

THE RETRIBUTION PROCESS IN HUNGARY: MAGYARS AT THE GROUND
LEVEL IN BUDAPEST, 1945-1948

BY

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To Greg Mason, who has been my closest companion and my rock for the last five years. I dedicate this work to him as a way of giving thanks for all of his support in my personal and academic life. I look forward to sharing our lives together.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BUDAPEST FŐVÁROS
LEVÉLTÁR (BFL)

Budapest City Archives. All of the surveys and Certification Committee documents have been collected and archived here.

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This study aims to examine the role of Hungarians in the retribution process in post-World War II Hungary. Most analyses on this process in postwar Europe concentrate narrowly on the war crimes trials in each country. By discussing the role of Hungarians in the attempt at political justice in Hungary, I intend to complicate the picture of everyday life in postwar Hungary, and that of Eastern Europe more broadly.

Under the guidance of Hungary's postwar governments from 1945-1948, the Certification Committee (Igazoló Bizottság) instructed every citizen in Budapest to complete a postwar survey. On the surface the purpose of the survey was to help the Committee determine who collaborated with or profited from the Hungarian Nazi government's seizure of power. Despite outward aims to perform thorough retributive justice of Hungarian society in Budapest, the Committee conducted perfunctory investigations of the surveys. At the same time, Hungarians in the capital city preferred to focus more on the reconstruction efforts than on rooting out former fascists. More importantly, they sought to convince the Certification Committee of their non-fascist behavior during the war, so that they could receive approval, and begin to rebuild their

daily lives. In the few cases that Hungarians denounced their neighbors for wartime fascist activity, they did it as a way of seeking retribution for their wartime experiences. Furthermore, Hungarians concentrated on presenting themselves as bereft of Nazi affiliation and concerned with rebuilding their country as a way to conceal potential misbehavior during the war.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Post-World War II Hungary

By the time the Red Army liberated Hungary in early 1945, the nation and its people were left in complete and utter ruin. The years of war wrecked havoc on the entire nation, most visibly on the architecture, governmental infrastructure, and the social structure. While tens of thousands of Hungarian soldiers died fighting alongside the Germans, about 100,000 Hungarian Jewish men suffered in the *munkászolgalát*, or the labor camps on the eastern warfront. Furthermore, an estimated 400,000 of the country's Jews, mainly from the countryside, perished in Auschwitz and other concentration and death camps in the summer of 1944. The Siege of Budapest, which lasted from December 29th, 1944 – February 13th, 1945, remained one of the bloodiest battles of the entire war. The Red Army's invasion and subsequent occupation of Budapest and the rest of the country served to liberate Hungary from the Nazis, but also resulted in countless women being raped, civilians deported to the USSR, and even more destruction of the nation's landscape and architecture.

After so much devastation and loss of life, the Hungarians, like other Europeans, were faced with the task of reconstructing their lives and country. How did Hungarians cope with the realities of postwar Hungary? How did they find lost family members? What of their pre-war and wartime businesses? Considering that 27% of the housing in Budapest was demolished, how did they deal with the housing crisis that followed the war? How did the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, or of the labor camps in the East, rebuild their lives? These questions illustrate the basic challenges that Hungarians, and Europeans more broadly, faced in the first few postwar years. As a consequence of

coming to terms with the wartime death, destruction, and chaos that characterized post-liberation Hungary, people from all walks of society struggled to deal with postwar life.

The Certification Committee and the Surveys

By looking at the wartime and postwar social and material conditions, Hungarians' pre, during, and postwar political affiliations, and peoples' claims to property rights, the overall lifestyle of urban Hungarians in the immediate postwar years becomes apparent. In the first few years after the war, Hungarians in Budapest emphasized the need to reestablish their everyday lives through reclaiming their professions, seeking ways to ensure a stable income, and securing a living arrangement. Through the governmental surveys, the Certification Committee aimed to evaluate Hungarians' wartime affiliations and lifestyles.¹ After establishing the nation's postwar judicial system by adopting Decree No. 81/1945 M.E. on January 25, 1945, the Hungarian Provisional Government created the Peoples' Court of Appeals and the Certification Committee in Budapest on July 1 of that year.² The Committee was intended to serve as a supporting institution to the postwar court system.³ Its first task was to create surveys that questioned people about their personal backgrounds and wartime affiliations, so as to determine if they participated in fascist activities during the war or not. In addition to requesting citizens' basic information like name, birth date, profession, and education, they also asked about peoples' businesses, incomes, apartment sizes, journal and newspaper subscriptions, etc. before, during, and after the war.

¹ Gyula Papp, "As igazoló eljárások és a háborús bűnök megtorlása 1945 után Magyarországon (The Certification Processes and the Punishment of War Crimes after 1945 in Hungary)," in *AETAS*, 24. Évf. 2009. 2. Szám, 164.

² Randolph Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: the Holocaust in Hungary, Condensed Edition*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000, 256. Papp, Gyula, 165.

³ *Ibid.*

These surveys illustrate the pre, during, and postwar lives of Budapest citizens, as they recorded it themselves. Thus, it is possible to get a glimpse of postwar life amidst the rising inflation in 1946, the property disputes that arose in part due to the housing crisis, and the nation's focus on rebuilding national landmarks like the Széchenyi Bridge. As part and parcel to Hungary's emphasis on reconstructing the city's architecture, these surveys demonstrate the extent to which Hungarians, both Jewish and non-Jewish, sought to return to daily life without war and strife. Rather than dwell solely on their wartime sufferings Hungarians instead focused on their present and future lives.

But what did this new life entail? How did they envision themselves reestablishing everyday life amidst the chaos and destruction that surrounded them? Hungarians wanted to create a life that revolved around activities like work, raising one's family, and enjoying simple pleasures like sports and viewing films at the theater. The fanfare that surrounded the reconstruction of the transportation system and the bridges enabled people to think about the places they wanted to go, see and experience. Films also served as a visual representation of how they should live their lives, such as how to view the present vis-à-vis their recent experiences under Nazism. Additionally, they wanted to obtain new consumer items that they could not have during the war due to material shortages, such as radios and fashionable clothing. Newspaper advertisements illustrate the wide variety of shops that existed in Budapest after the war. Even though many Hungarians in the city could not afford these items, the advertisements showed them what they needed to have, and helped them determine what kind of postwar life they wanted.

Postwar Process of Retribution

Regardless of their focus on reestablishing everyday economic and social stability, Hungarians were forced to confront how to deal with the fate of ex-Nazis, former members of the Hungarian Nazis' Arrow Cross Party, wartime collaborators, and retribution. The creation of the postwar court system brought the recent Nazi occupation into sharp relief. As mentioned before, the Certification Committee's task involved investigating and attempting to discern who collaborated and/or benefitted from the wartime regimes of Miklós Horthy and the Hungarian Nazi government in 1944.⁴ The citizens in Budapest were involved in this process as well, as the Committee used Hungarians' postwar surveys to determine those who needed further examination, and who did not. Moreover, the Committee asked Hungarians to write letters of support for their neighbors, co-workers, families, and friends. In these letters Hungarians were instructed to do one of two things: to vouch for the person's wartime political reliability, with no connections to the Nyilás (Arrow Cross) government or the anti-Jewish laws; or, to divulge the details of the individual's unsavory activities during the wartime regimes.

Yet across Europe the process of rooting out former fascists was riddled with uncertainty. It was the first time in world history that an entire continent was forced to deal with war crimes of this magnitude. Postwar governments such as the Polish, Romanian, French, and Dutch all struggled to make sense of their experience with Nazism, and to a small extent the fate of their Jews. As part of the retribution process these governments were also challenged with the task of delineating the parameters of

⁴ Although it cannot be considered a Nazi puppet regime, the government under Regent Miklós Horthy enacted three anti-Jewish laws between 1938-1941. More importantly for the postwar governments however, was Hungary's alliance with Germany and its entrance into the war on the Axis side. Thus, the postwar government viewed the top leaders who contributed to the decision to fight on the side of the Germans during the war as criminals as well.

wartime criminal activity. This was no different for the Hungarians. What kinds of behavior made an individual a Nazi? A collaborator? Is a collaborator strictly someone who helped the Nazis' maintain power, or aided in the deportation of Jews? For example, is a baker who supplied bread to Nazi officers in return for being allowed to remain in his apartment considered a collaborator or bystander? What constituted a bystander? These questions demonstrate the struggles that Hungarians, and Europeans more broadly, experienced in trying to identify who collaborated or benefitted from the Nazi regime after the war. Without clear definitions of these categories and the types of behavior that signified each one, European leaders worked to expel all traces of fascism from their societies.

Historians and Problems with Terminology

Historians today continue to struggle with these definitions, as well as how to define the processes of de-nazification and retribution in post-World War II Europe. De-nazification implies that the governments and leaders after World War II, viewing ex-Nazis and former fascists as the most dangerous elements to postwar society, focused their efforts primarily on purging these people from the government, economy, and society.⁵ However in Hungary both the Provisional Government and the Coalition Government sought to do more than just root out ex-Nazis. They also strove to punish the top political elite that had dragged Hungary into the war as a German ally, a crime they deemed nearly as egregious as being a former Nyilas member.⁶ Thus the term de-

⁵ Timothy R. Vogt, *Denazification in Soviet-occupied Germany: Brandenburg, 1945-1948*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000, 2.

⁶ *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath*, edited by István Deák, Jan Gross, Tony Judt, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003. Karsai makes it explicit that the Peoples' Courts wanted to indict those that had brought the Hungarian people great suffering and humiliation, much of which was caused by the wreckage of the railways, economy, bridges, and nation's capitol.

nazification is not inclusive enough, as the process in reality involved searching for more than just ex-Nazis. Furthermore, by focusing narrowly on the search and punishment of former German and/or Hungarian Nazis, the term “de-nazification” bypasses the intent to look for wartime collaborators who did not belong to the Nazi or Arrow Cross Party, such as the baker mentioned earlier. A Hungarian did not need to be a Nazi or Nyilas in order to aid, abet, and benefit from the German occupation. Consequentially one of the purposes of this analysis is to place the role Hungarians at the ground level, such as middle class jewelers, dentists, and clothing retailers in Budapest, in the center of the postwar retribution process.

“Retribution” is a much more inclusive term than de-nazification. By definition it includes punishments for all war crimes.⁷ In comparison to the stipulations posed by using de-nazification, retribution allows for the inclusion of prosecutions and punishments of top-level Nazis, to middle and lower class beneficiaries during the Nazi occupation. By focusing on the punishment and not the crime, it shifts the focus from simply the crime or the punishment on its own, to the intersection between the two: to how and why the postwar court systems punished collaborators of all kinds. This retribution, retributive justice, and political justice will be used rather than de-nazification.

It is also difficult for historians to gauge how Europeans, and in this case the Hungarians, determined who the collaborators were. According to Jan Gross, the term “collaborator” produces a very thin veil over an extremely complex reality, which makes

The Provisional Government was initially created in Debrecen in the fall of 1944 once the Red Army liberated the city, Once Budapest was liberated, the government move there. The Coalition Government was created by the free elections held in November of 1945, and it consisted of members of the Social Democratic Party, the agrarian-based Smallholders' Party, and the Hungarian Communist Party.

⁷ Politics of Retribution, viii.

it problematic.⁸ In other words, by labeling certain behaviors as collaborationist, it fails to take into account all of the important contextual details that determined a particular person's decision to interact with the Nazis. A person's social, political, and economic situation vis-à-vis the occupiers, such as whether they were a wealthy businessman or an impoverished worker, might influence their choice to act in ways that were questionable after the war.⁹ Thus, as Gross points out, collaboration was not entirely driven by the occupier.¹⁰ Opportunities for personal gain was a major motivator for working with the Nazis, as extra food, promises of protection, and chances of socio-economic improvement were highly prized during the war.

It remains difficult to formulate a category that encapsulates all of the terms of involvement with the Germans, particularly as those terms constantly changed throughout the course of the war.¹¹ Ultimately Gross calls for the use of a word between collaborator and resistance.¹² Tim Cole on the other hand argues for a more nuanced definition of a bystander, in order to lessen the term's ambiguity. As a consequence he delineates the differences between one that is active, and one that is passive. According to Cole, the active bystander actively negotiated the terms of his existence in the occupied state.¹³ This is best illustrated by the petitions made by Hungarians in Budapest in spring and summer of 1944 to either remain in their homes or move to a

⁸ Politics of Retribution, 30-31.

⁹ Other circumstances also affected peoples' decision to behave in certain ways. Some people acted out of revenge from prior situations, such as if one man, after being forced out of business by another store or practice, informed on the man to the Nazis. The military situation of the war also impacted everyday life and may have impacted peoples' decisions, particularly in countries like Poland that experienced double and triple occupation throughout the course of the war.

¹⁰ Politics of Retribution, 25.

¹¹ Ibid, 29.

¹² Ibid, 31.

¹³ Tim Cole, "Writing Bystanders," 58-59

new one during ghettoization, which will be discussed in more detail later.¹⁴ A passive bystander is someone characterized by their inactivity vis-à-vis the Nazis. By explaining the difference between an active and passive bystander, Cole insists that for some Europeans the bystander position entailed purposeful action, rather than just the lack of action that other historians attribute to the term. Although it remains difficult to determine who was an active or passive bystander, the two categories are essential to understanding how Hungarians viewed their wartime activities in the postwar years.

The Hungarians in Budapest

The surveys and Committee documents indicate how the Hungarians, rather than emphasize the need to punish those that aided and abetted the mass destruction of European Jewry, instead focused more simply on convincing the Committee to certify their wartime behavior as “democratic.” By being declared as having a “democratic” and pro-Hungarian attitude during the war, they could begin to reestablish their daily lives and routines. Ultimately most Hungarians preferred to believe that they did not participate in fascist or anti-Jewish activities, and they thereby strove to present themselves as passive bystanders after the war, to use Cole’s term.¹⁵

This focus on reconstituting their everyday housing situations, jobs, and lives, rather than on condemning their most recent past with Nazism and connections to the Holocaust forms the heart of this analysis. For most Hungarians in Budapest, their main goal in the immediate postwar years lay in trying to rebuild their lives and establish everyday stability. This is most clearly seen in the housing crisis, as few apartments

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ One way they did this was to selectively forget inconvenient details and adopted interpretations of their wartime activities in order to conform to the Provisional and Coalition government’s narrative of Hungarian activity under the occupation. This narrative dictated that the alliance with Germany, enactment of anti-Jewish laws, and the deportation of Hungarian Jews were imposed on them by the Germans and a few extremist Hungarian leaders. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

remained fully intact after the war, leaving thousands in need of housing. This led to a struggle amongst Hungarians to prove ownership over their property. There was massive pressuring on the government to build new housing facilities. A small number of Hungarians denounced their neighbors' wartime activities when attempting to prove housing ownership; these cases, however, were not characteristic of the majority of the population in the capital city. While some Hungarians did participate in the retribution process and helped to find and prosecute war criminals, they remained small in number. Instead, most Hungarians in Budapest longed for life to return to normal after the chaos and destruction of the war. In doing so they focused on proving their wartime innocence in the surveys and through outside letters declared their political reliability. After having their innocence verified by the Certification Committee, the residents of Budapest could continue rebuilding their daily lives and businesses, and their city as well.

Ultimately, the Hungarians in Budapest did not emphasize the need to recognize the Holocaust or the sufferings of the nation's surviving Jewish population. These beliefs about the Holocaust were not reserved for only the non-Jewish Hungarians. Many Hungarian Jews did make at least one reference to their wartime suffering in the surveys, usually that they were forcibly ghettoized or conscripted to work in a labor camp on the Hungarian front lines. Yet they stopped short of seeking compensation or official recognition of their experiences from the Committee. On the whole they did not attempt to use the questionnaires, or the Committee, as a way to alert the authorities of the injustice done to them by local Hungarians. In the few instances that appear in the certification documents of Budapest, District VII, in which Hungarian Jews denounced non-Jews for their wartime activities, they usually pursued it for the purposes of property

restitution. Instead of dwelling on their wartime experiences Hungarian Jews also sought to return to their daily lives.

The Historiography of Postwar European Retributive Justice

In order to broaden the scope of this analysis, the last question that this study attempts to answer concerns the similarities and differences between the retribution process in Hungary and those that occurred elsewhere in Europe. The years 1945-1948 saw a proliferation of war crimes trials and retribution courts, as nearly every European country sought to eradicate the traces of fascism from their societies. During the Cold War some, mainly East German historians, believed the postwar crimes trials in Soviet-occupied Eastern Europe occurred with more rigor and precision than in Western European countries.¹⁶ Since the collapse of Communism and the opening of previously closed archives historians have begun characterizing the retribution processes across Europe as having more similarities than differences. In his study on denazification in Soviet-occupied Brandenburg Timothy Vogt argues that Soviet policies were formed in a much more ad hoc fashion than previously assumed.¹⁷ More specifically he believes that the Soviet denazification process in Brandenburg was marked by significant confusion and more flexibility than East German historians were willing to admit.¹⁸ As a consequence the war crimes trials and retribution courts in the Soviet zone of Germany appear more akin to those in the West.¹⁹

Other historians of postwar Europe have advanced this argument as well. In the edited volume *The Politics of Retribution* Tony Judt summarizes the contributors'

¹⁶ Vogt, 3-4.

