

INTERFAITH HELP JEWISH VOLUNTEERS AND HELPERS DURING THE REFUGEE CRISIS IN BUDAPEST*

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In the summer of 2015 the refugee crisis intensified and reached its peak in Hungary. As it was preceded by a harsh anti-refugee campaign sponsored and created by the government, this issue already divided the population. Because the government only gave a minimal amount of support to arrivals, many Hungarians and non-Hungarians residing (or visiting) Hungary volunteered to help in different ways to accommodate their needs, while others were inciting against “economic immigrants”. This paper focuses on Jewish volunteers whose help can be subsequently defined as interfaith or intercultural action. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as the general Islamophobic/anti-Semitic atmosphere in Europe often overshadows Jewish-Muslim relations; thus, Jews helping (mostly) Muslims—as was the case during that summer—caught my attention.

Keywords: *refugee crisis, interfaith, Jewish, philanthropy*

Introduction

In the summer of 2015 the so-called “refugee crisis”¹ intensified and reached its peak in Hungary. As it was preceded by a harsh anti-refugee campaign sponsored and created by the government² (for a detailed review of Hungarian events, see Appendix 7.1), this question already divided the population. As the government only gave a minimal amount of support to the arriving people, many Hungarians and non-Hungarians residing (or visiting) Hungary (Szurovecz, 2015) volunteered to help in different ways to accommodate their needs, while others were inciting against the “economic immigrants”.³

Even though the scope of helping (thousands of volunteers and several organizations) cannot be perceived as extraordinary, the phenomenon itself, together with other factors in Hungary, make it unique. These factors include high xenophobic sentiment, the previously mentioned anti-immigration campaign (Thorpe, 2015) and the general context in which the aid took place (low civic participation, etc.). This phenomenon was previously analysed at length by TÁRKI (Simonovits et al., 2016). However, this paper sheds light on a specific aspect: the

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¹ I do not prefer this term. However, it was widely used in public discourse. The term has been highly criticized (Roth, 2015).

² The first anti-immigrant speech took place after the Charlie Hebdo terrorist act (“A kimaxolt morális,” 2015)

³ This term is frequently used by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in his speeches. (For example: “Orbán: Gazdasági bevándorlóknak,” 2015; “Orbán Viktor: A bevándorlók nem csak,” 2015; Ablonczy, 2015)

help of Jewish volunteers, which can be subsequently defined as interfaith or intercultural action. As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as the general Islamophobic/anti-Semitic atmosphere in Europe often overshadows Jewish-Muslim relations, Jews helping (mostly) Muslims—as was the case that summer—caught my attention.

First, I will summarize the international background of Jews helping or supporting refugees. This will be followed by the Hungarian Jewish communities' actions. Then I will elaborate on my research and present my findings.

Examples of interfaith help

Jewish-Muslim relations are heavily burdened, and this conflict goes back centuries. This paper aims at presenting some positive examples of Jews helping (mostly) Muslim refugees, despite this historical background.

One initiative in the US—which did not remain invisible⁴—saw more than 1250 rabbis sign a letter in support of welcoming refugees after Donald Trump called for banning Muslims from entering the country and some governors were preparing to close their states' borders to refugees. The letter referred to times both when the US offered refuge for Jewish refugees fleeing persecution (at the beginning of the 20th century) and when they the USA did not (in 1939), which is cited as “a stain on the history of our country – a tragic decision made in a political climate of deep fear, suspicion and antisemitism” (“1000+ Rabbis sign,” 2015). Alongside the Holocaust motive was a Biblical quote: “You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 22:20-23). Both motivations appear in my interviews.

Another example from the international sphere is the help of an Israeli NGO, IsraAID, a non-profit and non-governmental organization. To fulfill its goal the organization “has been helping people all over the world overcome extreme crises and has provided millions with the vital support needed to move from destruction to reconstruction, and eventually, to sustainable living.”⁵ IsraAID operates in 31 countries struck by disasters or catastrophes, but its presence in the refugee crisis is regarded as a “unique challenge” as help is provided to people coming from countries with which Israel is at war (like Syria and Iraq) or have hostile relations (like Pakistan) (Gavin, 2015). In an interview one of the members found this argument irrelevant: “You are meeting fellow human beings,” she said. “You see agony and pain, you see a need, then what does it matter where the person is from?” (Gavin, 2015) Humanitarian aid is the third motive appearing in my interviews.

A more recent motivation also appears: the ADL and the Creative Action Network opened an exhibition combined with a donation drive where artists from all over the world tell their stories. The products can be bought and the money will be used to help refugees (“ADL and Artists,” 2015). The motto of this initiative—as it was

⁴ The US President quoted the HIAS initiative twice in his speech and eventually the refugee restrictions were not implemented.

