

Rereading the Transmutations of Miksa Fenyő's 1944-1945 Diary, *Az elsodort ország* ['A Nation Adrift']

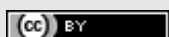
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Abstract: This review article examines the 2018 publication by Helena History Press of *A Nation Adrift* ['Az elsodort ország']: *The 1944-1945 Wartime Diaries of Miksa Fenyő*. Translated by Miksa Fenyő's son, Mario D. Fenyő, this work gains new layers of meaning when alternately read as a Holocaust narrative, a family history, an example of life writing and the continuation of intellectual activity in the face of great adversity. Only recently available to an English-speaking audience, *Az elsodort ország* provides a remarkably comprehensive, well-composed description of the Hungarian Holocaust, World War II and the Siege of Budapest, as related by Miksa Fenyő (1877-1972), the former editor and critic of the modern literary journal, *Nyugat* ['West'] and deputy director of GyOSz [Gyáripárosok Országos Szövetsége; 'Association of Hungarian Industrialists'].

Keywords: *Holocaust narrative, life writing, Nyugat, GyOSz, translation, emigration*

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Published in 2018, Mario D. Fenyő's translation of his father's Holocaust journal, *A Nation Adrift: The 1944-1945 Wartime Diaries of Miksa Fenyő* represents the fulfillment of a promise made when Miksa Fenyő, his second, Catholic wife, Mária Seyringer, and their son, Mario, were finally all able to live on the same continent, if not in the same city. To provide some background information on the main Fenyő family members mentioned in the journal, Miksa Fenyő's adult children from his first marriage to the Jewish Aurélia Schöffler, György (1904-?), Iván (1905-1978) and Anna Fenyő (1910-?), also survived the Holocaust. During the war, György and Iván served in forced labor battalions stationed in or near Budapest. At one point, Iván and Anna were interred in the Budapest ghetto but were able to escape due to Miksa Fenyő's contacts and efforts, a fact he mentions in the journal, but does not describe in detail (Fenyő 2018: 222). Although some Internet sources claim that György emigrated in 1956, based



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on family correspondence he and his first wife, Viola Hatvany, daughter of *Nyugat* benefactor, Lajos Hatvany (1880-1961), emigrated to Great Britain shortly after World War II. Both Iván and Anna remained in Hungary until 1956, at which time Anna and her husband escaped to Belgium. An art historian, Iván stayed in Hungary, where he published a variety of volumes in art history and directed the Graphic Art Department at the *Szépművészeti Múzeum* ['Museum of Fine Arts'] in Budapest. Iván is buried together with his wife and father in Farkasréti Cemetery, Budapest. (None of Miksa Fenyő's children from his first marriage had children of their own.) A painter and student of the great artist, Róbert Berény (1887-1953), György's works have recently reappeared in the Budapest art world. (See Péter Búza's fascinating, 2017 article regarding the fate of György's paintings during the war:

http://epa.oszk.hu/03000/03058/00033/pdf/EPA03058_budapest_2017_09_010-013.pdf). On September 10, 2020 the Bodó Art Gallery and Auction House opened the first exhibit of György Fenyő's work since 1938. His 1929 painting *Világoskék ház szürkületben* ['Light Blue House as Dusk'] recently sold for the record-breaking sum of fourteen million HUF. Mario D. Fenyő, the only child of Miksa Fenyő's second marriage, was born in 1935.



György Fenyő, *Világoskék ház szürkületben* ['Light Blue House as Dusk'], 1929
Source: <https://bit.ly/2RhoDgo>, Retrieved June 2, 2021.



György Fenyő, Önarckép ecsettel és palettával ['Self-Portrait with Brush and Palette'], early 1920s
Source: <https://bit.ly/3uKUmnV>, Retrieved June 2, 2021.



