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Life Stories and Interculturality

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Abstract. This article examines two short stories: Teréz Müller's *Igaz történet* [*A True Story*] and József Bálint senior's *Imádkozzál és dolgozzál* [*Pray and Work*]. The argument explores the way the texts reflect on shifts in power in the Hungarian region of Vojvodina, and the way power structures define the relationship between majority and minority in a society that undergoes constant and radical changes. Contemporary historical events of the twentieth century, changes, faultlines, traumatic life events and identity shifts emerge as the contexts for these narratives of the daily experiences of a Jewish merchant family and a farmer family respectively. Thus, the two texts analysed are representative works rooted in two fundamentally different social backgrounds. The discourse about the *I* is always also about the other; the construction of identity is already in itself a dialogic, intercultural act, which makes it an ideal topic for the exploration of the changes and shifts in one's own and the other's cultural identity. Translational processes of transmission are also required for the narration of traumatic experiences. Teréz Müller was the grandmother of the Serbian writer Aleksandar Tišma. Her book is not primarily a document of their relationship; however, it does throw light on diverse background events of the writer's life and oeuvre. Comparing the experiences of identity in the autobiographical novel of Aleksandar Tišma and the recollections of his grandmother reveals geocultural characteristics of their intercultural life experiences.[1]

Keywords: interculturality, life stories, identity, memory culture, social interaction

Hungarians in Vojvodina have recently started to discover the significance of popular and bourgeois narratives framed in diaries and autobiographies. Forms of self-representation on the border between diary and memoir are published one after the other. Authors come from diverse backgrounds, and their writings betray the characteristics of the social layer which they belong to. Among the authors there are farmers who played an important role only in the narrow environment of

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their own community, and whose anthologized memoirs fell victim to the rules of editorial practices as well as linguistic and stylistic standardization. Other authors, such as craftsmen or art loving teachers, voluntarily resign from the spontaneity of producing their own texts, frequently embellishing their writing with quotations. However, books written by authors who were politically influential in the interwar period have also been published, shaped into diaries only retrospectively. These are books in which the authors consciously foreground the collection of documents rather than the events of personal life, and the aims of the editors are similarly more focused on documenting social events than family matters.

The material that is growing larger and richer has remained mainly unreflected. The present article undertakes a discussion of a relatively new phenomenon in the cultural milieu of minority Hungarians in Vojvodina,[2] with its focus on two texts that are representative works of fundamentally different social environments, but which are comparable in the sense that both can be characterized by their authors as belonging to the same genre; both texts were written with the aim of describing "true stories."

The past as an entity worthy of documentation

My analysis focuses on two autobiographies whose respective authors started to document their lives when they were in their senior years. The first paragraph of József Bálint senior's work entitled *Imádkozzál és dolgozzál* [*Pray and Work*] reveals that he started to write his autobiography when he was eighty, while Teréz Müller was ninety-one when she began noting down her memoirs entitled *Igaz történet* [*A True Story*]. She specified her age herself: "in two months' time I will turn ninety-two"[3] (Müller 2011, 9), and she was ninety-five when she completed the text.

It is beyond doubt that Assmann's category of memory culture completely applies to both of these authors, since in Assmann's understanding the person who remembers has to be in a "relationship" with the past, which must also be consciously interpreted as the past. According to Assmann, this presupposes two things. One is that the past cannot have disappeared completely, and some documentation has to be available that refers to it. The other is that documents

2 The notion of the "cultural milieu of minority Hungarians in Vojvodina" presupposes the knowledge of a number of historical events, the most important of which are the following: after the First World War, the Trianon Peace Treaty annexed a territory that formerly belonged to Hungary, inhabited by Hungarians, Serbs, Bunjevci, Slovacs, Rusyns, Germans, Šokci and Croatians, to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. During the Second World War the territory again belonged to Hungary, while at the end of the war the Red Army and Tito's partisans occupied it, and made it part of Yugoslavia and of the state of Serbia. When referring to changes of borders and changes of regimes in my paper, it is these historical events that I have in mind.

3 Quotations from Hungarian and Serbian literature were translated by the author.

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about the past have to display characteristic differences when compared to the present (Assmann 2011, 18).

