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Resilient Women, Rebuilt Lives: A Study of JDC's Work in Szeged after the Holocaust

by *Dóra Pataricza*

Abstract

The Jewish community of Szeged, Hungary, has a rich cultural and historical heritage dating back more than two centuries. Approximately 60% of the Szeged Jewish population was killed in the Holocaust. In the end of June 1944, three trains departed from Szeged, taking the Jewish population from Szeged and the surrounding towns and villages. The first train went to Auschwitz, where most of the Szeged Jews were killed upon arrival. The second train was uncoupled, half going to Auschwitz, while the second half of the second transport and the third train ended up at the Strasshof Labor Camp near Vienna, where most people survived. The setup of the three transports resulted in Szeged's Jewry having an exceptionally high survival rate in the Holocaust, including children and elderly. Basic human needs formed the core of concentration camp survivors' interests following liberation. Jewish camp survivors received help from the Jewish community, obtained nourishment from Jewish-run soup kitchens, and mostly survived on care packages from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and other Jewish organizations. The current paper aims to present and analyze the role played by the Joint as well as the post-war life of women of three generations in Szeged, thus depicting life immediately after the war in Szeged.

Background

Restarting life in Szeged

A New Chapter: Szeged's Jewish Community in the Post-War Era

Background¹

The renowned Jewish community of Szeged stands as the largest Jewish community in southern Hungary and one of the most important in central Europe. Its Jewish community was founded in 1785, and at its peak, in the 1920s, it had 7,000 members as the third biggest one in Hungary. Nowadays, it counts only 300 members. The Jewish population of Szeged has a vibrant history, both intellectually and culturally. It is one of the few communities outside Budapest where, after 1945, Jewish religious and communal life continued and is still taking place. Essentially, this made it possible for a significant part of the community to retain its valuable collection of documents and a rich archive of material memories. The Szeged Jewish community is unique because Szeged was a primary focal point of Neolog (progressive) Judaism² and thus a prime locus (outside of Budapest) of the attempts of Jews living in Hungary to acculturate into mainstream, Hungarian-speaking urban culture after the creation of Austria-Hungary in 1867. Jewish community members have been active in Szeged's scientific, economic, cultural, architectural, and charitable life.

Unlike many other European Jewish Archives, the archives of the Szeged Jewish Community (SzJCA) survived relatively intact despite the destructive forces of the Holocaust and World War II. The archives contain interesting records and precious historical documents from the Neolog community of Szeged. These sources chronicle the life of the largely destroyed Szeged Jewish community and provide an essential window into its broad network with other central European

¹The author acknowledges the generous grant by Ruth and David Musher in the form of the JDC Archive Fellowship. The author also wishes to thank the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany (the Claims Conference, grant nr. 21880) and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (grant nr. 2021/952) for making the ongoing research project (2020-2022) possible. The author would like to express her gratitude to Mrs Terézia Horváth, née Löw (b. 1931, Szeged), who recounted her memories of the post-war period and her grandmother's fate after the Holocaust.

²Neolog Judaism can be defined as a 19th century movement within Judaism in Hungary, that sought to modernize and reform traditional Jewish practices and beliefs. It emphasized the use of the local language and a more liberal approach to Jewish law and tradition.

Jewish communities, utterly lost in the Shoah. In 2018-19, these archives were entirely processed, catalogued, indexed, and partly digitized.³

At the time of the 1941 census, the Szeged Jewish community numbered 4161 members.⁴ After the German occupation (19 March 1944), the Jews were confined to a ghetto together with other Jews from surrounding villages. As a major regional center in Southern Hungary, the city of Szeged was the main deportation center for the surrounding towns and villages (Csongrád County) and parts of current Northern Serbia, the Bačka region, at that time under Hungarian occupation. Approximately 2,000 Jews living near Novi Sad in Bačka were ultimately transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau or Strasshof from April-6 May 1944, via Szeged. In June 1944, 8617 people, including all the Jews of the surrounding cities and villages, were deported from Szeged in only three days.

The first train went to Auschwitz, with most victims being murdered. The second train was uncoupled, with half going to Auschwitz and half to Strasshof, a labor camp north of Vienna, while the third train was sent to Strasshof, too, with most of the Jews surviving.⁵ A third destination was Budapest, for a group of sixty-six people. Most of the deported to Auschwitz were killed within 24 hours of arrival, no records were kept about their fates, and we only know about their stories through the testimonies of survivors.⁶ Compared to other towns in Hungary (except Budapest, Szolnok, and Debrecen), Szeged had a relatively high rate of survivors, estimated to 60%, including children and elderly people.

Before the ghettoization and deportation in May 1944, the Jewish population had to hand in all their possessions. The Jews left behind their belongings, pieces of

³ The webpage of the archive can be accessed at <https://szegedjewisharchive.org> (accessed November 8, 2023).

⁴ József Kepecs, ed., *A zsidó népesség száma településenként* (Budapest: KSH, 1993), 26-27.

