

The Henrik Fisch–Ernő Munkácsi Controversy: A Jewish Investigation and Public Hearing Regarding “Matters of the Jewish Council” in Budapest in Early 1948

On January 7, 1948, Henrik Fisch requested a formal internal investigation among the surviving remnant of Hungary’s Congress Jewish community on the role the Central Jewish Council played in 1944. Following several acrimonious conversations and mutual threats exchanged by Fisch and Ernő Munkácsi in late 1947, Fisch was given the opportunity to detail his personal accusations against Munkácsi in front of a special committee in Budapest on January 29, 1948. Speaking as one of the few surviving representatives of Hungarian Jews living outside of Budapest, Fisch made numerous harsh accusations concerning Ernő Munkácsi’s actions, or lack thereof, in the spring and summer of 1944. He thereby answered, rather vehemently and controversially, the question of Munkácsi’s alleged responsibility for the near wholesale murder of his co-religionists from outside the capital city during those devastating months less than four years earlier.

The main idea behind the January 29th session organized by Congress Jewry, colloquially known as the Neologs,¹ was to investigate “the deporting national Jewish leadership.” As the accused Munkácsi did not fail to point out, the explicit aim of performing an investigation was in tension

1 Due to their profound disagreements in 1868–71, the Jews of Hungary created three separate nationwide organizations: Congressional, Orthodox, and Status Quo Ante. Congressional Jewry—colloquially known as Neologs—tended to be moderately reformist, liberal conservative, and interested in Hungarian acculturation and social integration. The Israelite Community of Pest for which Ernő Munkácsi served as chief secretary belonged to the Neologs. It was by far the largest community in the country, consisting of about 200,000 members at its peak.

with the fact that the session was organized as a public hearing. It was as part of this public hearing that he had the opportunity to respond to Fisch's numerous accusations, and he did so in a detailed manner.

The originals of both key documents from this consequential special session—the accusation by Henrik Fisch and the response by Ernő Munkácsi—are located in the Hungarian Jewish Archives (in MZSML XX-L-10 and MZSML XXXIII-5-a-1, respectively). The contents of the two were printed together for the first time in Ernő Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt? Adatok és okmányok a magyar zsidóság tragédiájához*.² This volume was edited by Kata Bohus, László Csősz, and me. My brief summaries and interpretations rely heavily on the contents of this volume. I draw especially on the original biographical reconstruction entitled “Versenyt futunk a végzettel” (“We Are Running a Race with Fate”) penned by my excellent colleagues Kata Bohus and László Csősz.

The accuser whose charges launched the special investigation, Henrik Fisch (1907-86), was the former Rabbi of Kápolnásnyék, a village some forty kilometers southwest of Budapest whose Jewish community, which had numbered around one hundred individuals, had been murdered almost without exception. Having survived Auschwitz while losing his family and community to the genocide of Jews, Fisch moved to Budapest to act as the secretary of the National Association of Rabbis (*Országos Rabbiegyesület*) in the early postwar years and was also affiliated with the Zionist movement. In 1947, he published a volume on antisemitism that contained key documents on the Hungarian Upper House's reactions to the anti-Jewish laws of 1938 and 1939 as well as a heart-wrenching introduction to the material.³

The person Fisch directly accused, Ernő Munkácsi (1896-1950), was a member of the Hungarian Jewish community elite during the regency of Miklós Horthy⁴ and a representative of the Congress (Neolog) community of Pest, which was by far the largest segment of Hungarian Jewry—and one of the most significant Jewish communities in all of modern Europe. Munkácsi played prominent roles in this community during the interwar period and the Second World War, including that of chief

2 Ernő Munkácsi, *Hogyan történt? Adatok és okmányok a magyar zsidóság tragédiájához* (Budapest: Park, 2022), 397-408, 413-21.

3 Henrik Fisch, *Keresztény egyházfők felsőházi beszédei a zsidókérdésben. 1938-ban az I. és 1939-ben a II. zsidótörvény kapcsán* (Budapest: Neuwald I. utódai, 1947).

4 Regent Miklós Horthy (1868-1957) was the head of state of the Kingdom of Hungary between March 1, 1920 and October 16, 1944. His quarter-century-long regency was characterized by discriminatory anti-Jewish laws, various forms of antisemitic persecution, and mass violence culminating in genocide.



