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Identity versus Alterity in Ernő Szép's *Emberszag* (1945)

Finnish abstract

Tässä esseessä analysoitava autobiografinen proosateos *Ihmisen haju* (1945) ei kerro Auschwitzin hirveyksistä, vaan Budapestin juutalaisten eloonjäämiskamppailusta ja juutalaismiehistä pakkotyöleirillä loka-marraskuussa 1944. Yli kolmekymmentä teosta julkaissut runoilija, näytelmäkirjailija ja esseisti Ernő Szép (1884–1953) kuvaa ja kommentoi kokemaansa ja näkemäänsä yksityiskohtaisesti kuin päiväkirjaa ja kronikkaa rinnakkain kirjoittaen. Hänen äänensä on holokaustikirjallisuudessa omalaatuinen: itseironinen Szép välttää leirin vartijoiden ja sotilaiden jatkuvaa tuomitsemista eikä hän moralisoi puhuessaan juutalaisten suhteista kristittyihin ja omiin käännyttäisiin. Leirille marssiessaan hän tarkkailee toveriensa raskasta, pelonsekaista taivallusta: sodan ja unkarilaisten nuoliristiläisten hirmuvallan kärjistämät ihmisten heikkoudet, vahvuuden ja pahuuden, hän rekisteröi tarkasti, jopa minuutilleen. Väkivallan ja nälän aiheuttamasta ahdistuksesta ja turtumisesta hän kertoo välillä hirtehisuumorillakin. Ihmisen haju haistaa omasta ja tuntemattomien 'naapurien' puutteellisesta hygieniasta, mutta se huokuu myös heidän yksilöllisistä piirteistään ja kärsimyksen täyttämästä leirielämästä. Hämmentyneen, mutta tarkkanäköisen lapsen tavoin Szép ei silti hyväksy ihmisen julmuutta toista ihmistä kohtaan. Hän ei vaivu epätoivoon, vaan karaistuu. Sairastuvalle jouduttuaan Szép selvisi leiriltä hengissä, mutta hänen muistelmansa 'kuolivat' pitkäksi ajaksi. Ne eivät sopineet sosialismin kirjallisuuskäsitykseen. Nyt ne voidaan periaatteessa ymmärtää merkittävänä puheenvuorona postmoderniin muistopoliittiseen keskusteluun.

Introduction: Identity versus Alterity

Some historians of antisemitism have described the period c. 1880–1914 in Hungary as a Golden Age for its Jews. Many of them gained social standing and enjoyed economic prosperity as allies of the Hungarian national integration. First World War, revolution and consolidation changed all that; the 'White Terror' of the troops of Horthy brought about a more hostile attitude and in 1920 Hungary was the first to impose discriminatory legislation (*numerus clausus*) restricting the number of Jewish students at university. This was due to the change from 'liberal' pre-war policy to semi-authoritarian, Christian-conservative one, which saw Jews as unreliable and 'foreign' – quite a few Jews had been in the short-lived communist government of 1919.¹

Theoretically this essay operates with a dichotomy of two concepts, Identity and Alterity (Otherness).² They become opposites, juxtaposed when a hostile Alterity crosses the *boundary* to encroach Identity, mentally and physically. This took place in the relations

¹ Steven Beller, *Antisemitism. A Very Short Introduction*. Second ed., O.U.P., 2015, 21, 71, 84, 92.

² I have applied this approach in a Hungarian-Finnish context, see Anssi Halmesvirta, "Encountering Hungarian Alterity: An Analysis of a Narrative by a Finnish Traveller". In: *Competing Eyes. Visual Encounters with Alterity in Central and Eastern Europe*. Eds. Dagnoslaw Demski, Ildikó Sz. Kristóf & Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska. L'Harmattan: Budapest, 2013, 100-111.

between the Identity of the Jews and the Alterity of Others in Hungary during the years 1944-1945 as the motives of the Others had transformed from co-existence to suspicion, harassment, hatred and finally to participation in genocide. Touch of Alterity became a deadly embrace.

