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Politics of Memory in Post-Socialist Košice and the Márai-Project

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to present and analyse the local politics of memory in post-1989 Slovakia with special attention to Košice, situated in the Eastern part of the Slovak Republic. In this study, local politics of memory is memory politics that the Slovak city leaders, the minority communities and the local civil society practices. The paper will address politics of memory by elaborating on what a currently mono-ethnic Slovak city does with its remarkably rich Hungarian, German or Jewish heritage. The first part of the paper will discuss theoretical issues. The second part analyses the battle for the public space in the city after 1989. For doing so, it is necessary to outline the significance and the place of Košice in the Slovak and Hungarian collective historical memories. The focus of analysis will be on the memory sites inaugurated by the Slovak city leaders and the Hungarian community, as well as the local policy of the civil society in promoting the heritage of the city. The third section will discuss the shifting place of Sándor Márai, an internationally renowned Košice-born writer, in the way this heritage is represented.

Keywords

Memory policy, Kassa, Košice, Márai, post-1989 Slovakia, Hungarian-Slovak relations

Introduction

In 2011, as a student of the Summer School of Slovak Language, I visited the city of Košice that is situated in the Eastern part of the Slovak Republic. The Slovak language instructors who accompanied the group of international students could not provide relevant information on the cultural heritage of the city. At the beginning of our sightseeing, a well-known local tour guide, Milan Kolcun, posed the question who we thought to have been the most famous person from Košice. Utterly astonished as I was to learn as he told us that considering Sándor Márai - as the Hungarian students answered, - proved to be wrong because in fact the Swiss professional tennis player Martina Hingisová who was born in the city should be regarded so. Eight years later, the same Kolcun suggested that the Košice Airport should be named after Sándor Márai. He cited the example of the Lyon Airport that bears the name of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Kolcun even argued that Márai's wife, Lola, deserved a street to be named after her.¹ How could the perception of Márai change so dramatically in less than a decade?

Košice (in German Kaschau, in Hungarian Kassa), together with Marseilles, held the title of the European Capital of Culture in 2013. The city used the personality and work of Sándor Márai,² an internationally renowned Hungarian writer who was born in the city in 1900, to promote and represent the events and programmes of the season. Thus, the title was also a good occasion for Slovaks to become familiar with Márai's writings and personality. In fact, until 1989, the writer was "a stranger in his hometown,"³ and also in Hungary.

1 *Monika Kacejová*: Ulic so ženskými nazvami je v našom meste poskromne. Košice: Dnes https://kosicednes.sk/zaujímavosti/ulic-so-zenskymi-nazvami-je-v-nasom-meste-poskromne/?fbclid=IwAR3wrmtfLdqmAJn0DFMqjcbcd1XCi-gWs1CrvSVKsH2c0P-Jruh_4raqIDpc (Last downloaded on 20 November 2020)

2 The programs of the Košice European Capital of Culture project focused on four personalities who are related to the city: Sándor Márai, Lajos Oelschläger-Öry, Juraj Jakubisko and Fernando Fallik.

3 *Louise Ostermann Twardowski*: Sandor Marai and the memory of exile. Kafkadesk <https://kafkadesk.org/2019/10/08/sandor-marai-and-the-memory-of-exile/> (last downloaded on 14 November 2020); See also: *Saša Petrášová*: He knew Košice, but Košice never knew him. The Slovak Spectator. <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20017067/he-knew-kosice-but-kosice-never-knew-him.html> (last downloaded on 14 November 2020); Peter Getting: Slovaks never heard of their own world-famous writer. The Slovak Spectator <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22060873/marai-sandor-writer-famous-kosice-slovakia.html> (Last downloaded on 14 November 2020)

His perception was controversial among Slovak intellectuals, since for them, Košice was an unquestionably Hungarian city and the bastion of the Hungarian culture. Indeed, the aftermath of the programmes reflects the longevity of this ambiguous attitude. As we shall see, after the European Capital of Culture season had ended, the Slovakian representatives and leaders of the city did not support the idea that a permanent exhibition dedicated to Márai should be established, although the demand for such a museum was clearly present: thousands of tourists visit the city and the local Hungarian elite kept pressing for it.

