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Hungarian Golgotha

Strategies for dealing with the past at a Hungarian publishing house in 1945*

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In 1945, the second issue of *Valóság* [=Reality], the newly established monthly journal of democratic Hungary, stressed the public and political importance of books and publishing houses in the post-war reconstruction efforts.¹ The editorial board even published a list of the books that had appeared in 1945 up to 20 October, when that issue of the journal was published. The article *Az új magyar könyvtermelés mérlege* [=A Balance of the New Hungarian Book Production], divided the titles into three categories.² Books categorised as “ideological” were the most prominent due to the urgent task of countering the harmful impact of the *ancien régime* in people’s minds. It attributed less importance to a category of books called “war-deportation-internment literature”, since these mass-produced books were a drain on the rare resources of paper required by more important publications, as well as diverting public attention away from dealing with the problems of the future and inviting people to immerse themselves in the pleasure of escaping from the horrors of the past. The third category, the so-called *belles-lettres*, turned out to be of lesser public importance since it lacked political-ideological pertinence in the post-war context; in peaceful and consolidated times it would have probably attained a higher ranking in the genre hierarchy. The subject of this study is the publishing policy of a small company that, publishing 13 out of the 36 titles of the “war-deportation-internment literature”, was the most influential in the second category.

Not only did the publishers and their publications constitute a political issue in the context of post-war restoration, but so did their readership. The journal *Magyar Könyvszemle*

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¹ On 12-14 July the Book Days were held (the event had taken place regularly since 1929) where 31 publishing houses presented 56 books to the Hungarian reading public. All in all 644 books were published and 3.2 million copies were sold in 1945. These figures doubled the following year: Varga Sándor, *A magyar könyvkiadás és könyvkereskedelem* [=Hungarian Book Editing and the Book Trade] 1945-1957, Budapest 1985.

² János Czibor, *Az új magyar könyvtermelés mérlege* [=A Balance of the New Hungarian Book Production], in: *Valóság* (1945) 1-2, 67-70.

[=Hungarian Review of Books] published a specialist survey of the Budapest reading public in 1945.³ Collecting data mostly via “direct contact” (e.g. interviewing, observation), the author came to the conclusion that people who picked up a book were led by two main needs, one public and one private. The overwhelming popularity of “topical, political literature” as opposed to other (quality) genres was a result of the fact that readers had become eager to know the “reasons for our decay and what the solution might be.” This category included small booklets, reports, memoirs, political programmes, and reviews, publications that “address[ed] the elimination of the politics of the recent past and the unfolding of the Hungarian future.”⁴ According to the study, the other factor orienting the reading public was the attainment of a state of psychological satisfaction, in other words, to “escape from the troubles of struggling for a living, from the bleakness of life” into the fictional world of desires. This need was met by a group containing religious and trash literature, which represented low quality literature with no importance for public life in the post-war era.

As a matter of fact, the role attributed to book publishing in post-war restoration comprised two main tasks. The first might be termed mental restoration, that is, the ideological work of uncluttering people’s minds and freeing them from the impact of the previous regime. Orienting people toward public affairs was also part of mental restoration. The second undertaking was to document and spread factual knowledge: because the draconian control of the public sphere and propaganda had hindered the free circulation of information before 1945, an urgent endeavour in the post-war period was to tell the true story of recent history, as well as to inform the public about the current political and social situation. Certainly, both main tasks contributed to legitimising the new regime. It might seem surprising that contemporary reports attributed a harmful role to the otherwise flourishing personal life-story genres although, at the same time, emphasising public interest in literature in general. Probably the classical approach to literary criticism is responsible for this disregard for the importance of popular genres considering them as low quality. Indeed, while currently great cultural value is ascribed to testimonies and oral history accounts of publicly unknown individuals and such works are published merely because their narrators lived through historical events, in the post-war period such values were non-existent. This is not to say, however, that the memory of the recent past did not play an important role in reconstructing the political life of the country. As the study of the *Magyar Könyvszemle* points out, “the

³ László Sziklay, Budapest olvasóközönsége 1945-ben [=The Reading Audience of Budapest in 1945], in: Magyar Könyvszemle [=Hungarian Review of Books] (1946) 1-4, 70-89.

⁴ Sziklay, Budapest olvasóközönsége, 75.

mental attitude of looking back” characterised both the readers of high literature and those “who expect only entertainment, narcosis” from the writings.⁵ Indeed, one of the bestsellers in 1945 was the personal journal of the well-known writer Sándor Márai. Other acknowledged writers, such as Lajos Kassák, Tibor Déry, Lajos Nagy, József Darvas, Ernő Szép, became the centre of attention through writings based on their personal experiences during the war. Apparently, in these cases the public was concerned with the ways in which a well-known public figure had lived through these catastrophic times. Popular imagination about literary writing holds that authors take material from their own lives; hence there is nothing unusual in the fact that they published their war experiences. However, what attracted the public to the personal writings of either unknown or non-literary authors? What social and political role can be attributed to the popular genres of experience-based ‘retrospective literature’?

In what follows I will analyse the social role of life-history writings published in the immediate aftermath of the war in Hungary. This study relies on two main recent currents in Holocaust Studies in the early post-war period. One focuses on attempts to document, narrate and research the catastrophe, immediately after liberation in Europe. Recent studies have persuasively challenged the “myth of silence” according to which survivors of the Holocaust, unable to bear their traumatic experiences, repressed their memories and focussed their energy on rebuilding new lives after the war ended, remaining incapable of telling their stories of persecution for decades.⁶ Indeed, survivors told, wrote down, showed, and performed their experiences in diverse forms, but “until recently, histories of ‘Holocaust literature’ and historiographical surveys have ignored most of these, either because they did not appear in English or because they did not address the fatal peculiarity of the Jewish situation.”⁷ The other tendency identifies a historical change in the practices of representing the catastrophe; fundamentally, it raises the question of how the memory of the Holocaust influences our global culture of memory.⁸ Accordingly, this article has a dual objective: on the one hand, to reconstruct early post-war discourses on the catastrophe, and on the other to confront them with elements of the currently dominant memory culture that defines European policies on the

⁵ Ibid., 83.

