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# Hungary, Soviet Jewish Refugees, and the Making of a New Geopolitical Identity, 1989-1991

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*The paper seeks to highlight the special role of Hungary in the system transition of Europe in 1989-1991. Hungary served as a gateway for free mobility for several groups of citizens of the crumbling Soviet Bloc. It is well known how the country let GDR citizens emigrate to the West through its Western borders. Parallel with this, the country played an important part in the emigration of Soviet Jewry as a transit point. Between 1989 and 1991, more than 160,000 Soviet Jewish refugees transited through Hungary toward their emigration targets in the West and Israel. It was a closing act of the Cold War, as the U.S. and Israel lobbied throughout the Eastern Bloc to let their Jewish citizens emigrate freely. The paper aims to highlight the agency of the Hungarian elites in the "transition period" of the country in making this transit possible, concentrating on the joint program of the Malév Hungarian Airlines and the Jewish Agency to transport Soviet Jews through Budapest to Tel Aviv from Moscow, and the Hungarian political decisions attached to it.*

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## Prologue: The Strike

The elections were four days away, all flights to Tel Aviv were grounded, and nobody was happy.

It was March 21, 1990, and Hungary, preparing for its eventual transition to full parliamentary democracy after decades of Communist rule, found itself in the epicentre of a geopolitical micro-crisis. The Malév airplanes were idling at Ferihegy airport, refusing to fly the Tel-Aviv route due to terrorist threats, while Soviet Jewish refugees thronged the hotels and hostels of the city, waiting for their ordeal to end. The issue focused the attention of both the superpowers and Israel on Hungary, a country already closely scrutinised amidst its democratic transformation.

The conflict was born out of the uncertainties of the international system. Securing the Jewish – and indeed, all – citizens of the Soviet Union free emigration was a top priority for the United States through the Cold War. Letting this outward mobility possible was legislatively linked with allowing lower tariffs for Soviet goods in the U.S. market and offering commercial credit to the money-starved Soviet Union. After decades of rejection by the Soviets, during the late 1980s Mikhael Gorbachev's reformist administration would happily agree to this liberalisation, letting ideological orthodoxies go. However, it needed to navigate geopolitical minefields. The mass immigration of Jews to Israel was seen by the Arab nations as upending the regional power equilibrium and giving Israel even more power, both symbolically and materially. Between the equivocating Soviet Union and the United States, Hungary, which was an accidental player in the logistical chain of this mass migration, now needed to make a decision. It was a smaller one amid the maelstrom of change that swept through the country, but it still constitutes an instructive lesson about how Hungary started the historical period that we are still living in, what risks it had to navigate, and what decisions needed to make both symbolically and geopolitically to accentuate a new geopolitical stance based on the respect of human rights and staunch pro-Westernism, while doing so in a very proactive way.

In the following paper, this micro-crisis of the transition period of Central Europe will be revisited, along with a short history of the formation of the Moscow-Budapest-Tel-Aviv airlink that carried the majority of the Jewish refugees from Moscow to Israel from mid-1989 to the summer of 1990. I intend to emphasise two key points: the logical chain of Hungarian political and economic decision-making that enabled the creation of this airlink, the outbreak and handling of its crisis in late March 1990, and its consequences for Hungarian participation in the transit of Jewish emigrants. This will serve to highlight the two features of the Hungarian system transition in the early 1990s: the country played a substantial part in the solution of a contemporary humanitarian crisis because its elite – both reform-communist and democratic –

needed to maintain credibility in the West, and it was an important opportunity to do so. It does not mean that they were forced to perform these tasks against their own will. Rather, this shows how strongly Hungarian transition elites of all colours wanted to align with the West, even if it meant taking a fair amount of security risk. In 1989-1991, almost nobody thought of traditional geopolitical threats, but there were new and emerging types that the countries of the post-Soviet sphere needed to deal with in a radically new environment.

## I. International Politics of the Exodus: The issue of Soviet Jews and the Cold War

Throughout the course of the Soviet-U.S. rivalry after the Second World War, the Soviet dismissal of collective and individual human rights was a huge point of contention. The United States sometimes weaponised this issue if it wanted to confront Moscow. In milder times, it was a nuisance, not in the forefront, but still made the idea of bilateral cooperation uncomfortable to sell in domestic US politics.

One of these issues was the Jews and their emigration. The Soviet Union always had an ambiguous relationship with its citizens of Jewish identity. The original Bolshevik standpoint that all religions and nationalities were to be supplemented by the class-based solidarity of the proletariat and dialectic materialism could mean a variety of approaches. In the 1920s, Jews were encouraged to form ethnic-based agricultural colonies, and Yiddish education was allowed, although strictly state-controlled.<sup>1</sup> This was swept away by Stalin's all-Russian nationalism. He purged many apparatchiks of Jewish origin and, ultimately, was on the verge of launching a veritable anti-Semitic national pogrom in the early 1950s.<sup>2</sup> The Khrushchev period, while bringing a "thaw" in society, was nevertheless quite inimical to the Jews. Synagogues were closed, the production of Matzoh, eaten at Passover, was barred, and some anti-semitic voices were publicly allowed.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the states of Israel and the Soviet Union were on opposite poles of geopolitics did not help. Naturally, Soviet Jews yearned for emigration to Israel and other territories in this environment. Paradoxically, the discriminated minority was compelled to remain and take part in the "building of socialism." The Soviet system, by nature, needed to control and direct the mobility of its citizens in all senses. Individual mobility was heavily restricted, and so was the emigration of Jewry.