The overwhelming Alterity in poet, playwright, essayist and journalist Ernő Szép's (1884–1953) memoir *Emberszag* (1945) is antisemitism embodied in antisemites full of hatred of Jews based on racial prejudices, pseudo-theories of conspiracy against social order and economy, ideology of violence and revenge and leadership-cult. Although all fascist movements were not at the time antisemitic, in Hungary the Arrow-Cross with its partners surely was. Its ideological variations and practical applications to humiliate, harass, persecute and kill Jews can be found in Szép's book. In it the antisemitic Alterity encounters the Jewish Identity, which it aims to defame, break up and finally disintegrate. Its executive incarnations were Nazi Germans, Arrow-Cross youngsters, civilian guards, Hungarian soldiers, and even antisemitic Jews themselves as well as Szép's own representations of the antisemitic Others.

Ernő Szép, to whom Jewishness as an Identity was an uninvited 'congenital defect', 'a bad joke', 'even sickness', had very early realized that a false picture of it was recurrently imposed on him by antisemites tarnishing his humanness and Hungarianness, 'real' pillars of his Identity. It was a very unpleasant surprise for him to experience that he was denied access to the Korona Coffeehouse in 1918. He was so upset that he became an emigrant for some time.³

Ernő Szép's *Emberszag*

Let us now analyse how Szép's reflections of his Identity as an assimilated Jew are represented in *Emberszag*⁴ and how they stand in confrontation with the representations of Alterity in it. This approach seems justified because previous studies have not sufficiently addressed the problem of how Alterity treated Szép's Identity and how Szép reacted to it.

Szép's first basic confrontation with Alterity is already striking: As a consequence of the German occupation of Hungary on the 19th of March 1944, the Jews of Budapest were interned in the so called 'yellow houses' (ghettoing started 15th of May).⁵ Being an assimilated Jew, he had to leave behind his thirty years' living in hotel Palatinus on Margit Island (he never married, led a solitary writer's and journalist's life). During the air-raids he hid in his apartment, but his basic fear was not to be killed by the bombs but to be deported to a concentration camp⁶. The threatening, unexpected 'ringing of the bell' by the looming Alterity might intrude to Szép's life, question his Identity as a Hungarian and endanger the

³ Széchenyi, Ágnes, "Három temetetlen hét. Szép Ernő: *Emberszag*", 43; Timea, Turi, "Esetlegesség, közvetlenség, naivitás. Szép Ernő *Emberszag* című regénye és a zsidó identitás", 157-158. Those who want to compare Szép's book to other Hungarian holocaust books, should read these articles.

⁴ It is not yet quite settled what the title conveys; it may imply that Ernő got used to rank smell of human bodies and sensing the nuances of the forced labourers' behaviour and character. Cf. Széchenyi, "Három temetetlen hét. Szép Ernő: *Emberszag*", 38-39.

⁵ Mária Ormos deals nicely with the occupation period ('milking cow' position); see Ormos Mária, *Magyarország a két világháború között (1914-1945)*. Csokonai kiadó. Debrecen, 1998, pp. 256-285.

⁶ Szép Ernő, *Emberszag* (1945). Osiris: Budapest, 2018, 16. Ernő knew of the gas-chambers but refused to believe that people were gassed in them, p. 48.

life of the Budapest Jews in general. Its encroachment would actualize, for instance, if Szép was found to have English-language books in his possession; he decided to burn them, although reading was an essential part of his Identity. He was 'watched' because of his Identity as a Jewish writer with some renown and everything he would write would be regarded as treason.⁷ Alterity had started insolently to step over the boundary and intrude to Identity's sphere.

Having experienced the vicissitudes of bombing, strict regulations of outdoors movement, fears of house-searching and harassment during the summer and early autumn 1944, Jewish men – irrespective of the fact that many of them were Christians, converts and elderly – were called-up by the recently established Arrow-Cross government on the 20th of October. What was left of Szép's freedom was now taken away. In this situation he remembered how he had had to wait for issuing of orders during the First World War in Serbia. Here again he had to wait and wait in boredom – wasting away invaluable, own private time and life. Becoming 'a conscript' once more meant stripping of his most valuable streak of Identity as a *Hungarian* writer/reader. He realized that he was made an obedient body, an object of taming, humiliation, suffering and in the end, violence. Carrying the yellow star (symbolic, stigmatizing step over the Identity's boundary) was shameful for the Jews and for Szép even more so: he promised to himself not to carry it in public as it brought him down to the level of 'a marked animal' but he could not avoid the inevitable gnawing at his Identity.⁸ Even more humiliating for him was to fill in a petition for 'a freedom letter' from Horthy telling that he had not done anything against the Hungarian people. This demand from official Alterity was outrageous since Szép had followed his calling to become a writer 'above the people' and now he had to beg to be considered as a Hungarian. Degraded to the level of 'a gipsy dogcatcher' or 'a prisoner' he felt his Identity badly hurt. What more, Alterity was intent on splitting the Jewish Identity when trying to 'elevate' Szép above the 'yellow-starred' comrades, thus aiming to cause ruptures among the Jewish community.⁹