¹⁷ Ibid, 4. "Denazification" was used here because of Vogt's own use of the term.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

arguments by stating that in the immediate post-World War II years European countries pursued the retribution process along very similar lines, with similar goals.²⁰ Aside from their contextual differences, each country sought to achieve political and economic stability, and to legitimize their power as a postwar ruling institution. It was these goals that motivated them to create war crimes tribunals, certification commissions, and in some case reeducation policies, and not simply to appease the public's demands for retribution. Furthermore, he says that:

Both sides of the divide had good reason to put behind them the experience of war and occupation, and a future-oriented vocabulary of social harmony and material improvement emerged to occupy a public space hitherto filled with older, divisive, and more provincial claims and resentments.²¹

Judt's statement succinctly sums up how leaders in Eastern and Western Europe viewed the postwar processes at hand. Aware that the populace desired to place the blame on specific individuals, in the first few months after liberation the war crimes courts administered harsh retributive justice largely only to the key players.²² Some former Nazi leaders, such as Hungary's Arrow Cross leader Ferenc Szálasi, were executed in full view of observers. Moreover, the authorities allowed observers to take private photos of the event, as well as one professional photographer so that he could disseminate pictures of it to the reading public in newspapers.²³ Hungary's postwar leaders hoped that the newspaper photos would reinforce their anti-fascist narrative and

²⁰ Politics of Retribution, 303.

²¹ Ibid. 293.

²² In fact, some of the harshest treatments were conducted before the war was even over. An example of this is the "wild expulsions" of the Sudeten Germans in the Czech lands, during which the Czechs violently forced the Germans out of their home and back to Germany. For more, see Ben Frommer, *National Cleansing: Retribution Against Nazi Collaborators in Postwar Czechoslovakia*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

²³ Andrea Petö, "Death and Picture: Representation of War Criminals and Construction of a Divided Memory about World War II in Hungary," in *Faces of Death: Visualizing History*, edited by Andrea Petö and Klaartje Schrujvers, Pisa, Edizioni Plus: Pisa University Press, 2009, 39-57.

thus garner support for the trials from the public.²⁴ The public's attendance at Szálasi's execution demonstrates their eagerness to observe political justice in action, specifically against the nation's fanatical Hungarian Nazi leader. It also depicts how the government had a specific agenda in mind with these trials and executions, which was to ostracize, prosecute, and punish ex-Nazis as a way to legitimize their rule.

The postwar governments punished the war criminals based on ex post facto laws, or laws that retroactively changed the legal status of certain activities that were committed prior to the law's implementation. Whereas aiding and abetting the Nazi regime was highly encouraged by the Nazis themselves, in the postwar years these activities were highly criminalized and punishable. After the initial fury of prosecuting the major war criminals, in most countries the pace of the war crimes trials slowed down significantly. This was partly due to the public's quick loss of interest in the trials. This oftentimes paralleled the governments' desire to focus more heavily on reconstructing the nation physically, culturally, and socially. This is also evident in how postwar governments accepted ex-Nazis into their ranks, which leaders believed would help silence former Nazis' wartime activities, as well as ensure their loyalty to the postwar social order.

In her article on the trials in Bordeaux, France, Sarah Farmer illustrates how complex and divisive some of the war crimes trials became due to the issues of ex post facto laws. In the 1953 trial a small group of men were charged with the collective responsibility for the mass murder of over 600 French citizens in Oradour-sur-Glane in

²⁴ Petö argues that due to the Christian symbology of photos taken by private parties, the privately captured photos undermined the government's intended narrative. The private photos likened the Hungarian war criminals to the execution of Christian martyrs, which implied that these men were heroes, and not perpetrators. This of course served to clash with the dominant narrative. Petö, 51.

June of 1944. Almost all of the French Alsatians were found guilty of being collectively responsible for the crime and received punishments of hard labor from five to twelve years.²⁵ Farmer details how the French public was utterly divided over the use of the ex post facto law. Several weeks after the verdict was delivered the National Assembly intervened and gave amnesty to the Alsatians, a move that was greatly applauded by most Frenchmen. Yet Farmer explains how when the law of collective responsibility was passed in 1948, it was generally welcomed by Frenchmen. This shows the decrease in public support for the war crimes trials after the initial postwar years. Moreover, Farmer convincingly argues that the National Assembly believed it more important and urgent to conserve national unity than to punish war criminals.²⁶

This and other cases illustrate the ambiguity surrounding ex post facto laws, and how some postwar governments struggled to come to terms with it. Her study also highlights the shrinking of popular support for political justice after the initial post-World War II years. Furthermore, Farmer's insistence that it was national unity that motivated the French Assembly fits within the historiography of the postwar retribution process as a whole. European leaders chose to sacrifice the aim of conducting a thorough and ongoing prosecution of war criminals as well as active bystanders in the interest of facilitating national, social, and political reunion. They believed that by advocating national unity their power would be legitimized by the public's support. The postwar governments in turn hoped that 1945 would serve as a breaking point with the past, as a Year Zero moment for their nation and people.

²⁵ In September of 1948 the French Parliament passed a retroactive law on collective responsibility for crimes committed during the Nazi occupation. *The Politics of Retribution*, 201.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 206.

In this analysis I argue that the case of Hungary's retributive process mirrored those in Eastern and Western Europe. After the initial sense of urgency and enthusiasm for the trials of leaders like Szálasi, László Bárdossy, and László Baky, Hungarians' interest quickly waned. When it came time to contribute to the retribution process through the Central Committee's surveys, Hungarians chose to conceal their wartime activities and focused on national renewal. As with the trial in France in 1953, the Provisional and Coalition governments did not thoroughly root out ex-fascists or beneficiaries of the Nazi regime, particularly as the Communists accepted some of them into their ranks. Instead, the postwar Hungarian governments, and the Communist Party in particular, concentrated on legitimizing their authority in the eyes of the public through national reconstruction and stabilizing the economy. Hungarian historian István Deák seems to excuse the postwar governments and national courts for falling short of the aims of the retribution process. He says that:

Still, the fact remains that never before had the peoples of Europe attempted, on such a large scale, to deal with ordinary and political criminals in their midst. Nor had there ever been such a continent-wide soul searching. Those who were punished for good reason far outnumbered those who were punished unjustly.²⁷

Deák makes an interesting point regarding the hitherto known enormous scale of the retribution process. But while Deák tries to pardon the postwar judicial systems from the criticisms it deserves, Tony Judt describes the postwar response as "tragically inadequate."²⁸ I agree with Judt, as I argue that the retribution process was incredibly insufficient in suiting the needs of those that suffered at the hands of the Nazis' and the active bystanders in each country. In pursuing notions of national renewal and political

²⁷ Ibid, 12.

²⁸ Ibid, 301.

legitimacy European leaders, especially in Hungary, chose to conduct a less thorough process of political justice and retribution. As Judt says in the Preface to *The Politics of Retribution*, the time for reevaluating twentieth century European history is upon us.²⁹ The postwar period in particular serves as one of the most critical moments in that history.

Representing Hungarians in Budapest

As a consequence of the available documents, this analysis concentrates on the attitudes and actions of the Hungarians in Budapest, and not in other cities or in the countryside. Thus the following study only claims to represent the Hungarians in Budapest. The name of the institution that presided over the Certification Committee, the *Budapesti Nemzeti Bizottság* (BNB), or the Budapest National Committee, refers to the fact that it was located and operated in the capitol city. However it is not likely that the citizens in Budapest were the only Hungarians to complete postwar questionnaires about their pre, wartime, and postwar activities and lifestyles. If Committees existed elsewhere, a comparison study depicting Hungarians' attitudes and the Committees' role in enacting political justice across the nation could offer extremely valuable insights.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid, ix.

³⁰ A comparison study between the Hungarians and Committees in Budapest and Szeged would be fascinating. In the southernmost city of Hungary the "Szeged Idea" of fascism flourished to a remarkable extent in the interwar period. Established after the fall of Béla Kun's Soviet Republic in 1920, the fascists in the city understood the "Szeged Idea" to be a type of "gentleman's fascism" that borrowed from Italian models to promote populism and a Hungarian version of antisemitism.

³⁰ Due to its history with fascism a comparison analysis between Budapest and Szeged on the topic could thereby offer some interesting perspectives on the topic.

CHAPTER 2 CONDITIONS IN POST-WORLD WAR II HUNGARY

On the eve of 1945 Hungary was on the brink of political and social ruin. Under Admiral Miklós Horthy's leadership Hungary joined World War II on the side of the Germans. Since almost none of the fighting prior to 1944 occurred on Hungarian soil, the nation, its people, cities and towns remained largely intact. After deposing Horthy in late 1943 however, the Germans occupied the country with the help of the Hungarian Nazi Arrow Cross Party (the Nyilás). During the first month of the Nazi occupation the head of the Arrow Cross press department remarked that, "Order has broken down in the capital. Anyone who possessed a machine gun could become judge and executioner."¹ The semblance of stability marked by Horthy's rule came to an end once the Arrow Cross Party took over. When the Soviets neared Budapest in late 1944 they besieged the city, during which near chaos ruled the capital city and countryside. While the Nazis tried to maintain power they arbitrarily took Jews to the Danube at night and shot them.² The Budapest Jews barely escaped deportation in the spring and summer of 1944, partly thanks to Horthy's intervention. Yet they were forced to hide out during the Nazi occupation to avoid being shot, and had to constantly move from place to place in order to avoid being taken.³

The Siege of Budapest crippled the city's population, as the Hungarian Nazi government's unpreparedness for the siege and the severe winter caused thousands to

¹ Kenez, 35.

² Ibid.

³ Some historians believed that Horthy did everything in his power to protect the Jews of Budapest. According to them he halted the deportations in the summer of 1944 in order to save them, as they were about to be sent to the death and concentration camps. Other historians, like István Deák argue that Horthy took more of a middle of the road position in regards to the Jews, saying that he stopped the trains out of Budapest in order to reassert his authority and prevent a coup d'état. For more, see *The Politics of Retribution*.

nearly starve. Unfortunately the Red Army's liberation did little to improve the country's conditions; the Soviets continued the looting began by the Nazis, and they arrested Hungarians at random. Peter Kenez argues that the aggression and brutality of the Soviet soldiers in Hungary signified their aims to punish the Hungarians as a whole for the nation's transgressions.⁴ As a consequence of experiencing the Nazi and Soviet occupations one right after the other, the brutality and suffering they experienced in 1944-1945 become emblazoned in Hungarian collective memory.

The Postwar Hungarian Government

Once the Soviets gradually liberated Hungary from East to West, local governments were hastily reorganized so that the so-called national and peoples' committees contributed to the local administrations, in addition to the various political parties.⁵ Despite the strong influence of the Communist party due to the Soviet's occupation of Hungary, some of Hungary's interwar political parties, mainly the Independent Smallholder's Party and the Social Democratic Party, still retained significant public support after the war.⁶ This supports what Tibor Valuch describes as the "liberation syndrome" that characterized the years of 1944-1945 until the Communist takeover in 1948. According to Valuch, this meant that the Hungarians possessed a certain faith and will in creating harmony amidst the social and political change, so that

⁴ Kenez, 39. After seeing their homeland invaded and destroyed and their women raped by a collection of German, Hungarian, and Romanian armies, the Soviets viewed liberation as a chance to return the favor so to speak, or to commit the same types of atrocities they suffered from earlier. Kenez says that while, "We may disapprove of vengeance, but in human terms, it is understandable." 39.

⁵ *Social History of Hungary: From the Reform Period to the End of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Gábor Gyani, György Kövér, and Tibor Valuch, translated by Mario Fenyo, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004), 541.

⁶ The Independent Smallholders' Party fought for land reform, universal suffrage, and was considered the peasants' party. Kenez, 88.

a new order could be created under the auspices of social justice and greater equality.⁷ Valuch's assessment accurately portrays the way that many Hungarians viewed the conditions of their liberation: that in spite of the Communist presence, this was Hungary's chance to establish a new democratic tradition, and a new Hungary for its people.

The National Provisional Government, which was initially established in Debrecen prior to Budapest's liberation, moved to the capital city in April of 1945 and was largely controlled by the Hungarian Communist Party, the MKP (Magyar Kommunista Part). Upon relocating to Budapest, the non-Communist members of the Provisional Government sought to minimize the Communist influence, pass an extensive land reform, and rebuild the governmental infrastructure and economy.⁸ The Provisional Government looked to establish political legitimacy by holding free elections, which they held in November of 1945. The results of the elections betrayed the public's attitude towards the Communist Party, as the MKP received only 17 percent of the votes, as did the Social Democrats, while the Smallholders' Party won the majority of the populations' votes, at 57%. Yet some Hungarian historians, like László Borhi, disregard the election results in November of 1945 as facade, arguing that the Communists' power was too strong to overcome between 1945-1947.⁹ While Borhi's assessment has some merit he relies too heavily on the decisions and actions of top political leaders, and does not analyze the election results, nor the vast majority of Hungarians' decision to support other, non-Communist parties. Rather, it appears that Valuch's "liberation syndrome" is

⁷ Social History of Hungary, 590.

⁸ Kenez 90-95.

⁹ For more on Borhi's argument regarding Hungary and the Communists in the postwar years, see László Borhi, *Hungary in the Cold War, 1945-1956: Between the United States and Soviet Union*, Budapest, Hungary: Central European University Press, 2004.

more indicative of Hungarians' attitudes in the initial postwar years. The election results, particularly the Communists' unpopularity amongst the non-working classes, characterized how Hungarians felt towards the Communist Party.¹⁰

As a function of the wartime fighting, deportations, and the redrawing of national boundaries, enormous numbers of Europeans were on the move between 1945-1948. Thousands of surviving Jews stayed in the concentration camps for several months, which more often than not were turned into Displaced Person's Camps, or DP camps. After being nursed back to health in the DP camps, some Jews, especially the Hungarian Jews, attempted to move back to their homelands in search of family, friends, and their community. At the same time a population transfer was imposed on the Hungarian government. While the Germans and Slovaks in Hungary were transferred back to their respective homelands, many of the Hungarians living on the Slovakian-Hungarian border were forced to move back to Hungary as well. These transfers situated Hungary at the crossroads of the large-scale population movements of the postwar period.

Thousands of Europeans, particularly those in Eastern Europe, debated about whether to return home under the auspices of the Soviet occupation or to immigrate abroad. The territorial gains from Romania and Slovakia under the Vienna Agreements had rendered the nation's population more multi-ethnic due to the increase of Romanians and Slovaks under their rule. But after signing the Peace Agreements in 1947 Hungary was restored to the borders designated by the Treaty of Trianon, which

¹⁰ This is Mark Pittaway's argument, that the non-working classes did not support the Communist Party, as illustrated by the election results. This in turn motivated the Communist Party to appeal directly to the middle class and peasants, in hopes of gaining their support. Mark Pittaway, "The Politics of Legitimacy and Hungary's Postwar Tradition," in *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 13, No. 4, Theme Issue: Political Legitimacy in Mid-Twentieth Century Europe (Nov., 2004), pg 453-475.

reduced Hungary's size by almost three-fourths after World War I.¹¹ The loss of its territorial gains, in addition to the transfer of the remaining German and Slovakian peoples, caused Hungary's demographics to become homogeneous once again.

The Postwar Economy and Economic Hyperinflation

The Hungarian economy also suffered immensely at the end of the war and during the immediate postwar years. Crippled by the extensive war costs and the Germans' extraction of the Hungarian government's gold reserves, Hungary lost upwards of 40 percent of its wealth. Then, indiscriminate banknote printing under the Arrow Cross government, and the Red Army's use of their own printed money caused the Hungarian currency the pengő to experience the highest rate of hyperinflation in recorded world history.¹² War reparations, such as the 300 million pengő owed to the Allies alone, also burdened the Hungarian economy. Higher denominations of the pengő were created in order to keep track of the inflation and to help citizens determine the approximate value of the pengő on a daily basis.¹³ These denominations included the milpengő (one million pengő), and the bilpengő (1 billion pengő). The hyperinflation of the pengő occurred so rapidly that prices skyrocketed on a daily basis. This is depicted in the changes in the cost of an issue of the Hungarian Communist newspaper the *Szabad Nép*, or The Free People. On May 4th, 1946 the price for an issue of the paper was 600,000 pengő, and

¹¹ The Entente Powers after World War I forced the Hungarian government to sign the Treaty of Trianon, which established Hungary's post-World War I boundaries and reduced the nation's size by 72%, which left thousands of ethnic Hungarian in Romania, Czechoslovakia, and some in Yugoslavia. The Hungarians, who felt (and continue to feel) wronged by the Trianon, argued for the return of its lands throughout the interwar period. Due to Hungary's alliance with Germany, the Vienna Awards in 1938 and 1940 gave Hungary back significant portions of the land it lost due to Trianon. After the war the Allied Powers reduced Hungary to its interwar size, and gave the territorial gains back to Romania and Czechoslovakia.

¹² Kenez, 12-13.

¹³ They also used high denominations of the currency so that they could reuse old bank notes, and simply change the color and number value on them.

the next day the price was 2,000,000 pengő; thus, the price of this particular newspaper increased by 1.4 million pengő (milpengő) in just one day.¹⁴ The drastic increase in prices, coupled with the housing crisis and rising unemployment rates, devastated the already flailing Hungarian economy.

As the Coalition government gradually began to focus on rebuilding Hungary, they replaced the pengő with the forint on August 1st, 1946. By introducing the forint at a rate of 1 forint=4x10²⁹ pengő, the coalition government hoped that it would stabilize the shaky economy. Despite the introduction of the forint, 50% of Hungarians' wages remained the same as they were in 1938, or even lower.¹⁵ In the governmental surveys conducted in 1945-1946, one of the questions asked about prewar and postwar incomes, with the aim of determining who benefited financially from the Hungarian Nazi regime. Although most did not report a postwar income, for the few Hungarians who did their answers accurately reflected the postwar economic crisis. For example, Tivady Bokody and Desző Balla, a dentist and wine vendor respectively, experienced an enormous income increase between 1937 and 1945/1946; Tivady's income increased from 5,000 pengő in 1937 to 300,000 pengő in 1945, while Desző's salary increased from 20,000-350,000 pengő.¹⁶ While Tivady, Desző, and their incomes are more representative of the urban middle class than other socio-economic classes in Hungary, the increase in their salaries, like in the newspaper prices described earlier, demonstrate the extent to which the economic situation affected Hungarian society. The

¹⁴ *Szabad Nép*, Saturday, 1946 March 4, and Sunday 1946 March 5.

