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# The Vicissitudes of Twentieth Century Hungarian Adepts, from the Austro- Hungarian Monarchy, through World Wars, Revolutions, Communism to Intellectual Liberation

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## Abstract

My paper maps the most important representatives of the occult and esoteric currents in twentieth century Hungary. Their works and testimonies encompass the genesis of modern esotericism in Hungary, but their careers also demonstrate the catastrophic watershed caused by fascism and the Second World War, only to be continued (however mostly secretly) during the communist era. The paper first provides an overview of the development of major esoteric trends in modern Hungary (from the late nineteenth century to the time of the regime change in 1989), then focuses on three outstanding seekers of holistic enlightenment: *Ervin Baktay (1890–1963)*, *Béla Hamvas (1897–1968)*, *Mária Szepes (1908–2007)*. All three developed their philosophy after WWI; all were influenced by Theosophy and Indian mysticism; all were scholars of various fields of the humanities, at the same time as being writers of “belle lettres” – poetry as well as fiction. After WWII, all three were looked at with suspicion and were silenced; however, they also found ways of expressing themselves and gathering disciples in various interesting ways.

**KEYWORDS:** *Western esotericism, Theosophy, Anthroposophy, traditionalism, astrology, Hungary, Ervin Baktay, Béla Hamvas, Mária Szepes, esoteric fiction, communist repression*

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** *zachodni ezoteryzm, teozofia, antropozofia, tradycjonalizm, astrologia, Węgry, Ervin Baktay, Béla Hamvas, Mária Szepes, fikcja ezoteryczna, represje komunistyczne*

## 1. Introduction

My paper initiates a new, longer-term investigation planned for the coming few years. Previously, my main research focus in relation to Western Esotericism was mostly focused on the early modern period,<sup>1</sup> although I have occasionally touched upon esoteric phenomena in the cultural history of modern Hungary. Another interest of mine – esoteric themes in modern fiction – has lead me to the project aiming to map occult and esoteric movements and their most important representatives in twentieth century Hungary. Their works and testimonies encompass the genesis of modern esotericism in Hungary; their careers also demonstrate the catastrophic watershed caused by Fascism and the Second World War, only to be continued (mostly in secret) during the communist era.

The present paper focuses on three outstanding searchers for a holistic enlightenment: *Ervin Baktay (1890–1963)*, *Béla Hamvas (1897–1968)*, *Mária Szepes (1908–2007)*. All three developed their philosophy after WWI, all were influenced by Theosophy and Indian mysticism, all were scholars of various fields of the humanities, at the same time as being writers of “belle lettres” – poetry as well as fiction. After WWII, all three were looked at with suspicion and were silenced; however, they also found ways of expressing themselves and gather disciples in various interesting ways. After the historical introduction, this essay will introduce the three aforementioned representatives of esoterism in Hungary; however, the analysis of their literary output remains for a following paper.

## 2. Fact-sheet and chronology

Although reverberations of Western esoteric trends and movements can be detected in Hungarian cultural history at least since the fifteenth century,

<sup>1</sup> See some of my publications in the References section, especially “The study of Western esotericism in East-Central Europe” (2023).



the first larger-scale impact arrived with the rise of Freemasonry in the eighteenth century. In the present research, however, I am interested in the modern period, beginning in the late nineteenth century and ending with the regime change in 1990. From the perspective of Western Esotericism, this longish and versatile epoch can be divided into the following periods:

- I. Growth of Western Esotericism in East-Central Europe and in Hungary (1886–1920)
- II. Hope, Crisis and Escapism (1920–1945)
- III. In the Socialist Strait Jacket (1945–1990)
- IV. Aftermath: The Reception of New Age after the Regime Changes (1990 – present)

All of these could be labelled as periods of cultural and religious developments of esoteric renaissance.

### **2.1. The prelude: Freemasonry**

As mentioned, the first Hungarian lodges were founded already in the 1750s and the Freemason movement in Hungary was closely connected with the Enlightenment and the national awakening. As a result of the unrest fuelled by the French Revolution, Freemasonry was banned in Hungary by the Habsburgs between 1795 and 1867. With the compromise between the Habsburgs and the Hungarians, and with the foundation of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, lodges were reestablished; however, the real cornerstone was 1886, when the National Grand Symbolic Lodge came to life, uniting the English and French rituals.<sup>2</sup> Ten years later, a lavish new Temple was inaugurated in Budapest (today, beautifully restored as the Mystery Hotel in 45 Podmaniczky Street) under the grand mastership of Ferenc Pulszky,<sup>3</sup> designed by Vilmos Ruppert, and decorated by such major artists as the painter Mór Thán and the stained glass designer, Miksa Róth. The heyday of the Grand Lodge – under whose auspices more than one hundred lodges were founded – lasted from 1886 to 1919 when the first Soviet revolution banned it. The ensuing post-WW1 regime under governor Miklós Horthy upheld the prohibition as did the communist regime between 1950 and 1989. Since then, Freemasonry has revived in Hungary; the Grand Symbolic Lodge does

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.szabadkomuves.hu/a-magyarorszagi-symbolikus-nagypaholy-vazlatos-tortenete/> [“The brief history of the Hungarian Symbolic Grand Lodge”]. Accessed: 12.12.2022.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.mysteryhotelbudapest.com/en/about-us/freemasonry/>. Accessed: 12.12.2022.



exist, but the different rituals have been divided again. Presently there are two institutions, represented by the Hungarian Grand Symbolic Lodge and the Grand Orient d’Hongrie, comprising several lodges.

