

## Review Article: The Saddest History Ever Written: On Randolph L. Braham's *The Geographical Encyclopedia of the Holocaust in Hungary* (2013)

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**Abstract:** Only in 1989, after forty-five years of Soviet domination, could the Holocaust in Hungary begin to be discussed openly and honestly. One scholar in particular, the author–editor of this mammoth geographical encyclopedia, Randolph L. Braham, has devoted his life and career to uncovering the truth about what happened within the borders of Hungary and the annexed territories. Since 1961 he has written or edited, co-authored or co-edited more than fifty books on the Holocaust. The masterful two-volume *Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (1994) appeared to be his definitive statement. But now, with a team of Hungarian Holocaust scholars and journalists, he uncovers, with maps and photos, how the Holocaust was implemented within each and every city, town, and village of every one of the forty-one counties in wartime Hungary. The authors document the histories of each location where Jewish families lived. The photos recover the multitude of synagogues that once were filled with a lively spiritual life, which today mostly serve other purposes, if they have not been destroyed altogether. The photos of the humiliating treatment of the Jews at the hands of the SS and Hungarian gendarmes, in conjunction with the maps showing the routes toward their final destination, depict how Jews were uprooted and discarded. Viewing the Holocaust in Hungary through a geographical lens creates a new perspective and fresh insights.

**Keywords:** *Holocaust in Hungary, Geography, Encyclopedia, Randolph L. Braham, Trianon Treaty, Jewish Council, Auschwitz-Birkenau*

**Biography:** Marguerite De Huszar Allen earned her MA and PhD in Comparative Studies in Literature from the University of Chicago, where she held a Whiting Foundation Fellowship. She received a BA with Honors from the University of Wisconsin, Madison and studied at the University of Freiburg, Germany. She has held positions at Princeton University and Loyola University of Chicago. A portion of her book *The Faust Legend: Popular Formula and Modern Novel* has recently been expanded and updated as a chapter in the book *The Faustian Century: German Literature and Culture in the Age of Luther and Faustus* (Camden House 2013). In 2008, she was a Fulbright Research Scholar in Hungary, as well as a Visiting Scholar at the Roberta Buffett Center for International and Comparative Studies, Northwestern University. Her most recent article, "Making Relations, Breaking Relations: Political, Economic, and Cultural Relations between France and Hungary 1905–1910 and the *Revue de Hongrie*," is in the current issue (41, 2-3) of the journal *East Central Europe*. Her continuing research on the *Revue de Hongrie* now enters the pre-war years and World War I.



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Samuel Barber's nine-minute masterpiece, the elegiac *Adagio for Strings*, dubbed by Thomas Larson "the saddest music ever written" (Larson 2010), seems emotionally appropriate as an introduction to *The Geographical Encyclopedia of the Holocaust in Hungary*, which I consider "the saddest history ever written." The *Adagio for Strings* had its world premiere in New York on November 5, 1938. Not coincidentally, the conductor was Arturo Toscanini, an outspoken opponent of Hitler and Mussolini. Toscanini had only recently fled Italy after becoming *persona non grata* for refusing to play the Fascist national anthem before his performances in his country. He also refused to conduct at Bayreuth or anywhere else in Nazi-occupied Europe. While still in Europe, Toscanini had asked the young American composer Barber to send him something short for his new orchestra in New York. Barber sent him this *Adagio*. The piece created a sensation, arousing in listeners an intense emotional response that resonated with the deeply troubling events of the time. It became the composer's most popular orchestral piece and America's unofficial national mourning anthem, later played to commemorate the deaths of Presidents Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy and the victims of the September 11, 2001 attacks.

In November 1938, the *Adagio* could be perceived as a prescient lament for Hungarian Jews. Only four days after its auspicious debut, a carefully orchestrated pogrom, *Kristallnacht* ['Night of Broken Glass'], unleashed an outburst of vicious hatred against Jews in all of Nazi-occupied Europe, leading to the murder of scores of Jews and the destruction of many synagogues, Jewish-owned businesses and homes. With the first major Anti-Jewish Law in May 1938, Hungary entered a Faustian "blood pact" with this Nazi Devil. As a result, the Devilish pact bore fruit at the signing of the First Vienna Award, returning Felvidék ['the Upper, northern Province'], one of the territories torn from Monarchical Hungary by the Trianon Treaty in 1920, following WWI.

