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In the Web of Political Language. Verbal Warfare and the 1945 Change of Regime in a Residential Building in Budapest*

This essay examines a conflict that arose between “Christian” and “Jewish” inhabitants of a tenement near the large ring street (*Nagykörút*, Grand Boulevard) in Budapest during the Second World War and in its immediate aftermath, when a new political system was beginning to take form. The analysis is based on documents related to a case involving housing matters and a case that came before one of the People’s Courts. I consider the cultural context in which a middle class “Christian gentleman’s” family that was suffering impoverishment and a decline in social mobility interpreted the “Jewish” milieu in which it found itself, a milieu that presented continuous affronts to its norms but from which it was unable to extricate itself because of the housing system, which was under close scrutiny given the circumstances of the war. How did the Jewish inhabitants of the tenement, most of whom had suffered persecution, respond to this family in the wake of the political changes of 1945? My intention is to shed light on the long term social process by which the official and hierarchical social image of the Horthy system and the concomitant system of norms began to lose their substance and relevance in the first half of the 1940s as a consequence of the impoverishment of the middle class and increasingly limited housing mobility. This took place before this system began, in 1945, to be exposed to radical attacks cloaked in the garb of political legitimacy.

In one of the residential inner neighborhoods of Budapest, in a building inhabited by tenants of not particularly high status, a dispute occurred among certain residents that spanned the 1940s.¹ The conflict was occasioned by a dispute surrounding the behavioral norms displayed in the public spaces of the apartment house. Specifically, one resident of the building, an unmarried and stay-at-home woman of nearly fifty living at home with her mother, was aggrieved that certain residents were violating the house regulations through their conduct, while the building caretaker, as the guardian of this order, was not enforcing the rules. One week after the German occupation of the country on March 19,

* I would like to thank Katalin Fenyves and Dániel Bolgár for their comments on my paper.

1 The sources for the case are: Budapest Főváros Levéltára [Budapest City Archives, hereafter: BFL] VII.5.e Budapesti (Királyi) Büntetőtörvényszék iratai. Népbírószágtól átvett peres ügyek iratai (hereafter Nb.) 18275/1949; XXV.1.a Budapesti Népbírószágtól átvett peres ügyek iratai 4924/1946; IV.1432.a Budapest Székesfőváros Központi Lakáshivatala iratai, Általános iratok 476/1947.

1944, the aggrieved resident, Aranka Richter, wrote a letter to the woman who owned the building. In it, citing the recent political changes she outlined (not for the first time) the disputes within the building. She expected help from her presumably because she trusted that the German occupation and the ensuing political restructuring would improve her chances vis-à-vis her antagonists in the building. Months later, availing herself of the opportunities provided by a further political turnabout, the takeover of power by the Arrow Cross Party, she attempted (unsuccessfully, as it turned out) to denounce the caretaker. Then in 1945 the tables were turned, and with the coming of the postwar new order her opponents began to make increasingly more active use of the means offered by the new political regime; these means differed from the previous ones only in their opposing content. In their lives the political turns of 1944–1945 bore precisely the opposite portent. For them the German occupation had brought mortal danger, whereas 1945 brought “liberation”: a return home from the ghetto, military labor service or the camp. On several occasions throughout 1945 and 1946 they denounced Aranka Richter to the political police, and the denunciations finally culminated in a trial before the People’s Court. As a result, after having spent half a year in custody, in the summer of 1947 Aranka Richter was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment; then in December 1947 her sentence was reduced in second instance to seven months.

The written traces of the conflict, which lasted for almost a decade, show the refined contours of the balance of power prevailing in the house. The community of residents in the building was mostly identical before and after 1945. Despite the fact that a substantial number of the building’s residents had been affected by the Jewish persecutions, in the spring of 1945 the building continued to be inhabited by the same families who had lived alongside one another since the second half of the 1930s. The Jewish resident community proved stable after 1945, too, and those residents unaffected by the Jewish persecutions did not change as a result of the war either: the tenants who had moved in before the war, in the second half of the 1930s at the latest, almost without exception remained inhabitants of the building in the postwar years as well. Because of the rapid changes in the political balance of power during and after the Second World War, the internal relations of this resident community were reinterpreted several times. Rooted in a hierarchical thinking that translated the cultural differences experienced side by side daily as well as divergent lifestyles and behavioral modes into the subordinate-superordinate relations of social statuses, the conflict was revealed time and again to the public sphere as embodied in the bureaucracy

and the authorities (i.e., the state), and time and again it was translated into the currently legitimate political language. During the years covered by the dispute the sets of political and ideological categories underwent rapid and radical changes, and this demanded that members of society immediately recognize the situation and adapt to it. Rapid political orientation and at the same time the ability to assert interests through political means became a precondition for existence. In the conflict examined here, too, the positions of the opposing sides changed according to how much they could identify their own situation with the dominant ideology, thereby privatizing the state in their own individual interest (privatization of the public realm): the hierarchy of social statuses, never devoid of ideologies or political meanings, was arranged into newer and newer constellations as a function of changing power relations.² Rather than passively submitting to power plays transpiring above the heads of average people, all this meant actively participating in the shaping, operating and maintaining of the political system. From the moment that antagonisms among the residents were also articulated in the language of politics, discord among neighbors could be diverted into institutional channels and become part of the interaction between the demands of citizens and the possessors of executive power that at all times operates the state itself and its apparatus.

The Almásy Square incident allows one to observe the process whereby a clash of divergences in cultural and behavioral patterns generated an evolving dispute that became imbued with political content and was brought before the political criminal authorities, overarching the change of regime in 1945. The study examines the ways in which the components of the general transformation, slow at first and then accelerating during the war years, appeared in local and individual constellations, and how the experience of social transformation was channeled into mechanisms that created and maintained the political system.

This analysis of the dispute relies first and foremost on the documents (complaints, statements and other petitions made by the two opposing sides) from the proceedings of the political police and the People's Court against Aranka Richter that took place between 1945 and 1947. The trial before the People's Court itself contains Aranka Richter's letter from 1944 as well. This is supplemented by the written traces of the Richters' apartment case extant in the archives of the municipal administration; however, the apartment case itself,

2 For the expression "privatization of the state" and a discussion of the problem, see Jan T. Gross, "Social Control under Totalitarianism," in *Toward a General Theory of Social Control*, vol. 2, *Selected Problems*, ed. Donald Black (Orlando: Academic Press, 1984), 59–77.

which began in 1945 and was still in progress as late as 1947, will not form part of the analysis.³ Thanks to all these sources we have before us the utterances of the protagonists from the years between 1944 and 1947, and the stories they tell reach all the way back to the turn of the 1930s and 1940s.

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For the widow Mrs. Richter and her two unmarried daughters, the move to the house on Almássy Square meant a change in status: their change of domicile was a sign of downward social mobility. The reason for their move was their shattered material and social condition following the death of the head of the family, a university professor. Because of this they moved from a four-room apartment with servant's quarters on Népszínház Street in the Józsefváros District, with an annual rent of 1500 pengő, to a three-room apartment with servant's quarters on Almássy Square, with an annual rent of 1200 pengő. Because Mrs. Richter had an aversion to taking in lodgers, the family therefore made up for the loss of income entailed by living on a widow's pension not in this manner but rather by saving on the rent. The three co-habiting adult women—the then sixty-three year-old mother and her thirty-eight and thirty-three year-old unmarried daughters—rented a cheaper apartment (even then, presumably of suitable size), where they did not even keep a maid.⁴

Their move placed them in a social milieu somewhat different from that to which they had been accustomed. There was a fundamental difference between the two buildings with respect to their apartment stocks as well. In their previous domicile, the apartment house on Népszínház Street, larger and more expensive apartments than the one on Almássy Square could be rented. Whereas the latter house was dominated by three-room apartments with servant's quarters rented for 1200 pengő annually, in the building on Népszínház Street four-room apartments with front hall and servant's quarters rented for 1500 pengő annually predominated. In addition, the way the apartment types were situated within the building here (on Népszínház Street) created a hierarchy by floors as well. On the ground floor were one-room apartments with kitchens, whereas

3 The system of apartment leases in Budapest had been placed under official control during the war years, and later this system was maintained after 1945 as well. Under this, based on the principle of "justified housing need," a part of the Richters' apartment also became subject to requisition by the authorities and assignment of tenants.

