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Revisiting the Life Story of Júlia Rajk

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I had spent three years of my life, between 1998 and 2001, writing the life story of Júlia Rajk. The reason I have chosen her life as the subject of my work is that in the post-World War II period (1949–1989) there were two names which were silenced in Hungary. These names, after the execution of their holders, were erased from documents and history. They were airbrushed from photographs and those who knew them in person might fear imprisonment and execution for pronouncing these names loudly. The first name was László Rajk (1909–1949), whose rehabilitation and reburial on 6 October 1956 proved to be a rehearsal for the Hungarian Revolution of 23 October 1956. The second name was Imre Nagy (1896–1958), the Prime Minister of the Hungarian Revolution, who was also executed by the order of János Kádár (1912–1989) in 1958. Milan Kundera characterized the resistance against communism as a fight with the power of memory against forgetting. In twentieth-century Hungarian history we cannot name anybody else who fought with such eloquence against the official versions of forgetting as Júlia Rajk. She had to fight to save from obscurity her own name, the name of her son, and the name of her husband. Júlia Rajk fought fiercely and

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bravely for the reburial and rehabilitation of these two men who are now present in every history textbook. She, on the other hand, is not. She was forgotten until 1989 for, besides being a woman, not being communist enough, and then after 1989 she was omitted from the canon because she was too much of a communist. That was a good reason to write her life story in the hope of writing her back into history.

My book about her life was published in Hungarian, in German, and in Bulgarian.¹ I also published two peer-reviewed articles based on the monograph, in English and in French, as I was commissioned to contribute to a special issue on history of women during communism and to a book on the de-Stalinization process.² These two topics, which already frame her life story, open up a space to talk about the importance of women from Central Europe before a larger audience.

Writing the book was emotionally demanding as it was a story of betrayal, surveillance, violence, and death. I interviewed the only son of Júlia Rajk for the book, László Rajk (born 1949). After the last interview I told him I had planned to complete the manuscript because I want to let him go on with his life as quickly as possible. He smiled at me bitterly and told me that now I know how he felt his entire life. This smile actually was very informative when I was writing the book as it reminded me that I can never be an insider or understand the feelings of the protagonists. Also, reviewing the changes in writing women's history of the past fifteen years proves how wrong I was when I thought I could disentangle myself from my subject quickly. In this paper, I will discuss the possible frames of narration of life story of a communist woman, the processes for how the intersection of different frames of narration make her life story invisible. I will also discuss what has changed, as far as sources and narrative frameworks are concerned, in the past fifteen years, that is, since I sent off the proofs with the hope that the book would have been finished. As a biographer you always remain inside the life story of your subject and you follow whatever happens after with the subject of your book: she always remains a point of reference but without the illusion of understanding her life story.

1 Andrea Pető, *Rajk Júlia* (Budapest: Balassi, 2001), in German: *Geschlecht, Politik und Stalinismus in Ungarn. Eine Biographie von Júlia Rajk* (Herne: Gabriele Schäfer Verlag, 2007), in Bulgarian: *Julia Rajk* (Sofia: Altera, 2010).

2 The chapters are: "De-Stalinisation in Hungary from a Gendered Perspective: The Case of Júlia Rajk," in *De-Stalinising Eastern Europe. The Rehabilitation of Stalin's Victims after 1953*, ed. Kevin McDermott, Matthew Stibbe (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 46–67); "Hongrie 1956, Julia Rajk ou le pouvoir de deuil," *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* 1 (2015): 153–165; "Hungary 1956: Júlia Rajk or the Power of Mourning," *Clio. Women. Gender History* 1 (2015): 153–164.

