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Hannah-Arendt-Institut  
für Totalitarismusforschung e.V. an der  
Technischen Universität Dresden

*„Überwindung der  
Diktaturen -  
Dichter, Künstler  
und Schriftsteller in  
der Begegnung“*

*„Overcoming Dictatorships -  
The Encounter of  
Poets, Artists and Writers“*



### 3. Projektbericht

(Oktober 2007)

Crossing the Danube and other walls.  
Overcoming Dictatorships takes shape in  
Budapest  
Gert Röhrborn

„The professional Human Rights activist is not a politician; he is much more of a priest, of an artist.  
[...]  
He is an artist of violating the law“.  
(Miklós Haraszti)

Is it correct to consider violating the law a piece of art? Do artworks have to include a legal violation in order to be recognized as an artistic achievement? Hungarian writer and dissident Miklós Haraszti some 30 years ago came to quite a different conclusion: art is not a political or resistant enterprise per definition; art is first and foremost searching for its own realms of freedom, thereby writing between the lines of democratic and dictatorial legislation alike. It touches upon borders of all kinds whose infringement has always coincided with the violation of laws.



VLAD NANCĂ: *I do not know which Union I want to belong to anymore* (installation, 2003).

Generally speaking artists are purposeful violators torn apart between their drive for individual expression and the need for public recognition. Two conflicting ideal types of artists may be found in all kind of regimes, manifesting themselves even in one and the same person: first the artist as a freelancer and second what Haraszti calls the „Corporation Artist“. The identity of the artist is a multiply fragmented one. There are some who invest a lot of energy into presenting their ambiguous self-

expressions in retrospective unity to both themselves and the public.

Over the past decades the process of European Integration has even ameliorated the already important role that remembrance and a shared memory can play for whole societies. Spanish writer Jorge Semprún described an impressive ambition in a speech given at the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camps at Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora: „One of the most effective ways to contribute to the future of united Europe, or more correctly re-united Europe is to share our past and to unite our remembrance, our so far separated ways of memory“. Some even believe that without a reunification of the past(s) the political unification of Europe can not be completed at all.

When facing the manifold and overlapping experiences of grief brought along during the 20th century the ancient question of reconciliation presents itself quite naturally. It is a commonplace position that overcoming collective wounds and traumas is an indispensable but most difficult process. Beyond this no agreement has been reached what kind of impertinences national communities of memory programmed to cherish strength and pride can actually take. Common reference points are needed to establish shared memory. The experience of victimisation through violence that puts an ultimate end to all communication (Hannah Arendt) does only superficially unite the victims. Without establishing a common perspective, at least to a certain degree, it will always be the same vicious circle fuelled by exclusionary identities and the fight for hegemony of interpretation that will persist. Violence always addresses the individual, even though its perpetration is usually legitimized by (alleged) collective features and decisions. „All shots on target are orbiting in space. God ordains. Only the evil justifies“ (Zsófia Balla).

It makes for a huge difference whether the history of Hungary as a Central Eastern European cultural nation is either told from the perspective of the annihilation of the European Jews (Arrow Cross Party State) for example, with the Soviet imperial rule over the whole of Eastern Europe in mind (1956), or in front of the background of transborder migrations (Trianon). It is the difficult relations between Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, Estonia and Russia or Poland and Germany which give ample evidence of how much of a feverish influence the antagonistic national historical narratives may still wield on contemporary politics in Europe. Not to forget about cultural misunderstandings, explicit economical and political conflicts of interest, as well as the obvious asynchronism of experiencing, overcoming, and transmitting the substance of historical processes.



To compare is not to identify? The Entrance of the House of Terror in Budapest.

Changing perspectives may not entirely prevent a common narrative, though. It would not be based on even “better” alternatives to the above mentioned perspectives, like the epoch-setting dates of 1968, 1789/1989 or 1848/1948. Rather, a set of fundamental values needs to be

identified which can work as an intersection of all perspectives. The unconditional protection of minorities in contemporary Europe may play this integrative role: “It took an eventful history of several thousand years more or less well researched on for man to realize that diversity is no reason for war“ (György Konrad).

The role of culture in coming to terms with dictatorships and their legacies is our topic here. Historical references are not effective in the political sphere alone, but also come to light all across the cultural public and everyday life. Historical themes only play a minor role in modern painting, be it in artistic production or public interest. A closer relationship full of resonances may be found even today between history and sculpture, though; this is particularly the case in the numerous memory sites and signs which pay explicit attention to historical substance and are designed to nurture remembrance. It is also theatre and literature productions that wield a significant influence on the collective assessment of historical memory: Who knew then, and who does remember today the “Largo Desolato“ (Václav Havel), a drama widely performed on the political stages of Eastern Europe just a few years ago? This makes for more than just a nominal difference in tenses.



