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# Collecting Personal Material of the Hungarian Holocaust

Frameworks, Practices and Institutionalisation.  
A Historical Overview<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The ambivalent attitude of socialist memory politics towards the Holocaust during János Kádár's regime (1956–1989) is reflected in the history of personal collections. Although museums did collect Holocaust memorabilia, this was not encouraged or publicised. Because of such delayed and restrained collection, the objects relating to persecution are mostly to be found in family homes. Since the end of socialism did not change this attitude, the contemporary memorial landscape of the Holocaust covers not only the institutions dedicated to the history of persecution but also the (second- and third-generation) survivors' homes. On the other hand, the public collection of the victims' documents – albeit in an incomplete, unprofessional, and politically motivated manner – had already been established during the Kádár era, and within the framework of a non-Jewish, party organisation. In this paper, we will attempt to describe the activity of the Committee for Persons Persecuted by the Nazis (*Nácizmus Üldözötteinek Bizottsága*, NÜB), the first organisation to specifically collect Holocaust memorabilia. Through examples, we will show the extent to which privately owned personal material traces contributed to the building of public collections in the post-communist period. The study particularly focusses on the collecting strategies and practices of the post-1990 Hungarian Auschwitz Foundation (*Magyar Auschwitz Alapítvány*) and the state-run Holocaust Memorial Center (*Holokauszt Emlékközpont*, HE), thus completing the institutionalisation process of Holocaust-related materials. We argue that the post-war era's memory politics and memory processes, mainly in the 1960s and 1980s, influenced both the biography of the objects and the histories of the world around them. Therefore, through the stories of the objects, we can better understand the relationship between institutional and personal memory. We seek to answer the question of what happened to the tangible heritage of the Holocaust during the Kádár era and how the survivors related to their preserved objects in the 2010s.

On 2 August 1959, an advertisement appeared in the newspaper *Népszava* (People's Word), placed by the NÜB. The organisation for Holocaust survivors asked the former inmates of the Dachau concentration camp to donate any relevant documents or objects in their possession to the international museum that would be set up in the place of the former concentration camp.<sup>2</sup> Two weeks later, Oszkár Winterstein responded to this call and sent a photocopy of his certificate. According to the document, he was deported from Hungary and worked as a prisoner in the laboratory of the SS Hygiene Institute in Rajsko (a subcamp of Auschwitz) and Dachau. In his cover letter outlining this background, he noted that he had kept the document

1 The research for this article has been supported by fellowships from the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure Fellowship (2017 and 2022), awarded to András Szécsényi, and the Bolyai János Research Fellowship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (2022–2025) and the Postdoctoral Excellence Programme of the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (2022–2025), awarded to Heléna Huhák.

2 *Népszava*, 2 August 1959, 6.

“as a souvenir”.<sup>3</sup> The story of Oszkár Winterstein raises many questions relating to the history of deportations from Hungary, the medical experiments in concentration camps, and the role of the functionaries in the prisoners’ society. In this study, however, we are more interested in the fact that he was probably one of the first survivors to respond to the call of the barely known organisation which had been set up two years earlier.<sup>4</sup> We aim in this paper to uncover some hubs of the collection landscape relating to the Holocaust in Hungary in terms of public and private saving practices.

Until recent decades, the literature on the personal collections relating to the Holocaust was much more modest compared to other areas of memory, such as publications, memorials, commemorations, and exhibitions.<sup>5</sup> From the 2000s, cultural and memory studies, anthropology, and archaeology followed by histories of genocides, wars, forced migrations, and terror attacks have focussed on the material aspect of personal recollection. Some researchers are concerned with the traces of objects and artefacts left in the landscape of former Holocaust sites, others with the institutionalisation of memory and heritage, or with the role of objects preserved in personal spaces.<sup>6</sup> These research paths are based not only on texts but also on visual sources and objects.<sup>7</sup> Research on material traces of the past claim that objects in this context can be seen not as passive products but also as subjects that have agency.<sup>8</sup> “Social worlds” – which always have material dimensions – create materiality, but materiality influences social worlds as well. These studies shed light on the relationships and interactions between humans and objects on different levels and from different aspects.<sup>9</sup> Using the material culture approach in memory studies demonstrates that such objects – the “surviving things” – have a narrative role and not only mediate the experience of survival, but also have their own relevance in post-war social, political, and memorial processes. According to Zuzanna Dziuban and Eva Stańczyk, we talk about objects and artefacts as historical sources that can activate “embodied storytelling” and are perceived as “carriers of memory” in the above-mentioned terms.<sup>10</sup>

Since the early 2000s, there has been an increasing interest in the personal accounts of the persecuted Jews, but these sources remained underrepresented in the Hungarian historiography of the Holocaust. The survivors’ diaries, memoirs, letters,

3 HE, Ad/2020, letter by Winterstein Oszkár to the NÜB, 15 August 1959.

4 It is not certain if a copy of the document was indeed forwarded to Dachau but, according to the memorial site’s staff, they did not receive any material from Hungary in response to this early call. Archiv, KZ-Gedenkstätte Dachau, e-mail to authors, 11 July 2022.

5 See some recent examples: *Revisiting Holocaust Representation in the Post-witness Era*, eds. Diana I. Popescu and Tanja Schult (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Sybil Milton, *In Fitting Memory: The Art and Politics of Holocaust Memorials* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2018); and Rebecca Clifford, *Commemorating the Holocaust: The Dilemmas of Remembrance in France and Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

6 Cf. Leora Auslander and Tara Zahra, eds., *Objects of War: The Material Culture of Conflict and Displacement* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2018), as well as Marita Sturken, “The Objects that Lived: The 9/11 Museum and Material Transformation”, *Memory Studies* 9, no. 1 (2016): 13–26, and articles in the *Journal of Material Culture* 25, no. 4 (2020).

7 Anthropological research also investigates the history of human remains as part of the material heritage. Cf. Zuzanna Dziuban, “Atopic Objects: The Afterlives of Gold Teeth Stolen from Holocaust Dead”, *Journal of Material Culture* 25, no. 4 (2020): 408–427.

8 Erica Lehrer, “Materiality and Holocaust Memory: Activating and Theorizing Poland’s Unquiet Places”, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 112, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 241.

9 Marek E. Jasinski, “Predicting the Past – Materiality of Nazi and Post-Nazi Camps: A Norwegian Perspective”, *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 22 (2018): 639–661.

