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Dialogue? Jewish-Christian (Catholic) Rapprochement Efforts in 1960s Hungary In the Light of State Security Documents

Jewish-Christian dialogue, in the modern sense, began in 18th-century Europe. The Mendelssohn–Lavater debate can be considered the first manifestation[1] of this dialogue, which was initially initiated by Protestants and, over the centuries, took place among the more open-minded representatives of Judaism. The necessity of inter-religious dialogue between Judaism and Christianity, moving from the principled/religious level and the articulation of differences and similarities in doctrines and religious practice, raised entirely different dimensions after the tragedy of the Holocaust. Responsible forces, now including Catholics who were in this respect „late" in coming to the issue, seriously considered initiating some kind of „relationship" with Judaism in the shadow of the tragedy. The dialogue was not initiated by the Jewish community, nor could it have happened otherwise: after the persecutions and the destruction of a significant portion of European – and in particular Hungarian – Jewry, the Jewish community was diminished in numbers and in a state of paralysis. Their lives continued in the very country from which they had been deported; the social environment was also the same. The conviction of many within Judaism was that dialogue takes place between equal parties, a situation which did not exist. They held the Christian churches historically responsible for what had happened to their community; therefore, they believed that there could be no question of any dialogue

1 See on this the translation and study by the excellent, late László Kisbali (1954–2009). Kisbali 1991, 139–151, 152–175.

https://doi.org/10.65017/NEB_EVKONYV.2025.265-297

until a sincere apology was made from the Christian side and some form of self-examination had begun. Others within Judaism were also convinced that „dialogue" was the name for a new missionary discourse, a kind of new technology by which they were to be persuaded to accept the teachings of Christianity. At the same time, the pursuit of a serious dialogue also appeared in the Catholic Church, and its strength grew ever greater due to the waves created by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). The conciliar declaration Nostra Aetate (October 1965), which dealt with relations with non-Christian religions and which absolved Judaism of its previous collective condemnation and annulled its so-called deicide (a point given great emphasis in the document), marked both the end of an era and the beginning of a new one.

The Christian re-evaluation of Judaism had serious antecedents and had already appeared in the 19th century,[2] when the German-Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891) contrasted the conceptions of the law held by Jesus and Paul. Graetz connected Jesus to Judaism and Paul (Saul) to Hellenism, from which (in his view) Christianity had also originated. This type of understanding runs through those writings that – from the Jewish side – deal with Jesus and Christianity, whether we are speaking of Leo Baeck (1873–1956) or H. J. Schoeps (1909–1980). Martin Buber (1878–1965), the writer and philosopher[3] who did a great deal to improve the „relationship" between Christians and Jews, also harks back to Heinrich Graetz. He establishes that the conceptions of faith held by Jesus and Paul were completely different; the latter wishes to change the inherited faith of the „Jewish person" and is thus difficult to reconcile with Judaism. At the same time, this separation was precisely what was necessary to „rehabilitate" Jesus. This perspective sought to place the historical Jesus back into the continuity of the Jewish tradition, from which he had been excluded or was present only in a barely perceptible form (see the Jesus book[4] by the Jewish

2 I have relied heavily on the work of Günther Baumbach. Baumbach 1983, 135–158, and Baumbach 1981, 1–16.

3 Buber 1950.

4 Klausner 1946. After the change of regime, it was re-published (also n Hungarian) by Logos Kiadó in 1993: The Life of Jesus, His Teaching, and the Conditions of His Time Based on Jewish, Greek, and Roman Sources. The volume was first published in Jerusalem in 1922, and later in English in 1925.

historian and literary historian Joseph Klausner /1874–1958/). At the same time, these (fundamentally) liberal Jewish thinkers expected Christianity to progress from „rigid Paulinism" to the experience of Jewish faith (emuna). After the Holocaust, the religious contradictions – that according to Judaism the world is not redeemed, while according to Christians it is, or that according to Jews God did not become man, while according to Christians he did – were dwarfed by the fundamental existential problems profoundly affecting human Existence, which, for example, the Hungarian Catholic poet János Pilinszky (1921–1981), who had experienced the German camps in the spring of 1945 (as a soldier), also felt and understood well. What was now needed was not the „reconciliation" of the two (or more) religious systems – which in any case promised little result – but the demonstration of fundamental humanity in a dehumanised age, and the examination and revision of everything that led, or could have led, to industrial-scale mass murder. It was the creation of an atmosphere of trust, where the existential experience of the Holocaust was no longer an obstacle but an incubator for dialogue between Jews and Christians, for the rapprochement of human being to human being.

THE BEGINNING OF RELATIONS AFTER THE DEADLOCK OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The relationship between Christianity (not just Catholicism) and Judaism in post-Second World War Europe had to be started almost from scratch. During the Hungarian coalition era, after 1945, valuable initiatives were launched. Protestants led the way in reviving relations, which primarily meant the confession of sin. On 9 May 1946, the Synodal Council of the Reformed Church in Hungary passed a resolution condemning anti-Semitism and expressing its condolences for the persecution of the Jews. At its meeting in Nyíregyháza from 14 to 17 August, the National Reformed Free Council adopted a declaration in which the several hundred participants apologised to the remnant of Jewry and asked this community to let mutual respect and peaceful coexistence prevail instead of revenge and hatred. However, this position was rejected by Bishop László Ravasz

(1882–1975) in his opening presidential speech at the general assembly of the National Reformed Pastors' Association in Budapest on 25 September 1946, saying that one should not ask for forgiveness for the sins of others. Although Ravasz himself – along with the other Christian church leaders – had voted for two anti-Jewish laws, it is undeniable that after the German occupation and learning of the Auschwitz Protocols, he – standing out from the other Christian church leaders – tried to do much to save Jewish lives through the Reformed organisation called the Good Shepherd Missionary Sub-Committee.[5] His 1946 position, which went against that of Albert Bereczky (1893–1966), who was actively involved in rescuing people, was also partly motivated by his desire to oppose the power ambitions of the Pozsonyi Street pastor and others (the Nyíregyháza meeting can also be interpreted in this way). At the same time, it is also undeniable that László Ravasz's thinking retained several traditional prejudicial elements concerning Judaism.

Important steps were also taken in Germany and on the ecumenical „front." In 1948, at the founding assembly of the Ecumenical Council of Churches, it condemned anti-Jewish sentiment. In 1950, the Council (Synod) of the Protestant Churches in Germany stated that through omission and silence they had become participants in the sin that their compatriots had committed against the Jews, and had thus become guilty themselves. The next step in the dialogue was the ecumenical Seelisberg Conference in 1947, where Protestants, Catholics, and Jews (from Hungary, Fábián Herskovits (1907–1982), the chief rabbi of the Dohány Street Synagogue, participated in the gathering) sat together and reflected on what the Christian „reasons" for anti-Jewish sentiment were. At the meeting, a ten-point appeal was issued to the Christian churches, which also reached Hungary.[6]

It was striking that – while European Catholics had already participated in the aforementioned Seelisberg Conference – there was no reaction whatsoever from the Catholic Church in Hungary. The further steps of rapprochement were also linked to the Federal Republic of Germany, as the „heir" to the National Socialist past, which accepted the past but wanted to atone for and overcome it. In 1952, Rupert Angermair (1899–1966),

5 See Hatos 2017.

6 See on this Majsai [1999]

a Catholic moral theologian, declared that in the process of restitution, Jewish descendants should be given preference on the list of war victims to be compensated. This was also the year when Germany (or the FRG) and Israel agreed on reparations (full diplomatic relations were only established between the two states in 1965), meaning that the German state would pay the Jewish state as (a form of) compensation for the Nazi crimes. These steps provoked and stirred up enormous emotions in the Jewish state: the right-wing opposition of the ruling left continuously attacked the Labour government of Ben Gurion (1886–1973), and later Levi Eshkol (1895–1969), for this.

German Catholics established a journal entitled Freiburger Rundbrief specifically to promote Catholic-Jewish reconciliation. In Darmstadt, Lutheran Sisters of Mary held a Friday of atonement, and the German Lutheran Synod also made a confession of guilt in 1950. The Lutherans went so far as to adopt a congressional resolution calling for all those who had participated in the persecution of Jews to leave their leading state positions.

