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Illiberal Memory Politics and Its Institutions in Hungary: The Case of Holocaust Museums[1]

Abstract

A characteristic feature of "illiberal states" is the setting up of parallel institutions whose main role is to challenge the previously existing, democratically established institutional network's function. In the case of Holocaust museums, this means new exhibitions which reinterpret the past in accordance with the government's memory politics. As a result, "illiberal" Holocaust museums often gloss over the responsibility of the local government and the non-Jewish population in the Holocaust. Two Holocaust museums were recently established by the Fidesz government in Hungary: the infamous House of Fates, and the House of Jewish Excellences which exhibits the lives of famous Jewish scientists, artists, athletes etc. In this paper I compare the two exhibitions in order to provide an overview of how "illiberal" memory politics transforms and overwrites the existing Holocaust narrative, and to flesh out the complex ideological, political, and social motives behind this process.

Keywords: illiberal memory politics, Holocaust, Holocaust museums, Hungary.

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In the summer of 2014, during his usual speech in Tusnádfürdő (Băile Tuşnad in Romania),[2] Viktor Orbán, prime minister of Hungary, announced the establishment of an "illiberal democracy" in Hungary. He claimed that democracies could indeed exist without liberalism, and mentioned China, India, Russia and Turkey as examples, which, according to him, were political success stories. Orbán stated that the new Hungarian state structure would be based on Christianity, freedom and human rights, emphasising that strengthening a feeling of togetherness forged through nationalism and forming a national community would be the main goals (Molnár, 2014).

The term "illiberal democracy" became well-known after Indian-born American journalist and political commentator Fareed Zakaria published his paper "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy" in 1997. In this article, the author argued that the basic difference between Western and Eastern types of democracy was the protection (or lack thereof) of the individual's liberty – besides other differences, such as the separation of powers, rule of law, and so forth (Zakaria, 1997). Since then, researchers have refined this definition and created typologies of hybrid regimes, depending on the extent of authoritarianism and state control. The widely used concept of "competitive authoritarianism" was described in the volume *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*. According to authors Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, competitive authoritarian regimes have formal democratic institutions, but the state administration abuses its power, which gives them an advantage over the political opposition. While the latter uses democratic institutions to compete for power, "the playing field is skewed in favour of incumbents" and therefore the process itself is not democratic (Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 4–5). Governments in competitive authoritarian regimes implement a range of measures in order to ensure their lasting position in power. These characteristics are also true of Orbán's Hungary: the electoral system is unjust, the media are controlled by the government, and the judiciary has been changed (Bayramoglu, 2023).

Another instrument serving the lasting power of the government in a competitive authoritarian regime is the construction of a new national myth – a foundation which creates a sense of "national community", in the words of Orbán, and an institutional network to support it. Such a narrative represents a cohesive force, an additional resource for the government to propagate their

[2] The Bálványos Free Summer University and Student Camp has been organised annually since 1990, in Bálványos and later on in Tusnádfürdő, with the intention to promote international cooperation and cultural exchange between Romania and Hungary. Around 2010, Fidesz became involved and started using the summer university to exhibit their politics. After that, Romanian participation declined.

views. At the same time, this nationalist interpretation of history induces disagreement between those who internalise it – usually the supporters of the government – and those who do not, which leads to exclusion, hostility, and competitive victimhood. The traumatic events of 20th-century history (the Treaty of Trianon, the Holocaust, and the socialist dictatorship) in particular trigger comparative victim beliefs, i.e. a comparison of one group's suffering with that experienced by other groups. In such cases, members of the ingroup aim to establish that they suffered more than the other groups. As social psychologists argue, the experience of injustice results in the perceived legitimacy of victim status, and competitive victimhood fills in the perceived moral gap between the ingroup and the outgroups, thus preventing the latter from denying that status (Mari et al., 2020, p. 239).

In this paper, I investigate, first of all, the main characteristics of "illiberal" memory politics in Hungary, the processes which led to the institutionalisation of a new Holocaust narrative, and the nature of the institutions supporting it. This will serve as a framework to examine the narratives of two museums and their connections to Fidesz memory politics: the House of Jewish Excellences and the House of Fates. I chose these museums because their exhibitions are based on Holocaust history, and because, embracing the narrative which the government aims to canonise, they serve as "nation-building devices" (Elgenius, 2015). Therefore, their exhibitions showcase a nationalist interpretation of the Holocaust (Radonić, 2020, p. 49).

