The rise and fall of 'Judapest'

Jews were once the drivers of modernization in Hungary's capital, dominating its cultural and economic life. Then disaster struck

By Tibor Krausz

OSVÁTA/HUNGARIAN WIKIPEDIA

The Great Synagogue of Pest is said to be the largest synagogue in Europe.
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WHEN, AFTER four years, work on the Great Synagogue of Pest was finally completed in 1859, the imposing architectural extravaganza became an instant landmark in the Hungarian city. Europe's largest Jewish prayer house boasted an eye-catching cavalcade of Moorish, Byzantine and Gothic elements, featuring a golden dome, a church-style basilica, and a pair of onion-shaped towers up front in the style of minarets.

The ostentatious exteriors, matched by equally sumptuous interiors, befitted a mood of mounting optimism among the city's Jews: They were increasingly prosperous and emancipated after centuries of sometimes latent, often blatant, antisemitism. In a testament to the thriving community's newfound standing, no less a luminary than Franz Liszt gave a concert on the synagogue's 5,000-pipe organ during the opening celebrations.

Jews had come a long way in Pest. Prior to 1783, they had been barred by royal fiat from settling in the city, which lay in a sprawling flatland on the eastern bank of the Danube and faced the adjacent hillside towns of Buda and Óbuda ("Old Buda") across the river. From these twin towns too they had been banished in 1746 by the Habsburg Empress Maria The-

resa, a mercurial Catholic who periodically ordered the expulsion of Jews from various cities around her empire, before being allowed back by her successor.
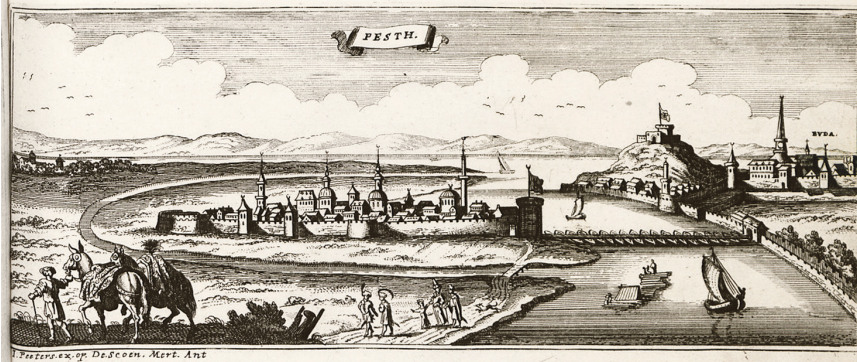
By 1869, the year in which Moritz Wahrmann, a wealthy grandson of a prominent rabbi in Pest, was elected to Hungary's parliament as its first-ever Jewish member, some 40,000 of his co-religionists lived in the city with another 5,000 in Buda and a smaller community in Óbuda. Within half a century, Jews numbered over 215,000 in Budapest, which was officially created in 1873 by conjoining the three adjacent towns, accounting for a quarter of the Hungarian capital's population. In Europe, only Warsaw had more Jewish residents.

But the strength of Budapest's Jews did not lie in their growing numbers alone; it also lay in their restless creative energy. They were prominent among the city's artists, musicians, writers, journalists, scientists, Olympians and businessmen. Many of them would have an enduring, outsize influence far beyond Hungary, among them the magician Harry Houdini, the novelist Arthur Koestler, the photographer Robert Capa, the composer Miklós Rózsa, the physicist Edward Teller, and the mathematician John von Neumann.

Theodor Herzl was born in a house right next to the Great Synagogue; and Max Nordau, a rabbi's son with whom Herzl founded the Zionist Organization in 1897, was his landsman. They were like most other Jews in the city: cosmopolitan and moderately observant or not at all. The country's Jews spoke not Yiddish but Hungarian. So dominant did they become in the capital in the late 19th century that a mayor of Vienna derisively called the city "Judapest."

The flowering of Jewish life was both a cause and a result of Budapest's radical transformation during its golden age in the glory days of the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary in the heart of Europe, where Budapest vied with Vienna for prominence. Within a few years, the Hungarian city had a lavish new opera house, one of whose first directors was Jewish composer Gustav Mahler. It had continental Europe's first metro line, which was opened in 1896 and is still in operation. And it had a visually stunning new parliament building, which remains an iconic sight by the Danube, bathed in amber light at night.

