

And the 2002 Nobel Prize for Literature Goes to Imre Kertész, Jew and Hungarian

Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek
University of Halle-Wittenberg

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

Recommended Citation

Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. "And the 2002 Nobel Prize for Literature Goes to Imre Kertész, Jew and Hungarian." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5.1 (2003): [<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1183>](http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1183)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 742 times as of 11/07/14. Note: the download counts of the journal's material are since Issue 9.1 (March 2007), since the journal's format in pdf (instead of in html 1999-2007).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>

Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture (ISSN 1481-4374), the peer-reviewed quarterly of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, is published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University online in full text and in open access. The journal publishes scholarship following tenets of the disciplines of comparative literature and cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies" in a global, international, and intercultural context and with a plurality of methods and approaches: papers for publication are invited to <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/submit.html>>; for the aims and scope of the journal consult <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/clcwebaims>>; for the journal's style guide consult <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/clcwebstyleguide>>. In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/library>>. Work published in the journal is indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature, in the Arts and Humanities Citation Index, in Humanities International Complete, and in the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America. *CLCWeb* is member of The Council of Editors of Learned Journals <<http://www.celj.org>> and it is listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals. *CLCWeb* is mirrored on the website of the British Comparative Literature Association <<http://www.bcla.org/clcweb/>>, it is preserved at research libraries in the Stanford University lockss system <<http://www.lockss.org/lockss/>>, and it is archived in the *Electronic Collection of Library and Archives Canada* <<http://www.collectionscanada.ca/electroniccollection/>>. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* is affiliated with the Purdue University Press hard-copy monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies and selected papers of the journal are published in thematic annuals in the series <<http://www.thepress.purdue.edu/comparativeculturalstudies.html>>. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 5 Issue 1 (March 2003) Article 6

Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, "And the 2002 Nobel Prize for Literature Goes to Imre Kertész, Jew and Hungarian"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss1/6>>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5.1 (2003)

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss1>>

Abstract: In his paper, "And the 2002 Nobel Prize for Literature Goes to Imre Kertész, Jew and Hungarian," Steven Totosy de Zepetnek presents an introduction to the recipient of the 2002 Nobel Prize in Literature, Imre Kertész, and his work. Totosy places Kertész's work in the context of Central and East European culture, and within that in the genre of Central European Jewish memoir literature (but not autobiography). In Totosy's opinion the cultural and social relevance of Jewish memoir writing today is of particular importance precisely for the same reasons Kertész articulates when he says, "I am a survivor. There are few of us left, we guard the memory of the Holocaust. We slowly disappear and die. And we disappear" (13 October 2002). The relevance of Kertész and his writing is acute because of the yet again growing of anti-Semitism in contemporary Central and East Europe.

Steven TÖTÖSY de ZEPETNEK**And the 2002 Nobel Prize for Literature Goes to Imre Kertész, Jew and Hungarian**

In October 2002, Imre Kertész -- resident of Berlin and Budapest and Hungarian citizen -- received the Nobel Prize for Literature for 2002. The Swedish Academy's choice came as a surprise to many and in various ways and observers of literary affairs including scholars were taken unawares. In particular the English-speaking world, including the US, knows little to nothing about Kertész and his work. For example, the MLA: Modern Language Association of America, the principal US organization of scholars working in the humanities and of academic institutions in the humanities, had difficulty to find an expert who would be able to field queries about the author. American and Canadian newspapers in print and on the web contain scant and same-source information. The cavalier attitude towards minor languages such as Hungarian prevails even with the Swedish Academy: in the first version of the official web site about the new awardee at *The Nobel Prize in Literature: Laureates* at <<http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/index.html>>, the material about Kertész contained several errors in the spelling of names and in titles of books (after I sent the corrections to the Academy via e-mail, some of the mistakes were corrected; no reply to the e-mail with the corrections came from the Academy).

The title of my paper calls attention to several matters I elaborate on in this introduction to Kertész and his work. The Oscar-type intonation and the association with the event of an award is tongue-in-cheek about the impending commercialization and canonization of Kertész and his work. More important is the second part of the title of the paper, namely "Jew and Hungarian": with this I signal the fact that Kertész is -- by his own recognition and by obvious logic based in his history -- first a Jew who is at the same time Hungarian and second a Hungarian who is first of all Jewish. This is an important distinction with regard to Hungarian culture where literature has always had a political and social function and not necessarily and primarily an aesthetic one and where, as we can observe after the award of the Nobel, Kertész is appropriated for the "glory of the nation."

