

Commissioned Memory

Hungarian Exhibitions in Auschwitz, 1960/1965

Blinken OSA Archivum, Galeria Centralis

September 14 — December 3, 2023

curator: Daniel Véri



Contrary to popular belief, the Holocaust was not a taboo in the fine arts of early Socialist Hungary. In addition to numerous non-commissioned works of art, the subject also emerged within official memory politics. The research-based exhibition and the accompanying book in preparation present an early Kádár-era chapter of Holocaust memory in the fine arts; the rediscovered art material from the 1960s Hungarian exhibitions in Auschwitz.

The Polish museum, operating at the site of the former concentration camp, offered barracks for national exhibitions from 1960 onward. In 2004, the Blinken OSA Archivum presented the history of the Hungarian exhibitions in Auschwitz under the title *Auschwitz 1945–1989. Reconstruction*. At that time, however, nothing was known about the fact that the organizers had commissioned a monumental art collection, as an illustration to the historical material of the (supposedly) first exhibition in 1965. The current exhibition reconstructs this completely forgotten group of artworks.

The 1965 Auschwitz exhibition was the second major state project connected to the memory of the Holocaust, after the Hungarian memorial in Mauthausen designed by Agamemnon Makrisz (1959–64). The exhibition and the works on display (by Gyula Hincz, János Kass, Béla Kondor, György Konecsni, Gyula Konfár, István Martsa, József Péri, József Somogyi, Endre Szász, and Imre Varga—unlike the rejected sculpture by Tibor Barabás) presented a historical narrative that emphasized antifascism, with particular reference to the role played by the Communists, whom the authorities regarded as their own ancestors and a source of legitimacy. Although none of the commissioned artists had any first-hand experience of the Holocaust, the figure and perspective of the victims were still represented both in the works and in the press, thus shaping the public memory of the Holocaust.

Nevertheless, the works soon disappeared from view: in 1979, as used exhibition decorations, they were relegated to the storage of a museum in Hungary, where most of

them have remained until now. The exhibition reconstructs the history, original subject, and context of the works, which have lost their original meaning and function.

Historical research has only recently revealed that the 1965 exhibition was preceded by a smaller one in 1960. Research in preparation for the current reconstruction confirmed that visual art here also played a role: works by surviving women artists (Ágnes Lukács and Rózsa Káldor), produced immediately after the war, were exhibited as testimonies and authentic illustrations of the historical narrative. It was furthermore possible to link to the 1960 exhibition a completely unknown large painting depicting Hitler as a vampire, and to identify the work on which the composition was based: an early drawing by Simon Wiesenthal, who later became known as the “Nazi hunter.”

Both 1960s exhibitions were completely devoid of the subject of the Roma Holocaust. In order to compensate for this, the current exhibition presents the earliest work in Hungary dealing with the topic, initiated by Roma intellectuals but never realized; an abstract memorial by György Jovánovics from 1974.

The analysis of Hungarian exhibitions in Auschwitz highlights the important role of visual art both as testimony and as exhibition decoration, and also confirms that the memory of the Holocaust was indeed present in the public space in the early years of Socialism, although initially only abroad and within the framework of antifascist memory politics.

A virtual version of the 2004 exhibition is available at <http://w3.osaarchivum.org/galeria/auschwitz/>.

The exhibition was realized in cooperation between the CEU Jewish Studies Program and the Blinken OSA Archivum.

Press images:

1. Unknown artist: *Deportation*, 1960, Hungarian National Museum
2. Gyula Hincz: *Horthy's Coming to Power (The Rider of Reactionaryism)*, 1965, Savaria Museum — Szombathely Gallery
3. János Kass: *Forced Labor* ([?], on the right); *Mass Murders Carried out by the Arrow Cross at the Bank of the Danube* (on the left), 1965, Savaria Museum — Szombathely Gallery
4. Béla Kondor: *Auschwitz: Appell!!!*, 1965, Savaria Museum — Szombathely Gallery
5. Endre Szász: *Jewish Man with a Yellow Star*, 1965, Savaria Museum — Szombathely Gallery
6. Gyula Konfár: *Resistance in the Camp (Prisoners of the Concentration Camp)*, 1965, Savaria Museum — Szombathely Gallery
7. György Konecsni: *Liberation (A Man, a Woman, their Child, and the Dove of Peace)*, 1965, Savaria Museum — Szombathely Gallery
8. György Jovánovics: *Plan for a Roma Holocaust Memorial I*, 1974, private collection
9. Exhibition design: animation, graphic design by Sarolta Ágnes Erdélyi
10. Exhibition design: Hungarian poster, graphic design by Sarolta Ágnes Erdélyi and Hajnalka Illés
11. Exhibition design: English poster, graphic design by Sarolta Ágnes Erdélyi and Hajnalka Illés

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Tuesday—Sunday: 10:00 a.m.—6:00 p.m.

(Closed during Verzió Film Festival, November 23—25.)

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