Research Article

Borbála Klacsmann*

Invisibilizing Responsibility: The Holocaust Museums of Slovakia and Hungary

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Abstract: Facing and coming to terms with the past in post-Holocaust Europe has not only been a moral imperative but also a challenge in scientific, political and social senses. This process was delayed significantly in socialist countries. A part of the development of a post-socialist commemorative structure was the establishment of Holocaust museums which not only serve as a memento of the past but also provide an institutional framework for memorialization, research and education about the Holocaust. However, nationalist political forces jeopardize this process by attempting to whitewash the past in order to preserve a positive picture of the nation. In this paper, I compare the permanent exhibitions of three museums from Slovakia and Hungary in order to illuminate how this struggle influences their exhibition narratives and activities. After examining the narrative strategies of the exhibitions and conducting interviews with museum personnel of the Holocaust Memorial Center (Budapest), the House of Jewish Excellencies (Balatonfüred) and the Sereď Holocaust Museum, it can be inferred that especially the way collaboration, perpetration, and in general, the role of the local non-Jewish population is depicted (or obscured), is inextricably intertwined with political agendas.

Keywords: Holocaust museum; nationalism; collaboration; Slovakia; Hungary

In 2011, András Levente Gál, secretary of state to the Ministry of Justice and Public Administration of the second Fidesz government, demanded that the photos in the corridor connecting the first two rooms of the Holocaust Memorial Center, Hungary's official Holocaust museum, be reevaluated. According to him, there was no direct connection between the occupation of the Felvidék and Northern Transylvania,

***Corresponding author: Borbála Klacsmann**, Postdoctoral Researcher, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland, E-mail: bklacsmann@gmail.com. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2913-3264

military labor service,[1] and the deportations of Hungarian Jews – as the historical photos suggested. "This is a historical distortion which creates unnecessary tension," he stated.[2] While this opinion reflects the will to detach Miklós Horthy's reign from the Holocaust, it is also an attempt at a politically motivated intervention into a previously accepted historical narrative. At the same time, Gál tried to avert responsibility from the contemporary Hungarian political elite and deny its complicity in the Holocaust.

In the nationalist reading, Horthy's reign is considered a golden era when the Treaty of Trianon was revised and Hungary had territorial gains. However, this interpretation conveniently neglects the help the country received from Nazi Germany and fascist Italy in this process, and collaboration and complicity during the Holocaust (Horváth 2021, 307; Posocco 2022, 33). This phenomenon can be explained through the will of politicians to preserve a positive picture of the nation (Pető 2019b, 479; Vrzgulová 2017, 100). In this endeavor, nationalist politicians also undermined the transnational Holocaust narrative promoted by the European Union (EU), whose acceptance was an implicit requirement during the EU integration.

In this paper, I compare three museums from Slovakia and Hungary: the Sereď Holocaust Museum, the Holocaust Memorial Center (Budapest), and the House of Jewish Excellences (Balatonfüred). I chose these institutions first of all, because their core narratives are based on Holocaust history, and second, because through their analysis, the strengthening influence of a nationalist agenda can be spectacularly demonstrated.

Before, and during the Second World War, in both countries, antisemitic measures were initiated by local politicians who collaborated with the Nazis to various extents. Furthermore, within both societies, antisemitism was prevalent and large segments benefited from the confiscation of Jewish possessions and properties, and the death of the Jewish population (Klacsmann 2021, 479–80; Kubátová 2018, 106–7).

Ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, more and more information has been uncovered concerning the above-mentioned processes as a result of which these controversial historical events became the focus of attention, as well as scholarly, political, and social debate and dialog (Romsics 2011, 485–6). However, this process was interrupted by nationalist-populist politicians who tried to whitewash regimes, political actors and the non-Jewish population collaborating during the Holocaust. Holocaust memorialization and memory politics carried the roots of later

1 The institution of military labor service existed from 1939, originally for men unfit for regular military service. However, in 1940, it was extended to all Jewish men of military age: they were conscripted to unarmed service, and thus it became a tool for humiliation.

2 http://www.kormany.hu/hu/kozigazgatasi-es-igazsagugyi-miniszterium/kozigazgatasi-allamtitkarsag/hirek/aktivabb-egyuttmukodes-a-zsido-kozossegekkel.

intensifying issues right after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The core problem was that after the socialist period, these nations had to redefine themselves, which process directed attention to the potential common values. However, there was no consensus concerning these, and nationalist aspirations grew ever stronger resulting in a certain duality. According to Nina Paulovičová, in Slovakia the influence of émigré historians who traced the Slovak state's roots back to the first Slovak Republic created by Nazi Germany was institutionalized through the Nation's Memory Institute. The same historians also relativized the Holocaust by stating that Slovak politicians organizing the deportation of Slovak Jews were "under the direct pressure of Hitler" (Paulovičová 2018, 10). Despite these relativization efforts, a national Holocaust remembrance culture was also formed: in 1990, the Slovak parliament apologized for crimes against the Jewish community; memorials, statues dedicated to the victims were erected, and in 2001, September 9 became the official Holocaust Memorial Day. The Museum of Jewish Culture was established in 1994, serving as one of the central sites where commemorations are held (Paulovičová 2018, 12).

