

# The Birth of Márai Sándor as a Writer

## A Sociological Analysis

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this paper is to outline the *psychosociography* of Sándor Márai from his early days, analyzing the writer's sociological problems, in order to comprehend the personal and social processes in the writer's formation. Becoming a writer is a lifelong endeavor influenced by a variety of factors, including personal, emotional, and psychological characteristics of one's family, education, and social class. Furthermore, being a writer is an intensive activity that requires constant effort, discipline, creativity, and a consistent strategy in order to compete in a field of numerous writers and forms of writing. This paper's temporal framework begins with the early days of Márai's writing. It was in the period of 1914–1928 that the young Márai laid the foundations of his career, determined to become a recognized master in Europe. To investigate the significance of the first stage of his oeuvre, we gathered all the works he published during that time, resulting in an astonishing discovery of 1630 texts, including books and press articles. Furthermore, we explore the psychosocial conditions that appear to have made him pursue a career as a writer. We dig into his childhood memories, approaching some interpretations based on Freudian psychoanalysis.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Sociology of literature, Sándor Márai, Hungarian literature, literary field

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## Introduction

On February 18, 1986, a month and a half after his wife Lola's death, Márai bought a semi-automatic pistol in San Diego. One night, he had a powerful realization that reinforced the idea of committing suicide... Resolved to end his life, Márai expressed his relief in his journal: "I slept well like someone who had arranged everything necessary at the ticket office before a long journey."<sup>2</sup>

George Szirtes, a great admirer and English translator of Márai's work, finds evidence for the 86-year old writer's despair in a letter written a month before his death. Márai talks about his deep exhaustion concerning his long-lasting illness and his reluctance to be taken to the hospital. Szirtes also draws attention to a rare handwritten entry in his journal, in which he states that his passing away shall happen shortly, and he feels ready to leave this world.<sup>3</sup>

One might immediately assume that his suicide was motivated by his bodily deterioration and emotional breakdown due to witnessing the horror of a slow death in absolute solitude. Almost blind, unable to read, averse to writing, and completely isolated, his life became untenable as he realized he had lost all his family, fellows, and contemporary Hungarian writers.

However, there are some additional psychogenetic and sociological circumstances in his life that we consider critical in understanding his prolific writing career. Sublimation, memory, and repression are crucial processes in comprehending the articulation between creative expression and self-elucidation.

Márai's writing sublimation process reflects his social position and his deepest existential inquiries as a bourgeois thinker, affected by the fading of modernity's promises and the waning of the hopes of the age of enlightenment. Not only was Archduke Franz Ferdinand assassinated in 1914, something died within Márai as well, paving the way for him as the writer of eternal exile.

Sublimation is not only the transmission of one's most primal self-expression through a specific medium (music, painting, language, etc.) that helps to channel subjective findings; it also requires a social vehicle to share the singular factors that are likely to connect with others' inquiries. The sublimation process is central to the construction of subjectivity among repression, memory, and oblivion; in its attempt to achieve artistic goals, it aims to address both the fundamental elements of subjectivity and the generational, social, or historical issues, but the singularity of sublimation lies in the creative energy that serves to express one's inner desires, fears, dreams, and emotions through established artistic canons and socially accepted styles. A writer's participation in the literary field requires a sort of transition through socially

2 Kosztołánczy, *The Swallows Arrive Here from Argentina*.

3 Szirtes, "The candle that burned right down."

constructed literary tastes. In terms of the sociologist Norbert Elias, “the libidinal fantasy-stream only becomes significant for other people, i.e., capable of mediation, if it is socialized through fusion with the canon or the conscience.”<sup>4</sup>

This notion contrasts with the voice of Henrik, the old General in Márai’s best-known novel *Embers*, when he states “one’s life, viewed as a whole, is always the answer to the most important questions. Along the way, does it matter what one says, what words and principles one chooses to justify oneself? At the very end, one’s answers to the questions the world has posed with such relentlessness are to be found in the facts of one’s life.”<sup>5</sup>

The aim of this paper is to reconstruct and analyze the social and emotional conditions of Sándor Márai’s childhood that may have compelled him to choose a career in writing, perhaps as a sublimation of inner struggles. Thus, the main objective is to provide plausible answers through psychosocial interpretations to the questions of what inner power drove him to pursue the exile-writer-path at the tender age of fourteen. How did writing become the medium through which he expressed his most profound emotions and existential questions within socially recognized canons?

We reconstruct the first 28 years of Márai’s activity as a young writer wishing to play a role in the central European literary scene. To investigate the significance of this first period, we gathered all his work published in that period, resulting in the astounding discovery of 1630 publications, including books and press articles. We then used quantitative methods of data collection and analysis to interpret and present his literary activity. This text starts with the discussion of Márai’s initial literary explosion in 1914 and its correlation with his childhood family breakdown, and finishes in 1928, when he decided to return to Hungary, eager to enter the Hungarian literary field. At the time, Márai was truly determined to become involved in the intellectual, writing, and journalistic spheres, which served as a catalyst for him to develop discipline and productivity.

In this direction, we center our analysis on the *will of writing*<sup>6</sup> of Sándor Márai and his early decision to become a writer, tying it to traumatic events that occurred at crucial moments in his life. His English translator, George Szirtes, described him as an “obscure writer”. What obscure circumstances led him to embark on a writing

4 Elias, *Mozart. Portrait of a Genius*, 138.

5 Márai, *Embers*, 140.

6 We define *the will to write* in the case of Sándor Márai as an early identificatory and sublimatory power (subjective) that impelled him from his childhood to find through the practice of writing the opportunity of naming the unnameable, identifying himself with the image of the Hungarian bourgeois writer-intellectual (objective, social figure) desiring to be a recognized writer (socially accepted).

career and eventually become a relentless émigré who ended his life with a bullet in the head? Suicide, exile, and literature are the three core elements of our discussion as the driving forces of his life and work.

