

# RESISTANCE TO POLITICAL POWER – HUNGARIAN LITERARY JOURNALS (1945- 2004): ZOLTÁN ÁGOSTON INTERVIEWED BY JOLÁN ORBÁN

»No democracy, without literature; no literature without democracy,« writes Jacques Derrida (Derrida, 1995, 28)<sup>1</sup> just as there is no literary life without literary journals. After the Second World War, literary journals played a vital role in preserving Hungarian cultural, linguistic, and national identity, often manifesting poetic and political resistance to the ideology of the communist regime. During this period (1945-2004), three historical events shaped the literary and political life of Hungary and that of the »Eastern Bloc«: 1956, 1968, and 1989. Following the 1956 revolution, many Hungarian literary figures were forced into exile, periodicals were systematically censored, authors were silenced, and editors were imprisoned (Tibor Szántó, *Dunántúl*, 1956) or replaced (Tibor Tüskés, *Jelenkor*, 1964; Ferenc Kulin, *Mozgó Világ*, 1983; László Vörös, József Anus and Sándor Olasz *Tiszatáj*, 1986).

From the sixties and seventies, the literary journals in Hungary (*Mozgó Világ*) or in the cultural centres of the Hungarian minority abroad (*Utunk*, *Korunk*, *Echinox*, Kolozsvár, Cluj-Napoca, Romania; *Irodalmi Szemle*, Pozsony, Bratislava, Slovakia; *Új Symposion*, Újvidék, Novi Sad, Yugoslavia), and the periodicals published in emigration (*Magyar Műhely*, Paris, Vienna), increasingly published texts and organised public debates that connected and turned the editorial offices within and beyond the

1 Derrida, Jacques (1995). »Passions: 'An Oblique Offering'«. In: *On the Name*. Edited by Thomas Dutoit and translated by David Wood. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 3-31. 28.

country's borders into places of political resistance. The critical spirit, "*esprit critique*" of literary journals and samizdat publications (*Beszélő*, *Médium-Art*, Budapest; *Counterpoints*, Nagyvárad, Oradea, Romania) played a special role in preparing the way for the regime change and the democratic transition in 1989.

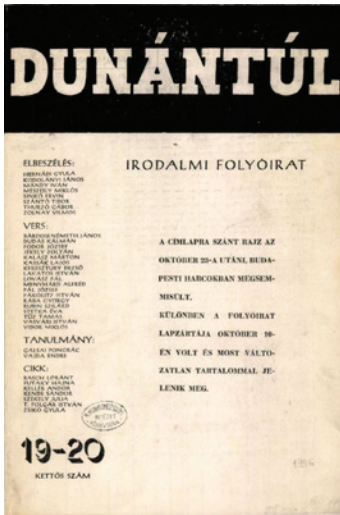
*Jelenkor* is one of Hungary's most prestigious literary journals; it was founded in 1958 in the city of Pécs. The journal's two significant predecessors were *Sorsunk* (1941-1948), edited by Nándor Várkonyi, Sándor Weöres and Győző Csorba, and *Dunántúl*, edited by Tibor Szántó. In the early sixties, *Jelenkor* gained increasing national importance under Tibor Tüskés, editor-in-chief. The authors of the journal included Sándor Weöres, Győző Csorba, and Miklós Mészöly, whose drama *Az ablakmosó* ("The Window Cleaner", 1963) led to the editor-in-chief's removal in 1964. The new editor-in-chief, Ervin Szederkényi, from the 1970s onwards, edited the journal with increasing autonomy; as a result, literary quality and intellectual independence became the leading objectives once again. Under the leadership of Gábor Csordás (1987-1990), István Csuha (1991-1999), and Zoltán Ágoston (1999-), *Jelenkor's* international relations significantly expanded, in which the bilingual (Hungarian-German) *Jelenkor Anthology* (1993), published on the occasion of the journal's 35th anniversary, played a key role. Zoltán Ágoston has been the editor-in-chief of *Jelenkor* for almost twenty-five years. The journal is sixty-five years old: this in itself is a milestone that prompts us to talk about the past, present, and future of the journal, especially about its role in the democratic transformations from the moment of its foundation to our entry into the European Union and up to the present day.

The interview with Zoltán Ágoston was conducted by Jolán Orbán on 13 September 2023 at the closing event of the exhibition LITMAG 1945-2004, organized in the frame of PécsLIT Literary Festival (Civil Közösségek Háza, Szent István tér, 17, Pécs, Hungary).

**„No democracy without literature; no literature without democracy,“** writes Jacques Derrida (Derrida, 1995, 28), - whose works have been translated into Hungarian and published in *Jelenkor* - just as there is no literary life without literary journals. The double link of democracy and literature and exposure to power affects literary journals more directly and up-to-date since they are published monthly, react immediately, even indirectly, to socio-political events, and reach the public faster. This is why, during dictatorships, journals are kept under close watch and attempts are made to control them. In the case of *Jelenkor*, how has the relationship with power evolved and changed from its creation through its entry into the European Union to the present day? What were the turning points?

