

A Life Lived for Progress and Democracy: Sára Karig (1914–1999)

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Since the downfall of the old regime in 1989-90, gender studies, starting from almost ground zero, have undergone an evolution in Hungary. On the other hand, historians of gender still have a long way to go to catch up with the state of women's and gender studies in the so-called Western world. A few outstanding and progressive Hungarian women have been singled out as subjects. Others, equally outstanding, have been overlooked, probably because they do not fit the mould: they are not heroines of resistance against the previous regime, they did not assume leadership role in the revolution of 1956, they did not seek martyrdom, although they may have suffered it. One such person is Sara Karig — poet, literary translator, and editor — according to the obituaries from 1999.¹ Yet she is not studied or discussed by the literary historians, but rather by those of us who are students of history, because her fate is a segment of 20th century political history. We may refer to this fate — no offence is intended — as absurd, because Karig was always there when something was occurring or, better said, something was occurring wherever she happened to be. Even if we focus merely on what she accomplished in 1944-45, her humanity, her altruism, the risks she took time and again would certainly deserve our attention. She saved the life of countless children, providing for their sustenance. She harboured the persecuted without regard to their ethnicity, religion or political affiliation. A clandestine printing shop was set up in her apartment, later described by the actor/director Tamás Major as a “laundromat” for producing extracts of birth certificates. Karig was most resourceful — fighting for the survival of the victims with her inexhaustible intellectual gifts. At an early age she committed herself to progress and democracy, for life. As a Social Democratic official she publicly objected to some aspects of the parliamentary elections held on August 31, 1947, when the Hungarian Communist Party perpetrated fraud. She was arrested as a result by the Hungarian political police and handed over to the Soviet state

security authorities. First she was deported to the Soviet occupation zone in Austria and then, some months later, to the Vorkuta forced labour camp (in the northern Ural Mountains, north of the Arctic Circle) from where she would return to Hungary only at the end of 1953.

Childhood

Sára Karig was the offspring of a family of teachers in Baja, in southern Hungary. Her mother, also a teacher, had an unusual life. She escaped from a forced marriage, immediately after the church wedding, eloping with the love of her life, a hydraulic engineer. The engineer, however, fell victim to an accident while practicing his profession, falling into the icy waters of the Danube. He contracted pneumonia and died soon afterward. Before he died he entrusted his wife to his friend, Emil Karig, the music teacher at the teachers' college in Baja. She and Karig married a year later, and eventually had three children, Emil Ubul, Júlia and Sára, who was the youngest. Her family lived under modest circumstances. To use Sára's own expression, the children were educated in "instalments" since they could only purchase clothing one item at a time. From the children's point of view, however, their life was a life of leisure, amidst books, music and flowers, and outings to the Danube, where they swam in the summer, skated in wintertime.

By the time Sára was enrolled in the convent school named Notre Dame (Miasszonyunk), she was able to read, and her special personality was already manifest; for example, on the first day of instruction she stood up during the period, declaring that her leg "had fallen asleep." The instructor on that day was a substitute teacher, and when she summoned the little girl to the front of the class as punishment for her remark she struck her fingers with her ruler. Sára seized the ruler and hit the teacher back (Gergely 1988, 12). Such insubordination would have sufficed to get her expelled, but her grandmother intervened, and offered a cow to the convent to assuage the institution. Thus Sára Karig became home-schooled in the first four grades as well as later, in the first two grades of the public middle school, under the auspices of the Roman Catholic bishop of Baja.

Learning languages was a family tradition in the Karig family. So, at the end of the school-year her parents decided to send Sára, along with her older sister, to Bavaria, to the Neuhaus convent of the English nuns to take an equivalency examination. (PIL, container 2). Thus Sára completed middle school, and took an entrance examination for admission into the fifth grade of the Saint Elizabeth School for girls (Saint Elizabeth of the Árpád dynasty). By

then she was studying Latin, English and French, in addition to the German she had already mastered. She was very good in her studies and thus she was exempted from paying tuition because of the outstanding grades she maintained throughout her school years (PIL, container 10). From third grade on she contributed poems and short stories to *Független Magyarország* [Independent Hungary], a daily of Baja. The October 9, 1931 issue of the paper refers to Karig as a regular contributor, reporting with considerable pride that the students of the high school in Szeged had elected her as president of their literary study circle (PIL, container 3).

Choosing a career — beginnings and friendships

Karig would have liked to become a teacher of English language and literature, but there was no such discipline at the Francis Joseph Royal University of Szeged. Thus, in 1932, immediately upon graduation from secondary school, she enrolled in the Hungarian-German department of the University while attending courses at the Hungarian/German department of the university's Teacher's College. Among her professors were Sándor Sik, Antal Horger and Gedeon Mészöly. Although she completed only one year, the friends she made in this period affected the course of her life. She was accepted into the legendary Circle of the Young of Szeged, comprising Miklós Radnóti, Gyula Ortutay, György Buday, Dezső Baróti, Ferenc Hont, Gábor Tolnai. Radnóti never failed to send her a dedicated copy of whatever he published, and Karig preserved these with great care (PIL, container 15).

