Exhibition Review

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1945 – Hogyan tovább? / 1945 – The Year Zero Exhibition of the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives and 2B Gallery. Curated by László Csősz, Zsófia Farkas, Tamás Kisantal, Hanna Mezei. 2B Gallery, Budapest, September 2 – October 16, 2025

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Staging museum exhibitions that present the postwar experiences of Jewish Holocaust survivors in eastern Europe was not, for a long time, a mainstream trend. DP camps and western Europe stood at the center of postwar Jewish history representations, for example in the 2015 exhibition *In a Foreign Country* at the Jewish Museum Berlin, the 2016 exhibition *After the Holocaust* at the Memorial de la Shoah in Paris, or more recently, in *München Displaced* at the Jewish Museum Munich (2023–2024). The history of survivors in eastern Europe has entered museum spaces during the last five years or so and gained new momentum with the 80th anniversary of the war's end. The exhibitions *Our Courage: Jews in Europe* at the Jewish Museum Frankfurt in 2021; *Another Country. Jewish in the GDR* at the Jewish Museum Berlin in 2023–2024; or POLIN's recent *1945. Not the End, Not the Beginning* are examples of this change of direction. The Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archive's joint exhibition with the 2B Gallery in Budapest *1945 – The Year Zero* fits this trend by bringing the experience of Budapest's Jews to Hungarian audiences in a small, intimate gallery space. It also thematically connects to the Museum's earlier exhibition from last year, *My story…* which showcased early artistic representations of the Holocaust.

The exhibition uses the gallery space resourcefully to enhance its gloomy atmosphere. Located in a former showroom, the facility gives the impression of being permanently under construction with exposed concrete floors, uneven walls, and

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even a makeshift curtain that hides building materials in one of the three rooms. The design of the exhibition also evokes the reconstruction process and the extreme scarcity that Budapest's inhabitants faced in the immediate postwar period: the materials used are inexpensive, simple, and unstable. The copies of contemporary documents and art are secured with tape onto brown paper sheets that hang on the walls. The exhibition texts are printed on corrugated cardboard, and the folded chairs that visitors can sit on to read the literary excerpts in the last room are also made of cardboard. Some items are exhibited under glass, some are not, displayed as if they were unremarkable and natural parts of the gallery equipment. The many simultaneous processes of reconstruction have been grouped around five themes that also denote the stages of managing trauma: awareness, mourning, reckoning, retribution, and beginning anew. The themes are presented through a mix of documents, photographs, fine art, and a few three-dimensional objects.

The first theme, awareness, begins right at the small entrance door where visitors are met by István Zádor's paintings from his album *Budapest 1945*. The artist, who survived the war in exile in the Netherlands, documented the ruins of the bridges connecting the two historic parts of the capital (Buda and Pest) in black and white watercolour. However, symbolically, they also represent the torn connections between those members of Hungarian society who were not Jewish and those who were (or were categorized by wartime Hungarian racial laws as such). Other artworks in this section, Péter Áldor's drawings, focus on people such as POWs returning home, Jews in the liberated ghetto or emerging from hiding. These works, supplemented by photos and contemporary documents, give a bleak but realistic image of the survivors' experiences of liberation that was marked by the feeling of loss rather than joy.

The second theme, mourning, is placed in a small, windowless room with black walls which provides an apt backdrop for visitors' engagement with the individual and collective processes of facing mass destruction. Out of some 780 thousand Jews who had lived within Hungary's 1941 borders, only between 220 and 260 thousand survived the war (Braham 2000, 252), many in the capital as the approach of the Red Army in late 1944 prevented the planned mass-scale deportations from there. However, there were thousands of dead bodies on the streets of the Pest ghetto and hundreds of thousands, most of whom had perished in the gas chambers in the camps or during forced labour, were recorded missing. The extraordinary situation brought about new commemorative traditions, shown in the exhibition in postwar photographs of the first Holocaust monuments and memorial services, and represented by objects brought back from the camps by survivors who kept them as mementos of their suffering.

The third theme, reckoning, presents visitors with the many losses that survivors had to face: not only that of their loved ones, but also their possessions and

communal spaces. Even before WWII started, Hungary's national governments began the legal discrimination of Jews with anti-Jewish legislation. Following the country's occupation by Germany in March 1944, the pro-German Hungarian governments issued hundreds of decrees that stripped Jews (and those who were categorized as such) of their material possessions. After the war, the restitution of these material goods, though legally possible, was not carried out due to administrative challenges and the resistance of those who benefitted from the wartime redistribution of Jewish wealth. The letters on display from survivors trying to reacquire their possessions showcase the difficulty of the restitution process as well as the emotions associated to this task. The immense losses that Jewish communal spaces – most importantly synagogues – suffered due to bombings and wartime confiscation are also detailed in the official documents on display of the postwar Jewish leadership's surveys of communal buildings.

The fourth theme, retribution, represents the deeply controversial issue of postwar justice and war crimes trials. Visitors are presented with court documents, drawings by survivor artist Margit Eppinger Weisz of the court processes, photographs of the executions of Hungarian war-criminals, and artistic representations of collective retribution and revenge. In fact, collective public revenge, as represented by a man hanged on a lamp post by the angry crowds in Péter Áldor's drawing, was rare in Hungary even though antisemitic pogroms did happen during the postwar period.

The fifth theme, called beginning anew, confronts visitors with the everyday difficulties faced by survivors when trying to rebuild their lives. They are apparent in the photographs of aid distribution and young boys eating in a public kitchen, or on the leaflet published by the city of Debrecen that gives detailed instructions to returning camp survivors about where they can get food, furniture, and how they should behave with other inhabitants of the city. The poster on display that used to hang on the door of Budapest's Kazinczy street synagogue calling for community members to donate money for the building's reconstruction is, in the meantime, a powerful symbol of survivors' resilience.

Though it occupies a small area, the exhibit requires considerable time investment and engagement from visitors. They must go near the items on display or read the small print documents to fully grasp their significance and meaning. However, perhaps it is necessary to place such high demands on visitors to convey the complex and hard-to-understand post-traumatic state that survivors were in during the first postwar years. Even so, some of the dramatic individual fates are captured in only a single object – like Lipót Herman's painting of Géza and József Szűcs who were both actively involved in postwar Hungarian Jewry's institutions of reconstruction but were later persecuted by the communist regime as Zionists and committed joint suicide in 1951 – perhaps not only because of the lack of space. This reflects the

challenges that curators of exhibitions about Jews in the postwar era face, namely that very few three-dimensional objects exist. With the inclusion of artwork and literary excerpts from the period, the curators of *1945 – The Year Zero* creatively counterbalance the lack of objects. Thus, those who take their time at the exhibition are rewarded with a sensitive and nuanced representation of Holocaust survivors' struggles in postwar Hungarian society.

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Reference

Braham, Randolph L. 2000. *The Politics of Genocide. The Holocaust in Hungary (condensed edition)*. Detroit–Mi.: Wayne State University Press.