Dealing with the betrayal of the Holocaust

Jews return to Hungary to try to heal old wounds

By YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

BUDAPEST—A monument to Hungarian Jews who died in the Holocaust was to be dedicated in this city in July, and the sponsor, a group called the Emanuel Foundation, offered me a plane ticket to cover the event. Hundreds of Hungarian-born survivors would be returning to Budapest for the ceremony.

Until now, the large survivor gatherings had occurred either in Israel or the U.S., in the places of post-war Jewish reconstruction. There was nothing left for Jews in Eastern Europe; the communist governments had forbidden even mourning. But now, suddenly, Eastern Europe is accessible. And the first group to rush through the opening were the Hungarian Jews. They had chosen to memorialize their dead not in Jerusalem or New York but in Budapest; though they themselves might deny it, they remain irresistibly drawn to Hungary.

The survivors were returning not only to mourn but to build. The Emanuel Foundation had begun a multi-million-dollar fundraising campaign to restore Jewish life in Hungary, whose Jewish community of perhaps 80,000 makes it by far the largest in the former Soviet bloc. Only the Soviet Union itself contains a greater number of Jews, but they are now fleeing rumors of pogroms. Jewish renewal in Poland and Czechoslovakia would be largely symbolic; only Hungary's Jews have the chance to create a substantial Jewish community in Eastern Europe.

It was no coincidence that so many Jews had remained in Hungary after the war, and that Hungarian emigres would be the first, perhaps the only, Holocaust survivors to return as a group to their birthplace. Nowhere else in Eastern Europe had Jews been as widely assimilated as in pre-war Hungary. Even Hungary's Orthodox Jews had been enthusiastic patriots: unlike Orthodox Jews elsewhere, their first language was not Yiddish but Hungarian.

My grandfather, the president of the Orthodox community of his town in Transylvania, had fought for Hungary in the First World War. One of his few photographs to survive the Holocaust— torn in one corner and with a crack running across it—shows him in his Austro-Hungarian uniform, a mustached young man with a plumed helmet. When the Romanians occupied Transylvania after World War One, my grandfather refused to speak Romanian in the house. Instead, on principle, he continued to speak Hungarian, and awaited the day when the Hungarian army would return and liberate Transylvania.

The Hungarians returned in 1940. They brought with them not the liberal rule of Emperor Franz Jozsef, whom my grandfather revered, but the pro-Nazi regime of Admiral Horthy. Anti-Jewish laws were passed; my father was among thousands of young Jewish men drafted into forced labor brigades. Still, this was not yet the Holocaust. While Jewish Europe burned around them, most Hungarian Jews continued to live more or less normally; the war even brought prosperity. Then, in 1944, to prevent Horthy's surrender to the Allies, the Nazis occupied Hungary. My father escaped to the forest; his parents died in Auschwitz.

RIVKA PERGAMENT

Hungarian Prime Minister Jozsef Antall tells Jews gathered in Budapest that "We want to accept you among us as full and equal citizens." His audience includes (front row, l-r) Gustav Zoltay, president of the Hungarian Jewish community; Israeli cabinet minister Zevulun Hammer; Leslie Keller, president of the Emanuel Foundation for Hungarian Culture (in white hat); Hungarian President Arpad Goncz; and (two people to the right) Edgar M. Bronfman, president of the World Jewish Congress.

My father never forgave Hungary for rejecting the Jews. The Hungary I learned of from him had no existence separate from the Holocaust. The Hungarians were either spectators to genocide or active collaborators: the only indignation they showed was when survivors returned to reclaim their plundered homes. Whatever good existed in Hungary, whatever it was that my grandfather had loved in its culture, I was told nothing about. My father was the only one of his friends—all of them Hungarian survivors— who spoke of "home" without nostalgia, recalling instead the unbearable paradox of Jewish love for Hungary and Hungarian hatred for the Jews. Most of my father's friends spoke to their children in Hungarian; in our home we spoke English. By denying his children any fondness for Hungary, my father tried to retroactively undo his father's shame: the shame of a man who loved a country that didn't want him.

I wondered what my father, if he were alive today, would think of his fellow survivors returning en masse to the place of their humiliation, showing their trust in Hungary by memorializing their dead there and, even more, by supporting a Hungarian Jewish renewal. Would he be outraged by their naivete, their persistent illusion of Hungarian good-will?

One day, shortly before his death, my father announced his intention to visit the town of his birth, and take the family with him. Never before had he shown any interest in such a trip. It might have been nothing more than a nostalgia that comes with age. But that nostalgia suggested a truce with his past. He died before he could go back; now I was going instead. I would be the first of our family to "return"—to a place I had never seen and had been taught to regard as untouchable.

Yiddish Kingdom

On the plane to Budapest I sat beside a young Jewish couple from Brooklyn. For much of the flight they bickered, in a Jewish way, mocking each other without ever raising their voices. I assumed they were coming for the dedication of the Holocaust monument, but no: they were on vacation. In fact they hadn't heard of the monument at all.

