

Mária SCHMIDT, Collaboration or Cooperation?: The Jewish Council of
Budapest

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The testimony of Samu Stern, the president of the Jewish Council of Budapest

EICHMANN SMUGGLES 1500 JEWS OUT OF HUNGARY

Eichmann was shocked to learn that this could have happened in Hungary (that is, that Horthy ordered the return of the railroad cars back to Kistarcsa, which were still on Hungarian soil, carrying Jews to Germany), and that Horthy dared foil the SS plans with armed force if necessary.

He felt that the authority of the Gestapo and the SS was at stake and he was hysterical about the defeat. Eichmann found out from the informers planted around Regent Horthy that it was we who sounded the alarm when the wagons left Kistarcsa.

Eichmann ordered all members of the Jewish Council to appear at Svábhegy at 8 a.m. on July 17. We had no idea why. We had to wait for long hours in a room, which we were not allowed to leave. The phones were turned off, so we could not communicate with the outside. Finally, an officer assistant of Eichler named Hunsche called us in and led a meaningless never-ending discussion with us on how the panic-mood of the Jews could be alleviated. This went on all afternoon until they released us in the evening at eight o'clock. We did not understand what was behind this, but we had a foreboding feeling about it. We found out the next morning: while they kept us at Svábhegy, an armed SS detachment attacked the internment camp of Kistarcsa without warning, dispersed the police, packed the Jews who were previously returned into the boxcars, and smuggled them out of the country on an express train. They were outside the border before we could have acted.

THE OSTENTATIOUS DEMONSTRATION OF THE SS

The race of time takes us to early August. According to the official stand of the government, there were no more deportations. But Eichmann, beyond the challenge of their authority, was determined not to let the Jews of the capital escape from his grasp. Veesenmayer and Winkelmann requested an audience with Regent Horthy, and referred to the agreement between them and the government that gave them the sole right to deal with the Jews. They threatened to carry out the task themselves with armed force if the Regent did not authorize use of the gendarmes for that purpose. The Regent firmly adhered to his stand. Eichmann flew to Berlin, then returned with greater threats. The number of SS troops steadily grew around Budapest. As the Regent's son has told one of the members of the Council, the capital was practically helpless against this force, as only a small garrison and the police was at their disposal. The SS could do whatever they wished, because no enforcement could be brought up to the capital, for the Germans keenly observed every movement of the Hungarian forces. The SS, desiring to boast of

their presence and power, organized a demonstration on the streets of Budapest, marching their troops through in full armor and equipment. It was obvious to us, too, that it was not possible to withstand the German demand much longer, and that the SS would execute the deportation of the Jews. There was simply not enough military force in Budapest to avert it.

How can military forces be brought to Budapest without challenging the Germans? This was our main concern, and we were contemplating a daring and dangerous plan.

THE TWO-FACED FERENCZY

A large portion of Erdély [Transylvania] had been already liberated. The liberating Red Army was approaching the Tisza River. Even a blind man could see that the war was nearing its end; the timing only depending on the movements of the Red Army. Those desiring to pull out of the senseless war were coalescing around the Regent. It seemed that Hungary soon would pull out. Ferenczy, gendarme colonel, rotten to the core, who participated in the transportation of the Jews from the country, also saw the probability of the tide turning, and started thinking. We took advantage of this moment in the life of Ferenczy. He always emphasized during our discussions that the deportations happened solely by the Germans' request and all brutalities were committed by the Germans. We knew what kind of things he himself had done, but we acted as if we were fully convinced of his innocence. We told him he was the only one who could save the Jews of Budapest from certain demise and could gain glory for himself from doing so, that he could gain indisputable merit and also remove the nation's shame. He liked this role. He probably thought that thus he could cover up those atrocities connected with his name during the deportations from the countryside. He visited me twice in my home, and he stated during our discussions that he was willing to turn against the Germans to save the Jews if enough military power was provided to back him up. He asked us to arrange for a meeting with the Regent.