What does a currently mono-ethnic Slovakian city do with its remarkably rich non-Slovakian heritage? Who was Sándor Márai and how he is perceived in contemporary Slovakian society and in today's Košice? Is a Hungarian writer able to represent a "Slovakian city" at the beginning of the 21st century? Based on contemporary media publications, promotional brochures, guidebooks and the analysis of the most important memory sites in the city, this paper aims to answer these questions and to provide an overview of the local politics of memory in post-1989 Košice with special attention to the European Capital of Culture season in 2013 and the so-called Márai project.

The first part of this paper addresses theoretical issues. The second part analyses the battle for public spaces in the city after 1989. Within this latter theme, it will be necessary to outline the place of Košice in the Slovak and Hungarian collective historical memory. The focus of analysis will be on the memory sites inaugurated by the Slovak city leaders. And finally, in the third part of the paper an examination of the so-called Márai project will be given. A brief biography of Sándor Márai explores how he represented Košice in his writings and I also investigate how the Slovak intellectuals view and evaluate his work today.

Košice's multiethnic past and cultural heritage has recently attracted the attention of German, Slovak and Hungarian scholars,⁴ although with the exception of Vanda Vittì, who is dealing with Jewish cultural heritage of post-1989 Slovakia,⁵ none of them have researched the local politics of memory taking shape after 1989.

4 See for example: *Remembering the City. A Guide Through the Past of Košice*. Eds. Gayer Veronika – Slavka Otčenašová – Zahorán Csaba. Bp–Košice 2013.; *Frank Henschel: »Das Fluidum der Stadt ...« Urbane Lebenswelten in Kassa/Košice/Kaschau zwischen Sprachenvielfalt und Magyarisierung 1867–1918*. Göttingen 2017.; *Ondrej Ficeri: Potrianoské Košice. Premeny etnických identít obyvateľov Košíc v medzivojnovom Československu*. Bratislava 2019.

5 *Vanda Vittì: (Trans-)Formationen jüdischer Lebenswelten nach 1989. Eine Ethnografie in zwei slowakischen Städten*. Bielefeld 2015.



View from the Cathedral of Košice. Photo by Csaba Zahorán, 2005

Terminology and Methodology

First of all, it is necessary to explain some of my terminological choices: what do I mean by politics of memory and identity of a city? Under local politics of memory, I mean decisions that the Slovakian city leaders and the representatives of the Hungarian minority community make regarding sites of memory. On the one hand, politics of memory are “methods of management or coming to terms with the past through acts of retroactive justice, historical-political trials, commemorative instaurations, dates and places, symbolical appropriations of different nature.”⁶ In this paper, the identity of a town is understood as “a concept which forms through the time and includes physical, natural, historical and socio-cultural characteristics of a particular town. Therefore, in any particular town, understanding and appreciating the local identity becomes an important issue in the conservation of its character.”⁷ In the case of Košice, the local identity is closely tied to the Main

⁶ *Nora Rabotnikof*: Memoria y política a 30 años del golpe. In: Argentina, 1976. Estudios en torno al golpe de estado. Comps. Clara Lida – Horacio Crespo – Pablo Yankelevich. México 2007. 261.

⁷ *Mert Nezih Rifaioglu – Neriman Şahin Güçhan*: The Concept of Identity and Its Iden-

Street. That is the area where important historical events took place, where architectural sights are situated, and most of the memorials (statues, plaques etc.) are related to this space too, thus it has a central part in this analysis too.

Furthermore, the notion of lieux de mémoire, places or sites of memory, is used according to the interpretation of Pierre Nora.⁸ Since its publication in 1984, the concept of lieux de mémoire, elaborated by the French historian, has been used often to describe national places of remembrance.⁹ In the past three decades, beyond the initial French project, places of German, Austrian, Dutch, Spanish memory (or rather, memories) have been collected and analysed. As most European countries initiated such projects, the original idea seems to have reached its limits. The transnational perspective, the aim of creating transnational memory sites, is a quite new initiative in Europe and it adds a new dimension to the notion and theory of lieux de mémoire. Shared but divisive sites of memory do not inevitably have to be antagonistic, yet they can contribute to overcoming inherent contradictions.