¹⁵ Kenez, 125-126.

¹⁶ Survez, Tivadar Bokody, 12 February 1945, Letter, Kovásznay to Committee, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazoló Bizottság iratai, 138/b, 1945-1946 1 box, Budapest Főváros Levéltár (BFL), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C. Survey, Balla Desző, 14 April 1945, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazoló Bizottság iratai, 138/b, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

hyperinflation compounded the rising unemployment rates, the difficulty in finding housing, and the disarray caused the by the war. The double occupation during the war also served to further exacerbate the already unpolitical, economic, and social base of Hungary.

Crying Out for Help: Material Shortages

There were numerous other indicators of the economic crisis, such as the severe lack of shoes, particularly for children. An article in the *Szabad Nép* describes how only higher quality shoes were being sold on the black market, thereby leaving the average Hungarian with access only to the lower quality shoes available in stores.¹⁷ Moreover, due to transport delays likely caused by the destruction of the railway lines during the war, there were only a small number of the lower quality shoes available in stores, which forced prices even higher. The shortage of children's shoes continued throughout the rest of 1946, as indicated by the Communist Party's announcement in December of that year that they were allocating 8,000 pairs of shoes to boys and girls in school.¹⁸ The newspaper article even goes as far as to detail how many shoes were given to each street in Budapest.¹⁹

Shoes were not the only consumer item that was lacking in Hungarian society, as food shortages also wrecked havoc on the population. A newspaper article from May 23rd, 1946, discusses how in Budapest 100 percent of the population paid 50,000 pengő, which for some Hungarians amounted to 100 percent of their yearly income, per

¹⁷ "Miért drága a cipő? (Why are shoes expensive?)," *Szabad Nép*, 1946 21 November, pg 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ The fact that the article only discusses the distribution of shoes to children in Budapest illustrates one of the Communist Party's key objectives after their failure to capture the election in November of 1945. Mark Pittaway discusses how in an effort to increase their voter base in the urban middle class, the MKP relentlessly announced and boasted of their efforts to help the economy and the material conditions of the urban society in Budapest. For more, Pittaway, "The Politics of Legitimacy and Hungary's Postwar Tradition," 459-461.

year for food in order to meet the caloric standards.²⁰ In the countryside, about 96 percent of the population paid about 40,000 pengő, and in the extremely rural villages about 85 percent of Hungarians paid 35,000 pengő for food.²¹ For most Hungarians, the total cost of food per year comprised the majority of their income. The enormous cost of food, coupled with the housing crisis, the shortage of shoes, and the lack of other material items, thereby affected Hungarians of all socio-economic stature.

In District VII in Budapest the average income listed on the surveys (for the few that provided it) was between 200,000-250,000 pengő in 1945-1946. For the majority of the Budapest residents in District VII who belonged to the middle bourgeois and haute bourgeois, the combination of the food shortage and hyperinflation meant that on average they spent about 20%-25% of their postwar annual income on food. While this may not initially appear to be an extraordinary amount, one must remember that the middle class comprised less than 10% of the total population in Hungary.²² For the working class, who earned significantly less than the middle class, the 50,000 pengő towards food per year must have been a substantial portion of their postwar annual income. The lack of food and hyperinflation also contributed to a spike in crime, as workers in Budapest pilfered from their factories in order to supplement their insufficient diets and incomes.²³

²⁰ "A kalória 50,000 pengő, 200% fizetésemelés (The caloric intake is 50,000 pengő, 200% of income)," *Szabad Nép*, 1946 May 23rd.

²¹ *Ibid.* In addition, the cost of the newspaper that day was 30 milpengő, which was 28 milpengő more expensive than the paper from May 5, only eighteen days earlier.

²² *Social History of Hungary*, 290.

²³ Pittaway, 460. Pittaway does not mention any other types of crime that took place in the capitol, yet other crimes were certainly committed. Corruption was also rampant at the time, which will be discussed in relation to the Certification Committee.

The Search for Missing Persons'

As part and parcel to the mass movement of peoples during the war, many Europeans returned home with the goal of rebuilding their lives. This was no different in Hungary, as many Jewish and non-Jewish Hungarians attempted to find their lost loved ones.²⁴ One of the ways that Jews and other Hungarians tried to find their families was through missing persons' ads in local and national newspapers. Throughout the beginning of 1945 until the end of 1946 countless missing person's ads appeared in the newspapers in Hungary. Some ads appeared in chart-like form and simply included the missing person's name, birth date, and birthplace (i.e. Mrs. Gerő László, born Weinberger Erzsébet, 1909), with a contact location, name, and telephone number.²⁵ Others included much more detailed information about the missing person, such as an ad for Binét György, which stated that he had been in a labor camp, marched off to Szekszárd, a small city in southern Hungary, and was then captured by the Russians.²⁶ Another missing person's ad did not include detailed information, but offered a 10 milpengő reward to the person who could provide information on the whereabouts of a widow and her two children.²⁷

Although these three do not represent the entire range of missing persons ads printed in newspapers at the time, they do demonstrate the types of information that family members were willing to share about their lost loved ones; this is perhaps best illustrated in the 10 milpengő reward offered by the last ad. Furthermore, it is interesting

²⁴ The search for loved ones was magnified for several reasons. One was the number of displaced Hungarians in Hungary and all over Eastern and Central Europe. It was also due to the large portion of the Jewish population in Budapest that survived, and because of the thousands of Jewish men that worked in the munkászólgálot, or the Hungarian labor battalions on the Eastern front.

²⁵ "Ki tud rolunk? (Who knows about us?)" *Szabad Nép*, Sunday, 1946 May 12, pg 2.

²⁶ "Munkászólgálotosok! (Work camp laborers!)," in *Szabad Nép*, 1946, 28 February, pg. 6.

²⁷ Ibid.

that Binét's ad mentioned that he had been captured by the Russians, even though it was printed by the Communist newspaper, the *Szabad Nép*. It is surprising that the Communist newspaper would allow an ad like that to be published, since it contained disparaging information about the Soviets. Normally the Communists would have censored it, since they did not allow printed information to contain negative statements about them.

Urban Reconstruction and Ties to National Renewal

The destruction of the capital city during the Siege of Budapest created the grounds for feelings of victimization amongst the Hungarians, in that it symbolized their own suffering under the double occupation of first the Nazis, and then the Soviets. In other words, the physical damage to the city, and to the rest of Hungary more generally, became the physical manifestation of the Hungarians' own terrible experiences during the war. The damages wounded Hungarian pride and identity, and were thus utilized as a motivating factor to rebuild after liberation. The Hungarians' determination to rebuild after being freed by the Soviets was so strong that construction began in Pest before the war even ended. A streetcar line was fixed and began to operate again on February 7th, 1945.²⁸ In addition to establishing a new police force and implementing land reform, the Communists, Smallholders' and other postwar political parties emphasized the importance of reconstructing the major landmarks in Hungary, particularly in Budapest. This was evident in the speed with which many of them, such as the Széchenyi and Freedom Bridges that connected Buda and Pest, were rebuilt and reopened in the first three years.

²⁸ Kenez, 51.

Less than a year after liberation, on January 18th, 1946, the newly constructed Kossuth Bridge was completed. The Kossuth Bridge was built so that Hungarians could have access to both sides of the city by foot, since the preexisting bridges (i.e. Széchenyi, Margit Bridge) were still under reconstruction. Although there was originally a festive celebration planned for the opening of the Kossuth Bridge, it was cancelled by Transportation Minister Ernő Gerő, who believed that it would be best celebrated by the mere fact that many Hungarians could now walk to and from the two sides of the city.²⁹ Several days before and after the opening of the Kossuth Bridge the story covered the front page of the *Szabad Nép* and other national newspapers, which illustrates the extent to which the reconstruction process was thought to be central to postwar Hungarian identity. The *Szabad Nép* in particular placed an enormous emphasis on the reconstruction process in Budapest, which was due in part to the Communist Party's focus on "democratic, national reconstruction."³⁰ The slogan appealed to Hungarians of all socio-economic backgrounds to a certain extent, since it emphasized the rebuilding process. It was the Party's attempt to stress its role in fixing the postwar economic and architectural destruction.

As more key elements of the city's physical infrastructure were either rebuilt or newly constructed, the newspapers and Hungarian government continued to emphasize the ties between architectural rebuilding and social renewal. When the 100th tram car was built in November of 1946 on the street line between Nagyszombat and Simon street in District III for example, the government stressed that the new tram car would enable more university students to attend classes, and for children to arrive to school in

²⁹ "Penteken reggel korlatozas nélkül megnyilik a Kossuth-hid (On Friday Kossuth Bridge Will Open Without Delay)," in *Szabad Nép*, 1946, 16 January, pg. 1.

³⁰ Pittaway, 461.

time.³¹ These examples illustrate how after the completion of nearly every construction project, the newspapers, particularly the Communist one, boasted of the significance of that particular project, and of its importance to both national and social renewal. The connection between architectural reconstruction and social identity served to distract the Hungarians from the realities of the postwar world. For Hungarians, the government and political parties' emphasis on architectural reconstruction most likely served as a welcome relief from the tragedies of war, the enormous hyperinflation of the currency in 1946-1947, the food and shoe shortage, the destruction of their beloved capital, and the double occupation of the Nazis and then the Soviets.

The Key to Funding the Reconstruction Efforts: Inflationary Financing

What was the government's role in the reconstruction process? According to Iván Berend, the state was the primary investor in rebuilding heavy industry and architecture.³² Since the state provided the money for two-thirds of Hungary's manufacturing production, it had to face the economic situation head-on. From June of 1945 onward increasing amounts of printed money entered the mainstream economy. As a result the state pursued a policy of inflationary financing, where they used the overabundance of printed money to make reparation payments and investments in reconstruction projects.³³ Thus the state, at the behest of the Communist Party, directly controlled the production of money and the amount of it invested in both of these activities. As a consequence the reconstruction projects were completed with incredible speed. 80% of the railway track was usable again by 1946, and 17% of Hungary's total

³¹ "Elkészült az ezredik újjáépített villamoskocsi (Preparations for the construction of the 100th tram car)," in *Szabad Nép*, 1946, 20 November, pg. 2.

³² Iván Berend and Tamás Csáto, *Evolution of the Hungarian Economy: 1848-1998*, Vol 1: One-and-a-Half Centuries of Semi-Successful Modernization, translated by Brian McLean, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, 260.

³³ Berend and Csáto, 266.

reparation payments were completed during the runaway inflation.³⁴ The speed with which the reconstruction projects, fully backed by the government, proceeded astounded Hungarians and foreigners alike, and became a symbol of pride for the nation.

The pursuance of inflationary financing was made easier by the Communist's push to implement a controlled economy in Hungary at the time.³⁵ To a certain extent this was a continuation of the state's economic interventions during the war.³⁶ By June of 1946 the government began regulating the scarce supplies of energy and raw materials, and also severely limited the existence of free markets within the country. The state maintained a steady grip on the direction of investments, to such an extent that 91% of the factories and banks' financing came from the National Bank.³⁷

But there were significant drawbacks to the state's implementation of inflationary financing. The continued printing of money further exacerbated the hyperinflation. Berend discusses how despite the gains spurred by the speedy reconstruction process and significant portion of reparations payments completed, the hyperinflation shocked the economy and severely impacted Hungarians' lives. In addition, since the simplest materials and methods possible were used in the reconstruction projects, little attention was paid to technical innovation.³⁸ For example, the textile industry was revived using fifty-year-old British machinery retrieved at bottom-of-the-barrel prices.³⁹ As a

³⁴ Berend, 267.

³⁵ Berend, 263-265.

³⁶ The state and then German government in 1944 intervened heavily in the ongoings of the economy and material production during the war. They both regulated production towards the war effort, and geared the economy towards sustaining the production of war materials. This in turn prepared the nation for a controlled economy after the war, since the mechanics were already in place.

³⁷ Ibid, 264.

³⁸ Berend, 276.

³⁹ Ibid.

consequence the bridges, railway lines, and the like were completed under the cheapest circumstances possible, which made for outdated modes of production and materials in many cases. Regardless, the speed with which the state paid a significant portion of its reparation payments and reconstructed main buildings and transportation systems served to mend most of the physical and economic damages from the war.

Hungarians' Contributions to the Reconstruction Efforts

Rather than dwell on the impossible postwar conditions, most Hungarians instead chose to focus on moving forward with their lives. One way to do this was to contribute to the postwar reconstruction efforts. In his memoir about the immediate postwar years the middle-class intellectual Sándor Márai observed that he found it encouraging to see his fellow countrymen busy themselves with the “disgruntled, bustling activities” that characterized the rebuilding efforts.⁴⁰ He explains that:

People surmised that they would benefit if they replaced broken windowpanes in their home. Even bellowed as “history” became significant, while the day’s news – where one could get bread, shoes, medical help – was real history. This is how we lived then, in bombed-out Budapest.⁴¹

In addition to focusing on how to obtain food, shelter, and becoming approved by the Committee, the Hungarians also viewed the reconstruction of their beloved capitol as a way to benefit their lives. This is all the more remarkable considering the meager payments that the Provisional Government allocated them in return for their efforts, and the speed with which they rebuilt the city. The “craftsmen,” who Márai describes as “conquering heroes,” believed in a specific kind of honor in their work. For them, the

⁴⁰ Sándor Márai, *Memoir of Hungary: 1944-1948*, translated by Albert Tezla (Budapest, Hungary: Corvina and CEU Press, 1972), 120.

⁴¹ Ibid.

honor of labor was the most valuable and human of all forms of honor.⁴² In the ruined apartments, he says, residents were again living the lives of human beings, and within a few short months after the siege they pieced Budapest back together again.⁴³

Interestingly, Márai says that the Hungarians who believed in this kind of honorary labor were primarily reared as Social Democrats⁴⁴ This illustrates that although some Hungarians believed that the reconstruction efforts contributed to individual and national renewal, they did not all necessarily view it as a Communist slogan per se. This does not suggest that no one believed in the Communists' emphasis on reconstruction and national renewal. But Márai's remark demonstrates that not all Hungarians contributed to the reconstruction process simply under the guise of the Communists' propaganda. Even though the Communists' claimed the completion of Budapest's reconstruction as their own victory, many Hungarians viewed the process differently. For Márai, "The country lay in ruin, so people said, but that was merely a flowery expression. In reality, the city had not perished; to the contrary, it began to live very vigorously."⁴⁵ The Hungarians' optimism influenced them to believe that it was meaningful to rebuild their homes, their city, and their lives, in spite of the social, economic, and political chaos.

Márai's ruminations about the honor of labor provides an interesting insight into why the Hungarians in Budapest contributed to the rebuilding process, particularly when they received little compensation in the form of money or goods. Yet Márai's socio-economic position before, during, and after the war isolated him from the "craftsmen" position he describes and admires. Unlike much of the urban population, Márai was a

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, 120-121.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 120.

⁴⁵ Márai, 121-122.

middle class Hungarian. As a self-proclaimed bourgeois writer Márai could not claim to represent the feelings and viewpoints of those who contributed to the reconstruction effort on their own accord, as they consisted mainly of the lower class workers.

Although parts of his home were damaged during the Siege of Budapest he did not experience the same devastation as most other Hungarians, and nor was he penniless. As a consequence of his social position his argument cannot be considered wholly representative of the working class citizens who contributed their labor.

Another reason why Hungarian workers in Budapest so readily contributed their labor to the reconstruction efforts lies in the struggles they faced to meet their caloric, housing, and material needs. During the war more than two thousand factories experienced significant damage, which resulted in halving their production.⁴⁶ Places of industry like the Fantó Oil Refinery and the Hungarian Wagon and Engineering Factory in Győr suffered damage that either entirely or partially inhibited their production.⁴⁷ The damage to the factories hurt the populace as well, as it rendered much of the Hungarian working class jobless. In May of 1945 industrial employment had decreased to one-third of its size in 1944, and output was down to one-fifth. Thus many Hungarian workers chose to aid the reconstruction efforts in order to obtain a transitional job and earn an income until their workplaces were rebuilt. Since inflated money flooded rebuilding projects across the country, sites of construction needed able and willing workers to complete the job. It was thus only a matter of re-employing the skilled labor that had worked in the economy before.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Berend, 255.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Berend, 276.

The resulting numbers of employed Hungarian workers rose 80% between 1946-1948, which raised the rate of productivity as well.⁴⁹ Although the average wage of a Hungarian worker in these projects did not come close to the value of their interwar salaries, they provided a jumping off point for them to begin providing for their families once again. Even if they did not view the same type of honor in labor Márai described, in the end many Hungarian workers knew that they needed to start the process of working and earning money for their families. Even if they failed to feel a sense of honor in aiding the reconstruction efforts, they most likely took pride in attempting to provide for their families during a time of utter devastation. Regardless of whether they viewed their labor as an honor or as a way to feel pride in their role as the provider, significant number of Hungarian workers devoted themselves to the task of rebuilding Hungary's cities and countryside.