THE SECRET MEETING

As I've said, knowing the situation, it was obvious that we could no longer resist the German demand, otherwise they themselves would carry out the deportation of the Jews of the capital. We came up with a bold and dangerous plan to prevent this, and we used Ferenczy to accomplish our plan. When he came to my home, a detective just happened to also be there. Ferenczy found it very unpleasant to meet a detective.

When the detective finally had left, we agreed with Ferenczy on the following:

Secretly – only two other council members knew about it besides me – we procured an audience for Ferenczy with the Regent, who promised his full support for our plan. Ferenczy would take the task onto himself of assuring the Gestapo of the reliability of the gendarmes, and would discuss with Eichmann the details of the deportation. He would suggest bringing up into the capital a larger number of gendarmes, and military forces as well. The Regent would feign an objection, but they would ignore it. Then, the commanders of the arriving units would be replaced with their own reliable people. They would also give orders to prepare the wagons. They would repair the infamous brickyard

of Békásmegyer, and fence it in as if making it ready for the deportations. In other words, they would do everything necessary to deceive the Germans, to make them believe that the deportation process was taking place according to a set plan, while they could have all the necessary companies and troops gather to counter the German forces present. When all the preparations were done, one to two days before the scheduled deportations, the Regent would send his written objection to the Germans and would forbid all deportations, which he could back up with armed force if necessary. If unavoidable, he would fight the Germans, but it did not seem likely that the Germans would go that far on the account of the Jewish issue.

The success of this plan required the utmost secrecy. Besides the three members of the Council – Dr. Wilhelm, Dr. Pető, and I – only the Regent, his son, Captains Ferenczy and Lullay, and Ferenczy's assistant knew about it. The next day, I was already up in Buda Castle. In an every day gray suit, I scurried up unnoticed the back stairs of the Castle to see the Regent, and arranged for him to see Ferenczy in 24 hours. After his audience, he left as the Regent's confidante and trusted executor of the secret plan.

THE WORRIES OF FERENCZY

Ferenczy worried about the Arrow Cross, as well. What would they do if the promised deportations would not happen? For this reason, Dr. Pető, our council member, brought him together with Kabók, the social-democrat parliament representative, and with Karácsonyi, the leader of the steel workers. I myself also had some contact with certain leaders of the social-democrat party since around 1918 or 19, when in the early twenties – during the white terror – the government wanted to take away the Általános Fogyasztási Szövetkezet [a company] from the socialists; I did all I could to prevent it, and I was indeed successful.

The topic of the careful discussion between Kabók, Karácsonyi, and Ferenczy was how the workpeople might help against the Germans during the switch. We ourselves did not take part in this discussion; we only brought the negotiating parties together.

THE PREPARATIONS FOR THE DEPORTATION

By mid-August, Eichmann was ready with a detailed plan of the deportations, how the transportation of the Jews to the brickyard of Békásmegyer would proceed day to day, street by street, district by district. He set the date for the start of the deportations for August 26. The railroadcars multiplied around the capital, Wysliczeny's detachment arrived, and the feared gendarmes appeared on the streets of Budapest. The embassies were at a loss as to how they could help. Wallenberg assailed the cabinets. The Jews of the city were restless, overwhelmed by fear and despair. They were attacking us, blaming us for our indolence, and we had to keep quiet, withholding the facts from our own brothers in faith, because we were surrounded by spies, and one careless word could bring down the success of our daring plan. And the three of us, who know about the well-thought-out but dangerous plan that could save the Jews of Budapest, we three were anxiously waiting to see if Ferenczy would stay true to his word.

ONE GROUP STARTS OFF

The leaders of the orthodox Jews, about 50 of them, believed our battle hopeless, and left by train to Bucharest. When their escape became known – one of the council members were among them – Eichmann was furious and could not be contained. For days he investigated, summoned us and questioned us if we knew about the escape. He had Dr. János Gábor council member arrested, and the Germans released him only after weeks of our persistent, repeated requests. Unfortunately, later the Arrow Cross deported him, and this great man, who worked so devoutly for his community, died abroad.

OUR ARREST

Eichmann prepared the deportation. He wanted everything to run smoothly, so he arrested the three council members – myself, Dr. Ernő Pető, and Dr. Károly Wilhelm, who were behind the daring plan – along with our families, and locked us up in the jail on Pestvidék.