In Hungary, similar processes can be observed: the instrumentalized Holocaust memory of the socialist period transformed and became a part of official memory politics in the 1990s. This manifested in memorials dedicated to rescuers and later victims too (Gyáni 2015, 187–188), the appointment of an official Holocaust Memorial Day, and Hungary's joining the IHRA.[3] However, joining Western European countries in the internalization of a global Holocaust memory did not automatically mean confronting the state's own past (Kovács 2015, 198–199). Randolph L. Braham states that Holocaust relativization, trivialization and competitive victimhood were present from the beginning due to the lack of explicit moral principles. During the reign of József Antall, the first Prime Minister of democratic Hungary, Regent Miklós Horthy's rehabilitation started with his reburial. Besides, a number of historians rewrote the already existing historical consensus (Braham 2015, 236–239).

Thus, in both countries two lines of Holocaust memory politics – a global and a local memory, as Mónika Kovács formulated – existed simultaneously which were connected to the expectation of confronting a past whose moral gravity became immense in the decades after the Holocaust and to a nationalist agenda which tried to whitewash this past (2015, 201–202).

Facing the Holocaust and developing a both, nationally and internationally acceptable consensus about local collaboration is a moral imperative, in addition to a political and social challenge. As demonstrated above, in post-socialist societies, the framing of the Holocaust in education, memory culture, and the museum is closely connected to and shaped by the clash of nationalist interpretations and a critical, historically more accurate view – the narrative promoted by the EU

3 International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/.

(Traverso 2018, 59–61). Especially collaboration, perpetration, and the role of the non-Jewish population are the topics where these narratives dissent (Bartha and Otčenášová 2019).

Through the comparison of the three museums in Slovakia and Hungary, I seek answers to the following questions: How and to what extent were their establishment and functioning influenced by the contradicting coercive forces of integrating into the EU and preserving a positive picture of the nation? Does this clash appear in the exhibition narratives, and if yes, in which form? In order to find the answers, I examine the museums' establishment, the authenticity of space and architecture, their narrative strategies concerning collaboration, and finally, political controversies surrounding the institutions. Contrary to previous scholarship, in my analysis I will utilize nationalism theory to discuss the intersecting topics of museum, politics and the historical topic of collaboration.

1 Methodology

In the research project *When Nationalism Fails: A Comparative Study of Holocaust Museums*, hosted by University College Dublin and funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, I conducted fieldwork in Slovakia and Hungary, visiting a number of museums – among them the three around which this study is centered. While going through the permanent exhibitions, I observed narrative strategies, choices of sources, photos, and documents. In the Sereď Holocaust Museum, I participated in a guided tour and had the possibility to ask questions of my guide. Additionally, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with museum personnel: directors, if it was possible, and staff members who have knowledge about the programs and functioning of the museum.[4] Interviewees provided details not only about their work at the museums, but also background information concerning the institution's establishment, financial conditions, connections to other museums, and plans for the future.

In this paper, I compare three institutions to collect information about the museums' situation and the manifestations of political struggles between nationalism and an inclusive, more authentic historical interpretation in the exhibitions. Comparison, an essential scientific method, relies on a set of aspects, factors, based on which two or more units are analyzed. This method is useful from several points of view: first of all, it may reveal causalities which would otherwise remain hidden. Comparison is adequate for stressing both similarities and differences, and it may

4 Interviewees were offered the possibility to remain anonymous, but most of them gave me consent to use their names in this study. All of them received and signed a consent agreement form.

transcend research focusing on only one unit – one nation-state, for instance – inasmuch as it may reveal that phenomena considered unique exist in other nation-states too, or the opposite: that certain cases are characteristic only on a national level. This, in turn, inevitably distances the researcher from the examined units ensuring better insight and a more objective analysis (Haupt 2007, 700–1; Tomka 2005, 251).

2 Theoretical Background

In their book, Levy and Sznaider effectively demonstrate how the abstract notions of "good and evil" grew strongly connected to the Holocaust, and how this Holocaust narrative had become decontextualized by the 1990s, as a result of which it evolved into a cosmopolitan concept dislocated from space and time (Levy and Sznaider 2006, 4–5; 46–51). During the establishment and formation of the EU, this kind of Holocaust narrative became a pan-national memory, which guaranteed "the continent's restored humanity" (Subotić 2018, 299), and it serves as a "founding myth" of the EU, and a normative, universal "negative icon" ever since then (Malinova 2021, 1002; Pető 2021, 161; Radonić 2020, 47). Indeed, one of the aims of creating the transnational system of the EU was to prevent the Holocaust from happening again, and therefore accepting the universalized Holocaust narrative became an implicit requirement for becoming an EU member state (Paulovičová 2018, 9; Radonić 2020, 47–8).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the accession to the EU brought about efforts to create a common European identity in Central and Eastern European countries too. The integration promoted the transnational Holocaust narrative and if the new member states aimed to be perceived "fully European," they were also required to face their own past and role in the "Final Solution:" collaboration and complicity (Subotić 2018, 297). Integrating the new Holocaust narrative into post-communist countries' historical discourses seemed problematic not only because of this expectation, but also because replacing the memory of communism with a Holocaust narrative destabilized the states' identities, which in turn triggered competitive victimhood (Malinova 2021, 1003; Subotić 2018, 300). This is not surprising, taking into account that according to the traditional interpretation in nationalism studies, the "nation" is defined by public narratives and their effect on self-understanding (Brubaker 2004, 123). In this process, of particular importance are stories connected to a decisive point in the nation's history, which usually fall not only in the scope of public memory but also politics of memory. Therefore, they comprise a field of conflict: a constant symbolic struggle evolves around diverging historical narratives connected to the identities of various societal groups. Generally, nationalist discourses focus on reinforcing a positive image of the nation through the

representation of the past – anything that would challenge this image is downplayed, obscured or silenced (Malinova 2021, 998).

