

Jews in contemporary Hungary

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Introduction

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, Jews in Hungary, while contributing to the modernization of economic life, went through a rapid process of assimilation, which chiefly concerned the change of their language and the process of secularization – at least concerning the majority. Both processes were accelerated by their full emancipation in 1867 (as a consequence of the Austro-Hungarian compromise), paving the way for their urbanization, while they emerged as the driving force of capitalism and modernization – to an even more significant degree than anywhere else in East-Central Europe. By the end of the nineteenth century, around 70% of Hungarian Jews spoke Hungarian as their native tongue (and in consequence were classified as “ethnic Hungarians”), while the remainder spoke mostly German or Yiddish. The schism between the Neolog and the Orthodox communities in 1868 demonstrated that most Hungarian Jews, even in Greater Hungary, belonged to the more secular Neolog community. With the division of Greater Hungary, and the loss of territories in 1920, the number of Orthodox Jews living under Hungarian administration further decreased. At the same time, conversion to Christianity was rare, since it was not a basic requirement of assimilation and really only concerned those who aspired to higher state office. In Central Europe, the basic principle of assimilation was that commitment to Judaism and loyalty to the nation were compatible.

Some historians use the concept of a “contract of assimilation”¹ tacitly made between Hungarians and Jews. It expresses the intention of Hungarian elites to accord full recognition to Jews in exchange for their participation in the modernization of the country, and maybe even more importantly in the Hungarianization of the multi-ethnic empire, where (in the Hungarian lands of Austria-Hungary) Hungarians represented less than 50% of the population. However, this also meant that the assimilation of Hungarian Jews did not take place according to the ideals of the Enlightenment, but was rather understood as being part of a national and nationalist project.² In

¹ Viktor Karády, “A zsidóság polgárosodásának és modernizációjának főbb tényezői a magyar társadalomtörténetben”, Balázs Fűzfa and Gábor Szabó (eds), *A zsidókérdésről*, Szombathely, Nemeth Laszlo Szakkollegium, 1989, 95–136.

² Ferenc Fejtő, *Magyarság, zsidóság*, Budapest, MTA Történettudományi Intézet, 2000.

fact, antisemitic political movements during the 19th century were short-lived, and the state or public administration never associated itself with antisemitic ideas or practices until the end of World War I (in contrast to the Austrian part of the empire, Germany or France). But this also meant that from the moment that Hungarians did not need the Jews to grow their numbers, which became the case after the Trianon peace treaty in the smaller, ethnically almost homogenous Hungary, ideas of racial antisemitism, although arriving somewhat belatedly, could gain ground. “According to the newly emerged dominant ideology, modernization, which began in the 19th century in Hungary, was not the integral result of Hungarian development but had been imported by aliens, Jews first of all, and in the long run served their interests exclusively. Assimilation on the other hand was only superficial and pretended: the Jews put on a Hungarian disguise simply in order to gain more opportunities to force back the Hungarian ‘historical classes’, and to delete and disintegrate the nation from inside.”³

The intention of discriminating against Jews, and separating them from “real” Hungarians on a racial basis, rapidly became widespread in the political class, and also in some parts of the general population – young intellectuals and university students being its most important flag-bearers. Jews were blamed for the defeat in the world war, and for the Commune of 1919, and equally for the immense territorial loss sealed by the Trianon treaty in 1920, a trauma that has been carefully nourished by right-wing political and cultural elites ever since. In fact, one cannot exaggerate the importance of the Trianon trauma both politically and symbolically. After one hundred years, it still exerts a great influence on Hungarian self-perception and memory politics. It not only became absolutely determinant in the interpretation of subsequent Hungarian history, but also in the perception of Jews.

Seventy-five percent of Hungarian Jews were murdered in the Hungarian Holocaust in the summer of 1944 (an almost total annihilation except for the Jewry of Budapest), in probably the smoothest operation of collaboration with the Nazis among all allied or occupied states. The Budapest Jewry, although decimated, remained the only surviving community in East-Central Europe after 1945, with around 150,000 people.

Demography of Jews

³ Adrás Kovács, “Jews and Jewishness in Post-war Hungary”, *Quest. Issues of Contemporary History*, 1, 2010, 36.

How many Jews now live in Hungary? A difficult question to answer, since Jews in Hungary, traditionally, are not considered (and do not consider themselves) as a nationality/ethnicity. Officially, they were also not considered as such even during the antisemitic period until the first and second Jewish laws were introduced at the end of the thirties; however, the 1920 legislation on the *numerus clausus* (limiting the number of Jewish students entering higher education) was already based on tacit racial criteria.⁴ Zionism traditionally has exerted a very weak influence in Hungary, and after 1945 (and especially after 1948, the year of the communist takeover) it became clear again that Hungarian Jews (at least those who chose to stay in the country), due to the experience of discrimination and persecution, did not want to be considered a separate ethnicity. On the contrary, the majority opted for a fuller assimilation (so much so that in a great many families the Jewish origin, a kind of stigma, was kept secret, and many people in the second generation only found out about being Jewish at an adult age⁵). Certainly, some tendencies of dissimilation could only be observed after the 1990 political transition, understood as “Jewish revival”.

Judaism being a religious denomination, there is no data collected on this community in ethnic statistics (there are thirteen recognized ethnic and national minorities listed in the Law on Ethnic and National Minorities, and Jews are not among them). This we makes it highly difficult to determine their actual number. Also, due to the pace of assimilation, which is manifested especially in the ever-growing number of mixed marriages from 1945 until today (which has just been slightly reversed during the last ten to fifteen years), now about half of Hungarian Jews are living in heterogamous marriages. However, a further problem in determining the size of the Jewish population is that, in spite of the fact that officially Judaism is a religious denomination, the sweeping majority of Hungarian Jews are totally secular, or at least not affiliated to any of the Jewish communities.

In their research on contemporary Hungarian Jewry,⁶ András Kovács and Ildikó Barna came up with a methodical definition for their sample, for which they adopted one objective and one subjective criterion. The objective is having at least one Jewish grandparent; that is, the qualification for Israeli citizenship according to the Israeli “Law of Return” (but, contrary to the

⁴ Mária M. Kovács, “The Hungarian *Numerus Clausus*: Ideology, Apology and History, 1919–1945”, Victor Karády and Peter Tibor Nagy (eds), *The Numerus Clausus in Hungary: Studies on the First Anti-Jewish Law and Academic Anti-Semitism in Modern Central Europe*, <https://mek.oszk.hu/11100/11109/11109.pdf>; Nathaniel Katzburg, “Anti-Jewish Measures and Policies and Nazi Influence in the 1930s”, Herbert A. Strauss (ed.), *Hostages of Modernization: Studies on Modern Antisemitism 1870–1933/39, Vol. 2: Austria – Hungary – Poland – Russia*, De Gruyter, 1993.

⁵ Ferenc Erős, András Kovács and Katalin Lévai, “Comment j’en suis arrivé à apprendre que je suis Juif?” *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 56, 1985, 62–68.

⁶ András Kovács and Ildikó Barna, *Zsidók és zsidóság Magyarországon 2017-ben [Jews and Judaism in Hungary in 2017]*, Szombat, 2018.

law, members of non-Jewish religious denominations of Jewish origin were not excluded from the sample). The subjective criterion was that one must self-identify as Jewish in any sense (origins, religion, tradition, culture, etc.). Also, in their sample they only included people older than 18 years of age. Today in Hungary, approximately 73,000 to 138,000 people have at least one Jewish parent. Whereas, according to the broadest definition of Jewish origin as we see it in the Israeli “Law of Return”, the Hungarian Jewish adult population would be around 160,000 (1.8 to 2% of the whole Hungarian population).⁷

The total Jewish population is between 59,000 and 110,000 according to maternal descent, while there are 160,000 Hungarian Jews according to the criterion of one Jewish grandparent. The number of people who ethnically identified as Jewish in the Hungarian national census, and/or who have offered 1% of their taxes to Jewish communities (as they are legally entitled to), was slightly less than 11,000 (since the huge majority of Jews do not want to be considered a separate ethnicity, but define themselves as “Hungarian Jew” or “Jewish Hungarian”, or even “European”). Kovács and Barna estimate the number of occasional participants in religious life to be around 4,000, while the number of regular religious practitioners is a maximum of 1,000. This is to say that fewer than 10% of Hungarian Jewry express their Jewish self-identification through institutional means, and no more than 5% express it at least symbolically. The number of regular religious practitioners does not exceed 1% of the total Jewish population.⁸

Jewish communities

The difference between the number of people going to synagogue regularly and those who only go on holidays is largest for the Neolog denomination (which corresponds more or less to the Conservative community in American parlance), and smallest for the Orthodox. The data also indicate that both communities are supported by many individuals who do not attend synagogue even on major holidays, and that the sum of annual support, namely the number of 1% tax donations going for them, is steadily growing.

Hungarian tax laws allow taxpayers to dedicate 1% of their taxable income to one religious community (officially accepted as such by the state) and another 1% to an NGO (non-governmental organization; which can also be a religious community organization that is charitable,

⁷ Kovács and Barna, 23.

⁸ Kovács and Barna, 23.

educational, etc.). This practice can provide a measure for comparing the popularity and importance of the various communities. Before 2012, this list included five Jewish denominations: the Hungarian Jewish Association of Jewish Communities of Hungary (Mazsihisz), the Unified Israelite Community of Hungary (EMIH, the Hungarian Chabad), the Hungarian Autonomous Orthodox Israelite Congregation (MAOIH) and two small Reform communities: the Szim Salom Progressive Jewish Community and the Bet Orim Reform Jewish Community. However, the last two lost their official status in 2012 as a result of a change in the law, so they could not benefit from these 1% donations anymore.

Of all Jewish denominations, it is Mazsihisz that is supported through tax donations by the most people. The number of supporters of Mazsihisz in 2016 was slightly more than two-and-a-half times the number of that of EMIH, which is the second largest recipient of 1% tax donations. However, in recent years the gap between the two communities has gradually decreased. While between 2010 and 2014 Mazsihisz was the largest recipient with 80% of the donations, and EMIH stood with 17 to 18%, in 2015–2016 Mazsihisz received 70% and EMIH supporters donated almost 30%. During these years MAOIH has stagnated, with 3 to 4% of donors giving it their 1%.

Among the NGOs with a cultural or social profile linked to the different Jewish communities, those of Mazsihisz and EMIH have received the most donations. The two most important Jewish schools, the Lauder Javne and the Sándor Scheiber (linked to Mazsihisz), have also received an important percentage of the donations.

Jewish identity

What are the most important elements of Hungarian Jewish identity? Nearly a third of respondents say in the research mentioned that they are primarily European citizens. Twenty-nine percent consider themselves “both Hungarian and Jewish”, while the other mixed-identity option, “Hungarian of Jewish origin or religion”, was chosen by almost one-fifth of respondents (19%). Thus, the relative majority of the sample classified themselves in the dual-identity group.⁹ However, half of the respondents said they felt a stronger sense of belonging to Judaism in the last four to five years. A growing sense of identity was most pronounced among the youngest age group; i.e., 18- to 24-year-olds. Only one-fifth has a very strong connection to Judaism, which is the proportion

⁹ Kovács and Barna, 81.

of those who identify mostly as Jewish and not so much as Hungarian, while 6% identify mostly as Hungarian and not Jewish.

The past is still a central element of Jewish identity, whether it is the memory of the ancestors or that of the Jewish past, or the remembrance of the Holocaust. Equally important are the subjective sense of belonging to Judaism, and the interest in or familiarity with Jewish culture. In contrast, the least important elements are the choice of a Jewish spouse, the practice of the Jewish religion and participation in Jewish community life. “The assessment of each identity element has changed very little in the last twenty years, since overall it is still the historical memory and – certainly not unrelated to this – subjective identification, which are the main factors of Jewish identity.”¹⁰

In fact, according to a representative sample concerning European Jewry, in all Europe, Hungarian Jews are the ones who have the highest level of trust in European institutions.¹¹ For Hungarian Jews, Europe plays the role of shelter against the emergence of deadly nationalisms coupled with antisemitism. “The true religion of most Hungarian Jews is anti-fascism, anti-racism, minority rights, the admiration of Hungarian culture and Hungarian liberal traditions, the disgust with anti-Semitism and – overall – the memory of the Holocaust. These last two factors are the real bond between liberal assimilated Jews and the members of the Jewish religious establishment.”¹² The Holocaust is very significant in identity formation in general for the Jewish community as a whole; neither affiliation nor attachment to tradition decreases its importance,¹³ although younger generations do not think that it should constitute the core of their identity anymore.¹⁴

This finding is confirmed by the research of Kovács and Barna: Jewish respondents overwhelmingly “rejected authoritarianism, political conservatism, and xenophobia, even though these are widely supported by the population as a whole, even among university graduates, and even more so among the lower educated. The most striking differences were found in the rejection of otherness and minorities.”¹⁵ Jews seem to be by far the most tolerant group in the whole Hungarian society, expressing solidarity with the Hungarian Roma population, and also with refugees, whereas both groups are widely rejected by mainstream society.

