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**Fatelessness (book) – Imre Kertész**

Imre Kertész was born on 9th November 1929 in Budapest where he also died on 31st March 2016 (he suffered from Parkinson’s disease). He was a jewish-hungarian writer, translator, journalist and screenwriter. He was awarded by Nobel Prize for literature in 2002 which makes him the only Hungarian writer recieving this prize. He recieved it for his book Fatelessness and for „writing that upholds the fragile experience of the individual against the barbaric arbitrariness of history.“[[1]](#footnote-1) On 30th June 1944[[2]](#footnote-2) when he was 14 years old he was deported through Auschwitz-Birkenau to the concentration camp Buchenwald. He survived and came back home in 1945. After he worked as a journalist in the journal Világosság but he was fired in 1950 after communists took over the newsroom. In his writtings from 1955-1960 he created the backround of the novel Fateless which he then wrote in 1960-1973. In late 80s thanks to the change of regime he became popular and he was able to work only as a writer. He also translated books of Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietsche, Joseph Roth and others. The book Fateless was made into a film in 2005, the directior was Lajos Koltai and the script was written by Kertész himself. In 1998 he became a member of Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung, he also became a holder of Knight Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany or Grand Cross of the Order of Meris of Hungary and he recieved many other prizes like Sándor Márai Prize, Tibor Déry Prize etc.

Main topic of his books is a persecution of Jews during the Second World War. He wrote four books about the Holocaust which almost make a series: Fatelessness (1975), Fiasco (1988), Kaddish for an Unborn Child (1990) and Liquidation (2003). In these books he writes about life in concentration camps but also life after it, about how these experience affect the characters who even thought they survived carry the Holocaust with them forever, about loneliness, responsibility, identity, future etc. Holocaust is his eternal theme, “When I am thinking about a new novel, I always think of Auschwitz,” he said.[[3]](#footnote-3) His books are philosophical, they question life, past and future and he also got inspired in the philosophy of Nietzche and others who Kertész translated. Another book which was translated to English is The Holocaust as Culture where the writer is interview by literary historian Thomas Cooper and where he speaks again about his experiance from the camps but also life in the communist Hungary. The conversation brings the relationship between the personal and the historical. Another book translated to English is Detective story (1997) which is a story of criminal Antonio Martens who was a torturer for secret police of a recently defunct dictatorship. He killed two men and now in the cell he is able to write about his participation in the assasination. We can see how Martens rationalizes the crime. Other books are for example The Union Jack (1991) or The Pathfinder (1977). In his books there are many autobiographical elements but Kartész himself stated in the interview with translator Tim Wilkinson that it’s not autobiography, it’s still a fiction and it’s his own creation of the war, concentation camps, regime etc.[[4]](#footnote-4) But the character of György is basically the author himself which is even more showed in the book Fiasco.

Writer’s prime translator to English is Tim Wilkinson who also did some interviews with Kertész. Translators to Czech are mother and daughter Dana Gálová and Adéla Gálová. Fatelessness was translated to Czech by Kateřina Pošová in 2009. There is a short epilogue by her about her own experience. As Kertész she was also sent to the concentration camp at the age of fourteen and she talks about how she felt while translating this book.

Fatelessness or Fateless (Hungarian: Sorstalanság) was published in 1975. Firstly it was rejected for publishing that’s the reason of two years between finishing and publishing.[[5]](#footnote-5) The story is about 15 years old hungarian Jew György Köves. It starts in Budapest when György with his stepmother has to say goodbye to his father who is sent to a labour camp. György has to work in a factory but one day he is taken by police with other Jews and kept in customs. The police offers them a work in Germany and many of them agree. Unfortunately they are sent to concentration camps. Firstly they arrive to Auschwitz where some of them stay but some are sent to Buchenwald and then to Zeitz. The readers can see an ordinary life in the camps. Later György is hurt and he is near to death. He is sent to Buchenwald where they treat him. Before he can come back to work, on 11th April 1945 Buchenwald is liberated by American Army and later he can come back home with other survivors. In Budapest he finds changes, talks to his old friends and thinks of his friends from camps and about the time there and the future which is ahead of him.

The book is narrated in first person by György. The narration is very interesting because it’s completely devoid by judgment. György just tells the readers things which are happening around him without any feelings. There are passages where are descriptions of the day or of the camp and suddently it ends with one sentence about how someone is beaten by the Nazis. He uses words like "naturally“ to describe atrocious events. "The absence of feeling“ affects the readers even more. There appears bitterness, coldness and irony. The writer uses the naivity of the boy. For example, when György comes to the camp and he sees all the people in the stripped old clothes behind the fence he thinks they are criminals who work there as a punishment and he doesn‘t realise that soon he will also become „the criminal“. But the naivity and the child view of the main character helps him survive. He keeps the child hope, in the beginning he even thinks this will be a great opportunity and experience for him, he takes it almost as a play. Kertész himself said that the fact that he was a young boy helped him survived, that he believed this cruelty can’t happen for a long time and someone has to help them soon. In an intrerview he said: "As a child you have a certain trust in life. But when something like Auschwitz happens, everything falls apart.“ But in another interview he said: "You know, it is not so easy to dampen the joie de vivre of a fourteen-year-old boy, especially if he is surrounded by pals of the same age who are sharing his fate. There is a … an unspoiled innocence about him that protects him from a sense of being completely defenseless, completely without hope. In that sense, an adult can be broken much more quickly. (…) Indeed, and I think that even at the extreme of my own most emaciated state of physical deterioration that trust … even if I was not exactly radiating it, it must have been plain to see. I simply supposed that the adult world had a duty to save me from that and get me home in one piece. That sounds rather funny today, but it really was the way I felt. I firmly believe that I have that childish trust to thank for my being rescued.“[[6]](#footnote-6)

