

Némethy, Judit Kesserű: “Szabadságom lett a börtönöm”: Az argentínai magyar emigráció története 1948-1968 (“My Freedom Became My Prison”: The History of the Hungarian Emigrés in Argentina, 1948-1968). Budapest: A Magyar Nyelv és Kultúra Nemzetközi Társasága, 2003. ISBN 963212 152X, 430 pp.

Reviewed by Andrew Ludanyi, Ohio Northern University.

In “Szabadságom lett a börtönöm” (“My Freedom Became My Prison”) Judit Kesserű Némethy provides us with a fascinating cultural profile of one generation of Argentine-Hungarians. The author focuses on the post-World War II. émigré Hungarian culture that existed between 1948-1968. In the process she links the fate of these displaced persons (D.P.s) both to the domestic developments in Argentina and to the global confrontation between East and West, the latter mainly via the activities and reports of the Mission, later Embassy, of the Hungarian People’s Republic.

Némethy’s 430 page volume reflects systematic and conscientious research. The 574 explanatory and documentary footnotes that support the narrative are testimony to the breath of this research, based on source materials and data collected on three continents in three languages. Némethy had access to the extensive archival and book collection of the Hungarian Book Club in Buenos Aires (*Hungária Könyvbarátok Köre-HKK*), and she continued her research in the USA at the American Hungarian Heritage Center, the Biblioteca Nacional in Spain, and finally at the Széchényi National Library, and in the Hungarian National Archives in Budapest. In the latter she was able to access formerly restricted materials of the Communist era Foreign Ministry.

This extensive resource base also provides a rich storehouse of information that composes the second half of Némethy’s book, including an attractive section of fifty-three illustrations and photos (209-33), a thorough and selective bibliography (235-81), and an appendix section (285-430) of five subsections devoted to key speeches, organizational memberships, listings of presentations and publications, the content outlines of courses and workshops, as well as the texts of memoranda to and from the Embassy in Buenos Aires and the Hungarian Foreign Ministry. Other subsections include the profile of the Argentine-Hungarian Press (333-41) and book publishing (343-67). Finally, three subsections include activities of the Argentine-Hungarian community in response to the 1956 Revolution, as well as the reports of the Hungarian Embassy concerning the activities of the émigrés in 1956. Last, but not least, the volume includes a section on the essays and poetry of Márton Kerecsendi Kiss (409-30), a renowned journalist and poet who was one of the driving forces behind the intellectual and cultural effervescence of the 1948-ers’ first decade. This extensive documentation is a literal inventory of the cultural production of the Hungarians in Argentina between 1948 and 1968, held together by the author’s narrative in the first 208 pages of the volume. The narrative is broken into five subdivisions. The first deals with the “1948” émigrés, who are the generation of the author’s parents who fled their homeland between 1944 and 1949. Némethy’s personal connection to this generation is acknowledged, and she is able to balance her familial loyalties with a broad range of interpretations that cover the entire political spectrum from left to right, from the official Communist perspective of the Hungarian Foreign Ministry and Embassy pronouncements to the writings of all the émigré groups, particularly the groups within the “Centro Húngaro” which established the work and activities of the 1948 generation.

The author’s narrative is written in a clear, readable prose. Hopefully when (and if) the English and Spanish translations are finalized, they will retain this clear and direct style. It is

my hope that this research will be disseminated beyond the “Hungarian language island” and will inspire young scholars to follow in the footsteps of the author.

The research of these potential successors must take into account the drama of human existence, that change is constant, that we cannot step into the same river twice. The generation that Némethy has documented for us is a distinct cohort of émigrés. The author is already part of the following, no longer émigré generation, and is today a professor at a North American university (NYU). Still, she retains her Hungarian heritage and ties on a global level and thus has the perspective of a “diaspora” Hungarian, rather than that of an “émigré” Hungarian. The scholar who will write the next chapter in Argentine-Hungarian existence (1968-1988 or 2008) must be able to grasp this changed circumstance and its sociological and psychological consequences.

In Némethy’s study it is perhaps the sociological considerations that have received least attention. Because her focus has been on cultural production, she provides an all-encompassing description of the literary and publishing activity of the 1948-ers. She also provides an insight into the rich legacy of Hungarian theatre during this period. This is accomplished almost as an aside to her outstanding chapter on the life and role of Márton Kerecsendi Kiss. His writings and the Revolution of 1956 link the emigration to the challenge of cultural survival in a foreign land.

The impressive, often magnificent, cultural accomplishments of the 1948-ers were in large part a consequence of the professional middle-class background of this generation. Its intellectual and cultural legacy did not, however, fertilize all of Argentine-Hungarian existence. The deep divide was never really bridged between the 1948-ers and the peasant/laborer earlier immigrants that had settled in Argentina. The Scouts, the churches and the language schools were not able to overcome the class divisions, the socio-economic stratification of Argentine-Hungarians. To some extent a parallel situation exists in the USA, Canada and Australia. This is the Achilles heel of Hungarians living beyond the frontiers of Hungary, which automatically made it possible to be exploited by the agents of the Hungarian People’s Republic. (Note that these divisions completely disappeared with the next generation of Argentine-Hungarians).

“My Freedom Became My Prison” should be required reading for all émigré and diaspora leaders who labor in the gardens of cultural survival. It is also highly recommended reading for all scholars who wish to understand the struggle for minority cultural survival not just in Argentina, but as a global phenomenon. With almost ten years having passed since its publication, it is time for its ripple effects to appear in English and Spanish.