

**Assault on Historical Memory:
Hungarian Nationalists and the Holocaust**

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Perhaps no other event in world history has been as thoroughly documented as the Holocaust, the destruction of approximately six million European Jews during the Nazi era. This vast documentation notwithstanding, however, the authenticity of no other event has ever been so consistently questioned as that of the Holocaust. The campaign to distort, denigrate, and actually deny the Holocaust was launched soon after the end of World War II by extremist antisemitic elements of the Right. Spearheaded in the Western world by politically and ideologically motivated neo-Nazis, many of whom came to be identified as “historical revisionists,” the campaign gained ground after 1948 in the Communist world as well. Unlike what happened in the West, however, the campaign in the Soviet camp was waged under strict state controls, so that its intensity varied with the changing political interests of the Soviet Union and its satellites.

Following the dissolution of the Communist regimes and the disintegration of the Soviet bloc in 1989, the assault against the historical memory of the Holocaust became quite similar to that being pursued by neo-Nazis and others in the Western world. The hotbed of antisemitism during much of the twentieth century, East-Central Europe—the area in which four-fifths of the nearly six million victims of the Holocaust had lived before the war—was fertile soil for the quick and effective penetration of “historical revisionism.”

Historical revisionism, which in many of its adherents represents a new and potentially virulent strain of antisemitism, has infected the xenophobic nationalist stratum of Hungarian society as well.¹ Ironically, this new strain came to the fore following the liberalization measures that the first democratically elected government adopted after the systemic change of 1989. The political stresses and socioeconomic dislocations engendered by the new administration’s privatization and marketization measures enabled the xenophobic nationalist-populist elements to revive both “the

Jewish question” and antisemitism as convenient instruments of domestic politics. They have revived and skillfully exploited a favorite technique of the Horthy era: scapegoating. They clearly are resolved to direct against the Jews the anger of people suffering from the ravages of unemployment, inflation, and general impoverishment, blaming the Jews for the current and past ills of the country.

While the number of xenophobic champions of antisemitism—like that of Hungarian neo-Nazis actually denying the Holocaust—is relatively small, the camp of those distorting and denigrating the catastrophe of the Jews is fairly large and—judging by recent developments—growing. With their political power and influence, members of this camp represent a potentially greater danger not only to the integrity of the historical record of the Holocaust but also and above all to the newly established democratic system. Unlike the Holocaust deniers, who are a fringe-group of “historical charlatans” and bound to end up in the dung-heap of history, the history cleansers who denigrate and distort the Holocaust are often “respectable” public figures (e.g., intellectuals, members of parliament, influential governmental and party figures, and high-ranking army officers).²

The rhetoric and tactics of these respectable individuals vary in terms of their particular political-ideological group interests and personal ambitions. They appear united only by their manifest resolve to “explain” and justify Hungary’s linkage to Nazi Germany, bring about the rehabilitation of the Horthy regime, and above all absolve the country of any responsibility for the destruction of approximately 550,000 of its citizens of the Jewish faith or heritage. In other words, they show every evidence that they are determined to cleanse Hungary’s historical record of the Nazi era.

The drive to whitewash the record of this era in general and of the Holocaust in particular uses a variety of approaches. Some of the history cleansers are forthright, brazenly revealing their chauvinistic-nationalist positions by questioning the authenticity of the personal and historical accounts of the Holocaust. They go so far as to identify all those involved in Holocaust studies or remembrance ceremonies as traitors bent on branding the Hungarian people as Fascists.³ Others are more astute, using mitigating historical and socioeconomic arguments to justify the policies that the

successive Hungarian governments pursued during the Horthy era. Toward this end, many of them try to deflect attention from the Holocaust by focusing on the “positive” experiences of the Jews since their emancipation in 1867 and on the rescue activities of Christian Hungarians during the German occupation, including Horthy’s halting of the deportations in early July 1944. Still others, the “moderates,” are among the most sophisticated. Impelled by political expediency, many of these camouflage the pursuit of the same objectives by deploring the tragedy of the Jews and loudly proclaiming their commitment to the struggle against contemporary antisemitism. The differences in tactics notwithstanding, they appear equally resolved to bring about the rehabilitation of the Horthy regime and cleanse the historical record of the Nazi era by denigrating or distorting the crucial facts of the Holocaust in Hungary: *the active and often enthusiastic involvement of Hungary’s wartime governmental and law enforcement authorities in the humiliation, expropriation, and subsequent destruction of the Jews.*

THE FACTS UNDER SIEGE

The Jews of Hungary numbered more than 700,000 and were the last relatively intact Jewish community. Having survived throughout most of the war, on the eve of Allied victory they were destroyed with the connivance of their own government. An ally of Nazi Germany starting in early 1938, Hungary instituted a series of increasingly severe anti-Jewish measures that not only curtailed the basic civil and socioeconomic rights of the Jews but also claimed approximately 64,000 Jewish lives by early 1944.⁴ Nevertheless, the bulk of Hungarian Jewry survived the first four and a half years of the war thanks to the physical protection of the conservative-aristocratic government. After the German occupation of March 19, 1944, however, it was this Jewish community that was subjected to the most concentrated and brutal destruction process of the Nazis’ efforts to bring about the Final Solution. This murderous process was launched almost immediately after the beginning of the occupation—at a time when the leaders of the world, including those of Hungary, were already familiar with the realities of Auschwitz, and even most Nazis must have realized that the Axis would lose the war. It was precisely because of this prospect that the Germans and their Hungarian

accomplices decided to win at least the war against the Jews. Time was clearly of the essence. The Red Army was fast approaching Romania, and the Western Allies were expected to launch their invasion of Europe soon.

The Nazis' machinery of destruction was already well oiled by 1944. With experience gained through the mass murder of Jews from all over German-dominated Europe, the Nazis were ready and well prepared for a lightning operation in Hungary. Toward this end, they updated the death factories in Auschwitz. They extended the rail lines to Birkenau to the immediate vicinity of the gas chambers and, above all, acquired the wholehearted support of the Hungarian government of Döme Sztójay for the implementation of the Final Solution. Without the unequivocal support of the new, constitutionally appointed government that enjoyed the blessing of Miklós Horthy, who was Hungary's highly respected head of state, the Nazis—as the cases of Bulgaria and Romania had clearly shown⁵—would have been severely hampered if not helpless. The SS commandos were, in fact, amazed at the enthusiasm with which their Hungarian counterparts were ready to “solve” the Jewish question. The new government placed the instruments of state power at the disposal of the Hungarian and German Nazis bent on the swiftest possible implementation of the Final Solution. With Horthy still at the helm and providing the symbol of national sovereignty, the Hungarian police, gendarmerie, and civil service collaborated with the SS in the anti-Jewish drive with a routine and efficiency that impressed even the Germans. Within less than two months (i.e., from late March to mid-May, 1944), the Hungarian authorities acted in conjunction with their Nazi “advisors” to complete the first phase of the anti-Jewish drive. The Jews were isolated, marked, robbed of their possessions, and placed into ghettos. During the next two months, they were subjected to the most barbaric and speedy deportation and extermination program of the war. It was so massive and so swift that the crematoria in Auschwitz-Birkenau, updated as they were, could not cope. Special ditches had to be dug to burn the thousands of victims the crematoria could not handle. When Winston Churchill was informed about this catastrophe, he referred to it as “probably the greatest and most horrible crime ever committed in the history of the world.”⁶

The magnitude of the crime committed by the Nazis and their Hungarian accomplices is dramatically illustrated by the following comparative statistical data. Three transports arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau with close to 12,000 Jews from Northern Transylvania on June 6, 1944. Better known as D-Day, this was one of the most magnificent days in the annals of military history, when the greatest multinational armada ever assembled under one command stormed the beaches of Normandy. By the end of that day, the number of invading Allied troops killed was about half that of the Hungarian Jews. While the Allies' killed-in-action figures declined dramatically after the toehold had been gained on Normandy later that day, the Hungarian Jews continued to be murdered at almost the same high rate day after day until July 9, continuing the awesome daily massacre rate that began on May 16. In the end, the wartime losses of Hungarian Jewry significantly exceeded those incurred by the military forces of the United States in all theaters of war, just as they also significantly exceeded the combined military and civilian war deaths of the British, a nation that bore much of the German military onslaught. These comparisons are cited not to minimize the sacrifices or diminish the heroism of the Western Allies but simply to underscore the magnitude of the Holocaust in Hungary.

