and the “bad Jew.” In his second term as prime minister, Teleki’s role in promoting anti-Jewish policies overshadowed all the other politicians. His preoccupation with “foreign Jews,” as noted earlier, was exacerbated by the addition of 330,000 Jews in the newly acquired territories between 1938–1941. This was especially true of the annexation of Carpathian Ruthenia, where the percentage of Jews came close to that of the local Hungarians, around 15 percent, in the general population prior to 1941. The uniqueness of the region also manifested itself in the large number of Jews who were engaged in agriculture—the largest percentage in Europe.

In addition, the major cities were overwhelmingly Jewish. The fact that the proportion of religiously conservative “easterners” increased significantly within the Jewish population was exploited for justifying these laws. Indeed, one of Teleki’s main arguments for limiting Jewish influence was that the addition of so many Eastern Jews overwhelmed the thinly spread assimilated segment, rendering the assimilation process a failure.

As the prime minister, he did not need special inducement for his anti-Jewish feelings or rhetoric. One historian depicted him as “a deep-rooted anti-Semite, the most unaccommodating anti-Jewish politician of the period.” Yet, he was a savvy politician, who belonged to the ruling aristocratic families in the Hungarian Parliament. He was also regarded as a leading intellectual, one who believed in racial determinism. Unfortunately, his views were not beyond the mainstream, since a large segment of the aristocracy and the leadership subscribed to similar precepts. His race theory was not based on the Nazi model of anti-Semitism. As one of the preeminent historians of the period opined, while “he was determined to curtail Jewish dominance in Hungarian life, he had no intention of exterminating them.” He openly challenged Hungarian Jews who “must choose between Hungary and their co-religionists, who are foreign to us and infiltrated into the country.” With this, he repeated the charge of dual loyalty for the assimilated Jewry. More importantly, in his justification for the Second Jewish
Law, he made no differentiation between the established community and “the Eastern Jews, an oriental race, which due to its long history of isolation is more different and more unassimilable than any other kind. We have treated them with western democratic principles. That is the Hungarian problem that needs to be solved.”

One of the unfortunate by-products of the emphasis on collective guilt and responsibility for the “sins” of the “Galicianer” Jews, perceived or real, was a split within the Jewish community itself. The Jewish leaders in the provinces blamed the emotional and intellectual disconnect with the more assimilated community concentrated mainly in Budapest and major population centers in the provinces. There was an unstated sense that the leadership in Budapest did not represent the needs and interests of the more traditional Jews in the newly incorporated territories. As for the assimilated Jews, instead of seeing through the subterfuge of crafty politicians like Teleki, they turned against the Eastern Jews. We cannot find a more poignant example of this rift than the fiery speech by Dr. Lajos Láng, a noted Jewish financier, during a heated parliamentary debate in the upper chamber of the Parliament on the further economic restrictions for Hungarian Jews seen in the Second Jewish Law. Representing the assimilated segment of Hungarian Jewry, he rejected the planned anti-Jewish legislation by stating that “it stigmatizes us, who have resided in this country for the past three hundred years, speak Hungarian, think Hungarian, and have nothing in common with the so-called eastern—caftan-wearing Jews.”

Regrettably, he did not understand, or did not want to understand, that according to these laws, the economic marginalization of the Jewish community affected all persons equally and that the onus on the Galicianers was only an excuse. As a consequence, more than 200,000 people lost their employment all across the Jewish community. The law especially impacted the Jews in the outlying regions. Not surprisingly, when the Jewish laws were submitted by the government and discussed in the House of Representatives, no distinction emerged between the assimilated Jews and the Galicianers. The message was that these anti-Jewish legislative actions were made necessary because the eastern influx in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that blocked the assimilation process of Jews who had been living in Hungary for centuries.

The prime minister invoked an even weightier accusation, which was directed toward the established Jewish community—the grave sin of dual loyalty: “No doubt Hungary has had a Jewish community which has lived here for centuries. . . . The rootlessness of these masses . . . and the fact that the Jews who have lived here for a long time . . . felt a stronger sense of affiliation with these newcomers than with the non-Jewish population of the country.”