⁶ Hasia Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love. American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945-1962*. New York 2009; David Cesarani/Eric J. Sundquist(eds.), *After the Holocaust. Challenging the Myth of Silence*. London/New York 2012; Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe*. Oxford 2012.

⁷ David Cesarani, *Challenging the ‘Myth of Silence’: Post-War Responses to the Destruction of European Jewry*, in: Cesarani/Sundquist (eds.), *After the Holocaust*, 21.

⁸ See e.g. Jeffrey C. Alexander, *On the Social Construction of Moral Universals. The ‘Holocaust’ from War Crime to Trauma Drama*, in: *European Journal of Social Theory* 5 (2002) 1, 5-85.; Daniel Levy/Nathan Sznajder, *Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*. Philadelphia 2006.

past. For that reason, I will analyse the publishing strategy of Károly Müller and his Áron Gábor Book Publishing Company, a small publishing house whose entire post-war activity was concerned with the recent past. Particular attention will be paid to the joint edition of eight books titled *Magyar Golgota. Regénysorozat* [=Hungarian Golgotha. A Series of Novels], published in 1945.

Publishing and political resistance

In order to understand Müller's publishing policy in 1945, it is important to see the direct link between his publishing and political activity⁹ in Hungary where he returned after one and a half decades of working abroad. As a former resident of Prague, Müller became a key figure in the rescue movement for Czechs, persecuted mostly because of their political affiliations following the Nazi occupation. One year after his return to Hungary in 1938, he launched his first Hungarian publishing company with the help of a front man. The firm published mostly books in popular genres by English and American authors, providing employment in the form of translation to blacklisted writers, and it also published works by blacklisted Hungarian writers. He continuously gave work, temporary or permanent, to people persecuted due to their political convictions or Jewish origin. Such activities brought consequences: the authorities forced the company into bankruptcy in 1942. Müller could not avoid persecution, either: he was confined for nine months in an internment camp in Kistarcsa, and was fined for violating the anti-Jewish laws (the trial was not concluded due to the war in late 1944).

Because he was not allowed to obtain a trading license, Müller only managed to found the Áron Gábor Book Publishing Company in 1943, again with the help of the 'Strohmann method' (as soon as possible, he obtained the trading license and changed the name of the firm to his own in March 1945). The new company employed practically the same personnel as the former one. Initially, the war and the political regime prevented the company from publishing extensively. Only one book appeared in 1943, *Kint a pusztán* [=Outside in the Puszta] by Mihály Cserzy (1865-1925), which depicted everyday peasant life in a sociographic style. In 1944, there appeared a translation of a work by K. R. G. Browne, "the most appropriate book to help us forget for a few hours all the troubles of the day," as one of the advertising flyers of the publishing house put it.¹⁰ The same year Müller prepared a literary series entitled *A világirodalom titánjai* [=Titans of Foreign Literature], that would

⁹ Source of this summary: Budapest Főváros Levéltára BFL [=Budapest City Archives BFL] XVII.797. Budapesti 404/a. sz. Igazoló Bizottság iratai, 1. doboz, Gábor Áron könyvkiadó Nyilatkozatok, határozatok 1945 B-W.

¹⁰ BFL XVII.797.

have comprised works by six classic French and Russian novelists: Balzac, Dumas, Maupassant, Dostoyevsky, Gogol, and Goncharov, of which eventually two went public. The names of the series were not without political connotation in a country that fought the war as an ally of Nazi Germany. More importantly, by means of this publishing activity, Müller managed to offer work to those who otherwise would have been left without income. Indeed, at the time the six translators of the publishing house were of Jewish origin.

In his curriculum vitae in 1945, one can read that Müller provided (advance) payment to more than an estimated 25 authors “who for a long time were not permitted to work because of their political affiliation or race and who were exposed to the gravest financial problems.”¹¹ The collective declaration of more than a dozen journalists and writers to the committee of political verification¹² in favour of Müller in June 1945 confirms the statement of the publisher-entrepreneur: when “everybody was occupied with clearing up the ruins”, there appeared a “book publisher who did not negotiate or give vague promises but immediately gave money, a possibility to live, and work. Many Hungarian writers lived for months off what they received from Károly Müller.”¹³ This declaration, signed by most of the authors of *Magyar Golgota*, proves that resistance politics and publishing policy were closely related in Károly Müller’s activity. Many of the books that appeared immediately after the liberation had already been written and paid for in 1944. For Müller, however, resistance did not exclusively mean the support of blacklisted intellectuals. He worked as one of the “direct aids” of Raoul Wallenberg,¹⁴ and also personally rescued a number of people from forced labour as well as from arrest by Nazi authorities.

The majority of Müller’s publications came out at the beginning of 1945, and focussed directly on Hungary’s recent past. Even some of the literary publications had political relevance to the country’s past. A novel that Müller wanted to publish as early as 1944, written by Renée Erdős (*Gránátvirág* – Garnet Flower), a previously blacklisted and persecuted writer, could not appear until after the liberation. A novel by József Kerekesházy (*Egyszer béke volt...Once There Was Peace...*) had already appeared before the war in a

¹¹Károly Müller, Curriculum Vitae, in: BFL XVII.797.

¹²Committees of political verification were formed to lustrate the post-1939 activity several categories of people, such as public servants and civil servants, employees of justice, public instruction, and state companies, etc. Tibor Zinner, Háborús bánósök perei. Internálások, kitelepítések, és igazoló eljárások 1945-1949, in: Történelmi Szemle [=Historical Review] (1985) 1, 118-140.

¹³BFL XVII.797.

