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An Open Secret?

The Dissemination and Reception of News about Auschwitz in Hungary in 1944

Abstract

In this paper, I analyse diaries from 1944 to explore the extent to which ordinary Hungarian civilians were informed of the genocide of the Jewish population. The diaries indicate that information was sparse among the Hungarian population, and mainly obtained, directly or indirectly, from BBC radio broadcasts. The reactions of individual Christian and Jewish diarists varied according to the amount of credit they gave to the broadcasts or the rumours circulating within their social circles. However, both Jews and Christians tried not to give credit to the rumours as the idea of gas chambers and mass gassings was simply inconceivable to the majority of the examined diarists. Even Jewish diarists who had received news of the on-going genocide and feared for their lives thought it more likely that they would be executed by volley fire. For them, this method of mass murder posed a more realistic danger.

The issue of how much information contemporary citizens possessed about the Holocaust is still debated today, and it is especially important to examine this question with regard to Hungary, for several reasons. Within the context of Holocaust history, the Hungarian Holocaust was a unique episode inasmuch as the Germans only occupied Hungary in March 1944, which meant that the deportations took place near the end of the war, by which time even ordinary civilians should have been able to access information about the genocide. Moreover, similarly to other Central Eastern European countries, Hungary has yet to confront its historical past, with postwar non-Jewish generations still collectively exempting themselves from responsibility by claiming that they and their ancestors had not known about the death camps and were therefore in no way responsible for the genocide of the Jewish population. In order to debunk this myth of non-Jewish ignorance, it is worth examining how much information ordinary citizens actually possessed of the death camps in the course of 1944.

Due to a lack of available sources, contemporary horizons of knowledge, especially those of ordinary civilians, are rather difficult to trace, because diaries appear to be the only suitable sources on the subject. In terms of genre, diaries are non-retrospective ego-documents that record what information was available to the diarist at the time of a given event, which makes them especially useful for mapping the dissemination of information among contemporary civilians. However, Holocaust publishing continues to focus on victims, which is why I supplemented published or publically available diaries with privately owned and unpublished diary manuscripts written by bystanders and currently unknown in scholarly literature. In accordance with applicable Hungarian law on the protection of personal information, I completely anonymised the authors of the unpublished diary manuscripts.

For my research, I examined eleven manuscripts written by ordinary civilians, meaning that these diarists did not belong to Hungary's political, military, or eco-

conomic elite. On the other hand, if we consider their social situation or level of education, they did not represent the average Hungarian citizen, as the examined diarists were predominantly middle-class and had all completed high school education or even higher education.

For the purposes of this paper, I included every published or unpublished diary where the diarists explicitly mentioned listening to wartime radio broadcasts or hinted at news or rumours of the death camps and Auschwitz. Some of these diaries are published (the diaries of Miksa Fenyő, Fanni Gyarmati, Ármin Bálint, Éva Weinmann, Lilla Ecséri, Mária Sárdi, and István Pius Zimándi), while the rest are unpublished manuscripts, including Éva Kornássy's diary (which belongs to a public collection), and the diaries I collected by publishing calls for historical ego-documents (the diaries of Matild Forgács, Margit Molnár, and Katalin Horváth). It is important to note that the examined diarists belonged to various religious denominations. With the exception of Zimándi, who was Roman Catholic, the rest of the published diarists were all classified as Jewish during the war, while the authors of the unpublished manuscripts were Christians: Kornássy belonged to the Reformed Church and the others were Roman Catholics.

Historical Background

Before I begin my analysis, I shall provide a brief overview of the persecution of Hungarian Jews between the two world wars, with a particular focus on 1944, as the diaries I examined date back to this period.

As early as 1920, the Hungarian government introduced the *numerus clausus*, a quota system which limited the number of Jewish and female students at universities. Then, from the second half of the 1930s, more extensive antisemitic regulations were introduced, including four major anti-Jewish laws which entered into force between 1938 and 1942.¹ These laws and regulations defined Jewishness in various and increasingly restrictive ways, first on the basis of religious denomination, then based on racial or ethnic background, in order to extend these measures to an increasing number of social groups.

From 1920 onwards, the primary aim of the Horthy system was to reclaim the territories that had been annexed from Hungary after the loss of the First World War. To this end, and in the wake of the global economic crisis, the Hungarian political elite began to gravitate towards Nazi Germany in the hopes of furthering its own foreign policy goals. In 1941, Hungary entered the war on the side of the Axis Powers by launching an offensive against the Soviet Union. During the occupation of the Ukrainian parts of the Soviet Union, both the German and the Hungarian troops played an active role in the genocide of the local Jewish population.² However, in January 1943, the Hungarian Army suffered a devastating blow from the Red Army at the Don Bend, which forced the Hungarian political elite to reconsider its alliance with Germany. Germany was aware of their dissent and, to prevent Hungary's withdrawal from the war, on 19 March 1944 German troops occupied Hungary. After the German occupation, from April 1944 onwards, wearing the yellow star in public became compulsory for Jewish citizens and the authorities soon established temporary

1 Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide. The Holocaust in Hungary*, Detroit 2000, 208.

2 Tim Cole, *Holocaust City. The Making of a Jewish Ghetto*, New York 2003; Krisztián Ungváry, *A Horthy-rendszer mérlege. Diszkrimináció, szociálpolitika és antiszemitizmus Magyarországon [An Account of the Horthy Regime. Discrimination, Social Policy, and Antisemitism in Hungary]*, Budapest 2012.

ghettos in every major settlement except Budapest, where instead of establishing a single ghetto, the authorities designated certain apartment buildings as 'yellow star houses' for the relocation of citizens who were classified as Jewish under the anti-Jewish laws.³

In May 1944, the mass deportation of the Jewish population from the Hungarian provinces began at an alarming rate. By 6 July 1944, more than 400,000 Jewish citizens had been deported. On this date, due to widespread international protests, Regent Horthy halted the deportations, but by that time, only Budapest residents and the labour service units remained in the country, since virtually all other Jewish citizens had been deported to Auschwitz.