Košice through the Stormy 20th Century

Since its foundation, Košice had been one of the most important regional centres of the Hungarian Kingdom and it developed as a multi-ethnic space inhabited by Slavs, later Slovaks, Hungarians and Germans. Ethnicity, language and communal affiliations remained a complex matrix in the 19th and 20th centuries. Settlement of the Jewish population was a gradual process that began in the 1840s. During the second half of the 19th century, every fifth person in the city was Jewish. While according to the census in 1850/51, the Slovak inhabitants formed a relative majority in the city,¹⁰ by 1910, the Hun-

tification Process in Urban Conservation Projects. Conference Paper presented at the event “Regional Architecture and Identity in the Age of Globalization” organized by the Center for the Study of Architecture in the Arab Region (CSAAR) Tunis 2007. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284038848_The_Concept_of_Identity_and_Its_Identification_Process_in_Urban_Conservation_Projects (last downloaded on 14 November 2020)

8 *Pierre Nora*: Entre Mémoire et Histoire. La problématique des lieux. In: Les lieux de mémoire. Première partie: la République. Dir. Pierre Nora. Paris 1984. XXXIV-XXXV.

9 *Pim den Boer*: Lieux de mémoire in comparative perspective. In: Loci memoriae Hungaricae I: The theoretical foundations of Hungarian 'Lieux de mémoire' studies Eds. S. Varga Pál - Karl Katschtaler- Donald E. Morse – Takács Miklós Debrecen 2013. 44.

10 *Czoch Gábor*: A nemzetiségi megoszlás kérdései és társadalmi dimenziói Kassán az

garian-speaking population represented 75.43% of the population. During this period, though, most city dwellers remained bi- or trilingual.¹¹

At the end of WWI, Košice became part of the first Czechoslovak Republic, then following the first Vienna Award in November 1938, Hungary annexed this territory. Thus, the city was under Hungarian administration during WWII and the Holocaust.¹² By the end of the war, Košice became part of the restored Czechoslovakia. During the final year of the war, Košice lost most of its Jewish inhabitants to the Holocaust. In subsequent years, due to the Czechoslovak-Hungarian population exchange and re-Slovakization, it lost a good part of the Hungarian population, too.¹³

In February 1948, after the communist takeover in Czechoslovakia, Košice became part of the Eastern Bloc. A well-known local anecdote, mentioned in the work of the Slovak art theorist Tomáš Štrauss, summarizes the rapid change of borders and regimes in the first half of the 20th century also the difficulty of drawing clear boundaries between communities:

“...one man from Košice tells another: Imagine, I had such a great dream last night! I dreamt that all Hungarians left Košice... Then all Slovaks followed them... Only we, the local people remained...”¹⁴

The construction and expansion of the East Slovakian Ironworks caused the city’s population to grow from 62,465 in 1950 to 235,000 in 1991. This de-

1850/51-es összeírás alapján. In: Czoch Gábor: „A városok szíverek.” Tanulmányok Kaszáról és a reformkori városokról. Pozsony 2009. 155.

11 *Juliane Brandt*: Mehrsprachigkeit – ein Weg, verkehrsfähig zu sein. Die Stadtbevölkerung von Kaschau/Kassa/Košice und ihre Sprachen um 1900. Spiegelungen 8. (2013) 1. 52–67.

12 *Michal Potemna*: Židovská otázka v Košiciach v rokoch 1938–1944. In: Eds. Anna Jurová – Pavol Šalomon. Košice a deportácie Židov v roku 1944: zborník príspevkov z odborného seminára k 50. výročiu deportácií z Košíc. Košice 1994. 48.

13 In the course of the Czechoslovak-Hungarian population exchange, 1507 Hungarians were forced to leave the city. Over 12,000 ethnic Hungarians were “re-Slovakised”, which meant signing an application form to request Slovak nationality. See *Vadkerty Katalin*: A kitelepítéstől a reszlovakizációig 1945–1948. Trilógia a csehszlovákiai magyarság 1945–1948 közötti történetéről. Pozsony 2007. 282, 349.

14 *Tomáš Štrauss*: Moje Košice. Bratislava 2012. 52.

mographic growth was a major factor in the Slovakization of Košice.¹⁵ Following the creation of the Slovak Republic in 1993, Košice as the second largest city in Slovakia, became the seat of the Slovakian Constitutional Court.

Košice lost its multi-ethnic character because of the war, forced migrations, urbanization and assimilation in the 20th century. Today, Košice has 240,433 inhabitants and the vast majority of them are Slovaks. According to the official census of 2011 73.8% of the population declared to be Slovak, 2.65% Hungarian and 2% Romani. However, we need to keep in mind that, as a reflection of the complex story of communal boundaries outlined above, 19% (45 972) of the population did not declare their ethnic affiliation.¹⁶



The statue of the municipal coat of arms of Košice inaugurated in 2002. Photo by the author

¹⁵ *Adriána Priatková – Ján Sekán – Tamáska Máté*: The Urban Planning of Košice and the Development of a 20th Century Avenue. *Architektúra & Urbanizmus*. LIV. (2020) 1-2. 80.

