

Hungary

Aside from Romania, this is my most comprehensive archive. There's a reason for this: I lived in Budapest from March 1988 until January 1990 and continued shooting there until 2000.

I wanted to capture what made Hungarian Jewry so different than the rest of the region, and the question I had to consider: would I be able to find it? After all, there were no orthodox Jews living in former shtetls of Poland and Lithuania and it would have been senseless to look for them in the 1980s.

Hungary's prewar Jewish community was enormous and throughout the country there were hundreds of orthodox communities, where Jews lived as they had for centuries. But starting in the late 19th century, as more and more Hungarian Jews attended university and began entering the professions and the retail trade, they, like Germany's Jews, looked to develop a type of Judaism that would reflect their lives then. That is when they created the Neologue branch of Judaism, something akin to Conservative Jewry in America today. Women and men sat separately, but there were organs and choirs. Rabbis were trained, for the first time, to give sermons — something quite new.



Rabbis Schoener and Schweitzer, two of Hungary's chief neologue rabbis, in the Sip Street community office.

For all intents and purposes, the kind of reform German Jewry that developed there was never restarted after the Second World War, because most German Jews who escaped chose not to return. It was Polish Jews who re-established the German communities. In all of Germany, there is but one classic reform choral synagogue service and that is in Berlin's Pestalozzi Strasse synagogue. It is highlighted in my German chapter.

Starting in 1988, however, I found Neologue Hungarian Jewry gorgeously intact, as you can see in the two photos on the left. It didn't have many adherents but I could photograph it to my heart's content. Over the years I worked in Hungary, I also wanted to capture community life, Jewish schools, the elderly and everything else I could find.

The essay below was first written in the early 1990s but was updated in 2017.



The ceremonial hall of the community office, built in the 1890s.

There had been 910,000 Jews in what was greater Hungary when the twentieth century began — and 250,000 in Budapest alone. While most of them were poor wage earners and craftsmen, over a third of Budapest's doctors were Jewish, as were its lawyers. Wealthy Jewish industrialists were funding the construction of enormous, ornate synagogues — not on the edge of town like in Poland or tucked away in a courtyard in Bohemia — these were looming, glorious houses of prayer built right in the center of their cities. They practically glittered with patriotism and a sense of optimism.

Then came the First World War and in its wake, Hungary lost two thirds of its land mass to successor states and a series of irredentist Hungarian governments, especially after Istvan Bethlen's rein ended in 1932, became more and more antisemitic as the country was pulled into Germany's orbit.

Even though Hungary did protect most of its Jews in the first years of the Second World War, tens of thousands of Jewish men were conscripted into forced labor when the Hungarian army joined the Germans in its attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 and never returned. But that would not compare to what happened in 1944 when the mass deportations began.

When the Germans occupied Hungary in March of that year, Adolf Eichmann arrived with no more than one-hundred-fifty SS men. In short order and with the willing help of local police, they divided Hungary into twelve zones of occupation with Budapest being the twelfth. More than 430,000 Jews in eleven of those zones were sent off to their deaths between April and July, and by the time Eichmann began on Budapest's Jews, the Allies had put so much pressure on Hungary's ruler, Admiral Horthy, that the deportations stopped. But Horthy was overthrown in October and Jews in Budapest were herded into a ghetto. They were murdered in the streets and shoved into the Danube, but hundreds of Hungarian non-Jews (more than eight hundred) hid or protected Jewish citizens while Raul Wallenberg of Sweden, Carl Lutz of Switzerland and others handed out protective passes.

When the Soviet Army fought their way into Budapest in January, 1945, they found some 70,000 Jews in the ghetto and over the next few months, tens of thousands more returned from forced labor and the camps.

All the optimism and patriotism that had built the great Hungarian synagogues throughout the country just a few decades before was well and truly gone. In the provinces, synagogues fell into ruin or were sold off since there were so few Jews left to use them. Forests reclaimed Jewish cemeteries in town after town.

In Budapest, where tens of thousands — perhaps more than 100,000 still lived — many wanted nothing more to do with Judaism. After what the twentieth century had thrown at their families, who could blame them?

Yet I had arrived in 1988 at a pivotal moment. Mikail Gorbachev had been in power in Moscow for three years and while he was trying to reform what was proving to be an unreformable economic system, the Soviet Union was loosening its grasp of the satellite states. Hungary, which had long been called 'the merriest camp in the barracks,' was pushing its advantage.



Twelve months after I had moved to Budapest, in March 1989, the Hungarian government let it be known it would re-establish diplomatic relations with Israel (relations had been severed, at Moscow's insistence, in the wake of the Six Day War in 1967).

Before the ink was dry or the Israeli ambassador had even found an embassy, Israel's Prime Minister Itzhak Shamir flew to Budapest to pay an official visit — I took the picture on the left of his entourage arriving in the Jewish community offices. The next week, Zionist organizations were allowed to function again — for the first time since 1948.



By that fall, in October, Hungary announced that it was becoming a multiparty democracy again and a few weeks after that, at the annual Hanukkah dance held in the Gellert Hotel, instead of the two or three hundred souls who normally showed up, I estimated there were close to three thousand and they stretched through the vast hall and out the door.



That was the night a few families I was chatting with told me friends of theirs were talking about opening a Jewish school. But there's already one here. I yelled above the music. "We're Jewish," one of them said laughing, "You think we'd send our kids to that school?" And not long after, a third was announced.



Some older Hungarian Jews told their adult children: stay away. It will come to no good. Look at how our government stood aside in 1944 and how the Soviets came back in 1956 after we chased them out. But many young couples were having none of it. They were walking their children up to the doors of those freshly opened Jewish schools and dropping their kids off on Sunday afternoons at Jewish youth clubs. Then in July, 1990, they drove their children to the village of Szarvas, where a huge Jewish summer camp had just opened.



Almost a thousand kids from eight to eighteen enrolled that July. Most had never been to any sort of Jewish camp before, but by the end of the first day they were competing in singing Hebrew songs, yelling their way through the prayers before and after meals while counselors walked through the dining hall holding posters with the words on them, fiercely playing their hearts out on the basketball court, and late that first night, a few were creeping off holding hands into the high grass, bringing blankets with them. I took the pictures on the left in the Jewish summer camp in 1999.



The Polish dissident turned president Lech Walesa once said that creating a capitalist society out of a communist one was easy — it was like taking an aquarium full of fish and turning it into fish soup. Turning a communist society back into a capitalist one, he said, was much harder. That would be turning the fish soup back into an aquarium full of fish.

It would not be much different in creating a Jewish community again in Hungary after a half century of degradation, deportation, murder followed by decades of persecution and a sense of dread that hung over every Jewish family's history. But at this writing in 2017, a quarter of a century after the changes of 1989, Jews in Hungary are indeed affiliating with their roots and their religion in ways that are comfortable to them. And I was privileged to be there just when all this was about to start and the photographs I took over a twelve year period detail the steps they were taking at this critical time.