The issue of Soviet Jews, according to Lewis H. Weinstein, a Jewish communal leader and author, was introduced into the international arena in April 1964 by Lyndon B. Johnson; he was the first to recognise the issue and use it as a rhetorical device in the Cold War.<sup>4</sup> The primary demand was to allow the free emigration of Soviet Jewry. The Soviet policy on emigration was a hybrid of internal concepts on the mobility of citizens

and, at the same time, reaction to the changing tides of the Cold War. In the 1970s, many Jews and other nationalities were let go because the Soviets recognised that most of them were already "ideologically lost" for Soviet society, being focused on emigration. They even added some regular fees to the emigration process so some money could be raised through emigration.<sup>5</sup> By 1970, *détente* came in the spirit of toning down the Vietnam War, geopolitical conflicts, and nuclear armament. With the combination of changing internal ideology and international moderation, a moderate number of Soviet Jews were allowed to emigrate every year from 1970.

Nevertheless, the Americans increased the pressure. In 1974 the Democratic Senators Henry Jackson and Charles Vanik introduced a law (named the Jackson-Vanik amendment) that barred "any non-democratic nations" that did not allow free emigration from the "most favoured nation" trade status. In short, more emigration meant less tariffs. While it was supposed to be *détente*, a thaw between the superpowers, Americans wanted to tighten the screws on the Soviets, hoping that they would give up on the prospect of greater cooperation.<sup>6</sup> The Realpolitik-oriented White House of Nixon thought otherwise, and Henry Kissinger even tried to bully Israel because of the amendment, pressing for Tel-Aviv to press lobby groups in the U.S. to support its repeal, even threatening them with withholding military aid in the crucial days of the Yom Kippur war.<sup>7</sup> The lobby groups in the U.S. did not comply, and the amendment remained in force throughout the Cold War. 1979 was a peak year for Jewish emigration so far with 51,320 exit visas, but then it fell to minuscule levels, under a thousand per year, and there it remained until 1987, two years into the reformist regime of Mikhael Gorbachev, when emigration began to be liberalised. According to the American author Geoffrey Levin, the reduction was possibly a consequence of Washington applying too much pressure.<sup>8</sup> The Americans thought that they could extract even more concessions and even freer emigration before they offered a waiver of Jackson-Vanik. This did not happen, and the Soviets radically curtailed the exit visas from May 1979. With the temporary end of *détente* in late 1979, this situation persisted until 1987. The leader of the World Jewish Congress, one of the American-based Jewish organisations, Edgar R. Bronfman, led a delegation to Moscow to negotiate the expansion of Jewish emigration in February 1987.<sup>9</sup> The Soviets increased the approval rates and numbers for Jewish emigrants. In 1987, 8200 exit visas were approved for Soviet Jews, a relatively small amount, but nevertheless, more than were in total between 1980 and 1987.

At this moment, the question of the Soviet Jews' destination, and the mechanisms to handle them became an ever more important question for the West, the United States, and Israel. It is quite illustrative of the growing focus on these details that Bronfman attempted to obtain specific concessions in his February 1987 visit, such as the opening of a direct Tel-Aviv – Moscow flight. The Soviets, with one eye on their Arab allies in

the Middle East, were adamant that they would not allow this. The standard route of Jews out of the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War led to Vienna. There they made their choice to continue on to Israel with the help of the local Jewish Agency office or apply for U.S. refugee status. Throughout the Cold War, both were without problems if they managed to get out of the USSR. The U.S. extended "presumptive refugee" status to all Soviet citizens.<sup>10</sup>, which it could by all circumstances do, as so small amounts emigrated. The choice was consequently free, and through the decades, the rate of people opting for settlement in Israel was slowly decreasing. In 1971, it was still 96.4%, while in 1987, it was only 24%.<sup>11</sup> The reasons are not yet thoroughly investigated and are beyond the scope of this paper. Generally, though, it is discernible that with the economic strains growing in the Soviet Union, the "push" factors were growing, while the "pull" of Israel did not rise comparatively. Zvi Gitelman, an authority on the subject, suggests that the decrease is mostly attributable to the background of Jews in the different periods. The Jews more connected to the idea of Zionism emigrated earlier, and throughout the 1980s, there were mostly assimilated communities moving out of the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup>

Israel logically wished to attract more emigrants, both in concrete numbers and as a proportion of the increasing emigration, for both economic and ideological reasons. It was to the relief of the U.S. throughout 1988 that the numbers of these emigrants exponentially grew following the Washington Summit of Gorbachev and Reagan, which was met with massive demonstrations of American Jewry.<sup>13</sup> However, by August 1988, the Cold War refugee rules had been struck down for and admission to the US became more difficult. From then on, Soviet emigrants needed to prove their individual eligibility for U.S. refugee status. This was problematic. According to the American author Gregg A. Beyer, Soviet citizens needed to revoke their Soviet citizenship and most of their possessions before emigration.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, they would not have anywhere to go if they were not accepted to their destination. This system continued into March 1989, when the U.S. enlarged its consular department in its Moscow embassy, where those preparing to leave could check their eligibility before taking the trip.