The improvement of Catholic-Jewish relations is clearly due to the intervention of Pope John XXIII (1881–1963). The genesis of the Nostra Aetate declaration can also be explained by the relationship between Jules Isaac (1877–1963), a French Jewish historian who made Christian-Jewish relations his personal cause, and the Pope. As early as October 1949, Isaac had indicated to Pope Pius XII the need to improve Catholic-Jewish relations, summarising the concrete steps for this in an 18-point list. He was not successful at that time, but Pope John proved more receptive. After this, in September 1960, Cardinal Augustin Bea (1881–1968), the head of the Secretariat for Christian Unity, prepared the document that dealt with Christian-Jewish relations. The Pope also made other gestures: in 1959, he removed the offensive references to the Jews from the Good Friday liturgy (the prayer for the conversion of the perfidious Jews); in 1963, the Vatican established contact with the World Jewish Congress. Vatican-Israeli relations also began to develop; in January 1964, Pope Paul VI (1897–1978) visited the Holy Land (as his first foreign trip), where he made a pilgrimage, and although he did not even utter the name of Israel, the ice was nevertheless broken: he visited the Jewish state. Full diplomatic relations were established between the parties in 1993, and the process of dialogue has continued ever since.

CATHOLICS AND JEWS IN HUNGARY AFTER 1945

While – globally speaking – Christian-Jewish relations at least had a pre-history, in Hungary even this pre-history was frozen. Although the Seelisberg theses were circulated by Bishop Albert Bereczky among the country's Reformed pastors for comment, an ambivalence towards the Jews was still observable. The Christian churches still thought in terms of a „mission to the Jews," and at the official meetings of the Catholic episcopal conference, they were most concerned with the problems of converts from Judaism and similar issues. But the fundamental problem, namely what could have led to the Holocaust and what Catholic components it might have had, did not really arouse their interest.[7] At the same time, anti-Jewish clichés occasionally reappeared at the meetings; the identification of the left with the Jews, as well as the relativisation of what had happened to the Jews and the deflection of responsibility, were also observable.

At the first post-war conference of the Hungarian Catholic episcopal conference – on 24 May 1945, in the ceremonial hall of the Actio Catholica – the Jewish question came up in connection with the fate of the country's Germans, when the Catholic episcopal conference protested against the planned deportations. „[...] It may be that in the atmosphere of hatred against the Germans, some took this submission amiss, but what we did for the Jews, we also had to do for our German congregants [...]" – declared József Grősz, the Archbishop of Kalocsa (1887–1961).[8] This type of statement was not very fortunate immediately after the Holocaust, nor was the way they reacted to Gyula Szekfű's letter calling for greater Christian Democratic activity, where (in this connection) derogatory remarks were also made about Hungarian Jewry.[9] The episcopal conference also dealt with

7 Balogh 2008, 1460.

8 Beke 2015, 64. Present were: József Grősz, Archbishop of Kalocsa; Gyula Czapik, Archbishop of Eger; Lajos Shvoy, Bishop of Székesfehérvár; József Pétery, Bishop of Vác; József Mindszenty, Bishop of Veszprém; Sándor Kovács, Bishop of Szombathely; Endre Hamvas, Bishop of Csanád; Krizosztom Kelemen, Archabbot of Pannonhalma; János Drahos, Capitular Vicar of Esztergom; and Miklós Pokorny, Capitular Vicar of Győr.

9 „II. He is not willing to execute men who have earned merit in the past, just because they do not please those whom we opposed in the past, and in fact still oppose today. He is

Jewish issues a few more times before 1949, mainly with the problems of Jewish converts (the „Christian Jews"), and with the issue that delinquents should not have to appear twice before the Jewish religious „authority," the Rabbinate, to announce their baptism and departure from the community.[10] The Ministry of Religion and Public Education made a promise on this.

At the end of May 1945, an ecumenical (Catholic-Protestant) initiative was launched, instigated by the Vatican. At this time, János K. Tóth, the referent for the Holy See, contacted Elemér Radisics (1884–1972), a ministerial counsellor at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who won over Albert Radvánszky (1880–1963), the general superintendent of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary, to the cause.[11] The initiative was dominated by Protestants (the Catholics were not happy about this), while the Jewish community was disturbed by the Christian theological-ideological content that appeared in the whole organisation. The Catholic episcopal conference had great reservations about the matter; at the episcopal conference of 2 April 1946, it was even stated that: „first the Jews should stop the arsonists in their own circles. The Jews themselves should condemn those who violate human rights. Until this happens, nothing can be done, because even our best followers would be scandalised."[12]

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thinking here of Mihalovics, Nyisztor, Közi-Horváth, László Tóth. The accusation of an anti-democratic attitude against all four of them is ridiculous and completely unfounded. On the other hand, no one was in sharper opposition to Nazism and its Hungarian edition than Közi-Horváth, Nyisztor, and László Tóth. Everyone also knows that they had no part in the anti-Jewish measures of the Sztójay government. However, that they loved their own race more than the Jews, and also gave expression to this, no one can take amiss. If this is anti-Semitism, then he too was an anti-Semite, is one today, and will be one in the future, more than ever. Because our Jewish compatriots have learned nothing from the events of the recent past. Their current performance is good for everything except for making themselves liked. Nor can he condemn the said persons because they were anti-communists [...]" (Without footnotes). Beke 2015, 66.

10 Beke 2015, 134–135, 150.

11 Majsai [1999].

12 This was noted with approval. Ibid., 144. It is also interesting that at the episcopal conference of 25-26 February 1947, Endre Hamvas, Bishop of Csanád, raised the issue of so-called fascist books, since „many excellent Catholic works" had been placed on the proscribed list: „Any just criticism against the economic and intellectual conduct of the Jews is declared anti-popular and fascist, as is the struggle waged with purely intellectual weapons against the Soviet Union or communism. They do not take into account that we became directly acquainted with communism from its performance in 1919, when

In the end, due to the abstention of József Grősz, Archbishop of Kalocsa, and Cardinal-Primate József Mindszenty (1892–1975), nothing came of the joint action. However, Elemér Radisics and Albert Radvánszky formed the Council for Social Reconciliation, which was officially established on 18 April 1946.[13] Since Mindszenty did not join, the participating Reformed, Lutheran, and Unitarian church leaders (including Bishop László Ravasz) decided that the organisation should not be identified with clergy, because they certainly did not want the whole initiative to appear to the outside world as a kind of „Jewish-Protestant" organisation. The organisation eventually declared its dissolution at the end of September 1947. At the Catholic episcopal conference on 10 December 1947, Elemér Radisics's proposal for a Catholic committee to combat anti-Semitism (this would come up again later) was discussed; according to the proposal, the chairman of this committee would be a member of the episcopal conference.[14] Mindszenty sent the proposal to Endre Hamvas (1890–1970), who agreed with Radisics's suggestion and also with the fact that anti-Semitism was growing in the world. For the first time, the episcopal conference spoke in this form about the Seelisberg Conference; Hamvas, who acted as a kind of referent for the body on Jewish matters, called it a „serious movement." Quoting the findings of the conference, he said that everyone was under the influence of the catastrophe that had happened to the Jews, and that in this connection there were „grave," „great," and „urgent" tasks. For the first time, it was stated, albeit by quotation, that „incorrect concepts and unfortunate expressions" had slipped into Christian religious education, which „could have contributed" to the incitement of hatred. The Hungarian Catholic episcopal conference agreed that when they fight against anti-Semitism, they also weaken the anti-Christian waves. When they ask for „reparation" for the Jews (see committee report no. 5 of the Seelisberg Conference), „at the same time we also strengthen the basis of our own

the national flag, the anthem, and religious education were forbidden, when a veritable persecution of Christians was taking place." Beke 2015, 223–224.

