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Intervention

Lóránt Bódi, *From Rumour to Holocaust Icon – Historical and Memorial Trajectories of the Holocaust Soap Myth*

On April 4, 2025, in the quiet afternoon of a small town in northeastern Hungary—Rakamaz, located near Tokaj, the renowned wine-producing region with a once-thriving Jewish community—a peculiar incident occurred. In front of the grocery store, activists from the recently established opposition party had set up a booth as part of their “Voice of the Nation” referendum campaign. Their presence, however, was met with sudden hostility. Without warning, a woman drove her car into the booth, pushing it aside and a brief but revealing exchange followed the accident between her and one of the activists:

— *“What was that? Are you trying to run me over?”*

— *“If I wanted to, you’d be soap already!”*

This disturbing case is evoking the so-called “soap myth”, underscores the enduring presence of this narrative in Hungarian antisemitic folklore. Its casual use as an insult reflects not only a troubling trivialization of the Holocaust but also the persistent political weaponization of the myth in everyday contexts. Yet the use of soap as an object of hate and an antisemitic threat dates to the postwar period and was not solely a Hungarian phenomenon; rather, it formed part of a broader pattern. Similar incidents have been documented elsewhere: in Argentina, football hooligans have targeted clubs stereotypically labeled as “Jewish” by throwing bars of soap at players entering green field. In neighboring Austria, soap was repeatedly sent to Simon Wiesenthal in Vienna as a direct

and menacing antisemitic threat. However, this paper does not focus solely on the contemporary antisemitic uses of the soap legend; rather, it offers a brief genealogy of this contested historical phenomenon and traces its different trajectories, while also briefly summarizing the approaches, methodologies and main sections of my current FMS-funded research project, whose structure follows that of the planned monograph as its principal outcome.

But first, how did this all begin?

In folktales, anecdotes and literary works, the idea of 'turning someone into soap' persisted, evoking horrific fantasies of primordial punishment, such as sinners being boiled in a cauldron — a familiar motif from horror depictions of hell. However, the idea of using corpses for industrial purposes became closely associated with modernisation and mechanised killing.

The most important historical precedent—widely recognized in studies of propaganda—is the story of the so-called *German Corpse Factory* during the First World War. The war transformed not only the nature and scale of warfare but also marked the emergence of modern war propaganda as a significant force. On both sides of the trenches, propaganda frequently emphasized real or imagined enemy atrocities, producing what came to be known as “atrocities stories.” From the start of the war, rumours spread widely in Britain, claiming that the German military leadership was desecrating its own war dead—transporting corpses in bundles and burning them in mass incinerators to hide the real casualty numbers. Among these rumours, the “corpse factory” stood out. It originated from a misunderstanding: a German newspaper military term—*Kadaverwertungsanstalt* (corpse-processing facility)—which the British press misinterpreted. In April 1917, *The Times* picked up on this and relayed it to the British public. This gave rise to a series of sensational articles—especially in newspapers controlled by media magnate Lord Northcliffe—such as *The Times* and *Daily Mail*, etc.²

According to these reports, the Germans were not only indifferent to their soldiers' lives on the battlefield but also failed to grant them dignity in death. In reality, the word *Kadaver* referred to animal carcasses, not human remains. However, the story backfired. The allegations reached the German authorities, who responded with counterpropaganda, claiming that the Allies were fabricating stories about the German people in order to incite hatred. After Germany's defeat, this counter-narrative took on a new role: to delegitimise the “unjust” peace treaty, particularly the “shameful” clause that required Germany to pay reparations for the atrocities committed by its army against Belgian soldiers and civilians.

