



## DEVECSERI, GÁBOR

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**DEVECSERI, Gábor** (b. Budapest, 27 February 1917; d. Budapest, 31 July 1971), Hungarian poet, scholar, and translator. He was educated in Budapest, matriculated in the Protestant Gymnasium. After completing his secondary education in 1934, he worked as a private clerk. A year later he enrolled at the Péter Pázmány University to study Greek and Latin. His talent in writing poems revealed very early, his poems having been published before he reached the age of twenty. He graduated with a Greek-Latin teacher's diploma in 1939 and received his doctorate in 1941. From 1942 to 1945 he worked as a librarian in the Baumgarten Library. After the World War II until 1948, he was Assistant Professor and taught literature in the Greek Institute of the Péter Pázmány (later Lóránd Eötvös) University of Budapest.

In the years 1948-1954, in the rank of Major, he taught literature at the Officer's Academy of the Hungarian People's Army. He was captivated by the Marxist ideology and the vision of the socialist future (Hegedüs, p. 574). In 1948 he joined the Hungarian Workers' Party (formerly Hungarian Communist Party), where his presence was appreciated and highly rewarded.

In 1949, when the introduction of the Stalin's cult to Eastern Europe began in earnest, the celebration of the Soviet leader's 70th birthday was turned into a mass event in the Hungarian People's Republic also. Devecseri got the distinct honor to compose a poem for this occasion and to recite it, donning his military uniform, on 21 December 1949, the festive day of the celebration. In his poem entitled 'Terjed a fény' (The Light is Spreading), he turned the date of Stalin's birthday, which falls on the winter solstice and is close to the starting



point of daylight increase, into a simile: it was as if Stalin, born on that day, had cut a window in the sky of humans.

Between 1949 and 1951 he was general secretary of the Writers' Union of Hungary. From 1953 to 1956, the year of the outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution, he was editor of the periodical *Szabad Hazánkért* (For Our Free Homeland), devoted to literature and art of the Hungarian Peoples' Army.

His first major translation was of the poems of Catullus in 1938, which earned him the Baumgarten Prize in 1939. There then followed the translations of Plautus, Plato, Herodotus, and of other classical authors (1943). At the highest point of Rákosi's personal cult, he was awarded the József Attila Prize (1952) and received the most coveted Kossuth Prize a year later. Concerning the latter he was dismayed that he had been given this distinction for his translations and not for his poems. Many believe that in this regard the Kossuth Prize Committee was right: no change of regimes could erase the merits of Devecseri's translations, especially those of Homer's *Odyssey* (1947) and *Iliad* (1952).

The revolution of 1956 was a sobering event for the minstrel of the Personal Cult. He withdrew from public life and devoted all his time and energy to literature, writing poems and essays and making translations. He embarked on a major project to translate Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma* into Hungarian, trying, as it were, to find solace in a world of heroes whose fame never dies. He did not "learn Persian for the sake of the *Šāh-nāma*" (Hegedüs, p. 574), but got the best help from contemporary experts: Rezső Honti, himself an Iranist, made the selection and the prose translation, and Zsigmond Telegdi, professor of Iranian studies, double-checked the final product. He also translated a few poems of [Anwari](#) and Manučehri.

Devecseri was an educated and conscientious translator of great integrity. He would never shortchange the authors or the readers by introducing his own preferences into his translations. In 1937, still as a young man, he lashed out on Gábor Faludy for re-composing rather than translating Villon's poems, just because "he (Faludy) liked them so better" (Nyugat, 1937, p. 368).

#### *Bibliography:*

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