

Exile Diaries: Sándor Márai, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, and Others

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In 1998 I conducted interviews with the Polish writer Gustaw Herling-Grudziński (Bolecki *Rozmowy*), who had been living in Naples since 1955. During one of our conversations Herling-Grudziński remarked that he was fascinated with the Italian translation of Sándor Márai's novel *A gyertyák csonkig égnek* (The Candles Burn to their Stump), which had just been published in Italian and immediately became a bestseller. From the Italian press, Herling-Grudziński learned about Márai's biography and other works, among which he found the diary the most interesting. By that time, Herling-Grudziński had published seven volumes of his own *Diary*. Herling-Grudziński deeply regretted that he had not known Márai's works earlier and not had met him in person when they lived so close to each other in Italy for many years. Naples and Salerno, where Márai lived, are merely seventy kms. apart and Herling-Grudziński used to be a frequent visitor in Salerno and its surroundings.

In Márai's novel, which came out in Poland several months after our conversation, Herling-Grudziński found both the topic and the poetics fascinating. Márai tells a story about a complex combination of love, passion and envy which occurs between two men and a woman. The same theme pops up continuously in many of Herling-Grudziński's works. The narration in Márai's novel, lean, somewhat traditional, yet very intensive and free of allusions, must have been very appealing to Herling-Grudziński.

However, it was only the reading of the three-volume Polish edition of Márai's *Diary* (which covered the years 1943–89) that made clear to me that the parallel with Márai was not only Herling-Grudziński's last great literary fascination, but also a crucial issue in twentieth-century East-Central European literature. Márai's *Diary* is like a beam of light bringing out of the darkness many still unnoticed problems and similarities between Polish writers and him.

Let us start then by tracing this common territory. The lives of both authors were cut into two similar halves: before World War II (in Hungary and in Poland) and after 1945 in exile. Both Márai and Herling-Grudziński became

closely acquainted with Nazism and Communism, the two totalitarian systems of the twentieth century; both witnessed two occupations: the German and the Soviet one, of which the second was not known in the West; both watched the political paradox of World War II in Eastern Europe: the barbaric crimes of the Nazis caused the Bolsheviks (allies of the Nazis in the years 1939–41), to be awaited in 1945 by some Eastern European societies as liberators; both witnessed the depravation of societies and individuals under the influence of both of these ideologies and political systems; both spent most of their lives in exile, about which they made up their minds approximately at the same time, right after the communists took over the power in Central Europe.

Márai's and Herling-Grudziński's destinies and interests coincided in several ways, though neither was aware of that. Both lived for a while in Italy as well as in Germany, which they describe with great acuity, both contributed to Radio Free Europe and were among the most prominent people in their respective exile communities (though Márai, for one, consistently kept away from exile groups). Both were fascinated with art and literature, wrote about the same writers and even the same texts, often in a very similar way.

Both Márai and Herling-Grudziński closely watched the stances of the Western European politicians and intellectuals resigned to or fascinated by Communism and accepting the totalitarian regime in Eastern Europe. Wherever they resided and whatever they did, they lived the same hopes and suffered the same kinds of bitterness. As an example for that I can refer to the 1956 Hungarian revolution, which received no support from the Western countries – an issue they both touch upon in their *Diaries*. For decades, Márai and Herling-Grudziński were unknown writers in their countries, banned by communist censorship, and both reconnected to their readers in Hungary and Poland only after the fall of Communism. The list of such similarities is so long that my lecture could be just an index to a book titled “Márai and Herling-Grudziński.” Such a book may one day be written; in this article I shall focus only on a few introductory issues.

At the beginning of this comparison, we should note that Herling-Grudziński was not Márai's peer. Born in 1919, Herling-Grudziński was two decades younger than Márai, but the latter had peers among the important Polish exiled writers, including Aleksander Wat (born in 1900), Józef Mackiewicz (born in 1901), and Witold Gombrowicz (born in 1904). Like Márai, Wat committed suicide (in Paris in 1966). Mackiewicz died of cancer a few years before Márai (in Munich in 1985), and Gombrowicz died of asthma in Vence, France in 1969. Like Márai, they all died in exile, and the latter two were forbidden in their home country. Herling-Grudziński died of a stroke in 2000 in Naples.

