

Intersectional Approaches to Jewish Youth During the Holocaust in Hungary

My doctoral research project develops age, specifically youth, as an intersectional category of analysis by exploring young Hungarian Jews' responses to persecution during the Holocaust. Drawing on multi-archival research using Hungarian, French, and English language sources, I deepen our understanding of youth and youth agency in times of crisis by exploring different inter- and intra-generational perspectives. I also incorporate understudied territories and temporalities into English-speaking scholarship. While there is a strong historiography on the Holocaust in Hungary, few English-language studies examine areas outside of Budapest before the German invasion.¹ Similarly, in Hungarian-language research, the history of provincial antisemitism has been told mainly through general regional studies of Hungarian Jewish history.² By studying Jewish youth associations in provincial cities, my research contributes to an enhanced understanding of Jewish life in wartime Hungary, going beyond the narrow focus on Budapest and post-March 1944 in the existing historiography. Furthermore, with antisemitism and controversies over wartime collaboration and resistance on the rise in East and Central Europe, my research also refutes politically driven narratives of national resistance and the influence of Cold War ideologies on historiography.

- 1 For an outline of the latest historiography of the Holocaust in Hungary, see: Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000); Tim Cole, *Traces of the Holocaust: Journeying in and out of the Ghettos* (London: Continuum, 2011); Robert Rozett, "Information About the Holocaust in Hungary Before the German Occupation, Revisited," *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 36, no. 1 (2022), 68–76.
- 2 The Hungarian language "Yizkor" Memorial Books for regional Hungarian Jewish communities provide detailed local histories. See, for example: Ágnes Szegő Orbánné, *A Heves Megyei Zsidóság Története: A XVIII. Századtól a Holocaustig* (Tiszafüred: Tiszafüredi Menóra Alapítvány, 2001); László Szilágyi-Windt, *Az Újpesti Zsidóság Története* (Tel Aviv: Lahav, 1975).

These narratives continue to shape contemporary debates about the history and memory of the Holocaust in Hungary. By employing age as an intersectional category of analysis—probing how it interacted with gender, religion, ideology, etc.—my research enhances our knowledge of Jewish subjective experience.

My project takes a roughly chronological approach to chart how Jewish youth evolved from the interwar period, during the war, and in the immediate postwar years, covering approximately 1920–1946. In so doing, it becomes possible to understand their progression through the lifecycle during times of significant social, political, and geographical change. Key themes are threaded throughout my research, showing how experiences built on each other and intensified over time. This long-term approach also develops an understanding of the social and political context of wartime experiences. Instead of viewing the Holocaust in isolation, the historical context of Judaism in Hungary provides the basis for understanding the intergenerational clash brought about by antisemitic persecution. Indeed, family is one of these key themes, as Jewish families faced an assault in different ways across the period. Gender, place, and—of course—youth are also themes that intersect with each other and weave through every element of my research. As a result, I show how these categories of analysis acted in different ways and took on new meanings dependent on the place, time, and circumstance.

My research begins with a survey of Jewish childhoods in interwar Hungary, detailing Jewish youth identity through their intersections with Judaism, youth, gender, family life, and geopolitics. By exploring these experiences, I seek to establish how the generation of young people born in the 1920s and 1930s held a unique position in Hungarian Jewish society, with distinct perspectives and opportunities to those of their parents. I then move on to their wartime experiences, exploring how the war and new antisemitic policies interrupted young people's lives and reformed family structures. Drawing on examples of antisemitic laws and how they were felt, I show how wartime Hungary became a state that increasingly excluded Jews from society, with a detrimental impact on their family and youth. I then explore the fundamental moment of the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944 and the impact that it had on Hungarian Jewish family life. Building out from the moment of occupation, I outline the changes that young people experienced in their lives, including the closure of Jewish schools, limits on their daily activities, and the emotions they felt at the arrival of soldiers.

My research then follows the approximate four hundred and forty thousand Hungarian Jews deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, exploring

their trajectories through the concentration camp system, how they adapted to life in the camps, and how their youth and gender formed their experiences. I focus on a case study of one thousand Hungarian Jewish women—of whom over ten percent were aged eighteen or under—who were deported from Auschwitz to a munitions factory in Allendorf, Germany in August 1944 as an example of the wider camp system. While these women were in the camp system, Jewish organizations in Budapest (the only remaining city in Hungary where Jews had not been deported by the summer of 1944) stepped up rescue and resistance efforts. Approaching these activities, my research places the Jewish community's responses and young people's wartime communal life at the forefront. By looking in depth at the youth work by and for young people in 1944, I paint a picture of the diverse youth community at the time, complicating traditional narratives that focused simply on certain groups and revealing the complex web of interactions between different parts of the Jewish community. To close, I explore how young people and youth groups engaged in rescue efforts in the final months of the war, raising questions about youth agency and identity. Finally, my research ends by reflecting on young people's lives after the war. I chart how anti-semitism continued to impact young people's lives in later years and where and how they rebuilt their homes.

