Arbeitspapiere des Osteuropa-Instituts
Arbeitsbereich Politik

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A Discovery Report from Archives. The Forgotten Hungarian Jewish Correspondence to Stockholm, Summer 1943.

98/2025

Freie Universität Berlin

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Abstract:
Nearly 2,000 forgotten letters from Hungarian Jews, sent to a Jewish aid organization in Stockholm during the summer of 1943, were uncovered in the Swedish National Archive by Elena Medvedev during her initial research into the personal micro-archive of historian Paul A. Levine. The discovered artefacts sought information about Jewish men conscripted into Hungary's Jewish labor battalions under an increasingly repressive regime. The survival and decades-long neglect of this correspondence is both astonishing and revealing. Now housed for starting scholarly examination at the Osteuropa-Institut at Freie Universität Berlin, the letters will be studied through both quantitative and qualitative methods—initially analyzing socio-demographic variables and narrative content to explore patterns of assumed selective repression. Were intellectuals and cosmopolitan figures especially targeted? What mechanisms allowed these letters to bypass censorship? More than historical documents, the letters supposed to display logic that guided the regime's repressive choices; they challenge us to claim the Holocaust details left in silence.

Keywords:
Hungarian Jews, Holocaust, Jewish Labor Battalions, Paul A. Levine, Stockholm Jewish Aid Committee, Shoah memory.

OSTEUROPA INSTITUT

Arbeitspapier 98/2025

Abteilung Politik am Osteuropa-Institut der Freien Universität Berlin

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Elena Medvedev (2025) A Discovery Report from Archives. The Forgotten Hungarian Jewish Correspondence to Stockholm, Summer 1943. Arbeitspapiere des Osteuropa-Instituts (Abteilung Politik) 98/2025 Freie Universität Berlin 2025.

Impressum

Arbeitspapiere des Osteuropa-Instituts, Freie Universität Berlin
Abteilung Politik

Garystraße 55
14195 Berlin

Redaktion: Alexander Libman
alexander.libman@fu-berlin.de
Lektorat/Layout: Alexander Libman

"Researchers are interested in discovering first-hand information that can shed new light on historical events. Moreover, holdings of smaller grass-roots organizations or private initiatives can complement, refine, and critically scrutinize specific narratives of the past."[1]

Some will try to convince you that there is little to no unresearched chapters in the historiography of Shoah today. To this I say: wait a minute! Do not give up so easy as a passionate researcher, if you are sharp of discovery in the field; but ultimately focus your view at studying micro-archives more carefully, because the unresearched gaps in Holocaust documents still exist.

Around two thousand unexplored Jewish-Hungarian World War II artifacts came to the surface while working on my bachelor's thesis in the Fall of 2021. The unpublished, unstudied, and entirely unknown WW2-remains were spotted within the personal research materials of the Holocaust historian Paul A. Levine. A box with covers surfaced as part of a posthumous effort to preserve and re-evaluate Levine's private micro-archive.[2]

That the correspondence was written at all surprised many. That it survived is astonishing. But should it more surprise, or amaze and encourage that this rare collection of Jewish Hungarian letters was not explored until today?!

The author assume that artifacts have an unexpected window into forgotten dimensions of the Hungarian Holocaust: Hungarian Jewish Labor Battalions. The discovery makes it clear that in the summer of 1943, while the Hungarian repressive regime had already escalated its persecution of the Jews with bureaucratic precision[3], a fragile stream of appeals made its way toward Sweden. Penned in various districts of Budapest and across Hungary, these handwritten or typewritten letters were desperate searches by family members for their loved ones. Marked by restraint, dignity, and unmistakable urgency, they all were addressed to the same Jewish aid organization in Stockholm. Yet, for decades since then, the existence of this correspondence escaped Swedish, Hungarian as well as international historiography. Even leading historians of Hungarian Holocaust Studies—András Kovács and László Karsai—responded with bafflement when informed of the finding. Their surprise speaks to the profound absence this collection fills.

Through Levine's meticulous note-taking and fragmentary references, as well as very helpful hints and discussions with the Holocaust researchers from the US and Sweden[4], the insides of the findings were stated and accessed in the Swedish National Archive. The collection reassembles a correspondence network that stretched from repressed Jewish communities under fascist rule to neutral Sweden. The letters arrived in Stockholm during a period in which Hungary's authoritarian regime maintained a complex alliance with Nazi Germany.[5] It was a state of escalating repression: Jewish men were conscripted into brutal labor service; Jewish communities were increasingly isolated through law and propaganda; and international contact was deeply restricted. Yet somehow, these letters passed through.

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[1] The European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI).

[2] Medvedev, E. (2022). [Bachelor's thesis]

[3] Braham, R. (1994). P. 969-971.

[4] I address my sincere gratitude to Victoria Van Orden Martínez, historian at Lund University, for her generous support and guidance through the archive's labyrinths. My profound thanks go to Pontus Rudberg, historian at Uppsala University, whose expertise was of invaluable assistance at the early stages of my research.

[5] Levine, P.A. (1996).

