Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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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-

68 Although the areas of historiography, public commemorations, and public debate are a different story, with ideological restrictions and Party anxiety over Jewish questions holding greater sway.
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constructed in the service of its post-1956 consolidation. Rather than forming the exclusive core of the narratives—the literary equivalent to the vexed issue of “uniqueness” of the Holocaust in history—the Jewish tragedy appears amongst a myriad of tragedies and false turns, as part of a longer period extending after and before: as part of Hungarian history. But looking for Holocaust memory in this period through a lens shaped by the particular Western forms that developed especially from the mid-1980s onwards is bound to obscure what was able to arise from Hungarian conditions. In the words of Máté Zombory, András Lénárt, and Anna Lujza Szász,

Instead of taking the political repression and the different forms of discursive regulation in an era seen as one-dimensional as constant and unchanging, let us examine the possibilities of speech. Let’s not, looking back from after 1989, ask what all was not possible, but what had become possible.

The overall picture presented by these novels is one where suffering and tragedy are shared, responsibility and guilt are ubiquitous, the narratives of the events overlap and interact, memory is treacherous but unavoidable, and historical fates are intertwined. Despite their broad label as “antifascist literature,” fascism and fascists are often distant, abstract quantities; at the same time, an everyday inhumanity, a “banality of evil,” infuses the flawed behavior of ordinary, identifiable people, most pointedly through the issue of looting and plunder. The Holocaust is sometimes central, sometimes more peripheral, but always present. The events of the latter part of 1944 are not isolated, but part of a span of history that encompasses the depredations of the Stalinist period and, to the extent it could be slipped past ideological gatekeepers, the upheavals of 1956. This also shakes up the accustomed periodization, placing the Holocaust in a broader historical context: as Géza in Drunken Rain points out, “What is happening here [in ’56] . . . didn’t start just now. Not even yesterday. In ’45 . . . in ’44 . . . or maybe

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much earlier.”74 Most importantly, the histories told are not walled off between the “Jewish experience” and the overall Hungarian one, but appear as simultaneous and codependent—to use Michael Rothberg’s much-cited term, as “multidirectional.”75

Just as Hungarian Jews were traumatized by the memory of 1944, which became the focal point for much of their thinking about the past and its dangers,76 the 1956 uprising and its violent suppression traumatized all of Hungarian society. The ideological strictures on the interpretation of ’56 did not prevent its trauma from appearing in literature. In addition to the vivid scenes of protest and violence depicted in Drunken Rain,77 Darvas published a play, Sooty Sky, which took place solely in those fateful weeks, with various characters dramatizing, and to some extent legitimizing, different positions vis-à-vis the uprising—though with an ultimate bias against the revolt.78 Another example is the novel Rust Cemetery (1962), the story of the hapless Hábetler family through and beneath the dramatic events of twentieth-century Hungarian history: after the intrusion of the Holocaust in the deportation of the son Jáni’s lover, when the narrative reaches 1956, it is referred to as a “revolution,” and the infamous hanging of suspected secret policemen from lampposts is intertwined with the memory of Auschwitz.79 Despite attempts by the regime to suppress references to ’56, for example on major anniversaries, “everyone knew” what had happened and what was at stake.80 The imperfect taboo on addressing the trauma of 1956 further

74 Darvas, Részeg eső, 276–77. The communist “broader context,” as mentioned above, in taking 1944 and 1956 as two poles on the arc of fascist danger, clashes with one that might connect the deprivation of rights visited on the Jews with the show trials, deportations, and camps of the Stalinist period, and the general deprivations of rights that spurred the ’56 uprising. But Drunken Rain—and many of these works—bears within itself alternate readings; in particular, the portrait of ’56 is strikingly ambiguous, with righteous anger acknowledged, Party orthodoxy questioned and argued. Darvas, Részeg eső, 223, 230, 238–39, 261, 275.


76 Györi Szabó, A kommunizmus és a zsidóság, 177.

77 Darvas, Részeg eső, 223, 230, 238.

78 József Darvas, Kormos ég (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1959); it was performed at least in Szeged and Miskolc in late 1959. Drunken Rain was also written as a play and performed at the National Theater, in 1964. József Darvas, Részeg eső: Dráma két részben [Drunken Rain: A drama in two parts] (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1964).


loosened an imperfect taboo on Holocaust memory, and the indelible connection between the two, and the unsuppressibility of the memory of both, fostered a certain rehabilitation of Holocaust memory in literature, as at turns a precursor, warning, and surrogate for ’56.