During my research, I conducted interviews with the curators of the exhibitions: Ferenc Olti from the House of Jewish Excellences, Rabbi Slomó Köves and Itzhak Mais, curators of the new exhibition concept of the House of Fates, and Tamás Stark who served as an external expert, reviewing the planned exhibition's material. I visited the House of Jewish Excellences, and also received a booklet containing the concept of the House of Fates' planned exhibition, *Etz Hayim*. Based on these resources, I provide an overview of the concepts, their changes, new elements, and whether or how these can be connected to illiberal memory politics. As a result, this paper introduces the opinion and motivations of those in charge of museums established in and serving the agenda of a competitive authoritarian regime – an aspect which has largely been neglected in previous research.

Holocaust Memorialisation and the State

Hungarian historian Andrea Pető has dealt extensively with the memory politics of Hungary, and named it "illiberal memory politics". According to her definition and findings, the Orbán government emptied the international

Holocaust narrative, and the new interpretation they created and have been propagating is supported by institutions established parallel to the already existing academic network. This process started with the reorganisation of existing scientific and academic structures. First, the government nationalised the research institutes of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, placed public universities under private foundations, thus depriving them of their autonomy, and literally expelled institutions where students and staff were inspired to think critically, such as the Central European University. Since 2010, the coming to power of the second Fidesz government, and especially in 2014, during the Holocaust memorial year, the government spent huge amounts of money on shaping memorialisation practices while at the same time government-critical institutions were discredited and deprived of state funding. Additionally, the government established other institutions which were supposed to take their place and embrace the state-supported historical narrative (Pető, 2022, pp. 242–243).

In her paper "'Bitter Experiences' Reconsidered", Pető described the concrete steps which led to a paradigm change in Holocaust memorialisation and to the distortion of the consensual Holocaust narrative. These include the de-Judaisation of the Holocaust narrative by emphasising that the entire nation suffered during the Second World War, which glosses over extensive local collaboration. Illiberal memory politics also supports competitive victimhood by comparing the Holocaust and the socialist period, while reinforcing the idea of a "double occupation" (first by Germany, then by the Soviet Union),[3] and denying the Hungarian state's responsibility for events. Finally, a number of practical steps were also taken in order to shape a Holocaust narrative convenient for the government: for instance, new terminology was created, politicians emphasised the need to close off the past and move forward, thus suggesting that there was no need to discuss the Holocaust on a societal level, and questioned the legitimacy of academic research and scholars who dealt with the topic (Pető, 2019a).

All these developments led to the transformation of a globalised Holocaust memory into a provincial, distorted narrative which is convenient for the government as it silences uncomfortable voices, obscures the responsibility of the state and the role of collaborating civil servants, civilians, and law enforcement. This serves two goals: first of all, it presents the nation in a favourable light, and secondly, it creates a positive image which facilitates group cohesion (Malinova, 2021, p. 1002); this, on the other hand, helps the govern-

[3] This historical distortion is even recorded in the new Hungarian constitution ("Fundamental Law"), introduced in 2011. For more on this topic, see Subotić (2019, p. 6).

ment to keep its power and maintain itself. According to Pető, this last aspect is the ultimate aim: all elements of memory politics serve only as settings for it (Pető, 2022, p. 247). Legal expert András L. Pap agrees with this view, stating that Fidesz's nationalism is hollow in the sense that, for instance, while it tries to return to pre-First World War borders, the government does not follow revisionist policies (Pap, 2018). Therefore, we may conclude that while Fidesz aims to whitewash the Horthy regime – the system of Regent Miklós Horthy (1919–1944) under which approximately 440,000 Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the period when Hungary had territorial gains after the humiliating Treaty of Trianon – this in itself does not explain why a new Holocaust narrative was (and is being) forged by the government. The new narrative propagated by Fidesz also serves as a pretext for strengthening "national cohesion" and through that, the power of the government.

The House of Fates: Only the Foreign Expert Is a Good Expert?

Originally, the House of Fates was supposed to be opened at the Józsefváros train station[4] on 16 April 2014 (Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Day), and it was designed to present good Jewish–non-Jewish relations by celebrating rescuers during the Holocaust, while the main focus would have fallen on the child victims of the Holocaust (Radonić, 2020, p. 70). According to the initial plan, Mária Schmidt, the director of the House of Terror,[5] was supposed to lead this institution. Schmidt is infamous as a historian-ideologist of the Fidesz government, and her participation in the project meant the danger of the narrative's corruption.

The year 2014 was the memorial year of the Hungarian Holocaust, but already in February, MAZSIHISZ (*Magyarországi Zsidó Hitközségek Szövetsége*, the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities), the most prominent Jewish organisation, refused to cooperate with the government on its programmes, including the establishment of the House of Fates – after the initial concept had been revealed to them. Major international organisations such as the World Jewish Congress supported this decision, and they demanded a revision of the concept which had received heavy criticism from historians, experts and journalists both inside and outside Hungary (*A Zsidó Világkongresszus*, 2014).