¹⁰ Kovács and Barna, 82.

¹¹ Sergio Della Pergola and L. Daniel Staetsky, *Jews in Europe at the turn of the Millennium: Population Trends and Estimates*, JPR Demography Unit, 2020, p. 7.

¹² János Gádó, “A New Deal for Hungary’s Jews”, *K*, 28 April 2021, <https://k-larevue.com/en/a-new-deal-for-hungarys-jews/>.

¹³ Kovács and Barna, 97.

¹⁴ Kovács and Barna, 100.

¹⁵ Kovács and Barna, 159.

Antisemitism: attitudes in mainstream society

In 2021, comprehensive antisemitism research was conducted in sixteen European Union (EU) countries by András Kovács and György Fischer. The objective of the research was to establish the level of antisemitic prejudice in mainstream society by socio-psychological means, whereas it did not intend to inquire into either the potential use of antisemitic tropes in political rhetoric or the direct reasons behind antisemitic physical attacks in countries where this phenomenon is characteristic. “Using empirical social research tools, [the research sought] to explore the prevalence and intensity of anti-Jewish prejudices in European societies, this necessary but not sufficient precondition for the development of antisemitism as worldview and political ideology. [...] There is a broad consensus in the scientific literature on prejudice that there is no direct link between prejudice and the propensity for discrimination and violence against the prejudiced group.”¹⁶ The empirical findings have confirmed the theoretical consensus: although Hungary can be characterized by high numbers of people nourishing antisemitic prejudice, this fact does not translate into widespread physical atrocities. On the contrary: the number of aggressions is lower than in most countries of Western Europe, where antisemitic attitudes are much less frequent. In many countries with high levels of antisemitic prejudice, such as Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, there are negligible numbers of violent incidents. By contrast, many antisemitic atrocities – assault, harassment and vandalism – occur in countries with low levels of antisemitic prejudice, such as France, the UK and Germany. (This finding has been heavily instrumentalized by the Hungarian government; see below). This proves that there is essentially no correlation between the number of serious violent incidents and the level of antisemitic prejudice.

According to the results, nearly half of the Hungarian population (42%) harbors strong or moderate prejudices against Jews. Twenty-four percent of the Hungarian population proved to be strongly antisemitic (regarding primary antisemitism), while 18% were moderately antisemitic. Compared with previous studies, the current survey does not show any major changes. However, this time the researchers also measured latent prejudice, which is expressed, for example, in opinions such as “Israel’s policies make me dislike Jews “more and more” or “Jews are trying to take advantage of their wartime persecution, of the Holocaust.” The latter statement was endorsed by 39% of respondents in Hungary. All in all, secondary – that is, latent – antisemitism conveyed

¹⁶ András Kovács and György Fischer, *Antisemitic Prejudices in Europe: Survey in 16 European Countries*, Vol. 1, Action and Protection League, 2021, 5–6.

through Holocaust relativization or denial gives an even higher number than primary antisemitism: around 63% of respondents.¹⁷ “If primary antisemites and latent antisemites are added together, Hungary has the 3rd highest rate of antisemitism (59%) among the 16 countries surveyed”¹⁸ (since there are 17% who are not primary but only secondary antisemites). This is the same rank as for primary antisemitism. Concerning antisemitism mediated through opinions on Israel, Hungary scores somewhere in the middle among the sixteen countries.

“In Hungary, antisemitism is most strongly defined by xenophobia and populism. Those who voiced non-Jewish-specific general xenophobia were 14.2 times more likely to be antisemitic than those who were not characterised by xenophobia.”¹⁹ This result is confirmed by the political affiliation of antisemites: “In Austria, Germany, Hungary and Poland, those who put themselves on the political right were 2 to 3 times more likely to be primary antisemites than those who put themselves on the left. In Slovakia, on the other hand, the left was roughly twice as likely to be antisemitic.”²⁰ Therefore it seems that more than the divide between left and right, populism is more predictive of antisemitic attitudes, regardless of where populist parties position themselves in a given country. In those countries where it is traditionally the left that is populist, like in Slovakia, the tendency is reversed: left-wing voters are more antisemitic (and to a much lesser degree this is also the case in the Czech Republic, the UK and Spain).

Governmental politics and populist rhetoric: destroying democracy

It is important to give a brief overview of the political situation in Hungary, because it touches upon questions of antisemitism, and generally speaking the situation of Hungarian Jewry. Hungary has become the most extreme example of European populism, where the populist party has been in fact ruling the country with a super-majority for the last twelve years. This dominance has been confirmed in the latest elections (March 2022), which even reinforced Viktor Orbán’s parliamentary majority, while a new neo-Nazi formation (Mi Hazánk, Our Homeland) acceded to parliament as a potential ally (Jobbik, the ex-neo-Nazi party, has transformed itself into a sort of moderate right-wing party, and is now allied with the opposition).

¹⁷ Kovács and Fischer, *Antisemitic Prejudices in Europe: Survey in 16 European Countries*, Vol. 2, Action and Protection League, 2021, 76.

¹⁸ Kovács and Fischer, *Antisemitic Prejudices in Europe*, Vol. 2, 78.

¹⁹ Kovács and Fischer, *Antisemitic Prejudices in Europe*, Vol. 2, 83.

²⁰ Kovács and Fischer, *Antisemitic Prejudices in Europe*, Vol. 1, 83.

Starting in 2010, the Fidesz party introduced a sort of “hybrid regime” between democracy and dictatorship, which is also sometimes called “managed democracy”. This system is coupled with the kleptocratic rule of oligarchs loyal to the government. It closely follows the Russian model, without resorting to physical violence and direct oppression (since it does not need to do so for the preservation of its power).

Prior to the 2010 parliamentary elections, Orbán, then leader of the opposition, had already called for the “creation of a central, unitary political force field”. This repeatedly expressed desire became reality when Orbán’s Fidesz won two-thirds of the seats in parliament in the election. During his first three years in power, he succeeded in completely dismantling the democratic system of checks and balances: the country has been ruled ever since entirely by Orbán’s monolithic party. Indeed, the creation of a “managed” democracy or semi-dictatorship was achieved around 2013:²¹ the laws that restrict democratic freedoms or flout the principle of equality are so numerous that it would be futile to list them all.

It is not only the control of the executive (i.e., Orbán himself) over absolutely all state institutions that characterizes this regime (and the related practice of marginalizing civil organizations), but also the fact that it does everything in its power to solidify its cultural anchorage and legitimization by very violent means. Indeed, it is conducting a fierce *Kulturkampf*, which is not limited to the goal of taking over cultural institutions, universities and the media, but also to reshaping them in depth.

It is worth noting that one of the government’s first actions in 2010 was its takeover of the public media (provoking the first mass demonstrations): the government’s media empire is now dominant in the audio-visual sector. After getting rid of the highly popular and most significant left-wing daily newspaper, *Népszabadság*, in 2016 (bought by a government-friendly company with the sole objective of closing it down), it finally successfully banished (through bureaucratic means) the only oppositional radio station, Klubrádió, that was still around. Klubrádió could broadcast until 2020 (even if in a very limited range), but now it can only function on the internet. If it were not for the internet, to which a large part of the population does not have access or which is not used by them for political news and information, there would be practically only information directly controlled by the government and the Fidesz party. It is literally true that oppositional voices can never be heard in public broadcast; the opposition only appears depicted in a negative light or even as the object of smear campaigns.

²¹ See, for example, Balázs Berkovits, “La Hongrie, un Etat autoritaire en Europe”, *Esprit*, Dec. 2014, No. 410.

Implicitly or explicitly racist and/or hate-mongering discourse are commonplace in this rather homogeneous pro-government right-wing press (although in recent years explicit antisemitism was deliberately taken off the agenda), which could be described as extreme right-wing without any qualms, and of which public broadcasters – that is, state-owned TV channels and radio stations – now form an organic part. In these news media, facts bothering the virtual reality of government or critical opinions simply cannot appear (this is clearly shown, for example, by the way they interpret the war in Ukraine, by tacitly adopting Russian propaganda points). However, their role is not simply silencing and restricting information, but also attacking political adversaries of the ruling party by denigrating them, and by stirring up animosity and hate against various groups, which is the single most important tool of this authoritarian populist governance.

Libel and hate are directed against variegated targets on a daily basis: the political opposition, “multinationals”, “big capital”, students who protest and occupy their faculty, NGOs, the unemployed, sexual minorities, the Roma and, since 2015, refugees, these latter still being their main, although only rhetorical, target (since there were almost none who wanted to remain in the country on a permanent basis, until the arrival of the Ukrainians, who are supposed to receive much better treatment). This press never fails to refer to “foreign interests”, “the concerted attack on Hungarians”, “malicious speculators”, “international conspiracy”, etc., to provide an explanation for the government’s obvious economic failures and to counter critics who protest against the democratic deficit. Indeed, this totalitarian language uses figures familiar from antisemitic discourse, without naming the Jews.

“We will not be a colony” – this is how the prime minister initiated his first campaign against the EU, which he systematically compared to the Soviet Union of yesteryear. Criticism from Brussels about anti-democratic measures is presented as foreign interference in “the lives of Hungarians”, as an aggression against the country. Also, these criticisms are equated with the supposedly negative influence of “predatory international capital”, financial or otherwise, which “exploits” the country. The campaign against European political bodies and foreign capital (to which, by the way, the Hungarian government is totally subservient in practice) is paralleled by the recurring smear campaign against “domestic enemies”, especially NGOs, which are presented as agents of foreign interests. As with all populist politics, the enemies have to be changed from time to time. The refugee crisis of 2015 provided a great opportunity for Orbán to designate new enemies and present himself as the great protector of European civilization against the barbarous hordes of Muslim masses. “Brussels, the European Union, the IMF, immigrants, foreign banks and speculators such as George Soros have been called the enemies of Hungary, and an increasingly

belligerent tone has also characterized attitudes towards domestic opponents.”²² Indeed, this rhetoric can be deemed successful from the perspective of power politics, since it has had a chilling effect on free speech, while certainly preventing new political actors and personalities from emerging. “If a regime manages to frame its critics as ‘enemies’ and ‘foreign agents’, while at the same time citizens worry about showing their discontent, an environment may be successfully created where critical actors are stripped of the resources needed to mobilize against it.”²³

Jews in the rhetoric of the government

The Hungarian right has certainly been traditionally nationalistic with undertones of antisemitism. This is a historical-cultural package it has inherited from the irredentist and antisemitic regime between the two world wars. This nationalistic disposition is reflected in its memory politics, based on one-hundred-year-old “Trianon grievance” perpetuated even in our epoch by many commemorative practices; the biased rewriting of school curricula entrusted to Mihály Takaró, a well-known antisemite,²⁴ with the task of making it more “patriotic”, among other things, by the inclusion of highly controversial literary figures; the questionable historical interpretations relative to the pre-World War II years spread in the media and taught in schools, along with the build-up of an institutional research framework representing a radical right-wing view of history; and, last but not least, the anti-Soros campaign (see more about these in the section on memory politics).

However, regarding antisemitism, there is a twist with Orbán. Lately, for the last three to four years, explicit antisemitic rhetoric has been banned from right-wing newspapers. Rumors have it that it is an explicit order from Orbán (which is probably true, since a categorical ban could not be ensured otherwise). Now even journalists who have been known to be notoriously antisemitic, like Zsolt Bayer,²⁵ the veteran Fidesz ally, the proud owner of the No. 5 Fidesz membership card, have abandoned this style of writing. “In the context as a whole, they are very careful not to lose

²² Akos Kopper et al., “Creating Suspicion and Vigilance: Using Enemy Images to Hinder Mobilization”, *Intersections, East European Journal of Society and Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2017, 109.

