Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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Despite the post-’56 repression, the reorganized Party was actually weak—especially in the field of culture, where it had been almost completely abandoned by the intelligentsia—and was in need of at least the tacit loyalty and passive support of the writers, who after the dark years of Stalinism had redeemed their status as the conscience of the nation. The system that emerged was one based more on cooption than coercion and, as Péter György argues, more on the editor than the censor—that is, on the carrot over the stick, and on massaging conflicts or delaying reckoning with them until the potential sticking point had been worn down, or, in the constantly changing stream of “correct” politics, no longer stuck out. This policy is signified by the well-known “TTT” formulation, standing for the three categories of artistic regulation: Támogatott, Tűrt, Tiltott (Supported, Tolerated, Prohibited), and ruled until 1972 by György Aczél. Aczél, a figure shot through with contradictions surrounding his Jewish identity and wartime memory, took charge of an also ambiguous and constantly shifting cultural policy. He is an apt representative of what Kata Bohus has called the “institutionalized confusion” of Hungarian Jewish policy during this period. Though permeated with a rigid antifascist ideology and its accordant taboos, it evolved, especially in the wake of the 1961 Adolf Eichmann trial, into a “dynamically changing body” featuring “ongoing negotiation and incessant dynamism.”

**Jews and Non-Jews: Responsibility and Guilt**

The key question for the Hungarian Holocaust, both in the communist period and now, is that of responsibility for the Jewish catastrophe—and for the broader national one. Kertész’s answer was sharply negative—the protagonist of *Fatelessness*, Gyuri Köves, finds no help or even sympathy among the non-Jewish population, accounting in large part for Kertész’s difficulties in publishing and harsh reactions, at the time and after. The picture in the earlier novels consid-

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ered here is more mixed. There is a general sense of fascism as the political environment surrounding the action, but wholly evil protagonists are few and far between. The most stereotypical villain is the local Arrow Cross commander Péter Hohn in György Rónay’s 1963 novel Night Express.20 The protagonist, the retired pharmacist Kálmán Kerekes, had in the autumn of 1944 been reunited by chance with his former schoolmate Hohn, whom he had protected as a younger pupil from bullying—an experience of victimhood that slightly mitigates or at least explains Hohn’s isolation and rage. The adult Hohn, lacking any human contact, had taken to pressuring Kerekes into regular suppers together; at one of these, the non-Jewish Kerekes inadvertently revealed the Jewish identity of the elder pharmacist couple he was posted to assist, causing their arrest and death. But the center of the novel is not the evil Hohn but Kerekes, the quintessential Everyman, and his growing and eventually overwhelming guilty conscience, which torments him for some two decades until he finally ends his suffering under the wheels of the evening express train.

Another forthrightly negative figure is Károly Baróti, the protagonist of Tibor Cseres’s Clover Baron (1956);21 while not an explicitly political actor, he represents the discredited and historically defeated landlord class. His behavior is despicable, especially vis-a-vis the peasant wives on his large estate, who he relentlessly beds, in a modernized droit du seigneur. While his fate, dispatched in an inevitably brutal and collective fashion by the peasants whom he tries to return to servitude on his regained estate, shows a certain kind of historical justice, his position with respect to the Jews is more ambiguous. The year before the story’s events, he had sheltered Éva, a Jewish doctor’s daughter, after her parents were deported, though at the price of forcing her to submit to his advances, threatening otherwise to turn her in. Thereafter she is haunted by her pain and desire for revenge—she blames him for her parents’ death, “he could have been their savior, with a word”22—embodying a much deeper hostility and resistance to the baron than the peasant women, who accept his predations and care only about material survival. But Baróti is surrounded by casual, explicit antisemitic remarks by other aristocrats, as well as by the prostitutes he visits, for which he admonishes them. The peasants’ prejudices come out more forcefully: on the final, fateful day, at the May 1 parade, their Party-dictated chants of “Down with the barons and

22 Cseres, Here-háró, 246.
counts! ... Down with fascism” are supplanted by spontaneous ones: “Beat the Jew, that way you defend the people!” Thus, despite this novel’s putative socialist realist form, the sense of guilt for the Jews’ disappearance is pervasive.