¹⁴János Botos, Raoul Wallenberg magyarországi kapcsolatrendszere [=Raoul Wallenberg’s Hungarian Network], in: János Botos/Tamás Kovács (eds.), Üldöztetés, embermentés, újrakezdés: tudományos emlékülések 2007. április 12. és május 8. [=Persecution, Life Saving, New Beginning. Academic Meeting in Remembrance, 12 April and 8 May 2007], Budapest 2007, 8-46.

editor-friendly version and was put on the blacklist in 1943. In 1945, “it was the idea of my publisher to write again about the old, peaceful times”, “to take the reader back to [that] world of dreams, after a sea of suffering.”¹⁵ One book by Jenő Antal Molnár (*Két világ – Two Worlds*) was a fictional narrative of the “real epoch” between 1939 and 1944 when “the basis thought to be the most solid, the moral world order, shifted and dissolved.”¹⁶ The fictional personal journal of a young Christian woman tells the story of the gradual process of discrimination, stigmatisation and exclusion because of her supposed Jewish origin, a process which then leads to a suicide attempt. There was another novel by a Hungarian author,¹⁷ and in addition the publishing house published two translations, Defoe’s complete *Robinson Crusoe* and *Germany: A Winter’s Tale*, a satirical verse-epic by Heinrich Heine from 1844. The latter, the “prophetic judgment of the poet genius on his homeland”,¹⁸ was certainly not lacking the political dimension in its interpretative context. An interesting undertaking of the publishing house was the *Fonetikus magyar-orosz szótár és társalgó* [=Phonetic Hungarian-Russian Dictionary and Talker], which was intended to serve practical purposes, and was hence addressed to those who did not intend to learn the “quite difficult Russian grammar” and the Cyrillic alphabet but would have been keen to get on with Russian people in everyday situations such as discussions, in shops or in the office. It seems that only the company’s musical publications remained completely apolitical.¹⁹

The majority of the titles in 1945 were issued as part of the *Új Idők – Új Könyvek* [=New Times – New Books] series, which addressed problems directly connected to the recent past. Totalling nearly 30 publications, they can be divided into four categories:

1. The largest, and thus probably the most important in the publishing policy, contains autobiographical-journalistic accounts of the catastrophe. The main topics are the siege of Budapest, the Pest ghetto, forced labour, death camps, political resistance, war crimes, etc.
2. The quasi-scholarly books on the former regime constitute another typical trend in Müller’s company, with a clear commitment to reaching the broader public. A good example is the sequel publication of booklets, *A tízhónapos tragédia* [=The Ten Month-Long Tragedy], which provided a short and easily understandable historical

¹⁵József Kerekesházy, *Egyszer béke volt...* [=Once There Was Peace], Budapest 1945, 7.

¹⁶Jenő Antal Molnár, *Két világ* [=Two Worlds], Budapest 1945.

¹⁷Lőrinc Kovai, *Ítélet előtt* [=Before Judgement], Budapest 1945.

¹⁸The publisher’s advertisement, *Libertas Zenekurir*, First Issue, November 1945.

¹⁹The publishing house launched a journal, which carried sheet music, and published a book by the Italian conductor Sergio Failoni, who was well-known in Hungary as a former musical director of the Hungarian State Opera in Budapest.

account of the period between 19 March 1944, the German occupation of Hungary, and 20 January 1945, the armistice agreement between Hungary's provisional government and the representatives of the Allied Powers. Altogether four issues of the sequel publication came out.

3. The third type of publication dealt with questions of historical justice, also in a popular style, addressing the wider public: books on the People's Courts, public accusations against perpetrators, as well as reports on newly accessible historical documents.
4. Finally, the fourth group of books was the miscellaneous. It contained titles that were difficult to put into one of the previous categories, such as a collection of anti-fascist anecdotes and jokes.²⁰

After 1945, the publishing house gradually began to decline:²¹ the great moment for Müller's second publishing house happened to be the year of change. As an important agent in the emerging national public sphere, particularly among the small publishing houses, he represented a unique publishing policy. Connecting capitalist enterprise with national issues of restoration, especially with questions related to the recent past, he combined social scientific inquiry with popular-sensational genres, and as shall be shown later, personal memoir genres with journalism. This policy is inseparable from the social network he was part of during the war, and from the resistance activity he pursued. A thorough analysis of his network would merit a separate article. However, what is important to point out here is that his relationships cannot be described in party political terms. He himself was a member of the *Szociáldemokrata Párt* [=Social Democratic Party], and in his circle one can find members of the *Független Kisgazdapárt* [=Independent Smallholders' Party] as well as the *Magyar Kommunista Párt* [=Hungarian Communist Party]. One cannot classify his network in 'racial' terms either: there were people with Jewish origins, and also those with non-Jewish origins. The common denominator of this group of people seems to be the fact that all of them were 'people of letters': journalists. Accordingly, in what follows closer attention shall be given to a peculiar publication of Károly Müller's company, in which seven authors were involved.

National Tragedy

²⁰ László Palásti/Stella Adorján, *Ne vessünk Hitleréken: antifasiszta viccek gyűjteménye* [=Let's Laugh at Hitler and His Companions: Collection of Anti-Fascist Jokes], Budapest 1945.

²¹ In 1946, a collection of interviews with the principal defendants of war crimes appeared.

“The eight books even individually are of great value to experience-literature, which is necessarily based upon the world’s greatest events; taken collectively they provide a true cross-section of the story of the dark, recent past. No photograph or film could record the truth for the viewer as colourfully, animatedly and realistically as the ‘Magyar Golgota’ as it reveals to its readers what really happened in the days when power was in the hands of the enemies of true Hungarians.”²²

In this excerpt from the publisher’s foreword a number of features are explicitly stated in relation to the joint publication of *Magyar Golgota*. First, the eight works represent “experience-literature”, which means that they are factual genres, with reference to the most recent great event of history. Second, as the phrase “true cross-section” suggests, the joint publication was supposed to describe the totality of the “dark recent past”. In the publisher’s advertisements, all eight books are referred to as items in the *Új Idők – Új Könyvek* [=New Times – New Books] series. The publisher selected the books on the basis of their role in conceptualising the recent catastrophe: each book of the “series of novels” stands for an aspect of the *Magyar Golgota*. Third, the publisher’s intention was to give a colourful, animated and realistic picture of the catastrophe. Thus the target audience was the national public, in other words, the ordinary people of the country. And finally, the “dark recent past” is characterised by the fact that the catastrophe happened to the Hungarians. Considering it as a discursive construction of the catastrophe, I will first analyse the thematic construction of *Magyar Golgota* to determine the meanings attributed to what had happened. This will be followed by a study of the series of novels in relation to the currently dominant culture of memory that is characterised by the central role of the canonised, institutionalised and universalised Holocaust memory.

