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The Dybbuk Speaks with the Mouth of the Living: Wartime Trauma and Strategies of Holocaust Remembrance in Hungarian Literature Between 1949 and 1953

I would like to... say, without cheap literary jargon, that the Holocaust is the Dybbuk of our history: the historical Dybbuk. Here are the unburied dead, millions of people who were humiliated and exterminated in a "horrific" way; this atrocity has not received closure, neither ritual nor spiritual. The Dybbuk of history leaves no one alone—neither the mourners of the dead..., nor the perpetrators (and we are well aware of the acute torments inflicted by the Erinyes), nor even the completely innocent, even though they did not live in that time or their geographic location, or their social or personal situation could not have been directly affected by those events, and still they know the burden of death that humanity has on its conscience. In fact, the historical Dybbuk of the Holocaust has become the Dybbuk of all humanity, and rightly so.

Géza Komoróczy, *A pernye beleég bőrünkbe*

1. Deadlock

The question of post-war Hungarian literature dealing with the Holocaust is really a question of how, under strict censorship and stringent cultural policies, authors were able to make their artistic visions a reality. Was there any space for niche writing and where were the lines of social taboos? And, also, did literature shoulder the burden of dealing with recovering from trauma which was not addressed in the public debate?

If we were to review wartime and postwar texts, we would have no difficulty finding passages that suggest the need for a moral reckoning and also talk about the fear of the moment when it happens. In his *Pince-napló* (Basement Diary) (1945), written during the siege of Budapest, Lajos Nagy says:

I am ashamed that I have something to do with these scoundrels, that I too am a Hungarian and a Christian. What am I going to say when I wind up somewhere abroad after the war? A Hungarian! Will I be able to deny it? But this feeling of shame wells up in me and soon fades away. In the end, I never wanted to have anything to do with these scoundrels. You can't divide people into Hungarians and Jews, into Christians and Mohammedans, into bald and hairy. You have to divide them into stupid and wicked and honest. (Nagy 1976: 30)

Nagy's voice represented Hungarians hiding from the bombs in shelters and basements, aware of what fate had befallen the Jews ("[they] are being transported to a German city called Auschwitz," 15), and also those Hungarians who experienced the war from the safe position of bystanders. A mere act of observation, resulting in a diary entry, can hardly be called engagement (if we consider intellectual activity as something that does not require or expect the participation of others). Sándor Márai expressed a similar view of the ethical burden on Hungarian society in his *Napló (Diary)* in 1944:

Who is responsible for this? What punishment would offset this responsibility?... Ultimate responsibility, however, lies with Horthy and his men, as they are the ones who let this mentality, from which everything sprang with tragic consequences, grow and flourish. But accountability will not change anything, and revenge will not bring anything back. (Márai 2016: 155)

The writer was not yet aware that the greatest problem after the war would not be an overbearing sense of responsibility or a failure to make proper amends for the wrongs done, but institutionalized silence. The difference between Márai and Nagy was key. Although they both pondered on the need for accountability for wrongdoings, they stood at two opposite sides of the argument. The former, although he did not like to boast about it, as he took such acts for granted, had led Jewish girl out of the death march along the Danube (see Földényi 2013: 177). The writer's wife, Ilona Matzner (Lola), was Jewish; his in-laws, despite the family's desperate efforts to free them, perished in Auschwitz. Additionally, the atmosphere of hatred towards the former bourgeoisie (or patriciate, to use a word Márai would use) drove the family to emigrate in 1948. The latter writer also opposed fascism, but became involved in the Communist Party right after the war, and the year Márai left the country, he was awarded the state Kossuth Prize, a clear sign of support from the authorities.

István Bibó also spoke on the issue of reckoning with the past in his book *Zsidókérdés Magyarországon 1944 után* (The Jewish Question) (1948). The thinker linked the notion of freedom with social maturity, which he did not discern in his country, and he believed that the freedom of Hungarians was not completely fulfilled, because, as he argued:

we can speak of adulthood and freedom when we recognize that our deeds—though mainly determined by external factors—are abominable and when we begin to take responsibility for them in order to continue to act with the dignity of a free, responsible human being. (Bibó 2012: 338)

Bibó was convinced that the earlier plight of the Jews at the Danube and many events that had occurred in his homeland were not sufficiently processed and thus could recur. When lessons are not learned from the past, and especially when perpetrators are not punished, when sowers of hatred, agitators and anti-Semitic journalists influencing public opinion do not pay for their actions, it will be difficult to expect society to apologize and recognize to what considerable extent it participated in the Holocaust, for example, by securing transports to Auschwitz with military escorts.

