

Discovering Europe's non-Jews who kept the faith

Although neither Jewish nor Christian, the Szekely Sabbatarians honored the Sabbath and kept many Jewish rituals, with their activities centered around the village of Bozodujfalu in Transylvania. The Jewish world had its doubts about them, but the Nazis didn't.

By [Shay Fogelman](#)

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Margot Ishtavenfi turned 80 this summer. She is lucid, articulate and brimming with energy and joie de vivre. She and her husband live in a small house with a red-tile roof opposite the Catholic church in the Transylvanian village of Criseni. In the backyard, which is enclosed by a faded wooden fence, they cultivate a small vegetable patch and raise a few chickens. At the end of spring, when night falls and the temperature plummets to close to freezing, they heat the house with a wood stove. They do not have a television set. The Internet and cellular phones have not yet reached the village, which is connected to the main highway only by a bad road of 20 kilometers - a distance measured in local terms as "an hour and a half's ride in a horse-drawn cart."

Meeting with an Israeli journalist was a moving experience for Margot Ishtavenfi. At the start of the interview, she said she remembered nothing from her early childhood. Throughout the evening, she never stopped offering slices of bread covered with black plum jam she had made from the fruit of one of the big trees in her garden, while constantly refilling the glass of red Romanian wine and apologizing endlessly for the simplicity of her home and for her own lost beauty. She spoke a great deal, passionately and rapidly. She had a story to tell. "But when it comes to my early childhood I just don't remember anything," she reiterated time and again, referring in particular to the period before she and her family were thrown into a ghetto.

That is a day she remembers vividly, just as she can recall the day they were herded into cattle cars and the moment when the priest Istvan Raduly arrived on his bicycle and took them off the train, after showing the Gestapo troops papers proving they were Christians. A few members of her family and an even smaller number of Jews from her native village got off the train with her. All the others were taken to Auschwitz and, as far as is known, were murdered as soon as they arrived at the death camp.

But everything before that event is "a black hole of forgetting," she says. Then, after almost an hour of conversation (she spoke Hungarian, the village priest translated), she suddenly fell silent. She wrinkled her brow and looked as though trying to extract something from her memory. A few seconds later she pulled the wool kerchief on her head tighter and started to mumble in a barely audible voice, "Aleph, bet, gimel..." The first letters of the Hebrew alphabet were uttered hesitantly, in a whisper, but her voice grew stronger as she progressed: "Chet, tet, yud I remember," she said in Hungarian, and smiled. Then she wrinkled her brow again and continued slowly, "Kaf, lamed, mem, nun..." emphasizing each letter, nodding her head from side to side as though praying in tune with the rhythm of the letters.

As a child, Margot learned the Hebrew alphabet, along with the Jewish prayers and holiday customs, in the synagogue of the Sabbatarians, the Shabbat-keepers, in the village of Bozodujfalu. These days she terms herself a "reform Christian" and, apart from brief memory flashes, has no recollection of her Jewish roots. Nor is she in touch with relatives who live in Israel or with the descendants of the community and the village in which she was raised.

The remnants of Bozodujfalu lie only a few kilometers from her home, but she says she hasn't visited the place for years and tries to avoid passing too close to the site. "It grieves me to see what is left," she says, placing the palm of one hand on her chest. The priest has a hard time deciding whether she is saying that this situation "wrings" or "wrenches" her heart. Finally he tries to illustrate with his hands; in

pantomime, the two gestures are indistinguishable. In 1989, the authorities flooded the valley in which the village of Bozodujfalu is located, by direct order of the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaucescu.

According to contemporary newspaper accounts, the deliberate flooding - accompanied by the building of a dam - was part of a plan to prevent the ravages caused by the winter rains every year. However, the descendants of Bozodujfalu and the inhabitants of the neighboring village insist this was just an excuse, and that the real reason for the submersion of the village was never stated.

The villagers went to court, sabotaged heavy machinery that was brought in to build the dam and even staged a small demonstration, which was suppressed by the Romanian police. Nothing helped. A week before Ceaucescu was executed in December 1989, the valley was flooded and the village disappeared under the water. The post-revolution government canceled plans to build additional dams in the area, thus sparing dozens of threatened villages. Only Bozodujfalu sank beneath the waves, its inhabitants scattered. A few settled in neighboring villages or in bland government housing projects. Many left Transylvania for other countries, including some who moved to Israel.

Now only two old houses, which were built on the slope of a hill, remain. Even they almost abut the water. Three more small structures have been built next to them in the past few years, home to a few Roma families whose members have their roots in the village. The wall of one church and the tottering bell tower of another - both slowly crumbling - thrust out of the artificial lake. On the other side of the lake lie the sad stumps of a drowned pine forest, now rotting. A few headstones from the village's Jewish cemetery are visible nearby. The cemetery is in a disgraceful state. Most of the headstones lie askew and are covered with dense vegetation. The site is now used by fishermen, who come to the lake every weekend, mostly to dump garbage and relieve themselves. Jewish organizations that document and preserve the remnants of the communities in Europe ignore the village. Their reports usually note that the cemetery was flooded and no longer exists.