[4] A prominent venue from where groups of Jews from Budapest were deported at the end of 1944. On this topic, see Pelle (2016, pp. 30–63).

[5] According to several researchers, Hungary's most prominent institution promoting the illiberal version of 20th-century history is the House of Terror. See, for example, Radonić (2020, p. 45); Posocco (2022, p. 32).

During the memorial year, the government, MAZSIHISZ and other Jewish organisations negotiated constantly, and several times it seemed that they would come to an agreement (*Orbán: Nem változtathatok*, 2014). In August 2014, even International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Chair Sir Andrew Burns travelled to Budapest and discussed the plans for the future museum with experts, historians, representatives of MAZSIHISZ, and Schmidt. As a result, IHRA published a statement in which they wrote that

> IHRA will not be in a position to endorse the House of Fates concept until the consultations with the national and international experts as well as with the Hungarian Jewish Community have been taken into account. Dr Heisler [President of MAZSIHISZ] has published a letter to Dr Schmidt about the points of concern to the Jewish community which are shared by IHRA. Close cooperation with MAZSIHISZ is not only desirable but essential in ensuring the integrity of the project. (*IHRA*, 2014)

One of the conditions of MAZSIHISZ was that the House of Fates exhibition would use the same historical approach as that of the Holocaust Memorial Centre,[6] which they saw as a guarantee against the use of the Holocaust narrative supported by the government. They also wanted to participate in the development of the concept (*MAZSIHISZ*, 2014). Even though government officials emphasised several times that the House of Fates would only open with the consent of the Jewish organisations, ultimately the negotiations remained fruitless. While the building was renovated and initial steps were taken for the installation of the exhibition, the museum never opened its doors to the public (Czene, 2023).

Ever since then, the House of Fates has been a symbol of Fidesz's attempt to rewrite the history of the Hungarian Holocaust. Over the last decade, news of its opening have appeared in the media from time to time. However, even the latest such news, in 2021, proved to be false (*Pár hónap alatt*, 2021). In the meantime, the project was transferred to a new owner in 2018: the government-appointed EMIH (*Egységes Magyarországi Izraelita Hitközség*, Unified Hungarian Jewish Congregation), a Chabad-affiliated community, as project leader (Czene, 2023).

EMIH was established in 2004, and they consider themselves the "heirs" of the Status Quo Ante community,[7] even though their Hasidic affiliation has

[6] This centre's permanent exhibition, *From Deprivation of Rights to Genocide*, deals with the complicity of prominent politicians, civil servants and law enforcement as well as the non-Jewish population. The curators elaborated on the political and social contexts of the exclusion, ghettoisation and deportations, the question of responsibility, and the complexity of the Holocaust as a historical event.

[7] Besides the Neolog and Orthodox communities, the Status Quo Ante was the third major Jewish denomination in Hungary, whose members refused to join either of the

never been denied. Contrary to government-critical MAZSIHISZ, EMIH supports the government's policy concerning Hungarian Jewry ("Köves Slomó", 2022), and the denomination is surrounded by controversies, such as the question of the state support they receive – allegedly as much as what the significantly larger MAZSIHISZ gets, besides loans for obtaining various pieces of real estate (Nagy, 2018)[8] – and the recent scandal involving the occupation of the Orthodox community's central synagogue and headquarters in Kazinczy Street, Budapest (Spirk, 2023). All these factors indicate that EMIH is well-embedded in the political sphere and were presumably chosen as the new project owners because the government saw them as a guarantee of the implementation of its Holocaust narrative (Posocco, 2022, pp. 35–36).

Nevertheless, as soon as EMIH was appointed as the new project owner, they initiated major changes. As Chief Rabbi Slomó Köves emphasised in his interview, he wanted to invite a number of Hungarian historians as advisors who would have provided expert opinions on the evolving plans. However, many of them refused to participate in the project due to political considerations.[9] Thus, ultimately it was foreign experts who created a new concept for the Hungarian museum. Rabbi Köves invited a new steering committee comprising Itzhak Mais,[10] Esther Farbstein,[11] David Marwell,[12] and Dániel Bodnár.[13] It seems that

other two after the Jewish congress of 1868–1869. This was the smallest congregation, its central organisation only being established in 1927. After the fall of socialism, the Status Quo Ante denomination was not revived.

[8] EMIH rejected these claims, stating that they received merely 0.3 per cent of the budget allocated for all churches, while MAZSIHISZ received 0.7 per cent. See *Vádak és valóság* (2018).

