As the Old Homeland Unravels: Hungarian-American Jews’ Reactions to the White Terror in Hungary, 1919–24

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“The conversion of Hungary from a Hebrew paradise into a hell for Jews is one of the most melancholy aftermaths of the World War.”

_The Hebrew Israelite, 1922_

IN HIS OFFICE on 1 Union Square West in New York City, Samuel Buchler, president of the Federation of Hungarian Jews in America, sat at his desk and looked at the trees turning red, yellow, and brown in the park below the window. It was September 1924, and Buchler had just read the news from Hungary. After years of anti-Jewish violence—the white terror, passively condoned by the postwar regime—the Hungarian government had decided to honor Felix M. Warburg, president of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC, or Joint), with a Red Cross Decoration. The honor came directly from Admiral Miklós Horthy, regent of Hungary, who wanted to acknowledge the role the JDC had played in “mitigating misery in Hungary.” It was clear that the JDC had aided millions of Jewish war victims across the devastated landscapes of East Central Europe, including Hungary. But Buchler was skeptical. Since its founding in 1916, the Federation of Hungarian Jews had tried to ameliorate the fate of Hungarian Jews across the ocean, who in quick succession had felt the tremors of war, terror, revolution, social exclusion, and institutional antisemitism. It was ironic that the government Buchler held responsible for much of the anti-Jewish violence and agitation was now hoping to be on good terms with the most famous Jew in the

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1 “A Step Toward the Redemption of Hungary,” _The American Israelite_, 20 July 1922, p. 4. This article is based on archival material found at the JDC Archives in New York City, as well as a selection of American Jewish newspapers accessed at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, Ohio, _The American Hebrew, The American Israelite_, and _The Jewish Exponent_, selected because of their rich discussion of Hungarian Jewish events.

realm of international humanitarianism. For Buchler and the Federation of Hungarian Jews, this was cause for concern.3

Six years had passed since the end of the war, and its reverberations could still be felt throughout the world. In the United States, immigrant communities faced multiple challenges. As a result of the war, which the United States had entered in 1917, there was now an increased distrust of foreigners, which culminated in the Quota Laws of 1921 and 1924. The entry of new immigrants from East Central Europe, including many Jewish migrants, into the New World was to be strictly controlled and regulated. And so, in the United States, which was deemed the most liberal toward Jews of the new nation-states, there were doubts about the divided loyalties of Jews—a people without a nation-state of their own. As a result, Jews did not feel immune from the pressures of proving their loyalty to the new American homeland.4

In the case of Hungarian Jews, the changes in their social standing as immigrant communities coincided with a sudden and violent turnaround of the position of Jews in Hungary. These developments were to some degree entangled, that is the distrust of “enemy aliens” in the United States erupted at a time when immigrant communities felt a strong need to help their families and loved ones in war-torn Europe. Jews and others were thus engaged in transatlantic networks that, by virtue of being transatlantic, challenged their status as Americans. This caused dilemmas for people like Samuel Buchler, who wanted not just to send money and goods to the Old World but also to help Jewish migrants, or future migrants, without breaking the law or inadvertently casting suspicion upon their communities. This balancing act—between Jewish community values and outreach, on the one hand, and US law and nativist discourse, on the other—changed the dynamics of international Jewish solidarity at a time when it was most needed.

In the following pages, I analyze the responses of American-Hungarian Jews to the white terror in Hungary in the immediate aftermath of the World War until roughly 1924, when most of the anti-Jewish violence had abated. While most studies of this period focus on events inside Hungary, this article argues that because of the new borders and the violent political climate, after 1918 a large segment of Hungarian Jewish history unraveled outside the borders of Hungary. The attachment of Hungarian Jews to Hungary—something for which they have been both celebrated and criticized and that lasted until the Holocaust—does not mean that other communities did not form elsewhere, complicating the notion of what it meant to be a Hungarian Jew. This essay sheds light on this question by introducing the Atlantic perspective and demonstrating the global networks some Hungarian Jews belonged to prior to the almost complete destruction of this community in 1944. I ask two questions: What happens to the formation of diasporic communities when a migrant group is forced to confront the catastrophic collapse of its place of origin? In the case of Hungarian-American Jews in the United States, especially the overseas entanglements between this immigrant community in New York City and their families and hometowns in the Old World, what did it mean to be a Hungarian Jew living beyond the confines of post-Trianon Hungary?5

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3Rabbi Samuel Buchler was a lawyer and a Jewish chaplain at Sing Sing prison. In 1932, he was prosecuted for larceny from immigrant aid initiatives and disbarred as a lawyer. Even though these events took place after the events discussed in this article, it does place a shadow over Buchler’s involvement with Jewish immigrant aid work.


5These questions are inspired by Rebecca Kobrin’s work on immigrant communities from Poland. See Jewish Bialystok and Its Diaspora (Bloomington, 2010), 8.
The story of the Federation of Hungarian Jews illuminates some of the answers, because their umbrella organization united more than 120 societies of Hungarian Jews in America, many of them recent immigrants. Yet the story of the Federation—which did not leave behind an archive and whose story is best reconstructed through recourse to the American Jewish press—provides an illuminating parallel tale of the American chapter of the history of Hungarian Jews. The time frame of this essay, 1919-24, coincides with the period in which the Federation was most active. As such, its story functions both as a narrative device and an analytical lens: Why was the Federation called into existence at this point, given the long history of Hungarian Jewish emigration to the United States? How did the involvement with Hungary change from aid to more ideological matters of freedom and democracy? How did violence and antisemitism in Hungary bring into focus the nativist discourse in the United States, and how did Hungarian Jews in the United States face these challenges? It brings to light the challenges of immigrant identity politics in America and shows how difficult it could be to shift one’s loyalties to a new country while trying to maintain ties to the old. The complexities of this balancing act become apparent in the considerations that informed the responses of Hungarian Jews in New York to the terrible predicament of Jews overseas, responses that were rooted in old stories about Hungarian Jewish belonging and in the reorientation of this idea in the wake of emigration.

