Ferenc Laczó and Tamás Scheibner

Beyond Anti-Fascist Heroism, Representations of Buchenwald in Hungarian Literature

Abstract: The current paper explores the main Hungarian literary representations of Buchenwald. While the discussion below presents the most relevant historical facts, relates to transnational trends and briefly covers the reception of select texts' Hungarian translations, it focuses primarily on three major works of literary fiction in the Hungarian language that address experiences of Buchenwald to a significant extent and in a fictionalized way: Pál Királyhegyi's *Mindenki nem halt meg* [*Not Everyone Has Died*], Imre Kertész's *Sorstalanság* [*Fateless*] and László Kroó's *Bölcsőm, koporsóm Buchenwald* [*Buchenwald: My Cradle, My Coffin*]. The paper argues that Királyhegyi's 1947 work is a fascinating experiment in black comedy, Kroó's 1981 novel reconsiders anti-fascist certainties and develops a more hesitant and sceptical approach to past heroism within the broad parameters of state socialism, whereas Kertész's 1975 novel amounts to an innovative attempt to create authentic testimony opposed to any and all forms of memory instrumentalisation.

Introduction

This paper explores the main Hungarian literary representations of Buchenwald. In the introduction, we will sketch a history of Hungarians in the Buchenwald camp complex to highlight, among other things, that the large majority of them were Jewish Hungarians in a place that otherwise held mostly non-Jewish inmates. The chief part of our paper in turn focuses on three major works that address experiences of Buchenwald to a significant extent and in a fictional way. The literary works in question, all of them penned by authors who themselves had survived Nazi camps and had been incarcerated in Buchenwald, are Pál Királyhegyi's *Mindenki nem halt meg* [*Not Everyone Has Died*], Imre Kertész's *Sorstalanság* [*Fateless*] and László Kroó's *Bölcsőm, koporsóm Buchenwald*

Note: Tamás Scheibner has contributed the sections on the three main literary works analysed below, and Ferenc Laczó has added the historical parts to this co-authored paper. They have co-drafted both the introduction and the conclusion and have jointly edited all parts.

 https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110770179-005

[*Buchenwald: My Cradle, My Coffin*]. Analysing these major works in post-war Hungarian literature will allow us to show that Buchenwald was approached in a variety of ways; attributes that can be used to label these novels are 'pre-communist' (inasmuch as one of them was written before the solidification of the Hungarian Stalinist regime in the aftermath of World War II), pro-communist and non-communist. More specifically, we argue below that Királyhegyi's 1947 work is a fascinating experiment in black comedy, illustrating the constitutive role of a genre of early Buchenwald writings that was increasingly marginalised later on. Moreover, Kroó's 1981 novel reconsiders anti-fascist certainties by taking a new, more hesitant and sceptical approach to the heroic past and present-day values within the broad parameters of state socialism, while Kertész's 1975 novel (now available in two English translations, of which critics consider Tim Wilkinson's 2004 work the better) is an original attempt to create authentic testimony intended to oppose any and all forms of memory instrumentalisation. While we relate our discussion to transnational trends and include the reception of Hungarian translations of select texts, our paper is primarily meant as a case study of literary fiction in Hungarian. This also means that we will not be devoting similar attention to Buchenwald-related memoirs in Hungarian, such as, perhaps most famously, Miklós Julesz's 1971 *Kirándulás a pokolba* [*Excursion to the Inferno*] or Éva Fahidi's 2005 *Anima Rerum* (published in English in 2020 as *The Soul of Things: Memoir of a Youth Interrupted)*, significant accomplishments which could doubtlessly serve as the subject of another paper.

Hungarians in the Buchenwald camp complex

In this historical part of our chapter, we would like to clarify when and how Hungarians were forced to enter the Buchenwald camp complex and with precisely what consequences. In connection with these questions, we will reflect on how the history of the concentration camps is intertwined with that of the Holocaust in general and the genocide against Hungarian Jews in particular. Going beyond a mere sketch of the historical context in this way, we wish to highlight ways in which these historical facts and connections matter when it comes to Hungarian literary representations of Buchenwald.

Leading Hungarian historians of Nazi genocidal policies Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági estimate in their *Táborok könyve: Magyarok a náci koncentrációs táborokban* [*Book of Camps: Hungarians in Nazi Concentration Camps*] that about 18 – 19 per cent of all Nazi concentration camp inmates came from Hungary (2017: 645). This is, of course, a disproportionately large number considering the near continent-wide expansion of Hitler's empire and Hungary's demography

– the temporarily enlarged country had about 14,700,000 inhabitants according to the only wartime census of 1941 (Mazower 2008). What is more, the devastating experiences that Hungarians were submitted to in the Nazi camp universe had a clear temporal focus: the vast majority of Hungarians in question were camp inmates during the last roughly thirteen months of the war, i. e., after Nazi Germany invaded Hungary in March 1944 and following the onset of extremist collaboration (Kádár and Vági 2013). Thirdly, it is equally unusual within the European context that, of the over half a million individuals who were deported from Hungary after 19 March 1944, no less than 98 per cent were Jewish (Kádár and Vági 2017, 645). In short, a huge and disproportionately large number of Hungarians were forced to enter the Nazi camps in a relatively short period of time towards the end of the war, and nearly all of them were Jewish.

As Kádár and Vági (2017, 128) report, some 32,818 persons from Hungary were registered at KL Buchenwald, and the registration list we possess is admittedly not quite complete. The predominantly Jewish individuals from Hungary who were deported to Buchenwald and its subcamps, of which there were some 130 by 1944, were forced to arrive there via several alternative routes. Many of them were moved to Buchenwald or one of its subcamps from Auschwitz-Birkenau (without necessarily being registered in the latter camp complex first). As Kádár and Vági (2017, 127) explain, there were recurrent transports of persecuted Hungarians, mostly young and able-bodied Hungarian Jews, between Auschwitz-Birkenau and Buchenwald in the course 1944, with the first such transport initiated on 23 May and the last one on 4 November. Others who had been deported from Hungary had also passed through Auschwitz-Birkenau and then landed in Buchenwald, but only after being forced through one or more camps in between. Following the Arrow Cross takeover in Budapest in mid-October 1944, even more people were deported from Hungary to Buchenwald or its subcamps, now often directly: as part of this late wave of persecution in November and December 1944, another 3,306 persons arrived in the camp complex.[1]

When the Nazis made the decision to "evacuate" major camps further east such as Auschwitz-Birkenau and Gross-Rosen ahead of their imminent conquest by the liberating Red Army, KL Buchenwald emerged as the single largest camp complex within the Nazi camp universe. By February 1945, this sprawling institution with its centre on the Ettersberg above Weimar contained a staggering

1 For details regarding these various routes of deportation and their respective frequency based on an analysis of the complete sample of 349 interview protocols from 1945 – 46 containing information on Buchenwald, see Laczó 2013, 614 – 615.

112,000 inmates (Kádár and Vági 2017, 123). About 15,000 of them would die there during the roughly one hundred days prior to liberation in 1945. A further 12–15,000 inmates eventually lost their lives during the death marches leading out of the camp complex in the very final stages of fighting. Thousands more succumbed to various illnesses after their (nominal) liberation from their Nazi tormentors. Overall, the victims of those early months in 1945 constituted about half of all the victims of Buchenwald between 1937 and 1945. Inmates from Hungary thus experienced the final stages of this camp complex when Buchenwald and its subcamps imprisoned an unprecedented number of inmates, and by far the largest number of victims in the camp's history, while survival tended to be a question of chance more than anything else.

Nikolaus Wachsmann (2015) has rightly emphasised that the history of concentration camps and the history of the Holocaust were partly intertwined but largely separate. Of the millions of victims of the Nazi genocide against European Jews, at most 200,000 died in all those concentration camps, which were not simultaneously death camps, which Auschwitz-Birkenau was (Kádár and Vági 2017, 644). Of the total 56,000 victims of the Buchenwald camp complex, Jewish victims may have been the largest subgroup but did not represent the overall majority.

