

Bánó, András. 2013. *Észbontó élet: Kövesdy Pál regényes története. A '30-as évek megpróbáltatásaitól kezdve az ukrainai szörnyűségeken át a New York-i galériáig* (A Ravishing Life – the Novelized History of Pál Kövesdy from the 1930s Tribulations, through Horrors in The Ukraine, to his New York Art Gallery). Budapest: Scholar Kiadó. 160 pp.

Reviewed by Gábor Takács, art historian, Budapest

Észbontó élet [A Ravishing Life] is, as its subtitle explains, the life-story of Pál Kövesdy (b. 1923), a Hungarian-born New York art dealer who, having survived torture and misery during World War II and communism, fled from Hungary in 1956 and became a distinguished member of the Hungarian American community. The author, András Bánó (b. 1949), is a well-known Hungarian journalist and TV presenter and – importantly for the topic – himself a collector of modern Hungarian art. The book is based on Kövesdy's memories, recently recorded by Bánó on twenty-one tapes, and is written as an autobiography. This is a somewhat unusual yet understandable choice that explains why the author of this book – written in first person singular – is different from the hero of the story, or why Bánó is not sounding his author's voice.

Kövesdy's family, of Jewish middle-class background, changed their name from Steiner to Kövesdy in the nineteenth century. In late 1918 his father, a business executive before World War I, became a high-ranking advisor for the liberal government led by Count Mihály Károlyi, as a result of which he could only continue his business career on a more modest level after the Conservatives regained power in 1919. In this situation, Kövesdy's mother took the unusual step of learning cosmetology in Berlin and becoming an employee at a high-class Budapest cosmetics salon, in order to support the education of her three sons. Pál Kövesdy went to a technical school, but his real interest was singing, so he started studying at the Budapest Academy of Music. From 1941, however, he was called in for labor service in the Hungarian army several times, and as of 1942 he shared the fate of those 200,000 Hungarian soldiers and mostly Jewish labor servicemen who were taken to the Eastern Front and overrun by the Soviet Army in early 1943. As a labor serviceman, he had considerably lower chances of surviving than the soldiers, but thanks to an officer who had heard him singing in a Budapest club before the war – and some bribe given to others – Kövesdy was able to escape back home. This was, however, by far not the end of his miseries, as after Szálasi's Hungarian Nazis gained power in Autumn 1944, Kövesdy was arrested, beaten in prison and barely escaped deportation. Subsequently it was the Soviet "liberators" of Budapest who took him to labor service once again, but a handwatch he gave as a bribe to a Russian camp guard assured his escape.

In the following years, up to 1956, Kövesdy's lifepath was similar to those of left-leaning intellectuals who had to learn at their cost that communism was not much different from



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

National Socialism for groups and individuals standing out as Others. A freemason and a Social Democrat, Kövesdy pursued his singing career in Szeged and then in the prestigious Opera House in Budapest. In 1952 he was unexpectedly arrested and tortured by the secret police (ÁVH - *Államvédelmi hatóság*) to make him "confess" about crimes he never committed, and he was sent to labor service at Oroszlány coalmine for two months, cleaning offices and lavatories. After his release, he continued singing in the opera choir until the revolution broke out, on October 23, 1956. Kövesdy actively participated in the protests and, as a member of a delegation of musicians, even met with Prime Minister Imre Nagy. After the revolution was suppressed by Soviet troops and a communist restoration was imminent, Kövesdy decided to follow several members of his family who had earlier moved to the United States, and he fled through Austria and landed in the U.S. in November 1956.

The start of Kövesdy's new life in America was a typical one for Hungarian emigrés: blue-collar jobs at first, efforts to learn English, contacts with Hungarian organizations and with various members of the community. He also tried to make use of his musical talents by working as a singing waiter, participating in international entertainment tours, and giving piano lessons. Then a few old master paintings smuggled out of Hungary by a Hungarian emigré, which Kövesdy was asked to sell to art dealers, proved a real turning-point in his life, and art trade soon became his exclusive source of income. At first, his stock contained mass produced paintings of modest artistic quality, produced by well-trained artisans and sold as wall decoration to middle-class families. Kövesdy's success grew thanks to the fact that the Hungarian paintings he initially stocked were of good quality, owing to the academic education of the artists, who produced them back home for the state-owned trading company Artex for export to the West, as a means for the state to obtain hard currency. These paintings were of far better quality than the Italian, Japanese or other foreign pictures Kövesdy's competitors brought to the market at the time. Kövesdy's next professional move as an art dealer was to go to France and purchase mediocre yet tasteful and appealing *École de Paris* paintings in large quantities and sell them on the U.S. market. From 1963 to 1976 (the year he started his own gallery), Kövesdy tirelessly travelled throughout the country with his carload of approximately 150 pictures at a time, and supplied a growing network of retailers.

