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A Community of Interests or a Relationship of Interest?

Hungarian and Zionist Diplomatic Contacts in the Second Half of the 1930s

In the second half of the 1930s, a new factor emerged in Hungarian foreign policy. This was “international” Zionist diplomacy, along with some of its European leaders. There was also an openness to this on the part of Hungarian officialdom (and semi-officialdom), and there were even some who considered that Zionism should be supported in the Hungarian national interest. The question is: what lay behind this seemingly curious alliance at a time when the power of the extreme right and the political influence of Nazi Germany in Hungary was on the rise? Furthermore: if it was also in the interests of the leading lights of Hungarian foreign policy to improve relations, why did this diplomatic relationship fail to become permanent?

The first question is not difficult to answer. Police pressure on the Zionist movement at this time, that is to say, the obstruction of fundraising activities, the restriction of the freedom of those active in the international Zionist movement, and other kinds of harassment, all necessitated talks between leaders of Zionism in Europe, talks that were also taking place in other countries. As for the international scene: the Palestinian Jews (nearly 385,000 people in 1936), the Yishuv, was under great pressure because Arab riots swept the land and serious damage to the infrastructure resulted in the launch of the Mifal Bitzaron (consolidation and security) campaign worldwide: this was largely motivated by the intensification of the demand for raising funds. According to a Hungarian document, the Jewish Agency in a circular of 2 October 1936 called on Jewish associations to raise a world total of £300,000, while the Hungarian Jews would have to “pass the hat round” for the equivalent of £7,500; or at least, that was the plan.³⁸ The Hungarian Zionist Association and the Pro-Palestine Alliance of Hungarian Jews also established a Bitzaron Committee, everyone prepared for intensive fundraising.

The first signs of problems

The work of the Hungarian Zionist Association and the Pro-Palestine Association of Hungarian Jews began to become impossible around 1935. The Pro-Palestine Alliance

³⁸ 7 January 1937 (901/55/1936.fk.állro.). Royal Hungarian Police, Budapest HQ. Public Order Department. Subject: Pro-Palestine Alliance of Hungarian Jews (Magyar Zsidók Pro-Palesztina Szövetsége). Ref. no: 595/1936.VII.res. Letter from the Deputy Chief of Police to the Minister of the Interior. In MNL (MOL) National Archives of Hungary (hereafter: NAH) K 149 1936-7-8486.

for Zionism, established in December 1926 with the aim of winning round a broader spectrum of Hungarian Jewry, had until then been raising and donating funds on the basis of an annual permit from the Ministry of the Interior, officially “for the assistance of Palestinian Hungarian Jews”. The shekel was a concrete symbol of belonging to the Zionist movement and functioned as a membership fee. The funds were collected for the Keren Kayemeth Leyisrael (KKL, Jewish National Fund) and the Keren Hayesod (KH, Palestine Foundation Fund), which – as the international institutions of the Zionist world – enabled the movement to purchase land and machinery in Palestine. KKL and KH operated in Hungary as departments of the Pro-Palestine Alliance.

The Pro-Palestine Alliance’s fundraising licence expired on 31 December 1935 and was not extended by the Ministry of the Interior; in fact, it was legally terminated in June 1936. The reason advanced for this was that all fundraising of this kind, including the Zionists’, would limit the scope of the poverty relief campaign launched by the wife of the Governor, Admiral Miklós Horthy, by syphoning away Hungarian citizens’ generosity. In September 1936, the sub-department of the Ministry of the Interior’s Department VII dealing with associations wrote to the one responsible for public security that in “recent years” donations for purposes other than social welfare and charity had been taking advantage of the Hungarian public to such a degree “that they seriously endangered the success of appeals to aid the indigent”. For this reason the Minister of the Interior, by decree No. 167.800/1936. B.M., was restricting the collection of donations, which even had a negative impact on Christian churches. Since even the homeland was able to benefit only to a limited extent, “there is not sufficient justification for allowing the raising of funds destined for overseas”.³⁹

The explanation caused immediate problems because the money flowing into the Zionist foundations was not a huge sum from the point of view of the national economy, and not least because another Jewish organisation, the Magyarországi Autonom Orthodox Izraelita Hitfelekezet Központi Irodája (Central Bureau of the Orthodox Israelite Denomination of Hungary) had received permission to raise funds from 1931, which was not revoked, at least not separately.⁴⁰ Since the orthodox collected funds for the use of the religious Yishuv of Hungarian origin, and so did not pursue such limited and direct political goals as might have affected the Hungarian Jews’ internal status quo, the authorities did not prevent them from pursuing this activity.

