

THE HUNGARIAN-SPEAKING JEWRY HERITAGE MUSEUM IN SAFED, GALILEE

MEETING WITH EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

RON LUSTIG

by

GYŐZŐ VÖRÖS

I first met with Director Lustig during a lunch at the Jerusalem Hotel Astoria in September 2023, organized by the Hungarian Embassy in Tel Aviv, just before the Gaza War. I was a member of a Hungarian government-delegation, and it was the Hungarian minister of culture and innovation, HE János Csák, who requested us to meet with each other. At that time, parallel with my other academic duties in the Levant, I served as a minister chief-counsellor in Budapest as well. It was a very pleasant meeting indeed, in the company of some Hungarian diplomats, and as a name card, after the kosher lunch, Mr. Lustig gave me a copy of a book, written about his museum in Safed, overlooking the Lake of Tiberias on the north, in the highest city of the Galilee. In addition to this, he invited me to visit his museum once. After our Jerusalem meeting, I found the following introduction by Mr. Lustig in his 2021, freshly published Israeli book:

When my father, Yosef, joined my mother Hava (Chava, Éva) in retirement after many years of work, I expected that my parents would adopt a new hobby, or open a world atlas and mark some exotic destinations they would like to visit. But my father took me by surprise when he excitedly told me of their plans. “Your mother and I are going to open a museum,” he announced. As it turned out, they already had partners for this project, a large group of friends who had decided to take action and devote themselves to the challenge, despite being totally clueless as to how to go about it. “We must tell the story of Hungarian-speaking Jewry,” said my mother, “otherwise no one else will.”

They sought to tell the story of a community whose sons and daughters lived in a complex and dynamic world, one abundant in rich cultures

and which experienced both conflict and transformation. They wanted to paint a picture of a diverse community that had given rise to different, and sometimes opposing, streams of Judaism.

In 1987, they began work on an extraordinary museum. Its exhibits, which were drawn from familial and communal experience, describe life in the community in a simple and original way, allowing for a direct, authentic encounter with its history. Naturally, the museum also deals with the Holocaust, which was a devastating and decisive chapter in the history of the community. There are emotionally charged items in the museum that shed light on several aspects of this period, although most of its exhibits are dedicated to life before the Holocaust, underscoring the enormous rupture and the extent of the loss.

Today, thirty-four years after the founding of the museum, we have taken pause. We are studying the heavily laden walls, examining the pieces posited in the display cases, recalling the stories behind them and the people without whom none of this would have happened – and are attempting to chronicle them all in this book.

The selection of the items and exhibits that have made it into these pages was a long, complex and painstaking task. We aimed to create a book that would introduce readers to the special character of the museum, offer them a taste of the experience of visiting the museum itself, and enable them to touch the rich world displayed in it. We wished to express the museum's meaningful connection with all those who chose to entrust it with the preservation of the rare fragments of memory that they had cherished over the years.

The materials that constitute this book are brimming with knowledge, nostalgia and emotion, are eye-opening, and are sometimes chilling to the point of tears. Their presence in this book is a testament to their importance as a cultural legacy for the younger generation, for whom an understanding of the past is essential for the clarification of issues that relate to their future.¹

Needless to say, I wanted to visit the museum as soon as possible, however history, with the next Israeli war in line, interrupted. Within weeks after our meeting, the Holy Land was once again at war, against a Muslim coalition of Shia and Sunni forces around its borders: Hezbollah on the north, Iran on the east, Hamas and the Houthis on the south. The so-called War of Gaza (or the

¹ Ron Lustig (edited and curated), *Threads of Memory Weave Community: Book of the Hungarian-Speaking Jewry Heritage Museum*, Safed 2021, pp. 134-133. The bilingual, English-Hebrew book is available in Hungarian-Hebrew language-mutation version as well: *Emlékfonalakból szövődő közösség: A Magyar Nyelvtérületről Származó Zsidóság Emlékmúzeuma*, Cfat 2021.

7 October War) delayed my visit until the Holy Thursday of 2025, when I arrived to the just re-opened Museum with my darling wife Noémi, and our beloved children, Alexander and Salome Alexandra. It is important to note that we did not want to be a burden on Mr. Lustig, therefore we arrived without any arrangements or prior notice, it was a spontaneous “touristic” visit from our side, at around 10 AM. The garden-gate of the museum was open, and after parking into a free lot, we knocked on the door of the museum and opened it. We found Mr. Lustig together with other visitors, but as a very pleasant surprise he immediately recognized me, and called me by my first name with a perfect double acute accent (that only a native Hungarian can pronounce):

“Győző! Great to see you again! As you may see, I am engaged with a group now, but until I finish, would you like to see a film as an introduction to our museum? It is around 20 minutes, and when you finished, I will be already available for you!”