Fertile ground

But it is not only the streets and homes of Bozodujfalu that were covered by the waters of the artificial lake; the heritage and memory of the last Sabbatarian community of Transylvania also drowned here. It was a community with a distinctive centuries-long tradition which survived despite strictures and prohibitions, was rejected and assimilated by religions and branches of religions and was almost decimated in the Second World War, before disappearing into oblivion when the village was flooded. Margot Ishtavenfi is one of the last surviving remnants of that community.

The Sabbatarian movement in Transylvania was founded at the end of the 16th century amid the jolt delivered to Christendom by the Reformation. According to most historians, Transylvania's location as an independent buffer zone, a no-man's-land straddling the Ottoman, Polish and Austrian empires, gave rise to religious diversity and tolerance unknown anywhere else in Europe at the time. This was fertile ground for the emergence of a broad variety of ideas, movements and religious sects. Some of them died out or were assimilated, their memory existing only in history books. Others are, to this day, considered dominant in the region.

This was probably the only environment in which the unique accident of history that engendered the Sabbatarian movement could have occurred. Its founder is generally thought to be Andras Eossy, an educated nobleman and landowner from the Szekely nation, an ancient people whose origins are the subject of dispute. First testimonies of their settlement in Transylvania exist only from the beginning of the 10th century, though recent DNA-based studies suggest they may be the forebears of the Hungarian nation. Like many aristocrats from the Szekely people, Andras Eossy converted to the Unitarian Church. This was in 1567, in the wake of the conversion of the former king of Hungary, John II Sigismund Zapolya. Underlying the Unitarian creed is the belief in the unity of God.

According to Szekely tradition, Andras Eossy lost his wife a few years after adopting Unitarianism and his three sons died of illness. He fell into a deep depression and sought solace in the holy writings of the Jews. The Jewish Scriptures were regularly read at the time by the clergy and the educated class, who also learned Hebrew and ancient Semitic languages in order to be able to interpret the writings with the greatest possible fidelity to their original meaning.

Eossy's research into the early sacred texts, combined with his Unitarian approach, led him into the depths of the Jewish religion. At first he adopted the Ten Commandments, with an emphasis on the fourth commandment: to observe the Sabbath. Afterward, he adopted more of the Old Testament commandments and late in life he rejected the New Testament outright.

Eossy disseminated the principles of the new faith he had adopted among his courtiers. They were soon joined by dozens of peasants who farmed his lands. The movement's major growth occurred in the period of his successor, Simon Pechi, who was his adopted son and close adviser. Pechi is described in Hungarian history books as a statesman, poet and caustic thinker who was fluent in 12 languages. As a young man, he was sent by his patron on long journeys to the Middle East and North Africa in search of ancient holy manuscripts. He visited Jerusalem, Constantinople and Cairo and met members of Jewish communities. After returning to Transylvania, he translated the movement's first prayer books from Hebrew to Hungarian and distributed them via envoys to dozens of congregations and villages.

The Szekely Sabbatarians of the early 17th century can by no means be described as Jews. They did not make use of ritual purification baths and did not practice circumcision. However, they cannot be considered Christians, either. They did not baptize their children and did not believe in the New Testament. They fused the two religions and practiced religious rituals that were unique to them. Within a few years, the number of Sabbatarians across Transylvania soared. Historians are divided about the exact number, but the minimal figure that is agreed upon is 20,000 in the 1630s.

According to statistics compiled by the different churches in Transylvania at the time, Sabbatarian congregations sprang up in more than 40 villages. The Hungarian names of some of the villages still contain variations on the word "Shabbat." In 1602, Bishop Demitrius Napragy noted that the Sabbatarians were the third-largest religious sect in Transylvania. The heads of the large churches looked askance at the rapid growth of the Shabbat-keepers.

Following pressure from several church leaders, Pechi was imprisoned by the authorities for four years. However, when he was freed he was more ardent than ever about the new movement. He became a renowned scholar of Jewish holy writings, took up kabbalah and studied the secrets of numerology and was an expert in the writings of Shlomo Ibn Gvirol, the poet and philosopher, and Maimonides' "Guide for the Perplexed." In some of his works he maintained that there are common lines of destiny in the history of the Jewish and Hungarian peoples.

In 1639, the Sabbatarian movement was outlawed. Its adherents were threatened with death if they didn't convert back to one of the traditional Christian denominations. A thousand people, including the movement's leaders, were imprisoned, their homes and property confiscated. The movement's houses of prayer were demolished. Pechi's translations of holy texts were banned and in some cases were burned publicly.

Pechi's fate is not known. According to several sources, he died destitute and alone in Transylvania. In other traditions, he and a group of followers are said to have settled in Constantinople, where in time they assimilated into the Ashkenazi community. "There is not one Sabbatarian in the whole country, with the possible exception of those who practice their religion secretly," Bishop Stephan Katona of the Reform Church of Transylvania declared in 1645.

