

■ Paul Robert Magocsi

Short history of Jews in Transcarpathia

The Jewish presence in this region dates back at least to the sixteenth century, although their numbers were very small until the second half of the eighteenth century. At that time larger numbers of Jews began to arrive in the northeastern part of the Hungarian Kingdom from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth north of the Carpathians. They were fleeing from pogroms associated with the Haidamak revolts in Ukraine and the political instability connected with the three partitions and eventual disappearance of Poland.

Hungarian Times

By contrast, the Habsburg Empire, at the time under the enlightened Emperor Joseph II, implemented an Edict of Toleration (1781) that eliminated many of the legal restrictions Jews faced in other European countries. If in 1785 there were 2,000 Jews living in the Rusyn areas of Hungary, their number increased by 1850 to some 40,000 and by 1880 to over 80,000. By the first decade of the twentieth century (1910) in those counties of the Hungarian Kingdom where Rusyns lived, the largest number and percentage of Jews lived in Maramorosh—66,000 (18 percent), followed by Bereg—33,700 (14 percent), Zemplén—33,000 (10 percent), Uzh—17,600 (11 percent), Sharysh—12,000 (7 percent), and Ugocha—11,800 (13 percent). The Jews who settled in Carpathian Rus' were, like others in central and eastern Europe, Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazim. The vast majority belonged to the ultra-conservative Hasidic tradition, whose members were devoted followers of so-called miracle-working rabbis, and Carpathian Rus' soon became home to powerful rabbinic dynasties.

In contrast to other parts of Europe, the majority of Jews in Carpathian Rus' lived in the countryside, where they owned and worked the land as small-scale agriculturalists engaged in fruit-growing, honey-making, and

sheep-herding or were employed as woodcutters and rafters. Most were poor, and an estimated 30 percent were illiterate at the outset of the twentieth century. Aside from their native Yiddish, they communicated easily in Rusyn. It was largely the Jews' socioeconomic status, so similar to that of their Rusyn neighbors, that encouraged equality and mutual respect between the two groups.

This situation was to a degree destabilized in the 1890s, when a new wave of Jewish migrants—fleeing pogroms in the Russian Empire and joining others from Galicia where their socioeconomic status was being challenged by the successes of the Ukrainian cooperative and national movement—crossed the Carpathians and settled in Rusyn villages. These newcomers did not initially work the soil like their co-religionists already living in Carpathian Rus', but instead established taverns, inns, and village stores and lent money to Rusyn peasants often at exorbitant rates. Consequently, Hungarian publicists (Miklós Bartha) and government officials (Ede Egán) viewed Jews as the source of the region's economic woes.

Bartha wrote an influential book, *Kazár földön* (In the Land of the Khazars, 1901; repr. 1939), which drew a distinction between the older, integrated Jewish communities and the newcomers from the east (the Khazars) who were allegedly the cause of the local populace's economic hardships. Some of these new Jewish immigrants from Galicia (known in Yiddish as Galitsiyaner) moved on to Budapest and Vienna; others remained and quickly adapted to the local Carpathian environment. Despite the anti-Semitic tracts of Bartha and others, as well as examples of anti-Jewish trials (the 1882 blood libel case in nearby Tiszaeszlár being the most infamous), the favorable relations between Rusyns and Jews remained basically undisturbed. It is noteworthy that Carpathian Rus' is one of the few places in central and eastern Europe where pogroms never took place.

Czechoslovak State

With the collapse of Austria-Hungary in late 1918, and the incorporation of Subcarpathian Rus' and the Prešov Region into Czechoslovakia, Jewish life was to be significantly influenced by the democratic and secular environment promoted by the new state. The demographic and socioeconomic status of Jews did not change much. In Subcarpathian Rus' their numbers increased to 102,500 (1930), which represented 14 percent of the province's population. Over two-thirds still lived in rural areas and over half supported themselves through manual labor (as agriculturalists, shepherds, wagon workers, artisans). On the other hand, Jews comprised more than 20 percent of the inhabitants in as many as 37 small towns and cities. They were particularly dominant in places like Solotvyno (44 percent), Bushtyno-Buzhchyns'kyi Handal (36 percent), Irshava (36 percent), and in Sighet (38 percent), which after the war was incorporated into Romania. However, Mukachevo (43 percent Jewish) with its suburb Rosvygovo (38 percent) remained the largest community as well as the cultural and spiritual center of Subcarpathia's Jewry.

Under Czechoslovak rule Jews were for the first time recognized as a distinct nationality, with 95,000 claiming themselves as such out of 102,000 of the Jewish faith (1930). The government also encouraged secular education, which was gratis in state schools. In the pre-World War I era a small percentage of the community, especially urban Jews, attended Hungarian-language schools; most, however, received their education at the Jewish kheyder (elementary schools), the yeshiva (higher schools, or academies for the study of the Talmud), or the beis medresh (houses of religious study for adults). These Jewish schools were supported by the local communities, and some, such as the yeshiva headed by Rabbi Josef Meir Weiss in Mukachevo gained a reputation for excellence in Talmudic studies that attracted students from other communities. Under Czechoslovak rule the number of Jewish students in Hungarian schools declined further, and students from the Orthodox religious schools began to attend in ever-increasing numbers state-run Rusyn-language and later Czech-language elementary and secondary schools. By the mid-1920s only 7 percent of the estimated

13,000 Jewish student population attended the seven Hebrew-language elementary schools and one gymnasium in Mukachevo (a second was opened in Uzhhorod in 1934).

