



The House of Fates in 2018

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The Splendour and the Misery of the House of Fates

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The 'House of Fates', the future Holocaust memorial museum in Budapest, stands empty. Efforts to realize this project have divided the Hungarian Jewish community and have been widely criticized as an attempt by the Orbán government to re-write the history of the Holocaust in Hungary. The article reconstructs the main trajectories of this highly politicized conflict by focusing on the key actors, their political manoeuvrings and motives in this ongoing power struggle over the representation of Hungary's past.

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The Splendour and the Misery of the House of Fates

The House of Fates is a highly disputed, unfinished memorial site located in Budapest, Hungary, designed to spread the message by the government of Viktor Orbán about the Holocaust of the Hungarian Jews. The memory of the Holocaust has been the subject of extremely turbulent debates since the end of communist control in Hungary. Over the past 30 years, no other issue has provoked such strong emotions in public life. As in other Central and Eastern European countries, the stakes are obvious, revolving around the question of who bears responsibility for the Holocaust, reflecting the moral integrity of the nation. The House of Fates is part of a serious effort by the Orbán government to resolve this crucial issue once and for all. Its first attempt was unsuccessful: a master plan put forward by Mária Schmidt, a historian with close ties to the Orbán government, was rejected by most professionals and the Jewish public alike.

Currently, we are witness to a second, much better prepared attempt to complete the project: This time, the Hungarian branch of the Chabad Lubavits (the United Hungarian Israelite Congregation, also known by its Hungarian acronym, EMIH) has been brought on board as a partner. Only recently, the community's leader, Rabbi Slomó Köves, presented an initial outline of the project to representatives of the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance](#) (IHRA), which agreed, in early June 2019, to [observe](#) the process of designing the exhibition at the House of Fates and to provide input as part of a group of experts. But let us start at the beginning.

The Backstory to the Endless Tale of Designing the House of Fates

The first Holocaust memorial centre in Budapest, the [Holocaust Documentation and Memorial Center](#) (HDMC), opened in 2005 while a socialist government was in power. The institution did not meet expectations: Located in the basement of a synagogue far from downtown, a high quality exhibition was squeezed into a small space in a faraway building. The unfortunate setting was the result of a decision by the leadership of the Jewish community at that time to offer that synagogue as a location in order to meet their own obligation to renovate the building. The HDMC remained contested, as neither the Jewish community nor left-liberal opinion makers could accept it as a worthy site of Holocaust remembrance. As it emphasized Hungarian responsibility in the Holocaust, the Hungarian right silently boycotted the institution.

After the 2010 elections, during which Viktor Orbán and his deeply nationalist Fidesz party came to power, the government was keen to downgrade the HDMC even further. Attempts to rewrite the narrative were met with a public outcry however, so the government reverted to nominating politically loyal individuals to leadership positions within the institution and reducing its budget. In the end, the HDMC did not cease to exist formally but disappeared from the map in practice. The number of visitors – around 30 000 per year in the beginning – has hovered around 20 000 for the past 10 years.^[1] Meanwhile the House of Terror, a downtown memorial centre dedicated to communist crimes and Hungarian victimhood, became very popular and boasts some 400 000 visitors per year.^[2]

In this political atmosphere, it was not surprising to hear calls for a new Holocaust memorial site which would be more suitable to the government's worldview. The director of the House of Terror, Mária Schmidt, was asked to prepare a proposal for the establishment of a new Holocaust memorial centre. A spectacular location was found: a smaller railway station in a Budapest suburb, where, in the final

months of 1944, several trainloads of Budapest Jews were sent off to their deaths. Construction on the 'House of Fates' was started in 2015 and advanced at great speed. Yet, the reconstructed building remained empty, as the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities (Magyarországi Zsidó Hitközségek Szövetsége, or [Mazsihisz](#)) and more left-leaning media outlets demanded to see the plans. Schmidt complied by publishing some 300 pages of documents, but never presented a full design for the new centre. Mazsihisz therefore withheld its consent and remained highly suspicious of the project, anticipating that the House of Fates would have the same message as the Memorial to the Victims of German Occupation, a monument erected in 2014 in the very centre of Budapest, which [depicted Hungary as an innocent victim](#) of Nazi Germany. As details of the scenario became known, the Jewish community became even more infuriated: it seemed that the new exhibition would focus only on the suffering of Jewish children, because – as one official put it – they were 'definitely' innocent. "Why? Were adult victims of the Holocaust less innocent?" – critics of the project asked.^[3]

