



Language and Identity in Erzsébet Juhász's *Border Novel*

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Abstract. Erzsébet Juhász's *Border Novel*, which is composed of short stories and anecdotes, can be defined as a travelogue as well as a family novel. Its most important motif is the border. In this context, the border denotes a political, cultural and linguistic dissociation. By bridging the distance and the border, travelling is represented as an experiment of temporal break-up. In the family stories the language is a determining power: it is shown both as loss and gain. The Monarchy is the widest space of the novel: its towns (Novi Sad, Szeged, Pozsony, Temesvár, Linz) are identified related to the Hungarian era in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (referred to as 'the Monarchy'). This paper examines Juhász's *Border Novel* as a featured construction of Vojvodinian Hungarian literature: border novel, travel novel and post-Monarchic novel.

Keywords: language, border, family, story, loss of identity

The Genre of the *Border Novel*

The title of Erzsébet Juhász's (1947–1998) posthumous prose volume is a result of editorial choice. The text is comprised of epic forms: short stories and anecdotes (Bence 2009, 122). The seven short stories construct the episodes of the family novel which recounts the story of the Patarcsics family. The story about the family consists of linguistic and cultural codes: Hungarian-Serbian attitudes,

Serbian-Slovak, Romanian-Hungarian national political oppositions, ambitions of assimilation, and experiments for linguistic/national self-identity.

The novel recounts Emi's view as an insight perspective into the novel. In the 1990s, Emi is in a borderline situation of either staying or leaving the country. Those years were the time of disintegration of the Yugoslav state and the beginning of new wars in the Balkans. The story starts in Novi Sad, with a recollection of a memory – the grandmother, Angeline Nenadovits, spent a whole day on a tram in 1910 – to travel through the places that once belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, rolling up the confused family story's diversified strings, and to end up with a bizarre, symbolic crack on the Vienna Express. One imbecile member of the family begins a hasty and unwitting run on the sweeping tram as if "some unknown, mighty force was pulling him back and forth. Maybe it is the same force which pulled his ascendants through generations from Graz to Szabadka, from Szeged to Isonzo, from Temesvár to Pozsony, from Novi Sad to Arad" (Juhász 2001, 94). By mentioning the main points of intersection, the quoted comment of the narrator draws up the motions of a typical family. In this sense, the novel can be characterized as a type of travelogue in which the protagonists bridge distances and separations, and make their own imaginary and realistic ways toward each other. In fact, these heroes are related to the travellers in classical epics. The heroes follow in these travellers' footsteps trying to reorganize the organic unit of historical novels. They carry damnation and anxiety in their destiny, and recall the image of a dissipated wander of medieval times. The organic unit, which is realized through the protagonists' travels and encounters, refers to the world of the Monarchy before World War I, where the families lived in a united region with no boundaries tearing them apart.

The border alterations and separations structure the constellation of the Trianon-novel. The story of Angeline Nenadovits – who spent a day on a tram in Novi Sad, not long after her father had moved the family from Vienna to another town – creates the basic tone of the novel. Travelling on the tram and thinking about her love Miro, Angeline Nenadovits had by then experienced the loss of self-identity, separation, and the cultural border situation, which would later be experienced by each and every member of her family as a form of existence through centuries: "She had a deep and sure premonition induced by the effect of strange and depressively primitive environment, that she would never see Miro again. (...) Her premonition did not deceive her. She never met Miro again. She had no news of him after 1918" (Juhász 2001, 8).

The effect of destiny in the stories of "living on the margins" is that Emi, a descendant of the family, experiences the same split up of unit and continuity, in this case in 1990, when her husband, Boro, with his Southern-Balkan views and no nostalgia for the Monarchy, emigrates, leaving her behind alone, knowing that the plan of getting together is a mere deception. They would never live together again.

Emi's and her family's sensation of foreignness and homelessness is created by the post-Monarchic lack of identity: "The difference between us is that Boro has a future perspective, while I have none, and I have never had one. Just like I've never had a homeland, only a country of birth" (Juhász 2001, 16).

Numerous reflections, allusions, determinations relate to the semantic and poetic concept of border. The most concrete information is involved in the titles of episodes. Two texts bear the title *Toward the etherealization of border*, but the other titles also refer to the meaning of the border, crossing the border, distance, absence, travelling. While the title of the chapter *Fogolyvár, nicht war?* is based on a play upon words, it relates to the concept of prison. The episode about Szeged reflects the territory and the continuity of the novel: it draws up the movement of the family story.

