

# Petitioners of Jewish Property in Košice: A Case Study on the Holocaust and Local Society in a Slovak-Hungarian Border Region\*

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vol. 10, 2021, 1, pp. 75–101

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33542/CAH2021-1-03>



This study aims to provide an insight into the microworld of a group of witnesses to and participants in the Holocaust in Košice, a town ceded from dismembered Czechoslovakia to Hungary in November 1938. We argue that Košice represents a suitable case study for the examination of Aryanization of Jewish property on the municipality and individual levels in the Slovak-Hungarian border region (Southern Slovakia), which is a hitherto understudied field in Holocaust studies. Our analysis is centred around 253 petitions submitted by local residents to obtain rental rights to apartments previously occupied by Jews and supporting documentation preserved in the Košice City Archives. Our primary research question is who these petitioners for Jewish apartments actually were and how and why they became involved in the process. We explore the petitioners' social stratification, occupational structure, gender, ethnic origin and other social indicators. Furthermore, we present and interpret their arguments, excuses and motivations. This issue also involves the striking question of how much these ordinary men and women understood they benefited from mass murder.

Keywords: Holocaust. Košice. Aryanization. Antisemitism. Jewish property. Housing question.

## I. Introduction

*"Then all of a sudden we stood in front of our own door, with our rucksacks. The police cadet sealed the door behind us. It was hard to believe we could have not stepped back to our apartment even if we had wanted. He escorted us towards the Jewish temple, as if we were prisoners. The three of us walked slowly and portly. Daddy greeted all his acquaintances, raising his hat, and they greeted us as if the policeman would have not been there. We would not cry, shout or try to escape. We went on, as if we would walk on the promenade on a Sunday morning. The difference was the weird rucksack on us. Mummy had a pair of worn-out summer shoes on. She wanted to put on her boots, but the officer's wife, who had been moved to the section of our apartment which had a separate entry, took them off of her feet. She told the officers wearing gloomy, black uniforms that those were her boots, although even the blind could see they would have been too small for her feet. The men in the black uniforms did not argue, because they were also afraid of the officer's wife. The officer and his wife stayed in the apartment. The rooms facing the staircase and the street with the separate entry were left to them. That part of the apartment was not sealed."<sup>1</sup>*

\* László Csósz's contribution to this article is an outcome of a project at the Institute of Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Sciences, funded by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic: EXPRO 19-26638X, "Genocide, Postwar Migration and Social Mobility: Entangled Experiences of Roma and Jews".

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1 KÁLMÁN, *Örökség*, 243–244.

This study focuses on the residents of the city of Košice/Kassa (henceforth we will use the Slovak version) who petitioned for the apartments and other property of their Jewish neighbours, and thus became beneficiaries of the genocidal campaign, just like the Hungarian military officer and his wife appearing in the autobiographical novel quoted above. The author, Márta Kálmán, the youngest member of the Kannengiesser family in Košice, managed to escape from the Košice ghetto and ultimately survived World War II in Budapest.

The main purpose of this study is to look into who these petitioners for Jewish apartments were and how and why they became involved, as well as to provide an analysis on the petitioners' social stratification, occupational structure, gender, ethnic origin and other social indicators. Furthermore, we are interested in gaining a better understanding of the extent to which these ordinary men and women were aware of the final outcome. In other words, did they fully understand they benefited from mass murder? How much was the available information internalized and rationalized? Were questions of legitimacy and morality raised? We intend to shed light on the motivations, besides sheer greed, which fuelled the broad interest in the expropriation of Jewish wealth, as well as to investigate the expectations, social realities and ideological incentives behind the petitions.

We argue that the story of Košice, a city ceded to Hungary by the First Vienna Arbitration in November 1938, represents a suitable case study for the examination of Aryanization of Jewish property on the municipality and individual levels in the Slovak-Hungarian border region. Besides the specificities of the Holocaust in Košice, we also investigate the problem in the broader context of nationwide anti-Jewish policies, concepts and practices from 1938 onwards, focusing on the Hungarian state's policy to improve social conditions – and the housing situation in particular – that was inseparably linked to racist proposals and policies. Furthermore, we examine the way the state policies and communication influenced local decision-making and individual responses and vice versa: what was the impact of grassroots initiatives and reactions on the top levels of the power structure?

The cohort of archival records we explore covers the fateful months between the German occupation of Hungary on 19 March 1944 and the end of Hungarian administration in Košice on 19 January 1945. Our analysis is mostly based on petitions and supporting documentation preserved in the Košice City Archives. In these files we identified 253 petitions submitted by local residents to obtain rental rights to apartments occupied by Jews, and these materials are the primary focus of this study. However, it should be added that we explored an additional 222 archival documents concerning Jewish property, which we partly used in our analysis, but should be subject to further research.<sup>2</sup> According to the data provided by the city administration, a total of 2,100 Jewish apartments were emptied before the end of April 1944. The petitions quite often mention more than one apartment (in some cases apartments that had been taken over by the military); as well as this, the same Jewish apartment could be mentioned in multiple petitions. That is, the 253 documents investigated represent an estimated 12% of all Jewish apartments that were transferred to non-Jews in Košice

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2 We identified 27 petitions submitted by organizations or political parties to gain Jewish apartments for their purposes, 81 documents on the appointment of guardians (zárgondnokok) to "vacant" Jewish apartments, as well as 110 cases of Jewish apartments allocated to German or Hungarian armed forces and officers. Furthermore, we identified 4 separate files in which Jewish apartments were requested by the German or the Hungarian army.

between May 1944 and January 1945. Besides the petitions, we examined a wide variety of other primary sources, including municipal, ministerial and post-war trial records and press reports, as well as memoirs and post-war testimonies.

## II. Historiographical and theoretical remarks

“What happened during World War II in the Southern part of Slovakia, I call the forgotten Holocaust. In Slovakia, we pretend that it does not concern us, because the territory was ruled by Hungarians, while the Hungarians say: it’s the territory of present-day Slovakia” – Peter Salner, ethnologist and former head of the Jewish religious community in Bratislava argued.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the social history of the territory of Southern Slovakia, including Košice after the Vienna Arbitration, is still an overlooked aspect of Slovak historiography.<sup>4</sup> The main reason for this is that monographs or textbooks on the history of Slovakia are based on the national-territorial principle, so they focus only on the history of the Slovak nation and after 1918 on the history of the Slovak state or territory. However, in Hungarian historiography, this border region has been considered as part of the wartime Hungarian state and therefore it has been discussed in the framework of studies on the Holocaust in Hungary.<sup>5</sup> Recently the American historian Leslie Waters contributed to the discussion on the Holocaust in this specific borderland by arguing that the territory re-annexed to Hungary in 1938 played a particular role in Hungary’s Holocaust and Košice became a key strategic point, being the final stop for trains headed to Auschwitz. Besides, the proximity and historical connections to the wartime Slovak territory provided both the perpetrators and the victims with extra information that influenced the local patterns of genocide.<sup>6</sup>

In Hungary, very few scholars scrutinized the primary sources kept in the Slovak state and municipal archives, mostly due to the language barrier posed by the overwhelmingly Slovak research infrastructure (finding aids and working language). One notable exception was Ádám Gellért’s investigation of the case of a war criminal, police commissioner László Csatóry.<sup>7</sup> The Holocaust history of Košice was represented for a long time by the propaganda publications from the period of World War II and the memoir literature. The Slovak Marxist historiography made contributions to the subject, mainly on the Košice Arrow Cross Party; however, they paid primary attention to the “crimes of Hungarian fascism” without addressing the complex problem of collaboration and the Holocaust at a local level.<sup>8</sup> Then, Michal Potemra investigated the history of Košice between 1939 and 1945 in his bibliographies and in his works examining the everyday life of Slovaks.<sup>9</sup> In the last three decades, few publications drew on local archival material, for example the papers of a commemoration conference

3 “Na juhu Slovenska máme zabudnutý holokaust” SME Domov. Accessed November 15, 2020. <https://domov.sme.sk/c/6722500/na-juhu-slovenska-mame-zabudnuty-holokaust.html#ixzz5yGwHKgTO>.

4 VERES, *Košice v období rokov*, 148–152. See also in detail: SZEGHY-GAYER, *Personálna kontinuita*, 129–140. The work of Tomáš Lang and Sándor Strba is focused mainly on the Jewish community of Nové Zámky. See LANG – STRBA, *Holokaust na južnom Slovensku*.

5 BRAHAM, *The Politics of Genocide*.

6 WATERS, *Borders on the Move*, 146–147.

7 GELLÉRT, *Csatári László*.

8 OLEXA – VIPLER, *V tieni šipových križov*. VIETOR, *Dejiny okupácie*.

9 POTE MRA, *Kultúrny život v Košiciach*. POTE MRA, *Kultúrny život Slovákov*. POTE MRA, *Politický a hospodársky život*.

on the 40th anniversary of deportations.<sup>10</sup> As for the case of Aryanization in Southern Slovakia, the most remarkable contribution is the study of Katarína Repášová, who dealt with the issue of Jewish property after the deportation of the Jews in her case study of Komárno.<sup>11</sup>

In brief, neither the Holocaust nor the history of the local Jewish community – which was the second-largest Jewish community in the territory of Slovakia – has been sufficiently explored so far.<sup>12</sup>

Table 1: Jewish population numbers by religion in Košice between 1910–1950<sup>13</sup>

	1910	1919	1921	1930	1938	1941	1950
<b>Jewish population</b>	6723 (15,2%)	7 797 (16,6%)	8 792 (16,6%)	11 195 (15,9%)	11 420 (19,6%)	10 079 (15%)	1 500 (2,4%)
<b>Total</b>	44 211 (100%)	46 826 (100%)	52 898 (100%)	70 117 (100%)	58 090 (100%)	66 981 (100%)	62 465 (100%)

Hungarian participation in World War II and the Holocaust are still among the topics that lack a social consensus and have provoked bitter public and professional disputes. Recent historical research on Hungarian collaboration has focused largely on the perpetrators, including the decision-making process and the activities of political movements and various state agencies. Significant efforts have been made, especially in the fields of sociology and social psychology, to give voice to the victims. However, the responses of the majority society have remained an understudied aspect and have not been the subject of a comprehensive study. Holocaust scholarship has widely used the ambiguous term “bystander” to describe the non-Jewish population of a “perpetrator country”. Some scholars, however, preferred a broader definition of “bystanders” that included the neutral and allied countries and even the Jewish world outside Hitler’s Europe.<sup>14</sup>

As the quotation marks suggest, we propose abandoning the monolithic category of “bystanders”, and even the more specific subcategories of the general term introduced by Raoul Hilberg.<sup>15</sup> In any case, in any micro-history even these categories would blur as one observes the kaleidoscope of individual experiences, behavioural patterns and responsibilities. Being a “bystander”, in fact, is an active choice: many chose to remain ignorant, passive or become participatory agents of the genocide. In fact, all terms describing the part of society involved in the economic annihilation of Jews (beneficiary, facilitator, profiteer, etc.) prove to be too static to describe complex social

10 ŠALAMON – JUROVÁ, *Košice a deportácie*.

