

# THE HOLOCAUST IN HUNGARY

When the Germans entered Hungary on March 19, 1944, its more than 800,000 Jews were the last intact Jewish community in occupied Europe. Between May 14 and July 9 – in less than two months and on the very eve of Allied victory – more than 400,000 were deported to Auschwitz, where 75% were killed immediately.

Such swift, concentrated destruction could not have happened without the help of local collaborators – help Adolf Eichmann clearly expected when he brought only 200 staff with him to oversee the deportations. Collaborators included the government, the right wing parties, and the law-enforcement agencies, bolstered by the tacit approval of most non-Jews and Church authorities. Indeed, laws allowing synagogues to be expropriated for secular use and the many private requests for real estate and other property formerly owned by Jews, indicate that few expected any Jews to return.

The Vatican, the International Red Cross, the Allies, and the neutral powers also had a role in the catastrophe, since it took place when details of the “Final Solution” – especially the Hungarian situation – were already known to them. In summer 1944, at the height of the deportations, the Allies rejected Jewish underground leaders’ pleas to bomb Auschwitz and the rail lines leading to it, claiming that bombers flying from Britain were incapable of attacking Poland and could not be diverted to targets not “military related.” To be sure, pressure from President Roosevelt, Sweden’s king, and the pope – combined with the success of Operation Overlord and the Soviet Union’s summer offensive and Allied intimations they would carpet-bomb Budapest if its Jews were deported – did force Regent Miklos Horthy to stop the trains on July 7, 1944. However, it was too late to save the provincial Jews and it did not prevent the violently antisemitic Arrow Cross Party from massacring hundreds of Budapest’s Jews – actions only partly offset by the rescue work of Raoul Wallenberg and his aides.

As for the Jewish populace, most either had no concrete knowledge of death camps and mass murder or dismissed such talk as rumor and propaganda. Like many of their leaders and like the rest of European Jewry, they could not credit such atrocities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And those leaders who, like world Jewry’s leaders, had some knowledge of the situation placed too much faith in diplomatic negotiations to “ransom” the Jews – negotiations that saved some lives but that did not stave off the deportations.

In the end – abandoned and defenseless, without allies or any real recourse – Hungary’s Jews were completely unaware of what lay ahead. Elie Wiesel, whose community of Sziget was deported in May 1944, has said, “The diplomats in the western capitals knew about the Holocaust, but the Jews of Hungary did not.”