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"An infernal masked ball" – Sándor Márai and Tamas Dobozy on the Siege of Budapest

« Un bal masqué infernal » – Sándor Márai et Tamas Dobozy sur le Siège de Budapest

Katalin Kürtösi

Abstract

The paper focuses on two recurring motifs – raping women and images of hell – as manifested in the writings (journals, novel, short stories) of Hungarian Sándor Márai and Hungarian-Canadian Tamas Dobozy (*Siege 13*). The selected works deal with the siege of the Hungarian capital during the winter of 1944–45. Márai was an eye-witness, writing a journal during that crucial historical period, while Dobozy, born two decades after the end of the Second World War, had access only to second-hand information. Márai's short novel uses the topic of the battles for posing existential questions, while for Dobozy these events serve as a basis for haunting images and memories for characters who had left their country.

Keywords: historical events in fiction, memory, trauma and raping women in literature.

Résumé

L'article se concentre sur deux motifs récurrents – le viol des femmes et les images de l'enfer – comme en témoignent les écrits (journaux, nouvelles, romans) du Hongrois Sándor Márai et d'auteur Canado-Hongrois Tamas Dobozy (*Siege 13*). Les œuvres sélectionnées traitent du siège de la capitale hongroise au cours de l'hiver 1944–1945. Márai en a été témoin et a rédigé un journal au cours de cette période cruciale, tandis que Dobozy, né deux décennies après la fin de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, avait accès à des informations de seconde main. Le court roman de Márai utilise le sujet des combats pour poser des questions existentielles, tandis que, pour Dobozy, ces événements servent de base à des images et des souvenirs obsédants pour les personnages qui ont quitté leur pays.

Mots-clés : événements historiques dans la fiction, mémoire, traumatismes et viols dans la littérature, violences faites aux femmes.

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Professor George Bisztray, to whom I am most grateful for having assisted me in finding my way around in Canadian academia.

"During the night, Hassan cooked an oxhead in the kitchen for them.
He rounded up a few chickens in the village and served them
chicken soup in several buckets for breakfast. They ate the soup and oxhead.
The dirty floor of the room was covered with feathers,
like after a demonic, witch-like all-night ball when the dancers
shed their feather costumes." (Márai, 1996: 110)[1]

Almost three-quarters of a century after the end of the Second World War – and of the siege of Budapest – it is relevant to observe how this historical event was reflected upon in the works of two writers: Sándor Márai, a contemporary 'bourgeois' writer, and Tamas Dobozy, born in Canada more than two decades after that time. The siege as a central motif brings various questions to the surface. What is the relationship between historical accuracy and a fictional approach? How does it relate to the literature of trauma and of post-traumatic stress disorder? Where are the borderlines of autobiographical elements, life writing and fiction? Can we call a work with only sporadic references to exact dates a diary?[2] How reliable is memory after several years,[3] or even decades? So many exciting aspects to explore the literary representations of those days full of suffering – but this time we skip these possible themes of investigations and focus primarily on how the figure of the raped Hungarian woman is presented in Márai's journals, his short novel *Szabadulás* [Getting free], and Dobozy's story sequence *Siege 13*.[4]

The several-week-long fight for and in Budapest during the bitterly cold winter of 1944/45 has inspired several Hungarian artists (e.g. Ferenc Karinthy, *Budapesti tavasz* (*Spring Comes to Budapest*), 1953, filmed by Félix Máriássy two years later) to describe the endless suffering and destruction in various literary forms (Fried 2007: 100; Lőrinczy 231–2). The two key motifs of the present paper – namely, the "dark carnival" metaphor and the raping of women by soldiers of foreign armies – are strongly present also in *Valahol Európában* (*Somewhere in Europe*), a 1947 gem of Hungarian

1) With the exception of excerpts from Albert Tuzla's translation of *Memoir of Hungary 1944–1948*, all translations from the Hungarian are my own. For the sake of brevity, only the English is included here; the page references are to the original Hungarian publications.

2) "What is the purpose of the journals of a writer? … To get closer to ourselves through it? That would make real sense. But can we do so, if we are aware that other people also read these lines? Yes, we can. Writers are the kind of people who are never 'alone'. … One must write the journals keeping this in mind, without reservations, shamelessly and honestly, if possible" (Márai 2006: 260–261).