THE ASSAULT ON MEMORY

The Hungarian chapter of the Holocaust of European Jewry constitutes not only the greatest tragedy in the history of Hungarian Jewry but also the darkest chapter in the history of Hungary. Never before in the history of the Hungarian nation were so many people expropriated and murdered in so short a time as in 1944. Most of the hundreds of thousands of victims were Hungarian citizens who had proudly considered themselves to be "Magyars of the Jewish faith." To the chagrin of the other ethnic-national minorities of Hungary, most Jews were patriotic and had been firmly committed to the Magyar cause since 1848. They were the forerunners of Hungary's modernization and champions of the Hungarian language and culture even in the territories Hungary lost in 1918. At the end, however, they fared less well than the other

ethnic and national groups. They were destroyed with the connivance of the regime they had so eagerly supported and implicitly trusted.

The details of this apocalyptic chapter in the history of Hungary have not yet sunk into the national consciousness of the Hungarian people. The reasons are many and complex. The wartime history of Hungary, including the Holocaust, has been manipulated by the successive regimes to serve their particular political interests. During the immediate postwar period, the needs and interests of the survivors came into conflict with the political aspirations of the various parties. It is one of the ironies of history that, at the end, the surviving remnant of Hungarian Jewry suffered most at the hands of the very political party that many of them trusted as their genuine supporter and which, like the Jews, had been a main target of the Nazis and of the Horthy regime: the Communist Party. During the ideological euphoria of the immediate postwar era, many of the victimized Jews placed their faith in the party, believing that it was the only one that was genuinely free of any stain of Fascism. They also considered it reliable for the advancement of their legitimate interests, including the roundup and prosecution of war criminals, the effectuation of an equitable restitution and reparation program, and the building of a just and egalitarian society. They were soon awakened to the political realities of the postwar power struggle. Small and generally mistrusted by the ethnic majority, the Communist Party had no scruples about sacrificing the interests of the survivors in order to build a popular base for the acquisition of state power. Driven by political expediency, the party leadership, which included a proportionately large number of Communists of Jewish origin, urged the survivors to forget about their past suffering, abandon their demands for restitution, and subordinate their special needs to the building of the new socialist society. With the exception of the diehards who remained loyal to their ideology and newly acquired power, the survivors soon discovered that it was the Communist Party's search for mass support that was in fact largely behind the antisemitic agitation and the many "spontaneous" anti-Jewish outbursts and pogroms that occurred during the immediate postwar period.⁷

During the Stalinist era, the Holocaust was virtually sunk into the Orwellian black hole of history. The Jewish martyrs were subsumed as part of the losses incurred

by the population at large. The survivors themselves were subjected to many inequities. Many of them found themselves persecuted on both social and religious-political grounds. They were either identified as members of “the exploiting bourgeoisie” or accused of the sins of Zionism and cosmopolitanism. The former were deported to concentration camps for “re-education.” The latter were either jailed or deprived of a livelihood. In the course of time even the Communist Party itself was purged of its Jewish component to make it more attractive to the ethnic majority.⁸

During the National Communist era that followed the Uprising of 1956, the Jewish question and the issue of antisemitism, while persistent at the popular level, were kept under control by the government. Consistent with the policies of the previous governments, public awareness of the Holocaust continued to remain low even though Hungary—unlike the other Soviet bloc countries—witnessed the appearance of several important documentary and historical publications on the tragedy of Hungarian Jewry.⁹

Since the triumph of democracy in 1989, the Holocaust has emerged as an “embarrassing” topic for the various governments that succeeded the Communist regime. Driven largely by domestic and international political considerations, the elected national leaders of the new democratic society have publicly acknowledged the wartime tragedy of the Jews and committed themselves, especially during the Holocaust remembrance periods, to combat the scourge of antisemitism. With a few exceptions, however, they have so far failed to come to grips with Hungary’s wartime record. They have failed to confront the Holocaust openly and honestly, let alone publicly assume national responsibility or apologize for it.

The historical memory of the Holocaust is clearly under siege. Given the political climate of the post-1989 era, including the absence of unambiguous and unequivocal moral guidance on the Holocaust, the history cleansers appear to have been given the green light to “safeguard the national honor of Hungary” by absolving it of any responsibility for the catastrophe that befell Hungarian Jewry. Under control during the Communist era, the controversy over the Jewish question in general and the Holocaust in particular surfaced almost immediately after the systemic change. It became particularly venomous following the publication of a statement by Sándor

Csoóri, one of Hungary's most celebrated writers, claiming, among other things, that "liberal Hungarian Jewry wanted to 'assimilate' the Magyars in style and thought." The implicit claim that the surviving remnant of Hungarian Jewry was a threat to the Christian Magyars was reminiscent of the anti-Jewish campaign of the Horthy era.¹⁰

The history cleansers of the post-Communist era appear to have been encouraged, indirectly at least, by some of the judicial decisions and governmental policies that impacted negatively on the historical memory of the Holocaust and the interests of the Jewish community. These included:

- Judicial revision of the People's Tribunals Act and the subsequent reversal of verdicts in many war-crimes cases;
- Inequitable and demeaning handling of restitution and reparation;
- Difficulties relating to the acquisition and transfer of archival materials; and
- Plans for a new exhibition at the Hungarian pavilion in Auschwitz.

The historical memory of many of the survivors was jolted early in 1994, when the Constitutional Court (*Alkotmánybíróság*) that was established in late 1989 nullified many provisions of the People's Tribunals Act (Law No. VII of 1945), reversing the conviction of many individuals involved in the Final Solution.¹¹ Arguing that the wartime activities of the convicted individuals were not deemed criminally punishable at the time of their commission, the court enabled the rehabilitation of many of those who were involved in the roundup, expropriation, ghettoization, and deportation of the Jews.

Another setback endured by the survivors related to the inequitable handling of the issue of restitution and reparation.¹² The successive Hungarian governments since 1945 have failed to come to grips with this issue. Citing a variety of domestic economic and political factors, they handled this matter in a dilatory manner while the rightful owners of the properties expropriated by the Hungarian state in 1944 were gradually dying out. While the various Communist regimes ignored the issue almost altogether, citing the requirements of socialist construction, the post-Communist regimes became preoccupied with compensating the victims of Communism. The overshadowing of the

Holocaust by a politically guided preoccupation with the horrors of the Communist era has led, among other things, to giving priority to the compensation of the victims of Communism over those of Nazism. To add insult to injury, an indeterminate number of the Christian victims who were compensated for properties nationalized by the Communist regime had, in fact, “legally” or fraudulently acquired them from Jews during the Nazi era. Compounding this virtual obscenity, the government of Viktor Orbán sought in late 1998 to ease the collective conscience of the nation by offering to compensate survivors by paying approximately \$150 for each member of their particular immediate families, assuming that they can prove that their loved ones were in fact victims of the Holocaust.¹³

From the point of view of scholarship, perhaps the greatest challenge to the preservation and perpetuation of the historical memory of the Holocaust was provided by the many judicial acts and governmental regulations that virtually prohibited the acquisition of pertinent archival materials and their transfer abroad. The “personal data protection” provisions of various legislative acts and judicial decisions, presumably designed to protect public officials who had formerly been associated with either the Nazi-collaborationist or the Communist regime, impose considerable restrictions on the activities of scholars, especially foreign nationals.¹⁴

The frustration over the failure to acquire Holocaust-related documentation from Hungary has been felt not only by individual scholars but also by world renowned archival and research centers such as Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Miles Lerman, then chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, expressed this frustration in a letter addressed to Prime Minister Orbán on June 17, 1999. Among other things, he stated: “After several rounds of discussions with Hungarian officials and archivists and a series of unfortunate experiences, we have reached the regrettable conclusion that Hungary has failed to cooperate with the Museum in its efforts and stands nearly alone among countries in Europe in its failing to make available its records on the Holocaust.”¹⁵

The most scandalous assault on historical memory was launched in 1999, however, in connection with a plan initiated by several governmental agencies to

“update” the Holocaust-related exhibit in the Hungarian pavilion in Auschwitz. The original plan called for merely reconstructing the exhibit, which had originally been built by and allegedly reflected the position of the Communists. However, the experts in the Ministry of Culture subsequently decided to shelve the reconstruction plan altogether and create a new exhibit that was to open with appropriate pomp and circumstance by Prime Minister Orbán on May 9, 2000. The Ministry entrusted the planning and creation of the new exhibit to the Hungarian National Museum. The head of the Museum, Tibor Kovács, apparently had no problem in finding the “right person” for the job: István Ihász, the chief of the Museum’s Contemporary History Division. An unabashed rightist, Ihász had already established his nationalist credentials as the creator of the Museum’s highly controversial “Twentieth Century Hungary” exhibit, which is still one of the Museum’s most popular exhibits. In my assessment and that of many other scholars, it virtually glorifies the Horthy era and denigrates the tragedy of Hungarian Jewry.

