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Canada, Hungary, Exile: Hungarian Characters in Mavis Gallant

Canada, la Hongrie, l'exile : Des personnages hongrois dans Mavis Gallant

Nikola Tutek

Abstract

Focusing on the stories within “Edouard, Juliette, Lena” and “Speck’s Idea,” this paper examines the role of and representation of Hungarian cultural identity in Mavis Gallant. It explores the understanding Gallant showed for particular European cultures, examines the “Hungarianness” of Gallant’s characters, while considering themes of exile, otherness, and exclusion. I argue that Gallant’s portrayal of characters such as Sandor Speck displays the psychology of exile and fear. Such stories are also crucial for understanding nationalism and otherness in the Europe of the present.

Keywords: Mavis Gallant, Hungary, short story, European culture, exile, otherness

Résumé

Cet article se concentre sur les nouvelles contenues dans « Édouard, Juliette, Lena » et sur « Speck’s Idea ». Il examine le rôle et la représentation de l’identité culturelle hongroise chez Mavis Gallant. De même, l’auteur y explore la compréhension que Gallant a montrée pour des cultures européennes particulières, examine la « Hongrie » des personnages de Gallant, tout en considérant les thèmes de l’exil, de l’altérité et de l’exclusion. La conclusion de ce travail est que la représentation de personnages tels que Sandor Speck élaborée par Gallant nous plonge dans la psychologie de l’exil et de la peur. De telles histoires sont également cruciales pour comprendre le nationalisme et l’altérité dans l’Europe d’aujourd’hui.

Mots-clés : Mavis Gallant, la Hongrie, nouvelle, culture européenne, l'exile, l'altérité



1. Introduction

This paper analyses literary depictions of Hungarian characters and literary representations of various features of Hungarian cultural identity seen in the Mavis Gallant stories contained within “Édouard, Juliette, Lena” and “Speck’s Idea.” My analyses of Gallant’s short fiction are focused on three main points: exploring the profound understanding that some Canadian writers show for particular European cultures (in this case with respect to Gallant’s literary interpretation and employment of elements of Hungarian culture), exploring the ‘Hungarianness’ of characters as postulated, conceived, and described by Gallant, and, finally, exploring the shared Canadian–Hungarian theme of exile, otherness, and exclusion. The analyses are conducted both on the level of the plot (that is, individual fates of characters), and on the level of intercultural exchange between the different cultural backgrounds from which these characters originate. Hence, my research into Gallant’s literary employment of Hungarian characters is interdisciplinary and it draws from both literary and cultural studies.

I have chosen these particular short stories by Gallant because they arguably do not contain Hungarian characters at all. The characters of Magdalena and Sandor Speck are in no way ordinary and canonical representatives of Hungarian culture and they are hardly literary types which are given certain features recognized by the majority of readers as Hungarian. Magdalena and Sandor are not created to fit the story and neither are they created to be employed in the story – they themselves are the story. Both Magdalena and Sandor are complex literary constructions which, although only tacitly Hungarian (to the extent that they themselves would not identify as Hungarians), carry an intellectual riddle of connotations, meanings and information indicative of Hungarian culture both in the past and in the present. The Hungarianness of these two characters is a maze, a mystery created by a skillful writer astonishingly well informed of the complexity of both Hungarian and French cultures and histories.

Magdalena and Sandor are quite different in their understanding of identity. Magdalena is a Jewish woman who born in Budapest, and she moved to France long before the Second World War. She kept her Hungarian accent while speaking French – an accent noticed (only) by other characters. However, being an intellectual coming from a well-educated and affluent upper-class family, her understanding of the world and her existence, which often shows a high level of detachment from reality, does not allow her to spend too much energy thinking of her identity and origins. Magdalena creates a new identity for each situation she finds herself in, laconically improvising her vision of personal and general truth. She changes her religion, homeland, and language, all that seemingly with an unusual ease. In contrast, Sandor was born in