3) As Fried (2002: 191) remarks, "It would be misleading to deny that the journal entries have been edited by the writer himself."

4) Béla Illés, who served as a high-ranking officer in the Red Army during the battles for the Hungarian capital, had reportedly said that in the eyes of Soviet soldiers Hungarian women were also part of looting (Sebő, 230).

film history, directed by Márai's brother, Géza Radványi. In later years, historian Krisztián Ungváry shed light on details which had been "erased" from history books before the changes. Still, both critics and readers were wondering why a young writer would opt for dealing with this motif more than half a century after it. Dobozy's stories, however, reveal that those shocking occurrences haunt people – his characters – at faraway locations many years later, too.

A quarter century after his death, a widely known and published author – even if, before the political changes his works did not appear in his homeland – generally cannot "surprise" his readers, and critics can "lean back" or make efforts at finding some new aspect of analysis. Not so with Márai: during the past few years, new, enlarged editions of his diaries have caused sensational reactions and re-evaluations of his oeuvre. *A teljes napló 1945* [The complete diary 1945], published in 2009, started this process, while *Hallgatni akartam* (2013) [I wanted to keep quiet] stirred the more or less still waters of Márai criticism. These newly discovered and edited works are of special importance if we consider that Márai's *Memoir of Hungary 1944–1948* (the only existing English version of his journals from this historical period) was published in 1996. *Hallgatni akartam* is more of a philosophizing – sometimes moralizing – sequence of ideas about the historical situation of Hungary, a "peremország" ('a country on the periphery', 22) in the war. He defines his own position as follows: "I am not a historian; therefore I do not think that I have the right to give a historical judgement even about the events of the near past. But I am a Hungarian writer … and I think the Hungarian writer does have the right to speak about the fate of his nation in a historical perspective, even if writing history is not his profession" (*HA* 36). And, indeed, later he recalls the fatal day, evoking it with images of hell and a danse macabre:

> It was a hot day in June … Hungary declared war on the Soviet Union. That evening I had a meeting with a member of the Prime Minister's office in a small restaurant in Buda. … The country was already blacked out.
>
> It was in this dimness that the Hungarian Walpurgis night set off, and one particular face was highlighted in this witch-like, ghostly, infernal waltz … from among the ring of the often-changing and dropping-out dancers. The man who, on behalf of the Hungarian nation, declared war on the Soviet Union – László Bárdossy. (*HA* 127)

For Márai, then, the metaphor of the "infernal" could be applied right from the moment when Hungary declared war on the Soviet Union. For our purpose, however, *A teljes napló 1945* is more relevant. Márai, who always defined himself as a "bourgeois writer," left his apartment in Buda for Leányfalu when the German troops occupied the country in March 1944, returning to the capital on a more or less regular basis

during the following months. The leitmotifs of this complete diary are his musings about Russian culture and how it appears in Soviet soldiers, on the one hand, and how the contacts between these very strange soldiers of diverse ethnic backgrounds and the Hungarian population are shaped during the fights. Right at the beginning, Márai claims that "Watches, pens, drinks and women are what soldiers need. … Their hunger for women is just natural: they are young men, on the road for years, without women" (*TN* 8). He likens the Red Army to a traveling circus (*TN* 24) – an image that occurs in *Memoir* as well:

> The Russians had everything required to wage war; but what they had was "different" … It was as if a monstrous, dreadful, enigmatic Eastern traveling circus had set out from the distance, from the dim remoteness, from the East, from Russia. This traveling circus was, in reality, one of the largest military machines on earth. And those who led it did so incomprehensibly but magnificently in the eyes of foreigners: everything was in place, everything functioned in the apparent confusion … (*MH* 52–53)