Deciding who is guilty and accountable does not hinge on proving that the perpetrator did not act out of social or personal motives, but that regardless of all this, they chose to perpetrate despicable deeds out of their own will; if, on the other hand, it is proven that they acted under the pressure of various external factors, they are innocent and do not bear any responsibility. For wickedness or cowardice does not come from some diabolical resolve, but precisely from the fact that we wretchedly, unconsciously and unwittingly do what (and only what) social and personal circumstances compel us to do, what our deep-seated prejudices, distorted and distorting experiences, hollow platitudes and foolish phrases drive us to do. (Bibó 2012: 337–338)

In charting the history of anti-Semitism in Hungary, Bibó not only showed a range of social phenomena that stoked hostility and later public hatred toward Jews (such as the Tiszaeszlár show trial and the era of Horthy's revisionism), but also enumerated behaviors that required urgent response in 1948, when he was writing the essay. He traced the post-war indifference of Hungarians to the Holocaust to learned passivity that had never before been stigmatized and that

had been perpetuated and even strengthened over time (cf. Fritz 2012; Győri 2009; Seewann, Kovács 2006; Karády 1984).

If we look at the first post-war gestures in terms of neglect and inexplicable anti-Semitic zealotry, it becomes clear that the surviving Hungarian Jews found themselves in very difficult circumstances. For one thing, the Communist Party, which had few members at first, wishing to seize power, aspired to create a political program that would draw the “masses,” and this forced its members to equate all wartime experiences, which they subsumed under one umbrella term: the wartime past. The more general the term would be, the better, because it is easier to cut off what fits into one word (“the past”). All displays of social difference, such as public demonstration of ethnic identity or the wish to stand out from a centrally homogenized society were answered with violence. After all, social divisions could not uphold the pretenses of a supranational community. When the few Hungarian Jewish survivors returned to their former homes, demanded the return of their property, and wanted to live their lives in accordance with their old habits, this only fueled resentment. As Ágnes Heller argued in her essay *A ‘zsidókérdés’ megoldhatatlansága* (The Unresolvability of the “Jewish Question”) in 2004:

One became accustomed during those few months that Jewish belongings and apartments that had been seized had now become the property of the [Hungarians]... Perhaps it was because of this “reminder of their existence,” but I believe that this was not the only reason why hatred toward Jews was rekindled after the Holocaust. If one of the good old neighbors or schoolmates had been sent to the ghetto with his entire family, deported, and was the only one of the whole family to survive and come back—without the children—this instilled an inevitable sense of guilt in the neighbor, if they had any sort of remorse whatsoever... This neighbor felt that they should have helped... instead of acting as if nothing had happened, as if everything was fine. Humans do not like witnesses to their weaknesses and misdeeds. (Heller 2013: 40–41)

As Heller argued, what was a social trauma in 1945–1947 turned into “neurotic reactions” and triggered “a wave of anti-Semitism” (Heller 2013: 41). First came threatening comments and growing hostility, which turned into anti-Jewish agitations, and, finally, those turned into spontaneous acts of hatred. Pogroms occurred in several towns: Kaposvár, Kunmadaras, Debrecen, as well as Ózd, Sajószentpéter, Szegvár, Tótkomlós, Miskolc, Kiszombor, and Mátészalka. In Budapest between 1945 and 1948, Jews were regularly accused of abducting

children, of making various food products from their “Christian blood” (which was reminiscent of the blood legends that were alive in nineteenth-century Hungary). These events were a clear indicator of the situation in post-war Hungary: Jews were blamed for the country’s ruin, economic and commercial collapse (as they had been for all previous failures, from the nineteenth century onward).

