Liberty Square, Budapest: How Hungary Won the Second World War

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ABSTRACT
After more than sixty years of almost complete silence about its role in the Second World War, Hungary managed to find an officially satisfactory and morally uplifting story of the country’s involvement in the war. One of the central squares of Budapest offers a vivid, sensual, and tangible demonstration of both the futile past efforts of coming to grips with a difficult past and the unexpected recent solution. The square, its monuments and artefacts provide a spatial trace of historical and historiographical contentions and controversies of the past decades and the future to come.

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The Panopticon

The US embassy, the former Chancery building, stands at the northern corner of Budapest’s Liberty Square. An architectural historian looking at the buildings and the monuments that populate the square today would say: eclecticism. A tourist lost in the maze and thick layers of anachronistic and unintelligible historical references would murmur: insane.

In the nineteenth century, the square functioned as the courtyard of an oversized Habsburg military barracks that had been turned into one of Europe’s largest prisons where, in the 200 × 200-meter courtyard, Count Batthyány, the prime minister of the 1848 Hungarian Revolution was shot on 6 October 1849, as he was unfit for hanging. The prison authorities had barely saved his life the previous day when his wife managed to smuggle a small dagger into his cell with which the count cut his throat in order to avoid public hanging, considered disgraceful for an aristocrat. Because of his neck wound, the authorities, who had saved his life so they could kill him, had to order his execution by firing squad. His body lay in public at the scene of the execution for long hours next to where an awkward, slightly-larger-than-life-size statue of Ronald Reagan, the victorious hero of anti-Communism, stands today.

The embassy building is protected by a heavy metal fence, as if it were locked in a cage, opposite the Soviet liberation monument, erected above the graves of unknown soldiers of the Soviet Red Army, to commemorate the liberation of the city from the Nazis and their Hungarian allies after the Second World War. The rationale behind choosing this site for
the Soviet monument, in the early years of Communist rule, was to remind the Americans looking out of the embassy’s windows, that post-Second World War Hungary had become the ally of the other side of the Cold War divide. The monument too was surrounded by a massive fence until recently, as radical right-wing groups, following the collapse of Communism in 1989, have repeatedly tried to demolish or at least to desecrate the obelisk. Today, however, when Putin’s Russia is one of the most important and ideologically closest ally of the Hungarian government, the right-wing and neo-Nazi activists look at the monument with changed feelings. A new monument, recently erected on the opposite side of the square, made the metal fence superfluous.

Cardinal Mindszenty, the arch-conservative head of the Hungarian Catholic church, imprisoned by the Communist authorities and freed by the revolutionaries during the days of the 1956 revolution, arrived at the gate of the embassy building in the early hours of 4 November 1956. The Soviet troops had entered the city the previous night. The cardinal asked for asylum from the air attaché, who, despite the early hours, received him on the stairs at the entrance to the building. The cardinal stayed for fifteen long years, and took up residence in the office suite now used by the US ambassador. When he looked out of the windows of his room, the Soviet monument reminded him of those who ruled the country after the military defeat of the most serious anti-Communist uprising in Eastern Europe.

On Halloween, sometime in the early sixties, the embassy had a costume party, and as some employees, still wearing their costume and masks, were leaving the building that night, they were accosted by flashlight-bearing secret police who pulled up the partygoers’ masks, looking for the Cardinal. This incident provided the real-life material for Woody Allen’s modestly acclaimed play of 1966, “Don’t Drink the Water,” which takes place in an American embassy in an unnamed country, where an American family seeks refuge and tries to escape wearing Halloween costumes.¹

In front of the embassy, there are two more monuments: the grim, uninspiring statue of Harry Hill Bandholtz, the largely forgotten brigadier general of the US Army, who arrived in Hungary in August 1919, as a member of the Inter-Allied Control Commission, primarily to supervise the disengagement of occupying Romanian troops after the First World War.

Bandholz, once the Chief of the Philippines Constabulary at the time of violent anti-American rebellions, who led expeditionary forces against Pancho Villa and, later on, undid the miners’ strike in West Virginia, is remembered in Hungary, because – according to his memoirs, the only source of the incident – on one night in October 1919, as the rotating president of the Commission, and armed only with a riding whip, he allegedly prevented a group of Romanian soldiers from removing Transylvanian treasures from the Hungarian National Museum. His statue was damaged during the allied bombing of Budapest and, in the late 1940s, it was removed for repair. The communists did not attempt to put the statue back, which lay in a statue boneyard until it was hastily re-placed at its original location in July 1989, at the time of the collapse of the communist regime, just a day before the visit of President George Bush. Every year, the military attaché of the US embassy lays a wrath of flowers at the pedestal of the statue on the birthday of the general, who locked his wife in a mental asylum, as it was easier than engaging in a long divorce process with the woman.

¹ Don’t Drink the Water premiered on Broadway on 17 November 1966, and closed after 598 performances.
The other is a modest memorial in the form of an open book dedicated to the memory of Karl Lutz, the Swiss vice-consul in Budapest during the Holocaust, who – according to the never precise historical record – saved more than 50,000 Jews by issuing false passports and safe-conduct documents from the building of the US embassy.

Lutz had lived in the US for twenty years, working at different Swiss diplomatic posts before he was appointed vice-consul to the Swiss consulate in Jaffa, Palestine. His five-year stay there made him especially sensitive to the tragedy of the Jews when he arrived in Budapest. When Hungary declared war on the US and America cut diplomatic ties, Lutz became the representative of Britain, the United States, and a dozen other countries in Hungary, and moved to the US embassy building which, from that moment, operated under the Swiss flag. According to credible sources, he hid Jewish refugees in the lower levels of the building. His ties to the British Mandate in Palestine created the opportunity to provide Palestinian entry permission for Jewish children, so he was able to help 10,000 Jewish children to immigrate to Palestine. While in Jaffa, Lutz intervened on behalf of German citizens interned in Palestine; this is why the SS and Nazi authorities in Hungary, after Germany occupied the country in March 1944, were hesitant in halting his rescue efforts.