Ihász began working on the new assignment in December 1998, preparing a script and collecting the visual and archival materials he wanted to use in the new pavilion. He pursued his task with the assistance of a committee of three experts: Mária Schmidt, a chief counselor to the prime minister; Tamás Stark, an associate of the Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences; and József Schweitzer, the Chief Rabbi of Hungary. The first draft of the script was finished early in the spring of 1998. Following the experts’ input during several consultations, a second draft—dated April 9, 1999, and bearing the names of the three experts—was forwarded to the Ministry of Culture early in June. Apparently convinced that the main purpose of the script was informational rather than educational, Ihász reportedly recommended that no further experts be consulted. The Ministry, however, followed a more cautious approach and forwarded the script for evaluation to three well-known historians and museum specialists, including the head of the Jewish Museum of Budapest, who decided to involve two other experts.¹⁶ The reaction of all five experts was prompt and virtually unanimous. They individually concluded that the script (a) basically falsified the history of the Jews in Hungary in general and the Holocaust era in particular and (b)

appeared to have a political objective: the rehabilitation of the Horthy era by transferring virtually all responsibility for whatever crimes were committed in Hungary almost exclusively to the Germans.¹⁷ The planned exhibit also attempted to portray a virtual symbiosis of Hungarian and Jewish life since the emancipation of the Jews in 1867, downplaying the many anti-Jewish acts and manifestations as mere aberrations in the otherwise enlightened history of Hungary.¹⁸ It focused attention on the positive aspects of Jewish life in the country, emphasizing the flourishing of the Jewish community between 1867 and 1944, the rescue activities of those identified as Righteous Among the Nations, and Horthy's saving of the Jews of Budapest. The Ministry of Culture decided to shelve the plan in early September 1999 when *Népszabadság* (People's Freedom), which is Hungary's most influential daily newspaper, revealed the Jewish community's unhappiness with it, provoking a national debate about the scandal.¹⁹ It should be said that Tamás Stark denied seeing that version of the document before it was submitted. Stark, for one, has himself criticized that version, and the rabbi withdrew from the committee.

Dedicated to rewriting their country's history so that "conservative Hungarians could once again be proud of their past," the history cleansers have intensified their drive in recent years to bring about the rehabilitation of the Horthy era by whitewashing the Holocaust. The techniques employed by them are almost identical with those used by their counterparts elsewhere in former Nazi-dominated Europe.

The most frequently and effectively used technique is that of "denationalization," which constitutes absolving the nation of any guilt by transferring responsibility for the Holocaust exclusively to the Germans. The history cleansers who are championing this approach give no credence to the evidence that the Germans would have been largely helpless without the full and wholehearted cooperation of the Hungarians.²⁰ The few among them who admit that the anti-Jewish excesses were in fact also committed by some Hungarians, consider the tragedy of Jewry as an aberration in Hungarian history and blame almost exclusively the *Nyilas*, the Right radicals whom the Horthyite aristocratic-conservative regime had feared even more than they did the Jews. By blaming the *Nyilas* alone, these cleansers apparently aim not

only to protect the historical integrity of the Horthy era but also to bring about the rehabilitation of the Regent, a process that actually began with the reburial of his remains in early September 1993.²¹ The Horthy apologists overlook the historical evidence that the liquidation of Hungarian Jewry took place with the consent and cooperation of a stable, non-*Nyilas* government that was formally and constitutionally appointed by the Regent while he was still head of state. While Hitler and his cohorts sympathized with the ideological purity of the Arrow Cross (*Nyilas*) Party, they clearly preferred the stability and support of the Horthy-appointed government, which was a “legitimate” body that was dedicated not only to the continuation of the war but to the “solution” of the Jewish question as well. They decided to embrace the *Nyilas* only on October 15, 1944, when Horthy announced Hungary’s withdrawal from the Axis and asked for an armistice.

In their drive to deflect attention from the Hungarians’ responsibility for the tragedy of the Jews, many history cleansers also resort to a variety of disingenuous explanations. Some go so far as to identify the Jews themselves as primarily responsible for their own tragic fate. The most disgusting among the cleansers claim that the Holocaust was in fact intentionally brought about by rich Jews who had supported Hitler.²² Others, deflecting attention from their own involvement in the anti-Jewish drive, blame the Jewish Councils for the suffering the Jews endured in the ghettos.²³

Another favorite history-cleansing technique is that of “generalization.” This approach is used by those claiming that the tragedy of the Jews was part and parcel of the general catastrophic consequences of a war in which many others suffered as well. Some even find a linkage between the tragedy of the Jews and the trauma endured by Hungary at Trianon.²⁴ Others, who are eager to disclaim Hungary’s 1936–1945 pro-German stance, argue that the country was in fact Nazi Germany’s last victim rather than its last ally. In this revised version of history, the Hungarian people also are identified as victims themselves who suffered as much, if not more, than the Jews.

Insisting on the commonality of suffering, many history cleansers have dedicated themselves to the preservation of “collective” historical memory. They

generalize the Holocaust by amalgamating the losses of Jewry with those incurred by the military forces and civilian population during the war. Thus the many memorial plaques, monuments, and books dedicated to communal casualties transmogrify Holocaust victims into war casualties. The equation of the martyrdom of armed soldiers, who died as heroes in the service of their country, and of Christian civilians, who were killed in the wake of the hostilities, with that of the Jews, who were murdered irrespective of their age or sex, is often politically motivated. This approach enables history cleansers to demonstrate that the combined military-civilian casualties incurred during the Holocaust by the Christian population far exceeded those suffered by the Jews.²⁵

Still another technique frequently employed by history cleansers is that of “trivialization and relativization.” Denying the uniqueness of the Holocaust, the destruction of the Jews is viewed as just another chapter in the long history of man’s inhumanity to man. The apparent main objective of this group of cleansers is to safeguard Hungary’s honor by demonstrating not only that the Holocaust, to the extent that it took place, was in fact preceded by other examples of mass murder (e.g., the massacre of Indians in the Americas and the genocide of the Armenians by the Turks), but also and above all that the destruction of the Jews was dwarfed in scope and magnitude by the atrocities committed by Communist regimes the world over. In this context, many in this group also argue that the Jewish suffering, like that of many other ethnic-national groups, was war-related.²⁶

The nationalists dedicated to the cleansing of the Horthy era have found a new and effective ally in recent years in the person of Mária Schmidt, one of Prime Minister Orbán’s chief advisors and a rising young scholar in Holocaust studies during the Communist era. Following the systemic change of 1989, her original academic ambition appears to have shifted to a preoccupation with anti-Communism, which is a somewhat politically risky undertaking in a country in which Communism has been claimed by sundry antisemites since 1919 to be Jewish in origin and character. Like many other nationalists, she apparently concluded that by unmasking the crimes of the Soviet-dominated Communist regimes in general and those perpetrated by the