²³ Akos Kopper et al., 110.

²⁴ “Az antiszemita, horthysta Takaró Mihály hazafias nemzeti alaptantervet ír”, <https://www.szombat.org/hirek-lapszemle/antiszemita-horthysta-takaro-mihaly-hazafias-nemzeti-alaptantervet-ir>, “Takaró Mihály: _Itt az ideje, hogy kiegészüljön a mi kulturális kódunk”, <https://neokohn.hu/2020/02/05/takaro-mihaly-itt-az-ideje-hogy-kiegeszuljon-a-mi-kulturalis-kodunk/>

²⁵ <https://444.hu/2022/05/25/bayer-zsolt-aljas-antiszemita-kijelentesirol-ir-az-egyik-legreggebbi-amerikai-zsido-szervezet>

the elements of the radical right ideological palette – but without uttering the word ‘Jew’, one of its important components.”²⁶

In fact, Orbán has the predilection of representing himself as the great friend and protector of Jews. This representation relies basically on three pillars, which are not only rhetorical. First, he finances a lot of Jewish communal projects (restoring synagogues, organizing exhibitions, etc.), for which he can use a lot of money coming from the EU. Second, he shows off his newly found friendship with the Israeli government (which could work well during the Netanyahu governments, whereas in the Bennett government many coalition partners expressly repudiate Orbán, like Yair Lapid, who has Hungarian origins), while Hungary is usually supporting Israel in every international forum, also in opposition to most EU countries. Third, Orbán is regularly boasting about the security the Jewish community is able to enjoy in Hungary, in comparison with some Western European countries, where wearing ostensible signs of Judaism can bear risks, as verbal and physical atrocities are now routine, and where recent terror attacks have expressly targeted the Jewish community or Jewish individuals. Emphasizing the safety of the Hungarian Jewish community gains special importance in light of the fact that the anti-refugee theme has been the single most important element in Orbán’s political rhetoric since 2015. It is also notable that East European right-wing parties remained mainly hostile to Jews even after the regime changes in 1989–1990, whereas Orbán seems to be the first who seemingly espouses the Jewish community and even Jewish causes, and sometimes even in a very emphatic manner. Of course, we could suspect that this is not due to a selfless and true enthusiasm; it seems more likely that it fits into his political agenda, all the more so given that antisemitism has also not been absent from his political toolbox.²⁷

The extremely cruel management of the 2015 refugee crisis (breaching international and EU law) was interpreted as something that also happened in order to favor Jewish existence in Hungary. And at each and every occasion Orbán is boasting about the fact that there are practically no physical attacks against Jews, which he attributes to there being practically no (Muslim) refugees in Hungary. Hungarian policy towards refugees was never very generous, but the Orbán government has introduced much harsher policies and treatment. Refugees were never actually let

²⁶ Attila Novák, “Megkomponált győzelem, alkalmazkodó társadalom”, *Szombat*, 6 April 2022, <https://szombat.org/politika/megkomponalt-gyozelem-alkalmazkodo-tarsadalom?fbclid=IwAR3JjRjC25gaEjZHvTZi4Sc1tm2fwiVSNHJy4ALp279J4aU688ALoMYUdkY>.

²⁷ See the following section on “the anti-Soros campaign”, and also the one on “Politics of memory”; see also for example: Ira Forman, “Viktor Orbán's antisemitism and those who enable it – opinion”, *Jerusalem Post*, July 20, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-712649>

into the country, or if they were, they were incited to leave on short notice. (The infrastructure of abandoned refugee camps has been degrading ever since, which of course makes it harder to offer shelter for Ukrainians fleeing their country – about whom Orbán seems to talk much differently than previous waves of refugees; however, he does very little to help them, contrary to the decried NGOs).

The treatment of refugees from 2015 on was exceptionally harsh, and also illegal (therefore, now there are very few who try to cross into the country), which was denounced many times by the EU. The fence which was built on the border with Serbia was intended to become a highly important symbol of Hungary “protecting the imperiled European Christian civilization”, the defense of which the “decadent” West has renounced, as is regularly emphasized by Orbán. Now, this time around (and this is a real novelty of Hungarian right-wing rhetoric) Jews are equally comprised in the “European civilization” to be protected, at least when they are instrumental for populist political purposes, the main element of which is anti-refugee discourse.

The anti-Soros campaign

However, this rhetoric, while emphasizing the importance of caring for Hungarian Jews, singles out one particular individual, none other than George Soros, the American billionaire of Hungarian Jewish origin. Soros is depicted as the promoter of mass immigration, intent on changing the face of Europe. He is the one who strives to dismantle and emasculate Europe – “as we know it”, that is, imagined as white and Christian. This is the theory of the “great substitution”, which we also know from elsewhere, from the extreme right of the blogosphere in Western Europe, from the alt-right in the US (the Charlottesville demonstrators chanting “Jews will not replace us”) and from the French extreme right (represented especially by Éric Zemmour in the French presidential campaign, but without the antisemitic connotation). However, it is highly unusual that it is being promoted by an actual government.

In the narrative of the Hungarian government, the person implementing “the great replacement” is a billionaire Jew, who is tacitly attributed with all the stereotypical traits of the “cosmopolitan, rootless Jew”, all too familiar in European antisemitic discourse from the last 150 years; at the same time all explicit references to the Jewish origins of Soros have been erased. Characteristic of this tendency of operating with conspiracy theories while effacing the Jewish reference is a speech of Orbán on 15 March 2018, a couple of days before the previous general elections. In his speech he stated the following: “We have to fight an enemy that is different from

us. Not open but hiding; not straightforward but crafty; not honest but base; not national but international; does not believe in working but speculates with money; does not have its own homeland but feels it owns the whole world. It is not generous but vengeful and it attacks the heart, especially when the heart is red, white and green.”²⁸

It is not difficult to grasp from this depiction the image of the all-too-familiar figure of the “international Jew” lurking in the background, manipulating the honest and patriotic nation-states for his private interests, while intentionally harming it. However, Orbán declared several times that the government has a policy of zero tolerance towards antisemitism. George Birnbaum, one of the masterminds of the anti-Soros campaign and an American Jew (usually working for US Republicans) recently “explained” it in an interview:²⁹ “When we planned the campaign, we never thought for a second about Soros being a Jew.” The same is echoed by the spokesperson of the Hungarian government. And although this assertion can be deemed utterly cynical, it is also true that there is constant debate whether the anti-Soros campaign can be said to be antisemitic, or if it is just aggressive and unjust, and whether Orbán himself is antisemitic or not, and so on. However, it would be much more important to note that Orbán’s interpretation of Soros’ actions creates a discursive trap, an interpretative double-bind for the Hungarian Jewish community, which proves to be extremely difficult to sort out. This double-bind is constituted by the declarative philosemitism of the prime minister combined with the tacit or not-so-tacit antisemitism of the anti-Soros campaign. It is on this double-bind that the rivalry between the two most important Jewish communities, Mazsihisz and EMIH, has been forged with the help of the government (see more below).

Soros as the actor of the “great replacement” theory – that is, the symbol of the “Jew” promoting the replacement of the “white” European ethnic stock with Muslims from the Middle East and Black Africans – comes in handy for Hungarian government propaganda. In Orbán’s discourse Hungary is imagined as an ethnically homogenous country, which is to be preserved as such (while Hungarians are already “constrained” to live with a large Roma population for hundreds of years, as he once said); while he never misses the chance to take a firm stance against what he terms “multiculturalism”.³⁰ Therefore, Soros was already designated as a target as a

²⁸ Shaun Walker, “Hungarian Leader Says Europe Is Now ‘under Invasion’ by Migrants”, *Guardian*, 15 March 2018, www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/15/hungarian-leader-says-europe-is-now-under-invasion-by-migrants.

²⁹ Hannes Grassegger, “Der böse Jude”, *Das Magazin*, 14 January 2019, www.tagesanzeiger.ch/ausland/der-boese-jude/story/20981022.

³⁰ In 2014 he claimed: “In the past four years, we performed better because we were united. We are today the most homogenous country in Europe.” <https://2010-2014.kormany.hu/hu/miniszterelnokseg/miniszterelnok/beszedekek-publikaciok-interjuk/orban-viktor-unnepi-beszede>

consequence of his philanthropic activities, supporting NGOs defending minorities and promoting liberal democracy – all those values and practices against which the Orbán government has defined itself from the beginning (and even without Soros and before the refugee crisis of 2015).

Soros is also instrumental for this propaganda as a critic of the Israeli government with even anti-Zionist inclinations. Criticizing a critic of the Jewish state (often presented as its enemy) cannot be antisemitic, since usually those are these critics who can be accused of antisemitism. This line of tacit argument was in fact endorsed by the Netanyahu government, namely that Jewish Israel critics are not really Jews, or only self-negating ones, and therefore attacking them cannot be antisemitic by definition. Netanyahu even sent Orthodox rabbis to Budapest to explain that the Hungarian anti-Soros campaign is indeed not antisemitic. (And it is in fact true that many anti-Zionists are antisemitic, or that they are susceptible to formulating an unfounded criticism of the Jewish state). Netanyahu endorsed Orbán's propaganda, since he also considered Soros an enemy: for his short-term political interests Netanyahu was ready to absolve an extreme right-wing Hungarian government of antisemitism. He thereby failed to distinguish between fighting a political adversary and the wholly independent issue of antisemitic propaganda targeting the same person. An additional reason for siding with the Hungarian government in this issue was probably his intention to ensure the support of Hungary in the EU and the United Nations, in order to counterbalance Israel's unilateral singling out for criticism in these international forums. Orbán, during one of his visits to Israel, praised the Israeli government as strongly "patriotic" – which would imply that they have common ground and agree on many things. (This qualification, beyond its comic overtones in the mouth of a Hungarian prime minister, would merit a political analysis in itself). But as János Gadó has put it, the cooperation between the two may be explained by pragmatic rather than ideological reasons: "Orbán needs the 'kosher stamp' for his policy, while Netanyahu needs political allies in the rather unfriendly EU. Strong nationalism and suspicion toward the EU is a robust bond between the two. However, the history and political traditions of the two nations are extremely different."³¹

As a result of the Israeli government's position in this affair, the Hungarian diaspora felt somewhat abandoned in its fight against antisemitism being promoted on the state level. In fact, there have been fierce debates in Hungary on social media between those who felt that the Israeli position is totally justified, both for pragmatic reasons concerning international politics and for the reason that Soros sides with Israel's enemies, and those who thought that it is utterly disappointing and unacceptable. These latter people voiced the opinion that Hungarian Jews were sacrificed by

³¹ Gadó.

the Israeli government for a short-sighted and morally dubious political deal. Later on, it turned out that Netanyahu even gave the Hungarian government access to Pegasus software, which was used for spying on political adversaries and journalists. This would further confirm the pragmatic nature of the collaboration between the two governments.

The anti-Soros campaign was conducted in the press and also on giant billboards all around the country, representing Soros with stereotypical Jewish traits, with the inscription “Don’t let him have the last laugh.” However, and maybe most importantly, the campaign was also promoted through the so-called “national consultations”. These are key to the extreme populist politics of the Orbán government, and were implemented shortly after Orbán retook power in 2010. From time to time, “survey questions” are sent out to the entire population, concentrating on some issues considered highly important in governmental rhetoric. These issues are always related to topics of identity (religious, national or sexual), sovereignty (preserving the country’s independence by countering “Brussels”), or security (relative to the presence of illegal aliens).³² These are the “hot” topics that the government has intended to “discuss” with the people.

In 2015 the “national consultation” on refugees started, which was instrumental for governmental politics, insofar as it engaged with the three most important topics mentioned. It has to be noted that these “surveys” use suggestive pseudo-questions that strive to inculcate fear by implying frightening possibilities, while evoking negative prejudices in people, in this case those linked to xenophobia. In 2013, government propaganda had targeted NGOs, decried for being financed by “foreign entities”, and especially George Soros. Soros has been the greatest benefactor of civil society in Hungary since the 1980s, and also in other post-socialist and post-Soviet countries after the regime changes in the region. (In fact, all oppositional and social movements were slandered under the pretext that they were supported by “foreign money”, including those that were financed by the Norway Grants Scheme). From 2015, these NGOs, along with Soros, have been the number one enemy of the government, since, on top of all previous sins, they were accused of causing the greatest harm of all: promoting emigration from the Middle East.