As the battle for Pest, and then for Buda, proceeds, the "underworld" occurs both in the literal sense and on the metaphoric level. At the beginning of the new year, he has the sense that "slowly we are approaching the end of this infernal tunnel; the price, however, is awful" (TN 11); it is a passage accompanied by unimaginable suffering: "what has been happening to people in Pest for three weeks cannot be conceived and it is unbearable. I can hear this infernal noise – helplessly, hopelessly" (*TN* 28). The battlefield is not limited to military objects and the streets, residential areas, but expands to the tunnels of the underground railway[5] and those who could not escape the city try to survive the fights in cellars. "They are lying here [in the cellar] on their filthy beds, munching what food they could save from old days; it was here that the wounded caretaker was dying, it was here that Mr. K. died of liver cancer during the siege before the very eyes of more than thirty people" (*TN* 102) – this is what the writer found when he and his wife walked thirty kilometres from their hiding place to their apartment, only to see it completely ruined and looted. Other people report about similar experiences:

> In the evening, a lady from Visegrad. She tells us that during the siege for Buda, in a cellar, where she and some seventy other people were on the edge of dying, a fascist woman informed the police about an old French teacher who was hiding two Jewish people with fake documents. During the night, Arrow Cross soldiers entered the cellar, picked the old lady and the two refugees out from the crowd, and shot all three in front of the entrance door on the street. (*TN* 124)

5) "Combats in the tunnels of the underground railway" (22).

Another woman relates a rape story: "during the siege, she and the other women in the cellar were attacked by the Russians. When the next day, early in the morning, she left the house, she found the young Russian soldier, with whom she was forced to spend the night, dead, shot in the head. She tells this story in a simple, unadorned way" (*TN* 260).

As time passes, more and more similar events come to the surface – very often with strange comments, for example:

> Women who suffered "accidents" during the siege say that the really awful part of the sexual assault took place after it: the Russian became unbearably tender. The rape was over, each woman wanted to be left on her own, to pull herself together on her bodily level and mentally … But no, the Russian started to crow with pleasure … producing photographs of his mother and sister… (TN 285)

In chapter 13 of Part One, "Memoir of Hungary," we can read about sexual abuse by Russian soldiers in the village where Márai, his wife and some family members were hiding; such cases were reported from neighbouring settlements, too. His first-hand experiences occurred when more than a dozen soldiers had been billeting themselves on the writer's refuge-home and had established a workshop for repairs in the garden and in the kitchen. On one occasion, Anatol, a Georgian suffering from carbuncles, turned to him "in an acute fit of sexual passion" (*MH* 97) demanding that the writer get him a woman. "I replied that I do not engage in such matters, that he should turn to the village beauties and court them …" but this advice did not satisfy him, and the soldier "started to cry. He sobbed uncontrollably, like someone suffering from a great physical need, like someone starving or thirsting" (*MH* 97, 98). On another evening, a drunken hunchback wanted to get Ilonka, the interpreter.

> He approached slowly, stealthily. When he stood before me I extended my hand, touched his shoulder and said something to him. I spoke in Hungarian quickly and quietly. … And I touched his shoulder. The moment that followed seemed endless. Suddenly the hunchback turned away and, grumbling furiously, went to the door and slammed it shut behind him. The others began to applaud the way spectators extol the lion tamer after accomplishing a daring feat. (*MH* 99)

Women were not safe even after the end of the war. Márai himself saw the dead body of a man who was trying to protect his wife from abusive soldiers. As he stated, "Others related other, more terrible acts. … news of atrocities spread slowly but steadily" (*MH* 97).

As a short aside, let me cite the first-hand description of a victim, who happened to be the widow of poet Miklós Radnóti:

> I glance at the ugly face of the caretaker who is signalling to me without any compassion that I have to go. I set off, almost unconscious, grasping my rosary. In the entrance hall I can see a pretty woman sitting cheerfully at a table with a Russian soldier. Later I heard that she was let free because she was menstruating. I try to explain that I had just escaped from the Jewish ghetto, asking him to leave me alone and let me go away, but he does not: instead he takes me to the laundry room next to the air-raid shelter.[6]