Three months later, on 15 October 1944, Regent Horthy made an ill-prepared attempt to withdraw Hungary from the war and join the Allied Forces, but his attempt was sabotaged by the occupying German forces and the extreme right-wing Arrow Cross Party. Upon seizing political power, the Arrow Cross immediately began the violent persecution of Jewish citizens in the capital, during which they and the German troops raided 'yellow star houses', forced the residents to leave the buildings, then marched them to the bank of the River Danube, where the troops murdered them by volley fire.

The Difficulties of Examining Contemporary Horizons of Knowledge Regarding the Mass Gassing of Jewish Deportees

In Hungarian scholarship, the issue of how much information ordinary Hungarian citizens actually possessed about the death camps during the Second World War has not yet been examined, while in international Holocaust scholarship, the issue has predominantly been examined only with regard to the Third Reich. Current research emphasises that from the end of 1942 onwards, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) gave detailed reports of the mass executions and that by June 1944, radio broadcasts also featured news of the death camps and gas chambers, while Nazi propaganda hinted at the genocide by way of propaganda posters and public speeches.⁴ According to Claudia Koonz, in Nazi Germany, knowledge of the unfolding genocide was available to anyone who chose to pursue the subject, which meant that millions of German citizens knew enough to understand that they were better off not knowing.⁵ Ian Kershaw also confirmed that the genocide was an open secret in Nazi Germany, as rumours and gossip came from several channels, including BBC broadcasts, soldiers returning from the front, and the stories of various witnesses.⁶

According to Kershaw, from 1941 onwards German citizens had access to information about the deportations and mass executions and the anti-Jewish atrocities committed by German troops, although their knowledge of the gassings and death camps remained rather limited. Peter Fritzsche argues that German citizens were better informed than the citizens of other countries, but even their information was fragmentary, so they had no knowledge of the entire process of genocide nor access

3 Ágnes Nagy, *Harc a lakáshivatalban. Politikai átalakulás és mindennapi érdekérvényesítés a fővárosban, 1945–1953* [Struggle at the Housing Office. Political Transformation and Everyday Advocacy in the Capital], Budapest 2013, 81–88.

4 Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience*, Cambridge 2005, 267–269.

5 *Ibid.*, 272.

6 Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution*, Jerusalem 2008, 201–207, 223–224.

to the details of its various stages.⁷ Despite the circulation of available information, German bystanders nevertheless continued to regard the rumours with disinterest and moral apathy, mainly because they considered the deaths of Jewish citizens to be but one aspect of the wartime brutalities, one that could not be held comparable to the tragic deaths of more than 5.3 millions of German soldiers on the war front.⁸ According to Fritzsche the failure to recognize these anti-Jewish atrocities as systematic mass murder was also due to the fact that the German government and military carefully filtered all information regarding the gassing of Jewish victims. Although German party leaders often spoke of the murder of Jews in public speeches, they never mentioned the gas chambers, which meant that ordinary German civilians had to rely on rumours and only knew of gassing by vehicles, rather than the use of gas chambers for mass executions.⁹ In summary, rumours of mass execution by gassing were too general and vague in the Third Reich to compete with the more dominant images of mass executions on the Eastern front, where civilian victims were forced to dig their own graves before being executed by volley fire.

Similarly to Germany, in Hungary both the political elite and ordinary civilians had access to information about the ongoing genocide. In 1941 and 1942, the Hungarian Jewish press occasionally hinted at the anti-Jewish mass murders being perpetrated by German troops, while news of the atrocities committed by the Hungarian authorities might have reached the population through Polish refugees or reports from the labour service units.¹⁰ Regent Miklós Horthy and the secular political elite had received news of the genocide as early as 1942 and by November 1943, Hungarian Zionist circles had also received news of the existence of Auschwitz.¹¹ Christian Gerlach and Götz Aly claimed that prior to the German occupation of Hungary, the vast majority of Jewish Hungarians did not believe the rumours of genocide, if these rumours even reached them, or were convinced that if the rumours were true, then only unassimilated Jews would be targeted by the authorities.

In Hungary, László Karsai and Krisztián Ungváry studied the issue of the circulation of Auschwitz-related information within the upper echelons of the political and religious elite. Due to the recent publication of the Auschwitz Records, a document recorded in April 1944 based on the testimonies of escaped prisoners Walter Rosenberg and Alfred Wetzler¹² and brought to Hungary via Zionist leader Rezső Kaszner, György Haraszti also examined the issue with regard to the Hungarian Jewish Council.¹³ All three researchers claim that in 1944, even before the deportations began, both the Hungarian Christian and Jewish political and religious elite had learned of the existence of the death camps, but did not inform the general public or the persecuted Jewish minority in order to avoid panic among the Hungarian populace. Consequently, ordinary Hungarian citizens could only obtain information about the goal of the deportations by listening to BBC radio broadcasts.¹⁴

7 Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich*, Cambridge 2008, 236-240.

8 Jay Lockenour, Review of *Deutsche militärische Verluste im Zweiten Weltkrieg* by Rüdiger Overmans. *German Studies Review*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Oct., 2000), 620-621. here 621.

9 *Ibid.*, 264.

10 Christian Gerlach/Götz Aly, *Das letzte Kapitel. Realpolitik, Ideologie und der Mord an den ungarischen Juden 1944-1945*, Stuttgart 2002.

11 *Ibid.*, 15.

12 György Haraszti, *Auschwitzi jegyzőkönyv [Auschwitz Records]*, Budapest 2016, 5-15.

13 László Karsai, *Holokauszt [Holocaust]*, Budapest 2001, 279-280; Ungváry, *A Horthy-rendszer mérlege*, 527-538.

14 Frank Chalk, *The BBC Hungarian Service and Rescue of Jews of Hungary, 1940-1945*, in: Jacques Semelin/Claire Andrieu/Sarah Gensburger (ed.), *Resisting Genocide. The Multiple Forms of Rescue*, Oxford 2014, 313-330.