France, and, although obviously a child from an immigrant family, he is a fervent French nationalist. Sandor is the one who observes other characters' foreign accents. He is an insecure and precarious person, frustrated by his existential situation, and hence his French identity functions as his main intellectual remedy – “Speck had been born in France. French education had left him the certainty that he was a logical, fair-minded person imbued with a culture from which every other Western nation was obliged to take its bearings. French was his first language; he did not really approve of any other” (27). However, Gallant, with her masterly command of the psychology and destinies of her characters, has succeeded in discretely and inconspicuously keeping Speck tied to Hungarianness by the use of numerous and often orphic cultural connotations. This striking difference between these two characters also determined the difference in the theoretical approaches used to analyse these short stories.

Exile, immigration, otherness, loneliness and exclusion, together with a constant examining of the relations between Canada (the New World) and the old country (mostly Europe), seem to be some of the basic reoccurring themes in Canadian literature. Gallant is no exception in that respect. She skillfully applies the idea of otherness and exile in the stories examined here, and she provides the reader with an interesting (and quite unorthodox) outlook on cultural exchange between North America and Europe. It is one of my principal claims that Canadian authors who apply this intercultural approach to their writing usually show an astonishing knowledge and awareness of both cultures. Gallant holds a special place in that respect. Being both a citizen of Canada and a resident of France, she provides her readers with almost encyclopedic insight into particular cultures from both continents. My analysis of her short stories is, to a great extent, an attempt to explain and exemplify this feature of Gallant's writing.

2. “Édouard, Juliette, Lena” – The story of an un/uprooted cosmopolitan

The collage of four stories that make up “Édouard, Juliette, Lena” – namely, “A Recollection,” “The Colonel's Child,” “Rue de Lille,” and “Lena” – gives the reader an account of an unusual relationship between two existentially detached people at the time of the German occupation of Paris. Édouard, a young man eager to travel south in order to join the Resistance, marries Magdalena, a Hungarian-born Jewish woman who is 15 years his senior. His reason for marrying is to save her life by giving her his French surname, and hence, identity. By the time they got married, they had only known each other for a short time. Magdalena is an actress, a member of a rich intellectual elite, only superficially aware of the peril she has found herself in. They



part in Marseilles; Magdalena travels to Cannes, while Édouard continues to North Africa and eventually London, where he joins the Free French. In London he meets a younger woman, Juliette, the daughter of a French colonel and war hero. A realist in nature, Juliette is of a humbler origin. They stay together until Juliette's death at the age of 60, although Juliette knows that Édouard is officially still married to Magdalena, preventing their marriage. Magdalena, on the other hand, survives the war and for a long period of years refused to divorce Édouard. When Magdalena finally agrees to a divorce, both Juliette and Édouard are too old to have children (Juliette did not want to have children out of wedlock). After Juliette dies, Édouard visits Magdalena, whom he now refers to as Lena, in a hospital. Lena has decided to claim Édouard for life; as soon as Juliette dies, she sees herself as Édouard's only legal spouse, although she's bedbound at the age of 82. Édouard, feeling a mix of fascination and discomfort, has no choice but to play along and reconcile with his destiny of being trapped in this unusual marital arrangement.

Mavis Gallant's deep understanding of North American and European cultures and the differences between them can be read in her vivid and historically justifiable settings and the characterization of her main protagonists. Gallant's skillful explanation of subtle differences between America and Europe can be seen in her description of Juliette before and after she took a trip alone to America. Gallant writes, "and she had come back with a different colouration to her manner, a glaze of independence, as though she had been exposed to a new kind of sun" ("Lena," 164) This description plays along with the stereotypical notion of America being more open-minded and liberal than Europe. The other instance is more important for this analysis – namely, when Édouard and Juliette decide to take Lena out to lunch. In a tense situation and even more tense conversation between the protagonists, Lena is described as representative of old, traditional, and class-divided Europe, while Juliette represents the new, liberal influence of America. Lena's position is illustrated through the description of her pulling off her gloves. Juliette, on the other hand, "went on about America" (166). Juliette talks about her surreal experience with a Pentecostal preacher in Philadelphia who, allegedly, cured an old woman's hearing by prayer. Using such a superficial, perhaps working class image of America is not coincidental. Juliette, absorbed in such a proletarian and unlikely event, is in striking opposition with the gentility of Lena's conduct, and this only adds to the absurdity of their existential situation in which Lena is the one acting irrationally (by not allowing Édouard to divorce her), while Juliette is the one anchored in reality – she is an ageing woman hoping to be allowed to have children with the man she loves. The duality between Lena and Juliette (as representatives of different words and worldviews) is a leitmotif employed by Gallant throughout "Lena."



