

Jews on the Eastern Front

A graphic picture of the terrible suffering endured by Jews in the Hungarian Labor Service who were sent to join the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union

• EFRAIM ZUROFF

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the mass deportations of Hungarian Jewry to Auschwitz and the mass murder of most of the community, one of Europe's largest. Among the many events and conferences held this year to mark the tragedy is the publication of this book by Holocaust historian Robert Rozett, director of the Yad Vashem Libraries and one of the leading experts on the Holocaust in Hungary. While the deportations and mass annihilation of Hungarian Jewry in the spring and summer of 1944 have been well-researched and analyzed in depth, the subject of this book is hardly known outside of Hungary, despite its historical importance.

The story of the Hungarian Labor Service (HLS) began on March 11, 1939, with the passage of Law No. 11 Article 230, which mandated the drafting for public labor of all civilians of military age who were unfit for regular army service. In principle, the law was directed at those whom the regime considered "unreliable": members of minorities, socialists, communists and anyone perceived to be an enemy of the right-wing regime then in power. Those drafted were put to work doing all sorts of manual labor, initially in Hungary, but later many of them were sent to the Nazi-occupied areas of the Soviet Union in which the Hungarian Army operated. It is the fate of the Jews among those sent to the battle zones, where the conditions were the most dangerous, and in many cases ultimately proved fatal, which is the main focus of the book.

Dr. Rozett makes clear that while the HLS was not established to facilitate the murder of Jews, but rather to separate them from the Hungarian nation, by singling out the Jews who served in its ranks for officially sanctioned discrimination within the military framework the Hungarian regime facilitated their "dehumanization, inhumanity, and even outright murder."

About 6,000 Jewish HLS men were among the approximately 90,000 Hungarian troops initially sent to join the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, but that number grew significantly during 1942, when Hitler requested additional Hungarian soldiers to assist the

Wehrmacht. By September of that year, the number of Jewish men serving on the Eastern Front grew to somewhere between "well over 40,000" to "about 50,000," which was approximately half the number of the Jews drafted into the HLS.

The dominant experience of these men can be summarized in Rozett's words as "suffering and death," due to three key factors: the brutality of war and the deep anti-Semitism of many of their Hungarian commanders; the extreme weather conditions, especially in winter in the occupied areas of the Soviet Union; and the horrible living conditions they were forced to endure, including inadequate housing, intolerable hygienic conditions, extreme hunger and rampant disease, all while being forced to perform backbreaking labor which at times was extremely dangerous. In that respect, the laying and clearing of minefields without any appropriate equipment or even minimal training, during which many of those forced to perform these duties were killed or severely maimed, became a paradigm for the terrible mistreatment of the Jewish HLS men, approximately 80 percent of whom perished in Nazi-occupied Soviet territory, and which in Rozett's opinion is among the most convincing arguments for regarding the HLS system on the Eastern Front "as part and parcel of the Holocaust."

Making extensive use of personal testimonies of the relatively few survivors, Rozett is able to provide a very graphic picture of the terrible suffering endured by the HLS Jews on the Eastern Front, including the mass murder of 600 to 800 men who were locked in a barn in Dorozhische, a kolkhoz in northern Ukraine, east of Sarny, which was purposely set on fire, and was surrounded by Hungarian soldiers who shot anyone who tried to escape. In this regard, Rozett also correctly emphasizes the deeply-ingrained anti-Semitic hatred of many of the Hungarian commanders quoting, for example, first lieutenant Gyula Gesco, who told the Jewish HLS men under his command that "I hate you... I have always hated you... I'm proud of it," and then proceeded to claim that the reason he had been assigned to such a unit was that his superiors "know that I hate you... [and] I can only tell you that you will die in my hands you dirty, stinky Jews..."

Needless to say, such attitudes were



SOLDIERS PULL a staff car through the heavy mud of the Russian roads, November 1941 (German Federal Archives)

particularly painful for those more acculturated Jews serving in the HLS, who until the war had so revered their native country, as Rozett explains in his extensive introduction, which provides a good summary of the history of the Hungarian Jewish community and the factors that spawned not only the HLS, but also the expulsion in the summer of 1941 of about 18,000 foreign Jews to Ukraine, where almost all of them were murdered; the mass murders in January 1942 in and around Novi Sad; the mass deportations to Auschwitz; and the deportations and murders carried out by the Arrow Cross regime in the fall and winter of 1944-1945.

A meticulous historian, Rozett is careful to note that despite the horrible results of HLS service for most of the Jews who served on the Eastern Front, the labor battalions actually briefly became an instrument of rescue during the mass deportations to Auschwitz, when Jews were purposely drafted to spare them from deportation to that death camp, a step taken under the influence of senior Hungarian officials who opposed the Final Solution. Unfortunately, that changed in the final months of the war, when the ascension to power of an Arrow Cross regime once again turned the HLS into an instrument of mass murder. In that respect, Rozett writes convincingly of the arbitrariness of the fates of those who served in the HLS, whose survival very often was determined by chance factors which could not be predicted with any degree of certainty.

Dr. Rozett has earned the gratitude of the English-reading public by at long last providing a comprehensive chronicle of the history of the HLS Jews who served on the Eastern Front and their fate during World War II, which he correctly places squarely in the parameters of the larger tragedy of the Holocaust. ■

The writer is the chief Nazi-hunter of the Simon Wiesenthal Center and the director of its Israel Office. His most recent book, Operation Last Chance; One Man's Quest to Bring Nazi Criminals to Justice (Macmillan), deals extensively with his discovery of several Hungarian Nazi war criminals and his efforts to bring them to justice in Hungary. His website is www.operationlastchance.org and he can be followed on Facebook and Twitter @EZuroff

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