Needless to say, my kids were thrilled by the idea of an unexpected movie, and we were captivated with Noémi after such a warm and hospitable welcome. We sat down in the little “cinema” of the museum, and listened stunned to the Hungarian-speaking (!) film, he started for us. It was really astonishing. The narrative offered a very unique perspective about the Jews in the Carpathian basin, who were there centuries before the Hungarian conquest, based on archaeological evidence, already at the time of the Roman Empire. Our cherished compatriots were living for a millennium with the Hungarian Christians, until the occupying German Third Reich poisoned the relationship between the Christian-Hungarians and the Jewish-Hungarians. However, the film ended with the New Moses of the Jews, a Hungarian gentleman Theodor Herzl, who was born in Budapest in 1860, and moved with his family to Vienna only in 1878, after he completed his secondary education in the Protestant-Evangelical School on the Deák square in Budapest. It was he, who had a vision of a Jewish State in the geographical entity of historical Palestine, “*a land without a people, for a people without a land*”, as the Christian Zionists, the so-called restorationists said, already decades before him. The famous phrase was coined by the Scottish clergyman, Reverend Alexander Keith, already in 1843. The film ended with a *mise en abyme*, with the final scenes already taking place inside the museum, where we were sitting.

As another unexpected surprise, Mr. Lustig sat down with us for the last minutes of the film, and told us that he is called Roni by his friends. It is very difficult to describe the warm hospitality we received, including his passionate guiding-around in the exhibition halls of the beautiful museum. His narrative in excellent English, and the embedded dozens of *cameo stories* were giving the same crystal-clear message to my 11-year-old daughter, as to me in my 54th year: A hidden chapter in the history of Hungary, and a unique story within

the history of Israel. The two are reflecting each other like facing mirrors, and the narrative to be told is as long as our joint history: Since the conquering Hungarians warriors arrived to the Carpathian basin in AD 895 on horseback, and met with the Jews there. However, after living together longer than a millennium, a part of the “Hungarian-Speaking Jewry” (as the name of the museum defines our former compatriots), remained in Hungary, while the other part immigrated to Israel, thus fulfilling the vision of the Budapest-born Theodor Herzl, with a New Exodus: This time not from Egypt, but from the territory of the millennium-old former Kingdom of Hungary.

After leaving Safed, we went with my Hungarian family through Capernaum to Haifa, on the Mediterranean seacoast, and bought purple peony flowers, to visit the Holy Virgin in the Stella Maris Monastery, in the Basilica of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. The statue of the Madonna is just above the cave of Prophet Elijah. A Christian shrine above a Jewish historical place. We arrived as humble pilgrims, to start the Sacred Triduum of the Easter there. In the port we went to a Russian restaurant, and ate a fantastic pork-clod steak, commemorating the Jerusalem Last Supper, in a Hungarian-Christian way. Then, I told my children that we are here in Haifa, and visited the Mount Carmel Virgin as Christian pilgrims, meanwhile in Safed, we were similarly pilgrims, however as Hungarian patriots. Therefore, this museum is a pilgrim destination as well, for all Hungarians, Christians or Jews, from Hungary, from Israel, or from anywhere on Earth. They understood and agreed. We returned home to Jerusalem late in the evening.

Next day, I received a letter from Mr. Lustig, who wrote me the following:

“Dear Győző, Thank you for your very kind words. Yesterday’s meeting was certainly a most moving experience for me and a pleasant surprise. I was touched by the way you and your lovely family members have all sympathized with the spirit of our museum and how you so quickly connected to the subtexts of our collection. I believe that your visit will indeed serve as a promising beginning of what I hope will turn up to be long-standing collaboration between us.”

During the next days I re-read the museum-book I had received in 2022 from Mr. Lustig, and realized I would like to know more about his mission and share it with others as well. Therefore, I wrote to him that I would like to make an interview with him in Safed, if he would be ready to meet me again, already for the third time. We agreed on the day and time, and I was in Safed, for the second time on 5 May 2025, Monday morning at 10 o’clock in the Museum. Our conversation was the following (that my son, a student at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, who kindly accompanied me, recorded with the permission of Director Lustig, who generously agreed to publish it here, after he approved the text of the interview):

– Dear Roni, thank you for the opportunity of meeting you again, here in your distinguished museum. I arrived with a bunch of questions, and I trust, you will be ready to answer them! Approximately how many Israeli citizens have roots in the Carpathian basin today, connected to the territory of historical Hungary?

– Ron Lustig: Well, there is no exact figure, and there are no official records in the Ministry of Interior that categorize the Israelis by their original historic roots.

– Is it a sensitive information?

– RL: That's right, during the early days of the State of Israel, there was a very precise documentation regarding the origins of the new immigrants. These early records are stored at the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem, and in the Archives of the Ministry of Interior. But we talk already about their third generation.

– This is exactly why I am very kindly asking you about your estimate, according to the figures of your museum archives, since probably it is the closest to reality, and the most trustable one.

