

Wartime Memories from East and West: The Construction of George Faludy's Gayness

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Abstract: The young, bisexual Faludy wrote homoerotic poems closeted behind historical masks till having come across two homosocial scenes, Morocco and the American Army, during the second world war. Faludy continuously rewrote his memoirs and poems, so we can follow the development of his gay persona in his oeuvre. The first publications, including the canonised English version of *My Happy Days in Hell*, only hinted at man-to-man relations, contrary the later Hungarian editions. I demonstrate the rewriting of his history with parallel citations, furthermore, I attempt to reconstruct the real events with contemporary letters, diary entries and posterior testimonies. His many poems leave the homosexual dimensions in gloominess till the English translations, when the language clarifies the specific gender. Finally, a new, stable homosexual partnership, the North American environment and the gay liberation movement together helped Faludy to come out of the closet at the end of the eighties.

Keywords: Faludy, memoirs, Morocco, shaping of the image

George Faludy (1910–2006) was called the Ulysses of the 20th century since he lived for forty years as an emigrant. Many of his works were translated into English, as was his best-known autobiography, *My Happy Days in Hell*, besides three volumes of his poems (*East and West*, *Learn This Poem ...* and *Selected Poems*).

Despite his many works, we do not know many facts about his life. Faludy rewrote his memoirs, as well as his poems: he frequently reconstructed the events. He could eternize the same night implying he was making love with a dancer girl or chatting with a soldier, hand in hand (Faludy, “Pokolbéli” *Menora*; *Pokolbéli* 1987, 97-101). He mystified not only his literary sources but his own life as well.

Even though Faludy had four wives, his many poems, autobiographical novels and statements reveal his attraction to men. After some peripheral mentions of the subject,

cloaked in historical allusions, his first published homoerotic poem appeared in 1940 in a Transylvanian left-wing magazine, describing a young, nude Sicilian fisherman and his petrified admirers (*Elfeledett* 203).

When this poem was published, Faludy had fled the ever more fascist Hungary and later Europe. Subsequently, he found two homosocial environments: the Arabian culture in Morocco and the army in the United States.

When the Nazis invaded France, Faludy left Paris, where he had spent one and a half years, and escaped to Morocco. While his friends preferred colonial Tangier and Casablanca, Faludy lived in the souk of Marrakesh, wore local costumes, travelled to the countryside accompanied not by his wife, but by an Arab.

This man was immortalized in Faludy's oeuvre as Amar, mentioned in several poems and his autobiography. He was a living person: in the Hungarian Literature Museum they keep the diary of an emigrant fellow of Faludy, Endre Havas, who wrote down the full name of Amar – Amar ben Nassir – as in many evenings he made the suggestive remark: "George–Arab". We can imagine what George did with the Arab, regarding a letter that Faludy jokingly wrote to his diarist friend, when they separated: "Write me again precisely how the supplies are in Tangier concerning a) women, b) Arab boys, c) goats, since a globe-trotter needs to discover everything." (Letter to Kellermann and Havas). Another communist emigrant comrade, László András, later reported to the secret police: "I first heard in Tangier that Faludy had a homosexual attitude. He wears very flamboyant and feminine clothes" (my translations).

Faludy placed articles about his Arabian nights in news media during as well as after the war; he published his autobiography in English in 1962, which was rewritten in Hungarian twice. The first four publications, including the canonised English version of *My Happy Days in Hell*, only hinted at man-to-man relations, contrary the later Hungarian editions.

On the evidence of this late coming-out we observe an episode about a blond Berber youth. Faludy first wrote about him in 1946, in a Hungarian weekly. The article describes a funny, exotic, even mildly erotic tale.

It was the blond Riffkabil, who had attracted my attention at first sight due to the colour of his hair and his blue eyes. Without speaking a word, he pushed his mat next to me, he covered it with his burnous, laid close to me, surrounding my neck with his arms and he pulled me vertically close to him. He fell asleep the next second. His balanced breathing, the warmth of his body soothed me at once and I fell asleep soon. (Faludy, "én ..."; my translation)

However, in 1962, in the English version of *My Happy Days in Hell*, they did not sleep separately, but under the same blanket:

Soundlessly, at a snail's pace, he slid towards me, pushing himself forward now with his hip, now with his elbow, until he slipped out from his blanket

and under mine. His body emanating a light but penetrating perfume, that of withered flowers in an arid field; I felt this perfume not only in my nostrils, but in my throat and further down in the ramifications of the bronchia, right into the apex of the lungs.