In addition to departure, arrival, and return, this essay argues that there is a fourth dimension to emigration history, namely, émigré communities looking back at their places of origin at times of crisis, without the desire to return. Because of their history of transatlantic relocation, these communities were no longer in transit, but rather already at home. Especially at times when life for the Jews in Europe was being endangered, they ended up at the receptive side of the hopes and dreams of those across the ocean wishing to join them. As such, they were confronted with a rather different set of questions: How were they to respond to the political nightmare European Jews found themselves in? How should they balance their loyalties to both, or more, homelands in an increasingly volatile anti-immigration climate in America? And how did this act of looking back create new and diverging histories of the same place of origin? For Jews, emigration had long been part of everyday life. A large percentage of Jews in America were foreign born or of foreign-born parents, and as such immigration was a central concern in Jewish life. In addition, there was no government to advocate on their behalf, as was the case with other émigré communities from Europe, and so Jewish leaders took the task of securing the rights of immigrants upon themselves. It is for this reason that American Jews were the most visible and organized of ethnic, religious, and other civic groups involved in migration issues. This is also what made theirs a different experience from non-Jewish Hungarians in the United States, as we shall see in the text that follows.

New York City: Hungarian Jews Looking Back at the Old World

This story is not just part of the history of Hungarian Jews but also of emigration history and the transatlantic entanglements between émigré communities. The notion that immigrants severed their ties with the Old World as soon as they disembarked at Ellis Island—one of the requirements, both then and now, of the “American Dream”—has long been discredited.

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During the war years, immigrant communities in the United States displayed a passionate engagement with the Old World, which, besides a diplomatic or humanitarian endeavor, was an engagement that for many people quenched a deep, personal longing for a place of origin. Many East European Jewish immigrants summoned up maternal imagery of their home countries, remembering landscapes that were forever lost. However, these nostalgic recollections of the European homeland seldom indicated an active desire to withdraw from the present and return to an imagined past. Engaging with the troubled continent also meant to invert the sense of hopelessness Jews in the United States felt as they witnessed the tribulations of the Jews in Europe. And sometimes, as Julianna Puskás has observed, when Old World feelings were already fading, the dangers now confronting Jews overseas strengthened “weakening feelings and fading memories.” As we shall see, in the wake of 1918 and as a consequence of the multidirectional character of their humanitarian efforts, Hungarian Jews in the United States shed some of this nostalgia. It shows that in thinking about migration, what matters is not just the destination but also the point of departure. And not just this—it is the convergence of the two, the meeting points between two, or more, worlds in the émigré mind, which has the potential to shed light on the intricate patchwork of homelands—imagined and real, mythic and inspirational—that coexisted in the new realities of Jewish diasporic life.

Jews, contrary to the main migration patterns of the late nineteenth century, often left Europe forever. In East Central Europe before World War I, between 30 and 40 percent of migrants planned to return home. Initially, return migration was the norm—people left for economic reasons, with the intention of coming back, and only after a few trips back and forth did they begin to consider the possibility of remaining elsewhere. Thus, in a way, what should be studied for this period are the decisions to remain overseas, not those for leaving Hungary. Jews, however, often undertook the journey without a plan to return. In Hungary, Jews were among the first—together with Slovaks and Germans—to leave the Hungarian Kingdom in the 1840s and 1850s, and this trend intensified during the 1880s. As such, Hungarian Jews had a long history of emigration, on the one hand, and of settlement and community building in the United States, on the other. In 1910, for instance, 53,000 Hungarian Jews lived in New York City, 70 percent of all immigrants born in Hungary. This meant that they made up 5.3 percent of all Jews living in New York City. By 1918, they were deeply entrenched in American society, and this long history of emigration shaped the way they reacted to the political events in their old homeland in the wake of World War I.

In its origins, the Federation of Hungarian Jews in America was established to organize Hungarian Jews in the United States and “uplift the morale” of recent immigrants. Reacting to the schism in Hungarian Jewish religious life, which had legally separated the Orthodox and Neolog communities, the Federation’s first president, Samuel (Samu) Bettelheim, bemoaned the unorganized state of Hungarian Jews in America. His main goal, he said, was to “avoid all that will divide the community and always strive for the things that will unite us.”

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7Ibid., 180, 175.  
9Ibid., 194.  
instance, it was to warmly greet the immigrant Jew from Hungary and protect him or her “against
the mistakes, errors and harm which the ‘Greenhorn’ upon his arrival may meet.” It was to create
a sense of solidarity among émigré Hungarian Jews by means of social work, cultural lectures, and
literary events, as well as the establishment of philanthropic institutions, which Hungarian Jews in
America still did not have. While safeguarding Hungarian tradition in their “new fatherland,” the
Federation promised to “promote Americanization in the best sense of these terms.”

In regard to humanitarian relief, which was their main transatlantic activity, the Federation was
careful not to hurt the greater cause of Jewish philanthropy by organizing competing actions. In a
letter to Felix Warburg, Bettelheim vowed that the Federation was “a result of the desire to see all
Jewish work and endeavor concentrated as much as possible and therefore we have no intention to
hurt the oneness of your activities.” In 1917, worried that the “very serious political situation” in
Hungary, Poland, and Galicia would lead to a blockage of funds, the Federation urged the JDC to
send transmissions to these countries. The same month, it launched a fundraising campaign
among Jews of Hungarian descent, taking its method from prewar tradition, that is “the
support of at least one Yeshivah Bachur (student) and … a contribution by each member of a
sum representing the support of a family in the war zones for one week.” However, it made
sure to keep the JDC informed at all times about the funds they collected. During these early
years of its existence, the Federation’s involvement in war relief consisted mainly of small,
localized, and personal remittances aimed to reach Hungarian Jews overseas. But it also hoped
that by partaking in general humanitarian relief efforts as an organized and productive
community of recent and decidedly less recent immigrants, Hungarian Jews would become an
even more ingrained part of American society.