Lutz did not have explicit Swiss authorization to issue Swiss documents to so many people in danger; he was authorized to issue eight thousand individual passports to people who had received entry permission to Palestine. Instead, he issued papers for more than eight thousand families. After a short time, the passports began to be forged and duplicated, which endangered the whole rescue operation. The Germans insisted that Lutz personally verify the authentic passports. He was taken to an abandoned brick factory on the outskirts of Budapest, along the highway to Austria, where, in last months of the war, given the lack of trains, Jews were forced to march on foot towards death in the Austrian labour camps. At the brick factory, as Lutz later recalled, he was confronted with five thousand people. He had to inspect their papers, decide, and tell the Germans which ones were genuine, and which were forgeries. Together with his wife, he stood there in the snow and freezing wind,

while the five thousand, standing in military lines, freezing, dressed in rags, were handing their papers to me. I will never forget those frightened faces; the police had to intervene, as the people were begging me desperately to state that the paper was genuine; their life depended on my words. This was the last sign of their will to live, before they succumbed into utter desperation, which ended so often in death.2

The Church of Homecoming stands on the southeastern edge of the square. The reformist church, commemorating “the return” of Transylvania – part of pre-First World War Hungary that Hitler gave back as part of the 1940 Second Vienna Accord – is a Novecento building constructed in the style of Mussolini’s Italy, and it is today one of the headquarters of Jobbik, Hungary’s neo-Nazi party. The priest of the church, who sometimes refers to himself as “Hamas,” had been a radical right-wing MP; his wife, herself also a priest, now represents the neo-Nazis in parliament. (Unlike their West-European counterparts, before the refugee crisis acquired tragic proportions in the summer of 2015, the Hungarian radical right was moderately pro-Arab, as their most important cohesive force is

2 Theo Tschuy, Dangerous Diplomacy: The Story of Carl Lutz, Rescuer of 62,000 Hungarian Jews (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 198.
antisemitism.) The patriarchal, Byzantine (double) cross, a favourite symbol of the nationalist right, stands in front of the church. Behind a low iron fence, on the stairs leading to the main gate, there is the pantheon of the right with the statue of Admiral Horthy, Hitler’s ally, and the interwar governor of Hungary, in the centre. Behind Horthy’s statue, next to the entrance of the church there remains a bilingual (Hungarian and Hebrew) plaque marking the 1944 hiding place for children in the basement.

The Period Without a Meaningful Story

The square, crowded by monuments of different persuasions and ideological messages, is today the site of small but determined and continuous demonstrations, open-air lectures, sit-outs, and commemorations. Since the first day of 2014, groups of people, mostly – although not exclusively – elderly men and women, among them survivors of the horrors of 1944, have been coming together every early evening, even in winter times, to protest against another monument. They call themselves “The Living Memorial.” On the last day of 2013, the Hungarian government, with a two-thirds supermajority in Parliament, and constrained neither by the constitution nor by moral considerations, issued a surprise order in the late hours of 31 December, to set up a new memorial on the square. The monument is dedicated to the memory of the German occupation of Hungary on 19 March 1944.

The monument is not intended as an inconsequential public memorial: it aims at carving in stone and steel the new official revisionist interpretation of the Second World War: the innocence of the Hungarian nation in the Holocaust, and also the (fictitious) continuity with the interwar right-wing, autocratic, illiberal, antisemitic regime. The preamble of the new 2011 Constitution, passed exclusively by the votes of the governing party, states: “We date the restoration of our country’s self-determination, lost on the nineteenth day of March 1944, from the second day of May 1990, when the first freely elected organ of popular representation was formed.”

By stating that the country had not been a sovereign state between 19 March 1944, when the German troops occupied Hungary, and the first session of the post-communist Parliament, when the last Soviet soldiers were leaving the country, the governing majority claims that Hungary was not and cannot be considered historically, politically or morally responsible for, among other things, the deportation and murder to close to 500,000 Jews and Roma in the summer of 1944; the post-Second World War deportation of the German and Slovak minorities; the internment of hundreds of thousands in the 1950s; the collectivization of agricultural land; the crushing of the 1956 Revolution; the post-revolutionary retributions; or the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Hungarians are the blameless victims of a history made by others.

Until recently, Hungary did not have a meaningful story of the Second World War to tell. After 1945, following the Communist takeover, school textbooks claimed that although Hungary had been Hitler’s last ally (which was probably true, although Croatia and the Italian Social Republic, better known as the Saló Republic, were also runners-up for the title), and that the majority of the population had either collaborated with the Nazis

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3 Official translation of the consolidated version of the Fundamental Law of Hungary (passed in Parliament on 25 April 2011) as of 1 October 2013. Online at: http://www.kormany.hu/download/e/02/00000/The%20New%20Fundamental%20Law%20of%20Hungary.pdf (accessed 16 June 2018).
and their local allies, helping the extermination and enriching themselves from the expropriated goods of those who had perished, or had passively accepted and endured what the government and fate provided, still – and despite everything – Hungary had not only been defeated in the war, but at the end found itself among the victors.

Had Communist history-writing and political propaganda emphasized only Hungary’s role on the side of Nazi Germany, then Communist rule after 1948 could have been perceived and felt by the majority of the population as an external, Soviet-imposed punishment for past deeds. To avoid this politically dangerous and defeating perception, the Communist narrative of the Second World War used another historical and rhetorical line, but it was barely possible to stitch together the two elements, of a fundamentally different nature. According to the Communist narrative, the Second World War was just an episode of the twentieth-century epic fight between Communism and anti-Communism. The victims of the war suffered because they were anti-fascists, not because of their ethnic origin. The dead Jews were expelled from (the memory of) the concentration and extermination camps, and replaced by murdered antifascist Communists. (Every year, when the Secretary General of the Polish Communist party or the Prime Minister visited the Auschwitz camp on the anniversary of the liberation, he wore the red triangle of the political prisoners, a reminder of the Communist victims.) Although Hungary – according to the Communists – was at its core, even after the Second World War, still a fascist nation, the country, thanks to historical justice and the Soviets, who became the liberators of the country, ended up on side of the antifascist victors at the conclusion of the war. Hungary – according to the pre-1989 history books – was liberated by the Soviet Union; liberated from its external and internal oppressors, so – finally – it could become itself, fulfilling the objective and dialectical laws of history. While fascist Hungary was defeated in 1945, after the Communist take-over in 1948, when Hungary became a Soviet ally, it emerged, retrospectively, victorious out of the cataclysm of the century. As Hungary was now a Communist country, thanks to its defeaters, it could proudly consider itself as one of the antifascist victors of the war. The story of the war, consisting of two fundamentally contradictory elements – defeat and victory – made no sense; it was impossible to recount. The textbooks enumerated the facts of the war in great detail, without providing a persuasive narrative to remember.