⁵ Dóra Pataricza, “‘Put My Mother on the List Too!’ – Reconstructing the Deportation Lists of the Szeged Jewish Community,” in *Deportations in the Nazi Era*, eds. Henning Borggräbe and Akim Jah (Arolsen: DeGruyter - Arolsen Archive, 2023) <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110746464-017>. See also Kinga Frojimovics and Judit Molnár, eds., *Szeged – Strasshof – Szeged: Tények és emlékek a Bécscben és környékén “jégre tett” Szegedről deportáltakról. 1944–1947* (Szeged: Szegedi Tudományegyetem Állam- és Jogtudományi Kar Politológia Tanszék; Szegedi Magyar–Izraeli Baráti Társaság, 2021). Similarly, many Jews from Debrecen and Szolnok also ended up in Strasshof, altogether 15011 Hungarian Jews (Molnár in Frojimovics and Molnár, eds., *Szeged – Strasshof – Szeged*, 34)

⁶ Laurence Rees, *The Holocaust: A New History* (London: Viking, 2017), 392.

furniture, as well as artworks at the synagogue, together with the community's objects. As for these items, survivors were relatively fortunate since the synagogue was neither destroyed nor plundered. About 40% of the pre-war Szeged Jewish population returned and many have re-established their lives and families in their former homes.⁷

Several questions can be raised regarding both the process of resettling and the ways of restarting life. The current paper aims to analyze and present the role Joint in rebuilding post-war life. Holocaust studies have given comparatively less attention to the experiences of women, resulting in an incomplete understanding of the Holocaust and its impact on this gender group. Most scholarship has primarily focused on the male population, leaving women's experiences under-examined. Examining JDC's role in post-war Szeged from the viewpoint of women is essential to gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by female survivors, including the loss of family members, disruption of traditional gender roles, and limited access to resources. Analyzing JDC's contributions can provide insights into the ways in which gender impacted survivors' experiences in post-war Szeged. Thus, through a few case studies of women belonging to various age groups, life immediately after the war can be depicted and new findings relevant to the history of Holocaust, trauma, and memory studies can be uncovered. The primary sources used for this article are testimonies and requests which are mostly inaccessible to a broader international audience since it primarily consists of handwritten texts only in Hungarian.⁸ The paper seeks to answer the following research questions: What information is available on the immediate post-war life of women from various generations? What kind of help was needed immediately

⁷ 3,881 Jews were included in the ghettoization list of Szeged (May 1944), out of whom 3095 were taken to the brick factory from where they were deported. 1894 Jews returned to Szeged, however, not all of them were Jews included in the ghettoization list, as some of the survivors might have returned to Szeged instead of moving to their settlements near Szeged. Pataricza, "Put my mother," 310-311. It must be noted that the real estate and artwork were taken away from the Jews in the months and years prior to deportation and never returned. László Marjanucz, "A szegedi zsidó polgárság műértékeinek sorsa a deportálások idején," in *Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve, Studia Historica 1* (Szeged: Móra Ferenc Múzeum, 1995), 241-303.

⁸ On requests from Szeged see also Kinga Frojimovics, "JDC Activity in Hungary, 1945-1953," in *The JDC at 100 – A century of Humanitarianism*, eds. Avinoam Patt, Atina Grossman, Linda G. Levi, and Maud S. Mandel (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019), 421.

after the war, and how did relief organizations fulfil these needs? How did women of different age groups cope with the hardships after the war?

This contribution is one outcome of a broader, ongoing research project to create the most extensive list of individuals who were deported from and through Szeged during World War II, allowing for further in-depth analysis of various segments of their lives as well as the circumstances of their deportation.

Restarting life in Szeged

The exceptional situation in Szeged, both regarding the relatively high rate of Jewish survivors and their pre-Shoah possessions being relatively well kept, can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the arrangement of trains to Strasshof allowed for a higher number of survivors in Szeged and a few other cities compared to the rest of Hungary. Additionally, Szeged was reached from the South by the Soviet army on 11 October 1944,⁹ thus the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party did not even have a chance to operate and kill more local Jews. Concerning the fate of objects and belongings, it should be noted that pieces of furniture, carpets, curtains, and other everyday equipment, along with shoes and clothes, were kept at the synagogue, which was never hit by a bomb.¹⁰

The first Jews from Szeged—men in forced labor who were in the region and who managed to escape—could return to the town as early as October 1944 and restart the local Jewish Community's operation in early November 1944. Leó Dénes (born Leó Rottman) (1897, Mohora-1977, Budapest), must have had a significant role in protecting Jewish property after October 1944. He was a member of the Szeged Jewish Community, serving in forced labor in Szeged in October 1944,

⁹ György Pálffy, "A városházán," *Délmagyarország*, October 11, 1969, 5.

¹⁰ The six bomb attacks, carried out by the United States Air Force between 2 June 1944 and 3 September 1944 aimed to destroy its airport, railway stations and food warehouses that were vital to the Hungarian and German war effort. According to Tóth, these bombings caused extensive damage to the city, with an estimated 146 people killed and 60 injured. The attack destroyed approximately 200 buildings, including homes and public buildings. During the first half of October, the Russians conducted bombings in Szeged, followed by the Germans after the occupation of the city in October. However, the bombs dropped by the Russians and Germans did not cause as many civilian casualties as the carpet bombings by the Anglo-American planes. Marcell Tóth, "Az első amerikai bombázás és Szeged," *Szeged folyóirat* 31, no. 6 (2019): 35-41.

when he managed to flee. Already in the same month, he was appointed as a deputy mayor's secretary.¹¹ One of the first things he did was to render the anti-Jewish laws and decrees invalid.¹² In November 1944, he became a councilor, then in January 1945, the deputy mayor of Szeged,¹³ at the same time he was an honored member of the Jewish Community. The high rate of survivors, the early return of forced laborers and the good collaboration between the Jewish community and the city's administration played a significant role in protecting Jewish property and in making Szeged one of the least devastated Jewish communities in Hungary.

