Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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erected abroad, they did not solely represent the past: they were intended to shape the present perception of their countries—and their current leadership—internationally.

From the history of the Hungarian memorial in Mauthausen it is evident that for the communist leadership of the country, the memorialization of the Holocaust was a means and not an aim. The international setting where the memorial was placed provided an excellent opportunity to present Hungary—and the leadership itself—in the context of the antifascist narrative, which served as a tool for self-legitimization, imagining and visualizing a central role for antifascist resistance in a country which lacked such a strong historical role.

1965, Auschwitz: The Permanent Hungarian Exhibition

Auschwitz was the location of another artistic project that represented Hungary abroad within an international context. The new permanent Hungarian exhibition in Auschwitz, which opened in 1965, was completed with artworks commissioned specifically for the project.\(^{27}\) Although the main focus was on the monumental visualization of the antifascist narrative, some of the works represented victimhood. Moreover, on this occasion, criticism was formulated about the realization of the project within the jury while an explicit need for a different perspective emerged in the press, one that concentrated on the experience of the victims.

The historical exhibition—reconstructed in 2004 by the Open Society Archives in Budapest—consisted mainly of texts, documents, and photos, as well as illustrative artworks arranged on panels.\(^{28}\) The narrative began with the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic (1919)\(^{29}\) and ended with postwar trials and the introduction of the socialist system in Hungary.\(^{30}\) Out of the 120 panels,

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\(^{27}\) I would like to express my gratitude to Mária Árvai for helping me locate archival material about the exhibition. She was the first to publish the list of the artists involved: Mária Árvai, “Ország Lili első magyarországi gyűjteményes kiállítása, 1967. Székesfehérvár” [Lili Ország’s first comprehensive exhibition in Hungary, 1967. Székesfehérvár], Miúlt és Jövő 4 (2016): 88, 94.

\(^{28}\) “Auschwitz rekonstrukció,” (Auschwitz reconstruction), Open Society Archives, 2004 http://w3.osaarchivum.org/galeria/auschwitz/, accessed April 30, 2019, the webpage of the exhibition is currently under reconstruction.

\(^{29}\) Also translated more literally as the Republic of Councils in Hungary (Magyarországi Tanácsköztársaság), this was a short-lived (133 days) communist state in 1919.

only 10 made reference to Jewish victims, and none of them mentioned the Roma.31 The plans, with their disproportionately wide representation of the 1919–1939 period, evoked criticism from the director of the Auschwitz State Museum who recommended to broaden the part about the fate of Hungarians, from their deportation in 1944 until the end of the war.32 The Hungarian exhibition, which occupied block 15, was the fifth to open, following the Czechoslovakian, East German, Soviet, and Yugoslav exhibits.33 These, and further national exhibitions established during the 1960s form the original international context of the Hungarian exhibition.

The artists were chosen by the Committee for the Division of Work in the Fine Arts Fund at the request of the Department of Museums in the Ministry of Culture.34 (This body was responsible for choosing artists for state-funded projects directly, where a competition was not deemed necessary.) The artists did not apply for the project but were instead appointed to participate. Consequently, they were not necessarily interested in or closely acquainted with the


subject of the commission. Furthermore, judging by the late start and the short deadlines for the project, it seems that the artistic part was a belated addition to the historical exhibition, in preparation since spring 1963. The artists were chosen and notified in late December 1964, and the sketches approved by mid-January. The deadline for the finished works was March 1, since the opening of the exhibition was scheduled for May. Although the appointed lector warned in January that the plans for the exhibition were vague and the various artistic works were lacking a coherent composition, the project continued unchanged.

The major part of the artistic material consisted of a “series of drawings” (actually large paintings on particleboard), which corresponded with the narrative of the historical exhibition. The themes were defined as follows:

- Wall 1: The Hungarian Republic of Councils and the Horthy-era.
- Wall 2: Fascism in Hungary (Massacre in Yugoslavia [Novi Sad, 1942], Anti-Jewish laws, Forced labor, Ghetto).
- Wall 3: The concentration camp (“lager”) in Auschwitz.
- Wall 4: Terror of the Arrow Cross, Resistance, Liberation.