Right at the beginning of the story, Gallant writes that Lena was “Jewish and foreign – to be precise, born in Budapest, in 1904” (“A Recollection,” 137) She was brought to Paris by a wealthy Frenchman who had recently become rightist and broken up with Lena. Lena was an actress, an occupation popular among pre-war Jewish citizens of Budapest. In fact, at some point before the rise of Fascism, most of the Budapest theaters, cabarets, and generally cultural and amusement centers were either influenced or owned by the city’s Jewish population. Édouard perceives Lena as a “cosmopolitan,” a word that closely describes the intellectual layer of the citizens of Budapest in the carefree and liberal artistic realms of the city’s interwar period – while also euphemistically referring to Jews. Furthermore, Édouard keeps on noticing her accent (a Hungarian accent is mentioned three times in the story, either referring to Lena or her friends). Regarding her voice, Édouard reports that “it was lower in pitch than a Frenchwoman’s, alien to the ear because of its rhythm. It was a voice that sang a foreign song” (139). Here Gallant shows her awareness of the Hungarian language as an extremely rhythmical language, which, in turn, helps in the formation of a very specific Hungarian accent. Later, in “Lena,” Édouard notices, now with much less compassion and fondness, “Her foreign way of speaking enchanted me when I was young. Now it sharpens my temper. Fifty years in France and she still cannot pronounce my name, ‘Édouard,’ without putting the stress on the wrong syllable and rolling the ‘r’” (163). There is yet another important mentioning of the Hungarian accent in connection to Hungarian friends visiting Lena in the hospital. In Édouard’s words, “friends wrote me, too, singing their alien names...” (168). This instance is also important for two more reasons: firstly, frequent mentioning of friends is symptomatic of Hungarian culture where the institution of friendship is regarded more highly than in many other European cultures. When Édouard and Lena part in Marseilles, she complains about being away from all of her Paris friends, a complaint rather unusual in the moment when her bare survival was in serious jeopardy. Secondly, and more importantly, women friends who were visiting Lena in the hospital were “the residue of an early wave of Hungarian emigration [after 1919, NT]. They have small pink noses, wear knitted caps pulled down to their eyebrows, and can see on dark street corners the terrible ghost of Béla Kun” (“Lena,” 160) In this way, the women visiting Lena reaffirm her Hungarian identity because she is seen by these woman as a symbol of her old and anti-Communist homeland. Interestingly, Béla Kun and Lena have one thing in common: both of them were born Jews and grew up speaking Hungarian, and both of them have changed their family names in order to take on a new, more acceptable identity (Édouard’s and Lena’s family names are not specified, while Kun magyarized his birth name Kohn).

All this unmistakably reflects Lena’s Hungarian, and to a less extent, Jewish background, and Gallant’s surgically precise knowledge of this culture. On the other



hand, Lena herself never in the story acknowledges her awareness of belonging to any cultural circle. Behaving and acting like a typical cosmopolitan aristocrat, she puts herself and her needs before any culture or individual (which coincides with her refusal to grant Édouard a divorce).¹ This leads to a complex personality well depicted by Gallant; Lena is simultaneously a cosmopolitan, unburdened by belonging and tradition, and typically Hungarian, more precisely, a Budapest member of high society from the beginning of the twentieth century. If asked about her nationality, Lena would either offer no answer, or she would offer the least expected one. Gallant, with her masterly psychological portrayal of character, has made this question and its answer redundant anyway; Lena is first of all a woman and a survivor, trying to make the best of her situation. The character of Lena, an unrooted intellectual in a precarious existential situation, echoes in quite a few literary characters in Canadian literature, especially in the short stories of second half of the twentieth century. (For example, in George Bowering's "The French East India Company," in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, and throughout Margaret Atwood's flash fiction in the collection *Bones and Murder*, just to name a few.)