Saved from the fire

Zsuzsanna Toronyi, the director of the Hungarian Jewish Archive in Budapest, has a hard time finding the box in which the prayer books of the Sabbatarian community in Bozodujfalu are preserved. Researchers haven't asked to see the books for years, she explains and, moreover, since the Second World War Transylvania has been part of Romania and the Hungarian archive has very little documentation from the communities of the region.

The archive is located in a side wing of Budapest's Great Synagogue, not far from the house in which Theodor Herzl was born. There is also a souvenir shop on the premises. Even though the site has become one of the city's most popular tourist attractions in the past few years, its valuable archive looks outdated. It has not yet undergone computer scanning or digitization, and the same goes for the database of contents. All this might hamper the search, but when the prayer books are at last found, they can be touched, their worn covers caressed and their pages, written more than 400 years ago, be rifled through.

Toronyi relates that the books were saved from fire long ago. "Smell them, they still have the smell of smoke," she says, as she reverently removes one of them from a box. It's a thick volume. Its leather cover is torn and the pages are stained and faded from years of use and sheer old age. "I have set the Lord always before me," the opening page declares in solemn Hebrew. All the rest is in ancient Hungarian, which even Toronyi has a hard time understanding. Despite the great investment in casting the letters in biblical style, the letter yud is missing at the end of the first word. Nor is that the only mistake. The books were written and copied from each other by hand - so too the mistakes.

According to Toronyi, one of the books in the archive's small collection is considered the earliest of all, probably dating from the end of the 16th century. Restoration has saved it from disintegration. The letters are simple and clean, and there are no illustrations or decorations. Toronyi says this may be the handwriting of Pechi himself. The later books show a greater investment in calligraphy. The titles are stylized under Gothic influence and the first letters of the paragraphs are decorated with flowers and floral motifs. Some of the books contain quotations in Hebrew. The style of the letters resembles the script used in medieval Torah scrolls in Germany. The Sabbatarians' prayer books follow the Sephardic formulation. According to various analyses, Pechi used a prayer book from a Jewish community in Turkey for the translation. In his Hungarian version, the order of the blessings and the words sometimes differs from the original. There are also minor differences in the texts of the prayers. But the general message and the intention are always identical: God is one. And he is the God of the Jews.

Immediately after the imposition of the 1639 decrees, most of the Sabbatarians converted back to one of the conventional streams of Christianity, but only outwardly. Secretly, they continued to uphold their faith and use Pechi's prayer books. To satisfy the authorities, they preferred to be accepted into one of the Protestant churches, if possible one that sanctified Shabbat. They joined Catholic congregations only if there was no other choice, and in church tried to keep their heads bowed and not look at the crucifixes. In general, they avoided taking part in masses and other prayer events, though they always sent one representative from the family so as not to arouse the clerics' suspicions. In short, they behaved like the Marranos - or "secret Jews" - during the Spanish Inquisition. They buried their dead according to Jewish religious law far from the village and outwardly staged a Christian burial, the coffin filled with stones. They celebrated Jewish holidays in caves or other distant places to avoid provoking the neighbors' suspicions. They tried to have their children work in Jewish homes, sometimes without a salary, so that they could learn about the Judaic precepts and their observance. They married other Sabbatarians. In a few cases, they agreed to have their daughters marry Jews, but only on condition that the groom's family observed the Jewish precepts piously.

In this way they were sometimes integrated into the greatest rabbinic dynasties of Transylvania. This fact remains a huge secret in some ultra-Orthodox families down to our time, but is open information on birth certificates and marriage licenses that are deposited in various archives in Hungary. In the wake of the prohibitions, most of the Sabbatarians' community frameworks fell apart. They practiced their religion secretly at home. Only in a few remote and isolated villages did they continue to conduct a covert communal life. The position of rabbi was rotated among the men in a fixed manner; every few weeks a new rabbi was appointed who also served as ritual slaughterer, teacher and bearer of all the related tasks. Only the serving rabbi was allowed to let his beard grow. Thus the men could observe the ban on shaving, at least individually and for a time, without arousing the suspicion of their Christian neighbors.

The authorities and leaders of the various churches did not relent in their persecution of the Sabbatarians. Not without reason were they known as the "Inquisitors of Transylvania." Local tradition is replete with stories about tests to which the clergy put those whom they suspected of heresy. They were said to invite them to Christian homes and offer them pork to eat, or they would forcibly remove them from their homes on Shabbat and make them work in the fields. Those who refused sometimes paid with their lives. In other cases, monks were sent to live in suspects' homes for a few days in order to see whether they were secretly violating the precepts of Christianity.

This unforgiving attitude was even more blatant when compared with the tolerant attitude from which the Jews of Transylvania benefited in this period. Although Jews faced discrimination in employment, taxation and places of residence, the practice of Judaism was not considered a crime and its adherents were never forced to convert. Judaism in Transylvania was considered a tolerated religion: inferior and abhorrent, but not prohibited. The Sabbatarians, in contrast, were perceived as heretics, Christians who had committed the unpardonable sin of taking on themselves the precepts of the Jews. To the local residents, that was far worse than abandoning Christianity.