According to a contemporary survey conducted during the Second World War, some forty per cent of Hungarian citizens with radio receivers listened to foreign broadcasts (whether British, American, or Soviet), which suggests that news of the genocide of Jews could have potentially reached a wide Hungarian audience. At the same time, we must account for the realities in Hungary during the 1940s, when the majority of the country did not have electricity, which meant that most settlements had no means of listening to the radio at all. Therefore, although historical research suggests that listening to the radio had become a widespread social activity in Hungary,¹⁵ we must remember that this pertained predominantly to the urban middle class, which at the time constituted a rather small portion of Hungarian society. Furthermore, only those living in cities and larger settlements (such as industrial, administrative, or cultural centres) could afford to purchase a radio, which meant that rural Hungary had virtually no access to radio broadcasts.

A regulation issued on the day of the German occupation of Hungary, but only entered into effect on 2 April 1944, prohibited listening to foreign radio broadcasts, including news and music programs. The regulation was later amended to include exceptions, such as the radio broadcasts of countries in military alliance with Hungary, but listening to the broadcasts of the Allied forces had effectively become a criminal offence in Hungary, punishable by two to three months in prison or in camp.¹⁶ From mid-April 1944, Jewish Hungarians were also required to surrender their radio receivers to the authorities, which ensured that a large number of citizens were barred from listening to the news. The criminalisation of listening to foreign radio broadcasts may have also kept some diarists from recording such activities in their diaries. However, not all citizens complied with these regulations, and those who did still had limited access to major news through rumours and gossip.

In my analysis of the diaries of Christian and Jewish Hungarians, especially those who had access to foreign radio broadcasts, I shall indicate BBC radio broadcasts under the umbrella term “BBC”, without identifying the exact version, as these broadcasts were translated into several languages, including the English-language *Home Service*, the German, Slovak, Czech, and Polish services, and the Hungarian service. Due to the fact that the examined diaries only mention these broadcasts as “the BBC” or “the British radio”, without specifying which broadcasts they had listened to, and the fact that some diarists received their information second-hand, I did not attribute any of the information to the broadcasts of the Hungarian service. It is likely, however, that most people listened to the Hungarian-language broadcasts.

The fact that some of the examined diaries contain no information about the genocide does not necessarily mean that the diarists themselves knew nothing of the genocide. However, it is difficult to interpret the apparent silence of these diarists, which prompts the question of what circumstances, expectations, and cultural or moral frameworks could motivate diarists to record such information in the first place. I would argue that several factors were at play, and we can readily identify two

15 Gabriel Milland, *The BBC Hungarian Service and the Final Solution in Hungary*, in: *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 18 (1998) 3, 353–373, here 355.

16 Heléna Huhák/András Szécsényi/Erika Szívós (ed.), *Kismama sárga csillaggal. Egy fiatalasszony naplója a német megszállástól 1945 júliusáig* [A Young Mother with a Yellow Star. The Diary of a Young Wife from the German Occupation until July 1945], Budapest 2015, 65; Zsuzsa Boros, *A Magyar Rádió a német megszállás és a nyilas uralom idején* [Hungarian Radio during the German Occupation and the Reign of the Arrow Cross], in: Tibor Frank (ed.), *Tanulmányok a Magyar Rádió történetéből, 1925–1945* [Studies from the History of Hungarian Radio, 1925–1945], Budapest 1975, 203–238; Zoltán Szász, *A Magyar Rádió a második világháborúban* [Hungarian Radio during the Second World War], in: Frank (ed.), *Tanulmányok a Magyar Rádió történetéből*, 149–202.

closely intertwined factors. The first source of motivation would be whether such information was relevant or applicable to the diarists themselves. This would explain why diarists who were persecuted under the anti-Jewish laws frequently recorded news and rumours of the genocide, while diarists who did not face persecution might have been less concerned about the genocide and therefore did not record related information in their diaries. Another important factor might have been political affiliation, or the extent to which the diarists identified with the political objectives of the Hungarian leadership. Until the second half of 1944, at which point the war front had reached Hungary, the Christian majority supported the war efforts and antisemitic measures of the Hungarian government, and did not question the justness of the war. In other words, as long as they remained safe, the majority did not question the information propagated by official Hungarian radio stations and accepted these official accounts as authentic and truthful. Once the war front reached Hungary, however, these same radio listeners might have been more motivated to turn to the BBC for information, because even those loyal to the Hungarian regime might have been worried about an Allied victory and interested in hearing from those who might ultimately determine their fate.

In addition to personal relevance and political affiliation, I also observed a clear denominational pattern across the examined diaries, with Jewish diarists often having recorded news or rumours about the genocide in their diaries, while Christian diarists almost never mentioned it, not even when evidence clearly suggests that they had listened to the BBC. As mentioned above, how we should interpret their silence is a difficult matter. On the one hand, it is possible that some of these diarists did not listen to broadcasts that pertained specifically to news of the death camps. However, it is highly improbable that news or rumours of the genocide, especially during the mass deportations of the regional Jewish population, never reached those living in Budapest. The lack of information or discussion in Christian diaries suggests a general antisemitic sentiment, closely intertwined with the idea that the Christian diarists largely regarded the news as fearmongering and therefore dismissed such information as irrelevant. However, it is certain that within persecuted Jewish circles, news spread faster and more intensively than among Christian bystanders.

Finally, before I begin my analysis, it is important to note that in the past seventy years, the majority of Hungarian society and its institutions (museums, archives, and so forth) have shown no interest in preserving documents that prove the majority's knowledge of the death camps, since the existence of such documents would disprove their persistent claims of ignorance, still a widespread defensive strategy and an important aspect of collective self-exemption from responsibility. István Bibó, one of the greatest Hungarian political thinkers of the twentieth century, addressed the issue of contemporary horizons of knowledge and the responsibility of the Christian majority as early as 1948. During the German occupation of Hungary, Bibó was working as a ministerial clerk, a position that allowed him to save a number of persons classified as Jewish by issuing fake protection documents. As a contemporary, he examined the role of the majority Christian population in the genocide of the minority Jewish population, as well as their lack of accountability and self-reflection, and confirmed that the majority population did know of the death camps and therefore knew something of the goal of the mass deportations as well.¹⁷

¹⁷ István Bibó, *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination. Selected Writings*, Boulder 1991, 186-187.