Although the State Security Department of the Budapest Police HQ was unaware that the Hungarian Zionist Alliance could not collect even on the basis of the original authorisation, and this made the work of the Mifal Bitzaron appear somewhat easier

³⁹ 24 September 1936. Ministry of the Interior to the VIIth Public Security Department (8486/res.1936. VII) from the VIIth Dept. re: fundraising by MZSPPSZ. In NAH K 149 1936-7-8486.

⁴⁰ 31 March, 1937. Copy of document 180.287.1936.V.a. B.M. no. Document. Reply number: 5639/1936. II. Subject: Fundraising by MZSPPSZ. Orthodox Jews were granted permission to collect funds until further notice under BM no. 193.871/1931. They could collect money in private apartments. In NAH K 149 1936-7-8486.

(collecting money at stage performances and not very efficiently at that),⁴¹ by the autumn of 1936 the Hungarian authorities had already banned all collections, and the chief of police outside the capital (on orders from above) reported to Budapest on the basis of data aggregated from all over the country about Zionist fundraising up and down the country.

The Hungarian movement's activities were made more difficult by a change in the atmosphere: the increasing mistrust of the internal organs towards the Zionists. From an early stage the police were alert to the activities of the so-called *hachsharas* (hachsharoth), Zionist preparatory training centres where young people received training for physical work in Palestine. Thus, they helped to ease unemployment, if only minimally. The authorities, however, regarded them as "hotbeds" of Bolshevism and one of the main domestic sources of the "atheistic-communist threat", and the collectivist way of life in these centres only reinforced their prejudices. The second half of the 1930s was shaken by several hachshara scandals, which in the eyes of foreign Zionist leaders were at least as problematic as the difficulties encountered in fundraising. These scandals mainly affected the Marxist-Zionist Hashomer Hatzair, and several smaller, mainly left-wing, groups (e.g. Dror, Shtam Chalutz, etc.), but eventually they began to endanger the operation of the Zionist movement as a whole, and the official Zionist leadership had to handle these extremely delicate cases amidst a vociferous campaign by the right-wing media.

These difficulties – and the answer to the second question lies buried here – were compounded by the fact that the National Office of the Hungarian Israelites and the Budapest Jewish Community, under the direction of the Neolog Samu Stern (1874–1946) and his circle, were hostile to the Zionists. Contrary to rumour, the differences between the Zionists and the leadership of the Jewish community were not primarily to do with money. The leadership of the Hungarian Zionist Association included people of means. But the Zionist movement also absorbed many Jewish working class youth, to whom the community had little to say. The Zionists thus demanded not only the democratisation of the Jewish community but also increased representation of the Jewish strata carrying out physical labour, which was linked to one of the main theoretical and practical objectives of the Zionist movement, the re-stratification of manual workers. The community leadership regarded "national(ist)" Jews as traitors, since they were seen as attempting to break up the framework of the assimilation policy that they followed. Accordingly, they used their government connections to frustrate Zionist aspirations and to establish a separate Neolog organisation to fundraise for Palestine – indeed, they sought to monopolise this activity; internal documents of the Ministry of the Interior indicate that this was the reason the Zionist organisations were not allowed to do so.

News of the obstruction of Zionist activity soon reached the relevant overseas venues. The Jewish Agency for Palestine, which represented Zionist interests in the outside world after the founding of the League of Nations, swung into action in two European capitals.

⁴¹ Letter of the Deputy Chief of Budapest Police to the Minister of Internal Affairs, 7 January 1937. In NAH K 149 1936-7-8486.

