

The Antisemitism of Lajos Esztergár, Mayor of Pécs during the Holocaust

Evidence from his Private Correspondence

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Abstract: The efficient transfer of close to 440,000 Jews (Braham 2016: 1507) from the Hungarian countryside to foreign concentration camps (nearly all to Auschwitz) in the spring and summer of 1944 would not have been possible without the cooperation of Hungary's mayors and other local officials. Were collaborating mayors primarily motivated by antisemitism, careerism, or fear? While much work needs to be done in this area of Hungarian history, insights into the mind of one mayor, Lajos Esztergár (1894-1978), of Pécs, have become possible with the release of a large collection of his personal correspondence in 2024 (Dr. Esztergár Lajos iratai). While the areas of his collaboration are, for the most part, well documented, his attitude toward that collaboration has been debated by historians and advocates of local memory policies since the weakening of the communist regime in the mid-1980s and especially after its demise at the end of the decade. Esztergár's letters provide us with a clear view into his feelings and thoughts on the "Jewish problem."

Keywords: *Antisemitism in Hungary, Pécs mayors, Lajos Esztergár, local memory*

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Who was Lajos Esztergár?

Esztergár served as mayor of Pécs from 1940 to November 1944, and then again, under Russian occupation of the city, from December 1944 to May 1945. He was born into a large Roman Catholic family of ten children in Abrudfalva (Abrud-Sat), a town in the Western part of Transylvania. His father was a carriage maker. We know little about the family's economic condition, though one author claims that they occasionally experienced want (Horváth 1990: 296). Esztergár attended a *gimnázium* in Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia). He was a schoolmate of the later bishop of Gyulafehérvár, Áron Márton (1896–1980), who, unlike Esztergár, took a brave stand, as we shall see, against the deportations (Vargha 2002; Rozs 2002).



Esztergár began his legal studies in Kolozsvár (Cluj Napoca) but was called up in 1915 for military service. In 1916, six months after his deployment, he was wounded in the arm on the Russian front and served the rest of the war in Budapest in a clerical position ("Előjegyzési lap a gyógyintézetbeli betegek felől"). He completed his law degree in Debrecen in June 1919 (Esztergár, "Életrajz" [1936]) and left for Romania immediately afterward, no doubt because he preferred to practice law there rather than under the Hungarian Soviet Republic. He returned to Hungary as a refugee after the August 1 demise of the Soviet Republic and began a long career in government service under the emerging Horthy regime, first as an administrator in the refugee program, then, in 1920, in the newly formed national police. The police deployed him to Pécs in 1921.

The historian István Vörös quotes a newspaper article from 1946, which claimed that Esztergár, by his own account, was active in the establishment of antisemitic organizations in Pécs (Vörös 2020: 1; "Újabb súlyos adatok"). While the source of the newspaper article, the transcript of Esztergár's second trial before the People's Court, has been lost, his private letters substantiate the claim. In 1942, Esztergár boasted of his part in founding and leading the local chapter of the *Egyesült Keresztény Nemzeti Liga* ['United Christian National League'] to Dezső Makay, its new national leader:

Already in the 1920s, after the liberation of Pécs from Serbian occupation, I was involved in the founding of the Christian National League, as well as in its later work. It was the Christian National League that took on the struggle against Marxism, Free Masonry, and Jewry. This work and struggle, during the 1929 municipal election, resulted in a Christian city hall. (Esztergár, "Letter to Dezső Makay" 24 February 1942; all subsequent letters, unless otherwise noted, are also from Esztergár; all translations, mine).

Még az 1920-as években Pécsnek a szerb megszállás alól történt felszabadulása után a Keresztény Nemzeti Liga pécsi megalakulásában és későbbi munkájában dolgoztam. A Keresztény Nemzeti Liga vette fel Pécsen a küzdelmet a marxizmussal, a szabadkőművességgel és a zsidósággal szemben. A munka és a küzdelem eredményezte [az] 1929. évben megtartott törvényhatósági választás során a keresztény városházát.

In the 1920s, the League was involved in charity as well as in local political campaigning. Mayor Andor Nendtvich (1867–1951) recognized Esztergár's contributions in both areas by awarding him the post of *népjóléti tanácsos* ['city councilor for social welfare'] ("Dr. Esztergár Lajos: 'Ki akarom ragadni a szegényügyet'"; "Az új városi tisztviselők").

Esztergár was undeniably an important figure in the development of Hungarian social work and social policy (Deák 2026). He was tireless and creative in establishing part-time public works and poor-house types of jobs for the growing numbers of the unemployed in Pécs during the depression which began in 1929. His solutions were copied in other cities, and in August 1940, he was elevated to be the *ügyvezető elnök* ['executive president'] of the *szociális felügyelők* ['Social Supervisory Committee'] (Berey 1981: 375), overseeing the work of a newly formed national agency, *Országos Nép- és Családvédelmi Alap* ['Countrywide Foundation for the Protection of the

Nation and the Family'] or ONCSA, whose purpose was to raise "deserving" families (in practice, Magyars with four or more children) out of poverty by providing interest-free loans for step-by-step improvements in their ability to fend for themselves (Hámori 2023; 65). Most of the loans were used to construct single-family homes in rural areas with the help of social cooperatives set up under the guidance of ONCSA. Esztergár held the presidency only until January 1941, when he resigned in great bitterness. He was forced out by intense criticism from all sides of the political spectrum for overspending on a headquarters for the organization in the Castle District of Buda, for holding onto his other full-time job as mayor of Pécs, and other complaints (Esztergár 1990: 208, 211, 215).

Esztergár's mayoralty, to which he was elected in February 1940 (having served as vice mayor since 1936), largely overlapped with Hungary's participation in the Second World War. Although this was a difficult time for most residents, the city was spared from serious physical damage. The Jewish population, however, had already suffered major economic damages as a result of anti-Jewish legislation passed between 1938 and 1942. The situation took a catastrophic turn with the German occupation of March 1944 and the April 4 decision of the Sztójay government "to clear the Jews out of the country within a short time" ['az országot rövid időn belül megtisztítja a zsidóktól'] (Vörös 2014; 21). Subsequently, the city's Jewish population, was nearly wiped out. Of the approximately 3000 residents of Pécs deported, perhaps ten per cent of whom were Jewish only according to the racist laws of the time, about twenty per cent returned to the city (Vörös 2014: 24, 33; Schulmann 2026: 338).