"After more than 200 years had passed since the death of the man Pechi, the community of the last Szekelys arose once more like a root in a wasteland in the neglected and abandoned Szekely village called Bozodujfalu," the Warsaw-based Hebrew-language paper Hatzfira reported in October 1890. Another Hebrew-language paper, Hamaggid, published in Vienna, wrote, "When freedom of religion was introduced in Hungary and the Israelite religion was authorized by the government, many members of this sect hurried to assume openly the Israelite religion, and old peasants aged 60 and 70 were circumcised with great joy. One of them said that if he had needed to cut his throat in order to enter the fold of the Israelite religion, he would have done so lovingly."

Many Hebrew-language and Hungarian newspapers carried similar descriptions of the revival of the Sabbatarian movement following the emancipation of the Jews in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1867. All of them were amazed at the sudden appearance of Shabbat-keepers in a number of villages in Transylvania and demanded that their rights be upheld. No precise data exists about the scale of the phenomenon, but the press articles mention at least five villages in which remnants of the communities sprang back to life. They were joined by a small number of families from all parts of Hungary, including the capital, Budapest.

Most studies place the total number of believers at between a few hundred and a few thousand. The largest community emerged in Bozodujfalu, a village that lay in an isolated green valley in the heart of a region known as Szekely Land. In 1867, about a quarter of the village's 700 inhabitants declared that they belonged to the Sabbatarian sect. Hungarian newspapers of the time reported that the community's members celebrated for three days the religious freedom they had been granted after centuries of persecution. They took a holiday from work and marched in a procession to the nearby

village, Sangeorgiu de Padure, where they circled around the synagogue of the Orthodox congregation with song and prayer.

However, within a few days, it became apparent that the joy of the Sabbatarians in Bozodujfalu had been premature. The Hungarian Justice Ministry announced that this was a mistaken interpretation of the law and that the emancipation of Hungary's Jews did not apply to them. The movement remained outlawed. But the announcement came too late. It was impossible to ignore the phenomenon. Lengthy and turbulent debates on the subject took place in the Hungarian parliament. The Justice Ministry dispatched delegations to reexamine the movement's legal status. Historians, theologians and scholars made their way to Transylvania to research the history of the Sabbatarians. Hungary's greatest writer at the time, Mor Jokai, visited Bozodujfalu and published a novel ("God is One") whose plot unfolds against the backdrop of the community's life.

The Jewish world was mostly embarrassed by the revival of the Sabbatarian movement. The Jewish leadership was loath to identify itself with the Shabbat-keepers. After all, as the talmudic saying goes, "Converts are as hard for Israel as a scab." Some studies about the Jewish community of Budapest cite a comment that was widespread at the time about the Sabbatarians: "They are indefinable. They are neither Christians nor Jews, neither bird nor rat. Maybe they are a type of bat." A few rabbis went to Transylvania to acquaint themselves with the movement's character. They too found it difficult to decide on the proper attitude to be taken toward it and its adherents.

Rabbi Samuel Kohn, from Budapest, was a leading advocate of forging closer relations with the movement. His 1889 book, "The Shabbat-keepers: History, Belief and Writings," is still considered one of the most important and comprehensive works about the Sabbatarians. The movement's origins, he wrote, lie in "the diligent study of the Holy Scriptures. And in the heart of those who dwell on those Books, a feeling of most sublime respect for the Torah of Moses was born and slowly took root."

Pursuing this theme, he noted, "The history the Sabbatarians have undergone is an eternal sign of the strength and vigor of the religious desire which beats in the hearts of humanity, so much so that one small sect offered its back to the floggers and bore with courage and heroism every form of misery and endured through hardship of hundreds of years. And it did not submit to any tyrant or oppressor who raised a hand to it, to do it harm and wipe its name from under God's skies."

Refusal to convert

Finally, in order to resolve the legal conundrum, the Hungarian minister for religious affairs, Baron Joseph Eotvos, allowed the Sabbatarians of Bozodujfalu to convert to Judaism. A few months later, a mass conversion ceremony was held in the village for 105 members of the community, under the supervision of Orthodox rabbis from Budapest. The men were circumcised, the women entered a mikvah. As far as is known, this was the first collective conversion to Judaism conducted since the Second Temple period. According to stories in the local villages, some of the young men were afraid to be circumcised and fled for a few days into the forests and hills. The community's records also note that five families, totaling 17 souls - including a judge and his older brother - refused to convert as they could find no reason to change the name of God and the ancient prayer books.

The mass conversion had the effect of creating two communities in the village: one Jewish and known thereafter as "Community of converts, Yeshurun congregation, Bozodujfalu"; and the other Sabbatarian. The two groups worshipped in the same synagogue, availed themselves of the services of the same ritual slaughterer and celebrated the same sacred festivals, with minor differences. The other Sabbatarians had to wait two more years to be recognized and granted freedom of worship. They persisted in their refusal to convert and established independent houses of prayer in towns and villages

across Hungary, continuing to use the prayer books translated by Pechi and meticulously observing the Sabbath and the Jewish religious precepts, in some cases more so than the Jews themselves.

