



Rewriting History, Reshaping Memory: The Representation of Historical Events in Sándor Márai's Wartime Diaries and in his *Memoir of Hungary*

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ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

The paper tries to analyse how the irruption of history was transformed into an artistic and intellectual challenge in the autobiographical works of Sándor Márai. Márai who started to keep his diary in 1943 inspired by his readings of the diaries of André Gide sought to construct an authentic space of presence, safe from historical time and from the discourses of public opinion, in order to devote himself to researching the singularity of his existence and his “lived time”. But the programme of his diary was progressively changed: although Márai had started recording his daily observations and reflections with a similar detachment from public affairs as Gide, during the course of the war, his diary became more and more determined by public discourses. The Hungarian writer shifted his perspective from the individual to the collective, the aphoristic discourse giving way to passionate accusations. His reflection, which earlier belonged to the order of cognition, turned later into the order of ethic, in a mixture of moral reflection, political commitment, expression, and performative verbal action. But the overshadowing of the aesthetic experience of the world during the chaotic years of his intellectual and artistic confusion also had its dangers, namely the incursion of semi-public political and ideological discourses in Márai's wartime diaries. In the reformulation of his wartime experiences thirty years later – in the *Memoir of Hungary* – Márai succeeded in finding a new artistic form to represent his past. The complexity of narrative

structures and temporal composition, the dramatic and metaphorical correlation of the changing social, national and psychological components of identity represented in the *Memoir of Hungary* creates a particular literary (aesthetic) effect, which in turn intensifies our reading experience and encourages the reader to go beyond the ideological constructions of official historical writing.

ABSTRACT IN HUNGARIAN

Újraírt történelem, újjáalkotott emlékezet: történelmi események reprezentációja Márai Sándor 1943–1946-os naplóiban és a Föld, föld...-ben

Márai Sándor életművének egyik legfontosabb, kritikai és irodalomtörténeti megítélés szempontjából is jelentősnek tartott területe a szerző önéletírói munkássága. A két világháború közötti magyar önéletírás reprezentatív darabja, az *Egy polgár vallomásai* méltán került más eddig is az értelmezések középpontjába. Márai monumentális, csaknem fél évszázadot átívelő naplója azonban mostanáig leginkább stilisztikai mikroelemzések tárgya volt. Tanulmányomban a naplóvezetés változó intencióit igyekszem vázolni Márai írásművészetében. Megvizsgálom a napló kiinduló programját, kapcsolatát Márai aforisztikus, esszéisztikus, monologizáló írásmódjával, továbbá a korai naplóban megjelenő időfelfogást elemzem. Összehasonlítom a naplóvezetés egzisztenciális felfogását André Gide naplóival, mely Márai egyik meghatározó napló-olvasata volt. Az összevetésben különösen fontos szerepet kap, hogy mindkét naplóíró igyekezett ellenállni a történelmi időnek és a háborús eseménynek, csak míg Gide egészen a háború végéig ellen tudott szegülni a háborút övező kollektív diskurzusoknak és ideologikus beszédmódoknak, addig Márai naplójában a hadi cselekmények közelségével egyre nagyobb szerepet kapnak ezek a beszédmódok. Az 1944–46-os naplók elemzésével bemutatom, hogy miként változik meg a háború eseményeinek hatására Márainál a naplóírás programja, hogyan vált át a személyes léttapasztalás kollektív léttapasztalássá, illetve miként szűrődnek be különböző ideológiai diskurzusok és nyilvános beszédaktusok a napló eredetileg bensőséges, privát írásterébe. Végezetül a háború, majd az azt követő évek eseményeit közel negyven év távlatából újraíró *Föld, föld...* című visszaemlékezést tanulmányozom, s igyekszem választ adni a felidézett események újrendezésének okaira, az emlékezet arányainak és a jelenetté formált, allegorikusan ábrázolt történelmi pillanatok megválasztásának jelentéseire.

Keywords: Diary writing, memoir, modern Hungarian literature, World War 2, private and public representation of historical events, influence of public political and ideological discourses on private literary genres

BETWEEN AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND FICTION: SÁNDOR MÁRAI AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

Sándor Márai (1900–1989) is probably one of the best known Hungarian writers for a foreign reader. In a recent bibliography by the Petőfi Museum of Literature, there are almost 300 entries in the list of his works translated into different foreign languages. Nevertheless the foreign reader's image of Márai differs slightly from that of the Hungarian reader.⁷ While outside Hungary Márai is rather respected as an elegant novelist representing the malaise of the middle class between the two world wars, in his native country, above all, he is celebrated as one of the greatest modern autobiographers of Hungarian literature. Obviously, this opposition is not absolute: the popularity of Márai's writings resides probably in his *Weltanschauung*, in his poetical credo and in his literary style; and these features are present both in his fictional pieces (novels and plays) as well as in non-fictional works (diaries, memoirs, essays).

