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Why does anyone, for example the Hungarian-born Paul Varnai in this case, write an autobiography? Only to tell his story? To write a typical East European testimony? Did Paul Varnai, by any chance, decode the enigma of the philosophical and intellectual inanity of living numerous lives? Pál/Paul Varnai, a Holocaust survivor, left Hungary in 1956 wishing to reach his dreamland, France, to find liberty; instead, he embarked on a new life in Canada and found freedom.

How many Varnais have set sail to find personal liberty? Thousands? Millions? Paul Varnai is one of them. Being a Hungarian Jewish intellectual, Paul Varnai — like other Hungarian Jewish immigrants— mistook liberty for identity. Many, like Paul Varnai, have been desperately searching for liberty, which they were denied in their homeland, and not realizing that they were looking for self-identity. Being a Jew, Varnai was deported to a Nazi concentration camp as a child. After surviving hell, he lived his early years in a colorless, rural town in Hungary, still an outcast for being Jewish. Eventually, he arrived in Canada only to discover and finally experience the words: "Yes, I am a Jew". In the case of Varnai, freedom was nothing else but a recognition and acknowledgement of who he was. Throughout such journeys, immigrants finally unearth their identity, which always leads them back to the country where they were deprived of it. This is also Paul Varnai's paradox. Finding identity and freedom in a strange country gets him trapped in his past from which he escaped. He writes, "Where do I live exactly? In my childhood."(181) -- albeit, his childhood was the Holocaust.

Is it a depressive message that someone lives in his past, though he intentionally left it behind to find another actuality? The different points in time in Paul Varnai's life got amalgamated into an eternal past tense: being a Hungarian Jew. There's another decisive declaration from Varnai, "I am a person without a past." (138) How can this be true? Of course, it cannot be, in general. But finally it became true for Paul Varnai: he found one of his Jewish identities in Canada, but awakened to another paradox. He can be Jewish in Canada willingly and readily, either as a young immigrant or a university professor at Carleton University, Ottawa; but the Canadian Jews, and Jewry in general, were definitely not as he had imagined them in Hungary. As a McGill student, he spent the Sabbath with a Jewish family in Montreal and was taken aback by how different Jews they were. Not at all like the way he had imagined the Jews when in Hungary. These were ordinary Jews who struggled and tried to cope with the hardships of everyday life. They were not JEWS who were chosen to suffer from the hardships of everyday life. He could be Jewish in a free country, but was unable to be the JEW he had always dreamt about. Sadly, only his motherland could give him the illusion and vision of being a JEW, as one under repression and suffering indignity. Even though he was not subjected to embarrassment and suffering in Canada, this land shattered his vision of the JEWS and stole his imagined identity. Only suffering and humiliation could give him the meaning of being Jewish in Hungary, but freedom and liberty stripped him of the meaning of being JEWISH.

What an absurdity! Várnai is well aware of this absurdity since he quotes the Polish playwright, Mrożek, “There’s no way back because once you go back home, you lose the essential purpose of your life that one day you are going to return home.” (145, translated by J.O.).

While writing this review, I tried phoning Várnai in Ottawa to find out whether or not he has found one of his lives but there was not even an answering machine to reveal his whereabouts. Later I learnt he IS in Hungary. It was not the first time he returned, just one of the numerous trips back to the land of his fathers. Where is a Hungarian Jewish immigrant supposed to find one of his lost lives? In Hungary. Where else? Where is a Canadian Jew of Hungarian extraction supposed to find one of his other lives? In Canada. Obviously. Várnai re-discovered his Hungarian selfhood by translating Hungarian short stories into English in Canada in the eighties, and recently, he has created his very Hungarian persona by interviewing Hungarian intellectuals in Hungary. Essentially, Paul Várnai gave us another enigma to figure out.

Várnai recalls that in Hungary he had been considered non-Hungarian but was accepted as a Hungarian in Canada. Since his retirement, Várnai mostly writes for Hungarian Jewish publications concentrating on literary reviews, interviews with well-known Hungarian personalities, and personal writings. Is this his double life or has Paul Várnai remained “in-between”? I don’t know if Paul Várnai has already found or will ever encounter not one of his lives, but life in the singular. I doubt it. I don’t know if any first-generation Hungarian immigrant has ever come across his one-time life after he left it behind. I am hesitant in finding the proper answer.

Why did Paul Várnai open his narrative and journey to the public? Through his autobiography, why did he make his Hungarian immigrant readers despondent? The message he shares in his book is distressing by declaring the number one rule for Hungarian immigrants: live lives — yes, in the plural— if the previous one is lost.

Being a fan of the absurd, Várnai’s answer to his life-long question was so simple and — what else? — absurd. After a successful career at Carleton University and publishing several short stories and articles in Canada, he returned to Hungary. He went back to the country where emerging anti-Semitism and a newborn autocracy frightens the so-called non-Hungarians: Jews, the Roma, left wing and liberal intellectuals. What a slap in the face! A one-time persecuted Hungarian Jew is back in his detested homeland to recover his genuine identity, once again a filthy Jew in today’s Hungary.

Who is right? Sławomir Mrożek or Paul Várnai? Mrożek is convinced that going home is meaningless for an immigrant, but Paul Várnai challenges this claim: descending into the one-time hell is nothing else but an exploration of his one and only life among all his parallel lives.

To tell the truth, initially I was somewhat afraid to undertake writing a book review on Paul Várnai’s biography entitled *Életeim* (My lives) published in 2011 by Zachor Foundation, Budapest, Hungary. I was shrinking back from writing about someone’s life because I have always felt that it is entering their private sphere. This is so

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even if it is the author himself who — intentionally — opens the door and allows complete strangers to enter his world. Moreover, reading the title in Hungarian shocked me: *Életeim* (My lives). Ever since I left Hungary, this has been exactly my boogiemán: to see the singular of the word *life* in plural. The first time I experienced the phenomenon in the plural, I had a mild feeling of schizophrenia. However, having already spent a couple of years in Canada, I came to believe that there are parallel actualities existing. After reading Várnai's book, I got assured that while one of the realities fades away as time goes by, the other(s) manifest themselves more and more, although all of them are constantly in competition to keep my soul and intellect on the rack. There are different realities, contrasting identities and differing actualities that can exist side by side, not in harmony, but in excoriating symbioses. While the country left behind is floating away, the one welcoming you is infiltrating every brain cell, slowly but surely intensifying the contrast between the one-time actuality and the undertaken reality giving crystal clear meaning to the “here” and “there”. Such absurdity is embodied in the use of a simple English word in plural, *lives*.

Shall I recommend this book to read? I still don't know if Paul Varnai gave up the journey in a maze of his numerous lives or whether he put on his ragged shoes again to walk on a road that once headed to the ultimate monstrosity. Having read Varnai's book, it's up to the reader to choose reality in the singular or non-existing realities in the plural. I have made my decision, now it's up to you to make yours.