Thus, confrontation with collaboration in, or perpetration of atrocities or genocides committed in the past becomes problematic and the EU accession not only "brought the clashes between competing memories to international arenas" as Malinova puts it (2021, 1002), but also stimulated nationalist political forces to protect their vision of the nation during the EU integration. As a defense mechanism, the political elites of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries facilitated the acknowledgment of Stalinism's crimes as equivalently evil as Nazism (Radonić 2020, 49). While it is true that the Soviet occupation and communism constitute a "central defining memory" for these countries which is still quite fresh (Subotić 2018, 300), this challenged the idea of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, and resulted in a "divided memory" (Pető 2021, 162). Jelena Subotić also adds that this kind of decentralization of Holocaust memory and the expansion of totalitarianism brought back the communist interpretation of the Holocaust by obscuring Jewish suffering (2018, 302).

Part of this process was that nationalist politicians tried to establish a solid, "desirable" memory that does not present the nation as villains (Subotić 2018, 298–99), through glossing over responsibility for the Holocaust. Ljiljana Radonić labeled these politicians and parties as "mnemonic warriors" – actors who do not accept any other interpretation of the past apart from their own (2020, 44–5). "Mnemonic warriors," i.e. populist-nationalist politicians and parties instrumentalize Holocaust memory through the configuration of memory politics, as described by Andrea Pető: first, they nationalize the universal Holocaust narrative by constructing an overarching national narrative that downplays other interpretations. Then, they legitimize competitive victimhood by canonizing the "double occupation" narrative – and at the same time, they push all responsibility on the Germans and the Soviets, and depict communism and fascism as alien ideas to the nation (Pető 2021, 161; Subotić 2019, 6). Consecutively, when nationalist politicians seek legitimacy in the interwar and wartime period, they tend to obscure the exclusionary nature and the collaboration of these regimes with the Nazis (Subotić 2018, 303). While this process can be interpreted through Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory, as indeed various layers of memories affect each other (Rothberg 2009, 3); we must not forget that certain agents of memory – such as the government – have more power to enforce their views and subjugate others.

The clashes of various narratives and political agendas connected to them also appear in museums. Museums are significant national symbols that were often used as "nation-building devices," and they can also contribute to the construction of national identities (Elgenius 2015). As Radonić states, "museums showcase which version of the past is canonized for identity purposes" (Radonić 2020, 49), while adding not only context to the central topic but also a moral framework. As a

consequence, exhibitions in museums are value-laden, and they express a certain interpretation that is often used by nationalist political forces. Most Holocaust museums are established and funded by the state, and they are the sites where the official canon is consolidated, therefore their narrative choices bear significant importance in memory politics (Radonić 2014, 491).

The same applies to the museums investigated in this article: they process the history of the Holocaust and/or the local Jewish population, and as such, a central segment of national history. Therefore, their exhibition narratives are crucially important for identity construction, and they are the objects of the debates outlined above: how the curators of a Holocaust exhibition perceive history, – what kind of interpretations they use – is inevitably affected by political agenda. The influence of a nationalist view is changing, though, and the exhibitions' way of depicting collaboration is inextricably linked to that.

3 Politicians, Volunteers, Professionals – Establishment of the Three Museums

Out of the three museums, two are official national Holocaust museums, while one – the House of Jewish Excellences – was established by the local municipality. This means that the financial and administrative backgrounds, and the founding bodies' roles are also different. The Holocaust Memorial Center (HDKE) was founded by the first Fidesz-government in 2002, and it opened for the public in 2004, the same year when Hungary joined the EU, during the reign of the Hungarian Socialist Party. The establishment of the HDKE was closely connected to the EU accession, and can be considered the fulfillment of the implicit requirement of facing the past and embracing the transnational Holocaust narrative. The institution is financially maintained by the government, and the board monitoring the museum's activities has a member who is a government representative. This is a contradictory factor: on the one hand, it means that the state symbolically took responsibility for the Holocaust. On the other, this way the government has direct control over the institution's activity.

The HDKE's permanent exhibition entitled *From Deprivation of Rights to Genocide*, was created by a curatorial team that included renowned and young Holocaust historians, museologists and other experts on the topic, and it was proofread by similarly acknowledged researchers (Karsai et al. 2006). The script was written, adjusted and edited through several phases, which included, among others, an open debate, and a debate with the Memorial Center's curatorial team and staff (Molnár 2012, 439–41). The exhibition discusses the relationship between the Hungarian state and its Jewish and Roma citizens: all rooms are thematically arranged

around the various steps of the persecution, not necessarily in chronological order. Given this principle, the focus falls on the events of the Holocaust within the borders of Hungary, while in two of the rooms, the fate of the deportees in camps/military labor service is discussed. In this respect – and despite the controversies surrounding its establishment and opening (Kovács 2017, 112), – the museum is part of the process of coming to terms with the past: it inevitably tackles the issue of the Hungarian state's responsibility.

The concept of the first (and only) Holocaust Museum in Slovakia was presented at an IHRA meeting, as early as 2008 – however, the museum opened only eight years later. For the purpose of the exhibition, some of the barracks of the former Sereď camp were given to the Slovak National Museum (Vrzgulová 2019). Sereď is about 60 km from Bratislava; in this town, a labor camp was established in 1941, where Slovak Jews aged 16–60 were forced to work. From September 1944, the camp served as the only concentration camp in Slovakia, guarded by the SS. Therefore, it is an authentic place – even though most buildings have been renovated and rebuilt since then. Officially, the museum is under the Museum of Jewish Culture, which belongs to the Slovak National Museum – creating a three-level hierarchy, in which the Sereď Museum stands at the bottom. All three institutions are financed by the Slovak Ministry of Culture; thus, they are all connected to the state, similarly to the Holocaust Memorial Center. In this regard, and considering the date of the original initiative, this museum can also be connected to Slovakia's acceptance into the EU.

