


# Women writers and the possibility of a women's literary tradition in Transylvanian Hungarian literature

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

Received: April 1, 2022 • Accepted: September 8, 2022

Published online: January 13, 2023

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## ABSTRACT

Within the regional literary canon of Transylvanian Hungarian literature, female authors had a marginal position during the last century, as a quantitative methodology can show. The objective of the paper is to point out the structural dimensions of this marginalization, through exploring patterns in the reception of women authors, and characteristics of the literary field of Transylvanian Hungarian literature. The question is whether thematic or genre issues, the prestige of certain literary and cultural forms (like memoirs, children's literature, theatre etc.) affected during the past century the canonical position of female authors. The analysis outlines a possible structure of a women's literary tradition.

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## KEYWORDS

canon, cultural memory, minor literature, women's literary tradition, Transylvanian Hungarian literature

## WHAT COULD A WOMEN'S LITERARY TRADITION MEAN?

To study individual women's literary achievements is not quite the same as to theorize and research a women's literary tradition. The works of women authors in the Hungarian literary

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canon, including the Transylvanian Hungarian literary canon, have appeared mostly as singular exceptions for most of the last century. The dynamics of remembering and forgetting thus became accessible only by focusing on a single author again and again, within an optimistic scenario of hoping that the aesthetic value of the individual achievement itself would become the main argument that could turn forgetting into remembering. However, the analyses published in the last two or three decades have also shown that we need to approach the issue of women's literature in structural terms if we want to understand more precisely the shifts in canonisation and literary memory. The existence and materiality of a women's literary tradition could mean that the experiences, writing practices and genre creations of female authors enter into dialogue with each other and are shaped into a network within the literary tradition. In Hungarian literary memory, on the other hand, it seems that the achievements of female authors are isolated and most often presented in relation to their male contemporaries—which in turn leads to a simplistic, oppositional use of the adjectives 'women's' or 'female', since on the one hand it is a constant source of surprise from the male perspective, and on the other hand, the female writer has to "invent" something again and again that she could build and rely on if a living tradition and memory existed. It is precisely the case, as experts' accounts suggest, that, predictably, this kind of structural forgetting also affects those who might gain most from remembering and might find in their own confrontation with experiences as women some confirmation or tried and tested patterns in earlier experiments that are worth elaborating further. This study aims to point out blindspots in cultural memory that are produced by power shifts and implicit silences – and which can be seen as structural, showing the mechanisms and historical-social expectations that create the context for the shaping of an individual woman's writing career. The framework and direction of my own research is thus primarily determined by the fact that I am examining the position of women in power contexts, as a situation from which the relativity of certain principles that seem to be taken for granted in cultural-social terms can potentially be seen, and therefore it becomes possible to bring these into dialogue and move towards a real consensus. In this dialogue it becomes important to be able to pay attention to changes, to the movements and, of course, to the points of view expressed in the works themselves.

Let us start with some data on the presence of women writers in the public sphere of Transylvanian Hungarian literature, in institutional structures and in representative handbooks, as this may shed light on the sense in which the position of women writers in Transylvania can be considered a multiple minority situation and may serve as a starting point for further analysis centred on looking for possible patterns of forgetting and practices that need to be changed.

The *Helikon Writers' Society* was the representative writers' society of Transylvanian Hungarian literature between the two World Wars, which did not have a member's list, and which held its yearly meetings in Marosvécs (today: Brâncovenești, Romania). Ildikó Marosi has found the names of 55 invited writers in the records of the meetings, three of them women. This represents 5.45% of the membership (Marosi, 1979, II, p. 301).

Ildikó Marosi's database also contains the complete list of titles of the series of books published by the Erdélyi Szépművés Céh (Transylvanian Fine Arts Guild), with a total of 164 volumes published in the period between 1925 and 1944 (some of them in two volumes). Of these, 6 volumes were written by women (Irén P. Gulácsy, Mária Berde, Zsuzsa Thury), and 6 can be considered anthologies. The proportion of books written by women is therefore 3.79% if anthologies are excluded from the total number of books (Marosi, 1979, II, p. 302–312).