In 1988, only around 19 400 Jews got an emigration visa from the USSR, while in 1989, it was estimated to be 72 500, and it was set to multiply in 1990.<sup>15</sup> Soviet relaxation and creeping American immigration restrictions logically allowed Israel to "skim" an increasing number of refugees from the growing outflow. The missing link was logistics, an organised system that could offer easy and ready access to Israel. Given the technical opportunities, an airlift seemed the best possibility. The Soviet Union was reluctant to open direct routes, though. The Israelis, consequently, turned to those Eastern Bloc countries that were, for various reasons, open to more "alternative"



relations compared to their Cold War networks. Through them, the flow of refugees had better prospects of reaching Israel.

## II. The Soviet Satellites and Israel

While the Soviet Jews floundered between the liberalised Soviet exit opportunity, the suddenly tight U.S. rules and Israel waiting for them with open arms, Moscow's satellites sought to find a new geopolitical direction in the changed situation. By the end of 1988, while there were no apparent changes in the political systems, the strength of democratic forces, the fragility of communists, and the need for urgent reform were unmistakable. In Hungary, János Kádár, First Secretary of the Hungarian Workers' Party and the embodiment of the Soviet vassal regime, resigned on May 21, 1988. The new leader, Károly Grósz, tentatively led the country toward market reforms, while the democratic opposition had already formed its parties. A core feature of this transition was the unmistakable need to get closer to the West. Hungary, be it democratic or still socialist, needed new funding, as its inefficient planned economy would not function without external investment. The basis of the post-1956 settlement was<sup>16</sup> that the Socialist regime would offer modest consumer prosperity for its citizens in exchange for their acceptance and recognition of the regime. This was, in turn, impossible without Western trade and credit. For this reason, Hungary rose to be the "top student" of Westernization already in the 1970s. Even when it came to "alternative" international networks of the Socialist world, such as those built with global South countries, Hungary tried to maximise its profit opportunities and minimise the geopolitical risks that meddling in the global South entailed.

As a pioneer in Western relations, Hungary understood that the reconstruction of the relationship with Israel was part of the checklist that was needed to become a viable Western country. This was expressed openly by Károly Grósz to an American diplomat on October 17, 1988.<sup>17</sup> The Hungarian leader, obviously sensitive to the visuals of the move, emphasised that relations were reestablished "out of conviction, and not because of profit".

The relations in question were timider than a full reestablishment of bilateral formal ties: Hungary established a "Representative Office" in Tel Aviv staffed by Hungarian diplomats in March 1988, formally under the jurisdiction of the Swedish Embassy in Israel. Hungary was still probing American and Arab reactions before any substantial move. The Foreign Ministry was unsure about the cost-benefit estimate of the bilateral relations. On April 19, 1989, it released an internal memo on the possible consequences of the full reestablishment of relations with Israel.<sup>18</sup> The document was not overly positive. While keeping in line with the political will, it supported the reestablishment of relations; it also warned that "Israel's market cannot replace the Arab ones" in the field of trade. Two prescient thoughts appeared as well: that Hungary should keep away from "high-profile projects" lest it draws the ire of the Arabs, "especially the rich and conservative Gulf countries", and that "from radical organisations, even terror attacks

possible". It was a grim but realistic assessment of the consequences of the geopolitical pivot in terms of security risk.

Nevertheless, Hungary went through the full reestablishment of relations on September 18, 1989. It a pivot not only of symbolism but, by that time, also of substance. Alongside the official ties, the infrastructure discussions progressed at an even greater speed. The establishment of the airlink started with this part of the bilateral relations: the introduction of airline traffic between the two countries which would offer a new and potentially lucrative passenger route for the state airline Malév (Magyar Légivállalat, Hungarian Air Corporation) between Hungary and Israel. The Jewish state was home to hundreds of thousands of Jews of Hungarian origin, many of whom were interested in rekindling personal ties with their or their parents' birthplace. To accommodate this traffic, Malév and the Israeli airline El Al signed an agreement in August 1988, and the two states signed an air service agreement on March 2, 1989.<sup>19</sup> The first regular Malév plane flew to Tel Aviv on March 31, 1989.<sup>20</sup>