As mayor, Esztergár played an important role in the execution of this process. The city's administration, which he directed, participated in the expropriation process (Hábel 2014). *Ex officio*, Esztergár was a member of the exemption committee that could argue for the non-Jewish status of individuals based on interpretations of the complex racial laws of the time. He declined to attend any meetings of that committee beyond the first. Very few people were exempted in Pécs, unlike in some (admittedly few) other cities, where the mayors tried to sabotage the process as much as possible, even at the risk of their jobs. Although the topic deserves more research, cases of mayors resigning or not fully cooperating with deportations are known. For example, the mayor of Kaposvár, György Kaposváry, arranged for one of the wagons of the train that left the city for Auschwitz (the one containing the city's wealthier Jews) to be detached in Budapest. (Kovács Tamás 2005: 511–512). Other mayors, like Tivadar Homonnay of Budapest and József Pálffy of Szeged, resigned, thereby making an implicit statement that immoral laws should not be obeyed (Molnár 1995: 39; Veszprémy 2019: 18, 42, 44, 48). The mayor of Nagykanizsa, István Krátky, and the vice-mayor of Hódmezővásárhely, Pál Beretzky, also resisted some of the extreme measures of the deportation process (Vörös 2014; 20). Ferenc Májay, mayor of Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mureș) and a friend and correspondent of Esztergár, was forced to retire from his job because of his efforts on behalf of the Jews. Esztergár, who—as we shall see—was not aware of Májay's reasons for resignation, could not even imagine acting as his friend did, neither in supporting the Jews under his jurisdiction nor in resigning.

Esztergár was instrumental in setting up the location of the ghetto into which the deportees were crowded (Hábel 2014: 23). He decreed that the cost of the move, and the cleanup after the

deportation, as well as the costs of upgrading the former apartments in which the Jews had lived, were to be paid with expropriated Jewish resources (Hábel 2014: 90, 99; Vörös 2020: fn 23-27; Molnár J. 2002: 262-263). Unlike the *főispán* ['lord lieutenant'], Mihály Nikolits, who refused to participate in planning meetings for the deportations with the coordinating bodies from Budapest, Esztergár attended the planning meeting in Siófok and carried out its instructions faithfully. One of the tasks assigned to him there was to provide the food for the deportees for the transfer process. The food that he delivered, which included blood sausages, spoiled in the summer heat, leading to a number of deaths along the way (Deák 2024: 280-282).

Esztergár was charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity before the People's Court in two trials in 1945 and 1946. He was acquitted of both charges, even after an appeal by the prosecution. Carrying out the inhumane laws and decrees against the Jews or participating in their deportation did not count as crimes unless they were performed with extreme cruelty. The antisemitic atmosphere in Pécs during the time of the trials—there were serious disturbances in some trials in Pécs, as in other cities in Hungary—also mitigated against holding Esztergár responsible (272). Nevertheless, the court criticized Esztergár for not standing up more courageously for the city's Jewish citizens (283).

Public Memory

Esztergár's public memory, largely neglected under communist rule, was kept alive for a small audience in Pécs by defenders of the old regime, and by local archivists in the 1980s (Vargha 2002; Rozs 2002 and Molnár M. 2002). They stressed his contributions to social policy in the city and nationally during the 1930s. Soon after the regime change, Esztergár's reputation in Pécs enjoyed a broader revival. A main thoroughfare was named after him in 1990, several plaques were placed in the city (Vargha 2002: 69), and his portrait was displayed in the city hall soon after. In 1993, an institution for social aid to families was named in his honor ("Szociális és Családsegítő Intézet Meszesen"; Pörös 2021). In 2001, the Lajos Esztergár Conservative Circle was founded by members of the city's intellectual and political elite who subscribed to "Christian and nationalist liberal principles" ("Beköszöntő"; Staub 2021; Staub 2022: 83). A Lajos Esztergár prize was also established by the city in 2013 or 2014 ("Esztergár Lajos Díj"). Esztergár's role in the deportations was meanwhile ignored or glossed over with reference to his acquittals by the People's Court.

The small, aging Jewish community of post-communist Pécs was not consulted about the memorials for Esztergár and failed to publicly join the issue for more than a decade. For example, the book commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the deportations did not mention Esztergár (Stark 1994). However, several important studies have appeared since 2002, challenging Esztergár's one-sided memory. Judit Molnár, an eminent authority on the holocaust in Hungary, first exposed Esztergár's role in the deportations based on archival sources (Molnár Judit 2002). She followed this with an article in 2012 comparing the deportations in Pécs and Szeged, demonstrating the lack of humanity of the mayors of both towns. She attributed their behavior to the habit of bureaucratic compliance, a judgment that we see as too lenient in the case of Esztergár, considering the letters presented here (Molnár 2002: 93; Molnár J. 2012: 483).

Two part-time historians in Pécs, János Hábel and István Károly Vörös—both of whom worked at

various times for the archives of the Jewish Congregation of Pécs—published documentary collections with local presses. It should be noted that the historians questioning Esztergár's cult were not brought up as Jews. Hábel is of local German (Swabian) extraction. Vörös had one Jewish great-grandfather. They, like Molnár, were inspired by empathy and the conviction that it was important for Hungarians to face their full history. Hábel's *"Elköltözött" szomszédaink* ['Our Neighbors who "Moved Away"'] demonstrated both empirically and dramatically the way in which the Jews were expelled from a city "of which they were an organic part," the way Esztergár participated in the ghettoization, and the way the deportations were used by the city officials to "solve" the city's housing shortage. Hábel's *Pécsi levelek 1944-ből* ['Letters of Pécs from 1944'], publishing a large selection of documents from the Baranya County branch of the National Archives, added more detail about the heartless and, at times, proactive involvement of the city government in the deportation and despoliation of the Jews, and of the eagerness of the local citizenry to inherit the spoils. Both books were published in 2014. The introduction to *Pécsi levelek* was written by Vörös, who also stressed the proactive role that Esztergár and his staff took in satisfying "the interests of the Christian population" in the handling of the deportations (Vörös 2014:19). He noted that Esztergár acted "on the basis of a selective empathy" toward "Christians" suffering from the war (35). In 2020, Vörös published an article in the Hungarian Jewish magazine *Szombat* ['Saturday'], bringing the controversy over Esztergár to the attention of a national audience (Vörös 2020). Moreover, he placed Esztergár's policy into a broader historiographical context by citing the works of Krisztián Ungváry and the sociologist Dorottya Szikra. Ungváry and Szikra illustrated ways in which the social welfare efforts of the late Horthy period were "racially" biased, both in whom they targeted as the recipients of their programs—Christian "Hungarians"—and in whom they planned to expropriate to fund those efforts—the "Jews" (Vörös 2020: 2n1; Ungváry 2016; Szikra 2008: 61).