¹⁶ *Ivana Juhaščíková – Pavol Škápik – Zuzana Štukovská*: Základné údaje zo Sčítania obyvateľov, domov a bytov 2011. Bratislava 2012. 12.

Košice in the Conflict between the Hungarian and the Slovak Collective Memory

Košice played a prominent role in Hungarian history, literature and culture, thus, it has a much more important place in the Hungarian collective historical memory than in the Slovak one. The most significant Hungarian memory site is the tomb of Francis II Rákóczi, the aristocrat who led the Hungarian uprising against the Habsburgs at the beginning of the 18th century. After his reburial in Košice in 1906, the city became the center of the Rákóczi cult and Hungarian literary works began to refer to Košice as *Rákóczi's town*. The thousands of Hungarian tourists who visit Košice mainly come to see his tomb at Saint Elizabeth's Cathedral, which is located in the central part of the Main Street. For Hungarians, Rákóczi represents the Hungarian character of the city.

On the other hand, however, Košice's place in the Slovak history and historical remembrance is insignificant. In fact, in promotional brochures published for Slovaks, in guide books and even in academic works of Slovakian authors and in school textbooks, the city appears as the "Capital of East Slovakia" or "the second largest city of Slovakia."¹⁷ This is to say that unlike Bratislava, Nitra, Banská Bystrica or other towns of Northern Slovakia, Košice cannot be linked to any specific important Slovak historical event or Slovak historical personality.¹⁸ The only exception is the Košice Government Program, which was the basic document of the restored Czechoslovakia after WWII and was issued in Košice on 5 April 1945 by the new Czechoslovak Government. Chapter VIII of the program announced the equality of Czechs and Slovaks and declared the collective guilt of Germans and Hungarians. The so-called Beneš decrees confirmed these points. The palace that today hosts the East-Slovak Gallery in the city center was renamed because of its link to these events during the Czechoslovak period. Until 1990 it served as a Czechoslovak memorial place known as the House of the Košice Govern-

¹⁷ Vitajte v Košiciach. Oficiálny sprievodca mestom. Slovenská agentúra pre cestovný ruch, Bratislava v spolupráci s KOŠICE – Turizmus. 2011. 2.

¹⁸ Because of its multiethnic character, Košice has never become an important place of memory in nation-building and forming narratives presented in Slovak and Hungarian history school textbooks unlike, for example, Buda, Debrecen, Martin or Nitra. See László Slávka *Otčenášová*: Košice ako symbol národnej identity v slovenských a maďarských učebniciach dejepisu po roku 1918. In: Košice a dejiny – dejiny Košic. Ed. Štefan Šutaj. Košice 2011. 130–134.

ment Program. This building was the most important tourist attraction during the socialist period in Košice where expositions about “the most important event in the history of Czechs and Slovaks” were on display.¹⁹ In 2007, the Slovak parliament confirmed the Beneš decrees, as they are an integral part of the Slovak constitution. This move triggered outrage among the Hungarian population in Slovakia, as well as in Hungary. The Hungarian minority community in Slovakia today considers the mass deportation and the forced re-Slovakization of the Hungarian population after WWII as their greatest traumatizing experience.²⁰ As a consequence, for them, the Košice Government Program memorial building could not become an acceptable site of memory.

However, it is important to note here that this historical event did not play an important role in shaping the new Slovak identity of Košice after 1993, even if today a housing estate still bears the name of this government program. What were the constituents of post-1993 memory, then? This is the question that the next section turns to.



Hand sanitizer on Tram no. 7 of Košice. Photo by the author, 2020

¹⁹ *Alexander Frický*: Košice kultúrne pamiatky. Vydalo Východoslovenké vydavateľstvo v Košiciach pre Mestskú správu pamiatok v Košiciach. 1974. 17.

²⁰ *Štefan Šutaj*: Trianon v historickej pamäti na Slovensku. In: Rozpad Uhorska a Trianonská mierová zmluva. K politikám pamäti na Slovensku a v Maďarsku. Eds. Miroslav Michela – Ladislav Vörös. Bratislava 2013. 97–114.

