

HUNGARIAN—JEWISH WRITING OUT OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA: A LOOK AT TWO RECENT PROSE VOLUMES:

The Choice: Embrace the Possible by Edith Eva Eger, New York: Scribner, 2017, and **Memento Park** by Mark Sarvas. New York: Farrar, 2018.

Zsolt K. Virágos

[A] Preliminary Observations and Citations:

{1} Edith Eva **Eger**¹ was born into the polyglot Hungarian, Slovak, German, Jewish, etc.—altogether 16 different ethnic nationalities—community of Kassa (today Kosice, Slovak Republic). She was 16 when she and her family were sent to the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz, Poland. Her parents lost their lives there. She emigrated to the U.S. and in the 1940s she completed her university studies of psychology. Today she is an internationally known psychologist. She is also one of the few remaining Holocaust survivors in the world today. She is a resident of LaJolla, California, where she maintains a busy clinical practice and holds a faculty appointment at the University of California, San Diego. She also serves as a consultant for the U.S. Army and Navy in resiliency training and the treatment of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Dr. Eger has appeared on numerous television programs, including a CNN special commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. She was also the subject of a one-hour program on Hungarian (MTVA) television in 2018.² She was named Psychology Teacher of the Year in 1972, Woman of the Year in El Paso in 1987, and earned a California State Senate Humanitarian Award in 1992. Her most recent book—*The Gift: 12 Lessons*

1 From an onomastic point of view it is rather unlikely that this surname should be—should have been— **Eger**. The recommended, version is **Éger**, which is pronounced [eiger] and has fixed meanings: **alder** in English, **éger, égerfa** in Hungarian. I am belatedly seeking the permission of the author to use the **Éger** form a couple of times.

2 The MTVA program has been aired under the title *On the Spot – Az ellenség gyermekei* [‘The Children of the Enemy’] It also offered footage to presenting aspects and the physical environment against which she works. They showed her elegant and posh California home, her large palatial house complete with all the luxurious modern fixtures. Not surprisingly, while she was taking a relaxing evening bath in her large open-air jacuzzi pool, the question was asked: “Edith, did you ever dream of a life like this?” “Never,” she confided, “never. An enormous amount of work went into it. It is a kind of happy feeling which satisfies my soul. It makes me feel good also because I am in the position to help other people.”

to *Save Your Life* [Az ajándék: 12 lélekmentő lecke]—was published a few weeks ago in Hungarian by Libri. In this second book the author continues a practice initiated in her first volume: she employs the case histories of her patients as the bases for exploring various mental states such as stress, fear, grief, anger, shame, etc. that tend to confine and imprison our psyche. *The Choice* will be discussed below.

{2} Mark **Sarvas**, a second-generation Hungarian Jewish-American, who hails from Santa Monica, California, is an author, critic, and blogger. He is also a teacher and educator; he teaches novel writing at the UCLA Extension Writers' Program. His book reviews and criticism have appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Threepenny Review*, *Bookforum*, and a number of other publications. The German Expressionist painter Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's painting "Berlin Street Scene" served as the inspiration (*Budapest Street Scene*) for the fictional model of *Memento Park* (2018), Sarvas's most highly acclaimed novel so far.

{3} As regards the *generic terminology* used in the present discussion, by the time the reader comes to the end of the argumentative framework, it should be clear why in my title I am using the words, "prose volume" instead of "novel," or "memoir" or "life writing," or even "reminiscence."

{4} With reference to the *selection of texts* to be looked at here, this is what I can offer by way of comment: if the thematic-ethnic focus of the present text had been constructed for the purposes of applying them to Hungarian and Californian writing exclusively, our exemplary primary source would have been Imre Oravecz's massive, epic trilogy of almost fifteen hundred (1470) pages—**A rög gyermekei** [Children of the Soil]; I: Ondrok gödre [Ondrok's bottom], II: Kaliforniai fürj [California quail]; III: Ókontri [The old country]—depicting the lives of three generations of Hungarians in the U.S. and in the "Ole Country" between post-civil war America and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The authors of the two respective volumes chosen for review here are residents of the U.S., each one of them living within the cultural context of a mythicized Californian dream, making us think, among other things, of Walt Whitman's California poem entitled "Facing West from California's Shores:" " But where is what I started for so long ago? // And why is it yet unfound? A couple of lines that speak volumes.