A White Terrorist Comes to America

Thinking about their family members in Hungary, Jews in New York anxiously followed the
news about the violence that erupted at home in the summer of 1919. A few days after
Romanian troops retreated from Budapest, white guardists, officers of Admiral Horthy’s
National Army, descended on the city and began their reign of terror. Jews, they believed,
were to blame for losing the war and the punishment that was looming over Hungary from
Versailles. They accused Jews of being the instigators behind the regime of Béla Kun, a
Bolshevik coup d’état they believed was aimed at undermining true Magyordom. After its
defeat, they declared the rebirth of Christian Hungary. In Hungary, as elsewhere in East
Central Europe, the Judeo-Bolshevik myth, morphing Jews into communists and
communists into Jews, became a reality for many reactionaries. The Association of

13JDC Archives, Records of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee of the Years 1914–1918, Folder
#56, Federation of Hungarian Jews in America, 19/01/1917.
14JDC Archives, Records of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee of the Years 1914–1918, Folder
#56, Letter from Federation of Hungarian Jews in America Provisional Committee to Mr. Felix Warburg, 10/11/1916.
15JDC Archives, Records of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee of the Years 1914–1918, Folder
#56, Letter from Federation of Hungarian Jews in America to Joint Distribution Committee, 16/01/1917.
16Ibid. At a meeting held on 22 Jan. 1917 at 8 Avenue D, New York, there were present delegates representing more
than forty constituent societies of the Federation of Hungarian Jews, 22/01/1917.
17See Ilse Josepha Lazaroms, “Marked by Violence: Hungarian Jewish Histories in the Wake of the White Terror,
18Paul A. Hanebrink, In Defense of Christian Hungary: Religion, Nationalism, and Antisemitism, 1890–1944 (Ithaca,
Awakening Magyars (Ébredő Magyarok Egyesülete) and like-minded paramilitary squads awoke to a postwar dawn eager to clear the streets of Jews. Gangs of disgruntled nationalists and National Army guards hunted down socialists, communists, and Jews—or anyone suspected of being one or the other—and imprisoned, tortured, and killed them. Mobs of angry men and ex-military attacked Jews in coffeehouses along Andrássy Avenue and Damjanich Street, and, for a period of roughly two years, mostly at nighttime, Jews were attacked, beaten, and murdered.\(^{19}\) The numbers vary, but an estimated two thousand people, many of them Jews, died in this way.\(^{20}\)

It took until 1920 for the Federation of Hungarian Jews to respond in earnest to events in Hungary.\(^{21}\) In July, the Federation set about to collect shoes, clothes, underwear, and other items that could alleviate the suffering of Jews overseas.\(^{22}\) In August, news came that the Jews of Budapest were “panic-stricken,” fearing the recurrence of pogroms.\(^{23}\) Eugene Bagger, who was born in Budapest in 1892 to a middle-class Jewish family and had immigrated to the United States as a young man, called these times Hungary’s “restrictive days of near-peace.” Indeed, the aftermath of war in Hungary was arguably more violent than the war itself, characterized by revolution, territorial losses, and a fatally wounded national pride.\(^{24}\) Compounding all this was a dramatic surge in antisemitic violence. After many decades of thriving in the high echelons of Hungarian life, Jews had now become its victims. For many people living through it, the violence was abrupt and unexpected, causing shockwaves of disbelief in the Jewish communities in Budapest and the provinces. The loyalty of Hungarian Jews to Hungary was no longer questioned—as it had been during the prewar years—in restrained and public discussions; it was brutally negated, annulled, and made undone overnight. Hungarian Jews overseas struggled to make sense of what was happening—but the divide, symbolized by the vast Atlantic Ocean, and contrary to their feverish relief efforts, was growing.

Quite tellingly, it was the arrival of Károly Huszár, former premier of Hungary, in New York on 12 July 1920, that sparked the Federation’s outrage. Huszár, formerly of the anti-Communist government in Szeged, had been Prime Minister of Hungary between November 1919 and March 1920, at the height of the white terror. He had come to the United States with two goals. As a representative of the Hungarian Red Cross, he hoped to raise money for the repatriation of Hungarian prisoners of war in Siberia. More importantly, he hoped to undo some of the damage Hungary’s reputation had suffered in recent years. Since the end of the war, at his initiative, the Hungarian authorities had been taking international visitors and aid workers on tours of the Budapest slums. This was not just to garner international sympathy for the plight of Hungary and raise money for charity and reconstruction but also an attempt to influence the decision-making processes at the Paris Peace Conference in favor of Hungary. In the summer of 1920, when Huszár visited the United States, the Treaty of


Trianon had just been signed and the fate of Hungary’s territorial losses sealed, but Huszár continued his efforts to gain international sympathy for the Hungarian case.\textsuperscript{25} For many émigré Hungarians, both Jews and non-Jews, Huszár was a symbol of the violent postwar regime, and they wanted nothing to do with him, let alone welcome him to their new homeland on a barely concealed propaganda tour. That summer, at a meeting in New York said to represent 250,000 Hungarian Jews across the United States, the Federation took steps to obtain Huszár’s deportation. In a letter to immigration officials, they stated that Huszár had entered the United States as a stowaway and was basically an enemy alien with propagandistic goals “of a very doubtful character.” They held him responsible for some of the most terrible crimes committed during the white terror.\textsuperscript{26} The \textit{American Hebrew} warned its readers that the Horthy regime was a “militarist tyranny that tramples upon every human right and every prospect of civilized conduct, murders or connives at the murder of thousands of innocent Jews and Gentile workmen, and menaces its neighbors and the peace of the world with preparations for a new war.”\textsuperscript{27} Huszár was an advocate of both antisemitism and the restoration of the Habsburg kingdom. Despite reassurances by Huszár that the violence had abated, Jews in America knew that their families and co-religionists continued to be maltreated and killed in Budapest.\textsuperscript{28}

