

Memories of Hungary: A Review Article of New Books by Suleiman and Teleky

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**Steven Totosy de Zepetnek,**

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## STEVEN TÖTÖSY de ZEPETNEK

### Memories of Hungary: A Review Article of New Books by Suleiman and Teleky

Memoir writing of the most varied types and persuasions have become a prominent genre in Central and East Central Europe after the fall of the Soviet empire in 1989, attracting a large and varied readership. While many if not all of these memoirs are personal recollections as the genre demands, there are some which are more than descriptions of lives and views. Especially those texts which are published in translation or written and published by authors who are residing outside Hungary, are of a nature that takes into account the reader's unfamiliarity with matters Hungarian. Thus, these types of memoirs serve the purpose of cultural reading. Memoir writing of such cultural reading is, for example, where the rediscovery of the author's cultural heritage is connected with personal history. Owing to its language as well as history, Hungary is one of the quintessential "Other" cultures of Europe and this Otherness is stereotypical and historically and linguistically determined. It is in this context of cultural reading, personal history, and Otherness that I have read Susan Rubin Suleiman's *Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. Hardcover, 232 pages) and Richard Teleky's *Hungarian Rhapsodies: Essays on Ethnicity, Identity and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997. Softcover, 217 pages).

Both Suleiman and Teleky describe their re-discovery of their "roots," familial and cultural, one Jewish Hungarian, the other Protestant Hungarian; both are intellectuals: the former a professor of French and Comparative Literature at Harvard, the latter an editor and director of York University's Writing Program in Toronto. What binds them together, apart from the personal and familial, is their emotional as well as intellectual interest in Hungarian culture. Memoirs by exile and refugee Hungarians have been a frequent type of writing in Hungarian letters, obviously owing to the frequent exodus from a country habitually undergoing foreign invasions. Examples are many, from Prince Rákóczi's (rebel against the Habsburgs) or Count Benyovszky's (king of Madagascar) to the numerous memoirs of refugees after the 1848 Revolution against Habsburg domination and Tsarist intervention and the memoirs by refugees from the White Terror and Admiral Horthy's semi-fascist regime between the two World Wars. The largest exodus of Hungarians occurred after the Second World War and after the 1956 Revolution against Soviet and Communist domination of the country. The memoirs of this more recent period of Hungarian history are particularly important because these texts published abroad -- mainly in English, German, and French -- in most cases are of a structure combining personal experiences with cultural descriptions and explanations, explicitly or implicitly and obviously in response to the problem of "Otherness" of Hungarians in Western cultures and languages. Perhaps the most important of these memoirs is George Faludy's *My Happy Days in Hell* (1962). Faludy described his experiences in a Hungarian Communist concentration camp and it is as good as Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* published later. Among English-language memoirs describing the double and/or consecutive rape of Hungary, George Gabori's *When Evils Were Most Free* (1982) is notable, although there are of course also many fictionalized autobiographies such as Stephen Vizinczey's *In Praise of Older Women: The Amorous Recollections of András Vajda* (1965) or Béla Szabados's *In Light of Chaos* (1990). However, these memoirs about the post-World War period and others describing the semi-fascist Interwar period eventually culminating in the mass killing of Hungarian Jews upon the German invasion of Hungary in 1944 and the memoirs about the Soviet Communist oppression up to 1956 (or 1968, depending on one's political sensitivities), Suleiman's and Teleky's memoirs are exceptional because they are written by "second-generation Hungarians." Both authors are "Hungarian" in the sense that they severed for decades any interest in matters Hungarian, language or culture. Suleiman fled Hungary in 1949 as a ten year old and returned there first in the 1980s for shorter visits and for an extended period after the 1989 Changes and Teleky, although not born in Hungary, learned Hungarian as an adult. Both authors intended to re-discover their Hungarian background as adults: thus the designation of "second-generation Hungarians."

Suleiman's book title is intriguing: *Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook* and it is similar to Tibor Fischer's (another second-generation Hungarian) *Under the Frog* (1992, Betty Trask Award of 1992 and shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1993), in that it contains a translation from the Hungarian. Fischer's un-English *Under the Frog* is a translation of the Hungarian phrase describing when one is in bad circumstances (as in quality of life): *a béka segge alatt* ("under the arse of a frog"). Suleiman's *Motherbook* is a translation of *anyakönyv*, the official name of one's birth certificate in Hungary and a term laden with references of nostalgia and patriotism in Hungarian literature and even in general discourse. Thus, the title of the book sets the scene, the author's search and re-discovery of her Hungarian background and history. In the first chapter, "Prologue: Forgetting Budapest," Suleiman describes her escape from Hungary as a ten year old, in the last months when the border was still open to Czechoslovakia. After stops in Košice and Bratislava -- Kassa and Pozsony, respectively; Hungarian cities before 1919 -- the Rubin family of three arrived in Vienna, free. The author then earned a profession and her life with clear distance to her ethnic background in the American melting pot. Although with a brief interest in Hungary during the 1956 Revolution and its aftermath of Hungarian refugees in the United States, it is only in the early 1980s -- upon the illness of her mother, her own divorce and raising of two sons -- that Zsuzsa (the Hungarian version of her name) again takes to Hungary and her unresolved past. After the 1989 Changes, she is invited to Budapest as a guest professor and she spends an extended period in Hungary. In Budapest -- and it is in these chapters where the cultural reading I am interested in is written -- Suleiman immerses herself in the intellectual life of scholars, writers, and artists and makes many interesting observations. Her

