

LÓWY DÁNIEL

WHEN THE PILLARS OF THE STATE OF LAW COLLAPSED

– The Jewry of Cluj/Kolozsvár during the Holocaust –

On August 30, 1940, following the second Vienna Award, accepted by both Hungary and Romania, the Northern and Eastern part of Transylvania, with an area of 43.492 km² (less than half of the entire territory) was returned under Hungarian administration. The overall population of the region was of approximately 2.64 million; out of them 165,000 were Jewish, representing four fifths of the entire Jewish population of Transylvania.

At the beginning of September 1940, prior to the Hungarian takeover, a large number of Jewish citizens moved to Northern Transylvania, abandoning their homes on Romanian land. Their “resettlement” was mainly motivated by their devotion to Hungarian language and culture. Most of the Jewish community, having a strong Hungarian cultural identity, enthusiastically welcomed this turn: „The Hungarian sun shed its light again on Kolozsvár” – wrote art historian József Bíró in 1940, in his preface to the book *Kolozsvári Képeskönyv* (Kolozsvár in Images).

Along with the Christians the Jewish population of Cluj wore national cockades when the Hungarian army marched into the city. Businessman Bischitz Ernő welcomed governor Horthy Miklós from the official stands. „My father was a convinced Hungarian patriot” – Bischitz György remembered, – “this is why the later persecution of the Jews hit him very badly.” Ilona Elek went with her parents to the Main Square of the city for welcoming Governor Horthy; it was for the first time when she saw her father crying. Her father cried for the second time, when the family was evacuated from their home. While first time he was deeply touched, the second time he cried because of his desperation.

Jews of Northern Transylvania awaited this transfer of power with hopeful anticipation, expecting the restoration of the legal circumstances and equality in rights characteristic to the period prior to WWI. The greater their disappointment was, when without delay the Horthy-regime applied in the newly occupied territory the two Jewish laws that already passed the Hungarian Parliament. They instituted meant discrimination in social and economic life and severe restrictions of civil rights. Thus, the so-called 1st Jewish Law (No. XV), passed in 1938, affected mainly the Jewish intellectuals and artists, while the 2nd Jewish Law of December 1938 reflected a racist standpoint, as it defined Jewry by ethnicity, rather than religion. It limited the percentage of Jews in public employment and in private sector to 6%. In 1941, the 3rd and most severe Jewish Law was passed; the so-called race-protection law was enforced in Northern Transylvanian, and affected its Jewry from the very beginning. Article XXXI of the law prohibited the marriage of Jews with non-Jews, and proclaimed the sexual relationship between Jews and Christians as being monstrous to the race.

„We were aware of the Jewish laws passed in Hungary, but we did not lose our preference for Hungary, as our culture and mother tongue were Hungarian” –Katalin Kallós remembered.

In fall of 1940, most of the Jewish civil employees in Transylvania lost their job. The same fate awaited Jewish lawyers, journalists, and professionals employed by private companies. By the end of the year Jewish persons were almost completely excluded from industry and commerce. Following the example of their Berlin and Budapest colleagues, unemployed Jewish actors established a Jewish Theatre in Cluj.

One of the first measures of the new administration was to immediately outlaw all Jewish newspapers and to suspend all Jewish associations and clubs; only religious organizations were

allowed. By the decree of the Ministry of Education, *numerus clausus* was enforced in secondary education, which reduced the percentage of Jewish students to 6%. In a class of 35 this meant 2 Jewish pupils, nevertheless in the case of classes under 33, this was reduced to 1.

Owing to Professor Márk Antal's personal connection to Bálint Hóman, the Hungarian Minister of Education, in November 1940 a Jewish secondary school was authorized in Cluj. It opened shortly in a building located in Nagy-Szamos (today: Iașilor) Street. The University of Cluj ceased appointing Jewish professors, and neither enrolled Jewish students. Only 10 students were allowed to continue their studies in 1940/41, nevertheless the frequent brutal manifestations of their colleagues hindered them from attending lectures. For the sake of comparison, 443 Jewish students (11% of the total number of students) attended courses at the Cluj University in the year 1932–1933.

The principle of *numerus clausus* was applied in all labor sectors. Székely Imre had for six years been a locksmith at the Dermata shoe factory, when he was fired in autumn 1942. Others who shared this fate were Fried Samu clerk, Berkovits József locksmith, Schönberger Kálmán engineer, Malek József engineer and Radó György master, former Romanian tennis champion. The latter two had been raised by the factory.