– RL: Based on our evidence and calculations, we may conclude that there are about 350,000-400,000 Israelis with Hungarian-speaking or Carpathian-basin geographical-roots in Israel. Meanwhile, decades ago this Israeli community was believed to consist of only around 300,000 people, but since then, the community has expended, especially among our Orthodox compatriots. These particular congregational groups are frequently intermarrying among each other, and are very traditional in preserving their Hungarian customs, the way they dress, the way they cook, even the way they speak. These conservative families often have from eight to ten children, sometimes even 15, and thus are growing substantially. I assume that their number is around 50,000 in these days, and you know their number can considerably increase in a generation. If you go to *Mea She'arim* in Jerusalem, there is an Orthodox neighborhood called *Batei Ungarin*, where they speak an archaic form of Hungarian. It is far from the contemporary colloquial Hungarian language and culture, and therefore is of great interest for scholars who visited them from Hungary, to study their language and customs. They are all ethnically Hungarian descendants, with very deep cultural roots. Among the Orthodox families, before a marriage, there is a meticulous process of checking the legacies and heritages of the future relatives. In Hebrew, it is called *yeches*. When somebody is offered for marriage, his or her lineage is carefully examined, and if it can be proved that s/he is a descendent of a famous Hungarian rabbi from Sátoraljaújhely, or Tokaj, or Pápa, there is always a certain image or high reputation, and a prestigious matchmaking.

– Your museum has a formidable library, a commanding archive, and a beautiful collection. Would you be so kind as to share with us the figures? How many books, archive documents, and museum-artifacts are you treasuring?

– RL: Our library consists of around 20,000 books. We have archive documents around 70,000, in addition to the tens of thousands of photographs. In terms of museum artifacts or objects, we have somewhere between 3,500 and 4,000. I like to see the role of the objects through a *rectangular sequence*: Behind every object there is a donor. The museum that accepts the objects is the third component, and finally there is the community who benefits from the objects. So, there is a very close, very intimate relationship between the four elements of this cycle. Most of our items were given to us by the original owners, who were with us for the last - I would say - 30 years, and were being directly involved with the activities of our museum, engaged with the operation and participating in the events. So, they were an integral part of our routine day-to-day life. We call them as the first generation, because these were the immigrants who came to Israel and settled here. Naturally, nearly all of them have passed away already. I am considered second generation, since I was born already here, in Israel. Now, these first-generation immigrants were extremely vital in preserving the memory of this community, and without them our mission could not have been achieved. So, from their point of view, the choice to handover to us their most cherished personal belongings that could be a small photograph from kindergarten, a Judaica object or a very rare book, first and foremost reflected their concern for preserving them for the next generations. But most importantly, these decisions were motivated by the will to participate in this extremely important process, in which they felt that they had a share in commemorating this heritage that should serve as an inspiration for the future of this community, being developed in the State of Israel.

– I try to imagine those Jewish immigrants who arrived with two suitcases to the Holy Land, one filled with clothes, the other with food, having a little space for personal items as well, the latter probably in their handbags or backpacks. We are speaking about these extremely cherished items which were taken in hand, or through inside pockets from their ancestral Homeland. So, these are those personal belongings that you rescue together with your children, in case of a fire in your house, as the most cherished pieces you would like to save from being consumed by the fire. Something like that. I trust that every piece in this museum is a treasure, because they have such an extraordinary moral value.

– RL: Right, and if I may elaborate on it a bit further, I think what they represent is a very unique perspective on looking back at the role of their past. I think most of those Israelis that came to Israel from Hungary had a special

interest of looking back at their own past in this very unique perspective of somebody, who made a decision to leave his or her homeland, chose an alternative country to live in, but at the same time, examine and appreciate the role of their heritage and their legacy, in the creation of the new society that they were engaged, and very intensely involved with. So, it is not only a documentation center, this place serves as a lens, as a very special lens for people to look through, but in a very, as I said, a very unique perspective, examining what is the relationship between what we had over there in the past, and what we have here. One of the main objectives of this exhibition is to highlight the relevancy of this past, and what it has contributed to those individuals, but at the same time, to the whole Hungarian population, and in the meantime, evaluate its relevancy to the society here in Israel.

– It is very clear, your museum is a testimony of the successful Jews in the history of the Kingdom of Hungary (before 1945), the successful Hungarian-Jews in relation to Zionism and Israel, and ultimately, about the history of the Hungarian-speaking diaspora in Israel: A Memorial. And more, as I understand, your museum is also like a bridge between Hungary and Israel, and serves as a lens, like you said, with very special optics and perspectives to/from both countries. Where do you believe that this museum-memorial would have the best location in Israel? Because today, it is in Safed, not necessarily easy to reach, especially not for those Hungarians who are visiting Israel, as tourists.