Types of borders

The novel deals with numerous types and meanings of borders. In essence, these are territorial-political borders (e.g., the stories of border alterations according to the Trianon Peace Treaty), but they can also be linguistic and cultural barriers. We cannot follow the family line all along the novel because although the boys, Miklós and János, identify themselves as Hungarians, their mother, Cecilia "did not say anything, nor a word in Hungarian all her life, while the father, Ivan Patacsics was convinced that the Patacsics family was from Slovenia" (Juhász 2001, 52). Real and unreal contents and events can be connected to them. In most cases, the question of linguistic identity and the lack of self-identity are recalled. As a real historical event, the formations and alterations of political borders, subsequent to World Wars I and II, intrude into the story of the Patacsics family: the members of the family are separated from each other staying inside and outside the borders. At the same time, the Patacsics brothers, Miklós living in Szabadka [Subotica], and János living in Pozsony [Bratislava], have the same vision. The vision of them being lost in the Rogina Swamp, and their inability of getting out of it can be seen as imaginary spiritual borders. These represent the inner, almost metaphoric fences of the self: "I am here in the Rogina Swamp alone, I can't get out, but I told János to help me, he is nowhere to be found, he can't hear me. It is no wonder; the Rogina was buried a long time ago. Now it is under the Maria-Valeria Park. It was buried a long time ago" (Juhász 2001, 39), Patacsics quotes his father's recurring vision. With the aim of visiting his uncle in Pozsony in the future, he recalls this vision: "Anna said that they had no idea what the Rogina was. 'Miklós, Miklós,' he cried in sheer desperation. 'Miklós, Miklós, I am here in the Rogina! Help, I can't get out of here'" (Juhász 2001, 43). The two parallel monologues connect in Endre's consciousness as his single heritage – as the narrator interprets this spatial metaphor of destiny: "(...) feeling horrified he feels

that he is sinking too, already standing in Rogina, from where he can't get out" (Juhász 2001, 52).

Angeline Nenadovits builds similar imaginary walls around herself in her last decades.

(...) In 1981, she hadn't been out of the house for at least 20 years. She would stagger out into the garden only in the early morning, turning her face toward the sun, and totter back into her dusky room. (...) She was thought to have stepped out of life, and somehow by accident only her body remained here. One morning in the summer of 1998, she did not wake up any more to take a trip on the tram, whose passenger she once was for a whole day in the early autumn of 1910. (Juhász 2001, 9)

It is only Emi and Emil who can enter her special world. They are interested in Angeline's story, so they have a chance to go back into the pre-war world. Therefore, Emil is interested in Angeline's world in order to understand the past, which determined the destiny of their ancestors and of border towns. This story of destiny usually means that "they left their native land, to settle in another town, or they didn't leave it, but they became citizens of another country because of unforeseen historical events, wars" (Juhász 2001, 6). Emi is the only one who is able to decipher the metaphor of the tram, and find it in herself. The 16-year-old Angeline is on the tram all day because she feels "there is nothing left to do without Miro, it is an exile" (Juhász 2001, 8). And then she awakes to the tragedy of her life: the nonexistence of ways towards each other. The feeling of homelessness, the tragic lack of self-identity creates a spiritual and emotional border alongside with political borders. Angeline cannot escape from the fact that she loved Miro "best in this world," while "for him, she was just one of the many" (Juhász 2001, 8). Therefore, Emi cannot follow Boro into emigration, "because she had never been able to get closer to Boro's art" (Juhász 2001, 9). She has no real connections to anybody, and the concept of homelessness is related to it. The meaning of senselessness is connected to the concept of home in her mind. She was in Hungary for the first time at the beginning of the 1960s, which "became as real as mother tongue," but "it was foreign in other perspectives" (Juhász 2001, 16). But she looks at her native land as being foreign too, "which fell apart so intensely, that we don't know where its borders are" (Juhász 2001, 16). It is very interesting that experiencing the destiny of a minority community makes her get closer to her relatives from Pozsony she has never seen before.

The emotional function, activity, and locking oneself away from the world is a specific version of a border. Emi's version is reading, while her mother, who – according to family traditions – cannot produce any emotions, takes up painting (*The trap of distances*). The family-based micro-community is a perfect copy, a

repetition of the lifestyle typical of the society: it is separated by real and emotional borders: “There is no viable way toward each other” (Juhász 2001, 28).

The episode about Temesvár [Timișoara] is remarkable because the destinies are connected to two anecdotes: the marriage of Sándor Sajtos from Szeged and Lina Rosch from Temesvár, and Lina’s tragedy. Temesvár was regarded as the Siberia of the Monarchy, where people were taken to die, or rather “those who once came here could never go away. Or, it was possible to leave, but only to the other world” (Juhász 2001, 69). This predestination sheds light on the unique, multicultural Rosch family, because grandmother Fanny’s great-grandfather arrived there from Germany on the occasion of visiting his relatives, but as he could not find any of them (they had all died of malaria), instead of turning back, he settled in the town: he was the one to suffer the damnation of the inability to leave.

