

The Red Countess

Online Appendix I

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A Recollection of Hermynia Zur Mühlen and Stefan Klein

Sándor Márai

One morning Klein, the translator – a plump young Hungarian writer, who is an émigré and constantly looks around him with Weltschmerz and a feeling of grievance – arrived from the Black Forest with his two dogs. His lady friend was with him – an Austrian countess who translated the works of the American writer Upton Sinclair into German and was subsequently active in German literature of the Left. I met them at the railway station. Their coming to Frankfurt created a stir.

In the boarding house where they rented rooms immediately on their arrival the dogs caused a lot of trouble. The owners refused to put up with them. So, soon afterwards, I let Klein and his friend have my apartment. For quite a while, by then, I had no longer been living at the sadistic tailor's. I now had three lovely bright rooms on the Escherheimer Landstrasse not far from the newspaper offices [Marai was employed at the time as a journalist for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*—L.G.] and even closer to a publisher by the name of Rütten and Loening. I had the entire second floor of a villa there to myself and was very pleased with my new living arrangements. So, when K. had a falling out with the owners of the Frankfurt boarding house due to their different ideas about the world and about canine upbringing, they moved in with me, and I withdrew to an attic room on the third floor of the villa. And so we lived together as a community of strangers thrown together by fate in a foreign land, feeling constantly aggrieved and irritated. K. in particular was always ready to take offence. Yet, on the whole, we felt good. K. and the Countess worked a lot and even I began to be regular in my working habits around this time.

K. was by nature distrustful. He detected slights everywhere and from everyone, and he vented his distrustfulness in angry letters, which he fired off by registered mail, express mail, and air mail. He wrote the most registered and express delivery letters of anyone I ever knew. Later too, when I was living abroad, I continued to receive such letters from him. I would be awakened in the middle of the night with a registered, express delivery letter from him, in which all he had to say was that he was moving ahead with his work as planned, or that he was withdrawing his friendship from me, or that our misunderstanding had been cleared up and I should be reassured that our friendship was solid and unchanged. Everything with him required urgent attention. He had a quarrelsome disposition, often got into disputes with the Germans, wrote letters, and went to court. He had got to know the Countess in Davos during the War. Both of them had been sick and had developed an affection for each other at the sanatorium that was indestructible and purer and more powerful than any officially sanctioned union and that bound those two sick individuals together for their entire lives. They had two passions: literature and dogs. I never again met anyone who spoke with as much humility to dogs or writers as K. and his lady friend. Caring for dogs and translating books occupied their whole lives. They translated a great deal and were artists in the practice of their craft. Translation is a remarkable craft; it takes two artists to make a translation. The translator is always a writer *manqué*, as the photographer is a painter who has strayed from his *métier*. K. and the Countess devoted their talents, with the humility of true artists, to translating foreign authors. Every now and again we would argue for hours until we found an exact German equivalent for a Hungarian or English concept. K. translated from Hungarian. He was the first to introduce modern Hungarian literature to a world audience. He never received official support; on the contrary, he was denied any recognition. And so we lived in the villa in Frankfurt with the dogs, which K. spent hours examining for fleas and lice, with an angry stream of registered and express letters – I do not exaggerate when I say that half of K.'s income went for the postage on his furious letters – and in a strange condition of restlessness and excitement, for in K.'s proximity the air was always heavy with the smell of gunpowder. I lived in the attic room and wrote the whole livelong day – only poetry, as far as possible. Between manuscripts and typewriters, K. prepared our lunch; mostly it was boiled beef and vegetables. He did not know how to cook anything else.

These two, K. and the Countess, stuck to one another and belonged together for better and for worse. I never saw such a strong human bond between any other couple since. I don't know whether they were "happy" together – what is commonly considered idyllic is probably not a characteristic of such relationships. They found each other as invalids; K. subsequently regained his health; she was never cured. No other woman ever made such a strong, soothing, and at the same time – in the full and complex sense of the word – stirring impression on me as that young Austrian aristocrat. She was tall in stature and unhealthily thin; in her face only her sparkling eyes were alive, ennobled by the anticipation of death and glowing warmly with human solidarity. She sewed her own clothes and went around in disturbing robes which the Germans stared at in astonishment. Wherever we appeared in the city, we were met with hostile looks, for something emanated from this woman that was not familiar, an alarming, enticing singularity, the radiance of a spirit purified by pain, passion, and understanding. People would fall silent, the moment we showed up anywhere. The Countess would walk on, without looking and with head lowered, and she moved the same way through crowds, incognito. Behind her would come K., holding the dogs in his arms, sizing up strangers with sullen and suspicious glances, full of distrust and bitterness, eager to start a quarrel, and ready, the very next moment, to write a registered, express delivery letter to the presumed, suspected offender. In this procession, I was no more than a kind of page, bringing up the rear with dignity.