– RL: Well, evidently our museum has proved throughout the years that people do make an effort to come all the way to Safed to see what we can offer them, especially the very immediate circle of Hungarian families who live in Israel, who relate to it as a shrine, as a place for empathy, for recollection of their own memories, and very often we had families who would frequent us and visit us, and join the public events that we have been conducting here. We used to have an annual conference called “Herzl Day” during October. It was a traditional event where we would have between 600-800 people coming here attending an event.

– Which day of October?

– RL: During Sukkot.

– A moveable religious festival.

– RL: At the beginning we had it celebrated on the day that Herzl passed away, this is on July 3, but due to other considerations we decided to move it to October.

– And were you offering your invitation as one of the tents for Sukkot, to celebrate together?

– RL: That's right! So, this was a very successful yearly event, and occasionally we conducted seminars and workshops. But life, sometimes, is much tougher and unpredictable. Reality has to be faced objectively. We always thought that our museum should be located in a much more central location. Much closer to cultural infrastructure, educational institutions that cater themselves to this type of activities that we feel we can contribute. We have been looking for locations throughout the country. We examined a number of options, among them was Haifa, the other one was Herzliya. Tel Aviv has never been an option because the mayor of Tel Aviv decided that the city should have one museum that serves all the diasporas of the Jewish people, which is the Museum of the Jewish People (ANU), a museum that is located within the campus of Tel Aviv University, so Tel Aviv was never open to these kinds of ethnographic museums. We had discussions with mayors of several cities, and Holon was one of them. Holon is to the south of Tel Aviv; it has a quite large museum community, six or seven museums clustered in one place. But we gave it up, and then we were left with Herzliya due to some very clear considerations.

First of all, Herzliya is located in a highly central location and is accessible to the cultural consumers of this country. Excellent educational system, elementary and high school, with a good university. I have had a number of meetings with the former president of the university, Professor Uriel Reichman. And, the city is named after Herzl! Not only that, the first pioneers who established Herzliya came from Erdély, from Transylvania! So, they all are very well connected, and provide the appropriate context for choosing a good location for this museum. Now, when we envisioned this new museum, we did not see it as a memorial. On the contrary, we thought that it should be a relevant, vivid, multidisciplinary cultural center, which would enable its full integration within the cultural scene of not only the local population of Herzliya, but rather, cater itself to the whole population of Israel, and competing for attention with other museums as a cultural resource that provides multidisciplinary cultural events and activities, all under the umbrella of what I consider *collective memory cultural elements*, which are inherent in our society. Memory in the Israeli culture is one of the most basic values upon which the whole system has been built, and we believe that our assets may very well serve building a versatile cultural platform that would serve the young generations as well as the older one, and providing each one of them relevant activities and points of interest.

This was the basis of our program that we developed for the new museum. We have a quite substantial document that was prepared for the sake of developing the concept of the new museum, which is dominantly based on this notion of establishing a rich cultural center that would enable groups of different backgrounds, not necessarily Hungarian ones to interact. Israelis and international tourists with Hungarian roots and, naturally, Hungarians are our

most immediate and natural market. But it has always been our effort to exemplify the Hungarian-Jewish community as an excellent case study to show insights to the Jewish world, insights to the creation of Israel, and to examine the role of Hungarians in the creation of Israel. And here, I brought you, I do not know if you have seen this book before, this is a book that we have participated in publishing, it's called *Meagan Hakarpatim vead Hayam Hatichon (From the Carpathian Basin to the Mediterranean Sea)*, edited by Dr. Anna Szalai, an Israeli scholar.² This book is about prominent Hungarian immigrants who contributed to the State of Israel in different categories and in different historical periods.

– How do you see those Jews with Hungarian roots, who arrived from the Carpathian basin, and settled down in Israel: Are they keeping their Hungarian traditions and customs? You spoke already about the Orthodox Jewish community in the Batei Ungarin neighborhood of Jerusalem. Are the Hungarian descendant Neolog (reformed) and secular Jews keeping their deep cultural roots as well, like those in Jerusalem? Can they still dance as Hungarians? Cooking Hungarian food? Understanding the language? Do their hearts beat in Hungarian? Naturally, these questions are relevant to all Hungarian diasporas, anywhere on Earth. Usually, the second generation forgets how to speak proper Hungarian, while the third generation already loses its Hungarian identity, sometimes completely, some of them even change their names, in a harsh contrast to the Italian communities, to the Chinese or Anglo-Saxon diasporas. Meanwhile, I always saw that the best and strongest of such communities anywhere on Earth are the Jews, because they have kept their identity in the diasporas for the past 2,000 years. What is the legacy here in Israel, among the Hungarian-Jewish people, with double roots: Being Hungarians with a weakness in keeping identity already on the short run, but in the meantime being Jews as well, with the best skills on Earth in keeping identity on the long run. Please, kindly do not limit your answer to the Orthodox Jewish community, but in general, regarding this close to 400,000 people.