10 Zuzanna Dziuban and Ewa Stańczyk, “Introduction: The Surviving Thing: Personal Objects in the Aftermath of Violence”, *Journal of Material Culture* 25, no. 4 (2020): 2–3.

photos, and especially objects had not been part of the academic discussions thus far, and we find only a few efforts that pay attention to the historical value of these complex family sources.<sup>11</sup> The history of the collection in the HE – which is Hungary’s only public collection dedicated exclusively to personal histories of the Holocaust – is largely unknown to the academic community.<sup>12</sup>

In the Hungarian context, the NÜB was the first organisation to specifically collect Holocaust memorabilia. However, this study aims not to write a history of the institution, but to look at the historical role of the NÜB and the survivors through the lens of the material heritage of the survivors’ persecution. We argue that the post-war era’s memory politics and memory processes, mainly in the decades from the 1960s to the 1980s, influenced both the afterlife of the objects and the histories of the world around them. Therefore, through the histories of the objects, we can better understand the history and relationship between institutional and personal memory.

By examining the archive of the NÜB, including the letters of donators, contemporary press reports, and oral history interviews with survivors, we seek to answer the question of what happened to the tangible heritage of the Holocaust during the Kádár era. What was the role of the NÜB and how can this role be integrated into the contemporary historical discourse on Holocaust memory? The NÜB collection, together with the resources collected by the Hungarian Auschwitz Foundation in 1990, were merged into the collection of the Holocaust Memorial Center that was established in 2004. Since the NÜB’s collecting practices have largely determined the historical source value of the Memorial Center’s collection, we will conclude our study with a discussion of the post-1989 history of the NÜB’s collection. What was, then, the attitude of the survivors in the 2010s towards objects that were not included in public collections either during the Kádár era or after the regime change in 1989/1990? The stories of the objects missing from museum collections have been and are being written in private spaces. There can be a variety of motivations behind the failure to place objects in a public collection, and the interviews presented here provide some examples of these motivations.

### The Memory Politics of the Kádár Regime

According to the historiography of previous decades, the Hungarian Holocaust was a taboo subject under the post-1945 communist regime. During the Stalinist era when Hungary was led by Mátyás Rákosi, the general secretary of the Hungarian Working People’s Party (*Magyar Dolgozók Pártja*), the “Jewish question” was explicitly silent, and even life-threatening to deal with. It was inappropriate for survivors to talk about the unhealed wounds of their persecution, as this would have led to accu-

11 While there is a lack of secondary literature on the reasons and problems relating to the poor representation of Holocaust-related family materials in the historiography of the Holocaust in Hungary, some examples that analyse these materials are: Kelbert, Krisztina, *Eye to Eye: With the History of Szombathely’s Jewish Community* (Szombathely: Yellow Design Kft., 2016); and *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945*, Ungarn 1944–1945, vol. 15, ed. Regina Fritz (Munich: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020).

12 On the collection of victims of the Holocaust in Hungary, see *Holocaust Memorial Center Budapest Collection Catalog*, eds. Heléna Huhák and András Szécsényi (Budapest: HDKE, 2019). Unfortunately, there are no complex museum projects in the Hungarian context like the online exhibition *Fundstücke* of the NS Documentation Center in Cologne. That exhibition examined the history of Nazi relics in the museum and the relationship of the perpetrators and their descendants to the burdensome legacy of their ancestors. Cf. Chloe Paver, *Exhibiting the Nazi Past: Museum Objects Between the Material and the Immaterial* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 173–192.

sations of these people separating themselves from the majority society, which was about to be homogenised. There could be no separate Jewish cause in any form.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, in public discourse and academic studies, the genocide could only appear after the revolution of 1956, with the new government led by Kádár. This view has been tempered in recent years by research. It seems that, during the so-called “martyrs’ holidays” or the internal commemorations of Jewish communities, survivors and their family members in Hungary under the Rákosi regime had limited but very real opportunities to experience commemorations of the genocide on a communal level. To the extent that the suffering of the Jews could be incorporated into the communist anti-fascist canon of commemoration<sup>14</sup> (for example, in the case of the 4 April commemorations), it was accepted by the party-state.<sup>15</sup>

After the fall of the revolution in 1956, Kádár came to power and, as secretary general of the Hungarian Communist Workers’ Party (*Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt*, MSZMP), pursued a different policy than that of his Stalinist predecessor. Historiography has long described the relationship between the Kádár regime and state memory policy as homogeneous in terms of Holocaust commemoration. Géza Komoróczy, for example, spoke of “decades of silence”,<sup>16</sup> while Andrea Petó spoke of “the oblivion imposed on us by the communist politics of memory”.<sup>17</sup> Due to the revival of mainstream academic debate on this topic, we have a much more nuanced view of the question. In recent years, in-depth analyses of several aspects of the “Jewish question” have been developed. These analyses have been concerned with: the politics of memory under the Kádár regime;<sup>18</sup> the hidden or open experience of Jewish identities in Hungary as redrawn by the Holocaust;<sup>19</sup> the representation of Jewry and the Holocaust in films<sup>20</sup> and in fiction;<sup>21</sup> local memory of the genocide in transcultural contexts;<sup>22</sup> and the Hungarian exhibitions in Auschwitz in 1965 and 1979.<sup>23</sup>

Most studies to date have shown that the discourse initiated by the Eichmann trial in 1961 was the catalyst that gave rise to the visualisation of the genocide of the Jews in Hungary.<sup>24</sup> Since the 1960s, the communist political leadership provided limited space for the presentation of the Shoah in art and science. Overall, the new research

13 Györi Szabó Róbert, *A kommunizmus és a zsidóság az 1945 utáni Magyarországon* (Budapest: Gondolat, 2009).

14 That is not equal to the anti-fascist narrative of the West after the Second World War, which became a consensual framework of memory of the war and the Nazi genocide. Dan Stone, *Goodbye to All That? The Story of Europe since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

15 Kata Bohus, “Parallel Memories? Public Memorialization of the Antifascist Struggle and Martyr Memorial Services in the Hungarian Jewish Community during Early Communism”, in *Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism: Remembering the Holocaust in State-Socialist Eastern Europe*, eds. Kata Bohus, Peter Hallama, and Stephan Stach (Vienna: CEU Press, 2022), 90–96.

16 Komoróczy Géza, “Történelmi események a gondolkodásban: felejtés, feldolgozás, felelősség”, in *A pernye beleég a bőrünkbe*, ed. Komoróczy Géza (Budapest: Osiris, 2000), 158–182.

17 Petó Andrea, “Utójáték”, *Egyházforum* XXIX, no. 2–3 (2014): 71–75.

18 Regina Fritz, *Nach Krieg und Judenmord: Ungarns Geschichtspolitik seit 1944* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012).

19 Cf. Kata Bohus, “István Szirmai between Communism and Zionism: Discourses of Jewishness, Holocaust Memory, and Antisemitism in Postwar-Hungary”, in *Geschichtsoptimismus und Katastrophenbewusstsein: Europa nach dem Holocaust*, eds. Jan Gerber, Philipp Graf, and Anna Pollmann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022), 409–426.