We started early at dawn.” (*My Happy Days* 129)

This remains the final English version to this day.

Nevertheless, in 1987 a newer and more explicit version of his autobiography was published, but only in Hungarian.

He came so close that I felt his sigh on my face. He pressed his breast to mine; his two nipples were hard and sharp as if he would desire to scratch me with them. He slipped one of his arms below my neck, stroked my hair with his other hand and tenderly kissed me. His lips were dry, choppy, and sweet. Then he began to laugh. He knew exactly what I was afraid of. He kissed me again, closed his eyes, bent his head onto my shoulder and pressed his lap into my hipbone. He may have told me that I should not be afraid of rape: if either of us were to seduce the other, it could be only me. He even did not open his eyes until many hours afterwards and helped me out only with some fast, wild moves when I did not know, or I did not dare to know how I could do it with a sixteen-year-old Visigoth boy. (*Pokolbéli* 1987: 139, my translation)

Actually, the Riffkabil boy may not have been a real person. There are parallels in the description of him and of Amar, such as the fair skin and the adoration of a gay icon, Alexander the Great. The Riffkabil wore a medallion; Amar had the same ring (*Pokolbéli* 1987, 138-139; *A Pokol tornácán* 16). It is noteworthy that the Riffkabil was a carried over persona for the sexual part of Amar, projected to another, imaginary character.

In his poetry, Faludy wrote some neutral poems praising Amar without any sexuality, and especially from the seventies onwards wrote erotic poems about sexual actions not mentioning the gender of his partner.

Interesting examples are three poems about a Chleuch dancer. They represent a dancer in the market of Marrakech who pays attention to a cowardly Faludy but who is finally killed by a lover and whose body the poet mourned (“Slóh táncos a téren”, “A slóh táncos halála”, “Rekviem a slóh táncosért”, *Versek 1926*, 189-193).

The mentioned face, the shoulders, the arms, the fingers and the eye are all gender-neutral and together with the nightingale-like voice the description of the admiring men evokes a dancing woman among heterosexual readership. Conversely, for non-heterosexual readers the harsh profile, the muscles as well as the possible distinction between dancers and dancing-girls in the Hungarian language develop another reading about a dancing boy.

Three years after the Hungarian publication, in 1978, the last one of the poems, the “Death of a Chleuch Dancer”, appeared in English in the Canadian Faludy-book of

East and West. Due to the gender representation of the English language there was no space for the delicate word play. In the translation by Dennis Lee, the masculinity of the dancer is clear: Lee used the pronouns he and his. There is even a note for the English readers: “Chleuch Dancers are dancing boys of the Chleuch tribe in Morocco” (49).

Nonetheless, in Hungarian Faludy always kept the delicate gender uncertainty. Which could be the author’s original intention because even today the dancers in the main square of Marrakech are cross-dressed boys.

After 13 months in Morocco Faludy successfully travelled to America, where he first worked as a journalist. In February 1943 he joined another homosocial environment: the U.S. Army.

Faludy rarely wrote about his years as a soldier. Still, there is one forgotten novel, which focuses on this period. In 1947, when he finished his autobiography about the Arabian memories, having described the arrival in the United States, he continued with another memoir about his military service. Among his fellow soldiers he presented Terence Wilde. “His name was Wilde, like the poet, though he pronounced it as ‘veelthe’ in the introduction. He was about twenty years old and very handsome, so handsome that the other soldiers would treat him with a mixture of some envy and anger” (Faludy, *Mars*, 25 Oct).

For homosexual writers it is a familiar method to mention gay icons, referring to the works of the gay canon. During the first half of the 20th century Oscar Wilde was the most well-known LGBT person in Hungary (Takács 92). In addition, we find multiple references to the homosexuality of Terence Wilde. Lines like: “‘How many good-looking women stroll here,’ added Karl keeping his eyes open. ‘And how many good-looking boys,’ said Wilde closing his eyes.” (*Mars*, 8 Nov) They set off for the Aleutian Islands together, whereas we shall never know the ending – due to the changing expectations during the communist takeover the tabloid abruptly ended the series at the end of the year.

With these lines and some scattered, later references we can reread his soldier-poems from a homosexual perspective. The refusal to visit female prostitutes (“Brothel-Going”) or the thought crime of the naked soldiers (“Katonafürdő a Kígyó-folyónál”: Soldiers’ Bath at Great Snake River) both open a new horizon for homophile readers.