Márai's autobiographical writings belong to a tradition of modern autobiography whose authors, on the one hand, avoid the direct confessional discourse and the ceremonial act of the autobiographical pact, and on the other hand, do not fit exactly the conventional topology of the genre. "Márai's autobiographical writings hide as much as they disclose," begins John Neubauer his short essay in which he analyses the relationship between the diaries and some novels by the Hungarian author in his exile period. His thesis sums up the opinion of the most influential Hungarian critics and historians of literature about Márai's work: Márai's art reached its most completed and most successful form in his "fictionalized autobiographies" and in his non-fictional prose.¹ It is also a commonly shared opinion among the experts of his oeuvre that Márai always refused to detach literature from the essay, the novel from autobiography. In fact, Márai never signed a clear autobiographical pact, he never denominated a particular work as his real and official autobiography, but his works seem to fulfil an indirect form of the autobiographical pact, the phantasmagorical pact as defined by Philippe Lejeune. In such cases the author, and this is the case with Márai, classifies some of his own fictional pieces, by way commenting on his own texts, as more sincere, more autobiographical than his works designated as "autobiographical". By employing this strategy, the author invites the reader to read all his narratives in the autobiographical register, and creates an "autobiographical space"

¹ In particular *Napnyugati Őrjárat* (1936) [Patrol in the Occident], *A négy évszak* (1938) [The Four Seasons], *Ég és föld* (1942) [Sky and Earth], *Füveskönyv* (1943) [Herbarium].

where the autobiographical relevance of a particular work can be determined only in relation to his other works.

The confusion or mixture of the literary genres is confirmed by a variety of topics treated in his so-called autobiographical works: Márai's diaries as well as *Egy polgár vallomásai* (*Confessions of a Bourgeois*) and *Föld, föld...* (*Memoir of Hungary*) are full of ethnological and sociological descriptions, historical and political analysis, aphorisms, travel observations, and literary comments on his readings; however, the reader hardly finds any revelations on the writer's private life. Márai's diaries and autobiographies present rather a moral portrait of their author, and in these works he expresses his taste, his opinions and his reflections, but he does not consider himself as a hero of the great historical moments or the adventures of everyday life.

In fact, Márai's hesitation between different traditions and discursive patterns of the literary self representation was not unique in the Hungarian context of autobiographical literature between the two world wars. At the beginning of the 20th century the practice of autobiographical genres such as diary, memoir or autobiography writing was commonly spread among the educated bourgeoisie in Hungary. The gradual literary emancipation of these genres culminated in the thirties, when a large number of well-known Hungarian writers published their autobiographies. The most influential and important among these works were probably Sándor Márai's *The Confessions of a Bourgeois* (1934), Lajos Kassák's *The Life of a Man* (1933), or Gyula Illyés's *People of the Puszta* (1936). These autobiographers (mainly Márai and Illyés) have in common that instead of emphasising the history of their personality by narrating some allegoric episodes of their individual life, they rather describe and analyse the social and cultural context of their origins (for the authors in question: bourgeoisie, proletariat and peasantry). In short the collective and the individual identity play an equally important role in their autobiographies: for these Hungarian writers it is impossible to narrate and understand a life without introducing the nature of the social class to which they belong.

It is clear that autobiographical genres - in spite of their above-mentioned ambiguous position within the whole opus - played a very important role in Márai's artistic project; they were at the heart of his literary creation. Certainly, his autobiographical project is quite far from a dangerous representation of the self, where the author incurs a more or less direct existential risk by the publication of a scandalous work as described in the *Autobiography as bullfighting* of Michel Leiris. Márai never wanted to correct or to corrupt his public image by a single work, neither nor to intervene directly in his life or that of the society he lived in by a work of art. He never stopped criticising the bourgeois way of life and its artistic institutions, but

he always considered literature and art as circumscribed and autonomous fields of culture and society. Nevertheless, the practice of the autobiographical genres reveals a certain ethics of autobiographical writing in Márai's work, where writing can be understood also as a form of action. In the following, I will focus on this ethical and pragmatic function of Márai's autobiographical writing by analysing the representation of historical events and their transformations in his *Diary* and in the *Memoir of Hungary*.

DIARY AS AN EXISTENTIAL AND ETHICAL SPACE: MÁRAI AND GIDE

Márai started to keep his diary in a systematic way in 1943, in the middle of World War II, at the age of 43. At this time he was already an established and popular writer of the Hungarian middle classes: his public was composed both of the liberal and the conservative, cultivated bourgeoisie. This period of his career was particularly productive (see footnote 2), so it would be hard to explain the apparition of the diary as a sign of an artistic crisis. On the contrary, after the publication of some very successful non-fictional works, it seemed somehow a logical step to discover a new form and genre for the essayist and aphoristic writing for everyday usage.

