

Memories of Camps, Memoirs of War: Personal Experience, Historical Trauma, and Literary Expression in Post-War Hungarian Literature

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the testimonial works of two Hungarian writers, Ernő Szép (1884-1953) and Miklós Radnóti (1909-1944). The two Jewish descent authors suffered grievously during the last months of World War II, and they rendered their persecution in different literary genres. The poet Miklós Radnóti kept a diary during his first two mobilizations of forced labor, and during the third, fatal one, he wrote some of his most famous poems found in a mass grave in 1946. Ernő Szép, novelist and playwright of the inter-war period, tells the story of his forced labor in a memoir written and published in 1945. Following some theoretical remarks on aesthetic and moral questions associated with attempts to represent traumatic historic events, the paper analyzes the above-mentioned works with a twofold aim. It shows how the irruption of history influences the two authors' artistic aims, and vice versa, how their former writing production determines their attempt to grasp their historical reality.

Keywords

Hungarian literature; literary forms in Holocaust memory; testimony; trauma writing; World War II

1. Introduction

In recent years, in social and cultural history, as well as in literary studies, many research projects have turned to comparative approaches to illuminate aspects of historical, cultural, artistic events previously unintelligible to scholars working within a national frame of reference. The history of World War II is full of such events. Understanding how extermination and

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forced labor camps, premeditated war crimes against ethnic groups and other minorities, and the attempt to exterminate the European Jews were possible in a Europe which had considered itself democratic, liberal, and humanist, rational and enlightened remains our common task and burden, especially in the countries of Europe where these crimes were committed, in countries of victims, perpetrators, collaborators, silent witnesses. But responses to historical trauma vary from one national context to another, and it is important to continue to explore the local differences, because each European country implicated in the tragic events has its own story or stories, its own explanations, its own efforts to integrate its calamitous past into its present.

The past we are investigating exists in individual memories, in those, fewer and fewer in number, who lived the events, and in the different forms of collective memory (familial, national, or other), materializing in various cultural representations: in rites of commemoration, in places of commemoration (museums, expositions, memorials, etc.), in scholarly research, and in oral or written textual representations. Working within my own disciplinary parameters, I can deal only with the latter, more specifically with written literary representations of the historical cataclysm in Hungary in 1944 and in 1945.

A whole generation of Hungarian modernist writers perished or suffered grievously during the last months of World War II in non-combatant labor corps in the Hungarian Army, in the extermination camps set up by the National Socialists, or during the siege of Budapest¹. After the war, many of the surviving literati wrote the story of these tragic months, entirely or partially, in direct documentary and confessional genres or mediated by fictional forms. This essay focuses on two testimonial works whose authors rendered their persecution in different literary genres (diary, poetry, memoir), and the temporal distance between their personal experiences and the moment of putting them down in writing influences their interpretation considerably. The first author studied here presents a *simultaneous perspective* of narration, when the time of experience and its representation coincide:

¹ The *Magyar mártír írók antológiája* (Bóka 1947, Anthology of Hungarian Martyr Writers) enumerates 74 Hungarian literati in wide sense of the term died in the atrocities of World War II.

the poet Miklós Radnóti kept a diary during his first two mobilizations of forced labor and wrote some of his most beautiful and famous poems during the third, fatal one. He himself did not survive the war, but his notebook did; it was found in a mass grave almost two years later after his murder. The second author offers a *close retrospective perspective*, when the recording follows the experience itself, but the temporal distance remains relatively short: in a memoir written and published in 1945, Ernő Szép, a popular novelist and playwright of the inter-war period, tells the story of his forced labor of 19 days at the age of 60, after the Arrow-Cross (the Hungarian party which was inspired by the German National Socialist ideology) turnover and terror.