The geographic location of Szeged and the fact that it was one of the first cities to be liberated resulted also in the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC, often called simply Joint) resuming its operation in Szeged at the end of 1944, reestablished by escaped forced laborers from Bor, joined by the Hungarian committee in Bucharest. At the end of January 1945, a food kitchen was also established in the territory of the former ghetto.

Originally JDC was founded end of 1914 with the specific aim of helping Jews in Eastern Europe who had been hit hard by the war, especially the Galician front movements. It continued and expanded its activities between the two world wars. It should be mentioned that non-Jewish individuals have received aid from the very beginning as well. In June 1941, Hungary entered the war, followed by the US in December, and thus JDC became a foreign agent in a hostile country and could no longer send money to Hungary. The organization's main issue was that it steadfastly followed US government directives banning the transfer of money to, and personal contact with, those living in Nazi-held territories while, at the same time, aiming to assist such people.¹⁴ Throughout the initial months of 1945 in Hungary, the collaborative partnership between JDC and the International Red Cross (IRC) Division A was characterized by the latter acting as the implementing

¹¹ István Sárközi, "Adalékok Dénes Leó munkásmozgalmi és közéleti tevékenységéhez (1919–1977)," in *Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve 1980–81/1* (Szeged: Móra Ferenc Múzeum, 1984), 330.

¹² "Dénes Leó Szeged polgármestere," in *Szegedi Népszava*, 23 August 1945, 1. In other parts of the country, the anti-Jewish laws were annulled later, in January 1945 by the newly established government.

¹³ "Dénes Leó," in *Magyar Életrajzi Lexikon*, eds. Ágnes Kenyeres and Sándor Bortnyik (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1967).

¹⁴ Yehuda Bauer, *American Jewry and the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), 217. Accessed November 8, 2023, <https://bibliotecacomplutense.odilok.es/opac?id=00628045>

agency of the relief branch, a role which they fulfilled until the end of June in the same year.¹⁵

In response to the early communication from the National Organization of the Hungarian Deportees in April 1945, informing the Szeged Jewish Community that many people deported to Vienna [Strasshof] had survived,¹⁶ the city and the community had some time to prepare for their arrival. Upon liberation, concentration camp survivors' immediate interests focused on addressing basic human needs. They were temporarily housed at the Hotel Bors near the railway station in Szeged, where they received essential items and aid such as cleaning and disinfection from Szeged City's Bath and Disinfection Services. Survivors required essential everyday items such as clothes and bed linen, which were provided in cooperations with the Jewish community. The soup kitchen, also run by the community served them all meals. Despite their desire to return to their former homes, many survivors faced difficulties when looking for surviving family members and finding new homes.¹⁷ Physical and mental health issues were widespread, requiring medical care and social welfare support. Rebuilding their lives in the aftermath of the Holocaust proved challenging, most survivors were unable to return to their pre-war lifestyles.

¹⁵ "A Joint történetéből," in *Szombat* 2 (1991). Accessed November 4, 2023, <https://www.szombat.org/archivum/a-joint-tortenetebol>.

¹⁶ Letter from the National Organization of the Hungarian Deportees to the Szeged Jewish, 15 April 1945, SzJCA 1945/262

¹⁷ Dóra Pataricza and Mercédesz Czimbalmos, "We really did not expect to see you again' – A case study on Jewish – non-Jewish relations in post-war Szeged," in *AREI: Journal for Central and Eastern European History and Politics* (forthcoming).



Fig. 1. A kosher kitchen run by JDC in Szeged, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Archives, NY_53612, photograph of Pál Jónás.

Dr. Joe Schwarcz, the European President of JDC, was responsible for defining the mission of the Hungarian branch, which aimed to provide aid to Jews of all denominations in the aftermath of the Holocaust. This assistance focused on two key issues: facilitating the repatriation of deported Jews and supporting those in need after their return home, including those who were released from the ghetto or had been in hiding. To achieve these goals, the JDC distributed food, clothing, and temporary housing through soup kitchens, temporary residences, clothing, one-time cash assistance, and medical aid. Additionally, the organization coordinated the lending and borrowing of household equipment and was responsible for tracking the victims and survivors, providing information about their status to their relatives.¹⁸ During the post-war period the JDC in Szeged performed numerous tasks, related to the resettlement of survivors, which were supposed to be the responsibility of the state. The JDC's economic and social assistance was also crucial to both the Hungarian state and the Communist Party,

¹⁸ "A Joint történetéből," in *Szombat* 2 (1991). Accessed November 8, 2023, <http://szombat.org/archivum/a-joint-tortenetebol>.

as it helped alleviate the government's burden in providing for survivors. Furthermore, as the largest foreign organization operating in Hungary after WW2, the Joint played a significant role in providing the country with foreign currency, making it Hungary's largest annual foreign currency provider, receiving a total of 52 million dollars over the course of eight years (1945-1953).¹⁹

In August 1945, the National Jewish Assistance Committee was established as Hungarian Jewry's unified aid organization. Besides immediate support, it provided more permanent kinds of care, such as e.g., setting up children's homes. DEGOB (National Committee for the Deported Persons) was also instrumental in aiding survivors and was one of the organizations cooperating with the JDC in Hungary.