Following the fall of Communism in 1989, the first post-Communist, democratically elected prime minister, a conservative historian himself, stated in Parliament: “The nation should understand that we have nothing to be ashamed of, either politically or militarily in connection to our role in World War II”; Hungary took part in an “anti-Bolshevik crusade.”4 (Goebbels started using the phrase “crusade against Bolshevism” only after the defeat at Stalingrad.) Fighting against Bolshevism, from the perspective of the Fall of the Berlin Wall, when the crimes of Communism finally surfaced from the archives of repression, seemed to warrant no further explanation. The fact that Hungary had been at war with the United States and Great Britain as well, and fought against Bolshevism on the side of the Germans, Mussolini’s Italy, and Antonescu’s Romania – as hostile to the East as to the values of the West – remained unmentioned and unremarked.

4 Prime Minister József Antall in Parliament on 3 August 1990. At http://www.parlament.hu/naplo34/032/032tart.html (accessed 16 July 2018).
The prime minister called the fallen soldiers “heroes” and “martyrs,” but added that unfortunately, the country, because of a lack of historical alternatives, had to fight on the wrong side, regrettably, as an ally of fascist Germany.

There is, most probably, no one in the benches of this Parliament, who would not consider himself as the heir of those political ideas and parties that stood against Germany in course of World War I (sic!) … This is why I would emphatically state here that praising the heroism and martyrdom of our soldiers does not amount at the least to either identifying with or absolving Nazism in World War II.5

As it is deeply problematic to wage a crusade on the wrong side, die as a hero or martyr while fighting as an ally of a genocidal regime, the immediate post-Communist efforts failed once more to provide a consistent narrative of Hungary’s involvement in the Second World War. Schoolbooks, once more, just recounted the basic facts, without the effort of providing a historical interpretation.

Another historian turned member of the Parliament, a former member of the democratic opposition, reacting to the words of the Prime Minister, wrote:

So far only the Communists labeled the Nazi aggression against the Soviet Union a ‘Christian crusade’ … It seems that what is happening now is a revision of the defeat … The aim seems to be to prove that [after the fall of the Communist regimes] it was Germany that eventually won the war, and the Soviet Union lost it, but this outcome remained hidden during the decades-long vacuum following the end of the war. And Hungary is seen now a crucial element of this victory, since Hungary, having opened the iron curtain [for the East German refugees in the summer of 1989], played a central role in the reunification of Germany. The Prime Minister stipulated that by the help of their peaceful revolutions, the East European countries won the Cold War. And with this – the Prime Minister could claim – Hungary won, belatedly, the Second World War for Germany.6

The Emerging Narrative

From the early 2000s, primarily neo-positivist military historians, making use of the newly available archival sources, and the appropriate political climate, started publishing works on Hungary’s military participation on the Russian front. One of the focal points of these histories was the fate of the Second Hungarian Army on the Eastern front between the summer of 1942 and January 1943. The Second Army suffered a tragic defeat at the River Don in the harsh Russian winter at the turn of 1942–43. In post-war historical memory, the defeat was remembered as “the second Mohács.” (On 29 August 1526, the Hungarian Kingdom suffered a devastating defeat by the army of Suleiman the Magnificent at Mohács. The majority of the Hungarian soldiers of the close to 25,000 strong army were killed, together with Louis II, the king of Hungary. Following the victory, the Ottoman Empire occupied large parts of Hungary for 150 years.)

The neo-positivists tried to dismiss “the myths” that the defeat had been as tragic and deadly as the Communist historians had claimed; that the Hungarian army was as unprepared and as unwilling to fight as had been previously stated; that the officers and the soldiers had not been supposedly enthusiastic enough fighting against the Bolsheviks; that

5 Ibid.
6 Miklós Szabó, “Ki nyerte meg a második világháborút? (Who Won World War II?),” Magyar Nemzet 22 January 1992. At: http://mek.oszk.hu/02200/02238/html/cikk3.htm (accessed 17 June 2018).
the army had been sent to the front just to satisfy the German demands and not to defeat the Soviets.

According to the newly scrutinized figures, as opposed to the allegedly close to 140,000 casualties, the losses could not be higher than about 127,000, of whom 41,972 died as a direct consequence of the Soviet breakthrough in January and February 1943; 28,706 were taken into Soviet custody, while the number of those who were wounded or fell seriously ill, and transported back to the homeland was just 28,044.7

It is instructive to remark that these figures end with a number other than zero. These are surprisingly exact figures that provide the aura of exactness, careful counting, painful, reliable, miniscule research, objectivity, and archival authority. The numbers remind the reader of Timothy Snyder’s critically acclaimed Bloodlands, where the author writes:

Cultures of memory are organized by round numbers, intervals of ten; but somehow the remembrance of the dead is easier when the numbers are not round, when the final digit is not a zero … The Nazi and the Soviet regimes turned people into numbers, some of which we can only estimate, some of which we can reconstruct with fair precision. It is for us as scholars to seek these numbers and to put them into perspective. It is for us as humanists to turn the numbers back into people. If we cannot do that, then Hitler and Stalin have shaped not only our world, but our humanity.8

Still, as a reviewer of Snyder’s book wrote in the Observer: “For Babi Yar, as for Auschwitz, the figures needed are the poetic kind.”9

It is obvious that Snyder’s humanistic project and well-worded, emotionally coloured rhetorical assertions were influenced by the mathematical historian, T. W. Krüger’s The Pleasure of Counting,10 where Krüger says:

The problems people had with the new Indian notation, and in particular with the idea of zero (representing empty columns) have left traces in the English language. The Indians called their new symbol sunya, i.e. void; this became sifra in Arabic, and the Arabic word gave rise to both to ‘zero’ and ‘cipher’. If we say that someone is a cipher, we mean that he is a nonentity, a null … 11