By commenting on and analyzing these two-testimonial works, my aim is twofold. On the one hand, I analyze how the irruption of history influences artistic aims, and vice versa, how their former writing production (generic laws, horizon of expectation of their reading public, awareness of literary traditions) determines their attempt to grasp their historical reality. The works of both authors demonstrate that while they are deeply rooted in a historical reality, they are consciously constructed and crafted. For that very reason it is necessary to make some preliminary theoretical remarks on the general aesthetic and moral questions associated with attempts to represent the Holocaust.

2. Testimonies, literary work, and the question of representing trauma

The supposed factual or referential nature of the autobiographical works in question puts professional fiction writers or poets – survivors or witnesses – in a delicate situation because despite of their most honest intentions of producing a historical account, they must be aware of the interference caused by the status of their writing as ‘literary’, an interference manifested both in the creative process of writing and in the reception of their work. Moreover, the expression and the transformation of the experiences could lead to a real formal experimentation which transgresses the horizon of expectation of readers seeking realism. The situation is even more delicate when highly tragic and traumatic historical events are related or evoked in any kind of literary representation, when the aesthetic function of the

work seems to supersede the testimonial one, especially in the case of the so-called Holocaust-literature and the famous synecdochical prohibition of the poetic transformation of the historical trauma by the Adorno's decree («to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric»)².

The critical legacy of Adorno's position is so huge and complex, that it would be vain to even try to outline its more important elements. In 1962, Adorno (1977) himself clarified, contextualized, and slightly modified his own idea about the question of representing the human suffering, especially the suffering of the victims of the Nazi concentration camps. Adorno connects the impossibility and the necessity to speak about the horror of Auschwitz to the birth of a new critical literature. Here, we find Adorno's former general prohibition of transforming human suffering into an aesthetic artefact reduced to the production of the committed literature:

² German original: «[...] nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch.» This famous sentence was originally formulated in the essay «Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft» (Adorno 1951). According to the argumentation of Adorno, the extermination camps were born from a totally reified society, where human lives were reduced to the existence of the pure objects, from the failure of the Western culture and thinking. After the scandal of Auschwitz, no artistic practice can pretend to provide a totalized approach of the human world and works of art which promise consolation or even understanding the meaning of the historical trauma take part of fading the past, collaborate – in an unconscious way – with the denial of the historical responsibility. «The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation» (Adorno 1983, 34). In the German original: «Je totaler die Gesellschaft, um so verdinglichter auch der Geist und um so paradoxer sein Beginnen, der Verdinglichung aus eigenem sich zu entwinden. Noch das äußerste Bewußtsein vom Verhängnis droht zum Geschwätz zu entarten. Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben. Der absoluten Verdinglichung, die den Fortschritt des Geistes als eines ihrer Elemente voraussetzte und die ihn heute gänzlich aufzusaugen sich anschickt, ist der kritische Geist nicht gewachsen, solange er bei sich bleibt in selbstgenügsamer Kontemplation» [Adorno (1951) 1963, 26].

The aesthetic principle of stylization, and even the solemn prayer of the chorus, make an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed. This alone does an injustice to the victims. [...] When genocide becomes part of the cultural heritage in the themes of committed literature, it becomes easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to the murder. (ivi, 189)³

However, according to Adorno, a new form of critical, reflective art can resist the attempts of appropriation by an alienated and reified society, by its ideology and its cultural industry: a search for new forms of expression and for new languages is necessary for thinking the singularity of an event. The unheard-of suffering of the Holocaust necessitates the general renewal of art, and what is more, redefines the function of art by underscoring its unique power. For Adorno,

this suffering [...] also demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it; it is virtually in arts alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it. (Ivi, 188)⁴

Thus, art and literature can go beyond the contradiction of the impossibility and the necessity of representing traumatic historical events by creating a new artistic language for it, by refusing to give sense to the suffering with any predetermined ideological meaning.