⁵ See: <http://www.israaid.co.il/>

launched around Pesach, which is a holiday where Jews tell the story of Exodus, i.e., how Jews escaped Egypt—is “we were strangers too,” referring to biblical times (at least according to the description).

There were other smaller initiatives as well, such as the Montreal Jewish and Muslim community uniting to help Syrian refugees, some instances in England, Sholem Aleikum’s initiative of Viennese Jews, the North Charleston school’s co-managed project with JDC and Centropa, Mark Zuckerberg’s post on Facebook and Salaam-Shalom in Germany (Arnold, 2015; Herwood, 2015; “Shalom Alaikum,” 2015; Ludwid, 2015; “Zuckerberg, in Facebook post,” 2015; “Salaam-Schalom Initiative,” 2015).

Research

In this chapter I summarize the results of my research, starting with the description of the methodology, followed by the answers of my interviewees organized along three main motives which were touched upon in the first section.

Methodology

The interviewees were found using the snowball method. I asked many acquaintances if they knew people of Jewish origin (or identity) who helped during the refugee crisis, and then by using maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002) I selected a small group of people from the potential interviewees who differed by age, gender⁶ and religious/ethnic background (based on what I knew about them). The concept of being Jewish is debated. In this research project, the emphasis fell on their self-identification: those who considered themselves Jewish were included into the sample. The research was based in Budapest because most of the Hungarian Jewry (hence the Jewish organizations) is based in Budapest (Kovács, 2002). As the main goal was to explore the widest array of ways and various motivations for helping, I did not require a representative sample. I also decided to use some of the published articles on Jewish volunteers to widen the scope.

The length of the interviews ranged between 25 and 59 minutes and they were semi-structured (with guiding questions). The interview started off with an introduction where the interviewee presented him or herself by talking about family background and its Jewish relations, the profession of the parents and him or herself. The second part delved into the refugee crisis: what exactly they did, how often and where, what their main motivation was, what they think about the responsibility of Jewish organizations (mainly the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities, from now on: MAZSIHISZ, and the Unified Hungarian Jewish Congregation, from now on: EMIH) and how they perceive their actions. As a closing question, I asked them how they think the refugee crisis should be solved.

⁶ A recent research project claimed women are easier to be found among volunteers (Kende, 2015).

One of the biggest limitations of qualitative research is non-generalizability. However, as this study does not aim at giving an overview of the distribution of the answers, but rather highlights different motives, this methodology seems suitable. Furthermore, it is almost impossible to construct a representative sample, as the population is unknown (i.e., we do not know how many Jews with what kind of socio-demographic characteristics were helping during the refugee crisis).

General overview of the interviewees

As seen in the table (see Annex 7.2), the interviewees come from different backgrounds and experience their Jewish identity in different ways. In most cases assimilated family background means either the interviewee found out (or realized) about his or her Jewishness later, or that it was simply not a topic at home, both of which are typical of a certain group of today's Hungarian Jewry (Erős et al., 1985). Jewishness is an important part of the present day identities of every interviewee. In some cases, this meant they were (or still are) very active in Jewish (youth) organizations, or simply are surrounded by Jews and Jewish values, while some of them practice the Jewish religion.

The scope of helping and volunteering also differed: there were some who only helped once or twice, while some volunteered from five to ten times and again some spent most of their time at train stations (or where they were needed). (For a detailed overview see Appendix 7.2.) Almost all interviewees went beyond direct social action and made (or organized) donations.

Results

The most important findings of the analysis of my interviewees' answers are below, supplemented by findings from different reports and other interviews (which are available online) with volunteers who are openly Jewish.

How it all started

Following the structure of TÁRKI research, I start with the crucial moment: what was the first trigger? There were two factors influencing this. Either someone had to live in those areas where the presence of refugees escalated, and/or the person had to read the news to be informed about the crisis. From my interviews, I gathered that seeing refugees live or on the news had the same effect—at first.

I rather follow public events and politics and it was pouring into us. And I saw on forums that people started to move and do something. And I saw—surely there were other smaller groups—but what was really visible was Migration Aid and BK, Let's Help Refugees⁷ and for me Let's Help Refugees came in handy, I saw many acquaintances there that do something and then some. There were possi-

⁷ Groups helping refugees, initially organized via Facebook.

bilities to send donations, which is the most comfortable way for the couch revolutionary, like myself (laughing), but there was a moment in August when I felt that I have to do more. (Interviewee 5)