The House of Jewish Excellences was built on the initiative of mayor István Bóka (Fidesz), who decided to buy and renovate Balatonfüred's old, abandoned synagogue. He consulted Ferenc Olti, the town's only Jewish resident – and a descendant of Holocaust survivors, – and asked what kind of institution should be established, with the prerequisite that "it does not disturb the Jewish past and sensitivity."[5] Obviously, this must mean the Holocaust and Jewish–non-Jewish relations, which are generally considered divisive topics, and hence it is easier to avoid public discussion about them. Olti then came up with an innovative idea: a digital exhibition that focuses on Jewish inventors and scientists, and through their oeuvre, demonstrates how much would have been lost, had the "Final Solution" been fully implemented.[6] This idea

5 Interview with Ferenc Olti and Anna Szeszler, October 22, 2022, Balatonfüred.

6 Umut Erel labeled this method as "rucksack approach," i.e. a sociological view of migrants' cultural capital as ethnically bounded, and presuming that they possess a set of cultural resources deriving from their country of origin (in this case the Jewish population perceived as an ethnically defined group whose several members migrated due to the National Socialists coming to power or the unfolding "Final Solution"). Instead of this rigid approach, Erel proposes a more flexible one, stating that migration results in new ways of knowledge production which are interconnected with power relations of the country of origins and the country of migration, as well as migrant institutions, and relations with the ethnic majority. See: Erel 2010.

seems like a compromise: the reference to the Holocaust is only implicit, however, it is still part of the foundational concept. The mayor embraced the idea; the synagogue was renovated, then an additional building to house the exhibit was built; all this was financed from three sources: the local municipality, the Norway Grants, and the government. Afterward, Olti and the representatives of MAZSIHISZ,[7] EMIH,[8] MAZSIKE,[9] and the *Hit Gyülekezete*[10] established a foundation also led by Ferenc Olti, whose board has members from each of these institutions.[11] This board controls the activity of the museum. Since the opening in 2018, the place serves three purposes: it is a memorial to the lost community of the town, an exhibition hall, and a communal space for the locals. Since the opening, two more sets of Jewish excellences have been added to the exhibition database: artists and sportsmen. Thus, altogether approximately 450 persons' life stories can be explored.

4 Three Museums – Three Different Spaces

All three museums analyzed in this paper were built at authentic locations, even though they are in very different environments. The HDKE can be found in the capital of Hungary, close to a busy main road. It was built around the Páva Street synagogue, the capital's second largest synagogue which was used as an internment camp in 1944. The museum building is full of symbolic features. For instance, the western walls of the courtyard are covered with black glass panels on which the names of known victims are engraved. When visitors stand in front of the wall, they see their own reflection together with the names and thus are "facing the past" (Figure 1).

The exhibition itself consists of 8 + 1 rooms of which the last space is the synagogue itself. Throughout the exhibition, the corridors and rooms slope downwards, and are dark; only certain photos or artefacts are illuminated with spotlights. Sounds accompany the visitor in each room and turn increasingly depressing and grim, starting with wedding music in the first room concluding with the sound of a train in the sixth. Even with these settings, the museum creates an atmosphere that

7 *Magyar Zsidó Hitközségek Szövetsége* (Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities) is the major representative body of the *Neológ* denomination.

8 *Egységes Magyarországi Izraelita Hitközség* (Unified Hungarian Jewish Congregation) officially the representative body of the Status Quo Ante denomination, however, with a more conservative attitude deriving from the Chabad Lubavitch movement.

9 *Magyar Zsidó Kulturális Egyesület* (Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association) an independent association.

10 Faith Church Hungary, a charismatic Christian denomination.

11 Interview with Ferenc Olti and Anna Szeszler, October 22, 2022, Balatonfüred.

Figure 1: The memorial wall of victims (photo by author).

facilitates the visitor's immersion in the story, but which is overwhelming and suffocating at the same time (Creet 2013, 55). These strategies both force the visitor to face and understand the past, and to contemplate the tragedy of the Jews and the factors which led there: the indifference or hostility of the majority society included (Figure 2).

After the eighth room, the visitor goes up to the synagogue whose vast, clear, empty space is in sharp contrast with the dark, narrow rooms and corridors of the exhibition. This may symbolize both liberation and the empty spaces left behind by exterminated communities – the glass benches reinforce the latter idea. All in all, the HDKE operates with traditional spaces and architectural symbolism, which are also parts of the transnational Holocaust narrative: while the dark parts represent collaboration and the suffering of the Jewish population, the synagogue stands for the hope that visitors will learn from the past and avoid its mistakes (Figure 3).

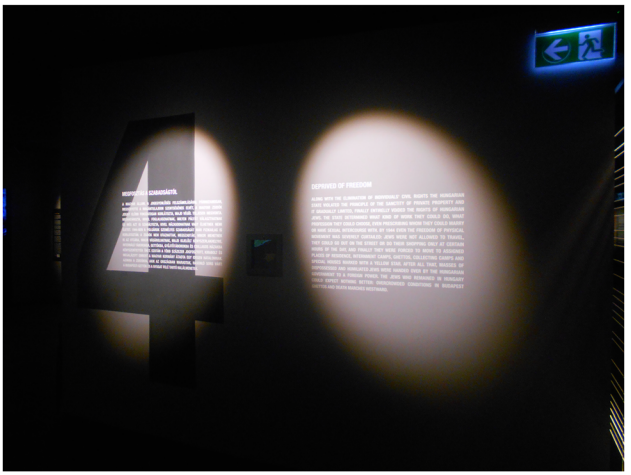

Figure 2: Dark space at the HDKE's permanent exhibition (photo by author).

