

The Poignance of Holocaust Memorialisation in Budapest, Hungary. - Carys Loxton

In March of this year, I had the pleasure of participating in one of the Holocaust Educational Trust's Ambassador Study Visits. We visited Budapest, Hungary, exploring many of its Holocaust Memorial sites to gain a deeper and enlightened understanding of the Holocaust in Hungary.

Historical Context

On the 19th of March 1944, Hungary was invaded by Nazi forces. Although anti-Jewish legislation in Hungary had been underway for half a decade prior to its occupation, modelled after Germany's Nuremberg Laws, the German occupation of Hungary intensified anti-Jewish legislation to permeate all aspects of the Hungarian social sphere.

The Hungarian Arrow Cross came into power in October 1944, a far-right party with an ideology similar to that of Nazism. Alongside Nazi presence in Hungary, the Arrow Cross massively contributed to the Jewish suffering during the late war-time period.

Prior to its invasion, Hungary's Jewish population amounted to over 800,000 people. However, under regent Horthy, much of Hungary's Jewish population was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland in the eight weeks following Nazi contact. One in every three victims of Auschwitz-Birkenau was Hungarian, and by the end of the war, over half a million Hungarian Jews had been murdered.

Via a process of ghettoisation, Hungary's remaining Jewish population was concentrated within its capital, Budapest, a city now dedicated to the preservation of Jewish memory.

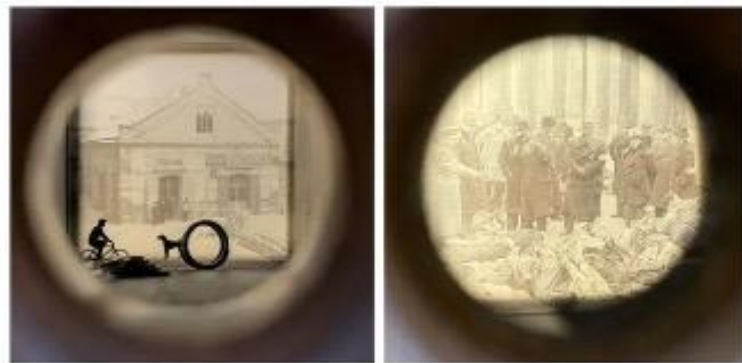
The Ghetto Wall Memorial - Dohany Utca 34

This memorial is situated on the wall of Budapest's Ghetto, in which 70,000 Hungarian Jews were forced in November of 1944. Later liberated in the January of the following year, over 10,000 inhabitant lives had been lost.

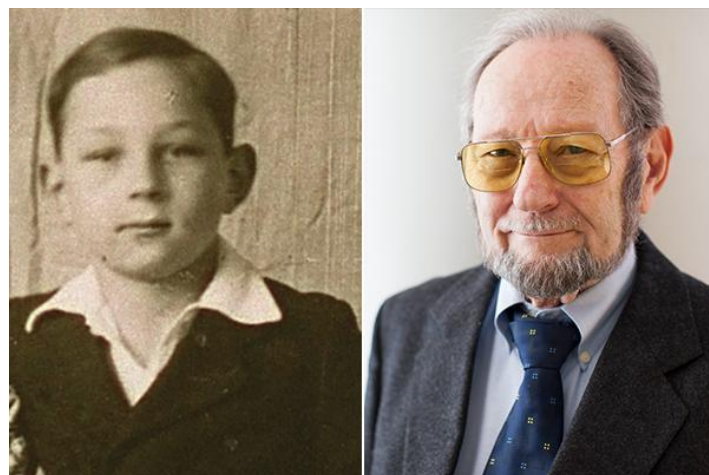


Guarded by both Nazi soldiers and Hungarian Arrow Cross Henchmen, this ghetto contained just 4,100 apartments, averaging 14 people crammed into each room. The Jewish population confined within this ghetto lived in constant fear, whether it be of political execution or of succumbing to the dreadful living conditions.

Inside what appears to be bullet holes on the map of ghetto, are pictures taken inside of the Budapest ghetto during these horrific six weeks. They show Hungarian people of all ages enduring their daily lives, forced to dwell in such a harshly inhumane environment.



György or “George” Pick was ten years old when him and his family were forced into the Budapest ghetto, in which he was forced to live with neither electricity nor water. His accommodation, for lack of a better term, was heavily crowded, as he shared a room with almost a dozen elderly people displaced from a care home.



