Rosen, Ilana. "Judit Kováts. *Megtagadva* [Denied]. Budapest: Magvető, 2012. 255 pp." *Hungarian Cultural Studies.* e-Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 6 (2013): http://ahea.pitt.edu DOI: 10.5195/ahea.2013.133

# Judit Kováts. *Megtagadva* [Denied]. Budapest: Magvető, 2012. 255 pp.

Reviewed by **Ilana Rosen, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel**

The rendering of twenty-three oral histories, gathered during a hundred hours of recording, and distilled by Judit Kováts into a fictionalized memoir of one woman aims at this target: to sound the voices and experiences of ordinary Hungarian civilians, predominantly but not exclusively women, during the crucial second half of World War II. This time period began with the defeat and westward withdrawal of Nazi Germany and ended with the Soviet takeover of Eastern and Central Europe. In-between these two mega forces, Hungary first acted as a member of the Nazi Axis (until March 1944), then as another of its occupied countries (until the fall of 1944), and finally as a torn battlefield between the conqueror/liberator Soviets and the fleeing Germans joined by Hungarian and Romanian troops.

*Megtagadva* [denied or repressed/suppressed in passive form] is told in the first person by Anna Somlyói, in 1944-1945 aged eighteen-nineteen and barely out of high-school. Anna lives in a *falu*, namely a village or small town in north-eastern Hungary, close to the border with the USSR. Her mother is rigid and strict, hardly ever showing emotion. Her father, who has been away for army service during most of the narrative, returns and dies toward its ending. Her paternal grandmother, a folk-healer, lives with the family. Anna's beloved "Americanized" [*'Amerikás magyar'*] uncle Miklós lives close by, after having spent a few years in Cleveland, Ohio, working in a factory, saving and sending money back home. Uncle Miklós functions in lieu of the missing father for Anna and for her younger sister (Piri) and brother (Laci), though he too is captured and enslaved several times in that period.

In the fall of 1942, the last school year that opens regularly, Anna and her schoolmates know and think of the war only remotely, occasionally noticing a teacher's mourner-black outfit (20), or hearing of a schoolmate's father being drafted (15). Anna experiences a first, teenage love with András, of the nearby boys' high school. The two walk or ride busses or tramcars together to and from school, occasionally meet in public places, and once go out to a *cukrászda* [bakery] as a "couple." At the book's turning point, just before the ultimate bad times, András re-assures Anna that trouble is soon to end. But for Anna, this is only the beginning of a period that will scar and traumatize her forever: "…and the one who lived through all that followed, that wasn't me. That was another Anna Somlyói" [*'…és aki megélte mindazt, ami következett, az nem én voltam. Az egy másik Somlyói Anna volt'*] (90).

As the front draws nearer, and with it the Soviet forces, the entire area of Eastern Hungary becomes a battle-finale field, including homes, bunkers, public places and the people entrapped in them. No one and no place are secure anymore. People flee, hide wherever they can, run for shelter from air raids, suffer hunger and become swarmed with lice. Women and girls hide even

New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

This journal is published by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program and is cosponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Press

ISSN 1936-8879 (online)

more frantically and for a good reason. At one time Anna and her sister are nearly suffocated in a chimney (128). Some neighbors and acquaintances lose or give up their humanity and turn in their friends and neighbors to the *oroszok* [Russians, meaning Soviets] (90, 169). But all these become local wounds once the Soviet takeover of the entire area is completed. This era starts with gruesome rumors of atrocities that the inhabitants at first find hard to believe, like the group rape of Klári Tarnoczi, which ends with the rapists breaking her skull (117). Soon, however, such deeds and scenes become the lot of many and the content of many nightmarish so-called legends of the time and place. Such is a succession of events starting with a man named Jani Darabos saving his womenfolk from Klári's fate and ending with his paying with his own life for his bravery (172-173).

Apropos moral relativism, for a researcher familiar with oral histories told or written by Hungarian Jewish Holocaust survivors, the description of the deportation of the town Jews, including the neighbors and friends of the Somlyóis - the Goldberger family - carries a rashomonic effect. This happens due to the switch in point of view to that of the bystanders, the Christian neighbors including the Somlyóis, who are just returning from Sunday Mass with their daughter Anna wishing that it all be over soon, because she just has to pee (43). If this can be dismissed as a childish or youngish indulgence, for sure the obsession with the belongings of the deported Jews, attributed in Anna's narrative mainly to her mother (46-48), and later the fascination of all with the contents of a warehouse of foods left behind by the Germans (91-93), teach us a lesson about people's conduct at times of need and menace, their caring about their own trouble and their blindness to the suffering of others, or Others, around them.