Imre Kertész was born in 1929 in Budapest into a Hungarian-Jewish family. About his family background, his parents, his early schooling, etc., little has been published although in some of his texts there are references to an unhappy childhood. As a fifteen-year old, Kertész is caught in the worst of twentieth-century history: after Hitler's army occupies Hungary in 1944 and with Eichmann's final solution the Royal Hungarian Gendarmerie (*Magyar Királyi Csendőrség*) and units of the Hungarian army begin to round up and murder the Hungarian-Jewish population of Budapest, Kertész is sent to the Nazi concentration camps at Auschwitz and later to Buchenwald. In 1945 he returns to Hungary and finds work in factory assembly line work, odd jobs, and later in the press office of the government's ministry of the steel industry. In the 1950s he begins to write musicals and translates into Hungarian the works of Nietzsche and Freud, and works as journalist for the Budapest newspaper *Világosság*. In 1951, when the newspaper begins to adopt communist orthodoxy (as the country as a whole), he is dismissed. From 1951 to 1953 Kertész does the two years of obligatory military service after which he decides to devote all his time to writing. As to employment and income, he makes money with translations, a in some ways lucrative activity in Hungary during the country's communist period. In this line of work, he concentrates on German-language authors such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Elias Canetti, Joseph Roth, and Arthur Schnitzler, and on translating the works of thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Kertész shares a small apartment in Budapest with his wife for years and lives under constrained and limited circumstances. It is in 1960 when he begins to write his novel -- a fictional narrative with some autobiographical elements and not an autobiography -- *Sorstalanság* (Fatelessness would be the correct translation of the word) -- and finishes it in 1973, with its publication not until 1975. The book's reception was less than overwhelming although by the 1980s Kertész's work is recognized as among the best of

Hungarian postmodern prose (on Central European postmodern literature -- e.g., Endre Kukorelly, Mircea Cărtărescu, and Péter Esterházy -- see my *Comparative Literature* 121-72). Kertész published his corpus of fictionalized narratives about the Holocaust in the novel *Sorstalanság* in 1975, followed by *A nyomkereső. Két regény* (The Pathfinder: Two Novels) in 1977, *A kudarc* (The Fiasco) in 1988, and *Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért* (*Kaddish for a Child not Born*) in 1990. In the decade following the publication of *Kaddish for a Child not Born*, his publications are mostly in the genre of the reflective essay, and, in the case of *Az angol lobogó* (The British Flag) (1991), a collection of short stories. Between his two residences, in Berlin and Budapest, Kertész is now working on a novel about the Holocaust as an issue and factor in contemporary times.

To date (March 2003), Kertész has published the following (the list here includes translations from the Hungarian in German, French, and Swedish):

Sorstalanság (1975; *Fateless*, trans. Christopher C. Wilson and Katharina M. Wilson. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1992. *Steg för steg*, trans. Maria Ortman. Bromma: Fripress, 1985. *Mensch ohne Schicksal*, trans. Jörg Buschmann. Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1990. *Roman eines Schicksallosen*, trans. Christina Viragh. Berlin: Rowohlt, 1996. *Etre sans destin*, trans. Natalia and Charles Zaremba. Arles: Actes Sud, 1997. *Mannen utan öde*, trans. Maria Ortman. Stockholm: Norstedt, 1998). *Sorstalanság* has also been published in Spanish, Dutch, Hebrew, and Italian translations.

A nyomkereső. Két regény (1977; The Pathfinder: Two Novels).

A kudarc (1988; *Fiasko*, trans. György Buda and Agnes Relle. Frankfurt: Büchergilde Gutenberg, 2000. *Le Refus*, trans. Natalia Zaremba-Huzsvai and Charles Zaremba. Arles: Actes Sud, 2001. *Fiasko*, trans. Ervin Rosenberg. Stockholm: Norstedt, 2000).

Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért (1990; *Kaddish for a Child not Born*, trans. Christopher C. Wilson and Katharina M. Wilson. Evanston: Hydra Books, 1997. *Kaddisch für ein nicht geborenes Kind*, trans. György Buda and Kristin Schwamm. Berlin: Rowohlt, 1992. *Kaddish pour l'enfant qui ne naîtra pas*, trans. Natalia Zaremba-Huzsvai and Charles Zaremba. Arles: Actes Sud, 1995. *Kaddish för ett ofött barn*, trans. Ervin Rosenberg. Stockholm: Norstedt, 1996).

Az angol lobogó (1991; The British Flag; *Die englische Flagge. Erzählungen*, trans. György Buda and Kristin Schwamm. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1999).

Gályanapló (1992; The Galley Diaries; *Galeerentagebuch*, trans. Kristin Schwamm. Berlin: Rowohlt, 1993. *Galärdagbok*, trans. Ervin Rosenberg. Stockholm: Norstedt, 2002).

A Holocaust mint kultúra. Három előadás (1993; The Holocaust as Culture: Three Lectures).

Jegyzőkönyv. Kertész Imre Esterházy Péterrel (1993; Notebook: Imre Kertész with Péter Esterházy; *Eine Geschichte. Zwei Geschichten. Imre Kertész mit Péter Esterházy*, trans. Kristin Schwamm and Hans Skirecki. Salzburg: Residenz, 1994. *Jegyzőkönyv. Meine Rede über das Jahrhundert*. Hamburg: Hamburger, 1995).

Eine Zurückweisung (Buch und CD zum Brandenburgischen Literaturpreis 1995). Potsdam: Vacat, 1995. (The Rejection).

Valaki más. A változás krónikája (1997; Someone Else: The Chronicle of Metamorphosis; *Ich ein anderer*, trans. Ilma Rakusa. Berlin: Rowohlt, 1998. *Un autre. Chronique d'une métamorphose*, trans. Natalia et Charles Zaremba. Arles: Actes Sud, 1999).