4 Mrs. Richter had two sons as well; they, however, did not live in the same household with them.

every apartment on the first, second and third floors had four rooms with servant's quarters. On the fourth floor could be found only two- and three-room units, and finally a one-room unit was located on the fifth floor. By contrast, in the building on Almássy Square the apartments of varying size were situated together on each floor as well. As for the inhabitants, there was no difference between the two houses in as much as both had heterogeneous tenants, ranging from high-ranking public and private employees through doctors, merchants and entrepreneurs to craftsmen, tradesmen and journeymen. Nor did they differ from each other in another respect: in both the percentage of tenants of the Israelite faith was so high that each would be added to the list of yellow-star buildings in 1944.⁵ The crucial difference between the two buildings showed up in the divergences in lifestyles, which in turn were related to differences in their



Figure 1. The building on Almássy Square. Photo by the author

5 In the house of Népszínház Street, we know the percentage of Israelite tenants only from 1941, but not from the period when the Richters lived there. See: BFL IV.1419.j Budapest Székesfőváros Statisztikai Hivatalának iratai. Az 1941. évi budapesti népszámlálás felvételi és feldolgozási iratainak gyűjteménye. On June 16, 1944, then on a modified list on June 22, 1944, the mayor designated those buildings in Budapest in which those obliged to wear the yellow star could live. A yellow star had to be placed on the door of the building. See Tim Cole, *Holocaust City. The Making of a Jewish Ghetto* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

housing stocks. In fact, in the area of keeping servants and taking in lodgers the two buildings were the exact opposites of one another.⁶

Whereas in the building on Almássy Square keeping a maid was rare and taking in lodgers the norm, in the building on Népszínház Street it was precisely the reverse: many kept maids, but hardly any took in lodgers. Despite the fact that twelve of the seventeen apartments in the building on Almássy Square had servant's quarters, according to the 1941 population census maids were kept in a mere three households. At the same time, in the building on Népszínház Street domestic employees were not indicated in only one of the three- and four-room apartments, while in these apartments there was only one case of a lodger. On Almássy Square at the same time lodgers were kept in eight of the seventeen apartments. The households taking in lodgers formed the more populous tenancies in the building: whereas households that did not take in a lodger had primarily two to three persons, those taking in lodgers numbered five to six persons. The practice of taking in lodgers was linked primarily to the three-room apartments with servant's quarters, and half of the tenancies belonging to this type had lodgers. In other words, it was precisely in the tenancies belonging to the building's largest and most expensive type of apartment (and at the same time the one giving it its dominant middle-class character—the type in which the Richters themselves lived) that this lifestyle was characteristic. The households that took in lodgers, moreover, were concentrated precisely on the third floor: three of the floor's four apartments took in lodgers, and the unmarried tenant of Apartment III/3 next door to the Richters, where eight lodgers resided, earned her living expressly from this practice.

In this new milieu, with the passage of a few years conflicts would arise between the Richters and their neighbors. They linked the deterioration of the situation to a specific point in time: 1940, when, they asserted, new residents moved into the building on Almássy Square, thereby altering the building community in such a way that living there became unbearable for them. In her letter to the building owner a week after the German occupation of the country, the Richter daughter stated that “until four years ago I did not know that there existed such base people who through the practice of the late caretaker filled the third floor of Your Ladyship's building in particular. The situation today is simply dreadful because oversight within the house is tantamount to nothing. This is

6 Although we do not know who lived in the house on Népszínház Street at the same time as the Richters, the difference in lifestyles between the residents of the two buildings in relation to the variations in housing stocks may be called a factor independent of the turnover of the residents.

one of the reasons why up to and including last week the bulk of the residents through their most awful behavior have lowered the building's niveau to that of a market stall."⁷ She likewise dated the start of their problems in the residence in a letter one year later, when she informed the owner of the following: "In the past five years the bulk of the building's residents has changed, and the peaceful building together with the neighborhood has become so noisy that we have done everything possible so that we may move out during this time. However, because of the war and the subsequent suddenly pressing conditions (high costs, family reasons, etc.) this has been completely thwarted."⁸ In the course of the affair it also turned out that she had involved the police with the house already prior to 1944,⁹ and a friend of Aranka Richter was also aware of a conflict lasting years.¹⁰

However, the Richters precisely delineated the changes that they viewed as the start of their difficulties within the building not only in time but in space as well. They linked the transformation they detected in the building's society in 1940 to the third floor, specifically perceiving the neighboring Apartment No. III/3 (where so many lodgers lived) as a focal point: "On behalf of my mother I ask Your Ladyship to be so kind as to inform the Housing Office of Apartment III on the third floor, in which the Tenant does not live inside at all, but from where the nuisances for years have determined the behavior of certain residents of the entire building. I believe the Housing Office can find a way for respectable people to live in the apartment directly next to us. And this lesson would certainly influence the climate of the entire building."¹¹ However, the building's Apartment III/3 would gain publicity in a different context as well. Following the designation of the yellow-star houses in June 1944, the widowed owner of the apartment building on Almássi Square, Mrs. Antal Berkó (née Astrid Gregersen), was also one of those building owners who lodged complaints against the mayor's decision and tried to have their buildings exempted from the designation. Mrs. Berkó's arguments included that "the five tenants in the building rent the larger three- and four-room apartments exclusively. Only the tenants of the small apartments are Jews, who take in Jews as lodgers as well. Hitherto I have attempted, as much as the

7 BFL Nb. 100. Letter of Aranka Richter to the building owner, March 28, 1944.

8 BFL XVII.2 Budapesti Nemzeti Bizottság iratai 17. kisdoboz, 22. csomó. Petition of Aranka Richter, May 2, 1945.

9 Before the People's Court the caretaker mentioned having seen a dossier in November 1944: "in the packet were the accused's old house affairs[,] written complaints, or copies of them." (BFL Nb. 56. Testimony of László Lambert in the People's Court, June 10, 1947.)

10 BFL Nb. 94. Declaration of Clerical Worker Ilona Borbély, September 28, 1945 (my emphasis – Á. N.).

11 BFL Nb. 96. Letter of Aranka Richter to the building owner [1945].

lease restrictions have permitted [.] to terminate the leases of the Jewish tenants. [...] At present, too, I have initiated proceedings to have Christian renters placed in the apartment of the Jewish tenant renting Apartment No. III/3, because the present tenant has taken in exclusively Jewish lodgers and has herself continually lived in the provinces.”¹² To this she added, like so many of her fellow building owners, that it was common knowledge that the “Jews” were dirty, and therefore imperiled the condition of her building, which would only increase in the event of designation. It may well be that her opinion, or at least the strategy she applied to the given situation, was strongly influenced by the complaints coming from the Richters. Under the circumstances of the designation of the yellow-star houses, in any case she need not have felt any inhibitions about publicly articulating an attribute of the apartment which the Richters, though they did not state it explicitly, nonetheless hinted at: they had a problem with the residents of the apartment also because they were Jewish.

The assumption that the Richters also hinted at this is confirmed elsewhere as well. In a letter written on March 28, 1944 Aranka Richter complained to the owner about the deteriorated level of the building, to her negative comment on the residents’ behavior she also added the following: “Of course, the present political turnabout has rendered some of the residents simply invisible, but the result and all that happens behind the walls is left behind.”¹³ It was either leftists or those qualifying as Jews who would have become invisible as a consequence of the German presence.¹⁴ Although Almássy Square and its environs had been known as an area densely populated by left-wing movements since the late nineteenth century, and Communists were hiding within the building itself, the proportion of the Jews¹⁵ within the building was large enough for the Richters to be able to detect their withdrawal.¹⁶ To contemporaries, linking the decline

12 BFL IV.1409.c Budapest Székesfőváros Polgármesterének iratai. Polgármesteri Ügyosztályok Központi Irattára 2784/1944–IX. 148159.

13 BFL Nb. 100. Letter of Aranka Richter to the building owner, March 28, 1944.

14 Indicative of the evolving sense of fear of those deemed Jewish was that the number of suicides committed by such persons in Budapest immediately increased after the German occupation; see András Lugosi, “Zsidók és keresztények városa: Az üldöztetés térbeli rendje Budapesten 1943–1944-ben” [City of Jews and Christians: the Spatial Order of the Persecution in Budapest in 1943–1944], manuscript, 2008. This change, as an immediate reaction to the German occupation, also possibly explains why the building’s Jewish residents did not appear in this period.