Márai considered the diary as an autonomous literary genre with its own virtues and defects. In his diary, like in his essays, he praised the diaries of other writers such as André Gide or Jules Renard. Márai appreciated the aesthetic values, the authenticity and the originality of the human experience expressed in these French writers' diaries. He confirmed several times that even the most intimate diary was written with a - perhaps latent and unconscious - intention of being part of the whole work of an author.

Keeping a diary for Márai had the same existential dimension as other forms of written discourse (novel, play, essay etc.): "The only meaning of my existence consists in responding to the world with words."² In this respect, Márai's conception of writing is very close to that of one of his most respected contemporaries, another famous diarist, André Gide, whose books Márai read with special attention throughout his life. In the very first pages of his own diary, he evoked the sentimentally charged event of having finished the seventy-year-old Gide's diary. The passage and the quotation devoted to Gide's text functions as a call for a similar enterprise

² „Az én létezésem egyetlen értelme, hogy írásban feleljek a világnak.” Sándor Márai. *A teljes napló 1945* [The Complete Diary]. Budapest: Helikon, n.d. 108. (This and all subsequent translations are my own.) Print.

of his own. Márai and Gide belonged to a very similar tradition in literary modernism. Both of them conceived of and practised writing as a form of experiencing the human condition. For them, writing itself - as an essential mode of perceiving and reflecting the “world” or “reality” - became transcendent in comparison to a particular work or genre. In this respect, Éric Marty’s characterisation of Gide’s diary is also valid for that of Márai: writing “is not only a stylistic performance, but a project, a choice which determines a commitment of the conscience to the language, a kind of intentionality.” According to Marty, in his diaries Gide sought to construct an authentic space of presence, safe from historical time and from the discourses of public opinion, in order to devote himself to researching the singularity of his existence and his “lived time” (*le temps vécu*). After some disappointing attempts at political commitment in the thirties, the André Gide of the forties was more or less convinced that the centre of his existence was far from history or politics. Or, to be more precise, he believed that identification with any historical or political discourses (political engagement, communism, nationalism etc.) would threaten or even destroy his own personal moral principles.³ On the surface, his silence, his lack of judgement could be understood as kind of stoicism, especially during German occupation in the Second World War, but it was rather – if we accept Marty’s argumentation – a resistance to any kind of public reduction of the complexity and the ambiguity of his positions and his opinions. Following Marty’s interpretation, Gide’s wartime diary is a manifestation of “an extremely strong and extremely fragile ethics toward History, emphasizing a concept of responsibility which is very far the one of Sartre.” In Gide’s view, the notion of responsibility is not forged in a “Christian perspective of culpability,” nor yet in relation to other people, but “is decided only in relation to him, and in this sense, it is much deeper, much more authentic and more risky than the ideology of Sartre.”⁴

Despite their common existential conception of writing and some shared aesthetic interests, Márai’s wartime diaries differ from those of Gide. Although Márai had started recording his daily observations and reflections with a similar detachment from public affairs as Gide, during

³ The reader of the diary of Gide can find notes concerning the first years of the Second World War where Gide seeks to explain the success of Hitler, to understand the reason why the French intelligentsia underestimated the growing influence of Nazism. At this time he also notes and comments on the most important military events, but these entries decrease considerably after 1942. Furthermore, as Marty remarks, he was more interested in other people’s reports and discourses on wartime events than the event itself. For example he comments and analyses Marshal Pétain’s public *speeches* before and after the French capitulation, but his own opinion on the capitulation is not visible.

⁴ See Marty, 59.

the course of the war, his diary became more and more determined by public discourses. For those who – like Marty – read Gide’s wartime diaries as a successful attempt to refuse to speak a collective discourse and about collective themes, an attempt to maintain his own style, themes and language for the purposes of representing the self, Márai’s wartime diaries are certainly a failure. A failure in that sense that his diaries gradually become more and more dominated by reflections and commentaries on political and historical events, by ideologically predetermined discourses. One can explain this different approach with their difference in age: Gide was almost seventy years old when the Second World War broke out in 1939, while Márai was only thirty-nine. It is obvious that the reclusion of Gide and the trepidation of Márai are partly due to their ages: as a well-known and influential writer at the peak of his intellectual and physical forces Márai must have regarded himself as a potential agent of social action, while the seventy year-old Gide, on the threshold of the last chapter of his life, probably did not.⁵ But there is another explanation for the different reactions of the two writers to historical events, and it comes from Márai’s conception of responsibility, of ethics, and his different relationship to social discourses and languages.

THE ORIGINAL PROJECT OF THE DIARY

As mentioned above, starting to keep a diary was a deliberate choice for Márai. Even if we refuse to explain the appearance of this new genre in terms of an artistic crisis (search for new modes of expression, genres, languages, themes etc.), we should accept that the escalating historical trauma had a formative part in the genesis of Márai’s enterprise. The daily practice of writing, in a way, counterbalanced the obtrusive and threatening historical reality. The function of the diary – mainly in the beginning – was to circumscribe an intimate space of reflections and memory, safeguarded from the events of war, and as I have demonstrated, this project was comparable to that of Gide.