The author of *A True Story*, Teréz Müller, started her life story accordingly, referring to the past and the present as markedly different categories. "My thoughts must fly back to times long past." (Müller 2011, 9) The attitude of the autobiographical author was driven by the intention of documenting the past. She first described her family tree, without which understanding the life narrative would not be complete, since as it customarily happens, the characters appearing in the narrative are family members who bear similar names. The author specified her intentions as well. She considered the "future generation" as her readers, aware of the fact that the past was constituted throughout her text. She wished to put her life story in writing, and the guiding principle of her undertaking was truth. In her words, "My aim is to report truth as it happened, even when it was not entirely nice or good, and I also want to report about places where the sun was always shining on me." (Müller 2011, 9) She did not strive for further pedagogical aim. The aim of her self-representation was not to set up an example to be followed, nor to create a moral model; she merely wished to describe the story of her family for the next generation, so that they could get to know their ancestors. Hers was a gesture of leaving a trace, of summarizing a life while creating the past. She was propelled by the type of primal experience that is discussed by Jan Assmann in his volume entitled *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*:

> The rupture between yesterday and today, in which the choice to obliterate or preserve must be considered, is experienced in its most basic and, in a sense, primal form in death. Life only assumes the form of the past on which a memory culture can be built through its end, through its irremediable discontinuity. One might even call it the primal scene of memory culture. There is a difference between the autobiographical memory of the individual looking back from a certain vantage point over his own life, and the posthumous commemoration of him by posterity, and it is this distinction that brings out the specifically cultural element of collective memory. We say that the dead will live on in the memory of others, as if this were some kind of natural prolongation of their life. (Assmann 2011, 19-20)

The autobiographical writing of Teréz Müller may be partially called a "commemoration by posterity," since her grandchild, the well-known Serbian writer, Aleksandar Tišma was the person to buy her the notebook in which she started recording her memories—as we learn from his autobiographical novel *Sečaj se večkrat na Vali* [*Always Remember Vali*]. He asked his grandmother to write down the stories she frequently used to tell her family, just to pass the time, as a recreational activity. He mentioned in the same text that his grandmother

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could always entertain her guests with exciting stories about the stinginess of the grandfather, her husband, or her chores with the villagers and the maids, and said that her memory did not fade a bit, not even in her old age. It was with this same gesture that he kept her among the "members of the community," and transferred her to the present.

"Commemoration by posterity" was taken over at this point by natural remembrance, and it was moulded according to the psychology of the elderly: childhood was given the largest role, and the biggest gaps of uncovered periods appeared in mature adulthood and old age.

When discussing the autobiography of Teréz Müller, it should be kept in consideration that the primal experience of death played a crucial role in the narrative. At the primal stage of memory culture, stories written with a consciousness of death—but not in its proximity—play an important role in the early stages of remembrance. The goal of writing was constituted in opposition to death: the family history emerged at the border between a real and a mythical worldview, since the narrator believed in it, while later those who are no longer among the living will live on through our reading about them.

Apart from Assmann and his notion of memory culture, another influential theorist has to be mentioned, whose work is also related to autobiographies. Philippe Lejeune in his work discussing diaries as antifiction proposes the primacy of everyday/ordinary writings against narrative strategies and solutions relying on diverse types of fiction. He calls authors of literary diaries imitators of the genre, and believes that a diary evoking genuine interest in its readers is the one which describes a subject that is impossible to control, in other words, something that cannot be found in other sources, such as history books or works written for the larger public. It is also important that the narrative should not be goal-oriented, the narrator should not know how things will evolve, and it is also crucial that the readers do not know the end of the story either. In Lejeune's opinion our life offers several scripts, and the choice changes daily, while we are acquainted with them only partially. "Nobody knows where the path of their life will take them, except for the final destination: death." (Lejeune 2008, 19)

Regarding the narrative in memoirs, the principle of a story does not allow us to take the material as entirely unstructured. The "past," for the narrator, is an already known, existing entity, which receives its final form through its creation. What gives Müller's text a diary-like quality is the dates signalling the beginning and the end of her writing: 25th October 1968 and "Novi Sad, 12th March 1972." It took nearly four years for Teréz Müller to finish the story, and end her notebook with the following words: "Thus I finish the story of my life. God only knows when I will add the full-stop at the end." (Müller 2011, 76)

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Narrating the experience of trauma

Teréz Müller's autobiography is a remembrance which inscribes not only the identity of the self, but is also imbued with historical, social and cultural tradition. An interpretation cannot disregard the fact that the narrative, apart from recording real, factual events and creating a private history, has another dimension as well, that which textualizes significant historical events.