## 2.2. The Hungarian theosophical society

As is well known, the international Theosophical Society was established in 1875.<sup>4</sup> From its early years, we find a Hungarian presence. Baron Ödön Vay, a Hungarian magnate became a member of the British Society’s Council in 1880.<sup>5</sup> He may have been attracted there by his wife, Adelma von Vay-Wumbrand-Stuppach, a world famous spiritualist and medium, who is said to have been Madame Blavatsky’s cousin, although this has not been verified. Mr. and Mrs. Vay established the “Verein spiriter Forscher” (“Hungarian Spiritualist Association”, in Hungarian “Szellembúvárok Egyesülete”) in 1871, which eventually lead to the foundation of the Hungarian Theosophical Society. The Society became a member of the Federation of European Sections (established in 1903 and presided by Henry S. Olcott) and its theosophical activities became so prominent that in 1909 Budapest was chosen to host the fourth European Congress. By that time, Annie Besant, Olcott, and Rudolf Steiner had visited Hungary on several occasions.<sup>6</sup>

One of the leading figures and sponsors of the Hungarian Society was Károly Zipernovszky (1853–1942), a notable inventor and industrialist and one of the creators of the electric transformer. The early history of the Society was characterized by an industrious translating program to make books available in Hungarian: in 1907, they published the wise teachings of Lao-Ce and from 1908, they started a periodical of the Society, after a short period of publication it was later revived between 1928 and 1933 under the title *Csillag* [“Star”]. Some of the important publications included Besant’s *A mesterek* (1913, “The Masters”) and *Az élet rejtélye* (1925, “The Secret of Life”); Blavatsky’s *Titkos tanítás* (1928, “Secret Teachings”); *Az élet problémái* (“The Problems of Life”), an anthology featuring Besant, Leadbeater, and others, compiled by Ms. Zoltán Poliány (1929). Elza Alexy was an interesting Hungarian author: a Theosophist and eager student of yoga and other esoteric practices who penned a great number of conduct books as of 1914. One of

<sup>4</sup> A short summary history of the Hungarian Section can be read on the homepage of the present Society: <https://www.teozofia.hu/node/26>. Accessed: 12.09.2022.

<sup>5</sup> See Szigeti 2014.

<sup>6</sup> The Hungarian Theosophical Society was founded on March 2, 1906 and received its patent from Aydar in July 7, 1907.



those is *A lélek útja teozófiai megvilágításban* (1914, 1922, “The Progress of the Soul as Seen by the Theosophists”). We also have reflections by Hungarian authors, such as *Teozófia és antropozófia* by Lajos Wolkenberg (1923, “Theosophy and Antroposophy”) and, interestingly, a very combative pamphlet by the translators of Blavatsky, Dr. Vilmos Hennyey and Mária Szlemanics, in which they severely criticized the ‘neo-Theosophy’, lead by Besant, Leadbeater and Krishnamurti, while advocating a return to the pure sources, the legacy of Blavatsky (*A Teozófiai Társulat csődje*, 1929 [“The Failure of the Theosophical Society”]).

From the mid-1920s, the Hungarian Section continued to flourish; its members were the most numerous in this period; Besant and Krishnamurti visited Budapest in 1927 and 1931 respectively. As mentioned, through the influence of the Order of the Star in the East, a Hungarian periodical, *The Star* was published, but when Krishnamurti dissolved the organization, the publication ceased. In 1929, the European Federation had its congress in Budapest and in 1939, the Dutch Section organized a Hungarian week in Narden.

The Society continued to function during WWII, however in 1944, due to the German occupation of Hungary, the Jewish members were expelled. Since the remaining members found this decree in opposition to the principles of Theosophy, they decided to officially disband the Hungarian Section. In the meantime, they sheltered persecuted Jews and helped the Polish refugees who flooded to Hungary after the German invasion of their country.

After the war, the Society was reestablished, but again banned in 1950 by the communist government, only to be once again legalized in 1990 upon the regime change. The official reestablishment was on May 8, 1991. Currently, there are three subsections of the Hungarian Theosophical Society: the Oriental (founded in 2005 in Hajdúszoboszló); the Siddharta (2007) and the Forrás (“Spring”, 2009), the latter two in Budapest. Each group organizes public lectures, and the Society frequently releases publications.