{5} ROS: We have done nothing wrong! We didn't harm anyone. Did we?"
GUIL: . . . there must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said—no (Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967)).

Supposing Guildenstern were given a chance to continue his line of reasoning, this is what he would probably say: 'We could have prevented the blind and tragic unfolding of events, of raw everydayness, of history.' Stoppard's two protagonists seem to be confiding in self-defence. Indeed, the formulated views of the two courtiers' help to objectify a special set of dilemmas—most often both existential and epistemological—and nearly always profoundly and intrinsically moral. Statistically speaking, this might be the retrospective "who is to blame?" game people most often play, most typically in the wake of devastating wars and battles lost as a repercussion of man-made and natural disasters: unforeseen loss of any kind. And, it is almost needless to point out, that the politics of everyday discourse, indeed, the various departments and compartments of the social consciousness tend to be pervaded by this kind of self-justifying truth-seeking. There exist quite a few time-tested and well-rehearsed paradigmatic clichés often quoted in the day- to-day cultural discourse of most historical as well as contemporaneous nations (including the ideological statements and projections to be witnessed in this country).

One of the problems of Stoppard's courtiers is whether to withhold comment to avoid the clash of mutually exclusive truth preferences. The pragmatism of everyday life seems capable of teaching us that if we can manage to refrain from comment, i.e., to keep silent, we will not have to run into unpleasant repercussions. To put it as simply as possible, we have been talking here about a play-it-safe formula of conduct and decision-making. "Do not volunteer information," a child is often likely to hear as a piece of parental advice. "No utterance, no headache." All in all, in the final analysis, we have been talking here about noninvolvement as a survival strategy. Thus, the recipient—the reader, the cultural consumer—is likely to be confronted in these contexts with a special sort of dilemma: the manifestation of the moral responsibility of the "silent" intellectual, where "silence" can be, or is bound to be conducive to—, therefore synonymous with—"betrayal." The lurking awareness of betrayal is likely to deplete the moral reservoir of the writer or of any other literate intellectual as communicator; the self-recognition of ideological shortcoming may gnaw at what we can simply identify as conscience. If we look at our examples in this study, we can sense how this utterance-versus-silence dichotomy can calibrate morally charged responses.

{6} Consider the case of one of our "invited witnesses." This time the person chosen to testify will be Jorge *Semprun* of Spain, who waited more than 16 years to share the heart-rending events involving the cold-blooded murder of the 15 Jewish boys arriving at the railway station of Auschwitz on a winter day. "Perhaps" Semprun testifies, "the time has come for me to tell the story of the Jewish children, to tell of their death . . . that story which has never been told,

which has lain buried in my memory like some mortal treasure, preying on it with a sterile suffering. That is, now, after these long years of willful oblivion, not only am I able to tell this story, I feel compelled to tell it” (162-163). Thus, one of the major objectives of authorial communication is to get the story told for the purposes of *getting it off the author’s mind*; a therapeutic—as well as an epistemological—transaction.

{7} There also seems to be a second objective. This one is the logical consequence of a general agreement over the fact that the representation of excessively violent atrocities and unredeemingly revolting life material—consider much of what we generally label as Holocaust literature—should somehow be controlled (most often filtered through the consciousness of the author). This “rescue operation” is normally created for the benefit of the “jaded” reader in the sense that a detailed chronicle of the killings, gassings, appalling clinical medical experiments, slow deprivations, excremental outrages, screaming madresses, beatings, tortures, and other entries into the historical account which have already been made by men of letters and political activists such as George Steiner, Tadeusz Borowski, Elie Wiesel,³ Bruno Bettelheim, etc. are preferably minimized or avoided. For instance, the argument that the Japanese in Manchuria outdid the Nazis in committing horrendous crimes against humanity will not minimize the overall impact of German involvement. Semprun’s masterpiece—already quoted from above—will be used as an illustration. And now, as I promised earlier, an abridged text from the pen of Semprun will be made available below:

