

Introduction to "Holocaust Victimhood in Hungary: New Histories"

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INTRODUCTION

Andrea Pető, Alexandra M. Szabó, and András Szécsényi

There was a significant debate in the Hungarian journal of social sciences and culture *Kommentár* in 2008 initiated by Gábor Gyáni as to whether Hungarian Holocaust research had or had not been successfully integrated into international discourse after 1989.¹ One element missing from the debate was that after 1989, main concepts and the language of the discipline derived from the Western side of the (fallen) Iron Curtain. The histories of the Holocaust survivors had been only descriptive in nature, while the experiences of Jewish communities, the members of which had lived under communism was of predominant focus. There was no theoretical inquiry in Holocaust scholarship as long as the objective fact-finding was taking place, expanding on questions as to when, where, and what had happened to which actors. Historical inquiry, however, needs to extend further to explain the uncovered events and experiences.

For instance, a significant element missing from the scholarship in its entirety is gender analysis, and this observation brings to the fore the lack of discussion on methodology and the consequent absence of acknowledging developments. Hungarian scholarship of Holocaust historical inquiry with a central aim evolving around gender analytical perspectives is still nonexistent, yet there are some contributions about women and the Holocaust in the English language, for instance by Andrea Pető.² This special edition of the Hungarian Historical Review lines up studies which draw on new modes of analyses and frameworks with the aim of achieving knowledge production on a whole new level about the Holocaust in Hungary.

The lack of innovative theoretical frameworks and other new approaches in understandings of the history of the Shoah in the Hungarian context explains the current poor state of institutionalized Hungarian Holocaust research. The consequences are not only prevalent in academia, but also in the public sphere (which influences science policy) and in shifts in public memory of the Holocaust in Hungary.

However, the current struggles for memory are far from a memory policy based on democratic consensus and development. Since illiberal states do not

1 The articles of this debate can be found in *Kommentár*, no. 3, 5, 6 of 2008.

2 *Women and the Holocaust: New Perspectives and Challenges*, edited by Andrea Pető, Louise Hecht, and Karolina Krasuska (Warsaw: IBL PAN, 2015).

have an ideology but only a memory policy, the weak domestic institutionalization of Hungarian Holocaust research with low international recognition has contributed to the successful reinterpretation of the Holocaust remembrance paradigm by illiberal actors. Scholarly attempts against this were and are still being made, such as the relevant scholarly volume published on the occasion of what is referred to as the 70th anniversary of the Holocaust in Hungary, which was published in Hungarian and English by CEU Press³ (a year of anniversary that is misleading as it suggests that the Holocaust in Hungary began with the German occupation in 1944 instead of with the labor service system and with the earlier deportations of Hungarian Jews, such as the deportation of Jews to Kamianets-Podilskyi in 1941, where an estimated 23,000 Jewish deportees were massacred in two days). At the same time, historical research workshops operating in Hungary mostly outside the system that ensures scientific standards and outside the international scientific frameworks are growing, and they are pursuing ad hoc research in parallel with the existing research infrastructure in support of the present government's politics of memory.

Demonstrating the lack of new research directions in Hungary that are prevalent in international Holocaust scholarship, Andrea Pető called for the organization of a conference entitled *The Hungarian Holocaust: Victimhood and Memory*, together with Gábor Gyáni, Edit Jeges, and András Szécsényi and in cooperation with Central European University and the Humanities Research Center of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest on December 18, 2017. A selected number of presentations were considered for publication in *Századok*, the most prestigious Hungarian historical journal, for its special section dealing with the Hungarian Holocaust. The selection of conference speakers and publications mirrored the work of mostly young researchers who, despite the dwindling research infrastructure, had carried out methodologically innovative work based on archival research. The introduction to this section in *Századok* was censored for discussing “illiberal memory politics,” although the authors took a clear stand against this suppressive act.⁴ The presentation of this special issue, which took place on September 25, 2019, was met with unprecedented interest at Central European University, indicating that the Holocaust continues to be a subject of major scholarly and public interest.

3 *The Holocaust in Hungary Seventy Years Later*, edited by András Kovács and Randolph L. Braham (Budapest: CEU Press, 2016).

4 Andrea Pető, “Áldozatok, emlékezet, jóvátétel a magyarországi holokauszt kutatás új irányjai,” *Századok*, no. 4 (2019): 639–40.

Despite the controversial nature of memory politics and the lack of proper infrastructure, a new generation of researchers worked on this special issue to present new approaches and findings, thus taking an important step towards international exchange by elevating Hungarian Holocaust research onto the international stage *and* bringing innovative research methods from the international pool into Hungarian scholarship.

