

**Review Article:**

**A Modern-Day Antigone:  
The Life and Times of Júlia Rajk**

**Judith Szapor**

Andrea Pető, *Rajk Júlia* (Budapest: Balassi 2001). 275 pages. ISBN 963506-423-3, ISSN 1586-3344.<sup>1</sup>

**In one of the** ironic twists with which Hungarian history is so abundantly endowed, the history of the Hungarian 1956 would be forever linked with László Rajk whose reburial on October 6, 1956 marked the unofficial beginning of the revolution. Ironic for, had he lived and not been executed seven years earlier in the eponymous show trial, it is unlikely Rajk himself would have become a member of the reform Communist group formed around Imre Nagy and played a part in the revolution. Rajk had emerged in 1945 as the first among the non-Muscovites (those who lived through the war in Hungary or abroad as opposed to those in Soviet exile) of Hungarian Communists, with a stellar record of arrests, torture, and jail by both Horthy's police and the Arrow Cross, participation in the Spanish Civil War and the Hungarian resistance. He went on to serve in a series of high offices: as secretary of the Budapest party committee, deputy of Rákosi, the party secretary, minister of the Interior from March 1946 and minister of Foreign Affairs from August 1948. As minister of the Communist-controlled Ministry of Interior he was directly responsible for the annihilation of democratic and religious organizations and, ominously, the first show trials, against leaders of the opposition parties; he was also involved in the widespread electoral abuses (the so-called "blue slips" affair) during the August 1947 elections. Despite all this, he was by far the most popular Communist leader, a popularity earned as much by his charismatic good looks and oratorical gifts as by his openly uncompromising stance reinforced by genuine credibility.

If Rajk's trial and fate came to symbolize the worst excesses of Rákosi's regime, his 1955 "rehabilitation" (agreed to by Rákosi only under Soviet pressure), the official admission that the charges and confessions had been false, contributed to a collective crisis of conscience. The reburial of Rajk and his three co-accused, attended by a quarter of a million people, let

free flow to a massive outpouring of solidarity, guilt, and anger, and served as the prelude of the revolution, to erupt in little more than two weeks. The irony, however, was not lost on contemporaries; it was eloquently expressed by an old comrade, himself recently freed from Rákosi's prison who wryly remarked: "Poor Laci, were he alive today, he would surely have the troops fire at us."

One could argue that Rajk's posthumous reputation and his likely position vis-à-vis the 1956 revolution are not only hypothetical but also irrelevant in this context, given that the subject of Andrea Pető's biography is not Rajk himself but his widow, Júlia. Conversely, the argument could be made that Júlia Rajk (1914-1981) is a legitimate subject of a biography and historians' interest only in-so-far as her association with László Rajk (1909-1949) went, the five years during which she was his partner in the underground Communist movement and prison, from September 1944, and his wife from July 1945. (Counting the years of occasional contact in the underground movement, their acquaintance lasted a slightly longer eight years, still only a fraction of her life.) These arguments are very much at the heart of the book, equally rich in biographical detail and theoretical insight, and the author devotes considerable attention to addressing them. Andrea Pető, professor at the Gender Studies Department of Budapest's Central European University, is exceptionally well equipped to do so as she is not only among the pioneers of women's and gender history in Hungary but is also amply published in several areas that cut across Júlia Rajk's life. In previous articles and a monograph, she covered the history of the women's associations after 1945 and their takeover by the Communist MNDSZ (the Democratic Organization of Hungarian Women in which Mrs. Rajk served as secretary and president),<sup>2</sup> and wrote on gender and spousal relations in the Communist party.<sup>3</sup> In these as in more recent works, she has displayed a passionate interest in the ways, often mitigated by gender, in which historians and the public shape historical memory.

In the introduction, Pető elaborates on the methodological pitfalls of writing woman's biography in general and the specific challenges she faced as the biographer of Júlia Rajk who seemed to fit the conservative template prescribing a supporting role for women in politics: after all, she gained a public profile and political office as Rajk's wife and was arrested and jailed as his wife. And, from the moment of her release in 1954 until the end, Júlia devoted her life to the fight to clear Rajk's name and restore his legacy. Pető also describes the difficulties in finding documentary sources (destroyed, still not accessible, or of dubious value) and dealing with memoirs and interviews of contemporaries (distorted by personal and political considerations), commonly experienced by scholars of such recent period. Not even Júlia's own interviews and written testimonies would be spared scrutiny as, shaped by her self-assumed role as an incorruptible witness, set to correct the lies,

falsifications and manipulations of official history, they were still not immune to the human impulse of determining one's own legacy.