– RL: You know, when you meet an Israeli, you usually ask him several main questions if you don't know each other. First of all, where do you live? Where did you serve in the army? The next question is not directly being asked, but it's up in the air: What are your original ethnic roots? You know, we have Ashkenazim and Sephardim. These are very sensitive issues. But it comes very quickly to the point where people identify themselves. You know, our

² The book is available in a Hungarian translation as well, on 939 pages: *A Kárpát-medencétől a Földközi-tengerig: A magyar anyanyelvű izraeliek története*, Edited by A. Szalai, Gondolat Kiadó Publishing, Budapest 2021.

contemporaries are already belonging to the second, third and fourth generation descendants of the original immigrants, and they are gradually less focused on this particular question, but you cannot ignore it. However, in the United States, if you speak to somebody, one of the two main questions on an introductory level would be: Where did you study, which university you went to? That's an important question. And secondly, what kind of sport you are involved with? In America, I lived there, so I remember it took me awhile to understand that I have to find a sport field to affiliate myself with. I was very active in sports, all sorts of sport activities, but for the Americans, I had to establish it very clearly. Yes, I'm a swimmer, or yes, I'm a basketball player, they cannot consider it to be a multi-task activity... So, which university did you go to, and what was your sport field?

In Israel, one of the main, key questions on the introductory level was, not so much these days but at least during the last 30-40 years, what is your ethnic background? What are your roots? Whenever the issue came up, an immediate discussion of common topics would develop or emerge out of this conversation. These types of conversations have developed to be very vivid ones, because people here are very aware, and were familiarized with the history of their families. They know where they came from, where they were born, what day they arrived in Israel, what were their activities once they settled here? Did they go to a kibbutz? Did they go to a New Immigrants' town? And based on those pieces of information there would be a formation of some sorts of friendship or communication format, being developed very easily between the partners that were conversing.

– From these colorful tesserae pieces, you put the mosaic together.

– RL: That's right. But let's go further. Currently, I would say that due to technological development there is more of a tendency to be involved in social media groups that have ethnic affiliations. I can name maybe 10 or 12 social groups, either on WhatsApp or on Facebook, that focus on their Hungarian background. There are groups called "Hungarians" or "Paprika". There are many, I can list you a full list of names of those groups. They are involved in cultural issues, some historical information sharing, information about Hungarian recipes. Food is always a key factor, and I think it is the one element that has been preserved the best way, because usually when I meet people with Hungarian backgrounds, I try to find out how connected they are to their roots. I have some key questions, and I immediately understand how they are connected. One of my key questions is to ask them whether they still eat Hungarian, or in a Hungarian fashion. They often say: *"Yeah, yeah, my wife is Polish, but she cooks me Hungarian."* So, Hungarian food is something that is staying with us, and will stay with us for many years to come. This is like the strongest adhesive traditional element that I can single out.

The others, and I think I can characterize the third and fourth Hungarian-Jewish Israeli generations, as the groups that are more interested in learning about their historical roots. One of the reasons for that is that here in Israel, in 7th Grade, you get an assignment, that you are required to do a project on your family roots, and it is called: "Roots". This is like a national-educational project, and every single student in Israel goes through documenting and preparing a large volume of historical records about their family's roots.

– That is fantastic! I didn't hear about it, but it sounds unbelievable.

– RL: For example, I have three children. All of them have undertaken this assignment. Obviously, most of the information was very similar in their works, but each one of them chose to focus on a different facet or angle of the family. Keep in mind, in my family, my wife is from a German-Jewish tradition. Not only that, her grandfather with his brother were key Zionist activists here in Israel in the 1930s, from the Ruppin family. There is a Ruppin university here, Ruppin kibbutz, Ruppin streets in almost every city. The Ruppin family is a highly distinguished German-Jewish family. They were in charge of purchasing lands from the Arabs in Israel, and allocating them for the Jewish settlements. So, we have quite a background from both sides, and each one of my children chose to focus on a particular perspective. So, back to the general topic, I think that due to this project, there is this infrastructure embedded into the Israeli education system that prepares the students when they are around thirteen years old, to look in a more mature perspective on this issue of their family heritage. This is where you start talking about the role of the past, what happened to your family, what does it mean that they lived either in Hungary, or in France, or Tunisia. A child at this age is gradually developing its own identity, which is not only limited to this country, but it is being expanded to geographical domains that are far beyond his/her neighborhood.

– May I have another question? I can imagine that you have among your visitors a lot of Grade 7 kids, who are arriving with their parents, to develop their projects in this museum.

– RL: Not only that, we get copies of these projects, we kindly request that they send us a copy of their final work, and we have in our dossiers many of those.

– How many do you have?

– RL: Around 200 maybe. And we definitely encourage the families to come here. I think one of the most moving experiences is to see a grandson with his grandfather coming here, with the grandfather directing him, giving him all sorts of ideas how to go about doing his work, collecting some information here, and so on. Let me expand a bit more on this issue. As I said, the

social networks, the food, the trips to Hungary, you know many Israelis choose Hungary as one of their most favorable touristic destinations. Naturally, many of those Israelis who have Hungarian backgrounds find it much easier to make a decision to have their vacation in Hungary because of that.

