Cataloging and Digitization of the Archives of the Szeged (Hungary) Jewish Community: A Central European Case Study

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Can you see this knitting old lady? She happened to be gr-gr grandmother who - On a summer day in 1944, in Szeged, Southern Hungary when she was 66 years old, almost exactly 75 years ago was put on a train together with her daughter. She was one of the 4000 Jews the Hungarian city Szeged had back then. Today through her story, I would like to present you what kind of Holocaust related documents are available at the Szeged Jewish community to find out what exactly happened to my gr-gr-grandmother.
“This is where Szeged is located, 1 ½ hours south of Budapest.”
Szeged is the third largest city in Hungary.
I would like to show you a few pictures of the Szeged Synagogue which is one of the largest synagogues in the world. It was renovated recently from the outside and is still a memory of the culturally rich Jewish population of Szeged that existed before the Holocaust.

The turn of the 19th-20th century meant a revival for Szeged, with industrialization and the trade. This era was the most beautiful time of the life of the Jews in Szeged, attracting even those arriving from afar. The Jewish population (8,500 people) of Szeged was vibrant, liberal, and contributed a great deal to Hungary’s cultural and financial life.
Outline of the Presentation

1) Szeged Digitization Project
2) Brief overview of the Hungarian/Szeged Holocaust.
3) Records from the Holocaust in Szeged
4) Novel techniques for identification of the victims
5) Records on/by survivors
6) A Central-European case study
How do we know what exactly happened in Szeged? We have many sources:

1) Cataloging, indexing and digitizing all of the documents of the Szeged Jewish Community (82 linear feet)
2) Documents related to Holocaust in Szeged (13 linear feet)
3) Deportation list of Szeged (4,000 names, 1944).
4) Lists of 1,700 survivors
5) Requests from survivors
These are pictures of our archive - this is what it looked like before we started our cataloging/indexing/digitization work
This is what it looks like now
I want to tell you briefly about the history of the Hungarian Holocaust. Hungary had the largest Jewish population left in Europe in 1944. Naively, the Hungarian Jews thought their fate would be different and better than what happened in nearby Poland, Germany. By now we all know that they were wrong and sadly mistaken.

Hungarian Holocaust

1) In 3 months from May-July, 1944, ca. 440,000 Hungarian Jews were deported to their deaths at Auschwitz.

2) With few exceptions, no records were kept on these people. Most of them were murdered within 24 hours of arrival.

3) Only the deportation lists provided us with a record (if survived).
There were three trains....
I am convinced that my gr-gr-grandmother Terézia got on the third train since she was the widow of the former principal of the Jewish elementary school. With the help of written and oral testimonies we know that employees of the community were put on the third train. Because of the fact that 1,5 trains ended up in Strasshof - much more survivors than elsewhere.
“This is what we call the deportation list. An international team worked on the list to have all 92 pages transcribed. The list is typed and has names, DOB, birth city, profession, address, and a few comments for each person (4,000).” As I said, we call it dep. List but it was written before the ghettoization. How do we know? - death register
“There were roughly 4000 names on our list. Interestingly, nearly 60% or a majority were women, and only roughly 40% were male (men by then were interned or in forced labour). Strikingly, there are very few children on our list.
1) As with most such Holocaust projects, we have very little information on these victims.
2) Development/Adapting new research techniques to advance the research.
3) Using the internet, historical, and genealogical tools to expand our data.
I will give you a case example how more information can be found. In many cases the deportation list is the only document with someone’s name so it is crucial to get as much information as possible. We have 700 married women on the deportation list, nearly 1/3 have no real names, only matrimonial ones. We had to develop new tools to give these women their identities back. On our deportation list, we have “Lajosné Kurzweil.” “Mrs. Lajos Kurzweil,” age 32, born in Szeged. Who is she? What was her maiden name?
“This is her marriage license from 1940, which we found easily through online genealogy sites. You can see her date of birth, her parents’ names, the same for her husband. Mrs. Lajos Kurzweil is actually Aranka Burger. This way we can give her back her identity. This way we integrated historical and genealogical data from many sites like Yad Vashem, Family Search, MACSE, Geni, Ancestry.com, and the internet. “We actually don’t know what happened to this woman. She is in the 95% of people on our deportation list who are NOT in the Yad Vashem database. Her fate is unknown.
I would like to show you how the synagogue looked during World War II. Everything that was taken away from the Szeged Jews was stored here. The Szeged Jewish Community was relatively fortunate in this regard because the city was liberated already in October 1944 and the city commander after this was a Russian Jew who he did not allow the synagogue to be destroyed or plundered.
After the liberation of the concentration camps, survivors of the Shoah often feared to return to their homes, due to the vast sentimental and material loss that they and their families had suffered, but also because of the trauma. Antisemitism persisted in many parts of the continent. After the “liberation”, only a third of the deportees returned to Szeged.

