

## Parallel Memories? Public Memorialization of the Antifascist Struggle and Martyr Memorial Services in the Hungarian Jewish Community during Early Communism

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Photos of the Jewish National Assembly (Izraelita Országos Gyűlés) from February 20–21, 1950, show representatives of the Hungarian Jewish community sitting in their headquarters on Budapest's Síp street, together with Gyula Ortutay, Minister of Religion and Public Education. Behind them, a wall is adorned with the portraits of three men: Lenin, Stalin, and Mátyás Rákosi, the General Secretary of the Hungarian Workers' Party (Magyar Dolgozók Pártja). In the background, one can also see a large, ornate menorah, one of the most well-known symbols of Judaism. The photos depict what appears to be an unremarkable gathering, giving little indication of the dramatic turn that the assembly represented for Hungary's Jewish community.

The event marked the formal establishment of complete communist state control over Jewish institutions in Hungary. The atheist state implemented massive restrictions on all religious activities. It defined Jews strictly in religious terms, referring to them as "Israelites" (*izraeliták*) to emphasize a distinction from previous ethnic (and politically tainted) definitions. It was at this assembly in 1950 that the merger of the three traditional branches of the Hungarian Jewish religious community (the Neolog, the Orthodox, and the Status Quo Ante<sup>1</sup>) was announced. Everyone concerned, however, knew that the decision had not been made by the Jewish community leadership but by the communist state apparatus.

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<sup>1</sup> These three branches had existed since the so-called schism of 1871 with separate institutional structures and different understandings of Jewish religious practices.



**Figure 4.1.** Gyula Ortutay, representing the ruling communist Hungarian Workers' Party, speaks at the Jewish National Assembly, 1950. Courtesy of the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives, Budapest.

The merger was one in a series of communist policies that sought to consolidate the power of the Soviet-style Stalinist dictatorship of Mátyás Rákosi, who would lead Hungary's Communist Party and state until his forced retirement in 1956.<sup>2</sup> Financially, Jewish institutions became completely dependent on the state. Jewish schools were nationalized.<sup>3</sup> Many yeshivas were closed, their teachers incarcerated.<sup>4</sup> Religious Jews were forced to work on Saturdays and could not keep Sabbath.<sup>5</sup> The Hungarian Zionist Association had already been disbanded in 1949,<sup>6</sup> and the activities of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee

2 See Árpád Pünkösti, *Rákosi: Sztálin legjobb tanítványa* [Rákosi: Stalin's best student] (Budapest: Fapadoskonyv.hu, 2010).

3 For further details about the Jewish community's situation under early Communism, see Róbert Győri Szabó, *A kommunizmus és a zsidóság Magyarországon 1945 után* [Communism and Jews in Hungary after 1945] (Budapest: Gondolat, 2009); György Haraszti, "Lejtmenetben: A magyarországi zsidóság vészorszak utáni első 12 éve" [Downhill: the first 12 years of Hungary's Jewry after the age of destruction], *Múlt és Jövő*, no. 4 (2007): 4–36; András Kovács, "Magyar zsidó politika a háború végétől a kommunista rendszer bukásáig" [Policies towards Jews from the end of the war until the fall of communism], *Múlt és Jövő*, no. 3 (2003): 3–39.

4 For example, the teachers of Budapest's Kazinczy street Orthodox synagogue were imprisoned. See Zsuzsanna Toronyi, "Bevezető" [Introduction], *Magyar Zsidó Levéltári Füzetek*, no. 7 (2010): 22; Sándor Bacskai, "A második nap" [The second day], *Múlt és Jövő*, no. 3 (2003): 50.

5 Sándor Bacskai, *Egy lépés Jeruzsálem felé* [One step towards Jerusalem] (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő, 1997), 121.

6 Attila Novák, *Átmenetben: A cionista mozgalom négy éve Magyarországon* [In transition: the four years of the Zionist movement in Hungary] (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő, 2000), 172.

(JDC) aid organization were banned two years later.<sup>7</sup> Members of the Party who had received aid from the JDC (or whose close family members did so), or who had been members of the Hungarian Zionist Association (Magyar Cionista Szövetség) were dismissed from the Party.<sup>8</sup> Several former members of the organization were arrested, but even Jews who did not have close ties with the Zionists often lived in fear of being picked up by the State Security Services.<sup>9</sup> The communists also employed explicitly or implicitly antisemitic policies and rhetoric.<sup>10</sup> Even though the state's ideology was officially antifascist (and thus "anti-antisemitic"), both coded and open antisemitism was present in Hungarian society in general, and within the Communist Party in particular.<sup>11</sup> Following similar initiatives in Moscow<sup>12</sup> and elsewhere in the Soviet zone of influence,<sup>13</sup> several spectacular anti-Zionist, antisemitic trials were scheduled to take place in 1953. The plans were only aborted by Stalin's death and the consequent change in Soviet policies.

According to the renowned historian of the Hungarian Holocaust Randolph L. Braham, the communists' totalitarian repression effectively silenced narratives of Jewish victimhood during the Holocaust.<sup>14</sup> Regina Fritz also noted

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- 7 For further details about the activities of the Joint in postwar Hungary, see Kinga Frojimovics, "JDC Activity in Hungary, 1945–1953," in *The JDC at 100: A Century of Humanitarianism*, ed. Linda G. Levi, Atina Grossmann, Maud S. Mandel, and Avinoam Patt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019), 421–38; Kinga Frojimovics, "Different Interpretations of Reconstruction: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the World Jewish Congress in Hungary after the Holocaust," in *The Jews are Coming Back: The Return of the Jews to their Countries of Origin after World War II*, ed. David Bankier (New York and Jerusalem: Berghahn Books and Yad Vashem, 2005), 277–92.
- 8 László Svéd, "A magyar zsidóság és a hatalom" [Hungarian Jews and authority], *Múltunk*, nos. 2–3 (1993): 248–98.
- 9 Sándor Bacskai, *Egy lépés Jeruzsálem felé*, 44–50.
- 10 András Kovács, "Antisemitic Elements in Communist Discourse: A Continuity Factor in Post-War Hungarian Antisemitism," in *Antisemitism in an Era of Transition: Continuities and Impact in Post-Communist Poland and Hungary*, ed. François Guesnet and Gwen Jones (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Land, 2014), 135–47; Róbert Györi Szabó, *A kommunizmus és a zsidóság*, 212–19; Éva Ständeisky, *Antiszemizmusok* [Antisemitisms] (Budapest: Argumentum, 2007), 39–43.
- 11 On the various forms of antisemitism during the communist period in Hungary, see Éva Ständeisky, *Antiszemizmusok*.
- 12 On anti-Zionist trials in the Soviet Union, see Jonathan Brent and Vladimir Naumov, *Stalin's Last Crime: The Plot Against the Jewish Doctors, 1948–1953* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); Zvi Y. Gitelman, "The Evolution of Soviet Anti-Zionism: From Principle to Pragmatism," in *Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism in the Contemporary World*, ed. Robert S. Wistrich (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 11–25.
- 13 One of the most notorious trials was against Rudolf Slánský in Czechoslovakia. See Helaine Debra Blumenthal, "Communism on Trial: The Slansky Affair and Anti-Semitism in Post-WWII Europe," UC Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, July 23, 2009, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4wr2g4kf>.
- 14 Randolph L. Braham, "Assault on Historical Memory: Hungarian Nationalists and the Holocaust," in *Hungary and the Holocaust: Confrontation with the Past* (Symposium Proceedings, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, 2001), 51.

