

effort to “Judaize” the Eastern city and to push them out, this is no joke. Their fear is genuine.

Since the millions of inhabitants of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have no access to the Temple Mount—contrary to all the talk about “religious freedom”—the Islamic Movement in Israel proper has assumed the role of guardian of the two shrines. This week, the call went up to outlaw the movement and to put its leader, Sheikh Ra’ed Salah, in prison.

Sheikh Ra’ed is a charismatic leader. I met him 16 years ago, when we both lived for 45 days and nights in a protest tent opposite the prime minister’s office, after Rabin had deported 415 Islamic activists to the Lebanese border. The sheikh was, at the time, a friendly person, pleasant to be with, full of humour, who treated Rachel, too, with utmost friendliness (but without taking her hand, much like our own Orthodox rabbis). I learned from him a lot about Islam, and answered as well as I could his questions about Judaism. Nowadays he is much more tough and uncompromising.

There is something symbolic about the proximity in time of the awarding of the Nobel Prize and the Temple Mount happenings. The two events represent the two options facing Israel.

We have to decide what we are: the Israel of Ada Yonath or the Israel of Ateret Cohanim. An Israel that cherishes its culture, science, high-tech, literature, medicine and agriculture, which marches in the first row of progressive human society towards a better future, or an Israel of wars, occupation and settlements, a fundamentalist state that looks to the past.

Contrary to the prophets of doom, I believe that this battle is not yet decided. Israel is far from being the monolithic body that appears in the caricatures. It is a varied, multifaceted society with many possibilities, one of which leads to war and the other towards peace and reconciliation.

The winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Barack Obama, can have a lot of influence on the choice. After all, wasn’t the prize awarded to him as a down payment for deeds to come? ♦

Holocaust Literature: How the Murderer of a Poet Became a Hero in Hungary

By Thomas Ország-Land



Miklós Radnóti

The commander of the death squad personally responsible for the murder of Miklós Radnóti—perhaps the greatest poet of the Holocaust, well known in English translation—escaped retribution for the deed. His remains rest in official burial grounds reserved for the heroes of the Hungarian republic.

This has been established beyond doubt by Tamás Csapody, a noted Hungarian jurist and sociologist. His revelations, published prominently by Hungary’s leading literary and political journals, coincide with the centenary of the poet’s birth. They are of particular interest in the context of the widening anti-Semitism currently sweeping Eastern Europe.

Radnóti was shot at the age of 35 in 1945, a victim of the National Socialists’ attempt at the “ethnic cleansing” of Europe. He was condemned with a group of Jewish-Hungarian prisoners because of their inability to keep up with a westward “death march.” Their bodies were dumped in a mass grave.

But his best poems, contained in a notebook, were recovered after the war when the bodies were exhumed. They are treasured today as some of the most flawless modern additions to Hungary’s poetic heritage.

The circumstances of the massacre are even worse than the many myths current about the event. It was carried out by the Royal Hungarian Army, not some “foreign” ethnic Germans hitherto blamed by the literary establishment. And two members of the five-man death squad positively identified in secret inquiries after the war were allowed to go free. The reason: they had by then joined the ruling Communist Party.

Radnóti’s literary stature is enormous. The other great writers of the Holocaust—Anne Frank, Imre Kertész, Éva Láng, András Mezei, and Elie Wiesel among them—were children at the time. Paul Celan and Primo Levi were very young men eventually compelled by their grief and outrage to protest in literature. By contrast, Radnóti was at the height of his literary powers when he entered the storm, notebook in hand, seeking to transform the horror into poetry.

His murder has been hitherto shrouded by misinformation. In common with the opinion shapers of the rest of formerly Soviet-dominated Europe, most of Hungary’s teachers and editors have not even begun to digest the shameful role their country played during the war. This explains the vulnerability of this region to neo-Nazi agitation today in a climate of insecurity generated by the current recession.

Holocaust poetry is therefore an irritant here. Generations of Hungarian schoolchildren have been required to recite Radnóti by heart,

continued on following page

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but they have been taught that the poems were about the general horrors of war rather than genocide. They have been told that the poet met a “tragic death”—but not that it was racist murder committed with the approval or connivance of the Hungarian nation.

But unbeknownst to the public, the circumstances of Radnóti’s murder were reliably established shortly after the war by confidential inquiries conducted under the authority of the Interior Ministry in order to forestall any hitch to the smooth administration of the Communist order. Its archives, at last exposed to researchers, are belatedly rewriting history.

