DANUBE INSTITUTE

Coming to terms with a dark past: Hungary's struggle over wartime historical memory

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February 2025

Introduction

The most difficult thing about living in central and eastern Europe, says the old Soviet joke, is having to predict the past. Revolutionary leaders and leading Communist ideologues once hailed as heroes could be – and were - suddenly denounced as traitors or class enemies. Some, such as Leon Trotsky, were even murdered by Stalin's assassins. Others, such as Hungary's László Rajk, a veteran anti-fascist and a leader of the wartime Communist underground, were put on trial on nonsensical charges then executed. After the death of the person, came the state-sponsored rewriting of their legacy and achievements – Trotsky and Rajk became 'non-people'.

More than forty years after the collapse of Communism, key figures in Hungarian history are no longer airbrushed out of photographs or removed from official accounts. Democracy means a multiplicity of views and the freedom to express them. Hungarian historians continue to probe the darkest periods of the country's history, assessing and analysing with rigour and intellectual honesty. Yet the wider political backdrop is impossible to avoid. History is still a battleground, its terrain contested by politicians and ideologues who seek to use the historians' work to further their own arguments. As Maria Schmidt, the director of the Terror House museum, told me in 2002, when the museum opened, "The past is a very sensitive issue in every country. It gives you legitimacy or it takes it away"[1]. Dr Schmidt would soon find herself in the eye of an storm about history and memory.

The result is a lively and powerful debate about the key turning points in Hungary's history. Lively but sometimes also bitter and personal. Each new memorial or statue sends messages to both sides of a still polarised society. Is it a confession of guilt or denial? Some memorials, like the Monument to the Victims of German Occupation on Liberty square, manage to be both. This is more than a matter of historical debate, of interest only to historians and intellectuals. History in Hungary, across the former Soviet bloc, is alive. As Zoltan Pokorni, a former leading figure in Fidesz and mayor of Budapest's District XII said, "History is not about the past. History creates a community in the present and it creates the future."[2]

There are still survivors living today in Budapest who lived through the later years of the Horthy regime and the Holocaust. For them, and their relatives, such historical debates are not just a matter of academic enquiry. They are intensely personal - a form of validation of their experiences and their lives. Or, depending on the historian's perspective, the 'wrong' memorial can be seen as a means of diminishing or even delegitimising what they lived through.

Major reassessments seem to occur about every decade as key events take place. This paper will examine the debate around several milestones: the reburial of Admiral Miklos Horthy's ashes in 1993, the opening of the Terror House museum in 2003 and the Holocaust Memorial Centre in 2004, the erection of the German occupation memorial on Freedom square in 2014, the ongoing debate around the Turul monument in District XII and the current government's framing of the Horthy era. By way of comparison it will also consider France's response to its wartime past and its collaboration of the Vichy regime with the Nazis. I lived in Budapest and reported on

Hungary and central Europe for more than twenty five years. As a first hand witness to the battle for memory, I will draw on my own experiences as a reporter here.

Admiral Horthy returns home

On September 4 1993 I was standing in a crowded field in Kenderes, about one hundred miles of Budapest, reporting for The Times. The small town was the birthplace of Admiral Horthy, Hungary's ruler from 1919 to 1944. Horthy had died in exile in 1957, in Estoril, Portugal. His ashes were now finally being interred in the family crypt. There is a Hungarian saying, "temetni tudunk", which translates literally as "we can bury people" or "we know how to bury people". But there is an extra layer of affirmative meaning, something like, "burying people…that's something we know how to do". Burials – and re-burials – have marked turning points in Hungarian history. In early October 1956, many thousands of mourners attended the reburial of László Rajk. The former Communist minister had been executed in 1949 after a show trial, but was rehabilitated in 1955. The funeral was a significant mass protest against the Communist dictatorship and later that month the uprising against the Soviets began.

Around 50,000 people gathered at the reburial ceremony in Kenderes, which made it one of the largest mass gatherings since the collapse of the Communist regime several years earlier. A number of government ministers and MPs attended and the whole ceremony was broadcast by state television for two and a half hours. József Antall, the first post-Communist prime minister, did not attend, but sent his wife, Klára. Speaking about Horthy before the ceremony, Antall said, "I consider him a Hungarian patriot who should be buried on Hungarian soil. If his attempts at breaking away from Germany in 1944 had succeeded he would be regarded in a more positive light." (Which is true, but his attempts largely failed not because of outside circumstances, but because he lacked the courage to make the final break).

