The Secret Diary and the Frozen Oeuvre of Gyula Ortutay

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Gyula Ortutay (1910–1978) was the unquestionable leader of Hungarian folklore studies and ethnography during era of state socialism in Hungary. After the Second World War, he took on a political role as Minister of Religion and Public Education, and the list of his leading positions could fill pages. His undeniable talent, academic positions, engaging social manner, and the political posts he fulfilled in the Socialist state all contributed to an unparalleled concentration of academic power, which promoted the extension of the institutionalization of ethnography and folklore studies, as well as monopolized or marginalized certain research areas and methods within the field. Ortutay has remained an authority in Hungarian folklore studies, but his oeuvre became frozen over the decades, an empty point of reference, as no endeavours have taken place to reread and reinterpret his folkloristic oeuvre. His diary, which he banned from publication for thirty years after his death, was published in 2009–2010 by his son. I present the very intensive and controversial reception of the diary and various interpretations that have accompanied Ortutay's oeuvre and try to illustrate what sort of ethical problems may arise when the main protagonist of a narrative in disciplinary history is a person of impact, a founding father who took on political roles in autocratic regimes.

Keywords: Gyula Ortutay, Hungary, folklore studies, socialist state, diary, secret services, politics

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The Secret Diary and the Frozen Oeuvre of Gyula Ortutay

On 28 August 1971, a Hungarian Airlines plane flying from Oslo to Budapest encountered a storm off the coast of Denmark and crashed into the Baltic Sea. Gyula Ortutay (1910–1978), a scholar of folklore, Member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Director of the Research Group of Ethnology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and Member of Parliament and the Presidential Council, recorded this news and his worries in his diary in the library room of his villa in Budapest. He immediately thought of two people: his 25-year-old son Tamás, who was en route from Denmark to Stockholm, and "Klári", his secret lover, a stewardess (whom he had wanted to marry; however, they had ended their relationship a year ago). It soon turned out that his lover, Klára Tolnai, was aboard the flight and died in the crash. When Tamás Ortutay safely returned home, Gyula Ortutay told his son that in the event of his passing, he had hidden a box in his library for his son to retrieve. Ortutay instructed that the box's contents remain undisclosed after his death. This box contained Gyula Ortutay's diary, which he had kept from 1938 until 1977.

Tamás Ortutay begins his foreword to the diary of his father, published in three massive volumes in 2009 and 2010, with the information in the previous paragraph (Ortutay, T., 2009: 5). If, after this introduction, one reads the entries in the diary written in the summer and autumn of 1971, it turns out that, among other things, Gyula Ortutay visited Finland on one of his official trips with the President of the Presidential Council of the Hungarian People's Republic in the days before the air disaster. During this visit, he had lunch and enjoyed a sauna with Finland's President and Prime Minister. One can also read about how Ortutay kept trying to get information about whether Klára was on the plane or not, and he finally learned of her death from a phone call in the middle of a family lunch. He had to sit back at the table and carry on as if nothing had happened. He mourned his former lover in the diary and did not attend her funeral to avoid attracting attention; days later his driver drove him to the cemetery, where he laid flowers and took home a pebble from the grave as a keepsake. One may also read that Ortutay was notified that he was awarded the Herder Prize (after the Pitré Prize). He mentioned having written a formal will that stipulated that his diary would remain sealed after his death and that it would not be accessible to academics for at least thirty years ("If there is anyone giving a damn to this text, in which I'm displaying myself and my little world"; Ortutay, Gy., 2010b: 261, translation by the author, here and henceforth). He also wryly remarked that the politicians in charge of the state security services would not necessarily respect this provision and would read his diary anyway if they wanted to since he was aware that he was constantly being observed and reported on.

Even from these few entries (which I almost referred to as "episodes" – as if they were part of a novel), one can perceive the intricate web of motifs that runs through Ortutay's diary, which chronicles and reflects on events in private life, politics and (to a diminishing extent) academia. Key themes include protective paternal love, secret

relationships, intense passions, formal "protocol" events, professional recognition, high-level politics, privileges, state surveillance, and motifs of secrecy and concealment. Gyula Ortutay was a leading authority in Hungarian folklore studies and ethnography during his lifetime and long after his passing. His diary was one of the first published ego-documents of Hungarian intellectuals who actively engaged in political tasks during the communist–socialist regime.

In this paper, I will first present an overview of Ortutay's life and work, including his academic and political roles, embedded in Hungary's political history, as it is essential to consider these basic details to understand the diary in its multiple contexts. While it is necessary to be selective, my overview focuses on the information and themes that I consider crucial in shaping Ortutay's habitus and oeuvre and understanding his diary and its reception. Next, I summarize the circumstances of the diary's publication and present its reception, along with the evolution of the late reception of Ortutay's academic work, which became somewhat vacant and hibernated under the influence of the diary's release. Finally, I will discuss some of the dilemmas associated with interpreting sensitive ego-documents.

The Life Path, Academic, and Political Roles of Gyula Ortutay

Gyula Ortutay was born on 24 March 1910, in Szabadka (Subotica, Serbia) into a Roman Catholic family of noble descent. He grew up in nearby Szeged, a city in southeastern Hungary that enjoyed the economic and related cultural boom of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy at the end of the nineteenth century. Ortutay was eight years old when his father, a journalist, passed away. This loss led to significant financial hardship for the family as the widowed mother struggled to support her five children. The deceased father's friends (writers, journalists, museologists) patronized young Ortutay. Ortutay attended the esteemed Piarist Grammar School; then, in 1928, he enrolled at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Szeged, where he graduated in 1934 with a doctorate in humanities and degrees in Hungarian, Latin, and Greek literature and languages (Paládi-Kovács, 1991).

Ortutay was a founding member of a student association, *Szegedi Fiatalok Művészeti Kollégiuma* [Young Artists' College of Szeged]. This small group included sociologists, graphic artists, psychologists, theatre directors, photographers, literary historians, and poets; Ortutay contributed as a folklorist and ethnographer. One of the main objectives of the Young Artists' College besides artistic activity was to explore the life, lifestyle, economic and cultural conditions, mentality, and worldview of the population in agrarian settlements. The Young Artists' College was involved in the sociographic–sociological research that gained traction in the 1930s. This initiative highlighted severe socio-economic problems in the countryside (such as poverty, starvation, illegal abortions to cut the number of peasant children to hinder the splitting of their landed property, feudalistic relations, and disproportionate

investment in prestige goods). Sociological data collection among rural communities sought to reveal persistent issues that had existed for decades, including lack of prospects and social mobility. This analysis of contemporary society did not merely aim for an academic audience but sought to instigate change in the situation.[1] The subversive nature of the movement is reflected in the fact that the ruling authorities, in several cases, took the authors of these sociographies to court for "defaming the Hungarian nation". In his 1961 article "Science and Politics", published for the first time in *Combat*, in Paris, Ortutay explained that what had driven him into politics in the 1930s – and ultimately to the realization that action and change were necessary – was the profound sense of shame he had felt while collecting folk poetry amid the suffering of the peasants. "That was how the folklorist prepared for a political action-programme and how he acquired also the theoretical knowledge on which political activity can be based" (Ortutay, Gy., 1972a: 10; see also Paulinyi, 1972).

Ortutay's early folklore collections were associated with the Young Artists' College of Szeged, and this peer group played a vital role in shaping his folkloristic work, identity, and network of contacts. After graduating, Ortutay moved to Budapest, the capital. He worked as an official for the national broadcaster, Magyar Rádió. Meanwhile he was a private tutor for the sons of Miklós Kozma (former Interior Minister and President of Magyar Rádió and the Hungarian News Agency). At the radio, Ortutay initiated a project involving Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály to record hundreds of albums of folk songs and folk tales from several peasant performers. In 1938, he married Zsuzsa Kemény, an experimental dance artist (Svégel, 2023). Between 1933 and 1942, the young Ortutay published fifteen books on various aspects of folk culture, many aimed at a broader audience.[2] He twice received the Baumgarten-prize, the most prestigious literary award of the period. Yet, despite his reputation, ambitions, and repeated attempts to be appointed as a professor to ethnography and folklore departments of various universities or to join the staff of the Museum of Ethnography, he remained outside the institutions of the discipline.

In 1940, he published a monograph, *Fedics Mihály mesél* [Mihály Fedics Narrates Tales], which proclaimed new aims and methodology for research into storytelling (Ortutay, Gy., 1972c). Ortutay published the tales, belief narratives, and the autobiographical narrative of an elderly illiterate storyteller of Carpathian Ukrainian descent. Unlike previous practice, the focus was not on the texts alone but on the storyteller's personality, knowledge, taste, the process of storytelling, and the performance that brings the story to life. Eventually, the study of the performers of folktales (performance style, narrative characteristics, worldview, repertoire, and the

1 Ortutay's rarely quoted essay reacting to the controversy surrounding the *Discovery of Hungary* sociographic project summed it up as follows: "One accusation can only be true: we have done little and talked much. I write these unnecessary lyrical lines, which do not help to improve the knowledge of our peasantry and its social fate, with a blush of the cheeks, in contradiction to myself" (Ortutay, Gy., 1936).

