

DIFFICULT LOVE

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF ISTVÁN VAS



In October 2010, the 100th Anniversary of the birth of István Vas was commemorated with the opening of this exhibition in the Manuscriptorium Exhibition Area. The celebration revisited the important moments of the writer's life, using the biographic documents of his estate and the letters and photographs of the characters of his autobiographical novel, *Difficult Love*.

The book-loving child was transformed into a conscientious reader and faithful enthusiast of Hungarian literature – and above all of poet János Arany – by László Vajthó, the excellent teacher of literature at Berzsenyi Secondary School. István Vas came from a middle-class Jewish family actively practising their religion (his grandfather was a rabbi in Bátaszék). His father was a gifted businessman, who valued two things above all others: rationalism, and money. The father's wish to educate him to become a merchant and a businessman met with protest and rebellion from the teenage boy. Yet, the promise of independence and escape from the family environment led him to accept the idea of going to Vienna to learn to become a merchant. There, the foreign city and its libraries allowed him to broaden his literary knowledge.

His first literary attempts in Hungary were published in the poet Lajos Kassák's *Munka* (Work) journal. Very soon, however, he moved away from the avant-garde, partly due to personal reasons, partly due to the hardened dogmatism of Kassák. In Vienna he met his future wife Etel Nagy, the adopted daughter of Kassák who was learning dance art. On returning home he became a clerk at Standard Electronic Limited's factory in Újpest in order to start an independent life with Eti; both the Kassák and the Vas families vehemently opposed the relationship. Besides being a clerk, he wanted to become an "old-fashioned conservative" poet, writing his lines on the back of bills. His first volume of poetry was published in 1932, under the title *Autumn Destruction*. Soon he became a contributor to *Nyugat* (West), the famous literary journal of the age, first by writing poetry, later by publishing critical reviews. He was a personal acquaintance of Kosztolányi and Babits, which brought fresh inspiration and opened new horizons for him.

In the 1930s he established relations with other contemporary literary figures, becoming a regular author in his generation's anthologies. He frequently appeared at literary evenings of the János Vajda Society, and also on Hungarian Radio's poetry programs. By now he was an acknowledged poet among the so called 3rd generation of the poets of *Nyugat*.

Living under the constant threat of the 1940s was made bearable by escaping into the world of literary translation. Together with poet Miklós Radnóti he translated the poems of Apollinaire, which helped to reduce their uneasiness with each other. The intensity of their work created an unfortunately short but nonetheless intimate friendship between the two of them. Under the pressure of the anti-Semitic regulations and later the harassment of call-ups for forced labour, they buried themselves in their work. Radnóti did not want to escape, and his fate is well known. István Vas' surroundings, and first and foremost the courage of his partner Mária Kutni, helped him through the most critical moments. Following the German occupation, the months of the siege saw him sheltered in Géza Ottlik's flat in Riadó Street. These days fraught with danger were immortalised in his spiral notebook (*Siege Diary*), and in the string of poems *From March to March*. His first ominous words after the siege („Pest felszabadult romjai / Jaj nem tudok ujjongani” *Februári jegyzetek*; “The liberated ruins of Pest / Oh, cannot make me cheer” *February Notes*) were soon followed by the hope that a new social world would be built, which he had dreamt of since his early youth. He joined the Communist Party and became the principal accountancy advisor in the new government's Ministry of Home Affairs, a profession which was alien to him but was necessary to earn a living. Later, he was invited by Endre Illés to become the literary adviser and editor of the Révai Publishing House. In 1947 he published *Double Whirlpool*, a volume of poetry reflecting the previous decade's personal and emotional ordeals. It describes the struggle between two women; to one he connects responsibility and gratitude, to the other new love.

Until 1948 he frequently published in periodicals such as *Magyarok* (Hungarians) and *Válasz* (Answer). In 1947, with the aid of a scholarship, he travelled to



Ferenc Földesi evoked the figure of István Vas with pertinent words

Italy where his attraction to antiquity was enhanced by new impressions; the poetic harvest of this journey is the volume *Roman Moment*. In 1948, prior to re-nationalisation, he was one of the final recipients of the Baumgartner prize. The new establishment strictly censored the opinion and freedom of authors, and having been denounced in various critical controversies, Vas stopped publishing. He requested to leave the party, but only succeeded in doing so after long months of threats and quarrels. („Ha milliók lépése dobban is / Nem turórnok el, hogy zárt rendbe terejen, / Szabad leszek, ha kell magamban is” – *Kérdező idő*; “Even if there are millions of steps / I will not suffer being driven into a closed system / I will be free, if need be alone” - *Questioning Times*)

He retreated to editorial work and translations. His oeuvre of translations covers the authors of ancient times through to modern foreign contemporaries. („Köszönöm nektek, nyájas óriások / Hogy elnémulva sem hallgattam el / Hogy tiltott hangom hangotokon át szólt / Schiller és Goethe, Shakespeare, Molière” – *A fordító köszönete*; “I thank you suave giants / That with my lips sealed I was not silenced / That my forbidden voice echoed in your voice / Schiller and Goethe, Shakespeare, Molière” - *The Gratitude of the Translator*)

The display cabinets of the Manuscriptorium Exhibition Area shed light on the partners of István Vas' life: the never-forgotten dancer wife, Etel Nagy, who died young; his life-saving second wife, Mária Kutni; and finally the painter, Piroska Szántó, his partner of many decades, supporting each other's artistic endeavours.

The stream of autobiographical novels (*Difficult love; Why does the bearded vulture screech?; Afterwards*) all try to explain the decisions made over the course of his life, examining the impressions experienced in different circles, student years, the emotions of friendships and relationships, and literary discussions assessed from many angles. The self-confession, however, remained unfinished. *The Absolution* found in his estate could have become the chronicle of his years after 1945, but the five completed chapters only deal with the events of the first few months after the war. (*The Absolution* was published in the journal *Holmi* in 1992.)

The exhibition is enriched by the paintings of Piroska Szántó, radiating her sparkling zest for life and within which every sign reveals her partner, hidden amongst the flowers. The paintings were made available by the kind permission of the Picture Gallery of Szombathely.

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