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The role of the Good Shepherd Committee in the international rescue activity for Jews in Hungary, 1942–1945*

ABSZTRAKT

Jelen tanulmány a Jó Pásztor Bizottság részvételét vizsgálja a magyarországi nemzetközi zsidómentőhálózatban, a második világháború alatt. A Református Egyház zsidópárti munkájának áttekintéséhez a legfontosabb mentők és egyházi vezetők megnyilvánulásait és visszaemlékezéseit elemzi. A kutatás vitatja a kortárs historiográfia ellentmondásos értékeléseit a protestáns egyházak hozzáállásáról, illetve humanitárius erőfeszítéseiket és mulasztásaikat erkölcsi elkötelezettségük és gyakorlati lehetőségeik fényében tárja fel. A protestáns egyházak nem tiltakoztak nyilvánosan és intézményesen a deportálások ellen, hanem a Jó Pásztor Bizottságon keresztül közösen segítettek az üldözött zsidókat. Lelki és anyagi támogatást nyújtottak a munkaszolgálatosoknak, zsidó gyermekeket rejtegettek, valamint tájékoztatták a vallási vezetőket és a kormányzót az auschwitzi koncentrációs tábor működéséről. A tanulmány vizsgálja Éliás József és kollégái személyes jelentőségét a mentési munkában, továbbá hangsúlyozza, hogy az egyházi humanitárius eredmények elsősorban néhány szolgálatkész egyén bátorságából, odaadásából és kitartásából származtak. A cikk arra a következtetésre jut, hogy a „Jó Pásztor” jelentős mértékben hozzájárult a nagyszabású nemzetközi zsidómentő tevékenységhez. Eredményességüket azonban nagymértékben korlátozta az egyházi vezetők tiltakozásának késedelme és összehangolatlansága az állami hatóságok embertelensége ellen. A holokauszt felelősségének elismerése és a trauma kezelése továbbra is kezdetleges stádiumú a magyar társadalomban. Ez a hiánybetöltés egyre relevánsabb és sürgősebb feladattá vált, amint 2019-ben elértük ennek a nemzeti és nemzetközi tragédiának a 75. évfordulóját.

The Reformed Church in Hungary has gained a number of spiritual benefits from the diversity provided by its relations with the Hungarian Jewry, as Protestant Jews often played a prominent role in the life of the church in the area of theology and education.¹ As a Christian institution that nurtured traditionally good relations with the Jewish community, their participation in the rescue work is an essential area to discover in the international humanitarian network. The Hungarian Protestant humanitarian endeavours during the Second World War were united in a missionary movement which was launched by the the Reformed Church but organised by a young pastor whose memories serve as the core of this chapter's analysis. Humanitarian institutions such as hospitals, deaconess ministries and children's homes occupied a special place in the structure of the Reformed Church since they were not closely attached to the central church administration and the political leadership, and their function was less hierarchical. These features provided them with a greater freedom of action and relations with other charity, religious and diplomatic organisations.

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1 Kovács: „Ideje van...” [„It is time to...”], 159.

The Christian churches regarded themselves responsible primarily for the 100,000 baptised members of Hungary's 800,000 Jews and were willing to take risks only for them.² The reason for making distinction between converts and Jews who remained loyal to Judaism had two main factors. Firstly, converted Jews formed a marginalised group in society. The Jewish leadership and press regarded converts as apostates who had betrayed their faith and unfortunately, their new Christian communities also acted distrustfully towards them. Secondly, the churches regarded the Jewish question as an issue that belonged to the competency of the government with whom they did not want to start any conflicts, mainly because of the concern of losing subsidies. By 1942, the Reformed Church recognised the need for a concentrated assistance service that could spiritually encourage Reformed Jews and in some cases help them improve their material living conditions as well. A group of churchmen, led by pastor Albert Bereczky, suggested an organisation to look after these vulnerable 'sheep' more thoroughly. The Universal Convent of the Reformed Church established the 'Good Shepherd Subcommittee' on 20th October 1942. It aimed to help the members of the church of Jewish origin who had become increasingly defenseless due to the physical, legal and moral discrimination of the anti-Semitic policy of the political leadership. The chairman of the committee was missionary rapporteur Gyula Muraközy and the head of the missionary service was a young Reformed pastor József Éliás – also a Christian of Jewish background.³