The following day, Hungarian Jewish societies in Chicago demanded that Huszár refrain from visiting their city, citing fear of disturbances. Rabbi Samuel S. Meyerberg reported that before a Hungarian audience, Huszár had made the “absurd and dastardly statement” that if any harm should come to him in the United States, 50,000 Jews would be slain in Hungary. Demands for his deportation poured into the White House.\textsuperscript{29} “I do not intend to visit Chicago,” Huszár responded coolly, denying there was any political reason for his visit. “The Chicago Hungarian societies who have asked that I be barred from their city have taken those steps for nothing. I intend to return to Hungary in two weeks after finishing my business here in relation to relief for Hungarian prisoners in Siberia.”\textsuperscript{30} The press was skeptical. “What America can do for Hungarian prisoners in Siberia is open to doubt,” wrote \textit{The American Hebrew}, “but at any rate Mr. Huszár will be gone within two weeks.”\textsuperscript{31} Rabbi Meyerberg was pleased. “American money cannot be used for pogroms,” he wrote. “It may teach [Hungary] the valuable lesson that if she seeks American support she must come to these shores with clean hands,” so that “decent and respectable nations shall not fear to associate with her.”\textsuperscript{32} Soon after Huszár left the United States, the charge that he had entered the country as a stowaway was proven false. Immigration records showed that Huszár had

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\bibitem{hajto}Vera Hajtó, \textit{Milk Sauce and Paprika: Migration, Childhood and Memories of the Interwar Belgian-Hungarian Child Relief Project} (Leuven, 2016), 73–74.
\bibitem{huszar}Huszár’s war record stretched from Budapest to Braşov and included the Kecskémét massacre. On 19 Nov. 1919, a detachment led by Lieutenant Hejjas kidnapped and murdered 200 people, mainly Jews, on the charge that they had been communists. Their mutilated bodies were later found in the forest of Orgovány. While the authorities, including Huszár, knew the perpetrators, Hejjas and his men escaped judgment. See “The Kecskemét Massacre,” reprinted from \textit{The Nation}, 3 Apr. 1920, in \textit{Importing the White Terror}, 9–14. See also Josef Halmi, \textit{Das schwarze Buch über Kecskémét}, Mit einem Vortwort von Andor Gábor (Vienna, 1921).
\end{thebibliography}
arrived at Ellis Island on the steamship *Rotterdam*, was in possession of a valid passport, traveled in the first cabin, and met all the immigration requirements. He had come to Ellis Island together with the other, less conspicuous passengers.33

While these events were unfolding, the Federation published a pamphlet entitled *Importing the White Terror*.34 “What is Mr. Charles Huszár, Emissary of the Militarist Government of Hungary, doing in the United States?” it asked. “Shall American dollars finance the murder of Jews and workers of Hungary and aid the restoration of Habsburg autocracy?” “From the standpoint of democracy,” said the journalist Eugene S. Bagger, “[Huszár’s] presence is thoroughly objectionable.”35 Because the question of the repatriation of Hungarian prisoners of war had already been dealt with, there was no guarantee that the funds raised among Hungarians in the United States would not be used for other, less noble purposes. While Huszár was touring the country, emitting the dark odor of the white terror, Israel Cohen, secretary of the Zionist Organization in London, reported on the situation in East Central Europe. In Hungary, Cohen wrote, Jews “were huddled away in the middle of the night from towns and villages were they had lived useful and peaceful lives for decades.”36 Despite what government officials like Huszár were saying, there was no end to the violence yet.

**Divided Loyalties: Hungarian Jewish Congregation Ohab Zedek Reacts**

In February 1921, a picture appeared in the Hungarian press in which Captain Pedlow, director of the American Red Cross in Hungary, was seen signing a document that would distribute more than a billion Hungarian crowns in aid throughout the country.37 It had taken a few years to get to this point. In the immediate postwar years, Hungary, a former enemy nation, was not a priority to most international aid organizations. The JDC argued that the Jews of Poland and Ukraine were in direst need. They also felt that the Jews of Budapest were wealthy enough to account for most of the aid themselves. Two years after the war, however, amidst increasing social exclusion and legal persecution, the wealth of Hungarian Jews had dwindled, and so, perhaps, had their optimism. In April 1920, representatives of the JDC in Europe finally deemed the situation in Hungary serious enough to warrant aid. Due to the influx of Jewish migrants, high prices, the devaluation of money, and the long aftershocks of the war, there were now “conditions of want and poverty that are said never heretofore to have existed in Hungary.”38

A few months later, the congregation Ohab Zedek joined the call. Ohab Zedek was one of the oldest Jewish congregations in the United States, established in 1872 on Manhattan’s Lower East Side by a small group of Hungarian Jews who, lacking a suitable house of worship, had come