Attempts at intervention

One of the activities was directed by Nachum Goldmann (1895–1982), a delegate of the Jewish Agency to the League of Nations in Geneva. Goldmann was an interesting personality: as leader of the Comité des Délégations Juives, and as one of the founders of the Jewish World Congress in 1936, he had a finger in several pies. He played a role in Jewish minority affairs but devoted himself mainly to Zionist issues and became increasingly prominent over the years, rising, after World War II, to being head of the Jewish Agency and the World Jewish Congress. The other initiative was that of the London Group. Its leading figures included Arthur Lourie (1903–1978), political secretary of the Jewish Agency (and Israeli Ambassador to Canada and the U.K. in the 1960s) and Selig Brodetsky (1888–1954), member of the Jewish Agency's executive and later second president of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

At this time, the Jewish Agency was very active in the diplomatic sphere. It lobbied intensively to convince the European powers of the importance of creating a Jewish State. It was at this time that the British dispatched the Peel Commission to investigate the causes of unrest in Palestine. This report, recommending partition, appeared prior to the 20th Zionist Congress.

The news of the problems in Hungary prompted the Zionists to contact the Hungarian representatives at once. One of the intermediaries in Geneva was László Velics (1890–1953), Hungary's representative at the League of Nations, who had served as a diplomat since 1917, and another was Szilárd Masirevich (1879–1944), an experienced diplomat and ambassador in London. In Geneva on 22 June 1936 Goldmann handed Velics a multi-page memorandum.⁴² In this (aware that his name was unknown to the Hungarian diplomats) he called upon the Hungarian authorities not to hamper the work of the Zionists, to allow the Hungarian Zionist Association to continue its fundraising activities, and the Pro-Palestine Alliance to amend its statutes. The memorandum stated: "In no country in the world has the government intervened in internal Jewish debates which do not affect the loyalty and the self-evident responsibilities of the Jews as loyal citizens of their state". It continued: "Of course, there is opposition to Zionism even within Hungarian Jewry. But this difference of opinion has arisen due to internal Jewish disagreements and has nothing to do with Hungarian interests or with the principles of Hungarian domestic and foreign policy". Goldmann also offered to travel to Budapest if necessary in order to negotiate with the authorities; by the way (according to Hungarian foreign ministry sources), he made a similar offer to Turkey.

The position of the Zionists is clearly outlined in the document: Jews as Hungarian citizens are duty-bound to comply with the requirements for all Hungarian citizens, but as members of a people, they are obliged to satisfy special requirements also. These requirements are those of a cultural, religious or "national" (we would now say "ethnic" – *trans.*) minority. By this logic, the Hungarian state has no involvement in the conflicts among the Jewish people, since these concern only the internal affairs of the

⁴² NAH K 149 BM Res.1936-7-8486.

Jews. Velics sent the memorandum as a diplomatic letter but noted that he did not see much chance of having the constraint on fundraising lifted. At the same time, the letter points out the potential economic benefits that may accrue to the Hungarian economy from the Zionists: merchants and tradesmen there “would gladly increase their promotion of Hungarian goods if Zionism could freely organize in our country. The proceeds of any fundraising would also be transferred by means of commodity exports”, writes Velics in his diplomatic report to Budapest.⁴³ He also stated that he understood the Turkish representative had sought similar instructions from his government.

Meanwhile, on 2 December 1936, the police in Budapest raided the premises of the Pro-Palestine Alliance and seized the sum of about five hundred pengő, the proceedings of the fundraising effort.⁴⁴ Velics, presumably at Goldmann’s request, also raised this issue in his letter and proposed that the police action be terminated. Another reason he is in favour of the Pro-Palestine Alliance, he writes, is because it is “anti-Bolshevik” and enjoys the support of “the higher echelons” in England. Velics claims that the Jews are “planning” to establish a worldwide anti-communist organisation and they would be inclined to entertain the Czechs’ friendship towards the Soviets “and, in this regard, it would of course be easier to place appropriate items of news with them if there are no incidents likely to bring them into conflict with Hungary”.⁴⁵ At the urging of the representative in Geneva, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a letter to the Ministry of the Interior calling for the termination of the police action.⁴⁶

Goldmann’s offer to visit Hungary was soon taken up. Inquiring via Velics about whom he should negotiate with, he was initially directed by Kálmán Kánya, Hungary’s Foreign Minister (1869–1945), to Pál Balla, a secretary in the ministry’s political department.⁴⁷ This instruction was later modified, because Balla’s job was not the conduct of the negotiations themselves, but only their preparation.⁴⁸ For the Zionists it was Miklós Buk (1907–1962), Secretary-General of the Zionist Association who took part in preparations for the negotiations. Miklós Buk, who held this position in the Zionist Association between 1935 and 1944 and in Israel was later known as Moshe Buk, was one of the most lively

⁴³ NAH K 149 1936-7-8486.

