Sandor Marai. *Memoir of Hungary (1944-1948).* Budapest: Central European University Press, 1996. 427 pp. $22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85866-064-6.

Reviewed by Johanna Granville (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C)
Published on HABSBURG (April, 1998)

Home Sick Home

Sandor Marai's *Memoir of Hungary (1944-1948)* provides an interesting glimpse of post World War II Hungary under Soviet occupation. Like other memoirs by Hungarian writers and statesmen, it was first published in the West, because it could not be published in the Hungary of the post-1956 Kadar era.[1] Marai authored forty-six books, mostly novels, and was considered one of Hungary's most influential representatives of middle class literature between the two world wars by literary critics. He sought his true identity both in his profession and through a geographic attachment: first to Hungary, then to Europe, and finally to the West. He decided to leave his homeland in September 1948.

The English version of the memoir was published posthumously; Marai took his own life in 1989, the same year that he was awarded the prestigious Kossuth Prize, Hungary's highest award for literature.[2] Whether or not Marai intended it, this memoir makes the reader wonder what influenced Marai to commit suicide, despite his literary success. Was it due to the bleak environment of Soviet-occupied Hungary, emigration from his homeland, or the inner dreams of a sensitive and expressive man?

Written in the first person, this book has certain strengths that are absent from secondary works. Marai gives the reader a keen sense of the humiliation Hungarians felt in living under Nazi and then Soviet domination. Marai also entertains as a diarist, and later generalizes about his experiences in a way that endears him to his readers. Like a good playwright, he engages the audience on several levels, but none better than the homesick artist who, ironically, had grown sick of home. These strengths make the volume an excellent choice for undergraduate and graduate courses on the history of the central European region.

On the other hand, Marai's memoir does not provide a dispassionate, critical defense of a central argument with supporting evidence and dissenting opinions. Precisely because it is a diary, the book lacks a single thesis, containing several competing themes instead. One gets the impression that Marai is writing more out of an inner need to articulate his thoughts for himself, rather than to persuade or impress an audience. Thus it would be inappropriate to evaluate this work as one would a scholarly argument. Development of thesis and selection of sources are irrelevant here. Marai's ideas are original and spring from his own experiences. While he cleverly incorporates quotations from great writers and poets, both Hungarians and foreigners, these are simply tools for expressing his own thoughts.

In addition, the title of this memoir is a bit of a misnomer, since the book does not discuss in much detail Hungarian politics in the 1944-1948 period. Marai never mentions such public figures as Horthy, Rakosi, or Revai. Only in a couple of places does he refer to the "returned Hungarian communists," the Muscovites. As a subjective diary, it often digresses. One whole section provides details about the daily habits of his wife Lola's grandmother; no larger interpretation accompanies the section.

As traumatic as wartime Hungary must have been,

Marai found it in some ways preferable to living there after 1945. According to Marai, World War II fostered a sense of human collectivity. People felt closer to each other during the siege because their lives were threatened. After the war, however, people focused on the retrieval of their material possessions, and the spirit of cooperation and unity disappeared.

Marai and his wife had been forced to flee their home in Budapest for a small house in a village. There he lacked everything a writer needed: good lighting, quiet, and privacy. There was no electricity, and candles were scarce. Marai lived there with escapees and refugees from the war. After the Soviet occupation in September 1944, random groups of Russian soldiers stopped by Marai's village house, often in the middle of the night, without knocking. They stole scarce food and supplies. Others stayed for longer periods of time. Once a group of Russian soldiers set up a repair shop in his house. Noise was continuous; tools banged and a record of Ukrainian children's choir played around the clock. Marai had to sleep in one room with the others in the household. He also had to witness atrocities. Once a group of Russian soldiers shot the husband of a woman they were abusing. Marai's opinion of the Russians did not improve with this close contact, to say the least. He writes: "We lived for weeks with the thirty men like animals in a cage, slept on the same straw, did their laundry, cooked their meals and helped them with their work" (p. 85).

At the same time, it would be incorrect to say that Marai despised the Russians. Instead he was curious about them, and he often pitied them. Despite these intimate living arrangements, Marai continued to find the Russians very strange. The Russians, he writes, "brought Cyrillic letters and all that 'difference,' that mysterious strangeness which Western man never understands and which even this compulsory and very intimate living together could not dispel" (p. 85).

While he admired the Soviet military for defeating the Nazis at Stalingrad ("turning around the wagon shaft of world history"), he also knew that the source of Soviet military power was its inexhaustible reserves, not its organizational and technical skills (p. 36). "This Eastern army," he writes in almost Churchillian fashion, "gave the impression of some instinctive biological power–human variants of ants or termites–that had assumed a military shape" (p. 80).