My motivation was that every disadvantaged person who is in need can build a better life for themselves with my help, I support them and I try to help if it doesn't hinder me. My inner feeling is that if I can help to stop the suffering of suffering people, I do it. And when I was at Köztársaság⁸ square, I saw that there is need. Actually, to be honest, the situation wasn't that harsh, when one went down to Keleti subway, one could be shocked or surprised. Especially as a pediatrician, the children's status and condition was that which sensitized me. And when I saw them, I decided to do this in an organized manner. To secure medical care especially for children but for everybody who is in need, which can help in their miserable situation. (Interviewee 4)

The latter quote includes something that was also mentioned in TÁRKI's report: a special empathy towards a specific group of people, in this case children. Here is another example:

Yes. I thought about women and children. Even with women I had [fear] but—it was stronger that I have to help. And I helped in a focused way. (Interviewee 11)

One aspect of fear is the reaction towards something new as implied in the word “xenophobia”. During the refugee crisis it intensified partially because of successful fear-mongering by the government (see above and/or Appendix 7.3). Being afraid or reluctant at first was observed among some of the interviewees. The general Jewish-Muslim atmosphere prevailing in Europe, and in the world in general, certainly strengthens the already uneasy relations between the two groups. As Slomó Köves⁹ said, within the religious communities known by him, the urge of helping is combined with a huge amount of fear (Kránicz, 2015). This is what Interviewee 11 (a religious female) struggled with as well (see the quote above). However, she added: “I would definitely not take any of them into the flat.” Another quote:

I got slowly engaged because I was afraid of them and I felt a distance from the situation but there was the point when you couldn't walk on the streets of Budapest without feeling you were in Egypt or I don't know where, some Middle Eastern city, in the high heat, the smells were really harsh and everything was a bit Middle Eastern. And I got linked very slowly. I had this feeling in me: “poor them, how bad it can be for them.” I didn't actually follow the news, I didn't pay attention to what's going on with them. I didn't read the news. I was like I have a lot of things, this is what's going on, I'm really sorry but I have a lot of things to do. And then in a circle of friends it came up that they adopted a family for a night. And they were talking about this, it got to me. (Interviewee 3)

⁸ The square used to be called Köztársaság tér (Republic Square) but the government changed it to Pope John Paul II Square. During the refugee crisis its nick name was Afghan Square because several refugees stayed there.

⁹ The founder and president of EMIH.

Interviewee 7 was not only fearful at the beginning, and only a bit later did her opinion turn around. Some of the quotes above also reveal the importance of friends: they can be a pressure point.

Another important factor which was found in the TÁRKI research (Simonovits et al., 2016) as well is the existence of previous volunteering experience. Interviewee 8 had volunteered once in her life, but because it was with immigrant children and it was an amazing experience, it helped her in this situation. Many of my interviewees were active members of the Jewish community (whether as a member of a youth organizations or a regular camper and later counsellor in a Jewish international summer camp, etc.) and as Kovács and Forrás-Bíró (2011) highlighted, most of the organizations and events are organized with the help of volunteers, easily leading to another volunteer work. Another explanation for this is that one of the core values of Judaism is philanthropy and these Jewish organizations are mostly leftist communities where these values are taught.

So we had this frustration from our organization's side that it doesn't do anything and obviously our whole Jewish education, which is Szarvas¹⁰ for us and which is Jewish school for others, donations and helping others played always an important role in it and we indeed had a feeling that up to now, this kind of time didn't test to what extent we can help those who are in need. (Interviewee 1)

Motivations

Nagy (2013) states several arguments concerning why states should help refugees. Even though they are mostly about the macro level, some of them can be transferred to the micro world. I divided the motives into three main categories which partially overlap with TÁRKI's findings. The first and most common motive found is *humanitarian aid*. Coinciding with universal egalitarian help in Nagy's writing, it is based on sharing a common trait: being human. The second is closely related but a bit more specific to background: it is the understanding of the others' situation thanks to *sharing a common fate*. In the case of Jews this can be related to the Holocaust as well as to a general feeling/experience of being persecuted. In TÁRKI's finding it was mostly about Muslims who could identify with the Arab/Muslim refugees—because of the common language, background, etc. This aspect corresponds to group identity in Nagy's reasoning. Instead of political activism, which was the third category in TÁRKI's research, I uncovered *Jewish values and beliefs*. Jewish philanthropy is a well-known concept and is part of many traditions. One of these is the oft-mentioned: *tikkun olam*. This expression refers to repairing the world and one way to understand it is to offer a donation, but it can also be done by volunteering. The other oft-mentioned base for Jews was a biblical quote which also became a frequently used tool in the media as well as on social media¹¹ to encourage Jews to stand up for refugees (Greenblat, 2015). These coincide with what Nagy refers to as religious arguments. All these categories can overlap, of course. Here I provide a detailed overview of all three.