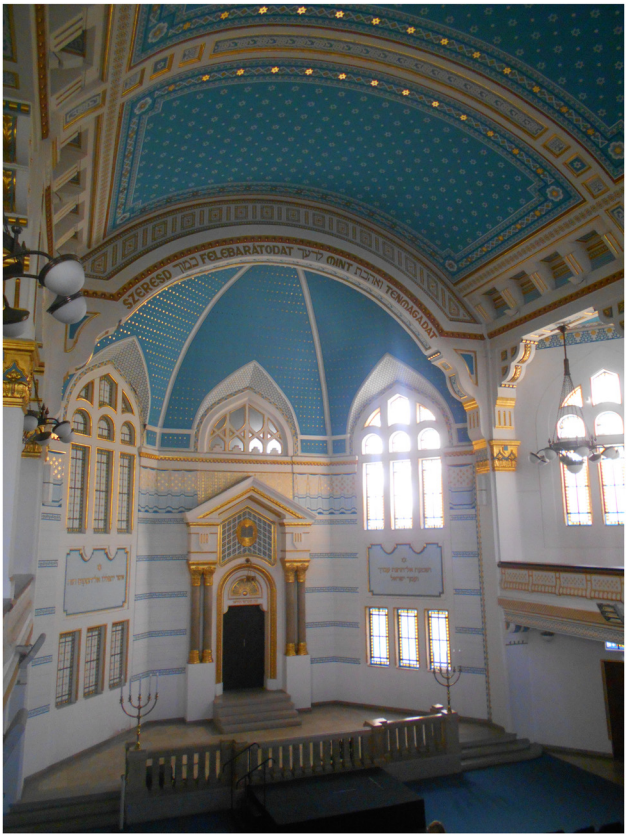

Figure 3: The Páva Street synagogue (photo by author).

Figure 4: Authentic freight car in the courtyard of the Sereď Holocaust Museum (photo by author).

The purpose of the Sereď Holocaust Museum is to house permanent and visiting/temporary exhibitions, and to serve as a place of commemoration. The exhibition and offices are placed in five renovated and rebuilt barracks, and the former Appelplatz in addition to three other camp buildings that also belong to the museum while the rest of the place is owned by the Ministry of Defense. Between the first and the second barracks an authentic freight car stands which was used during the deportations – today, commemorations take place in it. The exhibition space inside the barracks is gloomy but not as dark and overwhelming as the underground corridors of the HDKE (Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 5: Barracks of the Sereď camp, today parts of the museum (photo by author).

Figure 6: The new building of the House of Jewish Excellences, and part of the synagogue (photo by author).

Figure 7: The renovated synagogue building and its courtyard (photo by author).

The third museum, the House of Jewish Excellences is strikingly different from the other two. It hides in the northern regions of Balatonfüred, a picturesque town at Lake Balaton, which teems with tourists in the summer but has a population of merely 13,000 in winter. The museum has two buildings: the renovated synagogue and a newly constructed building that houses the exhibition (Figures 6 and 7).

Figure 8: The Torah ark in the renovated synagogue (photo by author).

Characteristics of the museum are a clean design, the lack of artefacts, photos or captions, and a fully digital exhibit. Contrary to the other two museums, it lacks underground or dark spaces. However, certain elements complement the exhibit: in the synagogue, a Torah ark can be seen, on both sides of which 2–2 panels, both in Hungarian and in English, tell the visitors about the past of the Balatonfüred Jewish community and the story of the synagogue building. On the other, upon entering the museum building, the following inscription greets the visitor on the glass doors: "Had the evil plan succeeded, these excellences would have been killed, as well, just as our other brothers and sisters were. However, they were able to escape, responding to the darkness with the words of life. They built a palace from their thoughts, and that became our home. It is due to their grace and genius that humanity and mankind live on." (Figure 8)[12]

12 Translation from https://www.zsidokivalosagok.hu/en/fooldal-en/.

The symbolic features of the three museums reinforce the idea that the nationalist narrative's influence is increasing: the HDKE is obviously a product of internationally accepted trends of depicting the Holocaust; the Sereď Museum also utilizes some of these features, such as the authentic place, dark spaces; however, it lacks such dense symbolism as the HDKE building. Finally, the House of Jewish Excellences basically operates with opposite strategies in order to create an atmosphere where the visitor is not forced to contemplate the past at all.

5 Narratives about Collaboration

Facing and discussing complicity and collaboration is crucial for coming to terms with the past. As mentioned before, this was an implicit requirement during the EU accession processes. Therefore, these topics and how they are represented at (Holocaust) exhibitions need special attention. In this subsection, I compare the three exhibition narratives through the lens of their interpretation of collaboration.

The permanent exhibition at the Holocaust Memorial Center is interweaved by references to complicity: it introduces and discusses the role of the main Hungarian perpetrators and collaborators, and depicts the embeddedness of antisemitism in Hungarian society through a set of anti-Jewish and antisemitic flyers and posters. The non-Jewish population actively participated in the expropriation of Jewish property (Kádár and Vági 2005, 14), which is illustrated by appalling photos of non-Jews looting the abandoned ghettos after the deportation, and synagogues filled with collected Jewish belongings (Figure 9).

