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Introduction

Budapest, 20 October 1944. Ernő Szép, the 60-year-old Hungarian Jewish poet, playwright and novelist, is among the fifty elderly men wearing the yellow star who are brutally rounded up from the apartment building on Pozsonyi Road by gun-toting Arrow Cross youths, and marched off into the unknown. *The Smell of Humans* is the story of the next nineteen days, narrated with a remarkable degree of compassion and detachment by a master of twentieth-century Hungarian literature.

Ernő Szép was born on 30 June 1884 in Huszt, in the eastern part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, and grew up in a small town in eastern Hungary, where his father was a schoolteacher, and his mother a seamstress. From these humble origins, starting with his 1902 volume of poems *Első csokor* ('First Bouquet'), he went on to a career as a popular writer in Budapest who would publish well over thirty volumes of poetry, fiction and plays, ending with the 1945 appearance of *Emberszag* ('The Smell of Humans'). Already before the First World War Szép had gained

recognition as one of the writers grouped around the pioneering literary periodical *Nyugat* ('West'), dominated by the personality of his slightly older contemporary, the epoch-making poet Endre Ady. For a variety of reasons Ernő Szép's critical reputation during his lifetime and after his death in 1953 was that of an outstanding poet in the 'minor' mode. This picture has changed considerably with the advent of Dezső Tandori, who, since the late 1970s, in a series of essays and a volume of selections from Szép's poetry and prose, has single-handedly created an entirely new level of Ernő Szép appreciation for generations to come. Even more significantly, Tandori's own poetry and prose, considered by some to be the most significant Hungarian literary oeuvre of the late twentieth century, has consistently included generous portions of Szép's work, in the form of allusion, direct and indirect quotation, 'subtext' and leitmotif. Tandori has, in fact, resurrected an author who was in danger of falling into a 'black hole' of his nation's collective conscience and memory.

For nearly forty years after the event, the fact of the Holocaust eluded full public confrontation and examination in Hungary. It is no accident that *The Smell of Humans*, written and originally published in 1945, was not reissued in Hungary until 1984 (the year that saw the publication of Tandori's volume of selections from Szép). Ambivalence persists to this day about collective responsibility for the destruction of Hungarian Jewry.

By the time of the events narrated in *The Smell of Humans* (October–November 1944), the 'organized' brunt of the Holocaust had already transpired. After the German occupation of Hungary on 19 March, hundreds of thousands of Jews were rounded up in ghettos all over the country. Edmund Veesenmayer, Hitler's minister plenipotentiary in Budapest, reported that (under Eichmann's command) 437,402 Jewish men, women and children were transported to Auschwitz between 14 May and 8 July. Some 230,000 Jews remained in Budapest, in daily terror of their lives.

The fate of the Budapest Jewry hung in a tragic balance during the summer of 1944. Against the SS, ever demanding and ready to carry out further deportations, the waning powers of the aged Governor Horthy proved only partially effective in protecting the Jewish population. (The community of about 3,000 Jews in the outlying Budapest district of Újpest was rounded up and packed into cattle-wagons overnight: on 17 July the 1,500 mostly Jewish prisoners at the Kistarcsa camp were also seized and abducted to Auschwitz after the Governor's intervention had seemingly saved them.) During these months representatives of neutral states – Sweden, Switzerland, Portugal and Spain – offered some hope of shelter by issuing protective passes and establishing 'protected houses'. The heroic efforts of Raoul Wallenberg saved thousands of lives.

On 15 October, as Russian troops approached Budapest, Governor Horthy made an ill-prepared attempt to withdraw Hungary from the war by declaring on Hungarian Radio a unilateral cessation of hostilities. On the same day he was deposed by German troops, and the government was seized by the extremist Arrow Cross party led by Szálasi. Instead of surrendering, the Germans and their Hungarian allies made desperate efforts to defend the city, sending thousands of Jewish slave labourers, Ernő Szép among them, to dig earthworks around the outskirts of Budapest. The Russians reached the perimeter on 6 November, but the ensuing bloody siege of Budapest ended only on 13 February. During these months of hell the Arrow Cross thugs went on a murderous rampage against the defenceless wearers of the yellow star. Ernő Szép, after his dismissal from forced labour on 6 November, miraculously managed to survive the siege and the reign of terror. Not so his brothers József and Márton, murdered, and his sister Vilma, 'disappeared'. And let us not forget the fate of the remaining members of Szép's forced labour company, who were not dismissed on 6 November, and were probably driven west along with retreating Hungarian army units. It was on such a forced march, and around this

time, that the great Hungarian Jewish poet Miklós Radnóti was murdered: his last poem is dated 31 October 1944.

After the war, with the exception of *The Smell of Humans*, Ernő Szép published only shorter, occasional pieces in periodicals. He was not in favour among the Marxist literary policy-makers who came into power in the late 1940s, nor did he in any way participate in the Stalinist programme of literary manifestations. He died in Budapest in October 1953. The publication of this memoir, and a future volume of selected poetry and prose, will, I trust, introduce a new friend (as Tandori says in his introductory essay, an 'unknown familiar') to readers everywhere.