At the city's hundreds of coffeehouses, frequented by a bohemian crowd, ideas were exchanged, novels and articles written, busi-

An illustration of Buda and Pest, 1686.
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ness deals struck. Many aspiring intellectuals, writers and filmmakers, a great many of whom were Jewish, had their first breaks in them. Among their clientele were debutantes, socialites and dignitaries, including the Prince of Wales, the future Edward VII, during his regular visits to Budapest, where he relished staying incognito as a guest of a wealthy Jewish banker.

For a historian, all this is grist for the mill. In his *Budapest: Between East and West*, a new biography of the city starting from its origins as a provincial Roman garrison town built atop a Celtic settlement, British author Victor Sebestyen adroitly mines this storied period over several chapters. In so doing, he draws heavily on *Budapest 1900*, an authoritative portrait of fin-de-siècle Budapest by Hungarian-American historian John Lukacs, a Catholic born in the city to a Jewish mother.

Although Sebestyen's book is a general history, the Jewish author detours frequently into the fluctuating fortunes of Jews, first in Buda, then in Buda and Pest, and later still in Budapest. The sprawling subject matter necessitated that he focus on certain details at the expense of others, but he ticks all the important boxes in his retelling of the urban settlement's two-millennia-long history during which periods of peace and prosperity were interspersed with conquests, bloodbaths, plagues and other upheavals.

Throughout it all, Jews were the subjects of prejudice, expulsions and massacres, but oftentimes many non-Jewish residents did not fare much better either as those familiar with the city's torturous history know and as Sebestyen's book makes clear.

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Jews settled in the area of what is now Budapest long before any Magyars did. They were already among the residents of Aquincum, a bustling Roman city of around 40,000 inhabitants at its height in the 2nd century, famed for its thermal springs. Emperor Marcus Aurelius enjoyed spending time there, away from the cutthroat intrigues of Rome.

During repeated barbarian invasions Aquincum declined, its palaces, temples, two amphitheaters and public baths falling into ruin. The invaders included the fearsome Huns from Central Asia in the 5th century. They occupied the deserted Roman settlement, which would later be named, according to a medieval account, after their leader Attila's elder brother, Bleda, also known as Buda.

If some Jews did live in the subsequent centuries in the area, they have left no mark. But after the conquest of the Carpathian Basin in the 9th century by Magyar tribes who hailed from the Ural Mountains and claimed descent from the Huns, Jewish tradesmen, moneylenders and artisans reappeared in Buda.

By the 13th century, they had their own quarter, synagogues, cemetery and ritual baths (in "a sleepy, out-of-the-way place," Sebestyen writes). However, they were taxed heavily, had to set themselves apart with marks on their clothes, and faced some religious and legal restrictions. Nonetheless, "for the most part they were treated better in medieval times than [their] co-religionists [in] Germany or France or England," the author observes.

In the following century, Jews were expelled by King Louis I from Buda twice in short order — as scapegoats for the Black Plague and as targets of resurgent anti-Jewish animus in Central-Eastern Europe. Jews being victimized on trumped-up charges was "hardly an unusual event in the Christian world during the Middle Ages," Sebestyen points out. "King Edward I had thrown out all Jews from England seventy years earlier, when hundreds drowned in shipwrecks as they tried to escape to France."

Within a decade, Hungary's king changed his mind and invited wealthy Jews back to Buda, the better to avail himself of their gold and financial acumen. Their status rose in the kingdom; and in the latter half of the 15th century, King Matthias Corvinus, a tolerant and erudite Renaissance monarch still beloved by Hungarians, granted the Jews of Buda considerable legal autonomy and protected them from religious persecution.

This development, though, did not sit well with many locals. Soon after Matthias' death in 1490, a rampaging mob set upon the Jews of Buda, murdering them, torching their houses and plundering their possessions. "[L]ife for the Jews returned to something like the default position in Hungary," Sebestyen notes wryly.

Their fortunes would change yet again in 1541 when, during his westward military conquests, Sultan Suleiman I laid siege to Buda and seized it. The Ottoman Empire would occupy the city, along with much of Hungary, for 145 years, which would suit Jews just fine. They would find a haven of relative tolerance in Ottoman-controlled Budun (as the Turks called the town), fleeing there from periodic pogroms in Habsburg lands, the Balkans and elsewhere.