Throughout the aforementioned period, youth is a defining category, creating distinct spaces, experiences, and roles in society.³ It is also forward-looking, intersecting with a community's fears and hopes for the future. For Hungarian Jews born in years between the 1920s and the 1940s in a country renegotiating its relationship with Jews, youth is a particularly important category of analysis. These Jews held a special position in Hungarian society, living in the time between high interwar Jewish emigration and the collapse of Jewish fertility after further

3 For an outline of some of the literature on youth as a category of analysis, see: Mark Bennett, "Children's Social Identities," *Infant and Child Development* 20 (2011): 360; Joanna B. Michlic, "An Untold Story of Rescue: Jewish Children and Youth in German-Occupied Poland," in *Jewish Resistance Against the Nazis*, ed. Patrick Henry (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 318; Gill Valentine, "Boundary Crossings: Transitions from Childhood to Adulthood," *Children's Geographies* 1 (2003): 48; Mary Jo Maynes, "Age as a Category of Historical Analysis: History, Agency, and Narratives of Childhood," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 1 (2008): 123; Steven Mintz, "Reflections on Age as a Category of Historical Analysis," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1, no. 1 (2008): 93; Barnabas Balint, "Coming of Age During the Holocaust: The Adult Roles and Responsibilities of Young Hungarian Jews in Auschwitz-Birkenau," *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 35, no.1 (2021): 20–40, 24.

antisemitic laws in 1938. My research identifies the specific experiences of these young people, which were different from those of adults and younger children. It explores how their identities were formed within the highly charged and uncertain religious, cultural, and political context of interwar and wartime Hungary. Employing youth as an intersectional category of analysis thus offers a window into the composition of the Hungarian Jewish communities, how they responded to persecution, and how they interacted with wider Hungarian society.

Being on the cusp of adulthood, this generation entered the war at a time of their lives when they often wanted and felt capable of taking on new responsibilities, as well as being perceived by the adults in this way. My research presents the history of Alan Brown, who was sixteen years old when he was imprisoned with his family in the Miskolc ghetto. Because of his age, the ghetto authorities conscripted Brown as a member of the “youth service,” responsible for running errands. In a video testimony, Brown tells us how he had special privileges because of this work and was able to move in and out of the ghetto, something that he leveraged to improve his and his family’s living conditions.⁴ Far from losing his youth, it was precisely his young age that influenced how he experienced the Holocaust.⁵ Young people’s age—in between that of children and adults—also positioned them well to become involved in later resistance and rescue work, often within the context of youth movements.⁶ My research showcases examples from the Zionist youth movements, many of whose members were in their late teens and early twenties, which led rescue work both across Hungary and internationally.⁷ I also show how ideas about youth were central to constructing the ideal Zionist pioneer figure that dominated debates around *Aliyah* (Jewish immigration to the British Mandate of Palestine in the 1930s and early 1940s) from Hungary.

Finally, my research applies youth as an intersectional category of analysis. Treating those within this age range as subjects of a distinct analytical category changes how we think about young people as histori-

4 Alan Brown Interview, University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive/14639.

5 Martha Stroud, “Barnabas Balint Lectures about Growing Up Jewish During the Holocaust in Hungary,” last accessed July 10, 2023, dornsife.usc.edu.

6 Asher Cohen, *The Halutz Resistance in Hungary, 1942–1944* (Boulder, CO: Columbia University Press, 1986); Robert Rozett, “Armed Resistance in Hungary,” *Yad Vashem Studies* XIX (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1988), 269–88.

7 Barnabas Balint, “The Tiyul: Rescuing Jews by Smuggling across the Hungarian-Romanian border,” in *Anti-Axis Resistance in Southeastern Europe, 1940–1944: Forms and Varieties*, ed. John Paul Newman, Ljubinka Škodrić, and Rade Ristanović (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

cal actors, introducing age-based nuance to the otherwise uniform categories of ideology, religion, and gender. I reveal, for example, how youth and gender acted together to form both young men's and women's experiences. Young Jewish men were generally conscripted into slave labor with the Hungarian army even if they did not reach the minimum age threshold of twenty-one. This removed many men of "working age" from the ghettos, changing the demographic composition of the communities there and during the deportations to the concentration camp system. In an environment where young people's lives were transformed by persecution, youth-specific elements of their gendered, ideological, or religious lives were, in turn, constructed, performed, and challenged.