Júlia Rajk, a Biography Written in 2001

There was only one woman in the Hungarian history whose destiny it was to have as personal enemies the two most influential Hungarian politicians of the post-WWII period, Mátyás Rákosi (1892–1971) and János Kádár. Together they masterminded the execution of her husband, László Rajk, after the first Hungarian show trial in 1949. Her husband, a legendary fighter in the Spanish Civil War and the leader of the home-grown communist movement in Hungary, was the iron-fisted Minister of Interior, who introduced the decree banning women's organizations in the country, among other things.³

Júlia Rajk was born Júlia Földes in 1914 in a lower working class family with a strong communist tradition. In the 1930s she lived for a while in Paris and became active in promoting Red Aid for Spain. She re-entered Hungary at the beginning of the Second World War. She saved the lives of Jewish communists by providing false papers. She worked illegally for the Communist Party before being arrested in December 1944 with her partner whom she had to take care of (as a Party task). That partner was the leader of the illegal Communist Party in Hungary, László Rajk. It was quite common to assign communist women a caring role for important male comrades by the Party independently of their emancipatory ideology. Between 1945 and 1949 as a wife of the famous communist minister of interior, Lászlóné Rajk (Mrs. László Rajk) was a member of the party elite as she worked as a leading functionary in the communist-controlled Democratic Association of Hungarian Women (MNDSZ). The couple was living the life of a busy professional couple. Júlia was eager to have a child and she gave birth to one in January 1949. The godfather of László junior was János Kádár, who has been the successor of László Rajk in the seat of Minister of Interior, when László was appointed to the unimportant place of Minister of Foreign Affairs of a country which did not have any foreign policy other than a friendly relationship with the Soviet Union. László Rajk was not a Muscovite, he did not speak Russian, so he was lacking the qualifications required for this job and therefore became an ideal first victim of the Stalinist show trials in Hungary.

In Júlia's trial, which took place in March 1950, nine months after her arrest, she received a five-year prison sentence, having been convicted of supporting her husband's so-called "subversive policy." The son of Júlia and László, also called László, was a five-month-old baby when his mother was arrested in June 1949. The infant was taken to an orphanage and renamed István Kovács, the most common name in Hungary.

3 See on this: Andrea Pető, *Women in Hungarian Politics 1945–1951* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

After she served her sentence and was released from prison as Lászlóné Györk (Mrs. László Györk), her name, and also her son's name, were changed without any consultation to erase the name of her husband from memory. Her appeals for official rehabilitation to the leaders of the Communist Party were signed by both names Rajk and Györk. She knew that her husband needed to be rehabilitated, having been recognized as a victim of a Stalinist show trial in 1949. In 1955, during Júlia's rehabilitation process, she fiercely fought for the right to use her own name: Ms. László Rajk. Júlia used her unquestionable and uncontested moral power as a widow of the innocently executed hero of the Hungarian communist movement to force the Communist Party leadership to begin and complete the rehabilitation of political prisoners, and her husband was buried with all possible official honors on 6 October 1956. The photo of the widow and her son taken at the funeral became famous throughout the world as a symbol of the victims of Stalinism.

The "language of grief" is first and foremost a women's language, and this gave Rajk her confidence. Standing up for her executed husband gave meaning to her own years in prison. As a wife fighting for the honorable burial of her husband, she was also raised above the controversies and dividing lines of Hungarian politics more generally. The struggle, however, did not end with the graveside photograph of Júlia accompanied by her son, taken at her husband's reburial at the Kerepesi cemetery in Budapest and published in the international press. The fact that a reburial was held inspired the leaders of the Hungarian Revolution, who saw that it was possible to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people for a "cause," using only the telephone. The implacability of Júlia Rajk and her insistence on the broadest publicity for her husband's reburial on 6 October 1956 rendered the event a psychological dress rehearsal for the 1956 Revolution.

On 4 November 1956, when the Soviet Army occupied Hungary, she asked for political refugee rights at the Embassy of Yugoslavia together with Imre Nagy, the Prime Minister of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and the members of Nagy's cabinet. Ms. Rajk was subsequently kidnapped and taken to Romania by the Soviets, together with Imre Nagy, and she spent two years there till she was given permission to return to Hungary as Júlia Rajk.