Tradition and Modernism

Aside from the secular incursion of the Czechoslovak state into traditional Jewish society, the Orthodox Hasidic majority was challenged by a rapidly growing Zionist movement that made its first appearance in the Subcarpathian region after World War I. The movement was led by Hayyim/Chaim Kugel (1897-1966), a native of Minsk in the Russian Empire who had gone to study in Prague in 1920 and who arrived in Mukachevo soon after. The Zionists promoted the need for modern education conducted in Hebrew, which was intended to prepare young people for their ultimate goal, emigration (aliyah) to Palestine, that is, the ancient Jewish land of Israel (Eretz Israel). They also adamantly rejected the Hasidic life-style, which they considered to be reactionary and superstitious. In response, the Orthodox castigated the Zionists and their institutions, such as the Hebrew gymnasium in Mukachevo, which one Hasidic rabbi described as "a place from which come out heretics pure and simple who deny the Torah."

The Hasidic-Zionist conflicts spilled over into politics. During the last years of Austro-Hungarian rule Hungarian-speaking Jews living in urban areas were attracted to the left-wing socialist movement. Several played an active role in the 1919 revolution of Béla Kun that created a Communist regime in Hungary and Soviet Rus'ka Kraïna (Armin Dezso, Herman Fejér/Feier, Ene Hamburger, Béla Illés, Erno Seidler, Moszes Simon), and most joined the International Socialist and Communist parties in Subcarpathian Rus' after the province was united with Czechoslovakia. As supporters of an ideology that espoused atheism, these individuals more often than not rejected or even denied their Jewish heritage. The Subcarpathian Communist party did, however, continue to attract Jewish voters throughout the interwar years.

The Czechoslovak era also witnessed the creation of specifically Jewish parties. In 1919 an all-national Jewish party/ idovská strana was founded by Zionists in Prague. Its

leading activist in Subcarpathian Rus' was Hayyim/Chaim Kugel, and the party was supported by press organs published in both Hungarian, *Zsidó néplap* (1919-38), and Yiddish, *Yudishe Shtimme* (1929-38). Although the Zionists were able to attract a portion of the Orthodox Hasidim, especially among the younger generation, their party was able to elect its own deputy from Subcarpathian Rus' to the Czechoslovak parliament (Kugel, in 1935) only after it joined in an electoral coalition with the Czechoslovak Social-Democratic party.

Initially, the Orthodox Jews eschewed direct participation in electoral politics and instead established a Jewish Central Bureau, recognized by the Czechoslovak government, whose political leaders were to be designated by the influential rabbis. When, however, the Zionists began to solicit support among the Jews in rural areas the Orthodox leaders created their own Orthodox Jewish party/ *idovská strana orthodoxní*, headed by Sándor/Alexander Kroó (1885-19??). The Orthodox party at times entered into a coalition with the Czechoslovak Agrarian/Republican party (although it never had its own deputy in the national parliament); at other times it campaigned independently in local and municipal elections, supporting autonomy for Subcarpathian Rus'. With regard to voter preference in general, the largest percentage of Jews, like Rusyns, supported the Communist party.

Aside from their problems with the Zionists, the Hasidim were deeply divided by internal conflicts caused largely by personal rivalries among their charismatic and authoritarian rabbis, each of whom felt obliged to defend the interests—and righteousness—of their respective dynasties. Among these were the Spinka Hasidim headed by Rabbi Josef Meir Weiss (1839-1909) and his son Isaac/Eizik Weiss (1875-1944) in Mukachevo and the Sziget-Satmar Hasidim led by Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum (1886-1979), based in Satu Mare just across the border in Romania. But the most passionate feuding took place between the region's most powerful rabbi, Hayyim Eleazar Shapira/Spira (1871-1937) of Mukachevo, supported by the Yiddish-language newspaper *Yidishe Tsaytung* (1927-??), and Rabbi Issachar Dov Rokeah (1854-1927), a World War I refugee from Belz in Galicia, who in 1918 settled and soon attracted a

large following in Subcarpathian Rus'. A bitter rivalry for control over the region's Hasidic community continued between the two men until 1923, when Rabbi Spira succeeded in convincing the Czech authorities to expel his Belz rival from the country.

Destruction

Despite the achievements in education and increased Jewish participation in political life, the Czechoslovak regime was not able to improve in any significant manner the poor economic status of most Jews. Their economic conditions, like those of the Rusyns, only worsened during the 1930s, following the negative impact of the worldwide economic depression on Subcarpathian society. This decade also witnessed the growth of small Rusyn-owned businesses and cooperatives which challenged the previous Jewish dominance of retail trade. The resultant economic rivalry led at times to boycotts and to verbal friction in the press. Finally, Jews became concerned with the growth of the Ukrainian national movement, which reached its culmination during the few months of Subcarpathian autonomy (October-March 1939). The presence during that time of émigré activists from the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (mostly from Galicia), the increasing authoritarian nature of Carpatho-Ukraine's government, and the sympathy of some of its leaders toward Nazi Germany did not bode well for the Jewish population.