### 2.3. Anthroposophy

In 1912/1913, the Theosophical Society experienced a schism when the leader of the German Section, Dr. Rudolf Steiner, broke with them and founded the Anthroposophical Society. Although the two movements were related, Steiner forcefully differentiated his own from the ideology and teachings of Besant and Leadbeater, pushing theosophy in a more Western direction and emphasizing the Christian and Western esoteric heritage as opposed to the



Eastern-Tibetan-Indian orientation of the Blavatskian grouping.<sup>7</sup> Steiner and his associates decided to create a new centre, suitable for conferences and performances, and they started building the Goetheanum in Dornbach, Switzerland.<sup>8</sup> While the Theosophical Society by that time had abandoned the Blavatskian orientation, a keen interest in a wide variety of interdisciplinary sciences had reshaped theosophy into something pronouncedly theological and ritualistic (they ordained bishops and Besant paraded with her twelve apostles). Steiner's main focus was to syncretize mystical experiences, occult practices and modern scientific theories, and his works touched upon medicine, pedagogy and education, the humanities and arts, even agriculture.<sup>9</sup>

During WWI and after, Steiner questioned German nationalism and proposed a European order based on "social territories" with democratic institutions that were accessible to all inhabitants of a territory whatever their origin while the needs of the various ethnicities would be met by independent cultural institutions."<sup>10</sup>

As of 1919, the Nazi Party viciously attacked Steiner and called him a German traitor and a tool of the Jews. In 1923, he emigrated from Germany and set about reorganizing the Anthroposophical Society, encouraging the formation of national branches. This was the inspiration for the foundation of the Hungarian Anthroposophical Society of which – at the present state of research – we have hardly any documentation.

The first main flag-bearer of Anthroposophy in Hungary was Mrs. Emil Nagy, née dr. Maria Göllner (1894–1982), who also founded the first Waldorf School in Hungary.<sup>11</sup> Maria Göllner graduated in geography, history and philosophy and defended her PhD in 1918. During WWI she worked for the Red Cross and in 1924, she visited Steiner in Dornbach and also participated in the last conference presided by the founder. In 1926, she established the Friendship Circle of Hungarian Anthroposophists, which can be considered the birth of the institutionalisation of Hungarian Anthroposophy.

<sup>7</sup> See Steiner 1949.

<sup>8</sup> See the short history of Anthroposophy on Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolf\\_Steiner#Anthroposophical\\_Society\\_and\\_its\\_cultural\\_activities](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rudolf_Steiner#Anthroposophical_Society_and_its_cultural_activities). Accessed: 12.09.2022.

<sup>9</sup> See the following articles in Uhlenhoff 2011: Wolfgang Schad, "Rudolf Steiner's Verhältnis zur Naturwissenschaft" (pp. 125–87); Andreas Hantscher, "Rudolf Steiners Anthroposophie und ihr Verhntnis zur Theosophie" (291–333); Johann Kiersch, "Waldorfpädagogik als Erziehungskunst" (423–77); Manfred Klett, "Landwirtschaft und Anthroposophie" (613–49), etc.

<sup>10</sup> Uwe Werner, "Rudolf Steiner zu Individuum und Rasse: Sein Engagement gegen Rassismus und Nationalismus." In Uhlenhoff 2011, 705–79.

<sup>11</sup> See the history of the Hungarian Anthroposophical Society: <https://antropozofia.hu/>. Accessed: 12.12.2022.



She married Dr Emil Nagy, a respected lawyer, MP, and for a period government minister of justice – this liberal man sponsored Maria’s Waldorf school, which was set up in their home garden.<sup>12</sup> Steiner and Anthroposophy without doubt attracted a number of Hungarians during WWII and even in the decades of communism; however, the official foundation of a Hungarian Anthroposophical Society only took place after the regime change in 1990.

The three esoteric trends outlined above, Freemasonry, Theosophy and Anthroposophy, were the main intellectual and cultural inspirations for my three protagonists – Baktay, Hamvas, Szepes – to whom I turn shortly. However, one more interesting movement should be mentioned, which had strong connections with modern Western esotericism, it was yoga, imported from Asia by the first theosophists. Mircea Eliade’s attraction to yoga is well documented,<sup>13</sup> but this interest had its counterparts in Hungary, too.

Apart from the three persons to be discussed, mention must be made of Erzsébet (Elizabeth) Haich (1897–1994), who was born in an upper-middle-class Budapest family and from her childhood was attached to the arts as a talented pianist and visual artist. She had an interest in spiritualism and developed a friendship with Ervin Baktay. In the 1930s, she met with Selvarajan Yesudian, an Indian medical student in Budapest who became her life-long spiritual and esoteric companion. They spent 55 years together and established the first European yoga-school in 1937. In 1948, they emigrated to Zürich where they continued teaching and practicing yoga, while in 1953, Haich published her autobiographical revelatory novel, *Initiation*, which became a world bestseller.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Biographical sketches

#### 3.1. Ervin Baktay (1890–1963; born Ervin Gottesmann)

Baktay was born into a Hungarian-Jewish noble family with some fascinating French and Austrian ancestry. When he was fifteen, he came under the

<sup>12</sup> See Zadow 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Eliade 2009.