As far as exile and otherness are concerned, these notions are the leitmotifs throughout the four stories that make up "Édouard, Juliette, Lena," and they apply to all of the characters. Lena has left her culture, and is divided from other characters by her class, language (accent), origin, attitude, and even age (she could easily be Juliette's mother). After the establishment of Vichy France, Lena has to escape to the south. In order to be able to escape, she first has to escape her own identity, masking it by the usage of the French surname of her more-or-less accidental husband. Lena's exile does not end after the war. At the age of 80, she is in a yet different type of exile – in a hospital. Being a foreigner who has married a good French boy, and has not been decent enough to die in time, she is now (quite ironically) visited by other Hungarian refugees who have escaped a political regime and who carry a certain ideological burden (something entirely foreign to Lena). The idea of isolation by illness or age, the idea of exile in hospitals that provide shelters to powerless characters, who, in turn, have a deep impact on the destinies of other characters, seems to be echoed in numerous Canadian short stories written after Mavis Gallant, namely, in Alice Munro's short fiction (most obviously, "The Bear Came over the Mountain," with its focus on dementia).

1) Édouard describes Lena as a "devout, light-hearted, probably wayward Catholic convert" ("A Recollection," 127). She uses her Catholicism to stymie the marriage to Juliette. Édouard's second wife, asks reasonably "how much of what she says does she believe?" ("Rue de Lille," 148).



3. “Speck’s Idea” – Gallant’s prophecy

The plot of “Speck’s Idea,” which is for good reason regarded as one of Gallant’s finest, could be retold in just a few sentences. In the story, which Marta Dvořák terms a “satire of the art world” (53), Sandor Speck is a marginal gallery owner in Paris. He is married to a Marxist woman, which leaves him in a dramatic scene when she openly calls Speck a fascist – an insult that is constantly hurled (“Why was this always the final shot, the coup de grâce delivered by women?” (11)). He then forms the idea of putting on a retrospective show of works by Hubert Cruche, a minor and almost forgotten painter of a rightist political orientation. The problem is that Cruche’s widow, Lydia Cruche, a Canadian and seemingly a rightist as well who owns most of Cruche’s surviving work, is not willing to lend the artefacts for the show. In the course of planning the show and trying to convince Lydia to cooperate, Speck is revealed as a spineless opportunist, a nervous little soul prone to all types of extremisms, but primarily inclined to fascism, which he embraces fervently and uncritically only to assure his personal gain. In other words, Gallant provides a detailed anatomy of the descent of an individual and the whole of society into the darkness of extremism. In the end Lydia decides to allow Cruche’s artefacts to be exposed, but at a show organized by a different gallerist, Sandor’s competitor from Italy, who befriends her. Sandor feels betrayed, and consequently he denounces Lydia as a fascist. Sandor does not give up on this idea; he remains determined to conquer the whole of Europe with Cruche’s artwork.

Many analyses of “Speck’s Idea” have been written in regard to Mavis Gallant’s depiction of the rise of fascism in French society during the turbulent decade of the 1970s. My objective is to focus only on those features of the story which could be brought into connection with Hungary and Hungarian culture. In that respect, my analyses have to be entirely focused on the character of Sandor Speck. Who is Sandor Speck, and what makes him Hungarian or at least illustrative of or even emblematic of Hungary and its culture?