Shaping Local Identity after 1989

After the fall of communism, almost every city in Central and Eastern Europe was in search of its own local, national and European identity. Since 1989, the inhabitants of these cities have experienced rapid geopolitical and economic transformations. Consequently, new territorial identities and new senses of place have emerged. Notably, the basis of these were often the old traditions. Post-socialist cities had to redefine their relationship to the nation, reshape their own identity and meet the expectations of the European Union and globalization at the same time. In the book entitled *Cities After The Fall of Communism: Reshaping Cultural Landscapes and European Identity* we can follow this transformation process through the example of eleven cities. “The residents of post-socialist cities project their future through history as much as they project their future against history.”²¹ In fact, history and its local interpretation, as well as myths and mythmaking played an important role in the post-1989 development of such cities. Editors of the mentioned volume emphasize that new historical narratives have developed. A particular example for this is the policy that overwhelmingly mono-ethnic cities – such as L’viv or Wrocław – follow: discovering, celebrating and even promoting their historic and bygone diversity.²²

Like in many Central European cities, we might observe the spectacular process of self-rediscovery after 1989 in Košice, too. Following the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the reconstruction and renovation of the historical old town played a decisive role in the politics of strengthening the local identity of the city. As a result, the Main Street regained its central role in the life of the city and became the natural reference point where the most emblematic buildings of Košice stand, such as the Saint Elizabeth Cathedral, the building of the State Theatre, the medieval House of Levoča, the historical town hall and several other palaces built between the 13th and 20th century.

In 2002, in order to strengthen local traditions, the coat-of-arms of the city was chosen as the symbol to stand in one of the most emblematic places of the city, at the southern tip of the Main Street, which were a scene in the battle for the public memory in Hungarian, then Czechoslovak, and later Czecho-

²¹ *Cities After The Fall of Communism. Reshaping Cultural Landscapes and European Identity*. Eds. John J. Czaplicka – Nida Glazis – Blair A. Ruble. Baltimore 2009. 3.

²² *Ibid.* 3-4.

slovak communist nation-building throughout the 20th century. This decision sounded especially reasonable since Košice has the oldest municipal coat-of-arms in Europe, the first that a king awarded to a city, dating back to 1369. The monument of the coat-of-arms has its own history.²³ Since 1994 Košice has celebrated the City Day around 7th May, the day when Emperor Louis the Great awarded the coat-of-arms to the city. In December 2002, then mayor Zdenko Trebuľa and Rudolf Schuster, at that time President of the Republic and a former mayor of Košice (in 1983–1986, 1994–1999) and a main promoter of local traditions after 1989, inaugurated the statue representing the coat-of-arms. In their speeches, they outlined that the coat-of-arms was „a symbol of the independence, originality and determination of the people of Košice to make decisions in the interests of the city, together.“²⁴ During the 20th century, the site where the monument of the coat-of-arms stands today was home to many important monuments. The Statue of the Hungarian Soldier stood there for more than a decade (1906-1919), then, it hosted the statue of M. R. Štefánik, the Slovakian national hero between 1929 and 1938, and again from 1945 until 1952. Subsequently, the monument of the Holy Crown of Hungary (1938-45), the statue of Stalin (in 1949 for a short period of time) and of Klement Gottwald, the first communist president (erected in 1975 and removed in 1990) followed each other in succession.²⁵ Against this backdrop, we may posit that the embodiment of the coat-of-arms in the infrastructure and its role in representing the city reflect and shape the efforts to legitimize the city’s own modern political and cultural identity. The mayor currently in office, Jaroslav Polaček, also stressed the importance of the coat-of-arms of Košice by placing a new memorial plaque depicting the coat-of-arms on the historical town hall’s wall in 2019.²⁶

The use of medieval traditions and symbols to legitimize the aspirations of cities is a European-wide phenomenon. It suffices to mention the politics of memory in the cities of the former Hanseatic League²⁷ or refer to the

23 *Jozef Kirst*: The oldest Coat of Arms in Europe awarded to a city. In: *Košice in the Coordinated of European History*. Eds. Mária Hajduová – Martin Bartoš. Košice 2013. 66–73.

24 *Plastika erbu Košic zdobi centrum mesta*. *Korzár*. Vol. 5. 12 December 2002. 3.

25 *Juraj Bauer*: *És múltak a századok... Emléktáblák és feliratok, címerek, szobrok, monogramok, jelek a házakon*. Košice-Kassa 2008. 13–17.