34 Bagger, “Importing the White Terror,” 3.
37 “Pedlow Kapitány, a ki az amerikai-szeretetadományokból több mint egy milliárd korona értékű osztott szét Magyarországon” [Captain Pedlow, who has distributed more than one billion crowns in US charity donations in Hungary], *Vasárnapí Ujság* [Sunday Newspaper] 68, no. 3, 13 Feb. 1921, p. 1.
38 For Goldman’s assessment of the situation, see JDC Archives, Records of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee of the Years 1919–1921, Folder #148.2, Letter from Julius Goldman to Felix M. Warburg, 13/04/1920, 3.
together to pray according to the Orthodox tradition. In 1890, Rabbi Philip Hillel Klein assumed spiritual leadership and led the congregation until his death in March 1926. Driven by Klein’s genuine attachment to Europe, Ohab Zedek was committed to help and sustain Jewish communities in Hungary. Prior to the war, the Tomche Torah Society had periodically remitted money to individual yeshivas and Talmud Torahs “in the old homeland.” During the war, the congregation was sensitive to the fact that Europe was going through terrible times. In July 1915, for instance, they postponed Klein’s silver jubilee “owing to the suffering of the European war.” At the same time, Ohab Zedek excelled in expressions of patriotism and devotion to American democracy. In March 1918, the Jewish press observed that “[t]he attitude of Orthodox Jewry toward the war was expressed … in no uncertain fashion.” With a service flag with eighty-seven stars behind him—two of which represented the sons of rabbis who had died in the war—Rabbi Klein reminded the congregation that more than 61,000 Jewish soldiers, including Jews of Hungarian descent, were currently employed at the US mainland, fighting “the battle for freedom the world over.”

After the United States entered the war, in April 1917, Ohab Zedek was able to combine concern for its brethren in Europe with expressions of patriotism for America. In the spring of 1918, Rev. Dr. Josef Rosenblatt, a native of Kiev and Ohab Zedek’s cantor, sang at the War Savings Tent in front of the Public Library in New York. He duly opened with “The Star-Spangled Banner” and continued with “Eli-Eli,” the Jewish folk song, and many other songs. His voice attracted attention beyond the Jewish congregation, and soon Rosenblatt began performing at war-relief events nationwide. Cleofonte Campanini, the general director of the Chicago Opera, who heard him sing at an event in Chicago, was so impressed that he offered Rosenblatt the part of Eleazar in Halevy’s opera The Jewess. “I suppose the story of the opera is familiar to you,” he wrote in a letter to Rosenblatt. “It is the glorification of the Jewish religion, and the role of the Jewess will be sung by Rosa Rulsa, who is a Jewess, a native of Odessa.” The engagement, which would pay $1,000 a night, caused a stir among the religious leadership of Ohab Zedek. After discussions with Rosenblatt, Morris Newman, president of the congregation, responded to Campanini that from a “Jewish standpoint, there were no objections,” but that the Board of Trustees felt that Rosenblatt’s “sacred position in the synagogue does not permit him to enter the operatic stage.” Rosenblatt declined the offer. But after his resignation, in 1926, he returned to the stage, an indication that he was never fully able to forget the episode.

The story of cantor Rosenblatt’s career shows how quickly some Jews became woven into the fabric of American cultural and religious life. Not only did Rosenblatt embolden the American public with his renditions of the American national anthem but also he sang for the relief of his European brethren from a decisively distant cultural stage, which was ready to embrace him beyond his immediate religious duties. While the history of this period of Jewish immersion into American life is made up of thousands such individual stories, there were conscious attempts to unify Jewish routes into American life. Rabbi Klein, for instance, proposed to

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39Perlman, Bridging Three Worlds, 251. See also Chaim Steinberger, First Hungarian Congregation Ohab Zedek, Founded in 1873: A History (New York, 2005), 6.
40Klein was born in Baracska, Hungary, on 20 May 1849; however, the Jewish press states his date of birth as 22 May 1848.
41Steinberger, First Hungarian Congregation Ohab Zedek, 6.
44“Cantor Rejects Flattering Offer to Sing in Opera,” The Jewish Exponent, 19 Apr. 1918, and “City Notes,” The Jewish Exponent, 3 May 1918.
build a memorial building in the name of the Jews of America, honoring Jewish philanthropy during the Great War. The desire to appear, at least to the outside world, as a strong community of productive, Americanized citizens emboldened the actions of Hungarian Jewish spokespeople in the United States.

Within the context of Americanization, however, the dedication to stay connected to and help the European homeland remained. In June 1919, Rabbi Klein blessed a cargo of kosher meat on the SS Asburn about to depart to Europe.45 In his Passover sermon in 1921, Klein said: “Hungarian Jewry has always set its face resolutely against the acceptance of aid from outside sources, and their innate pride and their willingness to divide all of the little they had with the more needy, has been an inspiration to world Jewry. Now, however, the time has gone past when they should be permitted to make further sacrifice, which, at the best, will not suffice to save thousands and hundreds of thousands from actual starvation.”46 Klein announced a drive to raise $500,000 within the next thirty days. The Relief Association for Hungarian Jews in Europe and Israel joined in the effort and praised Hungarian Jews for their stoic demeanor during their suffering. “But we,” they said, “of their race and their blood in this blessed country of ours cannot longer sit idly by and let them perish.”47 In July, a commission sailed to Hungary and the ceded territories—provinces that were now part of Austria, Romania, Slovakia, and Serbia—to assess the situation. The same month, “ever anxious to cooperate with the Joint,” Ohab Zedek and the Relief Association abandoned their drive in favor of a similar one in October, organized by the JDC.48 It was one of many instances in which the JDC thwarted the efforts of local Jewries in the postwar American landscape, further complicating the already precarious balancing act between, on the one hand, maintaining a deeply personal attachment to one’s country of origin and, on the other, forging a new collective identity as a wider body of Jews of European heritage.