Image 1: "In the state room of their headquarters at 12 Síp Street, the Pest Israelite Congregation, representing Budapest's Neolog Jews, is gathered here for its general assembly, circa 1937. On the wall at left is a portrait of the banker Mór Wahrmann (1832-1892), the first Jew elected to the Hungarian Parliament (in 1869). At right hangs the portrait of Wolf "Sáje" Schossberger, president of the Pest Israelite Congregation from 1869-71. The small man with white moustache on the dais next to the speaker is Samu Stern, president of the Pest Israelite Congregation. Seated next to him is Ernő Munkácsi, then chief counsel and secretary of the Pest Israelite Congregation. A few years later, when Adolf Eichmann ordered the creation of a Hungarian Judenrat in March 1944, requiring that it be run by men with authority in the community, Samu Stern became president and Ernő Munkácsi secretary of the Jewish Council." (Caption of image by László Csősz, in Ernő Munkácsi, *How It Happened: Documenting the Tragedy of Hungarian Jewry* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018), 10. Photograph by Sándor Diskay. Source: HJMA F 96.323, General Assembly of the Pest Israelite Congregation, Magyar Zsidó Múzeum és Levéltár.

attorney and president of the newly established Jewish Museum. He was to assume the role of *főtitkár* (roughly, managing director) of this most influential community in 1942. In a disturbing irony, Ernő Munkácsi thus reached the peak of his impressive career among the Hungarian Jewry during the Europe-wide genocide.

After the end of the war and the Holocaust, Munkácsi became the managing director of the National Office of Hungarian Israelites (*Magyarországi Izraeliták Országos Irodája*),⁵ which was headed by Lajos Stöckler at the time.⁶ Stöckler had arguably played the leading role in the fourth and last Central Jewish Council in the months of Arrow Cross rule starting in mid-October 1944.⁷ (Historians tend to distinguish four

- 5 The National Office of Hungarian Israelites (NOHI) was the central administrative body of the Congressional (Neolog) Jewish Communities from the time of the great split in 1869 until 1950. In 1950, the organizations of the Jewish communities were united under the pressure of the communist state, and the NOHI was renamed the year after.
- 6 Lajos Stöckler (1897-1960) was an industrialist and member of the Jewish Council starting in July 1944. During the Arrow Cross regime, which came to power in mid-October, he became the *de facto* head of the Council (even as Samu Stern nominally remained its president). He proved effective in organizing food supplies and providing protection for Budapest ghetto residents. After the war, he became president of the Pest Israelite Community and the National Association of Hungarian Jews. In 1950, Stöckler was appointed head of the National Representation of Hungarian Israelites, the organization sanctioned by Hungary's communist regime. In 1953, as part of the anti-Zionist campaign in communist bloc countries, he and other Jewish community leaders were arrested on false charges. Stöckler was convicted but was subsequently released. In 1956, he emigrated to Australia.
- 7 In the spring and summer of 1944, following a pattern established in other occupied countries, the Nazi Germans and their Hungarian allies established approximately 150 *Judenräte* or Jewish councils in Hungary. Due to the swift deportation of Hungary's Jews, including members of the councils, the councils outside Budapest typically ceased functioning within a few weeks. By contrast, the Budapest-based Hungarian Central Jewish Council, whose sphere of authority was effectively restricted to the capital city, continued to act from March 20, 1944 until the liberation of the remaining Jews of Budapest in January 1945. Scholars typically distinguish four phases of the Council's activities. The "First Council" was headed by Samu Stern, who largely controlled the Council with his two deputies, Ernő Pető and Károly Wilhelm. The "Second Council" was established toward the end of April 1944, when the Jewish Council, now officially recognized by and brought under the purview of Hungarian authorities, was renamed the Interim Executive Board of the Association of Jews in Hungary. A few new members joined at that stage. July 14, 1944 marked the beginning of a "Third Council," when the group was expanded and modified with the addition of a separate Interim Executive Board of the Alliance of Christian Jews of Hungary, consisting of nine members (which was created to represent converts to Christianity). The final phase (the "Fourth Council") began with the Arrow Cross Party's seizure of power in mid-

phases of the Central Council's activities in German-occupied Hungary in 1944-45, which also correspond to important changes in its membership.) Munkácsi was among the earliest interpreters who addressed in detail the Holocaust in Hungary and the controversial role the Central Jewish Council played in 1944, releasing his essential volume *Hogyan történt? Adatok és okmányok a magyar zsidóság tragédiájához* as early as 1947.⁸

