

Vashegyi MacDonald, Ágnes. Tamas Dobozy. *Siege 13*. Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2012. 339 pp. AHEA: E-journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 6 (2013):<http://ahea.net/e-journal/volume-6-2013/28>

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Tamas Dobozy. *Siege 13*. Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2012. 339 pp.

Reviewed by Ágnes Vashegyi MacDonald, Columbia College, Vancouver, Canada

*Siege 13* is a war story. Or rather, many stories of war. Thirteen. In thirteen short stories, grounded in oral histories told by family members and friends in Canada and Hungary, as well as in official documents, Tamas Dobozy offers clues about the siege of Budapest during World War II. Dobozy, a professor of American literature at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario, was born in British Columbia to Hungarian parents whose lives were affected by the siege in Budapest before they emigrated to Canada. Like the Dobozy's, so have many Hungarians lived with the ghostly memories of the siege in Hungary and of exile, to which this book is a commemoration in the genre of fiction. Dobozy received the prestigious Canadian Roger Writers' Trust Fiction Prize and was a finalist for the Governor General's Fiction Award for *Siege 13* in November 2012. While it may have been atypical to see this Canadian fiction prize go to a short story collection, it in fact proves that the genre holds importance today and, in turn, that the subject matter is compelling.

The battle for Budapest began on October 29, 1944 when the Soviet Red Army instigated its offensive against the Germans. The Soviets' military maneuver was carried out by sealing Budapest off from the rest of the country, trapping over one million people inside, including German and Hungarian soldiers. In the city the Jewish ghetto had already been established, creating antagonism toward the government and among the inhabitants. The number of military casualties in the course of the siege was compounded by the suffering of the civilians in the freezing winter, as they were cut off from food supplies and sanitation. Decaying bodies of humans and animal cadavers were scattered about in the shadow of bombed out buildings and collapsed bridges, while soldiers pillaged and raped what and whoever they could lay their hands on for 108 days. Historians, including Krisztián Ungváry, assert that the siege of Budapest was one of the bloodiest, equal to that of Stalingrad and Berlin (*The Siege of Budapest: 100 Days in World War II*. Foreword by John Lukács. New York: Yale University Press, 2005. From the original Hungarian: *Budapest ostroma*. Budapest: Corvina kiadó, 1998).

The historical accuracy of the siege transpires in Dobozy's texts; he has done his homework in World War II history for contextualizing his short stories. Using first and third person narratives, in *Siege 13* Dobozy illuminates the ripple effects of the siege that to this day haunt the survivors, their children and their children's children. There is a moral imperative in Dobozy's short stories not only to memorialize the Second World War and its aftermath in Hungary but also for the survivors to find reconciliation as they go about living their everyday lives. Moving between Hungary and Canada over a six decade timeframe, Dobozy's stories promote the nuances by which people have been making sense of their lives, that is, normalizing trauma by falling into mundane day-to-day activities, on the one hand, and intensifying it, on the other, through obsessive

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behaviors, humorous quirks, and rituals. In *Siege 13* Dobozy calls on the ghosts of the siege in each short story in order to form a kind of literary phantom theory.

Dobozy blends reality with fiction and blurs the lines between horrible and magical through psychological effects, which urge the reader to wanting more and yet gasping for air at the same time. The richness of images and most attentively crafted sentences feel almost programmed, with a deliberate aim to search for some kind of truth among the ruins, the ruins of the battered city and of the sufferings of its people. The *truth* begins in the first story, “The Atlas of B. Görbe.” It is May 2007, and the narrator, Dobozy himself, is at NYU on a Fulbright Fellowship, living in Manhattan with his wife and children, dedicated to writing his next book on a Hungarian topic. But instead of finding inspiration he discovers that disappointment is eating away his precious time. His first efforts received a “faked interest” from “László somebody or other” at the Hungarian Cultural Center in New York (4). But just before his Fellowship ends he connects with B. Görbe, “an ex-boyfriend of an aunt in Budapest” (1), and seeks out his assistance regarding the book’s theme. Görbe, the author and illustrator of the popular children’s book series, *The Atlas of Dreams*, is a coarse looking, dodgy character who left “a good life under the Party” in Hungary in order to “‘escape towards the dream,’” as he explains, that would provide for his schizophrenic wife, Zella, the chance of “‘having better ‘food and medical care and lifestyles’ in the U.S” (13). Görbe’s help does not come cheap to the narrator. Their initial cordial meetings in New York city’s various restaurants and bars ends up in arguments and a fist fight, a crisis which at last unlocked the door to Görbe’s “unhappy truths” (23). There is a sense of mutual release for both the narrator and Görbe that their interactions have prompted and, in turn, it encourages Görbe to declare, in comparison to 9/11, how he “lived through events a million times worse in Hungary - the war, the siege - like a lot of people” (8). Here, the reader ought not to take Görbe’s discourse as bragging, but rather as unapologetically factual. Instead of hedging, passion and straightforward conviction drive him. This awakens the narrator and jolts him out of feeling trapped: “I had thought that Görbe, like me, was trapped in a world of failure, and we’d found each other, two men without any illusions” (24). Görbe’s assistance for the narrator becomes his own story about the siege of Budapest, and how it has affected, or rather, trapped his life ever since. In this story, the image of being trapped, as echoing the encirclement of the city by the Soviet Army, thus initiates a leitmotif that recurs in the ensuing stories and gives cadence to trauma following the siege.

