



Hungary and the Distortion of Holocaust History: The Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Year 2014

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Abstract: *This paper deals with the Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Year 2014 and the ongoing debate about how to assess Hungary's involvement in the Holocaust. By introducing the Holocaust Memorial Year 2014, erecting the Monument on the German Occupation and initiating a Memorial to Child Victims of the Holocaust (the House of Fates), the Hungarian government tried to establish a common narrative about the Holocaust in Hungary. For various reasons, however, this attempt failed. Instead, it turned out that the anniversary year 2014 fostered the emergence of diverse new cultures of commemoration at different levels of society. This study discusses the reasons for these developments and provides an overview of the (public) events surrounding commemorations in the Holocaust Memorial Year, thus exploring Hungary's process of coming to terms with its past. The events in 2014 were accompanied by disputes at multiple levels that were held in the public domain and involved all types of traditional and modern media. This study highlights the reactions to several statements and explains how they came about. Our aim is to engender interest in further scholarly examination.*

Keywords: *Hungary, Budapest, Holocaust, memory, memorial, museum*

Research Context

The subject of this paper is the Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Year 2014 and the debate about how to assess Hungary's involvement in the Holocaust, a politically charged topic that is the focus of current discussions about Hungary's history. This connects to events surrounding the 2014 commemorations of the 70th anniversary of the beginning of the Holocaust in Hungary. Although the discussion has been intense, it would be a mistake to assume that it has been followed by the entire country. In fact, outside of Budapest, the capital, the general public has not shown much interest. The debate is basically being held among different politically engaged intellectual groups and has also been characterised by its polemics, including personal attacks on opponents. This – as well as the fact that the controversy has not yet cooled

down – puts certain restrictions on our efforts to approach the topic from a purely academic position.

After the fall of state socialism, Hungary and other Central European countries which had existed under Communist rule until 1989 developed new cultures of commemoration. The fact that they had been among the losers of both world wars made it even more difficult for Hungarians to come to terms with their past. It should be taken into consideration that “open societies” west of the “Iron Curtain” had more opportunities to cope with their fascist past than former “socialist” states. Thus, cultures of commemoration in Eastern and Central Europe may reveal certain delays in this respect. Moreover, these developments differ from country to country, and the Hungarian debate serves as only one example. In order to explore Hungary’s process of coming to terms with its past, we take as our case study the events surrounding the commemorations of the 70th anniversary of the beginning of the Holocaust in Hungary, which took place in 2014.

Hungary and Memory

Although in 1944 more than 400,000 Jews were deported from Hungary and most of them murdered, Hungary’s Jewish community is today one of the largest in Europe. This is partly due to the fact that in contrast to the fate of Hungary’s rural Jews, many of the Jews living in Budapest were able to escape annihilation in 1944, and most Hungarian Jews today live in the capital. While Budapest – and the *Zsidónegyed* (Jewish Quarter) in particular – has recently experienced a boom, turning ‘from ghetto to hot spot’ (Weber-Steinhaus et al. 2011), both the city and Hungary as a whole have made the headlines abroad in a more unfavourable light, not least due to anti-Semitic incidents (e.g. Bogner 2012; Roser 2012; APA 2012; Rásky 2012; JTA 2013; A. Kovács 1999; Ungváry 2012). Against this backdrop, the Hungarian government has been trying to improve the country’s image. The year 2014 was designated the Holocaust Memorial Year. In this way, the government tried to “exculpate” itself internationally from accusations that it was not fighting anti-Semitism sufficiently. Nonetheless, it did not succeed. What was meant to create and establish a common narrative on Holocaust history ended with mudslinging and highly-charged debates and a struggle for interpretive predominance over history. And all of this was carried out publicly.

This research paper shows how the government failed to establish a common narrative on the Holocaust in Hungary when it introduced the Holocaust Memorial Year 2014 and erected two central monuments. This outcome may not have come as a complete surprise since in Hungary, as in other countries, the politics of memory and history have been characterised more by conflict than by consensus. This, too, will be no surprise since the roots of this contest

can be found in the interwar period. Hungarian intellectuals have been divided since the 1920s when *népiék* (folklorists) and *urbánusok* (urbanists) shaped intellectual life (Borbándi 2000). After the First World War and the subsequent loss of territory, some saw the rural population as the only social group with a promising future and others located this promise in the urban bourgeoisie (Borbándi 2000; Papp 2012). To this day, the (supposedly irreconcilable) differences between the Hungarian national and international (often labelled “Jewish”) approaches to “Hungarian memory” typify this debate, and reconciliation seems impossible. Under Communism, the dispute between “folklorists” and “urbanists” was silenced by the state or at least this appeared to be the case. In fact, it survived the Communist Kádár regime (Oplatka 2015: 110). After 1989, it re-emerged and became a virulent force in party politics, particularly within the Hungarian Democratic Forum and the Alliance of Free Democrats. Initially, today’s governing party, FIDESZ (then the Alliance of Young Democrats and now the FIDESZ-Hungarian Civic Alliance) aimed to overcome this split. However, after 1994, it took a turn from liberal to conservative, adopting the legacy of the “Democratic Forum,” which basically vanished from the scene (Ripp 2011).