This was to be their third vacation in Budapest. The husband said, "You'll love the Hungarians. They don't care about anything." He was from Brooklyn: that was meant as a compliment. "Nothing bothers them. Even under the communists, they'd stand right in front of the KGB headquarters in downtown Budapest and make jokes about the government."

I asked, "What about anti-Semitism?"

"I never heard anything. I'm telling you: You're gonna love it. Budapest is as nice as Paris. You got restaurants as good as Paris any day—and much cheaper. Whatever you want, you can get in Budapest. It's better than Paris. But don't tell anyone."

"Don't tell anyone," the wife mimicked.

This man's enthusiasm startled me. Could a Jew really have such an unburdened relationship with Hungary: a great cheap place to vacation?

The Hungarians on the plane were returning from Western vacations. I listened to their speech: hard words accented on the first syllables, a singsong trying to soften the sounds. Those were some of the most familiar, if incomprehensible, sounds to me. As a child I thought Hungarian was a Jewish language: everyone I knew who spoke it was a Jew. I was genuinely surprised the first time I heard non-Jews speaking Hungarian; it was as if they had been conversing in fluent Yiddish. I had prepared myself now for an entire country that spoke Hungarian; but part of me still found that notion absurd, as if I were going to a Yiddish kingdom that had been hidden away and somehow survived the war.

On the bus to the Budapest airport terminal, young men told jokes, and all the Hungarians, including apparent strangers, joined the loud laughter. Then a policeman appeared. Instantly everyone was silent. The policeman accompanied a man who seemed to be looking for someone; he scanned the bus, shook his head at the policeman and they left. Just as abruptly as it had ended the joking began again, now obviously about the policeman and his search. This is how Hungarians must have adapted under communism: formal obedience undermined by irreverance. In their boisterousness, their evident irony, these people reminded me of Israelis. Was that why I felt on familiar ground?

Condensed Process

My five-star hotel, courtesy of the Emanuel Foundation, was just outside the boundaries of the old Jewish ghetto. The narrow streets were lined with peeling and soot-colored apartment buildings, some of them built around courtyards. The Nazis had hastily created the ghetto in 1944—hastily, because they were losing the war and hadn't much time left to kill the Jews. Elsewhere in Europe, the Holocaust process had taken years: marking the Jews with yellow stars, separating them into ghettos, weakening them with hunger, controlling them through a pliant Jewish leadership, confusing them with constantly changing regulations, deceiving them with rumors of hope. In Hungary, this process was condensed into months. Here, despite oneself, one had to ask: Why? What was the purpose of this rush to kill? Destroying Hungarian Jewry offered the Nazis no possible gain. The opposite: they were harming their own war effort by diverting men and trains for the Holocaust. What would possess a nation fighting invading armies on all fronts to accelerate a militarily useless campaign against a civilian population?

The ghetto area begins just off the main commercial avenues. It is only a few minutes' walk to the banks of the Danube, with its palatial parliament, domed museums, spired churches, grand hotels. The faded apartment buildings boasted classical moldings, lions and goddesses, pillars built around arched windows. Physically, the city has changed little since the war. Here one realizes how modern—how familiar—was the world in which the Holocaust happened.

I thought of my father walking these streets. In 1943, he escaped from his forced labor brigade in the Hungarian army. He could not return to his parents' town, where the police would easily find him; so he came to Budapest, to get lost in the big city. He rented an apartment with another Jewish fugitive, a rabbi from Poland, who had entered Hungary hidden in a hay-covered wagon. The rabbi told him what was happening across the border. My father became convinced that the Nazis would invade Hungary and that all its Jews would die; but when he tried to warn people he was dismissed as an alarmist, a Zionist demagogue. Even if those horror stories were true, Jews told him, Hungary wasn't Poland: the Hungarian government and people would protect their loyal Jews.

What was it like for my father to live in a thriving city while imagining imminent doom? Watching Budapest's shuffling derelicts, I thought: perhaps they would have understood my father, living an opposite reality from everyone around you.

But I could not hold my father's terror for long. Budapest was filled with new life, an exuberance that intruded on the past. Crowds gathered around long tables piled with books, set up at entrances to subways and on nearly every downtown corner. Kiosks offered new literary and political magazines, as well as dailies mimicking Western tabloids, a Hungarian edition of *Playboy* and the kind of pornography which deserved confinement to special districts. Budapest was indiscriminately absorbing the West, trying to make up for lost time. Stores sold random Western goods. One store window displayed a computer diskette case, a washing machine, toy cars: their single common denominator was that they all came from the West.