She was granted permission to return to Hungary in October 1958, and gradually became a key figure in the opposition movement, demanding the rehabilitation of Nagy and his fellow martyrs. After 1958, she became the Júlia, a real institution who always protected the weak against those who were abusing their power, negotiating with the Party leadership to protect anti-communist intellectuals. She organized the first NGO in Hungary, a dog shelter, after the ban on such associations in 1951. She also gathered signatures supporting the Charta 77, and campaigned against strengthening the abortion

law. She offered the compensation she received for the loss of her husband for a fund supporting talented university students, at a time when individual charity was not widely accepted. She worked as an archivist in the Hungarian National Archive till her retirement. She died of cancer in 1981 in Budapest.

Frames and Sources of Writing Life Stories of Communist Women

The life stories of women who joined the communist movement before WWII can be told in different frames, driven by the insight and politics of the historian and the aim of constructing a gendered political subjectivity. As there were very few women who actually held important positions in “politics proper,” they are described either as ruthless and savvy manipulators or as victims who believed in the good cause (i.e., communism), but allowed themselves to be misled by antidemocratic practice even as they were full of good intentions in promoting women’s rights.⁴ I based my work on the analysis of memoirs and interviews of Hungarian communist women active in the illegal movement before 1945 to show how they were silenced or confined to the narrative frames that did not challenge the patriarchal frame.⁵

When writing Júlia Rajk’s life story I had several options to choose from. I decided to base the narrative frame on the fight for her name, following the basic feminist fight for one’s own name.⁶ The political success and influence of Júlia Rajk was due to her explicitly non-political use of language. She spoke publicly as a mother and as a wife, undermining the disenchanting political discourse using Stalinist newspeak. Júlia was also the first practitioner of “anti-politics,” who built separate institutions in the semi-public sphere: ran a saloon discussing politics and recent gossip, a dog shelter, brought children of imprisoned comrades to cake shops, and the like.⁷ She institutionalized the informality and created institutions, as in Romania, as part of the Imre Nagy

4 Nanette Funk, “A Very Tangled Knot: Official State Socialist Women’s Organizations, Women’s Agency and Feminism in Eastern European State Socialism,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 4 (2014): 344–360.

5 Andrea Pető, “A Missing Piece: How Hungarian Women in the Communist Nomenclatura are Not Remembering,” in *Eastern Europe: Women in Transition*, ed. Irena Grudzińska-Gross, Andrzej Tymowski (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013), 145–155.

6 Denise Riley, *Am I That Name?: Feminism And the Category of ‘Women’ in History* (London: MacMillan, 1988).

7 Andrea Pető, Judit Szapor, “Women and the »Alternative Public Sphere«: Toward a New Definition of Women’s Activism and the Separate Spheres in East-Central Europe,” *NORA. Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 3 (2004): 172–182.

group organized school (1956–1958), the “Júlia tours” bus tours to the “West,” and used the power of conversation as a force of resistance.

At first glance it looks like an excellent life story that is easy to narrate. However, there are problems only the biographer encounters.

The first problem, as always, is related to sources. The first difficulty in writing life stories is the family as the gatekeeper of information. Her son, a well-known architect, stage designer, and prominent member of the democratic opposition, has the right to remain silent and to select what to share and what not to share with the researcher. His selectivity has changed during the past fifteen years. Furthermore, my heroine was not an intellectual, and there are no written sources apart from her handwritten prison testimony – political action was her self-writing. I could not get access to her private archive: her son said there is a big trunk in the attic consisting of all her papers but he does not want to open it.

The second issue is the iconoclasm of communists. Her husband, László Rajk, was a ruthless and talented communist who without a moment of hesitation destroyed the remaining democratic fabric of the Hungarian society, imprisoned opposition figures, and sent them to the Gulag. Therefore, sources about him, the minutes of his trial, and surveillance records have all been destroyed. And that impacted her as well.

The third issue is that Júlia was not a lovable and kind public personality as she was tall, harsh, and she knew everything better than anyone in public conversations. The major source of the biography I have written are oral history interviews which are more about changing narrative frames and self-representation of the interviewees than the couple themselves. By now, all the interviewees are dead, so there is no way to ask further questions.