In the joint publication of *Magyar Golgota*, the separate books follow each other in alphabetical order of their authors – this suggests that the editor gave equal weight to the topics the authors treated in their works. Some topics recur in several books while some are dealt with only in one.

Table 1. The composition of *Magyar Golgota*

Author	Title	Topic	Genre
János Fóthy (1899–1979) journalist, writer, art critic	Horthy-woods – The Hungarian Devil’s Island	Forced labour	Report/novel
István Gyenes (1915–1984) journalist, writer, literary historian	Life Below Ground	Resistance, war	Novel

²²Magyar Golgota. Regénysorozat [=Hungarian Golgotha. Series of Novels], 1945, 4.

Margit Izsáky (1899–1977) journalist, theatre actress	Crucified Country	War	Report
Jenő Lévai (1892–1983) journalist, writer, editor	László Endre. The First on the List of Hungarian War Criminals	War crimes	Biographical account
Jenő Lévai (1892–1983) journalist, writer, editor	The Martial Law-Court Judges of Margit Boulevard. Indictment against József Babós, Vilmos Dominich and Their Court-Martial Henchmen. Details of Various Resistance Movements	War crimes, resistance	Documentation, historical account
László Palásti (1903–1979): journalist, writer	The Novel of the Death March of Bor	Forced labour service	Report/novel
Mihály Petyke (1906–?) journalist	I Was a Captive of the Gestapo...Political Report-Novel	Persecution for political convictions	Report/novel
Zoltán József Vajda (no special status)	Army with Shovels	Forced labour, war	Autobiographical account

Forced labour

The theme of forced labour is represented thoroughly in three books of the series. The author of the first work,²³ János Fóthy, adopts the position of an intellectual who shares his opinion with the public in crucial social and political matters, as suggested by the allusion to Émile Zola's *J'accuse*: Alfred Dreyfus was imprisoned on Devil's Island. The author was interned on Csepel Island in Budapest where he was forced to work in the former Manfréd Weiss factories. He explains:

“I was a Hungarian writer and journalist of Jewish origin. This was my only crime. My only crime was that I dared to serve Hungarian culture and European humanity on the pages of *Pesti Hírlap*, *Nyugat*, *Új Idők* and other papers humbly, modestly, poorly and passionately for a quarter of a century.”²⁴

“Dedicated to the martyr-memory of my fellow-internees who were deported and never came back”, the report-novel is based on Fóthy's experiences between April and November 1944. The book ends with the author's return to Budapest, where, in the “city of Satan”, dominated by hatred and fear, he struggles with the feeling of alienation: “I have returned from Devil's Island, but I have not returned to freedom. I made my way back to the world, yes, but this world is not mine anymore.”²⁵

²³ János Fóthy, *Horthyiliget – a Magyar Ördögsgiget* [=Horthy-woods – The Hungarian Devil's Island], Budapest 1945.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

László Palásti tells the story of his internment in the forced labour camp in Bor, Serbia, from May 1944 and the death march to Hungary that lasted until October.

“When I was called up on 17 May 1944 in Vác, I thought I would be discharged in three months and I would be able to go back to my original job, writing, albeit illegally. Although I lost my editor’s desk in 1938, I still believed that Hitler’s reign of terror would be over and the country would be liberated, as would be the soul and the fountain pen.”²⁶

For Palásti, similarly to many other intellectuals in Hungary, the anti-Jewish laws, the first of which came into force in 1938, meant that they were deprived of their professions. It is telling that Palásti starts his story with the forced labour, rather than discussing the event that forced him into illegal work. In his book he depicts everyday life in the camp in a classical reporting style. Although he managed to escape from the death march in Hungary, the story of the forced labourers continues. Relying on survivor testimonies, Palásti tells of the tragic fate of those who remained captured by the Hungarian forces, and later by the German forces. For the author, the issue of public interest is not his personal suffering but the story of Bor, told through the experiences of his fellow internees. In fact, the report-novel ends with scenes in which the former captives reunite regularly to share their experiences with each other and to find out what happened to their other comrades. “They remember everything. Many bad things, few good things.” Retelling the stories about the forced labour camp has another important function, which is to attest to the deeds of the perpetrators, for example to those of lieutenant-colonel Ede Marányi: “Wherever he may be, he cannot escape. Six thousand witnesses desire his punishment. Three thousand living and the same number of dead witnesses, killed though innocent, with eyes crying for revenge.”²⁷

The third book on forced labour is that of Zoltán József Vajda, who began writing it in 1944, but the story starts in the late 1930s with the introduction of the first anti-Jewish law, and ends with the liberation. Not being a professional writer or journalist, his narrative is not restricted to events he witnessed and his experiences as an internee. He applies a ‘civilian narrative’: in other words, he gives an account of what happened to his family members, as well as commenting on the political situation, and often steps outside the narrator’s role. Contrary to the other two books on forced labour, in Vajda’s work a detailed pre-history unfolds before the actual physical persecution. In this narrative the main reason for the humiliation, whose form *par excellence* is forced labour, is hatred between people. As the author puts it, forced labour is

²⁶László Palásti, *A bori halálút regénye* [=The Novel of the Death March of Bor], Budapest 1945, 3.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 90.

“humiliation which differentiates one human from another”, a dehumanising label. As this hatred grows, the division of society deepens.

