Towards a Shared Memory?

former army comrades, as well as witnesses and survivors, and on trial docu-
ments and reports.\(^{36}\) 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 fac-
tors produce an overwhelming sense of guilt. Major Büky, in the course of try-
ing 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.”\(^{37}\) This specific means of denial of
Hungarian responsibility, active immediately and up to the present day,\(^{38}\) 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, Holo-
caust 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 *Fateless-
ness*.\(^{39}\) Gyuri, while on his way to a family friend, Zsámboke, 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 Zsámboke 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.


\(^{38}\) See for example the controversy over the Occupation Monument erected in Budapest’s Szabadság (Freedom)
1 (2017): 109–20; Ferenc Laczó, “Integrating Victims, Externalizing Guilt? Commemorating the Holo-
uni-jena.de/debates/integrating-victims-externalizing-guilt-commemorating-the-holocaust-in-hungary-
in-2014/.

tében: Keszi Imre és a zsidó-magyar együttélés” [Enthralled by utopias: Imre Keszi and Jewish-Hungarian
coexistence], *Irodalomtörténet* 94, no. 3 (2013): 439.
he is confined, marched across town, put into a boxcar and ultimately, inexorably arrives and is interned in “Elysium,” a somewhat fantastical children’s adjunct of Auschwitz run by the Mengele-like Dr. Helmer and his brutal assistant, Sepp, and, though not without its momentary joys, never for a moment free of the stench of the crematoria.

Keszi, the only Jewish writer under consideration, was himself a Labor Service survivor, but also a “loyal and strict Marxist critic . . . [and] an enforcer of literary discipline” 40 and “one of the country’s cultural commissars” 41 during the Stalinist period. Gyuri and his family are not faceless “victims of fascism,” but real and very Jewish characters, with a detailed and sympathetically told history; and they, especially young Gyuri, wrestle with, and debate, their Jewish identity and its connection to their fate. But other, non-Jewish writers, used obvious elements and tropes from the Jewish Holocaust to express the oppression suffered by their non-Jewish characters.

While Ági, of The Sea, is not herself Jewish, her travails during the fateful months until the arrival of the Soviet liberators persistently intersect with and ultimately shadow those of her Jewish compatriots. She learns of an arrest warrant out for her, as a suspected communist, due to her father’s activities in the 1919 Council Republic. She unsuccessfully tries to secure false papers, in order to flee to a relative in the countryside, and finally finds refuge in the attic of an unused warehouse, which has running water and a stock of musty jars of jam that keep her alive for the remaining months of the occupation and Arrow Cross terror. (The parallels to Anne Frank’s story—already well known in Hungary at the time—cannot have been lost on the novel’s readers.) One morning, “history [comes] into her prison”: she peeks out the window and sees Jews with yellow stars arrested and taken away. 42 Dr. Römer has already made clear what awaits: “ghetto, deportation, death camp.” 43 When she runs out of food, she survives only because the Jewish Spitz family buys refuge in an adjoining room, and then is discovered and taken away, leaving behind their own provisions. At war’s end, the improbable survival and return of her father and brother from Labor Service—though as suspected (non-Jewish) communists—replicates that of Jewish Labor Service survivors. While the spotlight on suffering has been taken by Ági and family, the numerous and striking details up to that point of

40 Földes, “A holokauszt a magyar (próza)irodalom tükrében,” 90.
41 Oszváth, “Trauma and Distortion,” 341.
43 Fehér, A tenger, vol. 1, 96.
Jews’ travails are likely to have stuck with readers even in the midst of an almost interminable accumulation of other stories.

While the main theme of *Drunken Rain* is of communists, mostly non-Jews, wrestling together and apart with their principles, contradictions, and failures over 15 years and more, culminating in the climactic days of 1956, the Holocaust and its victims and survivors intrude into the narrative at various points. While in transit between safe-houses in Budapest in 1944, Béla passes a “yellow-star person” on the sidewalk: he remarks that “our motions recognized and sniffed each other, like dogs on the street.” On October 15, as Regent Horthy, before being deposed in favor of the fascist Arrow Cross, declares a peace proposal to the approaching Soviet Army, Béla witnesses the residents of one of the yellow-star houses taking down the star and stomping on it. In a later incident, he sees a long line of Jews being herded by Arrow Cross militiamen, “probably from the ghetto.” When liberation comes, he himself happens upon the ghetto, where he hears “wailing, the crying, and complaints of millennia.”

Although most of the victims of the massacre that *Cold Days* concerns itself with were Serbs, and only about one-third were Jews, the characteristics of the atrocity—roundups, mass confinement, police raids, and mass shootings after forced disrobing on the frozen Tisza river, with bodies disposed of in mass graves and under the river ice—mirror those of other well-known events of the Holocaust going on at the same time in the East and later during the Arrow Cross terror after October 15, 1944 in Budapest. The presence of many non-Jewish victims (including a few Hungarians as well as Serbs) could seem to dilute the “Jewish character” of the Holocaust, but statements such as “It’s clear: there’s no difference between Jews and Serbs. The one is as criminal as the other” make the antisemitic (as well as Hungarian nationalist) nature of the crimes evident. And there are unmistakable references to core Holocaust tropes—“selections” where civilians arriving on trains are made to go either left or right, making Lieutenant Tarpataki, who had been the commanding officer at the train station, realize that “we are masters of life and death”; and Major Búky’s statement that “someone mentioned that incineration [of bodies] is a hygienic and so-to-say humane measure.”

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44 Darvas, *Részeg eső*, 50.
46 Darvas, *Részeg eső*, 220.
While these narrative strategies may appear at first as a kind of “dejewification” of the war experience, appropriating the fates of Jews to non-Jewish characters, I would argue that a more complex phenomenon is taking place. The presence of auxiliary Jewish characters maintains a “crossover” nature for phenomena such as deportations, Labor Service, hiding, and massacres, binding both sets of victims. The strong “mirroring” aspect, expressed explicitly by Darvas’s character Béla as he skulks around 1944 Budapest, especially in the context of the politics of assimilation enforced by the regime, also produces identification, a sense of shared fate.

**Fate and Memory**

In some treatments, this sense of shared fate extended beyond individuals to the fate of the nation during the period. *Drunken Rain* is the account that most explicitly attempts to reckon with what has been created, its overriding question being “where did we (communists) go wrong?” The events of 1944 and of 1956, however politically nebulous in the latter case, form the key signposts to this investigation and self-criticism—the Jewish persecutions of the former echoed in the chaos and danger of the same Budapest streets of the latter. The setting of *Cold Days*, with its protagonists imprisoned and about to go on trial for the widely known crimes in question, and the representative nature of the characters themselves—with stark contrasts of class, background, character and even dialect, as well as of rank, function, and experience during the events—implies such a reckoning, though it ends before any formal judgment can take place. (After the lowly Corporal Szabó relates a scene of killings on the frozen river, including a victim that could only be Major Büky’s wife, dashing his illusory hopes that she has survived, Büky savagely beats him to death.) The testimonies that make up the bulk of the novel, presented alternately and piecemeal, add up to a chaotic tale of unclear and contradictory orders, actions at the same time random and over-determined, cruelty at top and bottom punctuated by small individual moments of compassion, yet marching overall towards the inevitable

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