A gondolatnyi csend, amíg a kivégzőosztag újratölt (1998; A Thoughtful Moment while the Execution Squad Reloads; *Eine gedankenlänge Stille, während das Erschiessungskommando neu lädt*. *Essays*, trans. György Buda. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1999).

A száműzött nyelv (2001; The Language of Exile).

Sorstalanság. Filmforgatókönyv (2001; Fatelessness: The Film Script).

Kertész's awards for his work to date include, in Hungary, the Milán Füst Prize (1983), the Forintos Prize (1986), the Artisjus Literary Prize (1988), the Attila József Prize (1989), the Tibor Déry Prize (1989), the 1990 Best Book of the Year Prize, the Örley Prize (1990), the Soros Foundation's Prize (1992, 1995), the Sándor Márai Prize (1996), and the Kossuth Prize (1998), and in Germany he

received the Brandenburg Prize for Literature (1995), the Leipzig Book Fair Prize of European Cooperation (1997), the Friedrich Gundolf Prize (1997), the Jeanette Schocken Prize (1997), the Herder Prize (2000), the literary award of the weekly *Die Welt* (2000), the Robert Bosch Foundation Prize (2001), and the Hans Sahl Prize (2002). In October 2002 Kertész receives the Nobel Prize for Literature from the Swedish Academy.

Kertész began to write his novel *Sorstalanság* (*Fatelessness*) in 1960, fifteen years after he came back from the concentration camp. After much tribulation including the then communist government's censorship and reluctance to publish the book because of its topic, the Holocaust, the book was published in 1975, with its first foreign translation ten years after that, in Swedish in 1985. It is this novel that brings Kertész eventually recognition in Germany in particular and that leads to the Nobel Prize: it is the story of a fifteen-year-old Hungarian-Jewish boy's experiences in nazi concentration camps. Although the novel is clearly autobiographical, Kertész states that he "did not write an autobiographical novel" but "a novel using autobiographical material. You must not think of me as the protagonist of the novel and if you do, that only proves that I succeeded in writing a good one" (Kertész qtd. in Adorján and Minkmar 21; my translation). He continued the novel in a trilogy, with the novels *A kudarc* (*The Fiasco*) (1988), and *Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért* (1990) (*Kaddish for a Child not Born*) (1997), the latter written in the technique of stream of consciousness. In the mode of autobiographical fiction similar to *Fateless*, the protagonist is now a middle-aged survivor of the Holocaust whose literary career has been unsuccessful in a failed marriage with an ex-wife who has her new family and children. The alter ego of the author does not want children of his own because to bring children into a world that has allowed the Holocaust is impossible (see *Books and Writers* at <<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/kerte.htm>>).

What is important to register is that all of Kertész's work is connected to the Holocaust of the Hungarian Jewry. Kertész's commitment to his own experience as a Jew in the Hungarian and German Holocaust and his understanding of the history of Hungarian Jewry is perhaps best illustrated with Zsuzsanna Ozsváth's concise articulation of the historical and cultural context of Miklós Radnóti, one of Hungary's best poets and who was killed in a forced labour unit of the Hungarian army. Concentrated into one insufficient sentence: the history of Hungarian Jewry is a horrific resolution of assimilation and the termination of unparalleled contributions to Hungarian culture ending in the genocide of 1944:

For many years, most Hungarian Jews had participated in, and benefited from, the fast-spreading emancipation and assimilation processes initiated in nineteenth-century Hungary. Protected by the law of 1867, giving them equal rights, and by that of 1895, giving them equal religious status, Jews started to live in considerable freedom in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Grateful for being tolerated, appreciated, even feeling wanted -- unless, of course, they showed too deep an attachment to their religious or cultural past -- masses of Hungarian Jews assimilated to the Hungarian way of life and became passionately patriotic. But their sense of security changed considerably after the First World War. The loss of that war, the subsequent violence created by the commissars of Hungary's Soviet Republic, the rise of the counter-revolutionary army and its pogroms, and the Trianon Peace Treaty, which excised two-thirds of Hungary's historical terrain, catapulted the country into ever new turmoil. Amid chaos and economic collapse, old ideals of liberalism disappeared and the nineteenth-century tolerance shown toward the Jews changed into hatred ... [but] Magyar was the language of his [Radnóti's] environment, the language of the great Hungarian poets, whom he loved and revered, the sound of his earliest nursery rhymes and the words of his lyrics. He expressed his joy and sorrow in Hungarian; he dreamt in Hungarian; Hungarian was the language of his people, whose fate and future he felt to be his own. He conflated his sense of being and identity with those of other Hungarian poets, and he understood his life in terms of the ethos and myths of his homeland. (Ozsváth 52-55).