The Transylvanian Carpathian Association (Erdélyi Kárpát Egyesület) was reorganized with the exclusion of Jewish members. The Baross Union (Baross Szövetség), with the motto „Christian money into Christian hands!” quickly wrecked Jewish commerce; the Ant Association (Hangya Szövetkezet) and the Union of Transylvanian Private Clerks and Commercial Employees (Erdélyrészi Magántisztviselők és Kereskedelmi Alkalmazottak Egyesülete) periodically obstructed and finally made Jewish economic life impossible. Baron Atzél Ede, leading the armed group Wesselényi Rifle Association (Wesselényi Lövészegylet) became the tool of extremist politics.

On basis of law XII/1942, Jewish men were drafted to the Hungarian labor service without arms. Commanders of such labor regiments were instructed that the fewest possible of their men should be returning from the front. The law did not protect these people: they could be beaten, snapped, scolded by anyone. “No matter whether they had been directors or doctors back at home, in the front line they were nothing but filthy Jews.” They collected mines with bare hands or had to pull the carts instead of horses. These labor servicemen were still unwilling to deny their Hungarian roots. Physicians banned from practicing their profession treated wounded Hungarian soldiers on the front with heroism that was praised even in front reports.

The Nazi settlement of the Hungarian Jewish issue began on March 19, 1944, when Germans occupied the country. With governor Horthy Miklós remaining in charge and the Sztójay government invested at German demand (on March the 23), the entire state apparatus continued functioning. Government institutions complied with all demands of the invaders, giving up the country, from the economic standpoint, to German interests. In merely five months, the debt of the Third Reich to Hungary rose from 997 million imperial marks to 2.224 billion, and by September (the time of the Lakatos government) it reached 3.32 billion.

An avalanche of unbelievably aggressive and inhumane anti-Jewish regulations commenced. This plan was evil: Jewry was subjected to increasingly humiliating measures in order to keep them from getting aware of the greatest danger: the imminent physical annihilation. Part of this misleading policy was the German promise, which granted to the Jewish population undisturbed religious, cultural, and social life.

On March 27, when the invading German troupes reached the city of Cluj, Hungarian newspapers made reference to the “final and perfect solution” of the Jewish issue, which would

be carried out by the government. Two days later the council of ministers debated the first measures related to the Jewish question.

The Gestapo established its headquarters at the New York Hotel (later Continental), while the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD) set up its base in the Peter and Paul villas, on Apáczai Csere János (today: Argeş) Street. On the day of their arrival, the Germans arrested 150 Jews, most of them outstanding representatives of the Jewish intelligentsia and economy. The primary goal of this action was intimidating the Jewish population.

Over the first days of April, the Gestapo called for a *Judenrat*, which had to perform administrative tasks on behalf of the Jewish population, namely to forward German orders to the community, to confiscate money and valuables, and to secure discipline. Its president was Dr. József Fischer, attorney-at-law and President of the Congressional Congregation, and a former member of the Romanian parliament. On tactical grounds, the Germans frequently changed the members of the *Judenrat*. Germans and the Hungarian authorities of the city increasingly burdened the Jewry in Cluj with unattainable demands; when the Gestapo requested a large number of typewriters, desks, and radio tuners, the Hungarian authorities demanded flats; when Germans decided increasing the number of Jewish men taken to labor, Hungarian authorities “replied” by seizing the entire cash reserve of the *Judenrat*.

A series of actions followed quickly. According to a regulation issued on March 31, Jews were no more allowed to keep Christian servants. In the meanwhile, they were banned from all professional chambers and public institutions. Wearing the yellow star and the interdiction of traveling represented the first steps toward the *Endlösung*. “Jews have the obligation of wearing a yellow star on their left chest” – reads the front page of *Ellenzék*, on March 31. Yellow-starred Jews were forbidden to wear uniforms. They were also banned from using any public transportation. Next, Jews had to surrender their radio tuners, preventing the community from keeping up with the news.

According to a regulation issued on April 13, Jewish stores had to keep open on Saturdays; nevertheless, one week later, all Jewish shops were closed down. Starting May 1, the food quota for Jewish persons was reduced.

The Jewish community of the city first learned about the danger of being confined to compulsory residence, when newspapers disclosed that the Jewry of Kassa (Kosice) and certain settlements in Carpatho-Rus had been relocated to areas endangered by air strikes. The Hungarian press was pleased to inform on the establishment of ghettos. Nonetheless, the belief that such measures would only reach non-assimilated Jewry was short-lived. Defying the growing number of frightening news, the Jewish community of Cluj was unable to appraise the gravity of the situation. By the end of April, the Jewish high school conducted the customary baccalaureate examinations, and the local Wald factory baked the matzos for the approaching Passover. Just as the majority of the Hungarian Jewry, the Jewish population of Cluj continued believing that the Hungarian state and legal system would defend them. They thought that by obeying the laws and regulations would be more secure than fleeing or hiding. Rabbi Mózes Weinberger, leader of the Congressional Congregation left Cluj at the very last moment, but still on time for escaping.