Unlike many Hungarians at the time, Marai knew these Russian were not liberators; they could not bring freedom because they lacked it themselves. They merely continued the thieving and murdering that the Nazis had begun. Indeed, this memoir bears similarities to the memoirs of Jewish writers persecuted by the Nazis, in particular to the recently published diary of Victor Klemperer, a Jewish professor of Romance languages in Dresden during World War II.[3] Both writers use their journals partly to substitute for their emotions, partly to maintain their sanity. Both know that if their journals are found by the wrong people, it could mean imprisonment or death. But both also sense in their Nazi or Soviet oppressors a concealed awe of writers.

The dangers of journal-keeping are brought home to the reader when Marai tells the story of his friend Poldi Krausz, who in 1944 suddenly showed up outside Marai's door (in Budapest), asking Marai to safeguard his personal album. Krausz knew the Nazis would soon arrest him. Marai advised his friend to ask someone else, because his house would not be any safer than Krausz's. Indeed, literally the next day, Marai and his wife were forced to abandon their house. When they returned years later, after the siege, the house lay in ruins.

Marai realizes that the Soviet military was no less ruthless than the Nazi military. Like the Soviet political system as a whole, it was not a meritocracy. Outstanding performance was not rewarded. Instead, Marai writes, "what always counted in the Soviet system was whether it could use a human being, the raw material, today, Thursday, at 4:30 p.m." (p. 83). The system subsisted primarily on forced labor.

Moreover, Marai is struck by the Russians' frenzied looting, which he views as the manifestation of "some blind, biological instinct." He noted that the Soviet soldiers "pounced" on a village, a house, a family, and destroyed everything they needed or did not need. Thus "for years and years on barges, trucks, and trains, they hauled away from these rich lands the wheat, iron, coal, oil, and lard, and also human resources, German technicians and Baltic workers" (p. 69). In response, the Hungarian peasants–"just as in the time of the Turks"–took the cows into the woods, buried the potatoes in pits, and hid the women. This looting also explained Soviet military power, Marai claims, since "without the domestic and kidnaped scientists, spies, forced labor of an entire Russian generation," and American aid, "Soviet industry could not have built ballistic missiles, new airplanes, the atom bomb, and a navy" (p. 81).

Indeed, Marai concludes that Soviet soldiers plundered so zealously, including property they did not need, because of the abject poverty they had endured for

decades. Poverty–not ideology–motivated them, since they robbed both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie indiscriminately. Poverty also engendered corruption. Marai saw how Russians would sell a healthy horse for just one liter of brandy.

For Marai the factors he notes in individual Russians' behavior–the lack of freedom, submission to compulsory labor, indiscriminate looting–help to explain Soviet behavior in world politics. For example, the Soviet leaders relied on compulsory solutions vis-a-vis relations with central Europe: rigging or banning free elections to ensure that the Communists would rule. While the Soviets did not shy away from the use of military force, they used it prudently–only when sure that no one would retaliate. To describe Soviet behavior in the 1945-1947 period in particular, Marai uses the metaphor of a sniper, who warily takes a step, looks around silently to see what effect it has produced. If the sniper suspects serious opposition, he steps back prudently, in order to take two steps forward at the next turn.

Marai tries to connect the idea of the Russians' lack of freedom and individuality to alleged distinguishing characteristics of Easterners in general. The Buddhist mystics themselves, he writes, encourage the "dissolution of the personality," because only then–when a human transcends his individuality–does it "mingle with the world rhythm" (p. 107). He implies that Hungary, in contrast to the Soviet Union, never sought communism; the most influential communists in Hungary had lived for many years in exile in Moscow. Now back in Hungary leading the new communist regime, they were still marionettes, still intimidated by the Kremlin.

Marai's traumatic experiences with the Soviet occupiers lead him to generalize about Hungary's unique history and place in the world. He sees Hungarians as "a people, in awful isolation, companionless among the peoples of the world" (p. 73). The more he witnesses the brutal side of the Russians, the more he identifies Hungary as non-Slavic and Western. At one point he speculates on Hungary's good fortune that it did not "vanish in the Slavic melting pot," which he thinks could have happened in 900 A.D., when Hungary renounced paganism and embraced Christianity. At that time Hungary opted for the Western Roman Church instead of the Byzantine church, "which Slavic characteristics had permeated by then" (p. 73).

Maligning the Soviet Union and everything "Eastern" serves a special purpose for Marai. The more backward he can portray the East, the more enlightened he can become by contrast as a Hungarian and "Westerner." Indeed, one senses that Marai is groping for an identity in his geographical location. Beneath the seemingly objective and dispassionate observance of events is a talented and sensitive writer searching for an unaltering identity.