– Concerning citizenship, do you know how many have a second, European passport from this 350-400 thousand Israelis, with Hungarian roots from the Carpathian Basin, from the former territories of the Kingdom of Hungary (Hungarian, Romanian, Ukrainian, Slovak or Serb, etc. passports)?

– RL: I can share with you my impression that this is a constant phenomenon here in Israel. People are interested in obtaining Hungarian citizenship. Of course, they come here to look for records, family records. Sometimes, you have to substantiate and prove, as you said, that your ancestors lived in Hungary, and among our records, we can show some proof. For example, there were several times that people were desperate, this goes like 20 years ago, and they couldn't find any proof of their residential records in Budapest. We have a telephone book from 1944 that lists those families, and the Hungarian government recognizes it. So, you never know, you have to be very creative pulling out all sorts of ideas. Those blue dossiers right there on the right-hand side are very important record-sources for this purpose. These are the lists that were compiled by the Jewish Agency in Budapest, documenting Jews that survived and lived in Budapest immediately after the Second World War. Here you can get the proof, because there is a very detailed description of the age of the people, their occupation, the family members, so this is considered one of the best documentations. So, back to your questions, I cannot give you a figure, but I would say it's tens of thousands of Israelis who have Hungarian citizenship, that's my own impression, although I've never been exposed to formal figures.

– To what extent is the historical figure of Theodor Herzl a key to Hungarian Jews? How do you see the importance of the person of Herzl for the Hungarian Jews in Israel? Are they cherishing him? Are they proud of him?

– RL: Well, first of all, you cannot ignore the fact that Herzl exemplifies the role of the secular Jewish leader. You know, in our tradition, or in our history, there have always been important rabbis and figures, who are associated with the Biblical tradition, with the Jewish tradition. Herzl is one of the first Jewish leaders who is associated with secular Judaism, and I would say that in most part, secular Jews who live in Israel, regard Herzl as one of their key figures, because he brought into the picture a different perspective of how to relate to your Jewish roots, and how to interpret them from a realistic perspective at the beginning of the 20th century. While there were very dominant theological systems that were setting the tone in the Jewish communities throughout Europe, the phenomenon of the Zionist idea came up as a very

refreshing idea for Jews, who wanted to experiment and integrate within new cultural systems. For them, that served as an option that they very enthusiastically got hold of, since to choose the pure Orthodox option was not a valid one for many of them. So, from that point of view, for most Israelis, very much so for Hungarian Jews who live in Israel, Herzl is a very important figure.

I can share with you that from the other side of this picture, the Orthodox Jewish community regards Herzl as a fall, as an enemy. I will give you an example. I tried to develop an educational project with a very Orthodox community in Jerusalem, from the *Mea She'arim* area, from *Batei Ungarin*, that I mentioned at the beginning of our conversation, and I offered them to come to visit our museum, because they came to Safed, and Safed is a very important religious city for them. You know what they do? They come here to visit the cemetery because Ha'ari Hakadosh [Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572)] is buried here, he was the leader of the Kabbalah movement, and this is the main motivation to come to the ancient cemetery of Safed. They also visit some of the synagogues but this is less important, the main target is visiting the cemetery. So, I said, ok, you come here at least once a year with your students, I mean every grade comes here at least once a year, why don't you bring them here to our museum? Because we certainly cover a lot of ground, as far as your Hungarian roots are concerned. We have here books, pictures, testimonials, and we have tens of thousands of photographs of graveyards in Hungary that belonged to your families. We have people who come here frequently before they go to Hungary to look for the documentation of a gravestone in a particular community, and we provide them with the information. How to go there? Whom to contact to get the key to the cemetery? Then they go, pray next to the grave of the old grandfather. For them it's one of the most important *mitzvot* [religious obligations].

– This is beautiful...

– RL: That's why I said, coming to Safed for the Orthodox Jewish community is, in many cases for the purpose of visiting the ancient cemetery. So, I offered them to come here to see what we can provide them. So, when I met with their representative, he said, you know what, sounds like a great idea, we can develop a special educational program for our Orthodox community, why don't I come to you, and let's discuss the plan. He came here, we walked around, he was totally impressed, and we pulled out some books and some documents, and then he took me aside and said: *"Listen, there is one request I have from you. Please, do me a favor; whenever I come with a group, pull down the carpets of Herzl and Nordau from the wall. This is something that I personally ask you to do."* I replied: *"There are some limits to what I can do, and to the flexibility that I can express. This is something that I cannot consider."*

So, there is this ongoing conflict. For them, Herzl represents the tendency to assimilate, the choice of easy-life Judaism, full integration and assimilation

within the Christian community, and you know, the Hungarian Orthodox Jewish leaders are very well known for their extremity. In Szatmár, Sátoraljaújhely, many others. Still, their leaders are the most extreme among the Orthodox communities within the Jewish world. So, from that point of view, Herzl is quite a symbolic figure, but also a very divisive one. Many Israelis think that he was Austrian, but Herzl from my point of view is really a Hungarian heroic figure, from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

– What are the plans of your museum? Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with his colleague in Hungary during this spring in Budapest (3-6 April 2025). You even mentioned to me last time, that you were part of the Israeli delegation there. The cabinet of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and the delegation of the Israeli Premier agreed that your museum is a treasure-house for both countries, and a bridge between both nations. How do you see its place in the bilateral relationship?