11 RÉPÁSOVÁ, *Arizácia židovského majetku*.

12 One remarkable contribution to the topic is KOVÁCS, *Felemás asszimiláció*. For recent work, see: SZEGHY-GAYER, *Jewish representatives*.

13 Concerning the year 1950 we found an estimated figure. See “Kosice”. Accessed March 7, 2021. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/kosice>.

14 See, for example: CESARANI – LEVINE, *“Bystanders” to the Holocaust*; BARNETT, *Bystanders. Conscience and Complicity*.

15 In the last edition of his ground-breaking monograph, Hilberg abandoned even the general term, replacing it with the much more neutral term “neighbours”. See: HILBERG, *The Destruction*.

dynamics and human behaviour, sometimes even on the individual level. Moreover, one can even argue that participants of the “gold rush” of 1944 took their share in the dispossession of their neighbours, hence became accomplices of mass murder and therefore could be termed Holocaust perpetrators. Hence, we chose the neutral and general term “petitioner” to describe those who were competing for “Jewish” apartments, irrespective of how much they acted under compulsion or were motivated purely by material interests.

### III. Housing Question, Racist Solutions

Housing shortage was one of the most severe social problems in Hungary in the interwar years and during World War II. Closely intertwined with other pressing social issues, such as intellectual unemployment and the land problem, the “housing question” was a central element of social and political discourses, which had been almost exclusively monopolized by race protectionists by the end of the 1930s. Far-right spokesmen and publicists blamed the Jews for the housing shortage, high rents and all social problems connected to it, such as lower fertility rates, health and moral issues, and criminality. They offered increasingly radical solutions, including the registry of Jewish apartments, special taxes, confiscation of Jewish apartments larger than two rooms, and even ghettoization.<sup>16</sup> The popular far-right Arrow Cross Party prepared a program for the segregation of Hungary’s Jews: they suggested re-settling all Jews in Budapest and the ten cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants, including Košice, and establishing ghettos in the neighbourhoods most densely populated by Jews. In the ghettos, Jewish families were to occupy a living space not exceeding one room.<sup>17</sup>

The system of Hungarian public administration, inherited from the liberal Austro-Hungarian era, afforded a rather broad sphere of authority to local governments, which were significant political factors. Municipalities dominated by the extreme nationalist and racist “new generation” regularly submitted initiatives to the legislators and the central administration through which they wanted to influence anti-Jewish policies.<sup>18</sup> Right-wing radicalism was also prevailing in the newly re-annexed territories, mostly due to the influx of politicians and civil servants arriving from Hungary proper (known as the “*anyások*”: “those from the motherland”),<sup>19</sup> who were typically more radical than their local counterparts, and spearheaded those grassroots initiatives to “solve” the housing problem and other social issues.<sup>20</sup> For example, in 1942, the municipal authorities in Užhorod urged the government to impose radical discriminatory

16 Interpellation of Arrow Cross MP Count Miklós Serényi, 1 December 1943. In: *Képviseelőházi Napló, 1939–1944*, 492–493.

17 Memorandum of Count Miklós Serényi on the possibilities of the forced resettlement of the Jews from Hungary, July–August 1941. Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár (hereinafter MNL) Baranyai Megyei Levéltár X. 2. Records of the Youth Organization of the Arrow Cross Party in Baranya County and Pécs, monthly reports.

18 It was due also to the fact that after the second anti-Jewish law in 1939, with the exception of few major cities, most Jewish representatives – who had provided a balance up until then – lost their membership, and 90% of Jewish citizens lost their right to vote.

19 Sándor Márai, the Hungarian writer who returned to his hometown Košice after the Vienna arbitration in 1938, has devoted an entire book to presenting the ideological and social differences that developed during the interwar period between the society in Hungary and the Hungarian community of Czechoslovakia. However, his book was only published in 2013. See: MÁRAI, *Hallgatni akartam*, 92.

20 However, one can cite examples of the radicalism of local agents as well. Andor Jaross, one of the political leaders of the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia, joined the Hungarian parliament and was appointed the Minister responsible for the re-annexed Czechoslovak lands in 1939. He was the co-founder of the Party of

measures, including a decree “to null the rental contracts of Jews, if these violate Christian national interests, and relocate them to a place segregated from the Christian society.”<sup>21</sup>

Košice was no exception in this trend. In June 1939, the staunch antisemite Sándor Pohl was appointed the mayor of Košice.<sup>22</sup> Since the 1920s, Pohl had served in the municipal administration of Pest county and became as one of the right-hand men of Chief Constable László Endre, the forerunner of bureaucratic antisemitism, who initiated implicitly discriminatory measures and practices in Hungarian administration long before the formal anti-Jewish legislation.<sup>23</sup> Pohl’s administration in Košice also went beyond the framework of discriminatory state legislation out of antisemitic zeal. Jews were deprived of trade licenses and dismissed from state employment en masse. The Municipal Assembly in Košice also supported the abovementioned antisemitic legislative proposals. However, the conservative government firmly rejected such radical propositions. The traditional ruling class were motivated by their private networks and interests, economic and foreign policy considerations, and calculations about the outcome of the war, as well as a political culture which was averse to any Bolshevik-style solution.

In the housing system of cities in interwar and wartime Hungary, private rented accommodation was the dominant form of tenure. In Budapest, in 1941, only 7% of the apartments were owner-occupied.<sup>24</sup> Antisemitic publications presented the problem of urban housing as the conflict of the non-Jewish tenant and the “exploiting” Jewish owner. They cited statistics on heavy Jewish “overrepresentation” in the real estate sector.<sup>25</sup> Of course, racist narratives failed to present the other side of the coin. According to state statistics, around 1930, less than 10% of Hungarian Jews owned any real estate. Jews owned only 3.3% of all houses in the country. The overwhelming majority of Jews lived in a rental apartment or house.<sup>26</sup>

The government issued several war decrees regulating housing issues between 1938 and 1944, which imposed increasing state control and surreptitious forms of anti-Jewish discrimination, including non-termination and fixed rent clauses and state appointment of tenants. In September 1941, even requisitioning became legalized. With the pretext of solving the housing problems of state employees, the government allowed the requisition of the vacated apartments, summer houses and apartments of those renting more than one house in the same city, as well as the parts of larger apartments suitable

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Hungarian Renewal, a pro-Nazi splinter group of the government party. In 1944, he was appointed Minister of the Interior and became one of the main architects of the Holocaust.

21 Proposal by the Municipal Committee of the City of Užhorod, 30 April 1942. MNL OL, K 150 I-31/h-1942.

22 See also the personal file of Sándor Pohl in Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára (hereinafter ÁBTL), Pohl Sándor – 3.1.9. V.13523.

23 László Endre (1895–1946) was a civil servant, administrative expert, and one of the most influential extreme right-wing public figures in Hungary. Between 1938 and 1944, he served as subprefect of Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun county. After the Nazi invasion in 1944, he was appointed state secretary of the Ministry of the Interior. In close cooperation with Adolf Eichmann, Endre orchestrated the mass deportation of Hungarian Jews. After the war, he was convicted of war crimes, sentenced to death and executed. On the practice of bureaucratic antisemitism, see VÁGI – CSÓSZ – KÁDÁR, *The Holocaust in Hungary*, 24–32.

24 HEGEDŰS – TELLER, *A támogatott bérlakásszektor*, 31.

25 BOSNYÁK, Zoltán. Lakaskérdés és zsidókérdés. In: *Függetlenség*, 1942 (15 November).

26 BOTOS, János, *A magyarországi zsidóság vagyonának sorsa*, 17.

for creating a private dwelling.<sup>27</sup> In Košice, for example, Mrs. Áronné Glück, a 73-year-old widow, lost her rented apartment, because she got gravely ill and temporarily moved to her son's apartment.<sup>28</sup> The Kannengiesser family were forced to offer a part of their home to a military officer, as recalled by Márta Kálmán's autobiography quoted in the introduction above, in line with the rules indicated in this decree, while none of the decrees mentioned Jews or referred to existing anti-Jewish laws or decrees. However, administrative records concerning the implementation demonstrate that local officials interpreted and enforced the decrees in a vigorously antisemitic context. Besides the strive for solving local problems exclusively at the expense of Jews, they proposed more radical and openly antisemitic proposals.<sup>29</sup>

Many individuals, of course, followed this line and started "private investigations" to determine whether an apartment met the criteria, reported their Jewish neighbours to the authorities and filed petitions to obtain their homes.<sup>30</sup> Reacting to the increasingly deteriorating public mood, the Pest Israelite Community started negotiations with the government at the end of 1942. In the framework of the so-called "public interest housing action", the members of the community "voluntarily" offered 500 apartments within four months for "social purposes". In practice, the rental apartments were occupied by ministerial employees and other civil servants. The programme apparently served as a mitigating gesture to prevent further state discrimination or antisemitic violence.<sup>31</sup>

As a result of this political climate, many Hungarians interpreted the anti-Jewish persecution in 1944 as the continuation of previous policies, only with different means. "Aryanization" was often presented as a necessity, something serving social justice and even the rightful reclamation of jobs, positions and property that had been "taken", as argued by several wartime articles and petitions. "I one hundred percent believe in the sanctity of private property and consider its violation a mortal sin. However, as my well-thought-out and well-reasoned conviction dictates that the Jewry in Hungary obtained its wealth from usury, fraud, and the exploitation of Christian society, which can be considered robbery, there is therefore a legal basis for legally taking it from them."<sup>32</sup> Petitioning the authorities to achieve these goals, including the revocation of trade licences and the rental rights of shops, taverns, pharmacies and landholdings, had become common social practice years before the German occupation.