¹⁰ Szarvas is city where the international Jewish summer camp takes place every year. According to estimates, 8.000 Jewish children and adults from Hungary took part at least once in his or her life in this camp as a participant. (Sasha Friedman, JCC)

¹¹ For example: <http://www.hias.org/passover2016>

Humanitarian Aid

Helping out of empathy is probably the most encompassing reason of all. Voluntary help cannot be offered without this, but it might not be the only reason. Here I chose those quotes in which the interviewee did not connect humanitarian help with his or her Jewish values, but in which he/she only wanted to give the refugees some of their dignity back.

Simply it was bad to see that the poor ones coming, they don't know where they are, they don't know where to go, without any info, without translation and an interpreter going through the whole country. (Interviewee 10)

Children... They have no idea what will happen tomorrow... This is what hurt me the most. (Interviewee 7)

Tikkun olam, tzedakah and beyond

As mentioned above, several Jewish values can be associated with helping. Philanthropy is considered a core value of Judaism, which can be understood through *tikkun olam*, or the reparation of the world. Since it coincides with the previous motivation, here I emphasize those answers where the interviewee explicitly identified their motive with a Jewish value. The more tangible understanding of philanthropy is donation itself, or *tzedakah*: Jews—according to the Halacha¹²—are obliged to give ten percent of their (net) income to the poor (“Tzedaka,” n.d.). This overwrites all the other commandments.¹³ Interviewee 11 told me that when she donated, she directed her money to the crisis. On a more abstract level, here are some explanations:

There is an Orthodox understanding [of *tikkun olam*] to make the world better, and it has another understanding which is much closer to me which doesn't only say that Jews are obliged to help Jews but it is their task to make the whole world better and mostly this [was my motivation]. (Interviewee 1)

I helped and I learned and it seems logical and I believe in it that we don't do only a concrete thing when we do something but it means something more in a bigger sphere. (Interviewee 11)

Depending on the interpretation, this motivation can be partially identified with a broader understanding of the concept reciprocity, which is one of the reasons discussed in Nagy's article (2013). Reciprocity is when we help in the hope of being treated the same way later (not necessarily by the people we helped):

To create a minimal level of comfort for them... To me what counts the most is if when someone talks to me and calms me down, that I understand something, so I tried to focus on communication.

¹² Jewish Law

¹³ “*Tzedakah* and acts of kindness are the equivalent of all the mitzvot of the Torah” Jerusalem Talmud, Pe'ah 1:1.

So for them to see that I'm here, an eighteen year-old girl, a random blondie and I welcome them and I am happy to talk to them. I just wanted to show that I am not here to feel pity but to help and to manage. I didn't pity them, I was just there for them because it would make me feel good as well in a similar situation if one of them was there. (Interviewee 6)

Remaining with reciprocity, another oft-cited refugee-welcoming biblical quote (Greenblat, 2015) is related to Jews having been refugees in the past: "You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 22:20-23) As this quote is not only connected to the Judaist tradition but also to the Christian, Pope Francis quotes it when he openly and repeatedly welcomes refugees ("Message of his Holiness," 2016). This quote can be used as a commandment, creating the basis for a Jewish value. Further, it can be regarded a trigger for empathy.

More sources can be found in Judaist tradition for helping the other, such as "The laws of priority in giving refer solely to communal monies, whereas individual donations can be given to anyone we deem to be in need" (Responsa of Rav Moshe Feinstein, Yoreh Deah 1:144) or "Thus said the LORD: Do what is just and right; rescue from the defrauder one who is robbed; do not wrong the stranger, the orphan and the widow; commit no lawless act, and do not shed the blood of the innocent in this place" (Jeremiah 22:3). However, these were not referred to by anyone.

Holocaust, community of fate — "We, Jews, cannot turn our heads away"

When the interviewees said something along the lines "as Jews" I could not always decide what they meant and thus I asked some clarifying questions (or the interviewees would elaborate on it by themselves). One of the meanings was related to having a common fate: being persecuted. This argument is called historical identification in Nagy's reasoning. Even though Jews have not been the most privileged ethnic group for centuries (e.g., Wistrich, 1994), the concept of having a common fate can refer to both ancient/biblical times and to more recent persecution, namely the Holocaust. Since the first was analysed above, here I will focus on the more recent.

There has been a debate worldwide over whether the Holocaust can be compared to other tragedies (e.g., Moses, 2005) or whether it is a unique phenomenon (Bauman, 1991). This issue came up during the refugee crisis in both the international (e.g., Zeitz, 2015) and the Hungarian context (see below). The reason for this comparison was not only the fact that Jews became refugees during and after the WW II, with many similarities in their situations: many specific instances from the Hungarian context reminded people of those times. One of them was when the Hungarian train company, owned by the state, closed the doors of the wagons on the refugees (Medvegy, 2015). Another was when refugees were deceived: they thought they would be able to go West by train when Keleti train station (Szurovecz, 2015) was opened, but instead they were taken by bus to refugee camps (Nagy, 2015). The last example did not place in Hungary but rather close by, when the Czech authorities started to write numbers on the refugees' arms ("Számot írnak," 2015).