1922: How to Explain Postwar Hungary

The year ended, and 1922 announced itself with unrelenting gloom. In February, Bertram A. Unger, a New York banker and prominent figure in Hungarian relief work, visited his old country to reassess the need for humanitarian aid. While he found the economic situation better than expected, he reported that many people were still in distress, in particular the 50,000 to 60,000 Jewish refugees from Galicia, Poland, and Russia. In addition, the Jews from the former Hungarian territories were also in a pitiable situation, with thousands living in abandoned railway cars.49 While politically, Unger said, the country’s Jews and non-Jews

45See also the newspaper clipping “Great and Far Reaching Work Done by American Hungarian Jewish Federation” (date unknown, presumably 1922), Jakob Hoffmann Collection, AR 2017, box 1, folder 6, Leo Baeck Institute, Center for Jewish History, New York.
46JDC Archives, Records of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee of the Years 1919–1921, Folder #148.1, Letter from the First Hungarian Congregation Ohab Zedek for release, 25/04/1921, 2.
47The Relief Association for Hungarian Jews in Europe and Palestine was one of the many small nongovernmental organizations by Hungarian Jews in the United States. It appears to have been founded in 1921; the JDC Archives contain two files, one from 1921, the other from 1926. Ibid., Folder #84.2, Relief Association for Hungarian Jews in Europe and Palestine, 12/5/1921.
48“Hungarian Jews to Be Aided by Former Countryman [sic],” The American Israelite, 7 July 1921, p. 4.
seemed to be in a process of rapprochement, economically the Jews still needed the full support of American Jewry.\footnote{Need for Jewish Aid in Hungary, “The American Israelite,” 16 Feb. 1922, p. 4.}

But international aid to Hungarian Jews was not the same as aid to Hungary by way of its governmental institutions. “Hardly a day passes,” The American Israelite wrote in May 1922, “without a body being fished out of the Danube in Budapest, and in every case the body shows wounds by shooting or other means, while the hands usually are found tied with thick rope behind the back of the victim. Other bodies have been found with heavy stones tied to the neck, and it required the strong winter current to cast the bodies ashore.”\footnote{Budapest Bomb Outrage May Cause Change in Ministry, “The American Israelite,” 19 May 1922.} The white terror was going on undiminished, and a bomb went off at the Budapest Liberal Club (Erzsébetvárosi Kör), killing nine Jews and seriously wounding twenty-three others.\footnote{Ibid.} And yet, the US government was considering a loan of millions of dollars to Hungary, a country that was “hopelessly bankrupt.” In fact, the previous year the US government had signed a treaty of “friendly relations” with Hungary, signaling the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, which had been on opposite sides during the war. In the wake of this treaty, Ulysses Grant-Smith was appointed US Commissioner to Hungary, “with the mission of reporting on political developments and promoting commerce.”\footnote{Embassy of Hungary, “Key Dates in Hungarian-American Diplomatic Relations,” accessed 24 Dec. 2018; https://washington.mfa.gov.hu/eng/page/fontos-datumok. See Friederike Kind-Kovács, “Transatlantic Humanitarianism: Jewish Child Relief in Budapest after the Great War,” in From the Midwife’s Bag to the Patient’s File: Public Health in Eastern Europe, eds. Friederike Kind-Kovács, Heike Karge, and Sara Bernasconi (Budapest, 2018), 145–72.} There could be little doubt, The American Israelite said, that this was the result of “insidious propaganda.”\footnote{Hungarian Propaganda in America, “The American Israelite,” 13 Apr. 1922.} In October 1922, it warily noted Hungary’s favorable position in Washington and wondered why sending millions of dollars to a corrupt government that silently condoned antisemitic violence was even an option. The writer concluded that the world would be a better place “if Hungary were wiped off the map as an independent State and a mandate for it given to some civilized country.”\footnote{Is Hungary a Civilized Country? “The American Israelite,” 7 Dec. 1922, p. 4.} And so, while journalists in and beyond Hungary were aware of their country’s plunging reputation in the eyes of the world, the Hungarian government was unfazed. Aid, it seemed, was on the way.\footnote{At this time, the US government seemed to prioritize giving aid to unstable countries, in the hope that the aid would stabilize them, prevent the spread of Bolshevism, and quell poverty—all issues that could stir up antisemitism. American Jews, however, preferred that its government did not fund antisemitic regimes and instead insisted on the United States obtaining real change.}

Meanwhile, the American Jewish press tried to explain the situation in Hungary. “One of the most turbulent, as well as the most disgraceful among the newly formed Independent European States at the present day is Hungary,” wrote Harold Berman in The American Israelite. “Ever since her separation from Austria, she has been running amuck, and most recklessly, right in the very heart of Europe. She has been a hotbed of reaction, of plots and organized murder. Terrorism, open and undisguised, rules the unhappy land, the cries of the maltreated and tortured are everywhere, while a frankly avowed throat-cutting gang rules supreme in a shameless and utter disregard of all human rights as well as of the protests and manifestations of disapproval from abroad.”\footnote{The Puzzle of Hungary, by Harold Berman, “The American Israelite,” 3 Aug. 1922, p. 3.} Berman thought the problem was neither temporary nor political, but essential and biological. Hungary, he said, was an outlier in Central Europe; only a thin veneer of civilization clung to its foreign body. A Mongol people,
they did not belong to European civilization, and this, he argued, explained the sudden and violent discarding of a seemingly well-adjusted, peaceful way of life. In another lengthy piece, *The American Israelite* reported that in the midst of anti-Jewish riots, the University of Budapest had posted a sign that read “Dogs and Jews are not allowed in the University.”

Vilmos Vázsonyi, former minister of Justice in the Hungarian wartime cabinet and an outspoken critic of the *numerus clausus* (and a Jew), gave a detailed account of the methodic violence against Jews and said that these horrendous tales were too numerous to tell. “Throughout these sombre stories of cruelty, there echoes and re-echoes the same old question: ‘For how long are we doomed to endure these tortures?’” The question of how Hungary went from being a celebrated safe haven for the Jews to being a burning house continued to occupy these critics, but clear answers escaped them.