Many of the mourners were elderly. It was a sunny day and stalls were piled high with nationalist propaganda, including maps of Greater Hungary, before the country lost two-thirds of its lands at the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, and glossy pictures of the Regent with his wife Magdolna, whose ashes were being interred. The day was about laying the Horthys to rest in their family crypt. But it was also about reanimating old ghosts. There were a lot of men in uniforms, including soldiers in their second world war finery, elderly scouts and a bus-load of skinheads wearing black boots. But overall, the atmosphere was celebratory and the ceremony quite moving. Several of those attending pointed out that Horthy had saved the Jews of Budapest during 1944, and there was even a large wreath with a ribbon, supposedly from Budapest Jewry, expressing its gratitude to Horthy. My conversations with Jewish people though indicated quite strong concern at the prospect of Admiral Horthy being rehabilitated. There was a sense that such a move was about whitewashing Hungary's – and Horthy's role in the Holocaust – and that the nationalist right was trying to avoid examining his culpability in the death of hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews.

More than thirty years on from the Kenderes ceremony Admiral Horthy, his legacy and wartime record, remain a key battleground in Hungary's memory wars. In part because under Communism there was no meaningful discussion about Hungary's wartime role and the fate of its Jews – who were anyway often described in general terms as victims of Nazism, rather than its specific target for genocide. The Communist authorities propagated a simplistic view that everything was the fault of 'Horthyite fascism' and its alliance with Nazi Germany – and to argue differently, in a one-party state, could bring unpleasant consequences. Not surprisingly, this brought forth a strong reaction, especially on the right, once the one-party system collapsed and with it, the 'approved' version of Hungary's wartime past. Among the nationalist/conservative camp there was elation that at last Admiral Horthy and his regime could be praised. Any criticism, or even a more nuanced approach, could be, and often was, dismissed as left-wing propaganda.

Horthy was neither a Fascist nor a Nazi. His regime was an authoritarian conservative managed democracy – not a liberal western democracy but also not a dictatorship. To add a further layer of complication, there are more perspectives beyond the classic right/left paradigm. Horthy was often perceived differently by Hungarians of different Christian faiths. For some Catholics, in the west of Hungary, who wanted to see the return of the royal family (known as 'Legitimists') Horthy was a traitor, who betrayed the Hapsburgs. Horthy was appointed Regent in 1920, acknowledging his role as a stand-in for the royal family, but did everything to prevent the return of Charles IV to the throne. But for Calvinist Hungarians in eastern Hungary, who were pro-independence and anti-Habsburg, Horthy was a hero, who rebuilt Hungary after the trauma of Trianon, ensured its independence and was the driving force behind the national revival.

Contested space at the new museums

A decade or so after Horthy's return to Kenderes, the two main historical museums opened in Budapest, both with considerable fanfare, and one, especially with considerable controversy. The Terror House museum opened in 2002. The name was apt. Its address, Andrassy way, 60 was indeed for decades a place of terror. After the Arrow Cross coup in October 1944, the party building became a place of brutality and murder. Those taken there did not expect to leave alive and most did not. Many were savagely tortured before being beaten to death. After the war the building was taken over by the Communist secret police. It was a seamless transition and the cellars soon echoed again to the screams of the victims. Many of the Arrow Cross jailers and torturers simply stayed on, now serving their new Communist masters. The exhibitions were both imaginative and utterly chilling. The basement, including the torture cells, have been preserved, complete with the instruments used – often even more unsettling for their banality, such as a length of rubber hose or a pair of pliers.

Yet inevitably, the Terror House triggered furious debates. Its critics pointed out that while the horrors of Hungary's Stalinist era in the 1940s and 1950s are shown in great and gory detail over several floors, only a few rooms dealt with the Arrow Cross and the museum glossed over the Horthy era. The harshest criticism – and praise – was reserved for the 400 photographs on the 'Wall of the Perpetrators', showing those who supposedly took part in the horrors. If this was a kind of historical justice, or at least recompense, it was rough and arbitrary. One of those photographs displayed showed a man called László Pető, who was according to the files, an interrogations officer for the secret police. His son Ivan Pető, then a Free Democrat MP, formerly a well-known anti-Communist dissident in the 1980s, was one of the most high-profile critics of the museum, accusing it of ignoring the Horthy era.