Information about the Genocide as Described in Christian and Jewish Diaries

According to the diaries I examined, the political stance of families and individuals greatly determined their radio listening habits. For instance, since Hungarian regulations prohibited listening to the radio broadcasts of non-allied countries, certain Christian diarists regarded listening to foreign radio broadcasts as an act of disloyalty. One example would be Matild Forgács, whose family was so loyal to Regent Horthy and the contemporary political system on account of the fact that her father was a military officer that her diary never even hinted at listening to any foreign radio broadcasts. At the same time, Forgács still received, through her classmates, news unavailable on Hungarian radio stations, but frequently broadcast by foreign stations in 1942. Consider the following excerpt, which pertains to the failed German offensive at Stalingrad: “The Stalingrad counterattack of the Russians has begun. I heard this at school, from girls whose fathers listen to foreign radio broadcasts at home.”¹⁸

Éva Kornássy, born 1925, a Protestant diarist who was attending university during the war, decided to listen only to Hungarian radio broadcasts and eschewed listening to foreign radio broadcasts. However, in March 1944, she received news from fellow students that, following the German occupation of Hungary, Hungary would be bombed by the Allied forces because it had failed to defy Germany: “[...] they listened to the British radio yesterday and they announced that the Hungarian privilege of not being bombed will be suspended.”¹⁹ As these examples show, civilians did not have to tune into foreign radio stations in order to receive news exclusively broadcast through these channels, since such news, if sufficiently interesting or important and relevant to a given audience, would inevitably circulate in the course of everyday communication.

Certain diarists decided to document the radio listening habits of their families, including when they had listened to enemy radio broadcasts, and how they began to question the official Hungarian broadcasts they had once considered truthful and trustworthy. One example is Margit Molnár, born 1927, a Roman Catholic diarist born into an antisemitic lower middle-class family in Budapest, who were extremely loyal to the Hungarian political system and the Hungarian media until the German occupation of Hungary. In 1941, when Hungary launched an offensive against Yugoslavia, despite the fact that just a few months prior both countries had signed a Hungarian-Yugoslavian treaty of eternal friendship, the Molnár family accepted the reasons offered by Hungarian broadcasts as legitimate and just. Molnár herself also agreed with the assertions of the radio broadcasts, which were to the effect that following the separation of Croatia, Yugoslavia as an entity had ceased to exist, which rendered the treaty null and void. Her diary shows that by April 1941, the adolescent diarist had adopted the arguments of Hungarian radio broadcasts as her own and contrasted these views to those of the BBC broadcasts, which she considered the work of the enemy: “Just now, Hungarian radio responded to the vulgar attacks of the British radio. Yugoslavia fell to pieces, so it is no more. And the Croatians have become independent.”²⁰

18 Matild Forgács, *Memoár* [Memoirs], 83. Unpublished manuscript from the author's private collection.

19 Budapest Főváros Levéltára [Budapest City Archives, hereafter BFL], XIII. 41. – Sz. Éva Kornássy, *Naplók 1942–1947* [Diaries 1942–1947].

20 Margit Molnár, *Naplók 1941–1949* [Diaries 1941–1949]. Unpublished manuscript from the author's private collection.

Following the German occupation of Hungary, the nationalist and Roman Catholic Molnár family had become so disillusioned with the current Hungarian political situation that they abandoned their old radio listening habits in favour of foreign radio broadcasts. Although they had once adopted the objectives of the Germans as in line with Hungary's interests, the family rejected the official interpretation of the German occupation as an allied country lending assistance to Hungary and began to regard Germany as an enemy. As their views now clashed with the official views broadcast by Hungarian radio, they turned to the BBC for information, despite the fact that they continued to regard the British as an enemy of Hungary. The BBC broadcasts were such a novelty to Molnár that on 24 March 1944, she wrote an entry about her family listening to the radio in secret:

"We listened to the British radio at night (it has a very frightening tum-tum sound), they were really threatening and jeered that it took the Germans long enough to get a government together. And they said that Sztójay is a satellite government. They called on us to resist the Nazi Germans, because they want to eat up all our food anyway, and gave the good advice of burning the food. We are no such fools, I hope ... Then came a huge beat of a gong, and the good Jewish announcer recited the following: 'Hungary is not privileged anymore when it comes to air strikes. We shall destroy the Hungarian targets as mercilessly as the German ones!!!!'"²¹

It is interesting to note that Molnár presumed the announcer of the foreign broadcast to be Jewish, a presumption inspired by antisemitic prejudice where Jewishness was associated with betrayal and being in the service of the enemy. At the same time, in spite of these notions, Molnár accepted the announcements of the 'Jewish' announcer as truthful.

For the purposes of this paper, I decided to examine published diaries that had not yet been analysed with regard to contemporary horizons of knowledge of the genocide. In this regard, one of the most important published sources is the diary of Hungarian writer and intellectual Miksa Fenyő (1877–1972), who had converted from Judaism to Roman Catholicism a few years after the conclusion of the First World War.²² In the 1930s, Fenyő became a parliamentary representative and as such belonged to a group of liberal politicians that was specifically targeted by the Gestapo during the German occupation of Hungary and later by the Arrow Cross upon their rise to power. In the summer and winter of 1944, Fenyő was forced into hiding in the capital and started keeping a diary where he often recorded news of the gas chambers and the mass deportations to Poland. It is worth noting that at the time Fenyő wrote these entries, it was still uncertain whether Regent Horthy would surrender to international pressure and halt the deportations.