The attempt to compare was addressed by a statement from the MAZSIHISZ and the EMIH (separately) where they expressed their sorrow and added: “at the same time the Jewish religious communities find it groundless and refuse the comparison of the Holocaust and the present day Hungarian situation. Comparison with the Holocaust is a grave irresponsibility and we believe it is a kind of relativization of the Holocaust” (“EMIH és MAZSIHISZ,” 2015). As the Holocaust plays an important factor in the Hungarian Jewish community (Kovács, 2002, p. 144) and because there was only one instance where this statement was clearly refuted (by Ádám Schönberger, the director of MAROM¹⁴) (Schönberger, 2015), I asked my interviewees what they thought about these statements. It may be important to add that MAZSIHISZ and EMIH are the two (out of the three) federations which officially represent the Hungarian Jewish communities (based on religious understandings of Jewishness¹⁵) and their role is ambiguous (Rubin, 2016). However, most of them agreed to refute comparisons. For example: “The Holocaust and this refugee crisis cannot be mentioned on the same page because they don’t do systematic genocide, I agree with this.” (Interviewee 8) But the evaluation of the Jewish community’s (and federations’) presence in the crisis was rather diverse. I will come back to this later.

The motives triggered by common fate were rather frequent, which can be explained by the strong role of the Holocaust in Hungarian Jewish identity (Kovács, 2002, p. 144). In his interview Róbert Békési tells us how the lives of these humans got to him because his family experienced horrible events as well (Halmos, 2015). Zsuzsa Fritz, the executive director of the Bálint House (Jewish Community Centre), wrote in her article: “We are all newcomers in a way. Our parents, grandparents were usually fleeing from something bad in the hope of a better life” (Fritz, 2015). Finally, some examples from my interviews:

If the last couple of years was good for something, it was the motivation of a couple of people and mine as well. The other thing is more historical as well, that the religious or Jewish community was never welcome and now there is a rather big community which is not accepted so there is a similarity... And this has to be dealt with. (Interviewee 2)

We Jews cannot turn our heads away. I felt it was so symbolic. The family also asked why I help. I felt that if we turn our heads away now, then we do the same as the majority did at that time and now we are the majority and how lucky we are that we don’t have to go through this, we are not fleeing from war. I also told the children how good it is that we live in peace. (Interviewee 8)

András Léderer, who was similarly a very active volunteer in the field, pointed out two motives combined: the Holocaust as the basis of our common fate and philanthropy as a Jewish value:

¹⁴ A member of MAROM international. Their headquarters is in Auróra, which is mentioned throughout this paper and is an important part of Jewish everyday life.

¹⁵ Jews are accepted only as a religious minority in Hungary. There was an initiative to make it a national-ethnic minority but it failed due to several reasons (Miklósi, 2011).

I help because as a Jew, my most important, personal conclusion of the Holocaust is that I cannot passively watch groups who are left alone consciously by the state. Besides, we can never close our eyes because that's how our story started as well. With a bit of exclusion, a bit of humiliation, being left on our own; we know exactly how it ended. My starting point is that so many people died only because no one offered help. Now the refugees are here, they also need help, so it is my duty to help. One of the biggest mitzvah (good deed) is when we do not get direct compensation for it (Horváth, 2015).

And finally a great example for the mixture of motives from my own interviewees:

Jewishness played a role not only because of discrimination and persecution: there were many helping stories in my family. Many people were hiding us, we got food, there were many things like this during the war which saved my grandparents and aunties. And this is definitely part of this thing but—but I hope I didn't do it because of this. I have this hope that it would have been defined in me anyway: it's summer time, I had a couple of days when I was free, I like people, I like to talk, human stories interest me, they are there, I can help, why not? I hope this is rather a human-human meeting and not that I come from here and to get into cultural things. I think. (Interviewee 3)

I would like to mention two other reasons for helping. As they were only marginally present in the answers, I did not place them into any of the categories above. One is to help improve the evaluation of Jews by others. This can be done by showing that we are Jews. Interviewee 9 expressed this as follows: "I went there, as a Jew I appeared there. I am a rather typical Jewish face, they saw it." Interviewee 10 was wearing a Jewish necklace throughout the whole period (and since it was a hot summer, it was rather visible). The idea was for others to see that Jews helped in a time of crisis and maybe later the refugees will remember this and carry a positive story about them. Another aspect is that helping can be beneficial to the volunteers themselves (see for example Tabassum et al., 2016). As Interviewee 3 said: "Beside being cool to help, those who were reluctant to help, including me, we forget how much it gives us emotionally."