*Jelenkor* is one of Hungary's most prestigious and longest-running literary journals, founded in 1958 in Pécs in the spirit of the so-called “consolidation” that followed the 1956 revolution. After the decision of Trianon following the First World War, the University of Pozsony (today Bratislava, Slovakia) was transferred to Pécs; thus, centuries after the short-lived medieval university foundation (1367), the intellectual life of the city took on a new dimension, which also had a significant impact on artistic and literary life from the early 1920s onwards. In the 1920s and 1930s, Sándor Weöres, one of the greatest Hungarian poets of the 20th century, studied at the University of Pécs, and together with his friend Győző Csorba, also an outstanding poet, he became editor of the journal *Sorsunk* (Our Fate), which was launched in 1941. The editor-in-chief of the journal was Nándor Várkonyi, a highly educated polymath university librarian, who considered the preservation of the intellectual independence of *Sorsunk* and protecting it from the influence of Hitler's Germany as his primary objective. Following the difficult war years, the journal ceased publication in 1948, when the civic values it represented became the target of attacks by the cultural policy of the post-communist revolution. Shortly afterward, a new

journal was founded in Pécs, *Dunántúl* (Transdanubia), which continued to be published bimonthly throughout the 1950s. Its gesture of solidarity with the 1956 revolution, when the journal was issued with a black cover, led to its abolition, and its editor-in-chief, Tibor Szántó, was arrested and thrown into prison.



Cover of the 1956/19-20 double issue of *Dunántúl* (Transdanubia, 1949-1956): the journal was published with a black cover as a sign of solidarity with the 1956 revolution. The editor-in-chief, Tibor Szántó, was arrested on “trumped-up” charges, and the journal was abolished in 1956.

Following these two crucial predecessors, *Jelenkor* (“Present Age”) was launched. In the early sixties, it grew into a journal of increasing national importance under the leadership of Tibor Tüskés, editor-in-chief. The journal welcomed among its authors former literary figures of Pécs, those who did not meet the expectations of cultural politics known as “socialist realism”. Thus, Sándor Weöres and Győző Csorba, who lived their entire life in Pécs, became the most influential authors of *Jelenkor*. Among prose writers, the role of Miklós Mészöly was outstanding; he was discovered as a novice writer by *Sorsunk* in Pécs and, sensitive to the developments in modern and absurdist literature in Western Europe, was one of the prominent figures in the post-war renewal of Hungarian prose. The publication of his drama *Az ablakmosó* (“The Window Cleaner”), which depicts the brutal intervention of power in civilian life

through absurd means, and its author's commentary, triggered a press campaign in the communist party press of the time, which resulted in the removal of the editor-in-chief from the paper in 1964.



Cover of the 1963/9 issue of *Jelenkor* (Present age, 1958 -): the publication of Miklós Mészöly's drama *Az ablakmosó* ("The Window Cleaner") in the 9th and 10th issue of *Jelenkor* in 1963 led to the removal of editor-in-chief Tibor Tüskés, in 1964.

In the years following political retaliation, the paper lost its character. From the 1970s onwards, however, authors who had previously been undesirable to the authorities, including Miklós Mészöly, slowly returned to the paper. On his recommendation, in the second half of the 1970s, young authors like Péter Nádas and Péter Esterházy, who were the central figures of the literary tendency of the so-called "new prose", arrived at *Jelenkor*. The new editor-in-chief, Ervin Szederkényi, from the 1970s onwards, edited the journal with increasing autonomy; as a result, literary quality and intellectual independence became the leading objectives once again. However, this process increasingly distanced *Jelenkor* from dominant ideological expectations. In the eighties, especially after 1983, when political retaliation led to the replacement of the entire editorial staff of the journal *Mozgó Világ*, *Jelenkor* became the forum for those authors and readers who preferred literary quality,

free-thinking, and renewed poetics. After the fall of communism, several new organs were founded, most of which sooner or later ceased to exist. However, *Jelenkor* is still one of Hungary's most distinctive and important literary-artistic journals.

**How typical is the history of the journal *Jelenkor*? How has its relationship with other Hungarian journals evolved? With *Alföld*, *Tiszatáj*, *Mozgó Világ*, or with Hungarian journals beyond the border, such as *Új Symposion* (Vajdaság, Vojvodina, Vajdaság), *Korunk*, and *Utunk* (Erdély, Transylvania, Romania)?**

The history of the three prominent old journals – *Alföld* in Debrecen, *Jelenkor* in Pécs, and *Tiszatáj* in Szeged – share similar features that are more or less typical: they all suffered from hostile actions on the part of the authorities of one kind or another at different times. But it was their character, the *couleur locale*, which was the reason or pretext for the retaliatory measures taken by communist cultural policy. Thus, for example, in 1964, *Jelenkor* was attacked by the official press for “bourgeois views” and “existentialism”; *Alföld* was also attacked for “nationalism,” “anti-urbanism,” and the prominent presence of popular literature. The relationship between these journals was collegial; they had many authors in common, while each had its own hinterland. In all three cases, this intellectual hinterland is the respective cities with rich cultures, which form cultural de-centres with universities in an otherwise heavily Budapest-oriented country, and it is precisely this specificity that ensures that these journals are still in operation after the change of regime. Meanwhile, several journals established after the regime change, such as *Holmi*, have already ceased to exist.

*Mozgó Világ*, edited in Budapest, was inspired and strengthened by the younger literary generation's aspiration for autonomy. By the second half of the 1970s, it had become a genuinely distinctive and courageous organ

due to its multi-artistic way of thinking and powerful visual composition. Of course, *Mozgó Világ* and *Jelenkor* also had authors in common, such as Miklós Mészöly, Péter Nádas, and Péter Esterházy, contributors to the literary-historical phenomenon later called “new prose”. *Mozgó Világ* was organised on a completely different basis; for many years, it was published by the Kommunista Ifjúsági Szövetség (Communist Youth League), first as an almanac, later a bi-monthly; and from 1980 onwards, it enjoyed monthly publication. When its editor-in-chief was replaced in 1983, the entire editorial staff left. This marked the beginning of a new period in the paper.