Our research shows that unlike former debates, the disputes of 2014 were no longer mere discussions among historians published in professional journals, but were now carried out on multiple levels. All types of traditional and modern media (especially the Internet and social networks) were used by the participants in the discussion. Moreover, the proponents published their articles in several languages (often Hungarian, German and English) in order to address not only a national but also an international audience. The character of the debates became personal, particularly in the case of the discussion between the historians Krisztián Ungváry and Mária Schmidt (e.g. Schmidt 2014a; Ungváry 2014d).

A vast number of newspaper articles, comments and blog posts were published in these discussions but there was hardly any scholarly literature (for exceptions, see Pető 2014; Marosi 2014; Ungváry 2014d). In her article, Andrea Pető, a professor at Central European University in Budapest and researcher of social and gender history, oral history and the Holocaust, considered non-remembrance as a conscious strategy of not participating in the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Holocaust in Hungary. She argued that there was an absence of ‘dialogic remembering,’ and rather, the ‘lack of common language, the imprisonment of a “true” versus “false” dichotomy is contributing to the further polarisation of the Hungarian memory culture’ (Pető 2014). This accords with the (culturally) historical preconditions mentioned above. Drawing on national and international media, the current study, while still preliminary research, is an attempt to review the course of events in 2014 from a (trans)national perspective. We discuss the chain reaction triggered by some statements and why this transpired. Our hope is to engender interest in addi-

tional scholarly examination. This paper is a work in progress since the debate is informed by complex discourses that continue to circulate.

All the incidents discussed here must be placed in a broader context. They are accompanied by (inter)national debates on Hungarian history and historiography, including particularly those on the classification, interpretation and assessment of recent Hungarian history. Academics from several disciplines, including historians, cultural and media studies scholars, political scientists and sociologists have named and analysed political turning points, key events, places of remembrance and spaces of memory. Publishing in several languages, they have reached out to an international audience (e. g. Kovács – Seewann 2004; von Klimó 2006; Gröller – Balogh 2011; Pók 2014). At stake here are not only issues of historical memory and commemoration but also those of political legitimising and identity (religious and national) and the matter of identifying victims and perpetrators. As in the case in many Western as well as Central and Eastern European countries, memories of the Holocaust have been suppressed for decades and made “taboo,” at least on the surface (cf. É. Kovács 2003).

This paper is divided into several parts. First, we discuss the literature available on the issue of Hungary and the Holocaust and provide some background information on Hungarian (Holocaust) history. Second, we follow the historical course of events during the Holocaust Memorial Year 2014. We then address the construction of the Monument on the German Occupation and the *Sorsok Háza* (House of Fates) project and discuss how they were perceived by different groups (the “public,” politicians and academics).

Hungary and the Holocaust

As Andrea Pető (2014: 4) has stated: ‘After the forcible forgetting of memory policy under communism, a memory bomb exploded in 1989.’ The year 1989/90 brought not only political upheaval but also a reassessment and re-actualisation of history (Fritz 2008: 128). Only a few early publications were available (see, e.g., Lévai 1948) before American historian and political scientist Randolph L. Braham wrote his comprehensive and pioneering works on the Holocaust in Hungary (e.g. Braham 1981; Braham 1984; Braham 2001).¹ Since then, the number of debates and publications on the topic has increased considerably (see, e.g., Gerlach – Aly 2002; É. Kovács 2004; Ungváry 2005; Molnár 2005; Kádár – Vági, 2013; É. Kovács et al. 2014; Laczó 2014). In recent years, the so-called Hungarian historians’ dispute has caused quite a stir. The argument among the historians Krisztián Ungváry, László Karsai, Mária Schmidt and

1 There is only scope to name a few of the relevant authors in this article. For further reading, please see the bibliographies edited by Braham (1984; 2001). We would like to express our gratitude to Stefan Benedik, Dieter A. Binder, Christina Griessler, Éva Kovács, Carla MacDougall, Christoph Ramoser, Gert Tschögl and Heidemarie Uhl.

Mária M. Kovács has centered on the preamble to the new Hungarian constitution (of April 2011) and the question of responsibility for the deportation of Hungarian Jews in 1944 (e.g. Schmidt 2014 b; M. Kovács 2014; Csuhaj 2014). Recent works dealing with the politics of history in Hungary since 1944/45 (e.g. Fritz 2012) focus on individual Jewish fates (e.g. Molnár 1995), discuss the issue of Jews and the Holocaust in Hungarian commemorative culture since 1945 (e.g. Seewann – Kovács, 2006; Fritz 2006; Fritz – Hansen 2008) or analyse representations of the Holocaust in museums (e.g. Fritz 2008; Pölcz 2012) or memorials (Taylor-Tudzin 2011). In the “Memorial Year” itself, several books were published, some of which were supported financially by the state-sponsored Civil Fund 2014. Well-known public personalities and scholars contributed to the multidisciplinary book *Magyar Holokauszt 70 – veszteségek és felelősségek* (The Hungarian Holocaust 70: Losses and Responsibilities); they included the biochemist Máté Hidvégi, sociologist Viktor Karády, Rabbi József Schweitzer and Executive Director of the American Jewish Committee, David Harris, to name just a few (Babits 2014). The book *History and Remembrance* (Hunyadi – Török 2014) consists of papers presented at a conference organised by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Among other things, it contains a long hoped for statement about the discussion of the Holocaust Memorial Year by the Academy. Special attention should also be drawn to a published series on the situation of Jews in Hungary and, in particular, its volume four about Budapest (cf. Karsai – Karsai 2014).

