Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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

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

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

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52 Notes of the meeting of the Memorial Committee, July 15, 1946, Hungarian Jewish Archives, HU HJA XIII-1-6 (1947–50), Pesti Chevra Kadisha Iratai, Központi Mártíremlékmű iratai.
53 Notes of the meeting of the Memorial Committee, July 15, 1946.
pantheon of heroes. Katona had always been a firm believer in Jewish assimilation into the majority Hungarian society and his commitment to the idea continued even after World War II.\textsuperscript{55} He also pledged that Jewish survivors were ready to take part in the building of a “better future.” His words could be interpreted both as a commitment to a socialist future, and to one without antisemitism.

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

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

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

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


\textsuperscript{56} Rabbi József Katona’s speech, Hungarian Jewish Archives, HU HJA XIII-1-6 (1947–1950), Pesti Chevra Kadisa Iratai, Központi Mártiremlékmű iratai.
has always been everyone’s prey but has resurrected from thousands of deaths, should again find a homeland after two thousand years. . . . We say for the eternal peace of the agitated blood of our martyrs: your deaths were not in vain. We tell you: Eretz Israel was born from your blood. 57

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

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

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57 Rabbi Sándor Scheiber’s speech quoted in “Emlékünnepekély a Vadász utca 29-ben” [Memorial celebration in 29 Vadász street], Új Élet, January 8, 1948, 13.
59 According to a number of Jewish accounts, the communist takeover actually compelled many who had still believed in the possibility of remaining in Hungary after the war to change their minds and try to leave. “But in forty-seven . . . only the blind could not see that the communists would take over the power. . . . Unconsciously, our main goal became to send the children who had survived the Holocaust to Eretz Israel.” This report of an orthodox Jewish man is quoted in Sándor Bacskai, Egy lépés Jeruzsálem felé, 40–41.
60 István Szirmai’s speech, Hungarian Jewish Archives, HU HJA XIII-1-6 (1947–1950), Pesti Chevra Kadisa Iratai, Központi Máršíremlékmü iratai.
communist\textsuperscript{61} did not even identify the victims as Jews, but called for everyone to take on arms against what he defined as various ideological enemies. Commemoration was thus not enough; survivors were needed to actively take part in the continued war against fascism. During the official commemorations of the Jewish community, especially in the early years, communist officials frequently emphasized their conviction to help Jewish survivors in this struggle against the enemy (fascism). László Bóka, State Secretary at the Ministry of Culture solemnly promised, “in the name of the democratically thinking people,” to all those survivors gathered at the inauguration of a memorial plaque in the city of Szolnok that “they will make sure that the atrocities of the past would never be repeated.”\textsuperscript{62} Similarly, State Secretary László Peska vowed during his speech at the inauguration of the martyr memorial in Budapest’s 4th district in the summer of 1949 that “The Hungarian People’s Democracy and its government will assure that the conditions that would allow the repetition of the tragic and barbaric events of the past would not be present anymore.”\textsuperscript{63} Commemorations provided an opportunity for communist state officials like Bóka, Peska, and Szirmai to remind their audiences about the continued threat of fascism, and communism’s immense importance in fighting against it.

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

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

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

\textsuperscript{63} “A köztársasági elnök jelenlétében avatták fel az újpesti mártír emlékművét” [The martyr monument of Újpest was inaugurated in the presence of the President of the Republic], \textit{Új Élet}, July 29, 1948, 8.
cial antifascist ideology. However, it should also be kept in mind that during these early years, the symbolism and language widely known and used today to commemorate the Holocaust was not yet developed. Martyr memorial services had taken place before the Holocaust became a central element in (mostly West) European memory culture in the 1960s. Even the very terms “Holocaust” and “Shoah” became widespread only later.

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

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

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


⁶⁵ Új Élet, May 26, 1949, 3.
years passed, survivors added the names of their beloved ones onto the pillars, continuing the identification process of victims and guarding their memory. Had the Martyr Memorial been erected in a more central location, such dignified and undisturbed interaction would most likely not have been possible.

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

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

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66 Új Élet, June 22, 1950, 4.
67 Új Élet, June 4, 1953, 2.
rial services was definitely not the strengthening of Jewish community cohesion. However, the services did in time come to bear this significance within the Jewish community.

Conclusions

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

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

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

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