In Fenyő's diary, the first mention of gassing appears in an entry from 25 June 1944, when the deportation of the regional Jewish population to Auschwitz was still ongoing in Hungary. Fenyő, who contemplated the fate of the Jewish residents of Budapest and wondered why Budapest had not yet erected ghettos the way major provincial regional settlements had, composed the following entry:

"They could gun down [the Jews], or cram them into train wagons, where half of them would die on the road, and the other half could be claimed by the Nazis. But no, they have to suffer the various stages of destruction right

²¹ Ibid., unpaginated.

²² Maya J. Lo Bello, *The Holocaust Journal of Miksa Fenyő*, in: *Hungarian Cultural Studies. E-Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association* 9 (2016), <http://ahea.pitt.edu>; DOI: 10.5195/ahea.2016.230 (12 December 2018).

here in Budapest, before murderous hands will seize them at last. In the realisation of this ritual, beyond beauty, goodness, and justice, the eager line of thought that the British might not launch an air strike on Budapest the size of the Hamburg or Berlin air raids while the city had a Jewish population might have played a role as well. In other words, they had to establish the conditions for gradual extinction, to destroy them through starvation, disease, all kinds of physical and mental torture, and providing groups of about ten thousand people to the Germans for gassing tests, and whoever remained despite all this would be executed in the event of a German victory. But also in the case of a Russian and British victory, since it is advisable to dispose of the witnesses.”²³

On 29 June 1944, a few days after the above entry, which only mentioned gas as a means of execution without specifying the exact method, the term ‘gas chamber’ started appearing in Fenyő’s diary, which is no coincidence, as on 26 June 1944, the evening news of the BBC *Home Service* announced “mass gassing in the lethal chambers of the notorious German camp in Polish Galicia”²⁴

As Gabriel Milland’s article on Hungarian BBC broadcasts contains a transcript of the relevant BBC News announcement, I was able to compare it with Fenyő’s diary entry from 6 July 1944. Fenyő’s entry from that day read as follows:

“I heard in the British radio: Eden, the British Minister of Foreign Affairs, stated that according to reliable reports from Poland, entire wagons of Hungarian Jews are being transported there to be killed in gas chambers by the Germans. The British government observes the actions of the Hungarian government with horror and disdain and will do everything in its power to convince Hungary to cease these abominable measures.”²⁵

In the same entry, the gas chambers are mentioned once more: “Eighty of them, spending days or weeks in a closed wagon, without food or water, and for those who survive, the gas chamber.”²⁶

According to Milland, the corresponding BBC News announcement read as follows:

“The Germans transport the Jews from Hungary to Poland by rail. According to Polish authoritative information, between 15th and 22nd May six trains left Hungary a day, packed with Jews. According to Polish estimates more than a hundred thousand of them have already been murdered. The present government of Hungary is assisting in this horrible job. The resolute strategy of the United Nations is to bring into the hands of justice everyone who is guilty of participation in this terrible act. Until then I turn with confidence to my fellow railway workers in Hungary, and ask them to obstruct, delay and hinder the railway transportation of these poor victims to the utmost of their power and to help them flee from the scene of their agony. I ask for this in the name of workers’ solidarity, of Hungary’s future and its national honour, which will otherwise have been stained forever in the final phase of a lost war.”²⁷

23 Miksa Fenyő, *Az elsodort ország. Naplójegyzetek 1944–1945-ből* [The Foundering Country. Diary Entries from 1944–1945], Budapest 2014, 19.

24 Milland, *The BBC Hungarian Service*, 361.

25 Fenyő, *Az elsodort ország*, 42.

26 *Ibid.*, 44.

27 Milland, *The BBC Hungarian Service*, 363.

When we compare the BBC broadcast quoted above with Fenyő's diary entries, it becomes clear that the broadcast did not mention the gas chambers, which means Fenyő had heard of them before, and when listening to the broadcast, he instinctively linked the murder of tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews to previous mentions of gas chambers. It is also interesting to note that although the BBC often urged Hungarian workers in charge of the logistics of the mass deportations to commit sabotage, Fenyő failed to mention this fact in his diary.

Following the entries discussed above, on 8 July 1944, Fenyő wrote another diary entry based on BBC broadcasts and pertaining to the fate of the deportees:

“According to their [the Polish government-in-exile in London – G.K.] reliable information, to date Hitler's Hungarian subjects have provided the Führer with some four hundred thousand Hungarian Jews, a small number of whom – those in good condition – were coerced into forced labour, while the majority were sent directly to the gas chambers, where six thousand Jews were gassed daily.”²⁸

Previously, Fenyő only specified the destination country of the deportations, but on 30 July 1944, thanks to the BBC broadcasts, he also recorded the actual site of the mass murders:

“Fanciful dreams, in which, even if you are being persecuted, it is through regions of old, beautiful memories, to Paris, Arles, Vicenza, and never to Osvice (or what is it called?), where the Germans erected gas chambers and fitted them with every modern convenience known to man.”²⁹

According to Milland, the BBC broadcasts always specified the location of the death camps and used the Polish name (Oświęcim) instead of its more widely known German counterpart (Auschwitz), which clearly shows that Fenyő got his information from the BBC broadcasts, even if he did not remember the exact name at the time of writing his diary.

The fact that citizens classified as Jewish by the anti-Jewish laws had heard of the death camps did not necessarily mean that they believed the news or recognised it as an actual threat to their lives, as exemplified by the diary of Fanni Gyarmati (1912–2014), the wife of one of the greatest Hungarian poets of the twentieth century, Miklós Radnóti (1909–1944).³⁰ Gyarmati and Radnóti both hailed from non-religious Jewish families and both were high school teachers, but due to the anti-Jewish laws, neither was allowed to work for state institutions. They married in 1935, and in 1943 both converted to Roman Catholicism and became devout Christians as a symbolic rejection of their Jewishness. The time of their conversion was deliberately chosen, as they wanted to impress upon Hungarian society that they converted on the basis of religious conviction rather than the desire to exempt themselves from the anti-Jewish laws, which now classified citizens as Jewish based on ethnic background rather than religious denomination. Radnóti was drafted into forced labour service several times, which for Jewish men meant unarmed forced labour on the front lines or, in certain cases, in the hinterlands. At the end of May 1944, he was drafted into labour service for the last time and in November 1944 was executed by a soldier.