That was the day I saw—confides Semprun more than a dozen years after the fact— that was the day I saw the Jewish children die . . . [They came] from Poland in the cold of the coldest winter of the war, . . . [come] to die on the broad avenue leading up to the camp entrance, under the cheerless gaze of Hitler’s eagles. . . . The Jews from Poland were stacked into the freight cars almost two hundred to a car, and they had traveled for days and days with nothing to eat or drink When, at the train station of the camp, they opened the sliding doors, nothing stirred, most of the Jews died standing up. . . . One day, in one of the cars where there were some Jews alive . . . they discovered a group of Jewish children . . . about fifteen in all . . . who ranged in age from eight or so to twelve. . . . [T]he SS loosed their dogs and began to hit the children with their clubs, to make them run . . . [T]he pack of dogs and SS running behind the Jewish children soon engulfed the weakest

3 The Hungarian-born American Jewish writer and political activist Elie Wiesel was one of the best-known Holocaust critics and survivors. He received a Nobel Peace Award in 1986.

among them, the ones who were only eight years old, perhaps, the ones who no longer had the strength to move, who were knocked down, trampled on, clubbed on the ground, who lay there on the avenue, their skinny disjointed bodies marking the progress of that hunt swarming over them. And soon there were only two left, one big and one small . . . , and the little one began to fall behind, the SS were howling behind them and then the dogs began to howl too, the smell of blood was driving them mad, and then the bigger of the two children slowed his pace to take the hand of the smaller, who was already stumbling, and together they covered a few more yards, the older one's right hand clasping the smaller one's left hand, running straight ahead till the blows of the clubs felled them and, together they dropped, their faces to the ground, their hands clasped for all eternity (165-166).

Jorge Semprun, *The Long Voyage*. TUSK Ivories 1963.

{8} "You must come to a decision!" [. . .]

"I have already made my choice . . . I will not get involved. I mean this! "You have to assume responsibility, Zosia. You've come to the place where you can no longer fool around like this, you have to make a choice!"

William Styron, *Sophie's Choice* (1979)

{9} **Choice or Decision?** A brief look at the *either/or* pattern of argumentation in the introductory sentence will show an apparent inconsistency in word selection. On the one hand, we shall see that **choice** (as a noun) is the celebrated number-one buzzword in Eger's conceptualisation and the reader-interpreter is not encouraged to confuse it (them) with **decision**. The latter word possesses a sort of *finality* that **choice** does not. Yet the two nouns are very close in meaning and further synonyms could be brought into the picture (e.g. option, alternative, dilemma). The interpretation of the text recommended for consideration will show that it might be intriguing to know, for instance, that in the Hungarian translation and edition of Edith Eger's volume, the title—**The Choice**—is translated as **A döntés**, which translates back into English as **The Decision**. Interestingly, one of the early scenes of the film version of *Sophie's Choice* is the selection-line episode in which Doctor Mengele at the railway station of Auschwitz forces Sophie Zawistowska to surrender one of her children to the forces of darkness for eternity. This scene is so utterly powerful—and sinister—that we are tempted to believe that owing to the presence of the diabolic physician the choice (the "either-or" shape of the structural paradigm) belongs to the doctor. Thus, who actually sealed Ewa's fate; who uttered the sentence "Take the girl"? In view of what has been said so far—and in a very narrow sense—it was

the mother, Zosia, who triggered the fatal chain reaction that ultimately brought about her daughter's death in Birkenau the very same day.⁴

The Mengele affair can also be seen as an illustration of how some exceedingly energized images may be capable of reaching beyond the confines of their immediate borders. Thus, it is intriguing to realize, for instance, that in the energizing patterns of representation certain configurations can be granted existence even if they do not actually operate. For instance, speaking of Styron's above-mentioned novel, a large number of readers would be surprised, if reminded, that the widely known Nazi doctor does not appear in the novel at all. As our readers will remember, the German officer Sophie is "interested" in SS Obersturmbannführer Rudolf Franz Höss. However, as the saying goes, "that is a different story."