descriptions of life and letters in Budapest is valuable for the North American reader because it is the description of something that does not exist in North America and even in Western European cities it is at best only somewhat similar: it is specifically an East Central European situation. In her descriptions, Suleiman changed names but there are some personalities described who are easily recognizable. Among the many interesting aspects of East Central European and, within that, specifically Hungarian scenes, situations, and cultural specifics, some may be of particular interest to the North American reader. For example, descriptions and references to the situation of feminism and women runs throughout the book and it reminds me of a situation I was in when giving a paper using feminist criticism at a Hungarian Studies conference in 1991 and where both men and women in the audience attacked my paper saying that feminism is nonsense and inappropriate for the situation in Hungary. Evidently, not much changed in the few years since: Hungary is and remains a profoundly patriarchal society. Another theme in the book is the situation of Jews in Hungary. Suleiman describes the situation with some accuracy and when I was a guest professor in Hungary in 1995 I too found that in Hungary one is either a "Jew-friend" or one is an anti-Semite, there is no inbetween. Interestingly, there is one instance where Suleiman falls prey to that most Hungarian feature, cultural nationalism. In Suleiman's case this could perhaps be better described in terms of enthusiasm and over-valuation of things Hungarian: "I felt elated by the beauty of the city. 'It really is a great capital; it really can be compared to Paris.' I told myself as the cable car rose above the river." Well, yes, Budapest is a beautiful city, indeed, but in my opinion and despite the often repeated comparison to Paris it was never like Paris or Vienna and it is not comparable to them today either. Overall, the book is a good read for anyone interested in an "Other" culture and for those who know Hungary and Hungarians, the book is serious pleasure!

Richard Teleky's book -- in the context of my proposed cultural reading -- contains a wider range of matter than that of Susan Suleiman. Perhaps the larger range explains some of the mistakes the author incurred in the book. For example, I hate to disappoint the author but his surname or family are in no manner connected to one of Hungary's most prominent aristocratic families, the Count Teleki-s. There are a good number of Teleki as well as Teleky families who are either originally of such surname or have changed their name during various periods of "magyarization" -- when foreign nationals and Hungarian Jews were forced or "encouraged" to take a Hungarian surname -- in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Teleky's book covers a good and digestible chunk of matters Hungarian culture. What is novel and interesting in his book is that he obviously aimed at and achieved focus on such cultural matter which either has some connection to outside Hungary (meaning Western Europe and North America) or has become in some ways general cultural property such as the photograph André Kertész, "Central European Literature in Translation," Hollywood's Joe Eszterhas, or the contemporary "postmodern" Péter Esterházy or Péter Nádas whose books are available in English. Similarly to Suleiman, Teleky begins his book with a personal account of his Hungarian background and how he came to be interested in the language of his parents to the point of taking lessons and learning it as an adult. The second part of the book consists of Teleky's experiences over several visits to Hungary after the Changes in 1989. In his descriptions, Teleky at times demonstrates curious unfamiliarity with Hungarian culture and history. For example, he writes that he was puzzled that a Jewish man he meets bears the surname "Tóth" ("Slovak" in Hungarian translation, thus a common name reflecting on the ethnic background of its bearer) despite the fact that it is not a Jewish name (why, practically all Hungarian Jews have Hungarian names!). Dissimilar to Suleiman, it appears that Teleky came into contact with a larger segment of Hungarian life in Budapest than Suleiman and thus his descriptions and analyses are more complete and culturally wider ranging. Teleky, of Protestant cultural background and for obvious reasons when compared with the trauma Suleiman experienced, has less to say about the Jewish question in Hungary. On the other hand, he touches on new territory in Hungary, such as ethnicity in Hungary, the problem of Hungarian ethnicity in exile and his personal stand on these issues.

Both books are valuable, even indispensable, texts in any North American library, public or college, because they present personalized history and because they present contemporary Hungary in such a way that the country's culture becomes alive and less "foreign."

Note: A previous version of above book review was published in *Mfs: Modern Fiction Studies* (1998). Copyright release to the author.

Reviewer's profile: Steven Totösy de Zepetnek works in comparative literature and culture at the University of Alberta His most recent book is *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application* (1998) and he is now working on new projects including contemporary Central European culture and a theoretical framework for comparative cultural studies.