With the destruction of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 and the annexation of Subcarpathian Rus' and a part of the Prešov Region (as far as Snina) by Hungary the status of Jews steadily worsened. The Hungarian government immediately made a distinction between local Jews and the "aliens" from the East; eventually, the latter included those who had arrived in the region after 1850. Subcarpathia's Jews were also subject to Hungary's anti-Jewish laws (1938 and 1939), which placed restrictions on employment (including exclusion from the civil service and armed forces) and on access to schools. Subsequent decrees (1942) deprived religious communities of their legal status and provided for expropriation of Jewish-owned farms and forest lands. In response to this ever-worsening situation, young Jews began to flee the region. Some went to western

Europe, eventually reaching France and Britain (like the future British publicist and newspaper magnate Robert Maxwell (Ludvik Hoch from Solotvyno) or to Israel. Others crossed the Carpathians into what after September 1939 was the Soviet Union, where they, with fellow Rusyns, were promptly arrested and imprisoned in the Gulag until their release in 1943 to join the Czechoslovak Army Corps fighting alongside the Soviets.

Hungary's policy of legal restrictions was gradually replaced by one of physical expulsion. The first stage occurred in July 1941, when "alien" Jews (many of whom had only recently arrived as refugees from former Poland) as well as some Subcarpathian Jews, together numbering about 20,000, were forcibly deported to eastern Galicia, which had just been annexed to Nazi Germany. Almost immediately German SS units killed over half of them at Kamianets'-Podil's'k. For most of the rest of the war the Hungarian government under Miklós Horthy resisted deporting its "own" non-alien Jews, but after the German army entered Hungary Budapest was forced to comply with Nazi demands for deportation. In April 1944 Subcarpathia's Jews were rounded up and placed in temporary ghettos established (in several cases in brick factories) in Mukachevo, Uzhhorod, Khust, Vynohradovo/Sevliush, and Berehovo. Over a period of three weeks (May 15-June 7, 1944) virtually the entire Jewish population (116,000 as of 1941) was deported to Auschwitz, where they were killed in the gas chambers upon arrival. In Slovakia some Jews were deported as early as 1942, although those living in the Rusyn-inhabited Prešov Region remained until the spring of 1944, when they, too, were sent to the Auschwitz death camp. With regard to the reaction of the local Rusyn population to the deportations, there are reports of intervention to save Jews as well as reports of cooperation with the Hungarian authorities.

After the Holocaust

At the end of World War II it was estimated that no more than 20 percent (25,000) of the Subcarpathian Jews had survived. They included those liberated from concentration camps, those who hid in Budapest during the last months of the war, and soldiers who had fled to the Soviet Union and served in the

Czechoslovak Army Corps. Many returned home, but only briefly, to what was about to become Soviet-ruled Transcarpathia. Others emigrated to western Europe (like the future Nobel-Prize winning author Elie Wiesel from Sighet), to the United States, and to Israel (including the Holocaust historian Livia Rothkirchen from Vynohradovo/Sevliush).

The Satmar Hasidic Rabbi Teitelbaum settled in New York City (the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn), where his followers continue to maintain a close-knit community, as do the followers of Rabbi Shapira/Spira of Mukachevo, under the direction of his grandson, Rabbi Moishe Rabinovitch, based in the Boro Park Section of Brooklyn. Those who emigrated to Israel eventually set up religious and cultural centers, such as the Maramorosh House/Bet Maramarosh in Tel Aviv. The largest number of returnees took advantage of a supplemental clause in the Czechoslovak-Soviet Treaty of 1945 that allowed Jews from the former Subcarpathian Rus' to opt for Czechoslovak citizenship. Between 1945 and 1947 about 18,000 did so and were settled for the most part in the far western regions of postwar Czechoslovakia (see Optatsiia). But even they did not remain there for long. After the Communist coup of February 1948, all but about 2,000 Subcarpathian Jews left Czechoslovakia for Israel (1949-1950). In effect, the vibrant Jewish community that had once existed in Carpathian Rus' came to an end following the deportations and Holocaust of 1944 and the postwar emigration. In the late 1940s and 1950s Jews from other parts of the Soviet Union settled in Transcarpathia (an estimated 7,000 in 1979), but most of these, too, left for Israel or the United States during the wave of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union in the 1970s.

At present there are perhaps about 2,600 Jews left in Transcarpathia. Within today's independent Ukraine this small community, made up exclusively of post-War II Jewish immigrants from various parts of the former Soviet Union, has since the late 1980s experienced a revival. In 1993 a Jewish Cultural and Enlightenment Society was founded. It operates Sunday schools in Yiddish and Hebrew and sponsors events promoting Jewish culture. The Khesed Shpira Benevolent Fund publishes in Uzhhorod a Russian-language monthly magazine about Jewish life in present-day Transcarpathia.

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