The biography is built around the seeming paradox that informed Júlia Rajk's life: the conscious decision on the one hand to fulfil the traditional role of the "nation's widow" and, on the other, her consistent efforts to acquire a name and public role "of her own." Pető highlights the significant connection between names and public roles for women by structuring her chapters around Júlia's names, from her maiden name, Júlia Földi to Mrs. Rajk, to the only half-ironic "the nation's widow" to the final Júlia Rajk or, simply, "the Júlia," who became an institution. (She also describes the authorities' effort to erase her husband's memory by taking away his and her name and assigning her a different name, during and even after her incarceration.) Júlia's greatest success in her role as the "nation's widow" was to achieve a public funeral for her husband and his co-accused, executed and buried in secret seven years earlier.<sup>4</sup> Pető extensively documents this achievement, describing the traits — the relentless energy, the unusual frankness, the refusal to lie and make nice with the party officials she considered her husband's murderers — that became Júlia's hallmark, mastered in later decades. To the high-level party functionaries, accustomed to the lizard-like servility of the Rákosi years, she represented a force of nature they were unable to handle; and the picture of Júlia Rajk, standing at the grave of her husband, holding the hand of their young son, taken from her as an infant, was reproduced in the Western press, to become one of the iconic images of 1956.

Júlia Rajk chose to remain a widow for life: in that sense, her personal life as a woman came to an end. But other aspects of her personal life, most importantly as a mother, did not end and neither does the biography; and it makes an emphatic point of erasing the lines between the personal and the public in a life that would be spent maintaining communities and building informal institutions, delicately balanced between the officially tolerated and repressed. Regardless of what her husband would have done, Júlia Rajk went on to join the group of reform Communists around Imre Nagy. Following the Soviet invasion in November 1956, she shared their Romanian exile, acting as the group's unofficial leader after the removal of the men and, on her return, she became a bastion of solidarity and the go-to person during the worst years of repression. The political and diplomatic history of these events has finally come to light, due mostly to the efforts of the Institute of the History of 1956 in the last nearly two decades.<sup>5</sup> Some of the main figures of the group, among them Losonczy and Nagy, received a full-length biographical treatment.<sup>6</sup> Pető contributes to this scholarship in unexpected ways, by examining the everyday challenges, family and group dynamics, and the personal, political, and cultural roots of the values that affected the individuals and the group during the post-1956 terror and the following years.

She leaves no doubt that Júlia Rajk had always remained a Communist but one who lived by her own interpretation of Communist principles: loyalty, integrity, and solidarity with the underdog. This makes the last chapter, describing the last two decades of Júlia Rajk's life particularly rewarding: it was in these years, coinciding with the milder period of Kádár's "enlightened dictatorship," that Júlia came out of the shadow of her husband, all the while keeping up the fight to honour his name and legacy. Despite the political differences with her son, prominent in the democratic opposition, she took a stand for the rights of dissidents. In the famous 1978 episode of the "three widows," Júlia attended the trial of the dissident writer Miklós Haraszti, lending him support by demonstratively sitting in the first row with Ilona Duczynska (Karl Polányi's widow) and Katinka Andrassy (the widow of Mihály Károlyi); all, remarks Pető, women with a name "of their own." Her other achievements included the first Western-type shelter in Hungary for abandoned dogs, another joint project with Katinka Andrassy and her informal travel organization for friends, "Júlia Tours;" perhaps less obviously significant but nevertheless important informal institutions that contributed to the building of a sorely missing civil society.