In 2020, Szilvia Bognár, one of the two vice-mayors of Pécs for a short time, became a champion of removing public testimonials to Esztergár from the city. In a January meeting of the city council, she summarized the lessons carried by the works of Vörös and Hábel, and in a dramatic gesture, distributed copies of Hábel's *Letters of Pécs* to the councilors (Güth; "Pécs ... Képviselő-testületi ülés, 2020 01 28"). Bognár's advocacy resulted in the city council dropping Esztergár's name from the prize for social work ("Pécs ... Közgyűlésének 1/2023 ..."; "Elkezdődött"; "Balikó Zoltánról").

Despite the many indirect indications of Esztergár's willingness to collaborate in the deportation of the Jews that have been unearthed by the above-mentioned revisionist historians, his motivations and attitudes toward Jews were obscured by his earlier skillful defense at his trials. They were also left in some doubt by the fact that, in his public writings on social policy, he eschewed the use of antisemitic rhetoric. Such reticence was in keeping with the policy of the Horthy leadership after the early 1920s, realizing that antisemitic public statements might jeopardize Hungary's ability to raise funds from Western banks for the country's reconstruction (Romsics 2019: 220). Esztergár's private wartime correspondence, however, reveals his true attitudes toward Jews and toward their deportation.

Testimony of the Personal Letters

The collection of letters released in 2024 contains about one thousand letters from 1942–1944. They are mostly carbon duplicates of typewritten letters or fragments of letters he wrote to

acquaintances. (Unfortunately, the collection rarely contains the letters he received.) We shall look at the letters to see what light they can shed on the topic of Esztergár's attitude about Jews and the "Jewish question" before, during, and after the deportations. To assess where the deportations stood among his concerns during the German occupation, we shall also examine what other topics were at the focus of his attention. A clear picture of his thinking about Jews, at least in the years 1942 to 1944, emerges from this examination.

Most of the letters are addressed to friends, former colleagues, and other mayors living throughout the country. The majority were people with whom Esztergár had worked in his social policy career. Many of his correspondents were women—not surprisingly, since women, typically from upper-class families, were highly represented in the emerging career of social work and social policy (Hámori 2003: 32). Esztergár's tone in most letters was informal, friendly, often containing social invitations (despite the difficulties of wartime travel), and reminiscences of good times spent together. Several letters express complaints that his enemies are after his job. In some letters he solicits help in securing an alternative or additional job, should his fears of being removed from the mayoralty come true. One can posit that in these letters he might be trying to curry favor by expressions of antisemitism, though, considering other letters, we see antisemitic opinions were often expressed by him in more intimate settings.

A letter from September 3, 1943, six months before it could have been influenced by the presence of German troops in Hungary, gives a sense of his genuine attitude towards Jews. His correspondent, Father István Császik, was the long-time, aged parish priest of Balatonszepezd, a village on Lake Balaton where Esztergár and his family had vacationed in earlier years ("Dr. Császik István pápai kamarás"). Esztergár's letter was in response to an invitation to visit, which he declined. But he took advantage of the opportunity to share his thoughts on the political situation:

Recently the joy among the Jews [GD: 'izraelben'] has become more intense. They are certain that in a year the Jewish Laws will have taken their place among the bad memories of the past and they themselves will return to their positions over us in even more force and glory. It would be a terrible shame for Christian society if Jewry, which on average is only four percent nationally, were to gain supremacy over us again. It disgusts me even to consider it. Of course, here we have more opportunities to hear their comments. Although the local Jews used to be moderate, their militant ranks have swollen with the masses of philosemites. It is not the Jews who are going to sit upon our necks; it is the Christians who will help them to power. What an ugly world! ("Letter to István Császik")

Újabban izraelben kezd az öröm fokozódni. Biztosra veszik, hogy egy esztendő múlva a zsidótörvények a múlt csúnya emlékei között fognak éktelenkedni és ők visszakerülnek még nagyobb dicsőségben és hatalomban nyakunkra. Szörnyű szégyen lenne a keresztény társadalomra, ha az országos átlagban négy százalék zsidó ismét elhatalmasodik felettünk. Mégcsak rágondolni is undorító. Persze itt nekünk többször van alkalmunk megnyilatkozásait hallanunk. Bár az itteni zsidóság mérsékelt volt,

csatasoraik megerősödtek a filoszemiták tömegeivel. Nem a zsidók fognak a mi nyakunkra ülni, hanem a keresztények fogják őket hatalomhoz segíteni. Csúnya világ!

This letter was written during the time when Prime Minister Miklós Kállay (1887–1967) was secretly negotiating with the Western Allies to occupy Hungary before the Russians reached the country. Esztergár connected his fear of the Jews regaining their power over “us” with the observation that Hungarian society was split between two large groups, those rooting for a British victory and those rooting for the Germans. Apparently, Esztergár was still hoping for a German victory, lest, as he saw it, the Jews take over again.

It is worth noting that Esztergár’s expression of disgust and fear concerning the Jews is entirely without ulterior motives here. He did not request anything from his correspondent. The words probably were meant to act as a reminder of similar sentiments the two had shared in the past. Császik had been a supporter of the fascist-leaning former prime minister, Gyula Gömbös (1886–1936) (“Bornemisza Géza kereskedelmi miniszter”). The fact that by 1943 Hungary’s Jews had in many cases been deprived of their job and property and expelled from universities elicited no empathy from Esztergár. Clearly, he agreed with the goals and effects of the discriminatory and punitive Jewish Laws. Similar sentiments against the resurgence of Jews are expressed in other letters written by Esztergár in 1943 (e.g., “Letter to László Csanyó, January 22, 1943”).