20 Cf. Balázs Varga, ed., *Minarik, Sonnenschein és a többiek* (Budapest: Magyar Zsidó Kulturális Egyesület, 2001).

21 Cf. Jablonczay Tímea, “Hivatalos amnézia és az emlékezés kényszere: A holokauszt női elbeszélései az 1960-as években”, *Múltunk* 30, no. 2. (2019): 77–110.

22 Takács, Tibor. “Eichmann Nyíregyházán, 1961” [Eichmann in Nyíregyháza, 1961]. In 1961, 1962, 1963. A konszolidáció évei [1961, 1962, 1963. The years of Consolidation], edited by Tibor Takács. Budapest-Pécs, 2023. 232–256.

23 Kékesi Zoltán and Zombory Máté, “Antifasiszta emlékezet újragondolva: Magyar történelmi kiállítások Oświęcimben és Párizsban 1965-ben”, *Korall* 21, no. 2 (2022): 138–168.

24 Cf. Géza Komoróczy, *A zsidóság története Magyarországon*, vol. 2 (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő, 2012).

suggests that the “memory explosion” triggered by the Eichmann trial essentially removed the taboo nature of the Holocaust in Hungary, as the discourse about it broke out of the rules of the communist anti-fascist interpretive framework based on Cold War logic. However, the opening of a public debate on the Holocaust took different forms. In public education, it continued to be discussed at most as a by-product of the anti-fascist struggle, in fact until the regime change in 1989. By contrast, in many other areas the Holocaust was a subject in its own right: for example, from the first half of the 1960s onwards it was the topic of many major feature films. In the case of fiction and history, the process was much slower, almost mediated, but the first major novels and historical works about the Holocaust were written in the 1960s and 1970s, and the press continually updated on the subject.<sup>25</sup> In the context of Holocaust memory and public discourse, another node was the Arrow Cross trial in Zugló (a quarter of the XIV. District of Budapest), regarding which public attention was focused on the Holocaust through dozens of press articles, mostly in an anti-Western or anti-Israeli, but also in a pro-Soviet context.<sup>26</sup> It is thus far from decades of silence. Only Holocaust survivors, partly because of their inability to speak honestly about their traumas, remained silent until the late 1980s and, apart from the objectified memorialisation mentioned above, often avoided the subject even within their own families.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, recent research by Máté Zombory and Zoltán Kékesi convincingly demonstrates that the Holocaust in Hungary did not come to light as a result of the Eichmann trial, but that some organs of the party-state – the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior, and others – began collecting sources on the Holocaust as early as the 1950s, and that dozens of articles in the Hungarian press were devoted to the subject. As they noted in connection with the Hungarian exhibition in Auschwitz at the turn of 1980, the principle of “mythical identification of Holocaust memory and anti-fascism” was, in their view, unsustainable; from the 1960s onwards, “the memory of the Jews was also recognized within the anti-fascist paradigm and the glorification of the resistance”.<sup>28</sup> The Holocaust could be presented as a separate historical problem. Behind the half-hearted, slowly dissolving communist acquiescence were, of course, the political interests of Kadar’s party-state, which were not closely related to the memory and publicity generated by the Eichmann trial, although the trial only intensified the already ongoing processes. The party leadership aimed to use the Holocaust as a pretext, in line with the socialist countries controlled by the Soviet Union, to compromise the West German political leadership, which was perceived as fascist, by linking some of its prominent figures with a Nazi past to the crimes of the Holocaust. In these complex situations, it is hardly surprising that the party-state determined to establish an organisation that could not only be representative of the communist government and party interests in Jewish/Holocaust-related issues, but also join the forces of Jewish citizens in the country.

25 Szécsényi András, “Holokauszt reprezentáció a Kádár-korban: A hatvanas évek közéleti diskurzusának emlékezetpolitikai vetületei”, in *Tanulmányok a holokausztról VIII.*, ed. Randolph L. Braham (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő, 2017), 291–329.

26 Lénárt András, “Perek: A holokauszt tematizálásának példái a hatvanas évek magyarországi nyilvánosságában”, in *A forradalom ígérete? Történelmi és nyelvi események kereszteződései*, eds. Bónus Tibor, Lőrincz Csongor, and Szirák Péter (Budapest: Ráció, 2014), 522.

27 *Holokauszt és a családom*, ed. Fenyves Katalin (Budapest: Park, 2015).

28 Kékesi-Zombory, 140; Zombory Máté, “Antifasiszta olvasatok: Magyar történeti dokumentáció az Eichmann-ügyben”, *Múltunk* 30, no. 2. (2019): 13–57.

## The Committee for Persons Persecuted by the Nazis

The NÜB was a social organisation founded in 1957 and was partly made up of survivors. It operated within the Hungarian Partisan Association (*Partizánszövetség*), which was established at the same time under the authority of the MSZMP. The NÜB was an antifascist organisation in the true sense of the word, that is, any party member who had been active in the workers' movement during the Second World War, the interwar period, the Spanish Civil War, or elsewhere, and on the side of the Soviet Union, could become a member. Additionally, the Partisan Association was also ideologically anti-fascist: it included individuals and groups once persecuted by the Nazis and their collaborators, and who had embraced the Soviet-style anti-fascist ideological framework. It had a branch under the name of the Anti-Fascist Committee of Deportees, which in 1957 became a sub-organisation with its own structure and rules of procedure. It took the name of the "National Organisation for the Protection of the Interests of Persons Persecuted by Nazism", and in the 1960s it was renamed the "Committee for Persons Persecuted by Nazism".<sup>29</sup>

The NÜB, based at 16 Szabadság Square in the center of the city, was set up with the express purpose of becoming a sub-organisation of the Partisan Association specialising in "Jewish affairs". One of its main tasks was to administer West German financial reparations for Hungarian Jews. Based on the Federal Restitution Law (*Bundesrückerstattungsgesetz*) of 19 July 1957, and in accordance with the Council of Ministers' Decree 216/1957, the NÜB was responsible until the mid 1970s for restitution from West Germany to all survivors of the Holocaust in Hungary. The financial reparations were carried out in several stages in the 1960s and 1970s, and this party organisation played a key role in the process by providing data and authenticating historical sources of data collected from archival documents or survivor testimonies. Some 50,000 survivors received a one-off grant of 100 million Deutschmarks.<sup>30</sup> The Hungarian state profited from this huge amount of West German currency due to the extremely unfavourable exchange rate of the Hungarian National Bank at the expense of the survivors. It follows from the above that the NÜB had already begun to collect some form of personal data on the Holocaust and process the personal data of the survivors as early as 1957. According to a 2004 report by Gábor Verő, the president of the Hungarian Auschwitz Foundation, the foundation's collection was based on "memoirs, photographs, press clippings, and library material" transferred from the NÜB in 1990.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to its central role in facilitating compensation from West Germany, the NÜB also played, to some extent, an advocacy role and mediated between party organisations and persons concerned, representing the interests of 65,000 Holocaust survivors who lived in the country in the 1950s and 1960s (of whom 15,000 were party members in 1957).<sup>32</sup> The leadership of the NÜB, comprised of communist Holocaust survivors, clearly tried to accommodate the anti-fascist discourse, but often stood outside of it and represented the legitimacy of the Jewish history of suffering. The central thrust of its work, which it consistently represented, was to keep alive and enhance the memory of persecution, and even elevate it to an international level. The organisation's documents contain a wealth of information on the various