Hungarian Communists in particular, she would not only help mitigate the impact of the Holocaust but also contribute to the defense of the domestic and foreign policies of Horthy's Hungary. Whatever her motivations, she emerged as a vociferous advocate of the idea that the same yardsticks must be used in the assessment of the Nazi and Communist-type totalitarian regimes and of the crimes perpetrated by them.²⁷ By mechanically applying this methodology, Schmidt, like her apparent ideological counterparts, overlooks the many historical, socioeconomic, and moral factors that differentiate these regimes, concluding that in terms of numbers the crimes committed by the Communists the world over far exceeded those perpetrated by the Nazis.²⁸ Among the crimes and injustices committed by the Communists, she also includes many of the verdicts of the People's Courts of the immediate postwar period.²⁹

Ms. Schmidt caused a considerable political uproar in early November 1999 when she spoke extensively before a largely rightist group on an accustomed theme: the supposed use of two yardsticks in the evaluation of Nazi and Communist crimes. She expressed profound disappointment that only the Holocaust of the Jews was being recalled in connection with World War II. In her view, the idea that the Holocaust was unique and indisputable was being advanced and propagated by a segment of the intelligentsia who dominated the mass media, whereas, in fact, "the Holocaust, the extermination or rescue of the Jews represented but a secondary, marginal point of view not among the war aims of either belligerent."³⁰ The reaction of the Jewish community leaders and many intellectuals was immediate and caustic. In a press release, the Jewish leaders characterized Ms. Schmidt as "the best Hungarian student of Jean-Marie Le Pen," the French far-right leader who referred to the Holocaust as a "detail" of history.³¹ Others questioned her historical analysis and intellectual integrity.³² Still others expressed disapproval of her activities as head of the newly established and financially well-endowed Twentieth Century Institute.³³ The numerous protests and criticisms notwithstanding, she continues to play an influential role because of the support she receives from various nationalists and, above all, because she continues to enjoy the confidence and support of the prime minister.³⁴

Yet other elements among the Hungarian history cleansers have taken the anti-Communist crusade a step further. Counterbalancing the accounts of the Holocaust, they emphasize almost exclusively the crimes perpetrated by the Communists. Identifying Communism and Bolshevism as Jewish in origin and character, these cleansers insist that the wartime suffering of the Jews was matched, if not actually exceeded, by the pain the Jews supposedly inflicted upon the citizenry during the Communist era.³⁵ This was particularly the case during the Stalinist period when, in their view, “the Jews” exploited their power to avenge the suffering they had endured during the Holocaust. In parliamentary debates and other public forums, even “moderate” politicians occasionally feel compelled to remind their compatriots of the Jewish factor during the Soviet era by selectively identifying former Communist leaders by their original Jewish names.³⁶

Another ploy in this context is the tendency to equate Auschwitz with the Gulag, “balancing” the suffering of the Jews with that endured by Hungarian POWs and other political prisoners in Soviet camps. Borrowing a page from their counterparts elsewhere, some Hungarian revisionists claim that Auschwitz was modeled on the Gulag. In so doing, these people at best reveal their ignorance about the fundamental differences in the operation and objectives of the Nazi death camps and the Soviet penal establishments.³⁷

IN STEP WITH ORWELL

Much of the reinterpretation of the Nazi era and the whitewashing of the Holocaust are clearly designed to help bring about the rehabilitation of the Horthy regime. Dedicated to building a future society to their own liking, sundry nationalists, less than fully responsible rightists, and neo-Fascists have decided to rewrite the past in an Orwellian fashion in order to provide the historical continuity that they require for this purpose. Part and parcel of this objective is the reintroduction of national symbols³⁸ and the revitalization of traditional, national-Christian values. The need to return to these values was recently articulated by Ibolya Dávid, the Minister of Justice in the Orbán government and head of the Hungarian Democratic Forum Party. Early in November

1999, she declared, among other things, that the “experience of the post-Communist era revealed a great societal need for the representation of Christian-conservative values based on national traditions.”³⁹

The pursuit of these values gathered momentum following the elections of May 1998, which brought to power a basically nationalist, right-of-center coalition government under the leadership of Orbán. Enjoying only a very narrow parliamentary majority, Orbán has given a virtually free hand to the widely perceived antisemitic and Holocaust-denigrating István Csurka, leader of the ultra-right Hungarian Justice and Life Party, whose support he covets.⁴⁰ While reportedly not an antisemite himself, it appears that political expediency has compelled Orbán to condone the activities of the ultra-right and to encourage, if not actually support, those dedicated to cleansing Hungary’s wartime history. During the first two years of the Orbán administration, the reintroduction of national symbols has been coupled with other measures manifestly designed gradually to bring about the rehabilitation of the Horthy era. In connection with the Holocaust, history cleansers have been indirectly encouraged to “re-evaluate” the state agencies that were involved in the Final Solution and focus on the “positive” contribution of Hungarians to the rescue of Jews.

As part of their re-evaluation drive, history cleansers have expended considerable effort to bring about the absolution of the gendarmerie, which played a crucial role in the roundup and deportation of the Jews, by placing all responsibility onto the Germans. Toward this end, they have among other things produced a “documentary” that was first shown on Hungarian television in early December 1998.⁴¹ The effect of the video was to help bring about the exoneration of the gendarmerie by deflecting attention from the barbaric manner in which that force implemented its role in the Final Solution. The “historians” featured in the presentation advanced a variety of propagandistic arguments. The moderator, Sándor Szakály, who also performed a function in the production of the program, argued that there had been no need for the gendarmerie to use force because the Jews—law-abiding citizens that they were—carried out the anti-Jewish measures of their own volition. Another expert in security affairs tried to persuade viewers that the gendarmes were, in fact, engaged in a form of

resistance by carrying out the anti-Jewish measures “humanely.” All of them appeared to conclude that the gendarmes were guided by the Christian spirit and were highly appreciated by the people they served for the preservation of law and order. The gendarmes who were interviewed for the documentary—all of whom were veterans of the anti-Jewish drive—offered a variety of extenuating “explanations” for their own involvement.⁴² Less than a year later, the television presentation was followed by another move toward the eventual rehabilitation of the gendarmerie. In the courtyard of the Institute of War History and Museum, which is headed by Szakály, Zsolt Lányi, head of the armed services committee of parliament, unveiled a plaque honoring the gendarmes who died during the two world wars.

Concurrently with the re-evaluation of the gendarmerie and other state agencies, many history cleansers have also concentrated on portraying the generosity with which Hungary had treated its Jewish subjects since 1867, largely overlooking the many antisemitic legal and physical measures that were taken against them during all these years. As to the Holocaust, they have been focusing almost exclusively on the “positive” record of the wartime era, highlighting:

1. The rescue of the Jews of Budapest;
2. The protection provided by the military labor service system after the German occupation;
3. The rescue activities of the relatively few non-Jews who were recognized by the appellation of Righteous Among the Nations.

The survival of most of the Jews of Budapest is attributed to Horthy’s halting of the deportations on July 7, 1944.⁴³ While this may largely be true, history cleansers fail to identify the political and military factors that induced the Regent to act at a time when all of Hungary, with the notable exception of the capital, had already been made *judenrein*. They also fail to acknowledge the Regent’s own responsibility for the liquidation of the provincial Jewish communities. He did so by consenting, during his March 18, 1944 meeting with Hitler, to the delivery of hundreds of thousands of Jews “for labor in Germany,” and by his decision not to be involved in Jewish matters during the first four months of the German occupation.⁴⁴ The argument advanced by some top

Nazis after the war (i.e., that a head of state who demonstrated his ability to halt the deportations at a particular time could have prevented their initiation in the first place, had he really wanted to) is not totally without merit.⁴⁵ Horthy's champions also overlook the fact that credit for the rescuing of the Jews of Budapest is also claimed by or attributed to many others, including the commander of the troops that foiled an anti-Horthy coup early in July 1944.⁴⁶

It is true that the Jewish labor servicemen were, with a few exceptions, exempted from the ghettoization and deportation measures and enjoyed the protection of the armed forces, which continued to exercise exclusive jurisdiction over the labor service system even after the German occupation. The historical record demonstrates that insightful military commanders recruited Jews from within the ghettos on many occasions in order to save those individuals from deportation and almost certain death. However, the history of the labor service system is far from spotless. The history cleansers fail to reveal the basically discriminatory nature of the system and the horrors to which many of the labor servicemen were subjected along the Soviet front lines, in the copper mines of Serbia, and during the *Nyilas* era. A few well-known historians, the effect of whose work tends to minimize the losses of Hungarian Jewry, early in 1992 proposed to the Hungarian public that the labor service system was quite equitable, that the treatment of the Jewish labor servicemen was tolerable, and that their losses were far fewer than generally claimed.⁴⁷