The conditions of postwar Hungary were not unique in Europe, as cities, towns, and villages across the continent lay in complete ruin. After liberating Eastern Europe country-by-country, the Soviets stayed and occupied them. While shortages of food and material goods were experienced in most countries at the time, the hyperinflation that gripped Hungary was (and remains) the most severe case in all of world history. The Hungarians' rebuilding efforts served as a way for them to reconstruct their personal lives, as well as the life of the nation. As a consequence the determination with which they rebuilt the city cannot be accredited solely to the Communists' postwar slogan, but rather to their own pride in working to rebuild the nation. That sense of honor was not always present when it came time to deal with the postwar housing crisis. The shortage of livable housing offered a different opportunity for the Hungarians in Budapest.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Perhaps due to the personal nature of one's home and its connection to their social status, some Hungarians resorted to unfavorable behavior in order to prove the validity of their living arrangements. This type of behavior was not characteristic of all Hungarians however, and it was due in large part to the exceptional nature of the housing crisis.

Hungarian Visions of Postwar Life

As evidenced by the missing persons' ads and their willingness to contribute to the city's reconstruction, Hungarians in Budapest sought to reestablish some sense of normalcy in their daily lives. But what did this normalcy entail? As demonstrated by the desire to find lost family members, Hungarians strove to put their families back together and forge new lives without the recent memories of the war. As will be discussed in the next few chapters, in the surveys Hungarians avoided discussing their role in fascist activities, and on the whole they did not seek opportunities to denounce known former fascists or active bystanders. Instead most Hungarians focused on the more mundane details of everyday life, as well as the simple pleasures. The sports articles in the newspapers served to distract Hungarians from the pains of postwar life. These articles appeared with more frequency the more that time passed, as sports clubs and associations were slow to recover after the war. A newspaper from December 12, 1946 discusses the surprising victory of the Újpest football (soccer) team over the Szolnok team.⁵⁰ The article details how the new striker on the Újpest team scored two goals against its opponent, which contributed to the team's 10:1 win over Szolnok. Although the article does not discuss how many people were in attendance, it seems that due to

⁵⁰ "Sport: Gólszüret Újpesten, Újpest-Szolnok 10:1 (Sport Goals in Újpest, Újpest-Szolnok, 10:1)," in *Szabad Nép*, 1946 December 12, pg 6.

the increasing number of sports articles in the newspapers the attendance to sports games gradually increased in the postwar years, as did the readership of the articles. Aside from being a distraction, sports provided a way for Hungarians to develop a sense of community around their teams, and served as a source of pride. After the Nazi occupation, the destruction of the city, and the continued Soviet presence after the war, the Hungarians needed a symbol of pride to rally around.

Movies also served as a welcome distraction from the struggle of rebuilding one's life. Furthermore, films were an important medium through which Hungarians received information on how to live their lives. An article in the same newspaper issue discusses the films shown at the Cannes Film Festival in 1946, which was the first time the festival took place. The short article discusses the film *Die Letzte Chance*, or *The Last Chance*, which won the Palm D'Or award, or the Gold Award for the best film. According to the article the film describes the fight against Nazism, in which 2 escaped prisoners of war flee to Switzerland and establish a refugee smuggling operation for the Italian underground. With its themes of resistance and perseverance the storyline most likely appealed to the Hungarians trying to rebuild their lives. By romanticizing the pair's resistance activities and ability to create a new life after escaping, *Die Letzte Chance* showed viewers the value in hard work and new beginnings. Whereas most films simply received a simple advertisement in the newspapers, this one enjoyed a short descriptive article in addition to the advertisements shown in the days thereafter. This article was not intended to be an explicit advertisement, like in the radio ads that populated every daily newspaper. Yet the article offered enough information about the film in order to entice the Hungarians in Budapest to view it.

By 1947 advertisements for films, plays, concerts, and exhibitions were seen in the newspapers almost everyday. As with the sports articles, the entertainment ads were initially short and infrequent, and eventually grew in proportion to the increase in performances across the city. During this time Western music and films were still shown in the theaters and music halls. For example, an entertainment ad in April of 1947 says that the American film *Of Mice and Men* was to be shown at the Madach Színház (theater) that week.⁵¹ Interestingly, this ad was printed in the Communist newspaper the *Szabad Nép*. The existence of the ad shows that despite the strong Communist standing in the Coalition government Western culture and influences still existed in Hungary, and that the Communists were willing to include it in their paper even in 1947, a year before they seized power. As for the Hungarians themselves, not all of them could afford a trip to the theater or opera house to view these performances. Yet the fact that the opportunity existed at all was most likely a cause for optimism for the Hungarian populace. These performances, like the sports games, served to distract them from the stress and unhappiness that was characteristic of postwar life. They also offered them a goal to work towards that paralleled their focus on reestablishing everyday life. In other words, if someone could not afford to spend the time and/or money on a film or sports match immediately after the war, then they could work towards earning enough to enjoy them in the future. By enticing and instructing Hungarians on what films, concerts, and sports games to watch, the newspapers and advertisements served to delineate what they needed to strive for in their postwar lives.

⁵¹ "Mit érdemes megnézni, meghallgatni? (What to see, what to listen to?)," in *Szabad Nép*, 1947 April 27, pg 8.

These activities encouraged people of all classes to strive for more stability and money, so that they could experience the entertainment available. Hungarian working class men contributed to the reconstruction efforts in order to begin providing for their families until the factories reopened. Although for some it proved difficult to partake in the entertainment enjoyed by middle and upper class men, the existence and advertisement of these activities motivated many of them to work towards becoming economically stable enough to enjoy them as well. Whereas the wartime activities of working class men were reviewed and approved by their factories, middle class men and women focused on receiving approval from the Certification Committee. After receiving approval they also could return to work and begin reestablishing their daily lives. As with the workers this consisted of achieving the economic means to enjoy films, concerts, and the like, as well as obtaining the consumer items that they desired. In addition to achieving economy stability and the time for more leisurely activities, many Hungarians in Budapest needed to find secure living arrangements. The housing crisis that followed the mass destruction of apartment buildings and ghettoization policies made life extremely difficult for the Hungarians. Settling into a reliable living situation was instrumental to the task of moving forward with their lives.

CHAPTER 3 THE HOUSING CRISIS

The population movements affected not only Hungary's social structure, but its housing situation as well. Since approximately 27% of Budapest's housing was unlivable after the war, many residents struggled to find available apartments during these years. One of the positive effects of the German and Slovakian population transfer was that a number of apartments lay vacant in the initial months after the war. Since these apartments technically lay vacant, homeless Hungarians could and did move into them without a permit or official rental agreement. Although the provisional government discussed the possibility of opening up the vacant apartments for the displaced Hungarians from Czechoslovakia, due to internal debates the Ministry of Finance failed to reach a decision in a timely manner. An article in the Communist newspaper the *Szabad Nép* covers the unresolved situation in October of 1946, nearly a year and a half after the end of the war.¹ This demonstrates the extent to which the Provisional Government, marred by the tensions between the Communists and other opposing political parties, failed to reach an effective consensus on issues such as the housing crisis in the immediate postwar years.

Hungary, its Jews, and Ghettoization

The vacancies left by the expelled Germans and Slovaks did not prove to be the biggest problem for the Hungarians and official authorities, however. The tensions between the Hungarian Jews and non-Jews over the question of apartment ownership and property rights ultimately became one of the most contentious issues of the immediate postwar years.

¹ "Az áttelepülők lakásai (The migrants' apartments)," in *Szabad Nép*, Friday, 1946, 4 October, pg. 4.

Horthy and the Hungarian government held off on ghettoizing the Jewish communities and deporting them until spring of 1944, after which they were rounded up and deported with unprecedented swiftness.² The speed with which the Hungarian Jews, compared to the Polish Jews and other communities in Europe, were deported and exterminated differed to an enormous extent; by the time the Hungarian Jews were taken in the spring of 1944, the Nazis had greatly improved their methods from their experience with the rest of Eastern European Jewry. Thus, in the spring of 1944 the Nazi deportation and killing process had greatly increased in its efficiency and speed from before. The deportation and murder of Hungary's Jews occurred so quickly that within a few months, from when they were first ghettoized in March 1944, to Admiral Horthy's decision to stop the deportations in July 1944, over 400,000 Hungarian Jews had perished, mainly in Auschwitz.³

While the Jews in the countryside only resided in the ghettos for a few weeks before being deported to Auschwitz and other camps, the Budapest Jews were ghettoized mainly into ghettos across the city.⁴ One of the consequences of ghettoization all over Europe concerned the non-Jewish residents whose apartments

² Historians are divided as to why Horthy held off the deportations until 1944, and why he halted them in the summer of 1944. Randolph Braham argues that Horthy did not stop the deportations in time to save non-Budapest Jews because he did not like the "Galician" and Eastern Jews that lived outside of the city. Cole says that Horthy stopped them due to geopolitical issues and mounting pressure from the Catholic Church and other sources. Randolph Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1981), Vol. 1, 374-375. Tim Cole, *Holocaust City: The Making of a Jewish Ghetto*, (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 2003), 192.

³ Tim Cole, "Building and Breaching the Ghetto Boundary: A Brief History of the Ghetto Fence in Körmend, Hungary, 1944," in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 23, No. 1 (Spring 2009), 54-75, 56.

⁴ Provincial Hungarian Jews were ghettoized and deported before the Budapest Jews. In Budapest, streets and houses that were designated as "Star of David" houses formed the various ghettos., with one ghetto area per district. The districts with the largest ghettos were District IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, and XIV. Tim Cole and Graham Smith, "Ghettoization and the Holocaust: Budapest 1944," in *Journal of Historical Geography*, 22, 1 (1995) 300-316, 307. Cole discusses a little about the ghettoization process of towns outside of Budapest in another article where he talks about the northwestern town of Körmend. Also see Tim Cole, "Building of the Ghetto Boundary," 54-75.

now lay inside the ghetto boundaries. Tim Cole describes how once the local Hungarian officials designated which parts of Budapest were part of the ghetto and which were not, Jews and non-Jews began petitioning the Arrow Cross government to change the ghetto boundaries.⁵ Hungarians within both groups sought to re-situate their apartments vis-à-vis the ghetto boundaries so as to prevent moving. Whereas the Jews wanted their homes placed within the ghetto, non-Jews asked for their apartments to be excluded from the ghetto altogether. By remaining in their long-term living arrangements, both Jews and non-Jews wanted to maintain some semblance of normal life whilst under the Nazi occupation. Although the active protestation of the ghetto's boundaries occurred in most cities and large towns in Hungary, it was done to the largest extent in Budapest.⁶

While urban Hungarian Jews were thoroughly assimilated and lived throughout the city, the districts that housed the most Hungarian Jews were V, VI, and VII.⁷ When it came time to ghettoize the city, rather than confine the Jews to only seven ghetto areas, as had been decided in May 1944, there were to be housed throughout the city.⁸ Instead of moving the Jews to the ghetto, the ghetto moved to the Jews.⁹ Cole argues that for many of the Hungarians Jews and non-Jews in Budapest, "What was of majority

⁵ Tim Cole, "Writing 'Bystanders' into Holocaust History in More Active Ways: 'Non-Jewish' Engagement with Ghettoisation, Hungary 1944," in *Holocaust Studies*, Vol. 11, Summer 2005, no. 1, 55-74, 67.

⁶ Cole, "Building and Breaching the Ghetto Boundary," 36.

⁷ District V was well populated with Jews since it was located in Új Lipótváros, a sizeable middle class Jewish neighborhood. District VII was (and is today) considered the Jewish quarter and houses the Dohány Synagogue. Cole says that VI is also home to part of the Jewish quarter. Tim Cole, *Holocaust City: The Making of a Jewish Ghetto*, New York: Routledge Press, 2003, 86.

⁸ Cole, *Holocaust City*, 105. Cole discusses how the "doctors of space" originally wanted the Jews to be secluded in only certain parts of Budapest, that way more areas would be *judenfrei*. After a door-to-door survey was conducted on June 1st -2nd, 1944, they realized that it would be easier to ghettoize Jews into areas that already housed them, rather than make them move into areas like the Mária Valéria working-class slum neighbor that was home to very few Jews leading up to that point. Ibid, 107.

⁹ Ibid, 107.

concern was that they be allowed to stay where they lived.”¹⁰ Both groups wanted to avoid the inconveniences that moving apartments entailed. They needed transportation large enough to fit the furniture that could be moved, and people to help with the moving process. Hungarians understood that by moving their belongings, they would be forced to leave the unmovable items in their old homes. This, coupled with the loss of the property itself, meant that they would lose a considerable amount of wealth by moving. For non-Jews, as a consequence of moving the ghetto to the Jews, the odds of staying in their pre-1944 houses were not in their favor.

Yet a small group of non-Jews petitioned the ghetto boundaries for other, more self-serving reasons than those just discussed. The Arrow Cross government promised non-Jewish Hungarians that they would receive accommodations that were equal to or better than their old homes if they were placed within the ghetto lines. This encouraged a small group of Hungarians to take advantage of the situation and argue for their apartments to be placed within the ghetto boundaries. By requesting for “ghetto house status” for their homes, these Hungarians sought to capitalize on the ghettoization process, and thus improve their living conditions. Furthermore, the apartments that these Hungarians then occupied were usually former homes of Jews. Interestingly enough, these Hungarians were arguing for the same thing as the Jews: for their homes to be situated within the ghetto. For Cole, the petitions against the initial ghetto boundaries illustrate how both Jews and non-Jews attempted to negotiate not only the terms of their living conditions, but also the terms of Budapest’s ghettoization itself.¹¹ Moreover, that some non-Jews desired to take advantage of the opportunity presented

¹⁰ Cole, “Writing ‘Bystanders,’” 67.

¹¹ Ibid, 68.

by the ghetto and subsequent petitions in order to better their housing arrangements is a testament to some non-Jewish Hungarians' active participation in the process of ghettoization. Rather than be passive bystanders, the actions of these Hungarians demonstrates the extent to which some non-Jews not only went to great lengths to maintain the stability of their home life, but that some also attempted to capitalize on the ghettoization and persecution of their nation's Jewish population.

Ties Between Wartime Ghettoization and the Postwar Housing Crisis

The consequences of Budapest's ghettoization did not cease at the end of the war. Rather, the forced movement of both Jews and non-Jews out of their pre-1944 apartments in order to accommodate the ghetto boundaries contributed to the postwar housing crisis and property disputes. Although the Nazis promised the non-Jewish Hungarians better housing if they had to move out of their homes, it is likely that some of them simply moved into a vacant apartment of their own choosing. On the other hand most Hungarian Jews were crammed into small apartments within the revised list of ghetto houses. While some Hungarians wanted to remain in their "new" homes after the war, others sought to reclaim their pre-1944 apartments from the people that had since occupied them. Thus, the postwar housing crisis was not only caused by the destruction of buildings during the war, the forced expulsions, and the return of Hungarians from the camps and front lines; the capitol city's ghettoization, particularly the Hungarians' struggle to accommodate to the ghetto's borders around Budapest in 1944, was one of the main contributors to the postwar housing shortage.

By forcing both Jewish and non-Jewish Hungarians to relocate in order to accommodate the ghetto lines, the ghettoization process in 1944 provided the foundation for the postwar housing crisis. In all, about 40,000 Hungarians Jews and

12,000 non-Jews were forced to move from their pre-1944 homes in the early summer months of that year.¹² The local Hungarian officials in Budapest ultimately reinvestigated the ghetto boundary lines with the petitions in mind, and subsequently submitted a second list of ghetto houses that were to be situated within the ghetto. Therefore, according to Cole the petitions, and thereby both the non-Jewish and Jewish Hungarians, influenced the ghettoization process in the city.¹³ Moreover, by contributing to the ghetto process in 1944, Jewish and non-Jewish Hungarians also aided the postwar housing crisis to a large extent.

Postwar Housing Reconstruction

Although numerous articles appeared in the *Szabad Nép* and other newspapers about the lack of housing from 1945-1948, neither of Hungary's postwar governments nor the Communist Party discussed the housing situation as a "crisis." Perhaps this was done in order to minimize the magnitude of the housing shortage to the Hungarian public. Regardless, apartments remained in high demand throughout the immediate postwar years. As with the fanfare conducted upon the completion of construction projects, the building of new apartment buildings were reported by newspapers like the *Szabad Nép* with considerable celebration. Yet this is not to say that the construction of new apartments and the rebuilding of national monuments received the same level of enthusiasm from the public; rather, that although the new apartment buildings did not earn the same attention as the monuments, the fact that they were reported with significant regularity demonstrates both the gravity of the shortage and the importance of new apartments to Budapest society.

¹² Ibid, 67.

¹³ Ibid, 68-69.

When the construction of two different apartment buildings was announced in October of 1946, articles about the progress of the structures appeared in the Communist newspaper multiple times a month. One of the groups of apartments was built in Mária Valéria, a working-class slum in Budapest located in present-day József Attila Lakótelep. Although it was characterized before the war as having poor and unsliving conditions, the situation in Mária Valéria worsened due to the destruction caused by the war. Described by the *Szabad Nép* as being the “ulcer” of Budapest, in 1944-1945 most of the homes’ roofs’ collapsed, it was overridden with rats and diseases, and an average of 8-10 family members lived in every apartment.¹⁴ The conditions of Mária Valéria were some of the worst in the city, and the area did not improve in 1945 and for most of 1946, since materials and money proved too scarce to begin rebuilding.

In October of 1946 the government announced the beginning of the construction of new apartments in the neighborhood. This was part of the Communists’ plan to link reconstruction with national renewal, as the article discusses how the new buildings would provide space for much needed food stores. They also said that the apartments would be big enough for families of young and adult children.¹⁵ Since the two articles on the Mária Valéria slum neighborhood appeared within nine days of each other in the *Szabad Nép*, it appears that the Communist Party planned the articles so that readers would first learn about the terrible conditions of the area, and then praise the party after reading about their efforts to improve the living conditions of the slum. This thereby

¹⁴ “Mária Valéria-telep: fekély a város testén (Maria Valeria establishment: the ulcer of the city),” in *Szabad Nép*, 1946 Oktober 16, pg 5.