The fourth problem is the framing. Usually, women’s life stories are narrated as *Bildungsroman*, as how the heroine is becoming more and more determined and ideologically more convinced. Julia Rajk’s life story should be presented differently. It is not a *Bildungsroman*, a story that developed out of her childhood experiences (her socialization) in a leftist working class family – her father was a soldier during the short lived communist revolution of 1919 and was on the watch list of the police after that. She was a committed social democrat, and a member of the underground Communist Party, and she remained so until her death in 1981. She always used her power – the power of a widow – as a victim of the show trials, to achieve what she wanted: from the rehabilitation of her husband to obtaining passports for dissidents. Her life story was an *Unbildungsroman*, a process of un-learning and of adapting to changing political circumstances while not giving up values. Her life story moved from illegal Communist Party activist to wife and widow and mother. It is also difficult to fit her life into the post-1989 feminist framework as she

was interested in and supported different issues such as freedom and democracy, not necessarily those which are labeled women's issues today, like domestic violence or LGBTQIT rights. However, in the last sixteen years major changes happened and they have altered the way Júlia Rajk's story can be written as far as sources and framing are concerned.

New Sources

As far as the sources are concerned, access to primary sources became easier during the past few years, but at the same time it became more difficult. Definitely in the past sixteen years more and more material has become available online as a consequence of the digital turn. Researchers do not need to travel to the archive anymore. Journals, newspapers, and documents about Júlia Rajk which I had no idea had covered her story, showed up on my screen after I have googled her name. This technical development will have a major impact on research. The primary sources which have been digitized will be used in research, like in this paper, while the non-digitized, like most of the Hungarian journals and newspapers published in the past decades, will be omitted and forgotten by researchers.

When I did my research for the book at the end of the 1990s I was sitting in the archives literally for years. Now I could not physically do that as recently the Hungarian government has relocated the collection of the national archives from the historical Castle District to a new archive to be built in the uncertain future. Due to the relocation no archival research can be done on documents produced after 1945 and no date has been set when it will be again possible. Therefore, the internet and digital sources will remain available for research as of now with their specific politics of selectivity. The digital archives of major international journals such as *Der Spiegel*, *La Republica* are searchable and their reporting on Júlia Rajk is now accessible on-line.⁸ The subject file collection of the Open Society Archives has been digitized too, so there is no need to sit in their cozy research room anymore. However, major sources in Hungarian, both archival and secondary, have not been digitized or are not even accessible hindering the research process.

The second aspect of the digital turn is the abundance of photos available on the Internet. As for photos, ones I did not have access to when I performed my research are now popping up in dozens in a Google search. Fifteen years ago I considered myself lucky and trusted by the owner, when I was given the cherished paper prints from private photo collections. A majority of these new photos now available online are photos documenting the reburial of László

⁸ *L'Espresso* 4 November (1956); *La Republica* 15 April (1992); *Der Spiegel* 24 October (1956).

Rajk on 6 October 1956. These are both private and press photos as this was the most photographed public event of the 1950s and beyond.

Following the *Zeitgeist*, László Rajk Jr. also launched his own personal website where he uploaded his family photos, which he did not share with me when I did my research. The website of Júlia Rajk's son represents his parents and their work equally. These family photos I have not seen before are of Júlia's mother, depicting Júlia with her family in the 1930s on an excursion, and the only photo when the family was together with Júlia holding her son in a baby blanket with his father standing behind them and looking at the baby-boy with a proud smile. The intimacy, ordinariness and iconography of the photo: a mother with a child while a father watches them proudly, is difficult to reconcile with the couple's shared communist values of equality.

The most exciting task of writing a book is selecting the cover image. I suggested an official photo with the couple together clapping during a harvest celebration standing on a podium. In the original picture there was a pretty woman standing on the left of László Rajk, as he has been always surrounded by pretty women. The publisher, when designing the cover, decided to photograph the second woman from the photo. Reviews, articles, interviews about the book have often been published with this photoshopped photo as an authentic photo. The phenomenon of fake science and fake photos is not entirely new and, of course, the troubling question of who was that woman who was airbrushed from a feminist biography, especially as she will possibly disappear from historiography forever.

