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3 The memory of national literature in Budapest city 4 centre

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8 **Abstract** This paper, which focuses upon the analysis of street names and public
9 monuments in the central area of Budapest, leads us to consider how the funda-
10 mental and far-reaching under-girdings of literature (world literature, the very
11 system of writing, literary art, literary institutions) ultimately influence the portayal
12 of the cityscape and the very representation of the city. In such evocations of
13 Budapest, one discovers that description and depiction constitute, above all else, a
14 conduit for political content.

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16 **Keywords** Budapest · Literature · Public monuments · Kossuth Square ·
17 Petőfi

18 A cityscape may express ideological messages in many different ways, from the
19 organization of public space through the names and looks of important buildings
20 (with the techniques of emphasising their importance or rather making them
21 important), to directly verbalized utterances written on durable or perishable
22 materials. In the following discussion, however, I will focus on two features which
23 may be loaded from the viewpoint of ideology, namely street names and public
24 monuments. Budapest, the city as we know it, was founded and given this name in
25 1872 through the unification of three towns, namely Buda, Óbuda and Pest. The
26 structure of the new, would-be metropolis developed in the following decades, and
27 most of the buildings of the city centre were built in that period. The population
28 increased from 270,000 in 1869 to 880,000 in 1910 (Romsics 2000, p. 65). It was
29 the fastest developing capital in Europe at that time (Bertényi and Gyapay 1993,
30 p. 451). The second boom in the growth of the city happened in the 1950s, when the

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31 communist regime decided to create a large-scale industry centre for the country.
32 An important factor in this second enlargement was the incorporation of three
33 nearby towns (Újpest, Kispest, and Rákospalota) and a number of villages. The
34 result was a city of 2 million inhabitants, which was disproportionately large for a
35 country of 10 million. It is obvious, however, that the second enlargement was much
36 more interested in quantity than in transforming the general look of the city, and
37 focused rather on the peripheral areas. The Budapest we usually think of and, with
38 rare exceptions, all the important features of its mental map, were developed around
39 the end of the nineteenth century.

40 The city design of that period transformed the public space into a monument of
41 national history, which can also be read from the street names. A fair number of streets
42 still keeps their organic, medieval denominations, especially in the real historical core
43 of the city, and such names as *Fővám tér* or *Régiposta utca* (Main Tax Office Square,
44 and Old Post Office Street, respectively)—preserving the memory of long-gone office
45 buildings—or *Sas utca*, *Kígyó utca* (Eagle, and Snake Streets)—after inns demolished
46 long ago—or *Molnár utca*, *Sütő utca*, *Aranykéz utca* (Miller, Baker, and Golden Hand
47 Streets)—named after professions or shops once typical there—are now protected by
48 law as part of the urban heritage. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, many
49 streets were given new names that fitted better into the cultural-ideological climate.
50 Political issues played a central role in the new metropolitan space, but emphasis was
51 also laid on cultural achievement. Most of the street names cherish the memory of
52 kings, generals and politicians,¹ but there were also some artists who were regarded as
53 being qualified to give their names to some streets or squares. Although this tendency
54 continued into the twentieth century, nineteenth century names prevail in Budapest's
55 streets, just like nineteenth century figures in the city's public monuments. When
56 twentieth century authorities decided to rename some streets, they tended to choose
57 nineteenth century figures. The city centre is a monument to the great nation building
58 project, as the glamour of the capital was planned to show pride in the success of nation
59 building, and further ambitions. The proportions are telling. In the fifth district, which
60 is the real heart of the city, 34 streets are named after rulers, soldiers and politicians,
61 and 19 after artists. The artists include an actress (Jászai), a musician (Bihari), a
62 composer (Kálmán), two architects (Steindl and Hild), and a sculptor (Ferenczy), and
63 maybe a painter (Markó), but no less than 11 writers. (To do the sums correctly, one
64 needs to know that the national poet Sándor Petőfi has both a street and a square in the
65 fifth district—and 17 other streets in Budapest.) Among all these authors we can find
66 only one twentieth-century poet (Attila József), while seven of them lived in the
67 nineteenth century. If we look at the whole city centre (inside the boulevard), the odds
68 are more equal: 27 persons of the ruler-soldier-politician persuasion, and 26 artists, 16
69 of them being writers. This result is strongly influenced by the neighbourhoods around
70 the opera house and the nineteenth century Academy of Music, which led people to
71 name some streets after musicians around there. The nineteenth century prevails
72 among these authors even more strongly: only one eighteenth century poet could make
73 his way into this group. To be fair, it should be said that some also wrote influential

¹ Apart from some local celebrities, such as Károly Vajkay, an influential lawyer, whose name was given to the street he had lived in.