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Esztergár’s thoughts on the damage that the Jewish “mentality” had done to Hungarian society is reflected in the next letter, also written prior to the German invasion. It was in response to a letter dated February 4, (clearly 1944). It makes no mention of the German occupation, so it must have been written prior to March 19. It is addressed to László Csaba, *főszolgabíró* [‘chief magistrate’] of Szatmárnémeti, the site of Esztergár’s first experiments for ONCSA. Again, the letter is written in a very familiar tone, addressing the recipient with the diminutive *Lacikám*. The light-hearted letter mainly discusses the situation and problems of ONCSA. In the weeks prior to its composition, Esztergár had been in Budapest and had discussions on the status of the welfare cooperatives and ONCSA in general. He claims that the principles laid down when the organization was founded (with which he was closely involved) were correct. However, he attributes the problems in the operation of the cooperatives to the general Jewish mentality of the country, which left its imprint on the Hungarian bureaucracy.

Of course, everything depends on the people involved. Where the right people are involved, there the results are excellent. But unfortunately, our economic actors are not all Knights of the Holy Grail, and the Jewish mentality makes itself felt in a much wider circle than we had anticipated. It will take 50 to 60 years [to get rid of that mentality]. The consequence of this is that the majority of those involved in economic life have neither good business sense nor are they very much concerned about Christian ethics (“Letter to László Csaba”).

Persze, mint mindenhol, embereken múlik az eredmény. Ahol jók az emberek, ott nagyszerű az eredmény. Gazdasági életünk sajnos nem csupán Grál-lovagokból tevődik, a zsidó mentalitás sokkal szélesebb körben érezteti hatását, mint azt remélni lehetett. 5060 év hiányzik. Ennek következménye az, hogy sem üzleti szellem, sem keresztény etika nem bántja túlságosan a gazdasági élet vivőknek nagy részét.

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As the deportation of the Jews from the countryside was commencing in the late spring of 1944, Esztergár learned of the resignation of a fellow mayor, Ferenc Májay of Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mureș), who had been delegated there in 1940 when Northern Transylvania was reannexed to Hungary ("Rendkívüli közgyűlésen": 8). Deportation trains left Marosvásárhely on May 27, May 30, and June 8. By June 2, when the following letter was dated, Esztergár was aware of Májay's resignation. He wrote to Májay, asking him to divulge the truth of why he was leaving his post, hoping to convince Májay to remain at it and not to let the "opportunists" ['a minden áron érvényesülni akarók'] push him aside. The tone is quite intimate. He urged Májay to follow his example: competitors have been angling for his job in Pécs since the German invasion, despite his longstanding services to the causes of the Right, which included "the repression of Jews in every arena, which we accomplished at a time when Jews were still in a position of power" ['a zsidóságnak minden vonalon háttérbe szorítása -- amit olyan időben produkáltunk, amikor a zsidóság még hatalom volt']. He continues ...

But I trust that Providence, which has indicated for us Hungarians our mission, will come to our aid here, too, and those with honest intentions cannot fall victim to the bounders, to become the prey of those with unbridled ambition. Cleansing ourselves of the sludge—in the first place the elimination of the always poisonous question of the Jews—from our daily tasks will help those who have taken on the task of leading our nation's affairs to find the correct paths ("Letter to Ferenc Májay, June 2, 1944," emphasis mine, GD).

No, de hiszem, hogy a Gondviselés, aki a magyar küldetést számunkra kijelölte, itt is segítségünkre lesz, az igaz, jó, becsületes szándékok nem eshetnek a feltörőknek, a minden áron érvényesülni akaróknak prédájául, és a sok salaktól megtisztulva elsősorban a mindig mételyező zsidóság kérdésének napirendről való levétele hozzá fogja segíteni azokat, akik az ország ügyeinek vezetését vállalták, a helyes utak megtalálására.

In the quote, we note a recurring meme voiced by Esztergár: the Jews as *mételyezői* ['corrupters, poisoners'] of Hungarian life. In this quote, it is the "question of the Jews" that provides the poison. In the previous letter to Csaba, it was the Jewish spirit that corrupted the Hungarian administrators of ONCSA. The letter, written during the process of deportation, advocates the support for the deportation by mayors dedicated to Hungary's future.

Esztergár seems not to have received an explanation from Májay for the latter's resignation. Despite their friendship, Esztergár misjudged Májay's attitude towards the deportation of the Jews. Májay informed State Secretary László Endre (1895–1946) in the Ministry of Interior, who

directed deportations in Hungary, that the conditions in the ghetto were intolerable. He participated in the exceptions committee in Marosvásárhely, which saved about one hundred people from deportation. As a result, he was accused by the government of sabotaging the deportations and forced into retirement, whereupon he moved back to Budapest.

Rather than follow in Májay's footsteps and resign from his post, Esztergár took it upon himself to try to have Májay reinstated in Marosvásárhely. Although he wrote several letters to various officials with whom he was on friendly terms, none of his efforts changed any minds ("Letter to Erzsébet Diószeghy, August 11, 1944"). In a letter to Májay written soon after July 5, he reported that he had spoken to Béla Imrédy (1891–1946), a key government minister, on Májay's behalf, but the minister remarked that Májay had not treated him well ("Letter to Ferenc Májay, n.d. [in response to July 5, 1944]").

Esztergár could have seen from Májay's resignation and numerous similar instances (to which he referred in his letters) that resignation carried little risk beyond the loss of one's job, a hardship perhaps, but not an irremediable loss ("Letter to Sándor Pohl, July 5;" "Letter to Erzsébet Diószeghy, July 26"). It seems that he sought justification for his own collaboration by urging Májay to do the same. Sadly, and ironically, Májay's punishment came after the war, but at the hands of the Romanian communist authorities. When the war was over, he traveled to Marosvásárhely, by then once again under Romanian control, to retrieve what movable property he could. He was arrested there, placed before the Romanian People's Court in a massive group trial and condemned to ten years of prison. At the urging of his daughter in Budapest and because of the testimony of colleagues and Jewish survivors, the post-war Hungarian Ministry of Justice tried to intervene on his behalf. However, the Romanian authorities rejected the appeal without a serious investigation of the evidence (Kovács 2018: 16-17; "Dr. Májay Ferenc volt marosvásárhelyi polgármester" [archival source]).