¹⁵ “Uj lakásokba költöznek a Valéria-nyomortelep lakói (New homes to move into for the slum residents of the Valeria neighborhood),” in *Szabad Nép*, 1946 Oktober 25, pg 3.

demonstrates not only the Communist Party's attempt to boast of its own reconstruction efforts as a way to revive the Hungarian society and livelihood, but also the extent to which the party viewed the housing crisis as an issue of the utmost importance.

In October of the same year, the newspaper also announced plans to construct one hundred new apartments near Gyöngyösi Street, close to the shopping district on Vaci Street. In this article the Communists' efforts to connect the reconstruction effort with social renewal became much more obvious. By citing the need to fight against unemployment, the Communist Party emphasized that the Hungarians in Budapest, particularly the workers, needed to help build the apartments, from which they would receive gainful employment and enough compensation to buy real bread.¹⁶ The article states that since the city was in need of over 1000 összkomfortos "full comfort" apartments, the construction of these apartments on Gyöngyösi Street would alleviate the housing shortage. They also claimed that it would help bring the laborers out of the poverty-stricken state that characterized much of the urban population. Once the apartments were finished, which the article says would happen quickly once the government finds enough Hungarian labor, they would be fully equipped and ready for Hungarians to move in.¹⁷

The tone and message of these articles about apartments were reminiscent of the one expressed in the articles on the completion of the new trolley car and the Kossuth Bridge discussed earlier. All of them attempted to link reconstruction with national renewal. They explained that the Hungarians' labor contribution would enable the citizens of Budapest to re-establish daily routines, and to bring Hungarian society out of

¹⁶ "Ezer lakás gazdát keres (Thousands of homes looking for owners)," in *Szabad Nép*, 1946 Oktober 30, pg. 4.

¹⁷ Ibid.

its state of poverty and countrywide destruction. Thus, even though the construction of new apartments did not receive the same level of fanfare in the newspapers, they were written about with significant regularity, which demonstrates the extent to which the housing shortage in Budapest was considered instrumental to the city's postwar devastation. Moreover, by being linked to the postwar destruction, it was thereby connected to the government and Communist Party's plans to reconstruct the city, and consequently to the pursuit of national and social renewal.

The Home as the Embodiment of One's Socio-Economic Status

The housing shortage affected Hungarians on the most basic level. For many, the home signified their livelihood, and their place in society; in other words, the condition of one's apartment was seen as a symbol of a person's socio-economic wellbeing. Gábor Gyáni describes how for the residents of Budapest, the world of one's home embodied the aspirations and self-image of the people who inhabited them.¹⁸ In the context of the postwar capital, the fact that 27% of the city's apartments and homes were in unlivable conditions remains striking.¹⁹ In addition to suffering enormously from the bombardment of their beloved city during the Siege of Budapest, experiencing the Nazi occupation, and being forced to move during ghettoization, Hungarians in Budapest struggled to come to terms with how the housing shortage proved detrimental to their everyday lives and routines. For most of them, the housing shortage affected at least several people in their family. In addition, a small percentage of the urban residents conducted their business or professions inside their homes, particularly those that lived there either part-

¹⁸ Gábor Gyáni, *Parlor and Kitchen: Housing and Domestic Culture in Budapest: 1870-1940*, (Budapest, Hungary: Central European University Press, 2002), 115.

¹⁹ *Social History of Hungary*, 544.

time or full-time.²⁰ Of those who used their homes as both a workplace and living space, many of them were independent wholesalers or businessmen, like Ignacz Balassa, who ran his wholesale wine business from his apartment on Almassy Tér, number 11.²¹ He lived in a two-room apartment, which suggests that he used one of the rooms solely for business purposes.

Gyáni discusses how for these types of tenants, the workplace and the living space were the same.²² Prior to the interwar years only a small portion of the residents of Budapest lived this way, since before the two spaces on the whole tended to be separate. The destruction from World War II drastically changed things. With most of the city in ruins from the war, it is highly likely that more people had to combine the workplace and living space in their homes than before.²³ Thus, the loss of all or part of one's home could bring financial disaster to the family; not only were their homes and everyday modes of living disrupted, but economic losses incurred by the devastation of workplaces further decimated both the urban and rural Hungarian population.

Receiving Approval From the Certification Committee

With their homes in ruin and inflation skyrocketing, most Hungarians sought to repair their economic and living situations as quickly as possible. This led them to focus on reestablishing their everyday routines, which centered on receiving approval from the Certification Committee and securing a living space. The postwar government, and the Communists in particular, preferred to certify people quickly in order to complete the de-retribution process and move on with their postwar plans. Yet the citizens of Budapest

²⁰ Gyáni discusses how the Hungarians that occupied their apartments the whole year were usually the breadwinners of the family.

²¹ Survey, Ignacz Balassa, 20 May 1945, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazólo Bizottság iratai, 138/1, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

²² Ibid.

²³ Gyáni, 52.

did not know this, and so they feared the consequences of being denied approval. If denied, it could mean a forced suspension from work or prison time, being denied approval could jeopardize the future of one's family. Almost just as important was the need to prove the legality of one's ownership, or the leasing rights if they did not own it, for the apartment that they resided in. Seeing as many Hungarians, both Jews and non-Jews, moved apartments during the war, it was inevitable that more than one person would claim the rights to an apartment. Thus, for the Hungarians in Budapest the ultimate goal in the immediate postwar years lay in receiving approval from the Certification Committee so that they could continue to work, and to validate the right to remain in their living space.

CHAPTER 4 THE CERTIFICATION COMMITTEE AND POSTWAR SURVEYS

The Role of the Surveys in Rooting Out “Fascist-Behaved” Hungarians

The Hungarians believed that the decisions made by the Certification Committee (Igazoló Bizottság) helped determine the course of their postwar lives. White-collar employees in public administrations and industry, as well as factory workers, were subject to verification by the Committee.¹ In order to return to their jobs they needed to prove their loyalty to the postwar regime, and not to the 1944 Nyilas government.² In the terms of the Communist Party, Hungarians needed to prove that they acted “democratically” during the war, and not “undemocratically.” What did it mean to act in either of these capacities? Like with the uncertainty over what activities delineated a collaborator and active or passive bystander, the Communists were ambiguous about what characterized certain behaviors as democratic or undemocratic. But by analyzing Communist ideas about work and the importance of a classless society, in conjunction with Hungary’s postwar conditions the party’s understanding of the two types of behavior come into sharp relief.

In order to reverse the widening gap between the classes and eliminate the exploitation of workers, Communism sought to create a society solely based on one’s work and productivity. By determining peoples’ worth according to their labor and production value the Communists strove to construct a classless society. In 1950 Hungarian Communist leader Mátyás Rákosi described Hungary’s path to a “new democracy” as needing to remove all barriers to the full economic and political

¹ Pittaway, 463.

² Ibid.

realization of the working classes' power.³ Fortunately for the Communists, the devastation wrought by the war and postwar hyperinflation effectively removed many of those barriers for the workers. Many workers, middle and upper class Hungarians emerged penniless from the war, which served to level much of Hungarian society. As a result the distinct class boundaries that existed before the war gave way to fluid notions of social difference based on who emerged on the victor's side with the Soviets. The social leveling effect of the war thus directly served the goals of the Communist Party.

In order to behave "democratically", Hungarians needed to act like Communist citizens. Authorities were looking for surplus spaces in the remaining houses for homeless residents. The surveys helped locate underutilized apartments. As will be depicted in Chapter Five, the Communists also did not look kindly on those of the upper middle and upper class that owned multiple apartments in Budapest. To avoid being categorized as exhibiting "undemocratic behavior," it was advisable to restrict consumerism, or any ostentatious behavior. In any event, hyperinflation and scarcity was a great level and people tended to purchase only what they absolutely needed. Furthermore, the middle and upper class Hungarians on the whole did not contribute physical labor to the reconstruction process like the workers; thus by taking more than their share of the available goods, housing, etc., coupled with their reluctance to aid the rebuilding process, they were a far cry from being categorized as "democratic" Hungarians. The discrepancies between Communist ideas of being "democratic" and the reality of middle and upper class life were closely scrutinized during the Certification Committee hearings and trials. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five in

³ Pittaway, 461.

relation to a female furrier and two plaintiffs accusing her of antisemitic and undemocratic behavior.

While workers' representatives observed fellow workers' actions in the factories, professionals, independent wholesalers, and industrialists were subject to review by the Committee. It was, as Mark Pittaway explains, part of a series of anti-fascist measures, most of which were aimed to root out former fascists. This included those who were "fascist behaved" (*fasiszta magatartásuák*) during the war, who disrupted the nation's democratic spirit of rebuilding, as well as anyone who benefitted from the regime by receiving financial or social aid.⁴ The postwar surveys and Certification Committee also aimed to remove-left wingers who were deemed too radical by the Communists.⁵

While the Committee's regulations stressed that each case must be judged individually, the members were also instructed to be deliberately lenient to workers and poor peasants.⁶ They were also told to keep track of those who joined either the Social Democratic or Communist parties after belonging to a far-right party or association during the war.⁷ Hungarians were not automatically denied approval if they belonged to a fascist organization. If a person could demonstrate that they had reformed their thinking and would not hamper the "democratic spirit" of postwar Hungary, then the Committee oftentimes approved them. If however the Committee decided to reject an applicant's survey and punish them for pro-fascist behavior, the penalties ranged from job loss, suspension of political and/or working rights, a six to twenty-four month stay in

⁴ Papp, 168. Pittaway, 463.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Papp, 168.

⁷ Ibid.

an internment camp, and various prison sentences and capital punishments.⁸ By attempting to remove the remaining fascist elements from society, the Certification Committee tried to act as an agent of the retribution process in Hungary. At the same time, by seeking out potentially dangerous left-wingers as well, the Committee, with the strong backing of the Communist Party, also sought to eradicate the other dangers to society, or those who could criticize and undermine the Communist Party's legitimacy in Hungary.

Since they were both part of Hungary's postwar retribution process, the Certification Committee and the Peoples' Courts were inextricably linked. The Peoples' Courts in Hungary were well known for cases concerning high profile ex-fascists, like the Arrow Cross leader Ferenc Szálasi and his governing cabinet. After the war the Peoples' Courts sentenced over 27,000 people accused of war crimes, crimes against the state, or crimes against humanity.⁹ As the first step in the retribution process the Certification Committees handled the initial hearings about people suspected of fascist behavior. If the Committee decision was appealed, the case would then be passed onto the next level of the court system, the Peoples' Courts. As a result of the ties between the Committee and the courts the use of cross-filing cases, or using evidence from another trial in one's trial, sometimes served to influence the decision of the initial case. As will be depicted in the complex case that will be discussed in the next chapter, cross-filing cases did not always work in the ways that the defendants and plaintiffs intended.

⁸ Papp, 165.

⁹ Law VII, 1945 gave the Peoples' Courts power to sentence people even if the nature of their activity was not considered a crime at the time that it was committed. In addition, these courts were more like party courts, in that each of the main political parties designated a member of their party to the council of the court. *The Politics of Retribution*, 233, 236.

Completing the Certification Surveys

For the Hungarians, the first step of the approval process required them to complete mandatory postwar surveys, which asked questions regarding their date of birth, birth place, education and profession, as well as pre and postwar incomes and housing sizes, political affiliations, and newspaper subscriptions, to name a few. A sample size of seventy-five surveys was analyzed in an attempt to draw a few conclusions about the inhabitants of Budapest. This particular set of surveys was completed by the residents of District VII, or the Jewish Quarter in Pest. Very few of the applicants answered every question. In fact, the vast majority of them only completed half the survey, while a few only offered basic information about themselves. Thus, when looking at the percentages and numbers within the sample size one must remember that they were determined from the answers given, and not from every answer on all seventy-five surveys.

As previously discussed, when the Germans and Hungarian Nazis ghettoized the city in 1944 they formed the ghettos around where the highest numbers of Jews already lived. Since District VII was the Jewish Quarter and was home to one of the biggest Jewish communities in Budapest, it housed one of the largest ghettos in the entire city. Thus a significant portion of the applicants from the area were Jewish. To be more precise, in the sample size forty-four Jews, or nearly 59%, completed surveys for either their homes in the district or their businesses located there.¹⁰ Although an analysis of seventy-five applications cannot claim to be wholly representative of all of District VII, at

¹⁰ The surveys did not ask Hungarians about their religious or cultural backgrounds. Out of the sample size only four people mentioned that they were Jewish. Thus I relied on applicant's references to being deported, being forced to move out of their homes and live in the ghetto, spending time in a labor camp, or being personally affected by the anti-Jewish laws. Lastly, determining the origins of the applicants' surnames (i.e. if they were Jewish surnames) and/or their mother's family name also helped me determine who amongst the sample size was Jewish.

the very least it indicates that Jews comprised at least half of the district's population, if not more.

Of the seventy-five surveys analyzed twenty-two were married with one child, seven were married with two or more children (no one exceeded three children), twenty-one were married but child-less, while eleven were either divorced, unmarried, or widows/widowers. As for education, about 46.6% completed at least two years of *polgári iskola*, or the elementary schools developed in the late nineteenth century in order to train lower-level civil servants. Only about 10.6% completed between two and four years of *közepiskola*, or the high school dedicated to preparing more men to be intellectuals and for higher-level bureaucratic positions. Table 4.1 illustrates the different types of apartment sizes in District VII, and more importantly how more Hungarians in the sample owned a two-room apartment than any other size.¹¹ It also shows how scarce it was for Hungarians to occupy a three-bedroom apartment considering the economic hyperinflation and struggles to get adequate food and clothing.

Table 4.1 shows how many applicants resided in the different sized apartments. Out of the sample size twenty-one people, or 28%, occupied a two-room apartment. It is not surprising that after the two-room apartments the one-room spaces, or the studio apartments, were the most popular, as they were easily the most affordable before the war. With the inclusion of Desző Balla, only three of the applicants (or 4%) increased their living space between 1944 and when they completed the survey. Only 12% were

¹¹ In Hungary, the number of rooms in an apartment did (and does not today) correlate with the number of bedrooms. A one-room apartment is similar to a studio apartment in the United States. Thus, a two-room was a one bedroom and one-room apartment, three rooms meant two bedrooms and one spare room, etc.

forced to move to a smaller apartment, while a considerable 17.3% were lucky enough to remain in their pre-1944 homes. This is also not a surprise, since the occupied government's decision to bring the ghetto to the Jew enabled more of them to remain in their prewar apartments.

Aside from a few dentists and lawyers, 58% the respondents worked in independent businesses as wholesalers, such as in wine, clothing, and other consumer items. A few of them belonged to professional associations, such as the Hungarian National Shoemakers' Association, or the Hungarian Industrialists Association. About 18% of the Jewish men admitted to forced labor in the *munkászolgálat*, or the labor battalions on the Hungarian front lines in the East. Working in the labor camps spared the men, but sometimes not their families, from moving into the ghetto.¹² A few of the older Hungarians, both Jewish and non-Jewish stated that they had fought in the Hungarian Army during World War I, and several of them received honorary awards for their service.

The Differences Between Pre and Post-1944 Living Arrangements

The purpose of the questions concerning income differences and house size were to determine whether the respondent had received any housing improvements or increases in income due to affiliations with the Nyilas government. The question regarding peoples' pre and postwar income proved misleading however, since the postwar hyperinflation drastically increased peoples' incomes regardless of wartime political leanings; one such example was illustrated earlier, in Tivady Bokody's income

¹² According to Tim Cole, the Hungarian Jewish men who worked for the military's labor battalions were spared being forced to move during the ghettoization process, which ended up saving many of their lives. Cole describes this as the "gendered" aspect of the Holocaust in Hungary. While these men did not have to move into the ghetto, most of their families were forced to do so. For more, see Tim Cole, *Holocaust City*.

that rose from 5,000 pengő in 1937 to 300,000 pengő in 1946. The spike in Bokody's salary indicates that although most of the questions on the survey were aimed to gauge an individual's potential relations with the Nazis, oftentimes the postwar conditions in Hungary complicated matters further for the Committee, such as when the hyperinflation caused many incomes to increase drastically.

The same stipulation applies to the question about changes in house sizes; due to ghettoization, nearly 52,000 Hungarians had moved apartments in 1944, and as a consequence of the destruction of most of the city's housing most Hungarians could not live in either their pre-1944 or 1944-1945 apartments.¹³ People moved with such frequency during the war and immediate postwar years that it was difficult to clarify who had benefited from the Nyilas regime in this respect, and who had not.

In referring to Table 4.1, of the 12% that moved to smaller living spaces most of them included extra details in their surveys that discussed being forced to move during the war. Several of them mentioned that before moving the Nyilas looted them of their finest items, which sometimes resulted in stripping the Jews of their personal wealth. A more extreme survey describes how Hungarian Nazis dragged him and his wife from the ghetto onto the street after moving there, and then robbed his ghetto residence of all their personal belongings.¹⁴ Although only 12% of the sample size was forced to move apartments, the answers and details they provided offer an apt depiction of the suffering they endured at the hands of the German and Hungarian Nazis. Yet District VII was unique in that most of its Jews did not have to move out of their prewar homes in order to reach the apartment buildings designated as part of the ghetto. Jews were more likely

¹³ Cole, "Bystanders," 67.