These statements only reinforced a sense of dilution of the Hungarian identity among the established community by the influx of thousands of Jews, who were considered, for all practical purposes, stateless easterners. In justifying the anti-Semitic
measures, a minister in the government placed the burden for the Galicianers’ sins on the established Jewish community: “The earlier ones [Jews] tried to adjust themselves to the public spirit, but the newcomers live separated, thus Hungarians regard them as aliens. . . . Therefore, those Jews who have been living here for long also have a vested interest in solving this question. For that is the only way to assure a peaceful coexistence and the quelling of the anti-Semitic atmosphere now prevalent all over Europe.”

There was an urgent need for implementing a comprehensive policy of managing and regulating these two parallel problems: the steady stream of Jewish refugees from the West and a parallel but more substantial “Galicianer problem” in Hungary itself. From policy formulation to practical solutions, the road was short. The most immediate question remained how to handle the influx of refugees from the west. Many of these international refugees viewed Hungary as a way station to future destinations. Consequently, these refugees from the Nazi-controlled territories were conveniently funneled into a series of internment camps. A more long-range and much larger problem for the Hungarian leadership was the addition of the more than 300,000 Jews from the reannexed territories. It had to find a regulatory agency that could ferret out these two loosely interconnected issues.

To regulate immigration, promulgate citizenship policies, and monitor alien residents, an administrative unit within the Ministry of Interior was established in 1930: National Central Alien Control Office (Külföldieket Ellenőrző Országos Központi Hatóság, abbreviated KEOKH). Modeled after the Swiss immigration agency, Fremden Büro, the unit mainly concentrated its activities in Budapest, with some provincial outposts around the country. By the later years of the decade, it evolved from a gray regulatory agency within the Ministry of Interior to a dreaded institution, arbiter of the fate of thousands of people.

The office reported directly to the minister of interior. As an alien control agency, its personnel viewed anyone who could not present their citizenship papers or attempted to enter the country, even via legitimate means, with open suspicion. The office also had the authority to launch police raids for suspected populations. The appalling violence accompanying these raids against suspected Eastern Jews presaged the horrors of the 1941 Galician deportation.

COUNTING DOWN AND FINDING THE RIGHT OPPORTUNITY

The succession of three Jewish laws and various other regulations unleashed a process that, by defining the community in racial terms, inevitably led to and sped up the momentum for the 1941 deportation. During the enactment of the Second Jewish Law,
the issue of the Galicianers became a lever against the Jewish community as a racial entity. It intractably connected the fate of large numbers of Jews, some of them possibly Galician in origin, with those who had already settled in Hungary for several generations and lived in perfectly legitimate conditions.

The stipulations of the second Jewish law in regard to the annulment of naturalization indicated that the establishment of citizenship was becoming a subject of political considerations. It was accompanied by calls for a review of the citizenship of all “Galician” Jews as well as a call for “those tribal Jews who should emigrate from the country in the first place because they do not identify themselves with Hungarians either in language, taste or culture.” Perhaps the most uncompromising view about the prevailing political sentiments in the Hungarian Parliament was voiced by one of the radical conservative deputies who advocated for a cessation of efforts to assimilate the Jewish community because they are unassimilable and, rather, “expel it to the last person.”

The issue of citizenship thus became a legal tool for removal from the country when an opportunity presented itself, which generated a deep concern in the Jewish community. Pieter Judson noted that during the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, a sense of nationality or citizenship was not necessarily strong or well-defined in the population, and served more as a political umbrella than an official designation. After the conclusion of World War I, a large segment of the minority population, and especially the Jews in the successor states, defined themselves as Hungarians. But assimilated or traditional, Hungarian Jews believed that being born in a multinational Austro-Hungarian monarchy automatically granted protection before the law.

The Jewish response to the successive anti-Jewish decrees—which limited options for citizenship—and to the economic difficulties that resulted from the Jewish Laws, was setting up two organizations. The Hungarian-Jewish Assistance Committee (Magyar Izraeliták Pártfogó Irodája, abbreviated MIPI) handled issues relating to the status of refugees streaming into the country from newly occupied German territories, as well as the citizenship issues of Jews from the successive territorial expansions of Hungary itself. The humanitarian-economic cost resulting from the anti-Jewish legislation of the late 1930s, mainly impacting the lower socioeconomic strata of the community, was addressed by the Hungarian-Jewish National Aid Action (Országos Magyar Zsidó Segítő Akció, abbreviated OMZSA). These quintessential self-help institutions were unique in that they were able to unite and represent a bitterly fragmented, fractious Jewish community along economic, demographic, as well as theological lines. One of the preeminent historians of this subject well summed up MIPI’s significance in uniting Hungarian Jewry: “MIPI was of fundamental importance not only in the invaluable aid it provided but to the internal history of Hungarian Jewry.”
With the emergence of Nazi Germany and an escalating refugee crisis across Europe, the rapidly shifting national borders in the waning years of the 1930s and the parallel problem of citizenship became an all-European issue. Arbitrary reclassification of Jews as non-citizens by the tens of thousands happened almost simultaneously in Romania, Slovakia, and Poland. In Hungary, KEOKH became the gatekeeper and final arbiter of thousands of people who got swept up in its dragnet, as it ferreted out “alien” Jews and “stateless” refugees arriving from various countries. Because these countries ceased to exist as sovereign states, the refugees had no clear citizenship status, which implied that there was no legal recourse to repatriate them to their “home” countries.

