

The Attempt of the Impossible: Conveying the “Mythified Remembrance”

The commemorations related to the 70th anniversary memorial year of the Holocaust in Hungary provide a spectacular illustration of the process of creating myths in human remembrance. As the last living witnesses are passing away, the history of the events and of objects, due to the researchers, is becoming obscure. The renewed investigations, in spite of the vast new data, merely contribute to the chaos in the heads. Due to the ruthlessly selective memory that operates with symbols, in certain circumstances the already questionable Wahrheit is replaced by Dichtung, and this poetry, which should be more appropriately named mythos, is subject to the most various interpretations.

Of course, this is linked to the validity of “meta-narratives”, questioned altogether by the post-modern historiography, to the ability to learn, perpetuate and convey to future epochs the so-called historical facts. To whichever interpretation we commit ourselves, the choice of the tools of presentation adopted to our objectives represent a further problem.

Contrary to the scientific “facts”, and similarly to the antique ones, modern myths are most efficient when using the language of the arts in addressing the interested public, not to mention the indifferent and hostile. Although the modern forms of visual display (e.g. movies, television, internet and the like) have a huge propaganda value (just to have Schindler’s List and Faithless on mind), from the classical arts (music, sculpture and painting) it is still the literature that is able grabbing the complex totality of the reality (both of the mentioned movies are based on novels, the later one received even the Nobel Award).

If we think of the pieces of various values in the (Soviet)-Russian literature dealing with, or mentioning the genocide of Jewry, like Babiyy Yar by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, or the description of the same location in “The Storm” by Ilya Ehrenburg, and possibly the documentary novel by Anatoliy Kusnetsov, the primate of the literature in planting the mythified Holocaust into the consciousness of the next generation may be observed well. In spite of their aim toward realistic description, similar role is played by pieces written or published later, e.g. “Heavy Sand” by Anatoly Naumovich Rybakov, or the monumental piece of Vasily Semyonovich Grossman, “Life and Fate”. (The case of Ehrenburg and Grossman is additionally interesting, as they published at the end of WWII the documents linked to their works in the “Black Book” well known and used until present by the experts of the topic. Banning of this publication and its later destiny would lead us to the slippery field of politicized and directed remembrance, which is a different area, although connected directly to mythification.)

Other sites and tools adopting scientific approach for keeping the memories alive in the public are large museums, usually established by states, as well as memorial sites, located on the ground of former extermination, concentration and work camps. Among the most important museums dealing with Holocaust (including the Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the US Memorial Museum in Washington D.C., the Memorial de la Shoah in Paris, the Holocaust Museum in Berlin, the Auschwitz State Museum, the Imperial War Museum in London) is also the Holocaust Documentation Center and Memorial Collection, or simply the Holocaust Memorial Center in Budapest, that I represent here today.

The Government decided the establishment of this institution of national remembrance in 1999, by transforming the Hungarian Auschwitz Foundation, created on private initiative in 1990. As the venue for exhibitions and commemorations, the second largest synagogue of Budapest, situated in Páva Street has been chosen. It was abandoned by the community in the 1960s, and it is itself an authentic site of the Shoah. During the 1940s a minor internment camp was situated at the location, and its rabbi also became victim of the Holocaust. Adjoin to the synagogue the modern building of the research center was completed, financed by the Hungarian government. It received a prestigious prize for architecture in 2005.

The Holocaust Memorial Center was established on purpose outside of the traditional Jewish quarter of Budapest, further emphasizing its national character, its role in remembering the tragedy of the whole Hungarian nation, and not merely of the Jewish community. The founding stone was laid on December 16 2002; the ceremonial opening took place after the completed construction on April 15 2004.

Since April 16, 2004, the institution is open to the public. Beyond remembrance, its most important objectives include supporting the education and processing the tragic past, which may serve as a basis for dealing with the contemporary challenges and learning tolerance. The first exhibition of the Center displayed the photos of the so-called "Auschwitz Album", a unique document illustrating the deportation of the Hungarian Jews. The present permanent exhibition titled "From Deprivation of Rights to Genocide" was opened on February 21, 2006.

The Holocaust Memorial Center is a museum and an exhibition hall at the same time, offering daily to its visitors an attractive permanent, and frequently changing periodic exhibitions. The equipment and the space in the modern building are shaped to allow displaying classical retrospectives, as well as innovative, interactive exhibitions. The permanent presentation is placed in the basement of the Memorial Center, in a space that had been specially designed to the purpose, while the periodic exhibitions use the space of the refurbished synagogue, particularly its gallery, and the inner court of the Center.

The Holocaust Memorial Center regularly hosts periodic exhibitions covering topics linked to the Holocaust and the Roma Holocaust. Photos, pieces of art, episodes from the Holocaust and documents from that period reflecting specific topics are displayed. Occasionally, exhibitions dealing with the social background of contemporary exclusion are also on display. The moving exhibitions are displayed not only within the Memorial Center, but due to their light construction and mobility, in partner institutions all over the country, first of all in the schools in Budapest and throughout Hungary.

