

Jewish World

# REVISIONIST

A memorial to murdered Jews on the pavement at Budapest's Freedom Square – the words on the stones read (from left): 'With infinite pain,' 'Grandpa' and 'Grandma'; the objects are part of a citizens' memorial by local Jews in opposition to a government monument to the 'Victims of the German Occupation' at the site





# MEMORIAL

A Budapest monument erases the distinction between Holocaust murderers and their victims  
**By Tibor Krausz** *Budapest*





**T**he elderly Holocaust survivor seethes with indignation. “Look at these children. Don’t they look Hungarian?” Györgyi Wieder asks a visiting journalist, her pleasant childlike tone going up an octave in fleeting anger.

The diminutive woman holds a fading sepia photograph of a boy and a girl dressed in Magyar-style tunics. The only sign that marks the children out as Jews are the large Stars of David pinned to their chests. The picture was taken sometime during World War II and is now part of an impromptu curbside memorial to the country’s Holocaust victims that has emerged on a stretch of cobblestone pavement at a busy segment of Budapest’s scenic Szabadság Tér (Freedom Square).

Covering the ground are ad hoc arrangements of Jewish funerary pebbles, many with the names of Holocaust victims scrawled on them in colored markers: “Grandpa,” “Grandma,” “Magda,” “Dénes Fischer and his parents” — siblings, loved ones, long lost relatives. Placed among the stones are mementos of the dead: photographs, penciled portraits and their left-behind belongings — old shoes, yellowed *siddurs*, an antique suitcase, a threadbare teddy bear.

Here, on a nylon string suspended between decorative cast-iron posts, hangs the copy of a deportation notice from 1944. There, on another, dangles a poem by Miklós Radnóti, a celebrated Hungarian Jewish poet who converted to Catholicism in 1943, but died during a forced march in August a year later.

“Why did they kill these children?” Wieder, 79, wants to know, still clutching the photograph she has spotted among the displayed family relics. “But you see, it did not matter how closely Hungarian Jews identified themselves as Hungarians, they were still shot and gassed,” she tells *The Jerusalem Report*. “And they were still killing us even when they knew the war was lost.”

In 1944, as the liquidation of Hungary’s Jewry gathered pace, Wieder was a wheat-blond nine-year-old, around the same age as those children in the picture. Her father had been hauled away two years earlier by Hungarian gendarmes never to be seen again and her mother had gone missing. The girl managed to survive the end of the war by hiding with a few other Jewish children in the basement of a Budapest hotel whose upper floors were occupied by German soldiers. Sickly and starving, the children tried to eat anything they could lay their hands on. That included shoe polish. “I chose the brown because that resembled chocolate the closest,” the elderly woman recalls.

## THIS ISN’T JUST A JEWISH ISSUE; IT’S AN ISSUE FOR EVERY PERSON WHO VALUES TRUTH AND DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES

Momentarily, however, her attention returns to the photograph in her hand. “It was Hungarians who killed these children,” she insists. “They did it, not the Germans.”

The question of who is largely responsible for the mass murder of Hungarian Jewry — whether it was the Nazis or their local collaborators — has pitted local Jews against their government and highlighted the growing threat of far-right views and historical revisionism in the country. The country has the largest Jewish population in Central Europe estimated at between 35,000 and 120,000, many of whom are unaffiliated and four-fifths of whom live in Budapest.

It all came to a head because of a statue. Erected this summer by the country’s right-wing government, it looms over the improvised citizens’ memorial that has been created in response to it by local Jews. Dedicated to the “Victims of the German Occupation” after 1944, the monument commemorates the Nazi seizure of power in the country on March 19 of that year, leaving the identity of those “victims” unexplained and open to interpretation. A group of policemen guard the statue day and night in case malcontents decide to deface it.

**THAT FEAR** isn’t entirely unwarranted. Many local Jews so despise the monument that, since plans for it were announced by Prime Minister Victor Orbán in early January, they have fought tooth and nail against it. A dedicated handful of protesters have picketed daily at the site for months; organized flash mobs; thrown water-filled balloons at it; and, before all that, tried persistently to obstruct its construction by staging sit-ins and refusing to move.

Many of the protests have been spearheaded by two spirited middle-aged women: Andrea Zoltai, the daughter of the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities’ former president, Gusztáv Zoltai, who is a survivor of Auschwitz; and Fruzsina Magyar, a dramaturge whose mother was press-ganged into digging graves for fellow Jews about to be executed in Budapest in November 1944 but escaped be-

ing murdered herself.

“This statue is a disgrace. It erases the distinction between the murderers and their victims [by portraying both as victims of the Nazis],” Zoltai fumes to *The Report*. “We aren’t naïve. We know we’re powerless to bring it down [through peaceful means] just as we were powerless to stop it from being built. But, with our constant presence here, we want to remind people that we will not acquiesce to the falsification of history.

“This isn’t just a Jewish issue,” she stresses. “It’s an issue for every decent person who values the truth and democratic principles.”