What motivates this new breed of revisionist Hungarian historians is not so much humanism, not the desire to give back the individuality to the unknown dead, the lost dignity of those who could not have been mourned in a decent way, but to prove, on the basis of exact looking, non-subjective data that the Hungarians fought heroically against the Soviets: we do not have to be ashamed either of our participation in the war or of our eventual defeat. Whereas – according to these newly recounted statistical figures – the casualties of the second Hungarian army at the Don amounted to supposedly less than half of the personnel of the army, around the same time, to the south of the Hungarian divisions, at Stalingrad, out of the encircled 260,000 German soldiers, only about 46,000 survived (43,000 who were eventually evacuated, but ninety per cent of them

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7 See the statistics in Péter Szabó, Don-kanyar. A magyar királyi 2. honvéd hadsereg története (1942-1943) (The Don-Bend. The history of the Hungarian 2nd Royal Army, 1942-1943) (Budapest: Corvina, 2001). Obviously, the figures do not add up.
8 Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 408.
9 Christopher Glazer, “Body Count: Timothy Snyder Strips the Holocaust of Theory,” Observer, 11 February 2010.
10 Snyder on Krüger’s book, at: http://www.blackbirdinc.com/recommendations/131-book-recommendations-from-timothy-snyder.html (accessed 4 March 2013.)
11 T. W. Krüger, The Pleasures of Counting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Cambridge Press, 1996), 233.
were wounded and of those about 4,000 who later survived the Soviet prisoner of war camps). While the Germans were completely defeated, half the Hungarian army survived.12

The efforts to decrease the number of casualties served to prove the effectiveness of the military contribution, its significance, and also the strategic insights of the Hungarian military leadership. Attempts to the contrary, at the same time – sometimes by the same historians – to emphasize the high numerical losses of the army, aim at substantiating the exceptional Hungarian sacrifice to the anti-Bolshevik crusade, especially when compared to that of the Wehrmacht.

The importance of the Hungarian army – compared to the number of the citizens of each country – surpassed the military contribution of Italy in 1944. At the end of the war, about 170,000 Italian soldiers fought on the German side, while Hungary was present on the Eastern front with close to 400,000 fighting men. The same is true, if we compare the overall losses: on the one side 340,000–360,000 dead Hungarian soldiers, while on the other, … from a significantly more numerous country, 330,000 Italian war dead … Without Hungarian help, already in the summer of 1944, Germany would not have been able to keep its positions in the Carpathian Basin. After the Romanian exit from the war, on August 23, 1944, it was solely due to the Hungarian efforts that Hitler was not defeated earlier.13

By 2014, almost all the elements of a possible new revisionist interpretation were in place: the army was not sent to the front to die, but to stop the Bolshevik tide; the Hungarians fought better and more bravely than even the Germans as is proved by the comparatively lower number of casualties; they were ready to sacrifice themselves as the relatively higher number of losses show; without Hungarian participation, Hitler would have been defeated earlier. Just a few additional components were needed in order that for the first time since the war, Hungary finally could find a comprehensive story about its legitimate role in the war.

The Facts

2014 was the seventieth anniversary of the Hungarian Holocaust, when close to half a million people, classified as Jews, were deported in fifty-six days to Auschwitz, where most of them were immediately murdered. Every third Jew killed in Auschwitz was Hungarian. Auschwitz is the largest Hungarian Jewish cemetery. Surprisingly, and unforeseen by anyone, the radical right-wing government of the illiberal Viktor Orbán officially designated 2014 as the memorial year of the Hungarian Holocaust. The political intention behind this startling decision became clear only when the government decided to erect a monument commemorating the German occupation.

12 Typical of the counting exercise: Krisztián Ungváry, “Mítoszok a Don-kanyarról” (Myths about the Bend of the Don), HVG online, 17 January 2013, accessed 2 March 2013.
13 Krisztián Ungváry, “Magyarország II. Világháborús Szerepvállalása” (Hungary’s Role in World War II), Korunk 23, no. 11 (2012): 39 and 38. It is important to emphasize that these neo-positivist historians do not share the same ideological persuasion. While most of them obviously work in order to substantiate a new right-wing official interpretation of Hungary’s role in the Second World War, the most talented historian among them, Krisztián Ungváry, has no such political agenda. In fact, Ungváry writes: “It is still completely unknown in Hungary that in the course of the war, Hungarian army units provided occupation services on a territory about 500,000 square kilometers.” Ungváry, A magyar honvédég a második világháborúban (The Hungarian Army in World War II) (Budapest: Osiris, 2005), 123–228. “… [B]etween the end of 1941 and the middle of 1944, in the territory behind the German Eastern front, 25% of the armed occupation army was supplied by the Hungarians.” “Magyarország II. Világháborús Szerepvállalása,” 38.
Hungary was the first country to introduce anti-Jewish legislation in Europe, with the *numerus clausus* in 1920, which maximized the percentage of Jews – and women – who could be admitted to higher education. The law was followed by three major, and hundreds of smaller, anti-Jewish laws in the 1930s and early 1940s – some of them harsher than the Nuremberg laws in Nazi Germany. The first mass killings of Hungarian Jews took place already in August 1941, not long after Hungary entered the war, when more than 20,000 Hungarian Jews, deported by the Hungarian government to Ukraine, under German occupation, were ruthlessly murdered there by the SS.

By March 1944, the outcome of the war could not remain uncertain even for those who tried hard to mislead themselves. The Germans suspected – and rightly so – that the Hungarian government would try, unilaterally, to find a way out of the war, especially since the Soviet Red Army was already close to the eastern borders of the country. Hitler decided to occupy the country of his unreliable ally, and eventually, with Admiral Horthy’s consent, German troops arrived in Hungary on 19 March 1944. When the German troops crossed the Hungarian border, the Hungarian government issued a statement:

> On the basis of mutual agreement, German troops have arrived in Hungary in order to help Hungary to fight more effectively in the common war against the common enemy, especially in our efforts of defeating Bolshevism. The two allied governments agree that in the spirit of traditional friendship and military co-operation, the arrival of the troops would contribute to the final victory of our joint cause.¹⁴

There was no resistance; the incoming troops did not encounter any obstruction.