By the 1580s, Jews comprised one-fifth of Buda's non-Turkish population, free to worship and congregate, albeit taxed heavily. By the middle of the 17th century, Buda had a Jewish Street and three synagogues. The city's Jews prospered as merchants, running lucrative trade routes along the Danube into Turkish lands farther south and east. "The pashas of Buda often intervened on the side of Jews in cases where they had been wronged by Hungarian Christians. Jews would repay the Turks by aiding their defense of Buda against the Habsburgs in sporadic attempts to retake the town," the historian writes.

The Habsburgs did manage to retake the town in 1686 after pitched battles, and the Jewish survivors of Buda's 1,200-strong community instantly fell on hard times. "Everyone was lamenting and weeping in despair, crying out for help... In my great torment I took my phylactery and prayer book, weeping to my wife and my son Simson, praised be his memory," Izsák Schulhof, a rabbi who survived the siege but lost his wife and son, recalled later in his Hebrew-language account *Buda Chronicle*.

"While in the midst of the commotion a great many soldiers burst in, foot soldiers with

destructive weapons in their hands, firearms, Hungarian hussars too, with their crooked swords in hand. And in the House of God they brought sacrifice, spilling the innocent blood of the sons and daughters of Israel. Killing, pillaging, robbing and slaying — all befell us."

Those that were not put to the sword were enchained, tormented and thrown into jail, where many more would perish. The prisoners who survived the ordeal were ransomed with money donated by the influential Viennese banker Samuel Oppenheimer and Jewish congregations around Europe.

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Over time, Habsburg rule would prove to be a blessing for Jews who began settling en masse in Pest, a fast-growing and hitherto ramshackle town on the opposite bank of the Danube, where elaborate buildings of stone replaced mud brick abodes with thatched roofs. Hungarian aristocrats, who lorded it over disenfranchised, impoverished peasants on their estates, looked askance at commerce and trade, which allowed Jews and other non-Magyar traders, manufacturers and artisans to dominate the economic life of the twin towns.

Encouraged by Habsburg monarchs, Jews relocated in droves to Austria and Hungary from Slavic lands farther east where pogroms and discrimination remained commonplace. In Hungary, many arrivals settled in Pest, which would transform into the booming cultural, political and commercial heart of Hungary, with Buda relegated to a subordinate role. Freed from many previous restrictions, Jews became "the agents of modernization" as Sebestyen puts it. "Nowhere in Middle Europe did Jews play such a prominent part in modernization as in Hungary — in industry, commerce, banking, the professions."

In the process, Hungarian Jews turned into proud patriots and abandoned Yiddish in favor of the local vernacular, deeming its use to be a mark of their emancipation in the comparatively tolerant country. "Let us complain to our God of our earthly woes in this language; and let us be confident that we will soon sing out our thanks in this tongue for the relief we have won and for our complete emancipation," advised the Jewish-Hungarian journalist Márton Diósy, an aide of prime minister Lajos Kossuth during the failed Hungarian revolution of 1848-49 in which thousands of Jews fought heroically on the Hungarian side against Habsburg forces.