⁴⁴ NAH K 149 BM Res. 1937-7-4113. Letter of the Hungarian Jews’ Pro Palesztina Szövetsége (Pro Palestine Alliance) to the Public Department of the Royal Hungarian Police. Also: CZA (Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, Israel) S6 1918.

⁴⁵ NAH K 63-1939-43. 18 December 1936.

⁴⁶ NAH K 63-1939-43. 18 December 1936.

⁴⁷ Little is known about Pál Balla. According to one source, in the early 1940s (1939–1944) a civil servant named Pál Balla headed the II.B Department of the Prime Minister’s Office dealing with the affairs of Hungarians living abroad. See Attila Seres: Pál Péter Domokos’s Mission to the Hungarian Embassy in Bucharest (1940–1941). *Magyar Kisebbség*, 53–54. (2009), 3–4. 276–321.

⁴⁸ NAH K 63-1939-43. 26 January 1937.

thinkers of Hungary's Jewish national movement. In his original sociological works he described the birth of the Jewish state as a "physical law or necessity".⁴⁹

In addition to the possibility of negotiations, there was also the possibility of a boycott. On 15 December 1936, Keren Kayemeth Leyisrael, in a letter to the political department of the Sochnut, suggested a boycott of Hungarian goods in Palestine.⁵⁰ Goldmann himself also embraced this idea, because he believed that this would usefully pave the way for his negotiations in Hungary.⁵¹ Eventually, Leo Lauterbach (1886–1968), head of the Organizational Department of the World Zionist Organization, told Goldmann – whom the media had dubbed "Foreign Minister" – that the idea of a boycott had been dropped, because not only were there doubts about its tactical expediency, but he feared that importers would not yield to pressure from the Sochnut.⁵²

Goldmann arrived in Budapest on 12 February 1937. His stay was, however, marred by a curious event. The police banned his lecture, scheduled for 16 February, on security grounds (mainly threats from right-wing Zionists), though even Endre Fall (1891–1954), the Secretary-General of the Revisionist League, who was later to play an important role, raised his voice in support of holding it.⁵³ The lecture did, in fact, eventually take place, on orders "from above": at the intervention of the Ministry of the Interior.⁵⁴

"A Community of Interests"

Goldmann visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 13 February 1937. His interlocutor was Gábor Apor, "Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary" (1889–1969). During their conversation, Apor – according to his own notes – was "in receptive mode", while Goldmann spoke of "the community of interests" between Hungarian and Zionist foreign policy. In his view, even revision of the Trianon borders was in the Jews' interests since, unlike in Romania, in Hungary the Jews "lived in clover". But what does "community of interests" mean in this particular case? Can one speak of common interests?

⁴⁹ See Mirjam Buk's memoir: www.szombat.org/archivum/hol-volt-hol-nem-volt-2. He was the author of the following books: *What Does Zionism Want?* Budapest, Hungarian Zionist Association, 1935; 2nd edition 1940; *The Two-Thousand-Year Journey. The Sociology of the Jewish Question*. Budapest, 1943; 2nd edition March 1944. (The book was burned by the Arrow Cross.) The Hebrew edition appeared in 1962, a few days before his death: *Haderech bat haalpayim*. Hotzaat Javne 1962; reissued by the Oneg Shabbat Club in Budapest in 1995.

⁵⁰ CZA S25 1989.

⁵¹ CZA S6 1918. 27 December 1936.

⁵² CZA Z4 10345/1. Beginning of 1937.

⁵³ NAH K 63-1939-43. 17 February 1937. Pál Balla's Note "Pro Domo".

⁵⁴ NAH K 149 BM Res.1937-7-4113. Letter from the Hungarian Jewish Pro-Palestine Federation to the State Security Department of the Royal Hungarian Police. See also CZA/Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, Israel/S6 1918.

In my view this is possible only on a theoretical level, because in principle the two “motherlands”, Hungary and Palestine, each have their own “territories beyond the borders”. It is in the interests of every existing (or emergent) nation state to protect the rights of those “beyond its borders”, which in the case of the Hungarian state meant the protection of the “nationality” interests of the Hungarians living in Romania and the other foreign (adjacent) countries, while in the Zionists’ case, this involved the interests of the Jews in the Diaspora, something that the Zionist movement, as it grew in strength and influence, increasingly took it upon itself to represent. If there are no territorial disputes between two national movements, they may even be positively inclined towards each other: of course, strictly on a reciprocal basis, and even if, as in the latter case, the state does not (yet) exist.