Therefore, we provide the study in a discontinuous chronological fashion, digging deeper into his memories of childhood and their effects on his professional and emotional life, focusing on his later experiences of exile and suicide. In the following section, we analyze the significance of his most celebrated autobiographical work in Hungary, the *Confessions of a Bourgeois*, as a source for tracing the events he recalled and emphasized in a narrative fashion. For us, the *Confessions* is a literary, historical, and personal source that reconstructs the vanishing of an era of hopes and beliefs that supported the foundations of modern western civilization. In it, he recalls some childhood memories that influenced him, most notably the first major emotional family split on the verge of World War I. This book, hand in hand with other fictional works, provides some clues for reconstructing the initial impulses that shaped his career as a writer, a writer in perpetual exile.

Our main hypothesis is that there are certain connections between Márai's numerous exile experiences, his memories of childhood, and his will of writing to express himself through literature, using it as an ideological platform against any sort of imposition of power or authoritarianism and violation of liberal-humanist values.

We must avoid the conceptual dichotomy of the social and the individual. Thus, we speak in terms of *subject* or subjectivity, *the subject subjected to others*; and in this way, we reconstruct the period when he decided to become a writer and his bursting into literature, using a source triangulation strategy: his literary work, biographies, and the data about his writing activity in the publishing field.

Elias argues that the evolution of an artist is also the evolution of a person. It is important to pay particular attention to the emotional development of the artist, intrinsically connected with others since his childhood and their transformations. For instance, Elias sustains that perhaps there were serious emotional reasons for Mozart's death: "The rapid advance of his fatal illness may well have had to do with the fact that his life had lost its value for him. He clearly died with the sense that his social existence was a failure; metaphorically speaking, he died of the meaninglessness of his life."<sup>7</sup>

Elias's sociological proposal is composed of two main spheres. The macro-social world, that is related to structural contexts based on historical, economic, political, and cultural characteristics of an age in constant change and evolution, is what he called the sociogenetic. The second sphere is the psychogenetic, centered

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7 Elias. *Mozart. Portrait of a Genius*, 3.

in the particularities of the personality, and emotional characteristics of the subjects. “Undoubtedly, the psychological problem cannot be dealt with separately from the sociological problem.”<sup>8</sup> These two levels are completely implicated in which the most singular experiences of a subject are totally interconnected with their social and historical context. For Elias, the analytical interconnection of these two structures is capable of dealing with biographical studies, what we call the *psychosociography* of a writer.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, every individual, personal, or subjective phenomenon is structurally connected to the relationship with others. As Freud notes, “the contrast between Individual Psychology and Social or Group Psychology, which at a first glance may seem to be full of significance, loses a great deal of its sharpness when it is examined more closely (...). In the individual’s mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent, and so from the very first Individual Psychology is at the same time Social Psychology as well.”<sup>9</sup>

We learn from other people how to desire, how to transform a necessity into a satisfaction; we learn from others what happened before we began to recall our lives, incorporating others’ images of the past into the personal narrative of our memory.

If we assume that memory is unable to capture real events as they occurred, and instead is an imaginary construction, a work of focus and fuzziness that plays a crucial role in the construction of the subject, we must keep in mind that, rather than capturing the historical truth, it reorganizes a tale, covering and showing, remembering and keeping secrets, forgetting and transforming, all under the ambivalence of language and its particular limitations. The truth of the memory is not historical, its truth is narrative, and its significance resides in its phantasmal-imaginary construction in retrospective, which builds the foundation of the personality as an identifying force to place itself within a social network.

However, remembering is also a social practice constructed by the tension between one’s past images in connection or in contradiction with others’ memories. But also the exercise of putting memories into words, recalling through literature and using autobiographical genres, such as diaries—the most intimate way of writing—involves a paradox: every diary or any intimate writing about the writer’s life waits for the other, the diary is written to be read by a future reader.

Márai was aware of how memories appear as hazy flashbacks, overlapping with confusing gaps, photographs, smells, words, and others’ past tales. Memory is a social and imaginary construct that has been veiled and corroded by time’s

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8 Elias. *Mozart. Portrait of a Genius*, 138.

9 Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 1–2.

vicissitudes. Memories are social as long as they are always linked to one another and to other people's memories. We do not always know whether we are remembering the image of a photo or the fact itself. Márai's great inspiration, Goethe, affirmed that „when we desire to recall what happened to us in the earliest period of youth, it often happens that we confound what we have heard from others with that which we really possess from our own direct experience. Without, therefore, instituting a very close investigation into the point, which, after all, could lead to nothing.”<sup>10</sup>

The autobiographical experience, happening also in the novel or any form of fiction, is the effect of the tension between memory and literature, driven by writing as a method of seeking existential inquiries, looking for answers to inner questions and also, as in the case of Márai, as a method of cure.

### What drew Márai to the craft of writing?

Sándor Márai's writing career started with the 1915 publication of 11 press articles in his hometown Kassa [today: Kosice]. However, according to his biographers and his recollections in the *Confessions of a Bourgeois*, he began writing a year earlier, when he was only 14 years old. We can see that the first literary stage occurred in two waves that correspond to specific events he recounts in his memoirs: He started writing in the rough context of his adolescence, which was full of family conflicts culminating in his father's decision to send him to a boarding school in Budapest.

Márai's early literary contacts in Kassa, or in Bourdieu's terms his “social capital”, were almost certainly made through his classmates at the *Kassa Premontré Grammar School*. At the age of 14, in the middle of Márai's family breakdown, he met Dönyi, Ödön Mihályi, who soon became his best friend and had a significant influence on Márai: he introduced him to great modern literature, encouraged him to write poetry, and served as an inspirational figure and point of contact for his entry to the field of journalism, particularly to the *Kassai Újság* [Kosice Daily] (1920/21).<sup>11</sup>

Starting from his first writing experience, Márai and his fellows had to confront censorship restrictions. Although his schoolteachers had strictly prohibited students from publishing anything, this did not stop him. In 1916, Sanyi, as he was known at home, emerged for the first time as Salamon Ákos, with three short stories in the two Budapest periodicals *Élet* [Life] and *A Pesti Hírlap* [The Pest News]. In our interpretation, as we will discuss later, rather than quenching his desire to write, the restriction of freedom boosted his literary activity.