The questions raised by their existence are as urgent as they are unsettling: How did these appeals escape censorship? Were Hungarian authorities indifferent, fragmented, or even complicit in allowing certain communications? Were Swedish aid channels operating below the radar? And most critically: What type of selective repression might these artifacts suggest in the context of the Hungarian Holocaust? And finally what kind of Sweden's response to the Repressions on Jews in Hungary in summer 1943 these letters suggest?

These are no longer abstract questions. The Jewish Hungarian Letter's Collection 1943, now entrusted for initial scholarly research at *Osteuropa-Institut, Freie Universität Berlin*, offers a unique opportunity to examine these dynamics using a multi-methodological approach of both quantitative and qualitative research design. By framing the letters not only as historical documents, but as social, political, and transnational artifacts, the initial research is positioned to explore what stories lie within their words about the anatomy of a Hungarian repressive wartime regime.

The letters themselves are diverse in tone and content: some are short and extremely formal; others offer a view in the life stories on missing family members; and all documents quietly witness the crime of crimes[6] in general and rather in thousands of details[7]. The letters—each addressed, censored, and containing detailed sender information—include data about the missing individuals, certain variables as names, dates and places of birth, residential addresses, parental names, occupations, military field post numbers, and the last known time and place they were seen alive. Among the named individuals is the renowned mathematician Géza Grünwald.[8] While most of the letters are written in German, a few appear in French. Originating from various regions across Hungary, all are directed to the same destination: the Jewish Aid Committee in Stockholm, Sweden. Collectively, the letters may trace the outlines of a form of selective repression, potentially aimed at intellectuals, civic figures, or members of professions. Who stood a greater chance of being conscripted into the Hungarian Labor Battalions before 1943? And which factors—both in terms of recruitment and survival—most decisively influenced their fate?

A central aspect of the planed research involves systematically categorizing the individuals mentioned as missing in the letters, based on their identifiable data-variables, to trace potential patterns linked to socio-demographic factors that may have played a decisive role in targeting and recruitment. If a systematic rationale underpinned the selection of the listed victims, these letters could provide crucial aspects of its operational logic.[9]

Why do these patterns continue to demand our attention? According to experts, post-Communist antisemitic narratives in Hungary have portrayed Jews as agents of foreign influence, accusing them of advancing "cosmopolitan" interests through international financial and media networks—interests seen as opposed to national sovereignty. This rhetoric, which frames Jews in Hungary as inherently linked to external powers, echoes

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[6] The term has been established since it was coined by Raphael Lemkin in his book "Axis Rule in Occupied Europe" (1944) and enjoys a special status in international law.

[7] The letters contribute to an ongoing debate over the past decades about the "search for nuances in responses to the Holocaust", particularly in the Swedish context. Byström, M. (2013). Cesarani, D., & Levine. (2002).

[8] O'Connor, J. J., & Robertson, E. F. (n.d.).

[9] Grounding the analysis in King's, C. (2012)and Tammes's, P. (2017) theoretical framework affirms the relevance and adaptability of their model to the current inquiries.

earlier patterns of scapegoating and suspicion.[10] The analysis of the Hungarian Jewish letters aims to explore how narratives of perceived disloyalty or foreign ties shaped the regime's repressive logic. It asks additionally whether those who wrote abroad—especially to neutral countries like Sweden—were later more vulnerable and what was their fate. Their cosmopolitan connections may have marked them as suspicious in the eyes of the repressive state.

More broadly, this discovery raises questions about archiving and research: Why have these materials survived and been ignored for so long? While "*On Swedish campuses, growing hostility toward Israel impacts Jewish scholars and students"*, which recently attracts international attention[11], the same cannot be yet said of the letters of Hungarian Jews in the Swedish National Archive. Why did they remain obscure for so long? Even more pressing is the question of why these documents—still forgotten more than eighty years later—remain hidden as artifacts of the Shoah, especially in the aftermath of Oct. 7, in light of escalating antisemitic tensions across the globe.[12] The answers point to the fragility of historical memory, one more time underlining the vital role of private micro-archives, which, in their quiet preservation of history's margins, seemed to wait for someone, someday, to rediscover what was left behind.

However, the Jewish Hungarian letters, once silenced by state violence and later buried by institutional neglect, have found their way to their re-reading. The Shoah-artifacts call not just for analysis, but for reckoning—with the regimes that tried to erase them, and with both academic and bureaucratic structures that failed to recover them until these days.

> *"We have always been aware that to cover the material legacy of the Holocaust, we need to incorporate*
>
> *the abundant material in smaller archival collections… The interest in hidden archival collections outside larger institutions has grown steadily over the past years.".*[13]

When you live in the age of Holocaust denial and a new wave of attacks on Jews only because they are Jewish, there is an even greater challenge to give it a responsible expert effort.

The Jewish Hungarian letters message across centuries. It is time to answer.

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[10] Kovacs, Andras, (2021).

[11] The Israeli newspaper Haaretz published an article titled "Jews Should Not Have to Take a Detour", spotlighting also the case of historian Paul A. Levine. After examining this and other reports, a remaining question comes into focus: Whose memory is protected, and whose gets deleted next? Stavrou, D. (2025, April 6); Stavrou, D. (2025, February 3).

[12] Rich, D. (2024); Rosenfeld, A. H. (10.06.2024). Rosenfeld, A. H. (Ed.). (2021).

[13] EHRI.

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