Lajos Kántor and Gusztáv Láng summarised the developments after the Second World War in their handbook, *Romániai magyar irodalom 1944–1970* (*Hungarian Literature in Romania, 1944-1970*) (Kántor and Láng, 1973). Instead of the data in the index of names, I have taken into account the data on the authors who are mentioned separately in the margins of the book, i.e. are discussed in analytical paragraphs or pages. In total, 113 authors are highlighted in the margins (some of them, who work in several genres, more than once), six of them women: Júlia Szilágyi, Gizella Hervay, Magda Simon, Mária Tamás, Ilona Varró and Mária Földes. This number represents 5.3% of the total number of authors.

Gyula Dávid, Péter Marosi and János Szász's textbook, *A romániai magyar irodalom története* (*The History of Hungarian Literature in Romania*), published in several editions in the late 1970s, covers the literary tradition practically up to the publication of the book (Dávid et al., 1978). Seventy-two authors are listed in separate entries in the textbook's table of contents, two of them women (Mária Berde, Gizella Hervay). In percentage terms, this is 2.77% of the total.

Zoltán Bertha and András Görömbei's book, *A hetvenes évek romániai magyar irodalma* (*Hungarian Literature in Romania in the Seventies*), a continuation of Kántor and Láng's work, looks at the literature of a decade (Bertha and Görömbei, 1983). There are 58 authors listed in the table of contents, three of them women (Gizella Hervay, Ilona Varró, Zsófia Balla), which represents 5.17% of the total number of authors. Regarding the period after the change in political regimes, I would like to highlight two facts: the period between 1995 and 2015 was marked in Transylvania by the publication of a book series called the *Előretolt Helyörség Könyvek*, a representative collection of authors emerging after the regime change. Of the 86 individual volumes published in the series, 13 were written by women, amounting to 15.11% of the total number of books (Horváth, 2015, p. 81–83). The current members' list of the *Erdélyi Magyar Írók Ligája* (Hungarian Writers' League of Transylvania) gives us a rough indication of the current situation: of the 129 members listed on the website, 29 are women, which represents a ratio of 22.48%.

In an optimistic view, this change in proportions may indicate a gradual shift, some kind of a changing trend in Transylvanian Hungarian literature after the regime change. However, on the one hand, the number of female authors is still far from parity proportions, and on the other, this change does not provide a solution to the issue of literary memory. Based on the emerging proportions it is plausible to make the claim of a "multiple minority" situation with regard to the literary canon (Tompa 2019, p. 30), and we can also fairly assume the presence of some kind of a marginalizing process as regards the power mechanisms in the society. This is nothing new in view of the lessons learnt from works that analyse the functioning of patriarchal systems, as the process is certainly similar to the one unfolding in other countries of East-Central Europe, including Hungary.

In short, it can be assumed (and the trend-like changes in the proportions provide some support for this) that there is a correlation between the changing wealth and political status of women, their education and the conditions of current social norms in the twentieth century, in terms of the proportion and weight of their presence in the public sphere – and, in this context, in cultural memory. In the following, I will attempt to take stock of possible constructions of the tradition of women's literature in Transylvania, based upon some insights already formulated in Hungarian and Anglo-Saxon literary studies.

In my work, I was able to draw on analyses by Anna Borgos (2007), Judit Kádár (2014), Anna Menyhért (2013) and Györgyi Földes (2021) for an overview of the Hungarian literary



historical framework, and on the works of Andrea Gál (2001) and Judit Pieldner (2013) for an overview of Transylvanian literature.

From a structural point of view, there are women writers of at least four types of profiles that have not been persistently present in longer-term literary memory over the last hundred years.

