The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms

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Memoir of Hungary

Memoir of Hungary 1944-1948. By Sándor Márai. Translated with an introduction and notes by Albert Tezla (Budapest: Corvina in association with Central European University Press, 1996) 427 pp. £11.99 paper.

Katalin Kürtösi

Sándor Márai (1900-1989), one of the most remarkable twentieth-century bourgeois writers in Hungary, collected his memories of a decisive period in Hungarian history, ranging from the Nazi occupation of the country on 19 March 1944 to the Communist takeover and the writer's self-imposed exile in 1948, and had them first published by Stephen Vörösváry (Toronto: Weller Publishing, 1972).[1] The original Hungarian title was *Föld, Föld... Emlékezések* (Land, Land... Memoirs). The English translation of the book, which is divided into three parts, is preceded by an introduction giving a historical background about the period and saying a few words about the author himself. The introduction points out that he refused to publish in or return to Hungary while the country had foreign troops in it. It was not until after his death—after forty-two years of self-imposed exile, he chose self-imposed death, i.e. suicide—that he was rehabilitated as a member of the Hungarian Academy and awarded its highest prize in 1989.

The sixteen subsections of Part One recall the main events of 1944 and early 1945, from the arrival of Nazi troops to the Soviet soldiers establishing themselves in Hungary during the last months of the war. While the Hungarian capital was being besieged, he and his family left their apartment with all their books, paintings, and furniture to stay in a cottage in a nearby village. That is where he met the first Soviet soldier, who apparently appreciated him for being a writer. A few days later, however, a group of these soldiers arrived at the cottage with a tank, destroying the gate and the fence, and decided to house themselves there for a while. Observing their everyday activities and working methods gave the writer a unique opportunity for the study of humankind. Having overcome the difficulties of communication, he sometimes discussed famous writers and political issues with them, and also managed to discourage a desperate soldier from raping the women. Márai, however, was most interested in their "otherness," what the main differences between them and other Europeans were.

> In that confused, raw and dangerous situation, I adhered to my resolve to observe the Soviet system without prejudice and preconception.... Along with (the) Russian reckoning of time, they also brought Cyrillic letters and all that "difference," that mysterious strange-

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> ness which Western man never understands and which even this compulsory and very intimate living together could not dispel" (pp. 84–85).

Then the Soviet soldiers left the house overnight and the writer could return to his home in Buda, only to discover that all that remained of it was a huge heap of debris. Finding his bilingual edition of Marcus Aurelius was impossible. "The blasts had, like some paper mill, ground the books into a pulp. Still, one book with an undamaged title page lay on the rubbish pile next to my top hat. I picked it up and read the title: 'On the Care of a Middle-Class Dog'" (p. 113).

While Part One gives a personal account of historical events in 1944–1945, Part Two is dedicated to literature, mainly to Márai's understanding of Hungarian literature. In Parts Two and Three, the subsections are occasionally separated by passages of poetry. After the war had ended, the writer moved into temporary accommodations in Buda, and stayed there until leaving the country for good. Step by step, order began to reemerge in the chaos; he even could find a bookseller who helped him save books "from the jumble of the filthy, crumbly rubbish pile" (p. 121) of what used to be his study. What surprised him most, though, was the apparently infinite energy of people trying to recommence their normal activities. At the same time, he also had to realize that many of his old friends and acquaintances had perished in the fighting or had left the country. Roaming along the once flourishing streets, he remembered fellow writer Dezsô Kosztolányi[2] and the old caretaker who served as model for one of his characters. These memories inspired him to make comparisons, draw conclusions about the relationship between writing and writers in Hungary and the rest of Europe.

> Among European writers, those in Hungary were, I believe, the most diligent readers. . . The beautiful, secluded Hungarian language not only had to be protected, weeded and cleansed, through reading, it had to be replenished with the stimuli of other languages (pp. 134–35).

This literary restrospective stimulated a historical survey, too. He did not fail to mention the controversies of interwar Hungarian politics, dominated by Regent Miklós Horthy, who ruled the country from the palace in Buda. It was in the neighboring streets where the

> members of the "ruling class" resided. . . . I looked into some of the familiar rooms, and I thought that these Hungarian upper ten thousand were no worse than the privileged castes in other countries. They were no worse than the French or English upper ten thousand were in the twentieth century, they were just more absent-minded—they forgot to pay taxes (pp. 169–70).