[9] The author's interview with Slomó Köves, 22 November 2022, Budapest. On this issue see, for example, the 2019 controversy when researchers from the Hungarian Jewish Historical Institute at Milton Friedman University (an institution belonging to EMIH) were pressed to provide expert opinions, as a result of which they wrote an open letter to President Dániel Bodnár reminding him that most of them had signed their contract with the prerequisite that they would not get involved in the House of Fates project. See Konrád et al. (2019). Subsequently, some of these researchers were fired, others quit, and the institute was dissolved.

[10] Holocaust survivor, former director of Yad Vashem, chief curator for New York's Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust and a number of other Holocaust museums worldwide.

[11] Israeli Holocaust historian specialising in the spiritual responses of Jews to Nazi persecution. She is considered the leading Haredi scholar of the Holocaust.

[12] American historian, former director of the Museum of Jewish Heritage.

[13] Philosopher, leading member of EMIH. He also serves as the president of Milton Friedman University.

at this point both the government and EMIH gave up on the initial idea of a consensus, since no Hungarian historian – or Jewish organisation for that matter – was willing to participate in the project. Once this complication had been removed, the process became much easier, and, as Itzhak Mais said, they experienced "openness and honesty" from the government (*Kedvezően fogadta*, 2019).

According to Rabbi Köves, his aim was to create an entirely new exhibition when the government gave the project to EMIH. During the interview, he emphasised the innovative quality of the exhibit:

> I believe that this Holocaust museum will be very different not only from Páva Street [the Holocaust Memorial Centre] but also from most other Holocaust museums. … This will be a Jewish Holocaust museum, which means that it will be built for non-Jews, but the narrators will be Jews. In such state-financed Holocaust museums, especially in Europe, the disposition is usually that the state feels obliged to create a Holocaust museum, but from which position can they narrate the story? Either from a false absolving position or from a self-critical position, but they do not have anything else to hold on to. … We can show from a Jewish perspective the values this community (and I mean the whole spectrum from baptised Jews to Orthodox Jews) represented, which were attacked during the Holocaust not only in a physical but also in a spiritual sense … Plenty is said about how antisemitism and the Nazi ideology evolved, their history, but the Jews, so to speak, play a secondary role and are placed in the helpless victims' role. (The author's interview with Slomó Köves, 22 November 2022, Budapest; see also *Etz Hayim*, 2021, pp. 26–27)

As is evident from the interview, Rabbi Köves planned to adapt the international trend in Holocaust research which aims to give space to the voice of the Jews and include sources and egodocuments created by them, which were considered too subjective and therefore not reliable in the first decades of Holocaust research.[14] The Jewish perspective would indeed be a welcome addition in the new museum. However, the question is whether highlighting the "Jewish voice" would complement the narrative or be used to cover other important aspects of the Holocaust, such as the collaboration and complicity of the non-Jewish population.

Based on the concept book of the planned exhibition, the most important characteristics of the narrative would be: 1. Following the history of Hungarian Jews from the "Golden Age" (1867, the date of the emancipation, to 1914) up to our times, in an international context, 2. Emotional and cognitive engagement of visitors, 3. Personalising the story by including testimonies and thus 4. Adding the Jewish perspective, 5. Using "up-to-date" language, concise

[14] On this topic, see Cohen (2011, pp. 100–115).

text and interactive solutions (*Etz Hayim*, 2021, pp. 23–29). The planned exhibition would consist of seven major thematic sections: "Voices from Today" (an interactive, introductory film); Jewish life before the First World War; the period between the two world wars; the outbreak of the Second World War and the Holocaust; liberation; Jewish life under communism; Jewish life today, and "meeting" the survivors. All exhibition spaces would be connected by a meandering wooden structure, the "Tree of Life", which would both serve as a timeline of the exhibition and symbolise "the battered – but never completely broken – Hungarian Jewish community and Hungarian–Jewish coexistence" (*Etz Hayim*, 2021, p. 234).