The panic increased among the Jews, who perceived our arrest as the first sign of the deportation process. We were also quite anxious, worried about the possibility that the unreliable Ferenczy exposed the whole plan. It seemed obvious that Eichmann wanted to keep us in prison until the deportations started. But the Regent intervened and we were freed.

On August 21, the Gestapo requested the list of the members and employees of the council, because, as we had later found out, they wanted to start the deportations with us. We wanted the Germans to believe that we had no idea about the pending deportations and why they were requesting the list. So, one of our council members who got freed just the day before, took the list up to them to Svábhegy.

THE ACTION BEGINS

The set date was quickly approaching. With all preparations completed, the council requested the various neutral embassies to hold a conference and declare their objections to the deportations. On August 22, headed by Angelo Rotta nuncius, they met and submitted their protest to the Regent, which the nuncius personally delivered on the afternoon of the same day to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Regent was notified about the objection, and, according to the plan, he forbade the deportations, referencing the international opposition.

Sztójay has been sick for some time, and his assistant, Reményi-Schneller, Minister of Treasury, did not dare deliver the note about the deportation refusal to the Germans, and none of the other Ministers were willing either. Ferenczy came to the rescue, assuming the task himself. He went to Eichmann and declared that the Hungarian government would not allow the deportations, and would use the csendőr and honvéd forces if necessary to counter the obtrusive German efforts. Eichmann furiously realized he was deceived, but did not dare to use arms, but turned to Berlin for directions. Himmler's response arrived on the evening of August 24, and it probably contained an

acknowledgment of the turn of events, for Eichmann was willing to discuss a new agreement with the Hungarian government regarding the resolution of the Jewish question. Reményi-Schneller only now, on August 25, dared to deliver the government's official refusal of deportation to Veessenmayer, the German ambassador. And we, who could not reveal our part in the events, certainly did not enjoy popularity among fellow Jews, but still wholeheartedly rejoiced over the success of our dangerous plan, and thanks be to God, prevented the deportation of the Jews of Budapest for a second time.

NEW AGREEMENT: CONCENTRATION

The Sztójay leadership fell and the Germans made a new agreement with the new Lakatos government regarding the Jews. The Germans objected to the 200,000 Jews in Budapest using up resources without contributing. They first took away the Jews' right to work, compelling them to idleness, and then found fault with their not working. Using this as an excuse, they made plans to move them from Budapest to the countryside and put them into work camps. Ferenczy told us this was the only way to save the Jews from deportation, but in our eyes, great danger lurked behind this plan, if it were carried out. The Germans could have smuggled them out of the country from these remote and defenseless camps far from Budapest, as they did the ones from Kistarcsa and Sárvár. But the Hungarian government included in the agreement that these camps must meet European standards, and that was to be supervised by the Hungarian Red Cross. This requirement was our salvation. Ferenczy was in charge of these proceedings. He enthusiastically started it with great haste. He traveled to the site in Tura by car to check it out, and planned to send the first group by foot in 24 hours. We turned to Bonczos, Minister of Interior, complaining that they had not even properly inspected the site, so the concentration proceedings could not be started as it was not according to the deal. He agreed with us. He requested Ferenczy to appear before him the next day and ordered him to first have the camp site inspected by trustees of the Red Cross as well as engineers approved by our council. The Red Cross was in full support of us, and after a month-and-a-half of searching, they could not find a camp site in Western Hungary meeting the European standards.

Meanwhile, I procured an audience with the Regent. Again, I snuck up the back stairs in street clothes, without being noticed, and brought to his attention the grave danger the concentration process might mean for the Jews. They might simply smuggle the collected Jews out of the country from these remote camps, just as they did with the ones at Kistarcsa. Or, they might bomb them from concealed airplanes. I reminded him of his speech in which he declared that we must correct our mistakes and repair the damage that hurt Hungarian honor. The Regent agreed, and promised that, contrary to the agreement with the Germans, the concentration of the Jews will not be carried out. And he kept his word. Ferenczy turned to him in vain in trying to get his approval.