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Another mayor to whom Esztergár addressed several letters was Sándor Pohl, mayor of Kassa (Košice), a city which had been returned from Slovakia to Hungary in 1938. Pohl, quite different in character from Májay, was a confidant of the notorious László Endre. Esztergár turned to Pohl, an acquaintance from conferences of mayors, to ask for advice on how to set up the ghetto, since Pohl had been praised by Endre for his handling of the issue ("Letter to Sándor Pohl, April 26, 1944"; "Letter to Sándor Pohl, May 8, 1944"). On July 5, a day before the last trains were to leave Pécs for Auschwitz, Esztergár wrote to Pohl again to ask if he knew about the reason for Májay's resignation. He also expressed his feelings on the deportations. Admittedly, here he was writing to an avowed antisemite, but Esztergár's sentiments were consistent throughout his correspondence on the subject:

We are now, thank God, finally done with everything. I think the Jewish Question has been solved for a long time, for a few generations. We hope that after the war, they will not be allowed to return ("Letter to Sándor Pohl, July 5 1944").

Most már hála Istennek túl vagyunk mindenen, a zsidó kérdés azt hiszem hosszú időre, pár generációra megoldódott. Reméljük, hogy a háború után nem fogadják vissza őket.

Esztergár often complained about how much work he had to do in connection with the Jewish deportations. He had been sick with pneumonia or the flu when the Germans entered the city and had no time to rest since that day. In the above letter, relieved, he rejoices at the opportunity to take a break. Meanwhile, the first train was heading for Auschwitz, and the second one would follow the next day.

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Esztergár's supporters today sometimes excuse his demonstrable antisemitism with the notion that it was part of the "spirit of the times." While such arguments may have some merit when applied to attitudes towards morally outdated institutions like slavery in the ancient world, they have less value, either morally or as explanations of behavior, in modern times. In 1944 Hungary, a multiplicity of ideas was readily available to any educated person. People with similar backgrounds to Esztergár's held quite varied moral viewpoints. This is well illustrated by an exchange of letters that occurred between Esztergár and a prelate from Kolozsvár (Cluj Napoca), Imre Sándor, in the weeks after the deportations were completed in Pécs. Sándor was the papal *protonotarius* in Northern Transylvania, representing the Bishop of Gyulafehérvár, Áron Márton. (Gyulafehérvár, Alba Iulia, was then—as now—in Romania, though the bishopric extended into Hungary.) As we have mentioned earlier, Áron Márton had been a schoolmate of Esztergár in *gimnázium*. Vargha even claimed that Márton had a great effect on the development of Esztergár's character (2002: 64).

Sándor and Esztergár had corresponded before the German invasion about a conference that Esztergár wished to organize in Pécs to inform the local believers about how Catholicism was able to reinforce Hungarian national identity in Transylvania after its return to Hungary ("Letter to Imre Sándor, January 26 1944"; also "March 27"). This conference had to be cancelled because of more pressing matters occasioned by the German occupation of Hungary.

On July 12, Sándor wrote to Esztergár and enclosed in his letter the text of a sermon delivered at the dedication of new priests by Bishop Márton in Kolozsvár on May 18, a week before the deportation of the Jews from that city began. Márton, one of the few Hungarian Catholic prelates who tried to actively prevent the deportations, reminded those present:

We are all the children of God and in Christ we are all brothers. ... The undeniable duty of Christ's priests is to ... see in every human being—regardless of faith or language—their brother. ... In the defense of truth and in the service of love, suffering persecution and jail are not signs of shame but of honor (Trasca 2011: 48-49).

... mindnyájan Isten gyermekei és Krisztusban mindnyájan testvérek vagyunk. ... Krisztus papjának elutasíthatatlan kötelessége, hogy az igazság mellett kiálljon, és az emberben, bármilyen hitet valljon és nyelvet beszéljen, a testvérét nézze. ... Az igazság védelmében és a szeretet szolgálatában az üldöztetés és börtön nem szégyen, hanem dicsőség.

The bishop also wrote letters to several government ministers, including Prime Minister Sztójay, urging the end of deportations. The Hungarian authorities in Kolozsvár reacted by threatening to arrest the bishop, upon which he returned to Gyulafehérvár (Romania).

Esztergár reacted to the text of Márton's sermon by recognizing his bravery but also voiced disagreement with the bishop's explicit resistance. Esztergár advocated working behind the scenes, but he did so to different ends. Unlike Márton, who sought to save human lives threatened by racist policies, Esztergár urged defense of the Hungarian "race". "[K]evesebb hanggal, fanatikus fajszeretettel kell dolgoznunk" ('[W]e must work with less talk but with fanatical love of race') (Letter to Imre Sándor, July 29, 1944).

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By September 13, 1944, when the following letter was written, Pécs—along with the rest of Hungary outside of Budapest—had been "cleansed" of Jews for months. As we can see, Esztergár still considered the remaining Jews to pose a danger to the country. He approved of plans he had learned about to remove them. The recipient of the following letter, Klára, Mrs. János Szabados, was a former colleague from his ONCSA days in Budapest ("Letter to Mrs. János Szabados, August 31, 1942"). At the time of the September 1944 letter, she and her military-officer husband were expecting their third child and staying at the resort town of Balatonlelle to avoid the dangers of occasional bombing in Budapest. She was well connected to government officials and was an important source of inside information to Esztergár (e.g., "Letter fragment to Mrs. János Szabados (Klára). n.d." [in response to "March 28, 1944"]). In their relatively large correspondence, Esztergár tried to reciprocate her help with gossip and his speculations about politics in Budapest. In the September letter, he sought to inform her, now that she was away from Budapest, of the situation in the capital soon after Romania had switched sides in the war.

