

A REFUGE FOR ONE MILLION JEWS

UP TO March 1944, Hungary was the only European country east of the Pyrenees where the lives of Jews could be considered as secure. Besides the Hungarian Jews then numbering almost one million, sixty to seventy thousand Jewish refugees from foreign countries had fled to Hungary and lived there in safety until Hitler's armies occupied the country and ordered their systematic extermination. Hitler's wrath against Hungary had been largely provoked by the protection granted to the Jews, a large percentage of whom survived the Nazi period in Hungary; for by the time the German armies actually took over, Hitler was near the end of his tether.

The safety of the Jews in Hungary was largely due to the type of restrictive laws passed. Through them Hungary seemed to be falling in line with the demands of the tyrant; but was able to maintain an oasis of refuge. Had she refused to pass any such laws, no doubt the period of real security for the Jews would have ended much more abruptly than it did.

The first Hungarian Jewish restriction law was in reality a challenge to Hitler. When it was announced, I went to see Philip Weiss, a member of the Upper House and president of the Commercial Bank of Pest, Hungary's biggest financial institution, which controlled much of the country's industry and agriculture and indirectly the treasury. Philip's+Weiss was a good banker, conservative, cautious, vigilant, and his bank had survived the great crisis of the early thirties with an untarnished reputation. I wanted to hear the authoritative opinion of one who had always referred to himself as a Jew.

"Well", he said, "I thought I was a Jew, but now it seems I am a Christian." The law provided that anyone who had been baptized before a certain date was not to be considered a Jew. This stipulation was indirect opposition to Hitler's Nuremberg laws which made Jews of Christians, if they had certain Jewish ancestors.

Hungary's solution of the problem is only a small part of the story in central European countries. To understand what happened, we have to remember that anti- Jewish measures were one of the cardinal ingredients of the German foreign policy under Hitler. Compliance in this matter was the touchstone of friendliness toward Germany - - and tyrants insist on being loved. Love of deity always has to be expressed by the observation of ceremonial and ritual; foremost of the religious rites prescribed by the national socialists was Jew baiting. By refusing it, one was unmasked as a heretic; and heretics have to burn. I do not know whether Hitler really believed in Jews being vermin. Perhaps he was a cynic also in this respect, but it did not change the fact that he exacted anti-Semitism as proof of allegiance and affection. There was no reason whatsoever why Jews should have been more hostile to national socialism than non- Jews. They had often played leading parts in European socialist movements; but by outlawing them Hitler made Jews his enemies. This enabled him to accuse other

governments which did not outlaw them of tolerating anti- German tendencies in their countries. Thus he used anti- Semitism as a lever of intervention and aggression.

The reaction of governments who had reason to fear him can easily be imagined. They had to face a whole set of German demands, among them the call for anti- Jewish measures. This request - - or to put it more truthfully, this order - - was often linked with measures, fulfillment of which would violate vital interests. If you imagine yourself approached in the darkness of night by a husky robber who at pistol point informs you that he wants your money or your life, you will understand the position of small countries like Hungary. You know that if you refuse to give up your possessions, you may lose both your money and your life, and you do not have much time to decide the matter. Germany had a way of making a number of demands, most of which she apparently did not expect to be granted, but she never forgot them and it became more embarrassing to refuse as time went on. So these small nations, finding that Germany was set on anti- Jewish measures, felt that it was better to yield on that point than to endanger the whole nation. This explains, though it certainly does not justify, Mussolini's transition from freely expressed philo- Semitism to anti- Jewish laws. It explains, again without justification, the anti- Jewish measures of the Vichy regime which created a rift between Marshal Pétain and the Church. These are but two examples of a long series. If we compare the degrees of Jew- baiting as practiced in the countries which were under German pressure, we obtain a scale showing, first, the varying length of that pressure and, second, the varying moral strength of the resistance. It is a fact confirmed by Jewish refugees from central Europe that, despite Mussolini's anti- Jewish laws, they were infinitely better treated in Italy than in "liberal" France. Not many Italian Jews left their country; those who did were driven by fear of the Germans, not of their own government, and certainly not of their non- Jewish compatriots. The small Austrian republic resisted admirably, because both Dollfuss and Schuschnigg were faithful sons of the Catholic Church. Most submissive to German demands were, as in every other respect, Czechs and Slovaks. Even under Dr. Benes, one year before Hitler marched into Prague, Austrian Jews were turned back by Czech constables and handed over to the Gestapo - - among them Robert Danneberg, the moderate leader of the Viennese socialists, who died after four years of agony in concentration camps. When Hitler occupied the Sudetenlands six months later, fleeing Jews were again driven back by Dr. Benes' police; in 1939, the new regime under President Hacha as well as the Tisogovernment of Slovakia introduced and applied the Nuremberg laws lock, stock and barrel.

