

POSTMEMORY TWICE:

POETIC AND NARRATIVE TRANSFORMATION IN GEORGE SZIRTES'S BIOGRAPHIES OF HIS MOTHER

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Returning to his childhood homeland, Hungary, in 1984 as an adult “changed the direction of [his] professional life,”¹ claims the British poet George Szirtes in the preface to his poetry collection *The Budapest File* (2000). At that time, he was already an acknowledged author with his Faber Memorial Prize recipient debut collection of poetry *The Slant Door* (1979), soon succeeded by two other books, and he also worked as a visual artist, who had graduated from schools in Leeds and London, and who was making a living as an art instructor. Yet, his short trip to Budapest motivated him to embark in new directions. He began both to rediscover the city of his earliest memories and to explore family history, burdened with numerous traumas, which have been central themes in his oeuvre ever since. He also started to relearn his mother tongue and became one of the most brilliant and renowned translators of Hungarian literature into English. The interaction of these layers of personal memories, family narratives, and complex heritage is one of the most exciting aspects of Szirtes's artistic work. This paper focuses on how the most prominent figure in his work, his mother, is portrayed in the cycle of poems “Metro” (1988) and the book *The Photographer at Sixteen* (2019), his first and his latest extensive biographical texts about her. Examining the diverse, yet closely connected, layers of personal experience and history in these two pieces, the essay traces two interrelated processes: how individual memory is imbued by postmemory – as defined by Marianne Hirsch – and, as a result, how Szirtes – quite in the spirit of Derek Parfit – transcends the conventional concept of the self as an entity completely separate from others by articulating identity as being deeply embedded in the wider context of culture.

¹ G. Szirtes, *The Budapest File*, Budapest, 2000, p. 13.

To appreciate the narrative achievements of “Metro” (1988) and *The Photographer at Sixteen*, the reader needs to be informed about certain details in the history of the author’s family. Fortunately, George Szirtes often shares biographical facts both in his fiction and documentary texts – from interviews through introductions of his books to informal communications like blog entries. He was born in 1948 in Budapest, the first of two sons of his Holocaust survivor parents: Szirtes László and Szirtes Magdalena² (born as Nussbacher Magdalena³ or Magdalena Nussbächer⁴, according to two different books by Szirtes; the loss of the umlaut presumably results from the name’s anglicisation which usually involves removing accents otherwise not used by the English alphabet). In December 1956, the young parents, who felt threatened by the anti-Semitic atrocities taking place during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, fled from Hungary to England, and settled down in London with their two sons.

The change of citizenship involved certain changes in their first names as well. The father started to call himself Leslie Szirtes⁵ (adopting the English name order of the first name followed by the family name, unlike in Hungarian which has a reverse order; replacing László with its English equivalent Leslie; and pronouncing his family name in a more English-friendly way for the sake of social integration), and the future author, previously called Gábor or, in an endearing form, Gabi, all through his early childhood⁶, also assimilated to English society by identifying himself as George Szirtes. The name George has an intricate background history, quite relevant to the subject of this paper, as it is not simply the English match for the child’s original middle name György (Szirtes Gábor György Miklós⁷), as stated in his Hungarian birth certificate, but coincides with the first name of a particular man named George, an American soldier who had participated in the liberation of the concentration camp where Magdalena had been held captive before the birth of her son. The American George proposed to her, but she chose to remain faithful to her previous engagement to László as Szirtes’s prose biography about his mother recounts the decision⁸. Although George Szirtes claims that the choice of his English first name was made by himself, uninfluenced by his mother’s previous encounter with the American George, of which the young child had no knowledge at the time of making the choice⁹, it cannot be fully excluded that the mother had some effect on her son’s decision, following an unconscious logic similar to the one described in her biography¹⁰.

From a social perspective, one’s name is the primary signifier of one’s identity. Thus, the fact that the young Hungarian child integrated into English society not by the English equivalent of the name he had used so far – not as Gabriel, the closest match of Gábor, but

² *Ibidem*, p. 5.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ G. Szirtes, *The Photographer at Sixteen*, London, 2019, p. 110.

⁵ Szirtes, *The Budapest File...*, p. 5.

⁶ Szirtes, *The Photographer at Sixteen...*, p. 181.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 134.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 132–134.