Relations with newspapers from abroad became looser as institutional contacts were replaced by personal connections with individual editors or authors. Alongside the internationalist ideology of the communist countries and the propaganda about “friendly countries,” there were severe rifts and conflicts for historical reasons, since the neighbouring countries were primarily established on the territory of the former Hungarian state; as a result, a significant Hungarian minority was separated from the mother-country. These oppositions became extreme in the cultural sphere, with the authorities of the neighbouring countries watching Hungarian-Hungarian relations with a wary eye, fearing the dreadful image of revisionism (and, naturally, the Hungarian authorities did the same). The socialist countries published each other’s literature in their journals as translation blocks, in which they intentionally avoided dangerous themes and texts. *Jelenkor*, because of its territorial characteristics, had mostly contacts with Yugoslavia, and from 1973, Eszék (Osijek, Croatia) and Pécs became sister cities, which to some extent promoted cultural relations after the earlier rigid policy of isolation. However, relations were further complicated because, while public censorship was less strict in Yugoslavia than in Hungary, it was more stringent in Transylvania than in Hungary. Because of these complex relations, Hungarian authors from abroad rarely wrote for *Jelenkor*. The exception was the literary historian and critic

Lajos Kántor from Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca, Romania), who wrote for us from the mid-seventies onwards, including reviews of Romania, which informed our readers about literary developments over there. In addition, one of the best-known Hungarian writers of the time, András Sütő, was interviewed twice in *Jelenkor* in the mid-seventies. (Géza Páskándi, imprisoned in Romania for political reasons, was immediately published in the pages of *Jelenkor* in 1974, the year he moved to Hungary.) Romanian authors such as Béla Markó, Aladár Lászlóffy, and András Ferenc Kovács in the late 1980s, or Zsófia Balla and Ádám Bodor only started publishing in Romania after the fall of communism. *Új Symposion* in Újvidék (Novi Sad, Serbia) was one of the freest Hungarian-language journals in Yugoslavia, publishing or being associated with writings by authors who were officially undesirable in Hungary, such as Miklós Mészöly or György Konrád. The authors of *Új Symposion* were published in *Jelenkor* only in 1985/1986, and Beáta Thomka, Ottó Tolnai, and László Végel are still some of the most influential authors of the journal.

**What kind of relations did *Jelenkor* have with Hungarian periodicals and samizdat publications in emigration? For example, *Magyar Műhely* („Hungarian Workshop“), edited in Paris by Papp Tibor and Nagy Pál, or the various groups in Hungary and abroad?**

As far as I know, *Jelenkor* had no institutional links with the emigration journals or the domestic samizdat publications, as these would have entailed severe retaliation on the part of the authorities. It must be understood that Ervin Szederkényi, who edited the journal from 1964 until his death in February 1987, was a party member. Otherwise, he would not have been given this position of trust in the sphere of controlled public life. (The poet Lajos Parti Nagy, who worked with him for many years as a young man, describes him as a “transmission-artist” in the poem he wrote on his death (Parti Nagy,



1987, 515).<sup>2</sup> It was a game of “fast and loose!” with severe existential impacts. Szederkényi had to explain himself to the authorities several times in the context of more courageous, autonomous writings. For example, in the early 1980s, when Miklós Mészöly said in an interview about the post-WWII expulsion of Germans in Hungary that it was unjust: “látunk kellett, hogy ártatlanokat visznek el, és bűnösök intézkednek a sorsuk felől (“we had to see innocent people being taken away and guilty people deciding their fate”). (Alexa-Mészöly, 1981, 18)<sup>3</sup>. A ministry leader wrote a scathing letter demanding an official “justification report” from the editor-in-chief on how he saw Mészöly's statements as compatible with the party's position on so-called “nationality policy”.

The writer Győző Határ, who emigrated to England, was published only at the end of ,87, after Szederkényi's death, presumably under the influence of Gábor Csordás. György Petri, a significant figure in the circles of Hungarian samizdat literature, was also published in *Jelenkor* but only from ,88 onwards, when his ban from the domestic public sphere ended, and the softening regime allowed it. It is interesting to note that in the early 1960s, György Konrád contributed sociological studies and critical articles on French and Russian literature to the journal, but since he was practically banned in the 1970s and relegated to samizdat publication in Hungary for almost a decade and a half (while becoming the best-known Hungarian writer abroad at the time), he only became a contributor in the early 2000s.

Finally, a related fact: in 1984, *Jelenkor* published the still living authors of *Újhold* (“New Moon”) for the first time after *Újhold* was banned in 1948, following three years of operation after the Second World War.

2 Parti Nagy, Lajos (1987). »( )«. *Jelenkor. Szederkényi Ervin emlékére* (»In memory of Ervin Szederkényi«). XXX. évfolyam. 6. szám. 1987. 515. <https://www.jelenkor.net/userfiles/archivum/1987-6.pdf>

3 Alexa, Károly (1981). »Beszélgetés Mészöly Miklóssal« (»A conversation with Miklós Mészöly«). *Jelenkor*. 24. évfolyam, 1. szám. 7-20. <https://www.jelenkor.net/archivum/cikk/6666/beszelgetes-meszoly-miklossal>

The issue, edited by Balázs Lengyel, featured older contributors like Géza Ottlik, Sándor Weöres, István Vas, Iván Mándy, György Somlyó, Magda Szabó, and Ágnes Nemes Nagy, and among the younger contributors Péter Nádas, Péter Esterházy, and Péter Lengyel.