Éliás was born in 1914 as one of the six children of a blacksmith and a seamstress, to a family of Jewish origin. His calling for the Gospel drove him to a Calvinist secondary school, then he attended the Pápa Reformed Theological Academy between 1937 and 1941 and completed his training there as well. He started his career as an assistant pastor in 1941 in Cegléd and was ordered to Budapest in the autumn of 1942 by Bishop László Ravasz, the ministerial president of the Universal Convent. Éliás became the appointed secretary and later the head pastor of the Good Shepherd Committee. His reminiscence of his 'job interview' with Ravasz and the conditions that the bishop outlined, depicts the relationship between the church and the committee in a meaningful way:

The official church undertakes the responsibility only for the services that are reported in its handout and listed in the regulations of the GSC. Apart from these, I can do what I find right but I have to know what consequences I will need to take on.⁴

In addition to outlining the participation of the church in the action merely as the institution of the committee, Ravasz stressed that he would not be able to provide a room in the centre of the Universal Convent or any financial assistance for the work. Thus, Éliás started the management of the committee as a sort of personal

2 SZENES: Interview with József Éliás, 35.

3 Jelentés a magyar evangélikus egyházak „Jó Pásztor” Missziós Alapítványának tevékenységéről [Report on the activity of the „Good Shepherd” Missionary Foundation of the Evangelical churches of Hungary], 1–2.

4 SZENES: Interview with József Éliás, 38.

enterprise and could rely only on the trustworthiness and dedication of his colleagues. The financial and material contribution derived from the donations of Reformed church members that they could send to the account or to the address of the committee.⁵

Éliás carried out his anti-fascist political activity in the Hungarian Independence Movement and Breakout Office in parallel with his rescue efforts in the Good Shepherd Committee through Géza Soós, whom he knew from his secondary school years in Budapest. Soós was a lawyer and Reformed pastor who attended the Évian Conference in July 1938 in France, which was convened by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt with the aim of discussing the issue of Jewish refugees. Between 1940 and 1946, Soós served as the president of the Soli Deo Gloria Reformed Student Movement that was established in 1921 in order to renew the Reformed Church, especially the religious identity of its youth. In August 1943, the leadership of the SDG arranged an opposition conference in Balatonszárszó that gathered a wide political and ideological range of intellectuals to discuss Hungary's perspectives after the country's increasingly obvious defeat in the war.

Furthermore, Soós and his colleagues started to organise a resistance movement of young intellectuals to save the Hungarian nation from the consequences of the probable collapse.⁶ This dual activity provided Éliás with a broad horizon of information, allies and opportunities that he managed to utilise in favour of those in need. At the beginning, the GSC offered mainly counseling for Jews who were confused by the increasing number of anti-Jewish rules and prohibitions they had to face day by day. The Good Shepherd cooperated with several lawyers who explained the new legislations to the inquiring Jews and recommended various ways to bypass them. Contrary to the official propaganda about Jews, most of the Jewish families lived at the average standard of living and their financial situation dramatically deteriorated due to the deprivation of their rights. As the discrimination against Jews increased, many Israelites remained without job and income. Moreover, they started to be deprived of their fundamental human rights, excluded from their social positions and slowly even from the platforms of public life. The temporary financial aid was not enough to ensure a stable solution so the Good Shepherd Committee had to grant Jews job opportunities and legal advice in the confusing situation created by the anti-Jewish laws.

The GSC's first commitment, that remained a crucial endeavour all along the war, was the legal, spiritual and material support for the most vulnerable group of Jews, the forced labourers and prisoners of internment camps.⁷ The institution of labour service was implemented in 1939, initially for young men incapable of military service, later for the humiliation of political (leftist) opponents and national and religious minorities, mainly Jews. The forced labourers were part of the national army, but importantly, they accomplished war service in mines and at railway

5 JAKAB: „The perception of Jews in the Hungarian Catholic and Reformed churches” press and their attitude towards the Jewish community between 1919 and 1944, 36–50.

6 In the winter of 1942–1943, the serious defeats of the Axis powers (Stalingrad, Northern Africa) and more importantly, the destruction of the Hungarian Second Army at the Don River on the Voronezh Front led to a widespread disillusionment in the initial ideals of the war.