The diaries of Miklós Radnóti, written between 1934 and 1943, have been published in several editions in Hungary,³¹ while the more extensive diaries of Fanni Gyarmati, written between 1935 and 1946, were only published after her death in

28 Fenyő, *Az elsodort ország*, 61.

29 *Ibid.*, 126.

30 Fanni Gyarmati, *Napló 1935–1946* [Diary 1935–1946], Budapest 2014.

31 Miklós Radnóti, *Napló* [Diary], Budapest 1989.

2014. The couple belonged to contemporary intellectual circles in Budapest and, based on Gyarmati's diary, rumours and news spread relatively fast in these circles, so their primary channel of information was not the contemporary political papers or the radio, but acquaintances and friends.

Gyarmati's diary offers an extensive account of how news of the deportations and genocide spread in Budapest, both in the circles of the persecuted Jewish minority and among the bystander Christian majority. For instance, just two days after the German occupation of Hungary, Gyarmati recorded in her diary that during their visit to a friend, said friend made a joke about crematoriums. The person in question was a Hungarian and German language teacher called Albert Gerhauser, an important and frequent member of Gyarmati and Radnóti's intellectual circle and the only one who was exempt from the anti-Jewish laws. Like most contemporaries, Gerhauser probably received his information from the BBC³² and, based on Gyarmati's entries, he must have been well-acquainted with the mechanics of genocide, because he also claimed that the deportation of Hungarian Jewish citizens would go according to the 'fool proof' scripts of former deportations elsewhere, and knew that the deportations were being orchestrated by one Adolf Eichmann, even if Gerhauser mistakenly presumed that Eichmann was the town major of Budapest (a misconception shared by other contemporaries as well).³³ The fact that Gyarmati expressed surprise at Gerhauser's account shows that this information was new to her, which means that Gyarmati and Radnóti had received the news from Gerhauser himself. This in turn suggests that news of the genocide spread rather fast in intellectual circles, so we must conclude that the death camps and Auschwitz were not unheard of in Budapest.

Gyarmati's diary clearly shows that both bystanders and the persecuted Jewish minority refused to take the news and rumours seriously. For instance, on 21 March 1944, Fanni Gyarmati and her husband discussed different strategies of escaping from Hungary after the German occupation, during which they mentioned poet Ágnes Erdélyi,³⁴ who at the time lived in Nagyvárad (today's Oradea in Romania) and who was ultimately deported and killed in Auschwitz. Erdélyi was Radnóti's half-sister, and the discussion mentioned in Gyarmati's diary revolved around potential ways of saving her from deportation.

"Aczél is coming around at noon with his fantastic (Swiss?) passport plan. And then Pista Vas and Gerhauser. That monster was at it again with his impossible fancies, regarding Ági [Erdélyi] too, and then told us that our town major was the Eastern European expert in "genocide" and how three hundred thousand Jews, roughly the number living in Hungary, were nothing for the Polish crematoriums, and we had these and these options for escape. [Gerhauser] is a detestable guy, I was completely out of it after that visit, though I did not show it, I just froze."³⁵

In March 1944, just two days after the German occupation of Hungary, the Radnóti's had theoretically received information regarding the impending genocide, which became a constant source of fear in their lives. Consider Gyarmati's entries between April and July 1944, which pertain to the ghettos, the end of the deportations, and the potential fate of the Jewish population after the German occupation. When the ghettos were first established, Gyarmati primarily feared that they would

32 Anna Valachi, *József Jolán, az édes mostoha* [Jolán József, the Sweet Stepmother], Budapest 2005, 205.

33 Gyarmati, *Napló*, 285.

34 *Ibid.*, 538.

35 *Ibid.*, 285-286.

have to leave their home: “Now they write about how Jews must be roped into production. Probably into the most dangerous war factories, for twelve-hour workdays. What do I care, I just want this situation to stabilise, and not be followed by extermination. And let us sleep at home.”³⁶ As we can see, the possibility of extermination as a source of fear was already present in the diary at this time. Towards the end of April, Gyarmati recorded the following entry:

“The plan right now is to intern Jews into endangered areas, into barrack camps. Lord have mercy, I would rather they just shot us dead all at once, instead of these day-to-day surprises and roaming the streets like a hunted animal, looking left and right, pretending to be the most ordinary pedestrian in the world.”³⁷

In mid-May 1944, while Jewish citizens held in the provincial ghettos were being deported en masse, Gyarmati recorded her speculations of what fate might await Budapest residents:

“[The deportation] is already in progress in the countryside. The Nyírség, Kassa [Košice], and Kanizsa camps have been deported of the country. We had completely wilted by the time Feri [one of their friends – G.K.] left. Not that we were expecting anything good, but sometimes I kind of forget that there is a volcano ready to erupt beneath our feet, that there are actual horrors awaiting us. If I could be certain that a well-aimed gunshot to the nape of the neck was waiting for me, I would not mind, but the things that might come before it. The internment, the misery over the suffering of others, and then the end, when no one can find you, and the calcareous moving lime pits, moving graves we have to dig ourselves, into which we will be thrown indiscriminately.”³⁸

We may conclude from this excerpt that entries where Gyarmati envisioned “a well-aimed shot to the nape of the neck” as a desirable and efficient form of mass murder were motivated by her fear of the atrocities committed on the Eastern front by Hungarian and German troops. Gyarmati, whose husband was drafted into labour service several times, must have received news of these atrocities from soldiers and labour service workers, who were participants and bystanders of these events. News of these murders haunted Gyarmati and often emerged in her diary entries from this period, but she never mentioned the gas chambers, which suggests that she was unable to believe that they existed. Compared to her husband’s accounts of the mass execution of forced labour service units, the gas chambers simply did not seem like a real source of danger. For instance, in her entries from the end of April, when the deportation of the regional Jewish population was already in motion, Gyarmati wondered where they were being transported, when two weeks earlier, she had made a diary entry in which she explicitly designated Poland as their destination: “Now they are taking them out of the country in locked wagons, to God knows where.”³⁹ It is also important to note that by May, Gyarmati had precise information of the horrible reality of the ‘transportation’ of deportees.