The reader discovers, however, that Marai's attempt at self-identification on the basis of geographic location is relative. As he travels westward, he notes certain negative qualities of the people there, and begins to see himself as an "Easterner" after all. In 1947 he goes to Switzerland, Italy, and France. Switzerland, with its brightly lit streets, abundant display windows, and thoroughly swept streets, strikes Marai as too clean. Like a castrated animal, Switzerland is "sterile" because it had remained neutral during World War II. He feels claustrophobic there because everything is done on the basis of "systems," not individual personal contacts. Italy seems a bit friendlier because, like Hungary, it is one of the poverty-stricken, vanquished powers of World War II. France brings back old memories of his last visit there right after World War I. In all three western European countries, however, Marai perceives a condescending attitude toward him (beneath the polite veneer) because he is an "Easterner." In contrast, the Russians and other Slavic peoples treat Marai violently but with "a measure of underlying respect," because to them he is a Westerner and a writer.

Throughout his memoir, Marai engages in an agonizing debate: should he stay in Hungary permanently, or should he emigrate? His ruminations about the East versus the West represent his attempt to decide this issue. He had first confronted this dilemma while in Paris after World War I. At that time he decided to return to his native Hungary because he wanted to write only in Magyar for his fellow Hungarians, since so few Europeans outside Hungary knew the language. After World War II he finds himself in the same dilemma–only this time in a Hungary under communist dictatorship. He writes:

> In critical times, the moment arrives for the writer when he must decide whether he must relate what he has to say with perhaps corroded words in the linguistic sense but freely [in exile], or to lie in his pure native language with gasping circumlocution. This is a grating, difficult moment. But it cannot be avoided.[4]

Marai realizes that if he stayed in Hungary, not only would he have to "write for the desk drawer," but that he would lack even the "freedom to remain silent." Without an audience, Marai knew he would lose all incentive to write. Thus, Marai decided to leave Hungary for good.

Realizing that he would have to wait a whole year before emigrating, Marai spent the time reading books by "second tier" Hungarian writers, since their books would be nearly impossible to find outside Hungary. Marai valued these writers and poets "who got lost in the pandemonium of the literary hubbub [because] they would not allow themselves to create something inferior" (p. 371). Gyula Szini was one of these writers, a "slight, professorial-mannered, bespectacled man" who usually sat alone in the Balaton Cafe on Rakoczi Road with a "briefcase bulging with French and literary newspapers." Other writers and poets included Tomorkeny, Lovik, Cholnoky, Kosztolanyi, Moly, and Terey.

The book thus ends at a beginning–the beginning of a new life in permanent, voluntary exile. At the same time, the volume marks the end of his painful inner debate. It ends, moreover, on a sad, paradoxical note. Throughout the memoir, Marai emphasizes the innate freedom of the intellectually creative writer, be he in the "catacomb or the prison." Always the detached recorder of his experiences and his emotions, including fear, the creative writer remains in a sense free from them. Yet, as the train pulls out from the Budapest station for the last time, Marai feels afraid.

Perhaps the ending of this memoir seems sad because the reader knows that the author eventually commits suicide. Like the memoirs of many writers who took their own lives–Ernest Hemingway, Arthur Koestler, Sylvia Plath–his writings become all the more prophetic. Marai decided to emigrate because he feared losing his individuality in communist-controlled Hungary, and yet he never felt at home in any other country. As a result, he took the most destructive step of all. In the final analysis, a combination of the trauma of Soviet occupation and the identity crisis of a writer torn between East and West led to self-elimination.

Notes:

[1]. See, for example, Geza Lakatos, *As I Saw It: The Tragedy of Hungary* translated by Mario D. Fenyo (Englewood, N.J.: Universe Publishing, 1993). This memoir also covers the 1944-1948 time period in part. Worth reading is Nandor Dreisziger's illuminating review of this memoir published by HABSBURG, `http://www.hnet.msu.edu/reviews/` showrev.cgi? path=15977873320934

[2]. The book was originally published in Hungarian as *Fold, fold!* in 1972 by Stephen Vorosvary-Weller Publishing Co., Toronto, in 1972. It was then republished in 1991 by Akademiai Kiado, Budapest.

[3]. Victor Klemperer. *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten, 1933-1945.* 2 vols. (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1995). This book was reviewed by Anthony Northey on H-Holocaust, `http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?~path=25772851617659.`

[4]. This passage appears in a later memoir written by Sandor Marai entitled *Naplo, 1968-1975* (Toronto: Vorosvary Publishing Co. Ltd., 1976; republished as *Naplo, 1968-1975* (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado: Helikon, 1993). Albert Tezla cited the book on page 16 of his introduction to *Memoir of Hungary, 1944-1948.* No full citation was provided.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the reviewer and to HABSBURG. For other permission, please contact <reviews@h-net.msu.edu> and <habsburg@ttacs6.ttu.edu>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg

Citation: Johanna Granville. Review of Marai, Sandor, *Memoir of Hungary (1944-1948).* HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. April, 1998.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1923

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.