{10} This above-mentioned absence of Mengele from Styron's book, however, does not necessarily mean that the spirit of Nazism is waning. It is present in the highly predictable mode of traditional thinking systematized and elaborated by the German school system, the blunt and sinister mechanism of ideological persuasion, a la in the logistics of top-notch organizational skills of mass annihilation as industry. Read Fritzch Hauptsturmführer's "welcoming address" delivered to the newly arrived inmates of the extermination camp in Auschwitz: "You have come to a concentration camp, not to a sanatorium, and there is only one way out—up the chimney. Anyone who don't like this can try hanging himself on the wires. If there are Jews in this group, you have no right to live more than two weeks. Any nuns here? Like the priests, you have one month. All the rest three months" (216).

{11} Let us briefly ponder now what I may have meant by the phrase "viewed from a balcony." "In Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" (1898), on the third page of the short story, contemplating the existential distress of the four men fighting for survival in the tiny dinghy, Crane makes this observation about the contemplated scene: "Viewed from a balcony, the whole thing would doubtlessly have been weirdly picturesque." Crane is actually talking here about one of the fundamental requirements of aesthetic perception and appreciation: the human recipient—in other words, the cultural consumer—is simultaneously capable of contemplating and absorbing the messages of the aesthetic realm only if he can also manage to distance himself from the object of contemplation at the same time. In other words, if he is sufficiently alienated/estranged from the object of

4 In like fashion Edith Eva Eger was tormented for decades by the memory of saying the "wrong" word at the selection line. When the Nazi officer, who was actually nobody else but the "Angel of Death" himself, asked whether the woman next to her was her mother or sister, she said "mother." She should have said "sister."

perception. Narrowly pragmatic considerations, precarious existential threat, cosmic anxiety represent forces that may tend to work against—even cancel—the aesthetic dimension. That’s why Crane’s story begins with these words: “None of them knew the color of the sky.” They were clearly exposed to existential threat, and in a predicament like that they could not care less what color the sky happened to be. I would briefly add that there was a sizeable proportion of the population who were ready to embrace the values of the conqueror or who were not reluctant to claim that they simply “did not know” what was going on inside the death-camps. I will quote at this point a single sentence from the Hungarian poet Mihály Babits: “*For he who is silent among culprits will be an accomplice.*”

{12} Let it not be too late to consider the importance of **language** in the cultural transactions we looked at. When E. E. Eger arrived in the United States about half a century ago, she took with her from Europe, and particularly from Central and Middle Europe, the rich multicultural tradition of understanding other people, learning other languages, and ‘reading’ other cultures. In Europe it was taken for granted that the answer to the challenge of a polyglot linguistic culture was appropriating the language(s) of your partner. For how do I respond in a situation of inadequate communication? Earlier, when we discussed linguistic sources in the case of Dr. Eger in Kassa/Kosice, where she grew up as a child, we mentioned the inevitability of cooperation, where the word cooperation is a code-word for bridge building. What do I do if I wish to communicate with someone who is a linguistic stranger to me? It is very simple: I learn his/her core cultural alphabet. What did Edith Eger do after she had found that she would be foredoomed to failure in her chosen, New World environment if she was unprepared to communicate in English; when she realized that she failed to measure up? She buckled down to study English. The English language used in America.

Eger has no intention of alienating actual or potential supporters, so she does not go in for a complicated and far-fetched private terminology. Even so, the reader should be careful to stick to well-rehearsed meanings and usages. The most promising approach seems to be using Eger herself as a source. Here is a useful example:

I want to make one thing very clear. When I talk about victims and survivors, I am not blaming victims—so many of whom never had a chance. I could never blame those who were sent right to the gas chambers who died in their cot, or even those who ran into the electric barbed wire fence. I grieve for all people everywhere who are sentenced to violence and destruction. I live to guide others to a position of empowerment in the

face of all life's hardships . . . I also want to say that there is no hierarchy of suffering. There's nothing that makes my pain worse or better than yours, no graph on which we can plot the negative importance of one sorrow versus another. (*The Choice* 8-9).

And here follows a mercifully economical way of making a relevant distinction: "Survivors don't have time to ask, 'Why me?' For survivors, the only relevant question is, 'What now?" (*Choice*, 8-9). If everything works out fine, survivors become *thrivers*.