Dr Maria Schmidt, then an adviser to Viktor Orban, was dismissive of the complaints about the museum from left-wing and liberal politicians. The Terror House was a necessary correction to the former version of history. She told me: "So far Hungary has only had one version of history. It was the official version and it was accepted as such. Now they are confronted with a different version and people are not used to this. They are not used to debate." The Terror House's defenders also argued that the museum was telling the story of a particular building. A new museum, dedicated solely to the Hungarian Holocaust, would be the right place to tell the story of the genocide of Hungarian Jewry.

Two years later, in April 2004, Hungary finally confronted its darkest era, with the opening of the Holocaust Memorial Centre, the first such museum in the former Soviet bloc. The complex, which cost just over £5m, was built around a restored former synagogue on Pava street, in District IX, in a gritty, working class part of Budapest. The site includes exhibition halls, lecture rooms, a library and an archive research unit. That month marked the 60th anniversary of the start of the deportation of Hungary's Jews, when the Pava street synagogue was used as an internment camp. Like the Terror House, the public areas of the museum are intentionally jarring. The Terror House chills because so much of the original layout has been maintained, most of all in the basement cells. The Holocaust Memorial Centre is also unsettling – in part

because of the grim and tragic story that it tells but also because of its design. Partly inspired by Daniel Liebeskind's controversial museum in Berlin, it features angled walls, narrow windows and a dark main exhibition hall.

Balint Molnar, the centre's spokesman, was open about the intent to shock Hungary out of its complacency about its role in the Holocaust. He told me: "For 60 years there has been no debate about the responsibility of Hungarian society for the Holocaust. Under Communism everything was blamed on the Germans and a handful of Hungarian extremists." Beyond the genocide, the country needed to discuss numerous associated issues: the role of the Hungarian authorities, the lack of resistance and the wholesale looting of Jewish property. The centre had another, more ambitious aim, to universalise the Holocaust among non-Jewish Hungarians, to help to understand the extent of the country's loss. As Balint Molnar said, "The Holocaust in Hungary was not the private tragedy of the Jews. It is part of Hungarian history, as much as the revolutions of 1848 or 1956. Even now it is hard to comprehend the profound damage that has been done to Hungarian society"[3].

Hungary and 'history-washing'

Hungary's deep political divide remains broadly reflected in the continuing contested approaches to Holocaust guilt and responsibility. For many on the left, Hungary itself bears primary responsibility for the deportations, which they see as the ultimate expression of a long tradition of anti-Semitism that reaches back through the three anti-Jewish laws passed between 1938 and 1941 to the Numerus Clausus law of 1920 that restricted the number of Jewish students at universities. During the war Jewish men were recruited for labour service in the army, where tens of thousands perished, sometimes at the hands of their own officers, or in conditions of great brutality. For many on the right, primary guilt resides with the Germans. They point out that until the Nazi invasion of 1944 most of the Jewish community lived safely, and many were successul and prosperous. In comparison to neighbouring countries such as Poland or Serbia, Hungary was a sanctuary where Admiral Horthy repeatedly refused Hitler's demands to immiserate and deport the Jews. In the summer of 1944 Horthy also stopped the deportations and saved the Jews of Budapest.

Randolph Braham, the author of The Politics of Genocide, the central work on the Hungarian Holocaust, was a sharp critic of Hungary's post-war approach to historical memory. Himself Hungarian and a Holocaust survivor, Braham accused the leaders of both Hungary's Communist and post-Communist governments of "history-washing" through the techniques of "denationalisation" and "generalisation". The former transfers exclusive responsibility for the Holocaust to the Germans while the latter seeks to place the genocide of the Jews as part of a terrible war in which millions of others also suffered.