74 works at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this area we find one street baptised
75 after a non-Hungarian author, Alexander Pushkin.²

76 Literature, however, appears in this context as a political issue too. The statue of
77 Mihály Vörösmarty (1800–1855) may be a case in point. It was erected in 1908 in
78 the very centre of Budapest on a square that was also named after him in 1926. The
79 poet is represented sitting in an armchair as a giant figure towering over a set of
80 minor figures (even these are approximately 50 % bigger than life size) who
81 represent society as a whole (farmers, labourers, gentlemen) listening to his poetry,
82 or rather to the version set to music of two introductory stanzas of a poem by him.
83 Vörösmarty was a brilliant romantic poet who composed a huge body of lyric
84 poetry, many dramas, and an impressive set of epics. His name, however, is not
85 indicated in this statue at all. The inscription on the monument is the two first lines
86 of his poem “Appeal” (Vörösmarty 1836), the beginning of which functions as the
87 second national anthem of Hungary.

88 *To your homeland without fail*
89 *Be faithful, O Hungarian!*
90 It is your cradle and will your grave be
91 Which nurses, and will bury you.

92 In the great world outside of here
93 Where is no place for you
94 May fortune’s hand bless or beat you
95 Here you must live and die!

96 The lines in italics are carved in the marble of the statue, and these two of the
97 poem’s fourteen stanzas were set to music by Béni Egressy in 1843. This monument
98 does not represent a poet of great imagination, not even a poet as the author of a
99 complete poem; it is rather a monument to the “Appeal” and the nation’s unity in the
100 solemn moment of singing it. The only merit for which the poet is to be remembered
101 is that he wrote the text of the song which offers to the members of the community
102 an opportunity to experience the sublime feeling of their national identity. Even if
103 the monument was erected in 1908, his achievement has been presented exclusively
104 in the national-political context. It is not a falsification, to be sure, but rather a
105 restriction, since Vörösmarty really did contribute to the nation building project
106 through many of his works, but a huge body of his production can hardly be
107 interpreted from this viewpoint.

² The street was given this name in the 1950s, during the communist period. Previously it was called Esterházy Street. The communist regime did not accept the name of an aristocratic family (which they associated with centuries of oppression) in the city centre. Many of such re-nominations were withdrawn after 1989, but not all of them by far. The name of the Esterházy family was not really important in the 1990s (and, for what it is worth, could have been associated with two living members, a footballer who was also member of the national team, and the excellent, but still living, prose writer), and Pushkin seemed still acceptable. Although being Russian might have been the main reason why he had a street in the 1950s, he could not be associated with communism, therefore the name could stand. A couple of non-Hungarian writers have streets after them a little north of the city centre. They were regarded as representatives of “critical realism” highly esteemed by communists, as Balzac, Hugo, and Gogol.



108 Some streets advertise local past or pride. Particularly relevant is a more
109 sophisticated example, in which local memory, national ideology and literary affairs
110 intertwine. A small street in the heart of the city is called Mihály Vitkovics Street.
111 Vitkovics (1778–1829) was a minor poet and an organizer of literary life. Apart
112 from the name nothing connects this street to his person. There is, however, a
113 memorial plaque a kilometre away from here, erected in 1932. The inscription says:
114 “Here stood the house in which Mihály Vitkovics, prose writer and poet gathered
115 between 1812 and 1829 writers and scholars of the age of the Hungarian boom,
116 hosting those working to elaborate the Hungarian language, to promote national
117 perfection, and to make Pest a literary centre.” The plaque celebrates him as a figure
118 of national development, but explicitly as a poet too. Or rather the plaque celebrates
119 him as host, and his house as the place where literary life started developing, which
120 is important, since a “perfect nation” must have literature too.