The moment when Kövesdy's essentially personal life story turns into a genuine document of cultural history comes around page 120, toward the end of the book. Due partly to increasing competition and partly to his evolving artistic taste, from the late 1960s Kövesdy started focusing on Hungarian avantgarde artists. His visits to American museums had made him realize the huge potential – in both artistic and commercial terms – of the modern art that had flourished in Europe in the 1910s and 1920s. Hungarian artists seemed a natural choice for him, and Béla Kádár (1877-1956) and Hugó Scheiber (1873-1950) became his favourites. Although back in the 1920s both painters had been connected to international avantgarde circles (especially the *Sturm* movement in Berlin and, in the case of Scheiber, the Italian *Futurists*, too), by the mid twentieth century they received little attention from museum curators and art dealers either in their native country or in the West. Being extremely prolific artists, Kádár and Scheiber produced portraits, nudes, and a variety of figural compositions in the characteristic styles of expressionism, futurism, and other international avantgarde schools. In both cases, the artists' modernist tendencies were expressed moderately, so their works had the potential to appeal to a

wide audience. Kövesdy's decades-long friendship with these two artists, who had been regular dinner guests at his home in Hungary, coupled with contacts he established in his 1970s visits to Hungary with well-known art collectors like Dénes Deák and László Keresztes, turned him into a key figure in establishing the current fame of these two artists. Kövesdy was, of course, not the only entrepreneur in this process, as a retrospective exhibition for Kádár was also organized at the Hungarian National Gallery in 1971, created partly from the private collection of Rudolf Bedő.

Kövesdy's achievement was unique in that he bridged between the Hungarian and the American art scenes in presenting the Hungarian avantgarde to American art. Besides, he was keen to discover those periods in the oeuvres of Kádár and Scheiber that were considered "too avantgarde" at the time (in the case of Kádár, this label referred to his constructivist works). Although Kövesdy was able to purchase these works for very low prices, his commercial success did not come fast. According to his autobiography, he started purchasing quality avantgarde works in the early 1970s but was able to sell them only after a decade. In 1976 he opened a gallery on Madison Avenue in New York, running it for almost two decades. The gallery was first named *Matignon Gallery* but from 1986 onward it carried his own name. 1986 was not only the year of renaming the gallery but also the time when Kövesdy started focusing exclusively on Central and Eastern European avantgarde art. Kádár and Scheiber were, of course, not the only artists he stocked. Other Hungarians who were well-connected to international avantgarde movements, like Sándor Bortnyik, László Moholy-Nagy, Béla Uitz, Lajos Kassák, János Mattis-Teutsch, or Russians like Natalia Gontcharova and Leon Bakst, were also represented at the Paul Kövesdy Gallery. The works he exported from Hungary or purchased on the Western market were either sold in his gallery to U.S. collectors (some of whom, like Nicholas Salgo or George Soros, were of Hungarian origin) or put to auction. Kövesdy also realized the importance of international art fairs, an arena not as popular in those times as it is today, so he became a regular at the New York, Cologne and Basel fairs.

Kövesdy gave up his New York gallery in 1996 and moved back to Budapest where, by now aged over ninety, he resides permanently. Pál Kövesdy is not only a witness of the turbulent twentieth century but, more importantly, a promoter of Hungarian Modernism. In the past two decades, modern, mostly left-leaning, Hungarian artists replaced late nineteenth-century classic artists and became the "blue chip" of the Budapest art market. Auctions of fine art are regularly filled with paintings and drawings by Kádár and Scheiber, with their best works fetching prices of up to a hundred thousand U.S. Dollars. Bortnyik, Kassák and others sell well, too, but in their case, the supply – and the turnover – is not so large.

Észbontó élet is a valuable source of information about an important art dealer who is, at least in Hungary, virtually unknown outside of narrow professional circles. The book can be read as an exciting personal story, although the abundance of names and episodes sometimes distracts one from the main story line. However, its lasting value lies in the last chapters, which discuss the background of the Kövesdy Gallery and the discovery of Hungarian avantgarde art. This book is not always clear in chronology and facts, therefore another book, published by Kövesdy in 2011, *A Kövesdy New York-i Galéria története – The History of the New York Kövesdy Gallery* (author's edition without indication of place), based on a dissertation by Margit Gitta Sódar and edited by Csilla Györi, is a useful – and, luckily, bilingual – addition for those

seriously or professionally interested in the topic. As for visual documentation, *Észbontó élet* contains forty photos ranging from family portraits to reproductions of artworks. The 2011 book features an almost similar number of illustrations, dealing exclusively with the gallery's history and taken on exhibitions, as well as copies of newspaper articles, posters and other documents.

The value of Pál Kövesdy's memories is increased by the fact that very few Hungarian art dealers of the post-1945 period have published autobiographical material. The majority of the legendary figures of that period, like Dénes Deák or Dezső Kovács, are dead by now, while most of those active since 1990 probably feel too young as yet to write their autobiographies. A notable exception to this situation is the controversial antique dealer Árpád Polgár, with his autobiographic novel *Polgársors - önéletrajzi regény* [Citizen Polgár's Fate - an Autobiographical Novel] (Budapest: Alexandra, 2006). Also, leading auctioneer Judit Virág published *Senki többet? Harmadszor!* [Non Anymore? For the Third Time!] (Budapest: Korona, 2004), a book that is first and foremost a portrait of her auction house and a history of the Hungarian auction business, enriched with personal memories. Hopefully Tamás Kieselbach -- arguably the most important Hungarian modern art dealer and book publisher of our times (and one of the sponsors of the publication of *Észbontó élet*) -- and others, too, will one day follow the example of Pál Kövesdy.