Another prominent Jewish-Hungarian journalist, Max Falk, a distant relative of Jew-
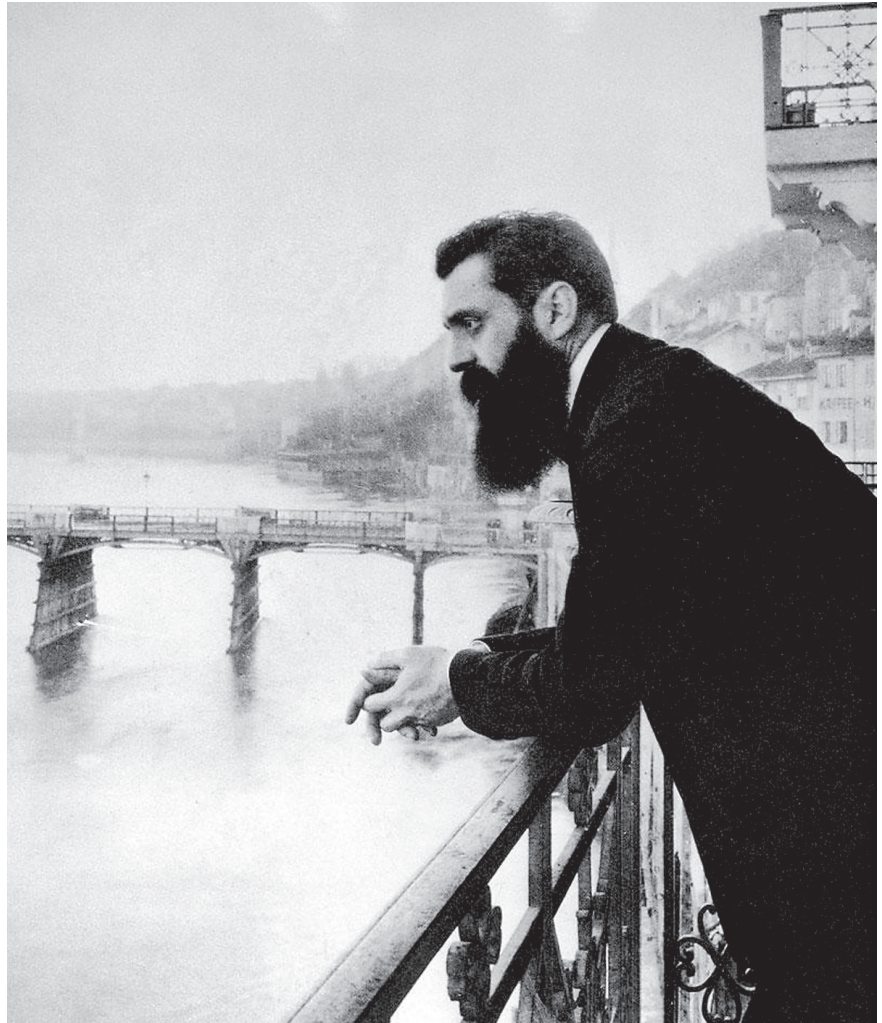
Theodor Herzl on the Hotel Les Trois in Basel, Switzerland. (The Bettman Archive)
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ish-American actor Peter Falk, served as a private tutor in Hungarian for Elisabeth, wife of Emperor Franz Josef I, at the court in Vienna. Beyond language lessons, Falk schooled the Austrian empress, who was famous for her pro-Magyar sympathies in the reformist agenda of Hungarian liberals and their national aspirations. Elisabeth would go on to help convince her dithering husband to restore a degree of Hungarian sovereignty through the formation of the Dual Monarchy in 1867, following which Budapest became one of Europe's most dynamic cities.

It is tidbits like this — frequently offered in footnotes — that enliven Sebestyen's account, which generally hews to a fairly straightforward narrating of the many twists and turns in the Hungarian capital's long and eventful history. To be sure, there are more comprehen-

sive histories, but few of those more academic tomes available in English might appeal as readily to the general reader. A journalist turned historian who was born in Budapest in 1956 but grew up in England, where his parents fled from communist rule, the author admits to speaking little Hungarian (which shows in his recurrent misspellings of Hungarian names), yet he clearly retains a passion for his birthplace. Among his earlier works is *Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution*, a fine account of Hungarians' failed uprising against Soviet rule.

Issues of Jewish interest command Sebestyen's attention as well; and in *Budapest: Between East and West,* he devotes entire chapters to them. In one titled "The Hungarian Pogroms," he expounds on nationwide outbursts of violent antisemitism in 1883 follow-

EPHRAIM MOSHE LILIEN

ing lurid accusations that several Jewish men ritually murdered a Hungarian girl in a small town to use her blood in baking matzah for Passover in a latter-day repeat of the medieval blood libel.

In Budapest, a dozen Jews were lynched, and scores of others were left badly wounded by rioting mobs as the capital's genteel atmosphere gave way to scenes of unbridled savagery. "Those who could not, or would not, think for themselves, those who lacked all integrity, saw a murderer in every Jew," recalled Károly Eötvös, a prominent Hungarian lawyer who defended the Jews standing accused of ritual murder during their trial.

The pogroms shocked the country's Jews, who accounted for around eight percent of the country's population, considered themselves to be Hungarian and had a prominent role in the country's economic and cultural life. "[B]y the end of the nineteenth century, Jews as a group had achieved a power position in Hungary unmatched by their co-religionists in any other country," observed Raphael Patai, a Budapest-born Jewish historian and ethnographer who at one point taught at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

The numbers alone speak for themselves: More than half of the businesses in Hungary were Jewish-owned as were 85 percent of financial institutions. Kálmán Tisza, a liberal politician who was prime minister between 1875 and 1890, waxed lyrical about the importance of Jews in the country's economy, calling them "the most industrious and constructive segment of the Hungarian population." In Budapest, over half of the doctors and lawyers, a third of the engineers, and a quarter of the writers and artists were Jewish by 1910.