15 When I use the term Jewish without quotation marks, it means the “religious affiliation.” “Jewish” in quotation marks indicates the contemporary category.

16 For the labor movement topography of Erzsébetváros, see Andor Tímár, *Erzsébetváros* (Budapest: Budapest Főváros VII. Kerületi Tanács, [1970]).

they experienced in the quality of their residence to those inhabitants who had “became invisible” because of the German occupation must have been a clearly understandable hint that for them it was the Jews living in the building who represented the social status and style of behavior which they regarded as beneath their own self-attributed status and perceived as disorder.

The Richters’ self-definition is clearly outlined from their petitions written during the affair. In her letters and petitions sent to various addressees between 1944 and 1946, the Richter daughter frequently resorted to categories designating social status, regarding both themselves and others. In both the spring of 1944 and summer of 1945 she addressed the building owner in her letters as “Your Ladyship” (*Méltóságos Asszony*), calling her a “Hungarian gentlewoman” (*magyar úrinő*) and a “proper gentlewoman” (*korrekt úrinő*), and defining herself, too, as a “gentlewoman.” Her friend, an employee at a private firm who made a declaration in support of Aranka Richter in September 1945, used the same categorization when she called her a “gentlewoman of irreproachable morals.”

For her opponents in the building, meanwhile, although the Richter daughter did not use categories designating social status, she did use plenty of labels. In 1944 in the presence of the building owner she labeled them “despicable people,” an “uneducated, obtrusive bunch,” “violent, uncultured person[s],” while she compared the conditions in the building (which in her opinion they had created) to a “market stall.” In 1945 she wrote likewise to the owner that “decent people could live next door”; in 1946, however, as the dispute became more and more savage she once again spoke of a “dispicable, parasitical rotten company” and “fraudulent criminal gang.” In her petition in the fall of 1946, while addressing the district chief as a “person of culture,” she described the situation as a “cultural scandal.” In addition to the status-marking categories conforming to the official conception of society in the Horthy era, the expressions she used all referred to hierarchically viewed cultural and behavioral manifestations. She used opposites such as “intelligent person” versus “violent and quite uncultured individual,” or “a proper gentlewoman” versus “people of Pestszentlőrinc,” who “generally were not a safe entourage for a proper gentlewoman left on her own.”¹⁷ In addition, she mentioned the “bad manners” of certain residents, comparing their behavior to a “market stall,” and complained of the noise and commotion dominating the building because of them. Just as in the summer of

17 BFL Nb. 98. Letter of Aranka Richter to the building owner, August 31, 1945. The “people of Pestszentlőrinc” may have appeared in the house in the course of December 1944 when the authorities moved them into the vacated apartments of Jews forced into the ghetto.

1945 she had informed the owner that “in the past five years the bulk of the building’s residents [had] changed, and the peaceful building together with the neighborhood [had] become so noisy,”¹⁸ in her evidence given to the political police in the fall of the same year she traced every charge leveled against her back to this single factor. She said things such as “they made a racket or were a nuisance,” “made noise in front of my apartment,” the caretaker “was not willing to ensure quiet in the building,” and that she had a problem with “those who make a racket in the shelter.”¹⁹ Although her arguments could also be interpreted as a defensive strategy in order for her to neutralize her alleged anti-Semitic and political utterances, her other statements tie all this unequivocally to her expectations concerning behavioral norms. That she experienced their problems in the building as a violation of norms was unequivocally indicated by her opinion of the caretaker as well. Her recurring complaint about the “upsetting of the house regulations”²⁰ and about how “I expected the caretaker to observe the house regulations,”²¹ but who “was unwilling to ensure quiet,”²² indicated that she expected the caretaker, as the guardian of the building regulations, to take punitive sanctions against the objectionable behaviors. Yet the signs indicate that the caretaker was unwilling to do this, perhaps he did not regard this same form of behavior as a violation of norms.

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It was not only the witnesses accusing Aranka Richter who claimed that she was nervous, ill-tempered in nature and, indeed, an outright neurotic; but she herself several times referred to her neurological treatment. Her neurological problems may very well have played a role in her perceiving any sort of newly appearing behavior in the building primarily as noise, to which she was incapable of adapting. However, her heightened sensitivity was also combined with cultural content.

For the Richters, being “genteel” as a form of conduct ruled out relations with neighbors, while during the affair they took every opportunity to emphasize the building residents’ practice of being constantly with their neighbors, which they perceived as hostile. Of their former domicile in Pozsony Aranka Richter said that

18 BFL XVII.2 17. kisdoboz, 22. csomó, May 2, 1945.

19 BFL Nb. 43. September 25, 1945.

20 BFL Nb. 100–101. Letter of Aranka Richter to the building owner, March 28, 1944.

21 BFL IV.1409.c 174/1945–I. Petition of Aranka Richter, February 14, 1945.

22 BFL Nb. 43. Testimony of Suspect Aranka Richter, September 25, 1945.

“moving from Kolozsvár to Pozsony we did not know any neighbors. Yet they were gentlefolk.”²³ In other words, maintaining neighborly relations presumably had never been part of their lifestyle. Therefore they easily could have felt the sociability evolving in the building to be a violation of norms, and “being noisy” as one symptom of this. They likewise may have experienced the concentration of lodgers on their floor (indeed, right next door) as a difference in social status. This practice was not only alien to them (“we never had lodgers”²⁴), one to which they could not have become accustomed in their previous, inherently higher-status residence either, but they very well may have associated it with a lack of being genteel and at the same time noise. In addition to this, however, the noise also had another connotation: the Richters perceived their neighbors according to a set of cultural concepts that had evolved for decades.

When in June 1944 the owner lodged a protest with the mayor because of the designation of her building as a yellow-star house, that is, a “Jewish house,” in her arguments she linked the practice of keeping lodgers in the building to the “Jews.” Her petition stated that in her building the larger, three- and four-room apartments were rented by “Christians,” and “Jewish” tenants lived only “in the small apartments,” and only they took in lodgers. Her claims did not correspond to reality,²⁵ but they were in step with the publicly announced program of ghettoization, that is, the improvement of the “Christians” housing situation to the detriment of the “Jews.” In her depiction, if the building were designated a yellow-star house, then her “Christian” renters living in the larger apartments would unequivocally suffer damages because of their “Jewish” neighbors renting the smaller apartments. Yet on the other hand, her emphasis on the fact that many “Jewish” lodgers lived in her building contradicted her previous argument, since in principle it was the buildings inhabited in the majority by those deemed to be Jews according to the statutes that were designated as yellow-star houses. The contradiction may be resolved by her outlook, which perhaps inadvertently revealed itself. Because like many she, too, argued using the anti-Semitic cliché according to which the “Jews” were dirty and therefore depreciated the condition of her property, it is thus conceivable that she identified the residents of the small apartments who took in lodgers or lived as lodgers, as the representatives of a lower social status, with the category of “Jew.” The Richters also gave meaning to the concept of “Jew” in linking to it the notion of social inferiority

23 BFL Nb. 101. Letter of Aranka Richter to the building owner, March 28, 1944.

24 BFL XVII.2 17. kisdoboz, 22. csomó. Petition of Aranka Richter, May 2, 1945.

25 Among other reasons because more than half of the three-room apartments were rented by Jews.

manifesting itself in the divergent behaviors and lifestyles. They assimilated the conception of society which held that the Jews “represent something apart, inferior, socially ignored, if not to be concealed.”²⁶