26 *Výročie udelenia erbu*. Košice:Dnes. 9 May 2019. 6.

27 For more on the topic of the medieval city as modern political symbol see: *Nicolai N. Petro*: *The Novgorod Model: Creating a European Past in Russia*. In *Cities After The Fall of Communism*. Eds. Czaplícka, J. et al. 58.; *Olga Sezneva*: *Locating Kaliningrad/Königs-*

so-called Pentapolitana project in Slovakia that intends to revive the cooperation of five towns – Košice, Levoča, Bardejov, Prešov and Sabinov – that were allies in the Middle Ages. These towns use their former importance as members of leagues to establish their new identity.²⁸



The Statue of Sándor Márai. Photo by the author 2013

berg on the Map of Europe: "A Russia in Europe" or a "A Europe in Russia". In: *Cities After The Fall of Communism* Eds. Czaplicka, J. et al. 195–215.

28 <http://www.kosice2013.sk/projekty/pentapolitana/> (last downloaded on 3 December 2020)

“Košice’s Franz Kafka”

Although Sándor Márai (1900-1989) published some papers in the communist *Vörös Újság* [Red Journal] in 1919, he consciously kept himself away from politics through his adult life.²⁹ He started his studies and literary work in Germany and France in the 1920s. One of his most important novels, entitled *Confessions of a Bourgeois*, was published in 1934. In interwar Hungary, many believed that he was the most influential literary representative of the middle-class. However, in one of his unedited manuscripts entitled *Hallgatni akartam* [I wanted to be quiet], which was published in 2013, he strongly criticized both the authoritarian Horthy regime and the behaviour of the Hungarian upper-class for their attitude and actions between the two world wars and during the Holocaust.³⁰ He lived through WWII in Budapest, where he was hiding his Jewish wife. His father-in-law, Samuel Matzner became a victim of Holocaust.³¹ In 1948, he left Hungary as a staunch anti-communist, refusing to permit his works to be published while Soviets dictated in Hungary. Márai eventually committed suicide in self-imposed exile in San Diego in 1989, shortly before the fall of communism. After the political changes, Márai became the symbol of the new and democratic Hungary. Today, his popularity is due to his work but also to his life in exile that mirrored Hungary's misfortunes in the 20th century.³²

After 1989, the Hungarian minority community in Slovakia and in his hometown, Košice also rediscovered his personality and works, gradually. In 1991, a memorial plaque was placed on the house where his family used to live in Košice. In 2000, the Hungarian Secondary School in Košice was renamed in his honor, and in 2002, the Studio of the Thalia Theatre also took up his name. Then, a statue of him, Péter Gáspár's work of art, was inaugurated on 11 December 2004. In those years, the political leaders of the city did not support the cause: the Hungarian minority community had to rent the venue for the statue from the city until 2007. Eventually, a shift occurred and during the European Capital of Culture season in 2013, office bearers of the

29 *Fried István*: A politikus író Márai Sándor. In: *Fried István*: „Ne az író történjen meg, hanem a műve”. A politikus és az irodalmi író Márai Sándor. Budapest 2002. 174–188.

30 *Márai Sándor*: *Hallgatni akartam*. Budapest 2013. In 2019 it was translated into Czech language: *Chtěl jsem mlčet*. Praha 2019.

31 *Ötvös Anna*: *Lola* könyve. Kassától Márai Sándorig. Budapest 2017. 97.

32 *Tibor Fischer*: The alchemist in exile. The Guardian <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jan/05/fiction.reviews1> (last downloaded on 4 December 2020)

city participated in renaming the square in Márai's memory and symbolically approved of the existence of the memorial through an official inauguration ceremony which was held on 19 January 2013. How can we explain the initial reluctance and what caused the change?

While Hungarians rediscovered Sándor Márai as a middle-class writer who is both anti-communist and anti-fascist, in the collective remembrance of the Slovaks Márai was a rather different image. Ethnic Slovaks tend to find it unacceptable that Márai zealously welcomed the First Vienna Award in November 1938, when his hometown was annexed (returned) to Hungary³³ and that he wrote about Košice as an Upper-Hungarian city. As a result, Slovak media often depicted him as a chauvinist, or even fascist Hungarian writer who was a supporter of the authoritarian Horthy regime, in spite of the fact that he had opposed all totalitarian regimes. Although it was an academic, Ján Doruľa, an emeritus professor at the Jan Stanislav Institute of Slavistics at the Slovak Academy of Sciences who gave voice to the sharpest criticism of this kind³⁴ Slovak journalists and bloggers criticizing Márai's work through short articles tended to be more aggressive. Their pieces often contained factual errors and had no knowledge of Márai's oeuvre as a whole.³⁵

33 The First Vienna Award was the outcome of the First Vienna Arbitration, which took place at Vienna's Belvedere Palace on 2 November 1938, following the Munich Agreement. The decision separated the areas with Hungarian majority population in Southern Slovakia, including Košice and Southern Carpathian Rus, from Czechoslovakia and awarded these to Hungary.