¹⁴ Survey, Zoltán Sándor, unknown completion date of the survey, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazoló Bizottság iratai, 138/1, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

to have been forced to evacuate their apartments, taking only easily transportable belongings with them to shared spaces in Yellow Star houses. Thus by looking at another district that was less populated by Jews it could be possible to explore a more complete picture of the displacement of both Jews and non-Jews during Budapest's ghettoization.

The case of Desző Balla, who was previously mentioned as having experienced an enormous income increase between 1937-1945, perfectly illustrates the ways that Hungarians could profit from ghettoization. Balla moved from a one-room to a two-room apartment during the city's ghettoization, the latter of which happened to be a former Jewish home.¹⁵ By improving his living arrangement to a larger apartment, he benefitted from the ghettoization of the city to some extent, and thereby from the Nyilás government as well. Whether it was intentional or not remains unclear.

Balla did not attempt to reclaim or return to his one-room apartment. In fact, when first asked about his current living situation he stated that he lived in a three-room apartment. In the question about the difference between one's pre and post-1944 housing conditions however, he answered that he changed from a one-room to a two-room apartment. The discrepancy between the two answers could mean one of two things. On the one hand, it could mean that he mistakenly wrote the wrong number of rooms for one of the questions. That implies that he either increased his living space by one or two rooms in the last year of the war. On the other hand, the difference between the two answers could mean that he first increased his apartment size by one room, and then moved again to a larger apartment between 1944 and when he completed the

¹⁵ Survey, Desző Balla, 14 April 1945, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazoló Bizottság iratai, 138/1, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

survey in April of 1946. The likelihood that the second situation occurred is considerable. In light of the architectural damage and the mass movement of Hungarians, Germans, Slovaks, and Hungarian Jews, a person could move into an empty apartment at any given moment. The notion of “squatter’s rights,” or the right to “squat” or spontaneously occupy an empty apartment carried significant weight in the postwar years. If the previous owner tried to reclaim the space, unless he or she had concrete ownership documents then it was extremely difficult to delineate one’s possession of that apartment. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five in relation to a court case involving competing claims to property rights. In the case of Balla, it is highly likely that he used the chaotic atmosphere of the wartime and postwar years to improve his living situation, and thus his social status, by occupying increasingly larger apartments.

Balla’s circumstances were not unique in this regard. Tim Cole discusses how numerous Hungarians capitalized on the ghettoization process and increased their living space. Yet due to his focus on the Holocaust period in Budapest, he neglects to push his argument further. In addition to the ghettoization process, Hungarians like Balla also benefitted from the devastation and mayhem that characterized the immediate postwar years. Since housing was inextricably tied to one’s social status, it enabled people like Balla to increase his social standing during the after the war. From this perspective, Balla’s situation depicts how some of non-Jewish Hungarians profited from the 1944 Arrow Cross regime in their home life and social status, whether by accident or by purposeful action

If some non-Jews had the opportunity to improve their living arrangements, then the Hungarians Jews, like the Jews across Europe, were usually forced into smaller, more cramped living quarters in the ghettos. For the Turkish Jew Gábor Behár, the ghetto process afforded him little more than that. Upon being forced to move to the ghetto he went from a three-room apartment to a one-room.¹⁶ As a married man with two children, it meant that four people were forced to live in a one-room, or a studio apartment. His survey does not reveal whether he had a kitchen or hall, or full comfort utilities. But it can be assumed that squeezing four people in a one-bedroom space, considering that two of them were adults, was difficult indeed. That Behár and his family moved from a three-room apartment most likely made the situation even more challenging. His case is not atypical of ghetto living, however. In ghettos across Europe Jewish families were forcibly moved into tight living spaces, and oftentimes they had to share that space with other Jewish families. Behár's case confirms the opposite of what the Certification Committee hoped to find; in contrast to Balla, Behár did not profit from the Nyilas regime, and instead lost a significant amount of personal wealth in that time. As a Jew, his story attests to the suffering and loss that European Jews as a whole experienced as a result of the Holocaust and the aftermath in the postwar years.

How the Committee Viewed the Jews and Property Restitution Claims

By analyzing answers from people like Bokody, Balla, and Behár, it is clear how difficult it was for the Committee to determine the status of Hungarians' wartime affiliations from the surveys alone. The city's ghettoization, wartime destruction of

¹⁶ Survey, Gábor Béhar, 24 Maz 1946, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazólo Bizottság iratai, 138/b, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary. Behar listed his birthplace as Constantinople, or Istanbul, and said that in the last census he declared his nationality as Turkish. Since he has a Hungarian name, one can either surmise that his parents were Hungarian, or that he Magyarized his name upon moving to the state. Behar unfortunately does not offer this information.

buildings, and hyperinflation complicated matters even more, by making it more challenging to determine who benefitted from the Nyilás regime as a result of premeditated actions and intentions, and who improved their lot simply due to circumstance. And lastly, the Committee did not recognize the plight of the Jews that lost the majority of their wealth and possessions. According to Peter Kenez, “It was explicit Communist policy not to support Jewish efforts to take back what was legally theirs. In the case of Jewish-owned apartments and houses that Christians had taken over, the police were instructed not to allow the removal of Christian tenants.”¹⁷ The Communists, who exercised significant control over the Committee, did not illustrate that it was important to sympathize or attempt to right the wrongs that the Jews endured during the war.

Hungarians’ political backgrounds and wartime behavior

As depicted in Table 4.2, Hungarians most commonly reported that they read the *Magyar Nemzet* and *Népszava* newspapers.¹⁸ Of the seventy-five total applications analyzed from District VII, nineteen of them reported reading more than one newspaper on a daily basis. As with the rest of the questions, the Certification Committee most likely believed that peoples’ newspaper subscriptions would yield information about both their wartime and postwar political affiliations. Yet unless there was other, more pertinent information that belied their political stances, the Committee did not attempt to question someone based solely on their newspaper subscriptions. Of the twenty-one applicants who provided their political affiliations, seventeen were members of the Social Democratic Party between 1919 and their completion of the survey. Four of them

¹⁷ Kenez, 158.

¹⁸ The *Magyar Nemzet* was a moderately conservative paper, and *Népszava* was the Social Democrats’ paper.

were either former or current Communist party members.¹⁹ Perhaps since the Committee made it clear that they sought to obtain Hungarians' political affiliations in order to punish former Nazis, Hungarians preferred to leave the question blank. Seeing as a significant percentage of the urban population refused to answer this question on the survey, the Committee had to rely on other answers to determine the Hungarians' wartime activities.

Hungarians' participation in fascist organizations

The problems with the Hungarians' responses to the survey questions did not end there. As with their political background, in the inquiries about peoples' SS or Nazi affiliations the vast majority of them did not respond. If a Hungarian did respond to one of these questions, they either provided an extremely vague answer, or described how they had relinquished all contacts with that group many years prior. Why the lack of clear responses? The answer to this question is simple. The applicants sought to conceal the truths about their wartime behaviors as much as possible. Since the occupation, ghettoization, and initial deportations of Budapest Jews had occurred only one-two years before (depending on when they completed the survey), the physical and mental damage still loomed fresh in peoples' minds. Many of the Hungarians in Budapest had something to hide, and they believed that the postwar Provisional and Coalition governments wanted to comb through Hungarian society in search of wartime criminals. The anti-fascist rhetoric of the Communist Party in particular made no secret

¹⁹ One of the Communists was a member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, not the Hungarian one. In 1919 the Magyar Kommunist Part successfully overthrew the short-lived democratic government headed by Mihály Károlyi. The Communist government, the Hungarian Soviet Republic, also did not last, and after Miklós Horthy and his conservative allies overthrew the Communists, they followed through with a White Terror that sought to purge the country of all the Communists. This nearly decimated the Magyar Kommunist Part, which could not successfully rebuild its support base until the last few months of the war, with the help of the Red Army and Moscow.

that they wanted to excise all elements of Nazism, and anti-communism, from Hungarian society. In order to prevent suspicion about their wartime behaviors they did their best to veil the realities of their wartime activities, by refusing to respond to the more incriminating questions and offering ambiguous answers when possible. Thus, it was not in many Hungarians' best interest to embrace and contribute to the state's retribution process.

Hungarians also feared the next step in the retribution process: the Committee's investigation of one's survey for questionable activities. In other words, they feared the consequences if their applications were rejected by the Committee. The punishments that accompanied the rejection in particular frightened people from participating more whole-heartedly in the process of retributive justice. Even the most lenient punishment, being suspended from work for six-twelve months, threatened the very livelihood of the accused and his or her family. And yet imprisonment in a labor camp had even worse repercussions for one's family. Once the Committee's decisions spread by word-of-mouth, neighbors, friends, and families alike had to determine how they would continue with their relations with the accused, if at all. The public humiliation of being declared "undemocratic" was undoubtedly severe, as it could serve to ostracize the entire family from society.

The attempt to conceal one's wartime behavior is best depicted in the answers from Desző Balla, who profited generously from ghettoization by receiving a larger apartment. In addition to experiencing an enormous increase in income and improving his living situation, he belonged to a few noteworthy affiliations. In 1929 Balla was a member of the Egységés Part, or the Unity Party, which was a Fascist party based in

Szeged that rallied behind nationalist and racist beliefs that mirrored the other fascist groups across Europe.²⁰ Furthermore, Balla was also a member of the Baross Szövetség, a Christian business association that sought to rid the commercial sector of Jewish influence. Although Balla says that he was only a member of the Egységes Party for six months and of the Baross Szövetség for one year, his participation in the two groups raises serious questions about his interwar and wartime beliefs, particularly concerning his stance towards the Nyilás government.

To add further insult to injury, Balla took over a food and wine store from Jakab Kornfeld, a Hungarian Jew.²¹ Balla claimed that he did not receive any stock from the store, and that he did not buy it directly from Kornfeld.²² On June 13th, 1942 he received a permit to conduct business at the store, after which it appears that he ran the business as usual.²³ Although from the surface his survey does not divulge any concrete links with the Hungarian Nazis or the SS, upon further investigation Balla's political character and personal intentions become questionable. After combining his membership in the Egységes Part and Baross Szövetség with the situation with the Jewish store, it appears that Balla's case should have been investigated more thoroughly by the Certification Committee. Instead, on April 24th, 1946, Balla received his approval from the Certification Committee.

²⁰ The Unity Party was a Christian-based political party that formed in 1922 and based in Szeged, and rose to prominence when its leader István Bethlen became Prime Minister of Hungary in the 1920s, and when Gyulas Gombos ruled as Prime Minister from 1932-1936. After 1939 its name changed to the Party of Hungarian Life The Unity Party was known for its radical right beliefs, as they were high nationalist and utilized racist propaganda. For more, see Peter Sugar, *History of Hungary*.

²¹ Although Balla does not specify when he appropriated Kornfeld's business, it most likely occurred in the 1940s.

²² Survey, Balla Desző, 14 April 1945, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

²³ Ibid.

Another man who admitted to being a member of the Baross Szövetség was a lawyer by the name of Dr. Béla Koppány. In a similar fashion, Dr. Koppány stated that he was only a member of the Christian association through his profession, and that he paid two pengő for monthly dues.²⁴ As with Balla, Koppány offered at best a vague answer explaining his membership, by saying that he only joined the group for “professional” reasons, which makes it difficult to determine the true nature of his membership. In addition, Koppány’s survey also reveals similarly intriguing information regarding his wartime activities that may shed light on his membership with the Christian association. During the war, many Jewish businessmen and professionals sought help from non-Jews by signing their businesses over to them for safekeeping, which was called a Strohman (straw-man) agreement.²⁵ By doing this the Jewish former-proprietor could still participate in the business and receive some income from it, and not be punished for breaking the law.²⁶ According to Koppány, once the assets of Jozséf Krammar, a Hungarian Jew, were frozen as a consequence of the Second Jewish Law, Koppány received Krammar’s apartment on Csengery Street, 8000 pengő, and an assortment of the man’s valuables.²⁷ In both the general survey and the business survey Koppány refuses to characterize his business dealings with Krammar as a Strohmann agreement, despite giving this answer to the question about any involvement in this type of transaction. In the end, the Strohman agreement

²⁴ Survey, Béla Koppány 23 April 1945, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazólo Bizottság iratai, 138/b, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

²⁵ Yehuda Don, “Economic Implications of the Anti-Jewish Legislation in Hungary,” in *Genocide and Rescue: The Holocaust in Hungary, 1944*, edited by David Cesarani, 47-76. 62.

²⁶ This was a result of the Second Jewish Law, which severely restricted Hungarian Jews’ participation in entrepreneurial ventures. According to this law, the ration of independent or self-employed Jewish businessmen compared to non-Jews had to be lowered to six percent. For more, see Yehuda Don, “Economic Implications of the Anti-Jewish Legislation in Hungary.”

²⁷ Survey, Béla Koppány, 23 April 1945, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

appropriately describes the nature of Koppány and Krammar's business relationship. Koppány most likely believed that if he specified his business dealings with Krammar as a Strohman agreement, the Committee would refuse to approve him. Without an approval from the Committee Koppány would experience difficulties in finding a job in the years after the war.

Koppány stated that after the war he returned the valuables, money, and apartment to Krammar.²⁸ Koppány did not provide any other information, and there are no documents from the Committee or from any supporting parties to describe what happened to Koppány, Krammar, or the apartment and goods; nevertheless, a few assessments arise from the available source materials. In a similar vein as Balla, Koppány denied being seriously involved with the Baross Szövetség beyond belonging to the group on a "professional" basis. But his membership, coupled with the business dealings with Krammar, speaks to the contrary. Rather, it appears as though Koppány may have utilized the Baross Szövetség's ideas concerning the need to rid Hungarian businesses of Jewish influence and participation. This would explain his involvement with Krammar and his business and assets. Despite stating that he returned all of Krammar's assets after the war, no documentation survives that confirms it one way or another. At the same time, there is no proof that Krammar attempted to sue Koppány in court to reclaim his belongings, and there are no Committee documents that detail an indictment of Koppány for any pro-fascist beliefs or activities. As with Balla, we are left to speculate about the nature of Koppány's involvement with the Baross Szövetség and Jozséf Krammar. Although Balla received approval from the Certification Committee, the existing sources do not reveal whether Koppány experienced the same outcome.

²⁸ Ibid.

As with Balla, in spite of receiving evidence in Koppány's survey about his involvement in the Baross Szövetség and reading about the Strohman agreement with Krammar, the Certification Committee does not seem to have examined Koppány's case further. The absence of any documents from a Committee hearing or court case for Koppány or Krammar suggests that the Committee did little more than briefly glance over these surveys, and then submitted their approval of Koppány. This type of uncertainty about the fate of Koppány unfortunately characterizes the vast majority of Hungarians in Budapest after the war. The cases of Balla and Koppány remain indicative of the Communist Party and the Committee's emphasis on needing to approve Hungarians as swiftly as possible; since the Committee and Communist Party focused mainly on eradicating ex-fascists and overly radical leftists, people like Balla and Koppány did not constitute a threat to the postwar state. As for Koppány, the focus of his survey answers lay in receiving approval from the Certification Committee in order to return to work and resume his daily life; as a consequence, he avoided designating his arrangement with Krammar as a Strohman agreement, most likely to avoid being rejected by the Committee.

Once applicants submitted their surveys, the Certification Committee spent several months evaluating them before taking the next step, most likely due to the sheer number of surveys submitted at the time. The next step involved posting a notice on the wall of the person's apartment building, which asked neighbors, house managers, and co-workers to submit letters of support detailing whether they believed the person in question exhibited any pro-fascist, pro-Nazi behavior during the war. The notice usually provided a window of about nine-ten days during which people could bring their letters

of support to the Committee building. These letters often proved instrumental to a person's case, as will be analyzed in more detail later.

Elements missing from the surveys

It is worth noting the types of information that remained absent from the surveys. Aside from a few exceptions, the surveys were largely completed by Hungarian men. This was largely because the Provisional Government required every Hungarian male to complete a survey. Furthermore, since they needed to complete a survey in order to be certified and be allowed to return to work, Hungarian men promptly submitted the surveys upon returning home. If a woman's husband was dead or had not returned from the war, either from the front lines, a labor battalion, the concentration or death camps, or from a Soviet prisoner-of-war camp, then she was instructed to complete the survey in his absence. Some women, usually widows, filled the forms out in their own name. If their husband had not returned yet or the wife did not know that he was dead, they refrained from providing any personal information in the questionnaire, except to report that they were completing the survey for their husbands.

In the case of Mrs. Salomon Achs, born Mária Knöpler, and Mrs. Jenő Barabás, as war widows they explained the difficulties they endured financially; while Achs describes herself as "fortune-less" (*vagyontalan*) as a result of the war and being a widow, Barabás did her best to provide for her two children as a shopkeeper.²⁹ In addition, the two women appeared to be friends, as Barabás submitted a letter of support for Achs.³⁰ In the next section the case of Mrs. Bélá Kovásznay, a married woman and a fur trader,

²⁹ Survey, Mrs. Salomon Achs, 10 August 1946, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazoló Bizottság iratai, 138/b, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary. Survey, Mrs. Jenő Barabás, 7 June 1945, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazoló Bizottság iratai, 138/1, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

³⁰ Survey, Mrs. Salomon Achs, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

will be discussed in great detail, which promises to display more about Hungarian women's experiences during the war. Finally, in some cases, the eldest son of the father completed the survey, and not even the mother. Aside from these few examples, as a result of the overwhelming male presence in the surveys the image that arises from the immediate postwar years in Hungary for the most part is glaringly devoid of a woman's perspective.