**As the Central and Eastern European countries lived their own literary life under Soviet pressure after the Second World War until 1989, what kind of relationship developed between *Jelenkor* and the journals of the neighboring countries? How has this relationship changed in recent decades?**

Two of *Jelenkor's* predecessors in Pécs also ended due to social cataclysms: *Sorsunk* in 1948, the year of the communist takeover, and *Dunántúl* with the 1956 revolution. *Jelenkor* has now been in operation for sixty-five years. The regime change did not disrupt it, as it was not rooted in the socialist social structure of the state but in “Pécs literature” that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, shaped by semi-permanent and semi-changing participants, who were mostly in line with universal aesthetic demands. The majority of writers of “Pécs literature,” despite their scarce and limited circumstances, always sought its place on the horizon of universal Hungarian and world literature, striving for independence from changing ideological expectations. By the eighties, especially after the elimination of the old *Mozgó Világ* in 1983, *Jelenkor* became, for many, the most important literary journal, in which readers practiced the so-called “reading between the lines” strategy of the time by decoding a political message which went beyond any literal and the symbolic meaning.

As I have mentioned, *Jelenkor*, similarly to the other journals, was only allowed to have state-authorized foreign contacts before the regime change. Thus, on the one hand, it introduced some writers from a friendly socialist country through translations, and on the other hand, the contact was maintained by the exchange

of writer delegates from the same countries. But these meetings were not without their dangers. At the end of the 1970s, when the editor-in-chief, Ervin Szederkényi, went on such a visit to the Soviet Union with the poet László Bertók, and they reached Armenia, they got increasingly involved in a discussion with a local writers' group, which united the Armenians and Bertók, who had been imprisoned for anti-state agitation for some of his poems when he was twenty, over their shared hatred of Russia. But afterward, Szederkényi reprimanded Bertók harshly in private, not because he disagreed with him, but because he knew that at such a meeting, someone was always undercover reporting everything to the Soviet authorities.

After the regime change, *Jelenkor* established a collegial relationship with Hungarian literary journals and their editors in the neighbouring countries. In particular, this was the case with the Transylvanian journals *Látó* and *Korunk* and the Vojvodina-based *Híd*, while *Új Symposion* was discontinued due to the war in Yugoslavia and continued in Hungary under the name *Ex Symposion*.

In the same way, our newspaper developed its relations with non-Hungarian-speaking colleagues on a professional basis, free of any political ties. When I took over as editor-in-chief of *Jelenkor* in 1999, I was almost immediately invited to the Central European Literary Meeting in Vilenica, Slovenia, and from there, networking began, which for two decades was particularly active in the journal cooperation "Review within review." *Jelenkor* also has a stable relationship with the literary institutions of Osijek in Croatia: the journal *Knjizevna revija*, the publishing house Matica Hrvatska, and the literary staff of Strossmayer University [The Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek], with whom we have also been cooperating since the early 2000s. Our historical community with the Croatian town near Pécs dates much further back than the twin city relationship from the socialist times since our past shows many similarities. As a result of our joint work, I can mention a series

of paired volumes in which we present each other's literature (partly focusing on the two cities and the narrower region of Baranya and Slavonia) through mutual translations. We have also organised several literary events where Croatian and Hungarian authors and the public could get to know each other personally. Two or three years ago, this cooperation, which has lasted for more than twenty years, was given a new impetus with the help of an INTERREG grant. In addition to the events, this funding has also resulted in a new bilingual book.

**As a literary and art journal, *Jelenkor* has continuously played a prominent role in the dialogue between different artistic genres, disciplines, and cultures. How has this relationship evolved over time, and what role has it played in democratisation? I want to highlight the attention paid to theatre, visual arts and music, literary theory and philosophy, and Balkan literature, especially the thematic issues published after the war in Yugoslavia.**

From the first half of the sixties onwards, the paper was acutely concerned with issues of modernity, from studies on modern Western literature to numerous discussion articles on contemporary music, architecture, etc. György Konrád, for example, addressed the question of the so-called "hooligan" phenomenon – a category that referred to people who were not integrated into socialist society and therefore were dangerous to it – from the perspective of his original profession, sociology. Instead of the ideological slogan of the "socialist realist", modern poets such as Mallarmé or contemporary poets such as Wisława Szymborska were published in Hungarian. *Jelenkor* published many poems and writings of the great Hungarian avant-garde poet Lajos Kassák, who was still alive at the time. The fact that Ferenc Martyn, returning after a decade and a half from Paris, was living in Pécs and had become a "one-man" institution increasingly influenced the journal's orientation towards the fine arts. In France, he was a member of the *Abstrac-*

tion-Création group of artists, was personally acquainted with many world-famous artists, and became a member of the European School, the most crucial gathering of Hungarian modern art after the Second World War. He created a unique non-figurative art and designed the image of the present-day *Jelenkor*.

Interestingly, an emphasis on an old author was also a kind of revolt against the expectations of official cultural policy. The oeuvre of Janus Pannonius, the great Neo-Latin poet of the 15th century, was a cohesive force for Pécs literati in the first half of the 20th century, and this oeuvre once again was in the spotlight in 1977, on the 500th anniversary of his death. The ties with Janus Pannonius were strengthened because he also served as Bishop of Pécs and held high office in the court of King Matthias. The translation of his Latin poetry into Hungarian, rooted in ancient literature, inevitably drew attention to the standard foundations and unity of European culture – at a time when the Iron Curtain was dividing Europe.

In the seventies and eighties, *Jelenkor* regularly followed the seasons of the Kaposvár Theatre, which underwent a kind of theatrical revolution in Hungary. In the same way, modern music, Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály (the latter also had a biographical link with Pécs), was given a voice in the pages of the journal, alongside international musicians such as Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and others. This kind of approach to culture in *Jelenkor* has helped to raise awareness of actual artistic and cultural values and thus erode false ideological thinking.