Why did the Hungarians pivot so radically to Israel, while only several Foreign Ministry officials emphasised the potential costs and proposed a more pro-Arab approach? The structural reasons are not entirely explicable. In other Eastern Bloc countries, and notably in the imperial center, the Soviet Union, certain orthodox Communist party and security elites, were rejecting rapprochement with the West, and dragged their feet through the transition process. No such thing existed in Hungary, however. Once again, the key to understanding these policy decisions is the effect of 1956 on the Socialist regime. Hungary's foreign policy elites built their identity on slavishly following the Soviet Union's directives. This meant closely following the lead of the mainstream of the center in all times, including in its dynamic relationship to the West. This diligent following in turn, gave great leverage to János Kádár to uniformize the leadership and not let substantial hardliners remain in the background. As the Gorbachev period continued, Kádár allowed the fast-tracking of the Western integration of the country. This meant that when the moment of change arrived the democratic opposition grimly noted that many in the Communist establishment had better relations with the West than the democrats themselves. The about-face also applied to geopolitics. In September 1989, not even two years had passed since when the state-controlled Hungarian press denounced Israel in unison over its handling of the Palestinians at the start of the first Intifada.<sup>21</sup> In August 1989, when relations seemed to warm up, the Israelis duly banned a Hungarian journalist from a visit to Israel. The Foreign Ministry people wanted to answer in kind by banning an Israeli journalist, but the ministry leadership overruled, and no Israeli journalist was banned.<sup>22</sup> The Kádár establishment really wanted to beat the incoming democratic opposition to the door of the western powers.

For months, everything seemed calm. Then, on September 28, 1989, the Moscow embassy of Hungary sent a warning to its foreign ministry. "People with a valid emigration permission to Israel – people who [consequently] lost their Soviet citizenship – are visiting our Consulate and the Malév office in Moscow in growing



numbers."<sup>23</sup> The Moscow Malév office, since August of that year, was becoming overcrowded with Jewish customers seeking tickets to Budapest, then from there to Tel Aviv. Since September 19, the ticket office needed to introduce a serial number system so it could reintroduce a semblance of order in the office. "All tickets sold out to Budapest for the year," noted the Hungarian chargé d' affairs. "Sales are already open for 1990 spring flights from Budapest to Tel Aviv".<sup>24</sup>

How did the route become so popular? This would need an answer that considers all logistical opportunities through Eastern Europe to Israel. An important question is why Romania was not selected. The Communist regime of that country was almost on the level of Yugoslavia in its "alternative" way of Communism. That entailed a foreign policy strongly removed from the Soviet Union and enjoying one of the best relationships with the West, even if its dictator was among the worst in Eastern Europe. A possible answer is that the Ceausescu regime in Romania did not offer the level of stability and streamlined administrative process that Hungary did. The refugees rushing to buy tickets could also engaged with the announced new U.S. immigration rules as well. Some recognised that they would not be accepted to the U.S. from October 1, when the pre-screening was due to start at the US embassy in Moscow.

The makeshift airlift was supposed to last just a few months. It was reported that the USSR would introduce a direct Aeroflot route from Moscow to Tel-Aviv, and the agreement of the airlines was signed in December 1989. But in the hectic process of geopolitical transition, the pendulum swung in the other direction. Hungary was to play an extended part in the airlift, and in its history, now not only the credibility of the outgoing Communist regime, but the incoming Democratic one were interwoven as well.

### III. The Pitfalls of the Coming Democracy

The core cause of the extension of the airlift was a sudden tightening of Soviet policies in the face of Middle Eastern crises. The Soviet Union faced the same dilemma as Hungary and in a much more pressing way. It had an extended and intensive relationship with several Middle Eastern and North African Arab countries and Palestinian organisations, primarily with Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organisation. The opening of the airlift already strained this relationship, but a new controversy inflamed the situation even more. Yitzhak Shamir, the Prime Minister of Israel, asserted in a speech on January 14<sup>25</sup> That "big immigration needs a big Israel." Critics suggested that it meant that Israel wanted to house the new immigrants on the territories taken in the 1967 war – Gaza and the West Bank. Arab elites were outraged, and Moscow took the opportunity to offer a symbolic crackdown on bilateral ties. As they shared with the Hungarians, they wanted to pressure the Israelis anyway to lobby in Washington for the speedy repealing of the Jackson-Vanik amendment,<sup>26</sup> which still

restricted trade relations with the U.S., and Washington signalled openness to repeal in December 1989. The tool to increase pressure was the official rejection of the Aeroflot-El Al deal for the direct route.