During the political police procedures against her and her trial before the People’s Court Aranka Richter did not deny only one of the charges categorically: “I acknowledge that in such instances when I was irritated I really did use the word Jew.”²⁷ Her testimony in this vein makes it unequivocal that, although based on the evidence of their surviving letters and petitions they never declared this in writing, the Richters identified the residents who in their view did not behave appropriately, violated the house regulations and made a racket as “Jews” and regarded this type of behavior as “Jewish.” Behind her perjorative labels the Richter daughter essentially thought of the category of “Jew” as the opposite of “lady,” regarding the former as a group incapable of behaving in a “genteel manner,” thus giving voice to the cultural anti-Semitism that had formed part of the “genteel” mentality since the end of the nineteenth century.²⁸ This outlook perceived the “Jew” as the opposite of the “refined,” “cultured,” “distinguished” person of “pleasant manners,” defining him as “excitable, mobile, loud and irritable.”²⁹ Comparing the quality of the building, which had deteriorated on account of certain residents, to a “market booth” also used this set of cultural signs. Also part of this system of signs was the association of the words “Jewish,” “market” and “noise.” This was captured in 1874 in the Czuczor–Fogarasi explanatory dictionary under the following entry: “*Zsidóiskola* (Jewish school), coll. n.: A school for Jewish pupils. Fig. humorous sense: the noisy speech of some multitude or assembly neither understanding nor listening to one another. Used in the same sense: Jewish market, Jewish vespers and synagogue.”³⁰ This semantic content later became integrated into the anti-Semitic mode of speech appearing on the political level as well. For the writer József Erdélyi the voice of the “Jews” is again placed only in the context of marketplace loudness: “‘We must beat back the Jews to door-to-door sales in the area of commerce, and to marketplace auctioneering in the area of literature,’ I stated, ‘otherwise they will destroy us, they will occupy the country, they will turn us into mere

26 Anna Lesznai’s 1917 essay is quoted in Katalin Fenyves, *Képzelt asszimiláció? Négy zsidó értelmiségi nemzedék önképe* [Imagined Assimilation? The Self-Image of Four Generations of Jewish Intellectuals] (Budapest: Corvina, 2010), 223.

27 BFL Nb. 43. Testimony of Aranka Richter at the political police station, September 25, 1945.

28 For a presentation of this kind of anti-Semitism, see Fenyves, *Képzelt asszimiláció*, 232–41.

29 Oszkár Jászi’s 1917 and 1919 statements are quoted in Fenyves, *Képzelt asszimiláció*, 234–36.

30 Quoted in Fenyves, *Képzelt asszimiláció*, 137.

servants...”³¹ It was precisely at the time of the Almásy Square conflict, in the course of 1944, that the expression “Jewish market” itself became imbued with the expressly pejorative meaning linked to the Jewish persecution, thus becoming embedded into the legitimized anti-Semitic violence.³²

Behind the expression and its variants stood a more extensive set of ideas which posited the attitude of the “Jews” to the public and at the same time their behavior in public space as differing from that of “non-Jews.” In 1917 Emma Ritoók formulated how “non-Jews” perceived this public behavior, seen as specific, as follows: “[The Jew] is accustomed to evaluating according to loudness, he does not know that quality of the Hungarian whereby he does not like to draw attention to himself, that for him there is but a single forum, politics, and that to him the most disagreeable attribute of the Jews is precisely that they have a forum everywhere; at the professor’s lectern, in the clinic, on the tram, in the shop doorway, in the newspaper.”³³ This negative cultural content, which the dominant “non-Jewish” culture associated with the public behavior of the “Jews,” may have determined how the Richters perceived the behavior of their Jewish neighbors in the public space of the building, offering at the same time the linguistic means of articulating it as well.

In this conception of the world, the circumstance that the Richters were living next to the servants’ stairs while the three-room apartment next to the main staircase was rented by a Jewish family, counted as the overturning of the hierarchical order (Figure 2). The spatial organization of the residential buildings of Budapest, which also manifested itself in the duality of the main staircase–servants’ staircase and mapped the social hierarchy, bore social meanings as well in this period: the maids could not even use the main staircase. In the rear apartment the Richters had two choices: either they traveled via the servants’ staircase, which would have been out of the question, or by the main staircase and along the corridor. Yet the latter option meant that despite their standoffishness

31 József Erdélyi, *A harmadik fiú. Önéletrajz* [The Third Son. An Autobiography] (n. p.: Turul Kiadás, n. d.), 232, quoted in János Pelle, *Az utolsó vérvádak. Az etnikai gyűlölet és a politikai manipuláció kelet-európai történetéből* [The Last Blood Libels. Ethnic Hatred and Political Manipulation from East European History] (Budapest: Pelikán, 1996), 54.

32 “In the meantime Platoon Sergeant Kilinyi arrived on the scene, who with a brutal movement shoved one of the ladies on the shoulder: ‘What’s going on here? A Jewish market ... that’s enough of the circus! There’s a war on! Approaching the railway cars is forbidden! This is the decree!’” Emanuel Kamil, *Erdei sárga karszalagosok* [Transylvanians with Yellow Armbands], 38, accessed December 17, 2012, www.emanuelkamil.home.ro/hu_vol1pag001-100.pdf.

33 Emma Ritoók, “Van-e zsidókérdés Magyarországon?” [Is There a Jewish Question in Hungary?], *Huszadik Század* 18, no. 36 (1917): 135 (my emphasis – Á. N.).

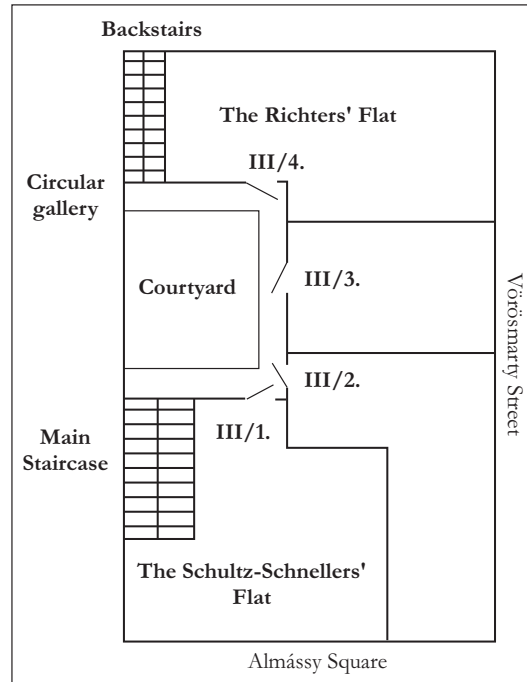


Figure 2. Floor plan of the third floor

befitting their “genteel” identity they would regularly enter into the public space of the house, which could be observed by anyone: “If somebody passed by the window along the corridor, they immediately discussed this person, and she learned more in one hour about what was going on in the building than in all the ten years they had lived there. They lived in a large apartment, of which only the kitchen and servant’s windows opened onto the corridor, thus they never saw anyone who came or went. They didn’t even know who lived in the house, but from this spot, as if from some guard post, the Véghelys kept track of all the residents and their every affair.”³⁴ Passing along the corridor the Richters must have regularly experienced the type of social life which they themselves, following the norms of their social status, completely shunned. In her statement the Richter daughter declared “I have not been and am not on speaking terms with the residents of the building. Whenever it has been avoidable, I have not

34 Zsigmond Móricz, *Az asszony beleszól* [The Lady Chimes In] (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1934), 67; Judit Valló treats this structure of space in apartment houses in connection with Móricz; see Judit Valló, “Móricz Zsigmond Budapestje: Egy bérház társadalma Az asszony beleszól című Móricz-regényben” [Zsigmond Móricz’s Budapest: The Society of an Apartment House in Móricz’s Novel *The Lady Chimes In*], in *A város és társadalma: Tanulmányok Bácskai Vera tiszteletére* [The City and Its Society: Studies in Honor of Vera Bácskai], ed. István H. Németh et al. (Budapest: Hajnal István Kör–Társadalomtörténeti Egyesület, 2011), 456–57.

communicated with anyone.”³⁵ Not only did the Richters constantly detect the presence of the “Jews,” but they must have confronted the very collapse of the hierarchy on a daily basis as they passed the door of the apartment next to the main staircase, rented by the well-situated Jewish family that earned its living from a prominent tailor’s workshop. The shattering of their social standing, which was embodied also in their change of apartment, must have only sharpened their sensitivity to the signs of social positions.

3

In one of her petitions in the fall of 1946 Aranka Richter drew a quite three-dimensional picture of relations in the building as she perceived them. She wrote that “in the building the caretaker is unwilling to take notice of anything and for years has represented an easily corruptible position. He quotes the house commissioner, who, however, last year moved into my mother’s apartment by force for a day and who since then has lived in the building for a couple of months in another apartment, where together with the women who lived with me last year and the present house commissioner also currently living with us, one or two detectives and one or two contacts from the Housing Office they form a ring around me and keep me under a veritable seige.”³⁶ Thus, she detected a hostile network at work in the building, one whose members were the caretaker, the house commissioner and certain residents.

