

The Holocaust in Hungary

By: Dr. Frances G. Sternberg, MCHE

Sixty-five years ago, when the Germans entered Hungary on March 19, 1944, Hungarian Jewry was the last intact Jewish community in occupied Europe. In April, the Jews were forced into a network of ghettos organized throughout the country. Between May 14 and July 9 – in less than two months and on the very eve of Allied victory – more than 400,000 Jewish men, women, and children were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau at the rate of 12,000 to 14,000 per day, where 75 percent were murdered immediately on arrival.

Such swift, concentrated destruction could not have happened without the help of local collaborators. These included the government bureaucracies, the right wing parties, and the law-enforcement agencies, bolstered by the tacit approval of most non-Jews and Church authorities.

The Vatican, the International Red Cross, the Allies, and the neutral powers also had a role in the catastrophe, since it took place when details of the “Final Solution” – especially the Hungarian situation – were already known to them. In summer 1944, at the height of the deportations, the Allies rejected Jewish underground leaders’ pleas to bomb Auschwitz and the rail lines leading to it, claiming that bombers flying from Britain were incapable of attacking Poland and could not be diverted to targets not “military related.” To be sure, pressure from President Roosevelt, Sweden’s king, and the pope – combined with the success of Operation Overlord, the Soviet Union’s summer offensive, and Allied intimations they would carpet-bomb Budapest if its Jews were deported – did force Regent Miklos Horthy to stop the trains on July 7, 1944. However, it was too late to save the provincial Jews and it did not prevent the violently antisemitic Arrow Cross Party from massacring hundreds of Budapest’s Jews.

In the end – abandoned and defenseless, without allies or any real recourse – Hungary’s Jews were completely unaware of what lay ahead. Of approximately 825,000 Jews living in Hungary in 1941, only about 255,000 survived the Holocaust.