The Israelis were already planning for this, riding the waves of the spontaneously formed Budapest airlink. The Jewish Agency, a core non-state organiser of Jewish immigration, asked to install an office in the autumn. Benjamin Netanyahu, then sub-secretary for foreign affairs, personally arranged for the office to be approved by the Hungarians quickly,<sup>27</sup> and it was up and running by January 1990, when the news of the cancellation of the Soviet airlift broke. The Agency moved to officialise the Budapest link. On February 2, a commercial agreement with Malév was signed to launch charter flights on the Moscow-Budapest and the Tel-Aviv-Budapest routes. The airlines were full, and "business was booming" throughout February and March 1990 as Hungary prepared for its first democratic elections after the fall of Communism. According to a MALÉV official stationed in Moscow, the local black market sold counterfeit MALÉV tickets at sometimes three thousand rubles. "Some people here won't make this much in a year," noted the exasperated Hungarian expert.<sup>28</sup>

The new democratic forces that were apparently poised to win the election needed to face a question of international credibility that, at first glance, was unconnected to the fate of the airlift. The debate was about the potential return of antisemitism in Hungarian politics, and the public debate centred on the alleged "dog-whistling" rhetoric of some public figures. In early 1990, the discussion was whirling around a radio talk given on January 14 by István Csurka, a conservative popular writer and founding member of the Magyar Demokrata Fórum (MDF, Hungarian Democratic Forum), which was predicted to win the coming elections of March-April. In his radio talk, Csurka, who was already accused of antisemitism, talked about the enduring power of Socialist technocratic elites and warned of the power of "small cliques and sects" and "dwarf minorities" that he compared to the group of "Béla Kun" and "Lenin-boys", that is, the leaders of the short-lived, but brutal Soviet regime (Tanácsköztársaság) of 1919. This echoed, for many, dark sentiments. The allusion to the rulers of the Tanácsköztársaság as an antisemitic trope was one used frequently since the 1920s by radical anti-semite groups against Jews because several of the leaders of the Tanácsköztársaság had a Jewish family background. The history of the trope and the correct discernment of the concrete situation would need a deep dive into Hungarian antisemitism and intellectual history beyond the scope of this study. The point here is that Csurka's speech, filled with such intended or unintended dog-whistling, was understood as "racial and religious hatred."<sup>29</sup> that is, antisemitism, in many of its listeners.

Denouncements were flying all over the place. Jewish leaders demanded that Csurka clarify his statements about the mentioned unspecified groups,<sup>30</sup> and groups of journalists denounced Csurka's statements.<sup>31</sup> A leader of the centre-liberal Union of Free Democrats party quipped that "Csurka is like a time machine; if the MDF does not get off of it, they will be transported back to 1938",<sup>32</sup> a time full of antisemitic laws, and a precursor to the Holocaust. Csurka openly declared on January 21 that he was not an anti-semite in the next iteration of his radio talk, but the genie was out of the bottle. The biggest image problem was that the issue found its way to the pages of the New York Times as well.<sup>33</sup>

In conclusion, while the outgoing Socialist regime established and maintained such important relations in order to be accepted by the West, the incoming administration needed to prove its moral credibility as well. The Csurka issue was not described here as simply an instructive example of contemporary debates, but a direct reference will be presented between the need to reclaim the MDF's public image and the Western requirements in maintaining the airlink in times of crisis. When Imre Pozsgay, Minister of State, visited Israel between January 28 – February 2, Prime Minister Shamir expressed his concern with "anti-semitic rhetoric in Hungary",<sup>34</sup> and the issue became even more pronounced as international tension rose.

## IV. Target Hungary - The Crisis of the Airlink, 1990 March

After the Shamir speech on January 14, the Soviet Jewish airlink routed through Hungary was increasingly at risk from external threats. The Hungarian Foreign Ministry correctly warned about rising threats in April 1989 in the case of "high-profile joint projects". Just as the Jewish Agency launched the Malév charter line to officialise the airlift, on February 9, the Malév office in Cairo received a call from an "English-speaking female" that threatened the Cairo and Tel-Aviv offices with terror attacks.<sup>35</sup> The security of the offices was increased by local police, and the report on the issue was marked as "Top Secret", and presumably not publicised officially. The Israelis did not leave the issue to chance: on March 2, ten armed "security officers" of an unspecified agency of the Jewish state arrived in Budapest with the agreement of the Hungarians to help in the defence of the temporary accommodations of Jewish emigrants.<sup>36</sup>

The ice was broken by a "public" terror threat and its consequences in the airport. Given that earlier threats arrived and were not publicised, the Malév personnel could feel the predictions of the informal news channels coming true. On March 16, the Islamic Jihad terror group issued a public communique threatening all airlines that transport Soviet Jews to Israel with terror attacks<sup>37</sup>. The MALÉV workers suddenly realised that the security of the airport was in poor shape and inadequate. In the Budapest Airport of

1990, several crucial security systems were missing. According to the newspaper of the airline workers' union, the airport lacked scanning machines capable of detecting "plastic explosives", presumably the feared Semtex, which, for example, was used by Libyan terrorists to annihilate PanAm Flight 103 over the Scottish town of Lockerbie in December 1988, little over a year before the Budapest events.<sup>38</sup> The horrendous memory of the Lockerbie affair looming over the crisis was directly referenced by the MALÉV workers in the company press as well.<sup>39</sup>

As for the security equipment necessary to prevent such events, the union newspaper claimed that the technology was already used in Western airports, but the administration in Budapest had yet to introduce it.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the baggage scanning was so slow that it could gridlock normal traffic if they wanted to check all the baggage. Thus, the sudden density of passengers that the charter flights brought was dangerous not only because of the identity of their passengers but also because of their sheer volume. After all, the post-Socialist air traffic of Hungary was not capable of handling new threats and new tasks on a technical level. This almost doomed the whole geopolitical undertaking. On March 20, the Budapest police announced the reinforcement of the security of the airport "in light of the recent threats".<sup>41</sup> Cars could not loiter at the gates of the terminal, and police presence was around the clock. It would not be enough.