The assigned artists were:

- Wall 1: Gyula Hincz (1904–1986)
- Wall 2: János Kass (1927–2010)
- Wall 3: Béla Kondor (1931–1972)

A closer look at the list reveals that no consideration was given to the probable thematic preferences of the artists: the historical narrative was divided between them according to strict alphabetical order. Two further paintings were commissioned: one representing the skeleton-like figures of the prisoners

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35 Horn, “Az auschwitzi magyar emlékkiállítás,” 88.
36 The artists were first notified on December 18, 1964. Another letter shows that the consultation with them was scheduled for December 21. Letter, 6550/64, SzM KEMKI ADK, 25020/2014/82.
38 A handwritten note containing only the numbering of the walls, without mentioning the themes, set the deadline for the sketches (January 13) as well as for the finished works (February 15). Agreement upon the division of the graphic works of the exhibition in Auschwitz, December 30, 1964, SzM KEMKI ADK, 25020/2014/82. The themes were defined in Proceedings of the Graphics Jury (in case of Kass, Kondor, and Szász), January 13, 1965, G/1/1965, 2, SzM KEMKI ADK, 25020/2014/82; Proceedings of the Painting Jury (in case of Hincz), March 1, 1965, F/30/1965, 2, SzM KEMKI ADK, 25020/2014/82.
Figure 8.11. Gyula Konfár, Resistance in the Camp (Prisoners of the concentration camp), 1965. Source: Szombathelyi Képtár.

Figure 8.12. György Konecsni, Liberation (A man, a woman, their child, and the dove of peace), 1965. Source: Szombat-helyi Képtár.
Commissioned Memory

(figure 8.11) by Gyula Konfár (1933–2008), and another, a large postwar idyll, showing parents with their child and a dove (figure 8.12) symbolizing peace by György Konecsni (1908–1970).39

The Committee also commissioned an artwork based on an earlier model: István Martsa’s sculpture created for the competition related to the Mauthausen memorial (figure 8.13).40 A female counterpart of this life-size figure, a sculpture not listed among the commissions, József Somogyi’s fearful Mother with Her Child (figure 8.14) was added at a later stage.41 A further element, a

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39 Proceedings of the Committee for the Division of Work, December 16, 1964, 5. Konecsni was selected conditionally, in case Endre Domanovszky (1907–1974), Rector of the Academy of Fine Arts would not accept the task. For the acceptance of Konfár’s 1:1 cartoon and Konecsni’s 1:5 colored sketch, see Proceedings of the Painting Jury, January 29, 1965, F/10/1965, SzM KEMKI ADK, 25020/2014/82. Konfár’s work was originally intended as a mosaic (to be executed by Lajos Csákvári Nagy), but due to the limited time the technique was changed to painting. Letter by István Fazekas to Lajos Csákvári Nagy, January 20, 1965, 10.025/65, SzM KEMKI ADK, 25020/2014/82. Today, the works commissioned for the Auschwitz exhibition are in the collection of the Szombathelyi Képtár (Szombathely Gallery).


41 The sculpture was mentioned and reproduced for the first time (titled Auschwitz) in an article, written while the exhibition material was still in Budapest. Imre Péter, “Pannók, tablók és plasztikák az auschwitzi magyar
red copper urn by metalsmith József Péri (1933–2003) that symbolized commemoration, served as the container for a memorial candle placed in the exhibition room, which was divided by wrought iron panels by the sculptor Imre Varga (1923–2019).42

At the stage of commissioning the works, the Hungarian Jewish Museum proposed the exhibition of Forced March (1959) by Tibor Barabás from their collection (figure 8.15).43 It references the eponymous poem, Erőltetett menet (Forced March) by Miklós Radnóti but, as we will see shortly, the meaning of Barabás’s work diverges from what the title suggests.

The sculpture belongs to a wide range of works commemorating the well-known Hungarian poet who was murdered as a Jewish forced laborer.44

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42 For the acceptance of the 1:10 models, see Proceedings of the Complex Jury, January 12, 1965, Sz/21/1965, SzM KEMKI ADK, 25020/2014/82.
43 The jury consisted of sculptors András Kocsis (1905–1976), Tamás Vigh (1926–2010), István Kiss, and the specialized lector Zoltán Boross. Proceedings of the Committee for the Division of Work, December 16, 1964; 5. According to the invitation, the jury deliberated on January 7, 1965, at the Jewish Museum. Invitation sent by the Lectorate for Fine and Applied Arts, December 28, 1964, 6653/64, SzM KEMKI ADK, 25020/2014/82. For the rejection, see Letter by Tibor Ormos, Director of the Lectorate for Fine and Applied Arts to the Museum Department of the Ministry of Culture, January 20, 1965, 10.025/65, SzM KEMKI ADK, 25020/2014/82. The documents do not make clear who proposed the sculpture in the first place. The work is in the collection of the Hungarian Jewish Museum: Tibor Barabás: Erőltetett menet (Forced March), 1959, inv. no. 64.2200, painted plaster, height: 191 cm. I would like to thank Rita Rusznák, curator of the museum, for her help in identifying the sculpture. (In the inventory the work is dated to 1960, but on the bottom right side of the sculpture “BT 59” is carved.)
44 As he continued writing during the labor service, some of his last works can be classified as Holocaust literature.
Radnóti’s figure achieved a cult-like commemorative position in this period, as he was strangely suitable for both official memory politics and for people aspiring on their own to commemorate the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. For official memory politics, Radnóti was convenient in that he could be remembered as a great Hungarian poet who fell victim to the war. (As a Christian convert, he was not “obtrusively” Jewish, and as a forced laborer, his death did not necessarily evoke the deportation of the Jews and the extermination camps.) The poet’s officially sanctioned commemorative status, however, offered a continued opportunity to honor the memory of the victims of the Holocaust in general.