Just as the legendary Faustus ignored the warning to flee the Devil in his eagerness to enjoy the fruits of the pact, so the Hungarian leadership, in the flush of enthusiasm for the return of pre-Trianon territory, rationalized the Anti-Jewish Laws as part of their alliance and alignment with the Nazi cause as well as their own revisionist ambitions. While Hungary continued to recover more pre-Trianon territory—Carpatho-Ruthenia (in March 1939), Northern Transylvania (in August 1940), and Délvidék or the Lower, southern Province (in April 1941)—Regent Miklós Horthy and Hungarian leaders legislated two other increasingly restrictive anti-Jewish laws, in 1939 and 1941. All three Anti-Jewish laws were timed to demonstrate Hungary's willingness to cooperate with Nazi Germany in the hope of greater territorial compensation (Case 2008). These reciprocal dealings bound Hungary ever tighter to Germany while gradually disenfranchising Jews of their livelihoods, their civil rights, their possessions, and eventually their lives.

### **The Geographical Perspective**

What does *The Geographical Encyclopedia of the Holocaust in Hungary* add to what we already know about the Destruction of Hungarian Jewry? While previous scholarship has often treated the Holocaust as if it had happened on "another planet" (Cattaruzza and Iordachi 2012: 2), this work is geographically and concretely grounded. Two hefty volumes present forty-one alphabetically arranged chapters devoted to Hungary's forty-one counties, including the annexed territories, and are followed by a third volume of sources. Randolph L. Braham, the foremost survivor-historian of the Holocaust of Hungarian Jewry, together with twenty-three other

Holocaust researchers and journalists, documents the history and fate of each and every Jewish community, no matter how small or obscure. Thus, the book moves from the national to the county level to specific locations within the county. This structure takes us back in time by means of maps, photos, and documents to the places where Jewish families and communities once lived—at times for decades or centuries—and where today, with few exceptions, no Jews live. This approach emphasizes the authors' determination to pay tribute to and memorialize all past Jewish life in Hungary. This encyclopedia is an essential resource for scholars and for those especially interested in the Holocaust in Hungary and in Jewish history as well as for people tracing their family histories or the places they have come from.

Braham's ninety-page concise historical overview of the Holocaust from a national geopolitical perspective contains not only an abundance of black-and-white photos, many of them iconic, but also four important maps. The first map distinguishes between the Trianon Hungary and the Hungary with the annexed territories, which are identified by name, date of annexation, and relevant demographic data. Another map, depicting the ten "Gendarmerie Districts and Deportation Zones," details the geographical order in which the Final Solution was implemented. The two maps together reveal that with each regained territory, the number of Jews under Hungarian control increased dramatically, while the ultimate chances for their survival diminished proportionately. Comparing these two maps with the third, that of "Jewish Congregations of Hungary, April 1944," highlights the utter devastation brought by the Final Solution upon a large population of provincial Orthodox, mostly Hasidic Jews living in Carpatho-Ruthenia and Northern Transylvania, the first two zones to experience mass deportations. In contrast, the last deportation zone in the third map consists of assimilated urban Neolog Jews, living in Budapest, who largely survived the Holocaust. (The recent commemoration on June 21, 2014 of "yellow star" houses in Budapest, seventy years after Jews were forced into them, reflects the geographical awareness of present-day public and its need to remember events through tangible real life objects and places; see Cole 2013.)

The "Administrative Map of Hungary, 1941-1944," reveals, among other things, that the largest Jewish communities in Zones I and II were located either in county or district seats, suggesting that local officials cooperated with the Hungarian gendarmerie and the SS. The history of the "Ung County and Administrative District" verifies the voluntary collaboration of top Hungarian officials. The authors of this chapter—Kinga Frojimovics, Rita Horváth, Yeshayahu Jelinek—note: "In addition to the anti-Jewish measures cited above, authorities in Ung did everything in their power to further aggravate the living conditions of the Jews" (Braham 2013: 1114) and "On April 15, 1944, the top officials of Ung County and the Ung Administrative District held a meeting at Ungvár to discuss the details of the plundering of the Jews and of their ghettoization and deportation" (Braham 2013: 1115). The Final Solution began in the geographical space where the so-called "Galician" or "Eastern" Jews lived. Poor, Yiddish-speaking, and non-magyarized, they were helpless in the hands of officials who treated them as sub-human and whose top priority was plundering and making the space that these Jews occupied their own.