The first pages of his 1943 diary could be drawn from any of his other books at this time. These pages are also among the most analysed by the experts of his art, because they are in complete accordance with the stylistic structure that Márai had developed in his other works, which can be quite easily recognised by the reader as typical of “Márai’s voice”. If we analyse his mode of writing, we can see that stylistic perfection – according

⁵ Just like in Gide’s case, the reader of the late diaries of Márai can discover the same reclusion, the disinterest of public affairs.

to Márai – must be based on the balance of the conceptual and the sensual in written discourse. Accuracy, clarity, complexity and sensuality – these are the stylistic ideals that Márai’s writings try to achieve. His “elegant prose” consists of an emblematic linguistic formulation of a moral, psychological, social, in one word, human truth, which is confirmed and generalised by the sensuality of a natural (body, seasons, weather etc.) phenomenon or observation. Sometimes this method seems exaggerated, and therefore a little bit “mannered” in his novels, while in the short but closed fragments of his diary, it suggests a new form of cognition which unifies conceptuality and sensuality:

“The play of the wind and the water in front of the window. It seems to me that I have been *seeing* the movement of the world’s structure – as if the wind, the water, the light were flowing inside me too. Is that what life brings by and by? What am I still in for, when I get old? I suspect that it will be fine getting old. Everything becomes thick, sleepy, quite sweet and quite bitter.”⁶

Márai’s mode of writing tries to give back the complexity of human existence by unifying its separated dimensions in an emblematic and aphoristic linguistic form. He expresses several times that real knowledge, real truth – even the most abstract recognitions of them, historical, emotional ones – must be experienced in an almost physical way. This detail explains perhaps the popularity of his writings: the reader can discover an aphoristic formulation of the truth in every page of his works, hidden in the long monologue of a personage in a novel or fragmented in the three-line-long phrases of an aphorism.

The first pages of the 1943 diary have a special temporal structure. Generally, they respect chronological order, but the entries are without dates, so the reader has to deduce the date of the notes indirectly. Moreover, most of the notes are not only without a date, but timeless. This diary begins like a nostalgic recollection of a world and a life which are now things of the past. A number of entries have similar a structure: they mark the place and the time of the noted memory (season, time of day without an exact date – for example: “Seven o’clock in the evening, in London somebody speaks to the crowd. It’s raining. London is soft and slippery in the rain like a leviathan, which is a bit sentimental and timorous because of its size.” or “Another day in Marseille, eight years later. [...] And below the nobly shaped windows the slippery babble of a night in Marseille flows by.” etc.), followed by its general and detailed description, then an observation of human behaviour at this place (“People stand quiet around the

⁶ Sándor Márai. *Napló 1943–1944*, [Diary 1943–44], p. 34.

speaker” or “R., like a queen who has come home to her people, walks through this hot, grimy, unthinking and clammy crowd.”), and finally a short conclusion: departure, disappearance (“I have never felt so hopelessly lonely and strange among human beings.” or “She will be dead in two months.” or “In the evening I go to the railway station in daze, after a Carthaginian diner.” etc.).⁷

These sequences are constructed in a similar way to what Gérard Genette describes as a “pseudo-iterative” narrative in his *Narrative discourse*. He means a narrative sequence which is in fact a narrative of a singular event, but stands for recurrent events, for example a story of a summer evening dinner which represents several similar dinners of the same period. But there are two major differences between the method analysed by Genette (his example is of course Proust’s novel) and Márai’s mode of writing. On the one hand, Márai uses the present tense, instead of the “imparfait” (an imperfect tense, the French equivalent to some extent of the English past continuous) which does not exist in Hungarian. The present tense makes the narrative more dreamlike, but it maintains its repetitive and unfinished character as well. These fragments are like still lives, whose temporal dimension is shrunk to the continuous present. On the other hand, there is no logical connection, nor temporal progression between the consecutive fragments; they are not the episodes of a story that the reader could reconstruct on a higher level of the composition. These frozen episodes from the past – because of their uncertain temporal position – are both separated from each other, and from the present of the narrator; they compose an unidimensional time where the remembered past is conserved in a nostalgic eternity.

THE INCURSION OF THE WAR AND THE POLITICS IN THE DIARY

But this timeless and nostalgic universe of the diary progressively gives way – without completely disappearing – to the commentary of war events and to analyses of the moral collapse of Hungarian society during World War II. The closer the fighting and the front-line approach Budapest, the more the entries concerning the war become frequent. The incursion of history transforms the original project of the diary in two respects: on the one hand, Márai shifts from the individual point of view to a collective perspective; he interprets the decades preceding the war and the war itself from the point of view of the “nation” considered as a singular being; on the other hand, the historical time determines more and more

⁷ Ibid. pp. 14–15.

the structure of the diary: both the micro- and the macro-structure of the narration is constructed around war-time events.