The archives of the Szeged Jewish Community hold various documents from 1945-50, such as correspondence with other Jewish communities about the activities of the Joint, different forms of aid provided by it, the operation of the local JDC office, and requests by locals to the JDC. This documentation provides valuable insight into the challenges faced by the JDC-run hospital and the broader Jewish community in Hungary during the post-war period, highlighting the extent to which the JDC's commitment to meeting diverse needs was necessary and ongoing. Survivors were sending requests to the community and asking for essential items right after their return to their hometowns, starting from May 1945. Most of the claims are on small pieces of paper, primarily handwritten, although a few are typewritten. Many documents include reports on the returnees' families, health, and economic status. Upon arrival, most requests include bedlinen, clothes, and household equipment necessary for everyday life, with little monetary value.

In Szeged, the JDC operated in close cooperation with the Soviet leadership of the city, which is also reflected in the bilingual (Hungarian and Russian) letterheads and the text of the official stamp.²⁰ Its operations were widely known in town. According to an article written by Magda Szántóné Ipolyi in September 1945, the JDC had been carrying out serious and remarkable activities in Szeged from

¹⁹ Frojimovics, "JDC Activity in Hungary, 1945-1953," 426.

²⁰ International Red Cross * American Joint Distribution Committee Szeged / Международный комитет Красного Креста * Американ ДжойнтДистриб'юшн Комите.

December.²¹ In the above-mentioned article, the two directors of the Szeged branch, István Bárok and Dr Béla Basch, gave a report to the local newspaper *Szegedi Népszava* in September 1945 on the activities of JDC's Szeged branch so far, including the donations given to the (non-Jewish) returning prisoners of war. At that time, nearly two thousand people received aid regularly, mainly those returning from deportation, a vast number of university students and, in general, everyone who needed help. Those returning from deportation receive 1500 pengő per person in a lump sum immediately, and additionally either two hundred pengő every six days, or access to meals in the canteen consisting of breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In the autumn of 1945, two hundred university students were assisted by the JDC which covered fees to continue their studies and, in addition, provided meals or money for food.

The JDC also provided help for foreigners in transit, who received a travel allowance and access to the canteen where seven hundred and fifty people could eat daily. It also maintained a hospital providing free treatment and free medication to about six hundred patients monthly. Additionally, it also helped by providing anything that would improve the quality of life of the returning Jews by distributing furniture, and medical equipment such as glasses, dentures, instep raisers, and hernia belts. According to the aforementioned article, between December 1944 and August 1945, the Szeged branch of JDC spent 16 million pengő.

The case of Gabriella Göttler underscores the significance of the multifaceted approach adopted by the JDC in Szeged's post-war restoration. Beyond providing help by allocating objects that were necessary for the restart, JDC's employment of local Jews, particularly a young mother, fostered economic empowerment, social stability, and intergenerational support. Employment not only enabled Göttler to provide for her own family, but also ensured the care of her elderly mother and young daughter, thus contributing to the broader goal of community rehabilitation. Her case highlights the importance of holistic interventions that address both material and human needs, as critical components of post-war reconstruction efforts. Gabriella's daughter, Györgyi Göttler, was born in

²¹ Magda Szántóné Ipolyi, "Nyolc hónap alatt tizenhat millió pengő segély," *Szegedi Népszava*, September 16, 1945, 4.

Budapest in 1934 to a Christian man and a Jewish mother, out of wedlock. She grew up with her mother, Gabriella Göttler, and grandmother Mrs Mór Göttler (née Sarolta Friedmann)²² in Hódmezővásárhely, a town ca. 10 kms from Szeged. Her grandmother was 76 years old at the time of the deportation, when their family was deported through Szeged to Strasshof. Once liberated, in May 1945 in Hauskirchen, they headed home through Czechoslovakia, and upon arriving in Hódmezővásárhely, in July 1945, they had to start all over again.

An excerpt from the unpublished memoir of Györgyi, a child survivor, sheds light on the difficulties faced by Gabriella and her family as they attempted to rebuild their lives amidst the devastation of war:

People were staying in our flat. One of the relatively well-to-do neighbors had a lovely, big farmhouse with a driveway. They were big farmers, my mother had sewn for them before, and they gave us a room so we could still be near our flat. Then they took quick action, and after a few days, they emptied our flat, but there was nothing in it. Apart from one or two bad dishes, nothing was left, none of my toys, and we never got back the things that were looted. We never found out who took them. [...] The only thing necessary for her was getting her sewing machine back. She thought she would continue to earn her living with it. [...] However, my mother could not make a living sewing underwear after the war because who had shirts and pajamas made in great poverty? So, my mother cooked with her sister in the Joint kitchen for a while, and we children went there for lunch. I would take meals home to my grandmother, who could no longer go there because it was far from our flat.²³

²² Imre Makó and János Szigeti, “*Vihar és vész közepette*”: *A Holokauszt hódmezővásárhelyi áldozatai* (Hódmezővásárhely: MNL Csongrád Megyei Levéltár 2014), 53.

²³ Mrs Ferenc Maczelka, née Györgyi Göttler (b. December 12, 1934), an unpublished manuscript written down by her daughter Dr Noémi Maczelka. n.d.



Fig. 2. Györgyi Göttler, aged 16, Maczelka family archive.