Sandor Speck is the prototype of a political opportunist, populist to the bone, a nervous egoist and an irresponsible hunter of ideas which he is ready to uncritically use for his own benefit. He is also a fervent French nationalist and, to an extent, openly French supremacist. His idea is to revive a mediocre artist who had been openly fascist during the Second World War (a fact that Sandor has no problem with whatsoever, even if he is struck by the revelation late in the day – when he realizes that “Hubert Cruche had been far right,” he immediately loses “any hope of [supportive] letters” from hard-line Communists (38)). The idea follows Speck’s logic of national restoration, of rebirth of traditional values, and of salvation of a society in decline, all three terms (restoration, rebirth, salvation) being the backbone of



practically every extremist political movement. Sandor, who is prone to using rightist terms and verbal symbols, plans to, in his words, “attack” (25) Europe with Cruche in order to save the culture of the continent. In fact, Sandor does not truly care for Europe and its culture, he is simply trying to free his world from new and foreign influences that might put his business and his existence in jeopardy, and he justifies his actions by restoration of order and stability. Like many an extremist, he right away defines his enemies among the most vulnerable minorities in the society. He focuses his anger towards the weakest because he is aware of his own vulnerability. However, he is neither convincing nor consistent in the formation and execution of his ideas. He is, furthermore, not particularly picky when it comes to his choice of allies; his ex-wife is a Marxist, he plans to invite far-leftists to the Cruche show, and, in the end, he is a Freemason. Ultimately, he gets outplayed by Lydia, Cruche’s seemingly simpleton widow from Saskatchewan, and he finds himself in a situation where he, something of a semi-declared fascist, calls Lydia a fascist – just as his wife Henriette had called him a fascist. This complex, unorthodox, and comprehensive depiction of an extremist was quite rare in the time when Gallant wrote this story, and it proved to be highly prophetic. As shall be argued, when reading through earlier critical analyses of “Speck’s Idea” from 20 or more years ago, it seems that Sandor’s character was a novelty quite hard to grasp and critically explain. Most authors stop at describing Sandor as a reckless opportunist. However, today Sandor’s character both in literature and reality is more of a rule than an exception: Sandor is the prototype of a new age populist which represents the majority (or, at least, the empowered minority) in some parts of the European continent. In that sense, this short story has proven to be highly prophetic.

How is Sandor Speck Hungarian? We should, naturally, start with his name. Most of the characters in this story have names that have a meaning (for example, Cruche means a jug in French), and the choice of a Hungarian first name surely was not accidental. Danielle Schaub writes that Speck means bacon in German, which reinforces the futility of all Sandor’s actions. I would here add here that Speck is *szalonna* in Hungarian, a meal that has an important place in Hungarian culinary tradition, especially *sült szalonna*, which is prepared on many occasions by whole families sitting in a circle around the fire, and roasted on long wooden rods. Schaub goes even further and makes two other, I would say quite bold, claims on the background of the name Speck. She writes that Hubert Cruche’s first name can be brought into connection with Saint Hubert, the patron saint of hunters. In that sense, Hubert Cruche (or better, his artwork)² provides protection and hope to a Speck, who is professionally

2) In a deftly funny passage, Speck hears an interview in which Cruche’s first name is confused: “‘Not Henri, excuse me,’ said a polite foreigner. ‘His name was Hubert. Hubert Cruche’” (41). The humour draws further attention to the naming and the act of naming – not least since “Henriette” was the name of the wife who left him.



nothing more than a hunter. Speck treats art as prey, goods that he collects in order to survive another season. The other connection Schaub makes is with John Marlyn's novel *Under the Ribs of Death*. The main character in Marlyn's novel, Sandor Hunyadi, a Hungarian immigrant to Canada, finds it hard to adjust to the new country and, in an attempt to integrate, he changes his name to Alex Hunter.³ Regardless of the speculative nature of both of Schaub's claims, the fact remains that Sandor is a typical and specifically Hungarian given name. For Andy Lamey there is no doubt that Sandor is a descendent of Hungarian immigrants. Taking into consideration that Speck sounds very German, Lamey speculates that Sandor, an open anti-Semite, could actually be of Jewish descent. In regard to Sandor's smallness and vulnerability, so many times emphasized in the story, Lamey offers another interesting insight to Speck's name: to an English speaker, the name Sandor Speck evokes "sand and specks of dust" (194) (it could actually be read as 'sand or speck'). In that sense, this combination of a Hungarian and presumably a German name functions perfectly in the characterization of the main protagonist.