In certain situations, in which Alterity demanded obedience and from the Jewish elderly men, the Jewish posture was paradoxically strengthened. That the Jews were made to stand in attention during the call-up made some of these (Arrow-Cross) 'scouts' smile because it was somewhat playful for them but ridiculous to the Jewish men to be commanded by youngsters who were Hungarians, not really personifying the Alterity in themselves, but being pitifully under the lure of antisemitism and actually weakening the authority of Alterity.¹⁰

Szép does not reveal how deeply disappointed he was at the Jews who had become antisemitic (irritated he was). They were either Christians, Hungarian Germans (*sváb*) or original converts who avoided socializing with the Jews who had converted recently.¹¹ They manifested a misconceived Alterity in close contact: one *sváb* woman would not sit beside Szép's sister (a teacher). There were several of the so called 'starred Christians' (mostly Catholics) who were most ardent antisemites among the Jews. Their Alterity was despised by other Jews because they obviously were made suffer from the 'sins' of the Jews. The Identity

⁷ Ibid., 19-20.

⁸ Ibid., 9, 21.

⁹ Ibid., 33. If he would have been liberated from the 'star', he still would have carried it in the house in order not to cause envy and further humiliation to comrades (Identity saved).

¹⁰ Ibid., 9-10.

¹¹ Szép did not want to convert but remain among his 'brothers in faith' although himself a 'pagan' (also pacifist), p. 46, 49, 130-131.

of such a deceiver was questionable: as Szép put it: if the antisemite were the only Jew in the world, he/she would be placed in a vitrine as a relic without any Identity.¹² It is evident that Alterity was able to divide the Jews and make the boundaries of their Identity porous. To see this process was to Szép a pathetic sight.

After long time of fermentation since the early 20th century, the Alterity had become very concrete for the Hungarian Jews before and during the war. Szép saw a gang of its agents, ‘our hangmen’, SS-youngsters bragging in black uniforms on the streets. Even if their Alterity was reflected in lust of (temporary) power, they seemed harmless, they were handsome-looking and appeared ‘mistakenly’ as human as any human being made ‘in the image of God’. Some of them spoke Hungarian revealing that they were the progeny of the Hungarian Germans. They had been gravely misled by Alterity; they had been caught by a fabulous dream: Hungary would be annexed to the Third Reich, the ultimate source of Alterity as Szép saw it.¹³

Here and there it transpires from *Emberszag* that Alterity’s hatred of Jews was at times more deeply embedded in Hungarians themselves than in its other agents. Szép’s sister faced a very nasty surprise¹⁴ when returning from the Swedish Embassy where she had delivered photos for passports. Overhearing her discussion with a friend, a fifty-sixty years’ old woman shouted police and pointed to her:¹⁵

This Jewish woman has desecrated our nation. She just said to the other woman that we are a dirty, lowly nation and that she would be happy if Hungarian army would be beaten. Please, arrest her.

This woman let the hatred and anger of Alterity out in public exposing the latent, vile Hungarianness of the wartimes. Szép’s sister tried to avoid the trap turning to a benevolent-looking Colonel who happened to come to the scene. She swore to God that she had not said anything disgraceful about Hungary. However, Alterity, this time disguised in outwardly honourable Hungarian attire, roared: “Jewish swine, to Danube!”¹⁶ Szép’s sister was dragged to the police-station but released by a compromising police-officer; she had to report every Monday.¹⁷ Already this case showed the range of Alterity in *Emberszag* from blatant threat of death to a compromise between respect of humanity and acting by the book.