29 Szécsényi, "Holokauszt reprezentáció", 306–311.

30 Ungváry Krisztián, "Kárpótlás és kifosztás között: Németország kárpótlási kifizetései a Kádár-rendszerben", in *Tettesek és áldozatok: Feltáratlan fejezetek a XX. század történelméből* (Budapest: Jaffa, 2014), 208–219.

31 Verő Gábor, "A Magyar Auschwitz Alapítványról", in *Négy évtized a holokauszt túlélőinek szolgálatában: A NÜB tevékenysége negyven év tükrében* (Budapest: Ex Libris, 2004), 32.

32 Ungváry, "Kárpótlás és kifosztás között", 33.

commemorations that took place in the form of commemorative events, the unveiling of commemorative plaques, and press campaigns both nationally and abroad.

More significant were the “martyr pilgrimages” organised from 1958 onwards in the former camps; the martyr pilgrimages were supported by press campaigns based on the establishment of camp memorials, which proliferated from the mid 1950s onwards. These events served two purposes. On the one hand, especially if the tour went to Western countries, it contained a particular political gesture, statement, or programme denouncing Nazi Germany and linking it to Western, so-called “fascist” or “imperialist”, aspirations. The parades were held on the anniversary of the liberation of the camps in 1945, so it was easy to emphasise or even exaggerate the liberating role of the Soviet Red Army. On the other hand, the victims of the Holocaust were indeed commemorated, with the very notions of “Jew” and “Jewish suffering” becoming increasingly common. In the 1960s, the NÜB consistently represented Jewish victims’ and survivors’ interests within the Hungarian anti-fascist movement, calling for the development of commemoration programmes, the writing of commemorative newspaper articles, and the placement of memorial plaques in the areas of the former concentration camps.<sup>33</sup> The NÜB’s collection was not the result of conscious documentary and preservation activities, but a possible by-product of these functions, and it continued to grow in this way until 1989.

### The First Holocaust Collection in the Kádár Era

After 1945, no museum in Hungary systematically collected material sources from the Holocaust. Materials were either placed in the museum by chance, through personal contacts, or were collected specifically for a forthcoming exhibition.<sup>34</sup> The contradiction between the collecting attitude of public museums and official ideology was manifested such that even if Holocaust relics were occasionally included in a collection, they were not given publicity. The Museum of the Hungarian Labour Movement (*Magyar Munkásmozgalmi Múzeum*, known from 1957 to 1966 as the Museum of Modern History/*Legújabbkori Múzeum*) and the Hungarian Jewish Museum (*Magyar Zsidó Múzeum*) kept Holocaust-related objects. Rural museums and archives across the country also saved materials, but these institutions did not take steps to collect them, nor did they publish calls for contributions.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, it was not a museum that was the first to specialise in collecting Holocaust-related documents, but a party-state organisation of survivors, which was until the fall of communism the only organisation to do so.

The NÜB organised meetings for the survivors and archived the first items in its collection – such as Oszkár Winterstein’s document and cover letter – in the late 1950s. However, the active gathering of personal legacies only began belatedly, in the early 1980s, thanks to the NÜB’s questionnaire, which had as its prelude the preservation of documents and records attached to the compensation claims. The process

<sup>33</sup> Szécsényi, “Holokauszt reprezentáció”, 308–311.

<sup>34</sup> The photo collection of the Museum of Contemporary History includes several important Holocaust-related photographs, some of which were collected for the Hungarian exhibitions in Auschwitz which were organised in 1965 and 1979. Jalsovszky Katalin, “The Photographic Representation of the Holocaust in Hungary”, in *Fényképtár/Material Photograph*, ed. Fislí Éva (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, 2020), 103–131.

<sup>35</sup> On the Hungarian Jewish Museum, see Toronyi Zsuzsanna, “A múltat végképp eltörölni”, *Targum* 1, no. 1 (2022): 133–151, and Kata Bohus, “Budapest: The City of Survivors”, in *Our Courage: Jews in Europe 1945–48*, eds. Kata Bohus, Atina Grossmann, Werner Hanak, and Mirjam Wenzel (Frankfurt: Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt, 2020), 140.

of collection and the collected items were not documented following museological or archival rules and methods. The staff did not produce documentation with the full identification and description of each object, its associations, provenance, condition, treatment, and location. Data regarding the donations and the former owners were usually not noted at all. As a result, we can only assume that some of the certificates that were found in the collection became the NÜB's property as attachments to the compensation claims.

In 1981, under the heading of the "completion of existing records", questionnaires were sent to survivors who were registered as members, asking them explicitly for memories and for recollections, which went beyond the attachment of certificates for compensation. As this took place by post, it was possible to send a few pages of documents, certificates – mostly photocopies – and memoirs.<sup>36</sup> It is not apparent from the sources what the background was to the collection of data and memories, or whether it was encouraged by the opening of the *Memento 1944* exhibition of the Museum of the Hungarian Labour Movement in 1980, in collaboration with the NÜB.<sup>37</sup> In any case, it seems to have been a delayed move, as one of the survivors noted in his letter of reply:

[...] I consider their recruit-like initiative to supplement data after 31 years of events to be belated. Unfortunately, as a victim of these events myself, and knowing full well that war crimes are never forgotten and that the international situation is, unfortunately, prompting renewed vigilance and cooperation, I am forced to conclude that the past years have been wasted.<sup>38</sup>

From the letters of response, which are fragmented and retained in an ad hoc way, it is not possible to generalise the reaction of NÜB members to the call for donations and remembrance, but this group of sources does illuminate some examples of individual motivations. Among the letters, we find some whose authors rejected the request to write memoirs because of their physical and mental problems resulting from persecution. Their contact with the NÜB was limited to filling out the questionnaire. Some people had very definite ideas and documented their donations in detail. Olga G. was a journalist and, before the war, she became involved in the workers' movement. Her diaries, written in 1944 in Auschwitz and Breslau, were published privately in 1978 under the title *Tíz hónap Babilon* (Ten Months Babylon). She donated copies of the diary and other personal papers to the NÜB in 1982. In her cover letter, she explained the desired method of storage, what parts of the text she had highlighted and what she had changed, and what she considered sensitive. She deleted passages that were "purely private" or "completely confidential". Additionally, she found it important to note that by "confidential" she did not mean political content, but "emotional motives relating to her person and other persons".<sup>39</sup> The detailed cover letter, the instructions for physical preservation, the editing of the contents – omission, censorship, and renaming – suggest a caution parallel to the donor's intention, but this attitude may also have resulted from a personal attachment to the manuscript and documents, as well as from her professional background.