But what about autobiographical forms of expression which do not seem to be concerned by the prohibition of representing the Holocaust, because usually they do not pretend to provide any aesthetic transfiguration of the historical reality, they just pleased, with some humble documentary

³ German original: «Durchs ästhetische Stilisationsprinzip, und gar das feierliche Gebet des Chors, erscheint das unausdenkliche Schicksal doch, als hätte es irgend Sinn gehabt; es wird verklärt, etwas von dem Grauen weggenommen; damit allein schon widerfährt den Opfern Unrecht, während doch vor der Gerechtigkeit keine Kunst standhielte, die ihnen ausweicht. Noch der Laut der Verzweiflung entrichtet seinen Zoll an die verruchte Affirmation. Werke geringeren Ranges als jene obersten werden denn auch bereitwillig geschluckt, ein Stück Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit. Indem noch der Völkermord in engagierter Literatur zum Kulturbesitz wird, fällt es leichter, weiter mitzuspielen in der Kultur, die den Mord gebär» (Adorno 1965, 126-127).

⁴ German original: «Aber jenes Leiden [...] erheischt auch die Fortdauer von Kunst, die es verbietet; kaum wo anders findet das Leiden noch seine eigene Stimme, den Trost, der es nicht sogleich verriete» (ivi, 126).

intention, to record it? Of course, in the light of narratological and other approaches we are aware of the epistemological limits of a representation which wants to grasp the 'real' as it is, the past as it was, but this theoretical knowledge does not discredit the mimetic and realistic intention of the so-called referential representations. As Philippe Lejeune, the French theorist of the genre, claims about autobiography: «An autobiography is not a text in which one speaks the truth about oneself, but a text in which a real person says that he or she is speaking the truth about himself or herself»⁵ [(2005a, 2005b) 2015, 17]. Hundreds of memoirs or other kind of written testimonies were published since the end of World War II by survivors and by witnesses about their experiences in extermination or labor camps, or about other wartime atrocities. These testimonies do not express any explicit aesthetic and poetical pretensions, and they are made up of different discursive models, generic patterns, and communicative needs, including the desire to bear witness, to document, to understand, to assign responsibility, and to grieve for the victims. The legitimacy of this writing is obvious from a practical point of view, which could be juridical, historical, political, moral, or therapeutic. Nevertheless, these honest intentions and the lack of interest in producing aesthetic pleasure do not prevent them from being easily appropriated by ideological agendas, and mainly, as the temporal distance of 70 years shows, falling into a historical oblivion: most of these testimonies, witness narratives, memoirs are read only by scientific purposes, they are not constitutive parts of the worldwide or national memory of Nazi extermination camps.

But if we have look to the most famous pieces of world Holocaust literature, works whose reception goes beyond national literary contexts, we can notice that a great number of works, especially in narrative forms, is directly autobiographical, in that sense that their factual content is confirmed by an *autobiographical pact*⁶ and/or their genetic patterns borrow

⁵ French original: «Une autobiographie, ce n'est pas un texte dans lequel quelqu'un dit la vérité sur soi, mais un texte dans lequel quelqu'un de réel dit qu'il la dit» (Lejeune 2015, 17).

⁶ This classical concept of autobiographical studies is developed by Philippe Lejeune in his 1975 essay *Le pacte autobiographique* (*The Autobiographical Pact*, 1989). In this essay Lejeune defines autobiography in a wide sense as a contractual phenomenon, in which the author, as a real person, identified by his/her proper name proposes to read his/her own life story as

explicitly from the conventions of classical autobiographies and memoirs, and sometimes diaries. Works of this international canon (works of Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, Jorge Semprún, Imre Kertész, etc.) are determined, on one hand, by an autobiographical inspiration, by the facticity of the lived experience, and on the other hand, they risk literary experimentations to better render the singularity, the radical incommensurability of the lived experience, the emotional dimensions of the historical event. These works, which we might call «literary testimonies», refuse to choose between experience and expression; between reality (in an ontological sense) and truth (in a moral sense). Conforming to Adorno's remark on the importance of art in rendering voice to the traumatic event, they show – as Susan Suleiman (2006, 158) emphasizes in her book about trauma, memory, and literature in the context of World War II – that «the substance of the experience is indissociable from its telling; [...] only a self-consciously literary writing can render the truth of the camp experience».