10 Goethe, *The Autobiography of Goethe*, 5.

11 Ötvös, *Márai Sándor írásai*, 27–28.

After school, Márai's literary gang used to go to the Drab Club, which was the publishing house of another newspaper, the *Kassai Munkás* [Kosice Worker]. According to the letters of Márai and his close Mihályi's, they had personal contact with the editors of the *Kassai Hírlap* [Kosice Paper], *Felsőmagyarország* [Upper Hungary], and the *Kassai Újság* [Kosice Daily].<sup>12</sup>

This initial writing impulse was bolstered in 1919 when Márai fled Hungary for living a nomadic life primarily in Germany and France, originally with the goal of studying journalism in Leipzig. After the establishment of the Hungarian Soviet Republic on 21 March 1919, the great political promises attracted the intellectual elite.

“They included not only Communists like Lukács (...) and Kassák, but also most members of the *Nyugat* [West] circle who held positions in the Directorate of Literature. (...). Newly appointed professors of the University of Budapest included Mannheim, Babits, (...), and Sándor Ferenczi (...). Gradually, however, most of these figures became disaffected, as did the middle classes and the intelligentsia.”<sup>13</sup>

Márai was not an outlier. He initially supported the uprising, even contributing to communist journals like the *Vörös Lobogó* [The Red Flag], (1918–1919) and the *Vörös Újság* [The Red Paper] (1919), harshly judging and blaming the adult world and apologizing for the defeat of obsolete power structures. Indeed, as discussed later, this subject will be central to his novel entitled *Zendülők*, [The Rebels].

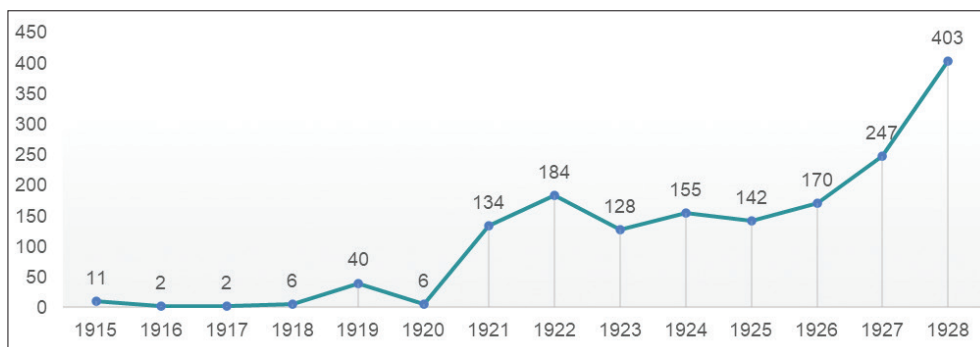


Figure 1 The numbers of Márai's publications (1915–1928)

The period after his emigration in 1919 could be interpreted as the time during which he took writing and publishing more seriously. Indeed, in his early twenties, he began to cultivate a strong network of intellectuals, publishers, and literary figures, primarily in Kassa, Budapest, and Prague, which helped him break into the journalistic and literary fields.

12 Ötvös, *Márai Sándor írásai*, 27.

13 Kontler, *A History of Hungary*, 346.



Márai's father, Géza Grosschmid, played an important role in providing social capital to his young son, who was eager to see his writings in the public sphere. Coming from an influential bourgeois family, Grosschmid was a prominent lawyer in Kassa. As a member of the Christian Socialist Party, between 1925 and 1932, he served as a senator at the Congress of Prague, which probably helped his son establish some niches in the publishing industry in the cities where the father exerted his influence. After his resignation from Congress, he acted as a notary public in Miskolc and was a member of Kassa's Kazinczy Circle. As a political figure, he also contributed articles to some journals, demonstrating his affinity for the writing ethos of the interwar bourgeoisie.

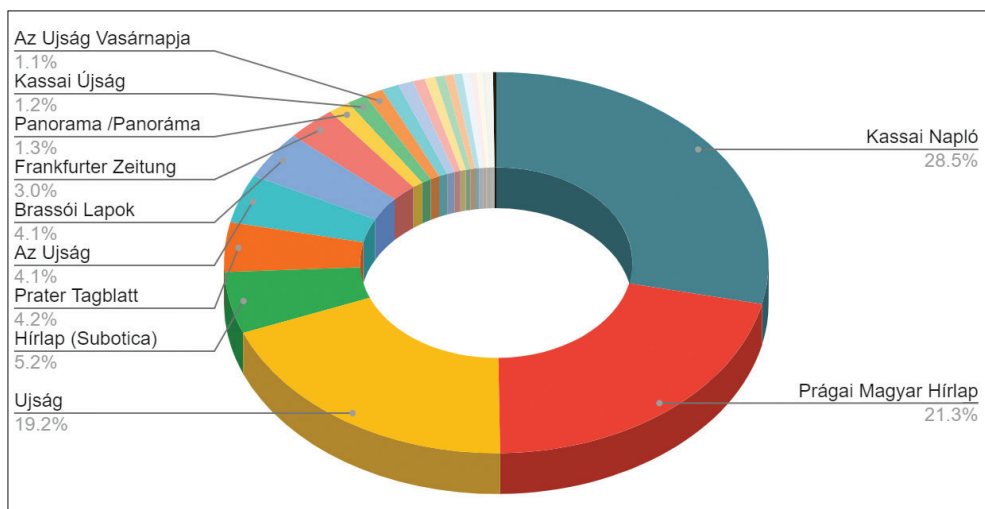
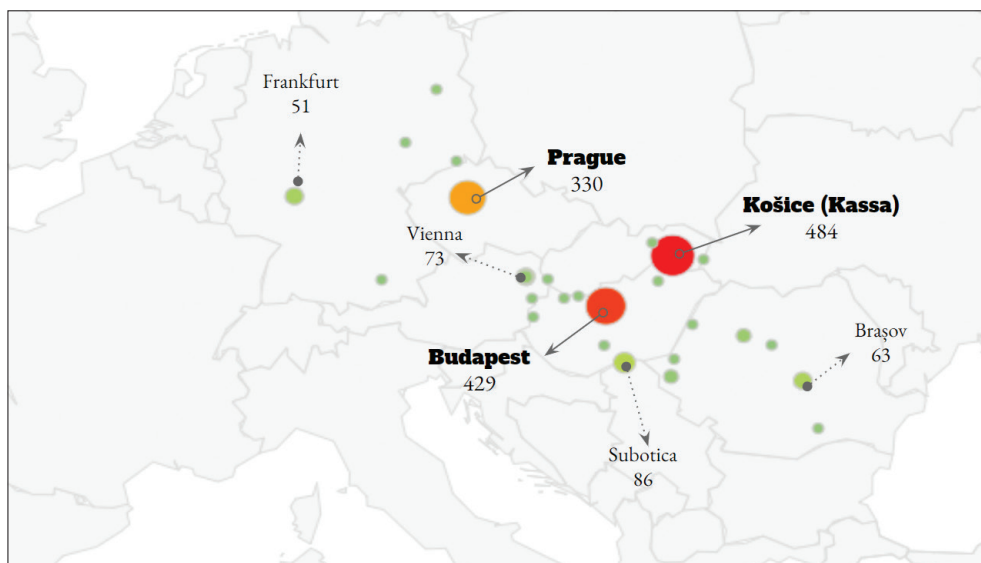


