Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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The meta-issue of memory itself is also touched upon. *Cold Days*, as much as it constitutes a work of sociocultural memory, is also about the process of how such memory is created: its compulsions and silences, its intellectual pitfalls and concrete dangers, as embodied in the concluding murder. The novel’s final line, quoting the commander’s order just after the end of the massacre—“Gentlemen! Not a word of this, ever!”—sets this work squarely against the repression of memory that threatens from many sides. *Katalin Street*, in a very different way, is steeped in memories that will not fade, in the form of the ghost Henriett, and in the obsession of the other characters with her fate and, thus, with the past. Memory here is less something an individual or society must struggle to preserve than an all-encompassing ether, which returns unbidden, infusing everything with its bittersweet essence.

**Official Criticism and the Issue of Reception**

Although it is clear that these novels were widely distributed—published in relatively large quantities and in many cases reprinted multiple times within a few years—the question of reception is still difficult to gauge. To what extent and how were these works actually read when they appeared? Looking back after half a century and more, how can their effects be accessed? This literature encompassed many of the leading writers of the period: they figured prominently in publication quotas for the annual spring book fair, the prime launching point for new titles, and in lists of Hungarian works designated for translation across the socialist bloc. They were reviewed in the most important literary journals, often multiple times. Several were produced as plays or films. As such, they were integral to the cultural landscape of 1960s Hungary.

Criticism in the official press showed evidence of what might be seen as silencing, often avoiding mention of the Jewishness of characters, using euphemisms and, despite contrary positions seen in the literature, attributing depre-
dations to unspecified (and thus unaccountable) “fascists.” Reviews of The Sea almost uniformly ignore the Jewish questions within. Anna Földeš, who was quoted above on the “silence,” called it a “novel of liberation”—but in a strictly communist sense.52 Several critics of Clover Baron stick to the framing conflict and ignore the Jewish/Holocaust issue altogether; though István Órkény, author of the 1947 People of the Camps, who later became a beloved symbol of literary independence in the communist era, recognized that “Éva’s Jewish character is the key to the relationship [with Baróti],” though criticizing Cseres for “hiding away this key” until the middle of the novel.53

The review of Drunken Rain in Kortárs, the voice of the official cultural sphere, mentions the incident with “the abducted Jewish Steiner’s cow” as the crux of the criticism of the Hungarian people’s revolutionary potential, and gives a separate paragraph to “Darvas’s honest and deep [treatment] of one of Hungarian society’s and Hungarian history’s difficult and ‘delicate’ questions, the Jewish question,” which he does “with deep sympathy and empathy towards the persecuted, the reviled and the murdered.”54 Oszkár Zsadányi’s review in the Jewish publication Új Élet (New Life)—the only one in the country still publishing after the communist takeover—predictably focused on the “deportation and persecution to death of the Hungarian Jews,” as well as the incident with Steiner’s cow.55 However, other reviews almost completely ignored the Holocaust aspect, focusing their—rather heated—debates instead on ideology and style.56 The reviews of Death of the Doctor ignore the Holocaust aspect even more than those of Drunken Rain, seeing merely the struggle of an individual

52 Anna Földeš, “A tenger: Fehér Klára regénye” [The Sea: Klára Fehér’s novel], Irodalmi Újság 7, no. 22 (June 2, 1956), 2.
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against time, the human condition, and the unrelenting demands of his calling; the most direct acknowledgement being that of “the shadow of the tragedy.”

Reviews of the other novels, depending on the directness of their engagement with the fate of the Jews, the identity of the author and the date of publication, as ideological strictures loosened as time went on, were less obfuscatory. The review of *Elysium* in Új Élet was unsurprisingly gushing, though also predictably stilted, declaring that the new society which has “declare[d] war on every form of fascism” is full of love for the Gyuris of today. While reviews of *Night Express* somewhat tiptoed around the invocation of the Holocaust as such, using euphemisms such as “the persecuted” or “the betrayed,” the centrality of the Eichmann case to the plot left little room for separation. (Newspaper headlines about the Eichmann trial echo in the conversations of other citizens of the little resort where the present-day Kerekes lives, and even children “play Eichmann” on the street.) Kerekes’s identification as “one characteristic type of all Europe in the time of fascism” is fairly damning, though diffusing the particular responsibility of Hungarians.

Reviews of *Cold Days*, given the repeated new editions, continued to appear for several years. They were not completely free of tiresome, obfuscating characterizations such as “Hungarian nationalism acting in the service of German fascism.” But references to Eichmann, to the selection scene as “the symbol of the right-and-left-side, life-and-death [nature] of all of the death camps,” to the Warsaw ghetto

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Nemzeti Színházban” Népszabadság, April 12, 1964, 9, which makes a passing, general reference to “the single-rooted tragedy of Voronezh [site of the Hungarian Second Army’s devastating 1942 defeat on the Eastern Front] and Auschwitz.”


58 “Keszi Imre: *Elysium,* Új Élet 15, no. 4 (1959): 6. The only other review of *Elysium* was all of one sentence long in the daily Magyar Nemzet (“Keszi Imre: *Elysium,* Magyar Nemzet, January 20, 1959, 6); this critical silence stands in stark contrast to the substantial amount of reviews of all of the other works discussed here, though the novel’s republication in two further editions up to 1965 suggests some kind of countervailing pressure.


63 Horgas, “*Hideg napok,*” 1149, 1151.
uprising 64 and to Auschwitz,65 make it clear that after the Eichmann trial, this could be openly recognized as a Holocaust story. The repeated invocation of concepts such as “conscience,” “guilt,” “responsibility,” and even “memory” take the collective voice of the critics out of the realm of empty ideological sloganizing.66 While the experimental style of Katalin Street, moving back and forth in time and space and prone to mysticism, was not to the liking of several critics, all mentioned the Helds’ Jewishness and the specificity of their fates.67

Reflecting the ambivalent position of the official cultural sphere towards the Holocaust, much ambiguity comes through these reviews, which constitute the most tangible, if indirect, evidence of reception. But in a society of media consumers famous for their ability to “read between the lines,” I would argue that the disciplinary effect of such reviews, and thus their control over memory, at least insofar it is shaped by popular literature, was probably limited.

Conclusions: Towards a Shared Holocaust Memory?

As my survey has shown, the period between the 1956 upheaval (and starting even earlier that year, as the winds that propelled it already had begun to blow) and the early 1970s, rather than being a great silence or “black hole” with respect to the Holocaust, was full of references to and, especially as time went on, serious engagement with it, at least in literature.68 It is true that these representations were wrapped in both ideological and stylistic conventions—in short, they by and large hewed to the precepts of antifascism, which the Kádár regime re-