An example of this was noted in September 1902, in an article published in the Jerusalem newspaper Havatzelet. According to the article, a soldier from the Sabbatarian sect refused to bear arms on Shabbat, "because in the sect's opinion there is no greater Sabbath desecration than this." The article adds that the soldier insisted "courageously" in clinging to his faith, "and all the warnings of the army's officials and all the torments were to no avail." In the meantime, the "local Jews are waiting eagerly" to see what happens; they want very much to know "whether the army can also force Christians to violate their religion, or only Jews."

The condition of the nascent Sabbatarian communities was shaky. They did not receive economic or spiritual support from the churches or from the Jewish communities. They lacked stable institutions resting on a long tradition. Their children had to attend the state's general schools. And the community assemblies held in the prayer houses no longer united the believers as they had in periods of persecution.

In its first years, the young community of converts in Bozodujfalu also needed economic and spiritual support. Its members were mostly poor and its institutions were not organized. With the aid of donations that were sent from the Reform Judaism community in Budapest in 1874, a mikvah was built, along with a synagogue with 67 seats for men and, in the Orthodox custom, a woman's section with 40 seats.

"They fear God and follow both light and strict precepts precisely," Hamaggid wrote of the Sabbatarians in August 1888. "No razor passes over their beard, nor do they cut their hair; their women cover their heads with a wig and on the day of their wedding they cut off the hair from their head with scissors. The number of families in this community is about 40 and they all gather on holy days and on Shabbat in their synagogue dressed in peasant clothes, with only the cantor dressed in the clothes of the Jews."

The Jewish communities in Hungary continued to support the converts of Bozodujfalu until the beginning of the 20th century. They sent them rabbis and ritual slaughterers, helped renovate community buildings and assisted them in the purchase of sacred books in Hebrew. The community flourished from year to year. Its young generation married Jews from villages in the region and, after a visit, one Hungarian writer noted, "Bozodujfalu is the Jerusalem of the Szekely Jews, with one difference: it was not destroyed."

Andre Rozenczi lives in Sangeorgiu de Padure, the closest village to the ruins of Bozodujfalu. At 76, he is younger than Margot Ishtavenfi and so remembers less vividly the Hebrew letters and the prayers he learned in the synagogue as a child. He too says he is a Christian, but his father, Lajus, was the head of the community of converts in Bozodujfalu for 15 years, until 1944.

The only photographs that perpetuate the community are in the Jewish Archive in Budapest. The identity of the photographer is unknown, but from the information he noted on the backs of the pictures, it can be inferred that he visited Bozodujfalu at the beginning of the 1930s.

Lajus married a convert from the village. They had seven children, of whom Andre was the youngest. At the end of August 1940, Transylvania was annexed to Hungary from Romania. The annexation gladdened the Szekely people, who were always loyal to their Hungarian homeland, language and culture; but the convert community of Bozodujfalu worried that they would be subjected to the same racial laws as the Jews.

Immediately after the annexation, the authorities ordered the demolition of the village synagogue. Lajus Rozenczi, the head of the community, went to Budapest to appeal the decision. He managed to get a

temporary delaying order and began a vigorous correspondence with the Hungarian Justice Ministry. After the conversion to Judaism of the members of the community and the mixed marriages with Jews, their legal status was more complicated than ever. The government appointed Alajos Degre , a senior jurist, to make a decision. He consulted Rabbi Kohn's book, paid several visits to Bozodujfalu and met with Lajus and the community elders. He tried to trace their roots via registrations of birth and marriage, but for months was unable to arrive at a decision.

"Confusion in Hungary," the Tel Aviv-based Davar reported in a front-page story in August 1941. "The Hungarian government is having difficulty in finding a solution to the legal status of the 1,200 non-Jewish Shabbat-keepers who live in Transylvania," the report said. "The members of this sect are of Aryan origin but observe Shabbat and the Jewish dietary laws. As a result, the prohibition on kosher slaughter affects them, too. They are neither Jews nor Christians, and not even the Nuremberg Laws contain any measures for solving this problem."

Finally, on October 3, 1941, the Hungarian justice minister signed an order exempting the descendants of the Sabbatarians in Hungary, including the community of converts in Bozodujfalu, from the anti-Jewish decrees. To benefit from the exemption, the community's members had to prove a certain percentage of Szekely roots in the family lineage. The order drew a distinction between Jews according to religion and Jews according to birth. The date of the conversion was also of importance in this connection.

In Bozodujfalu, 94 members of the convert community were granted exemptions from the "Jew laws." Another 40 villagers who termed themselves Shabbat-keepers but were not circumcised were also exempted. But the Szekely Sabbatarians did more than save themselves: they could not remain indifferent to the persecution of the Jews. Many survivor testimonies from Romania and Hungary mention them as offering food and shelter to Jews on the run. Some testimonies now deposited in Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, describe how they sometimes identified themselves to Jews as Shabbat-keepers and tried to strengthen their spirit by declaring that God would not abandon his chosen people.

The archive of the Hungarian army documents dozens of cases in which Sabbatarians refused to serve in the army or take part in anti-Jewish actions. Many of them were sent to labor camps as punishment. As the war drew to a close, the few who survived the brutal conditions there were force-marched to Dachau and Buchenwald. Apparently, only one of them survived, in Mauthausen concentration camp.