Figure 2 Márai's output in the press (1915–1928)

As can be seen in Figure 2, Márai published his works mostly in political and literary journals. Regarding the newspapers that published him most frequently, it is interesting to look at their distribution in terms of political views. He wrote for the conservative-liberal pro-government platform *Az Ujság* [The Newspaper] and its literary annex *Az Ujság Vasárnapja* [Sunday's Newspaper]. He frequently published in more conservative newspapers like the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, the *Hírlap* [Daily News], or *Brassói Lapok* [Brasso News] too. On the other hand, his works were published in such periodicals as well as the *Kassai Újság* [Kassa's newspaper] or the *Kassai Napló* [Kassa Journal], which had initially been a German weekly newspaper named *Panorama* (Ötvös, 2015).<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the *Prágai Magyar Hírlap* [Prague Hungarian newspaper] was a leftist paper. Overall, this shows that Márai explored numerous contrasting points of views regarding politics.

14 Ötvös, *Márai Sándor írásai*, 21–44.





**Figure 3** Number of Máriai's publications per city (1915–1928)

At the beginning of his career, while living in Hungary (1915–1919), Máriai published primarily in his hometown (Kassa) and Budapest, as well as in other pre-Trianon Hungarian cities. This initial exploration, a pioneering effort to establish his first publishing network (seven cities and 21 newspapers), with the help of his family and friends, reflected his interest in circulating his writings, crossing borders, and addressing diverse audiences. Living abroad after 1919, he began publishing in German (119 press articles between 1919 and 1928) in Frankfurt, Leipzig, Munich, Vienna, and Königstein (Dresden), as well as sending other Hungarian pieces to editors in several cities in Hungary and to the Hungarian community in Prague.

Comparing the number of Máriai's publications to that of the prominent writers of his generation at the time, Lőrinc Szabó (1900–1957) published 408 pieces;<sup>15</sup> László Németh (1901–1975) published 65;<sup>16</sup> Géza Féja (1900–1978) published 61 in 1919–1928,<sup>17</sup> and Antal Szerb (1901–1945) 45 pieces.<sup>18</sup> This is by no means an evaluation of their artistic productivity; nevertheless, it indicates that Máriai, with his 1630 publications in the given period was indeed an extremely prolific writer.

The main question of this section, i.e., what made Máriai a writer or what attracted him to the craft of writing, leads us to delve into the psychosocial conditions that paved the way for him to be the eternal writer in exile. His self-identification with this

15 Horányi and Kabdebó, *Vers és valóság*.

16 Hartyányi and Kovács, *Németh László bibliográfiája*.

17 Balogh, *Féja Géza bibliográfiája*.

18 Nagy, *Szerb Antal bibliográfiája*.

intellectual image and, more specifically, the modern poets of his generation (Ady, Krúdy, and Kosztolányi) compelled him to explore the world of writing in order to enter the fields of literature and journalism and play a significant role in them, whatever it took, following his break with the family world. As a young teenager of 13 to 15 years, the family conflict he experienced was also a conflict with the social institutions he was involved in: religion, school, the empty life of the bourgeoisie, the war, the men in the war, and indeed, the institution of the family. This emotional conflict, which he may have experienced or at least remembered as such, is reflected throughout his entire literary work. From his adolescence, when he rejected his father, the teacher, the priest, and the censor, his political stance was to oppose any form of authoritarianism, and at the same time, to always try to flee. This will be discussed in greater detail later.

### Exile and suicide

This is how Kosztolányi summarizes Márai's last years:

“From the spring of 1985, Lola's illness began to worsen, and Sándor Márai took care of her at home. He complained of constant tiredness in his diary, sensing »the imminence of death«. The genre of his diary went through noticeable changes. Comments on public life occurred less frequently, the text turned more personal. Márai started to confess the miserable physical and mental state they were suffering from.”<sup>19</sup>

What we can see, especially in his last diary, is that this autobiographical writing is a conversation with another person, in fact, a conversation with himself. Every diary expects a reader, a hypothetical future reader; therefore, diary writing comes from the writer's complex experience of time projected for a future reader.

Certainly, from that dramatic spring of 1985, his journal constituted his platform to express his deepest sentiments about death, illness, and solitude, repeatedly stating that life is meaningless. However, those nihilistic statements can be detected even before the decline of Lola's health. His literary work is pierced by a set of concepts developed in different genres: the notions of death, illness, memory, suicide, literature, and exile feature in novels, poems, memoirs, and diaries, as a constant detour to himself, to his position as a writer in constant leaving.