As we have seen, the “historians’ dispute” initiated a discussion about responsibility. What role had the Regent of the Kingdom of Hungary (1920–1944), Miklós Horthy (1868–1957) and many other Hungarians played in the deportation of Hungarian Jews? Most of the above-mentioned scholars concluded that Hungary was the first European state to enact an anti-Semitic law after the First World War and that the Hungarian political position on the Jews was quite ambivalent. On the one hand, the Hungarian government had declined to hand over the Jews to the German Reich during the Second World War. On the other, three further anti-Semitic laws had been passed; (fascist) Hungarians as well as Hungarian troops had murdered Jews; and tens of thousands of male Jews were conscripted for dangerous *Munkaszolgálat* (fatigue duty). On 19 March 1944, German troops took over Hungary and German Nazi official Adolf Eichmann (1906–1962) was in charge of organising the deportation of the Jews. Nevertheless, Miklós Horthy remained in power. From March until July 1944, more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau where the majority were murdered. This was, then, the quickest deportation carried out in the history of the Holocaust. Emphasising the role of the Hungarian perpetrators and bystanders, Máté Hidvégi has said: ‘Apart from the responsibility of the Nazis we must not forget the responsibility of those, who have assisted to this tragedy cowardly and without taking care of the events’ (quoted in *Holokauszt*

2014: 70). Under international pressure, Horthy stopped the deportations in July 1944. Some historians infer that he had had enough power to end them in May, but did not do so. Horthy was forced to resign on 15 October 1944 when the Hungarian fascist Arrow Cross took power. Horthy's intervention had saved the lives of many Jews but the Arrow Cross continued to deport Hungarian Jews or murder them on the banks of the Danube (thus, the Budapest memorial "Shoes on the Danube Bank," which was erected in 2005) until February 1945 when Budapest surrendered to the Soviet army.

"Victim Discourse"

Memory takes many different forms: the memories of victims, perpetrators, bystanders, resistance fighters, silent collaborators and so on. Seewann and Kovács (2006: 27) assert that in the post-Holocaust era, two 'main' identities can be distinguished: one denotes Jewish Holocaust survivors and the other Hungarian society, parts of which were either bystanders or perpetrators.² It can be said that since the end of the Second World War, Hungarian memory has been divided into many different "memories," all of which have been highly contested and polarised. Further, "victim myths" have enabled Hungarian society (like the societies of other countries) to expunge an anti-Semitic history from the collective memory (Fritz 2008: 128). In Hungary, there have been competing "memories of victimhood"; the commemoration of Holocaust victims is challenged by the commemoration of the victims of the Communist regime. Above all, there is a general myth that Hungary and Hungarians were the victims of the Treaty of Trianon at the end of the First World War (seen in the revisionist literature as the "peace dictate" of 1920). Lately, there has also been a general trend in Hungarian historiography to re-assess Horthy and his era, focusing therefore on his efforts to stabilise the country in the interwar period (Turbucz 2014; Romsics 2015). At the same time, in right-wing politics especially, there is a move to rehabilitate Horthy and his regime, externalising responsibility and crimes and "heroising" and victimising the Hungarian population (Fritz 2008: 133).

The first Orbán government (1998–2002) tried to establish a national Hungarian victim discourse, taking up the idea that Hungarian history was nothing but a chain of historical catastrophes. This enabled Hungarians to hold the Communist regime to account, but it also paid attention to the Holocaust. Holocaust Memorial Day was established in 2000, followed soon after by the establishment of a memorial day for the victims of Communism. As Fritz has demonstrated, the raising of awareness about the Holocaust was closely linked to two issues (see Fritz 2012: 286; Fritz – Hansen 2008: 73). First, the Holocaust served as a point

² Seewann and Kovács (2006) give a clear and explicit outline of the Hungarian 'stations of coming to terms with the past.' The page number seems to be missing here.

of comparison for the Communist terror (Fritz 2012: 286; Fritz – Hansen 2008: 73). Second, it was connected to international developments and expectations. Hungary was eager to enter the European Union (EU). Therefore, the year 2002 saw not only the opening of the “House of Terror”³ but also the laying of the foundations for the Holocaust Memorial Centre. The House of Terror is a museum that deals with the terrors perpetrated by the Communist regime as well as by the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party. It was built as a memorial to the victims of these regimes. In contrast with the years it took to inaugurate the Holocaust Memorial Centre, the House of Terror was opened within one-and-a-half years of its conception. This difference met with international criticism. As Fritz and Hansen (2008: 73, 78) argue, the Holocaust Memorial Centre was opened in 2004 due to Hungary’s accession to the EU that year but the permanent exhibition was only inaugurated two years later. According to Seewann and Kovács (2006: 56), the different values ascribed by the government to these projects can also be seen at a symbolic level in the fact that the House of Terror is located in the centre of the city while the Memorial Centre was built on the periphery.

