

70 Years After Nazi Occupation, Anti-Semitism Still a Problem in Hungary

Seventy years ago Wednesday, shortly after the German army invaded Hungary, thousands of Jews were prodded by bayonets and swords into the freezing waters of the River Danube.

But first, they were ordered to remove their shoes so that others could walk around in them.

For Jews worldwide, March 19 is a horrific anniversary.

During the 12 months after the invasion, more than 450,000 Hungarian Jews were rounded up by the Gestapo with the enthusiastic help of its Hungarian equivalent, the Arrow Cross Movement, and sent by train to Auschwitz-Birkenau and other extermination camps in Poland.

Of an estimated 800,000 Hungarian Jews at the beginning of 1944, fewer than 200,000 were alive at the end of the war. The Nazis and their allies murdered three-quarters of Hungary's Jewish population in the last year of the Second World War.

Today, many Jews are wondering whether the passage of time has done much to quell this nation's troubling history of anti-Semitism.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who is seeking re-election on April 6, said at recent meetings of the World Jewish Congress in Budapest that his government is determined to stamp out the rising tide of xenophobia and anti-Semitism. He described the latter as "unacceptable and intolerable."

Earlier this month, unidentified vandals desecrated a Jewish cemetery in Tatabanya in northwest Hungary, daubing slogans such as "Stinking Jews" and "There was no Holocaust but there

will be" on gravestones.

In February, the Israeli Foreign Ministry called in the Hungarian ambassador to Jerusalem in a rare move to voice Israel's "deep concern" over growing anti-Semitic incidents in his country.

The envoy heard Jewish concern about the Hungarian government's apparent unwillingness to deal truthfully and courageously with its past.

Hungary's far-right Jobbik Party last week held a pre-election rally in a former synagogue at Esztergom, 60 miles north of Budapest. Jewish demonstrators stood outside waving Star of David flags, calling Jobbik members "Nazis."

"This is a disgraceful event," Agnes Drelvo, one of the protest organizers, told a reporter from a local paper. "Any normal person who is morally OK will not agree with what's happening."

Jewish pressure has persuaded the Hungarian government to delay erecting a disputed memorial of Germany's invasion of Hungary in one of Budapest's main squares. Pressure groups said that a memorial showing a German eagle swooping down on Archangel Gabriel (symbolizing Hungary) minimized Hungary's own involvement in the Holocaust and placed all blame for the deaths of Hungarian Jews on Hitler and the Nazis.

A new memorial to all those who died in the war will be unveiled after next month's election.

"We're here on a visit," an elderly Jewish American couple said outside Dohany Street Synagogue, the largest in Hungary and second largest in the world. "But to live here again, as our parents lived before the war? Never."

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