

## HERBERT FIERST

Notes on Charles Fenyvesi's interview with Herbert Fierst, 86, in his house on 4114 Rosemary Street, Chevy Chase, Md, on Aug. 15, 2000 and subsequent phone interviews. Fierst is a former senior State Department official who worked in the late 1940s as assistant on DP and refugee issues to John H. Hilldring, assistant secretary of state in charge of occupied areas (Germany, Austria and Japan).

**State's choosing the Jewish Agency as a beneficiary of Hungarian Jewish assets is "strange,"** said Fierst who, despite his position, has never heard of the Becher Loot. He characterized postwar State Department as divided between officials who feared the impact of a Jewish State on America's good relations with the Arabs and others whose priority was to relieve the pressure of Jewish refugees coming from Russia, most of them originally from Poland. "State too wanted to close down the DP camps that the US Army did not want to run as its people were not trained in welfare work. These were **two competing outlooks.**"

He says that those in the first camp included anti-Semites who did not hide their prejudices and who feared that Jews were hell-bent to assert their interests. But the second camp included Dean Acheson, often Acting Secretary of State in those days, who was "sympathetic to the misery of the DPs and the refugees but was not an advocate of Zionist positions." Nor did he ever get emotionally involved though he "loosened up a bit" and allowed himself to be influenced by American Jewish leaders describing the situation of their coreligionists in Europe. Acheson relied on Hilldring, a plain-spoken, gruff soldier keenly aware that the U.S. occupation forces did not have the facilities to take in any more refugees from the East. In 1946 there were weeks when as many as 1,000 Jews a day arrived in Germany from Russia via Poland where most of them had originally come from.

"Intellectually and emotionally, Hilldring was very very well-disposed to help the refugees and ingenious in finding ways to help them." Unlike some of his colleagues in State and the Pentagon, he opposed the school of thought that the US must seal Germany's eastern border. On the issue of the US Army handing over its responsibilities for DPs and refugees, Hilldring used a clever approach: He testified in Congress that it would be cheaper to have an international organization handle refugees than US occupation forces. He won. "But," Fierst emphasized, "**in terms of his friendliness to Jews, Hilldring was a lone wolf in the State Dept.**"

Fierst said he and his office was aware that the Jewish Agency used hard currency, raised in the US and elsewhere, to buy arms for the Hagana, the self-defense organization of the *yishuv* in Palestine.

Only a small fraction of the uprooted were Jewish, Fierst pointed out, but they created the problem that "worried most the State Department, the War Department, and the White House." Acheson, directed by Truman but also in sympathy with the plight of the DPs, commended legislation to admit to the US 400,000 DPs, Jewish and non-Jewish, to relieve the overcrowded facilities in Germany, and Congress adopted the legislation.

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The second group in the State Department was opposed to letting more Jews emigrate to Palestine because of the fear of damaging America's good relations with the Arabs. Fierst, who visited the DP camps on several occasions, encountered many American officers "loyally carrying out their duties" while privately antagonistic to the Jews, finding them "dirty, smelly, and adept as black marketers" and sympathetic to the Germans, former Nazis included, because they were "clean and reliable." "The Army wanted to get out of running the camps," Fierst says. "They were not trained as welfare workers. They were willing to facilitate Jewish emigration to Israel."

Aug. 15 and 19, 2000, Charles Fenyesi's phone interviews with Herbert Fierst, 86, former State Dept official who worked as assistant to assistant secretary of state John H. Hilldring in charge of occupied areas, Germany, Austria and Japan.

State's choosing the Jewish Agency as a beneficiary of Hungarian Jewish assets (i.e. the "Becher Loot") is "strange." But the State Dept was divided between officials who feared the impact of a Jewish State on America's good relations with the Arabs and others whose priority was to relieve the pressure of Jewish refugees coming from Russia, most of them originally from Poland. They wanted to close down the DP camps that the US Army did not want to run as its people "were not trained in welfare work." "These were two competing outlooks."

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MARIA DE KORNFELD, HANNA SZEGEDY-MASZAK nee KORNFELD

Notes on Charles Fenyvesi's interview on June 24, 2000 at the Washington, D.C. home of sisters Maria de KORNFELD (MK) and Hanna SZEGEDY-MASZAK (HSM), granddaughters of Manfred Weiss, followed up by telephone interviews. The sisters, in their 80s, remember Kurt Becher who is still the subject of conversation at family gatherings. Nearly the entire Weiss family now lives in the U.S.