“The memorial isn’t the issue,” concurs Balázs Horváth, 42, who is program coordinator for Eleven, a small non-Jewish liberal group that is part of the grassroots initiatives that have joined forces with Jewish protesters to oppose the government monument. “It’s a symptom of dangerous ideological trends in this country, which includes a blatant manipulation of history in the service of a political agenda that seeks to promote an idealized form of a ‘pure’ Hungarian identity,” he tells *The Report*.

One night last spring, Horváth set up camp at the building site to sabotage the construction of the statue in an act of civil disobedience. Workers simply carried on building after erecting some scaffolding around him in the presence of numerous police officers. In another tactic, Zoltai and Magyar tried to close off the site by leading people in forming human chains around it, hoping that would thwart construction.

In the end, all such initiatives failed. After several delays, the monument was finally unveiled on July 20, furtively and under cover of night without any official ceremony.

There it now stands as a permanent emblem of revisionist politics. In an odd blend of Greco-Roman and postmodern figurative elements, the statue features a cartoonish German imperial eagle, with absurdly long and thin legs, swooping down rapaciously on a somewhat effeminate archangel, his arms thrown wide in abject surrender, as a stand-in for Hungary.

Despite the memorial’s questionable artistic merits, its implication is obvious. Everything that followed the March 1944 takeover of the country’s government by Nazis — who would soon replace their suddenly dithering, longtime ally dictator Miklós Horthy with the homegrown Arrow Cross national socialist movement — was the Germans’ fault. And what followed was the mass-scale deportation and slaughter of Hungary’s Jews.



TIBOR KRAUSZ

Györgyi Wieder, Holocaust survivor, with a photograph of two Hungarian Jewish children who perished in the Holocaust

The new official take on history rather overlooks the fact that Hungarian authorities needed little prodding to do the Nazis' dirty work. Within a few short weeks, in the spring of 1944, Hungarian gendarmes rounded up most of the country's already despised and disenfranchised Jews, locked them up in ghettos, and sent them off to their deaths in Auschwitz and other concentration camps. Hungarian officials were doing such a brisk job with the roundups and deportations that German authorities pleaded with them to slow down because they were unable to process the large numbers of new arrivals to the death camps.

Tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews had died well before March 1944, many of them as members of forced labor battalions on the

## AFTER 70 YEARS HERE WE ARE AGAIN, BACK TO HATE AND CHAUVINISM AND RACISM

eastern front – this reporter's grandfather and great uncle among them. Already in 1920, long before the Nazis came to power, Horthy, a self-professed anti-Semite, passed an anti-Jewish numerus clausus law that severely limited the number of Jews allowed to attend university.

"This is all very personal to me. They took

my grandfather away on forced labor [in 1942] and he never came back," Gábor Popper, 54, a librarian and founder of the nascent Hungarian Liberal Party, who actively campaigned against the new memorial at Freedom Square, relates to *The Report*. "Now they are trying to absolve Horthy and his henchmen of their crimes," the Jewish intellectual bristles. "Who was it that locked Hungarian Jews into ghettos? Who was it that sent them to the death camps? Who was it that ransacked their homes and pilfered their valuables?"

Yet, according to Prime Minister Orbán, an avid supporter of the monument, all Hungarians, regardless of what they might have done, were merely hapless victims of the occupying Germans. Orbán, an erstwhile Social Democrat turned autocrat whose party, the Hungarian Civic Alliance, has enjoyed an overwhelming parliamentary majority for the second consecutive term, openly pooch-poochs the very idea of Western-style liberal democracy, considering it to be against "Hungarian values." He has spoken out against anti-Semitism but has also championed the cause of historical revisionism.

In a recent open letter, Orbán claimed that the Freedom Square monument's "historical content" was "impeccable" because after their occupation of Hungary in 1944 the Germans (and not just simply the Nazis) became "solely responsible" for the deaths of "hundreds of thousands of victims" be they "those of the old faith [an odd term by which he presumably meant Jews], Christians or unbelievers."

Orbán has likened the persistent Jewish protests against the monument to the equivalent of a "tawdry bar brawl!"

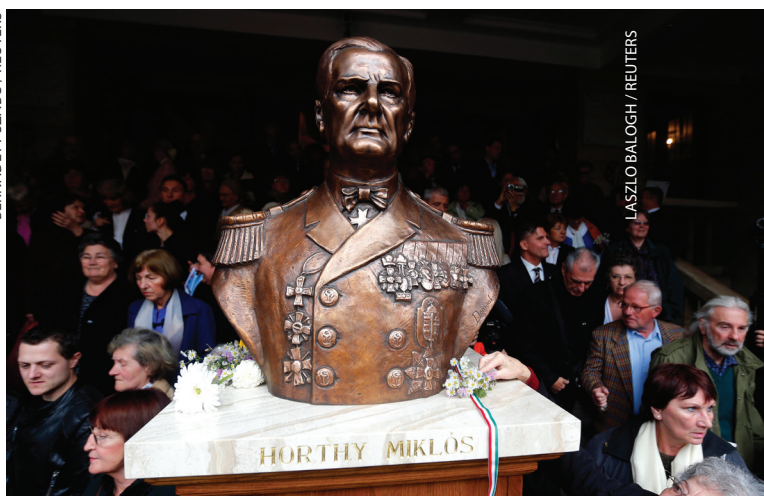
Yet the prime minister is a bleeding-heart Judeophile compared to the likes of Jobbik, a radical irredentist and nativist movement with overt anti-Semitic views. Jobbik won more than a million votes (in a country of less than 10 million) in national elections last April, earning itself a fifth of the seats in the National Assembly.