This twofold determinacy manifests not only in the genesis of these «literary testimonies», but also in their reception by their public, because most of their readers appreciate the emblematic linguistic formulations and complex literary compositions in the light of a biographical and historical knowledge, knowing about the referential or factual character of these works, keeping in mind that what they are reading is not simply fiction, but the events narrated also happened in a non-textual reality.

3. Miklós Radnóti's wartime *Napló* (1989, Diary) and *Bori Notesz* (1970, *Camp Notebook*, translated by Francis R. Jones, 2000)

The extraordinary case of Miklós Radnóti is worth a brief biographical introduction⁷. He was born in 1909 in an assimilated Jewish family; his moth-

real and factual to his/her public. The factual nature of the events and opinion revealed in the text is assured by the identity of the name of the author, the narrator, and the protagonist, and sealed by some paratextual instances like title, sub-title, generic designation, foreword, editorial notes, etc.

⁷ The English reading public can find an excellent biography of Radnóti (Babus 2009). This web site was set up to celebrate the centenary of the birth of the poet in 2009. Bio- and bibliographical information and quotations are from this web site, just as the English translations of his poems.

er and his twin brother died after the delivery. His father soon remarried, and the secret of Radnóti's birth was only revealed by his stepmother after the death of his father in his teenager years. After briefly studying business, he became interested in *belles lettres* and earned a degree in Hungarian and French literature. During his university years he started to write poems and joined a leftist youth movement committed to the social progress in a conservative, nationalist Hungary. Despite all these, his political convictions never really influenced his poetry, and the poetic universe of his early years was characterized by a neo-popular lyricism and pastoral poetry, as well as a solid knowledge of Greek and Roman versification. He published eight volumes of poetry in his life, translated contemporary French authors such as Apollinaire, the contemporary avant-garde poet. His mature art can be described as a successful synthesis of classical poetic forms and some moderately avant-garde experimental modes. His most beautiful poems represent a detailed material universe in a sensual way and reflect on the ephemeral nature of human existence. Without having an explicit and direct relation to the philosophy of existentialism, Radnóti's poetry evokes a vision of the world where the awareness of all beings about to pass soon, of a life destined for Death, paradoxically gives that life its meaning.

As regards the lyrical voice in the poems, far from considering itself a universal subjectivity, it is rather a personal presence, a humanist gaze indirectly reflected in the represented material world. In this respect one can argue that Radnóti's elaborated or (re)constructed textual subjectivity (or self) is a typically modern choice to transgress a given social identity, a limiting historical and cultural condition.

But through the tragic events at the end of Radnóti's life, his historical and cultural context and his literary work somehow converge. A more direct autobiographical writing, already present, but carefully kept apart from his 'creative writing' since his youth, manifests itself in a spectacular way in his oeuvre from the end of the thirties. From the middle of the thirties, he kept a diary again, as he did in his youth. In the meantime, he transformed his childhood notes into an autobiographical narrative, which he published in 1940 under the title *Ikrek hava. Napló a gyerekkorról* (Gemini. A Childhood Diary). He continued his diary during the three months of his first two mobilizations in the labor battalion of the Hungarian army in 1940 and during