Since October 1942 oversight in the house had been tended to by an ironworker and his wife. The iron-founder’s apprentice, in his thirties and with four years of civil (a lower stage of middle) school education, was an organized skilled worker: since 1941 he had been a member of the Social Democratic Party and a trade union delegate.³⁷ As a soldier, László Lambert failed to return from leave to fight alongside the Germans in the fall or winter of 1944 but instead remained in the building.³⁸ His vetting in the summer of 1945 did not cause any

35 BFL Nb. 47.

36 BFL IV.1432.b Budapest Székesfőváros Központi Lakáshivatala iratai, Vezetői iratok 17. kisdoboz, Hivatalvezetői vegyes iratok, 1946. Petition of Aranka Richter, October 4, 1946.

37 BFL XVII.1598 Magyar Házfelügyelők és Segédházfelügyelők 291/a. számú Igazoló Bizottságának iratai, VII. ker. Lambert László. Declaration of László Lambert, June 15, 1945.

38 In his statement filled out in his screening he gives the date of the conclusion of his military service as September 1944. This is more or less confirmed by his 1946 testimony (BFL Nb. 30. Witness statement of László Lambert, September 19, 1946), while based on his wife’s testimony we may put his return home in December 1944. (BFL Nb. 38. Witness statement of Mrs. László Lambert, September 18, 1946).

problems, and nor is there any sign that he could not cooperate with the house commissioner, as occurred in other buildings, because of jurisdictional rivalry. Taking advantage of the opportunities for mobility offered by the party state, he became an engineering official in 1950 and at the same time probably ceased to work as the caretaker as well.³⁹

Oszkár Schlésinger, elected house commissioner by the residents after the siege, had certainly not been a resident of the building before the German occupation, but he was the brother-in-law of the Jewish printing press owner who had been living in the building since 1915.⁴⁰ It is possible that the Jewish crop agent, in his fifties and with six years of elementary school education, came to live in the house with his relatives in the summer of 1944, during the ghettoization process (the concentration of Jews into yellow-star houses). A crucial factor in his selection as house commissioner may have been that he embodied the majority of the building's residents. Besides the fact that he also may have earned trust through his brother-in-law, one of the three occupants residing in the house the longest, with his low level of schooling and as a Jew as well must have easily fit in amongst the building's residents, the majority of whom survived the persecution. Although his six years' of elementary schooling hardly made him one of the building's better schooled residents (who were incidentally in the minority), nevertheless it was he, and not the university-trained non-Jewish doctor or financial councilor, whom they elected.⁴¹

These same criteria must have prevailed in the election of his deputy and (after the Schlésingers moved away in early 1946) successor. The widow Mrs. Miksa Erős (née Anna Weisz) was likewise Jewish, and although as far as Mrs. Richter knew she had studied at a secondary school (*gimnázium*), her position as a factory worker as well as the compositional style and spelling of her petitions were not exactly indicative of higher schooling.⁴² Mrs. Erős had lived in the

39 BFL IV.1404 Budapest Székesfőváros Törvényhatósági Bizottsága Igazoló Választmányának iratai. 1950. évi törvényhatósági választói névjegyzékek.

40 After the siege house and block commissioners were mandatorily elected in the buildings of Budapest to assist the public administration, which at first was not functioning but later resumed. However, from the very beginning the post was targeted for appropriation by the Communist Party.

41 In the spring of 1945 only two of the building's twenty-six tenants and co-tenants possessed a university education, while the number of those with only elementary school education was nine.

42 The housing form of March 1945 was filled out by the widow Mrs. Richter, and it was she who indicated secondary school (*gimnázium*) in Mrs. Erős's personal data under the heading schooling. See BFL IV.1419.n Budapest Székesfőváros Statisztikai Hivatalának iratai, Az 1945. évi budapesti népösszeírás felvételi és feldolgozási iratainak gyűjteménye.

building as a lodger in Apartment III/3, next door to the Richters, since 1941. The nearly fifty-year-old Jewish lady returned to the building in early February 1945, while her husband had died in January from the illness he acquired during the persecution. However, after being struck by a bomb on January 2, 1945, two of the three rooms in apartment III/3 were destroyed, and so at the time of her return home the block commissioner (*báztömbmegbízott*) moved her into the Richters' likewise damaged apartment.

The Richters were never on good terms with anyone who ever held a position of authority in the building. During the war years they were on expressly bad terms with the building caretaker, the wife of the assistant caretaker and the air-raid warden. Their conflict with the caretaker concerned the observance of the building regulations; the Richter daughter considered the wife of the assistant caretaker “ungrateful” and “vile”; and she nurtured antipathies for the air-raid warden, who had completed six years of elementary school, because of his “poor manners” and “lack of culture,” qualities which in her eyes ruled out the possibility of anyone occupying an official post above others. After the siege Aranka Richter also linked the house commissioner, with whom her relationship must have been quite venomous, to this hostile circle.

The state of affairs in the building after the siege was filled with an entirely new meaning for Aranka Richter. According to the statements attributed to her by the residents testifying against her, she experienced the postwar social and political changes as the breakdown of order. In August 1946 she had allegedly shouted that “as long as the likes of Gerő, Ferenc Nagy and Rákosi govern, there will be no order here.”⁴³ She mapped the change of regime according to the logic of “us” versus “them,” contrasting “them” (defined as “Jewish Communists”) with the undefined “us,” and she saw the new balance of power as the overturned power relations of these two groups: “She asserted furthermore that we would be on top for a little while longer, then it would be their turn. She also declared that woe to you, you stinking Jewish Communist band.”⁴⁴ In a society experienced in her ideas as cleft in two, she identified each of the two opposing sides with a political system, the pre-1945 regime with the “us” group, that of post-1945 with the “them” group, that is, the “Jewish Communists;” she expected that the old system, “our system,” would return, and that through a showdown with the “Jews and the Communists” order would be restored.

43 BFL Nb. 34. Witness statement of Mrs. Miksa Erős, September 18, 1946.

44 BFL Nb. 3. Report of Mrs. Miksa Erős, August 10, 1946.

She perceived relations within the building according to these same notions after the war. In the triumvirate of the “Communist” building caretaker, the Jewish house commissioner and deputy house commissioner she discerned that the “Communist Jews” had assumed control, which only must have been reinforced by the fact that some of the residents hostile to her were members of the Communist Party. According to the assertions of the neighbors giving evidence against her to the political police and at the People’s Court in 1946, she now regularly abused them with the phrase “stinking Jewish Communist gang,” and warned that they would not be in control for long. She witnessed the changes within her apartment, the house and the country alike while fitting them into this interpretative framework, and for her the change of political regime was mapped in the building’s inner relations: she saw her domicile as part of the “Communist Jewish rule.”⁴⁵

4

Among the building occupants giving testimony against Aranka Richter to the political police in 1945 and 1946, and before the People’s Court in 1947, only the caretaker and his wife did not count as Jews.⁴⁶ At the same time, no one testified on behalf of Aranka Richter. In this connection, not only did the inspector of the political police write in his report that “not one of the building’s residents was willing to make an exculpatory statement on behalf of the suspect,”⁴⁷ but one resident even declared that “the inhabitants of the building without exception condemn her present conduct.”⁴⁸ The abstention of the non-Jewish residents

45 For the contemporary everyday interpretations of the 1945 change of regime and the topos of “Communist Jewish rule,” see Gergely Kunt, “A kultuszteremtés társadalomtörténete. Szocializációk, előítéletek, politikai propagandák kamasznaplók tükrében (1938–1956)” [The Social History of the Cult Creation. Socializations, Prejudices and Political Propaganda as Reflected in Teenage Diaries (1938–1956)] (PhD dissertation, Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, 2012).

46 Apart from the Lamberts, only Mrs. Lipót Fleischmann was not a Jew, but her husband was. About half of the building’s Jewish residents stayed out of the affair, and in fact no one living in the apartment next door to the Richters testified. With regard to the cited events and linguistic forms, the divergences observable in the testimonies from witness to witness indicate that taking the minutes of the testimonies did not simply bring about stereotyped texts using the elements of a new political language, but rather recorded the personal experiences of the fights and shouting matches experienced by the residents. And although obviously the questions posed to the witnesses indicated the content expected in the testimonies, the omissions—silence—observable in the statements when compared to one another indicate the existence of the witnesses’ scope for action and the possibilities of individual reactions.