According to Györgyi's daughter, Noémi, the family moved into a Jewish doctor's house (who most probably did not survive the deportation). Sarolta lived long enough to see her great-granddaughter, Noémi Maczelka, born in 1954. She died in the same month, at the age of 87. Gabriella first got employed by the Joint,

where she cooked meals, and later she ended up getting a job in the catering industry, and worked first as a bartender, then as a kitchen clerk and cashier.²⁴

Child survivors like Györgyi provide a significant source of testimony for assessing the after-effects of the Holocaust. Many of these survivors were deported and remained with their closest relatives during the war, something which is often present in their recollections. Despite variations in accuracy, the use of autobiographical accounts and memoirs—both formal and informal—provides a foundation for historical reconstruction. While some commonalities exist among the testimonies,²⁵ seemingly minor details can offer valuable insights into the circumstances these children experienced. The recurring theme of the presence of parents and grandparents in these narratives obviously helped alleviate some of the survivors’ pain.²⁶

Veronika Szöllős, b. 1937 in Szeged, was also deported together with her parents and maternal grandparents. All of them survived. Her maternal grandmother, Mrs László Hoffmann, née Ilona Szigeti (1888, Budapest-1966, Budapest), used to be the director of the Szeged Jewish Kindergarten, and she set up a kindergarten also during the displacement. Her testimonial account underscores the support provided by the JDC, operating as a connection to American Jews and providing opportunities for communal meals and other forms of assistance:

We returned to our flat, rang the doorbell politely and said we had just come from deportation and were living here. Now we live here, they [the new residents] said, and bang, they slammed the door. Then we left. Well, what could we have done? That flat had already been rented out to them, or maybe the landlord had rented it out. We did not even know what we had a right to after they had completely excluded us. We have been

²⁴ Personal correspondence with Noémi Maczelka over emails, August 2022

²⁵ Due to spatial limitations, the author of this article decided not to focus mainly on language or language use, while it can most definitely affect the narratives and the recollection of specific memories of the victims.

²⁶ Dóra Pataricza, “‘The first time I saw my father cry’ – Children’s accounts of the deportations from Szeged,” *The Usage of Ego-Documents in Jewish Historical Research. Jewish Culture and History* 24, no. 2 (2023): 277-291. Accessed November 8, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462169X.2023.2202085>.

banished, they tried to kill us but failed, and now we would even try to get back?

After returning home, our first accommodation was a small room, if I remember correctly, in the Hotel Hungária in Szeged. [...] We got our accommodation from the Joint, and they also gave us clothes and money. Also, probably through the Joint, they gave our address to American Jews, and from there, I got two packages from a little girl about the same age, with all kinds of clothes, art supplies, candy, and things like that. We went to the Joint for lunch regularly. At first, there was a canteen, later they gave out coupons, which you could redeem at a non-meaty restaurant, I think, it was called Milk bar [Hun. Tejcsarnok]. Back in those days, when we used to go to the Joint canteen, my father met an acquaintance there and asked him if he knew of a sublet, and he recommended the one to which we then went.²⁷

Vera resumed her studies at the Jewish elementary school following the war, though not in the class taught by her grandmother. During this time, the school accommodated 44 students across four classes.²⁸ Owing to her lung disease, Vera was compelled to spend several months at a Jewish orphanage, which functioned as a sanatorium and a preparation center for orphans planning to migrate to Israel under the auspices of the Dror Zionist movement. The institution in question was likely the same as the one referred to as a children's home in several photos captured for JDC in the summer of 1948.²⁹ Vera was one of the few surviving students in the Jewish Elementary school up until 1948, when it was nationalized. On the other hand, the fact that there was a Jewish school running in the Hungarian countryside was unique, as pointed out in a JDC's report written in 1948:

They [the Szeged Jewish Community] are very proud of their Jewish School, which 150 children attend. They have seven classes, and the

²⁷ <https://www.centropa.org/hu/biography/szollos-veronika>, accessed November 8, 2023.

²⁸ Dr Sándor Vág, "Felszabadult ország, felszabadult zsidóság," *Új élet*, January 15, 1960, 4.

²⁹ Photos of the JDC camp, item IDs: 572894 – 572850 at archives.jdc.org (accessed November 8, 2023).

President [Dr Kertész] pointed out that very few Jewish children go to Szeged City School, even though they are admitted, because the Jewish school has better teachers, and parents desire their children to have Jewish culture.³⁰

A recurring motif in the narratives of these young girls is various forms of Holocaust traumatization, such as silence in their families and the use of expressions such as “before and after the deportation.” Their families did not talk about their experiences and could not find a way to process the trauma. The phenomenon is known as encapsulation in psychology. Emotional encapsulation, psychic numbing of responsiveness and total amnesia of the past were among the post-traumatic responses. Less dramatic survival techniques that persisted until adulthood include becoming invisible, not sticking out, being quiet, submissive, and being “good.”³¹ Parents and grandparents simply had no tools and knowledge to alleviate the feeling of loss in their children.³² Another phenomenon is that of uncertain identity,³³ also mentioned by Vera Szöllős.

³⁰ Letter from Israel G. Jacobson to AJDC Paris, Re: Field Trip to Szeged, JDC archive, item ID: 1028603. For more information on these temporary homes aimed at preparing aliya: Viktória Bányai and Eszter Gombóc, “A traumafeldolgozás útjain – Holokauszt túlélő gyerekek Magyarországon, 1945-49,” *Régió* 24, no. 2 (2016): 41-44 and on the Jewish orphanages after the war in Hungary in general: Eszter Gombóc and Viktória Bányai, *A Vészorkorszak Árvái: A Magyarországi Zsidó Árvaházak és Gyermekotthonok Emlékezete* (Budapest: "NÜB" Nácizmus Üldözötteinek Országos Egyesülete, 2020). The location of the sanatorium and the children’s camp is what used to be the Gerliczy Castle in Deszk, currently serving as the department of pulmonology of the University of Szeged. (<https://u-szeged.hu/szakk/tudogyogyaszati-tanszek/bemutakozas-2022/>, accessed August 27, 2022).

