

Illés, Klára. 2020. *Megtartó erő. Egy parasztcsalád vége* ('Sustaining Force: The End of a Peasant Family'). Budapest: Magvető. 379 pp.

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I wonder if a book, whose main characters are two people who lived to over 80 years of age, passed away from sickness, and who have not accomplished anything remarkable for social memory, is worthy of attention. (11)

[*Vajon érdemes-e a figyelemre egy olyan könyv, amelynek főszereplője két, nyolcvanéves korát is megélt, betegségben elhunyt idős ember, akik nem vittek végbe a társadalmi emlékezetben is számontartott, rendkívüli dolgokat?*] (trans. I.A)

The volume compiled and partly written by Klára Illés is a memory-monument erected for two ordinary people, the author's parents, and their life's work. Positioned as a hybrid, experimental collection of survivor memories and intergenerational memory-narratives (about which see Mónika Fodor's 2020 *Ethnic Subjectivity in Intergenerational Memory Narratives: Politics of the Untold*; New York and London: Routledge), *Megtartó erő* is an attempt at reconstructing a once-was world of rural peasantry and a historically burdened mixed-ethnic family ethos. Illés's material, itself a treasure of micro-heritage, records elements of a "village world" and a universe of rural knowledge that have long disappeared and are largely unknown by today's urban generations. By completing the tenacious and sometimes painful task of piecing together her parents' lives, Illés has created a book that is a reflection on historical change, trauma, and guilt, as on the role of memory in creating historical continuity and enabling a continuity of one's family and identity.

The title of Illés's book is somewhat challenging to translate properly; it might be phrased as "sustaining force," a phrase that has multiple connotations as a drive that keeps one afloat, or as a power that preserves both one's physical existence and one's moral compass. *Megtartó erő* is a well-researched and meticulously edited volume of parallel biographies and intergenerational memory work, which took decades to produce, and which points well beyond the sentimental motivation of a grownup child to remember and memorialize her parents. This collection is not an academic pursuit either, as Illés refrains from analysis or from using any distancing scholarly terminology. While it is easy to read, the genre is hybrid, one in which through fragments of different kinds of sources, the author embarks on uncovering her parents' life story, or life stories. And by reconstructing the parents' experiences, strengths and weaknesses, work

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and love, historical victimhood and even mundane everyday life, the book actually commemorates them. Illés's creative interweaving of written and oral fragments to tell an almost seamless, multivocal story amounts to an innovative endeavour – especially in present-day Hungarian historical, cultural and literary contexts.

Illés consciously prepared for writing a commemorative work about her parents, which many of her generation might only remember to do once it is too late. Unfortunately, in many instances, when it comes to collecting first-hand memories of survivors of many twentieth-century atrocities, it *is* too late. The book's subtitle of *The End of a Peasant Family* does not only provide a multivocal account about the "end" of one specific family, but it also constitutes a collective account of many other rural, ethnically mixed German-Hungarian families of Western Hungary. Such families have had their own unique "rural" experiences of changes brought upon them by history during the twentieth century in East-Central Europe, as the author demonstrates throughout her book.

Illés's maternal ancestors were assimilated ethnic Germans (Schwabs) who owned some land north of Lake Balaton and made a living of cultivating their land. Before the Second World War, the family briefly joined the Volksbund, a German-sympathizer organization of ethnic Germans, because of which in 1945-1946 they lost all their property and were subjected to forced migration, along with two-hundred-thousand other Schwab Hungarian citizens. In 1948 Klára Stampfer (the author's mother) and her mother were lucky to receive permission to return to their home. Although life was seemingly back to normal, and Klára even found love with her future husband Károly Illés, (the author's father) the family still suffered long-term consequences of their having once joined the Volksbund, such as poverty, persecution and discrimination by Hungarian Prime Minister Mátyás Rákosi's pro-Stalinist regime.

