

Storytelling and the Recovery of the Past

Notes on an American Hungarian Genealogy

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Abstract: This essay explores the declining role of storytelling in contemporary life by blending a personal and literary lens. After reflecting on storytelling's evolution into novelistic art, the author draws on Magda Szabó's homemade cartomancy as a metaphor for shaping randomness into meaningful narrative and moves to consider philosopher Byung-Chul Han's warning that storytelling is falling mute, eroding social cohesion across generations. The author applies this framework to his own Hungarian American heritage, piecing together fragments of his great-grandfather's life via a faded newspaper clipping relating the story of a thwarted robbery, and a visit to the author's decaying ancestral village. Ultimately, the essay argues that storytelling revives both the living and the dead, weaving personal lives into a "living knot" with ancestors, countering erasure in diaspora and modernity.

Keywords: *Storytelling decline, narrative crisis, Magda Szabó, Hungarian diaspora, American Hungarian identity, intergenerational memory, family genealogy*

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The Novel, Storytelling, and Identity

In shear after indecipherable shear, storytelling has been shaved from our day-to-day life as a means of knowing. While this might not initially alarm the skilled practitioners of more analytic, scientific experimentation, it ought to alarm us all as a narrowing of engaging with reality.

I do not yet believe that these windows have been irreparably sealed shut by the well-laid bricks of rationalism, though I do believe that the mortar has been mixed and the glass itself all but removed. I offer this metaphor because of my respect for both the rational approach and the irrational approach to engaging reality—what we might conveniently term as logic and emotion; yet as I see it, while the walls of this imagined house give structure to it, it is the doors and windows which allow a certain level of engagement with the world outside the house. To brick them up is to transform the house—from the outside—into a ruin or—from within—a tomb. Neither is enviable.



After a brief exploration of storytelling and its (diminishing, perhaps) relationship to existence, I will turn to relating together two personal anecdotes that I see as woven together despite time and continental separation distancing the two. My contention is that storytelling as a personal and cultural practice, however local, is a counter to modernity and the erasure of diaspora, particularly as experienced in the fragmented American Hungarian family story at the heart of this essay.

It is not unreasonable to assume that the dismissiveness toward storytelling as a means of knowing has been invited, like a houseguest, by the storytellers themselves. As Wayne C. Booth observes about French novelistic philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, Sartre knowingly makes a "radical break" with the past, "claim[ing] that the novelist must not show any signs of his control, because to do so reveals that he is 'playing God,' [which] is to condemn, obviously enough, almost all earlier fiction, including that written by the most avid prophets of objectivity" (1983: 51). "Objectivity" here is sloppy at best, as objectivity is nearly impossible and not at all universally recognized as desirable for any human engaged in any activity (McGilchrist 2021: 712). In his diagnosis of the novel as against experience, Walter Benjamin laments that experience itself has become "ever less communicable" (2019: 51).

Somewhat conversely, Czech writer Milan Kundera indicates that ambiguity is the very heart of the novel (1995: 6), and that ambiguity, when employed efficiently, requires an immense amount of control *and* subtlety. Furthermore, while ambiguity thrives in the silent stutter of the printed word, it is precisely through ambiguity and subtlety that Kundera tacitly establishes his claim for the artistic superiority of the novel (1995: 17).

While Kundera writes specifically of the novel's artistic benefits to wrestling with existence, Marilynne Robinson, an American practitioner of the novelistic art, writes that the "distinctions [...] between fiction and nonfiction [...] are profoundly relative, conditional, and circumstantial" (2005: 76), which does not make them any less real. In "Facing Reality," Robinson uses the term "Reality" and "collective fiction" interchangeably, not to cast into question the actual existence of Reality, but to claim that Science, as a discipline, is *also* a storytelling endeavor (2005: 77, 79, 80–1). Neither Robinson nor I remotely advocate disdain or dismissal of the scientifically analytic approach to apprehension. Indeed, as psychiatrist and researcher Iain McGilchrist rightly observes, the best apprehension is "balanced" to provide cohesion and wholeness (2021: 702). The novel, in even more ways than the short story, appears to me to provide for this balance in a way the orally transmitted story does not.

