

Zoltán Peterecz trans. ed.: *Forradalmi időkben Budapesten és Bécsben. Egy amerikai katona-hírszerző-diplomata feljegyzései 1919 első feléből.* (Witness of revolutionary days: notes of an American intelligence officer-diplomat from the first half of 1919). Eger. 2019.

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According to Pierre Nora the task of remembering makes everyone their own historian. As his famous maxim goes, “an order is given to remember, but the responsibility is mine, it is I who must remember” (15). Nicholas Roosevelt presents an example of such self-initiated recollection. Roosevelt, a member of the American presidential dynasty and a distant relative of Theodore Roosevelt made a significant contribution to the American delegation at the Paris Peace Conference after World War One.

Roosevelt’s writing is a personal journal commemorating historical facts. The genre itself gives rise to questions concerning the role of memory and the motivating factors behind the writing process. Nora emphasizes the aspect of duty memory, a compulsion exerted either by internal or external impact, that is the creator of the text, himself or herself, or an outside authority. Kathleen Brogan distinguishes between two kinds of memory. Narrative memory as a flexible process helping to reshape or give meaning to the past, while traumatic memory is rigid, inflexible (155). Furthermore, Stephen Kagle argues diary or journal writing is motivated by the lack of internal balance in the given person.

Nicholas Roosevelt, whose recollections were translated and edited by Zoltán Peterecz heeded such a dual call. As a member of the Coolidge Commission performing a fact finding function during the Paris peace talks, he became direct witness to the upheaval in Central Europe following World War One. His notes cover his experiences gained in Vienna and Budapest, and the recordings related to the latter assignment serve as a historical document of special importance.

While the events he commemorates are registered in the private or personal narrative memory, the tragic episodes of Hungarian history including the presentation of the Vix Notes, the fall of the Károlyi government, the rise of the Soviet Republic, and the eventual dismembering of Hungary serve as the cornerstones of traumatic memory on the national level.

The text including the description of the events in Vienna and the experiences gained in Budapest is expanded with a scholarly introduction and an annotated

index. The introduction contains scholarly justification for topic selection while the translator/editor provides crucial explanations and further guidance to the potential reader. One of the most notable aspects of the text is the author's uncensored opinions, and statements reflecting a belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority, ethnocentrism and chauvinism. Not only does Peterecz render a faithful translation of such controversial statements, but easily handles the respective sensitive content with elegant explanations. The detailed description of the memoir's historical and political background along with genre-specific analyses is a valuable addition to the work.

Captain Roosevelt spent the first half of the year 1919 in Vienna and in Budapest and during this time he became the proverbial witness to the making of history. As an outsider observer to the troubled region he considers Central European politics as "a great jumble of conflicting interests, in which the dominating note is 'Let's grab all we can.'" While Roosevelt recognizes that America represents the hope for all nations of the region for a fair post-war settlement: "There is no question that everyone in this part of the world wants to be nice to the Americans. They all look to America as the dispenser of high justice," he tempers such expectations by the realization that the Coolidge Commission "had no consular, diplomatic or commercial powers, and could do nothing except study." At the same time, he makes several derisive and anti-Semitic statements about members of the local cultural and political elite: "I saw first of all Benedict [sic] of the *Neue Freie Presse*, a most interesting Jew, large, fat, square-headed, but with the nose and mouth of the race."

Furthermore, in an effort to maintain the position of the neutral observer and attempting to distance himself from the surrounding political turbulence he frequently resorts to ethno-centric comments: "we Northern races don't understand the fierce selfishness of the non-Anglo-Teutonic peoples." In the same vein he asserts: "The violence of racial jealousy among the Eastern European peoples is inconceivable to the more staid Anglo-Saxon mind." Conversely Roosevelt is equally critical of his own compatriots pointing to a lack of American diplomats "who are good at languages and know how to pass the time of day with foreigners." Partly as a result of the relatively preferential treatment received in Vienna Roosevelt notices the positive aspects of the Austrians including their courtesy while he continuously warns of the danger of Bolshevism and the continuing German influence in the country. In the other way around, he considers members of the Austrian elite, a "menagerie" and refers to Princess Lichtenstein as an "old girl." He also juxtaposes the national character of America to Austria: "These old-timers are charming old dears to play around with, and have fine manners, and much tradition, and also some education, and very little understanding;

but they lack the American ginger.” Roosevelt’s choice of words concerning the defeated nations is noteworthy as well. He regards the emperor of Germany and the country’s leading politicians “unrepentant sinners” and calls for the “crushing of the obnoxious, arrogant German spirit.” Needless to say in his description of the Hungarian political establishment he uses similar terminology.