What is the place of these chief concepts in the development of Márai's personality and in the process and constitution of his artistic-literary production? What are his sociological problems? Certainly, the transition of the modern cosmopolitan writer to the figure of the postwar intellectual in exile; the transition of producing

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19 Kosztolányi, *The Swallows Arrive Here from Argentina*.

literature in a liberal context to literature produced in totalitarian states and postwar literature written in exile. What are the causes of the change of the bourgeois writer's social situation with the imposition of the totalitarian regimes and exile as a solution for keeping creative freedom?

In 1943, Márai decided to keep his journal, using it as a political platform to express his sentiments on public affairs. The diary is written in a journalistic, but also poetic, and novelistic style, with the true aim of incorporating it into his literary project. But what happened in Márai's life to cause him to adopt one of the most intimate private genres to communicate public issues?

Due to Hungarian participation in the war and the decadence of liberal arts in the public sphere, it was in 1943 that Márai expressed for the first time his desire to leave the country and to contribute to Hungarian culture elsewhere, far from the suffocating atmosphere of the totalitarian wave.

“To leave this place as soon as possible. If I am alive and if I have the strength and the opportunity, I will leave this place. I will write in Hungarian, even out there abroad, I will be working to nurture our nation. But I am leaving this place. I will not conceal that I have been offended.”<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps this was the beginning of a career crisis in which he chose to stop writing and publishing for his audience and instead, “write «for the drawer» or for himself. The eagerness to write his diary and personal notes are not a simple coincidence, they will help him later to write *Hallgatni akartam* [I wanted to be silent] and *Föld... föld* [Earth, earth]. Indeed, in Márai's writing, diaries and memoirs functioned as a platform for expressing his thoughts and viewpoints regarding the European political situation of the 1930s and 1940s.

Indeed, the Hungarian political turn of adopting the Nazi ideology and its cooperation in the army intervention influenced many liberal intellectuals involved in politics that took a radical position as an ethical stand in times of war. Márai, as a *homopoliticus*, had a strong attitude against any form of authoritarianism. As a consistent intellectual, he channeled his actions in defense of his ideals. Because of the emergence of forms of ideological imposition and censorship, “he wished to stay silent” as a symbol of protest. Certainly, the arrival of Nazi ideology in Hungary left an indelible mark on his life. This may be considered a significant crisis in his career but not the first in his life where the imposition of power became unbearable.

This running away sentiment perhaps stayed with him until his last decision of taking his own life and probably started at the time when he fled home in 1914 to find refuge in young gangs and literature. Indeed, the inclination to leave was a

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20 The author's translation. Márai, *Napló 1943–1944*, 137.

driving force all his life, not only with his voluntary exile in 1948, but also with other decisions associated with experiences in his childhood.

Clearly, Márai's exile had a huge impact on his life and literature, as it was one of the most traumatic events for him, which he reflected in his journals, poems, memoirs, and novels, becoming one of his leitmotifs. His exile did not begin and stop when he left his homeland in 1948. It appears to be one of the final links in a chain of continuous exiles, which may be reconstructed by analyzing his childhood recollections, memoirs, and fictional works.

Every *exile* reflects on its opposite, which is *to remain, to continue to be in a location*, and also *to return*. Every exile is linked to the dialectical tension between a citizen and a stateless person. Sándor Márai, like numerous other writers and intellectuals who fled their nations owing to the advent of totalitarian regimes in the first half of the twentieth century, remade himself by creating a place to stay, both physically and symbolically, via literature written in his mother tongue, seeing writing as a vital activity, in which exile was one of the most prominent issues of his literary enterprise.

Exiled intellectuals of the twentieth century settled their identities in the ambiguous reality of belonging to a cultural community that lives in a demarcated earth under the national rhetoric of a common heritage, sharing the same language, flag, national anthem, and heroes, and the reality of no longer physically belonging to that community.

Edward Said, who studied the excluded, namely the subaltern, the outsider, the traveler or stranger, argues that the idea of exile might be alluring, but the experience itself is terrible. When a human being is forced to leave their native place, their selves leave their true home, which results in a deep trauma. Said also emphasizes that although literature and history often present an exile's life as heroic, romantic, glorious, or even triumphant, these are usually just some means of compensation for the wounds of estrangement.<sup>21</sup>

The experience of exile is a disruptive chronological state of living under the shadow of the past, a past that is constructed based on a set of dramatic, idealistic, heroic, or tragic memories that tie back the present life to the lost land. Memory and exile go together as a painful relationship with an impossible return. In the words of Said,

“[E]xile can produce rancor and regret, as well as a sharpened vision. What has been left behind may either be mourned, or it can be used to provide a different set of lenses. Since almost by definition exile and memory go together, it is what one remembers of the past and how one remembers it that determine how one sees the future.”<sup>22</sup>

21 Italics added. Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 99.

22 Said, *Reflections on said Exile*, 17.

Thinking of exile implies contemplating its structural opposite: the home as a lost land. It is widely known that, after 1948, Márai referred to the Hungarian language as his unique homeland, one of the symbolic elements that constructed the borders of modern states. It is the societal constructions of national memory that played an important role in Márai's political position in defense of the modern values of the Hungarian nation, part of an individual frame regarding the public and highly connected with one's personal life.

### Márai's Confessions

In 1928, when Márai returned to Hungary after acquiring a position in the Magyar literary sphere, his writing output skyrocketed, with the publication of two to three novels each year in addition to the daily texts published in several magazines in the major cosmopolitan cities of Central Europe (see Figure 3). However, in 1948, he wanted to be quiet, and his presence in the publishing market nearly came to an end. Indeed, the intrusion of totalitarian regimes into his cosmopolitan realm and his voluntary exile had a tremendous effect on his writing career.

However, some scholars stand by the fact that Márai's 1948 exile was the unique and definitive exile. Others are more daring (Zeltner; Ruspanti; Jakab; Sciacovelli, etc.) and have sought to uncover clues to previous exiles that may have occurred, taking seriously his early references to not belonging, leaving the country, value crises, decadence, and escape, among other negative sentiments. It seems to them that physically fleeing Hungary was among the last links in the chain of other exiles described in his memoirs of childhood or in fictional works with some autobiographical elements in them. Apparently, they are giving credit to Kosztolányi's words: "to play with words is to play with destiny",<sup>23</sup> a sort of *Memoro ergo sum* [I remember, therefore I am] motto that could equally have come from Márai.