The clumsy attempts to rehabilitate the Gendarmerie in the late 1990s caused particular outrage. Working with the SS, the national paramilitary police force was responsible for the round-ups, ghettoization and deportations. There are numerous accounts of the brutality and sadistic pleasure the Gendarmes took in their work, including savage beatings and torture of the Jews to force them to reveal the location of any hidden valuables[4]. In December 1998 a television documentary on the Gendarmerie, entitled Hiven, becsülettel, vitézul (Faithfully, honourably, bravely) claimed that the paramilitary force had acted decently and humanely, to preserve law and order. The programme caused fury, especially among Jewish organisations. The following year a senior Hungarian politician unveiled a plaque to the Gendarmerie in the courtyard of the Institute of War History and Museum in Budapest's Castle district. (The precise further details of every twist and turn around memorials, events, government statements, Jewish organisations' responses and policy decisions are beyond the scope of this paper. They are detailed from a critical perspective by Braham in his 2014 paper "Hungary: The Assault on the Historical Memory of the Holocaust"[5].)

Whitewashing Vichy France

Hungary had no monopoly on shying away from taking responsibility for its role in the Holocaust. The discussion and debate may have stirred strong emotions, but it was more open than that in some of its post-Communist neighbours – and even western countries. France remained a democracy after 1945. Historians – and government officials – were free to explore and publicise its wartime record, which although grim was still better than that of many countries under German occupation. Around 76,000 Jews were sent to Auschwitz, two-thirds of whom were foreigners.

Like Hungary's Gendarmes, the French Milice, the collaborationist paramilitary organisation, enthusiastically participated in the round-ups and deportations, often with great savagery. But overall, of around 250,000 Jews living in France, more than two-thirds survived. Yet for decades after the war there was widespread reluctance to discuss the role of French officials and the French state in the deportations. French officialdom and the ruling elite preferred not to talk about France's role in the Holocaust. The French state ceased to exist after the German invasion, they claimed. The country had no agency. They blamed everything on the Nazis, whitewashing the central role of French officials and police in organising the deportations.

The violence of the 1968 riots tore apart the cosy post-war accord that saw those on different sides in the war co-habit peacefully if uneasily. The following year a landmark documentary was released, whose impact would still be felt decades later. *Le Chagrin et la Pitié* [The Sorrow and the Pity], by Marcel Ophüls, chronicled in detail the response of the population in the town of Clermont-Ferrand, 400 kilometres south of Paris, to the Nazi occupation. It included interviews with politicians, resistants and collaborators. It tore apart the national myth that most French people had resisted the Nazis. Most had not. Many had collaborated, most of all in the Vichy zone, the unoccupied southern area under French control. Yet the film was only shown in cinemas – to packed audiences. Some cinemas were stoned. France's ruling elite refused to show the film on television, declaring that it would destroy the fragile post-war consensus. The survival of fictional national myths was judged to be more important than facing the truth.

One reason the film was not shown on television was because a good number of former Vichy officials not only escaped justice, but had been living comfortable lives. René Bousquet was a high-ranking official in the Vichy police and had personally been involved in the round-ups and deportations of French Jews. After the war Bousquet served a short prison sentence and was later amnestied, before being welcomed back by the French ruling elite. During the 1980s he became a regular visitor to President Mitterrand. A new legal case against him faded away. Bousquet was assassinated in June 1993. Two years later, in July 1995, President Chirac finally broke the fifty-year taboo among French leaders, and acknowledged France's role in the Holocaust. "These dark hours have stained our history forever and are an insult to our past and our traditions. Yes, the criminal madness of the occupiers, was, as everyone knows, supported by French people, supported by the French state"[6].

The Turul spreads its wings

Ten years after Chirac's speech, in 2005, a new monument was erected in Budapest's District XII. A giant Turul, its wings extended, loomed over an imposing base. The Turul is a mythical bird whose roots reach back to the Magyar origin legends. Its powerful symbolism as a national icon saw it appropriated by the far-right during the Horthy era. The Turul student organisation had tens of thousands of members, who regularly beat and humiliated Jewish students. The Arrow Cross also incorporated the Turul into its badges and emblems. For its defenders, the Turul monument was a symbol of the Magyar nation. It was regrettable that it had been appropriated by the far-right during the dark years, but in itself it was not an anti-Semitic emblem. The bird is incorporated nowadays into the emblem of the Constitution Protection Service, the domestic state security service. But for the monument's critics, including the then mayor Gábor Demszky, the Turul's past had changed its essential nature. Whatever its origins, it was now inexorably part of the symbolism of the Arrow Cross and the far-right.