Secondly, as Randolph Braham said, “after 1948, under the Rákosi regime, the Holocaust was basically engulfed by the Orwellian black hole of history. Jewish martyrs were lumped together with other victims” (Braham 2015: 235). The unwritten injunction against dealing with the Jewish question (although these were not the only suppressed topics, as the problem of Red Army rape, for example, was also regarded as taboo) (see Kunt 2019) came as a surprise, since Rákosi was himself Jewish (he was born Mátyás Rosenfeld), so one might have expected him to take at least a neutral stance on the revisiting of Hungary’s attitude during World War II. It is worth noting here that the People’s Courts and the People’s Tribunal began operating right after the war in 1945, and issued tens of thousands of verdicts, with almost four hundred death sentences for war criminals (such as Dóme Sztójay, Béla Imrédy, László Bárdossy, László Endre, and László Baký¹). However, the executions and their press coverage failed to spearhead a larger-scale reckoning. The removal of information about citizens’ backgrounds and religions from official records did not help either. Since no one was asked about their roots, it was easier to hide the actual social diversity (this applied not only to Jews, but also to Swabians or Serbs) and in theory there was no “need” to distinguish between individual experiences and especially between narratives about them.

These narratives were subjected to strict control under József Révai, who from 1948 subordinated all cultural activity to the Marxist–Leninist doctrine, having formulated a socialist cultural ideal that radically rejected the value of European tradition and its continuing influence on literature. Révai held the position of one-man manager of Hungarian cultural life, and thereby made decisions about literature, in effect eradicating anything that did not support the illusion of a homogeneous Soviet art promoting a single legitimate model of artistic life. Of course, these decisions had consequences for literature. Some authors chose to emigrate (also internally), some chose to support the regime’s policy of “Soviet art,” while others were silenced for many years. The latter were mainly authors of Jewish descent, who were feared because of their alleged bourgeois inclinations, as well as their sympathies for Zionist movements,

1 Politicians and/or military officers who were complicit in the Holocaust of Hungarian Jews and collaborated with the Third Reich.

which were officially banned in Hungary just a few months after the founding of Israel (Braham 1997: 1300).

After 1956, that is, with the advent of the Kádár era, the religious, educational and social life of minorities came under strict government control (Szécsényi, Braham, ed. 2017: 291–329). Even though from the 1960s the subject of the Holocaust and the wartime fate of the Jews returned to prose (for example, in Imre Keszi's *Elysium* [Elysium] or Tibor Cseres' *Hideg Napok* [Cold Days]), this did not mean that Hungarians had made a reckoning with the war, but only that there were now literary representations of the experience of war. One consequence followed from this: since there was no place in the public and political space for the collective pursuit of justice, for redressing the wrongs, or worse, for talking about tragic experiences, people's knowledge of the war and especially of the Holocaust was diminishing, and as the silence grew longer, everything connected with the war congealed into a taboo, which in turn reinforced the sense of trauma (another trauma). Meanwhile, public debate had to be replaced by cherishing personal memory, despite the fear of its consequences.

As Andrea Pető wrote, "the politics of memory under communism forced people not to remember." In her essay on Władysław Pasikowski's *Pokłosie* (Aftermath), she notes the importance of private conversations and of grassroots groups whose members remembered the "true history." She writes about both nations, Polish and Hungarian:

While silence and oblivion cost many their Jewish identity, in other families and groups of friends the re-telling of past events helped create identity. Among friends, family stories were told at informal social gatherings, which was an important means and requirement for belonging to the group. Personal narrative gave authenticity to historical events: by telling a story, the story became true. This is how the commandment of *nichum aveilim*, to improve the mental, emotional and spiritual well-being of surviving mourners, became tied to the politics of memory. (Pető, accessed 2014)

Naturally, there is the question of the limits of such individual memory, which, as we know from the writings of Maurice Halbwachs, cannot be divorced from the social context. What individuals remember crystallizes through interactions and communication with others, especially when it comes to sharing knowledge of dates and facts. As the sociologist wrote, "[it is only] to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection" (Halbwachs 1992: 38).

Halbwachs refers to collective memory—which is impossible in Hungary—that is “produced” from the accumulation of individual experiences and their shaping by society. Memory relies on a supra-individual pattern of recollection of a specific event, which has been developed in the course of multiple confrontations. “The individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but... the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories.” When a narrative about the past is banned or “frozen” (Klüger 2009: 195) in a generation, we can expect the problem to grow into a multigenerational phenomenon. This is what happened in Hungary.