The eight meters tall wall of the Center serves also as a memorial wall at the same time. The names of the victims are perpetuated by laser technique, 8 millimeters high letters burned into glass plates. More than 170,000 names are on display now. If we knew the names of all the victims, the whole wall would be covered by letters. Standing in front of the wall, thanks to the reflecting surface of the glass, the visitor observes not only the names, but also his or her own reflection, and the image of the memorial behind. It is a moment of facing not just the history, but ourselves, and our own past. The six pillars in the yard commemorate the 600,000 Hungarian and 6 millions of European victims. Since April 16 2006, the "Tower of Lost Communities" is situated in the yard of the Center, displaying

1441 names of settlements, where Jewish communities have ceased to exist as the consequence of the Holocaust.

The interactive permanent exhibition mentioned above focuses primarily on the events that took place in Hungary and on the stories of the Hungarian Jewish victims. Sections of the exhibition elaborate the details of the main episodes of the Holocaust in Hungary, inspiring a didactical interpretation of the events by the visitors. The exhibition space is placed underground, symbolically conveying that the events taking place during the Shoah represent the nadir of the human ethics and morality. The downward trend continues through the exhibition, the sloping floor involves the visitor, expresses that the process ends at its deepest point, in the massacre.

One of the sections of the exhibition is the room dealing with the deprivation of rights. The pillars in the room symbolize the obstacles set up by legal acts and regulations, preventing the advancement of Jewish people, and also indicating that the maze of acts and regulations is impenetrable for the common men. As the young generations are among the most important target populations of the exhibition, the original documents and objects are supplemented by cutting edge devices, multimedia contents, touch-screens linked to computers and interactive maps.

With the main stream of the exhibition, a fine line of a chamber exhibition presenting family stories of is interwoven, displaying the history of the Holocaust in Hungary (and of the Roma *Pharrajimos*). The lines running on the wall symbolize the changes in the number of Jewish people during the Shoah. As the years pass, there are fewer and fewer lines of the living on the wall, and more and more victims. Texts and audio recordings of personal and family stories offer to visitors the opportunity of a more complex understanding of the historical developments.

The former synagogue is also part of the exhibition space. The destruction, the void is communicated at the ground floor, but the rescuers are also reflected upon. Glass chairs symbolize the emptiness left behind by the victims (and their unborn descendents). At every chair, a photo of a randomly chosen victim (or a whole family) and a short biography is displayed. It indicates that their place would be there, and that nobody can replace them. A “meditation space” at the loft gallery of the synagogue closes the exhibition. The gallery provides space for travelling exhibitions as well.

Apart of managing the permanent and the travelling exhibitions, and the scientific research, the staff of the Memorial Center is also engaged in the following activities:

a. Collection

Within the Holocaust Memorial Center is situated the only public collection of Hungary dealing exclusively with collecting, processing and displaying objects and documents from the era. The seed collection had been gathered by the Hungarian Auschwitz Foundation, and since then enlarged by further donations of individuals and occasional purchases. The work of researchers, interested students is further supported by a collection of photos, some twenty linear meters of selected articles and a library with some 7000 volumes.

b. Knowledge-base

One of the basic tasks of the Holocaust Memorial Center is to research the historic events that took place during the Holocaust, in particular in (or related to) Hungary, as well as to process and systematize the available data. The on-line Knowledge-base (containing a pocket-encyclopedia of terms, persons and legal regulations, a chronology, as well as studies of particular aspects of the period) aims at publicizing the results of the research, in order to provide as accurate as possible information on the Holocaust to visitors and readers of the website.

c. Remembrance

The Holocaust Memorial Center is a venue established by the Founder of the Institution in honor of the victims of Shoah, where homage can be paid to the memory of the persecuted, deported and massacred relatives, loved ones, compatriots. The names of the identified victims are displayed on the Memorial Wall of Victims, where new names are added periodically as the result of the ongoing research.

A digital-data base assists the visitors to find the name of their relatives. A commemorative card may be issued on demand, indicating the location of the name on the Memorial Wall. This service is also available online, under the "Searching for Names" section of the Institution's website. A standardized form is also available, to make it easier reporting details on the deportees, thus supporting the efforts of the Memorial Center. Whenever photos of the victims are available, they are published in the photo album of the website.

d. Education

Regarding the future results, the most important activity of the Memorial Center since its establishment is its active participation in education, keeping the memory of the Holocaust in Hungary alive, as well as supporting the dissemination of the knowledge about the historic period. The Founders claim that by educating the future generations, the visitors may understand better the facts and moral conclusions from the era of the Holocaust. Beyond providing support to the understanding and processing the past, this helps also to face the contemporary challenges and educates on tolerance.