13 Majsai [1999]

14 Beke 2015, 362–364. Similar committees would be established by other religious communities, and they would send one member each to the national council, which would connect with the international council through its delegate.

demands for our assets taken for reparation."[15] The episcopal conference approved that the different religions should form separate councils (so they would not be embarrassed from a dogmatic point of view). It was also raised that the establishment of the Hungarian Catholic committee should take place with the help of the Hungarian Holy Cross Association, which was originally concerned with the protection of Catholics of Jewish origin and was founded in the late 1930s (or at least one or two members should be represented). The body expressed that it would be better to have a prelate living in Budapest as chairman instead of Radisics. During the debate, Miklós Dudás, the Bishop of Hajdúdorog, stated that it is in vain for Christianity to ask for forgiveness; if they do, „they will still beat us." The Archbishop of Kalocsa spoke specifically about the fact that this could only work if the Jews gave an assurance that „the villainies of the Jews against Christianity will cease." Endre Hamvas replied that the faults of the Jews had already been admitted at Seelisberg, and he himself had stated in his Szeged lecture that establishing the faults of the Jews is not yet anti-Semitism. According to Endre Hamvas – and at this point he entered into a debate with Gyula Czapik, the Archbishop of Eger – it is not enough for the Holy Cross Association to deal with the matter. Several members of the episcopal conference spoke in defence of Christianity, and Cardinal Mindszenty stated that „for the sake of truth, we must establish not only what happened to them contrary to the Decalogue (Ten Commandments – A.N.), but also what is now happening to Christians on the part of the Jews."[16] Finally, the episcopal conference decided to „transfer" the matter to the Holy Cross Association (whose protector was the Bishop of Csanád), so that „the truth of both sides may come out through this Council, in every statement."[17] It is clear from this debate as well that although the facts of the Holocaust had reached the highest Hungarian Catholic body, the perspective was significantly influenced by traditional Christian anti-Judaism, and also by its right-wing-conservative interpretation „adapted" to Hungarian history, which (and this came up several times at the meetings

15 Beke 2015, 363.
16 Beke 2015, MKPKT 1/ 364.
17 Ibid.

of the episcopal conference) saw in the Jews a unified and anti-Christian collective, from the Galileo Circle to the communists.

It is well known that the Jewish community was not unified, and even after the Holocaust, it was divided by political and social issues. A good example of this is that the organ of one of the Hungarian left-wing-socialist Zionist groups (the HaOved movement, belonging to Mapai) criticised Jewish religious personalities in May 1946, for example Ferenc Hevesi, the chief rabbi of the Dohány Street Synagogue (1898–1952), because (according to them) he was demanding the return of church lands.[18] Moreover, the conflicts between conservatives and radicals also appeared within the Jewish organisations. As a reaction to the leftward shift of the Hungarian Zionist Federation (MCSZ) and its institutions, on 20 January 1948, the „Lema'an Zion" group (literally meaning „For Zion," but they appeared under the name Zionist Working Community) was formed from „old-school" Zionists who opposed the federation's „anti-religious" policy, and had such rabbi members as the already mentioned Fábián Herskovits and Mózes Richtmann (1880–1972).[19]

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18 Chief Rabbi Ferenc Hevesi demanded land for Hungarian Jewry at the national Jewish conference: „We do not need the land of the Hungarian peasant. Not a crumb, not a handful of it, for the benefit of priests... And from the speech of the reverend major general, we see our view confirmed that Jewry today has very little need for religious communities, but all the more for ethnic communities. Communities that show the true face of the Jewish people and that do not want to enrich themselves from what belongs to others for the benefit of others, but for their own benefit. And to the reverend Hevesi, we recommend that in his enthusiastic and zealous assimilationist endeavours he should not choose Prince-Primate Mindszenty as his model, and if he does, he should not speak in the name of the Jews." Kastner 1946, 3.

19 The inaugural meeting of Lema'an Zion was on 20 January 1948. *Új Élet,* 22 January 1948, 5–6. The justification for the establishment of the association was published in the same place: „For months, there have been disagreements between the old leaders and veteran supporters of Hungarian Zionism and the current leaders of the Hungarian Zionist Federation on the following issues: they objected to the spirit of the parties, disapproved of the irreligious education of the youth, held the cultural activity to account, and were dissatisfied with the political line taken towards other Jewish institutions. The old Zionists requested that the presidency of the Federation remedy these grievances. As this request was not fulfilled, they convened a founding assembly on Tuesday evening in the ceremonial hall of the Chevra Kadisha, which was attended by a large audience." The Zionist Working Community later also organised a hachshara (training program) for young people between the ages of 16 and 24. *Új Élet,* 12 February 1948, 9. The Zionist Working Community later

Albert Bereczky, an influential Reformed pastor (later, from 1948, bishop of the Danubian Reformed Church District) and member of parliament, established a new organisation on 26 February 1948, in the spirit of Seelisberg: the Hungarian Section of the International Council of Christians and Jews (this was an international organisation created in the Anglo-Saxon world). In this connection, the vice-president of the organisation asked the episcopal conference to turn to the parishes in a „confidential circular" to report everything they could „observe in connection with the phenomenon of anti-Semitism," so that valuable material could be placed in the hands of the committee. The episcopal conference dealt with the problem at its meeting on 18 March 1948,[20] but Endre Hamvas, the Bishop of Csanád, remarked that those who committed the faults did not commit them as Christians, „whereas the Jews worked against the Christians for 50 years."[21] Therefore – after several comments – they decided to refuse the request, but delegated Ferenc Ibrányi, a papal chamberlain and university professor, to the Catholic Council.

Thus, the organisation operated within the framework of various denominational committees (or sub-committees), and they also participated in the international Christian-Jewish conference in Freiburg in July 1948. Its activities, however, were sealed by the fact that the International Council of Christians and Jews did not integrate the Hungarian section: it gave an evasive answer to their application. From 5 December 1949, they worked as the Committee for Christian-Jewish Cooperation, and then from October 1950 – now omitting the words Jewish and Christian from the name – as the Interdenominational Committee. Later, the fate of the whole activity was sealed with the resettlement of Elemér Radisics.[22] The Catholic episcopal conference was also not interested in initiating a dialogue: at its meeting on 16 February 1950, it rejected Elemér Radisics's submission in which he requested members from the Catholic Church for the „Catholic

held several general assemblies in the ceremonial hall of the Chevra Kadisha. *Új Élet,* 15 July 1948, 15; 22 July 1948, 12. The Zionist Working Community also had a local branch in the 7th district.

20 Beke 2015, 391–392.

21 Beke 2015, p. 391.

22 Majsai [1999]

sub-committee for Jewish-Christian reconciliation."[23] According to the minutes, „...the episcopal conference, however, does not delegate a member, because in the Hungarian committee itself there are members who attack the Church, and Christian defence causes us enough trouble today."[24] However, the episcopal conference did not object to Catholic priests being members of the sub-committees.

The development of relations in Hungary was fundamentally determined from this period onwards by the fact that after the communist takeover, we could not speak of independent religious communities, but of religious communities existing under state control, where some of the participants in the future (and expected) dialogue were also state security agents. Not only was there no free dialogue, but its initial phases were also influenced by events that would not have occurred in the case of a healthier, more democratic political development. Sometimes bizarre reactions came from the Jewish side as well; thus, the arrest of Cardinal József Mindszenty was followed by a Jewish community (Orthodox and Neolog) and a Zionist federation statement in an extremist tone.[25] The leaders of the

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23 Balogh 2008, 165. Presumed attendees: under the presidency of Archbishop József Grősz of Kalocsa, Archbishop Gyula Czapik of Eger; diocesan bishops Lajos Shvoy of Székesfehérvár, Miklós Dudás of Hajdúdorog, József Pétery of Vác, Endre Hamvas of Csanád, Sándor Kovács of Szombathely, Kálmán Papp of Győr, and Bertalan Badalik of Veszprém; as well as coadjutor bishop Ferenc Rogács of Pécs, archepiscopal general vicar János Drahos of Esztergom, episcopal vicar Mihály Barót of Satu Mare, apostolic administrator's vicar László Pintér of Oradea, and governing abbot Pál Sárközy of Pannonhalma. Presumed absentee: Barnabás Tost, capitular vicar of Košice and apostolic administrator of Rožňava.