I consider it likely that the whispering propaganda will decrease soon, because all the Jews are about to be called up for the labor service and taken away to factories. In this way, the mass of poisonous material will be eliminated, and Christian society will perhaps come to its senses. Generally, there is a lot of organizing effort going on underground. The proximity of the Russians has given an impetus to the organizing of the extreme left. Meanwhile, middle-class society, as usual, looks on in a cowardly manner, quacking like ducks at the garbage growing around them but not daring to grab a broom with a strong hand and to clean up ("Letter to Mrs. János Szabados (Klára). September 13, 1944").

Valószínűnek tartom, hogy a suttogó propaganda a közeljövőben alábbhagy, mert minden zsidót behívnak munkaszolgálatra és elviszik gyárakba őket. Így aztán kikerül a sok mérgező anyag és talán a keresztény társadalomnak megjön az esze. Általában a föld alatt nagy szervezkedési munkálatok folynak, az oroszok közelsége újra tápot adott a szélső baloldali szervezkedésre. A polgári társadalom pedig a szokásos gyávaágával hápogva nézi, hogy gyülemlik körülötte a szemét és nem mer erélyes kézzel seprőt ragadni és tisztogatni.

Note the reference to Jews as poisoning Hungarian life, used even after most had been eliminated.

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While the letters we have presented so far leave no doubt of Esztergár's antisemitism, it should be noted that Esztergár occasionally was less radical than some members of the government or the extreme right in defining who should be considered Jewish. There are two letters among the ones we have read that illustrate this. The criteria that legally defined Jewishness became increasingly more severe after 1938, and it came to include people whom Esztergár considered "innocent." One such case occurs in a letter to the same Klára, Mrs. János Szabados, as above. It was written soon after the German occupation, perhaps in early April 1944, when the official definition of Jews had been further expanded by a government decree, as noted in the letter.¹

Poor Miklós Székely. According to the latest decree, he will also have to sew on the yellow star. How many leading personalities, or members of their families, will appear with yellow stars? I do not see much point in branding people. I would consider it much more important to remove the Israelites from the economic sphere. But I see that it will be much more difficult to accomplish that, first because of the depravity of the Christians. There is no point in replacing people if we cannot create a genuine Christian and national spirit in our public life. Instead, we carry forth that infected atmosphere that Jewry has spread for decades in the country ("Letter fragment to Mrs. János Szabados (Klára). n.d." In response to "March 28, 1944").

Szegény Székely Miklós a legújabb rendelet értelmében szintén kénytelen lesz felvarrni a sárga csillagot. Hány főember kerül majd elő, vagy családjának valamelyik tagja sárga csillaggal. Különösebb értelmét ugyan nem látom a bélyegzésnek, sokkal fontosabbnak tartanám, hogy gazdasági vonalon állíttassanak az izraeliták félre. Ott pedig úgy látom sokkal nehezebb lesz a feladatot megoldani főképpen a keresztények hitványsága miatt. Hiába váltjuk fel az embereket, ha nem tudunk igazi keresztény és nemzeti szellemet teremteni közéletünkben, hanem visszük azt a fertőzött légkört tovább, amit a zsidóság évtizedeken keresztül terjesztett ebben az országban.

Lest we conclude from the above that Esztergár was opposed to the use of racial categories; in a later paragraph of the same letter, he writes about Klára's husband: "I am glad that János is in touch with the journal *Cél*. It would be a shame if he [being in the Army] would end his race protector activities" (on the racism of the *Cél*, Godinek: 40-58). We also see once again Esztergár's notion that it was Jewry that "infected" the nature of economic life.

¹ Prime Ministerial Decree 1.240/1944 of March 20, 1944 required, among other criteria, that anyone married to a Jew also be considered a Jew, and a Jew could be defined as anyone with a single grandparent who was a Jew (*Magyarországi rendeletek tára*, 1944: 263). The criteria about marriage were removed on April 4, the day before 1.240/1944 was supposed to come into force.

The only other example of moderation in his antisemitism that we have found in his letters goes back to 1942. Through his continuing association with ONCSA, Esztergár corresponded with Sister Veress Marianne, a member of the order of worldly nuns, *Szociális Testvérek Társasága* ['Sisters of Social Service']. The order had been founded by Margit Slachta, later recognized as a Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem. Sister Marianne was training social workers in Kolozsvár and turned to Esztergár for help when two of her students could not get summer internships because they had problems with their racial backgrounds.

Two of our students are not "Aryan." Each has a grandparent who was Jewish. ... Only one of them ... knows about her background. It was kept a secret from the other one. ... She is unaware that her maternal grandfather was Jewish. ... There is nothing "Jewish" in either girl's appearance or behavior. ("Veress Marianne, Letter to Lajos Esztergár, April 8, 1942").

Két hallgatónk nem „árja”. Egy-egy nagyszülő zsidó volt. . . Csak egyikük ... tudja zsidó származását, a másik ... előtt titok, hogy anyai nagyapja zsidó volt. ... Sem külsejükben, sem a viselkedésükben semmi 'zsidóság' nincs.

After the second time he was asked, Esztergár accepted the students as interns in Pécs and provided them with a stipend ("Letter to Marianne Veress"). In 1942, Sister Marianne apparently had reason to judge Esztergár to be more liberal than the local decision makers at ONCSA with whom she would have been dealing in this issue.

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What conclusions can we draw from the letters about Esztergár's attitude towards the Jews? First, the fact that the letters cover a period that began considerably before the German occupation and continued well after the completion of the deportations from Pécs indicates that Esztergár was expressing his true feelings when he wrote about Jews. He was not posturing to impress anyone—neither the German occupiers (who were not yet there when his letter to Father Császik was written), nor his local detractors on the Right, whom he lambasted in the letters, as we shall see in the next section.