What these writers shared may be characterized with the title of Aleksander Wat's memoirs, *My Century* (1977). The other diaries could carry similar titles, for they cover most of the century's second half: Márai wrote his *Diary* between 1943 and 1989; Herling-Grudziński's *Diary* covers the period from 1971 to 2000 (he started it already in 1942 but did not publish the notes covering the years 1942–70); that of Gombrowicz's covers the years 1953–66. The similarity lies not only in the use of diary as a literary genre, but also in the discourse characteristic for all these writers, which is based on memoirs of and reflections on the age, with the writer and 'his century' as protagonists. A century of abrupt cultural and social changes, a century of the worst crimes and ideological madness, a century in which masses became the subject and the individual was degraded. In one of the first records in Márai's *Diary* in 1943 the fear of gigantomania, of surpassing human measures appears (1: 10).

The question what is the essence of "my century" functions as a fundamental leitmotif in Márai's, Gombrowicz's and Herling-Grudziński's diaries, as well as in Wat's *My Century* or Mackiewicz's various autobiographical recollections. All these writers, Márai, the oldest among them, were part of a common intellectual formation which could be called Eastern European Modernism. Despite similarities, this Modernism differed significantly from the Western European literary Modernism in one matter: in Eastern Europe, historical heritage proved to be the driving force behind the works of the writers. The historical heritage influenced not only the topics but also the poetics of their works; above all it determined the particularity of their diaries.

I am interested in what we say about the diaries of the Polish writers from the perspective of Márai's, and, at the same time, what we can note in Márai's diary from the perspective of the Polish writers.

Eight Issues of Comparison

1.

Not all of Márai's *Diary* is fully published as yet. It is even difficult to say how many volumes the diary will consist of. The Polish version comprises three volumes, the Hungarian volumes are being complemented with titles "what was left out of the *Diaries*," and gradually republished in annotated "complete" editions from the huge reservoir in the Márai archives. In contrast, the *Diaries* of Herling-Grudziński and Gombrowicz have already been entirely published. The latter writers gave themselves their final literary shape and published them. Possible supplements found in their archives will not change these diaries.

Why did Márai write a diary? Why did he publish it during his lifetime? These same questions come up when we consider the diaries of Herling-Grudziński and Gombrowicz. Why did the exiled East-Central European writers publish their diaries during their lifetimes, while the ones who stayed in their homeland did not? One answer to this question is that the diary gave the exiled writers the opportunity of a non-fictional and totally unbound first-person expression. The diary was for all of these writers an experience of independence (Márai 44). In his diary, the writer presents himself to the readers not as the author of a literary construction, behind which he himself is hidden, but as a person, as a specific, living individual. In the literary sense, the writer who publishes a diary rejects the convention of objective literature whose ideal – since the times of Flaubert – has been the so-called “author’s disappearance.”

In Anglo-Saxon reflections on the modern prose, started by the essays of William James and then theoretically developed mainly in Percy Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction* (1921) and Wayne Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), the main characteristic of the modernistic novel was the disappearance of the omniscient narrator. In this conception the dismantling of the nineteenth-century realistic novel was carried out by turning the figure of the narrator into an instance invisible to the reader. This conception – well justified in the English language novel – is not suitable to describe the development of the modernistic prose in Polish literature, where the so called author’s narration (Irzykowski, Witkacy, Gombrowicz, Schulz, and others) was characteristic.

In his *Diary*, Márai speaks in his own name – differently from what he does, for instance, in the novel *A gyertyák csonkig égnek* (The Candles burn to their Stubs), where the narrator is anonymous. Herling-Grudziński and Gombrowicz avoid using anonymous narrators in their literary works; they are always written by an internal (first person) narrator, who has many characteristics in common with the author – for example parts of the biography and even the last name. Whatever the differences between the poetics of Márai, Herling-Grudziński, and Gombrowicz, their notion of the diary allowed them to argue in their own name with the world, their nation, literature, art, politics and all twentieth-century culture. For the writers living in exile, the diary was an exceptional genre of literary expression, in which the truth about reality did not have to be replaced with literary fiction. However, this was a privilege of only writers in exile, for due to censorship the writers living in communist countries could not publish any truth about anything. This is why the diary (just like the essay) became the most characteristic and, at the same time, the most original genre of exile literature.

