

Review Article:

In Search of "Hungarianness"

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Richard Teleky, *Hungarian Rhapsodies* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, and Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), xv + 217 pages.

This is a subjective review of a book whose author characterizes it as "a combination of essay, lament, celebration, and scholarship" (p. xiii). The unusual character of the volume justifies the unusual review, especially since it is documented with twelve pages of notes and fifteen pages of bibliography, which validate the exposed facts of mind and soul.

There will be several critical observations in my review. Before anyone misunderstands this fact, let me express my admiration for Teleky's book. With regard to Hungarian culture, it may be unique in its genre, and it is definitely an eye-opener for those among us for whom the richness of Hungarian culture is easily accessible because of our proficiency in the language. In this book a sensitive and highly educated mind is expressing a moving yearning to belong to a culture, to be accepted by his heritage which himself has already accepted.

The author was born and raised in Cleveland by Hungarian parents who gave him insight into the psyche of their ancestral culture, but did not teach him the language. The little information he got as a child about Hungary, mostly about the countryside, came from his grandparents. He did not visit Hungary until the age of forty-seven. He is one of those hundreds of thousands of North Americans whose family must have been regarded as "good immigrants" by the receiving country: hard-working and eager to assimilate. In the meantime, they became lost for Hungary, perhaps also for themselves. In seemingly unrelated essays Teleky traces his long way back to his roots, and to the understanding of

what he calls "Hungarianness." This was a conscious search, chosen and undertaken by an adult. In the meantime, the author became editor-in-chief of the Canadian branch of Oxford University Press, then retired from publishing and now teaches at York University in Toronto.

Of the twelve essays, seven are reprinted from earlier publications in various North American journals, and a further three were also published previously in a shorter version. It is a rare luxury for North American authors to have their dispersed essays published also in collective volumes, but the reader should welcome the opportunity to receive them in such convenient form. The arrangement of the papers does not appear to follow any logic but, the title of the volume being what it is, let's call the sequence rhapsodic. At least the reviewer can also take some liberties with logic.

Teleky's understanding of Hungarianness is limited, which he knows. Judging from his confessions, he has been studying the language diligently for some years but is not yet entirely at home in it. Most of his information is based on English sources. Why? Because "Hungarian is a notoriously difficult language" (p. 118). While countering stereotypes about Hungarians (once with critical intellect, another time with good-natured irony, depending on the stereotype), Teleky too perpetuates this die-hard one about the language which many Hungarians also proudly profess as proof of their being different. It is hoped that whoever finds Hungarian "notoriously difficult" has already tried learning Polish or Greek or Hindi, relatives of English, not to mention Japanese which, like Hungarian, is no Indo-European language. Only after such comparative venture would this sweeping generalization be valid. (Which is not to say that Hungarian is an easy language. Only that there are no objective criteria of which languages are "difficult" and which ones "easy." Dezső Kosztolányi knew this, as one can read in his polemic "open letter" to the French linguist Antoine Meillet, written about seventy years ago.)

It irks Teleky, as a man of letters, to witness the under-representation of Hungarian literature in English translation, and the segregation of North American Hungarian literature from mainstream Canadian or American fiction. Can we blame only the North American cultural mentality, however? The reading list Teleky compiled for his course on Central European literature at York University is reproduced in full, and the Hungarian titles show how little representative the available volumes are. The uncoordinated, haphazard way of singling out Hungarian works for translation also amazed me many times. With all that pride taken in national literature, it was, alas, never a successful vehicle to promote Hungary.

Hungarian political and cultural propaganda was never coordinated and, as one may fear, never will be. Our *terra incognita* is an ideal breeding ground for stereotypes, something that the book discusses as one of its central themes. Stereotypes in society, literature, and the cinema: we have to be grateful that not all of them are negative ones, although most of them are. Those who have read Teleky's report on Margaret Atwood's story "Wilderness Tips," with its gro-

tesquely repulsive Hungarian-Canadian protagonist, will have a lasting opinion about this celebrated author's ethical standards (pp. 58-60). As we know, success does not come from, or create, an honest personality. A whole critical essay (one of my favourites) discusses the outrageously insincere and slanderous movie, "The Music Box" (1989). Joe Eszterhas, the scriptwriter, may have attained a dubious fame with his contribution to such cinema "classics" as "Flashdance" and "Basic Instinct," yet his defamatory handling of anybody and anything Hungarian in "The Music Box" deserves Teleky's well-applied term, "ethnic self-hate" (64-65).¹ Also, as Teleky points out, insincerity produces bad art. Which is, of course, pretty obvious if one considers the overall output of Hollywood.

Is this just another example of Hungarian paranoia that we don't cease to imagine ourselves as whipping boys? Teleky knows that, in spite of the attention and improved image that Hungary has received recently, nasty old stereotypes live on to serve fiendish new purposes. As he writes about Atwood's character: "Atwood is too clever a writer to make 'George' a black Jamaican, a Soviet Jew, or a Vietnamese businessman. He is Hungarian because Hungarianness provides a safe target" (p. 60). We all knew the above, yet we dared to bring it up only in low-voiced private conversations lest we be regarded once again as racists and anti-Semites, which are two frequent epithets used for us "Eastern Europeans." Teleky's courage was overdue, yet the more praiseworthy.