#### IV. The Housing Question in Košice between 1918 and 1944

From 1918, Košice, as part of the first Czechoslovak Republic, experienced rapid economic and demographic growth during the interwar period. It became an important strategic centre connecting the Czech Lands and the territory of Subcarpathia. Between

27 Prime Minister's Decree no. 6740/1941. Magyarország (hereinafter ME) Rendeletek Tára, 1941, 3145–3151.

28 Archív mesta Košice (hereinafter AMK), Košice – Mesto s municipálnym zriadením 1939–1945 (hereinafter KE MMZ), box 210, file 48885/1944.

29 See, for example, the report of the Prefect of Gömör and Kishont Counties, 22 August, 1941. MNL OL, K 150 I-11. 121/1941.

30 MNL OL, K 150 I-11.

31 MNL OL, K 150 I-11. f. 711/1943.

32 MNL OL, K 150 I-11. 71212/1942.

1918 and 1938 its population roughly doubled,<sup>33</sup> which was in great part due to the mass migration of civil servants within the new republic. In the interwar years about 12,000 Czechs and 7,000 Slovaks from the Western part of Slovakia moved to Košice.<sup>34</sup> They were mostly employees of the newly formed Czechoslovak law enforcement agencies, the state railway, the post and the radio, and financial officials and teachers, but also included a significant number of soldiers. The arrival of newcomers caused a serious housing shortage in the 1920s. At the beginning, the city was forced to take measures to be able to control even the allocation of hotel rooms.<sup>35</sup>

However, the lack of apartments and houses for the purpose of accommodating the new civil servants and their families boosted the building industry to a great extent. By 1927, about 150 million Czechoslovak crowns had been spent on the construction of such new apartment blocks, most of which was public investment.<sup>36</sup> For the location of the new buildings the city leaders generally selected a state- or city-owned property.<sup>37</sup> As a result, between the two world wars, approximately 1,500 new apartments were built for the Czechoslovak civil servants,<sup>38</sup> some of them on a cooperative basis, such as the complex of two building blocks called "Little Prague" for the accommodation of the Czechoslovak railway officers in the northern part of the city centre.<sup>39</sup> Among others, barracks were also built to accommodate Czechoslovak soldiers and their families.<sup>40</sup> As a result, according to Hungarian official data, in December 1937 the percentage of vacant apartments in the city was only 0.3%.<sup>41</sup>

Following the border changes caused by the first Vienna Arbitration, the Hungarian military administration, based on the directives of the KEOKH (National Central Authority Controlling Aliens), implemented a full-scale registration of foreigners (including those who moved in after 1918), "non-resident aliens", and all Jews. By the end of 1938, approximately 16,000 Jews were listed in the reannexed territory on these grounds, and some 5,000 of them were expelled. Some of them had lived in the city of Košice since the early 1930s.<sup>42</sup> Roma were not collectively discriminated against, and they did not comprise a category in the statistics; however, some administrative reports suggest that dozens of Roma families were also expelled from the region.<sup>43</sup>

According to Hungarian data, a total of approximately 25,000 Czech and Slovak inhabitants fled Košice in this period.<sup>44</sup> As a result, the total population of the city that exceeded 70,000 in 1930 and, according to some assumptions, reached 80,000 by 1937–1938, had shrunk to 58,000 by December 1938.<sup>45</sup> Expulsion and forced migration

33 See: SZEGHY-GAYER, *A szlovák-magyar-zsidó-cseh.*

34 FICERI, *Czechoslovakism in Mentalities of Košice's.*

35 AMK, Policajný kapitanát mesta Košice (1830) 1861–1922, box 221, file 6086/920.

36 Az épülő Kassa. In: *Prágai Magyar Hírlap*, 1927 (17. IV.), no. 89, p. 19. BIANCHI, *Mesto Košice*, 47–55.

37 SEKAN, *Kassa városrendezése*, 60.

38 MIHALIKOVÁ, *Bytová kríza*, 59.

39 MEŠKO, *Po stopách*, 40–49.

40 PRIATKOVÁ, *Architektúra Košíc*, 67.

41 A visszatért magyar városok jelentősége a magyar nemzeti életre. In: *Városok Lapja*, 1938 (15. XI.), no. 22, p.539.

42 MNL OL, K 492 1/10-1938.

43 MNL OL, K 492 11/4-1938.

44 Kassa a magyar Grác. In: *Esti Újság*, 1938 (14. XII.), no. 284, p. 5.

45 Magyar Statisztikai Szemle, 1930, 11. Magyar Statisztikai Szemle, 1939, 11–12.

resulted in a huge abundance of housing in the town. In January 1939, more than 5,000 apartments were vacant<sup>46</sup> and a few months later in June 1939 their number was still 2,100.<sup>47</sup> Later, at the end of 1940, Mayor Sándor Pohl reported that there were still 1,700 apartments without a new tenant.<sup>48</sup>

Between 1939 and 1944, there were only few construction investments in the city.<sup>49</sup> Initially, from a countrywide perspective, in Košice it was easy to get a modern apartment with central heating at a low price,<sup>50</sup> which in that time was in line with the prices of the economically more backward Užhorod.<sup>51</sup> In 1940, rental prices were 30–40% lower than before the reannexation.<sup>52</sup> As a possible solution, the idea of Košice as the “Hungarian Graz” was raised: it was a programme that aimed to develop tourism in the city and take advantage of the empty apartments to accommodate Hungarian pensioners from all over the country.<sup>53</sup>

However, with the flow of civil servants and military officers of the Hungarian administration from the heartland, the population had increased to 67,000 by 1941. By the summer of 1942, the housing of state employees in Košice once again became a pressing issue. Therefore, the Mayor’s Office asked for the requisition of Jewish apartments that had been vacated “without due reason” or were “unnecessarily large” for non-Jewish civil servants. They argued that Jewish owners who moved abroad (after the reannexation of Košice) would have rather left their apartments vacant than rent them to “Christian, Hungarian officials”.<sup>54</sup> With the frontline approaching the Hungarian borders, the further increasing inflow of military personnel and refugees caused another housing crisis in 1944.

## V. Besieging the Housing Bureau

The predominant reaction of Hungarian society to the anti-Jewish campaign unfolding after the Nazi invasion on 19 March 1944 was indifference and political passivity, as was the case in many occupied European countries.<sup>55</sup> According to an SD (*Kommandeur der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD*) report from Hungary in May 1944, only the “simple folk” and some military officers supported the campaign wholeheartedly. Middle-class people, however, generally considered the anti-Jewish action too strict. They refused to cooperate unless direct material benefit was concerned.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, opportunism was a mass phenomenon, even though it had various forms and could often

46 A kassai építkezések. In: *Miskolczi Estilap*, 1939 (29. I.), no. 24, p. 7.

47 SEBESTYÉN, Lajos. Kassa háztartása. In: *Városok Lapja*, 1939 (1. VI.), no. 11, p. 239–240.

48 „Kassa jövője nem marad el ragyogó múltja mögött”. In: *Nemzeti Újság*, 1940 (25. XII.), no. 294, p. 10.

49 In 1940, some 15,000 new houses were built in Hungarian cities, but only 12 houses and 18 apartments were built in Košice. 15 110 ház épült tavaly az országban. In: *Miskolczi Estilap*, 1941 (14. VIII.), no. 185, p. 6.

50 Milyen az élet a több mint két éve visszacsatolt Kassán? In: *Ellenzék*, 1940 (24. XII.), no. 295, p. 31.

51 Lakáskérdések. In: *Kárpáti Híradó*, 1941 (27. IX.), no. 218, p. 4.

52 The report of the Mayor of Košice to the Prime Minister, dated 27 September 1940, emphasized the miserable situation of “thousands of house owners who are the true-born citizens of Košice and maintained their Hungarian identity under the [Czechoslovak] occupation”. See: MNL OL, K 28 1940-58-P-20675.

53 SIMON, *Magyar idők*, 153–175.

54 MNL OL, K 150 I-11.

55 HILBERG, *The Destruction*, 1121–1123.

56 Telegram from Veesebmayer to Ritter Relaying SS Report of 19 May, 20 May, 1944. In: BRAHAM, *The Destruction*, doc. no. 269.

be mixed with other motivations. At first, several non-Jews volunteered to “safeguard” the assets of their Jewish neighbours, who were frantically trying to hide or save their property from the plundering “hate state”. It is probable that only a few neighbours helped out of purely altruistic considerations. Then, having realized the unexpected opportunity for making a fortune, many others chose the “legal” ways of obtaining the apartments, businesses, furniture and other goods of the persecuted. Occasionally, these petitions were connected to transactions and agreements with the former owner. In any case, few of those assets were returned to the original owner after the war.