The plight of Jews in Rumania was even worse, but of that I shall speak later. Switzerland, the foreign nation for which I have the greatest respect and admiration, had to be cautious, acting on the theory that "we have to play anti- Semite in order not to be obliged to be anti- Semite." Not many Jews found a haven there, and those who did were ousted as quickly as possible.

The real exception was Hungary. Discussing Jew baiting, Admiral Horthy once gave me the key to his attitude. "As a boy," he said, "I have received a good

education. I shall not forget it." Jews to him were human beings as they had been to his idol, the Emperor- King Franz Josef under whom children of Jewish parents had been members of the general staff, generals and admirals. The Regent's opposition to anti- Semitism was strongly backed by the Hungarian prince- primate, Cardinal Seredi and by both churches. In parliament the Regent's views on this matter were vigorously voiced by leading aristocrats who in their exclusive club, the National Casino, liked to chant a song of which the refrain was "No, we are not Aryans, we are not Aryans, no!" This referred to the Magyars "Turanian descent.

Anti- Semitism would have been good politics for anyone looking for cheap popularity. Anti- Jewish feelings were but slumbering. They had been very much awake in the early twenties, for two reasons. First, the general misery after the war had made people look for scapegoats, and in the Old World Jews have been the traditional scapegoats. Second, the communist interlude of 1919 was chiefly the work of Jews, according to Professor Jaszi, a leftist writer, who stated that Jewry had supplied ninety- five percent of the active figures of the revolution. I do not mean this to be construed as indicating that more Jews in Hungary favored communism than Gentiles. I have no way of knowing anything about it, since communism at the time I was there was underground.

It is obvious, and proved by history, that conservative regimes offer Jews the best opportunities, and of this Hungary was an outstanding example. Conservative Magyars were, as a rule, loyal to the Christian faith, and all churches in Hungary condemned anti- Semitism. Conservatives, especially people of title, are generally immune to racial nationalism. Kings and other aristocrats have an old tradition of tolerance toward Jewry Ballin, the great Hamburg shipowner, who committed suicide because William II lost his throne, was a Jew whom the Emperor had treated as a friend. In old Austria- Hungary, anti- Semitic journalists had to be careful to avoid prosecution for insulting a religious community. Altogether, Jews had to be vitally interested in social and political stability because only in a well- established order did they have a safe position. Every disorder was certain to rebound upon them.

In Hungary every citizen had to pay tithes to some church, and the government made no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. The Hungary of my day was in religious and racial matters much more liberal than any other country with which I am familiar. People were very tolerant about religion, and I seldom knew to which church anybody belonged. It is also a curious fact that the men who occupied the highest positions in Hungary were very often Protestants, despite the fact that the country was two- thirds Catholic. Regent Horthy was a Protestant, as were Count Bethlen, Premier Gombos and Daranyi Although I was a very close friend of de Kanya I don't remember what his religion was, but I think he was a Protestant. As I think back, it would be difficult to say to which church most of my friends belonged.

Shortly after I arrived in Hungary, I attended a mass in the Coronation Church in honor of St. Stephen with the rest of the diplomatic corps. We sat on one side up near the altar. On the other side were dignitaries of the Hungarian government.

And in front near the altar was a chair reserved for the Regent. Being a Protestant, I thought that I had better watch the Regent so I would know the right thing to do. I watched him a while and I saw he did nothing. Then it occurred to me that he must be a Protestant, so I concentrated on the prime minister, who did nothing either. So I decided to do nothing -- and nobody paid any attention.

A special trait in the Hungarian character worked in favor of the Jews. I have already mentioned that to a Hungarian the only function of money is to be spent. The male members of the upper classes were seldom interested in business, even though they badly needed money. Most of them considered that money-making was really undignified. This created a general atmosphere similar to that of medieval times when rulers turned their business affairs over to Jews. A Magyar gentleman with empty pockets did not consider himself inferior to the richest Jewish merchant. "The poor devil," he thought, "has no greater pleasure than business." He did not begrudge him this pleasure. As a result, Jewry wielded immense influence as a necessary element of the Hungarian community. Von Erdmannsdorf, the German minister, understood perfectly when, commenting on the anti-Jewish laws, he said that Hungary was unable to act toward Jews as Germany did because there was no one to take their place. But at the same time that he was telling me this privately, Hitler was compelling him to put pressure on the government to do what he told me could not be done. It can easily be seen that this situation offered excellent opportunities to anti-Semitic demagogues. Financed by Germany, they appeared here and there. Recalling the cruelty of the communist regime of Béla Kun they pointed out that there were too many Jews in Hungary; indeed about one-tenth of the population was Jewish.