2 For a bibliography of Ortutay's works (with titles translated into English) see Oszlánszky, 1970.

Picture 1: Mihály Fedics and Gyula Ortutay. Photo: Miklós Müller / Nicolás Muller (1937). Source: Archives of the Institute of Ethnology, Research Centre for the Humanities, Budapest

ways of acquiring and sharing narrative knowledge within a community) was linked to exploration of the laws of oral transmission (Voigt, 2002; Dégh, 1995).

The impact of this new trend soon became apparent. Ortutay began lecturing on folk poetry as a private tutor *(Privatdozent)* at the University of Szeged and at the Pázmány University in Budapest in the early 1940s. Among his students were Linda Dégh and Ágnes Kovács, two significant researchers in postwar Hungarian folkloristics (Dégh, 1969). Their early collections of folktales were published in the *Új Magyar Népköltési Gyűjtemény* [New Hungarian Folklore Collection] series founded by Ortutay. Despite having only occasional opportunities to work as a university lecturer, Ortutay attracted students and followers to his new methodology relatively quickly.

He became involved in the resistance in the first half of the 1940s. He joined the Independent Smallholders' Party in opposition, where he became one of the leaders in 1943. In 1944, he resigned from his position at the radio when the Wehrmacht occupied Hungary, whose government had been an ally of Nazi Germany since the 1930s. Following a coup, the antisemitic far-right Arrow Cross Party formed a government. Ortutay was forced to hide his Jewish wife and newborn daughter to save them from deportation and execution. Among his friends from the Young Artists' College of Szeged, the sociologist Béla Reitzer and the poet Miklós Radnóti

Picture 2: Minister of Religion and Public Education Gyula Ortutay (clapping) and Interior Minister László Rajk (to the right of the portrait looking downwards) on 1 May 1947, Heroes Square, Budapest. Photo: Pál Berkó. Source: Fortepan, No. 78682

were killed due to their Jewish descent. Radnóti was exhumed in 1946 from a mass grave, where his small notebook was also found containing the last poems he had written in the labour camps before his execution. The first page of this notebook, written in five languages, requested that the finder send it to Gyula Ortutay. This friendship with Radnóti, a very highly esteemed poet in literary and cultural memory, positively influenced Ortutay's post-war position.

Following the disestablishment of the Hungarian Kingdom, Hungary became a parliamentary republic from 1946 to 1949. This period, characterized by a coalition government of the Independent Smallholders' Party and the Hungarian Communist Party (backed by the Soviet Union), was relatively democratic. Subsequently, it gradually succumbed to the manipulative strategies of the Communist Party. By August 1949, Hungary was declared a People's Republic, came under complete Soviet influence, and became a one-party state with the Communist Party as the only electable one.

After the Second World War, Ortutay held significant roles in academic and political institutions. He became a Member of Parliament for the Independent Smallholders' Party and served as the head of Magyar Rádió and the News Agency; for this reason, he was often referred to as a quasi Minister of Propaganda. In 1947, he was appointed Minister of Religion and Public Education, and his most notable and controversial

action was the nationalization of church schools in 1949. From 1945 onward, Ortutay was also a secret member of the Communist Party. Despite this, he publicly presented himself as an associate politician and later as a non-party intellectual, aiming to create the illusion of political pluralism. Regarding his academic career, he was elected a corresponding member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the academic body of the highest prestige. He became president of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society, and served as professor and head of the Ethnography Department of Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest from 1946. He ordered the reorganization of the discipline to meet the criteria of the new ideological requirements (Ortutay Gy., 1955; Sárkány, 2005; Paládi-Kovács, 1991; Paládi-Kovács, 2024).

In the autumn of 1949, the show trial and execution of former Interior Minister László Rajk marked the ultimate decline of democratic rule in Hungary. The communist dictatorship consolidated its power and Stalinist repression intensified. At the beginning of 1950, Mátyás Rákosi, de facto communist leader of Hungary, removed Ortutay from his ministerial position. Ortutay ceased to be a Member of Parliament in 1953, after which he resigned from all of his posts with the exception of being a university professor. During the early 1950s, following his loss of political office, Ortutay redirected his focus to science and science policy. In 1951, he established the independent Folklore Department at Eötvös Loránd University, which is the only one of its kind in Hungary, and took on the role of head of the department. He actively engaged in collecting folklore, conducting fieldwork in northeastern Hungary and Czechoslovakia from 1955 to 1956. He edited several folklore anthologies with co-editors but did not publish his (earlier or new) collections of folktales. He also launched a number of book series and served on editorial boards.

On 23 October 1956, the Hungarian Revolution broke out. Ortutay did not participate in it (there are no entries in his diary between 24 October 1956 and June 1957; only a reconstruction based on his contemporary notes exists, from which it seems that he regarded the revolution as a largely rightwing initiative). Soviet troops marched into Hungary and a new state party, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, was formed under the leadership of János Kádár, supported by the Soviet Union. The initial years of Kádár's regime until 1963 (often referred to as "the consolidation phase") were marked by reprisals, including imprisonments, executions, and dismissals. The trial of the prime minister of the revolutionary government, Imre Nagy, and his associates began. On 16 June 1958, they were executed. The verdict and the fact of the execution were only made public afterward, and the bodies were buried in unmarked graves.[3]

3 The ceremonial reburial of Imre Nagy and the executed revolutionaries took place on 16 June 1989 on Heroes Square in Budapest. This event was a symbolic landmark that signalled the change of regime. The International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR) happened to hold its ninth congress in Budapest that week, with 300 participants; many of them attended the reburial ceremony (Brednich, 1990).

Starting in the summer of 1957, Ortutay took on several political roles. He became the secretary general of the Patriotic People's Front, a position he held from 1957 to 1964. This organization, by organizing public meetings and debates, was responsible for engaging and persuading non-party members to join the political consolidation. During this period, the academic and artistic communities were also targeted. Those who voiced critical opinions publicly faced imprisonment or dismissal from their jobs, while the government offered "a drop of vinegar and a drop of honey" to either compel intellectuals to collaborate or force them into internal exile. Winning over intellectuals, privileging key intellectuals, and seeking their opinions was an essential strategy of the Kádár regime's cultural policy. It was later based on implementing three categories: supported, tolerated, or banned artistic/academic expressions (Bolvári-Takács, 2023). From 1958 until his death, Ortutay was a Member of Parliament and also member of the Presidential Council of the People's Republic, which was the third most important organ of state power besides the Parliament and the state party. Ortutay also received a mandate in science policy: he was appointed rector of Eötvös Loránd University (hereinafter ELTE), the country's most prestigious university, from 1957 to 1963. As regards his scientific positions, he became a full member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1958 (Ortutay, Gy., 1959; Ortutay, Gy., 1972b).

From 1963 onward, a milder phase of the Kádár era began, encapsulated by the slogan "Those who are not against us are with us". This period saw the continuation of censorship in literary journals and publishing houses manifested through editorial reports, the withdrawal of certain articles, and the temporary silencing of ideologically problematic writers. Many authors faced restrictions that led to their works being delayed in publication or relegated to obscurity. In the field of ethnography and folkloristics, there was a gradual decrease in the requirement for the overt display of Marxist–Leninist ideology, commonly referred to as the "red tail", which had previously been attached to the introduction or conclusion of academic studies. During the 1960s, Hungarian ethnographers, folklorists, and ethnologists began to engage in Western European conferences. By the end of the decade, opportunities arose for study trips not only to socialist countries but also to Western and Northern European states and the USA. This trend of increased academic exchange continued to grow until the fall of the Berlin Wall (Sárkány, 2005; Vidacs, 2005; Hofer, 2005).

In 1964, Ortutay was sidelined from frontline politics, which was challenging for him as he perceived it as a reiteration of his former replacement as minister. He then became the head of the Scientific Dissemination Society and, from 1967, the director of the Research Group of Ethnology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (later renamed the Institute of Ethnology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences), an institution established mainly under his initiative and influence. Ortutay maintained an extensive network of contacts including scientific and political circles, various associations, societies, and even agricultural cooperatives he patronized. Despite

frequently noting in his diary the need to complete his major scholarly works, he wrote very few new studies from the 1960s onward. Although his publication activity remained significant, most of his work during this time consisted of revised and recycled editions of his earlier papers, essays, and memoirs in Hungarian and English or German. Ortutay served as editor-in-chief for many book series and encyclopaedias, was a member of the editorial board of several journals (e.g., *Fabula*), and was a member or president of numerous scientific committees and societies at home and abroad. He travelled abroad extensively due to his cultural–diplomatic and academic duties, across Europe and beyond to Japan, Argentina, and Cuba. He received numerous political, cultural, and professional honours, awards, and honorary titles in Hungary and abroad, and even had a minor planet named in his honour ("2043 Ortutay").