On March 21 1990, MALÉV, after heated internal discussions between the leadership of the company and workers, announced that it would stop charter flights to Tel Aviv.<sup>42</sup> The airlink from the Soviet Union to Israel was suspended. Apparently, the company made a last attempt to simply circumvent the announcement and launch the scheduled charter flight anyway. Boarding cards were issued, and the flight was scheduled to take off when the crew of the plane noticed the contents of the passenger list and simply refused to board.<sup>43</sup>

Frenetic discussions followed, in which the image of the coming democratic Hungary took centre stage. First, the MALÉV office in Tel-Aviv, when the Israelis asked about the cause of the stoppage, falsely referenced a supposed government decision to stop the flights.<sup>44</sup> This would have signalled an even more serious crisis, a geopolitical about-face on a national level, with the Hungarian government caving to terrorists. The Hungarians quickly offered clarification, but it was not the full story. The Israelis demanded a solution to the problem, given that the MALÉV broke a valid contract by stopping the charter flights. Now, the security problem has become a financial issue for the airline.

The first remedy to the problem was transporting the emigrants by Aeroflot and El Al planes on the Moscow-Budapest and Budapest-Tel-Aviv routes, respectively. The Hungarians offered ground services to these planes, even if their flying personnel

would not make the flights. The Israelis tried to incentivise Malév to resume the flights. G. Reken, an official of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, offered MALÉV the opportunity to fly to "military airports" in Israel and unspecified security screening systems as well.<sup>45</sup> It was no use.

However, it quickly became apparent that the issue was more than just a technicality. On March 27, the Washington embassy warned Budapest that the Deputy Secretary of State of the Bush administration, Lawrence Eagleburger, raised doubts about the causes of the Hungarian stoppage.<sup>46</sup> The Americans simply shunted aside the MALÉV personnel's security concerns. They floated the idea that the Hungarian government had stopped the airlink for political reasons. "He doesn't believe the Hungarian explanation" noted grimly the Hungarian Embassy in Washington. Moreover, the American Jewish Committee sent a delegation as well. Their message was much more direct and clearer: they asked for resolutions from the still-incumbent Socialist government, the Free Democratic Union and the MDF as well. In the latter case, they expressed that a positive resolution would help forget "the Csurka speech" in the expression of Hungary's Ambassador in Washington. The conclusion of the ambassador was clear: without the airlink, "Hungary's prestige in America can substantially decrease".<sup>47</sup>

The ripples ran through the Malév's whole network. Dangers seemed to lurk everywhere while international pressure was on. On March 25 1990, the Malév office in Bucharest was firebombed.<sup>48</sup> It was mostly blamed on Romanian-Hungarian tensions after the bloody attacks of Romanian protesters on Hungarians in Marosvásárhely on March 20,<sup>49</sup> but it definitely did not help the company already on edge. On March 26, Jewish citizens of Leningrad started a hunger strike in front of the local Malév office.<sup>50</sup> It seemed that all the ire was targeted an air company that was only an accidental player in the whole process. Hungary, in the meantime, looked the other way. On Sunday, March 25, its citizens voted democratically in a legislative election, without foreign meddling, for the first time since the end of the Second World War. The Hungarian Democratic Forum, the first post-communist centre-right formation, won resoundingly. However, the new democratic rulers, along with many other high-profile problems, had the issue on their hands due to the scrutiny of the West about their eligibility for "moderate" status. The technicalities were still left to the transition government, but the rhetoric of the winners was crucial.

In the meantime, other Central European countries stepped in to assert their eagerness to conform to Western wishes in helping the problem. Polish and Czech officials both asserted their willingness to build a similar airlink to that of Budapest.<sup>51</sup> After these, Malév apparently stood to lose market share in any case.



How could the Malév project have such a bad public image while the demands of the workers for better security organisation and system were legitimate? Later, a discussion in the *Légiközlekedés* air-workers union newspaper, pointed to the mismanagement of the crisis by Lajos Jahoda, CEO of the Malév since January 1989.<sup>52</sup> All the security concerns of the workers were not aired in local and global media, simply their decision to reject emigrant flights in the wake of the Islamic Jihad threats. Jahoda apparently wouldn't allow the concerns of the Malév workers to be shared with the press aside. No information was released apart from a short notice on the stoppage of flights. It was a long-running problem that he strictly controlled the information flow of the company. Now, it rebounded on the workers at a critical moment.