Some of the subsequent twelve short stories in the volume are linked to each other loosely, while others stand independently, offering a tightrope walk between elements of magic realism, the absurd, and spy thriller. The second and third stories, entitled “The Animals of the Budapest Zoo, 1944-1945,” and “Sailor’s Mouth,” are gripping for both the author’s and the readers’ imagination. Through magic realism, Dobozy manages to illustrate fabulous and fantastical events combined with otherwise objective, even reliable episodes. He draws on the actual fate of the famous Budapest Zoo, which was destroyed during the offensive. Only a few young workers, including Sándor, József and Márti are

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left in charge of the Zoo after its director, Teleki, fled upon the entry of the Red Army in Hungary's eastern borders. "If there is a siege, how are we going to protect the animals?" Sándor asks his colleagues in November 1944 (25). Their courageous efforts to save the animals are curtailed by starvation and fear, and by January 1945 the preliminary question turns into the problem of how the attendees themselves are going to stay alive. At the command of Lieutenant-General Zamartsev of the Soviet Army, József and Sándor release some of the skin-and-bone animals so that the soldiers can hunt them out of sheer pleasure. Sándor's last attempt to defeat starvation and destruction turns into a magical self-sacrifice of throwing himself to a skinny lion as a meal. Only the fantastic attributes of the characters, coupled with the absurd, provide reason in the midst of unimaginable ruin during the siege of Budapest.

The story entitled "Sailor's Mouth" is a gesture toward the absurd told in the first person by a Canadian man who is on a quest to find the perfect Hungarian child to adopt and take back to his wife and son. His wife, Anna, influenced by her father who lived through the siege, was adamant about adopting an orphaned Transylvanian girl and giving her a chance to grow up in present-day Toronto's Hungarian community. On his way to Romania, the narrator becomes entangled in Budapest in a love affair with Judit, who tells him about the "Museum of Failed Escapes" (43). Upon visiting the Museum, he learns about the "different medium of escape, 'land', 'water', and 'air'" (61) on display, and about a transparent plastic boat that carried its sailor on a failed escape attempt from Hungary in 1957 with "a sack of *kifli* [rolls] and a jug of water" (43). Dobozy stretches the canvas between real and magical in this story even further by depicting a video in the Museum which portrays another old sailor who tried to "talk himself to sea. To make his mouth a sail. As if his words were so much wind" (62). The sailor is trapped in the video, as is Judit in her decrepit apartment in the notorious eighth district of Budapest with her mother and child, and the Canadian couple in their wish for a Transylvanian daughter.

Like encirclement, another returning theme in Dobozy's stories is betrayal. In the fourth story, a young comrade wanna-be, Zoltán, appropriates for himself the Kálmán's villa in Budapest, persecuting all of the deceased Tibor Kálmán's family members who survived the siege. The villa grows into Zoltán's obsession: "it was like the place was imagining him rather than the other way around...as if the new life it promised was his true life, and the one he was living now only an alias, false, no one real inside it" (67). But the villa is not empty and Zoltán, now a decorated "war hero" by the Soviets" (69) has to find ways to get rid of the remaining family members. "Betrayal had become Zoltán's vocation," pronounces Dobozy (69). But betrayal is a double-edged sword. While Zoltán fabricates report after report on the Kálmán family's so-called anti-government activities so that he can finally claim the villa in his name, the Kálmán siblings betray one of their own, who will come back to haunt them in a later story, called "The Ghosts of Budapest and Toronto."

The three best stories in the collection are "The Beautician," "Rosewood Queens," and "The Selected Mug Shots of Famous Hungarian Assassins." These stories have such

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visual plots that their text becomes cinematic in front of the reader's eyes. "The Beautician," the longest story in the collection, is a satire about the petty meddling of Hungarian community members in Toronto who congregate at the Szécsényi Club led by the enigmatic dissident Árpád Holló. Holló wears a mask of thick makeup. His appearance intrigues and aggravates the club members who seize every opportunity to start gossip about his political involvement in Hungary as well as his feminine look. Inserting Hungarian reference words at optimal moments, Dobozy emphasizes the authenticity of the characters' double lives as immigrants, trapped in-between Hungary and Canada, past and present. The narrator, a graduate student of Hungarian descent, inadvertently reveals Holló's past actions as a chief Party censor for the Ministry of Culture in Budapest in the 1950s. While searching for material in the Szécsényi Club library for his honors thesis in Central European Studies, the narrator comes across copies of the *Piros Krónika*, a Communist Party periodical, that has photographs depicting Holló among other cadres. Holló explains to him how he survived the siege and eventually became an active member of the Communist Party: "The siege had made it impossible to maintain anything - a politics, a community, an identity... One day we were subhuman - homosexuals, Jews, communists, gypsies - fit only for execution, and the next we were liberated, the proletariat, the people of the future...But...we were only what they made us" (106). During his work at the Ministry, Holló became involved with a female colleague, Adriána. In order to protect their relationship, he started to wear makeup so that no one would recognize him. He had become a master of his own disguise - the beautician. While the make-up protected Holló in the maelstrom of Hungarian Party politics, it subjected him to the worst scandal among his fellow Hungarians in exile.

