



## **Coping with Horror, Writing with Humour: A Hungarian Teenager’s Diary of Her Family’s 1951 Deportation to the Countryside**

**Gergely Kunt**

In honor of Philippe Lejeune’s eightieth birthday, I would like to direct attention to a diarist I originally mentioned in my first English-language article, “How Do Diaries Begin?,” (2015) a study inspired by Lejeune’s famous work, “How Do Diaries End?”. This individual is none other than Gizella Somlay a young Roman Catholic girl born in 1936 as the daughter of a Hungarian general who had participated in the attack on the Soviet Union during World War II (Ungváry 409). Due to his wartime career, in 1947 Gizella’s father was incarcerated in a gulag camp while his wife and two daughters were eventually deported in 1951 to a small village named Tiszaföldvár, located on the Hungarian plains in one of the nation’s most poverty-stricken regions (Krausz and Varga 594). Their story was not unusual: during this time in Hungarian history, thousands of people were uprooted from their homes and deported. These deportees mainly belonged to families classified as “class enemies” by a communist dictatorship determined to rid the country of people who were members of the aristocracy or had figured among Hungarian society’s military, political, bureaucratic, or cultural elite in the decades before the war.

It must be emphasized that very few Hungarian personal narratives describing deportation are available to historians today: Gizella Somlay’s diary reflects this period through the eyes of a young, teenage girl experiencing deportation first-hand. Written between 1951 and 1953, Gizella Somlay’s entries were first published in Hungarian in 2009. The reason why so few contemporary sources exist regarding deportations is twofold: until the Soviet Army left Hungary’s territory, the issue was considered taboo. Victims of this period were therefore understandably reluctant to speak about it in public. Similarly, the atmosphere of fear that held Hungarian society in its grip at the time was also effective in keeping people

from leaving a record of their thoughts, whether in letters or in a document like a journal. To date, the literature knows of two diaries describing deportation; the journal discussed in this paper constitutes one of these. Written by the Countess Borbála Pallavicini-Andrassy, a noblewoman deported at the age of sixty from Budapest to Besenyszög, a village near Tiszaföldvár, the second known diary was published almost immediately after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Other than these two sources, interviews and memoirs that mainly appeared well after the end of the socialist regime form the bulk of personal accounts describing deportation.

When discussing the underlying motivation which pushes individuals to write diaries, many of Philippe Lejeune's studies point to multiple instances in which a critical situation or crisis moved diarists to pick up a pen and begin writing (Lejeune 193). Coming of age represents a crucial period in an individual's life; when the further pressure of an experience such as deportation is added to this, then it can be argued that, for Gizella, writing in her diary was an integral part of her battle against this double crisis. The numerous instances of humor found in Gizella Somlay's diary act as a type of defense mechanism against her circumstances while also allowing Gizella to distance herself from her daily struggles and see a negative situation in a more objective light (Martin 269–333). Numerous examples (mainly drawn from literature on the Holocaust) reveal the significant role humor, irony, or even a dark quip made in the shadow of life-threatening danger could play in providing an all-important strategy toward mental preservation (Feinstein 53–75, Dwork 279–299). Perhaps the most well-known source originates from the psychiatrist, Victor E. Frankl, who held humor to be a basic technique for surviving the horrors he experienced in a Nazi concentration camp. As Frankl writes in his memoir: "Humor was another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation. It is well known that humor, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds" (Frankl 63). The role played by humor in Gizella's diary is one reason why I find it such a valuable source: while her suffering was brought about by a communist rather than a fascist regime, Gizella also reacted to her victimization by using humor as a means of preserving her mental health.

