

## Why is the Hungarian Government Promoting a New, Ahistorical Holocaust Museum Designed by a Holocaust Distorter?

**On September 7, 2018, the government of Hungary, in a joint press conference with the small Chabad-affiliated Unified Hungarian Jewish Congregation (EMIH), announced that the House of Fates, a new, revisionist Holocaust museum, will be developed by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's close associate, Mária Schmidt, and owned by EMIH.**

Hungary already has a Holocaust Museum—The Holocaust Memorial Center on Pava Street in Budapest. This institution has been designed to present the most historically accurate depiction of the tragic story surrounding the Holocaust in Hungary: the country's pre-war anti-Jewish policies; the laws of the late 1930s that stripped Hungarian Jews of their citizenship rights; Hungary's role in the massacre of Jewish refugees at Kamenetz-Podolsk;<sup>1</sup> German pressure on its Hungarian ally to deport its Jews to death camps; and the resistance to that pressure as well as the eventual full-scale collaboration of the Hungarian state with the deportation of some 435,000 Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz over seven weeks in the summer of 1944.

Hungary's current government seeks to modify this complicated narrative and promulgate a different story. Since returning to power in 2010, it has

starved the Pava Street museum of funds<sup>2</sup> and pressured staff scholars to leave. Rather than Pava Street's nuanced, historical narrative, the ahistorical story it prefers is about Hungary's attempt to protect its Jews from a tragedy that was fully the fault of Nazi Germany and a few Hungarian thugs. This narrative avoids historically uncomfortable facts. It instead focuses on instances of Hungarians who saved their Jewish neighbors, and on the individual suffering of victims and of a tragedy that befell all Hungarians—not just Jews.

For years, the most prominent advocate of this revisionist history has been a wealthy Orbán ally named Mária Schmidt. Now, despite promises made to the largest and most prominent Jewish organization in Hungary, Mazsihisz, as well as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yad Vashem, and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, the Orbán government has announced the opening of a new museum in 2019 called the House of Fates that will be designed by Schmidt.

**The Hungarian Government must not let a Holocaust distorter create the content of the new Holocaust museum. Mária Schmidt is a Holocaust distorter.**

**Schmidt supported a memorial to an antisemitic politician.** In 2016, when there was an attempt to establish a memorial to a 1940s

<sup>1</sup> <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/kamenets-podolsk>

<sup>2</sup> <http://hungarianspectrum.org/2014/02/20/viktor-orban-finally-sent-an-answer-but-the-jewish-communities-boycott-is-still-on/>

racist and antisemitic politician who spearheaded legislation to forbid marriage between Jewish and non-Jewish Hungarians, Schmidt denounced those who opposed the memorial and argued “[i]t is intolerable that after condemning and executing György Donath to death, even in death, he was wounded by the fact that ‘a handful of people’ made the remembrance impossible....there is no reason to be ashamed...”<sup>3</sup>

- ☑ **Schmidt denies the Hungarian government’s massive and active participation in the ghettoization and deportation of Jews to Auschwitz.** Mária Schmidt has been quick to criticize those who point out Hungarian government complicity in the Nazi murder of Hungarian Jewry. In responding to such facts, she argues for near full German responsibility and has sarcastically written, “[Germany] will soon achieve the transformation of the Holocaust into the work of Poles, Hungarians, Lithuanians, etc.”<sup>4</sup>
- ☑ **Schmidt attempts to revise history; when her critics point this out, she denigrates them as perpetual ‘victims.’** The Hungarian Jewish community has continually countered Schmidt’s revisionist history of Hungarian actions during World War II. In response, she has written “[b]ut recent decades have seen the victim’s status cemented into permanence. We are at a point where some groups would like to consider their ancestors’ tragic fate an inheritable and advantageous privilege...And so, because they act as if our national mourning can have no palliative effect on tragedies past, they exclude themselves from our national community.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> [https://hvg.hu/itthon/20171123\\_schmidt\\_maria\\_szobor](https://hvg.hu/itthon/20171123_schmidt_maria_szobor)

<sup>4</sup> “BBC’s Nick Thorpe vs Maria Schmidt.” Hungarian Spectrum, April 24, 2018

<sup>5</sup> A Historical Exchange: Maria Schmidt vs. Maria M. Kovacs, Hungarian Spectrum, July 20, 2014

- ☑ **Schmidt minimizes the facts of the Holocaust.** Schmidt has expressed disappointment with the emphasis on the Holocaust in World War II memory. Like French far-right leader Jean-Marie Le-Pen, who characterized the Holocaust as a mere “detail” of history, Schmidt has minimized its importance by declaring “World War II was not about Jews, not about genocide. However regrettable the Holocaust, the extermination or rescue of the Jews represented but a secondary, marginal point of view not among the war aims of either belligerent.”<sup>6</sup>
- ☑ **Schmidt defended an antisemitic journalist.** When the Hungarian government awarded its third highest state award to a journalist, Zolt Bayer, who is perhaps the country’s most prominent purveyor of vile, antisemitic, anti-Roma and anti-refugee rhetoric, dozens of previous Hungarian recipients returned their own awards in protest. Schmidt defended and congratulated Bayer. “The Knight’s Cross was received by the Christian crusader who does not allow us to lose our values, traditions, sensibilities, and common sense! I congratulate Zsolt Bayer on his Knight’s Cross!”
- ☑ **Schmidt has criticized Nazi war crime trials.** According to Schmidt, the trials against war criminals in Nuremberg and in other countries “were political trials that served political purposes....”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> James Kirchick. The End of Europe: Dictators, Demagogues and the Coming Dark Age. p.51. Yale University Press