MK called **Kurt Becher** "**a thief with taste and good manners...** He cleaned out the house of my uncle, Ferenc Chorin, on 116 Andrássy ut. He took not only his fine collection of paintings and the furnishings but Uncle Feri's silver toiletries." She thought that Becher probably shipped the items to Switzerland. She said Chorin's daughter, Daisy von Strasser who now lives in Austria, went to see Becher in Bremen in the 1960s or 70s. Becher was "very cold and distant and would not answer her questions." It was very hard for her to get to see Becher, and it was her impression that he lived "a life of isolation." Her impressions were shared by her cousin (and MK's brother) George Kornfeld who ran into Becher when Becher visited the US and on one occasion stayed in the hotel Kornfeld ran.

According to Chorin, as quoted in his daughter Daisy de Strasser's book "Chorin Ferenc Emlekkönyv" (A Book in Ferenc Chorin's Memory), Becher demanded not only the Manfred Weiss Concern but also the entire personal wealth of the extended Weiss family. Becher wanted the trusteeship to last 33 years and one fifth of the family (and the leading personalities) as hostages staying behind in Germany as "guests of the Reich."

Both sisters thought Becher was "very handsome, tall and with good manners." They called **Vilmos Billitz** "**a proud Jew, a real Jew,**" "**trusted by everyone in the family,**" and "**a wonderful person who was probably killed by his SS guards in Vienna, possibly on orders from Becher.**" They said their uncles believed that but did not have proof.

The sisters think that Chorin might have been the only family member present at the April 4 negotiation session with Becher. Chorin, then recovering from a serious illness and brought home from the Oberlansendorf internment camp near Vienna only to be placed in house arrest, named Billitz as the family negotiator.

The sisters explained that the May 17 signing of the contract was in the summer house owned by the Mauthner branch of the family, just outside Budapest, on Budakeszi ut. Family members, some of who had been hiding, were collected by other family members in cars. The message from Becher was that if only one family member was missing, the deal is off. All family members were present, plus the families of Billitz and another lawyer, Gyorgy Hoff, a total of 41 people. For the first time since the March 19 invasion, the family saw Chorin, "very thin and very much older," (MK) as he was held in house arrest in his own house. **Chorin asked everyone to sign the contract with the SS,** as he agreed to the terms and because the transaction will allow the family to leave for Portugal or Switzerland.

All 41, including small children and two pregnant mothers, were packed into SS cars, each of which could hold only 4 people. The convoy was protected by machinegun-toting SS in armored cars in the front and the back. The commanding officer told the family that in case the Hungarian border guards created any problems (no one in the

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Weiss family had the required permission to leave the country), the SS unit would have to shoot its way out. But the Hungarians, once seeing the SS uniforms, let the convoy pass without inquiring about who was in it. On the German side, they were told by SS headquarters to let through the convoy that arrived in Vienna early in the morning of May 18.

The next two and a half weeks were spent in a train consisting of three wagons and equipped with a kitchen and bathrooms, parked in Purkersdorf, just outside Vienna. SS personnel guarded the train around the clock and no one was allowed to leave the train. On one occasion Becher visited the family. But in a few days the prisoners were allowed to take walks in the nearby Vienna woods. Once a week they were taken to a public bath in Vienna, Bad Diana, as the SS were very worried that family members might develop infectious diseases. Then a day or two after the Allied landing in Normandy on June 6, they were taken by train to Stuttgart, Germany, then by one plane to Switzerland, and two planes to Portugal. 32 people went to Portugal, 9 to Switzerland. The Portuguese police arrested the male family members once the Portuguese authorities discovered that all the visas were forged, presumably by the SS. It took the intervention of British Ambassador O'Malley (previously stationed in Budapest) and the former Hungarian ambassador in Lisbon, Andor Wodianer, to arrange their release.

According to George Kornfeld who, according to his sisters, knows family business lore, the **Germans dismantled the Csepel factory's most important machinery** (many of them designed and patented by Weiss Concern engineers), put them on barges, shipped them to Austria and Bavaria and sold them to various companies. **The delay in getting compensation for the machinery was due to the German companies insisting on yet more proof that the machinery originally belonged to the Weiss Concern.** The money the family received was a small fraction of the value of the machinery. But the family did not try to recover its possessions in Hungary. When the war ended, "the always well-informed" Chorin was sure that the Russians would take over the country and that the communists will launch another wave of expropriation.