Under the circumstances, it was heroic on the part of the regime to permit a strong influx of foreign Jews, chiefly Polish, Slovakian and Austrian. It would have been sufficient proof of courage if the government, defying German pressure, had protected its own Jews, at the same time keeping the borders closed. Hungary did more than she was morally obliged to do, by offering shelter to foreign Jews in addition to her own. She was not allowed to remain an oasis of compassion in a desert of oppression. But even when she yielded, Hungary did so more slowly and with more dignity than her neighbors.

Mrs. Anne O'Hare McCormick wrote in the *New York Times* of July 15, 1944: It must count in the score of Hungary that until the Germans took control it was the last refuge in Central Europe for the Jews able to escape from Germany, Austria, Poland and Rumania. Now these hapless people are exposed to the same ruthless policy of deportation and extermination that was carried out in Poland. But as long as they exercised any authority in their own house, the Hungarians tried to protect the Jews.

This was acknowledged by an American leftist, Mr. Jonathan Stout, who, in March 1944, wrote in the *New Leader*: The clamping of the Nazi vise on Hungary is a greater tragedy than the American people realize. The fact is that Hungary for many months has willingly provided the route by which untold hundreds of Jewish and other refugees of the Nazi terror have been rescued.

These facts must be kept on record. I am pleased to say that the American Jewish Year Book observed through these perilous times a fair and level headed attitude toward Hungary. The Year Book reported truthfully that Hungarian concessions to Germany's anti- Jewish demands were meant to take the wind out of the Nazi sails. To do this is always risky because concessions are apt to entail further concessions, but Hungary was always playing for time. She did what a tree does in a storm - - it bends in order to survive unbroken. For instance, when banks were ordered to reduce the proportion of Jewish employees to a certain percentage within five years, the unspoken idea was that in five years the storm would have subsided. Furthermore, all restrictions were strongly interlarded with exemptions. This was chiefly done in parliament, where Horthy's aristocratic friends and the prelates instructed by the Cardinal made their weight felt. I have mentioned that the aristocrats, despite their economic and political status, set the fashion as leaders of society and were copied by the middle classes. If national socialist demagogues were successful with the mob, more representative people remained decent. General Count Joseph Takach- Tolvay, one of those "detestable feudal lords," resigned as chairman of the Veterans Association when, after the German occupation of March 1944, the puppet government excluded Jews from his organization. Count Stephen Bethlen, another "feudal lord," retired from political life long before the German invasion, protesting against the anti- Jewish laws, comparatively mild as they were. When Hitler offered a larger slice of Transylvania as a bribe, Count Paul Teleki refused to secure it by anti- Jewish concessions. "It was really surprising," wrote the American Jewish Year Book, "to note his resistance at this point, certainly a minor issue for Hungary after all the fundamental sacrifices extorted from her." Before Hitler took matters into his own hands, the situation of the Jews as described by the Year Book was that considerable numbers of those who lost their original occupations found some devious but tolerated ways to earn at least some irregular income. The Jewish community was permitted to organize large- scale self- help. It was able to do so because, with the exception of land, no Jewish property right was violated until the fateful Spring of 1944. Jews dwelt safely in their original homes; there were no restrictions on their liberty of movement, travel or recreation, and no discrimination against them in the distribution of food. They were protected also from the malignity of the local Nazi groups.

Shortly before the German invasion, when Hitler's military fortunes had begun to wane, there was loud agitation for abrogation of the restriction laws, led by Andrew Bajcsy- Zsilinsky, member of the Smallholders Party in parliament. The Year Book states that: "One of the official German pretexts for the occupation was "the unrestricted presence of some one million Jews as a concrete menace to the safety of German arms on the Balkan peninsula." So strong was the solidarity of the non- Jewish Magyars with their Jewish compatriots, that not even the puppet regime which the Germans set up in 1944 dared to follow openly the German method of deportation and extermination. When the German Gestapo took it upon itself to start the deportation of Jews, "tens of thousands of

Christian Hungarians", according to the Year Book, are known to have rushed to the aid of Jews in distress, trying to shield and hide them, to take over their homes and valuables for safekeeping, and to help them in their futile attempts to escape. Both Catholic and Protestant clergymen issued thousands of spurious birth certificates, in the vain hope of saving their bearers from persecution. Young Christian girls have frequently been seen parading the streets of cities and towns arm in arm with young Jews wearing the Star of David.