This miniature version of *Magyarország története* ['The History of Hungary'] bears the following inscription, "Fenyő Pannika barátnőmnek 1925. karácsony, Csinszka" ['For my girlfriend, Pannika Fenyő, Christmas, 1925'] and represents one of the few, extant artefacts connected to Miksa Fenyő's daughter, Anna, who is referred to by her nickname of Panni in the journal. This doll-sized treasure was a gift from Berta Boncza (1894-1934) or "Csinszka," the muse and wife of *Nyugat* poet, Endre Ady (1877-1919), whose poems are often quoted in Miksa Fenyő's wartime diary. The author of this review found this book quite by chance while visiting the *Hetedhét Játékmúzeum* ['Beyond the Beyond Toy Museum'] in Székesfehérvár, where it is on display in an exhibit of a miniature, dollhouse library. Photo courtesy of *Hetedhét Játékmúzeum*.

As happened to so many others, for the Fenyő family who had occupied a place among the upper echelons of Hungary's literary and industrial elite, World War II and the Holocaust not only meant living under the constant threat of death, but also brought about long-lasting, economic and social repercussions. After surviving the war and following their emigration from Hungary—with Mario and his mother leaving in 1947 while Miksa Fenyő joined them later in 1948—the Fenyő family found itself living adrift in various parts of Europe. Once their whereabouts were discovered by the former industrial magnate, director of GyOSz and lifelong friend of Miksa Fenyő, Ferenc Chorin Jr. (1879-1964), Miksa and his wife traveled to New York

City, where they remained in the Chorin family's proximity, a connection that stayed constant even after the Fenyős moved to Vienna in 1969. From 1947 until the completion of his secondary studies, Mario Fenyő was a scholarship student at a boarding school in Switzerland. He then briefly joined his parents in New York City before relocating to Virginia, where he attended the University of Virginia.

From the perspective of the Fenyő family's history, *Az elsodort ország* can also be interpreted as their "first," dramatic lesson in surviving the nearly constant separation, fluctuating circumstances and endless search for a safe haven that defined their postwar years. Similar to the journal entries he painstakingly composed during the war, Miksa Fenyő wrote to overcome the daily challenges he and his family faced. Other than his travelogue, *Ami kimaradt az Odysseából* ['What Was Left Out of The Odyssey'] (1963), multiple articles published in emigré, Hungarian journals and his memoirs, *Önéletrajzom* ['My Autobiography'] (1994), Miksa Fenyő corresponded regularly with his son, Mario. Preserved in the Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum's ['Sándor Petőfi Museum of Literature'] archives in Budapest, the over two hundred letters he wrote present an extraordinary record of a father-son relationship that was as much an intellectual mentorship as it was a deep, emotional bond. Translating his father's writings became a collaboration that also enabled Mario to maintain his connection to the Hungarian language: in fact, Mario first discussed translating his father's journal into English in this very correspondence. Throughout his own years of traveling the globe during the 1960s and 1970s, Mario continued to return to this project at times, yet never finished the manuscript until the publication of the present, aesthetically pleasing volume issued by Helena History Press.

As adventurous as the background story to the journal's English translation may appear, its Hungarian version also underwent a series of transmutations. Published in 1946 by Révai Publishers, the journal's first edition must be viewed as this work's original version since no other manuscript has remained extant. A tantalizing glimpse into how Miksa Fenyő may have collected his information can be found in Mario D. Fenyő's Translator's Note, in which he refers to the black pocket diary his father used for keeping notes (Fenyő 2018: xxvi). Like his journal's original manuscript, none of these pocket diaries are available to researchers today, an unfortunate circumstance given that the issue of whether Miksa Fenyő altered his journal after the war is not only raised in the Translator's Note (xxvi-xxvii), which is a question of particular importance that surrounds many other Holocaust accounts. The relevance of issues related to authenticity are rampantly apparent in the case of the second edition of *Az elsodort ország* published in 1986 by Magvető Publishers as a part of the critically acclaimed, popular book series, *Tények és tanúk* ['Facts and Witnesses']. Despite the series' name, this second edition was actually censored and is missing roughly one third of the original text. Any indication of where sentences (or even entire sections) were removed was not displayed, beyond the seemingly innocuous description of *javított kiadás* ['corrected edition'] found in small print on the flyleaf. To mention the most obvious textual change, in the first edition Miksa Fenyő begins his entries on June 22, 1944 while in the second he "starts" writing on June 24, 1944. While the second edition does not excise all of Fenyő's testimonials regarding the atrocities committed against Hungarian Jews, his comment made on July 26 referring to Hungarian Jews' "unwillingness" to end up in gas chambers was removed (Fenyő 1986: 129; compare to Fenyő 2018: 117). The