A crucial part of her narrative is the story of the survivor, in which she described the 1942 raid in Novi Sad and its preceding events, which resulted in the Hungarian fascist regime's massacre of several thousand Jews and Serbs. Since there are few descriptions of the events, let me include here a quote from the testimony, which can be interpreted as a significant document of oral history. The attitude of fear was prevalent in those days in Novi Sad: "We dreaded going to bed, and waking up in the morning meant dreading our unknown fate." (Müller 2011, 58)

Later we get to know details from the rising fear and the state of public affairs. "Anyone can imagine what these days were like; although from a distance only, gunshots could be heard from morning to evening, and despite the strictest prohibition, the news spread that there was a human victim for each shot." (*ibid.*) The voice of detachment and distance is constituted as the prefiguration of the experience of trauma. "The dead were thrown into the Danube." (*ibid.*) Even the knowledge of sure death was better than insecurity, fulfilment better than waiting. This is revealed by the author's slip of the tongue. The word introducing her deportation is *at last*. At last, on the third day of the raid, a sergeant and two ordinary soldiers arrived. The way she described the sergeant is characteristic: he was a rather kind man, who even warned her to put on her heavier fur coat instead of the cloth coat, since it was minus 29 degrees Celsius outside.

> I was sixty-five then, and I did as he said, put on warm clothes and stepped out of the gate of the house followed by the sergeant. A long line of deported Jews were waiting outside, and I was thrust among them, and we were walked towards a square where empty lorries waited to take us to the Danube. (*idem*, 59)

The narrator's attitude was governed by the principle of keeping one's dignity at all times. The psychological shock wiped emotions out, it was only a few details, such as "I was thrust," that revealed her strong emotions. Human life appeared as a worthless object, the body a thing, and consequently, even human beings as existential entities became questioned in the narrative recollection: "We were thrown up onto the lorries as if we were rubbish, until they were full. Then off to the Danube." (*ibid.*)

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The description of the terrible event emerges vividly even from the distant past; it is succinct and objective:

> When we reached the shore of the Danube, we were arranged into lines of five, and were slowly marched towards a hole cut in the ice, into which, clothes stripped off, adults and children were thrown in alive. If someone had the strength and the life instinct to try and crawl out, they were pushed back with a pitchfork. (*ibid.*)

Survival did not evoke exultation or joy either; the author confined herself to record the facts without emotions: "The line was shrinking slowly, and there were about five metres between me and the site, when a car rolled in with a few civilians who stopped the massacre. The rest of us, who were freezing outside, perhaps five or six hundred, were set free." (*ibid.*)

Apart from being unique, the return home and the escape draw attention to the narrating subject's mechanisms of remembrance. The sequence of images based on personal observations emerging from the depths of consciousness arranges scenes next to each other which are crucially important for the narrator, even though the scale of the presented events is not really comparable in the eyes of the readers: in the process of recollecting the memories, facts of shooting decrepit people, being seated on the floor and then called out in pairs are equally frightening for the narrator:

> While we were on our way, decrepit people who couldn't keep pace with the rest were simply shot and left in the snow. When we arrived at the sports hall, everybody had to sit down on the floor, and no one was allowed to go out, not even in urgent need for the bathroom. Now we were waiting here speechless and hopeless, when finally they started taking out people in pairs; we were trembling with fear of what was still to come. (*idem*, 59–60)

In a deeply cynical situation they had to listen to the explanation of the events, as if they had not seen them with their own eyes. At this point we witness deception, the concoction of a lie: "When everybody was inside, a loudspeaker went off from the balcony: 'And now we'd like to thank all the Jews for behaving so well, and everybody can go home now. Our reasons for keeping you so long were merely to have the streets cleared'." (*idem*, 60) In the moment of survival, one of the paradoxical emotions stemming from fear was gratitude towards their executioners that filled the people present, triggered by the psychological moment of the traumatic experience. People thanked them, exalting them for having been set free: "This was when hysteria broke out. 'Long live Horthy', cried several women hugging and kissing the policemen." (*ibid.*)

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The primal experience of death is coupled with figures of silence. Teréz Müller obviously did not speak or perhaps not much about her experiences to her children. Aleksandar Tišma did not include this episode in his autobiographical novel, only the circumstances of the escape, primarily the absurdity of the situation and the gratitude of the survivors.

Leaving the site of the trauma behind initiated a process of self healing. Teréz Müller most probably wished to spare her family from the dreadful events; her daughter reacted in the following way: "My poor Olga got so excited, she was seized by a fit, Gábor and I could hardly put her to bed. I rested after the excitement at Olga's house, lying in bed for a couple of days, Saturday, Sunday and Monday." (*ibid.*) Dori Laub's remarks can be duly applied to this situation. In her opinion those who are listening to the account defend themselves with total paralysis, and "a sense of total withdrawal and numbness." (Laub 1992, 72)

The unaccountability of trauma is also connected with this. According to Dori Laub, the fear of fate returning like a bad omen plays a key role in narrations of traumatic events, and hinders both the witness and the person recollecting the events from talking about them. Silence offers security, while uttering words may revive things from which one is trying to hide. Also, the act of speaking may become traumatic in itself. Thus, revival and speech do not function anymore as remedies, but become further sources of traumas.

