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Senselessness of Space

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Panel: A sense of place I. The author discussed the importance of setting in their work. This can address topics of regional fiction as well as the challenges/rewards of reaching audiences unfamiliar with a particular location.

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Senselessness of Space

By Dénes Krusovszky (Hungary)

I once heard a story about one of the popes who invited two people from the city of Rome to visit him, both of them foreigners. The pope asked them how long they had been in Rome. One answered "I've been here a week." The pope replied "Ah, then you've seen the whole city". The other said „I've been here for a year." "Well," said the pope, "then you've hardly seen anything."

I have the same feeling about places--the more time I spend somewhere, the more I feel like I don't know anything about it, or, let's say, not enough about it. Maybe this is why I have never felt homesick.

I've lived in Budapest for thirteen years now, so I can call myself a Budapest, even if sometimes I don't recognize my neighbours on the street. Can I say I know the place where I live? Is it the cobblestones, the bricks, the doors, the trees, the shadows, the sounds, or the people that make a place? I would say all those, but I barely recognize the sounds of my street, or the shadows of the trees there, or as I said, my neighbors.

Perhaps it is memories that are most important, that I know how this or that corner looked, years ago? But if I only have old memories about a place, can I still say I know that place?

I grew up in a small town in the Eastern part of Hungary, I spent the first eighteen years of my life there, so you have to believe me, I have lots of memories of it. But I haven't been there for almost thirteen years. My parents moved elsewhere, and all my friendships, loves, connections faded away. Still, I think about the town almost every day. We have a troubled relationship, let me add.

One day I was drinking a coffee with Benjámín, one of my new classmates at the university campus in Budapest who later became a friend, and I told him that I came from this small Eastern town. He was overjoyed, and told me that he had gone there several times during his childhood to visit the grave of the famous „wonder rabbi" in the Jewish cemetery. He saw the surprise on my face and asked, "Didn't you know that there is a Jewish cemetery?" I answered him confusedly that if you live there, the past is sometimes too hidden to recognize or too silent to hear. Unfortunately this is still not really unusual in Central-Europe.

I still say I grew up there, but since that day, if someone asks me if I know the place, I say no.

Now I live in the heart of Budapest, between the Oktogon square and the Andrassy allee. Almost every time I take a walk or go shopping at the nearby market hall, which opened its gates one hundred and sixteen years ago, I think about the words of Imre Kertész, the Nobel Laureate writer who lived in the same neighborhood. Kertész said "The Andrassy allee, designed on the model of Champs Elysée or Kurfürstendamm, leads from the riverbank of the Danube to the edge of the City Park, where it joins a monumental square. I have known five names of this allee. Originally it was simply called the Allee. Later they named it after the late prime minister Andrassy—Andrassy allee. After the Second World War it became Stalin allee, then during the revolution of 1956 it became the Alle of the Hungarian Youth. During the restauration-period of the Kádár-regime it was called the Allee of the People's Republic. Its main cross was first called Oktogon, because of its geometrical shape, then it was named after Mussolini, and later, the 7th of November Square."

Now the alle is called Andrassy alle again, and the square, Oktogon. There is a small rounded square on the same allee, not far from Oktogon, which is called the Kodály circus. It is a beautiful small square with fancy art nouveau style concave facades dating from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The shameful fact is that this place, during the 1940s, was called Adolf Hitler square, with the same facades, the same trees, and perhaps the same shadows.

I cross these streets and squares every day, I still don't know them, but sometimes I call them home.