Such differences may give an answer to several problems raising in the course of comparison. There are a few moments when Márai seems to be apologetic, asking whether it is

> possible to pass judgement on a society that foreign powers exploited and mauled for centuries? The Turks, the Austrians, then yesterday the imperialistic Nazi Teutons and today the imperialistic Slavs—always foreign armies in the country and foreign will in public life, always the constraint of compromise to come to terms with foreign forces, and thus the inevitable corruption. And Trianon in between, the millions of humans torn from the nation's body. The tragedy of Hungarian society can not be explained by inner structural shortcomings (p. 168).[3]

After the Second World War, European cities could still be found on the same geographical spots where they used to be, but Europe as a whole no longer existed in her old form.

The cruelties of the war made him muse about the nature of hatred: a typically human phenomenon. He described in detail the case of a Jewish police officer going to a restaurant in his uniform shortly after the war had ended, consuming a substantial dinner with some wine and then even ordering a song from the gypsy band—a sweetish melody with the words about a "lovely, and beautiful Hungary, nicer perhaps than the whole world": the Hungary that had let the Jewish officer's whole family go and disappear in concentration camps or do forced labor for the army on the Soviet front. This was just another contradiction in the complex picture of Hungary shortly after World War II.

Simple weekday events also made an impression on Márai—crazy inflation, mediocre journalists starting new careers by joining one of the parties, peasants exchanging a pound of bacon for a Persian rug: "The moral imperatives of a society had been destroyed. And everyone hated everyone else." (p. 197). The logical consequence of these events was the appearance of terror. Slowly, communists returned from Moscow and began to domesticate the Soviet system in Hungary, creating a split among Hungarian intellectuals.

The last part of Márai's memoirs gives his impressions about two trips abroad as the framework of his ideas about European culture and his anticommunist standpoint. In the winter of 1946 he was able to spend some weeks in Switzerland, Italy, and finally in Paris. He had lived in the French capital in the twenties (1923–1929), and on his return he felt peculiar, not sure if he was truly European or just someone from the fringe of the old continent. But Europe had also changed in the meantime:

> The "human" was missing now. It was this that perished in Europe. . . The Russians never experienced the Renaissance, nor the Reformation, because they were not humanists, the Russian "philanthropist" never sought the human measure, but always the extreme, the immoderate, the inhuman. . .(p. 256).

The relative opulence of Switzerland made him really upset, while he felt at home in Italy, which, like Hungary, was also among the losers of the war. Later, instead of the Paris of his youth, he found a city uncertain about itself.

> About the reality, that Europe in its entirety had lost the war, and a victorious Europe no longer existed—about that no one spoke a word. . .. It seemed—in Paris and everywhere in the West—that people wanted to pick up life where they had left off before the war. . . no one mentioned that the great stream of history had already passed by the shores of Europe"(pp. 26O–62).

Not only the people, but even the books disappointed him at this crucial moment. He very aptly noted—just like Marshall MacLuhan in Canada—that "picture civilization replaced print civilization" (p. 269), meaning the culture of writing.

For a while he was considering staying in Paris, but then decided to return to Hungary, fully aware of the difficulties awaiting him, but also keeping in mind that it was only in his mother tongue that he could keep quiet about what he wanted to keep quiet about. Back home, his disgust with the political system overcame his love for the language, and he did not hesitate to accept an invitation for himself and his family to leave the country, this time for good.

The memoirs of Márai present historical events through the perspective of an outstanding writer, sensitive to problems of his nation and of human culture. The introduction and the notes provide ample background information, although in some cases it might have been useful to include more notes about facts or historical figures well-known to a Hungarian readership, but less so to readers outside Hungary.[4] Márai, being a great master of the Hungarian language, has a prose style of his own, but the translation very often uses heavy sentence structures and fails to suggest his delicate nuances. Grammatical and spelling mistakes occasionally make it hard to follow the text, but despite this, we have to say that Sándor Márai's *Memoir of Hungary 1944–1948* is not only a book to enjoy but also an invitation to readers to understand better, in the light of a decisive period of Hungarian history, what is now happening in this part of Europe after the recent changes.

NOTES

1. These memoirs can be seen as the continuation of his autobiographical works of the 1930s.
2. Dezsô Kosztolányi (1885-1936), poet, writer, translator.
3. After World War I, it was in the small castle of Trianon that the treaty referring to Hungary was signed—resulting in the loss of two-thirds of the country's territory and millions of its citizens.
4. E.g., Critic Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, writers Géza Csáth, József Eötvös, Kálmán Mikszáth, etc.