

REVIEW OF:  
**Imre Kertész: Fateless**  
 Trans. by C. Wilson & K. Wilson.  
 Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern  
 University Press 1992

1 Kertész, Imre: *Fateless*. Trans. by C. Wilson & K. Wilson. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press 1992.

2 Kertész, Imre: Nobel Lecture ›Heureca‹. Trans. by Ivan Sanders. Stockholm: The Nobel Foundation 2002.

3 Ibid.

4 Kertész 1992, p.102.

5 See Deák, István: *A Fatal Compromise? The Debate over Collaboration and Resistance in Hungary*. In: Deák, István / Cross, Jan T. Cross / Judt, Tony (eds): *The Politics of Retribution in Europe*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2000, pp. 39-73; and Deák, István: *Stranger in Hell*. In: *The New York Review of Books* (Sept. 25, 2003), pp. 65-68.

6 Kertész 1992, p.191.

7 Ibid., p.188.

8 For Kertész's place in the Hungarian literary tradition see Deák 2003, p.68.

*Fateless* is an autobiographical novel written by the Hungarian writer Imre Kertész (b. 1929). It is a disturbing literary memoir about the Holocaust written from the point of view of George Kovcs, a Hungarian Jewish boy, who survives the German concentration camps during the Second World War. George responds with childish optimism to the horrific logic of that world and examines satirically the development of his own moral and intellectual reflections. *Fateless* is also a psychological and historical novel about identity and freedom after the Holocaust and a powerful testimony of the role of memory in modern European culture.

Imre Kertész was born in Budapest in a Jewish family. In 1944 he was sent to Auschwitz at the age of fourteen. He survived the German concentration camps and returned back to his native Budapest where he has been living since. During communism, Kertész worked as a journalist, playwright and translator. *Fateless (Sorstalanság)* was first published in Hungary in 1975. It was consequently translated into German, French and Swedish. In 1992 *Fateless* was published in English and in 2002, Imre Kertész received the Nobel Prize for literature.<sup>1</sup>

*Fateless* is a Holocaust memoir – a genre that has been better represented in the post-war western European literature compared to the East European tradition. In the then communist world, all aspects of life, including literature, were controlled by the communist party. Communism had its own official interpretation of the Holocaust, which understated it. Communist ideology assessed the Holocaust according to the Marxist-Leninist theory of the class struggle and communist historiography taught that capitalism caused the Holocaust and Jews fell victims to the fight for the liberation of the working class from the oppression of the bourgeoisie, rather than to ethnic persecution.

Kertész is conscious of how the history of the Second World War and the Holocaust have repeatedly been twisted and manipulated in the workings of communism.

He made a personal decision to remain in his native Budapest after the Hungarian revolution in 1956 when hope for political freedom was crushed. Under communism, he observed how a dictatorship functioned:

I saw how an entire nation could be made to deny its ideals, and watched the early, cautious moves toward accommodation. I understood that hope is an instrument of evil, and the Kantian categorical imperative - ethics in general - is but the pliable handmaiden of self-preservation.<sup>2</sup>

Kertész believes that writing is a private matter.<sup>3</sup> In *Fateless*, he writes about the private nature of identity and how history violates it. He makes recurrent references to Jewish identity in Hungary. At the beginning, George, the protagonist, has an identity of a young boy largely unaware of the meaning of being Jewish. Later on, when in the camps, where he is sent because he is Jewish, he encounters a variety of definitions of Jewish identity. George observes this with a touch of strange and funny detachment. He is particularly impressed by the multilingual skills of his Jewish fellows:

Among themselves and with the Latvians they spoke Yiddish, but they also knew German, Slovak, and God knows what else, with the exception of Hungarian – unless, of course, they were talking business.