However, when it comes to the case of Hungary, the Buchenwald camp complex and the history of the Holocaust overlap to a much higher degree. Of the 6,548 identified victims of Buchenwald who came from Hungary, more than 6,000, or about 96 per cent, were Jewish. These numbers do not include those 800 to 1,000 Hungarian individuals who died at Mittelbau-Dora and its subcamps, which – though they had originally been subordinated to Buchenwald in formal terms – were independently administered from 1944 (Kádár and Vági 2017, 130, 339).

The same connection between Buchenwald and Hungarian Jews also holds when the question is approached from another angle. Of the Jewish inmates in the Buchenwald camp complex, Jews from Hungary constituted the most substantial subgroup. Kádár and Vági (2017, 123) highlight, for example, that of the nearly 11,000 Jewish inmates there in mid-October 1944 (when the complex contained some 88,000 registered inmates in total) almost all had been deported from Hungary. Of the roughly 21,000 individuals eventually liberated from Buchenwald in April 1945, some 1,240 were Hungarian Jews. A significant percent of the surviving children – about one-third of all liberated children in Buchenwald – also came from Hungary. As Kádár and Vági (2017, 645–646) show, this made KL Buchenwald one of seven Nazi camps where more than 5,000 Hungarian victims perished. After Auschwitz-Birkenau, which was clearly the major site of the Holocaust against Hungarian Jewry with approximately 340,000–

345,000 victims from this one country alone (notably, Hungarians were the largest group of victims of this most infamous camp complex), the numbers of the (predominantly Jewish) Hungarian victims in Buchenwald are in a range comparable with the numbers recorded in Dachau (6,000) and four other camps – Gross-Rosen, Bergen-Belsen, Stutthof and Mauthausen – for all of which it is difficult to make precise estimates.

The very marked Jewish complexion of Hungarian experiences in Nazi camps is worth emphasising, especially since Hungary subsequently became part of the Soviet Bloc. This in turn meant that an anti-fascist perspective on history was mandated, a perspective that found various ways to incorporate the Jewish catastrophe but did not explicitly prioritise its remembrance (Bohus et al. 2021). The mandated anti-fascist consensus in Soviet-ruled Eastern Europe devoted significant attention to the violently destructive nature of the Nazi camps but preferred to focus on the heroic aspects of political resistance rather than on the innocent victims of the Nazis' racial war. When it comes to literary works and memoirs of the post-war period, this means that authors whom we might label 'Jewish survivors of the Holocaust' employed a different, broader and often more directly political frame to interpret their experiences. However, it is also true that, when it came to the remembrance of Buchenwald in post-war, officially anti-fascist Hungary, the carriers of this memory were predominantly Jewish Hungarians whose relevant publications often reflected newer trends in the development of transnational Holocaust remembrance.

While Hungarian Jewish survivors' experiences in Buchenwald have been addressed in hundreds of witness accounts recorded in Budapest as early as 1945 – 1946 (Laczó 2013), the experiences of the politically persecuted in a special part of the Mauthausen camp were more extensively covered in early post-war Hungarian-language memoirs (Laczó 2016, Ch. 6). Literary representations ambitioning to address Jewish or political persecution at an artistic level were less frequent and focused mostly on the experiences of hiding, on ghetto life in Budapest or on forced labour (*munkaszolgálat*) – which is unsurprising given that the chances of survival were much higher among those who had managed to avoid deportation. The major exception in terms of early literary representations of Buchenwald is undoubtedly Pál Királyhegyi's (1900 – 1981) 1947 novel *Not Everyone Has Died*, to which we will now turn.

A Buchenwald cabaret

'My trip was urgent, lest I miss the Auschwitz express. I didn't miss it.' (Királyhegyi 2018, 145) Pál Királyhegyi recalls his deportation with sarcasm in his mem-

oir *Első kétszáz évem* (1979), recently translated to English as *My First Two Hundred Years* (2018). As a screenwriter going by the name of Paul King, Királyhegyi collaborated with some of the greatest Hollywood directors of the 1920s. He moved to England in 1938 and decided to repatriate to Budapest in 1941, from where he was forcibly transported to Buchenwald in 1944. A couple of years after his return to Hungary, he published a book, *Mindenki nem halt meg* [*Not Everyone Has Died*], in which the autodiegetic narrator is taken to Buchenwald after a brief stay in Auschwitz. The blurb referred to this early post-war text as a novel; however, its entire corpus was included, with only minor changes, in Királyhegyi's 1979 memoir.

The genre of Királyhegyi's text may be fluid and difficult to define, but it is clear that it did not aspire to achieve a realistic effect – unlike most of the *Lagerliteratur* [camp literature] of the immediate post-war years (Zombory 2016; Laczó 2016, Ch. 6), it did not intend to portray events meticulously or with the greatest possible accuracy. Instead, Királyhegyi created a highly stylised text comprising a series of episodes structured as cabaret sketches (Kisantal 2020, 138–139), which were to be recited in an anecdotical style and often had a punch line.

For instance, after spending some three weeks in Buchenwald, the narrator is assigned to a labour transport heading to the aircraft factory in Niederorschel. The days of unbearable thirst and hunger in the cattle wagon are recounted as follows:

> On the fourth day a colleague of mine, a certain Mittelman, fortunately stole my remaining bread and cheese from my pocket at night. It couldn't be proven, though, since in all his guile and while he ate it immediately in the dark. This theft did have the advantage that starting then, the thirst didn't torment me as much, for I remembered that good, cold, fresh water truly tastes good only after eating.
>
> The train spent more time standing still than moving, and even when it was moving, it was just barely jolting along, so we made the six-hour journey from Buchenwald to Niederorschel in five days. It was inhumanly cold, but it turned out that not even this weather helped us against thirst, so the superstition that water is truly important only in the dog days of summer proved to be injust. (Királyhegyi 2018, 207; 2015 [1979], 213–214.)

As this quote illustrates, Királyhegyi emphatically rejects compassionate portrayals of suffering. In this regard, he keeps his distance from most survivor accounts, especially those without a marked antifascist political agenda which tended to foreground senseless suffering. Királyhegyi's text achieves its effect by – humorously and sarcastically – contrasting the clearly inhuman conditions with bourgeois social chatter and the apparently unfounded optimism that trivialises hardships out of mannered modesty. It is a telling detail that the civilian profession of one of the narrator's campmates was that of dance and etiquette

teacher. Indeed, nothing is further from the style of Királyhegyi's novel than pathos.

In accordance with such an anti-pathetic disposition, the experience of extreme abuse and the witnessing of mass-death are depicted as if they were regular societal events – as if they were events that were certainly irritating and might call for a satirical approach, but which would in no way drive the narrator to re-evaluate his complete existence or perspective on the world. Királyhegyi's book clearly shares this disturbingly normalising perspective with Kertész's *Fateless*. Unlike in the latter, though, Királyhegyi's novel does not suggest that the protagonist goes through a fundamental change. In the final phase, once he has been taken to work in a quarry and an SS guard attempts to methodically beat him to death, he survives by calling upon the guard to explain why such brutality gives him enjoyment. The guard admits in response that this is merely his profession and that he has no special interest in killing him, and decides to let him go. This is the final, crucial act before the camp's liberation. By this time, the narrator reports falling into a state of total apathy and describes himself as a dead person. However, there is no indication whatsoever that such a near-death experience qualifies as a watershed event in the life of the protagonist or changes his disposition in any way. The post-liberation period is recalled using the same anecdotal technique. As literary historian Tamás Kisantal (2020, 146) has pointed out, the inclusion of this text in Királyhegyi's memoir *My First Two Hundred Years* further underlines the episodic approach to the deportation in the wider context of his life story. Királyhegyi is indeed narrating his life story from the perspective of a stand-up comedian looking back and presenting himself as a *Jedermann:* an everyman who reveals the absurdity of given situations by approaching them with faux naïveté and a rather cheerful attitude.