These images inevitably raise awareness of complicity, its extent and forms. Even the historical explanation is straightforward: "The anti-Jewish laws triggered a tragic process: the negative discrimination of Jews and later their despoilment roused the interest of significant Christian middle class and upper-middle-class groups, years before the German occupation. For Christian merchants, artisans or intellectuals who were unemployed or in difficult positions, the simplest way to improve their positions was to support the anti-Jewish measures and occupy the places of rivals."[13]

All in all, the HDKE's exhibition discusses three layers of collaboration: that of leading politicians, civil servants, and the non-Jewish population. Ljiljana Radonić emphasized the uniqueness of this strategy and termed it "negative memory:" instead of conveniently blurring certain aspects of the past, the exhibition introduces the perpetrators (2020, 60), and motivates the visitor to engage in a self-critical reflection, and to face and contemplate uncomfortable issues such as neighbors

13 The official English translation of the exhibition's text.

Figure 9: Photos of the various stages of expropriation: in the first row, non-Jews looting the ghettos (photo by author).

looting Jewish houses. Compared to the other two museums discussed in this paper, it is indeed a particular trait: none of the others discuss complicity in such depth. This underpins the statement that the HDKE's exhibition was indeed inspired by the transnational Holocaust narrative embraced by the EU.

The Sered' Holocaust Museum's permanent exhibition is organized in a thematic way. The first barrack addresses antisemitism and the Holocaust in Slovakia. Similarly to the HDKE, propaganda flyers, newspaper clippings, and contemporary photos illustrate antisemitism during the existence of the Slovak state (Figure 10).

The short texts included in this section discuss the general historical background. Unfortunately, historical accuracy is sacrificed for conciseness and easy understanding: for instance, while the description deals with antisemitism in

Figure 10: Anti-semitic caricatures and graffiti in the Sereď museum's exhibition (photo by author).

Hungary from the 1920s, it fails to mention the 1944 German occupation and everything that happened afterward. Addressing the responsibility of the Slovak state and the local population is also controversial: while in one of the panels, the text clearly states that it was the government that deported the Jews, it fails to explain what the Jewish Code[14] was, and at other places mentions the blurry phrase "fascists in Slovakia."

In the second barrack, the exhibition explores the history of labor camps in Slovakia. Here, broader descriptions are included, which explain that members of the Hlinka Guard were responsible for the inmates' fate. When discussing the post-uprising reprisals, again, the narrative addresses the complicity of collaborators. While the third barrack, processing life in the Sereď camp, would be the place to explore the complexity of roles and behavioral patterns (Nešťáková 2023), this is probably the most problematic part of the exhibition. Most of the photos do not have captions, and the reconstructions of camp workshops, school, and barrack convey the message that prisoners actually had a comfortable life – which is far from the truth (see Nešťáková 2020, 132–140). My guide stated that visitors refer to this section as a "Holocaust skanzen," which in itself reflects the authenticity of the exhibit. Instead of exploring the complex relations among the occupying forces, Hungarians, Slovaks and Jews, the narrative is again simplistic. The final barrack describes a general Holocaust history, focusing first and foremost on Nazi camps where Slovak

14 A set of antisemitic laws and decrees introduced in 1941.

Figure 11: Reconstruction of the workshops in the Sereď camps (photo by author).

Jews were deported; the victims (both symbolically and individually), and the Slovak Righteous among the Nations (Figure 11).

A general major issue with the exhibit is that only a few of the artefacts or photos have explanatory texts and thus the visitor does not get to know whether they are replicas or originals, their origin or what they depict, etc. (Vrzgulová 2019) The length of texts is disproportionate, and they are descriptive instead of analytical. Thus, the exhibition of the Sereď Holocaust Museum lacks an analysis of the role of collaborators, bystanders, and the underlying reasons behind the fact that in 1942, "the Slovak Republic was the only state not directly occupied by Germany in which Jews were deported by the state's own administrative and security forces" (Kamenec 2011, 189–190). In fact, what the non-Jewish population gained through the deportation of the Jews, is not even mentioned in the exhibition, neither are the main perpetrators and collaborators introduced. The gravity of complicity is also reduced by the idyllic depiction of camp life. This way the institution's achievement in processing the past is unbalanced; compared to the HDKE, it seems superficial in the sense that it does not delve into the depths of collaboration – the visitor has to consciously seek for hints about it in order to gain at least an incomplete picture. This is the result of reluctance to face the past – contrary to the previously discussed HDKE, the influence of a nationalist narrative and an endeavor to blur responsibility for the Holocaust is more noticeable at the Sereď Museum's exhibition.

Upon entering the House of Jewish Excellences, visitors find themselves in a clean, light-filled, spacious hall, where, together with the ticket, they receive electronic cards. By placing the card on one of the information panels standing across the

Figure 12: The reception hall of the House of Jewish Excellences with ticket booth and information panels (photo by author).

ticket booth, visitors can start tailoring their visit: they have to choose whether they want to learn about scientists, artists, or sportsmen; and they can select five personalities from these groups (Figure 12).

The exhibition itself is on the first floor. By touching the card to the glowing circle in the middle of one of the folding screens, the projection starts. On the left-hand-side panel, the visitor can pick one of the five excellences, while information about the selected person appears on the right-hand panel. We can choose from five categories: lifeline, oeuvre, fun facts, videos, and games. Each lifeline contains the most important dates of the person's life and a short description of what happened then. In the oeuvre part, we can read 4–5 short stories about the most important inventions or the hallmarks of their career. The fun facts section contains 8–10 informative and curious anecdotes. All descriptions are short and concise to facilitate an easier understanding and quick learning. Finally, we can test our knowledge with the games.