2. Politics of oblivion vs. literature

The problem of silence about the Holocaust can be interpreted using handy metaphors (such as Zerubavel’s “elephant” (see Żukowski 2018: 28) or Eliot’s “rumination” (see Assmann 2013: 109–110) that also highlight the time that was to come after the end of political or social suppression. The period of the “thaw” (Ruth Klüger’s term) laid bare earlier phenomena and their undercurrents, but also revealed some irreversible processes. Hungarian literature of the 1949–1953 era, seen from the hindsight of later decades, appears mainly as state-controlled art, which was ideologically purged of all traces of individualism (also in the matter of interpreting reality and the past) and was a tool of disconcertingly effective indoctrination. As literature is important in strengthening identity and cultural memory (see Erl 2022), it may seem relevant what happens when it is manipulated and what strategies for salvaging knowledge about the past the authors chose.

Despite the constraints and problems that writers had to face, some of them tried to write about the Jewish experience of the war, although it is difficult to compare the artistic opportunities of this generation with authors publishing in the 1960s. Certainly, the authors of books published until 1953 could not freely choose the storyline, but they did not relent in trying to smuggle the taboo subject of the Holocaust into literature. Below is a list of books that came out during this period: József Debreczeni’s *Hideg krematorium* (1950), Imre Sarkadi’s *Rozi* (1951), Sándor Sasdi’s *Magvetők* (1951), Kamjén István’s *Emberpiac* (1951), Tamás Aczél’s *A szabadság árnyékában* (1952), Ferenc Karinthy’s *Budapesti tavasz* (Spring Comes to Budapest) (1953), Róbert Kertész’s *Ne felejts!* (1955) and Tibor Cseres’ *Here-báró* (1956).

3. Abomination and a hint of humanity (József Debreczeni's *Hideg Crematorium*)

József Debreczeni (1905–1978) is one of the most remarkable authors on the artistic map of the 1950s, not least because he published his concentration camp novel, *Hideg krematorium* (Cold Crematorium) (1950), at the very moment when such books ceased to come out. One can view this publication as the last of the books released right after the war that offered a bold portrayal of the Jewish experience. Debreczeni, however, can hardly be compared to writers of the 1945–1948 transition period. There was no account of the death camp experience among the novels or diaries that were penned right after the end of the war, such as József Darvas' *Város az ingoványon* (1945), Lajos Nagy's *Basement Diary* (1945) or Tibor Déry's *Alvilági játékok* (1946). As István Szeli noted in the afterword to the second edition of the book, Déry, Nagy, and Darvas could only “observe the global battle of formidable forces from a narrow ‘basement perspective,’ being relatively safe in their hiding places” (Szeli 2015: 88). Meanwhile, Debreczeni described his experience from the vantage point of his personal, tragic destiny. Lajos Szokolcsay devoted his review precisely to this difference between the other texts of the “war series” and *Hideg Crematorium*. He stressed that for the writer the most important goal was the “anti-romantic, essential,” “intellectual” and “precise” description of Auschwitz (Szirmai 2015:88).

Although the writer did not provide his novel with a preface or an afterword to aid the reader, we can surmise what role the work played, as Debreczeni did not return to his war memories after the war. When he was deported to the camp, he was 39 and used the genre that was most obvious to him—reportage—to record his experiences. The precision and authenticity that all the book's reviewers appreciated was not so much an elaborate strategy as a professional habit, and therefore likely the only way for the writer to describe his stay in Auschwitz. Debreczeni had worked as a journalist since 1925 and resumed editorial work after the war, when joining the ranks of Hungarian writers in Serbia.

It seems interesting to trace the reception of Debreczeni's novel after its subsequent reissues, namely in 1975 and in 2015. One of the first reviews that appeared in Hungary, right after the writer's prose debut is the most interesting for us here. In 1951, Károly Szirmai wrote in the *Híd* magazine that *Hideg krematórium* depicted the experience of “internment” (“internáltság”), and praised the author's style as “sharply articulated, tough, masculine writing (“férfias írás”), which showed signs of “nobility, restraint,” as well as “economy of means.” According to the critic, the novel's greatest strengths were its “purely intellectual” treatment of the subject, its “impeccable rhythm, rich linguistic imagination..., and wonderful play of consciousness” (Szirmai 1951: 618).