Together with the soldiers, a special German unit of a few dozen experts led by Adolf Eichmann arrived in Budapest, to plan, coordinate, and eventually carry out the deportation of the Jews.

The *Sonderkommando* Eichmann – the deportation experts who came to Hungary with Adolf Eichmann after the German occupation in March 1944 – consisted of less than 200 people. The guarantee of success could not be but the collaboration of the Hungarian authorities. [With the help of the entire Hungarian civil service, around 51,000 people, and the active participation of close to 200,000 civilians, this small group of extermination experts accomplished the deportation of all the Jewish population of the countryside in less than two months.] In fifty-six days[,] according to German documents – 437,402 Jews were deported by 147 trains, with the exception of 15,000, to Auschwitz.¹⁵

Eichmann was delighted by what he experienced after his arrival. “It seems the Hungarians are indeed the descendants of the Huns; we would never have managed so well without them,” remarked one of his deputies to a member of the Jewish Council.¹⁶

Rudolf Höss, the commander of the Auschwitz camp, begged the Hungarian authorities not to send more than one transport every second day, as the camp crematoria did not have the capacity to cope with the sheer number of bodies arriving from the gas chambers. The Hungarians wanted to send six transports a day, and as a sensible compromise, Eichmann suggested two trainloads every other day. In the end, three, sometimes

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¹⁴ Official Hungarian communiqué on 2 April 1944, online at: [http://mek.oszk.hu/11500/11506/html/haromoldal/Braham411.htm](http://mek.oszk.hu/11500/11506/html/haromoldal/Braham411.htm) (accessed 16 July 2018).
¹⁵ Gábor Kádár, Zoltán Vági and Krisztián Ungváry, *Hullarablás. A magyaroroszági zsidók megsemmisítése*. (Robbing the Corpses. The Economic Annihilation of the Hungarian Jews), unpublished manuscript, Budapest, 2003, 159–63.
¹⁶ Quoted by Randolph Braham, *A népírtás politikája: a holocaust Magyarországon*. (The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary) trans. Tamás Zala, et al. 2nd enlarged edition (Budapest, Belvárosi Kvk, 1997), 648.
four trains, each with about 3,000 deportees, left the stations every day, for fifty-six days. The camp authorities in Auschwitz dug open pits to burn the corpses.

**Revisionism Unbound**

The monument on Liberty square, erected in July 2014, above an underground parking garage, weighs about twenty tons, adorned with thirteen broken columns, a gate in the middle, and is topped with a tympanum, where “the beautiful and gentle” Archangel Gabriel stands. “In the history of culture and the history of religion, he is God’s man, the Strength of God, Divine Might. He is overpowered, subjugated” – as the official description provided by Péter Párkányi Raab, the sculptor states

but his body is perfect, there is no dread in the eyes, as the eyes are closed. The composition makes it obvious that dream is turned into a nightmare … . The ruined, clip-winged culture [sic!] is subdued by a mightier power: this is the Third Reich, or more specifically, by the Nazi symbol, the eagle of the empire, the perfect antithesis of the beautiful figure of Gabriel. This imperial eagle sweeps over the whole world, and in no time arrives to us and annexes Hungary to shackle her inhabitants.17

The eagle which, according to the concept of the monument, bites deep into the clean and innocent flesh of the gentle angel, is in fact not the Nazi symbol – the eagle holding the swastika in its claw – but the Imperial Eagle, one of the oldest European heraldic marks that can be traced back to the banner of the Holy Roman Empire, probably to the ninth century; it is older than the exonym designating the Germans. It seems, nonetheless, that the heraldic symbol was not just the awkward and accidental choice of an undereducated sculptor, who is nowadays overwhelmed by government commissions, but it is supported, and consciously so, by Prime Minister Orbán himself, who did not want to conceal the fact that setting up the monument was his personal decision. He made his views public in an open letter: “[W]ho were the occupiers; the Nazis or the Germans?” asks the Prime Minister rhetorically.

According to my – primarily constitutional – view, in fact, they were Germans, who at that time happened to live their lives in the frame of the Nazi state. Differentiating between the two, and drawing sufficient conclusions, is the business of the German people, not us … . This is why we do not feel it improper to use, as the representation of Germany, the imperial eagle

declared the prime minister-turned-iconographer and heraldic expert.

What I discover in the figure of the angel, is the innocent victim … and I think of the anti-Christianity [of evil]. The occupying German empire brushed aside the two thousand-year old European Christian virtues, the Christian expectations and teachings about politics and power, and this is why the sufferers – be they old-believers [sic], Christians or unbelievers – became the victims of … the embodiment of an anti-Christian spiritual course.18

Orbán chose his words carefully: he did not use the word atheists, rather “hitetlen” (unbeliever, in Hungarian), which, according to the Hungarian etymological dictionary

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17 Péter Párkányi Raab, *Description of the Object*. Prepared for the 14 January 2014 meeting of the Budapest Vth District City Council. Online at: https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B4gcb6t1VP3eRHU2U0dRWGzQ/edit. See also Margit Feher, “Hungarian Sculptor Defends Monument to Victims of Nazis,” *Wall Street Journal*, 1 August 2014.

18 Public letter by Viktor Orbán to art-historian Katalin Dávid on 30 April 2014. At: http://www.origo.hu/attached/20140430davidk.pdf (accessed 16 July 2018).
means “someone who does not believe anyone,” “who does not trust in anybody’s integrity,” “who is a non-Christian, a pagan or a Muslim,” “who is a perjurer.”

When the plans of the monument became public, the German embassy in Budapest issued a statement:

Germany is aware of its responsibility for the crimes committed during World War II, and takes the responsibility for those crimes committed on Hungarian soil as well. The responsibility for choosing appropriate sites of commemoration in Hungary, rests, however, with the Hungarian government.19

Opposite the German monument, a makeshift counter-monument is permanently in the making: photographs of the deported and murdered, pebble stones for the dead, the names of those cities, towns and villages where nobody visits the abandoned Jewish cemeteries as there are no relatives left to remember, clippings from old newspapers, and a large, already vandalized, broken mirror in front of the German memorial, which was intended for visitors to confront themselves, while watching the shameful, polarizing and contested site. Every single day, a small group of people assemble at the makeshift counter-monument. They bring chairs with them, sit down, and in the presence of the onlookers, they talk about the history of Hungary. They have been coming together already for more than 1,400 days; every day, in rain and snow and in extreme heat in the summer.