Since the award of the 2002 Nobel Prize in Literature to Imre Kertész, Hungarian media, politics, as well as the academe, locate Kertész and his work in the traditional patriotic -- that is, nationalist or at best self-referential -- context of Hungarian culture and literature thus in fact appropriating Kertész and his work. This is problematic to say the least. In my view, Kertész's work ought to be read in the context of Central and East European culture and within this in the social, historical, and literary relevance of Central and East European Jewish memoir culture. And here is the crux of the matter: no

culture of Central and East Europe has dealt with its Jewish history and the Holocaust; not Austria, not Hungary, not Czechia, not Romania, and so on. And then there is the renaissance of anti-Semitism. In today's post-communist Hungary anti-Semitism is alive and well and separately from justified (or not) criticism of the Israeli-Palestinian situation. In fact, sociologists and Hungarians in general often refer to Hungary as the "Two-Hungarys," the perception based on clear lines of division -- roughly speaking and in the reductionist mode -- between anti-Semites and Judeophiles. In Hungary, it is said, one does not have the luxury of neutrality or indifference: one must take sides either for Jews or against (on this, see, e.g., Susan Rubin Suleiman's *Budapest Diary*). Kertész and his work and now the Nobel Prize for Literature in recognition of his work represent a problematic situation for Hungary and Hungarian culture for several reasons, not the least because Kertész himself has said often that he considers his existence, his life, and consequently his writing belonging to no particular place or space (see, e.g., Adorján and Minkmar; more on this see below). It is also true that many Hungarians would vehemently disagree with the suggestions that they are anti-Semitic. Why, "some of their best friends are Jews, the only problem is that Jews control the media, the universities, many industries, the country's finances, etc."; in other words, such and similar arguments are precisely those of traditional anti-Semitism. It is the emotional logic of a people who have often been colonized themselves but who at the same time have a self-imposed mythology of national virtues against adversity, a navel-gazing attitude, and certainty that does not allow for the inclusion of a "foreign," that is, Other, people, even if they have been an integral part of society for several generations such as the Hungarian Jewry.

Hungarians have been successful in assimilating and incorporating many other nationalities into their national make-up but only if and when such Other accepted and made all matters Hungarian their own. That is, the homogenization and the homogenousness Hungarian culture has always been considered -- and so is today -- a matter of survival. Jews have also been assimilated and integrated -- perhaps in higher numbers than in any other culture of Europe -- until World War I (the integration and assimilation of the Hungarian Jewry occurred at large in the nineteenth century. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the time from when onward the Hungarian-Jewish population began to increase, there were about 4000 Jews in Hungary, living under circumstances similar to those of other countries at the time). The Hungarian Jewry of the period 1840 to 1918 accepted the proposal that they would be considered equals if they assimilate to the homogeneous Hungarian culture, a particular alignment owing to the fact that Hungarians themselves have always been an "other" in Europe, which they invaded and settled in the ninth century whereby their choice of the Danube valley is inbetween the Slavs and the Germans. The process of assimilation along with the development of a bourgeoisie and the industrialization of a country very much feudal until the late nineteenth century (in many ways even after still) served at the time the Jewry of Hungary well and in retrospect it could have been a model of succes against historical anti-Semitism. But then, in retrospect again, the choice to accept the Hungarian proposal turned out to be a major mistake: a change arrived with Austria-Hungary's losing the war on the side of Germany and, briefly put, the country's and its culture's turn towards racism and intolerance can be explained as follows. With German nazism next door and Hungary's choice to align itself with Hitler much of nazism's ideology gained open acceptance in all walks of life. The rampant intolerance of many things deemed "non-Hungarian" and thus objectionable is a consequence also of more recent history, namely the aftermaths of World War I, when in 1919 at the Treaty of Trianon Hungary lost 60% of its territory and population, with large numbers of Hungarians in the newly created Czechoslovakia, in Austria, in Romania, and in Yugoslavia. The alignment with Hitler, at the time, appeared inevitable to most because of Hungary's history with Germany, the impossibility of alignment with Stalin's Soviet empire, because of Hitler's expansionism towards the east, etc. Of course, the new post-1919 intolerance and anti-Semitism had some "justification" in the minds of many, precisely because the proportional exuberance of Jewish intelligentsia, Jewish artists, writers, the banking industry, indeed the relevance of Jews as the main representatives and in some ways the initiators and creators of the urban bourgeoisie of the country.

But this had reasons obvious to anyone who knew just a bit of history: for centuries the Hungarian Jewry was not allowed landed property and were barred from many walks of life (similar to the situation in practically all of Europe) while the Hungarian gentry, landed or other, considered business and industry unworthy of interest (in literature, this has found expression in many ways but without the desired effect to the better). Add to this the fact that in history Jews are the only people who since the dawn of time encouraged knowledge, reading and writing, to all members of their people (instead of using knowledge as privilege) and while in Europe for example obligatory schooling was not instituted until the late eighteenth century, how can anyone be surprised that Jews excelled in all areas of intellectual, artistic, and business activity? It is the educated mind of the Jew and the logical consequences of excellence resulting from this that bothered (and still bothers) the Hungarians. Pity. And in my opinion simply plain stupid, although as we know well, not exceptional as the same has been going on elsewhere and continues to go on today. The work of writers like Kertész -- a rare type because of his total and consequent devotion to writing and literature -- is thus in my opinion of great relevance today as literary text and as memory while at the same time his prose in its literary, sociological, and political contexts suggests lasting relevance as well, precisely because of its aesthetic literary content and form, autobiographical content, and as historical and personal documentary about Central European culture (for a recent bibliography of studies about Central and East European culture, see Tötösy "Selected Bibliography" 189-206).