The German invasion came as a godsend for many who aspired to the positions and assets of their Jewish neighbours. It seemed as if the collaborationist government fulfilled all the wishes of antisemites at once through the full-scale nationalization of Jewish property, including apartments and shops. Government propaganda characterized ghettoization as being fundamentally about a fairer distribution of apartments, serving the double purpose of veiling the scale and brutality of expulsion and ensuring the mass support of the population. The Subprefect of Pest County, László Endre, acted immediately in the wake of the German invasion, and issued the decree (which apparently had already existed long before as a draft) on the confiscation of Jewish apartments, on 21 March, even before the formation of the new, pro-Nazi government.<sup>57</sup> When the first major Allied air raids reached Hungary at the beginning of April 1944, it was “natural” that bombed-out families were offered new homes at the expense of Jews. However, this time there was no room for compromises, as was the case in 1942 with the “housing action” of the Jewish community discussed above. In April 1944, the Ministry of the Interior explicitly ordered the Jewish community to hand over 1,500 apartments.<sup>58</sup>

By the end of May, some 100,000 apartments throughout Hungary became “vacant”, causing an unmanageable logistical problem for the authorities and inciting a huge wave of petitions requesting Jewish real estate.<sup>59</sup> The greatest push was launched in Budapest where the “prey” included 28,000 apartments, and where tens of thousands had lost their homes due to the air raids. Despite calls by the press and authorities to wait, many petitions came in even before the process of setting up the yellow star houses began.<sup>60</sup> City leaders in Budapest approached the cabinet, as the unfolding situation had become unsustainable: “under the double pressure of connections being deployed at higher levels<sup>61</sup> and impatient petitioners, they could not provide a moral guarantee that matters would be resolved in a reassuring way.”<sup>62</sup>

In order to avoid total chaos, a special commissioner’s office was created to take charge of apartment affairs in Budapest and its vicinity.<sup>63</sup> This office received 5,000–

57 MNL OL, K 557 fasc. 20, file no. 8.

58 The demand was “legalized” by Prime Minister’s decree no. 1320/1944. ME Rendeletek Tára, 1944.

59 One can find hundreds of such petitions in the surviving documents of virtually all regional archives in Hungary. See, e.g.: MNL, Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok Megyei Levéltár (hereinafter JNSZML), V-73, boxes 672–676. RG V-474, boxes 502–506. MNL Heves Megyei Levéltár, V-173, boxes 43–78.

60 Egyelőre nem lehet megürült zsidó lakást igényelni. In: *Pesti Hírlap*, 1944 (18. VI), no. 136, p. 4. BENOSCHOFKY – KARSAL, *Vádirat a náciizmus*, II. volume, 231.

61 The remark refers to the fact that high-ranking public administration officials and law enforcement officers tried to use their influence to obtain Jewish apartments for themselves and their friends and families.

62 Minutes of the meeting of the Council of Ministers, 5 July 1944. See: MNL OL I, Reel 1.

63 Prime Minister’s Decree No. 2510/1944, 5 July 1944. ME Rendeletek Tára, 1944, pp. 1465–1467.

6,000 petitions daily.<sup>64</sup> Even in smaller municipalities the number of petitions exceeded twice or three times the available apartments.<sup>65</sup> In the county town of Szolnok, where allied bomb attacks destroyed or damaged more than 500 houses, this ratio was probably much higher. According to a financial directorate report in Szolnok, "every able person requested a Jewish apartment, if possible, a furnished one" and "of course, the claimants were all requesting that the inventorying take place as a matter of urgency. Lock-breaking has already been on the agenda for some time now."<sup>66</sup> The allocation and management of the apartments was the task of the municipal housing bureaus, and it far exceeded their capacities. Local residents exerted enormous pressure on town and county halls. The Subprefect of Komárom County, for example, urged the Ministry of the Interior to lift the ban on apartment allocation, saying that people are "besieging my office as well as the chief constable's office on a daily basis".<sup>67</sup>

According to the deportation "master plan", the Košice military district (no. VIII, including northeastern Hungary and Subcarpathia) was the first zone to make "Judenrein". In the early morning hours on 16 April, gendarme and police detachments brutally woke up thousands of Jewish families.<sup>68</sup> Forced relocation started in the villages, and was soon continued in the cities. In Košice, at first about 4,000 Jews from the vicinity (Abaúj-Torna County) were crammed into Jewish homes and the buildings of the synagogues. Then, all but a few of the Košice Jews were evacuated from their own or rented apartments, starting on 20 April. They were only allowed to take a package of 50 kilograms and a supply for 15 days with them.<sup>69</sup> By 3 May a total of 10,601 Jews were forcibly moved to two collection camps set up in the territory of a brickyard in the outskirts of the city. Another 972 Jews were sent to a designated urban ghetto a few streets southwest from the old town.<sup>70</sup> However, the ghetto was soon liquidated, and its inmates were also taken to the collection camps, apart from a few craftsmen toiling for the Germans. On 16 May, the mass deportations began. By 3 June, some 12,000 people were deported from Košice, in four trains, to Auschwitz.<sup>71</sup>

Due to the deportations, about 2,100 Jewish apartments were vacated and 609 Jewish trade licenses (*iparjogosítvány*) were nullified in Košice.<sup>72</sup> A few days before

64 GERLACH – ALY, *Az utolsó fejezet*, 171.

65 According to a press report, in Jászberény, 300 petitioners competed for 150 apartments. See: *Jász Hírlap*, 1944 (29. VII.), p. 1. In Dévaványa, this ratio was 3:1. See: MNL Békés Megyei Levéltára, V. 308.b. boxes 28–30. RUTTKAY, György. Ne zavarjuk apró-cseprő magánügyekkel a hivatalnokok. In: *Felvidéki Újság*, 1944 (9. V.), no. 105, p. 4.

66 MNL JNSzML, RG VI. 101. b. 60/1944. Published in: VÁGI – CSÓSZ – KÁDÁR. *The Holocaust in Hungary*, 185–187.

67 Letter of the Subprefect of Komárom County to the Ministry of the Interior, 12 July 1944. See: MNL OL I, Reel 11.

68 On the moment of eviction, see the memoirs of Edith Eger. EGER, *A döntés*, 57.

69 Zsidótlanították Kassa városát. In: *Felvidék Újság*, 1944 (27. IV.), no. 94, p. 2.

70 AMK, KE MMZ, box 173, file 16963/1944. In addition, there were 217 Jewish citizens in police custody, 30 in the local Correctional Institution (Javitó Intézet) and 32 in the city. Another 1,401 Košice Jews were on labour service.

71 According to the last report, the number of victims in the camp was 11,839, including those from the vicinity, but excluding the labour servicemen, most of whom were eventually not deported. AMK, KE MMZ, box 173, file 16963/1944. On the list of lawyer Miklós Gaskó, who prepared a clandestine list of the transports, there were five trains from Košice with 15,707 people, but this figure is apparently an administrative error. See: BRAHAM, *The Politics of Genocide*, Appendix no. 6.

72 Polgármesteri jelentés. In: *Kassa Thj. Sz. Kir. Város Hivatalos Lapja*, 1944 (15. VI.), no. 6, p. 64–65.

the German occupation, the Housing Bureau of the Department of the Administrative Affairs (*közigazgatási ügyosztály lakáshivatala*) of the city officially registered 130 petitions for apartments.<sup>73</sup> By May, around 5,000 Košice residents applied for the former Jewish apartments,<sup>74</sup> and in a month their number increased to 8,000.<sup>75</sup> György Ruttkay, one of the main officials of the Housing Bureau, reported on 9 May 1944 that crowds of people were storming the office every day,<sup>76</sup> so they decided to cancel the consultation hours and people could not apply for an apartment personally any more.<sup>77</sup> Meanwhile, the non-Jewish owners of the houses from which Jewish tenants had been taken away contacted the Housing Bureau on the matter of the rent payments. These owners were told to wait about 1.5 months before the office would process all the applications. However, until then, homeowners could not demand rent from anyone for the apartments.<sup>78</sup>

The inventory of the sealed Jewish homes was carried out by a four-member committee that included officials from the Housing Bureau and the Financial Directorate (*Pénzügyigazgatóság*), but usually one or two police officers too.<sup>79</sup> Entering the apartment, the committee first looked for the keys to the locked cupboards, then took an inventory of the clothes and small utensils (porcelain, tableware, etc.). This was followed by the appreciation of high-value items (pictures, Persian rugs, furniture, etc.), among which the luxury items were delivered directly to the City Hall.<sup>80</sup> Then, from June 1944, the Financial Directorate was entrusted with the inventory of Jewish property, from which they hoped to accelerate the processing of applications.<sup>81</sup>

During the summer, however, there were personnel changes in the staff of the Housing Bureau. The Ministry of Interior received a complaint, based on which a proceeding was initiated against three members of the committee responsible for the Jewish apartments in Košice, with charges of misconduct.<sup>82</sup> One of the accused officials was György Ruttkay, a city councillor, who moved to Košice in 1939 and was the key figure in judging the petitions in May and June 1944. At the end of June, he was replaced by László Váczy.<sup>83</sup> After World War II, Ruttkay fled to Hungary and became a renowned law expert, professor and avant-garde painter. Several books and articles

73 Közigazgatási ügyosztály. In: *Kassa Thj. sz.kir.város Hivatalos Lapja*, 1944 (15. III.), no. 3, p. 26.

74 RUTTKAY, György. Ne zavarjuk apró-cseprő magánügyekkel a hivatalnokok munkaidejét!. In: *Felvidéki Újság*, 1944 (9. V.), no. 105, p. 4.

75 Polgármesteri jelentés. In: *Kassa Thj. Sz. Kir. Város Hivatalos Lapja*, 1944 (15. VI.), no. 6, p. 64.

76 RUTTKAY, György. Ne zavarjuk apró-cseprő magánügyekkel a hivatalnokok munkaidejét!. In: *Felvidéki Újság*, 1944 (9. V.), no. 105, p. 4.

77 Fölöslegesen senki se igényeljen zsidólakást! In: *Felvidéki Újság*, 1944 (10. V.), no. 106, p. 4.

78 Mi lesz a keresztény házakból kiköltöztetett zsidók üres lakásaival? In: *Felvidéki Újság*, 1944 (4. V.), no. 100, p. 3.

79 A zsidó vagyonok leltározása. In: *Felvidéki Újság*, 1944 (24. V.), no. 116, p. 2. Polgármesteri jelentés. In: *Kassa Thj. Sz. Kir. Város Hivatalos Lapja*, 1944, (15. VI.), no. 6, p. 64.