Teréz Müller never returned to the house from which she was taken to the Danube, nor did she go back to the city, but left for Budapest.

The cultural background of the narrative

I first underscored the most traumatic event in the volume, but the whole book can be generally characterized as a series of crisis narratives. The reasons for this were, first, that the narrator wished to avoid being a boaster, and second, that the hurtful events were probably inscribed and stored very deep in her memory.

The described period of nearly a hundred years, an entire history of the twentieth century with its diverse changes and shifts in power, ensures that the way the narrator's life evolved remains a secret for the reader. The author was an exceptional "civilian autobiographer," constructing herself as the subject and creating her past while writing about her life.

> In the house of my grandmother, Teréz Müller, [...] there was a piano on which she played festive songs and classical etudes; although she completed only four years of school, she had her own books as well, among others, the collected works of writers such as Vicor Hugo, naturally in Hungarian, and when she went to Szeged or Budapest on business trips, she would

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always go to the theatre or opera in the evening, and she would talk about the performances for a long time—Aleksandar Tišma (2012) wrote in his work mentioned above.

The narrator attended school for four years only, but in her youth received private tuition. The six siblings—five girls and their brother—learned to play the piano, were taught German, and twice a week a teacher visited them "for the sole reason of teaching us spelling and writing in Hungarian." (Müller 2011, 13) Learning to knit and crochet prepared Teréz for becoming a good housewife and businesswoman already in childhood.

She spent her youth at the turn of the twentieth century in an exuberant, eventful village, Horgos, a place where balls were organized weekly. The place was full of lively people, teachers, journalists from the capital, tradespeople and poor people, doctors, registrars, judges and scribes, and her spirited descriptions about them surpasses the observations of ethnographers and anthropologists. The socially stratified world in Horgos was created between groups at the crossroads of social relations and interrelationships; this was a world in which work discipline and the knowhow of trade and business were acquired already in childhood.

Teréz Müller revealed secrets of her life unintended. The perspective of the naïve narrator not only obscured facts, but with the power of her style and narrative vein disclosed hidden connections as well. Narrating without any pretence, Teréz gave a vivid account of her suitors, explaining how she followed her sister's advice on whom and how to reject, and whose lily of the valley bouquet to throw after the suitor into the street. It is only the linguistic power of depicting the scene that reveals the intense jealousy of her older sister; the narrator did not recognize the web of intrigue spun around her, which led to her sister seduce and marry the narrator's fiancé.

The recurring element of starting anew is the central motif of the narrative written as a remembrance in the past tense. Moving between Horgos, Martonos, Szeged, Mezőtúr, Budapest and Novi Sad with several changes of regimes and borders were the central elements in her recollection. Teréz Müller, the person who was always on the move, was always active and engaged.

The establishment of the new border, the "Serbian occupation," was regarded as temporary by the Horgos society, but they soon realized that they had been wrong. The family was in Szeged at the time, but only the parents returned, leaving their three daughters and the governess behind. To attend her daughter's wedding, the mother could cross the border only by bribing a "detective," who took her to the border and waited for her until she returned.

In the meantime, the family was affected by market fluctuations: the Hungarian crown was replaced by the Serbian dinar. Entire enterprises were run on smuggling goods across the borders. The new regime tried to penalize the black

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market traders, and Teréz Müller was also interrogated about the smugglers; since she would not betray her fellow villagers, she was even slapped across the face.

Changes in her family and the society, as well as her unfortunate marriage did not feed her defeatism, but rather, strengthened the determined warrior inside her. Her dominant life motive was not defined by the fact that she belonged to more than one minority group, which could have become a traumatic experience in the interwar period. She did not consider herself a second class citizen due to her religious beliefs or being a Hungarian. Being a woman could further aggravate the feelings of inferiority. Although it is true that she admitted she was not a great housewife, and perhaps she did not take as much care of her children as she should have, she took over the role of leader and supporter of the family.

Her female identity as a narrator is unquestionable, but her text does not belong to the group of feminist texts which although in line with patriarchal ways of behaviour undermine and contest at the same time. Her authorial attitude is comparable to "feminil" texts that are written from the point of view of female experiences, and written in a style that is culturally defined as feminine (Zlatar 2012, 165).