In his book *Memory and Dread*, Néstor Braunstein convincingly argues that memory determines how one sees the future, which implies its strong effect on one's actual future. Relying on psychoanalysis, he also states that memory does not stem from the past, as we would logically think, but rather from the future, since it is from there that all memory receives significance and meaning.<sup>24</sup>

Having defined the complexity of memory, we should ask what Sándor Márai's crucial memories are in his *Confessions*. This may help us understand the psychological particularities of the writer through his key signifiers, such as exile, freedom,

23 Remenyi, "Dezso Kosztolanyi, Hungarian Homo Aestheticus (1885–1936)," 188.

24 Braunstein, *Memory and Dread or The Memory of Childhood*, 11.

dread, escape, identity, and literature. The *Confessions* exploits the characteristics of the genre of the confession initiated by Augustine and continued by Rousseau, in which disquiet is experienced in its necessity of expressing the self-rupture, a sort of crisis of one's lost existence. A confession always begins with self-elusion, an escape from oneself, expressing guilt, and also with the need to finding something that can give form or unity to a painful existence.<sup>25</sup>

What binds Márai's confession to classical ones is the experience of humiliation, feeling left abandoned, being excluded and outside an order.

“Confession as a literary genre has not had the same fortune in all ages. It is something proper and exclusive to our western culture and within it, it appears at decisive moments, at moments when the culture seems to be bankrupt, when man feels helpless and alone. They are the moments of crisis, in which the man, the concrete man, appears exposed in his failure.”<sup>26</sup>

The essence of the narrator's testimony, manifested in the form of a confession, is found in the urge to explain to himself and to others, the evolution of the artist, how a citizen, a bourgeois, a *polgár* is formed in the twentieth century under the influence of external and internal forces, and how he becomes able to find the way and vocation to identify as and become an adult, a functional neurotic, a European, and indeed, a Magyar writer. If Márai wanted to be a recognized or celebrated writer, if he wanted to identify as a *polgár writer*, he had to confess the conditions that made him a man of words.

For crucial situations in which the world is split in two, Alain Badiou uses the term *event*, which refers to “something stronger and more violent than a biographical narrative.” In Badiou's words,

“...an Event is a cut. It belongs to a part of existence that is unpredictable, that cannot be inferred from the laws of the world. Any truly original creation must begin with an Event. Otherwise, it is merely the continuation of what came before it. So it cannot be truly original (...). Finally, dealing with an event transforms a biography, it transforms a story. There is a before, and there is an after.”<sup>27</sup>

Thus, what is the “cut” in Márai's childhood memory that represented an after and a before for him?

25 Zambrano, *La confesión: Género literario*, 33–35.

26 The author's translation. Zambrano, *La confesión: Género literario*, 39.

27 Badiou, directed by Gorav Kalyan and Rohan Kalyan (Nonetheless Productions, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTQogmLRM4g>

### ...after losing my throne... or his first exile. Márai the rebel

“I’ll carry the past away with me into  
my new life, like a nomad’s pack; that I’ve  
lived: I, Sándor Márai, was alive,  
And I would live to rifle my memories,  
for what I’ve earned has tracked me on my path:  
one life I have been given, and one death.”<sup>28</sup>

Márai’s family structure was quite complex; while his mother’s side was made up of sloppy, lowly, and hedonistic individuals, his father’s side was stricter, ascetic, and disciplined. For example, the mother’s father was a craftsman, traveler, and well-known beer drinker; his uncle Ernő was a mathematician, pianist, and inveterate smoker; another uncle worked as a butcher, was an unsuccessful musician who committed suicide because of his failures; he then had Mátyás, the rich and socialist uncle, and another uncle, who was a painter and father of six musician daughters. Márai’s mother was a pianist and a voracious reader, who encouraged him to read and study at a young age. In contrast to his mother’s relatives, his father’s family was composed of intellectuals, attorneys, accountants, and other prominent members of the bourgeoisie. This tension between the worlds of the rational father and the sensual mother must have had a significant influence on his life and work.

However, another tension developed into a transcendental one in his emotional life. The *Confessions* certainly reflects an intimate crisis truly connected to the disaster of the war and the fall of western European humanism. On the one hand, Márai found in the genre of the confession the possibility of recounting the breakdown of the childhood chimera, the decomposition of the idyllic image of a perfect family life, on the other, the decadence and disappearance of the classical bourgeois values of enlightenment. The book is divided into two sections. The first is the exaltation of the social context he was born in, and the confession of a phantasmatic image of his childhood; the second part is a sort of lament that will accompany him to the end of his life, for the vanishing of the bourgeois class and the death of his father.

The *Confessions* starts with a bucolic celebration of the bourgeois life in his hometown replete with bright descriptions. In the second chapter, he gives honor to the family members as individuals who defined and contributed to his life. The third and fourth chapters take a dramatic turn to a critical perspective on the radical opposition between the institutions that exercised power on him: religion, the family, the school, and on the other side, his search for freedom. These two chapters are fundamental in understanding how Márai’s character was shaped and the significance of literature in his life.

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28 Márai, *The Withering World. Selected Poems*, 5.



This book, as a testimony of a double rupture, narrates, on the one hand, the personal-familial breakdown, and on the other, the social-historical circumstances in Europe. The two are structurally connected: his emotional or individual crises are socially subjected; they occurred within the specific social and historical contexts in which he lived, more precisely, under the rules and control of modern institutions at the turn of the twentieth century: He was born and raised in a bourgeois family, educated in a Christian environment, and was surrounded by a strict educational system. Additionally, during his adolescence the political environment attracted him mainly through his father's liberal activism, the effects of WWI on the new generation who began to discredit the role of the older generation of leaders, sensing a dramatic shift toward totalitarian ideologies. At the same time, the figure of the *polgár intellectual* as a political and aesthetic stance served as an inspirational image for the younger generation, paving the way for a possible solution in times of crises. Indeed, these social and psychological factors led some youngsters raised in an intellectual environment to finding a vehicle for self-discovery in the activity of writing, as was the case for Sándor Márai.