⁹ “At that stage I knew nothing about the American soldier. The name was suggested by my early Hungarian language reading of *Tamás bácsi kunyhója*. As I recall, there were two characters called George in it. I found one of them heroic and admirable.” This is a quotation from a private e-mail written by George Szirtes to Katalin Szlukovényi on 14 September 2023. The title mentioned in the message is the Hungarian translation of the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. See: H. Beecher Stowe, *Tamás bácsi kunyhója*, trans. and revised by I. Mándy, Budapest, 1945.

¹⁰ Szirtes, *The Photographer at Sixteen...*, p. 134.

as George, reminiscent of an actual English native speaker, the American soldier – seems to be an excellent early example illustrating complicated nature and fluidity of the individual, which will be a frequent topic in Szirtes's work later. Similar transformations in the parents' names – described above – also instantiate the overwhelming experience of the assimilation process, a formative experience of the future poet.

The Szirtes family's story includes a series of traumas, which seem to epitomize the turbulent history of Europe in the 20th century – a central theme in both biographical texts by George Szirtes about his mother examined in this paper. Magdalena Nussbächer was born in Cluj by its Romanian, Kolozsvár by its Hungarian, and Klausenburg by its German name – Szirtes deliberately and consistently gives all the versions in *The Photographer at Sixteen*¹¹, highlighting how ambiguity lies at the very roots of history – and moved to Budapest at around the age of sixteen to study photography. The need to leave her family behind in order to be able to master her chosen profession in the Hungarian capital indicates the challenges and vulnerability of her position both as a young woman wishing to have a career at a time when feminism was still in its early stage in the region and as a member of the Hungarian Jewish minority living in Transylvania under Romanian rule. The trauma of borders moved to and fro between countries in Eastern Europe was followed by the trauma of the Holocaust, in which Magdalena's entire family perished – like most of the Jewry living in the countryside – while László lost some of his relatives but not all of them. Having survived two concentration camps – first Ravensbrück and then Penig¹² – Magda married László who had returned from forced labour – the Hungarian version of persecuting Jewish men during the Shoah – and they soon started a family with two sons: George and then Andrew (by the future English versions of their names). After a few calm years, however, Magda felt forced to move again, and the Szirtes family, fleeing from the violence related to the 1956 Revolution, found refuge in London.

“Englishing ourselves as best we could”¹³ – as Szirtes recalls – the young family kept distance both from their Jewish and Hungarian heritage. The mother completely rejected her Jewish background, claiming that she had been sent to the concentration camp for political reasons. “According to the fiction she was not Jewish at all, or that was the story she told us later,”¹⁴ writes Szirtes in his memoir, explaining the fabrication by the mother's wish to protect her children from being categorized as Jewish, since that label had cost the lives of many people in her family. “Avoiding thinking or talking about the trauma”¹⁵ or suppressing facts related to the traumatic experience is of course not unique to Magda Szirtes but one of the well-known symptoms of PTSD. However, the Szirtes family did not keep in touch with other Hungarian refugees either, preferring to attend events organized by the Romanian Embassy in London¹⁶, as Magda “was an ethnic Hungarian yet Romanian by birth”¹⁷.

Apart from family history, Hungarian literature is Szirtes's other major source of inspiration in many of his works, including the two biographical texts discussed here. Except for

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 146, 160, 163, 165, 166, 168, 169, 170, 171.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 126.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 126.

¹⁵ Zielinski M. and Dworkin E., *Trauma During Adulthood*, “International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies”, <https://istss.org/public-resources/trauma-basics/trauma-during-adulthood> [access: 15.10.2023].

¹⁶ G. Szirtes, *The Photographer at Sixteen...*, p. 150.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 146.

a short summer holiday in 1968¹⁸, George Szirtes returned to Hungary first in 1984 and has been a regular visitor since then. Soon, he was entrusted to translate a seminal text of the Hungarian literary canon, *The Tragedy of Man* by Imre Madách, a 19th-century verse play, the English version of which was published in 1989. In 1990, Szirtes received the first of his numerous international awards in literary translation, the Hungarian Déry Prize for Translation, for that work. In the next 25 years, almost two dozen Hungarian books came out in his translation, from classical to contemporary authors, from drama through prose fiction to poetry, including novels by László Krasznahorkai, which contributed significantly to the international acknowledgement of the latter, leading to Krasznahorkai's Man Booker International Prize in 2015. Szirtes has done the greatest service to contemporary fellow Hungarian poets like Ottó Orbán and Zsuzsa Rakovszky, whose book-length collections of poems selected and translated by Szirtes allowed them to be introduced to the global market, the lingua franca of which is English. Besides, he also promoted the cause of Hungarian literature as the editor of numerous anthologies like the comprehensive collection *The Lost Rider: Hungarian Poetry 16–20th Century* (1998) or *The Colonnade of Teeth: Twentieth Century Hungarian Poetry* (1996) deliberately focusing on the youngest generation of the time.