A True Story is also a book about a woman who managed to survive, and who was endlessly resourceful. It is a report about a grandmother who left this world when she was ninety-seven, ultimately without fortune, but in the firm belief that she had carried out her duties properly, since she was able to start from scratch eight times and make a living for herself and her loved ones even when she was old.

Imagery and visual communication

Teréz Müller concealed and suppressed her emotions in her memoirs. This is not surprising, since the *I* that is constructed within the texts as powerful and fit for survival is not compatible with an overflow of emotions. However, the book also includes photographs and a few hand-written pages from the notebook. The poem by József Kiss, entitled *The Heart of a Mother,* which she included on the final page—probably from memory—stands out as a sentimental counterpoint, since neither its punctuation nor its type-setting resembles anything previously printed in the volume. It seems to soften the rationality of the text, while modestly directing attention from herself onto her descendants.

The cohesive power of the family plays a central role in the memoirs; helping out each other was a natural state of existence. Descriptions regarding household duties or raising children are rare. Even the relationship between mother and daughter is mentioned only in connection with minor quarrels.

However, as already mentioned, the volume also includes photographs, which convey a strong sense of narrativity, and contribute to the process of identity

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formation. Among the first images there is one which represents the head of the family resting his hands on a book. The gesture is telling even if we know it was set by the photographer.

The lack of intimate descriptions is entirely substituted by another element: the photographs intensify the motive of bodily inscriptions, primarily through the posture of the grandmother. The role of the hand is particularly noteworthy among body narratives: the grandmother always holds someone's hand firmly; in the pictures from the late 1960s she has her arm around her teenager great-grandson with a protecting and guarding gesture.

Dilemmas of identity

A True Story talks about the city of Novi Sad as of a place where speaking several languages was a natural phenomenon; Teréz spoke Hungarian, but she could still communicate with the Serbian major. "He spoke Serbian, a bit of German, I spoke German better than him, and a little Serbian, yet we could still understand each other well." (Müller 2011, 66–67)

If we compare the autobiography of the grandmother with the diary and autobiographical novel of her grandson, Aleksandar Tišma, we can see that the identity of the grandmother is immutable. It is not through practice of religion that we can sense Jewish lifestyle: it is obvious that Teréz Müller did not consider religion to be important. Nevertheless, Jewish identity defined her lifestyle and worldview to a great extent. Her sister was rejected by the family because she married a non-Jew, so Teréz Müller chose a Jewish husband, with whom she was not even happy, because she did not wish to end up like her sister. The empathy of the parents became obvious later when the family, seeing that she was unhappy, was inclined toward a divorce, letting her even marry a Catholic, in case that would end her misery. Nevertheless she stood her ground. This shows that the family is characterized as being tolerant and able to adapt to changes.

The grandson, on the other hand, struggled continuously with the question of belonging. "Based on the claims of Tajfel's (1974, 1978) theory, Bourhis and Giles (1977) conclude that the individual will leave his/her group if it does not offer them a positive image of identity in the process of comparison." (Bindorffer 2001) Aleksandar Tišma dedicated long reflective passages to this topic both in his last, autobiographical novel and in his diaries. Indeed, the entire narrative of *Sečaj se večkrat na Vali* [*Always Remember Vali*] deals with this set of problems. Hungarian, Jewish, Serbian, Orthodox identities—these are the national and religious groups that he reflected upon, since his identity included elements of each.

His grandmother's memoirs, as I have mentioned above, deal with the question of nationality and religion only regarding her own identity. She referred to her

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son-in-law, the husband of her daughter Olga, as Gábor. From her grandson's autobiography we learn that Gábor, i.e. Gavra Tišma was in fact a Serb from Lika who, as an immigrant in Vojvodina, adapted perfectly to the urban lifestyle of Novi Sad, not only to its superficial characteristics, an impeccable sartorial taste, suits and ties, but also to its cultural traditions. In the typically intercultural spirit of the place he learned both Hungarian and German. Aleksandar Tišma, whose mother was a converted Hungarian Jew and whose father was a Serb with a weak Orthodox identity, tried to find his own identity and weigh the rightfulness of his choice.

Aleksandar Tišma continued to deal with the issue of identity and homelessness throughout his life: "The difference stems from the fact that I believed that I was secretely something else (i.e. a Jew) and not what people considered me to be (i.e. a Serb), but in fact it was only me pretending to be something else (i.e. a Serb) rather than being what I really was, and what people considered me to be (i.e. a Jew)." (Tišma 2001, 785) However, regarding the question of identity, an equally forceful role is played by languages and the switch of languages.

