

# Jews in Hungary



**Mosaic** – Victims  
of Nazi Persecution



# Jews in Hungary

**For over two thousand years Jewish communities have existed in countries across the continent, but despite making profoundly significant contributions to European life, Jews have been subjected to both intolerance and persecution. Prior to the outbreak of World War Two, the highest concentration of Jews could be found in Eastern Europe; particularly in Poland and those countries within the Soviet Union. These people were known as Ashkenazi Jews and their ancestors had migrated eastwards from Central Europe during the Middle Ages; usually to try to escape persecution in Western countries.**

Jewish life in Eastern Europe was distinctive. In general, Jews were not very assimilated into non-Jewish society and instead they usually lived in shtetls – small towns characterised by large Jewish populations. These communities were commonly very traditional and centred upon long-standing customs and cultural practices. This included observing orthodox religious rituals and laws, spending much time on education and learning, and using Yiddish as a language.

All in all this meant that the Jews of Eastern Europe looked and behaved very differently to Jews living in countries further towards the West. In countries such as France and Germany, the Jewish population was far smaller and tended to be well-integrated. In appearance Western Jews seemed no different to anyone else, and where they practiced their religion and maintained their culture they did so in a cautious manner. This of course did not prevent them being the target of antisemitism, but it did distinguish them from the Ashkenazi Jews living in the East.

Hungary was a European country with a sizeable and historic Jewish community. At the end of World War One the Treaty of Trianon saw chunks of Hungarian land given to Romania; including Transylvania, the region in which Sighet was located. Although these territorial losses reduced the Jewish population in Hungary, throughout the inter-war period Hungarian society became increasingly antisemitic. This began in 1920 with the passing of the *Numerus clausus* law which restricted the admission of Jews into universities, but a number of laws after 1938 escalated persecution to a new level. These “race laws” were modelled on Nazi Germany’s Nuremberg Laws, which had led to Jews losing their citizenship and being banned from marrying non-Jews.

In Germany, the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935 was a powerful symbol of Nazi antisemitism. To the Nazis, the world was to be understood in terms

of a constant struggle between different “races” distinguished by biology. Germans, like other “Nordic” people, were members of an “Aryan” race which was superior to all others but threatened by “inferior” races. Chief among these supposedly “inferior” races were the Jews, who were regarded to be an inhuman species plotting to take over the world. Such views drew on a long history of religious intolerance throughout Christian Europe, as well as a number of pseudo-scientific theories. Although the Nazis were the most enthusiastic promoters of this brand of antisemitism, others across Europe also shared some of their views.

In the summer of 1940 Hungary was given possession of northern Transylvania (including Sighet) and in October the country formally became part of the Axis alliance. By the spring of 1941 Hungary had acquired even more land, and its Jewish population had swelled to over 725,000. During this time able-bodied Jewish men were forced into hard labour, often carried out in severe conditions, and around 20,000 were deported to their deaths in the Ukraine.

By autumn 1942 Germany was putting increasing pressure on its ally to deport the rest of its Jewish population, but the Hungarian government refused to cooperate: Hungary had suffered large losses during the invasion of Soviet Russia and, with the war appearing to turn against the Nazis as a result of the Battle of Stalingrad, the Hungarian government was beginning to consider its position in light of the possibility of Germany losing the war. Despite growing demands throughout 1943 Hungary continued to resist mass deportation, and in so doing protected its Jews from almost certain death.

In early 1944, the Hungarian government made moves to begin negotiating peace terms with the Allies. Responding to this, the Nazis invaded Hungary in March and installed a government it believed would be more pro-German. Adolf Eichmann was despatched to Budapest with a team of officials to prepare for the

deportation of Hungary's Jews. Within a matter of weeks a host of anti-Jewish laws were passed, Jewish Councils were formed, and Jews were forced into ghettos.

The Sighet ghetto was established in April 1944 and housed around 13,000 Jews in extremely cramped conditions. Between the 16th and 22nd May the ghetto was liquidated, with its inhabitants deported to Auschwitz. This action was part of a broader, nationwide policy which saw around 440,000 Jews deported from Hungary to Auschwitz between late April and early July 1944. The speed with which this occurred was unprecedented, and could not have occurred without the cooperation of the Hungarian authorities. By the end of this period, only the capital Budapest had a Jewish population of any note.

On 7th July 1944, Admiral Horthy – the Hungarian Head of State – ordered deportations to be stopped. Horthy made this decision in response to growing international criticism and warnings of retribution from the Allies. Deportation of the remaining Jews was not possible without Hungarian cooperation, and with Horthy reopening peace negotiations it appeared as though the Nazis' wishes would be thwarted. However, in October 1944 the Germans sponsored a coup d'état led by the extreme right-wing Arrow Cross party. Horthy was dismissed, and a wave of antisemitic violence began. Jews were hunted down and murdered in the streets of Budapest by death squads, whilst those living within the city's ghetto faced starvation and disease. By November Jews were being marched out of the city towards the Austrian border, with those unable to keep up shot along the way.

In January 1945 Hungary signed an armistice with the Red Army, though it was not until April that the last pockets of resistance were defeated. By the end of the war, between 563-568,000 Jews who were in Hungarian territory in 1941 had been killed. Sighet was returned to Romania, and by 1947 had a Jewish population of around 2,300 – made up mainly by survivors and Jews



Further materials will become available through the course of the joint project.

For further information go to  
National Education Union  
**[www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk)** and  
Holocaust Educational Trust  
**[www.het.org.uk](http://www.het.org.uk)**

**This brochure can be used with the following items**

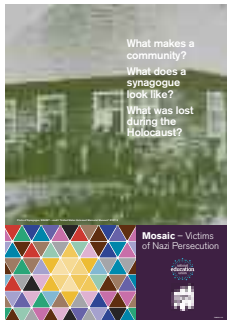


Photo of Synagogue, SIGHET – credit: “United States Holocaust Memorial Museum” #22718  
Photo credit: “United States Holocaust Memorial Museum” #NO3392