The relationship between Szirtes's output as a literary translator and as a poet is intriguing and quite relevant to his quest for identity manifest in his narratives about his mother as well. With a rather unusual gesture, he includes his translation of a number of Hungarian poems in some of his own collections of poetry. In *The Photographer in Winter* (1986), he paraphrases the poem "Jön a vihar..."¹⁹ by Attila József as "After Attila"²⁰ and closes the book with a short cycle "From the Hungarian"²¹, including translations of poems by Miklós Radnóti, Ottó Orbán, and Dezső Kosztolányi. He continues this non-standard practice of mixing original work with translation in *Bridge Passages* (1991) as well, which has the cycle "Seven Poems from the Hungarian of Ottó Orbán"²², whereas *Blind Field* (1994) features "Four Short Poems from the Hungarian of Ágnes Nemes Nagy"²³.

The act of not simply relearning the once forgotten language of his childhood through translating poetry but also integrating some of the canonical poetic achievements of Hungarian literature into his own books can be interpreted in at least two ways. Practically, Szirtes serves the cause of Hungarian poetry by sharing some of its highlights with English-speaking readers, many of whom would probably not open a volume of translation from an obscure foreign language but may be interested in the latest work of a mainstream contemporary British poet. However, this communal purpose is well supplemented with the other possible interpretation focusing more on an individual author. Namely, Szirtes seems to readopt his Hungarian identity lost at the age of eight by reproducing certain outstanding literary texts in English, and, what is more, by presenting some of them as part of his own work.

This is far from being cultural appropriation: he pays due credit to the original authors – actually, doing them a great favour by popularizing their work beyond the small number of Hungarian speaking readers – and the poems he chooses obviously articulate themes important to him because of his own – once lost and gradually rediscovered – Hungarian identity.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

¹⁹ J. Attila, *Jön a vihar...*, 1937, <https://www.mek.oszk.hu/00700/00708/html/kolto00000/kotet00001/ciklus00519/cim00537.htm> [access: 15.10.2023].

²⁰ G. Szirtes, *The Photographer in Winter*, London, 1986, p. 46.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 51–56.

²² G. Szirtes, *Bridge Passages*, Oxford, 1991, pp. 20–26.

²³ G. Szirtes, *Blind Field*, Oxford, 1994, pp. 41–42.

For example, “Forced March”²⁴ by Miklós Radnóti is one of the best-known Hungarian Holocaust poems. Furthermore, “The Snows of Yesteryear”²⁵ by Ottó Orbán playfully builds upon intertextual references both to “Ballade of Ladies of Time Gone By,” Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s classical translation of François Villon’s ballad and to the epitaphs in the *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) by Edgar Lee Masters:

Where is Mr Orbán, last year’s visiting professor?
Where is his queer accent, his strange opinions?
Deep, deep, deep in the hill he sleeps,
like other citizens of the Spoon River.²⁶

Thus, Szirtes’s translation of Orbán placed in the context of the translator’s own poetry and full of allusions to various languages and periods of world literature playfully meditates on the interpersonal nature of literature, quite in the spirit of Roland Barthes’s concept of the writerly text: “Some third person is writing my poems”²⁷.

Therefore, I would rather call Szirtes’s gesture of recognizing his own concerns in the poems of his Hungarian predecessors and adopting them into his own books an idiosyncratic and creative act of postmemory, as described by Marianne Hirsch:

“Postmemory” describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation.²⁸

Bearing the instances mentioned above in mind, George Szirtes cannot be simply defined as an English author with a Hungarian Jewish origin, but rather as a person whose identity includes numerous components of various cultures – Hungarian, Jewish, English, etc. in ethnic terms as well as poet and visual artist in professional terms. The potential of each of them sometimes lies hidden for decades and sometimes manifests itself explicitly.