Deportation of the Jewry was executed in compliance with order No. 6163/1944, issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs on April 7. In two secret debates, on April 26 in Szatmárnémeti (Satu Mare) and two days later in Marosvásárhely (Tg.-Mures), both presided by State Secretary of Internal Affairs László Endre, Hungarian and German authorities in charge established the details and defined schedule of the round up of Jews.

On the night of May 2, a large number of banners were posted on the streets of Cluj. Signed by chief of police Hollósi-Kuthy Lajos, they beared the order of prohibition for Jewish

persons of leaving their home after 6 PM. The May 3 issue of *Ellenzék* announced it in capitals: “COMPULSORY RESIDENCE FOR THE JEWRY OD CLUJ. The Cluj ghetto is located in the brick factory and its surroundings.” Public administration authorities in Cluj estimated that the said order affected a number of 16.750 Jews under the obligation of wearing the yellow star. The covered space allotted to them in the brick factory was of 19.600 m². Hence, the “covered dwelling space” (actually brick yards with no side-walls) per capita was less than 1.17 m², barely enough to a person for stretching out.

As Mihály Sebestyén wrote, the Jewry of Cluj was “rounded up and taken to the ghetto starting from the right side of József Ferenc (then Horthy Miklós, later Horea) Road and the left side of József Ferenc Road in less than one week.” This action was the result of a well-organized cooperation of the Hungarian police and public administration.

Christian witness Irén Reinfeld-Flórián remembered: “The truck halted, and people got on it with their small packs. It was a terrible sight. We lived near the cinema later named Munkás (The Laborer). A child in the neighborhood kept running around the pear tree, reluctant to get on the truck.”

Judith Ferenczné Grünwald evoked how her father was enforced to sign a statement that his family left their home “voluntarily.” “They rounded us up on May 10. A rusty truck, a policeman, one civilian and one Hungarian soldier came to our house. My father had to fill out a statement that he, Albert Grünwald, resident with the address so and so, leaves his apartment, sealed in front of him, on his own will.” They made him sign it, and then they posted the declaration on the entrance door. Afterwards the authority applied its seal. It was a symbolic seal, anyway.”

Éva Rosenfeld, future physician and University Professor in Cluj, remembered: “It didn’t even occur to me leaving my baccalaureate diploma behind; I took it with me. I had a cardboard box with holding the rolled diploma inside. I hung on the box, when they cut my hair in Auschwitz. I wanted saving it. Almost all of my school colleagues took the same approach. On April 28 or 29 we received our graduation diplomas, and as soon as on May 3 we entered the ghetto.”

Upon arrival to the brick factory, people were escorted to an office, where they all their money and valuables were taken. Then, in another room, they were undressed, and “an excellent professional” searched all their clothes. The neighboring room was assigned to women, and those who came out were burning red with embarrassment.

The ghetto on the area of the brick factory drying facilities was fenced with barbed wire, and guarded by Hungarian soldiers and gendarmes, with dogs. According to Katalin Markovits Weisz, the surveillance of the ghetto was “very strict, we were guarded by Hungarian gendarmes. At the time when we arrived, one gendarme hit me. I remember my mother telling him: – Hit her, dear, hit her!”

The conditions of the ghetto failed to live up even to the most elementary standards of hygiene. The only covered spaces were the barns used for brick drying, however, they did not have sidewalls. A five centimeters thick layer of dust covered the ground. There were many holes in the roof; wind blew through the barns, and it practically rained inside. People tried to prevent this by hanging up blankets. For the several thousand people massed together in the ghetto, only four latrines were dug: two for the men and two for the women. They were open on one side, the other side being flanked by long boards fastened to pillars. Typically, twenty people were using the latrine at once. When the weather was hot, the odor of these sinkholes became unbearable.

At first, people ate their own provisions, but they soon ran out of food. Then, the city “catered for” the ghetto: a few bathtubs were brought from Jewish apartments, and turned into

caldrons. They were placed on bricks, and fire was lit under them. This is where lunch was cooked; the daily menu consisted of been soup.

Drinking water and water for daily toilette was rare. Only fifteen taps of a single fountain provided drinking water and water for cooking. Meanwhile the number of inhabitants of the ghetto grew, by the end of the period, to 18 thousand. People struggled with lice. The sick were care for in one small room, where birth giving took also place. Harsh living conditions brought death closer for the diseased and the old.