his ten-month mobilization in 1942-1943⁸. He recorded everyday life events in the labor service, his health problems, but also news from literary circles, comments on his works in progress, details of his economic situation, and expressions of his love for his wife. The diary's tone becomes darker during his second mobilization; he complains about the harsh working conditions, the hardships of work, the insufficient supplies, the increasing hostility against the members of labor battalions, and the growing anti-Semitism, and he related some shocking scenes of his humiliation. The importance of this diary is clearly shown by his practice of copying some of his important letters into it, for example, the one addressed to Aladár Komlós, editor of a Hungarian-Jewish writer's anthology at that time, in which he explained why he had refused to contribute to his anthology. Constraints of space do not allow for a fuller discussion of the complex and delicate reasons for his ambiguous feelings about his Jewish descent, which can be at least partially attributed to his abovementioned will to shape his identity in and by his literary work, in his commitment to Hungarian language and literature, and the fact that he declared his Jewish origin «not a decisive element of my "intellectual" and "spiritual" and "poetical" identity»⁹. Radnóti, like many other members of his generation, refused to think about the nation in racial terms; he conceived of an imaginary national identity manifested in national culture and language. The Nazi takeover of 1944 threatened him not only with physical destruction, but also with a violent abdication from this imaginary community.

After being released from his second mobilization, Radnóti stopped keeping a diary, but the recently published diary of his wife, Fanni Gyarmati, shows how deeply he was affected by becoming an outcast in his homeland¹⁰. In May 1944 he was mobilized again, and was transported – together with his fellows – in cattle trucks toward Serbia where he was forced to work in a copper mine in Bor. He did not keep a diary, but he did

⁸ His diary was published in Hungarian in 1989 (Radnóti 1989).

⁹ Hungarian original: «nem „szellemisségem” és „lelkiségem” és „költőiségem” meghatározójának» (Radnóti 1989, 208-212).

¹⁰ The publication of the two volumes of the diary of Radnóti's widow after her death in 2014 was a huge literary and commercial success (Radnóti Miklósné Gyarmati 2014).

write poems throughout his stay in the camp and his way back to Hungary by foot, in forced march, when their camp was evacuated. The famous *Bori Notesz* (1970, *Camp Notebook*, translated by Francis R. Jones, 2000), found during the exhumation of a mass grave in Abda, a small city near to the Austrian-Hungarian border, contains eleven poems, all of them carefully dated and geographically located¹¹. Six of them would have survived, even if the notebook had not been found, because Radnóti copied them on loose sheets, and consigned them to one of his fellows destined to leave the camp with another group. This companion escaped a few days later, and two of these poems were published by the end of October; all of them, along with other unpublished poems, appeared in 1946 in the posthumous volume *Tajtékos ég* (1946, *Foamy Sky*, translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner, 1992).

In a way, we can consider this notebook an 'uncanny' diary: its miraculous escape from the destruction makes it an especially eerie and macabre testimony. As I mentioned before, the disposition of the poems, dated in chronological order, follows the form of the diary, but we can extend the similarity to the thematic level, because the lyrical situation of the poems evokes the everyday life in the camp, with its typical scenes (barbed-wire fence, barracks, captives, hunger, dirt, worms, fleas, harsh living conditions, and brutality of the guards). The poems show fragments of the life in the camp with amazing simplicity and with extraordinary poetical awareness, where the ubiquitous death and the sweet memories of a former life are reflected in verses formally linked to the Greco-Roman tradition *Hetedik ecloga* (*Seventh Eclogue*) or in a calligram *Erőltetett menet* (*Forced March*). These miniature descriptions serve as departure points for a lyrical meditation or reflexion based often to the opposition between an embellished past and a hopeless present [*Hetedik ecloga* (*Seventh Eclogue*), *À la recherche...*, *Levél a hitvesnek* (*Letter to my Wife*)]. The imaginary escape from the rankling re-

¹¹ «During the exhumation several documents, photos, and letters as well as a 14,5×10 cm large notebook with thirty leaves were found in the clothes of Radnóti. The notebook included ten poems written by him in the lager of Bor and during the forced march. This notebook that for twenty months was exposed to decay under the earth, is called the *Bor Notebook*» (Babus 2009).