Sára also contracted lifelong friendship with Albert Szent-Györgyi and his family. Szent-Györgyi's daughter Neli became a close friend. Karig had free access to Szent-Györgyi's home, and the famous scientist showed true affection for her. Karig basked in the glory of his Nobel prize and helped him answer the letters of congratulation from abroad. He exerted considerable influence on her ways of thinking, her world view; their correspondence indicates meaningful human relations (PIL, containers 8, 14). "Szent-Györgyi and his family," she was to write in the 1980s, "broadened my understanding of the world. Albert lived an ascetic life, loved music, poetry, and taught me that I should travel while I am still young" (Gergely 1988: 12).

Two years with the Faculty of Liberal Arts did not satisfy Karig's ambitions; she sought a different career, perhaps precisely because of Szent-Györgyi's mentoring. In the summer of 1933 she completed a six-week course in infant care at the Szeged Hospital; at the same time she tried to enrol into the Faculty of Medicine of the university, but her application for admission

was rejected by the Dean on the grounds of lack of space. Clearly, the young woman was still seeking her place in life. She attended law school at the Péter Pázmány University in Budapest for two semesters in the academic year 1945-46 (PIL, container 14). Following the example of her sister, she was also seeking a job with a secure income: she completed the course in Commerce at the Commercial Academy of Budapest and became a certified accountant.² Thanks to the intercession of Mrs. Szent-Györgyi she became an *au pair* in England for two years.³ Her child-caring duties notwithstanding she was able to attend lectures at the University of Durham. She also obtained a certificate as a language teacher from the University of London, while attending the meetings of the Fabian Society.

While Sára had several great loves in her life, she resolved, around the time she returned from England, that is around 1937-38, to remain single. Her rationale is indicative of her sense of sovereign independence:

I decided that it [i.e., marriage] was not for me. One contributing factor was that my area of interest was not the ideal of the time. Of course, it may have been possible to train or educate a husband, but not at a time when the entire country on the one hand, and myself in particular, except for perhaps one or two emancipated and sophisticated individuals, could not even imagine a man doing the dishwashing. That may have been possible in England ... Even my great role model, Szent-Györgyi, spent no time with his only beloved daughter, until she became an adult, a more sensible person (Bakonyi 1988-89: 140).

Upon her return from London in 1937 Karig was employed at the Budapest plant of the Vas és Gépgyár [Iron and Machine Works] of Salgótarján. She was in charge of German and English correspondence. Her supervisor was Pál Justus, a leading personality among Social Democratic intellectuals, appreciated and respected by Karig. Under his influence she came to sympathize with the Social Democratic cause; in fact, she joined the Party in 1943.

In 1939 she worked for two years at the Kereskedelmi Bank [Bank of Commerce], and then, for another two years, with the Viticulture Trade Corporation of Count Somsich. The chief executive officer of the latter, Oszkár Zerkovitz, was a follower of Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky;⁴ during the war they hid weapons in the wine-cellars on behalf of Bajcsy-Zsilinszky's resistance movement (Gergely 1988: 13).

1944-45

In March, 1944, when Hungary was invaded and occupied by Nazi German troops; the change forced Sára to make a clear choice. It was most natural for her that when human beings were persecuted by those in power, her conscience dictated that she assume the role of rescuer. After March 1944 she helped hundreds of individuals find apartments, acquire documentation, receive counselling. She placed children into safe homes, enabling them to avoid the horrors of the ghetto, as we may read in an archival document from 1945 (MOL XIX-B-1-r, 802). She hid Polish refugees and British soldiers who escaped from captivity in ten different apartments, rented under her name. She contracted nominal marriage on eight occasions, to enable the husbands to pass for Christians. Officially she was working for the Swedish Red Cross child services, led by Asta Nielsson and Waldemar Langlet. The overall head of this humanitarian undertaking was Raoul Wallenberg.⁵ The infants and children entrusted to Karig and her friends were placed in regular Hungarian orphanages and children's homes, as these were deemed safer than the homes set up by the Swedish Red Cross. The precaution paid off; all the children in the orphanages survived, whereas the Arrow-Cross militants broke into the safe-houses "protected" by the Swedish Red Cross (Gergely 1988: 13).

Immediately after the war Sára Karig received the Alexander Medal awarded by General Alexander, the commander-in-chief of the Allied forces in the Mediterranean area, expressing his gratitude to Karig for the aid provided to soldiers of the British Commonwealth.⁶ According to Karig's recollection the British offered her citizenship in the UK. Indeed, Karig's name appears on the list in a British dispatch; the list includes the names and addresses of those who worked with the British in 1944-45.⁷ In 1985 the Israeli government rewarded her activities with the Yad Vashem award.⁸ In 1987 she participated in the Wallenberg commemoration in Israel; she planted a locust tree along the row of trees of the Worthy — according to a recently established — tradition.