24 Idib.165.

25 „We have observed with concern that all those who were the preparers and active participants in the terrible tragedy of Hungarian Jewry, hiding behind Archbishop Mindszenty, were planning a new Auschwitz. We saw that the Arrow Cross and Hitlerite elements, all enemies of democracy, the people, human equality, religious equality, and religious freedom, under the leadership of Mindszenty, were inciting anti-Semitism in processions, on church pulpits, and at religious gatherings, fanning the still-unextinguished fire of Jew-hatred, and thus threatening the lives of the still-remaining remnant of Hungarian Jewry. [...] It is for this reason that Hungarian Jewry received the arrest of Mindszenty with great reassurance. With this measure, the Hungarian government has put the head of a pogrom-centre, which endangered the good fortune of not only Hungarian but of all Eastern European Jewry, in his deserved place. [...] The responsible leaders of Hungarian Jewry call on the leaders of the American and Western European brother organisations to inform those interested, the press, public opinion, and not least our leading co-religionists in accordance with reality.

Jewish community (most notably Lajos Stöckler, 1897–1960) also rejected the plan for joint action initiated by Protestants on the occasion of the resettlements, although in the matter of the resettlements, the leaders of the Jewish umbrella organisation, the National Representation of Hungarian Israelites (MIOK), which was created under state pressure, tried to act with goodwill and help those in trouble, and Stöckler (who was not a man of the communists) was arrested by the ÁVH in early 1953.[26] The complete hardening between the parties also occurred for external reasons; the 1949 decree of the Vatican's Holy Office forbade all cooperation with communists. This was motivated, among other things, by the Mindszenty trial: in this case, it meant that one of the largest state-dependent religious communities, the Catholic Church, entered into an almost warlike relationship with the state authorities, which it viewed with suspicion also because of its members of Jewish origin, and to which state authorities the official Jewish religious leadership otherwise tried to be maximally loyal. In the countries belonging to the Soviet sphere of interest, the freezing of relations with the Jewish world, the cessation and persecution of the Zionist movement, and the reduction of relations with Israel to an almost minimum also did not serve to allow Hungarian Jewry to perceive the freer intellectual influences coming from abroad, especially from the West. The Hungarian state security service knew about almost every step of the leadership of the two religious communities, the Catholics and the Jews; not only Catholic leaders (such as Pál Brezanóczy, the apostolic administrator of Eger, 1912–1972, i.e., agent „Kékes Pál"), but also community presidents, Endre Sós (agent „Sipos," 1905–1969) and Géza Seifert (agent „Sárosi," 1906–1976), continuously informed the Hungarian organs about the internal affairs of their religious communities. The Kádárist state did somewhat ease the grip (according to the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, HSWP

They should state that Mindszenty and the fascist, anti-Semitic forces gathered around him were threatening the lives of Hungarian and Eastern European Jewry, and were colluding with those former Hungarian politicians (Horthy and his associates) who are responsible for the destruction of the majority of Hungarian Jewry." The full text of the declaration can be found among the papers of the Secretariat of the HWPP (Rákosi's Secretariat) (MNL OL KS276/65/356/2021). A summary of the declaration was published as the lead article in the 27 January 1949 issue of *Új Élet*. Quoted in: Kovács 2003, 20.

26 Ibid.

resolution of July 1958, the fight against religion had to be subordinated to political interests, and the fight against religion was separated from the fight against „clerical reaction"), but the law-decree no. 22 of 1957 made the filling of more important church positions dependent on state approval: the control, therefore, did not decrease.

Life controlled by the State Office for Church Affairs (ÁEH) was – with respect to the Jews – subject to numerous other restrictions. According to paragraph 25 of the rabbinical regulations, a rabbi could not preach against the state order (1952). The law no. 22 of 1957, which also applied to the Catholic Church (and has already been mentioned), made the appointment of the leaders of the MIOK and the Budapest Israelite Community (BIH) dependent on the consent of the Presidential Council, while for the appointment of the director of the Rabbinical Seminary and the Jewish secondary school, „only" the agreement of the ÁEH was necessary. In August 1960, under pressure from the ÁEH, the managing committee of the Rabbinical Seminary was reorganised; of the three members, two were agents, while the third was a committed supporter of the state party.[27]

THE 1960s

The 1960s were also about the slow rapprochement between the Vatican and Hungary. The Hungarian side also wanted to normalise relations, although the Mindszenty case was removed from the points of negotiation because there was so much disagreement between the parties. According to the Hungarian historian Csaba Békés, the Hungarian government also tried to achieve the normalisation of relations through the Americans,[28] but for this it was also necessary for the Vatican to demonstrate a more pragmatic position.

27 Kovács 2013, 349–358.
28 Békés 2019, 199–200.

Pope John XXIII's[29] encyclical Mater et Magistra (15 May 1961) also presupposed a certain desire for peace on the part of the Soviets, which facilitated the creation of an atmosphere of rapprochement.[30] After the Pope's death in June 1963, his successor, Paul VI, also continued his predecessor's reform policy. Cardinal Agostino Casaroli (1914–1998), a defining diplomat of the Vatican at this time, and József Prantner (1911–1975), the then president of the ÁEH, concluded the partial agreement between the Holy See and Hungary on 15 September 1964. This made episcopal appointments possible, but prior state approval was needed for them, and an oath had to be sworn on the constitution of the Hungarian People's Republic. The party leadership permitted the Hungarian bishops to travel to the Second Vatican Council, although it ensured that the delegation also included members who would provide accurate information on the developments. Although the agreement was a great success for the Hungarian government, many Hungarian Catholics felt that their situation had become more orderly, if you like, more legal, compared to previous years.

Recently, new state security documents have come to light which prove that the phenomenon that could best be described by the word „dialogue" also appeared in Kádár's Hungary. Hitherto, we had only one serious source for this, the autobiography of György Kis (1914–2005), a Catholic priest and parish priest of Bakonyszentlászló, which contained certain details in this regard.

Agents providing intelligence to the state security services reported on these attempts, recounting everything they could find out. Agent 'Xavér' – in civilian life, Ilona Benoschofsky (1913–1997), director of the Jewish Museum after 1963 – reported to section III/III/2-a of the Ministry of the Interior (the department within the main group directorate that dealt with the churches) on 22 May 1963 that Károly Gyula Bakonyi, a parish priest from Eger (1915–1983),[31] had paid a visit to Endre Sós, the leader of

29 Pál Hatos's important study sheds light on the cultural dimensions of the Ostpolitik: Hatos 2014, 23–39.

30 His another famous encyclical, Pacem in terris (11 April 1963), also went beyond the previous framework, as it addressed not only the clergy and Christians, but „all men of good will."

31 Károly Gyula Bakonyi was born on 16 October 1915 in Budapest, and was ordained a priest on 9 November 1947. He was a member of the Minorite order until 1950, an assistant pastor

Hungarian (including the Budapest Israelite Community) Jewry (MIOK), and then – on Sós's instructions – the museum was opened for the priest, and thus she also met him.[32] A recruitment file (Bt. file) on Bakonyi's later activities is preserved under the name 'Krausz' in the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security Services (ÁBTL), from which it emerges that – according to his own account – he was of Jewish origin. He told his handlers that he had applied for theology in 1938 and then joined the Minorite order due to the growing anti-Semitism. He was ordained a priest in 1947, and after the dissolution of the religious orders, he was taken over by the diocese of Eger as a secular priest. This intelligent priest, who spoke several languages and maintained a very good relationship with Pál Brezanóczy, had been under „processing" by the Heves county state security department since 1954 on „suspicion of conspiracy and espionage." They tried to recruit him at that time, but he resisted „due to the atrocities that occurred."[33] The turning point, the rapprochement with the state security, occurred in the summer of 1965, and then in 1967, he was recruited as part of the „Patriots" action plan: this was the Hungarian state security operation in which an agent was „posted" (namely him) to the position of Hungarian confessor at the Vatican. At the same time, it can be said to Bakonyi's credit that he withdrew from this role within a (relatively) short period of time.[34]

The other party, Ilona Benoschofsky, was an interesting figure in Hungarian Jewish public life: she led the Hungarian section of the World Jewish Congress, then on 1 March 1953, she was taken into custody, but was released on 6 August. She was accused of Zionist activities, and her arrest was connected to a show investigation related to the previous activities

at the St. Anthony parish in Eger (the old and current Minorite parish), an administrator at the same place from 1958, and an archepiscopal counsellor in 1970. He died on 24 September 1983. Bánk 1975, 58.