“They keep taking people away. The entirety of Szabolcs county and the Jewry of Szatmár county as well, they say some 1500 people fit on one train, possibly more. I don’t know if this is accurate or not, they just said that people were crammed into the trains like we often are when taking the worst

³⁶ Ibid., 293.

³⁷ Ibid., 299.

³⁸ Ibid., 308.

³⁹ Ibid., 300.

trams in Pest, but there we have open windows, and hopes of getting off at any moment. Meanwhile, they were locked down, they had to do everything in there, and did not get to eat, so very few survived, definitely not the elderly.⁴⁰

While diarists like Gyarmati acquired their information on the genocide through acquaintances, other diarists kept track of the events via Hungarian media, including Ármin Bálint (1875–1945), a non-religious Jewish banker. Bálint started keeping a diary after his retirement and dedicated his entries to his son, writer and journalist György Bálint (1906–1943), who had been conscripted into labour service on the war front. The first few volumes of Bálint's diary were lost, so I only had access to entries from 1944, according to which in 1943, Bálint received news that his son had died on the Eastern front during labour service. Bálint refused to believe the news and, hoping that his son might still be alive, he started keeping records to share them with his son on his return. Bálint was almost seventy years old at the time and through legal channels, including approved Hungarian media and Hungarian radio broadcasts, he came to the conclusion that the Jewish population was being threatened with extermination, though he did not know any particulars about the methods of genocide.

Following the German occupation of Hungary, Bálint recorded the statements of various Hungarian politicians who had either mentioned the extermination or hinted at it at any way, sometimes specifically by denying it. We must note that inverse interpretations were widespread in Hungary at the time, where the audience automatically understood a piece of information as meaning its polar opposite, so whatever was being denied was accepted as the truth, and whatever was stated with certainty was questioned. A good example would be Bálint's entry from May 1944, where he simply put a question mark after a statement to signal that he did not believe its veracity: "Minister of Industry Lajos Szász: 'Nobody is aiming to exterminate, exile, or exploit the Jews.'⁴¹ A few weeks earlier, Bálint also noted a statement by State Secretary László Endre, who cooperated closely with Adolf Eichmann and played a key role in the deportation of the Jewish population: "[...] the goal is not the extermination of Jews, but to turn rich Jews into beggars and exile the beggars."⁴² At the end of June, Bálint recorded yet another statement by László Endre, in which the State Secretary talked of the "ultimate danger" and said that "it is first and foremost the Jews who must resolve the issue of the Jews, or due to reasons beyond our power, the ultimate danger threatening the Jewish population will irrevocably and relentlessly turn into reality."⁴³ Within another week, Bálint clearly came to expect violence and death when he contemplated the fate of the Jewish residents of Budapest: "What else is left? The last two stages: concentration camp, then deportation and the end."⁴⁴

With regard to contemporary horizons of knowledge, it is also important to examine the entries of adolescent diarists, who recorded news they had heard from their parents and acquaintances.

One of the adolescent diaries I examined belonged to sixteen-year-old Lilla Nagyecséri Ecséry (1928–1986), who was born into a non-religious Jewish family of

40 Ibid., 311.

41 Ármin Bálint, *Feljegyzések Gyuri fiam részére. Napló 1944-ből* [Notes for My Son Gyuri. Diary from 1944], Budapest 2014, 28.

42 Ibid., 26.

43 Ibid., 40.

44 Ibid., 43.

landholders and bankers and grew up in Budapest. She kept a diary in 1944 and 1945, in which she recorded the following news:

“We have never been closer to death than right now. No! I cannot die right now, when I have not even lived yet. But everyone is telling us that unless a miracle happens, the sealed cars will soon take us to our DOOM. They already have in the countryside. One more month and it will be our [Budapest’s – G.K.] turn.”⁴⁵

Another adolescent diarist, Éva Weinmann (1928–1946), who hailed from a non-religious petty bourgeois family, also mentioned the deportees in her diary, but in her case, it was an assumption rather than certain knowledge that they were being killed: “Now, only we are left in the whole of Hungary. Where the others are, only the good Lord knows. All my friends have been taken away [...] God, please save them from the worst, from death! My heart aches so much for them.”⁴⁶

According to the adolescent diary of Mária Sárdi (1929–), a non-religious Jewish girl from a petty bourgeois family, her relatives were informed of the genocide of the Jewish population relatively early by listening to radio broadcasts from London. In February 1944, one month before the German occupation, fourteen-year-old Sárdi noted that the family discussed the subject of extermination: “The Germans have already done a lot of nasty things, they say that the London radio always announces how they took the Jews to the camps and how there are no more Jews in Poland by now, because they gas them and burn them.”⁴⁷

To this day, diaries that were written by bystanders – Christians, for example – remain scarce, and only a few pertain to the subject of the present analysis. Therefore, to counterbalance the lack of available sources, I included unpublished diary manuscripts from bystanders such as Katalin Horváth, born 1933, a Roman Catholic girl who was only eleven years old when she started keeping a diary in 1944. In an entry presumably dating from 1 November during the reign of terror of the Arrow Cross Party:

“The Germans are committing horrible and hair-raising acts against the Jews. Not only do they have to wear a yellow star on their left side, but they are also taken to the ghetto. They write rude and tasteless jokes about them. And they cannot go out, only at such and such times. Jews are not allowed to correspond with anyone or go to Christian houses. Furthermore: they take away their cars and clothes and their nice apartments, they put them on trucks and take them to the ghetto or to Siberia. And there are those, most of them, who are killed (by the German soldiers of course) and turned into soap after they are killed. And out of fear, they either imprison or kill Christians who are anti-German.”⁴⁸

The above excerpt is especially interesting because in spite of the fact that the most prevalent dichotomy during the Second World War in Hungary was to talk of ‘Jews’ versus ‘Hungarians’, Horváth perceived the difference as a matter of religious denomination, rather than race, and also mixed personal experiences, rumours, as well as old and more recent events in her diary entry.