As Kisantal (2020, 143) has insightfully observed, Királyhegyi invokes the tradition of picaresque fiction. Indeed, the narrator presents his deportation and life in the camps as a chain of adventurous situations that each pose a challenge he needs to overcome through his wit and sheer luck in order to survive. 'Life was beautiful, and I was almost happy,' the narrator insists when recalling his times in the camps. 'I was satisfied with everything except from going hungry all the time, and I felt that if it went on like this, the whole famous deportation would proof to be but a passing adventure I'd someday tell stories to my grandchildren about.' (Királyhegyi 2017, 214) In accordance with the picaresque tradition, the underdog succeeds against all odds, returns to his family and even reunites with his long-lost love. The typical picaresque hero is a troublemaker who leads a sinful life but also conveys a higher standard of morality that relativises everyday norms. Here, such norms are defined by the Nazis, and subverting them is a demonstration of humanity.

The idea of happiness and joy felt by the victims in a concentration camp would later be taken up by Kertész (most famously in the closing lines of *Fateless*) and indeed provides a key to his understanding of the Holocaust.[2] Pulp fiction also served as an important reference point for him when trying to find the proper language for his novel. Certainly, there are also significant differences between the two authors. In Királyhegyi's text, the obvious vulnerability of the protagonist is frequently contrasted with a type of narration that flips hierarchies. A typical excerpt from a scene which depicts the narrator caught in an 'infringement', having actually witnessed others being beaten to death, reads as follows: 'the sergeant began slapping me. He seemed quite agitated, the veins swelling on his temples and his face purple with rage, and I began getting worried about him. It seemed that his wretch might have a stroke at any moment, and then I'd be executed for murdering a sergeant, which was strictly forbidden in Germany.' (2017, 220) Királyhegyi's narrator maintains his dignity by elevating himself above his persecution and persecutors using a combination of wit, sarcasm and humour, while Kertész's narrative approach, as we shall see, constructs a protagonist subjected to and captivated by a tyrannic language.[3]

Despite reasserting his dignity and authority through narration, Királyhegyi depicts his protagonist as someone who does not have any intended impact on the course of events: he acts spontaneously and is only capable of improvising. Such a protagonist was certainly very different from what was officially desired and expected under the (soon to be consolidated) state socialist regime. A number of characters and events from the history of the Buchenwald camp familiar from other accounts appear here as well, but the book does not offer many specifics; instead, such references are offered in passing between two anecdotes, and these supposedly key events add little to the structure of the novel.

Crucially, Királyhegyi omits references to armed resistance within the camp and the courageous struggle for liberation by the inmates, save a single sentence about Russian captives breaking into the food warehouse. Given that antifascist narratives about Buchenwald tend to place great emphasis on such acts of resistance and self-liberation, and they indeed came to play a central role in the official communist interpretation of the history of the Nazi camp at Buchenwald, it ought to come as little surprise that Királyhegyi's intriguing novel *Not Everyone*

2 There are conflicting interpretations of the significance of happiness in Kertész. In our view, it is not a corollary to the experience of camps revealing occasional solidarity among inmates (cf. Adelman 2004) but a key feature of Kertész's approach as a whole as noted by Louise Vasvári (2005, 261).

3 For a theoretical elaboration on the topic by Kertész, see especially Kertész 2001.

Has Died had been practically forgotten by the time it was republished as part of the author's memoirs more than three decades later.

The melancholy of anti-fascism

As shown above, Buchenwald was one of the Nazi camps where thousands of inmates from Hungary perished, and the camp on the Ettersberg was one of the main locations of the Holocaust of Hungarian Jewry. However, Buchenwald was not one of the central loci of Hungarian camp literature during state socialism. That does not mean that the memory of Buchenwald was not assigned a prominent position in the broader memory of World War II under Hungary's Soviet-type regime; however, this was more the result of an immensely successful and influential (East) German literary text, Bruno Apitz's *Nackt unter Wölfen* [*Naked Among Wolves*] (1958), which was soon translated (next to dozens of other languages) into Hungarian. Apitz's text was widely discussed in Hungary at the time of its appearance in 1960 and temporarily became a standard reference with which no other work of fiction could quite compete – not even Jorge Semprún's *Le grand voyage* [*The Long Voyage*], which appeared in Hungarian translation as early as 1964 (the year after its publication in French), but which received significantly less attention than Apitz in the 1960s and 1970s.

When it comes to Hungarian-language authors, the autobiographical novel by Oszkár Betlen, *Élet a halál földjén* [*Life in the Land of Death*] (1959) was considered one of the definitive accounts of experiencing the Nazi camps in those years. Betlen, a communist author, was born in 1909 in Pozsony (renamed Bratislava when it became part of Czechoslovakia, later becoming the capital of Slovakia). Arrested by the Gestapo in 1939 on the pretext of human trafficking, he was deported to Dachau and then on to Buchenwald, where he was forced to spend over three years. In 1942, he was transported to Auschwitz to work in the IG Farben factory. Despite his extended imprisonment on the Ettersberg at a time when few other Hungarian-speakers were there, the Buchenwald camp features in Betlen's novel rather briefly and essentially only as a prelude to its major parts, which describe communist resistance in Auschwitz.

Buchenwald, however, received more elaborate treatment in a 1981 Hungarian novel by the title *Bölcsőm, koporsóm Buchenwald* [*Buchenwald: My Cradle, My Coffin*]. Its author, László Kroó was, like Betlen, a member of the communist underground. Kroó was born in Transcarpathia in 1921, a formerly Hungarian region inhabited mostly by Ruthenians and Jews, which belonged to Czechoslovakia in the interwar years and which was (re-)annexed by Hungary in 1939, shortly after the 1938 Munich Agreement (Segal 2016; Fedinec and Csernicskó 2019). De-

spite his Jewish family background, Kroó refused to identify as such and devoted himself to the workers' movement in Užhorod (Ungvár), intent on building a utopian community of all peoples. He was a member of the Czechoslovak communist party during his high school years (Kroó 1988; Dupka 2015, 253).

Like most Jews under Hungarian rule, Kroó was arrested and deported to Auschwitz in 1944, from where he was transferred to Buchenwald. After his liberation, Kroó returned to Užhorod, which had by then been incorporated into the Soviet Union. Publishing under the pseudonym László Szenes, he was to play a seminal role as an editor, journalist and writer in the local Hungarian cultural scene. In 1975, he moved to Budapest where he continued with the publication of short stories and recollections (now under his own name) while also acting as a leading representative of the Hungarian Federation of Resistance Fighters and Antifascists (Magyar Ellenállók és Antifasiszták Szövetsége, MEASZ).

Both Kroó's 1981 novel *Bölcsőm, koporsóm Buchenwald* and his 1988 memoir, *A Kárpátok alatt* [*Beneath the Carpathians*] firmly asserted an antifascist interpretation of Nazi persecution that refrained from highlighting antisemitism as a major driving force. The dividing line between political and ethnic definitions of victimhood, however, was rather permeable: right after the regime change, Kroó not only began to attach greater importance to the Jewishness of Nazi victims, but also suggested a direct link between the Holocaust and Israel's struggles in the Middle East. The speech he delivered at a 1991 commemoration ceremony on the victims of and triumph over fascism organised by MEASZ stated:

> The developments during the Gulf War have once again made us aware that the Jewish state is an island in the Arab world. She must therefore act wisely and circumspectly and, if the situation so requires, it must fight back to discourage all aggressors and terrorists. At the same time, it is important to fight for world recognition, to prove that knowledge, diligence, enthusiasm, and patriotism can create a thriving oasis in the middle of the desert. ('Megemlékezés' 1991)

These lines could be said to provide a textbook example of a Zionist perspective.