A legal battle erupted over the fate of the monument, as the city administration attempted to order the District XII council to take the monument down. The story, and its broader historical context, is told in detail in the groundbreaking 444.hu film, Monument to the Murderers. Gabor Pokorni, the area mayor, pledged that the monument would stay. But the dispute was also reanimating ancient ghosts and hatreds. This part of District XII was an Arrow Cross stronghold. A short walk from the monument was a building that was a former Arrow Cross headquarters, where prisoners were tortured and beaten to death. This was also the headquarters of Father Andras Kun, the psychopathic mass-murdering priest who delighted in sexually violating his female prisoners and shooting Jews en masse. Three of the worst massacres of the last convulsions of the Hungarian Holocaust took place not far from the Turul monument, all within a few days of each other, when hundreds of elderly Jews, their doctors and nurses were slaughtered.

The furore over the Turul monument enraged those on the far-right and led to open expressions of anti-Semitic hate. The Magyar Garda, the thuggish paramilitary wing of the then far-right Jobbik party, quickly sensed an opportunity and gathered at the monument. "Let me remind everyone that for now this city is still called Budapest, not Judapest," proclaimed one speaker. "For sympathy protests you should go to Tel Aviv or the Israeli embassy, not here." Another used openly Nazi language, declaring that "We must revolt, we must chase the parasitic hook-nosed Hungarian destroyer, country wrecking traitor crime gang from the Carpathian basin."[7] On one occasion a crowd gathered, hurling abuse at the police and counter-demonstrators, screaming, "Mockos zsidok, dirty Jews". Such displays aside, the Turul monument inadvertently showed how the wartime District XII Arrow Cross organisation was deeply entwined with the local community, as Zoltan Pokorni, the mayor, discovered. The base of the monument was inscribed with names of the Arrow Cross's victims. Among them was his grandfather, Jozsef. However although Jozsef Pokorni died in the last days of the war, shot in the spine by a Soviet soldier, he was not a victim. Pokorni was an Arrow Cross killer and had taken part in the massacres. For Pokorni, the revelation that his grandfather had been a mass murderer was profoundly traumatic.

A decade later, Pokorni looked back on his role in the battle of the Turul with regret, showing a self-awareness unusual in Hungarian politics. The monument immediately became the centre of a political battle between the twelfth district and the Budapest municipality, he recalled. "Today I regret those words I said back then. They were inconsiderate and in a sense arrogant…there are no excuses for it, perhaps only that I had battlefield blindness in the middle of such a political conflict"[8]. Even now the row still rumbles on. At one stage the council voted to leave the monument standing, but remove the names underneath. The plan was to repurpose it to commemorate the first world war and build a new monument for the victims of the second world war. In October 2024 Janos Lázár, the minister for construction and transportation, announced that the monument would be given the status of historic monument and so placed under statutory protection.

Crowd-sourcing the memory of the Holocaust

Nine years after the Turul monument was erected, another monument was unveiled which also triggered strong emotions. The Memorial for the Victims of German Occupation was erected in July 2014 in Liberty square, central Budapest. The green space and its surrounds, not far from Parliament, is one of Hungary's most contested public areas. At one end stands a Soviet-era memorial to the soldiers who fell liberating Budapest from the Nazis. The monument is emblazoned with Communist symbols, the display of which is illegal, but is protected by an international treaty with Russia. Facing it is the current American embassy, also the site of the pre-war Legation. During the Holocaust the building was taken over by Switzerland. There the courageous Swiss diplomat Carl Lutz provided a base for Jewish rescue organisations and issued protective papers. Nearby is a statue of the American general Harry Hill Bandholtz, who in 1919 prevented Romanian soldiers from looting the National Museum. Just off the square, inside a building owned by the Hungarian Reformed Church, is a large bronze bust of Admiral Horthy, looking out on the square.

The new memorial featured a large statue of the Archangel Gabriel holding an orb representing Hungarian sovereignty. A large eagle swoops down overhead, representing Germany, about to snatch the orb from Gabriel's hands. The two figures stand against a backdrop of a colonnade of broken columns. The memorial's stated intention was to commemorate all innocent victims of the Nazi occupation. In fact it had the opposite effect and caused instant uproar. Seventy years after the German invasion and the Holocaust, long-dormant, or privately expressed emotions, suddenly exploded into the public sphere. Perhaps anticipating this, the monument had been put up under cover of darkness and with heavy police protection. Jewish organisations, their allies and critics of the government furiously attacked the memorial as an attempt to whitewash history and portray Hungary as an innocent victim of the Nazis, rather than an active and enthusiastic participant in the Holocaust. Peter Parkanyi Raab, the sculptor behind the monument, said that the protestors were "consciously driving a wedge between Jewish and non-Jewish Hungarians"[9].