There are two more interesting connections between Sandor Speck and Hungary which Gallant encrypted deep into the tissue of the story. The first is provided by Lamey, who notes that the first church mentioned in the story, the one in the vicinity of Sandor's first gallery, is called the Church of St. Elisabeth. Lamey dexterously notices that the full name of that church is the Church of St. Elisabeth of Hungary. In that respect, both Sandor's given name and the church become symbols of otherness. The other connection, in my opinion a much more speculative one, again comes from Schaub. Sandor is mentioning a disturbing article he read in *Le Monde* titled "Redemption Through Art – Last Hope for the West?" (15) In that article, packed with recurring conservative and often rightist notions (the end of the decadent and impure Western civilization and its redemption or preservation), it is said that the society can be saved through the application of pure, true art which will lead to an artistic renovation and subsequently to the new rise of the Western (European, Christian, white) culture. Schaub (who claims to be indebted to Wolfgang Hochbruck for drawing her attention to the similarity in discourse) makes a direct connection between the ideological content of this article and the speech given by Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi on 15 March 1848 when addressing a crowd in Budapest and in a way marking the beginning of the Hungarian national revolution. Indeed, some of the ideas from the (imaginary) article do echo the proclaimed ideas of the Hungarian national hero Petőfi but then again, these ideas were at the core of all romanticized artistic and cultural considerations of all national movements in the mid-nineteenth century. On the other hand, the fact that both Speck and

3) Danielle Schaub: "Mavis Gallant's Double Illusion: Text and Image in 'Speck's Idea' and 'Overhead in a Balloon.'"



Petőfi are named Sandor might be revealing of Gallant's aspirations in constructing Speck's portrayal.

Though "Speck's Idea" shares many mutual themes with the stories grouped within "Édouard, Juliette, Lena," these are symmetrically reversed in the later story. While Lena has a Hungarian accent, Sandor observes Lydia's foreign (English) accent; indeed they speak English together. While Lena is quite unaware of the peril she is in because of her Jewish ancestry (her detachment can especially be seen in the moment when she picks up a yellow cloth star and takes it away) she is surely not pro-fascist, and is definitely a representative of a liberal, cosmopolitan world. On the other hand, Sandor, although quite possibly of Jewish descent, is openly anti-Semitic (maybe exactly because of his own insecurity in his belonging to the mainstream European tradition). While Lena is nationally neutral, Sandor is a fervent French nationalist. While Lena is in constant exile, Sandor is at any moment ready to approve, if not take part in someone else's exile. In that respect, Sandor is in a very personal and surely troublesome kind of private exile; he is constantly trying to escape from himself – his precarious position, his otherness, and his suspicion of his own foreignness. Finally, Lena is a symbol of a European calmness which is derived from lengthy experience and cultural tradition, while Juliette's American experience is provided exactly to contrast that. In Sandor's case, this is quite the opposite – Sandor is the one who has no idea where Saskatchewan is, while Lydia, a Canadian, seems to be the carrier of a superior knowledge (symbolized through her being a "Japhetite," that is, one of the tribes descending from Noah).⁴ In that respect, an interesting example is the contrast of Sandor's nineteenth-century premises (the symbol of old and fragile) and the central heating system installed by Americans in the 1960s (the symbol of the new and powerful). In fact, throughout Sandor's story, America is represented as something superior, and as such threatening to Europe. Lena is a sort of a winner in a dead race with Juliette because the latter dies childless because of Lena's stubborn refusal to divorce. On the other hand, Sandor is absolutely outmaneuvered and outwitted by Lydia.