The last feature indicates a positive attitude towards the non-Jewish population, but even though the Jewish–non-Jewish relationship and "coexistence" seems to be a central feature of the concept, it barely appears in the exhibition narrative. The historical part of the narrative provides a general overview of Hungarian Jewish history and the persecution mostly from a political history perspective, complemented with quotes from Jewish personalities and survivors, and additional chapters which are relevant from the Jewish perspective – such as, for instance, the story of the Kasztner train,[15] or the dilemmas the survivors faced upon returning to Hungary. The curators left the question of Jewish–non-Jewish relations unexplored, even though there is a rich source basis and plenty of research available.[16] This stands in sharp contrast to the alleged symbolism of the "Tree of Life". Moreover, tackling coexistence and the attitudes of non-Jews during the Holocaust would have inevitably meant dealing with the question of collaboration and complicity, as a massive proportion of non-Jews participated in the persecution not only because they worked as civil servants or members of law enforcement, but also because they claimed Jewish property, houses, shops, or denounced Jews, and so forth. The exhibition does not say anything about the economic annihilation of Hungarian Jewry, which was actually a major factor already in the pre-war anti-Jewish laws that gave the possibility to non-Jews to take over the economic positions of their Jewish fellow citizens.

Consequently, the exhibition also does not tackle the issue of restitution and compensation – neither in the post-war years, nor after the fall of socialism. This is, again, an uncomfortable topic which is often intertwined with

[15] Rezső Kasztner, a Zionist leader, negotiated directly with Adolf Eichmann, as a result of which, in exchange for USD 1,000/person, he was allowed to compile a transport of approximately 1,700 Jews who were transported to Bergen-Belsen, then to neutral Switzerland. On this topic, see Braham (1997, pp. 1023–1057).

[16] See, for example, Gecsényi (2019); Szívós (2012, pp. 166–199).

the competitive victimhood and antisemitism of the non-Jewish population (Klacsmann, 2021). On the other hand, however, the closing section of the exhibition entitled "Contemporary Legacy of the Holocaust" is headed by a 2017 quote from PM Viktor Orbán stating that Hungary committed a crime when collaborating with the Germans (*Etz Hayim*, 2021, p. 203). This is especially ironic, considering that it was the first Orbán government which wanted to reduce the planned compensation sum for the state's wrongdoings during the Holocaust from HUF 300,000 to merely HUF 30,000, while the victims of communism received HUF 1 million compensation sums.[17]

Another problem of the exhibition is that the Kállay era is largely neglected, even though those two years (1942–1944) proved crucial in the wartime fate of the Jews and later on during the German occupation. The exhibition also does not tackle the question why Hitler decided to occupy Hungary. Additionally, according to the narrative, the fact that Regent Miklós Horthy received the Auschwitz protocols was a "key factor for stopping the deportations in July" (*Etz Hayim*, 2021, p. 119). This is a problematic statement relativising Horthy's responsibility, as historical evidence indicates that he had already received the protocols in May (Frey, 2011, p. 128), and had only stopped the deportations in early July due to international and inner political pressure – by which time the entire rural Jewish population had been deported.

Despite the promise of an international context, the exhibition pays little attention to European events, apart from the intensifying persecution in Nazi Germany and the turning points of the Second World War, even neglecting neighbouring countries where many Hungarian Jews lived who came under Hungarian rule again before and during the war years. The depiction of the responses of the Christian churches is also problematic: the text focuses only on church leaders, and it does not mention the fervent antisemitism of much of the lower clergy (Jakab, 2021). Finally, when the narrative describes the work of the post-war people's tribunals, it states that these already operated "under Russian occupation" (*Etz Hayim*, 2021, p. 173), hinting at the idea of a double occupation while at the same time simplifying the complex issue of the growing influence of the communist party and the inner workings of the tribunals (Barna & Pető, 2012).

Looking through the expert opinions published on the museum's website,[18] we may find that out of five historians, only two formulated serious criticism concerning certain aspects of the narrative: László Borhi suggested that the creators should add a "meet the perpetrators" room to the exhibition, and

[17] On this issue, see M. László (2006).

[18] *Tudományos tanácsadók* (n.d.).

thus highlight individual responsibility, and outline the role of ordinary people (Borhi, n.d., p. 3). He also recommended fleshing out the Jewish Council's complex role, and doubted that the curators had indeed managed to embed the "Jewish voice" as much as they initially aimed to.

Tamás Stark went even further when he claimed in his interview – and also in his expert opinion – that

> I mentioned [in my expert opinion] that even though the story starts from the beginning of the 19th century, the part about the Holocaust only starts in 1938. In the Horthy system, a certain institutionalised antisemitism had been present from the very beginning. … After 19 March 1944, what the political elite connected to the Horthy regime had demanded since the autumn of 1919 was realised, meaning the abolishing of the role of the Jews in cultural and economic life, and reducing their numbers through the deportation of the so-called 'alien' Jews. … I felt a certain intention of whitewashing the Horthy regime. (The author's interview with Tamás Stark, 16 December 2022, Budapest)[19]

To sum up, while the new House of Fates exhibition has certain virtues compared to the previous plans, it fits into the government's memory politics: apart from mentioning the most important perpetrators, it ignores local collaboration, does not say much about Jewish–non-Jewish relations, and also neglects a series of important issues which contribute to the understanding of the Holocaust, such as the role and choices of ordinary people, the embeddedness of antisemitism in society, its causes and effects, and so forth.