After the change of regime, it was natural for *Jelenkor* to turn its attention towards contemporary artistic and cultural phenomena. (It is worth noting here that officially, in communist Hungary, no tangible office carried out political censorship; in fact, censorship was more complex, multilayered, and more cunning, if you like.) Since the early 1990s, the presence of contemporary philosophy in *Jelenkor* has been strengthened, and the works of Derrida and Rorty have received considerable attention, above all thanks to your translations and

writings, which were often co-edited by your husband, János Boros. The many different schools of literary theory were also more prominent than before, from the Germans to the French and Americans, and the paper also hosted a related debate, the so-called “critique debate”.

At the end of the 1980s, Gábor Csordás, the editor-in-chief at the time, created the Jelenkor Publishing House from the journal, which, by his interests and his wide-ranging literary translating activities, dealt intensively with Balkan literature. The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the traumatic experiences of the wars had left the inhabitants with a powerful literary output. Pécs strongly felt the war in Croatia near the southern border in the early nineties, not only because of the refugees arriving in Hungary, but also because of the explosions that could sometimes be heard in the border areas. All this could not be kept in silence or left out of the journal. For many writers, it became an essential literary experience that armed struggle was often preceded by years of struggle with words and that many writings inciting hatred laid the foundations for wars. In the 2000s, we presented the Zagreb journal *Fantom Slobode* (“Phantom of Freedom”) and gave an overview of contemporary Bosnian (war) literature. Our active participation in the “Review within review” journal collaboration has been an essential means of cultural exchange between different languages and literatures for more than two decades since the early 2000s. In line with its tradition, the journal continues to be open to other literatures and also regularly publishes translations.

**How do you see the role of literary journals in the struggle for democracy today, since this struggle hasn't ended with the entry into the European Union in 2004? What challenges do literary journals face today?**

Indeed, this process is not over, nor is history, as Fukuyama thought in 1989. There are both the problems

of globalisation (e.g., the hegemonic role of the English language and American culture) and the problems of technical civilisation (e.g., the control of the means of communication, artificial intelligence, etc.), as well as the ancient, historical conflicts between different nations, which unfortunately did not disappear with our entry into the European Union, and which flare up again in border situations.

Criticism and debate are essential functions of journals that keep the community's self-reflection alive and counteract social dementia. This is particularly important in the case of Hungary, where, in recent years, the state-dominated public sphere and the legislative system have been undergoing a process contrary to the liberating tendencies of the 1990s. Journals are, in the words of the eminent Hungarian political thinker István Bibó, "the small circles of freedom", and they must remain so. In their literary works, the authors of *Jelenkor* write freely and in many different ways about topics that arouse murderous passions in society. The state-controlled media believes that there is only one correct approach to these issues and that anyone who does not follow this approach is a moral void, should be erased from public life, is a "traitor", etc. Therefore, literary journals are indispensable in preserving the diversity of thought and ensuring that different opinions are equal; these are norms taken for granted in a democracy.

Naturally, it is always a challenge for journals to raise the money they need to operate since, in Hungary, they are not published at market prices but with state and local government subsidies (as a legacy of communism). This exposure causes vulnerability, but at the same time, after decades of communist social order, it is not easy to break down the expectations that culture is "free". This is why private patronage is very weak in our country. But we need to find those patrons willing to invest in quality literature free of ideological constraints, which, incidentally, also contributes to preserving the Hungarian language and its flexibility and, thus, to the survival of national culture.

**The title of the journal *Jelenkor* – „present age“ – implies that it is concerned with contemporary literature, art, criticism, literary theory, and philosophy; as the editor-in-chief of the journal, how up-to-date do you consider *Jelenkor* to be?**

My perspective, my thinking, is determined by my socialisation in the twentieth century, but of course, it is constantly evolving through new experiences. And I've always had younger colleagues, and younger and younger ones have come along during my quarter-of-a-century editorship. In the same way, there are always newer and newer generations of authors. For many of today's young authors, publishing here is a form of initiation into becoming a writer-poet. The readership also includes young people, which leads me to conclude that the journal is relevant in the present. We have already published a study that analysed a literary work from the point of view of computer stylistic analysis, and the results were exciting.

**You've been editor-in-chief of the paper for almost twenty-five years. Have you had to compromise in any situations during that time? How far have you been able to implement your vision? To what extent can an editor-in-chief be democratic in their daily editorial work? What have you learned from previous editors?**

I have never had to make any political compromises, so I have never returned any text for fear that the paper would suffer some retribution. However, there have been occasions in the last decade and a half when I have considered the possibility of retaliation for a published text. Some of our widely known authors, such as Péter Nádas, László Krasznahorkai, or our senior fellow Lajos Parti Nagy (but also Péter Esterházy, who died in 2016), sometimes sharply criticise the ruling government, which happens a lot in free countries. In our country, however, the authorities dominate the majority of the press, and criticism of



the government, regardless of its content, sometimes triggers a controlled campaign against the critic. Although *Jelenkor* does not publish directly political writings, the opinions expressed by its authors elsewhere make them undesirable actors in the eyes of official cultural policy. So far, however, our authors have not caused the paper to suffer any disadvantages that would render publication impossible, but we receive less state funding than some of our fellow journals.

My ideas have been fulfilled to a large extent over the decades. However, they have always been in strong interaction with the living literary processes and are always supported by an excellent editorial team and a range of quality authors. As editor-in-chief, you must always strive to ensure that your decisions result from collective wisdom while you bear the ultimate professional and financial responsibility. There have been very few decisions in my long career that have been entirely at odds with the judgment of my colleagues. I have inherited from my former editors the *Jelenkor* tradition, the principle of *sine ira et studio*, and the need to share our aesthetic judgments interpersonally to be able to argue for them. Not incidentally, this coincides with my university studies, where my other subjects besides Hungarian were aesthetics and art history.