Visitors during a reading.

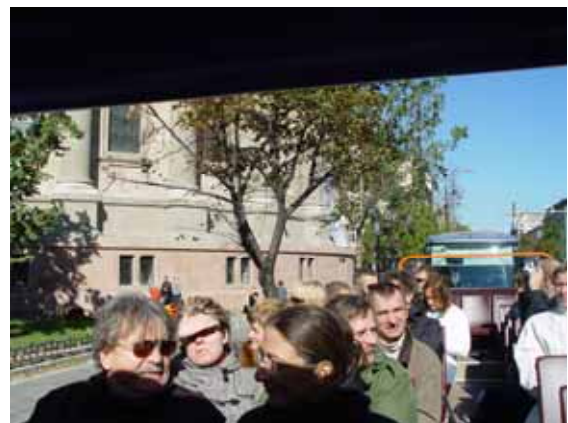
Besides museums and exhibitions audiovisual media has earned itself a significant role. The mass media widely

support a commercial approach. They force writers and artists to reflect and refine their role. Ousted as defenders of inalienable national traditions or transmitters of dissident critique they have been pushed back into intellectual reservations. Nonetheless, this development might also include a specific potential: a vibrant and absorbing culture of remembrance cannot forego telling, disclosing and discussing individual experiences in a conscious dialogue with fellow men. The literary text unfolds only and each time again in the mind of the reader; it is conceived, processed and transferred individually. Thereby it is able to establish contact with wider fields of human consciousness than those its professional competitors in science and the cultural industry may ever touch upon.

György Konrád once summarized what for him is the specific contribution of literature towards creating a European culture of remembrance and a community of experience. First and foremost Konrád underlines its century-old cross-border outlook which preceded all political attempts for unification. Second he values the instruments for experiencing plurality in practice, with the help of the myriads of interpreters which apart from politicians and bankers are to be considered “the real weavers of Europe“. Third he advocates the method of in-field observation that equips the professional spectator with a so-called “third view” which lends its voice to the victims and losers where usually winners write history. Thereby authors overcome the fate of tragic Cassandra: “In a sense, as soon as we lay our hand on the pen, or the computer keyboard, we already cease to be the helpless victims of whatever it was that enslaved and diminished us before we began to write. Not the slaves of our predicament nor of our private anxieties; not of the “official narrative” of our country, nor of fate itself“ (David Grossman).

## II

Without any doubt Budapest is a first-class site of European history – a metropolis full of European architecture, shaped by the multiple traces of dictatorships and resistance alike. Recently it has also been the scene for European attempts to coming to terms with the past. Participants of the project “Overcoming Dictatorships – the Encounter of Poets, Artists and Writers“ were happy to make good use of various opportunities in this field before setting out on their own path. This included a joint sightseeing tour and a visit to the unsettling “House of Terror” which claims to give evidence to the inherent continuity of the rule of fear by consecutive totalitarian regimes, and by individually exploring the city.



Sightseeing Budapest.

It would be hard to find a place better suited for facing the legacies of dictatorships. The impressive and richly ornamented Goldberger House which has been hosting the Open Society Archives (OSA) ever since 2005 had been build as the headquarters of the flourishing textile company Goldberger and Sons Ltd. at the turn of the century. Funded by the Soros Foundation the Archives strongly support the project goals, with Prof. ISTVÁN REV and KATALIN GÁDOROS happy to open the third workshop. OSA staff devotes its time to research on Cold War and Human Rights in Central Eastern Europe. Material originating from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute and covering the

social development and Samizdat of the region is a particular asset.

The picturesque gallery of Goldberger House presented the artistic progress of the project in all its variety. One wing was devoted to selected works from the past 25 years by ALEXANDER MAREK ZYŚKO (Wrocław), SILVESTRO LODI (Venice), ZBYNĚK BENÝŠEK (Prague), VLAD NANCĂ (Bucharest), MIRELA DAUCEANU (Bucharest), ULF GÖPFERT (Dresden), HARALD HAUSWALD (Berlin), as well as PINCZEHELYI SÁNDOR (Pécs). These photographs, paintings, sculptures and installations will be part of the touring exhibition to be opened in Birmingham in October 2008.



Poetress Denisa Mirena Pişcu (left) gazing at the works of her colleagues.