War-time events appear on four levels in the diary: first, in the reticent accounts of military actions by the diarist-witness (German, later Russian occupation, deportations, the siege of Buda etc.); second, in the transcriptions and interpretations of reports about the distant war; third, in the record of the direct influence of the hostilities and the war-time measures on his private life; and finally, in moral reflections on the collapse of pre-war Hungarian society.

Notes taken from the first three levels often have a similar structure to those nostalgic ones at the beginning of the diary. The military event is not interesting in the itself for the diarist: it is only a point of departure for a reflection, just like any other external event. But while in the opening pages of the diary the reflection belonged to the order of cognition, and the diarist tried to reveal a secret knowledge through the sensuality of his language, later, observations and reflections are rather of the order of ethic, and the diarist judges the crime of the world from a moral perspective.

From the beginning of the German occupation in March 1944, especially from the beginning of the deportation of Hungarian Jews, Márai's diary was focused on the questions of the responsibility and the punishment. In the notes of the last months of the war the "beautifully stylized", aphoristic discourse is transformed into a passionate accusation: Márai tries to find and name those politically responsible for the moral decline and corruption of Hungarian society, and he seeks to understand the reasons why Hungarian society became unable to prevent war-crimes.

Chronologically, the first stage of this discursive transformation is the recognition and thematisation of the presence of sin in the world by the diarist. The recognition and the apperception of the crime – in particular the beginning of the deportation of Hungarian-Jews – becomes real knowledge by a physical, corporal experience, by a sense-datum, like in the aphoristic notes from the beginning of his diary:

Nothing can help: everything must be lived personally, by our body, in the reality to understand what is really happening. Everything what we have heard about the destiny of Polish, Austrian and German-Jews was only a mirage.⁸

Later the themes of responsibility and punishment become more and more frequent, and a discourse of accusation begins to dominate Márai's

⁸ Sándor Márai. *Napló 1943–1944* [Diary 1943–44]. 154. Print.

diary. His discourse of accusation leans on a double rhetoric strategy. On the one hand, he adapts a historiographical argumentation, and argues that the gradual moral decline of the Hungarian nation is due to the lack of modernization and democratization of Hungarian society in the thirties, but also to the failed cultural mission of the middle classes. On the other hand, the argumentative discourse is often dominated by an emotional tone which varies from anger to shame. When Márai characterises – in this period – the Hungarian political leadership of the thirties and its nationalist ideology, he resorts once again to the same corporal and sensual signs to prove his truth that we have observed before:

“This Hungarian middle class is like the Bourbons: they have learnt nothing and forgotten nothing. Now, when the sky is broken over their heads, they are blinking and hawking, clearing their throats, while they are already manoeuvring for position. They are chiding softly the arrow-cross militants, and they are hoping that fixing the blame on them they can avoid the attention...”⁹

But his research for responsibility seems to be more complicated, because the diarist blames not only a criminal world, namely the former political leadership, for the moral collapse of the society. Márai does not regard the fall of the Hungarian society in 1944 with the eyes of a stranger who has nothing to do with this society, but considers himself member of it who must also accept the responsibility, the punishment and the penitence. “The crime that is being committed now is collective, so the punishment will be collective too.”¹⁰ According to the notes of the 1944 and 1945 diaries, while the responsibility is assumed only by the former leading class, the whole Hungarian society must share the punishment. In this respect the variation of the grammatical subjects in the text of his diary is highly remarkable: Márai uses mostly third person plural (“they” – the reactionary, nationalist leading class), or first person plural (“we” which refers to the whole of Hungarian society, including himself), or sometimes impersonal structures.¹¹ In his notes recorded during the siege of Budapest, he considered the demolition of the capital, the loss of his personal property, or the beginning of the Russian occupation as a punishment for

⁹ Sándor Márai. *A teljes Napló 1945* [The Complete Diary]. Budapest, Helikon, 71. Print.

¹⁰ Sándor Márai. *Napló 1943–1944* [Diary 1943–44]. 173. Print.

¹¹ See “We deserve all, and all kinds of punishment are poor, if we consider the sins this society has committed in the last twenty-five years. We provoked and invited fate into our home.” (*A teljes Napló* 1945 [The Complete Diary]. 39); but also “I am not able to regard with anger what this Hungarian society did in the last ten months; I feel only disdain and nausea.” (ibid. 30.). It is characteristic that Márai avoids the word “nation” when he deals with the question of responsibility, and uses rather “Hungarian society” which a more neutral expression.

the war crimes committed or assisted by Hungarians, the destruction of the Castle of Buda as a symbolic abolishment of the legitimate political power of the country. The theme of punishment provides an occasion for Márai to evoke one of the most popular elements of national mythology, the death of the nation, and sometimes he transforms his discourse into an obituary.