Views on the responsibility¹⁶ and actions of the Hungarian Jewish community

As we can see from 7.2 and 7.3 (see Annex), most of the Jewish donation events took place in a later phase of the refugee crisis (and this was true for other religious communities too (Rab, 2015)). This was clearly criticized by some of the interviewees. One of the organizers of the MAZSIHISZ Youth Council's donation said the following:

¹⁶ Responsibility in the sense that Jews have to help refugees and not that it is their fault.

Before, I didn't feel what is happening and when I came to Pest¹⁷, I saw. I called one of them [from MAZSIHISZ Youth Council] to do something: anything, collection, but I think it's very bad that the Jewish community didn't do anything. I think there was some kind of collection before, in Auróra or I don't know. So it wasn't my idea how handy blankets would be but there was an example from which we took it and I thought—many of us thought to do this and as soon as possible. We had this idea on Wednesday and we did it on Friday. It was a very good experience for me because a lot of donations came from the community. This was the first time that the Jewish Community, MAZSIHISZ, did anything in relation to this and was visible. I think we showed an example to the bigger community that we all have to take a stand not politically but socially, charitably we have to stand up. I was ashamed that nothing happened up till now. (Interviewee 2)

Besides timing, another issue came up, namely the general responsibility and role of Jewish organizations in helping. Evaluations on whether MAZSIHISZ and EMIH did enough or should have done more differed. Interviewee 1 (another organizer of the MAZSIHISZ Youth Council) believed that they should have done more and they would have, but that possibilities were limited:

Other religious organizations helped more than MAZSIHISZ because it didn't help much. But it happened not because they didn't want to but because they have no possibilities and it's a problem... It's a mistake that a church which operates freely for twenty-something years in Hungary didn't create a charitable organization because then obviously, I don't know, resources and energy could have been allocated there. So... by the time we got to the point of participating in this aid, we were already rather frustrated that because of this MAZSIHISZ didn't do much. There were one or two statements but otherwise they weren't too active in this question. (Interviewee 1)

Without criticizing the organizations, Interviewee 5 emphasized the role of Jewish individuals who stood up. She also mentions the late awakening and she definitely thinks Jews have a responsibility:

There has to be and there was, I think. They could have awoken earlier but I know that there were individual initiatives, I know that in the Frankel [synagogue rabbi Verő] Tomi organized collection. I know that [rabbi] Zoli Radnóti, Bet Shalom organized as well. Maybe the Orthodox, I don't know whether it was the Lubavitch or the EMIH but I know there were initiatives there as well. I think they have. Exactly because—I think there was a debate about it in Bálint House and I think rabbi Darvas said—he quoted this as well—no matter what we think about the consequences, terrorism touches more Jewry or they are more sensitive to these questions but the basic principles were emphasized and tikkun olam and that empathy is different with groups who... so I think definitely. Definitely. And it is not a coincidence that Israel Aid was there at the border. I think Israel feels it as well, even if not within. But I think Jews have responsibility in this.

¹⁷ He was in Szarvas beforehand.

Interviewee 9 thinks they did enough: his problem was rather about the different organizations within the Jewish community:

MAZSIHISZ did a collection. This is an important thing. They managed to get a big amount of donations (checks online¹⁸). And the president of MAZSIHISZ, András Heisler took part in this as well. It is an important thing that they sided with it and helped, which is important because the government is on the other side. EMIH didn't do much, they only gave 2 boxes of medicine. (After checking online.) They said they gave 2.000.000 HUF worth of medicine to them... MAZSIHISZ took part more. They have good communications in the federation and the rabbis [quoted] that you were a foreigner as well. The Torah writes this and it is important. Anybody can be in such a situation. Jews were in this situation as well and they welcomed them.

Most of the interviewees agreed that Jews have responsibility. Interviewee 3 stated: "I think this is the least they can do. It [the help of the Jewish community] wasn't that visible for me. I only saw that the Bálint House is doing a collection." But regarding the acts of the Jewish community, opinions differed. The reasons are various: first, there are several organizations and, for an outsider, who belongs where and what they do can be confusing; second, how much they are informed about these events from the media is left to chance as they were not well covered in all cases.