On March 28, the government, the owner of Malév, stepped in. Hungarian state-owned companies had been able to make their business decisions independently since 1987, but in this case, the political gravity of the situation triumphed. On March 28, the Minister of Transportation, András Derzsi, agreed with the workers that Malév would continue to fly to Tel-Aviv without the charter flights and would continue transporting those refugees who already had tickets. At the same time the regular flights would resume, without distinguishing the identity of the passengers, and even with occasional increases in their frequency.<sup>53</sup>

In the meantime, Gyula Horn, the acting Foreign Minister, forwarded the messages of the U.S. and Jewish organisations to the Hungarian parties on March 29. In the brief lull of the election campaign (after the first round on March 25, the second round was scheduled for April 8), on March 31, all notable Hungarian political parties expressed their dismay with the Malév decision. Csaba Kiss Gyula, the spokesperson of the soon-to-be government party MDF, clearly expressed his concern about Hungary's "international image" in stopping the flights and referenced the commitment of the MDF to human and minority rights, which was a mainstay of the MDF's profile.<sup>54</sup>

Does the rush to solve the crisis of the airlift and its eventual quick solution mean that the Hungarians caved to external pressure? If we look at the overall zeitgeist of the Hungarian political life in the period, we may express more correctly that they took the issue as a litmus test to demonstrate their Western orientation. That they did not give explanations right away is most likely the question of focus. We need to remember that while tensions boiled on the asphalt of the Budapest airport, the country was bracing for the first democratic elections to be held on March 25. An issue of MALÉV crews, which was a technicality, did not show up on the radar of national politics. But when the foreign affairs experts warned that it was a clear opportunity to express Western geopolitical commitment, all parties followed suit.

Not everybody was that happy with the rush to conform Western wishes, although these voices were keeping low-profile. A commentator of the MDF weekly *Magyar*



*Fórum* took a quick swipe on Tom Lantos, Hungarian-born Democratic representative for his condescending attitude toward Hungary. According to the columnist, Lantos spoke about the new democratic elections “like a white man praising a bushman” and paternalistically wagged a finger at the Hungarian government for stopping the flights to Israel.<sup>55</sup> While it was a small episode, it is informative that in the April 21 iteration of the weekly, a “readers’ letter” took issue of this tiny back-page swipe, asking as of why the *Magyar Fórum* commentator was critical of an American politician who denounced the airlift stoppage<sup>56</sup> While the noise of the elections deafened out most of the public debate on the airlift issue, it was indicative that it did sent some ripples, and touched upon a sensitive issue: can we criticize the West, just out of the geopolitical prison camp of Communism? Can Westerners criticize us, and how all of this is related to our sovereignty?

Despite some confused whispers in the background, the new democratic leadership continued with the airlift. For the incoming government of József Antall after the democratic elections, the role of Hungary in the transportation of Soviet Jews was a minor, but crucial issue in their Western integration. “Our participation in the transport cannot be seen as wavering”, warned the Foreign Ministry in a memorandum for the office of the Prime Minister,<sup>57</sup> preparing József Antall for a later delayed visit to Israel in October 1990.

The traffic was uninterrupted in the aftermath of the crisis of March 21-29. Flights restarted by April 7, although, for the time being, excluding the charter route agreed upon with the Jewish Agency. If we look at contemporary timetables, there are three flights scheduled for Tel Aviv per week throughout 1990 only by Malév<sup>58</sup> and there are indications that the charter flights slowly restarted on selected occasion. There was also at least one week with “25 flights to Tel Aviv”, according to the recollection of a Malév pilot.<sup>59</sup> The threats did not subside: when the deal to continue the flights was made, and the Poles announced that they would step in to help out Jewish refugees, two Polish diplomats were shot and wounded on March 30, Saturday, in Beirut. A radical Palestinian group expressly announced that the attempt was because of Polish rhetoric in connection with the Moscow-Tel Aviv airlift. The Hungarians persevered. In January 1992, when the traffic was already decreasing, it was reported that at least 160,000 Soviet Jews passed through Budapest airport on their way to Israel - this number was given by the police, including only those arriving in “protected” transports, so the total number can be even much higher.<sup>60</sup>

They received feedback on it as well: a U.S. foreign ministry delegation and every high-level Israeli official expressed admiration for Hungary for its role in the transportation of these refugees.<sup>61</sup> Hungary took a risk in late March 1990 and won Western appraisal. The logistical role of Hungary somewhat diminished. Prague and Warsaw were quick

to express their willingness to participate in the transport; throughout the second half of 1990, the transit routes consequently diversified.

The Hungarians naturally sought to distance themselves from the unwanted burden of the airlift. In the 1990 June 8 meeting of the Hungarian government with Gorbachev, which was crucial in starting the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the issue was mentioned again. The Soviet leader promised to start direct Moscow-Tel-Aviv flights once more<sup>62</sup> – without following up with actual results, just as he did at the start of the year. Hungary thus continued its somewhat diminished role in the airlift well into 1991.