80 RUTTKAY, György. Leltározó séta egy kassai zsidó lakásban. In: *Felvidéki Újság*, 1944 (17. V.), no. 111, p. 5.

81 A zsidó vagyonok leltározása. In: *Felvidéki Újság*, 1944 (24. V.), no. 116, p. 2. Polgármesteri jelentés. In: *Kassa Thj. Sz. Kir. Város Hivatalos Lapja*, 1944 (15. VI.), no. 6, p. 64.

82 AMK, KE MMZ, box 185, file 25600/1944.

83 Közigazgatási ügyosztály. In: *Kassa Thj. Sz. Kir. Város Hivatalos Lapja*, 1944 (15. IX.), no. 9, p. 98. On the corruption cases during the procession of the petitions see the file of a complainant, Róza K.: AMK, KE MMZ, box 191, file 31985/944.

were published on him, but none of them mentioned his controversial role in Košice.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, another city official accused of corruption, István Gazsi (1910–1969) got away with his wartime activity. In November 1944 he was arrested by the Arrow Cross authorities,<sup>85</sup> but later released. He survived the war, served in the new Czechoslovak city administration and lived in Košice until his death.<sup>86</sup>

From August 1944 on, the city administration appointed guardians (*zárgondnokok*) to the “abandoned” Jewish apartments and businesses. It incited a second wave of petitions: guardianship offered another route to benefit from the process. Following the Arrow Cross takeover in October 1944 there were still plenty of empty Jewish apartments without a permanent tenant. Several apartments were allocated to Arrow Cross party organizations and militias.<sup>87</sup> The last petition preserved in the Košice City Archives was filed on 9 January 1945, ten days before the Red Army captured Košice.<sup>88</sup>

## VI. Petitioners in Košice

Hundreds of files have been preserved in the wartime records of the City of Košice pertaining to Jewish property. In this study, we turned our lenses to the applications of individuals specifically for the rental right of nationalized Jewish apartments. It was the largest cohort of petitions, due to the structure of tenures explained above, and also the category in which the local authorities could make substantive decisions. Public administration did not have the competence to hand over Aryanized private property to individuals. The same applied to Jewish shops and other enterprises. The authorities received quite a few petitions for these businesses as well, but they had to turn these applicants down, with specific exceptions. As stipulated by the decree of the Ministry of Commerce and Transport on the closure of all Jewish businesses, only the shops and other enterprises essential for “national defence or public supply” were allowed to operate under state-appointed company managers.<sup>89</sup> Despite this, these kinds of petitions also reflect the attitudes and approaches of local citizens involved in the process.

We could identify 253 petitions and supporting documentation for apartments formerly rented by Jews (including those which were owned by Jews or non-Jews), which belong to 250 petitioners, as three petitions were actually the second attempts of the same individuals. That is, we could analyse a sample representing about 3% of all supposed petitioners, since the number of petitions for Jewish apartments reached 8,000 by June 1944.

Some applicants simply filled out the request forms prepared by the authorities, which contained the following entries: name, occupation, number of dependent family members, reference to military care and/or military service, present address and number of rooms, date of moving to Košice, reasons for moving, the size of the

84 See, for example: TAKÁCS, *Egy jogász-festőművész*.

85 See also: AMK, KE MMZ, box 189, file 30020/944.

86 BLAŠKOVÁ – GAŠPAR – MIHOKOVÁ, *Lexikon Košičanov*, 318–319.

87 AMK, KE MMZ, box 210, file 48921/944. Before the Arrow Cross era, these petitions were mostly rejected by the Housing Bureau of Košice, which typically argued that there was no decree regulating the requests of political organizations.

88 AMK, KE MMZ, box 210, file 47771/944.

89 Decree No. 50.500/1944 K.K.M. on the sealing of stocks and business equipment belonging to Jewish traders' shops, 21 April 1944. ME Rendeletek Tára, 1944, Vol I., 603–604.

requested apartment, and the address of the actual apartment they applied for. Quite often the applicants also mentioned the name of the former resident (sometimes with an extension such as “the Jewish József S.”) and/or indicated more than one apartment. However, many people added a lengthy letter to support their case, handwritten or typed, which often reveals a lot about the social circumstances, living conditions and attitudes of the applicants, and sometimes even meticulous details about their everyday lives. After the Arrow Cross takeover on 15 October, petitions took a simple and concise form, which was probably due to the instructions of the authorities to formalize the process.

We could specify the **occupation and/or social status** of 240 applicants. The largest cohort of the petitioners belonged to the category of **state-employed middle class**, 59 applicants in total, which included active and retired civil servants (45) from all levels of the city and municipal administration as well as officers (military, police and gendarmerie, including one invalid, 14 in total). Another distinctive group is that of the **self-employed middle class**, ranging from top businessmen, manufacturers and well-off house owners to petty craftsmen and traders (44). They often also applied for the shops, workshops and offices as well as for the merchandise and equipment of their one-time Jewish competitors. A third branch of middle-class applicants constituted a similarly diverse group of **intellectuals** (24 petitioners), who belonged to liberal professions (medical doctors, pharmacists, lawyers, engineers), or to the state-employed educational and cultural elite (teachers, artists, a protestant pastor and the director of the Italian Cultural Institute). More than one fifth of the applicants were **working class**, including craftsmen’s and traders’ assistants, housemaids, day labourers, chauffeurs and other blue-collar employees (51 in total).

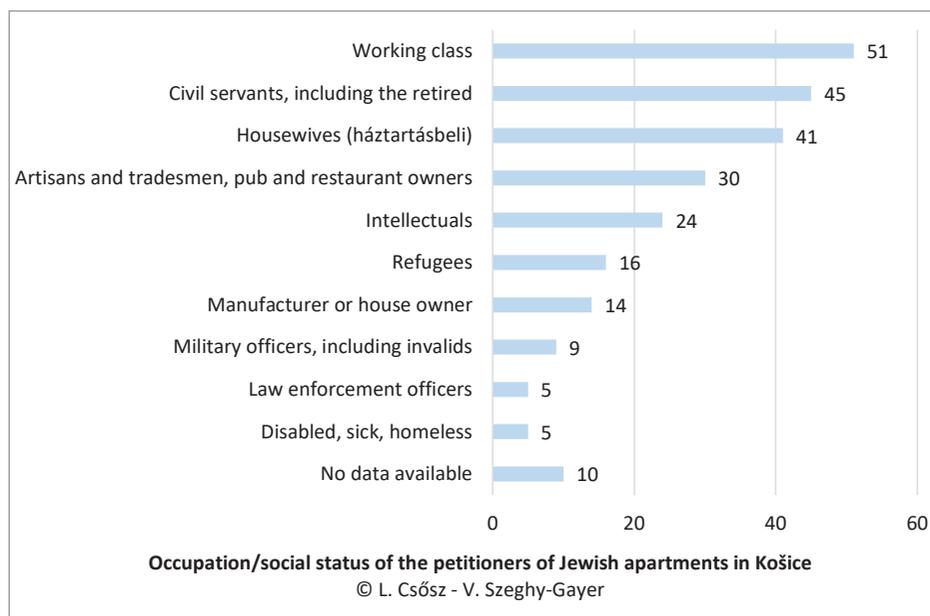


Chart 1

There are two specific “**status groups**” within the petitioners, in the case of which categorization by occupation or social stratification is problematic. One of them is the group of those who requested an apartment based on **social grounds** (refugees, disabled, sick, homeless, 21 petitioners in total). Quite a few petitioners were “**housewives**” (41). These women petitioned on behalf of their husbands or families, or they were widows, including war widows. The total proportion of female applicants was actually higher (78 persons, that is, 31% of all petitions). What is more, about 40% of these female applicants acted in their own capacity. This, aside from practical explanations (husbands and fathers serving in the army), is perhaps also an indicator of changing gender roles and relations in wartime.

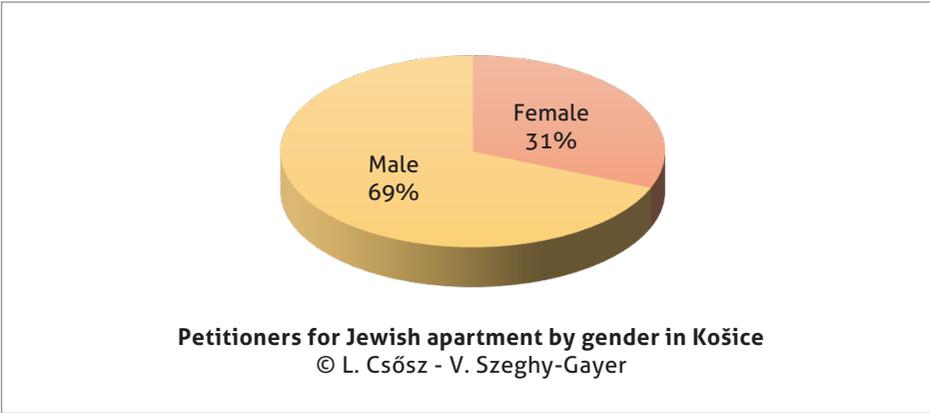


Chart 2

In the case of the last three categories, most of the petitioners referred to (seemingly) well-grounded social needs, such as large families, severe health conditions, military service of breadwinners or unbearable living conditions such as overcrowded and unhealthy (dark, mouldy, humid) apartments. According to a public health officer’s report attached to a petition, the one-room apartment of the applicant was “damp, with bulging walls, the rain is constantly dripping in, the wall is completely mouldy, the floor is shabby and rotten, never exposed to the sun through its small windows, dark, musty air, and he is subsisting with two children and a sick wife who is becoming blind”.<sup>90</sup>

These “beneficiaries” of the process obviously had little room to manoeuvre. Neither did the refugees, who arrived in Košice in increasing numbers from late summer from other parts of Hungary threatened by the front, or those who lost their homes in air raids.<sup>91</sup> They apparently applied for Jewish apartments because that seemed the only solution available. Those forced to move from the territory of the Košice downtown

<sup>90</sup> AMK, KE MMZ, box 187, file 28808/944.