So how do Hungarian Jews react to these developments? As we saw, it can be said that Hungarian Jewish identity, at least concerning its secular and more assimilated part, is mostly a political identity, beyond the elements of identity attached to the historical memory of antisemitism and the Shoah. It is often expressed in a certain political and moral stance: being pro-democracy, tolerant, liberal, favoring and helping other minorities, and being extremely sensitive to

³² Domonkos Sik: “Populist Juggling with Fear – The Case of Hungary”, University of Eötvös Loránd, Department of Social Theory (manuscript).

antisemitism. Therefore, Hungarian liberal Jewry naturally opposes Orbán's populist politics as a whole, and especially when it comes to potentially antisemitic propaganda. As the president of Mazsihisz, András Heisler, wrote in an open letter to Orbán concerning the anti-Soros campaign: "This campaign is not overtly anti-Semitic, but it is still very capable of stirring up uncontrolled anti-Semitic passions, among others", while in fact "the past few days have shown that our fears were not unfounded". In the streets of Budapest and some other big cities, the anti-Soros posters were decorated with antisemitic texts, which thereby became "reminiscent of dark periods in Hungary's history", while, added Heisler, "the invisible social damage is probably even more serious"³³. Orbán's response was utterly cynical. On the one hand he reiterated the core message of the anti-Soros campaign: with illegal migration "we are importing a culture of intolerance and growing anti-Semitism into Europe". On the other, he emphasized that "it is my responsibility to protect our country and the citizens of Hungary"; therefore, "against those who threaten the security of Hungary, we will use the political and legal power of the Hungarian state, regardless of origin, religion or wealth".³⁴ In other words, Orbán claimed that while protecting the nation, he cannot make an "exception" for Soros just because he is Jewish. However, as was mentioned before, a minority of Hungarian Jews were susceptible to accepting Orbán's arguments against Soros, also in light of the relationship between Soros and Israel, and in connection with the stance of the EMIH-Chabad community.

Rivalry between the two biggest Jewish communities: Mazsihisz and EMIH

The relationship of the Orbán regime to Hungarian Jews can be summarized as a tacit offer. "The main provisions are such: find a mutually acceptable interpretation of the Holocaust in Hungary; find the common elements of Hungarian and Israeli nationalism for the sake of mutual political benefit; increase the religious character of the Hungarian Jews and decrease the political character of the Jewish issue in order to minimize the significance of those universalistic 'subversive' Soros-

³³ "Nyílt levélben kéri a kormányt a Mazsihisz elnöke: szedjék le a Soros-plakátokat, *hvg.hu*, 6 July 2017, https://hvg.hu/itthon/20170706_nyilt_level_mazsihisz_soros_kampany.

³⁴ András Király, "Pont a zsidóktól inkább egy kis segítségre számított volna Orbán", *444.hu*, 7 July 2017, <https://444.hu/2017/07/07/pont-a-zsidoktol-inkabb-egy-kis-segitsegre-szamitott-volna-Orban>.

like elements among the Jews.”³⁵ Orbán expects loyalty from Hungarian Jews, and in exchange he has been willing to offer financial support, and the toning down of right-wing antisemitic rhetoric.

The government has attempted to build up a somewhat alternative Jewish infrastructure to the already existing one that would legitimize its political goals, and endorse it as non-antisemitic. This role has been given to EMIH, which has also become the main challenger to Mazsihisz and Neolog Jewry as a whole. In fact, EMIH maintains a close alliance with the ruling party, embracing its declared conservatism, and together with its satellite organizations helps to promote the government’s relations with Israel and the US.³⁶ Slomó Köves, the leader of EMIH, “promises the government (though not overtly) no less than to help it to deal with all Jewish related problems – like accusations of anti-Semitism and the never-ending story of Holocaust memory. In exchange, Köves gets all necessary assistance to build up his network, necessary to spread his version of Judaism.”³⁷

Mazsihisz was also ready for a certain compromise after its boycott of the Holocaust memorial year in 2014, which saw its relationship to the government at its lowest. There were essentially three reasons for the boycott:³⁸ the planned “Memorial of the German Occupation” that was designed to symbolically absolve the Hungarian leadership of the deportation of Hungarian Jewry during the Holocaust; the “House of Fates”, a Holocaust memorial planned by the government, also under construction, and presumably concentrating on the individual fates of Jewish children under the Holocaust, but the conception of which was not made public; and the scandal of the Veritas Institute, a historical research institute in the service of the government narrative, the director of which, Sándor Szakály, declared that the deportations of Jews of foreign citizenship from Hungary to Nazi-occupied Ukraine in 1941 was merely a “law enforcement procedure”.³⁹

Later on, the Mazsihisz leadership proved to be more conciliatory; however, without budging on the question of Hungarian responsibility in the Holocaust – this would never have been accepted by the vast majority of Hungarian Jews. They could simply never endorse the narrative of the Hungarian government in this regard. Still, Mazsihisz could appreciate the fact that antisemitic physical violence is in fact absent from the streets of Hungary. Therefore, after 2014 it went ahead and accepted generous funding from the government, earmarked not only for the

³⁵ Gadó.

³⁶ Novák.

³⁷ Gadó.

³⁸ “Mazsihisz bojkott a Holokauszt emlékévkapcsán”, 9 February 2014, www.atv.hu/belfold/20140209/a-mazsihisz-bojkottalja-a-holokauszt-emlekevet.

³⁹ https://index.hu/belfold/2014/01/17/idegenrendeszeti_problema_a_zsidok_deportalasa/

reconstruction of synagogues, but also for cultural events and the Jewish press. It also created an exhibition entitled “House of Coexistence”, which was supposed to represent the “golden age of Hungarian Jewry”, concentrating especially on the second half the 19th century, and therefore somewhat removed from the debates concerning antisemitism and the Hungarian Holocaust.

Nevertheless, the intention on the part of the government to change the attitude of Mazsihisz persists. In turn, this has been further nourishing the animosity between Mazsihisz and EMIH. EMIH and its pro-government media outlets under the control of Slomó Köves are often instrumental in attacking the Neolog community leadership and its oppositional sympathies. Important in this regard is the recently founded (2019) journal *Neokohn*, which is owned by a company linked to EMIH. *Neokohn* often attacked not only Mazsihisz, but also another journal, *Szombat*, which is supposed to be closer to Mazsihisz (although it is not closely linked to it, receiving about only 10% of its annual budget from Mazsihisz). *Szombat* is much older – it was founded in 1989 – and has a liberal and pro-Israel orientation. “When starting the magazine, the editors decided to deal with all facets of Jewish life, presenting all trends of Jewry to the Hungarian Jewish community that had lived in isolation, being separated from the main centers of Jewish life.”⁴⁰

Neokohn has a staunch pro-Israel stance (and prides itself on being very well informed on Middle Eastern issues), while for internal affairs it has been promoting more and more the position of the government (so much so that the founder editor-in-chief, László Seres, resigned in 2020, as he did not want to associate himself with this, while apparently not enjoying the desired autonomy in his position).

A smear campaign was even organized against Heisler in a different outlet (probably with the intention of bringing him down) on an anonymous blog called Smúzoló (Schmoozing), and strongly supported by the government and EMIH. “Smúzoló smeared and slandered Heisler and his loyalists in the most offensive and earthly manner. Its anonymous and unproven accusations were picked up by the government press and the Chabad/EMIH media.”⁴¹ But in fact, Mazsihisz is closer to the cultural outlook, values and historical understanding of Hungarian Jewry: it cannot be re-profiled as politically conservative and religiously Orthodox, since the Neolog tradition has deep roots in the country, historically constituting the majority.

Fidesz and antisemitism

⁴⁰ www.szombat.org/about.

⁴¹ János Gadó, “Hungary: The Price of Tranquility”, *K*, 31 March 2022, <https://k-larevue.com/en/hungary-the-price-of-tranquility/>.

The ban on antisemitic speech in Fidesz is fairly recent, while previously it was not censored and was widely practiced in the government press, especially in an implicit form (with some exceptions when it was very explicit). However, the ambiguity in this regard is still maintained, and the discourse changes according to the audience addressed. Parts of Fidesz are eagerly participating in the hero worship of former far-right leader Miklós Horthy, even though he was among those responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust. Meanwhile, Hungary's national school curriculum recommends a number of pre-World War II antisemitic authors for readings, like József Nyirő or Albert Wass. This is the reason why in 2012 Elie Wiesel returned an award received from the Hungarian government in 2004. He found that, as he wrote to Speaker László Kövér, "in Hungary, public squares are named after Miklós Horthy, Albert Wass, while other public figures who collaborated with the fascist government during the World War II are rehabilitated, and authors who promote far-right ideas are brought into the curriculum"⁴². He was furthermore angered by the fact that Kövér himself had participated in a ceremony honoring Nyirő, who was a loyal member of Hungary's World War II Arrow Cross parliament, an act he suggested reflected the authorities' willingness to gloss over the country's dark past. Reuven Rivlin, then speaker of the Knesset, wrote to Kövér that due to his participation in the reburial of Nyirő, he was not welcome in Israel.⁴³

Neither Orbán nor his party have distanced themselves from his friend and Fidesz co-founder Zsolt Bayer, a far-right journalist who has penned antisemitic, anti-Roma articles⁴⁴ and who plays a central role in rallying far-right voters. For the 15 March celebrations (the Hungarian national holiday), the government always awards state honors to a number of people (artists, scientists, etc.) known for their loyalty to the government (since loyalty is now also a key factor in matters of culture and art). Some of these are known for their far-right extremist tendencies, including János Petrás, the singer of the far-right rock group Kárpátia,⁴⁵ or Mihály Takaró, the above-mentioned antisemitic literary historian⁴⁶, or the extreme right-wing journalist Tibor Franka,

⁴² <http://magyarnarancs.hu/belpol/ctie-wiesel-levele-kover-laszlonak-80538>.

⁴³ Gil Ronen, "Rivlin Disinvites Hungarian Counterpart", *Israel National News*, 24 June 2012, www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/157179#.T-IRS7VOjXU.

⁴⁴ See footnote 25 above

⁴⁵ https://hvg.hu/velemeney.nyuzsog/20130322_Csak_kihal_ez_a_faj_kituntetes

⁴⁶ See footnote 24 above

who in his book praised Holocaust denial.⁴⁷ Enumerating these kinds of persons receiving medals from the state could continue – the list is long.

As is well expressed by the historian Krisztián Ungváry, “The party speaks with two tongues. On the one hand, one distances oneself from right-wing extremism in order to maintain a good reputation abroad and because one notes that the political damage would be too severe. On the other hand, Fidesz pays tribute to anti-Semitic writers of the interwar period ... or expresses right-wing extremist positions in regime-friendly newspapers because it wants to attract voters on the right.”⁴⁸

Politics of memory

For this right-wing government, and generally for the Hungarian right, it is of utmost importance to see the Holocaust as part of a narrative in which the question of the responsibility of the Hungarian administration and that of the Hungarian people is not clearly posed. This is the reason why hugely distorted narratives are still in vogue, represented by both memorials and museums, and also school curricula. There are many historians, employed in some “research institutes” founded by the government, who are ready to provide the desired narrative (and not only with respect to the 20th century, but concerning other periods as well of the “glorious one thousand years of Hungarian history”, perceived as a continuity). In Hungary, the epoch of “wrestling with the past” has not arrived yet, but it is also true that genuine historical scholarship on the Holocaust has not been banned, contrary, for example, to Poland, and there is highly developed academic research about it. “Historians in Hungary are free to research and write about the period, even though the Hungarian government has also created its own network of research institutes, the ‘Veritas Institute’ being one of those.”⁴⁹ Small wonder that the results of genuine scholarship do not always reach the wider public living in an artificially maintained and delimited educational and media bubble; therefore, the government narrative can live on unabated.