Mazsihisz, as the mainstream Jewish organization in Hungary, receives about 80 per cent of its budget – through various compensation lines – from government funds, as well as receiving extra one-time funding, such as 2.8 billion forint (approximately 8.6 million euros) for the restoration of the [magnificent Rumbach street synagogue](#). The organization is therefore usually quite careful to stay away from confrontation with the government. The issues of Holocaust memory and antisemitism are, however, exceptions. Here, Mazsihisz proved itself ready to directly confront state organs – on more than one occasion, on behalf of its constituency (around 5000 people), who expect that Mazsihisz leadership will speak up in such cases.

In 2013, Mazsihisz first spoke up during the planning of the 'Memorial to the Victims of German Occupation'. Although [Mazsihisz leaders protested](#) publicly, it proved ineffective, and they decided to stay away from state-organized Holocaust Memorial Year's events in 2014.^[4] The memorial statue was erected, but has attracted much resistance ever since. Activists placed various objects – such as inscriptions, photos and belongings of deported relatives – in front of the statue, calling their installation an "alternative memorial". Moreover, they continue to organize protests, such as a series of lectures about the real story of the Holocaust. To this day, the statue has not been officially inaugurated and the "alternative memorial" attracts much more visitors than the official one. [International media also covered](#) these events, engendering a serious loss of prestige for the government.^[5] The protesters also invited Mazsihisz leaders to join their anti-government actions, but the leadership of the Jewish organization politely declined, arguing that they could not act as a political opposition movement.

Following the fiasco with the memorial, the government became more cautious, and tried to avoid similar high-profile confrontations regarding the House of Fates. János Lázár, the government appointee responsible for the matter, declared that without the consent of the Jewish community, the House of Fates would not be completed. The stalemate remained in place for almost three years. Mária Schmidt did not produce any new proposals and the Mazsihisz leadership, uninterested in promoting that agenda, remained mum.

The empty building of the House of Fates continues to stand there. Its emblem, a huge star of David, two meters high, can be contemplated by passers-by from a great distance. Over seven billion forints (twenty million Euros) have been invested thus far.

The House of Fates Further Divides Hungary's Jewish Communities

In the 2018 elections, Orbán's Fidesz party won a new victory in a landslide. As usual, Orbán replaced a great number of his subordinates: Gergely Gulyás took János Lázár's position as the new Minister of the Prime Minister's Office. With Gulyás' active involvement, the government began a new push to break the stalemate and to complete the construction of the House of Fates in line with its agenda.

As Jewish protests had blocked the completion of the project, the [Orbán government may have presumed](#) that some form of Jewish participation was necessary to break the deadlock. As such, rabbi Slomó Köves, head of a rival Jewish community in Hungary, agreed to publicly back the government's plans for the House of Fates. Slomó Köves is the leader of the United Hungarian Israelite Congregation (EMIH). Young and extremely ambitious, Köves has built up an infrastructure over the past 15 years that is almost as strong as that of the Mazsihisz network, including educational institutions from kindergarten to university, a network of seniors residences, several media outlets, and a kosher slaughterhouse. According to those around him, his vision is to build up a network of business enterprises in order to guarantee the financial independence of his various religious and social institutions. Such financial support is crucial in a country where Jews – for the most part Holocaust survivors and their offspring – often do not have the personal financial resources to support their religious institutions themselves. Köves has managed to secure advantageous state loans for his enterprises,^[6] in exchange for his more and more public political support for the government. This support has been crucial as the government has faced charges of antisemitism – for example, when it launched its infamous anti-Soros campaign in 2017, blaming the Hungarian-born American philanthropist for all evils inflicted on Hungary.^[7] While the campaign was labelled antisemitic at home and abroad, Köves declared that this specific conspiracy theory was not antisemitic – although people receptive to antisemitic theories might interpret this campaign as such.^[8] This was important for the government, as rival Mazsihisz publicly called upon the prime minister to end the anti-Soros propaganda – which Orbán politely but firmly refused.