In the weeks preceding Germany’s defeat, György was tormented by the guards of the ghetto, maliciously mocked by a Nazi adolescent in particular. György was told that he, and the other inhabitants of the ghetto, would be executed before the Russian forces could liberate them and grant them freedom; an attempt to diminish any remaining hope he held for survival.

Following the ghetto’s liberation by soviet forces in early 1945, although György had survived, he discovered that over 120 of his relatives had perished in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Moreover, György's incredible story of survival is not limited to that of the Budapest Ghetto. Having escaped a Swiss Red Cross orphanage prior to his placement in the ghetto, György later learnt that the children who remained in this orphanage, of which there were approximately 500, were taken to Budapest's Danube river and executed on the banks.

Danube Riverside Memorial



Placed along the banks of the Danube river, separating the two cities of Buda and Pest, are sixty pairs of shoes. Men's, women's and children's shoes line the river edge, commemorating the deaths of approximately 20,000 Jewish individuals shot by Hungarian Arrow Cross Militiamen between 1944 and 1945.

Extremely poignant, the shoes installed onto the Danube riverside in 2005 represent the horrific execution process these Jews endured.

Deemed an efficient method of mass murder, whereby the bodies of their victims would be swept away by the Danube's tide, the militiamen elected the embankment as their execution ground. Lined up on the river's edge, Jewish men, women and children were on times ordered to remove their shoes which were later sold by the executioners for profit, before being shot into the current.

Often, due to the severe restrictions on the purchasing power of Hungarian Jews and the inhumane conditions in which they were forced to live, the shoes of these victims were severely worn down and unfit for resale. Consequently, the laces of these shoes would be removed and used to bind the hands of the victims lined up on the banks, before either being shot or pushed into the water and left to drown. Only adding to the barbarity, it is essential to acknowledge that these murders would have taken place during the dark, bitter evenings of winter.

A Hungarian Holocaust survivor, Zsuzsanna Ozváth, recalls hearing "a series of popping noises", before witnessing the murders of several Jews along the Danube embankment from her window. Zsuzsanna recalls the event to be "worse than she'd ever seen before", which speaks volumes in a country so severely plagued by prejudiced brutality on a daily basis.

Several hundred-thousand people visit this memorial each year, leaving flowers in the emptiness of the shoes as a sign of remembrance. During my own visit, I watched young children prance along the promenade and identify the shoes of similar sizes to their own, calling out to their parents to inform them that they'd found a set of tinier, seemingly misplaced, shoes amongst the pairs of larger boots and sandals. They knelt down to touch them, some even attempting to pull them from the concrete, visibly disappointed when they wouldn't budge. This provoked a sense of eternal permanence and stagnance, adding a heavy and emotional weight to the already present-thought of the lives that were lost.



Carl Lutz Memorial - Dob Utca 12 District IX

Lutz was a Swiss politician assigned to the city of Budapest in 1942, prior to the German occupation of Hungary. A truly heroic figure in a time of utter turmoil, Lutz saved over 60,000 Jews during the Second World War.

Lutz was instrumental in helping Hungarian Jews escape the Holocaust, negotiating with both the Hungarian and Nazi authorities to organise Swiss protection letters that would later allow 8000 Jews to emigrate to safety in Palestine.

Lutz put his life on the line to save these individuals. He wrote in his diary that he met with high ranking Nazi official Adolf Eichman, chief of the 'Jewish question' , several times in

order to push for the documentation that would eventually save thousands of innocent lives. In his own recount of events, Lutz wrote that Eichmann pejoratively compared him to Moses, foolishly saving the lives of an undeserving people.

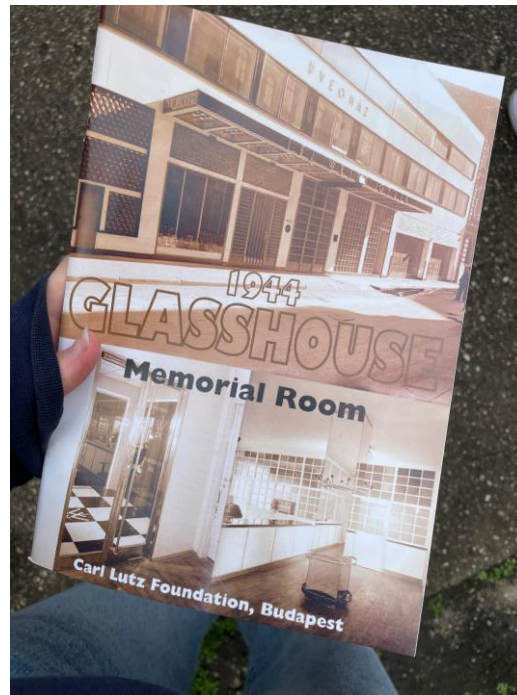


There is plaque positioned on the wall beside the statue which reads, "Whoever saves a life is considered as if he has saved the whole world"