121 The most important historical events to be remembered in the Budapest cityscape
122 were the 1848–1849 revolution and the national war of independence. There are two
123 important foci of the materialisation of this memory. The first is a place in the area
124 now called Lipótváros, the Hungarian translation of the nineteenth century German
125 Leopoldstadt. This area was situated to the north of the historical city centre, but
126 still inside the city wall. It was developed in the last decades of the eighteenth
127 century, and received its name in 1790, when Leopold II was crowned king of
128 Hungary. Nowadays it is the administrative and financial centre of the country, but
129 until 1897 its most impressive building was a huge military complex and prison
130 called Neugebäude, the symbol of Habsburg oppression. When it was demolished,
131 its site was transformed into a monument of anti-Habsburg resistance. A large
132 square was created with a ground-plan similar to that of a basilica, and given the
133 name Liberty. Four streets leading out of its apse were named after generals who
134 had fought against the Habsburgs. Three of them (Ernő Kiss, Károly Vécsey and
135 Lajos Aulich) were executed on 6th October 1849 in Arad. Mór Perczel was also a
136 general of the Hungarian army, but in the final weeks he had some conflicts with the
137 political leaders, especially with governor Lajos Kossuth, and was relieved of
138 command. Nevertheless he fought till the last minute, at which he found himself on
139 the Turkish border, giving him an opportunity to escape. In 1851 he was sentenced
140 to death in contumaciam, but after the Compromise he returned to Hungary, where
141 he died in 1899. The street which extends the axis of the square is called Honvéd.
142 This word was coined in 1821, and means soldier, but not in the general sense.
143 According to the dictionary it has or had three meanings with historical differences:
144 “honvéd” may refer first to a soldier of the Hungarian army in the period 1848–
145 1849. Second, it may mean a soldier of the Hungarian army between 1868 and 1918
146 (Austria and Hungary had a common army with German as the language of
147 command, and separate armies for each country, *Landwehr* for Austria and
148 *honvédség* for Hungary with Hungarian as the language of command; but only those
149 men were allowed to join the latter that had not met the standards of recruitment for
150 the common army). Finally, it may mean a private in the army of independent
151 Hungary (after 1918). This is the meaning of the name of the street now. Around
152 1900 the association with the army of the anti-Habsburg independence war was
153 much stronger. There were, for example, “honvéd associations” all around the



154 country for people that fought in the Hungarian army in 1848–1849. The street that
155 seems to continue Honvéd Street on the other end of the square is called October 6th
156 Street, commemorating the day when 13 generals of Hungarian army (remembered
157 as the martyrs of Arad) were executed.

158 In addition to the street names a monument was constructed to commemorate the
159 war of independence. The first prime minister of Hungary, Count Lajos Batthyány,
160 was executed by the wall of the Neugebäude on 6th October 1849. The Budapest
161 city council decided in 1906 that on the spot of his death a monument with an
162 eternal flame should be installed. However, it was not inaugurated until 1926, when
163 Liberty Square was already loaded with new ideological content. Even if national
164 independence remained a rather important value in the period after World War I,
165 that regime did not cherish the memory of 1848. The new ideology was based on the
166 trauma of the dismemberment of the Hungarian Kingdom and regarded nineteenth
167 century liberalism as the main reason for the collapse. Those in power therefore did
168 not feel comfortable with the memory of a liberal revolution. In 1921 an irredentist
169 monument was erected in the semicircular northern end the square, four groups of
170 statues representing the various irredentas. In 1928 a new element was added to the
171 composition, the so-called “national flag with relics.” The relics were pieces of soil
172 from the irredentas contained by the pedestal, and the flag was always at half-mast
173 to express national mourning. The name “Liberty” in this new context was supposed
174 to mean the liberty of which the Hungarians in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Romania
175 and Yugoslavia were deprived.