To return to Márai's unabridged journal, the experience of the siege, of meeting Russian soldiers of various ethnic and cultural background, of the women's stories, could not leave his novel-writing self dormant. First he considered writing a play about the abnormalities of life in shelters, cellars: "An excellent theme for some jack-of-all-trades of the stage: to write about a siege, with the title 'Shelter' and describe how in the cellar of an apartment house of a big city under the shock of the siege 'intelligent' people forget about any traits of culture after the first grenade attack and start to behave like beasts, they cannot learn a thing, they cannot forget a thing…" (*TN* 154) A few days later, however, Márai changed his mind – but only as far as the genre was concerned. Instead of a play, he was planning to write a novel, and he became immersed in this project immediately, completing the short novel within six weeks. He felt that limiting himself to keeping a journal was evading his dedication as a writer under the circumstances:

> After every war there are themes that are present and mushrooming in the air. … Right now homelessness will become such a general topic that raises above the individual. But I am thinking of another one, am really thrilled about the possibility, the bizarre reality radiating from the theme of "Getting Free." To write about getting free. How from the unbearable, from the cellar, the siege, from among the carcasses, from the cloaca, from the loop of dogcatchers, from the underworld someone is yearning for freedom, for light. And then freedom arrives. (It would be a woman to relate this scene to a man, her boy-friend, whom she would see again after the siege, and there would be some strange, unsolvable strangeness: the man would feel that "something had happened" to the woman, she is not exclusively his any longer…) The woman describes the siege, the Arrow Cross people, the cellar, the nights and the days in the cellar, the process of waiting which is more and more worrying, horrible and unbearable; and then getting free. One break of day a Russian enters the cellar. (Maybe the blond Siberian who visited us one night.) And he rapes the woman. In the streets there are still fights. The Russian leaves without saying a word. The woman follows him and finds the corpse of the aggressive Russian in the doorway. It is already morning time, a riding Cassock patrol appears in the "liberated"

6) Cited by Gábor Czene, "Megint hetven" *Népszabadság* (http://nol.hu/velemeny/megint-hetven-1526149): "."

street among the debris. At the corner they are still fighting. This is the frame. What is most important is to understand that no one can bring liberation. We ourselves cannot liberate. There is no liberation.
I need to put everything aside and write "Getting Free."
It has to be written in the third person, because it is more economical, more dramatic – the lyric elements of a "confession" should not erase what in this topic is reckless, solid and objectively fatal.

How do these ideas appear in the novel itself? The most dramatic scene reads thus:

The Russian silences the screaming mouth of Erzsébet with one of his hands. The scream dies out as if out of breath. Lightly, as if she were an object, he lifts Erzsébet with one hand, lays her down on the filthy bed and falls on her. As if this huge body had no weight at all. Erzsébet can feel pain, and the smell of some cheap eau-de-toilette that reminds her of a ridiculous barber's shop at the edge of the town. How strange, he even uses eau-de-toilette, she thinks. But the pain is very strong. She leans back on the pillow with her eyes closed … And she starts to vomit …
Then she can feel that a hand is fiddling with a handkerchief around her mouth: the man is wiping off the traces of vomit from Erzsébet's face and neck with careful, clumsy and tender movements. …
She is concentrating on her body, still with eyes closed. … She is astonished to observe that this body is calm.
Erzsébet cannot hear any sort of outraged complaint, protest, no scream crying out from the forcefully touched and ruined body …
My body does not say a thing, she summarizes. Pain will evaporate, I will forget the nausea, and this man cannot stay here for much longer …
… they are looking at each other … What do I look like? Disgusting – she concludes with satisfaction. I have not washed for four days, not even my face. I vomited … My hands are dirty, sticking with filth. I have not changed underwear for ten days. Most probably, I am even stinking. … And this man is clean, neat …
Poor one, she thinks with a sudden and honest compassion. This is what he could get, this body full of filth. This dirty body, stinking with neglect… (*SZ* 120–122)

Erzsébet was not completely alone in the cellar: a paralyzed elderly man was hiding in a dark corner, and did not give any signals to prevent the soldier from committing the horrible act. This made Erzsébet think about human nature. Following his initial idea, Márai continues with the death of the Russian soldier in front of the house. All Erzsébet's ideals about "liberation" are ruined – the "liberators" are not destined to bring it to Hungarians.