Concerning official statements of the government, the image is slightly different. Admitting a certain degree of Hungarian responsibility, without emphasizing it, is acceptable. For example,

⁴⁷ “Holokauszt-tagadásban is utazott a Tánicsics Mihály díjjal kitüntetett szerző”, *Szombat*, 18 March 2022,

<https://szombat.org/hirek-lapszemle/holokauszt-tagadasban-is-utazott-a-tancsics-mihaly-dijjal-kituntetett-szerzo>.

⁴⁸ Keno Verseck, “Hungarian Leader Adopts Policies of Far Right”, *Spiegel International*, 30 January 2013, www.spiegel.de/international/europe/ruling-hungarian-fidesz-party-adopts-policies-of-far-right-jobbik-party-a-880590.html.

⁴⁹ Gadó, “Hungary: The Price of Tranquility”.

here is the declaration of Gergely Gulyás, minister of the Prime Minister's Office, on the occasion of International Holocaust Memorial Day in 2019: "The Hungarian state bears responsibility for not protecting its citizens during the Holocaust; there is no collective guilt, but there is state responsibility."⁵⁰ As was said before, the government is nourishing ambiguity concerning the question of responsibility. Its desired solution for Holocaust remembrance is the following: "Hungarians recognize—mostly for the international and the Jewish public—the immensity and uniqueness of the Holocaust; in exchange, the Jews stop accusing Hungarians of Nazi collaboration concerning the crimes committed during this time."⁵¹

It is in this light that we shall enumerate the different instances of governmental memory politics, the government-sponsored venues for memorialization, followed by those memorials and museums which are not part of it. Beyond the political intention of wanting to preserve the "innocence" of the Hungarian nation, there is a symbolic heritage which equally points to this direction. It is characteristic of Hungarian national memory that it subordinates everything that has happened to the Hungarian nation, real or imagined, in the last hundred years under the trauma of Trianon (the division of Greater Hungary). Those historical events which are unsuitable for this subsummation, those for which one should take responsibility, are either removed from the national trauma circle and silenced, or, in turn, reinterpreted. "Everything becomes Trianon, in the form of a Trianon sticker: a two-dimensional, self-adhesive label without depth, which can be applied to everything."⁵² It is the "Trianon sticker" which offers a collective absolution, a kind of right to a general amnesty that not only absolves the personal sins of the country's historical condition and its self-deceptive nationalisms, along with the sins of the state, but which also abets forgetting, and incites the rewriting of modern Hungarian history as a whole from this perspective. The Trianon sticker serves to erase the real trauma of Trianon and to erase another real and no less profoundly national trauma, the trauma of the Holocaust.

Therefore, the Holocaust and Trianon appear as rival traumas. Currently, the construction of the Trianon trauma occupies a hegemonic position in Hungarian social memory; the Holocaust

⁵⁰ Pál Dániel Rényi, "Gulyás Gergely: A magyar államot felelősség terheli, amiért nem védte meg állampolgárait a holokauszt idején" [The Hungarian State bears responsibility for not protecting its citizens during the Holocaust], 444.hu, 27 January 2019, <https://444.hu/2019/01/27/gulyas-gergely-a-magyar-allamot-felelosseg-terheli-amiert-nem-vedte-meg-allampolgarait-a-holokauszt-idejen>.

⁵¹ János Gadó, "The Changing Faces of European Antisemitism – the Hungarian Case: Attitudes toward Jews in Viktor Orbán's Semiauthoritarian Regime", Alvin Rosenfeld (ed.), *Contending with Antisemitism in a Rapidly Changing Political Climate*, Indiana University Press, 2021, 259.

⁵² Sándor Radnóti, "A Trianon-matrica", *Szombat*, 7 July, 2015, www.szombat.org/politika/a-trianon-matrica.

cannot compete it.⁵³ In turn, the Trianon trauma is equally responsible for the solidity of a symbolic link between communism and Jews.

The House of Terror

The House of Terror, which cost the equivalent of nearly twenty million dollars at the time, opened its doors in February 2002. The building itself, Andrásy Street 60, had been used by both the communist regime and the preceding Nazi Arrow Cross regime for jailing and torturing their enemies. Therefore, it seemed appropriate to establish there a memorial/museum of totalitarian terrorist regimes. However, the museum has rather had the mission of promoting the particular vision of Hungarian history of the first Orbán government (1998–2002) as an instance of memory politics, and perhaps as the zenith of governmental actions in this domain after four years of governance, during which nationalist symbolism became omnipresent.

Its opening was destined to be an important event for the start of the electoral campaign, as elections were held in April 2002 that Orbán eventually lost, after which he spent eight years in opposition. The exhibition follows a precise framework, which is delimited by two temporal events, symbolized by the first and last rooms: the first is called “Double Occupation”, the last “Farewell”. This structure indicates that the Nazi occupation of the country on 19 March 1944 dispossessed Hungary of its sovereignty (while introducing a Nazi-type dictatorship), which, after 1945, was transformed into a dispossession of the Soviet-type. Hungarian sovereignty was not recovered until the full withdrawal of the Soviet army on 19 June 1991, which made possible the independent and democratic evolution of the new republic. There are twenty-seven rooms in the House of Terror representing the so-called “double terror”, Nazism and communism. Interestingly enough, only two-and-a-half are devoted to the rule of the Arrow Cross, all the others to communism. The exhibition starts with the story of the “double occupation” that introduces the exhibition; the respective dates are 19 March 1944 and the beginning of 1945. The Soviets are not presented as liberators, only as conquerors, since the flyer in the museum fails to mention that there was a connection between the end of the Arrow Cross rule and the entry of the Soviets. A more accurate narrative should of course admit that the Soviets were both liberators and conquerors.

⁵³ Gabor Gyáni, “Trianon versus holokauszt”, *Élet és Irodalom*, 32, 2012, es.hu/gyani_gabor:trianon_versus_holokauszt;2012-08-09.html.

It is telling that the museum's conception was elaborated without the participation of expert historians, as if in matters of historical memory it was hopeless to rely on them and reach a certain consensual ground. Historians were rather considered as antagonists to the project. True, the House of Terror is not really a museum (only in its name),⁵⁴ as it is not based on archival material (either the exhibited objects are not originals, or it cannot be known if they are), and does not even strive to represent history with the intention of some kind of objectivity. Its role is much more to bring about some form of justice,⁵⁵ and in doing so it is openly decoupling the politically constructed collective, or rather national memory, from historiography. The House of Terror is destined to be a public forum for holding the perpetrators of communist crimes morally accountable, since judicial accountability was never seriously envisaged after the transition (and accountability for the perpetrators of the Nazi crimes to an even lesser degree). Part of this mission is to expose publicly the crimes of individuals responsible for supervising the brutal secret police in the 1950s, some of them still alive at the time of the opening of the venue.⁵⁶ All in all, the House of Terror “minimizes the experience of the Holocaust and Hungary's own dangerous brush with fascism, and it shapes the past and its memory in the service of present day (Fidesz) politics”.⁵⁷

The Trianon syndrome informs the historical narrative in relationship with both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. In this sense, it can be said that “the House of Terror renewed the cultural tradition of tragic self-representation, including the conception of mutilation. The first room in the museum is the so-called ‘Occupation Room’, which implies that everything that happened in Hungary after 1920 was due to the influence of foreign countries and powers. In this regard, one can see how the sacred territory of Greater Hungary was mutilated by the Western Powers in 1920, how the Third Reich occupied Hungary on 19 March 1944, and how the USSR took over the country a year later. This point of view supports the innocence of the Hungarian population, and thus automatically rejects any responsibility for what happened. In fact, the House of Terror is not really a museum of the communist period, but rather a tragic self-representation of the recent past.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ In Hungarian its full name is Terror Háza Múzeum, House of Terror Museum.

⁵⁵ András Rényi, “A retorika terrorja. A Terror Háza mint esztétikai probléma” [The terror of rhetoric: The House of Terror as an aesthetic problem], *Élet és Irodalom*, 47(4 July 2003), 3, 11–2.

⁵⁶ Amy Sodaro, “The House of Terror: ‘The Only One of Its Kind’”, *Exhibiting Atrocity. Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence*, Rutgers University Press, 2018, 67.

⁵⁷ Sodaro, 82.

⁵⁸ Zsolt K. Horváth, “The Redistribution of the Memory of Socialism. Identity Formations of the ‘Survivors’ in Hungary after 1989”, Oksana Sarkisova, and Peter Apor (eds.), *Past for the Eyes. East European Representations of Communism in Cinema and Museums after 1989*, CEU Press, 2008, 271–272.

Ever since the House of Terror opened its doors, its director has been Mária Schmidt, a highly controversial historian and longtime adviser to Orbán in matters of Hungarian history, a sort of ideologue of the regime. Although between 2002 and 2010 there was a socialist-liberal government, the exceptionally high annual budget of this museum has never been reduced, nor was the director dismissed, for fear of being tagged “anti-national”, “pro-communist”, etc. Perhaps as a result of the overwhelming Trianon syndrome, and the afferent nationalistic thematic, the Hungarian left was always embarrassed to use national symbols and, apart from certain intellectuals, has been wary of promoting a different, antinationalist interpretation of 20th-century history. The socialist party, for a certain time after the transition, has also had a very uneasy relationship both with the state socialist past and with the 1956 revolution. In the 1990s, the liberal party (participating in the coalition with the socialists) tried to rely on the 1956 revolution inserted in the antitotalitarian and left-wing tradition, but later on it was also hijacked by the right, an operation in which the House of Terror had also a role to play.

On the original website of the House of Terror, the following text could be read: “During World War II, Hungary found itself in the middle of the crossfire between the Nazi and communist dictatorships. On March 19, 1944 the Nazis occupied Hungary and raised the representatives of the extreme right, unconditionally faithful to them, into power. The new, collaborating Hungarian government no longer guarded the life of its citizens with Jewish origin.”⁵⁹ It is notable that this theory of Hungary being in the “crossfire” of two totalitarian regimes, and the theory of the subsequent “double occupation”, regulates the whole conception of the museum. This theory is built on the idea of essential evil, which is a single entity, only two-headed, and that cruelty and suffering does not bear political qualification.⁶⁰ This theory was also described in some detail on the original web page: “After the German invasion, the short and blood-thirsty Arrow-Cross rule began ... In 1945 Hungary was brought under the sway of the new conqueror, the Soviet Union. The Hungarian Communists who arrived in the Soviet tanks, in contrast to the short-lived Arrow-Cross rule, settled down for the long run. One of their first acts was to take over No. 60 Andrassy Boulevard, in order to signal to everybody that the moment of revenge has arrived. But that moment lasted but for very long painful years ... The museum wants to become a memorial dedicated to all those people who fell victim either to Arrow-Cross terror, which lasted for a few months, or to the decades long Communist rule.”⁶¹

⁵⁹ István Rév, “The Terror of the House”, Robin Ostow (ed.), *(Re)Visualizing National History*, University of Toronto Press, 2008, 60.

⁶⁰ András Rényi.

⁶¹ Rév, 64.

These texts contain a number of historical distortions, which actually sustain the official historical narrative concerning the period between the two world wars and communism, epitomized by the concept of “double occupation”, and by the intention of not taking responsibility for the German alliance, and the highly significant collaboration of the Hungarian state in the deportation. Hungary has always been a victim of totalitarian world powers, and the Trianon treaty is the most conspicuous “evidence” in this kind of discourse. The narrative of victimhood also characterizes interpretations of the communist period, when it is asserted that both communism and Nazism are something “foreign” to Hungary. Mentioning many times “Hungarian Nazis” instead of the Arrow Cross is supposed to signal that these are the followers and puppets of the Germans, and therefore not really Hungarians, since their terrorist and genocidal ideology was only imported from its original source. Communism is also alien to Hungary, since it was established by force by the Soviets and Hungarian communists returning from emigration from Moscow; and also because, as it is implied rather tacitly, a great number of those communists were Jews.