2.

The diaries of Márai and Herling-Grudziński differ in formal terms. Herling-Grudziński's always specifies the date and place of writing the entry. As for Márai, a large part of his *Diary* is a collection of reflections from the whole year; one does not know when and where they were written. Herling-Grudziński's *Diary* resembles an intellectual chronicle held from day to day. He wrote his diary in one city, Naples, and in one country, Italy. Gombrowicz wrote his *Diary* in Argentina (1953–63), and during the last three years in Germany and in France. Márai's *Diary* travels along with the author across the world, and often becomes a travel journal. Of course, Herling-Grudziński and Gombrowicz travel as well, however these are trips rather than long journeys. This also has consequences for the construction of the themes in the diary. Márai's *Diary* could be compared to a changing, rotating stage of the world, a *theatrum mundi*. He purposefully chooses the role to observe the weirdness and madness of the twentieth century on different continents.

The diarist Márai is aware that he is partaking in historic events that defy up-to-date knowledge about society and the individual. This is why his *Diary* focuses on reality. His *Diary* is saturated with condensed notes of a sociologist, historian, ethnographer, and explorer of civilization. Márai is moved by everything he sees: he always asks himself where people will be led by the processes and changes of twentieth-century civilization. Changes that nations, societies, groups, and individuals undergo in the twentieth century, are an important subject his *Diary*. As an observer, Márai often wonders and questions: unanswered questions prevail in the modality of his *Diary*.

What the diaries of Márai and Herling-Grudziński have in common is a similar description of reality, reflection on phenomena and events, behind which the diarist hides his privacy. Márai's *Diary* is usually a collection of autonomous reflections, sometimes only two, three sentences. Herling-Grudziński's diary is daily chronicle, an intended portrait of his time seen from Italy and France. As for Gombrowicz's *Diary*, it is a collection of micro-essays and polemics, in which the author's "I" is the center and dominates over everything. Briefly speaking: Gombrowicz's *Diary* is from the very beginning the author's manifesto. The subject on which Gombrowicz "lectures" at many different occasions is the individual within cultural roles and institutions. The subject of Herling-Grudziński's *Diary* is Europe after Yalta, seen through the eyes of a former prisoner of a Soviet concentration camp. The perspective of Márai's diary is broader because it also refers to America.

Herling-Grudziński's and Gombrowicz' *Diaries* consist of many commentaries and interpretations of their own works, as well as of literary works by others. Márai avoided commenting his own work. He wrote much about other

people's works and about literature in general, but he did not turn himself as writer into a hero of his *Diary*. In this, he utterly differed from Gombrowicz, who purposefully created a diary of a writer – of an artist. Herling-Grudziński's *Diary* is in between these two variants. Just like Márai, he mainly observes the world in his *Diary*, and yet, at the end of his life he made himself and his writing a hero of the *Diary*.

All of these diaries, regardless of their differences, are similar insofar as their authors believe that the diary is a literary piece. Herling-Grudziński and Gombrowicz devote much space to this question. Márai, contrary to them, does not write about this issue at all. However, in the very construction of Márai's diaries, one can find an identical artistic conception. His *Diary* is not a collection of notes, but a literary work whose poetics consists of a condensation and generalization of observation. Observing a concrete individual event (a conversation, a reading, or an observation of the world) the narrator universalizes the singular fact and turns it into an entity. The records in Márai's *Diary* become short parables, metaphoric presentations of what happened to societies and individuals in the twentieth century. Márai is a master of abbreviation in the *Diary*: he switches from narration to a brilliant comparison, aphorism, or a literary climax.

3.