Her activities during the German occupation were also acknowledged in Hungary. The actor Tamás Major, a member of the Communist Party and deputy in the Provisional National Assembly who became the director of the National Theatre, wrote as follows in 1945:

Sára Karig ... courageously and actively supported our Party during the entire Nazi occupation (from March 19, 1944, to liberation). She gave lodging to comrade Sándor Haraszti and his family (Haraszti is now the editor-in-chief of *Szabadság*), to our comrade Géza Losonczy, now the editor-in-chief of *Szabad Nép* — at a time when they were

harassed almost to death by the Def [the Hungarian military's counter-intelligence department].⁹ The doors were open to myself as well, when I had no place to stay. I received a pile of documents from her — her apartment was practically a workshop for laundering excerpts from all kinds of registries. On several occasion we met our comrade Ferenc Donáth, a member of the Central Committee, and with comrade Gyula Kállai (now undersecretary of the Interior) at her place. I believe this may suffice to demonstrate that Sára Karig is among those few who really and truly¹⁰ took part in the resistance movement (MOL XIX-B-1-r, 802).

At the beginning of April 1945 Karig was visited by the leadership of the Social Democratic Party asking her to accept the administrative post in the office of Undersecretary Sándor Millok, at the Commissariat of the Returnees. There was great need for her knowledge of languages. When that office disbanded in December 1946, she joined the British Council as an official, later as secretary. All along she was a party activist in social work with the executive committee of the Social Democratic Party in the Second District (nowadays District I.). She also became involved in the work of the Education Section of the party; she organized preparatory courses for the benefit of those interested in joining the party (Bakonyi 1988-1989: 115).

Elections of August 31, 1947

Karig was already involved in preparing voters' lists for the elections to the National Assembly in 1945. She was coordinating these activities as the head of the voting center of in the Second District, once again prior to the elections of August 31, 1947.¹¹ It was here that she met the next political challenge: to record the electoral abuses committed by the Hungarian Communist Party. Her sense of justice and devotion to democratic principles would not allow her overlook these abuses. She could have remained silent, but she chose to speak out! In fact, compared to any other district in the country, the abuses in this district were the most notorious.

There were over fifty polling stations in the district. Karig developed a special telephone conference network for keeping in touch. During her sojourn in England she became aware that business transactions could be carried out by involving several conversation partners simultaneously, resorting to what we today would refer to as conference calls. She mentioned her experience to the employees of the postal services in the Second district; the mail personnel responded by offering to hook up a similar network locally. Thus the Social

Democratic workers of the Telephone Bureau carried out the assignment and, accordingly, on August 31, every polling station employee could listen to her at the same time if she felt it necessary (Bakonyi 1988-89, 151-152).

The electoral law of 1947 differed from the law of 1945 in several respects. One such area was the extension of suffrage by the use of the so-called “blue slip”, that is, voting by temporary listing of the name outside one’s own district. In 1945 this procedure applied only to pollsters and to those members of the electoral committees who were not serving in their own district. In 1947, however, anyone could avail themselves of this opportunity, if she or he knew in advance that they would not be near their home on electionday, and could thus secure the document, coloured blue, giving them the right to vote. These papers were printed out in the State Printing Office, but the paper used bore no watermark or any other unique feature which might have prevented forgery.

Since no abuses had been reported during the elections of 1945, the legislators took no precautions in this regard. As the chair of her district electoral committee Karig received the package of blue slips from István Ries, the Social Democratic Minister of Justice. Once these papers were distributed to the appropriate parties, a member of the electoral committee, who happened to be the secretary of the local branch of the Hungarian Communist Party, asked Karig to turn over the remainder of the blue slips, and he would return them to headquarters. Karig answered that, since she had received the temporary register of voters from Ries she felt obligated to account for them herself. In other words, she refused to hand over the package. At this point, according to the Karig’s recollection, the person uttered the following threat: “Comrade Karig, Siberia is not that far away!” (Bakonyi 1988-89: 152; Gergely 1988: 13).

Then a faint suspicion arose in Karig: what were these “blue slips” good for? After all, those who needed them could acquire them legally. Sára had a well-developed sense of trust, and it did not even occur to her that these slips could be abused. As a good organizer and a decisive person, at the last meeting before the elections she asked the chairs of the polling committees to let her know immediately whenever someone was using the “blue slip” as a ballot, to enable her to keep track (Bakonyi, 1988-98: 152).

On August 31 Karig received the first phone call, not long after the polls opened: industrial worker such and such had voted with a blue slip. In and of itself, this would have been innocuous but, to exclude all suspicion, Karig called in the personnel data of said voter to all polling stations, just in case the person showed up at some other polling station. If he did, he was to be detained along with his documents and turned over to the police officer on

duty, under suspicion of fraud. Indeed, Karig's suspicion proved correct; many tried to vote at several polling stations during the day. The news of the arrests reached the National Election Committee without delay, and István Ries called Karig by phone to find out the particulars. Karig requested trucks to transport the arrested abusers. Finally the police took the culprits to Andrásy Avenue 60 — the headquarters of the political police. According to Karig, however, they entered through one door and left by another. The documents remained with Karig (Bakonyi 1988-1989: 153).

