

**Symposium Opening Remarks**  
***The Holocaust in Hungary: 70 Years Later***  
**Washington, DC—March 18, 2014**

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Good morning and welcome to this special symposium on *The Holocaust in Hungary: 70 Years Later*. The symposium is a program of the Museum's Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies. I am Paul Shapiro, Director of the Center. I would like to thank our partner in organizing today's symposium, the Rosenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies at the Graduate Center, City University of New York; the speakers, who have prepared an excellent set of presentations for us; and the staff members of the Museum who have seen to all of the organizational details for today's program.

I am pleased to welcome the Holocaust survivors who have joined us today and the representatives of the State Department, other agencies, and a number of important NGOs who are here. I also want to thank Deputy State Secretary Ambassador Gergely Prohle from the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and officials from the Hungarian Embassy in Washington for spending the day with us. Deputy State Secretary Prohle will serve as Hungarian Chair of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance in 2015, and I know that he is already deeply involved in developing Hungary's approach to that important responsibility.

The Holocaust in Hungary

Let me briefly provide a few key facts regarding the Holocaust in Hungary as background for the presentations that we will hear today. For more information regarding some issues of this complex history, let me refer you to a set of "frequently asked questions" that will appear this week on the Museum's web site ([www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)). And I would also refer you to a new book produced by the Museum and based firmly on documentary evidence, *The Holocaust in Hungary: Evolution of a Genocide*.<sup>1</sup> You will hear from the co-authors of this important new study in the course of the day today.

According to Randolph Braham's authoritative 2-volume *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*, there were approximately 825,000 Jews in Hungary at the start of World War II, and of these, nearly 75 percent were murdered during the Holocaust. Antisemitism in Hungary was a widespread and powerful force, strongly embraced by the chief of state from

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<sup>1</sup> Vagi, Zoltan, Laszlo Czosz, and Gabor Kadar, *The Holocaust in Hungary: Evolution of a Genocide* (Lanham MD, Alta Mira Press, 2013, published in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

1920 to late 1944, Regent Miklos Horthy. The tropes and stereotyping that constitute parts of antisemitism in Hungary today echo themes that were promoted by Hungarian antisemites during Horthy's decades-long rule. Regent Horthy allied Hungary with Nazi Germany and joined in the Nazis' attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. As elsewhere in Europe, the outbreak of war produced dramatic consequences for the Jews of Hungary. In July-August 1941, 20,000 Jews, including many who were residents of Hungary but not Hungarian citizens, were deported across the border by Horthy's government to Kamenets-Podolsk in Ukraine, where the majority of them were executed by waiting German forces. Hungarian troops executed another 1,000-plus Jews during their invasion of northeast Yugoslavia that same year. When Hungary's military wanted to continue deportations of Jews to the east, it was the Germans who resisted because of the uncertain military situation that had set in there in 1942. Not long after, of course, it was the Germans who wanted to re-start the deportation process, but with the course of the war turning against the Axis, Hungary hesitated. Over 40,000 of the Hungarian Jewish men conscripted into Jewish forced labor battalions were taken to the eastern front, armed only with shovels, and died there of exposure, killed in battle areas, or massively executed by the Hungarians as they retreated following the Axis defeat at the battle of Stalingrad in early 1943. Between April and July 1944, over 440,000 Hungarian Jews were driven from their homes into ghettos and deported to Auschwitz, where the overwhelming majority of them were gassed on arrival. While German forces had occupied Hungary unopposed in March 1944, it was not Germans, but the Hungarian gendarmerie and police who identified and concentrated the Jews, loaded them onto trains, delivered them to German SS units waiting at the German-Hungarian border, and then on to Auschwitz. Only the Jews of Budapest remained, and after Horthy was removed by the Germans in mid-October 1944, in the wake of a last-minute attempt to extricate Hungary from its alliance with Hitler, the Hungarian fascist Arrow Cross Party (Nyilas) attempted to finish the job. Nyilas gangs engaged in wild shooting orgies of Jews in Budapest and considered it sport to shoot Jews seized at random into the Danube from the riverbank. Three months of Nyilas rule cost the lives of an additional 85,000 Hungarian Jews. Hungarian collaboration and complicity in the Holocaust was thus substantial, as were the losses suffered by this once-large and great Jewish community. In all, nearly 600,000 Hungarian Jews had been murdered. Some 28,000 Romani citizens of Hungary were also deported and fell victim to this horrific carnage.