Another novel steeped in an inescapable, though diffuse, sense of guilt is Gyula Fekete’s The Death of a Doctor (1963). It is the tale of Weisz, the old village doctor, and his last week on earth. Tired and unwell, he is supposed to retire, but his young replacement leaves for a fellowship abroad, and he is left to carry on “indefinitely.” As he does his rounds, and his condition declines, we find out—only by-the-by—that he is Jewish; lost his two sons, who perished while on Labor Service; and, along with his wife, was the sole survivor of a deportation transport. At the end of the week, he is summoned in the wee hours to the home of a family who had verbally abused him during the war, and during a scuffle with the midwife over the condition of the baby—which he has saved—falls, hits his head, and dies of a heart attack. Though not presented directly, the culpability of his fellow villagers—and by extension Hungarians in general—infuses the novel and this final scene.

József Darvas’s Drunken Rain (1963), personifies the guilt much more pointedly, through a leitmotif that reappears throughout. It opens in the present (the early 1960s) with the funeral of the artist Géza, who has committed suicide, and was the best friend of film director Béla, the narrator. Béla recalls the day in 1944 when the few Jewish families in Géza’s home village were taken away. Sándor, Géza’s brother, had appeared with the cow of his neighbor Steiner, known as the “featherbed [meaning relatively wealthy] Jew.” Géza had ordered Sándor to take the cow back, exploding: “Rotten country! Let the sky fall down on it.” Sándor pointed out that others were already lined up to take the Steiners’ bed and other possessions, so there would be no point in returning the cow. The two brothers got into a fight, beating each other and rolling in the mud: “for a cow the whole country, honor, everything . . . is it worth 30 pieces of silver?” Shifting back to the present, Béla accuses Sándor: “You didn’t take back the cow,
that’s why Géza is dead!” The matter emerges as the root cause of the torment at both the individual (Géza) and the national level. (Pouring rain surrounds the incident, evoking the title.)

The material benefits released by the persecution of the Jews—to put it bluntly, the issue of plunder—focuses guilt on a very concrete level. The stripping of the possessions of the Steiners is echoed in several other novels. Sándor Kerekes, the pharmacist, is gifted the pharmacy of the murdered couple by Hohn, as an indication that service to the nation pays off personally; though he ultimately abandons it, as well as the site of his transgression, the recognition of his susceptibility to such an attraction forms a key part of his torment. The old doctor Weisz recalls how his house was cleaned out by his neighbors after his deportation, down to the plug boxes in the walls. A man of limited horizons, looking forward only to retiring to rest a little, he suppresses the past and bad feelings against his neighbors.

That this or that one ripped the connectors out of the wall, this one or that one made a pigsty on my floor, this one said this, that one said that . . . that all felt bad to me as a person, after my decades of work . . . As a person. But as a doctor . . . it has nothing to do with me. Still, the unleveled accusation refuses to disperse.

Klára Fehér’s *The Sea* (1956), a socialist realist coming-of-age story of the generation that launched the communist experiment, situates its heroine, the non-Jewish Ági Csaplár, as a worker in an office divided into anti-Nazis and fascist cheerleaders. As the Jewish employees, and the relative of the exiled Jewish owners, exit the scene, the scramble for their possessions commences. The left-behind relative, Dr. Römer, who has buried his valuables in the garden of his villa in the Buda hills, is betrayed by his confidant, the (hitherto anti-Nazi) company lawyer, who steals both the valuables and the villa. Caught digging in the yard by the office fascist, who has his own eyes on the property, he in turn betrays the Jewish physician, Dr. Barta, who once saved his son. The fascist obliges by instead grabbing Barta’s villa, which he celebrates with a party, wherein his colleagues paw through the family’s food, clothes, and mementos, pointing to the more gen-

eral theft of the Jews’ possessions. The crowd sings “Pogrom, pogrom, pogrom in
the village, at the edge of the village the machine gun is sounding nicely . . . let it
keep on sounding, as long as there’s a Jew in the village.”33