Szirmai also suggested that Debreczeni's writing mastery would "give pleasure" (sic!) to the reader.

[He] knows how to stir our interest in even the most heinous, the most horrid, the most oppressive things. Just to mention the multiple descriptions of latrines. He paints a whole series of "de profundis" scenes of the wretched souls walking in the dance of death... in language that is half medical and half poetic. He also charts a rich variety of different shades of misery, suffering and deprivation. (Szirmai 1951: 618)

The critic took special note of the way Debreczeni portrayed the reality of the camp (although he did not use the noun "camp"²) and stressed that he "evoked the past faithfully" despite the physical suffering. We should mention here the well-known mechanism of erasing the truth about history after the war. Deliberately and in the spirit of the linguistic practices of the time, Szirmai substituted nouns that directly indicated what experience was being referred to in the book. Also, he used mostly neutral terms, and remembered to couch anything that could cause concern (including moral concern) in uplifting phrases. For example, Szirmai wrote that:

however realistic these scenes may be, they are not repulsive. One can find a hint of humanity even in their hideousness. His sense of justice is a whip in his hand, but also a firmly clamping brake that keeps his neurotic temper from going to extremes. (Szirmai 1951: 618–619)

As can be seen, the strategy described at the beginning of this article predominates in the cited excerpts from the reviews of Debreczeni's novels: it is best not to talk about the war at all, and if you do, then do so in such a way that the reader of the review does not feel the horror of the Holocaust, as long as they guess that this is what the book is about. The reviews also made no mention of the autobiographical aspects of the novel, did not contemplate the significance of Debreczeni's identity, and did not raise questions about morality.

When compared with the articles that appeared after the second edition of *Hideg krematorium* in 1975, Szirmai's review seems even more bizarre. In 1975, the reviewer was no longer afraid of the word "lager," and chose the camp number, 33031, as the title of the article. This should not surprise us, since

2 Szirmai mentions only once that the novel is about all the camps that make up the "land of Auschwitz" and lists the camps at Eule, Fürstenberg and Dörnhau (Szirmai 1951: 618).

there was a “cultural thaw” in Hungary at the time. The year before, Mária Ember’s *Hajtűkanyar* had been published, Imry Kertész’s *Fatelessness* had come out almost simultaneously, and a year later, Péter Nádas’ *The End of a Family Story* was released.

4. “Hitler does not really speak to me” (István Kamjén’s *Emberpiac*)

The discussion of literary representations of the Holocaust, barring Debreczeni’s book, boils down to analysis of single sentences from novels that mentioned the war and/or the Jewish experience on the sidelines of other narratives. The two most notable examples of such texts are István Kamjén’s *Emberpiac* and Ferenc Karinthy’s *Spring Comes to Budapest*. Both works were written in compliance with József Révai’s cultural policy. Press reviewers approached them as worthy representatives of the mainstream literary movement, namely, texts that demonstrated the power of the working class and worldview transformation. Curiously, although the plot, themes and language fit perfectly with the trends of the time, the authors also managed to insert themes that, had they been spotlighted by the critics, could have been a starting point for a larger debate. Let us take a closer look at the authors and their novels.

István Kamjén (1907–1976) was involved in political activity throughout his life. Starting in 1932, he was a member of the Hungarian Agricultural Workers’ Association (Magyar Földmunkásszövetség); in 1939 he joined the illegal Communist Party; in 1942 he enrolled in the Historical Remembrance Committee (Történelmi Emlékbizottság); and from 1947 to 1949 he was a member of parliament for the National People’s Party. His literary works, which seem an obvious corollary of his political activity, revolved around the problems of workers. After arriving in Budapest from Mezútúr in 1921, Kamjén worked as a *kubikos*, or “digger,” a laborer traveling from place to place to do the hardest physical work, usually with small tools and wheelbarrows. Diggers were cheap labor and were employed to pave streets, build flood fortifications, plant crops and do harvesting. The author, like his father (also István Kamjén), was himself a digger for eighteen years, so he was well acquainted with the stark realities of this wandering and dimly paid trade. Diggers worked and lived together (in the Diggers’ Hotel), and often suffered from poverty (“we will die of hunger” [Kamjén 1951: 38]). Their customers chose which of them would get a particular job by organizing a “people’s exchange,” or the “market” referred to in the title. Kamjén recounted these experiences in *Emberpiac* (The People’s Market), thus creating what is arguably the only literary portrait of the diggers, as well as illustrating the general situation of the workers and the violent influence of the authorities on their existence. As the author wrote: “The world is divided