One of the major means by which many history cleansers aim to unburden the national conscience is by focusing on the rescue activities of the relatively small number of Hungarians recognized as Righteous Among the Nations. They appear to be heeding the admonition of former Prime Minister József Antall, who was of the opinion that if discussions on the Holocaust must take place at all, attention should be focused on the rescuers rather than the perpetrators.⁴⁸ By doing this they deflect attention from both the horrendous suffering of the Jews and the large number of Hungarian perpetrators. The magnificent humanitarian activities of the Righteous—few as they relatively were—clearly must be remembered and highlighted as exemplary acts to be emulated, but unidimensional, politically oriented accounts of activities of the

Righteous play into the hands of those who distort history. In the absence of the historical context in which these few Righteous operated, namely the Final Solution in all its complexity, the world at large will inevitably conclude that the practitioners of righteous conduct were the dominant elements of the Holocaust era.⁴⁹ A relevant example is based on a personal experience that I had in Budapest in September 1997. I found that all of the graduating students of the Jewish High School were acquainted with the wartime activities of Raoul Wallenberg, but none of them had any recollection of ever having heard or read anything about László Endre or László Baky. Since these students were completely unaware of the key role that these high-ranking Hungarian officials had played in the destruction of the Jews, one can assume that the same students were basically ignorant of the Holocaust in general. If this is the case with students graduating from the Jewish High School in Budapest, one can surmise the level of Holocaust awareness on the part of Christian students in the capital, let alone in the countryside.⁵⁰

The gradual escalation of the activities of historical revisionists and of “respectable” history cleansers leads one to suppose that they have indirectly been encouraged by myopic governmental policies that tolerate the abuse of civil liberties. Despite its very brief tradition of civil liberties, Hungary permits among other things the dissemination of hate literature⁵¹ and the denial and denigration of the Holocaust, acts that are deemed illegal and severely punished in France and many other countries with a much longer record of liberal democracy.⁵² Although the many Right radical and neo-Nazi skinhead groups are still relatively weak in terms of membership and following, their actual and potential threat to the fledgling Hungarian democracy must not be underestimated.⁵³ As the many acts of violence and antisemitic outbursts of the past few years clearly indicate,⁵⁴ they represent a potentially grave danger not only to Jews, Gypsies, and other minorities but also to the survival of the new democratic system of government.

Ultra-nationalists seem to have been encouraged in history cleansing activities by the attitude of some of the highest-ranking officials. A few among these have not only expressed sympathy for the objective pursued by many of the cleansers but have

also occasionally engaged in such practices themselves.⁵⁵ This is to a large extent due to the failure of the top leaders of the Hungarian state and government to provide clear and unambiguous guidance with regard to the Holocaust in Hungary. Regretfully, with the exception of expressions of sorrow and resolve to combat the scourge of antisemitism, especially during Holocaust remembrance periods, the top official leaders of Hungary, unlike those of France, Germany, and several other countries,⁵⁶ have so far failed to publicly and unequivocally acknowledge their country's responsibility, let alone apologize, for the destruction of approximately 550,000 of its citizens of the Jewish faith or heritage.⁵⁷ A formal statement to this effect would not only undercut the legitimacy of the history cleansers and Holocaust deniers but possibly also lead to the catharsis and reconciliation people of good will so deeply desire.

History is a formidable weapon. It is particularly corruptive and dangerous in the hands of chauvinistic nationalists bent on shaping history. Unless the historical revisionists and the history cleansers are unmasked and counteracted, the record of the Holocaust will inevitably be tarnished, if not partially obliterated. One must protect the integrity of this record in order that the world—the current and future generations—might learn its lessons.

Notes

¹ This study is limited to the identification of some of the approaches used in cleansing the historical record of Hungary during the Nazi era by denigrating, distorting, and, in some cases, denying the Holocaust. It does not aim at an overview of the various factions of the Right in contemporary Hungary.

² One cannot, of course, determine how many of these “respectable” individuals also engage in Holocaust denial “secretly” for ideological or pecuniary reasons. Gábor Bencsik, the General Secretary of the Association of Hungarian Journalists (*Magyar Újságírók Szövetsége*), for example, reportedly was caught in August 1998 selling Holocaust-denying videotapes stored together with much other Nazi-related literature in the second-hand bookshop of his brother András, the editor-in-chief of *Hungarian Democrat* (*Magyar Demokrata*). Under pressure, Gábor relinquished his position in the Association.

³ László Karsai, “A Shoah a magyar sajtóban, 1989-1991” (The Shoah in the Hungarian Press, 1989-1991) in *Zsidóság, identitás, történelem* (Jewry, Identity, History), Mária Kovács, Yitzhak M. Kashti, and Ferenc Erös, eds. (Budapest: T-Twins, 1992), pp. 68-69.

History cleansers characterize the yearly Holocaust commemorative events as propaganda against the Christian Hungarians.

⁴ Approximately 40,000 to 45,000 of these were labor servicemen; 17,000 to 18,000 so-called “alien” Jews who were deported in the summer of 1941 and murdered near Kamenets-Podolsk; and the remainder victims of the massacres in and around Újvidék early in 1942.

⁵ Although members of the Axis alliance, Bulgaria and Romania, after having “solved” some aspects of the Jewish question on their own, resisted the pressure by Nazi Germany to implement the Final Solution. In a different context, this was largely also the case with France and Slovakia.

⁶ For details, consult Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 2 vols. (Cited hereafter as Braham, *Politics*).

⁷ For details see Róbert Szabó Györi, *A kommunista párt és a zsidóság* (The Communist Party and Jewry) (Budapest: Windsor Kiadó, 1997), 350 pp.

⁸ *Ibid.* See especially, pp. 179-283.

⁹ Among the most important of these publications are the three-volume *Vádirat a náciizmus ellen* (Indictment of Nazism) by Elek Karsai and Ilona Benoschofsky, (1960-1967); Karsai’s two-volume “*Fegyvertelen álltak az aknamezőkön...*” (They Stood

Unarmed in the Mine Fields...; 1962); Mária Ember's *Hajtűkanyar* (Hairpin Bend; 1974); György Száraz's *Egy előítélet nyomában* (In the Footsteps of a Prejudice; 1976); and István Nemeskürty's *Requiem egy hadseregért* (Requiem for an Army; 1972).

¹⁰ Csoóri's diatribe was part of his autobiographical series *Nappali Hold* (Daytime Moon), published in *Hitel* (Credit), Budapest, September 5, 1990, p. 6. Like others, Csoóri singles out a few noted writers and poets, including Antal Szerb, Miklós Radnóti, and György Konrád, as "good Hungarians." The contrasting of a few "prominent" Jews with the rest of Jewry was also the technique used by Bishop Ottokár Prohászka, the notorious Catholic Jew-baiter, and Miklós Horthy, the former Hungarian head of state.

¹¹ See Decision No. 2/1994.(I.14) AB, which was adopted on January 11, 1994, in *Az Alkotmánybíróság határozatai* (Decisions of the Constitutional Court), Budapest, No.1, 1994, pp. 9-20.

¹² For some details, see Péter Feldmajer, "Az osztogató igazságtalanság elve és gyakorlata" (The Principle and Practice of the Injustice of Distribution), *Új Élet* (New Life), Budapest, January 15, 1999.

¹³ The reparation offer was based on Law XXIX of 1997. The survivors who availed themselves of this obscene offer discovered, after considerable time-consuming paper work, that even this amount was to be obtained in forints and spent in Hungary.

¹⁴ For example, see the ruling by the Hungarian Constitutional Court of June 30, 1995, and Decree No. 118/1998 of the Council of Ministers. To cite just one example of the difficulties, access to the archives of the National Central Alien Control Office (KEOKH), which was the agency that was responsible for the roundup and deportation of nearly 18,000 "alien" Jews in the summer of 1941, most of whom were slaughtered near Kamenets-Podolsk, was blocked for ninety years. László Varga, "A Holocaust és a rendszerváltás Magyarországon" (The Holocaust and the Systemic Change in Hungary) in *Adalékok a magyarországi zsidóság történetéhez* (Contributions to the History of Hungarian Jewry). Randolph L. Braham, ed., (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, forthcoming).