36 In addition to basic information (name, contact details), the questionnaire asked about the time and place of deportation or labour service and of liberation.

37 This was a travelling exhibition organised by the museum under the direction of Emil Horn, and its historical perspective was similar to Hungary's third historical exhibition at Auschwitz, which opened in 1979. It was the first exhibition to present the Holocaust and the persecution of Jews in a professional manner, with the previously obligatory "anti-fascist narrative" as a backdrop. In the absence of information, it can only be assumed that the NÜB and the museum collected information from the Jewish population to create this travelling exhibition. Szécsényi, "Nem szabad zsidókérdés csinálni belőle", 13–14.

38 HE, Ad/1439-2016, letter of Tibor Krausz to the NÜB, 23 December 1981.

39 HE, Ad/71-2011.



Due to the communication with the survivors by post, three-dimensional objects are very rare in the NÜB's collection. One exception is the donation of Teréz B. She was a resident of the northeastern town of Debrecen. Upon her death in 1996, at the age of ninety-three, she was mourned in an article in the daily newspaper *Új Magyarország* (New Hungary) as "a hard-working woman devoted to her religion and the local community".<sup>40</sup> She had already sought contact with the NÜB in the late 1950s, considering that she sent diary extracts to the organisation for publication in 1958.<sup>41</sup> Since this cooperation did not succeed, she published her writings in the local press. Extracts from her memoirs and poems were published in the county paper in 1959 and read at local commemorations. Some twenty years later, she responded positively to the NÜB's call. In 1982, she donated a memoir and eighteen items to the organisation, including a spoon which – according to a memoir published in a newspaper – she bought in Auschwitz,<sup>42</sup> chewing gum given to her by American soldiers, matches, and a cigarette butt smoked during liberation.<sup>43</sup>



Teréz B.'s collection: a spoon (HE 2015.34.1.), chewing gum, cigarette and matches (HE 2015.35.1-5) and a cigarette but (HE 2015.35.4).

40 *Új Magyarország*, 27 April 1996, 8.

41 HE, Ad/1513-2016, letter of Teréz B. to the NÜB, 20 June 1958.

42 "Teréz B.: Auschwitzban kanalat vásárolok" [I buy a spoon in Auschwitz], *Új Élet*, February 15, 1970, 5.

43 These objects are pretty unique in the collection of the HE. Besides the articles, her notes attached to the donation and her memoir from the early post-war period which was saved in her hometown gives some background information to the objects. HE, Gy/2405.

A political comment is also included here: B. thought that she had to justify her non-joining of the party in a letter to the NÜB. However, she explained this not by religious conviction but by her deteriorating condition due to persecution. Her illness and the physical and psychological after-effects of deportation prevented her from becoming a party member: “[...] unfortunately, in a crowd, I have a crowd of 10 people, I cannot hold still for a few minutes and end up in the doctor’s surgery, often lying in the clinic for days”.<sup>44</sup> B.’s public activism was based on her personal memories of persecution from the late 1950s to the 1980s. During these decades, she found channels and forums through and in which her memory of persecution as a Jew could be shared with the contemporary public, and she donated her objects to ensure access to her legacy in the future.

The two survivors quoted here considered the organisation to be part of the party-state system, as evidenced by the political content of their letters. At the same time, they saw the NÜB as an interest group of the survivors, to which they also entrusted their memories. This is shown by the fact that both G., who was linked to the labour movement, and the religious B., were associated with the organisation. The collection of the NÜB was the result of a social organisation’s venture to preserve the memories of the Holocaust. The NÜB did not collect as a museum, but *instead of* the museums. As a consequence, these relics have been preserved, but their historical source value is much lower due to the lack of documentation. In many cases, missing data in provenance histories could not be filled in later. This early failure to collect means that there is a greater chance of reconstructing family histories through objects that are still in private hands.

### Holocaust in the Credenza: Conservation in Private Spaces

According to Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche, memory is present not only in monuments, museums, and commemorations, but also in scenes of everyday life,<sup>45</sup> and it is also embedded in social networks and material environments. Because of the delayed and restrained collection, the objects related to persecution that were kept during the socialist period are mostly to be found in family homes. The memorial landscape of the Holocaust covers not only the institutions dedicated to the history of persecution but also the second- and third-generation survivors’ homes.

In trauma literature, one view is that the traumatised self’s prolonged attachment to the material traces of a difficult past reinforces silence, inhibiting the material passing down of family heritage. This attitude can prompt a desire for getting rid of objects.<sup>46</sup> Interviews with survivors, however, nuance this finding and provide examples of positive object attachment. Researchers on the person-object relationship argue that the material memories preserved in families contribute to the transgenerational transmission of Holocaust stories.<sup>47</sup> Our own interviews also confirm that

44 HE, Ad/1306-2015, letter of Teréz B. to the NÜB, 9 August 1982.

45 Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche, eds., *Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 1–21.

46 The descendants of the perpetrators were in a completely different situation, but they also had the desire to be free of the burdensome legacy of the past. In some cases, a transaction takes place whereby members of society are freed from a morally or emotionally irritating object, and a museum supports this negative process in order to strengthen its historical archive. Paver, *Exhibiting the Nazi Past*, 50–51.

47 Carol A. Kidron, “Breaching the Wall of Traumatic Silence: Holocaust Survivor and Descendant Person-Object Relations and the Material Transmission of the Genocidal Past”, *Journal of Material Culture* 17, no. 1. (2012): 3–21.

many Holocaust memorials are still in private property because they are associated with positive emotions: they materialise not only the tragedies but also the triumph of survival, the triumph of escape, or memories most closely linked to lost family members.<sup>48</sup>

One of our interviewees, Lili S., had sued for, bought, and acquired back her family crystal glasses from her Christian neighbours after her return home from deportation in 1945. In the 2010s, she kept the recovered pieces of the set in a cabinet, and they were taken out and used on celebrations and birthdays.<sup>49</sup> On the one hand, the glassware evoked her nostalgia for a lost family home. On the other hand, it was the material trace of her post-war sense of vitality and will to live, a struggling recovery of a piece of the past. Katalin S.'s teddy bear, named Andris, which she received for her first birthday, is also the object of a strong emotional attachment. The gendarmes in the ghetto wanted to cut it open because they suspected it contained jewellery, but the then four-year-old girl started crying so loudly that the gendarmes threw the teddy bear, which she had brought home from Strasshof and Bergen-Belsen.<sup>50</sup> Katalin said of Andris that he has a personality in his own right and is not just an object. Demonstrating this, she sat him down at our table during our interview. The bear became Katalin's fellow survivor, her parents defended her and she defended Andris, making him a symbol of the family's agency. A further example is Júlia K., who keeps an object brought back from Bergen-Belsen which invokes positive feelings. Her mother exchanged a piece of bread for embroidery which she gave to Júlia as her sixth birthday present. For Júlia, this object became a reminder of her mother's love and self-sacrifice.<sup>51</sup> To this day, these objects are in private hands and will probably remain so.