The special committee to assess the merits of Fisch's accusations and hear Munkácsi's defense in early 1948 was appointed by the national leadership of Congress Jewry. It included seven community presidents and was headed by István Földes, who had—somewhat curiously—also been a member of the Central Jewish Council in the months of Arrow Cross rule.⁹ The notary appointed to the investigation was István Kurzweil, who was otherwise—as Fisch complained at the very beginning of his speech held on January 29th—a subordinate of the accused.¹⁰ Clearly, all key actors were profoundly implicated one way or another in the grave matters that were tackled so confrontationally on that mid-winter day.

The harsh public accusations Henrik Fisch voiced in 1947 and early 1948 were certainly not the first to be made in connection with the activities of the Central Jewish Council in Budapest. Even though Ernő Munkácsi was never formally a member of the Council, several of those accusations concerned him personally. In fact, the raging polemics surrounding the Council's activities largely defined the final years of Munkácsi's life.

Munkácsi's past was first investigated in 1945, when an *igazolóbizottság* (literally, verification committee) consisting of seven appointees from various Hungarian political parties came together to pass judgement on his behavior during the previous months. Munkácsi provided the first

October 1944. While the Council went through several phases, operating under various names and with different personnel, its basic mandate remained unchanged throughout its existence. Of the altogether twenty-five men who served on the Hungarian Central Jewish Council, twenty-two survived the Holocaust.

8 English translation: Ernő Munkácsi, *How It Happened: Documenting the Tragedy of Hungarian Jewry*, edited by Nina Munk (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018).

9 István Földes (1882-1953) was a prosecutor by profession, who also acted as a leading representative of the Israelite (Neolog) Community of Pest and co-director of the Israelite Hungarian Literary Society.

10 István Kurzweil (1897-1958) was an employee of the Pest Israelite Community's Public-Interest Housing Office and a leading official in the Jewish Council's housing department.

detailed account of his recent activities to the verification committee as early as May 1945. Remarkably, the initial judgement of this Hungarian committee was that he was unsuitable to continue performing his role within the Jewish community since he had irresponsibly left his post for months during the Arrow Cross's brutal and violent rule. In other words, by applying a rather perverse logic, this non-Jewish verification committee retroactively held Ernő Munkácsi, who clearly was among those persecuted in late 1944 and early 1945, to an unrealistic standard of unimpeachable public behavior. Fortunately for Munkácsi, a People's Court accepted his subsequent appeal in the fall of 1945 in which he correctly emphasized that he did not enjoy any form of protection in late 1944 through the Jewish community or otherwise and was, thus, forced to flee.

In the summer of the same year, the socialist Zionists of Ihud Mapai led by Béla Dénes launched a trial at their unofficial people's court—which they rather grandiosely named *néptörvényszék* in Hungarian—to pass judgement on the Jewish Council from within the Jewish community.¹¹ The proceedings in July 1945, which were arguably motivated primarily by political considerations and social resentments, lasted for two days and went beyond examining the Council's activities in a highly critical light. They contained more general accusations against the previous Jewish leadership, including their supposed collaboration, corruption, treason, and neglect of religion. While Munkácsi was not personally critiqued in this case, he clearly belonged to the community elite the socialist Zionists sought to discredit.

The January 1948 public hearings within the Neolog community impacted Ernő Munkácsi much more directly. Due to the initiative of Henrik Fisch, Munkácsi suddenly found himself in the role of main defendant. Not only was his moral and professional integrity publicly questioned in this case; the accuser explicitly argued that Munkácsi was personally implicated in the mass murder of his co-religionists. Even though the committee established to oversee the investigation and assess its results closed the case without passing judgement and recommended

11 Béla Dénes (1904–59) was a Hungarian physician, author, and Zionist leader. Active as a social democrat at first, he joined Poale Zion in the 1930s. In 1942, he was arrested for hiding and supporting Jewish refugees. In 1944, he went into hiding. Between 1945 and 1948, Dénes was a leading Zionist representative in Hungary. In 1949, he was accused of spying for the State of Israel and spent five years in prison. In 1957, he emigrated to Israel. His memoirs *Ávós világ Magyarországon. Egy cionista orvos emlékiratai* (*The Rule of State Security in Hungary: Memoirs of a Zionist Doctor*) were published posthumously.

that no more public sessions be held, Munkácsi—who had been seriously ill for years by then—was apparently profoundly shaken by the affair and felt slighted that his dedicated efforts on behalf of the Jewish community in Hungary and his manifold achievements over the decades had been overlooked.