By now… The stories of the deportees and the returnees have to be reconstructed...
The second batch of documents that we hold and that I would like to talk about in detail, are the requests of the returnees. These are the most heart wrenching batch of documents of the archive. As I said before, fates, stories, information is completely missing from this era. In a time when soon there will be no more survivors, every little piece of paper has to be used if it helps us understand the history of the Holocaust. We have three boxes of these requests, altogether ca. 4000 pieces. These will need a detailed analysis in the future.
The first one I would like to show you is that of my gr-gr-grandmother. Based on this we know that she returned to Szeged and she was in Szeged 1945 August. We also know that she took a nightstand lamp with herself to the ghetto and she was able to take it back. This is the only record I found on her, I have no idea what happened to all her other belongings.
With the help of these, we can get a picture of what is needed to rebuild life from
scratches after the Holocaust. I would like to translate you a few of these. Here Mrs.
László Engel (we have no idea what her own name is), ex-deportee asks her own
sewing machine back either to create herself clothes or to make a living.
Here the rebbetzin asks for a bunch of rags, snow shoes and tights
Mrs. Henrik Fischer asking her lamps back
August, 1945

Here a survivor asks back her lamps and includes drawings
Another saddening request: the survivor heard that those who need can get knitting yarns. She/He (cannot read out the signature) heard that the Jewish community is distributing yarn among the needy and since she has no clothes at all, so asks for yarn so that she can prepare warm tights, gloves and other clothes.
Other people needed surprising items: Éva was a seamstress who returned from Auschwitz 3 months ago (1945 September), she does not have the means to buy things she needed for her work: a socket, switch, electric wire and a banana - which refers to a banana plug.
Finally the last request: József Fényes, university student of chemistry asks the J community of Szeged to give him a white doctor apron. His parents “disappeared in deportation” (Written 09.1945 - no news yet - either they have not returned yet or they were killed and he was not informed yet), he is all alone, no salary, one set of clothes - which have to be protected. He also asks for an umbrella and a pullover.
We have several further tasks. Our further tasks are:

- Processing all documents of the Szeged Jewish Archives
- Comparing and synchronizing several databases
  - Survivor’s list
  - Marriage records
  - Yad Vashem records
  - Person-related records
- Co-operation with Jewishgen to make our documents widely accessible
- Building family trees
(My) further plans - research

- Database of deported children
- Database of all deported people (incl. Serbia - 10500 people)
- “Rebuilding life from scratch” - processing all requests - what is needed to rebuild a life
- Connecting all documents - an indexed database/family tree
Please give me one minute to quetch: the title of my presentation says “a Central European Case study” What does this mean?
First there are a few positive things: we have an almost complete Jewish archive. With the help of funding, with cheap fore and the establishment of workplaces we can fulfill this project. We can also build a community.
But...
A total lack of finance, no grants, no foundations, the maximum amount that could be applied from the Jewish Congregation of Hungary is about 2000 USD. No private persons to donate. No Szeged Jews to contribute. Lack of understanding of the importance of our project, even by the president of the community and the board. Szeged in opposition. Straight after Holocaust - communism - those Jews who were not killed, have ceased to live as Jewish.
I do not want to shift the focus of my presentation but I want to highlight how I see our project is a C. E. case study
And YET - plenty more big projects
I would like to find means to secure the restoration of the synagogue plans by Lipót Baumhorn
Restoration: 50000 USD, exhibition: 30000 USD
100000 USD
My gr-grandparents were married under one of these
Rabbi Immánuel Löw's (1854-1944) library

- Recollecting the lost library of Chief Rabbi Immánuel Löw (1854-1944) (? USD)
- At least digitally
- Scattered all over the world
- He wrote 600 articles (1879-1944)
- He had 6600 books
Summing up: Our responsibility as historians and archivist dealing with the Holocaust is increasing as there are less and less survivors. Research on the Holocaust cannot be done by relying simply on long lists of names and big data in general. There is always a human aspect to the matter in which every single story counts. Our project, therefore, is aimed at combining the available big data with personal testimonies. In view of the large quantities of data that can be evaluated and processed by means of digital networking, we must be careful not to lose sight of the fact that even just a little piece of paper might be the last trace a person left behind. What is more, there are a lot of gaps that will never be filled.
Thanks a lot for your attention!

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