It seemed strange to me—almost intrusive—to have come to Budapest for a Holocaust memorial at this

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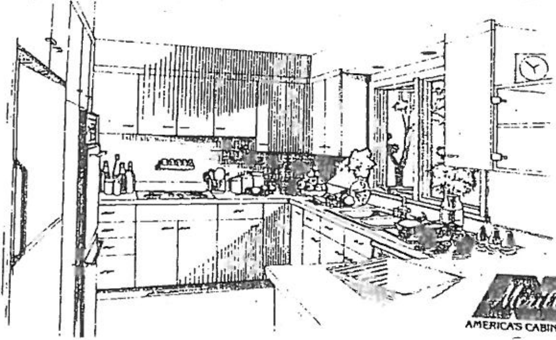

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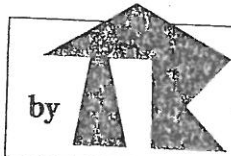
by  TRI-BORO
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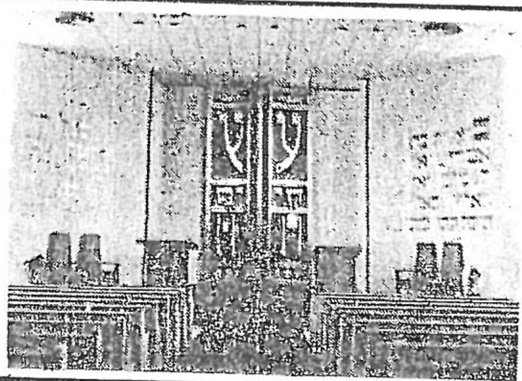

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Hungary

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time. And yet just as Budapest was moving, however confusedly, into a new era, it was beginning to confront old wounds and grievances. Past and future had been suppressed by communism, and Hungarians were now looking toward both with equal fascination. The city's many used book stores displayed old maps of Hungary, which contained territories like Translyvania that had been lost to Romania after World War Two. When newspapers published stories about Transylvanian cities and towns, they used their old Hungarian names. Nearly all the non-fiction books being sold on the streets were about the past: the imposition of communism on Hungary, the 1956 Revolution against the Soviets, the murder of prime minister Imre Nagy. And the Holocaust: in one bookstore alone I saw three separate titles about Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved thousands of Budapest Jews during the war.

Past and future seemed to compete, one displacing the other. And into this confusion came hundreds of Jewish expatriates, bringing their own suppressed wounds and conflicts of identity, their own confused sense of time.

A Defector From Hungarian Identity

The Dohany Street Synagogue is the largest synagogue in Europe, the second largest in the world. It was built in the last century, a monument to Hungarian Jewish grandeur. Its great central dome is flanked by silver-domed towers. With its two balconies, which rise one atop the other and nearly encircle the sanctuary, the synagogue can seat 3,400 people. Enormous organ pipes—it is a Reform temple—line either side of the Ark of the Torah, which is the size of a comfortable room.

In 1944, the Dohany became home to thousands of uprooted Jews sent into the ghetto. People slept in the pews and the balconies, relieved themselves in the corners of the sanctuary. Others waited in the Dohany's courtyards to take the place of those inside who died of hunger and disease. Armed Hungarian fascists invaded the building, shooting at random. Five thousand Jews who died here are buried in a mass grave in one of the Dohany's courtyards.

The Dohany never recovered from the violation of its dignity. The walls are peeling, the pews are chipped, the stone steps cracked. Rubble collects in the hallway. A plastic bubble protects the central dome from collapse.

And yet the synagogue is still used, on holidays, not on ordinary Shabbats. But on one Shabbat in July it opened in honor of several hundred guests from abroad, who had been brought by the Emanuel Foundation for the dedication of its Holocaust memorial. These were special guests, for the repair of the Dohany is one of the Emanuel Foundation's main goals. And so the Dohany put on its best face. A cantor sang, accompanied by the synagogue's powerful organ and surprisingly good choir. The rabbi, a young man in a goatee, wore a black robe and a stiff peaked black yarmulka. When it came time to take the Torah out of the Ark, its velvet curtain was lifted by electronic control.

The Dohany's attempt at dignity seemed absurd, a performance in a graveyard. Why not leave the synagogue to its slow decline, admit that death had defeated the grand pretenses of those who had built it? There are enough beautiful synagogues in the world, monuments to Jewish persistence; let there be one broken synagogue where Jews could come and contemplate mortality, the futility of all ambition.

And yet one had to respect the Dohany's refusal to surrender to shabbiness. There was even a bar mitzvah celebration, a wide-cheeked Budapest boy in a tuxedo, proof that the Dohany could hold new life. The boy read his portion of the Prophets with fluency, in an archaic Hebrew that turned vowels into sounds of "oy" and which is heard now only in hasidic synagogues, never in Reform temples. When he finished he looked around and grinned widely. The people in the pews stood and shouted "Mazel tov!"; some were so enthusiastic that they violated synagogue decorum and applauded.

I sat beside a man named Tamas Fulop and his young son. Tamas, formerly of Budapest, now lives in Washington D.C. He is very tall, with short blond hair. Perhaps because he is gentle and soft-spoken, he seemed younger than his 41 years.

We spoke about the possibility of a Jewish renewal in Hungary, and Tamas said, "It's finished here. People will tell you all kinds of things: they're opening a new Jewish school, they're starting organizations. It's at best temporary. Even an occasional bar mitzvah won't change the reality. To be a rabbi here means to be a nurse in a cancer ward. A Hungarian Jew has to decide what is more important to him: to be a Hungarian or a Jew. If the answer is to be a Jew, he has to pack up and leave."