These archives form the core of Csapody’s evidence, corroborated by the records of slave labour camps in Serbia where Radnóti and some 6,000 other Hungarian Jews were deployed during the war, about half of whom perished. Csapody matched his findings with testimonials by survivors and material in the archives of Yad Vashem¹, Belgrade, Berlin and Budapest.

Csapody is a widely published, highly respected intellectual and author of *Civil Scenarios*, a collection of essays on principal aspects of the Hungarian transition process. He has published several specialized papers in recent years on his researches into Radnóti’s murder and the Bor slave-labour camps.

But the issue burst into the public domain only this year through the publication of major articles by Csapody in the authoritative newspaper *Népszabadság* and the literary journal *Élet és Irodalom*. These articles have been reprinted by many other newspapers, and the subject taken up by many other writers. The issue is of considerable public interest, because Radnóti is a genuinely loved national figure and the revelations coincide with an upsurge of neo-Nazism that upsets many people.

Csapody writes that the Serbian slave labour camps near Bor were supervised by the Germans but administered by the Hungarians with brutal sadism. They were vacated late in 1944 as part of the German retreat, its inmates dispatched westward in the infamous “death march.” The weakened captives were driven at a forced pace under the blows of their armed escorts, who were themselves being harassed by Serbian partisans. People were murdered at no provocation. This is how Radnóti described the horror in his tragic notebook (rendered in my translation from the Hungarian):

Deathmarch

Collapsed exhausted, only a fool would rise again
to drag his knees and ankles once more like marching pain
yet press on as though wings were to lift him on his way,
invited by the ditch but in vain, he’d dare not stay...
Ask him, why not? maintaining his pace, he might reply:
he longs to meet the wife and a gentler death. That’s why.
But he’s insane, that poor man, because above the homes,
since we have left them, only a scorching whirlwind roams.
The walls are laid. The plum tree is broken. And the night
lurks bristling as a frightened, abandoned mongrel might.
Oh, if I could believe that all things for which I yearn
exist beyond my heart, that there’s still home and return...
return! the old veranda, the peaceful hum of bees
attracted by the cooling fresh plum jam in the breeze,
the still, late summer sunshine, the garden drowsing mute,
among the leaves the swaying voluptuous naked fruit,
and Fanni waiting for me, blonde by the russet hedge,
while languidly the morning re-draws the shadow’s edge...
It may come true again — the moon shines so round—be wise!
Don’t leave me, friend, shout at me, shout! and I will arise!

In a rare gesture of humanity, an officer participating in the “death-march” ordered that Radnóti and 21 others who could not keep up with the pace be put on horse-drawn wagons, under the command of Sergeant Andras Talas. The same officer ordered Talas and his subordinates to take the captives to any local civilian hospital or medical centre for treatment. But since all such facilities were overcrowded, Talas and his men were unable to secure places for the captives. Talas could have chosen with impunity to abandon them in the prevailing chaos, but instead cold-bloodedly chose to murder them. Witness testimonials state that Talas himself drew his handgun and led the massacre.

Tálas was recognized after the war by a former Bor inmate. He was tried and executed in 1947 for other war crimes. His body was buried in parcel No. 298 at Rákoskeresztúr cemetery in Budapest, together with those of several other war criminals.

But after the eventual collapse of Soviet administration in Hungary, a simplistic public honours committee mistakenly assumed that all people executed by the Communists had sacrificed their lives for freedom. Or was this a deliberate act of neo-Nazi mischief? The burial grounds of shame thus became a resting place reserved for the “martyrs” of the nation.

Today, Tálas’ grave is furnished with all the trappings of honour that the living can lavish on the dead. His name at least been removed from the list of “heroes” borne by a commemorative plaque, but those of other war criminals may still be present.

The grounds regularly receive ceremonial visits by state dignitaries and school children. Csapody argues that “at least this should cease until another, better advised honours committee thinks its way out of the memorial mess.”

The issue has thus emerged as a matter of great symbolic significance in Hungary’s current, painful transition from a humiliated subject state to a robust democracy, one capable of confronting its past as well as the present neo-Nazi resurgence. For the declared choice of a country’s public heroes may influence the behaviour of its leaders in the future. ♦

¹ The Holocaust memorial and research centre in Jerusalem. – eds.