The House of Jewish Excellences: What Is Einstein Doing in a Hungarian Jewish Museum?

A smaller museum called the House of Jewish Excellences opened in Balatonfüred in 2018. This museum was initiated by the local mayor who, being a Fidesz party member, asked the curator, Ferenc Olti, to create an exhibition which would not tackle any sensitive issues – meaning the fate of the local Jews, the collaboration of the local population, and so forth.[20] Thus, the House of Jewish Excellences became another epitome of illiberal Holocaust memory, as it completely avoids uncomfortable questions and only focuses on the positive side of Jewishness. The fully digital exhibition demonstrates the life and work of famous Jews; however, it gives no historical background whatsoever (Pető, 2019b).

[19] See also Stark's expert opinion: Stark (n.d., pp. 2–3).

[20] The author's interview with Ferenc Olti and Anna Szeszler, 22 October 2022, Balatonfüred.

The House of Jewish Excellences is located in Balatonfüred, a town on Lake Balaton which had a small Jewish community of fewer than 140 Jews in 1941 (Kepecs, 1993, p. 344). Today, a memorial plaque preserves their memory at Tagore Boulevard, the most frequented lakeside promenade. Other mementos of Jewish life include the cemetery and the synagogue building. The latter was originally a Reformed church, bought by the Jewish community in 1855. Today it is home to the House of Jewish Excellences.

Mayor István Bóka (Fidesz) decided to renovate the ruined synagogue and organise a cultural institution in it. He and Ferenc Olti, the only Jewish resident in the town, whose parents were Holocaust survivors themselves, set down three main principles: the institution should "not disturb the Jewish past and sensitivity", to which Olti added that he would not create a Holocaust memorial place, as "there are two of them already in Balatonfüred"[21] (the memorial plaques at Tagore Boulevard and at the Jewish cemetery), and that the synagogue could not be used as a religious place, since there was no Jewish community. While the latter is understandable from a practical point of view, the first two principles already create a setting in which a meaningful discussion concerning the Jewish minority, discrimination, and Jewish–non-Jewish relations seems impossible.

Based on Olti's idea, a digital exhibition was eventually created which centres around famous and less famous Jewish scientists, artists, and athletes who contributed significantly to (scientific) advancement and, through that, to today's comfortable lifestyle. Most of them are Hungarians, but there are several internationally known Jewish personalities as well, such as Albert Einstein, Dustin Hoffman, Amy Winehouse, etc. The project was endorsed by a number of organisations and institutions, which then became members of the foundation running the museum. The foundation is headed by Olti, while MAZSIHISZ, EMIH, MAZSIKE[22] and Hit Gyülekezete[23] all have representatives in it. The exhibition was established and created with funding from the local municipality, the government, and the Norway Grants.[24] Even though

[21] The author's interview with Ferenc Olti and Anna Szeszler, 22 October 2022, Balatonfüred.

[22] Magyar Zsidó Kulturális Egyesület (Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association), an independent association.

[23] Faith Church Hungary, a small, charismatic Christian denomination. This church is infamous for their financial machinations; for instance, its leader Sándor Németh bought the majority of a commercial TV channel's stock (at least partially) with the church's money. Faith Church is on good terms with the government; their TV channel regularly broadcasts government advertisements. See Lukács and Bodoky (2020).

[24] The author's interview with Ferenc Olti and Anna Szeszler, 22 October 2022, Balatonfüred.

the prerequisites of the exhibition seem overly restrictive, the composition of the board suggests that the creators wanted to cooperate with as broad a spectrum of the main Jewish organisations as possible, and thus guarantee that the future institution enjoyed the support of every congregation.

The core concept of the exhibition is to show visitors what would have been lost had the Nazis been successful in exterminating the Jews. Therefore, when picking the Jewish personalities to be featured in the exhibition, "we did not consider them from a halakhic point of view, but whether the given person – regardless of their own self-definition – or their ancestors would have been condemned to the gas chamber according to the Nuremberg laws".[25] Thus, the exhibition's concept is strongly connected to the Holocaust, which is reflected by the quote engraved on the entrance gate:

> Had the evil plan succeeded, these excellences would have been killed, as well, just as our other brothers and sisters were. However, they were able to escape, responding to the darkness with the words of life. They built a palace from their thoughts, and that became our home. It is due to their grace and genius that humanity and mankind live on. (*Mission statement*, n.d.)[26]