Nowadays no serious historian denies the central role of the Hungarian state in organising the Holocaust. Many of the key figures in the deportations were Hungarian: Andor Jaross, the minister of the interior and his henchmen László Endre and László Baky were all virulent anti-Semites. In 1960 Eichmann gave an interview with Life magazine and said:

> It was clear to me that I, as a German, could not demand the Jews from the Hungarians. We had too much trouble with that in Denmark. So I left the entire matter to the Hungarian authorities…And so it was no miracle that the first transport trains were soon rolling towards Auschwitz[10].

The reference to Denmark is telling and the contrast is stark. Danish authorities organised a massive rescue operation, sending 8,000 Jews by boat to Sweden. Hungarian authorities dragooned the full power of state to send 430,000 Jews to Auschwitz in one of the speediest and most efficient deportation operations of the Holocaust. Sporadic acts of individual bravery aside, there was no meaningful resistance by either the authorities or its citizens. As the historian Istvan Deak noted,

the deportation operation "was probably the smoothest administrative operation in Hungarian history"[11]. Soon after the memorial was erected one of the most moving Holocaust memorials anywhere appeared. Relatives of those killed began attaching testimonies, photographs and mementoes on the fence in front of the statues. Nowadays the area is filled with a crowd-sourced memorial of moving accounts of loss.

Re-assessing the Horthy era and its legacy

Defenders of Hungary – and Horthy's- wartime record point to the fact that he stopped the planned deportation of Budapest's Jews. Yet saving the capital's Jews also highlights his failure to even attempt to stop the deportation of the Jews from the countryside. Horthy remained as head of state all through the Nazi occupation, until he was deposed in a coup on October 15 by the SS and Arrow Cross. The fact that Horthy was never charged with war crimes – as he would have been, had he returned to Hungary - and instead died in exile in Portugal in 1957 leaves room for a more positive interpretation of the Horthy era. All governments seek to root themselves in the culture and tradition of the nation they govern – and this is especially important for a country whose history is as troubled and turbulent as Hungary's.

"The current government is keenly interested in perpetuating a positive picture of the Horthy era. It is a point of reference for the political establishment," says historian Zoltan Peterecz, a specialist on interwar Hungary. "If you look at how they take things from the past, you will find similarities with the 1920s and 1930s – the use of language and symbolism, their clothing, how counties are referred to – vármegye instead of megye - the return of the title főispán [chief magistrate or governor] even the weather report for the former Greater Hungary has a political aspect"[12].

This is in large part because there are few options for a government seeking to root itself in historical continuity. Before 1919 Hungary was not fully sovereign but was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Between 1945 and 1991 Hungary was occupied by the Soviets. Horthy's defenders argue that for all his flaws, and complicity in the Holocaust, between 1919 and 1944 Hungary remained a unitary, sovereign state which was steadily modernising.

Over the last few years the government has ensured that positive messaging about the Horthy regime remains a central part of Hungarian political discourse. In 2017 Prime Minister Viktor Orban lauded Horthy and other Hungarian leaders after 1920 as "exceptional statesmen". The speech caused anger among Jewish groups and in Israel, so much so that Peter Szijjarto, the foreign minister, was drafted to reassure the Israeli ambassador that Horthy had "positive periods but also very negative periods". As for his complicity in the Holocaust, "all these are historical transgressions the seriousness of which cannot be diminished"[13].

The discourse around the Holocaust and the government's position has changed, especially over the last decade. Numerous government officials, speaking publicly, have acknowledged Hungary's catastrophic failure to protect its Jewish citizens. Speaking in 2017, at a joint press conference with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Viktor Orban strongly denounced Hungary's alliance with the Nazis: "We decided that instead of protecting the Jewish community we chose collaboration with the Nazis. I made it clear that this will never happen again. In the future, the Hungarian government will protect all its citizens". This has happened. The Magyar Garda, whose thuggish members railed against Hungary's Jews twenty years ago at the Turul monument, was banned and has vanished. Nowadays demonstrators screaming about "Mockos zsidok" would be swiftly, and efficiently dispersed and arrested. The government commemorates both International Holocaust Memorial Day on January 27

and Hungary's own memorial day, on April 16, the anniversary of the first ghettoization in 1944. Hungary is an active participant in the international network of Holocaust commemorative organisations and events.