All this shows Mavis Gallant's amazing insight into both French and Hungarian society. In both stories analysed here she uses French culture as a framed Gobelin's tapestry which is in some parts subtly, and sometimes almost conspiratorially interwoven with threads of Hungarianness. The Hungarian motifs, although unobtrusive, carry meanings crucial for the full understanding of the texts. Naturally, Mavis Gallant comments on the intercultural understanding between the Americas and Europe in the frames of her literary tapestry.

4) As Lydia informs Sandor: "That crowd Moses led into the desert were just Egyptian malcontents. The true Israelites were scattered all over the earth by then. The Bible hints at this for its whole length. Japheth's people settled in Scotland. Present-day Jews are impostors" (35).



In the end, why is a story containing a character whose Hungarianness can be observed mostly as a literary coding of cryptic knowledge prophetic to the modern Hungarian society? As mentioned earlier, Sandor is a political bigot, a Mason prone to elements of both far-left and far-right ideology. However, during the course of time his mental and existential insecurity inspires him to concoct an idea which would bring a level of stability and safety into his life. This idea, the *Cruche* show, includes far-right elements and instantly defines Sandor as a rightist who feels most at home in such ideological surroundings. Thus, transforming from an intellectual agnostic and an indifferent cosmopolitan, Sandor the opportunist becomes, at least by association, a fascist who, in his political considerations and imagery, provides an account of political images/devices such as:

- “Europe for Europeans” (13) and a spider on a field of banknotes walking over the map of France (both images connected to Amandine’s bookshop, a right-wing establishment across the street from Sandor’s gallery; images of pureness and vulnerability to foreign influence that Sandor does not in any way confront but rather accepts as generally correct)
- a decadent and endangered Western society that needs salvation through tradition (in the *Le Monde* article, an article about purification that strongly influences Sandor)
- the idea that it is the time to attack (“attack the museums with Hubert *Cruche*” (25)), that is, to reinstall traditionalism, which will eventually lead to the re-birth of the ‘real’ Europe free of injustice
- the fight against the hegemony of foreigners (expressed on a leaflet he receives by chance, a leaflet whose blank side Sandor, significantly, uses to rewrite his show programme)
- treating political extremism with neutrality (where neutrality actually means agreement)
- accusing chosen enemies of mirroring his own political views (what Lamey calls “fascist anti-fascism” (204), a dangerous mechanism of modern populism and extremism)
- and, of course, all this for the sake of a civilized and stable (Christian, white, finally French) Europe

None of these images or devices is included in the story by chance, and the very fact that Sandor notices them and ponders on them shows that these notions are intrinsically important for him, if not essential for his worldview. If we extract key words from these few selected accounts provided by Sandor’s perception of reality, we get the following: pureness and vulnerability to foreign influence, a decadent



and endangered Western society that needs salvation, purification, time to attack (act), re-birth, injustice, the fight against the hegemony of foreigners, agreement with extremism, “fascist anti-fascism,” civilized Europe. These key words basically summarize every populist, nationalist and European supremacist ideology in twenty-first-century Europe, especially in the eastern part of the continent, and in Hungary as well. When Mavis Gallant’s story was published in 1979, most depictions of political extremism were typically one-sided and flat; evil always had to be absolute and easily definable. It took more than 30 years after the Second World War for the first important treatises to appear which recognized that evil usually has a more plausible side as well.⁵ In that sense, Gallant’s genuine and realistic description of fascism was ahead of her time even when the story was published. However, Sandor’s character eluded much due critical scrutiny in the end of the twentieth century simply because Sandor as a character was atypical and could largely remain under the radar. Things changed radically at the beginning of the twentieth century when Sandor’s type became mainstream, a category of its own, a new age populist which has changed the political visage of a now united Europe. Gallant created the typical nature of the new European populist some 20 to 25 years before such populists would take large portions of Europe under their rule or influence. In that sense, “Speck’s Idea” surely belongs to some of the most prophetic works in short fiction, and not just Canadian. To what an extent “Speck’s Idea” anticipated the situation in modern-day Hungary can be illustrated by one incredibly prophetic (but surely entirely accidental) instance from the story. When Sandor wants to arm himself with a copy of the Bible to employ his assistant Walter to search the Bible for arguments Sandor will later use in his ideological clash with Lydia, he is surprised by the color of the dust jacket of the Bible he found in the shop. The dust jacket was orange. Speck notices: “There had been something unusual about the orange dust jacket, after all. He did not consider this a defeat. Bible reading has raised his spirits” (36).⁶