Driven by his original mission, and directed by his Anglo-Saxon point of view, he continues to provide ethnically and culturally biased stereotypical descriptions. Being part of the American elite, his opinion is largely conditioned by his socialization. At any rate he correctly perceives how all Central European nations wish to assign the function of arbiter or “the referee in this big game” to the United States and how the politicians of the region see him and the Coolidge commission as a potential channel of communication to the Paris peace conference.

Naturally, the most intriguing aspect of the notes is how Roosevelt saw the events and decision makers of Hungary. He personally met several representatives of the contemporary Hungarian political establishment. His notes concerning the encounter with Albert Apponyi, Mihály Károlyi, and Pál Teleki speak for themselves. Naturally, Apponyi, although the best-known Hungarian politician in the West, represented the past, Károlyi stood for the ephemeral present, and the figure of Teleki anticipated the not so distant yet tragic future. His description of Apponyi is similar to that of German leaders: “He is an interesting old scoundrel—very intelligent, perfectly unrepentant, and a thorough Chauvinist.”

His depiction of Károlyi is as ambiguous as that of the view held by his contemporaries and posterity as well. He acknowledges his feat for overcoming several setbacks: “One can’t help admiring a man who has three such handicaps and yet can rise to the position of leading politician in his country.” Nevertheless, he is dismayed after the Hungarian President turns his government over to radical Communists in the wake of the Vix Note and makes an appeal to the international proletariat: “Why, the man’s mad, simply mad!”

Teleki is seen as a “canny man, and the most intelligent and in his line the ablest.” Yet again, Roosevelt’s first impressions are rather ambiguous: “At first he didn’t appeal to me so much, but after lunch I got him up in the office before a gigantic map of Hungary, and I told him I was going to ask him forty questions. So I pointed in, and I have rarely spent a more interesting two hours. Here was a man who knew exactly what I wanted to know.”

Not only does Roosevelt berate the political leaders, but he does not shy away from making broad-sweeping comments about the Hungarian people in general: “These people have much spirit, and at the same time have an appearance of energy that is almost American. And it seems to me, as I thought—the intelligent Hungarian is a fine animal. But the others (?)”

Roosevelt also grapples with the quandary of making the Hungarians, but in fact all Central European people to accept the fact that his and the Americans' presence in Budapest amounts to "no more than a study trip." He, however, not only views himself as American only, but as a representative of the West and Western culture. Often he is unable to hide his condescension over the "infernal Oriental indirection" he is faced with.

Such an ethnocentric conviction comes especially to the fore in his scathing remark on the political culture in Central Europe. "Politically, the Eastern Europeans are badly brought up children." This comment expresses the same views that were held by the British, concerning the Americans one hundred years earlier perceiving the latter as unruly children at the lunch counter.

While he is acerbically critical of the leaders of the countries he visited, he is equally disappointed with the naiveté of Wilsonian internationalism and the negligent attitude of the Allies culminating in the unwitting American acceptance of the Vix Note. As he states "the moral lesson is formidable." He is equally sceptic with the conative impulses of Wilson's idealism. and views the American foreign policy in Europe as "inglorious meddling:" "This was merely another example of the criminally evil consequences of high sounding, meaningless rhetoric applied to issues of world-wide importance. [...] The idle phrase of the politician becomes a poisoned shaft when it is used to right the world."

Attempting to understand the geopolitical and topographical aspects of Central Europe, Roosevelt often employs American terms. He compares the dispersed ethnic population of Hungary to a "patchwork quilt" and establishes a parallel between the Hungarian landscape and that of Illinois. Roosevelt's notes also reflect the anti-Catholic hysteria of the late 19th century referring to the alleged evil and sinister aspects of the Roman Catholic Church: "I look at them with all the mysterious feeling that their ways are dark, and they are plotting and scheming to advance the Church politically, and bring the world back to its condition of the middle ages."

All in all, Roosevelt's memoir and the thoroughly prepared Hungarian translation provide an unprecedented historical source. The author's words convey the objective external view of events perceived through a subjective lens domestically while presenting another example of the proverbial American in Europe. The volume projecting a unique version of the "politically innocent abroad" reiterates the historic inability of either side of the Atlantic to decode and correctly perceive the intentions of their counterparts.

As far as research into American and Hungarian relations is concerned it is a welcome development that Zoltán Peterecz found Roosevelt's heretofore unpublished notes at the "depth of the archives of Syracuse University." The main

value of the work lies not only in the thorough and attentive translation, as the detailed explanations, the carefully compiled footnotes and the annotated lists introducing the respective historical actors help to make this volume a significant addition to the achievements of American Studies in Hungary.

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