Karig's intervention caused a furor. We know from the recollections of Vilmos Böhm, the grand old man of the Social Democratic Party, that the voters who used false papers were indeed turned over to the police for identification and investigation. When, however, this came to the knowledge of László Rajk, the Communist Minister of the Interior, he issued a confidential order by radio, to the effect that all police personnel who are arresting the abusing voters, will be suspended from their position. Thereupon István Ries instructed the prosecutor to visit the polling stations with immediate effect, arrest all voters who used forged papers and hand these persons over to the courts. Whereupon Rajk issued a fresh directive by radio to the police, that any prosecutor who showed up at a polling station be turned away and, should he refuse to leave, place him under arrest.¹²

Karig knew nothing about the circumstances of the "blue slip" affair. (Szerencsés, 1992, Gyarmati, 1997/98).¹³ The day after election day the same person who had approached her earlier to collect the unclaimed blue slips, now asked for the documents of all those who had been "arrested" because of the unlawful use of the blue slips. Karig refused once again, upon which he uttered another threat, and left (Bakonyi 1988-1989: 154).

The abduction of Sára Karig

On the morning of September 1, 1947, Karig was getting ready to report for duty at the British Council; she intended to stop at the precinct station on her way and turn in the key to the official safe that had remained in her custody; the confiscated documents were kept in that safe. As she stepped out of the entrance to her apartment building on Ponty Street she was accosted by two men in civilian clothing who informed her that she was to be taken to the headquarters of the economic police for deposition. Sára called her sister who shared the apartment using a convened whistle signal, and shouted that she was "heading for the economic police and, should I disappear, call the Ministry of Justice!" (Bakonyi 1988-1989: 383).

She was escorted to a big black Zis limousine parked around the corner, *with* curtains pulled, and driven to the building on the Avenue of Princess Vilma (now Városligeti fasor) 34-36, where she was handed over to the Soviet authorities.¹⁴ Her documents and valuables were taken away, including the Socialist insignia — the naked red man wielding a hammer! That same day the Russian authorities transported her to the Soviet occupation zone in Austria, and interned her at Baden bei Wien. The Soviet occupation forces used the cellars of a row of villas as prison cells, and detained Karig there for almost three months. She was subjected to continuous interrogations at night, whereas she was prevented from sleeping in the daytime. At first Karig was hoping that there may have been some misunderstanding; after all she was not a high-ranking party leader, nor was she a professional politician.

The repercussions of Karig's disappearance

Karig's disappearance met with incomprehension among the Social Democratic leaders. According to the recollections of Klára Szakasits, the daughter of Árpád Szakasits, the First Secretary of the party — the latter assumed it had something to do with the upcoming elections, since she had submitted specific proof of the electoral fraud perpetrated by the Hungarian Communist Party (Mrs. Siffer Szakasits, 1985, 216-17). Vilmos Böhm merely confirms this in his memoirs. He adds that he paid a visit to Mátyás Rákosi, the First Secretary of the Communist Party, and asked for his intervention in tracking down Karig. Rákosi did not hesitate: he placed a call to the Minister of the Interior László Rajk and to György Pálffy, the head of the Military Police section of the Ministry of Defense. Both told him that they knew about Karig's fate. Böhm sought out the leader of the Allied Control Commission,¹⁵ Lt. General Sviridov, who promised him that if Karig was indeed in their custody, the Soviets would release her. A few days later Böhm was informed, once again, that she was not under arrest. (Böhm 1990, 182-85). However, according to Antal Bán, the party's Deputy First Secretary, Karig was taken away in order to intimidate the Social Democrats (Bán, no date: 86).

In fact, the Social Democratic leaders had no idea of what became of Karig: the Social Democrats of the Second district did place an advertisement regarding the disappearance — that is, they started an official search for a missing person (Bakonyi, 1988-89: 382). Friends and family did not remain idle. When Karig's older brother turned to the Ministry of the Interior with an official request, he was told that she had probably defected to the West. The widow of the well-known artist István Dési Huber — a close friend of Sára —

also inquired with the authorities, but she was scared away upon being told that whoever is looking for Sára will end up suffering the same fate (Bakonyi 1988-89, 380). Finally, a Social Democrat lawyer came up with the correct information: he told the family that he knew for certain that Sára had been arrested by the political police who turned her over to Soviet counterintelligence (Bakonyi 1988-89: 382). The family found confirmation of the fact that Sára was alive when, toward the end of 1947, a woman released from camp in Lwow sent them a letter at Sára's request (Bakonyi 1988-89, 379). In one instance they received a postcard from Sára herself, from Vorkuta, during a visit to the camp by the Red Cross (Bakonyi 1988-98: 382).¹⁶