What the surveys lack the most are questions asking about Hungarian Jews' suffering and experiences during the war. The surveys and Certification Committee as a whole were not concerned with the hardships the Jews' encountered. Since the Communist Party played a significant role in the Committee and the creation of the surveys, they remained focused on their anti-fascist campaign throughout the immediate postwar period. As a consequence they did not concern themselves with questions regarding the ghettoization process, the deportation and murder of hundreds of thousands of Jews outside of Budapest, or the labor battalions on the Hungarian Eastern front of the war.

In spite of this, numerous Hungarian Jews inserted bits and pieces of their experiences in the surveys. Lajos Keresztessy, a bank manager, reported that he suffered persecution because of the anti-Jewish laws, in response to whether he was connected to the implementation of them.³¹ In an answer by the widow Mrs. Miksá Kohn, she says that either the Germans or the Nyilas in Sopron, a city near the Austrian-Hungarian border, killed her husband in March of 1945.³² In most of their

³¹ Survey, Lajos Keresztessy, 29 April 1946, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazoló Bizottság iratai, 138/a, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

³² Survey, Mrs. Miksá Kohn, no date, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazoló Bizottság iratai, 138/b, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

surveys Hungarian Jews included at least one statement about their horrible experiences during the war, either about forced ghettoization or their work in labor battalions in the East. This demonstrates that absence of questions about their experiences did not prevent Hungarian Jews from sharing them in the surveys at the time. In the minds of the Certification Committee and the Communists rooting out known fascists far outweighed other concerns, including the Jews' wartime suffering.

In the end, the Communists, the Certification Committee, and the Hungarians in Budapest stressed above all else the need to receive approval, so that everyone could resume their daily lives. In fact, in many of the surveys people addressed the Committee directly, asking if they could be approved. Mrs. Jenő Barabás, for example, declared that she had submitted her paperwork after liberation, and that she was still waiting to receive an approval from the Committee.³³ By requesting to be approved on the survey, Barabás sought to receive her certification as quickly as possible, most likely so that she could resume her work as a small shopkeeper. In other cases, Hungarians attempted to receive certification from institutions other than the Committee. In one such case Zoltán Ferenc, an independent shoemaker, asked the Hungarian National Shoemaker's Association to approve him. The association replied that they could not certify him, since they were not credited as a verification institution.³⁴ Even though only the Certification Committee contained the legal rights to approve Hungarians, Ferenc sent a request to the Shoemaker's Association in hopes of becoming certified anyways. Ferenc's situation illustrates the lengths to which some

³³ Barabás submitted her paperwork to the Committee in 7 June, 1945, and did not receive the Committee's approval until 08 August, 1946.

³⁴ Survey, Ferenc Zoltán, 6 April 1945, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazoló Bizottság iratai, 138/1, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

Hungarian went in their attempts to become approved. Without that approval, they risked being suspended from work or imprisoned, which could threaten the quality of their postwar life. For some the inability to work stalled their job placement and/or advancement. Since the sole focus of the majority of Hungarian society lay in reestablishing modes of everyday life, they went to great lengths to receive approval from the Committee in the first few postwar years.

Table 4-1. List of applicants who owned one, one plus hall or kitchen, two, or three-room apartments in District VII

Number of bedrooms	Number of Applicants	Percentage
One-room	17	22.6%
One room plus hall or kitchen	5	6%
Two rooms	21	28%
Three rooms	6	8%

Table 4-2. List of the percentage of District VII residents that subscribed to these newspapers during World War II

Newspapers	Subscribers	Percent of Total
<i>Magyar Nemzeti</i>	13	17.3%
<i>Népszava</i>	17	25.3%
<i>Esti Kurir</i>	8	10.6%
<i>Újság</i>	7	9.3%
<i>Magyarország</i>	3	4%
<i>Pesti Hírlap</i>	4	5.3%

CHAPTER 5 PROPERTY CLAIMS AND HOUSING DISPUTES

Despite the high frequency with which Hungarians in Budapest moved apartments during the last few years of the war, property disputes did not occur at the rate that one might assume. Since some Hungarians moved multiple times, while others lost all of their belongings due to the bombing damage, it proved difficult to find or obtain official documentation that supported one's right to occupy a living space. As a consequence they had to rely largely on letters of support, like the ones submitted to the Committee to help people receive their certification, and witness testimonies. By analyzing one particularly complex case involving multiple properties and several opposing parties, unique insights arise about Hungarian attitudes towards the retribution process, the nation's Jews and the Holocaust, and the Communist Party.

The Initial Dispute: Kovásznay and Span

The case involves a woman by the name of Mrs. BÉLA Kovásznay, who conducted a relatively prosperous fur business in Budapest. In her initial survey, completed April 24th, 1946, she reported that she was married and with one child, and that she lived in a three-room apartment on Tas VÉZER Street.¹ In addition to the apartment on Tas VÉZER Street, she used an apartment on Somogyi BÉLA Street to run her business.² There is nothing particularly remarkable about Kovásznay's survey, aside from the fact that she was able to remain in her three-room apartment during the war, and that she had been a member of the Smallholders' Party since 1945. Even these answers fail to reveal why Kovásznay would have been of special interest to the Certification Committee. But by

¹ Although Kovásznay indicated that she was married on the survey, her husband is not mentioned at all in the Committee proceedings, in the letters of support from either sides, or even in her own testimony.

² Survey, Mrs. Béla Bogdany Kovásznay, 24 April 1946, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazólo Bizottság iratai, 138/1, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

examining the evidence that accompanies her survey, which consists of over forty total documents, it becomes clear that Kovásznay was at the center of multiple contentious property disputes, due largely to her wartime behavior in her business dealings and relations with her employees.

The other main party involved in Kovásznay's case was Frigyes Pan Span, a Hungarian Jew whose fiancé worked for Kovásznay during the war. On April 14, 1946, Pan submitted a letter to the Committee that detailed his relations with Kovásznay. In this letter he levied several accusations against her, the first of which was fraternizing with the German soldiers during the war.³ Span discussed how Kovásznay supplied him and his fiancé with food from time to time and helped them find hiding spots during the war.⁴ When Kovásznay hid in a house in Buda during the siege Span and his fiancé collected the machines and products from Kovásznay's store and hid them with Span's future brother-in-law.⁵ After liberation the three of them agreed to form a partnership for the fur business.⁶ For a little less than a year Span, his fiancé, and Kovásznay worked together peacefully, although they did not sign an official agreement for their partnership.

In February of 1946 Kovásznay abruptly eliminated Span and his fiancé from the business.⁷ Even though Span contained several furs that he bought during their partnership, without official documentation of the business agreement Span could not induce Kovásznay to compensate him. Span explains how according to a 1941

³ Letter, Span Pan Frigyes to Certification Committee, 14 April 1946, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazoló Bizottság iratai, 138/b, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ It seems that Kovásznay agreed to form the partnership with Span and his fiancé because they protected her machines and inventory in early 1945 when she fled to Buda during the Siege and beginning of the Soviet occupation. Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

government decree, all businesses needed to submit paperwork to the government detailing their total assets and goods in February of every year.⁸ He argues that Kovásznay's decision to cut them out of the business was part of her attempt to evade paying all of her taxes. By removing Span and his fiancé from the business, Kovásznay did not need to include Span's furs in the report.⁹ Span states that Kovásznay was trying to take advantage of the postwar chaos in Hungary by attempting to cheat on her taxes and claim that furs were theirs and not hers.¹⁰

Span's Accusations of Kovásznay's Pro-German Behavior

Span's accusations of Kovásznay did not end here. For him, Kovásznay's covert business dealings were also connected to her wartime affiliations with the Germans, which included her father's position as a Nyilas member¹¹. Although he made this accusation at the beginning of his letter, he refrains from explaining it in full until the end of his statement. Span describes how during the Arrow Cross regime Kovásznay frequently entertained SS soldiers in her fur shop, and sometimes in her bunker with pálinka and music.¹² Although Span does not say that Kovásznay benefitted financially in her business from her friendship with the Germans, in his mind her behaviors needed to be taken seriously by the Committee. By emphasizing the gravity of her actions, it is clear that Span hoped that the Certification Committee would withhold their approval.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Span accused Kovásznay of a much larger tax evasion scheme, but it is too complicated to detail here. Essentially, Span spotted an error in one of the itemized forms that Kovásznay completed with another vendor. The form said that Kovásznay and the vendor sold fewer products between the two of them than Span claims that they did. When Span tried to fix the error, both Kovásznay and the vendor accused him of lying. Kovásznay also charged Span with embezzlement. Even though the reasons for this charge are not described, it was probably related to his role in finding the tax evasion scheme.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. None of the accusations about Kovásznay's habit of entertaining Germans in the bunker describe how she had a bunker. Perhaps she lived on the bottom floor of the building and had access to it there.

He knew that by denouncing Kovásznay for having overly friendly relations with the German SS in the initial part of the letter that the Committee would take the case into consideration.

Span did not denounce Kovásznay in order to contribute to the Committee's retribution efforts. Rather, it appears that largely he denounced her in hopes of preventing Kovásznay's approval from the Committee. This was not uncommon, as Hungarians viewed the Certification process as one that could be molded in their favor. If the Committee refused to approve her, and penalized her for pro-fascist activity, then Kovásznay may not be have able to run her business.¹³ If Kovásznay, a successful fur trader in the context of postwar Hungary, was permanently banned from running her business, then that could leave an opening for others in the fur industry in Budapest. Span would most likely have benefited by the void left by Kovásznay in the fur business. Thus it seems that Span denounced Kovásznay for personal gain. But this type of personal gain was not characterized by greed. Rather, people were motivated by need and loss. In other words, since Span was penniless it meant that he would have had the means to survive the postwar years, perhaps with a little extra income. Additionally, people like Span who lost their wealth, status, and/or property needed to blame someone for their losses. Thus for Span, preventing Kovásznay from conducting her business most likely served to meet his basic needs, and the desire for retribution.

¹³ Although Kovásznay's son Otto is mentioned at the end of the Committee hearing, he did not play a substantial role in the proceedings, nor did he provide a testimony. By speculating about the nature of their relationship, It appears as though Kovásznay controlled her business by herself, and her son remained in the background. In the event that Kovásznay would be prevented from continuing her business activities, Otto would have to take the reins of her fur shops. Perhaps Span viewed this as an opportunity for himself, to take some of her business.

Span's intentions in preventing Kovásznay's approval were characteristic of other Hungarians at the time. His initial partnership with Kovásznay provided he and his wife with a healthy income after being left penniless after the war.¹⁴ He knew that if Kovásznay was suspended then he and his fiancé could receive that income once again. Rather than genuinely contribute to the postwar retribution process, it appears as though Span denounced Kovásznay mainly in order to meet his basic material needs and quell the feelings of loss from the war. In the context of postwar Hungary, this can be seen as Span's attempt to better his life.

The Property Dispute: Kovásznay and Klein

After receiving news of Span's accusations, Kovásznay submitted her postwar survey to the Committee, and quickly found employees, fellow business vendors, and neighbors to submit letters supporting her political reliability and generous nature. Span did the same, to the extent that when the Committee met in early June of 1946 they had amassed numerous support letters for both sides. Interestingly enough, the bulk of the case did not concern Span's tax evasion accusation. Instead, they trial cross-filed cases and included a situation that was completely unrelated to the business relations between Span and Kovásznay took center stage. It involved a Hungarian Jew by the name of the Sándor Klein, who was in a property dispute with Kovásznay that was under investigation in a separate case with a regional court.¹⁵ Yet the details of it ended up being a deciding factor for the conflict between Kovásznay and Span.¹⁶ Despite

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Minutes of Committee hearing, 25 April 1946, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazoló Bizottság iratai, 138/1, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary. The document says that the case was being investigated by the Tablá Biróság.

¹⁶ The reason why it became a part of the case between Kovásznay and Span was because Span mentioned it briefly in his first letter to the Committee, as a way to bolster his accusation that Kovásznay had committed multiple fraudulent crimes in the span of a few years.

Kovácsnay's repeated attempts to dismiss the topic of her property dispute with Klein from the proceedings with Span, both he and the Committee believed that it was inextricably linked to the case at hand.

The property case between Kovácsnay and Klein reveals important insights into the motives of the Certification Committee and Hungarians at this time. During the war, Kovácsnay heard from an unspecified administrator in the mayor's office about a certain apartment that might be available for rent.¹⁷ Klein, who ran a fur business in the apartment on Karoly Street, rented it in 1941 from a man by the last name of Halász.¹⁸ Unfortunately for Klein, the man who owned the permit for the fur business died, and without one he was forced to shut down the shop. Upon hearing about the situation, Kovácsnay applied for the rights to the apartment, which she hoped to use as another storefront for her business.¹⁹ Since she obtained a permit already and Klein did not, she won the rights to the apartment.²⁰ After the war Klein attempted to sue Kovácsnay in order to receive their apartment again.²¹ According to Span and several other witnesses in the case, Kovácsnay took advantage of Klein's unfortunate situation, and used her connections with the Germans to obtain the property.²² A few of them, Span included, also accused Kovácsnay of taking unfair advantage of Klein since he was

Although he most likely did not intend for the dispute between Klein and Kovácsnay to play a large role in his own lawsuit, witnesses were collected to discuss the property dispute, which forced the issue to the fore.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ When Halász returned home after being in a labor camp and found that Kovácsnay had won the right to rent it in 1943, he tried to sue her for the apartment.

Klein also tried to obtain the ownership rights to the apartment from Halász in the Arbitration Court, but since Kovácsnay had already received ownership rights in her case with Halász, Klein was unable to pursue his claim. Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ It is not clear whether Kovácsnay won from Klein the right to lease or own the apartment in 1943.

²¹ The case between Klein and Kovácsnay was heard by the *Tablá Biróság*, or the Arbitration Court.

²² Letter from Span Pan Frigyes to Committee, BFL, Budapest, Hungary. Minutes of Committee hearing, 25 April 1946, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

Jewish, and who during the war had no recourse available to fight Kovásznay's actions.²³

The charge that Kovásznay purposefully sought to remove Klein from the fur business also fell in line with the aims of the Baross Szövetség, and the *numerus clausus* law. This law, the first of its kinds of twentieth century Europe, restricted Jews' participation in higher-level education to 6%. Considering that Hungarian Jews comprised over 15% of the students in the law and medical schools at the time, the limitations demanded by the law severely curbed the Jews' future access to the professions as well. Whereas the Baross Szövetség wanted to eradicate Jewish influence from the commercial sector completely, the *numerus clausus* law called for a more moderate position. Yet the two helped to institutionalize the belief amongst Hungarians that Jews did not belong in Hungarian society, much less in the more sought-after jobs. Regardless of whether she intended this or not, from an outsider's perspective Kovásznay's actions appear as though she was actively trying to prevent Klein from conducting business, largely because of his Jewish origin.

The Role of the Letters of Support and the Witnesses

For Span, the witnesses' claim that Kovásznay unfairly received the rights to the Karoly apartment over Klein because he was Jewish strengthened his own case in court. His accusation of her ties with the Germans also made the case particularly pertinent for Span. By denouncing Kovásznay for exhibiting both pro-German and antisemitic beliefs during the war, Span hoped to appeal to the Committee's goal of punishing former fascists. In addition to Span and his witnesses' testimonies, a letter

²³ Minutes of Committee hearing, 5 June 1946, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazoló Bizottság iratai, 138/1, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

was submitted before the Committee hearing that described her pro-German attitude in a little more depth. The letter stated that Kovásznay used the basement cellar of the Somogyi Street apartment building as a place to conduct illegal activities.²⁴ According to this letter Kovásznay routinely invited SS soldiers into the basement to drink, which caused them to behave in offensive ways.²⁵ Written by Ernő Bauer, the letter was signed by seven people total, who were most likely some of Kovásznay's neighbors in the building. At the end of the letter Bauer encourages other witnesses to step forward and corroborate his statement. Regardless of whether anyone else substantiated Bauer's denunciation of Kovásznay, the fact that he did not mention Span in the letter remains important. It suggests that Bauer's letter was not written at the request of Span, but rather as a response to the Committee's bulletin announcement asking for letters detailing Kovásznay's political reliability. Furthermore, it suggests that Kovásznay did display a pro-German attitude during the war, to the extent that she openly entertained German soldiers in her building. Without any connections to Span, Bauer's letter added credibility to Span's claims.

As part of her defense Kovásznay arranged for a collection of witnesses whose aim was to verify the positive aspects of her business dealings, and her friendliness and generosity towards her Jewish witnesses. In order to combat Span's accusations and the claims issued against her in connection to the case with Klein, the majority of her witnesses were Jews, which she most likely believed would boost the credibility of the witnesses' statements. In his statement Ernő Felsenburg, a businessman in the silk industry, described how Kovásznay continued working with him during the war, despite

²⁴ Letter to Committee, Ernő Bauer, no date, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazoló Bizottság iratai, 138/1, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

²⁵ Ibid.

the increasingly antisemitic atmosphere that characterized the city.²⁶ After being ghettoized in 1944 Kovásznay continued her friendship with him, even when he wore a yellow star.²⁷ Felsenburg describes how at one point Kovásznay sympathized with him and said that, “the rough times would pass.”²⁸ By confirming both the equality of her business relations and her willingness to continue her friendships with Jews, Felsenburg supported the image that Kovásznay wanted to display to the Committee, in order to disprove the slew of accusations against her.