Lina is the lover of distances; she is driven by compulsions of travelling and searching for something. (Her customs officer lover moved desperately far, to Fiume, and was killed in action in 1915. Later Lina falls in love with Elemér Ban, a famous contemporary writer.) She has nightmares, and she overdoses herself on the day she finishes reading Elemér Ban’s novel. She wants to get out through the town gate, but it closes right in front of her. So her destiny has a tragic paradox because she, who always wanted to escape every kind of real and imaginary gates, dies crawling and lying in front of a door, shouting “Let me in!”

Loss of political border and identity

The loss of identity and tragic lives are induced by the drastic border alterations and change of political power. While the Patacsics family experience the horrors of the war – the “authorities” beat Angeline’s husband to death, the Partisans dragged away Gitta’s lawyer husband and shot him in a ditch, Amalia Eichinger never uttered a word after her sons died in the war – the family’s destiny is strongly determined by the experience of losing home as a result of border alterations. János was stuck in Pozsony in 1918. Due to a nervous breakdown caused by the experience of the horrors of the war, he could not imagine or believe that Szabadka still existed. He wrote letters to Miklós, who was in Szabadka, but they were returned by the authorities.

As if the addressee would have to change as the borders and streets had been changed. János had to wait until 1932 for a benevolent soul who had the minimum of compassion and honesty to deliver the 27th letter after the 26th, which for the Patacsics brothers was the sign of life. (Juhász 2001, 34)

A lot of parallel stories about the loss that happened in Szabadka and Pozsony reflect on the Trianon trauma.

The family relatives from Temesvár, Sándor Sajtos and his family also suffer an identity crisis caused by the new borders. Lina's restlessness and nightmares were triggered by the horrors of the war. She was always afraid that her husband (whom she did not love but saw him as the only stronghold amidst chaos) would be taken to the battlefield and get killed.

After the Trianon Peace Treaty, the family felt as if they were prisoners of a nightmare they could not get out of. The greatest disappointment was that the people changed. The Romanian families looked down upon them, while a significant number of Hungarian families disappeared.

The novel contains an episode about the tragic disappearance of acquaintances:

(...) when you come around, you feel ashamed: you feel as if you were incapable and helpless. And shame cannot turn into pride or satisfaction; you see that the cowards are abandoning the sinking ship, but you are different – you hold onto your determined position. This kind of feeling cannot satisfy you; you know that where you are is a sinking ship. There is nothing to fight for. *Horror vacui*. Fear of space, the fear of the future. You miss everybody who left. Those people as well who you did not like. (Juhász 2001, 50)

The Patacsics family experience both border alterations as landslides: "It can't be accidental that everything happens again," János concludes (Juhász 2001, 51). However, his wife's dramatic report is about how she shook hands with three hundred of her students because by their leaving the country she became a redundant employee.

Linguistic and cultural line of division

The linguistic and cultural colourfulness and variety meant richness for the Rosch family until the Trianon demarcation lines. It meant intellectual coquetry and advantage, while they impressed Sándor Sajtos, the son-in-law, with the ability of mixing the languages. This was caused by their ironic superiority of possession. Fanny (the grandmother of Sándor's wife) produced 'arias' from these mixtures of languages.

Eichinger Amália had nostalgia for the German language, so she spoke to her eldest son in German, and made him read aloud from her cherished German books. Between Sándor and his mother there is a bridge created by the language and reading. Sándor complains to his brothers, who live in Szabadka, that his daughter Réka was angry when she learned that he spoke to his grandchildren in Hungarian,

and the children spoke the language quite well. Vasile, the son-in-law, solved the problem saying “They will forget it all anyway” (Juhász 2001, 89).

The mixture of linguistic and cultural codes induces insecurity and bewilderment in the Patarcsics family. Their mother was not able to identify herself as Hungarian. She looked down on them. This aversion can be traced back to an anecdote: her father, Marko Bajić, shamed Rózsa Sándor, who called him ‘Racz.’ Her mother, Cecilia, who was not a very intellectual person, deduced her views about the Hungarian nation from the story about the outlaw, who was regarded as a coward. So according to her, being cowardly and unheroic was a more serious national imperfection than her disregard of her own Serbian identity, or abandoning her mother tongue. She did not blame her sons for changing their language, but for identifying themselves as Hungarians. Cecilia could never speak to Miklós’s wife, Ila Sajtos, because she would not speak in Hungarian, and Ila had no talent for languages. She could only say one word in Serbian, “dobordan,” and this is just because she had to, and regarded it a curse” (Juhász 2001, 60). So she was unable to understand their uncertainty of self-identity and the desire for Hungarian national self-evaluation which caused her husband’s death. For a man without any Croatian or Slovenian national identity, being Hungarian would have been the desired target. When the Russians marched into Szabadka in 1944, he died because of the language and national uncertainty: he chose death instead of changing his identity again. After the Russians came in, he had a horrifying suspicion that he would have to identify himself as a Russian after all the uncertainty and aversion he had had for decades. Feeling unwell, “he never woke up into this world any more” (Juhász 2001, 63).