"A substantially different attitude to language" Mark Sarvas theorizes, "can be discerned in Matt's (lack of) understanding of how communication works." "Despite my childhood visit to the Balaton sleepaway camp, I find Hungarian impenetrable. It alludes me, defies my attempts to form even its most rudimentary sounds. It's alien to me as Hebrew, though without the music. What language, I wonder, did my father think in. His English was serviceable if heavily accented, a touch of Bela Lugosi, although I like to imagine that he dreamed in his native tongue, the familiar sounds of his childhood language perhaps giving him some fleeting comfort." (212)

[B] Edith Eva Eger and the Triumph of Affirmation

I am inviting the reader to recall the 'pool scene' (cf. footnote No. 2), especially the question asked there by one of the Hungarian television crew, and her answer to the query. From what we see and hear emanates the spirit of wealth, elegance, a glimpse of the Pacific Ocean across the fence. At night one can probably hear the surges of the ocean beating against the shore. There is no doubt about the fact that this property must have cost "a pretty penny." To me, this manifestation of being morally obligated and rewarded in a karmic sense has an irresistibly symbolic significance; she has been repeatedly reminded by fate that she has got still more homework to do. Thus, in a sense she is not in the position to quit. To measure up to these tasks and challenges she had to learn the art of survival, of resilience and of healing other people.

The general mood of the quoted scene is that of optimism, affirmation, the overall belief in times to come, the soothing concept of having "arrived." It has been a long journey and it was far from being easy. The person who owns the place (remember William Faulkner self-appointing himself "sole owner and proprietor"?) seems to be in total control of understanding and meeting the major human challenges and ambitions. Whoever lives here must be favored by the gods. Whoever lives here must

be a person who has “made it.” The image of Succeeding in the Land of Success is both an acceptable and irresistible ideology. The Hollywood movie industry has been churning out cinematic images of the self-made man for over a century now. What about the self-made woman? Cinderella perhaps?

She was fated to survive two world wars. There was a point in time in Europe when she was left for dead in a mass grave. She was snatched from the abyss in the very last minute—by her guardian angel? There was a time when it seemed, with a baby in her arms, that she would never make it. She did not have the six dollars to board the ocean-going vessels that would take her to the New World. She did not speak the language of her future home. All in all, she may have harbored revenge for some time. But then she went through a radical change. “I refuse to fall into the trap of revenge.” I will tell you a secret: I can pinpoint where you can diagnose Edie's “revenge” at its most spectacular. It is a full-page document on page five (v.): “five generations of my family.” Altogether 15 people. What could be a more effective revenge than creating a grand family made up of the children and grandchildren of the purported victim?

You have to read this book to realize that the word **survivor** is a lexical item expressing a sort of go-ahead spirit, individual energies, faith, positive vibrations, and a whole bunch of affirmative traits routinely associated with Emerson's brand of New England Transcendentalism. Another concept I am ready to use without hesitation and compunction to describe the unique power of Dr. Eger's semifictional handbook of survival is **heroism**. Heroism of the romantic kind that can make you believe that the human agent—as an individual--is capable of changing the world. It was not by accident that I was referring to Walt Whitman a few pages earlier.

This book itself has been written for students of U.S. culture, as well as for indomitable seekers and therapists of the soul. The power of these ideological foundations may explain surprising decisions in Eger's “choices” and “decisions”. For example, she was capable of forgiving . . . Hitler. “I accept the invitation to Berchtesgaden.” “I am walking on the same steps that Hitler once took, but he isn't here now, *I* am. . . . It is springtime, though not for Hitler. For me. . . . *I am alive*. . . .

Purists may consider *The Choice* a “recent prose volume” that violates the accepted norms of literary creation. This reasoning is rooted in the confrontations of familiar concepts such as the fictive, the creative, the literary, as well as fortuity, inspiration, etc. This has generated lengthy debates that I do not wish to perpetuate here. Instead, I will offer two brief observations. One, fictivity versus literary as opposed to expressive versus creative often produce random means of achieving special effects (leaving things to luck and chance, generating fortuitous experience as part of the process of inspiration and invention). Two, what is

more relevant in our case and what also explains the reason for the insertion of a detailed—over a dozen pages long—name and subject index is that the intentions behind the book are in agreement with the fact that part of the life writing on the title page is coded as “memoir”, the rest as psychological material, mainly actual case studies Dr. Eger has used in her therapeutic activity.