This is why I remain sympathetic to Benjamin even as I embrace Kundera's view: the novel's four-century existence—belonging to no single nation but adapting and expanding across borders—has not diminished but enriched storytelling (1995: 29). While Benjamin and Kundera do not fully align on the novel's worth, they do agree that to lose storytelling is to lose not only something of our past; it is, eventually, to lose ourselves.

It is in this context that I turn to Magda Szabó's home in Debrecen and the fragile fragments of my own Hungarian American heritage, where the loss of language, the changed names, and quiet emigrant courage join the hand of the storyteller to that of the documentarist, becoming, more than an act of mere verbiage, an act of storytelling. Which is to say, an act of love.

In the Palm of Empty Air: An American Hungarian Genealogy

In Debrecen's Magda Szabó Memorial House is a coffee table, maybe walnut, displaying underneath its glass a set of French playing cards. The house itself, modest and unassuming, is tucked away on a somewhat busy street of Szabó's hometown, belying both the importance and the genius of this Hungarian writer. Though her bookcases are stacked with volumes of classic Hungarian and American literature, what most interests me in that museum is the writing scribbled on those face-up playing cards: fading notes of delicate penmanship. Szabó herself wrote those notes—predictions, directions, a kind of homemade cartomancy in blue and black ink. That a masterful novelist would be drawn to fortune-telling is no surprise. Szabó's cartomancy was not about predicting the future—it was an act of storytelling, of shaping apparent randomness like the shuffle of a deck into something meaningful. Yet, as German philosopher Byung-chul Han warns the act of storytelling itself is falling mute in our time. If stories "create social cohesion" between the past and the future, if they are a bulwark of the present, what happens when that bulwark is no longer built or reinforced? I think of this as I piece together scraps of my great-grandfather's past—his life reduced to a single, nearly lost newspaper clipping, its ink faded even as Szabó's ink thinned to its skeletal scrawl on those cards. Like her, I am trying to shuffle these separate remnants into something meaningful.

Like storytelling itself, Szabó's cards are an attempt to make meaning out of mystery, to give order to apparent randomness. She may have scrawled some predictions on her cards, but she was no clairvoyant. She was eminently a storyteller, practicing a far different and far deeper craft than fortune-telling. But what happens when stories are ignored—when memory is seen as a burden rather than an inheritance? *Iza's Ballad* makes this clear.

This novel follows an aging widow, Ettie Szőcs, whose daughter, Iza, is devoted to practicality and progress. Iza welcomes her mother into her Budapest home, but strips it of everything familiar, believing that "old people's pasts are their enemy." She does not realize how those pasts are explanations, how they shape the present. Even the furniture "was becoming more comfortable, more practical, [like] how they turned on the new electrical appliances" (2016: 315).

Though there was a time when identity was primarily formed and found in family, now it is Iza's work that provides for her a sense of identity and purpose. In the end, this gives her no answers. Szabó's novel demonstrates how the dead intrude into the lives of the living—and how the refusal to acknowledge the past isolates us. If storytelling is disappearing, what else is lost with it?

This is the question I am attempting to answer, using, in some part, my own family's story. I intend to understand and to love a bit more of the small but fascinating place my family has in this world. As much as Szabó's novels are about family and death, they are also about what happens when we cease telling stories—or, what happens when we cease relating to each other at all.

Like Szabó's scribbled narratives, my great-grandfather's story had been reduced to ink on paper—not a novel, not a deck of playing cards, but a brittle scrap of newspaper, nearly forgotten in his daughter's scrapbook. While working in a small corner store in the early 1960s, Frank Meyers once stopped a robbery with nothing but a stapler. He crept up behind the would-be robber and placed the stapler at the base of his skull, daring him to take the money. The robber dropped

everything and fled. A few paragraphs were printed about the incident, and nothing more was printed about Frank Meyers until his obituary appeared decades later in 1982.