At first glance, one might think that Goldmann and the host, Gábor Apor, intended to agree a straightforward “sale and purchase” contract, and this was made easier by the rhetoric. But far more than this was at stake.

Goldmann offered that, provided the Hungarian authorities did not obstruct the Zionists’ efforts in Hungary, he would use his influence at the League of Nations and cooperate with the Hungarian delegation in minority issues. And this was not an irresponsible promise. According to a memo from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the beginning of 1938, Goldmann was “closely” cooperating with Hungarian diplomats in minority affairs.⁵⁵ Indeed, even after the first anti-Jewish law, Goldmann tried to temper the outrage in Zionist circles.

The Jewish Agency wanted not only to solve Hungary’s problems, but also to support its own “national” ambitions. On 13 September 1937, Goldmann sent Balla a long letter on the situation in Palestine, hoping that Hungary would line up behind the Agency when the League of Nations discussed plans for partition.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, the other group also swung into action. On 17 March 1937, Arthur Lourie, and on 3 November Selig Brodetsky, handed a memorandum to the head of the Hungarian delegation in London.⁵⁷ They had previously visited the embassy and, at Masirevich’s request, set down these points in writing. The texts reasserted almost word for word what Goldmann had repeatedly said, suggesting that they were offering separate interpretations of one of the Zionists’ decisions. At all events, they managed to win over the Hungarian ambassador and Masirevich noted, “I consider the Zionists’ request to be justified and compatible with Hungarian interests”.⁵⁸

The re-licensing of fundraising had still not been achieved, so Goldmann offered to visit the Hungarian capital again on 14 or 15 October.⁵⁹ However, the Foreign Ministry did not consider the visit warranted, since they could not convince either the Ministry of Internal Affairs, or the Ministry of Culture, which was asked for an opinion in April

⁵⁵ NAH K 63-1939-43. 2 February 1938.

⁵⁶ NAH K 63-1939-43.

⁵⁷ CZA 4 10345/1. Brodetsky to Goldmann, 17 March 1937. Also NAF K 63 1939-43.

⁵⁸ NAH K 63-1939-43. 31 March 1937.

⁵⁹ NAH K 63-1939-43. Goldmann to Balla, 5 October 1937.

1937, to support it.⁶⁰ Balla tried to appeal to Szóllósy, counsellor in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, but he refused to issue a licence on the grounds that Samu Stern, the Neolog leader and his circle, were against it.

However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs cited “the international Jewish press manipulated by Goldmann” in vain: Szóllósy and Kálmán Tomcsányi (1881–?), Secretary of State in the Ministry of the Interior, remained unmoved. The policy pursued by the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Religious and Educational Affairs differed from that of the Foreign Office. This policy was not motivated by the western support for the “nationality rights of Hungarians living beyond the borders”, but by the maintenance and assistance of Hungary’s Jewish “establishment”.

The cultural officials – with whom Stern and his people had excellent connections – wanted to concentrate fundraising in a single authority or organisation. To this end the leadership of the community created the Association for Supporting Hungarian Israelites’ Settlements in the Holy Land and Elsewhere (*Magyar Izraeliták Szentföldi és Egyéb Telepítéseit Támogató Egyesülete*), which enjoyed the confidence of the ministry from the outset. This was despite the fact that the British authorities’ permits to immigrate to Palestine could be distributed only by the Jewish Agency. And these permits were given to local Zionist bodies that were largely independent of the community organisation.

Virtually simultaneously, police pressure on the movement increased. In the first days of November 1937, Budapest police arrested more than 30 Zionists, most of them young people from *hachsharas* in the seventh and eighth districts of Budapest. The charge of “subversive activity” was soon dropped but continued to greatly exercise the right-wing press, which again revelled in the “atheistic–Bolshevik–agitatory” activities of the training centres. The Hungarian Zionist Association had to devote several weeks to explaining the situation and its influence declined further accordingly. It was also obliged to close all its *hachsharas*.

2 February 1938 found Buk once again at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in order to pave the way for a new round of talks with Goldmann. Once again, the Ministry of the Interior allowed the scheduled lecture to go ahead only under heavy pressure from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. No records of the discussions with Apor are extant, but we know that the visit had no direct impact.