In celebration of his sixtieth birthday in 1970, *Acta Ethnographica*, the foreign-language journal of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, dedicated an entire issue to him (*Acta Ethnographica*, 1970). This special tribute contained papers from scholars such as Petr Bogatyrev, Yeleazr Meletinsky, Archer Taylor, Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann, Francis Lee Utley, Mikhail Pop, Carl-Hermann Tillhagen, and many others. The forum, the act of publication, and the names in *Tabula Gratulatoria* (e. g. Robert Austerlitz, Hermann Bausinger, Rolf Wilhelm Brednich, Alan Dundes, Wolfram Eberhard, Åke Hultkranz, Jaromír Jech, Julian Krzyżanowski, Max Lüthi, Georgios Megas, Michal Markuš, Juha Pentikäinen, Vladimir Propp, Kurt Ranke, Lutz Röhrich, Marie Louise Tenèze, and Stith Thompson) all demonstrated that Gyula Ortutay was the leading authority and primary representative of Hungarian ethnography and folkloristics during this period in Hungary and abroad. Ortutay was a true ethnographic chief (Balaš, 2025) whose influence and power were unmatched by any Hungarian ethnographer or folklorist before or after him. Gyula Ortutay passed away from kidney cancer on 22 March 1978 at the age of 68, following a prolonged illness.

Afterlife

After Ortutay's death, a series of obituaries, memorial sessions, and special issues highlighted his influence within the discipline and the cultural–scientific landscape of Hungary. He was posthumously awarded the Gold Medal of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The Hungarian Ethnographic Society established a commemorative medal in his honour that is awarded every three years for outstanding scholarly achievement. Streets, student hostels, schools, and cultural centres in various cities, including Baja, Szeged, and Győr, were named after Ortutay. He continued to be regarded as a professional authority, and the performer-centred method of folk narratives he introduced remained one of the most significant contributions to Hungarian folklore studies. The *Új Magyar Népköltési Gyűjtemény*

series, founded by him and still active today, has published around forty volumes of folktales and folk legends with extensive scholarly commentary, employing Ortutay's method to uncover the narrative knowledge of outstanding storytellers or storytelling communities.

From the 1990s onward, following the regime change, Ortutay's role in political and scientific policy, along with a critique of his decisions – primarily the nationalization of schools and the marginalization of some fellow researchers – emerged in public discourse. This criticism did not significantly alter the perception of him, especially among his former colleagues who began their careers in the 1960s and 1970s. Ortutay's talent and professional qualities, along with the originality and significance of his methods and approach to folklore and narrative research, remained acknowledged, leading to a professional consensus on his merits. The phenomenon often observed in authoritarian regimes, where a politically reliable but professionally untalented individual is empowered, does not apply to Ortutay. He was remembered as one of the most important scholars in Hungarian folkloristics and as someone who successfully converted his scientific and political influence into the discipline's institutionalization, founding, and advancement. Over time, a consensus emerged, initially latent but increasingly manifest, that his academic contributions were innovative until the mid-1950s, culminating in his inauguration at the Academy in 1958, and that his political role eventually became a detriment to his scientific work.

In 1985, on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of Ortutay's birth, Vilmos Voigt – Ortutay's former student and his successor as the head of the Folklore Department – remarked that despite numerous commemorative writings and tributes, the exploration of Ortutay's works, including the publication of his manuscript folklore collections, and an interpretive analysis of his published works still needed to be undertaken (Voigt, 1985). I think this situation has not fundamentally changed over the past four decades. Although two minor monographs about him were published around the time of the regime change (Katona, 1990; Paládi-Kovács, 1991), and Ortutay and his work have been frequently referred to – usually as "the renowned Budapest School of folktale studies" – these references have, over time, become empty clichés, mere rhetorical devices. Meanwhile, fundamental philological and conceptual issues remain unclear, particularly regarding Ortutay's early work and his impact on folkloristics.

The Diary

Published in three volumes between 2009 and 2010, the diary kept by Ortutay spans a total of 2000 pages and covers the years from 1938 to 1977 (Ortutay, Gy., 2009; 2010a, 2010b). The first volume addresses the period from 1938 to 1954, the second from 1955 to 1966, and the third from 1966 to 1977. Ortutay began writing at the age

of 28 and completed the final entry nine months before his death. The diary then remained in the family's possession and was not part of a public collection. The publication of Ortutay's diary in 2009 was unexpected, as its existence had been previously unknown even to scholars in the field. The only information available about the history of its creation, its variants, and the manuscript (typescript) itself comes from a one-and-a-half-page preface of the published diary written by his son, Tamás Ortutay, a sculptor, human ecologist, and environmentalist.

Paratexts

The covers of the published diary feature rare photographs of Ortutay and his family members, including his parents and wife, which Tamás Ortutay selected from the family legacy. Each of the three volumes is accompanied by a photo supplement, also chosen from family photographs, with personal commentary by Tamás Ortutay. Each volume includes 200–250 pages of notes and an index of names and geographical locations.

The first volume of the diary begins with five prefaces. In the laconic first foreword titled *They Protect Me,* Tamás Ortutay recounted two stories, obviously not by chance, alongside the 1971 account mentioned in my introduction. The first story is about György Buday (1907–1990), a graphic artist, book illustrator and former head of the Young Artists' College of Szeged, who emigrated to Great Britain in 1937 due to the ever-increasing state discrimination against Jews in Hungary (Buday, 2022; Waterhouse, 2018). He returned to Hungary in 1949. His first visit brought him to Ortutay at the Ministry of Public Education. Ortutay anxiously asked Buday if he had been home or elsewhere before paying him a visit. When Buday replied no, Ortutay, obviously relieved, got him into his car, instructed the driver to head straight to the airport, and told Buday to take the first flight back to London immediately. (The implied context for this story is that some emigrants returned from Western Europe during this period and soon faced dire consequences.) The second story Tamás Ortutay shared was about his childhood. He was a skinny, quiet, shy boy regularly bullied by a schoolmate named Fáy (whose name happens to mean Pain). When his father learned about the bullying, he arrived home with a friend of his, a retired boxer, who began to train young Tamás. After some time, the bullying ended. For Tamás Ortutay, his father was a storyteller and seemed like a character from a folktale "who always managed to escape trouble and save those in need" (Ortutay, T., 2009: 6).

Ortutay's protective role is often interpreted as that of a father figure, a sentiment echoed by others as well. This idea is further highlighted in two short forewords by Zsuzsanna Tátrai (a scholar of folk customs) and Attila Paládi-Kovács (ethnographer and former director of the Institute of Ethnology), both researchers affiliated with the institute founded by Ortutay (Paládi-Kovács, 2009; Tátrai, 2009). At the end of her foreword, Zsuzsanna Tátrai expresses her hope that "the diary will eventually

initiate an objective research to explore Ortutay's life, work, and significance." Additionally, a foreword written by Ágnes Roboz, a dance artist and a friend of Ortutay's wife, recalls the image of Ortutay as a cultured, book-loving, generous, and impatient individual (Roboz, 2009).

The last and longest foreword, *Memories from a Library*, was written by Dušan Šimko. Šimko, a writer and Assistant Professor of Political and Social Geography at the University of Basel, reminisces about a summer trip he took with his parents from eastern Slovakia to Yugoslavia in the 1960s. During the journey, they stopped at Ortutay's home in Budapest. (It is not stated in the preface, but Zsuzsa Ortutay was a relative of the Šimko family, a prominent medical dynasty in Košice). After enjoying lunch, Gyula Ortutay took young Šimko to his expansive library, where he showcased books with a touch of bibliophilic irony. Šimko pulled out a particular book, *The Ship of Fools*, written by Sebastian Brant, a law professor at the University of Basel in the fifteenth century. Some years later, Dušan Šimko settled in Basel after emigrating from Czechoslovakia due to the Warsaw Pact intervention. In Basel, Robert Wildhaber, Director of the Museum of Ethnography, spoke to him highly of Ortutay. Meanwhile, Šimko's mother sent him a Czech edition of *Hungarian Folk Poetry*, edited by Ortutay.[4] In Dušan Šimko's memory, Ortutay was a charismatic figure who "never lost touch with social reality" (Šimko, 2009).

The text

The first entry in the diary was written by Ortutay just before Christmas in 1938, when the discriminative second Jewish law was submitted to Parliament. This initial entry reflects the author's motivation for documenting his thoughts and the purpose behind keeping the diary.

> *I have an old bad habit of making diary notes, and I've scribbled many unnecessary, childish, and stupid things under the guise of a diary. A few years ago, since I began living in Pest and had the opportunity to observe major events in Hungarian life closely – and even influence them in some instances – I stopped writing diaries* [....] *I was stubbornly fixated on this idea of immortality. Feeling somewhat naive about this aspect of immortality, especially in the shadow of an impending world war, I eventually broke my habits and began typing* [....] *Of course, I could have cited other reasons for my silence: dispiritedness, fatigue, or fear of confronting myself day after day, week after week* [....] *Having gone through numerous typical experiences in recent years and met many people and*

4 I have not managed to identify a book matching these data in the catalogues of the National Széchényi Library, National Library of the Czech Republic, and Slovak National Library. There was a collection of folktales edited by Ortutay and published in Prague in the 1960s (Ortutay, Gy., 1966).

events, I often reflect on those past days during quiet moments. I am more interested in characterization than in literary form. In any case, this is not a literary diary, nor is it focused on detailing my experiences with books, poems, or individual grievances and gossip. Instead, I aim to portray my life, environment, and country; I want to write history or, more accurately, preserve source material for historiography (Ortutay, Gy., 2009: 17–18).