¹⁵ A similar letter was addressed on the same date by Wesley A. Fisher, the Museum's Director of International Programs, to Peter F. Tufo, the American Ambassador in Budapest.

¹⁶ These were Szabolcs Szita, the chief historian of the Hungarian Auschwitz Foundation of Budapest; Ilona Radnóti, the historian associated with the Janus Pannonius Museum of Pécs; and Róbert Turán, the head of the Jewish Museum of Budapest. Shocked after its first reading, Turán decided to forward copies of the draft to László Karsai, a leading expert on the Holocaust, and Emil Horn, an expert with many museum exhibits to his credit, for their reaction and input.

¹⁷ In connection with the pre-Holocaust era, for example, the planned exhibit failed to deal with various aspects of the anti-Jewish drive, including the antisemitic manifestations of the pre-World War I era; the agitation of the so-called Patriotic Associations; the pogroms by the counterrevolutionary forces during the White Terror; the enactment of ever harsher anti-Jewish laws; the shared responsibility of the Christian churches for reinforcing the climate of antisemitism by approving the adoption of virtually all anti-Jewish measures; the inequities of the forced labor service system; the deportation and subsequent murder of close to 18,000 “alien” Jews in the summer of 1941; and the mass murder of Jews during the so-called Délvidék raids early in 1942.

¹⁸ Almost three weeks after these reports were forwarded to the leadership of the Jewish community, the Chief Rabbi decided to resign from Ihász’s committee. Stark, reportedly upset that his name appeared on the second draft of the script without his authorization, informed Mária Schmidt about his displeasure. Only Schmidt is reported to have expressed her basic satisfaction with the unfortunate script. Ihász, on his part, must have felt vindicated. He received a prestigious state award on August 20, a national holiday, on the recommendation of the prime minister’s office.

¹⁹ For some details, see Randolph L. Braham, “Dishonoring the Victims of the Holocaust.” *Menóra*, Toronto, Nov. 5, 1999. At the request of the Ministry of Culture, another script was prepared with the cooperation of Szabolcs Szita, one of the main critics of the original text. *Népszabadság* (People’s Freedom), June 7, 2000. It was made public in late September 2000; while better than the first it too suffers from many shortcomings.

²⁰ For details, consult Braham, *Politics*, passim.

²¹ The remains of the Regent were brought back from Portugal, together with those of his wife and youngest son, and re-interred in their home town of Kenderes on September 4, 1993. Among the tens of thousands of Hungarians attending the reburial were four leading members of the Antall government. Randolph L. Braham, “The Reinterment and Political Rehabilitation of Miklós Horthy,” in *Slavic Almanach* Vol. II. Henrietta Mondry and Paul Schweiger, eds. (Johannesburg: University of the Witwaterstand, 1993), pp. 137-40.

²² This view is espoused by, among others, Aron Mónus. See his epilogue to the 1996 Hungarian edition of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (*Harcom*. Hódmezővásárhely: Interseas Editions, p. 366). He reiterated the same views in *Új Magyarország* (New Hungary), Budapest, August 13, 1994, p. 5. See László Karsai, “The Radical Right in Hungary,” a paper read at a conference in Seattle on March 23, 1996.

²³ This view has been expressed by, among others, István Jáni, who is the former gendarmerie captain in charge of a unit guarding the ghetto of Szombathely. His views were aired on a TV program that many viewers perceived as designed to whitewash the anti-Jewish activities of the gendarmerie. Titled *Híven, becsülettel, vitézül* (Faithfully, With Honor, With Bravery), which was the logo of the former gendarmerie, the documentary was aired on the Duna TV-station of Budapest on December 6, 1998. For additional details about this documentary, see note 42.

²⁴ This view was aired by then Foreign Minister Géza Jeszenszky on April 5, 1994, during the opening session of the International Scholars' Conference in Budapest on "The Holocaust in Hungary: Fifty Years Later." His comments caused a scandal in the hall as well as in the press. For example, see "Holocaust-konferencia: kitapsolták a külügyminisztert" (Holocaust Conference: Foreign Minister Applauded Down) in *Népszabadság* (People's Freedom), Budapest, April 6, 1994; "Az igazság megismeréséért, a lelkek megbékéléséért" (To Know the Truth and Give Peace to the Spirit) in *Esti Hirlap*, Budapest, April 6, 1994, p. 3; "Holocaust-tanácskozás Budapesten, Jeszenszky—kitapsolt párhuzam" (Holocaust Discussion in Budapest, Jeszenszky—Parallelism Applauded Down), by Éva V. Bálint and Éva Cseh in *Magyar Hirlap*, Budapest, April 6, 1994; "Holocaust-konferencia Budapesten, Jeszenszky Géza beszédét félbeszakították" (Holocaust Conference Budapest, Géza Jeszenszky's Speech Interrupted), by Sára Szeli in *Pesti Hirlap*, Budapest, April 6, 1994.

²⁵ Many communities in Hungary have erected plaques and monuments honoring the local martyrs of the war, listing them alphabetically irrespective of the circumstances of their death. The same approach is followed in many memorial books. For example, see *Somogy megye a II. világháborúban* (Somogy County in the Second World War), Péter Szabó and Ferenc Szily, eds. (Kaposvár: A Somogy Megye Levéltár kiadása, 1993), 539 pp. Pages 179-536 of the book, for which Sándor Szakály wrote the introduction and served as editorial consultant, contain the listing of the wartime casualties by communities. With this approach, which amalgamates Jewish and non-Jewish civilians into a single category, the number of Christian casualties is almost three times as high as that of the Jews killed during the Holocaust: Soldiers, 5,916; civilians, 4,498; Jews, 3,539.

²⁶ Champions of this group argue, among other things, that the suffering of the Jews was due to the fact that they had sided with the Allies and actually participated in revolts in many ghettos and concentration camps. For example, see "Összehasonlító véralgebra és a holocaust" (Comparative Blood Algebra and the Holocaust) by István Lovas in *Népszabadság* (People's Freedom), Budapest, March 5, 1999, p. 10. I perceive Mr. Lovas' intent in an apparent selective use of dubious sources, and his "analysis" of the Wannsee Conference hardly reflects favorably upon his knowledge or capacities. One is perplexed not so much by the views of the author, widely identified as a "Rightist-nationalist-conservative" publicist, as with the explanations offered by Pál Eötvös, the editor-in-chief of one of Hungary's most popular and respected dailies,

Népszabadság, for publishing a piece that, according to his own assessment, would be liable to criminal prosecution in several other countries. Ibid. He apparently fails to recognize that not only the denial of the Holocaust but even more its denigration and distortion—a practice engaged in by many “respectable” nationalist history cleansers—are among the primary sources and components of contemporary antisemitism in Hungary.

Lovas’ views were rejected by many reputable Hungarian scholars and intellectuals. See “Vita a vérről és a holocaustról” (Debate About Blood and the Holocaust), *Hetek* (Weeks) 4:10 (March 1999).

For a fully documented scholarly treatment of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, see Steven T. Katz, *The Holocaust and Mass Death Before the Modern Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). (*The Holocaust in Historical Context*, Vol. I.)

²⁷ At the London conference on the Holocaust on April 17-18, 1994, for example, Mária Schmidt was virtually shouted down by members of the audience when she tried to “prove” that the postwar Communist regime in Hungary was more oppressive than the pro-Nazi Sztójay government. Found unsuitable, the paper was excluded from the volume dealing with the conference (*Genocide and Rescue: The Holocaust in Hungary, 1944*, David Cesarani, ed. (Oxford: Berg, 1997)). It appears that many ideas similar to those in the Schmidt paper were later used by István Ihász in the script for the planned Auschwitz exhibit (see above).

²⁸ Supporters of this argument rely for documentation on *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* by Stéphane Courteois, et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 858 pp. In a controversial speech (see below), Ms. Schmidt emphasized that while the Communist regimes were responsible for close to 100 million victims, the Nazis killed only about 25 million. In this context, see also some of her essays in her *Diktatúrák ördögszekerén* (In the Devil’s Cauldron of Dictatorships) (Budapest: Magvető, 1998), 289 pp.