The latest novel of those covered, Magda Szabó’s Katalin Street,34 revolves
around a central inadvertent betrayal, as did Night Express, but has a very differ-
ent stylistic approach and a softer judgment. The novel is awash with nostalgia
for the “Eden” of the former community of the everystreet of its title, shattered
by the destruction of one of the three families who form its heart. The parents,
a Jewish dentist and his wife, are deported and meet their deaths in the camps,
and though their teenage daughter, Henriett Held, evades the roundup and is
hidden for a time by the other two (non-Jewish) families, she is unintentionally
betrayed by the neighbor girl, and shot by an Arrow Cross soldier in her house’s
garden. But Henriett lives on to haunt the street and its surviving remnants, lit-
erally, as a ghost commenting from the beyond. She is concerned with the emo-
tions, spirit, and course of individual lives buffeted by historical events, rather
than with those events themselves.

The ultimate responsibility of the Germans who occupied Hungary in
March 1944 for the deportations that followed has been a commonplace since
the end of the war. But these novels are remarkable for the lack of German char-
acters. As a fleeting exception, Imre Készti’s Elysium (1958), a story of the arrest,
ghettoization, and deportation of ten-year-old Gyuri Szekeres in Budapest in
the summer of 1944, mentions one single German officer, who strides into the
Jewish Council offices barking orders. Otherwise, there are no alien “fascists” to
distract from national responsibility: the persecution of Gyuri and his family is
a Hungarian phenomenon. Another novel by Tibor Cserés, Cold Days, first
published in 1964, concentrates directly on one of the most notorious incidents
of the war, as far as Hungarian forces were concerned. Occurring well before the
occupation, while Hungary was an independent ally of Nazi Germany, the Jan-
uary 1942 Novi Sad massacre saw over three thousand civilians killed in puta-
tive retaliation for a minor partisan attack.35 This short novel was based on ex-
tensive interviews carried out by Cserés with ex-soldiers, some of them his

33 Fehér, A tenger, vol. 1, 141.
34 Magda Szabó, Katalin utca (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1969).
35 Tibor Cserés, Hideg napok (Budapest: Magvető, 1964). Initially published together with three other novel-
las, it went through numerous further editions by itself already in the next few years, was translated into
many languages, and was even republished in 2005 and 2014, making it unusual (along with Katalin Street) am-
ong all of these works in that it is still being widely read.
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former army comrades, as well as witnesses and survivors, and on trial documents and reports. It is set exclusively in a prison cell, where four officers are awaiting their (postwar) trial. While in some respects it is a picture of muddled responsibility, the relentlessly oppressive setting and the lack of mitigating factors produce an overwhelming sense of guilt. Major Büky, in the course of trying to convince himself that his wife, who was on the scene and disappeared, could still be alive, postulates that German units involved in the atrocities took her away as a potential witness against them—thereby also deflecting at least partial responsibility onto “the Germans.” This specific means of denial of Hungarian responsibility, active immediately and up to the present day, is however delegitimated by the character’s confused, desperate thought process, as well as by his particularly negative portrayal overall (see below).

Narrative Strategies

Narrative strategies were another means of recognizing, or appropriating, Holocaust issues. Keszi’s provides the most “classical” Holocaust story, *Elysium*, with its tragic Jewish child-hero, prefiguring Kertész’s protagonist (they even share a given name). János Pelle has called the novel a “significant precursor” to *Fatelessness*. Gyuri, while on his way to a family friend, Zsámoked, a retired Interior Ministry official who has been providing his family with produce from his Buda garden, is picked up by gendarmes in a random roundup and thrown together with other Jews in an unused factory. There follows the story of the attempts by Gyuri’s parents and especially Zsámoked to access all possible acquaintances and contacts to retrieve him. In parallel, we experience the boy’s tribulations as

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36 Árpád von Klimó, “Fascists with a Human Face? The Novel and Film Cold Days and the Discovery of the ‘Ordinary Hungarian’ as Perpetrator in the 1960s,” in *Remembering Cold Days: The 1942 Massacre of Novi Sad and the Transformation of Hungarian Society until 1989* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018), 131–51. This massacre was unique in that a trial of some of the officers responsible was held soon after, in the middle of the war, though most of those convicted at that time fled to Nazi Germany.