editor likewise cut Fenyő's pointed declaration of July 27 in which he analyzes a speech given by Goebbels as an extreme example of political propaganda (Fenyő 1986: 130; compare to Fenyő 2018: 118-119). Most tellingly, Fenyő's musings on July 28 regarding whether any Hungarian author would be capable of recording and masterfully depicting the Holocaust are also absent from the 1986 edition (Fenyő 1986: 136; compare to Fenyő 2018: 124). These examples taken from a few days in July 1944 comprise just a few of the alterations that were made in the journal's first mass-printed, state-mandated publication. It is therefore of particular significance that a third, Hungarian edition of *Az elsodort ország* was reissued in 2014 by Park Publishers, an endeavor greatly aided by Mario Fenyő's ability to decode the names of family friends and associates whose identity Miksa Fenyő protected by only referring to their initials. With the addition of this essential information and a formidable array of scholarly footnotes (the work of the literary historian, Erzsébet Schiller) to clarify references that would otherwise be unfamiliar to today's reader, the third edition of *Az elsodort ország* can almost be viewed as the equivalent of the journal's annotated, critical edition. Now in English, the journal's 2018, English edition adds new facets to the 2014 version in the form of a seventeen-page, historical overview written by Zsuzsanna Varga (University of Glasgow), the aforementioned Translator's Note by Mario D. Fenyő and an offering of photographs and other memorabilia gathered from public archives and the Fenyő family's private collection.

With the diary's appearance in English, the current question is what role the most recent transformation of *Az elsodort ország* will play in this work's ever-evolving journey. Although Miksa Fenyő's correspondence does give permission for Mario to alter any of his works for the purpose of making them more relevant to an English-speaking readership, I am personally quite grateful that the editors of Helena History Press did not allow Mario Fenyő to carry out his original plan of making the journal more "interesting." (As a philologist, however, I would find it fascinating to examine how Mario initially reshaped his father's narrative: a textual comparison of the two manuscripts would undoubtedly provide further insight into how family members can affect the fate of personal narratives.) Even if the question of whether Miksa Fenyő altered his knowledge of wartime events will never be fully answered, I concur with Judy Young's interpretation of the journal as "an example of life writing with a particular emphasis on the intermingling of the documentary, testimonial (that is, factual) elements with the self-reflexive, literary, and fictive ones which distinguish this diary from many other examples of life writing in wartime" ("History or Fictionalized Truth in Fenyő's *Az elsodort ország* ['A Country Adrift']" <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2690>>). As a specialist in Miksa Fenyő's pre-World War II writings, I have alternately viewed *Az elsodort ország* as the masterful culmination of the literary techniques and views he developed during the decades he spent writing for *Nyugat* versus an essential "directory" to the tightly-knit relationships he maintained on a daily basis with GyOSz members, yet kept carefully distant from his personal recollections of launching a modernist literary movement in what became his final work written on Hungarian soil, before being permanently "cut adrift" by postwar politics.

While historians may view the journal's thoroughly composed and edited nature with suspicion, I do not find it surprising coming from a man who edited Hungary's modern literary greats and habitually checked even his most hurried epistles for spelling, grammar and stylistic

errors; the spidery copy-editing marks traced in the margins and spaces of his copious correspondence represent one of the most endearing qualities of Miksa Fenyő's letters. When placed within the context of his extremely broad social network that extended from cultural giants and journalists to key politicians and industrial scions, the extent of Miksa Fenyő's access to privileged information echoes his nearly prescient awareness of the events leading up to World War I, as best exemplified in his 1912 *Nyugat* article, "Gazdasági érdekeink a Balkánon" ['Our Economic Interests in the Balkans'], in which he predicts the Dual Monarchy's readiness to employ military forces in the Balkans; or in his 1913 *Nyugat* article, "Vámpolitikai készülődések" ['Preparations for Customs Policies'], an analysis of the utter futility in determining customs policies to regulate the import of wheat and meat from Balkan states until 1917.