Jewish memoir culture with regard to the Holocaust is a prominent genre across several types of cultural production. As I propose above, Kertész's work needs to be located and read within the context of Central and East European culture. Although there is the danger this way to make Jewish memoir writing a particular and thus limited and specific type of text, when read in the Central and East European cultural context, Kertész's work discloses exceptional qualities and associations which would otherwise remain hidden or secondary. Kertész suggests himself that he belongs "to that Jewish literature which came into being in eastern and central Europe. This literature was never written in the language of the immediate national environment and was never part of a national literature. We can trace the development of this literature from Kafka to Celan and to their successors -- all we have to do is peruse the various emigré literatures. For the most part, this literature deals with the extermination of European Jewry; its language may vary, but whatever the language, it can never be considered a native tongue. The language in which we speak lives as long as we speak it. Once we fall silent, the language is lost too -- unless one of the larger languages takes pity on it and lifts it on to its lap, as it were, as in the *pietà* paintings" (Kertész "The Language of Exile," (2002): <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,12084,814056,00.html>>.

Following my earlier suggestion that Kertész's work can be understood as part of a phenomenon of Central European culture categorized as Central European Jewish memoir literature, first I present examples of this genre of writing, in the present instance texts written in English (for an extended version of this, see Tötösy "Comparative Cultural"). My focus on English-language Jewish memoir literature is for the reason that the "central European" is particularly prominent in these texts. As John Willett writes in his paper "Is There a Central European Culture?" "the elements of a new Central European culture must come from even farther a field than they did before Hitler and Stalin. We certainly cannot expect them to depend on the spontaneous German-Jewish-Yiddish tradition that once seemed to link the comedian Peischacke Burstein in Vilnius with the writer Ettore Schmitz in Trieste: however unforgettable, the source is barred, buried under the masonry of the great concentration camp memorials. But the essence of mid-Europe surely is that its cultural inspiration must come from both East and West, and its role be to test ideas against one another and use the result in its own creativity" (15). Willett touches on several issues pertinent to my line of thought. The importance of Jewish culture in its varied forms on and in Central Europe is a given. However, while I understand the history of Central European Jewries tragic as Willet does, I do not find it "barred" and "buried" (on this, see also Ozsváth). Instead, I understand Central European Jewries as a

quintessential synthesis and expression of Central European culture very much present and with a future. And my immediate proof is the Nobel Prize for Kertész. The notion of a "Central European culture" is a debated notion: in my understanding, Central European culture is an expression of art, thought, and literature, a world view defined through a geographical region stretching from Austria and the former East Germany (incl. Mitteldeutschland) to Romania and Bulgaria, the Baltic countries, Serbia and the Ukraine, etc., including the Habsburg lands and German influence and their spheres of interest at various times including now.

In contemporary US-American and Canadian English-language literature, memoir writing is a genre with a significant and growing corpus. In Central Europe proper, too, after 1989 and since there has been a large output of memoirs. In Hungary, for example -- although of course memoirs have been published under the socialist/communist period -- after 1989 memoirs of all possible persuasions appeared in large numbers. In English, I find of particular poignancy André Stein's *Hidden Children: Forgotten Survivors of the Holocaust* (1993), a collection of oral histories as told by child survivors from Central and East Europe. Among recent Holocaust (auto)biographical histories with a Central European background similar to those I discuss below, of note is Eugene L. Pogany's *In My Brother's Image: Twin Brothers Separated by Faith after the Holocaust* (2000), the story of a Hungarian-Jewish family and their conversion to Catholicism, their conscious assimilation into Hungarian culture and urban Central European society, and the Holocaust, Anca Vlasopolos's *No Return Address: A Memoir of Displacement* (2000), a fictional autobiography of a family of Hungarian, Romanian-Jewish, and Romanian-Greek intellectuals, their lives, and the lives of their relatives and friends in communist Romania (on Vlasopolos's book, see Freedman at <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss3/6/>>), and Judith Kalman's *The County of Birches* (1998), a poetic novel about a happy and charmed childhood in an environment best described as the suggested "Central European culture" best exemplified by the Jewish bourgeoisie of the region. On the other end of the spectrum, there are memoirs by the former upper class whose members were, in the rule, patriotic and nationalist, anti-Semitic, and conservative while at the same time very much Central European in their outlook towards Austro-German culture and with family, friends, and contacts over the whole region. A good example of this category of memoirs is Jenő Koltai's *Egy honvédtiszt visszaemlékezései. Korkép a XX. Századból* (Memoirs of an Officer: A Portrait of the Twentieth Century) (1989). While resonating with much nostalgia, Koltai's writing is void of emotion and suggests an emotionally dry, truncated life. On the other hand, he represents most aspects of the patriotic Hungarian cultivating a belonging to Central European culture and with commitment to honoring the codes of the upper-class bourgeois officer serving in the country's professional army. What is fascinating in the text is the author's description of a Central European landscape of culture and social life in the interwar period of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Austria, and Germany.