1. *the type of the conservative woman writer.* Among the writers working between the two World Wars, this type fits both Mária Szabó (Szentmihályiné) and Irén P. Gulácsy, both of them members of the Helikon Writers' Society. Both developed their writing career largely after their resettlement in Hungary and, like their Hungarian counterparts Renée Erdős, Cecile Tormay, Lola Réz Kosáryné, and so on, their posthumous reception was characterised for a long time by remaining in the shadow. 2. *the type of the left-wing woman writer.* In Transylvania between the two World Wars this applies, for example, to Ágnes Erdélyi, who wrote two volumes; but the list could also be extended to include Karola Nagy, Renée Heves, or even Irén Becski, who also belonged to the wider circle around the periodical *Korunk* and published poems in several contemporary literary journals but never compiled an independent volume. The careers of these authors were documented to some extent by literary history between 1944 and 1989, but after the literary paradigm shifts of the 1970s they essentially vanished from the field of literary interest, along with the entire left-wing literary tradition. 3. *women authors of Holocaust literature in Transylvania*—an overview of the work of these authors was recently published by Andrea Tompa (2021). As she shows, there are multiple reasons why the works of these authors have faded from cultural memory, while the works of Anna Molnár Hegedűsné, Zimra Harsányi or Mária Földes are still worthy of attention. Genre codes, the essentially taboo nature of the themes, as well as the émigré status and multiple affiliations of their authors may all have contributed to the need to rediscover these works. 4. *the canonical position of women who create in "peripheral" genres* is inherently problematic—this characteristic of reception can be traced back to the 19th century in the history of Hungarian literature. Authors of children's literature (Lili Marton, Gabriella Csire), of historical novels that can easily be classified as lowbrow (Borbála Nagy), of autobiographical works, or even of theatrical works (which partially overlap with the third category of Holocaust literature, e.g. Mária Földes), inherit the marginal status of the genres themselves in their reception. At the same time, the renewed interest in authenticity in recent decades has led to the discovery of the modality of testimony and the potential of autobiographical genres to resolve trauma; thus, Elaine Polcz's book *Asszony a fronton (One Woman in the War)* has been receiving increasing attention recently, and in this context, alongside the aforementioned Mária Földes, the works of Rózsa Ignác, Zsuzsa Thury, Mária Berde and others—including the posthumously published memoir and poems of Emese Várady—also deserve special attention.

The versions of the history of Transylvanian Hungarian literature that became paradigmatic in the period 1944–1989, but which already had precedents in Elemér Jancsó's interwar works, and which narrates the history of literature as the process of literary modernisation (while counterbalancing and complementing it with social relevance), only admitted a handful of women authors into this narrative – those who were of paramount importance in the histories of literary innovation, possibly on an institutional level. Such authors included Mária Berde, as the initiator of the 1929–1930 debate which became known as *Vallani és vállalni (Confess and Represent)*, Gizella Hervay, as a participant in vision-changing literary project of the first generation associated with the book series *Forrás*, Zsófia Balla, as a member of the *Echinox* circle and of the Bretter School of the 1970s, or Noémi László, from the circle around the journal and



book series *Előretolt Helyőrség*. In terms of previous concepts of the canon, the works of these authors are therefore the most solid reference points for establishing a possible literary tradition of women authors. The question, of course, is how to continue shaping and opening up a canon in which authors currently in a state of relative obscurity and structural oblivion can be present in their own right.

## THE INTERWAR PERIOD

The presence of family, gender, and bodily metaphors in the texts of the founding period of Transylvanianism has been analysed by Andrea Gál (2001). Her conclusion is that in the texts of authors such as Károly Kós, Sándor Makkai or even Irén P. Gulácsy, a discourse of a masculine nature prevails. This does not mean, of course, that deviance, or even alternative experiments, are entirely absent from these fictional or discursive texts, but rather that all such deviance leads to failure. In fact, archetypally fixed roles are the main feature that define the system of family and gender metaphors permeating Transylvanian literature between the two world wars.

