

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE JEWS IN HEVES COUNTY, HUNGARY

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Funded, in part, by the "J. and O. Winter" Foundation

INTRODUCTION

This work is the result of one and half decades of research. The majority of the material is from Hungarian public collections in the Hungarian State Archives, the Archives of Heves County and the Archives of Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County. Remembrances from interviews are included from the collective memories of Jewish and Christian families in and around Tiszafüred, Hungary. Until 1950, Tiszafüred was a part of Heves County. In 1995, I published some articles with this theme in a book titled: *The History and Demography of the Jews in Tiszafüred*. While researching the history for this thesis, I discovered a lot of history of the Jews in Heves County. Gratefully, my research efforts were funded, in part, by the "J. and O. Winter" Foundation.

RESEARCH GOALS

The primary goals of this research was to answer important questions regarding the role Jews played in the following areas:

- Jewish immigration and settling in Heves county
- Jewish modernization of Heves county
- Jewish impact upon agriculture, industry, commerce, society and culture in Heves county
- Jewish assimilation in Heves county
- Jewish Holocaust history in Heves county

RESEARCH

Heves County lies on the border of the Northeastern Mountains and the Great Hungarian Plain. At the beginning of the 20th century its territory was 3.761 square kilometres (1452 square miles), the county included six districts, 133 settlements; two cities and four little towns, 255,345 inhabitants lived there. Eger was the county seat, and Gyöngyös was the most important centre of the Jews from the middle ages to the Holocaust. During the last two centuries, most every settlement had Jewish residents. However, in the villages, only a few Jewish families were found and they generally leased their homes and farming from the local landowners. The Jewish population in 1805: was 918 (0.5 %) and in 1859: 6,851 (2.6 %). Their numbers continued to increase and in 1880, there were 10,928 Jews, 5.2 % of the population. Later, with the growth of Hungarian economy, their numbers tapered off because of the economic growth of the county. In 1920, there were 9,371 Jewish settlers and in 1941, 7,053 inhabitants lived there.

Written documents, from the 15th century, indicate the settlement of Jews in Heves County. After the Mohács disaster, Jews were generally driven out of Hungary. In the 16th-17th century, Hungary was occupied by the Turks and Jews lived under considerably safe conditions enjoying religious tolerance. They were engaged in commerce trading goods between the East and West and in finance. Data was found about Jewish settlers in Gyöngyös, Pásztó and Verpelét. Following the expulsion of the Turks from the country, the resettlement of the devastated county started with German, Slovak and other settlers. Jews arrived here, too. The first census of 1736 shows nine Jewish families lived there and that the heads of the families immigrated from Bohemia and Moravia. Increasingly, at the end of the 18th century, more Jews

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settled in the county, mainly on estates, and the creation of Jewish communities began. The Jews were mostly engaged in the agricultural commerce. They were the ones to market the product (wine, grain, leather, etc.) of the large estates and the villages. They first settled in the larger estates and commercial centres, little villages and, later, in the towns.

The most important Jewish communities were at the intersection of major trade routes. Mostly, the landowners settled them in the manors of city houses. Gyöngyös, however, disapproved of this endeavour, because the Jews were rivals to the local tradesmen. The leaders of the town had been trying to expel them until the reform period and their only patrons were the landowners.

The Jews couldn't settle in Eger until 1840. Pyrker, the Archbishop of Eger and the landowner of the town, allowed them to live there. The Jewish population grew progressively and shortly thereafter, they played a key role in the trade, finance and in the industrial life of the town. From the thirties and forties of the 19th century, there are tax censuses with their property status. Most of them were poor peddlers, but we can find rich people too. Tradespeople, leaseholders, some craftsmen, paupers, rabbis, intellectuals and medical professionals lived there during this period. They came mostly from the northeastern counties, only few people came from abroad.

The local Jews participated well above their ratio in the campaigns and battles of the 1848 revolution. The revolution and independence war changed their legal status radically. Jews were permitted to join the revolution's army and the National Guard in the county, too. In Gyöngyös, Rabbi Wolf Lippe described very *enthusiastically* during a service, articles about the fights in Jewish newspapers of Pest. Joseph Hirsch Weiss, the Rabbi of Eger, suffered imprisonment after the defeat, because of his participation in the independence war.