³¹ Natan Kellermann, “The long-term psychological effects and treatment of Holocaust trauma,” *Journal of Loss & Trauma* 6 (2001): 207.

³² Gabriella Markovicsné Bobár has extensively analyzed the issue of PTSD in 30 Holocaust survivors, all deported from Szeged. She conducted 30 interviews with survivors, most of whom were children or teenagers during the Holocaust, approaching the topic as a health professional. Her research questions included the psychological or social effects that the persecution had on the later lives of the survivors and the ways and methods the survivors used when coping with the psychological trauma. Her interviews are quoted anonymously; thus, the author of the current paper is not aware of the overlap in the informants. Gabriella Markovicsné Bobár, “A holokauszt túlélési szindróma, mint poszttraumás stressz zavar pszichoszociális vonatkozásai” (MA thesis, University of Szeged, 2007).

³³ Bányai and Gombóc, “A traumafeldolgozás útjain,” 33-34.

Terézia Löw, who was 14 years old in 1945 and the granddaughter of Chief Rabbi Dr Immánuel Löw, was one of the 66 people saved by Kasztner³⁴ on the merits of her grandfather, and she vividly remembers the aid they received from JDC in restarting their life in Szeged:

As for the furniture piled up in the synagogue, it was not carried by our Jewish fellows who had been deported to the ghetto but were thrown in after we had been taken away. You can see from the pictures how badly they were stacked! When we returned (from Pest)—I think it was February—we did not get our apartment back, of course, and I remember that my parents did not want to evict the family with small children. After a short respite, they allocated us an apartment in the same building as ours. There we had to share an apartment with a couple, they gave us a room, and the kitchen and the bathroom had to be shared. But we put furniture into that room, pieces we took out of the synagogue, so we all had a bed. Thanks to the Joint, we were initially provided with food. I remember we got parcels from abroad (and Hershey chocolate and cocoa), and then my mother's brothers and sisters were able to send parcels of clothes and food from Bogota.³⁵

When trying to reconstruct the post-war fate of middle-aged and elderly women survivors, we face several brick walls. DEGOB has only two testimonies by women deported from Szeged, and both were younger than 45 at the time of the recording. At least to our knowledge, none of the elderly women wrote accessible memoirs or testimonies after the war, and this age group did not live long enough to be interviewed by scholars in the 1980s and 1990s. Their lives must be reconstructed

³⁴ Rezső Kasztner, a Jewish journalist from Kolozsvár, managed to rescue 396 people from Hungarian administration custody and the local brick factory and saved them from deportation to Auschwitz and secured a place for them in the garden of the Wechselman Blind Institute, known as the "Columbus Street Camp." As more and more people arrived, they built additional barracks. When Kasztner could no longer bring more people from Transylvania to Budapest, he focused on rescuing Jews from the Alföld region. As a result, 66 prominent Jews from Szeged and its surroundings were selected for Kasztner's special group, from which eventually many ended up in Switzerland via Bergen-Belsen. (Testimony of Dr Lipót Löw, nr. 3618, <http://www.degob.hu/index.php?showjrk=3618>, accessed May 5, 2023).

³⁵ Personal correspondence with Mrs János Horváth, née Terézia (Teresa) Löw, April 2021.

piece by piece based on alternative sources, and these reveal only a small and fragmented part of their everyday existences.

Mrs Immánuel Löw (née Bella Brenning, Galați, 1862-Szeged, 1950), aged 83, the widow of Chief Rabbi Immánuel Löw (Szeged, 1854-Budapest, 1944), survived the war in the international ghetto of Budapest. She too was among the 66 exempts to be saved by the Kasztner rescue operation. After her husband's death in Budapest, she survived with her daughter and son-in-law in a yellow-star house, and later in a Swedish-protected house on Pannónia Street. Her son, Lipót Löw and his family were in the Columbus Street collection camp before moving to a protected house on Pannónia Street [also located in Újlipótváros].³⁶ Three months after returning to Szeged, Bella Löw filed a 4-page long typewritten complaint and request to the Szeged Jewish Community on 1 June 1945, emphasizing that the only help she received was from the Joint:

It is known to the Honorable Board that on my return from deportation, I found my apartment destroyed and looted and had to live for weeks in the janitor's apartment offered to me by the congregation. My husband had died in the deportation, and I was left without any property or means of support, in view of which the honorable board paid 500 pengő a month to me in the form of alimony. This small amount gave me a living initially, but only because I got my lunch from Joint's kitchen. Today, when food prices have risen several times,³⁷ this amount has shrunk to a pittance and does not even provide a minimum living.³⁸

³⁶ Máté Hidvégi, "Löw Immánuel élete," in *Löw Immánuel Válogatott Művei 1, Virág És Vallás*, eds. Máté Hidvégi and Tamás Ungvári (Budapest: Scolar, 2019), 59.

³⁷ Bella Löw referred to the hyperinflation in Hungary, following World War II, when Hungary experienced one of the most severe cases of hyperinflation in history. In July 1946, the country recorded the highest monthly inflation rate ever recorded, at 41.9 quadrillion percent ($4.19 \times 10^{16}\%$). Prices doubled every 15.3 hours during this period. The hyperinflation led to the issuance of the largest denomination banknote ever officially circulated, a 100 quintillion (1020) pengő note, to keep up with skyrocketing prices. Beatrix Paal, "Measuring the Inflation of Parallel Currencies: An Empirical Reevaluation of the Second Hungarian Hyperinflation," *Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

³⁸ Bella Löw' complaint to the Szeged Jewish Community, 1 June 1945, SzJCA 321/1945.