Indignation over Hungarian-bashing alternates with good-natured humour, which is another means to defeat ignorance. In the chapter "A Short Dictionary of Hungarian Stereotypes" he discusses such examples as the "Hungarian lover," "Csardas" [*sic*], "Goulash," "Gypsy music," "Paprika," even the fashionable turn-of-century American painter Virginia O'Keeffe whose maternal grandfather, as we learn, was a Hungarian count and Kossuth's aide-de-camp in the 1848-49 Hungarian war of liberation. (Strangely, history books never mention this Count Totto, and the reader wonders why.) The two recipes that Teleky reprints here: that of the goulash and the chicken paprikas [*sic*], are authentic and delicious.

Perhaps the most penetrating observations that the author makes are the most subjective ones: reflections on immigration and ethnicity. Childhood memories of Cleveland's St. Elizabeth church lead him to examine the role of religion in preserving ethnic coherence and heritage language. Upon revisiting the church as an adult, he is interested not only in the stained-glass windows, objects of his childhood fascination, but also in the archives, pondering all the while what will happen to this spiritual centre now that its "vital neighborhood link" has been cut.² (At another place he expresses similar, justified concern about the erosion of Hungarian Studies at North American universities.)³ The fascinating juxtapositions of adolescent dreams and adult realities also appear in the description of image building. "Just as fairy tales have forests and castles, [Hungary has been] part of my imagination." (p. 172). With a slight twist, after his first visit to the ancestral land, he says: "my associations with the country are no longer from other people's lives — my family's, or favorite writers'. I have

people to correspond with and to see again." (p. 164). This concreteness of the "ethnic experience" is impossible in the new world exclusively — something that Canadian ethnic studies are still reluctant to accept.

Continuing the observations on immigrant mentality, the author points out that assimilation was never completely possible for the immigrants: between the world wars "deeper loyalties, fears, and anxieties kept the Hungarians keenly interested in the affairs of their homeland." (p. 40). Only when the passing time slowly ended community life and newer immigrants did not find structures to accommodate them did "the melting pot [become] a reality more by erosion than by choice." (p. 41). Xenophobia (illustrated by several instances from the film "The Music Box" [p. 71]), the "badge of foreignness" that Teleky confesses to have often felt (if not for other reasons, then for the frequent misspellings of his family name [p. 170]), and an "American distance from ethnicity" (p. 175) are some of the formidable obstacles facing immigrants in their uphill struggle for acceptance. As for today's Canada, according to Teleky, it "officially advances an idea of multiculturalism, but always in relation to a dominant culture that knows its identity as truly Canadian." (p. 175). The author does not seem to be happy about the term "ethnic" (p. 171) and states, perhaps unkindly but justly, that currently "'multiculturalism' tends to refer to non-European ethnicities," for which reason "it seems unlikely that Hungarian American subjects will come to the fore or be fashionable." (p. 62). A timely cold shower to cool down never-subsiding Hungarian illusions.

I found only three minor factual errors in the book — let me mention just one here. Teleky writes that Hungary was occupied "by Germans for only a few years during the Second World War." (p. 153). Actually, Hungary was under German occupation only for a little over a year — and the eastern parts of the country for less than half that time. The author and I live in the same city but we have never met — should I have the pleasure to do so in the future, I'll point out to him the two other errors. I will also have questions for him: for instance, how could he so astonishingly misread a simple statement in my book on Hungarian-Canadian literature (p. 56). Or, whether he really tried to take an elementary Hungarian language course at the University of Toronto, about which he sweepingly writes: "Each time I've registered in [such] a course, with the assurance that it would be *introductory*, I was soon lost in a room of young people who already had more than a rudimentary knowledge of the language" (p. 5). I wonder where this personal experience comes from, if it is indeed a personal one.

Considering the fact that Teleky's information about Hungary is almost exclusively based on English language materials, he is eminently knowledgeable about many things. As a matter of fact, his zeal for information carries him away into directions where the goal is not worth the effort. He writes reproachfully about the University of Toronto's library in which he could not find any book by Árpád Göncz when the latter became president of the republic (pp. 101-102). The reason is, as Hungarians discreetly know, that Göncz was an undistinguished

writer. He had published three volumes before stepping into office. Now that he has gained notoriety, however, even the University of Toronto's library has several of his volumes.

The long bibliography looks impressive. Still, one wonders why Hannah Arendt's correspondence with Karl Jaspers, or Aronowitz's *The Politics of Identity* (among others) are such essential sources of information when basic works like Francis Wagner's *Hungarian Contributions to World Civilization* (1978), Zoltan Bodolai's *The Timeless Nation* (1978), or Stephen Sisa's *The Spirit of Hungary* (1983) are missing. Having arrived at the end of the volume, having sifted through the bibliography titles, having ascertained that the author missed a few useful works and had to rely on many peripheral ones, one ponders: is this all that we can offer to third generation North American Hungarians in their own language, which is, almost invariably, English?

Alas, we have to conclude that it is. And, even offering books may not be enough. Besides reading such books as Teleky's, third generation North American Hungarians need perseverance, intellect, and discrimination to sort and organize the facts to re-connect with their ancestral Hungarian culture. Very few young people of Hungarian extraction have Teleky's bitter and heroic determination to sacrifice decades of their life to redcm the omissions that had been made by their family, the Hungarian North American community, and their ancestral nation. This book is a warning to all of us.

The other day my son-in-law asked me to give him a book about Hungarians. He is a very typical mainstream American without any Hungarian ancestry. A short and uncomplicated survey of Hungary: history, people, geographical areas, customs, and the arts — was his desire; and... I had nothing to offer him.

NOTES

1. In "Hollywood, Ethnicity and Joe Eszterhas," pp. 63-73.
2. "The Archives of St.Elizabeth of Hungary," pp. 32-43.
3. Cf. p. xiii.