Braham's general overview is followed by discussions of the annihilation of Hungary's Jews in specific counties. Although these chapters vary in content and length depending on the availability of documentary resources and each county's unique characteristics, each chapter nevertheless begins with a detailed map of the county it studies. These maps display specific information about the demographic distribution of Jewish settlements within the county's general population around the census of 1941, the year Hungary joined the "German war effort." The

maps also mark the counties' ghettos, concentration and entrainment centers, and the routes used to transport Jews to these locations from their villages, towns and cities. These sites are linked to the concentration routes and railway lines—including stops along the way—that eventually carried the victims outside of Hungary to their final destination, which in most cases was the Auschwitz-Birkenau Extermination Camp.

The maps disclose other interesting information as well, including escape possibilities that were either realized or missed. For example, the maps titled "Kolozs County" and "Bihar County" both illustrate the proximity of cities like Kolozsvár and Nagyvárad to the Romanian border, which explains how some 1,200-1,500 Transylvanian Jews dared to take the dangerous escape route from Kolozsvár to relative safety in Romania (Braham 2013: 514). Distance, however, was not the only determining factor: Marosvásár in "Maros-Torda County" and Sepiszentgyörgy in "Udvarhely County" are similarly close to the Romanian border, but no Jews are known to have escaped from there to Southern Transylvania. The *tiyul* [Hebrew: 'excursion'], the cover-name for an extensive operation of smuggling Jews out to Romania and later to Palestine, saved between 5,000 and 7,000 lives (Cohen 1998: 129). Finally, any particular county map can be inserted, like a piece in a puzzle, into the national maps, for the sake of a more comprehensive perspective.

Each county map is followed by an introduction describing the county's Jewish population and their life before, during, and after the Holocaust. The chapters dealing with each county begin with the first trace of Jewish life recorded in it and end with accounts of survivors returning to the county, if there were any, and information about the present state of these Jewish communities including their synagogues and cemeteries. These histories report the interwar ethnicities living in the county, typical Jewish occupations, the community's ideo-religious identity—Orthodox (learned or Hasidic), Neolog (Reformed), Status Quo, or Zionist—and its relationship with its Christian surroundings. The histories follow the step-by-step anatomy of annihilation from the *Numerus Clausus* Law through isolation, ghettoization, expropriation, deportation, to elimination. Some of the *Encyclopedia* authors write about postwar trials, convictions, and sentences meted out to perpetrators and collaborators, often *in absentia* (on many of these issues, see Cole 2011).

Most accounts also relate when the conscription of Jewish men into the Hungarian army labor service system took place. (Interestingly, conscription into the labor service was also the author-editor's personal fate in WWII.) Established in 1939 as part of national defense, the forced labor service quickly developed into a means to humiliate the country's Jews who no longer qualified as "Hungarian" soldiers and officers, in contrast to WWI. While the forced labor service saved many men from deportation, it became part of the overall plan to annihilate all Jews, leading to previously unimaginable forms of cruelty and inhumanity that characterized the Final Solution as a whole. (Indeed, the rates of survival of the "service" men—around ten percent—matched those of Nazi-occupied European Jewry as a whole and turned out as lower than the twenty-five percent of Hungarian Jewry by itself). The reader can locate, near Hungary's border with the Reich, three of Hungary's most notorious forced labor camps for Jewish men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five, mentioned in the text (Braham 2013: xxxix, 846, 851, 1185-1186), but not identified as labor camps on the maps: Nagycenk (Braham 2013: 835), Sopronbánfalva (Braham 2013: 835), and Kőszeg (Braham 2013: 1169). Their location signals the antisemites' awareness of the Soviet Red Army's rapid approach from the east.

The overview of each county is followed by an account of the fate of each and every Jewish community within specific cities, towns, and villages, all arranged in alphabetical order.