However, just like the vague reference to Nazism and antisemitism in the quote above, the exhibition itself does not say much about these ideologies, the history of the Holocaust, or the story of the Hungarian Jews. When entering the museum, visitors receive electronic cards to which they can upload information about five Jewish personalities chosen from among approximately 450. On the museum's first floor, folding screens visualise the information, which is divided into five categories: lifeline, oeuvre, fun facts, videos, games. The oeuvre of the personalities contains anecdotal stories about the most important inventions and/or milestones of their careers. The descriptions are short, concise, and the design of the exhibition material facilitates quick learning. At the same time, the personal histories simply omit the period of the Second World War and the Holocaust, and thus avoid any controversial topics which would inspire a dialogue, or contemplation of the contemporary situation of the Jews or responsibility for the Holocaust.

This is due both to the mayor's initial requirement about not tackling "the Jewish past and sensitivity" and to Olti's decision to create an exhibition which the visitors do not leave with sad or negative feelings: "We provide pos-

[25] The author's interview with Ferenc Olti and Anna Szeszler, 22 October 2022, Balatonfüred.

[26] Translation from https://www.zsidokivalosagok.hu/en/fooldal-en/ (*Mission statement*, n.d.).

itive experiences",[27] Olti underlined in his interview. He also added that the curators' goal was to improve non-Jewish visitors' attitude towards the Jews through this exhibit.

Capturing the "positive side" of the history of the Jews and the successes of Jewish fellow citizens, of which it is easy to be proud, the museum may indeed contribute to the recognition of these excellences. However, the Jewish community is much more colourful and complex, and it cannot be represented solely by the usually secular, assimilated stratum which produced the bulk of the famous personalities who are included in the exhibition. On the other hand, depriving the topic of its historical context and suppressing uncomfortable issues such as antisemitism, responsibility for the Holocaust, involvement of the non-Jewish population in the Holocaust, and so forth, does not lead to a deeper understanding of the situation of the Jews. Thus, it also cannot considerably improve Jewish–non-Jewish relations. This kind of empty narrative was termed a "Holocaust simulacrum" by Pető in her article about the museum (Pető, 2019b).

In conclusion, the House of Jewish Excellences is indeed a modern and appealing institution with an interesting exhibition which, understandably, attracts visitors. However, while the core concept is intertwined with the history of the Holocaust, the topic is completely ignored in the exhibition. Therefore, instead of helping come to terms with the past, it reinforces illiberal memory politics concerning the Holocaust: whitewashing the Horthy regime and creating a narrative which does not require contemplating sensitive issues.

Comparison of the Two Institutions

While the two exhibitions and concepts are very different, evidently both are strongly connected to the Holocaust. The most striking common feature is that both exhibitions omit the topics of Jewish–non-Jewish relations and collaboration during the Holocaust. In the case of the House of Jewish Excellences, this tendency is even more spectacular, as the life stories of the Jewish personalities are stripped of any historical context. In contrast, the *Etz Hayim* concept contains references at least to the main local perpetrators. However, it disregards an important aspect of the persecution: the confiscation of Jewish wealth, through which the extent of local collaboration and the behavioural patterns of non-Jews could be grasped. As a result, neither of the exhibitions facilitates facing the past, but both depict the Holocaust as an event that hap-

[27] The author's interview with Ferenc Olti and Anna Szeszler, 22 October 2022, Balatonfüred.

pened in a social vacuum – and thus, they avoid the issue of historical responsibility, the cornerstone of processing this historical event.

Additionally, the House of Jewish Excellences does not deal with the Jewish personalities' wartime experiences and their persecution – this is in line with the government's memory politics, whose goal is to construct a narrative which renders the memories of minorities invisible (Pető, 2021, p. 161). The quote at the entrance is vague enough to comply with the mayor's initial request about not tackling sensitive issues; and uninformed visitors do not even get a sense of what happened during the Holocaust. These strategies are similar to those of the House of Terror: responsibility for the Holocaust is mostly placed on the Germans, the history of the Horthy era is not addressed in the case of the House of Jewish Excellences or not adequately explored in the case of the House of Fates. Local collaboration is ignored; the motivations of the actors are not discussed. Thus, the two institutions both support the government's memory policy.

The pattern described in the previous analysis matches Pető's definition of "illiberal memory politics": structurally, both museums are part of the procedure through which the government establishes alternative institutions to support its new historical narrative while discrediting the already existing ones (Pető, 2022, p. 244). The aim of the regime is to create and maintain its national mythology, which in turn supports the system by offering the masses a vision of the past with which it is easy to identify. The two museums analysed in this paper provide methods of how this can be achieved, not through the falsification of history but through more subtle tools such as omissions or shifting of the focus. Thus, they serve as examples through which we can understand the functioning of memory politics in competitive authoritarian regimes.