Of the many texts of first- and second-generation Central European Jews who published in recent years memoirs and fictional autobiographies, in a geo-cultural context, perhaps Julie Salamon's *The Net of Dreams: A Family's Search for a Rightful Place* (1996) is perhaps the most "Central European." Her idea and research of the book began by the impetus of reading, in 1993, about Steven Spielberg's plans to film his *Schindler's List* after which she traveled to Poland and other areas of Central East Europe such as Huszt, now in the Ukraine, and formerly a Hungarian town. Salamon's description leading into the history of the mixture of nations is intriguing itself: 'This was the land of the *shtetl* -- and of Gypsies, Slovaks, Hungarians, and Ukrainians -- an ignorant backwater that had been annexed by the USSR after World War II. Now Communism was finished and the place where my parents were from had been reshuffled again. Their birthplace had lost the status of affiliation with Czechoslovakia or the former Austro-Hungarian Empire' (13). What is significant in this brief excerpt is the reference to Czechoslovakia (the interwar period) and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (the period prior to the 1919) and thus the setting of the notion of Central Europe, geographically and culturally. The Salamon family history, like that of Susan Rubin Suleiman or that of the Sonnenscheins' in István Szabó's film

Sunshine (see Portuges; Suleiman) stretches across Central and East Europe in time, in space, and in cultural parameters. It includes the particularities of their education (the Austro-German *Gymnasium* and university), their knowledge of languages and cultures, and the necessities of maneuvering from one cultural context to another but altogether being in a Central European space. Salamon's interpretations and explanations of matters and things Central European -- be those in the particular Slovak, Hungarian, Ruthenian, Jewish, or Czech -- extend over much detail. For instance, at one point she explains a specific instance of the usage in Hungarian of the familiar (*te*) and polite (*maga*) forms of address and other forms of address they used such as the Ukrainian-Czech mixture of *zolitik* ("little golden one") in their social and individual contexts (205). Salamon's narrative of memory is concentrated on family and family history and the memory of the horror of the Holocaust runs through it. Yet, the Central European cultural space as well as spaces the family's history and the histories of individual members occupy the book's narrative and they involve us as readers not only as historical evidence but also as evidence for a culture and literature of the region.

Elaine Kalman Naves's *Journey to Vaja: Reconstructing the World of a Hungarian-Jewish Family* (1996) is the most historical among the texts introduced here (it also has the least mistakes with diacritics and the translation of phrases and terms). The Hungarian-Jewish families whose history is told in the book, the Schwarz-Székács, the Weinbergers, the Rochlitz, etc., belonged to that stratum of Jews in Hungary who assimilated and became members of the educated upper-bourgeoisie of the country (see Braham; Ozsváth). In the case of the author's family, they produced members who were members of the Austro-Hungarian officer corps (the *crème de la crème* of pre-First World War and interwar society) and upper-government officialdom, landowners, industrialists, and the urban intelligentsia such as one Aggie Békés, who earned a doctorate in comparative literature from the University of Debrecen in the 1930s (section of photographs, n.p.). Jews in Hungary underwent perhaps the most widespread and deepest possible process of assimilation, for the reason that Kalman Naves describes as "during the forging of Magyar nationalism, they cast their lot wholeheartedly with that of the emerging Magyar nation -- only one of the many ethnic groups in the polyglot Austro-Hungarian Empire which included Slovaks, Ukrainians, Slovenes, and many other nationalities. Even the orthodox among Hungarian Jews described themselves with self-conscious pride as *Magyars* of the Israelite faith" (15). In many instances, assimilation and magyarization resulted in access of numerous Hungarian-Jewish families to both non-titled nobility and to the ranks of the aristocracy and the large numbers of the urban strata of Hungarian Jews created much of the country's industrialization. Although assimilation and "voluntary" magyarization occurred to all of Hungary's national minorities such as Germans, Slovaks, Romanians, etc., in the case of Hungarian Jews the results of cultural and emotional assimilation explain much of the proposed character of Central Europeanness of the region's Jewries (for the Jewish nobility of Hungary, see McCagg; see also Molnár and Reszler; the above mentioned autobiography by Koltai contains descriptions with regard to the assimilation of Hungary's ethnic German population). Magda Denes's *Castles Burning: A Child's Life in War* (1997) is a doubly sad book in view of its author's recent death in 1996 (all other authors of the memoirs under discussion here are alive today). The story of Denes's family is particularly poignant because of her father's abandon of his wife and daughter in 1939. The story of this Hungarian-Jewish family, again in the context of its position as educated upper bourgeoisie, is of particular interest for my argument of Central Europeanness because the story unfolds in "travel." What I mean is the telling of the tale when Magda Denes -- after surviving the Holocaust in hiding -- flees Hungary in 1946 with her mother and grandmother and how she perceives and experiences life as a refugee with and among all the other nationalities in the refugee camps. The narrative contains much reference and description of the self-confidence of the educated and cultured Central European (a theme in itself). Here is an excerpt: "I always suspected Ervin of having a bit of the prole [proletarian] in him. Anyway, now he wants to emigrate to Palestine with her, and he wants to fight for a Jewish state. I don't even know what that means. Jews are intellectuals, not farmers or soldiers" (147). Denes eventually ends up in New York

where she becomes professor of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy at Adelphi University.