<sup>91</sup> See, for example the cases of a group of refugees from Southern Transylvania (Romania) and the cases of air raid victims: AMK, KE MMZ, box 189, file 30694/1944. AMK, KE MMZ, box 201, file 41052/1944. AMK, KE MMZ, box 202, file 41805/1944.

ghetto joined the ranks of “non-voluntary” petitioners. As soon as the ghetto area was designated, authorities called upon the non-Jews living in the territory of the ghetto to show up at the city hall and pick up an apartment request form. Residents were urged to move, or otherwise “they would share the same treatment as the Jews”.<sup>92</sup> Later on, state authorities generally avoided such grave warnings. Instead, the government preferred to win over the locals for the campaign.<sup>93</sup>

However, it is impossible to quantify the proportion of substandard apartments and the applicants in “real need”, as certain petitioners supposedly exaggerated and dramatized the seriousness of their housing circumstances. In any case, a total of 54 petitioners mentioned substandard circumstances. Furthermore, there was a sizable group of applicants who clearly intended to improve their already favourable living conditions, and wanted to change apartments merely “out of passion”, as a letter addressed to the mayor’s office put it.<sup>94</sup> They used a variety of arguments, from more grounded ones to the nearly ridiculous. These included major life events such as a proposed marriage, pregnancy, sickness or changing jobs, but also such nuances as the tenant wishing to move to ground floor to avoid the steps, their apartment being “too far from the tram stop”, having an unfavourable distribution of rooms, or the tenant badly needing a garden “to calm his nerves” and for his children “to move freely”.<sup>95</sup>

Members of the local intellectual elite took the lead in this way, trying to use their private connections and reputation. Adjunct Professor Béla Gy. was trying to make use of nepotism while condemning it at the same time. He stated that his wife had been “besieging the housing bureau” for more than a year, with no success, whereas recently 300 new applicants had received an apartment. “I can’t and I don’t want to believe that it is only connection that matters again, and there is no protector for those who wait modestly and without proper connections for a housing assignment” – he wrote in a letter addressed directly to city councillor Ruttkay. He even added bitter criticism: if it is the only factor what matters, he argued, then “what is better in this world [regime] than in the old?”<sup>96</sup> The violinist and music teacher József L. listed no less than ten “Jewish apartments” he would prefer to take over. He argued he needed an extra room to practice for his “artistic development”, and also complained about the neighbours, “a very poor and unclean family with five children, whose unclean air flows out of my apartment and so it is almost impossible to ventilate my apartment in the summer.”<sup>97</sup> Mrs. Andorné M., a teacher, could not find a proper apartment in the city and therefore entrusted her parents to take care for her children outside Košice, who, for her, handled them “too gently”. “These times require very serious sacrifices from all Hungarian women, but not as severe as from me if I would not receive the requested

92 Felhívás a gettó keresztény lakosságához. In: *Felvidéki Újság*, 1944 (29. IV.), no. 96, p. 7.

93 13 petitioners were moving from the ghetto area, while in 17 cases the petitions were submitted by refugees. Besides, 15 petitioners had to move from the “city shacks”, a social housing area.

94 Anonymous letter of support attached to the petition of Mrs. István K., see: AMK, KE MMZ, box 187, file 28808/944.

95 AMK, KE MMZ, box 179, file 22298/944.

96 AMK, KE MMZ, box 176, file 19518/944.

97 AMK, KE MMZ, box 185, file 25820/944.

apartment" – she added.<sup>98</sup> The retired civil servant Károly F. simply felt "bored" in the vicinity of Košice, where "everyone speaks Slovak and we have nobody to talk to".<sup>99</sup>

Corruption and nepotism flourished. Several political and intellectual leaders penned letters to support the requests of their protégés or attempted to obtain Jewish apartments and businesses. Certain church leaders and congregations could not abandon the temptation, either. Even Mayor Sándor Pohl acquired a luxurious six-room house and garden for himself. The move caused an administrative paradox: he petitioned his subordinates to allocate the house for him. A supervisor delegated by the Ministry of Interior gave the mayor a warning for misconduct, and instructed him to ask the permission of his superior authority. He did so, but the Subprefect of Košice replied that the decision should have been made by the mayor of the city.<sup>100</sup> Other city officials, including the chief archivist, Rudolf K., who moved to Košice from Miskolc after 1938, followed Pohl's example.<sup>101</sup> The commander of the gendarmerie unit responsible for the round-up and deportation of the Jews in Košice, Colonel Jenő Sárvári, was also allocated a spacious downtown apartment, with extras such as a piano.<sup>102</sup>

Employees and business associates of the former tenants also joined the ranks of petitioners. For example, the long-time executive manager of Izsák Weil's textile factory immediately took over the business and also requested the apartment attached to it, which "has been closed down due to his deportation", because it was "urgently and absolutely necessary for the continuation of the business", as she argued.<sup>103</sup> The neutral and uncaring tone is striking, as well as the usage of the term "deportation", which appears in only two other petitions: others preferred to use euphemisms. Mass murder was considered a legal and administrative fact: "a resident who has left Košice permanently shall be deemed to be a person who does not claim to rent an apartment, as a sign of which he or she does not pay the rent" argued the lawyer of a house owner.<sup>104</sup>

Petitioners often had widespread and detailed, even intimate knowledge of the homes and other property of their fellow citizens. Some of them could easily produce a "wish list" of several apartments with addresses, numbers of rooms and other figures. Applicants included neighbours, acquaintances and even family members.<sup>105</sup> For example, a separated wife of a deported Jewish house owner petitioned for her former family home: "Now that my husband (a Jewish individual!) has been taken to an unknown place, the opportunity has opened for me to return to my own home."<sup>106</sup> There was even a Jewish applicant, who "enjoyed" exempted status, at least for the time being. Mrs. Jakabné Stern, the widow of a decorated Jewish World War I hero, was spared from ghettoization in the first round, but evicted from her apartment at Luther Street 9 and was forced to live in the yard, where "I and my furniture and kitchen equipment were exposed to the open air". In her petition penned on 26 April,

98 AMK, KE MMZ, box 182, file 24587/944.

99 AMK, KE MMZ, box 177, file 20238/944.

100 AMK, KE MMZ, box 179, file 21899/944.

101 AMK, KE MMZ, box 174, file 17358/944.

102 AMK KE MMZ, box 186, file 19736/944.

103 AMK, KE MMZ, box 191, file 31904/944.

104 Petition submitted on behalf of Rudolf P., a resident of the Czech lands. AMK, KE MMZ, box 207, file 45708/944.

105 AMK, KE MMZ, box 195, file 36020/944. AMK, KE MMZ, box 179, file 22676/944.

106 AMK, KE MMZ, box 186, file 26887/944.

which was supported by the Jewish Council of Košice, she asked the Housing Office to reopen the apartment, where she had lived for 15 years. Soon after, the request was rejected, because Mrs. Jakabné Stern “was removed from the country in May”, as the mayor’s office’s investigative department reported.<sup>107</sup>

As for the residency of the petitioners, in only 146 (58%) cases could we identify whether they were “natives” of Košice (born there or moved in during the Czechoslovak era) or were newcomers from the motherland (“*anyás*”) arriving in the city after November 1938. 63 applicants were from the latter category, while 83 were local residents, which implies that these two groups were represented in roughly equal proportions among both the petitioners and the recipients. The participation of “*anyás*” civil servants in the administration and public life of the reannexed (ceded) territories is an area that requires further research. For example, in specific sectors like the state police or public education the “*anyás*” civil servants were in absolute majority, while at the post or railway offices their number was lower. Attila Simon pointed out that the majority of the personalities appointed into the key administrative positions (prefects, mayors and chief constables) were from the ceded territory. However, he also argued that from the summer of 1939, there was a turnaround in this policy. Budapest was no more interested in strengthening the positions of the former regional minority elite.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, quite a few of the local administrative leaders were replaced by civil servants arriving from Hungary. This was also the case in Košice: the conservative Mayor and local politician, László Tost, was replaced by the radical antisemite Sándor Pohl. From the perspective of our case study on the housing question it is more important to point out that in the Housing Bureau of Košice (see the cases of György Ruttkay and István Gazsi above), and also among the petitioners, one can find both newcomers from Hungary (“*anyások*”) and locals.

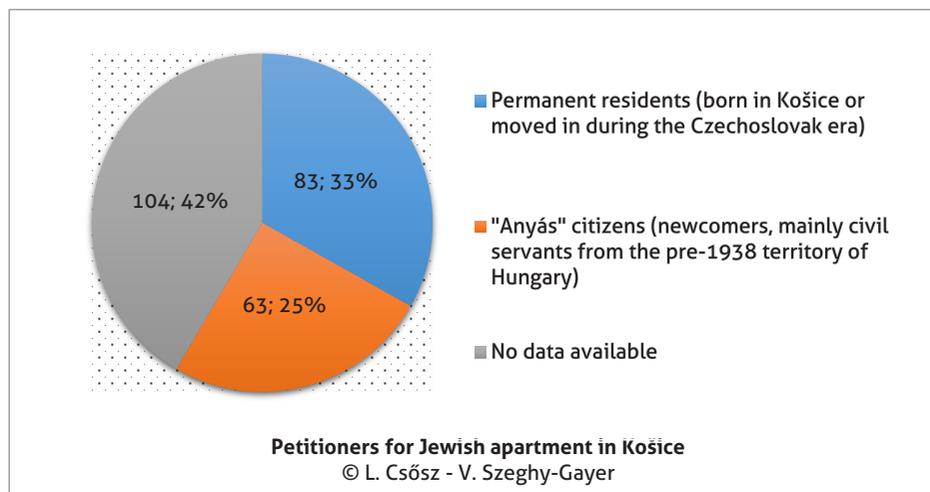


Chart 3

<sup>107</sup> AMK, KE MMZ, box 174, file 17052/944.

<sup>108</sup> SIMON, *Magyar idők a Felvidéken*.