More recently, I find myself rereading *Az elsodort ország* in order to gain a deeper understanding of the constellation of factors and decisions that enabled the survival of Fenyő, his wife and four children. As demonstrated by Tim Cole's meticulous analysis of the passes used to enter and exit Jewish ghettos in his book, *Traces of the Holocaust: Journeying in and out of the Ghettos* (2011), chances of survival increased for those living in a "mixed" marriage, and therefore more embedded within a community consisting of both Christians and Jews and better equipped to remain "culturally" hidden. Each time Miksa Fenyő records observations based upon telephone conversations, radio broadcasts, books, newspapers and visits from trusted (Christian) GyOSz colleagues, it must not be forgotten that his ability to remain in hiding at the home of the Fenyő family's friends, the non-Jewish Drs. Pál and Mancsi Dessauer, guaranteed access to sources unattainable to those interred in a *csillagos ház* [lit. 'starred house'], apartment buildings designated by a Star of David for the internment of Budapest's Jews. Depicted almost day-by-day, the Fenyő family's case brilliantly illustrates how even individuals in the "best" possible situation still scabbled to employ every bit of their knowledge, social connections, intelligence, resources and determination in order to escape deportation. Although I welcome a detailed, historical examination of what facts Miksa Fenyő may have added to his journal after the war—and take this opportunity to task Holocaust historians with an investigation of this type—my estimation of this multifaceted work's value does not diminish in the face of any confirmation that the author did or did not rewrite his work before its 1946 publication. In fact, gaining insight into the journal's historical accuracy would add yet another, philological-cultural layer to the examination of this text's four, already known transformations.

When assessing the work of a man whose career as a critic was largely based on the view that objectivity can only be attained via the practice of sincere confession, it is only right that I disclose my own, very marginal role in Mario D. Fenyő's process as a translator. I first began corresponding with Mario in 2013, while researching Miksa Fenyő's impressionistic criticism for my M.A. thesis. In truth, the 1986 edition of *Az elsodort ország* was the first work I read by Miksa Fenyő; already then, in spite of the many defects of that version, the journal's value was apparent to me. After reading his father's letters to him, I half-jokingly offered to translate the journal myself: after all, by that date Mario had already had decades to transform it into English. To put it mildly, Mario was not very amused by my jest. I eventually came to regret my half-serious suggestion when he began translating the journal in earnest at the behest of Helena

History Press. Although our conversations often surrounded enjoyable debates regarding the art of translating or forays into how to transfer into English the indelible image of a *csajka* (the military-issue, tin bowl that, in the Hungarian psyche, still embodies wartime fears and hopes connected to food access), reliving his childhood sometimes proved overwhelming for Mario. Adamant that his family's privileged position, his status as one of the "lucky ones" whose escape was comparatively "easy" and his identity as a child of a "mixed marriage" whose godfather was none other than Mihály Babits (1883-1941), the modern poet known for his Catholicism, Mario spoke little about his own wartime experiences. In spite of our many exchanges, the closest I have ever seen him admit to any trauma at all is the terse, final sentence of his Translator's Note: "At times, I feel 'survivor's guilt'" (Fenyő 2018: xxix). The fact that *A Nation Adrift* has appeared at all in English is a testament both to Mario D. Fenyő's highly honed ability to overcome adversity, as well as to his extreme devotion to his father's memory. I find myself mourning the fact that *A Nation Adrift* will most likely not undergo another transformation as a genuine father-son dialogue, in which Mario's memories and formidable training as a self-described "student of history" who published and translated a broad array of scholarly works, could have provided a contrast to Miksa Fenyő's daily entries.