Jews began to establish their own schools in the settlements and the first one was established in 1839 in Gyöngyös. In 1891, there were eleven Jewish schools in the county. In the towns, they created their Jewish communities with synagogues, rabbis, religious foundations and organizations. In addition, there was a Chevra Kadisha, Talmud Tora school and an organization of Jewish women everywhere. The heads of the local communities were always from the richest people.

The half-century preceding World War I was a period of prosperity and advancement for Jewry in the county, too. There was an emergence of an extensive layer of educated intellectuals, well-trained professionals, merchants and landowners who regarded Hungary as their homeland and had no problems in reconciling its Hungarian and Jewish heritage. Jewry has played a key role in the creation and development of the local trade and industry. In Heves county, the Hatvany-Deutsch family played the most notable role of the economy as they owned a large estate in Hatvan. They established the largest sugar industry plant factory in Europe. Later, they became nobles and barons in 1879 and 1908.

Jewish people had a key role in the establishment and direction of most banks. Lipót Kánitz settled in Eger in 1850. He was originally a merchant, later bought an estate and established a starch factory. His son, Dezső, was the most successful Jewish man in Eger. He

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fostered many joint ventures with rich Jewish and Christian people, for example: banks, mills and factories. He became a noble in 1912. In the first part of the 20th century, he was the head of the local Jewish community. In Gyöngyös more rich families played a similar role, from the 18th - 19th centuries, for example: the Hirschl, Spitzer, Günsner, Rusz and Rosenfeld families.

At this time, bankers, economists, scholars, engineers and inventors swelled the ranks of the local Jewry. Jewish writers, poets, artists, actors and directors have indelibly inscribed their names into the history of Hungarian culture. Some of them had local origin, such as: Sándor Bródy, Lajos Hevesi, Lajos Bíró, Lajos Hatvany, writers; Irén Alföldi, the soprano singer of the Opera in Prague, Ede Reményi violist, and the scientists; Gedeon Richter, chemist, Ödön Tisza, chemist, who was the colleague of Edison. His relative, László Tisza (age 93), is a well-known physicist and today he is Professor Emeritus of the University of Massachusetts. György Hevesy (Bischitz) won a Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1944. His family had a large estate in Heves at the turn of the century.

A decisive part of the middle class of the county came from Jewish families. The middle classes, however, were not only accessible through economical status, but also through education and with prominent offices. The Jewish intellectuals of the county, lawyers and physicians, were also characteristic in Hungary. They participated in the direction of the local banks, factories, in the workings of the local government and local organizations. Usually, they also owned an estate. At this time, 210 rich people who were the greatest tax payers, participated in county governance. Among them, in 1907, were 77 Jewish people. This fact reflects their economical potency in this period.

The beginning of World War I broke a labourious, but undeniably peaceful period in the history of local Jewish communities. From the county, more than a hundred Jewish soldiers had taken part in the fights. A lot of people of them died in action and countless returned crippled. The pogroms during these revolutionary times made their situation impossible. During the proletariat establishment of class divisions, there was overhasty and irrational socialisation. After the fall of the direktorium (guides), open or secret anti-Semitic plotting dominated period. The assimilation process, seen earlier, did not start again. In 1920, the sporting clubs of Gyöngyös and Eger decided that they would not tolerate Jews in their clubs anymore. In 1925, Jews were expelled from the Gyöngyös Casino Association. Such tensions and open anti-Semitism naturally contributed to decrease in the number of Jews in the county. Their definitive economic role, however, stayed unbroken.

In 1938, following the German model, three laws were passed that made continued participation in the economy of the county impossible. Their greatest burden, until the German occupation, was forced labour service.

The German occupation brought a radical turning point in the handling of the Jewish question. The order to confine Jews in getthoes appeared on 26 April and impacted 6,601 persons from the county. Ghettos were set up at Eger, Gyöngyös, Hatvan and Tiszafüred. Another ghetto was established at the Bagólyuk mining area, belonging to the village Szúcs. During the period of 8-13 of May, every Jew was moved to a ghetto with only a maximum 30 kg of belongings. The Jews lived in terrible circumstances within the ghettos.. At the end of May, all men in the ghettos

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fit to work were selected and transported for labour service. On 12-13 June, the remaining inhabitants in the ghetto, mostly women, children and old people, were transported to the Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps. After a three-day journey through Kassa, they arrived at the concentration camps. After arrival, the Nazis ordered everybody unselected to the gas chambers. Most of the Heves county Jews died then and many later, too.

In 1949, only seven Jewish communities functioned in the towns and bigger villages of Heves county with 868 Jewish people.