34 *Ján Doruľa: Hornouhorsko-košický Uhromadžar Sándor Márai v osídlach karpatsko-uhorskej slovansko-slovenskej traumy. Slavica Slovaca 46. (2011) 2. 97–142.*

35 *Svätoboj Clementis: Košické prelúdiu maďarského šovinizmu.* <http://www.prop.wz.cz/kosicke.htm> (last downloaded on 18 November); Jarmila Durániková: Sándor Márai: Mýtus a pravda. <http://duranikova.blog.sme.sk/c/322787/Sandor-Marai-Mytus-a-pravda.html> (last downloaded on 18 November 2020); Pavol Ičo: Sándor Márai. Šovinista, ktorý vebíľ maďarskú okupáciu Košíc. Slovenské Hnutie Obrody. <https://sho.sk/sandor-marai-sovinista-ktory-velebil-madarsku-okupaciu-kosic/> (last downloaded on 18 November 2020); Moreover, Milan Lasica, the well-known Slovak humorist described Márai as a chauvinist although Lasica appreciated Márai's literary talent and novels. See: <http://www.divadelni-noviny.cz/milan-lasica-rozhovor> (last downloaded on 18 November 2020)



Sándor Márai Square. Photo by the author, 2013

Within professional literary circles, Slovak critics, usually gave a more nuanced picture of his work and offer a deeper analysis of his writings.³⁶ For example, Zuzana Demjánová, a Slovak literary translator argued that although Márai had a certain dislike towards Slovak statehood as a Hungarian writer, he was of German origin, as well as he had a Jewish wife and was not actively or rhetorically fascist and thus might be considered an excellent European writer.³⁷ Similarly, Lukáš Krivošík, analyzing one of his novels pointed out that Márai “reveals the traumas of the Hungarians,”³⁸ while, a Slovak literary

³⁶ Gabriela Rakúsová: Nedovolili mu slobodne mlčať. Impulz. 3. (2011) <http://www.impulzrevue.sk/article.php?736> (last downloaded on 18 November 2020)

³⁷ Zuzana Demjánová: Z väčšej časti génius, z menšej šovinista. http://www.inaque.sk/sk/clanky/books/non_fiction/z_vacsej_casti_genius_z_mensej_sovinista (last downloaded on 18 November 2020)

³⁸ Lukáš Krivošík: Horthy v Košiciach a smutný Sándor Márai. Konzervatívny Denník Postoj. <https://www.postoj.sk/44006/knihomolov-zapisnik-kosican-marai-odhaluje-traumy-madarov> (last downloaded on 18 November 2020)

historian, Tibor Kočík, called him “the sworn enemy of dictatorships.”³⁹ In a convincing study, another Slovak literary scholar, Radoslav Passia, also argued that Márai had become a point of reference in Slovak literature, too.⁴⁰

In 2013, there was a practical reason for choosing Márai as part of the city’s “branding” despite the differences in Márai’s Slovak perceptions: he remains the most famous person from Košice, at least at the European scene. His writings have been translated into multiple languages, his novels are particularly popular in Italy, France and Poland. This explains why Márai, a Hungarian writer, was a suitable representative of a Slovak city. The main purpose of the official programs related to him was to present and popularize the life and work of the writer in Slovakia.⁴¹ Translating several of his novels into Slovak language for the first time was part of the project. This gave the opportunity to Slovak readers to make themselves aware of Márai’s ideological orientation and his perceptions of Košice. Given the European dimension of the project, Márai’s Europeaness was also an aspect that was at the forefront. To express his importance ads and brochures referred to him as Franz Kafka’s incarnation in Košice⁴² and as the greatest “Košičan” (the local demonym) writer. Slovak theatre performances and expositions popularized Márai’s lifeworks during the 2013 and in the subsequent years.