When the march of the Jewish men – many of them over sixty-years old – from Budapest to the labour camp in Erdősváros started, their treatment by the guards and soldiers was as hostile as towards any convicts with the difference of the use of abusive antisemitic terms about the Jews (‘Moses’, ‘Abel’, ‘Mama’, ‘dirty swine’, ‘traitor’, ‘old thwarts’, ‘the rabble’ etc.). Alterity ingrained in their slander gradually developed into sheer violence (hitting on the face and back). Soldierly outlooks varied: most prominent were the civilian guards who wore brown suits, carried truncheons, and had Hitler-moustache, an imitation of the arch-Alterity. They were more aggressive and violent than ordinary, disciplined soldiers. Their

¹² Ibid., 23-24.

¹³ Ibid., 41.

¹⁴ See Tímea Turi, “Esetlegesség, közvetlenség, naivitás. Szép Ernő *Emberszag* című regénye és a zsidó identitás” about the repetitive randomness of the ‘attacks’ Jews experienced.

¹⁵ Ernő Szép, *Emberszag*, q. p 44.

¹⁶ Ibidem. In many other occasions in Hungarian history, killed people were thrown to Danube.

¹⁷ It leaks from *Emberszag* that usually only policemen had been able to put Alterity aside when dealing with the Jews whose arrest had been demanded by the Christian Hungarians, e.g. p. 50.

power of Alterity also was in their mouths – some used German – and hands ready to strike. Once a 72-year man went to take a leak without permission at playground and was forced to show his penis to all others – the show-off of power of Alterity was absolute over the Jewish body defaming its Identity in extreme.¹⁸ This meant that the men had to learn the way Alterity watched them, keep silent, low and distance. And again, not everybody met on the way expressed inhumanity: while marching past a village, no malicious comment or word of curse was heard from some female onlookers, only laughing at the ‘helpless cow-herd’. For Szép this incident told that they were ‘childish’, so far lack of inculcation to Alterity.¹⁹

Szép differentiated between his comrades by occupation and demeanour: there were all sorts of Jews from all walks of life. He described them in detail and often touchingly.²⁰ The only division in the world that really counted was between the rich and the poor, Szép himself belonging to the poor and in addition to the Jewry he evaded, which was even worse.²¹ This combination proved fatal: on the way to the labour camp one poor, sickly and old man collapsed and could not get up any longer. He was shot on the spot. Szép concluded: Alterity did not allow issuing death certificates, no garlands, no priest’s ‘oily’ blessings, no mourning of relatives, no friends to ‘throw earth onto coffin’.²² No trace of Identity left behind.

There were exceptional personalities who detested Alterity itself but could not help the marching men out of their misery because they were ‘on duty’. Once when hungry and thirsty men rested by the roadside where there was also a pub (*kocsma*), one 45-years old ‘upright’ Lieutenant approached and asked what the men wanted. Hundreds of dry mouths wanted water. It was duly catered to them and Lieutenant himself offered beer. He explained his relation to Alterity:²³

Every descent Hungarian feels ashamed for what is done to the Jews. For this brutality Hungary will be wiped out from the surface of the Earth.

He excused himself: he had a family and could not ‘escape the dirty dogs’ (Arrow-Cross). When a soldier approached on the road, he pretended commanding the Jewish and duly left. Szép noticed how compliant military in the service of Alterity usually was.

When the men arrived at the labour camp and settled down on straw-beds up in the upper-floor of a brick factory, Szép came to realize that such compromises concerning the boundaries between Identity and Alterity could be observed also by the camp-officers. For example, one Captain Megay greeted him nicely (interested in literature) but when Szép asked whether he could do something for the men, he became evasive and was sorry. Since he was known to be a ‘defender of the Jews’, the only thing he could do was to tell the guards

¹⁸ Ibid., 64.

¹⁹ Ibid., 68.

²⁰ Purcsi tells that Ernő himself was moved when had seen Gypsies, Negroes, Zulus and Indians in an ethnic exhibition. It resembled utmost internment. See Purcsi, *Szép Ernő*, 167.

²¹ Ernő knew that among the Jews who had committed suicides were predominantly desperate poor people. See p. 106.

²² Ibid., 89.