These examples show that the material landscape of the Holocaust was defined not only by memory politics on the macro-level but also by the emotional dynamic between generations within the Jewish families. In some cases, the presence of objects in family homes broke the silence and started a conversation between survivors and descendants about persecution. However, we assume that the above cases are not representative of the surviving Jewish community as a whole. The majority in Hungary chose the strategy of silence. Therefore, the members of the second generation realised their origin as adults.<sup>52</sup>

In her essay "Canon and Archive", Aleida Assmann distinguishes between active and passive cultural forgetting. The former is an intentional act, such as trashing and destroying. In the latter case, objects are not materially destroyed but "fall out of the frames of attention, valuation, and use": they are lost, hidden, neglected, or abandoned.<sup>53</sup> The hiding – or at least ignoring – of objects and documents can also be inferred from the fact that many descendants found these objects after a survivor's

48 As historians at HE, we conducted around fifty interviews with survivors between 2010 and 2017. Most of the interviewees came to us as donors of the collection. The recollections were audio recorded in the survivors' homes. We asked about the interviewee's entire life and family history, before and after the Holocaust, but the main focus was on the years of persecution. In recording the semi-structured oral history interviews, we used a single set of questions in each session, while allowing the interviewee to speak freely. This allowed the recollections to serve as a source not only for the time of the historical events but also for the influences that shaped the recollections in their present.

49 Lili S., interview by Edit Linda Németh and Heléna Huhák, 2015.

50 Katalin S., interview by András Szécsényi and Heléna Huhák, 2015.

51 Júlia K., interview by András Szécsényi and Heléna Huhák, 2015.

52 Cf. Ferenc Erős, András Kovács, and Katalin Lévai, "Hogyan tudtam meg, hogy zsidó vagyok?", *Medvetánc* nos. 2–3 (1985): 129–144.

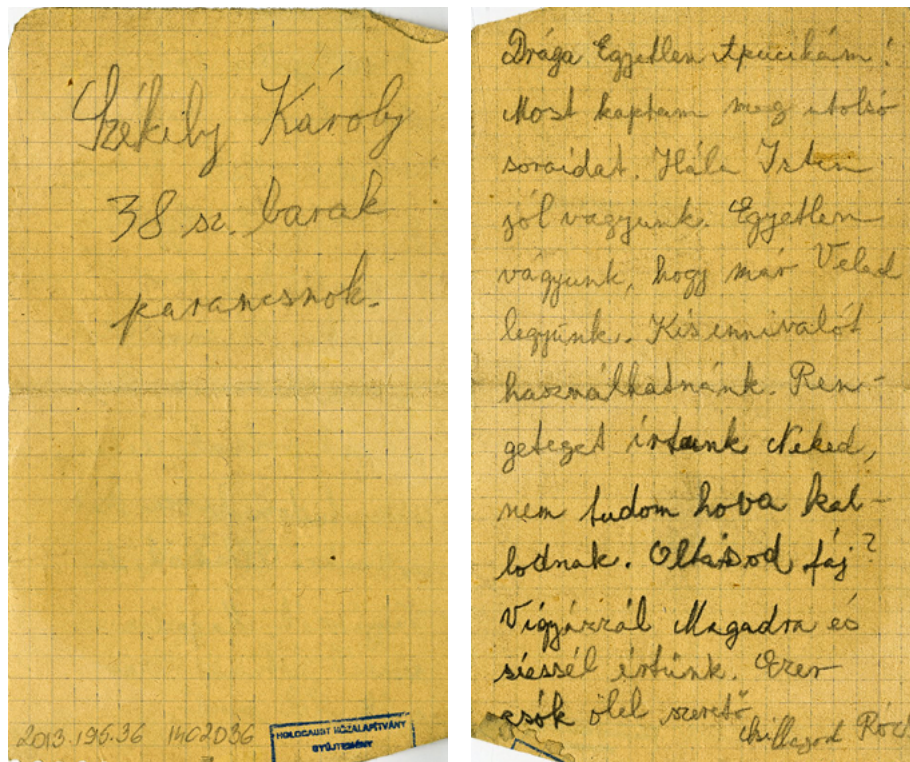
53 Aleida Assmann, "Canon and Archive", in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 97–98.



A teddy bear in Katalin S.'s private collection, Julia K.'s private collection: a piece of bread and an embroidery.

death, as in the case of Károly Székely. Károly was deported to Bergen-Belsen and kept secret correspondence with his daughter Magda. The young woman died there but her letters have survived and were brought home by her father.<sup>54</sup> From the time of his return to Hungary until he died in 1965, Károly was actively involved in the memory of the victims, creating the first Hungarian exhibition in the Auschwitz museum in 1960, and organising memorial tours for youth groups to several camps. His legacy includes a photo album of commemorations and exhibitions, documenting his own public activities.<sup>55</sup> However, he did not tell his family about the surviving letters, which were only discovered after his death by his younger daughter, who was still alive in Budapest, while she was sorting out his estate. We know from her account that Károly was never able to come to terms with the loss of his daughter Magda, and they moved out of their apartment, where the family had lived together before the war, because of the painful memories.<sup>56</sup>

Therefore, Székely continued a different strategy compared to the aforementioned Olga G. and Teréz B.: he was active in the public spaces of memory, but he did not want to or could not deal with his own memories. He kept the letters but locked them away, at least for his daughter, who was also a survivor and did not pass on the documents or their history. The unique letters were separated from their owner, from the stories before and after their writing, which gave them personal, cultural, and social meaning (by not being told, written down, or passed on to future generations), because of silence and forgetting. Thus, family memories could not become trans-



Magda Székely's letter to her father in Bergen-Belsen in Károly Székely's collection (HE 2013.95.36).

54 Cf. *Táborok tükrében: A Székely-család levelei a munkaszolgálat és a deportálás idejéből*, eds. Heléna Huhák and András Szécsényi (Budapest: HDKE, 2014).