The institution has a rich offer to teachers teaching holocaust related topics and separately, modules to students interested in the history of the Shoah. The so-called *tolerance programs* are particularly interesting. These are initiatives aimed at spreading understanding and peaceful co-existence, as well as supporting the education in creating open-mindedness.

The website of the Holocaust Memorial Center publishes continuously educational materials for teachers in order to support their work in the schools. For the 70th anniversary of the deportations, a series of twelve modules has been completed in cooperation with teachers. These modules cover the main topics of the Holocaust in Hungary, and are related to the events that have occurred during each month. The recommended literature and sequences of articles support the teachers in preparing the lessons, while the students are supported by presentation materials.

Because the brevity of time, please allow me just to list the twelve topics, without entering into the details of their content and pedagogical aspects:

1. Together, for each other – problems of multiculturalism;
2. Contained by the law – Jewish Acts of 1938-1942;
3. Collaborationists – German occupation and the Hungarian collaboration;
4. Behind the walls – the ghettoization;
5. 56 days, 147 trains – the deportations from Hungary;
6. Hungarians in Nazi concentration camps;
7. “And then the world kept silent...” – reactions from the outside world;
8. The last ghetto – the destiny of the Jews of Budapest;
9. Looting – private and state interest in robbing the Jewry;
10. Extermination through work – forced labor service, death marches;
11. Rescue and self-rescue;
12. Back to life.

The Holocaust Memorial Center, on top of the interactive guided tours, provides also special classes, study groups and summer camps for students. The essence of the guided tour of the permanent exhibition “From Deprivation of Rights to Genocide” is to emphasize the long term coexistence and cooperation that have been annihilated in the prolonged process (anti-Semite propaganda, discrimination, deprivation of rights, deportation, primitive, and subsequently industrial extermination) of the Holocaust. During the tour, the guides talk about the daily human dilemmas of all of the actors (victims, perpetrators, by-standers, rescuers and resistance fighters) during the Shoah, while presenting the authentic historical facts. In line with the contemporary tendencies (Yad Vashem, US Holocaust Memorial Museum) the emphasis is not on the depiction of the horrors (pile of corpses, etc.), the guides do not attempt to generate artificial emotions, nevertheless, if these emotions erupt, they deal with them naturally. The pedagogical objective is to underline the responsibility of knowledge; although we can't bear responsibility for the deeds of our forefathers as we were not alive in those times, yet we know where the road of racism and discrimination leads.

In addition to visiting the permanent exhibition, the school groups at the Holocaust Memorial Center may also take part in museum-pedagogical activities (with literary, historic, cinematic or Judaist approach). These activities, supported by visual aids, assist to comprehend better various aspects of the Holocaust. There is also a possibility for arranging these activities, as well as commemorations, at the schools. At these activities, the contemporary situation of the Jewish and Roma community is also reflected on, and the present day racism and anti-Semitism is analyzed. A further in-depth understanding of these phenomena is provided by the tolerance program that provides the chance of experiencing the harmonious co-existence, of mutual acceptance. Our special “One/Another” program provides a detailed international outlook onto the projects and initiatives on tolerance building worldwide.

Concluding this lengthy “self-promotion”, let's take a brief look on the actual challenges too. The events that have already taken place within the frame of the 70th anniversary of the Holocaust in Hungary, as well as the ones that are planned to be organized until the end of the year, underpin the thesis on the tendency of unlimited mythification mentioned at the beginning of this paper. At the end of 2013, the government decided to create another national institution, beside the existing

Holocaust Memorial Center, at one of the authentic sites of the Holocaust, at the presently defunct Józsefváros railway station. The aim of the new institution, named the “House of Fates” is to commemorate the children victims of the Holocaust. The coordination, harmonization and delimitation between the exhibitions, the educational tasks and scientific programs, as well as the administrative competences of the Memorial Center, already functioning for more than a decade and the new institution is still to be finalized in the future. If I had to summarize the philosophies of the two institutions in one sentence, I would say that the Holocaust Memorial Center aims at influencing the minds, while the House of Fates aims at winning the hearts of the visitors.

During the 70th anniversary memorial year some episodes of the Hungarian “pre-Holocaust”, the process of creation of the House of Fates, as well as the symbolic “German occupation” memorial erected in the center of Budapest fueled (at least within intellectual circles) wide debates that still reverberate. The two round anniversaries since the beginning of the process of transition, the 50th and 60th ones, haven’t created by far so many controversies; perhaps because the wider society needs, even in normal circumstances, several decades to process the past and to reach (though a never-complete) consensus – as illustrated by the example of (West) Germany. One can’t jump over the shadow of the decades deemed to silence and lost during the “socialist” regime. The conflicts of nowadays cannot be evaded, one can only hope that these are fertile conflicts, leading to a common future. We all have to join our efforts to this aim.