

Eörsi, László. 2019. *Pesti Lányok, 1956* ['The Pest Girls, 1956']. Budapest: Noran Libro Kiadó.

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László Eörsi is the relentless, thorough historian of the many biographies of the fighters of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, who started collecting and publishing these life-stories when they were mostly unknown, forgotten or in the realm of legends in Hungary. His first article about these fighters came out in 1988 in the literary weekly *Élet és irodalom, ÉS* ['Life and Literature'], just before the regime change; moreover, it appeared on the fourth of November, a symbolic anniversary of the second Soviet invasion into Hungary in late 1956. That article addressed the volley-firing at demonstrators on Kossuth square in Budapest, in front of the Parliament, in an era when public and academic debate on the revolution, at that time officially called the "counter revolution," was slowly becoming legitimate. Eörsi is the son of writer István Eörsi, who was imprisoned after 1956, when the son was only one-and-a-half years old. When the historian son started putting together the steppingstones of the history of 1956, meaning the facts about the people who actually fought in the streets of Budapest, he proceeded geographically, as though in a strategic war-game, gradually covering various areas of Budapest in the following order: Tűzoltó Street in District IX (1993), the entire Ferencváros or District IX (1997), Angyalföld or District XIII (1997), the Corvin-Building Complex in District IX (2001), Buda as a whole (2018), and finally the outskirts of Pest (2020).

If we look at the evolution of the publishing process of these monographs, we might informatively trace the historiography of 1956, which has always been placed into a contemporaneous political arena, at times more or less than at other times. While at the beginning Eörsi could conduct his initial research as a historian in the 1956 Institute, which was newly formed in 1991, his latest study was published by the John Wesley Theological College, an institution founded by Pastor Gábor Iványi, a legendary figure of the era of the political transition. The budget of the 1956 Institute was first cut by the Fidesz-Christian Democratic Coalition elected in 2010. Later they were reorganized and became part of the National Széchenyi Library, and finally in 2019 the Institute was incorporated into the conservative Veritas Research Institute. Losing their independence, at this point most of the historians working at the Institute resigned or retired. The present book was published in 2019 by the Noran Press with the support of private donations.

The book at hand is both typical of its author's work and an exception to it. It is typical in that it delineates the biographies of sixty-six female members of the 1956 rebel groups in alphabetical order as a kind of "hagiography," and source-material at one and the same time. This work is also an exception in that it reverberates the earlier title of "Srácok" ['kids' or 'fellows' in colloquial Hungarian] with its title of "Lányok" ['girls'], thus filling in a long-time gap in the history of 1956. Eörsi is in no way a women's historian, but his collection of life



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stories does what other women's histories do: it recovers the memory of unknown or forgotten heroines. Shorter articles and one co-authored monograph about women in 1956 have already been written by women researchers (Casoar-Balázs, *A forradalom arca - Egy pesti lány nyomában* ['The Face of the Revolution - Following one Girl of Pest], 2016; Juhász, *1956. Mégis kinek az emlékezete?* ['1956: Whose Memory Is It?'], 2001; Kiss, *Tóth Ilona-per* ['The Ilona Tóth Trial'], 2015; Tóth, *Munkások és munkásnők 56-os megéléstörténetei* ['Workers' and Worker Women's Experiences of '56], 2006, and more), but a systematic lexicon of the lives of mostly young female revolutionists of that time was still missing.

Eörsi carried out a thorough archival research of the trial papers about the women in his book in the Historical Archives of the State Security Organization (ÁBTL), The Budapest City Archives (BFL), the Archives of the Institute of Military History, and more. The vast oral-history archive of the 1956 Institute containing the accounts of the survivors and witnesses of the Revolution was just as important a source. Eörsi remains consistent in his loyalty to the memory of the rebels. For example, he excludes the three women who on October 30 took part in the lynching of secret police officers near the Party Headquarters in Köztársaság Square, and also one fictional fighter-character, "Cinka Panna," who is nevertheless immortalized on a marble plaque in Budapest. Some of Eörsi's heroines carried guns, but in most cases they acted as Red-Cross nurses, organized food supplies or printed and distributed underground fliers. A less well-known figure in Hungary is the young doctor, Judit Mona (Mrs. Attila Lehoczky or Lehotay), who later, as a refugee in the United States, became an established forensic doctor. During the revolution she was a leading surgeon in the Práter Street Hospital treating revolutionaries and communist secret-police persons as one. She became the first woman director of the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME), as well as a leading member of the U.S. Freedom Fighters Association.