32 Report. Budapest, 22 May 1963. ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-37478. 'Xavér'.

33 ÁBTL 3.2.1. Bt-1120/2. 'Krausz'. Summary report. 23 October 1967. BM III/I-4-K. sub-department. The document was initialled by Police Major László Keszthelyi, senior operative officer, but was also signed by Police Major György Földes (head of department).

34 In the summer of 1965, the county „comrades" dealt with him again under the pretext of processing his passport application. His request was granted, and he „utilised" the received passport to visit the Minorite order's centre. After his return, he gave a detailed and positive-toned oral briefing on his experiences in Rome. ÁBTL 3.2.1. Bt-1120/2. 'Krausz'.

of the Joint Distribution Committee. [35] According to a 1953 state security document (18 July 1953), department I/2 had already tried to recruit her at that time. It cannot be known for certain whether she was recruited at this time, but it is certain that by January 1957, she was demonstrably an agent.[36] As director of the Jewish Museum – and as the successor to Fülöp Grünvald (1887–1964),[37] who had been removed under pressure from community president Endre Sós – she had access to a great deal of information and was involved in the life of the extremely limited denominational public sphere. At the same time, she was a complex personality, undoubtedly intelligent and perceptive, and skilfully concealed her true intentions. The agent codenamed 'Pesti Péter' (in fact, a journalist for the denominational paper *Új Élet*) in a report from November 1962 – where he divided the Jewish community leadership on Síp Street into „reliables" and „Zionists" – placed her – along with Marcell Steiner (MIOK vice-president), József Schweitzer, then chief rabbi of Pécs (1922–2015), Chief Rabbi Dr. Artúr Geyer, and Fülöp Grünvald – in the latter group.[38]

During the aforementioned conversation – the pretext for which was that Father Bakonyi claimed he wanted to write a book and was collecting material for it – he indicated that he was interested in the history of Hungarian Jewry, its religion, and „fascism," but he also stated that he was not a „peace priest," as the clerics who cooperated with the system were called within the church, after the priests' peace movement. The priest self-critically noted that „the Catholic Church did not do everything in its power against the persecution; on the contrary, it fanned the flames of

35 According to one document, he was taken into custody in connection with the Gábor Péter case. ÁBTL 3.1.9. VII/13 V-101890. Budapest, 19 May 1981. Memorandum.

36 ÁBTL 3.1.9. V/116/663/1. Ervin Groszberg and his associates, and ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-37478. 'Xavér'.

37 Fülöp Grünvald was a teacher and historian, born in Sopron and the brother of Malkiél Grünwald, who played a very important role in the Kasztner case. Together with Sándor Scheiber, from 1959 until his death, he published several volumes of the Monumenta Hungariae Judaica, which had last appeared in 1938. The publication of the volume was made possible by the support of the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany, and the publication of new volumes continued after Grünvald's death until 1980.

38 ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-30841 'Pesti Péter'. Report of Pesti Péter, 22 November 1962, although the end is dated the 23rd. A man named Hübsch also appears in this group; he is probably Alfréd Hübsch.

hatred. Among the initiatives of the current Pope, he also proclaims peace towards the Jews."[39] It is important to note that Sós (who also played the role of an agent) reacted relatively openly to the approach. In any case, it is not domestic considerations that seem to be reflected in the priest's words: quite obviously, alongside his personal life story, Vatican influences and the supposed quest of Brezanóczy, who was able to convey them, may have (positively) influenced his actions. The state security, which considered the report „valuable" from an operational point of view, „naturally" instructed agent 'Xavér' to talk to Father Bakonyi next time about his political stance and his relations with other churches.

The role of Pál Brezanóczy and Gyula Bakonyi is, by the way, unique in the burgeoning Catholic-Jewish relations, because Bakonyi represented the church on several occasions at the local Jewish martyr commemorations in Eger. *Új Élet,* the official paper of Hungarian Jewry, reports on two such participations: first, on 7 June 1964, at the commemoration at the martyr's memorial in the Eger cemetery (where Chief Rabbi Dr. Miklós Máté and MIOK vice-president Dr. Géza Seifert spoke, alongside the representative of the Patriotic People's Front), and secondly, on 2 July 1967, also at the same place. On the first occasion, the priest „conveyed" the condolences of the Catholic Church and Brezanóczy, while on the second occasion – in the presence of community president Endre Székely, Rabbi Dávid Weisz of Gyöngyös, and MIOK-BIH general secretary József Ács – it was specifically a matter of conveying Brezanóczy's „sympathy."[40] On the first occasion, Reformed pastors also participated, and on the second, Reformed and Lutheran pastors, so the Eger commemorations (at least at that time) were almost unique in the country.

A very important state security document confirms that the issue and problem of dialogue had also emerged within the Jewish community in Hungary.[41] A report written in October 1963 (by agent "Sárosi," i.e., Géza Seifert, then vice president of the Budapest Jewish or officially "Israelite" Community) mentioned several incidents. He recalled a Jewish celebration

39 ÁBTL 3.1.2. M-37478 "Xavér"

40 Commemoration of the Jews of Eger. *Új Élet,* 15 June 1964, pp. 1–2; *Új Élet,* 15 July 1967, 2.

41 ÁBTL 3.1.5 O-17169/1 Ellenséges tevékenységet kifejtő cionisták. (Zionists engaged in hostile activities.) Report. Budapest, October 11, 1963. Subject: Cooperation between religious communities.

in Nagyfuvaros Street in Budapest in 1962 (probably Simchat Torah, the Festival of the Torah, on October 27[42]), where Chief Rabbi László Salgó, director of the Budapest rabbinate, praised Pope John XXIII in his speech.[43] The teachings on „the killing of Jesus" will also be modified, the pope is fighting against anti-Semitism, and „We must therefore turn with gratitude to the person of the pope and to the new spirit of the Catholic Church," Salgó said. After the surprisingly speech, Géza Seifert (the agent himself) stated that they welcome all „words of peace," but that they want to fight anti-Semitism not with the Pope, but together with the „peace camp" (as the East-European Communist countries call themselves). "In this regard, we have nothing to do with the Pope or the Catholic Church," he declared. The agent also accused Endre Sós, president of MIOK, of inviting priests to certain "Jewish gatherings," singling out Tamás Esze, a Calvinist lay-leader, in particular. Seifert also reported that in September 1963, Endre Sós had a meeting with the bishop of Eger (possibly Pál Brezanóczy), had lunch with him, and "spoke with great enthusiasm about what he had seen there and his discussions with the bishop." In addition, Sós received an American Jesuit, (according to Seifert) „Edward Dugg," who arrived in Budapest on the recommendation of the World Federation of Hungarian Jews (and about whom he reported separately). Seifert obtained the Jesuit's name; in fact, it was Edward Duff, a member of the Social Order Institute at St. Louis University, who was one of the five people appointed by the Vatican to attend the World Council of Churches meeting in New Delhi (at the end of 1961). The Catholic press also reported on Duff's visit to Budapest from Warsaw and Prague and the special circumstances surrounding it.[44]

42 Szimhasz Tauró ünnepségek (Simchat Tora celebrations). *Új Élet,* November 15, 1962, 2.

43 "[...] in his speech at the celebration, he was pleased to point out that Pope John XXIII would review certain statements in the Catechism concerning Jews. For example, they want to remove the phrase "perfidious Jews" and other similar expressions from certain prayers, and they will also modify the teachings concerning the killing of Jesus, thereby taking significant steps in the fight against anti-Semitism [...]" In: ibid.

44 Szentmise a Royal Nagyszállóban (Holy Mass at the Royal Hotel). *Új Ember,* September 15, 1963. 3. Due to the black plague, the hotel was closed, and the Boston priest celebrated Mass (with special permission) on the ground floor of the hotel and in a room next to the restaurant, which was converted into a chapel for the occasion. (!) Father Duff later, in July 1966, was one of the Catholic observers at the World Council of Churches meeting.