Two years ago, the party's deputy parliamentary leader, Márton Gyöngyösi, suggested making a list of Hungarian Jews, especially those in politics, arguing they posed "a certain national security threat" because of their dual loyalties to Israel. Another prominent Jobbik stalwart, Krisztina Morvai, advised "self-confessed 'proudly Hungarian' Jews" to





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“spend their free time playing with their tiny little circumcised tails instead of vilifying me.”

A third member of the party, Mihály Zoltán Orosz, recently staged a mock execution of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former president Shimon Peres in the small town of Érpatak in eastern Hungary where he is mayor. Dressed in a national costume and surrounded by Palestinian flags, he stood between effigies of Netanyahu and Peres hanging from gallows and read out an indictment against Israel over Operation Protective Edge against Hamas militants in Gaza.

**“WE HAVE** to raise our voice against the brutal genocide of Palestinians, which is today’s new Holocaust,” the mayor intones in a video of the event available on YouTube. “These people [the Jews] don’t even deserve the bullet so we’ll give them the noose,” he adds, whereupon an executioner wearing a black medieval-style hood kicks the chairs out from under the effigies of the Israeli politicians.

“I’m not Jewish myself, but I’m appalled by the extent of anti-Semitism in this country,” asserts Eleven’s Horváth. “The very word *zsidó* (Jew) is now a ubiquitous catch-all insult. Anti-Semitism doesn’t just target Jews. It targets the liberal values that ensure Jews enjoy equal rights. And what was once casual anti-Semitism is now becoming institutionalized.”

That certainly seems to be the case. Within 50 meters or so of the monument to the “Victims of the German Occupation” at Freedom Square stands another provocation to Jewish sensibilities: a bronze bust of Admiral Horthy. It is on display at the gated steps of a protestant church, the Temple of Homecoming, whose pastor is a Jobbik sympathizer notorious for

his Jew-bashing sermons from the pulpit. The statue was unveiled last November with much fanfare by the far-right party.

Every day, come rain or shine, Zoltai, Magyar, Popper, Horváth, and a handful of other Jews and liberals turn up at the Freedom Square monument with unflagging zeal to fulminate against it. They give speeches about the sad state of affairs in the country. They lead sing-alongs during live performances by local folk musicians and they listen to talks by sympathetic academics, actors, celebrities and intellectuals.

It’s a late summer evening and there is a lecture going on right now with an educator lamenting the erosion of standards in the country’s elementary and high schools. “We’re raising a new generation of children completely ignorant about basic facts of history,” he explains, with a hundred or so people standing around and listening despite an unseasonably cold drizzle. “The new government curricula on the teaching of history are a disaster.”

On the side, several police officers who guard the monument look on with feigned indifference but one of them is recording the proceedings with a video camera.

“We all have our police files,” observes Gábor Sebő, 62, a retired Hungarian Jewish economist who is a regular at the daily protests. “Many people are afraid to come here,” he explains to The Report. “If you protest against this illiberal government, they’ll come after you. They’ll get you fired from your job and destroy your career.”

Suddenly, a paunchy, well-dressed, middle-aged man with a bulbous nose appears and begins taunting demonstrators. He, too, is a regular at the protests, where he comes to try and wind up the Jews at the site. “You have Is-

(Left) Signs displayed by protesters are pictured in front of the government memorial, installed overnight after months of delay, in Budapest, on July 20; (above) Right-wing nationalists attend a ceremonial unveiling of the statue of Hungary’s wartime Nazi ally Miklos Horthy in Budapest November 3, 2013

rael. Why don’t you go there?” he goads them from beside a pair of policemen. “It’s nice and warm there with beaches,” he adds and winks at the stony-faced officers.

Today the provocateur is alone, but he often has like-minded folks for company. At times, some skinheads, Holocaust deniers, and Jobbik supporters show up to rail at the Jews. “They call us Nazis for protesting against fascists,” Wieder says and chuckles at the irony. “They tell us we’re the real Nazis for killing children in Palestine.”

Some far-right firebrands have also criticized the government’s monument. They agree with the Jews that it tries to whitewash ethnic Hungarians’ role in the Holocaust and they resent that because they are proud of that role.

Yet Wieder insists that no amount of abuse or intimidation will stop her. “I’ve come here every day for months to protest and will continue to come as long as this horrible statue stays here,” the elderly Holocaust survivor vows.

“It’s all lies and lies, and they deny and deny. And so after 70 years here we are again, back to hate and chauvinism and racism. I’m an old woman, but I’ve had enough of it and won’t keep quiet.” ■