When Kroó published *Bölcsőm, koporsóm Buchenwald* in 1981, he apparently could not have been more at odds with such a political discourse. The novel's protagonist, György Gadó, is deported in May 1944 when 'Jewish transports' from Hungary to the Nazi camps were indeed in full swing – and, as we have seen, those who would eventually arrive at Buchenwald from Hungary were predominantly Jewish as well. However, Kroó's text not only de-emphasises the Jewishness of inmates in favour of highlighting the presence of political deportees but goes well beyond that: the book gives the impression that mere passers-by had been forcibly deported to the camps due to their terribly bad luck as opposed to as the result of targeted and systematic campaigns. Even though

Jews are explicitly mentioned in this context, it is done in a carefully calculated manner: 'A wide variety of people were rounded up: illegals, Jews, suspected partisans, black marketeers, and even people who just happened to be on the street.' (Kroó 1981, 49) It is striking that the primary function of referring to Jewish captives in the novel is nothing else but to demonstrate the presence of chauvinism in the camp even among inmates – first and foremost by pointing to the antisemitism of Polish nationalists (Kroó 1981, 119).

We ought to recall that depicting Buchenwald as a site of Jewish suffering was far from unprecedented in Hungary when Kroó's novel appeared in 1981. *Nagyvilág*, a literary journal devoted to world literature, published Austrian survivor Fred Wander's 1970 novel *Der siebente Brunnen* [*The Seventh Well*] in its 1972 translation by Mária Ember, who was herself a survivor of the Strasshof camp in what is now Austria and author of *Hajtűkanyar* [*Hairpin Bend*] (1974; published in German as *Schleuder Kurve,* 1988), an important documentary novel drawing on the experiences she had there. By 1981, Imre Kertész's *Fateless* had been released as well, that used a very different voice to that of Wander, but also emphasized Jewish suffering Obviously, offering alternatives to the officially preferred modus of memorialisation was by no means a safe path to Hungarian reception. The case of Elie Wiesel in fact illustrates the contrary: *Night* (1960), originally written in a much more extended Yiddish version than the one that became internationally famous in its translations, was not published in Hungarian translation until after the regime change in 1989/1990, even though members of the Hungarian Jewish community publicly expressed their interest in Wiesel's person and writings ('Elie Wiesel' 1964), not least because he was deported from Sighetu Marmației (Máramarossziget) when it was under Hungarian rule. Tellingly, Wiesel winning the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize also barely featured in Hungarian news. Fred Wander was forced to pass through some twenty Nazi camps before arriving in Buchenwald. Viennese by birth, Wander chose to move to the GDR in the 1950s. Thanks to his aforementioned novel *Der siebente Brunnen*, which revived the tradition of Hasidic tales and portrayed the camps as hopeless places abandoned by God, Wander was decorated with the Heinrich Mann Prize of the GDR Academy of Arts in 1972 – and it seemed to make no difference in his case that the type of interpretation he offered differed from many other officially endorsed accounts of the Nazi camps. If anything, the publication and reception of *Der siebente Brunnen* demonstrates that literary censorship and cultural policy in the GDR might have had their specific preferences (Prédhumeau 2019, 235–254), but the emergence of what we today call Holocaust memory, which for decades now has been considered a primarily Western development that had its beginnings during the Cold War, had close, if still understudied parallels in state socialist countries.

Censorship in the GDR clearly did not prevent the publication of works that highlighted the torments suffered by Jews as such. Even though one censor observed that Wander's novel was 'appearing rather late and at a socio-political moment when there is a danger that the portrayal of these Jewish mass sacrifices could direct readers' sympathies into the wrong channel, namely into sympathies for today's Israel' (quoted in Prédhumeau 2019, 247), it was still possible for him to publish *Der siebente Brunnen*. Contrary to the censor's suggestion, it appeared without a 'guiding foreword'. During the 1970s and 1980s, the book was issued in five consecutive editions in the GDR alone. The Central Committee of the SED, however, directly interfered with the planned cinematic adaptation and prevented it from being realised on the all too familiar grounds that it presented the victims of fascism as 'passive' (Görner 2005, 47–69).

In 1981, Wander's novel was finally published in Hungary in book format, even though the 1972 translation in *Nagyvilág* [*Great World*] literary journal had received a long and enthusiastic review at the time in *Új Élet* [*New Life*], the biweekly magazine of the Magyar Izraeliták Országos Képviselete (National Representative Office of Hungarian Israelites), which explicitly called for a book publication (Zsadányi 1972). We could speculate that the publication of Kroó's antifascist novel that same year in 1981 might have made it easier for Wander's book release to be approved as it was, in a sense, appearing in the shadow of the former.

As is to be expected based on the above, *Bölcsőm, koporsóm Buchenwald* by and large followed the antifascist narrative of Buchenwald[4]; however, it certainly did not do so in a schematic or propagandistic way. The book instrumentalises the memory of Buchenwald to assert a continuity between communist underground resistance in the camps and present-day state socialism, takes a combatant position towards the West, and clearly assigns higher value to the active resistance fighter than the passive victim, but despite this, it also reflects a crisis of remembrance that appears to have emerged on both sides of the Iron Curtain during the 1970s.

At the heart of the novel is what is referred to as the 'Red Cross night'. The communist organisation in the camp instructs the protagonist György Gadó to select a small group from among the wounded or gravely weakened inmates from the 'barracks of death' that will be transported to the Auschwitz gas chambers the following day. The communist underground intends to smuggle out these lucky few from the barracks using fake ID numbers. Gadó is thus confronted

4 For a concise summary of the main purposes that the narratives were intended to serve as part of the instrumentalisation of the memory of Buchenwald, see Monteath 1994; 1999; Katago 1998.

with a moral dilemma: how to select twenty people from among five hundred strangers in a single night without arousing the suspicion of the *Blockälteste*, compared to whom, as it says in the book, 'the butcher slaying in the slaughterhouse is but an innocent lamb' (Kroó 1981, 45). As Gadó circles the barracks and gets to know the stories of their inhabitants, he tries to make decisions in haste and stifling fear. Some of the inmates challenge his choices on the spot and even accuse him of taking advantage of his privileged situation. Meanwhile, as we know from earlier parts of the novel, the protagonist struggles with his 'sectarian' passions that govern his behaviour at times instead of more dispassionate, rational calculations. Kroó stages the Red Cross night as something morally ambivalent inasmuch as it is not possible to fully justify any decision regarding the inmates. The author thereby raises difficult and sensitive questions about the nature of communist resistance in Buchenwald.

Such moral dilemmas, which were arguably central to the political controversies surrounding the remembrance of Buchenwald in the late twentieth century, signal that Kroó's novel embodies a type of antifascist engagement with the experience of the camps in which the past is not a closed chapter with a definite lesson but something haunting, with a less than clear meaning. The roots of this approach to the past can be traced back to the 1960s, when influential Hungarian literary works and films redefined the relationship to the past, not through the collective's supposed need for ex post justifications, but instead through complex accounts of individuals' consciences.[5]

Kroó's anti-fascist novel exhibits precisely this shift as its protagonist reevaluates his approach to the past. The recollection of Gadó's wartime experiences is embedded within a story set in 1964, when, in reaction to a denunciation against him, the state firm at which he is working sets up a disciplinary committee to launch an investigation into whether he collaborated with the Nazis in the camp. At first, Gadó seems to be unshaken in his belief that such accusations, driven by personal antipathies and political differences, will be easily and quickly refuted, but the whole process transpires differently.

The committee summons witnesses who Gadó saved on that prominent night; several of them have had spectacular careers during the consolidation of the Kádár regime. Some of the witnesses indignantly reject the accusations against Gadó, while others turn away from him to avoid being associated with the case in any way. The omniscient narrator conveys the protagonist's thoughts

5 Examples include *Húsz óra* [Twenty Hours] and *Hideg napok* [Cold Days] by novelists Ferenc Sánta and Tibor Cseres, and the films *Nappali sötétség* [Darkness in Daytime] and *Utószezon* [Late Season] by director Zoltán Fábri (see Varga 2019; Klimó 2018; Szász-Lénárt-Zombory 2013).

and internal monologues. Even though the chronology is subverted, the result of the investigation is unmistakable: Gadó's belief in collective agency is shaken, he starts to doubt the meaning of his past deeds and becomes an isolated individual. As we find out at the beginning of the novel, he is in hospital, where he is barely recovering from a heart attack that was probably caused by the grinding impact of the investigation.

