



Captives in a Frozen World

Book Review

Gyula Ercsey: Im Schatten der Wölfe. Klausenburger im GULAG¹

The author, Gyula Ercsey, spent his childhood in the village of Tordatúr (today in Romanian: Tureni), where his father had a mill. He studied in the prestigious College of Nagyenyed (today in Romanian: Aiud). After his returning from the Soviet captivity, he finished his studies, and worked as a chemistry teacher at the same college. He started to work on his memoir in 1990, and he finished it in 2000.

In his memoir, Gyula Ercsey compiled the events happened with him between 1944 and 1948, during his captivity in the Soviet Union. The main story begins with his deportation from Kolozsvár (today in Romanian: Cluj-Napoca) in October 1944 within the *Malenkaya Rabota* campaign led by the Red Army. The term means ‘little work’ in Russian language, but in reality it refers to years of forced labour under very hard conditions.

With his memoir, the writer assumes the role of the main speaker of the events as an intellectual. His memoir relates very detailed facts about his captivity, revealing the truth about the Soviet camps. He spent, as mentioned before, four years in the Gulag. In this genuine memoir, the author reveals the way he was able to survive the captivity. He was asked by other war prisoners to write about the events in the Gulag should he survive the terror what ruined the lives of almost 5,000 Hungarians who had been deported from Kolozsvár in 1944.

The author, together with his father, was taken by the Russians on the 13th of October, 1944. After this, they were watched by the Russian and the Romanian guards. The 17-year-old boy helped his father to escape at Focșani. He managed to escape indeed, but his son did not. So, Gyula Ercsey was transported by train to the Soviet Union. On the way, many of the captives died because of the extremely bad conditions.

When they arrived in the area, the prisoners were directed to the first camp, Salasova. They were surprised by the immeasurable cold and the beauty of the landscape. The Russian officers told them that they had to buy their liberty with work because they were simple war criminals. The first winter was very tough,

1 Gyula, Ercsey: *Im Schatten der Wölfe. Klausenburger im Gulag* [In the shadow of the wolves. People from Cluj in the GULAG], Novum Pro Publishing GmbH, Neckenmarkt, Österreich, 2012.

but Ercsey had luck and he spent all that rough time in the infirmary. In this way, he survived; meanwhile, many of his acquaintances starved to death or contracted some disease that would kill them.

The arrival of the spring brought the author good fortune as he got a place in a smithy, where things started to go better for him: he learned some of the profession, but he was not really good as a blacksmith, but in the camp this kind of inconvenience were not taken seriously. He thought the worst of the camp life is gone, but he was wrong. In October 1945, he had to go back to Salasova. But fortune was not with him this time as he ended up in the forest as a lumberjack. The life of the lumberjacks was not good in the camps; they were short of food, the beds were inconvenient, and in the sleeping area there was barely enough place for the prisoners. In winter time, the lumberjacks were in great danger. They had to face cold, (temperature drops to -40°C) snowstorms, while the worst of this is the continuous starving. The 'adventures' continued and 'our hero' arrived in Beloreck, where he found love with a girl named Ruth. We can hardly call the feeling what they felt in the camp love, but it surely helped Ercsey to handle the sorrow. In this last camp, the author also worked as a plasterer, so this was not a bad place to work either. One day, the officer told that they could go home. It was in 1948, after four years of captivity.

The memoir guides the reader from the deportation through the captivity and the returning. It introduces the reader into the daily routine of the camps. The book describes the experiences of the prisoners. It is an introspection into a world where human life worth nothing. This totalitarian regime designed by Stalin was inconceivable for the prisoners at the beginning of the captivity. It made actions to destroy intellectual progression and tried to destroy all the visions which are different from the official communist one. The writers had to create in a communist spirit: if they did not do so, there was a straight way for them to the Gulag. The civilian life was destroyed by this horrible apprehension. It was idolatry for a system created by a maniac, which was shiftless for its members. The greatness of Tolstoy and Pushkin was suffocated by Stalin's madness and their spirits ended up in the Gulag, while the society remained with Stalin's compromised soul.

The unspeakable living conditions in the camps are presented in chronological order. The thread is sometimes interrupted by stories from the camp. This story tells about the author's friends, events, love, stealing, virtue, and others. The author's tenacity helped him to survive this horrible situation; his mental strength is incontestable. Strange as it is, morality did not disappear from his consciousness, but when it was necessary the survival instinct took its place. Ercsey relates how they have stolen a stove, food, and what was required for surviving in the wildness of the place and the inhumane living conditions.

Ercsey's language is very clear; he writes about this sadness with beautiful metaphors. His diction is clear. His metaphors let us experience how the prisoners

felt in certain situations like continuous starving, bone-freezing cold, or some mesmerizing landscapes. He describes their misery with an incredible attention to detail as they were prisoners of a system that was truly inexplicable for them, and he tried to take their lives with all of its means. In this system, we cannot find Confucius' principles at all.

In the memoir, he writes about how different illnesses took away his friends from him, or how they froze to death in the woods while they were lumberjacks. He recites what and how much they were eating, how they managed to fool the cooks to get more food; he told about the relations among camp members and how the guards behaved with the captives. He also describes how the camps were: the Salasova camp was surrounded by forest, which was dreadful and sublime at the same time. Asa has remained in his memory as the waste incinerator camp, Minyar is memorable because of the suspension bridge, and Beloreck is remindful because of the girls.

After he had escaped from the Gulag, his memoir gave us a perspective into an evil system built by a tyrant who did not care about human rights. When he arrived home, he had to realize that in his country a similar system had started to grow on the same ideological basis.

The chronological structure creates a good cohesion for the story and the short stories built in the text help the understanding. As a teacher, Gyula Ercsey manages to write a great and genuine memoir, with great descriptions and admirable diction. Because he was an intellectual, the memoir is more relevant and he can relate to a much ampler picture. The personal archive photos at the end of the book bring along a genuine feeling.

The memoir appeared first time in Hungarian language at the Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület (Transylvanian Museum Society) in Cluj-Napoca, after the death of the author, in 2006. The memoir was edited by János Kristóf Murádin, PhD, historian, Assistant Professor at the Department of Juridical Science and European Studies at the Faculty of Sciences and Arts of Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania. After that, it was translated into German language by Peter Gschwendtner, the son of a former prisoner, fellow sufferer of the writer. The German version of the memoir appeared in Austria in the year 2012, and it had a remarkable success. The book has lived up to its success because of its high-flown literary style and historical documentary value.

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