7 People were usually interned for being classified as unreliable, politically dangerous elements.

constructions without any weapons. This way, their opportunities and resources for any kinds of resistance or revolt were crucially restricted.⁸ 100 000 Jewish men were mobilised for labour service, in which 42 000 of them lost their lives due to the extremely poor living conditions, diseases, mass starvation and the insufficient circumstances of catering, clothing and hygiene.⁹ Moreover, many of them were executed by commanders and guards during marching. The wives and children of the forced labourers and internees were left at home without any sort of income and thus, became exposed to famine and poverty to an increasing extent.¹⁰ For the labourers, the committee collected woolen jackets, pieces of underwear, socks, boots and blankets in its centre in 5 Lázár Street in Budapest, from the church stocks, Reformed believers and wealthy sponsors. A large amount of these donations were sent to soldiers fighting in the high mountains of Transylvania and on the banks of the Don.¹¹ Éliás visited internment camps in Csörgő, Garany, Ricsé and Budapest where he spiritually counseled religious and non-religious prisoners as well. He used these occasions to gain first-hand experience about the most urgent needs and difficulties, to pass on messages between them and their families and then to write reports about his experiences.

Furthermore, the committee was collecting baptismal certificates from meritorious Christian acquaintances and from depositories. Jewish children and pregnant women were sheltered in an orphanage and thirty-one homes, in buildings that were all sorted out carefully by Éliás, after thorough safety considerations. A home for orphans opened in 1944 in Noszvaj, later this institution served also as a shelter for international soldiers, forced labourers and people who were hiding from arrest in illegality. The GSC provided equipment, clothing, cash and safe-conducts for Hungarian Jews who had asked for assistance, and ensured that the protected people were mentally supported by the committee's deacons and deaconesses regularly.¹² The following Ecclesiastical Deacon Certificate was issued by the 'Good Shepherd' Subcommittee of the Universal Convent of the Reformed Church for Jenő Pór on 10th July 1944:

The document certifies that 'According to the provisions of the ecclesiastical laws, his profession is visiting and counseling the abandoned, the poor, the orphans and the sick and helping the work of the pastor.' Although Hungarian Jews suffered from various forms of discrimination during the Second World War, their lives and physical well-being remained relatively intact until Germany technically occupied the country and took over the power.¹³ The invasion called 'Operation

8 BAUER: Conclusion: The Holocaust in Hungary: Was Rescue Possible?, 195–198.

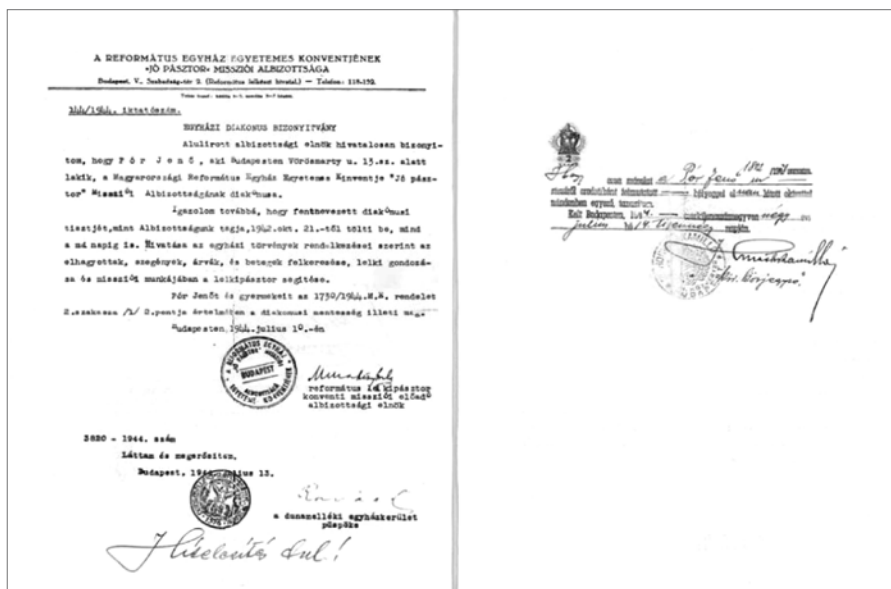
9 COLE: Holocaust City: The Making of a Jewish Ghetto, 63.

10 Jelentés a magyar evangélikus egyházak „Jó Pásztor” Missziós Alapítványának tevékenységéről [Report on the activity of the „Good Shepherd” Missionary Foundation of the Evangelical churches of Hungary] Budapest, 1945. in A Magyarországi Református Egyház Zsinati Levéltára [The Synodical Archives of the Reformed Church of Hungary], A „Jó Pásztor” zsidómisszió iratai [Documents of the „Good Shepherd” Jewish mission], 15. fond, 1. d., 1. cs., 1–9.