55 HE, Ad/1212-2014.

56 Zsuzsanna Sz., interview by András Szécsényi and Heléna Huhák, 2013.



Photo of the first Hungarian exhibition in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum in 1960  
(Karoly Székely collection, HE Ad/1212-2004).

generational carriers of history from the information acquired from donors. Eventually, Magda Székely's letters were also placed in a public collection. Since 2014, the Holocaust Memorial Center has been preserving these letters.

### The Collection of the Hungarian Auschwitz Foundation and the Holocaust Memorial Center<sup>57</sup>

The memory of the Holocaust was developed with the emergence of global human rights after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and it became part of the universal memory. Since the 1990s, Holocaust remembrance has contributed to the formation of a common European cultural memory and identity.<sup>58</sup> In the 2000s, Holocaust museums and exhibitions appeared independently from Jewish museums across Europe (e.g. in London, Paris, and Berlin), presenting the Holocaust as a European historical event and as part of national histories. Susan Sontag defined this new type of museum as a separate category, a "memory museum".<sup>59</sup> This type of museum was developed in memory of the destruction of European Jews, but the pattern can also be used to process the history of other modern genocides and to mourn its victims.

After the regime change of 1989, the Hungarian Auschwitz Foundation – Holocaust Documentation Center (*Magyar Auschwitz Alapítvány – Holokauszt Dokumentációs Központ*, HDK) was established only in 1990 by survivors and civilians. This private foundation was supported and sponsored by companies, banks, and individuals. HDK was the first organisation that considered its task to be not only to

<sup>57</sup> This section (if not otherwise indicated) is based mainly on the authors' own experiences and memories.

<sup>58</sup> Jelena Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019), 20–23.

<sup>59</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Stratus and Giroux, 2003), 68–69.

research the history of the genocide, but also to establish a Holocaust-related collection based on the NÜB's documentation and, eminently, on its collecting practices and work. In 1991, the HDK published calls in the press to collect written and tangible memories, asking survivors to write their memoirs or record them on tape. In the 1990s, there was an even larger number of survivors who could be interviewed, and the HDK gathered, first-hand, all background information.<sup>60</sup>

In 2001, the Hungarian government – preparing for the sixtieth anniversary of the deportations – also determined to establish a public museum for the research and collection of works related to the Hungarian Holocaust. In order to reach this goal, in 2002 the Holocaust Documentation Center and Memorial Collection Public Foundation (*Holokauszt Dokumentációs Központ és Emlékgűjtemény*, HDKE) was established by the state. With this move, the Auschwitz Foundation (and its documentation) was merged into the HDKE.<sup>61</sup> In the end, in 2004 the HE was established as a state museum on Páva Street 39, and operated by the HDKE.<sup>62</sup> In the award-winning museum area, the permanent exhibition, *From Deprivation of Rights to Genocide*, opened its doors to visitors two years later.<sup>63</sup> The HE – according to its founding charter – collects, preserves, exhibits, and researches documents, testimonies, photos, artefacts, and objects of those who suffered racial, ethnic, and/or political persecution before and during the Second World War, or of those who were involved in the rescue of the persecuted.<sup>64</sup> These personal material traces (objects, photographs, narrative sources) were donated primarily by survivors or by their relatives.

Both the HE and its predecessor, the HDK, faced the same problems regarding the collection work, which were consequences of inappropriate managerial decisions, including the failure of the constantly changing management to develop concepts. There were no qualified, full-time staff members to collect and register the materials received. The lack of documentation caused significant data losses that also affected the historical value of the sources handed over by the donors. These negative circumstances affected mostly the objects and visual sources, as it is hard to contextualise these types of sources due to the lack of written documentation. Overall, not only the poor documentation of the material inherited from the NÜB, but also the sloppy management of the sources collected in the 1990s and 2000s made it very difficult or even impossible to uncover the historical context of the collection regarding the years of persecution. On the other hand, these practices shed light on the political and social conditions around the establishment and development of the first Hungarian Holocaust museum.

In 2010 a new era began, as the museum's new director, László Harsányi, started to develop the Collections Department. A new compact stack room was built a year later. The management introduced annual "collection campaigns" which proved successful and lasted until recent years. Last but not least, in 2012, a new inventory soft-

60 Táborcsoportülések, *Új élet*, 15 January 1991, 4.

61 Hargittai István, *Jeremiás nyomában: Beszélgetések Komoróczy Gézával* (Budapest: Magvető, 2021), 472–476; Székely Gábor, *Elszakadás és visszafordulás: Egy élet a zsidóságtól a zsidóságig* (Budapest: Magvető, 2022), 234–238.

62 The use of the name of the museum (officially "HE") has been extremely varied since its establishment, both in the public and scientific spheres. It is known by more than ten different, inappropriate common appellations, such as the Holocaust Museum (*Holokauszt Múzeum*), not to mention the different, wrong mixtures of the elements of the name of the public foundation and of the HE. See the official webpage *Holokauszt Emlékközpont – Holocaust Memorial Center*, accessed 8 September 2023, <https://hdke.hu/en/>.

63 The exhibition's curator-in-chief was Judit Molnár. Frazon Zsófia, *Múzeum és kiállítás: Az újrarajzolás terei* (Budapest: Gondolat-PTE Kommunikációs és Médiatudományi Tanszék, 2011), 115–138.

64 *Holokauszt Emlékközpont – Holocaust Memorial Center*, accessed 6 October 2022, <https://hdke.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/alapito-okirat-2021.pdf>.

ware was developed for keeping records of every document, object, image, and testimony. Due to the collection and marketing campaigns, publications in scientific and popular historical journals, and cultural programmes and commemorations, the museum became more visible for publicity in the 2010s. Dozens of survivors had donated their family documents, memoirs, diaries, photos, and objects to the HE or told their stories in oral history interviews. But they were still only a very small part of the thousands of Holocaust survivors. Around 300 donating survivors or family members visited the memorial center between 2011 and 2016. The largest number of donors (82 donors, who offered a total of 1,907 items to the collection) was registered in 2014, on the seventieth anniversary of the Holocaust, and the smallest number (24 donors/673 items) in 2015.<sup>65</sup> This decline can be seen partly as a detrimental consequence of the negative press publicity and political environment around the institution from 2010 onwards.<sup>66</sup>

Despite the negative political contexts that the museum has faced, museological work has not stopped. To date, the HE has processed about thirteen thousand items in the collection inventory, and it maintains digitally several thousands of photos and personal documents. In addition, interviews with survivors in the 2010s contributed to the mapping and documentation of privately held sources. All of this is completed by a repository of data collection, which contains valuable background information. This stock is one of the most significant collections of the personal narratives of the Hungarian Holocaust. In the near future, the role of the collection's wide range of personal sources and family materials will depend on many circumstances: the extent of accessibility and online availability of the materials, especially for the English-speaking public; the visibility of Holocaust scholarship in Hungary; the museum's political context as it is a state institution; and interest in the collection among Holocaust scholars, as we are getting closer to the post-witness era. Above all, the memorial center could fill a gap by making contact with survivors and their descendants.