On her paternal side, the author's ancestors were artisans. Her grandfather was a well-known smith who had his own workshop in Csátka, the village the new couple moved to in 1948 and lived in until 1963. Although the grandfather had two sons, Lajos the elder and Károly the younger, before the war he only allowed Lajos to study. In 1946, however, Lajos was sentenced and found guilty of crimes against the Jewish population during the atrocities of 1944. He was imprisoned for two years, after which he could not pursue a career. The younger brother, Károly, the author's father, did not play a role in the war, yet now he had to support his family, but even then, he did not get from his parents an equal treatment to that of his older brother Lajos. Therefore, throughout his entire life, he would resent them for having supported the education of the wrong son.

Among the original narrative fragments in the book are the author's mother Klára and her father Károly's written correspondence of 1955, Klára's own old-age memoir of 2006 and her diary entries from the period of 2000-2015. After her parents retired, the author conducted interviews with them and recorded the life stories of both her parents. These personal biographical sources are complemented by archival material the author found in the National Archives, as well as by letters and documents preserved in her family's private archives. Both the interviews and the written sources are reproduced with some degree of editing and punctuation while also preserving some elements of the family's local dialect. As Illés writes in her introduction, these source materials served as the basis for her chapters and guided the logic of her comprehensive work.

Chapter 1, "*Merre van a szép Magyarország?*" ['Where is beautiful Hungary?'], recounts the mother's life story from her own perspective. The apropos for the chapter were provided by a peasant biography contest held in 1990, which gave the author the idea for the first interview

with her mother. This narrative is heavily edited by Illés, wishing to reconstruct the chronology of events as well as to give the narrative a sense of coherence. From these anecdotes, a specifically situated and gendered account emerges, one which is built upon the crucial experiences of persecution, the collective punishment of ethnic Germans, and the long-lasting trauma of discrimination and dispossession. Illés's narrative is thus an important addition to the shared memory of postwar atrocities against German minorities, a collective experience to which two-hundred-thousand people were subjected.

Chapter 2, "*Édes anyukám, édes apukám*" ['Sweet Mother, Sweet Father'] is a reproduction of the parents' letters to each other over the course of three months in the spring of 1955, during the husband's deployment in the military. The letters, treated commonly as a source of private family histories, are repetitive representations of monotonous, day-to-day routines on both ends: the husband being bored in the army and transmitting his sense of uselessness and meaninglessness, and the wife working the land, providing for the children, and describing it all in terms of duty and sacrifice). Despite the evident discourse of "speaking bitterness" (as phrased by Lisa Rofel in her 1999 *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism*; Berkeley: UC Press), the reader gets a surprising sense of mutual emotional tenderness and elaborate reflection (or even philosophical meanderings), which are all too often considered as uncharacteristic of working-class rural people. This chapter is perhaps the most eventless yet also the richest in the book, as it delineates an intimate history of social disenfranchisement, poverty, hard work and loving family relations. Károly's letters clearly contain subtle criticism of the socialist regime as one that lacks rationality, foresight and meaningful action. As the husband is far away from home, the slippery topic of marital devotion also pops up and is discussed openly in a funny and straightforward manner.

Chapter 3, "*Éngem nem vernek, az biztos!*" ['I will not get beaten, that's for sure!'], is the only part in the book in which the narrator is the author's father and we read about the family's life in his rendition. This text is also a heavily edited account of Károly's oral narrative, with the daughter's questions omitted. Juxtaposed to the previous chapters, this text enables some pieces of the family mosaic to become visible, such as the father's perspective on some of the already mentioned life events, as well as the evolution of the family relationship (e.g., he refers to his conflicts with his wife's family, including an incident in which things came to mutual blows), their struggle to make ends meet, and their moving from one house to another.