Under the regime led by Mátyás Rákosi—whose leadership between 1948 and 1953 represented Hungary's version of Stalinism—criticizing the political system in the form of humor was quite dangerous. The regime itself recognized the threat humor implied and employed every possible tactic to keep political jokes from spreading; discussing political issues in any kind of humorous tone was declared a form of instigation and incurred either a suspended or actual prison sentence. While some

humorous papers connected to political parties—such as the Small Freeholders' magazine, the *Szabad Száj* [Free Mouth], or the Social Democrats' *Pesti Izé* [Pest's Whatchamacallit]—remained in circulation for a few years after 1945, they were eventually replaced by the Communist Party's official organ of humor, *Ludas Matyi* [Matyi Ludas]. As such, this paper naturally did not poke fun at the regime or point to any type of policy failures; its jokes instead strove to make laughing-stocks of the "Western imperialists." Foremost a means of survival, Gizella's humor also served the purpose of marking her allegiance to her own "collective" while additionally offering the opportunity to rebel against the system within the privacy of her diary.

When Gizella employs humor as a form of survival strategy, she is actually drawing upon a tradition collectively present in Hungarian society. With its reliance on self-irony and the satirization of grotesque situations arising from conflicts with official powers, Gizella's specific brand of humor owed quite a lot to the urban humor developed by primarily Jewish performers for the sake of mainly Jewish audiences in the cabarets and burlesques located in the Pest side of Hungary's capital city during the *fin de siècle* (Lo Bello 163–167). Later, under communism, this type of "Pest" humor turned to sharpening its wit on the regime's oppressive measures and corruption. Humor therefore became a collective form of preservation that enabled individuals to maintain their dignity at a time when no other tool was at their disposal. I describe this as a collective phenomenon because criticizing the regime in the form of a political joke was not an act that could be done publicly; whispering a joke like this into someone's ear, or passing it on behind closed doors worked to reinforce a sense of trust between both the teller and the listener. Trading political jokes bound people together; these jokes were told to those select people who knew how to "fill in the blanks" regarding even what was "best left unsaid" and could therefore be trusted not only to understand, but also silently exchange a knowing wink and chuckle following the punchline. Jokes, in other words, formed a basis for anti-regime individuals to come together and bond.

While humor acted to relieve the stress and anxiety caused by traumatic events, it also masks—to a certain degree—how Gizella genuinely experienced the situation she depicts. When reconstructing the event in her diary, Gizella creates a narrative that employs humor as a means of distancing herself from the reality she was experiencing. Writing a journal was in itself a similar act: Gizella could both protect herself and enact some control over events by becoming the author of her daily life. As such, she gained the ability to view events from afar while additionally adopting fictive elements in order to portray her situation with humor.

During the Rákosi regime, deportation's primary purpose was to humiliate and break the spirits of those singled out for this form of

discrimination. The process began by first stripping them of every vestige of property, material wealth, or any other factor that would have reminded them of their former status in life. In this short analysis, I examine how Gizella Somlay described the various humiliations she experienced by relaying these stressful and depressing events in a positive light, a technique that transforms her diary entries into a means of psychologically armouring herself against her surroundings. Diary-writing can therefore be seen as Gizella's method for surviving the circumstances related to deportation and the forced labour she performed on a daily basis.

For Gizella, keeping her diary was an activity that allowed her to construct her own stories out of disturbing events, including unexpected "visits" from the police, or forced labour. She herself wrote that recording daily events was an essential form of therapy (Pennebaker 1997). The onset of a traumatic period also bears a close relation to Gizella's diary, an endeavour she initiated on the very day her family received the order decreeing their deportation. Her method of employing diary-writing as a means of transforming a miserable reality into a more positive interpretation and end result is already present in her first entry, in which the "residence" where they were forced to live during their deportation is laid out before our eyes:

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"Our residence" is actually not a room at all. It's really a pantry with a floor of beaten earth and a teeny-tiny, barred window offering us a direct view of the outhouse. Without electricity, the only light is a petroleum lamp or candle, which is actually for the best. This way we only occasionally notice the mice scurrying about in the shadows without taking the least bit of notice of us. They've got the right to it—after all, they were here first! (Somlay 23)

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By writing down the thoughts and actions that she did not want to or could not express to her family, Gizella found another way to construct her own, independent universe, another means of preserving a feeling of autonomy and reassuring herself that the circumstances could not crush her inner world. Other than humor and irony, Gizella frequently employed her sense of self-irony to narrate events that were, in truth, extremely frightening and completely beyond her control. An instance of this can be found in her description of the police unexpectedly arriving to deliver a travel permit to her sister while simultaneously inspecting their living quarters:

