



# AVOTAYNU®

The International Review of Jewish Genealogy

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# Hidden Treasures in the Libraries of Budapest, Hungary

by András Koltai

*This article is based upon a presentation given at the IAJGS conference in New York City, August 2006—Ed.*

Genealogists know a good deal about how to conduct research in Hungarian archives and cemeteries, but most have not explored Hungarian libraries. While doing Jewish genealogical research in the major libraries in Budapest, I discovered several highly useful, but little known, sources, including a variety of books, newspapers and journals that reveal much about Hungary's Jewish community in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In these collections, one may find wedding announcements, obituaries and other events of daily Jewish life. These unique sources are not widely cited, as they are accessible in only a handful of libraries in Budapest. Many Hungarian books published in the past 15 or 20 years are available in the United States and/or Israel, but earlier ones may be found only in Hungary; a few exist in only one copy and are true treasures.

I shall focus on three libraries:

- Library of the Theological Seminary-University of Jewish Studies
- Szabó Ervin Library
- Széchenyi Library

## Library of the Theological Seminary-University of Jewish Studies

This library, located in Pest's Eighth District, holds a vast collection of publications in the fields of Hebraic and Judaic Studies—books, newspapers and manuscripts. Two specific types of material, regional publications and Jewish documents, are highlighted here.

**Regional Publications.** These books were written about specific regions and cities, some now located in Slovakia and Romania, areas that were part of pre-World War I Hungary. One example of this genre is a book on the history of the Jews in Nagykőrös, published in 1926 and written by Samu Salamon, the local clerk. Among other data, it includes names that appear in the census of 1798, a list of members of the Jewish community in 1848, individuals who contributed to the building of the synagogue and the names of the clerks of different Jewish institutions. Some Jews apparently lived there secretly before 1800. Their names and the number of years they were in hiding are given. Also included is the 1808 census, as well as a small paragraph written by Salamon about the people listed. For

example, Mr. X, age 56, merchant, name of city where born, wife Rosalie and three daughters, living 18 years in Nagykőrös. Others listed are the caretakers of the Jewish school from 1852 until 1926, a complete list of people working for the school with dates.

A history of the Jews in Abony and the surrounding region, by Rabbi Dr. Béla Vajda, published in 1896, includes names from 1720, listing the members of the Jewish community, as well as other names and birth dates. The author even lists the various generations of these families. In the Frank family, for example, the first person is a Josef Lev whose son, Ignac, was born in 1750. Ignac's son was another Josef Lev, clearly named after his grandfather—and his son was Ignac, and Ignac's son was Josef again. So here we have five generations. Other families are similarly recorded.

A third example is a history of the Jewish communities in Slovakia, by Menyhért Lányi, Mrs. Popper (sic) and Hermin Békefi, published in Kosice in 1933. The authors devote full chapters to large cities such as Bratislava, Kosice and Nyitra; smaller towns have just a few paragraphs, sometimes just one. In this book, one may find the history of the Jewish community; names and sometimes photographs of members of Jewish associations; and a section dedicated to Jewish soldiers in the 1848–49 revolutions, sometimes

with their place of birth.

**Jewish Documents.** By this term, we mean books and other publications created to mark anniversaries or other important events in Jewish life, published by Jewish associations and clubs. Typically, these items include information about members of the association, often birth dates and family relations.

Among such publications is the book commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Jewish Women's Association of the Fifth District, 1909–34, with pictures, names of leaders, names of members and details about their activities.

School bulletins and monthly publications about Jewish education in Hungary for the period 1881–1944 list teachers, schools, pupils and members of educational associations.

The Jewish Theological Seminary had students as early as 1848. It published school reports from 1878 until 1944 with names and details about students and

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professors. The report for 1894–95 included photographs, names of students, places of birth (including counties).

### Szabó Ervin Library of Budapest

Although a Szabó Ervin Library exists in each district of Budapest, the most interesting one is the Central Library, the second largest in Budapest, located in the city center. Its Budapest collection is the local historical collection of Hungary's capital. Included are 100,000 books, periodicals and journals; 300,000 posters and small prints; and 120,000 photographs. Old register books and telephone books have useful information for genealogists.

**Register books.** Register books (tenant lists) include names of individuals, businesses, government organizations and associations registered in Budapest. Although not everyone was registered, thousands are recorded. With some gaps, these books cover the years 1881–1928. Between roughly 1890 and 1908, one book was published per year; before and after that time, books appeared only every three or four years. Books include some individuals who lived outside of Budapest and are divided into several chapters. The first lists the aristocracy, then governmental organizations, a separate chapter for associations, another for businesses, and yet another for an alphabetical list of individuals. Finally, the tenants of Budapest are listed according to a map of the city, e.g. "in this or that street under number 1 the following families and businesses lived," etc. Thus, because names are listed geographically, it is possible to see which individuals lived under the same roof or close to one another. It is possible also to determine how long an individual lived at a given address.

**Telephone directories.** Telephone directories cover the years 1918–2004, including some years for which tenant lists are missing. One must remember a few facts about these publications: Only wealthy individuals had telephones in the early years, and during the Communist years, it was the regime (the party, the state, the municipality, etc.), not the individual, who decided who would have a telephone. Finally, if a name is missing, that does not necessarily mean that the individual did not have a telephone. The first telephone book appeared in 1913. From it researchers may learn names, addresses and occupations. It is noteworthy that one rabbi had different summer and winter residences.

### Széchenyi Library

Located on Castle Hill, this Hungarian national library holds the largest single collection of Hungarian publications. By law, one copy of all works published in Hungary—books, journals and newspapers—must be sent for preservation to this library. Opened more than

two centuries ago, in 1802, the Széchenyi holds some eight million items, among them Hungary's oldest texts. A long list of unique Jewish newspapers and journals are held here. Some are newspapers from large cities; others are newspapers devoted to a specific, small audience, such as "The Hungarian Jewish Woman" and "Newspaper of the Jewish Soldiers." Such publications and associations abounded before World War II; such groups died out during the post-war Communist regime.

Following is a list of journals, some of which date from the 1880s; dates in parentheses indicate years of publication:

- *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* (Hungarian Jewish Review) (1885–1944), contains various mixed news, including obituaries
- *Remény* (Hope) (1920s), literary, Jewish community writers
- *Zsidó kalendárium* (Jewish calendar) (early 1900s), events of the year, lists of associations
- *Zsidó szemle* (Jewish review) (1919–1938), weekly paper, social political, cultural writings
- *Múlt és Jövő* (Past and Future) (1915–1944), arts publication, annual
- *Zsidó élet* (Jewish life), social, political, cultural writings

Of course, researchers are wise to look also in local and regional newspapers. The Széchenyi holds newspapers from all of Hungary, including those areas lost after World War I, such as Slovakia, portions of Austria, Romania and Transcarpathian Ruthenia. Sometimes one stumbles upon pure treasure. One such is a list made in 1938 of all Jewish families living in Pest. The list ran for several weeks and also covered marriages.

I have created an Excel file of 420 resources, the dates of publication and regions covered. It may be accessed through my website ([www.jewishroots.hu](http://www.jewishroots.hu)) under "Resources."

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<http://www.avotaynu.com>

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