## Conclusion

Anthropologist Carol A. Kidron depicts the nature of memory work in the House of Being, a Holocaust survivor geriatric center and memorial museum in Israel. This place created and maintained by Holocaust survivors and their descendants is a place where memories can be preserved outside the survivors' homes while maintaining a personal connection with the descendants. A volunteer survivor said that the House of Being is her home where her family members are around her, referring to their photos on the walls. One of the descendants added that "[t]his place is not Yad Vashem".<sup>67</sup> Kidron's interviewees demonstrate the contrast between this kind of

<sup>65</sup> The data are based on notes taken by the authors as memorial center staff for the annual statistical report.

<sup>66</sup> The Fidesz (*Fiatl Demokraták Szövetsége*/Alliance of Young Democrats) government (2010–2014) put the HE under pressure, expecting it to cooperate with the highly controversial governmental memory politics project *Sorsok Háza* (House of Fates), which was seen by scholars, Jewish organisations, and Holocaust survivors as a governmental effort to falsify the history of the former Hungarian state and civilian participation in the genocide. Cf. "What Will Be the Fate of the House of Fates?", Moment, accessed 15 May 2023, <https://momentmag.com/what-will-be-the-fate-of-the-house-of-fates/>. The HE never confronted or stood up to the government's aspirations regarding these issues. In the 2010s, historian Randolph L. Braham also often criticised the government-friendly politics of the HE, and in 2014 he forbade the use of his name in the appellation of the museum's digital information platform (*Braham Téka és Információs Központ*). Cf. *Népszava*, 27 January 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Carol A. Kidron, "Embracing the Lived Memory of Genocide: Holocaust Survivor and Descendant Renegade Memory Work at the House of Being", *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 3. (August 2010): 435.



“lived memory” and mainstream, official, ritualised places and practices. This initiative raises the question of whether a joint study of the various private practices (which save collections) and museums and archives might create a common knowledge through which the history of the Holocaust and the post-Holocaust period in its continuum can be better understood. In this article, we have sought to present the institutionalisation of the Holocaust’s tangible heritage and personal preservation by aiming to find the links between the two processes.

The material history of the Holocaust began with the first step of the deprivation of property. During the next decades, fragments of tangible heritage circulated between individuals and institutions. Some objects were taken by force, others were found abandoned, passed down from generation to generation, or donated to a museum. Different personal stories, cultural, political, and social contexts, interpretations, and meanings are associated with the long history of these objects. The ambivalent attitude of the socialist memory politics towards the Holocaust during the Kádár regime is reflected in the history of the personal collections. The museums collected Holocaust memorabilia, but this was not encouraged or publicised, so much remained in private hands or, due to the materially absent beings according to Dziuban and Stańczyk’s phrasing, they became “lost objects”.<sup>68</sup> The examples given show that some of the families actively cultivated and cherished these material memories. Strong emotional attachment prevented and still prevents the crystal glasses, the teddy bear, and the embroidery from entering the public collection.

The public collection of the victims’ documents, albeit in an incomplete, unprofessional, and politically motivated manner, had been established under the Kádár regime, and within the framework not of a Jewish, but rather of a party organisation. The many and varied activities of the NÜB which need to be further investigated can be understood as part of the process that produced the Hungarian exhibition in Auschwitz in 1965 and 1979, which was of a similar spirit and had a great impact on society. The history of the collection of survivors’ memories confirms the claim that the story of Jewish suffering remained part of the anti-fascist narrative. The NÜB fulfilled the political role assigned to it by the party-state (mainly through the organisation of the “martyr pilgrimages”) but, at the same time, it also found a place for the act of preserving survivors’ memories.

The NÜB’s activities involved the receipt and preservation of documents. The first items of the NÜB’s Holocaust collection in the late 1950s were the certificates, memoirs, and letters attached to the compensation claims, which slowly, occasionally, but steadily grew over the next decade. By the early 1980s, the organisation had already taken a proactive role in this passive reception and preservation work. The NÜB did not request information from donors, but if the donors wrote down on their own initiative their memories and the history of the objects which they donated, the staff members of the NÜB kept these letters and notes, as we have seen in the cases of Olga G. and Teréz B.. In its letters of reply, the organisation assured donors of that the donated memories had been deposited in its archives. The preservation of survivors’ materials also acknowledged the importance of preserving their personal stories of suffering.

Overall, institutional and family strategies particularly worked against the creation of well-documented Holocaust public collections as well. A traumatic event, such as the placement of Holocaust relics in a museum, cannot be understood simply as a gift, a transfer from the private sphere to the public one. There were much more

<sup>68</sup> Dziuban and Stańczyk, “Introduction: The Surviving Thing”, 6.

complex processes at work behind it, processes that cannot be separated from individual life histories or the political and social context of the socialist era. Further studies could provide answers to how different forms of memory (commemorations, the publishing of books, films) and political decision-making (trials, compensations) affected the treatment of objects in private spaces. What were the motivations that encouraged survivors to support the transgenerational transmission of their materials, to keep them and their stories silent, or to donate them to the public collection?

Despite the missing data and the fragmentary nature of the collection in the HE, its wide range of objects, artefacts, and other narrative sources has become indispensable for researching the history of the Holocaust in Hungary from the perspective of the victims. In the future, the memorial center needs to interpret its collection beyond the walls of its depositories. In addition to the collection and documenting of the materials held, copies of privately owned documents, photographs, and objects should be made and preserved along with the stories of these family legacies. Museologists, historians, anthropologists, and sociologists could work together to successfully uncover these stories. Oral history can bring the object out of oblivion, or the object can unfold a story of survival or an unknown detail of it, meaning that the object can function as a tangible continuity with the past and across generations. In the 2020s, this will be possible mostly with the contributions of second- and third-generation survivors who are willing to open the credenzas and drawers and to take action against passive cultural forgetting.

There is also a more negative reading of the future of these collections. The personal memories of the Holocaust still carry vulnerability. There is considerable doubt about the future use of these rare, precarious, and often special objects and the stories which they carry as part of collective historical knowledge. To return to Assmann's thesis on cultural forgetting, these materials are certainly no longer at risk of being lost or not collected by the HE or other museums. Rather, the genocide's cultural memory preserved in objects, documents, and narrative sources is threatened by the simple loss of the significance of the Holocaust in the mediated space, in the era of information diversity and dumping that also affects culture. The certainly changing position of the Holocaust in Hungary could easily affect the need for remembering and also the ability to interiorise the information of these highly precarious personal material traces, which require openness and sensitivity.

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