

*Communal Protocols and the Daily Life of Hungarian Jews:
Proposal for a new Research Tool*

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Research Goal

The central aim of this project is the creation of a database of mini-biographies of Jews who lived in three Hungarian Jewish communities – Pest, Óbuda, and Miskolc – using the vast and hitherto unexamined information to be found in the protocols of those Jewish communities. These protocols have been broadly under-used, owing to legibility (they are largely manuscripts), linguistic barriers (they are written in an amalgamation of Yiddish-Deutsch, German, Magyar, and Rabbinic Hebrew), and to problems of accessibility (they are largely unpublished, located in the archival holdings of several research libraries in Israel and North America) Once completed, this database will allow academic genealogists and family historians researching for Hungarian roots to probe back farther into the past and to glean information regarding often more elusive groups, such as women and children.

Outline

Genealogical efforts to reconstruct family trees and have conventionally relied on a variety of sources, including census data, memorial books, oral histories, personal memoirs, biographies, and autobiographies. While providing the basis for countless impressive family histories, the scarcity of pre-20th century memoirs, autobiographies, and first-hand oral accounts often makes it difficult to trace back one's family history beyond the late 19th or early 20th century; and to discover details concerning less publicly active and visible family members, such as women and children. With such chronological and sociological limitations in mind, it is proposed to develop a heretofore under-exploited source for genealogical research: communal protocols. At the heart of this project, therefore, is an attempt to combine the most incisive aspects of social history and *Alltagsgeschichte* (daily history) with the invaluable work and methodologies of Jewish genealogists. Communal protocols, more colloquially the minutes of meetings held by the Jewish community council or some other Jewish communal organization, have been a widespread element of Jewish communal administration for centuries. Minimally, a communal scribe or official would record membership rolls, taxes assessments, communal ordinances, births, marriages, and deaths. However, the protocols often included additional information, in the form of detailed reports concerning the activities of various Jewish communal organizations – schools, women's association, burial and other voluntary associations – and recapitulations of the cases that came before the Beit Din (Rabbinical tribunal), where they sat in the synagogue, how much they donated to charity and to whom, intra- and inter-familial squabbles over money and prestige, and how they perceived and were perceived by their non-Jewish neighbours. The persons, groups, and events described in the protocols are situated in real time and space, without the requisite embellishments of the memorialist or autobiographer,

The untapped potential of communal protocols drew my attention after the publication of my first book, a history of the Jews of Miskolc, Hungary. This book, a social and institutional history of Hungarian Jewry's third largest Jewish community from its eighteenth century beginnings until 1878, relied heavily on the unpublished Jewish communal protocols of this Hungarian Jewish community. During the months following the appearance of this book, dozens of requests were addressed to me by Hungarian Jews and non-Jews whose family tree had traversed Miskolc or its environs at some point. More recently, my research on the Jews of Pest and Óbuda (amalgamated in 1873 to form Budapest) in which I used the protocols of these two Jewish communities in a similar fashion, elicited an even larger series of queries regarding the nineteenth century roots of the descendants of Budapest Jews. In each case, detailed information from the communal protocols could be accessed that allowed the inquirer to begin his or her family history as many as three or four generation earlier. In addition, information could be provided as to how these individuals and families were impacted by milestone events such as the Napoleonic Wars, the flooding of Buda-Pest in 1838, the Revolutions of 1848, and the Cholera Epidemics of 1831, 1848, 1855, and 1873.

It is proposed, therefore, is to address the overall picture behind such queries on an aggregate scale by compiling a database of mini-biographies based on the records of the Jewish communal protocols of Miskolc, Óbuda, and Pest from the 1760s through the 1880s. The end result will be a complete database of Jews from these locales, searchable by name, place, and year. The protocols are unpublished manuscripts, written in Hebrew, Yiddish-Deutsch, German, and Magyar. Once this project is completed and its value recognized within the world of Jewish genealogists and among social historians generally, others may be moved to retrieve similar information embedded in the relatively large number of communal protocols still existing from dozens of Jewish communities from Europe to the Middle East, currently gathering dust in various libraries and archives in Europe, North American, and Israel.