***Jelenkor* published a magazine a few years ago; what is the difference between a magazine and a journal in the case of *Jelenkor*? What was the feedback like?**

The *Jelenkor Magazine* was originally the idea of my colleague Tibor Noé Kiss, a prose writer and former journalist. He constantly brings quality literature to a broader readership in the latter role. The magazine attempted to do this, and in keeping with the expectations of today's dominant visual culture, it provided the reader with a much more comprehensive range of images than the otherwise puritanically structured magazine. The texts were shorter and more readable, and the magazine did not

include a column of articles or reviews. There was a lot of positive feedback, but this also meant a lot of extra work (and cost) for the editorial team over and above normal operations that we cannot regularly undertake.

**Literary journals have played and continue to play a significant role in the organisation of literary life. In the 1990s, *Jelenkor*, in cooperation with JAK (Attila József Circle), held literary programs and conferences in the autumn in Pécs. Still, for years, these events, which were also crucial for pushing boundaries and the democratic transition, were not held. Beginning in 2021, you are one of the organisers of PécsLIT literary festival, which is different in nature, but shares the same critical spirit and insight. To what extent do you think these encounters can be a stage for democracy beyond literary life?**

Indeed, the three prominent traditional newspapers – *Alföld*, *Tisztáj*, *Jelenkor* – have all played a central role in organising literary life in their own cities – Debrecen, Szeged, Pécs – for many decades. I joined *Jelenkor* as a young editor in 1992, and already in '93, with some colleagues of mine, we started to organise study days of the József Attila Circle, an organisation of young writers in Pécs, and in '94, we even set up an international literary meeting on the literary impact of the social changes in Central Europe after 1989. (It is interesting to note that the event was opened by György Konrád, the vice-president of the international PEN Club at the time, and was attended by the future Nobel Prize winner in Literature, Olga Tokarczuk). The JAK Study Days were organised in the 1990s, thus connecting the young generation of writers of the time to Pécs and *Jelenkor*. Later on, in the framework of the *European Capital of Culture – Pécs, 2010* project, I had the opportunity to organise many literary events, including several international ones. We also started re-organising Central European literary meetings around 2010. These

meetings are, of course, not purely literary but always provide an opportunity to compare the situation of one's institution in the social and political field with literary people from other countries. So, ultimately, we can compare our degree of freedom with that of the others.

PécsLIT is a relatively new initiative, but the third edition of the Pécs Literary Festival in September 2023 was a resounding success, attracting thousands of readers. We contribute with the literary expertise and contacts of *Jelenkor*, and our partner is the central library (Dél-Dunántúli Regionális Könyvtár és Tudásközpont), which has a dedicated staff and a giant new library complex. As a result of our joint work, we have created one of Hungary's largest and most prestigious literary festivals almost from scratch, with the financial and moral support of the city of Pécs. In addition to presenting new works by renowned authors, the audience can also meet young authors, and we always host guests from abroad. Here, the public can meet free writers and free ideas, which can strengthen their immunity to violent, necessarily simplistic propagandistic political influence.

**For almost twenty-five years, *Jelenkor* has been participating in the „Review within review“ project, a collaboration between Central European journals initiated by the Ljubljana-based journal *Apokalipsa*. What does this cooperation mean? What is its role in literary life and intercultural dialogue?**

I will start my answer from a slightly more distant place. *Jelenkor* is based in Pécs, in a Budapest-oriented Hungary, in the “countryside”, so to speak. *Jelenkor* represents the idea that the rich and layered historical past of Pécs (of which its ethnic and linguistic diversity is essential) provides the basis for the city's cultural decentralisation in Hungary. The culture of the former Roman city of Pécs (Sopianae), however, is not only rooted in the ancient past but also has strong links to twentieth-century modernity (Bauhaus, modern arts in

general, fine arts, ballet, etc.) and is still diverse and of high quality, with perhaps the most extensive cultural institutions among Hungarian provincial cities, and a significant number of artists and people working in education and culture. However, this specific culture of the city does not define itself in opposition to something else, but in dialogue with different traditions, ways of thinking, and creativity, regardless of their place of origin in Hungary or beyond its borders.

*Jelenkor*'s activities in the spirit of the above are connected to the Hungarian communities; yet our journal also has a strong Central European network, primarily owing to the almost twenty-year-old "Review within review" journal collaboration. Our journal has developed professional relations with its non-Hungarian-speaking colleagues, regardless of political affiliations. When I took over as editor-in-chief of *Jelenkor* in 1999, I was almost immediately invited to the Central European Literary Meeting in Vilenica, Slovenia, and from there, the networking of contacts began, which for two decades was particularly active in the "Review within review" journal cooperation. The Ljubljana-based journal *Apokalip-sa*, particularly Primoz Repar and Stanka Chrobakova, were the driving forces behind this. It would be difficult to list the number of events and publications that came into being as a result. The newspapers translated each other's material directly from the different languages without using an intermediary language. In addition to the Slovene and Hungarian participants, there were also Slovak, Czech, Croatian, Austrian, Polish, Serbian, Romanian, and Italian participants. Numerous literary events were also held in the participating countries.

