Fear and loathing in Budapest

Hungary's Jewish community is thriving, but so are nationalism, anti-Semitism and Holocaust revisionism

By Tibor Krausz
Budapest

Budapest's Jews have erected improvised curbside memorials to Holocaust victims in protest of a government-sponsored revisionist memorial in the city's Freedom Square

Take a stroll on the cobblestoned streets of Budapest's historic "Jewish Quarter," within a walkable radius of the Great Synagogue on Dohány Street with its richly ornamented Moorish designs, and you encounter a vibrant urban shtetl.

Here, amid ornate, newly renovated Habsburg-era buildings, a stylish kosher restaurant is open for business near a place called Hummus Bar, while a nearby bistro invites all comers with "traditional Jewish pastrami sandwiches." There, near the building where Theodor Herzl was born, a couple of souvenir shops, decorated with Old World Yiddishkeit charm, peddle silver *hanukkiot*, embroidered kippot and leather-bound *siddurim*. Klezmer music plays on a recorder somewhere, and decorative Stars of David are everywhere.

Over an arched entrance, a neon light beams "Mazel Tov" at passersby – the sign of a bar mitzva or wedding unfolding within. Walk on, and you'll come across a small, elegantly decorated theater named after Baruch Spinoza, which stages plays with Jewish themes. On a sidewalk, Jewish-American tourists rub shoulders with a modern-Orthodox family of five from Israel. Presently, a local ultra-Orthodox rabbi pops into view before disappearing down a street that takes you to a yeshiva.

And you've barely even started.

Budapest has 23 shuls, often within sight of one another, and numerous Jewish institutions – including schools, hospices, and a hospital – for its estimated 50,000 Jewish residents, who comprise the vast majority of the country's Jewish population.

Take a closer look, though, and you discover a darker side to this ostensibly quotidian idyll of Jewish revival in post-communist Hungary.

Szabadság Tér (Freedom Square) lies within easy walking distance of the Dohány Street synagogue, which draws busloads of tourists from around the globe daily as Europe's largest shul and a historical hub for the homegrown liberal stream of Neolog Judaism. At the entrance to the square stands a statue to the "Victims of the German Occupation." Erected in 2014 by the country's democratically elected but increasingly autocratic conservative government, the statue commemorates the Nazis' seizure of power in Hungary on March 19, 1944. It leaves the identity of those "victims" unexplained, but there is no real mystery.

The memorial features a German imperial eagle swooping down, talons at the ready, on the archangel Gabriel, who is depicted as an effete and defenseless youth and is a stand-in for wartime Hungary. In the recrudescence of historical revisionism that has swept post-communist societies from Hungary to Lithuania, the memorial seeks to whitewash the role of many Hungarians in the persecution and murder of Jews during World War II by lumping the perpetrators and their Jewish victims together as equally guiltless victims of the Germans.

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"This statue is a symbol of the Hungarian government's blatant disregard of history in the service of a nationalist agenda," fumes Fruzsina Magyar, a Jewish-Hungarian dramaturge who has been at the forefront of rowdy protests against the statue by grassroots groups, both Jewish and non-Jewish, since early 2014, when its construction got underway. "It's a disgrace. It tells you about the state of affairs in this country," she adds.

For months on end, the protesters – led by Magyar and her husband, Imre Mécs, a left-wing politician who once spent time in prison for his role in the Hungarian uprising against Soviet rule in 1956 – sought but failed to stop the memorial from being built through daily acts of nonviolent resistance. Then on July 21 of that year, when the statue was to be officially unveiled, hundreds of protesters formed a human chain around the memorial, bickering with right-wing provocateurs and tussling with police officers, to prevent the ceremony from happening. They succeeded: the statue has still not been officially unveiled.

Two years on, many local Jews are still protesting it. They gather daily at the site for discussions, fiery speeches, poetry readings, performances and concerts. On a recent Friday afternoon, some three dozen protesters, including several elderly Holocaust survivors, sang and clapped along energetically to a Hungarian rendition of "Hava Nagila," performed for their benefit by an operetta singer on a patch of lawn behind the statue.

