

Debrecen,

Third largest city in Hungary, located in the northeastern part of the country on the Nagy Alföld (Great Plain), near the present-day Romanian border. Debrecen is a major center of Hungarian Calvinism. In 1941, 9,142 Jews lived there, comprising 7.3 percent of the population. An officially recognized Jewish community existed in the city from the mid-nineteenth century.

Like the other Jews of Hungary, the citizens of Debrecen were greatly affected by the first and second Hungarian anti-Jewish laws (1938 and 1939), which severely limited Jewish participation in economic life. Many Debrecen Jews became destitute. One reaction of the community was to turn inward, and as a consequence, Jews gravitated toward Zionism or sought solace in exploring their Jewish heritage more deeply.

Jewish men from Debrecen were drafted into the Munkaszolgálat (Labor Service System) shortly after its creation in the summer of 1939. By 1941 the rate of conscription had increased significantly, and most of the area's Jews were sent to the Ukraine, from which few returned. Gen. Karoly Beregffy, known to be particularly anti-semitic, was the head of the Debrecen area draft board for the labor units and commander of the sixth labor camp, located near the city in the town of Hajduboszormeny. In the fall of 1944, he served as a minister in Ferenc Szalasi's Arrow Cross Party regime, for which he was hanged in 1945.

During the period of German occupation, the Jews of Debrecen, like those of Szeged, were assigned to the fourth anti-Jewish operation zone (for the purpose of deportation, Hungary had been divided into six zones). For the city's Jews, the road from occupation to extermination was short and direct. German soldiers entered Debrecen on March 20, 1944. They promptly ordered the disbanding of the Jewish community and forced it to reorganize as a Zsidó Tanács (Jewish Council), under the leadership of Rabbi Pal (Meir) Weisz. A Jewish police force was set up under a former army captain, Bela

Lusztbaum. On the last day of March a decree called for Jews to wear the Jewish badge. Early in April, Jewish automobiles were confiscated and Jewish telephones disconnected. On April 8 (during Passover), a handful of Jewish leaders were taken hostage by the authorities and imprisoned at nearby Hajduszentgyorgy. Eventually, three hundred Jewish notables from the Debrecen area were confined there. On April 21, Jewish stores were forcibly closed. The following week witnessed a public burning of books considered "Jewish" or too liberal for the Hungarian right wing; it was directed by the anti-semitic newspaper editor Mihaly Kalosvari Borsca.

On April 28, 1944, the order to set up a ghetto was issued by the mayor, Sandor Kolcsey. Ironically, Kolcsey and the city secretary, Jozsef Zold, voiced their opposition to erecting a ghetto; this led to their ousting by Lajos Bessenyei, the Debrecen area chief magistrate. Lajos Csoka became the new mayor. On May 9, the boundaries of the ghetto, which was to be established in the western side of the city, were set. It had two parts, known as the "large" and the "small" ghetto, which were divided by Hatvan Street. The Jews of the city were forced to build the wall of the Debrecen ghetto, which stood 8.9 feet (2.7 m) high. On May 15 the ghetto was declared completed. A handful of Jews refused to enter it and hid in bunkers until the Soviet army arrived that fall. Local Hungarian police guarded the ghetto, whereas the Jewish police were charged with keeping order within the walls and were ordered to hand over those Jews whom the authorities wished to interrogate. Each Jew was allocated 43 square feet (4 sq m) of space, which meant that most rooms contained at least one entire family and often more. On June 7, all traffic in and out of the ghetto was ended, including that of Jews leaving the ghetto for work.

Two weeks later, on June 21, 1944, Hungarian gendarmes entered the ghetto and removed the Jews to the nearby Serly brickyards. There they joined the Jews from the neighboring communities of Balmazujvaros, Hajduboszormeny, Hajdudorog, Hajduhadhaz, Hajdunanas, Hajdusamson, Hajduszoboszlo, Teglás, and Vamospercs--altogether, 13,084 Jews. At the brickyards, the Jews

were stripped of their remaining valuables. A small group was sent to Hajduszentgyorgy, from where the Jews were deported beginning on June 26. The first two trains, with 6,841 relatively fortunate passengers, were sent to Strasshof, in Austria, where the deportees were dispersed and put to work in agricultural and other enterprises for Organisation Todt. Most of the other Jews from Debrecen were deported to Auschwitz, where they arrived on July 3. About half of the Debrecen contingent of the Strasshof group survived the war. Among those killed in the Strasshof group were 233 Debrecen Jews, supposedly on their way to Theresienstadt; they were shot by SS men in Bratislava in May 1945.

During the period of ghettoization and deportation, news of the so-called Kasztner train (see Kasztner, Rezső) reached Debrecen via messengers from the Zionist youth movement who posed as gentiles. They told the leader of the Orthodox community, Shlomo Strasser, that anyone from Debrecen could be included in the designated quota for the city. During the deportations, ten families, including those of Rabbi Weisz, Rabbi Strasser, and Zionist leaders, were taken to the Columbus Street camp in Budapest. Soon thereafter they embarked on the Kasztner train, which eventually brought them to freedom in Switzerland. A handful of Zionist youth activists led by Dr. Adoniyahu Billitzer also escaped from Debrecen. They reached Budapest, where they took part in rescue and defense activities.

Debrecen was taken by the Soviet army on October 20, 1944, and became the administrative center of the antifascist provisional government. Some four thousand Jews from Debrecen survived the war. In 1970, twelve hundred Jews were living there.