47 BFL Nb. 4. Report, September 20, 1946.

48 BFL Nb. 36. Witness statement of Mrs. József Liebermann, September 18, 1946.

displayed a rather unified picture: without exception they must have thought that the animosity of the Jews in the building towards Aranka Richter was their own affair, in which they did not have to take part. They drew a dividing line between themselves and the Jews, and their position on the matter, which affected the latter but was alien to them, was to remain aloof and silent.

The campaign to mobilize the political criminal authorities against Aranka Richter was linked to three focal points in the building. One was Rózsi Strausz, who lived on the first floor, and the others were two neighboring apartments on the third floor: that of Mrs. Imre Rauch, who lived at Number III/2, and the Schultz-Schneller apartment at Number III/1, on the corridor across from the Richters, where following their return home from the ghetto and the camps the female members of the family who survived the persecution stayed together. It was in this latter apartment that the house commissioner, Oszkár Schlésinger, also lived for a time. These three centers were expanded to include other residents of the house in various lineups, but always according to the same clearly observable organization: the witnesses were almost exclusively women. Ten of the twelve residents testifying at the three different dates were women (only the caretaker and the house commissioner were men), and the attacked side also consisted of women: a widowed lady and her unmarried daughter. The preponderance of women is explained in part by the fact that of the ten women who agreed to testify one was divorced, one unmarried, and four or five had become widows as a result of the Jewish persecutions. However, the husbands of the others did not become involved in the affair either, just as Mrs. Richter's son, who lived elsewhere, did not intercede on his mother's and sister's behalf either. And even in the case of the two men who did speak out in the matter, it may be presumed that they as official persons were obliged to appear before the authorities. Thus, the dispute within the building's residential community was the affair of the Jews and the women.

The five witnesses' testimonies recorded during the proceedings of the political police in 1945 revealed the following accusations: Aranka Richter was pro-German and had been visited by German soldiers during the German occupation; she held anti-Semitic sentiments and constantly used Jewish epithets; she had threatened to denounce the residents of the building; and furthermore she reviled the new regime, declaring that the new order could not last long and the old one would return shortly. The nine witness statements made in the same place one year later contained various elements that were also related to the increase in the number of witnesses. First, new elements appeared among the

accusations stemming from events occurring during the war (Aranka Richter's behavior in the shelter, or the richly detailed narrative of the Richter daughter's denunciation of the caretaker). Second, they cited the insult "stinking/dirty Jewish, Communist gang," presumably a new kind of current daily experience for all of them, as well as allusions to the pogroms that had recently taken place in Miskolc and Kunmadaras.⁴⁹ The emphasis on her acquaintance with German soldiers was retained, while her anti-Semitic sentiments this time were described not with the expression "Jewish epithet" but rather with the adjective "anti-Semitic." All the while mention of Aranka Richter's quarrelsome, ill-tempered nature became dominant. The basis of the accusations remained unchanged and continued to be built on the elements of pro-German feeling, anti-Semitic sentiments and animosity toward the regime.

Then in 1947 the communicative situation surrounding the witnesses fundamentally changed, and this elicited a new kind of behavior from them. In the witness statements recorded at the proceedings before the People's Court the palette of accusations did not change, and although here and there elements of minor weight disappeared (for example, the element of Aranka Richter's behavior in the shelter, or threatening to make a denunciation), new ones did not appear. The lone shift was that the insult "stinking/dirty Jewish, Communist gang," which had first cropped up in 1946, now became the most clear-cut accusation. However, an uncertainty of sorts, a perceptible retreat compared to the previous testimony, appeared in the recriminations. For instance, whereas this time, too, five witnesses claimed that the accused constantly had used and was using Jewish epithets, four either said only that she had used them in the air-raid shelter or cited only hearsay or declared that they had not heard such things from her since the liberation, or had not heard her clearly. The witnesses became similarly uncertain regarding the charge of hostility toward the regime as well. There were five witnesses who, having resolutely declared in their 1945 and 1946 testimony that Aranka Richter reviled the regime or was dissatisfied with it, omitted this same element before the People's Court. And this same retreat appeared in one witness who, having accused Aranka Richter in 1946 also of making allusions to the pogroms in Miskolc and Kunmadaras, in 1947 now claimed not to remember such utterances.

49 On May 21, 1946 a pogrom took place in Kunmadaras, while on August 1, 1946 three Jewish inhabitants were lynched in Miskolc. Péter Apor, "A népi demokrácia építése: Kunmadaras, 1946" [Building the People's Democracy: Kunmadaras, 1946], *Századok* 132 (1998): 601–32; Péter Apor, "The Lost Deportations: Kunmadaras 1946" (MA Thesis, Budapest, CEU, 1996).

It was only the testimony of the caretaker and his wife that deviated from these concordant witness statements, which displayed similar linkages of the elements. László Lambert and his wife assumed a role only in the case that commenced in 1946 and culminated in the trial before the People's Court in 1947; in 1945 they did not give evidence. Their testimonies contained very few accusations: they were aware of only a fraction of what the other residents recounted. Pro-German feeling and acquaintance with German soldiers appeared only quite faintly in their statements or not at all. Neither of them mentioned the "pro-German sentiments"; and while László Lambert claimed only on hearsay that Aranka Richter had received German soldiers in her apartment, when asked by the people's prosecutor his wife stated frankly that she knew nothing of German soldiers. In a similar way they did not mention the use of "Jewish epithets" either. Although one of their testimonies included the charge that Aranka Richter harbored anti-Semitic sentiments, Mrs. Lambert later said that she had not heard the accused's declarations concerning the Jews distinctly. About her conduct regarding Jews László Lambert cited no details whatsoever, and Mrs. Lambert spoke of her behavior in the shelter only in 1946. In 1946 they made no mention of remarks about the pogroms. In 1947, too, evidently answering the question posed to her, Mrs. Lambert stated only that she had not heard such a thing. And the epithet "dirty Jewish, Communist gang" did not appear in their testimonies either.

In place of all these elements, their testimonies told the history of the denunciation of the caretaker by Aranka Richter in 1944, emphasizing Aranka Richter's quarrelsome, ill-tempered nature, and anti-regime utterances. But this, too, they did differently than the others. In connection with Aranka Richter's ill-tempered nature they alone remarked that "because of her conceited manner that looks down on the poor person there has not even been anyone on speaking terms with her over an extended period of time,"⁵⁰ or as Mrs. Lambert put it: "Even now she insults everyone and no one is good enough for her."⁵¹ And their comments on Aranka Richter's hostility to the regime also differed from those of the other witnesses in being less straightforward and definitive. At the proceedings of the People's Court László Lambert expressly stated that he had not heard her make pronouncements against the regime.⁵² Contradicting this he nevertheless did note that "one night two weeks ago with my own ears I heard her shout 'this is

50 BFL Nb. 30. Witness statement of László Lambert, September 19, 1946.

51 BFL Nb. 38. Witness statement of Mrs. László Lambert, September 18, 1946.

52 BFL Nb. 56. Witness statement of László Lambert, June 10, 1947.

democracy, this is shitocracy.” In her statements Mrs. Lambert went further than this, claiming that Aranka Richter “is not reconciled to the present situation”; that “she makes statements like ‘this won’t last long’”,⁵³ that “I once heard her say ‘this can’t last long, things will be different for sure.’”⁵⁴ However, this was still substantially more cautious than the other residents’ assertions.

Based on all this it appears that the Lamberts saw (and tried to make the authorities see) the dispute within the building differently than the other testifying residents did: they, too, regarded the conflict surrounding Aranka Richter as the Jews’ affair, in which they did not intend to intervene. Their testimonies betray a certain hesitation to prove Aranka Richter’s pro-German feeling and anti-Semitism. Instead of discussing anti-Jewishness they gave the happenings in the building an entirely different emphasis: in addition to a detailed account of the one event that affected them personally (the denunciation), they stressed Aranka Richter’s political and social views. They were the only ones who highlighted the elements from Aranka Richter’s utterances in such a way that they referred to differences in social standing as interpreted according to class ideology, in which “lady” was the opposite not of “Jew” but rather of “poor person.” For them Aranka Richter’s behavior was interpreted not as a binary division between “Jew” and “Christian,” but rather they attributed “class content” to it. However, even this they did with a fair mount of caution. The quite faint mention of the anti-regime pronouncements, as well as the “class content” (occurring in their statements alone, but only just hinted at) were articulated not in words that fitting into the political lexicon of the period and the others’ usage, but rather in a politically neutral fashion that was devoid of ideological rhetoric, and this kind of neutrality also matched their caution.