In June 1922, news from overseas gained in optimism. Although Horthy remained in power, in the recent elections the most antisemitic politicians had been defeated and eight socialist deputies had returned to their seats. Since then, some of the most violent white guardists had been handed prison sentences and police in Budapest had dispensed demonstrations of the Awakening Magyars. The government announced it was willing to look into the legal validity of the *numerus clausus*, with the aim, its critics hoped, of annulling it. Even the American Jewish Committee, which had been slow in reporting on Hungary, noted that antisemitism was on the decline there. “Even in Hungary,” its *Yearbook* for 1923–24 stated, “where Jew-hatred was for a time regarded as ‘respectable’ and many a high-handed outrage went unpunished, the miscalled ‘Christian policy,’ a hypocritical euphemism for a course of procedure looking to the moral and economic annihilation of the Jewish population, has been definitely repudiated.”

Could this, then, be a reversal of fortunes in favor of the Jews?

Because of the lull in anti-Jewish violence, critics dared to venture into longer, more analytical pieces about Hungary’s fate. Vilmos Vázsonyi reacted to something that Hungarian premier Count Bethlen had said about the Jews. According to Bethlen, it was the lack of support by foreign Jewries that kept Hungary in its miserable state. If only world Jewry would stop withholding funds, he said, Hungary would blossom and the *numerus clausus* could be revoked. In other words, Bethlen placed the responsibility for national regeneration in the hands of the Jews. But, Vázsonyi reminded his readers, the *numerus clausus* was introduced on antisemitic grounds, not nationalist ones. The heartbreak it caused the Jews was moral, not material. “The humiliation hurts and not the loss of bread. The universities do not teach how to accumulate fortunes. The learned professions provide very little livelihoods for those who follow them.” Indeed, it was the antisemitism of the universities that caused the greatest hardship among the Jews of Hungary. Many students went into exile for the sole purpose of pursuing an education, ending up at universities in

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60. “A Step Toward the Redemption of Hungary,” *The American Israelite*, 20 July 1922, p. 5; “Hungarian Jewry Hopeful of Improvement,” *The Jewish Exponent*, 4 Aug. 1922. This did not mean, however, that antisemitism had vanished from the political landscape. In his memoirs, a member of the Hungarian National Assembly, Pál Sándor, recalled how on the day after his speech in Parliament, in which he denounced the white terror, he had received 207 threatening letters, one of which promised to turn him into “goulash.”

Austria, Germany, and Italy. With the *numerus clausus* still in place, also the American Jewish Committee was doubtful whether a safe Jewish future was possible in Hungary. With its anti-Jewish law, "Hungary … reverted in this respect to the shameful practice of old Russia." While Hungary pledged to the League of Nations to abolish these regulations, the Committee was not so confident: "It will be interesting to see to what extent these pledges will be observed."\(^6^3\)

### Philanthropy above Politics

By the end of 1923, the worst anti-Jewish violence had abated. The League of Nations Finance Commission was even considering giving Hungary a loan.\(^6^4\) In the following year, news from Hungary became less frequent, until, in the autumn, Samuel Buchler sat down at his desk and read about Horthy’s plans to decorate Warburg. As the Chairman of the Siberian Repatriation War Fund, Warburg had facilitated the return of roughly 8,000 Hungarian war prisoners who had been abandoned in Siberia. The JDC had contributed $250,000, and it was for this reason that Horthy wished to honor Warburg. At the time of these operations, in November 1920, Kendall Smith, deputy commissioner of the American Red Cross, had been obliged to deny a rumor circulating in Budapest that the money contributed by the JDC for the retribution of war prisoners was restricted to Jewish soldiers only. As he wrote to Ulysses Grant-Smith, the American minister to Hungary, no restrictions had been put on the use of this money, and therefore "the rumor that the Jews restricted their donation is wholly fabricated and should be denied." Grant-Smith urged his colleague in Budapest to use his position to deflect any local criticism, "out of which I understand," he added, "a certain amount of entirely unwarranted anti-Semitic propaganda has been devised."\(^6^5\) In July 1921, shortly after the last of regular transport of Hungarian prisoners from Eastern Siberia had been completed, a letter from Budapest reached the offices of the JDC in New York. Signed by three ministers of the Hungarian government, it expressed a "deep-felt debt of gratitude" to the JDC and the other aid societies whose contribution to the International Repatriation Fund had enabled the return of the prisoners "to their native soul and the bosom of their families." The JDC, it said, had greatly alleviated the suffering of "our unfortunate compatriots."\(^6^6\) In September Warburg replied, saying it had been a privilege to be part of such a noble cause, which was undertaken as "an act of humanity and in a spirit of duty to our fellow men."\(^6^7\)

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\(^6^5\)JDC Archives, Records of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee of the Years 1919–1921, Folder #151.2, Letter from Dr. Kendall Smith to Ulysses Grant-Smith, 11/03/1920.

\(^6^6\)It thanked the Joint in the name of the government, in the repatriated men and their families, and, "in fact, in the name of the whole nation." JDC Archives, Records of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee of the Years 1921–1932, Folder #90.a, Letter from Bethlen et al. to Joint Distribution Committee of American Funds for Jewish War Sufferers, 23/07/1921.

