

Summary

From Idyll to Irony. Hungarian Literature on the Holocaust between 1944-1948

When Imre Kertész was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2002 for his debut novel, *Fateless* [*Sorstalanság*], it caused agitation in Hungary for several reasons. Firstly, the laureate was little known. The first press comments came from German critics and experts on his prose, who had appreciated the writer since 1990, when the first German translation of his book was published. Secondly, the consternation of local critics exposed a bigger problem, as it was not only Kertész who was unknown in Hungary, but so was the topic he addressed in his book. Literary debates on television, radio and in the press confirmed the thesis, recognized in the Hungarian Jewish community: even after several decades, the Holocaust in Hungary was still a topic that was sensitive, willfully ignored, and marginalized. Additionally, this distinction for Kertész (an author who was perceived as not Hungarian “enough”) aroused antisemitic sentiments in the society. Thirdly, the “ill-presence” of “Jewish” literature was largely caused by serious scholarly negligence, primarily in the field of war literary studies and the extermination of the Jews. Until 2002, not a single scholarly book on the Jewish experience of World War II in Hungarian literature had been printed in Hungary. Of course, the wave of Kertész’s success led to the publication of books discussing his work (György Vári, Sára Molnár, Péter Szirák or László Földényi, to name but a few). However, even these publications could not make up for the lack of reception of Hungarian texts devoted to the Holocaust.

The silence about the Holocaust was the fruit of extremely effective political efforts, first Stalinist and later communist. Immediately after the war, authors of Jewish origin, i.e. those representing the bourgeois trend, along with all enemies of the system, had a *silencium* imposed on them in Hungary, which in practice meant that their books could not be printed, and they were, broadly speaking, forbidden from working in culture. If any of the authors stubbornly pursued a career in literature, they ended up as a translator of children’s books or an in-house reader in a publishing house.

Despite the cultural thaw in the times of Kádár and the great hopes placed in the political transformation, the “Jewish subject” in literature remained an unexplored and

neglected topic. To this day, in Hungary there is no separate department of scientific research, separate study programs, lectures, or seminars devoted to Jewish history or literature, and the most intensive exchange of testimonies and memories took place within a closed Facebook group, "A holokauszt és a családom" [The Holocaust and my family], founded in early 2014.

However, the scarcity of Hungarian literature devoted to the experience of the Holocaust did not mean that this literature did not exist. I decided to seek out and describe it. In this book, which is the first scholarly monograph presenting the reaction of Hungarian literature to the Holocaust, I was guided, as a pioneer, by the literary order, selecting and analyzing authors in terms of the innovation of their artistic strategies. This also imposed the selection of research methodologies, in this case, the use of a variety of literary studies tools. The first preview of this method is the title of the book, signaling the two extremities between which the analyses made in the book will be suspended: genres and stylistics.

When selecting authors, I was interested in the first reaction to the wartime experiences of writers of Jewish origin, and it was the concept of presenting a full panorama of wartime experiences that was the overriding element determining the selection of authors, and later organizing the text. The choice of the time frame 1944-1948 resulted from two facts; Hungary was occupied by the Third Reich on March 19, 1944, and the year 1948 closed the period of the "three-year literature" [*hároméves irodalom*], as Tibor Gintli described it in his monumental monograph *History of Hungarian Literature*. The literature of this period underwent an intense metamorphosis, splitting after the war into thematic factions ("bourgeois writers", quickly eliminated from the literary circulation, and "people's writers"), only to get completely subordinated to the politics of Stalinism in subsequent years. In 1948, the last of the books I have discussed, the drama *Voronyezs* by István Örkény, was published.

The structure of the book is also largely ordered by the concept of presenting the full scope of the experiences of Jewish writers: deportation to the camps, forced labor (home and abroad), staying in the ghetto and hiding during the siege of Budapest. Each chapter is devoted to a separate experience and a separate author, and in the case of several of them the experiences overlap, because the scenarios of the Jewish fate in Budapest or Nagyvárad (and only these cities appear in the text) bore a resemblance. Most of the writers who were sent to forced labor camps had previously lived in one of the ghettos.

The first chapter of the book is devoted to the emergence and course of the debate around the "Jewish issue" in Hungary. I focus mainly on the 19th and early-to-mid 20th century (when the German occupation began). A very intensive exchange of opinions in the press and in separate books on the presence of ethnic minorities (predominantly Jewish), fundamentally shaped society's awareness and influenced the language of speaking about Jews, their image, Jewish literature in Hungary, and the philosophy of writing.

In Chapter Two, I analyze the camp novel by Teréz Rudnóy, *Szabaduló asszonyok. A szabadság első 24 órája* [Women freeing themselves. The first 24 hours of freedom]. The choice of this writer, the author of popular novels about fishermen and domestic helpers known before the war, allows me to trace how the "sociographic novel" func-

tioned in the narrative about the Holocaust. This genre dominated the books describing village life and defining what “Hungarianness” is. Rudnóy created an extremely brave portrait of female prisoners, broke the taboo of the body, and wrote about what “sisterhood” was and how “female solidarity” functioned in the camp.

The third chapter is devoted to a series of poems by Miklós Radnóti, *Razglednicák* [Postcards], which I research using the tools of animal studies. During the Death March, the poet created poignant pieces that equate the subjectivity of a prisoner with the position of animals. Radnóti wrote about the fear of death and the awareness of the irrevocable sentence, styling his poems on Virgil’s bucolics.

The fourth chapter concerns the novel *Emberszag* (*The Smell of Humans*) by Ernő Szép, in which the author talks about forced labor in the convention of ironic but also lyrical reportage. The horror of death, humiliation, and physical weakness are veiled by the masterful descriptions of the landscape, through which one of the most talented artists of the interwar period rebels against Nazism.

In Chapter Five, I interpret the poetry series *Márciustól márciusig* [From March to March] by István Vas and his *Ostromnapló* [Diaries of the Siege]. The author dealt with the war using irony and sarcasm. The harsh evaluation of the country, the outrageous metaphors of putrefaction and decay became the hallmarks of his wartime output.

The sixth chapter is devoted to the surreal poem by Stefánia Mándy, *Egy halott álmaiból* [From the dreams of the dead woman], in which the author created with extraordinary courage and artistic panache an apocalyptic vision of the world of the Holocaust. The unusual complexity of the text and numerous references to post-war graphics and oratorio works allow for reading her short piece as a poignant example of the correspondence of the arts.

The next chapter presents two unique war diaries by Judit Heyman and Anna Dévényi Sándorné, a teenager and a pregnant woman. Both authors report, although each in a different way, their definition of girlhood and femininity, as well as motherhood in the face of the Holocaust. Both writers dealt with the threat and a fierce desire to survive uncompromisingly.

The last chapter is devoted to a book depicting the realities of forced labor in the Donu Bend – *Lágernek népe* by István Örkény and to his drama *Voronyezs*. The author stripped his memories of pathos in favor of irony and the grotesque. This inventive use of genres contributes to an even more penetrating and painful definition of the human condition, and thus opened up an artistic path for later generations of authors writing about war and the Holocaust.

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