ality is mediated by an apostrophe, an inner speech to his wife, and their imagined meeting takes place in the past, in the future, or in a conditional fiction. According to the seminal monograph of Győző Ferencz (2005), in his very last poems Radnóti opposed the maintained quality of his poetry to his deteriorated life conditions. Despite the adverse conditions for writing poetry (he refers to them in his poems), he wrote what are possibly his most beautiful and perfect poems in the camp, producing Greek versification, French alexandrines, and calligrams which achieve a successful balance between cultural references and the intimacy and sensibility of everyday life's scenes. The poems of the *Bor Notebook* have an important performative function in common with diary writing: for Radnóti writing had a vital, anthropological function, it helped him staying alive. As Ferencz notes, the rhetorical pattern of Radnóti's last poems can be described as a self-persuasion to stay alive, to keep fighting for survival [*Erőltetett menet* (*Forced March*), *Levél a hitvesnek* (*Letter to my Wife*); *ivi*, 737].

But the most eerie and macabre piece of this weird diary, this report from the brink of death, is his very last poem, written probably four days before his death. In his fourth *Razglednica* ('postcard' in Serbian) he describes (and predicts) his own death, which takes a form that was by then all too familiar to him:

RAZGLEDNICA (4)

Mellézuhanám, átfordult a teste
s feszes volt már, mint húr, ha pattan.
Tarkólövés. — Igy végzed hát te is, —
sugtam magamnak, — csak feküdj nyugodtan.
Halált virágzik most a türelem. —
Der springt noch auf, — hangzott fölöttem.
Sárral kevert vér száradt fülemen.

Szentkirályszabadja, 1944. október 31.

RAZGLEDNICA (4)

I fell beside him, his body rolled over
already as stiff as a string about to snap.
Shot in the back of the neck. — "So this is how
you, too, will end," —
I whispered to myself. — "Just lie still.
From patience death will bloom." —
"Der springt noch auf," — I heard someone
say above me;
as mud caked with blood dried upon my ears.

*Szentkirályszabadja, October 31, 1944. Translated
by Gabor Barabas (Radnóti 2014, 175).*

The poem shows the simultaneous perspective of a victim and the bystander, the subject of the poem is twofold, because it shares the point of view of the (already dead) Other and the Self (who must die soon); it condenses in

itself the present, the near past and the near future. To write one's own death is an impossible task, but the miraculous escape of Radnóti's manuscript from decay made his last poems some of the most authentic and possibly the most extreme writing of the experience of the Nazi persecution.

4. Ernő Szép: *Emberszag* (1945, *The Smell of Humans*, translated by John Bátki, 1994)

If Radnóti occupies extraordinary place in the history of modern Hungarian literature, the second author treated in this paper, the playwright and novelist, Ernő Szép (1884-1953) seems to be largely forgotten among average readers in Hungary today. However, in the beginning of the Twentieth century and throughout the inter-war period, he was a celebrated and popular author in the modern Hungarian literary scene. He started as a poet of urban and bourgeois life, and later he became a successful playwright and wrote screenplays. The smooth, ironic, and entertaining style and the representation of human relations in a modern urban bourgeois milieu became the hallmarks of his writing.

The Smell of Humans tells the story of nineteen days of forced labor after the Arrow-Cross Party takeover in October and November of 1944, when he was deported from the ghetto of Budapest. This restricted temporal frame of the narrative is surprising, because it contradicts the memoirs' general intention to narrate a story as a plausible and verisimilar whole, a common aim for all memoirs, especially those aspiring to public interest. Moreover, despite of an 'in medias res' beginning, the story starts very slowly with a long detour when, in an anecdotic mode, the author depicts a rather quiet and peaceful life in the ghetto between March and October (it takes approximately the one third of the book). The progression of time does not play an important role in the temporal structure of Szép's memoir. The story neither has a real starting point nor a proper ending: the group of old men are released as randomly as they were collected. Time in the story is a senseless time, which is perfectly symbolized by a scene in a stadium where the narrator-hero and his fellows are gathered before their departure to their worksite but even the guards do not know what commands they are waiting for.