In the fall of 1963, before the Jewish autumn holidays (or „high holidays"), a district presidential meeting was held at the headquarters on Síp Street (centre of the Hungarian Jewry), at which one of the leaders of the Zugló district spoke and complained that the *Új Élet* (the official only-one Jewish newspaper) had not published the speech of a Catholic priest at a funeral, nor had it even mentioned this fact. According to the report, Sós shifted the responsibility to the State Office for Church Affairs for removing the incriminating part from the text. Seifert, however, stated that this was not the case and that the Jewish community did not want to participate in any kind of interfaith cooperation. „We can only receive protection against anti-Semitism from our people's democratic state power," stated the vice president, who was eager to comply and prove himself.

The document clearly shows that the leaders of Hungarian Jewry were not opposed to official Jewish-Christian dialogue, and that the meeting with the bishop of Eger was merely a way of stroking the ego of the rather self-centered Endre Sós. At the same time, the vice president of the BIH ensured a firm stance on principle, clearly recognizing the "dangers" inherent in the rapprochement of religions in Kádár's Hungary.

The aforementioned György Kis, parish priest of Bakonyszentlászló, prepared a 14-point memorandum on Christian-Jewish reconciliation in the summer of 1963 and in July personally handed it to Endre Hamvas, the diocesan bishop and president of the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference.[45] Kis was also of Jewish origin; he completed his theological studies in Innsbruck as a student of the theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984) and – due to his atypical life story and personal involvement, which fundamentally influenced his interests – he was in every respect a special personality in the Hungarian Catholic Church. This was not Kis's first such manifestation, as he had already proposed a circular letter on the Jewish question in 1946, which was rejected at the time.[46] At the same time, he showed loyalty to his church, because in September 1947, in opposition to the call of Chief Rabbi Fábián Herskovits, who was participating in the Seelisberg Conference, for the reform of Catholic religious education, he defended the assertion (also citing Klausner's book on Jesus) that Jesus

45 Kis 1987, 272–280.
46 Kis 1987, 264–265.

was crucified by the Jews, and denied that anti-Semitic acts followed from this fact, and therefore that the textbooks needed to be changed.[47]

Kis considered himself a proponent of dialogue, and in 1963 he suggested to Bishop Endre Hamvas that the Catholic Church should issue a separate appeal regarding the Jews, and that a Christian-Jewish Secretariat should be set up in the country as a department of the Hungarian Catholic Action. Kis's position was influenced not only by the new Vatican spirit, but also by the declaration of the German Catholic Bishops' Conference in Fulda in August 1962.[48] This declaration, in which, evoking the 129th Psalm, they stated that an inhuman activity of annihilation had been carried out against the Jewish people in the name of the German people, was issued by the German bishops before their departure for the Second Vatican Council. However, Kis's efforts faltered: according to his memoirs, on 24 September 1963, he received a letter from a „priest friend" in the diocese, in which the content of a letter addressed to him from Bishop Hamvas was made known. The bishop had raised the question at the meeting of the episcopal conference, but they had concluded that his initiative was not timely. György Kis's submission was discussed at the meeting of the episcopal conference on 4 September 1963[49] We do not know exactly what

47 Christianity and Anti-Semitism. On a proposal of the Swiss Christian-Jewish Congress. *Új Ember,* 14 September 1947, 8. The Catholic episcopal conference also opposed changing the text of the religious textbooks: at its meeting on 17 July 1948, they did not agree with the comments made by the Ministry of Religion and Public Education against textbooks written by, among others, Antal Schütz. For example, Schütz had a passage stating that the Jews „hated Jesus"; according to the Ministry, this should be omitted, and elsewhere, instead of „the Jewish priests and scribes incited the people," it should be „the chief priests, notables, and the rich incited the people." According to the episcopal conference, changing these parts would not correspond to either historical facts or the Holy Scripture. Beke 2015, 476.

48 The text, referring to Psalm 129, stated that „At this historic hour, on the eve of the Second Vatican Council, we call upon our faithful to sincere atonement for the evil deeds committed in the name of our people against fundamental human rights by the godless possessors of power. We wish to particularly recall in this appeal the inhuman activity of annihilation carried out against the Jewish people, because it is from this people that we received our faith in the one true God, and from it, according to the flesh, comes the saviour of the world, Jesus Christ [...]" Kis 1987, 275.

49 Attendees: under the presidency of Endre Hamvas, diocesan bishop of Csanád, diocesan bishops Lajos Shvoy of Székesfehérvár, Miklós Dudás of Hajdúdorog, Sándor Kovács of Szombathely, and Kálmán Papp of Győr; Bishop Vince Kovács, apostolic administrator of Vác; Archabbot Norbert Legányi of Pannonhalma; apostolic administrators Artúr Schwarz-

was said at the meeting held in the bishops' council chamber of the Central Seminary in Budapest, nor what was written down. But according to the official text, Kis's submission was the third, and neither the word „Jewish" nor the phrase „Jewish-Christian" was included in the minutes; it was simply recorded that the priest's proposal concerned the organisation of a „secretariat for unity," „whose task would be to unite people of goodwill, first and foremost believers in God."[50] The episcopal conference decided to remove the issue from the agenda.[51] After the autumn 1963 episcopal conference, Kis – according to his own account – also spoke to his „bishop," who stated that such initiatives must originate from Rome „...and there they will certainly take all necessary steps in the matter."[52]

Kis wrote a bitter letter to the bishop on 29 December 1963,[53] to which the president of the episcopal conference replied on 7 January 1964, offering explanations. He wrote that he (Bishop Hamvas), as the pastor of Notre Dame de Sion between 1916 and 1928, had prepared many Jews for baptism, had founded a special association on account of the persecutions in Hungary (this must have been the Hungarian Holy Cross Association), of which he was a leading member as the archiepiscopal vicar of Budapest, and: „[...] As bishop of Szeged, I raised my voice from the pulpit against the persecution of the Jews. I do not doubt either that the government would not raise any obstacle against our endeavours in this direction [...]"[54]

Eggenhoffer of Esztergom, Pál Brezanóczy of Eger, and Sándor Klempa of Veszprém; and capitular vicars Imre Várkonyi of Kalocsa and József Cserháti of Pécs. Balogh 2008, 1156.

50 Balogh 2008, 1156.

51 In light of this, the editors of the volume mistakenly stated in note 55 that Kis's submission wished to create a Hungarian organisation „for the promotion of ecumenism" on the model of the „Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity" established by Pope John XXIII in 1960. Balogh 2008, 1156.

52 See Kis 1987, 278. Kis writes here that at the meeting of the conference, his proposal to Bishop Hamvas was discussed only „incidentally" and „superficially."

53 „I am aware that after the antecedents, I have truly little hope of realising my idea, yet I turn to Your Excellency again, because I feel that the Spirit of God is urging me so much. Perhaps divine Providence would still expect us, poor Hungarians and the Hungarian church, to try to do something in the Christian-Jewish cause! Let us try! The result is in God's hands anyway. If our attempt should fail because the state would not permit such a thing, at least we could not later reproach ourselves for not even having tried. The only important thing would be not to remain idle!" Kis 1987, 277.

54 Kis 1987.

However, the bishop evaded Kis's wishes and also cited the fact that the moment had not yet arrived, that they still had to wait for the right occasion.

It was sometime around this time that Kis may have established contact with Sándor Scheiber (1913–1985), the renowned director-professor of the National Rabbinical Seminary. Several personal and written „meetings" took place, but the surprised Scheiber finally declared that after the „precedents," he expected all initiatives to come from the Christian side.

Although on the Catholic „side" the official avenues for dialogue seemed to be closing, the parish priest – after Scheiber's refusal – embarked on a heroic solo action with other leading representatives of Hungarian Jewry.