<sup>7</sup> <https://hungarianspectrum.wordpress.com/2014/06/09/maria-schmidts-revisionist-history-of-world-war-ii-and-the-holocaust-part-i/>

**Respected scholars of the Holocaust, prominent Jewish NGOs, and journalists agree that the House of Fates should not be led by Schmidt.**

**If led by Schmidt:**

- The museum will present a false history.** According to Dr. Robert Rozett, Director of Yad Vashem's libraries: "There is a strong trend in Hungary today to present the destruction of Hungarian Jewry during the Holocaust as an exclusively German crime and, except for a small group of Hungarian thugs, to ignore the role and responsibility of the Hungarian authorities and society.... It has been confirmed that it is precisely the flawed concept that will be implemented in the new museum."<sup>8</sup>
- It will whitewash the facts.** The European Jewish Congress released a statement from its President which stated, "[t]he preference of the Hungarian government to whitewash this Holocaust memory in its sponsorship of the House of Fates in Budapest and to appoint a director who has specifically minimised the participation of the Hungarian collaborationist government of Admiral Horthy during WWII and its sponsorship of antisemitism is unworthy of a country which claims to abide by the norms of democratic governments in the European Union."<sup>9</sup>
- It will engage in "history-cleansing."** In a letter to the head of Mazsihisz,<sup>10</sup> Professor Randolph Braham, considered the foremost expert on Holocaust history in Hungary, stated,

"I have followed with great interest your consistent and well-founded opposition to the opening of the so-called House of Fates (Sorsok Haza), an ostensible 'Holocaust-related museum' that was conceived and planned by the director of the House of Terror (Terror Haza) — a formerly budding Holocaust scholar turned into an ardently nationalist Holocaust distorter. This Holocaust museum appears to be part and parcel of the long-range history-cleansing plan that had been initiated by the Viktor Orbán government to bring about the rehabilitation of the Horthy era..."<sup>11</sup>

- It will negate Hungary's promises to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.** The US Holocaust Memorial Museum has expressed strong concern with the project designed by Schmidt. Its statement reads: "[T]he United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is alarmed by recent decisions of the government of Hungary regarding the so-called 'House of Fates' project at the Jozsefvaros rail station site. The decisions by the Office of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to reinstate a version of the highly distorting exhibition plan for the site directly contradict assurances given to the Museum in 2015 that this historically flawed plan was off the table and that the designer of the plan, Dr. Mária Schmidt, would no longer be involved in development of the new memorial institution."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/commemorating-the-murder-of-jews-avoiding-responsibility/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://eurojewcong.org/eic-in-action/statements/holocaust-memory-in-hungary-is-not-a-plaything-to-reward-political-friends/>

<sup>10</sup> Mazsihisz is the Federation of Jewish Communities in Hungary and is the generally recognized umbrella organization for Hungarian Jewry.

<sup>11</sup> The Unholy Alliance Between Victor Orban's government and Shlomo Koves of Chabad." Hungarian Spectrum, September 24, 2018. <http://hungarianspectrum.org/tag/house-of-fates/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-releases/museum-calls-on-hungarian-government-to-honor-commitments-made-on-holocaust-memoria>

### **Rather than respond to criticism, Schmidt engages in “whataboutism.”**

In response to international criticism of her minimization of Hungarian complicity in the Nazi murder of Hungarian Jewry, Mária Schmidt has complained about representatives of democratic countries that more forthrightly acknowledge their countries’ role in the Holocaust. She has stated “[a]mbassadors of a number of western countries feel compelled to lecture me on how to interpret, indeed, how we all Hungarians should interpret our 20<sup>th</sup> century history, with a special focus on the role of Miklos Horthy. I have had to sit through countless lectures delivered by western diplomats about Horthy, Hungary’s ‘revisionism,’ the collaboration of Hungarians, etc., and all of them represented countries whose history offers at least as many, if not even more, very good opportunities to raise uncomfortable questions.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Schmidt’s revisionism reflects the views of senior members of the Hungarian Government.**

The international community’s reaction to the announcement by the Hungarian government and EMIH that they would develop the House of Fates has been almost universally negative. Yet Mária Schmidt’s views mirror the views of some of the most senior members of the Hungarian government, who have resorted to whitewashes of history and the use of thinly veiled antisemitic demagoguery.

For example, in 2014, the director of the Orbán government’s Veritas Institute, Sandor Szakaly, characterized the 1941 massacre at Kamensk-Podolsk of some 18,000 Jews as a “police action against aliens.”<sup>14</sup> This mass murder was the result of a collaboration of the Hungarian government, Hungarian police, and Nazi troops. The US

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<sup>13</sup> <https://hungarytoday.hu/7-19-1-love-stery-maria-schmidt-house-fates/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hungarian-jews-demand-resignation-of-shoah-revisionist/>

Holocaust Memorial Museum characterizes this deportation as “the first large-scale mass murder in pursuit of the Final Solution.”<sup>15</sup>

More recently, in a March 15, 2018 speech, Prime Minister Victor Orbán proclaimed “[w]e are fighting an enemy that is different from us. Not open, but hiding; not straightforward but crafty; not honest but base; not national but international; does not believe in working but speculates with money; does not have its own homeland but feels it owns the whole world.”<sup>16</sup> National Review’s Michael Brendan Dougherty later characterized these remarks from the Hungarian Prime Minister as “reading like a litany of anti-Semitic clichés.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/kamenets-podolsk>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.jta.org/2018/03/16/news-opinion/hungarian-prime-minister-orban-attacks-enemy-speculates-money-election-rally-speech>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/viktor-orban-george-soros-speech-anti-semitism/>