The monument on Liberty Square, with the innocent yet still sad archangel holding the Hungarian royal orb in his hand, demonstrates that in the final count, and despite everything, Hungary could not be considered Germany’s ally in the Second World War. According to this ambitious, revisionist, and official interpretation, Hungary joined the war only to defend the West from Bolshevik barbarism advancing from the East.

The Protector of Faith

In 1938 in Munich, Chamberlain and Daladier acknowledged that the West was no longer able to control the situation in Central Europe, and deviously threw the whole region into Hitler’s hand. The West – according to official Hungarian reasoning today – thus betrayed Central Europe: Roosevelt and Churchill blindly allied themselves with Stalin, so Hungary, having no other choice, was forced to defend herself and the millennial Christian values even against the treacherous West, seemingly fighting on the side of Nazi Germany.

Hungary found itself in the crossfire of an increasingly agressive Nazi régime in Germany as well as a menacing and powerful Soviet Union. First allies then enemies, the Nazi and Soviet dictatorships began a life-and-death fight to create a new European systém of client and subordinated states, where there was no room for an independent Hungary. After the outbreak of WWII, Hungary made desperate attempts to maintain its fragile independence and democracy and maneuvered to prevent the worst: Nazi occupation. … Until the Nazi occupation in 1944 Hungary had a legitimately elected government and parliament … With the cooperation of the puppet Hungarian authorities appointed by the Nazi occupiers, the National Socialists began their assault on Western Civilization’s value structure through the horrific and so-called final solution program. With record speed, the Nazi experts of Jewish persecution, the Judenkommando, began to round up and capture Hungarian Jews and on

19 Communique of the German Embassy in Budapest, on 22 January 2014, online at: http://hvg.hu/itthon/20140122_A_nemet_nagykovetsegnek_is_van_mondanival (accessed 17 July 2018).
May 15, 1944, the deportation trains began running… On August 27, 1944, Soviet troops crossed the Hungarian border. The country became the scene of life-and-death clash between the Nazis and the Soviet Union. The short, yet extremely brutal Nazi occupation during World War Two was then replaced by two generations of occupation of the Soviet Union…

The text comes from the so called “House of Terror,” a museum, a memorial, opened in 2002 by the first Orbán government, to commemorate, in fact to remind of the double occupation of Hungary, that started with the betrayal of Hungary by the Germans in the course of the Second World War.

As the new historical monographs argue, the Germans betrayed Hungary on the Russian front, where the brave Hungarian soldiers were sent to the most dangerous frontlines at the River Don, in 1942, and mercilessly let the Hungarian soldiers to freeze to death in the harsh winter as German military vehicles were not allowed to carry the withdrawing Hungarians to the rear, and the supposed German allies (the good Hungarian soldiers) were prevented from spending the icy nights in the cottages of the villages occupied by German officers, who took care to arrive before the withdrawing Hungarian army. And then, at the end, the Germans occupied Hungarian soil, having proven that even they themselves had not considered the Hungarians their allies. Let down by the West, occupied by the Germans, and fighting against the Soviets, Hungary was again left alone in her fight for the most traditional and most sacred Christian virtues. Official Hungary has finally found a way how to remember, without shame, in fact with pride, its role in the tragic, but retroactively glorious anti-Bolshevik crusade. The centrally distributed official history books are not far today from claiming that Hungary was the sole moral winner of the war.

In this politically calculated narrative, the West betrayed Hungary during the Second World War, as it had deceived her already after the First World War (when – as quoted in the history books – Wilson, the US president confided: “When the war is over, we would force our way of thinking on them [Central Europe], as they will be economically in our hands, anyway”): in 1920, with the Trianon Peace Treaty in which Hungary lost two third of its territory; with the Paris Peace Treaty, following the Second World War; just as in 1956, when despite Truman’s and Eisenhower’s “liberation doctrine,” the US let the Soviets defeat the revolution; and once more in 1989, when the West, allegedly following its own financial interests, forced on East and Central Europe an asymmetrical market system favouring multinational companies to exploit the region.

In 2011, when Hungary had the rotating presidency of the European Union, the Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, at that moment the head of the European Union, stated in no uncertain words: “Brussels believed that we would become Europe’s servants…. But
we have never accepted orders coming either from Vienna, during the time of the Austro-
Hungarian Monarchy, or from Moscow, and we would not accept them from Brussels either.23 (“Prime Minister Orbán, you are one of the few European leaders, who has a
grasp of history … When you say: ‘before we were dictated to by Moscow, and now it’s
Brussels, and you say that we will stand up to it, you actually mean it … Your six-month
presidency has been indeed historic … All in all, I would say that you have had a remark-
able, a superb six months in office … We have seen the beginning of the end.” – thus Nigel
Farage congratulated Mr. Orbán at the end of his presidency in his speech in Strasbourg, in
the European Parliament, on 5 July 2011, five years before Brexit.24)

It is not just Hungary that has been betrayed, but our Christian traditions as well. The
West deserted Christian values during the turmoil of the student and feminist movements
in the 1960s, when the West fell into “moral relativism” just like today, when – in the words
of the Prime Minister – “it wants to free the individual from his inborn traits … the bond of
the mother tongue … the bond of ancestry … and even from his sexual identity.”25 These
words echo, almost word for word, Vladimir Putin’s speech at the 2013 Valdai International
Discussion Forum:

We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, includ-
ing the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. I am convinced that
this opens a direct path to degradation and primitivism, resulting in a profound demographic
and moral crisis.26

The monument commemorating the German occupation turned Liberty Square into
the site of defiance, of the Hungarian freedom fight in defence of Christianity against
the decadent West. Hungarians, rejuvenated from their alleged deep Eastern roots, are
ready to defend, as they have always been – against the Mongols in the thirteenth
century, the Ottomans in the sixteenth and the Soviets in the Second World War – their
two-thousand-year-old Christian virtues. And sometimes, according to the official reason-
ting today, we have no other choice but to ally ourselves with the other committed defen-
ders of traditional Christian values. And if we look around, we understand that these forces
of Christianity are now in the East. This is why Hungary is allying itself with Vladimir Putin’s
Russia, in earnest defence of the West.