Lutz has since been awarded the title of "Righteous Among the Nations" by Yad Vashem for his courage, a hero away from the battlefield.

In addition to his organising of protection letters, Lutz also established 76 "safe houses" in which Hungarian Jews could seek refuge. The most famous of which is The Glass House.

The Glass House - Vadasz Utca 29



Owned by the Weiss family and built originally as a glass plant and shop, the Glass House became a place of protection for almost two and a half thousand Hungarian Jews during the winter between 1944 and 1945. Providing the emigration passes acquired by Lutz, the Glass House was a beacon of hope for many Hungarian Jews during these horrific years.

Notwithstanding, life in the Glass House was extremely challenging. Overcrowded, with people sleeping on the floors of cellars or in damp corners, the Glass house was still a place of immense suffering.





It was attacked a total of three times, two of which were instigated by Hungarian Arrow Cross forces. Amazingly however, almost every individual who sought refuge at the Glass House survived, living to see its liberation on January 18th 1945.



The building is now run by several volunteers, containing a memorial room which contains replica structures of the building during the war-time period, as well as the original memorial plaque of Arthur Weiss, the owner of the building. Strikingly, as antisemitism continued to purge the post-war period, his plaque was vandalised several times and is now in pieces.



Through the HET Ambassador programme, I had the pleasure of hearing the testimony of a Hungarian Holocaust survivor who found safety within the Glass House during his childhood, Paul Sved BEM.



Paul Sved was a young boy during the Holocaust in Hungary, around “six, seven going on eight.” Telling his story, he spoke fondly of his childhood growing up in Budapest, a city he urged all of us ambassadors to experience wholeheartedly and with an open mind.

Having lost his father in 1942, Paul depended on his single mother. Paul’s mother made a conscious effort to protect Paul when he began to take note of the antisemitic prejudice circulating throughout his home city. He recalled being locked out of his nursery school for the first time in March 1944, watching his friends, other non-Jewish children, being permitted access. Unable to comprehend the gravity of his situation, confused, he asked his mother why this was. His mother never informed him that it was because he was Jewish, rather, Paul came to accept the restrictions he faced, stating, “it was just the way it was.”



Paul described his mother as a very “forceful woman”, who made the unwavering decision to never expose Paul to the gruesome realities of the Holocaust outside of his immediate surroundings. Paul stated that he wishes he knew the reason why he was forced to live the way he was, restricted and threatened. Harshly, he believes he was naive.

This sense of childish ignorance was a particular focus of Paul’s testimony. Notably, Paul recalled viewing his yellow star, homemade by his mother, like an emblem which he wore “proudly.”

Paul’s uncle was able to secure him refuge within the Glass House, where he remained with his mother for several weeks in search of safety. At the young age of eight, Paul remembers queuing for extended periods of time just to use the lavatory, which was shared by dozens of people.

Having moved to the UK after the war during his adolescence, Paul has returned to Budapest frequently, but is saddened by the decline in the Jewish community there and the noticeable essence of Hungary being a “changed place.”

Miklós Radnóti Memorial

Radnóti is considered one of the most admired Hungarian poets, born to Jewish parents in Budapest in 1909.

Despite having converted to Catholicism, urged by the blackening of Hungary’s politics, Radnóti was assigned to forced labour by the Nazis due to his Jewish heritage. Despite his imprisonment, he continued writing poems, as well as translating those he loved from foreign languages, such as French, into Hungarian to share with his fellow inmates.

As German defeat grew ever closer, Rádnóti and other prisoners were marched elsewhere by the occupying forces, a journey he could not complete in his weakened state. Radnóti collapsed whilst marching and was subsequently shot, his body dumped carelessly into a mass grave.

The following year, this grave was exhumed and a small notebook containing Radnóti's final poems was found on his person, many of which have been translated into English.