in her monograph on Holocaust memory in Hungary that “in the Rákosi era, the memory of the persecution and murder of Hungarian Jews was increasingly limited to the Jewish community.”<sup>15</sup> Communist doctrine interpreted World War II as the struggle between fascism and antifascism, a monumental battle in which the persecution of Jews was but an episode, leaving no room for a more particular public narrative about their racial persecution. When Jews did make an appearance in official narratives on World War II, they were but one group among the many victims of fascism.

Though newer research has called into question the universal validity of this statement, scholars have only concentrated on the post-Stalinist period, particularly the 1960s.<sup>16</sup> When it comes to Rákosi’s reign, academics have still not challenged this assumption. This paper, however, offers a critical reassessment of this “myth of silence,” arguing that memorialization of the Holocaust did occur during the first years of communism in Hungary and was not completely suppressed. Though such efforts were indeed marginalized, some elements of the history of the wartime destruction of Hungarian Jewry did in fact make their way into official versions of the history of the war. Moreover, the communist regime tolerated the Jewish community’s memorial services for martyrs of the war (i.e., Jewish victims of the Holocaust), despite its preference for antifascist com-

15 Regina Fritz, *Nach Krieg und Judenmord: Ungarns Geschichtspolitik seit 1944* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012), 236.

16 The thematic issue of *Múltunk*, no. 2 (2019) included several essays on various aspects of Holocaust memory during socialism. See also Tamás Bezsenyi and András Lénárt, “The Legacy of World War II and Belated Justice in the Hungarian Films of the Early Kádár Era,” *Hungarian Historical Review* 6, no. 2 (2017): 300–327; Kata Bohus, “Not a Jewish Question? The Holocaust in Hungary in the Press and Propaganda of the Kádár Regime during the Trial of Adolf Eichmann,” *Hungarian Historical Review* 4, no. 3 (2015): 737–72; Richard S. Esbenshade, “‘Anti-Fascist Literature’ As Holocaust Literature? The Holocaust in the Hungarian Socialist Literary Marketplace, 1956–1970,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 31 (2018): 405–26; András Lénárt, “Perek: A Holokauszt tematizálásának példái a hatvanas évek magyarországi nyilvánosságában” [Trials. Examples of the thematization of the Holocaust in Hungary’s public sphere in the 1960s], in *A forradalom ígérete? Történelmi és nyelvi események kereszteződései*, ed. Tibor Bónus, Csongor Lőrincz, and Péter Szirák (Budapest: Ráció, 2014); Vera Surányi, ed., *Minarik, Sonnenschein és a többiek: zsidó sorsok magyar filmekben* [Minarik, Sonnenschein, and the others: Jewish fates in Hungarian films] (Budapest: MZSKE-Szombat, 2001); András Szécsényi, “Holokauszt reprezentáció a Kádár-korban: A hatvanas évek közéleti és tudományos diskurzusának emlékezetpolitikai vetületei” [Holocaust representation in the Kádár era: aspects of memory politics in the public and intellectual discourses of the sixties], in *Tanulmányok a holokausztról*, ed. Randolph L. Braham (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő, 2017), 291–329; Teri Szűcs, *A felejtés története: A Holokauszt tanúsága irodalmi művekben* [The history of forgetting: commemorating the Holocaust in literary works] (Budapest: Kalligramm, 2011); Máté Zombory, András Lénárt, and Anna Lujza Szász, “Elfeledett szembenézés: Holokauszt és emlékezés Fábri Zoltán Utószazon c. filmjében” [Forgotten confrontation: Holocaust and memory in Zoltán Fábri’s film *After-Season*], *Budapesti Könyvszemle*, no. 3 (2013): 245–56.

memorations of World War II that focused on communist political martyrs and heroes, because some aspects of the Jewish services matched the official ideological standards and language.

Furthermore, a close examination of the content and context of memorial celebrations and so-called martyr memorial services held by the Hungarian Jewish community reveals that these celebrations came to fill in the gaping hole left by the lack of community events and services no longer available to many Jewish survivors, particularly in provincial Hungary. These martyr memorial celebrations within the Jewish community strengthened cohesion at a time when the atheist communist state all but destroyed it and represented the community's early attempts to develop a new perception of itself, one framed by the memory (and memorialization) of the Holocaust.

### **Mutually Exclusive Memories? Jewish Martyr Memorial Services and the Communist "Cult of the Martyrs"**

The manifesto of Hungarian Jews in 1946 proclaimed that "the heaviest losses caused by the last world war and fascist insanity in this country have been suffered by the Jews."<sup>17</sup> The document was one of many testimonies that the community produced in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Unquestionably, Jewish survivors would dominate the field of Holocaust historiography and memory production in the postwar years. They took on the job of documenting the tragedy, creating statistics, and laying the foundations of memorialization practices.

Shortly after the end of the war, "rabbis and other religious leaders [all over Europe] attempted to think religiously about both how to commemorate the victims and how to explain their deaths."<sup>18</sup> They needed to address serious questions of Jewish religious practice (like how to convene a minyan of ten Jewish men to pray during the synagogue services when there were less than ten survivors at a given location) as well as larger theological problems (like deciding whether the destruction of World War II should be included in the preexisting narrative of Jewish suffering or considered something new). The desire to commemorate victims also posed philosophical questions to the community of sur-

<sup>17</sup> *Manifesto of Hungarian Jewry*, August 7, 1946, Hungarian Jewish Archives, XXXIII-5-b/4, 29.

<sup>18</sup> Leah Wolfson, *Jewish Responses to Persecution*, vol. 5, 1944-1946 (Washington DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2015), 410-11.

vivors. Was it at all possible to give meaning to such destruction? Should Jews take revenge on the persecutors or was forgiveness possible? What value should be placed on differences within the Jewish community when Jews were targeted as a whole? Were religious bodies responsible for the commemoration of those victims they had not recognized as Jews, but who had nevertheless been persecuted on the grounds of being racially considered Jews?