Both graphics and written material are the results of a conscious decision and a definite concept: in his interview, Olti stressed that they had wanted to create a new line of memory politics. Realizing that conventional Holocaust museums are "terribly important but less and less attractive," instead of "a sad exhibition delving into the past and displaying horrors," they made an exhibit "from where [the visitor] comes out without a knot in his stomach." An underlying feature of the exhibition is that the Jewish excellences were chosen based on whether they would have been considered Jewish according to the Nuremberg laws – this, however, is not mentioned anywhere apart from the vague quote on the entrance door. According to

Olti, this way it is much easier to attract the non-Jewish public and thus to "make the relations to the Jews a bit more positive."[15]

When I visited the museum, I chose Jewish artists based on the following criteria: they were Hungarians and they lived during the Second World War. None of the lifelines enlightened me about what had happened to them during the Holocaust or how they had survived it – moreover, the wartime period was often simply omitted from the descriptions. Thus, a problematic characteristic of this museum is that even though its basic idea is inextricably connected to the Holocaust, it discusses the life and achievements of Jewish personalities completely devoid of their context. Obviously, contemporary history, the question of historical responsibility, and the involvement of non-Jews in the process of the Holocaust are also missing. This, in turn, raises the question, whether it is possible to improve Jewish–non-Jewish relations through silencing or obscuring the past and not facing the trauma, not addressing the question, why Jewish–non-Jewish relations need improving.

Indeed, among the three museums discussed in this paper, the House of Jewish Excellences is the one where collaboration, and responsibility for the Holocaust are entirely invisibilized, which can be connected to the mayor's precondition: "not to disturb the Jewish past." This is an integral feature of Fidesz's nationalist memory politics: whitewashing the past, glossing over state responsibility, and instead, creating a convenient narrative which does not tackle uncomfortable questions.[16] The result of this paradigm change in memorialization is, as Pető labels it, a "Holocaust simulacrum": an empty simulation (Pető 2019a).

6 Controversies around the Museums

A major difference between the House of Jewish Excellences and the two other museums is that the latter are national memorial museums funded by the government, and thus they represent the official narrative of the state. The House of Jewish Excellences, on the other hand, is a municipal museum with hybrid roles: it has an exhibition, but it also serves as a communal meeting point for the local population. These differences also appear in the controversies which rose around the museums over time.

As mentioned in the introductory part of this paper, a major debate unfolded around the HDKE's exhibition narrative in 2011, only one year after Fidesz had come to power. Even though András Levente Gál later withdrew his opinion,[17] subsequent

15 Quotes from interview with Ferenc Olti and Anna Szeszler, October 22, 2022, Balatonfüred.

16 On this strategy, see: Braham 2015, 247, 254.

17 https://www.tte.hu/media/pdf/g_a_l_level_20110406.pdf.

events show that the government did not give up putting political pressure on the museum to achieve the changing of the narrative. First, historians who agreed with Gál's statements were appointed as the institution's new leaders,[18] and their reign meant a critical period when staff members were forced to resign or were dismissed while the museum's budget was drastically decreased by the government (Hamvay 2014).

Finally, the museum's functioning normalized in 2015, when Andor Grósz became the chair of the advisory board. In the last years, a stalemate situation evolved: the copyright of the permanent exhibition lies with its curatorial team and the Hungarian National Museum who are not willing to give permission for any modification. Even though the current leadership of the institution and the government too would prefer to create a new exhibition (given that the exhibition *From Deprivation of Rights to Genocide* is almost 20 years old already), there is no budget for such an undertaking.[19] Due to these factors, the government chose to marginalize the institution, which is reflected by the number of its visitors.[20]

According to director András Zima, "there is no [political] pressure" either on him or on the staff, and the museum's activities renewed: the scope of research was extended, researchers from various disciplines were hired and the focus on the Holocaust broadened to include Jewish life both before and after the Second World War.[21] Despite this, there is a gaping difference between the HDKE and the government-supported House of Terror (Posocco 2022, 32–33) which attracts 250–350,000 visitors a year.[22] It seems, that no political pressure on museum personnel is needed if the government has other tools to silence the narrative and a negative picture of the nation conveyed by the permanent exhibition (Radonić 2020, 61).

The Sereď Holocaust Museum's exhibition has different issues. The exhibit's chief curator was Pavol Mešťan (passed away in 2022), a former leading functionary in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia who received his diploma from the Institute of Marxism-Leninism. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he remained in public and academic life: he was a member of the Council for Human Rights, National Minorities and Gender Equality, and even though he was not educated in Jewish Studies, history or museology, he became the director of the

18 György Haraszti became the chair of the advisory board, and Szabolcs Szita the director. See: *Heti Válasz*, April 14, 2011, 54, and Molnár 2012, 437.

19 Interview with András Zima and Andor Grósz, September 16, 2022, Budapest.

20 According to the official statistics, in 2007, the number of visitors reached 40,000, but both before and after, it was significantly less than that, around 20,000, except for 2019, when it reached 30,000 again. Statistics from http://muzeumstat.hu.

21 Interview with András Zima and Andor Grósz, September 16, 2022, Budapest.

22 Source: http://muzeumstat.hu.

Museum of Jewish Culture.[23] He also facilitated the establishment of the Sereď Holocaust Museum.

