

## Historical background: Hungary

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The first Jews to settle in what is now Hungarian territory were inhabitants of the Roman province of Pannonia in the 2nd century Common Era. Three legions from Pannonia were sent to Judea to suppress the Jewish revolt (132-135) led by Bar Kochba, and after their victory, they brought Jewish slaves to Aquincum (now the northwestern part of Budapest) and Savaria (today's Szombathely). In addition to these slaves, it is also assumed that Jewish merchants from Rome traveled to Pannonia.

Written documents from the time of the formation of the Hungarian state prove the existence of Jewish communities. In 1251, Béla IV published the Jewish charter, which was later confirmed by all medieval kings of Hungary. Despite the royal protection enjoyed by the Jews of Hungary, they were subjected to numerous hostile decrees from the Church and nobility. In 1349, Jews were expelled from Hungary as a consequence of the Black Death, but they were able to return in 1364.

Large numbers of Jews moved to the growing Hungarian cities in the 15th century. The first "historical communities" were formed at that time in Buda, Esztergom, Sopron, Tata, and Óbuda. After the annexation of Hungary by the Ottoman Turks in 1541, Jews were able to practice their religion and participated actively in commerce. With an influx of Jewish immigration of Sephardim from Asia Minor, Buda became one of the major Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire. Jews also settled in the city of Kecskemet in central Hungary.

After Hungary became part of the Habsburg empire in the late 17th century, Jews were subjected to antisemitic persecution and were prohibited from living in the major cities. Nevertheless, there was an influx of Jews from Poland and Moravia, and the Hungarian Jewish population grew from 11,600 in 1735 to 20,000 in 1769. The reign of Joseph II as Holy Roman Emperor (1740-1790) and ruler of the Habsburg domains (1780-1790) saw a dramatic improvement in conditions for Hungarian Jews, capped by the Emperor's issuance of his Edict of Toleration in 1782, which provided greater religious freedom to Jews and members of other minority religions. By 1787, the Jewish population of Hungary had increased to around 81,000.

The 19th century was a time of assimilation and emancipation for many Hungarian Jews who were granted increased civil rights. A small number of wealthy urban families were the main representatives of Hungarian Jewry during that period. However, from the 1830s, poorer Eastern European Jews began moving to the country in greater numbers. Many Hungarian Jews took part in the 1848/49 revolution, and their social and economic standing rose.

In 1867, Hungarian Jews were fully emancipated and were granted the same political and civil rights as their Christian compatriots. During this time, Jews were active in Hungarian commercial, financial, and cultural life. Religiously, this same period saw the birth of Reform Judaism in Hungary, with Hungarian used as the primary language for religious services in Reform synagogues.

The liberal atmosphere of the late 19th century led to assimilation and, at the turn of the century, many Jews chose Hungarian or German spouses or had their children baptized as Christians. In successive years, Jews made enormous contributions to the development of Hungarian culture, science and industry, and played a particularly outstanding role in Hungarian sports.

After the defeat and dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in World War I, Hungarian Jewry—including many members of the Orthodox and Hasidic communities—suddenly found themselves living within the borders of Czechoslovakia, Romania, or Yugoslavia. In 1919, when the

short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic (in which Hungarian Communists of Jewish origin were depicted as a foreign menace) collapsed, a period of "White Terror" ensued, during which some 3,000 Jews were murdered.

In the 1920s, the situation became more stable, but by the late 1930s, the first of a series of antisemitic laws was enacted, restricting socio-economic activities of Jews in Hungary.

Following the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the short-lived 1919 Socialist-Communist regime in Hungary under the leadership of the Communist Bela Kun, Hungary was led for 24 years by a conservative authoritarian government under Admiral Miklos Horthy. Horthy himself considered himself an antisemite, and was quoted as saying, "I have considered it intolerable that here in Hungary everything, every factory, bank, large fortune, business, theater, press, commerce, etc. should be in Jewish hands, and that the Jew should be the image reflected of Hungary, especially abroad." Still, Hungarian Jewry lived in relative security through the 1920s and most of the 1930s. Between 1938 and 1941, Hungary's Jewish population grew to an estimated 825,000, including some 100,000 converts to Christianity, as the result of Hungary's annexation, with German and Italian support, of southern Slovakia and Subcarpathian Rus from Czechoslovakia in, respectively, 1938 and 1939| northern Transylvania from Romania in 1940, and the Backa region from what had been Yugoslavia in 1941. Between 1938 and 1941, the Horthy regime also enacted racial laws modelled on Germany's Nuremberg Laws that reversed the emancipated status Hungarian Jewry had enjoyed since 1867.