Held in the Soviet occupation zone in Austria

Karig was detained in Baden bei Wien until November 1947. In this period her questioning was carried out by the Soviet counter-intelligence. It became obvious, almost from the start, that she was accused of spying. Actually, this was mostly a bluff, since the interrogators did not even know that Karig was employed by the British Council. Karig herself revealed this fact in the autobiography she was forced to write, of which there are at least forty versions during these few weeks. Towards the end of the interrogations she was confronted by two high-ranking officials. One of the two was a prosecutor who informed Karig that her case was being investigated in Hungary as well, but the Soviet authorities did not file any charges against her, nor did they find out why the Hungarian authorities handed her over to the Soviets. They also made her sign a declaration to the effect that after her release, she was not to mention to anyone her experiences during her detention there. Not long after the door to her cell opened one night and she was told to gather her few belongings — but this time she was not taken for interrogation. She was put on a van that took her to the prison at Neunkirchen. Upon boarding the van an official read out a resolution to her; it was translated into German as well. From this resolution Karig found out that she had been removed from Hungary at the request of Hungarian authorities with the justification that her presence would interfere with the democratic collaboration between the Communist and Social Democratic parties, and that her presence would hamper democratic development in general. Therefore she was banned from Hungary for an undisclosed period (Bakonyi 1988-1989: 169).¹⁷ Only then did Karig realize that there was no way out; that, she would be taken to the Soviet Union. She was far from acquiescing, however; during the first three years of her imprisonment she seized every opportunity to appeal, besieging the authorities

with her petitions, every six month (Bakonyi, 1988-1989: 376; Gergely, 1988: 14).

Several more months had passed before she was removed to the Soviet Union; in the meantime she was detained at Neunkirchen, a camp which functioned as the Soviet concentration camp within Austria. Large transports of prisoners left from there to the distribution center at Lwow, transiting through Hungary, of course. Conditions at Neunkirchen were better; there was heat and warm water, she was receiving rations of milk. In her recollections she repeatedly mentions that it was only once she arrived in the tundra region that she realized how good the fare had been in Austria. She received the fare destined for the officer class: pork with lard, large pieces of beef joints with plenty of cabbage which, however, she could not stomach given the diet to which she was accustomed. Consequently, she lost 22 kilograms at the very beginning of her detention. Later, when the fare became truly poor and had little caloric value, she was to regret not eating properly while she had the chance. She found out too late — as she put it — “that it was not a matter of eating tasty food, but rather adequate caloric intake.” (Bakonyi, 1988-1989: 203-204.)

Sára was given chores at Neunkirchen: cleaning toilets, operating a sewing machine: along with a Czechoslovak medical student of Hungarian descent, she was told to mend the clothing of the detainees. During the summer vacations at Baja, and thanks to her mother’s insistence, she had taken courses in home economics, in tailoring and sewing, knitting and crocheting, cooking, canning fruit and other household chores. It should be noted, in all fairness, that at the time she had felt this was an imposition but, after returning from her detention she had to admit that there were great benefits to all this practical knowledge during her years of captivity. In Neunkirchen it enabled her to become part of the prison’s two-person tailoring workshop.

With regard to the old Singer sewing machine there was an interesting episode which tied her to Béla Kovács, the First Secretary of the Smallholder Party, arrested on February 25, 1947 (see Palasik 2002, and 2011). Kovács, too, was held by the Soviet authorities at Neunkirchen, in the men’s wing of the prison. On one occasion Sára was given a man’s drawers to repair, embroidered with the monogram KB. Her intuition told her this must refer to Béla Kovács,¹⁸ even though all she knew about his fate was that he too had been taken into custody by the Soviets. The two seamstresses were able to obtain red/white/green thread, which they sew under the fold, along with a small heart, before returning the item to Béla Kovács (Bakonyi 1988-1989: 179). On another occasion they were told to tailor a man’s suit from German military felt. They were given an old suit for measure, but the material barely sufficed

for a pair of trousers. Only after Béla Kovács was released did it dawn upon them that this article was also designed for Kovács. In fact, Kovács was to ask Karig much later: “Tell me, why did you make it so extra-large? I felt so loose in it!”¹⁹

In the tundra district of Vorkuta

In late December of 1947 Karig was removed from Neunkirchen and taken to Lwow, by the last transport of the season heading in that direction. The railroad car was idling at the Déli [South] railroad station in Budapest, but the detainees were unable to get a message out. At the camp in Lwow she was able to make good use of the know-how acquired during the infant care course she had taken in Szeged. She worked alongside the camp doctor, especially in curing scabs and syphilis, and the extermination of an infestation of bedbugs (Bakonyi 1988-1989: 181). Karig was transported further after two months, spending a day in Moscow, at the infamous Ljubjanka prison, and a day and a half at Kirov. Her attire in Lwow was the same as on the morning she left her apartment on Ponty Street in Budapest on September 2: a camelhair coat, a woolen dress and leather thongs. She bartered these for warmer clothing with the woman, already mentioned, who related her encounter with Karig in a letter she sent upon her own release. Thus, at the time of her departure for the arctic region she had a cotton overcoat and a pair of cotton pants. Much later she acquired a pair of gentry boots that had been patched innumerable times, and a buslat²⁰ which reached half way down her legs, a cap with earmuffs and a pair of one-fingered gloves. By then no one had their own underwear, everyone being forced to wear the official issue (Bakonyi 1988-1989: 185-207, 378).