4. Conclusion

The Mavis Gallant stories analysed here provide two similar but also radically different characters who could conditionally be dubbed as Hungarian characters. Not in the sense that these characters are literally Hungarian but rather that they convey certain notions and information regarding Hungarianness on the connotative and associative

5) By this I mean principally works by Hannah Arendt.

6) There is a possible reference to *The Orange Catholic Bible*, a fictional book from the Dune universe created by Frank Herbert in 1965, whose title implies Protestantism and Catholicism. Of course, the word “spirits” is laden with irony, since Sandor is looking for a passage with which to convince Lydia to agree to his exhibition of her late husband’s works.



levels. Rather than repeat the features of this literary technique, I have devised this internal comparison of the two analysed characters:

	<i>MAGDALENA (LENA)</i>	<i>SANDOR SPECK</i>
<i>COSMOPOLITAN</i>	A typical twentieth century representative	False cosmopolitan turned supremacist
<i>NATIONAL IDENTITY</i>	Neutral	French nationalist
<i>POLITICAL ACTIVISM</i>	Entirely passive	Active extremist
<i>FOREIGNNESS, EXILE</i>	In exile; comfortable with her otherness	Ready to provoke the exile of others; afraid of his possible otherness
<i>JEWISH ANCESTRY</i>	Confirmed, later swiftly exchanged with a different identity	Unconfirmed
<i>HUNGARIAN ANCESTRY</i>	Never discussed; proved simply by the place of birth	Lurks around him but it is not in any way acknowledged by Sandor; Hungarian given his name
<i>SELF-CONFIDENCE</i>	Seemingly very self-confident	Extreme lack of self-confidence, causing anxiety and anger
<i>MATERIAL SECURITY</i>	A well-off person	An existentially precarious person
<i>KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE</i>	Presumably well educated, well experienced	Incomplete knowledge (presumably quite ignorant), strong practical experience
<i>OPPORTUNISM</i>	She is presumably saved twice by two men; one brought her to France, the other saved her life; justified adjustability	The archetype of an opportunist ready to subject everything to personal gain regardless of any ethical standards
<i>FIXATION ON AN IDEA</i>	The idea of marriage to Édouard	The idea of a Cruche show
<i>LANGUAGE</i>	Speaks with an accent	Notices accents; accepts only proper French
<i>CONSERVATIVE</i>	Conservative in her understanding of marriage to Édouard (although this might be discussed)	False conservative using this ideology according to his needs



	MAGDALENA (LENA)	SANDOR SPECK
<i>LIBERAL</i>	Liberal in the sense that she accepts people and events without much prejudice	False liberal turned disappointed quasi-liberal, turned anti-liberal
<i>TYPICAL OF</i>	Enlightened European liberals of the first half of the twentieth century	Frustrated new European (opportunist) populists of the beginning of the twenty-first century

The characters of Lena and Sandor, united and divided in the endless inspiration of Mavis Gallant's erudite writing and masterful psychological portrayal of characters, both function as encrypted echoes of exile and fear. Although based on different ideological grounds, both characters are crucial for the understanding of the cohabitation of nationalism and otherness in French society and in Europe in general. In a typically Gallant manner (which has inspired many later Canadian authors), characters are not represented simply as stereotypical literary national types; Gallant would never opt for the easiest solutions. Instead, Gallant creates Hungarians who do not acknowledge, recognize or admit their Hungarianness. She creates characters on the run, characters who are only reminded of their possible descent by the existential circumstances – yet characters who are deeply affected by their elusive origins. Mavis Gallant provides readers with a deep analytical insight into Hungarian culture and destiny in works of short fiction which display the absence of Hungarians.

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