> An example for the personal background of nationalism: while I was hesitating about which language to write in (in Hungarian, his first language or Serbian—the author's remark)—in other words, which nation to belong to, I was almost left completely indifferent about the rebirth of the Serbian or the Yugoslav state. But once I decided, although not quite firmly, to be a Serbian writer, I have started to worry about the fate of the Serbian nation. I wish to see the nation to whom I primarily write to be as powerful and as important as possible. (Tišma 2001, 39)

Language played an important role in his everyday life as well. As he remarked about it later, his Serbian wife laughed at him when they quarrelled, because he started losing his Serbian. No wonder, said his wife, it was because "I left my home and went to live among Hungarians. Yet, I spoke Hungarian only with my mother. The fact that I started losing my language competence stemmed from trying to distance myself from the language I learned later—somewhere in the brain. Today, while waking up, I murmured Hungarian words…" (*idem*, 784)

Words that one murmurs while being half asleep support Jan Assmann's claim, according to which "[i]dentity is the matter of consciousness, that is, of becoming aware of an otherwise unconscious image of the self" (Assmann 2011, 111), and this applies to both individual and collective identity.

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Individual and personal identity

> The time we live in is spun through with stories. Our place in life is defined by family stories even before we gain consciousness; perhaps we are not exaggerating when we say: even before we are born. We add our own ever changing story—which does not come to an end even with our death—to the ones that we inherit. Things that influence us from the outside, things that we do ourselves, things we think, imagine, experience, things that we are afraid of or hope for—we tell all these things about ourselves, and about each other, over and over again, and as different stories. (Tengelyi 1998, 13)

László Tengelyi's words from his volume entitled *Élettörténet és sorsesemény* [*Life Story and Event of Fate*] apply to the autobiography of József Bálint senior, who wrote his memoirs *Imádkozzál és dolgozzál* [*Pray and Work*] at a similarly old age as Teréz Müller, at the age of eighty; it took him ten years to write it, and he lived for another nine after finishing it. He wrote the source text in slightly more than three years, but after that he made six copies of the text, not entirely identical: some were amended, while he left out some episodes from the others (Bálint 2010, 211). The published version of the text does not refer to differences between the various copies, although these could reveal the "ever changing story" of our identity mentioned by László Tengelyi. It may be significant, though, to look at the list of people to whom he presented copies of his memoirs: his two sons and the family of his third son who had disappeared in the war; the village teacher, a respected priest and a Hungarian journalist reporter working for the minority Hungarian daily paper. The seventh copy is in a public library, available for anybody upon request.

It turns out from his introduction that apart from documenting the events of his life, he also found it important that his readers followed what he considered was "right and true." (*idem*, 7) He offered his writing not only to his successors—or as he referred to them, his "family"—but hoped for the recognition of intellectuals, and apart from that, dedicated it to all of his "Christian Catholic Hungarian brothers and sisters," as a moral exemplum. The subtitle reads: "This is a farmer's autobiography, from which all people could learn." He continuously reflected on morality in his writing; he called it a parable at one point, and compared it to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

We cannot know exactly which books József Bálint senior read in his mature age, but he admitted that his readings inspired him to record the events of his life: "Since I have read a lot of great books, especially in the latter half of my life, it made me think that the authors of these books were encouraged by the gospel and the teaching of our Lord Jesus, and the different views on life they had met during their lifetime." (*ibid.*) Based on this quote his sources may have been the

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Bible and facts of life, although there is no sign that he ventured upon the serious reading or study of the Bible at any point in his life.

The act of writing reveals the experience related to Assmann's notion of "individual identity," which is "the coherent self-image that builds itself up in the consciousness of the individual through features that (a) distinguish them significantly from everyone else and (b) remain constant across the various phases of their development. It is the awareness, beginning with the constant motif of one's own body, of an irreducible self that is unmistakable and irreplaceable." (Assmann 2011, 113) Actually, in Assmann's words, "[i]ndividual identity relates to the contingencies of life, incorporating such key elements as birth and death, physical existence, and basic needs." (*ibid.*) Related ideas, however, are more important than individual identity in József Bálint senior's text. "It is not a euology for myself that I wish to write, but praise to the glory of God, according to my humble talents." (Bálint 2010, 7) On the one hand, we hear the echo of lessons learnt at school, on the other, the humbleness is not genuine. The ideas of praising God and praising oneself are placed next to each other, and the book has hardly a single page without God and the praise of God.

