Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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Conclusion

This study attempted to provide an overview of the first major state-funded art projects concerning the memory of the Holocaust in Hungary. These projects were all representative, monumental visualizations of the communist leadership’s official memory politics between 1955 and 1965. This period, from the tenth until the twentieth anniversary of the end of World War II, saw the first major phase since the immediate postwar years in the formation of artistic Holocaust memory in communist Hungary, encompassing commissioned and non-commissioned works alike.

An important and meaningful aspect of these projects is their geographic location, which of course was closely connected to their primary function. The initiatives that brought about such projects always originated from, or at least were connected to, foreign organizations. Two of the three projects were conducted abroad at sites of former concentration camps (Mauthausen and Auschwitz), which became the loci of competing national historical narratives, both “Eastern” and “Western.” The third project, the exhibition Hungarian Artists Against Fascism, although staged in Budapest, followed a similar pattern, as its primary audience was made up of the participants at the congress of the International Federation of Resistance Fighters.

This international aspect meant that these projects served a diplomatic function in addition to a domestic one. In this respect, the insistence on a combatively antifascist narrative—even when Hungary’s history did not support such claims—was part of a broader attempt to build a heroic antifascist and legitimizing image for an international audience, one that benefited both the country and its communist leadership. In this respect, the starting point of the Holocaust was an almost accidental, albeit necessary, element. These projects did not stem from a specific national need for or interest in memorializing the Holocaust. Characteristically, in the period between 1955 and 1965, no comparable state-funded Holocaust-related project took place on Hungarian soil solely for domestic use without an international audience. These three projects made the memory of the Hungarian Holocaust externalized, it became distant and—although relevant symbolic sites were readily available inland—extraterritorial.

From an art historical point of view, abstraction and figuration emerged as important issues in the case of both the Mauthausen memorial and the Auschwitz exhibition. In this period—which followed the violent and short-lived introduction of the Soviet brand of socialist realism—abstraction was still banned
in the domain of fine arts. Consequently, artists struggled with the crucial problem of modernizing figuration while holding on to an acceptable level of realism. Their solution was a small step towards abstraction: the geometric presentation of the human figure. Makrisz’s winning design for Mauthausen already moved quite far from socialist realism: the defensive, ideological apology of the lector confirms the novelty of this new type of figuration. Berczeller’s non-commissioned plan, however, which went even further in deconstructing realist figuration, would have certainly been unacceptable, not only because of its dangerously “pessimistic” content that focused on the suffering of the victims, but also due to its form. The difference between Hungarian and Yugoslav cultural political attitudes towards abstraction is evident in the fact that the Yugoslav memorial in Mauthausen contained the same type of figuration as Berczeller’s plan. Only five years passed between the contest for the Mauthausen memorial and the commissions for Auschwitz. Nonetheless, it appears that during this short period, abstraction started to gain momentum, becoming partially tolerated by the authorities, even if only in the background of paintings and as decorative elements connected to figurative motifs.

Nonetheless, these state-funded projects represent only one part of the two-sided artistic reception of the Holocaust in this period. The first phase of internally driven, non-commissioned Holocaust-related works date—after the immediate postwar reflections—to the same period. The two groups of works differ not only in their narrative, but also in their authorship. Non-commissioned works were created almost exclusively by Jewish survivors who emphasized the figure, identity, experience, and perspective of the victims through a variety of themes and stylistic approaches. In this period and even in the following years, with the exception of commissions, Holocaust-related works by non-Jewish or non-Roma artists were extremely rare.65

Contrary to the non-commissioned works, commissions that originated from official memory politics concentrated on visualizing the antifascist narrative. It appears to be more than a coincidence that in the case of the two examined commissions (Mauthausen and Auschwitz) none of the invited artists had a Jewish background, so far as we know. Consequently, they were not personally driven to represent the survivors’ perspective and were more susceptible to following the preferred historical narrative. The Auschwitz project was criticized

by Péter for lacking the important and authentic perspective of the victims, but the suggested inclusion of this narrative into official memory politics did not happen in this period.

Even though the three projects analyzed above had antifascism at their core and not the memory of the Holocaust, the latter’s integration into the antifascist historical narrative opened up possibilities for the appearance and articulation of the victims’ perspective nonetheless. In the case of Mauthausen, the winning plan represented antifascism in a combative manner, yet half of the submitted works did in fact focus on the victims. In the case of Auschwitz, partly due to its later date and partly to the multiple works included, the representation of the victims emerged, even if their Jewishness remained mostly hidden. Moreover, the non-winning designs submitted for Mauthausen also reached the public gradually; Martsa’s plan was realized for Auschwitz, while the others were exhibited, for instance at the National Gallery in 1965. The 1965 exhibition already signified a conscious attempt to include non-commissioned Holocaust-related works that represented a narrative different from the official one. Through these artworks, regardless of their geographical location, intended audience, and suggested historical narrative (antifascism), doors opened for the theme of the Holocaust to enter public spaces and thus reach a larger audience, while their critical reception opened up a discursive space. All these factors contributed to the emergence and formation of the memory of the Holocaust in Hungary.