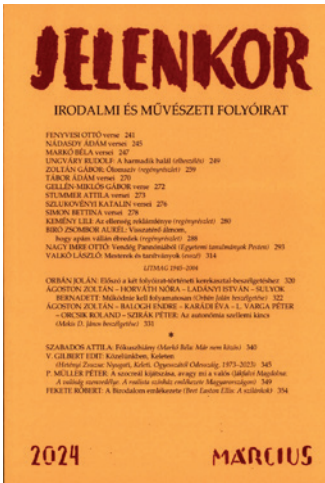
For me, the experience of living abroad has had a potent impact on my outlook and has considerably broadened my horizons. I gained some insight into the literature of other languages through personal experience, albeit fragmentary. There are many standard literary and cultural links in our past with common themes, sometimes buried. One day, you see the mighty ruler of the former Kingdom of Hungary, the powerful state of Central Europe at

that time, the “fair-minded” King Matthias of Hungarian folktales, in a naive folk depiction of a refrigerator magnet at the Ljubljana market. Kralj Matjaz is also a great king for Slovenians, so much so that centuries later, in the 19th century, a custom developed whereby peasants painted figural scenes on the lids of beehives, and he features as a well-known and frequently occurring motif. This is a minor thing, but there are many existing similarities. It is more likely to be remembered that in the 1950s, there was also a barbed wire fence between Hungary, part of the Moscow bloc, and Yugoslavia, including Slovenia, which rejected Soviet supremacy. “Tito, the chained dog of imperialists” – was Hungarian communist propaganda’s way of inciting against Yugoslavia. If you know something about the culture of the other country, which is in many ways similar to your own, and their narratives about your own, you will understand them better, and an atmosphere of mutual trust will soon develop. In Central and Eastern Europe, many historical traumas and unresolved grievances prevail among peoples. Like on the Hungarian side, the Trianon peace dictates a hundred years ago, by which Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory and millions of Hungarian-speaking citizens. By manipulating these grievances, the various nationalist-populist forces can mobilise voters to this day, while cultural dialogue can act as a vaccine against such diseases.

**The roundtable discussions held during the opening and closing events of the travelling exhibition in Pécs were organised in the frame of the project *East European Literary Magazines 1945 – 2004: Testing the Boundaries and Paving the Way to Democratisation* (LITMAG1945-2004) and in collaboration with *Jelenkor* and PécsLIT literary festival have convinced me that we need such discussions. What is your experience? Do you plan to organise similar events as part of the PécsLIT festival?**

Editors are always happy to share their experiences with others, including some of their old friends and

acquaintances. Together, they can recall certain literary events, authors, and phenomena from decades back. This is cultural memory itself, a kind of oral history. And there are bound to be also interested members of the audience. Earlier, around 2010, I organised a few meetings of Central European newspapers as part of the European Capital of Culture events in Pécs, which were also instructive. We learned about the similarities and differences between Slovenian literary magazines, which have a smaller audience than Hungarian ones, and Polish literary magazines, which have a much larger audience. The exchange of experiences is also essential in this respect because it often helps people see beyond their “inborn” situation and perhaps opens up new directions. I believe that PécsLIT is also the place for the future presentation and cultural exchange of domestic and foreign publications.



Cover of the 2024/3 *Jelenkor* (Present age): this issue contains a block on the *East European Literary Magazines 1945 – 2004: Testing the Boundaries and Paving the Way to Democratisation* (LITMAG1945-2004) project, which includes an edited version of the roundtable discussions held at the opening and closing events of the travelling exhibition in Pécs (Civil Közösségek Háza, Szent István tér; 17. 07.06.2023 – 13.09.2023).

I was glad you received the *Szépíró-díj* (Literary Award) named after Piroska Kéri (Piroska Kéri Prize) in 2023. Congratulations. There are few awards in honour of Hungarian women; therefore, receiving an award named after a woman editor has a symbolic significance. One of the aims of the *East European Literary Magazines 1945 - 2004: Testing the Boundaries and Paving the Way to Democratisation* project, initiated by the Slovenian publisher Beletrina, and the present discussion that is also part of it, is to map the situation of women editors-in-chief in Central and Eastern Europe between 1945 and 2004. I was shocked that there are still relatively few women editors-in-chief in Hungary. I also looked at the Slovenian, Polish, Lithuanian, German, and Italian journals involved in the project. The situation in Central and Eastern European countries is very similar; on the other hand, the Italian magazine *La battana* boasts of several women editors-in-chief over recent years. In Hungary, during the period in question, Ágnes Nemes Nagy was a central figure in *Újhold* (1946-48), even if she was not the editor-in-chief. I would like to mention a few journals that have a female editor-in-chief. The editor-in-chief of *Mozgó Világ* (Budapest, 1975-) since 1983 has been Julianna P. Szűcs. Éva Karádi has been the editor-in-chief of *Magyar Lettre Internationale* (Budapest, 1991-2016). Nóra Horváth has been the editor-in-chief of *Műhely* since 2020. At *Jelenkor*, Beáta Thomka has been a long-standing editorial board member; initially, she started from the journal *Új Symposion*.

