


A Poem of the Barricades Refuses to Die

by Thomas Ország-Land (October 2015)




One heady afternoon during the Hungarian Revolution of October-November 1956, I attended an editorial conference of *The Independent (A Magyar Függetlenség)*, the flagship daily of the doomed anti-Soviet insurrection. I was an 18-year old high-school dropout employed on the paper as a cub reporter. József Dudás, our hugely charismatic editor-in-chief, assigned the serious tasks of the day to the senior correspondents. Then he turned to me: "...and what can you contribute to the edition?"

 I offered to write a poem. "Make it good," he accepted, "and be sure not to miss your deadline."

My piece was ready on time, of course. It could have turned out a tad less sentimental. The composition comprised three quatrains fuelled by some clever cross-rhyming and employing the odd repetition of lines to save time and trouble. It described a girl on the barricades shot while distributing bread to the warriors. Unlike its fictitious heroine, the poem has refused to die for more than half a century.

Dudás and 228 others were hanged by the Communists after the revolution, some of them even younger than me at the time. Many more were sentenced to death and eventually reprieved. Tens of thousands were imprisoned.

I left Hungary with a Westward flood of some 210,000 patriots, most of them  young and educated. Europe has not experienced such a mass movement of refugees again, until the present march of destitute Middle East migrants across this secure and prosperous continent.

Only some 40,000 of us have returned. More survivors may well turn up for a visit next year that has been devoted by the government to continuous celebrations to mark the 60th anniversary of the revolution. The loss has been

enormous for a small country deeply troubled by its relentlessly declining population levels.

I switched to English as soon as I could. I have spent the rest of my life as a freelance writer. I did my best during the early years to have nothing to do with my homeland – except for translating the Hungarian poetry of my betters into English in the hope of learning how to write English poetry.

The dead heroine of the poem also took on life in English through the translation of Western writers who read my effort in the columns of *The Independent* – although some of them, I am afraid, turned the girl into a boy. The most successful translation was done by the late Watson Kirkconnell, the great-grandfather of Hungarian literary translation into English, who was president of Acadia University in Canada where I read philosophy on a scholarship after the revolution.

In post-Communist Hungary, the poem is still being recited from time to time at public celebrations commemorating the revolution. It has been included in a mass-circulation anthology intended mostly for school children.

At last, the poem has seduced me. I recently edited its original Hungarian text (as indeed it should have been done by someone on *The Independent* before publication all those years ago) when it occurred to me that, today, perhaps I can do better.

So I have just written another Hungarian poem, this time about an old lady. I do not think that my voice has changed, but I have.

And the poem has taught me, to my astonishment that words are far from the most important aspect of a poem. What matters most is the passion expressed by the words.

“Ha,” observed a close friend, a great Anglo-Jewish poet. “All you now have to do is... write it again, in English.” Quite, and that’s the easy part.

Here is the poem of the barricades:

INSTEAD OF A TOMBSTONE

(Translated from the Hungarian of Thomas Ország-Land & edited by Watson Kirkconnell)

*He shyly closed the lids of darkened eyes,
a small red flower blossomed on his breast.
A smile still lingered on his mouth's surprise
as if at home he slept and loved his rest...*

*The little hero in the filth is laid
(around him fall his bread-loaves in the mud)
just as but now he paced the barricade –
in vain let fall his bomb, and shed his blood...*

*He shyly closed the lids of darkened eyes,
a small red flower blossomed on his breast.
Beside his corpse a steaming gutter lies.
The world sings victory, but signs a jest.*

✘ **Thomas Ország-Land** is a poet and award-winning foreign correspondent who writes from London and his native Budapest. His work appears in *The New English Review* as well as *The Hungarian Quarterly*, *The Jerusalem Report*, *Stand (UK)* and *The Transnational (Germany)*. His last book was [here](#).

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