After the case was closed, Ernő Munkácsi no longer wanted to act as managing director of the National Office of Hungarian Israelites and assigned his tasks to his deputy (and former notary of this strange public investigation) István Kurzweil. Munkácsi was formally pensioned in July 1948, at the age of fifty-two. He passed away two years later.

What sort of content is contained in these especially valuable and equally disturbing sources?

Henrik Fisch began his speech by emphasizing how “indescribably grave” the matter to be examined was, how “limitless” the responsibility of the committee appointed to examine it, and how he personally had never felt such inner pressure and blockage before, not even during the worst days of persecution (all translations from Hungarian are my own—FL). Fisch then turned to his broader subject, which he specified as “the problems that arise in connection with the extermination of provincial Jewry.” Speaking in front of a high-profile Neolog committee at this public session, Fisch posed his confrontational key question thusly: “Does the Jewish leadership of today identify itself with the leadership of 1944, which led the country during the deportations from the provinces?” Fisch also made his narrower, more concrete aim clear early on. He wanted formal recognition of his conviction that, based on the record of his behavior in 1944, Ernő Munkácsi had disqualified himself from participating in the “new, democratic public life of Jewry.”

Fisch went on to argue that numerous people directly responsible for “our Jewish tragedy” continued their lives across the country “without any punishment or with a disproportionately minor one,” and there was still an urgent need to publicly dissect “the matters of the Jewish Council.” He elaborated on what he saw as the four main reasons behind this need: that a “morally cleansed Jewry” could make public demands in Hungary with much greater force; that the last will of close relatives who had been murdered oblige the few survivors to demand such accountability; that the currently dominant image of Jews as a dehumanized group undeserving of freedom would need to be effectively countered in the interest of future generations; and that Jewish ethical ideals would need to be restored, not least by proving that the leadership of recent times should not be seen as the true representative of Jewish spirit, ideals, and morality.

When expanding on his third point concerning the dehumanization of Jews, Fisch aimed to oppose what he saw as a key accusation: that Jews were so “debauched” that they continued to believe the Germans and their Hungarian collaborators as late as 1944. Fisch claimed that this had not been the case at all. In his interpretation, the masses of Hungarian Jews “only trusted, and naturally at that,” their siblings in leadership positions—and those siblings ended up betraying them. Fisch emphasized that this was a crucial point: it needed to be demonstrated that Jews were “not an immoral nation deserving of its fate” but rather “the tragic victims of traitors.” According to him, the latter was far from unprecedented and something much less shameful than the former.

Having provided his more theoretical justifications for the case, Fisch’s speech went on to explain why the focus of his charges was Ernő Munkácsi. Fisch began by trying to counter what must have sounded to many like an obvious objection: Munkácsi was not a member of the Central Jewish Council in 1944. Fisch intriguingly argued that this should not be seen as a decisive criterion: members of the Council had been responsible to those who appointed them, he argued, and Jewish responsibility for what happened in 1944 should rather be measured by assessing those whom Jews trusted among their own leaders. It should be clear, he added, that Jewish trust was neither based on nor, certainly, enhanced by the fact that Nazi German and Hungarian leaders appointed someone to the Council. At the same time, significant trust was placed in certain leading personalities, he claimed, such as Samu Stern,¹² László Bakonyi,¹³ Zoltán Kohn,¹⁴ and Ernő Munkácsi: so long as someone like Munkácsi was continuing in his role as managing director of the Israelite (Neolog) Community of Pest, the Council would also be trusted, Fisch reasoned. Of all the leaders who avidly cultivated their fellow Jews’ trust and thereby betrayed them, only Munkácsi was still alive; hence, he was the most logical person to target now, Fisch asserted.