Just a few hundred meters away, on a nearby square outside the country's flamboyantly gothic Parliament building, a different group of people was singing another tune. Some members of the widely popular far-right party Jobbik (Movement for a Better Hungary) had arrived bearing flags and insignias styled after those once carried by members of the Hungarian fascist Arrow Cross movement, which

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(Above) Dramaturge Fruzsina Magyar with husband Imre Mécs, a politician, have been at the forefront of protests against the memorial; (left) Zsuzsa Solt, a Jewish-Hungarian woman, is a frequent participant in the protests

played a pivotal role in the murder and deportation of 600,000 Hungarian Jews in 1944 and 1945. Their middle-aged speaker railed against "alien-hearted influences" and the "tyranny of minorities" (code words for Jews) before a thunderstorm scattered the gathered.

"I think anti-Semitism is worse now than it was in 1938, before the war," laments György László, a Jewish engineer who frequents Freedom Square to meet like-minded Jews. "Most people in this country have been inculcated with anti-Semitic views."

LÁSZLÓ BAKKI, a photographer, agrees. "Basically, all my [ethnic Hungarian] friends are anti-Semitic," notes Bakki, an avuncular man who isn't Jewish but regularly participates in protests with Jews. "They will believe even the most outlandish conspiracy theories about Jews." During the halcyon days of "Goulash Communism," Hungary's relatively benign version of Soviet-style communism in the 1970s and 1980s, "it was never an issue who was or wasn't a Jew," Bakki recalls. "Now people keep tabs."

Many local Jews, feeling increasingly beleaguered, see the revisionist memorial as ground zero of the ruling populist government's obscurantism, denialism and anti-Semitism. In unrelenting opposition to it, they have been tending to their own memorial, erected along a sidewalk in front of the statue. They have fashioned it from funerary stones, old mementos (leather suitcases, shoes, sepia portraits), laminated printouts of contemporary diary entries and newspaper clippings about dead relatives.

These small personal testimonies by the living about loved ones who were murdered in Auschwitz and various massacres, often perpetrated by ethnic Magyars, are meant to serve as poignant counterpoints, highlighting the real victims and perpetrators.

"My mother was killed in Auschwitz. Thank you, 'Archangel' Gabriel," reads one laminated note, in English, hung from a barbed-wire chain strung between decorative poles. "My dad was taken to Bor, where he starved to death," reads another, referring to a town in Serbia, where numerous Hungarian Jews, chain-ganged into labor battalions for work at a local copper mine, perished. They included the celebrated Jewish-Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti, who died in November 1944 during a forced march: he kept penning lyrical poems about murder and death until the very end. His photos and poems adorn the curbside memorial.

One recent night, after a right-wing website ran an article lambasting the Jewish memorial, some people vandalized it by tearing down many of the photos and personal testimonials. "The following day we carefully replaced them all," attests Gábor Sebő, a Jewish-Hungarian economist who regularly hangs a large mobile, fashioned from cardboard plates, onto an outstretched hand of the archangel on the statue. It lists the crimes of Hungarians against Jews before 1944, including three anti-Jewish laws (from 1938, 1939 and 1941) and several massacres.

A few meters away, on the steps of a right-wing Protestant church, stands another affront to local Jewish sensibilities: a glossy bronze bust of Admiral Miklós Horthy, Hungary's wartime regent who allied himself with Hitler until the admiral got cold feet in 1944 at the prospect of impending German defeat.

When Horthy tried to sue for peace with the Allies, he was promptly unseated by the Nazis in March of that year – an event commemorated by the revisionist memorial on Freedom Square. In recent years, Horthy has been rebranded by vocal Hungarian nationalists as a fine patriot and statesman, an almost cult-like figure whom irredentists and right-wing demagogues alike have embraced as an embodiment of timeless Magyar virtues.

"Horrible. Terrible. Tragic." That's how Zsuzsa Solt sums up the current political

climate in the Central European nation.

A petite and soft-spoken elderly Jewish woman with delicate features and snow-white hair, Solt is a regular at protests against the statue and Hungary's conservative government, headed by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, whose Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Alliance party won in landslides in 2010 and 2014.