At the meeting of the Budapest Rabbinate (this was a Neolog body) on 12 February 1964, Chief Rabbi Artúr Geyer of Buda (1894–1976) reported that György Kis had written a very beautiful, „poetic-toned" letter to him, in which he expressed that he would consider it right if the „priests" of the two religious communities cooperated.[55] It is not known when Kis's letter was written, but it must have been after his own church had already rejected his individual initiative; thus, his action could not be interpreted as an official Catholic position, since the approach did not come from the leading body of the Catholic Church. A note on the rabbinical assembly meeting was prepared by agent 'Sárvári', that is, Chief Rabbi László Salgó (1910–1985), director of the Budapest Rabbinate and member of the National Rabbinical Council. Geyer said that he would bring and read out the letter at the next meeting and also asked for the opinion of the rabbis present on establishing contact. The responses to this were not very positive; for example, Dr. Henrik Fisch (1907–?), rabbi of the Dohány Street Synagogue, explained that during the Pope's visit to the Holy Land (4 January 1964), he had „kept the president of the state of Israel waiting for an hour and a half," and it did not seem that he respected the Jews. As long as this was the behaviour, striving for peaceful cooperation was „pointless," was his verdict. He therefore proposed that a reply letter of a similar tone be prepared and that they should not deal with the matter any further. Henrik

55 ÁBTL 3.1.2. H-40.122. 'Sárvári György'. Report of agent 'Sárvári', 19 February 1964. The minutes of the Neolog Rabbinical Council are incomplete; the materials for these years cannot be found at the Hungarian Jewish Archives (MILEV), so we are reliant on agent reports.

Fisch's reaction was not accidental; he was the one who, after the Second World War, published the speeches of the Christian church leaders given during the debate on the anti-Jewish laws, and illustrated the volume with a photograph of his family member murdered in the Holocaust.[56] Dr. Imre Benoschofsky (1903–1970), the national deputy chief rabbi and leading chief rabbi of Budapest, even explained that one of the „church leaders" who participated in the council had personally told him that the „Jewish question" had been discussed at the Vatican's great assembly, but no resolution had been passed, so it was removed from the agenda. The state security assessment (BM III/III/2) acknowledged the Catholic Church's intention of rapprochement and sent this to the Catholic Church group.[57]

The next stage of the reviving Jewish-Catholic relationship was not long in coming. At the beginning of March 1964, Father Ottó Kormos (1924–1972) approached the aforementioned Chief Rabbi László Salgó of Budapest (Dohány Street Synagogue) and requested a personal meeting, which took place „the next day" in the Jewish community's building on Síp Street. The report of agent 'Sárvári' (the highly contradictory personality of Chief Rabbi Salgó himself),[58] who had a serious knowledge of liturgy, actually showed the same tendency as we have seen from the previous case. Kormos, who was born in Budapest, had served in several places, mostly in the archdiocese of Esztergom. According to the Hungarian Catholic Lexicon,[59] at the beginning of 1957, Kormos wanted to have packages from an international aid organisation brought for his faithful in Márianosztra (where he was then parish priest) from Budapest, but the guards directed the shipment to the police, where he was accused of wanting to get its contents to the prisoners. He was arrested together with his chaplain, Imre Mester; both were sentenced to six months in prison. His contact with the authorities did not cease after his release, and his death was also surrounded by several question marks.[60] Kormos was an open person, a regular author

56 Fisch 1947.

57 ÁBTL 3.1.2. H-40.122. 'Sárvári György'. Report of agent 'Sárvári', 19 February 1964. The report was forwarded to Police Major Oszkár Kiss.

58 5 March 1964. ÁBTL 3.1.2. H-40.122. 'Sárvári György'.

59 http://lexikon.katolikus.hu/K/Kormos.html (Accessed: 29 September 2021).

60 According to the Hungarian Catholic Lexicon, he was ordained a priest of the Archdiocese of Esztergom on 20 June 1948. He was a chaplain in Csolnok, Kemence, and Nyergesújfalu,

for the journal *Vigilia*, and travelled relatively a lot; a few years later, he even wrote a Baedeker, precisely about the Holy Land.[61] On the occasion of his visit to the Jewish community, he did not mince his words: he said that it was time to find a connection with the „Jewish priests" as well, not just with the other Christian religious communities. He said that in West Germany, in Freiburg, there was also a journal dealing with this. Much had been said about Salgó in his „house" – he said – (referring to his mother's apartment at 4 Kiss József Street in Józsefváros, where Kormos also used to stay when in Budapest), which is why he had sought him out. Salgó replied that the rabbinical council would meet on the following Wednesday, and he would raise the issue there. 'Sárvári' writes in his report that Benoschofsky (and here it is probably not Ilona, the aforementioned museum director, but her chief rabbi brother, Dr. Imre Benoschofsky, the national chief rabbi, 1903–1970)[62] had told the rabbi that a priest from the diocese of Eger (he did not mention Bakonyi's name to Salgó) had visited him, and as a result of the conversation, he had introduced him to Pál Brezanóczy, the apostolic administrator (1912–1972), one of the outstanding leading figures of the diocese of Eger. Endre Sós visited Eger, and then Brezanóczy visited him and Sós in Budapest. The assessment of the agent's report reacted sharply to what was said: „the Catholic Church in Hungary is also making several attempts to create a united front of the various churches against communism." It clearly called this a „centrally directed activity" and instructed 'Sárvári' to sound out Kormos about what their intentions and goals were and who was behind the initiative.

On 11 March 1964, another meeting of the Budapest Rabbinate took place in the building complex of the official Hungarian Jewry on Síp Street, where Chief Rabbi Artúr Geyer read out the aforementioned (two) letters

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then from 1953, parish priest in Márianosztra http://sematizmus.vaciegyhazmegye.hu/feladatkor_kategoria.php?id=6&plebania_id=107 (Accessed August 10, 2025.) In 1958, he was a chaplain in Érsekvadkert, and in 1959, in Nagymaros https://nagymarosiplebania.hu/lelkipasztoraink/ (Accessed August 10, 2025). In 1960, he was parish priest in Tarján http://plebaniatarjan.lapunk.hu/?modul=oldal&tartalom=1077132 (Accessed August 10, 2025), and then from 1968, he served in the Ják Chapel in Budapest, and from 1969, he was the director of the Servite Church on Martinelli Square.

61 Kormos 1968.

62 "No first name is legible in the report."

addressed to him by Father György Kis (previously, there had been talk of one).[63] Kis wrote about the obvious theological differences of opinion, but also about the need for „conversational meetings" between Catholic and Jewish clergy. He also complained about anti-Semitism and mentioned that there were also anti-Semites among the committed supporters of the system. The Budapest Rabbinate decided that Geyer should reply very politely to Kis, but that no steps should be taken until Imre Benoschofsky had discussed this with the competent supreme authority (obviously, the relevant officials of the State Office for Church Affairs). Chief Rabbi Salgó also reported on his meeting with Ottó Kormos, and received permission from the rabbinate for a private conversation. Salgó wrote him a letter; on the 16th, Kormos called him, and they met on the 23rd. The recipient (or assessor) of the state security report wrote in strict terms: „New signs are arriving of the activity of the Catholic clergy, which is aimed at creating a united front. It is an interesting phenomenon that Fr. Dr. György Kiss (sic!) wants to use the sensitivity of the Jews to anti-Semitism to fight against communism, when he writes in his letter that state functionaries and party members are anti-Semites. This phenomenon is interestingly in harmony with the resolution of the World Zionist Organisation, which states that the emigration of Jews to Israel should be facilitated by all means, and with the sharp anti-Soviet campaign that the Western Zionist organisations have been waging recently."[64] Police Major Ferenc Mélykuti also drew the attention of agent 'Sárvári' to the fact that he should meet with Kormos and obtain information about Father Kis's letters as well, and find out who was pulling these strings.