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Györgyi and I were making potato noodles. We were just browning the breadcrumbs, when two policemen appeared in the lane. They made a big show of bursting through the gate. In our lightning speed to whisk our drying undergarments out of sight, the breadcrumbs burned to a char...One

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of them in particular wouldn't stop staring and absolutely couldn't take his eyes off the jars of jam lining the top of the cabinet. He must have a sweet tooth. For a minute I was almost going to give him a jar of the jam he was so obviously licking his lips over. Then I caught myself: that would be an attempt to butter up—or *jam* up—an official authority with a bribe. For that they'd have every right to slap me with another few years, when the time I'm serving now is more than enough. (Somlay 113)

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Deportation was a terrifying and deeply traumatizing experience for each member of the family, given that any illusion of privacy or personal safety was shattered the instant they were forced—at a moment's notice—to leave behind their home and former lifestyle. Yet they still did their best not to show their fear. Older than Gizella by two years, Györgyi, her sister, had an especially difficult time adapting to the forced change in environment and the way in which they were ripped from their familiar life in Budapest. Gizella made the following joke about Györgyi's behaviour and how miserably it reminded them of their vulnerable position:

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The church was filled to the rafters with deportees. The priest spoke so beautifully that we all sobbed. He preached about belief in God, trust and hope. Yes, I agree that we'll need all of these to get through this. But we'll need patience, too, because Györgyi is a hysterical kangaroo! She blubbers constantly about how she can't get used to being here (as if anyone had actually asked for her opinion), she's going to demand to be exempted, she's a working woman, and on and on. She's supposedly in her best years of girlhood right now, right when this rotten life stuck away in the countryside had to come at the worst possible time. (I guess it came at the best time for the rest of us!) It's beastly listening to her go on and on for hours. Listening to Györgyi, you'd think the lamentations of Jeremiah were just a bit of a snafu. (Somlay 67)

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In her diary, Gizella quoted slogans taken from official propaganda, but rarely did so according to their original content. Instead, these slogans appeared in jokes, demonstrating that the rhetoric utilized by the one-party state became the target of humor among the "younger set" of deportees. She went to great lengths to turn their wretched conditions on their head by making the situation into a joke. One of the main methods for tormenting the once-powerful elite was by placing them in the worst and most humiliating situation possible, such as by denying them sufficient firewood in the middle of winter. Gizella improved their miserable situation by making a joke of how cold they were in the freezing temperatures. In the following entry, Gizella depicted their terrible circumstances while also creating a spoof of the political system's discriminatory

attitude and language which labeled deportees as wealthy members of the aristocracy:

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I think we can definitely hang a sign out on our door advertising ‘Deep freeze for all your frozen foodstuffs!’ I even pondered what a fascinating phenomenon we’d present frozen. Tiszaföldvár would be in all the papers overnight. All the top scientists would come to catch a glimpse of the frozen deportees. Our fate would inspire writers. The author of children’s tales would call his story, ‘Princes Changed to Ice.’ The realist author would entitle his: ‘Genteel Poverty.’ The author of crime stories, now, wouldn’t be all that inspired by the cold, I think he’d get his topic from another source entirely. (Somlay 99)

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The writer’s ironic usage of language represents another important element of humor found in the diary while also casting direct light on the political slogans and metaphors in use at the time. Attempts to poke fun at the regime’s usage of language was not characteristic of Gizella alone, but was generally utilized throughout her particular age group and friends among the deportees even though jokes of this type were not shared in public. It is important to note that the kind of language used in newspapers and radio broadcasts did not spread through general speech without undergoing certain changes in meaning. These nuances in meaning, however, were thoroughly dependent on the given context and situation.