Mark of protest

Another example of the Sabbatarians' sensitivity toward Jews was reported by Davar in December 1942. "All the Romanian newspapers that were received here in the past few days relate that in a Romanian village near Timisoara, 120 peasant families converted to Judaism and accepted the Jewish religion as a mark of protest against the oppression of the Jews in Romania. These Romanian peasants previously belonged to the Sabbatarian sect and have now announced that it is better for them to share in the fate of the persecuted Jews than to stand aside as the blood of the Jewish population is shed. The government of Romania immediately took revenge against these peasants by issuing an order to expel them all from the village and confiscate their fields and all their property. The order was instantly executed. The village's leaders were sent to a concentration camp and the peasants themselves were expelled to Transnistria."

The Nazis completed their conquest of Hungary on March 19, 1944. Throughout the country, Jews were ordered to enter ghettos and wear a yellow patch on their outer clothing. The order also applied to the converts in Bozodujfalu. Seeking to appeal the edict, Lajus Rozenczi showed the Gestapo officers and the Hungarian police the letter of protection he had received just a few years earlier. For a few weeks, the

group remained in the village and demonstratively appeared in public without the patch. But the ancient legal hairsplitting was of no interest to Fernec Koreh, the Hungarian gendarmerie officer who was appointed to deal with the issue. Before the German conquest, Koreh had published vicious anti-Semitic articles in the local press, and now, after consulting with Sturmbannfuhrer Schroder - the SS officer in charge of the region - he gathered forces from the local gendarmerie and raided the village.

"When we got up in the morning, we saw two gendarmes walking around in the yard and examining it," Ilona Rozenczi, Lajus's daughter, recalled about the day in April 1944 on which the fate of the Bozodujfalu community took a cruel twist. "They entered the cowshed; afterward they examined the barn. They did not say a word, but we saw through the window that they were smiling to each other. Father looked grim and suspicious. He knew that something bad was about to happen.

"The next day," she continued, "the gendarmes returned and informed us that it was forbidden for anyone to leave or enter the house. Afterward, from the morning hours, family after family from the community started to arrive in our yard. All told, about 50 people arrived. They carried the few things they had managed to take from the house. The gendarmes housed them in the barn next to the stable and did not let us communicate with them in any way. My grandmother - my father's mother - was also housed in the barn. The family implored the gendarmes, but to no avail. They would not allow her to enter the house."

Margot and her whole family - the Chukomaro family - were also moved to the Rozenczis' yard. "I remember that my father went out to give the cows water in the morning," she related. "While he was gone the gendarmes entered the house by force. Then they brought him in, too, and told us that we were not allowed to leave the house or look out through the windows.

"We waited in the house for a few hours," she continued, "and packed things in bundles, in sheets - a few clothes, prayer books and other necessary items. Around noon, two gendarmes arrived and told us to leave the house. Outside we saw Joshka and Ester Kovacs, who also belonged to the Shabbat-keepers community. They walked ahead of us, and in front of them there was another family. We walked in a convoy. A few Christian residents of the village tried to encourage us and said how sorry they were that we were going. The gendarmes shut them up and told them to close themselves in their houses. They said they would shoot anyone who dared talk to us or they would take them with us. They had no choice - they were silent.

"I remember that on the way my father managed to speak with one of the neighbors and asked him to look after our animals until we came back. The gendarmes threatened to shoot him if he did not stop talking. We were led to the large yard of the Rozenczi family. There we slept for one night. The next morning we were loaded onto carts and taken to the ghetto."

The converts and Sabbatarians from Bozodujfalu soon found themselves in the ghetto in Tirgu Mures. The ghetto was located in an abandoned brick factory on the edge of town. According to the lists the Hungarian gendarmes conveyed to the SS, the population of the ghetto was 7,380, of whom 6,500 were from Tirgu Mures and all the rest were Jews and Sabbatarians from the surrounding villages.

"The ghetto was full when we got there," Margot Ishtavenfi recalls. "Jews were living in the building and there was no place for us. We stayed outside, in the courtyard. But before night fell we made tents from the few blankets and sheets we had managed to take from home. The conditions there were severe." She tells about the tense relations that existed in the ghetto between the Sabbatarians and the Jews. She does not recall details, but the tone of her voice suggests that the Jews were patronizing to them and that they felt discriminated against. Similarly, Prof. Randolph L. Braham, the author of an encyclopedic work about the Holocaust of Hungarian Jewry, notes that the Jews of Tirgu Mures did not

welcome the presence of the Sabbatarians in the ghetto. He also adds, however, that the Sabbatarians, for their part, looked down on the Jews for not being pious enough.

Additional testimony about the complex relations between the two communities exists in the Institute for Holocaust Research at the University of Haifa. The testimony was given orally by Holocaust survivor Sharona Shalom: "When I was brought to the ghetto, I noticed that many Szekely peasants, with their wives and children, were with us. They wore the Szekely clothes, consisting of handwoven textiles, embroidered close-fitting pants and leather boots. A few of them had erected a tent made of sheets and the women were inside it. I became friends with them because I found them interesting. The women's hair was shaved and they wore kerchiefs. A few of the men and all the children had sidelocks. They had biblical names.