At first glance, the Lamberts’ complete ignorance of everything was peculiarly at odds with their position as caretakers. Although the husband had been at the front until November or December 1944, and thus it is possible that he really did not encounter the German officers visiting Aranka Richter, it is unlikely that his wife, who as building caretaker obviously must have been aware of all movement occurring through the building entrance, had not seen the German soldiers at all, as she claimed. As a consequence of its very location the caretaker’s one-room kitchen apartment, which situated just opposite the doorway and the main staircase and next to the backstairs, looked out on the building’s courtyard (Figure 3), served

53 BFL Nb. 38. Witness statement of Mrs. László Lambert, September 18, 1946.

54 BFL Nb. 58. Witness statement of Mrs. László Lambert, June 10, 1947.

to supervise movement within the house. In such a relatively small, four-storey apartment house, with only four apartments per floor and its corridor encircling a 9x15 meter courtyard, it is difficult to conceive that the thirty-six year-old caretaker would not have heard anything of the quarrels and cursing audible on the third floor corridor or by the open windows from her apartment opening onto the courtyard. She alleged that “since the accused was shouting up on the third floor, I could not hear her statements against the Jews and the regime distinctly,”⁵⁵ while on the contrary a resident on the ground floor heard everything.⁵⁶ In addition to the above reasons, however, the Lamberts may have had a separate reason for keeping silent as well. It may be presumed that, as employees of the owner, Mrs. Antal Berkó, they were in no position to be directing accusations of a political nature against a tenant who in her social position and mentality greatly resembled the owner of the building, not only from the point of view that the latter, too, was a member of the middle class (in fact, a “lady” of the upper middle class), but also because the accusations against Aranka Richter perhaps would have applied equally to her as well. While in June 1944 Mrs. Berkó tried to avoid the designation of her apartment building as a yellow-star, that is a “Jewish house,” by utilizing anti-Semitic clichés as an argument, it was in those same days that the registry court recorded the procurement rights of her son, as manager, for the wine wholesale business, which her sister had obtained in November 1942 by exploiting the absence of the interned Jewish owner.⁵⁷ If nothing else, the Lamberts must have known of the effort to prevent the building’s designation as a yellow-star house, and perhaps at other times, too, they had had occasion to gain experience of the owner’s views relating the Jews. If under such circumstances through their testimony they maintained Aranka Richter’s anti-Semitism and pro-German feeling, their employer quite justifiably could have felt them to be a potential source of danger to her as well.

The testimony of another witness, Rózsi Strausz, who played a key role in the attack against Aranka Richter, evolved with the passage of time in a way somewhat reminiscent of that of the Lamberts. In 1945 and 1946 she cited several elements to illustrate Aranka Richter’s anti-Jewishness to the political police. She called her an anti-Semite, accused her of constantly using Jewish epithets, and she, too, brought up her remarks about the pogroms in Miskolc and Kunmadaras. Yet in

55 BFL Nb. 58. Witness statement of Mrs. László Lambert, June 10, 1947.

56 “I live on the ground floor and always hear the accused constantly shouting ‘dirty Jewish bunch.’” BFL Nb. 59. Witness statement of Mrs. József Liebermann, June 10, 1947.

57 BFL VII.5.e 23678/1949. Mrs. József Mikolay and Co.

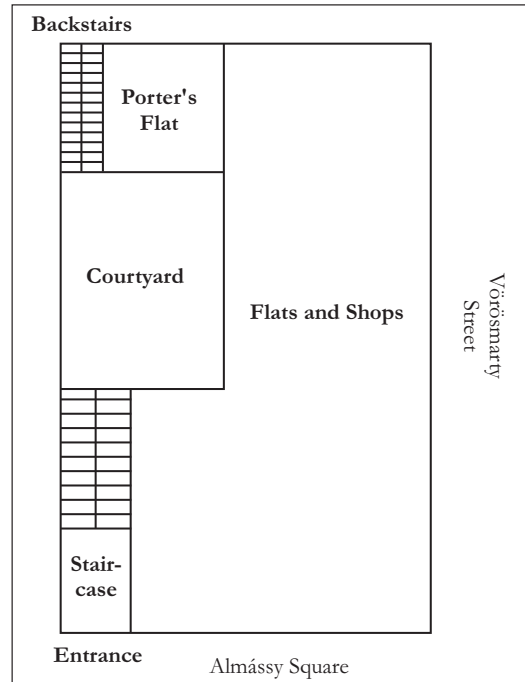


Figure 3. Floor plan of the ground floor

her statement before the People's Court in 1947 there is no longer a trace of any of this. Indeed, with regard to the pogroms she claimed not to remember such pronouncements. Aranka Richter's anti-Jewishness disappeared from her testimony to such a degree that even the charge, repeated in the others' testimony, of the accused's use of the compound epithet "dirty (stinking) Jewish–Communist gang" appeared in her statement only as "stinking Communist gang." At the same time, her evidence, given at three different dates, contained an element that occurred in no one else's. At the trial before the People's Court in 1947, to the judge's question she replied that "[Aranka Richter] once made the declaration that '*we working people* will never have any peace from her.'"⁵⁸ This same "working" category cropped up in her testimony as early as 1946, at that time as part of her self-identification. In a statement given to the political police she complained that Aranka Richter "because of her ill-tempered conduct keeps the residents of the building in constant agitation. We spend all our free time in court and at the police station, which *for us working people* is an intolerable state of affairs."⁵⁹

58 BFL Nb. 46. Witness Statement of Rózsi Strausz, June 10, 1947 (my emphasis – Á. N.).

59 BFL Nb. 26. Witness Statement of Rózsi Strausz, September 19, 1946 (my emphasis – Á. N.).

Examining the witnesses, there is no doubt that the stay-at-home widow Mrs. Richter and her likewise stay-at-home daughter were confronted by mostly working women. Only four of the women testifying did not work outside of the home, while the narrower circle of those who participated intensively in the hostilities was made up of working Jewish women who lived off their own earnings. It is no coincidence that one of the central categories of the new, post-1945 political language, the term “working” (*dolgozó*), appeared precisely in the testimony of one member of this group, a divorced woman working as a clerk. Between the persons of Rózsi Strausz and Aranka Richter the conflict in the building carried separate semantic layers as well. The dispute between the two women, who were almost of the same age (45–50 years old), who moved into the house in the same year and who both rented three-room apartments with servant’s quarters, was not only about the contrast of a “gentlewoman” to a “Jew,” but also the antipathies of the “gentlewoman” toward a “Jewish woman.” For the mother and daughter, as members of the genteel middle class, the divorced and working Rózsi Strausz must have embodied the independent, modern woman, whom as a type the conservative ideology explicitly associated with the figure of the “Jewish woman.”⁶⁰ In addition, her status as a divorcée made her, of all the Jewish working females, especially suited to be just the target of the Richter daughter’s negative ideas: with respect to women’s roles her modernity doubly manifested itself. Moreover, in Rózsi Strausz’s case it is also possible that her identity as a working woman from 1945 on was imbued also with Communist ideological content. The fact that before the People’s Court in 1947 she denied having heard Aranka Richter make allusions to the pogroms, and furthermore, the fact that she now no longer called her an anti-Semite, nor accused her of using Jewish epithets, and did not quote her specific insults aimed at the Jews either, may be interpreted as her having in the meantime adopted the Communist Party’s stance concerning the persecution of the Jews, i.e., from a certain point in time on it kept profoundly silent about it.⁶¹

60 Cf. Katalin Fenyves, “When Sexism meets Racism: The 1920 *Numerus Clausus* Law in Hungary,” AHEA – E-Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association 12 (2011), accessed December 15, 2012, <http://ahea.net/e-journal/volume-4-2011/12>.