Although Márai lived in America for many years, the main subject of his diary – if one may speak of a subject in a diary at all – is the history of East-Central Europe: its revolutions, wars, terrors, atrocities, and suffering; its restrictions on the freedom of thought, its contempt for the individual, and its trampling on elementary values. Márai writes about himself as a writer from the turn of the century: “I was born at the turn of two epochs.” Although his key experience – just like that of Herling-Grudziński – was World War II and its consequences, the two writers take totally different perspectives.

Aged thirty-nine, Márai was already a mature person at the beginning of the war. In 1939 Herling-Grudziński was 20 years old. Márai describes in his *Diary* Europe after 1939 from the perspective of a disintegrating historical unity – the disintegration of its Latin culture and tradition. These were – to quote the title of his great book – “memoirs of a citizen” who saw the destruction of liberal Europe by totalitarianism and nationalism. Herling-Grudziński's Europe is totally different, simply because he was not a citizen or a “patrician” in Mann's sense of the term. Yet, there was a different, more important reason: young Herling-Grudziński's traumatic experience was the Soviet camp in which he had spent two years. He called it “a world apart,” meaning a world of reversed values, a “prison civilization.” Márai was terrified by the degeneration

of liberal Europe, which he remembered from before 1939. Herling-Grudziński fled from the Soviet hell simply to Europe. Whatever it was: compared to the Archipelago Gulag, Europe was a normal. Márai also experienced “a world apart,” the ghetto in Budapest, which he described in his *Diary*. From these two different personal experiences of the “world apart” Márai and Herling-Grudziński drew identical philosophical and ethical conclusions. For both authors, the question “what is the nature of man?” became a major problem. Who is responsible for and who the victim of crime in the twentieth century? The conclusions of both writers were similar. No crime may become a norm, because man – despite some horrible experiences – is a moral being. Although Márai’s stance could be described as religious skepticism, he was sensitive to the metaphysical dimension of reality and of man’s nature. In his notion of human nature, God and the gift of faith were paths to understand the mystery of man. According to Márai, man learns about himself when he is “face to face with God.” The key to his humanness is therefore his conscience, which can be neither reduced nor determined by anything. Herling-Grudziński’s conception was exactly the same. As for Gombrowicz, he thought differently: he interpreted conscience not in moral or metaphysical categories but in interactive, social terms, as the result of inter-human relations. This conception was unacceptable for Herling-Grudziński, and Márai would probably not have been its partisan either. Márai and Herling-Grudziński experienced World War II in Europe; Gombrowicz was then in Argentina.

Márai’s and Herling-Grudziński’s conception should also be viewed from a different perspective. Márai’s peer was Aleksander Wat, who wrote about himself that he had been born at the moment when Nietzsche died. Wat debuted in the same year as Márai (1918–19), and also as a poet. However, Márai saw the fundament of European culture in its bourgeois character, Wat, who was a futurist, debuted under the banner of the Nietzschean war against all of culture and its axiological foundation. For twenty years, Wat was an advocate of the Bolshevik revolution. He changed his approach twenty years later, during the war which he spent mostly in Soviet prisons. After his return to Poland in 1945 he became one of the most profound and most religious poets of Mediterranean culture, and after he emigrated in the mid-1950s, as an uncompromising anti-communist. His Oxford lecture, *The Semantics of the Stalinist Language*, preceded Sovietological studies by several decades. Wat’s *My Century* is a result of this experience; it is a story about an anti-human utopia of creating a new civilization on the ruins of European culture and about the price paid by humanity for this common Bolshevik-Nazi madness. If Márai had titled his diary *My Century*, his diagnosis would be the same, only the word “we” would mean something else.

Márai and Herling-Grudziński watched Bolshevism and Nazism give birth to a culture of lie. Both of them, and also Wat and Mackiewicz, devoted much space in their diaries to the unofficial history of Communism. They all saw treachery, offense, political and moral crime, in the communist methods of taking over and holding power in Poland and Hungary. Their common reply was the decision to go into exile, because – as Márai wrote – none of them wanted to be an “accomplice in crime.” In this sense, their diaries were individual and intellectual attempts to destroy what they could not accept, namely the popularity of the pro-communist discourse in the western media.

4.