The impossibility of a clear separation from the crime of the external world is a sign of a deep identity crisis: in the centre of the historical cataclysm Márai is confronted with the failure of the foundations and common values of European culture: freedom of thought, humanism, respect for the heritage of the Enlightenment, belief that erudition and education have an influence on moral conscience. The collapse of pre-war Hungarian society provokes a personal crisis for Márai as a prominent representative of the bourgeoisie. In the complete version of his 1945 and 1946 diary, he expresses several times his wish to leave the country, and he even toyed with the idea of suicide; the loss of his belief in a collective identity goes together with a serious personal identity crisis. The political element has only a secondary importance in his self-questioning: Márai was already hostile to national-socialist thought and to the movement at the beginning of the thirties, and he rejected communism, too: his individualism made him opposed to all political manifestation of collectivism; he always considered himself in slight but permanent opposition to the current political power. According to his war-time diaries, the most important elements of his crisis of identity were the destruction of the cultural and human values of the educated bourgeoisie and the destruction of the frames of a bourgeois life-style, in particular his intellectual role as a literary gentleman. Márai had already dealt with the decline of Western civilisation and the bourgeois culture in his books inspired by the readings of the German philosopher, Oswald Spengler, and the Spanish essayist, Ortega y Gasset, but the everyday life experience of *The Downfall of the Occident* recorded in his diaries was apparently more painful than the fashionable cultural pessimism expressed in his former works.

While his regard for the past allowed Márai to make a general historical argument, to practice a collective and an individual self-examination, the day-by-day perspective oriented toward the present suggests to him some idea of the near future. Despite of his stereotypes, he observes with mild optimism the beginnings of the Russian occupation. He describes a rather positive image of the cohabitation with the occupying troops in everyday situations. Márai's ethnographic observations are about the Russian national character, about the "Oriental" man, about the influence of communist ideology in common people's behaviour and opinion. In this early period of the occupation, Márai contemplates even the news

of raids and rapes with a certain indulgence, and he does not yet identify communism with Slavic imperialism, which becomes his conviction after 1947. His rather tolerant and even hopeful attitude toward the Russians in the first weeks after the “liberation” of Hungary is probably due to his violent rejection of the past. This tabula rasa later proved to be an illusion in two regards, but the necessity of forming a new identity to replace the old, destroyed one was so strong that for a short period Márai believed that socialism would be the potential political system for Hungary and the rest of the world.

The years of disillusionment and disappointment soon arrived. Márai’s pessimism grew about the new political situation in Hungary after the end of World War II. Two major questions preoccupied him in his 1945 and 1946 diary. On the one hand, he felt antipathy towards the emerging new elite. Both their cultural background and their political ideology made him worried. The new political leadership consisted of returning communist emigrants from the Soviet Union, of members and sympathisers of the Hungarian left-wing parties and movements, and finally of survivors of the persecuted Hungarian-Jewish intelligentsia. Márai condemned the way that this new leadership purged public affairs, judged the past, without differentiating in the question of culpability. His antipathy was also motivated by the fact that he was offended personally by the representatives of the intelligentsia of the new ruling elite; his work (including his freshly published *1943–1944’s Diary*) was violently criticised. He was considered in the eyes of leaders for the new cultural politics’ as a man of the past, a silent supporter of the former reactionary political system.

On the other hand, the reader can find several notes concerning the “Jewish question” in the complete version of his 1945 and 1946 diary. The way Márai treats the reappearance the Hungarian-Jews in public affairs and in political power after World War II could be shocking, sometimes to the point of anti-Semitism. One may wonder why Márai, whose wife was also Jewish (the reason why they had to escape from the capital immediately after the German occupation), and who was a fervent enemy of Nazi ideology, could express such anti-Semitic sentiments, even if he did it in the private space of his diary? There are a couple of possible answers to this question. Márai comes from the conservative, slightly nationalist, traditional middle-class milieu of the first decades of the 20th century, where prejudices, reserve and a mild disdain towards Jewish people was not considered a moral fault even in “liberal” families. This heritage was even strengthened by a positivist conception of the national character in Márai’s thinking. According to this conception, it is collective identity which above all determines individuals, not personal achievements. In his

diaries, Márai seems to think in terms of fixed national characters (Russians, Germans, French, Jewish, Americans etc.) even if he highlights the cultural dimension of this collective identity. On the other hand, in the chaotic moments after the end of the war, Márai's personal desire to start over was comparable to the general expectation of making a fresh start. In this atmosphere, he regarded with equally anxiety the re-emerging anti-Semitism in semi-public discourses, but also the attempts of the Hungarian Jews to avenge their tragedy. Márai expressed in his diary that such a revenge, an undifferentiated impeachment, would reinforce the persisting latent anti-Semitism of Hungarian society. For Márai, punishment was essentially a moral category and not a legal one, independently of the collective (national) or individual subject of punishment. He regarded with scepticism most attempts at a human justice. As a consequence, he held it more important to forget the past and turn towards the future: this explains how he could believe, even for a while, that the acceleration of Jewish assimilation and their conversion into Catholicism would be a possible way of reconciliation.