Thus far, the history and fate of Jewish Hungarians have not been perceived as integral parts of Hungarian history although as early as 1994, the then prime minister Gyula Horn (1932–2013) publically declared that Hungarian officials had collaborated with the Nazis (Kovács – Seewann 2004: 830). Since then, it has been government policy to – at the very least – acknowledge national responsibility, particularly on Holocaust Memorial Day and after anti-Semitic incidents; this occurred more recently in connection with the Holocaust Memorial Year when Undersecretary László L. Simon and Minister János Lázár made official statements (cf. Magyar Nemzet 2013; Népszava 2013; Holokauszt70 2014; kormány 2015). Whether these actions were merely tactical remains to be seen. At the same time, it should be noted that these announcements do not always reach the general public. In practice, there were no follow-up actions, and thus, the situation remains a ‘political whitewash,’ as Ungváry (2014a) puts it. To this day, there is no common Holocaust narrative in Hungary.

The Holocaust Memorial Year 2014

In 2013, hopes were raised when the Hungarian government announced its plan to establish a Holocaust memorial year. Initially, the commemoration year seemed well prepared. János Lázár, the minister overseeing the Prime Minister’s Office, was appointed head of organisation. The government had allocated a HUF 1.5 billion (approx. USD 5.4 m) budget, and therefore, a special fund, Civil Fund 2014, was established and a public call for applications issued (Civil Fund 2014). The planned programme included nationwide commemora-

3 Ungváry (2009) gives a summary of the main points of the ‘House of Terror controversy.’

tion services, funding for memorial projects and publications, renovation of synagogues and the establishment of the Memorial to the Child Victims of the Holocaust – European Education Centre (House of Fates) at Józsefváros railway station in Budapest (Közlöny 2014 b). The government seemed to be eager to present an ambitious and unprecedented programme to the world. We should keep in mind that 2014 was not only the 70th anniversary of the deportation of Hungarian Jews but also the 10th anniversary of Hungary's accession to the EU as well as a year of parliamentary elections, and thus, the government had to cover both international and national interests.

In 2013, the government established a website for the memorial year, which was also available in English (at <http://holocaustmemorialyear2014.gov.hu/>); by this means, it addressed an international audience. The Holocaust 2014 Memorial Commission was created and embassies from selected foreign countries (e.g. Austria, Germany, Israel and the US) were invited to contribute to the preparations. Thus, in February 2013, the Austrian ambassador to Hungary invited Austrian researchers to participate by submitting project proposals; they proceeded to do this, elaborating ideas about different levels of collaboration –with Hungarian state institutions, civil society organisations and schools, for example. In the end, however, after several meetings and negotiations, the actual implementation of the projects proved to be difficult. Ultimately, only one of three projects was realised, and this occurred through Research Society Burgenland in cooperation with the Cultural Association of Hungarian Jews, MAZSIKE (www.mazsike.hu) and schools in Hungary and Austria. This was the project *Zsidó sorsok a közös határon* (Jewish fates in the shared border region), and it was fully financed by the state of Austria (except for the working hours spent on the school project by the Hungarian partners) (BFG 2014).

To reiterate, expectations were raised high in 2013 due to the establishment of Civil Fund 2014 and the Hungarian government's invitation to foreign countries to contribute to the Holocaust Memorial Year. In the end, the events of 2014 did not meet all of these expectations, and the Austrian case is just one example among many. The plan did not unfold according to the government's wishes in 2014. But let us pause to take stock of the situation for a moment.

The year 2014 started with a lively debate. As has been mentioned, research has proven the Hungarian responsibility for decision-making and implementation around the Holocaust in Hungary (Kádár – Vági 2013). Nevertheless, Sándor Szakály, a military historian and the head of the newly founded government-based history department, *Veritas* (Truth) stated the opposite point of view in a presentation on 17 January 2014. This speech concerned the 1941 Kamenez-Podolsk massacre in which Nazi troops murdered more than 20,000 Jews (MTI 2014; Fejes 1997). In 1941, many of the victims had recently been deported to this area by Hungary, by then an ally of Nazi Germany. Since they were not Hungarian citizens but rather Jewish refugees who had fled to Hungary, the

country claimed it was “repatriating” them, and thus, participated in one of the largest mass murders during the Holocaust. Szakály now called the deportation ‘action taken by the Foreigners’ Police [immigration authorities].’ Both inside Hungary and internationally, many people understood his statement as a “relativising” of Hungarian responsibility for the murder of Jews. While Szakály himself clung to this opinion in later public statements (Lakner 2014; Magyar Narancs 2014), it must be noted that on several occasions, Veritas allowed different academic experts in Hungary (e.g. Andrea Pető, Ignác Romsics, János Botos) to have a say on this controversial topic. As Andrea Pető argued in a critical article, the discussion was such that the “truth” found by Veritas was challenged by a “counter-truth” set out by civil society organisations, historians and Jewish organisations, etc. This was the approach ‘rather than analyzing the factors that go beyond the true/false binary’ (Pető 2014: 6).