into two camps: the oppressors and the oppressed” (Kamjén 1951: 38). Kamjén outlined the history of the *kubikos* over the span of a decade. We meet the novel’s protagonists around 1931, when Prime Minister István Bethlen gets dismissed and a time of famine and abandonment of all investments begins in Hungary. The worst sufferers are the diggers, who cannot find work. The storyline concludes with the end of the war, the formation of the Communist Party and the seizure of power by Mátyás Rákosi’s supporters. Despite this, the book proclaimed the main slogans of liberation from the shackles of the bourgeois world: first in opposition to rising Hitlerism, and then in the name of the new Soviet order.

Kamjén tells the story of the workers from the point of view of Mihály Szabó, who suffers hunger and unemployment. When the protagonist finally manages to start a family, he is arrested for two years and returns home when his daughter, whom he had not been seen before, is no longer a little child. His wife, Erzsi, dies from untreated illness, having lived in a damp and moldy home, and he starts trying even more desperately than before to keep himself and his child alive. The digger’s story ends with Szabó starting a new relationship and proposing to Eszter as the Soviets liberate the country and power falls into the hands of the Communists.

Although one can accuse Kamjén of minor construction errors and language lapses, which make his book formulaic and very generalizing (Molnár 1951: 1173), it is hard to deny his courage in describing the situation of Jews under National Socialism. Szabó is consistent in expressing his indignation against the aggressive anti-Semitic policies and deportations and his opinion on the situation of the Jews is voiced several times in *Emberpiac*. Mostly to juxtapose them with Szabó’s views, the novel cites widespread stereotypes and myths about Jews at the time, which originated in the language of the Third Reich (“the Jews are to blame for all this,” and “what a beautiful world it would be if there were no Jews (Kamjén 1951: 146). In one of the scenes in which the digger talks to a stranger on a train, the following conversation takes place, after a series of travelers’ claims: “Well, Hitler is a genius. He knows how to deal with the world,” “Yes, kind sir.” And “it will be like that in our country too. We have our Szálasi guys!³ They do their job right!” (Kamjén 1951: 182), Szabó offers an utterly different perspective:

3 Ferenc Szálasi (1897–1946) was the leader of the Arrow Cross (Nyilash) party, which ruled Hungary from October 17, 1944 to May 8, 1945. The party was subservient to the anti-Semitic policies of the Third Reich and was responsible for the execution of Jews.

Look, since the Jews dispersed all over the world, the masters have had no better propaganda than to bring up the Jewish question... There are no Jews in India, or if there are, there are very few of them, and yet the Indians are mercilessly exploited by the British masters. (Kamjén 1951: 183)

And when a fellow passenger calls Indians “a people without culture,” with whom “it is impossible to deal otherwise,” the protagonist states:

You cannot look at the world from the point of view of race... You have to see the true situation of society and judge it by the degree of its development... Capitalism has long stopped developing, even a little bit, so it started to obstruct the progress of humanity. (Kamjén 1951: 183)

Leaving aside the fact that most of the books published in 1951 featured slogans promoting the new regime, Kamjén’s writing clearly shows that it was possible to talk about the Jews and their war experience in novels. Admittedly, it was difficult to include profound insights into the issue and make accusations against Hungarian society, because even if the writer had such plans, the censors would have instantly picked up on them. However, *Emberpiac* shows us where the line of taboo was and what manner of speaking about the Jews seemed acceptable in 1951.