11 HAJÓS: „Az Ő nevéért...” [„For His name..."], 60.

12 BERECKZY: A magyar protestantizmus a zsidóüldözés ellen [The Hungarian Protestantism against the Persecution of Jews], 41.

13 BRAHAM: The Uniqueness of the Holocaust in Hungary, 184.



Ecclesiastical Deacon Certificate issued by the GSC¹⁴

Margarethe' was completed on 19th March 1944 and in a couple of days, a pro-German puppet government was established under the prime ministry of Döme Sztójay.¹⁵ The first deportations started in the middle of May and in the course of six to eight weeks, the process of 'dejewification' of the countryside was completed. By the end of June, only the Jews of Budapest and those in labour service remained in the country.

The joint action of church leaders was not materialised but these small rescue bodies managed to find the common ground in a number questions in order to aid a persecuted group of people. Consequently, the achievements of this cooperation were mostly initiated and organised from 'below'. For instance, Éliás visited internment camps with a Catholic monk from Nagytétény and the GSC's pastors provided spiritual support for Jewish members of the Roman Catholic Church or the so-called free churches (Baptist, Methodist, Unitarian) in the ghettos and labour camps.¹⁶ On a higher level, but with the same individual enthusiasm, Catholic bishop Vilmos Apor drafted a letter jointly with Éliás and Cavallier and sent it to Prince-Primate Serédi, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church on 15th June. The message

14 A Jó Pásztor Bizottság által kiállított egyházi diakónusi tanúsítvány [Ecclesiastical Deacon Certificate issued by the Good Shepherd Committee], A Magyarországi Református Egyház Zsinati Levéltára [The Synodical Archives of the Reformed Church of Hungary], A „Jó Pásztor” zsidómisszió iratai [Documents of the „Good Shepherd” Jewish mission], 15. fond.

15 BAUER: Conclusion: The Holocaust in Hungary: Was Rescue Possible?, 193–194.

16 A Jó Pásztor Alapítvány a magyar protestáns egyházak zsidó missziójáért [The Good Shepherd Foundation for Jewish Mission of the Protestant Churches of Hungary], A Magyarországi Református Egyház Zsinati Levéltára [The Synodical Archives of the Reformed Church of Hungary], A „Jó Pásztor” zsidómisszió iratai [Documents of the „Good Shepherd” Jewish mission], 15. fond, 1. d., 5. cs., 2.

highlighted that the "The Reformed Church has preceded us and is already about to take a crucial step."¹⁷ Additionally, the committee contributed to the preparation and education of proselytes (recently converted people) and supported Jewish refugees who had fled from anti-Semitic persecutions in Poland and Slovakia. The church periodical called 'Reformed Herald' launched a column to report about the news of the GSC which was an effective way to increase the reputation of the service. Thanks to the great number of donations (1 500 000 pengő¹⁸), the committee managed to purchase 1100 pieces of warm clothes, 1400 pairs of boots, 1200 canvas items, 1350 upper garments, 260 overcoats and 500 rugs for about two thousand people in labour service, as it is stated in the report of the Presidential Board of the committee written in March 1945.¹⁹ Importantly, the Good Shepherd Committee cooperated with another institution in favour of Hungarian Jews before and during the Second World War. The Church of Scotland's Jewish Mission was working for interreligious dialogue, peace and understanding, and was advocating respectful attitude towards the Jews, particularly within the framework of female education for Jewish and Protestant girls. The Reformed Church and personally László Ravasz largely contributed to the maintenance of the mission in the form of regular significant financial assistance. The GSC organised its 'Evangelisation week' for Jews in the building of the Scottish Mission in order to provide spiritual help and a supporting community.²⁰

The role of the GSC was crucial in informing the leaders of the Christian churches and Regent Horthy about Auschwitz. Géza Soós received a copy of the Vrba-Wetzler report,²¹ one of the Auschwitz Protocols from the Slovak resistance movement (via the Hungarian resistance movement). The report described the location, structure, buildings and equipment of the concentration camp, the operation system of the gas chambers and the crematoriums, the method of tattooing the prisoners and reported data about the number and place of origin of the victims.²² Soós gave it to Éliás to translate the document from German to Hungarian, so in the first days of May, the pastor commissioned his co-worker, interpreter and translator Mária Küllői-Rohrer Lászlóné, née Székely with this task. Mária worked for Éliás at the GSC, interpreted at conferences of the delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross to Hungary and later for Gábor Sztehló as well, when the Lutheran pastor organised the 'Good Shepherd' children's homes. In addition to translating the German text, she copied the drawings with a ruler, some carbon and tracing papers. She finished the translation in a week and Éliás sent three copies to the three most important church leaders, Roman Catholic Prince-Primate