The fragmented narrative of forced labor experiences continues with the arrival in the camp. Here the storytelling, previously maintained despite the constant temptations to anecdotic digression, is replaced by sketches of human behavior in the camps. In this part of the story, the narrator enumerates the hardship of their life in the camp, where aged men accustomed to a bourgeois way of living found themselves brutally deprived of the elementary needs of human existence, such as sleep, nutrition, shelter, elementary care of the body, and adequate private space. The captives exposed to suffering and to humiliation experienced their miserable situation immediately in their bodies: lack of sleep, starving, cold, parasites, and the overwhelming proximity of other people (evoked by the title of the book) constitute the small troubles of the camps.

But all these troubles are represented from a rather distant point of view. For the most part, the narrator-hero sees and describes offenses and attempts at humiliation from the heights of his intellectual advantage. He refers to the Arrow-Crossed criminals as 'youngsters'; he describes a scene in which he hardly restrains his mirth when a guard tries to humiliate him. Throughout, his account manifests a tension between the narrated atrocities and the ironic, often humorous manner of the narration. Szép employs the rhetorical figure of apostrophe, though for different purposes. He tells his story as if it were an entertaining story related in a café, colored by witticisms, contrasted by a pretended naivety. He makes jokes and puns about his Jewish descent, sarcastically refuting the stereotypes disseminated by the anti-Semitic propaganda.

Despite of the effort to take things easy, Szép's ironic attitude and easy tone do not hide his consternation and his stupefaction in this Kafkaesque universe. Even if he is resigned to the loss of basic civil rights and his fundamental liberties, the loss of his identity as a Hungarian writer affects him badly. Like Radnóti, Ernő Szép considered his literary oeuvre as a new form of identity by which he may transcend the social contradictions and the cultural tensions of his age. The exclusion of the Hungarian Jews from the nation through the brutal annulment of the assimilatory pact, which had been respected widely in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the *Belle Époque* and not violated explicitly before 1938, provoked a real crisis of identity:

You may imagine how shameful I found this: making sure to include in the petition a statement that I had never done anything against the nation. No, you couldn't have fathomed the shame of one who had been called to rise above his nation by the very nature of his vocation as a writer now forced to beg to be considered just as much a part of the Hungarian nation as any dog catcher or criminal under lock and key. And why should I be treated differently from my fellow sufferers marked by yellow stars? (Szép 1994, 30)¹²

But stupefaction and indignation turn into incredulity when the rumor about the extermination camps reaches him: «It was not the first time that I heard about Jews being taken to the gas chambers in Germany. But I did not believe it. And I still cannot believe it. Deep down I cannot believe it, I just cannot» (ivi, 45)¹³.

The ambiguity of this passage emerges from the fact that while the narrated events took place in 1944, Szép wrote and published his memoirs in 1945. At that time, he must have known that the extermination camps did exist. I am quite sure that this ostensible ignorance was not caused by the lack of information. The denial concerns rather the unacceptability of the horror in these camps.

Szép rehearses the same attitude toward his worst experiences during his persecution, which he deliberately omitted from his book:

It was the ninth of November when we got home. I will not go on to narrate what happened starting on the tenth. That, I feel, is not to be described, not to be believed. And even what I have narrated here, even this "if you want, remember, if you want, forget". [In English in the original Hungarian text] (ivi, 173)¹⁴

¹² Hungarian original: «Elgondolhatják, kérem, hogy megszégyeltem magamat: belé kell a kérvénybe írni, hogy a nemzet ellen semmit se vétettem. És milyen feneketlen mélyen szégyeltem, hogy kérni kell annak, aki küldetése révén a nemzete fölé magasodik, annak rimánkodni kell, hogy vegyék annyira magyarszámba, mint a kutyasinter cigányt meg a lakat alá tett betörőt. És aztán nem illik különbözni az embernek csillagos sorstársaitól, azok fölé kerülni» [Szép (1945) 2018, 33].

