

Enemies of the People: My Family's

Journey to America (Review)

by Johanna Granville

Source: Johanna Granville, review of Kati Marton's *Enemies of the People: My Family's Journey to America* in *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 54, issue 1-2 (2012), p. 227-228.

Ask Hungarian college students today to interview their grandparents about their lives in Hungary during the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s, and surprisingly, at least half will talk about the benefits of life in a socialist, command-economy. Their accounts resonate with nostalgia for economic “stability.” Kati Marton's *Enemies of the People* is a useful memoir to remind us of the restrictions that both Hungarian citizens and American diplomats faced in an ÁVO-dominated society.

Among the most closely surveilled individuals were Hungarian journalists working for the Americans, like the author's parents. Endre Marton had served as the Budapest correspondent for the Associated Press since 1947, while his wife Ilona worked for United Press International. All foreign correspondents of Western news agencies had been hounded out of Hungary by the late 1940s as Mátyás Rákosi's Stalinist regime solidified. Thus, for several years, the Martons were the Western press's sole inside contacts—reliable, boots-on-the-ground, Hungarian-speaking reporters.

Enemies of the People consists of twenty short chapters, each skillfully building up to the arrest of Endre Marton, while keeping the reader in suspense. Both Endre and Ilona knew they were being stalked by ÁVO agents and that their closest acquaintances – even their daughters' French governess - were required to report on their activities. They long expected their own arrests, but when the moment arrived – in February 1955 for Endre, and June 1955 for Ilona – it was still a shock.

A number of factors compelled the author to write this memoir. Just seven years old when her family fled Hungary after the fateful uprising of 1956 and

Soviet military crackdown, Kati Marton could never coax her parents into talking freely about their past as she was growing up in the United States. She and her sister Julia had been sent to live with total strangers for a year while both parents were incarcerated. Even as an adult, Kati Marton's recollection of her mother's arrest has "a powerful physical effect" on her (p. 120). The declassification of ÁVO files and the deaths of her parents in 2004 and 2005 thus presented Marton with an opportunity both to explore her parents' prison ordeals and to resolve her own personal trauma.

Opening the Pandora's Box of ÁVO files triggered revelations difficult for someone late in life to assimilate, however. These include her father's suicide attempts in prison; her mother's willingness to abandon her daughters in order to save them; both parents' marital infidelities; Endre and Ilona's compulsory reporting to the ÁVO even after their release; and the ÁVO's desire to recruit the Martons long after their emigration to the United States. The author also learned more about her own Jewish heritage. The author had been raised as a Catholic. Yet, during her research for *Wallenberg: Missing Hero* (1995), she had discovered by accident that both her maternal grandparents were Jewish and had been killed at Auschwitz. Nevertheless, the author's "greatest fear" in opening the ÁVO files had proven unnecessary; in the course of their interrogations neither Endre nor Ilona Marton compromised a single Hungarian citizen (p. 131).

Apart from the lively writing style, a key strength of this memoir is the light it sheds on the ÁVO's modus operandi. Endre Marton had passed along a secret document - the 1954 Hungarian state budget - to the U.S. State Department. Richard J. Glaspell, a U.S. Army chief warrant officer, then told Hungarian secret police about it. The ÁVO had apparently blackmailed Glaspell after discovering his extramarital affair with a Hungarian woman. The author quotes from her father's memoir: "The story is almost always the same. The foreigner has an affair with a local woman who is either on the payroll of the secret police or was pressed into serving it. Then they are photographed in bed, through a one-way mirror, as happened in the case of the man who betrayed me." (p. 71). Initially sentenced to thirteen years' imprisonment, Marton spent eighteen months in prison and was freed in August 1956. Ilona Marton was originally sentenced to six years, but was incarcerated from June 1955 to April 1956.

Khrushchev's Secret Speech and the ensuing thaw in effect saved the Martons' lives. They were released just in time to record the ultimate results of the thaw in Hungary: the brief revolution and military crackdown. In chapter sixteen, the author recounts her own brief memories of the events, as well as her father's activities. Endre Marton was one of the only reporters who witnessed the revolution from the very onset. He attended the October 23, 1956 demonstration in Bem Square to honor Poland and later saw the statue of Stalin cut down. Despite difficulties, he was finally able to contact the West by telephone to file his reports. Marton was also one of a handful of journalists who remained in Budapest well after the Soviet invasion to continue reporting. The Marton family defected to the United States in January 1957, where Endre continued to write for AP in Washington D.C. until retiring in 1975.

While the memoir is well-written, it cannot be considered historical scholarship. Despite the "thousands of pages" of ÁVO interrogations, as well as her parents' individual memoirs and oral interviews, the author provides no footnotes. It is also not a key source on the 1956 revolution. Readers should consult the memoir by the author's father, *Forbidden Sky* (Little, Brown, 1971) for a more detailed account. We read that Babics, the interrogator, "barked" and "bellowed," but documents alone do not reveal the sound of a voice. The author may be taking the police records too much at face value. Earlier she recounts how her father cheerfully composed reports for household servants to submit to the ÁVO, and how he also wrote creative, detailed reports about American diplomats that did not, in fact, contain anything useful for the secret police to use. She also writes that her father never talked to her about how he, as a Jew, avoided persecution in fascist Hungary. How, then, can she be sure that what he told his interrogators under duress is true, namely that he "volunteered to lead French officers, hiding in Budapest, to Slovakia, to participate in the only armed anti-German uprising in the region" and also "to participate in a secret mission to Tito's Yugoslav headquarters"? (p. 137).

In short, this memoir is well worth reading, but should be read in conjunction with other studies that show the deeper impact of the Hungarian revolution and other Cold War events on peoples' lives. In *Carrying a Secret in My Heart*

(2003), for example, Zsuzsanna Kőrösi and Adrienne Molnár interviewed over forty children of Hungarian insurgents imprisoned or executed after the 1956 rebellion. They were thrust into poverty and degrading manual labor, barred from secondary school, and permanently stigmatized as “enemies of the people” by friends and society. For many East Germans, the Berlin Wall physically separated them from family members for a lifetime, as detailed in studies like Anna Funder’s *Stasiland* (2011). By comparison, Kati Marton lived a privileged life in communist Hungary. She had a French governess, rode in a white Studebaker, dined often at Budapest’s Gerbeaud Café, and received fancy clothes and gifts from American diplomats. She was separated from her parents for one year, as opposed to twenty or more years for other children. She emigrated to the West soon after the revolution and grew up with two, fully employed parents.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Endre Marton, *Forbidden Sky* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).

Kati Marton, *A nép ellenségei: családom regénye* [Enemies of the people] (Budapest: Corvina, 2010).

Zsuzsanna Kőrösi and Adrienne Molnár, *Carrying a Secret in My Heart: Children of the Victims of the Reprisals after the Hungarian Revolution in 1956--An Oral History* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003).