This context raises the question of personal identity, which is "the embodiment of all of the roles, qualities, and talents that give the individual his own special place in the social network." (Assmann 2011, 113) References to social acknowledgement and classification of the individual are raised gradually; in this case, they are connected to Catholicism and belief. Assmann (*ibid.*) comes to the following conclusion:

> Both aspects of the "I" identity are determined sociogenically and culturally, and both processes – individuation and socialization – follow culturally prescribed paths. They arise from a consciousness that is formed and determined by the language, ideas, norms, and values of a particular time and culture. Thus, in the sense of the first thesis, society is not a powerful opponent for the individual; instead it is a constitutive element of the self. Society is not a dimension mightier than the individual, but represents a constituent element of the self. Identity, including that of the "I", is always a social construct, and as such it is always cultural.

Regarding the question of personal identity, peasant lifestyle is given a secondary importance in the recollections, at least from a rhetorical point of view. However, in reality, the various stages in a farmer's life were of utmost importance for Bálint. He described not only stages of self-sustenance, but also of economic growth. Both the language and the moral values of the text are in line with the norms of this social stratum.

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Sites of movement, cultural encounters, shifts

Sites of movement are created accordingly. At the beginning, before his parents settled in the re-populated village of Telecska, the main course of migration took them from one house to another which they rented according to their financial circumstance. When older, he was to go to work to the neighbouring village. Finally, military service came, a typical site of migration for young men, which also contributed to the experience of foreignness.

The principle that defines the notion of journey is closely connected to the genealogy of foreignness, and in this case, it is realised through migration. There is also a shift in the status of the individual in this process: Bálint left the familiar world that he considered home. In works that are based on an intercultural perspective, the emerging feeling of foreignness is represented by war, which foreshadows a direct and physical threat to the life of the individual. "If the definition of the Self needs the confrontation with the Other to mark its own borders, it is undoubtedly war as the most intensive conflict between cultures, which effects the strongest motivation for the shaping of the cultural self-image." (Hima 2005)

As a teenager, he had been drafted several times by the age of sixteen, but was always considered too short and weakly built. His first experience of war was when, still a child, he walked his brother to the train leaving for the Galician front. He was overwhelmed by the external formalities of the sight:

> Although I felt sorry for my brother, from my child's perspective I felt immense joy and a great experience to be there. The officers were marching at the front of the procession, followed by the infantry, after them the trumpet band, and finally the machine gun squadron, with my brother Jani marching on the surfaced road, and me trotting on the pavement, always towards my brother. I followed him with my eyes all the time, and I enjoyed the sound of music; I was admiring the sight. (Bálint 2010, 25)

His brother died of pneumonia and did not come home from the Galician front. The description of the loss of the First World War is reduced to including contemporary patriotic poems and songs, together with numerous stereotypical slogans: "Our wonderful Hungarian land was wrapped in grief, it was torn apart. All the precious Hungarian blood was spilt in vain." (*idem*, 37)

This time he could not avoid military service, since Hungarians too, had to become "Yugoslav soldiers." As it turned out, he would have earlier considered it a status symbol to be a Hungarian soldier. The fact that he was previously rejected is mentioned not as a fortunate circumstance, but rather as a painful memory. "I hadn't been able to become a Hungarian soldier; I wouldn't jump now at the

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opportunity to enlist as a Yugoslav soldier." (*idem*, 40) Language knowledge and cultural differences gain new tension with the change of the borders: "One afternoon I was lying in my room and the door opened, with policemen, two Serbian and a local one, entering; actually, this last one was the interpreter, since at that time we couldn't speak a word of Serbian …" (*ibid.*)

Until that time he lived the life of a farmer, with no movement; he hardly left the village where he was born, and this was why he attributed such great significance to the geocultural experience: "We were taken to Prizren. At that time there was no railway there. We travelled by train for two days, from Sombor to Subotica, Topola, Vrbas, Novi Sad, Belgrade, Niš, Skopje, then to the west to Uroševac, and from there 60 kilometres on foot to Prizren." (*idem*, 48) The training was fast, since most of the soldiers "had already done service for the Hungarians." (*ibid.*) Among his memories from the military he mentioned that they "lived well"; the first things they learned in Serbian were commands and military ranks, and Bálint used the Serbian terms when mentioning them. The farmer boy did not feel that military service in peacetime was a burden; he ended up in a multicultural community, the company of "5 Hungarian, 3 German and 2 Serbian" young men. "I got rested in the military, especially in those four months when we were stationed near the Albanian border; we didn't work, and lived like lords." (*idem*, 51)