In his speech at the Hungarian Zionist Association’s Herzl Hall on February 6, Goldmann stated, *inter alia*: “I have to say that in Geneva I received the greatest possible moral support from the Hungarian commissioners, because they know that the issue is not just about Jews, but about minority rights.”⁶¹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also received a measure of praise: “I often met with Hungarian statesmen during my political work, outstanding men who are able to represent Hungarian interests at least as ably as the assimilated Jewish worthies, and I can say that they are without any ulterior motives.”⁶²

⁶⁰ NAH K 63-1939-43. Note “Pro Domo” of Balla. 14, 15 and 22 October 1937.

⁶¹ *Zsidó Szemle*, 11 February 1938. 4.

⁶² *Ibid.* 7.

So, once again, Goldmann returned to Geneva with nothing to show for his pains.

Liaison work in Geneva – Book publication in Budapest

The idea of a “community of interests” was also represented to the outside world by András Tamás (1900–?), the secretary of the Revisionist League. Tamás was the scion of an old Székely family, who did the rounds of Romanian prisons before becoming a supporter of Hungarian revisionism, and worked in several European countries, publishing books chiefly in French to promote the Hungarian position. He recognised this great opportunity.⁶³ When Dr Lajos Fodor, a Hungarian delegate to the 20th Zionist Congress held in Zurich in August 1937, sought him out in Geneva immediately after the congress, a fruitful relationship developed between them. The lawyer from the town of Hatvan was a Zionist of long standing, and – according to Raphael Patai (1910–1996) – at the beginning of the 1930s, together with the latter’s father, József Patai (1882–1953), bought 10 dunam (2.5 hectares) of land near Tel Aviv (Shunat Boruchov), in today’s Givatayim, where two houses were built by Patai when he emigrated in 1940.⁶⁴

A book was born from the encounter between the left-wing Zionist and one of the representatives of Hungarian Revisionism: in *The Jewish State and the Hungarian Minority Protection* the secretary in Geneva wrote 31 of the preliminary studies for Fodor’s 1937 work *Questions of Jewish Fate and the 20th Zionist Congress*.⁶⁵ The book was published (under another imprint) by the Hungarian authorities’ bugbear, the left-wing Marxist Hashomer Hatzair. This suggests that Hungarian foreign policy thinking was able to distance itself from domestic political constraints and that the need to find allies extended to areas which the domestic political situation would not otherwise have made possible. The left-winger and member of the Zionist electoral coalition Eretz Yisrael Haovedeth in Hungary, proudly referred, in his letter of 5 April 1938 to the executive of the World Zionist Organization, to the fact that the foreword to the book, which sold 20,000 copies, was written by the “Hungarian diplomat”, who “pointed out [...] that Hungary’s national interests require that it cooperate with the Zionist world organization”.⁶⁶

Tamás regards East European Jews as one of Europe’s national minorities. He points out that the “general problem” of the Jews will be solved by factors independent of Hungarian official politics, public opinion and Hungarian Jewry, and that the Hungarian question is part of the same question as Zionism. “Opposition is unnecessary and unreasonable; it

⁶³ Keresztény Közéleti Almanach. Vol. II. M-ZS. Budapest, „Pátria” Irodalmi vállalat és nyomdai részvénytársaság, 1940. 1059.

⁶⁴ Raphael Patai: *Apprentice in Budapest. Memories of a World That Is No More*. Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2000. 126.

⁶⁵ Published by the Magyar Cionista Szövetség Budapest: Budapest, Seventh and Eighth District Branch, 1937.

⁶⁶ CZA S5/2004.

is far better if a serious study is carried out on the international issue of Jewishness, and if we relate the direction of the development of Hungarian Jewry to that reality. Along this path, after having solved the question, we can ask for and, indeed, demand benefits that we can justly claim as a result of our prudent position.” (p.7), he writes.

Tamás draws attention to the fact that every nation has developed its own ideal that can save it from being “periodically scapegoated”. “The Hungarians have developed revisionism and embraced the principle of international minority protection; however, the Jewish thinking masses have developed Zionism and, in parallel, the minority system that they have adopted,” he writes. There is no doubt that there will be a Jewish state; that was decided by the First World War. The Jews will not be concerned by Hungarian anti-Semitism, which will in any case be put in its proper perspective by the forces of Christianity.