The commander of the brick factory camp, police chief Dr. Ferenc László Urbán, beat many interned Jews, especially those who reported themselves sick. At the beginnings, local Hungarian gendarmes guarded the ghetto; soon the authorities replaced them with more reliable gendarmes brought from Hungary; the number of guards totaled twenty or thirty. The Jewish people confined to the Cluj ghetto never saw a German soldier, except for the SS military spotted on the very first day. Initially, the mail service delivered letters to the people in the ghetto, but later the Hungarian Royal Post returned the letters with the note that “addressee moved to unknown address”.

Similar to the other ghettoes in Hungary, the ghetto of Cluj had its “mint”, i.e., a building where the interned were subjected to interrogation for confessing their possible hidden assets. In an office building of the brick factory, the gendarmes interrogated 20-30 persons every day. Men were frequently tortured in the presence of their wife, and children or women were beaten in presence of their husband. Interrogations were conducted with monstrous methods, which included spanking people’s face, testicles, or soles, the “search” of young girls, the beating of women and of the elderly, burning people with flames, and torturing them with electric shocks.

Among the Christian inhabitants of the city remained passive, even those sympathizing with the Jews. Only the elite protested; open-minded intellectuals and church leaders. The attitude of Catholic Bishop Áron Márton was exemplary; he defended the persecuted with prophetic bravery. On May 18, 1944, in his speech from the pulpit of the St. Michael’s church in Cluj, he pleaded in defense of the Jewish population confined to the ghetto, but not yet deported. Four days later Áron Márton took upon the deporting authorities, in harsh words; he wrote letters to the Hungarian Royal Ministry, the Cluj County Prefecture and the Cluj Gendarmerie. He also sent petitions to the highest authorities: to Prime Minister Döme Sztójay and to Minister of Internal Affairs Andor Jaross, urging the latter to immediately resign.

Lutheran Minister Andor Járosi stood up for his friends under obligation of wearing the yellow star; later, both as a church official and as a private person he protested against the deportation of the Jews, attempted procuring exemption to his friends. Also, he issued fake birth certificates, and saved Anna, writer Kádár Imre’s 15 years old daughter. Beside this girl, a very few Jewish people went to hiding, and the number of exempted families was small. Approximately 150 people managed to flee from Cluj to Turda, across the border, and they eventually survived the war on the Romanian side.

Bishop Áron Márton’s call proved to be in wane, just as the generous attempts of Minister Andor Járosi had no considerable results. In a mere two weeks time period, the brick factory ghetto was liquidated via six transports directed to Auschwitz. These trains left Cluj on May 25, 29, 31, and on June 2, 8, and 9, 1944.

The last group of left the city on the May 10, with the aid of attorney Rezső Kasztner. As a leader of the Hungarian Rescue Commission, Kasztner convinced Eichmann to authorize the departure of 750 Hungarian Zionists to Switzerland or to another neutral country, provided that they possess immigration permits to Palestine. In Budapest, SS Standartenführer Kurt Becher negotiated on behalf of Himmler. These negotiations pertained Jewish persons, who were able

paying immense ransom for their escape. Kasztner was authorized to select 388 Jews interned in Cluj. They were taken to Budapest, and eventually to Switzerland via the Bergen-Belsen camp. This group was formed in the most secretive way possible.

The deported were walked from the camp to the embarking place in the vicinity of the Dermata shoe factory. The luckier families received half of a bread loaf and some salt for the trip. While marching toward the railway carriages, the weaker threw away their packs, and then started falling out of the line. Gendarmes urged people toward the carriage with the rifle butt; they showed no mercy either to children. By the side of the road, opportunists were assisting the event, trying to gather the fallen packs. This march remained a dark memory to most of the deported: "I have been in nine labor camps. [...] I have endured all the torture of the inquisition... They threw me into a bunker; they set the SS-dogs on me... Nevertheless, no memory of mine is worse than that of this four kilometers path. The sight of wailing shades, aggressed children... Piles of backpacks and blankets left by the roadside telling how those in front have given up their last drags. I can see my husband's distorted face... I can hear my child whine, as the gendarme hits her with the rifle butt" – wrote Dóra Ferencz after the war.

They jammed between seventy and one hundred persons in one single cattle wagon, so that only every second person had a seat. The most terrible experience of the three days trip was thirst; it was worse than having to ease oneself in front of others. Approximately 75 percent of the Cluj Jewry – those unfit for work – were selected upon their arrival to Auschwitz, and directed to the gas chambers right after stepping off the train. Many of the young ones found "fit for work" died of hunger, sickness, or were discarded in later selections.

All this happened in summer 1944, when the outcome of the war was more or less clear to everyone, and there was no question about the negative light that the extradition of the Jews to the Germans would shed on the country after the war. Rural Hungarian Jewry – including the residents of Cluj – was taken to death camps at the time, when the fate of transports directed toward such destinations was no more a secret to the Hungarian government and local authorities.