\(^6^7\)JDC Archives, Records of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee of the Years 1921–1932, Folder #90.a, Letter from Felix M. Warburg to His Excellency, 12/09/1921.
This, however, was not the end of the matter. Two years later, in April 1923, another letter appeared at Warburg’s desk. Count László Széchényi, the Hungarian minister, writing from the Royal Hungarian Legation in Washington, felt obliged to let Warburg know that in December of the previous year, the last prisoners had returned from Russia. With the mission now completed, Széchényi, seemingly misunderstanding the nature of philanthropy, thanked Warburg for his efforts and said he “would be glad to receive a statement of the amount due, accompanied by appropriate vouchers and receipts,” so that his government could compensate the JDC for the expenditures.\(^68\) William J. Mack, the JDC’s secretary, responded that the work had been done entirely out of a desire to alleviate human suffering, without regard to nationality of creed. “Our organization acted solely from motives of humanity and philanthropy and desires no financial reimbursement for the work it did or for the money it expended.” It felt amply compensated by the appreciation it received from the Hungarian government.\(^69\) Accepting this, Széchényi thanked the JDC for their “generous spirit” and “splendid service.”\(^70\)

A year passed. The act of honoring Warburg with a Red Cross Decoration for the JDC’s role in the repatriation of Hungarian prisoners of war thus had a long and somewhat uncomfortable prehistory. It is not surprising that Samuel Buchler, given his organization’s engagement during the previous eight years with the harrowed fate of Hungarian Jews overseas, was displeased at this news. On September 17, unsure whether Warburg had already accepted the distinction, Buchler penned his response. “Are you aware of the fact,” he asked Warburg, “that Horthy, the man who bestowed upon you these ‘Honors’, is directly responsible for the organization and existence of the ‘Awakening Magyars’ whose murderous performance against laborers and innocent Jewish men, women and children have undermined the fair name of the Hungarian people, while the Admiral found no way of punishing these scoundrels and has allowed these conditions to drag on to the very time when he deemed it fitting ‘Honor’ you?” In the wake of these persecutions, Buchler said, 25,000 Jewish artists, physicians, lawyers, laborers, and rabbis had come to America. “Do you know,” he continued, “that the lives of the families of these ‘refugees’ are in constant danger in Hungary?” The real reason, Buchler felt, Horthy had decided to honor the JDC was to secure another loan from the United States. But American Jews, Buchler wrote, “can ill-afford to have Czar Horthy degrade with his ‘Honors’ one of its most popular and distinguished Philanthropists and for this reason I found it necessary to familiarize you with the conditions as they now prevail in unfortunate Hungary.”\(^71\)

A week later, Warburg responded to Buchler. He said that he was quite aware of the attitude of the Hungarian government, but that, “inasmuch as the services rendered by the Joint

\(^{68}\)JDC Archives, Records of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee of the Years 1921–1932, Folder #90. a, Letter from Minister of Hungary to the Joint Distribution Committee, 04/10/1923. As to those men still residing in Russia, Széchényi wrote, they had been given ample opportunity to return to Hungary but decided not to do so. Thus they could no longer be considered prisoners, but rather “Hungarian emigrants residing in a foreign country.”

\(^{69}\)JDC Archives, Records of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee of the Years 1921–1932, Folder #90. a, The Ship had on Board 131 Hungarian War Prisoners, Whose Names and Addresses …, 10/04/1923. While this was the Joint’s official position, it was not entirely true: the Joint did give aid to non-Jews to establish goodwill with the authorities, and thus be able to better help Jews in a surrounding in which they were still considered the enemy and faced antisemitism and violence.

\(^{70}\)JDC Archives, Records of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee of the Years 1921–1932, Folder #90. a, “Letter from Minister of Hungary to Mr. Wm. J. Mack,” 05/09/1923.

\(^{71}\)The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Felix M. Warburg Papers, 1910–1937, MS 457, Series 214, Folder 23, “Federation of Hungarian Jews in America, 1924.”
Distribution Committee to humanity were recognized and appreciation expressed in the document addressed to me as Chairman of the Joint Distribution Committee, I felt that such recognition should be accepted and placed with the many documents which we have received from other governments and other people." It was a diplomatic response; also, it was the end of the discussion.

Conclusion

After 1924, the Federation’s engagement with overseas humanitarianism petered out. As Hungary entered a state of relative peace—which would last until the early 1930s—the urgency of the immigration question also disappeared. To Robert Dell, writing for The New Statesman in May 1924 and cited in the American Jewish press, Budapest was “one of the most agreeable cities of Europe,” but its future was unsure.

Hungarian Jews took divergent routes as to the memory of this violent period in their recent history, which had been a painful contrast to the liberal golden age in which their attachment to Hungary was rooted. In Hungary, once the white terror was over, those Jews who had remained—and survived—hoped that the violence had been an anomaly and that their relations with non-Jewish Hungarian society could be restored. Their faith in the government had been shaken, but contrary to what was happening to their friends and family members overseas, Jews in Hungary continued to place a strong emphasis on the Hungarian aspects of their identity in a bid that this would help rejuvenate the prewar balance.

In America, Jews returned to the project of integration, community building, and local politics. They were dismayed about what happened in Hungary, but, with time, they distanced themselves from their place of origin, a country where civil liberties were being repressed and that, as a result, was becoming further removed from the realities of their new homeland. The “collective historical continuity” that a shared image of Hungary had given Hungarian Jewish émigrés before the war changed in the wake of their encounters with a much-changed Hungary after World War I. Because of the negative influence of political developments and rising antisemitism in Hungary, American-Hungarian Jews now prioritized the Jewish and American aspects of their identity. As Julianna Puskás has observed, “[T]he homeland that served as a foundation for continuity became a negative symbol that was contrasted with the reality of the new America.” Because of the urgency of the immigration and refugee questions, which deeply touched their own lives, they came into contact with Jews of other backgrounds, and their ties to Christian Hungarians began to loosen. Instead of associating with other Hungarian immigrants in the United States, they diverted their attention to like-minded Jewish communities in a shared effort to more firmly establish their American roots by means of an active engagement in humanitarianism. Once the main wave of war-relief activities had passed around 1924, and America began to look

72 Ibid.
74 Puskás, Ties That Bind, 301.
75 Ibid.
differently at its own immigrants, Hungarian Jews in America turned their attention once more to their new homeland, a country they had been unwilling to taint with the presence of military criminals such as Huszár or criminal politicians such as Horthy. Hungary, they said, had a terrifyingly short memory to be engaging in such violence against the Jews, and its democratic legacy had been tarnished beyond repair.

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