Some aspects of this entry showing Ortutay's self-interpretation are echoed throughout the diary: the desire for immortality, intense ambitions, the consciousness of being chosen, the self-reflexive irony associated with it, the desire and need to characterize, to record experiences, to create a historical source, and to shape events. I do not have more space to quote entries (which seems to be a hopeless enterprise anyway, given the massive volume of the diary); therefore, I quote here only the last lines from Ortutay's diary, recorded in June 1977, when he was already heavily suffering from kidney problems:

Once again, there were long gaps, I had no time or inclination to take notes, although there were a few bitter topics. Judit Kárász died; she committed suicide.[5] *Since she came home from Bornholm in 1948 – she asked for it – I got her a job, but we didn't know how much she was a bride of death. Since she returned home, she has tried to commit suicide three times* [...] *We loved Her very much, but this Sunday when we were with the Barótis,*[6] *we didn't say a word about Her. We simply couldn't talk about Her, as if we were all underlining our responsibility with this silent mourning* [...] *In the meantime, I was back at the Zsebők Clinic with my lousy kidneys* [...] *They examined me, held a consultation* [...], *and then gave me the verdict: what I must eat to keep in good condition, because my kidneys cannot be operated on: both are in an equally bad state, but the death sentence is postponed for the time being, I must eat heavily, rest more, etc. etc. I missed a discussion with the Finnish (Lauri Honko et al.), and cancelled a trip to the Soviet Union. The rest we'll see; let's keep peeing diligently* (Ortutay, Gy., 2010b: 463–464).

5 Judit Kárász (1917–1977), born in Szeged in a Jewish family, was a photographer, studied at École de la Photographie in Paris and at Bauhaus School of Art, Design and Architecture in Dessau, then worked for the DEPHOT photo agency in Germany. She was a member of the Young Artists' College of Szeged in the 1930s. Between 1935 and 1948 she lived in Denmark, on the island of Bornholm, then returned to Hungary. https://bauhauskooperation.com/wissen/das-bauhaus/koepfe/biografien/biografie-detail/person-596 (accessed 1 February 2025)

6 Dezső Baróti (1911–1994) was a literary historian, member of the Young Artists' College, and Ortutay's close friend. He was Rector of the University of Szeged during the 1956 revolution, signing a petition asking for international help during the Soviet invasion. He was sentenced to prison by the Kádár regime. Ortutay tried to intervene on his behalf, but unsuccessfully. After prison, Baróti worked as a literary historian, museologist, and translator. He was not allowed to teach any longer.

The Early Reception of Ortutay's Diary

The forewords to Ortutay's diary were dated March 2009 and the first volume of the diary was released in May 2009, just before the traditional festive book fair held every June. The publication of Gyula Ortutay's diary was reported by the National News Agency and subsequently covered by most newspapers, making it one of the highlights of the book week. The coverage was extensive, with daily newspapers, political, cultural, and literary weeklies, and magazines publishing short and lengthy reviews of Ortutay's diary. The book made its way onto literary bestseller lists. Suddenly, there was a rarely seen interest in the work of a folklore scholar.

This interest of the reading public stemmed from two main factors: first, the "secret" nature of the diary, which naturally intrigues readers by providing a glimpse into something hidden, and offering exclusive information; and second, the character of Ortutay himself. His diary was written during the prewar period, throughout the Second World War, and during both the fascist and communist dictatorships. It presents the perspective of someone primarily known as a scholar who also had access to information from the inner circles of politics. Additionally, Ortutay maintained extensive connections within the academic and artistic communities at a time when public discourse was strictly controlled. This privileged access to information allowed him to acquire knowledge not readily available to others. Moreover, Ortutay's diary represented one of the first examples of ego-documents from the postwar intelligentsia that engaged in politics, paving the way for many more professional editions to follow.[7] Furthermore, the reflections, corrections, and debates (e. g. Vajda, 2010) about certain information and opinions published in Ortutay's diary – whether in the text itself or its annotated apparatus – contributed to its broad reception and ongoing impact.

The Reviews

In total, more than thirty reviews of Gyula Ortutay's diary have been published. Below, I summarise the main aspects of this critical reception. The reviewers included aestheticians, writers, journalists, historians, and (a small number of) ethnographers. Since I cannot present all the reviews, I focus on the more detailed and analytical ones. Generally, the recurring themes and motifs from the reviews are as follows:

7 Two such editions were the diaries of István Király and Pál Pándi, two communist literary historians undertaking political roles who had a close relationship with György Aczél, the leader of the cultural policy in the Kádár era. Their diaries were published in the *Tények és Tanúk* [Facts and Witnesses] series of the Magvető Publishing House, the most prestigious literary publishing house in Hungary (Király, 2017; Pándi, 2022). The reception of these two diaries was not as extended and harsh as that of Ortutay's diary.

1. Ortutay's diary features little mention of academia, art, literature, or reading experiences. Instead, it primarily focuses on interpersonal relations, intrigues, and tactics in science policy and politics, along with events from his private life.
2. As a historical source, the diary is valuable because it provides insights from the socialist–communist top management; however, it lacks coverage of significant historical–political events especially in those periods when Ortutay held a high-ranking political position.
3. Ortutay writes in a harsh, mocking, and contemptuous manner about a vast number of his contemporaries; he often expresses his fatigue or disgust.
4. Ortutay emerges as a very ambitious, vain person craving instant positive feedback.
5. He demonstrates surprising openness and self-reflection, frequently expressing self-recrimination for his personality traits (such as vanity) and for having wasted his life by choosing politics over science.
6. Ortutay was a secret member of the Communist Party; he was a crypto-communist. (This information had formerly been published between 2003 and 2008 but became widely known due to the diary.)[8]
7. Ortutay was surrounded by informers/agents who reported on him to the State Security Services.
8. The description of Ortutay's numerous extramarital affairs and various secret relationships alienated several reviewers while some reviewers noted that these affairs had also been also a source of concern for the puritanical János Kádár and his party and likely contributed to Ortutay's relegation to a minor role in politics.
9. His friendship with the poet Miklós Radnóti served as a moral yardstick for Ortutay, contrasting his own moral shortcomings. Some reviewers noted that the entry describing the exhumation of Miklós Radnóti in 1946 was a poignant highlight of the diary.
10. Reviewers acknowledge Ortutay's talent, professional qualities, and the quality of his writing.
11. The lengthy notes attached to the volumes were considered redundant, incomplete, or misleading.
12. Many reviewers expressed gratitude to Tamás Ortutay for the courageous decision to publish his father's diary.

The reviewers' attitudes towards the diary varied: perplexity, disappointment, rejection, derision, contempt, and aversion. These attitudes are also indicated to some extent by the titles: *The Speck in the Eye of Others* (O. A., 2009), *Notes of an Amoral Intellectual* (N. N., 2009), *Lost Generations* (Ungvári, 2009), *The Morality and Amorality of the Writer and Writing* (Rónay, 2010), *Going by Volvo into Communism: Gyula Ortutay and His Little Bit Ashamed Diary* (Bölcs, 2010a), *The Diary of*

8 The relevant sources are summarized by Révész, 2009.

Disillusionment: Gyula Ortutay on Honor Guard (Bölcs, 2010b), *Nice Old Gentleman?* (Szilágyi, Zs., 2010), *Concise Hungarian Ethnography and Folkloristics* (Ungvári, 2010),[9] *Vanity Fair* (Szalay, 2010), *On the Slope: the Journey of Gyula Ortutay from Ethnography to the Second Line of Kádár's Regime* (Pethő, 2010),[10] *Once upon a Time: Tutus, the Vainest Politician* (Solymár, 2010), *Gyula Ortutay: the Grand Master of Careerism* (Pelle, 2010), *Tutus, "The Progressive Intellectual"* (Pelle, 2011).[11] In summary, Ortutay's public image was much more favourable before the diary's release than after.

Out of the more detailed reviews, the one by Péter Nádas, published in a political–cultural weekly, undoubtedly stands out as it elevated Ortutay's diary beyond the scope of academic interior affairs. Nádas was, and still is, regarded as one of the most significant, internationally renowned writers in Hungarian literature. He rarely publishes reviews, and, in addition to being a prominent literary figure, he also attested his moral integrity. Nádas worked as photographer–journalist in the 1960s, but upon the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, facing the moral corruptness of the Socialist regime, at 26, he decided to quit his job immediately. He left the capital, entered internal exile for decades and broke away from the state. He was banned from publishing anything for eight years and could only do so later under strict supervision. In his review essay (*A Life on the Run – the Symptomatic Significance of the Diary of Gyula Ortutay)*, Péter Nádas drew comparisons between Ortutay's diary and those of other authors such as Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, André Gide, and Sándor Márai. He characterized Ortutay's diary as being marked by a lack of autonomy and the presence of emptiness, narcissism, and an insatiable desire for validation. According to Nádas, this diary serves as a document of the evolution of mentality, carrying a symptomatic meaning. Ortutay's identity was "first eroded and then swallowed up by these eras". Nádas observes that the diarist, preoccupied with intrigues, "squandered emotional and moral capital throughout his life". Ortutay criticized himself repeatedly, yet it ultimately amounts to an empty confession. His diary reflects a pattern of self-deception. Nádas also observes that Ortutay:

> *escaped to confront the cold and brutal reality that he had contributed to for decades, day after day. He recognizes this, but he escapes his dwindling ambitions through erotic adventures. However, these distractions cannot rescue his consciousness from the overwhelming absence and pestilent boredom imposed by dictatorship. While*

9 *Concise Hungarian Ethnography and Folkloristics*: a reference to Ortutay's popular radio lectures and the resulting book, which was produced with the help of Ortutay's students.