**Defender of Fortress Europe**

Allow me a detour here to provide a context for the defense of faith: “pro fide,” especially
since the ruling party in Hungary is called Fidesz.

In 1555–56, Giorgio Vasari, the painter, architect and historian was commissioned to
decorate the former apartment of Pope Leo X in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. Accord-
ing to the artistic and hagiographical programme, each room was devoted to the deeds of
one of the Medici patriarchs. In the room dedicated to the Medici Pope Clement VII

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23 Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Hungarian National Museum on 15 March 2011, online at: http://2010-
2014.kormany.hu/hu/miniszterelnokseg/miniszterelnok/beszedek-publikaciok-interjuk/1848-es-2010-is-megujulas-
hozott (accessed 17 July 2018).
24 Online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8QDNyW93rg (accessed 15 March 2018.)
25 Speech by Viktor Orbán in Tusnádfürdő, 23 July 2007 (the infamous “illiberal” speech), Online at: http://2010-2015.
miniszterelnok.hu/beszed/orban_viktor_tusnadfurd_337_i_beszede (accessed 16 July 2018).
26 http://russialist.org/transcript-putin-at-meeting-of-the-valdai-international-discussion-club-partial-transcript/.
(nephew of Lorenzo the Magnificent), Vasari’s assistant, Giovanni Stradano offered an oil painting: Cardinal Ippolito de Medici Sent to Hungary as a Papal Legate.”

In 1532, Pope Clement VII sent his cousin, Ippolito, the very young cardinal as papal legate to recruit soldiers for a crusade to help the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, in defending Vienna from the advancing Ottoman army of Suleiman the Magnificent. Suleiman tried already once, and in vain, to capture Vienna in 1529. The painting played an important role in the political programme of the Palazzo Vecchio decoration, as the Medicis, who were dependent on Charles V, aimed to show that the help of the Medici Pope and his cousin, the cardinal, proved to be essential in defending Vienna and the Habsburg Empire from the Turks.

Ippolito, however, had no chance of defending Vienna, as the Sultan’s main army wasted several weeks with the siege of the small fortress of Kőszeg (Guns, in German) in the Western part of today’s Hungary. By the time the siege was over after more than three weeks, the fighting season was over as well; the bad weather forced the Ottoman army to return to the Balkans, without attempting to capture Vienna. Guns was defended by only a handful of regular soldiers and about 500 civilians, who found refuge inside the walls. The heroism of the defenders of the fortress, especially the captain of the place, Miklos Jurisics, is remembered as one of the finest, and bravest military achievements accomplished by Hungarians in defence of Vienna, the West, and of Christianity. During his recent visit to Bavaria, Orbán referred to himself as the defender of Bavaria, the captain of the fortress.\textsuperscript{27}

Guns, today’s Kőszeg, is now in Hungary, but by 1532, after the Ottoman defeat of the Hungarian army in 1526, Hungary was divided into three parts: the Hungarian part, ruled by the Hungarian king, who willingly became a vassal of the Sultan; another part, under Ottoman rule; and Western Hungary, including Guns that belonged to the part ruled by the Habsburg emperor, Ferdinand I, king of Bohemia, Hungary, Croatia, brother of Charles V, and the future Holy Roman Emperor. The heroic defenders of the fortress stopped the advancing Ottoman army on behalf of the Habsburgs, not the Hungarians. The defenders asked for help from the Habsburg emperor, not from the Hungarian king, the Turkish vassal. The captain of the fortress, Jurisics, was unfortunately born in Dalmatia, so he was Croatian, rather than a true-born Hungarian.

The allegedly Hungarian landscape in the background of Stradano’s painting, is most probably a reproduction of Albrecht Dürer’s woodcut, the “Siege of a Fortress,” now at the British Museum in London. As Vincenzo Borghini, the Florentine Benedictine monk, the artistic advisor of both the Medicis and Vasari, wrote: “[S]ince we are dealing with history, and with a part of history that makes use of other things than certainties, we will have need of conjectures, of signs, of verisimilitudes, of names, of opinions, of rumors, of similarities …”\textsuperscript{28}

Perhaps our geographical position every thirty years causes history to suddenly thrust us into the main current of debate on the future of Europe. In 1956 … we sought to push the Iron Curtain back beyond our Eastern border … In 1989, it was we who had to open our border, to let [East] Germans find their way to other Germans … And now, in 2015-2016, it is we

\textsuperscript{27} https://ujszo.com/kulfold/orban-en-vagyok-bajororszag-vegyvari-kapitanya (accessed 15 March 2018).

\textsuperscript{28} See Ryan A. Gregg, “Setting as Revisionism: Vasari’s Use of Dürer’s Siege in the Palazzo Vecchio”, Renaissance Studies 29, no. 3 (2015): 411–32.
who have had to close our border to stop the flood of migration from the South. We have continued our duty, even while being attacked from behind by those who we have in fact been protecting ... We have no reason to surrender ourselves to fear. There is no reason to yield ... to terrorists who declare war on the Western world; to profit-seekers, who send towards Europe hundreds of thousands of people who yearn for a better life; to do-gooders and naïve souls who have no idea of the extreme danger towards which they are pushing Europe – and with it themselves ... Today Europe prefers to choose what is cheaper, watered-down and less demanding; bringing in immigrants instead of building their own families, speculation instead of work; debt instead of discipline. We Hungarians have set off on a more difficult path: our own children instead of immigrants; creating work instead of speculation and welfare benefits; achieving self-sufficiency instead of debt slavery; and border protection instead of the white fold of surrender.29

Thus, spoke the prime minister of Hungary on 23 October 2016, on the sixtieth anniversary of the 1956 Revolution.

History, the Maiden of Populism

The monument and the official interpretation attached to it provide and intend to legitimate a new political programme, and a new foreign policy.

