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**SEEKING FACTS AND WITNESSES  
IN A POST-FACTUAL AGE  
THE YEAR IN HUNGARY**

ZOLTÁN Z. VARGA

January 2015 to November 2016 was a particularly lively time for the publication of life writing texts in Hungary. In the beginning of 2015, the prestigious literary publishing house Magvető relaunched its nonfiction book series, *Tények és tanúk*. The book series had a cult following in the seventies and in the eighties, probably because it was one of the few public sources for testimonies representing twentieth-century Hungarian history from an angle different than the one official history books offered. Several memoirs, diaries, and autobiographies that important figures (writers and politicians, among others) and also common people wrote on Hungary's twentieth-century history were published during this first period of the series and appreciated by a large readership. The series ceased after the political climate changed in 1990, at which point censorship was lifted and memoirs of all kinds concerning collective traumas in twentieth-century European and Hungarian history became available. Another reason that the series ceased publication may be the hostile theoretical and critical climate of the time, during which critics and readers—influenced by the freshly imported theory of the “death of the author”—at large refused to address the biographical interpretation of literary works. However, in the past decade contextual approaches of literary works became popular again, and a new theoretical interest rose for different types of biographical and autobiographical reading. The recent success of life writing in the Hungarian book market could be explained by the “memoralist turn” both in history and in literature, and also by a growing need to replace the great historical narrative with lived experiences. In 2016, again, under the leadership of former director of Magvető, Krisztián Nyáry, whose bestselling books on love stories of Hungarian writers and artists have contributed to

the popularization of biographic genres, a new publishing house, Szépművés Könyvek Műhelye, was launched, dedicated to the republication and the re-discovery of several nineteenth- and twentieth-century diaries and autobiographies unnoticed at the time of their release, or forgotten since then.

It is impossible to give an exhaustive account of the latest Hungarian auto/biographical production in such a small space, but it is possible to describe some important tendencies in it. From a thematic and quantitative point of view, historical subjects—especially twentieth-century's events—prevail in this year's auto/biographical production. If we have a look at new publications, the number of diaries and other forms of life writing produced during World War II might strike us. Some of them are republications (such as the memoirs of Miklós Nyiszli, a Jewish pathologist and survivor of Auschwitz, whose writings served as resource and inspiration for the Oscar-winning film *Son of Saul*), but most of them are previously unpublished materials representing the last year of the war: Hungary's German invasion in March 1944, the siege of Budapest, the terror of German and Hungarian Nazis, and the arrival of the Russian Red Army. Recent releases are part of a new politics of remembrance that encourages the Hungarian society to face its own repressed past, and are also part of a new scholarly interest in history as lived experience. Life stories of common people in historical moments broaden the meaning of history for a larger readership; they introduce social history and historiographic methods as integral parts of historical understanding. In other words, they “help reconstruct the experience of everyday life in wartime from the micro-historical vantage point of the writers, who could not know how the events around them would end, as well as to shed light on their day-to-day personal experiences in ways that formal historical documents cannot” (Vasvári).<sup>1</sup> However, in wartime everything is extraordinary, so everyday life stories ought to be understood as war stories lived and recorded by ordinary people (and not by agents of historical actions like politicians and soldiers).

Autobiographical texts about historical events of 1944 and 1945 published in the last year could be described according to two different divisions: on one hand, their writers are either persecuted (Jewish) victims or the (Christian) witnesses; on the other hand their writers are either men or women. Anna Sándorné Dévényi's diary, *Kismama sárga csillaggal* (Huhák, Szécsényi, and Szívós), like most of the life writing texts treated here starts on March 19, the first day of Hungary's German occupation. This day was a tragic turning point for the Hungarian Jews, whose fundamental liberties were already restricted by severe anti-Jewish laws, but who were mostly spared from mortal danger until that day. The diarist Anna was a young, married, middle-class, assimilated Jewish woman who was the mother of a thirteen-year-old boy

and in her fifth month of pregnancy by that time. Her husband was doing his military service in a forced labor corps. Her diary records her struggle for survival, her everyday life strategies to find food and shelter for herself and for her children, her efforts to get protection letters and fake personal documents, her concerns over rumors and news of war, the persecution of Jews, her fears for her family members, and her sorrow about the loss of her belongings and properties. Her notes reveal, from the day-to-day perspective of a victim of these events, the brutal break of an almost hundred-year assimilatory pact that assured civil rights and prosperity to Jewish people within Hungarian society. Her diary represents not only the different types of dangers and threats—deportation and dislodgement, raids of Nazis, bombardments, etc.—but the psychic and emotional pain due to the humiliation and exclusions of outcast Jewish people confronted with the indifference and often hostility of their compatriots, the Hungarian civilians. The diary articulates a feminine perspective inasmuch as its heroine tries to keep her role as mother and housewife, taking care of her family and herself, nourishing her newborn baby, keeping her surroundings and her clothes clean, preserving a notion of home even during the worst conditions, and manifesting a stubborn determination to survive.