12 Samu Stern (1874-1947) was a businessman who was president of the Pest Israelite Community as of 1929 and the National Office of Hungarian Israelites as of 1932. He served as the president of the Central Jewish Council from March 21, 1944 to the end of October 1944, when he went into hiding.

13 László Bakonyi (1891-?) was a lawyer and writer who acted as executive secretary of the National Office of Hungarian Israelites between 1927 and 1944. After the German occupation, he served as a legal adviser to the Jewish Council.

14 Zoltán Kohn (1902-44) was a teacher at Pest’s Neolog Jewish high school, editor of the literary journal *Libanon* between 1936 and 1941, and co-editor of the yearbook of the National Hungarian Association to Assist Jews (*Országos Magyar Zsidó Segítő Akció*).

Fisch escalated his accusation against Ernő Munkácsi by making two claims: that the latter actively misled the Jewish masses by repeatedly claiming in 1944 that there was “no reason to worry,” and that escape options would have been available but were not pursued. Fisch explained in harrowing detail how hundreds of “wives and children”—including his own daughter—could have easily found shelter and been saved had they not believed in the reassuring messages of those they considered trustworthy leaders. Fisch formulated his main charge in the following pointed way: “Solely due to the treason of Jewish leadership was my child brought to Auschwitz.” This amounted to the crime of “handing innocent people to their murderers,” Henrik Fisch concluded. The new policies he demanded in front of the special Neolog committee were that there should be a clear separation between the present (postwar) leadership and “the old one,” and that Munkácsi be banned for life from holding any position in the Hungarian Jewish community.

Whereas Fisch started his remarks by complaining about what he perceived as the lack of neutrality of the appointed notary, Munkácsi began his rebuttal by emphasizing how he fully accepted that an internal (i. e., Jewish) investigation would be conducted prior to him launching any potential libel case against Fisch, but that he was incredibly and unpleasantly surprised by the fact that what was supposed to be an internal investigation took the shape of a public hearing. Observing the matter as a qualified lawyer, Munkácsi considered this an unjustified case of holding a trial without having conducted a proper investigation.

Munkácsi considered Fisch’s main argument that the “trusted” community administration was more responsible than the Central Jewish Council, which had issued various commands to Jews across the country, to be inadmissible. His main counterarguments to Fisch’s grave personal charges were that he played no administrative or influential role in connection with the Jews from outside Budapest in 1944. He was employed by the Jewish community of Pest and not by the National Office prior to 1945, Munkácsi explained. Second, he asserted that he was no more than a person of “third rank” during the mass deportations from the country.

While trying to respond to Fisch’s numerous personal accusations point by point, Munkácsi maintained, more generally, that from early April 1944 on, he completely disagreed with the Council’s policies regarding the Germans (*a németekkel való politikát április eleje óta teljesen helytelenítettem*); that back then, he consistently propagated the idea that Hungarian resistance had to be strengthened (and, as he explained, he even helped write and distribute a relevant underground pamphlet

addressed to the “Christian middle classes,” for which he was subsequently investigated); that the dichotomy Fisch suggested between privileged elite access to accurate information and the ignorance of the Jewish masses kept in the dark by them was invalid (news about the deportations was widely circulated at the time, and Munkácsi argued that he had no early access to the Auschwitz Protocols nor did he fully believe its assertions at the time);¹⁵ and that while he was not in a competent position to advise others whether to stay or try and flee, he “personally recommended going into hiding to everyone.” In other words, beyond directly challenging the admissibility of Fisch’s charge on legal premises, Munkácsi contested them on more political, epistemological-moral, and personal grounds.

Ernő Munkácsi concluded his response by stating that, in his assessment, he had served the Jewish community with dedication and honor for some twenty-eight years; that Henrik Fisch’s accusations against him were issued in the “exalted style of a blood libel charge”; and that he (Munkácsi) intended to take legal action against his accuser, who could not possibly have acted on his own—adding that this would require examining Fisch’s mental state.