Historian Leah Wolfson claims that “memorial services and the reformulation of Jewish holidays provided a way to perform evolving theological beliefs and practices”<sup>19</sup> about these fundamental issues. Commemorating Jewish martyrdom had played an important role in both Jewish religious practice and historiography for centuries, and thus the reformulation of this tradition in the wake of the Holocaust is unsurprising. Medieval *Memorbücher* of Central European Jews listed the Jewish martyrs who had been killed during the first Crusade and other medieval massacres. Traditional fast days of Jewish religious tradition commemorate tragedies that befell the ancient Jewish people, for example *Tzom Gedaliah* (The Fast of Gedaliah) which commemorates the assassination of Ben Achikam, the Governor of Israel during the days of the Babylonian conquest. The 20th of Sivan was established in Ashkenazi communities as a Memorial Day of fasting to commemorate the Kholmetsky massacres that had taken place in 1648–49 in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. During the Cossack and peasant revolt against Polish rule, hundreds of Jewish communities were destroyed. Postwar martyr memorial services can be viewed as newer forms of this longer tradition of commemorating Jewish martyrdom.

The communist narrative of World War II was formed at the same time when the new commemorative traditions of Jewish victimhood were established within the Jewish community. Communist propagandists and historians in Hungary had to face the fact that the country had entered the war on the side of Nazi Germany and remained its ally despite the Horthy leadership’s aborted attempt to switch sides in 1944. The narrative of the successful antifascist struggle bore an immense significance in the Soviet Union where millions had died<sup>20</sup> to defeat Nazi Germany, but Hungarian soldiers had given their

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19 Wolfson, *Jewish Responses to Persecution*, 415.

20 Nearly 27 million Soviet citizens died in the course of what Joseph Stalin declared to be the Great Patriotic War, constituting half of the total 55 million victims of World War II. Out of this 27 million, close to 9 million were military dead. Roger Markwick, “The Great Patriotic War in Soviet and Post-Soviet Collective Memory,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Postwar European History*, ed. Dan Stone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 692–713; Olga Baranova, “Politics of Memory of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union,” working paper, Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen, [www.iwm.at](http://www.iwm.at), accessed January 13, 2019.

lives fighting on the opposite side, making commemoration of the antifascist struggle in the country much more fraught. Moreover, the homegrown Hungarian communist movement had been weak and received little support from the population before or during the war, generating a feeble and insignificant opposition to fascism in the country.<sup>21</sup> However, communist historians could not emphasize this. Had they done so, the communist takeover after 1948 would have seemed imposed by the Soviets and opposed by the majority of the Hungarian population.<sup>22</sup>

To remedy this discrepancy and to construct, retroactively, an image of wide popular support for the Hungarian antifascist movement before and during the war, the communist regime presented its own miniscule wartime movement as one embedded in the tradition of Hungary's national history, transforming its fairly minor antifascist heroes into national ones.<sup>23</sup> "Our martyrs were everywhere to fight against the enemies of the Hungarian people. . . . The French Communist Party is also called the party of martyrs because they alone gave more heroes for the liberation of their homeland than all the other political parties together. We can proudly say the same thing about the Hungarian Communist Party,"<sup>24</sup> wrote General Secretary Mátyás Rákosi in 1946, exaggerating the role of his Party both in the imagined, grandiose Hungarian antifascist resistance, and in the Soviet occupation that he interpreted as liberation.

The nascent communist state's attitude toward political opposition to Admiral Miklós Horthy's regime between 1920 and 1944 was similar. The minutes from a meeting of the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party Committee of Greater Budapest in July 1949 sheds light on this phenomenon. Discussing the "fight of Hungarian communists against the oppressive Horthy regime," the department declared that "these [communists] are the heroes of the Hungarian people, who fought and died for the freedom and independence of the working people even though they did not live to see the liberation of our

21 István Deák, "A Fatal Compromise? The Debate Over Collaboration and Resistance in Hungary," *East European Politics and Society* 9, no. 2 (Spring, 1995): 209–33.

22 Hungary was by no means the only country in Europe where national identities and historical narratives had to be reconciled with the general population's wartime collaboration with the German occupiers, and their indifference (or even hostility) towards their persecuted Jewish neighbors. See Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945–1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

23 Martin Mevius, *Agents of Moscow: The Hungarian Communist Party and the Origins of Socialist Patriotism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 191–212.

24 *A Magyar szabadságért: A Magyar Kommunista Párt vértanúi* [For Hungarian freedom: martyrs of the Hungarian Communist Party] (Budapest: Szikra, 1946), 7–8.



country and our people, achieved by the Red Army of the Soviet Union.”<sup>25</sup> This narrative emphasized the “importance of wartime sacrifice as a model of the antifascist struggle”<sup>26</sup> (i.e., active participation in political opposition) that would qualify someone as a martyr.

The antifascist narrative was being developed during the early years of communist rule and, in practice, it was not always clear who actually belonged among its martyrs and heroes. For example, according to a 1948 governmental decree, those who had died during forced labor service during World War II were considered to have met a “heroic death” (*hősi halál*).<sup>27</sup> The category was not only a symbolic honor but also brought financial benefits for surviving family members. With the inclusion of those who had died during labor service, a group of predominantly Jewish martyrs was established. Forced labor service meant unarmed military service during World War II, and though originally not established exclusively for Jews, as the war progressed, it gradually became a method of discrimination against Jewish men (defined according to racial laws) of military age.<sup>28</sup> Forced labor service cost the lives of 50–70,000 people,<sup>29</sup> the great majority of them (over 40,000) Jews. That they were defined as war heroes by the postwar Hungarian government contradicted a strictly political activity-based definition of heroism or martyrdom.

25 “Javaslat mártírjaink megemlékezésére” [Proposal to remember our martyrs] by the Propaganda Department of the Party Committee of Greater Budapest, July 5, 1949. Budapest City Archives, HU BFL – XXXV.95.a, MDP Budapesti Titkárságának ülései, July 19, 1949.

26 Péter Apor, *Fabricating Authenticity in Soviet Hungary: The Afterlife of the First Hungarian Soviet Republic in the Age of State Socialism* (London: Anthem Press, 2014), 29.

27 “A magyar köztársaság kormányának 6510/1948: számú rendelete a katonai szolgálatot teljesítő személyekre és családtagjaikra vonatkozó születés, házasságkötés és halál, valamint a hősi halálra vonatkozó megjelölés anyakönyvezése tárgyában” [Decree no. 6510/1948 of the government of the Republic of Hungary: on the registration of births, marriages and deaths of persons performing military service and their family members, as well as the designation of a heroic death], *Magyar Közlöny*, no. 133 (June 15, 1948): 1341; “Kik a hősi halottak? Rendelet az elhunyt hadifoglyok, muszósok, leventék, szabadságharcosok és 44-es szökevények hősi halottá nyilvánításáról” [Who are the heroic dead? Decree about the declaration of the heroic deaths of deceased prisoners of war, labor service men, levante members, freedom fighters, and fugitives of 1944], *Világ*, June 16, 1948, 6.