Her father had been an ambassador [*sic!*] under the monarchy, her mother was an Austrian baroness [*sic!*]. Her childhood was spent wherever her father was sent on diplomatic missions, in a highly cosmopolitan milieu. She married a Baltic count [*sic!*], with whom she went to live somewhere in Lithuania [*sic!*]. One day, being sick, she got away, headed directly for Davos, and never returned to her husband's estate. She spoke and wrote German, French, Spanish, and English perfectly; she translated Upton Sinclair and Charles Péguy [?]; Sinclair once sent her a long letter, typewritten, in minuscule characters. Anyone who got to know her remained her friend for life. In politics she sided passionately with the Left. But I have never met any other woman who combined in her behavior as miraculously as she the hauteur of an individual of high social rank and the unapproachability of a worldly *grande dame* with the passion and energy of a woman who is deeply engaged politically. Wherever she settled, a "salon"

immediately blossomed around her; and those who gathered at it – at times those attending this “salon” included active anarchists who were under surveillance, for the politically “engaged” were drawn to K. in swarms – had no choice but to behave in a manner appropriate to a salon. So every afternoon, teacup in hand, we would sit in the Countess’s living room – writers, workers, revolutionaries, Frankfurt intellectuals and patricians, reconciled with each other by the atmosphere, the effect of which could not be evaded by anyone having come into close contact with the Countess; and we chatted as the invited guests might have done at an afternoon tea given by her father at the Austro-Hungarian Embassy in Cairo. The “conversation” was guided by the Countess – K. would occupy himself in a corner with the dogs, casting mistrustful glances around him – and the guests followed haltingly as that refined and restless spirit glided over the battlefields of life, literature and politics.

But she was no bluestocking. And there was such power in her fragile, sick body that it enabled her to disturb the peace of very large groups of people. Her lung had almost completely stopped functioning, yet she worked ten to twelve hours a day, bent, from early morning on, over her typewriter, a fat opium-charged English or American cigarette dangling from her lips and sending up clouds of smoke. She seldom went out into the street. She feared the way people looked at her. Their looks “hurt her too much,” she once said to me. She had a sharply critical view of her class and her past; she hated them out of a mixture of nostalgia and envy. The people who gathered around her from time to time, only to vanish later into the unknown, came mostly without giving their names; revolutionaries visited the Countess’s salon incognito, as if they were coming to a conspiracy, the precise details of which had never been discussed. [...] One day a man with the pale complexion of a woman and a chestnut-coloured beard appeared in this society. He had long, white, soft, manicured hands, sat among us with a sleepy, sly look on his face, gave short, dry answers to our questions, and carefully preserved his incognito. There was talk that he was a worker in a Frankfurt automobile factory and he did indeed wear worker’s overalls but these had been masterfully tailored out of dark blue material and we never saw a trace of oil or iron filings on his snow-white hands with their clean, carefully cut and shaped nails. [...] From the shape of the head, the mouth and the forehead, he bore a striking resemblance to the Habsburgs, and naturally legends soon grew up around him. There were many such nameless individuals who came and went in the Countess’s magical circle.

She called me “my child,” shared with me whatever K. prepared in the way of food, as well as her cigarettes and the books she was reading. I lived with docility in her proximity and put up with her aggressiveness and her eccentricities. Never again have I tolerated another human being – a woman, into the bargain – as selflessly and modestly and with such sadness as that extraordinary Countess. Fate had prepared painful life experiences for her, which she bore defiantly and rebelliously. In the core of her being, she was an aristocrat – in the broadly human sense of the word. One day we had a visit from Stefan Zweig. Afterwards we went walking for hours in the rain. Zweig told me the life story of the extraordinary Countess with the thoroughness of a biographer and with emotion and enthusiasm. That is the only way one can speak of people who have sufficient resources of strength and resistance to keep their balance when, all around them, social class, principles, and values have fallen off balance. Now and again we would drive to the surroundings of Frankfurt, to workers’ housing projects; the Countess would give a reading at a social evening organized by the workers of the great Hoechst chemical factory; and there too the politically “engaged” would flock to her, drawn by the kind of embarrassed attraction that would pull them towards anyone they felt they had to support even though that individual did not fully belong.

Early that autumn, K. took offence at something or other and sent me a registered, express letter from downstairs to upstairs. The Countess naturally stood by him, as she did always, in everything, and perhaps the essence and the meaning of the relation between the two of them lay in the very solidarity that led one exceptionally sensitive soul to give unquestioning support to another wounded and discontented one. So I moved out and for a while lived the life of a transient artist in a hotel near the railway station...

(Sándor Márai, the Hungarian novelist [1900-1989], is best known in English-speaking countries for his novel *Embers* [orig. Hungarian 1943, Engl. Trans. 2000]. This passage is from his memoirs, *Bekenntnisse eines Bürgers. Erinnerungen*, translated from the original Hungarian [1934] into German by Hans Skirecki, ed. by Siegfried Heinrichs [Munich and Zurich: Piper Verlag, 2000], pp. 250-56. The translation into English was made from the German text.)