²⁹ In recent years, she emerged as a crusader for the rehabilitation of former Prime Minister László Bárdossy, who was executed for war crimes in 1946. For example, see her “Az első kirakatper” (The First Show Trial), Ibid., pp. 217-30. The article was first read as a paper at the Vienna Conference of November 2-5, 1995, held under the sponsorship of the *Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen*. This writer took pains to remind her and the audience that the former prime minister was not only the statesman she basically portrayed him to be but also the man during whose relatively brief tenure as head of government (April 4, 1941–March 7, 1942), Hungary among other things declared war first on the Soviet Union and then the Western Allies; adopted the Nuremberg-type Third anti-Jewish Law; aggravated the status of the Jewish labor servicemen; rounded up close to 18,000 so-called “alien” Jews, who were deported and subsequently murdered near Kamenets-Podolsk; and massacred more than 3,300 men, women, and children in and around Újvidék. György Dancsecs, a top-ranking leader of István Csurka’s neo-Fascist Hungarian Justice and Life Party

(*Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja*–MIÉP) in Budapest, launched an initiative in late October 1999, for the re-trial and possible rehabilitation of the former prime minister. *Népszabadság*, October 22, 1999. A month later, the initiative for the judicial rehabilitation of Bárdossy was publicly endorsed by Csurka himself. Michael Shafir, “Radical Politics in East-Central Europe.” *RFE/RL East European Perspectives* 2:2 (January 26, 2000), p. 6.

³⁰ Ms. Schmidt’s talk was given under the auspices of the Eckhardt Tibor Political Academy (*Eckhardt Tibor Politikai Akadémia*) at the headquarters of the Independent Smallholders’ Party (*Független Kisgazdapárt*). For text, see Mária Schmidt, “Holokausztok a huszadik században” (Holocausts in the Twentieth Century), *Magyar Hírlap* (Hungarian Journal), Budapest, November 13, 1999.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² For example, see Tamás Gáspár Miklós, “Sírrablok és halottgyalázók” (Grave Robbers and Vilifiers of the Dead), *Ibid.*, November 16, 1999, and Sándor Kopátsy. “Holocaust csak egy volt” (There Was Only One Holocaust), *Ibid.*, November 23, 1999.

³³ In this capacity and with a huge budget at her disposal, Ms. Schmidt reportedly has the power to determine which historians and projects will receive state funding. According to a published report, “she also backs the unrestricted publication and distribution of *Mein Kampf*, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and other antisemitic tracts, which are selling well in many Budapest bookstores in new Hungarian editions.” Michael J. Jordan, “Hungary Whitewashes Its Murky Past,” *Jerusalem Report* 10:23 (March 13, 2000), pp. 30-31.

According to many reports, Schmidt has also been exerting considerable influence on shaping media policy. Some details about her role in this area were revealed in the March 2, 2000 judgment of the *Pesti Központi Kerületi Bíróság* (Central Regional Court of Pest) in a libel case she initiated—and lost—against the *Magyar Hírlap*. For the text of the judgment, see *Magyar Hírlap*, April 6, 2000.

³⁴ See “Orbán bizik Schmidt Máriában” (Orbán Has Confidence in Mária Schmidt), *Népszabadság*, November 17, 1999. Among the nationalist-rightist organizations that expressed support of Schmidt’s activities is the *Történelmi Igazságtétel Bizottság* (Committee for Historical Justice). See *ibid.*

³⁵ Antisemites and ultra-nationalists continuously emphasize that most of the leaders of the short-lived proletarian dictatorship of 1919 were “Jews,” overlooking the fact that these Communists of Jewish origin were in reality “magyarized internationalists” whose class-oriented social and economic policies hurt the Jewish community even more than the Christian society. Of course, these antisemites also always fail to note

that the counterrevolutionary forces that succeeded the proletarian dictatorship killed many more human beings—Jews and non-Jews alike—than the Communists.

As to the postwar Communist era, they fail to note that the Communist Party of Hungary had more than 800,000 members in the late 1980s, among whom the percentage of Jews was relatively small (the total Hungarian Jewish population was only around 80,000). Moreover, the top leadership of the Party, like its membership in general, consisted overwhelmingly of ethnic Hungarians, the Jews having been largely purged in the wake of the anti-Zionist and anti-cosmopolitan campaign that began in the Stalinist era

³⁶ A notorious example of this was the comment by G. Nagyné Maczó Ágnes, a representative of the Smallholder's Party and one of the vice presidents of the Hungarian Parliament. During a speech on March 17, 1997, the former member of the right-of-center Hungarian Democratic Forum reminded Imre Szekeres, the leader of the Hungarian Socialist Party faction, that his predecessor was “the Hungarian-hating Manó Roth,” which was a clear reference to Mátyás Rákosi, the Stalinist leader of Jewish origin. Ignoring the fact that Rákosi was perhaps an even greater Jew-hater, the parliamentary vice president clearly did not even know that Rákosi's original name was Rosenfeld. For some details on this incident, see Péter Regös, “Zsidózó ‘56-os vendég” (An Antisemitic Guest of the ‘56 [Generation]), *Menóra*, October 3-10, 1997.

³⁷ Horrible and murderous as the Gulags were, the inmates were overwhelmingly political and performed tasks deemed useful by the Soviet state. These history cleansers ignore the fact that, unlike the Jews deported to Auschwitz, the Gulag inmates, identified as “enemies of the people,” were allowed to receive mail, food packages, medical care, and occasionally visits during the period of their incarceration. While millions of Gulag inmates died or were killed during the seventy-year history of the Soviet Union, their entire families were not automatically subjected to genocidal treatment as the Jews were during the Holocaust.

For a balanced overview of the basic differences between Auschwitz and the Gulag, see Steven T. Katz, *The Holocaust and Comparative History* (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1993), pp. 18-25. (Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture 37).

³⁸ Early in 2000, the Orbán government restored the Royal Crown of St. Stephen as the symbol of the Hungarian state. Overlooking the inherent contradiction between the symbol of a royal crown and Hungary's current democratic, republican form of government, Zsolt Lányi, vice president of the Independent Smallholders' Party and chairman of Parliament's armed services committee, for example, declared that the Crown represented “the embodiment of Christian Hungary.” The Orbán government also revived the Corvin Prize, the state award introduced by Horthy in 1930. Some nationalists have also called for the restoration of noble titles and knighthood rituals, the honoring of those who fought for the Fascist cause as “heroes,” and the renaming a street in Budapest for Horthy. Alex Bandy, “Hungary Revives Nationalist Symbols,” *The Associated Press*, December 14, 1999, and Zoltán Vajda, “Horthyról mégsem

neveznek el utat” (There Will Be No Road Named for Horthy), *Magyar Hirlap*, March 17, 2000.

Prime Minister Orbán’s nationalist orientation is also reflected by the government’s packing of the state-run broadcasters’ boards with rightist elements, including Péter Csermely, the former editor of *Demokrata*, the right-radical weekly. In contrast to the other NATO heads of government, Orbán also found it necessary to attend the funeral of Franjo Tudjman, the controversial President of Croatia, and failed to take a public stand in connection with the inclusion of Joerg Haider’s Freedom Party in Austria’s coalition government early in February 2000.

³⁹ “Antallra emlékezett az MDF: Dávid Ibolya pártelnök s demokrata fórum integráló szerepéről” (The MDF Memorialized Antall: Ibolya Dávid, the Party President, on the Integrating Role of the Democratic Forum). *Népszabadság*, November 1, 1999. The Minister has also rejected the Jewish leaders’ plea to initiate legislation making Holocaust-denial punishable.

⁴⁰ Orbán’s FIDESZ Hungarian Civic Party and his coalition partners (i.e., the right-wing rural-based Smallholders’ Party led by József Torgyán and the Hungarian Democratic Forum led by Ibolya Dávid) control only 213 seats (55 percent) of the total 386 seats in Parliament. For some details on antisemitic incidents since the inauguration of the Orbán government, see Marta S. Halpert, “Hungary: A Growing Tolerance for Anti-Semitism,” *ADL International Notes*, New York, December 1999.