Here, the attempt to deal with the past is presented not as Gadó's choice but as an unavoidable necessity; it is an essentially reactive process. The protagonist is forced to realise that the fixed meaning that he has attributed to communist resistance in Buchenwald can be challenged and the entire morality behind it questioned. This kind of drama in the book is all the more remarkable as Gadó's version of events is ostensibly consistent with the canonical historical narrative that was officially endorsed at the time: this 'official' version of the past is put to the test by both domestic and international actors on the pages of Kroó's novel.

Let us explore domestic factors first: the perceived distortion of the past is linked to careerism and, as such, it is embodied through a character by the name of Géza Pulkánszki. Because of his high government office, he is considered by the disciplinary committee to be a key witness in the investigation, whose false testimony thus signals grave dysfunctionalities. Indeed, his false testimony is shown to be part of a wider crisis. At one point in the novel, Gadó complains that many try to obtain advantages by claiming they were antifascist resistance fighters without any serious basis. This certainly inflates the ethical authority of those who were indeed involved in the resistance. Moreover, it also raises serious issues about the most desirable approach to take towards the past: since the emphasis falls on individual deeds over the collective efforts of the underground organisation within the new testimonial paradigm, the central subject of history shifts, with the implication that individual responsibility is now the new standard by which past events ought to be assessed. At the same time, the novel suggests that the past cannot be reliably reconstructed as witnesses might deliberately distort facts, avoid testifying or simply be unable to adapt to a culture of testimony.[6]

6 Witnesses in the novel who have a favourable view of Gadó and are not scared to express their opinion are unable to make a strong case for him precisely because they do not have the proper language to deliver their message. Typically, one of the witnesses, a leading intellectual in socialist Hungary, who has no doubts about Gadó's positive historical role, cannot even relate to the accusations directed against Gadó, and instead of giving testimony that might save his former benefactor, he vulgarly suggests the Disciplinary Committee flush their papers down the toilet.

Raising such sceptical points in epistemological terms, the novel suggests that potentially manipulative and dishonest witness testimonies present a particularist viewpoint that does not necessarily lead to a more valid understanding of past events and might even obscure their historical meaning. In contrast to imperfect and fallible individual witnesses, the collective is in possession of the truth: 'We are aware that this is a political manoeuvre. Our enemies failed to overthrow our system in fifty-six [1956] and now they are trying to devise various tricks. They want to implicate our people. We can see through them. You, Comrade Gadó, may well be one of their chosen victims.' (Kroó 1981, 216 – 217) The president of the Disciplinary Committee has thus already passed his judgment prior to the investigation, knowing full well that the person who made the accusations against the protagonist was a pro-Horthy émigré from South America.

As we suggested early on, Gadó eventually gets acquitted, but that is not the central issue anyway. Legal absolution and the trust the Party expresses in him does not satisfy him. The question becomes a personal matter for Gadó: he now desperately wants to establish whether his life truly had meaning. As we shall see shortly, the novel provides a rather ambiguous answer to this existential question.

The novel connects the significance of how the camps are remembered to the global Cold War. The reader is informed that the central reason for thoroughly investigating Gadó's case is the fear that the enemies of the socialist system might take advantage of the ignorance of such an issue and abuse it for propaganda purposes of their own. This is where survivor testimony is expected to play a key constructive role; however, the solidarity that characterises the underground communist networks in Hungarian prisons (symbolised by the Orpheus medallion carved by Gadó's fellow communist prisoners) and later in Buchenwald has evaporated. In accordance with a powerful interpretative tradition, Buchenwald is depicted here as a space where true internationalism emerged[7] – and the organised resistance consisting of various nationalities is presented as a precursor to a pan-European community.

However, Gadó's somewhat utopian beliefs are shaken, and by the end of the novel he has serious doubts about whether the legacy of Buchenwald will determine the future. Loss of hope is indeed one of the recurrent motifs employed in the novel. The aforementioned medallion of Orpheus is the only material relic that Gadó has managed to hold onto, even through his time in Buchenwald. The medallion provides him with strength on several occasions when he is

7 On the history of how myths of the Buchenwald communist underground were fabricated, see Neumann-Thein 2014.

about to lose faith, and he considers it a reminder to not look back but focus on the road ahead – the road that leads to a communist society. However, he loses this relic just as the accusations are being made against him, and he is forced to revisit the past without the power transmitted by the medallion.

The novel's last chapter takes place in Weimar and at the Buchenwald memorial site that Gadó visits on the twentieth anniversary of liberation in April 1965 as a member of the Hungarian delegation. Visitors from all over the world have gathered there, among them many survivors. The group at first seems to resemble the multinational community in Buchenwald. However, as it turns out, the *Nationale Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Buchenwald* [National Buchenwald Memorial] does not really fulfil its function as a memorial site. Firstly, Gadó identifies in the crowd a driver of the cattle wagons between Buchenwald and Auschwitz, who has come for a visit from his new home in the FRG. This provides a chance for Gadó to complain about the lack of any earnest process of dealing with past crimes by West Germans. The presence of the driver signals the corruption of memory and serves to confirm the lessons of Gadó's investigation from an additional angle. Secondly, he voices criticism against Hungarians who have travelled there as tourists and not as part of the official delegation: they prefer not to visit the Buchenwald exhibition, for they are 'try[ing] to bury these things as deep as possible' (Kroó 1981, 220).

In the face of such ignorance and wilful avoidance, Gadó and Pfeifer, his former campmate, emphasise the importance of remembering. Significantly, they do not set a fixed memory in opposition to the refusal to confront the recent past but highlight the importance of a process of discussion – even when such discussions lead to confrontations between survivors in the novel as they cannot agree on where exactly the *Revier*, the camp hospital, was located. However, these kinds of 'dead objects' are presented as less important than the people who survived to tell their stories (Kroó 1981, 227).

This insistence on personal remembrance is in a tense relationship with the earlier portrayals of witnesses. It might suggest that remembering is only truly worthwhile in a non-institutionalised setting where it is devoid of functionality – only then can it become part of a societal and intersubjective engagement with the past between individuals whose perspectives on the past are far apart. The politically conscious camp activist who we get to know in the novel turns into a remembering subject largely defined by his melancholy. It is not that his antifascist political beliefs are shaken, nor that the future appears entirely bleak to him. Even when Gadó, in a sceptical and rather pessimistic moment, laments Franco's Spain, South American dictatorships and US military interventions in South and Southeast Asia, he is contradicted by Pfeifer: there is a 'socialist world order', even in a part of what was once Nazi Germany. They come to

agree that there is 'no assurance that we have eradicated the Himmlerian-style concentration camps surrounded by electrified wire fences' (Kroó 1981, 229). While the fight thus remains timely and urgent, there is a palpable feeling of loss and a certain sense of nostalgia towards that alternative 'spirit of Buchenwald' here.

The final two paragraphs of Kroó's novel link back to Apitz's as they recall the figure of Stefan Jerzy Zweig, called Garibaldi in Kroó's fictional account, the child who was supposedly saved in a suitcase and hidden by the *Internationale Lagerkomitee*.[8] Garibaldi, who has also visited the memorial, is being discussed by other travellers. Gadó partially overhears some remarks about him: '– I felt that the mere fact that little Garibaldi was among us, the mere fact that he exists and is alive... / The noise of the wheels absorbed the words of Gadó's companion. He was sorry. He wanted to hear the end of the sentence...' These are the very last words in the novel. They suggest that saving a single individual might make all other efforts meaningful. This humanist message, which is presented rather hesitantly, does not quite amount to a firm, communist and anti-fascist outlook.

Bölcsőm, koporsóm Buchenwald goes beyond the conventional anti-fascist narrative in several ways. It certainly contains a number of predictable elements: it highlights the self-liberation of the inmates led by the ILK, camp society appears as a 'Europe in miniature' fighting against dehumanising forces, it avoids emphasising the Jewishness of many of the victims of Nazi persecution, and it even invokes the fictional story of Zweig. However, and more interestingly, Kroó's novel also points to the difficulty of conveying the past and does not portray the prisoners in the camps, including the communists among them, as flawless characters. By breaking with the discourse of heroism, the book raises the question of moral responsibility – of communists as well as others.