The sculpture of Barabás shows the life-sized representation of two men. Contrary to the title, however, the hairless, thin figures do not evoke the image of forced labor or a death march, but rather that of prisoners of a concentration camp. The function of the title, borrowed from Radnóti, is merely to situate the sculpture in an acceptable cultural, historical, and commemorative context. Although the Committee took the offered sculpture into consideration, according to the laconic opinion of the jury, it was “not suitable” to be shown in Auschwitz. It was probably the passive victimhood represented by the figures that was deemed inappropriate—especially since the project already included Martsa’s sculpture, which struck a similar tone, although in a more symbolic form.

Most of the artworks commissioned for the project share certain characteristics. First, their exact themes are rather difficult to identify visually, even knowing the topics assigned to the artists. This is partly due to the lack of discrete narrative elements and partly to another recurring characteristic: the abstraction of the figures and, to a lesser extent, the addition of purely abstract elements to the composition. The fact that the artists were lacking both personal experience regarding the depicted themes as well as an expressed interest in the topic most probably contributed to the ambiguous nature of their works.

Hincz’s works are the most narrative ones, but even he added geometrical, stylized figures to his compositions (figure 8.16). The panels by Kass show not only an abstract background, but even the depiction of what appears to be an

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46 Letter by Tibor Ormos, Director of the Lectorate for Fine and Applied Arts to the Museum Department of the Ministry of Culture, January 20, 1965, 10.025/65, SzM KEMKI ADK, 25020/2014/82.
abstract sculpture (figures 8.17–19). The theme of the latter work—depicting men, a woman, and her child—which shows an iconographic reference to the biblical Massacre of the Innocents, can be identified as the massacre of Novi Sad (figure 8.17). There the Hungarian army murdered thousands of predominantly Serbian and Jewish civilians in 1942 under the false pretext of counter-partisan operations. Another work by Kass depicts on the right side a kneeling man with his arms tied and floating heads on the left; these most likely reference forced labor (or the ghetto) and the mass murders carried out by the Arrow Cross at the
Figure 8.18. János Kass, *Forced Labor or Ghetto* (on the right); *Mass Murders Carried Out by the Arrow Cross at the Danube* (on the left), 1965. Source: Szombathelyi Képtár.

Danube, respectively (figure 8.18). A third painting, showing nothing but a human figure almost completely covered in a geometrical structure of dripped paint could, through the constraints of the figure, represent anti-Jewish laws, but due to the lack of clearly identifiable motifs it could be interpreted in many ways (figure 8.19). Kondor’s three paintings and two etchings evoke victimhood mostly through Christological iconographic references, as well as visual (e.g., the chimney of the crematorium) and textual (e.g., “Appell!!”) allusions to Auschwitz (figure 8.20). The monochrome series of paintings by Szász can be arranged into a sequence that follows the deterioration of the human figure from a man wearing a yellow star (figure 8.21) leading to disembodied heads, masks (figure 8.22), and finally a skull. This series depicting victimhood is complemented and contrasted—in accordance with the antifascist narrative—with the hopeful image of a liberating Soviet soldier and a landscape with spikes of wheat, symbolizing peace.
The emaciated prisoners on Konfár’s monumental painting (320 × 210 cm) are closer to the portrayal of actual victims than Makrisz’s sculpture, although the entwined and partially entangled arms of two figures and the lowered but clenched fist of the third man could support the title given in a 1965 article and the exhibition’s brochure published in 1969: “Resistance in the Camp” (figure 8.11). The gargantuan postwar idyll by Konecsni (300 × 480 cm, painted on 40 panels, 60 × 60 cm each), titled Liberation in the same article offers a schematic representation of a family with the dove of peace (figure 8.12), but also an art historical reference to modernism through the woman’s naked figure, reminiscent of Manet’s Le déjeuner sur l’herbe (1863). The painting’s peculiarity lies in the background, which is formed by purely abstract panels painted using the dripped paint technique of the American abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock. With the ban on abstraction still in effect, this painting presented a strange hybrid of modernized figuration (still reminiscent of socialist realism) and abstraction absorbing the background.