According to András Tamás, the Jewish state will come into being via the League of Nations and will be a member of the organisation, which will also bring about a change in the minority “process”. For this reason, too, it is desirable from the Hungarian point of view for the Jewish state to be represented in the federal organisation “because this would allow its general assembly to keep the minority issue permanently on the agenda of Committee VI”. (9) As things stand, writes Tamás, Committee VI of the League of Nations will not have the minority issue on its agenda until Germany returns to the organisation, “or until a nation with preeminent minority protection interests has the power to consistently and effectively represent this issue among its member states”. Only two states could carry out this role: Switzerland or the “independent Jewish state that is to be established”.

Samu Stern, “Dictator” of the Hungarian Jews

On 11 February 1938, the Hungarian Zionist Association and the Pro-Palestine Alliance submitted a new petition to the Hungarian Government.⁶⁷ The text lays out in detail the advantages of economic relations between Hungary and Palestine and the problems associated with fundraising. But the Ministry of the Interior continued to delay the case.

On 1 March 1938, Goldmann wrote to Gábor Apor, saying he had spoken in Geneva with László Kádár (head of the department of public administration in the Ministry of the Interior), who said that the ministry did not object in principle to the issue of licences to raise funds, but that the Ministry of Religious and Educational Affairs made this conditional on the agreement of the leaders of the Jewish community. Goldmann, in a manner that was unusual for him, burst out: “Maintaining the position that no fundraising or other activity can be pursued without the consent of the Neologs’ national leader means

⁶⁷ NAH K 63-1939-43. 19. “Emlékirat a magyarországi Palesztina-munka jelenleg fennálló egyes nehézségei tárgyában” [Memorandum on some of the current difficulties of work on Palestine in Hungary].

that court counsellor Stern has been, with the assistance of the Ministry of the Interior or the Ministry of Culture, declared *de facto* dictator of Hungarian Jews”.⁶⁸

In his letter to Foreign Minister Kálmán Kánya dated 19 May 1938, László Velics outlines the dilemmas, primarily of a diplomatic nature, that the Geneva mission encountered.⁶⁹ He reports that the World Jewish Congress considers Hungary’s Jewish laws an assault on mandatory minority contracts and has charged its representatives in Paris, London and Washington to intervene with the local Hungarian ambassadors. At the beginning of May, the World Jewish Congress issued two communiqués, truly informative and not especially aggressive in tone, citing statements about Jews by distinguished public figures. The second communiqué is “generally moderate in tone, but at times employs forceful expressions. It argues that the Hungarian Government, with its elevated sense of culture and propriety, acknowledges the important role played by Jews in building our economic lives. However, this very acknowledgment shows that anti-Jewish regulations were inspired only by the principle of the survival of the fittest, whereby the stronger relentlessly devours the weaker. The communiqué goes on to explain that as in all modern states, so in Hungary, too, the state is the biggest entrepreneur and employer. So the Jews are restricted to the private enterprise economy and it is precisely from this sphere that they now want to supplant them”.⁷⁰ From 6 May 1938 onwards the Jewish World Congress issued a fortnightly information bulletin entitled *Correspondance Juive*, devoted, *inter alia*, to the situation of the Austrian, Hungarian and Romanian Jews. This was distributed to the attendees by Goldmann at a press conference on 11 May, but Velics recorded that he did not raise the situation of the Hungarian Jews in the Secretariat, because “[...] they hope that through their Hungarian friends they can influence the Hungarian Government towards greater tolerance”.⁷¹ Velics’s warning to the Foreign Minister is particularly important: they must take great care not to behave as they did at the time of the numerus clausus law, when the Hungarian delegates implied that the law did not apply to commercial academies and the like because they did not intend to “restrict” Jews in that sphere. Since the Hungarian Government considered the Jews to be a minority at that time, it is difficult to argue “now” that it was not. According to the diplomat, the struggle against “receivability” (acceptability) should not be fought along these lines. Rather: “The most expedient course of action would thus seem to be to exploit the tactical division that already exists between Zionist and non-Zionist Jews in order that the Jews of Hungary, in their own interests, protest as early as possible against any outside interference or against petitions lodged against their will”.⁷² It is quite clear that Hungarian diplomacy, as the “handmaiden” of government policy at the time, simply

⁶⁸ NAH K 63-1939-43.