28 For a comparative perspective on the institution of Hungarian forced labor service, see László Csősz, et al., “Munkaszolgálat a második világháború idején a történelmi Magyarország utódállamaiban” [Labor service during World War II in the successor states of historic Hungary], *Múltunk*, no. 2 (2015): 72–139. The edited volume by Elek Karsai, *Fegyvertelen álltak az aknamezőkön...: Dokumentumok a munkaszolgálat történetéhez Magyarországon* [“They stood unarmed in the minefields...”: Documents on the history of labor service in Hungary] (Budapest: MIOK, 1962) was the first comprehensive documentary account of forced labor service in Hungary that was published during the communist period.

29 Csősz, et al., “Munkaszolgálat,” 120.



There was one element in the forming new communist memory politics that vaguely resonated with Jewish experiences and commemorations of the war's end. Introduced in 1950,<sup>30</sup> April 4 became the national holiday of Hungary's liberation by the Soviet Red Army.<sup>31</sup> Mass celebrations and processions held all over the country thanked the victorious Red Army for liberation, and wreathing ceremonies at symbolic graves and monuments reminded everyone to the sacrifices of Soviet soldiers who had died during military operations in Hungary.<sup>32</sup> In early 1945, the arrival of the Red Army was a question of life and death for the country's surviving Jews, most of whom were by then confined in the Budapest ghettos,<sup>33</sup> and terrorized and decimated by the Hungarian Arrow Cross militia. For them, as opposed to Hungary's non-Jewish population that rightfully dreaded the Soviets' approach,<sup>34</sup> the Red Army's arrival was indeed an event to be celebrated. "They are here! Finally, the Russians have arrived," wrote the relieved Éva Weinmann in her diary, which she managed to keep even in the Budapest ghetto, on January 19, 1945.<sup>35</sup> The narrative of freedom was central to the yearly celebrations commemorating the liberation of the Budapest ghetto held by the Jewish community during the postwar years, and allowed for the continued functioning of a religious space as a location for gathering large numbers of community members without imposing the threat of state retributions on them.

30 Legislative Decree no. 10/1950 officially proclaimed April 4 the Day of Hungary's Liberation.

31 In fact, Soviet military operations in Hungary continued at least until April 11, 1945, so even the date of Soviet "liberation" was incorrect.

32 Minutes of the Meeting of the Secretariat of the Hungarian Workers' Party, March 8, 1951, Hungarian National Archives (MNL OL), 276. f. 54. cs. 133. 6. e.

33 Though Budapest's Jewish residents were forced into a ghetto during the last phase of the war, the rapid advance of the Red Army prevented large-scale deportations from the city, which was liberated in February 1945. The Jewish survival rate was above 50 percent in the capital, as opposed to a mere 20 percent in the provinces. Thus, the majority of survivors in Hungary—about 120,000–140,000 persons—lived in Budapest. Tamás Stark, *Zsidóság a vészidőszakban és a felszabadulás után (1939–1955)* [Jews in the age of destruction and after liberation, 1939–1955] (Budapest: MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 1995), 47. András Kovács refers to 144,000 survivors in Budapest. András Kovács, "Jews and Jewishness in Post-war Hungary," *Quest: Issues in Contemporary Jewish History*, no. 1 (2010): 39.

34 Soviet troops brought immense suffering to the country: violence, killing, rape, and looting were common events. They took more than half a million Hungarians to Soviet labor camps, from which tens of thousands never returned. On these various issues, see Andrea Pető, *Elmondani az elmondhatatlant: A nemi erőszak Magyarországon a II. világháború alatt* [To say the unspeakable: Sexual violence in Hungary during World War II] (Budapest: Jaffa, 2018); Éva Mária Varga, "Magyar hadifoglyok és internáltak a Szovjetunióban az oroszországi levéltári források tükrében (1941–1956)" [Hungarian prisoners of war and internees in the Soviet Union in the light of Russian archival sources, 1941–1956], PhD diss., Eötvös Loránd University, 2008; Krisztián Ungváry, *Budapest ostroma* [The siege of Budapest] (Budapest: Corvina, 2005), 281–95.

35 The original document can be found in the collections of the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives. The diary's text is available at: [https://issuu.com/milev/docs/weinmann\\_lapozos/35](https://issuu.com/milev/docs/weinmann_lapozos/35), last accessed December 10, 2019.

For very different reasons, both the Hungarian communist state and Jewish survivors were struggling with the problem of how to interpret the recent war, and the deaths it caused, in a historical perspective. Though the totalizing state did not tolerate deviance in questions of ideology, the communist narrative of antifascism and its heroes and martyrs was not yet ossified, and suffered from discrepancies and inconsistencies at this time. Though communist propaganda did not allow the inclusion of explicit accounts of Jewish persecution during World War II into this antifascist narrative framework, some elements of Jewish commemorations resonated with official interpretations of the war. This had long-term consequences for Holocaust memorialization practices that managed to continue, if in a very limited and restricted form, among Jewish survivors and filled a void that the officially imposed silence left among them.

## Screaming Silences? Memorialization of World War II in Public Spaces

A monumental, six-meter-tall sculpture commemorating the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, who had saved thousands of Jewish lives in Budapest during the war, was supposed to be unveiled in Budapest's Szent István Park on April 10, 1949. The structure had already been standing in the small green public space next to the Danube for days, ready and waiting for the big day. The area was part of the former "International Ghetto"<sup>36</sup> that had housed thousands of Jews during World War II who were protected by a number of different neutral powers, most importantly Sweden. However, the inauguration of the statue never took place.

During the night on April 9, 1949, there was an unusual commotion around the sculpture. Pál Pátzay, the memorial's well-known and decorated sculptor got a phone call from his friend, writer Lajos Hatvany, in the wee hours of the morning of April 10. Hatvany, who lived right next to the park, witnessed what happened. "Pali, your sculpture is being demolished right now!" he shouted into the telephone. But by the time the confused and rather panicked Pátzay made his way to the scene from the other side of the river, he only found the empty space where his sculpture used to stand. The figure, depicting a muscular man squeez-

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36 The International Ghetto was established by the government of the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party in November 1944. About the ghettoization of Budapest, see Tim Cole, *Holocaust City: The Making of a Jewish Ghetto* (London: Routledge, 2003).

ing the neck of a snake that is attacking him, together with the base and the inscription on it, disappeared.<sup>37</sup>

As it soon turned out, Hungarian communist authorities took the sculpture down on direct Soviet orders. Wallenberg arrived in Budapest in the summer of 1944, when deportations of Hungarian Jews in the provinces were well underway. Having no doubts that the same fate awaited the 200,000 strong Jewish community of Budapest, Wallenberg issued thousands of Swedish protective passports (the so-called *Schutzpass*) to Hungarian Jews, and also sheltered many in about 30 protected buildings in what is now Budapest's 13th district.<sup>38</sup> Wallenberg disappeared, under mysterious circumstances, on January 17, 1945, after having been seen in the company of Soviet officials as the Red Army besieged Budapest. Presumably, he was detained on suspicion of espionage and was subsequently murdered by the NKVD.<sup>39</sup> Soviet authorities in 1949 probably wanted to avoid the publicity about Wallenberg's suspicious disappearance, and thus instructed Hungarian authorities to call off the inauguration of the monument in Szent István Park. Furthermore, Wallenberg's story did not fit at all with the antifascist narrative. He came from a western country, he was not a communist, and he was not trying to save communists or defeat the fascists. He was to be commemorated for saving Jews, regardless of their political leanings, and he was killed by the so-called antifascists as a potential enemy.