Moreover, individuals who sought refuge from Nazi persecutions in Hungary had little chance to be granted international refugee status. While this designation was mandated by the League of Nations, and was also ratified by Hungary, it was conveniently ignored by the authorities. This wave of refugees from Nazi Germany and its rapidly expanding empire—Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia—ranges from 8,000 to 10,000 men, women, and children, who were shunted into internment camps across Hungary.

The only exception to this policy were Polish military units and civilians streaming over the northern border after the defeat of Poland by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. All other nationalities wanting to enter Hungary, even with legal documents, were viewed with suspicion if not outright hostility. Thanks to Hungary’s traditional ties with Poland and an aristocracy that intermarried with Polish nobility, an estimated 100,000, Jews and Christians were welcomed with open arms. Perhaps the key factor in accepting and ultimately saving several thousand Polish Jews along the way was that these refugees “were removed from the KEOKH’s scope of authority between 1939 and 1945.”

A much more encompassing concern for the government was the dramatic increase in the number of Jews as a consequence of territorial revisions in which Hungary was the largest beneficiary, with corresponding reformulation of its demographic composition. While some of its neighbors lost Jewish population, Hungary doubled the number of Jews residing there. Thus, the two critical elements in the citizenship question, and a visceral concern of the ruling political elite in Hungary, were this increase in the number of Jews residing within the newly redrawn borders, and the continuous arrival of Jewish refugees from the west and neighboring states. One of the leading politicians of the era summed up this new reality in stark terms by suggesting that the Jewish community was a “life threat” for Hungary. In a political speech, he claimed that “with the incorporation of the new territories, the proportion of the Jews changed for the worse. . . . Therefore, we need to reassess also our views in this matter.” This reassessment led to tragic consequences. There was no territory or country to which this population could be transferred. The citizenship status of a large segment of Hungarian Jewry, especially in the upper provinces, northern Transylvania, and Carpathian Ruthenia remained at best tenuous.
On the administrative level, clear differentiation between Jews and non-Jews emerged with the evaluation of their entry permit applications, review of their citizenship status, or applications for obtaining it. At the same time, the role of KEOKH, entrusted with the implementation of this new approach, assumed added significance. During the trials conducted against KEOKH personnel after the war, testimonies of its top-level officials made it clear that, following the Second Jewish Law, the distinction between Jews and non-Jews became an official policy.

Along with the laborious paperwork, Jewish applicants had to prove the Hungarian citizenship of their ancestors going back to their grandparents. A more vexing stipulation, inserted intentionally by the Ministry of Interior, demanded an official marriage certificate. For religious Jews, this was almost nonexistent.

The problem was especially acute in Carpathian Ruthenia, where a rabbi conducted the marriage ceremony, attested by two witnesses, without a corresponding civil procedure. Thus, no official records existed for such marriages. The traditional Jewish marriage contract (Ketubah) was not accepted by the Ministry of Interior as a proof of marriage. The internal communications at the Ministry of Interior directed its administrative staff to emphasize this requirement, as this was an insurmountable obstacle for citizenship, especially for the despised Galicianers.

Adding to their predicament, there was also a policy that aimed to slow down the naturalization process. The observation of a deputy in the Parliament describes the scenes taking place in front of the offices of KEOKH when “people were mostly driven by anxiety and fear to apply for their certificates of citizenship . . . waiting for hours and days and weeks on due to the shamefully inefficient public administrative procedure, and they are lucky if they can have their request granted after months, which they had submitted to the Ministry of Interior.”