It seems that not all that help was in vain. On November 26, 1945, Mrs. Anne O'Hare McCormick reported from Budapest: The Jews did not suffer so much as Jews in neighboring countries because the worst persecution did not begin until the Nazis gained full control in 1944. Jewish firms were 'Aryanized' before that, but many who took over were friends of the dispossessed and held their property in trust. Only a small minority of Hungarian Jews are Zionists. The majority are loyal Hungarians who desire to remain in their country and help reconstruct it. It is estimated that about 60 per cent are back.

In connection with the position of Jews in Hungary, Dr. Béla Imredy, minister of finance at the time I went to Hungary, is an interesting psychological case. He had risen to his important position through his own ability. During the time I was there he left the finance ministry to become president of the National Bank, with which he had formerly been connected. He was known to be very pro-English, and was highly thought of by both English and American bankers, as well as by the economic section of the League of Nations. Just why I do not know, but he acquired a reputation which induced many people to believe that he would make an ideal premier. As a banker he was close to the influential leaders of the Jewish community and he therefore seemed a perfectly safe person to entrust with the task of stealing German thunder and placating the Nazis by mock persecution of the Jews, which would allow them to survive with minor scratches.

In March 1938, he was made cabinet minister without portfolio so that he could devise his Jewish bill. It was introduced in April by Premier Daranyi and generally fixed the *numerus clausus* at twenty percent for Jewish employment, giving business five to ten years to adapt themselves to it. People who had been baptized before 1919 and all those who had been in the armed forces during the first World War were not considered Jews. Daranyideclared that this was the limit of anti-Jewish measures that he was willing to advocate.

About a week before Imredy was made prime minister, in May 1938, he came in to see me in connection with the New York World's Fair. On all sides, everybody was talking about Imredy for the premiership, so I mentioned it to him. He seemed a little modest about it, but he told me his theories of combating Nazi penetration. They sounded dangerous to me. He believed it was much better to forestall the Nazis by passing the anti-Jewish law he had devised than to wait and be forced to pass much more severe laws. I did not believe it could be done, but he was sure that he could handle the situation and satisfy everybody without doing any real harm.

A rather colorless civil servant, the then Prime Minister Daranyihad also proved very weak. Everybody felt that the country needed a strong man in view of the occupation of Austria which had brought the German army to the border. Imredy seemed to be the answer to Hungary's prayer. I never knew, anything to cause so much satisfaction all around as when he became Daranyis successor.

Imredy began to be quite a big man, and his success went to his head. In December 1938 he introduced a new Jewish restriction bill. It went far beyond the first one, which had been in effect only three months. It reduced the *numerus clausus* from twenty percent to six. It excluded Jews from many professions, but above all, it adopted the criterion of race by declaring that a Christian was a Jew if his parents had been Jewish. Grandparents were still neglected. Jews, the bill provided, should keep the franchise, but only be allowed to elect a special Jewish representation.

When I heard about this bill, I got in touch with Imredy and asked him if he would let me see it before it was made public. He agreed to this and I went up one morning by appointment for that purpose. The only other person present was Richard Quandt of the National Bank. I did not know why he was there unless it was because he had been associated with Imredy in the bank. He was anything but anti- Jewish and was a very decided anti- Nazi. As Imredy read the bill aloud, Quandt and I looked at each other repeatedly. It was much worse than we had anticipated. I tried to argue with Imredy about it. I said I could not see why, if the Christians were being discriminated against as he claimed, a bill could not be passed to prevent such discrimination and to see that Christians who wanted to work had just as good a chance as did the Jews. I argued that each case should be considered separately instead of by an arbitrary rule which might do incalculable harm to the economy of the country. He would not listen to me, though we had quite an argument about it. That he was more interested in politics than in economics was very plain.

As soon as the bill was made public, opposition supported by the Regent and the churches became so strong that the ministry of justice a few weeks later announced the government was prepared to accept several changes in the restriction bill. One week later, on February 14, 1939, as I have recounted earlier, it became known through Regent Horthy that one of Imredy's great-grandparents had been the son of a rabbi and a Jew until his seventh year. Although this fact, even under the Nuremberg laws, would not have affected Imredy, he fell as a victim of general laughter, and Count Teleki became his successor.