The *Confessions* is unquestionably a reconstruction of an era's devastation. In a personal sense, Márai confesses, through the memoir style, some childhood memories that impacted him, most notably the first major emotional family split that occurred concurrently with the outbreak of the Great War. That concludes the first section of the book, effectively splitting it in half. Symbolically, it could represent a symptomatic schism between the two facets of his life. This period marked the end of an era for him, but also the beginning of a new one, a rupture that began with the formation of his subjectivity and laid the groundwork for him to dismantle and later reconstruct himself in a life devoted to literature. Through his work, Márai crafted himself into the hero of his own story. In his recollections, he reconstructs the precise moments when he broke free from the suffocating family environment as a traumatic experience, as well as the start of his career as a writer at the age of fourteen.

“Once, only once they did leave it to my taste to buy ‘whatever shoes I wanted’ for myself, my father handed me a fifty-crown note after lunch, and by the evening I returned with ‘the most expensive’ pair of shoes available in town: not with the buttoned boots that I usually wore, but canary-yellow, laced, foppish shoes with antelope inlays, which cost me forty crowns and made my mother cry when she saw them; this shoe-motif returned then in the family for years, and even my distant relatives were desperately telling me that ‘I will meet a sad end’ if ‘I don’t quickly mend my ways.’ Yes, I felt too, anxious and inexperienced, that ‘I will meet a sad end’; and so I diligently tried to find my place in the family, played the piano, ground away

at my homework, and was bored. The family surrounded me with orderly and rigid forms, and we swarmed obediently, like bees between the hexagonal walls of honey. Until one day this idyll exploded. I was fourteen then, and one morning I ran off from home.”<sup>29</sup>

One could say that the memory of the yellow shoes might be insignificant, but this very detail cracked the surface that perhaps was hiding the deepest problem. The conflict with the family dates back to several years prior to that morning in 1914 when he fled, and is truly connected in his recollections with the birth of his sister, as he recalls in the *Confessions*.

“This idyll lasted until I became six years old. Then my sister took over my title and place—maybe it was only me who felt this way, but something changed around me, I wasn’t the first person anymore, I got into a strange and thwarting exile. “The girl!”—said the family with overjoyed gallantry, and my mother also said, “The girl!” I was striving to be a ‘good child’ to somehow return to the lost paradise.”<sup>30</sup>

The effects of the accession of his sister had an emotional impact on Márai. Kató was born on March 8, 1904, nearly two years after Márai’s older sister Klementina Margit Dora died at the age of five months. Between death and life, the young Sándor lost his preferential position as the first son and as a custodian and focal point of his mother’s love. A new period in his life was beginning, which Márai referred to as “after losing my throne”.

The expulsion from the lost paradise (leitmotifs in his oeuvre) or as he called it, an “awkward exile”, is associated with one of the most traumatic events that can occur during a neurotic’s childhood: the breakdown of the image of a perfect family and the incursion of culture, society, and its norms. Freud, one of the most influential forces of Márai’s literature, acknowledged his problem:

“The liberation of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development. It is quite essential that that liberation should occur and it may be presumed that it has been to some extent achieved by everyone who has reached a normal state. Indeed, the whole progress of society rests upon the opposition between successive generations.”<sup>31</sup>

29 The author’s translation. Márai, *Egy polgár vallomásai*, 208–9.

30 The author’s translation. Márai, *Egy polgár vallomásai*, 170.

31 Freud, *Family Romances*, 217.

We should get back to the fragments of the recollections of his first exile (1914):

“(...) I still remember the details of the accident with haziness and terror. The blow hit me unexpectedly, totally devastated me, and after the tremor of the explosion, only small splinters remained of “the motif”, which they searched so feverishly later. At that moment, all the explosives that were steadily culminating around me every day as the years passed blew up.”

“(...) I was a fourteen-year-old, well-developed, and strong youth - against a door that was closed. The attack did not last long but totally exhausted me. Outside in the garden, the noises ceased; I lay on the floor, without moving, and then I started slowly crawling in the room; I remember these minutes clearly. And then everything becomes blurred again, the “experience” remains broken, scanty, some splinters get lost forever. I don’t even know how I got out of the room, was it the door that finally gave in, or was it the window?... The only thing I knew was that I cannot bear this anymore, and I have to get away from here; I have to break out forever, irredeemably, from this family (...). I also had an awry sense of purpose, since I was not striving to get to a place, but to get away from one...”<sup>32</sup>

Márai’s subjective response to the necessary rupture in order to be integrated into the society was through the transgression of the law. The first identification as a child happened as a member of the family; however, after his decision to reject his membership, he formed a new sense of belonging with groups of young gangsters dedicated to playing dangerous games. He admits that the refuge he found during his first exile was in groups of peers: “We used to play writers... while our school-mates played cops-and-robbers.”<sup>33</sup>

Márai’s tendency to join gangs, which he mentions in the *Confessions*, is also documented in his novel *The Rebels* [Zendülők]. Published in Budapest in 1930, it depicts the conflict between the warlike oppressive-disciplinary society in Europe prior to WW I, the aggressive world of the adults who are leading Europe to war, and the imaginative, creative, and free world of the new bourgeois generation represented in the *youngster*; a sort of Hegelian dialectics between the master and the slave, between a violent elite and the old-fashioned *flâneur*, the artist-poet of the modern metropolis. The novel constitutes an ironic and visionary critique of modern institutions based on the control and surveillance of human behavior. Perhaps this book deals in depth with his childhood memory and his battle against the family and religious constraints. In our interpretation, *The Rebels* can be read in parallel with the third and fourth chapters of the first part of the *Confessions*.