The topic of “Jewish communism” has been fundamental in Hungarian right-wing imagination and ideology since the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the short-lived Commune of 1919 and the Trianon treaty. Obviously, this identification was aided by the fact that the most important leaders of the country between 1948 and 1956 were of Jewish origin (although they did not identify as Jews; mostly opposed any “Jewish” cause after the Holocaust, such as compensation for Jews; and even conducted antisemitic policies). There is a third reason why communism is alien: many rank-and-file members of the Arrow Cross were incited to join the communist party, which they did in great numbers; they simply changed their uniforms (this is symbolized by the room entitled “Changing Clothes”, where Arrow Cross uniforms alternate with that of the AVH, the communist secret police). This is presented as further proof that the two types of totalitarianisms are essentially one and the same, and that both are somehow foreign-born and just forced upon the Hungarian nation. “Communists and members of the AVH were thus either Jews who returned with the Soviets, or they were former members of the Arrow Cross – that is, Hungarian Nazis. Neither of the groups could be classified as native Hungarian.”⁶² Obviously, this type of presentation is essential for the establishing of the narrative of innocent victimhood of the Hungarian nation: “the Hungarians (are) the true victims, and the enemies of both kinds of terror, who found themselves in the midst of the crossfire of the life-and-death struggle between these terrorists”.⁶³

⁶² Rév, 70.

⁶³ Rév, 71.

Critics of the museum have pointed out that it is just an instrument being used by the radical right in power to actively revise history “in a way that abdicates Hungary of any responsibility for the destruction of its Jewish population”,⁶⁴ and furthermore it “indicates that it was the Jews who were responsible for the decades-long communist rule”,⁶⁵ since their intention was nothing short of striving to “take revenge for the Arrow Cross rule and to punish all of Hungary for what had been done to them (by the German Nazis)”.⁶⁶

The most conspicuous factual distortion of the text on the website (and of the exhibition) concerns the Nazi occupation of Hungary. It describes this event as if, as a result, the Hungarian Nazis – namely the Arrow Cross – had already taken power at that moment as a puppet government established by the Germans. Therefore, there is no mention of the fact that after the German occupation the government was still nominated by Horthy (with the strong influence of the Germans), who stayed in his position as regent until 15 October, the date of his removal by the Germans and the beginning of the Arrow Cross rule. “Horthy’s interwar Hungary could thus be incorporated into the mythic prehistory of the present.”⁶⁷

However, it was in fact this government nominated by Horthy, and led by Döme Sztójay, that conducted the deportation of almost 500,000 Hungarian Jews in two months. This rapidity could not have been possible without the wholehearted and overly zealous collaboration of the Hungarian administration and gendarmerie, which was unequalled in other countries. When the Arrow Cross seized power, in October 1944, there was only the Budapest Jewry that was left in the country, more or less intact, since Horthy had stopped their deportation in July (there is ample evidence that he could have done so earlier or even obstructed it to a certain degree; instead, he explicitly “recused himself” of Jewish affairs, giving a free hand to government officials).⁶⁸ Once in power, the Arrow Cross refused the constantly reiterated German demands for deportation (with some exceptions),⁶⁹ since they considered the Jews as an available and exploitable work force, and since for them this was a proof of Hungarian sovereignty. Of course, the Arrow Cross terrorized the Jews of the Budapest ghetto, and conducted mass killings, but the proportions were far less significant compared to what had been done previously by the Sztójay government. “Though it is meant to be a museum focused on the terror of both regimes, in the terrible building that was used first by one and then the other, just two rooms are devoted to the Arrow-Cross, Holocaust, and

⁶⁴ Sodaro, 82.

⁶⁵ Sodaro, 79.

⁶⁶ Rév, 65.

⁶⁷ Rév, 72.

⁶⁸ See, for example, Zoltán Vági and Gábor Kádár, *The Holocaust in Hungary*, AltaMira, 2018.

⁶⁹ Vági and Kádár.

German Nazi occupation of Hungary; and these rooms emphasize German control over Hungary's actions and allude to how short-lived fascism in Hungary was, while barely touching on Hungarian complicity. Nowhere is it clearly stated just how devastating the Hungarian Holocaust was (75 percent of the Jewish population was killed), nor is the homegrown build-up of anti-Semitism in Hungary that paved the way for the Holocaust addressed.⁷⁰

Since historians, and also the public, voiced their disapproval, the text on the website has been somewhat modified and shortened, thereby shielding it from criticism. Now it gives away fewer clues about the narrative in advance before someone goes to see the actual exhibition. However, the conception of the museum, manifested in the exhibition, still follows this narrative. In interviews, Mária Schmidt has regularly advanced the argument that the House of Terror need not even allude to the events that took place before the Arrow Cross rule, since this would be done by the Holocaust museum anyway. "It is as if she were saying: this is our story, but you do your own – let's see, which one of us is stronger!"⁷¹

Another important distortion is that the antisemitic and authoritarian regime that ruled the country between the world wars (and well before the German alliance) is nowhere mentioned in the museum. Also, there is nothing that would refer to the inherently antisemitic nature of the Horthy regime: the Jewish laws, the first of which was introduced in 1938, and the second in 1939, still without any German pressure; the introduction of forced labor battalions, designed chiefly for Jews, which were sent to the Soviet front in 1941 unarmed, the members of which were treated as slaves and often even killed by their own Hungarian officers. But there is also no mention of the emergence of the Horthy regime after World War I, characterized by pogroms against Jews on a wide scale during 1919–1920. Nor is there any word of the introduction of the *numerus clausus* law drastically limiting the number of Jewish students in 1920, which was in fact the first racial type of legislation in Europe. Therefore, the frequent reference in the text to the contrast between the respective durations of Nazi and communist rule (short months versus long decades) obfuscates the existence of the authoritarian and antisemitic regime between the two world wars, while omitting the fact that the rule of Hungarian Nazis was short-lived only because they were defeated by the allied and Soviet war efforts.⁷²

⁷⁰ Amy Sodaro, 79.

⁷¹ András Rényi.

⁷² Rév, 64. Also, contrary to what is suggested in the museum's narrative, Hungary did not enter the war on the side of the Germans to resist communism, since it was never threatened by the Soviet Union before it actually attacked the latter in 1941. The real motive was the promise of territorial gain, which Hitler did provide to Hungary in 1938, and then much more in subsequent years.

The “German Occupation Memorial”

It is highly indicative that the historical conception of the House of Terror has been consistently reiterated in subsequent memorials even years later, namely when Fidesz retook power in 2010. This tendency is manifested chiefly in the “German Occupation Memorial” erected in 2014. But in the new Constitution of 2011 (adopted unilaterally, without the participation of the opposition), a very similar conception of Hungary’s historical victimhood can already be found. In its preamble, the following passage can be read: “Our country lost its sovereignty on March nineteenth 1944, which was restored on the second of May 1990, the day of assembly of the first freely elected representative body of the people. This day is considered to be the day of the establishment of our country’s new democracy and constitutional order.”⁷³ This sentence indicates that the Hungarian state bears no responsibility for what happened in the aftermath of the German occupation. It also states that in the socialist period Hungary was still not sovereign (whereas there may be some confusion about the question of national independence, and that of people’s sovereignty, and democracy).

The “Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation” (in the media and everyday language: the “German Occupation Memorial”) is a sculptural monument in Budapest’s Szabadság (Liberty) Square which represents the same conception. It commemorates the people whose death or persecution was linked to the German occupation of Hungary in 1944. In the words of Viktor Orbán, the memorial “is intended to express the pain and suffering that the Hungarian nation felt and endured because of the loss of its freedom. It reminds us all that the loss of our country’s independence had tragic consequences. It claimed the lives of many hundreds of thousands of people and caused millions more to suffer a sea of misery.”⁷⁴

The creation of the monument was established by a government decision of 31 December 2013, providing merely two-and-a-half months for its preparation. The plans for the monument were known by the public three weeks later, and the Association of Jewish Communities in Hungary (Mazsihisz) started to protest against the monument right away. Mazsihisz said that the concept implied that Hungary was an innocent and blameless victim of the German occupation, as if the Hungarian authorities had not provided effective assistance in deporting nearly half a million

⁷³ www.parlament.hu/irom39/02627/02627-0187.pdf, 2.

⁷⁴ “Orbán megszólalt emlékműügyben”, *Magyar Nemzet*, 21 July 2014, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold-archivum/2014/07/orban-megszolalt-emlekmuegyben>

Jews to death camps after the occupation. In a gesture of protest, most Jewish organizations and communities did not accept the money allocated to them by the government to support the Year of Remembrance programs (seventy years after the Hungarian Holocaust in 1944). This event has catalyzed a series of conflicts between the Hungarian government and Jewish communities.

The memorial depicts an eagle with extended claws that resembles the German coat of arms descending on the angel Gabriel, a symbol of Hungary. The eagle represents the Nazi invasion and occupation of Hungary in March 1944. The date “1944” is written on its ankle. The inscription at the base of the monument reads “In memory of the victims”. Critics rightly argue that this not only fails to recognize Jews as the primary victims of the Holocaust but, worse, depicts Hungary as an innocent victim, when in fact the Hungarian government and portions of the population were highly complicit.

The erection of the memorial began right after the elections of 2014, in April, but it was hindered by protesters. From the next day, a permanent protest started in Liberty Square. The cordon around the construction site was dismantled in the evenings and protest signs were painted on it. Police repeatedly cracked down on the protesters, and even detained some of them. The protesters set up a counter-memorial, called “Living Monument”, with objects, photographs, copies of letters of Holocaust victims, and pebbles, reminding people of those deported in the wake of the German occupation. This exhibition was constantly evolving during the construction. It also became a highly interesting cultural venue with lectures, concerts and exhibitions, not always closely related to the question of the monument.

The official monument was eventually erected in July, secretly, at night, under police protection and without an official inauguration. The previous day, the police had evacuated and closed Liberty Square. On 20 July, when the square was reopened to the public, protesters threw eggs and *kefir* at the completed monument and were subsequently prosecuted by the police. In fact, the government has never taken the risk of inaugurating it.

According to certain opinions, one of the main functions of the “German Occupation Memorial” is to reinterpret the Soviet liberation memorial, located on the other side of the same square, as another occupation memorial. Therefore, they have both become part of the Trianon narrative, even though the events they commemorate happened more than two decades later, while this shift in the way these two events are commemorated has happened a hundred years later. This time they symbolize not spatial but spiritual and political mutilation and dispossession: something bad has happened again and again to the Hungarian nation, for which it bears no responsibility.

The Holocaust Memorial Museum

The Holocaust Memorial Museum opened in 2005 during the socialist-liberal government with the intention of furnishing a fair representation of the Hungarian Holocaust, emphasizing Hungarian responsibility: “it stands within the traditions of so-called Holocaust museums and references international Holocaust commemoration while also explicitly countering the dominant right-wing discourse about the Holocaust in Hungary”.⁷⁵ In the museum’s exhibition the Holocaust is treated as something that concerns the whole country, and not only the Jewish community. Also, unlike in the House of Terror, the story does not start in 1944 with the German occupation, but spans the period from 1920–1945, giving a historically more realistic picture of the unfolding of the Hungarian Holocaust. It addresses the question of perpetrators and collaborators, and generally the question of responsibility. It equally highlights the Roma holocaust, of which there are still very few discussions in Hungary. Also, unlike in the House of Terror, there is no intention of comparing the Holocaust to crimes committed under communism. “Hence, the centre counters a dominant, right-wing discourse that idealizes the Horthy era, externalizes responsibility, downplays the Holocaust by comparing it to the Communist crimes and denigrates its victims.”⁷⁶

However, a notable problem with the museum is that it is located relatively far from the center, in the basement of a synagogue, and the space of the exhibition is too small. For these reasons, it “remained contested, as neither the Jewish community nor left-liberal opinion makers could accept it as a worthy site of Holocaust remembrance. As it emphasized Hungarian responsibility in the Holocaust, the Hungarian right silently boycotted the institution.”⁷⁷

Small wonder that the Orbán government did not want this venue to become the representative institution of Holocaust commemoration. It even had plans to remodel the museum in a way that would better match its narrative. However, protests were voiced from the public, and therefore it renounced the ambitious project; instead, it tried to marginalize the museum, by nominating politically loyal persons for its direction, cutting its budget, and in this manner making it insignificant, quasi-invisible.⁷⁸ In fact, as a result the number of visitors fell from 30,000 to 20,000

⁷⁵ Birga U. Meyer, “The Universal Victim – Representing Jews and Roma in a European Holocaust Museum”, A. T. Sindbæk and B. Törnquist-Plewa (eds), *Disputed Memory: Emotions and Memory Politics in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe*, De Gruyter, 2016, 123.

⁷⁶ Meyer, 124.