²³ Ibid., 93.

to treat them as humans – to no avail. One man was shot because he had not handed over all his money to the guards.²⁴

To combat Alterity's executive powers in the labour camp where the men had to dig three meter wide and deep panzer trenches, they agreed on maintaining camaraderie to survive the ordeal. It was not easy, there were such 'comrades' who shirked the work, pretended sickness or were quarrelsome troublemakers and during the last days became thieves. The Jewish Identity was degenerating. The company was gradually split at least in two: there were the 'gentlemen', men from various high positions in Hungarian society and there were the 'commoners' with whom also Szép did not want to get closely acquainted with. Notwithstanding, this social ranking did not eat away men's Jewish identity nor did it enhance the grip of Alterity because it was in any case loosening towards liberation which took place after nineteen days.

Szép's own situation became more tolerable by an accident in which he hurt two fingers so severely that he could not work at all but loitered in ennui at the sick room. In doctors' and their assistants' 'care' Alterity's executives could not reach him as directly and murderously as at the trenches.²⁵ He in fact held that it would have been despicable to stay there without injury while many older men ('Egyptian slaves') had to dig. He would have claimed the 'right' to suffer in as much as the comrades²⁶, which was yet another way to express will to preserve Identity intact.

The prejudices Alterity had impregnated in the minds of soldiers and guards in the camp manifested every day. Once when a man over sixty stopped digging and wiped his head with a handkerchief, a soldier hit him twice in the back with the result that the man fell to the mud. Alterity had demonstrated its effrontery by striking an innocent man. Man stood quickly up, started digging hurriedly and put his nice hat on. Seeing it the soldier asked his profession; he was a compositor. The soldier was astonished and said: "You surely take only the pickings". Instantly Szép remembered how six or seven years ago this saying spread in Hungary and every errand-boy and street-monger learned it in the form 'the Jews always walk on the sunny side of the street', irrespective of the fact that poverty was more common among them than in other social stratum.²⁷ Alterity's stupidity had become a weapon not only against the Jewish Identity but against 'facts', too.

Under the sub-title 'Jewish question' Szép told of some absurdities contained in the antisemitic Hungarian urban folklore. The problem of Alterity was nicely put to him by one of his comrades: how credulous antisemitic people could be to believe in the inherent wickedness of the Jews? One guard had told him that Jews climb on the roofs of houses and somehow signal the Allied and Soviet bombers to drop their bombs on public buildings in Budapest. This 'children's fable' was heard even in higher military circles, and if someone objected to it, she/he was branded as 'a defender of Jews'.²⁸ Alterity, ignorant of Jewish reality, abused the Hungarian imagination to the limit of impossible.

²⁴ Ibid., 102, 117.

²⁵ The greatest irony was that digging the trenches was not for panzers to fall in but to exhaust the Jewish diggers, Alterity's ultimate purpose.

²⁶ Ibid., 125, 143-145.

²⁷ Ibid., 130.

²⁸ Ibid., 168-169.

Szép himself had been astounded to encounter Alterity's influence in two children at the entrance of the Jewish Museum in Budapest in 1941. The children seemed to be curious, and he asked them to join him in. They refused saying:²⁹

We are not allowed to go in, we are Christians.

And when Szép exhorted them: "Come on", they retorted:

No, we cannot, the Jews will kill us.

Szép asked the boy whether he goes to school, and he answered, "yes, I am on the 4th grade" and then the children run away. For Szép the children's mind had been poisoned by the Alterity's deep prejudices of a female teacher. Many like her had been contaminated by the 'advertisement' publicized by right-wing papers in Hungary that if after the catastrophe in Stalingrad (early 1943) Nazi-Germany would lose the war, Jews would exterminate the Christians. Szép somewhat humorously contemplated with his comrades how on earth 'half a handful' of adult Jews helped possibly by c.150.000 Jewish 'babies' jumping from the prams could defeat ten million Hungarians. In comparison Alterity had brought about the greatest ordeal Hungary had ever experienced:³⁰

We have helplessly to tolerate how the basic elements of this gifted nation are debauched and how reason, humour and spirit of this country are atrophied. Can we ever repair the damage they did to the mind and soul of the nation?

