Exhibiting Rape, Silencing Women
Alaine Polcz in the House of Terror in Budapest

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One of the very few autobiographical texts presented in the House of Terror Museum (Terror Háza) in Budapest, and the only one which has appeared as a book and demands to be read as literature, is Alaine Polcz's memoir/autobiographical novel Asszony a fronton: Egy fejezet az életemből (Woman on the front: A chapter from my life) (2005 [1991]).\(^1\) Polcz's book is the first and so far only first-person narrative written in Hungary that takes on the task, so to speak, of the experience of the mass rapes committed by the Soviet troops in 1944–45 in territories from which they were pushing out the Germans. At the time of its first publication in 1991, the book stirred waves as the first female voice speaking openly of a suppressed memory of many women, of a historical trauma not discussed in Eastern Europe until the collapse of communism.\(^2\) Polcz's Asszony a fronton is a highly complex autobiographical narrative that

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1 Here and further in the text, I will refer to the book by its original title to avoid confusion, and because its English translation appeared under two different titles, both of which are inaccurate. My page references are from the Hungarian 2005 printing and the 2002 English edition. An earlier English edition was published under the title A Wartime Memoir: Hungary 1944–1945 (1998). Later another prose work (Kováts 2012) as well as a documentary covered the theme, the latter being especially problematic and contradictory to Polcz's novel, its approach being more similar to that of the House of Terror: Elhallgatott gyalázat, dir. Skrabski Fruzsina, 2013.

2 In Germany, the pathbreaking work was: Sander and Johr (2005 [1992]). In Hungary, Krisztián Ungváry writes about it in a few pages, in a chapter “Soviet violations of the law” (2005: 348–357). The original was published in Hungarian already in 1998. The first historian dealing with the topic in detail was Pető (1999). The war crimes, especially rapes and looting committed by the US troops are discussed in the following works, among others: Roberts (2013); Lilly (2007); and Grossman (2007). The fact that it was not only the Soviets of the Allied forces which committed rape confirms Susan Brownmiller's thesis in her groundbreaking work (1993) that rape is primarily a gendered crime and as such it does not depend on race, ethnicity, or culture.
ties in this particularly traumatic experience with diverse people and events as well as the general situation in the country before, during, and after the war in a sophisticated and intelligent way.

The House of Terror Museum in Budapest, Hungary, is a highly controversial enterprise that presents and commemorates the “terror” of two oppressive regimes in Hungary, those of “Fascists” and “Communists”. The use of excerpts from Polcz’s book to bolster the museum’s argument clearly serves the purpose of the political aspirations of one of the leading Hungarian political parties. While the House of Terror has been the focus of serious criticism from its beginnings, so far none of its critics have mentioned this element. In my reading, it opens up several issues, though the lack of interest can be explained by the focus on the wider political issues and by the rather hidden position of Polcz’s text within the exhibition. There is tension between the importance of this text and the events it describes (the mass rapes), as well as the tension between what the House of Terror stands for and the meaning of Polcz’s novel/memoir. This case highlights at the same time that the House of Terror, similarly to many other historical discussions in Hungary and elsewhere in the region, is grossly deficient as far as women and their representation in historical narratives are concerned—which all calls for further detailed analysis.

Here, I discuss the way excerpts from this book are used in the museum for ideological purposes the book itself would not support, often even deny. As I will explain, by taking excerpts compiled as one coherent theme, but out of the context of the whole book, the original is presented in a way in which it loses all its purpose and meaning and ceases to be what it is in its entirety. Therefore, whereas it is supposed to fulfill a synecdochic representation, the “pars pro” is disconnected from its original “toto” and becomes a representation of something completely different.

There is an inherent tension in the way that the House of Terror Museum deals with the issue of the mass rapes committed by the Soviet Army when it forgoes any serious discussion of either the mass rapes in general or Polcz’s excerpts in particular, which requires further discussion of the institution. The foundation of the museum and what and how issues are represented there was subject of fierce debates in Hungarian society among public figures, intellectuals, journalists, and politicians at the time of its creation in 2002. In the following, I analyze the (missing) gender aspects of the House of Terror in the light of the importance of violence against women and the gendered aspects of the suffering of women in oppressive regimes, and then I will speak about the book and ways it contradicts the aims of the House of Terror itself.