– RL: I think this is a very unique story which can serve both Israelis and Hungarians very well. On top of that, as I said, I think we can create a cultural platform that can be used as a host for cultural activities, providing Hungarian artists, scholars, researchers, giving the opportunity to be engaged in research work, as well as conducting or participating in workshops, seminars, cultural interactions with Israeli colleagues. This is actually one of our ideas in the program for the new museum. We called for a space for changing exhibitions where we would invite Hungarian artists to showcase their works, to actively engage with Israeli artists, doing joint projects together, to provide scholarships, and afford resident-ships for scholars as well as for artists.

One of my ideas was to relocate our museum to Haifa, to the University of Haifa campus on top of Mount Carmel. This campus was designed by the Brazilian architect who designed the city of Brasília [Oscar Niemeyer]. There is a huge skyscraper overlooking the campus on the top of the mountain. The reason I am saying it is because they will open a new museum in September about German Jews. The German Jewish Museum used to be located not far from here, up north. But it had to close down its gates due to some logistical issues, and it was the decision of the university to host the alternative location of the museum. So, there is a model, an existing example to follow.

– So, maybe the relocation to the University of Haifa campus would be the successful path for the future?

– RL: It's one of the options, and one of the major benefits that I see in it, is the fact that the museum is going to be located in a museum network, as a viable research resource that will cater itself to the academic community, and will enable the university to use this asset in the most productive way. You should

know that most of our collection is digitized, and we have a full-scale professional information management system that manages the whole collection.

– Are you planning to put it online?

– RL: It is capable of being put online but I don't want to do it yet, because I think it has to be carefully reviewed by professional archivists. Right now, most of the collection is digitized, but the descriptions are in Hebrew, and they have to be translated both to Hungarian and English. So, there is still a lot of work to be done, but we have the infrastructure and the technological tools for that, it is only a matter of resources. From my point of view, the assurance of the museum's future is the most important thing. As I live in Haifa, and know the local circumstances well, I am convinced that it could be a very good idea, although I've always been open to all ideas and to all options.

– I wonder about the institutional legacy of the museum itself. This is somehow your family legacy as well, isn't it?

– RL: Well, the most important anchor for me in this personal association with this undertaking, is of course, the family. You should know that at the beginning of the story of the museum, I was still concerned with my own career, my own things to attend to. By profession, I'm a graduate of Columbia University, specifically the Historic Preservation Department of the School of Architecture. This has always been my main professional field; I worked in this field both in the United States as well as in Israel. In Israel, I have gradually adapted to other venues in this profession, not necessarily strictly tied to the original title of my profession. But it had always been engaged in development, planning, but also some new projects not always old ones. There was a very important project that I did in Jerusalem, renovating one of the old neighborhoods outside the Old City in the *Bukharim Quarter*. So, my life has been dominated principally by my choices, but then you know, once you get older, there are other things that start attracting your attention. This was especially the case for me when I heard that my parents were being engaged in this project, which I had no clue how substantial it was until I began to wet my feet in it, only on a partial basis at the beginning. I was immediately attracted and I realized the importance and significance of the project.

– When was it?

– RL: Around 2008. I was asked by my parents to attend to some issues here. Due to my professional experience, I had no doubts that if I can contribute, I will do so. You know, the more I got interested, the more I got myself involved. Parallel to my private occupation, I dedicated a lot of time and resources to what was going on, in the beginning as a goodwill advisor. You know, it was not easy to get into the dynamic of running a family business. My

parents were running this operation with a staff of 14 volunteers and 3 fully-paid employees, with my father as the director of the museum. Eventually, I think we developed a very good dynamic, my parents and myself, to allow for me to step in and assume more responsibilities. I realized that this is a treasure-house, and I was afraid that if it did not have the continuation of somebody like me, who was very committed and fully appreciative of the value of what was developed here, I thought that there was a very good chance that this would have somehow been lost. I think that due to my personal involvement, with all modesty, the continuity of this museum was assured. Because without me, I don't think there would have been a natural successor, not so much to the role of my parents, but to the way they did their work and to the commitment they took upon themselves.

– And you also inherited the family network. Everybody trusted you.

– RL: That's right, but it took years to prove it. You know, you're a newcomer, you are from the younger generation. People who have dedicated their lives here, are not suspicious, but they want to see what your contributions are, and what your motivation is. There is certainly no economic benefit here.