The diary of Pál Kis (Schmal), a well-established and relatively famous photographer at that time, could be somehow a counterpart and a complement of the Jewish fate in Budapest under Nazi rule represented in Sándorné Dévényi's diary. While this young woman's writing exposes the story of a wife struggling alone during the last long months of the war, that of Pál Kis contains the complaints of a middle-aged man pulled away from his family in the first days of the Hungarian Arrow-Cross Nazi turnover in October 1944, deported for forced labor in nearby Budapest. The events related in the first part of the diary are already known from similar life writing: an assimilated, middle-class Jewish man finds himself suddenly outcast, excluded from his homeland, deprived of his main civil rights and his bourgeois way of life. Confronting the rude humiliations and offenses of Nazis, as well as the harsh working and living conditions in the labor camp, disappointed by his fellows' lack of solidarity, he chose to escape during their return to Budapest from the labor camp. That escape begins two months of hiding all over Budapest. The diarist notes his (successful) efforts to save his two teenaged daughters, and he describes the idleness during his stay at his brother's place. The second part of Kis's notes do not focus on events. Rather, they contemplate his former, pre-war life and focus on his feelings of loss. The complaining tone and the apocalyptic vision of the text evoke the Old Testament's jeremiads. The testimony of the persecuted victim is moving, and his intention to produce a

work is evident. The diary is fragmentary—Kis did not use a notebook for his diary, recording his experiences, feelings, and thoughts on any kind of paper he found in his neighborhood—and remains unfinished, very likely because of his arrest and deportation to Buchenwald, where he perished in January 1945. In the printed text the reproductions of his illustrations and the drawings from his life in the labor camp make the diary even more affecting for today's readership.

While the testimonies of the persecutees—especially Jewish victims of Nazism—constitute a crucial and obvious issue in a politics of remembrance, other representations of different traumatic experiences help us gain an increased understanding of the tragic events of the last year of WWII in Hungary. From Christmas Eve in 1944 to June 27, 1945, Klára Szebeny, a twenty-four-year-old mother with two small children wrote each day an (unsent) letter to her husband fighting at the frontline at that time. The whole collection, published by the author herself last year under the title *103 el nem küldött levél Budapest ostromáról* resembles a diary with its daily records describing the difficulties of surviving in the middle of the siege of Budapest. The focus of her interest is very close to Sándorné Dévényi's diary, with a less accentuated interest in politics. Her private life, including her duties as a housewife and mother, are at the core of her notes. From the letters the reader can form an image of a smart and provident young mother devoted to protecting her children from hunger and cold, trying to make a new home in the various places they sought shelter. She reports to her husband the dangers they went through (incidents, fires, partial destruction of their house and belongings, loss of money, destruction of their food reserve, etc.), relates some everyday life conflicts within an enclosed microcommunity, her annoyance with the passivity and weakness of some family members. She recounts every important decision (including whether she should leave their older child in a foster home or not) she is expected to make, seeking comfort and support in an imaginary dialogue with her absent husband.

Another recent publication that underscores the importance of private lives in relation to historical events comes in the form of another woman's diary from the same period: the diary of Miklósné Horthy, wife of the governor of Hungary in the interwar period. From November 1944 until springtime of the next year, Miklósné Horthy was detained in German custody after her husband's failed attempt to extricate Hungary from the war. After the end of the war, American officers arrested her husband, and while he was summoned to an international tribunal at Nuremberg, Miklósné Horthy and some of her closest family members were held in Bavaria. Miklósné Horthy's diary tracks the life of the former Hungarian leader's family in an almost complete

isolation from the ongoing events in Hungary. The reader who expects revelations of historical secrets and hidden motives of political actions from the position of an insider will be disappointed with this text. The diary focuses on familial issues: Miklósné Horthy's thoughts are often with her beloved child "Niki," Miklós Horthy Jr. (the only one of her four children alive, the three others had died in different circumstances by that time), who was kidnapped by the SS in order to force the governor to abdicate. Her thoughts are also with her husband, who awaits his interrogation before the international tribunal (this is the period during which her diary changes to letter form, to address her absent husband). The diarist is extremely reticent about political problems, and she expresses hardly any concern over her husband's responsibility to Hungary's material and moral destruction during the war. It is surprising that Miklósné Horthy's diary barely provides historical curiosities. Her heroine seems to lose her public persona almost entirely. Once her representative social status, which framed her life, has collapsed, their past, once real, seems as fictitious as a fairy tale. Living in a small world of reduced social interactions, Miklósné Horthy depicts in her diary their former life through a mild melancholy and she writes of their future through her worrying about and seeking comfort in her closest family circle, in the joy of her grandchild, in her love for her husband and son.