Even though all of this is arguably instrumentalised here to deliver a political message, it is still noteworthy that, largely parallel to the Western discourse of reassessing the past in the 1970s, a similar demand was emerging in Eastern Europe within the broad parameters of anti-fascist literature. Kroó's antifascist novel can be interpreted as a depiction of how the communist political subject is destabilised and his belief in the utopian community imagined at Buchenwald shaken, and how that subject is replaced by a hesitant humanist individual who nevertheless remains a firm supporter of the existing Soviet-type regime.

8 The circumstances of Zweig's arrival and survival in Buchenwald, including how he entered the camp, have been a subject of debate (see Niven 2009, 162).

Buchenwald as a Holocaust site

The best-known Hungarian-language author to depict the Buchenwald camp is doubtlessly 2002 Nobel Laureate Imre Kertész (1929 – 2016), who in the summer of 1944 – like the teenage protagonist of *Fateless*, Gyuri Köves – was forcibly sent to Buchenwald following a brief stay in Auschwitz-Birkenau and was subsequently transferred to the Zeitz subcamp. After being liberated at barely fifteen, Kertész returned to Budapest where he soon joined the Communist Party and became a journalist. He and Királyhegyi were active in the same socio-cultural milieu during the post-war decades and were personally acquainted.

As his biographer, Clara Royer, has shown (2019, 67), Kertész found it difficult to relate without irony to the rhetoric expected in loyalist party circles and newspapers, and was therefore unable to remain with any of them for long. Compulsory military service left a deep mark on him, not least because his years as a prison guard to a certain degree reversed the power hierarchy that he had become accustomed to in the Nazi camps (Royer 2019, 74 – 77). Being cast in the role of a guard made him ask profound moral questions and led him towards his career as a writer. He found his opportunity once he had been discharged and was commissioned to co-author musical comedies with some of his friends (Royer 2019, 126 – 136).[9]

In the second half of the 1950s, Hungarian musical comedies, which drew on the tradition of the Budapest cabaret, were intended to satisfy the needs of an audience tired of socialist realism and looking for light entertainment. Kertész earned a modest income from the irregular royalties that he received for the comedies, which, together with his wife's earnings, provided them with a living wage and meant that Kertész did not have to take on a permanent job. Although this also led to certain sacrifices in terms of comfort and entertainment, having completed his comedy-related assignments, Kertész was free to devote his remaining time to his real passion: novel-writing. However, his unpublished diaries show that he experienced writing as a permanent crisis and was indeed unable to develop his plans for a novel about military prison. In 1960, he turned to the subject of Buchenwald instead, hoping for a sort of salvation from his permanent struggle with words (Kertész 1960).

The novel that would become *Fateless* was initially meant to be an exercise in conveying the experience of the camps, which Kertész hoped would help him overcome his personal crisis and clear a path to the novel he had originally plan-

9 For a thorough discussion of the changing cultural political status of musical comedies in socialist Hungary, see Heltai 2011.

ned to write (Kertész 1960). In light of Kertész's reflections on the birth of what is indubitably his most famous novel, it is somewhat ironic that the book would then be popularly interpreted via trauma theory. Contrary to his expectations, developing a language that would mediate the experience of the camps proved to be a difficult struggle, to which the fact that he ended up working on his not particularly lengthy novel for some twelve years attests (between 1961 and 1973). However, his search was not of a psychological but rather of an artistic nature: Kertész sought to find a language that would break with the schemata that he associated with the representation of the camps and, in a broader sense, of existentially liminal situations.

The diaries he kept are, to a large extent, reader's diaries, in which he discusses issues of tone, language and structure. In doing so, he condemns practically all of the authors who have been canonised in world literature, from Dostoevsky and Camus to Thomas Mann and Semprún – who, although he judges their foundations to be far from solid, at least remain standing before his unyielding critical gaze. It appears that Kertész's main problem with the process of recalling and writing was not the difficulty of expression, but, on the contrary, its excessive lightness: the turns of phrase in the comedies he had written, the clichéd language of journalism and the conventions of camp literature were constantly seeping into the chapters of the novel he was writing, which made him feel like he had to constantly purify his own text. It took him years to complete just the first two brief chapters of the eventual book, and he carried out this stylistic search with extraordinary self-discipline and awareness (Kertész 1961).

In the twelve years he spent composing *Fateless*, Kertész seemed primarily concerned with finding an authentic language and authentic expressions. In this regard, he was no different to the authors of other camp novels and memoirs. The fact that the question of authenticity played such a prominent role in the discourse of the time also indicates that the early post-war abundance of memoirs had overwhelmed society's capacity to absorb them (Kisantal 2021) and that, from the 1960s onwards, the prospective authors of newer works felt a special need to justify their contributions.

Authenticity for Kertész meant, above all, that the form and content of the story had to be in harmony. The child's narrative point of view was what enabled him to achieve this. The experience of the camps – note that at the time of writing the novel he did not yet use the term Holocaust – is not portrayed from the position of an independent, mature, self-determined liberal subject, but from the perspective of a teenager who is trying his best to adapt to the current norms of society. By having such a young person narrate the story, Kertész limits both the protagonist's agency and the narrator's authority. The choice of a child narrator proved to be an ideal medium for Kertész to convey his perception of the victim,

a central element of which was his (the victim's) at least partial identification with the viewpoint of the perpetrators.[10]

This is reflected in the language of the novel, where the traces of social and ideological norms are woven into the narrative voice, or are left on it like traces on a palimpsest. The conformism of the protagonist's acts and in the narrator's language leads to Gyuri becoming a *Muselmann*, to borrow the camp's own idiosyncratic jargon, which becomes a transformative stage inasmuch as it is then that linguistic determination is fully eroded. At this dramaturgical climax of the novel, an inexplicable reflex of the body, a 'spark' of life following the final dissolution of the will and the loss of all articulation, sets the protagonist on the road to recovery. What we might call resistance results here from a biological reaction, which in turn suggests that it is not conscious actions that lead to freedom, but the utmost and forced detachment from oneself. The *Muselmann* condition is thus presented as the essential end point of camp life, which then also proves decisive for the formation of a new subject.

On returning from the camp, this new subject rejects the common language and communal narratives on offer (Kaposi 2004). As a condition of testimony, he suggests that happiness can be found in self-dissolution and the accompanying liberation from normative constraints, although he remains aware of the extreme difficulty, even near impossibility of living up to this task. The paradox of such an authentic account is that it can only be achieved through unparalleled linguistic control: linguistic idioms must be mixed in a calculated way to serve the overarching purpose of composition.

Kertész did not contrast fictional and non-fictional genres as competing means of authentic testimony. At the same time, he was deeply concerned about the instrumentalisation of memory, towards which he was critically disposed regardless of the genre. He disapproved of anti-fascist and humanist approaches just as he did neoliberal attempts to commercialise the Holocaust – and sensed that he himself was being turned into an instrument of the latter towards the end of his life (cf., e. g., Radisch 2013).

He found it difficult to accept the descriptions of suffering in the camps precisely because they came with such loaded language (Kertész 1965). From his point of view, the richness of detail was a risk factor in authentic testimony, which could in fact easily erode the very possibility of testimony. Consequently, barely any specific details about Buchenwald appear in the novel, and they can

10 Blurring the boundaries between victim and perpetrator became a key claim for understanding Kertész's oeuvre. Monographs in Hungarian that have had a lasting impact on his reception include Szirák 2003; Vári 2003; Molnár 2005. See also the collections Szegedy-Maszák and Scheibner 2004; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári 2005.

only be identified by readers who are already familiar with them in some way. We do acquire a certain sense of the prisoners' various identities in the novel due to the well-known symbols on their clothes and other less obvious indicators; however, from the moment of deportation onwards, the centrality of Jewish characters to the story is indisputable: a distinctly Jewish story unfolds through the main character and narrator Gyuri Köves, and *Fateless* clearly presents instances of Jewish suffering.