An additional problem with these institutions is that instead of facilitating trauma processing, they, rather, obscure the deeply rooted social traumas caused by the Holocaust. As social psychologists Nurit Shnabel and Arie Nadler proved, resolving traumatic victimisation episodes can be achieved through satisfying the emotional and psychological needs of both parties: in the case of the perpetrator this means fear of exclusion from the moral community, while the victims' sense of power is damaged during victimisation. Thus, only apology and forgiveness can lead to reconciliation (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008, pp. 129–130). The existence of institutions covering up the role and activity of perpetrators thwarts this process and, instead, strengthens competitive victimhood.

Even though antisemitism has declined somewhat in recent years, it is still "firmly entrenched" in Hungarian society, as the Anti-Defamation League's

survey has proved: in 2023, 37 per cent of Hungarians harboured antisemitic sentiments (*ADL survey*, 2023). Under such circumstances, measures and institutions disseminating historically accurate information and facilitating a more balanced relation between the Jewish and non-Jewish populations would be essential. However, while the Orbán government is in power, this is unlikely to happen, as political profit is preferred over a long-term process which requires effort but which would lead to reconciliation.[28]

Interviews

Interview with Slomó Köves, 22 November 2022, Budapest
Interview with Tamás Stark, 16 December 2022, Budapest
Interview with Ferenc Olti and Anna Szeszler, 22 October 2022, Balatonfüred

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[28] As of 20 September 2024, in its decree No. 1291/2024, the government withdrew its decree No. 1422/2018 which contained a decision concerning the opening of the House of Fates (*A Kormány 1291/2024*, 2024, p. 6665). It is unclear what will happen to the building. However, EMIH's concept will not be implemented as an exhibition.

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Illiberális emlékezetpolitika és intézményei Magyarországon – A holokausztmúzeumok esete

Az „illiberális államok" egyik jellegzetessége, hogy olyan intézményeket állítanak fel, amelyek legfőbb célja a korábban már létező, demokratikusan megalapított intézményi hálózat szerepének megkérdőjelezése. Holokausztmúzeumok esetében ez olyan új kiállításokat jelent, amelyek a múltat a kormány emlékezetpolitikájának megfelelő színben tüntetik fel. Ennek eredményeképp az „illiberális" holokausztmúzeumok gyakran elkendőzik a helyi kormány és a nemzsidó népesség holokausztért viselt felelősségét. A közelmúltban a Fidesz kormány két holokausztmúzeumot hozott létre Magyarországon: a hírhedt Sorsok házát és a Zsidó Kiválóságok Házát, amely híres zsidó származású tudósok, művészek, sportolók életét mutatja be. E tanulmányban összehasonlítom a két kiállítást, hogy bemutassam, hogyan alakítja át és írja felül az „illiberális" emlékezetpolitika a már létező holokausztnarratívát, és milyen összetett ideológiai, politikai, társadalmi motivációk húzódnak meg e folyamat hátterében.

Kulcsszavak: illiberális emlékezetpolitika, holokauszt, holokausztmúzeumok, Magyarország.

Nieliberalna polityka pamięci i jej instytucje na Węgrzech – przypadek muzeów Holokaustu

Jedną z cech „systemów nieliberalnych" jest tworzenie instytucji, których głównym celem jest podważenie roli wcześniej istniejącej, demokratycznie utworzonej sieci instytucji. W przypadku muzeów Holokaustu oznacza to organizowanie nowych wystaw, które przedstawiają przeszłość w świetle zgodnym z rządową polityką pamięci. W rezultacie „nieliberalne" muzea Holokaustu często tuszują odpowiedzialność lokalnych władz i ludności nieżydowskiej za zbrodnie Holokaustu. W ostatnim czasie rząd Fideszu utworzył na Węgrzech dwa muzea Holokaustu: kontrowersyjny Dom Losów oraz Dom Wybitnych Żydów, prezentujący życie znanych naukowców, artystów i sportowców pochodzenia żydowskiego. W niniejszym artykule porównuję obie wystawy, aby pokazać, jak „nieliberalna" polityka pamięci przekształca dotychczasową narrację o Holokauście oraz jakie złożone motywacje ideologiczne, polityczne i społeczne kryją się za tym procesem.

Słowa kluczowe: nieliberalna polityka pamięci, Holokaust, muzea Holokaustu, Węgry.

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