176 The monument of irredentism was destroyed in 1945, and one year later a
177 Monument of the Soviet Heroes was erected in the place of the national flag. In that
178 re-interpretation, liberty meant the Soviet liberation of Hungary, both from German
179 occupation and inner oppression. It is still a topic of discussion, since those
180 liberators did not leave the country until 1989. For many people it still can be
181 considered as liberation, if regarded separately from the installation of a communist
182 dictatorship in the following years, but for the majority, Russian invasion was just
183 another conquest. For them a Soviet monument on Liberty square was a cruel irony.
184 After 1989 all the Soviet monuments in Budapest were removed except this one. Its
185 persistence is guaranteed by interstate agreement between Russia and Hungary.
186 Although the extreme right regards its existence as an insult, and actually nobody
187 likes it, it will stay there for a long while to come. The current rightist local
188 government, however, tried to create a new balance by erecting a statue of Ronald
189 Reagan in the square in 2011, on the 100th anniversary of his birth. Since the statue
190 has no pedestal, and is only 19 % higher than life size, it gives the impression that
191 the president is walking across Liberty square to see the Soviet Heroic Monument,
192 or going to the American embassy passing by the monument. In any case, the Soviet
193 Monument is now situated between the Embassy of the USA and the statue of
194 Ronald Reagan, which makes the Liberty square into a monument of the cold war.
195 The names of streets leading to its apse still preserve the memory of its original
196 meaning associated with 1848–1849.

197 On the other end of the historical city centre we find another memory complex of
198 the revolution of 15th March 1848 with much more literary motives. Petöfi Square
199 and March 15th Square create a unified space now. The former received this



200 denomination around 1870, the latter only in 1948, for the 100th anniversary. Sándor
201 Petőfi is the national poet of Hungary and the emblematic figure of the revolution.
202 His statue was erected in his square in 1882, as a result of a civil initiative. It is
203 reasonable enough that he has a statue and a square in the city centre. He was a great
204 poet, who left behind a huge, very rich and colourful oeuvre. The statue represents
205 him as presenting his *National Song* to the revolutionary crowd on the steps of the
206 National Museum. Even if he wears nineteenth century clothes, his coat creates the
207 impression—when viewed from a certain angle—that he is a Roman tribune
208 perorating. A poet, to be sure, but in direct contact with his audience in a rare
209 moment when poetry is a direct political action. The street which starts from March
210 15th Square is called the Road of the Free Press. This name was given after World
211 War II, also cherishing the memory of the revolution. Since censorship was
212 abolished on that revolutionary day for the first time in Hungarian history,
213 journalists (a category which used to include the vast majority of people producing
214 literature) celebrated the freedom of speech on the 15th March in the era of dualism.
215 Its continuation is named after Lajos Kossuth, the leader of the independence war.
216 The city authorities decided to give the street this name about the time when the
217 exiled revolutionary leader was deprived of his Hungarian citizenship in 1889. At
218 the transition point, a street begins which was called Crown-prince Street until 1923.
219 Since that time it is called Sándor Petőfi Street. While the memorial place of 1848–
220 1849 was created at once around the Liberty Square, and it has more or less lost its
221 meaning through the course of history, this second one has slowly developed
222 starting with Petőfi's square and statue.

223 In the case of erecting a public monument, the lack of explicit ideological message
224 implies a message. János Arany (1817–1882) was the most prestigious poet of the
225 second half of the nineteenth century. The street in which he was living in Budapest is
226 named after him. We have to admit, however, that Arany was the chief secretary of the
227 Hungarian Academy of Sciences between 1865 and 1877, and due to this function he
228 had a department in its headquarters, which he was allowed to use even after he retired.
229 Therefore the denomination celebrates him also as an organizer of an institute that used
230 to have central importance in the nation's cultural politics.³ There is also a statue to
231 Arany two kilometres away, in front of the National Museum, which was erected in
232 1893. It represents him as a genuine poet, sitting in an armchair, with fictional figures
233 from his epics as accessories. One may ask, however, why Arany is sitting in front of
234 the National Museum, while Petőfi is standing more than a kilometre away in a pose
235 which presents him as if he was here? The building of the National Museum functioned
236 as the House of Lords between 1867 and 1902, while the House of Commons was
237 located in the neighbouring Sándor Street. It is only logical that a revolutionary figure
238 like Petőfi could not be allowed to stand in front of the House of Lords. Arany was
239 much more acceptable.