In her entry, Horváth mentioned Siberia as a possible site of deportation, which raises several questions, because unlike other Jewish diarists, Horváth did not even

45 Lilla Ecséri, *Napló, 1944* [Diary, 1944], Budapest 1995, 18.

46 Éva Weinmann, *Weinmann Éva naplója* (1941. okt. 10.–1945. január 19.) [The Diary of Éva Weinmann, 10 October 1941–19 January 1945], Budapest 2004, 12.

47 Mária Sárdi, *Pokoli karácsony* [A Hellish Christmas], Budapest 1994, 22.

48 Katalin Horváth, *Napló, 1941. december 25.–1946. április 3.* [Diary, 25 December 1941–3 April 1946]. Unpublished manuscript from the author’s private collection.

mention Poland. To make better sense of her assumptions, it is important to note that in Hungarian social consciousness, Poland was mostly associated with positive imagery, as political propaganda continued to emphasise, even during the interwar period, the idea of Hungarian-Polish friendship and a shared destiny of the two nations. By contrast, the general perception of Russia had been negative ever since 1849 due to Russia's role in the repression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848/1849. Russia's reputation only deteriorated during the First World War, when Hungarian prisoners of war were deported en masse to Siberia. The idea of Soviet internment continued to haunt Hungarian social consciousness during the Second World War as well, and was one of the key points of anti-Soviet propaganda at the time, which might explain why Horváth designated Siberia as a potential site in her diary.

Although Horváth's entry was written in the autumn of 1944, months after the deportations to Auschwitz, her diary clearly shows that even adolescents had access to information on certain specifics of the genocide, including the idea that the Germans turned the remains of their Jewish victims into soap. With regard to the subject of analysis here, it is also interesting to note that according to Horváth, the majority of deportees were killed by the Germans, a claim that has since been disproved by historical research. This idea, as well as the fact that Horváth designated Siberia as a place of genocide also suggests that she was not aware of the mass executions that were being committed by the Arrow Cross in the streets of Budapest.

We know of very few published diaries written by Christians who explicitly wrote of the deportations of Jews or the fate of the deportees, but their collective ignorance and neglect is itself representative of the general apathy that ultimately facilitated the persecution of the Jewish population. With regard to the horizons of knowledge of contemporary Christian diarists, one source worth examining in detail is the diary of Pius Zimándi (1909–1973), a Cistercian monk who lived in a monastery in Gödöllő, a town near Budapest, and taught Hungarian literature at a local high school. Zimándi began keeping a diary in 1944 at the age of 35, and explicitly documented how Christian circles had received news of the mass executions, which proves that various rumours were in circulation regarding the fate of the deportees. Nevertheless, these rumours mutually weakened their own credibility, which might have played an important role in people refusing to believe them, especially if they themselves were in no danger of deportation. Moreover, in some cases the rumours simply seemed absurd, such as the idea that the deportees were being turned into soap or fertiliser:

“Nobody knows anything certain of the fate of Jews transported abroad. There are various horrific rumours in circulation: the thin ones are turned into fertiliser and the fat ones into soap. Another rumour: in Poland, they corral them into chambers and kill them with toxic gas, etc. Official circles do not inform the nation of the actual state of affairs and the newspapers do not mention any of these facts at all.”⁴⁹

Unfortunately, we do not know how and from where Zimándi had received his information of the genocide, as he never stated his sources nor mentioned listening to the BBC broadcasts. However, his diary clearly shows that ordinary civilians also knew of the goal of the deportations, even if they refused to believe the rumours. If ordinary high school teachers like Zimándi (or Gerhauser, discussed earlier) had access to information about the genocide of the Jewish population, then the genocide

⁴⁹ István Pius Zimándi, *Egy év története naplójegyzetekben: 1944. március 19.–1945. március 17.* [The History of One Year in Diary Entries. 19 March 1944–17 March 1945], Budapest 2015, 110.

could not be considered a secret at all. Zimándi repeatedly returned to the rumours of soap and fertiliser manufacturing, which was often discussed at the time, whether seriously or as a joke, to the effect that the victors of the war would apparently turn the losers into soap. In fact, these rumours were more widespread in Hungary than the method of gassing, to the extent that some Hungarians even believed that in the event of losing the war, the Soviets would also turn them into soap. For instance, as the Soviets approached the war front, Zimándi noted the following exchange during a fleeting conversation with one of his friends: “And then off he went, rushing to Pest. As we parted, he joked: ‘See you at the Kiev soap factory!’ ‘I hope I’ll be turned into toilet-soap’, said I. Pali Sz. looked at me. ‘I’d say fertiliser, you’re mostly bone!’”⁵⁰

In conclusion, my analysis of the diaries of Hungarian Christian and Jewish citizens shows that in 1944, rumours of the death camps, while not common knowledge, were in fact circulating among the residents of Budapest. Some had access to concrete information by listening to the BBC broadcasts, but rumours also spread to those who did not listen to these broadcasts, which clearly refutes the still widespread belief that nobody in Hungary knew of Holocaust. News and rumours of the death camps were even available to adolescents of the era, who might not have known the specifics, but heard from relatives and acquaintances that the deportees were being killed. The majority of examined diaries were consistent, however, in giving little credit to these rumours, and not considering the death camps to be a real, actual source of danger, with the exception of Miksa Fenyő, who never questioned the veracity of the news and believed the information broadcast by the BBC. In rejecting rumours of the genocide, Christians were often motivated by a general and pervasive antisemitism, while many Jewish citizens hoped they might be spared individually. Whenever either group heard rumours of the death camps, the rumours seemed so absurd and inconceivable that they were unable to take them seriously, and instead envisioned the genocide as mass executions by volley fire.

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⁵⁰ Ibid., 240.

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