Besides, he repeatedly reveals identity as constructed and unavoidably fictive. For example, in his poem “The Child I Never Was,” his missing English childhood is associated with the sea, whereas the forgotten Hungarian childhood is symbolized by a land without access to the sea, emphasizing how the two children within the lyrical I are unable to understand each other – in other words, to fully coincide with themselves:

The child I never was could show you bones
that are pure England... All his metaphors
are drawn from water...
...
The English schoolboy cannot understand

²⁴ Szirtes, *The Photographer in Winter...*, p. 51.

²⁵ Szirtes, *Bridge Passages...*, p. 22.

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

²⁷ *Ibidem.*

²⁸ M. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, New York, 2012, p. 5.

a country that is set in seas of land.
The child I never was makes poetry
of memories of landscape haunted by the sea.²⁹

This ambiguity and uncertainty of the personal identity is one of the major themes in Szirtes's oeuvre. Many of his texts can be read as attempts at restoring the unity of identity, either of the speaker – in his lyrical poems – or of the protagonist – in his more narrative work – and ultimately of both, as the protagonist is often a family member lost during the series of traumas listed above.

The most important protagonist of these attempts is George Szirtes's mother. The title poem of *The Photographer in Winter* (1986), his first book published after having returned to Hungary, is dedicated to her, and it describes the lyrical self's journey as a tourist with a camera trying to follow in the footsteps of his mother decades later in the same streets of Budapest³⁰.

The long cycle of the poems in the next book with the eponymous title *Metro* (1988) gives a more narrative account of the mother's Holocaust experiences³¹. The central image of the poem connects the descent into the underground with entering the underworld of both the historical past and of hell's inconceivable tortures. The primary speaker is the author's imaginary, childhood self: "My aunt was sitting in the dark, alone / Half sleeping when I crept into her lap"³², juxtaposed with the voice of the adult visitor of Hungary: "The Metro provides a cheap unending ride / If you switch trains below the city"³³, who is trying to restore his personal identity through recognizing places of his forgotten childhood and understanding family history. As part of the attempt, sections 6 and 7 – starting with the poem "In Her Voice" – lend a voice transcribed in italics to the ghost of the mother – deceased by the time of writing the poem – following her to the gates of the Ravensbrück concentration camp. "The Budapest that Szirtes re-encountered in 1984 seems a space saturated initially by parental, rather than immediately personal, memories, and specifically with the ghosts of memories that predate the poet's birth in 1948"³⁴, explains his monographer, John Sears in his analysis of *Metro*. In other words, the individual speaker's forgotten memories and sense of identity can only be reinstated by relying on postmemory. Moreover, the two cannot be separated.

In the process described above, memory is a crucial concept. Its importance in establishing one's identity is also confirmed in *Reasons and Persons* by Derek Parfit who challenges the conventional, reductionist views of personal identity, asserting that "it is memory that makes us aware of our own continued existence," yet adding that "various other continuities" like physical, spatio-temporal, or psychological continuities "have great importance"³⁵ as well. In the conclusion of the third chapter on "Personal Identity" he suggests that one should "cease to believe that persons are separately existing entities and come to believe that the unity of a life involves no more than the various relations between the experiences in this life"³⁶. This seems to be precisely what Szirtes performs in poems of the cycle "Metro." The poetic voice, which is a combination of the author's fictitious childhood self and his similarly

²⁹ Szirtes, *The Photographer in Winter...*, p. 37.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 1–9.

³¹ G. Szirtes, *Metro*, Oxford, 1988, pp. 15–46.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 17.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

³⁴ J. Sears, *Reading George Szirtes*, Newcastle, 2008, p. 68

³⁵ D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford, 1984, p. 186.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 310.

fictionalized adult persona revisiting Budapest, is supplemented by the haunting voice of the mother, resulting in a language that sounds intimately personal yet can articulate truth beyond the individual: “My body is still standing. The wind blows through it / Like a language, of which not a word / Is what it seems, and yet it survives”³⁷.

The haunting presence of postmemory and the wish for survival seem to be the emotional drives behind Szirtes’s first book in prose, *The Photographer at Sixteen* too. Just like the cycle “Metro,” this book – which won the James Tait Black Prize for Biography in 2020 – also sets a narrative memorial to the author’s late mother. Similarly to the poems, the text is organized along spatial and temporal terms. However, in “Metro,” two levels run constantly in parallel: the present and the past; the happenings above ground and the subway underground; the ordinary route of the Budapest metro and the train transporting people to Nazi concentration camps during the Holocaust; the rational adult and the half-conscious or even pre-conscious child, etc. The permanent juxtaposition of the two layers results in a fragmented structure in which the meaning of the past constantly shines through bits and pieces of the present, all the time promising but never quite achieving a coherent and complete interpretation of personal history, which remains always beyond the reach of the lyrical I.