Tamas's emotional break with Hungary happened in 1967, during the Six Day War. He said, "I don't want to use big words, but the war was a revelation to me. The anti-Zionism of the Hungarian government and press shocked me. I couldn't believe this was happening in Hungary. Until then I thought of myself as a Hungarian Jew. A part of Hungarian society. But after 1967 I couldn't ever see myself as a Hungarian again."

Tamas began getting together regularly with friends, to discuss Israel and Zionism. Though they had no political agenda, their meetings were dangerous and illegal. "You see that flag," Tamas said to me, pointing to the Israeli flag on the Dohany's platform. "You probably think, so what, it's just a flag. But this is the first time I have ever seen an Israeli flag in Hungary. Under the communists, if you showed the Israeli flag you would go to jail."

In 1970, Tamas defected to Israel. At first he offered no details about his escape; he gave only very brief replies to my questions. "Daddy," his son, Dan, said, "tell him about the guy you escaped with." Tamas stroked Dan's head and smiled, but didn't tell me the story. Tamas had lived too long in the West to worry about revealing dated secrets. Instead, his reticence came from modesty: he preferred not to boast of his past.

He said, "I didn't tell anyone I was going, not even my parents. It was too risky. One day I just left—through Yugoslavia."

"Daddy," Dan insisted, "tell him how you got out of Yugoslavia." But Tamas said only: "From Yugoslavia I made my way to Israel. Then, after a year, I went to America."

A few days after Tamas's escape, one of his friends from the Zionist discussion group was arrested; the police were also looking for Tamas. Tamas hadn't at all suspected he might be arrested; he had simply decided to leave at that time. Tamas's friend was sentenced to a year and a half in prison for "Zionism"; Tamas received three and a half years in absentia.

Nevertheless, Tamas returned to Hungary, to visit his family, in 1981. "Of course I was taking a chance. But a lot of time had passed and things had gotten a little better here. I thought they would forget about me, and they did."

I had assumed that Tamas was in Budapest now for the unveiling of the Holocaust memorial; but he had come instead to bring his grandmother—the last remaining Jew in her town—back with him to the U.S. It seemed fortuitous, though, that Tamas had chosen this time to come: though he had been born after the Holocaust, that was the central event of his life.

He said, "I don't stop thinking about the Holocaust for a single day. That's how it is in my family. When my mother and grandmother sit down to eat, after two minutes they're already talking about Auschwitz. 'Do you remember when so and so stole a potato?'

"For me the biggest question is how the Hungarian Jews could have been so unprepared. The Nazis came here in 1944, five years after the war began. But still the Hungarian Jews didn't know what to expect. I'll probably be wondering about this for the rest of my life."

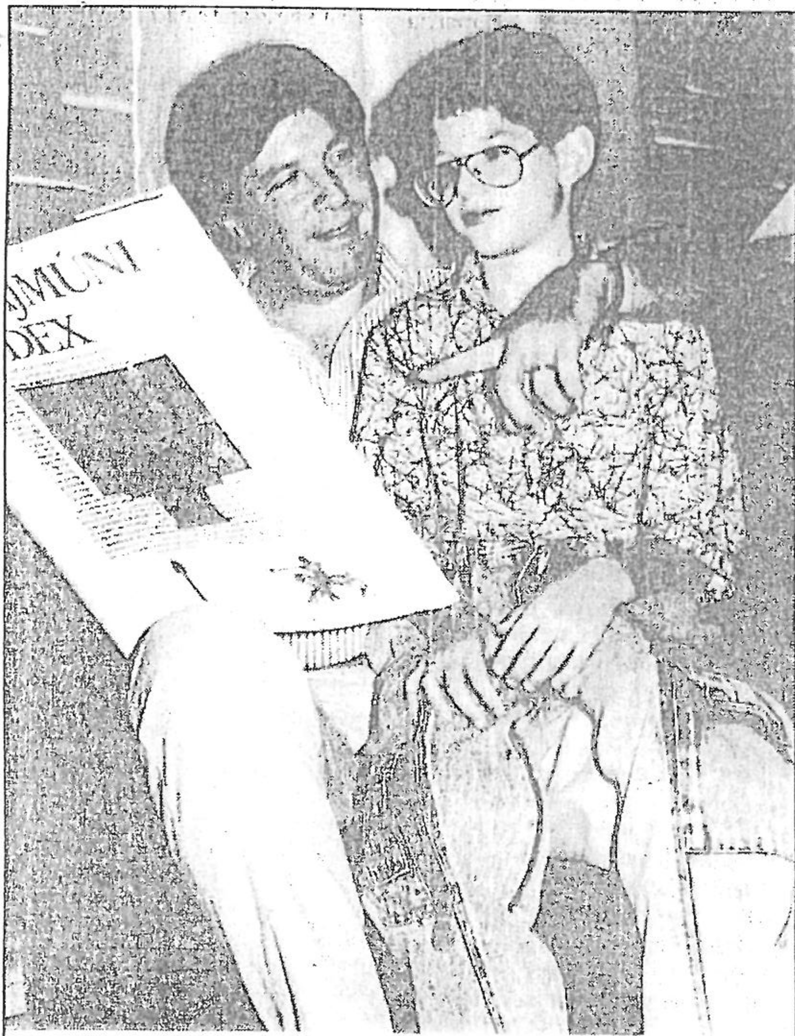
I asked, "Why do you think they were so unprepared?"