No doubt, the center of gravity in *Megtagadva* lies in the sexual atrocities endured by (mostly) young Hungarian women of the time and in their later growing inability to even refer to these horrors in words other than "they trod upon me time and again" [*'végig mentek rajtam'* ] (202),"that" [*'az'*] (214), and "about that" [*'arról'*] (215); not to mention discussing their suffering with others or delving into their traumatized souls, except at the memoir's very ending. By contrast, in real time Anna's wording does convey the horror of the event of her first rape by a group of Soviet soldiers: her fluctuation between hope and despair as they pull her out of the bunker where she hid with her family and into a nearby shed, her wish that her mother would plead or cry for her and not stand there speechless, the stab like pain between her legs, the grinding of her spine and bones against the ground, her screams, and the huge palm laid on her mouth that nearly suffocates her. Withdrawal from this state of sharp and pain-full consciousness occurs immediately afterward. It is there and from then on that the negative and obscure mode becomes Anna's way of relating to what she went through: "The seconds accreted, there was no beginning and no end to that which happened to me. I don't know how long it lasted, I don’t know how many they were" [*'A pillanatok egymásba értek, annak, ami velem történt, nem volt kezdete és nem volt vége. Nem tudom, meddig tartott, nem tudom, hányan voltak'*] (151).

Kováts' fictionalized memoir belongs in the relatively new trend of female writing about women's war-related sexual exploitation, abuse, defaming, and their later silencing. This trend is manifested in the academic work of researchers such as Judith Baumel-Schwarz, Myrna Goldenberg, Marlene Heinemann, Sarah Horowitz, Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, Joan Ringleheim and Louise O. Vasvári. In world literature, the memoir of German journalist Marta Hillers, published anonymously, *Eine Frau in Berlin - Tagebuchaufzeichnungen vom 20. April bis 22. Juni 1945* (Mit einem Nachwort von Kurt W. Mare) (Frankfurt a. Main: Eichborn, 2003), and later turned into Max Färberböck's film *Anonyma - Eine Frau in Berlin* (2008), has captured

the attention of wide audiences to the "narrative" in a broad sense of women sufferers at the tail-end of WWII and their triple oppression as victims, objects of shame, and forever traumatized and silenced persons. Less known to non-Hungarian readership is Alaine Polcz's *Asszony a fronton* [A Woman on the front] (on this see: Louise O. Vasvári's article in *AHEA E-Journal* 3 (2010) http://ahea.net/e-journal/volume-3-2010/4?&request=pages&print=1&ajax=1; *Idem* in English., "The Fragmented (Cultural) Body in Polcz's *Asszony a fronton* (A Woman on the Front)," *Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies*, eds. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Louise O. Vasvári (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2011), 72-85).

Within the context of letting the women victims of the end of WWII talk, historian, archivist and writer Judit Kováts has assumed upon her the mission of freeing these elderly women of the burden of unjustified shame for mega events way beyond their control. To illustrate the heaviness of this burden, one might be reminded of the humiliating words, still another euphemism for rape, addressed to Anna by her family in their attempt to make her concede to marrying a family friend twice her age: "Everyone knows whom they wasted" [*'Mindenki tudja kiket pocsékoltak meg'*] (239), meaning that she has been devalued. Though in real time is was clear to all that women were helpless victims (so is Anna's mother, who becomes *terhes* [pregnant] and eventually bears a stillborn, 186, 253), now Anna is considered "used" as an older woman, or worse, like a whore. As such, she is not worthy of marrying a man her age (like András, whom she still awaits at that time, despite all she went through), but only this friend-of-the-family Illes, her uncle's friend and protégé since their American period.

It is this fate of shame and worthlessness - in addition to pain, horror, disgust, disease (gonorrhea) in real time and later infertility and a lifelong cold marriage - that Anna tries in vain to escape in her recurrent statements of denial - or *megtgadás* - that "that" ever happened to her. As aforesaid, Anna's *megtgadás* starts in her delirious murmur "*nem én, nem én, nem én*" [not I/me x 3] (153) immediately after the first rape, and continues up until her old age, at which time she still contends: "That wasn't I… that was a stranger" [*'az nem én voltam… az egy idegen volt'*] (252). Alas that by that time the victimized, fractured, lonely, agonizing and bitter "stranger" has become the only "I" she knows and can be. Sorrowfully, it is this other/Other Anna Somlyói who utters the memoir's very last sentence: "It's useless, I cannot go free" [*'Hiaba, nem szabadulhatok'*] (255).