The digital turn introduced a new element in the politics of selectivity of historical sources as it made certain sources available online depending on the power position and resources of the given institution or individual. Digital citizenship is empowering some but making others invisible, depending on institutions having resources to digitize and to put sources available online. Júlia never served in an institutional power position, therefore sources on her life are not available. Her story is represented by others even after the digital turn.

Not only has the digital turn brought unexpected new sources to light but also new and exciting publications. I received an email from a dear friend, Padraic Kenney, in 2012, who suggested that I should help out his PhD student who is planning her first book project on women imprisoned during the communist period. An email from Anna Muller soon popped up in my mailbox asking for documents to be published in a volume curated by IPN (the newly established Polish Institute of National Remembrance). I responded to her that I think all of Júlia's documents have been published or are available on the website of her son, but I could inquire with László Rajk Jr. I contacted him and it turned out, again, how wrong I was as unexpected documents have

materialized from the private archive of László Rajk to be published in Warsaw in Polish. Maybe that was the moment when the trunk in the attic has been opened.

László Rajk made available to the Polish project three letters sent by Julia to her son from captivity in Romania, which he did not share with me when I was writing the book. There was another heartbreaking photo in the package of scanned documents which he sent with my help to Warsaw. That is a photo of him in an orphanage with Júlia's handwritten comment saying that the photo was taken in December 1949, seven months after the couple was imprisoned, and after the execution of her husband. Júlia also found it important to note in pencil on the back of the photo that she held on to it during her imprisonment. The photo was given to her by Ákos Pál, an old school colonel of the state security services, who participated in preparing the Rajk trial and who committed suicide when János Kádár was imprisoned in 1951. It is very understandable that the son did not want to share this photo with a wider audience, so it is not available on his webpage. What has changed that he gave the permission to published this photo in a Polish book? The publication did not go into print at the time of writing of this article due to the politics of the Polish historical institution – the Institute of National Remembrance – which originally commissioned the book. After years of silence, the IPN gave permission in 2018 to Anna Muller to publish the book somewhere else. On the one hand, exciting new sources have emerged as a result of the book project, curated at the time by a new and already controversial state-funded historical research institute, and on the other hand, these sources have remained unpublished because of the illiberal turn in places like Poland, while they were discovered precisely in the framework of this illiberal turn.

New Frames

The second question is related to how the framing of women's life stories has changed in recent years. What has happened sixteen years after my book was published in 2001? Has the book succeeded in building a canon of its own while questioning the concept of canon itself? Did the results of my biography become an integral and indispensable part of history writing, which is confined to a national frame? Has the introduction of gender as a category of analysis produced the expected "epistemological change" in history writing?⁹ The answer is a definite no, the book on Júlia Rajk has not become a part of the historical canon: she remained confined as the widow of László Rajk in

9 Andrea Pető, *Eastern Europe: Gender Research, Knowledge Production and Institutions. Handbuch Interdisziplinäre Geschlechterforschung*, 2018. Vol. 2. 1535-1547.

historical narratives.¹⁰ But two unexpected changes did happen in the past fifteen years in the context of how women's history has been written.¹¹ The first is the conservative "herstory turn" that actually gave visibility to Júlia Rajk and the increasing interest of feminists in the communist women's movement, which had paradoxically contributed to the silencing of her story.

The first change, the "herstory turn," where absence of women in history was replaced by the presence of women. In this framework history of women has been written from the point of view of suffering, sacrifice, and victimhood and not in searching for agency or subjectivity.¹² This new school of history writing is a way for an illiberal state to appropriate memory politics of historical events for its own purpose. Women slowly became acceptable and worthy topics of historical research but without questioning the traditional framing. The research on particular subjects, such as female political prisoners during communism, has become an important research topic in institutes specialized in researching crimes of communism with the aim of making women visible. The life story of Júlia Rajk actually could be framed this way as a story of suffering and oppression during communism. As the increasing of women's visibility was the aim of feminist history writing, there was a clear confluence. But the nation-centered narrative maintains its self-standing community paradigm and women are considered as one group among others, as an appendix. Therefore, Júlia remained outside of this newly formed canon, too.