These events were followed by the controversy surrounding the government’s announcement on 17 January 2014 of its plan to erect a monument on Budapest’s Szabadság Tér (Liberty Square) that would commemorate the German occupation and present all Hungarians as victims of the Nazi regime. Again, from the government’s point of view, the Hungarian state was either not all responsible or only partly to blame for the murder of Hungarian Jews. Based on the new preamble to the 2011 Constitution, the argument was brought that the state had lost sovereignty on 19 March 1944. Countering this position, historian Krisztián Ungváry and others published several newspaper articles in different languages in which they discussed the issue of historical distortion in detail (e.g. Ungváry 2014a; Ungváry 2014 b; Ungváry 2014c; Ungváry 2014d).

In response to these developments, the historian Randolph L. Braham protested against ‘government efforts to rewrite history and exonerate the country from its role in the Holocaust’ by returning a high award he had received from the state in 2011 (The Guardian 2014). In an open letter, Krisztián Ungváry and about two dozen other historians (including Gábor Gyáni, János Rainer M., Mária Ormos etc.) denounced the government’s distortion of history and demanded that the monument not be erected as planned (Galamus Group 2014). At their meeting in February 2014, the members of MAZSIHISZ, the umbrella organisation of Jewish communities, called for a boycott and decided to pull out of the Holocaust commemorative year because they disagreed with such politics of remembrance (Pető 2014: 6). MAZSIHISZ named the following as conditions for its re-entry into commemorative activities: 1) the right to have a say in the creation of the House of Fates, 2) the removal of Sándor Szakály from Veritas and 3) the scrapping of plans to erect the mentioned monument.

We can safely assume that it was no coincidence but rather a politically calculated decision that in August 2014, Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Imre Kertész (born in 1929) received Hungary’s highest state award, the Order

of Saint Stephen of Hungary. This came as something of a surprise since Kertész lives in Germany and has been a rather controversial figure in Hungary due to his criticisms of the Hungarian government, which have been taken amiss by the Hungarian media. The conferring of the order provoked mixed reactions: ‘certain leftist journalists and critics... called upon Kertész and asked him to reject the state award, warning the writer that he was being used to legitimize the Orbán government’ (Orzóy 2014). When Kertész accepted the award, many people were disappointed. The Holocaust Memorial Year of 2014, thus, generated a great degree of unrest. Let us now take a closer look at the two main government projects which were at the root of the matter.

The Monument on the German Occupation at Liberty Square

The government’s announcement of its plan to erect a monument dedicated to ‘all victims of German occupation’ (Közlöny 2013a) immediately met with great criticism. The monument was supposed to be inaugurated on 19 March 2014 (Közlöny 2013 b), 70 years after the German invasion of Hungary, but this event had to be postponed (Közlöny 2014a) due to strong domestic resistance and criticism from abroad. Nevertheless, in April, two days after Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s party won the parliamentary elections, the construction of the monument began (Kirchengast 2014). It was completed during the night from 20 to 21 July 2014 under police surveillance in an effort to avoid public resistance, but it has still not been inaugurated (Euractiv 2014). The monument depicts Hungary as an adolescent (the Archangel Gabriel) with his arms outstretched; he is holding an orb in his right hand and being attacked by a black German imperial eagle. In its claw, the eagle is carrying a ring bearing “1944,” referring to the year of invasion by German troops.

This monument was supposed to be a ‘gesture of invitation’ to supporters of the right-wing Jobbik party, but it instead ‘became a flashpoint of the Hungarian government’s failure to create national consensus in remembering’ (Pető 2014: 2; Assmann 2014). Why did this happen? The monument’s critics have said that it distorts Hungary’s role in the Holocaust by blaming the Germans and so externalising responsibility and suppressing the active role of Hungarians in sending more than 400,000 Jews to the death camps in 1944. The dedication to ‘all victims’ glosses over the fact that different people were targeted for different reasons. The racial persecution of Jews and Romani people (“gypsies”) cannot, for example, be equated with the wartime situation of the Hungarian population during the German occupation. The monument has been perceived as ‘falsifying the Holocaust,’ ‘confusing the murderer and the victim’ (Euractiv 2014) and dishonouring Holocaust victims (including not only Jews but Roma and others as well). Well-known philosopher Ágnes Heller has called it a ‘desecration of the commemoration of the victims’ (cited in Lendvai 2014a; Lendvai 2014 b).

