Comments to the presentations on Imre Kertész Fatelessness (1.5.2020) Hana Nichtuburgerová

Thank you for both presentations, which were very good.

Just one correction: Fatelessness was translated to Czech by Kateřina Pošová before 2009. In another edition she says she was first asked to translate it in 1997. After awarding the Nobel Prize it was finally published in 2003 in Czech.

According to Press articles on the 19th February 2020 although Imré Kertész has been the only receiver of a Nobel Prize in Hungary so far Fatelessness has been removed from the Hungarian school curicullum.  [The author Susan Suleiman wrote: „Jewish Nobel Laureate Imre Kertész Is Dumped From the Hungarian Curriculum“. She repeated concerns of signatories of a petition about future students of Literature: „](https://www.tabletmag.com/contributors/susan-rubin-suleiman) The prescribed books by Herczeg, Wass, and Nyírő were hardly going to make enthusiastic readers of the schoolchildren who would be forced to read them, the signatories wrote. On the contrary, they would turn them off from reading. As a result, it wouldn’t be until they reached university that they would learn to read—if there were any students left who still wanted to study literature, the signatories added somewhat grimly.“[[1]](#footnote-1) The Article is available under this link:

She also complains that “Wass, and especially Nyírő, were not only mediocre writers, they went several steps further politically as outright Nazi sympathizers and supporters of the Arrow Cross, which is famous for its enthusiasm in having shot thousands of Jews into the Danube in the winter of 1944-45.“ There is a Memorial to this event known as „The Shoes on the Danube Promenade“ installed in 2005.



Photo Source: Times of India

You can find more information about the Memorial on the Website Yad Vashem in an article by [Sheryl Silver Ochayon](https://www.yadvashem.org/author/sheryl-silver-ochayon.html): <https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/general/shoes-on-the-danube-promenade.html>

Hungary was for some period during the war a relatively safe place for Jews. Even though antisemitic laws were imposed since 1938 and the Hungarian Army was fighting along Germany, but Horthy’s war government was relatively liberal. This lasted till March 19, 1944. Then the German Army occupied Hungary and introduced same antisemitic laws like everywhere else. Within 1944 till the End of War approximately 1 million Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz and other Concentration Camps. After arrival in Auschwitz Kertész pictures a situation of everyone being helpful, which would be the usual instinct for survival but in this place it leads to the opposite. Steve Sam Sandberg[[2]](#footnote-2) wrote in article that the book should not be perceived as a depiction based on the life of Imre Kertész. He points that Kertész himself denied that the work was autobiographical. The literary technique according to Sandberg is that the protagonist does not have any individual features. The aim was according to him that it could have been just anyone. One of those who identified with the boy was the Czech translator who wrote in the afterword how she felt reading her own experience. The Czech translator Kateřina Pošová a survivor herself recognised the distant, very rational, non-sentimental and non-attached, cool and detached and dispassionate protagonist as something typical after overcoming a trauma, which was according to her a self-protection mechanism. The protagonist in the book is a smart, rational, well-behaved child – In my opinion something that was well captured in the film. Another important message of the book is the impossibility to retell the story. Either the journalist, nor Jewish neighbours can relate to his standpoint.

In the speech to the occasion of receiving the Nobel prize Kertész said that it was not his memory that made him to write about the events:

*„To my horror, I realized that ten years after I had returned from the Nazi concentration camps, and halfway still under the awful spell of Stalinist terror, all that remained of the whole experience were a few muddled impressions, a few anecdotes. Like it didn’t even happen.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

But the occasions after the suppressed Hungarian revolution in 1956 and the totalitarian rule afterwards and a revelation he had a year ahead in 1955.

*“The nausea and depression to which I awoke each morning led me at once into the world I intended to describe. I had to discover that I had placed a man groaning under the logic of one type of totalitarianism in another totalitarian system, and this turned the language of my novel into a highly allusive medium.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

As the book should not capture an individual fate but merely the reality of an expanding totalitarianism, where the individuals have to adapt to situations challenging logic, which explains the conclusion of the book when the protagonist Gyorgy returns to Budapest asked how has it been in the concentration camp and is incapable to communicate it, as for him it was not something that has passed but is still an ongoing reality and this drives him into isolation.

1. Rubin Suleiman S. Jewish Nobel Laureate Imre Kertész Is Dumped From the Hungarian Curriculum (accessed 30.4.2020) <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/299208/holocaust-hungary-viktor-orban?fbclid=IwAR2vu5qiYbB-izofh-zbjSAPVgEw3_FpixMRpc1QEYbJFNcd84X3d9IZ2ZM> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sem-Sandberg, Steve: Imré Kertézs: Roman eines Schicksallosen (1975), In Roth, M./Feuchert S., Holocaust Zeugnisliteratur, Wallstein, Göttingen 2018, p. 182 -191. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Imre Kertézs – Nobel Lecture: Heureka. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2020. (Accessed 30.4.2020) <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2002/kertesz/25364-imre-kertesz-nobel-lecture-2002-2/>. (Accessed 30.4.2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Imre Kertézs – Nobel Lecture: Heureka. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2020. (Accessed 30.4.2020) <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2002/kertesz/25364-imre-kertesz-nobel-lecture-2002-2/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)