<sup>14</sup> On her biography: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elisabeth\\_Haich](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elisabeth_Haich); on her book: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/619040.Initiation>. Accessed: 12.12.2022.



influence of spiritualism.<sup>15</sup> Between 1906 and 1909, several important influences determined his later life: India/Buddhism, esotericism, and the world of the North American Indians. In 1906, he read a drama by the Classical Sanskrit poet, Kalidasa. At the same time, he saw Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in Budapest and with his friends he organized a mimic wild west show in his native Dunaharaszti. In 1909, he met an as yet unidentified "wandering theosophist" in his hometown, who opened his eyes to the philosophy of Helena Blavatsky.

After graduating, he studied painting, first in Budapest, then in Munich, where he was infatuated with India and the Orient. In the meantime, one of his sisters, Marie-Antoinette, married an Indian magnate, Umrao Singh Sher-Gil<sup>16</sup>, and they settled down in Budapest in 1912. This interesting philosopher and passionate photographer also opened for Baktay a gateway toward India.

From 1914, he was a conscript in the Austro-Hungarian army and finally ended up on the Russian front, then he was transferred to Transylvania. This is where his literary career started; his first translation appeared in 1917, an Indian mythology-based fantasy story by the British writer, Francis William Bain. After a period of service on the Italian front, he was demobilised in 1918.

In the post-war period, he devoted himself seriously to Oriental studies, continued the Bain translations, and also produced a Hungarian version of the *Kama Sutra* (1920). As a writer, he published a digest of the *Mahabharata* (1923) and wrote a small book on the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore (1922). His esoteric interests appeared in his book, *The Five States of the Mind* (1923), and he corresponded with Mahatma Gandhi and published his selected writings in Hungarian in two volumes (1925-26).

He lived in India between 1926 and 1929, first at the home of his sister and brother-in-law, then he led several expeditions to Kashmir and Western Tibet; on his way he met the famous Hungarian orientalist, Aurél Stein, then rediscovered the monasteries in which a hundred years earlier the charismatic explorer and linguist, Sándor (Alexander) Csoma de Kőrös had stayed and created the first Tibetan-English dictionary and grammar. In 1929, he travelled to Ceylon and met Rabindranath Tagore. Due to repeated malaria attacks, he had to return to Hungary, where he became a member of the Hungarian Geographical Society. While he was writing monographs on

<sup>15</sup> The annals of Baktay's life can be found in Kelényi 2015, 25-34.

<sup>16</sup> On Sher-Gil see several internet publications, among them in *Better Photography* (2021).





various aspects of India,<sup>17</sup> he also started publishing on more esoteric topics and delved into the study of astrology.<sup>18</sup>

Baktay had an amazing profile, which characterized him from his earliest years to the latest. He called himself a *homo ludens*, and he lived up to his image.<sup>19</sup> As a teenager he had organized a Wild West Show (inspired by Buffalo Bill's circus); then, in the 1920s he invented the "Zree Meetings" – these were kind of thematic fancy dress parties in which his family, friends, and representatives of the Budapest bohemian world participated. In the post-WW1 years, they role-played ancient settings, such as Roman orgies. In 1925, they invented a Wild West Town, called Loaferstown, and the Zree Meetings acquired a cowboy setting. Baktay himself became the sheriff, named Hooligan Bucktay. In 1931, celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Zree Meetings, he founded a "Native American" tribe and moved his circle to a small island of the Duna (north from Budapest), role-playing "Indians" and studying Native American culture.<sup>20</sup> Unsurprisingly, Baktay became the Chief of the tribe, naming himself Couching Buffalo. He participated in the yearly summer camps till 1954. The Tribe continued to be active even after his stepping down and, in the 1960s and 70s, became an important island of free spirits keeping themselves away from the communist realities of Hungarian life. As a true *homo ludens*, during his active life, Baktay also directed theatrical plays, produced films and acted in them.

After a miserable time towards the end of WW2 he was appointed honorary director of the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Art; however, with the communist takeover his life experienced ups and downs. In 1948, he was downgraded to the rank of 'independent researcher', and after 1956, sent to retirement though, unexpectedly, this was revoked a few months later. He

<sup>17</sup> *A világ tetején* ["On the Top of the World: Tracing Alexander Csoma de Kőrös in Tibet"], 1930; *India* ["India: Its Past and Present, Religions, Ethnography, and Art"] 2 vols, 1931-32; *A boldog völgy országa* ["The Land of the Happy Valley: Strolling Though Kashmir"], 1934; *Indiai éveim* ["My Years in India"], 1938).

<sup>18</sup> Related publications: *Szanátana Dharma, az örök törvény* ["Sanatana Dharma, the Eternal Law"], 1936; *Diadalmas jóga* ["Glorious Yoga: The Lore of Knowledge and Self-discipline"], 1942; *A csillagfejtés könyve* ["The Book of Astrology"]; *India bölcsessége* ["The Wisdom of India: The Hindu World View"]. Budapest: Pantheon, 1943.