"If I dared to say anything about our bitter fate, the women silenced me and said it was God's will and that we must not rebel against the Lord's decree," she continued. "They spent most of the time reading Psalms; they knew the Hebrew letters better than I did. One Friday afternoon I did not see one of the older women in her usual place in front of the tent. A young woman was standing there, polishing her husband's shoes before Shabbat. I asked her where the older woman was and she told me she was inside the tent. I went inside and found her sitting on an embroidered cushion, crying. I asked her why she was crying so bitterly and she replied that the candles had run out and there was nothing with which to consecrate Shabbat. I went to people I knew and managed to collect a few candles, which I took to the tent. She thanked me with tears of joy. Even when I was some way from the tent I could still hear her words of gratitude."

Lajus Rozenczi did not enter the ghetto. After the members of his community were concentrated in the barn, he stole out of the house and rushed to Budapest in the hope of getting the order repealed. When he returned he discovered that the entire community had already been herded into the ghetto. He asked the village's Catholic priest, Istvan Raduly, for help. Istvan consulted his superiors in the Church. They told him not to meddle, for fear he would incite the wrath of the authorities. But Istvan did not let the matter rest. He drew up lists and ramified family trees, consulted Rabbi Kohn's book and came up with a document about the history of the movement. He claimed the members of the convert community were Christians and, with the cooperation of the Unitarian priest, forged baptismal certificates for many of them. During the month of May, Istvan visited the ghetto several times. A few survivors related that he begged them to sign the baptismal certificates and thereby save their lives. Many refused, some because they did not want to leave their relatives behind, and others, it is said, because they chose to share the Jews' fate.

Istvan managed to get a few members of the community out of the ghetto - apparently five families who had previously belonged to the Catholic Church and a small number of Jews. After the war, he related that he had forged documents for some of them even without their authorization or knowledge. One of those rescued by Istvan is Pavel Samuel Kovacs, who is now 84 and lives in Tirgu Mures. He too no longer has any ties with his Jewish past, even though he is a descendant of one of the community's most important families; his grandfather was a leader of the struggle for their conversion to Judaism during the Emancipation.

Kovacs' father and his two brothers were also taken out of the ghetto thanks to Father Istvan. Kovacs relates that his mother was of Jewish descent and therefore the Hungarian gendarmes refused to let her go. Her daughter, Kovacs' sister, remained with her because she refused to part from her mother. During the whole period of their incarceration in the ghetto, Kovacs says, his father tried to rescue them, but failed. Mother and daughter perished in Auschwitz.

"There was an office next to the gate of the brick factory," Margot Ishtavenfi says. "Almost every day we were ordered to report there and listen to the gendarmes read lists. There were also cases, especially when German officers visited, when we were asked about our faith, whether we were Christians or Jews. I remember that I was also asked that question. I said I was a Jew. But I was a girl and I don't think they attached much importance to it.

"I remember transports leaving from the ghetto twice. The ghetto started to empty out of Jews. The more time that passed, the more room there was in the factory building, and a few people who were living in the courtyard were moved inside. I remember that the Stein family, who were our neighbors in Bozodujfalu, were taken in the second transport. There was another woman there from the village. She was pregnant and her daughter was there, too. In the end, they were sent to Auschwitz. I also remember that the Pirushko family, who were Shabbat-keepers and our neighbors, were sent to Auschwitz in the same transport. The wife was named Luba, her husband was Jewish and they had two children. They were all sent and no one came back.

"So, gradually, only Shabbat-keepers were left in the ghetto, or those whose religion was in doubt," she continues. "One day, the gendarmes sent us to clean the place. After we were done they put us on vehicles and on horse-drawn carts and took us to a large building in Tirgu Mures, which had been the Jews' synagogue. By now nothing was left of the things we had with us in the ghetto, and that night we slept on the floor. From there we were taken in the morning to the train station."

The last transport of Jews from the Tirgu Mures ghetto left for Auschwitz at midday on June 8, 1944. Margot and her family were put into the cattle cars in the early morning. Shortly before the train left, Father Istvan arrived at the platform by bicycle. "He had a basket tied on in front that was filled with documents," Ishtavenfi says. "My big sister, Pirushka, described it for me. She was tall and could see out the window of the car. Then two policemen who were marching on the platform passed by next to us. They were probably forbidden to talk to us, but one of them said that we would soon be released. I remember that we were a little skeptical, but we were also very happy."

At the last minute, Istvan was able to get a small number of Jews and Sabbatarians taken off the train. One of them was Andre Rozenczi. "The priest actually clashed with the gendarmes and the German SS soldiers," he recalls. "When they refused to allow us to leave the train station, he stood opposite them, puffed out his chest and said, 'They are just as good Christians as I am. I would rather you shoot me and do not take them.'"

However, their persecution did not end, even after they were taken back to the village. The archive of the Hungarian Justice Ministry contains a few letters received from informers in June 1944. In one, seven villagers wrote that a few of the Sabbatarians who had been brought back to the village from the ghetto were continuing to bury their dead as Jews, practicing kosher slaughter and using Jewish prayer books to worship: "They behave more like Jews than the Jews."