Challenges and conclusion

Even though I focused on the positive aspects of the refugee crisis, the picture is much more shaded. Most of my interviewees have concerns (and fears, as illustrated above) and the Jewish communities (throughout Europe) undoubtedly faced a difficult situation. The question is where they draw the line, where they want to put the emphasis: on the fear of terror or first helping people in need. Many interviewees mentioned something similar:

Whatever I think about the political aspect, I'm not a specialist and as a civilian, as a Jew, it is my duty to help and participate in this type of crisis. You can always deal with Anti-Semitism and organize Purim parties, it is cool and important for the community, but when such a huge issue comes not even to your door but your living room, then I think you cannot show indifference and you cannot not help because there is a tiny... every issue is complicated but you cannot not help because "I'm afraid that in 50 years something [will happen]." You cannot not help because there are three conditional things which if they correlate, there will be something [bad]. (Interviewee 1)

As mentioned above, I asked what they think the solution is, and many of them believe that one of the keys is to have a good integration policy.

¹⁸ The interview was conducted via skype, hence the interviewee had a chance to google things we discussed.

Kibic¹⁹ interviewed some of the figures of the Hungarian Jewish community when MAZSIHISZ asked for the government's help for fear of terror (which happened in November: after the Paris terror attack but also after the Hungarian borders were closed and hardly any refugees came through. See Appendix 7.3) (Dezsó, 2015). Marcell Kenesei, director of the Centropa Foundation, said:

I would not find it a problem to ask for the government's help even while they disagree in certain topics,²⁰ if the security risk indeed existed. However, there is no real danger behind MAZSIHISZ's decision because there are hardly any refugees in Hungary... It would be more important for the Jewry to react to such a situation based on values, because based on its own historical experiences they should understand it more when people need to flee. (Ádám, 2016)

He goes on:

The Hungarian Jewry was supposed to step toward a more humanitarian direction. I strongly expected MAZSIHISZ to offer its help to refugees and to stand up for them much more unambiguously as the most important representative of the Hungarian Jewry... With this step, they rather supported the propaganda of the government which is trying to instill fear of refugees in people.

Ádám Schönberger (see above) judges the role of MAZSIHISZ similarly; according to him the policy of MAZSIHISZ is mostly focusing on Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust and this act fits perfectly into this narrative. He also thinks that requesting help was not needed because the Hungarian Jewry is not likely be attacked soon and Muslim refugees are not present in Hungary anymore. He believes that society should face and fight all the related problems and the Jewish community should be part of this fight, but not the ones to create fear "because not many want to share a fear-based identity" (Ádám, 2016).

This article aimed at showing some examples of the complexity of Jewish aid and explore some of the motives in-depth. As the sample is rather small and not representative, some other motives might be missing—although it is possible that all are covered. However, the proportions of each motivation cannot be known from this small research project. Two things can be concluded: most likely motivations do not exist on their own: they strengthen each other. Further, we can hypothesize the Holocaust motive is rather central and it can be explained by its general presence in the narrative of the Hungarian Jewry.

¹⁹ A Jewish cultural journal.

²⁰ To mention two: the Statue at Szabadság square (Lengyel, 2014) and the statue of Hóman (an Anti-Semite) ("A Homán-szobor," 2015).

Annex 1

Refugee-related events chronologically

Date (2015)	Event
11 January	The first relevant official statement related to immigration into Hungary: Prime Minister Orbán's speech in Paris after the commemoration ceremony of the victims of the Charlie Hebdo terror attack: economic migration is bad, Hungary will therefore not provide asylum for economic migrants.
April	Preparations begin for the so-called "national consultation" on immigration initiated by the government (mailing a questionnaire to all Hungarian adults to survey their opinions on immigration). Increasing number of anti-immigration communiques by politicians in the government.
May	"National consultation" on immigration.
June	Government sponsored anti-immigration billboard campaign nation-wide; a counter campaign is organized by a fringe political party with pro-immigration messages.
25-30 June	The formation of new voluntary grassroots organizations.
13 July	The Hungarian government starts building a fence along the Hungarian-Serbian border.
5-8 August	The opening of transit zones at railway stations in Budapest with volunteers and grassroots providing street social work and aid for asylum-seekers.
8 August	71 dead migrants are found in a van in Austria close to the Hungarian border, obviously en route from Hungary.
25-29 August	Negotiations about a central transit zone in Verseny Street, Budapest, controlled by the Municipality of Budapest.
end of August / early September	Increasing tensions at Budapest railway stations, where thousands of asylum-seekers are waiting for the opportunity to travel on to Germany. Tensions are increased by the hectic reactions of the Hungarian authorities and the state railway company (at one point no asylum-seekers are allowed to get on trains leaving for Germany, including those with valid tickets; later it is again possible to get on the trains for a few hours, but then all international trains leaving for Germany are canceled for a few days; on September 3 a train leaves Budapest Keleti railway station with asylum-seekers who were informed they are heading for Germany; the train, however, is stopped at the Bicske reception camp (Hungary), with asylum-seekers feeling cheated and trapped.
3-6 September	Right after the train incident at Bicske on September 3, asylum seekers at Budapest Keleti railway station set out to walk to Austria on the M1 motorway. In response, the government provides buses for the asylum-seekers to transport them directly to the Austrian border from the motorway as well as from Keleti station. A statement is made by the head of the Catholic Church in Hungary, Cardinal Peter Erdős, justifying the limited involvement of the church in the crisis, in stark contrast to statements made by the Pope.
8 September	Petra László, a camerawoman at a right-wing Hungarian TV channel, trips refugees running from the police in Röszke (Serbian border).