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JAMES MCCARGAR

Notes on Charles Fenyvesi's telephone interviews with U.S. intelligence official James McCargar of Washington, D.C. (202-362-0877) in July and August, 2000.

Russian speaker McCargar was the political officer at the U.S. Legation in Budapest from April 1946 to December 1947. As an intelligence officer dealing with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, he was in the position to know what went on elsewhere in Europe.

**Looting by U.S. forces** in Europe was "quite horrendous." There was "an awful lot of corruption." He recalls one lieutenant colonel in what was then the Air Corps who declared \$75,000 on his income tax return, at a time when the Secretary of State drew an annual salary of \$10,000. This officer was "a master looter," working for many top U.S. military officers. He was eventually brought to trial but was acquitted. "If they get me, I'll bring the whole house down," he threatened.

When asked about Mate Topic Mimara, McCargar said he heard such stories "more than once," as **fraudulent claims** were "in the air, and they were the kind of thing that went on all over the place. Occasionally, they were in the press, but most of the time they were left unmentioned."

"**Restitution** was a rather obscure subject. It was a highly specialized operation, not in the forefront of everyone else's thinking. Other things were on people's minds, and the foremost was what we will do with our increasing difficulties with the Soviets, as exemplified by the communist coup in Czechoslovakia and the blockade of Berlin. We all got very nervous about the Soviet plans. And we knew that whatever restitution to Hungarian victims of the Holocaust might be made by the West, the communists would only expropriate it – one more time."

"In Hungary, we had no doubt that a complete **communist takeover** was coming. Perhaps we had a slim chance to avoid it, and we tried. One kept hope alive. But after Ferenc Nagy's ouster in 1947 we knew it was all over."

ACC: When asked what happened to all the unresolved Anglo-American complaints about **Soviet violations of various reparation and restitution agreements**, McCargar said: "The cases we brought up and got no answers on were 'stockpiled,' which meant that at some later date in the course of a negotiation we would bring them up. We didn't forget about the cases. We kept a lively list of American properties lost to the Soviets. Someone in the State Dept was in charge of the list. Russian refusal to deal with our complaints didn't mean the end of those cases. Standard Oil of course just wrote off its investments in Hungary. Then there was the case of the Soviet Legation which legally belonged to Gladys Vanderbilt, an American heiress who married a Hungarian count and bought the mansion before the war. All such cases were recorded for possible eventual negotiations with the Russians."

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## SID YATES

Notes on Charles Fenyvesi's Aug. 15, 2000 phone interview with Sid Yates, 91, 24-term congressman from Chicago, first elected in 1948, a respected leader of the Congressional Jewish caucus in the 1960s and 70s.

**The State Dept's decision to give the Becher ransom to the Jewish Agency for Palestine "doesn't make sense" to Yates.** "I have heard many bizarre stories about survivors unable to claim their property but this one is unbelievable," he said. "At no other instance was something like this done. The obvious disposition of the treasure was to the heirs." "And you expected the State Department, with its many anti-Semites, to be against giving the treasure to the Jewish Agency, to the Zionists."

"The Jewish Agency was a very worthy cause but the treasure should not have been given to it without the consent of those who owned the items."

Yates cites "two possible reasons for the State Dept's action:"

1. It was hard to track down survivors and to verify ownership. Giving the treasure to the Jewish Agency was the easiest way out. The State Dept didn't want to bother with a long process.
2. Truman might have been told about it, and he gave orders to the State Dept. Truman liked to do that sort of a thing, and it is hard to imagine the State Dept initiating such an action.