15 The first version of the Auschwitz Protocols of April 1944, also known as the Vrba-Wetzler report, was the first detailed and reliable eyewitness account of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp complex. Dictated or handwritten by Rudolf Vrba (originally Walter Rosenberg) and Alfred Wetzler, Jewish prisoners who escaped from Auschwitz in early April 1944, the report not only attempted to quantify the number of people imprisoned and killed in this major Nazi camp complex but also explained precisely how prisoners were “selected,” murdered, and cremated, and included sketches indicating the layout of the gas chambers and crematoria. After reaching Žilina, Slovakia, in mid-April, Vrba and Wetzler told their story to members of the Jewish Center of Slovakia, who in turn typed up the report. The Auschwitz Protocols, completed in late April, was translated from Slovak into German and then Hungarian almost immediately. It was narrowly circulated in Budapest just as Hungary’s Jews were being deported to Auschwitz *en masse* between May and July 1944. The leaders of Hungary, including Regent Miklós Horthy, received a copy of the Protocols—the precise date of this remains a matter of dispute. Equally controversial is that while certain Hungarian Jewish leaders, including members of the Jewish Council and prominent Zionists, knew of the contents of the Vrba-Wetzler report (possibly even earlier than their Hungarian persecutors), they refrained from sharing the information more widely. The first English version of the report, which combined the Vrba-Wetzler report with shorter reports by other Auschwitz escapees (Arnošt Rosin, Czesław Mordowicz, and Jerzy Tabeau), was published on November 25, 1944 by the United States War Refugee Board under the title “German Extermination Camps—Auschwitz and Birkenau.” The joint reports, known colloquially as the Auschwitz Protocols, were used as evidence during the Nuremberg Trial.

Ernő Munkácsi felt a deep sense of injustice about being placed alongside the accused among Neolog Jewry shortly after the Holocaust. As he saw it, his intense, decades-long constructive involvement with the Jewish community had practically been ignored. The sole part of his past to be scrutinized in the early postwar years—and scrutinized with great vigor and, as he experienced it, inexplicable malevolence—concerned his role in and responsibility for the persecution and genocide of 1944, a devastating series of events he barely survived.

The detailed response he offered on January 29, 1948, though making a strong case on multiple grounds, avoided several of the most controversial points where the evidence was more ambiguous. It was true that, for several reasons, Munkácsi's role in Jewish communal affairs gradually diminished in the course of 1944. It was similarly true that he still belonged to the inner circle of key decision-makers even after the Nazi German occupation and heightened Hungarian collaboration in March 1944. He was technically correct to assert that the Council and the Jewish Community of Pest had parallel administrations. However, their competencies were not that clearly separated, and there remained overlaps in their actual tasks.

More concretely, Munkácsi was correct to emphasize that he was employed in the administration of the Pest Israelite (Neolog) Community as managing director and thus played no formal role in connection with Jews from outside Budapest in 1944. It was also at least partially true that he was considered an important contact person across the country—and desperate requests from the ghettos and camps outside Budapest would, therefore, land directly on his desk during those fatal months. Munkácsi was also correct to recall that he had not been fully loyal to Hungarian state authorities or the Nazi-appointed Jewish leadership throughout 1944. It is also clear from the historical evidence that he benevolently and naively trusted the rationality and moderation of Hungarian state authorities well into the years of anti-Jewish persecution and was arguably far too slow and cautious in reassessing his relationship to those he tended to perceive as Hungarian Jews' Christian-conservative partners.

Beyond the burning desire to name responsible persons and vehemently demand their punishment that many among the surviving Jewish remnant must have felt, which could, at times, manifest in exaggerated or downright false accusations, the harsh polemic and irreconcilable disagreement between Henrik Fisch and Ernő Munkácsi also reflects in a striking fashion the unbridgeable gap between the diverse existential experiences within the Hungarian Jewish community during the Holocaust,

as well as the profound implicatedness and tragedy of the Neolog community elite. Ultimately, the 1948 dispute between Fisch and Munkácsi also reveals the contrast between, on the one hand, a discourse that clearly emerged out of existential despair and was built around stark moral concepts of trust, treason, and moral cleansing, and, on the other, a discourse that carefully delineated and rejected legal responsibility in a defensive manner but seemed unable or was simply unwilling so shortly after 1944 to more substantially grapple with the moral ambiguities—the vast grey zone—that shaped the history of the Central Jewish Council in Hungary in that most devastating year.