Family secrets

Spring in Transylvania. The fields are plowed and awaiting the summer seeding. The last puddles of mud are drying on the dirt trail that leads to the lake. The storks and the cranes have returned from their winter travels. High on a tall pine tree next to the lake, a mother stork buttresses her nest. Below the nest is a memorial wall for the village of Bozodujfalu. The wall is the only remnant of the house that once stood on this spot. In it is a window frame with broken wooden slats, from which hang dry floral wreaths adorned with Hungarian flags. Flanking the window are two marble plaques that recount the history of the village, in which the members of different religions and sects lived harmoniously for centuries. Below the plaques are a Catholic crucifix, an Orthodox crucifix, a goblet symbolizing the Unitarian Church and a Star of David.

According to the tradition of the Szekely Sabbatarians, the community's young members used to meet on this hill on the first Shabbat of September. Here they would get to know members of the Sabbatarian communities from the neighboring villages and matches would be made. Since the destruction of the village - and of the Sabbatarian community - descendants of the village of Bozodujfalu from all religions and denominations meet here on that same September Saturday. In the gatherings they reminisce and pray in their way for the ascent of the souls of the dead.

A reporter for the Hungarian newspaper Nepszabadsag was present at the gathering last year. He noted that 250 descendants of the village's residents came from all over the world, but added, disappointedly, that for the first time, kaddish was not recited.

The story of the Szekely Shabbat-keepers has provoked considerable interest in Hungary in recent years. A young generation of Hungarians whose parents left Transylvania after it was finally annexed to Romania in 1947 is now looking for its roots. Some of them are discovering, to their great surprise, that they are descendants of the Sabbatarian community. In the past decade, two of them wrote books about the village which received wide coverage in Hungary. Studies on the subject have also been written by offspring of the Unitarian communities in the U.S.

According to estimates, there are a few thousand Israelis who are direct descendants of the Sabbatarians. Most of them are unaware of their roots. Those who know preferred not to be interviewed for this article. Some of them told me that they are Haredi Jews and are fearful that the exposure of their origins might affect their children's prospects to find a good match in the ultra-Orthodox community.

Most of them related that their parents, who immigrated to Israel from the region, kept their origins secret and that they discovered the details about their roots only when they reached adulthood. The relatives of Margot Ishtavenfi, Andre Rozenczi and Pavel Kovacs who live in Israel also declined to be interviewed. When they were told that their aged relations in Transylvania had said angrily that they had not received even a letter or a photograph from them for many years, they promised to renew the ties.

True martyrs - The fate of Sabbatarians in the Second World War

There is no mention of the Bozodujfalu community in Beit Hatfutsot – the Museum of the Jewish People – in Tel Aviv, or in the Safed-based museum devoted to the heritage of Hungarian-speaking Jewry. Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, has no information or testimonies about the community's fate in the Holocaust, apart from a few lines in its book devoted to the Jewish communities of Romania. It states that some of them did not want to accept the exemption certificates that were obtained for them by the community's leaders and that they were sent to Auschwitz together with the rest of the Jews. Most of the works of history and research that mention the Sabbatarians maintain that no more than 100 of them perished. However, the historian Yitzhak Peri said that the number was far higher.

Peri researched the history of Hungarian Jewry and devoted one of his dozens of books to the Sabbatarian community in Transylvania. He knew the community from his childhood in the town of Tirgu Mures and recalled meeting some of its members in the ghetto.

According to Peri, several thousand members of the community were murdered in the Holocaust: "I found a reference to 1,511 of these Jews in an SS cable sent by Eichmann's staff to Himmler. Another German document states that there were 17,500 Jews in the Tirgu Mures ghetto. I checked the lists. Only about 12,000 were really [Jews]. In my estimate, about 5,000 Sabbatarians and maybe more were murdered in the Holocaust."

In the view of Prof. Peri, the disparity between the statistics is due to the fact that “Jewish Orthodoxy has a serious problem with this phenomenon. For hundreds of years, the Sabbatarians intermixed with them, and this is not a fact they like to talk about. On the other hand, Reform Judaism in Hungary also has a problem with this community in the context of the Holocaust. Tens of thousands of them survived after declaring that they were Christians. The result is that in the Jewish world, it is convenient to dismiss the phenomenon and treat it as marginal.”

This data is disputed by Dr. Laszlo Harsanyi, the director of the archive of the Holocaust Museum in Hungary. His estimate is that no more than a few hundred Sabbatarians were murdered in Auschwitz. But he agrees that the phenomenon has not received the attention it deserves in the history books.

“It is customary to treat all the victims of the Holocaust as martyrs,” he explains, “but they were not really martyrs – after all, they had no choice. They were rounded up, transported and murdered, and in those circumstances they had no possibility of altering their fate. The Shabbat-keepers are perhaps the only ones we can treat as true martyrs. They were the only ones who made a collective decision to tie their fate to that of the Jewish people, despite all the dangers this entailed.”

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