From a retrospective perspective, it is obvious that Márai's position was partial and was not firmly elaborated, and must have been inspired by the confusion of the historical moment. He was probably not aware of the importance of the Holocaust in the history of anti-Semitism, that expressing anti-Semitic sentiments no longer had the same meaning as before the Holocaust. In his search for reconciliation, he underestimated the importance of keeping alive the memory of its victims. Yet, in his analysis and his accusation of the politics of the Hungarian middle classes before the war, he showed how even the moderate anti-Semitism of the middle classes had contributed to the moral collapse of Hungarian society. He also foresees in some of his notes that the borders of Jewish identity are softer and more flexible, rooted more in a cultural identity than could be described by a collective national character,¹² and that the attribution of such an identity to an individual can hurt his or her sensibilities.

In the shortened, published version of his *1945–1957 Diary*, Márai omitted almost all his observations concerning the Jews. He must have been aware that in the public discursive space his words could be misinterpreted and hijacked by anti-Semitic political movements. But his historical interpretation of the wartime situation also changed considerably from a distance of more than a decade. The irruption and domination

¹² In one of the notes about cohabitation with the billeted Soviet soldiers, he writes about two soldiers of Jewish origin that “they don't know anything about their Jewishness, that to be Jewish is a fate”. Sándor Márai. *A teljes Napló 1945* [The Complete Diary]. 48. Print.

of ideological discourses in Márai's wartime diaries reflect his personal disarray and his disturbed collective identity. In the public version of his diary he kept rather quiet regarding these chaotic years of his intellectual and artistic confusion. But history remains in the focus of his interest in his exile period, too. It was therefore not surprising that he tried to find a new artistic form for retelling the story of the period around the war.

RESHAPING HISTORY, REWRITING THE DIARY

Keeping a diary, reworking and publishing it regularly remained a life-long practice for Márai. Between 1945 and 1983 he edited and published his notes in five volumes (only the first of these appeared in Hungary, because he forbade to publication of any of his works while Soviets troops were in the country). Deprived of a larger Hungarian public, the publication of these volumes during the years of exile was among the few possibilities to express his political credo, to maintain the role of the public writer. However, the edition of *The Complete Diary* from 2005 revealed that the original text was heavily and significantly truncated. His self-censorship affected mainly the size of his diary (he kept approximately a tenth of the original), trying to eliminate the redundancy peculiar to the genre. Ideological reasons also motivated his editing on the text, and the published version is much more "reserved", largely lacking the emotional tone of the original version.

In the late sixties¹³, Márai decided to rewrite the history of the period between 1944 and 1948 that led him to leave his country forever. In 1972, he published his revisited memories, entitled *Memoir of Hungary (Föld, föld...)*. The resemblances to his diaries of the same period are obvious, but the differences are all the more visible. The retrospective and teleological point of view, the consolidation of the two poles of world rule, the historical and political changes between 1946 and 1972, the memory of the failed revolution of 1956 and its successive repression, changed the proportions and the focus of Márai's memoirs.

In the *Memoir of Hungary* Márai analyses and interprets the 20th century history of the country, seeking to explain the reasons for its historical cataclysms with a rather rational, argumentative tone, instead of the passionate accusation of his wartime diaries. Of course, the temporal distance and the awareness of new historical events in the meantime eroded the emotional character of remembrance. But also a new, synoptic conception

¹³ Sándor Márai. *Memoir of Hungary*. Budapest: Corvina Central European Press, 1996. Print.