The last diary on WWII published this year that I discuss here is written by István Zimandi Pius, a member of the Premonstratensian religious order and literary scholar. As its title suggests, *Egy év története naplójegyzetekben (1944. március–1945. március)*, this text covers almost exactly the last year of the war. Unlike the diaries discussed above, Pius's text belongs to the tradition of memoir writing, in the sense that it focuses mainly on public events. In this respect, Pius's position is that of the amateur historian, of the distant witness and observer. He barely expresses his feelings about the ongoing political events, but his diary is rich with information. He transcribes meticulously radio news from different stations, he summarizes and often jokes the contents of propaganda leaflets, and he records rumors and political jokes. As a good scholar, he approaches the oral and written information he encounters from a critical position; he always tries to compare his sources, to remain objective in his judgments and in his forecasts. From Pius's text, the reader can form a representative image of conservative, intellectual Christian middle-class opinions and thoughts on the war, and on the national and international political situation. Pius's strongly rooted political convictions are hostile to Nazism and to Communism; he expresses his sympathy for some individual Jewish destinies he encounters, but he remains rather indifferent when he thinks of Jewish people as a social group.

Besides this wave of publishing war diaries, two important life interviews were published within the last year in the Facts and Witnesses series by two important figures of Hungarian literary life in the sixties and seventies. The interviews with modernist poet Ottó Orbán and editor and translator Pál Réz were already recorded around 1989, but they became only available last year for the public, thanks to the boom of life writing publications. These “loud memoirs”—a neologism, a newly invented autobiographical subgenre to name the transcription of this tape-recorded interview or conversation—track back the literary career and the social pathway of the two literati during the years of Nazi rule, the communist dictatorship, then the two long decades of the political consolidation of the state’s socialist regime. The conversations reveal—through entertaining anecdotes and stories—how literary life in those days was connected to politics, and how the project of literary modernity went through different transformations due to the changing ideological, social, political, and cultural contexts.

I finish my review of autobiographic texts published in 2015 and 2016 with two literary diaries. The first is written by György Dalos, a novelist, entitled *Tíz év: Európai naplójegyzetek*. This work is a condensed chronicle of a ten-year intellectual and physical journey. The author, who grew up in Hungary during the years of socialism and lives now in Budapest and Berlin, reflects on his impressions of the newly unified Europe in the first decade of the new millennium. His diary belongs to the intellectual and essayist tradition of diary writing because his notes are reflections on political, cultural, and literary news, and on social, political, and historical problems of today’s Europe and Hungary. These notes are full of insightful and ironic comments on recent political and cultural life, achieving an intellectual height, a carefully crafted linguistic perspective above the annoyances of public life, above the darkening historical age.

But in terms of literary life writing, the text of the year was, no doubt, *Hasnyálmirigynapló* by internationally renowned novelist and emblematic figure of Hungary’s postmodern literary movement Péter Esterházy. The publication of this book was a real event in the Hungarian literary scene. It was also a sad occasion, because in May 2015 Esterházy was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. That was the moment Esterházy decided to keep a diary and relate the story of his illness. The diary was published a month before his death in June 2016, which made it probably the most poignant reading of the year for the Hungarian readership.

For those familiar with his work, nothing is stranger than Esterházy’s choice of the diary form. Esterházy’s literary reputation was based on a radical and multilevel practice of intertextuality (from pastiche to direct and often



quite long literal quotations), on the contamination of factual and historical reality by fictional elements, on the domination of the act of narration over narrated events, and on a vertiginous play with biographical elements. So he transformed also the genre of diary, and he personified his illness as a beautiful young woman with whom the diarist starts a dangerous flirtation. Throughout the diary, his illness is represented as a playful and erotic love-hate relationship in which the lovers nurse a grudge against but are not able to get rid of each other. *Hasnyálmirigynapló* is also a modernist experiment with writing. The illness provokes a unique state of mind, a particular condition of existence and experience, in which the world shows other, unknown dimensions to the writer who feels obliged to uncover it with his art. In Esterházy's diary, this experiment of writing is also an opportunity to escape from the sad everyday reality of his sickness to immigrate to the realm of writing forever.

If we judge this year's autobiographical production in Hungary only by the number of published works—obviously on the scale of the national book market—we might easily deduce that the reviewed period was particularly rich and intensive. The variety of subjects treated in these works and the difference of readers' attention they draw strengthens the hypothesis that life writing production and consumption has an important role in contemporary cultural and literary life in Hungary, whether we talk about actual political issues, or collective interpretation of sensitive historical events, or modernist literary experimentation.

## NOTES

1. In her recent and insightful paper, Louise O. Vasvári analyzes many of the diaries discussed here and examines how gender issues are represented in these testimonies of historical traumas.

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