32 The author’s translation. Márai, *Egy polgár vallomásai*, 217–18.

33 Márai. *Egy polgár vallomásai*.

The book is summarized by the writer Tibor Fischer is as follows:

“Ábel, Tibor, Ernő and Béla are finishing school. Their gang gets up to the pranks and petty crime adored by male adolescents everywhere. What might have been a slight account of evanescence, a kind of precursor to ‘American Graffiti’, is beefed up by the date of the boys’ graduation: 1918. They will join their elder brothers and fathers at the front; for them, the adult world is not merely confusing and hypocritical, it’s fatal.”<sup>34</sup>

“Painful experiences urged the process of rebellion that hit me when I was fourteen and has been with me since, with regularly returning throw-backs; and I also know that this will continue until I die. I don’t belong to anybody. I have not a single person, friend, woman, relative, whose company I could bear for a longer time, there is no such community, guild or class where I could settle, my views, lifestyle and inner attitudes are those of a *polgar*, and I feel much more at home than among *polgars*; I live in an anarchy that I feel is immoral, and I can hardly bear this condition.”<sup>35</sup>

We must take his personal writings seriously, eschewing the erroneous divide between fiction and reality. That is not to argue that we can discover the truth of Márai’s life via his fictional autobiography or his autobiographical narrative; rather, given the impossibility of encountering the past as fact, what we have as historians and biographers are some remnants or leftovers that serve as clues to reconstruct via language the ephemeral existences.

As we have noted before, the visual structure of memory is very similar to the texture of dreams. Memory is a narratological construction based on past images that have impacted our lives, that have helped us to construct the self-representations of what we are. The formation of the ego, as well as the formation of the national states, occurs in the retrospective construction of a symbolic or imaginary tale of discontinuous events. Each of us becomes the person we believe ourselves to be by organizing the facts of our experiences.

“Freudian memory is a three-sided coin. In addition to memory and forgetting, there is also repression, that is the function of the unconscious deciding what, how, and how much shall be remembered and forgotten.”<sup>36</sup>

Thus, we are not *who we are* because that happened to us but rather because we have registered and understood what happened to us in a certain way, collecting, covering, and selecting traces of personal experiences, always mixed with other

34 Fischer, “Hungarian Graffiti.”

35 The author’s translation. Márai, *Egy polgár vallomásai*, 222.

36 Braunstein, *Memory and Dread*, 41.

people's narratives. Memory is not an archive of documents, but memory is a construct enriched by the imagination in tension with its opposite: oblivion.

### **Epilogue. Travel coming back and Márai's determination to be a writer (1928)**

The life of an artist graphically illustrates the social conditions of others who experience similar situations due to their shared historical, economic, cultural, and political circumstances. Adopting Norbert Elias' notions (2008), Márai first became an outsider to his family; he needed to break with the first modern institution that imposes power, the family, the patriarchal bourgeois family. His adolescence, to the full extent of the word,<sup>37</sup> was marked by the separation of the institutions in which he was involved: the family, the Catholic religion, and the educational regime; in consequence, a profound rupture with the bourgeois world. Subsequently, as he recognized when writing his *Confessions*, that initial breakdown allowed him to question his place in the world, launch his career as a writer, and condition himself to endure a long war of countless exiles. The will of writing and the determination to become a writer have their roots in his subjective process of breaking with the family to find his own place, his own voice outside the limited confines of the family institution, reconstructing his identity vis a vis the ideal type of the modern poet.

The first exile, as a memory of childhood, probably paved the way for the following attempts to flee. In 1935, more than ten years before he broke away from the new imposition of power and apparently without knowing it, he wrote:

“I might be a writer. This desire to *escape* has been haunting me ever since, it breaks loose in me during certain phases of my lifetime, it blows up the framework of my life, it plunges me into scandalous situations and embarrassing, awkward crises. That's how I later escaped from the profession that was designated for me, that's how I ran off from my marriage from time to time, that's how I got involved in some 'adventures' and was escaping from these adventures at the same time, that's how I broke loose from sensuous affairs and friendships, that's how I fled from town to town in my early youth, from homely and familiar climates into foreign climates, until this permanent homelessness appeared to be natural, and my nervous system got used to this sense of danger, and in a sort of artificial 'discipline', finally I started working, too... Still, that's how I live today, between two lines,

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37 Although the etymology of the word *adolescentia* [Latin] is connected with “growing, near maturity, youthful”, (Harper, D. (n.d.)), we cannot deny its proximity.

between two flights, two ‘escapades’; as someone who never knows what kind of a dangerous, inner adventure will wake him. I got used to these conditions. That’s how it began.”<sup>38</sup>

In the spring of 1928, Márai returned to Budapest, leaving behind his life in Paris, resolved to be a literary gentleman. He settled down with his wife Lola on the first floor of a building in Mikó Street in Buda, the traditional residence of the enlightened bourgeoisie. Dezső Kosztolányi, one of the most celebrated writers of the time, a friend and literary mentor to Márai, lived close by in Logodi Street.

At the Hungarian border, before leaving Austria, at the age of 28, Márai was concerned about not being up to par with the literary development of the Hungarian milieu mobilized largely by the contemporary writers of the *Nyugat*, his intellectual, political, and literary paradigm. As a result, “I had many dictionaries and encyclopedias. I collected all kinds of dictionaries that explained the correlations and origins of the Hungarian language.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, in his time before coming back to Budapest in 1929, he could live Krúdy’s life: acting as a bohemian, reading, drinking, writing, falling in love. His life had been destined to follow the family tradition of doing law, but he ran away from that. He knew he was expected to become a lawyer, but instead devoted his life to writing.

He knew that becoming a writer in Hungary making a living from books (economic capital) implied an investment in social, cultural, and symbolic capital. It represented getting into the intellectual and literary network working in coffee houses, being involved in political discussions, reading, writing, and publishing daily in newspapers to gain enough recognition in the public sphere and make alliances and compete with other writers. If he wanted to be a well-known writer in his land, he needed to work hard to accumulate cultural capital (knowledge and literary skills) to enter the writer’s arena. His first 28 years served as a writing warm-up on his way to achieving prominence in the global literary field in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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