10 The journalist used the syntagm "political prostitution" when describing Ortutay's career and political activity.

11 *Tutus* was Ortutay's nickname, derived from his surname. He was called Tutus by his peers (and definitely not by his students, or subordinate colleagues, who often referred to him as "the Boss"). *Tutus* sounds in Hungarian as if it was the name of some friendly dog.

adventure and deception serve as a means of escaping despair and potential suicide, they also expose him to both imaginary and real ailments. These are afflictions that even his attentive doctors are unable to alleviate. Few things more hellish than his last entries have been written in a diary or memoir in Hungarian. (Nádas, 2010; the essay was republished in Nádas' volumes of his essays, Nádas, 2011; Nádas, 2019)

Sándor Radnóti, an aesthete, philosopher, and literary critic, was one of the few Hungarian intellectuals who publicly criticized the ruling regime in the Kádár era and was sanctioned for it. He signed the petition (as did Nádas) sent to the Presidential Council of Hungary in 1979, in which they spoke out against the verdicts of the Prague trial of the Charter 77 representatives and demanded the release of the convicts. Radnóti was dismissed from his post in 1980 and unemployed for ten years. After 1990, he was a professor at the Aesthetics Department of ELTE. Radnóti summed up his opinion about Ortutay's diary as follows:

A significant, shocking, poignant read, one of the most important documents of the Kádár era – from the pen of a man who lost his significance and became weightless [...] *What makes his diary a significant document is that there is little self-deception in it. It seems that precisely this secret diary, which only became public posthumously, in which Ortutay wrote the truth, was the shelter of his self-esteem. He was also a helpful man, and if his immense vanity was not abused or was even fanned, then he arranged many things for those who turned to him for help. (It rarely occurs to him, of course, that an endlessly corrupt and feudal world makes his successful interventions possible).* (Radnóti, 2009, 2010; republished in a contracted form in Radnóti, 2018).

Péter György, an aesthete and Director of the Institute for Art Theory and Media Research at ELTE, examined Ortutay's diary from a comparative perspective. His essay *(Renowned Men Amongst Each Other)* is likely the only in-depth analytical study of Ortutay's diary that does not focus primarily on its content or judge the morality of the diarist. Instead, it approaches the diary as a genre, examining the conventions and rhetoric of diary writing by analysing the diaries of influential intellectuals from the socialist period.[12] The diaries he discussed – written over decades by writers and scholars (including Ortutay, István Király, Ferenc Karinthy, and György Rónay) – were composed by individuals well-versed in text creation, the diary genre, and its mechanisms of influence. "All four texts were written precisely for what is happening now; their subsequent use and reading corresponded unintentionally but accurately to the authors' intentions," György notes. He continues:

12 Such an approach and similar questions (related to the genre and function of diary, or the possibility/impossibility of writing a review about a diary at all) were raised by literary historians and critics in the reviews published about the diaries of the aforementioned István Király and Pál Pándi.

The diarists perceived their entries as a by-product of their life's work, a tactical tool for preserving their legacies after death, especially since each had plenty of work published during their lifetime. Despite this, they approached diary writing with serious self-discipline, adhering to the logic of the autobiographical pact – the necessity of maintaining an appearance of honesty for the reputations they sought to uphold over time – while also engaging in self-censorship. They believed it was their responsibility to explain themselves and their actions to future generations. However, what they thought about themselves differed from the personas presented in their published works, and this distinction could only be clarified and interpreted through additional texts they had written. (György, 2018)

Another of György's significant reflections highlighted that intellectuals who assumed a public role in the autocratic regime often resembled court figures. Ortutay, in particular, was perceived as essentially a court man in this context. He

was well aware of the rules of the game: as long as the Party needed him, it provided everything he had achieved – his numerous posts, travel privileges, holidays, cars, chauffeurs, and a villa. The duration of the Party's need for him depended partly on his actions and partly on the shifting dynamics of intrigue, denunciation, and betrayal among the many court figures. It was a game in which he participated, characterized by uncertain outcomes. There was no world outside for the people within the court, and reality ceased to exist. (György, 2018).

The review by Krisztián Ungváry, historian and researcher of Hungary's twentieth-century military and political history and the history of state security services, was published under the title *Moral Asylum*. Ungváry's starting point is that the "godfathers" of the Kádár era, who had the status of "fellow-traveller intellectuals", were not the real masters of politics and, therefore, "were left to the gossip, intrigue, and chess games whose shocking tapestry this diary records". Ungváry considered Ortutay's diary to be a unique work of historiography and, from Ortutay's point of view, a major work which for Ortutay, "who had an avid fascination for politics and power", was probably more important than his academic works. Like Sándor Radnóti, Ungváry interpreted the diary as a refuge "where Ortutay could try to unite a world torn apart". The diary was the place where Ortutay's utterances were not to be defined by his public roles. Ungváry also pointed out that Ortutay's diary is an essential document to study the workings of the State Security Office, as it attests to the surveillance of the political elite of the Kádár regime (see Horváth, Apor, Mark, *Eds.*, 2017). This is also telling because although the State Security Office did keep a file on Ortutay, it was destroyed in 1964. After 1962, collecting data on citizens (especially party members) without a specific operational purpose was strictly forbidden: "They could only do so at the express request of a top client." From this point of view, therefore, the motive of secrecy penetrating Ortutay's diary is understandable and

may explain why entries are missing for months or even years during particularly intense periods of political and scientific–political activity. It may also explain why Ortutay's opinions on specific political issues in his diary are perceived as ambiguous, vague, or even slavish, as if he were writing an editorial (Ungváry, 2010).

According to historian Pál Pritz (*Gyula Ortutay, the diary of a homo politicus)*, Ortutay was a brilliant mind, overly aware of his abilities ("he had an orbital ego"), whose habitus would have predestined him to be a politician, but whose knowledge and talent were too excellent to push him into first place within the Rákosi or Kádár regime. But his seeming non-party status, in addition to his abilities, served the regime's public image well. Pritz derived Ortutay's diary writing from his Catholic upbringing: having been educated at a Piarist school, Ortutay was well-acquainted with the rituals and effects of spiritual practices, including confession. He intended his diary to serve as a historical source, prompting Pritz to emphasize the importance of source criticism in evaluating its contents (Pritz, 2017).

Although the non-public reception of Ortutay's diary was very intense among scholars of folklore studies and ethnography, only a few of them shared their views on the subject publicly. One notable exception is the review by Miklós Szilágyi, Deputy Director of the Institute of Ethnology founded by Ortutay. Szilágyi knew Ortutay personally; he was both his colleague and a student of Béla Gunda, whom Ortutay did not like at all. Nevertheless, during his tenure as minister, Ortutay appointed Gunda to head the other ethnography department in Hungary. Szilágyi began his presentation by emphasizing that, contrary to the extreme opinions that had emerged in recent years, Ortutay was "neither a saint nor a devil". He argued that it is essential to acknowledge Ortutay's contributions because "today's discipline would be unintelligible without a constant awareness of his many initiatives, his founding of institutions, and his decades of professional leadership. Ortutay is with us whether we like it or not". In Szilágyi's view, Ortutay was a brilliant scholar brimming with ideas, who dedicated much more time and energy to organizing science than to producing his major scholarly works. The diary further reinforced Szilágyi's impression gained from a personal acquaintance that academic work was somewhat of an exile for Ortutay. Szilágyi also discussed the folklore of folklore studies, highlighting that some of the information in the diary was already known to a limited professional audience – as part of the oral tradition of the field – but became widely accessible through this publication. He raised questions about how the diary contributed to scholarship. On the one hand, Ortutay documented political folklore (such as jokes and gossip) methodically; on the other hand, he included, albeit in fewer instances, his comments on academic projects and works. Overall, however, there is minimal evidence of the young Ortutay's theoretical and methodological initiatives in the diary; his papers and books deserve to be reread instead. In Szilágyi's estimation, the diary presents Ortutay as a weak yet self-reflexive and self-critical person. "As a reader, one may experience a sense of perplexity; Ortutay's personality remains an enigmatic mystery" (Szilágyi, M., 2010; 2018).