At the outset of the Second World War, the Nazi regime's primary enemy was Great Britain. Alongside the aerial war and strategic bombings waged, an intense media war aimed at demoralizing the British population and discrediting the BBC. The British were accused of having fabricated the earlier soap story to stir up anti-German feeling. According to Ralph Klein and Joachim Neander, it was within this propaganda war that the First World War “German Corpse Factory” narrative was reframed as the story of a “Human Soap Factory,” articulated in strikingly naturalistic and precise terms as the production of “soap from corpse fat.”³

With the onset of the Final Solution in the spring of 1942—when mass extermination began in the death camps—various types of rumours circulated in the German-occupied territories concerning the Nazi extermination machinery.⁴ During this period, the rumour about the soap took on new forms and directions.⁵ Rumours and hearsay circulated that the German industry was producing soap from the fat of murdered Jews. (It was possibly during the final phase of the war that the rumours became associated with soaps labeled “RIF” or sometimes “RJF”). The acronym was thought to stand for “Pure Jewish Fat” (*Reines Israelisches Fett* or *Reines Jüdisches Fett*), and—as noted in various contemporary reports—it was interpreted as proof of German atrocities, with the soap seen as originating from the victims' bodies. In fact, the acronym referred to the *Reichsstelle*

für Industrielle Fettversorgung (Reich Office for Industrial Fat Supply), a Nazi economic administration agency established in 1934.

While the Final Solution was unfolding and the Nazis were attempting to erase the traces of genocide as part of Aktion Reinhardt—a secret SS operation to exhume mass graves and destroy evidence of earlier mass shootings carried out by the Einsatzgruppen—the soap rumour became increasingly prevalent among the persecuted, as both contemporary perpetrator and ego-documents showed. In the latter sources it appeared as a harrowing image of mass extermination, often associated with a specific locality—most frequently the death camp of Belżec.

In this light, the soap legend appears to have emerged not only as a response to fear of extermination—but as projection born out of the erasure of evidence. In the meantime, the Nazi leadership was not only aware of the rumours circulating in Poland, but also conscious that information about the Final Solution was escaping from the sealed occupied territories and reaching the Allied states. For example, in November 1942, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, head of the World Jewish Congress, stated—on the basis of the Riegner telegram—that a campaign of annihilation targeting four million Jews was underway in Poland, which was followed by efforts to mobilize international action against it. Wise also claimed that the Nazis were exhuming corpses to use their remains for soaps and fertilizers. This claim was widely publicised in Allied countries. It is not surprising that a narrative on the soap rumour had built up from the Eastern part of the war as well, from the Soviet side since 1943. As the Soviet army advanced and unearthed the crimes committed by the Nazi occupiers, these were intensively covered by various parts of the press. In this context the narrative on the soaps also surfaced.

Immediately after the war, a disturbing and influential interpretation of the origin of the soaps emerged in Poland as a result of an investigation at the Gdansk Anatomic Institute in May 1945 by a Polish-Soviet commission. The alleged results of this investigation were subsequently

presented at the Nuremberg Trials, where they appeared in court on 19 February 1946. On that day—despite reservations on the British bench, who were not convinced of the reliability of the evidence—the Soviet prosecutors, led by Deputy Prosecutor Lev Nikolaevich Smirnov, presented, among other materials, evidence intended to support the existence of “human soap” (the production of soap) as proof of mass murder committed against the Polish and Soviet peoples, of German barbarism, and of the “cannibalistic theories of German fascism” (without mentioning the Jewish background of the victims). It should also be noted that in the NMT case 4, U.S.A. vs. Pohl et al, which was a sub-trial in 1947 against Oswald Pohl and other high-ranking SS officers, the soap allegation was also part of the indictment, so it wasn’t just limited to the Soviet prosecutors and propaganda. As a result of the trials, the origin of the “soap” gained worldwide notoriety and spread widely in the post-war years however, it died down in the shadow of the emerging Iron Curtain still didn’t vanish entirely. It resurfaced from time to time during the Cold War era—for example, in testimonial hearings at the Eichmann trial.

Meanwhile in the post-war years, survivors often treated RIF soaps as though they contained the remains of family members or fellow inmates and took soaps from the camps or elsewhere and kept or donated them to their Jewish communities. Accordingly, there were multiple burials and monuments erections—sometimes with desecrated Torah scrolls, ashes, or human remains—in DP camps and Jewish cemeteries across Central and Eastern Europe (especially in Romania and Hungary) as part of the early remembrance and mourning of the Jewish genocide. Emigrated survivors also held symbolic burials, carrying soap across continents to lay it to rest in their new homelands, leading to the creation of “soap graves” and monuments in Israel, the U.S., and Brazil as well. Some kept the soap privately or later donated it to local Jewish or Holocaust museums/memorials.