Szép's comrades asked how it was possible that Hungarians believed in Alterity's insanities, and they found one common explanation: Hungarians had learned the devious worldwide lesson disseminated by the proponents of Alterity which insinuated that Jews prospered by taking advantage of the work, business, and property of Hungarians which led them to reason that *all evil* was caused by them. It justified hatred and stultified Christians' voice of conscience. Among men this conclusion caused serious argument which brought many discrepant aspects of Jewish identity to the fore.

One 45-years old man, looking like a local police chief, started it by declaring "I am a nationalist" thus expressing his loyalty to the nation. He was immediately challenged by an elderly gentleman: "But what if our nation does not accept you as a Hungarian?" The policeman was hopeful: Alterity will in any case pass away. Then another man wanted (again) know why the Jews were hated and was given Identity's self-assurance: "We are so clever", causing laughter. Some thought that conversion to Christianity was the solution because it brought benefits with it, but some objected to it in principle: one had to remain 'strong-minded', stick to Identity. Some supported Zionism, some appeared to walk on a thin line: they were Christians, devoted Catholics but had Jewish 'blood' in them.³¹ The question of Identity remained contested.

Soon the argument turned to the problem of suppressed of minorities, Jews themselves included. It was agreed that various Alterities as majorities ruled all over the world: Armenians and Red Indians were cited as the 'historically' suppressed ones. In Hungary it meant for the Jews that they were considered 'foreigners' like Gipsies, the only Others

²⁹ Ibid., 169.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ Ibid., 171-172.

sympathized by the Jews because they had the same 'fate' as them. Seeing that the discussion was getting too serious, one man tried to lighten it:³²

Please, let's also go [like Gipsies] to a pub and make music, not pose ourselves as managing directors, then they won't treat us badly.

That Ernő referred to all these views implied that despite all hardships men had to experience in the camp their Identity could not be swept away by subjugation to Alterity's power machine. The argument showed that one means to deny and negate Alterity's power was to recourse to humour³³, childishness³⁴ and some naivete. As a remainder to it the old man who had initiated the discussion turned to Szép and asked him whether the whole matter of 'lost martyrdom' was not 'ridiculous' and Jews were just human beings after all? In addition to the Jewish Identity – and Szép could readily agree – Jews were Hungarians as well as human beings.³⁵ Instead, Alterity's attempt to persecute Jews for their religion was inhumane, bestial.

The strength of Jewish Identity was put to test when Alterity's violence was worked up in the camp. One 'aristocratic', well-clad man who did not look Jewish, was hit by a Corporal seven times, but the man stood on his feet. Szép's comment was: "I could have died of one such stroke". What provoked Corporal's vicious attack was evident: he punished the remarkable man of his 'gentlemanly' bearing, of the courage of a Jew to look like a Lord Lieutenant (*főispán*).³⁶ Szép reported also of another case of such an attack, executed by the same 'black youngster'.³⁷ Revenging one's own lowness in rank to 'gentlemen' was preparation to Alterity's plan to crush Jewishness altogether. However, the amounting bursts of aggression did not really increase Alterity's authority, quite the opposite.

Szép and his comrades could not help but putting the main Alterity, the German scourge, under closer inspection. Otherwise, they would have given the impression that the Jewish Identity could not cope with it. The character of the arch-Alterity, Hitler, inspired men's imagination. The suggestion of a professor dismissed from Halle University won the day: Hitler was not a man, but a kind of Golem baked of German bacilli of arrogance, stupidity of millions, superstition and savagery, the threads of Alterity sewn by such 19th century prominences as historian Trietschke, philosopher Hegel, national economist List and pioneer of race-theories, Gobineau.³⁸ To evaluate Alterity in such elemental terms bordered to gallows humor, but remained in the mode of ridicule. Hitler was doomed: the comrades agreed that his fate was to live for ever alone on the earth.³⁹

The fact that among men there were not only antisemites but also Germanophiles caused definite cracks in their Identity, because of having symptoms of Alterity in it. The hearts of

³² Ibid., 171.

³³ Humorously, the camp was 'jamboree' and the brick factory *Hôtel des Tuileries* where the men were only guests (ready to leave). When thieves among the men appeared, Szép called Moses back to declare the seventh command anew.