Esztergár's attitude was a common attitude on the Right in Hungary, though the attitudes of Hungarian antisemites were not uniform. There were those who stressed the racial, social Darwinist aspects of the question and there were those who stressed the allegedly incompatible cultural differences between "Jews" and "Hungarians." Esztergár was clearly in the camp of the cultural antisemites. His thinking and discourse bear the traces of people like Ottokár Prohászka and Béla Bangha, who combined ideas of Hungarian Christian Socialism with antisemitism (Gyurgyák 2001: 295). These thinkers also influenced Károly Wolf, one of the leaders of the Hungarian United Christian League, which Esztergár claims to have brought to Pécs. There is consistency in Esztergár's anti-Jewish discourse in his letters. His antisemitism was closely connected to his sense of the moral decay of Hungarian society, for which he blamed the Jews. He saw "the Jews," whom he connected intimately to capitalism (too intimately and without noticing the variety among Jewish lifestyles and social conditions), as the '*mérgező*' and '*megmételvező*'

(‘poisoning’) agents of Hungarian culture. He thought that once the Jews were removed, Hungarian society, after a span of fifty or sixty years, could regain its cohesive national spirit. Such ideas were rampant at the time, held by many simple-minded, uncritical thinkers, and even sophisticated historians like Gyula Szekfű, a main proponent of the idea. To understand the social-psychological bases of these beliefs is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, the disruptions of a pre-welfare capitalism on a semi-feudal, peasant society in a country that had lost a war and much of its territory, along with the shock of a radical left-wing revolution, called for a scapegoat, which, for Hungary as for much of “Christian” Europe, was supplied by the Jews.

The second point we can conclude from Esztergár’s letters is that when the deportations began, he fully supported them. Although prior to the government’s decision to deport the Jews, he may not have advocated such a move (only the removal of Jews from economic life), once the policy was in place, he embraced it without reservation. He voiced no concern about the suffering that this policy engendered or the tragedies to which it might lead. Neither did he take any mitigating action.

The place of the deportations in the context of Esztergár’s main concerns

The fate of the Jews was hardly Esztergár’s main concern during the German occupation. He was much more agitated about whether he would be able to keep his job as mayor, how he would earn a living if he lost it, and, as he claimed on occasion, what would happen to the city if he were replaced. He felt under siege and sought to understand who his enemies were. He suspected Béla Imrédy to be behind those who wanted him ousted. Esztergár’s letters document his attempts to find other work, should he lose his job as mayor, or work that he could perform in parallel with his well-compensated mayoral duties. He also explained why he would not resign, despite the campaign that he sensed taking place against him. We shall examine these themes briefly to show that, unlike the image he tried to project before the People’s Court, his mind was elsewhere than the tragedy of the deportations.

In a letter fragment from May 12, 1944, just as the Jews of Pécs were being herded into the ghetto, and when Esztergár was convinced that he would soon lose his job, he asked for support to obtain a university teaching position from his unnamed correspondent. This was most likely Baroness Erzsébet Diószeghy, one of the first Hungarian women trained in social work in the West, including at Vassar College. Esztergár knew her through ONCSA where she held the post of *szociális felügyelő* [‘Social Inspector’] of Northern Transylvania (“Országos Szociális Felügyelőség”; Ézsiás 2014: 55). He tells her that the vexations of a university teaching position, no matter how bad, would be “microscopic” compared to what he was going through as mayor. He suggests which high government officials she should contact on his behalf. He could not sleep after writing the letter and got up to write a postscript in which he added two other positions for which he requested her support (Letter “Minthogy politikailag mindig konstruktív voltam”).

In another letter fragment, evidently written only weeks after the German occupation, Esztergár names the people who were after his position: the lawyer Béla “Fifi” Rihmer, the local leader of the Imrédyist party in Pécs; Walter Massay, a real estate agent and banker; and city councilor

Elemér Várnagy, whom he had appointed to be in charge of Jewish affairs during the deportations.² The three men tried to enlist the help of the German occupiers to oust Esztergár, but their "failure was the most complete ever" (Letter "a politikai megbírkózkodásokat") as Esztergár was careful to deny them the slightest pretext for an attack. He also noted that these were Imrédy's people. Béla Imrédy, a former prime minister, was the architect of the fascist, strongly anti-Jewish, but socially transformative ideology of the Miraculous Revolution in the late 1930s, which threatened the gentry base of the Horthy regime. Pushed aside by the conservatives (who revealed Imrédy's own—though distant—Jewish ancestor), he had formed his own party in October 1940. The letter continues:

I am sorry for Béla Imrédy, because there can be no doubt that his good intentions and probity represented great value for Hungarian public life, but unfortunately, he could not refashion in his own image that coterie that hung on to his coat-tails.

Sajnálom Imrédy Bélát, mert az ő jóhiszeműsége és becsületessége kétségen felül értéket jelentett a magyar közéletben, sajnos azonban nem tudta magához hasonlóvá tenni azt a sleppet, amely mellé csimpaszkodott.

Several letters discuss Esztergár's anxiety-ridden relationship with Imrédy. As a social reformer, Esztergár agreed with many of Imrédy's goals. As a loyal stalwart of the government party, he kept his distance from Imrédy when the latter was in opposition but sought Imrédy's support during the German occupation when he was once more in a position of power.

In a long letter to Mrs. János Szabados, whom we had introduced in the previous section, Esztergár reflects on his relationship with the minister. She had apparently spoken directly to Imrédy on Esztergár's behalf and reported back that the minister held a grudge against him. Esztergár speculates on the origins of this grudge, explaining that he was not allowed to support Imrédy's splinter party *Magyar Megújulás* ['Hungarian Renewal'] in 1940 because of the threat of reprisals from then-minister of the interior, Ferenc Keresztes-Fischer (1881–1948) ("Letter to Mrs. János Szabados: 'Nagyon kérem szíves elnézését'"). In a later letter dated July 11, only five days after the Jewish deportations, he rejoiced that he had confronted Imrédy and asked the minister why he was angry with him in private, as the minister was having breakfast during his visit to Pécs. Imrédy reassured Esztergár that he had absolutely no problem with him. Indeed, he insisted that Esztergár retain his position and even promised support for his projects in the social sphere. Esztergár felt reassured and rewarded for having done a good job in the deportations ("Letter to Mrs. János Szabados (Klára), July 11, 1944").

The breakfast conversation had taken place when Imrédy was in Pécs to rally his supporters and to congratulate the city for the job it had done in clearing Hungary of its Jews, along with the rest of the country outside Budapest. Imrédy declared:

² Várnagy was later condemned by the People's Court. Typically of the Pécs court, however, he was not sentenced for his activities in the deportations but because he was a member of "a fascist party" (for Rihmer, see "A négy évi börtönre ítélt pécsi Imrédy-vezér"; for Massay, "Hármunkon kívül"; for Várnagy, Deák 2024: 264).