Sára Karig arrived at Vorkuta, at the northern edge of the Ural mountain chain, an island the size of Rhode Island, in March of 1948. The average daily temperature was subzero: minus 19 degrees Celsius [minus 4 degrees Fahrenheit]. In Vorkuta the winters are long and the summers last only six weeks. The so-called correctional labour camp was situated near factories and mines. The prisoners were housed in barracks built for two hundred inmates, with separate facilities for women and men. Except for one year, when she was transferred to a camp at Sverdlovsk, she spent her entire detention in the arctic region under the most inhumane conditions. For two and a half years she performed hard labour, working in a clay mine, where she had to load the wagons and push these to the brickyard manually. She was never able to meet

the prescribed quota. She also worked in the production of peat, in gardening and in gathering hay, in a region 200 kilometres to the south of Vorkuta.

In addition to the rigors of the climate and the dire working conditions, she found it humiliating that the brigade leaders, who were common criminals, insulted the prisoners as “fascists”, as “ones who had raised their hands against the holy Soviet fatherland” (Szira, 1089: 13). Sára’s physical health deteriorated, she fell ill. Her cheeks became swollen as a result of a serious inner ear infection. She was taken to the hospital and told a mastoidectomy was necessary, but the surgeon refused to undertake the operation for lack of analgesics. Karig would not give up, insisted she was familiar with caring for the sick, and that she would perform the surgery on herself, if necessary. Her tremendous willpower stood her in good stead, the surgeon relented and the operation was performed. She remained in the hospital for a few months, as a nurse’s aide. We do not know why she was transferred to Sverdlovsk, then back to Vorkuta. In Sverdlovsk, however, she lived under relatively humane conditions in a German P.O.W. camp, as the only woman in a camp of 440. Separate quarters were made available to her in the medical complex. She was not required to work, all day she could read the books sent as packages to the German generals from Germany. Once she returned to Vorkuta, she was assigned to the camp’s book-binding workshop. Her friends managed to make those in charge believe that she had training in the craft, and she was able to convince her supervisors that she could not read Russian. This became necessary because often the assignment involved binding confidential camp records, using glue made from starch. They were able to save enough flour to prepare *palacsinta* [crêpe] for themselves on holidays.

Karig, always the optimist, felt that nothing in her life happened by chance, and that every event had a positive side. She contracted lifelong friendships in captivity with Estonians, Lithuanians and Russians. Soviet citizens could receive packages which they often shared with others. Garlic, cone-sugar, and double toast figured as treasures in the camp. The relatives of her closest friends sent Sára a package every other month, illegally, even after she was transferred to a different camp in Vorkuta. The sole reason for the transfer was to prevent deeper relations from forming among those considered politically unreliable.²¹ Karig wrote as follows: “If I am in a good mood I say, that at a stage in life when people usually don’t make new friends, I succeeded under those special conditions to win over people who were to become lifelong friends and who, at great sacrifice, shared whatever was good in their own life, to save mine” (Bakonyi, 1988-1989: 3878).²²

Karig felt that the new languages she learnt were yet another positive aspect of her captivity; she was now able to read Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoi-

evsky in the original. She persisted in learning Russian and Ukrainian, and this enabled her later on, after her release, to learn Bulgarian as well. She kept a versified journal during her detention, parts of which have been published. These offer lyrical accounts of the reindeer, of the Zurjen shepherd, of the tundra, of her friends... The entire diary reads as if there had been no forced labour involved at all (Karig, 1995).

The return home

The death of Stalin in March 1953 brought about changes in the camps. At first the inmates did not expect to be released but some of them were. Karig was among the first to make it back to Lwow, where she now worked in the POW triage camp. At the end of November in 1953 she left for home in a freight-car flying the Hungarian flag, and a load of POWs. There were no guards on the transport. At the border the Hungarian authorities took over the passengers in alphabetical order, and issued a certificate to everyone certifying their status as prisoners of war.²³ The next stop was Nyíregyháza-Sóstó for further sorting. After a few days Karig was informed that her family was living under 14 Ponty Street, but was not told which members were alive. She could travel free, as a returning POW, was issued ten *forints*, and was placed on a train heading for Budapest, with the instructions that upon arrival she was to report to the office of the district physician. According to official documents Karig had crossed the border on November 26, 1953, and according to the registry of residents she arrived at the apartment on Ponty Street on December 2. On the 10th she duly reported to the office of the district physician on Maros Street (PIL container 3).

When Sára arrived at the Nyugati railroad station in Budapest, she looked for a phone booth and sought her own name in the directory. To her amazement she found it, but she felt discouraged upon dialling the number and getting no answer. She headed for Buda by way of the Margit Bridge. She was surprised to note that the name Karig was displayed on two mailboxes, one bearing the name of her sister, the other of her brother. Sára knew nothing about them. She had no idea that her father lost his mind and died because of her disappearance. Then her mother moved from Baja to Budapest to live with her daughter Júlia. Her brother moved next door, with his own family.

Sára Karig arrived from the Soviet Union as two-thirds invalid.²⁴ For a long time after her return she suffered from claustrophobia. She did not go out, neither to the movies nor the theatre, not even to meet friends. She felt ill at ease in any confined space. As she confessed:

I am not saying that I was drowning, but I distinctly felt that I could not get out, that I was locked up once again. I would wake in the middle of the night, suffering from insomnia; in other words, my health was poor. Moreover, I had to sort out this accumulation of terrible events in my own mind. This became all the more entrenched in me because I had paid no attention to it during my captivity, but looked at things with a bright outlook, that such was my life, even if I had to spend it over here, and, even if I died here, there could be no other existence for me. (Bakonyi, 1988-1989: 373-74).