These histories vary in length from a single paragraph to many pages. Prewar photographs of synagogues and their interiors, reflecting a once vibrant community life, contrast sharply with photos showing brickyard ghettos (e.g., in Kolozsvár and Tiszafüred), gates leading into ghettos (in Munkács and Debrecen), humiliating roundups and Jews being shoved into cattle cars (entrainment), as well as horrific piles of corpses discarded like refuse after mass executions. Many photos bring the past to life visually, if only for a moment. What cannot be reduced to a number or concretely displayed are the suicides committed after 1938 by Jews deprived of their livelihoods, abused labor servicemen, exempted rabbis who chose to accept the same fate as the members of their communities, internees in brickyard entrainment centers or ghettos, and wealthy Jews who preferred death to another trip to the "mint" (interrogations in which people were beaten to give up their valuables). More than a few disillusioned Jews also killed themselves in despair over the world's apathetic response to their pleas, as did Szmul Zygielbojm, a member of the Polish Government-in-Exile (Braham 2013: 809-11).

Cultural information enriches many accounts and informs us, for example, that Jews had probably settled in Szatmár County during the reign of Andrew II (1205-1235), and in the "Pest-Pilius-Solt-Kiskun County" since Roman times. Some historians record the fates of Jewish intellectuals, artists, and journalists. Dániel Löwy, for example, tells the story of the last-minute escape by train to Budapest of eleven-year-old (later to become writer) György Konrád with his older sister and two cousins just before the ghettoization of Berettyóújfalu. They (and György's parents) turned out to be the town's only survivors; years later Konrád recounted his amazing journey in his memoir *Guest in my own Country: A Hungarian Life* [Part 1: *Elutazás és Hazatérés*, 'Departure and Homecoming'; Part 2: *Fenn a hegyen napfogyatkozáskor*, 'Up on a Hill during a Solar Eclipse']. Descriptions of the good deeds of those that later became entitled as Righteous among the Nations by Yad Vashem (the Israeli Authority for the Commemoration of the Holocaust) provide relief in a few histories. In Kolozsvár, for example, the Roman Catholic Bishop Áron Márton protested, at great danger to himself, against the ghettoization and deportation of the town's Jews and was posthumously awarded the honor, Righteous among the Nations. Such "intransigence" was rare (I use the word "intransigence" as defined by Richard H. Weisberg in his important book *In Praise of Intransigence* to mean "a rigorous allegiance to what one already believes"; see Weisberg 2014: xi).

The third, much shorter volume of the *Encyclopedia* contains a bounty of bibliographical sources arranged into a somewhat idiosyncratic system of abbreviations, an eight-page chronology of events, a glossary of terms, the biographies of the encyclopedia's authors, and indexes of names and places. A topic index would have been even more helpful to enable cross-county and cross-country comparisons.

## **Denial and Betrayal**

Why is the history of the Hungarian Holocaust, as presented in *The Geographical Encyclopedia of the Holocaust in Hungary*, the saddest history ever written? Rita Horváth identifies what distinguishes the testimony of survivors deported from Hungary from the testimony of survivors from other countries:

...[S]urvivors from Hungary repeatedly insist upon their previous lack of knowledge and unpreparedness (Horváth 2008: 496)...[They] were and remain unable to decide at the end of the war precisely what they knew at the time, which is why a contradictory picture of self-deception, illusion, of at once knowing and not knowing, arises from their accounts (Horváth 2008: 494).

How was this possible when Hungary was the last country to be occupied by Nazi forces and the 800,000 Jews in Hungary formed the largest remaining community in Europe?

It is well known that when the Germans invaded Hungary (on March 19, 1944) and systematic mass deportation began in the countryside (on May 15), it was already clear that the Germans would lose the war. Within weeks, on June 6, the Western Allies would storm Normandy's beachheads and within three months Soviet forces would cross Hungary's eastern border. Time was a crucial factor for both Hungary's Jews and Adolf Eichmann's *Sonderkommando*, the special group of SS soldiers whose mission was to deport Jews to Auschwitz. The SS soldiers together with Hungarian government officials (László Endre and László Baký, in particular), and Hungarian gendarmes mobilized a kind of *Blitzkrieg* against the provincial Jews, implementing the Final Solution at breakneck speed in a matter of weeks with uncommon brutality and with the full support of the Christian churches and the Hungarian government, until Horthy, barraged with criticism from abroad, finally called a halt to the deportations on July 7. By that time, the provincial Jews and those living in the cities ringing the capital, including Budafok, Szentendre, and Újpest, had been exterminated.