Of course, the deputy didn’t realize that this slow process was not the result of “inefficiency,” but dictated by the policy of the agency itself. Many applications languished in the offices of KEOKH for months on end. A hefty bribe, though, often succeeded in speeding up the process. The final obstacle for shepherding through the papers for naturalization was a mundane one: pervasive corruption. The demands for exorbitant bribes and fees to the local administrators that were issuing supporting documents were beyond the means of an average resident in the provinces.

In the absence of documentation of citizenship, the “alien” or “stateless” Jews were, in principle, removable from the country. Reducing the number of Jews in this way seemed so attractive that some police authorities, border guards, and military units in the eastern and northern periphery of the country took it upon themselves to launch independent and arbitrary actions in cross-border transfer of Jews—even some with legal residence permits.
Such practices were mini-rehearsals for future cross-border removals that would encompass a much larger population. A blatant example of such removal was reported by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), on November 8, 1938, to its headquarters in New York. It concerned the arbitrary expulsion of thousands of people, mostly Jews, across the Hungarian border by Slovakian authorities as a consequence of the territorial revision between the two countries. As the report noted, paramilitary forces “seized Jewish citizens, who were mostly from the ceded border districts, placed them in trucks, which were requisitioned for this purpose . . . and took them at night across the new border, where they were dumped in open fields or forests.” It estimated that between 8,000 to 10,000 Jews ended up in no-man’s-land. Such expulsions from a border region precipitated a tit-for-tat response from the neighbor. Most often, Jews bore the brunt of these reciprocal expulsions. The Hungarian response was predictable: it transferred 3,000 Jews to Slovakian territory.66

Less than two years later, attempts to transfer Jews from Hungary to Romania and the Soviet Union encompassed scores of people. Thanks to Margit Slachta’s tireless efforts in exposing and halting the deportation, these action attracted more attention, including that of the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defense, and the Parliament. These initiatives of local military commanders centered around the Transylvanian town of Csikszereda (Miercurea Ciuc in Romanian), which made repeated attempts to transfer local Jews to neighboring countries. Romania rejected this influx, repatriating the Jews to the no-man’s-land where they languished for several days during the bitter winter. Those who were dumped across the Soviet border disappeared without a trace—perhaps transported to the Gulag. These ad hoc attempts, without any coordination by the respective ministries and the foreign countries involved, continued sporadically until 1942. Based on a flurry of directives from Ámon Pásztóy, the head of KEOKH, the involvement of this department in these initiatives, actively or tacitly, is beyond doubt.97

While the number of expellees in this case was relatively small, these cross-border removals were eerily similar to and bore the hallmark of the much more comprehensive deportation to Galicia in the summer of 1941. This group included a few individuals who might have lacked full citizenship, but the majority possessed proper papers, or were born and lived in this region all their lives, going back several generations. The authorities cynically demanded special payment, labeled “community service,” which was a form of extortion, and then deported these Jews nonetheless. Highly decorated veterans from World War I also were bundled in the group. Authorities gave half an hour to prepare, with the Jews allowed to bring a limited supply of personal belongings. Many families included only women and children, because the fathers and sons were serving in the Hungarian military.
The main players in this drama were the same ones who a year later impacted, positively or negatively, the deportation to Galicia. Ámon Pásztóy, as the head of KEOKH, fully endorsed these steps, and Miklós Kozma, as the government commissioner of Carpathian Ruthenia, acquiesced to them. A follow-up investigative report by Arisztid Meskó, who, as the police commissioner of Carpathian Ruthenia became the main planner of the 1941 deportation from this region, whitewashed the whole affair. Finally, Slachta, who later became instrumental in saving Jews in 1941 and during the main phase of the Hungarian Holocaust in 1944, became one of the lone voices to alert the country’s leadership about the travesty taking place in northern Transylvania.98

These loosely coordinated early attempts to forcibly remove people in the middle of winter, and without due process, might be considered as isolated initiatives by overzealous local commanders. On the other hand, we cannot discard the likelihood that they did not take place in an intellectual or a political vacuum. If one can draw some conclusion from this and other reports about cross-border population transfers, they might be predictive of future deportations to come. They were crude, inefficient, and almost bumbling undertakings. In any case, neighboring countries refused to cooperate. However, they foreshadowed the potential of removing a population when and where the opportunity presents itself.