of history, and more generally, of time replaced the perspective of a hero mixed up in the immediate historical experience. The first two parts of *Memoir of Hungary* are organised around the juxtaposition of three different historical moments the narrator lived through in the same place: three walks in the Castle of Buda on 18th of March, 1938, 1944 and 1945 (the last one is not a precise date). This curious temporal coincidence of these three memorable historical events (the Anschluss, the entry of German troops into Hungary, and the liberation of Budapest from Nazi occupation), the identity and the symbolic meaning of the place where the same activity took place suggest a particular conception of history that can be interpreted in different ways. One may conclude, for example, that “nothing changes history”, but another old proverb “history repeats itself” can be also plausible, if we understand it as a kind of message, sign, or warning sent to the hero. My interpretation is rather close to the second, without its mystical connotation: I consider the spatial identity of the narrator-hero and the identity of the natural circular time (the seasons, the months) as landmarks for a personal vision of history, an invitation to the narrator (but also, to the reader) to remember, to never forget the weight of history (the irresponsibility of Europe towards the expansion of Hitlerism, the irresponsibility of Hungarian society in missing the historical moment for social modernisation and democratisation). The synoptic representation of these three crucial historical events gives occasion also for a moral exercise, for facing the consequences of the historical event. The third promenade in the devastated Castle of Buda contains an allegoric scene in which Márai discovers and examines the ruins of his own flat near to the Castle, which had already figured in his diary of 1945. In the diary version of the scene he evokes this personal identity crisis as a consequence of the war: he describes the destruction of the capital, the destruction of his home, the destruction of his personal library in the war as a destruction of his own identity as an established writer. Nevertheless, the loss of his property – also the foundation of bourgeois existence – the material and intellectual products of his 45 years to date, are not only perceived as the end of a form of identity (he describes his former social image as a caricature), but also as a beginning of something new: the possibility of a social reconciliation and a personal ideological conversion. In the memoir version of the same scene, Márai attributed a different meaning to this “strange sense of relief”, to the flush of freedom of belonging to nothing: from the historical perspective of the late sixties and early seventies his expectations proved to be naive and wrong, and this disappointment led him to represent himself as one of the last chroniclers of a declining culture and a disappearing way of life: as one of the enlight-

ened bourgeoisie with its liberalism and its tolerance, with its cultural and political values.

The temporal construction of *Memoir of Hungary*, the juxtaposition of different historical moments evoked by the same place or same physical experience makes us think of the similar temporal construction of *A la recherche*. But while in Proust's novel the adventures of the hero, his successive unsuccessful attempts at forming an identity lead him to a happy end (becoming a writer and finishing his novel - following the interpretation of Gilles Deleuze), in Márai's *Memoir* this process of sobering up ends in a rather strange identification: belonging to nowhere is what the last scene of the book – leaving Hungary forever – illustrates perfectly.

The two other major themes of his wartime diaries are approached from a different angle too. While the arrival of the Soviet Army was described in the *Diary* with a double curiosity – ethnographic and political – in *Memoir of Hungary* it is told from the bitter historical experience of the repression of the 1956 revolution. The representation of the departing Soviet troops in the two versions illustrates the changing historical perspective. In both works, Márai tells the story when the nicest Soviet soldier gave him a picture of Stalin as a farewell gift. But while in the diary version he describes this gesture seriously, in the *Memoir* version it is understood as ironic. The scene suggests that even a simple soldier of the Soviet army knew the real nature of the Soviet system, while from the diary version of the same scene the reader could hardly draw this conclusion.

As mentioned above, Márai deleted almost all remarks concerning the Jews from the published version of his *Diary* in 1957. The only scene where this question appears in *Memoir of Hungary* is an allegoric story of a public diner in one of the most famous *cafés* in Budapest, at the end of 1945. The hero of this scene is a dreadful member of the political police of the new regime, a Jewish man who has a nodding acquaintance with the narrator. The policeman is described as someone who is absolutely aware of his power, but who behaves in an indulgent way at this public occasion. The scene which does not figure in the diary suggests that the communist officer's behaviour imitates paradoxically the leaders of the former, reactionary political system. But the paradox becomes complete only at the end of the scene, when the Jewish policeman asks for an irredentist song to be played, a popular song among the nationalists before the war. The inversion of the roles allows for several interpretations of the scene: it can be understood as a moral lesson by a persecuted, excluded citizen who was humiliated in his national feelings; but also as an attempt to expropriate an anachronistic national feeling. Ultimately, this equivocal representation of the situation of the

Hungarian-Jews after World War II is much more complex than in the *1945–1946 Diary*.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have tried to analyse how the irruption of history was transformed into an artistic and intellectual challenge in the autobiographical works of Sándor Márai. Márai's diary, which had originally been conceived as an unidimensional, remembered past, conserved in a nostalgic eternity of an aphoristic formulation, was progressively changed: the Hungarian writer shifted his perspective from the individual to the collective, the aphoristic discourse giving way to passionate accusations. His reflection, which earlier belonged to the order of cognition, turned later into the order of ethic, in a mixture of moral reflection, political commitment, expression, and performative verbal action. But the overshadowing of the aesthetic experience of the world during the chaotic years of his intellectual and artistic confusion also had its dangers, namely the incursion of semi-public political and ideological discourses in Márai's wartime diaries. In the reformulation of his wartime experiences thirty years later – in the *Memoir of Hungary* – Márai succeeded in finding a new artistic form to represent his past. The complexity of narrative structures and temporal composition, the dramatic and metaphorical correlation of the changing social, national and psychological components of identity represented in the *Memoir of Hungary* creates a particular literary (aesthetic) effect, which in turn intensifies our reading experience and encourages the reader to go beyond the ideological constructions of official historical writing.

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