[C] **The Strange Visit of Mark Sarvas in *Memento Park***

Sarvas’s professional career serves as an apt illustration of the recent academisation of the literary culture in the U.S. Like a large number of his present-day and one-time contemporaries (for example, Raymond Federman, Robert Lowell, Donald Barthelme, John Barth, Ronald Sukenick), he is actively interested in the interrelationships between belletristic theory and literary history. Besides generating a substantial amount of fiction, he teaches novel writing at the UCLA Extension Writers’ Program. As the reader may assume, on the basis of his critical remarks pertaining to the fine arts, he is also involved in art criticism. The comments on the statues in Budapest’s Memento Park make this obvious, and this is especially so in relation to *Budapest Street Scene*, a lost and found—as well as forged—painting by a certain Hungarian artist and around which—restitution, fake art, whereabouts, forgery, legal ownership, filial and fraternal responsibility—the plot of the whole novel revolves. “Now I stand here alone in the stillest and darkest moment of the night, with this strange painting and my strange story, tired and aching, and I can only think about all I have squandered, the astonishing lack of care with which I have blundered through life. So much beyond recovery, things that can never be restored, truths devoured by time, by neglect” (164). He feels “the presence of something” in the room. “Is it my father? Is it God? I know You’re here. Show Yourself. . .” At this point he chooses to focus on the facts of his father’s life, “as I know them”:

He was born in Budapest. He left it twice, once for London in his childhood, only to return two years later, and once for New York. . . . He was a commercial painter and a cardplayer and a collector of vintage toy automobiles, and a Hungarian Jew. He was my father. . . It would take a journey to the other side of the world for me to learn the rest. (165)

While in the Hungarian capital, Matt is determined to recharge his cultural and familial batteries; he is planning to visit and contemplate as many Jewish sights and memorabilia as possible. He also wants to spend time in his father’s boyhood home. There are two reasons why he experiences moments of bitterness and inadequacy.

On the one hand, he is not a religious Jew. He does not understand much of what the other members of the family do and say. “I placed the stones on his grave, as I had seen my mother’s mother do years ago, without knowing why. . .As I left the cemetery, I saw a pair of young workmen halfheartedly scrubbing away at a swastika that had been painted on a headstone. I could only make out one of the Hungarian words scrawled beneath it: ZSIDÓ. Jew.” None of the sights can measure up to what he experienced by what he himself calls “Yahweh’s rough justice.” This is about the Holocaust memorial on the Danube. One of the Budapest relatives told him about: “sixty bronze pairs of shoes left on the embankment where many of the murders had taken place. . . .” “We visited the Shoes on the Danube Bank memorial” continues Philip Zimbardo, “that honors the people, including some of Edie’s own family members, who were killed by the Arrow Cross militiamen during World War II, ordered to stand on the riverbank and take off their shoes, and then shot, their bodies falling into the water, carried away by the current” (qtd. in Foreword, *The Choice* xii). Matt is infuriated when he sees two neo-Nazi goons pack bloody pig’s feet into the bronze shoes. He comes to blows with them and is injured. He leaves Hungary in utter dismay and with the rhetoric of violence. Edie and Matt should compare notes. And basic strategies.

He has to go to the other side of the world to find his roots. “The other side of the world” for Matt is, of course, Hungary, regarded as the locus of acts of slow and painful discovery, as well as the “source” of whatever mystery that would help uncover vital information re the elusive painting. He visits Budapest’s Memento Park, which, as an institution, is a graveyard of gigantic cold-war-age exhibits outside the city limits in the south-western Buda section of the Hungarian capital. It also functions as a graveyard of kitsch and theme park including over forty large, allegorical communist-era statues of internationally known personalities of working-class and leftist radicalism such as Lenin, Marx, Dimitrov, Ostapenko, Béla Kun and other personifications such as soldiers of the Red Army who “liberated” Hungary during World War Two and the Revolution of 1956.⁵

Here were Stalin’s gleaming warriors and workers, rushing toward a future that has ceased to exist. Matt’s Jewish lawyer, Rachel, who accompanies him to Hungary, broke the silence: “I can’t decide if this is funny or creepy or sad”. I shrugged. “A little of each?” She nodded. . . . If one looked past the megalomaniacal subtext, it was almost possible to apprehend a strange beauty in these statues, . . . If you

5 The Park’s programmes also include optional guided tours and the display of retro art material such as the world famous monoxide-belching Trabant (Trabi) car, the “paper jaguar” manufactured in the German Democratic Republic.

divorced them from their context, their meaning, saw them as objects only. Can you do that, I wonder? (202-203).