There were also multi-media contributions on display, among them a video film by MICHELE ZAGGIA (Venice). Works may be seen on: <http://overcomings.blogspot.com/>. The main attraction of the three-day event was formed by six readings representing the literary project results. The programme was realized by the generous support of the national cultural institutes of Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary (Balassi Bálint), Romania, Italy and Germany (Goethe). Directors honoured the authors by introducing them to the international audience.

## Sediments

BALLA ZSÓFIA, famous in Hungary for her series of literary interviews on television (EFEU-Dialogues), opened the cycle of readings with her metaphorical and melancholic poems and autobiographical essays. The audience was taken at once by her treatment of love, loss and belief in the face of the conflicting human drives for happiness and political dominance. The capacity for understanding individual tragedies does not stop at the borders of countries and generations. Balla's texts speak up to readers and listeners alike with a provoking "Why": Why did all our ancestors, why do we have to endure violence again and again, no matter what the pretext? Why don't we do anything about it? Balla is using her atmospheric voice to confront these very experiences of violence. Some of these magic moments the poet is able to create were preserved in a film interview by BARBARA LUBICH (Dresden) which was also presented during the exhibition. Dr. Dr. JUTTA VINZENT (Birmingham) was particularly impressed by the disarming power of the poetic transformation of painful personal experiences. Balla is genuinely able to play a marvellous sleight of hand, i.e. carrying along historical sediments comparable to the way the stream of the Danube does in its long way through the continent, while advocating erecting bridges across it.



A voice for the persecuted – Balla Zsófia during the interview with Barbara Lubich.

The Danube also played a decisive role for the initiation of female suffering in the contribution of GABRIEL CHIFU (Bucharest). In “*Relatare despre moartea mea - Report on my death*”, the author’s most recent novel, he tells the story of an escape from Communist Romania. The tragic concurrence of two life lines – one belonging to a promising graduate, the other to a poet barbarising himself under forced orders of the military and the Securitate Secret Police – is used as a metaphor on how personal guilt and socially nurtured violence are irreversibly inscribed in the bodies of the persons affected, no matter what their respective position in the course of events. Passing through all stages of corruption and abuse the officer finally ruins his body, thereby freeing his mind at least from the ongoing influence of the secret service during the transformation period. The young woman is able to cross the border and, after experiencing living hell, reaches extrinsic freedom at last; she has to pay a high price for it, though, because the violence inflicted on her destroyed her emotions completely. Only for a limited time she is able to cover up this dreadful loss by attributes of prosperousness. Years later, when she is taken by the idea that she was carrying in her womb the fruit of evil she met on her dangerous dash for freedom, she has to concede: absence of external force does not necessarily coincide with intrinsic freedom.

DENISA MIRENA PIȘCU (Bucharest) is travelling on the difficult and confusing path towards self-determination, setting the ground for her generational fellows who try to free themselves from the legacies of dictatorship. With „*Banane verzi puse la copt pe dulapuri - Green bananas left to get ripe on cupboards*“ she offered a cycle of poems which expresses the paralysis the children of late Communism have apparently absorbed with the breast-milk. Old political networks still in power behind the scenes do not particularly encourage them to leave it behind; quite on

the contrary, they offer only another round of pain. Her view of the past, of her childhood is a dire melange of poverty and total control by party and police. While listening to Pișcu’s sad but gently flowing voice one might come to the conclusion that it may be easier to overcome underdevelopment than leaving behind fear and control. Be it as it might, this is a victory without meaning: the taste of bananas will never compensate for the flavour of freedom. During the discussion Dr. MARIUS OPREA (Bucharest) used his own activities in disclosing Communist crimes in Romania to illustrate how far the Romanian society still is from reaping the profits of this almost epic struggle.



Gabriel Chifu at his reading.

## Voids

That society may fail twofold in the face of dictatorship is exemplified in the text “*Jak to byla - How all that happened?*” by EDUARD VACEK (Teplice), read out by Prof. KRISTINA KAISEROVÁ (Ústi nad Labem): famous Czech dissidents like Václav Havel were the absolute exception from the rule, with large parts of society willy-nilly took up the service of

dictatorship. Vacek's family figures as his literary material. The tragic fate of his father whose professional future was intertwined with political engagement is the focal point of the story. This man had not only developed into a compliant servant of power, but did even transfer its impertinences into the heart of his family. The audience was left behind even more devastated by the author's realisation drawn from own experience that the attempt to dissolve the leading political networks after the official end of Communism was not only an outright failure, but a hideous trick from the very beginning. Therefore he has completely abstained from political participation before and ever since the "Velvet Revolution", choosing the absurd to play the role of his reality. Nevertheless, his engagement for an exhibition project that covers the expulsions on the territory of former Czechoslovakia shows that he is willing to defy his own principle from time to time if some benefit may be expected for his fellow citizens.