Thus, Bella asked the community to grant her, through its organizations, the same treatment as any other member of the community and to provide her with the most necessary furniture and bedding. The Jewish community most likely could not fulfil all her requests, despite her old age and the important role of her late husband, as she had to submit a new request a month later, with a list of fourteen items, all of which were pieces of furniture and all of which once belonged to Chief Rabbi Dr Immánuel Löw. Some of these must have been essential to lead her everyday life, such as chairs and a dining table, a mangle, while others, such as two note stands, most probably had been reclaimed simply because they were once owned by them.³⁹

Bella Löw remained in Szeged, where she lived with her daughter and her son-in-law (after his death in 1949, along with her daughter), first at Margit (now Gutenberg) street 4, then at Ostrowszky street 2/c.⁴⁰ She died there in 1950 and is buried in the same grave as Immánuel Löw, since he was exhumated and reburied in Szeged in 1947.

³⁹ Bella Löw' request to the Szeged Jewish Community, 15 October 1945, SzJCA requests 225.

⁴⁰ Hidvégi, "Löw Immánuel élete," n73.



Fig. 3. Mrs Immánuel Löw, née Bella Brenning and Eszter Löw in Szeged, 1950, Hidvégi collection, Budapest.

Mrs Vilmos Fuchs (née Terézia Neuwald, 1879, Érsekújvár-1966 (?), Budapest) most probably was deported with the third transport together with one of her daughters, photographer Borbála Fuchs. They must have been selected to be on the third transport since they were family members of a former employee of the

Jewish community. The late Vilmos Fuchs (1876, Mocsonok-1942, Szeged)⁴¹ served as a teacher and later as the principal of the Szeged Jewish elementary school for over 30 years. She did not leave behind any memoirs; thus, her story must be reconstructed at least partly based on other sources. Terézia was liberated in Theresienstadt, from where she returned to Szeged with Borbála. At the time of the return to Szeged, she was 66 years old. As reflected by her registry sheet filled in at the time of arrival, she returned to Szeged on 4 July 1945, together with Borbála, and first stayed at the Bors hotel. As an aid, she received flour, household packages and cash aid from the JOINT.⁴²

The image shows two handwritten registry sheet cards (Törzslap) from Szeged, Hungary, dated 1945. The left card is for Terézia Neuwald, and the right card is for Borbála Fuchs. Both cards include personal details, family status, and a table of family members.

Left Card (Terézia Neuwald):

- Hazaérkezett neve: Neuwald Terézia
- Születési helye: Budaörs
- Éve: 1879
- Atyja neve: Fuchs Vilmos
- Anyja neve: Bloch Terézia
- Családi állapota: nős
- Vallása: ukr.
- Házastárs neve: Fuchs Vilmos
- Legutolsó szegedi bejelentett lakása: Berlini krt 3
- Honnan érkezett: Theresia, D. mikor: 1945. 7. 4.

N É V	Rokoni fok	Életkor	Tartózkodási hely (együttérk., deportálásban, letétele)
Fuchs Borbála	gyermek	35	együttérk. erk.

Right Card (Borbála Fuchs):

- Hazaérkezett neve: Fuchs Borbála
- Születési helye: Budapest
- Éve: 1909
- Atyja neve: Fuchs Vilmos
- Anyja neve: Neuwald Terézia
- Családi állapota: nős
- Vallása: ukr.
- Házastárs neve: Fuchs Vilmos
- Legutolsó szegedi bejelentett lakása: Berlini krt 3
- Honnan érkezett: Theresia, D. mikor: 1945. 7. 4.

N É V	Rokoni fok	Életkor	Tartózkodási hely (együttérk., deportálásban, letétele)
Fuchs B.-né	nős	66	együttérk. erk.

Fig. 4. Registry sheet card of Terézia Neuwald, SzJCA.

⁴¹ Terézia Neuwald and Vilmos Fuchs are my great-great-grandparents. Even though my father, András Pataricza (b. 1954 in Budapest) had lived for 12 years in the same city with his great-grandmother, they never had a chance to meet due to an unsolved conflict in the family. Thus, Terézia's stories have not been handed down directly to him and thus neither to me.

⁴² Registry sheet of Vilmosné Fuchs, SzJCA 865/1945.



Fig. 5. Terézia Neuwald, Hon family archive.

She left behind only one request, asking back her nightstand lamp: “Please return my copper nightstand lamp I took to the ghetto. Szeged, 20 August 1945, Mrs

Vilmos Fuchs.” According to the document, she actually received the nightstand lamp. Due to the lack of other sources, it is impossible to determine if Terézia Fuchs requested that very nightstand lamp simply because of practical reasons or if it had particular emotional importance to her. This latter assumption could be supported by the fact that others were begging for mere clothes and bedsheets and among such mundane objects, a nightstand lamp seems almost extraordinary. Similarly to Bella Löw, Terézia Fuchs, too, received a pension from the Jewish community as a benefit after her husband. Her daughter picked up the pension. They left Szeged sometime after the war, and Terézia died in Budapest, probably in 1966. Her daughter, Borbála (Szeged, 1908-Budapest, 1996), never married. Terézia Fuchs was among the many Hungarian Jews who received aid from the JDC.