On 23 March 1964, Father Ottó Kormos visited Chief Rabbi László Salgó (cover name 'Sárvári').[65] The topic of the conversation was specifically the Jewish-Christian „rapprochement." Kormos spoke of a programmatic involvement and gave the chief rabbi two books that discuss the issue from a „new" perspective. In addition, he handed over two issues of the journal named *Una Sancta*. This journal was published in the monastery in Niederaltaich, Germany (near Augsburg). It was a forum for ecumenical

63 ÁBTL 3.1.2. H-40.122. Work file. 'Sárvári György'. Report of agent 'Sárvári', 20 March 1964.
64 ÁBTL 3.1.2. H-40.122. 'Sárvári György'. Report of agent 'Sárvári', 20 March 1964.
65 ÁBTL 3.1.2. H-40.122. 'Sárvári György'. Report of agent 'Sárvári', 26 March 1964.

and inter-religious dialogue and also dealt with Jewish-Christian issues.[66] Ottó Kormos claimed that he had also been invited there and expressed his hope of spending his summer holiday there. He also expressed to the probably surprised rabbi that he would like the Mindszenty case to be settled, and at the same time (similarly to Poland) the relationship between the Hungarian state and the church. The extremely friendly Kormos then floated the idea of a return visit in the summer to the chief rabbi, and then spoke of his travels in the Soviet Union. He also said that on 20 April, he would pay another visit, but perhaps he would bring a Protestant pastor with him. As he received no reply to this, he agreed to arrive alone. Major Mélykuti, the author of the state security assessment, expressed his great joy that Kormos had named the „Western centres" with which he was in contact, and drew the attention of agent 'Sárvári' to the fact that he should continue to maintain a good relationship with the priest and try to „get out" of him as much information as possible. He should also agree – said the major – to bring the Protestant pastor with him next time. A copy of the report was sent to Pál Rajos,[67] who was dealing with the person of Kormos.[68]

One more very important event took place, which can perhaps be called the closing event of this series. In his autobiographical work, György Kis wrote that in 1964, on the twentieth anniversary of the tragedy of Hungarian Jewry, he had proposed through a bishop that (on the model of the Fulda declaration of the German bishops) a circular letter be drafted in memory of this tragic event. A draft was prepared for him, and then the whole thing was rejected on the grounds that *„the Jews" would consider this circular letter*

66 He thus handed over four publications; the state security report described three of them: Hans-Joachim Kraus's work *Begegnung mit dem Judentum. Das Erbe Israels und die Christenheit* (Encounter with Judaism. The Heritage of Israel and Christendom), the second was F.W. Foerster's book *Die jüdische Frage. Vom Mysterium Israels* (The Jewish Question. On the Mystery of Israel). The third and fourth were the March 1961 and July 1963 issues of *Una Sancta*.

67 Pál Rajos had a serious state security past and – among other things – participated in the investigation against Imre Nagy and his associates. https://neb.hu/asset/phpt44NKI.pdf (Accessed August 11, 2025).

68 In the year of his death, 1972, Ottó Kormos also participated in the rabbinical ordination of two young men, István Berger and György Landeszmann, which took place on 2 January at the Rabbinical Seminary. *Új Élet* described the appearance of Kormos – who was then the parish priest/church director of the Servite church on Martinelli Square – as the participation of a „sister denomination." Rabbinical Ordination. *Új Élet,* 15 January 1972, 3.

an „unauthorised interference" and that those within the Catholic Church who were in any case talking about „Jewish rule" would accuse the episcopal conference of being „Jewish hirelings."[69] This initiative of the Bakonyszentlászló parish priest met the same fate as the previous one; the Hungarian bishops did not feel the need to take the initiative.

CONCLUSION

In the early 1960s, the circumstances were – in every respect – immature for a sincere dialogue, and the establishment of contact came from the Catholic side. We can assume that it was predominantly a private initiative (Father György Kis's role is particularly worth mentioning here), although a strong German Catholic and general conciliar influence was present. The initiative-taking role of the Catholic leaders (archbishops, bishops) could not be established, although there is a document that mentions the name of Pál Brezanóczy (in this connection). The Hungarian Catholic Church was very slow to adopt the conciliar resolutions; this was also observable in the case of other topics. Nostra Aetate also entered the Hungarian Catholic bloodstream extremely sluggishly. In 1966, *Vigilia* published an article by Cardinal Agostino Bea on the document, which had originally appeared in the Roman Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*.[70] In 1970, László Gyürki published an article in the same place on the significance of the conciliar document,[71] and then in 1982, *Vigilia* dedicated a whole thematic issue to the topic (no. 11).[72] The journal *Teológia* published an article by Chief Rabbi József Schweitzer in 1974 and 1987.[73] The question also occupied the

69 Kis, 1987.

70 Bea 1966, 217–225.

71 Gyürki 1970, 148–153.

72 In this, among others, László Paskai (Introduction), László Lukács, József Szécsi, Alfréd Schőner, György Száraz, and Géza Hegedüs published, and a conversation could also be read with Chief Rabbi Sándor Scheiber, the director-professor of the National Rabbinical Seminary (interview by B. András Bálint).

73 Schweitzer 1974, 207–211; Ibid. 1987, 77–80.

theologian-professor Tamás Nyíri, who also wrote an article for Sándor Szenes's volume.[74]

No common theological platform or any kind of dialogue, or even – at an administrative-organisational level – cooperation, was established in these decades; until the change of regime, not even representative corporate meetings were held. A good example of this is that (some twenty years later) the inter-church peace committee of the National Peace Council, established in December 1983 – to which 13 Hungarian churches and religious communities joined – mostly served the interests of Soviet and Hungarian state policy.[75] And yet, at least in principle, there would have been an opportunity for dialogue, since the chairman of the body was the Reformed Bishop Tibor Bartha, while its vice-chairman was Chief Rabbi László Salgó. But the role conception of the peace committee, prescribed by the state, did not aim at the rapprochement (or rather, the bringing closer) of Judaism and Christianity, but at the legitimisation of official state policy by the churches, and generally, for this role, church figures connected to the state security and (or) loyal to the Kádárist state were chosen. A good example of this is that already at this very beginning, in this body, the representatives of the Hungarian churches made an anti-American „peace declaration" reminiscent of the Cold War.

Returning to the 1960s: the Hungarian Jewish leaders – despite the existence of personal connections – were very suspicious of any external initiative; even the most open-minded Sándor Scheiber (who had extensive contacts that also extended to Christian intellectuals, and was known as a personal good friend of the famous Catholic ethnographer Sándor Bálint (1904–1980), and at one time also supported the exiled scholar from the resources of the Jewish community) expected steps from the outside, from the Christian side. And in the Catholic Church, there were very many who saw a kind of „Jewish rule" in the communist/socialist system that had begun in the coalition era and had fully developed from 1949, and which persecuted and strongly controlled the churches, including the Catholics: this view did not help the spirit of any kind of dialogue to prevail either.

74 Szenes 1986.

75 The inter-church peace committee of the National Peace Council has been formed. *Új Élet,* 15 December 1983, 3.

There was one more decisive element to this „connection." In the leadership of both religions/, there were also agents, who on the one hand considered making contact a means of gathering information (it is thanks to this that we know about these events at all), but on the other hand, they could also dampen (if they wanted to) the positive effects and spirit of the council. This means that apart from the personally involved, and therefore highly committed, Father György Kis of Bakonyszentlászló, we do not know the true motives of the other clerics involved in the case; the involvement of several of them as agents can be assumed. Pál Brezanóczy, the apostolic administrator of Eger, a cultured leader of the Hungarian church – who also played a special moderating role between the Party-state and the Catholic Church – was aware of the conciliar initiatives, since he participated in all four sessions, although at the first two „only" as an expert.[76] It is conceivable that his priest, Gyula Bakonyi, who was personally involved in the Jewish matter, conveyed his feelers to the official Jewish representation – thereby conforming to the Vatican spirit and its line, while at the same time he could also obtain and transmit information. But on the part of the state authorities, authorising the Vatican opening (and openness) for Hungarian church practice was not entirely without danger: *the representatives of the political power feared nothing more than that some kind of rapprochement would begin between the religions in Hungary, and* (*they even wrote this down*) *the idea of an anti-system clerical united front appeared before their „mind's eye," of which the Second Vatican Council was* (*in their eyes*) *an incubator.* Despite all this, and the fact that most of the people involved in the whole story also had a clear state security agenda, we can still see that – even if distortedly, fragmentarily, and incompletely, and without even having started the theological dialogue, but first establishing personal connections – the demand for dialogue, the possibility of it, appeared for the first time in post-1949, socialist Hungary.

76 Ságí 2015, 113–151.

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