Much of the novel's appeal derives from Fate resolved that Matt (i.e. Matt Santos), who is the novel's leading character, should take care of his dying father. "I am horrified at the sight of him. . . . He looks deflated, a clot of tubes and wires the only thing keeping him alive. His pallor is gray, his thick stubble in its third or fourth day, his mouth sunken in an almost dainty pucker . . . The doctor leaves me, his brief visit underscoring how little remains to be done. I pull up a chair to my father's bedside and sit beside him. I should take his hand, I know. It's the correct gesture, what the script calls for. I lean forward and take his limp, clammy hand. I'm here. . . It is hours before he awakens. When he does, the son is unprepared for his parent's response. "My father smiles at the sight of me. His smiles are rare, indeed, rarer still since my mother left him. And I am such a perennial disappointment to him, my fame and financial success notwithstanding, that his smiles have come to feel like an exotic currency" . . .(10, 156). Then the inevitable happens, Matt loses his father. The condolence e-mails are beginning to pile up.

Matt logs into his father's e-mail to set his auto-reply with news of his death. . . To his surprise, his inbox already contained more than thirty condolence e-mails. . . "I hurried through them at first, just scanning to see if I recognized the senders. Then I sat back and began to read. *Gabi will be missed. He was a true gentleman. Klara and Dezső.* Matt's mental response is skeptical at best: "He was? By what standard?" "*Such courage!*", announces a male citizen called "Viktor." "*He lived his life on his own terms and was an inspiration to me.*" Matt: "Yes, he was an obstinate, rigid bastard."

"For more than an hour I read on," Matt confides, "taking in these memories of my father from his contemporaries. I couldn't reconcile the picture they painted with the man I'd known. *Classy. Generous. Charming. A straight shooter. A good man.* I could only chuckle and think, *You obviously didn't know him like I did.* Then a darker, more troubling thought announced itself. What if I was the one who didn't know him? What made me think my impressions were the accurate ones? After all, the numbers were against me, thirty-seven to one. I sat back in my chair, deflated. How ungenerous had I been all these years? How rotten had I gotten to the old man? (172-173).

These are the facts of Matt's father's life as presented by the son himself. The life and the deeds. "He was born in Budapest. He left it twice, once for London in his childhood, only to return two years later, and once in New York. . . He was a commercial painter and a cardplayer and a collector of vintage toy automobiles, and a Hungarian Jew. He was my father."

The rest is still missing – Matt seems to be saying, "It would take a journey to the other side of the world for me to learn the rest" (165). The destination of this journey is Hungary. Matt suspects that his roots can be discovered and appropriated. He is in for serious disappointments however.

This part of the plot possesses all the characteristics of the classic father and son pattern. But why is the mother absent? For the mother is virtually nonexistent. Are we confronted with the loss of the mother as a cultural fact? The disappearance of Penelope?

WORKS CITED

- Eger, Edith Eva. *The Choice: Embrace the Possible* (with Esmé Schwall Weigandí), New York: Scribner, 2017.
- Eger, Edith Eva. *A döntés*. n.p. Libri, 2017.
- Sarvas, Mark. *Memento Park*. New York: Farrar, 2018.
- Semprun, Jorge. *The Long Voyage*. Trans. from the French by Richard Seaver. Tusk Ivories: The Overlook P, [1963], 2005.
- Stoppard, Tom. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. London: Faber and Faber, 1967.
- Styron, William. *Sophie's Choice*. [1978], Toronto: Bantam, 1983.
- Styron, William. *Sophie választ*. trans. Bartos Tibor. Budapest: Európa, 1985.
- Virágos Zsolt. *The Modernists and Others: The American Literary Culture in the Age of the Modernist Revolution*. University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary. 2008.
- Zimbardo, Philip. Foreword. *The Choice*. vii–xiii.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vqVMig-ybI&t=470s> Accessed 12 September 2020.