61 The Hungarian Communist Party handled the problem of the Jewish persecutions so that they would not arouse anti-Semitism. For the sake of its political aims it absolved the members of the Arrow Cross Party and extreme right-wing organizations who did not fill a leading post, did not press the question of the Jewish persecutions, and avoided the very word “Jew” itself, making it taboo as it were. On the strategy of the MCP regarding the Jewish question see Róbert Győri Szabó, *A kommunizmus és a zsidóság az 1945 utáni Magyarországon* [Communism and the Jews in Post-1945 Hungary] (Budapest: Gondolat, 2009); Péter György, *Apám helyett* [Instead of My Father] (Budapest: Magvető, 2011).

In the meantime, two reports were drafted on the matter by the political police, which the Communist Party held in its hands.⁶² A report written by an inspector in September 1945 remained outside the Communist mode of speech. In the report Aranka Richter is nothing more than “a vindictive individual,” who had denounced the building caretaker and another resident because “she was not satisfied with them.” There was no mention of Arrow Cross men, and the accusations voiced by the residents, which served as the basis of the report, in the inspector’s head became apolitical. From the testimonies he retained only that the suspect was pro-German and cursed the Jews (not even the label anti-Semitic appears); to all this he added only that “during her interrogation she professed her innocence insolently and boisterously.” In the report, which was not very abundant in details, there is no sign that its author, an inspector of the political police, placed the suspect’s behavior into any sort of political interpretative framework, or that he had at least made an attempt to do so.

By comparison, precisely one year later, in September 1946, an investigating police lieutenant described the behavior of the Richter daughter using unequivocally political categories. Thus, “according to the complaint the above-named both in the past and in the present has displayed fascist, anti-Semitic and anti-democratic conduct in her place of residence,” and “holds anti-Semitic and pro-German sentiments.” Unlike the earlier report, after enumerating the elements retained from the witness statements he then noted as well that “she is conceited, imagines herself as belonging to a higher social class and cannot find her place in the current system.” While the first half of this characterization must have relied solely on the accusation formulated by the caretaker (“her conceited manner that looked down on the poor person”⁶³), but even that translated into the Communist rhetorical scheme, the second half was explicitly the interpretation of the investigating lieutenant, for it did not occur to any of the building residents to make such an assertion. In the sentence the charge of class alienation, which by no means formed part of the common sentiment within the building, now began to assume form, and the label “fascist,” too, was the lieutenant’s innovation, since none of the witnesses used this term. They saw Aranka Richter not, in the new regime’s still malleable enemy categories, as a “class enemy” or a “fascist,” nor did they try to have her seen as such, but much rather as an anti-Semitic woman who irreconcilably hated them as “Jewish” and,

62 Or at least this many have survived. The source of the two reports: BFL Nb. 6. Report, September, 25 1945, and BFL Nb. 4. Report, September 20, 1946.

63 BFL Nb. 30. Witness statement of László Lambert, September 19, 1946.

in the wake of the political turnabout, more and more fiercely, who moreover also hated and reviled the new political system for being a “Jewish regime.” What was omitted from the report was precisely that which had formed the common logic in the Jewish residents’ testimonies. The investigating lieutenant kept silent about those elements according to which Aranka Richter attacked the new regime as a “Communist” and “Jewish” order. He cited not one statement which was based on the opposition of the “us” and “them” groups, which would have revealed that the suspect identified the new regime with the “them” group, defined as “Communist Jews.” As a member of both the political police and the Communist Party, he extracted the anti-Semitic content from the building’s “Jewish–Christian” conflict and translated it into the class-based ideological logic of defending the political and social order.

5

Hungarian historiography treats the year 1945 as a caesura, which it examines either on one side of the boundary or the other. The approach and at the same time even the research program, which Tony Judt and Jan T. Gross began to outline,⁶⁴ until now have yet to show little influence in Hungary: the examination of socio-political processes during and after the Second World War as a whole and in their continuity is lacking.⁶⁵ Yet it is precisely within this continuum that the case of Almásy Square is situated, namely, at the meeting point of social transformations which began to appear after the First World War, slowly took shape during the years, but with the Second World War radically accelerated and extending across the year 1945 exerted their effect in their own continuity.⁶⁶ In the intersection of convergent social processes the Richters’ social identity and the connected behavioral norms began to lose their validity.

The Richters’ downward slide within the middle class was not a unique phenomenon, and in this sense they were representatives of a broader middle-class stratum. As a consequence of their downward mobility their access to residential space also changed: in comparison to their own expectations they

64 Jan. T. Gross, “Themes for a Social History of War Experience and Collaboration,” in *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and its Aftermath*, ed. István Deák et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 15–35; Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

65 The only topic that is an exception to this: the issue of anti-Semitism.

66 With regard to the social effects of the Second World War Jan T. Gross goes as far as to speak of revolution.

had to make due with a lower quality. At the same time, the change in their share in residential space also fit into another scale of the social restructuring that accompanied the impoverishment of the middle class after World War I: the transformation of middle-class norms related to residential space and the narrowing of residential space through the dividing up of larger apartments into smaller ones. Later, during the years of the new war this no longer meant simply the transformation of market supply adapting to demand and the obligatory change in needs. It also meant the placing of the housing market, including the distribution of the residential space, as well as the channels of residential mobility under official control, and a worsening and resolved housing shortage. In turn, with the control of the market in apartment leases by the authorities the flexibility characteristic of the free-market apartment lease system, which made movement between apartments according to changes in life cycle, household structure or social status possible, ceased. With the extension of the official system of housing allocating in 1945, this situation became permanent. For the Richters, all this meant first the impossibility of moving out and, with the end of the war, the imposition of co-tenancy (*társbérlet*). The opportunity for them to choose their residential environment according to their social self-definition and cultural norms ceased. Their being forced to remain in turn began to undermine their social status, since in their residential environment their own social and cultural norms were considered invalid. On a general level, the narrowing of opportunities to obtain housing overturned the hierarchical system of social rules, which translated the hierarchy of social statuses to a hierarchy by size of apartment as well, and the official conception of society, with which the Richters also identified, became unrealizable. The long-term transformation of the system of apartment leases was at once the consequence of and the stimulus for the incipient dismantling of the hierarchy.

In the meantime, another social process was also taking place: a radical transformation in the relationship between the private and public spheres began within the multi-unit apartment building. The space of the public sphere expanded and became extremely intensive, while with respect to its content it became saturated with politics. As a component of this change, on the one hand a new type of common space came into existence within the building in the form of the air-raid shelter, bringing with it the hitherto unknown experience of the forcible confinement with the neighbors. Moreover, the functioning of the apartment building's hitherto existing public spaces (courtyard, corridor, stairway, doorway) was also transformed. The Jewish persecution and the reign

of the Arrow Cross fundamentally altered the use of the common spaces within the residential building and imbued them with new meanings: they became the everyday scenes of the presence of the authorities, of state violence and violence exercised through the privatization of the state, and of political action. After the siege this politicization would prove continuous in the formation of the new political system. Party agitation, political reckoning and political control kept the transformed structure running by creating new institutional forms. It was the change in the functioning of the public sphere in the apartment house, the politicization of the public realm, that brought into being all together the phenomenon which took shape in the Almásy Square affair: the political reinterpretation of neighborly relations, the political attack of neighbors against one another. Interwoven by cultural meanings and norms (which are never separable from political legitimacy), the space of the apartment house turned into a political arena.

In this transformation, the behavioral norms linked by the Richters to the public spaces of the apartment house—aloof conduct that refrained from sociability—became untenable during the war years. Nor was the (for them) overturned order restored even with the conclusion of the war. It is no coincidence that one of the recurring elements in the witness statements was the behavior of the Richter daughter in the shelter: just as in her conflict with the caretaker, it was the violation of the behavioral norms she considered valid that she experienced in this new kind of public space as well. The shift in the boundary between the private and public sphere of the residence, moreover, appeared also in the transformation of conditions for access to residential space. With the practice of co-tenancy, which had already begun in 1944 and became general in 1945, strange families and households were forced to share the space of the apartments; this, however, eroded the private-sphere character of the apartment. When the Richters' apartment came under the co-tenancy system, it upset the customary relationship between the private and public spheres, once again directly impacting their social identity and behavioral norms, which had maintained the strict separation of these spheres.

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