He said, "Hungarian Jews had a unique ability to delude themselves. They thought nothing could happen to them because they were good Hungarian patriots. When you're in love with a woman, you don't know what to bring first—chocolates, flowers. The Hungarian Jews were infatuated with Hungary; they couldn't see the danger.

"My grandmother told me about two Zionist emissaries who came to her town, just before the Nazis invaded. They spoke in the synagogue and said: Doom is coming. The Jews became very angry and threw them out of the synagogue. 'We are Hungarians; there's no need to speak like that.' And these were Orthodox Jews, not assimilationists."

"Tamas, you said to me that you yourself were shocked by the anti-Zionism of the Hungarian government in 1967. And you grew up *after* the Holocaust. Why are Jews here always so surprised by Hungarian hostility?"

"It's true: I was also naive. We all



NA'AMA BATYE LEWIN

Tamas Fulop and his son, Dan. Fulop, now an American citizen, was convicted in absentia of "Zionism" by Hungarian authorities in 1970, soon after he left the country.

'It's never too late to try to make up for the past.'

have a love-hate relationship with Hungary. I always say to myself, 'I'm not going back there; it's finished for me.' Then I come back. I see all the familiar streets, I see the people and I feel that I'm just as much—"

He stopped himself and smiled. "I'm a Jew visiting Hungary. That's all. If they told me now, 'Okay, we accept you, you can be part of Hungary,' for me it's too late."

Of course it was too late: he had made a new life elsewhere. And yet I sensed that Tamas, this defector from Hungarian identity, was hoping to be reconciled with his former home, even from a distance. Despite himself, Tamas remained a Hungarian Jew.

He said, "Jews gave so much to this country. The Hungarian people have no idea how much of their literature and art was produced by Jews. For 150 years Jews waited for some kind of recognition from the government about their contribution; but it was given very rarely. Even today, if you read the Hungarian Jewish newspaper in America, you'll see how grateful they are for any sign of recognition from the Hungarian government. But the time to have appreciated the Jews was when they were still in Hungary. Now the Jews are gone."

"Not all," I said.

Tamas immediately softened. "It's never too late to try to make up for the past. But I'm not talking about a one-time announcement. I mean a real effort to teach children in schools about the Jewish history in this country."

"If that happened, Tamas, would *you* feel grateful to Hungary?"

"Yes, I would feel grateful," he said. "And very proud."

A New Hungary

The Emanuel Foundation's monument to the Holocaust is in one of the courtyards of the Dohany synagogue. The sculpture resembles a weeping willow, whose supple white branches arch toward the ground. The leaves on the branches function as substitute tombstones: each one contains the name of a Jew killed in the war.

On the morning of the monument's dedication, several thousand Jews crowded the courtyard and the adjacent street, which police had blocked to traffic. It would have been easy for a Jew visiting from the West, accustomed to gatherings like this, to miss its historical significance. For the first time since the war, Jews were collecting in the streets of Budapest. And they were protected by Hungarian police. Hungary's new conservative government had also helped subsidize the memorial. In so doing it became the first of Eastern Europe's post-communist governments to try to make peace with the memory of the Holocaust.

While waiting for the ceremony to begin, I spoke with a young man who told me he had left Hungary and then moved back last year. Hungary had still been governed then by the communists; even granting the Jewish passion for Hungary, this Jew's loyalty seemed excessive. I wanted to ask him whether he had returned because of love for Hungary or disappointment with Israel. But just then, Jozsef Antall, the new Hungarian prime minister, was introduced and we both turned to the podium.

Suddenly, the young man I had just been speaking with began shouting at Antall: "Put on a yarmulka!" Antall was bareheaded; unlike American politicians, he was new at the etiquette of Jewish ceremonies. I tried to calm the young man. "Look," I said, "a lot of Jews here aren't wearing yarmulkas either." But he continued shouting. I moved away, hoping no one would identify me with him.

Antall, a middle-aged man with a double chin, a former museum director, spoke in a monotone, without eloquence. But one statement, addressed to the Jews of Hungary, was remarkable: "We want to accept you among us as full and equal citizens, whether you identify yourselves first as Hungarians or first as Jews." No Hungarian leader had ever spoken so frankly and sympathetically to the Jews about their conflict of identity. What Antall was really saying to Hungarian Jews was this: We understand your ambivalence about your place here; and we will accept you on your terms, not ours.

Hungary's new president, Arpad Goncz, came to the podium. He was a small old man with a thin mustache, a playwright who had sat in prison for eight years after the 1956 Revolution. Goncz said, "It took 40 years for us to meet together freely, Jews and non-Jews, and to be able to say what is in our hearts. The six million are all equally victims, but we are now mourning the 500,000 Hungarian Jews who were closest to us. The Holocaust is not only a tragedy of the Jews but of the Hungarians: a half-million Hungarians were killed.