Yet despite the government's admission of Hungary's culpability in the Holocaust, nostalgia for the Horthy era still flourishes among some on the right. In 2023, thirty years after I watched Miklos Horthy's ashes being interred in the family crypt, János Lázár was also at Kenderes, inaugurating a new exhibition at the town's transport museum. Lázár paid fulsome homage to Hungary's wartime leader. "It is my conviction that a remembrance and homage is due to Miklos Horthy. It is due to Governor Miklos Horthy because in Miklos Horthy we can honour an exceptional statesman who was a true heroic soldier and a true Hungarian patriot"[14]. Lázár's praise again triggered strong criticism from the American and Israeli embassies as well as Jewish groups, including Róbert Frölich, the chief rabbi. This time there were no diplomatic telephone calls with the Israeli ambassador. Instead Lázár responded by posting an interview with Jozsef Antall, Hungary's first post-Communist prime minister. Antall said, "I consider Miklos Horthy a Hungarian patriot who had every right and moral basis to wish to rest in his homeland. Assessing Miklos Horthy's historical and political role is not only the task of historians but must be placed with dignity in the continuity and consciousness of the nation"[15].

Facing up to the past

Hungary has proved immune to the explosion of anti-Semitism that erupted across the western world after October 7 2023. Ancient stereotypes still endure but there have been no violent anti-Semitic attacks. In an ironic twist of history, Hungary – and the Czech Republic – the graveyards of so many Jews, are now two of the safest places to be Jewish. Throughout 2024, the eightieth anniversary of the deportations, there were numerous conferences and memorial events around the country. Perhaps the most notable took place in Parliament on April 17, Holocaust Memorial Day, in Parliament. Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, was recited in the same building where more than eighty years ago three sets of anti-Jewish legislation were passed. Tamás Sulyok, the president of Hungary spoke movingly, "We not only bow our heads to the memory of the victims of the Holocaust, but we also take responsibility for the future." For the president, like Zoltan Pokorni, this was also a very personal matter. It had come to light that his father, László Sulyok, had been a leader of the Hungarian Nazi party during the war years – for which he expressed his shock and remorse.

That same month Ferenc Kumin, the long-serving Hungarian ambassador to London, spoke openly about the need for Hungary to examine and discuss its wartime past at the launch of an English-language edition of the diaries of Ottó Komoly, a wartime leader of the Zionist resistance who was killed by the Arrow Cross in December 1944. How was it that he, an educated, informed person with a strong interest in history, had never heard of Komoly and his heroic deeds, Kumin asked? The "lost generation" of Hungarian Jewry, those Hungarians of Jewish ancestry who were brought up without their faith and only discovered their roots later in life, has been documented. But there was another 'lost generation' Kumin argued eloquently: the "lost generation" of Hungarian education, who grew up under Communism and for whom the country's wartime history was hidden and not discussed.

Nowadays a new generation of writers and film-makers are dealing with some of the darkest aspects of Hungarian history – and with considerable success. Son of Saul, for example, directed by László Nemes, is set in Auschwitz, where Saul is a Hungarian member of the Sonderkommando, who removed the bodies from the gas chambers. Strongly supported by the Hungarian National Film Fund, it won an Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 2016. On a personal note, in January 2025 the Hungarian embassy in London generously hosted the launch of my book, The Last Days of Budapest, the first English-language account of the Hungarian capital throughout the Second World War, which includes a detailed account of the Hungarian Holocaust. Ambassador Kumin and I had an open and wide-ranging public discussion about Hungary's history in those years and the need to shine a light on the country's wartime record.

A friend of mine once asked an acquaintance in the eastern part of Hungary what had happened to the now-vanished local Jewish community. "They went away," he said, then changed the subject. Who they were, where they went, how and why they "went away", may, for some Hungarians, still be an unwelcome and uncomfortable discussion. But it is taking place.

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