Some grudges lingered in the MDF about the airlift. The “national radical” wing of the party, led by the aforementioned István Csurka, did not see the fast involvement of Hungary in new geopolitical conflicts that favorably. Csurka himself in the *Magyar Fórum* continued the subtle criticism of the migration of the Jewish people back to Israel. He mentioned Israel repeatedly as a culprit of Middle Eastern conflict with its “continued settlement in the occupied areas”<sup>63</sup>, and said that the Soviet Union is the greatest “supplier of humans” to Israel, helping them with their “foundation of an expanded homeland”.<sup>64</sup> This was all in line with Csurka’s stance of keeping a distance from the Western geopolitical sphere, seeing the unbridled integration of Hungary to the West as a less than ideal route to the new, sovereign Hungary. To support his position, he was keen to point out potential negative attributes West and its allies in his weekly column in the party newspaper. Alongside the Israel comments, for example, he took the time to point out how the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and the opportunity to liberate it came in handy for the regional goals of the U.S.,<sup>65</sup> or how “America and Israel” rejected a supposed Soviet peace plan in the Kuwait issue so they can topple the Saddam regime and advance “their own imaginations”.<sup>66</sup> Csurka’s commentary on global issues such as the airlift constitutes a minor, but substantial part of the ideological trajectory that led to elevated tensions within the party, and then led to his secession from the MDF and the launch of the MIÉP (Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja, Party of Hungarian Justice and Life) in 1991. In this sense, the impacts of geopolitics, the airlift included, served to advance the debates of Hungarian politics on the future of Hungary.

The formation of the crisis of the airlift, in the end, came about with the convergence of all the elements of opportunity and peril of the system transition. The outgoing socialist regime needed Western finances and acceptance and the corporation's new sources of funding. Consequently, Israeli relations were established, and in the commercial field, MALÉV quickly cashed in on the opportunity to open one of the few transportation routes to Israel from the Soviet Bloc. The rapprochement of superpowers unleashed Jewish people longing for their ancestral homeland on this airlink, and Hungary inadvertently drew – for the first time – the malign attention of

terrorists. The MALÉV personnel, who lived through years, even decades, of careless and arbitrary top-down company decisions during the communist era, expressed their insecurity, even panic about the order to fly refugees without attention to their security situation. Their trepidation of the fast-changing world and new threats boiled out on that March 21 mini-strike. Hungarian political life, on its way to Western integration, stepped in and built another symbolic link to a Western geopolitical identity, while the debates subtly continued in the background.

## V. Epilogue – Taking the Hit

On December 23, 1991, while the world followed the last hours of the dying Soviet Union with amazed and confused eyes, another bus convoy of Soviet Jewish emigrants approached Ferihegy airport, escorted by Budapest police cars. A couple of hundred meters before the gate, a device of hundreds of pounds of explosives blasted the back of the convoy. Four passengers and two policemen were injured, while the tailing police cruiser and the last bus of the convoy were heavily damaged. The first direct flight to Tel-Aviv from Moscow had landed almost three months earlier, on October 1, 1991, signalling the easing of the transportation situation for Central Europe.<sup>67</sup> After the tumultuous start of the airlink in 1990, Budapest airport introduced special security detachments, and through 1991 it even conducted spectacular anti-terrorist drills.<sup>68</sup> These did not prevent the terrorists from targeting Hungary, the first link in the air network since the start of transportation, signalling its enduring symbolic value in the process. The Hungarians had tried to keep the spectre of anti-semitic terrorism away from Budapest throughout the years, but in the end, they could not evade the terrorists' determination to attack the Soviet Jews.

A greater catastrophe was evaded only by the botched timing of the explosion. The culprits were two West German radicals. After almost half a century, Jews were targeted in Hungary once again, but this time from the other side of the political spectrum. Hungary, after the authoritarianism but relative geopolitical security of the Soviet era, had arrived at the age of hybrid threats. In the end, not the spectre of Hungarian antisemitism but Western alternative left-wing threats materialised. As the blast rang out on the highway to Ferihegy on that chilly December morning, it signalled one of the prices to step into a new era, where Hungary was aligned with the North Atlantic sphere, and not only as a fellow-traveller but a country that takes on responsibilities proactively of the new problems of the new era. With the airlift of Soviet Jewish refugees, clear risks were taken, and a clear security price was paid by the new democratic Hungary to demonstrate its commitment to Western geopolitical identity.

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<sup>8</sup> Levin op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Weinstein op. cit. 612.

<sup>10</sup> Beyer, Gregg A. "The Evolving United States Response to Soviet Jewish Emigration." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1991, pp. 139-56. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2537380>. Accessed November 29, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Beyer op. cit. 144.

<sup>12</sup> Gitelman op. cit. 357.

<sup>13</sup> Levin op. cit., 77.

<sup>14</sup> Beyer op. cit., 142.

<sup>15</sup> Heitman op. cit. 11.

<sup>16</sup> The Revolution of 1956 October-November is a turning point of Hungary's Soviet Era. While the revolution was crushed by the invading Soviet Army, it became clear, that Stalinism was untenable.

<sup>17</sup> "Telegram From the Embassy in Hungary to the Department of State" 1988.10.18. [\*Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981-1988, Volume X, Eastern Europe, Document no. 365\*](#)

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