The Hungarian title of the short novel is hard to translate – neither "liberation" nor "freedom" can cover the original meaning that contains both the process and the achieved state of becoming free. Márai raises the idea to an existential level. Lőrinczy, in 2002, could not know that Márai wrote the synopsis of this short novel in his journal. In his view, the end product is of mixed quality, but the description of the rape scene ranks among Márai's most outstanding passages:

> *Getting Free* becomes a real novel gradually, only after the raid of the Arrow Cross to reach its climax – also in the aesthetic sense – with the meeting of Erzsébet and the Russian. This is a masterly scene … The brutal act is laconic, devoid of pretentious details, that is why it is so shocking … what is most remarkable: the whole scene, its occasionally grotesque, but mostly nightmarish atmosphere and character… (Lőrinczy, 232)

Speaking about the novel, Fried (2007: 105) stresses that "In *Getting Free*, Márai strives at casting light at the problematics of freedom and liberation, ranging from fear to Angst, distancing what he observes in his journals from himself, wrapping his philosophy of history in a special terminology – viewing in the novel form what he had been dealing with in his successful and less successful novels of the early 1940s" – and later adding that "*Getting Free* is a personal and historical description (partly a panorama), but the personal features are hidden, and the mediators applied between the hypothetical author and the implied reader increase a feeling of insecurity … *Getting Free* occasionally looks like the 'fictional' version of his journal entries and of his autobiography" (Fried, 112).

Tamas Dobozy had been publishing for years before *Siege 13*, his breakthrough book that won the young, second-generation Hungarian-Canadian writer the prestigious Roger's Writer's Trust Fiction Prize in November 2012. The volume contains thirteen (long) short stories, each of which depicts haunting memories of the struggle for the Hungarian capital at the end of the Second World War. What Robert Kroetsch pointed out in connection with F. P. Grove seems to be valid with regard to writers with an immigration history even more than half a century later: "The experience of the migrating generation … is granted privileged status … The migrating generation is often seen in heroic terms by the later generations" (66). Works dealing with these topics often blend the conventions of fiction and (auto)biography, and the stories themselves are laced with the dichotomies of remembering/forgetting, success/failure, superiority/inferiority.

The use of historical events in literary works has various implications. In the case of Dobozy, on the one hand it may trigger the interest of post-millennium readers towards the "exotic" location and shocking details (both of these elements were markedly present in the marketing scheme of Dobozy's book), but on the other hand there

is the danger of sentimentality or self-pity. The writer – born twenty years after the end of the war – could get only second-hand information about life in Budapest during the winter of 1944: he heard stories from family members, including his father, who was a child at the time and spent the crucial weeks in cellars with his family. Dobozy read Márai's *Memoir of Hungary,* although – as he revealed to me in an e-mail written on 26 June 2014 – he "did not rely on it too heavily," and he also consulted books by historian Krisztián Ungváry. Dobozy did not set out to produce yet another historical novel (or sequence of stories) about the war. On the contrary, he was "interested in presenting fiction as nonfiction" (Grubisic). The extreme human situations during the siege offered Dobozy a framework for considering moral dilemmas and human responses with regard to survival, loyalty/betrayal, emotional and material loss, sin/crime/repentance, the pain caused by visible and invisible injuries, the dilemma of leaving the country or staying on, and above all, how all these symptoms of personal and historical trauma are passed on from generation to generation. In the stories themselves, these complex issues are often present in nightmarish or hallucinatory sequences of events, leaving the reader in uncertainty concerning their factual reality. The reader, thus, questions the reliability of the characters' memories. Some characters and events keep coming up in various stories – or the same story is told from a different perspective, thus forming a cohesive line in the book.