It can be concluded that the unique challenges faced by elderly women who survived the Holocaust, including issues related to healthcare and restarting life, have been largely overlooked in the existing literature, despite increased attention paid to the experiences of survivors. The marginalization of this group can be attributed to several factors, such as the gendered nature of Holocaust memory, the invisibility of elderly women in broader societal contexts, and the lack of emphasis on the experiences of non-western survivors. However, first-hand accounts of the challenges faced by elderly women in the aftermath of the Holocaust, found in sources produced immediately after the war, can help bridge specific gaps in the reconstruction of their immediate post-war life. Additionally, archival sources, such as requests for everyday items, can provide data that contributes to a more nuanced understanding of this group. By utilizing a range of sources created immediately after the war, a more comprehensive picture of the experiences of this group of survivors can be formed, filling in gaps in our understanding, including the type and extent of aid provided by organizations such as Joint.

Furthermore the JDC kept playing a crucial role in providing financial assistance to other Hungarian Jews in the aftermath of the war, aiding hundreds of thousands of people. The extent of the Joint’s financial help in 1945-46 in Hungary included 26 expeditions to get deportees home, and the registration of 85,000 Hungarian returnees. JDC spent 52,000,000 USD in Hungary (on today’s value: 700,000,000 USD). In 1945 over 66% of the Jewish community in the countryside

got assistance only from the JDC.⁴³ In 1946, according to an article in the newspaper *Világosság*,⁴⁴ 180,000 people received support, 52,000 people were fed in canteens, 40,000 people got medical aid, and 130,000 people were given clothes. Altogether 180 agricultural centers and industrial factories were supported, also proving the total lack of state aid and the fact that Jewish communities had to restart through self-aid.⁴⁵

A New Chapter: Szeged's Jewish Community in the Post-War Era

Another essential source for the reconstruction of the JDC's operation is a report written in 1948. They were still present when the primary industries of Szeged were nationalized in June 1948, and then, a couple of months later, also the Szeged Jewish Elementary school.⁴⁶ The soup kitchen still existed in 1948: Szeged served as a center for various little communities in the vicinity, where approximately another 3000 Jews lived. At that time, the JDC provided aid to approximately one-third of the members, ca. 1000 people, who were categorized into three groups according to their needs. The first category included 335 people. People in category two were issued with food and clothing only, while the third category consisted of 250 persons who were employed but could not afford to buy clothing, thus received clothes. In addition, it provided aid to 100 needy Jewish university students, 40 of them in Szeged.⁴⁷

The Joint was active in the community, presumably until 1950. Although its size was decreasing, the Szeged Jewish Community remained one of the few existing ones, in Hungary. In 1957, eight months after the 1956 revolution, 800 Jews lived there. Only 50 emigrated, and 25 applied for emigration passports. In 1957, at least

⁴³ Kinga Frojimovics, "Beilleszkedés vs. Kivándorlás," in *Beszélő* 9, no. 6 (2004).

⁴⁴ "Huszonhat millió svájci frankot juttatott a Joint a Nemzeti Banknak," *Világosság*, 7 August 1946.

⁴⁵ On the extent of JDC's aid in Hungary in 1945, see Kinga, Frojimovics, "JDC Activity in Hungary, 1945-1953," 424.

⁴⁶ Letter from Israel G. Jacobson to Elinor D. Rosenberg, Re: Jewish Elementary School in Szeged, Hungary SP-12180, JDC archive, item ID: 1029247

⁴⁷ Letter from Israel G. Jacobson to AJDC Paris, Re: Field Trip to Szeged, JDC archive, item ID: 1028603.

150 Jews attended the synagogue on Friday evenings, and 36 of the 50 children of elementary school age were enrolled in Talmud-Torah classes. The congregation at that time had 260 taxpayers, but seventy per cent of the Jewish population of Szeged was over 60 years old. The elderly people's home had 22 residents, 40 needy people still ate there, and six university students received kosher meals.⁴⁸

The JDC became active in Szeged once more in the late 1970s, when Dr Péter F. Váradi (1926, Szeged-2022, Florida), a member of the community who moved to the US and became a successful businessman, donated a memorable sum to the JDC and commissioned the repairs of the synagogue, in memory of his parents.⁴⁹ Besides Váradi's contribution of 120,000 USD, the Hungarian State Office for Church Affairs and the Hungarian Jewish Central Board (MIOK) had secured the funds.⁵⁰ The JDC was involved in the coordination of the restoration process, and, between 1979 and 1989, the synagogue was fully renovated. Its rededication took place on 9 October 1989.

Currently, the Szeged Jewish Community has an estimated 300 members, additionally there are several residents of Jewish origin living in Szeged and Israeli students studying at the local University. Around 30-40 people attend the events of the community regularly.⁵¹ The Szeged New Synagogue, up to this day, is active and popular among local and international tourists.

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⁴⁸ Restoration of Szeged Synagogue, Hungary, written on 6 June 1980, JDC archive, item ID: 2926901,

⁴⁹ Memorandum #349 from Joan Kagan to Ralph I. Goldman, Re: Chronological Report Regarding Szeged Synagogue Repairs, JDC archive, item ID: 3067366,

⁵⁰ Restoration of the Szeged synagogue, JDC archive, item ID: 2926901,

⁵¹ "Múlt, jelen és jövő a Tisza partján," in *Új élet*, June 1957, 3.

in 2024 with Hebrew Union College Press. In 2021, she received the Immanuel Löw Award from the Szeged Jewish Community.

Keywords: Szeged, Female Holocaust Survivors, Elderly Holocaust Survivors, JDC, Strasshof

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