According to a 1941 census, 6.2 percent of the Hungarian population of 13,644,000, i.e., 846,000, were considered Jewish according to the racial laws in place at that time. 725,000 of them were identified as Jewish by religion: 184,000 in Budapest, 217,000 in the pre-1938 provinces, and a total of 324,000 in Northern Transylvania, Carpatho-Ruthenia, southern Slovakia and Bácska—territories seized from neighboring countries.

At the beginning of World War II, Jews were barred from serving in the Hungarian military, but male Jews were conscripted into forced labor battalions where they were subjected to such harsh treatment and conditions that 27,000 are estimated to have died prior to the German occupation of Hungary in March of 1944.

In 1941 the Hungarian government deported 20,000 non-Hungarian Jews to German-occupied Ukraine in 1941 where they were shot by the paramilitary SS Einsatzgruppen. The following year, Hungarian soldiers murdered some 3,000 Jews and Serbs in the formerly Yugoslav city of Novi Sad. However, the Horthy regime refused to hand Hungarian Jews over to the Nazis until March of 1944 when Germany took over control of Hungary.

Large-scale deportation to the Nazi death camps began after German troops occupied Hungary in March 1944, but even though deportations began so late in the war, they were carried out with frightening speed.

In April of 1944, the approximately 500,000 Jews living outside of Budapest were forced to live in designated cities. Then, in less than two months beginning in mid-May of 1944, around 440,000 Jews were deported from Hungary to Auschwitz-Birkenau on more than 145 trains in what was the most effective and most efficient such operation of the Holocaust. The vast majority of these Jews, around 320,000, were murdered immediately upon arrival at the death camp. In Budapest, meanwhile, the capital's Jewish population was herded into a ghetto and terrorized by Hungarian Arrow Cross gangs

that murdered Jewish men, women and children indiscriminately. Many Budapest Jews were taken to Germany on death marches on which large numbers of them perished.

In the late spring and early summer of 1944, Gilel (or Hilel) Storch, the head of the Swedish Section of the World Jewish Congress, devised and financed a plan for a Swedish diplomat to undertake a rescue mission. With the support of the Swedish government and the US War Refugees Board, Raoul Wallenberg was recruited to travel to Budapest where he provided certificates of protection and forged documents that saved the lives of thousands of Jews. Similar rescue operations were undertaken in Budapest by Swiss diplomat Carl Lutz and the Italian Giorgio Perlasca who posed as a Spanish diplomat.

Only around 255,000 Jews, less than one-third of the 825,000 who had lived within enlarged Hungary in March of 1944, survived the Holocaust. Up to 600,000 Jews from "Greater Hungary" perished in the Shoah.

After the war, some 200 Jewish communities were reconstituted, but most dwindled rapidly due to migration to Budapest and emigration from the country. In 1946, anti-Jewish sentiment led to the pogroms in Kunmadaras, Miskolc and elsewhere. Communist rule resulted in the closure of many Jewish institutions and the arrest of Jewish activists. Many Jews were expelled from Budapest, but later allowed to return.

During the 1956 uprising against Communist rule, 20,000 Jews opted to leave the country. However, the situation of Hungarian Jewry began to improve in the late 1950s. The community was allowed to reestablish links with the Jewish world, and with the collapse of Communism, all restrictions on ties with Israel were also lifted.

After the fall of communism, the general religious and social revival led to a renaissance of the Jewish population in Hungary, which numbered approximately 80,000-100,000. Zionist organisations, civil and youth associations, cultural, educational and sports life, Jewish educational and organisational networks have been strengthened, and international relations have also increased.

Since the fall of communism, the Hungarian Jewish community has been active and committed to religious and cultural practices. Budapest boasts a wide variety of Jewish institutions catering to nearly every type of Jewish expression, but in the countryside, hardly any Jewish life remains.