⁴¹ Titled *Hiven, becsülettel, vitézül* (Faithfully, With Honor, Bravely), the logo of the gendarmerie, the documentary featured a few experts on national security, including Sándor Szakály and József Parádi, who were also involved in its production.

⁴² Among those featured in the film were Captain István Jáni, the former commander of the gendarmes in the ghetto of Szombathely; First Lieutenant László Radnay and First Lieutenant Mihály Gerencséry, who were convicted for their involvement in the Újvidék massacres in early 1942; First Lieutenant Pál Bugarin-Horvath, who was involved in the ghettoization of Jews in Matészalka; and Sergeant József Szendi, who was deported from the United States for hiding his background and involvement in the anti-Jewish drive. See also note 23.

⁴³ Sándor Püski, a publisher and bookdealer identified with pro-Rightist activities, went even further, claiming that the Horthy regime entered World War II to save the Hungarian Jews and could not end the alliance with Hitler for the same reason. For some details on this bizarre position, see Ivan Berend, “Jobbra át [Right Face]: Right-Wing Trends in Post-Communist Hungary” in *Democracy and Right-Wing Politics in Eastern Europe in the 1990s*, Joseph Held, ed. (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1993), pp. 127-28.

⁴⁴ Braham, *Politics*, pp. 393, 397-401.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 1063-64.

⁴⁶ While mythmakers operating at opposite ends of the political spectrum also claim credit for Heinrich Himmler and Raoul Wallenberg, very few find it politically fashionable to acknowledge the decisive role that the Red Army played in the liberation of the Jews. The chief spokesman for Himmler's alleged role in rescuing the Jews of Budapest is *SS-Sturmbannführer* Wilhelm Höttl (Walter Hagen), former Head of the Intelligence Service of the Security Service in Vienna (which covered Hungary). See his interview in Péter Bokor's *Végjáték a Duna mentén* (End Game Along the Danube) (Budapest: RTV-Minerva-Kossuth, 1982) p. 192. See also Braham, *Politics*, p. 939, note 152.

Wallenberg's transformation from an authentic hero of the Holocaust, the savior of some 4,000 to 7,000 Jews, into a myth took place during the Cold War. Numerous writers and politicians identify Wallenberg, who was killed by the Soviets, as the "savior of 100,000" if not all of the Jews of Budapest.

⁴⁷ Tamás Stark, Péter Szabó, and Sándor Szakály, "Második világháború: A magyar munkaszolgálat" (The Second World War: The Hungarian Labor Service), *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian Nation), Budapest, February 20, 1992 and February 28, 1992. See also Randolph L. Braham, "Nyugtalanító gyakorlatok Magyarországon a Holocausttal kapcsolatban" (Disturbing Research Practices on the Holocaust in Hungary), *Menóra*, May 29, 1992, pp. 3-4.

⁴⁸ See László Karsai's piece cited in note 22.

⁴⁹ See also Rabbi Marvin Hier, "Remembrance Needs to Emphasize Villains, not Heroes," *Martyrdom and Resistance*, New York, March-April 1995, p. 12.

⁵⁰ On January 18, 2000, the fifty-fifth anniversary of the liberation of the Budapest Ghetto, Minister of Education Zoltán Pokorni announced a plan to make Holocaust awareness part of the high school curriculum. He also stated that April 16, the day the ghettoization started in 1944, would be designated as a day of remembrance.

⁵¹ In addition to permitting the publication of such venomously antisemitic, Holocaust-denying periodicals as *Hunnia* and *Szent Korona*, the Hungarian authorities also consented to the reissuing of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (see note 22) and the notorious forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, works that were effectively exploited by the Nazis and their Hungarian hirelings in the drive against the Jews. Virulently antisemitic publications are available for sale even at the headquarters of the *Magyarok Világszövetsége* (World Federation of Hungarians) in Budapest.

⁵² Following are just a few examples. In late May 1999, a Munich court convicted the French far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen of inciting racial hatred by referring to the

Holocaust as “a detail in the history of World War II” during a 1997 press conference in Munich. On December 9, 1998, a Dutch court banned all publications that cast doubt on the authenticity of Anne Frank’s diary. In Spain, in November 1998, Pedro Varela was condemned by a Barcelona court to five-years imprisonment for propagating the idea that Auschwitz was a lie. This conviction was suspended by a higher court in April 1999, with the matter to go next to the Constitutional Tribunal. See also note 39.

⁵³ In the late 1990s, the popularity of extremist parties such as the Hungarian Justice and Life Party of István Csurka, and the Hungarian League for the People’s Welfare (*Magyar Népjóléti Szövetség*), led by Albert Szabó, appears to have grown. In February 1999, some of their followers, enjoying the protection of the Hungarian police, gathered in the Buda Fort area together with skinhead and neo-Nazi elements from abroad to commemorate the SS and their Hungarian allies who had fallen in the defense of the fort. For some details, see Tamás Barabás, “A Sieg Heil - szabad” (The Sieg Heil Is Permitted), *Új Élet*, March 15, 1999. See also Karl Pfeifer, “Nyilt levél Orbán Viktor miniszterelnök úrnak” (Open Letter to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán), *Hetek* 3:10 (March 1999).

⁵⁴ For example, see “Szaporodnak az antiszemita megnyilvánulások” (The Antisemitic Manifestations Are Multiplying), *Hetek* 3:11 (March 1999). See also Halpert’s piece cited in note 40.

⁵⁵ For example, István Stumpf, a top-ranking minister in the Orbán government, misled his audience at the January 2000 summit conference on the Holocaust in Stockholm about how Hungary was confronting the Holocaust. He did so by failing to address the anti-Jewish historical record of the 1938-1945 period. For the text of his talk, see *Új Kelet* (New East), Tel Aviv, February 4, 2000.

⁵⁶ Germany had already come to terms with the Holocaust in the era of Konrad Adenauer. Addressing the Knesset in February 2000, President Johannes Rau asked for forgiveness for the Holocaust. On July 16, 1995, two months after taking office, President Jacques Chirac publicly recognized France’s responsibility for deporting some 70,000 Jews to Nazi death camps during the German occupation in World War II. On August 21, 1997, Croatia apologized to the Jews for the crimes committed by the Ustashi regime during the Nazi era. Japan formally extended apologies to Korea on October 8, 1998 and November 26, 1998 and to China on November 28, 1998 for crimes committed by the Japanese occupation forces.

⁵⁷ A few Hungarian politicians have spoken eloquently about the need honestly to confront the past, but they have done so without admitting the crucial role the various Hungarian governments played in the destruction of the Jews. On January 31, 2000, for example, Imre Mécs used the platform of the Hungarian parliament to plead for an honest confrontation of the past and for the assumption of responsibility for the catastrophe that befell Jewry. An even more forceful position was taken by the

Hungarian ecclesiastical leaders. In a joint declaration issued in late November 1994, the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Ecumenical Council of the Churches of Hungary (*A Magyar Katolikus Püspöki Konferencia és a Magyarországi Egyházak Okumenikus Tanácsa*) acknowledged that responsibility must be borne by those Christians who, for a variety of reasons, remained silent during the tragedy that engulfed Jewry. The declaration was published in periodicals including *Magyar Hírlap* (Hungarian Journal), November 30, 1994. Eloquent as the statement was, it failed to acknowledge the role the Christian churches themselves had played in laying the ground for the tragedy.

By far the most honest expression of sorrow was that of former Prime Minister Gyula Horn. In a July 3, 1994 letter to László Keller, an advisor on Eastern Europe to the World Jewish Congress, Horn expressed the need not only to confront the past but also "to apologize for the destruction of 600,000 of our fellow citizens." The letter was reproduced in several places including *Új Kelet* (New East), Tel Aviv, July 8, 1994. Gratifying as this letter was, however, it failed to achieve the desired impact, primarily because—as a ruling of a Budapest District Court (*A Pesti Központi Kerületi Bíróság*, 29. P.92. 750/1884/13) so aptly indicated—the then prime minister-elect merely expressed his personal views. Perhaps the time will come when the leaders of the Hungarian state or government will give Horn's words the public resonance they deserve in the name of the nation.