Though the inauguration was aborted, the artwork and its political significance managed to survive both physically and in the public mind. A year later, in August 1950, Pátzay exhibited a smaller version of it in Budapest's Art Hall (Műcsarnok) during the First Hungarian Fine Art Exhibition (I. Magyar Képzőművészeti Kiállítás). The bronze sculpture had received a new title, "Figure with Snake" (*Kígyós figura*), and was now presented as an antifascist work, symbolizing the fight between ideologies where the good man (socialism/antifascism) triumphs over the evil snake (fascism). According to the introduction of the exhibition's catalogue, "with the leadership of our Party, we have rebuilt

37 Gábor Murányi, "Wallenberg-emlékművek Budapesten" [Wallenberg monuments in Budapest], *Barátság* 19, no. 2 (2012): 7122–26.

38 For a detailed description of Wallenberg's activities in Budapest, see Bengt Jangfeldt, *The Hero of Budapest: The Triumph and Tragedy of Raoul Wallenberg* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2014).

39 On the arrest, see Mária Ember, "Wallenberg elrablása" [Wallenberg's abduction], *Budapesti Negyed* 8, no. 2 (1995): 181–208. Based on a Soviet government report from 1956, Wallenberg was long believed to have died on July 17, 1947, while imprisoned by Soviet authorities in Moscow's infamous Lubyanka Prison. However, eyewitness accounts of Wallenberg still being alive in the Soviet penal system after that date called his death into question. The exact date and circumstances of Wallenberg's death are not known up to this day.

our country from the ruins, we gained victory after victory against the internal and external enemy, and successfully laid the basis of socialism.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, Pátzay’s figure commemorating the real heroic deeds of a Swedish individual came to symbolize the fictitious collective effort of the Hungarian people to defeat fascism and build communism. According to contemporary reports, the sculpture received a lot of attention from the visitors of the exhibit,<sup>41</sup> though a professional evaluation at the meeting of the Association of Hungarian Artists of Fine and Applied Arts (Magyar Képző- és Iparművész Szövetség) criticized the piece for relying on symbolism rather than a realistic portrayal (surely a consequence of the sensitivity of the of the artwork’s original topic).<sup>42</sup>

When György Rácz, an architect entrusted with the planning of a pharmaceutical company’s penicillin production building in the city of Debrecen saw Pátzay’s sculpture at the exhibit, he decided to get it for the garden of the future building. When he mentioned his idea to Iván Tabéry, the director of the Iparterv State Architectural Office who oversaw industrial construction in the whole country, Tabéry was baffled. “For the love of God, are you always mixed up in such things?” he exclaimed to Rácz, “That is the Raoul Wallenberg memorial that was demolished.”<sup>43</sup> Tabéry knew, at first mention, which sculpture Rácz was talking about and its original meaning was absolutely clear for him. That the industrial architect Tabéry, who was neither a propagandist nor deeply involved in memory politics, knew about the statue’s removal indicates that its connection to Wallenberg was not immediately erased from public memory.

Rácz did not change his plans and in 1952 or 1953, a copy of the sculpture was permanently erected in front of the pharmaceutical company, which appropriated it as the company’s emblem.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, the repaired original statue was placed in the forested area behind the company buildings, hidden out of

40 *I. Magyar Képzőművészeti Kiállítás: Műcsarnok, Hősök Tere, 1950* [First Hungarian Fine Art Exhibition: Art Hall, Heroes’ Square, 1950] (Budapest: Szikra, 1950).

41 “Az I. Magyar Képzőművészeti Kiállítás szoborművei” [Sculptures of the First Hungarian Fine Art Exhibition], *Kis Újság*, September 2, 1950, 4.

42 One participant at a meeting of the Association opined that “[t]he way Pátzay talks about the fight against fascism with his statue was the way the bourgeoisie fought: vaguely, elusively.” “A Magyar Képző- és Iparművész Szövetség szakmai ankétja” [Discussion of the Association of Hungarian Artists of Fine and Applied Arts], *Szabad Művészet*, December 1, 1950: 476.

43 Barnabás Winkler’s academic chair acceptance speech at the Széchenyi Academy of Literature and Art, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, March 8, 2010, [https://mta.hu/data/dokumentumok/szima/szekfoglakok/Winkler\\_Barnabas.pdf](https://mta.hu/data/dokumentumok/szima/szekfoglakok/Winkler_Barnabas.pdf).

44 Originally, the company was called Hajdúsági Gyógyszergyár, and after its merger with the Debreceni Gyógyszergyár in 1960, it was renamed Biogal and became one of the biggest pharmaceutical companies in communist Hungary. For further details on its history, see *10 éves a Biogal Gyógyszergyár* (Debrecen: Alföldi Nyomda, 1962).

sight. The male figure with the snake appeared on millions of medication packages during communism, becoming a well-known symbol of fighting diseases.<sup>45</sup>

Instead of an example of the communist suppression of the memory of the Holocaust, which it may seem at first glance, the history of the Wallenberg statue and its disappearance should be viewed as a case that highlights the regime's intolerance of narratives that could have questioned communism's (and the Soviet Union's) commitment towards antifascism. The statue was removed not because Wallenberg had saved Jews specifically but because he was a representative of a capitalist country engaged in true antifascist activities, captured (and most likely killed) by the supposedly antifascist Soviets. This is further supported by the fact that in 1953, a show-trial was planned where two wartime leaders of the Hungarian Jewish Council—Lajos Stöckler and Miksa Domonkos—would have been accused with Wallenberg's murder, proving that the murderers of the diplomat were not in Moscow.<sup>46</sup> Stöckler and Domonkos were horribly tortured in prison, but eventually freed in November 1953, when the show-trial preparations were aborted after Stalin's death.

Ironically, the postwar communist ideological commitment to antifascism made the survival of the Wallenberg sculpture possible: though stripped from its original, very concrete antifascist meaning (i.e., to commemorate a man who saved lives that were supposed to be extinguished by German and Hungarian fascists), it was given a new interpretation through a symbolic fight of (fascist and antifascist) ideologies. In fact, there is no indication that the third transformation of the artwork's message into something apolitical was the result of communist ideological considerations. Most probably, it was a mere coincidence.