To conclude, compared to the single-monument Mauthausen project, the exhibition in Auschwitz offered a more multifaceted artistic reception of the Holocaust with its diverse artists and artworks. Within the broader framework


48 These panels were painted horizontally—in accordance with Pollock’s technique—while Kass’s human figure, overwritten by the geometrical grid, was apparently painted on a vertical plane. (The vertical streams of the trickling paint are apparent.)
of the state’s antifascist narrative, a possibility emerged to focus on victims and on remembrance, although the Jewishness of the victims in question still remained mostly hidden.

The critical assessment of the Hungarian exhibition in Auschwitz presents an interesting insight into the reception of the Holocaust in Hungary. A detailed article about the material of the exhibition, authored by Imre Péter, appeared in Művészet (Art)—the only Hungarian periodical dedicated to fine arts at that time.\(^{49}\) It is symptomatic of this period’s public discourse that the words “Jew” or “Jewish” did not appear a single time in the lengthy article. The writing is otherwise both forthcoming and critical. In a “short subjective introduction,” as he puts it, the author clarifies that his parents and family were killed in Auschwitz.\(^{50}\) According to Péter, despite the artists’ efforts, the works could not be considered more than decent exhibition decorations.\(^{51}\) Moreover, these artists were, as he put it, fortunately far from the subject both in time and space, and thus they attempted to visualize something that was not within their own personal experience.\(^{52}\) As Péter concluded: “It is almost inexplicable why the organizers of the exhibition did not take into consideration that there are artists still living among us who have suffered the torments of hells like Auschwitz and even after twenty years they could have confessed about the horrors of that era in a more authentic and convincing way.”\(^{53}\)

What he proposed here—if we rephrase in a more contemporary perspective—was the merging of the two distinct narratives outlined at the beginning of this study: state-commissioned art sanctioned by official memory politics and non-commissioned art, driven by internal artistic receptions of the Holocaust, created almost exclusively by survivors in this period. His proposition remained, however, unfulfilled due to the lack of commissions. The works by survivors and other interested parties could not—with a few exceptions—be realized in such a monumental form as were the works of the Auschwitz exhibition or the Mauthausen memorial. Although the unrealized plans for Mauthausen, as well as some of the works that were created for the Auschwitz exhibition, represented suffering and victimhood, the victims’ perspective in general remained under-

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49 Péter, “Pannók, tablók és plasztikák,” 21–24. (The article was based on Péter’s visits to the artists’ studios and on the completed works amassed at the Museum of Technology before being delivered to Auschwitz.)
51 Péter, “Pannók, tablók és plasztikák,” 22.
52 Péter, “Pannók, tablók és plasztikák,” 22.
represented compared to the narrative of the antifascist struggle. Nevertheless, these projects opened up both physical and virtual discursive spaces, where the memory of the Holocaust could emerge and start to take form.

1965, Hungarian National Gallery: Exhibiting the Antifascist Narrative

Although set in Hungary, the exhibition entitled *Hungarian Artists Against Fascism* (1965, Hungarian National Gallery) served a similar cause as the memorial in Mauthausen and the exhibition in Auschwitz. It was organized in connection with the Fifth Congress of the International Federation of Resistance Fighters (FIR), which took place in Budapest. Consequently, the exhibition aimed to position the country for an international audience through its art production related to the antifascist struggle.

The exhibition attempted to trace a politically progressive tradition from World War I up to the present, attributing a central role to the political lineage of the socialist leadership. Despite the role Hungary played in World War II and in the Holocaust, the exhibition created an image of the country as one at the forefront of the fight against fascism. Judging by the exhibited material, antifascism was understood as a broad, undefined framework, which encompassed more or less any historical or contemporary topic considered meaningful from a left-wing—not necessarily communist or socialist—point of view.

Showing approximately 650 pieces, the exhibition was a gargantuan enterprise even if most of the artworks were rather small in scale. Seventy percent of them consisted of graphic works, complemented by paintings, posters, sculptures, and medals. The catalogue (figure 8.23) comprises data from all exhibited works, but contains only 15 illustrations. The titles are enough, however, for a thematic analysis. The time frame of the works ranged from World War I to the 1960s, covering such topics as World War I, the Hungarian Republic of Councils in 1919, the Horthy regime and World War II, and contemporary issues.

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55 Hungary was an ally to Nazi Germany during World War II. In March 1944, German forces entered the country to prevent it from leaving the Axis. Hungary’s governor Miklós Horthy stayed in power, appointing a pro-German prime minister. The Hungarian government and authorities played a crucial role in the deportation of Hungarian Jews and Roma.
56 A substantial number of the exhibiting artists were in fact either members or supporters of the Group of Socialist Artists (Szocialista Képzőművészek Csoportja), an organization active in the interwar period and during World War II.