Gizella usually altered the original message of important phrases contained in the party state’s propaganda by twisting them into an ironically different meaning. Various slogans intended to demonstrate that state power was in the hands of the workers building the communist system, such as: “The nation is yours, build it for you!,” became the butt of jokes. This slogan was naturally viewed in an entirely different light by the young people experiencing the system’s discriminatory treatment: “When [during mass—G.K.] the little young priest reached the part in the Lord’s Prayer about ‘the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,’ Vali added in a whisper, ‘build it for you!’ There was no use for it, I snorted with laughter right when the whole church was silent in prayer. My snicker echoed terribly, I was sure there’d be a scandal” (Somlay 87).

Generally, Gizella took note of three state celebrations introduced into the calendar by the communist dictatorship: the first marked the Day of Soviet Liberation on April 4<sup>th</sup>, the second was the International Workers’ Holiday on May 1<sup>st</sup> and the third was November 7<sup>th</sup>, the anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution. In Tiszaföldvár, celebrating the Day of Soviet Liberation was naturally mandatory and deportees were also expected to participate. For the deportees, parading a dog on a chain

symbolically turned the whole celebration into a farce due to the way this action referenced the state propaganda's habit of calling the Yugoslav leader, "the chained dog of the imperialists," an epitaph that made its way into official speech after Tito broke with Stalinism. Gizella thus described the official parade that formed an important part of the celebration: "My face split into a huge grin when I caught sight of our boys marching among the bricklayers. It was Simonyi, dragging an enormous dog on a chain that must have been Tito. Well, I thought to myself, they certainly have a sense of humor" (Somlay 144). For those outside of the group, however, this gesture could not be interpreted in any sort of unequivocal terms. Concerning the next state celebration, May 1, 1952, Gizella made the next remarks:

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Simonyi was there again dragging that dog on a chain. It was most likely the same exact dog he dragged on April 4<sup>th</sup>. I don't get this Simonyi, he thinks this will get him in good with the local authorities. It's as if he actually thinks they'll grant him an exemption for dragging Tito up and down the main street during every parade. (Somlay 151)

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The dog dragged on a chain during the official parade was named in keeping with the current political rhetoric and constituted a form of rebellion that could not be interpreted as such by the local powers. By "parading" the state's official enemy during a government holiday, the deported young people had found a way to express their resistance in terms that were silently humorous, yet also quite loaded. State celebrations were therefore viewed according to an interpretation that was either private or only held by a narrow section of society. More importantly, these private interpretations could be kept hidden from the authorities while simultaneously freeing the meanings of these events from their original context. In other words, private interpretations altered official meaning by removing certain aspects and details related to the state holiday and placing these within the context of everyday life in a way that created an entirely new meaning.

Gizella applied humor to other cases as well, ones not necessarily connected to living as a deportee, but stemming from personal grievances or family-related consequences that she judged as unfair. Interestingly enough, in spite of their personal nature, Gizella also used the jargon and language of political propaganda to turn these instances into laughable situations. An excellent illustration of this can be found in Gizella's entry describing the anniversary of the 1917 Socialist Revolution in Czarist Russia, a ceremony held in Tiszaföldvár. At the time, Gizella could not participate in the parade because of chores she was forced to do at home instead of her sister:

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It was a state of rebellion for me, too, only my blood didn't boil against the czar, but against the stack of dirty dishes unfairly foisted off on me when it was Györgyi's turn, yet Nacsá sent me to do them. No wonder that—instead of the Winter Palace—I charged the scullery while shouting all kinds of rallying cries for the revolution, where I found myself sorrowfully elbow-deep in greasy dishes. I can say I felt on my own hide what 'oppression and servitude' was like, not to mention the grease. (Somlay 203)

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Using humor as a survival strategy naturally had its limits; there are humiliations from which it is not always immediately possible to distance one's self. When her every instinct demanded she protest, yet the dictatorial system she was living under denied her any means of action, Gizella chose to employ the technique of imbuing seemingly insignificant actions with a sense of resistance or even self-defence. By doing so, some of her acts came to represent rebellion in her eyes, even if those whom she was protesting against did not interpret them as such. Notably, Gizella was particularly prone to reach for this tactic when she could no longer passively endure being stripped of her humanity and treated like a mere object. When, for example, Gizella described walking between two rows of policemen in order to board a cattle car at the railway station in Magdolnaváros, she made the following comment: "I almost choked with anger at how drunk with power they were and the looks of sheer spitefulness on their faces. No wonder that I 'accidentally' stepped on a policeman's sore bunion" (Somlay 13). Her placement of the word "accidentally" in quotations marks makes it quite clear that Gizella's action had been anything but accidental.