"We are here to remember the half million who were not only killed but whose homeland was taken from them before their deaths, who were rejected from a society which their ancestors were a part of, whose language they spoke and whose culture they felt to be their own."

For the first time, a Hungarian leader had acknowledged the wound of Hungary's Jews: their betrayed love for their country. What would my father say: that it was too late for fine words? Or—like Tamas Fulop—would he, despite himself, be grateful?

After the ceremony—which included a procession of Jewish dignitaries, and several speeches ending with kaddish and candles—I spoke to a man in the crowd named George Reimer. George, a former Hungarian who now lives in Los Angeles, introduced himself to me as "a major contributor to the Emanuel Foundation." He said those words quickly, as if it were a necessary formality, and he seemed relieved to move on to other subjects.

George is a real estate developer, specializing in shopping centers; he is now planning to build shopping centers in Budapest. When I asked him if he felt any emotional pull to Hungary he denied it. And yet when he had begun to expand his business abroad, Hungary was the first place he had come to.

George spoke and moved quickly, with an almost frantic vivacity. I know other Hungarian survivors like him. They are different from the Polish survivors, those grim men and

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Hungary

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women who seem physically squashed by the long Nazi occupation. There hadn't been enough time to scar the Hungarian Jews as visibly as the Poles: the Holocaust had taken six years in Poland; in Hungary, it had come and gone like a storm. The Hungarian survivors I know seemed to have emerged from the war enhanced rather than beaten, suffering only an excess of will, as though trying to appease a part of themselves that would always be hungry. Most of them, like George, don't seem at first glance to be survivors at all. But of course the wound is there. On George's face it registered as a sudden look of confusion: creased eyebrows, slightly parted lips, an elongation of the mouth that resembled the beginning of a smile. As much as this refugee millionaire had mastered the circumstances of his life, something basic eluded him: an ability to order the world.

George told me how he survived the war. In 1944, at age 10, he moved with his family into one of Raoul Wallenberg's "safe houses," under the protection of the Swedish government. For a while they were untouched. But then, in the anarchy of the last days of Nazi rule, diplomatic niceties were suspended; militiamen from the Hungarian fascist Arrow Cross routinely entered safe houses, took their inhabitants to the banks of the Danube, shot them and threw the bodies into the river. One day, just before Soviet tanks entered Budapest, the Arrow Cross came to George's building. George and his family and the other Jews in the house were marched toward the Danube. But the militiaman in charge of George's group was drunk; when they passed the entry to the ghetto—the courtyard of the Dohany synagogue—everyone in the group rushed through the gate.

George said to me, pointing to a building across the street from where we stood, "That's the building we lived in when we escaped into the ghetto. We stayed in the cellar; in those days you just entered any house. We didn't have food or water. I don't know how we survived."

George had already visited the safe house in which he had lived; he had visited the rabbinical seminary where he had been bar mitzvahed after the war. But he had no intention of going back to that house across the street. "I saw too much death there," he said only, and turned away.

I asked George what he thought of the speeches by Antall and Goncz. He said, "We have to realize it: there's a new country here." I told George that my father had raised me on the idea of Hungary as an especially anti-Semitic country. He said, "It's not so simple. During the war my family was helped by Hungarians who secretly brought us food. It's true that there were also Hungarians who murdered Jews—maybe more of them than helped. But I myself experienced the good here. Also many Jews I know were saved by Hungarians.

RIVKA PERGAMENT

Tony Curtis, honorary chairman of the Emanuel Foundation for Hungarian Culture, and Andor Weiss, the foundation's executive vice president, seen among "branches" of the new memorial.

"Anti-Semitism you can find everywhere, even in the United States. You'd be surprised the things I hear about Jews when I travel around on business. I know Jews who will tell you how anti-Semitic it was here during the 1956 Revolution. But I'm sorry: I was here and I didn't hear any anti-Semitic slogans from the people. Not one.

"I'm sorry to say it: We sometimes create anti-Semitism ourselves; we exaggerate it. I remember when the communists took over Hungary and they arrested the Catholic bishop. The Jews didn't care. Then they arrested the Baptist leader or whatever they had here. The Jews didn't care about that either. But then they arrested the chief rabbi—and suddenly, anti-Semitism!

"But one thing I'll tell you: there's a big problem in this city with taxi drivers. Terrible anti-Semites, terrible. One driver told me that the Jews were responsible for everything bad in Hungary; even this new government was Jewish. Another driver told me that Jews never tip. The meter read 396 forints. I gave him 400 forints and said, 'Give me back the change.'

"But you can't blame a whole country for a few taxi drivers. Who would want to become a taxi driver anyway? Only hooligans. I didn't hear yet of a taxi driver to win the Nobel Prize, am I right? If I get a chance to meet with the prime minister I want to speak to him about these people. They also cheat with the meter something terrible. They will hurt this new country's chances for the future.

"There is good and bad in every group. Sorry to say it: even among Jews. I hate prejudice of any kind; I hate it. It drives me crazy to hear the way some survivors talk about blacks. I honestly think they would send them to concentration camps if they could. Survivors! Sometimes I wonder if we learned anything at all."

