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Euphemism in Narratives of Hungarian Holocaust Survivors

At Mauthausen Concentration Camp, the Hungarian Jews were, after the Polish Jews, the largest national Jewish group (30.000-33.000 Hungarian prisoners). Already in spring 1944 - after the German invasion in Hungary (19th of March 1944) - several thousand antifascists, communists, aristocrats and politician of the different parties were deported to Mauthausen. The big mass of Hungarian prisoners arrived in Mauthausen with the death and evacuation marches.

In 1945, the returning survivors had rarely been welcomed with enthusiasm. Frequently disputes arose because the Jewish properties had been distributed to other owners during the 1940s.¹ A new wave of anti-Semitism grew, which was built on the reproach of “Jewish revenge”. This anti-Semitism mostly characterised the underclass, because these were who found wealth in the fortunes of the Jewish community. The returning Jews tried to reacquire their legitimate possessions, but they didn't have much success with their claim. Consequently, it came to numerous complaints regarding the expropriated fortune. The disgrace of “Jewish revenge” was also effective because many Jews held high-ranking positions in government organs, such as police or state security, which they could have theoretically abused with the purpose of revenge. Numerous Jews joined the Communist party because this party promised much sought after equality. Most of Hungary's Jews had been able to survive in Budapest and so many of them were grateful because the Soviet army had protected them from being killed. In general, the anti-Jewish atmosphere was fortified by the

economic crisis, which eventually resulted in the 1946 pogroms in the cities of Kunmadaras, Miskolc, and Ozd.

Characteristic for the experience of the Hungarian Holocaust survivors after the war was, that they had to learn to live with their memories on the Holocaust and that they returned in a country, whose people had supported the deportation of their Jewish fellow citizens. For lots of the survivors the fact of Hungarian complicity was one important reason to leave the homeland and to emigrate. Nevertheless Hungary was the only country in the Soviet sphere of control that did not "lose" most of its survivors to emigration. To the efficient reintegration also testifies an explicit view on the protocols of the National Committee for Returning Deportees (DEGOB), which took up protocols with Holocaust survivors in the first months after World War II. Although a high number of the interviewees expressed in these protocols immediately after the war the desire to emigrate, the general Jewish migration out of Hungary was less intensive than in other eastern European countries.

Reintegration proved very successful, in part because of the fact that the Joint Distribution Committee had supported the Jewish Community with massive financial aid. Indeed, emigration ran at a constant number until the end of the 1940s, increasing visibly only during (and shortly after) the 1956 uprising. Compared to other Eastern European countries, however, the Jewish population, who lives in Budapest today is the second largest in Europe after Paris.²

In general, while the resistance fighters were honoured in Hungary as freedom fighters, the Jewish victims were suppressed. After the communists came into power in 1948, even using the word "Jew" was taboo and only circumscribed as "persecuted by fascism / national socialism". The Jewish community was responsible for drawing the most attention to the Holocaust.

Nevertheless, in the first post-war years we can observe a certain inclination to document the crimes. Thusly one of the chief goals of the National Committee for Returning Deportees (DEGOB) was to set up protocols with Holocaust survivors. This organisation was founded in March 1945 and had already created 4,600 protocols between then and April 13th, 1946.³ Thereunder about 750 protocols were made with survivors of Mauthausen or one of its subcamps (above all Gusen, Ebensee and Gunskirchen). But although the first years after the war were characterised by a certain readiness to broach the issues of the Holocaust, as the communist regime became more radical, this subject became taboo.

But also personal reactions of friends and society in general caused that a lot of survivors stopped to speak about their experiences. Fending reactions and incomprehension were not the rarity. For instance an MSDP interviewee reported about the reaction of one of his non-Jewish friends to his narration about Gunskirchen, that also he had to suffer during the war: Someone stole his shoes.

Thusly for many of the 57 Hungarian survivors of Mauthausen who were interviewed within the framework of the Mauthausen Survivors Documentations Project (MSDP), it was the first time that they could speak to the general public about their experiences. Most of the interview partners emphasised that in the family there was never so much time to speak about the own experiences than in the two-three hour interviews and underlined that for a long time they didn't speak about the Holocaust at all: *“I didn't speak about that to my daughter, because we were working at that time, isn't it, we were young and somehow that wasn't a subject until years. It elapsed; we had to continue our life. We shacked ourselves and we overrode the loss, we stayed alive, [...] we were living.”*⁴

The MSDP interviews confirm that after the Holocaust, the bigger part of the Hungarian Jews didn't change their efforts of assimilation in dissimulation. Beside the people, who recollected their Jewish Identity and returned to the Jewish faith, the number of those, who decided in favour of the way of assimilation, was considerable. Among these a lot of people saw the fusion into the social democratic or in the communist party as a good possibility, because they didn't have to give up the way of assimilation this was, but at the same time they didn't need to melt down into the reactionist, fascist nation, which delivered their families to persecution. The emigration in the years 1945-1948 and 1956/57 concerned exactly the part of persons who kept most their Jewish identity and tradition.

Another way of assimilation was the concealment of the Jewish roots. Numerous Jews disguised their identity and the own family history even in front of their children, so that lot of children grew up in a way, that they didn't know anything about the Holocaust respectively, about their own religious and cultural traditions.