Köves was just as helpful in the conflict over the House of Fates. In September 2018, he participated in a press conference in the empty building and – together with Mária Schmidt and minister Gergely Gulyás – declared that the memorial site would open in 2019 under EMIH's auspices.^[9] They presented no new plans, merely a slightly polished version of the old design rejected by Mazsihisz. Prompted by a journalist's question, the three announced that the museum project would be based on survivor testimonies and that the intention was to emphasize the general human aspects of the Holocaust. In an [official statement](#), Mazsihisz objected to these plans, declaring that the efforts by EMIH were "against the aspirations of Mazsihisz and against the values of the Hungarian Jewish public."

The government clearly hoped that Köves would have sufficient moral power to grant the whole project public acceptance at home and abroad. Yet that is not what happened. By this time, Köves had already done so many favours for the government and received so many favours in return, that his credibility as an honest broker was widely questioned. Left-wing media outlets published several investigative articles about how he built up his empire of businesses and institutions and how he helped out the government in critical moments.^[10] In left-wing circles, he was widely regarded as a close political ally of the government. Moreover, his relationship with Mazsihisz deteriorated to the point that they actually stopped communicating with each other.

That is how the unconceivable happened in Hungary: the take-over of the museum project by a renowned rabbi was met by angry protests and antagonisms within both the Jewish community and the political left. Their questions remained unchanged: where are the plans and who are its actual authors? Slomó Köves declined to answer, arguing that he wanted the experts to work without outside pressure.

Angry protests followed, and Mazsihisz once again mobilized its network: messages of protest and disagreement arrived from the [World Jewish Congress](#), the [Yad Vashem](#) memorial as well as the [US Holocaust Memorial Museum](#).^[11]

Slomó Köves' Israeli network could not neutralize this wave of protests. The Ashkenazi chief rabbi, Köves's personal acquaintance, remained silent; the Israeli government emphasized the importance of historical credibility, thereby expressing Israel's desire to maintain its distance from the controversy. In an article in the daily Times of Israel, the Prime Minister's Office was cited,

the Israeli government reaffirmed its stance that it would only agree to a narrative that meets standards consistent with the objective historical and professional interpretation of organizations like Yad Vashem and similarly respected research institutes.^[12]

Slomó Köves and the Hungarian government issued no official reaction to the various protest statements. However, a few months later, Köves admitted that the 2019 opening was unrealistic. Viktor Orbán, who time and again uses his Jewish connections to defend his policy choices, likely recognized that his allies did not have sufficient clout to disrupt the deadlock, preferring to wait patiently and not to risk another confrontation, which would risk very negative media coverage.

Orbán's Struggle to Fit Holocaust Remembrance Into his Narrative

Viktor Orbán has managed to achieve something none of his predecessors since 1989 have: he reduced the number of antisemitic utterances – by reducing freedom of speech. He has, in other words, nationalized antisemitism by calling for “zero tolerance for antisemitism,” while simultaneously using this prejudice for his own purposes when necessary, as was the case during the anti-Soros campaign. In this effort, he time and again pointed to the anti-Zionism of Western left-liberal circles (where Israel is, for example, criticized as ‘an apartheid state’). Using the issue of immigration, which caused a serious identity crisis across Europe, Orbán positioned himself as a key figure in the traditional, Christian, anti-liberal nationalist camp. His message: those to his right (like the infamous, although repentant Jobbik party) are incorrigible Nazis, while those to his left are irresponsible politicians, who – willingly or not – support the cosmopolitan left-liberal camp and have opened the gates of Europe to mass Islamic immigration, an ostensibly lethal danger to the Jewish community. In his interpretation, therefore, Hungary is a safe haven for Jews, a place where left and right wing extremism are equally suppressed.^[13]

Orbán's immense self-confidence motivated him to attempt to end the discussion around the issue of the Holocaust for good, by arguing that as the Hungarians recognize the immensity and uniqueness of the Holocaust, so the Jewish community declines to accuse Hungarians of Nazi collaboration. A certain amount of Hungarian responsibility for Nazi atrocities is tolerable, but only if it is framed as ‘the Hungarian state is responsible for not protecting its citizens’. This is to be emphasized in government messages directed at Jewish partners. Beyond that, the core message remains that Jews and Hungarians are in the same boat, share the same fate, and are reliable partners indeed.

While Slomó Köves and his congregation were ready to discuss this model, the majority of the Jewish community and the left-liberal public opinion were unlikely to compromise. The contemporary culture of Holocaust remembrance dominant in the Western world depends on different norms and basic tenets: Embellishing the past is not an option. Ultimately, those who are unwilling to meet certain minimum requirements set by this Western European Holocaust culture will fail in their efforts to settle this

burning issue.