This actual and potential connection between 1944 and 1956 in Hungarian literature and memory represents the possibility of a “shared fate” and a common approach to the trauma of history. Certainly there was, alongside and largely separate from this, a distinct “Jewish memory,” focusing on the deportations, Labor Service, the camp experience, and the particularity of Jewish suffering, one often suppressed or discouraged. This provides an alternate, and not illegitimate, timeline highlighting the explosion of literature (memoirs, novels, documentation) in 1945–48, latent and mostly “silenced” during the Stalinist period and slowly emerging thereafter, in the pages of Új Élet and elsewhere, especially from the mid-1970s onward, and increasingly informed by an ultimately hegemonic “Western” perspective centered on Jewish victimhood, especially after 1989. A nationalist understanding, focused on (non-Jewish) Hungarian victimhood and informed by an enduring historical cultural identity, and symbolized by the massive losses of Hungarian soldiers on the Eastern Front and the deportation of citizens to the Soviet Union after the war, spread in a more subterranean fashion, and ultimately came to, arguably, dominate non-Jewish Hungarian memory. The perspective reflected in the literature under study here is not innocent of the crimes found in that vein of memory, of denial of moral responsibility of the nation and elision of the fact that non-Jewish Hungarians benefitted materially and socially from the expulsion and decimation of their Jewish fellow-citizens. Whether skewed presentations (of both the Holocaust and 1956) contribute to the repression of memory or, given a cultural atmosphere riven by gaps and confusion, can (also) facilitate “multidirectional memory” is a difficult question. But as a “real existing” orientation within the socialist cultural environment, the “antifascist” position, however limited, offers both an instructive picture of the memory possibilities within that cultural system, and a lost alternative model for the post-socialist transition as divided memoryscapes pushed their way to the fore.

81 For example, Béla Zsolt’s novel Kilenc koffer (Nine Suitcases), published serially in 37 installments between May 1946 and February 1947 in his weekly Haladás (Progress); it was published in book form only decades later, as Béla Zsolt, Kilenc koffer, ed. and notes by Ferenc Kőszeg (Budapest: Magvető, 1980).
82 See for example István Nemesskürty, Requiem egy hadseregért [Requiem for an army] (Budapest: Magvető, 1972), followed by several more editions.
The work under consideration here has been almost completely ignored by both scholars and Hungarian public intellectuals during the past quarter-century-plus of unfettered engagement with the Hungarian Holocaust and its legacy. This neglect presumably reflects the diminished status of (most of) these writers post-1989, adept at negotiating the politics of the publishing system under which they operated and declining to openly challenge communist political and cultural hegemony. (The aforementioned two recent editions of *Cold Days*, and no less than seven editions of *Katalin Street* in the new millennium, after four over the last two decades of the old system, constitute a challenge to this notion. *Rust Cemetery* has also been republished twice in the last few years.) They by and large lack the rigor and clarity of works we now consider classics; as a source for the brutal self-searching that we find lacking in the Hungarian post-Holocaust experience, they fall short. But taking them seriously could offer the possibility for a joint, if flawed, experience of memory for Jews and their Gentile neighbors: the possibility for an alternative future of Hungarian collective memory, avoiding or at least mitigating the absolute division that we see today. By mingling the suffering of Jews and non-Jews, these novels, taken collectively, hammer out a shared past and solidarity—one that may not have been there in reality, but which was an aspiration that arguably did its part to keep division and antisemitism at bay.

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83 Although for his appreciation of *Clover Baron*, *Elysium*, *Death of the Doctor* and *Drunken Rain*, see Péter György, “‘A láger sors’: Gera György: Terelőút [‘The camp is fate’: György Gera, Detour], Jelenkor 53, no. 12 (December 2010): 1350–60. See also Péter György, "A történelem felfedezése: Száz éve született Cseres Tibor" [The discovery of history: Tibor Cseres was born hundred years ago], Élet és Irodalom 49, no. 13 (March 27, 2015), http://www.es.hu/cikk/2015-03-27/gyorgy-peter/a-tortenelem-felfedezese.html.