“The hatred stirred up by base emotions is getting gradually stronger and the country is increasingly moving onto a path that at the outset manifests itself in the lawless expropriation of the material goods of Jewry, later in depriving them of their liberty, and finally in robbing them of their life.”²⁸

Most importantly, in *Magyar Golgota* forced labour appears as part of the national tragedy. Vajda, for example, explicitly locates the recent catastrophe within the great national narrative. He argues that Hungary’s participation in the war led the country into a greater tragedy than the Mongol invasion in 1241, or the battle of Mohács in 1526 when the Ottoman Empire invaded. Similarly, Fóthy considers the establishment of Jewish internment camps one of the most shameful episodes in Hungarian political history. Palásti recounts in his book that the forced labourers wanted to recite the Hungarian national anthem when they stepped back onto Hungarian soil. Thus forced labour, and the persecution of the Hungarian Jews in general, is presented as a radical exclusion from the Hungarian nation, as a forced division of the nation, and the persecution of a part of it. Fóthy even speaks in organic terms: “we were surgically removed from the body of the community like a malign ulcer.”²⁹ Those authors of *Magyar Golgota* of Jewish origin often use the distinction between the notions of Jew and “considered to be Jewish” or “racial Jew”, that is the person who becomes identified as Jewish by force through the racial legislation.

War crimes

Lévai’s book, commissioned by Müller, levies an indictment against one of the most infamous perpetrators of crimes in Hungary during the war. It reviews the life and political activity of László Endre, State Secretary in the Ministry of the Interior during the German occupation, and Commissioner of Civil Administration under the Arrow Cross rule. The book begins by addressing the People’s Court and providing the list of war crimes that Endre committed. The reason for publication is juridical:

“I have compiled a volume of detailed and authentic evidence for all my statements and I hereby distribute my work to the public in order that László Endre be brought to justice for

²⁸Zoltán József Vajda, *A lapátos hadsereg* [=The Army with Shovels], Budapest 1945, 3.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 23.

the above accusations and that he be fittingly punished based on the published conclusive evidence.”³⁰

Lévai’s method is journalistic rather than historical: collecting and commenting on documents, quoting interviews, referring to personal observations. His own newspaper articles, which he published from 1925 onwards about the wrongdoings of Endre, constitute a major source for his book.

László Endre is represented as a traitor who acts against the Hungarian nation. Two of the seven points of Lévai’s indictment against Endre deal with the crimes against the Jews (deportation of “more than 700,000 Hungarian citizen of the Israelite religion” and the death marches to Germany in February and March 1945). “He was the executioner of Hungarian Jewry, and also persecuted thousands of Christian Hungarians because of their political stance.”³¹ In a similar fashion, the publisher intended to clarify the role of Endre in the national catastrophe. In an unattributed remark after the publisher’s and the author’s forewords, the following can be read:

“[Endre] lives in the popular consciousness as the executioner of Hungarian Jewry. In actual fact, as we will see, László Endre is also the executioner of the Hungarian workers and last but not least the Hungarian peasantry, which he tortured and tormented for decades. He made hundreds of thousands of people from these layers of society homeless and played them into Nazi hands.”³²

War

Another important topic of the series of novels is war: besides serving as background in the works of Vajda and István Gyenes, it is the principal subject of Margit Izsáky’s book.³³ *Ország a keresztfán* [=Crucified Country] is a collection of reports and feuilleton pieces based on interviews and personal observations of everyday life during the siege of Budapest. The distinct short texts include the description of personal relationships and everyday life in the air-raid shelters, where the strict spatial distinctions that existed between the inhabitants of a house disappeared; and interviews that Izsáky conducted in prison with two teenagers who were former members of the Arrow Cross Party and were arrested for murder. Famine, bombardment and waiting – these elemental experiences of a small residential community in Budapest during the siege stand for the suffering of the entire country. In this representation

³⁰Jenő Lévai, *Endre László, a Magyar háborús bűnösök listavezetője* [=László Endre. The First on the List of Hungarian War Criminals], Budapest 1945, 3.

³¹*Ibid.*, 5.

³²*Ibid.*, 6.

³³Margit Izsáky, *Ország a keresztfán* [=Crucified Country], Budapest 1945.

the war impinges upon helpless Hungarian civilians who, passively endure the catastrophic times.

Resistance

The contrary is the case in Gyenes's novel on national resistance, the only fictional narrative among the books of *Magyar Golgota*. It represents the Hungarian fight for independence, and tells the story of a group of young resistance fighters during the siege of Budapest who chose not to support the war, but instead to take up the fight "when the anti-cultural forces overran the country."³⁴ The story, romantic in places, is built on the opposition of surface and below ground:

"On the surface everything was dancing the bloody dance of death of a past doomed to destruction. Order, reason, perspectives on the future thrived only below ground. In secret gatherings, among the deadly threats of thousands of dangers, the best were organising themselves, putting their lives at risk every hour and minute, to rescue as many human lives and material possessions as possible, and above all as many ideas and as much truth and humanity as possible from the hands of the murderous German-Arrow Cross terror."³⁵

Similarly to Izsáky's book, the story unfolds around the residents of a Budapest house in an air-raid shelter where the protagonist, who is the leader of the young group and "knew that he was neither a hero nor was he tilting at windmills", wants to take action instead of talking. The novel ends with a shoot-out between him and the Germans when finally the first Soviet soldier appears. Their shoulders meet and they fall to the snow embraced. The protagonist dies with the word "victory" on his lips.

In 1945, indeed, the new democratic regime needed the founding national myth of political resistance under the German occupation. Lévai's other contribution, *A Margit-körúti vészbírák* [=The Martial Law-Court Judges of Margit Boulevard],³⁶ was, as its entire title shows, written with different purposes in mind. It is partly devoted to documentation, as it explores three opposition movements and the ensuing trials for treason during the 1940s. By establishing a unitary narrative of the Hungarian "national resistance movements", and at the same time commemorating their executed leaders as "martyrs of democracy", Lévai surely aimed to contribute to the ideological foundation of the new regime. The publication also served as an indictment against the perpetrators, two judges of the martial court of the former regime

³⁴István Gyenes, *Élet a föld alatt* [=Life Below Ground], Budapest 1945, 34.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 36-37.

