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Book Review

'The Burning of the World' by Béla Zombory-Moldován

Called up in 1914, an artist is horrified by patriotic poets 'who sing of death, whilst delegating its practical implementation.'

by Henrik Bering

The sepia photo on the cover of Béla Zombory-Moldován's World War I memoir "The Burning of the World" shows a group of Hungarian artists, lawyers and teachers at a seaside resort on the Adriatic coast on the eve of the conflict, the women in white robes, the men in sailor caps and straw boaters. (In photos from that brilliant summer, be they British, French or Hungarian, it is always the men's boaters that get to you, fragile symbols of a long-lost world.) Three days later, war is declared and Zombory-Moldován, a 29-year-old artist from Budapest whose prewar existence had been that of the carefree boulevardier, has to report for duty. He dons his ensign's uniform, takes hurried leave of his family and, after a brief spell of training, boards the train for the Galician front, where the Hungarians face the Russians.

Hungary at this point was very much the junior partner in the Austro-Hungarian Empire: Its foreign policy was decided in Vienna, where policy makers were hellbent on avenging the killing of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo with a short and sharp punitive operation against Serbia. But Serbia was Russia's ally, and the Austrian action triggered the European system of alliances; soon rumors started circulating among the conscripts about setbacks on the battlefield.

What Zombory-Moldován finds upon arrival at the front is a parade-ground army much concerned with appearance—not for nothing is the Hungarian hussar credited with having invented the sabretache, a leather case suspended from the sword belt that replaced pockets in his tight-fitting pants—but woefully unprepared for the task at hand. Due to nationalists' demand that Magyar become the language of command in Hungarian units, modernization of the army had been delayed. Thus the author's infantry brigade finds itself outnumbered 3 to 1, with only four

7.5-cm field guns to the Russians' 12. For want of a spade, the author has to use a metal lid to scrape a shallow hole for cover.

The brigade's commanders are a pitiful lot. Their martinet colonel is "a peacetime hero," the kind who insists that digging foxholes is unsoldierly, since it "leads to cowardice and undermines discipline." To impress the commanding general, the colonel affects nonchalance by deliberately showing himself in the open and is ordered to get back among the trees. When he does it again the next day, he suffers a direct hit from a shell, with "not a shred of him left."

The author's regiment is placed in the very worst spot in a forest near the town of Rava Ruska in present-day Ukraine, its mission being to cover the retreat of the Third Army. He is hit in the head by a shell fragment and, together with other wounded, is hurriedly thrown on a creaking cart and pulled by two half-dead ponies to the nearest station, only just avoiding capture.

The Burning of the World

By Béla Zombory-Moldován
(New York Review, $16.95,155 pages)

Back in Budapest, his head wound heals well enough, but his nerves are shot, leaving him as "a twenty-nine-year-old graybeard" with a severe tremor in his right arm and a left leg that keeps buckling underneath him. He is diagnosed with "traumatic neurosis," a term coined by the German physician Herman Oppenheim, who believed that fear caused structural changes in the brain. Today the diagnosis would of course be post-traumatic stress disorder.

He tries to reconnect with his past by endlessly walking the streets of Budapest, visiting old places and friends, but he feels increasingly alienated. He is dismayed by the "coffeehouse Conrads"—Hungarian for armchair generals, referring to the Austro-Hungarian commander in chief, Conrad von Hötzendorf —and has only

contempt for those who do their utmost to avoid being called up, among them patriotic poets "who sing of death, whilst delegating its practical implementation."

He takes pleasure in the simple, familiar objects in his studio, his Winsor and Newton watercolors and his palette. He is keen to return to his painting but at a loss where to start, his mind full of images of death. As a mild-mannered conservative, he takes a dim view of the modernist direction that art was heading in before the war and of all the other -isms, artistic and political, that give the age a "poisonous spirit," which he compares to a "miasma of swamp gas." He finds a measure of peace in painting waves along the Adriatic.

To a certain extent, World War I memoirs written from the ant's perspective resemble one another, all mud and horror. What makes this one stand out is the author's painterly eye for detail, his ability to evoke a vanished way of life, and his tone of voice—gentle and civilized but perfectly capable of the occasional sardonic flash.

As his grandson Peter, who translated the book, tells us in the foreword, Zombory-Moldován reported for duty again in 1915. This time he served as the commander of a prisoner-of-war camp, and later in the War Ministry. Hungary paid a steep price for its participation in the war. The Austro-Hungarian casualty rate came close to 50% in the war's early phase, while total Austro-Hungarian casualties amounted to nearly seven million out of a population of 51 million.

In the interwar period, Zombory-Moldován disapproved of the Miklós Horthy regime's nationalism, and during the German occupation of Hungary in 1944, he sheltered a Jewish family. Under the Communists, he was fired from his job as principal at the Budapest School of Applied Arts and spent many of his remaining years alone in a small summer cottage, painting the countryside. He died in 1967. His last words were "Get down! Get down! They're shooting from there too."

Mr. Bering is a journalist and critic.

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