My family mostly told stories about the past around holiday tables or in the mute, tearful pause of prayers—where memories of long-gone family members would resurrect, reaching across generations to hold our hands. But the words, when they came, were never enough. Across the generations, hearing the same prayers, the stories were remembered differently—if they were remembered at all. For some, like me, they were inherited. The tears of another became tenderly amusing, a quiet reminder that someone had precious memories of their own, even if we could not access them.

We used a few stock Hungarian phrases at Easter, each person with their own awkward pronunciation. We did not even learn anything as simple as *a Mi Atyánk* [the 'Our Father'] as though we trusted the dead to finish the liturgy for us. None of us had set foot on Hungarian soil in generations. What little I knew of our origins was just that—we were Hungarian. None of us, though, spoke the language. That too, along with the stories that spanned the Danube and Cleveland's Cuyahoga River, had been lost. Or worse, simply forgotten—like the quiet erasure of Majoros, a family name changed to Meyers, a name hidden like an unwanted accent in a time of discrimination. What does it mean to inherit a past of which you cannot speak? To bear a name that carries no stories? To tell only the first paragraph of a story?

About a year or so before her death, my grandmother handed me a sheet of scrap paper, crisp and fresh, a list of names and dates scrawled in soft, cursive black, and punctuated with question marks. It was all the relatives she and my grandfather could remember. A family history full of gaps. Though not a full list, it was sufficient. Although at the time of this writing, I can find no birth certificate for Frank Meyers, other immigration documents suggest that he was likely born in Borsod county in 1907 and brought to America shortly thereafter. His first breath was Hungarian air; his last, American.

The village of Frank's family, Szakácsi, is squirreled away in the Palóc region on the northeastern ridge of the Bükk Mountain range. This part of northern Hungary is famous for its hills and its poverty. The Bükk Mountains span much of the county. Karst formations and trickling waterfalls, forested hillocks and higher, hunch-backed crests; the slopes blanketed in the bright vibrancy of rapeseed in full yellow bloom, rectangular patches growing thickly straight up to the borders of vineyards.

Though Szakácsi has always been a small village, I estimate no more than fifty people live there now. Roofs, gray with age, have collapsed. Fences are little more than chicken wire stretched between sagging wood slabs. Outside the abandoned church, a stone well has been filled in, grass growing from its mouth. Standing beside me in his usual gingham and denim, Zoltán, my friend, translator, and driver, asked if I was disappointed in what I saw. He was worried I had romanticized the place of my ancestors, that I imagined their home as a quaint village of quiet, persistent contentment. I assured my friend there was nothing of the sort. I had not come for nostalgia, but because I needed to see where my ancestors came from—knowing, it is where I too have come from.

Like Szabó, I believe we tell stories, or ought to tell them, to weave together our own threads and the strands of the dead into a living knot. I visited Szakácsi to reach across the generations and hold the memories of my dead ancestors. While there, I was filled with gratitude for their boldness, grateful for the risks they took in leaving behind the hills they had known to sail from Hamburg to Ellis Island, and from there to make it to the steel mills of East Cleveland, the New Debrecen, as it was called.

Many years later, my great-grandfather, Frank, died of a heart attack in his backyard. To my detriment, I never knew him. Though his grandchildren remembered the story of the day his store was robbed, the details were fragmented, thinned as the years passed and the day was spoken of less frequently. After the first shock of the event faded, Frank, whether humbled or embarrassed, rarely spoke of it, and eventually neither did anyone else. The courage he displayed and might have taught was, like the city of his birth, squirreled away by a silent humility his son—my grandfather—inherited. Not long ago, we found the newspaper scrap, chipped and faded, in his daughter's possessions. It is no more than a few sentences long, but to my understanding it reveals a truth as hidden as the future Szabó's playing cards tried to plumb. Not only can you stop a robbery with a stapler, but the dead can give life to the living with a story.

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