The indifference of the masses persists in every system – Zbyněk Benýšek (*Mitternachtswache*, Gemälde, 2007) lost the faith in his fellow citizens.

ALESSANDRO TAMBURINI (Trento) leads us to the edges of precipices which are opened up by war and dictatorship. In „*Il cielo che prima non c'era - The sky that wasn't there before*“ his electrifying and powerful language throws the audience into an Allied bombardment of a Northern Italian town in 1944. The horror brings along an alternative view on historic

reality. The centre ground is taken by the need to prove one's qualities in a forced life under dictatorships with its direct human implications of political decisions. En passant Tamburini is also opening up Italy's collective memory. In the story the ubiquitous myth of World War Two partisans' figures as what it is – a distant murmur in the conversations of teenagers who face the unwanted opportunity to live up to their usual large talk with decisions of existential quality, as Prof. GUSTAVO CORNI (Trento) pointed out. On top of all this the writer can claim the merits for broaching the issue of the Allied Bombings, a theme widely neglected in Italian discourse when compared to the hot debates that have been going on in Germany for years now.



Prof. Arnaldo Dante Marianacci, director of the Italian Institute of Budapest, opens the reading of Alessandro Tamburini.

## Time travels

LUTZ RATHENOW tried to keep „*Das Versprechen auf einen gültigen Ort - The promise of a place to call our own*“. The Berlin square Alexanderplatz is the scene of a daydream d'amour which incidentally incorporates central events of GDR opposition history that go up now and then like flares besides a drifting boat, with no influence on the suspense of the story whatsoever. His subtle humour discloses a side of remembrance all the soon forgotten. The contemporary communicative memory of a given society always contains to large

extent information on relevant events, in particular also on deviant behaviour (both on the annihilation of the European Jews and dissident activities under Communist regimes for example). Personal access to this information is of vital importance. Rathenow's prose is characterized by a refreshing dispensation of moral judgements, as project manager Prof. GERHARD BESIER (Dresden) pointed out in obvious consent with the audience.



Gerhard Besier discussing with Lutz Rathenow.

It is also worth considering that over the years the individual memory allows for transforming previous everyday activities into the virtually absurd, whereas the extraordinary personal experience may develop into the image of the normal.

### III

It turned out that writers and poets had taken the right decision at the very beginning, and organisers were wise to let them have their will – the individual approach to the project has produced its benefits in the long run. A pluralist and far from complete spectre of remembrance and transformation has been push-started, absorbing into its stream many more than just the various audiences. The contributions produced during the previous months do not only bear the handwriting of

their respective author, but were born out of the fruitful joint efforts for reflection in the project. Poets and writers carry strong self-images and prejudice like every human being; nevertheless, they are more open than others to partial revision at least. Results of cross-border dialogue are encouraging, which makes transmission into the wider public a noble and necessary task. A literary anthology will be published soon and, while incorporating a number of additional texts, will keep the perspectives described above. The provision of a



Don't look back in anger – Harald Hauswald and Lutz Rathenow enthusiastically taking possession of the remains of a Berlin Wall torn down by a Budapest artists' group.

scientific introduction and the multi-lingual outlook of the volume will ensure for easy access in all participating countries.

Attention will now be gradually transferred to the artistic side of the project. The upcoming workshop in Bucharest (December 07<sup>th</sup> - 09<sup>th</sup> 2007) offers the opportunity to finish the preparation for the exhibition. By making use of its broad variety of themes and stylistic devices already presented in Budapest visual arts

may considerably extent the view on “Overcoming Dictatorships“. Participants will be hosted by the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania (IICCR). Its mission is to collect data for the successful judicial persecution of political criminals, to inform the general public about the true nature of the former system, and to keep close contact with the victims of political violence. IICCR will particularly focus on combining the scientific and the artistic part of the project. European remembrance might see yet another metamorphosis.

Links:

<http://overcomings.blogspot.com/>  
[www.hait.tu-dresden.de/eu2](http://www.hait.tu-dresden.de/eu2)



Pinczehelyi Sándor in front of the sculpture „Cross in Crosses“ by his Polish colleague Aleksander Marek Zyśko, behind one of his one paintings.