In 2009 and 2010, two researchers in Hungarian ethnography were members of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and thus occupied a distinguished place within the discipline: Attila Paládi-Kovács, who wrote one of the forewords to Ortutay's diary, and László Kósa, who took his academic chair in 1999 with an inaugural lecture titled "Hungarian Ethnography and Folkloristics After 1945" (Kósa, 2000). Kósa, who published two reviews of Ortutay's diary, had been a staff member of the Institute of Ethnology directed by Ortutay, then he headed the Department of Cultural History at ELTE. In Kósa's view, Ortutay was a talented researcher with strong interpersonal skills; however, his ambitions did not align with his academic output, which is rarely cited today. Regarding Ortutay's political involvement, his role as Minister of Religion and Public Education had immensely damaging effects, mainly due to his decision to nationalize schools. Kósa characterizes Ortutay as embodying the politicization of the party fringes: a failed and disgraced politician marked by resentment and vanity who was aware of his "moral depravity", as his diary attests. Establishing the Institute of Ethnology can be seen as a significant step in institutionalizing the field. According to Kósa, this institution also represented a kind of "severance pay" for Gyula Ortutay, who had left politics and, given his public stature, was the only ethnographer/folklorist at the time allowed to establish such an institute (Kósa, 2009; Kósa, 2010).

József Liszka, Director of the Institute of Ethnology of the Forum Institute for Minority Research (Fórum inštitút pre výskum menšín) in Slovakia, was a student in Ortutay's department at ELTE in the latter half of the 1970s. He started his review with a personal experience narrative. Ortutay's illness prevented him from holding his courses and they were not personally acquainted, yet once Ortutay intervened on Liszka's behalf. When Liszka, as a student, faced obstruction from a drunk policeman during a fieldwork project in Central Hungary, the incident caught Ortutay's attention through indirect channels (József Liszka himself did not report this incident to Ortutay and did not ask for his intervention.) Using his contacts, Ortutay addressed the situation and held the policeman accountable for hindering one of his students' research. Liszka cited this as an example of Ortutay's generally known helpfulness. One may add that Ortutay may have recalled his experiences of having been escorted by gendarmes as a student in the 1930s during a fieldwork, which the authorities considered a suspicious activity. Liszka also reflected on the controversial and emotionally charged responses to Ortutay's diary. Most reviews focused on Ortutay's political views, roles, and machinations, while Liszka was more interested in the types of scholarly information accessible in the diary. He distinguished three categories: i) information on Ortutay's academic work; ii) data related to issues of science policy; and iii) personal (often gossipy) comments about fellow researchers. Despite this distinction, the information regarding scholarly research or significant research projects in the discipline led by Ortutay constitutes a negligible part of the diary. Nonetheless, the diary offers a selection of these insights, which Liszka presents, focusing on Ortutay's research in Czechoslovakia (Liszka, 2010).

Gyula Ortutay identified himself as a scholar of folktales. No review of his diary was published by any folklorists holding a position in folkloristics in Hungary and no mention was made of it in any periodicals within the field of Hungarian ethnography/folkloristics. The only trace of the publication of the diary of one of the chief authorities of the discipline appeared in the bulletin of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society, whose editor published a lengthy compilation of extracts from some of the published reviews. According to the editor's introduction the aim of the compilation was to draw attention to Ortutay's diary and to the reviews (Hála, 2011).

After the Diary

In 2010, in honour of the centenary of Gyula Ortutay's birth, the Institute of Ethnography at ELTE[13] proposed placing a bust of Ortutay in the university's lobby as part of the commemoration. The Dean of The Faculty of Humanities Council rejected this proposal, and issued a statement cancelling the invitation for the statue's placement, although the commemoration ceremony still took place.[14] The Dean described Ortutay as a divisive figure, noting that his role as a politician was controversial. That same year, the Department of Linguistics and Literature and the Ethnographic Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences organized a conference to mark Ortutay's 100th birthday, which coincided with the centenary of István Tálasi, the former head of the Department of Ethnography at ELTE. The emphatically stated goal of this commemorative conference was not to focus on the careers or works of Ortutay or Tálasi but rather to present the main trends in mid-twentieth-century Hungarian ethnography and folkloristics. Only one lecture specifically addressed Ortutay – delivered by Zsuzsanna Tátrai, titled "The Popularization of Folk Traditions and Ethnographic Knowledge Dissemination in the Work of Gyula Ortutay". Its author also utilized material from Ortutay's diary as a source for her lecture (Tátrai, 2011). Additionally, Ortutay was honoured with photo and book exhibitions in both Szeged and Szabadka (Beszédes, 2011; Voigt, 2011).

In the spring of 2015, Tamás Ortutay auctioned Gyula Ortutay's estate, which included various artefacts, documents, and photographs. A detailed photographic catalogue was prepared for the auction featuring manuscripts and photographs of ethnographic significance.[15] Notable items included the original manuscript of Mihály Fedics' collected tales, a folklore collection from the Szeklers of Bukovina in the early 1940s, a series of photographs of Mihály Fedics by Miklós Müller (Nicolás Muller), and documentation from the 1955–1956 fieldwork conducted in

13 The Institute of Ethnography at ELTE has two departments (Department of Folklore Studies and Department of Ethnography/Material Culture).

14 https://www.elte.hu/content/ortutay-gyula-centenarium.e.6853 (accessed 19 January 2025).

15 The catalogues of the sixty-fourth auction are available at the website of the Arte Gallery and Auction Office: https://www.arte.hu/regebbi-aukciok/ (accessed 12 January 2025).

Czechoslovakia. The proceeds from the auction supported the Green Point Environmental Foundation, which Tamás Ortutay had founded 25 years earlier. In conjunction with the auction, Tamás Ortutay displayed a maquette of his own work, Bibó's Freedom-Loving Statue, inspired by István Bibó's text, The Ten Political Commandments of a Freedom-Loving Man. This exhibition took place at the FUGA Budapest Center of Architecture, which hosted the auction. István Bibó was a law scholar and a classmate of Gyula Ortutay in the Piarist Grammar School; he served as a minister of state during the 1956 revolution and was later sentenced to life imprisonment during the Kádár era. Tamás Ortutay explained that in times of widespread corruption in the country there was a pressing need for works that promote public reconciliation.[16]

Also in 2015, the state-run Klebelsberg Centre for the Maintenance of Educational Institutions and the Ministry of Human Resources announced that the name "Gyula Ortutay Student Hostel" in Szeged would be changed and the name of Ortutay had to be deleted. This decision was made in light of a resolution from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, which suggested that naming public places after figures associated with any authoritarian regimes of the twentieth century should be stopped. The Ministry stated that using the name "Ortutay Student Hostel" did not comply with the Ministry's relevant decree. This announcement sparked intense debate in the Szeged City Assembly which received considerable media coverage, bringing Ortutay's political role back into focus.[17]

In 2018, folktales and folk legends connected to Ortutay's folklore collection in Czechoslovakia were published.[18] In 2019, sociologist Gyula Lencsés, relying on new sources he had uncovered in Great Britain, published a monograph on a research project of the Young Artists' College of Szeged conducted in Dudar, a west–central Hungarian village, in collaboration with the Institute of Sociology in London and Le Play House, Westminster, at the end of the 1930s. This book contained formerly unknown texts written by Ortutay (Lencsés, 2016; 2019). Attila Paládi-Kovács published a paper in 2024 in *Ethnographia*, the journal of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society, about Ortutay's political activity between 1938 and 1950. He concluded that, as a minister, Ortutay had been only a puppet in the hands of the Communist Party (Paládi-Kovács, 2024).

16 http://old.fuga.org.hu/ortutay-tamas-szobrasz-es-a-zold-pont-alapitvany/ (accessed 12 January 2025).

17 https://szegedma.hu/kozelet/2015/05/atnevezne-a-szegedi-ortutay-kollegiumot-a-klik (accessed 18 January 2025).

18 This book did not actually contain Ortutay's original collection, as his audio recordings had been destroyed during the siege of Magyar Rádió in October 1956. Following this loss, in 1957, Ferenc Sima, a linguist from the Hungarian Department at the University of Bratislava, revisited the exact locations and informants using Ortutay's surviving notes and created a typed record of folk poetry which came to be published as Ortutay's collection (Magyar, Varga, *Eds.*, 2018).

What Can Gyula Ortutay and His Diary Offer to Contemporary Students of Folkloristics?

While reading Ortutay's diary and the accompanying reviews, Dušan Šimko's foreword reminded me of his novel, *Esterházyho lokaj* [Esterházy's Footman] (Šimko, 2000). This connection triggered a series of associations related to the name Esterházy. A sentence from Péter Esterházy's novel, *Harmonia Caelestis*, also published in 2000, which recounts the centuries-long history of the Count Esterházy family, has become a sort of catchphrase in Hungarian culture over the past 25 years: "It is deucedly difficult, Sire, to tell a lie when you don't know the truth."[19] Clearly, no author of a study intends to lie; instead, they aim to uncover the truth. However, my overall reading experience of Ortutay's diary and the subsequent reviews has led me to question the common assumption among most reviewers that this diary has revealed the truth. While it is presumed that the published diary is a form of unveiling, allowing readers to understand and thus evaluate the "real" Ortutay, I do not find that conclusion so self-evident. I will elaborate on these dilemmas below.