³⁶Jenő Lévai, *A Margit-körúti vészbírák. Vádirat Babós József, Dominich Vilmos és hadbíró-pribékjeik ellen. Részletek a különböző ellenállási mozgalmakból* [=The Martial Law-Court Judges of Margit Boulevard. Indictment against József Babós, Vilmos Dominich and Their Court-Martial Henchmen. Details of Various Resistance Movements], Budapest 1945.

established in Margit Boulevard, Budapest. Commemoration of the martyrdom of the fighters for democracy is an important point here, since the three opposition movements discussed were not connected with each other: the common element is that their leaders became victims of the same regime through the treason trials.

Persecution because of political convictions

“The well-known political journalist’s exciting reporting on the inhuman methods of the Gestapo, based on his personal experiences,” reads the publisher’s teaser for Mihály Petyke’s book. It tells the story of the Hungarian ‘leftist’ intellectuals who were captured by the Gestapo during the German occupation of the country. Here, the tragedy of the nation is represented by foreign rule. Petyke is perplexed by the fact that during his interrogation the Gestapo cites conversations that he had with politicians long before the occupation. He writes in detail about the Gestapo’s means of breaking the spirit of the captives, and of the sophisticated methods applied during his interrogation, which lasted many hours. The story ends with the release of the journalist a few weeks later: he returns to the city of Budapest, and faces the radical changes in Hungarian politics. As if he had arrived on an alien planet, he writes: “Stigmatised people strolled in the street. They wore a yellow Star of David on the left of their breast. And people passed among them as if they had already got used to it and there were nothing unusual in it.”³⁷

The temporal construction of the catastrophe seems to be ambiguous. The intention of the publisher was certainly to use the year 1944 as the symbol of the national tragedy: it is even indicated on the cover of the series of books. In the books by Fóthy, Palásti and Petyke, the story begins immediately after the German occupation of Hungary on 19 March 1944. Losing national independence is thus the core topic of *Magyar Golgota*. This temporal limitation supports the interpretation that Hungary was the victim of the disaster. The war experience, indeed, is largely represented as the suffering of the civilian population of Budapest during the siege (particularly in Gyenes’s and Izsaky’s books). At first sight the 1944-concept of the catastrophe seems to be compact, yet there are many exceptions – three major ones concerning the temporality of the narratives.

First, Lévai’s book on the chief Hungarian war criminal is a political biography that begins with Endre’s family background, the emphasis being on the period starting in the mid-1920s.

³⁷Mihály Petyke, *A Gestapo foglya voltam... Politikai riportregény* [=I Was a Captive of the Gestapo... Political Report-Novel], Budapest 1945, 114.

Second, in Vajda's book the national decline commences with the anti-Jewish legislation at the end of the 1930s. Third, Lévai's work on the resistance movements focuses on the war years. Concerning Hungary's role in the war, Gyenes's novel constitutes an exception; in this the character of a deserted soldier demonstrates model behaviour for the Hungarian army in dealing with the occupiers. In general, the series shows Hungary's military participation in the war as a senseless sacrifice of the nation. However, the nation is not portrayed as a homogenous community of victims; at least two boundaries separating Hungarians are represented. One differentiates between the passive population and those who resisted: this can be seen in Gyenes's book and Lévai's contribution about the "martyrs of democracy". The other distinguishes the Hungarian perpetrators within the nation. In *Magyar Golgota* "the Germans" are never mentioned as the only ones who committed crimes. Hungarians serving German power interests are named as traitors, hirelings, sometimes as "Swabians" (Hungarians with German origin). As the protagonist of Gyenes's novel puts it: "Sometimes I wonder about this type of person: they speak Hungarian fluently, but remain German to the end."³⁸ These are the nation's "gangs working for foreign interests", according to Vajda, who are only driven by hatred. Hungarian perpetrators are often identified with the Arrow Cross Party and other extreme right movements of the time, mostly as high-ranking officials and decision-makers. Against them are posed the "true Hungarians".

Strategies of remembering

The following section aims to confront the memory-political strategies running through *Magyar Golgota* with elements of the currently dominant discourse on Holocaust memory, which defines the present-day global culture of remembrance. I will focus on three key features of the dominant culture of memory³⁹ and raise the question to what extent and in what sense they were decisive in the early post-war conception of the catastrophe.

1. First, I deal with the present-day regime of historicity⁴⁰ in particular with the social need to "preserve everything",⁴¹

³⁸Ibid., 10.

³⁹Henry Rousso, Vers une mondialisation de la mémoire, in: Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire, (avril-juin 2007) 94, 3-11.; Henry Rousso, History of Memory, Policies of the Past: What for? in: Konrad H. Jarausch/Thomas Lindenberger (eds.), Conflicted Memories. Europeanizing Contemporary Histories, 2007, 23-35.

⁴⁰François Hartog, Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps, Paris 2002.

⁴¹Tzvetan Todorov, Hope and Memory. Lessons from the Twentieth Century. Princeton 2003, 113-148; Pierre Nora, The Era of Commemoration, in: Pierre Nora/Lawrence D. Kritzman (eds.), Realms of Memory: The construction of the French Past. Vol. 3. New York 1996, 609-637.

2. second, I focus on testimony as the procedure of representing the past and victimisation as the mode of memory political action;⁴²
3. and third, I am interested in the “duty of remembering” as the ethical imperative of dealing with the past.⁴³

Instead of demonstrating the negative consequences⁴⁴ of this setting, or exercising normative criticism on “too much memory”, my aim is to reconstruct forgotten or marginalised practices of representing the recent past.

The sense of time that can be described as “present pasts”⁴⁵ is unknown in the early post-war period. In general, social interest concerns the restoration of society and the future, rather than the past. But the past is not left behind. The sense of time in which *Magyar Golgota* came into being can be called the ‘actuality of the past’, the sense of its not having disappeared. The authors of the series started writing mostly during the catastrophe, even though their work could be made public only after it. The social need behind the publication was mainly to document and provide information on the recent past. A new age had begun but what had really happened remained obscure. Lévai in particular posits his work as a preliminary effort to make future historical inquiry possible, as for example in the book on the national resistance movements he states that “by providing certain details we would like to be of service to historians later devoting themselves to more fitting research on this topic from a historical perspective.”⁴⁶ Instead of preserving past events for commemoration, the journalists strive to present the past in the national public sphere, that is, to show reality, to transmit historical truth. The need behind this memory politics is to learn from history, to derive a lesson from what happened as an orientation for the future. Perhaps not surprisingly, in the political undertakings of *Magyar Golgota* to deal with the past, we cannot find the need or urge of ‘coming to terms with the past’. Instead of ‘working through’ the traumatic historical

⁴²Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, Ithaca/London 2006; Bernhard Giesen, *Triumph and Trauma*. Boulder/London 2004; Marianne Hirsch/Leo Spitzer, *The witness in the archive: Holocaust Studies / Memory Studies*, in: *Memory Studies* (2009)2, 151-170.