We have seen that in the interwar period the presence of female authors in the dominant literary institution, the Helikon Writers' Society, did not exceed 6%. Moreover, two of the founders of this literary community (Irén Gulácsy and Mária Szabó) produced the bulk of their oeuvre after they had moved to Hungary, and therefore their presence faded in the literary memory of Transylvania. As Judit Kádár points out, Mária Szabó Szentmihályiné's articles and works are mainly models of the female role as outlined in patriarchal societies, depicting woman as subject to male authority, and described as a "helper" of the male (Kádár, 2014, p. 23). As I have already indicated, Andrea Gál has demonstrated similar relations in the works of Irén Gulácsy. The portrayal of women in the works of Mária Berde is more complex. Her position and perspective in the Transylvanian regional canon can be compared, to some extent, to that of Margit Kaffka, and she was the most prestigious and much-employed woman writer in the interwar period of Transylvanian Hungarian literature. Her works are aimed at a gentle correction of male values; for example, they often point out the double moral standard of male and female infidelity—see *Romuáld és Andriána* (*Romuáld and Andriána*) or *Tüzes kemence* (*Fiery Furnace*). At the same time, in the case of the female characters these are closer to being interiorised expectations rather than radically rebellious positions – the key is in fact in articulating and making relevant the problem itself, which is often assumed to be strange or irrelevant by male critics.

A work of documentary value on the intellectual life of Kolozsvár (today: Cluj, Romania) in the 1930s is Zsuzsa Thury's autobiography *Barátok és ellenfelek* (*Friends and Opponents*) (Thury, 1979). Compared to other accounts of the period, Thury, who was socialised in Budapest but also has family ties to Kolozsvár, accurately captures the characteristics of the stratified society of Kolozsvár and the obstacles encountered there by the type of the "independent woman", focusing on human relations and concrete situations in her characterisations. In a sense, Thury points out the blindspots in the historical descriptions of the period, in a similar way to the early works of Rózsa Ignácz, especially in her novel *Anyanyelvem magyar* (*Mother Tongue: Hungarian*) (Ignácz, 1990), which, as Júlia Vallasek points out in her interpretation (Vallasek, 2020), was born from a desire to show a generational experience, an attempt to analyse the experiences of a generation socialised in Romania with a claim to



authenticity, and at the same time with a kind of a polemical starting point, behind which the romanticised or otherwise neutralised image of Transylvania is counterbalanced not only by the rich description of interethnic experiences, but also by the fate of the female characters marginalised in a number of ways.

In the period between the two World Wars, it was perhaps in the context of left-wing movements that women could hope for broader equality. In the works of authors such as Ágnes Erdélyi, who was associated with both *Korunk* and the *Brassói Lapok* and later became a victim of the Holocaust, or Karola Nagy, who only gained posthumous recognition because of her early death, the type of the young woman who makes her own decisions and takes a job is already prominent. Irén Becski, a left-wing sympathiser and at one time a partner of Viktor Brassai, is also present in the Transylvanian newspapers between the two World Wars, publishing avant-garde poetry in the literary magazines of the first half of the 1920s as a young writer, but eventually managing to have a fulfilling career in her profession as a paediatric neurologist.

In fact, the Romanian milieu of the interwar period as a whole marked out rather peripheral roles for women writers, but the works that emerge from this context and the reflections on the contemporary environment contain a great deal of high-quality, nuanced analysis. They can therefore serve as a good starting point for constructing a literary tradition of women authors.

## THE PERIOD AFTER WWII

As Judit Kádár points out, after WWII women managed to achieve equal rights in the fields of work and education. The problem in this period was rather that the traditional, conservative family model remained fundamentally unchanged and, as a consequence, women were overwhelmed with multiple burdens (Kádár, 2014, p. 240–241). The observations of Júlia Szilágyi, who refers to her own Hungarian, Jewish, and female status in Romania as a triple minority identity, remain valid in this respect (see Tompa, 2021).