### Historical Memory of the Holocaust

Confronting such a history would be a huge challenge in any country, and this is no less the case in Hungary. While in the West efforts to "distort, denigrate, and deny the Holocaust" after World War II were principally the domain of extremists and radical antisemites, in the communist world, including Hungary, the campaign to minimize or relativize or simply submerge the history of the Holocaust was waged under strict state control and for governmental political purposes. The legacy of 40 years of communist rule has added to the challenge of confronting Holocaust history. In the post-communist period, right-wing, nationalist-populist, as opposed to leftist, forces took advantage of the political and economic dislocations of regime-change to revive the "Jewish question" and antisemitism, and as you are all aware from media coverage, surveys, and other sources, these developments remain far from being effectively addressed. Relativization of the Holocaust, trivialization, distortion and history cleansing in order to place responsibility on the Germans alone and absolve Hungarian authorities of that time, rehabilitation of extreme anti-Semites and killers--all have made an appearance since the

fall of communism in Hungary, and much serious work remains to be done to combat these phenomena. Even passages in the country's recently enacted new constitution, which deal with the issue of lost sovereignty, foster distortion and confusion regarding the actual events of the Holocaust in Hungary.

### Recent Events

Let me conclude with just a word about some recent events. Last year, the Hungarian Government announced an extensive set of projects that it intended to sponsor during this 70th anniversary year of the murderous 1944 events to which I have already made reference. Some of the projects were controversial, and were perceived to suggest a continuation of trends that might result in distortion of the true history of the Holocaust. But the Government promised consultation, inclusion, and transparency, and solicited advice and recommendations.

Regrettably, recent developments surrounding three major anniversary projects have raised doubts about whether true consultation and transparency, in which serious objections and suggestions might be taken seriously, remained possible. The Government-appointed director of a newly created Veritas History Institute made comments that appeared to whitewash actions of the Horthy government and Hungarian gendarmerie in 1941 that led to one of the first mass shootings of the Holocaust. The Government's rush to create and display an "alternate history" of the Holocaust at a new museum, the so-called "House of Fates," without review and input from leading scholars and the Hungarian Jewish community, elicited multiple complaints. And, most recently, a scandal broke out in protest against a Government-planned "German occupation monument," which, by making it appear that Hungary was an innocent victim of German aggression, threatened to further obscure the active role of Hungarian authorities in the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup>

While criticism flowed from multiple directions both inside and outside Hungary, the most revealing and grave indication of a serious problem was the reaction of the Hungary's resilient and principled Jewish community. After seeking to consult with the government and seeing their concerns and suggestions rejected, a number of major Jewish organizations announced that they would no longer participate in Holocaust Memorial Year events. A number of institutions and individuals that had received grants from the Memorial Year fund announced that in order to emphasize their objections they would not use the grants. When one considers that many of these organizations receive their core funding from the state budget, it is difficult to overstate the courage they have shown by speaking out, and it is impossible to fail to understand the depth of concern that has generated their protest.

70 years ago, the state leadership of Hungary—Regent Miklos Horthy, his government ministers, leaders of the army, gendarmerie, and police, in particular—failed to listen to the repeated desire for inclusion and, later, the urgent pleas for help in extremis that came from the country's Jewish community. What Hungary's Jewish citizens got instead...well, I described that earlier. That record has left an indelible stain on the legacy of the country's leadership of those years.

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<sup>2</sup>(See AFP, "US Scholar Returns Hungary Award over Whitewash, January 26, 2014; and New York Times, "Holocaust Scholar Returns Top Award to Hungary in Protest," January 27, 2014).

Today, once again, the Jewish community of Hungary is asking for real inclusion and real consultation, and is pleading for today's more modern, better educated, democratically elected leadership, to listen to their concerns and to be responsive regarding appropriate commemoration of the Holocaust, preservation in a dignified way of the memory of so much of the Jewish community that was lost forever, and commitment to teaching Hungary's young people the historical truth. As in Horthy's time, the long-term legacy of the political and cultural leaders of Hungary 70 years after the Holocaust ended will depend on the sensitivity, sincerity, and effectiveness of their response.