Date (2015)	Event
15-16 September	“The battle of Röszke” takes place between police and asylum-seekers after the closing of the Hungarian-Serbian border. The migration flow heads towards the Hungarian-Croatian border.
17 September	The Hungarian-Serbian border is closed down.
21-23 September	Repercussions of a speech by Prime Minister Orbán saying “the government has given financial support to the NGOs”; the volunteers and grassroots protest as they have in fact not received any state funds; the prime minister meant only those established charity organizations that were commissioned by the government with the aid activities at the Croatian and Austrian borders after 15 September.
16 October	The fence along the Hungarian-Croatian border is completed, the border is closed: the end of mass inflow of asylum seekers and migrants into Hungary.

Adopted from: Simonovits et al. 2016: 8-9.

Annex 2

Interviewees

ID	Gender	Age	Jewish background (of family)	Jewish identity (now)	Mode and amount of help
1	M	18-29	Neolog tradition keeper	Active	Organizing donation – one occasion
2	M	18-29	Assimilated, paternally Jewish	Active, brought tradition back to family	Organizing donation (once) + volunteering (6 times)
3	W	18-29	Assimilated	Used to be active, not any more	Volunteering – Intensely
4	M	30-44	Assimilated	Active, brought tradition back to family	Volunteering – Intensely
5	W	30-44	Assimilated	Active, brought tradition back to family	Donating several times + volunteering a couple of times
6	W	18-29	Assimilated, paternally Jewish	Important part of identity	Donating several times + volunteering 5-6 times
7	W	18-29	Assimilated, paternally Jewish	Important part of identity	Donating once + volunteering 4-5 times
8	W	30-44	Assimilated	Became important through children	Donating several times + volunteering 10 times
9	M	45-59	Assimilated	Religious (neolog)	Organizing donation (once) + going to Keleti twice
10	W	30-44	None	Converted, religious (neolog)	Volunteering for the whole period
11	W	30-44	Neolog tradition keeper	Religious (orthodox)	Donating twice

Annex 3

Dates for organized donations in Budapest

- July 10, 2015: MAZSIHISZ in front of Dohány synagogue – initiated by an individual²¹
- Available from August on: donations in Auróra²² + accepting refugees
- Beginning of September 2015: EMIH medicine to Nyugati²³
- September 4, 2015: MAZSIHISZ Youth Council collecting donations in the Frankel synagogue, in Scheiber Sándor high school and in Bálint House,²⁴ given to “Let’s help refugees” group
- September 11, 2015: Kibic in Bálint House²⁵
- November 1, 2015: rabbi, priest and imam pray together for the victims and peace

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²¹ Source: mazsihisz.hu (2015, July 10). *Zsidó szervezetek is segítenek a menekülteknek.* [Jewish organizations help refugees too.] Retrieved from <http://www.akibic.hu/kozosseg/item/1804-zsidó-szervezetek-is-segitenek-a-menekülteknek-kepgaleria>

²² Hir24.hu (created: 2015, August 19, updated: 2015, September 11). *Hogyan segítsünk a menekülteknek?* [How to help refugees?] Retrieved from <http://www.evangelikus.hu/hogyan-segitsunk-menekülteknek>

²³ Zsido.com (2015, September 3). *Az EMIH gyógyszerekkel segíti a menekülteket.* [EMIH helps refugees with medicine.] Retrieved from <http://zsido.com/az-emih-gyogyszerekkel-segiti-a-menekülteket/>

²⁴ (Announcement) Kibic (2015, September 2) *Adománygyűjtés menekülteknek!* [Donation for refugees!] Retrieved from. <http://www.akibic.hu/kozosseg/item/1943-adomanygyujtes-menekülteknek>

²⁵ (Announcement) Kibic (2015, September 9) *Adománygyűjtés: takarókat, sátrakat gyűjt a kibic a rászorulóknak.* [Donation: Kibic is collecting blankets, tents for the ones in need.] Retrieved from <http://www.akibic.hu/kozosseg/item/1961-adomanygyujtes-takarokat-satrat-gyujt-a-kibic-a-raszoruloknak>

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