<sup>19</sup> See the posthumous publication of his autobiographical fragments, Baktay 2013.

<sup>20</sup> In 2014 the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Art organized an exhibition representing the various activities and achievements of Baktay. The exhibition was accompanied by a huge album and collection of essays: *Az indológus indián* (2014). A few years later, another Ferenc Hopp exhibition resulted in yet another folio-size scholarly publication: *Indiánok a Duna partján* ["Indians by the Duna"], 2019.



had no part in the revolution, since that year he was invited by the Indian government – together with only sixteen other non-Buddhist members – to celebrate the 2,500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Buddha. In spite of his poor health, on that occasion he travelled extensively, staying in India till the second half of 1957. Before coming home, he spent some time in Vienna, even contemplating emigration from Hungary. However, in 1959, he curated the great Asia-exhibition in the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts. That year also marked the publication of one of his main works, *India művészete* [“The Art of India”]. In 1962, he was invited to the School of Oriental and Asian Studies of the University of London, where he gave six talks on the art of India and Sándor Csoma de Kőrös. A year later, he published his last book, a monograph on this famous Hungarian orientalist, but died in May. He could not live to see the appearance of the German edition of his *Art of India*. The second volume of his book on astrology (*Astrological Prognostication*) was published only posthumously in 2001.

His legacy is manifold and significant in contemporary Hungary, as manifested by the exhibitions and monographs referred to in the previous footnote. His interest in astrology is also much discussed, appreciated and criticized.<sup>21</sup> Let me finish this section with a fragment in Baktay’s autobiography, written in 1948:

Even if the stars faithfully showed my character and future when I was born in June 24, 1890, my parents had no idea what the stars would tell about me. It was because I put on my present incarnation at the end of the enlightened century when hardly anyone thought of turning to astrology as it was by then expelled into the trashbox of medieval superstitions.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.2. Béla Hamvas (1897–1968)

Hamvas was born in Eperjes (Prešov in today’s Slovakia); in his early years he lived with his family in Pozsony (Bratislava in today’s Slovakia) and finally they moved to Budapest in 1919. After graduation in the Lutheran Gymnasium of Pozsony, he took a “grand tour” with his father in Western Europe. But when WWI came, he volunteered for the Austro-Hungarian army and fought on the Ukrainian front. The cruel war caused a nervous breakdown, but in 1917 he was again sent to the Italian battleground. As his unit was

<sup>21</sup> See Veszprémy 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Baktay 2013, 11.



annihilated, he retired to recover in the house of an aunt, situated in the Tatra Mountains. There, he started reading philosophers and contemporary literature, such as Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Rimbaud and Dostoyevsky. Early life experiences and literary-cultural inspirations made him particularly sensitive to a feeling of world crisis. As he much later remembered in an essay:

[I read in Kierkegaard that] there is no society, state, poetry, thinking, religion, only that is rotten and falsely chaotic. That's correct, I thought. But this must have started some time ago. I started looking for the dark origo. The *proton pseudos*, that is the first lie. I moved backward from the middle of the last century to the French Revolution, the Enlightenment, rationalism, via the Middle Ages to the ancient Greeks, the Hebrews, the Egyptians, the aboriginals. Everywhere I found the crisis, but each crisis pointed to something deeper. The dark origo was earlier, even earlier. I made the characteristic European mistake by looking for the solution outside myself, although it was in me...<sup>23</sup>

Between 1919 and 1923, he was enrolled in the Pázmány University of Budapest,<sup>24</sup> as a German-Hungarian major, but he also took courses in musicology and medicine. Apparently, he never graduated, but started his career as a journalist, then, between 1928 and 1948, worked as a librarian in the Budapest Public Library. During these years, he published over three hundred studies, essays and pieces of criticism.<sup>25</sup> In 1935 he began a friendship with the world-famous classical scholar and mythographer, Károly Kerényi, and they founded an intellectual circle, called "Sziget" ["Island"] (a kind of Hungarian counterpart to the Swiss-German *Eranos*) together. The group published three yearbooks, but Hamvas soon became disappointed and parted from Kerényi. This is when Hamvas's first intellectual flowering began: he became enthralled by the contemporary philosophical school of Traditionalism and increasingly felt a kinship with René Guénon, Julius Évola, Leopold Ziegler, Dmitry Merezhkovsky. The major works of this period were his historiographical survey of crisis literature (*A világválság*, 1938 ["The World Crisis"]); his first major volume of essays (*A láthatatlan történet*, 1943 ["Unseen History"]), in which he started searching the ultimate traditions of

<sup>23</sup> Hamvas 1992, 260 (my translation).

<sup>24</sup> The predecessor of the well-known ELTE [Eötvös Lóránd] University.