Yet even as their dominant position largely insulated Hungary's Jews, for now, it also fueled widespread anti-Jewish animus in a country where the scapegoating and maligning of Jews had long been national obsessions and remain so today. Theodor Herzl, one of whose relatives, a prominent businessman and writer, was elected mayor of Budapest in 1912, presciently observed in 1903 that despite their fervent patriotism, Hungarian Jews would not be able to escape "the misery of antisemitism," as "the Jews of Hungary will also be overtaken by their doom, which will be all the more brutal and merciless as time passes, and wilder, too."

He was right, of course.

AUSTRIA-HUNGARY rushed headlong into war in 1914 against France, the United Kingdom and Russia, but the Dual Monarchy's bellicose hubris would be its undoing. The catastrophic defeat of the Central Powers led to the collapse of the Habsburg Empire and the dismemberment of Hungary, which lost two-thirds of its territory and a third of its population to neighboring states, some of them newly created. Filling the power vacuum in Budapest in 1919 was a short-lived, repressive Soviet-style communist republic, which was supported by some Hungarian Jews and whose leader, Béla Kun, was of Jewish ancestry.

A few months later Miklós Horthy, an admiral without a navy, seized control as regent in a kingdom without a king. The dogged irredentism of his regime, which would ally itself with Nazi Germany and last until 1944, proved a disaster for the country's Jews. They were promptly scapegoated for defeat in the war (notwithstanding the fact that tens of thousands of Jewish Hungarians had died or were wounded while fighting for the motherland) and for the subsequent four-month-long communist takeover (in which Jewish businesses were also targeted).

In 1920 the government of Horthy, a self-professed lifelong anti-Semite, anticipated later Nazi practice by restricting by law the number of Jews who could attend university. His regime would over time pass ever more crippling anti-Jewish laws. In 1941, Jewish men began to be conscripted into labor battalions, where more than 40,000 would perish on the eastern front as Hungary fought alongside Nazi Germany during Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union.

However, Horthy continued to resist Hitler's demand that he deport Hungarian Jews to Nazi concentration camps. In the end, though, the Nazis had their way. Within just two months in 1944, a large number of Hungarian gendarmeries, civil servants, volunteers and even doctors became willing accomplices to a small unit of SS officials, led by Adolf Eichmann, in deporting nearly 440,000 Jews from around Hungary by rail in jam-packed cattle cars to Auschwitz, where the vast majority of them were gassed to death upon arrival.

The cover of Victor Sebestyen's book
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"History does not record one instance of a Hungarian police officer, soldier or public servant openly refusing to cooperate with the deportation of Jews outside Budapest," writes Sebestyen, who does not reveal anything revelatory about this sad chapter in Hungarian history but illuminates it poignantly. In the capital, though, the great majority of Jews had a stay of execution. Desperate to wriggle out of his calamitous alliance with the Nazis now that he war was lost, Horthy halted further deportations in the hope of gaining Hungary more favorable treatment from the Allies in a postwar settlement.

Undeterred, militiamen of the Arrow Cross, the country's homegrown fascist movement, soon resumed murdering Jews. A favored technique involved lining up men, women and children by the Danube and forcing them to strip naked before shooting them dead and throwing their bodies into the freezing water of the river, which would be dubbed "the Jewish cemetery." The fascist thugs, many of whom were teenagers, carried on even as a brutal siege of Budapest was making life increasingly grueling for the city's one million residents.

By the time the Red Army liberated Budapest in February 1945, some 100,000 Jews from the capital had been murdered in daily pogroms over the previous few months. An equal number managed to avoid that fate and survived. In many ways the Budapest of old, too, perished in the war, and the decades-long communist rule that followed Hungary's defeat would do little to restore the city to its former glory.

Today, Hungary's capital remains a vibrant and picturesque city that has much to recommend it, but its halcyon days are long gone. Sebestyen's book is a fine testament to that bygone era by chronicling the storied rise and tragic fall of "Judapest." ■