Members of ethnic minorities were not explicitly excluded from the distribution of Jewish apartments, unlike in the case of land policy, which was often intertwined with Magyarization, especially in regions dominated by minorities, such as Subcarpathia. Ethnic Hungarians generally enjoyed an advantage, but it is actually impossible to measure the ethnic composition of the applicants, as of course ethnic Germans and Slovaks could hold Hungarian names and vice versa. Mixed identities and families were also not a rarity. The fifth of the relevant minority groups forming the multi-ethnic fabric of Košice, the Roma, were not legally excluded from the process, either. However, in their marginal social position it was nearly impossible for them to benefit from the process in this “legalized” way. There is only one Roma person among the identified applicants: Lajos L., a fiddler and father of six, who lived in a one-room apartment and applied for a larger one, but his request was turned down.<sup>109</sup> According to certain post-war explanations, it was mainly the Arrow Cross “riff-raff” and “irresponsible elements”, including the Roma, that had scrambled to seize Jewish assets.<sup>110</sup> However, it was clearly not the case and these narratives apparently served to whitewash the complicity of large segments of society in the expropriation of Jewish property, and the Holocaust in general.

Most of the petitioners emphasized their housing problems and/or their social status. The number of those who intended to take advantage of their military merits, “patriotic” achievements and tribulations was significantly smaller. This group included refugees from Southern Transylvania or Slovakia and those who suffered (real or alleged) discrimination under the “Czech occupation”, as one of the petitioners put it. “I have claims towards my homeland”, stated a retired teacher, who was forced to leave Czechoslovakia due to his “fervent patriotism” and live on the Hungarian side of the border.<sup>111</sup>

It is a striking conclusion that extreme nationalistic and antisemitic tirades and argumentation are less frequent in the Košice petitions, if compared to the same kind of documents submitted to ministries and municipalities in Hungary proper (post-Trianon territory). Extreme right-wing phraseology appears in less than 10 percent of texts. Only five petitions (2%) emphasized “ancient Christian” (“Aryan”) origin as a justification of the claim. Only very few petitions sported the phrase “with patriotic respect” (*hazafias tisztelettel*), the wartime nationalistic variant of the commonly used “with (full/deep/humble/excellent) respect” (*[teljes/mély/alázatos/kiváló] tisztelettel*), and only a single one used the Arrow Cross Party greeting “Kitartás” (“Perseverance”). However, it should be taken into account that after the Arrow Cross takeover, petitioners used simple request forms, which did not include space for such closing greetings.<sup>112</sup> Petitioners largely refrained from any political statement, or mentioning any party or movement, with very few exceptions. It is also remarkable, however, that there were both “true-born” residents of Košice and newcomers from Hungary proper among those who did use extremist language.

A possible explanation for this “moderate” tone is a kind of opportunism and careful manoeuvring because of the uncertain (or rather, increasingly clear) projected outcome of the war. According to a confidential gendarme investigative report dating from late

109 AMK, KE MMZ, box 176, file 19141/944.

110 MNL JNSzML, IV. 407. 684/1945.

111 AMK, KE MMZ, box 183, file 24843/944

112 AMK, KE MMZ, box 208, file 46615/944.

summer in 1944, many residents of Košice, a city the frontline was quickly approaching, calculated the return of the region to Czechoslovak rule as a realistic scenario and acted accordingly.<sup>113</sup> What is noticeable, however, is the cold pragmatism and indifference of the population who apparently considered the process as a natural and normal one. The word choice is telling: petitioners write about “vacant”, “vacated”, “abandoned” or “released” (Jewish) apartments. In fact, “Jewish” gradually had become a synonym of “vacant” or “public” property, as a clear indication of the routinization of the process. People filed petitions for “Jewish apartments”, just like they had petitioned for “Jewish lands” one or two years before, and soon after the end of the deportations (and the death of most of the owners) they continued to petition for “Jewish furniture”, “Jewish baby clothes” and other “Jewish stuff”. Non-Jewish citizens simply carried on, trying to adapt to the deteriorating war conditions and paying little attention to the private tragedy of their neighbours.

Those Košice residents who applied for Jewish shops, businesses and moveable property were actually more inclined to use nationalistic or antisemitic phraseology, but it was still not common, whether this choice reflected conviction or opportunism. Besides precise legal argumentation (which proves the participation of local administration or lawyers in penning the petitions), the petitions often used “moral” arguments, trying to prove the real estate or position they requested was something they could not achieve or had lost because of the unfair economic or legal activity of their Jewish (or “Czech”)<sup>114</sup> rivals. A timber trader claimed that “previously, all the proper facilities had been taken by concurrent Jewish firms”.<sup>115</sup> A carrier, who was a member of the Hungarian Parties “during the Czech occupation”, and was allegedly not even given enough work to make ends meet, praised the “long-awaited solution of the Jewish question” that would ensure that “hitherto begging poor Christians will also find work and bread”.<sup>116</sup> Self-victimization gave the submissions a “moral” tone: petitioners purported only to be seeking “their due”.

More commonly, petitioners acted as if the fulfilment of their request was actually of common interest and economically rational. An “ancient Christian” hatmaker requested the apartment and shop of her rival: “it is the primary interest of the community to reopen this Christian (!) business producing and selling public goods as soon as possible.”<sup>117</sup> A local farmer petitioned for a house with an orchard, arguing that “without proper handling the fruits would be lost”.<sup>118</sup> A non-Jewish housewife was anxious about some 50 rabbits her former Jewish neighbours “left behind”. “As [they have a] national and economic value, I took care of the poor animals myself.”<sup>119</sup> Perhaps the most astonishing example is a petition in which no real financial interest was involved. On 19 May, when three Košice transports had already reached Birkenau, and the rest of the victims were awaiting deportation in the transit camp among indescribable circumstances, a prominent local intellectual petitioned the Mayor’s Office. Participating in the inventory of a Jewish pharmacy, he found an aquarium in a box. He expressed his

113 MNL OL, K 149 1944-6-sz.n.

114 Remarkably, none of the petitions mentioned “Slovaks” in this context.

115 AMK, KE MMZ, box 177, file 19978/944.

116 AMK, KE MMZ, box 174, file 17070/944.

117 AMK, KE MMZ, box 177, file 20580/944.

118 AMK, KE MMZ, box 184, file 25388/944.

119 AMK, KE MMZ, box 174, file 17118/944.

concern for the “little animals who should be fed and taken care of” and requested that the aquarium should have been allocated to him, so as he could have saved them.<sup>120</sup>

## VII. Conclusion

Petitioners came from all layers of society, but the middle classes were over-represented among them. They had far better prospects in the competition, due to their connections, sources of information, education and capital. The economic hardships suffered by the population and the scarcity of apartments due to bombings offer only a partial explanation for the fervent chase after Jewish property. Many of the petitioners actually wanted to switch from a comparatively good housing situation to an even better one; they were submitting petitions without any legal ground whatsoever, in some cases probably by deceiving the housing authorities.<sup>121</sup>

Summing up, 71% of the investigated applicants were successful (180 petitions), while 31 applications were rejected, mostly because the desired apartment was occupied by the German or Hungarian military, or due to unfounded arguments. In 42 cases, the outcome is not clear or the petition was withdrawn (for example, in the case of people ultimately moving back to the territory of the downtown ghetto).

In fact, the government attempted to integrate various societal aspects, but simply lacked the time and capacity to organize the redistribution and satisfy all demands. Allocation of apartments was to serve as a way of rewarding servicemen, politically loyal public servants and local intelligentsia, and at the same time, as a means of social policy. High-ranking officials of the Ministry of the Interior suggested “allocating the vacated Jewish apartments to workers and clerks whose hearts are in the right place [i.e., who are politically loyal] and who are presently living in poor-quality apartments, and to Hungarian families, in order of their merits.”<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, it was a key issue to accommodate the demands of the frontline soldiers, who also fervently followed the news coming from home on the new “opportunities” and petitioned directly or through their families.<sup>123</sup> Government spokesmen did emphasize that “Jewish houses and lands are to be primarily given to frontline soldiers.”<sup>124</sup>

However, there were many other priorities and factors, and the authorities soon dispelled the illusions of many citizens who saw the scheme as an opportunity for upward social mobility. The mayor’s offices made sure that everyone got an apartment suitable for his/her social status. By exercising the tenant designation right, municipalities assumed an obligation to the landlord if the new tenant failed to pay the rent, and therefore they had to consider the tenant’s financial capacity. Thus, the distribution of apartments mirrored the social hierarchy and advantaged the more well-off applicants.

120 The author was Dr. Dezső R. (1905–1984), lawyer, public prosecutor, pianist and the chorus-master of the Košice Philharmonic Orchestra. AMK, KKE MMZ, box 178, file 21752/1944. He arrived in Košice from Hungary proper and returned there after 1945.

121 In Nagyvárad, proceedings were initiated against several local officials who submitted apartment petitions with false data. *Nagyvárad*, 1944 (June 15), p. 2.

122 MNL OL, K 557 fascicle 16, file IV/19.

123 In these cases we can often find a recommendation from an officer of their military unit attached to the petition, like in the case of László T., whose superior asked for a priority treatment in allocating the requested four-room apartment for him. AMK, KE MMZ, box 179, file 21825/944.

124 *Nagyszalontai Az Újság*, 1944 (7 July), p. 1.