In the name of strengthening time-honored Hungarian values, his Jewish critics say, Orbán and his government have helped resurrect a virulent and atavistic form of nationalism, one in which love of Hungary and Magyar culture often manifests itself in a hatred of minorities – Jews and gypsies, mostly. "It's no longer a sin in Hungary to be a racist," observes Ádám Fischer, a renowned Jewish-Hungarian conductor.

In fact, you can win accolades despite being one, or perhaps because of it.

In August, Zsolt Bayer, a columnist for the influential daily Magyar Hírlap, received the Knight's Cross of the Order of Merit, one of the country's highest awards, for his journalistic work, which includes intemperate potty-mouthed tirades in print against Jews, gypsies, liberals, left-wingers and anyone else Bayer, a former spokesman for the ruling Fidesz party, dislikes.

A poor man's demagogue with a widely read twice-weekly column, Bayer declaims on his pet peeves with the intellectual heft and verbal dexterity of a drunken rabble-rouser. The Jews, he informed his readers in one of his outpourings, "loathe us more than we loathe them," whereby "their sheer existence justifies anti-Semitism."

"Too bad," he opined in another, "that we didn't succeed in burying them all up to their necks in the forest of Orgovány," referring to a site in southern Hungary where, in 1919, right-wing Hungarian militants massacred several Jews they suspected of being communists.

TO PROTEST Bayer's award, more than a hundred previous recipients of the Knight's Cross – intellectuals, artists, humanitarians, Jews, Christians, atheists – have returned their own. Fischer, who received the award in 2002, is among those who have done so, as well as Gábor Iványi, a Methodist pastor and humanitarian who regularly champions pro-Jewish causes.

"We have left no other options for meaningful public protest in a society pervaded with anti-Semitism and [anti-gypsy] animus," Iványi tells *The Jerusalem Report*. "That a man like Bayer gets rewarded and embraced by the government demonstrates that hatred and bigotry have gone mainstream and become official policy."

Representatives of the government have publicly defended their decision to give the journalist the award. Bayer himself has shrugged off the controversy, dismissing his critics as people "closed up in their small and sad world." Bayer didn't respond to requests for comment from The Report.

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In a recent interview with a local newspaper, however, he was more forthcoming, insisting that he didn't despise all Jews per se – just those that got under his skin, like New York Times columnist Roger Cohen. The British-born journalist has rubbed Bayer the wrong way by lambasting Orbán, whom he labeled a "puffed-up little Putin," for closing Hungary's borders with Serbia and Croatia to the masses of predominantly Muslim migrants who have been flocking by the hundreds of thousands to Europe from the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia and South Asia.

Orbán's hard-line stance on the migrants has angered many Hungarian Jews. Several, including the country's chief rabbi Robert Frolich, have likened it – in what may seem like tactless hyperbole – to the Nazis' treatment of Jews.

Many Hungarians, though, do back the government on the issue. On October 2, in a much-touted though largely symbolic referendum on whether the country should allow Muslim migrants to settle in the country through European Union quotas, a whopping 98 percent of the more than 3.5 million people who cast their votes said "No."

The Jewish community itself has split into two bickering camps between those who support Orbán's anti-migrant policies and those who don't. Among those who don't is Fischer. "I have to say I'm saddened by the anti-migrant attitudes of certain Hungarian-Jewish circles," the conductor tells The Report. "I can't fathom how they've sunk so low," he seethes. "I know what problems the mass migration may pose. I know Islamic State might smuggle terrorists into Europe [among the migrants]. I know that there's the danger of a clash of cultures, etc., etc. But nothing justifies closing the borders to people who are running for their lives. Those so-called 'Jews' [who support Orbán's stance] should be ashamed of themselves."

"THOSE SO-CALLED Jews" include Rabbi Slomó Köves, a Lubavitcher Hasid who heads the Unified Hungarian Jewish Congregation, an organization he set up in 2004 as part of the Chabad Lubavitch movement's Jewish outreach project in the country. Militant Islam and Muslim anti-Semitism, Köves argues, pose a far greater danger to Jews in Europe today than does traditional Christian and right-wing anti-Semitism, which rarely manifests itself in physical violence anymore.

"Anti-Semitism can be a question of verbal abuse or physical safety," Köves offers. With Hungarian anti-Semitism, it's only the former, he says. With the militant Islamic variety, it's invariably both.