5. “So that was life?” (Ferenc Karinthy’s *Spring Comes to Budapest*)

Ferenc Karinthy’s novel, *Budapesti tavasz* (Spring Comes to Budapest) was published in 1953, just as the post-Stalin thaw was starting in Hungary. The first reviews of the book did not surface until 1954, which most likely had to do with the caution of critics. After all, Karinthy’s book addressed issues that were difficult to evade with vague descriptions. The main character, Zoltán Pintér, whom we meet as a private-deserter who is making his way to the capital on Christmas Day 1944 to hide in his parents’ house, dreams of continuing his university studies, interrupted by the war. Turned away by his father, who fears punishment for harboring a fugitive, he is sent away, along with his companion Bertalan Gázsó, to the Kochs’ abandoned apartment. It turns out that the very spacious apartment is now inhabited by engineer Tivadar Turnovszky, his wife and his wife’s relative, Jutka. It quickly becomes clear that Turnovszky’s seductive, beautiful wife is Jewish, as is the young girl, who does not actually come from Transylvania, as was claimed on the first evening. Zoltán soon falls in love with Jutka (whose real name is Klári) and becomes the confidant of her secrets,

and eventually a messenger, who delivers a package to her parents. The Erdős couple ask him to take one of their children to a safer place. Thus, the young man not only saves a Jewish child, but also witnesses the parents of his beloved being driven out of their home by the Nilash and taken to their deaths. At the end of the novel, when the Turnovszkys decide that the young girl's presence is a threat to their survival, Jutka (Klári) leaves the apartment, and although she runs into Zoltán in custody, he fails to save her, and she is shot at the Danube.

Karinthy portrays the two Jewish female characters in the roles of vestal virgins, charming women who create a homely atmosphere during the siege of the city, who are resourceful, can cook well from leftovers, are caring and look forward to the future with hope. Jutka (Klári) is shown to be dreaming of studying medicine (though she was not admitted to the university because of her background), and the engineer strikes up a tacit understanding with Gázsó, who begins to help her with the most difficult chores. Moreover, one of the two storylines that tie the book's plot together (besides the storyline about the role of the citizens and the nation) is Zoltán's love affair with Jutka (Klári) and his grief over her death. The protagonist, who, in the final scenes of the novel, stands on the roof of an apartment building and revels in the city's liberation, while watching the bombed capital and thinking about the country's future, embodies a role model of a citizen that cannot have appealed to culture experts.

The writer deftly juggled different themes, as he not only openly spoke about the presence of Jews in besieged Budapest and portrayed them as dedicated, helpful, capable people (not only from the perspective of the atrocities they suffered), but also made a harsh judgment on the times of pre-war nationalism ("Where are those whose lips were full of slogans, who strained their voice and beat their breasts from morning to evening?" (Karinthy 1977: 223). On the one hand, he criticized the Germans ("there is nothing left to do but to choose the lesser evil over the greater evil, meaning to stick with the Germans in these hard times" (Karinthy 1977: 16), but he did not regard the arrival of the Soviets as the best scenario for the war's end ("what do the Russians want here...? They will chase the Germans away, all right, but will they want to go back home later." (Karinthy 1977: 157). In the richly woven narrative, one can very easily recognize the recurring themes of race, which, as in Karinthy's work, are evenly distributed. The characters talk about Jews, Germans, as well as their own "Turanian-Mongolian" (Karinthy 1977: 54–55) origins, which removes the disturbing, nationalistic tone from the conversation, and incidentally reveals the author's strategy of balanced judgments, openness to different outlooks, and the decision to include the theme of Jewish experience.

The latter theme is intriguing for two reasons. For one thing, it can be interpreted as a desire to show one's own identity, since the writer's mother, Aranka Böhm, was Jewish, and one can find the character traits of the novel's heroines in her biography: seductive, beautiful, educated and resourceful. Böhm was the wife, lover and favorite of the great Hungarian writers (Endre Ady, Tibor Déry and Frigyes Karinthy). She died in Auschwitz in 1944, and we might think of the tragic fate of Jutka (Klári) as a tribute to her mother. Then again, Karinthy makes several factual errors related to the plight of Budapest's Jews, when he confuses, for example, houses marked with a star (*csillagos házak*) with protected houses (*védett házak*).