Given the subjective nature of this project, its sources are intentionally personal. My research is rooted in the individual histories of ordinary people, telling their experiences through their own words as far as possible. These include a wealth of varied source material from archives across the world, including in the United States, Israel, Hungary, Germany, and the United Kingdom. In particular, survivor testimonies—written, oral, and video—form a central part of my source base, drawing heavily on research and reflection conducted during a Research Fellowship at the University of Southern California's Center for Advanced Genocide Research, where the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive contains over fifty-five thousand video testimonies. Such oral histories provide powerful insight into the way events are remembered and the deeply emotional ways that persecution was felt. This thesis forms a part of the latest research methods on oral histories, drawing insights from visual cues and narrative construction, as well as making inferences about the meanings of impromptu remarks.⁸

Testimonies are combined with documents such as school yearbooks, official reports, parliamentary debates, and Jewish community material (letters, adverts, speeches, etc.) to provide a more holistic picture of Jewish life and responses to persecution. These are drawn from specialist archives in Hungary, as well as the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives, the Hungarian Cultural Heritage Portal, and the archives at Yad Vashem, where I held a European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI) Conny Kristel Research Fellowship. These sources provide insight into the everyday activities of young Jews and make it possible to

8 KP Truong, GJ Westerhof, SMA Lamers, and Franciska De Jong, "Towards Modeling Expressed Emotions in Oral History Interviews: Using Verbal and Nonverbal Signals to Track Personal Narratives," *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 29, no. 4 (2014): 621–36; Jeffrey Shandler, *Holocaust Memory in the Digital Age* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

intersect the individual with the community. School yearbooks, for example, spanning long periods of time allow individuals to be traced through the school system at the same time as a broader analysis of trends in schooling. Furthermore, contemporaneous letters, speeches, and reports provide direct insight into people's thoughts at the time, unencumbered as they are by issues of memory and postwar influence.

Finally, camp-related lists, registration cards, and allied intelligence reports on the camp system make it possible to analyze young people's lives in the concentration camps and their journeys through them. Material from the Arolsen Archives (formerly the International Tracing Service) is particularly relevant here as it contains extensive documentation from the deportation and camp systems. Despite being open to the public since 2007, much of this material has yet to be used for research, enabling this thesis to tell new histories and develop methodologies for including such material.⁹ Indeed, by showing how close readings of Arolsen Archive material can contribute to the social history of the Holocaust, this thesis introduces novel ways of understanding documentary sources and telling personal stories from dehumanizing documentation.

My research, therefore, draws on a wide variety of sources from archives across the world. This is indicative of the history that it tells; postwar Jewish migration stretched across the globe, scattering documentation in disparate locations. Through extensive cross-archival work that pulls together sources from London to Los Angeles and Budapest to Jerusalem, it becomes possible to create a corpus of material that works together to create a convergence of evidence. Comparisons between sources allow for correcting errors, revealing silences, and consideration of the process and meaning behind their creation—all crucial elements of this study on young people in a time of crisis. This is particularly insightful when a specific individual can be traced through multiple archives, offering different perspectives on their life. Working with a variety of source types also enables evidence to be deployed where it is most effective for illustrating different aspects of the Holocaust. While testimonies illuminate the personal, emotional, and subjective experience, sources from the Jewish communities allow a close analysis of their activities, and newspapers and other documents provide contextual and more detailed information.

In its use of this wide range of source material, my research employs both traditional and new methodologies, including oral history and

9 Dan Stone, *Fate Unknown: Tracing the Missing after World War II and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

digital humanities. Combining both primary source material and the latest academic research developments in the English, Hungarian, and the French-speaking world, I bring together and translate knowledge from across national borders, incorporating a broader array of perspectives and raising awareness of little-known sources and histories that enrich our appreciation of other cultures. By drawing on oral history testimonies to understand individuals' subjective experiences and comparing these with contemporary documentation, I also develop a more complex picture of Holocaust memory and personal identity, while grappling with issues of how memory influences our understanding of the past. Finally, by employing cutting-edge digital technologies in ArcGIS to create map visualizations of people's trajectories through early life, ghettoization, deportation, the camp system, and postwar life, I offer a better understanding of global movement, patterns of experience, and the composition of Jewish communities.¹⁰

Combining personal testimonies with broader documentation as well as emerging research on the history of childhood, gender, identity, and Judaism in Hungary, and utilizing some of the latest methodologies for historical research, my research contributes to our understanding of how young people's lives, identities, and experiences were formed during the Second World War and, specifically, the Holocaust.

10 Maja Hultman, "The GIS Prism: Beyond the Myth of Stockholm's Ostjuden," in *Jewish Studies in the Digital Age*, ed. Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, Zaagsma Gerben, Miriam Rürup, Michelle Margolis, and Amalia S. Levi (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022), 125–46, 127.