Thus, the 1941 expulsion of over 20,000 people was a predictable event. A report by JDC in early 1940 estimated that 2,800 foreign nationals and 10,000 refugees resided in Hungary. The report expressed concerns about the Hungarian authorities’ “demand that these Jews should leave urgently the country. . . . The Hungarian authorities insist further on removing the so-called illegal refugees, who entered Hungary without passport or visa.”99 It concluded that it would be only a matter of time when this will happen. This opportunity came much faster than the policymakers in Budapest and the provinces could have foreseen.

By 1941, a vocal chorus clamoring for expulsion emanated not only from the fringes of the political right, but also from a civil administration, the military, and ministers in the government itself, especially from the chief of staff and the minister of defense. The main impediment was the lack of identifiable countries or a designated territory where authorities could dump their unwanted Jews. Although negotiations were initiated in 1939 and 1940 with Romania and the Soviet Union “for the admission of Jews of Galician origin,” the two countries adamantly refused.100 Yet unceasing pressure by a wide segment of Hungarian society demanded the removal. This was especially true in the provinces where the “unassimilable” Jews resided. Not coincidentally, in these areas the Jews were also dominant in the economy.101

From the point of view of the ruling elite in the provinces, connecting racism and economic opportunism was both natural and went hand-in-hand with getting rid of a loathed minority. The demand for expulsion reached an especially high pitch in
Carpathian Ruthenia, where Kozma openly complained to the prime minister about the constant pressure and open intrigues against him from local circles. Not surprisingly, he had to address the issue of the Galicianers head-on, which he did repeatedly. As a member of the political elite who maintained contacts with civilian and military leaders, and had direct access to the leader of Hungary, Miklos Horthy, his views were an accurate barometer of the prevailing intellectual winds within the Hungarian political power structure. We can see in his pronouncements an evolution to the solution of the problem of the Galicianers.

During the early stages of his tenure as government commissioner, in a speech in the fall of 1940, he declared his intention to adhere to existing laws, which didn’t stipulate expulsion. In October of the same year, though, he recognized that the only solution for the local Jewish Question was removal. By early 1941, he wrote that “I would be very happy to relocate them somewhere, but for the time being it is not possible.”

In a speech in May of the same year, he admitted that there were no immediate remedies for the Jewish Question. “So, what can we do?” he said. “Sending them to reservations, introducing ruthless regulations such as throwing them into the river, and so on, is not a possibility. As long as they are here, we can, of course, implement very strict and comprehensive policies of controlling them . . . either way, they are here and will remain here. And as long as they are here, this question cannot be solved. . . . Ultimately and substantially, the Jewish Question at this moment cannot be solved, but it can be held in check until the end of the war provides a solution to this issue.”

This prophetic last sentence, in which the looming war provided a context for expulsion, might not have been as innocent as it seems. This pronouncement can be placed less than two months before the Nazi attack against the Soviet Union, and two months before the start of the deportation. Based on dispatches from the Hungarian embassy in Berlin that placed the start of the war in mid-June, Kozma might have been privy to information that the outbreak of the war was imminent. The Hungarian emissary to Berlin, Döme Sztójay, relayed back to Budapest the information, quoting German military sources, that that the chances of the breakout of a German-Soviet war were growing. In his report from June 3, he wrote that “the launching of the German military operation is to be expected by the middle of this month [June].”

Germany’s intentions of attacking the Soviet Union were not a well-guarded secret in Berlin. The American military attaché, along with his counterparts in various embassies, were aware of the preparations for the impending attack against the Soviet Union and openly talked about them. Consequently, the Hungarian general staff and Lieutenant General Henrik Werth, as the chief of staff, were also aware of these plans. Following Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, and Hungary’s declaration of war on the side of Nazi Germany five days later, this opportunity, finally, materialized. A large swath of territory across the Carpathian Mountains in eastern and southern Galicia came
under Hungarian control, and Hungarian governmental and military circles wasted no
time in utilizing this chance for the expulsion of thousands of Jews.

A fateful transformation took hold of Hungary. The image of the Galicianer sud-
denly metamorphosed into a living thing; it became a tangible target. Within two
weeks from the outset of hostilities, and with alarming efficiency, the cattle cars started
to roll and disgorge their human cargo by the thousands on the train platform of the
small, nondescript town of Kőrösmező, high up in the Carpathian Mountains, on the
Hungarian and Soviet border. Incarcerated in a transit camp in Havasalja, several ki-
lometers from the town, the Jews were transported from there by the Hungarian mil-
itary, fifty trucks a day, across the border to a mysterious land named Galicia, a place
where neither history nor geography forms a boundary.