In this respect the interviews of the MSDP fall in a time of change. With the revitalized anti-Semitism and revisionism after 1989-90, countless survivors felt the necessity to illuminate truth about the Holocaust. These years characterised the moment when they began to recollect their war experiences. In addition the year 2002 - when most of the interviews of the MSDP were made in Hungary - represent a type of turning point: On the one side the elections in

April resulted a social liberal government and superseded the right-conservative government of Viktor Orbán. At the same time the Nobel Prize for Literature for the Hungarian author Imre Kertész brought the Holocaust to the fore of public interests. On the other side the opening of the House of Terror⁵ in the same year opened heated discussions debates about the historical significance of the authoritarian Horthy regime and Horthy's ambiguous role in the deportation of the Hungarian Jews came up. The Horthy regime was romanticized and mystified, especially by the conservative parties, having searched for a period which might emphasize the national unity.⁶ The attention concentrated on the suffering of the Hungarian people, Jews were only mentioned as victims amongst others. The responsibility for the persecution of the Hungarian Jews was considered as being restricted to the Germans and the members of the fascist Hungarian Arrow Cross Party, although the deportation of over 400,000 people in eight weeks would not have been possible without the help of Hungarian authorities.⁷ The *Sondereinsatzkommando* under Adolf Eichmann, which was responsible for the deportation of the Hungarian Jews, was a small commando comprised of 100-200 people.⁸ This commando had to rely on the assistance of Hungarian police and gendarmerie forces.

This political background we have to keep in mind during analysing the Hungarian interviews with Mauthausen survivors. The interviewees speak out in most of the interviews frustration about the political situation and refer to the still existing anti-Semitism: *"I'd never thought that such problems come up again, like now. I was really forced to regret, that I stayed here in Hungary. This is a horrible feeling, because I really didn't think for decades, didn't feel, didn't think, that I'm not just the same citizen than the others [...]."*⁹

For most of the interviewees this political turn is the most important reason to speak about their experiences not just in the family, but also in a more public forum. One of their motivations for the interviews seems to be the enlightenment of the public about Hungarian responsibility. As already in the protocols of the DEGOB the interviewees accented the Hungarian anti-Semitism and the inhumanity of Hungarian gendarmerie. The increased emphasis of these aspects supposedly results from the disappointment about the new emerging anti-Semitism. This assumption confirms that reports from the communist era often faded out Hungarian involvement into Holocaust and underlined German responsibilities.

In general we can retain, that after a short period of narration most of the Hungarian survivors clung to a concealment about the Holocaust in order to find some kind of appreciation in the general Hungarian non-Jewish population. As recently as the political turn 1989/90 and the emerging anti-Semitic agitation caused a sort of rethinking and lead to a new readiness to

speaking about their own experiences during the war. On the other side we can also observe a growing interest on that subject in the society which possibly caused a kind of force to remember and to give up a probably successful repression.

Nevertheless, both during the immediate post war years and in the later phase of reactivation, broaching the issues of the Holocaust predominantly stayed narrative of the “others” and barely found its way into the “own”, Hungarian narration. The break which the deportations caused in the Hungarian-Jewish living together, was and is until today linked in a separation of the memories, which splits into a “Jewish” and a “Hungarian” one.

¹ More about the expropriation of the Hungarian Jews see in: Kádár, Gábor / Vági, Zoltán, *Hullarablás. A magyar zsidók gazdasági megsemmisítése* (Rape of corpse. The economic destruction of the Hungarian Jews). Budapest 2005.

² Between 1945 and 1951 about 20,000-25,000 Jews left the country. Karády, Viktor, *Zsidóság Európában a modern korban. Társadalomtörténeti vázlat* (The Jews in Europe in the modern era. A socio-historical outline). Budapest 2000, p. 426.

³ About the history of DEGOB see Horváth, Rita, *A Magyarországi Zsidó Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottsága (DEGOB) története* (History of the Hungarian State Commission caring for Jewish Deportees). In: MAKOR 1 (1997). The protocols are available for research on the internet: www.degob.hu.

⁴ Interview with G.J., MSDP, AMM OH/ZP1/589.

⁵ This museum commemorates both the victims of the *Arrow Cross* Party as well as the victims of the communist dictatorship. In the permanent exhibition the Holocaust is represented in only two and a half rooms while more than 20 rooms are dedicated to the Communist Terror. Consequently, an imbalance is evident in the sense that the suffering under the Communist Terror is moved into the foreground. The museum considers it sufficient that a few radical *Arrow Cross* Party members and the German occupiers are labelled as guilty and accountable for the matter.

⁶ In connection with the reevaluation of the role of Horthy stands the affiliation of the remains of Horthy and his family from Portugal to Hungary and his re-burial in Kenderes (Hungary) in September 1993.

⁷ Cf. Gerlach, Christian / Aly, Götz, *Das letzte Kapitel. Der Mord an den ungarischen Juden 1944/45*. Frankfurt am Main 2004.

⁸ According to the Hungarian historian Zoltán Vági this number includes also secretaries and chauffeurs. Cf. Vági, Zoltán, *Endre László politikai pályája 1919-1945* (The political career of Endre László 1919-1945), Budapest 2003, p. 150f.

⁹ Interview with G.B., MSDP, AMM OH/ZP1/162.