From the spring of 1944 onward, the fate of the “Jewish wealth” was a topic dominating the public discourse. Government spokesmen and the press would relentlessly stress that the confiscated assets belonged to the state, they were to be carefully inventoried, and their utilization would be decided upon later. Minister of the Interior Jaross stated: “I emphasize that the wealth that Jews, with all their greed, managed to collect in property, treasures, and valuables in the liberal [Austro-Hungarian] era has ceased to belong to the Jews and now belongs to the Hungarian nation. But this wealth cannot simply be presented as gifts – it cannot be used to honour certain national achievements. It must enrich the nation in its entirety, it must be built into the circulatory system of the national economy, so that all honest working Hungarians can have their share of it.”<sup>125</sup>

Actually, only fragments of the confiscated Jewish assets were successfully redistributed and the Hungarian state could not even get hold of a large portion of it. German and Hungarian authorities smoothly cooperated in their “blitzkrieg” against the Jews. However, the distribution of the booty caused serious conflicts from the very beginning. Besides the “legal” quartering of German military personnel, the Wehrmacht and the police and security forces (SS, Sipó, SD, Gestapo) also seized and robbed the homes of the wealthiest Jews all around the country. In Košice, German soldiers were accommodated in the empty school buildings, and later also in former Jewish houses.<sup>126</sup> Károly Stirling, head of the pro-Nazi Eastern Frontline Companions’ Association (KABSZ) was one of the first Hungarian agents to apply for Jewish property.<sup>127</sup> He requested the building of the Talmud Torah, the Jewish School at the Orthodox Synagogue on Kazinczy Street. However, the building had already been occupied by the local branch of Eichmann’s *Sondereinsatzkommando*, under SS-Hauptsturmführer Schmidtsiefen.<sup>128</sup> German units systematically plundered Jewish shops and warehouses as well.<sup>129</sup>

Therefore, a large number of apartments were simply out of the city hall’s sphere of authority.<sup>130</sup> We lack exact figures, but we do have data from Szolnok, another important railway junction with a high presence of German troops, where by early June, 20% of the Jewish apartments were in German hands.<sup>131</sup> We can presume that the figure was close to this in Košice. The failed “redistribution” of Jewish belongings disappointed many people, who had great expectations of honouring their alleged “patriotic” achievements, or solving all their existential problems at once.<sup>132</sup> The secret police and SD commander in Košice reported on the general discontent of the middle class due to the unfavourable economic situation. Local residents condemned the

125 Speech of Minister of the Interior Andor Jaross in Nagyvárad. See: *Magyarság*, 1944 (18. V.), p. 5.

126 Polgármesteri jelentés. In: *Kassa Thj. Sz. Kir. Város Hivatalos Lapja*, 1944 (15. VI.), no. 6, p. 64.

127 AMK, KE MMZ, box 180, file 23388/1944. Stirling was identified as a war criminal and convicted in Hungary twenty years later, for his activities after the Arrow Cross takeover. *Vas Népe*, 16 October, 1965. It is important to add that none of the identified applicants were tried on charges concerning the plunder of Jewish property.

128 AMK, KE MMZ, box 174, file 17569/944.

129 AMK, KE MMZ, box 174, file 18148/1944.

130 AMK, KE MMZ, box 174, file 17062/944. AMK, KE MMZ, box 189, file 30190/944. AMK, KE MMZ, box 198, file 37818/944. AMK, KE MMZ box 209, file 46961/944.

131 CSŐSZ, *Konfliktusok*, 168.

132 GERLACH – ALY, *Az utolsó fejezet*, 167–168.

Hungarian authorities for the slow implementation of the “solution to the Jewish question”, as the report put it.<sup>133</sup>

In the absence of uniform central regulations and with time running short, local decision makers had quite a lot of room to manoeuvre regarding the distribution of the apartments and other property under their control. Out of those taking part in the stock-taking of Jewish assets, few left with empty pockets. On 1 June 1944, for example, the Housing Bureau in Košice unexpectedly closed its doors to clients. Instead, the officials of the City Hall organized a closed auction of Jewish property among themselves.<sup>134</sup> It was not uncommon that such invitation-only auctions were held the first time around for insiders, where people could obtain at the fraction of the regular price the bed sheets, clothes and other valuables of their neighbours (who had mostly been killed by then). These phenomena further escalated the moral erosion of society.

Finally, most of the people aspiring to gain “Jewish wealth” could obtain only fragments of the booty, in the form of lootings or social aid.<sup>135</sup> The frustration occasionally led to protests and even “spontaneous” rallies in the last phase of Hungarian rule. In spite of the high risk (even the threat of capital punishment) involved, many people broke into the abandoned Jewish houses or joined the plundering Hungarian and German soldiers.

The mass activity of opportunists challenges the popular image of Hungarian society as passive and powerless onlookers, or even victims of the German occupation. Many non-Jewish citizens were in fact active players, who competed for Jewish wealth, and even contributed to shaping anti-Jewish policy. For example, the city officials planning the ghetto faced an agitated crowd of locals who demanded that their houses were omitted from the ghetto.<sup>136</sup> Winning over the masses to the campaign was essential for the new regime, and therefore this kind of intervention was not neglected.

“What did they know, and when?” is one of the key questions when discussing the responsibility of the participants of the Holocaust. Statesmen and diplomats already knew full well by 1942 what the Nazi term “Endlösung der Judenfrage” meant in practice. Such accurate information did not reach the everyman, but many were informed about the mass murders from accounts of servicemen who had been to the front line, as well as from Allied radio announcements.<sup>137</sup> Many “bystanders” (and victims) possibly rejected that kind of report as rumour. However, those who witnessed the campaign in 1944 and saw masses of people largely incapable of work (for men of active age had already been enlisted for labour service) being taken away ruthlessly and deprived of everything, could hardly do so. Tell-tale remarks in newspaper articles and petitions indicate that many people knew or suspected the real consequences of the operation. The high number of petitions for and widespread attitudes about “abandoned” property also implies that very few expected the deportees to return.

Mapping the post-war fate of the apartments and the former petitioners will also require further research. On the one hand, we cannot exclude the possibility that a certain number of petitioners were able to keep living in the apartments which

133 Telegram from Veessenmayer to Ritter, 15 June 1944. In: BRAHAM, *The Destruction*, doc. no. 281.

134 Complaint of Mrs. Imre Gréczi filed at the local Financial Directorate. 2 June 1944. MZsML, RG I, Reel 12. In: VÁGI – CSÓSZ – KÁDÁR. *The Holocaust in Hungary*, 204–205.

135 MNL JNSzML, IV. 407. 684/1945.

136 ÁBTL, Pohl Sándor – 3.1.9. V.13523.

137 LAQUEUR, *The Terrible Secret*, 33–34, 37–38.

they had acquired after the deportation of Jews. We assume that they were mostly petitioners who lived in Košice long before the first Vienna Arbitration. On the other hand, the majority of those who arrived with the Hungarian administration in Košice after 1938 probably spent only a few months living in the acquired Jewish apartments. For example, Rudolf K., the city's chief archivist who arrived in the city in 1940, was granted a Jewish apartment in the summer of 1944, but could not enjoy it for long. Arrested by the Arrow Cross in late 1944, he was imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp. After World War II he did not return to Košice.<sup>138</sup> Another petitioner for Jewish apartments, Béla Gy., who moved to Košice in 1942 as a secondary school teacher, escaped at the end of the Hungarian rule and lived in Budapest until his death.

Only a fragment of the Košice Jewish community survived the Holocaust. The few hundred survivors returning from camps, labour service or hiding struggled to get back their apartments and start new lives. However, few neighbours were inclined to give up former Jewish apartments and other valuables they had obtained in various ways during the war. In war-torn Central and Eastern Europe, the housing question was one of the gravest social problems, which fuelled frustrations and, in accordance with the old patterns, consequently became one of the major components of resurfacing antisemitism.<sup>139</sup>

Artúr Görög, member of the Jewish Council of Košice during the war, remembered the moment when he entered his house: *"I stood paralysed in the stairwell. At the door of my apartment, a stranger's brass plaque stared me in the face. Stunned, helpless, and without a thought, I sat down on a staircase. I was startled by a scream. – Jesus, Mary! But it is the landlord! Besides joy, a certain kind of fear also resonated in the cry. The enthusiastic neighbour who had found me was one of the more benevolent women. We took a mutual liking to each other, and as I discovered, she took the least of belongings from the abandoned apartment, and to her credit, she gave some of it back. This is how my life in my old home was restarted. But it also ushered in an era of disappointment and then resignation."*<sup>140</sup>

Legal rehabilitation of survivors was initiated, but fair and complete restitution was soon taken off the agenda both in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Presidential Decree No. 5/1945 of 19 May 1945 annulled the property transactions between 1938 and 1945, but Jews had to reclaim their former property from the state according to the Act issued a year later (128/1946).<sup>141</sup> However, this only applied to property rights, not to tenancy rights. What is more, persons who according to Decree No. 5/1945 were of German or Hungarian nationality were to be considered unreliable from the state's point of view, and consequently were not able to regain their lost property. Among the Jewish apartments mentioned in the petitions, we could identify only one that after World War II returned to its Jewish owner. This was the villa of Aladár Zahler, a prominent Jewish lawyer, victim of the Holocaust, whose family, with the help of the lawyer Miklós Gaskó, was able to get back almost all of the real estate that the Zahlers owned before 1945.

138 "55982 Kliegl Rudolf," Accessed December 15, 2020. <https://stevemorse.org/dachau/dachau.php?=&offset=55951>

139 ŠIŠJAKOVÁ, Protižidovské nepokoje po druhej svetovej vojne – rok 1945 na východnom Slovensku. Accessed December 16, 2020. <http://www.saske.sk/cas/archiv/2-2008/03-Sisjakova.html>

140 GÖRÖG, *A kassai zsidóság*, 212.

141 "Zákon č. 128/1946 Zákon o neplatnosti některých majetkově-právních jednání z doby nesvobody a o nárocích z této neplatnosti a z jiných zásahů do majetku". Accessed December 15, 2020. <https://www.psp.cz/sqw/sbirka.sqw?cz=128&r=1946>.

However, this would probably not have been possible if Mrs. Zahler had not applied for reslovakization after returning home from deportation.<sup>142</sup>

As the Soviet-style regimes gradually took over, several Holocaust survivors could not gain back their apartments and other assets or lost them again due to the nationalization process. Furthermore, the postwar years brought about another wave of violent state interventions and arbitrary practices in the housing sector, affecting many citizens, this time Jews and non-Jews alike.

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<sup>142</sup> Letter of Miklós Gaskó to György Zahler, 10 December 1947, Košice. See: the personal documents of Aladár and György Zahler owned by Veronika Szeghy-Gayer.

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