Even though Karig lived the years after her return in such negative terms, she did not remain inactive. In the middle of 1954 she completed an advanced course as translator at the Soviet-Hungarian Friendship Society. In 1956 she passed an advanced language examination at the Eötvös Loránd University in English and Russian; then, in the spring of 1957, in German as well. In 1957 she registered as a distance learner with the Department of Hungarian Ethnology.

It was not easy to resume life as a civilian; it took her a while to get over the feeling that she had been forgotten at home, that she had been missed by no one. There were friends who were afraid of what might happen to them should they resume contact, and even went to the trouble of crossing the street to avoid greeting her (Bakonyi, 1988-1989: 392-94). Others, however, came to her help when the opportunity presented itself. Among them we find Gyula Ortutay, her former friend from Szeged; Professor János Holló, chairperson at the university; Éva Derera, the editor in charge of the children's section of Hungarian Radió; Endre Barát, the editor-in-chief of the magazine *Ország-Világ*; János Domokos, the editor at the Új Magyar (after 1957 Európa) publishing house. All of them helped Sára find temporary employment until June 1956, when she signed a contract with Európa Publishers. Prompted by Domokos, she learnt Bulgarian. She became involved in long-range planning for the publishing house, acting as editor-in-chief for decades. She was in charge of special series such as the volumes of *Népek meséje* [Tales of nations] and the anthologies entitled *Égtájak*. She interpreted the works of Mikhail Bulgakov for Hungarian readers, as well as many a masterpiece of Ukrainian and Bulgarian literatures. She contributed a great deal to intercultural communication; we might even say, she "managed" the literatures of Finland, of Africa, of Australia, of Vietnam, among others. Since 1977 she was also editor of the *Új Tükör* [New mirror] for world literature. She remained active in literature even after she retired in 1989. She was an active

member of over ten scientific, literary and other societies; among these, she became president of the Mihály Károlyi Society.²⁵

Beginning in the spring of 1956 Sára Karig tried to seek rehabilitation. She filed petitions with the Soviet ambassador to Hungary, with Erik Molnár, the Minister of Justice, and with the Ministry of the Interior. She was rehabilitated by the secretariat of the Ministry of the Interior in 1957. The official justification on the cover of that file reads “since they had no document referring to any data on enemy activity”.²⁶ According to another source, the document pertaining to her rehabilitation by the Ministry of the Interior was dated October 2, 1957. The memorandum regarding the process of rehabilitation mentions that Hungarian law enforcement agencies turned to the Soviet authorities inquiring about Karig. The latter responded “that since nothing had transpired against her, there was no judgment against her. In 1953 she was offered Soviet citizenship, but she opted to return to Hungary.” Consequently the Hungarian rehabilitation commission determined as follows: “The commission examined the case of Sára Karig. Neither we nor the Soviet authorities found any act that would have justified her internment, hence we are issuing a document of rehabilitation.” The document of rehabilitation, issued by the military prosecutor’s office in Moscow, is dated November 6, 1957.²⁷

The rehabilitation made Sára’s life somewhat easier, but nothing could compensate her for the years lost. By the time she returned from the Soviet Union she had reached forty. In her view, she embarked on a third life. She was grateful to fate that at long last she was able to perform work she truly enjoyed. This new stage of her life proved as active as the previous ones: she became acquainted with hundreds of persons from around the globe; she corresponded extensively, and traveled a lot. No one begrudged her success; she was the kind of person whose success was appreciated everywhere. From the late 1970s on she received all kinds of political and literary awards; the one she prized most was the Attila József prize, awarded to her in 1986.²⁸

She never married; her mother, siblings, nieces and nephews, friends and beloved dogs formed her family. Her life, so rich in highlights, came to an end in February 1999.

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NOTES

This essay was translated from the Hungarian original by Professor Mario Fenyó, in cooperation with the study's author.

¹ Sára Karig died on February 2, 1999.

² She passed the course in Commerce, with a mark of “very good”, on June 13, 1934 (PIL, container 10).

³ She was a nanny to a small boy in Newcastle. She corresponded with the family even after 1945, nor did the correspondence stop when the head of the family, a surgeon, had to relocate to India (Bakonyi, 1988–1989: 384).

⁴ Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky (1886–1944), became a martyr of the anti-Fascist movement in late 1944. Having completed his studies in law he was associated with the extreme right until the late twenties. Then he gradually veered toward democratic opposition forces. In 1930 he formed the National Radical Party. On 15 March (a national holiday, sometimes official, sometimes not) in 1932 he launched an anti-Nazi weekly titled *Szabadság* (Freedom), which became a forum for intellectual and political resistance to Nazis. In 1936 his party united with the Independent Smallholders and Bourgeois Party. He was a deputy in parliament since 1939. In spite of the German influence he advocated a federation of the Danubian nations, and fought against Fascism. He was in touch with members of the Social Democratic and the underground Communist parties, stood up for those persecuted for racial or political reasons — became a leader of the anti-Nazi resistance. He was arrested twice in 1944 during the German occupation (which started on March 19, 1944). The Arrow-Cross national assembly handed him over to the military tribunal, which sentenced him to death. He was executed on Christmas Eve.