It is not only the government that has defended the monument against this commentary. Sculptor Péter Párkányi Raab claims the monument might have served as a means of reconciling Jewish and non-Jewish Hungarians but ‘protesters have barred the country from commemoration’ (Fehér 2014). His statement refers to a wave of physical protests on Liberty Square as well as the intellectual debate. At Liberty Square, members of NGOs, the general public and different political parties protested by forming human chains (Euractiv 2014). As we discuss below, through these actions, different forms of “counter-memory” were developed. MAZSIHISZ decided to boycott the Memorial Year, expressing regret at the failure to establish a dialogue successfully but noting that a discussion among academics, church officials and public personalities had at least been ushered in (Euractiv 2014). Their decision met with varied responses. Open letters were exchanged between MAZSIHISZ and German historian Michael Wolffsohn, a member of the international advisory board of the House of Fates. Wolffsohn accused MAZSIHISZ of withdrawing for strategic political reasons before the national elections (Hungarianvoice 2014) while Andrea Pető argued that MAZSIHISZ had passed up a golden opportunity to participate in the development of a remembrance culture (Pető 2014: 6).

This ‘monument of shame’ (Lendvai 2014a) can, thus, be regarded as a symbol of the split between society and policies in Hungary. As Assmann (2014) has stated, ‘the controversy over the new monument replaces a societal debate, which cannot take place, because the requirements of an open media landscape are increasingly reduced.’

Memorial to Child Victims of the Holocaust – European Education Centre (*Sorsok Háza* / the House of Fates)

In 2013, the government also announced the creation of a new Holocaust memorial at ‘a memorial site that w[ould] be Europe’s largest and very likely most grandiose and sophisticated such [sic] project’ (Schmidt 2014a). The memorial site was to be made up of three parts – an exhibition, an education centre and a training centre – and an international advisory board (including Yad Vashem representatives etc.) was to be established. Nevertheless, reactions were quite lukewarm. Many points of critique were put forward. They might be summarised as follows (in no particular order): First, there was objection to the name of the memorial/museum, *Sorsok Háza* (the House of Fates). It was argued that “fate” had not determined the deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz; it was people, human beings, who decided on and implemented their persecution and murder. Second, the site itself was called into question. It was claimed that historically, there was no important connection between the Holocaust and the abandoned railroad station in the Budapest district of Józsefváros. One could, however, object that Józsefváros train station had played an important role for

many Jews, including those rescued by the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, who provided them with protective passes in 1944 (USHMM 2015). Third, the need for a new Holocaust museum was questioned. After all, there was already a Holocaust memorial centre, which was also a research and education institution. It was also argued that it would make more sense to invest money in this Holocaust memorial centre than to build a new one (Balogh 2013a). Fourth, the government's argument for the creation of this new museum was seen as unconvincing. Minister Lázár explained that the site would be dedicated to children: 'We chose the "child Holocaust" as the theme because we were trying to find a point which cannot be relativized: no explanation, no answer can be accepted when it comes to the murder of a child' (quoted in Balogh 2013a). This, however, raised the question of whether the murder of adult Jews could be explained. Critics referred to the anti-Semitic subtext of this statement. The restriction of victimhood to children might also suggest that the history told at this site would lack a context, thus giving a distorted picture of the past. It was feared that the intent was to appeal to the emotions for shock value, recalling the representation of history at the House of Terror.

This was connected to a fifth critique: When it emerged that the project would be headed by "state historian" Mária Schmidt, the general director of the House of Terror, where fascism and Communism are seen as equal crimes, many feared that she would create a museum like that earlier project, displaying a similarly indiscriminate approach to history (see the debates at www.hungarianspectrum.org). Many felt their suspicions were confirmed when Schmidt declared that the site would only focus on the deportations and not on the events preceding them (Balogh 2014). A sixth point of criticism was that the whole idea did not amount to a well thought out plan; instead it reflected a rash government decision with strict parameters leaving no room for a real discussion or dialogue. Although Schmidt went on to write letters to (Jewish) intellectuals asking for their help, some thought the government was only pretending to include intellectuals and Jewish organisations while in fact using them as "fig leaves" or "background actors." The celebrated author György Konrád (born in 1933) took this line. He made Schmidt's letter public and responded: 'I find it difficult to free myself of the suspicion that this hurried organization of an exhibit is not so much about the 100,000 murdered Jewish children but rather about the current Hungarian government' (quoted in Balogh 2013 b). Schmidt's strategic approach summoned the critics to action. Through this Holocaust site, she said that she intended 'to take an oath on a common fate shared by all Hungarians: Jews and non-Jews alike,' and thus, take up the government strategy already displayed at the 'Occupation monument' (Schmidt 2014a). She wanted to show that 'we can also plan a shared future despite the cataclysms of the twentieth century.' Ignoring all historical facts, Schmidt quoted a friend who stated that the House of Fates was all about '... a love story. A story of love between Hungarian Jews

and non-Jews. A love that has survived everything. As a result of which there is still a large Hungarian Jewish community living in this country' (Schmidt 2014a). This position clearly matched Schmidt's historical views since she was known for her nationalist interpretation of Hungarian history in line with all three conservative (1998–2002, 2010–2014 and post-2014) Orbán governments (Schmidt 1994; Halpert 2012/2013). While employed as a state commissioner for contemporary history, she had also taken a revisionist approach, claiming that there had been no Holocaust in Hungary and that the Holocaust was only a 'side aspect' of the war (Seewann – Kovács 2006: 54; Pölcz 2012: 71).