Susan Rubin Suleiman's *Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook* (1996) is bittersweet in many instances of her narrative of recollection of Budapest life and death during the war and the Holocaust. The book's title itself 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), 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 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 Kosice and Bratislava -- Kassa and Pozsony/Pressburg (the Hungarian and German names of the cities, respectively) -- the Rubin family of three arrives in Vienna, free. After immigrating to the United States, Susan Rubin becomes an academic with a Ph.D. in French literature and her life is with clear distance to her cultural background in the American melting pot. Although with a brief interest in Hungary during the 1956 Revolution and its aftermath of Hungarian refugees arriving in the United States, it is only in the early 1980s -- upon the illness of her mother, her own divorce, and the stress of raising two sons as a single mother -- that 'Zsuzsa' (the Hungarian version of Suleiman's first name) takes new interest in Hungary, Poland (her mother's background), and her unresolved past. After the dissolution of communism in 1989, she is invited to Budapest as a guest professor and she spends an extended period there in 1993. 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. While her descriptions of life and letters in Budapest may be uninteresting and at times contrite to a reader familiar with matters Central European and Hungarian, they are valuable for the North American reader because in North America these matters are of little or no importance or interest. Suleiman's writing is such that among the many interesting aspects of Central European and, within that, specifically Hungarian scenes, situations, and cultural varieties of matter, some may be of particular interest to the English-speaking and North American reader. Interestingly, there is one instance where Suleiman falls prey to that most Hungarian characteristic, 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....

Desider Furst and Lilian R. Furst's *Home Is Somewhere Else: Autobiography in Two Voices* (1994) is a dual autobiography. For her book, Lilian Furst edited autobiographical writings her father left her and added her own recollections in some chapters. Desider Furst was born in Hungary, studied dental surgery from 1919 to 1926 at the University of Vienna, became a naturalized Austrian citizen in 1928, and practiced dentistry in Vienna until 1938. He fled Austria with his wife, also a dentist, Dr. Sári Furst-Neufeld and daughter, Lilian, after the German annexation of Austria in 1938, to settle in England. The Fursts, similar to the Salamons and the family of Susan Rubin (Suleiman), had relations all over Central and East Europe, including Poland, Hungary, and Austria. They were educated with active interest in literature, theater, and the arts. Lilian's father and mother both had an M.D. and specialization in dental surgery from the University of Vienna. And their families and relatives suffered the Holocaust everywhere. Yet, Lilian Furst and Desider Furst's memoirs of their lives and the lives of their families are imbued with nostalgia for the lost world that before the Shoah was theirs, a world that their memories recover and dress in sunshine. In addition to their value in the corpus of the

genre of memoir literature, the above texts are seminal descriptions of culture, history, and everyday life of pre-Holocaust Central Europe. These memories of real events are formations of an (imagined) Central Europe, a landscape with a culture of its own. Cumulatively, the texts reclaim a world destroyed and, by preserving and transporting its images to today, they locate a Central European culture of today. While these memoirs suggest and demonstrate variably similar perspectives of a Central European culture, they are also inseparable from the Holocaust and the history of the genocide of Jews remains part of Central European culture and its postcolonial situation.

And now there is the work of Imre Kertész: his texts are not only important because of his personal story as a Holocaust survivor who writes literature about the Holocaust; his work is important because he received the Nobel Prize in Literature. Again, in comparison to the texts introduced here, his work is more immediate because he remained in the culture and language that put him into the concentration camp, into the Holocaust. And one special feature of Kertész's *Fateless* is that within the genre of memoirs about the Holocaust, the narrative contains representations of the Holocaust with "laughter." As such -- and predating Lina Wertmüller's film *Seven Beauties* (1975) and Nicola Paviani's film *Life is Beautiful* (1997) -- the novel is one of the very few examples of representation of the Holocaust where the banality of evil is transcended in art despite the moral dictum that there cannot (or must not?) be art about the Holocaust: the novel's bittersweet and at times biting irony laced with intelligent humor represents originality and innovation (of course and naturally, among scholars of Holocaust literature Kertész's approach would have detractors precisely because of the "laughter" the author describes in the concentration camp and the humor he attributes to life under the most horrific circumstances). It is, indeed, as Sára Molnár suggests, the new aesthetics of the Holocaust (see Molnár <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss1/5>>).

For those familiar with Hungarian literature it may be of interest to study whether and if, how far the mood of the experiences of the protagonist and Kertész's alter ego, György Köves, is influenced by that standard text of the modern Hungarian canon, Ferenc Molnár's *Pál utcai fiúk* (*The Paul Street Boys*), published in 1907. Were it that the influence of Molnár's novel is tracable in Kertész's *Fateless*, this would mean of course a curious subversion of a canonized text of Hungarian literature and whether intended or not, this would fit with Kertész's confessed border existence as the quintessential Central European, one between Jew and Hungarian whereby the Jewish part has been put into him by his experience of the Holocaust. In other texts such as in *Valaki más. A változás krónikája* (1997; *Someone Else: The Chronicle of Metamorphosis*) Kertész travels through Central Europe. The time is 1991, after the fall of the Soviet empire. In Vienna, Kertész searches for the city of the philosopher and is unable to find it: "Wittgenstein. In Vienna I am unable to find any trace of him. But in him -- in Wittgenstein -- I face Vienna everywhere" (15; my translation). Thus Kertész searches for his imagined city and does not find it. Eventually, he finds some Wittgenstein, by association such as the Vienna Circle philosopher's who was shot to death in 1936, Moritz Schlick's memorial plate on his house. Kertész's continues his journey through Salzburg and back to Budapest and about everywhere his description is with a certain nostalgia about the possibilities of the Jewry of Central Europe always ending in the same question "Where did this assimilating Jewish upper-middle-class disappear to, they who served their own annihilation with such hopeful subservience?" (128). Kertész is not a revisionist and I think he is fully aware that we cannot fault the Hungarian Jewry of the nineteenth century for wanting to assimilate at the time. It is in retrospect and with the nostalgia about an imagined community that could have been that we are confronted in Kertész's text and that brings the Holocaust to the fore so painfully and that still breaths in Vienna in his text (and perhaps in reality? but this is only my extension, that of a reader's, of his text). In sum, Kertész's work, that is, one aspect of many, is precisely that, namely texts suggesting Central European culture and literature at its best, aesthetically, sociologically, historically, politically, etc.