How was this genocide possible when many world leaders, international Jewish organizations including the pre-State leadership in Israel/Palestine, and Hungarian Jewish leaders understood the meaning of "deportation," "resettlement," and the "Final Solution"? In his *The Politics of Genocide* (1994), especially in chapters 23 and 29, Braham documents in detail the sources of information alerting Hungarian Jewish leaders and ordinary people to the dangers ahead, warnings that for the most part went unheeded. For example, as early as the late summer of 1941, eyewitnesses reported the machine-gunning of approximately 23,600 "alien" Jews from Hungary, mostly refugees from Poland and Russia but also 16,000 Hungarian Jews, by SS *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units) near Kamenets-Podolsk, Ukraine. According to Braham, this killing event was "the first five-figure massacre in the Nazis' Final Solution" (Braham 2013, xxviii). A survivor of the massacre, Moishe Lieberman, the beadle of the Etz Chaim synagogue in Máramarossziget, returned home to tell Sighet's inhabitants about the executions, but encountered only disbelief; in fact, they thought he was mad. Elie Wiesel, who immortalized Moishe in his memoir *Night* [La Nuit] (Wiesel 1960: 3-8), also describes how quickly optimistic complacency replaced the initial shock in Sziget at the news of the German invasion. Many such examples reinforce the observation that people tend to believe what they want to believe, even when presented with contradicting information; they deny a reality they cannot accept.

By late summer of 1941, Hungarian Jewish leaders had reliable information about similar mass executions in the Baltic States, the Ukraine, Bessarabia, and Bukovina. They even knew about the first experimental use of gassing trucks. Jewish refugees from Poland and Slovakia reported their personal experiences and the realities of Nazi persecution to the Budapest-based Relief and Rescue Committee (in Hebrew: *Vaada*); the Committee then reported this information to its contacts in Istanbul and Switzerland and to the representatives of major Jewish international organizations. In December 1943, while Miklós Kállay was Prime Minister, the military officers in charge of the massacres that took place in Délvidék in January 1942 had a public trial; despite their pleadings that they were "only following orders," the court found them guilty and sentenced them to many years in prison. This was a major victory for the rule of law during a chaotic period of time. However, the officers were allowed to escape to the German Reich only to return in 1944 with the invading German army.

The Vatican had been aware of the situation in Poland since the spring of 1942. Around the same time the Jewish Socialist Party of Poland informed London that the Germans, having already exterminated some 700,000 Polish Jews, planned to physically annihilate the country's entire Jewish population. By then the gassing procedure had been verified. The Polish Government-in-Exile made sure their report on the genocide in Poland was broadcast over the BBC and published by *The Daily Telegraph*, several influential Jewish journals, and *The New York Times* (Braham 2013: 810). Jewish organizations had informed the leaders of the Allied Forces, including President Roosevelt on August 26, 1942, about the massacre of Jews in Central Eastern Europe (Braham 2013: 813). As for the Hungarian government, György Ottlik, a respected member of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Upper House, reported on October 10, 1942 to the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Döme Sztójay, the Hungarian Minister in Berlin, was eager to "resettle a sizable portion of our Jewish population in occupied Russia," adding that Sztójay "did not keep it a secret that 'resettlement' meant execution" (Braham 1994: 288). Yet all these efforts were in vain.

On April 4, 1944 American Jewish leaders received news that the Germans intended to exterminate Hungarian Jewry within six months. Hungarian Jewish leaders even received word from Bratislava that a railway agreement had been signed by Hungary and Slovakia and that the SS were in the process of improving and renovating the gas chambers and crematoria in Auschwitz in preparation for the Hungarian Jews (Braham, 2000: 90-92; Vrba 1997). On April 4, 1944, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, two Slovak escapees from Auschwitz, began to disclose the hideous truth about Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp. The "Vrba-Wetzler Report" (Auschwitz Protocols) completed by April 27, 1944 and translated into German, Hungarian, English, and French, reached leading Jewish authorities in Slovakia, the Budapest Jewish Council, as well as Catholic and Protestant churches in Hungary. Portions of it were published in Switzerland. Only after most all of Hungary was *judenrein* ['cleansed of Jews], with the exception of those in Budapest, did news of the extermination process reach a mass audience, causing President Roosevelt, the King of Sweden, and Pope Pius XII to insist on the halting of deportations. But as Vrba later concluded, those who most needed the information, those marked for deportation, did not receive it (Vrba 1997). Asher Cohen summed it up: "Except for a few individual cases, some well-known, no significant aid or rescue was rendered by non-Jews, neither from inside Hungary nor from neutral countries, despite the widespread knowledge of the deportations" (Cohen 1998: 125).