Dobozy's bizarre stories offer ample food for thought: some reviewers trace the influence of contemporary Hungarian writers like Péter Nádas, Péter Esterházy, Imre Kertész and László Krasznahorkai (Hallberg), others link these often embarrassing stories with magic realism (Kenyeres 89, Vashegyi), with the gothic tradition (Kenyeres 101) and with historiographic metafiction (Kenyeres 89). *Siege 13* is not easy reading: the stories move between the geographical spaces of Budapest and of North America. Occasionally, real historical events are mentioned, but in most cases, we are at the mercy of the characters' (often failing) memories and imagination. Some motifs – like intricate family relationships, memories of war events, or the struggle to forget them, loyalty, the question of emigration, the relationship of the old and new identities, haunting memories of the past, or mysteries in the past and present – tend to occur in several of the stories. Even the real historical events (like the case of the Vannay Battalion) blend with bizarre or absurd turns in the story line. Some twists in the stories verge on autotelism, as some critics (e.g. Hallberg) have remarked. Moreover, the first edition was not carefully proofread, which adds to the difficulties of following the plot lines (since words and place names in Hungarian were often confused, and in one case the names of characters are switched). But the merits of Dobozy's stories outdo the flaws and unevenness. There seems to be a consensus among critics and reviewers as to which stories form the core of the book: "The Animals of the Budapest Zoo 1944–1945," "The Restoration of the Villa Where Tibor Kálmán Once Lived" and

"The Ghosts of Budapest and Toronto" are generally considered to be the highlights, although some reviewers add "The Beautician" and "The Encirclement" to this list.

"The Ghosts of Budapest and Toronto" is a good example of Dobozy's intricate story-telling, his psychological approach to creating complex characters – and also to inviting the reader to work hard when deciding what he or she can accept as a credible event and what should be considered the end-product of the characters' imagination. The first sentence states that Mária, the protagonist, did not die during the siege of Budapest – but, like so many other women, she was raped by a Russian soldier, even though her husband, László, did his best to prevent him from doing so. László was knocked down by the soldiers; when he came to, Mária had been taken away. László later tried to track her down, but after a year of useless efforts, he decided to leave the country, taking their two-year-old son with him. They were followed by his brother and two sisters after the death of their father. The aggression against the women left physical and psychological injuries both in the victims themselves and in their family members. The husbands suffered from remorse because of their inability to help their wives, while the children very often were eye-witnesses to the horror. As time passed, in many cases the relatives detested and excluded these women from the family, as if the victims were to be blamed for what they had been subject to. Oftentimes, they just said these women died during the fights. László, too, felt, after the unsuccessful search for Mária, that he was more scared of her eventual appearance. How could he find words to bring her solace? How could they continue their lives together? This embarrassment helped him decide to leave the country. A few weeks later, however, the remaining family members got word from a Party functionary that he had found the mentally confused woman in the street after the Russians had let her free – László's father and siblings did not claim her back. In fact, they were quite relieved that they did not have to take care of Mária, whom the Party member took home. These details are revealed three decades later when László's sisters and brother have strange visions about Mária, as if she were haunting them at various locations in Toronto:

> Anikó was convinced that the ghost of Mária was seeking out László in order to exact revenge. "How do you know she's not looking for *us*?" István asked … "Remember how we let Béla take her off our hands? We did nothing to help her. We never even told her we were planning on following László!" (Dobozy, 299)

István, Adél and Anikó did not succeed in "making it." They became a cleaning lady, dish-washer and gardener, respectively, while Krisztián, Mária and László's son, became a university professor. Mária, apparently, also had visions – most often, she imagined she had seen her little boy, sometimes her in-laws. And Krisztián as a child and even later was "often … haunted by what wasn't there – the memory of a face, a touch,

the voice you most wanted to hear – as if absence could live on in you like a ghost" (Dobozy, 313).

"The Ghosts of Budapest and Toronto" is a disturbing story that reveals how aggression, helplessness, and opportunism leave their traces in human life many, many years after the actual event. Dobozy can create memorable human figures, while evoking locations in Budapest and Toronto as backdrops for unusual experiences. Evidently, facing the past is very hard for these people, and facing the present seems to be even harder.

Our two literary examples reveal how the months of suffering during the battle for Budapest were imprinted in the memories and bodies of civilians in the city. Images of hell abound in these works – be they the actual cellar scenes in Márai's works or the underground tunnel in Dobozy's story about two men who work for the zoo. Humiliating and even raping women are among the frequently-used weapons of occupying armies – this motif in a work of art receives broader symbolic meaning and points at the methods of aggression against innocent people. Both Márai and Dobozy found it important to respect historical credibility – and both of them underlined that, for them, these battles were literary raw material for creating a fictional world while also serving as material for investigating moral-philosophical issues.

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