⁴³See e.g. Éric Conan/Henry Rousso, *Vichy: an Ever-present Past*. New England 1998; Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago 2009.

⁴⁴See e.g. Sophie Wahnich/Barbara Lášticová/Andrej Findor (eds.), *Politics of Collective Memory. Cultural Patterns of Commemorative Practices in Post-War Europe*. Berlin 2008.

⁴⁵Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts. Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford 2003.

⁴⁶Lévai, *A Margit-körúti vészbírák*, 5.

experience,⁴⁷ the journalists of the series call for soul-searching as a practice of conscience and self-knowledge. Margit Izsáky's foreword makes this explicit:

“Let us search our souls. How were things allowed to come to this.[...]Devastation and ruins everywhere.Wretched country. I am a journalist. It is my duty to write down what I saw and lived through.And I do so in this form – I write reports, not novels. Everything which is in this book is real and experienced. [...] If we are able to accurately show what was in the past that is guidance for the future.”⁴⁸

In the currently dominant culture of memory, the legitimate non-expert practice of representing the past is the testimony of the victim. It is suffering that makes the personal experiences worthy of the public's interest. In this respect, the memory of the Holocaust certainly served as a model: each and every testimony of the victims of the genocide contributes to keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive and thus to presenting a memento of the consequences of discrimination, exclusion and persecution of individuals because of their group affiliations. According to the relation to the past here called the ‘actuality of the past’, the principal memorial practice of Müller's publishing policy is radically different from the life historical testimony of the everyday individual. It is journalistic reporting: a discursive practice of transmitting facts that makes private experiences public through elaborating them in relation to a political matter, either as an example, or as an analogy of an issue that concerns the political community. A clear formulation of this is in Petyke's book:

“I was a captive of the Gestapo in Budapest. In this work I attempt to describe objectively what I saw and heard and what happened to me and my fellow prisoners, from the perspective of a journalist. This was the most memorable experience of my life!”⁴⁹

Although factual genres such as reporting and biography predominate in the series, the mixture of literary and journalistic genres characterises it. A frequent term used for the books is report-novel, which refers to a text written on the basis of the experiences of the author-journalist to address public interest, but shaped with techniques borrowed from fiction, such as dialogue or dramatisation. Certainly, the publisher's aim to reach the widest possible non-specialist readership should not be neglected here. The narrative styles adopted are various: first-person memoir with fictional elements, documentary fiction, biographic reportage, documenting, etc. What all these cases have in common is that the journalistic discursive practices as legitimate modes of representing the truth make it possible to render the private

⁴⁷ On the cultural sociological role of trauma see Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma*, in: Jeffrey C. Alexander/Ron Eyerman/Bernard Giesen/Neil J. Smelser/Piotr Sztompka(eds.): *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley/London, 2004, 1-31.

⁴⁸Izsáky, *Ország a keresztfán*, 5.

⁴⁹Petyke, *A Gestapo foglya*, 4.

experiences public. Also important is that the books rely on journalistic methods of data collection such as interviews, personal observations, and documentation. This methodological relation to facts is a characteristic feature even of the treatment of personal experiences. With the help of the motto, the reader can recognise the author herself in one of the characters in Izsáky's book. Instead of using a first-person narrative of suffering, she represents herself as one of the ordinary individuals in the air-raid shelter in the third-person singular. Similarly, Lévai treats his personal experiences of persecution by László Endre as other sources of his inquiry (the publisher, however, had no qualms about advertising the book by representing their relationship as a long dramatic duel between the man of power and the man of letters). Lévai was engaged in one of the opposition movements he writes about in his book on national resistance (one that helped forced labourers). Instead of applying the first person narrative and representing himself as a hero of the resistance, he remains in the position of the unbiased reporter of the past who confines himself to publishing the files of his trial. All in all, lived-through experiences serve as the source of acute and real information, which has to be elaborated by the professional writer, and not as the exclusive object of narration. Moreover, personal suffering is not represented as trauma. There is no individual victimisation in the memory politics of *Magyar Golgota*. Instead of suffering victims, the authors speak of martyrs and comrades who took part in a fight and fell. The individuals who speak of the past in the series are journalists, not survivors; even those of Jewish origin do not take up the position of the victim of genocide.

In our present-day global culture of memory the central ethical imperative that guides our relations to the past is often called the "duty to remember". As a characteristic feature of Holocaust memory, this imperative calls for a commemoration of the past to prevent history repeating itself. With the universalisation of the memory of the Holocaust, the memory of the Jewish genocide has become a general emblem of evil, the final consequence of every form of inhuman action, irrespective of geographic or historical context. At the early stage of the history of Holocaust-memory, this duty was inseparable from the social obligation personally felt by survivors towards those fellow victims who were not able to return. Speaking in the name of the others, the silent witnesses, in other words representing the community of victims, was a peculiar characteristic of the memory of the Holocaust. In the books of Fóthy and Palásti, which are about the persecution of the Jews, the "duty to remember" is completely absent: the normative imperative of telling the truth of the past is the professional duty of journalism. For the journalist authors of Jewish origin, who pursuant to the anti-

Jewish legislation were deprived of their professional livelihood, Müller's publishing house provided the possibility to pursue their vocation legally. In this way, the very fact that the formerly excluded intellectuals could participate in the discourse of the public sphere proved that the persecution was over. The possibility of working legally provided a political subjectivity: the journalistic profession as political practice constituted a legitimate mode of participating in the public sphere. Thus the personal becomes political in a manner different to the case of personal life stories of Jewish suffering.