Another witness by the name of Mrs. Frigyes Behzsey, a saleswoman in Kovásznay’s fur store, explained how after she fled from her hiding spot in the city in 1944 Kovásznay allowed her to hide in her shop. Behzsey also said that when she moved to the ghetto Kovásznay visited her often and brought her food.²⁹ Non-Jews also corroborated Behzsey and Felsenburg’s testimonies. A short statement from a few of her business vendors described how Kovásznay consistently helped friends regardless of their background, and that they always purchased high quality goods from her at fair prices.³⁰ Lastly, they said that both Kovásznay and her son Otto, who stayed in the background of the proceedings, “lacked a radical opinion” concerning politics and social affairs.³¹ By confirming that Kovásznay did not discriminate against anyone in her business ventures or her personal relationships, Felsenburg, Behzsey, and her non-Jewish vendors attempted to dispel all of the accusations against her. In other words,

²⁶ Letter of support for Kovásznay, Ernő Felsenburg, 29 April 1946, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazoló Bizottság iratai, 138/1, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

²⁷ Ibid. Felsenburg did not say in his testimony whether he received the yellow star before or after he was ghettoized, or if Kovásznay saw him outside or inside the ghetto. There is also no information included in the court documents about whether her house was included in the ghetto or not.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Minutes of Committee hearing, 25 April 1946, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

³⁰ Letter of support for Kovásznay, Behzsey, 2 May 1946, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazoló Bizottság iratai, 138/1, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

³¹ Ibid.

they aimed to demonstrate that Kovásznay was friendly towards all Jews and even helped a number of them, and that she conducted her business fairly.

The Committee's Decision and Kovásznay's Response

In June of 1946, only a few months after Span originally accused her, the Committee presented their decision: although they did not believe Span's accusations about Kovásznay's antisemitic behavior, they still suspended Kovásznay from conducting business for six months.³² Initially the Committee did not thoroughly explain the reasons behind the verdict to either Span or Kovásznay, despite Kovásznay's request to do so. It seems that the Committee did not believe Span's claims, and remained wary of Kovásznay's testimony and witnesses. Rather they opposed her socio-economic position, which will be discussed shortly.

As a result Kovásznay submitted one last letter to bolster her testimony. In the letter Kovásznay explained how the Arrow Cross officials strongly urged her to cease both her business relations and friendships with Jews, because she was gaining the reputation of being a *zsidoberenc*, or a friend of the Jews.³³ Kovásznay seemed to include this statement in order to substantiate her witnesses' claims that she was not antisemitic. She also claimed that Span intimidated her with his statements in front of the committee, and that he threatened her and one of her witnesses before the hearing.³⁴ This assertion confirms a statement made by one of her witnesses, who said

³² Letter, Kovásznay to Committee, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

that Span aggressively tried to dissuade her from supporting Kovásznay in the hearing.³⁵

Lastly Kovásznay reiterates a statement that she made earlier, which was an attempt to address the accusation concerning her friendly relations with the German soldiers. She said that her connections with them began long before the war, as they were from Leipzig and she conducted business with them as fur traders in years' prior.³⁶ When they arrived in Budapest they established contact with her, and she sought to maintain the friendships so as that she could continue her business relations with them.³⁷ By explaining the nature of her relations with the German soldiers Kovásznay does not deny the claims made by Span and Bauer that she entertained SS soldiers in her cellar. But by explaining her actions in light of her business ventures, Kovásznay attempts to disprove the allegation that she supported the Germans and their occupation of Hungary. Instead she asserts that she interacted with the soldiers for business reasons only. Furthermore, she tried to substantiate her letter by reiterating that she did not support the German or Nyilas occupations. Kovásznay attempted to defend her character with a few key points: that she was a *zsidoberenc* (friend of the Jews) and not antisemitic, that she conducted her business fairly with everyone, and finally that she entertained the German soldiers as a way to ensure business ventures with them in the future. Kovásznay's emphasis on her business displays her focus on establishing everyday routines and achieving a stable life amidst the chaotic events of the war and postwar years.

³⁵ Letter of support for Kovásznay, Deszö Dienes, 31 May 1946, Fond. Xvii, 417, Igazoló Bizottság iratai, 138/1, 1945-1946 1 box, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

³⁶ Letter, Kovásznay to Committee, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

³⁷ Ibid.

Unfair Committee proceedings and issues of corruption in Hungary's Judicial System

In Kovásznay's final letter she addresses the Népbíróság, or the Peoples' Courts, in addition to the Certification Committee. It is unclear if the Peoples' Courts processed Kovásznay's appeal or not. However, that she addressed them in her letter suggests that appealing to the Peoples' Courts might have been the next step for the case.

In his article about the Peoples' Courts László Karsai argues that they did not always provide defendants with a fair trial, as they sometimes refused to hear the defendant's witnesses' testimonies because they said that the facts in the witnesses' statement were already well known by the court.³⁸ According to Karsai, this offers only one of many examples why the postwar court system did not perform the postwar trials in the fairest way possible.³⁹ Kovásznay substantiates Karsai's assessment, but in relation to the Certification Committee, which she criticizes for failing to perform several of the necessary requirements to ensure a fair trial. Her complaints included not questioning any of the witnesses' motives for their testimonies, for failing to require the witnesses to swear on the Bible prior to speaking, and for not informing any of the witnesses, herself included, of their rights, except for Span.⁴⁰ Although it is difficult to determine if Kovásznay's complaints had any truth in them, they suggest that the Certification Committee, like the Peoples' Courts, were not always consistent in the ways that they attempted to determine peoples' wartime behaviors.

³⁸ Karsai, 242.

³⁹ Although Karsai says that it is not up to the historian to judge whether the Hungarian postwar government, and thus the Peoples' Courts, failed the test or not, he essentially suggests that the courts fell short of offering fair and proper trials of the accused. He also says that the judges and the Council members of the courts, who were basically representatives of the political parties, used the platform of the trials to declare their own version of history according to their political beliefs. 242, 248.

⁴⁰ Letter, Kovásznay to Committee, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

According to Gyula Papp however, the Committee and court system committed crimes far worse than not informing witnesses of their rights. In addition to their inconsistent practices during the hearings, the Committee also accepted enormous bribes from some applicants, usually major companies, desiring approval from them. For example, a stone mining company sent 15,000 pengő in June of 1946 to the chairman of the Committee with instructions to allocate the money in advance of the decision to the other members.⁴¹ In another case a major bank offered a daily rate of 500 pengő to the Committee from the time their application was submitted to the date of the decision, for fear that they would be denied approval.⁴² Although the rate of hyperinflation makes it difficult to determine the exact amount that these companies offered the Committee, it demonstrates the high level of corruption that characterized the Certification Committee and its proceedings.

Although there is no evidence in the documents of defendants or plaintiffs bribing their witnesses, there is no reason to believe that it did not happen. It probably occurred on a much smaller scale than in the big companies, since individual Hungarians had very little personal wealth to work with. As mentioned earlier Kovásznay and one of her witnesses reported being threatened by Span with physical force if they followed through with their plans in the hearing. If some people were threatened on account of one of the Committee meanings, then there is a significant chance that other individuals bribed their witnesses to vouch for them.

These bribes show that the Certification Committee allowed monetary gifts to prevent them from pursuing their job of political justice in postwar Hungary. In other

⁴¹ Papp, 172.

⁴² Ibid.

words, they accepted the bribes in lieu of conducting a thorough investigation of the companies' wartime activities. This suggests that if the Committee had examined their records more meticulously, they might have withheld their approval. Moreover, it depicts how the Committee chose to override the purpose of the surveys, and thus the denazification process, altogether. Since the Committee was tied to the postwar court system, it also speaks to the level of corruption that characterized the postwar judicial system as a whole.

The reasons behind the Committee's decision

The Certification Committee provided several justifications for their refusal to retract or lessen Kovásznay's six-month suspension. The Committee, after showing particular interest in Kovásznay's case with Klein regarding the Karoly Street apartment, declared that she took advantage of the wartime situation and Klein's unfortunate circumstances when she "aggressively appropriated" his apartment.⁴³ The Committee believed that Kovásznay committed the largest crime when she acquired the rights to a Jew's apartment and then proceeded to leave it unoccupied during the war.⁴⁴ The Committee also said that she acted undemocratically (*antidemokratikus*) during the course of claiming Klein's shop.⁴⁵ It is interesting that although the survey did not ask questions of Hungarian Jews about their wartime sufferings, they viewed the appropriation of a Jew's apartment as a crime. This corroborates Gyula Papp's assertion that one of the indicators of fascist behavior lay in occupying and/or gaining the rights to a Jew's apartment during the course of the war.⁴⁶

⁴³ Letter, Kovásznay to Committee, BFL, Budapest, Hungary.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Papp, 172.

Kovácsnay discusses the Committee's decision in her letter to the Committee and Peoples' Courts, and says how she explicitly pointed out that she received Klein's apartment because he lacked a permit, and not because he was Jewish. It is clear that she disagreed with the Committee's use of an ex post facto law against her. Despite Kovácsnay's insistence on this point, the Committee clung to the fact that the apartment belonged to a Hungarian Jew. Additionally, since they asked her repeatedly how and from whom she heard about the situation with Klein's apartment, the Committee seemed to believe that this was an issue as well. As a consequence of being notified of the available apartment from an "unspecified administrator" in the Budapest mayor's office, and then refusing to name the person, the Committee had more reason to believe that she behaved undemocratically. In this light, the Committee took into serious consideration Span's comment that Kovácsnay's maintained "many connections in the government." This thereby illustrates that the Committee condemned her for illegal dealings with the wartime governments, both before and during the Nazi occupation, in addition to profiting from the Nazis' ghettoization of the city.⁴⁷

The Committee's categorization of her wartime behavior as "undemocratic" highlights their opinion of her socio-economic status. As discussed in the beginning of Chapter Four the Communists believed that anyone who owned more than their share was behaving "undemocratically." Since Kovácsnay's fur business occupied several apartments, of which the Karoly Street one remained empty, the Communists saw fit to punish her for her non-working class lifestyle. In addition, since furs were considered a

⁴⁷ It is not clear whether Kovácsnay gained the rights to Klein's apartment in 1941 or 1943, because Klein, Kovácsnay, and Span all list different dates. Regardless, it still happened before the Nazi takeover, making it possible that she benefitted from connections in the Horthy government in addition to the Nazi one.

luxury item and thus only the upper middle class and elite could buy them, the Communists had further reason to disapprove of her work and life. By suspending her from working for six months they knew that her business would suffer immensely, which could threaten her socio-economic stability. Thus their ruling was also part of their goal to undo the strict class hierarchy and create a classless society. Lastly, throughout Span's testimonies he constantly referred to Kovásznay as a *meltóságos asszony*, or a lady of honor (my lady). This was a nineteenth century term that conferred the status of the nobility about a person. Span's probably used the term intentionally, in order to alert the Committee to her high status. In the end his tactics worked to a certain degree. Although the Committee did not imprison or punish Kovásznay too severely, they labeled her behavior as "undemocratic" for her un-Communist lifestyle and business. By suspending her from work they set the wheels in motion for her to suffer financially, which could have socially leveled her high-class status.

Unfortunately for Kovásznay, in the context of the postwar retributive efforts her activities were no longer acceptable. They demonstrated that she benefitted from the Nazis, who were no longer in power. Perhaps if the Nazis had won the war, and not the Soviets and the other Allies, Kovásznay and others like her would not have been indicted for fascist behavior. The Committee's declaration of her wartime activities as "undemocratic" unveils the Committee's, and more importantly the Communist Party's, true intentions with the retribution process: to remove dangerous elements from society, whether because they were ex-fascists, revolutionary leftists, or members of the old socio-economic order that did not fit in with their goal of creating a classless society.

The cases of Kovásznay, Span, and Klein and the retribution process

The dispute between Kovásznay and Span, and Span and the Committee's inclusion of her case with Klein, illustrate several important aspects about the role of property disputes vis-à-vis the attempt to reconstruct one's personal life after the war. Property disputes were one of several ways that Hungarians could denounce their neighbors, employers and employees, and other people of pro-Nazi attitudes and fascist behavior during the war. The cases of Span, Kovásznay, and Klein suggest that most Hungarians did not denounce people unless they had something to gain or lose. Neither of them appeared to have sued Kovásznay simply for personal vengeance. While that may have played a part in the proceedings, it seems that both Span and Klein sought to gain financially from their disputes with Kovásznay. Yet they were not motivated by sheer greediness. For both Span and Klein the right to live in an apartment or the ability to take over a business afforded them the opportunity to rebuild their lives. Knowing this, the stakes were high for the two of them in their cases with Kovásznay. Meanwhile it is clear that Kovásznay, who succeeded to a certain extent in continuing her business activities during the war, was not penniless or property-less like Span or Klein. However, being suspended from running her business meant that she could lose significant wealth. Since in the context of postwar Hungary the ability to reestablish one's daily life was of the utmost importance, the suspension that Kovásznay received most likely made postwar life more challenging for her.

The property dispute between them also illustrates how Hungarians on the ground level perceived the retributive process. Span denounced Kovásznay for her connections with the Nazis in order to benefit financially from her suspension (or prison internment, if that had happened). Thus it appears that he did not do it simply out of an altruistic intent

to root out “undemocratic” people. Consequentially, Span chose to focus on suing Kovásznyay so that he could obtain the income to begin rebuilding his life, and to satisfy he need for retribution. This corroborates with what the vast majority of Hungarians in Budapest concentrated on in the immediate postwar years: reconstructing their daily lives, and to a certain extent receiving retribution. As with the applicants’ pleas to the Committee to certify them so that they could work, Span sought to prevent Kovásznyay from continuing to work as a way to participate in the fur business and profit from her absence.

The nature of Span’s efforts corresponds to how the postwar Hungarian judicial system, which included the Certification Committee, viewed their role in the process. It is unclear to what extent the Committee was corrupted in order to approve people. Yet the bribes they accepted from some of the major companies illustrates that they too were not fully committed to the effort to rid Hungarian society of those that collaborated with or benefitted from the wartime regimes. From this perspective, neither the Hungarians in Budapest nor the Committee focused solely on thoroughly rooting the city of ex-fascists and beneficiaries of the occupation. Since corruption in the Committee continued from the Provisional Government through the end of the coalition government in 1948, both governments were complicit in these activities. Although the Communist politician László Rajk believed that the masses needed to be informed of the corruption cases, several government officials did not hold the same opinion.⁴⁸ Peter Bechtler of the Social Democrats believed that if they notified the public of the Committee’s corruption, then the entire certification process would be discredited.⁴⁹ Despite their

⁴⁸ Papp, 173.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

awareness of the corruption issues within the Committee, both governments chose to continue the retribution process. Rather than amend the Committee and court system and pursue a more genuine process of political justice, the Hungarian governments from 1945-1948 chose to turn a blind eye in order to continue with their plans to architecturally and social reconstruct Hungary.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

The Certification Committee fought an uphill battle during the immediate postwar years. Most Hungarians in Budapest did not complete the survey in its entirety, as they sought to conceal information about their questionable wartime activities. Using large written and word of mouth testimonies the Committee attempted to piece together peoples' crimes and grievances in order to determine who did what. If approved, it meant that the Committee, partially influenced by Communist ideology, certified a person as exhibiting "democratic" as opposed to "undemocratic" behavior during the war. For the Communists "democratic" Hungarians were those who did not participate in fascist activities, and did not pose a social, political, or economic threat to their view of the postwar order. Conversely, "undemocratic" behavior belonged to those who were ex-fascists or benefitted from the regime, or whose political or socio-economic status went against Communist ideas of a classless society. As demonstrated by the cases of Desző Balla and Dr. Béla Koppány, the Committee did not always investigate the Hungarians' activities very closely. This is further substantiated by the unchecked corruption that characterized the Committee proceedings, particularly in the case of approving big businesses. This was because the Certification Committee, and thereby by the Communist Party, had other ambitions to contend with at the time.

By focusing their attention on those that posed a threat to their vision of postwar Hungary, the Committee failed to effectively penalize the everyday Hungarians that either collaborated with or significantly benefitted from the Nazis. The Committee accepted corruptive bribes from big business, and only haphazardly punished those that behaved "undemocratically," like Mrs. Bélá Kovásznay. Yet the Committee was not an

isolated entity in the postwar anti-fascist proceedings. Governmental leaders and officials knew about the corruptive practices, and still they did not attempt to amend the process. As László Karsai has shown, the Peoples' Courts did not pursue consistent methods in their proceedings either. This demonstrates that not only the Certification Committee, but the postwar judicial system in Hungary as a whole did not attempt to thoroughly pursue the retribution process between 1945-1948. This further substantiates my belief that Deák's statement is little more than an excuse. It is true that the postwar moment was the first in which retributive justice was attempted on such a large scale. But the corruptive practices and the focus on those that posed a threat to society derailed Hungary's attempt to punish war criminals, particularly at the ground level of society.

The Hungarians in Budapest cannot be left out of the narrative. They too did not contribute to an altruistic retributive process. This is not to say that they had nothing to lose by contributing more wholeheartedly. On the contrary, the fear of Communist punishments for their own wartime activities loomed large in their minds. While they cannot be entirely faulted for their refusal to actively denounce others and admit to their own wrongdoings, neither can they be exculpated from blame entirely.

Lastly, Hungary's attempt at the retribution process is not dissimilar to that which occurred in other European countries. Rather, the evidence has shown that the case of Hungary corroborates what historians like Judt, Deák, and Farmer have said about the similarities of the retributive processes across the continent. Although the contextual circumstances were different, the Hungarian governments' and the Communists' goals of national renewal and social cohesion matched what other countries sought to do at

the time. However, whereas other analyses like Laszlo Karsai's focus on the criminalization of upper level ex-Nazis and the major war crimes trials, this study offers other insights. My focus on how Hungarians in Budapest reacted to the attempts at retributive justice illustrates how everyday citizens were impacted by the process, and attempted to hide their past activities when the new political conditions clearly required them to perform a socio-cultural about face, and begin life anew.

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