Having encountered the two homosocial scenes concluded to the first, and for another forty years the only, coming-out poem. In “Nel mezzo del cammin” in 1947 he described a sexual conquest from his sixteenth year, with a look-alike boy. “Our loins were facing as reflections in mirrors,” using a well-known figure of homosexual literature (*Őszi* 15, my translation). If the Doppelgänger Other besides a classical gay icon were not enough for us to decode the situation, Faludy recorded, in a unique way in Hungarian poetry, a

description of masturbation. Faludy dared republish it only half a century after the first publication, still more explicitly rewritten.

Although the English version of *My Happy Days* barely contains any homoerotic fragments, it was enough to attract some readers' attention. According to an archived letter, an Australian youth offered his services to Faludy as a gay secretary (Ch... 's letter). After all, a different person did this: Eric Michael Johnson (1937–2004). The rather mysterious dancer and poet, Johnson, invented different personas about himself for different acquaintances, Lithuanian, Latvian, Icelander origins, though he came from Indiana. "I've spent my whole life trying to be invisible when more or less forced to perform publicly, to hide behind as many masks as I could find," he wrote to a friend.

Having read *My Happy Days*, he fell in love with the foreign author and the two masked artists finally met in Malta, in 1966, and lived together till 2002. These 32 years makes this the longest lasting relationship Faludy had. For the readers Eric remained only the secretary of the writer, notwithstanding that he earned money for both since Faludy wrote works that were never published and cared for nothing else. What is more, Johnson was the co-author of a book of essays, *Notes from the Rainforest*, which appeared in Canada as a work by Faludy.

Finding a stable gay partnership, facing the gay liberation movement, and living in North America, in Toronto next to the Gay Village, led Faludy to come out of the closet at the end of the eighties.

In 1987 a samizdat version of his autobiography *My Happy Days* appeared in Hungary. Its Moroccan part is abundant with homoerotic stories as opposed to the English editions. Making love with the blond Riffkabil and Amar, talking with Amar about sodomy, gay secondary characters such as a Sudanese merchant, admiration of the beauty of the young and emphasizing their feminine tones. It is interesting that Faludy intended the original version without homoeroticism for the international public, but the newer, more homoerotic version for the Hungarians (Letter to Csiszár). Thence all the later English editions of *My Happy Days* follow the older text.

In 1988 he published a vast anthology of world poetry, including 90 openly homosexual authors. Some of the poets in this book may be personas of Faludy such as the mysterious Liu Teh-Zsen, whose biography contains only the years of birth and death, who was never mentioned in the literature, his name was misspelled and on top of that he would have written only four-line homoerotic poems. (*Test* 674) In 2017 Zoltán Csehy studied the homoerotic translation of Straton of Sardis; according to this, Faludy used existing poems, condensed some or rewrote them in a rougher, more explicit way.

In 1990, Faludy published *200 Sonnets*, among them the love poems to Eric Johnson. Before Eric Faludy preferred long forms or cycles to express love. However, in the 14 lines of a sonnet there is no place for a long description, only a qualifier. Without

the distinction between he and she in the Hungarian language, mentioning eyes, bodies, shoulders and even muscles do not break through the heteronormativity. The most obvious clue is the marked social outsider status of the relationship. Like “I always knew that our love was impossible. This is the reason it is so nice.” In the same way here: “for our loves, this inconceivable magic I abandoned everybody and everything” (“Fényképedet írógépemre tettem”: I Put Your Photo onto the Typewriter, “Foghúzás előtt”: Before the Extraction of a Tooth, *Versek. 1956*: 85, 80, my translations).

During the nineties in his new collections of poetry he wrote many erotic poems and hinted at the old ones written decades before. Possibly at about the same time, Faludy wrote some pornographic queer themed poetical cycles, too. They were never published during his life, but he gave some taped manuscripts to his close friends. When I collected his poetry, I managed to find one, “Ali Baba”. The 36 items’ topic is the endless sexual activity of a group of Arabian muggers (*Elfeledett* 91-112, 217). The poems must have been written between 1989 and 1994. The fourth wife of the poet guards another pornographic homosexual cycle, however due to the controversy between her and the owner of the author’s rights it has never been published, nor could I read it.

In 2000 the sequel to *My Happy Days* appeared, with the title *Pokolbeli napjaim után* (After my Happy Days in Hell). It would be about the happy third marriage of Faludy, but it is full of homosexual representations.

In fact, Faludy’s status as a Hungarian homosexual icon was coming to an end then. In 2002 he married his fourth wife, Eric left them and committed suicide in Nepal. On top of that the more than ninety-year-old Faludy declared that he had always been attracted to women.

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