In contrast, the prose biography’s strategy is that of the reverse chronological order. Szirtes starts *The Photographer at Sixteen* with his last memory of his mother: the news of her suicide, the final trauma of their family history, which he tries to understand in the light of her life story, especially the Holocaust. Proceeding backwards in time, Szirtes moves from one home to the other, according to a primarily spatial logic. He starts with “The Last House”³⁸ where his parents lived, then describes the places where he grew up in London, continuing with the early married life of his parents in Budapest, and finally tells as much about the childhood of his mother in Transylvania as he can.

The author’s personal memory and history retrieved from various sources – family interviews, photos, factual research, etc. – merge in the biography, although Szirtes makes an honest effort to draw clear boundaries between his first-hand memories and his knowledge gained indirectly by dividing the book into two major parts. In the first one, he refers to the protagonist as his mother, whereas in the second part as Magda. The shift is made completely clear in the final sentences of the first part, in which the narrator admits the limits of his immediate knowledge: “So my mother disappears through the mirror and re-emerges in another life as herself. From now on, it is Magda’s story”³⁹.

The image of the mirror is rich in possible connotations. It may evoke the idea of true visual representation – which is a major theme all through the book because of Magda being a photographer by profession – but it may also suggest illusion, especially because entering the mirror is either magic or a magician’s trick. The crossing can also recall Lewis Carroll’s classic children’s fantasy novel *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871), emphasizing the imaginary aspect of any narrative. Finally, the sentence implies the biblical promise of transcendental wisdom and unity that can only be obtained in the afterlife: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known”⁴⁰. Accordingly, the reverse logic of the biography

³⁷ Szirtes, *Metro...*, p. 34.

³⁸ Szirtes, *The Photographer at Sixteen...*, p. 9.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

⁴⁰ *Corinthians 13:12*, English Standard Version, https://biblehub.com/1_corinthians/13-12.htm [access: 15.10.2023].

finally manages to restore Magda to life: the reader first met her as an elderly, suicidal woman, and in the final chapter she appears as a talented and beautiful young girl just about to start her life. One can call that the magician's narrative trick or the fulfilment of the transcendental promise of eternal life overcoming all earthly traumas – either way, Szirtes succeeds in producing a coherent biography which moves from commemorating the dead to celebrating life.

In both biographies about his mother – the cycle of poems “Metro” and, three decades later, the prose fiction *The Photographer at Sixteen* – George Szirtes articulates identity as defined by postmemory. While the fragmented poems display the present of the writing as constantly haunted by the past, the prose successfully restores the mother's image to life. Both books and many other texts by Szirtes seek answers to essential questions of identity, often concluding both in descriptive and performative actions of writing that identity is to be found beyond the individual, in the realms of interpersonal relationships, family history, and cultural heritage. Thus, George Szirtes's oeuvre seems to transform, quite in line with Derek Parfit's suggestions, the concept of personal identity from separate individuals into the continuity of interrelated human beings.

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SUMMARY:

The Hungarian-born English contemporary poet George Szirtes has written several times about two traumas of his family history: the Holocaust, which both his parents survived, while several of their relatives perished, and the Revolution of 1956, which forced them into exile. My paper focuses on two major narratives about Szirtes's mother: a cycle of poems "Metro" (1988) and a biography in prose *The Photographer at Sixteen* (2019). Exploring the differences in perspective and form as well as the similarities in themes and structure, I seek the answer to the questions how one's own memories are intertwined with the past of the communities where one belongs; how these controversial sets of memories might lead to internal conflicts; and how the memory of one's predecessors are being transformed by the process of the speaker's own transformation in the time span of three decades. Investigating these aspects, I argue that Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory not only proves to be instrumental in understanding several books by Szirtes better but also that Szirtes goes one step further than Hirsch by revealing how individual memory not only is embedded into and influenced by communal memory, but also is constructed in the form of family memories passed on from one generation to the next.

KEYWORDS:

contemporary poetry, biography, postmemory, Holocaust, identity