While keeping the child mind helped him survived, on the contrary another thing which helped him was the fact that György said he’s older. When he and his other 14 and 15 years old friends come to the camp they meet other prisoners who should take them from the train. One tells the kids that they need to lie and say that they are sixteen years old. The boys don’t know why and they take it as a play but in the end they say it which helped them. The Nazis also ask all the people if there are between them twins, handicaped people or children which will be treated differently and some people tell the boys to come forward but fortunately they don’t do it.

A huge motif in Kertész books is identity. In Fatelessness we can see it when György is punished for being Jewish by being sent to the camp. But he himself doesn’t feel like Jew. He can’t speak Yiddish so other Jews in camps don’t talk to him and don’t take him as Jewish. He is Hungarian but many times he states he doesn’t like Hungarians or that he is not surprised that others don’t like them. So he doesn’t feel being Jewish not Hungarian, so who he actually is? According to German Edmund Veesenmayer there was more than 400 000 Jews from Hungary deported to Auschwitz and about 80 % of them were killed.[[7]](#footnote-7) But in the book György doesn’t find that many Hungarians. And he can’t speak any slavic language so he is quite cut off from others. Yet other men are nice to him even if they can’t speak the same language. We can see that in the part from the hospital in Buchenwald. He can’t speak with other polish men but still Pyetchka or Zbishek help to the hurt men and give them food. György and his friends from Budapest who all together arrive to Auschwitz are deported to different camps and we don’t have any information about them later and we have no idea if they managed to survive or not. During his stay in the camps, György finds different friends from Hungary, the main one is Bandi Citrom. When they meet, György discribes him as „bad-looking man“ who has no hair, no teeth and with scars over his whole body from the beating and torturing, but soon he realises that he is only a little bit older then him. He realise how all the prisoners look horrible and how they changed so much. Bandi is really important for him, once when György lost hope, Bandi helped him to survive, he took him to clean themselves etc. Friendship is an usual motif in Holocaust stories. When György comes back to Budapest first he goes to the address of Bandi fellow home and he asks his family if he came back. His mother said he didn’t come back yet and we won’t find out if he survived or not. After that György goes to flat of his stepmother. He meets his neighbours Fleishmann and Steiner. They talk about his experience but they don’t understand what György thinks and feels. Again that’s common in Holocaust books. They didn’t understand it because they didn’t experience it and it’s something they can’t even imagine. That’s also why the friendship of him and Bandi is important. They both experienced the same thing and they could support each other after the war.

György’s relationship with his family is very strange. In the beggining he describes his family members with coldness. He is annoyed by them. He is not sad when his father is last day at home. He doesn’t like that they are sad, all he wants is to finally eat the dinner. That is also a strange meeting of readers with the main character. It makes them not to sympathise with him, at first. It can be explain by the attitude of teenage boy who actually don’t fully realise what is happening and doesn’t even want to realise. Tamás Juhász wrtites in his article „Murderous Parents, Trustful Children“ about the naivity of György who firstly trust all adults, the policemen, doctors in the concentration camps etc. But later he changes his opinions when he sees the truth.

The title of the book is also interesting. Before you read the story you would think that the title is sad, that when you have no fate you have no future. But at the end of the book György says that people don’t have fate which is a good thing because it means that anything can happen, the good and the bad. György thinks about his future and he hopes that everything will be better now, That makes the book ends in a positive note unlike other books of Kertész. But for an interview Kertész said that even in a place like Buchenwald it is possible to feel a happiness sometimes: "You cannot imagine what it's like to be allowed to lie in the camp's hospital, or to have a 10-minute break from indescribable labour. (…) To be very close to death is also a kind of happiness. Just surviving becomes the greatest freedom of all."[[8]](#footnote-8)

Sources:

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In case you are more interested in the book Fatelessness and the writer Imre Kertész there are many articles about them on JSTOR.

1. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2002/kertesz/facts/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It was „Csendőrpuccs“ which is a term for the gendarmer putsch which lead to the deportation of Jews from Budapest and surroudings and which is also the way of György getting to the concentration camp. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2002/kertesz/biographical/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/imre-kertsz-speaks-to-himself> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Unfotunately I don’t know what is the original source but I read that he was accused of the naivity of the main character which „could not happened“ and of a bitter irony. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/imre-kertsz-speaks-to-himself> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.holocaust.cz/dejiny/soa/holocaust-v-evropskych-zemich/holocaust-v-madarsku/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-35933390> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)