Travelling as a way of bridging the border

The heroes of the *Border Novel* are suffering from compulsive travelling (Toldi 2009, 84). There are parts about inner trips on a tram (Angeline Nenadovits); the travels can be imaginary (Emi’s dream about travelling) as well as compulsory, like Lina the morphinist’s trips to Kolozsvár [Cluj], which were real in the beginning.

The novel contains a few descriptions of trips, but there are three significant metaphorical travel stories containing the post-Monarchic feeling of life. The first is the Patarcsics family’s postponed and cathartic journey to Pozsony. Endre has to travel to visit his father’s brother in Pozsony to understand the multiplicity of national and familial collapse caused by border demarcations. (Endre’s wife does not love him. They got married and had children, but he feels as if he had copied the scheme, the formula of being unloved, separated from his children.)

The second travel is connected to Sándor Sajtos. He begins his journey in his hometown, Szeged, to Temesvár, but he gets off in Szabadka. He visits his sisters for a redeeming speech and confession hoping that they will understand his

frustration and fall. The speech is an opportunity to unlock the status of being separated and his crisis of identity. However, his mother remains silent forever, which means her secession from the world.

The border story, which begins with a trip by tram, rounds the most significant travel which recollects a visit to relatives in Austria in 1962. Emi's aunt has the idea to travel to Linz, to get connected with Lexi living in Austria. This trip is a failure too; it is the tragicomedy of a unit destroyed both linguistically and culturally. The communication between Lexi's family and the relatives from Szabadka is like a theatre play due to the insurmountable linguistic and cultural differences as well as borders developed through decades. So their superficial connection is represented by sightseeing.

Emi and Emil can only remember the great scene of crossing the border, just as her aunt Margit says elatedly, "We are home at last."

Female identity and types of border

The novel can be read as a collection of stories and destinies of women. Therefore, it can be defined as a female gender novel or a novel written by women because the coherence is created by their being. Three significant female identities should be highlighted here. The first one is Angeline Nenadovits, who spent a day on a tram in 1910. She had to see the famous places of the town. The town quarters, the streets meant a lot to her. She remembered some significant stories, in which she composed the most important movements of her life. When she was young, she moved with her family to Novi Sad, to Rákóczi Street. As time passed, the authorities changed the street names, but she called the street by its original name. This fact reflects on her identity. She was longing for the past. She lived in past times. In her last years, she did not want to remind herself of her husband, who died before World War II. So her main activity was sitting on the tram and thinking about her late husband, or reading books containing sad stories. She confessed to Emi that she had not had dreams for a long time. She had not left the house since 1981. Her main ambition was to live in the times when people did not have to think about self-identity or borders, or identify themselves according to the country or land where they lived. She experienced the actual border demarcations, and lived within imaginary borders around herself created on her own. Everyone experienced the war, political movements in a different way. She lived in her room, and her revolution was staying in it regardless of the real period in which she lived. Her name is also very interesting. It changes according to the border. Her surname is spelt Nenadovics, Nenadović, or Nenadovity.

Ella Patarcsics, Emi and Emil's mother was unresponsive to her family. In her last years, she spent her time separated from her family. She moved back to her family house, leaving her children and husband, while her parents took her in, and

regarded her moving house as a casual activity asking nothing about the reason. It is an open question whether this was an inherited behavioural pattern or she subconsciously hid behind this scheme. Her behaviour metaphorically represents the actual border demarcations. The get-togethers with her children in the Bodis sweet-shop are like compulsions, they are conducted in silence, which is the basic tone of hopelessness. When she died, her family members found her paintings. Emi and Emil, looking at their mother's paintings, had a feeling that they, the children existed only in the pictures. The paintings were as disharmonious as their real life was. They now knew why their mother left them, because while she was painting, she realized that the reality was what the pictures showed. Ella painted portraits of unknown women and men having horrific faces. Emi's mother painted herself too, as a dead person with a wrinkled face looking into nowhere. The concept of border in her context was dual. Having created the walls around herself, she made her space boundless. She made a border between herself and her family, while living a boundless life which was represented in her painting showing imaginary worlds and creatures. As she disclosed herself from the community, she opened up her own reality.

Amália Eichinger is described as a beautiful woman. After she knew that her sons died, she stopped speaking for good. Nobody could stay with her for long. Sándor was her favourite son and she made him read from her German books. Amália could not identify herself as German, she denied her German origin. The political movements and the war made her live in eternal silence.

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