³⁴ Szép's 'childishness' appeared in the tone of wonderment in the beginning of the march to the labour camp but as soon as Alterity's schemes unfolded, the tone changed into seriousness.

³⁵ Ibid., 172.

³⁶ Ibid., 132.

³⁷ Ibid., 137.

³⁸ Ibid., 161-162.

³⁹ Ibid., 159, 161-162. Cf. Purcsi Barna Gyula, *Szép Ernő*. Akadémiai Kiadó: Budapest, 1984, 169.

‘incorrigible’ admirers of Germans, their order, diligence, cleanliness and their ‘great men’, Goethe, Beethoven, and Wagner in particular, were now bleeding because Germany had been brought so low by the Nazis, the masters of Alterity. One of them surmised that Hitler would lose the war just because he incited the Germans against the Jews; if he had called them to his side, he would have won a great propaganda victory, regained lost colonies, and conquered Danzig, Vienna and Prague without a war. Other comrade was sure that in a hundred of years’ time the Germans would rule the world.⁴⁰ This extraordinary view was heavily opposed by those who opined that Germans should be wiped out from the surface of the earth. One professor was sorry that God could not make the German ‘race’ more humane by sending Goethe and Beethoven to them. Szép himself had tried to find ‘innocence’ in Germans but run only to ‘Gothic sabre rattling’, although he knew one or two decent and generous men among the German soldiers.⁴¹ The man who defended the Germans became the laughing stock by standing ambiguously on the Alterity’s ground. His stance must also have caused embarrassment in *Emberszag*’s readership.

When the release of the men from the camp was certain, Szép pondered what was his own situation. To experience that the war was still going on and devastating Hungary distressed him more than the memory of the ‘old’ war because he had now ‘lost his heart’; he accused himself of not taking toll of his own Being and Identity. He had only ‘lied, betrayed and hid’. The ‘sins’ of the world (‘why they dare tdo this when I am here seeing and hearing everything?’) haunted him and he felt in his anxious mind that he also was to blame; he had led the world ‘out of his hand’ and it had crumbled into pieces – a confession of culpability about silence and possibly also about letting Alterity conquer Hungarian minds.⁴² What more, Szép felt guilt about the choice of his personal Identity: he had emigrated and lived for years abroad intending to see the outer world and all humanity not caring about his homeland which he did not know very well. Repeatedly he confessed being ‘sinner’ himself, too, because of disloyalty to Hungary for which the Alterity evidently had punished him by dragging him away to a labour camp.⁴³

Szép had had an accident in handling a pump at the trenches and was ordered to a sick bay. Thanks to its lesser evil (doctors and their assistants softened the touch of Alterity), he survived, returned to Budapest, and laid low until the end of the war. His memoirs were published in 1945 but soon forgotten for a long time for they did not suit the literary canon of the socialist regime in the 1950s, although, for example, his short stories were still being published. He continued his work as a journalist until his death in 1953. Only recently researchers at the Petőfi Literary Museum in Budapest brought *Emberszag* to daylight, and in principle at least, they can be understood as a comment to postmodern discussions about the relation of Identity and Alterity and memo-politics in general.

Epilogue

Ernő Szép did not comment over too much on his comrades’ discussions and remarks. He let their voice to be heard (shades of Jewish Identity). Nevertheless, he approved of the general

⁴⁰ Szép, *Emberszag*, 177.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 175, 178.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 182-183.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 85.

explanation given by one of them for the social tensions and cleavages in Hungarian society: peasants scolded nobility, nobility scolded the Jews and Jews scolded each other. This state of internal warfare had unleashed the unavoidable clash between the Jewish Identity and Alterity. There was no common ground, not even any no-man's-land for Identities and Alterities to meet, discuss and repair the damages in peace. Szép's ideal was quite far away from contemporary, cruel realities; he would have liked to treat everybody on an equal basis as human beings, not as representing any other Identities than individual ones. After *Emberszag* there was nothing more to tell. He indicated that his curiousness about humanity culminated in dismal self-irony: out of 'sheer curiosity' he wanted to be present in his own hanging to meet Alterity eye to eye⁴⁴. That did not happen, it was the main representatives of Alterity who were hanged.

Ernő Szép's Work

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⁴⁴ Ibid., 29.