After the end of the service, a period of consolidation commenced. The formation of autonomous collective identity began in the interwar period. "The collective or 'we' identity is the image that a group has of itself and with which its members associate themselves. It therefore has no existence of its own, but comes into being through recognition by its participating individuals." (Assmann 2011, 113–114) Its prerequisite is that the members of the group acknowledge it: it would not exist "in itself." Its force also depends on its vividness in the consciousness of the participants and the intensity of its influence on their thinking and acts. We can trace collective identity being formed on the pages of the memoirs:

> We are in the year 1941, and exciting days are to come, although we almost got used to being parts of Yugoslavia […] The Hungarian Cultural Public Association was established. On some evenings we had nice gatherings […] Hungarian poems were recited, songs were sung, and we had readings too. (Bálint 2010, 75)

Soon the community became reorganised yet again, and this is interpreted as dislocation. The war shifted towards revision:

> After that came the great joy for the true Hungarians of King St. Stephen, the Easter of 1941. But we later learned that in this Christian Catholic community, which used to be entirely Hungarian, there were only few

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> Hungarians of St. Stephen. Ten percent, the Germans, waited for Hitler; and about another two-thirds of the Hungarians were waiting for another Hitler-type regime, that is, the Russians… (*ibid.*)

Bálint was drafted into the Hungarian army when he was forty-five and his ethnocentric thoughts were imbued with emotions: "The Hungarian commands sounded wonderful, not like when I was a Serbian soldier." (*idem*, 76) The fact that the author "really hates" the gun refers to cultural differences; although he was taught to aim, he never shot. In the end he was lucky, because he avoided being sent to the front.

A new change came about at the end of the Second World War, when the partisans entered. The description of the gathering around the Catholic church, partisan women, harmonica, the kolo, the Serbian round dance, and the shooting all draw attention to the culturally specific characteristics of one's own and of the other. Under these circumstances the idea of permeability of the relationship between the new order and the local community was mere illusion.

> There was continuous shooting on the road, and my two horses were almost impossible to control, perhaps they felt that my end and their end was nearing. Opposite the church, next to the two-story school building I stopped my cart; the place was crammed with partisans; a group of men and women, boys of 16 or 17 were followed here by armed partisans and a harmonica player. Another group was dancing the kolo in front of the church; the music was on, shooting everywhere, and my horses were terrified. (*idem*, 78)

The compulsory deliveries of products to the state were followed by the first "free elections," and this is one of the points in the text which stirred strong emotions and the feeling of rejection in the author: "The people from Telecska voted for cheap and vile people, they did not know that they elected the least worthy people to be leaders of the municipality." (*idem*, 97) He even included their names: "The well-known Andor Bezdán, and the other one, his pal, János Medve, became role models for leaders of the communist regime." (*ibid.*)

On questions of the genre of true stories

According to Ilona S. Dobos (1964), there are significant differences between male and female narrators of "true stories." The narratives of women are structured primarily around love, intimate events in the family, often stories about mothers-in-law, or the descriptions of first love. Men, on the other hand, write about their

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adventures, mostly heroic, which imbue the narrator with almost superhuman powers. But they may also include horror stories, or happy, funny events, while moral homilies are also frequent.

These categories do not apply in our cases. József Bálint senior's narrator gave a more detailed description of his marriage proposal than the female narrator, and a crucial role was given in his story to a matriarchal social structure: his mother gave her opinion about all the girls who he was going to propose to, and she was to give her consent, too, which he accepted with no objections, no matter how controversial her decisions were. He documented events of family fights about ownership of assets which were frequently difficult to entangle. He wrote about the birth of his children in different places in the text, including the event of an infant's death. Although he frequently included moralizing elements and episodes in his narrative—which are primarily texts with religious teaching that pervade his life narrative—the more significant layer of his memoirs was still formed at the crossroads of family and society, individual and collective identity, tinged with empathic, but frequently stereotypical voices of dissatisfaction. Elements of culture surfaced here that we are normally not aware of.

Teréz Müller, on the other hand, bore the female burden of taking care of her family, and remained an innovative personality to the end of her life, communicating in the meantime trauma experiences which are exceedingly rare in the literature of Hungarians in Vojvodina. Her personality as the narrator included spite, hurt and defiance, but was also characterized by exceptional resourcefulness; she was aware of her drawbacks, and always took them into consideration. Despite all, her story reveals the career of a content person: she felt fulfilment, she was endlessly open and always ready for change.

The difference between the two autobiographies is not gender-related, but rather stems from the differences in the authors' respective attitudes which are further underlined and nuanced by cultural contrasts and an intercultural experience of the world.

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