So what happened that such an interestingly portrayed Holocaust story did not provoke debate, that the book was considered a good but "a bit sluggish" (Ungvári 1954: 84) example of leaning toward communism? The novel's descriptive language was at fault. Tamás Ungvári, a distinguished historian and author of the monograph *Ahasvérus és Shylock. A "zsidókérdés" Magyarországon* (Ahasverus and Shylock: "The Jewish Question" in Hungary) (1999), who was, nevertheless, keenly engaged in the Communist Party during the Communist era, judged the protagonists based on the cultural politics of the time. He judged the educated members of the former elite most harshly:

[Karinthy] skillfully inserts Miklós Torday-Landgraf, an unprincipled intellectual... into the plot. He also introduces the cowardly, spineless intellectual, engineer Turnovszky, who was still on his feet even after liberation, as he used capitalist connections to his advantage. (Ungvári 1954: 84)

He further faulted Karinthy for underestimating the significance of the liberation by the Soviets and the power of the people in 1945, by which time the seeds of communism were to have germinated, without mentioning a word about the heroines and their relevance in the novel. He only uses the phrases "pacifist-humanist" outlook on the future and "the girl who must die." Unfortunately, the critic does not specify who he means when he writes about "millions and millions of fates" (Ungvári 1954: 84).

It was not until later years, and especially the literature produced after 1956, that the impasse of silence on the Holocaust was broken, although the final turn came only in the 1970s. Before Tibor Cseres set out to chronicle the fate of the Jews and Serbs of Novi Sad in his 1964 novel *Hideg napok* (Cold Days), and thereby illustrated the central mechanism of social and institutional denial, Hungarian literature was concerned with the purported comfort of its readers,

who were supposed to feel no fear of deserved retribution, and who were, on principle, spared from painful confrontations with the facts. As can be seen in the quoted excerpts from the novels and their press reviews, the balancing act between attempts to write about a banned topic and the interpretation of those attempts usually ended in the writers' subtle nuances failing. Strident critics, as later decades would show, would soon change their tone, and manifest an openness and willingness which they had previously rejected to provide honest commentary on history. For many Hungarians, however, who were raised in those times, this would be a belated gesture that would fail to make up for intellectual and social negligence.

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| Abstract

KINGA PIOTROWIAK-JUNKIERT

The Dybbuk Speaks with the Mouth of the Living: Wartime Trauma and Strategies of Holocaust Remembrance in Hungarian Literature Between 1949 and 1953

The article deals with the subject of the Holocaust in Hungarian literature between 1949 and 1953, and in particular with the writing strategies used by the authors to describe a phenomenon that was silenced and removed from public debate. During the post-war period, when the Communists were in power in Hungary, it was forbidden to write about the war and especially about the Holocaust of the Jews; moreover, all literary texts had to be approved by the censors. Despite the strict restrictions, Hungarian writers managed to smuggle the forbidden topic into their novels. In this article, I discuss the prose of József Debreczeni, István Kamjén, and Ferenc Karinthy against the background of social and historical phenomena in Hungary.

Keywords: Hungarian Jews, Holocaust, Hungarian literature, silence

| Bio

Kinga Piotrowiak-Junkiery is a Polish and Hungarian literary scholar (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań), and a graduate of Interdisciplinary Individual Studies in Humanities from The Academy of Artes Liberales. She is the author of the monograph *Świadomość zwrócona przeciwko sobie samej. Imre Kertész wobec Zagłady* (Warszawa, 2014) (Consciousness Against Itself. Imre Kertész in the Face of the Holocaust), the co-author of *Dyskurs postkolonialny we współczesnej literaturze i kulturze Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. Polska, Ukraina, Węgry, Słowacja* (Poznań, 2015) (Postcolonial Discourse in Contemporary Literature and Culture of Central and Eastern Europe. Poland, Ukraine, Hungary and Slovakia) and author of *Od idylli do ironii. Literatura węgierska wobec Zagłady w latach 1944–1948* (2020) (From Idyll to Irony. Hungarian Literature on the Holocaust Between 1944–1948). She is also a translator whose recent translation publications include *The Last Inn* by Imre Kertész (W.A.B., 2016), *The Rebbeh's Featherless Parrot. A Collection of Imaginary Hasidic Stories* by Géza Röhrig (Austeria, 2016) and Zoltán Halasi's *The Road to an Empty Sky* (Nisza, 2017). Her research interests are Hungarian literature in the face of the Holocaust and postcolonial discourse in Hungary after 1989.

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