That the abrupt and drastic removal of the Wallenberg statue from Szent István park had more to do with the attempt to cover up Soviet war-crimes than the tabooization of Holocaust memory can further be underscored by the fate of another, similar artwork. The journal *Világ* reported a mere three months after the Wallenberg statue incident that the renowned Hungarian caricaturist

45 A replica of this original statue would eventually be erected in Szent István park on April 18, 1999, fifty years after this episode. As Pátzay was already dead, the copy was made by Sándor Györfi.

46 József Szekeres, *A pesti gettók 1945 januári megmentése: "A magyar Schindler"—Szalai Pál visszaemlékezései és más dokumentumok alapján* [The rescue of the Pest ghettos in January 1945: "The Hungarian Schindler"—Based on the recollections of Pál Szalai and other documents] (Budapest: BFL, 1997); János Kenedi, "Egy kiállítás (hiányzó) képei 2," *Élet és Irodalom* 48, no. 42, October 15, 2004, <https://www.es.hu/cikk/2004-10-18/kenedi-janos/egy-kiallitas-hianyzo-kepei-2.html>.

and painter Lipót Herman<sup>47</sup> had just finished a monumental painting. The composition depicted “various martyrdoms (labor service, deportation, ghetto, etc.) surrounding one single vision: the resurrection and glorification of millions of martyrs.”<sup>48</sup> Herman was quoted as saying that he had wished that destructive “fascist cruelties” had not provided such rich materials for his art about resurrection. A significant collection of Herman’s art was exhibited in Budapest’s Ernst Museum in 1954 and the introductory text of the catalogue also mentioned his sources of inspiration in the postwar years, when he was motivated to work by “the liberation from the chains of fascism” and by “Persecution, the painful memory of the millions who died.”<sup>49</sup> Though it seems that Herman’s painting depicting the death and resurrection of Jews who had died during the Holocaust was not exhibited at that time, the topic of Jewish martyrdom was clearly discussed in both of the above mentioned sources. This discussion was possible as long as it was placed within the context of fascism’s cruelty, and as far as those who had suffered were not admittedly engaged in political activities outside the communist movement.

## Marginalized Memory? Martyr Memorial Services in the Jewish Community<sup>50</sup>

The need to erect one central memorial structure to commemorate the approximately 600,000<sup>51</sup> Hungarian Jewish victims of the Holocaust, most of whose

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47 Lipót Herman (1884–1972) was born in the town of Nagyszentmiklós into a Jewish family. His talent for drawing was discovered at a young age, but his parents wanted him to have a real profession in small trade. They eventually let him study art in Budapest, and Herman made a living from an early age with small caricatures and illustrations. He later also studied in Munich, Berlin, London, and Paris. He was conscripted into the Hungarian Army during World War I. From 1921 onwards, he taught at the independent school of the National Association of Hungarian Israelite Public Education. He worked in a number of places after World War II, Zsennye and Szolnok among them. In 1952, he received the prestigious Munkácsy Prize from the Hungarian communist state, acknowledging his artistic achievements. Herman always acknowledged his Jewish roots and identity, which he frequently depicted in his artwork.

48 “Hatalmas mártírfestményt fejezett be Herman Lipót” [Lipót Herman finished a monumental painting of martyrs], *Világ*, July 26, 1949, 4.

49 *Herman Lipót festőművész gyűjteményes kiállítása* [Collection exhibition of painter Lipót Herman] (Budapest: Ernst Múzeum, 1954), 9.

50 The author would like to thank Borbála Klacsmann for her immense help with the research for this part of the paper.

51 This number includes the 50,000–90,000 Christians categorized as Jews by the Hungarian racial laws who were living on the territory of what would become postwar Hungary. It also includes the Jewish population of territories that were annexed by Hungary in 1938 and 1940. Including these territories, the Jewish population under Hungarian jurisdiction amounted to about 800,000. See Stark, *Zsidóság*, 54.

places and times of death were unknown, was expressed in Hungary's Jewish community in the early years following the war. After several calls for architectural proposals and a long period of debates about which of the submitted plans for a Central Martyr Memorial (Központi Mártíremlékmű) was to be accepted, the *Chevre Kadisha* of Pest decided to erect the memorial based on the plans of the architect István Hermányi.<sup>52</sup> Hermányi, so the argument went, "was in Auschwitz, and his soul is filled with pain and compassion towards those who did not survive the war."<sup>53</sup> First-hand experiences of the death camp and the understanding of the recent destruction from a Jewish point-of-view were of central significance when choosing the architect.

The Memorial was inaugurated in 1949 in the Jewish cemetery in Budapest's Kozma street, in the outskirts of the Hungarian capital. The structure consists of thirteen pillars which each contain the names of the identified victims of the Holocaust, marking the place of the camps where they were likely killed. On the side of the structure, the Hungarian inscription reads: "Hate killed them, love guards their memory," while the Hebrew text above it says "God be mindful of the souls of our Jewish brothers who gave their lives for the blessing of God's name."<sup>54</sup> There is a distinct tension between the two inscriptions: while the Hungarian text focuses on victimhood ("killed them") the Hebrew text refers to heroism ("gave their lives"). The "blessing of God's name" mentioned in the Hebrew inscription is also a reference to the *Kiddush Hashem*, a principle of Judaism according to which any action by a Jew that brings honor, respect, and glory to God is considered to be the sanctification of his name. The tension between the Hungarian and Hebrew texts highlights a fundamental problem that Jewish memorialization practices of the Holocaust were grappling with at the time: were those who had been killed martyrs because they died for their faith, or victims of a meaningless massacre?

In his speech at the inauguration of the memorial, József Katona, rabbi of the Dohány street Great Synagogue, emphasized the continuity of Jewish sacrifices for the homeland during World War I (when many Jews served in the regular Hungarian Army) and World War II, resolutely placing Holocaust victims in the

52 Notes of the meeting of the Memorial Committee, July 15, 1946, Hungarian Jewish Archives, HU HJA XIII-1-6 (1947–50), Pesti Chevre Kadisa Iratai, Központi Mártíremlékmű iratai.

53 Notes of the meeting of the Memorial Committee, July 15, 1946.

54 Tim Cole, "Turning the Places of Holocaust History into Places of Holocaust Memory: Holocaust Memorials in Budapest, Hungary, 1945–95," in *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust*, ed. Shelley Hornstein and Florence Jacobowitz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 278.



pantheon of heroes. Katona had always been a firm believer in Jewish assimilation into the majority Hungarian society and his commitment to the idea continued even after World War II.<sup>55</sup> He also pledged that Jewish survivors were ready to take part in the building of a “better future.” His words could be interpreted both as a commitment to a socialist future, and to one without antisemitism.

Behind us stands the memorial of ten thousand heroes of the [First] World War, the sign of Hungarian Jews’ love for the homeland, faithfulness and honest steadfastness. In front of us stands the memorial of our hundred thousand martyrs . . . we are sad to think about the fact that there still are [people] who look back into the past. We are worried because there are some who want to incite peoples against each other. This memorial testifies that we want to, and we will take part in the building of a better future.”<sup>56</sup>

Whichever way the rabbi’s thoughts about the “better future” were understood, they were acceptable both for communist functionaries present at the event, and Jewish survivors, respectively. The rabbi’s words about Jews’ “love for the homeland” also echoed the already mentioned introduction by Mátyás Rákosi in the book of communist heroes who fought “against the enemies of the Hungarian people.”