⁷⁷ János Gadó, “The Splendour and the Misery of the House of Fates”, *Cultures of History Forum*, 16 August 2019, www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/debates/the-splendour-and-the-misery-of-the-house-of-fates.

⁷⁸ Gadó, “A New Deal for Hungary’s Jews”.

yearly, while that of the House of Terror has been constantly on the rise, with approximately 400,000 visitors per year.⁷⁹ And the plan for a more direct substitution of the Holocaust Memorial Museum came to fruition with the idea of the “House of Fates”.

The “House of Fates”

The government wanted to have its own Holocaust memorial, one promoting its own discourse. Therefore, the director of the House of Terror, Mária Schmidt, was asked to prepare the plans for a new Holocaust memorial center. A seemingly ideal site was found: “a smaller railway station in a Budapest suburb, where, in the final months of 1944, several trainloads of Budapest Jews were sent off to their deaths”.⁸⁰ Construction on the “House of Fates” was started in 2015 and advanced at great speed. However, the Jewish community was suspicious about the concept behind the new memorial, especially the fact that it was never made public. When details of the new museum were leaked nevertheless, the Jewish community expressed an even more angry skepticism. According to what was now known of the project, it “would be based on survivor testimonies and that the intention was to emphasize the general human aspects of the Holocaust”, while it would primarily focus on the “suffering of innocent children”.⁸¹ Due to protests from the Jewish community, the opening of the museum was postponed several times, and has now been delayed indefinitely, in spite of the fact that the government tried several times to finish the museum, and that it proceeded more cautiously. It wanted to avoid the type of confrontation that was already ongoing with the “Memorial of German Occupation”.

This is the reason why it sought to involve the Jewish community by assigning it a more active part in the elaboration of the project. Slomó Köves and EMIH were ready not only to publicly back the museum project, but in 2018 they even took on the role of supervision, jointly with the Prime Minister’s Office (which is a clear sign of how important this project is for the government). However, the plans were again not made public, as Köves said that he wanted to work “without outside pressure”. In consequence, Mazsihisz and the political left voiced their disagreement again, despite the fact that now a renowned rabbi was responsible for completing the museum project. “In an official statement, Mazsihisz objected to these plans, declaring that the efforts by EMIH were ‘against the aspirations of Mazsihisz and against the values of the Hungarian

⁷⁹ Gadó, “A New Deal for Hungary’s Jews”.

⁸⁰ Gadó, “The Splendour and the Misery of the House of Fates”.

⁸¹ Gadó, “The Splendour and the Misery of the House of Fates”.

Jewish public”⁸² Mazsihisz equally obtained voices of protest from the World Jewish Congress, the Yad Vashem memorial and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, while the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) was somewhat more cautious with its criticism.⁸³

Although Köves reached out to Yad Vashem, which in 2014 had already refused to endorse the plans, he was met with a novel rejection. It was Robert Rozett, Director of the Yad Vashem Libraries and an expert on Hungarian Jewry and the Holocaust, who explained why Yad Vashem still did not want to take part in the project. Relying on the declaration of the minister of the Prime Minister’s Office, according to which the House of Fates intends to “present personal fates ... particularly from the perspective of the child victims of the Holocaust”, Rozett declared that “this confirmed that the original, flawed concept remained the same, in particular focusing specifically on the personal narrative of child victims and not the broader historical context of Hungarian Jewry and the Hungarian government’s actions before the coming to power of the Fascist Arrow Cross party in October 1944”. Rozett went to great length in explaining his expert opinion: “visitors to the House of Fates are to be shown and taught that, except for a tiny, criminal and fanatic minority, the citizens of Hungary were essentially blameless for what was inflicted upon their Jewish neighbors”. Furthermore, “to this patently misleading distortion, the concept’s planners have added a statistically disproportional over-emphasis on rescue attempts on behalf of Jews, by Hungarians. Thus, it is implied, that Hungary was actually a nation of rescuers. This is a grave falsification of history.”⁸⁴

The House of Coexistence

The House of Coexistence project was proposed by Jewish leaders as an alternative to the House of Fates when controversy flared over the latter. The project was meant to represent Hungarian–Jewish coexistence, essentially the history of Jewry in Hungary through the history of one family from the end of the 18th century until today. The idea was to propose the House of Coexistence instead of the House of Fates, which was meant to be another Holocaust museum (although the Holocaust Documentation Centre and Memorial Site has been in operation for a decade).⁸⁵ The

⁸² Gadó, “The Splendour and the Misery of the House of Fates”.

⁸³ “IHRA Chair’s Statement on House of Fates, Budapest”, International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, 11 June 2019, <https://holocaustremembrance.com/statements/ihra-chairs-statement-house-fates-budapest>.

⁸⁴ Jeremy Sharon, “Yad Vashem: Hungarian Holocaust Museum Is a ‘Falsification of History’”, *Jerusalem Post*, 21 September 2018, www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Yad-Vashem-publicly-criticizes-controversial-Hungarian-Holocaust-Museum-567692.

⁸⁵ “Együttélés háza – gombhoz a kabátot?”, *Szombat*, 2 July 2015, www.szombat.org/politika/egyutteleles-haza-gombhoz-a-kabatot.

House of Coexistence, on the contrary, did not aim to focus exclusively on the perennially disputed Hungarian responsibility for the Holocaust, but equally on the brighter pages of the shared history of Hungarians and Hungarian Jews. The idea was to provide emotional and intellectual ammunition for improving and broadening today's public dialogue on history. In fact, Jewish organizations, in the wake of the amendment to the preamble of the constitution and the falsifying message of the "German Occupation Memorial" on Liberty Square, have feared that the historical narrative of the House of Fates will be in opposition to their and most historians' stance on the Hungarian Holocaust. However, the idea of the House of Coexistence lost some of its significance when it became clear that the government would not abandon the project of the House of Fates. Nevertheless, it opened in 2021 in the beautiful and renovated synagogue in Sebestyén Rumbach Street, which once belonged to the "status-quo-ante" community. However, the original message of "coexistence" has been de-emphasized, and was understood as just one, albeit important, element in the renovated synagogue's multifunctional community space. Now the restored building includes a space for prayer, as well as permanent and temporary museum exhibitions presenting various events and educational activities. The synagogue function will be unique in the sense that it is not appropriated by any particular Jewish community of Budapest, but belongs to all communities.

In an interview, Henriett Kiss, the vice-president of Mazsihisz, said: "the House will certainly not be about Jewish-Hungarian coexistence, because due to our historical traditions, we do not accept the existence of this conceptual pair. Jewish people living in the territory of historical Hungary have declared themselves to be Hungarians of the Israelite religion. However, to understand and present this fact will be a priority."⁸⁶

The exhibition is mainly based on audio-visual material, namely the film *Politzer Saga* by Péter Forgács – the story of the Pulitzer family (chosen to represent the experience of a typical Jewish family) between 1740 and 2020. It reveals the Pulitzer family's vicissitudes, tribulations, dilemmas and fateful choices, along with the mysteries surrounding their origins.⁸⁷ The story unfolds in ten, seven-minute film clips. Through the sketch-portrayals of several Pulitzer descendants, we can look at the history of the country and of Hungarian Jews; the life situations revealed explore the possibilities of integration. The context of the storyline is reinforced by maps, a chronology and brief explanations of concepts on the walls of the exhibition. Can the exhibition

⁸⁶ "A Rumbach nem egy közösség zsinagógája lesz, hanem mindenkié", *Szombat*, 13 November 2018, www.szombat.org/politika/a-rumbach-nem-egy-kozosseg-zsinagogaja-lesz-hanem-mindenkie.

⁸⁷ Zsuzsanna Szarka, "Etűdök családtörténetre", *Szombat*, 28 July 2021, www.szombat.org/tortenelem/etudok-csaladtortenetre.

concept of the Rumbach synagogue, originally planned as a House of Coexistence (between Hungarians and Jews), speak of coexistence? The subtitle of the *Politzer Saga, Neither Together nor Apart*, points to the tragedy inherent in the dichotomy, and there is no intention of embellishing the story.

The Holocaust in school curricula

Hungarian history education is traditionally dominated by a positivist vision of history concentrating either on “significant” events or the inculcation of nationalist memory, or some combination of these. Therefore, it is worth examining the interpretative schemes with which the individual textbooks approach the event of the Holocaust. Manuals focus mainly on military and diplomatic events, and economic developments, and very little on the history of antisemitism and the relationship between Jews and non-Jews. This limits the scope for interpretation. A significant role in the entry into World War II is attributed to the strengthening of the far right in Hungary and the “necessary” continuation of revisionist politics. This almost fully explains the German alliance; however, the economic crisis contributed to this, which gave the Hungarian Arrow Cross movement even greater electoral influence. In turn, this is also what led to the anti-Jewish legislation, which was intended to satisfy the demands of the Hungarian far right and supposedly that of the German Nazis (even though, according to established academic scholarship, German demands played little role in the first and second Jewish laws). Finally, it is said that the German occupation and the failed attempt to exit the war and the German alliance led to disaster.

All in all, the books portray the Hungarian Holocaust as the consequence of a historical process in which the unjust nature of the Treaty of Trianon, the need for revisionist politics, the strong Hungarian far right, the German influence and occupation, and the causal links between them played the main role. They try to present Hungary’s role in World War II by acknowledging to some extent its responsibility in the Holocaust, but they do not put any emphasis on it, and certainly do not emphasize the need to confront it in our epoch. The objective of awareness-raising concerning prejudices, education in human rights, democracy and tolerance is hardly ever the issue here, as this is apparently not the aim of most of the history textbooks currently in circulation.

In countries where Holocaust education has gained importance, it is used for inculcating democratic values, of which the Hungarian practice is the absolute antithesis. The teaching of the Holocaust in Hungary cannot be adapted to these goals already as a consequence of the positivist type of history writing employed in the manuals, and also because the teaching of history is still

aiming to construct and transmit the memory of the nation-state and national pride (the supposedly one thousand years of continuous history of the country). The objective of Holocaust education, on the contrary, would be to introduce a kind of discontinuity into national history both methodologically and morally: a break with the epoch of perpetrators and the passive bystanders, by constructing a new, self-critical, post-nationalist national image.⁸⁸

Jewish education in Budapest

The Sándor Scheiber Elementary and High School considers itself the heir of the original Jewish High School opened in 1919. It is managed by the Budapest Jewish Community, a member of Mazsihisz. The school intends to provide a multicultural but open environment. According to its mission statement, “In addition to teaching Judaism and Hebrew, we also preserve many traditions and religious observances that children would not learn in other schools. We celebrate all holidays together, go to synagogue at least once a month, and are active participants in Jewish life in Hungary.”⁸⁹

EMIH opened its high-school named after Maimonides in 2017. It functions according to the core ideology of the Chabad movement, which is to restore the Jewish spiritual heritage to the generations who have been already distanced from it, or have been deprived of the opportunity to learn about it.⁹⁰

The mostly secular Lauder Javne School understands Judaism as something fundamentally plural, which can be lived through various religious and/or cultural identities. The school wants to ensure that the students who wish to practice Judaism are given the opportunity for religious observance; at the same time, it does not expect anyone to practice Judaism. “We teach our students not to see their own understanding of Judaism as the only correct interpretation, but to respect, learn and understand other identities.”⁹¹ The school, founded by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, is very well known in town, since it accepts non-Jewish students. These often go to Lauder, not because of a special interest in Judaism, but because they are looking for a good private school (the school is situated in a wealthy neighborhood on the Buda side, home to many wealthy families). At the same time, the school takes it for granted that the applicants have an interest in the Jewish

⁸⁸ Mónika Kovács, “Holokausztoktatás és emlékezés”, Judit Molnár (ed.), *A holokauszt Magyarországon európai perspektívában*, Balassi, 2005.

⁸⁹ <https://scheiber.hu/rolunk>.

⁹⁰ <https://zsidogimnazium.hu/kozosseg/>.

⁹¹ www.lauder.hu/#zsidosagunk/zsidosag.

religion, tradition and culture, which constitute the framework of the whole school life. Knowledge of modern Hebrew and the relationship with Israel is also an important part of the type of Jewish identity that the school strives to promote.