George doesn't speak Yiddish and when told that therefore he is no Jew, he is perplexed:

[...] I also experienced that very same tenseness, that same itchy feeling and clumsiness that came over me if I weren't entirely okay, as if I didn't entirely conform to the ideal; in other words, somehow as if I were Jewish.<sup>4</sup>

This interaction documents the typical amazement with which many Jews, who were well assimilated linguistically and culturally in their respective countries in Eastern Europe, reacted to the popular perception that they were not equal to their co-nationals. This was also true under communism. In theory communism declared equality for all nationalities, but in practice it promoted nationalism. Kertész wrote *Fateless* with a specifically Hungarian insight into the intricate dynamics between nationalism, Holocaust and communism, best summarized by István Deák as a betrayal of history:

scarcely an honest word was published in Hungary about the Hungarians' role in the Holocaust or about the Holocaust in general.<sup>5</sup>

After the collapse of communism in 1989 history was re-opened for re-assessment. But the rethinking of the Jewish identity and the Holocaust somewhat surprised the audiences in the former communist countries. In general, the national majorities of post-communist Eastern Europe disliked the process because it seemed as if the Jews were asking not only for an acknowledgement of the past, but also for who should have been taking responsibility for the Holocaust. The claim was made that anti-Semitism was not only a crime committed by the German Nazis, but also a historically rooted problem of the societies in Eastern Europe. *Fateless* is best read with this complex political and historical context in mind.

The novel's narrative is effortless and personal. George sees life childishly through his uncorrupted eyes. His comfortable life is suddenly interrupted by the German invasion of Hungary and he is sent to Auschwitz. *Fateless* is a story about Kertész's personal experience, which evolves in fictional time: what happens to George in the camps, how does he respond to the experience and how does he survive. At the end George returns to his Budapest home. There he meets the indifference and the people's lack of will to validate his life in the camps. He is shocked and deeply hurt. But it also turns out that George's youthful satirical innocence has been translated into a reflection on identity, fate and freedom. After the Holocaust, George-Kertész has something very important to share, which comes from his very soul, even though he is not sure that anyone really would listen. One can almost ›hear‹ the writer's voice struggling to make one of the most powerful confessions in modern European literature:

I have to continue my uncontinuable life. My mother is waiting for me...There is no impossibility that cannot be overcome (survived?), naturally, and further down the road, I now know, happiness lies in wait for me like an inevitable trap. Even back there, in the shadow of the chimneys, in the breaks between pain, there was something resembling happiness. Everybody will ask me about the deprivations, the ›terrors of the camps‹, but for me, the happiness there will always be the most memorable experience, perhaps. Yes, that's what I'll tell them the next time they ask me: about the happiness in those camps...If they ever do ask...And if I don't forget.<sup>6</sup>

Kertész speaks with urgency about asking and forgetting – two major themes of European history and culture, inseparable from the concepts of identity and freedom.

Is fate our identity? Can one choose identity or is it fate? He repeatedly asks why he, who did not think of himself as a Jew, and was not perceived by other Jews in the camps as Jewish, had to suffer the fate of a Jew. And how he himself, who did not define his identity as Jewish, having lived through the horrors of the German concentration camps as a Jew, has become Jewish:

Thus identity is acquired and shaped by circumstances, which are not under one's control. Then identity is indeed fate. But...it could not simply be a mistake: ›I can't content myself with assuming that it was all a mistake, an aberration, some sort of an accident or that, in some way, it never really happened‹. And if identity is fate, it follows that it cannot be a matter of choice: ›Why can't you see that if there is such a thing as fate, then there is no freedom? If, on the other hand...there is freedom, then there is no fate. That is ...that is, we ourselves are fate.‹

Kertész's tormented conclusion feels like a catharsis:

Now I could tell...what it means to be ›a Jew‹: it had meant nothing to me until the steps began. Now there is no other blood, and there is nothing but...but given situations and concomitant givens within them... I, too, had lived out a given fate. It wasn't my fate, but I am the one who lived it to the end.<sup>7</sup>

Kertész is not only a great Hungarian writer, but a profoundly European spirit, whose real engagement with the human goes far beyond the history of the Holocaust in Hungary.<sup>8</sup> Although different in style, like Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (1958), *Fateless* is a prose about the darkest of times without self-pity. As a biography, it is an inimitable effort comparable to the finest works of Central and Eastern European literary tradition of Franz Kafka, Czesław Miłosz, Elias Canetti, Gregor von Rezzori. But above all *Fateless* is a very delicate and intellectual novel with no pretence. It deserves to be read and re-read.