The parallel usage of the words “martyrs” and “heroes” also hints at another possible answer to the question “Why did they die?”—one that was not to be uttered in 1949 anymore. In the earlier postwar years, before the establishment of communism in Hungary, the argument that the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine was an acceptable rationale for the death of 6 million European Jews made frequent appearance in commemorative speeches.

Why did six million Jewish martyrs die? Why did God’s justice tolerate their innocent deaths?—we have been torturing ourselves, and those whose faith is wavering have also been torturing us with this question for years. They [the Jewish martyrs] are gone, but they did not die miserably. Life was born from their deaths. Their martyrdom awakened the consciousness of nations, their deaths brought the resolution that the stateless people which

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55 Kinga Frojimovics, *Szétszakadt történelem: Zsidó vallási irányzatok Magyarországon 1868–1950* [Torn history: Jewish religious trends in Hungary 1868–1950] (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2008), 394–95.

56 Rabbi József Katona’s speech, Hungarian Jewish Archives, HU HJA XIII-1-6 (1947–1950), Pesti Chevra Kadisa Iratai, Központi Mártírelélmű iratai.

has always been everyone's prey but has resurrected from thousands of deaths, should again find a homeland after two thousand years. . . . We say for the eternal peace of the agitated blood of our martyrs: your deaths were not in vain. We tell you: Eretz Israel was born from your blood.<sup>57</sup>

When Rabbi Sándor Scheiber held the above speech in January 1948, less than two months after the United Nations had voted for the partition of Palestine, such an open expression of support of the Zionist cause was still possible. The Soviet Union, and thus the countries in its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, supported the creation of a Jewish State in Palestine. The Soviet leadership saw in this an opportunity to extend its influence in the Middle East. However, as the Jewish state's foreign policies became increasingly oriented towards Western countries, so did Soviet policies change their course. By the second half of the decade, Israel was considered the "mainstay of Western imperialism" in the Middle East.<sup>58</sup> As of the early 1950s, a speech like the above was not possible anymore, even within the confines of the mourning Jewish communities of Hungary.<sup>59</sup> With Zionism outlawed and ostracized by communist propaganda as "nationalist deviation," another positive image of the future was evoked during commemorative celebrations. This positive image, which was also in line with the official communist narrative of World War II, was the continued fight for a better future (as mentioned by Katona above) and against fascism.

One prominent communist representative at the inauguration of the Central Memorial was István Szirmai, Head of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Workers' Party. In his speech, Szirmai emphasized the need to not only mourn those who were dead, but also to take revenge against those who were enemies of "freedom, happiness and progress" and take part in the continued war and triumph over "new fascism and new antisemitism."<sup>60</sup> Applying a truly communist revolutionary language, the former Zionist turned

57 Rabbi Sándor Scheiber's speech quoted in "Emlékünnepély a Vadász utca 29-ben" [Memorial celebration in 29 Vadász street], *Új Élet*, January 8, 1948, 13.

58 Yosef Govrin, *Israeli-Soviet Relations 1953–1967: From Confrontation to Disruption* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 45.

59 According to a number of Jewish accounts, the communist takeover actually compelled many who had still believed in the possibility of remaining in Hungary after the war to change their minds and try to leave. "But in forty-seven . . . only the blind could not see that the communists would take over the power. . . . Unconsciously, our main goal became to send the children who had survived the Holocaust to Eretz Israel." This report of an orthodox Jewish man is quoted in Sándor Bacskai, *Egy lépés Jeruzsálem felé*, 40–41.

60 István Szirmai's speech, Hungarian Jewish Archives, HU HJA XIII-1-6 (1947–1950), Pesti Chevra Kadisa Iratai, Központi Mártíremlékmű iratai.

communist<sup>61</sup> did not even identify the victims as Jews, but called for everyone to take on arms against what he defined as various ideological enemies. Commemoration was thus not enough; survivors were needed to actively take part in the continued war against fascism. During the official commemorations of the Jewish community, especially in the early years, communist officials frequently emphasized their conviction to help Jewish survivors in this struggle against the enemy (fascism). László Bóka, State Secretary at the Ministry of Culture solemnly promised, “in the name of the democratically thinking people,” to all those survivors gathered at the inauguration of a memorial plaque in the city of Szolnok that “they will make sure that the atrocities of the past would never be repeated.”<sup>62</sup> Similarly, State Secretary László Peska vowed during his speech at the inauguration of the martyr memorial in Budapest’s 4th district in the summer of 1949 that “The Hungarian People’s Democracy and its government will assure that the conditions that would allow the repetition of the tragic and barbaric events of the past would not be present anymore.”<sup>63</sup> Commemorations provided an opportunity for communist state officials like Bóka, Peska, and Szirmai to remind their audiences about the continued threat of fascism, and communism’s immense importance in fighting against it.

The language of antifascism was present during strictly Jewish commemorations as well. It is very likely that the speeches held at the memorial celebrations by rabbis and other leaders of the Jewish community had to conform to the offi-

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61 The partaking of István Szirmai in the commemoration was not surprising though it was, given his biography, a rather fascinating element, revealing the multitude of attitudes and identity choices of Eastern European Jews in the postwar period. Szirmai was born into an emancipated petty bourgeois Jewish family in 1906 in the small town of Zilah (Zalău) in Transylvania. He was among the many Jews who became supporters of the Zionist movement there. He joined Hashomer Hatzair at an early age, but later became a member of the then illegal Romanian Communist Party and the secretary of the Transylvanian branch of the International Red Aid. Szirmai officially transferred his party membership to the Hungarian Communist Party (Kommunisták Magyarországi Pártja, HCP) in 1943, and later its successor, the Peace Party (Békepárt). After the end of the war, he held several positions within the HCP, including secretary of the National Organizing Committee (Országos Szervező Bizottság), which managed the Party apparatus. He not only continued in this post after the forced merger of the HCP with the social democrats, but was appointed president of the Hungarian Radio, as well as the Party’s unofficial functionary responsible for Zionist affairs. Despite his early career in Hashomer Hatzair, Szirmai’s opposition toward Zionism became more extreme during this period and he came to play a key role in the liquidation of the Hungarian Zionist movement in the early 1950s.

62 “A kormány, a pártok, a felekezetek képviselőinek beszéde után avatták fel a szolnoki mártírok emlékművét” [The monument of the martyrs of Szolnok was inaugurated after the speeches of the representatives of the government, the parties, and the religious denominations], *Új Élet*, August 19, 1948, 11.