In 1998, the former house of Márai’s parents on the Mäsiarska Street was transformed into a modest memorial room, which became the seat of the Club for National Minorities.⁴³ Then, within the framework of the European Capital of Culture project, a new Memorial Room opened as a result of cooperation with the Petöfi Literary Museum of Budapest, the custodian of Márai’s legacy. The primary target group of the project were tourist from

39 Tibor Kočík: Praha má Franza Kafku – Košice Sándora Máraia. *Zajtrajšie Noviny*. <http://zajtrajsienoviny.sk/2013/02/praha-ma-franza-kafku-kosice-sandora-maraia/> (last downloaded on 18 November 2020); See also: Peter Juščák: Košický Franz Kafka. Šándor Márai, zaprisahaný nepriateľ diktatúr. https://www.czsk.net/zrkadlenie/jesen_2004/juscak.html (last downloaded on 18 November 2020)

40 Radoslav Passia: Márai Kassája a mai Košice jelentésrendszerében. *Magyar Lettre Internationale* 94/2014. 28–30.

41 The official website is no longer available: <http://sandormarai.eu/>; Instead, one may refer to a new brochure that the publishing house Helikon published especially for the European Capital of Culture project. See : Régi Kassa, álom. Budapest 2013.

42 Jana Ogurčáková: Šándor Márai sa má stáť košickým Kafkom. *Korzár Košice* <https://kosice.korzar.sme.sk/c/5740763/sandor-marai-sa-ma-stat-kosickym-kafkom.html> (last downloaded on 18 November 2020)

43 <https://www.kosice.sk/mesto/klub-narodnostnych-mensin> (last downloaded on 18 November 2020)

Europe who visited the city.⁴⁴ After the European project ended, the local tourism board called *Visit Košice* was supposed to take care of the memorial room. However, the board was unable to provide a permanent staff member who could have guided the tourists around the exhibition. Although the city administration undertook to pay the overhead of the premises for a few years, remained uninterested in resolving this problem. The local Hungarian political elite also failed to propose a viable solution with or without the cooperation of the city. Finally, it was the Hungarian Foreign Ministry that decided to financially back the Hungarian organization called Csemadok,⁴⁵ so that the NGO could purchase the exhibition rooms and open a new Sándor Márai Memorial Exhibition there. In addition, the Minority Cultural Fund of Slovakia also contributed to the furnishing of the exhibition. Subsequently, during 2018, the Slovak National Museum undertook that they would provide the professional and personal conditions for the operation of the memorial exhibition. After such successful interventions of Bratislava and Budapest, the opening ceremony took place in January 2019. During 2019, the exhibition received more than 5 000 visitors from 30 countries, and it can be assumed that in the future it will play a major role in informing Slovaks about Márai's legacy.

⁴⁴ *Marsovszky Miklós*: Ismét látogatható a kassai Márai Emlékszoba. Új Szó Online. <https://uj szo.com/kozelet/ismet-latogathato-a-kassai-marai-emlekszoba> (last downloaded on 18 November 2020)

⁴⁵ Csemadok is a cultural society of ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia founded in 1949.



The building of the Sándor Márai Memorial Exhibition in Košice.

Photo by the author, 2020

Conclusions

Cities in Central Europe, including contemporary Slovakia, have undergone radical changes in the 20th century. The most traumatic events were the extermination of its Jewish population, forced emigration of Hungarians and Germans, and the efforts of the communist regime to homogenize the population in terms of ethnicity and culture. After 1993, when Slovakia became an independent state, a process of self-discovery began. Košice, which is perceived quite differently in Slovak and Hungarian collective memory, finds itself instrumentalized in different ways in the respective representations of these neighbouring nations. Remembrance of the past is contingent upon cultural frames, moral sensibilities, demands of the present and the will of both the local and national political elites in the two countries.

The post-socialist modernization process, including different urban design projects, the renovation of the historical old town and the Košice European Capital of Culture 2013 project provided the possibility to reshape the historical memory of the city in a new European context. Initially it was the Hungarian community that kept Márai's local memory, largely with the support of the Hungarian state. The political leaders of the city decided to make Márai's a flagship project by highlighting the European dimension of his oeuvre and personality during the European Capital of Culture project in 2013. For a Slovak city that is in search of its own identity, Márai, as a Hungarian writer could become a modern brand only in this European perspective.

Translated by Erika Gazdag



The Sándor Márai Memorial Exhibition in Košice. Photo by the author, 2020

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