This also underlines the fact that, in contrast to several other European national cultures, it was possible to seamlessly integrate the representation of Buchenwald in the Hungarian context into the evolving cultures of Holocaust memory. Because such a large majority of Hungarian deportees to Buchenwald were Jewish, establishing a direct connection to the genocide against European Jews was indeed standard practice in Hungary. It is telling that in the Hungarian reception of Imre Kertész's oeuvre and, more broadly, in that of Holocaust literature, the specific features of Buchenwald as a concentration camp within Nazi Germany are hardly ever noted. Kertész, of course, played a part in establishing such a direct and, from a transnational perspective, imprecise connection between Buchenwald and the Holocaust, not least because his novel, in accordance with the poetics of prose described above, presented a rather abstract and historically non-specific picture of the camps, despite the fact that Jorge Semprún's non-Jewish anti-fascist autobiographical novel *Le grand voyage* had been loosely integrated into school curricula and therefore achieved wider fame in the 1980s. By the time Kertész was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2002 and receiving the broad accompanying international and domestic acclaim, however, Semprún's reputation in Hungary had clearly declined, partly as a result of an anti-communist turn in the 1990s, and his anti-fascist novel tended to be remembered as Kertész's somewhat anachronistic counterpart.

An integral part of Kertész's literary mission in the 1960s and 1970s was his conscious decision to live in a sort of 'internal emigration' and at a critical distance to the politics of memory as they were developing in the West, particularly in the German Federal Republic. For him, this twofold distancing was a key condition for writing: it was his way to express his independence and create a nonconformist text. Writing thus became a form of self-formation, or, as Clara Royer put it, novel-writing as a demonstrative protest was 'a justification of one's own existence [...] to oneself, in which the individual reclaims his own responsibility [...] and becomes a witness of himself' (2019, 109). This approach also implies a radical scepticism towards the transmissibility of experience: people can only truly remember for themselves; even though the imperative to remember remains, the individual practice and social function of witnessing may disappear

over time. As we have seen above, *Fateless* is open to a reading consistent with this radical scepticism.

In the 1990s, *Fateless* entered the international canon of Holocaust literature, which had been developing since about the late 1970s, as a novel of individual testimony that tackles the experience of the camps through a more abstract representation of Jewish suffering and the degradation of the body. According to a distinct stream within this canon, the question of moral responsibility towards the past could be raised only when the victims were wholly and senselessly objectified in a given historical context, for instance by the modern bureaucratic state, and when the victims were simultaneously de-politicised. The Holocaust victim would thus emerge as a suitable subject to symbolise modern man thrown into a cruel and meaningless existence.

It is worth noting that Kroó's work, written after the publication of Kertész's novel, confronts the reader with similar issues, even if it has a significantly lower aesthetic standard and some intrusively ideological overtones (the question of moral responsibility is raised there by the disorientation and self-absorption of a victim in pursuit of political goals). Such anti-fascist moralising, however, was not a dominant mode in Hungarian literature, not even in the 1980s – and the much less impressive literary qualities of Kroó's work compared to Kertész's certainly played a role in this.

Conclusions

This paper has analysed the main Hungarian literary representations of Buchenwald. We have shown how Pál Királyhegyi's *Not Everyone Has Died* from 1947 narrates the author's life story, including his camp-related experiences, from the perspective of a stand-up comedian who reveals the absurdity of a series of situations and encounters during his persecution by approaching them with false naivety and penetrating irony. By imitating a staged oral performance, the book's narrator seeks the same kind of community with the reader as he would find in a live theatre act. The importance of laughter as a way of dealing with painful memories and recreating a sense of communality between the cabaret performer and the audience is implied throughout; it is a coping mechanism that was common in the immediate post-war period but was marginalised and even delegitimised later on as pathos emerged as the 'expected tone' in which to remember the camps.

If humour characterises Királyhegyi's novel, a different disposition shapes László Kroó's 1981 novel *Bölcsőm, koporsóm Buchenwald:* melancholy. This novel articulates a complex grappling with the past, a sense of loss of the alter-

native 'spirit of Buchenwald', and a rather hesitant humanist message that breaks with the discourse of heroism and other conventions of the anti-fascist narrative. We have argued that the novel's representation of Buchenwald raises moral dilemmas without questioning support for the state socialist regime. Kroó's work may thus be taken as an example of intriguing reconsiderations within broadly communist ideological parameters. This in turn suggests that the sharp contrast that has sometimes been drawn between memorial practices in Eastern and Western Europe during the Cold War needs to be re-examined. Whether such re-examination will lead to further nuancing and a greater emphasis on similarities, or will even result in a far-reaching reconsideration of the supposed contrast between the two sides, is an open question at this stage.

Last but not least, we have explored how Imre Kertész's 1975 novel *Fateless* found a way to narrate camp experiences from the perspective of a teenager trying his best to adapt to the norms of society. *Fateless* thus conveys its author's challenging perception of the victim, a central element of which was his at least partial identification with the viewpoint of the perpetrators. In Kertész's case, the result desired was an authentic form of testimony that would resist the instrumentalisation of memory. However, paradoxically enough, it was only possible to achieve the goal of liberating the narrative from normative constraints through unparalleled linguistic calculation and control.

Analysing these three major works has revealed that one thing that connects Hungarian literary representations of Buchenwald is their aspiration to challenge and subvert heroic narratives, an agenda which they admittedly pursue from diverse and even irreconcilable ideological, theoretical, political and artistic positions. The protagonists of these novels indeed significantly differ from one another, and they appear to reflect the respective authors' historically conditioned perspectives. Királyhegyi's work was written in the reconstruction period of the immediate post-war years. By restaging the ever-resilient Central European everyman with a touch of the schlemiel, the novel illustrates the revived critical optimism of those years. Kertész exhibits a much bleaker view: his position is defined by the conviction that the camps merely revealed the true nature of human existence – to be expected of someone drastically disappointed in humanity and aiming to keep his contact with the Soviet-type state in which he lived at a minimum. Kroó's novel reflects the changing character of the communist regime that seemed to him to be betraying the original ideals of the resistance and corresponding memory practices – a change of which his protagonist clearly disapproves but is unable to counter as he gradually loses agency.

Another shared element of these works of literature is their profound interest in issues of responsibility. All three novels refuse to subscribe to rigid binaries of victims and perpetrators: in Királyhegyi, SS guards are at times approachable

and even prove to be inexplicably helpful; for Kertész, victims became agents in their own destruction simply by taking one banal step after another; while Kroó directs our attention towards inherently unfair situations in which it is only possible to choose between alternatives that all result in fatal consequences for the majority. Our analysis of these novels has thus shown that Buchenwald was not only approached in a variety of intriguing ways in post-war Hungarian literature, but that the camp's history has provided literature with a subject that is particularly well suited to addressing the complex issues of the representation and memorialisation of a depressingly dark chapter in Europe's recent past.

Works cited

Adelman, Gary. 'Getting Started with Imre Kertész'. *New England Review*, 25.1/2 (2004): 261–278.

Bohus, Kata, Peter Hallama and Stephan Stach, editors. *Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism: Remembering the Holocaust in Communist Eastern Europe*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2022.

Dupka, György. '"Ne ítéljetek el …!": Zsidó népirtás, antiszemita üldözés Kárpátalján a náci és a kommunista eszmék nevében, 1938–1991' ['Do Not Sentence Me…!' Jewish Genocide, Anti-Semitic Persecution in Transcarpathia in the Name of Nazi and Communist Ideals]. Ungvár: Intermix, 2015.

'Elie Wiesel, Rivarol-díjas francia író látogatása' [Visit by Elie Wiesel, Rivarol Prize-winning French writer]. *Új Élet,* 15 October 1964, p. 4.

Ember, Mária. *Hajtűkanyar*. Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1974.

Ember, Mária. *Schleuder Kurve*. Berlin [East]: Neues Leben, 1988.

Fahidi, Éva. *Anima Rerum: A dolgok lelke*. Budapest: Tudomány, 2005.