A Friend From a Distance

Later that afternoon, the Emanuel Foundation and the World Jewish Congress held a reception for Prime Minister Antall, to present him with a certificate honoring his late father for rescuing Jews in 1944. A tree had also been planted in his father's memory in Yad Vashem's Avenue of the Righteous in Jerusalem.

Wealthy donors to the Emanuel Foundation, Hungarian Jewish leaders, as well as local politicians and government officials, crowded into a small hall in the Forum Hotel, which overlooked the Danube. Forty-five years ago the Danube had been a Jewish grave; now survivors were mingling on its bank with Hungary's elite. This morning these Jews had been mourners, victims; this afternoon, celebrants of their own power. If Jews fail to gracefully manage the abrupt transition between victimization and power, if they sometimes misread reality and see only threat instead of promise, who can blame them?

I spoke with a man who stood alone to the side, clearly unaccustomed to cocktail parties. He was Rabbi George Landesman of Budapest, a

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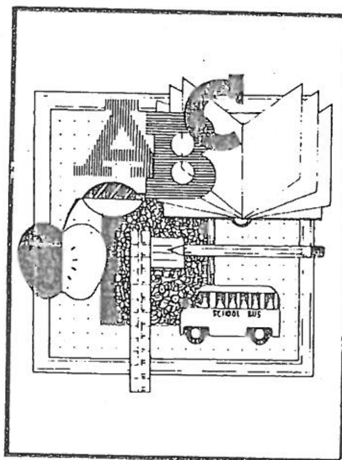

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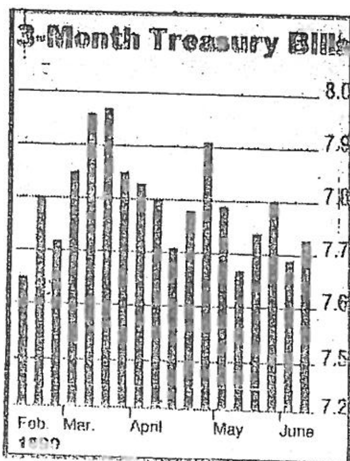

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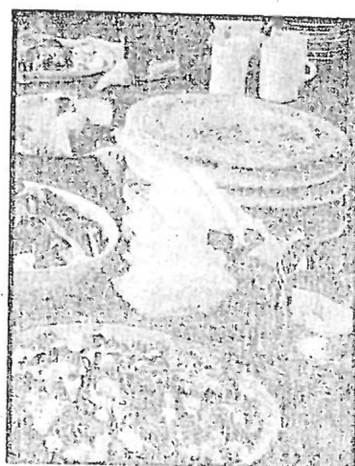

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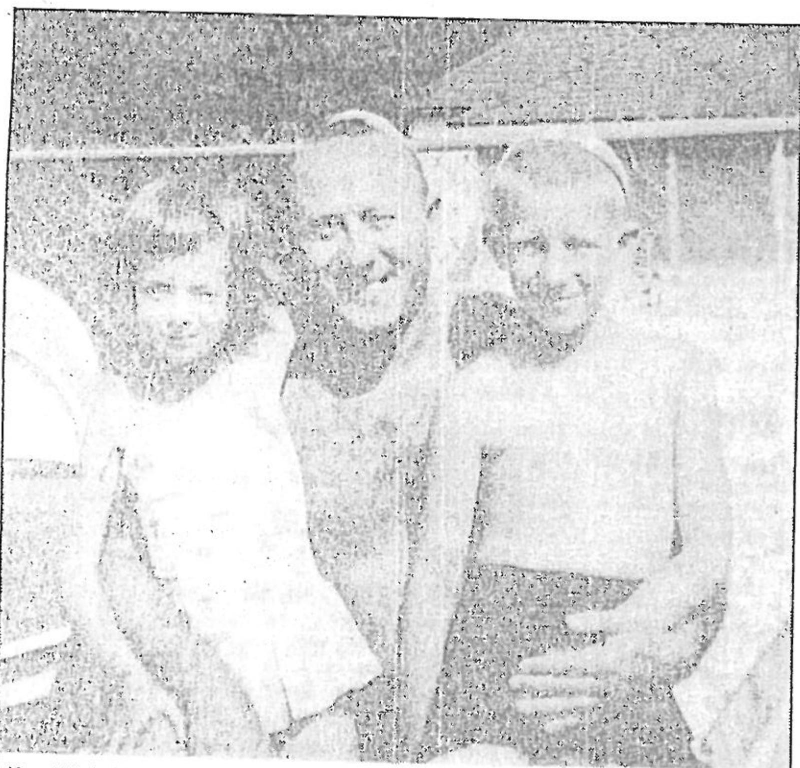

Yossi Klein Halevi, as a small boy, with his father and sister, Karen.

'My father never forgave Hungary for rejecting the Jews.'

thin balding man with sad eyes and a large nose that somehow fit comfortably onto his spare face. He seemed kind but timid, a man who enjoyed helping people but preferred to do so with as little risk as possible.

