

Gyorgy Faludy obituary

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Gyorgy Faludy, the voice of Hungarian resistance, died on September 1st, aged 95

DEPRIVED of pen and ink in Hungary's Stalinist concentration camp, Gyorgy Faludy used a broom-bristle to write in blood on toilet paper. Suffering, he once said, was not a virtue. But his three years at Recsk, from 1950 to 1953, were in a way darkly inspiring. Mr Faludy's best-known work outside Hungary, a prose account of his time in the camp, was called "My Happy Days in Hell".

In a sense Mr Faludy chose prison. He was offered the chance to flee to Austria but refused, arguing that he must bear witness to whatever horrors the communists could dream up. In "Ode for Stalin's 70th Birthday", he listed the fates reserved for the brave: kickings with jack-boots, bullets to the head, the gallows. Inevitably, it was not long before he was arrested himself.

His body was imprisoned, but his mind was not. "Starved and frozen," he wrote, "I huddled on the stone floor, making a sort of tent of my verminous coat, breathing into a sleeve to warm my body and made poems all day long." When a guard showed him his nephew's verses, Mr Faludy sardonically dismissed them as decadent and counter-revolutionary. The guard paled.

Held in Recsk's tiny, dark punishment cell, Mr Faludy spent hours transfixed as a ray of winter sunlight moved across the floor. He imagined himself in the South Seas. He and his fellow inmates ran an ad-hoc university, teaching poetry, history and literature. One prisoner whistled the whole of Mozart's "Don Giovanni", another recounted "War and Peace". Mr Faludy made his colleagues memorise his verses as he wrote them. If one was released, he would visit Mr Faludy's wife Zsuzsa and dictate the verses to her.

He was released in 1953, when Stalin died and Recsk closed. But the camp never left him. It reappeared, for example, in a poem of 1983.

Learn by heart this poem of mine,
Books only last a little time,
And this one will be borrowed, scarred,
Burned by Hungarian border guards,
Lost by the library, broken-backed,

Its paper dried up, crisped and cracked,
Worm-eaten, crumbling into dust,
Or slowly brown and self-combust,
When climbing Fahrenheit has got
To 451, for that's how hot
it will be when your town burns down.
Learn by heart this poem of mine

He had opted for poetry early, seduced by Budapest's cafés and literary life, but his scientist father would have none of it. Budapest already had 20,000 poets, he said, none of whom could support themselves. The young Faludy was packed off to Vienna to study chemical engineering. He remained unknown to his professors, publishing instead the translations of François Villon, a rebellious 15th-century French poet, that launched his literary career. He also wrote a poem against Hitler that would have earned him 14 years in prison, but he was tipped off and escaped. He fled Hungary in 1938 for France and, when war broke out, took a boat to Morocco, finding eventual sanctuary in the United States and enlisting in the American army.

He came back to Budapest after the war to observe, as he put it, “democracy being built without democrats”. In October 1956, when Hungary exploded against Soviet occupation, Mr Faludy was in the thick of it, as a delegate from the Writers' Association to the workers' councils that ran much of the revolution. But when the Soviet tanks rolled in he fled west again: to Vienna, Florence, Malta, New York and Toronto, where he set up home with an American dancer called Eric Johnson.

The handsome young man had tracked him down in Malta after reading “My Happy Days in Hell”. Mr Faludy was living there after his wife died. He fell hard for Eric, writing sonnets to him. In Toronto they shared a tiny apartment with a pair of finches; the birds would perch on Mr Faludy's typewriter, flying up each time the bell signalled the end of another line.

For more than 20 years, until 1989 when Communism fell, Mr Faludy stayed in Canada. He at last returned home, his books unbanned after four decades, to live in a spacious flat overlooking the Danube given to him by the city authorities. There, he went on shocking people. He dumped Eric for a lissom poetess more than 60 years his junior, married her and appeared with her, almost naked, in the pages of the Hungarian edition of *Penthouse* magazine. With his shoulder-length mane of white hair and piercing brown eyes, he looked like a biblical prophet—though, with Fanny, he hardly behaved like one.

She was far from the first. We lay there naked,
And, with one arm, I lightly caressed her body.
I hope it should be quite agreeable,
With just a touch of customary boredom.
It turned out to be more. I leaned above
Her small left nipple musing what to
Compare it with: a speck of coral? Or a wild strawberry
A tiny tulip still in bud perhaps

Revered by his compatriots, showered with prizes and honours, he wrote until the end. His last collection, published in 2003, was called "Stormy Century". He often stayed up until the early hours, watching the Danube flow by like the pulse of poems in his blood.