Chapter 4, "*Egyszerű hétköznapok, egyszerű ünnepek*" ['Simple Everyday, Simple Holidays'], is the edited version of the personal diary that Klára, the author's mother, kept during 2000-2015, the final fifteen years of her life. Keeping a diary and using it as self-reflection is rather rare for the rural peasantry and working classes (yet, among them, as elsewhere, it is perhaps more common for women than for men), and so it was regarding Illés's mother. Reading the brief entries, the reader can get a sense of what the narrating woman thought important to jot down, how matter-of-fact she was in listing her life events and how she assessed her experiences with much simplicity, discipline and little sentimentality. In these diary entries, we come upon a completely different account of the two's relationship than the one we learned about from the correspondence of the two as a younger couple in Chapter 2. By now, their relationship has become a starkly realistic, banal affair that has long been devoid of any romance. Furthermore, the diary entries can be read as an imprint of the process of ageing, as well as of Klára's surprising lack of any urge to summarize and evaluate her life in its entirety. The death of her husband is likewise but another entry, listed among many other daily events, and consisting of no sense of tragedy.

Chapter 5, "*Emelt fejjel, méltósággal*" ['With The Head Held High, with Dignity'], reads as an inverse text to old Klára's diary, as it contains the story of the last year or so in Klára's life as written by her daughter, Klára the author. This short chapter provides the story that was left out from the mother's narrative. Here we learn more about the ageing Klára, how she found out about her fatal illness, and how she spent her final months, all from the perspective of the daughter who has eventually lost her mother.

Finally, Chapter 6, "*Emlékpróba és gyónás*" ['An Effort to Remember and a Confession'], comprises the daughter's comprehensive story. Reading this account as a continuation of the parents' narratives, we realize how young Klára creates her genealogy by remembering and reinterpreting her own legacy in relation to her ancestors. Piecing together an inclusive story from her own often scanty memories, Illés employs the commonly used frame of religious confession to address her charged emotions of regret, appreciation, and identification. In this instance the reader might feel uncomfortable becoming so deeply involved in the author's intimate inner world. Young Klára, now getting older herself, confesses her so-called sin of freedom and liberalism, which many children might experience when making different life choices than those of their parents, and also upon realizing that they could only enjoy the luxury of choice because of the suffering and discipline endured by their parents.

It is in the same sixth and last chapter that the title of the book gains a quasi-religious connotation, as the "sustaining force" takes shape as a solid moral stance of appreciation of the disciplined, value-driven life of hard, self-effacing work, and identification with Christian religion and values. Seen in this light, the title can also be read as "conserving force," i.e., the power that keeps individuals, generations, and small communities the same in the face of vast, incongruous changes caused by political powers and their remote, impersonal elites. The book is an argument for the ordinary persons and their legitimate historical agency, even if not because of any romantic images of moral purity and of avoiding becoming corrupted by politics. Clearly, Illés's monumentalizing memory-work has nothing to do with either the nationalist or the urban elitist ideologies of both the respective right and left ends of the Hungarian political spectrum, which have both, even after the post-1989 changes, repeatedly tended to portray villagers as the preservers of the country's allegedly pure national character. Rather, hers is a more profound understanding of her parents' generation as a "historical community" that occupied an immensely important position as witnesses and survivors of the burdened twentieth-century history. Their ethos of hard physical work, and their simple, disciplined existence framed by Christian morality are all shown to have served as their *megtartó erő* or sustaining force.

The author's greatest concern, i.e., whether her parents' story has any universal relevance, and if it is at all possible to reconstruct such a life story as a coherent whole, or maybe only in fragments, is indeed a valid original concern in the present Hungarian context, albeit not so unique in the international literature on family history and collective memory, as well as on immaterial micro-heritage. Since the second half of the last century, Illés's questions about the potentials of universal relevance have often been pondered by descendants of transnational families, in which children were left without adequate answers about their own family, ethnic, or cultural roots, and even places of origin. In many analyses such narratives are seen as bearers of long-lasting legacies of larger historical moments such as transnational migration, genocide, geopolitical changes, colonization and other such mega events and processes. In Hungary, probably just as much as elsewhere, a plethora of intergenerational memory narratives have recently been collected; however, their systematic analyses, possibly breaking free of the somewhat restrictive religious frame of "memory as confession," have yet to come. Nonetheless,

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Klára Illés's extraordinary work of preservation, collection and interpretation of her own written and oral family-history and narratives deserves a prominent place in the larger transnational archive of the memory of totalitarianisms, as well as within the growing collection of German-Hungarian minority narratives.