The Cultic Rhetoric and its Critique: Advocates and Prosecutors

In light of all that I have presented above, and taking into account the possible biases and lack of nuance of my presentation, I think it is not an exaggeration to assert that Ortutay held a prominent position in postwar scholarship. He was regarded as a professional authority, and a kind of cultic rhetoric developed around him, broken by his diary's publication and its largely negative reception. In this context, speaking out becomes particularly difficult. Cultic rhetoric tends to suspend analytical approaches, and it seems to me that if any analytical attempt is made, it often automatically calls forth two sets of reactions and roles: that of the advocate and that of the prosecutor, leading to accusations or apologetic excuses. This creates a judicial context around criticism, accompanied by ethical judgments. In such a division of roles, analytical criticism becomes problematic because, among potential recipients, those who take on the role of defender usually interpret statements as accusations. In contrast, those who take on the role of accuser usually interpret statements as acquittal or excuses. As a result, discussions may cease altogether, replaced by silence, or any attempt to discuss the topic publicly becomes tied to the question of entitlement: who among the members of a given discipline has the authority to express an opinion on such sensitive issues in public?

19 Context: "[m]y father, this ferocious-looking baroque *grand seigneur* who was in a position, nay under obligation, to raise his eyes to Emperor Leopold, raised his eyes to Emperor Leopold, on his countenance an expression of solemnity, though his eyes, twinkling and mischievous, belied him as always, and he said, It is deucedly difficult, Sire, to tell a lie when you don't know the truth" (Esterházy, 2005a: 5).

Of course, we can tend to examine the oeuvre of a person, in this case, a scholar, without considering their other roles and without the enforcement of ethical considerations. However, in this particular case, we face a fundamental dilemma. Ortutay was not simply a researcher but a person of impact; he was a researcher with institutional power who happened to hold academic and political positions within an autocratic regime that restricted human rights, imposed an ideology defined by the state, and sanctioned those individuals who publicly contradicted it, effectively controlling the public and implementing censorship. As a result, Ortutay not only played a protective role, founding institutions and creating opportunities, but also legitimized the regime.[20] Ignoring this context undermines the experiences (or, the sacrifice) of those citizens who were marginalized or even criminalized for expressing political views that diverged from the state ideology under the same autocratic regime. This is a dilemma that, even if it cannot be solved, I think, has to be addressed.

Power Relations in Writing Research History

It is rare to find a research history that is a mere phonebook-like listing of the available data. A research history, in addition to the as-meticulous-as-possible exploration and arrangement of data, is also the narration of a story whose authors – however much they may strive for "pure" analytical presentation – by using pre- and post-temporality, creating causalities, and choosing protagonists and supporting characters assume a narrative position, namely that of a hidden omnipotent narrator. Research histories are, therefore, very often also acts of canonization. The narrators emphasize and positively evaluate those characters they retrospectively regard as progressive forerunners from their point of view, perspectives, and values. This process constructs a hidden teleological narrative at the end (or on the top) of which the author is positioned (Dávidházi, 1998). (Occasionally, a spectacular break with the forerunners is necessary to highlight the novelty of the author's approach and method.) A notable example of a powerful narrative in the history of research is Gyula Ortutay's evaluative overview of Hungarian folklore collections, published in the late 1930s (Ortutay, J., 1938). After 1945, as Ortutay occupied an increasingly crucial position in the institutional framework of the discipline, his evaluations shaped the canon of Hungarian folkloristics. They marginalized the research of negatively classified folklore collections and collectors, while Ortutay's approach and retrospective classifications were passed on without critical reflection.

Therefore, as a starting point, the writers of research histories indeed should make themselves and their readers aware of their perspectives and the position from which

20 Some types and motivations of intellectuals collaborating with and involved in autocratic/totalitarian political regimes in East Europe in the twentieth century are depicted in a parabolical manner by Miłosz, 1955.

they speak and ask questions.[21] This approach challenges the traditional expectations of academic writing, which often demands "objective", independent analysis and views statements about the author as intrusive, presumptuous, and unnecessary foregrounding. However, clarifying one's position helps to dismantle the image of the omnipotent narrator in retrospective narratives.

Additionally, when constructing a narrative about the history of research, it is important to acknowledge a seemingly trivial yet significant point: there exists an unequal power dynamic between the narrator and the figures they highlight. The narrator is alive, writing, evaluating, and categorizing, while the subjects, often prominent figures from the past, are mostly deceased. This means that these historical figures are voiceless and cannot respond to how they are depicted. I think, it is worth approaching this dynamic with respect and a commitment to understanding the internal logic behind various practices and concepts.

Some Aspects of Writing and Reading a Diary

In the present case of Ortutay's diary and its reception, the burden of responsibility is particularly great since I present autobiographical, often confessional texts which passed from the private to the public sphere, as well as the interpretations of these texts, in such a way that the majority of potential readers of my paper do not have access to these source texts due to language barriers. Whatever opinions the reviewers published about Ortutay's diary, Hungarian readers had and have the opportunity to form their own interpretation of the diary by reading the text. Non-Hungarian readers are deprived of this opportunity. Therefore, it is essential to emphasize that the summary I have given above reflects my perspective and understanding (obviously influenced by the maximum length a journal may provide for an individual paper), but it is difficult, if not impossible, for foreign readers to control my statements or accounts due to the inaccessibility of the sources. This is the basic ethical dilemma of this paper, which I cannot resolve; I can only make this dilemma transparent.

I may be one of the few readers who have read Gyula Ortutay's diary at least twice. Like many other researchers in Hungarian folkloristics, ethnography, ethnology, or anthropology, I read it upon its publication, along with most of the published reviews. Consequently, I was aware of the main critiques it had received. Rereading the diary

21 In this case, for example, I, due to my age, did not know Gyula Ortutay personally. I am a folklorist, a researcher of folktales, as was his chief scholarly identity. I studied at the department he founded and led in Budapest, and I have been working at the Institute of Ethnology (belonging to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences until 2019), also founded by Ortutay. My basic problem with the silence surrounding Ortutay's oeuvre is that, although there have been analyses of Ortutay's role in socio-ethnographic studies (e. g., Sárkány, 2000), his folkloristic work has not been the subject of similar analyses in the past decades, although they were closely intertwined. The history of Hungarian folklore studies simply cannot be understood and told without a philological and critical review and reinterpretation of Ortutay's oeuvre.

with this background in mind provided a distinct experience, as my expectations the second time differed from those of readers encountering Ortutay's diary for the first (and possibly last) time. I would like to share just two impressions from rereading the diary. Firstly, its value as a source for the research history of the discipline seems more significant than I initially thought. This appreciation may stem from the fact that upon the publication of the diary, such expectations had been higher for an ego-document of a person identified primarily as a scholar, and the critical reception somewhat eclipsed the possibility of this reading. The second one is that almost all the negative criticisms of Ortutay are contained in the diary itself – in Ortutay's own words. However critical the reviews were, Ortutay was at least as critical of himself. This diary contains a constant oscillation between self-praise and self-criticism, the amplitude of which was striking, as well as the repetition of self-criticism, the repetition of the need to change, and the inability to change.

Rereading the reviews of Ortutay's diary uncovers several assumptions that may deserve further consideration. These assumptions, among other things, concern the genre of the diary, the identity-derailing consequences of the compromised father figure, the relationship between science and politics, and the role of the scholar and the politician. As I mentioned above, many readers who publicly formed an opinion or judgment regarded the diary as a space for revealing the *true* self because the diary is a genre where the implied reader of the author's text is her/himself. This well-known autobiographical pact ensures a diary's authenticity – if readers believe the author was considering an audience beyond him/herself, the raw, "real" revelations may become constructions in the eyes of potential readers. This is true to some extent, as a diary serves as a kind of confession – a record of feelings, thoughts, and experiences relevant to the author.

At the same time, one should also remember that, as Péter György referred to, intellectuals are familiar with the mechanisms of text creation and understand how texts are received by their audience. Additionally, one should consider the characteristics of the diary genre as well, as the genre regulates how information is structured and presented in a text. For instance, confessional writing focuses on sharing the sins and mistakes, while fairy tales conclude with the phrase "and they lived happily ever after", avoiding detailed descriptions of that happiness. Fairy tales are primarily centred around the hero's adventures and tribulations. Similarly, as noted in the well-known opening sentences of *Anna Karenina*, novels are typically built on conflicts instead of the depiction of happiness. In this way, diaries primarily serve to express problems, conflicts, and struggles while recording events. Though diaries may include moments of contentment, happiness, and joy, these emotions are not the central focus of the genre. (Therefore, I find some recurring themes in Ortutay's diary particularly intriguing within this context, such as his reflections on his own "laziness" because these entries about sunbathing, observing nature, mere existence, and contemplation stand in contrast to the hyperactive social bustle associated with and created by him.)