In "Rosewood Queens" the narrator's voice is that of Mariska, who, after her mother had abandoned the family, was raised by her father, Mike, and his on-and-off girlfriend, Aunt Rose. Dobozy skillfully navigates between conveying a female voice and through it the father's who lost his parents during the siege. Aunt Rose is a professor at a university in Ontario and her passion is to collect the queen figures from chess sets, which she scavenges for in antique stores, always leaving the remainder of the sets incomplete and unsellable. Mariska, too, becomes a scholar with a "research speciality" in "the passing of trauma from one generation to the next" (183). Haunted by the ghost of her father's trauma, during one of her research trips in Budapest, Mariska once more encounters Aunt Rose, now old and frail but still soulful, who bequeaths to her the chess figurines.

"The Selected Mug Shots of Famous Hungarian Assassins" is a suspense in which Dobozy weaves the plot about a young man, Aces, who experiences growing up as a neglected child. Aces spends a lot of time at his cousin's house, where he creates and tells stories about characters of the political underworld related to Hungary, from "the Okhrana, [to] Stalin's purges, Hapsburg politics, [and] New York gangsters" (261). Aces's vivid imagination borrows faces for these characters from his cousin's family photo albums along with concocting "tard cards...as in *retard*" (my emphasis, A.V.M, 265), which depict neighborhood kids, and trading them in school. Aces's actions do not remain unnoticed by the affected children's parents, but his cousin - the narrator in the

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story - takes the blame. Aces's adventurous persona drives him across Canada until eventually he disappears in the U.S., giving vital signs through occasional postcards only. Years later, the family photos that the two cousins studied so often in their childish mischief resurface in a book called "*Hungarian Assassins, 1900-2000* in the Art Gallery of an Ontario bookstore" (274). How the photographs end up in a publication of course has to do with Aces who, like "Gyula Hegedüs," a notorious secret agent working for Stalin and later for New York gangsters (259), is now on the run from the authorities in America. Aces owes thousands of dollars in fines for overdue books on assassins that he took out from public libraries along with requests he put in for archived photographs which are actually the copies of pictures taken from the family album. A young scholar, "hungry for a new research field" (289), stumbles on the library material Aces has fabricated and writes her dissertation on the phantom assassins.

Seven years in the making, *Siege 13* is Dobozy's third published book of short stories, after *When X Equals Marylou* (2003) and *Last Notes and Other Stories* (2006) which all deal with Hungarian memories about the history of WWI, WWII, the Cold War, immigration, exile, and lastly, trauma from a Canadian perspective. In an interview Dobozy gave me in 2007 he explained his motivations as follows:

American and French publishers like to play up my Hungarian-ness in their publicity, because as low on the sexiness-meter as Hungary is, it's still above Canada. Or is it?...In the end, though, all of this is a waste of time to think about, since your writing is limited by your imagination only...and so you're always casting off from received opinion into what is yet to be received, or stated, or thought of. So I don't really think about how Canada or Hungary are perceived; I think about how they might be perceived, and of course I think about a lot of other things as well, which includes many other countries. I think there's a new term, "international writing," that I've seen recently in newspapers and journals, and I like this, as it fits with my sense of floating between specific boundaries and specific affiliations and specific experiences. I'm not trying to escape labels - I am a Canadian writer - but I think they're most useful when they open an experience rather than reduce it. This seems to me the general task of the writer: to create openings, places of uncertainty, ruptures in knowledge. ("Homing Identity: An Exclusive Interview with Tamás Dobozy." *The New Hungarian Voice*, 6.4, Fall 2007: 19 & 23, and *La Présence Hongroise Au Canada*. Fall 2007. E-journal at [www.hungarianpresence.ca](http://www.hungarianpresence.ca).)

It would not be misleading to suggest that *Siege 13* is a kind of belated or rather haunted *Trümmerliteratur*, that is, "rubble literature" due to its direct language of depicting a world in ruins after the war, and to its self-conscious restriction of space, time, and characters in the narration and plot development. The short story genre enables the author to depict trauma and its subsequent effects from many perspectives, hence giving voice to subjects in their diverse experiences without getting lost by trying to maintain the

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storyline in the structure of a novel. The stories act as a rearview mirror-like assessment of memories anchored in experiences of individuals' collective trauma. Hence truths shaped into half-truths and fiction do not weigh as mishandling of history, but rather as unraveling disheveled legacies of violence. For the reader, this format provides obligatory breaks between stories, which in turn facilitate reflection and a deeper, although maybe shorter in duration, connection with the characters. The multi-generational short stories of *Siege 13* defy the grand narratives found in novels, and in a way contradict expectations and assumptions linked to reality in the text, while they foster deconstruction and a fragmentary view of history.