The articles in the present volume contribute to historical understandings which primarily work from the perspectives of the victims of the Holocaust. Based on the division of historical inquiry by Raul Hilberg, the Hungarian historiography of the Holocaust focuses on one of categories suggested by Hilberg: perpetrators, victims, or bystanders. This mainstream allocation, however, has been widely criticized in recent decades by many researchers worldwide, and they have offered new approaches which shift the focus to the behaviors, interactions, and dynamics among societies and communities involved in the Shoah, together with closer study of the psychological and sociological perceptions of these groups. This paradigm shift has emerged only recently in Hungarian scholarship, another significant reason as to why Hungarian historiography has only rarely constituted a serious part of the international discourse.

In recent decades, there have mostly been descriptive, fact-finding monographs published that are based on archival sources and avoid the use of private or narrative sources.⁵ A group of Hungarian Holocaust researchers who mainly belong to the new generation would like to break from this approach and widen the perspective of inquiry. The papers in this issue seek answers to questions concerning how Jews, who were deprived of their basic rights, forced to serve in labor service, and then, in 1944, compelled to live in ghettos and yellow star houses or deported to concentration camps, lived and survived under these extreme conditions. The histories presented here also consider how the survivors remembered their pasts in the immediate postwar setting with a specific focus on the modes in which these experiences were later recounted.

The approaches and viewpoints presented by our authors are of a wider scale. Some papers belong to the field of microhistory, while others closely examine and reflect on specific oral historical sources and narratives. The interpretations largely rest on contemporary and postwar narrative sources (memoirs, diaries,

5 Gábor Gyáni, "Hungarian Memory of the Holocaust in Hungary," *The Holocaust in Hungary: Seventy Years Later*, edited by András Kovács and Randolph L. Braham (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016), 215–30.

and other notes), in addition to the archival documents, which touch primarily on questions pertinent to individual life stories.

István Pál Ádám examines the case of the butchers of Budapest and considers how the governmental and municipal administration of the late Horthy-era impacted the leftists and the Jewish butchers from the issuance of the 1939 anti-Jewish law. Ádám examines the ways in which the butchers of the capital were forced to change their strategy in the postwar democratic society of Hungary. Tamás Csapody examines diaries, some of them incomplete, written by six inmates of the camps in and around Bor. They were Hungarian citizens of Jewish and other free church denominations who had been deported from Hungary in 1943 and 1944 and taken to the lager-system of Bor (Serbia), later to be brought back to Hungary in the second half of 1944 and then (some of them) taken to German concentration camps. He provides insightful content analysis and examines diaries written by six inmates, one of which is being presented for the first time in this volume. Heléna Huhák analyzes the spatial experiences of some of the inmates who were deported from Hungary to Bergen-Belsen in 1944–1945. She draws on diaries, memoirs, and correspondence in order to explore perceptions of space formed in the memories of camp inmates. Edit Jeges examines survivor accounts by Polish and Hungarian Jewish women and reflects on the nature of her primary sources. She also considers the further potentials of digital storytelling as a source and the importance of survivor memory at a time when fewer and fewer survivors remain among us. Borbála Klacsmann summarizes the roles and the activities of the Government Commission for Abandoned Property regarding the restitution of Hungarian Jews in the first three years of the postwar period, providing specific examples from Pest County through personal accounts and correspondence. Alexandra M. Szabó examines Jewish women's experiences of miscarriages before, during, and after the Shoah through a specific case study in order to draw attention to the significance of such corporeal events from a social historical point of view. Her study considers the implications of the silence concerning women's experiences in Holocaust research to show that gender analysis substantially adds to further knowledge production. In his case study, which partly overlaps with Huhák's paper, András Szécsényi also concentrates on one space, a German DP camp. Szécsényi tries to reconstruct the spatial experiences of György Bognár, a former inmate of Bergen-Belsen who was taken to the Hillersleben DP camp after liberation. The paper explores space perceptions based on Bognár's diary and the maps he drew, which Szécsényi compares with his own in-person experiences of the sites (or

what remains of them). Ferenc Laczó's paper presents German historiography from recent decades on the Hungarian Holocaust by exploring the relevant findings and conclusions of the most important German histories. Through his findings, he seeks answers to questions concerning why there has been so little institutionalized cooperation between the German and Hungarian research communities.

We would like to dedicate our work to the memory of Randolph L. Braham (1922–2018), who, as the pioneer in Hungarian Holocaust research, was a true inspiration and supportive friend of the scholars whose works are part of the present volume.