Imredy soon began breeding mischief and revenge. His hatred against the Regent was intense and he bided his time, his soul now completely sold to Hitler. In October 1940, he thought that, owing to the fall of France and Italy's apparent weakness, German pressure was strong enough to allow for his comeback. He arranged a secession from the Government Party and founded the party of Hungarian Renaissance. The new party demanded adjustment of the "obsolete" governmental system to national socialist principles; and the Arrow Cross Party expressed its sympathy. Count Teleki fought back, declaring that a

million people could not be deprived of their livelihood. When, in April 1941, Teleki committed suicide, Imredy's hope of using his corpse as a ladder to another premiership was disappointed. Horthy nominated Ladislaus de Bardossy a professional diplomat. In March 1942, he was followed by Nicholas de Kallay, a great personal friend of the Regent, who became a thorn in Hitler's side. Imredy did not get another opportunity before the Germans invaded the country in March 1944, and even then, disgust for the traitor was so general that he failed to form a quisling government, and the Germans chose General Sztojaj, who had been minister in Berlin. Imredy was one of his ministers, but a few months later he was dismissed at Horthy's demand.

OttovonBismarck1">Ottovon Bismarck once said that everybody is worth the sum of his virtues minus his vanity. In the case of Imredy, despite his ability, the balance was negative. He used the confidence of political and business circles as his stepladder, but having reached the heights, kicked it away, intent on reaching even greater heights, perhaps the regency, by personal schemes which were founded on the expectation of Hitler's unlimited victory. Thus he became not a tragic but a despicable figure. It was very hard for those who had known him through the years to understand what had happened to him. One of his associates in the National Bank said that he could not understand it and as far as he could see, when Imredy walked out of the National Bank to become premier, he lost every bit of reason he ever had. Up to March 1944 Imredy was the only Hungarian premier who had made concessions to Hitler voluntarily, not only concerning Jews, but also in other respects. What weakened Hungary's resistance was that she was constantly being played against the Little Entente. Time and again, Hungarians were told by the Nazis that their neighbors were much more friendly to Germany than they were. This was a little alarming because territorial adjustments were to be made, and Hungarian leaders were always compelled to ask themselves whether by refusing Jew- baiting they did not endanger the fate of Hungarians under alien domination to the advantage of their masters. Of course, the Czechs, Slovaks and Rumanians were being told at the same time just the reverse; thus one was played against the other. Czechs and Slovaks had introduced the Nuremberg laws before World War II started, but in Rumania the development was even more turbulent. Prime Minister Goga in December 1937, had suppressed Jewish- owned newspapers, excluded Jews from the civil service, and declared that the state would no longer deal with Jewish business. In January 1938, Rumania deprived them of their franchise. Gogas premiership ended after forty- five days, but in the summer of 1940, when Gigurtu, Goerings friend, became prime minister, Gogas decrees were revived. All Jews were dismissed from public services, newspapers and liberal professions; the Nuremberg laws concerning mixed marriages, the employment of non- Jewish servants, and so on, were introduced. A few months later, these examples were followed by Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, although there were but seventy thousand Jews among fifteen million Yugoslavs and only fifty thousand among six million Bulgarians - tiny numbers compared with Hungary's Jews. In November 1940, the Rumanian Iron Guard carried out mass assassinations

among opponents and Jews. It was estimated that 2,160 non- Jews and 680 Jews were murdered. The government of General Ion Antonescu threatened penalties "in case of a repetition." In December he decreed that all Jewish- owned shops must be marked as such. In July 1941, when Rumania had declared war on the Soviet, all Jews were forcefully evacuated from the frontier provinces of Rumanian Moldavia. At the same time, the Bulgarians herded their Jews into ghettos. The same thing happened in October to Rumanian Jews, who were driven out from the provinces of Bukovinaand Bessarabia where they had been a numerous minority. In August 1942, the Bulgarian Jews were ordered to wear the Star of David and were expelled from the capital.

These facts have to be remembered if one wants to evaluate Hungary's record. It is senseless to compare her with England or Holland or Sweden. She must be likened to her neighbors: Rumania, Yugoslavia, and the two halves of the former Czechoslovakia: Bohemia and Slovakia. Then it becomes obvious that she maintained a considerable standard of decency as long as she could determine her policy in surroundings of moral decay.