Despite these tensions, on 30 June 2014, an agreement was reached among Schmidt, MAZSIHISZ, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) and a number of international and Hungarian experts about 'a five point "road map"' for the project. That agreement was also published (see Balogh 2014). Ultimately, however, all attempts at cooperation failed and were followed by a mutual assignment of guilt. In sum, things turned out to be more complicated and MAZSIHISZ published new conditions for further cooperation that were supported by the IHRA (see Balogh 2014). Yad Vashem and MAZSIHISZ finally withdrew from the international advisory board, and Mária Schmidt has continued to work on the programme. Her plans remain highly contested (Dercsényi – László 2015). The site was supposed to be unveiled in April 2015, but that opening did not take place (Győr 2015). At the time of writing, the project has been postponed. In her own account published in a Hungarian newspaper, Mária Schmidt connected her fate to that of Hungary. In nationalist rhetoric which at times revealed a latent anti-Semitism, she depicted herself and Hungary as victims while also asserting that she was (heroically) carrying out this project 'for Hungary' despite all the attacks. She claimed that she had agreed to this professional project team only 'out of love for my country... thereby neutralizing or at least weakening the forces continuously calling Hungary an anti-Semitic and fascist country, using these unfounded stigmata as a political weapon to discredit the Hungarian nation as a whole' (Schmidt 2014a). Schmidt has also compared her most recent experiences with events when the House of Terror was opened, locating the protesters in the 'same camp' and defending herself against 'unfair attacks' from abroad and from political and Jewish opponents, in particular MAZSIHISZ (key language included the 'same ruthless attack,' a 'politically motivated onslaught,' a 'relentless campaign,' the 'unleashing that orgy of hate which is so characteristic of them,' Schmidt 2014a). She has had a knee-jerk response to any criticism, rejecting and immediately assigning it to the interests and strategies of the opposing "camp." She has not refrained from bringing severe allegations including blackmail and has strongly defended the project against the interference of foreign diplomats (i.e. from the UK, the US and Israel) and 'a variety of influential international organizations' as well as against interpretations of Hungarian history 'from outside.' Her appeal has,

thus, been to the ‘national community that cannot be influenced by any particular or external interest,’ and whose aim is to ‘preserv[e] solidarity’ (Schmidt 2014a). Finally, she has reproached Minister Lázár, who was responsible for postponing her project (HVG 2015a): ‘Mr. Lázár apparently fails to understand that this time we are dealing with our very identity’ (Schmidt 2014a). Lázár had declared several times that the *Sorsok Háza* should only be opened with the approval of Jewish communities, experts and others (HVG 2015 b). Clearly, the government is trying to avoid a scandal similar to the one surrounding the Monument on the German Occupation.

Responses

As has been mentioned, the Holocaust Memorial Year and related debates met with many different responses. Certainly, the prevalent response was indifference. It seems that most Hungarians, and in particular those outside of Budapest, simply did not care. At the same time, however, there were a number of reactions from different groups. It is impossible to describe all these responses, but we will try to give a few examples.

Although there is not scope here to delve into this subject, it should be mentioned that for several reasons, Budapest specifically, and Hungary more generally, have found themselves at the centre of international attention. The Internet and social media like Facebook have become increasingly important not only for organising and advertising events and demonstrations and putting information and propaganda material at people’s disposal (in different languages), but also, as Pető notes, as a means of sharing a (personal, informal) ‘counter-memory.’ Pető (2014: 6) refers to the Facebook group The Holocaust and My Family where people have posted their stories, memories and reflections. Virtual commemoration platforms and archives (e.g. centropa) have supported the publication of counter-narratives. Moreover, there have been physical protests, marches and human chains. A ‘counter-memorial’ has appeared in front of the Monument on the German Occupation in order to exhibit alternative forms of memory such as family photos, personal objects etc. (Pető 2014: 2). We have already written about some of the reactions of MAZSIHISZ, the federation of Jewish communities. But responses have not been limited to the Jewish community; last but not least, these events have stimulated discussion among church officials and public personalities and in academia (Euractiv 2014). To cite one example among many, several historians took part in a public discussion at ELTE state university on 27 March 2014. The appearance of the Monument on the German Occupation as well as Szakály’s controversial statements had induced the Union of PhD Candidates (DOSz) to organise this event titled ‘What to do with our past? Talk about current questions on politics of memory.’ The discussion closed with the conclusion that in Hungary, right-wing governments have influenced national

identity formation and the creation of a collective view of history and memory culture. It was said that there had not been enough time since 1989 to develop a 'binding' collective view of history.

As a result of this public dispute, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, known for its caution about voicing an opinion on current political questions, has finally felt obliged to respond. It, thus, held a conference in May 2014 on historical memory/commemoration and the discipline of history. Participants discussed questions about the responsibility of historians, decisive elements for determining national identity and the tragic fate of Hungarian Jews during the Second World War. Overall, all speakers objected to the idea of political authorities steering a particular course with regard to memory and identity formation (Hunyadi – Török 2014).