Secondly, a scholarly discussion started in gender studies on whether "communist feminism" has existed at all. The summarizing dossier of *Aspasia, The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History*, volumes 6 and 7, are focused on the history of women's and gender history in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe by listing popular accomplishments. It is very understandable that, due to the disillusionment with neoliberal policies, critical intellectuals will revisit and turn to the evaluation and re-evaluation of statist feminism, as it existed under communism (but also in previous times). This scholarship is mostly focusing on different

10 See my acceptance speech of ALLEA 2018 Award published in Hungarian: "Germaine és Júlia. Párhuzamos történetek az európai históriában," *168 óra* 7 June (2018): 42–44, and in Bulgarian: „Паралели в европейската история,” *Literaturen vestnik* 27 June (2018): 9.

11 Andrea Pető, "Changing Paradigms of Writing Women's History in Post-Communist Europe," in *Параčovешкото: грация и гравитация— сборник в чест на проф. Миглена Николчин. The Parahuman: Grace and Gravity. In Honour of Prof. Miglena Nikolchina*, ed. Kornelia Spassova, Darin Tenev, Maria Kalinova (Sofia: Sofia University, 2017), 280–289.

12 Andrea Pető, "Roots of Illiberal Memory Politics: Remembering Women in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution," *Baltic Worlds* 4 (2017): 42–58.

women's organizations, on both the national and the international level. The story of Júlia Rajk does not fit into the agenda of any of this research, no matter that she was a self-confessed communist. Present debates about the nostalgic presentation of history of women during communism only contribute to this self-ghettoization in a historical moment when critical analysis of progressive tradition and practice need it the most.

Conclusions

The life story of Júlia Rajk illustrates the complexities of gender and communism, as far as the construction of female political subjectivity is concerned, and the vulnerability of women's histories to the populist challenge. Paul Frosh pointed out "the significance of witnessing for contemporary conjunctions between personal experience, shareable knowledge, and public representation."¹³ The life story of Júlia Rajk was shareable knowledge back in 2001. By 2018 it is the women's herstory turn together with anti-communism that validate some parts of her story while silencing others. Her life story, independently from the high number of sources available online, is limited to the web page of her son and to my biography.

I was recently asked to give a talk about Júlia's life in László Rajk College because the elite fraternity of University of Economics in Budapest was under pressure from the new conservative government to change its name following the government agenda of eliminating names of streets and institutions with connections to leftist movements. During the meeting, discussing how to handle the government pressure on the fraternity to change its name, someone suggested to change the name to Júlia Rajk College to satisfy the expectation of the government on the one hand, and spare some money on ordering new seals and letterhead on the other. But the leadership of the college dismissed this proposal with the majority stating the obvious that Júlia Rajk was as much a communist as László Rajk, and that fact has been the main concern of the government. The second reason they dismissed this idea of renaming the college after Júlia is that others, they argued during the meeting, might think that it is a joke.

13 Paul Frosh, "Telling Presences: Witnessing, Mass Media, and the Imagined Lives of Strangers Critical Studies," *Media Communication* 4 (2006): 267.

Abstract

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Revisiting the Life Story of Júlia Rajk

The paper discusses the difficulties of writing the life story of the wife of a leading home-grown communist, László Rajk (1909–1949), Júlia Rajk. It argues that the digital turn makes sources visible and available, which have not been accessible before, such as newspaper articles and photos. However, the building up of the memory politic of the illiberal state uses herstory as a tool of “mnemonic security” and places Júlia Rajk’s life outside the canon.

Keywords

life story, digital turn, women’s history, herstory, Hungary, gender history, women in politics