Considering the responsibility and (in)action of national Jewish leadership, Braham comes down hardest on the leaders of the Central Jewish Council in Budapest, to whom the SS and their Hungarian accomplices assigned the job of pacifying the Jewish masses, since the last thing the SS wanted was another Warsaw-style uprising. Although aware of the Nazis' Final Solution program, the national leaders of the Hungarian Jews failed to keep the Jewish masses fully and accurately informed. Instead, they persisted in the belief that an Allied victory would come in time to save their community (Braham 2013: xlix-1). Their belief, a form of denial, reflected their traumatized state of mind. Jewish councils in the provinces were similarly used by the Nazi and Hungarian authorities to lull Jewish communities into a false sense of security. The Germans used one of Hitler's favorite tactics on Council leaders, that of *quid pro quo*, similar to the granting of pre-Trianon territory in exchange for anti-Jewish legislation (see Goda 2000 who documents how Hitler bribed his own top military officers with money and estates to ensure their loyalty). On the morning after the invasion, SS officers promised to issue Jewish leaders special immunity certificates exempting them from any anti-Jewish measures. While the Jewish leaders

in the provinces were merely the last to be forced onto boxcars, the members of the Jewish Council of Budapest were granted special privileges to assuage their mounting fears: they were treated relatively well and were eventually saved by Horthy's suspension of the deportations.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the Jews' belief that the Hungarians would never betray their Jews had long roots. Hungary had benefited from the collaboration between the conservative aristocracy and assimilated Jews since the 1867 Compromise and the Emancipation, the beginning of the "Golden Era" for Hungarian Jewry. After the inclusion of the Jewish faith among the State's accepted religions, the Jews contributed even more to the modernization of Hungary, as their brilliant success as bankers, industrialists, and businessmen charged the economic system. In return for their service, Emperor Franz Josef/Francis Joseph rewarded many of them with titles of nobility. Even the anti-Semitic Regent Horthy worried about the economic implications of the loss of Hungary's Jewish financial and industrial entrepreneurs and leaders. Moreover, loyal Jewish sacrifices for Hungary during World War I—and for that matter during the 1848-1849 Revolution as well—were well known. Despite the growing anti-Semitism during the interwar years and notwithstanding the Anti-Jewish Laws, Hungarian Jewry at large felt confident that their country would never betray them. As events proved their confidence to be misplaced, they had too little time to adjust their previous assumptions.

Thus, what haunts the reader, as it did the survivors themselves, is the question for which there is no easy answer: how could this have happened? What *The Geographical Encyclopedia of the Holocaust in Hungary* achieves is the transformation of faceless numbers, like 800,000, to flesh and blood people who once lived in specific communities all over Hungary, who were subsequently erased and replaced by non-Jews (except in the capital Budapest). As the survivor Menahem Schmelzer wrote, "Not to forget means that we must first know" (Schmelzer 1997: 184). Thus, Randolph Braham's *Geographical Encyclopedia* is, above all, a haunting tribute and memorial to those Hungarian Jews who died and those who might have been saved.

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<sup>1</sup> For discussions on the many persistent questions about what might have been done differently, see two excellent collections of essays originating from international conferences: *Genocide and Rescue* (1997) and *The Nazi's Last Victims* (1998), as well as István Deák's response in "Could the Hungarian Jews Have Survived?" (1989) and in *Essays on Hitler's Europe* (2001). A small sample of the questions discussed are the following: Was armed resistance an option? Would Jewish lives have been saved if Hungary had not attempted to terminate the alliance with Nazi Germany to reach an armistice with the Allied Forces? Why didn't the United States and Britain do more?



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