After reading *Az elsodort ország* so many times in the original Hungarian from the revolving perspective of a reader, literary historian, philologist and translator, experiencing this text in my native language of English was initially unsettling: I could "hear" Miksa Fenyő's original phrases in Hungarian while simultaneously reading him "speaking" a conversational, everyday form of English adorned here and there with a more formal vocabulary. Given my background in literature, I had argued for the importance of preserving the flowing aestheticism (punctuated by pungent wit and heavily suffused with irony) that characterizes Miksa Fenyő's writing style; Mario demurred, explaining that he "heard" his father differently. While my interpretation would have imitated the *contrapunto* created by Miksa Fenyő's habit of using semi-colons to add dramatic *caesurae* to his tight compositions, the way in which Mario has one sentence run into the next in a sort of breathless urgency recreates the atmosphere of a text that is regularly punctuated by air raid sirens. Another challenge posed by translating Miksa Fenyő is his adroit mixing of linguistic registers, languages and literary references. Translating a style that intermingles literary description with street slang, while at the same time alluding to an astonishingly erudite palette of European literature and including quotations in Italian, German, French and Latin could easily result in a text that is over-the-top at best and ludicrous at worst. Although I sometimes find Miksa Fenyő's voice a bit too informal in English, the overall effect is one of "hearing" Miksa Fenyő's words up close and personal. While I have always enjoyed the composed, literariness of *Az elsodort ország* in Hungarian, in many ways this English version of the journal creates the far more ordinary (and thereby extraordinary) feeling that we readers are sitting together, crammed up close to Miksa Fenyő's desk in the tiny quarters where he was forced to hide, as he rushes to relay the day's events before the next bomb raid. Himself a polygot, Mario Fenyő's fluency in his father's languages and familiarity with the literary works his father loved so well poses an unparalleled advantage in translating the journal. After the first fifty pages, I only emerge from my metaphorical "hiding place" to pause and nod at the thorough historical notes or further translations scrupulously provided in the volume's footnotes. For those

unfamiliar with Hungarian literature and history, the background information provided in Zsuzsanna Varga's Foreword will doubtlessly be invaluable. The carefully curated collection of family and historical photos included at the end of the volume adds another means of visualizing both the times and main actors portrayed in this work.

As I pondered the question of what further interest the 579 pages of *A Nation Adrift* may hold for English-speaking readers, my attention ruefully turned to comparing my own, often futile attempts during the Covid epidemic to write papers, read "serious," weighty works and conduct some semblance of an intellectual existence while confined under one roof with my entire (always hungry, always loud) family. The stress of constantly changing government edicts, home-schooling, the havoc wreaked by power outages, the unexpected shortages in essential items, the frustration of lost Internet connections and, oh yes, the constant fear of infection by an often deadly virus adds a deep sense of relevancy to *Az elsodort ország* as I read the following description from July 9, 1944: "The days pass rapidly, but time does not. A few movements—listening to the broadcasts, meals, another tour of the room, note-taking, idleness, and the day is done. But time refuses to pass. What would put a period at the end, and indicate the beginning of a new stage, appears as distant today as it did yesterday, or the day before" (Fenyő 2018: 57). While I rationally and objectively understand that there can be no comparison between 1944 and the present day, let this next entry, from December 16, 1944, of events inexorably unfolding to Fenyő's riveting account of the Siege of Budapest, express my gut instinct that the present pandemic has unleashed another, ominous moment in history:

I refuse to listen to the news. I feel I should smash the radio. Whip the high seas. Medieval monks come to mind—not Beato Angelico's monks, whose work amount to entire libraries, but rather the memory of happy unknowns who spent their entire existence copying manuscripts in painstaking calligraphy, preserving their dreams, magnificent initials and beautiful marginalia of idyllic angels, little shrubs, flowers, lambs, the arabesques of crimson, gold, sky-blue covering the real outside world and making them forget how this world is torn to shreds, smashed to pieces (500).

It suddenly occurs to me: the force that has powered the transmutations and transformations of Miksa Fenyő's wartime journal, *Az elsodort ország*, ultimately lies in its author's ability to stare into the face of tragedy and... keep writing.

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