We spoke about the war. Landesman told me this story: In 1945, he lived with his mother and two brothers in one of Wallenberg's safe houses. One day, Arrow Cross fascists surrounded the house. The Jews were ordered into the street. But Landesman's mother refused to leave the apartment. She said to herself: If they want to kill my family at least let them come upstairs and get us. A few minutes later, an Arrow Cross man entered the apartment. He looked at the woman and her three sons. "You're a Jew?" "Yes, I'm a Jew." "These are your children?" "Yes, these are my children." "They should grow up healthy," he said, and walked out the door.

Landesman said to me, "Maybe he had three boys at home; maybe we reminded him of his own family. This man saved my family but he killed other Jews. He was a murderer? He was a murderer. He deserved to hang? He deserved to hang. But the Talmud says that if you save even one person it's as if you saved a whole world. Who can understand it?"

I asked Landesman what he had thought about this morning's speeches by President Goncz and Prime Minister Antall. He said, "It's a new government and new leaders. But it's the same Hungarian people. When I was walking into the hotel, I heard people saying, 'The Jews are taking over the Forum.' "

I wondered whether Landesman, a man who owed his life to the unexpected humanity of a fascist, should have been more subtle in his judgment of Hungary. I said, "Change has to begin somewhere. For the first time since the war Hungary has leaders who want to make peace with us. We have to give the process a chance."

He said, without enthusiasm, "It's true that there is anti-Semitism everywhere, not just in Hungary. Maybe it will get better here, little by little."

Arpad Goncz, the president of Hungary, was sitting at a table with friends. I squatted beside him and we began to talk. It is one of the delights of being a journalist in the new Eastern Europe: its leaders are so easily approachable. They speak to reporters as one human being to another; they have not yet learned to be politicians.

Goncz said, "This morning was one of the most emotional days of my life. One of my best friends, the grandson of the famous Orientalist Goldheizer, was killed in the Holocaust. Today I felt I was going to my friend's funeral: after 40 years he was finally given a burial.

"A group of us tried to take him out of the ghetto. We used to put on the armbands of the Arrow Cross and enter the ghetto and take Jews out. But my friend refused to leave. He said he wanted to share the fate of the others. In my life I have met one saint: this man. So I know what is a human being." His voice broke, and there were tears in his eyes.

He said, "I've never spoken about this before. Please don't write about it. It will sound like I'm bragging. We saved tens; we should have saved thousands."

I continued to take notes; Goncz didn't try to stop me. He said, "Yes, we have sinned. There is anti-Semitism here; Hungarians did participate in the Holocaust. But there were also Hungarians for whom it was impossible—impossible—not to resist the Nazis. Please, I can't speak anymore."

I had been raised on my father's indictment against a silent world; and I had taken on his bitterness. The Jews were alone and would always be alone. Just count how few trees line the Avenue of the Righteous in Yad Vashem.

And yet that cynicism was a lie, or at best a half-truth. How many acts of kindness, small and great, remained unknown to us? How many deserving Christians—from the anonymous Hungarians who had brought food to George Reimer's family to the future Hungarian president retrieving Jews from the ghetto—would never be honored with a tree in Yad Vashem? Those absent trees were more than a failure to acknowledge decency; the gaps in the Avenue of the Righteous confirmed us in our pessimism, damaged us with mistrust.

The ceremony began. Edgar Bronfman, president of the World Jewish Congress, spoke of how Antall's father had ferried Jews down the Danube. So the Danube had not only been a river of murder but of redemption. Bronfman said, "And now the son is carrying on in the same tradition as the father."

Bronfman gave Antall his certificate, and Antall said, "There were not as many Hungarians active in saving Jews as we would have hoped for. But many Hungarians did help. Wallenberg would not have been able to carry out his work unless he had Hungarians helping him. And hundreds of people helped my father. I accept this award not only for my father but also for all those nameless Hungarians.

"I understand the sensitivity of Jews. But I give you my personal guarantee that anti-Semitism will not be tolerated here. Let us set out and build a new and modern Hungary. It happened once before, in the middle of the last century. We ask for your help. Those who treat the Hungarian people as their friends in this difficult time will have the gratitude of the Hungarian people."

In this room, a new and modern Hungary seemed possible. Just as Hungary regained its freedom, it had chosen a president who had saved Jews and a prime minister whose father had been a rescuer. Here was the Hungary that my grandfather had believed in, the Hungary that had reciprocated the loyalty of its Jews.

I could not, of course, share my grandfather's passion for Hungary; that link had been severed by my father. But neither could I share my father's anger. Antall suggested another alternative: to become a friend of Hungary. I had never thought in such simple terms of my relationship to this place. But there was no reason why that relationship had to be complicated. The loyalties and conflicts which Hungary once roused in my family are over. I had found another homeland; and the Jews had new enemies. Why not accept my roots here with curiosity rather than anguish? Why not become Hungary's friend from a distance? In fact I already was a friend of Hungary. For what else could I wish this country, just now stirring from its long defeat, but the well-being my family had found outside its borders? □

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