Köves' Second Round

On 3 March 2019, the spokesman of the Hungarian government [acknowledged](#) that the opening of the House of Fates would likely be delayed by several years in response to these unresolved issues. But Köves is undeterred, taking it as a challenge to produce a Holocaust discourse which is acceptable to Hungarian Jews and Hungarian nationalists alike. Were he to succeed, he will have taken control of the Holocaust discourse in Hungary and of Hungarian Jewish history as well. Mission impossible, one could say, given that for many in the Jewish community, Hungarians were perpetrators during the Second World War; for most nationalist-minded Hungarians, they were heroes and victims.

Nonetheless, Slomó Köves has continued in his efforts to complete the new memorial. He has recruited a new team, with historians and other experts, presenting a new draft proposal to the IHRA's experts on 10 June 2019.^[14] Keen to garner professional and political support before going public with the detailed design of the exhibition, Köves has recruited Yitzhak Mais, a former director of Yad Vashem (from 1983 to 1995) and David Marwell, a former director of the New York Jewish Heritage Museum, to participate in the project. Although these might be renowned professionals, they both left their respective institutions a long time ago. A lack of support from prestigious institutions worldwide had been a major problem for the House of Fates project from the beginning.

The names of Hungarian experts working on the project have not been officially disclosed. Eight names, however, were mentioned during Slomó Köves' PowerPoint presentation to the IHRA. Szombat, a Jewish website, published the names in its [report](#) on the event,^[15] and Magyar Narancs, an independent weekly famous for its investigative journalism, [tracked them down](#).^[16] Of the eight, only two – Ákos Bíró and János Pelle – confirmed their involvement. A third expert, Tamás Kovács, director of the [Holocaust Documentation and Memorial Center](#) in Budapest, firmly denied any involvement. The others did not respond or were unclear concerning their participation. Ákos Bíró is not a renowned historian. János Pelle – a close acquaintance of Mária Schmidt – is a well-known author and has written several books on antisemitism and Hungarian Jewish history. He is however a freelance writer, and not an academic; many would not accept him as a professional historian.

In their search for experts willing to support the House of Fates project, EMIH leaders also approached historians at the Institute for Hungarian Jewish History. The newly established Institute operates under EMIH's auspices, and is attached to the Milton Friedman University in Budapest, an academic institution newly acquired by the EMIH network. Yet, four of the six historians working at the Institute declined to comment on the project.^[17] They referred to a previous agreement, which explicitly stated that the Institute and the House of Fates were two separate issues. In July 2019, the university president dismissed the historians' position as "noncompliant, disloyal behaviour".^[18] After several weeks of hesitation, the university leadership dismissed one of the historians on the grounds of financial difficulty. The next day, two of the historians resigned, one of them issuing a short statement of solidarity.^[19] The challenge thus remains much the same: renowned Hungarian Holocaust experts, public intellectuals, or community leaders have all declined to publicly support the project.

Viktor Orbán is likely aware of the importance of this game, giving Köves a great deal of room to manoeuvre. Köves subsequently declared, in early June, that he would exclude Mária Schmidt, the official historian of the government, from the project.^[20] However, that statement is unlikely to be the last

word on the issue, as the Prime Minister's Office soon thereafter informed the national news agency (MTI) that the government continues to count on Mária Schmidt's involvement.

As of this writing, Köves is far from winning the battle for the memory of the Holocaust in Hungary. His latest presentation of the draft design should be regarded as the first move in a long and sophisticated game. The House of Fates is far from being accepted by scholars and the larger public in Hungary and abroad. Yet, he continues to adamantly work on the project: This is his greatest venture to date, the expectations are high, and too much financial and moral capital has already been invested. Giving up is simply not an option.

Footnotes

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Slomó Köves, Mária Schmidt and Gergely Gulyás (r) announce that the House of Fates will be realized under the auspices of EMIH, 7 September 2018.

Author: Gergely Botár; Source: <http://www.kormany.hu>



Alternative memorial in front of the controversial Monument to the Victims of German Occupation in Budapest
Author: Sándor Horváth



Slomó Köves, ca. 2014

Author: Tett és Védelem Alapítvány; Source: <https://hu.wikipedia.org>



Mária Schmidt, Director of the House of Terror Museum and influential Hungarian historian
Author: Thaler Tamas [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)]