⁵ Raoul Wallenberg (1912–?), the Swedish ambassador to Hungary (serving from July 1944), was able to prevent the deportation of twenty thousand Jews to the concentration camps. He was arrested by the Soviet army in Budapest in January 1945. The ultimate fate of the diplomat is still unclear.

⁶ The award can be found in PIL Karig Sára collection, container 3.

⁷ National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, FO 371, 48512. The interesting thing about this archival source was that it was classified for fifty years. These particular documents were opened in 1996.

⁸ The award was brought by Sára Reuveni from Israel and handed to Sára Karig.

⁹ Department 2 of the General Staff of the Hungarian Royal Defense, the infamous VKF-2, was in charge of counterintelligence; the “defenziv”, or “def” for short, was one of its components.”

¹⁰ This word is underscored in the original.

¹¹ She was given two months’ leave without pay from the British Council for this purpose.

¹² Referring to the event, more particularly to the fact that he could not guarantee “the rule of law”, handed in his resignation, albeit he withdrew it after protracted negotiations. See Böhm 1990: 154-55, 176.

¹³ In the elections held on 31 August 1947 the votes given on blue slips illegally gave the Communist Party more seats, or about 60,000 more votes, than they were entitled to; this translated into two or three unearned seats in Parliament. Palasik 2011: 140.

¹⁴ The NKVD, the Soviet state security office, moved here in the second half of January 1945.

¹⁵ The armistice agreement on 20 January 1945 obligated Hungary to carry out the “anti-Fascist measures,” and she was to accept the Allied Control Commission (ACC) as the organization in charge of the execution of the armistice agreement. The ACC, made up of the delegates of the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the USA, remained in operation until the ratification of the peace treaty on 15 September 1947. In similar bodies created in other defeated countries the office of chairman, and the decisive voice, always belonged to the great power that was occupying a given country or that had pushed the German forces out. Thus the Soviet Union presided over the ACC in Hungary. Moreover, the Yugoslav and Czech missions also functioned to ensure the payment of reparations to Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. Executive Agreement Series 456, 1945, 59 Stat.: 1321; Palasik 2000: 25-30; Palasik 2011: 16-19.

¹⁶ She was able to indicate her return address on the card, and the family did send letters and packages, but these were never received.

¹⁷ The decision was reached by the “Osobennoye soveschaniye Moscowi”—a council composed of three members, fondly nicknamed the “Troika.”

¹⁸ Béla Kovács (1908–1959). Farmer of peasant background and politician. Joined the Smallholder Party in 1933. Political undersecretary of state in the Ministry of the Interior from December 23, 1944 to November 15, 1945. Minister of Agriculture from November 15, 1945 to February 23, 1946. First Secretary of the party from August 20, 1945, and a member of Parliament. He was widely regarded as the most popular peasant politician, as a charismatic individual — a spokesperson for the various strata of the peasantry. He consistently defended democratic principles, was less willing to compromise or sell out than many a member of his party, and resisted the attempts of the two workers parties to take over power. Consequently, on February 25, 1947 he was arrested and deported by the Soviet occupation forces, at the insistence of Mátyás Rákosi. He was sentenced to twenty years of detention, without due process. He was brought back to Hungary in 1955, but returned to his family only on April 2, 1956. See Palasik, 2002.

¹⁹ This comment simply indicates that Béla Kovács also lost a lot of weight in detention.

²⁰ A warm overcoat.

²¹ This policy failed, however, for Karig was able to maintain lifelong friendship through correspondence and exchanges of visits.

²² Karig belongs among the few who went back to Vorkuta. This happened at the beginning of the 1990s, at the instance of Sándor Sára who was filming a documentary entitled “Hungarian women in the GULAG.”

²³ So far the details regarding Karig’s return have not surfaced from the archives. On the other hand, her name appears on several rosters of POWs returning from the Soviet Union, or registers of persons under investigation. See ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-113; V-110209/2.; V-110209/5; V-110209/10; V-113409/10 and A 1341. Karig is listed under identification number 740, ÁBTL 3.1.9. V-113409/5 118, 123.

²⁴ This is also the consequence of the double mastectomy performed in Vorkuta. The operation was carried out under primitive conditions and with inadequate instruments, but it was corrected after her return to Hungary.

²⁵ From the seventies Sara developed a meaningful friendship with Katinka Andrássy (widow of Count Mihály Károlyi). In her last will the latter designated Karig and János Jemnitz as her spiritual heirs. They were also granted custody of the papers of Mihály Károlyi.

²⁶ ÁBTL 2.2.1. I/13.5. 598.

²⁷ Belügyminisztérium, Történeti Irattár, 22, documents pertaining to rehabilitation proceedings.

²⁸ Among the many medals and awards, Karig received the Order of Knighthood of the Finnish Order of the Lion (1989), The Star Cross of the Hungarian People’s Republic (1989), and the Star Cross of the Hungarian Republic (1994).