The solution to the Jewish Question on Hungary's territory was the greatest operation of the past decades. An operation cannot be performed completely dry, sometimes blood is also shed, though this should not be taken literally. Not a single drop of Jewish blood has stained any Hungarian hands (Krassó 2004: 127).

A zsidókérdés megoldása Magyarország területén a leghatalmasabb operáció volt évtizedek óta. Egy operáció nem történhet egészen szárazon, néha vér is folyik, bár ezt nem kell szó szerint venni. Egyetlen megölt zsidó vére sem tapad magyar kézhez.

After Imrédy's visit, Esztergár seems to have regained his sense of security in his job. He was later forced to resign and interned in Nagykanizsa only by the Arrow Cross government that came to power on October 15, 1944, following Horthy's final and poorly executed attempt to switch sides in the war, because the Arrow Cross government considered him "unreliable" (Vörös 2014, 36). As we have seen above, Esztergár had long suspected that local members of the Arrow Cross had wanted his position. He was an antisemite, but, like Horthy and the old guard of the government party, he was not a sympathizer of the Arrow Cross, whom he rightfully considered to be opportunistic incompetents, and this was well known. There is no evidence that he was arrested by the Arrow Cross because of anything that he did to save Jews.

The Denial Begins

In November, the German and Hungarian armies along with the Arrow Cross administration fled Pécs without a fight and the Russians, whom Esztergár had dreaded, moved in. Esztergár and his fellow captives found themselves without guards and he returned to Pécs in the company of the former chief lieutenant, Miklós Nikolits. Esztergár introduced himself to the Russians as the mayor of the city and offered his help, an offer which the Russians gladly accepted, as they did in other cities in the immediate post-conquest days (Nikolits 2013: 31-34; Rozs 2002: 90). Members of the Jewish community were also beginning to return to Pécs. They repeatedly requested Esztergár, as the mayor of the city (once again), to help them in their effort to find and repatriate those members of the community who might still be alive. In a letter, they reproached Esztergár:

What have the Free Royal City of Pécs and its inhabitants done to aid the return home of the thousands of its deported citizens? Is it permissible to pass by with indifference the fates of several thousand innocent people? We do not deny that we have need of financial support, but what we need even more is moral support (Hábel 2014: 388).

Mit tett Pécs szab. kir. város és annak közönsége [a] több ezer deportált pécsi polgár hazatéréséért? Szabad-e közönnel elmenni több ezer ártatlan ember sorsa mellett? Nem tagadjuk, szükségünk van anyagi támogatásra, de még nagyobb van az erkölcsire.

Esztergár, as an experienced bureaucrat, passed the buck by sending a letter to the prime minister, Miklós Béla Dálnoki, asking for his support. This letter shows the level of deception and duplicity of which Esztergár was capable, a skill that he continued to deploy in his defense before the

People's Court (Deák 2024; Dénes 2024). The letter begins by referencing the terrible war "that passed over us with all its trials and tribulations" and thanks Providence that calm is beginning to descend on the country.

In this free atmosphere the entire population and citizenry of Pécs ... is beginning to turn its attention towards the removal of the ruins and to the great work of reconstruction. ... When we project before our eyes the outlines of the work of reconstruction and building and take account of the tremendous work that lies before us in this regard, we notice that many are absent from our ranks for the work of whose hands, expertise, and intellectual cooperation we have an absolutely great need. These are the men, our fellow citizens, who were hauled away either for political reasons or on the basis of racial theories completely foreign to the Hungarians—and now lie and languish in prisons, internment camps and work camps (Hábel 2014: 389, emphasis by G.D.).

Ebben a szabad légkörben Pécs város egész közönsége és polgársága ... minden törekvésével a romok helyreállításának és az újjáépítés nagy munkájának nemes gondolatával kezd foglalkozni. ... Amikor tekintetünkkel magunk elé idézzük a helyreállító, majd az építő munka körvonalait és számot vetünk az e téren reánk háramló óriási feladatok tömegével és nehézségeivel, akkor tapasztaljuk, hogy sokan hiányoznak sorainkból, akiknek keze munkájára, szakismereteire és szellemi közreműködésére elengedhetetlenül nagy szükségünk volna. Ezek azok a férfiak, a mi polgártársaink, akiket az idegen zsarnoki önkény részben politikai, részben – a magyarságunktól teljes idegen elméletek alapján felállított elméletek alapján (sic) – faji okokból elhurcoltak, és akik most börtönben, internáló- és munkatáborokban szenvednek és sínylődnek.

Tellingly, there is no mention of the women, the children, and the elderly who formed a large majority of those hauled away, most of whose remains were by this time incinerated in crematoria. There is no mention of the role that Hungarians played in spreading racial theories or enacting and carrying out racial laws that prepared the way for the Holocaust. The death camps are not mentioned. They are reduced to places where prisoners lie and languish. The letter was written on April 18, 1945, more than five weeks after the first survivors had arrived back from Auschwitz, relating eyewitness accounts of what had happened there (Somogyi 2015: 3). Comparing Esztergár's letters written before the Russian occupation and after it, we see that the image of a mayor who felt compassion for the Jews is a myth he cleverly created for himself.

Esztergár's mindset, as we have seen from his letters, helps explain his willingness to collaborate in the deportation. It is well known that many of his colleagues in the government—the great majority of the mayors, prefects, sub-prefects, ordinary police officers, gendarmes, etc.—also approved of the removal of Hungary's Jewish population. By fully collaborating, they normalized the entire inhumane process from labeling to entrainment. Thus, Esztergár and his colleagues facilitated the most efficient deportation of Jews in Europe with minimal involvement of German forces.

The fact that he was not alone does not relieve Esztergár of moral responsibility. Beliefs and attitudes do matter. And those who held such beliefs uncritically should not be venerated. Esztergár contributed or tried to contribute much to the relief of poverty in Hungary in the interwar years (Deák 2026). But both aspects of his career need to be remembered by historians and the public. Providing public memorials to him, which by their very nature are only laudatory, distracts from this recognition. Perhaps his public memory is best served in a museum.

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MNL OL Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár, Országos Levéltár. Budapest.

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