Apart from numerous short biographies and photos, the book includes a crucial addendum: a study article by the author and a comparative-data table entitled *Adalékok a "pesti lányok" szociológiájához* ['Contributions to the Sociology of the "Pest Girls"'] written by Zsuzsanna B. Kádár and presenting the background of the heroines (181-184). Kádár, a historian of the Hungarian Social Democratic Party and most importantly of its leader, Anna Kéthly, the second female member of the Hungarian interwar parliament, examines the sixty-six women's histories regarding their place of birth and growing up, family background, education and occupation, and the length of their time in prison (six of them were executed). This is a very interesting statistical survey, which could be further developed in the future. As Eörsi describes the women basing himself on Kádár's contribution, in his English summary at the end of his book: "Their destiny, constant humiliation, their subaltern status, mirror the social system in which they lived. For them, the Revolution and Fight for Independence in 1956 was an exceptional time: for a short period, they were able to live the hope of freedom" (211).

The book also includes two longer articles or mini-monographs written by Eörsi on the two best-known female figures of the revolution, whose afterlives are maybe more interesting than their short appearance in the revolution: Ilona Tóth and Mária Wittner. Tóth was once called "the Jeanne d'Arc of the revolution" (by writer Gyula Obersovszky, fellow-revolutionary and convict), who became a symbolic figure for the conservative political memory of '56; and her alma mater, Semmelweis Medical University, erected a bust of her in front of its building. Several theatrical performances featured Tóth's martyrdom story. She was a young medical student who volunteered to make stencil copies of revolutionary newspapers in one ward of the Péterffy Hospital (a hub of one of the rebel groups), and she also took care of the wounded.

Wrongly believing that a Secret Police (ÁVO) agent, István Kollár, who was found nearby, would report on them, she murdered him with her fellow-revolutionaries, Miklós Gyöngyösi and Ferenc Gönczi. In the trial that followed all three of them were sentenced to death. Historians were divided whether this was a constructed, Stalinist-style fake-trial, and that she had not at all killed Kollár; or that the trial was not fake, but that as Tóth confessed with true remorse in a state of frenzy induced by lack of sleep and caffeine, she killed the battered captive with a knife following several unsuccessful attempts to inject ethyl chloride in his veins.

In 2000 a new Law (CXXX, unofficially called *Lex Tóth Ilona*) made it possible to acquit Tóth of the charges of crimes against public morality, and in 2001 her sentence of 1957 was annulled. According to Eörsi: "In my opinion, rehabilitation would not be possible on a legal basis, but Ilona Tóth (...) is in any case morally among the martyrs of the revolution. The court made an extremely fair decision, especially given the severe political pressure" [*Véleményem szerint jogi alapon nem volna lehetőség a rehabilitációra, ám Tóth Ilonának (...) morálisan mindenképpen a forradalom mártírjai között van a helyük. A bíróság rendkívül korrekt döntést hozott, különös tekintettel a súlyos politikai nyomásra*] (131). It is not the first time that Eörsi initiates a debate on Ilona Tóth, whose case he describes in a complex manner, citing ample sources, including original photographic material from her investigation and trial. Another of his well-based attempts at deconstructing the cult of Ilona Tóth appeared in English in 2006 under the title: *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 - Myths and Realities* (trans. Mario D. Fenyő).

Thanks to its two research articles, Eörsi's book on the "girls" of 1956 will be a central source for students and historians of the revolution and of its historiography. It also has the potential to be expanded into a monograph written in a more easily readable edition as a women's history centering on these rebels and their stories. Such a further or sequel work could concentrate on a few representative women fighters and activists of the revolution, as does Judy Batalion in her *The Light of Days* (2021), on female resistance fighters (partisans) of the Polish ghettos in World War II.