– Yes, it is a mission.

– RL: Right, so it wasn't very hard to prove it, but it was a gradual process. I was very warmly adopted by the community that was associated with the museum. I am talking about thousands of families. I gradually got engaged in social events and seminars, and keep in mind that I was not very familiar with the historical facts, so I had to educate myself. It came as part of this natural process which I was very interested in learning, and I have welcomed this process as a very enriching one for me, and so has my family. My wife has been very supportive all the way.

– Is she involved with the German Jewish Museum in Haifa?

– RL: No, no, she is not. But she is totally supportive, sometimes when she goes to a supermarket and she hears a woman talking in a Hungarian accent, she doesn't have any problems approaching the person and asking: "*Have you heard about the Hungarian Museum in Safed?*" So, every once in a while, she comes with some contact information of a new person. As for the potential role of my family, as I told you, I have three children: two sons and a daughter.

– How old are they?

– RL: My eldest child is 40, my daughter is 37, and my youngest is 33. My elder son lives in Melbourne, he is like a universal-type of technological professional, he is relocating with his family throughout the world. He has been in Shanghai, Paris, London, Valencia, and now he is in Melbourne. So, I don't see

him coming back to Israel in the near future. They will be here to celebrate my grandson's *bar mitzva* this summer [who is reaching the age of Grade 7, as a member of the fourth Israeli generation of the Lustig family!], and we'll be visiting them in October. But my daughter and my younger son live in Haifa. I think out of the three, maybe my daughter can be singled out. In any event, I never described this as a family business, everybody is welcome to step in, but it's not our own grocery store.

– In the American museums, there is always the so-called Founder's Circle. In your case, the Founders' Circle is still part of the executive administration. After some generations, there will still be a group in the management, the Founders' Circle. That's really wonderful.

– RL: Yes, it is indeed. By the way, in terms of the family connection, the Bylaws of our NGO museum spell out among other things, that the museum must focus on the history and the vision of Herzl. This is one of our principles. Also, one of the Bylaws is to commemorate the contribution of my parents, the Lusztig Couple to the foundation of the museum.

– Thank you for the conversation, dear Roni, and for your fascinating thoughts!

After the interview, Roni accompanied us with my son to our car, we said goodbye to each other, and departed from Safed amicably. We agreed that before the end of May, I will send him the text of the interview for his approval. On our way, back to Jerusalem, Alexander found on his laptop the book that Roni mentioned (edited by Anna Szalai), and bought its Hungarian, e-book version right away. Some days later, we visited for the first time *Mea She'arim* in Jerusalem, with the Orthodox Jewish neighborhood, called *Batei Ungarin*, "*where they speak an archaic form of Hungarian*", – as Roni told us. But this is a story for another time. A wonderful one.



Fig. 1: The museum building in Safed in the afternoon sunlight (© Memorial Museum of the Hungarian Speaking Jewry)

Fig. 2: One of the rooms of the permanent exhibition (©MMHSJ)



Fig. 3: The only room in the museum that was dedicated to the Holocaust (©MMHSJ)

Fig. 4: Another room in the permanent exhibition of the museum (©MMHSJ)



Fig. 5: Great-grandchildren of the Hungarian immigrants to Israel, in age of Grade 7 (©MMHSJ)

Fig. 6: A moment during the archival process, Hava Lusztig presides over the table (©MMHSJ)



Figs. 7-8: Celebrating “Herzl Day” in Safed, under Sukkot tents, and around an olive tree (©MMHSJ)

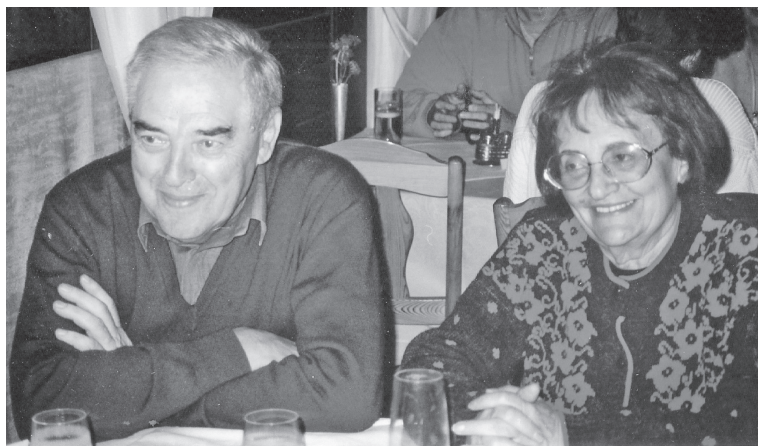


Fig. 9: Director Lustig with his late parents, Hava and Yosef Lusztig, at the museum entrance (©MMHSJ)

Fig. 10: The late Museum Founders: The Lusztig couple, Yosef and Hava (©MMHSJ)