⁶⁹ 19 May 1938. Report of Ambassador László Velics (21/pol.-1938) to Minister of Foreign Affairs Kálmán Kánya. In NAH K63 1939/43.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

wanted to have the Jewish Law accepted by the Jewish world and to defend itself against attacks on it by assuaging Hungarian Jewry on the grounds that they were divided.

In 1939, the Ministry of the Interior granted permission to fundraise both to the Pro-Palestine Alliance and also the Jewish community's phantom-Zionist organisation.⁷³ The Hungarian Jews' Pro-Palestine Association, wishing to maintain good relations with the state, wanted to split the confiscated amount (558 pengő and 72 fillér) on a 50–50 basis between the “Hungarians for Hungarians” relief action and the “Miklós Horthy National Aviation Foundation”, to which proposal in December 1938 the Ministry of the Interior also gave its approval. However, the dream of a “community of interests” rapidly dissipated because of the Jewish Laws, conflicts of interest between Hungarian government bodies, and the behaviour of the official Jewish leadership. The Jewish Agency's leaders noted with regret that Samu Stern's crew, who enjoyed little international standing, were more influential in Hungary than the Zionist organisation, which possessed a significant international network. However, even in January 1939, Ambassador László Velics reported that Goldmann had promised him, despite all his protestations, that his organisation would not raise the issue of the First Jewish Law at the League of Nations.⁷⁴

The situation of the Jewish Agency changed after 1939. Following the introduction of the Second Jewish Law, it was no longer interested in the problems of the Hungarian minority beyond the borders, because it had to confront a more existential situation and dangers. Nachum Goldmann fled to New York in September 1940.

Summary

In 1936–1937, certain diplomatic circles in Hungary came to the conclusion that the support of the Jewish state, expected to be founded in the near future on the basis of the traditional, interwar system of minority protection, could be beneficial to Hungary. It was no accident that the official Hungarian viewpoint in this attitude was better represented by the leaders and officials of the Revisionist League, who enjoyed greater freedom of movement in every way, than by the diplomats, who were obliged to operate within a much narrower ambit. It was Nachum Goldmann and his colleagues who convinced the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to consider Jews as a national (i.e. ethnic – *trans*.) minority living beyond the borders of a potential nation state, creating a parallel with the Hungarian minorities in Transylvania, (Czecho)slovakia and Yugoslavia, and thereby alerting them to the positive political opportunity offered by this situation. The administration had the good sense to realise that the problems of local Zionists could be effectively linked to the issue of the protection of the rights of the Hungarian national minorities. It is no coincidence that there was a Hungarian journalist and politician in

⁷³ NAH K 149 1936-7-8486.

⁷⁴ Report of Ambassador László Velics (6/pol-1939) 23 January 1939 to Minister of Foreign Affairs István Csáky (Dr Count Körösszeghi and Adorjáni). Royal Hungarian Delegation at the League of Nations. In NAH K63-1939-43.

Geneva who wanted to use the Zionist organisations and the Jewish state-to-be in the interests of Hungarian revisionism. However, the main opponents of the Jewish national approach, the Hungarian Neolog Jewish leadership, insisted that Jews be treated purely as a religious denomination not only because they feared anti-Semitism and the loss of their hard-won equality before the law, but also for reasons of sheer power, that is to say, in order to maintain their religio-political monopoly at home. They had a rational reason for this, too: the fact that political relations in Europe had taken a turn for the worse. The divisions resulted in the development of one vocabulary for home consumption and another for overseas. The Ministry of Religion and Public Education cleaved closer to the views of the Neologs, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was closer to the Zionists. Neither, however, identified fully with either group, and both the state and the official Jewish bodies were careful in public not to dilute the legal and linguistic definitions that had evolved for discussing the Jews. However, after 1938, this relationship was used by the Hungarian authorities to put the international impact of the Jewish Laws to the test. At this time, a fundamental precondition of the community of interests between the Hungarians and the Zionists was the establishment of the European minority protection system that had evolved after the First World War and was operated by the League of Nations, whose decline and fall, together with the beginning of the persecution of the Jews in Europe, brought about that system's collapse. Thus did the tempests of history ensure that these two hardly compatible parties moved far away from each other.

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