Márai repeatedly asked what the social sense of twentieth-century events was. Wherever he resides, his diary is a sort of a mobile study of culture. The question concerns the commercial and consumptive aspects of modern civilization. Márai interprets this question in an extremely original way. Commercialization itself is not a danger. It becomes one when the writer is requested to adjust to the rules imposed upon him. Thus, a writer is in Márai’s view an unadapted man, and consequently free and independent. This idea can also be found in the diaries of Herling-Grudziński and Gombrowicz. However, Herling-Grudziński and Gombrowicz do not become critics of commercialization, for they limit themselves to the defense of individual liberty against totalitarianism and the collectivization of thought. Márai knew the problems of modern civilization undoubtedly better than Herling-Grudziński and Gombrowicz, and he was more sensitive to this kind of discourse than they were. He praised the American Revolution as a pragmatic one, in which commercialization and consumption turned out to be the result of satisfying human needs. This result, Márai says, tends to be unpleasant in its symptoms; it is, nevertheless, accompanied by enormous progress in the twentieth century. At the same time, praising the American pragmatic revolution means in Márai’s *Diary* rejecting the myths of such European revolutions as the French and Bolshevik one, whose realization required guillotine, terror, concentration camps, and the “Archipelago Gulag.”

5.

One of the many common features of Márai’s and Herling-Grudziński’s diary writing is landscape description. It plays a crucial role for both writers: they are sensual, they take into account colors and shapes, and they form a never-ending admiration for the beauty of nature. Descriptions of nature in Herling-Grudziński’s diary are decidedly subjective and always very intimate. The landscape is moving and changes according to the moves of the observer in

space. Márai's conception of description is totally different. What matters in his diary is not what the landscape is to him but what the meaning is of what he sees and observes. The landscape in Márai's descriptions is then objective, independent of the observer. He tries to inform neutrally about what he sees. Things are different in Herling-Grudziński's *Diary*, in which the Naples area is described as his other homeland, using for this description symbolic reminiscences of the lost Polish landscape. Márai's description of landscape is first of all a means to reflect on the social world rather than on nature. My "everyday task is to see history in the landscape" (279), he writes, but he actually means the present understood as history, which produces itself in our eyes without having a name as yet. Márai and Herling-Grudziński renewed the literary and reflective function of description. What Gombrowicz did was utterly different: he deprived description of every bit of cognitive function.

6.

One theme in Márai's and Herling-Grudziński's diaries is common for both writers in a very special way: the descriptions of southern Italy, its customs, the mentality of its people, its cultural remains, its landscapes, cities, and works of art. Next to each other, these descriptions give us the impression that Herling-Grudziński and Márai followed each other's tracks, as if they complemented each other's observations, lived through the same fascinations, and paid attention to the same facts. We would need a large study to show this.

7.

The last theme of Márai's *Diary* is old age, the description of the dying body and of consciousness rebelling against this process, his feelings and his whole spirituality. This is also Herling-Grudziński's big theme, though he develops it in his last stories rather than in his *Diary*.

8.

Márai, just like Herling-Grudziński and Gombrowicz, considered himself a writer by vocation. Reading was for him a starting point for taking up a dialogue with other writers, a dialogue upon which he would build their condensed mini-portraits. Herling-Grudziński acted in a like manner, treating his *Diary* also as a place for practicing literary criticism. Gombrowicz's case is different: everything he writes in his *Diary* about other authors is only an excuse to formulate his own conception of literature. What is significant, however, is that Márai, Herling-Grudziński, and Gombrowicz directed their blade of his criticism against literature. Each of them required that literature uncover the

truth of life and surpass literary conventions and taboos. Herling-Grudziński could repeat after Márai that he is interested in literature and not in the literary life (44), that he finds “golden thoughts” and fictional stories without ties to experience boring. Herling-Grudziński and Gombrowicz would underwrite Márai’s protest against a literature of “pretty words” (2: 256). It is perhaps precisely for this reason that diary writing was so important to them: in post-1945 East-Central European literature it was the only genre that allowed neither the emptiness of “pretty words” nor Orwell’s “news-speak.”

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