Viktor Orbán became Prime Minister for the first time in 1998 as the self-styled leader of the so called Christian majority. At that time, before joining the European Union, the most important ambition of the former Soviet satellite countries was to prove by every conceivable effort that these countries, Hungary included, had always belonged to the Western Christian community. The year 2000 in Hungary was thus not dedicated to the bi-millennial anniversary of Jesus, but the thousand-year anniversary of the coronation of the first Christian king of Hungary, Saint Stephen, with the Hungarian holy crown as the centerpiece of the year-long celebrations.

When Orbán returned to power in 2010 with an anti-speculator, anti-banking, anti-market, anti-capitalist, anti-Western rhetoric in the midst of the financial and economic crisis that hit Hungary exceptionally severely, and the disillusioned electorate was looking for cheap explanations and scapegoats to hold responsible for the lost illusions, he turned the nationalist rhetoric against the West, and introduced the concept of “opening to the East”; the emerging East, as opposed to the allegedly decadent West. The government discovered the Eastern roots of the Hungarians, the ancient Eastern family relationship.

In its competition with the neo-Nazis, who are as deeply suspicious of the West as the ruling party is, and are also flirting with the mythical pagan past, the governing party rediscovered the romantic idea of “Pan-Turanism,” a nineteenth-century creation and reaction to both pan-Slavism and pan-Germanism, the alleged family relationship with some Central Asian ethnicities. Pan-Turanism originates in the work of the Finnish nationalist and linguist Matthias Alexander Castrén, who championed the belief in the racial unity and future greatness of the Ural-Altaic peoples. In this pedestrian syncretism, self-righteous Christianity is jumbled with pagan ideas as the deep soil of authentic national identity.

29 “Orbán Viktor ünnepi beszéde az 1956-os forradalom 60. évfordulóján” (Viktor Orbán’s gala speech on the 60th anniversary of the 1956 revolution, 23 October 2016, http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-unnepi-beszede-az-1956-os-forradalom-60-efordulojan/).
In his book on *The Savage Mind*, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss remarked that history is a fine point of departure in “any quest for intelligibility, but only if one gets out of it.”

In illiberal regimes that rule without a functioning parliamentary opposition, without the space and opportunity for rational debates about political alternatives, populist, demagogic political rhetoric and ambitions are cross-dressed as historical issues of identity. There is no escape: instead of rational and pragmatic choices, the discourse is dramatized and focuses theatrically on collective identity, on so called national essences.

One should not, however, look for ideological consistency of convictions behind the Christian rhetoric, pagan rituals, and un-Christian treatment of migrants and refugees. Marine Le Pen would be envious learning how Orbán managed to combine in one single image the contradictory ambitions of the European far-right: antisemitism and anti-Muslim xenophobia. According to the rhetoric of the Hungarian leader, liberal Jews – whose embodiment in the Hungarian official propaganda campaigns is George Soros, the Elder of Zion – (plan to) smuggle Muslim terrorist, posing as migrants, into Europe, in order to undermine the stability of the European Christian nation states. By building a razor fence along the southern border of the country, Hungary, the bastion of Europe, defends Christian Europe, even against the Latin-American Pope, who does not know and does not understand Western civilization. “The Pope does not know what he talks about” – claimed one of the Hungarian bishops, a former secret police informer under the Communist regime illustrating a peculiar understanding of the doctrine of infallibility. He was responding to the plea of Pope Francis, who asked for more Christian compassion for the refugees. “The Pope washes the feet of the migrants, but does not defend our Christian brethren suffering persecution by the hands of the Islamic terrorists in the Middle East,” wrote the Hungarian government daily paper on 2 August 2017.

At the same time, the Hungarian government set up an under-secretariat in defence of the faith, to provide serious amounts of money to the Christian communities in the Middle East. It seems that the Roman Catholic Church in Hungary, which follows and strongly supports the nationalist course of the government, considers itself a national institution, instead of being part of the universal Catholic Church anymore. The separation of state and church was practically abolished by the Orbán government; the Church – in one of the least religious countries of Europe – receives enormous subsidies, tax-breaks, and other privileges from the government. Church schools receive three times more state subsidy than public schools.

Unlike the arch-conservative Polish government or the new Russian political elite, motivated by strong anti-Western resentment, the Hungarian party-state is utterly pragmatic, and opportunistic. Still, cynical rhetoric is no less dangerous than sincere, ideologically motivated inhumanity that criminalizes poverty and vulnerability, promotes xenophobia and radical nationalism. After a while it becomes irrelevant whether politics is based on ideological considerations or ideology and officially promoted and sanctioned historical narrative is just a cover of lies and merciless, corrupt political behaviour. In 1964,

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30 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 262.
31 See the billboard campaign at the end of Summer 2017 with George Soros’ photograph and the sentence: “Don’t let Soros have the last laugh”.
32 https://index.hu/belfold/2015/09/08/kiss-rigo_a_papa_nem_tudja_mirol_beszelo/ (accessed 15 March 2018).
33 János Csontos, “Belső politikai front nyílt” (“Internal political front was opened”), *Magyar Idők*, 2 August 2017.
Kaneto Shindo, the great Japanese filmmaker, directed a horror noir drama, with the title *Onibaba*. When one of the main female protagonists of the film tries to tear off the demon mask from the face of a dying samurai, the mask comes off with the flesh, rotten beneath the mask worn for long years. The disfigured face became indistinguishable from the mask.

On 9 September 2016, when accepting the Man of the Year Award from Beata Szydło, the arch-conservative Polish prime minister, Orbán said:

> [T]he Central European nations must preserve their identities, their religious and historical national identities. These are not just outdated clothing that one should discard in the modern era, but armour, which protects us … The communities which will be successful, survive and be strong are those with strong identities: religious, historical, and national identities … I regret to say, that we must protect [these virtues] from time to time not only against the faithless and our anti-national rivals, but also from time to time we must do so against Europe’s various leading intellectual and political circles. But we have no choice: … there will be no room for us under the sun.34

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes on contributor**

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34 “Orbán Viktor elfogadó beszéde” (Viktor Orbán’s acceptance speech), 7 September 2016, http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-elfogado-beszede-az-ev-embere-dij-atvetelekor/.