240 In 1896 both houses of the Hungarian parliament moved to the new building still
241 under construction in Leopoldstadt. Before discussing their new location in some
242 detail, let me mention that Sándor Street received a new name in 1940. The name

³ The gesture of Count Széchenyi in 1825, when he suggested establishing a Hungarian academy of sciences and started funding it, is regarded as the beginning of the Hungarian awakening.



243 Sándor is nothing special; it is just the Hungarian version of Alexander. In some
244 periods, however, the street name was Archduke Sándor, since it was originally
245 named after Erzherzog Alexander Leopold Johann Joseph von Habsburg (1772–
246 1795). Nowadays it is called Sándor Bródy Street, after an excellent prose writer
247 and playwright active around the turn of the century (1863–1924).

248 Since 1902 the Hungarian parliament has been housed in a building overlooking
249 the Danube, although its construction was not completely finished until 1904. The
250 area around the building became the most important place in Hungary from an
251 ideological viewpoint. It has been called Kossuth Square since 1927, and its
252 monographer called it spiritually and symbolically overloaded (Gerő 2008, p. 78). In
253 2011 there were five statues, one statue group, four other historical monuments, plus
254 the state flag there. The four non-statuesque monuments are dedicated to the
255 memory of the victims of the massacre that happened on 25th October 1956 when
256 unidentified groups began shooting at a peaceful demonstration, killing 60–70 and
257 injuring 100–150 people. The statue group represents Kossuth and the first
258 Hungarian government, two other statues in important spots represented influential
259 politicians from Hungarian history, two statues in rather peripheral positions
260 represent third rank politicians of the twentieth century that were important for
261 some groups in given historical moments. And last but not least, there is the statue
262 of Attila József, an outstanding lyric poet from the twentieth century. How does a
263 poet come to be here, where “everything is always about power, directly or
264 indirectly, demonstrating or challenging it”? (Gerő 2008, p. 80) The statue is located
265 on the spot where the very first statue of the square used to stand, that of Gyula
266 Andrassy, the first prime minister of Hungary after the Compromise, and the
267 minister for foreign affairs of Austria-Hungary for decades. The statue was
268 destroyed in World War II, and the site remained vacant till 1980, the seventy-fifth
269 birthday of Attila József. On the one hand, the communist regime liked the poet,
270 who for a couple of years was member of the illegal communist party, writing some
271 poems of commitment; on the other hand, it was already the soft dictatorship of
272 János Kádár, based on the principle “who is not against us, is with us”, which is a
273 perfect match for a poet quietly sitting and reasoning. His statue, however, creates a
274 harsh contrast to the other monuments of the square. Not a member of the elite, but
275 an obviously poor man, not a performer of historical deeds, but a thinker, not in a
276 solemn pose and not even looking at the centre of the square, which is also the
277 symbolic centre of the Hungarian politics. He turns his back to that symbolic
278 political stage, and looks out over the Danube. And one more thing. All the other
279 statues refer to the national politics, while his statue quotes his poem “By the
280 Danube”, which in its finale advertises a fraternity of nations in the Carpathian
281 basin.

282 On 13th July 2011 the Hungarian Parliament passed an act on the reconstruction
283 of Kossuth Square, which contains the idea that one of the goals is to reconstruct
284 “the square’s artistic appearance of 1944.”⁴ This idea, if taken seriously, would
285 result in removing eight of the ten monuments, and brand new production of
286 replicas for statues perished long ago. The act, however, already emphasised that the

⁴ See <http://www.parlament.hu/irom39/03651/03651.pdf>.



287 memory of the victims of 25th October 1956 is an exemption, and the monuments
288 concerning that event should stay. The monument of Mihály Károlyi (1875–1955),
289 the president of the first Hungarian republic has already been removed by the time
290 of the completion of this paper, but the fate of Attila József's statue is still under
291 discussion due to civil protest. It would be surprising if a Hungarian government
292 which makes every effort to emphasise its national commitment were to tolerate the
293 presence of an object that seems to undermine the massive nationalist message
294 encoded in the square. József is represented as a poet, making passers by remember
295 that there are many other things to think about than national politics.

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