Ultimately, Holocaust survivors and later second, third generational survivors have played an important role in preserving the memory of the soaps. As illustrated by hundreds of oral history

interviews and testimonies from the post-war period (Hungarian DEGOB) then within the major oral history archives mentioning or telling their knowledge on the origins of the soaps.

Various forms of cultural representation have also played a significant role in the broader recognition and persistence of the soap myth from the post-war years onwards (literature, documentaries, feature films, Broadway show, exhibitions, and various depictions). Examples range from the works of the Polish writer Zofia Nalkowska and the less notable Kalman Sandor to those better-known authors such as Tadeusz Borowski and Robert Antelme. While some of these works depicted the 'soap myth' specifically, countless others invoked it as a universal metaphor for the barbarity of the Nazis and the immense suffering endured by their victims.

Importantly, while it became a recurring motif in antisemitic “folklore” since the postwar period, from the 1970s onward the story also developed into a reference point for Holocaust revisionism and denial in various countries (e.g. USA, Great Britain, France). They claimed that since the story of the soaps has been proven false, the mass murders of the Holocaust are equally fictitious and deliberately exaggerated based on the legal principle *Falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus*. Up to the present, the historiography of the “soap myth”—shaped decisively by Joachim Neander—has focused primarily on tracing the historical origins of the “soap myth,” concentrating on specific episodes in its development and seeking to debunk the legend.⁶ One of the aims was to clarify the basis of the legend and thereby regain authority over the discourse from Holocaust revisionists.

Despite laboratory tests having been conducted immediately after the war and having repeatedly confirmed that the RIF soaps contained no human remains, and the legend had been publicly challenged by expert historians, the myth continued to 'write itself forward'. Many have relied and continue to rely on its supposed factuality across national, generational, and cultural boundaries—far beyond the communities directly affected by. This belief shapes the emotions, meanings, and

actions associated with these existing and symbolic objects. In this way, the soap (narrative) eventually became, to use Oren Baruch Stier's term, one of the icons of the Holocaust.

As presented above, the soap myth is a complex historical and transnational phenomenon. Consequently, this research project relies firstly on the interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz—particularly its historical applications—which approaches culture as a self-contained system with its own symbolic logic and internal structure.⁷ Central to this perspective is the idea that a given phenomenon can be interpreted in multiple ways by different actors as a “text” and thus lacks a single, unified meaning. This framework is especially relevant here, as the soap phenomenon was not only understood—and often denied—differently by contemporaries, but also shifted in nature over time: from rumour, to propaganda, to 'historical fact,' and eventually to 'myth.' Therefore, the main objective of this project is not to verify whether the myth is true or false, but to uncover the meaning and discursive function it held in each historical context. Above all, it is a collective response to the devastating experiences of the Second World War and the Holocaust.

The myth appeared across a wide range of heterogeneous sources—from perpetrator documents and wartime and post-war newspapers to diaries, private notes, camp archives, oral history testimonies, trial documentations, and cultural artifacts. Its analysis therefore also requires a broader multidisciplinary framework. It not just draws on historical interpretive anthropology but microhistory (Carlo Ginzburg), the cultural history of rumours (Amos Goldberg), antisemitic imagination (Alon Confino), and folklore studies (Alan Dundes, Andrei Oișteanu), while also engaging with forensic approaches (Jean-Marc Dreyfus, Zuzana Dziuban) and recent scholarship on Holocaust materiality and musealization (Anne Berg, Lea David). In addition, it incorporates oral history research (Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce, Barbara Laslett; Henry Greenspan).

Accordingly, this project is conceived as a six-part monograph addressing different—yet interrelated—aspects of the myth. The first part of the project traces the origins and the morphology of the myth. This also forms part of a broader research agenda concerned with what could have been known about the extermination process during the war, and how meaning was constructed and perceived by various agents. To achieve this, it employs various methodologies from rumour theory, historical anthropology, Holocaust studies and related fields. It engages with existing scholarship on the subject and, wherever possible, draws on contemporaneous sources, albeit scattered in terms of locality and character, such as official documents, newspaper reports and personal accounts, in order to reconstruct the 'virality' and migration of the rumour during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath until the Nuremberg trials. However, given the very nature of the myth, such a historical reconstruction can never be entirely complete.