<sup>25</sup> On Hamvas's life and work there is substantial literature, mostly in Hungarian. My following paragraphs are based on the information taken from the undermentioned studies: Kemény 2009; Darabos 2002; Miklóssy 2002; Weiner Sennyei 2019, 204–292. I wrote about Hamvas in English on several occasions, see Szőnyi 1996, 2005, 2019.



mankind, not connected to any nation or race, but something that Guénon called *état primordial*, Boehme *Urstand*, or Hamvas *alapállás* [“basic/home position”]. He introduced this collection as follows:

This is a unified work with ten chapters, but each chapter is an independent essay. The first is “Aquarius,” diagnosing the state of today’s Europeans and that what possibilities they have to increase their knowledge about the world. Everything is in a state of dissolution, liquid, so sight is not disturbed by anything. This book connects the outer (history and physiology) and inner (psychology, mythology, religion) history of the soul thus arriving at the first, primordial state: the ‘first soul,’ the ‘green soul’ that appears as moth on the rock.<sup>26</sup>

These essays were the only ones published in his lifetime as well as his undoubted opus magnum, *Scientia Sacra*, the first volume of his monumental review of ancient traditions which he compiled during the war (1943–44). Pál Darabos calls this book the axis of his life work.<sup>27</sup> The failure of the Cartesian philosophy became apparent by the late eighteenth century and led to intellectual crisis in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nietzsche came to a murky conclusion while other philosophers turned toward the East for new hope. For example, Schopenhauer tried to assimilate in his views the then newly translated *Bhagavad Gítá* and the *Upanishad*. In the later nineteenth century, Helena Blavatsky and the Theosophical School tried to syncretize rational knowledge with subconscious intuitions, but soon many hopeful followers left Theosophy. Hamvas was also disappointed, as he wrote:

If one reaches the freezing point, his life ceases to be governed by spiritual forces, rather by pseudo-spiritual compulsion, known from the pathography of imbeciles, adolescents, primitives and psychopaths.<sup>28</sup>

It seems that Theosophy failed to arrive at the true primordial tradition. Contrary to Theosophy, Évola, Ziegler and primarily Guénon reached out to the absolute sources not by assimilating the tradition in our modern thinking, but to reveal the tradition as it is. Hamvas was their follower. In 1941, he was the one who published the first review of Guénon’s works in Hungarian, and he even borrowed the term *scientia sacra* from Guénon’s *science sacrée*.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted by Darabos 2002, 2, 317.

<sup>27</sup> Darabos 2002, 2, 463.

<sup>28</sup> *Pathmos* 1, 445, quoted by Miklóssy 2002, 44.



According to Hamvas, the world is one and complete; therefore, knowledge of it cannot be anything else. And this complete knowledge is included in the sacred books of the tradition, this is what he aimed at summarizing in this book, tracing in the following order: the ancient Greek traditions, the Chinese, Tibetan, Hindu, Buddhist traditions; the Hebrews, the Mohammedans, the Egyptians, and the *Tabula smaragdina*. Curiously, Christianity is left out because Hamvas considered it something special and separate; he set out to interpret it in the unfinished *Scientia sacra II*.

In spite of the grim war period and the fact that Hamvas was summoned to serve in the military on repeated occasions, he was very active in widening and deepening his intellectual horizons and developing his network of fellow intellectuals. A real shock came in February 1945, when, during the siege of Budapest, his apartment was hit by a bomb, and all his library as well as his manuscripts in the making were destroyed. By then, he was stoic enough not to be broken. After the war, he very actively took part in the reorganization of Hungarian cultural life, served on editorial boards, and started a series of publications in which he provided opportunity to a lot of good people to publish. Another dark turn came with the communist takeover in 1948/49. Together with his second wife, the art historian Katalin Kemény, Hamvas published an important new work, *Forradalom a művészetben* (1947 [“Revolution in Art”]). The new literary dictator, György Lukács disapproved of this book and initiated a press-campaign against Hamvas and other similarly “bourgeois” writers. As a result, Hamvas was expelled from his position in the Budapest Public Library and could not get his writings published. As he was not willing to make any political compromises, he refashioned himself as a farmer and tended a small garden in Szentendre, a village near Budapest. He did some gardening and grew fruit. During these years he wrote his greatest literary work, the monumental novel, *Karnevál* (1948–1951 [“Carnival”]). Parallel with this experimental work (which can only be compared with Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*), he wrote a theoretical explanation entitled “Fragments of a Theory of the Novel”.

Because of the communist rules of work, he was forced to take up a legal job. Between 1951 and 1964, he worked for the Powerstation Investments Co. as a warehouseman at various building projects, far from the capital. During these years he perfected his knowledge of Hebrew and Sanskrit, translated the *Sepher Yetzirah*, the *Kathaka Upanishads* and other works, worked on the second part of *Scientia Sacra* which was to place Christianity among ancient traditions, and developed his magnificent collection of essays, *Pathmos*.