"Of course, when you see a child suffer or die [in places like Syria], you want to help," he adds. "But once you have fundamentalist Islam embedded in your society, you have a much harder time [as a Jew]. The Torah tells us to help the needy. It doesn't tell us to be suicidal in doing so."

If any Hungarian Jew stands out as such on the street, Köves certainly does with his straggly beard and black Hasidic garb. Yet, he says, "I can count on two hands the times I've been abused verbally in Hungary over the past two decades."

Not so in Paris, where he recently spent four days.

"Even in those four days I had at least five negative experiences because I was a Jew – in a taxi, in a store, on the street," he recalls. The sources of those experiences, Köves says, were Muslim immigrants who looked askance at him and refused to have any dealings with him. "I have [Jewish] friends in Paris who send their kids to school with bodyguards," he observes.

COURTESY OF SLOMÓ KÖVES

Rabbi Slomó Köves, head of the Unified Hungarian Jewish Congregation, believes that fundamentalist Islam poses a greater threat to Jews in Hungary than right-wing anti-Semitism

Köves personifies the revival of Orthodox Judaism in post-communist Hungary. Born to secular and fully assimilated Jewish parents in 1979, he discovered his Jewish roots only in his early teens. He decided he wanted "the real thing in Judaism without compromises" and began studying in a Lubavitcher yeshiva in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He went on to become post-war Hungary's very first homegrown ultra-Orthodox rabbi.

Despite pervasive anti-Semitism in Hungary, Köves argues that the country remains a haven for Jews. "There aren't many countries in the world where we [Jews] are loved. Hungary is no different. But here, you don't need to have a survival strategy or an exit plan," he adds.

"The Hungarian government can act in ways that are hurtful to Jewish sensibilities, like building that statue [on Freedom Square]," Köves goes on. "But I don't think the statue is anti-Semitic. It's a sign of a confused national identity and a confused national narrative."

According to that confused narrative, Hungarians prefer to see their nation as having been a blameless victim of the Nazis despite the country's role in World War II and the Holocaust as a staunch ally of Nazi Germany. "Hungary has never woken up from the criminal deeds and decisions of the past hundred years," Iványi notes. Legally enforced anti-Jewish discrimination in Hungary long predated the Nazis' takeover of the country, he observes.

"Many Hungarians, including Catholic priests, were all too willing accomplices in massacres and deportations. It's such a shame," the pastor explains. "We've never really accounted for our unforgivable crimes against our Jewish compatriots. We can't keep lying to the world and ourselves about them."

IT'S UNDERSTANDABLE that Hungarian Jews might find this reluctance to face the facts objectionable, Köves allows, but insists that "I don't think this government is anti-Semitic." A lot of the unrelenting Jewish opposition to the statue "has to do with the psychology of Holocaust trauma," posits the rabbi, who has a PhD in history from a Hungarian university.

"Many Hungarian Jews [whose relatives died in the Holocaust or who themselves survived it] were fully assimilated and saw themselves as thoroughly Hungarian so they felt betrayed by non-Jewish Hungarians during the Shoah," he notes."Many of them have still not come to terms with that betrayal."

To his credit, Orbán acknowledged Hungarians' complicity in the Holocaust during an address he delivered in a Jewish cemetery in Budapest last year on the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. The Hungarian premier called the Holocaust "a national tragedy for Hungary" and insisted, "We were without love and indifferent when we should have helped, and very many Hungarians chose bad instead of good, the shameful instead of the honorable."

That said, ethnic Magyars can still make it hard for local Jews to forgive and forget.

Solt, whose father survived the Holocaust only by the skin of his teeth, regularly distributes home-cooked food, along with a few of her friends, to the many homeless people who live on the streets of downtown Budapest. During one of her recent charity rounds, near the revisionist memorial, two homeless men greeted her unexpectedly with a cry of "Heil Hitler!"

They followed it up by advising her to "relocate to Auschwitz." She was taken aback. "I told them I only wanted to help them," Solt recalls. "They told me they didn't need my help. They said I should take a shower." Presumably the men meant a shower in a gas chamber.

"I know it was just words," says Solt. "But we know from history that terrible words can lead to terrible deeds." ■