Works Cited

- Adorján, Johanna, and Nils Minkmar. "Liebe ist das Wichtigste. Der Literatur- Nobelpreisträger Imre Kertész übers Schreiben, die Diktatur, Martin Walsler und das Glück, nirgends dazuzugehören." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* (13 October 2002): 21.
- Books and Writers: Imre Kertész (1929-)* (2002): <<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/kerte.htm>>.
- Braham, Randolph L. *Studies on the Holocaust: Selected Writings*. Boulder: East European Monographs, 2000.
- Denes, Magda. *Castles Burning: A Child's Life in War*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997.
- Freedman, Ralph. "The Memoir and Representations of the Self: New Books by Vlasopolos and Picard." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 4.3 (2002): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss3/6/>>.
- Furst, Desider, and Lilian R. Furst. *Home is Somewhere Else: Autobiography in Two Voices*. New York: State U of New York P, 1994.
- Kalman, Judith. *The County of Birches*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1998.
- Kalman Naves, Elaine. *Journey to Vaja: Reconstructing the World of a Hungarian-Jewish Family*. Montréal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1996.
- Kertész, Imre. "The Language of Exile." Trans. Ivan Sanders. *The Guardian* (19 October 2002): <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,12084,814056,00.html>>.
- Kertész, Imre. *A száműzött nyelv* (The Language of Exile). Budapest: Magvető, 2001.
- Kertész, Imre. *Sorstalanság. Filmforgatókönyv* (Fateless: The Film Script). Budapest: Magvető, 2001.
- Kertész, Imre. *Valaki más. A változás krónikája* (Someone Else: The Chronicle of Change). Budapest: Magvető, 1997.
- Kertész, Imre. *Sorstalanság*. 6th. ed. Budapest: Magvető, 1975.
- McCagg, William O., Jr. *Jewish Nobles and Geniuses in Modern Hungary*. Boulder: East European Monographs, 1972.
- Molnár, Miklós, and André Reszler, eds. *La Génie de l'Autriche-Hongrie. Etat, société, Culture*. Paris: PU de France, 1989.
- Nobel Prize in Literature, The: Laureates* (2002): <<http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/index.html>>.
- Molnár, Sára. "Nobel in Literature 2002 Imre Kertész's Aesthetics of the Holocaust." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 3.1 (2003): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss1/5>>.
- Ozsváth, Zsuzsanna. "Radnóti, Celan, and the Aesthetic Shifts in Central European Holocaust Poetry." *Comparative Central European Culture*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2002. 51-69.
- Portuges, Catherine. "Comparative Central European Culture: Austrian and Hungarian Cinema Today." *Comparative Central European Culture*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2001.
- Salamon, Julie. *The Net of Dreams: A Family's Search for a Rightful Place*. New York: Random House, 1996.
- Suleiman, Susan Rubin. "Central Europe, Jewish Family History, and Sunshine." *Comparative Central European Culture*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2002. 169-88.
- Suleiman, Susan Rubin. *Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1996.
- Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. "Comparative Cultural Studies and the Study of Central European Culture." *Comparative Central European Culture*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2002. 1-32.
- Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. "Selected Bibliography for the Study of Central European Culture." *Comparative Central European Culture*. Ed.
- Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998.
- Willett, John. "Is There a Central European Culture?" *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. Thematic Issue *Eastern Europe ... Central Europe ... Europe* 119.1 (1990): 1-15.

Author's profile: Steven Totósy de Zepetnek's <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/totosycv>> areas of scholarship are in comparative media and culture studies (theory and application), communication studies, comparative literature, postcolonial and ethnic minority studies, film and literature, English, French, German, Central European, US, and Canadian cultures and literatures,

history, bibliography, new media scholarship and knowledge management, and editing. At the University of Alberta 1984-2000 and associate director the Research Institute for Comparative Literature 1989-97, since 2000 in Boston where he lectured in communication and media studies at Northeastern University 2000-01, he is concurrently professor of comparative media and culture studies at the University of Halle-Wittenberg, Germany. Totosy is author of numerous articles and books in several areas of the humanities and the social sciences and he is editor (founding) of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*. E-mail: <clcweb@purdue.edu>