In 1964, he retired and could move back to Budapest to his wife. He continued gardening in a small orchard, continued working on *Scientia Sacra II*



and his essays. He lived as a hermit; nevertheless, he had vital contacts with artists, intellectuals, and researchers, and became a kind of a guru. He died in great poverty in 1968, through a stroke. Until the 1970s, his works were circulated in typed “samizdat” editions; from the 1980s, some of his works were (re)published (*The World Crisis; Unseen History, Scientia Sacra I*), and his reputation became more and more public. Reading and citing Hamvas became an act of resistance against communism. After the regime change, all the barriers were demolished; the cult of Hamvas even took on an official, state supported form (which the recipient probably would not have approved). His collected works were published in various editions, and in 2003, the Petőfi Museum of Literature established the Hamvas Institute for Cultural Research.<sup>29</sup>

### **Mária Szepes (1908–2007, born Magdolna Scherbak)**

Mária Szepes was a kindred spirit of Baktay and Hamvas; she had close connection with the latter. Her career is also interesting and bears witness to the same vagaries of so many other esotericists who lived through the world wars and the period of communism. If we look at the family background of my three protagonists, all of them came from middle class families, but of different standing. Most severe was that of Hamvas, with his father being a Lutheran pastor and schoolmaster, who nevertheless had an open “European” personality, taking his son on a grand tour after his secondary school graduation. The family of Baktay were a mix of Austro-Hungarian military, Christianized Jewish businesspeople, and bohemian characters. Szepes came from an entirely bohemian family of converted Jews. Her father was an actor, her mother a singer-actress. Mária had a brother, Viktor Scherbach (1907–76), a linguist, writer, composer, and astrologer, who, under the name of Wictor Charon, became a secluded but very significant esoteric thinker.<sup>30</sup>

The father died prematurely in 1915, and the mother married Béla Galánthay-Balogh, an actor turned into filmmaker, who started with silent films and, up to his death in 1943, directed sixty-seven films, some of them real hits. Szepes grew up in an environment of theatre, saloon culture, early

<sup>29</sup> In 2022 the Institute changed name, they dropped Hamvas and adopted the name of its first director, FIDESZ politician and ideologue Ágnes Hankiss.

<sup>30</sup> Charon lived a secretive, lonely life, his oeuvre is largely unpublished and unexplored. When it becomes sufficiently researched, a major occult philosopher should emerge. Currently, his most relevant published work is his *Atlantiszi mágia* (1990, “The Magic of Atlantis,” prefaced by Mária Szepes).



filmmaking companies, and the like. While still a child, she danced on the stage in operettas, as a teenager played in several films, from the age of nine she wrote poetry and short prose. After secondary school she attended a private college and studied art history, literature, and psychology. In her home, spiritualist séances were regularly held; her mother was the president of the Hungarian Metapsychic Society<sup>31</sup> and even published a book on spiritual experiences. But Mária lost interest in that pastime and started seeking more serious esoteric lore.

Although brought up in a secularized Jewish family, her stepfather was Christian and she converted to the Lutheran faith when in 1930 married Béla Szepes, a graphic artist, skiing champion, and silver medallist in the javelin at the 1928 Olympic games in Amsterdam. Between 1931 and 1933, they lived in Berlin where the husband worked as a sport caricaturist while Mária pursued private studies in religion, psychology and cultural history with Professor Samuel Gerling, an esoteric thinker. In the end, the Professor was deported by the Nazis, and the couple had to come home to escape from the fascist regime.

Already receptive to esotericism, in 1939, she received Rosicrucian initiation and was inspired to start writing her eventually most famous novel, *The Red Lion* [“A vörös oroszlán”]. In the meantime, she cooperated with her parents in the family filmmaking company; two of their most famous productions featured Katalin Karády (*Don't Ask Who I Was; Opiumwaltz*), while the scripts and lyrics were written by Mária.

Together with her brother, she spent the war years hiding in a cottage in the Danube-bend and after the siege of Budapest, she reunited with her husband and occupied a dilapidated villa there. *The Red Lion*, a great mystical novel of alchemy and Rosicrucian initiation, was published in 1946, but after the communist takeover in 1948, the book was confiscated by the authorities and the copies were destroyed. For forty years, it was a prohibited reading in Hungary, while its German translation had already been published in 1947. Béla Hamvas, a friend of Szepes found some of the “banned” copies in his workplace, the Budapest Public Library, and managed to save them. In 1984, an English translation was published in New York and in the same year, it could come out in Hungary, too, characteristically in a sciences fiction series and somewhat curtailed. The central topic of the book is an alchemical elixir which provides long life and enables the taker to remember their previous lives. On the surface, this is an exciting novel of cultural history,

<sup>31</sup> See the autobiography of Szepes, *Emberék és jelmezek* (2017 [“People and Masks”]), 332.



ranging from the Renaissance till WW2; its deep structure is an initiation into esoteric mysteries.