Gizella was also likely to utilize this strategy when she found herself—as a fifteen-year-old girl—forced to defend her womanhood while in the miserably powerless position of being a deportee. In August, 1951 Gizella had gone with her sister to buy a watermelon—a forbidden treat for deportees—when they ran into the head of the collective farm. While her sister was able to hide, Gizella was not. "'Now, what's that you've got there, girlie?' Dombi guffawed, his hand reaching out for me" (Somlay 43). While there is no way of knowing what Dombi had actually intended to do, Gizella interpreted his reaching for her as an attempt to touch her without her permission, a gesture that—to her—meant anything could be done to a deportee. Struck with panic by her defenselessness, Gizella's reaction was one of attack: "Like a wildcat, I sunk my teeth into his hand, then took off as fast as my feet could take me. He didn't come after me, but I could hear him swearing a blue streak." In her diary she interpreted her dangerous reaction as a defence of her independence

and autonomy. While in her first mention of the event, she called it an attempt to grope her, a later entry describes it as a case of flirtatious impudence. Following the event, however, Gizella was clearly afraid that the man would enact some type of retribution. In spite of meeting several times after their altercation, the man did not retaliate. Nor did he try to touch her again: “When it came time to say goodbye he held out his hand and addressed me with *Kezét csókolom* [a formal greeting literally translated as ‘I kiss your hand’ used by men to address adult women]. Biting his hand did wonders for his manners. Maybe I’ll take a bite out of a few others after this!” (Somlay 74–75). This particular description reveals the care with which Gizella reconstructed an event months after it had actually happened, when she was finally able to discuss it. In her hands, a frightening altercation turns into a carefully crafted scene that also happens to end with a great punchline. Constructed on the basis of an everyday greeting transformed into the pun, “I kiss your hand,” Gizella used wit and humor to depict how she was able to get the upper hand in the end.

Similar insults to her person were experienced by Gizella: on another occasion, when she was working in the kitchen, she describes how one of the soldiers “took me for his little woman and pinched my behind as if nothing could have been more natural” (Somlay 78). The fact that Gizella did not react immediately against the man’s advances in this case is most likely due to his status as a soldier: “Such a wave of anger swept over me that I hurled the spoon into the kettle and the grease—good and red from all the paprika—splattered everywhere, all over everyone’s clothes, the whitewashed wall...red grease dripped from everywhere I looked” (Somlay 79). Gizella was then forced to apologize to the rest of the kitchen workers, who either had not seen what had happened, or thought nothing of it. Later, however, the gristly pieces of meat that found their way on the soldier’s plate symbolized her revenge: in her interpretation, the soldier could then “reflect on his fate and the unfathomable paths mere coincidence can take” (Somlay 79).

Throughout her diary, Gizella Somlay was frequently able to apply humor as a means of recording stressful and humiliating events in a way that altered her perspective, thereby imbuing the truly miserable reality of deportation with her own, unique interpretation. The fact that her recording of events created a narrative that rendered a bitter reality into a far more cheerful depiction allowed her to tap into the positive effect humor could have in preserving her dignity, protecting her mental health and identifying her allegiance toward a given social group.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gergely Kunt is a social historian and Assistant Professor at the University of Miskolc, Hungary. His dissertation was a comparative analysis of the social ideas and prejudices of Jewish and non-Jewish adolescents during the Second World War as reflected in their diaries. Kunt earned his PhD in History at the University of Budapest (ELTE) in 2013. He has been collecting privately-owned diaries and has acquired numerous unpublished diary manuscripts from the period of the Holocaust and the Communist era. He is one of the founding members of the European Diary Archives and Collections (EDAC). He was European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI) Fellow at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust-Studies in November 2016.