Magyar Golgota does not represent a homogenous discourse on the catastrophe; rather, it is a manifestation of an open and unstable discursive field of the national public sphere in which different conceptualisations and memorial practices compete with each other. Within the series, the work of Vajda differs from all the others in many respects. First of all, the autodidact author is not a man of letters. It is thus no accident that the publisher felt the need to provide an explanation for the publication of the first text by a publicly unknown person. In his foreword Müller recounts that the manuscript triggered an intense debate among the publisher's readers, who agreed that it was definitely based on lived-through experiences but "it lacks 'authorial heat', in other words the author of the work is not a professional writer." Consequently, the text "is not a poetic work of a high literary standard" but a "cross-section of reality, an authentic testimony on a glaring stain on the twentieth century, Hungarian forced labour, in the great lawsuit before the tribunal of democracy."⁵⁰ To be sure, however, the publisher advertises the book by comparing Vajda's talent to that of German author Erich Maria Remarque and Austro-Hungarian-born journalist and moderniser of Hungarian literary tradition Rodion Markovits. What is important is that finally Vajda's text, the *A lapátos hadsereg* [=The Army with Shovels], was included in the joint publication of Müller despite the differences to the other books of the series, and to Müller's publishing policy in general. Vajda's autobiographical account is very similar to the currently dominant practices of memory culture. The book begins with the following: "Memento!... Let us remember! ... Let our remembrance be nourished not by revenge but by the desire that the past shall never ever return. I started writing in hard, cataclysmic times. The story is about an average man in today's dire times."⁵¹

The drive behind writing "about an average man" is what we call the "duty to remember", and the product is very close to the narrative form of today's life history accounts and personal

⁵⁰Vajda, *A lapátos hadsereg*, 2.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 3.

testimonies. What makes Vajda's text peculiar in relation to Holocaust testimonies is the fact that the author speaks as a member of the community of "we, (humane) Hungarians."

Concerning the publishing policy of Károly Müller at large, the central question remains of how the brutal and often unimaginable events of the past could be named, narrated, and interpreted – without the discourse on the Holocaust and genocide. Again, there is no single answer to this: *Magyar Golgota* cannot be treated as an example of a homogenous discourse on the catastrophe. Accordingly, many metaphors were supposed to communicate what had happened during the war: catastrophe, tragedy, decay, dark age, etc. In this regard, there are three features that characterise Müller's enterprise.

1. The first is the push to integrate the catastrophe into the grand narrative of the nation. In this way Jewish suffering, taking an important role in the representation of the catastrophe, is manifested as an aspect of the national tragedy, either as a consequence of treason, or of the growing inhumanity and hatred in society. Both versions are well-known *topoi* of the (Hungarian) national imagination: the former represents the fight between the nations, the latter the case when members of the nation follow their selfish interests above those of the entire community.
2. The second characterising feature is a reliance on the contemporary judicial discourse on retribution.⁵² What is remarkable from the present-day reader's perspective is that, applying the national framework, legislation differentiated between war crimes and "crimes against the people" [népellenes bűnök]. The former referred in practice to any act of waging war and preventing the armistice after 1939 – that is, war *per se* became indictable, primarily in the case of those who had previously been in decision-making positions. The latter included actions on the basis of the "laws and decrees against certain portions of the people", membership in fascist parties, and distributing anti-democratic ideas. The authors of *Magyar Golgota* relied on this legal discourse, although neither systematically nor profoundly. Cases before the People's Courts regularly constituted burning issues in the public sphere in 1945, which probably increased the awareness of this legal terminology.

⁵²See László Nánási A magyarországi népbíráskodás joganyaga [The legal material of the Hungarian People's Jurisdiction] 1945-1950, in: Gyenesi József (eds.): Pártatlan igazságszolgáltatás vagy megtorlás. Népbíráskodás-történeti tanulmányok [Impartial Justice or Retribution. Studies in the History of People's Courts]. Bács-Kiskun Megyei Önkormányzat Levéltára, Kecskemét, 2011. 6-55.

3. Finally, the third characteristic feature of Müller's publishing policy is the application of a Christian vocabulary to name the horrors which neither the national nor the legal discourse could address appropriately. Most importantly, to narrate and thus to remember the human suffering, words like Golgotha, Calvary, crucifixion, martyrdom, sacrifice, etc. are used. This way, the suffering of the community could be remembered as a distant analogy to the suffering of Christ. This sort of suffering has meaning, because being victimised refers to an ideal or goal for which the sacrifice is made. Moreover, Christian vocabulary enabled people to face the responsibility for previous wrongdoings. In this sense, by searching one's heart, one has to confront the sins one has committed to be able to learn from the lesson of the past. Taking responsibility is thus a point of individual conscience. It is essential to note that what we have here is not a religious discourse, as none of the authors were believers (with the exception of Fóthy, who makes no use of the vocabulary under discussion). Müller's publishing policy was secular, as was his social environment.

Conclusion

The Hungarian publishing house of Károly Müller, focusing its activity on the recent past, represents a peculiar case among the early post-war discourses of cultural memory. Müller's publishing policy was closely related to his resistance activity as supporter and rescuer of intellectuals during the war years. By giving them the opportunity to work as authors and translators in 1943-1945, the publisher was able to market a good number of publications immediately after the liberation. The political relevance of publishing was multiple: to tell the truth about the past, to convey historical justice, to document the crimes, to indict the perpetrators, and to commemorate the martyrs. The joint publication of eight books, *Magyar Golgota*, involved seven authors, with one exception all journalists. As a conceptualisation of the catastrophe, it reconstructs the recent past as a national tragedy in which the topic of forced labour is a definitive component. Besides Jewish suffering, constitutive layers of the tragedy are war experience, resistance, war crimes, and persecution due to political affiliations. The strategies of remembering around *Magyar Golgota* differ in other additional respects from the present-day dominant culture of remembrance, which has at its center the memory of the Holocaust. In this article, these differences have been analysed from three perspectives: the sense of time, the practices of representing the past, and the ethical dimension of remembering.