Fahidi, Éva. *The Soul of Things: Memoir of a Youth Interrupted*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020.

Fedinec, Csilla, and István Csernicskó. 'The People of the "Five Hundred Villages"': Hungarians, Rusyns, Jews, and the Roma in the Transcarpathian Region in Austria–Hungary'. *Language Diversity in the Late Habsburg Empire*. Ed. Markian Prokopovych, Carl Bethke and Tamara Scheer. Leiden: Brill, 2019. 160–95.

Görner, Eberhard. 'Der Siebente Brunnen von Fred Wander: Die Geschichte eines Films, der nicht gedreht wurde'. *Fred Wander: Leben und Werk*. Ed. Walter Grünzweig and Ursula Seeber. Bonn: Weidle, 2005. 47–69.

Heltai, Gyöngyi. *Usages de l'opérette pendant la période socialiste en Hongrie, 1949–1968*. Budapest: Atelier, 2011.

Julesz, Miklós. *Kirándulás a Pokolba* [Journey to the Inferno]. Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1971.

Kádár, Gábor, and Zoltán Vági. *A végső döntés: Berlin, Budapest, Birkenau 1944*. Budapest: Jaffa, 2013.

Kádár, Gábor, and Zoltán Vági. *Táborok könyve: Magyarok a náci koncentrációs táborokban*. Budapest: Könyv & Kávé, 2017.

Kaposi, Dávid. 'Narrativlosigkeit: Kulturelle Schemata und der Roman eines Schicksallosen'. *Der lange, dunkle Schatten: Studien zum Werk von Imre Kertész*. Ed. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák and Tamás Scheibner. Vienna: Passagen, 2004. 67–102.

Katago, Siobhan. 'Narrating the Histories of Buchenwald'. *Constellations* 5.2 (June 1998): 266–282.

Kertész, Imre. Diary entry, 18 March 1960. Folder 22. Imre Kertész Archive, Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

Kertész, Imre. Diary entry, 23 July 1961. Folder 22. Imre Kertész Archive, Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

Kertész, Imre. Diary entries, 3 and 7 March 1965. Folder 27. Imre Kertész Archive, Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

Kertész, Imre. *Sorstalanság*. Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1975.

Kertész, Imre. 'A száműzött nyelv' [The Exiled Language]. *A száműzött nyelv*. Budapest: Magvető, 2001. 274–297.

Kertész, Imre. *Fateless*. Translated by Tim Wilkinson. London: Vintage Books, 2004.

Királyhegyi, Pál. *Mindenki nem halt meg*. Budapest: Globus, 1947.

Királyhegyi, Pál. *Első kétszáz évem*. Budapest: K. u. K., 2015 [1979].

Királyhegyi, Pál. *My First Two Hundred Years: From Budapest to Hollywood to Buchenwald and Beyond, a Beautiful Life*. [Superior, CO]: Anzix Publishing LLC, 2017.

Kisantal, Tamás. *Az emlékezet és a felejtés helyei: A vészkorszak ábrázolásmódjai a magyar irodalomban a háború utáni években* [Places of Memory and Forgetting: Representations of the Holocaust in Hungarian Literature in the Postwar Years]. Pécs: Kronosz, 2020.

Kisantal, Tamás. '"There Is No Need for Thriller Novels about Deportation!": The Postwar Reception and Criticism of the "Literature of Experience" in Hungary'. *Places and Forms of Encounter in Jewish Literatures: Transfer, Mediality and Situativity*. Ed. Olaf Terpitz and Marianne Windsperger. Leiden: Brill, 2021. 171–193.

Klimó, Árpád von. *Remembering Cold Days: The 1942 Massacre of Novi Sad, Hungarian Politics, and Society, 1942–1989*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018.

Kroó, László. *Bölcsőm, koporsóm Buchenwald*. Budapest: Kossuth, 1981.

Kroó, László. *A Kárpátok alatt*. Budapest: Kossuth, 1988.

Laczó, Ferenc. '"I Could Hardly Wait to Get out of This Camp, Even Though I Knew It Would Only Get Worse until Liberation Came": On Hungarian Jewish Accounts of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp from 1945–46'. *The Hungarian Historical Review* 2.3 (2013): 605–38.

Laczó, Ferenc. *Hungarian Jews in the Age of Genocide: An Intellectual History, 1929–1948*. Leiden: Brill, 2016.

Mazower, Mark. *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe*. London: Penguin, 2008.

'Megemlékezés' [Commemoration]. *Új Élet,* 2 June 1991, p. 6.

Molnár, Sára. *Ugyanegy téma variációi: irónia és megszólítás Kertész Imre prózájában*. Kolozsvár: Koinónia, 2005.

Monteath, Peter. 'Buchenwald Revisited: Rewriting the History of a Concentration Camp'. *The International History Review* 16.2 (June 1994): 267–283.

Monteath, Peter. 'Narratives of Fascism in the GDR: Buchenwald and the "Myth of Antifascism"'. *The European Legacy* 4.1 (February 1999): 99–112.

Neumann-Thein, Philipp. *Parteidisziplin und Eigenwilligkeit: Das Internationale Komitee Buchenwald-Dora und Kommandos*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014.

Niven, Bill. *The Buchenwald Child: Truth, Fiction, and Propaganda*. London: Camden House, 2009.

Prédhumeau, Alfred. 'Fred Wander et la censure.' *Austriaca* 88–89 (Dec. 2019): 235–254.

Radisch, Iris. 'Ich war ein Holocaust-Clown.' *Die Zeit,* 12 September 2013. https://www.zeit.de/2013/38/imre-kertesz-bilanz

Segal, Raz. *Genocide in the Carpathians: War, Social Breakdown, and Mass Violence, 1914–1945*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016.

Szegedy-Maszák, Mihály, and Tamás Scheibner, editors. *Der lange, dunkle Schatten: Studien zum Werk von Imre Kertész*. Vienna: Passagen, 2004.

Szirák, Péter. *Kertész Imre*. Pozsony: Kalligram, 2003.

Varga, Balázs. 'Vissza a múltból: Cselekvés/képtelenség és emlékezés Fábri Zoltán *Nappali Sötétség* című filmjében' [Back from the Past. In/action and Memory in Zoltán Fábri's film *Darkness at Daytime*]. *Múltunk* 64.2 (2019): 111–135.

Vári, György. *Kertész Imre: Buchenwald fölött az ég* [Imre Kertész: The Sky Above Buchenwald]. Budapest: Kijárat, 2003.

Vasvári, Louise O. 'The Novelness of Imre Kertész's Sorstalanság (Fatelessness)'. *Imre Kertész and Holocaust Literature*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Louise O. Vasvári. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2005. 258–70.

Vasvári, Louise O., and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, editors. *Imre Kertész and Holocaust Literature*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2005.

Wachsmann, Nikolaus. *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.

Wander, Fred. 'A hetedik kútfő.' *Nagyvilág* 17.3 (July 1972): 963–994.

Wander, Fred. *A hetedik kútfő*. Budapest: Európa, 1981.

Zombory, Máté, András Lénárt, and Anna Lujza Szász. 'Elfeledett szembenézés: Holokauszt és emlékezés Fábri Zoltán *Utószezon* c. filmjében' [Forgotten Confrontation: The Holocaust and Remembrance in Zoltán Fábri's film *After Season*]. *BUKSZ* 25.3 (2013): 245–256.

Zombory, Máté, András Lénárt and Anna Lujza Szász. 'Hungarian Golgotha: Strategies for Dealing with the Past at a Hungarian Publishing House in 1945'. *Als der Holocaust noch keinen Namen hatte: Zur frühen Aufarbeitung des NS-Massenmordes an den Juden = Before the Holocaust had its Name: Early Confrontations of the Nazi Mass Murder of the Jews*. Ed. Regina Fritz, Éva Kovács, and Béla Rásky. Vienna: new academic press, 2016. 331–354.

Zsadányi, Oszkár. 'Jegyzetek egyről-másról' [Notes on one thing or another]. *Új Élet,* 1 August 1972, p. 4.