17 SZENES: Interview with József Éliás, 92.

18 Pengő was the currency of Hungary from 1st January 1927 to 31st July 1946.

19 A „Jó Pásztor” Bizottság elnöki testületének jelentése [Report of the Presidential Board of the „Good Shepherd” Committee], A Magyarországi Református Egyház Zsinati Levéltára [The Synodical Archives of the Reformed Church of Hungary], A „Jó Pásztor” zsidómisszió iratai [Documents of the „Good Shepherd” Jewish mission], 15. fond, 1. d., 1. cs., 5.

20 KOVÁCS: „Ideje van...” [„It is time to...”], 163–164.

21 A 40-page document written about the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in occupied Poland by ex-prisoners Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, who escaped on 10th April 1944.

22 BRAHAM: The Politics of Genocide, 709–710.

Jusztinián Serédi, Reformed bishop Dr László Ravasz, the ministerial president of the Universal Convent and Lutheran bishop Dr Sándor Raffay. The fourth copy was sent to architect Ottó Komoly, one of the leaders of the Hungarian Zionists, and he started to multiply the report. The addressee of the fifth copy was Countess Ilona Edelsheim Gyulai, the widow of István Horthy and the daughter-in-law of the Regent. The countess, often referred to as 'little Mrs. Regent', believed that her husband's death in a plane crash in 1942 had been a German conspiracy, and therefore, later became affiliated with the resistance movement. She received the report from a member of her private circle of intellectuals, Sándor Török, the vice-president of the Association of Christian Jews.²³ In her memoir, the countess stated that the report became one of the main reasons for Horthy to decide to stop the deportations on 6th July, along with the protests that had arrived in the course of the previous weeks from US President Roosevelt, Gustaf V of Sweden and most importantly, Pope Pius XII.²⁴ The aftermath of the disclosure of the Vrba-Wetzler report and the widespread international protest against the Hungarian deportations played a dominant part in the fact that between the middle of July and 15th October,²⁵ the transports of Jews from Hungary were suspended.

In conclusion, the Good Shepherd Committee was the most effective religious rescue organisation for Jews in wartime Hungary. Nonetheless, it gained its success mainly from the committed, industrious and persistent endeavours of a number of righteous individuals, who dedicated their time, energy and resources to the accomplishment of Christian teachings. The role of József Éliás as the leader of the rescue work and the dissemination of the Auschwitz report were crucial in the success of the committee. The 'Good Shepherd' mission found and took care of the most vulnerable group of the persecuted, notably poor widows, orphans, physically and mentally tormented internees and labourers.

23 SZENES: Interview with József Éliás, 54.

24 OCSOVAI: Gróf Edelsheim Gyulai Ilona Horthy István kormányzóhelyettes özvegye [Countess Ilona Edelsheim Gyulai Widow of Deputy Regent István Horthy], 262–267.

25 The pro-Nazi Arrow Cross Party led by Ferenc Szálasi seized power of Hungary on 15th October 1944.



Reformed pastor József Éliás (1914–1995),
secretary of the Good Shepherd Committee/International Hebrew Christian
Alliance Award in 1948/

(Source: Ki kicsoda? A holokauszt Magyarországon
[Who is who? The Holocaust in Hungary],
[http://www.holokausztmagyarorszag.hu/index.
php?section=1&type=portrait](http://www.holokausztmagyarorszag.hu/index.php?section=1&type=portrait), Accessed: 20 April 2019)



László Ravasz (1882–1975),
bishop of the Reformed Church in Hungary and ministerial president
of its Universal Convent and Synod

(Source: Ki kicsoda? A holokauszt Magyarországon [Who is who?
The Holocaust in Hungary], [http://www.holokausztmagyarorszag.hu/
index.php?section=1&type=portrait](http://www.holokausztmagyarorszag.hu/index.php?section=1&type=portrait), Accessed: 20 April 2019)

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