At the entrance of the exhibition, a board enumerates the experts who worked on the exhibition: Hanna Yablonka, Gila Fatran, Róbert Büchler, and Radoslav Ragač. However, Büchler passed away in 2009, Fatran could not participate in the project due to health issues, and Yablonka did not even know about the role the museum attributed to her. Ragač, former director of the Slovak National Archives, provided sources for the exhibition.[24] From this information, it seems that the museum was a "one-man-project" and the question arises: if there are such excellent, both nationally and internationally acclaimed Slovak experts as Ivan Kamenec, Monika Vrzgulová, Hana Kubátová, Nina Paulovičová, and Ján Hlavinka, why was none of them involved in the creation of the exhibition? Additionally, there is extensive research on the complicity of the non-Jewish population in the form of denunciations (Kubátová 2018), bystander memories (Vrzgulová 2017), wartime and post-war antisemitism (Paulovičová 2018), however, none of these topics are discussed in the museum.

The Sereď Holocaust Museum's existence is connected to the EU accession, however, as Nina Paulovičová argues, even though the supporters of the integration took over the transnational Holocaust narrative and initiated public discussions about complicity, this was a political move and not so much an honest desire to face the past (Paulovičová 2018, 550). Probably this is one of the reasons why the exhibition's narrative is controversial when it comes to the responsibility of the government and the non-Jewish society: while it discusses the collaboration of top politicians, the role of civil servants and the local population is silenced.

Finally, the exhibition at the House of Jewish Excellences does not contain any reference to the historical background. One could argue that the conceptual framework – the life and oeuvre of famous scientists, artists and sportsmen – does not require this, however, as it has been pointed out, avoiding discussion about the Holocaust was a prerequisite by the commissioner, the mayor. While this is opposed by the basic concept of the exhibition, i.e. introducing famous Jewish people who would have been murdered during the Holocaust, unless the visitor reads the vague quote about the "evil plan" on the entrance door, s/he does not get to know this. This way, the Holocaust becomes almost a taboo at the exhibition, as a result of which the integration of the transnational Holocaust narrative is reversed.

This paradigm change is not a coincidence: as Olti expressed in his interview, they wanted to give "positive experiences" to the visitors,[25] which is rather

23 Information from Denisa Nešťáková; https://sk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pavol_Me%C5%A1%C5%A5an.

24 Information from Denisa Nešťáková.

25 Interview with Ferenc Olti and Anna Szeszler, October 22, 2022, Balatonfüred.

convenient, as it is easy to identify with the positive side of the "Jewish story." Silencing the victims' voices, and even the historical circumstances of the excellences included in the exhibition, and marginalizing their experiences during the persecution are tools of the Fidesz government's memory politics which aims at constructing an exclusionary narrative that supports nation building while invisibilizes the memories of minorities, and ignores state responsibility for the Holocaust (Pető 2021, 161). It seems that this strategy resonates well with the general public: the museum is visited not only by local inhabitants, but also many visitors even from distant towns.[26]

7 Conclusions

The starting question of this article was whether and how the presence of topics such as complicity, involvement of non-Jews in anti-Jewish acts, and collaboration at Holocaust exhibitions is influenced by nationalist political agenda. The three cases introduced here show that the nationalist agenda either affected the exhibition narratives, or if that was not possible, the visibility of the museum itself. The HDKE's exhibition is an example of the European, pan-national Holocaust narrative, it follows Western trends and does not avoid the issue of collaboration. It addresses the antisemitic nature of the Horthy regime – a historical period that the ruling Fidesz government has repeatedly tried to whitewash (Radonić 2020, 58–60). Since the creators of the exhibition resisted political pressure to change this narrative, the government's solution was the museum's marginalization. This way, Fidesz achieved its goal: a discourse that did not fit its exclusionary, nationalist interpretation was rendered insignificant.

The Sereď Holocaust Museum represents a middle course between the HDKE and the House of Jewish Excellences. Its creation can also be connected to the EU accession, but in the end, it was established later, during Robert Fico's leftist, social democratic Smer government. Nationalism was not alien to the Smer party either (Jurinová 2006), and while seemingly there was no political pressure during the creation of this exhibition, still, as Paulovičová suggested, the lack of an honest facing the past (2018, 550) resulted in a controversial narrative. Indeed, the responsibility of the political elite is mentioned, but the exhibition's lopsided interpretation of complicity leaves visitors with an unclear idea about responsibility and the role of the

26 The museum has approximately 4000 visitors/year. Information from Anna Szeszler, e-mail to author, January 31, 2023. In comparison, the Balatonfüred Town Museum's visitor statistics varied between 4 and 5000 before COVID-19. Statistics from http://muzeumstat.hu.

local non-Jewish population. Therefore, it is unlikely that this exhibition will contribute significantly to the evolution of a balanced picture of the Holocaust.

Finally, the House of Jewish Excellences is an example of how the nationalist vision of the past can be effectively incorporated into an exhibition, from the initial demand of the mayor to the attractive and modern museological solutions, design and concept. The historical context is almost entirely missing, and the exhibition itself does not discuss the Holocaust, the Horthy era, or collaboration. Only a brief, indirect reference in the quote at the entrance and the memorial plaques in the synagogue refer to these issues. While seemingly this paradigm change in memory policy results in a positive experience for the visitors, it silences the victims' voice and invisibilizes collaboration. Therefore, the exhibition does not facilitate coming to terms with the past – on the contrary, it covers up historical responsibility and relieves the visitor from facing a difficult past.

Comparing these three exhibitions, on the one hand, reveals a structural problem: while during the EU accession, coming to terms with the past was an implicit expectation, the EU as a supranational institution does not have control over the content of these exhibitions, which depend entirely on local stakeholders. On the other hand, it points to the process of how the transnational Holocaust narrative is negotiated and eventually emptied, while instead of it, another interpretation evolves: one which does not challenge and destabilize state identity (Subotić 2018, 300) but depicts the nation and the non-Jewish population as neutral actors or victims themselves, and outright silences their role in the Holocaust.

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