Another initiative of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation is the JDC-Lauder International Jewish Youth Camp at Szarvas. It is one of the most important Jewish outreach and educational programs in Central and Eastern Europe. As such, it equally has a symbolic importance. It was initiated right after the regime change, in 1990. Youths are coming to the camp to spend two weeks in the summer from all over the region, and further: from Hungary, the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, Albania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic countries, Moldova, Germany, the US, Israel and even India. Each year the Szarvas camp draws more than 1,500 campers from more than twenty-five countries. It is located some 170 km south-east of Budapest, with the mission of creating active members of their own Jewish community, but who remain at the same time open to their larger context and to the world. Learning about Jewish traditions and strengthening group belonging through a positive self-image are equally important.⁹² The camp has an obvious “impact on the Jewish identity of the Central and Eastern European participants, and by extension on their families and communities”⁹³

The Zachor Foundation for Social Memory is a non-governmental educational organization. Its objective is, on the basis of Holocaust education (following the recommendations of the IHRA), to help young people become more sensitive and open to accepting each other. Zachor produces a fair amount of educational programs and teaching materials (and also trains teachers), based essentially on personal life stories and survivor testimonies (conducted by the USC Shoah Foundation). Holocaust education is not a goal in itself, but serves social and emotional learning, and the strengthening of critical thinking. “We believe it is important that teachers, students and the wider public look with compassion at the dramatic social events of the 20th century, which stemmed from exclusion, racism, anti-Semitism, prejudice, and that they act as compassionate, active citizens and responsible people in their daily lives.”⁹⁴

The Jewish cultural scene in Budapest

⁹² <https://szarvas.camp/rolunk/tortenetunk>.

⁹³ Mina Pasaljic, “The International Jewish Youth Camp at Szarvas”, *Nordisk Judaistik/Scandinavian Jewish Studies*, 31(1), 2020, www.researchgate.net/publication/341676513 [The International Jewish Youth Camp at Szarvas](https://doi.org/10.1080/00137588.2020.1811111).

⁹⁴ www.zachor.hu/.

After the transition from state socialism, during which all expression of Jewish identity was banned, a rapid evolution of Jewish grassroots institutions could be observed. A great many NGOs and community organizations emerged, often relying on funding coming from the US, Israel or Europe. New individual and collective identities emerged in relation to a newly found Judaism in its variegated forms. Although some traditional, especially Orthodox, organizations have been promoting what they call “true Judaism”, many young people have been more receptive to more progressive initiatives.

It is interesting to compare happenings in this respect to what was going on in Western Europe. Whereas “in the West the attempt to reappropriate a Jewish culture that was not hierarchical remained marginal (with initiatives such as Limmud and Moishe House) because of the objection of Orthodox centralized national institutions, in postsocialist cities the countercultural became more mainstream by virtue of communal fragmentation and thus served as a crucial force in reshaping the Jewishness of Budapest, Berlin, and Krakow”.⁹⁵ However, the emergence of a local Jewish scene was closely linked to the sentiment of European Jewishness and diasporic consciousness, local and global at the same time.

This tendency may be called “lifestyle Judaism” promoted by “alternative cultural actors (who) creatively define nondenominational religious modalities: secularized but not assimilated, liberal yet adhering to ‘tradition’ as they see it”.⁹⁶ The most important initiatives (independent of Orthodox, Neolog or Reform communities) have been Judapest.org (which stopped its activities in 2007), Limmud (from the UK), Marom and Moishe House (from the US), which all started at the beginning of the early 2000s, and which, contrary to the traditional, established Jewish communities, do not receive any funding from the Hungarian state. The best known among them is perhaps Marom, since its most visible face was Café Sirály, in Király Street, right in the heart of the “Jewish quarter”. However, Sirály cannot be described simply as a manifestation of lifestyle Jewishness, since it took on many more cultural, activist and even political roles, their connection to Judaism being far from evident at first sight.

Sirály was a very well-known place throughout town, frequented by university students and intellectuals, but also people from its closer neighborhood. It could not even be identified outright as Jewish, and most visitors certainly were not familiar with its “Jewish side”, which only manifested itself during Jewish holidays or specific programs. It housed exhibitions, theatrical performances,

⁹⁵ Daniel Monterescu and Sara Zorandy, “Is You a Jew? The Jewish Revival Scene in Budapest”, Daniel Monterescu and Rachel Werczberger (eds), *Jewish Revival Inside Out: Remaking Jewishness in a Transnational Age*, Wayne State University Press, 2022 (in press).

⁹⁶ Monterescu and Zorandy.

and lectures about social and political topics. More importantly, Sirály had an obvious, somewhat counter-cultural or at least alternative stance, which after 2010 was perceived as directly oppositional in a political sense by the new government in place. It was seen as a kind of hub for grassroots activists, NGOs and organizers of political demonstrations, who frequently gathered there before and after the events. Small wonder that Sirály was not looked upon favorably by the new nationalist power, which manifested its dictatorial tendencies right from the beginning. Eventually, it was closed down by the local municipality (on orders coming from the central Fidesz party) in 2013. However, it found a new place under a new name: Auróra in the pre-gentrified eighth district, a little bit further away from the center of town, and where it has developed its links with human rights organizations and other NGOs, some of which were even housed in the building. “Embracing the principle of *tikkun olam* (repair of the world) beyond Jewish identity, Auróra expanded its activities. Helping Roma children get quality education, temporarily housing Syrian refugees during Hungary’s migration crisis (2015), or providing Hungary’s LGBTQ community with a safe space—all of this is an integral part of the spirit of Auróra. People from all walks of urban life come to Auróra, whether for a Purim celebration, a retro flea market, or a Bluesbreaker concert.”⁹⁷

Among the initiatives of Marom should equally be mentioned the Bánkító Jewish Summer Festival, which takes place each year by a small lake in the countryside. Again, only some of the programs are linked directly to Judaism; there are also alternative music performers, discussions on social and political issues (among which, the situation of the Roma population, for example, is emphatic), literary workshops, film clubs, etc.

There are a handful of other Jewish cultural festivals, like the Jewish Gastro Festival, the Kazinczy Street Ball, the Spinoza Jewish Festival, the Pozsonyi Picnic and the Quarter 6 Quarter 7 Festival. And there is a Jewish theater, Golem; the Israeli Cultural Institute, established in 2010; and two film festivals celebrating Israeli movies. A Jewish “cultural house” named Bálint Ház was opened in 1994, frequented mostly by the older generation, which has on its programs lectures, movies, and exhibitions linked to the history of Judaism and Bible study, but where can equally appear organizations of other minorities, like LGBTQ, etc., and where one can also learn the martial art *krav maga*. It is linked to Mazsihisz, and was founded with the help of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), the British World Jewish Relief (WJR) and the Doron Foundation.

⁹⁷ Monterescu and Zorandy.

Moishe House Budapest was established in 2009 by members of Marom, who experienced the model in London and wanted to implement it in Budapest. Moishe House as a network proposes funding all over the world for “young adults to connect with their own Jewish identities, their friends, and their wider communities”.⁹⁸ It is specifically aimed at those young people who did not necessarily grow up as observant or tradition-keeping Jews, so it seems to be an especially good fit for young Hungarian Jews. The goal is to enable people to “create intentional Jewish experiences for their friends and peers”,⁹⁹ so that they can forge their own Jewish environment.

Among the new initiatives it is important to mention the Teleki Square House of Prayer (*shtiebel*) in the eighth district, renovated in recent years and housing a particular community. Originally, it was opened in 1911, but the local Jewry gradually disappeared during and after the Holocaust.¹⁰⁰ Although life returned to some extent after the war and prayer houses began to function, after 1956 almost everyone fled. In 2012, research was initiated by extremely engaged Jewish youths with the help of sociologists, with the aim of mapping the Jewish past in the area linked to the *shtiebel*, by way of collecting stories from the past: old people’s recollections, mostly of the pre-war period and to a lesser extent of the Holocaust.¹⁰¹

The Teleki Square *shtiebel* is also a unique landmark in Hungarian Jewish life, because it is currently the only Orthodox house of prayer in the capital that still functions today following the Hasidic/Sephardic prayer order. However, the renovation work carried out has transformed the former women’s section into a community room. In addition to the original decorations and furnishings, the intimate, family atmosphere of the *shtiebel* has been preserved. Although the house of prayer itself is Orthodox (and interestingly, the rabbi is furnished by EMIH), the community includes Hasidic and non-Hasidic Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, Neologs and those who do not belong to any particular denomination, all of them being engaged in recreating Jewish life in this particular segment of town.

The ÓVÁS! (Protection/Appeal) Association was founded in 2004 with the mission of preserving the architectural heritage of the old Jewish quarter of Budapest (mainly the seventh district, and some parts of the sixth district). In 2002 the quarter was placed under the protection of UNESCO; in spite of that, the local municipality started pushing out many inhabitants from the

⁹⁸ www.moishehouse.org/about-us/our-story/.

⁹⁹ www.moishehouse.org/mhwow/.

¹⁰⁰ https://index.hu/urbanista/2018/09/12/teleki_ter_zsido_jozsefvaros_lakasimahaz_film_teleki_teri_mesek/.

¹⁰¹ <https://zsido.com/a-teleki-expedicio-feltarul-a-jozsefvarosi-zsidok-multja/>.

neighborhood with the aim of demolishing a lot of buildings and constructing new ones, foreign to the atmosphere and aesthetic of the area. The official slogan involved the “rehabilitation” of the quarter, but it mainly resulted in destruction, serving real-estate speculation, coupled with corruption (later the mayor of the seventh district at the time, György Hunvald, was in fact condemned for corruption, and received a jail sentence). It has to be noted that in Budapest the twenty-two districts are largely autonomous, each having its own mayor, and therefore the office of the mayor of Budapest itself did not have the legal instruments to intervene. ÓVÁS! was launched to stop actual and prevent further destruction.

The members and supporters of ÓVÁS! were architects and urban planners, but also intellectuals in the broad sense, sociologists, economists, historians, film-makers, photographers, writers, journalists and university students. “After years of persecution, ghettos and the Holocaust, the nearly two-hundred-year-old past of the area is once again under threat” reads the text on its website.¹⁰² The NGO has used every possible means and opportunity to raise public awareness. It has organized demonstrations, press conferences, photo exhibitions, film screenings, international conferences and tours, and also produced publications. As a result, many people were able to discover the streets, squares and buildings that were important places in the history of Hungarian Jewry. Following the action of ÓVÁS!, the president of the Cultural Heritage Protection Office granted the old Jewish quarter the status of protected area in 2005. Thus, twenty buildings could be saved that would have been demolished without this action. However, deprived of legal means and governmental support, ÓVÁS! could not prevent the destruction of most of those buildings which were designated to be demolished.

There is an academic research institute dealing exclusively with Hungarian Jewish history. The Institute for Jewish Historical and Cultural Research, named after Ignác Goldziher (a famous 19th-century orientalist), was established jointly by the Association of Jewish Communities in Hungary (Mazsihisz), the Rabbinical School – Jewish University, and the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives.¹⁰³ The founders have granted autonomy to the institute in selecting its research topics and the methodologies it uses. The aim of the institute is to carry out theoretical and empirical research on issues concerning the past of the Jewish community, and to disseminate the results and discuss them with the national and international academic community. The institute equally holds round-table discussions which are recorded and made available to the lay public. There have been discussions about 19th-century Hungarian Jewry, the Trianon treaty and its impact

¹⁰² <https://ovas.hu/nyitolap/about/>.

¹⁰³ <https://akibic.hu/2021/06/07/uj-zsido-tortenet-es-kulturalis-kutatointezetet-hozott-letre-a-mazsihisz/>.

on Jews, and antisemitism under the Horthy regime. Lately, the institute has not received any state funding from Mazsök, the public foundation (now under government influence) created for the funding of Jewish cultural and academic initiatives.

Two researchers of the institute, Attila Novák and Miklós Konrád, had been employed before at the Milton Friedman University, Budapest, which belongs to EMIH. When they were asked to give their expert opinions on the House of Fates project in 2019 (which by that time had been taken over by EMIH as well), they refused to do so, asserting their autonomy as researchers concerning political matters, and the independence of the university from the House of Fates project. As a consequence, Attila Novák was dismissed from the university. Protesting the decision of the university leadership, two of his historian colleagues resigned, including Miklós Konrád.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ www.szombat.org/politika/elbocsajtottak-az-egyik-renitens-tortenezst-valaszul-masik-ketto-felmondott.