Particularly impactful, providing insight into the tragedies of the war-time period, is 'Fragment' written by Radnóti in May 1944.

A stanza of his poem reads, "I lived upon this earth in such an age when man was so debased he sought to kill for pleasure, not just to comply with orders, his faith in falsehoods drove him to corruption, his life was ruled by raving self-deceptions."

The use of repetition in this poem, specifically of the line, "I lived upon this earth in such an age..", fosters a sentiment of unceasing suffering, of frustration and disappointment at the state of humanity. Distressingly, Radnóti's use of the past tense reveals his perception of his fate, that his death was inevitable.

The Emanuel Tree Memorial - Wesselényi Utca 7

Found within the Raoul Wallenberg Memorial Garden of the Dohany Street Synagogue, commemorating the efforts of a hero similar to Lutz, is a silver tree.



On each leaf has written on it the name of a Hungarian Jew murdered during the Holocaust, an astonishingly bitter-sweet sight to say the least.



The four red plaques at its base credit 240 non-Jewish Hungarian individuals who aided the protection of Jewish lives during the Holocaust.

The Dohány street synagogue itself is the largest in Europe and the second largest in the world, where I and the other ambassadors had the pleasure of attending a Friday Shabbat

service in a smaller one of its rooms. Witnessing the Hungarian Jewish community, comprising people of all ages come together unapologetically for a Friday service, the majority of whom would have been impacted by the Holocaust in one way or another, was beyond moving.



Holocaust Memorial Centre - Páva Utca 39

More than half a million Hungarian Jews were murdered during the Holocaust, their lives and legacies commemorated at the Memorial Centre's permanent exhibit titled, "From the Deprivation of Rights to Genocide."

The exhibit is deeply engaging, detailing the history of the persecution of Hungarian Jews. These events span several years, from when they were first stripped of their property to their mass deportations to camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau.

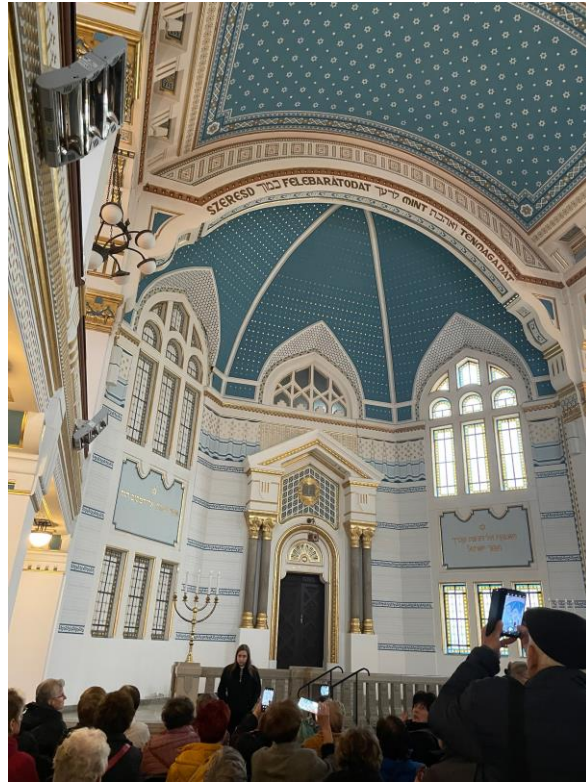


Several artefacts are preserved inside of the Museum, including anti-Jewish propaganda posters as well as a set of the infamous striped garments that concentration camp inmates were forced to wear.



The exhibit is extremely engaging, with interactive displays. These include a selection of authentic video clips capturing Hungarian Jews during the 1940's, as well as headphones playing the music of Hungarian composers who were victims of this atrocity.

Attached to the Museum is the stunning Budapest Synagogue.



Conclusion

Although the genuine nature of such a statement can never be fully assessed, the current Hungarian authorities assert that they do not tolerate antisemitism of any kind. This sentiment is reflected in the memorialisation of Jewish legacy within the city, which is nothing shy of powerful, poignant and moving. Even in its smallest, seemingly most insignificant forms, whether it be streets named after heroic individuals or small bronze plaques placed within dark alley ways, Holocaust memorialisation in Budapest is impossible to ignore and more impactful than can be expressed.

(All pictures capturing the memorials are my own, barring the 'small bullet hole' pictures at the Ghetto Wall Memorial, and the landscape image of the Emmanuel Tree Memorial)