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Only a small fraction of the uprooted were Jewish, about 50,000 at war's end and rising to 250,000 by 1947, due to the exodus from Poland and Romania. [Abraham S. Hyman of the Judge Advocate office of the U.S. Army, who later became the General Counsel of the U.S. War Claims Commission. Abraham S. Hyman: The Undefeated. Gefen Publishing House, Ltd. Jerusalem, 1993. pp. 13-15] But they created the problem that "worried most the State Department, the War Department, and the White House," says Herbert Fierst, who was the specialist on DPs on the staff of John Hilldring, Assistant Secretary of State for occupied areas. Fierst told PCHA that "two competing outlooks divided the State Department." Some officials, whose ranks eventually included Acting Secretary of State Dean Acheson, feared the destabilizing effect on Germany of the DP camps, wanted them shut down, and saw the DPs' emigration to Palestine as the best solution. Acheson, directed by Truman but also in sympathy with the plight of the DPs, commended legislation to admit to the US 400,000 DPs, Jewish and non-Jewish, to relieve the overcrowded facilities in Germany, and Congress adopted the legislation.

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SUSAN BERGER

A July 1, 2000 memo from Susan Berger, researcher and a member of the Swedish Wallenberg Commission, and notes taken from Charles Fenyvesi's interviews, on the phone and in person through the summer of 2000.

Becher had been with the RSHA since December of 1941 [Amt Reit- und Fahrtwesen (I.N.3)]. I simply mention this to emphasize that he had been in Berlin, under Fegelein, and therefore close to Himmler. After two tours at the Russian front he returned in December 1943 to Berlin and was working in his old position when Himmler sent him to Budapest.

When you contrast Himmler's two envoys as 'one rigidly Nazi and the other innovative and opportunistic' I understand what you mean, but it somehow does not do Becher justice, in the sense that he comes off too well. Becher was of course, as you say, a 'thief and a plunderer' but he was not only that. He was not just an opportunist dressed in a Nazi uniform. His dealings had a sinister quality, that so far has not been adequately captured.

To put it differently - there is a brutality to Becher which is not easily definable. Its blunt force has been mitigated by the swagger and breathtaking audacity with which Becher operated. And it was one step removed, so to speak - "confined" to the area of economics. Becher was an ice-cold operator and there is evidence of his coldbloodedness, as in his dealings with Billitz and in the numerous stories circulating where Becher extracted goods and services in return for promises of protection which he did not keep. He kept at least some promises when dealing with people such as the Weiss family, to protect his reputation as a man with whom one can do business.

And I am not so sure that Becher was not a committed Nazi. If not committed to the Nazi ideology, then certainly committed to its credo. Otherwise he would not have surrounded himself with so many of his fellow travelers after the war. You say quite rightly that he was not Oscar Schindler, not a bon-vivant - Becher was a cold, calculating, brilliant exploiter of human misery. I think he looked down on people like Eichman as lowly bureaucrats who had to do the dirty work. To him, as a sophisticated, 'civilized' man of the world brutal slaughter was unpalatable. There surely were better ways to get rid of the Jews - but I do not think that in the end he objected to getting rid of them at all. He simply disliked the method because it was primitive.

I was unaware of Sergeant Essex, etc. - how very interesting. This reminded me of the whole Saly Mayer/Becher negotiation. One question that has been on my mind for a long time is how Saly Meyer was able to string Becher along for so many months without offering anything to further the negotiations. I wonder what those two REALLY talked about ... Do you know if the Saly Meyer papers are now accessible in full?

Are you aware of that whole issue of 'Vorrat Linde', which refers to part of the money paid to Becher through Switzerland in the kidnapping case of Leopold Aszner? Documentation is now available in Switzerland, the Swedish part is missing.

Regarding what Becher told me about his Swedish connections, he told me that they were many and he strongly IMPLIED that they included contacts to the Wallenberg brothers. He was the one who offered the Oppenheim connection, to make the point of his being very familiar with Marcus, because a) Oppenheim had spent a part of his training at Enskilda Banken, and b) he was married to Markus Wallenberg's sister. Oppenheim was also an Abwehr agent [you can read about him in Ladislav Farago's book 'Game of the Foxes'] who reported on Sweden regularly. [Farago sidesteps the Wallenbergs very elegantly - he was apparently connected to them in some form. It was he who wrote the 'Festschrift' for Jacob Wallenberg's 75th birthday!]

Do you have a copy of the interview by Egon Mayer with Bruhn? That sounds fascinating. I am wondering about bankruptcy, however.

Becher was born December 9, 1909 and died on August 8, 1995. I called in Bremen on August 9, because I was to meet Becher again on the 10th. I was then told that he had passed away the previous day. His secretary found him sitting at his desk where he had a heart attack.

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