Values, stereotypes, and expectations would remain unchanged for many decades, patriarchal patterns would be preserved, and statements classifying women's intellectual achievements as non-essential and peripheral would reappear again and again, as amply demonstrated in Anna Menyhért's book (Menyhért, 2013) from the Hungarian environment of the period, and in my own study on Hervay (Balázs, 2003).

Perhaps the consequences of the additional burden on women can be best observed by comparing their career to that of their husband in cases where the latter is also a writer. While, for example, the careers of Ilona Varró, Gizella Hervay or Magda Telegdi unfold at a relatively slow pace, and those Varró and Telegdi essentially stall at a certain point, the literary careers of their husbands are particularly prolific: the books of János Székely, Domokos Szilágyi and Zoltán Veress follow each other in a much more rapid succession. In this respect, the period of 'existing socialism' was often a time of traumas and grievances that remained largely unspoken and came to the surface only in exceptional cases. Both Varró and Hervay take an explicitly analytical approach to the dynamics of relationships and the expectations posed by small communities, capturing elements of male-female relations that one would look for in vain in the work of male writers.

The entire issue of the Second World War and the Holocaust, and in particular the representation of women's experiences during these events, appear as a similarly peripheralised and





ambivalent problem. Talking about the issue is not restricted by a specific ban but it is met with silence and marginalisation. As Andrea Tompa's summary shows, of the three periods of Transylvanian Holocaust literature, the first two are mostly received with silence and the works are never republished (Tompa, 2021).

At the same time, after the regime change, Alaine Polcz's complex of experiences emerges as a significant narrative of trauma, primarily in her book *Asszony a fronton*, but also in her other successful works. Although Alaine Polcz does not appear primarily as a figure of Transylvanian literature, her early socialisation, her experiences, and her Transylvanian network of friends make her part of Transylvanian literature as an author with multiple affiliations.

A further issue to be examined is the history of works of "peripheral" genres produced during this period in general; given that the genre of the memoir itself, which includes Holocaust stories and Alaine Polcz's trauma narratives, is traditionally seen as lying outside the mainstream of the literary canon. As has been mentioned above, some other genres are also considered peripheral, such as the corpus of children's and youth literature, the strand of historical novels sometimes considered as lowbrow fiction, or even stageplays, in a certain sense, and these genres rarely become part of literary memory. Authors such as Lili Marton or Borbála Nagy wrote almost exclusively in such genres. Although theatre temporarily became a prestige genre in the 1970s mainly thanks to the historical dramas of András Sütő, János Székely, Géza Páskándi and István Kocsis, the success of these authors did not reflect on the genre in general, and Mária Földes' plays, also published in book form, were ignored for a long time.

Judit Pieldner examined a slice of the post-war period, spanning several years, from the perspective of Transylvanian Hungarian women writers (Pieldner, 2013). From the period between 2004 and 2009, she discusses the works of female authors Éva Emese Gál, Emese Egyed, Noémi László, Annamária Kinde, Edit Boda, Laura Iancu, Rozália Bakó (Sára Kövi), Mária Pongrácz P., Mária Kozma and Zsuzsa Selyem. Her conclusion is in fact a variant of Anna Menyhért's view, which approaches women's literary tradition as a reading of the works in each other's force fields, and thus as an explicit or implicit intertextual relationship. The author sees the corpus of texts written after the regime change as heterogeneous, yet potentially resonating with each other.

In contemporary literature, the early works of women writers are characterised by particularly good proportions and a good reception. This is proven by the launch of the *Hervay Könyvek* (*Hervay Books*) series, institutionalised in 2020, which the literary community of Kolozsvár has taken up by launching a literary "club", also linked to Hervay's name. What makes the gesture most authentic is the concrete dialogue it provides with Hervay's works. For example, 11 of the authors of the 2020 poetry anthology *Címtelen föld* (*Untitled Land*) (André and Horváth, 2020) are women and 15 are men – a ratio which is, even symbolically, close to parity. The *herstory* of Transylvanian Hungarian literature is still to be written, but contemporary developments indicate not only that there is a need for it, but also that it might make an impact on our contemporary world.

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