

Ferdinandy, György. 2013. *Mélyebbre - elbeszélések, jegyzetek* (Dig Deeper – Short Stories and Notes). Budapest: Magyar Napló. 296 pp.

Reviewed by Mario Fenyő, Bowie State University, Maryland

It behooves the reviewer -- and any author of non-fiction for that matter -- to disclose her or his preconceived notions, reveal whatever conscious biases she or he may harbor. Indeed, I am predisposed to like the work of György Ferdinandy, for his journeys in exile have paralleled some of my own. We also share a birthplace, Hungary, the land from which we have both been exiled, and the time of our birth, a mere twenty-one days apart (as I found out in Wikipedia). After Hungary, both of us had a stopover in France, lasting eleven years in his case (compared to my two), before our crossing of the Atlantic to the Western Hemisphere. I, too, crossed the ocean, and eventually spent a few years in the "Colony," the "Commonwealth of Puerto Rico," where Ferdinandy lived for thirty-five years before returning to Hungary. I ran across his name when my first wife mentioned it, since he was one of her professors at the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras. Or was he the professor of her martyred sister, the nationalist student leader, Olga Viscal? I no longer recall. I never taught at that prestigious institution, which produced many an outstanding Puerto Rican intellectual. Instead, I taught at the Universidad Católica de Ponce, on the opposite, southern side of *La Isla del Encanto* (The Magical Island). Indeed, the two of us have much in common, yet our lives are far from parallel, as I see time and again in my reading of his recent book.

It is one thing to be a polyglot, which Hungarians often are, given the uniqueness of their language, and another thing to be able to write, and write well, in languages other than one's native Hungarian. György Ferdinandy has become a well-known writer, writing in his mother tongue and publishing in his land of birth; yet his oeuvre also includes volumes in French and Spanish, in addition to scores of books in Hungarian. This volume is a collection of thirteen short stories or novellas, plus seven "fragments of memories," all of which loosely share the common theme of journeys to one's past. The longest of them all is "Egy másik élet" ("Another Life") (65 pp.). It is not listed under the novellas, yet it clearly belongs among them.

The eponymous title story, "Mélyebbre," is about the protagonist-narrator's encounter with his ex-wife in France, after some forty years since the time he had the reputation of a womanizer. I for one translate the Hungarian title as "dig deeper," because of the illustration on the cover, of a man holding a shovel; but it is also possible to translate the title as "write more profoundly," referring to the advice given to the protagonist-narrator by a fellow-writer in this story. The story tells the past, problematic relationship of the protagonist-narrator and his first wife Clotilde (or Clo), a French woman, who used to indulge in numerous love affairs, while he remained loyal to her and in the background of her life. It should be noted that this protagonist-narrator can often be mistaken for the author, and almost no story establishes a clear distinction between the two. However, this story, which is a self-abasing confession that most writers would



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eschew, is a rare instance of the author's explicit distancing of himself from the protagonist-narrator, the "I" of most if not all of the stories.

This story and others in the collection raise the question of whether Ferdinandy indulges in true, biographic confessions and if these stories provide clues to his real life. On the one hand, Ferdinandy repeatedly mixes his imaginary characters and plots with his real life events and with the history of Hungary and Europe in the second half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the historical reality he shares with us may or may not be real after all, as far as I as one reader may have experienced it. For example, in all of the stories dealing with the post Hungarian Uprising period, Ferdinandy could not have experienced or witnessed the events he writes about, for he was already away as one of the 200,000 refugees of the 1956 events. Yet, it seems that his narrative voice and spirit did not leave Hungary then, if at all.

To me, who, like the author, missed or escaped many of the events related in these stories, Ferdinandy's stories read like historical reality, or a substitute of it, as their details are so convincing. If I were to write the social history of Hungary in the Rákosi or the Nagy era, or in the ensuing Kádár years, these would be some of the details I would include, or invent. In other words, Ferdinandy manages to convince those of his readers who nowadays form the Hungarian Diaspora that this was the way things were during their/our absence from the country. My impression finds confirmation in the work of some of the most outstanding Hungarian social and political historians, e.g., György Csepeli, András Gerő and György Péteri, who provide an accurate description of Hungary in that period, as does Ferdinandy.

Ferdinandy's Hungarian readers may take pleasure in finding in his book plenty of literary allusions and references to renowned authors and poets and their oeuvre. Endre Ady (and Léda, his muse) are accorded a tip of the hat, as are more modern authors such as László Németh, Sándor Sik, Géza Ottlik with his *Facanos fiúk* (*The boys from Facanos*), Sándor Márai, Arthur Koestler, Lajos Zilahy and others. Besides literary figures and works, Ferdinandy also immortalizes a series of cars he may have once owned, or not: a Topolino (small Fiat), a Peugeot, a Simca and a Citroen. Like his character Clo, the cars, too, are mostly French and thus work to evoke nostalgic sentiments, and for me specifically – personal recollections.

Ferdinandy's Hungarian style and vocabulary sound authentic, regardless of his decades-long absence from Hungary. One cannot help but wonder how he managed to preserve his mother tongue to this degree, including integration of neologisms and nuances that sound much like contemporary, live Hungarian. I do not really know whether *all* the terms in his book are recent, and if they are even used in present-day Hungarian. All I know is that to me they all sound perfectly plausible.

In his story of return to his old country, "Homecoming" ("Hazatérés"), Ferdinandy reveals, somewhat apologetically, that his works are printed or reprinted one after the other, that he now has readers, and that people recognize and greet him, e.g., on bus number 8 or streetcar number 59, as an old acquaintance. "If I so desire" he writes, "I stop on the street, I gaze at my name displayed in the bookstore-windows" [*Ha akarom, megállok az utcán, nézem a nevem a könyvesboltok kirakataiban*] (147). Judging by these revelations and by reports from credible observers, Ferdinandy presently enjoys acclaim as a Hungarian writer, notwithstanding his decades-long life away, at least as far as bookstore-windows can reflect.

I too have travelled around Europe – in Eastern Europe, in Germany, in France and in many other countries – while in exile, but my travel experiences hardly qualify as adventures. Ferdinandy, by contrast, manages to transform the most ordinary experiences into adventures worth retelling.

To conclude, I would like to express my wish that György Ferdinandy be more widely read and known, not just in Spanish and French in addition to Hungarian, but also in ubiquitous English. Exactly because his writing style can be described as a staccato of often fragmented words and phrases, it should not challenge translation, but rather pass as contemporary hypertext of the kind that today's English readers might read and "hear" like theirs.