Thank you for your congratulations; I was delighted to receive the award named after Piroska Kéri because I was close to Piroska, and I have always appreciated the devoted and self-sacrificing work she did as an editor and literary organiser in the cause of contemporary Hungarian literature. I was deeply moved by her death a few years ago. The proportion of female editors in Hungary is indeed low. After the death of Ervin Szederkényi in the late 1980s, Erzsébet Hallama was the acting editor-in-chief of *Jelenkor* for a short time, and Gábor Csordás took over

the position from her. Boglárka Nagy also played a major role as the journal's editor between 1997 and 2010. She is currently the literary editor-in-chief of Jelenkor Publishing House. In the last few years, we had Eszter Pálffy as an editorial colleague, who became a teaching assistant at the University of Pécs. We also had several female trainees, such as Petra Bozsoki and Eszter Vilmos, now teaching assistants at the Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest. Yet, women are still underrepresented. Hungarian literature has traditionally been characterised by male predominance. It is telling that Ágnes Nagy Nemes, one of the major Hungarian poets of the twentieth century, tried to cultivate intellectual, "masculine" character, "thought poetry", in her lifetime to be accepted by her colleagues. Surprisingly, her legacy contained several quite different "feminine" poems that she did not dare to publish during her life. However, the proportion of female authors is steadily increasing. Female poets from earlier generations, such as Zsuzsa Takács and Zsuzsa Rakovszky, are still active and vital. The poems and short stories of Krisztina Tóth are translated into several languages. The proportion of women is much higher in younger generations. In recent years, an entire series of works by young women writers of Hungarian fiction share the common characteristic of a meticulous portrayal of the minor events of everyday life from a female perspective. But young women poets are also contributing a lot of new innovations to lyric poetry, often with radical, taboo-busting poems that question traditional female roles and defy the hypocritical prudery of state-promoted discourse about sexuality and sexual orientation.

**A literary woman or man is not a fortune teller, but I'm curious to know how you see the future of literary journals in digital culture. What are the new challenges for *Jelenkor* in the present?**

Digital culture is already with us; if you look at it from the perspective of traditional newspapers and maga-



zines, they exist in parallel worlds. Of course, there are meeting points. When *Jelenkor* was launched in 1958, the literati used mechanical typewriters and indigo paper between the pages to make a duplicate. Computer editing also impacts the creative process, as there is no need to cut out the wrong parts, proofread, glue pieces of paper with rewritten paragraphs, etc. Mallarmé's "horror vacui" about the blank paper has become less relevant. (There have also been those who relied on concentration before computer editing for the writing process, such as Peter Esterházy, who wrote by hand all the time and only entered the final version of the text into a computer). As a user, the internet is a great convenience when looking for something, a piece of information, or a digitalised text. However, for my part, I can't and don't want to imagine my life without traditionally printed books or journals, although I do read a lot on screen. As far as *Jelenkor* is concerned, I can say that as long as I am the editor-in-chief, I would certainly not want to give up the printed edition, even though the number of followers and readers of *Jelenkor online* is constantly growing. We are doing a lot to ensure that the online mutation, which is of the same quality as the paper but is primarily based on writings produced separately, is constantly developing and is up to date. Our digital archive contains all our print issues since the first one, and texts initially intended for online publication (since 2013: <https://www.jelenkor.net/>) are available to all readers free of charge. We could produce literary podcasts and videos with the necessary financial and human resources. So we need to keep up with technological progress and reach new generations of readers. Still, the utmost task is intellectual: to preserve the ideal of aesthetic quality and to find the original in emerging contemporary poetries. Nor should *Jelenkor* be concerned in the future with the kind of literature that artificial intelligence can algorithmically write from large amounts of input data. I am reminded of the poet László Nagy's poetic message from a TV interview in the 1970s when he was asked what his message would be to the people living hundreds of years

later: “Ha lesz emberi arcuk egyáltalán, akkor csókolom őket” (“If they have a human face at all, I will kiss them.”)

**Let me end by quoting Derrida again: „to be a democrat is to admit that we never live in a sufficiently democratic society“ (*Le Monde*, 2014). To be a philosopher is about doing everything possible to make our society more democratic. But what does it mean to be an editor-in-chief of a literary journal?**

Derrida's sentence rightly warns us of the essential requirement of being an intellectual, the maxim of constant self-reflection. In other words, we must constantly work to maintain a democratic society, and one of the essential elements of this work is value-based criticism, the ability to engage in dialogue, and the recognition of the necessary diversity and plurality of opinions and views. There is no difference between a philosopher and a literary editor in this expected essential attitude; it is their common task. In practice, my job as a literary critic and editor is to select, curate, and make available to readers works of good quality produced by different poetic and aesthetic sensibilities. And, naturally, to facilitate communication between the writer and the audience. Good literature helps readers make sense of their destiny and human existence. I hope this professional award indicates something well achieved at *Jelenkor*.

When I was young, I was a semi-professional athlete and a sprinter, and I hated running longer distances of several kilometres. The starting pistol goes off, the tension explodes, you run, it's a rush, you often win, you stand on the podium, they applaud, etc. When I started working at *Jelenkor*, it was not clear that I was not going for a 100m distance; I understood on the way that life and work are not like that. But this marathon is most enjoyable, as you can contemplate, think, and learn all the time.

Translated by Gertrud Szamosi

## Journals published in Hungary

*Alföld* (Debrecen, 1954–)

*Híd* (Szabadka – Újvidék – Novi Sad, Serbia, 1934-1941/1945 –)

*Holmi* (1989-2014)

*Jelenkor* (Pécs, 1958–)

*Korunk* (Kolozsvár – Klausenburg – Cluj, Romania, 1926 –1940/1957–)

*Látó* (Marosvásárhely – Neumarkt – Tîrgu Mures, Romania, 1989 –)

*Magyar Lettre Internationale* (Budapest, 1991–2016)

*Magyar Műhely* (Paris, 1962 –1989, Paris-Vienna-Budapest 1990-1996, Budapest 1990–)

*Mozgó Világ* (Budapest, 1975–)

*Műhely* (Győr, 1978–)

*Tiszatáj* (Szeged, 1947–)

*Újhold* (1946-1948)

*Új Symposion* (Újvidék – Novi Sad, Serbia, 1965-1992)

*Ex Symposion* (Veszprém, 1993 –)

*Utunk/Helikon* (Kolozsvár – Klausenburg – Cluj, Romania, 1946-1989/1990–)