The project is also working extensively with commemorative and ritual practices—including soap burials, memorials in Jewish cemeteries and rabbinic responses—analyzes the Hungarian, Romanian cases (as most of the known burials had taken place in these countries) and further cases beyond (France, Israel, USA) as sites of memory of the Jewish genocide. The project also extends its focus to the French context, spanning wartime accounts and postwar commemorative practices to the different migration of the rumour and the myth through to the emergence of revisionist and negationist discourses from the late 1970s onward.

The study further investigates the articulation of the myth at a personal level, as it appears in oral history testimonies and interviews. Hundreds of interviews mentioning the soap myth have been identified in the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, as well as in the Fortunoff Archive, the oral history archive of the USHMM, and Yad Vashem. These materials are analyzed as a distinctive narrative mode through which the past is remembered and interpreted, and as a form of coping, imagination, and private remembrance. This section of the research also focuses

on differences between the various corpora across archives, paying particular attention to the nationality, language, and narrative structure of the interviewees.

In another aspect of the project, an individual section will address the musealization and canonization of the myth by exploring recent museum and curatorial debates and practices surrounding soap as a contested “Holocaust object.” This question has become especially relevant because, over the past decades, such soaps have been withdrawn from major Holocaust exhibitions, and the collection of these objects has in some cases been discontinued as a result of changes in institutional collection policies, for example at the USHMM. The final section of the project examines the cultural representations of the myth in novels, short stories, and plays, while also addressing its contemporary reinterpretations in feature films and artistic installations.

The overarching aim of this ambitious scholarly endeavour is to produce a comprehensive study that accounts for the soap myth’s shifting morphology across time and space, and to explain why this contested narrative has continued to endure as a universal metaphor within the memory cultures of the Second World War and the Holocaust.

¹ Telex, April 4, 2025. <https://telex.hu/belfold/2025/04/04/akkor-szappan-lenne-beloled-mondta-a-fidesz-szimpatizans-majd-autojaval-eltolta-a-tisasok-asztalat>

² Badsey, Stephan. *The German Corpse Factory: A Study in First World War Propaganda*. Wolverhampton Military Studies, 31. Warwick: Helion & Company, 2019.; Neander, Joachim. *The German Corpse Factory: The Master Hoax of British Propaganda in the First World War*. Beiheft 6. Saarbrücken: Universaar, 2013.;

³ Klein, Ralph. "Der Wille zur Reinheit: Antisemitismus und hygienischer Furor". *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 7 (2002): 613.

⁴ Goldberg, Amos. "Rumour Culture among Warsaw Jews under Nazi Occupation: A World of Catastrophe Reenchanted." *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 3 (2016): 91–125.

⁵ Tomkiewicz, Monika, and Piotr Semków. *Soap from Human Fat: The Case of Professor Spanner*. Translated by Garth James Burge and Monika Sarnowska-Burge. Gdynia: Róża Wiatrów, 2013.; Jacobson, Mark. *The Lampshade: A Holocaust Detective Story from Buchenwald to New Orleans*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011.

⁶ Laqueur, Walter. *The Terrible Secret*. Boston–London: Little, Brown and Company, 1980, 82, 219;; Neander, Joachim "The Danzig Soap Case: Facts and Legends around "Professor Spanner" and the Danzig Anatomic Institute 1944-1945." *German Studies Review*, 1 (2006), 63–86; Neander, Joachim. Seife aus Judenfett: Zur Wirkungsgeschichte einer zeitgenössischen Sage. *Fabula* 46 (2005), 241–256; Neander, Joachim. "Symbolically Burying the Six Million: Post-War Soap Burial in Romania, Bulgaria and Brazil." *Human Remains and Violence* 1 (2016): 23–40.; Kartashova, Olga. "The Soap Myth of the Holocaust: The Old Story and The New Speculations". Edited by Menahems Barkahans. Shamir Society, 2016, 234–244; Lipstadt, Deborah. *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*. New York: Plume, 1994.; Panneton, Daniel. "The Soap Myth. A Holocaust Artifact in a Post-Truth Era." *Literary Review of Canada* 4 (2019).

⁷ Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1973, 3–30.