63 “A köztársasági elnök jelenlétében avatták fel az újpesti mártír emlékművet” [The martyr monument of Újpest was inaugurated in the presence of the President of the Republic], *Új Élet*, July 29, 1948, 8.

cial antifascist ideology. However, it should also be kept in mind that during these early years, the symbolism and language widely known and used today to commemorate the Holocaust was not yet developed. Martyr memorial services had taken place before the Holocaust became a central element in (mostly West) European memory culture in the 1960s. Even the very terms “Holocaust” and “Shoah” became widespread only later.

An early publication of the Jewish community about the efforts to exhume and rebury approximately 10,000 former forced laborers who had been killed in Hungary during World War II stated that the main importance of the graves was that they “reached towards the sky as an index finger, as a silent pledge: never again fascism!”<sup>64</sup> In the Rabbinical Seminary of Budapest, memorial services were held to commemorate those who were interned in the building during the Arrow Cross regime in late 1944 and early 1945. “The few who survived gather here, at the scene of their sufferings, every year to commemorate their martyr comrades and to gain strength for the continued struggle against Fascism,”<sup>65</sup> reported the newspaper of the Jewish community. In this interpretation, the deaths of Jews killed during forced labor and interned in the Rabbinical Seminary during the war gained meaning when linked to a continued fight against fascism.

The need for continuing the fight against fascism was emphasized during commemorations both by the leaders of the Jewish community and by communist state officials. This shared narrative nevertheless had a different significance and meaning for the actors. For the Jewish community, it was an assurance that antisemitism would not reoccur and that their dead would be remembered. For communist representatives, it offered legitimacy for staying in power. That martyr memorial services were still able to continue in this difficult period was closely connected to this shared use of the antifascist narrative. Nevertheless, the very marginalization of specifically Jewish victimhood by the communist regime facilitated more than just Jewish remembrance.

The Martyr Memorial in the Jewish cemetery in the outskirts of Budapest was practically invisible to the greater public. However, this marginalization made the Martyr Memorial a “living memorial” for the Jewish community where the structure remained in constant dialog with its visitors and viewers. As the

64 *10,000 hazahozott hősi halott: A Munkaszolgálatosok Exhumációs és Síremlék Bizottságai Kiadása* [10,000 heroic dead brought home: Edition of the Labor Service Men's Exhumation and Monument Committees (Budapest, 1948)].

65 *Új Élet*, May 26, 1949, 3.

years passed, survivors added the names of their beloved ones onto the pillars, continuing the identification process of victims and guarding their memory. Had the Martyr Memorial been erected in a more central location, such dignified and undisturbed interaction would most likely not have been possible.

By about 1950, the official representatives of the Party and State were not present at the martyr memorial services held within the Jewish communities anymore. However, this did not mean that commemorations ceased to exist. On the contrary, the official newspaper of the Hungarian Jewish community, *Új Élet*, which regularly reported about such celebrations listed more than fifty martyr memorial services from all over the country in 1949 alone. These memorial celebrations meant, most frequently, the inauguration of a plaque or a smaller structure on Jewish community grounds (either in the synagogue or the cemetery), bearing the names of those community members who had been killed during World War II. In the years that followed, such inaugurations became less frequent, and memorial services came to mean a service of mourning in the synagogue and/or at the memorial structure or plaque. But they came to bear a great significance especially in places where the remaining Jewish population was so small that communal structures or services were not available anymore.

The yearly martyr memorial celebrations started to function as important community events. For example, *Új Élet* reported that the memorial service in the summer of 1950 in Devecser, a smaller town in Western Hungary, drew Jews from nearby locations, and “it was moving to see how Jews from the area made a pilgrimage to the memorial in the cemetery. The memorial day became a convention for the Jews who live in the area but have no community life.”<sup>66</sup> In 1953, the Memorial Day in the synagogue of Nagykanizsa was attended by “deportees and their family members from the area and the capital.” The synagogue, covered in black drapery for the occasion, was overflowing with people.<sup>67</sup> During these years, it became customary that survivors who were living in Budapest but who used to belong to other Jewish communities across the country, travelled to these commemorations on buses organized by the leadership of the community. Thus, commemorative events became not only occasions to commemorate the dead but also to meet the survivors of one’s own extended family or former community, and exchange information about the everyday life of survivors across the country. The goal of the atheist communist regime by tolerating such memo-

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66 *Új Élet*, June 22, 1950, 4.

67 *Új Élet*, June 4, 1953, 2.

rial services was definitely not the strengthening of Jewish community cohesion. However, the services did in time come to bear this significance within the Jewish community.

## Conclusions

For the Hungarian communist state, the struggle against fascism was not over with the end of World War II. In order to continuously mobilize people and to legitimize its own power, it needed justification. Commemorating the Hungarian people's fight against fascism during World War II and the heroes who gave their lives for it was one important element of this justification. However, in the early years of communism, this narrative was still developing, with a changing emphasis on certain elements like the presentation of communist heroes as national ones.

Meanwhile, martyr memorial services within the Hungarian Jewish community were developing the narrative of the recent destruction from a Jewish perspective. Characteristic of the Jewish memorialization process was the parallel consideration of those commemorated both as victims and heroes, which allowed this narrative to be at least partially fitting into the framework defined by the combative antifascist narrative. In fact, the attempts to articulate the consequences of fascism within and outside the Jewish community did produce certain similar elements like the need for a continued struggle, even though with differing justification: to build a communist future (in case of the official antifascist narrative), or to honor the victims of the Holocaust, give meaning to their deaths, and ensure that antisemitism would not re-emerge (in case of the Jewish narrative).

Though the official antifascist narrative did not emphasize that fascist policies especially targeted Jews, the very fact that commemorations were confined to Jewish spaces (like the Jewish cemetery or the synagogue) served as reminders of the victims' identities. As in the case of these "invisible" (Jewish) spaces or connected to the peculiar disappearance and "rebranding" of the Wallenberg memorial, the communist regime's totalizing attempt to silence the memory worked counterproductively and produced long lasting (if perhaps limited and localized) pockets of remembrance to the Jewish catastrophe.

One of the unforeseen consequences of martyr memorials was that these yearly services within the Jewish community grew into perhaps the biggest community events of postwar Hungarian Jewry and had more than one function.

One was to make sense of the recent destruction and try to define its place in Jewish traditions and practices. Another function of these commemorations was that those survivors who remained without a local community or without a rabbi were able to observe Jewish rituals and connect with other Jews in the area by attending these events. Even though martyr memorials were confined within the religious sites of the Jewish communities, most frequently the synagogues and cemeteries, they did not necessarily carry a religious meaning, and in fact offered a certain secular Jewish identification, born out of a shared experience of persecution. As a result, perhaps paradoxically, even under the most repressive Stalinist dictatorship, Hungarian Jews were able to memorialize their dead and even maintain their community cohesion through martyr memorial services. Over time, the Hungarian Jewish community managed to articulate their own changed self-definition after the war through these commemorations.