In November 2014, a "counter-memorial" was also established at ELTE University. In the context of another conference there, students and professors inaugurated a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust and the Second World War. That memorial was described as follows: 'The 1-centimeter-wide and 200-meter-long bronze strip embraces the university campus along its walls as a kind of unique grout between the bricks, bearing 199 names. The university pays homage to its former professors, students, and staff members, all of those who lost their lives as a result of the anti-Jewish laws in forced labor, concentration camps, ghettos, or military service' (CEU 2014). The names on this list are to be updated and supplemented. A website has also been developed to give further information about the victims. The original intention was to create a silent memorial, which demands the 'work of remembrance' and produces 'common agreement' (ELTE 2014a; ELTE 2014 b).

Another view of Hungary's memorial culture can be seen in an example from the Petőfi Literary Museum and Goethe Institute, which held a conference titled 'Trauma-Holocaust-Literature' on 28–29 November 2014. The well-known cultural scientist Aleida Assmann participated and made the following remarks, which were recorded by Ágnes Huszár:

In this respect, Hungary is an exceptional country, I have not seen in any other Central European country such a captivating intensive confrontation with her own past. [...] The state monument speaks a historicizing symbolic language, which is hardly understood today, whereas the other part [ELTE memorial, A.N.] shows very moving individual fates. As the two stand opposite each other, they are a wonderful lively picture of society, which reacts like this. The monument appears to be a clinical thermometer, which does not only measure society's temperature but also raises it. The "generation 1968" has been missing here but it seems as if their task is now taken over by others. Something is on the point of being developed. [...] This memorial helps people to enunciate their opinions even more clearly (Huszár 2014).

We would like to conclude, however, by noting the latest developments: To the surprise of many, and based on an idea from Israel's ambassador to Hungary that was developed by two University of Tel Aviv professors in light of the "Hungarian peculiarities," the Catholic Peter-Pázmány University in Budapest has recently introduced a compulsory class titled 'The Holocaust and its Remembrance' (BBC 2015; ORF 2015; Curriculum-PPKE 2015). This announcement has prompted controversy and wide discussions across Hungary. Some like the Budapest University of Jewish Studies have welcomed the decision; others have voiced their opposition, saying that the course should not be mandatory. A student group has gone so far as to say that there is a Jewish lobby behind the unit; in an open letter to the rector, they state that they do not believe this attitude is compatible with the university's identity (cf. Lukácsi 2015). Nevertheless, as of September 2015, all Pázmány students will have to take the course before they can graduate.

Conclusion

In 2014, 'instead of a story with a happy ending, a memory war [...] started' (Pető 2014: 6; Assmann 2014). This was not a sudden phenomenon, but one rooted in Hungary's past, as Éva Kovács (2015) explains: 'The memory of the treaty of Trianon competes with the memory of the Shoa [Holocaust], and most people prefer the first victim narrative. I am of the opinion, that this complex, which I would call a "collective neurosis," prevents the country from coming to terms with her past. Thus[,] there is no success in establishing a firm national identity' (see Halpert 2013). As Seewann and Kovács (2006: 49) have written, the events of 2014 were not only about the 'polarization of Hungarian society, successfully pushed on by the Orbán government,' which has left "Hungarian society split in two hostile political camps that vilify and demonize each other. They were also about a 'polarization of memory,' a 'clash of memories.' (Seewann – Kovács 2006: 49). In the end, the key issues concern the sovereignty of interpretation and competition for collective recognition. The situation seems to be an *imbroglio*. What are the consequences of the 'failure of [the] Hungarian government intervention into memory politics' (Pető 2014: 2)?

After all that has transpired, it is important to point out that the initial refusal to accept political responsibility for Hungary's involvement in the Holocaust has supported new cultures of commemoration and led to an intensive discussion of the past as well as of current political issues. Furthermore, these debates have been held in public and been widely accessible due to online media. However, we must not allow these public disputes to obscure the fact that there have always been individuals, NGOs, associations etc. who have carried out remembrance projects and actively fought racism, stereotypes and anti-Semitism (e.g. HAVER 2015); this work stretches back to before 2014 and it will extend beyond.

At least on the surface and judging from official statements, it seems as if all these debates have also led to some modification of the government's policies.

There is a long road ahead. In March 2015, Hungary assumed chairmanship of the IHRA, which held its plenary meetings from 08–11 June 2015 in Budapest. During this event, Minister Lázár gave an impressive speech in which he addressed Hungary's responsibility for its past (breuerpress 2015, also available online). The Hungarian chair declared: 'The main focus of the Hungarian Chairmanship programme will be on tackling anti-Semitism, promoting Holocaust education, the issue of the Roma genocide and increasing visibility and importance of the IHRA' (IHRA 2015). This sounds like a promising and forward-looking programme, a challenge that has the power to effect transformation. It could engender change. Only time will tell if this was merely lip service, as has so often been the case in the past.

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