After the war, Mária and her brother regularly gave public lectures on esoteric topics. With the takeover of communism, they restructured their activities into secret home seminars entitled “The Science of Correspondences”, the material of which was published after the regime change under the title *Academia occulta* (1994). In these seminars all three protagonists met, as Szepes recalled:

In my apartment in Buda, since 1945, such visitors were frequent as Ervin Baktay, Béla Hamvas, Nándor Várkonyi. We were reading and translating illegal works, including literature such as *Animal Farm* and *Darkness at Noon*.<sup>32</sup>

To be philologically precise, there is no independent source to prove Baktay’s presence at the seminar meetings, on the other hand, Hamvas referred quite a few times to both Szepes and Charon in his diaries and correspondence. With Szepes, Hamvas discussed the meaning of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* which he was translating at that time and even offered a talk on that topic in the seminar. In Victor Charon, ten years his junior, Hamvas looked for the perfect master, as he called a “self-realized man”.<sup>33</sup>

During those dark years, she could not publish anything esoteric or philosophical. Like so many other authors, she escaped into writing children’s literature. She wrote several dozen “girl stories” under the series title *Pöttyös Panna* [“Dotted Annie”] which became an enormous hit, and the writer was honoured even by the communist cultural policy makers in 1963.

Her most important complex novella-series is *Raquel 7 tanítványa* [“Seven Disciples of Raquel”]. She wrote it from 1947 to 1977, but the concluding part was only finished in 1999. Raguel is a timeless avatar, who summons seven disciples to survive the Dark Times together. All seven stories take place in the inter-war period in different parts of the world and – after purifying lives and sufferings – all seven protagonists travel to Switzerland, where they finally meet Raguel in Mythenburg. The concluding chapter – written much later than the actual seven life stories – is a mystical-surrealist vision akin with the Akasha Chronicles. About this enormous work, Szepes wrote in 1977:

<sup>32</sup> Sennyei 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, Hamvas found the reincarnation of the most perfect master in his neighbour in Szentendre, an uneducated farmer-gardener. See Darabos 2002, 3, 9–15 and Attila Halász’s important publication from the correspondence and diary of Hamvas (2021).





This is my main and last great work. Today, I would write some parts of it in a different way, still, I have not altered it at all because this is a testimony about my own intellectual and spiritual development. I know that at present this work cannot be published in this country. But I am convinced that the time will come when it will be read and all those will have access to it whom I addressed with these important messages.<sup>34</sup>

Parts of this series have also been published in German in two volumes: *Der Berg den Adepten* and *Weltendämmerung*.<sup>35</sup> Szepes's success as a fiction writer was boosted by her "real" science fiction novels that reflected a Blavatskyan interest in the spirit as well as in technology and human innovation. There is in each of them some esoteric motive and a great deal of moral wisdom. On the one hand, they are exciting adventure stories, on the other pseudo-religious conduct books.<sup>36</sup>

Szepes died at the age of ninety-nine; until her final moment, she was working on her manuscripts, polishing her autobiography, giving interviews. With her, a true ambassador of intelligent and responsible esotericism stepped down.

#### 4. Interim Conclusion

After a brief survey of the leading trends of Western esotericism in modern Hungary, I selected three central representatives, who started their careers in the inter-war period of the twentieth century and demonstrated that among the crisis-ridden middle class, these esoteric movements held an important role to show intellectual escape routes and possibilities of restoring human integrity. All three of my protagonists survived WWII and found themselves in the radically changed and hostile environment of state socialism (popularly called communism), where they had to hide their convictions and find new survival strategies. Although they followed different paths – Baktay, relying on his international fame as an Indologist, managed to maintain a respectable scholarly career; Hamvas, true to his own self-purification, chose to become a hermit and guru; Szepes, while organizing a clandestine esoteric

<sup>34</sup> From the Hungarian afterword (1999, p. 1010 in the electronic edition).

<sup>35</sup> *Das erste und das zweite Buch Raguel: Der Berg der Adepten/ Weltendämmerung* (out of print, no publication date on amazon.de).

<sup>36</sup> Some titles: *A tibeti orgona* ["The Organ in Tibet"]; *Varázstükör* ["Magic Mirror"], the latter was also published in German (*Der Zauberspiegel*, no date on amazon.de).



network, refashioned herself on the surface as a popular writer of children's literature and science fiction – they had personal connections with each other and never gave up their inner convictions.

Another interesting parallel phenomenon was that all three turned to writing literary fiction. Baktay paraphrased Native American and Indian mythological tales and channelled his scholarship into popularizing fiction, preserving some mystical-esoteric motives in them. Szepes wrote esoteric-revelatory novels in the garb of either historical adventure stories or science fiction, somewhat like that of Gustav Meyrink. Again, Hamvas remained the most adamant: he could not even hope to publish his novels, among them *Karnevál*, the monumental, bitter, grotesque saga that I compared with Joyce, but could also be associated with Kafka.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> I finish now with an interim conclusion, since a follow up is due to come in which I will endeavour to bring closer these literary works to the interested international readership.



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