Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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

Screaming Silences? Memorialization of World War II in Public Spaces

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

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

36 The International Ghetto was established by the government of the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party in November 1944. About the ghettoization of Budapest, see Tim Cole, Holocaust City: The Making of a Jewish Ghetto (London: Routledge, 2003).
ing the neck of a snake that is attacking him, together with the base and the inscription on it, disappeared.37

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

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


39 On the arrest, see Mária Ember, “Wallenberg elrablása” [Wallenberg’s abduction], *Budapesti Negyed* 8, no. 2 (1995): 181–208. Based on a Soviet government report from 1956, Wallenberg was long believed to have died on July 17, 1947, while imprisoned by Soviet authorities in Moscow’s infamous Lubyanka Prison. However, eyewitness accounts of Wallenberg still being alive in the Soviet penal system after that date called his death into question. The exact date and circumstances of Wallenberg’s death are not known up to this day.
our country from the ruins, we gained victory after victory against the internal and external enemy, and successfully laid the basis of socialism.”40 Thus, Pátzay’s figure commemorating the real heroic deeds of a Swedish individual came to symbolize the fictitious collective effort of the Hungarian people to defeat fascism and build communism. According to contemporary reports, the sculpture received a lot of attention from the visitors of the exhibit,41 though a professional evaluation at the meeting of the Association of Hungarian Artists of Fine and Applied Arts (Magyar Képző- és Iparművész Szövetség) criticized the piece for relying on symbolism rather than a realistic portrayal (surely a consequence of the sensitivity of the of the artwork’s original topic).42

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

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

41 “Az I. Magyar Képzőművészeti Kiállítás szoborművei” [Sculptures of the First Hungarian Fine Exhibition], Kis Újság, September 2, 1950, 4.
42 One participant at a meeting of the Association opined that “[t]he way Pátzay talks about the fight against fascism with his statue was the way the bourgeoisie fought: vaguely, elusively.” “A Magyar Képző- és Iparművész Szövetség szakmai ankétja” [Discussion of the Association of Hungarian Artists of Fine and Applied Arts], Szabad Művész, December 1, 1950: 476.
44 Originally, the company was called Hajdúsági Gyógyszergyár, and after its merger with the Debreceni Gyógyszergyár in 1960, it was renamed Biogal and became one of the biggest pharmaceutical companies in communist Hungary. For further details on its history, see 10 éves a Biogal Gyógyszergyár (Debrecen: Alföldi Nyomda, 1962).
sight. The male figure with the snake appeared on millions of medication packages during communism, becoming a well-known symbol of fighting diseases.45

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

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

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

45 A replica of this original statue would eventually be erected in Szent István park on April 18, 1999, fifty years after this episode. As Pátzay was already dead, the copy was made by Sándor Györfi.
and painter Lipót Herman had just finished a monumental painting. The composition depicted “various martyrdoms (labor service, deportation, ghetto, etc.) surrounding one single vision: the resurrection and glorification of millions of martyrs.” Herman was quoted as saying that he had wished that destructive “fascist cruelties” had not provided such rich materials for his art about resurrection. A significant collection of Herman’s art was exhibited in Budapest’s Ernst Museum in 1954 and the introductory text of the catalogue also mentioned his sources of inspiration in the postwar years, when he was motivated to work by “the liberation from the chains of fascism” and by “Persecution, the painful memory of the millions who died.” Though it seems that Herman’s painting depicting the death and resurrection of Jews who had died during the Holocaust was not exhibited at that time, the topic of Jewish martyrdom was clearly discussed in both of the above mentioned sources. This discussion was possible as long as it was placed within the context of fascism’s cruelty, and as far as those who had suffered were not admittedly engaged in political activities outside the communist movement.

Marginalized Memory? Martyr Memorial Services in the Jewish Community

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

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

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

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

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

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