Particularly enlightening is Pető's description of the *modus operandi* of Júlia in the last chapter, titled "The two souls of Julia" (an expression borrowed from György Litván), especially for readers interested in the subtle ways the Kádár-regime co-opted the majority of Hungarian society, an even co-existed with members of the political opposition. Júlia had no qualms about accepting the privileges — the best available medical care, travels to the West, multiple yearly holidays — granted to the party elite and extended to "victims of Stalinist persecution." She realized early on — a fact that does not diminish her personal courage — that, as Rajk's widow, she was untouchable. Nobody would dare to arrest her or, for that matter, her son, whose downtown apartment served as the "*samizdat* boutique" of the opposition from the 1970s. She also exploited the unspoken but widely whispered personal responsibility of Kádár in her husband's fate and used her personal connections to old comrades, still in power, to claim her husband a place in the official party history, on a street sign, in the pantheon of the Communist martyrs, in the name of a school and a university residence. Annoying officials to no end, she took up the cases of the persecuted, friends or not, to help them get a job, a passport, an apartment, a university placement unjustly denied.

The personal arch, reminiscent of Greek tragedies, from Rajk to Kádár and from Kádár to Nagy came full circle in June 1989 at yet another reburial, of Imre Nagy, betrayed, kidnapped, tried and executed under Kádár's leadership. The ceremony, witnessed by hundreds of thousands in person and broadcast around the world from Budapest's Heroes' Square, became the unofficial beginning of yet another revolutionary change, Hungary's return to democratic government. The honour guard, led by Nagy's daughter and surviving members of Nagy's circle stood under the columns of the venerable

Műcsarnok (Palace of Art), draped in stark black and transformed into a stage of historical proportions by a young set designer, László Rajk.

Júlia Rajk died of cancer in 1981, long before the June 1989 ceremony on Heroes' Square, an event she no doubt would have welcomed wholeheartedly. Two more years later, in 1991, her husband's name was removed from the street named after him and reversed to Pannónia Street, an event that most likely would have devastated her. And so the endless battle for history and historical legacy continues, providing instant lessons in the ways in which we shape our collective memory. As the recent 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the Hungarian 1956 so clearly demonstrated, this process is far from complete and the biography of this remarkable woman represents an important step in the process of interpreting these still highly contested events of Hungarian history. The book is not without flaws: while it is bursting at the seams with details of political and personal history, astute observation, wit, and theoretical and methodological insight, a firmer editorial hand could have helped to mould these strands together more seamlessly. Signs of careful editing include useful biographical notes and a chronology although a few names and events could have benefited from a short introduction or context, even for readers familiar with the recent history of Hungary.

All in all, the book is an important contribution to our understanding of the role of individuals and communities in the fight for the right to remember, to retake and own their collective memory. Finally, it demonstrates the ways in which we create myths, demolish false idols, and uphold universal human values against the forces of tyranny and political expediency, just like the heroine of Sophocles's play, Antigone, and her unlikely modern-day follower, Júlia Rajk did.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The volume was published in the Feminism and History series. A German edition was recently published, under the title *Geschlecht, Politik und Stalinismus in Ungarn. Eine Biographie von Júlia Rajk*. Studien zur Geschichte Ungarns, Bd. 12. Gabriele Schäfer Verlag, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Her research is summarized in Pető Andrea, *Nőhistóriák. A politizáló nők történetéből, 1945-1951* (Budapest: Seneca, 1998); the work was also published in English: *Women in Hungarian Politics, 1945-1951* (Boulder, Co.: East European Monographs, distributed by Columbia University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, chapters 8 and 9.

<sup>4</sup> The best source on the circumstances leading to Rajk's funeral remains, to this day, the memoir of Béla Szász, published in English as *Volunteers For the Gallows: Anatomy of a Show-Trial* (translated by Kathleen Szász, London: Chatto and Windus 1971.) Szász was a co-accused in the Rajk trial, and the only one who refused to sign a confession or testify against Rajk. At Júlia's request, he gave a short

speech at the funeral. Szász also describes in detail Júlia's fight for the funeral, characterizing her determination as one that "put men to shame."

<sup>5</sup> A full list of the publications of the Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution can be found on the Institute's web site: [www.rev.hu](http://www.rev.hu).

<sup>6</sup> György Kövér, *Losonczy Géza 1917-1957* (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 1998) and János M. Rainer, *Nagy Imre. Politikai életrajz, vol. 1: 1896-1953, vol. 2: 1953-1958* (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 1996 and 1999).