Reading a diary creates a specific experience: although it is an ego-document – an unedited, or seemingly unedited – "raw material", it is still perceived as a kind of narrative construction, in which the diarist is the narrator and also the main protagonist, into whose world the reader is gradually drawn. In a fictional narrative, the reader follows the main protagonist's journey from the narrator's perspective and identifies with this perspective. Not having the opportunity to do so (because, for example, the disagreeable protagonist is also the narrator) will provoke a much more vehement rejection from the readers than if the same protagonist's story is revealed to them in a third-person narrative. The reviewers, for example, repeatedly mentioned Ortutay's vanity; one of the reviews was even entitled *Vanity Fair*. I think that reading Becky Sharp's story that is presented as *fiction* by a third-person narrator is much less likely to provoke strong emotions than an *autobiographical* first-person narrative related by any Becky Sharp.

As for the readers' expectations, while being immersed in the world of a diary, one of the most controversial parts of Ortutay's diary was his account of his numerous extra-marital relationships – sometimes written about with poetic nuance but sometimes with so many and keen-eyed details as if a camera had been present. Ortutay always wrote respectfully about his wife, while he reported on his sexual affairs without self-flagellation. Although these were secret affairs, they were known to the state administration through informers (moreover, Ortutay's long-term partners were even targeted for recruitment by the state security services). My impression is that one reason for the bewildered, dismissive, or even aversive reactions from readers of Ortutay's diary seems to be that reading about these affairs unavoidably places the readers in the role of voyeurs – though they were already in that role. Any reader of any diary is a voyeur. In this case, this awareness of their voyeurism makes readers uncomfortable. The individuals involved, such as the betrayed wife and various long-term or casual partners, were drawn out of their private lives, revealing such aspects that arguably should remain outside the public eye. Persons who are transformed into "characters" in a diary that is perceived by the readers as a narrative construct (when a text begins to function as auto-fiction) are drawn out from their safe space without their consent; diary is a dangerous genre in this respect.

Thus, due to the conventions and mechanisms of diary writing, I believe it is an illusion to think that a diary can provide *complete* knowledge of a person(ality). Of course, this does not deny the possibility of forming an opinion (judgment) about a person based on their diaries. Still, for me, a diary is only one type of source that should be investigated with critical reflection.

A Person of Impact in Communicative Memory

When examining the life and work of a person of impact from the recent past, this exploration occurs within the realm of communicative memory rather than cultural memory. The interpretation of events by those who experienced them is shaped by

their relationships, individual experiences, and the resulting opinions, whether publicly expressed or, more often, not. Additionally, we must consider that a person's influence extends beyond the *texts* they wrote – academic writings or personal documents such as diaries – despite the typical focus of historical research. Therefore, if the history of research is not articulated in the usual simple past but rather in the present perfect, it should reflect the idea that opinions about a researcher (or even about his oeuvre) within a discipline may be shaped not only by the meaning or value attributed to their surviving (manuscript or published) *texts* but also by the *personal experiences* of those within the interpretative community. This includes individuals interacting directly with the scholar, in contrast to those lacking such personal contact.

This situation is somewhat similar to Ortutay's approach to folktales, which claimed that former research on this topic had disconnected the folktale from its storyteller, focusing solely on the *text*, whereas folktales come to life through *performance*. This means that not only the text itself but also the storyteller's narrative and dramatic skills, as well as the interaction with the audience, are crucial to the quality and impact of the orally transmitted tale. In other words, a tale told in a performance cannot be reduced to the text; doing so would strip it of its essential characteristics.

In Ortutay's case, his influence within the discipline extends beyond his written texts. It encompasses the various opportunities, forms of support, and interventions he offered – such as jobs, scholarships, travelling abroad, publishing, and positions – that arose from his power position. Ortutay appears to have been exceptionally helpful, often exceeding expectations for an average leader, a theme noted even in critiques of his work. Additionally, we should consider aspects typically excluded from evaluations of a scholar's contributions and influence, as they are not deemed scientifically relevant. These include personal attributes such as charisma or networking skills. Such qualities shape the perception of a researcher, but they may not be apparent to those without personal interaction, as they are often orally transmitted through stories, which can fade and become irrelevant over generations; in the end only the written text remains. For instance, in the 1960s, much of Ortutay's writing consisted of forewords and afterwords related to his roles in cultural and scientific policy. His colleagues at the Institute of Ethnology would ask him, "And when will you write a 'middleword' after all those forewords and afterwords?" (Paládi-Kovács, 2018: 141). This remark underscores that, although Ortutay was regarded as an authority in a respected position, his informal communicative style probably stood in contrast to the more measured and rigid styles of other politicians and intellectuals; this atmosphere allowed for such playful questions to be raised. We may add that many of his contemporaries remember Ortutay for his engaging social demeanour, exceptional performance skills during lectures and speeches, quick perception, ability to see the bigger picture, strong managerial skills, and hot-tempered nature. This is just an example of how oral tradition (e.g., anecdotes and personal experience narratives) or oral history could also be taken into account after appropriate source criticism when the impact of a person is to be understood. Given that Ortutay was first and foremost

a scholar of folklore, such an approach to his oeuvre does not entail any serious deviation from the methods of folkloristics.

The Collapse of a Father Figure

My impression is that, in the case of Ortutay, the public reception of his diary – alongside a non-public reception within the discipline – has portrayed him as a politically and morally compromised individual. This perception, in turn, obstructs a thorough analytical examination of his scholarly work, a common issue when dealing with ethically problematic authors or artists. The neglect of Ortutay's oeuvre is particularly significant because he held considerable influence and was a father figure in his field. The terms "father" or "godfather" appear explicitly in various texts discussing Ortutay and his diary. This fatherly role can be interpreted not only in his interpersonal relationships with students and junior colleagues but also in the establishment and management of various institutions within the discipline – such as departments, research groups, book series, and journals – most of which were associated with him, highlighting his role as a founding father. While the father figure often embodies guidance and protection, a compromised founding father, by extension, seems to cast doubt on the integrity of the discipline as a whole.

Returning to the Esterházy examples, two years after the publication of *Harmonia Caelestis,* relating exquisitely the history of the most famous aristocratic family in Hungary through an extended father figure, Péter Esterházy published his book, *Javított kiadás: Melléklet a Harmonia cælestishez* [Revised Edition: An Appendix to Harmonia Caelestis] (Esterházy, 2003; Esterházy, 2005b). It is a reworking of the traumatic experience of learning that his father had collaborated with the state security authorities, writing reports for them during the socialist era. *Revised Edition* presents a first-person narrative of how a compromised father shatters the author's identity, and the desperate floundering struggle to rebuild it. The covert collaboration with authoritarian regimes raises moral questions so severe that the entire self, personality, life, and work of the person involved is obscured by the stigma of being an informer/agent or, in Ortutay's case, a crypto-communist.

Scholars and Politicians, Science and Politics

Another premise in the reviews is that the roles of the scholar and the politician seem to be incompatible or barely compatible, and that the role of a scholar is more valuable than that of a politician. In the case of Ortutay, some reviewers not only perceived him as a failed politician; if he had achieved success, that is, stayed in the frontline of politics, it would still be viewed as a decline, as politics eventually ate up his scholarly oeuvre. In the short term, political engagement is beneficial, as the connections and

positions gained through politics can provide resources for academic pursuits and act as a support system. In the long term, political involvement hinders academic work. Aside from the ethical dilemmas associated with participating in an autocratic regime and thereby legitimizing it, there is a noticeable distinction in value between scholarly and political activities. This distinction is often taken for granted. Nonetheless, it is not necessarily so – there may be scholars whose works are mediocre, as well as cultural politicians who do excellent work, even if, for historical reasons, there has been limited firsthand experience of the latter in Eastern Europe.

The prevailing view is that Ortutay was a scholar who embraced a political role, yet this involvement in politics ultimately hindered his academic achievements. In 1975, after evaluating the tendencies in contemporary Hungarian literature, Ortutay made the following remark in his diary:

> *When I have an inspection like this, I suddenly feel ashamed. What judgment will be passed on me, not by formal eulogies, but by such meditations. What a 'missed' opportunity my life will be considered; actually, I consider it a missed opportunity. I could have been an outstanding folklorist and I could have been an outstanding cultural politician. I achieved something of all this. Little or not enough? It was only partly up to me* [....] *You can't be a leader of cultural policy for two or three years. It takes decades.* (Ortutay, Gy., 2010b: 397)

This entry allows us to look at Ortutay's career differently. One could approach Ortutay's career by viewing him as primarily a politician or a cultural politician. This perspective aligns with his character and ambitions. He just did not have the opportunity to play a significant political role until 1945 due to his views being incompatible with the prevailing ideology of the establishment. When he finally did enter politics, it was during two autocratic regimes, both of which had leaders who, for various reasons, did not tolerate the ambitious and popular Ortutay in a prominent political position for long.

Ortutay's oeuvre may highlight the relationship between academia and politics, encouraging a broader exploration of their historical interactions. In Hungary, few attempts have been made to investigate this within the discipline, as such inquiries are often viewed as insinuations. The underlying belief is that the assumption of an interplay between politics and science, in any context, may undermine the integrity of the discipline itself.

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