¹³ Hungarian original: «Nem először hallok olyat, hogy a zsidókat Németországban gázkamrába halálra fullasztják. Ezt nem hittem el. Sőt még ma se hiszem. Eszméletem mélyén nem tudom elhinni, nem tudom» (ivi, 48).

¹⁴ Hungarian original: «November 9-e volt, mikor hazakerültünk. Hogy másnapról, november 10-étől kezdve mi történt velem, meg mindnyájunkkal, azt már nem mesélem. Azt leírni és azt elhinni, érzésem szerint, nem is szabad. És amit meséltem idáig, azt is „if you want, remember, if you want, forget”» (ivi, 186).

Szép's position on what can be represented is clear: what should not have been happened is not to be understood. And even if the very last words of his book sound like an easy and fashionable *bon mot*, even if these words destroy, or at least deconstruct the testimonial value of his narrative, they can be taken seriously, as an instruction for the survivors, designating the two, maybe inseparable strategies for enduring the memory of the camps: forgetting and remembering. What kind of lesson does the author himself learn, not only from his small and fragmentary story, but also from the Great Narrative of History? An anecdote (true? Who knows?) about the aged Ernő Szép, master of witticism, may perhaps answer how the collective traumatic experience affected the identity of the author. After the war, when he was asked to introduce himself, he always answered with these words: «I was Ernő Szép». The loss of a fundamental security, the broken assimilatory pact and social pact, the experience of an absurd and senseless violence is reflected in his faded pen name, evoking in a melancholic way an historical period that has forever disappeared.

5. Conclusion

The works by Miklós Radnóti and Ernő Szép, in different literary genres and in mixed modes of representation, help readers imagine and conceive of the borders of an unimaginable and unthinkable universe. These authors, who were personally exposed to the tragic events of World War II and Nazi persecution, provide an account of their experiences in literary works in a way that the experience rendered therein is as important as the lived experience itself. In Radnóti's late poems the biographical event and its description are quasi simultaneous; the coincidence of the position of the bystander-witness and the martyr-witness creates a unique point of view on the tragic fate of the deportees contrasted by a classical poetical elaboration. In Ernő Szép's autobiographical narrative, the ironic storytelling, the ostensibly easy mannered narrator-hero, the anecdotal narration, and the elliptical narrative construction seem only to stress the unimaginable Anti-Semitic crimes.

In her already mentioned book about the problems of testimonial writing, memory and literary representation, Susan Suleiman convincingly discusses how the possibility for literary expression emerges from the

inexactitude and the deficiency of memory, from the necessity of a continuous reshaping and rewriting of the traumatic experience. Factuality and truthfulness, notions which mutually presuppose each other for a historian, have a different relation in the so-called «literary testimonies», because literary works do not focus on reconstructing the past in accordance with the norms of a historiography. Obviously, the factual background has an essential part in the reception of these literary works as well: the subordination, rearrangement of the factual details into an artistic plan works only when the reader believes that there is an unquestionable lived experience behind the texts. But what does the artistic plan in question consist in? From a general – cultural and political – point of view, literary representations of traumatic historical events, Nazi persecution in this case, contribute to making an emotional reality available, one that would otherwise remain hidden in historical, documentary accounts and historiographical explanations. The specificity of complex literary texts with their rhetorical, figurative, narrative means is to transfer that emotional reality to the readers by provoking stupefaction, fear, compassion, empathy, and this transfer plays a constitutional role in understanding a historical event and keeping the past alive in the present. But this transfer is also the very essence of the poetical art, as it were defined by the ancient concept of catharsis: feeling pity and terror provoke compassion in the readers, just as it happens when we are reading the literary testimonies my essay discussed.

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